



BLADED KISSES

WITCHES OF PROTHEKA

CELESTE KING

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CONTENTS

Books in The World of Protheke

The World of Protheke

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

Preview of Mated to the Dark Elf

Amelie

Kral Ishiraya

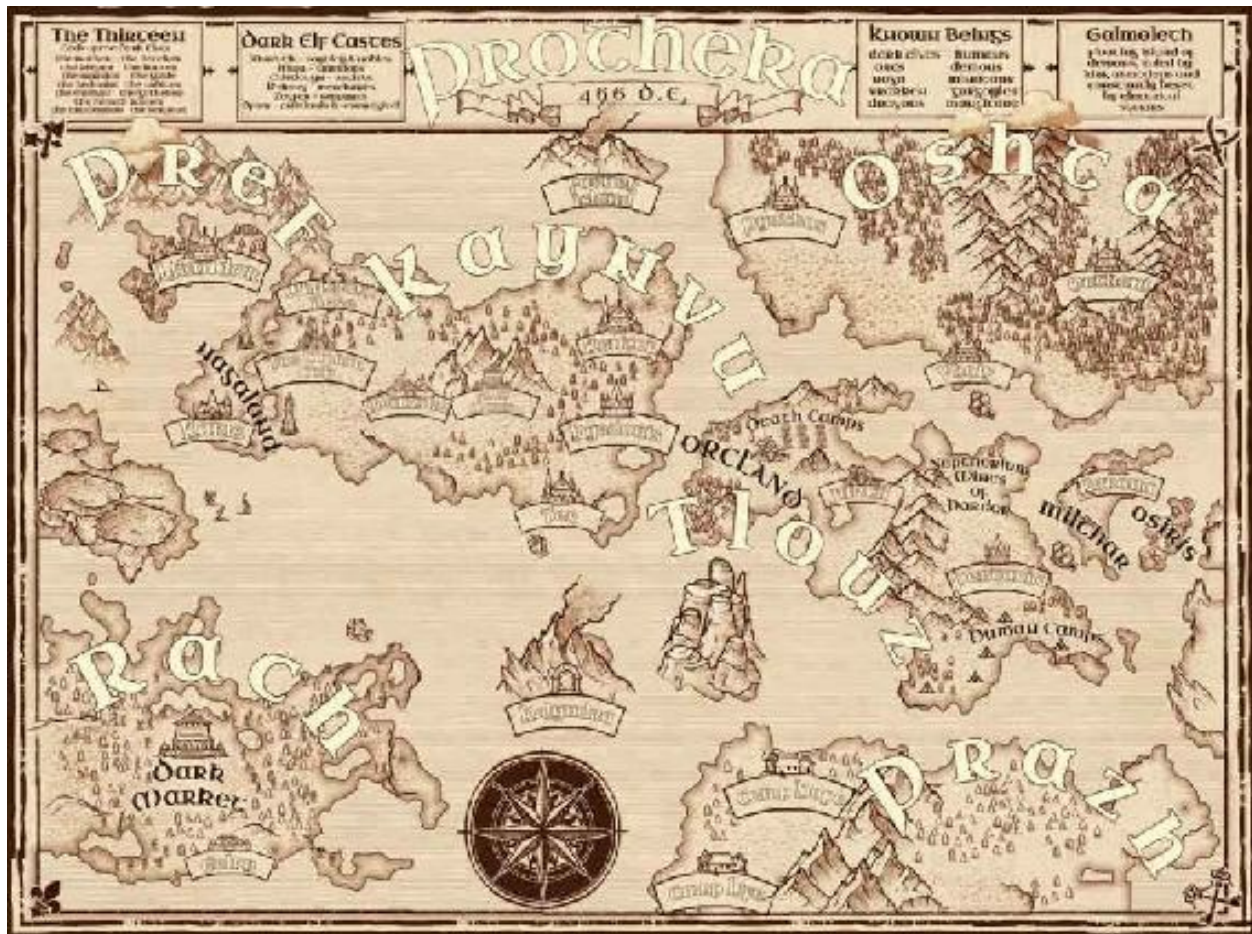
Amelie

Kral Ishiraya

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



SALINA

“**S**hit. This place looks scary as fuck even in the daylight,” I mutter under my breath.

Nakam is supposed to look unassuming, harmless even, when the sun is up.

But it has never quite managed that.

Instead, the dark twisted spires reach for the skies like gnarled limbs raising upwards in worship. There is a perpetual cloud of darkness that hangs over Nakam – some say the cloud arrived the day that a purna’s spell went horribly wrong.

I don’t know the truth of it. I don’t think anyone does.

All I know is that nothing really grows close to the ‘school’ building. And it is always dark, no matter how brightly or sharply the sun shines down on Milthar.

I puff slightly as I run up the front steps. Ivy grows up the front steps of Nakam, and with a twist of my hand, I rot them. They wither into dust and fall away.

An old teacher of mine, who died a long time ago when I first joined Nakam, practically beat it into me that I had to use my magic in even the most mundane situations because that would make me more powerful.

“You need to be addicted to it! You need to be addicted to your magic! Your power! Your talent! Otherwise, your magic will begin to rot and so will you!”

I haven’t ever really understood what he meant by that, but I took it to heart.

Now, whenever I'm in Nakam, I use my magic as much as possible.

You're late, an anxious voice in my head says. I shove it away as I run through the narrow, silent hallways of Nakam.

Callista is waiting for me in the training rooms.

"Are you ready?" A wicked grin crosses her pretty face and I roll my eyes as I pull the dark, hooded cape off my shoulders.

The cape hovers in the air as I focus on it.

This should be easy.

My shoulders tremble as the magic inside me strains against my instruction. But then with a wave of my hand, the cape settles on one of the many hooks that are attached to the wall.

"I'm ready now." I tell her. I am wearing a pair of tight, black trousers and a loose, black cotton shirt.

The walls are mirrored, and I look at myself as Callista prepares to take me through our warm up exercises.

I like what I see in the mirrors. And I know that as an assassin, my looks are my most important weapon.

Waist-length silver hair that gleams in the sunlight and shimmers in the moonlight. Golden eyes that glint and glitter and terrify. A full mouth that has brought scores of men to their knees, and a lithe body, whipped into shape from years of training.

That is what I am.

An assassin.

Sometimes I feel like I am living in a dream.

Sometimes, I wake up and I think I am back in Prazh, about to go through the morning rituals with the rest of my coven.

But then my world shatters. Because the reality is that most of my coven is dead. And those who are alive have banished me forever.

And I am now an assassin, and I live in Milthar, and I attend a school which is, at night, a school for assassins.

How did I get here?

The question flits through my mind quickly. I flex my hands, and magic burns off them as I relive the series of events that led me to where I am.

"I don't feel like warming up today." There is an edge to my voice.

Callista looks at me with narrowed eyes, but she nods her assent.

Then she leaps.

Callista always has weapons hidden all over her body. She has managed

to fit them into places I didn't know were possible and should surely be painful.

Now, as she arcs gracefully through the air, she pulls twin daggers from somewhere and throws them at me.

I twist out from under her, and her daggers shatter two of the mirrors behind me.

Sythar is going to be pissed.

I focus on my hands, my wrists, where my magic waits for me.

Sometimes I want to weep with joy that I always have my magic waiting for me.

Callista is still in the air – she stayed there longer than should be possible for a human woman – and she is about to go tumbling down gracefully to the floor.

Everything is energy. You have the magic of the arcane. Use it. Always remember, everything is energy. My old teacher's voice ripples through my mind as I grab the energy around Callista's body. I make it heavier than she is, and then I bring her crashing down to the floor.

She lands on her side, because we have all been taught how to fall while causing the least damage to ourselves, and she rolls onto her feet immediately.

I take a step backwards, wavering slightly, and Callista smiles again.

“Don't tell me you're already tired.” She croons the words at me in her soft voice, a voice that, like my mouth, has brought scores of men to their knees.

“You did say you didn't want to warm up,” she continues, and her voice is soft and sweet, and I remember Sythar's favorite words.

“A practice is a practice is a practice and a performance is a performance is a performance.”

Right now, we may just be training, but for Callista, a training session is no different from a 'real' job. She is always sweet and soft and so, so deadly that I'd never want to get on her bad side.

And the other students of Nakam are more afraid of me than they are of Callista, which is saying something.

Callista leaps at me again and again and again.

I dodge knives and spears and swords deftly until she uncurls a whip from around her hips and twists it around my ankles.

I fall until I remember that I don't really have to and force myself up

before I use my magic to stretch the fibers of the whip until it tears.

Callista laughs lightly. Her tinkling laughter resounds around the room like the shattering of glass and dances away from me. I pull and drag at the energy she leaves behind her as she moves.

More advice from my old teacher rings through my head.

“Perfect the arcane magic. But never forget your most powerful asset. Make them rot.”

She really shouldn't have remained on the ground. The wooden ground, I think as I pull at the wooden floor.

I can make anything rot. Even materials that have been made by humans or minotaurs or dark elves.

But wood is even easier. It was alive before. And I am so, so good at rotting the living.

Callista's eyes widen as the floor beneath her trembles and starts to crumble.

The stink of rot magic fills the room, and my own knees go weak for a second as I force all the magic that lingers in my body towards my hands.

There is magic everywhere inside of me.

There is magic in the tendons that hold my bones together. There is magic in my muscles and nerves.

There is even magic in the roots of my hair.

And I am forcing it all into my hands.

I do not know when I start murmuring the old purna chant. It is a chant we used to sing when the weather started changing.

It is more a prayer than anything else, except the purna have no one to pray to except ourselves.

I suppose I am praying to myself right now. I am praying that I don't fucking collapse before I've defeated Callista.

I almost laugh out loud when the floor gives way completely beneath Callista, who doesn't move quickly enough to avoid falling.

I fall to my knees, too. As I do, I remember the first time I used necromancy magic.

I remember the stares I got and the whispered insults that I, only half-purna, could wield magic as powerfully as I did.

I do laugh when Callista crawls away from the mess. With a wave of my hand, I force the high, small windows of the room to burst open so that we can let some air in.

“Sythar is going to beat your ass,” Callista says, and there is proud laughter in her voice. “You just ruined his hardwood floors!”

“He’s got the money to fix it.” I shrug. “How did your latest job go?” I ask her, changing the subject. She’s one of the best assassins here, and if I ever hope to actually get my first assignment, I know I should be taking notes from her.

That is why she helps me with training. Because while I may have magic, she is slightly physically stronger than I am and more adept at hand-to-hand combat and weaponry.

I’m catching up fast, though. I have to. I can’t use magic everywhere.

“It was good,” she says, and we start walking out of the training room. I flick my wrist, and my cape settles onto my shoulders.

“You easily could have done it, though,” she adds as an afterthought.

“Why?”

“This guy was an idiot. An older dark elf who just wanted an easy lay. I had to undress slightly to get him where I wanted him. You could have just winked at him, and he would’ve collapsed.”

“Oh, please,” I scoff and then burst into laughter. “You’re gorgeous, and you’re also exaggerating.”

“Can you believe we’re about to graduate?” she asks me wonderingly, and I shrug in similar disbelief.

“What are your plans after graduation?” I ask her with genuine curiosity. This isn’t something we’ve discussed too much before.

“I don’t know. Maybe Sythar will keep me on as an instructor. That feels like it would be nice.”

“Yeah, you’re a good teacher so that would suit you.”

“And your plans?”

“I have my eye on a contract that I’m going to request after graduation. There is someone I need to get even with.”

“That doesn’t sound like the best idea.” Callista’s voice is measured and gentle.

“I’m not changing my mind on this,” I reply firmly.

DENVE

“I have never been happier to be drunk than I am now,” I grumble beneath my breath, knowing no one can hear me.

Or maybe I’m too drunk to care.

I’m quite fond of alcohol. I have a refined palate and access to some of the greatest meads and wines in the world.

I’m not as fond of the aftermath of drinking entire barrels of ale on my own. But needs must, as they say.

Tonight, however, I’m *really* enjoying being drunk.

This is my fifth shot of zhisk. I know I’ll regret this tomorrow, but at a party like this, I cannot stand being sober.

I cannot believe they’ve invited all these people, spent all this money, just so that they can get a leg up in their social standing.

I sigh as a servant comes around with a tray. I grab some mead off it, along with a few hors d’oeuvres.

I need to give my throat and stomach a break from the sweet burn of the zhisk as I swallow it.

I also haven’t eaten all day, which could be why I’m already feeling warm and generous.

My parents are the Thuvrols. *The Thuvrols.*

I belong to one of Vhoig’s wealthiest and most influential noble families. My parents are very proud of their nobility and social status, and this party is one of many that they host every few moons or so.

I watch as my father is surrounded by a circle of lesser nobles, all who are anxious to gain his favor, and a wave of nausea washes over me.

“I think it’s time I took a break from this.” I wonder briefly if anyone has noticed the elf talking to himself in the corner.

We haven’t had dinner yet. That will come later. First, my parents, my mother in particular, must show off a great display of wealth to impress the variety of guests they have invited.

I cannot believe that all this is so that we can win the favor of the King of Vhoig.

I leave the dining hall, with its sparkling white walls and high, arching ceilings. Instead, I slip out through a side door that leads to one of the mansion’s many gardens.

The Thuvrol estate, the place where I grew up, is built on the crest of a hill in the High Towns. Because of this, I have always had an excellent view of the entirety of Vhoig. A city which I, in my childhood days, thought was magnificent.

Now, however, I am coming to realize how lifeless it is.

I used to think of Vhoig as the city that never sleeps. Vhoig has excellent clubs that operate at all hours of the day and night. Because it is a port city, it is also always filled with the most interesting people who have come from all over just to marvel at the city ruled by King Ishiraya.

I walk through the gardens on the west side of the house and ignore the giggles that come from the bushes. I saw a couple of young nobles slipping out of the dining room earlier this evening. I am sure they are the source of the noise, and do not care. Instead, I walk until the muscles in my legs start to strain and then I turn around.

Father will be looking for you by now, I think grimly to myself.

He’ll only be looking for me so that our family can look like a united unit, though, not from any place of true care. We need to look perfect, not only for the lesser nobles to aspire to be us, but also for the members of King Ishiraya’s court, such as his political advisors.

One of my father’s greatest obsessions in life is making our family look like we actually like one another. Because, according to him, the King will only do business with close family units.

I have no doubt that my parents like one another, and they definitely like my brother. But they are not as fond of me as they claim to be. And the feeling is mutual.

I used to love them. I used to love my brother. I idolized them. And I thought they loved me, too.

Eventually though, one grows up.

My father *is* looking for me, and he waves me over to sit at the head table while dinner is served.

This is going to be a long fucking meal. I groan internally as I smile at my father and kiss my mother affectionately on the cheek.

She giggles and pats my back then she leans in to whisper something motherly to me.

“You need to stay off the liquor for the rest of the night! You’re looking like a slob! You aren’t even dressed properly! Do you want to embarrass us?”

She pats my cheek and then sits back in her chair and smiles as my father makes a toast.

I decide that I’ll wait until the end of the meal, which will undoubtedly be five courses long excluding dessert, to have another drink.

Despite not caring all that much about me, my parents have always expected me to make something of myself, if only to ensure that our family’s name remains above reproach. I have dabbled in trade and have started numerous businesses at one point or another in my life.

However, nothing has ever really stuck.

And I know that this has been a great source of disappointment for my parents. My father in particular, who has always made a success of everything he has touched.

Maybe if they had paid more attention to me as a child, I would have made a success of myself.

Like they did with Ocuri.

My brother sits on the other side of my father. And he doesn’t look like a slob. Instead, he looks perfectly put together – my mother probably picked out the suit he is wearing and had it pressed and everything.

Oh, well. Did you expect anything less?

I suppose I haven’t made much of myself in my 26 years on Protheke because my brother has already done it all.

He’s done it all, and he’s done it all better than I ever could.

I think I stopped attempting things when I realized that I would never receive the same kind of praise that my brother did and still does.

And there goes my appetite.

I push my food around on the plate, lift my fork to my lips occasionally, and smile warmly at my parents every few minutes.

I laugh loudly at my brother’s jokes and restrain myself from rolling my

eyes.

I don't touch one drop of alcohol for all five courses.

I'm practically fucking sober.

I have to keep from jumping out of my chair when I finish dessert.

I kiss my mother hurriedly and announce that I'm feeling terribly ill to everyone in the hall.

And then I leave as quickly as possible.

But not quickly enough.

"Boy! Boy! Where do you think you're going?" My father's voice is thundering once we're out of earshot of the dining room.

I don't suppress the heavy sigh of annoyance that escapes me, and I turn around to face him.

This was inevitable. What did you expect?

"How dare you abandon me and your mother – your mother! On our special night! Do you try to disappoint us on purpose, or is it that you just can't help yourself?"

I don't say anything because it is futile.

My father smirks at me with an expression of cold disgust on his face.

"You cannot even defend yourself! You can't even give me a reason!"

"Why should I?" My voice is dull.

"Because then maybe I'd be able to see you as a man and not some kind of rodan! I mean, you couldn't even dress properly. You looked like you've been dragged through Vhoig backwards!"

"I'm sorry, Father." Apologizing to my parents has become uncomfortable. I am not sure why. Maybe because my apologies never satisfy them. "I won't do it again."

"No you won't! Because if you do, I'm renouncing you as my son! Maybe you'll do something with your life then!"

I have a sudden vision of grabbing hold of my father and choking him. Instead, I turn around and walk away from him.

I walk until I get to the gates of the estate, when sudden joy overtakes me, and I start running down the hill.

It is not a particularly high hill but running down it feels like flying, and I used to love doing it as a child.

Then I make my way into Vhoig.

My father's words ring in my head as I walk.

"Maybe you'll do something with your life then!"

I think of all the things I have tried.

The first thing I tried when I came of age was running an antiques and bookstore. It should have been a success as Vhoig is a trade city, and I sourced my products from all over Protheke.

I worked fifteen hours a day, painting the shop, building bookshelves, and sanding and polishing down tables so that everything could be displayed as lovingly as they could be.

I could have gotten some of the mansion's zagfers to do it, but I wanted to prove to my parents that I was hardworking.

Before opening day, I asked my mother to send word out to her friends. She assured me that she would.

I handmade fifty invitations and handed one to my father and brother.

No one showed up.

My mother's response was simple.

"You don't really think you can make a success of it, do you? I thought it went without saying that we'll support you if you have a successful venture. I didn't want to waste my time."

I tried again and again after that.

Eventually I stopped trying.

When I look up, I realize that I've walked right to the boundary of the Red District. I can see the lights pulsating from my favorite club.

What are you going to do?

You can't keep this up forever.

You're going to kill yourself drinking, or just kill yourself.

I know that I need to make a decision about my life, and I need to make it soon.

Because I have this sinking feeling that I don't have that much time left.

SALINA

“**Y**ou need to think about this carefully.” There has been a warning in Callista’s voice ever since I started talking about my mission. “You need to prepare properly. And you need to be more patient.”

I know she means well, and I love her for it, but right now, Callista’s cautiousness is driving me insane.

“I know.” I say what I need to say to placate her. “But we both know that receiving my mission is inevitable. I want to do this, I need to do this, so that I can put everything behind me.”

We are headed to our dorms. As we reach the entryway to our dorms, Callista places a firm hand on my arm.

When I look at her – because I have avoided looking her in the eye for a long time – there is concern on her face.

I suppress a sigh.

“I just want you to think carefully before you make a decision that is life-altering. You’re good at what you do. You’re excellent at it. But what you want to do with the skills you’ve been taught here is dangerous. Just, please, think it through.”

Footsteps sound in the hallway before I can properly respond to her.

Callista pulls away from me. We turn to see that it is Sion, a young minotaur who acts as Sythar’s assistant and is terribly mistreated.

Sion has clearly been running and is out of breath. He is wheezing slightly and comes to a skidding stop in front of us.

“Salina.” I wait for him to catch his breath as he stutters my name. “The headmaster needs to s-see y-you. Right, right away.”

I know that my eyes have widened as I look at Callista. She does not try to hide the expression of worry on her face.

But she also gives me an encouraging pat on the back, and I go running.

Today is the day.

Today is the day.

Today is the day.

I am receiving my mission today. I am sure of it.

I do not slow down once as I run to Sythar's office, and I am thankful for how fit training has made me, because unlike Sion, I am not out of breath at all.

I come to a stop outside Sythar's office and straighten my oversized shirt and trousers. I run a hand through my hair to neaten the flyaway strands that are probably standing upright around my head before I knock on the door.

The voice behind the door is booming and imposing. "Enter!"

I roll my eyes at his theatrics and enter Sythar's office. I close the door quietly and wait for him to instruct me to sit.

Sythar is quite strict about etiquette, and while I hated the mandatory etiquette classes that I attended for an entire year, I cannot deny that they have helped me a lot.

High society jobs are always so much easier when you know which fork to use, I think idly to myself as Sythar gestures widely at one of the chairs in front of his desk.

I sit down meekly and cross my legs. I keep my hands folded in my lap, and I ensure that my posture is perfect.

My throat is dry, I realize. I am bouncing my leg slightly, something that would drive Sythar crazy if he could see underneath the desk.

I *am* anxious, and I know it is a blend of my impatience and my excitement at finally receiving the thing I have been working towards for what feels like years.

"You called for me, Headmaster?" My voice is soft and smooth and as sweet as if I were speaking to a mark.

Sythar looks at me through narrowed eyes and grunts. He is clearly unimpressed by the show I have put on for him.

My mouth widens into a smile and before I know it, both the minotaur and I are laughing.

"Thank you for seeing me," he says once we have both gotten over the fit of laughter. "Now, I asked you here to discuss your mission. The one you

requested of me a long time ago.”

“Yes.” I try not to jump out of my chair and dance around the room. “The Thuvrol mission.” I clarify so that I know we are on the same page.

“Yes,” he grunts the word. His eyes narrow again, and I lower my head to hide the fact that I am swallowing convulsively.

The room is suddenly very hot, despite the constant dark cloud that hangs around the school.

“The Thuvrol contract.” He shuffles some papers on his desk. “Now, you are almost ready for graduation. You have, over the years, proven yourself to be an excellent student. You have trained relentlessly, and I can confidently say that you will be one of our most...well-equipped graduates to ever leave Nakam.”

“Thank you.” My mood has deflated slightly. All this praise cannot mean anything good about my mission.

“Despite all that.” Sythar pauses and looks down at his hands. A trickle of sweat is trailing down my chest and is making its way between my breasts. *There it is. He’s about to turn me down.* “Despite all that, I cannot quite decide whether giving you the Thuvrol contract is the right thing to do.”

“Why not?” I decide not to beat around the bush. I don’t have time to listen to Sythar hemming and hawing all day.

“Your personal connection to the family is cause for very obvious concern. I cannot have your personal feelings interfering with a contract as big as this one.”

“So you think that I won’t be able to keep my head just because I have an ulterior motive? Would you be saying this to one of the male students?”

I smile at Sythar, who doesn’t respond right away.

I interrupt him as he is opening his mouth. “And here I thought you were a feminist.” I say this mockingly, and Sythar rolls his eyes at me before lacing his fingers together.

I have known him long enough to know that is a sign of indecision on his part.

Or he’s just annoyed with you and is forcing himself to not slap you across the room.

I don’t think Sythar would ever raise a hand to me, but I do not trust anyone, especially not the men of Protheka.

I sit back in my chair and feel the edge of the blade that I keep in an inner pocket of my trousers, rubbing against the skin of my right thigh. The pain is

pleasant, mostly because I know the blade is close at hand.

“I am not hesitant about this because you’re a woman,” Sythar grumbles. “I’m hesitant because your desire for revenge is greater than anything I’ve ever seen before. I do not know how you could possibly walk into this mission with a clear head.”

I am silent as I absorb what he has said.

Well. He’s not wrong.

“And if I cannot trust that you’ll walk into this with a clear head,” Sythar continues. “Then I cannot, in good judgment, send you out into the field. That would be a risk to your life and the lives of everyone around you.”

Everyone at Nakam has been taught what happens when we get too close to the subject of our missions or contracts.

It can be bloody and brutal and very, very ugly.

This won’t turn out that way. You’ll keep a clear head. The mission is more important to you than anything else.

I prepare myself to argue, the way Sythar himself taught us in a debate class.

“Don’t you think that my knowledge and ‘connection’ to the Thuvrol family gives me the best advantage at completing this mission successfully?”

He looks at me sternly but doesn’t say anything, and I take that as an invitation to plow forward.

“I may have a more personal connection to this contract than other assassins usually have, but instead of that being a handicap, it could actually help me.”

I lean forward in my chair. It is time to make my case. Because there is no fucking way that I’m leaving this room without this mission.

“I *know* them. I know the Thuvrols. I don’t just know their daily routines, I don’t just know the weak spots in their security. I know who they are, I know how they think, and I know how they feel about almost everything.”

Sythar nods in reluctant agreement because he knows that I am telling the truth.

“Ultimately...” Now I sit back in my chair. I let a confident smile cross my face, even though I am about to retch from pure anxiety. “I am the best candidate for this, simply because I am, as some of my peers have claimed before, obsessed with them.”

Sythar sits back in his chair and rubs his eyes. He runs a hand through his messy, ruffled hair.

“Fine,” he says after about ten minutes of silence. “You can have this mission, this contract, but...” He glares at me menacingly.

In this moment, I am reminded of how truly dangerous Sythar is, even though he acts like a big softy around me.

He could probably get across the desk and throw me out the window in less than a minute, I think to myself.

I lift my right hip slightly and unclench my hands in my lap. *If he does try anything, slit his throat before he can get his hands around your body.* The knife shifts slightly, and I know the hilt will be easier to reach.

This is insane. Sythar will never hurt you. He has invested too much in you.

“You can have the contract, but only after graduation. I need you to prepare more for this, before I think you’re truly ready,” Sythar says.

He continues speaking before I can thank him. “You have impressed me with your little speech. I like your conviction. Just know that we’re all watching you. Now leave.”

I get up and walk out. I only slow down when I am several doors away from Sythar’s office.

I exhale with relief as I sag against the wall.

Finally.

DENVE

It is close to dusk when I leave the market district. I did not visit it for any particular reason, except to wander around and get some of the fresh, crisp air that blows in off the sea.

I also like walking around in the market district because it is so utterly different from the life I experience in my parents' home.

In the market district, no one cares about politics. People don't care about the King, or what his favorite kind of drink is, or where he has his linens made – a real conversation I overheard between my mother and another noblewoman.

Everyone in this district is too busy trying to make a living. They cannot be bothered about the latest gossip that my mother loves to indulge in. Gossip about which dark elf has left Vhoig to pursue greater things in a different city. Gossip about which dark elf has fallen prey to a human woman.

The air grows colder the darker it gets. The nighttime wind stirs up the sea, and the market vendors quickly pack up their wares.

Instead of going home, I take a walk over to my favorite pub, which is a few streets away from the markets.

Walking is a great distraction from thinking about the party last week and the argument with my father.

All I can do, it seems, is think about the party and how humiliated I feel.

It has always been very clear what my parents thought of me, but to have it verbalized and thrown in my face as some kind of punishment was the worst thing I have ever felt.

As if you won't go through worse, being their son. As if this will be the

worst thing they could ever do to you. As if now that he has gotten that off his chest, he'll be kinder.

As if you could ever come home and be exactly what they want.

My head spins from the tumultuous thoughts that seem to come at me from all angles.

What will I do? If they really never accept me as their son? Will they dismiss me? Forget about me? Will I fade away into the background?

Is this the start of my death?

"Denve!" Farzhi, one of my friends who I am meeting up with tonight, calls my name from outside the pub.

He waves at me from the busy establishment, and for the first time today, I feel a smile cross my face.

Farzhi's presence helps me forget that Ocuri came home from a trip today, and my mother practically pushed me down the stairs in her haste to get to her golden son.

They didn't even notice when I walk past them and out of the front doors of the mansion.

Farzhi has found us a table, and I pull out my coin bag. The pub owner comes over, and I hand him the bag.

Then I stand up.

"A round for everyone here!" I bellow. The pub almost shakes from the volume of the screaming, cheering, and yelling.

The barmaid brings our drinks first. Jugs of ale for everyone else, and three shots of zhisk for me. They already know my order.

At least here I am appreciated, I think darkly to myself, even though I know that has more to do with my money than them actually liking me.

I know that everyone except Farzhi, who is also a noble though a lesser one, sees me as a drunk privileged noble who they can take advantage of.

But they appreciate me, so at least I'm getting something out of it.

"You okay, brother?" Farzhi has been calling me that since we met several years ago in the Red District.

I don't know why he does it, but it makes me feel good, nonetheless. And Farzhi always pays for his own drinks, so I know that he spends time with me because he wants to.

More of our friends join us, although these are dark elves I don't spend a lot of time with.

"We're going into the Red District later. Maybe find a few human women

to spend the night with,” one of them says. “You guys want to join?”

I know that Farzhi has his own woman problems, so he won't go. And I'm not going into the Red District with people who are strangers to me.

“I'm fine.” I buy them all another round so that they don't pester me about this too much. “But you all enjoy yourselves. And don't get hurt.”

A hush falls over the pub then, and we all turn to the door to see who has entered. The person who has entered is headed directly for our table.

The miou dark elf is a messenger of King Ishiyara, and he holds a velvet envelope in his hands.

He bows to me. “For the young Master Thuvrol. This is an invitation to the hundred and fifth ball, hosted by His Majesty, King Ishiraya of Vhoig.”

He hands me the envelope, bows, and then promptly leaves.

I am conscious, then, of everyone's eyes on me. I open the envelope and pull out the glossy paper inside.

The date and time are stamped on the paper in gold and silver. For the first time today, I feel optimistic.

This is it. This is my chance.

I clap Farzhi on the back and jump up.

“I'll see you soon.”



THIS IS IT. This is my chance to prove myself.

It is the day after I received the invitation to the ball hosted by King Ishiyara. And I know that it is the perfect opportunity for me to prove myself to my parents.

I am at my favorite tailor today, and I have commissioned a fine ensemble for the ball. After the tailor finishes the ensemble, I head to a jeweler who has a forge nearby, and I pick up a fine gift for the royal family.

I realize then that I am, for the first time in a month, spending money on something that isn't alcohol.

At the jeweler's, I find several zanthenite bracelets, and the jeweler's eyes widen with shock when I drop a bag of ipia coins on his countertop.

Then I head back to the tailors' shop.

