



WORLDS OF  
PROMETHEA

DARKEAE'S  
*Desire*

ANNE HALE  
CELESTE KING

# **DARK FAE'S DESIRE**

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CELESTE KING

PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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## **DEDICATION**

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

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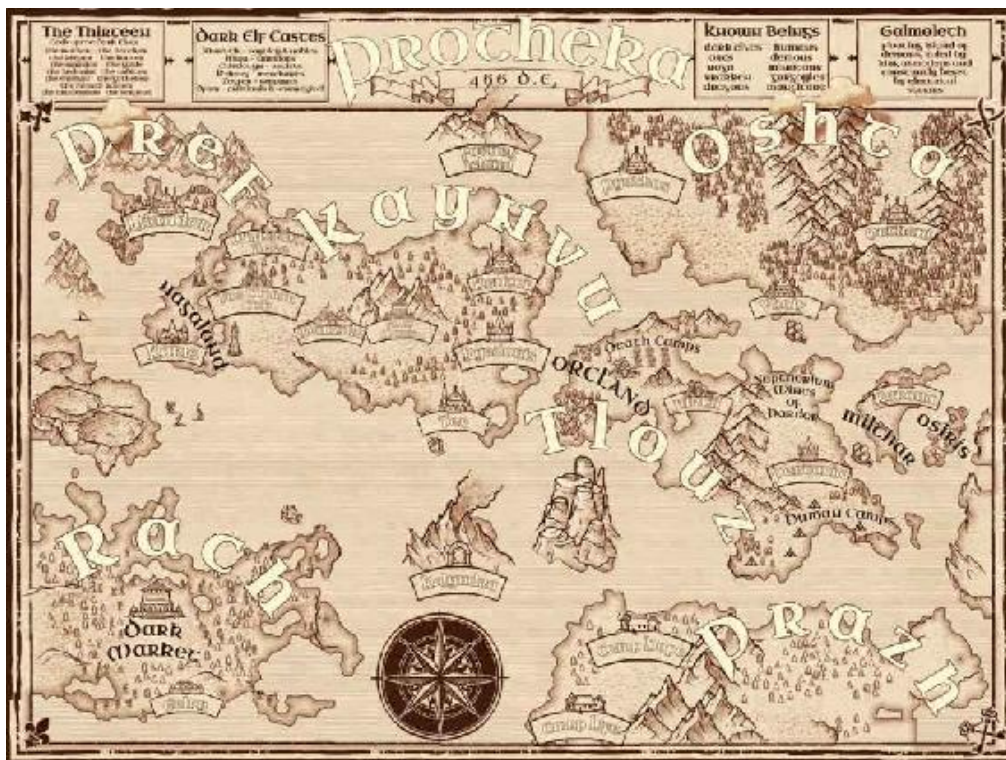
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# THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



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## DIANE

I bite my pinky nail off, the last my fingers have to offer, but not the last of my erratic nerves.

“I’m trying, Diane.” Mother says.

“You’re fine, Momma. You just stay in bed.” I wipe away my tears, smudging my cheeks further, before ladling her portion of the vegetable broth.

I pull back the curtain, separating Mother’s space from the one room shack we can barely afford. It’s squalor, even for Lowtowns, but in my efforts to balance shelter and food, it’s the best I can do with next to no coin.

Mother sits in bed, as she has for the past five weeks. Her blonde hair, a shade lighter than my dirty blonde bob, sticks to her face and neck in sweaty swaths. I reach past my younger brother, James, to hand her the bowl.

Quicker than a snake, James’ hands grab the bowl before Mother fumbles the meager soup on her lap. “Be careful!” He takes the spoon and feeds our mother.

“Sorry,” I mumble. Any louder and my frayed nerves will push the flood of tears dammed behind my sky-blue eyes.

I close the curtain behind me and rush past my own thin curtain to lay on the pile of straw I call a bed. I take a deep breath. *I can cry when they’re asleep. Not yet.*

I compose myself and fix James’ bowl, placing it on the floor next to him. I eat my dinner and wash my bowl out with a rag, all while my mind churns over my options.

Mother's not getting better and healing her could only come from expensive potions. The elves have the magic to heal her with a wave of their hand, but the bastards won't. Humans might as well be motes of dust to them. Flecks of nothing that come and go. Worthless.

Though, that's not wholly true. There is one thing elves use humans for.

I glance back at mother's room. Her pained moans and James' consoling eke out from behind the threadbare curtain. *She wouldn't allow it.*

*But what can she allow or not allow if she's dead?*

If I do this, if I give myself up to that world, I'll be gone. James will be all alone to take care of Mother. I can send money but... I remind myself that if it wasn't for James and his sticky fingers, we'd have nothing but boiled water for dinner. *He can take care of himself. And with the money I can send home, he can take care of Mother.*

A weight settles over my heart. It calms my fears of uncertainty, but it squeezes so tight with the fear of loss. *At best, I won't see them for months. At worst, I'll never see them again.*

I rise from the floor and stand at Mother's curtain for a moment, gripping the sides of my dress. I take a deep breath and walk in.

James glances at me before holding the bowls out to me.

"I'll take them in a moment." I walk to the other side of the bed, the only real bed we have.

I go to sit on the edge, but James shouts, "Don't! She doesn't like it when you sit on the bed."

Mother waves me to her. "I said it hurts a little, not that I don't like it. Come, sweetheart." She huffs air as if those few words were the same as running to the castle and back.

I sit next to her and take one of her frail hands in mine. "How are you feeling, Momma? Did the soup help?"

Her thin lips that used to be so full struggle to curl into a smile. “You’ll do well, Diane.”

“What?” My brow scrunches.

Mother chuckles, still keeping her smile even though her eyes close in a wince. “I said, you did well. With the soup, that is.”

“Oh. Good. I’m glad you liked it.” I bite my bottom lip, wondering how I’m going to phrase this. “I—”

“Promise me.” Her hand tightens on mine, a firmer grip than she’s had in weeks. “You won’t do what I did.”

It takes everything in me to not let my jaw drop. *How did she know?*

“That life glitters but ends in pain and misery.”

James frowns, his eyes searching the both of us.

“Of course, Momma. I’m glad you liked the soup. I’m going to wash the bowls now. You rest.”

I ease off the bed and reach out for the bowls, but James tucks them under his arm.

“I’ll help,” he says.

We walk to the corner of the shack with the wooden pail of water on the floor. I dip the rag in it and set to cleaning the bowls.

“What was she talking about?” James asks.

I’m not about to tell my little brother that Mother was once a slave and, among other things, used her body to earn money. “I’m not sure. She said I’d do well, at first. She’s not thinking clearly.”

James glances over his shoulder at Mother’s curtains. “It’s getting worse if it’s in her mind now. What are we going to do? Are there any other places that can hire you?”

I shake my head. I’ve been to all the seamstress shops in the city, including the ones I have no business being in. “I have an idea, but I’ll have to check it out tomorrow.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

Another thing I’m not about to tell my little brother is that I plan on becoming a slave and using *my* body for money. “No need to get your hopes up if it doesn’t work out. I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

James glares at me for a moment but goes back to Mother.

I take the dirty water out and dump it in the street. A short walk brings me to the queue for the well. Standing behind Mrs. Maggrie, I choose to take in our rundown corner of Lowtowns rather than talk to the old woman. It’d be nothing more than how she misses her husband and how tragic my father’s death was. Neither of which I’m interested in listening to again.

Little children find a way to run and frolic in the dirt between houses that were scrapped together with leftover materials from the homes of nobles and merchants. *Ignorance is bliss.*

With my two pails of water full, I walk back to our shack. As always, I’m forced to gaze up at Castle Orthani. The castle gleams with the moon hanging so low as to be a perfect, if ominous, backdrop. Maybe in another life I could have been so lucky as to be born a noble who walks those halls rather than trudge through the muck and grime of Lowtowns.

When I enter the shack, James sobs on his bed of straw.

My heart stops and I nearly drop the pails of water, but Mother moans, letting me know she’s still alive. I stagger over to the corner and place the pails down before I remember to breathe.

*I’m sorry, Momma. I have to do this. For you, for James. You both need me more than I do.*

I pull out a small wooden box, the last of my father’s belongings. I open the lid and take the two remaining sheets of paper, placing one off to the side. I rip the other in half since I have two letters to write.

*Dear James,*

*I'm going away for a while. I'll be sending money to you so you can take care of Mother. Don't steal anything other than food. If you get caught with anything more than that, you'll lose a hand, or worse. I need you home with Mother. She can't take care of you if something happens to you. So be careful, and think of her first in everything you do. I'll be back as soon as I can.*

*I love you,*

*Diane*

Now for the hard one.

I glance over my shoulder. My curtains hide me, but Mother's words expose me worse than being naked in the street. *Was she in a similar situation when she sold herself?* I wipe the tears from my eyes after two stain the empty page. I dip the quill into the last of the ink and write my apology.

*Dear Momma,*

*You told me not to, but I must. There's nothing else for me to do. You've always had me hide my face to avoid that life, but it's what I have. It's all I have. I hope you'll forgive me. Please know that this is not your fault. Fate hasn't been kind to us, and I don't think it's going to start any time soon.*

*Your loving daughter,*

*Diana Blaze*

Writing father's last name as my own chokes me to the point I join James in his weeping. The shack fills with the pitiful noise of two crying for their dying mother who grunts and moans with each breath.

After I cry myself out, James and Mother's low, rhythmic breaths take over. It's useless to wonder how long I've been crying for. Now is my chance to leave, and I take it.

James sleeps on the floor next to Mother. I place his note on his bed before stooping down to kiss his forehead. I lean over to kiss Mother's head and tuck her letter under her sheets on her lap.

Her eyes flutter open. "Don't go."

"I must."

Her blue eyes roll, and she falls back to sleep.

I grab my patchwork cloak, made from twenty different scraps, and walk out into the night.

## CARMICHAEL

“-D on’t you agree, Your Grace?”

I let out a soft grunt, as the heavy boot of the dark elf sat next to me comes down on my foot. It isn’t enough force to cause any pain, it simply comes as a surprise and pulls me from my counting. There are seventy-eight stars in the painting behind the noble staring at me expectantly.

I don’t remember his name, I am sure it was given when we entered the Eris House and sat at the long table. That was hours ago, or perhaps mere minutes.

Time has stopped. It has to be, there is no other explanation for why we are all still gathered in this cramped room. I saw on my way in that there is only one door and no windows. Which is no less than what I expected in a back room of the Eris House.

Why this place of carnal desires was chosen for the discussion on what to do about the rumors of workers revolting at the nephtherium mines, I don’t know. I would wager my entire fortune on it being the idea of the Duke sat across from me. Julius Rosenfire.

No doubt his plan is to work and then play. Much like the other elves seated around this table. All of us ignore the large marble statue of two dark elves in the throws of passion, against the back wall, situated in our peripheral vision as a constant reminder of where we are.

I wonder how many times the others have been inside these walls. Orthani’s most famous, wealthy, and eligible



bachelors. While my own disinterest is hopefully being seen as boredom towards the rambling of a nervous noble, and not at the services provided by the Eris House. I can admit only to myself that this is the first time I have been inside the establishment.

I do appreciate the craftsmanship of the building itself. The interlacing wood working along the ceiling, the rich colors of the paintings that gleam in the light of the sconces, and the privacy. The walls themselves are reinforced so well that even my enhanced hearing cannot detect the loudest of noises in the rooms around us.

This is even without the ruckus coming from the nobles, bickering among themselves. Collect more workers, pay a higher wage. I stopped listening almost as soon as they started talking.

“Perhaps,” Finlander Yggdrasil, another Duke I consider a peer and an important elf to be in good grace with as I carve my path to lay claim to the throne, says, “Duke Carmichael would be more comfortable taking a convoy to the mines himself. Rather than wait for a messenger to make the trip both ways.”

He is not wrong. I may be a High Duke, but I am also a warrior. My interest in politics comes solely from my goal to be crowned the next King. It is not an unattainable goal, and though I am a distant cousin of our current King, the relation is there and acknowledged.

As a warrior, being at the front is where my true comforts lie. Maybe I will go to the mines myself. It would, if nothing else, be a change of scenery and a chance to further prove that I am the right choice for the throne, should I be able to resolve the tensions at the mines on Tlouz.

I fold my arms over my chest and look over the group. The lesser nobles are waiting for my answer, I know full well it will dictate whatever they decide to say next. The other four Dukes and higher ranked nobles are also looking at me with varying degrees of expectancy.

The Dukes already know my answer with me having to say it. Josen Night, the one of the four who could prove to be my biggest asset or downfall, expects nothing less of me. He is well known for taking care of business himself. They all are. It is how we all came to be the richest and most powerful in Orthani. Below the King, of course.

“I would like to go with you.” The final Duke, Siderus Slayer, said. He may not always agree with Finlander’s opinions, rarely in fact, but his family has more empathy for the zagfer than any of the rest of us. You wouldn’t guess his penchant for compassion, looking despite his buff physique, larger than even my own. Which is no mean feat, I take great pride in the firmness of my muscles and the way the fabric of my tunic stretches to capacity around my shoulders.

The other Dukes are not small elves either. All of us stand just above average height, and though Josen is the leaner of us five it is only befitting to his need for stealth as a master assassin. Even the bookish, magic master, Finlander has mass worthy of a warrior.

“If you go, the zagfer will suddenly all be nobles overnight.” Julius taunts. His passion, for all things, burns just as hotly and dangerously as the fire magic he wields and his temper.

Unfolding my arms, I place a hand on the table. It silences the retort that Siderus was about to unleash, a sharp and witty barb no doubt that would have brought the whole room to fists. I take a deep breath, releasing it as I watch the magical ink of my tattoo coil and spiral around my wrist. The ivy continues the whole length of my arm, a visible reminder of the ties that bind me to my duties.

“I will go.” I tell them, locking eyes with Finlander’s green and gold stare, before turning to meet Siderus’s violet one. “I will not stop you, if you want to join me. But know it is not a requirement.” In fact, I’m certain that the more of us that went to the mines the longer it would take to resolve the issue. However, I would prefer to have either Siderus or Josen join me. Neither one of them feels the need to fill silence with the sound of their own voices.

The sound of a chair scraping against the stone floor filled the room, as one of the lesser nobles stood. His robes were too big for his small frame, the sleeves hanging over his fingertips as he rolled them to his elbows. He has a look on his face, one I do not inherently trust. I do not like surprises.

Every pair of eyes in the room are on him. He steps towards the door with purpose, poking his head out of the door and calling for the manager to bring The Gifts.

“For the Dukes.” He says, as the door opens wide.