I am feeling good for the first time in a very long time. Going to the ball is my way to finally prove to my family that I am worth something.

My attendance at the ball is where I will make a name for myself as a responsible, successful nobleman.

I do realize that most other nobles know me as a party going loser – only because I am sure that is how my parents describe me to them – but if they see who I am at the ball, who I can be, then they'll realize that everyone was wrong about me.

I have several advantages. I know that Prince Carisu is as much of a partygoer as I am. In fact, he throws several lavish parties throughout the year and has an open tab at every pub and tavern in Vhoig.

One of the other advantages I have is that I have received all the same training and schooling that Ocuri has.

I have just never used it, even though I remember most of everything I learned during childhood and adolescence.

Maybe I can become a royal advisor, I think to myself as I wait for my fine clothing to be packed up. Becoming a royal advisor might actually impress Mother and Father. All I need is to show them that I am worthy of their respect. And their love.

I wish I came into town in a carriage. I think this to myself as I balance all the items I have bought in my hands and start the walk home.

I am used to walking, and I am quite fit, but I think I overestimated my abilities to carry heavy clothing and jewelry.

I have not felt this confident about myself in a long while. To my surprise, I can actually envision the future. I have not been able to do that in a long time.

I envision a future where I have moved out of my family's home and I am living in my own mansion in the High Towns. I am successful as a royal advisor to Prince Carisu, and I have met a dark elf woman to have on my arm.

The vision is so vivid that I can smell the home I am living in. It smells like nimond beans and rirzed herbs.

The vision is so vivid that I can tell that I am happy.

The only thing I cannot see is the face of the dark elf woman I am mated to.

The walk up the hill to my family's mansion is long, and my arms are straining from the effort by the time I have reached the front doors.

I am still feeling quite confident as I walk in. I can hear my parents somewhere in the house as I make my way up to my quarters.

I have completely forgotten that Ocuri arrived home yesterday, because when I see him in the hallway outside my quarters, I am very surprised.

“O-ocuri,” I want to kick myself for stuttering his name. “You’re here?”

He gives me a snide smile – the only smile he seems to be capable of – and looks me up and down.

“So many packages, brother,” he says in a sing-song voice, and I am not unaware that he is mocking me. “Where are you going with all this?”

I don’t answer him and walk past him. Ocuri laughs loudly, and I realize that his presence here could completely ruin my efforts to prove myself.

Why do I feel like everything is about to go wrong?

SALINA

With closed eyes closed, I take a deep breath, silencing the disturbances in my mind. I clench my fists, slowly restoring my vision as I exhale. Time slows down as I picture the maneuver I'm about to make.

I spring forth like an animal out of a cage, advancing upon a set of target dummies. Each of them have bullseyes on their chests, clawed, scratched, and marked from years of use. Luckily for them, they're not my target.

Behind them is another dummy. That's my prey. I envision the face of Ocuri on it, a thought that fuels me to move with swift grace. That gray skinned bastard may have been long gone but the hatred I have for him still lingers.

A mechanism hurls the bodyguard dummies toward me. Held stationery in their arms are wooden swords that move at high speed. I time my movements, waiting for the opportune moment.

When they are mere inches from me, I roll forward onto my hand, angling my body with such precision that I slide between the two dummies without touching them or their mock weapons.

The third dummy jumps toward me. Thinking of it as Ocuri makes for easy work as I jump, this time grabbing the neck of the target as I flip over him in a magnificent display of athleticism. I twist the dummy's neck mid air, tearing the head clean off.

Landing in a crouched position, I snicker as I drop the head from my hands. Turning around, I marvel at my work. My skill is unmatched, only growing better the more time I spend at Nakam.

“Sythar better get some replacements,” I chuckle, kicking the head away. Grabbing a towel, I wipe myself off and leave the training room, having come here to blow off some steam at the excitement of getting another shot at the Thuvrol family.

I head to the wash rooms where I turn on the faucet, my gaze looking mindlessly at the bathtub as it fills up. The steam hits my nostrils, my head becoming enveloped with the hot vapor of the warm water. I climb in, sliding my body into the tub as I breathe a sigh of relaxation.

My muscles are sore from the training as of late. I’ve been pushing myself for the past few weeks in the hopes of graduating. I know my body needs to be in tip-top peak condition for my first job.

Now that I know who my first target is, I feel like my hard work is paying off. I’m so eager that part of me wishes I was on the boat right now. My fingers itch for blood, as do my daggers and the magic in my body.

Still, I know I must not become too reckless. I know others may already think of me that way, but no one knows my mind better than me.

I draw a deep breath and let it out, slipping further into the water. My silver floats on the surface as I close my eyes. I go into a state of meditation, delving deep into the mindset required of an assassin.

This needs to go successfully. No one is going to get in the way of putting an end to my target, Denve Thuvrol.

I imagine him looking like an uglier version of his brother. The thought of Ocuri still manages to cause a shift in my attitude even after all this time.

I wonder if this mission will bring me the peace I need to fully move on.

I become aware of the hatred flowing through my veins, mentally taking note to use that powerful energy as fuel for my goal. After a few minutes, I rinse off and climb out. It is time to get ready for my little business trip.

I close my bedroom door behind me and throw off my bath robe. Meeting my gaze in the mirror, I look at the tattoos on my thighs and arms. The inked flowers represent who I am.

“Denve Thuvrol will die looking into the eyes of the Black Petal.”

From underneath my bed, I pull out a small bag for travel. I then move to my closet and remove my set of light armor, inspecting it.

It’s a black cloak with padded armor beneath the fabric, invisible to the untrained eye. Red patches are stitched into the arms and shoulders, steel gauntlets woven underneath sleeves. At the top is a hood to conceal my face from prying eyes.

The gear is designed to keep me safe should I find myself in danger and will allow me to move like a true assassin. It appears as normal, everyday clothing to a normal citizen of Protheke, allowing me to travel through the streets if needs be.

I slip into the outfit, strapping it tight before fastening a utility belt around my waist. I take a glance in the mirror, my reflection staring back at a killer. I remove a weapons stash from a cabinet and place it on my bed.

Everything needs to be perfect. I better check to make sure these are all primed and ready to go.

I open it up, feeling like a kid who has received a new box of toys. Inside the stash is all of my weapons. I first remove one of my throwing knives, inspecting its tip and edge by smoothly running my fingers on it. A drop of blood falls from my hand.

Good, my knives are sharp like my mind.

I throw it up in the air and catch it by its handle, the hilt designed to fittingly accommodate my hands only. I do it again, thinking of where I need to be in terms of my mental state for this assignment.

The mind itself is a weapon, just as important as any knife, spell, or sword. Perhaps it is the most salient tool of all.

I pack my entire stock of throwing knives, arranging them neatly into my travel bag. Focusing my attention back to my stash, I remove a small vial of poison. To anyone else, it looks like medicinal fluid.

The truth is that the rich green fluid flowing around inside the container is a fast acting paralytic, designed to halt the body's functioning when inserted at a particular point in a target's neck.

The body freezes while the mind remains active, feeling all of the pain as the blood rushes to the top of the victim's head, where it then flows out of the eyes, ears, and mouth. Only a drop is needed to do the trick. I've been itching for a chance to use it on a deserving contract.

There comes a knock at my door as I pack the vial. I turn to see Callista enter my room, a concerned look worn within the flicker of her eyes. Her forehead creases with lines of worry as she comes closer.

"Salina, did you take the Thuvrol contract?"

"Yes," I answer without looking at her. I'm too focused on my dagger, holding it in my hand while its leather sheath rests on the bed.

"Salina..."

"What?" I snap, spinning around to face her. "You already knew I would

take it so don't go getting upset."

"It's just that I'm not so sure this is a good idea for you."

"Why wouldn't it be?" I ask, packing my dagger.

"I fear you'll become blinded by your loathing for the Thuvrol family."

"That's exactly what Sythar said to me in his office, so I'll explain to you what I explained to him," I say defiantly. "My heightened emotions are going to act as my fuel going forward with this. It's what's going to get me through it successfully."

"You sound so full of rage," says Callista worriedly.

"Listen, Callista. I know what I'm doing, alright?" I growl.

"Stop for a moment," she orders, placing a hand on my belongings.

I snap my glare at her, burning a hole with my eyes.

"Can you consider the possibility, just for a minute, that you're taking all of this way too personally? I know you got hurt in the past, but Ocuri is dead! Why can't you let it go?"

"I need to do this," I tell Callista, removing her hand. "You wouldn't get it."

"But Ocuri is not Denve!"

"I know that."

"Look, I'm not saying Denve is innocent. I'm sure there's a reason that there's a bounty on his head, but leave the job for someone else. Going back to the Thuvrol's territory might not end well for you."

"If I didn't know any better Callista, I'd think you were making a threat."

She sighs, shaking her head in frustration. "That's not what this is. The Thuvrols are way too powerful for graduates like you and I. Something like this should be left to a more seasoned member of the brotherhood. What if you get caught?"

My hands freeze as if her words arrest me in place. Her words replay in my mind, causing me to question if she's right, if this really is the wrong move.

What if you get caught?

I can't deny my emotions have no part in this, not even to myself. I'm an assassin, not some damned actor. Sighing, I lower my head, caught in an internal debate between my heart and my head, One is pulling me to stay and the other pushes me to go.

For a moment, I rest perfectly balanced between my choices. Raising my head with a certain mind, I turn to face my friend, laying a reassuring hand on

her shoulder. In her eyes are a glimmer of hope. My heart breaks, for I'm about to shatter it.

“Callista, I'm going to Vhoig. I'll be back soon.”

My friend is silent as I pack the rest of my gear in my bag. Zipping it shut, I throw it over my shoulder and walk out. I stop at the doorway, glancing over my shoulder. Callista stands with her back turned to me.

I brush off the urge to say anything further and leave Nakam, making my way to the docks. It's too late for me now. If I back out, I'd only be letting myself down, and that's not something I'm willing to do.

DENVE

WHY CAN'T HE LEAVE ME ALONE?

I am not sure what Ocuri's agenda is. Maybe he just wants to annoy me or be extra abusive.

Maybe he is trying to foil your plans.

I don't know. All I know is that since receiving the invitation from the King and formulating my plan to finally prove myself to my family, Ocuri has been bothering even more than he usually does.

I wouldn't expect anything less from him. He has been a bully our entire lives, no doubt a trait developed because of the way my parents spoiled him.

That is another reason why I am relieved when Ocuri travels to far away places. Because it gives me a reprieve from the constant verbal and emotional attacks.

I can vividly remember moments from my childhood when Ocuri would bully me during our lessons. He would taunt me about everything. The clothes I had decided to wear that day, or my handwriting, or my pronunciation of certain words.

On the days that he was feeling particularly vicious, he would kick me off my chair at random moments during lessons. It got worse as we grew up. During training sessions, he'd ensure that he would corner me, get me on my back, and then pummel me with his fists.

And no one did anything. Not our tutors, trainers, or any of the servants. And our parents certainly did not do anything.

"It'll build character. Teach him how to defend himself," they'd say with a laugh when discussing Ocuri's 'antics' with their friends.

Their friends would look at me, sitting obediently and smiling, with

sympathetic expressions on their faces. As if to say ‘buck up, you’ll be okay in the end.’

I wake up early in order to prepare for the ball. Today, I am going to the theater district to pick up another gift for Prince Carisu, who I have heard is a great lover of the theatrical arts.

I finish my morning ablutions and get dressed quickly, because I want to leave before Ocuri wakes up. He has always been a late riser, even since childhood, and of course my parents let him get away with it.

But somehow, Ocuri is awake and waiting for me outside just as I step out of my quarters.

“Good morning, brother.” He rolls the word ‘brother’ around in his mouth as if he is tasting it, as if he is experimenting with it. “You’re up early.”

I do not look him directly in the eye, because I am too afraid of what I will see there.

“So are you, brother.”

I move to walk past him, but he places a large, hard hand on my chest and stops me in my tracks.

“Brother, what do you think you’re doing? Actually, my question should be, what have you ever done?”

Ocuri’s voice is cold and cruel. For a second, I am violently dragged back to a childhood memory that I thought I had forgotten.

I am playing alone in the playroom. I am about five years old in this memory. I am enjoying myself for once because my parents have taken Ocuri out to celebrate one of his achievements.

I get hungry so I go to the kitchen, and I eat with the zagfers.

My parents arrive home just as I am finishing my meal, and my mother slaps the food out of my hand.

“You’ll eat when we tell you to!” my mother snaps.

I am pulled back into the present just as violently, and I try to focus on what Ocuri is saying.

“Do you really think you’re worthy of going to this ball? Do you think Prince Carisu will even want to be in your presence?”

I tense up because I am sure that my brother is about to hit me. He lets go instead. I stumble backwards, and he laughs before walking away.

You can do this. Don’t give up yet. The ball is your only chance.

After convincing myself that I am not making a colossal mistake, after convincing myself that I should not just give up, I make my way outside to

where the carriage waits for me.

“To the theater district please,” I tell the zagfer driver and settle back in my seat. I am surprised when hot tears roll down my face, and I quickly wipe them away.

I do not return home right away after I pick up the gift. Instead, I let the carriage driver go back home, and I take a walk to my favorite pub which is quite a distance away from the theater district.

But I know that the walk will do me good and help me clear my head, so I push myself to walk faster.

Farzhi is in his usual place, and my shoulders relax. I did not plan on meeting him here. I would have just had a drink with anyone at the bar.

But I have not seen my friend since receiving the invitation, and I sit down at his table and smile in greeting.

He smiles back instantly, and the barmaid brings a round of drinks for us. It is still early in the day. Maybe I should not be drinking this early, but after my encounter with Ocuri this morning, I need a drink.

“Where have you been, brother?” he asks me with his usual friendly demeanor, and I order some food as we talk.

I tell him some of the details of my plan, and he nods along.

Farzhi knows some of my family’s dynamics, and he has often given me advice on how to deal with it. Sometimes I wonder what he has experienced with his own family when he gives me advice, but I figure that he will tell me in his own time.

“Good luck, brother,” he tells me after we have gotten well and truly drunk. “You’ll be fine!” he calls as I get up from my seat, grab my goods, and start the long walk home.

I am not sure what has inflamed Ocuri so because he is waiting for me when I return home.

I am slightly more sober than I was at the pub, but I am still visibly drunk.

“So!” he calls, and I wince from the volume of his voice. “The drunk returns home.” It seems that our parents are away because the house is quiet.

Ocuri does not waste time laying into me. He walks up to me and grabs me by my shirt. He knocks the gift for Prince Carisu out of my hands, and I wince again as the items inside the package shatter upon contact with the floor.

Ocuri grabs me by the shirt and hisses into my ear. “I know you think

you're going to go to this ball and prove to Mother that you're worthy of being her son. I know what your plans are. Anyone can see. But you're not worthy of being her son, and you're certainly not worthy of going to this ball."

I am powerless to Ocuri's machinations as he walks me over to a mirror.

"Look at yourself!" he roars. "You've become a drunk, and you have accomplished nothing in your life! You are a piss head, and you deserve nothing from us! You don't even deserve my pity, brother!"

I am so tired. When is it going to stop? When do I get peace?

Ocuri lets go of me. I walk away from him, slightly more sober, but I do not miss the fact that my brother is following me.

I am so, so tired, I think woodenly to myself. I just want to get away from my family. I just want it all to be over now.

Ocuri grabs me as I head to my quarters and laughs mockingly in my face.

"You're such an embarrassment to this family. Look at you. Look at who you've become! Or were you always going to turn out this way? Tell me, brother, do you think you were born a failure?"

I know that nothing good is going to come from this confrontation. I still do not know what's provoked Ocuri.

He started leaving me alone when we entered adulthood, and there was a period of time when he did not live with us.

When he was home, he would ignore me. He would only join in when our parents were berating me for something or another.

But he hasn't been this vicious, this violent, in a very long time.

For the first time in a while, I am truly afraid.

"I hope you know that I am friends with Prince Carisu, and he already knows what a failure you are." He whispers this in my ear, and I close my eyes. I am not sure if this is the truth or if he is just trying to hurt me further.

"I hope you know that you will never live up to Mother or Father's hopes for you. Especially Mother. She lost faith in you a long time ago."

Something inside me snaps then. I do not know what it is.

All I know is that I am turning and twisting away from my brother's grasp and throwing a punch. I hit him squarely in the face, and he staggers backwards. I continue punching him. For the first time in a long time, I feel powerful.

I land on top of him and continue hitting him.

For a moment, I see Ocuri's face. His jaw has dropped, and his eyes are wide. He is breathing heavily.

I see fear on his face.

I stop. And that is my mistake.

He flips me over and hits me once before he jumps up, jerking me upwards.

"You need to remember your place, brother," he hisses in my ear. "Do that again and you'll wish you were never born."

SALINA

The boat rides smoothly along the water, rocking side to side ever so gently, the seas of Protheka cradling the vessel like a newborn baby. I stand at the starboard, surveying the city of Vhoig as the ship draws nearer to its docks.

The pier is quiet at this time of the night, but the main city itself is buzzing with activity. Lights are aglow everywhere, especially around the space I presume to be the clubs and theater district. In the far distance, the royal castle of King Ishiraya looms over the city as though keeping an eye on its behavior.

The lights cast a reflection in the water, the twilight glow complementing it perfectly. The city as a whole is a pretty sight, but one thing ruins it all for me. The dark elves. Some of them gather at the harbor, their loud and persistent laughter audible even from a distance.

“How I wish to plant their heads on pikes and leave their corpses rotting in the darkest alleyways,” I murmur.

The boat is moments away from docking now. I shift my focus away from the gray skinned bastards roaming the harbor.

“I better make sure all of my tattoos are covered.”

I disappear behind a corner hidden in a blanket of shadows. I throw my hood over my face and check my sleeves. I then cast a glamor spell, watching as my hair darkens from silver to jet black, starting from the roots and traveling down to the ends.

The boat comes to a stop, docking at the harbor just as I am ready to go. A crew member emerges from storage and hands me my belongings.

If only he had an idea of the weapons he's carrying. The thought puts a smile on my face as I toss him a coin and make my way across the plank, finally stepping foot into the elf infested continent of Vhoig. I take a look around, smelling the stench in the air.

“Time to go meet my contact.”

I turn and head for the direction of the pub where arrangements have been made for me to link up with a contact. Over its long and storied history, Nakam has developed a complex network of spies, assassins, and couriers over all of Protheka, its reach extending far and wide.

This line of work has to be handled precisely, and part of it entails working with trusted, discreet contacts for information on lodging and intel regarding contract targets. A wave of excitement washes over me, knowing this is the start of my journey in the real world. To my contact, it's just going to be another day at the office.

I ignore the whistles and catcalling coming from behind me. Hearing how vocal and confident these elves are puts a disgusting feeling in my stomach.

The nerve of them to think they have a chance with someone like me.

Fortunately for me, I'm about to have an opportunity to teach one the hard way. A dark elf up ahead notices me coming his way, taking it as a sign of interest. He drunkenly stands to his feet.

“Hey, baby,” he calls out, blowing me a kiss.

“Not interested,” I reply as I walk by him. My nostrils coil back at the reek of his breath.

“How much for half an hour of your time?” he asks, running up beside me.

“Is there an elven word for fuck off?” I hiss. “Get out of here.”

“Hey!” he snarls, grabbing my wrist. “What the fuck is your problem? A guy tries to be nice to you and this is how you treat him?”

I glare at his hand, then at him. Little does he know he just made the final mistake of his life.

“Okay,” I say, turning to him. I push the bastard up against a wall, a gesture he takes the wrong way.

“I like where this is going – Uh!”

I cup his mouth, looking around as I stick a dagger in his gut. It doesn't kill him. I've applied just enough force so that it leaves him in excruciating pain but without the strength to call for help. His knees buckle.

I catch him and drag him into the nearby alleyway, dumping him behind a

trash container. There I lay a hand on his face, casting a rotting spell that gnaws away at his face. His eyes are wide with fear as I back away and turn back for the street.

No one else bothers me on my way to meet my contact. I meet the spy on a quiet street, sitting down opposite him outside a 24-7 kaffo shop. I can't say I'm surprised to find he is dressed like an average citizen.

"Good evening," he greets.

"How's the kaffo?" I ask.

His eyes are glued to me as he takes a sip, smacking his lips thereafter.

"Tastes like shit. What do you think of Vhoig?"

I lean back in my chair, laying one hand on top of the other with a smile.

"Smells like shit."

The contact smiles back. He lays a hand on the table, sliding over a piece of parchment before rising from his chair.

"Enjoy your stay."

He then dips into a side alley, disappearing as if he was never here in the first place. Inspecting the parchment, details are written down for me regarding a place to stay, as well as information on the most recent whereabouts of Denve. Also noted are useful shops for supplies such as clothes and tools.

I leave the shop, making way to a loft secured for my stay, hidden deep in an abandoned warehouse. It isn't exactly the five star experience that one expects from a prosperous city like Vhoig, especially for a woman earning as much as I am for this job.

Then again, I don't intend on staying long. Arriving on the quiet road with the warehouse, I'm hit with second thoughts. My mind runs rampant with the thought of Thuvrol blood on my hands. I pull out the parchment, my eyes focusing on the most recent sighting of Denve.

Perhaps the loft can wait.

I stash my belongings behind the warehouse near an old dumpster, taking with me a set of binoculars and some throwing knives. I then turn in the direction where I'll find my target, delving deep into the grimy streets of the city center.

I turn down an alleyway and ascend the nearest building, climbing two levels at a time with a technique taught to us by Sythar. On the roof, I make my way to the perfect viewpoint, getting a bird's eye look over this cesspit of a city. Pulling out the parchment and a small map, I scoff at where I'll find

Denve.

“Looks like he’ll be at a bar. I bet he’s an alcoholic. Rich bastards know nothing better of what to do with their time and money.”

I break out into a run towards my destination, hopping from rooftop to rooftop. My movements are elegant and calculated with no risk of slipping. I come to the edge of a building, seeing the next one is too far to simply jump.

Not a problem.

I pull out a rappel gun, aiming it for a chimney across the way. I zipline across the rope, the people below me oblivious to my presence. I arrive at the bar that Denve apparently frequents, just in time to see him emerge from the building. I pull out my binoculars for a closer look.

“Show your face, you bastard.”

The dark elf is different from what I expected him to be. He’s definitely a Thuvrol, but I was on the lookout for someone more like Ocuri. Tilting my head in thought, I can’t deny how attractive Denve is.

“My, oh my. You’re one handsome son of a bitch.”

His muscular body is apparent through the fabric of his clothing, intrusive thoughts creeping in to wonder what he looks like without them. He flares his thick eyebrows at someone, the shape of them perfectly complementing his chiseled face.

As he turns, I get a full view of his jawline, seemingly as sharp as my dagger. Violet eyes dilate as he looks up at a streetlight, long raven hair falling over them before he brushes it out of the way.

“It’s a shame I have to kill you. Wait a minute...”

I zoom in on his cheek, spotting a patch of dried blood that stands out on his gray skin.

“Hmm. Must not have noticed while I was eyeing him up.”

A group of his lackeys come out to join him. I can’t get a clean hit from where I am, so I move closer with the intent of eavesdropping, hoping to get an ear on some intel.

“So do you think you’ll head to the royal ball, then?” asks a friend.

“Of course,” answers Denve. “And yes, I know it’s out of character for me, but this is my shot at proving myself. I’m going to attend and show my family I’m capable of being something in their eyes.”

My target bids his friends farewell and turns down the street. I peel back, reveling in curiosity at this newfound development.

“So you’re going to a ball then, eh?” I chuckle. “I suppose someone like

you will want to go out with a bang.”

I rise to my feet and quickly begin my journey back to the warehouse. Along the way, a rush of blood goes to my head in exhilaration of my plans. During my trip here, I was wondering just how I was going to get close to Denve.

Now I have a faultless plan on how I’m going to kill him. He may as well have handed me a pre-signed death certificate on a silver platter.

DENVE

The carriage lurches as it comes to a stop in front of the palace, and I can't help but relish this final moment of silence before I'm thrown to the wolves. Glittering lights shine from the many windows, and even from within the carriage, music and conversation spill from the open palace doors.

Tonight is an opportunity to finally break away from my family. Deep in my bones, I recognize it as the beginning it truly is – and yet, I can't find it in myself to feel excited.

It takes a truly pretentious, narcissistic asshole to believe themselves capable of making decisions for the fates of so many, and perhaps that's why politics have never held any appeal for me. I'd be much happier simply existing, with my only responsibilities concerning my well-being or where to spend my money rather than being responsible for the lives of so many individuals I could never possibly understand or relate to.

It's either sell your soul in politics or have it crushed beneath Ocuri's heel.

Politics it is.

The zagfer footman hurries to open the door. I run a hand through my hair as I step out of the carriage, craning my neck to see the top of the castle before remembering myself. My parents' many lessons ring in my ears, my spine straightening as though they were truly chastising me.

A Thuvrol doesn't ogle wealth, we have plenty.

The only people who outrank you are the royal family themselves, act like it.

Carry yourself with the dignity of our family name.

A mask of cool indifference settles over my features, my shoulders pushing back and my chin tilting up. My family name places me above these people, and I need to act like it. Especially if I expect tonight to go to plan.

I stride toward the castle doors, not sparing the various zagfer at their stations a glance as I make my way into the opulent wealth of the palace.

Marble floors glitter beneath the heels of the many khuzuth filing into the palace, swaths of decadent fabrics in all textures and colors draped from their bodies. I don't miss the glances thrown my way, or the way the available women titter and whisper as I pass them by.

The Thuvrol name is enough to make any woman throw themselves at my feet, regardless of whether or not I am the 'golden child' of the family. I can't help but hope that I'm able to avoid the worst of their attention tonight, but given the way that several fathers seem to shove their daughters in my direction, I doubt that will be the case.

I manage to slip into the ballroom without incident, and only by the grace of the Thirteen do I manage not to make a complete fool out of myself.

A full orchestra has taken up residence on a raised podium at the back of the ballroom. An expertly woven melody echoes off the walls of the luxurious space as the undercurrent of conversation melds with it like a heartbeat.

Heavily laden tables of every kind of delicacy imaginable line the walls, tables and chairs dotting the space surrounding the dance floor where eligible lords and ladies spin and dance with one another. By force of habit, I find myself receding against the wall, drinking in the sight of the ball as it unfolds before me.

I care as little for preening as I do for politics. Unfortunately, this ball is the perfect playground for both.

It's going to be a long night.

A zagfer weaves between members of the crowd, carrying a silver tray laden with glasses of various spirits. I swipe a glass of zhisk as the poor bastard moves past me, bringing it to my lips and savoring the way the burn of the alcohol slides down my throat and warms my belly.

The familiarity of the drink soothes some of my more frazzled nerves. I grew up around events like this, but having been the spare rather than the heir, fading into the background was not only allowed but encouraged.

Tonight will be different.

Tonight, I will have to step into the full force of the spotlight and pray that a lifeline is handed to me in the form of the Prince or the King.

My eyes rove over the crowd as I begin to walk the room, scanning for any sign of Carisu mingling with the guests. King Ishiraya notoriously detests having people grovel at his feet, so I'd be unsurprised if Grymlök had decided to forgo entertaining his guests until it was absolutely necessary – not to mention I'd be unlikely to get an audience with the King simply by walking up to him.

“Denve!”

I cringe inwardly at the sound of the wheedling voice but paste a smile on my face as I turn around.

“Lord Rostra, how wonderful to see you,” I say, the lie falling flat even to my own ears. The squat, rotund male inclines his head at me as he approaches, dragging his waif of a daughter behind him.

Wonderful. A marriage proposition.

“Indeed, indeed! I would have expected Ocuri to be the one representing your family at this event!”

My teeth grind together, and I have to force my smile to stay in place.

“I'm sure he's around here somewhere,” I concede, taking a step back. Rostra doesn't seem to get the hint, matching my step with one forward of his own.

“Well, all the better, because now you can have my daughter all to yourself! You've met Ahehu, haven't you?” he asks, thrusting a girl who I would only imagine is Ahehu forward. The poor thing stumbles, ire flashing in her father's eyes as she manages to right herself and then drop into a deep curtsy that I'm sure has her toothpick legs trembling from the effort.

“I don't know that I've had the pleasure,” I say smoothly in an effort to rescue the girl from herself. She rights herself with some effort, and it's only when she looks at me that I realize she can't be much older than fifteen. It's an effort not to recoil in disgust, and even more of an effort not to whirl on her slimy father.

What kind of a man would try to marry off his daughter when she's still a child?

I bite down on the rage that swells behind my chest and do my best to offer Ahehu a gracious smile. She offers me a wobbly smile back, and all I can think is that I'd rather the ground swallow me whole than try to romance the literal child before me.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have some business with the Prince,” I finally say, trying to make as graceful an exit as possible without chancing Rostra turning his rage on his daughter. The male opens his mouth as if to object, but I’m already turning away, bent on making my hasty exit.

I get little more than a few steps away before an older woman is stepping into my path, her hair pulled back so tightly that her lined skin is stretched, the powder coating her face settling into the lines around her overly-colored lips.

“Denve Thuvrol, what a delight!” she simpers in a voice that nearly makes me wince away. I know that I’ve seen her before and certainly heard that ear-piercingly shrill voice, but I can’t for the life of me remember the woman’s name.

“Ah, yes –”

“My dear daughter has just been dying to meet you!” she cries over me, shoving another young woman in front of me. This one, unlike Ahehu, is age-appropriate and practically vibrating with excitement. She’s batting her eyelashes at me so feverishly it’s a wonder she hasn’t taken off.

“What with our families being so terribly close, I cannot imagine a better match for you, my lord! Plus, she does carry her mother’s beauty, does she not?” The woman blathers on, screeching a laugh. I don’t imagine our families are nearly as close as she’s claiming, considering I haven’t the vaguest idea who she is, but correcting her would likely go poorly.

I fall into a stilted, politely vapid conversation with the woman’s daughter, whom she introduces as Pucnapi, while the woman circles us like a rabid batlaz. My eyes stray from the young woman in front of me more often than is probably polite, scanning the room for any available distraction or exit.

All I manage to find are more sets of hopeful women and families, lingering nearby and ready to swoop in the moment I step away. My jaw twitches in irritation at the sight.

This is not how tonight is supposed to go.

For what must be the hundredth time, my gaze falls on the entrance to the ballroom as I begin wistfully imagining fleeing this torturous evening and returning home with a bottle of zhisk to lick my wounds. Rather than finding the cavernous doors empty, however, my eyes settle on something that makes my heartbeat ratchet up inside my chest.