What gifts could this lesser noble possibly have for the five of us? There is nothing in this world that either of us want for. No need to be gifted items, if we want something we take it and our favors are not so easily won.

I know what the Gifts are before I see them. Though I sit facing the door, Julius has a better view of the hall and the lecherous grin on his face tells me everything.

Eleven, human, women step into the room. They all vary in height and shape, clothed in sheer silks and sparkling gemstones. Veils cover their faces. They all have curves, there are no small breasts or flat bottoms in the line up.

Though it is an odd number. The noble notices as well. He is pulling the manager back out into the hall, even as the other Dukes stand to examine the women in closer detail.

“Why are there eleven?” the noble hisses. He is trying to keep his voice down, but with my hearing their conversation is not a private one, “I told you ten. Two per Duke. Now I look like a fool.”

The manager, nervous by the tremor in his voice, clears his throat, “Apologies, M’Lord, the last one is an addition. We...I made an exception because she is one of the most beautiful humans I have ever seen.”

“Huh,” the noble’s voice loses the heat from the initial outburst. “-and her purity?”

“Untouched. An Eris House guarantee. M’Lord.”

This is of no interest to me. The gifts, the women. It does not matter if there are ten or a hundred. The other Dukes can share what was meant for me among themselves. I am sure they assume we will all share the women anyway.

“There’s nothing on your nose, Carmichael.”

I turn to look at Julius, arching an eyebrow, “Pardon?”

There is a fire burning in his crimson eyes, either for a fight or a fuck. Whichever happens first. Julius answers, “You’re staring down your nose pretty hard. I was worried you were about to go cross eyed.”

I don’t want to tell them I have no interest. It isn’t a secret, where my focus or my thoughts lay. Women bring about emotions, ones that I have been raised to subdue as though I would any enemy. To lock them away where they cannot be used against me, or cloud my judgment. I will always stand tall, straight, and unbending to the whims of the flesh or heart.

Instead of answering Julius, I watch as the manager steps back into the room. With a polite bow, he lifts his hand. Taking hold of a rope, the movement causes the veils adorning the women to move. With one swift pull, all eleven veils are removed at the same time.

They are all, as implied by the standards of the establishment, extremely gorgeous women. Flawless skin, sparkling eyes set and determined to be chosen and please whichever Duke shows them interest first. Heads of rich brown and copper reds, caramel eyes and green. Though attractive, they are nothing that I have not seen before.

Perhaps Julius is right. I am looking down at these women. Though why shouldn’t I? They are beneath me. I have no desire to touch any of them.

Or so I was sure. I take a good look at the eleventh woman. The gamble. Perhaps this is the true moment where time comes to a stand-still. All I feel is the force of my breath leaving me. All I can hear is the pounding of my heart. This human, nothing about her seems exaggerated though everything is perfect. From the firmness of her breasts to the

round swell of her ass. The golden threads of her blond hair frame the most beautiful face I have seen among humans or dark elves, set with a pair of deep sapphire blue eyes.

I have never seen such a timid looking creature before.

**DIANE**

I'm sold.

“Welcome to *Eris House*,” a foul, ring-encrusted turd of a man says to me as we shake hands over our verbal agreement.

I will be paid a hefty sum to be some sort of pleasure girl in this establishment. I'd expected to be sold as a slave, but they want me on their private menu. Apparently.

The black-clad, obscure man in the corner clears his throat.

“Oh, yes. Make your mark here. Everything official, you see,” the turd says, holding out a contract.

I can't read it, but I get the feeling it would be best if they don't know that. I make my mark after pretending to read the confusing squiggles, and the darkly-clothed man in the corner snaps his fingers.

Nervousness flutters in my heart as three plain-faced women in clean but simple garb rush in and grab me.

“You will be closely observed,” the black-clad man in the corner rasps. “You will do as you are told and give pleasure to whomever we tell you to.”

“Y-Yes, sir,” I say as the women tug me towards the door behind the desk, rather than the one I had entered.

The black-clad man nods. “We will fix your illiteracy later.”

So, I wasn't fooling anyone.

He smirks, his mouth the only thing visible from under the shadows. “You will begin your work tonight. Enjoy your evening.”

Then the women drag me out of the room and whisk me away down a long corridor. At the end, there is a room where ten other women are being coiffed and primped for whatever is coming tonight.

I still smart between my legs where I was “examined” by the turd, using his fingers. I’m no idiot. I might not be able to read paper, but I’m perfectly capable of reading people. My virginity is being sold tonight.

“Ack, dearie, what a shame about your hair,” one of the three women says, tugging painfully at the short ends. “And dirty, too.”

My hair is only long enough to frame my face. Mother always told me to hide my beauty, which included keeping my hair short and my face dirty. I scrubbed both to come here and sell myself as a slave.

As they strip me of my clothes and shove me back into a large tub to scrub me within an inch of my life, I realize my efforts were not good enough.

“Rouge?” one of the women asks. While the other ten girls are smiling and tittering with each other, I am feeling about as ornery as a drowned cat and nervous to boot.

The third woman grabs me roughly by the chin and turns my face this way and that. “No. No rouge. They don’t usually like that sort of thing, anyway.”

They?

“Who-?”

One of the women plugs my nose and plunges my head underwater, then proceeds to keep scrubbing my hair while I cough.

As the rest of the dirt falls away, the other girls start looking at me. I fold my arms over my pink-tipped breasts, but

apparently those are dirty, too, so my attempt at modesty doesn't last long.

“Ugh, these fingernails! What *have* you done, girlie?” The second woman clucks at the ragged state of my nails.

Perhaps I shouldn't have bitten the last one off before I came.

“False nails,” the second woman calls.

Yet another woman runs up, and then garish – or at least I think so – bright pink false nails are pressed over my real ones with some goo that hardens as it dries.

“They won't like it,” the third woman sighs.

The second woman shrugs. “It's better than the mess underneath them.”

The women nod to each other. Then they pull me from the tub and dry me, poke me, prod me, and shove me into a dress that leaves nothing – absolutely nothing – to the imagination. It fits my body tighter than a glove, and the fabric is diaphanous, giving peek-a-boo glimpses of my skin and other bits.

“I'm meant to wear this?” I gasp.

“Maybe not for long,” the fourth woman snickers, but the other three, who are older, stare her down and she falls silent.

I swallow. Well, I had sold this, hadn't I? The last and only thing I'd ever had to sell.

Mother and Jamie, though. They are going to be okay.

“Ah, finishing touch,” the first woman says.

She drops a dark veil over my head.

“I can't see!” I protest.

“You don't need to,” the first woman says. “We'll get you where you're going.”

I, indeed, stumble over something as they move me through the room.



“Honestly, Carissa, a hairbrush on the floor?” one of the women scolds, then navigates me back around the obstacle.

I can hear the other women giggling at my distress.

I’m often told I am really quite graceful, but stumbling around in this heavy veil is not showcasing that attribute. I’m glad the other girls can’t see me blushing under the veil.

“Right, through here,” one of the women says, and then I’m suddenly in a different room, with lush carpet under my feet. I can feel it even through the fancy slippers they put me in.

“Line up straight,” the turd says in my ear, and I glance under the bottom of the veil to line my feet up with the girl next to me. I wonder if their veils are so thick.

Maybe they’re used to this?

The turd goes on about something with pomp and flourish to whomever is waiting for us. I breathe slowly in through my nose. Whatever this is, whatever it will be, surely it will be better than being owned as one man’s slave. He wouldn’t pay me, just lock me away, after all.

Beggars can’t be choosers.

I square my shoulders with that resolve. No matter how fat, loud, or gross the man who will take my virginity is, I will serve as I’ve been told to. Mother and Jamie are depending on it.

The turd takes my veil off...

... and I am facing... ELVES.

Nothing in my wildest imagination has prepared me for elves. I can’t believe there is a deity so vindictive that he or she would make me lay with an elf – not after what happened to my father.

A sharp breath does nothing to calm my anger, instead merely fans the flames.

ELVES?

I want to scream. I’m afraid I might.

The elves, all noble, if I had to guess by their clothing, point and murmur at all of us, discussing amongst themselves. I suppose they are divvying who gets who and how much they will enjoy it, as men do.

I look over them, feeling my blood boil. Then my eyes lock onto the most handsome being I have ever seen in all my life.

He is like one of those statues in the town square – stately, chiseled, with broad shoulders, strong arms, and a tapered waist. I can't see the rest of him because his legs are under a table, but I imagine he is entirely made of lean muscle.

His hair is long and black. His eyes... are on me.

His gray eyes bore into mine, transmitting a storm of some unnamed emotion. My angry breath catches. I wonder how long I was staring at him before he caught me.

He seems to stare into my soul, uncovering my deepest, darkest secrets.

It's unnerving.

The turd begins introducing us one at a time. The ten women to my right curtsy prettily when he calls out their names. I do the same, though perhaps without as much demure submission. It burns my soul to bow to elves.

One of the noble elves points at the first girl, Lisette, a raven-haired beauty with a soft smile. "You, girl, what can you do?"

"Oh, our girls are quite well-trained in many entertainments," the turd says, as though it was him the elf called on and not Lisette.

The elves do not take their eyes off us, but the one who spoke does ask the turd, in a bored tone, "What entertainments would these be?"

The turd looks at Lisette expectantly.

Lisette curtsies again. "I sing, my Lord. I also play the pianoforte..."

What in the name of all that was holy was a ‘pianoforte’?

The next girl, Carmela, a chestnut-haired buxom girl curtsies next, somehow managing to make her bosom jiggle as much as possible. “I paint, my Lords. I also compose sonnets. I’m sure Lisette could put a nice tune to them.”

Ah. Carmela and Lisette must be friends. They smile at each other subtly, looking a bit smug.

Also, sonnet? What in...?

I don’t have time to think much on what a sonnet might be, because the other girls are listing their various talents.

My stomach drops as painting, dancing, the playing of various instruments, and more fill the air, the girls each trying to outdo each other on just how refined they are.

When it’s my turn, the elves look at me expectantly.

“I...” I want to run from the room. My skin flushes with flustered embarrassment. “I can... I make clothes?”

There is a short silence before many of the noble elves burst into laughter.

The turd glowers at me.

I feel desperate. “I can-I can learn whatever you see fit to teach me. I’ll learn whatever you want. I’ll *do* whatever you want.”

Gods, they won’t take away what they paid for me and throw me out into the street now, will they?

My eyes seek out the handsome elf’s once more.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” I whisper.

## CARMICHAEL

**W** *hatever you want...*

Her words fall through the air like a siren's song around me. Her voice weaves a spell like music to my sensitive ears. Outwardly I remain impassive, but within, I am a riot.

She looks at me- her gaze is enrapturing. This human slave presumes to meet my gaze, like an equal, while these sycophant nobles around us show proper benevolence. Even the establishment's simple veils cannot disguise her true beauty, and the lack of deference she shows only reveals a tempting innocence.

I have known the thrill of a lover's touch, and the call of a glorious victory, but never have I experienced the inspiration that comes from witnessing true beauty. This helpless, pleading slave was even more bewitching than some of the higher ranked nobles I have taken to my bed before.

I stare at this pathetic human, and my only instinct is to reach out to her. Despite being seated, I feel something in me reorient. It seems to pull towards her as if we were both embedded with magnets, polarized towards meeting.

No. I am Duke Carmichael Vatoris, second only to the King. I will not fall prey to my lust like some inexperienced novice; I will maintain control.

But oh, it is an arduous task. Her bright eyes glitter with uncertainty, but I will not be drawn in by her begging form. Women of higher rank and more experience had attempted to

curry various favors from me in the past- and if they couldn't succeed, then I won't be tempted by a mere human virgin.

The rest of the duchy seated alongside me on the dais continue to watch the scene play out, like some debauched theater. There is light conversation, and I feign an impassive interest, all while discreetly continuing to watch the frightened beauty, bound by silks. Secretly, I can feel a twisted curiosity stirring within me, as I wonder how this fresh-faced ingenue will react to the night's proceedings.

Will this angel cower? Will she panic, and try to run in terror? I suspect there might be a hidden strength to this little slave- will she fight?

*Will she beg?*

As I continue to watch her, my thoughts run amok, fueled by her reluctant adherence. There was also something deeper, something transmuting inside me, that was stirring long-buried memories of compassion. This is not the time, nor place for such thoughts, so I set them aside and refocus on the nervous, yet enchanting creature before me.

“Do anything we want, you say?” a snide voice mocked nearby, shattering the spell of her eyes. The one who spoke was a merchant of the k'sheng class, recently promoted, and greedy. He leered at the terrified maiden, along with several others, open lust darkening their eyes.

A few snicker malevolently, while others chose to grasp at the extra slaves that had been brought in. A few begin to descend upon the human that has enraptured me, like glinting shadows. She glances back toward me, desperation sparking in her eyes, adding to their luminosity.

Red tinges my vision as I feel my restraint slipping, and I have to physically check myself to remain seated. More women were now being pulled down and contorted, as these petty nobles decide to teach my angel the lessons she would begin learning as a slave, this evening at Eris House.

A scene like this, watching elves let their magic and their lust override their reason, can inflame the blood of any who

bear witness. The connection we elves share with the wellspring of Magic can be overpowering. In order to maintain balance, we must exorcize the onslaught of passions and emotions we experience, lest the arcane will consume us, and we are driven insane.

Hence, the necessity of nights like this. The Khuzuth class, such as myself and the Dukes around me, are instilled with an incredible sense of self-control, trained since birth. For lesser nobles, who rely on men like myself for resources, influence, and prestige- they require a more direct release as an outlet for their aggression.

We Dark Elves have endured as a race and a culture for centuries, creating a mighty civilization in the harshest of environments. This is entirely because we continue to follow our traditions; because we use others to maintain the delicate balance of emotion, intelligence, and the arcane that resides within us.

Yet I have a difficult time ignoring the small voice in the back of my mind, that only has concern for this woman, this human slave. Even as I work to plan my ascension to the throne, this woman's frightened eyes spark something powerful within me. Something inevitable.

"Move, girl," another lord barks at her, and shoves her forward before she can react. These men are here to release their lusts on these women- as is their right, I have to remind myself. What cruel joke the Gods have decided to play upon me this night, stirring my sympathies for this beautiful, lowborn slave!

The lord grabs her chin, forcing her to confront the scene. I can see her terror grow as she witnesses the other slaves be debased, the flower of virginity ripped from their writhing bodies. I start at the sound of creaking glass, and realize I am about to shatter the goblet I am holding.