A woman – a *human* woman. Alone.

A deep, blood-red dress clings to her smooth curves, pooling at her feet as if it were truly made of blood. Glossy black hair cascades around her shoulders, her golden eyes smoked with kohl and sharp and glittering as they drink in the crowd.

No one accompanies her or lingers beside her, only heightening my immediate curiosity. Taking human mates has become something of a fashion within the cities. Surely a woman as beautiful as her must be claimed, but I see no male hovering around her to enforce his claim.

She's drawn plenty more attention than just mine as heads begin to turn in her direction, and yet somehow, inexplicably, it's my gaze that she meets from across the room. A coy smile plays at her full, bow-shaped lips as she seems to take my measure, and then, just like that, she disappears into the throng of the crowd.

"Lord Thuvrol?"

My attention drops back down to the poor young woman in front of me, snapping me out of my daze. I have no idea how long I was ignoring her, but her impetuous displeasure is written all over her features.

"Forgive me, I... excuse me."

Any reasonable excuse dies on my tongue, my mind still stuck on the woman who's just entered the ballroom as I turn my back on Pucnapi and push past the other hopeful families in pursuit of the woman.

I thought tonight was destined to be dreadfully dull, but now, I can't help but think things are about to get much, much more exciting.

SALINA

I *t's been far too long since I've gotten to go to a real party.*

Distant music and conversation mingle together as they seep out into the cool night air from the yawning palace doors. I lift my chin, striding up the stairs of the palace and daring one of the few lingering zagfer to stop me.

Had there been miou stationed, I might've thought twice about coming in the front door, but thankfully the ego of dark elves, especially a dark elf King, knows no bounds. One of the first lessons I learned in Nakam is that confidence will get you anywhere, especially if it's combined with the right kind of pandering and the right kind of bias.

Tonight, I'm nailing all of my lessons, and a part of me wishes Sythar or Callista could see me now. In addition to the confidence I'm wearing like a shield of armor, I look every bit the part of the sexed-up, trendy human mate.

The list my contact supplied me with upon my arrival was thorough beyond my expectations, and the discreet and extremely talented tailor he included was my saving grace when I made plans to attend this ball.

The blood red dress she pulled together for me just a few hours ago is perfect. To any outsider looking at me, it looks like exactly the type of thing some distant noble would choose for a little human pet. Only the tailor and I know the difference.

Hidden pockets line the skirt, allowing me to keep a backup vial of paralytic poison close to my body, as well as a few jarred spells that will send clouds of smoke large enough to blot out the entire castle billowing as soon as I smash them.

My trusty dagger is sheathed safely to my thigh beneath the folds of my skirt, perfectly positioned to be within arm's reach through a hidden slit at all times. The entire ensemble is so perfect that I've already begun making plans to find room in my bags so that I can bring this beauty home with me.

"And where do you think you're going?" A zagfer demands, stepping into my path as I'm inches from the palace doors. I let my eyes skate over the ugly male, noting with more than a little bit of satisfaction that he doesn't seem all too sure of himself.

Perfect. That makes this all that much easier.

I arrange my face in a mask of outrage, lifting my chin at the male.

"To find my husband, who will most assuredly have your head for daring to speak to me!" I cry out, relishing in the way the zagfer's gray skin pales about two shades at my words. Despite his clear concern, however, he doesn't back down. *Too bad this kind of loyalty is wasted on Grymlök.*

"M-my apologies, madam, but I must insist upon seeing your invitation. The King is present, and you... well, you are... human," he manages to get out, looking increasingly uncomfortable with every passing word. I stifle my smirk, pulling out the thick, cream cardstock of my invitation.

A forger is always a good thing to have on hand, too.

"I know the King is present, you oaf, he's my cousin-in-law," I reply coolly as the zagfer takes my invitation and begins to look over it. Exactly as I had hoped, my words shock the male so deeply he drops the invitation before he can inspect it too closely, his hands beginning to shake at the idea of offending a member of the King's family.

"Forgive me!" he gasps, looking for all the world as if he's about to keel over dead on the spot. Rather than respond, I simply scoff and push past him, following the music ahead and making my way into the ballroom.

Chandeliers and magicked lights glimmer overhead as guests spin and swirl across the dance floor, the chatter almost deafening as it echoes off of the arched, painted ceilings. The ball seems to be in full swing. Despite the fact that I know I'm here professionally rather than for pleasure, a buzz of excitement races through me at the sight.

I linger in the doorway, drinking in the revelry and allowing my gaze to float across the room, seeking out the male my night will revolve around.

His broad shoulders and deep, raven hair make him easy to spot. I note with no small amount of satisfaction that his stormy, violet eyes are already trained solely on me, despite the young woman in front of him who is

obviously desperate to garner his attention.

A smile plays on my lips before I can think better of it, but rather than squash my little involuntary reaction, I let the smile turn seductive. Denve's eyes widen slightly in the corners, and I push into the crowd before he can see my smirk.

That'll get his ass moving.

More than a few other sets of eyes have already locked onto me, the weight of them pressing heavily against my neck as I move deeper into the crowd. A lone human woman is far from common in a place like this, and I'll need to bring my A-game if I expect to survive the night in a den full of predators without blowing my cover completely.

Exactly as I expect, I make it hardly more than a few steps before a set of khuzuth males are stepping into my path, blocking my way forward as they stand shoulder-to-shoulder.

"And what do we have here?" one of them leers down at me, his symmetrical features more uncanny than attractive. The shorter, uglier one next to him seems too busy undressing me with his eyes to participate in his buddy's attempts at intimidation, but it doesn't matter to me. This is all going better than I could've hoped for.

I dip my chin, letting a blush rise to my cheeks at the attention as I slip into the part of the demure human mate.

"Good evening, my lords," I say softly, sweeping into a curtsy.

"What's a human doing at the King's ball? Who let you in here?" the noble demands as he steps closer to me, violence written clearly on his features.

No matter what their title, all dark elves are the same. Fucking animals.

"Believe me, I'm as shocked as you are! My dear mate is gracious beyond all bounds. He treats me better than I deserve," I reply, fluttering my eyelashes at the man as I straighten myself up.

"And who's your mate?" he asks suspiciously, although he backs up a step.

"Why, Lord Rainzal of course! It was a whirlwind marriage, but I'm lucky to serve him," I say, adding a false air of shock to my voice. The males exchange looks, backing up another step. The truth of the matter is that Lord Rainzal is a distant cousin of the King who hardly ever bothers to show his face in court – which makes him the perfect alibi.

"Rainzal! I haven't seen that rascal in years!" the ugly one jabbars

excitedly. Both of the males seem to relax at my words, and I know that they've bought it. I open my mouth, ready to continue to delve deeper into the backstory I've created for myself when a sudden presence over my shoulder makes a prickle of excitement race down my spine.

"Ah, Lord Thuvrol. Nice to see you."

"Likewise," a deep voice rumbles from over my shoulder. I turn, and there he is, looming above the three of us. Up close, he's even more captivating, his rugged bone structure and purely masculine aura setting him apart from the preening of most of the elven upper class.

My toes curl inside my heels at his closeness, and I mentally chide myself for falling prey to his unearthly beauty. *He's your target. He's your target. He's your target.*

I paste on a coy smile as I look up at him through my lashes, watching as those dark violet eyes drop to my lips.

"We were just ensuring that a wayward human hadn't intruded on the King's festivities. Lord Rainzal has claimed this one for himself."

"Salina," I say, offering up my hand as I hold his gaze. Denve reaches forward, dipping down to brush his lips across the back of my hand, leaving a trail of fire in his wake.

"Denve Thuvrol," he replies, the heat of his breath curling around the sensitive skin on my hand. My heart rate picks up, and I suddenly find myself beyond grateful that dark elves don't have the sense of hearing or smell some of the other races are gifted with – otherwise, I'd be a goner.

The two nobles at my back seem to take our interaction as their cue to find somewhere else to be, and I'm left standing alone with Denve.

"So, how did you and Lord Rainzal come to be mated?" Denve asks after a moment. I don't miss the hint of jealousy in his voice, and I smother my smile before it can reach my lips.

"A mutual understanding," I reply smoothly, grabbing a scarlet glass of paquir off of the tray of a passing zagfer and sipping the delectably floral, fruity alcohol. My eyes find Denve's again, and he smirks, arching an eyebrow.

"A mutual understanding? What kind of mutual understanding?"

"Haven't you heard? I'm all the rage these days," I reply with a smirk. Denve barks a laugh, the sound wrapping itself around me and going straight between my thighs. He shakes his head at me as though he's in disbelief, that delicious smile still playing on his lips.

“I’d imagine you are,” he murmurs in response, his eyes skating from my head to my toes and back again. “And what do you get out of this arrangement, if it’s so mutual?”

I shrug, leaning in conspiratorially, so close to Denve that we’re nearly pressed against one another.

“A pretty house, pretty clothes, good food. And the freedom to act on whatever... *urges* I see fit.”

Heat flares in Denve’s gaze, and I know I’ve caught him, hook, line, and sinker.

“That does seem like a most beneficial arrangement,” he says, his voice low and rough and dripping with the most dangerous kind of temptation. The orchestra begins to sweep into a tune I recognize, the bodies around us moving toward the dance floor in preparation for the couples’ dance that is no doubt about to take place.

Denve’s eyes flick to the dance floor before landing on me again, and there’s no doubt in my mind what’s about to happen next. I know that I should be thrilled that my target is making this so easy, that the night is going more smoothly than I ever could have imagined, but the excitement pumping through my bloodstream is for an entirely different reason.

His mouth opens, the words seemingly on the tip of his tongue before someone comes to a stop beside me and clears their throat, breaking the spell.

Denve and I both turn to look at this unwelcome intruder, and I find myself face-to-face with the ugly noble from earlier.

SALINA

The noble bows to me, taking my hand and planting a kiss upon it.

“My name is Turon. It is a pleasure not only to meet you but to behold such a fine beauty as yourself.”

“I’m Salina. A pleasure likewise.”

The dark elf seems to have manners, more than I can say for others that I’ve met. Still, I can see the way he eyes me. I know he has something else on his mind, an ulterior motive for his politeness.

His features leave more to be desired. An unsightly pair of eyes sit far and wide from each other as if trying to jump off the sides of his face. His nose ends with a tip sharp enough to stab a man, while his lips coil into a crooked smile. He looks like the exact image I pictured Denve to look like, though my contract target is, of course, easy on the eyes.

“Forgive me for being so incredibly forward, but may I take you to the dance floor?” asks Turon.

With my hand still in his grip, I shoot a sidelong glance at Denve. In his eyes, I see a fire burning with jealousy. At that moment, a dastardly idea comes into my head.

It’ll no doubt add fuel to the blaze inside of Denve, but I never came here with the intent of playing fair.

“Of course you can, Turon,” I reply in a sultry tone. My response spreads a wide smile across the dark elf’s face. He gestures for me to follow as we break off toward the ballroom. I don’t even bother saying goodbye to Denve.

I know just how men work, how they’ll stop at nothing to claim what they think is rightfully theirs. I no doubt have already caught Denve’s attention on

a hook. Now it's just a matter of taking advantage and reeling him in further.

I need him to see just how desirable I am for other men around here. He'll fall right into my trap if I lead him on just enough to the point where he'll do something drastic to get me back from the intrusive noble.

Turon takes my hand once more, taking confident strides onto the dance floor as I follow behind. It's easy to see my acceptance of his proposal has fueled his ego, apparent from his exaggerated mannerisms.

We walk to the center, surrounded by other couples already immersed in the music. He spins around and bows to me once more as the live band transitions into another piece of music, this one slower in pace.

He rests a hand on my lower back as we step closer. We then start slowly stepping to the music, getting a feel for the instrumental for a few moments to match our movements to it.

We spin around, allowing me to get a closer look at the entrance to the ballroom. There I spot Denve leaning against a wall, holding a glass of mogabii in one hand with his arms crossed. Displayed on his face is a scowl.

It's working. Better take this up a notch.

I pull Turon's hand closer so that I'm deeper in his grip. Though he remains composed, I can see I've got him going because of the throbbing vein on the side of his neck.

"So," he begins, clearing his throat. "What brings a beautiful human like you to a fine occasion such as this?" he asks.

"I'm a distant relative to King Ishiraya through marriage. I'm mated with one of his cousins, you see."

"Ah, a human mate."

"Indeed. You know how fashionable they are these days."

"Especially in this city."

As we talk, I glance over at Denve every chance I get without making it too obvious. Every time I lay my eyes on him, the frown on his face grows to the point where others look at him strangely. I'm in the middle of figuring out what to do next when I feel Turon's hands grasp my ass.

"Turon," I say with a firm tone. "This is a dance between two party guests. Nothing more than that."

"Hmm." He chuckles. "I like it when a woman is resistant."

As if deaf to what I just said, his hands slide down my back. Without making a scene, I grab his wrists and move them back up.

"Let's keep this civil."

“Quit teasing me already.”

“I said no!” I snap, restraining my volume.

“Where is your owner?” he asks. “Surely he’d be here with you to keep you on a leash.”

“I don’t have an owner. I thought I made that –”

Turon throws a finger to my lips.

“Hush, now. All good rulers of humans know of the value of sharing their property.”

I fight back every urge to snap, resisting the appeal to snap this elf’s neck in front of everyone. Turon closes his eyes and moves in for a kiss, but before I can react, a hand reaches out and grabs him by the hair.

The pervert’s eyes widen in pain and dart to the owner of the hand just as I turn to see who has come to my aid. I hide the smile on my face when I see Denve.

He grabs Turon’s arm and twists his wrist, grabbing the attention of a few guests nearby. Some of them turn, seemingly eager to get a show with their drinks and dinner.

“Get out of here,” snarls Denve as he pushes Turon away.

I wish I had the satisfaction of saving myself but realize it’s a good thing that Denve came to help. My plan is working, and I didn’t have to blow my cover. Denve pulls the lapels of his waistcoat closer as he turns to me.

“Some people, eh?” He chuckles and offers his hand. “May I have the chance to make this better for you?”

I slightly tilt my head at him, narrowing my eyes as I subtly bite my lip. His eyes quickly glance at my mouth and then back to my eyes.

That got his attention.

I take his hand and pull him closer, wrapping his arms around my waist.

“Of course, you can.”

The plan is back on track as we begin to dance. Unexpectedly, Denve twirls me around in a blur and whisks me back into his grip, ever so slightly pressing me into his chest.

Through the fabric of his clothing, I can feel the tensing of his muscles and the beating of his heart, seemingly quickening as I smile at him. My own heart does the same as I momentarily forget the purpose of my mission.

We spend a while dancing, breaking away from the floor every few minutes to chat over a drink. Each time we resume swaying, his hands grip me tighter and slide down to my ass. I do nothing to stop it, feeling the bulge

of his hardening cock with my leg.

Denve doesn't go overboard, the placement of his hands showing he clearly knows how to tease a lady. I may be a hardened assassin eager for bloodshed, but beneath that, I'm a woman with needs. The combined effects of the alcohol and Denve's charm are majorly convincing me to let him tend to them. It's all so enjoyable, but I remind myself there's still a job to be done.

Having held it off for long enough, I decide to pull the trigger and make a move. I beckon for him to stoop down, bringing his ear to my lips. I kiss and nibble his lobe before whispering to him, smooth like silk.

"Kiss me, Denve. I'm hungry for the taste of your tongue."

He looks into my eyes, his pupils soft and gentle before they shut. Leaning in, our lips meet, first getting a taste through slow kisses as they gradually grow hot and heavy.

I forget that I'm surrounded by all these people as my hands instinctively slide to his chest. Just in time, I pull back and move toward his ear again.

"Bring me somewhere private and show me how a nobleman would take me."

Without answering, he takes my hand and guides me off of the dance floor. Along the way, I walk by older ladies with their mouths gaping open before they turn to their husbands, seemingly scolding them regarding why they've never treated them like that.

My mind is running rampant with two kinds of exhilaration. One comes from the fact I'm drawing closer to delivering the killing blow to my target, and the other is from the thought of being entered by him.

My heart wishes for it intensely, but my brain reminds me to focus on the job. After all, if I let myself go that far, I couldn't forgive myself for having sex with another Thuvrol scumbag.

We turn down a dark corridor, this section of the property clearly not meant for party guests. Still, Denve obviously has the power to go where he pleases.

We're halfway down the hallway when he suddenly spins around. The intense look in his eyes is akin to a predator drawing in on his prey. He pushes me against the wall and kisses me, pressing his hips into mine.

The sensation of his cock rubbing against me is so pleasure-inducing that I imagine him fucking me right then and there.

Such a shame that it's only going to go this far.

I slowly bring a hand to a hidden pocket on my gown, pushing it through a hole where I have a leather sheath wrapped around my thigh. I moan to disguise the sound of me unsheathing my dagger, the tip of which has been poisoned with the paralytic serum.

“Just like that,” I whisper as he kisses my neck.

“Hey! Who’s there?” yells a sudden voice.

Denve pulls back from me as we look down the hallway, a silhouetted figure standing a few feet away.

DENVE

There isn't a lot of forethought to my plan. All I know is I have to get her alone, and Salina seemed just as eager to go with me.

Not that it would have mattered either way.

Now that I have her, I'm not letting her go. I don't care who tries to get between us. Nothing is going to keep her from me.

Need pulses through me. I want to claim her, to mark her, to make her irrefutably mine – something I already know she is, but I want everyone else to know it.

I start to lead her down a dark hallway, considering pushing into one of the rooms. I want to take my time with her, to taste every inch of her skin uninterrupted. My magic bubbles up, considering slamming straight through one of these walls to find me a place to do so.

My entire body hums with the awareness of the woman right behind me. I am on edge, unable to think or see or feel anything that isn't her. It's all-consuming, and the desperate need for her overwhelms me.

My body moves before my mind can catch up. I spin around, pushing Salina up against a wall before I can think better of it. I pin her in place with my body, her form melting into mine, and it's then I realize there is no hope for me to pull away from her.

I need her now.

Leaning in, I inhale her scent. It tingles down my throat and vibrates in my lungs. Heat pulses through my body, every nerve ending screaming to take her. She is mine, ripe for the picking, and I am going to make good on that.

My lips press to hers, and I'm swept up in every sensation. She's so pliable beneath me, just like I want, but there's an edge to how she meets my kiss. Like she is considering fighting me for dominance.

I fight a chuckle as my cock hardens. I'd love to see her try.

My tongue swipes out just to get a taste, and I nearly moan right into her mouth as I force her lips farther apart. I need more, and she gives it up greedily.

She is *divine*.

Salina drips a leg around my waist, pulling me closer and the small whimpers that escape her drive me crazy. I can't get enough of her and I tilt her head back, pressing her deeper into the wall as I angle her for a better taste.

She moans into my mouth and my cock stirs. It's already hard, pressed against the lacing of my pants, and I have half a mind to let it free. Party be damned, I'm tempted to take her right here in the hallway.

But there is something about taking my time with her, about pushing her to the brink until she's knelt in front of me and shakily unlacing my pants herself because she can't stand it any longer, that makes me want to wait.

With a smirk, I decide to start my slow descent. My mouth moves down her jaw wanting to claim every inch of her. It's an intense need. I don't think I can pull myself away from her if I tried.

I've never felt this way about a woman. I can already tell her something different about her, something that I want to know.

She's like her own kind of spell, tethering me to her with just a kiss. I've never had someone make me go this crazy with just a kiss. It makes me wonder how much more enticing this woman will become when she's bare beneath me screaming my name.

My hips press into hers, grinding against the heat, I can feel through her dress. She moans again, louder, and I nearly lose it right here.

I already know once I take her that there will be no turning back. This woman is already my salvation and my undoing, and I don't even know her. But gods I want to know every inch of her. I don't want there to be a part of her body unexplored – untested – by me.

I will know everything about her by the time this night is done, that I am sure of. Her body will exist just to sing my praises, and I will play it accordingly.

I drag my teeth over the sensitive spot of her neck and her head tilts back

farther. “Just like that,” she whispers against my ear. Her voice is already husky, sending a sharp blaze of heat down my spine, and my hips jerk forward instinctively.

Fuck, I can't wait to hear her scream.

I'm going to make sure this entire party knows who she belongs to. She will leave tonight hoarse and her skin painted with my marks, eager for me to prove again and again why I am the only one she wants.

My hand moves down her body, prepared to lift her up against me when a booming voice calls out down the hall, causing me to jerk back. “Hey! Who's there?”

It is only now that my brain starts to catch up with my actions. I take another step away from Salina, not even daring to look in her direction. Rational thought starts to trickle in the more distance I put between us.

Looking down, I smooth my hands down my clothes, hoping to look together as I calm my racing mind. I hope I have not royally fucked myself.

Literally.

I should care about how this could affect my standings in the court. This could be a royal family member that she's mated to.

Two sides of my mind war with each other. On one hand, I really don't want to have to fight someone. On the other, I can't be bothered to care about wanting another male's mate. Not when mating means so little to most dark elves. Not when no one else deserves to have her.

If I have it my way, she'll be mine before long. Laws be damned.

As I make out the elf striding down the hallway, my muscles start to relax. It is a member of the royal family, but one I know not mated.

“My apologies, your highness,” I call out to the Prince. “I'm just enjoying the ball you've thrown...” I let a smirk slide onto my face. “And all the pleasures that come with it.”

The Prince stops in front of me. “It's a good one, yeah?”

His crooked grin confirms what I already knew. The prince only cares about a good night. He won't give me any grief about my lewd activities here. He's well known as a party loving elf, and I'm surprised he's not tangled up in one of these rooms right now.

I rock back on my heels, raising my eyebrows. “You always know how to throw them.”

He chuckles, nodding his head. “It's one of my skills.” His eyes dart down the hall, and I can tell he's weighing something in his mind. Eventually, he

lets out a soft sigh. “You know this wing is reserved for the royal family, Denve.”

I force my posture to stay relaxed, not wanting to give away how nervous I am to have upset the Prince. Truthfully, I don’t give a fuck who the wing is for. I just know why I wanted to use it.

I lean back on my heels a little, cocking my head. And I keep my grin in place, trying to look much more playful than I feel. “I didn’t realize. I was a little too... preoccupied to notice where I was. My apologies.”

I watch as his smile grows wider, hitting the mark I was hoping for. Enticed with a good time, the Prince will pay attention to little else. “I know what that’s like.” He chuckles beneath his breath. Reaching out to clap me on the shoulder, he gives me a squeeze. “Given your status, I’ll make an exception.” He winks. “It’ll be our little secret.”

Heat squeezes through my veins, a possessive need to make Salina my secret. I want everything about her to only be mine. In fact, I’d like to carve the eyes out of any elf’s head that dares to look at her.

But I don’t have that luxury right now.

Instead, I pat the prince’s arm. “I’d appreciate that,” I say lowly, like it really is a secret. I lean a little closer. “And when you hear screams tonight, I can assure you that no one needs to come running.”

His eyebrows jump up as he throws his head back, boisterous laughter bouncing off the walls. I fight to remain calm as he nods, patting me again before turning on his heel to return to his party.

I sigh, letting my body deflate. Running a hand through my hair, I try to shake off the interruption. “Maybe the hallway isn’t the best...”

My words trail off, hanging in the air before falling flat. I had turned, expecting to see Salina standing slightly behind me. She had been silent the entire interaction, but I only thought that was because she’s a well-trained human.

As it turns out, she’s not.

I’m standing alone in the hallway, not having even heard her slip away, and a new wave of anger – hot with the possessive need to find her – hits me. I grind my teeth together, my magic lashing out now as I let loose a low growl.

“Salina.”

SALINA

What the fuck?

That's the only thought in my head at the intrusion of the Prince. I immediately hide the blade behind my back, retracting the knife into my sleeve. Denve steps forward to greet the Prince as I turn away, not wanting for the newcomer to see my face.

They busy themselves with a conversation, and I'm not about to hang around and chat. With the dagger secured back in its sheath, I glance subtly over my shoulder, seeing Denve and his friend are turned the other way.

It's an opportune time for me to get out of here. An open door stands a few meters away. Ambling over, I spot an open window inside. Casting one final look at the Prince and Denve, I disappear out of their vicinity.

I climb out the first level window, stepping out into what appears to be the gardens. Sighing, I trudge over to a lone bench and take a seat, running a hand over my hair in frustration. Strands of hair stick to my forehead, having gotten messy in my moment of heat with Denve.

Damn it... I had him in the palm of my hands. Had I just another minute alone with him then I could've been going home not empty handed.

I curse the godsdamned Prince, annoyed that he has foiled what would have been a perfect hit. A distant voice in my head whispers to me, telling me that there's another reason why I didn't want our moment to end.

At that moment, despite the slight cold that whisks through the air, a sensation of warmth runs up my legs at the thought of Denve's hands making them quiver with delight.

I run my fingers along my lips, craving the taste of his mouth on mine

and feeling spiteful that they were ripped away so violently.

“Fuck...” I sigh. “Maybe it was for the best. Even with a good escape route, trying to drag an unconscious noble away from the ball would have attracted too many prying eyes. Damned rich bastards...”

I should have planned this out better. Instead, I allowed myself to get swept up in the moment, falling victim to Denve’s seduction abilities. Even if I was about to get the hit on him, I shouldn’t have let it go as far as it did, because now I can’t get him off of my mind.

It wasn’t a good move on my part. None of this reflects my many years of hard training in Nakam, where I invested many hours into becoming my best self. Certainly not a great start to my first contract.

It certainly doesn’t help that I’ve taken a genuine liking to the son of a bitch. Still, not all hope is lost. I’ll find a way back to him and turn this all around. Otherwise Sythar won’t be happy, and I won’t ever get another contract again. I’ve worked too hard to throw this all away over some bastard noble.

Rising from the bench, I look to the night sky, deciding it’s time to head back to the hideout and recollect my thoughts. There, I can come up with a new plan.

Sneaking around the back of the manor, I walk out of a side exit, only to bump into Turon when I come around a corner. At the sight of me, he chuckles and reaches out to touch my hair. I push his hand back.

“Stay away from me,” I hiss.

“Baby, come on. Don’t be like that. I was a bad boy, no doubt, but maybe I need some discipline – Ugh!”

His face winces in pain as I push my knife deeper into his liver, a small gasp escaping his mouth as I then twist the blade. His eyes roll back as life leaves his body, collapsing into my arms. I drag him into a bush and leave him to rot.

I take a quiet route out of the khuzuth estates, jumping from rooftop to rooftop. The journey back to the loft allows me to let off some steam, each leap exerting force and energy.

I jump over the busy streets of the city, spectating the rampant nightlife below. This city is filth, full of dark elf scum. I have two kills under my belt already, but it’s not nearly enough.

After some time, I reach the rooftop of the warehouse, deciding to camp up on the rooftop for a while. The city sits in the near distance, its bright

flashing lights full of life. The shouting of drunkards rings out through the air, too unclear to hear what's being said.

I sit on the edge of the roof, my legs dangling over a thirty foot drop below. I remove the knife from my sheath, running my eyes along its tip. I wish I was seeing the dried blood stains of Denve Thuvrol, but tonight wasn't my night.

To come so close and yet still fail makes me question my abilities. Why is this mission proving to be so much harder than I originally thought? I imagined this being a simple job.

Denve is a noble, so getting to him was always going to be tricky, but I hesitated far too much for my own liking when I had him in my trap. Given my hatred for the Thuvrols, I should have been able to pull this off, no problem.

Now my head is getting wrapped up in all of this bullshit. On top of tonight's failure are the voices of Sythar and Callista telling me *I told you so*.

Were they right in the end? I wonder. They told me my emotions would get in the way. I just never expected to be feeling something for Denve.

I toss my dagger up in the air and catch the hilt with a perfect grip. One thing is for certain, I'm going to need to adapt and evolve from tonight's mistake.

In the academy, I was taught that assignments can grow more complex once you're on the job itself. That was certainly proving to be the case here in Vhoig. My emotions are putting a fog over all of this.

I need a good night's rest to refresh myself. Before that, though, I have to come up with a new plan. Sheathing my knife, I hop over the edge of the building and slide down a pipe until I come to the level with my bed.

Climbing in, I throw off my clothes and slip into something more comfortable. I place my knife on the desk as I take a seat there. Pulling over a loose piece of parchment, I dip a quill in some ink and begin brainstorming a new approach, scribbling whatever ideas come to my mind.

I know he wants me, and no doubt my sudden disappearance will make him wonder where I've gone. For him to see me again will draw him to me like magic.

I need to find a way to get to him again, this time in a private place. I can't imagine the royals having another ball anytime this week, and I can't afford to hang around in Vhoig for longer than that. I need to get creative.

I recall how I saw him in the pub district one evening, remembering how

he's a noble who travels around with no bodyguards. At least I have that going to my advantage. Aside from his friends, he seems to travel alone.

But I need to be certain about this. I make a note to get in touch with Esra and see if he frequents any one place in particular. I want a plan that will work with no risk of failure.

I'll send word for information first thing tomorrow, I think as I yawn. It's time for some rest.

As I crawl into bed, only one thought ravages my mind.

I never thought I'd be attracted to another Thuvrol, let alone a target of mine.

The presence of Denve in my mind continues distracting me, even as I toss and turn in an effort to sleep. With nothing to take my thoughts away from him, my hands unconsciously drift between my legs, my eyes remaining closed as I imagine what could have been.

I hear his moans echo in my mind, thinking of what he would have felt like had he made it inside of me. Why is it that I'm not opposed to the idea? The fantasy only makes me touch myself with more intensity.

I become aware of what I'm doing, but I don't stop. If I leave it now, I'll be in a worse mood than I was before. I recall the warmth of his hot breath on my neck, wondering how it may have felt between my legs.

I fantasize about his tongue running up my clitoris, and it's then my body surges with a wave of pleasure. I grab the bedsheets in my hands as my moans echo between the walls.

Fuck... Why did I do that?

I feel awful. Grunting, I clean myself off and pull the blankets up. I shouldn't have done that. It only just validated my attraction to Denve. But what the hell else am I supposed to do with all these emotions?

Shoving them down certainly isn't working. This contract only grows more complicated by the hour.

DENVE

She is with me one minute, and then gone the next.

“I turned away for one minute! How could she have disappeared so quickly? And why did she disappear?”

The disappearance of the human woman, Salina, is disturbing to me for several reasons.

Maybe it is disturbing to you because it feels like something important has been wrenched away from you?

Maybe it is disturbing to you because it feels like the floor has crumbled out from beneath you.

I don't understand why I feel this way about a woman I have just met.

Your first meeting didn't exactly go the traditional way, I think as I look down at myself.

My shirt is rumpled, and the fabric of my jacket is crushed. The front of my trousers has been unbuttoned, and I groan as I look down at my hardened state.

Maybe her mate came to find her, and she had to vanish before they discovered she was in a tryst with a different male.

Maybe she is still here, I think as I right my clothes. Maybe I can still find her!

I don't know where this new urgency has come from. I am one of the most apathetic people I know.

After meeting her, having her in my arms, tasting her, feeling her, I know two things.

First, she has inflamed something in me that I didn't know existed.

Second, she is important. I do not know why she is important. All I know is that I cannot go on without knowing more about her.

I rush out of the prince's private rooms and back to the main room where the ball is being held.

My heart sinks in my chest as I look at the crowds of dark elves in the ballroom.

But I persevere and walk up and down around the ballroom, looking for her.

I must look like a crazed person, as I walk hurriedly with my shirt buttoned up wrong, and my shoes on wrong.

How long has it been? I think dazedly.

I must walk through the permitted areas of the castle for an hour before I give up.

She isn't here. She is very clearly not here any longer.

I have one last hope.

I find the dark elf who she was dancing with before me. I pull him roughly away from the dark elf noblewoman he is speaking to and question him about Salina.

He has no answers for me.

I ask the people around him too. But no one has heard of a human woman fitting her description, who is also the mate of a dark elf, related to the royal family,

As I think about it, about the story, I realize that it is a complete and utter lie.

Why would she tell a lie like that? I think to myself. *Why would she want to get into this ball?*

And how did she get into the ball?

She was clearly lying about her connection to the royal family, but she still managed to get into the ball.

And she looked the part. She looked like she belonged.

Why would she come to a ball she was not invited to, kiss a random stranger, and then disappear?

I have no desire to stay at the ball for the rest of the evening, but I cannot leave now, because several people will notice that I am missing.

So I stay for dinner and dessert and more dancing, and all I can do is think about the human woman whose body was so close to mine mere moments, and then hours, ago.



I WAKE up the day after the ball with a headache.

I returned home last night after midnight and went to the cellar, where I emptied several bottles of zhisk. I have a very high tolerance for alcohol, but last night I drank enough to put an entire herd of equu down.

Despite the amount of zhisk I consumed, all I can think about is Salina, my mystery woman.

She is important. She is important. She is important.

The words resound through my mind, practically bouncing off the walls of my brain. I cannot get rid of those words and the thought of her, no matter how I try.

I spend all day in bed thinking about Salina.

She is important to me, and I don't know why, and I know I have to find her. I have to find her.

I don't know why, I don't know why, I don't know why.

You need to stop this! I think fiercely to myself. *You are obsessing over her. This isn't right!*

I give a dry laugh as I realize how much I have been thinking about her.

When evening starts to fall, I get out of bed and prepare to go to my favorite tavern. I know several of my friends will be there, probably waiting for me, and that is motivation enough for me to get out of bed.

After I have finished getting ready, I fill my coin purse with some of the money from the meager allowance that my parents afford me.

I don't even want to think about how much Ocuri gets from them. He probably has open access to their pocketbooks.

The thought galls me, as all thoughts about Ocuri usually do. But the one about money is particularly hard for me to swallow, because if I lived on my own, I would not even be able to live off the allowance my parents give me.

I'd have to work three jobs just to survive, and I definitely would not be able to remain in the High Towns.

I arrive at the tavern just before the sun sets. The night is still warm, and there are hints of sunlight creeping over the horizon.

I get a table outside, where several of my friends are waiting for me.

I am still thinking about her when I order my first pint of ale. I barely participate in the conversation with my friends, because all I can focus on are the lines of her face and the curve of her mouth.

All I can think about is the way her body felt underneath my touch.

All I can remember is the way she responded to me, the way she moaned into my mouth and sagged in my arms.

She is important. And I want her more than anything in the world. She is all I want. She is all I want.

My friends and drinking companions do not seem to notice that I am lost in thought. Although my friend Farzhi does – but among the rest, he is my only real friend.

“Are you okay?” he asks me when I’ve had my sixth shot of zhisk. I want to order more, but when the barmaid comes around, Farzhi instead asks her for a basket of friend burgona and roasted dripir.

“You need to eat something,” he says firmly when I protest. “But you can order the rest of them.”

I have enough money to keep me – and this entire bar – liquored for the rest of the night, so I acquiesce to Farzhi’s conditions.

When the food comes, I realize how hungry I am.

I haven’t eaten all day. I have been too busy obsessing over Salina.

I groan as I taste the oily, salty food for the first time, and I scarf it down.

Farzhi looks at me with some satisfaction, and when the barmaid comes around again, he orders me some mead.

“You can have some zhisk later. The night is still young,” he tells me.

I trust Farzhi with my life. I trust him more than I trust anyone in my family. So I follow his advice and only have some more zhisk after midnight when my stomach has settled.

I also trust Farzhi because I know he doesn’t want anything from me. Everyone in the bar loves me because I can pay for their drinks.

But Farzhi, who is a lesser noble, always pays for his own food and alcohol.

I start thinking about her – Salina – when I start drinking the zhisk again.

I wonder how much zhisk it will take for me to forget about her.

I quickly realize that there isn’t enough hard liquor in the world to make me forget about her.

She is important. And I want her more than anything in the world.

The tavern closes several hours after midnight. Farzhi offers to give me a lift in his carriage, but I decide to walk.

I feel wide awake, and my mind is bouncing all over the place. I know that walking will help me to sober up and will also tire me out.

The walk from the tavern to High Towns will take quite some time, and if I take the long route, I'll arrive when the sun rises.

That will be a nice way to end the day, I think tiredly to myself.

As I walk, in my drunken state, all I think about is Salina.

My thoughts are not coherent and are hazy visions of her, conjured up by my fleeting memories of her, combined with things I have invented myself.

She is important.

I have walked home on my own, drunk, before. I know that this isn't always a good idea, especially because drunk nobles get robbed a lot.

But I should be fine, as long as I don't stray too close to the Red District.

The night grows darker as I walk. I stumble along, and then down an alleyway that should take me home more quickly.

I hope I get home soon.

SALINA

The air in Vhoig must always be cold, I decide as I drape the cloak around my shoulders.

The fact that Vhoig is a port city probably has something to do with it, I think to myself as I fasten the cloak underneath my chin and pull the hood up.

It is just after eleven at night when I open the window of the loft I am staying in and let myself fall through the air.

I catch myself before I get close to the ground. Drawing on the energy I have just created by plummeting through the air, I drag myself up and grab hold of the rooftop that is just opposite the loft I am staying in.

The distance between the two rooftops was too wide for me to jump across, but from here it should be easy to make it across the rooftops, all the way to the part of Vhoig where music, lights, dancing, and lots of alcohol burns throughout the night.

I know exactly where I am going – a tavern in the club district – and I take a running leap across rooftop after rooftop.

Thank gods that Callista kept me fit, I think as I make it across the fifth rooftop.

I have various contacts in Vhoig, and Esra, the human woman who is a dancer in the Red District, was the one I met up with this morning.

She has an entire folder on Denve, and I know practically everything about him now. And nothing I have learned about him surprises me.

He spends a lot of his time like most young nobles do – drinking himself to death.

He doesn't have an occupation of any kind and does not seem to be all that involved in the family business.

He is a waste. He has more wealth than I can ever dream of – his father probably owns most of Vhoig – and he cannot even find anything productive to do with his life.

He is a waste.

My thoughts about Denve are grim as I make it to the penultimate rooftop. I can see the tavern in the distance, and the rooftop closest to it will give me a perfect view of both the entrance and exit.

The distance between the two rooftops is again too wide for me to make a safe jump.

Callista could probably do it. She'd just go flying through the air.

For a second, I miss my best friend so deeply that it hurts. A lump threatens to form in my throat, and I blink hot, stinging tears away.

It has been ten days since my graduation from Nakam.

And I am finally here, doing the one thing I know will bring me peace.

Eight.

There are people on the street below me, and I know that making the distance will require more magic than I am used to.

I focus on the space between the two buildings, and, after concealing myself, I vault myself up, drawing on the energy of the waves crashing against the ports of Vhoig.

Callista would be proud. I cannot help the thought as I arc gracefully through the air.

I fall to the rooftop but land and roll onto my feet instantly.

I am breathing heavily as I perch on the edge of the rooftop. I do not remove the concealment magic that makes me look like nothing more than a dark patch of shadow on the rooftop.

He should be here any minute.

Esra's information seemed pretty solid, and for a second, I wonder about her. What is a woman like her doing as a dancer, when she could be using her abilities for something more exciting?

Like what you're doing now? Sitting on a rooftop and chewing your fingernails?

I wonder if she was trained at Nakam, and I also wonder if her work as a dancer in one of the best clubs in the Red District is her cover.

I know that some of the richest dark elves on Protheke travel to this club

to see their dancers and having access to that kind of clientele must serve her well.

It has been eight days since I received my mission from Sythar.

I can still remember the apprehensive expression on his face when he handed me the folder with all my contacts in Vhoig.

He didn't think I could do it.

My back straightens when I see Denve.

I am tempted, only for a second, to get closer to Denve. But I banish the temptation from my mind quickly enough.

FOUR.

I watch as Denve and his friends take a seat at a table outside the tavern.

He hands a bundle of notes to the tavern owner, and his friends cheer and throw their hands into the air.

I wonder how many of them actually like him, or are just friends with him for the money?

The thought makes me sad for him, and I realize that, even from this distance, I am attracted to him.

He has a bright, wide, generous smile, and he isn't dressed the way he was dressed at the ball.

Instead, he wears a simple shirt that is untucked and a pair of trousers, and he seems genuinely comfortable in his skin.

Unlike how he was at the ball.

Until you started talking with him, of course.

He was attracted to me as well. Now as I watch him, I find it difficult to reconcile the version I have created in my mind of Denve Thuvrol with the dark elf I am attracted to.

It is disappointing and shocking, and it *hurts*, because I have spent years planning this.

I have spent years building this image of who the Thuvrol's are, using what I had learned from who Ocuri was.

But now I am coming to see that Denve is not what I expected at all.

FOUR.

Denve seems quite harmless and is friendlier than his appearance would have anyone believe.

He is funny and charming and is clearly as generous with his money as his smile.

The soft spot between my legs pulses with heat as I remember Denve's lips on mine and his hands on my body.

He's a good kisser too.

I remain on the rooftop, watching as Denve orders drinks and food not only for his table, but for the tables around him.

Eventually, all the tables are pushed together. Denve becomes the center of attention as he tells a tale that must be side splittingly funny, because the people outside the tavern roar with laughter.

How could two brothers be so different?

The question gnaws at me, has been gnawing at me since I met Denve at the ball. Ocuri always showed me exactly who he was.

Cold and conniving and incapable of loving me properly, even when we were together privately.

He was always scheming to get more of everything. More power, more money, more, more, more.

Denve as he sits in stark, harsh contrast to his brother. He seems quite content with not being more powerful.

It has been four days since I met Denve.

It's a shame that I have to kill him.

Because despite my wonder at Denve and Ocuri's differences, the thought of Ocuri Thuvrol has hardened the part of my heart that will never recover from what he did to me.

And I might be attracted to Denve, but Ocuri is dead, and the Thuvrol's have to pay somehow.

And the best way to make that family pay is to take their only other son away from them.

It is a shame. I didn't set out to hurt anyone. But losing two sons is nothing to losing half a coven of innocent purna.

Someone has to pay.

Denve and his friends stay at the tavern until just after one in the morning. The air is frigid as wind blows into Vhoig off the seas.

I revel in the crisp, bright, salty air as I watch Denve settle the bill.

This is a real shame. He tips well.

Everyone at the tavern acts as if they like Denve a lot, but again I wonder how many of them would like him if had less money.

He is very clearly drunk, and I'd be surprised if he wasn't, considering the amount of spirits he consumed throughout the night.

He must have something he's trying to run from. He's going to put every producer of zhisk out of business if he does this every night.

He stumbles away from the tavern and heads back to High Towns, where the manor is located.

“Why the fuck didn't he come in a carriage? Why is he walking? He must be an idiot, because I know he can afford to keep a driver and carriage waiting all night.”

I grumble the words to myself as Denve comes closer to the building I am standing on.

I keep the concealment magic around me like a shroud, and I watch as he stumbles down an alleyway.

He really doesn't care about his life, I think wonderingly. Anyone could see he is a noble. He's going to get robbed, or worse.

I burst into laughter at the absurdity of my statement.

“I am the ‘worse’ that is going to happen to him,” I whisper and I swallow the fit of giggles as I walk along the rooftop. I follow Denve's haphazard movements and then prepare to drop from the sky as the alleyway narrows.

I let myself fall and drag and grab at the energy that my movement created, letting it wrap around me and catch me as I get closer to the ground.

Then, pulling a knife from my boot, and summoning the rot magic into my free hand, I follow Denve Thuvrol.

I have to do this because I am reminded every day that I have lost count of the days since I lost everything in Prazh.

Because of Ocuri Thuvrol.

DENVE

Let's see how long it takes to get home tonight. The last time you were this drunk, you only got home after two days of stumbling around.

I am surprised that I am able to form a coherent thought, considering the state I am in.

The truth is that I have been drinking my problems away. Everything about the ball did not go as planned.

I did not spend as much time with the right people, and I did not even spend any time with the Prince or the King.

Instead, I spent all night dodging Vhoig's most eligible bachelorettes, and then there was *her*.

I haven't been able to get her out of my mind.

She was perfection itself, and she vanished so quickly that in the day that has passed since the ball, I cannot help but wonder if I dreamed her up.

But I am quite sure I did not drink that much.

I find myself stumbling into the wall in the alley I am in.

That is when I realize that I need to relieve myself. Mostly because I will wet myself if I don't, and also because I should sober up slightly more quickly once I have relieved myself.

I don't want to end up in a ditch somewhere. My thoughts are slightly scrambled, but I am quite sure that I still want to live a little while longer.

After I unbutton my trousers and piss against a wall, I clean myself up as much as possible before I head back down the alleyway.

I must be just inside the Red District, I think to myself as the air around me becomes bright and sharp.

The bright lights of the clubs in the Red District help to sober me up, and I veer off into a different alleyway which will lead me directly home.

It is then when I sense someone behind me.

Later on, I will question how my very inebriated brain managed to sense her. But somehow, I do.

I turn quickly. And it is *her*.

“You’re, you’re the woman from the ball.” The words spill from me as I look at her with shock.

She does not look like the woman at the ball, but I am sure it is her.

Later on, I will question how I knew this, too.

I know it is her.

The woman who stands in front of me looks like she belongs to the shadows. She does not look like she belongs to the physical world at all.

Her disguise – although I am not sure why she is wearing one – is very good. Her hair is black and short. She has also disguised her face – her nose is larger, and her lips are thinner.

Her eyes widen as she realizes that I know who she is. And with that, the disguise melts away.

And there she is. Beautiful. Perfect.

Why is she shocked that I recognized her?

“I just wanted to see you. I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I wanted to finish what we started the other night,” she says in a throaty voice that goes directly to my cock.

I want to say yes immediately. Everything in me screams that I should say yes.

I want her badly. And my cock straining against my trousers is clear evidence of this.

Before I can answer her, she grabs me and kisses me. I groan into her mouth as I take her into my arms.

Her body is soft and strong and lithe and *perfect*.

She is so fucking perfect; I think to myself as the kiss goes on for forever.

Her full lips are soft. She pulls away from me then, and I groan with frustration until she starts to kiss the underside of my jaw, and then my neck.

Her hands go to the front of my trousers, and she laughs her throaty laugh when she feels how hard I am.

“You’ve been waiting for me, haven’t you?” she asks me when she reaches back up to kiss me.

I do not know what prompts me to pull away from her. Maybe her lips and hands on my body sobers me up.

But in the next moment, I have pulled away from her completely.

“What are you doing?” she cries, and I am tempted to grab her again. Her chest is heaving, her hair is ruffled, and her already full lips are swollen from the kiss.

“Why did you do that?” It is clear that she is upset by me pulling away, but I have to know.

I have to know.

“Who are you? Who are you? I need to know who you are?”

She scoffs impatiently at my question. “I’ve already told you who I am. I am a mate to a third cousin of the King –“

“I know that isn’t the truth.” I snap the words, more sober than ever.

“I know that isn’t the truth.” I repeat the words in a calmer tone of voice a second time. Her eyes are wide. And almost angry.

“Why are you here? How did you even find me in a random street? In all of Vhoig, how did you find me? And I know you’re not human – even if you look human.”

Her face is changing subtly before me as I ask her the last question.

I take a step towards her. My voice is so gentle when I speak to her that it surprises me.

I want to know her. I want to know who she is. And I want her.

“Who are you really?”

Her face changes even more. Gone is the seductive expression. Instead, her eyes are hard, and her full lips are pressed into a thin line.

Even her body changes. Her stance changes, becoming almost predatory.

For a second, before everything changes, I see the hesitation on her face.

She doesn’t want to do what she is about to do, I think to myself, and I wonder what she is about to do to me.

But the hesitation passes as quickly as it flashed across her face and instead, all I see is this hard mask that I know is impenetrable.

“You’re not as stupid as you look,” she says coldly.

She takes a step towards me, and I know that all the physical training I did as a child and teenager would not have prepared me for this, for *her*.

Whatever she is, she isn’t human. She is dangerous and cold and unfeeling and all I can feel is regret.

How can I regret something that never even happened?

How can I regret that I lost her before I had her?

I wish it had turned out differently.

I take a step away from her, but I am still too drunk, too weak, to make a safe getaway.

I don't think she is going to let me get out of here alive. I thought she was a good thing that happened to me. Am I not allowed to have something good?

“What do you want? If it's my family's money, I can get you that. Not a lot, but I can get you money if that's what you want?”

I realize every day how much I want to live, despite everything, and I realize that even more now as I bargain for my life.

She laughs sharply, mirthlessly, and my blood goes cold.

My heart drops to my stomach, and I swallow convulsively as I think about all the ways she could hurt me.

“Money is not what I want. You could give me all the money in the world, and you wouldn't be able to repay your family's debt.”

She tells me this coolly, her voice like ice, and I don't know what my family has done to her, but clearly it is bad enough that she is looking for blood.

She continues talking then. “I did not think you would figure me out as quickly as you did.”

Despite my fear of her, and my regret that she has clearly been out to get me from the start, I cannot help but want her more than I ever have.

She is so, so very beautiful, and I know I will never find another woman as beautiful as her.

I will never find a woman who makes me feel the way she does again.

Because you'll be dead, you fool.

“It doesn't matter that you figured it out though.” She takes another step towards me, and another, and another.

“Why not?”

This is it. This is the end of you.

She doesn't answer me, continuing to prowl toward me. Her eyes are narrowed, cold, unforgiving.

What do I need to ask forgiveness for? I haven't done anything!

Time seems to slow down, and I replay her words in my head.

My family owes her a debt, it seems. And I am going to be the one to pay.

Of course I am. I am always the one to pay.

“Why not?” I ask her again.

Why not? Why not? Why doesn't it matter?

She moves so quickly that I do not see her. All I see is a dark shape cutting through the air above me.

This time when she grabs me, she does not do so with the intent of kissing me.

There is no romance behind her movements.

Instead she closes her hands around my throat and wraps her legs around my midsection.

She twists and pulls me with her, and my head starts to swim as she continues to press almost gently at my neck.

I see the ground coming, but I do not feel it.

Later on, I will know that I lost consciousness before I even hit the ground.

SALINA

“**H**ow the hell am I going to get this son of a bitch back to the warehouse?” I ask myself as I stare at Denve’s unconscious body.

I employ the use of magic to temporarily grant me extra strength, dragging him through alleyways and darkened, silent streets. No one is out to spot me, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have a difficult time straining myself.

“You’re one heavy motherfucker,” I curse as I drag him along the ground.

I can’t help but to think I ought to have prepared for this by dragging sandbags back at Nakam, but from what I’ve heard from veteran assassins, each mission provides some sort of training in itself.

I feel trickles of sweat running down my body despite the fact my outfit was designed to keep me cool. After some time, I finally make it to the warehouse, where I’m greeted by the horrendous sight of stairs.

I take a moment to catch my breath and gather my strength before hauling him up to the loft. There, I leave him on the floor while I go about finding something to tie him up with. In a cabinet, I find an extra thick set of chains, rusted with age.

My muscles tense with aches and pains by the time I’m done tying him up. Retiring to the edge of my bed, I wipe a pool of sweat from my forehead and grant myself a much deserved break.

Fuck me, I think as I pant breathlessly.

I take a few minutes to collect myself, peeling off my outfit as my skin becomes exposed to the air. A refreshing sensation runs down my spine as I splash cold water on my face, washing the sweat off.

Standing in front of the mirror, I remove the glamor from my body. I watch as the jet black hair fades into silver, starting from the roots and running all the way down to the tips.

As that happens, I glance at Denve in the reflection as he rotates gently from side to side, like a compass trying to orient itself. I can't help but feel as though something is off. Walking over, I cross my arms and stroke my chin in deep thought as I inspect the unconscious elf.

I thought I would have felt better after subduing him. After all, this exact image is what got me to accept the contract.

Blowing it off as exhaustion, I break away from him and get dressed, slipping into my training leathers. Despite trying to take my mind off of things, my thoughts keep reverting to the problems bouncing around in my head. I take a seat and decide to confront it all.

I need to calm down. Everything has gone according to plan. The letter demanding a heavy ransom was already sent off this evening, and I have the Thuvrol bastard here in my captivity... So why the hell do I feel so damn conflicted?

I close my eyes, trying to envision myself departing Vhoig harbor on my return journey back to Milthar. Somehow, as hard as I try, I just can't see myself leaving after collecting the ransom money. The reason why baffles me.

Can I truly bring myself to kill him?

"Fuck me," I groan out. "I was so eager to do so beforehand, and I would have done so if that prince hadn't interrupted us at the ball... So what's stopping me?"

I contemplate deviating from the plan by simply departing after receiving the ransom, without sticking a blade in Denve's guts.

I haven't told him anything that could give away where I've come from. Even with the connections that a noble like him is sure to have, I highly doubt he can trace my movements all the way back to Nakam...

At that moment, I subconsciously tune out the world around me. Playing in my mind is the attack launched on the Lunar Flame coven. I hear the dreadful screams of my sister, a sound that haunted me in nightmares for so long.

All because I let Ocuri get too close... Well, it's a good thing I didn't repeat the mistake with Denve.

"Never again," I say aloud, snapping my mind back to reality. "After all,

the Nakam has taken extra steps to ensure it's never discovered by an untrained eye."

I glance at Denve, the look on his face so peaceful as he sways about gently. Rising from the bed, I amble over to him. Despite his immense frame and intimidating look, he somehow looks as though he'd never harm even a small insect.

Should I just do it right now? The only thing that's stopping me is my mind.

My hands gravitate to my dagger, but I don't find the strength to brandish it.

Do I even have it in me anymore?

I'm so engrossed in thought that I take no notice of Denve's eyes gradually blinking open. I only become aware when I spot a pair of violet eyes narrowing in on mine. I retract, unsheathing the dagger by instinct.

Denve grunts, the range of his sway increasing as he scrambles back and forth. His eyes move to the restraints above him. I smile menacingly as his eyes meet mine once again.

In them, I anticipate fear and terror, relishing the rush it'll give me as I see the dagger up and down.

"Don't bother trying to escape. Restraints are my specialty."

Immediately after I speak, he smiles, a sight that throws me off of my guard.

"You know, Salina, if you really wanted to tie me up, all you had to do is ask nicely."

This son of a bitch...

"Shut the fuck up, you bastard!" I hiss. "Don't you see the situation you're in?"

"Uh-huh," he answers, looking up at the restraints once more. "I've got to say, I'm loving it, although I would have gone a little tighter on the chains, but hey! We can try it out next time, eh?"

Words try to come from my mouth, but I'm so thrown off that only mumbles and stutters escape, the sound of which causes Denve's grin to widen.

How the hell is he still so... him?

He continues to smile at me as I stumble over my thoughts. By now, I expected to be enjoying his pleas for mercy, to listen as he cried and begged to be released.

From the very start, Denve struck me as a strong man, capable of getting anything he wanted. I thought I could break him, but here he stands mocking me. The thought of taking it further crosses my mind, but I'm still too shocked to even move.

"Are you going to continue gawking at me or are you going to take my clothes off? I'm too warm."

So much for all of these bastards being the same...

"How the hell..." I mutter. I draw myself up, refocusing my mind back on my objective. "You're something else, you know that?"

"That's what you'll be saying by the time we get done fucking."

"You're way in over your head," I snarl. "But I'm afraid you've got it all wrong, rich boy. If I truly wanted to fuck you, I would have done so already."

Smiling cockily, I wait for his grin to disappear, but again, it only grows.

"What?" I growl.

"Well, I mean..." he says through his teeth. "I just have an inkling of a suspicion that if you legitimately wanted me dead, you would have done so already."

That's fucking it.

I step closer and press the knife to his throat, trying not to get distracted by his scent.

"What makes you so confident that it's not part of my plan?" I ask.

"Come on, you have me right where you want me. I can see right through you, just as much as I want to see you underneath your clothes, or should I say underneath me..."

"What are you talking about?" I snarl, pressing the dagger harder against his skin. "And quit it with the fucking snarky comments."

"It's obvious," he chuckles. "You want what everyone else is after in this godsforsaken town."

"Oh yeah? And what's that, Mr. Wise Guy?"

"Money."

Grunting, I take a step back but keep the knife pointed at him.

"Tell me, am I right or am I right?" he asks in a condescending tone.

"You're too confident with that tongue of yours," I say before immediately realizing he's about to make some sex joke. I quickly follow it up before he has the chance to reply. "Each time you talk, I'm one step closer to cutting it out."

"Then why did you just take a step back?" he laughs.

My only response is a scowl.

“Come on now,” he says. “Do you really think this is the first time the Thuvrol family has come under such a threat like this?”

“I’m surprised you’ve lived this long, to be honest,” I quip.

“Funny, but my family are practically walking bullseyes for people like you. What are you? A thief? A spy of some sort?”

“I’m not telling you a fucking thing.”

His eyes move to the nearby bed, his brows raising in curiosity.

“Can we try that out together?”

“Ugh!”

I return the knife to his throat. “You have no idea how much it would satisfy me to run this across your neck right now.”

“Keep talking baby, I’m liking this talk about satisfaction.”

Going in circles, I keep my mouth shut. As much as I hate his stupid smile, I hate myself even more for liking it at the same time.

DENVE

OH DEAR GODS.

Fuck.
I don't think I can talk my way out of this.
And I don't think I want to.

She is fucking stunning. And I am very, very glad that she has finally given up that stupid disguise.

She was beautiful then, but now?

She is ethereal. She looks as though she was created by the Thirteen themselves. She looks like she was created just to be worshiped.

I want to worship her.

I have a sudden vision of her on a throne and me at her feet. The vision makes my cock harden instantly, and I swallow as I come to terms with the fact that I am deeply attracted to someone who is trying to kill me.

Her silver hair cascades down her back, swinging in time with the sway of her rounded hips.

Her golden eyes glint in the light of the loft we're in. And I can see the same gold in her skin, as though someone has sprinkled gold dust onto her skin.

I am strangely relieved that she is letting me see her as she is.

Her hair, her eyes, her skin, the tattoos, all look so much more natural on her than the disguise she was wearing.

I exhale heavily and wince when the movement of my chest makes the ties around my body tighten slightly.

She is using magic, and this is further confirmation that she is not human.

I can see the magic in her, in her hair and her eyes, and even in the way

she moves.

I can see the magic in the shape of her hands, in the curve of her neck and the way she tightens her lips when she looks at me.

She is clearly not a dark elf – I don't know what she is – but she has magic, and she has a lot of it.

She is very powerful. Probably more powerful than you, I think to myself. When she catches me staring at her, her eyes narrow. With a flick of her fingers, she tightens the bonds around my body.

She walks up to me and pulls a knife from some hidden place on her body, pressing the tip of the blade to the skin under my chin.

I cannot help but laugh then and her eyes narrow more.

I only stop laughing when I feel droplets of what can only be blood roll down my neck.

"I'll only kill you after I get the money I need," she tells me in answer to my previous statement.

I laugh again, and even I can hear the bitterness in the way the choking sound bursts from me.

How do I tell her the truth? If I tell her the truth, I'll admit it out loud. My family doesn't care about me. They do not care about me, or my existence.

They'll probably be relieved if she kills me. Because they won't have to pretend to care about me in public.

One more burden gone.

Her eyes widen as she looks at me. She clearly heard the change in my voice.

"I'm afraid you won't get very far with that. Maybe if you hadn't kidnapped me, I could have given you some of my own money. But my family won't pay dalar for me. They won't care enough to spend any money on me."

Her eyes narrow again, and it's clear she doesn't believe me.

I sigh heavily. I am not sure what to say to convince her.

"Listen, they really don't care about me. I'm only the spare to the heir. If you want money, then I'm afraid to say that you kidnapped the wrong brother."

She takes a step away from me at those words, and I wince with pain as the knife scrapes against my skin.

"Your brother is dead," she says simply. I don't know what emotion is crossing her face.

Maybe shock? Anger?

She must think that I am making a joke. Or stalling to save my life.

The truth of it is, I don't have any reason to lie. Maybe this is a good thing – there is not much life to save.

I try to smile at her, but I am pretty sure that it is more of a grimace.

“Whatever research you’ve done is very wrong. Ocuri’s alive and well and probably terrorizing anyone who doesn’t agree with him. I saw him like three days ago. So I’m pretty sure he’s alive.”

I don't think she wanted to hear that.

I realize this as she goes completely still. I think that she stops breathing, and I watch as her pupils become fixed.

I don't think that this is a good situation to be in, I think to myself, and I struggle against the ties around my body.

She is really not paying attention to me because the ties loosen slightly instead of tightening around me.

I smell it then.

Magic.

I know, like I did before, that she does not have dark elf magic. Not magic like mine.

I see it then.

Purple tendrils of smoke that curl and twist away from her skin. She is standing completely still, and I am convinced that she is not conscious of the magic that is floating, peeling, off her.

The magic, whatever it is, starts to twist and spit around her.

It's as if it's angry, I think as I focus on it.