I set my wine glass down calmly, lest the others see my self-control slipping. I have to internally focus in order to calm my sudden rage, blood boiling at the thought that this woman will soon join the ranks of the other nameless slaves, flesh and

spirit corrupted. Her anxiety grows, and I can feel it- it makes me want to embrace her; to know her and provide comfort.

These sensations ought to be foreign to me. Tonight's gathering is simply another one of my duties as a potential heir to the throne to provide for the lower classes. In spite of understanding this, I find myself becoming more entranced by the strange charms of this inferior, albeit magnificent slave.

As a member of the royalty, I too have received impeccable training in discipline, finding no need to engage in such exhibitions, and my reputation speaks for itself. Yet this evening, I find myself closer to being overwhelmed than I ever have before. She has bewitched me, consumed me, even as I remain still.

Even the other Dukes around me have fallen silent, choosing to enjoy the showing of tonight's entertainment before us. The lesser nobility among our group: self-important landowners, influential merchants, and high-ranking warriors, have already begun to slake their pleasures on the other slave women. The ambient sounds and light music have given way to a cacophony of flesh and moans.

Already a feral lust has begun to color the eyes of these inferior nobles. They grab at the slaves, some forcing the girls to their knees, while others have contorted bodies to fuel their passions. Humiliation and violence are just as much a part of this exhilaration as is pleasure- and it is the prerogative of any elf here to feast on desire as they see fit.

The one who had grabbed my human continues his cruel game, using his grip to knock the poor girl down to the ground. Some around him laugh and jeer, while others are otherwise preoccupied.

"Go on then," a Miou class fighter jeers nearby. "Show the girl what she'll be learning tonight!" I think nothing of their asinine behavior, fascinated instead with the innocent composure she manages to keep, despite being powerless and scrutinized.

Even more of the lords have joined, several grabbing at a slave to share between them. Although presumably pure, many

of the girls present already know what is expected of them. I suspect a few, such as the low-born zagfer, are even trained in the connubial arts, regardless of the house manager's promises.

Some have even decided to put on a show for the lords present, hoping to curry some paltry favor. These slaves were here simply as tools for our pleasure, including the one that has drawn me in, and to regard them otherwise would reveal a weakness of character that could quickly be exposed by an enemy, or even an ally.

Still, I could not help the feelings of concern and anger I felt at the young woman's treatment. She of all the others was the most innocent, untainted by the cruelties life had to offer. Where had she come from, and what had brought her to this place?

I have taken naive lovers, like the slaves present, as well as experienced ones, trained and educated in the art of seduction-and thought nothing of it. None have ever captivated me like this sweet creature. I continued to watch the proceedings, hiding a barely perceptible frown at her treatment.

Nights like this help to stabilize the delicate power structure we have maintained throughout the centuries. While the other dukes and myself have no need to partake of the House's delights, we allow our inferior peers a free reign. Many have already forced themselves onto the slave women, while my human is forced to watch.

Several women that have been driven to their knees are swallowing the cocks that have been shoved into their mouths. Some are taking several lords in hand, while others are bent over, legs spread and breasts exposed. Veils and skirts have been lifted, as the Lesser Lords have their way.

Some of the slaves gag and cough, revealing their inexperience. Others are quiet, simply allowing the men to have their way, small cries and tears are their only effort of resistance. Some revel in the show of leisure foreplay, fondling nipples and nether lips; while others forgo the show altogether, with vicious bites and bruises to expend their lust.



I only watch her, my human, while she looks on. One slave has been forced to take several lords with all her holes, while another is ruthlessly sodomized against a wall. Moans and sobs fill the air, as even more slaves are brought in, to satisfy the nobles' appetites.

The men are beginning to lose themselves in the excitement. Women are being passed around senselessly, taken on tables and across chairs, as thrusts turn harsher, commands more debased. Some of the slaves' cries turn into wails as the men turn more violent, their primal nature coming to the forefront.

Watching a dark elf revel in his magic, giving in to the exhilaration, can be an overwhelming experience to those who witness it for the first time. Our strength and stamina are heightened, while our regard for others all but disappears. I can see my human react with horror, panic setting in.

I can also tell from her intelligent expression that it isn't the taboo that frightens her, so much as it is the loss of control. I disdain the display for my own reasons, but I am secretly obsessed with her reactions. A twisted part of me wonders what she might have been like if she were adequately prepared for such a show.

Would she acquiesce demurely, or put on the act of a struggle? Would she be a great seductress, or would she cultivate her natural innocence? These questions slither through my mind, even as the nobles continue their demonstration, her lesson.

One of the men has had his fill of voyeurism, and impatiently lunges for her, heightening her panic. She dodges to avoid his lecherous grasp, but is no match for elvish agility. He tears at her skirts, revealing a slender, shapely leg to my gaze.

She falls back, clutching at the remnants of material, screaming in terror. I can only bring myself to observe, silently and angrily, as more men advance. They surreptitiously approach, closing in like lustful predators. They are ready for

this slave to show them the lessons she's learned from this show.

**DIANE**

**T**he terror grows within. Even as I stand, watching the debauchery before me, the fear spreads like a plague through my body. I had told myself that this was what I was here for, to sell my body so that my family could live, but I hadn't expected a scene like this on my very first night.

Not like this.

I struggle through the faces and writhing limbs, searching for an escape. Surely there must be some other way I can get the fortune that my family needs, that doesn't involve me being subjected to becoming an elvish plaything. I've never seen the prestigious and untouchable Elves devolve into such madness.

A man lunges for me, startling me out of my shock. I can't stay here, the house rules be damned. I quickly dodge his reach, tearing my dress in the process. It only puts more of my form on display, but I can't worry about that right now- I have to get out of this room.

It's too late. While attempting to escape the clutches of one noble, another grabs at my hair, yanking me back. No! My mind screams, even as I register the pain, second only to my fear. I cannot live like this- a slave to the whims of others' pleasure.

*What have I gotten myself into?* I wonder bitterly. For the sake of my family, I have sold myself to be used and abused at some stranger's whim. I thought I could be strong- for Mama

and for James, but seeing the other women forced to the ground has made me realize how helpless I truly am.

These elves seem determined to correct my mistake. They toss me between them, as if I already was their personal plaything. Perhaps I am. One pushes me too roughly- I stumble, tripping over the remains of my torn skirt.

To my everlasting shame, I land in the lap of one of the royals. Even through my terror I can still feel a tinge of embarrassment, at finding my face disconcertingly close to his groin. I assume he is a royal- he and his companions are the few who have yet to partake in the night's entertainment.

Additionally, they dress more stylishly, and they carry themselves a little differently than the feral crowd- with a little more control. These elves have spoken little, acted less, and yet they carry a higher, more powerful bearing. It's a level of refinement I have never seen, and I hope that it also comes with the smallest grain of compassion.

I look up into the eyes of my newest captor, longing for a glimmer of salvation from this erotic nightmare. But his eyes are cold, glinting things that rest under delicate, disdainful brows. This one looks down on me with the same apathy he has shown the rest of the night's activities.

"Please Sir," I beg nonetheless, desperate for kindness. The thought of begging an elf leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but it's better than the fate that waits before me. I have no experience with this sort of thing, and am completely out of my depth, but I have to try anyway.

"Please, I wasn't meant to be here tonight. It's only my first night in this place- "

But his coldness cuts me off before I can finish my plea, silencing my hope along with my words. "Filthy wretch," he says, looking down on me with a cold malice. With barely a movement, he presses a polished boot to my stomach, and easily shoves me away from his tailored robes.