It twists and whirls and threads around her, faster and faster. The light in the loft goes out, and the magic blocks out the light of the moon.

She starts rising from the floor. As I look down at her hovering feet, I see that the floor itself is lifting.

The wooden floor.

The wooden floor is lifting and splintering and cracking. The noise of it is painfully loud, deafening almost. For a second all I can think is that they can probably hear the noise all the way from the Royal Gardens.

“Salina?” I ask her quietly, too quietly, and start to struggle against my ties.

“Salina?” I yell her name this time, but it makes no difference. The floor and the wooden walls are cracking under the pressure of her magic.

Rot magic. She's literally rotting the floor away.

She cannot hear me – whatever is happening is so violent that all her senses must be blocked.

Salina looks down then, and I see that her gold eyes are glinting, more than they usually do.

I cannot see the whites of her eyes any longer. Instead, when I look at her, all I see are big gold disks.

I really start working on getting out of my ties then, because it's clear that I cannot get through to her like this.

If I can just get out of these ties, I can snap her out of this. If I can just get close to her, touch her.

Otherwise, we'll die here.

She has risen all the way to the ceiling of the loft, and she is shrouded in a cloak of purple fire. Her magic has consumed her, enveloped her completely. Her silver hair floats behind her like a cape.

Then I see the rot, tendrils of it snaking across the floor from beneath where she levitates.

I may not know much about the kind of magic she has, but I know what rot magic means.

It'll kill you, I think to myself.

It will kill me.

She'll rot me to death. There will be nothing of me left.

Her magic will consume even my bones. It will be like I never existed.

I let out a strangled noise as the rot magic touches my boot. I pull my foot away, but the leather of the boot is not so lucky.

Instead, it rots right off my foot.

There will be nothing of me left, and there will be no one to mourn me.

I will die alone.

And she will probably bring this entire warehouse down around us.

"Gods. Help me. I need your help." I pray to the Thirteen and just then silver sparks fly from my hands.

"I'm a fucking idiot." I grunt to myself.

The building is shaking around us, and Salina is so completely enveloped in her magic that I can barely see her.

Her magic has stretched and twisted all around the room, and I burst free of my ties, using my own magic, and jump out of the way just before the rot reaches me.

“Now.” I take a deep breath and draw the magic from deep inside me. Magic that I haven’t used in a long time. “How the fuck am I going to do this?”

I use my magic as a shield and use it to vault my body into the air, though I don’t stay there for very long.

It comes out as silver sparks, and it is not as strong as Salina’s.

It will just have to do, as weak as it is.

If I can just snap her out of it.

She may try to kill me, but at least she will be in her right mind.

Salina comes down from the ceiling slightly, and her rot magic starts to swirl around her even more quickly.

I know that the building will fall down around us if I don’t do something soon.

That is when I throw myself into the air, at her, and scoop her up into my arms.

We fall to the ground, and there is nothing I can do to stop our fall, except fall and draw her closer to me so that she doesn’t get hurt.

All I can do is hope, hope, hope that neither of us gets hurt.

SALINA

HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?

How could this be possible?

I don't know what I am feeling. It could be rage. It could be heartbreak. I don't know.

The world falls away from me until all I can see is Ocuri's face. *How could he still be alive?*

Ocuri Thuvrol is alive, walking on Protheka as if he didn't cause chaos and destruction.

As if he didn't *hurt* me. As if he didn't take my sister away from me.

He is alive, and my sister isn't.

I want to scream and sob as old grief and new hatred wells up inside me. I become light headed as I step away from Denve.

You've stopped breathing. You need to breathe.

You need to breathe!

My skin is prickling, tingling, and I want to scream and tear my skin off. I want to pull my hair out.

I seem to be feeling every emotion at once. And a thought that this isn't a good thing lingers at the back of my mind as the world falls and falls and falls.

Maybe I am the one falling.

The world becomes dark around me.

Everything is quiet here.

Now I am not seeing Ocuri's face.

Now I am seeing my sister's face.

She had the same golden eyes as I did. Her hair was a brighter silver than

mine, almost white.

She was rounder than me, softer than me, the opposite of me in every way.

Her magic was slightly weaker, but she didn't care.

She didn't want anything except to find love and have a family and make a home for someone.

I feel like I'm choking.

You need to breathe.

Ocure's face has been obscured by the memory of finding my sister's body after the battle.

She's dead, and he is still alive.

I want to scream.

Rage, hatred, grief, all crash into me in waves. It is brutal and breathtaking and devastating, and I am not sure how I am still alive.

I feel it, vaguely, when I lose control of my magic.

But all I can do is hang on to myself as my grief and rage becomes greater than I am.

I have lost control of my magic several times. The first time was when I found my sister's body.

Now, as I lose myself to the grief, I realize how powerless I am to myself and my magic.

A voice screams from my heart then. A voice of vengeance and hatred.

Let it all rot! Let them all rot!

I wish I could cry. I wish I could scream.

Let it all rot!

I have always known that I have the power, the ability, to cause great destruction.

Now, knowing that Ocure is alive, all I want to do is bring Vhoig to its knees as I search for him. All I want to do is rot Vhoig away until I hold the city in my hand, and Ocure is begging for me to kill him.

Something, something in the real, physical world, and not in my little world powered by rage, knocks into me then.

My magic sees this as an attack and reacts quickly, reaching for the body, as visions of my sister and Ocure fall away and all I see is the loft.

And Denve.

You are rotting him!

I can't hurt him, I think to myself. Suddenly I am back in my body, and

my grief and rage becomes less important.

The only important thing now is *not hurting Denve*.

I fight for control, and I realize that we are falling through the air. Denve's face is twisted with pain, and a high-pitched keening is resounding through the air, and finally I have control.

Denve and I are both fighting for control, and I realize he is using his magic to soften our fall, while I force the rot to die down.

The tendrils of my magic snake their way back into my body, and I watch with horror as I wait for Denve to rot.

He doesn't rot. We fall softly to the ground, and I wait for him to let me go.

And as I wait, all I can feel is horror, horror, horror.

He does not let me go.

"It's okay." He cradles me and strokes my head, and he keeps repeating the same words. Over and over again. "It's okay. It will all be okay."

My magic is gone, and I am in control, even if it feels like something inside me has exploded.

Denve is still holding me, and I never want him to let me go, and I also really, really want to cry.

But I cannot do that. Not in front of Denve. Not in front of Ocuri's brother – who is still alive. Not in front of Ocuri's brother, who has caused me so much pain.

I cannot cry in front of Denve because that is a part of myself I am not giving away.

And I have already lost too much to the Thuvrol family.

I have lost too much.

Instead of crying, I push Denve off me. "Are you insane?" I ask him sharply.

His face changes, and I see a flash of disappointment before his face becomes neutral. His arms fall away from my body, and I feel a sudden rush of pain at the nothingness of him letting me go.

And that is when I see it. The damage I have done. The gasp that escapes me is sharp, and it is one of horror.

Denve seems to feel it then, and he stumbles away from me as strips of rotten flesh curl off his arms like peeling wallpaper.

He screams then, and bile rises in my throat at the smell of rotten flesh though I really should be used to it by now.

Tears are pouring down Denve's face as he screams and screams.

I drag and grab at the residual energy left by my magic and use it to find the healing salve and bring it to me, while I help Denve onto his back.

"Oh, Gods," I murmur the words. I don't consider the Thirteen to be my Gods, but I need to pray to something right now. "Denve. Look at me. Calm down. Calm down. I'm so, so sorry. Please. Look at me. Focus on me. Focus on my voice."

He stops screaming. He looks at me, and groans with pain, and tears are still pouring from his face.

I rip his shirt off as the healing slave floats through the air towards me.

I grab it as quickly as I can and scoop out entire handfuls of it and apply it to his skin.

The healing salve is pungent, and it covers up the smell of the rotten flesh. I made it myself, using rirzed flowers, fylvek grass, and meqixste, and it is imbued with my magic.

I only hope that it works.

Denve is still crying but softly, and he stares at the ceiling as I apply the cream to every part of his body that came in contact with the rot magic.

I am more horrified than ever as I stare at his rotten body. I am so horrified that I want to cry.

Now is not the time, I tell myself sternly. But what have I done? What in the name of Protheka have I done?

Have I killed him?

The fact that Denve might die is terrifying to me. And the fact that I came to Vhoig to kill him is not lost on me.

But even if I had gone through with my plans to kill Denve, I would not have done this.

No one deserves to die like this.

No one except Ocuri.

I banish the thought of Ocuri from my mind and focus on Denve.

"I am so sorry," I murmur. He still stares at the ceiling, and I wonder how much he can hear.

Can he even hear me? Can he still see? How close to death is he?

His pupils are dilated, his eyes fixed, and all I can do is continue rubbing the salve into his skin.

I get up quickly – I do not dare leave him for more than a minute – and grab more of the healing salve.

I put another coat on him, and I lift him as much as I dare to get the underside of his arms and the back of his neck.

He cries out then and as much as it hurts to hear that sound from him, I am also relieved because it means he is still feeling pain.

And that means he is still alive.

Only the dead do not feel pain, I think to myself as I remember something that my necromancy teacher at Nakam taught me years ago.

I feel sick to my stomach at the thought that Denve might die. I have seen a lot of death in my time, and back at Nakam I thought I would be fine with killing Denve just to hurt the Thuvrol's.

But the thought of killing Denve makes me choke on errant tears.

I jerk upwards when Denve actually looks at me. His violet eyes are shining.

"I'm so sorry," I never apologize. The only people I've ever apologized to were my sister's dead body, the purna who survived the attack by Ocuri, and Callista when I kicked her in the face once.

"I'm so sorry. I am so sorry."

Denve starts coughing, and it is an ugly cough. It sounds like he is choking, and I help him sit up slightly so that he can breathe properly.

He turns to me and gives me a crooked smile, even though he is in a lot of pain.

"You're shit at tying ropes," he tells me.

DENVE

The look on her face intrigues me, and the frenzied way in which she tends to me tells me everything I need to know. Well, not *everything*.

There are plenty of things to learn about this woman, I imagine. But just seeing the panic in her eyes communicates to me that she doesn't want me to die.

No, it's more than that. She's desperate to keep me from rotting away at her hands.

Pain rips through me, and yet I can't help but drink her in. The taste is sweeter, more intoxicating than even the most expensive liquor one could buy. She was beautiful before, but here like this in her true form, I'm completely drawn in.

"What?" she snaps, her face contorted in something like panic and anger as I look up at her.

"Nothing," I say, and I know I'm smiling even though my skin is on fire. "I'm just touched to see how caring you are towards me."

"Oh, shut up," she says, her eyes narrowing. "I just don't need your death on my conscience."

"Is that so?" I muse. "Because from the way you move, I'm thinking you may have more than one death on that conscience of yours."

She takes in a deep inhale. "You know nothing of me or my conscience."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't mean to say I don't want to. Your moves, though. Seems I know a little of those now."

"Are you always so fucking annoying?" she snaps.

"Are you always so... deadly?" I reply instantly.

“You’re not dead, are you? But we can soon change that.”

“Argh!” I cry as she runs her hands over the wounds on my chest. I see her swallow hard and wonder what exactly is going on in that beautiful head of hers. Because nobody has ever cared for me the way she is doing now.

And still so many things wander through my mind. This woman is a complete enigma. I mean, what just happened? I have no idea why my brother being alive would have such an effect on her and why she would even think he was dead to begin with? Besides, how would she even know him? She’s clearly not from these parts.

Her face has changed as I look up at her, softened almost. Yet she’s still the most stunning thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Her silver hair spills over me as she continues working on my chest wounds and suddenly the pain is no longer there. All I can see, all I smell, all I can hear is her.

Nothing can keep me from doing what I do next – no pain, no wounds, no irritating questions that keep picking at my head. Leaning forward, I place my mouth to hers, feeling her lean back slightly with the shock of my actions.

But she doesn’t seem offended by what I’ve done. She pulls back and tries to return to healing my injuries, but they are now the last thing on my mind. I have one need right now, and that is her.

“Let me finish,” she says, her voice softer now.

“I’m fine,” I insist, reaching out and taking the back of her head in my hand. I pull her closer and feel her sink into my kiss, knowing that she wants this by the way a small moan rumbles through her mouth and into mine.

Everything disappears – the pain, the questions – and there’s just me and her, suspended in the moment as if this is a spell. I run my hands through her hair and deepen the kiss, owning her mouth with my tongue, wanting to possess all of her.

“Stop,” she says, pulling back breathlessly.

“I don’t want to stop,” I reply. “And I don’t think you do either.”

For the first time in a while, she smiles, and I can see a glint in her eyes that says I’m right. She flips her hair over to the side and runs a slender finger over my lips.

“Are you sure you’re up to it?” she asks, glancing down at my chest.

There’s a teasing quality to her tone, but also something that still tells me she’s concerned for my well being. That in itself makes me harden even more. No number of injuries is going to keep me from fucking her, right here, right now.

“Oh, I’m up to it,” I reply, unlacing my pants. She looks down at me as I release myself, hard and throbbing.

“Seems you are,” she says. I watch her as she stands, and I can’t help but run my hand gently over my cock as she sheds herself of her leathers. Above me she’s now a vision, like some fucking goddess – naked, adorned with floral tattoos that cover her arms and thighs, and of course, her long, silver hair.

“Where the fuck did you come from?” I say involuntarily. Because I have never seen anyone like her before, and I can’t take my eyes off her.

She doesn’t answer me. Instead, she smiles, takes one last look at my wounds and then sits next to me, wrapping a leg over mine and turning my face towards hers. She runs a hand down my chest and torso, and I wait in desperation for it to reach my cock.

“Yes,” I hiss when she wraps her fingers around me. Her eyes are on mine, seeking out the pleasure in them as she gently works me. “Kiss me,” I say firmly.

“You elves and your orders,” she says, her lips turning up at the corner into a wry smile. Then her lips are on mine, her tongue exploring my mouth, seeking me out. I pull her closer, my hand roaming over her skin, cupping her breasts, traveling down to her hip.

I draw her leg over further, encouraging to straddle me, cursing this damn body that seems weaker than usual. Because if I was at full strength, I would already have pinned her down, tasted her and would be inside her by now.

She’s on top of me now, her hands at my face, her hair spilling over me. Our tongues fight for ownership of each other’s mouths. I grab her backside, loving how my cock feels up against it but pull her forwards so that I can reach under and get to the place I want to be.

Her breasts hang at my chest, her nipples now hard. She gasps when I drag my hand from behind over her hot, slick sex. “You’re so wet for me,” I say, sinking my fingers into her creases and folds, feeling how easily they glide through and across her.

All of a sudden, she’s not so smart with that mouth of hers, and I can feel a vulnerability in her that makes me want her even more. She shudders on top of me, and I smile to myself thinking of all the ways I could make her do this over and over again.

“You want this as much as I do,” I whisper.

She sits back, and I find myself losing my reach, but the view is worth it.

Her skin is now flushed, her breasts engorged, and her legs spread wide across me. Then while looking me straight in the eye, she raises herself up, takes my throbbing cock and guides me into her, sinking down onto me until I'm fully hers, or she is fully mine – I can't be sure.

“Fuck,” I rasp, still watching as she now begins to ride me, her rhythm slow and determined.

“I do want this,” she says. “And I like to get what I want.”

I swallow hard, wondering where this creature came from. “I bet you do.”

It's almost hard to believe I was in such pain not long ago, as the sensation she now brings to my body is like nothing I've felt before. Like her magic extends far beyond the forces that she conjures.

Any discomfort has simply slipped away from me, and my strength has returned. I sit up and kiss her hard, before turning her over and placing her on the floor. She looks shocked as I remove myself from her, but when I crawl between her legs she lies back and lets me take control.

I trace the tattoos on her thighs with my tongue. Then my mouth is at her sex as I lick every fold and crease, lapping up everything she gives me. Her moans turn to cries as I place a finger deep inside her, needing to know how she feels while my tongue gently circles her sensitive spot.

Beneath me she's now writhing, and the sounds she makes stiffen my cock further. I hold down her hips as they start to buck and then her hand is in my hair as she explodes at my mouth. With my finger still inside her, I can feel her walls pulsing and beating. Before she stops, I swoop up between her legs and penetrate her, riding the last waves of her climax.

She grips me tightly, her arms around my neck, her legs around my back. I thrust into her, giving her everything I have. She is so hot, so wet and perfect. My mind is almost lost with sensation, but I keep going.

My pace picks up, my thrusts hard. I'm hot and breathless as I ram into her. Her nails now dig into my back. I want to tell her to do it harder, but I'm just so caught up in the moment, so taken by her, that I can't.

I want to cum, want to fill her up, but I need her to give herself up to me one more time, one more time while I am inside her fully.

A few more deep thrusts and she is there, her cries filling the air, her walls beating around me. “Gods, yes,” I say as she cums underneath me. It's the most magnificent sight, sound, feeling. “Yes!”

Finally, I spill into her, and it's like she's drawn out everything I have. My pelvis erupts with sensation, my muscles contract, and there's just the life

before Salina... and life after.

SALINA

IT HAS BEEN THREE DAYS.

T *hree whole days.*

Time certainly slows down when you're waiting for something. And even though I have only been waiting for three days, it feels as though I have been waiting forever.

It has been three days since I sent off the ransom letter to Denve's family, the Thuvrol's.

It has also been three days since Denve and I...

I cannot finish the thought without blushing.

It has also been three days since I found out that Ocuri is still alive.

I wasn't sure how to manage everything I am feeling, so I have just been ignoring everything.

Denve and I also have not left the loft in three days. Instead, all we do is talk.

And...

You are a grown woman and an assassin by trade. Why is this making you blush!

Denve and I seem unable to keep our hands off one another. And neither of us could find a reason why we shouldn't have sex.

I was worried at first, because he was still healing, but after three days, it looks like he is mostly healed.

I look over at him. He is asleep on the bed. I fell asleep with him earlier after sex, but when I woke up, I left him to sleep.

He may be almost completely healed, but he still needs a lot of sleep if he is going to be as good as new.

I decide to take a bath in the small, makeshift bathroom in the loft. The warm water feels so good that I let out a little moan as I lower myself into the bath.

After I finish in the bath, I wash my hair and pull on a set of clean clothes.

I have a meeting with one Esra tonight, and it is also the ransom deadline today.

I think about Denve as I get ready.

I really like him, and now he knows more about me than most people.

He doesn't know everything about me. I could not bring myself to tell him what I am or about Ocuri and my coven.

I know he is curious, but he hasn't pushed me to tell him, and I do not know if I'll ever be ready to tell anyone.

Today is the end, though.

Today is the ransom deadline. Today is the day it all ends.

Denve is still asleep when I leave.

My meeting with Esra is close by. We meet near the ports, which is quite close to the club where she dances.

She is fully dressed in a black shift dress. Her dark brown hair hangs to her waist, and her dark brown eyes shine as we take a walk.

The port is surprisingly quiet, and we are able to exchange information without interruption.

I only return to the warehouse around sunrise. I stop in front of the loft door.

He could be gone.

I have not tied Denve up in the three days since I sent the ransom letter and we first had sex.

I also did not lock him in.

He could have left at any time if he wanted to.

Why would he stay? It is against his best interests to stay.

Why would he stay? And what are you going to do if he is gone?

I take a deep breath and walk in. The loft, when I step inside, is quiet. It looks empty.

A wave of disappointment washes over me, until Denve pops his head around the wall that separates the bedroom from the small kitchen.

He smiles at me, but I cannot bring myself to smile back.

I am relieved that he did not leave. But I also feel guilty because he is in

this place because of me.

Something painful twists in my chest, and I swallow the sharp gasp that tries to escape me.

Denve's smile fades as he looks at me.

I walk further into the loft and sit down on the bed.

"They didn't respond, did they?" His voice is gentle. I shake my head and look up at him.

I search his face for any signs of disappointment or pain.

His face is open, and there is no great emotion there.

He sits down next to me and takes my hand in his.

Denve takes a deep breath before speaking.

"I suspected as much. I thought that they would not respond. And I did tell you that they wouldn't care enough to pay the ransom."

"Yes." My voice is wooden. "You did say that. And I don't understand how you're okay with this? How are you okay with them not caring about you?"

He shrugs. "I came to terms with it a long time ago."

We sit in silence for a long while.

"What are we going to do now?" he asks me. I want to lean into him and have him wrap his arms around me.

It feels good to hear him say 'we'. As if we're a team.

Instead, I continue to sit up and tell him about the mission.

"If I don't get the ransom, the contract says that I'm supposed to kill you and the rest of your family. But I am not going to do that."

Denve lays back on the bed, and I turn to look at him.

"Well," he says. His voice is light, and I know laughter lingers behind every word. "If you have to kill me, you're going to need to sate my curiosity first."

I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Let me talk," he says, and he does laugh this time. "What are you? Where are you from?"

I suppose it is time to let him know what and who I am.

I sigh and reply, although I still do not tell him everything.

"I come from Prazh. I'm a purna – well, half of one anyway. That's where I get my magic."

"The purna of Prazh." Denve says reflectively. "I've heard about your people but not much."

I laugh mirthlessly. “Yes, we try not to let a lot of information get out. We are a very secretive group.”

“So you’re a purna?” Denve’s voice is still gentle, but he is also asking me to continue.

I take a deep breath. “Yes, I am a purna. For most of my life I lived in Prazh. Until several years ago when half of my coven was killed in an attack.”

I get up from the bed then and start pacing up and down in front of him.

There is one more question he has to ask me. One question that I am not sure how to answer. A question that I do not want to answer.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” he says to my surprise. I stop pacing and turn to look at him. “But how do you know my brother?”

I exhale heavily and sit down again.

“I was in love with Ocuri,” I say simply. I ignore Denve’s sharp inhale and the way his body stiffens next to mine. “I was in love with him, and I thought he loved me. So I revealed myself and my coven to him.”

“What did he do?” There is a new urgency in Denve’s voice. He seems to know that this story will end badly.

But then, he does know his brother better than I ever did.

“I revealed myself to him, and he brought a platoon of dark elf soldiers and launched an attack on the village where my coven was located. Half of my coven was killed in the attack.”

I continue speaking before Denve can interrupt me. This is one story that I need to get through as soon as possible.

“After the attack, I was banished for revealing myself to the dark elves. I had nothing left there, no family except the coven who did not want me. So I left, fled to Milthar, and trained to be an assassin.”

I do not tell him about Nakam.

“My goal was to take revenge for everything I had lost. I tracked you and your family down and came to Vhoig with the intention of killing you. I needed to even the scales somehow.”

My voice breaks on the last word. I look at Denve, even though I am afraid of what I will see on his face.

“I couldn’t take revenge by killing your brother. So I decided that you were the next best thing.” I whisper these words.

I have grown to care for Denve in the last three days. I won’t kill him as per my ransom note.

But I do not know how he will react to the information I have just given him.

I am ashamed. I am ashamed that I betrayed my coven in the way I did. I am ashamed that I hurt Denve the way I did. And I am ashamed that I was planning to kill him and his entire family.

“I understand.” My voice is rough. “If you want to leave, I won’t stop you. I am not going to kill you.”

“What about your revenge?” he asks me. His voice is gentle. It is always gentle, and again, something painful twists in my chest.

“We can’t always get what we want,” I say hopelessly, helplessly.

I bury my face in my hands, and I only realize that I am crying when my hands become wet.

Denve sits silently for a minute. “Look at me,” he says, and there is a new tone to his voice. A tone of command.

He places a hand underneath my chin when I am unwilling to look at him, and he looks me in the eye.

“I guess we’ll have to kill Ocuri.”

DENVE

WHY IS SHE SO CONFUSED?

It is clear to me that Salina is shocked and confused by what I just said.

I do not know why. Maybe she didn't think I'd be okay with killing my own brother, let alone proposing that we actually do it ourselves.

The sun is setting over Vhoig. The loft has large, floor-to-ceiling windows on one side of the building. Right now, blood-red light is spilling into the loft from the sky. We continue to sit in silence as Salina processes what I just said.

There are so many things I want to say to her.

I realized several days ago that I was in love with you. Don't you see? I could have left at any time, but I stayed.

For you.

I really could have left any time, and I think that when Salina left today for a few hours, she knew that.

She also left the door to the loft unlocked so that if I wanted to leave, I could.

I don't think I can say it out loud. Not yet.

What if she says no?

"I don't understand," Salina says after we have sat in silence for several seemingly long minutes. "How can you propose that we kill your brother? How are you okay with that?"

I am not sure how to answer her.

How do I say that Ocuri has been hurting me my entire life? How do I say that I am not really surprised that Ocuri betrayed you in the way that he did, because that is what he does?

How do I say that Ocuri is made of rage and hatred and contempt, and that he is incapable of loving anyone except himself?

I do not know how to answer her, and I am afraid to answer her, because as I replay the story that she told me, the story of losing her entire life to Ocuri's manipulations, all I feel is pure rage.

I love you, even though you planned to kill me. I love you, even though you wanted to wipe out my family.

I love you and I need to get revenge for you, in any way that I can. I love you, and I need to do this for you. I need to do something for you.

I can almost picture it. The day when Ocuri went to Prazh and nearly wiped out Salina's entire coven.

I can picture the bloodshed, the horror, the pain.

I take Salina's hand in mine, and she threads her fingers through mine. The movement is so automatic that I want to gasp for air because I have never felt closer to another person than I do at this moment.

In the past three days, Salina has taken care of me more intently and more kindly than my mother ever has. She has done more for me than my father ever has. And she has apologized for hurting me more than my brother ever has.

I need to get this revenge for her, because I cannot stand the thought that she might be in pain.

I cannot stand the thought that she might never get the closure that Ocuri's death would have brought her.

I also cannot risk losing her to the darkness of her grief and rage – the way I almost did when she lost control of her rot magic.

Salina takes a deep breath, and my shoulders stiffen as I wait for her to respond.

"I am less shocked than I imagined I would be," she confesses. "And I think I am over that shock now."

Then she turns to me and places a soft hand on my shoulder. I relax underneath her touch as a smile stretches across her face, and she arches her eyebrow.

"Now." Her voice has changed, and I shiver just listening to her speak. Her voice has become low, quiet, soft. "Do you really intend to help me kill your brother in cold blood?"

"Yes." I do not need to think about it. "Of course I will. I have wanted to kill Ocuri for years now."

There are other things I could say, to plead my case such as it were. There are things I could say to convince her that I hate my brother.

Things like how Ocuri is a stain, an ugly bruise, who doesn't deserve to live. Ocuri is a burden that I, and Protheka, have had to carry for years now.

I could also say something like how I care about her more than anything in this world. I could say, I care about you and I would do anything for you.

"We should do this," I tell her and brush stray strands of hair out of her face. "Because it will bring you the closure you need. And it will free me from my brother's abuses forever."

Salina swallows, and her golden eyes glint angrily.

"Abuses?" Her voice is still low but it is no longer soft.

Now I do hesitate. I have explained to her that my family doesn't care about me. I have explained to her that I hate my brother.

I haven't, however, told her why I hate my brother. Why I fear him.

I haven't told her that her pain over Ocuri's violence against her and her family is something similar to what I have endured over the years.

She is looking at me urgently, and I shake my head.

"You are not the only person affected by Ocuri's brutality," I tell her. My throat is suddenly dry. "He had victims before you. And if we do not do this, there will be more victims. Ocuri is insane, and eventually he will destroy everything around him. And I don't know how I'll go on with my life, knowing I could have done something to stop him."

Salina gets up then and walks over to the small section of the loft that serves as a kitchen.

She walks through the low, red light of the nearly vanished sun, and for a second she is on fire.

Her silver hair lifts as a slight wind blows through the loft and takes on the color of the slowly setting sun. Her hair glows, like every strand of her hair has been painted red.

The color of the sky bleeds into her creamy skin, and the gold undertones of her skin absorb the blood red of the sky like her hair did.

When she turns to look at me, the sun has set completely. The lights of Vhoig have flickered on.

There is not much lighting in the loft, but then Salina clicks her fingers and lights flicker on in the loft.

When I look up, golden orbs of light have bloomed across the ceiling of the loft, and now her skin has changed.

She looks, again, ethereal.

She was created to be worshiped, I think again.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asks me. There is finality in her tone of voice. She is, subliminally, telling me that once we make this decision, there will be no going back.

She is telling me that she wants revenge, and that I still have time to back out of this plan.

I voice some of what I was thinking earlier.

“If you think you know Ocuri from when you were in love with him, trust me, you never did. If you think you know him from the violence he wreaked upon your life, you don’t. Ocuri is a curse on Protheka. And I say it again – if we don’t do this now, there will only be more violence, more deaths, more heartache.”

She nods. Then she walks to the kitchen. She brought back supplies when she went out.

I realize, as she takes a bottle of zhisk from the paper bag, that I haven’t had a drink in days.

And strangely, I do not crave alcohol at all.

She also takes bread and cheese out of the bag, along with a jar of tizret fruit jam.

We have no plates to eat off, and no cutlery to use, so Salina and I tear off pieces of bread and take bites of the cheese. We also dip the bread into the jam.

The meal, while plain, is the best meal I have had in years. It is salty and sweet and filling.

And I am eating it with the woman I love, so that makes it all the better.

We stay awake all night, discussing what we are going to do. We are still awake when the sun rises. And we have finally formulated a plan that we’re both happy with.

“So.” I yawn and stretch out on the bed. Salina also bought roasted ground kaffo and cream made from taura milk.

We sip the fragrant, slightly bitter kaffo as we stand at the loft windows and watch Vhoig wake up.

“We’ll lure Ocuri to the warehouse. And together we’ll take him out.”

I look over at the small table where Salina and I also spent part of the night writing a letter to my parents. A letter saying that I escaped, and I have also discovered a plot against my family. This letter will bring my parents

and Ocuri to the warehouse

“It will work,” Salina tells me confidently. “I know it will.”

I lean against her, and she snakes an arm around my waist.

“So, this is happening tonight?” I ask her. “I’ll have to send the letter in a few hours, so that they get it on time,” I tell her.

She nods and lifts a hand to caress my cheek. “It’ll all work out.”

DENVE

The night is darker than I've ever seen it. A full moon hangs over the ebony blanket, surrounded on all sides by shining stars. The vapor of my breath fogs the window as I stare out of it.

Breaking away from the window, I begin pacing back and forth in the loft amidst the glow emanating from the lamp in its corner. I draw a deep breath, trying to calm myself down.