Hope dwindles where I land, as this royal tosses me aside. Oh, what cruelty! Is there no one who sees me as more than an

object in this room? Despair curls in my center when I look out at the women I came in with. Many who were crying as the men took them have fallen silent, accepting their fate, while others have only the energy to release pained moans.

This is a nightmare with no ending. I thought I had prepared myself for every eventuality, and accepted my new fate as a slave, a plaything. But this ignominy, this abuse is too overwhelming for me. I'll scrub floors, clean streets, beg, do anything! Anything to just get out of this room right now.

To further add to my disgrace, I now find myself prostrated at the feet of the elf I took notice of when I first walked in- he must be their leader. Aside from being the most handsome, he is also the most composed, surveying the men, the scene, and even me while remaining aloof.

Everything about his bearing cries nobility, even perhaps royalty. There is an imposing presence that seems to exude from him- a quiet charisma that arrested me even from the moment I first laid eyes upon him. Even the other finely dressed elves seem to deference to him, and he has the bearing of a natural commander.

In spite of my hatred of elves, I find I cannot look away from this man. Everything about him radiates power and beauty, from the barest flex of clothed muscles, to the sleek, dark hair pulled back from high cheekbones. From my prone position I can just barely make out the lines of tattoos that peek out from his cuffs and his collar, and I wonder fleetingly how far down his body those tattoos go.

He stares down at me, but otherwise does nothing else to even acknowledge me. What goes through his mind when someone like him looks at someone like me? A man like him is the epitome of everything I am not.

Against all odds, a sliver of hope pierces my chest when I look at him. He has not said anything, but he also hasn't discarded me, or tried to force himself on me. Perhaps this man, this elite elf, could be my last hope.

"P-please," I cry brokenly, the tears glittering my eyes. "I beg of you, do not let them take me. Not like this," I sob. "I

never asked for this, I never wanted it to be like this. Please, have mercy!”

However my impassioned pleas only seem to fall on deaf ears. This elf only stares down at me, like a bird of prey. He does nothing but watch me silently, benign, and that small piece of hope within me begins to bleed back into dread.

Desperately, I look to the stunning elf above me, then around at the others, but they all only stare impassively, doing nothing. The elves in his group in particular, appear to be taking their cues from the one before me. Is there truly not one who feels even the smallest pity for me?

Hopelessness, like a black pit, begins to swallow me whole, as I fully start to understand my fate. I am nothing to these men: a slave to be used and discarded as they see fit. To them I am little more than a bug on their shoe, and not even worth regard, much less any kind of decency.

There is nothing for me now. My life, all the dreams and aspirations I once entertained in the dingy hovel I shared with my family- it's all gone now. Nights like this will be my life now, filled instead with tears and undulating bodies.

One of the elves that grabbed me before now approaches the dais. He seems wary of the lord above me, but determined to have his disgusting way with me. A maniacal grin stretches across his face, and his eyes have taken on an unnatural gleam.

I know what he wants- what they all want from me, ultimately. Yet there is still a part of me, buried deep within, that shines defiantly through the blackened despair that has taken over.

It's anger. The anger I have felt all day and night- anger at my circumstances, anger at the situation I find myself in now. The anger I feel when I think about my mother dying on a cot, and my brother stealing food just to barely survive, while these privileged men sip wine and force themselves on women.

My anger makes me act before I can even think. There is a wine glass on the floor near me; instinctively I grab it, and smash it across the face of the noble who is trying to approach.

It is a defensive reaction, one I am making before I even realize I am doing it- but the next thing I know, there is broken glass across the floor, and the leering noble howls in pain as he clutches at the blood streaming down the side of his face.

I have made a terrible mistake. A bloodlust seems to overtake the injured elf, and he reacts immediately, slapping me so hard that I fall back down to the ground. Pain as I have never known lances through me, as my head smacks against the unforgiving stone floor.

My ears ring and skull throbs. The pain seeps in all around, disorienting me as I taste blood in my mouth. Through the haze, I can barely register myself being pulled, as the noble I have injured yanks me closer to him.

He yanks my legs apart. I protest weakly now, and even that is effort as my stomach heaves from the sensations. This is it- my life is truly over. Everything I have ever believed in and hoped for myself will be taken from me tonight, destroyed by this man who is determined to rape me.

I whimper as he settles in between my legs. I try to resist, but every movement is heavy and constrained as he brings himself closer. My first night as a slave, and all the hope I've ever held for my future is about to be ripped away from me.

All the stories and tales I have heard about pleasure houses could not have prepared me for this. No one told me this was going to happen; that I was going to have my virginity taken by a lust-crazed elf in the middle of an orgy, while other men watch on.

There is no life for me now, truly. There are no dreams for me to aspire to, no hope to cling onto- this is the darkest moment of my life. The despair I feel is all encompassing, and even my feeble protests seem weak and hollow as I am consumed by hopelessness.

“Enough,” a sharp, clear voice from above me commands. It is a cold sound that cuts through the haze, and reverberates down my spine. Even the noble lifting my skirts seems to pause, and looks up- at the breathtaking, royal looking elf.

The other elves look to the one who gave the command. The room seems to have fallen silent at his command, and even I find the barest strength to look at him. It is difficult to tell through the pain, but I think I see his tattoos swirl across his skin.

“Enough of this.”



## CARMICHEAL

All eyes focus on me. Dukes and zagfer alike dare not take a single breath.

Holding the room with my gaze I try to rationalize my actions. Cursing my lack of discipline, I feel my mood blacken in response to my momentary weakness. I keep my face impassive and unamused.

The vile image of the inferior noble preparing to bury himself inside of what is mine replayed in my head. One by one the threads of my control begin to snap. Her fear, an inaudible cry, reaching out for the help only I could give. The honeyed plea, a temptress luring forbidden desire to the surface.

She whimpers. A haunting whisper of hopelessness squeezes my chest, shattering my control. She was mine.

“Enough” I order, daring anyone to deify me.

I look at the noble, his menial form presses against the trembling limbs of my angelic human. She stares in my direction, her hazy orbs struggling to understand what is happening. Blood stains her full lips. Sweat sticking the matted halo of warm golden hair to her oval face. My muscles begin to twitch. The claws of death press down on my shoulders and demand I take revenge.

“Collect yourselves, we’re finished here. All this noise is giving me a headache.” I state, my tone void of emotion.

I take a deep breath, dousing the rage threatening to boil over. With my mask firmly in place, I stand, making my way to my human. The weight of the Duke's eyes cause me to stand straighter. I steel myself, unwilling to allow them to detect storm inside. I can't blame their suspicion, it's unlike me to deny the elves their pleasure, regardless of how gruesome it may have seemed. I have never been a man to take part in earthly pleasures. Yet, here I stand, no better than a boy still learning to control his magic.

I stalk forward, drawing out my approach, a predator assessing his prey. She looks up at me, my broken dove, trapped under the weight of this mongrel. I release my magic, the heat wrapping around him, the threat clear. His face pales, looking quickly between the human and me, before removing himself from between her legs and stepping back into the shadows.

"Should I repeat myself," I ask icily, turning to the men still occupying the room.

Instantly, the Elves spring into action and begin collecting themselves. Righting their garments, they begrudgingly start exiting the room. Most keep their eyes downcast, to appeal to my favor. The braver ones risk lingering looks at the worn, slumped bodies of the Eris House women before disappearing through the doorway.