Anxiety is plaguing my body like an incurable disease. I can't seem to ease my nerves, even with the constant reassurances that things will go according to plan.

I keep straying off course in my head, somehow stuck on the mentality that things will turn upside down, that we're headed for certain doom.

Every aspect that I think about, there's a way I imagine it can go wrong.

Sighing in frustration, I close my eyes and rub my temples.

Just relax... There's no other way forward about this, you know that much. What else can be done?

I know this is the only method we can use that'll reap the best outcome. After all, this isn't just for me at the end of the day. The plan is also for the benefit of Salina.

Her line of work may not exactly be admirable, especially from my viewpoint as a noble. Alas, who would I be to judge someone else for their means of living? I never had to struggle to put food on the table or to keep a roof over my head.

I can't neglect all the years of training she must have put in to reach her level. Otherwise, it'd go to waste, and for what?

I run a hand over my head with a heavy sigh. Her job has already been flipped upside down. After all, she told me it was supposed to end with my death.

Even though that is no longer going to happen, I can't help but feel as though I'm making things worse for Salina. There still lingers the question of how she's going to return to Nakam without completing the scope of her contract.

She can kill one of us, or she can collect the ransom. To this day, there has still been no word whatsoever from my family, so them paying seems unlikely. And since I don't want to die, I'm more than willing to set up my worthless brother, anyway.

The option of forcing my parents to fork over the ransom had been discussed earlier in the day, but I said it couldn't be done. Part of it came from sentiment. As much as my parents seemed to regret having me, I still wish them no harm or distress.

"I just thought they would have sent communication by now," I mutter, checking the time on my stopwatch.

I knew they barely care about me. I stopped trying to convince myself of that years ago. Still, for them to go to this extent incites me with a poisonous mixture of anger and sadness.

I don't want to see them dead, especially at the hands of Salina. At the same time, I do not wish to perish myself.

Returning to the window, I lean my head against it, my body overcome with exhaustion from the stress. I glance up towards the rafters, knowing Salina is up there somewhere, keeping a lookout for any movement outside the warehouse perimeter.

I cannot see her, reminding myself that it's a testament of her ability to blend in with the shadows.

I wish she were down here so we could have fun and forget about all of this... But I need this time alone to think about everything.

I continue pacing around for a few hours, my tiredness tempting me to sleep on the bed. Still, I know that even if I tried, the stress would not allow me to slip into a deep slumber.

Salina remains in the rafters as I mull over my thoughts. Eventually, I begin to feel as though I'm losing it, questioning just how valid this plan really is.

What the hell is going on? Where the fuck are my family?

Grunting, I throw a hand against the window.

Are they even going to show up? The least they could have done is –

My ears perk, catching an interesting sound in the distance. My mind silences all thoughts as I close my eyes, taking advantage of my advanced hearing to identify the strange noise.

Drawing near to the loft is the sound of footsteps.

Someone is coming!

I know for a fact it's not Salina's steps. Hers are light and featherlike, unlike these ones that are heavy and booming.

Wait a minute...

I hear two more sets of footsteps following close behind the first pair.

It's my family, they've finally come!

My body becomes reinvigorated by their arrival as I straighten myself up. My heart beats faster as they draw near to the door.

They kept me waiting long enough but they're finally here, thank the gods!

I stand to attention as the doors swing open, greeted by a draining sight. Inward strolls my brother with two burly guards by his side. I'm unsurprised but still hurt.

"Hello, dear brother," says Ocuri.

"What is this?" I demand.

"Not even going to greet me?"

"Where is our father?" I sneer. "No, let me guess... He said he was too busy to deal with me?"

Ocuri scoffs, rolling his eyes.

"Don't get snarky with me, brother," he growls. "So this is where you've been hiding, eh? I must say, it suits you way more than our family manor."

"Just leave and go get Father, would you? And bring your friends with you, too."

"Denve, Denve, Denve," chuckles Ocuri, shaking his head. "That won't be happening."

"Why not?" I ask. A numb feeling of dread fills my stomach.

Ocuri tilts his head as though analyzing me.

"Hmm, you are my brother so I suppose I owe it to you... Fine."

"Owe what?" I ask with urgency. "Tell me what's going on."

"Don't rouse yourself, Denve," he warns. "There'll be plenty of time for that later on."

I clench my fists, internally feeling my stomach twist.

“That fancily crafted little letter of yours that was sent? You know, the one that was begging for the ransom? Neither Mother nor Father ever laid an eye on it.”

“What?” I gasp, the shock seizing the air from my lungs.

“I intercepted the letter before it got to them. I didn’t like what I saw, so I hid it in a place they’ll never find.”

I stumble over my words, dread growing into fear as I grip the window ledge behind me.

“Why?” I ask. “I don’t understand.”

“Need me to spell it out for you? So be it...” Ocuri takes a step closer.

“You’re weak, and a shell of an elf. All my life, I’ve seen how our parents have become influenced by your flaws. I always wondered why they never got rid of you... So I figured I would act as the responsible one and take matters into my own hands.”

A sinister smile stretches its way across his horrid face.

“Hell, you know yourself that I’ve always been the better son, yet somehow still they always had a soft spot for you. That’s what makes them weak, and in this day and age, there’s no room for weak minded people.”

“You’re not saying...”

“Oh, I’m saying exactly what you think I’m saying,” he chuckles. “I choose my words very carefully, such as what I’m about to tell you.”

He takes another step closer.

“I’m going to kill you. Only then will I finally gain the recognition I so rightfully deserve.”

“You sick bastard...”

“Then I’ll kill Mother and Father, gaining the estate, all of the money, and of course, the power.”

“No!” I yell. “Over my dead body!”

I spring forward like an arrow from a bow, lunging at my brother. I take him down to the ground and wrap my hands around his throat, squeezing as hard as I can.

“You motherfucker!”

Just then, I’m whisked off of my feet by his lackeys. They pin me against the nearest wall. They possess immense strength, but it pales in comparison to my rage. I headbutt the one on my right, knocking him back.

I grab the other and smash his head into the wall, then throw a punch at

his gut. He keels over, where I then send him to the floor with a hook. Ocuri grabs me from behind.

“You’ve got some fight in you yet!”

I whip my head back, causing him to let go of me. My head rings with a haze, but I lunge again at him, throwing continuous lefts and rights. A vicious knee lands against his groin.

I place my hands on his neck with the intent of breaking it. The recovered guards grab me again, pinning my arms in place. Ocuri rises, grabbing himself in agony.

“Commendable of you to go down with a fight!” he praises. “But it’s not enough to save you. No one is coming for you now.”

His enclosed fist rocks my temple, my world instantly turning to black.

SALINA

I stand perched on the precipice of the warehouse roof, having moved up here from the rafters in order to gain a better view. Here, I have a wider vantage point over the vicinity where I can easily detect movement within the perimeter.

It's quiet for the most part. Up here, there's no one to interrupt me or break my chain of thought which I'm deeply immersing myself into. The city center is a fair bit away in the distance. Out here, there's not much but the occasional passerby.

The time and space alone allows me to get lost in my thoughts as I mull over my journey up until this point. My body is as primed as ever as I clench my fists, hardened from years of physical training, but my mind is a totally different story.

"All those years of combat training and etiquette classes... And for what?" I ask myself, sighing in frustration.

I recall being deep into my training, always visualizing myself as being one of the greats, a fabled assassin whose stories and tales would be passed down from generation to generation as legend.

Alas, here I stand with the target of my contract resting nearby, his fate resting in the palm of my hands. If I wanted to, I could easily take him out, especially now with his guard down. Instead, I'm now protecting him, my focus changing to keeping him alive.

The urge to get rid of Denve Thuvrol is long gone at this point. I peer down at my hands, feeling them fill with shame with the rest of my body, just like a cup fills with water.

Sythar's face flashes in my mind as I imagine his disappointed frown. For me to be doing this goes against the very core of my work, to always focus on the contract. My punishment wouldn't be a mere slap on the wrist, no, it would mean expulsion, or something far worse.

It doesn't help that he has a lot of faith in me after I convinced him I could do this. I guess he was right all along. Sythar isn't the only person I have to worry about back at Nakam. I hear the imagined words of Callista repeating in my mind.

I told you so...

But the biggest person whomst I must confront is myself. I have no clue what's next after this meeting between Denve and his family, if it even goes ahead.

Things are so incredibly uncertain that I don't know what I'm going to do tomorrow. One thing is for sure, future events can only be determined based on what happens tonight.

There comes the sound of muffled voices below me. Immediately, I rise to my feet in a flurry.

Someone else is here! I got so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I completely missed people coming in! How foolish of me!

Scolding myself, I head back inside the warehouse interior through the rooftop doors. Descending down to the rafters, I stoop low as I take cover behind a beam of wood. I hear distant talking going on, presuming it to be Denve's family.

So they finally showed up then.

I peer over the edge but can only see Denve from where I hide. Whoever else is here is just out of view. I'm about to move when I hear the voice of Ocuri, halting me in my tracks. He steps forward, the full view of his face revealing itself.

The sight of him snatches the air from my lungs, as if a nightmare twists and spins in my sleep. In that moment, my awareness of my surroundings becomes invisible to me as I'm whipped into a flashback, my head suddenly filled with sounds of burning wood and blood curdling screams.

I see Ocuri's face, his eyes filled with flames as a sick smile spreads across his face. Burning in the fire is my dear sister who reaches her hand out to me. I try to go to her but as I run, she slips further and further away, Ocuri disappearing with her as he shoots me an evil grin.

Only when the sound of a scuffle breaks out below do I snap back to

reality. I look down, spotting Denve locked in a tussle with Ocuri.

Get a grip! Denve needs your help!

I move as quickly as I can through the rafters without making a sound. One thing is for sure, his parents aren't here. By the time I've reached a better spot, I look down just in time to see Ocuri land a sickening blow on Denve, the latter held back by two massive guards.

Shit, this isn't good...

Denve slumps to the ground as if all life has left his body. I swiftly check the weapons that everyone has, seeing they've arrived with a substantial arsenal. Ocuri steps back, wiping blood from his face with a cloth as he waves a hand.

"As fun as that was, I must be getting back to the manor. Get rid of him," he barks.

"With pleasure, sir," replies a guard as he unsheathes a sword.

Fuck, I need to act quickly!

The other guard pulls over a stool and rests Denve's head over the edge, holding his neck in an exposed position as the armed guard raises his sword. To my right, a rope is wrapped around a hook.

Grabbing it, I swing down from the rafters, kicking the armed guard in the chest just seconds before his sword would have sliced Denve's head off. My momentum causes the guard to fall back. His head hits a nearby barrel head, his eyes hazed with dizziness.

The sound of heavy footsteps come running at me from behind. I run straight, ascending the wall ahead of me and lunge jumping off of it. As I twirl around, I spot the surprised eyes of the other guard before my boot collides with his in a spinning kick.

I then dash to Denve's side, standing over him as I brandish my dagger and unstrap the holster for my throwing knives. I glance at Ocuri as he throws his hands together, clapping in a mocking fashion.

"Impressive," he remarks. "And most unexpected."

"Long time no see, you bastard," I hiss.

"Hmm, a pleasure to see you again, Salina."

"You're probably wishing I would say the same."

Ocuri bursts into laughter, hooting like a madman as he wipes a tear from his eye.

"You're snappier than I remember," he muses. "And even more beautiful. It's funny, I thought that by now you would have been a rotting corpse in the

ground beneath the Lunar Flame Coven.”

“Same with you, you conniving son of a bitch,” I growl. “You should have been the one who died in that attack.”

“Me!” he snaps with wide eyes, as though surprised. “No, I wouldn’t die with Purna whores like your sister.”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“It’s no matter anyway,” he sighs, shrugging himself off the wall. “At least with you here, I can now take care of two loose ends.”

He steps forth, unsheathing a small sword of his own.

“I’m actually glad you survived, I always wondered what it would have been like to kill you myself.”

The other two guards stumble to their feet, angry snarls emanating from them as they brandish long swords, their tips gleaming in the moonlight. The three adversaries surround me on all sides.

“Well come on then,” I growl.

They all lunge forward but I’m too quick for them. I duck and roll forward, casting a protection spell behind me at Denve as I do so. Maneuvering between a guard’s legs, I take a few steps back as they all ready themselves once more.

There’s no way I can take all three in a straight up fight of strength but I can use this environment to my advantage.

I pull off a backflip, landing on a small platform a few feet above the others. My hands grip three throwing knives at once, hurling them forward as they make way for each of my targets. The knives hit each guard in the knee, subduing them for a moment. Ocuri deflects the knife from the air with his sword.

“You can do better than that,” chortles Ocuri.

His snickering ignites within me a rage like never before.

“I’m going to kill you for all that you’ve done to me, you motherfucker!”

“No, no, no. I’ll kill you and send you to a family reunion with your sister!”

“How could you!” I hiss, my voice breaking. “I trusted you, and you tore my heart in two.”

“You played your part perfectly,” laughs Ocuri. “A young, helpless witch who just wanted to be loved, and who was all too easy to trick.”

I jump down, swinging my dagger at him. He dodges with ease, sidestepping and tripping me with his feet. I jump up and raise my dagger at

him as we circle each other.

“I’d do it all again if I could Salina, especially with that body of yours.”

His eyes wander my figure, sending a shiver down my spine.

“You were so easy to bed and fuck. Even easier was getting you to spill all of your secrets.”

“Why did you betray me?” I wail, a tear escaping from my eye.

“Because the purna are nothing but a walking plague on Protheka. You’re just as despicable as humans, standing in the way of a better Vhoig. Once I’m through with you, I’ll seek out the remaining members of Lunar Flame and destroy them once and for all.”

“No...” I groan.

“Yes,” he says. “Soon, the purna will be forgotten.”

“Never!”

I lunge for him but he grabs me mid air, slamming me into the nearest wall. Next thing I know, I’m on the ground, my head spinning in a daze. Instinctively, my hands reach for another weapon, grasping for anything I can find.

A guard steps into my blurred vision, holding a knife. He drives it down, plunging it deep into my shoulder. I scream in pain as I become pinned to the floor.

The guard steps back with a smile, Ocuri taking his place as the dark elf advances on me.

“This is it,” he snickers.

At that moment, I know he’s right. I’m about to die here alongside Denve, and there’s not a damned thing I can do about it.

DENVE

My awareness slowly begins to return to my body. Recalling the last memory being my brother attacking me, I wonder if I'm dead, if I'm about to wake up in the afterlife.

There come the sounds of grunting and scuffles all about me as I realize that somehow I'm still alive. As the haze clears, I half expect to see the warehouse up in flames. It'd be just like my brother to leave me and burn.

There whisks through the air a flurry of movement to my left. My vision clears to see Salina standing across from Ocuri, holding her dagger up. Struggling nearby to get to their feet are the two guards, pulling what appear to be Salina's throwing knives out from their knees.

She has fought valiantly and held her own against three attackers at once, I think in fascination. Then again, I can't say that I'm surprised.

I try moving but find difficulty, my body still feeling as though it's asleep. A warm sensation flows over the surface of my skin, as if kissed by a protective energy.

Just then, Salina's cry rings through the air. I glance over at her as a guard brings down a dagger into her shoulder, blood spurting into the air. Behind them, Ocuri moves forth with a look of bloodlust in the glimmer of his eyes.

The alarming sight surges me with newfound strength as I suddenly find myself rushing toward him.

I'm not about to sit and watch Salina die!

I move so quickly that the guards don't notice me. Ocuri spots me too late, his eyes becoming wide as I push him away. As he falls back, a guard grabs my arm but I headbutt him, disarming a sword from his waistband as he

stumbles away.

I raise the weapon in a defensive stance as I hold an arm to Salina. She grabs my hand, pulling herself up.

“Are you okay?” I ask, keeping my eyes glued on our enemies.

“I’m fine.” She groans.

“The dagger in your shoulder, it must be removed.”

“Not now,” she snaps. “Otherwise I’ll bleed to death.”

I shoot a sidelong glance at her, our eyes meeting as a look of relief comes over us. We smile, forgetting about everyone else for a brief moment. I realize she must have saved me when I fell, only reaffirming my love for her.

The mocking laugh of Ocuri breaks our immersion, snapping us back to the situation at hand. He wipes a smear of blood from his face as his eyes lock on mine. In them is the glare of a predator whose pupils are dead set on their prey.

“Oh brother,” he sighs. “As much as I despise the two of you, I never would have pictured you standing alongside a purna, let alone Salina. I must say though, it is quite fitting. You two will look good dying together.”

“We both know that’s not going to happen,” sneers Salina through her teeth. Her breath is strained, no doubt from the blade tearing at her flesh.

“As soon as we’re done with these goons of yours, you’re ours!” I exclaim as the guards rejoin his side.

“A confident choice of words for a pair of outnumbered fools,” he chuckles. He gives a hand signal to his men. “Go forth and make quick work subduing them. Save the killing blow for me though. I want to savor the moment of death.”

He leans back against the wall, removing a xaishet from his pocket as the guards advance. Little does Ocuri know that this’ll spell the end of him.

“I’ll take the one on the right,” says Salina. “You take the other.”

“With pleasure.”

Salina throws her remaining knives at them, their faces exploding with blood as we lunge forth. I grab my target and throw him into the wall, punishing him with blows to the head. He goes down swiftly, throwing his hands up to protect himself.

I glance at Salina as she crawls around her targets like an insect, causing the guard to hit himself with his own weapons.

Looks like she’s got this.

I grab hold of the hold once more, raising it high and bringing it down on the guard. His head rolls along the floor towards Ocuri. My brother's grin suddenly drops from his face as he realizes the numbers are now even.

He springs for me, the xaishet still in his mouth. I grasp his wrists and twist them, causing him to yelp in pain. The xaishet falls from his mouth, but I grab it before it hits the ground, shoving the lit end into his eye.

"Agh!" he screams, grabbing his face as I turn my attention to Salina.

She kicks the guard toward me. I grab his arms, restraining him as Salina takes her own dagger and throws it up in the air. She then performs a roundhouse kick, the force of which propels the blade like a dart as it sinks into the guard's chest.

I grab Salina, squeezing her hand reassuringly before we turn to Ocuri. He peers up at us, veins bulging on his forehead as he reaches behind him and pulls out a pair of curved swords. My brother rises to his feet with one last bout of strength and determination, seemingly dead set on coating his blades with our blood.

"Enough fooling around!" he exclaims.

Salina and I rush toward him as he begins swinging. Ocuri's attacks are unpredictable as I struggle to dodge. One of his swords slices through the fabric of my tunic, igniting a searing hot pain across my chest.

I stumble back, falling over a pile of wood. Shaking it off as quickly as I can, I look over at my brother as he goes for Salina, a look of grimace across her face as she maneuvers around each attack. Each time she moves her shoulder, she grunts in agony.

Ocuri feigns an assault from the right side, causing Salina to expose her left. He is quick to slash at her ribs, blood pouring out as she kicks him away. Desperately, she casts spells as Ocuri advances relentlessly.

He dodges each spell, barely giving Salina a second to recover before he's back on her. I run up to him from behind, grabbing his arm. In that split second, I feel the tension and strength in his arm. I headbutt him and disarm one of his swords just as Salina kicks him away.

She unleashes a powerful black orb that hits his left ankle, causing him to fall to one knee. He drops the other sword as he screams in pain. I watch in disgust as the boot on his leg peels off, as does the skin on his ankle. The flesh beneath slowly rots, crawling its way gradually up his leg.

With Salina by my side, we close in on him. The look on my brother's face is desperate, seemingly searching for an escape. Hope disappears from

his eyes as we take steps closer.

“Wait!” he pleads, throwing his hands up. “Don’t kill me, I beg of you!”

I pick up his curved sword and peer down at the pathetic sight of him. He’s never looked so vulnerable.

“Salina, I promise I’ll get you safe passage out of Vhoig! And dear brother, I’ll get you back to the manor safely and tell my parents everything! I swear!”

“Your promises mean nothing,” I snarl.

“And no amount of swearing will bring my sister back,” growls Salina.

I turn to her, exchanging a look as if speaking silently on how to kill Ocuri. Facing my brother, I impale him with the sword, dragging the blade across his insides as blood pours from his mouth.

“How... could you...” he groans, coughing up crimson red.

“What was it you said?” I ask. “Ah yes, you want to savor the moment of death.”

I grab his hair and pull his head back. Salina steps forward with a poison vial, pulling out the dagger embedded in her shoulder. She empties the entire vial onto it and plunges it down Ocuri’s throat.

At the same time, she’s casting her rotting magic all over my fallen brother. I let go just before it can reach me, and together, Salina and I take a step back as Ocuri writhes in pain. He finally falls back, life leaving him as nothing but a decomposing corpse.

“You get what you deserve,” I snarl.

Just then, Salina drops to the ground.

“Hey!” I yell, shaking her. “Salina!”

I take her into my hands, ignoring my pains as I carry her back to the loft. Her normally vigorous body feels like an empty sack as I rush, filling me with dread as I realize the fight may have been too much for her to take.

Salina is a skilled assassin but the numbers game catches up on even the finest of warriors. I kick down the door to our resting area and lay her on the bed. Removing her clothing, I can her wounds as sweat runs down my forehead.

“Stay with me!” I exclaim, casting healing magic on her injuries.

The wounds are deep, the skin around them fading from hot red to a pale white as her breathing becomes shallow. The seconds become minutes, which themselves feel like hours as I give her everything I’ve got.

My magic expels itself as I take her head in my arms, planting kisses on

her forehead and praying for her to return to me. Just then, she springs to life, throwing a fist forward. I catch it, laughing gleefully as her grimace melts into a smile.

“Denve?”

“It’s me,” I say reassuringly as I stroke her cheeks. “Oh, Salina. I thought I lost you.”

“No,” she mutters, resting a hand on my face. “I’m not going anywhere if it’s not with you.”

“Salina...”

Overcome with emotion, I gaze softly into her eyes.

“I love you more than anything.”

“Denve.” She chuckles, a tear falling down her face. “I love you, too.”

Our lips meet, and in that moment, I feel invincible. There’s nothing that can come between us, nothing that can tear us down. Against all odds, we survived everything. I know it’s only because of the love we’ve had for each other all along.

SALINA

The loft is quiet, yet I can still almost hear the many questions that hang in the air waiting to make themselves heard and be known. For now, I am just glad that the salves I brought from Milthar have done their job, healing us both completely. We may not have the answers to everything, but for that we can at least be grateful.

There's also a contentment that comes with knowing someone you despise so much is dead. Not a sentiment I would usually choose to settle into. As an assassin, these things rarely matter and are just part of the job. But this one was personal.

As I look over at Denve who is lying on the bed, his fingers interlaced behind his head and his hands supporting it, I can see he is feeling the same way about the demise of his brother as I am. The motivations may be different, but the relief is there.

There's been no mention of what we'll do next. I still have to complete my mission either by bringing the ransom or evidence of every Thuvrol's demise. And though Vhoig is Denve's home, he seems willing to leave it now that Ocuri is gone and with his parents already believing he is dead.

"You know we could just leave together. Run away, live a quiet life somewhere where things are not quite so fucked up," he says without even looking at me.

"What?" I ask, wondering where that came from.

"Oh, come on, I can practically hear your thoughts from here. I'm not used to you being so quiet, so I know something is on your mind."

"And you think running away with you is at the forefront of it," I tease.

He sits up now, his face serious. “All jokes aside, Salina, I am serious. More serious than I’ve been about anything before. Why have all of this hanging over us – everything being so damn difficult all of our lives – when we can just sink into the background somewhere far away? Just the two of us.”

I smile flatly and walk over to the bed, sitting next to him. If only it were that easy. I want to be with him, of course. I love him. But I also love Callista, and Sythar, and Nakam, too. I don’t want to leave with a debt hanging over my head.

“I just can’t, Denve. I want to be with you, I can promise you that. But it’s just too complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” he replies, and there’s something in his voice that presses at my heart. “Surely we can come up with something.”

I want to lie down next to him, have him take me in his arms and tell me for certain that we can, but something stops me from doing that. As if my heart can’t take any more hurt or uncertainty.

“What if we go back to my family’s estate?” he asks.

“What?” I say flatly. Because surely, he can’t be serious.

“We go back, tell them everything, secure the ransom money. They may be willing to help, but even if they aren’t, we still get access to the money somehow. I do know a very deadly assassin, after all.”

His slight grin and raised eyebrow threaten to make me smile, but I can’t get excited about such a crazy notion. “And then?”

“Steal the money, high-tail it back to Milthar.”

“This is one of the most underdeveloped and dangerous plans I think I’ve –” Before I can finish that sentence, his mouth is on mine, his tongue already stroking me, his lips soft yet powerful.

He spreads his hand over my throat, supports my neck with the other, and I sink into his hold. I have never been held by anyone in any way as I have been with him.

“Sometimes you just have to take a risk, Salina,” he says, his voice low and deep. It speaks to me in so many ways and, at this moment, I would believe anything that he says to me.

“We can do anything we desire. Anything *you* desire.”

Gods, when he speaks like this, I am lost to him, suddenly not the deadly assassin he talks of, but something softer, more malleable.

“I can do anything *I* desire,” he whispers into my ear.

My breathing is heavy and my body alive. “And what is that?” I ask.

“You’ve already tied me up. Now I think it’s time I gave you a taste of your own medicine.”

My heart pounds in my chest. I’ve never allowed myself to be so vulnerable with anyone before. Yet here he is asking me to do just that, even more than I already have. How does someone like me, someone who has been through so much at the hands of others, give myself up so completely?

“Come on,” he whispers. “Take the risk, Salina. For me. *With* me.”

“Denve...” I trail off, not knowing what answer to give him, my heart, mind, spirit all battling with each other to come to some conclusion.

“You can trust me with everything. Your body... your heart.”

“I... I...”

“Your *fears*. You don’t need to do anything you don’t want to. But you are safe with me.”

His lips meet my neck, and I’m undone. All of his words, all of actions up until this point tell me everything I need to know. I can trust. I do trust him. More than anyone ever in my life. Because I know how much I mean to him.

“Okay,” I say. I can feel his smile break out on my skin and his delight goes straight to my sex.

“Good girl,” he says, pulling back and then leaving me bereft of his attentions. “Now get undressed for me.”

He walks over to the other side of the loft. I lie panting on the bed, hearing nothing but his footsteps and my own heavy breathing. After a few moments, I do as he has requested and undress.

When he returns, I almost stop breathing and wait for whatever he has in store for me. He’s still clothed, though his shirt is now open, and I can see the lines of muscle that always make my mouth water.

In his hands are long pieces of fabric, and I swallow as I take them in. He smiles lasciviously down upon me. “First of all, let’s make this a bit more fun.” Slowly, he leans down and kisses me before he takes one of those strips of fabric, lifts my head and wraps it over my eyes as a blindfold.

Suddenly I’m hyper aware, sensing the rising and falling of my chest as he takes each of my wrists and binds them to the bed frame. I arch my back when his mouth unexpectedly lands on my nipple and then he’s at my ear again. “Trust me, Salina.”

Next his hand is running down my torso, then tracing over my belly and across my hip, all the way down to my ankle. He kisses it softly and then just

like my wrists it is restrained and tied to the bedpost.

“Anytime you want to stop, just say... but I’m hoping you won’t.”

Though my heart is racing, and my mind wants to tell me I’m unsafe, I know that I am, and my body is crying out for him, restrained or not. “I don’t... I’m... Oh, Denve.” His tongue is tracing up my calf and it’s hot and hard until it reaches the inside of my knee where he’s licking and flicking.

Instinctively I turn to him, to his mouth as my backside leaves the bed on the only side of my body that isn’t tethered, I’m stunned when a bolt of pleasure or pain or both shoots through me as he brings his hand across my naked flesh, my buttocks now stinging.

“Keep still,” he says as I hold my breath. But I don’t do as he tells me, because I’m hoping he’ll do it again. I want to feel whatever that was – his hand slapping my sensitive skin – one more time.

“Argh!” I cry with pleasure as he repeats the gesture.

“Looks like I should have done this sooner,” he murmurs, taking my foot and securing my ankle to the bedpost. “Mmm, what a sight this is.”

I’m completely vulnerable, completely exposed to him and my body is on fire. I pull against the restraints, desperate to find him, to get to his mouth. “Please,” I beg, and I hear his clothes dropping to the floor.

The mattress beneath me moves and his breath is at my shin. As he moves up over me his cock drags along my leg and I buck my hips to attempt to get to it. His hot breath now teases my sex, and when I beg him to touch me, he blows at my sensitive spot, driving me insane.

“Denve, I can’t...” I moan, squirming against my restraints.

Next my nipples are being teased, softly at first, and then something is pulling at them. I’m so delirious with need I can’t tell what he’s doing, all I know is if I don’t get some relief soon, I will be driven half mad.

“Oh, gods, I can’t, please!” I cry. That’s when he finally gives me some and his tongue is sweeping through my desperate sex, slow and soft. He uses one long stroke lingering for a moment on my clit and I wish I could take his head and press him into me.

Deep moans fill the room and at first, I am sure they must be mine, but as he eats at me, I feel the deep rumble of his actions reverberate through me. It’s the final assault on my senses and I scream his name, fighting against my bonds as I erupt with pleasure, the inability to move, making it so extreme that I fear I may lose consciousness.

“That’s it,” he whispers against my skin and before I know it, he’s inside

me.

My legs are spread so wide, my arms so open to him I feel as though I have given myself up entirely. With each pump, each penetration, each drag of his beautiful cock he whispers words into my ear.

“You’re so beautiful, Salina. Thank you for giving yourself to me, Salina. I love you, Salina.”

Thrust after thrust, he brings me back to the brink and when I tell him I’m about to lose my mind again, he pulls down my blindfold and I see him there above me, his hair damp with sweat, his eyes full of love.

One last time I give myself to him as he does to me, as we cum together, my moans drowned out by his voice as he roars my name. He kisses my forehead and strokes my cheek. “I told you, you can trust me,” he says.

And I do, completely.

DENVE

The carriage floats smoothly like silk upon the road, kissed by the warm ways of the afternoon sun as we make way for my family manor. As gorgeous as the weather is, the journey itself isn't quite as glamorous.

Sitting across from me, Salina glares out the window with a troubled look, hiding most of her face with her hand. Her leg bounces up and down nonstop with a clenched fist resting atop it.

Even with a face and demeanor as strong as hers, I can see through it all. She's nervous, despite insisting that she's not. A mouth can bend the truth but eyes cannot lie, and in hers I see anxiety and unease.