"Human," I look down at her. "Your beauty has granted you the privilege of pleasing me."

Her eyes deepen, a rush of blue threatening to pull me under. Relief and fear clash behind the barrier of her lashes as she fights to hold back tears. Examining her, I made note of the breaks between her smooth skin. The muted purplish-blue hues of newly forming bruises bloomed over the valley of sinful flesh. They taunt me and my inability to protect her, forcing me to acknowledge the fact that I want to.

"I've never known you to be enchanted by women" Siderus's mocking tone filled my ears as he took a step forward breaking off from the other Duke's.

I turn to him, regretting the loss of contact with my enchantress. An unspoken challenge passes between us. With a smirk on his hard face he waits to see if I will react. I keep him in my sight as I ignore his comment and motion for the service of two zagfer women. They move quickly; rounding Siderus's imposing frame with eyes cast down. I refuse to give him the pleasure believing he could best me in any way.

“Sir,” they nod respectfully, in unison.

“Take the girl, and ready her for travel,” I order.

The zagfer made their way to my human, gripping her arms securely, before helping her onto her feet. She lost her balance for a moment before righting herself, not bothering to hide her exposed flesh. Even in her disarray, her beauty calls to me. The heavy swell of her breast causes my palms to ache. Her lips part, drawing my attention to her silent offering.

“Travel?” Siderus sneers, freeing me from my trance. “Is she to become your wife?” he taunts. “Or are you planning to share once you've widened her hips?”

Before I could move, Julius is between us. His back is to me, as he faces Siderus. I silently thank him, as shame fills me. I unclench my fist, certain that if Julius did not react as quickly as he has, we would have one less Duke in Protheka. How dare he suggest sharing what is mine.

I will not forget the insult any time soon.

I am losing control, and for what? A night with a human virgin? The feeling of her writhing body beneath me? Or is it the possibility of more I see when I look into her clear blue eyes?

I eradicate my next thought before I could become fully conscious of it. There is no more for me. My future has been decided since the moment of my birth. I will be King, and nothing, not even a woman as divinely crafted as the one who stands before me, will veer me off my course.

“I've yet to see you deny a woman,” Julius said to Siderus, a bored expression on his face. “It's no concern of ours which women Carmicheal chooses to occupy.” He continues as he

crosses the short distance and places a hand on Siderus' shoulder.

Siderus is silent. His violet eyes give me a final once-over before he shrugs his shoulders in mock submission. This isn't over. I turn to the other Dukes. Each of them, purposely keeping their emotions hidden.

The unspoken questions still radiating from the other Dukes linger over my head, assessing my worth. What am I if not the greatest Warrior on Protheka ? And, if a mere human can cause the grip of my control to loosen, who will stand by my claim to the throne?

My mastery of control has a reputation amongst the ranks of powerful Elves. The King himself is known to seek my counsel when the magic he wields threatens to overturn his logic.

Control. It is my greatest strength, my unwavering ability to compartmentalize my mind, allowing only victory as the outcome of every battle I face.

Until now.

This fragile human woman has undone years of training in a matter of moments. Her vibrant blue eyes and rounded lips haunt the ridged edges of my heart. Already her presence seeks to undo everything I've built. Reinforcing my walls, I remind myself of all the reasons she can never be mine.

I stare at her; her unsure gaze shields a shadow of the strength I witnessed when she lunged at the noble. She is perfect in her dazzling imperfection. Something warm begins to thaw the ice inside of me.

No, she can't be mine. But she will be.

I snap my fingers, uncaring, knowing what comes next. A zagfer appears beside me holding a stone chest. I turn to the manager of Eris House, opening the chest so he can clearly see the lavender gleam of the ipias, the most expensive currency on Protheka, it held.

The manager's eyes grow wide; I have no doubt that he has never come across this much money in all his time on this

planet. His eyes turn ravenous as continues to stare. The glutton's shifting beady eyes draws his attention from me to the chest, as if he is afraid it will disappear at any moment.

"This should cover the cost of the Human," I state. "From this moment on, you can consider her contract with Eris House void. She belongs to me."

The zagfer places the chest in the waiting arms of the unsightly manager. Without another word he rushes through the doors with his newest conquest.

I didn't wait to see the expressions of the Duke's that stood behind me. Nor did I give in to the instinct urging me to check to make sure my prize was following. She is mine now, and there is no turning back.

The thud of my heavy leather boots overshadows the softer padding of my human and slaves. Nevertheless, I could hear her a few steps behind. I release a breath and pick up my pace, allowing the full reach of my legs to carry me through the maze that is the hallways of Eris House. Moving across the long corridors, I take the path leading to the nearest exit, desperate for an escape.

I have no idea what's next. What will I do with the human? Of course, there is the obvious possibility of keeping her as a bedmate. Even when I am King, it's not uncommon for me to keep a woman to pleasure me outside of a noble Elven wife.

I thought of my small humans' curves spending their days wrapped in the finest silks, hidden away, awaiting me to ravage the spoils between her thighs. Just as I could feel the warmth of her hand skimming across my hot skin, guilt blankets the satisfaction the image gives me.

The life of a whore holds no joy, no passion, and no safety. Those women eventually become the nameless mothers of bastard children. Thrown further into the fringes of society, and once their suitors have their fill, the child and mother are left to fend for themselves.

*My human deserves better. But can I allow myself to give in? The desire for something more causes my blood to rise.*

“Wait” my human calls after me.

I ignore her and continue at my pace. I need to keep her at a distance until I can figure out what exactly I am going to do with her.

“Wait” she calls out again, her voice louder.

Her uneven, awkward steps struggle to keep pace behind me. Every slap of her soles against the hard tiles of the hallway causes my heart to clench. I keep moving, unwilling to submit to this female any more than I already have.

“I said stop!” she shouts.

The dominance in her voice brings me to halt. Who does this human think she is speaking to?

I turn to face her, allowing my fury to slip through. She stands unmoving, her hands press firmly to her sides. The blue in her eyes shine brighter, her anger igniting, fueling their storm. Despite being the focus of my ire, she refuses to cast her gaze to the floor.

She is a fighter. A fact that shouldn't turn me on as much as it does. Even through my anger, I could feel my length hardening. My brave, albeit foolish dove. Even aware of what her actions can cost her, she faces me, fully prepared to go toe to toe with a demon.

I'm in front of her in seconds. She gasps, her eyes widen as I engulf her body with my own. Pressing her frame flush to the wall behind her, I barricade all routes of escape with my body. She turns her face from me, the sharp movement causing her soft locks to caress my cheek. Her scent coats my skin, and I cup her cheek roughly, forcing her to face me.

Her lip's part and I resist the urge to kiss her senseless. I refuse to allow this siren to negate the consequences with her seductions. It is time she learns her place.

Tracing a rough finger across the parting between her lips, she shivers beneath my touch.

“Say that again” I challenge.

## DIANE

He turns to me, the inhuman speed causing me to halt. The smooth unreadable expression I associate with his handsome face contorts in fury. The air seems to thicken with his mood making me take a step back. Fighting to control my breath I locked my knees in place, not wanting to appear more vulnerable than I already am.

A distant memory of my father's face starts to materialize in the forefront of my mind. Like magnets, they wrestle to link, creating the image that haunts me in my dreams. I force it down and pull every bit of coherence I have left to remain present. This is a new world and I am no more than a pet.