Still, I cannot blame her, I know she's only trying to seem strong so as to not worry me. I lean forward, laying a hand on her leg.

"Hey," I whisper. "How are you doing?"

"I'm alright," she says, smiling unsurely at me. "How about you?"

Up until that point, I had also told her I'm fine, but decide now is best to come clean.

"If I'm being honest, I'm nervous. I know you are too."

Salina's eyes meet mine. I expect rebuttal, but instead, she just shrugs her eyebrows and subtly nods.

"Whatever happens at your manor is going to change everything."

"I know but it's for sure only going to go one of two ways. The first is that by some miracle, it fixes all our problems. The second is that it all goes up in flames, there's no in between. Either way, I'm ready for anything, especially since I have you by my side."

Part of the tension in Salina's face melts away as she smiles. She rests her

hand on top of mine, giving me a reassuring squeeze.

“Know that no matter what happens today, I’m staying with you.”

“Same goes, my darling.”

The rest of the trip is silent. Not long after, the carriage pulls up to the manor. It sprawls high, donning a blue coat of pain on all sides with rows on windows sitting on each level. Marble statues of animals sit along the rooftop, looking as though they’re watching over the property.

A long, wide set of stairs run up to the front door where a zagfer servant is on standby. As the carriage comes to a halt, he begins his descent, accosting the vehicle with a confident stride. He reaches out a hand, gripping the door.

“Here we go.”

The carriage door opens. The servant gasps at the sight of me, covering his mouth as he retracts in shock.

“Hello there,” I greet.

The servant spins around on his heels and breaks off into a run, ascending the stairs as though his life depends on it. Salina’s hands shoot to her throwing knives.

“Should I kill him before he reaches the door?” she asks, a sense of urgency in her voice.

“Stay your hand, my love.” I chuckle. “Come on then.”

I step out and turn back to help Salina out of the carriage. She gazes up at the magnificent structure with wonder as we come to the bottom of the stairs.

“Some place you got,” she marvels.

She links her arm with mine. Together, we walk up as a breeze rings through the air, coming as a blessing in the immense heat of the afternoon sun. As we draw closer to the door, time itself slows down as the sound of my heart beating becomes louder.

Each pump of blood rings in my head. I feel my lungs filling to the brim with air as I breathe deeply, not noticing my grip on Salina’s hand becoming tighter. We reach the topmost step, where I snap back to reality.

“Denve, are you sure you can do this?” asks Salina.

Before I can answer, the doors burst open, my parents spilling out like water from a broken dam. My mother is suddenly on me, wailing as she envelopes me in her grip.

“Oh, Denve, I thought you were gone forever!” She sobs.

My arms remain at my side in shock and awe. My confusion worsens as

my father approaches with a smile on his face. He joins in on the hug as my eyes widen. My arms slowly come to welcome their embrace.

I look at Salina who tilts her head in deep thought, just as confused as I am. My parents have never shown me affection, so this was the last thing I expected them to do upon my return.

“Mother... Father...” I whisper.

“It’s good to have you back, my son,” Father says.

“Who’s your friend?” asks Mother, directing her attention to Salina as she dashes away her tears.

“Well, um...” I mutter, still shocked. “Mother, Father, this is Salina. Salina, this is Iona and Avalon, my parents.”

“It’s a pleasure,” greets Salina, shaking their hands.

“Well, this is all exciting!” says Iona. “Come on then, let’s get inside.”

“There’s so much your mother and I are keen to talk about,” says Avalon.

The next few minutes go by in a blur as we’re rushed into the dining room. A slew of servants run around the table, readying tea and cakes for us as I come to terms with the fact this is all happening. When all is done, I sit facing an eager set of parents with Salina holding my hand underneath the table.

“So,” begins Avalon. “Tell your mother and I everything.”

“Where do I start?” I mutter. “Well, I suppose I should start with Ocuri. There’s a lot to take in, so stop me if needs be.”

I leave no stone unturned, laying out all details of my brother’s devious plans for me, them, and the estate. As the story unfolds, they grow brooding, their faces overcome with contemplation.

“And to think we ever gave him praise in the first place,” remarks Avalon. “I can’t believe it.”

“Did he really want to kill us all?” asks Iona in disbelief.

“I tell no word of a lie,” I say with conviction. “And he came incredibly close to getting what he wanted. In fact, I wouldn’t be here if not for her.” I gesture to Salina.

“Salina here is an associate of mine I met in the city. She’s the one who saved me, and together we defeated Ocuri once and for all.”

“Why did it have to end this way?” moans Iona.

“I wish things could have been different, Mother. I took no pleasure in killing him, but there was no other choice.”

“Ocuri was beyond the point of no return,” says Salina, leaning forward.

“I’m sorry things turned out like this, but at least one of your sons remains.” She speaks strongly but there is a strain in her voice, which I presume to be from the discussion of my brother.

I make the conscious decision to leave out her past with Ocuri, as well as her assassin occupation, deciding that’s her story to tell. As she lays more details out for my parents, they listen attentively, exchanging murmurs between each other as well as asking the occasional question.

“Well, this is all a lot at once,” remarks Iona. “But Salina, we owe you a massive thank you.”

“Yes, you saved our son’s life, and ours, too. For that, we are forever grateful,” says Avalon.

“There’s much that your father and I must discuss but please, would the two of you stay for dinner?” asks Iona.

I look at Salina as she smiles at me. I then nod in acceptance at my mother’s offer. My parents rise to their feet, bowing respectfully to us.

“Feel free to roam around the manor grounds. Dinner is at seven. We’ll also have the servants prepare a guest room for two in case you want to stay for the night.”

Before they leave, I share another hug with them.

“It’s so good to have you back home, my son,” whispers Avalon.

Salina comes to my side as they make their exit.

“Well, that went far better than I thought it would.”

“So it seems.” I sigh. “I’m more shocked about their openness and warmth though. They’ve never even been like that before.”

“Maybe they thought twice about how they treated you when Ocuri told them of your demise. Grief changes people.”

“They seem to like you, too.”

“Never in a million years did I see myself becoming friends with your parents.” She laughs.

The hours pass as we have a family dinner in the dining room. As I engage in conversation with my parents, I come to an apparent realization. They only ever treated me the way they did out of tradition, for they were raised the same way.

“We only ever wanted you to do your best, that’s why we gave you such tough love.”

Soon, the night throws its ebony blanket of darkness over the sky. My mother escorts Salina to the guest rooms up ahead as I walk with my father.

“Denve, let me ask you something,” he says, laying an arm around my shoulders. “This Salina girl, she seems like a good person. Forgive me for being so direct but what do you plan on doing with her?”

Given their newfound attitude, I finally feel safe enough to be vulnerable with my parents.

“Well, truth be told, I plan on mating with her. I love her, Father.”

Avalon chuckles and nods.

“A good move on your part, my son. A woman like Salina is hard to find.”

I laugh, partly out of disbelief for how accepting he’s being.

“I can see you’re in a bit of shock about this all,” he chortles. “But there’s something else. Your mother and I had a conversation earlier, and we decided to dip into the manor fund for you.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Like we said at the dinner table, we only want what’s best for you. The only person who knows what’s best is yourself, so we want you to go off and make a life for yourself. We’ll grant you a share of the fund, so you take as much as you need.”

“Father, I...”

“Just promise me you’ll make the best life you can for yourself, and for your woman too.”

The news is a blessing directly from the gods, for this means Salina’s contract on me can be closed without issue. With our problems coming to an end, the future only spells happiness for both of us.

SALINA

The Thuvrol mansion is larger and more opulent than I expected.

It has been very tastefully and simply decorated, but it is obvious that no expense has been spared.

I am in Denve's chambers, and I am preparing to finish up for the evening.

Denve had to speak with his parents, and I can tell that he is thrilled that they are treating him warmly.

I still have my reservations about them – I do not trust anyone who could treat any of their children so poorly for so long.

But I will remain polite and courteous for Denve's sake. And maybe, in the future, I will grow close with his mother and father.

I stand at the window of his bedroom, which is just opposite his bed. The Thuvrol mansion is built on the crest of a hill in the High Towns, and I can see all of Vhoig from where I stand.

I realize as I stand there that I am seeing Vhoig through different eyes.

When I first arrived in the city, I had no time to look around at it. I also thought that it was, compared to Milthar, filthy, noisy, and too busy.

But now I see a thriving, growing city. I see a city filled with young life. I see a city filled with joy that spills over from pubs and taverns.

I cannot help but think of Esra, who dances in her club in the Red District.

I'll have to visit her before I leave.

I will never love Vhoig more than I love Milthar. The beautiful, almost secluded city of the minotaurs saved my life, and I cannot wait to return

there.

I stand in front of the window until the sun starts to set, before I pull off my dress and walk to Denve's large, fully equipped bathing room.

It is beautiful and is as lavish as the rest of the house. The bathtub is massive, and I can see that the zagfer servants of the Thuvrol mansion have already filled the bath with hot water.

They have also left jars of liquid soaps, lotions, and salves on the rim of the bath.

I open one jar and pour the liquid inside, into the bath. My senses are immediately filled with the fragrance of rirzed and gankoya. When I get into the bath, I let out a small moan as I allow myself to soak in the hot water.

I did not tell Denve, but my body took a beating in the fight with Ocuri and his guards. My purna heritage means that I heal fairly quickly and easily, but no one is immune to aches and bruises.

I know that the pungent rirzed herb, and the gentler, spicy gankoya root, will help with the inflammation of my bruises.

Denve should probably also take a bath like this. He was in that fight too, and neither of us had time to rest since the fight, I think to myself as my hips, pelvis, and lower back relax in the water.

I hear him then. I have grown so used to listening to Denve's movements that I can differentiate his footsteps from everyone else's.

He walks into his chambers and then stops walking.

"I'm in here," I call. I hear him laugh, before his footsteps resume. "Are you finished talking with your parents?"

I ask him as he enters the bathing room. He sits down on the rim of the bath and looks at me with his kind, violet eyes.

I am always surprised to see Denve in comparison to other dark elf men. All the dark elf men I have met are meticulous about grooming. So when I see Denve's rugged, roguish appearance, I feel a little thrill.

He is so perfect.

"Yes," he says and puts his hand in the slowly cooling water. "I finished speaking to them."

I sit up as I sense that a more serious conversation is coming.

"What is it?" The lights in the bathing room suddenly seem very low. Denve flicks his fingers and candles flicker into life.

"How did the talk go?" I continue as sudden anxiety strikes me, and my skin prickles with fear.

Denve smiles then and I relax quickly.

Surely that means the talk went well?

“The talk with my parents went much better than I expected,” he says. “They are really happy for me, and they definitely approve of you.”

A dry laugh escapes me, and Denve smiles because he knows exactly how I am feeling.

“I was hoping that they would disapprove slightly,” I confess as Denve stands. I watch him as he starts to undress. “I like annoying people.”

Denve gives a barking laugh and we both descend into a fit of giggles.

“They love you,” he says as he gets into the bath with me. The water shifts suddenly as our legs become entangled. Luckily the bath is large enough for both of us. I use the energy created by Denve’s movements to warm up the bath water again.

“They love you and they want me to make an honest woman out of you.”

“What does that mean?”

He takes my hand in his. He doesn’t tell me right away. Instead, Denve goes off on a slight tangent.

“I think I want to visit Milthar. And maybe one day, when you’re ready, we can go to Prazh. We don’t have to visit your coven. But I want to see all the places you’ve loved before.”

“They banished me, you know,” I say stiffly, but Denve massages my hands with his.

“I know. But people tend to forgive those they once loved. They were your family and it wasn’t your fault. Maybe I can explain that to them someday.”

“I think that is a very long way away,” I say. “But I appreciate the sentiment. I do miss Prazh.”

I have never admitted to anyone how much I miss my homeland.

“Something else happened. Something good,” he says and his face opens up with a smile, and I sigh at the beauty of his smile.

“What is it?”

“They gave me the money for the ransom. As a gift.”

“All the money?” I ask him, and my voice is low with shock as I think about the high number that I asked for in my ransom letter.

I look around the bathing room to remind myself that the Thuvrol’s are wealthy.

They are noble elves after all, with connections to the crown.

But still, I did not think that they would just hand over the ransom money. When I pictured my future with Denve – if that is what he wanted – I pictured us struggling for a few years before we got on our feet.

“Why did they do that?” I ask him, because I really have to know.

“They want me to start my life now. I am twenty-six years old and I have spent most of my adult life drinking and partying. I think they’re kicking me out of the proverbial nest. They’re helping me and also forcing me to start my own life.”

“That is amazing,” I tell him. “I’m so happy for you.”

Then something crosses my mind – something that Denve said earlier.

“What did you mean when you said your parents wanted you to make an honest woman out of me?”

He does not answer me directly.

“Aside from the money, I received something else,” he says. He leans over the rim of the bath for his trousers, and then pulls out a velvet box.

He opens it carefully. Inside, nestled in the velvet, is the most beautiful ring I have ever seen.

“It is a family heirloom. And when they said I should make an honest woman out of you.” Denve pauses as he takes my hand in his. He dries it off with a nearby towel and then slips the ring onto my finger.

“They meant that I should ask you to be my mate,” he says quietly. I do not miss the anxiety on his face when he looks at me.

He still doubts my feelings for him. We really cannot have that.

“And that is what I have been wanting to do since I knew that I love you. And I am hoping you want the same thing from me.”

I pull my hands away from his and examine the ring on my finger. It is beautiful and sparkles in the candlelight.

“The ring has been in my family for generations,” he says, almost conversationally as if to fill the silence.

He’s anxious about what I’m going to say. He is trying to fill the silence.

“I think it was made for my great-great grandmother.”

“Of course I’ll be your mate.” I interrupt him before he can give me a history lesson about his family’s bloodline.

I have come to know him well. And Denve talks when he is anxious. He talks a lot.

“Of course I’ll be your mate,” I tell him again.

He moves so quickly that I almost do not see him coming. He scoops me

up into his arms, and plants big, wet kisses all over my face.

I laugh out loud, not caring who can hear us as our lips finally meet.

“I love you so much,” he tells me. I stroke his wet head, doing my best to keep the ring dry.

“I love you too, Denve,” I tell him. “And I want to tell you that I love you every day for the rest of our lives.”

I kiss him again and again, before we settle down in the bath and just lay there.

“We should finish up,” he says when the water is completely cold. “We have a long day tomorrow.”

“What is happening tomorrow?” I ask him sleepily.

“We have a mating ceremony to plan. And my mother will be absolutely feral about this. But I am sure it will be a great bonding session for us all.”

DENVE

The big day has finally arrived. After a few nights debating over where to host the ceremony, Salina and I realized we were standing in the perfect venue all along. As such, we've mutually decided to hold the wedding right here in the royal gardens of my family manor.

I personally oversaw the renovation for the venue, designing a floor plan of sorts for the set up. The altar sits just in front of the fountains, where statues of four worgs spit water in all directions through their mouths.

The altar itself stands high, its height just a few inches lower than the fountain. White in color, the overhanging arch is accessorized with flowers picked out by Salina. Mirrors sit on each side, taking their place behind where Salina and I will be standing facing each other.

Rows of chairs host our guests, with an aisle centrally between them. I keep my eyes glued to the aisle entrance, concealed by two hedges on either side. The whole set up is placed in the center of the garden, surrounding us with nothing but nature. On a day like today, we only want family and friends to be here with us.

"A mighty fine job you've done with the design," remarks Shonak, a high priest overseeing our vows.

"Thank you," I reply, my eyes still on the aisle entrance.

"Are you nervous?"

"Who isn't when they're getting mated?"

Shonak lays a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I look at him, seeing in his eyes the look of a gentle paternal figure, a calming energy oozing from his demeanor. He needs not say anything for me to take control of my nerves.

“I just want everything to go right for Salina,” I tell him.

“Well if you ask me, she seems pretty happy,” he chuckles, gesturing behind me.

I spin around, spotting Salina as she appears at the start of the aisle. Our guests spin around to face her, audibly gasping at the sight of her. My knees almost buckle and give out from me when I see just how beautiful she is in her white dress.

The silhouette is just about see through, showing off her lean and toned muscles from her years of training. The waistline has been stitched to fit perfectly around her, with the dress gradually opening up as it transitions through the bodice to the neckline and sleeves.

Her décolletage shows, grabbing attention from the males in their audiences, but most of all from me. I can see her trying to conceal a giggle as I eye her up, likely with a gaping mouth.

“Don’t worry, honey,” she says as she takes her place across from me. “You’ll get to undress me later.”

Shonak checks if we’re both ready to go. We give the signal, prompting him to raise his arms to the sky. Our guests rise from their seats, all eyes darting our way.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the Thuvrol residence to come together in the presence of loved ones with the intention of mating.”

As the high priest speaks, I lose my focus, hypnotized not only by the way Salina looks but the glint in her eye, her gaze hooking me like a caesin. Only when Shonak clears his throat do I snap back to reality, causing my mate-to-be to smirk.

“Now then,” booms Shonak, he himself smiling at my distraction. “Have the both of you attended this ceremony through the freedom of choice, with no coercion? I ask this so that the strength of your union will be enhanced by the Thirteen Who Sleep.”

“I have,” say Salina and I simultaneously.

“Given the inevitable hardships of life, are you prepared to stand willingly by each other’s side through them all?”

“We are.”

“In that case, I ask Salina and Denve to take hold of each other’s hands.”

As I take her hands into mine, I feel the hardness of her usually strong demeanor melt in my grip. Her cheeks flush red as her eyes look elsewhere, seemingly in embarrassment.

“I ask you both to declare consent to The Thirteen.”

“Salina,” I begin. “To you I dedicate my life in its entirety, through good times and bad times, and everything in between.”

She looks lovingly into my eyes as she repeats the same. At this point, I’ve completely forgotten about the presence of the guests.

“Do you take each other to be lifelong mates?” asks Shonak.

“Through each and every day.”

“And everyday after death.”

“Then by the power granted unto me by The Thirteen, I declare you both mates! You may now kiss the bride!”

Our lips act as magnets, pulled towards each other as we embrace in a passionate kiss. The guests throw their hands together in a thunderous ovation, but even still I can only hear the whispers of my love in between each kiss.

“I love you.”

At that moment, a group of hired chivdouyu burst into a harmonic symphony as we make our way towards our guests. Amongst those who congratulate us, my parents embrace me in a loving hug.

“Well done,” says a tearful Iona. “You were great up there.”

“You make me proud, my son,” exclaims Avalon.

As they extend their congratulations to my bride, I spot my good friend Farzhi in the distance, the look of a party animal apparent over his face. He’s clearly in the mood to party, as am I. I’m eager to get out of here and begin a raucous celebration in my favorite tavern in town.

“Mother, Father, Salina and I will be heading into town with some of our friends to celebrate. Will you be coming with us?” I ask.

“Oh, I’m afraid not,” laughs Avalon.

“We’re far too old for a rowdy party, but do enjoy yourself, okay?”

“Will do.” I chuckle, pulling them in for another embrace. “Thank you so much, for everything.”

I grab Salina’s hand with an eager excitement suddenly filling me, whisking her away to the carriage that awaits us. It’s bigger than the average vehicle, designed for group transport of large parties.

Salina is quick to become friends with Farzhi and the others during the journey. We all sing and drink, rocking the carriage about as we dance around. The sight of her having fun puts a wide smile on my face, as does her confidence.

Soon, we arrive in town, parking outside the Elve's Ear tavern. By now, each of us are a little tipsy, yet the celebration is only about to begin. Even the staff are thrown off by our energy, rushing to our table with rounds upon rounds of drinks and food.

Our raucousness causes the other patrons to leave, essentially giving us the whole bar to enjoy ourselves. The hours pass as the late afternoon burns into the early evening, our bellies filled with good food and hearty laughter.

"Hey," says Farzhi, nudging my elbow. "I've got an idea."

"Oh, yeah?" I ask.

"How about a drinking game?" he proposes.

"Heh, I don't know. I've already had a lot, and I'm trying to pace myself," I reply, gesturing to the six empty pints resting on the table.

"What's the matter?" he teases. "Can't handle your alcohol?"

"I'll take you on!" says Salina, drawing herself up.

"You?" returns Farzhi.

"Yeah, are you afraid a girl will beat you?" she smirks.

"No!" he snaps, clicking his thumbs. "Bartender, a round of shots between the two of us please!"

Salina takes a seat opposite Farzhi, their eyes locked in an intense starting match. They only break eye contact when they take their shots. Four shots in, things aren't looking good for either of them. I approach Salina's side, whispering concerningly in her ear.

"Love, are you okay? You don't have to do this."

She turns around, her movements drawn out as she stumbles to reach for my ear.

"Don't worry, I'm only acting."

I take a step back, watching as Farzhi takes almost thirty seconds to bring the shot glass to his mouth. He knocks it back, a cocky smile on his face as he beams at my wife. Gradually, he begins to tip over, falling flat on his back. The guests ignite into applause as Salina drops the drunk act, her normal mannerisms resuming as if she's completely sober.

Soon, the time comes for us all to head our separate ways. Salina lays on her head on my shoulder during the return journey. As the moon slowly drifts by in the night sky, it's then that I realize I love Salina for how unapologetically different and authentic she is from anyone else I've ever met.

We find ourselves back in the guest room, readying ourselves for a well

earned rest. As I remove her dress from behind, I kiss her neck.

“That was the greatest day of my life,” I tell her, nibbling on her lobe. “But there’s one more thing I have to show you.”

“Oh yeah?” she giggles. “And what could that be? Another piece of jewelry? Or an expensive bottle of wine?”

I take a step back, holding her gift in my hands.

“Where are you going?” she asks, spinning around. The smile on her face swiftly turns into an open mouthed gasp when she sees the parchment in my hands.

“By the gods,” she exclaims. “Denve, is that what I think it is?”

I say nothing, only extending the paper toward her. She gently takes the parchment, her eager eyes running over the passage papers to journey back to Milthar.

“I... I don’t know what to say...” she mutters.

“Well.” I chuckle, pulling her close by the waist. “I figure that since you’ve seen my home, it’s about time I see yours.”

“Denve... I had no idea about this.”

“I wanted to gift you something special, and I thought there’d be nothing better than to return back to where you came from, only this time with me.”

A tear runs down her face as she kisses me.

“Denve, you’ve made me believe in love again. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Salina. Today is only the start of our life together, and we have a long trip ahead,” I say with a smile, dashing her tears away.

Our lips meet once more before she pushes me onto the bed, beginning a dance of love between the sheets.

SALINA

I wake up in the arms of the love of my life, Denve's grip held tight around my waist. The warmth of his body coupled with his scent has never been more inviting but I'm invigorated with the thought of returning home. I slowly crawl out of bed and throw on some clothes, eager to get some fresh air and calm my mind.

The cabin rocks gently from side to side as the sea cradles the ship like a child, the muffled sound of waves splashing against the hull coming through the wall. I open the door and climb out onto the deck, greeted by the bright and relentless morning sun.

Balancing out the unforgiving heat is the breeze of the ocean, carrying with it the briny scent of the sea. I look out upon the horizon, where the ocean continues far beyond it. I let down my hair, each strand bouncing up and down as the wind blows through it.

I close my eyes and take in a deep breath, then move to the front of the ship. There, I see the port of Milthar in the distance, the docks running grand and wide. Boats of varying shapes and sizes are sailing in and out of the harbor.

I'm closer than ever to stepping back on home soil, the emotions inside me mixed and unclear. On one hand, I'm excited but my nerves run up on the other.

What if Denve changes his mind about all this?

My mate has already seen my dark side in action, but being in my territory is undoubtedly going to carry a different energy. On top of that, I think about the others waiting to see me.

I stand the possibility of losing my chosen family, the friends I've made back at Nakam, despite the fact I've completed the mission. I've been telling myself that I'm overthinking but my mind keeps reminding me that no one has ever brought back the target of their contract before.

Even now, I can only imagine the look on Sythar's face. As I mull over my thoughts, a pair of strong arms wrap themselves around me, causing me to forget about my worries for a moment.

"Good morning, my dear," he greets with a kiss. "Catching some of the ocean air I see."

The docks loom closer as I remain silent, my eyes glued to them.

"Hey, is there something wrong?" he asks.

"I'm just nervous about all of this," I tell him. "I'm worried how everyone is going to react."

"What?" he asks in surprise. "The great Salina Caligari is nervous?"

"Shut up." I giggle, elbowing him.

"That would explain the steam coming out of your ears," he chuckles, turning me to face him. "You've got this. Everything is going to work out just as it should, and I'll be right by your side."

"You're right," I reply. "I still need time to prepare before I see them though. In my letter back to Nakam, I didn't mention when I'd be coming back or anything."

Denve's eyes move behind my shoulder, narrowing at something in the distance.

"What?" I ask.

"Something tells me that woman knows you."

I spin around, only now realizing that the ship is being docked. Standing on the harbor below is a familiar face.

"Callista?" I call out.

"Salina!" she yells, jumping around like an excited batlax.

Without hesitating, I jump off the side of the ship, twirling in the air as I land perfectly on my feet. I embrace her in a warm hug, the sight of her delighting me. I forget about all the troubles plaguing my mind, only grateful to see a smile on her face.

"I missed you so much!" she exclaims.

"Me too!"

"So," she asks, pulling back. "How did your first contract go?"

"Well..."

I turn around, gesturing to Denve as he dismounts the ship with our belongings. At the sight of him, Callisa tilts her head in confusion.

“There’s someone I’d like to introduce you to.”

Denve approaches, extending a hand to my closest friend.

“Denve Thuvrol, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Denve,” says Callista with surprise. “I’m Callista.”

“Ah, Salina has told me all about you. Perhaps there’s a move or two you could teach me for self defense.”

Callista’s smirk spreads as she chortles. “Well, why not, eh?”

She turns to me. “I’m sure you’re eager to get back to Nakam. The carriage behind me will take us back there if you’re ready to go.”

I glance at Denve but see his line of sight is focused in another direction. Following his line of sight, I spot a minotaur giving him a dirty look.

“Darling,” I call to him, pulling his sleeve. “Callista says the carriage will take us to Nakam. Should I just go now?”

“I’d say it’s the best thing to do. May as well get it over with. The more you wait, the more nervous you’ll be.”

He turns to face Callista as my friend seemingly studies him. “Thank you for arranging the transport. Let me get the door for you.”

Callista shoots a sidelong glance at him as he walks by her, then darts her gaze to me.

“Quite the gentleman you’ve bagged.”

I explain everything to her during the trip, with Denve occasionally adding in details here and there. Callista listens with intent, nodding and asking questions. When the story is all said and done, she leans back in her seat.

“So, just to summarize... Salina, you went there to kill Denve, fell in love with him, found out Ocuri was still alive, then you both killed him and got mated? I’d say you made the right move in going for that contract.”

“Yeah,” I chuckle. “I suppose I did.”

“She’s good,” says Denve, looking at me with a proud smile. “By no means am I an easy target, but there’s plenty of times she could have killed me. Hell, maybe more than I’m aware of.”

I pat his leg.

“Just watch your back,” I joke.

“She’s a feisty one, though I’m sure you already knew that,” says Callista. “We’re pulling into Nakam now, are you ready Salina?”

“No, but I don’t exactly have a choice.”

Prying eyes are shot our way by passers by as we tread through the halls of Nakam, Callista leading the way to Sythar’s office. We come to his door.

“He’s expecting you, so good luck.”

I lay my hand on the doorknob, knowing that whatever happens next will be life changing. Whether it’ll be for the better or worse remains to be seen. I draw myself up and step through into his office with a confident stride, Denve following behind me.

Sythar looks up from his desk and rises to his feet. His eyes dart straight to Denve, seemingly ignoring me. He walks around his desk, his full height and stature revealing itself. The minotaur walks straight up to him.

Instinctively, my hand shoots to my sheathed dagger, though I would never dream of drawing it on the head of our organization. Denve remains unbothered, their gaze leveled with each other before Sythar finally extends his hand forward.

“I’ve never shaken hands with a dark elf,” he booms.

“Nor have I with a minotaur.”

Sythar’s gaze runs up and down my mate before he faces me, finally acknowledging my presence.

“Salina, only someone such as you is capable of finding an unorthodox way of completing a mission.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

At my reply, Sythar raises an eyebrow and shakes his head. He huffs as he turns away but not before I catch a glint of amusement in his eye.

“So,” he says as he takes his seat. “I suppose you’re wondering about your fate here at Nakam.”

“I haven’t been able to get it off my mind,” I tell him. “But I will accept your judgment.”

“Salina, I’m going to give you a choice between three options.”

I step forward, my hands dropping to my side. This is where my fate will be decided.

“Option one, you leave Nakam and continue your life with Denve elsewhere, so long as you don’t carry out vigilante work,” he says, tapping his nose. “We have eyes everywhere.”

I glance at Denve then back at my boss.

“Option two, you continue living life as an assassin here, so long as Denve’s presence doesn’t interfere with your work or your ability to leave for

missions. Option three, you can remain here as a teacher.”

“A... A teacher!” I exclaim in shock. “Sythar, I always envisioned being an instructor but not until I retired from field duty... But I’ll take it.”

I turn to Denve, smiling as our gazes meet.

“There’s not a day I wish to spend without the love of my life.”

“I thought as such,” groans the minotaur. “Callista will lead you to a cottage on the edge of Nakam grounds, where a residence has already been prepared for you.”

“Sythar... Thank you for everything. Your guidance means a lot.”

“Don’t mention it,” he says, directing his focus on the paperwork in front of him.

“This is for you,” says Denve, leaving a bag of money on Sythar’s desk before we leave.

We head out the door, finding Callista waiting outside for us.

“So, do you want to see your new cottage?” she asks.

“You knew I’d pick option three, huh?”

“I know you better than anyone,” she says.

Denve and I link arms, proudly displaying our relationship to assassins as I become filled with a newfound confidence. Somehow, this all worked out better than I thought it would.

Callista leads us to a small cottage, handing me the key after she opens the door for us. Bowing, she steps out of the way and bids us farewell as Denve and I step inside. Our belongings lay nearby, ready to be unpacked.

“I... I can’t believe it,” I mutter in disbelief.

“Me neither,” says Denve. “But this is really ours.”

“Yeah...”

I take a glance around the house in shock and awe.

“I think Sythar likes me,” chuckles Denve. “Perhaps I’ll share a pint with him sometime.”

“That’ll be the day,” I laugh. “Come here and hold me.”

Denve and I pull each other close, his warmth filling me with joy. With everything working out for the better, I know there’s nothing that can possibly stop us from this point on.

CALLISTA

Sythar's eyes stare deep into the depths of my soul. It's apparent he doesn't believe the answer I've given him. Still, I stand my ground, refusing to be the first to look away.

"Alright, Callista," he says. "You're dismissed. No further questions."

"I have some of my own," I snarl.

"I said no further questions."

"What about my contract? When are you going to give me a shot?" I ask in a demanding tone.

"When there's something available for you then I'll let you know."

"Sythar, I've been waiting for-"

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

A deep growl emanates from me as tension brews inside of my chest. As much as I wish to prod some more, I know this bastard won't hear another word. I spin around, sighing with frustration as I march out of the door, slamming it shut.

Some of the other assassins glance over with curiosity. My glare causes them to turn away. A sudden wave washes over me, stripping the adrenaline from my body and leaving it feeling exhausted.

I ought to relax. After all, my secret is safe here, that much is certain. Still though, that damned minotaur expects something. I know suspicious, prying eyes when I see them.

I break away from Sythar's office, wandering aimlessly as I get a grip on myself.

I bet that's why he's yet to give me my first contract.

Much time has passed since I completed my training as one of Nakam's finest, three months to be precise. I think of Salina and how she received one almost instantly, wondering why I can't have the same.

How much more time until 'something is available'?

For an assassin to wait this long is unheard of. Graduates wait no longer than a month at most to receive their first contract, so my case is strange to say the least, something that my fellow associates agree with me on.

There are those who completed their training after me who have a handful of kills under their name already, the thought of which ignites a feeling of disrespect. Meanwhile, all I get is target practice.

I find myself in the canteen, mulling over my thoughts at a table by myself. As I eat, a familiar hand comes to rest on my shoulder. I peer up to see Salina, rising to greet her with a hug.

"Are you alright? Tell me what's wrong," she asks as she takes a seat beside me.

"Is it that obvious?" I chuckle. "Sythar is still refusing to give me a contract. Honestly, I'm beginning to wonder what was the point of it all? Why go through years of training if I'm going to sit here all day and let my skills collect dust?"

"Did he say why?"

"He says he'll give me a contract when something comes for me, but I watch other assassins get shipped off each week. I don't know, maybe I'm just not good enough."

"Bullshit," replies Salina. "You're one of the best, far better than anyone I've ever seen, even myself."

"Don't tease me. I haven't gotten the chance to prove myself yet."

"I mean it," she says reassuringly. "And I'm sure Sythar sees it too. Maybe he just wants to give you a target worthy of your time and skills. I've seen some of the ones on offer now, and even a recruit on day one of training can pull it off."

"Perhaps so." I shrug. Internally, I can't help but feel there's a deeper meaning behind it all, some insidious and crafty move pulled by the cunning hands of Sythar. Still, I don't think Salina will understand, and so I choose to change the subject.

"Enough about me. How are you getting on? You and Denve have been living in that cottage for what, a month now?"

"That's right. We're doing well, thanks for asking."

She checks the time on her stopwatch, rising from the table.

“I’ve got a class to teach. Why don’t you come with me? Maybe you can show the recruits a move or two, or take out some frustration on them.”

“Sure.” I chuckle, pushing an empty tray aside.

We continue chatting about her new life with Denve as we make our way to the training room. Stepping in, a group of new recruits stand to attention, nervous expressions written over their faces.

“Go on,” I say to Salina. “I’ll keep an eye out from the sidelines.”

Salina nods then moves to the front of the room, anxious sets of eyes following her as though she’s about to strike at any moment. She draws herself up, prompting her students to bow.

“Good afternoon recruits,” she announces. “Today, we’ll revise our combat lessons from the week and round off the month with some old fashioned sparring. Everyone breaks into pairs of two, and I’ll take on the remaining student.”

I laugh at the sight of the students scrambling to find partners, each prospect being snatched up like free money on the ground. Within seconds, a lone student glares at Salina, sweat running down his forehead.

“Alakar, come forth.”

“Yes, master!” he replies.

“First, you’ll be facing a fellow seasoned assassin by the name of Callista. Bow to her.”

Alakar bows to me without hesitation and assumes a defensive stance. With a smile, I bow back just as Salina whispers into my ear.

“Take it easy on him.”

All around us come the sounds of bodies hitting the astroturf floor as students are hurled to the ground.

“Show me what you’ve got, Alakar.”

The young elf shakily moves forward, readying his body for an obvious attempt at a roundhouse kick. With my eyes closed, I catch his ankle and flip him on his back. He gasps in agony but scrambles back to his feet, bowing to me.

“Alakar, I hope you’re all warmed up,” says Salina. “Time to face me.”

I hear an audible gulp of fear as she advances on the recruit. Salina moves gracefully, dodging each move from Alakar. The student pulls off some impressive maneuvers, a sign that Salina has taught them well. Still, there is no beating a master.

She knocks him to the ground. Alakar remains there for a moment, his eyes blinking in a haze before Salina offers her hand. Alakar takes it and is pulled to his feet.

“Students, take five!” commands Salina.

I toss her a nearby rag as she convenes with me near the door.

“You’re just as ruthless with your recruits as you are with your enemies,” I laugh.

“Perhaps so but someone has to teach them. Enemies aren’t going to go easy in the real world.”

“Still, they are incredibly fortunate to be taught by you. Listen, I ought to get going.”

“No worries,” says Salina. “Thank you for stopping by.”

“Say hello to Denve for me.”

I leave the training area, hearing the muffled commands of Salina calling her students back to attention as I smile. I’m happy to see her doing so well for herself, especially after learning of all that she went through in Vhoig.

Hidden deep underneath my happiness for her is a tinge of jealousy that I cannot deny, all because of her relationship with Denve. It’s not them that makes me upset, they know I love them dearly.

Rather, it is the notion of love and romance itself and knowing that I don’t have what they do. I walk off, mulling over the strange newfound thoughts of being swept away off of my feet just like my closest friend.

During all my years here and before that, I never once gave the idea of a relationship an ounce of my energy, deeming it to be a waste of time and money. I figured that the life of an assassin would be far too busy and dangerous to have any room for such a thing.

Yet, ever since I saw Denve and Salina together, I haven't been able to get the concept of love off of my mind. They also proved my thoughts to be false, exposing me to a greater truth, that love is more than possible even in a line of work such as mine.

I hope that the same future lies in wait for me... No, what am I thinking? I need to concentrate on getting a contract!

My efforts to push away the thought only causes it to become stronger. Images from my recurring nightmare flash in my mind as I enter my quarters, locking the door behind me.

Leave me alone!

But my mind doesn’t listen. Looking at me is the man from my dreams,

faceless as he stretches an arm out to me. Despite the lack of facial features, I can feel the love he has for me as he proclaims it, wishing to take me as his mate.

Just as I take his hand in mine, an axe swings in from nowhere and cuts off his arm, leaving me holding a detached hand. More axes surround the man as I try to look away but a force keeps my gaze directed on him. They come swinging down repeatedly, hacking the man to shreds until he's nothing but a bloodied pile of skin and bone.

I collapse to the floor, gasping for breath as I finally shake the image from my head. I know what the nightmare is telling me, that while love is possible to attain, there still exists the danger of being in a relationship with an assassin.

Why bother thinking about love? I know it's not in my future... I'm one of the few who knows what lies ahead for certain.

I peer down at my open palms, staring at the hands of a clairvoyant. Besides from me, there's only two more, not just in Milthar, or Vhoig, but on the entire damn planet of Protheka.

I clench them as my stomach twists into a knot, my very existence filling me with dread. I'm an endangered being, yet somehow I always saw Nakam as the perfect place to conceal my identity from the world.

It's always been safe... Until now.

THE END.

To read more about Salina and Denve sign up for my newsletter here: <https://www.subscribepage.com/celesteking>

PREVIEW OF MATED TO THE DARK ELF

The Worlds of Protheke is a vast and growing world. Check out the standalone series starter, Mated to the Dark Elf

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AMELIE

It feels like my birthday.

It's not that I'm excellent at keeping track of the days, from the window of this little room. Hardly a room at all, I have to admit. No, it's a feeling I have in the pit of my stomach, that's growing more sour with every passing day. The tension of my keepers, getting impatient as I come of age. I must be twenty, by now, though the seasons have drifted by like the clouds above. Meaningless.

I lean against the narrow frame of the window, watching the street below. It's my only entertainment here. The lone book they gave me weathered and worn from too many read throughs. I already know it by heart. They don't think humans need much to survive. This place is little more than a cell: a toilet, a bed, a sink... Enough to keep me alive, and little else.

It's not unknown what the dark elves do here, at Club L'amouer. I've heard the screams for years, of pleasure and pain. I was brought here as a child, under the impression that it was safe compared to the rest of the empire.

But that is not the case.

They refuse to tell me why I haven't yet been thrown into the pit with my friends, to be played with by their patrons until I expire. I've heard stories from Honey and have seen the marks. I've waited in this room for years, biding my time until they decide to drag me out and submit me to their wicked whims.

Every day, I have to wonder, *is this it?*

There is a strict order in their world. The upper caste of dark elves that

rule over everyone else, and their appointed talents—from artists to warriors and minor nobles. The lower caste, merchants and laborers and even criminals have a place in their society. Humans and the other species don't even make the rank, existing beneath their feet, entirely at the mercy of their dark magic. We subsist as little more than pets for their amusement.

I am worth only what my master can sell me for.

Swift footsteps sweep past my door, making me cringe. It is not often the dark elves come down this hall, but when they do, it is smart to be afraid. Hopefully, they pass by without a word. I would rather miss a meal than come face to face with a Zagfer—dark elf servants with a heavy chip on their shoulders.

They do the club master's bidding without hesitation, but there's a gleam in their dark eyes as if, without their shackles, they're capable of greater evil than even their master can imagine. I shudder at the very thought of them.

Another set of footsteps closes in, and I brace myself, listening for their passing. But instead, they stop at my door. Again, I have to ask myself, *is this it?* when a heavy knock jars me from my focus.

“Amelie,” comes a deep and grating voice.

I say nothing.

A key scrapes the lock, and the knob turns. It opens to one of *them*, just as I feared. He says nothing as he takes me in, his hard eyes roving over my threadbare clothes concealed by the washed out robe I use to cover myself. I tuck it tighter around my chest as if to hide my frame from him, but it does nothing to deter his hungry gaze.

“What do you want?”

His grin broadens, his massive frame barely fitting in the room as he enters and reaches for me. I'm too frightened to pull away when he grabs me by the arm, jostling me and forcing me to my feet. Even as he drags me out of the room, I try to secure the robe that's slipped around my shoulders.

My voice quivers when I dare speak out against his handling. “What's the meaning of this? Where are you taking me?”

He says nothing, my heavy boots clomping harder than his fine leather soles, though he's easily twice my height and three times my weight. I am not prepared for whatever they have planned, though I've been waiting most of my life to find out. My limbs are weak from years of captivity, and my knees give out on me.

But the dark elf won't let me collapse, his grip too tight around my

elbow.

The sounds of couplings are louder here, and the smell of hot flesh and sex is noxious. I can barely breathe as he drags me through their menagerie of rooms, some doors open to reveal the goings on inside.

I catch only glances, but the images sear themselves into my mind.

A woman is shackled from the ceiling, her body strained between heavy manacles that pull her taut as a dark elf patron rails her from behind. Her screams are senseless and batting, and I know she must be in great pain. It's a hard contrast to the gratification blooming over her host's countenance. In another room, several dark elves are crowded around a human who can't even let out a scream, choking on some kind of foul liquid. I can't even tell if they're male or female. All I can see is the surge of their flesh between the naked limbs of their dark elf masters.

Is that what will happen to me?

Of course, not, comes a small voice inside of me, *I am the most expensive pet here. They will reserve me for something far worse, I'm sure.* The thought brings tears to my eyes, blurring the horrible display as I am dragged toward the front of the building.

A human male nearly bolts from his captor, only to be dragged back in by a heavy dark hand and onto a waiting cock. Even as he struggles, his own cock goes hard against his will, and I understand the gleam of fear in his eyes as he stares right through me.

The space opens to more of the same, and as horrible as the sight is, I can't tear my gaze away. There's a woman, shackled to the bottom of a shallow pool, her head barely above the yellow waters as several dark elves take aim at her face. Hot streams cut off her gasps and make her choke as they laugh at her expense.

Two more sit atop human figures—who strain beneath the weight of them—watching with glee as the woman slowly drowns in their collective fluids. There are people strung from the ceiling here too, unmoving. I can't be sure if they're still alive or not, but no one seems to care. They're finished with those ones, and they'll be dragged away soon enough.

I want to puke.

But showing weakness will only make my punishment more severe, when it finally comes. I have to remain stoic and silent among the worst of it. The hot panting of a dark elf as he mounts one of the unconscious humans echoes in my mind, even as we turn down another hall, away from the gruesome

orgy.

I can breathe a little better here, though the air is still thick with the reek of sex.

The Zagfer catches me by the nape of my neck and leads me forward, his grip tightening as we near the master's office. A chill runs up my spine as I tear out of his grasp and turn to face him. He may be doing his master's bidding, but he is not my owner, and I will not be treated like a pet by him. "Get your hands *off* me, Zagfer."

He takes no offense to his title, measuring me up and licking his lips.

Disgust finds me again and I straighten. What is the point of being the most sought after pet if I am subjected to the whims of the master's servants? He wants to sell me to the highest bidder, and for that, I need to be pure before they put me on the auction block.

I bare my teeth at him in the only language they know and grab the handle to the master's door. "It will *never* be your turn," I say with certainty, stealing the smug expression from his face. He glowers at me as I turn the handle and enter.

I am pleased with myself, until that too is stolen from me.

KRAL ISHIRAYA

The silence of my study is a blessing.

It is free from the fickle emotions of court, and insulated from the whims of my family. Many in my position might have abused the authority of it by now, but I'd rather be studying the royal accounts, hidden away in my private chambers.

My brother, the King, respects my wishes to a point. But he insists that I still make appearances from time to time, so our subjects don't think I've disappeared entirely from proper society. They'll begin to wonder and talk.

It's the talk that I hate most.

Even those I respect are prey to it, where I am immune. It is no wonder why, however. We all know the story of how I was forced to seal away my emotions because they were simply too powerful when tethered to my magical abilities.

It's easier this way.

I prefer it, not having to worry about the subtleties that plague every interaction as the Archduke of my brother's kingdom. They will say one thing and mean something entirely different. They should simply pass around a ledger and sign their names under friend or foe, so that I know which to trust and which to have executed. I don't enjoy parsing through their words like puzzles to be solved.

Numbers make more sense than they.

A soft knock at my door makes my shoulders tense. I say nothing, in hopes that it is a stray Zagfer who will leave if I do not respond. The knock comes again and I sigh, surrendering the pages to my desk. "Go away."

The door opens a crack, and I realize it cannot be a servant. A servant wouldn't dare disobey an order from the Archduke. So, it must be one from among my family, coming to pry at why I have not left my chambers in days.

His presence is subtle but unmistakable. "Cousin," comes his silky voice. "Don't these walls grow tiresome?"

"They suit me quite well, actually," I grumble, lowering my head as if I am engrossed in my work, though I am the furthest thing from it. His very presence raises my hackles. "Don't *you* have some party to attend in the city, Carisu?"

"Not without you, Kral," he says, levering off the wall and making himself at home in my study. He falls into one of my favorite overstuffed chairs and runs his hands up the arms. When I turn to glare at him, a smug look has taken over his dark face, and one leg is draped lazily over the other, his fine shoe wagging impatiently. "Come out with me tonight. I insist."

"Insist all you like," I respond, "I much prefer the company of my books—"

"Which have been balanced and balanced again!" he cries, slamming a fist against the padding of the chair, hardly making a thud. "You have not been seen in public for over a fortnight. Do you even exist anymore, cousin? The other nobles are beginning to question it."

I straighten the pages in front of me and sigh, considering what my brother had told me, not so long ago. *I cannot make you do anything, brother, but please, for the sake of our family, you must uphold our social status.*

An Archduke that doesn't ever socialize is not a proper Archduke at all.

You are an extension of us, and should flaunt our power and influence among the higher caste. There is a city for you to explore. Explore it!

And carry with you our name in pride.

I scoff under my breath, shaking my head. "Explore, huh?"

"What was that?" Carisu asked, leaning forward in his chair. Out of all our family, he always had the keenest of our sharp elven ears. "You admit it, then? You will come out with me?"

"I said nothing of the sort."

That smile is back as Carisu flashes his sharp canines. "I have just the place in mind for you, cousin. Maybe it will liven you up a bit and bring a healthy flush to your cheeks in the process." He stands in a sweep of his finely cut surcoat and offers a hand. "The women will fall at your feet—and mine too—if you make an appearance."

With the utmost consideration, I return the sheaves to their binder. “I have no interest in seeking out trouble with you on the streets of Vhoig. You have friends who would gladly-”

“But they are rats! Son of K’sheng that can’t even vote in parliament! They are nothing in the light of you, oh great Archduke of Vhoig.” He closes the distance between us and grabs my shoulders, nearly shaking me with his frustration. “What can I do to convince you to leave this hovel?”

I push him away. “Go bother someone else. I will hear no more of this nonsense.”

Carisu doesn’t accept my answer, spinning me around by the shoulder. “There is delicious food among the Zagfer that you have never even tried!”

I sweep his hand off my shoulder.

“Great treasures to be bought on the black market,” he insists as I adjourn to my closet. “And women, cousin. Oh, the women!”

“I have no interest in love.”

My cousin scoffs. “Who said anything about love?”

I stall as I reach into my wardrobe. I’d happily leave my study if he were to remain behind. “You speak of the skin market, then. A most deplorable pastime. How many slaves do you own now, Carisu?”

“Ah, but they break so easily. They must be replaced on occasion.”

His little value of human life almost makes me disgusted. Almost. “I have no time for your games,” I say, donning a sleek black cloak, my last resort to lose this philandering cousin of mine. “If your business is done, I really must ask you to leave.”

Carisu troubles himself with fastening the clasp of my cloak like a Zagfer, patting it down until the folds are smoothed out. “Come with me, please. I don’t want to go alone, and I will get a better price if you’re sitting beside me. It will only be for a little while, and then you can return to your study. The King, long may he reign, will be satisfied with your attendance in public. You need only sit there and watch the proceedings.”

I meet his eye and scrutinize his mercurial features. “Who told you?”

He shrugs and withdraws with a dismissive air. “The walls might as well be made of paper, cousin. You should know that by now. And besides, it doesn’t matter who told me. We are all family here.”

“We are hardly family.”

“Then, let’s change that.” He links his arm in mine like a close friend, though he’s antagonized me for as long as I can recall. “I want to know what

you fancy, and what makes you smile. I've only ever seen that scowl of yours, hiding much emotion, I'm sure."

"You know better than that," I say, though I can feel my will crumbling. I could blast him out of the third story window with just a pulse of my magic, but I don't have it in me. "Why are you so insistent?"

"Because, I fear you are drifting away from us." He leans in and lowers his voice. "And so does the King. Soon, the whole of the city will suspect it, too, and your position will not be secure. Even the King cannot guarantee your protection. You know that.

"But if you make the occasional appearance, you'll show them that you are a dark elf to be reckoned with." He stares hard into my eyes, searching for something that has long since been locked away. "You don't even need to flaunt your magic," he continues, adjusting my cloak again. "You need only attend."

A long sigh escapes me, and my jaw works in consideration. "Just this once."

Carisu's features light up instantly. "I'll take it."

I chew on my lower lip in true resignation. My cousin certainly has a way of wearing a soul down. "When did you say you wanted to leave?"

AMELIE

I walk into Rhakis' office with my head bowed. I don't want to show any signs of defiance here. My life may be horrible, but it can always get worse, especially in a place like L'amouer.

"Amelie, it's lovely to see you this evening. How are you faring?"

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

The look in the manager's eye hints at one of the ways my life could get so much worse. We exchange pleasantries because that's expected of me, but I know what he really wants. As if I needed any more than the lustful stare to tell, he lets his robe fall open, revealing his massive erection.

"Frustrated."

Any other girl called in here would take this as the signal to bring him to bliss. And while his nakedness and lichenous stare make my skin crawl, I know he would never dare to touch me. I'm too valuable, untouched and pure.

I'm one of L'amouer's 'select stocks.' At a young age, with a little bit of divination magic, they select those who will grow up to be the most desirable. We are sequestered away from the rest, and our training is a much different matter. While others are taught how to perform carnal acts, we are trained in dancing, music, singing, and other forms of entertainment to keep our dark elf masters entertained in between whatever debauchery they have planned for us.

The manager gives a sharp whistle, and then another woman comes into the room, crawling on all fours like a dog. I keep my face serene, but my heart aches for her. Honey wasn't selected like I was. I don't know when the training starts for the others, but by the time I met her, she already had the

lifeless stare of someone who begs for death, knowing they'll never get it.

I'm also ignorant of exactly what hell she's gone through. I only know of mine. But while the exact nature of our torments is different, we both hate this place and hate men like Rhakis with every fiber of our being. I don't know if mutual, seething hatred of someone is the best basis for a friendship, but it's how our companionship started.

Honey crawls over to Rhakis and starts licking up and down his cock before letting the head pass between her lips. While his sneer never falters, he swallows hard as she manages to take far more of him into her mouth than should be possible. These are the things the girls like Honey are trained to do. For her, this is rote. And while she makes enthusiastic sounds, acting as though his cock in her mouth brings her to ecstasy, I'm sure everyone in the room knows it's an act.

It's something that will be expected of me when I'm sold, but to maintain my purity, my lessons have never been hands-on, so to speak. I've been made to watch it often. I've seen enough blow jobs to know that Honey's technique is flawless, wet, and sloppy, but not excessively so. Her breath control is admirable, something that makes me wonder how well she'd do playing a flute made of wood instead of flesh.

I have trained on illusions, and to be sure that no one is tempted to trick me, most of those I've cast myself. They're minor illusions, but I'm apparently quite adept. At the illusions. I don't know how well I can suck cock. Ephemeral magic constructs don't naturally spasm and twitch as their crown starts to brush the back of your throat.

But the praise for fellating phantasms does little to stop the way my stomach turns at the thought of actually having to do it to a real person, to whichever dark elf happens to purchase me for the express purpose of deflowering me.

But even as expertly as Honey sucks his cock, Rhakis' eyes stay fixed on me. I'd have to be a complete fool not to understand that he's imagining it's me on my knees in front of him.

Honey gags slightly and backs off, but that simply won't do for Rhakis. He grabs her head, forcing it down on his cock further, and from my angle, I can just make out the way his cock makes her throat expand as he pushes more and more into her.

Honey's face is starting to turn blue. Her eyes and nose are running, and I think for a moment that Rhakis is going to actually suffocate her with his

cock, either because he's too busy watching me to know that Honey is suffering, or it's the suffering that gets him off. Honey tries feebly to push away, but he just holds her there.

I mustn't move. I want to rush to her. Beat him back, pull her free and give her air, but our lives are not our own. Just as her eyes start to fade, Rhakis pulls out, and while Honey gasps for breath, he sprays his cum on her face and breasts.

But he doesn't even notice her. His eyes are locked on me as he licks his lips in carnal hunger.

"You're now twenty years old. The time has come to serve your purpose. Prepare to be auctioned."

Even though I knew this day was coming, and I was almost certain this was the reason he called me in here, the word auction hits me like a blow to my chest, driving the breath from my lungs, causing me to gasp.

I have to figure out a way to escape. But how? I've been trying to figure out how to leave this damn place since I could form conscious thought, and nothing has ever presented itself to me.

"You must prepare yourself to perform for your audience."

My head snaps up, and I look at him, half-dazed.

"Perform what? How?"

If they want me to sing or dance, even something salacious, that would be preferable to having to display other skills. They certainly wouldn't have me have sex with a real person in front of a gathering of dark elves, but I might be ordered to do something unseemly with an illusion.

Suddenly, Rhakis is on his feet. He moves so fast Honey doesn't have time to move, and he kicks her out of the way. I open my mouth to scream. In anger or in fear, I don't know and don't have the time to even figure that out before he pushes something into my mouth. I feel it burn as it dissolves on my tongue.

The fiery warmth spreads down my throat and into my belly before spreading out to my entire body. The heat starts to pull in places. Around my lips, behind my ears, the insides of my wrists, behind my knees, but most intensely my nipples and between my legs.

"What did you give me?" I ask. But it's an automated response. A question that was formed in my mind and on its way to my burning lips before the warmth had finished spreading. I don't know where it comes from, just that everyone calls it Heat for the sensation and the effect. It could be a

plant or maybe just pure, perverted magic distilled.

All we know is that it acts as half sedative, half aphrodisiac. It's used to make human sex slaves more compliant. And that's what I am, a slave here about to be sold at auction to the highest bidder who will do The Thirteen knows what to me.

And the worst part, now that the Heat has taken hold of me, my mind and body are at war. I want to be revolted by the thought of some dark elf using my body for their pleasure, but my body screams for it.

Rhakis just grins at me and then calls the guards in to take me away. I gasp as their hands seize my sensitized skin. I want to struggle, but my body wants them to touch me more. I hate how much I want it.

KRAL ISHIRAYA

I immediately regret agreeing to go out with this bunch. I linger at the back of Carisu's pack of overly loud friends. They're rough and obscene and vulgar. I wrinkle my nose as one of them jostles into me, looking across their playful punches with a bored expression.

I want nothing more than to go home, but they keep talking about how the place is full tonight and how much fun they are having. They laugh in a way I've never been able to, and for a moment, I just watch them.

People have told me before that it's weird when I do that, but I forget. I lose myself in evaluating them, trying to understand something I have no means to, when Carisu leans over to me.

"You have to stop staring at them like you might murder them," he murmurs.

"I won't. I lack the passion to do something like that. You know this." I raise my eyebrows at him.

"Yeah, that emotionless stare is what freaks people out. Just try to keep your face neutral and not stare at anybody too hard." He slaps me on the back. "Let's get you a drink and loosen up, eh? We're going up to the VIP lounge."

I choose not to tell him that I have no interest in going to the top floor of this building I'm being dragged through. Floor after floor exposes all that the L'amouer has to offer.

I swallow back how little I want to push through this building, seeing only reminders of why I had never come here before. In fact, I had always avoided this place because while others see fun, I see a mess that I don't want

to touch me.

The L'amouer boasts its abundance of humans to torment or screw, but it makes no sense to me. The hours of rutting don't bring me satisfaction, especially when I can fulfill my needs with a willing elf.

It seems that I am the only one that doesn't derive any pleasure from bullying these humans, and I have to assume it is because of my distance from emotions. No matter what it is, I know that I won't be having any fun tonight.

I make a mental note to bring this up to my brother. It's proof that I'm making an effort, even if everyone gives me a wide berth. I think they can feel how different I am if they don't recognize me first, and I don't mind. It's better than being brushed up against naked bodies that I wish I didn't have to be near.

I recoil from the humans in the halls, many attached to elves using them for the night. I've always avoided the creatures since they came. I have plenty of servants already, and I've found no need to deal with the new race that everyone has exploited.

Don't be mistaken. I don't care what other people do. That's none of my business. I just keep away from them, and until tonight, that's gone fairly well.

My cousin has now thrust me into the throngs of these humans, the L'amouer being full of them. On top of that, the smell of semen, sweat, and urine saturates the air, and while the others comment on the activities available for the night causing these scents, I just feel dizzy.

I don't know how it's not affecting them, but I need fresh air. It's the only thing that keeps me moving up through the floors as the stench grows and the entertainment turns even more twisted.

Relief bursts through me as we arrive at the VIP box. It's on the upper floor, and it's so exclusive that few people are up here. The guys are so excited they don't seem to notice as I hang back.

I let them go into the room while I linger in the hallway. The air out here isn't tainted, and for a moment, I want to cleanse my senses.

It's really been a waste of a night, and I question again why I even bothered to come out. I know my brother would never force me into anything, but I want to appease him.

Honestly, I thought by now I wouldn't be upheld to traditional standards. Having a social life isn't reasonable for someone like me, and I thought that

others would have seen that by now. It doesn't appear to be that way, though, so I find myself considering my options, of whether I'll join Carisu and his friends or head home and send him a Zagfer to tell him.

Before I decide, I hear a loud commotion coming from the other end of the hall. My curiosity piques, and I head toward the noise of thrashing and arguing.

As I turn the corner, I spot two dark elves dragging a human woman between them. She flails against them, but her movements seem weak, even for a human. I stand there wondering what they are even doing with her as she doesn't smell disgusting like the others when her eyes lift to me.

Something strikes me deep in my core as I stare at her, and my breath catches in my throat. My chest constricts, and my feet seem rooted into the ground.

Her eyes are a crystal-clear blue, so icy that they nearly look translucent as they watch me. I find myself frozen underneath her gaze, and I swear time itself stops in her presence.

It feels like everything about her engulfs me, and I no longer can hear the roar of the people on the other side of the door or smell the sour scents of the building. No, all I can see or feel or think of is her.

I've never felt something so all-consuming like this, and it's like my soul is being sucked from my body as she passes by me. My body aches to go to her, but I don't move. For a fleeting moment, I swear I don't remember how to.

I would have stayed there all night just staring at her, letting her gaze pin me in place, if it weren't for the dark elves. They drag her around the corner, breaking our eye contact, and it jerks me out of my daze.

Still, I don't move, even as my senses come rushing back in. I can hear and smell everything again, and I even take a few stumbling steps forward.

Her gaze has left my body feeling tingly and off-kilter, which is extremely unusual for me. I am known to be so disciplined now, but the way my heart is pounding and adrenaline is rushing through me proves that something revolutionary has just occurred.

My mind replays the scene over and over as I try to make sense of it. It's been so long since I've felt anything remotely close to that, and I need to understand what happened.

How did this human pull that out of me? What was she?

My body starts to burn with a fire that I don't know how to tame as I

think of her, and the only thought that I can process is that I need to go after her. I'm not sure if what I just experienced was pleasant, but it was more than the usual numbness that I have grown used to.

I ache to understand it, to explore it more, but I have waited too long. I pace down the hall, but I have no idea where they have taken the girl.

It seems that my questions are answered as the room below roars to life, announcers shouting. Normally, I would ignore such a commotion, but with my body heightened and my head in such a weird place, I find myself rushing toward the VIP door.

I'm not sure why, but I thought that maybe all that noise could actually solve something for me.

TO BE CONTINUED. To read more click [here!](#)