He crossed the space between us, the speed faster than my mind can register. I gasp, my back hitting the wall as his massive body blocks off every possible escape. I turn my face from his, desperate to create some distance.

Fear squeezes my throat, trapping all sound behind my lips. Instantly, I regret opening my big mouth. *What the hell was I thinking?* He might have saved me from the others, but he is still an elf. I should have just continued quietly limping behind him. He's not my hero, I'm not the type of girl that gets one, I remind myself bitterly.

His large gloved hand grips my chin, forcing me to meet his molten gaze. A firm finger traces the curve of my jaw, granite wrapped in silk. The life sparking in places his touch has already abandoned, makes me aware of just how alone we are.

“Say that again” he challenges.

His gray eyes narrow, becoming daggers, daring me to answer him. I can barely feel the ache radiating off my left ankle now, too focused on the beautiful, terrifying elf that engulfed me. Locks of long dark hair fall forward, framing his face. This man is made from the very temptation mother warns me about.

He tightens his grip on my chin as if to remind me of whom I now belong to. Panic and heat weave around each other, serpents constricting my heart.

His strong wide chest presses against my own. Every exhale causes my hardening nipples to graze against him, a delicious dance between predator and prey. My eyes travel down to his mouth, before looking up at him again. His eyes deepen at the action.

I press my thighs together, cursing the way his touch dizzies my senses. I need to get a hold of myself. I thought of my mother, lying weakly in bed. She didn't have much time, and there is nothing my brother can do if I'm unable to send back money for her treatments.

My stomach clenches as reality dawns on me. I don't even know if there is still money to send home. Last time I heard slaves don't get a salary. Turning my eyes towards the ground, I struggle to collect myself. I need to master this new life. And right now, that means figuring out what this man expects from his newest purchase.

“Do you know who I am?” he asks, his tone quiet as death.

I freeze, confused by his question. It's obvious he is a High Duke, given his position in the grand hall. Surely, he isn't asking me to name him. He knows better than me what happens to the humans that enter the city of Orthani without permission. Only slaves and whores have exceptions and still, they too are only to set foot where their masters dictate.

Uncertain of whether or not he wants me to answer, I decide to keep my mouth shut, nodding vaguely instead. If there is one thing I know how to do, it is how to be obedient



regardless of how I feel. Pleasing him is the only way to get on his good side and any hope I have of securing a future for my family depends on it.

“Do you have a death wish?” he asks.

I shiver at the edge in his deep baritone still refusing to look at him. To appear weaker, I force my form as flat as it would go, practically melting into the wall behind me. Angry or not, this Duke saved me from the violent taking of my virginity. My helplessness moves him, or at least it has and I have to know if it could happen again.

“You dare raise your voice to me,” his voice venomous. “The most powerful Duke in all of Orthani, master of war, second to none but the King.”

I flinch at the sharpness of his tone. My heart sinks, the force of his words suffocating me.

Carmicheal.

*Duke Carmicheal is my master.*

This day can't get any worse. Even the humans in the lowlands have heard whispers of the merciless war-hardened elf next in line for the throne. He is rumored to be the coldest amongst them, feared and respected for his savagery. Yet he is the one who saved me.

“No one commands me to do anything,” he continues. “Least of all a slave,” He spat the word. “You have no idea the power I hold, and how far my reach extends. This will be the last time you speak without being permitted to” he said, his tone final.

I don't want to think of the consequences that await me if I defy the Duke. Nerves force my eyes upward as I try to placate his rapidly changing mood.

“Do you understand?”

I nod my head slowly, not wanting to trigger him.

“Say it,” he says.

“I understand,” I reply.

“You understand whom?” he pushes.

“I understand, sir” I try, hesitantly.

“Not quite there yet, try again” he orders.

Heat rises to my cheeks, no doubt staining the pale surface with embarrassment. He is playing with me. A punishment for giving him an order.

“I understand, Duke Carmicheal” I respond, forcing evenness into my voice.

“Oh, come now, you can do better than that,” he said. Keeping his hands at my sides, he pulls his body from mine, straightening to his full height. The stark difference in our height reminds me he is far from human.

He looks down at me expectantly, a glint of amusement rising a single corner of his full lips. I clench my fist, holding my temper as I pray this next answer satisfies him.

“I understand, Master,” I said, annoyance slipping through.

The Duke stares at me. I look back boldly, uncaring as his eyes roam my mostly naked body. They linger on my breast before traveling down to my hips. My sex pulses, a need I’ve never experienced filling me. I wonder what my skin will feel like with his broad body between my thighs. I lick my lips wetting the dry surface.

“Thank you, for saving me,” I add breathlessly.

His hands drop to his side. Stepping back as if I have struck him, a mixture of anger and something I can’t identify crossing his face.

“Don’t be mistaken, you’re not special and there is no happy ending for you,” he said, beginning to circle me.

Instinct holds me in place. I follow his movements with my eyes. Time seems to slow and his hand shots out from behind, turning me so that I face him. The Duke’s thick fingers wrap around my neck, sliding his hand up until it cups my chin. He grips my jaw tightly before loosening his fingers and using his thumb to trace my cupid’s bow.

“I’m no better than any of the other Dukes you saw in the great hall. I’m much worse.”

He leans down, bringing our faces inches apart. I could feel the warmth of his breath charming my aching lips. I’m powerless against the lure of pleasure he can provide.

“Don’t forget you owe me. And you can be sure I’ll collect. With interest,” he said, releasing me, while putting distance between us.

I can feel his walls secure themselves around him once more. This is it, everything my mother has ever warned me about. The loss that washed over me at the separation of our momentary closeness terrified me. I’ve thrown myself into the unknown and now I have to live with whatever it brings.

“I hope you don’t regret my mercy,” he said before turning and continuing down the hallway. “I suggest you follow unless you want to be left in Eris House after all,” he says over his shoulder.

He doesn’t break his stride, his long legs eating up the distance as he nears the end of the hallway. I stare at his departing figure, weighing the paths laid out before me. I thought of the hall, of all the women being passed around for the Duke’s sick pleasures, and recognize how close I was to being one of them.

I thought of my family, and how far I’ve already come. I can’t fail them now, no matter what lay ahead of me. They were mine to take care of, and I will do everything in my power to ensure their safety. Even if it means becoming the future King of Orthani’s pet.

Duke Carmicheal rounds the corner and I take a deep breath, preparing for the pain that will follow. Limping behind him, I clench my teeth, keeping my back straight.

I made my choice, and even though I have no idea what is waiting for me on the other side of this, I walk behind my master with my head high.

## CARMICHAEL

**B**y the time I step foot in the mansion, my exhaustion has turned to rage. A zagfer scuttles past us, close enough to step on the hem of my robe.

I stop immediately and turn to the wretched creature, who quivers under my gaze. As he should. My mother would never accept this kind of insolence, so neither do I.

“My lord,” the zagfer says. His voice trembles with fear and he drops to his knees. The plates and cutlery in his hands spill onto the floor with a clatter of silver and gold. The sound echoes around the room, deafening me.

I yank my robe from beneath his body.

“My lord, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—” He mumbles out a string of simpering apologies that I cannot bear to hear.

“Be quiet,” I order. The zagfer shuts up. “You disgust me. Get out of my sight.”

He scuttles away as far as his legs will take him. As he goes, my rage simmers into depression, reminiscent of the deep malaise I have felt often in my life. When I turn to Diane, her look of horror stops me in my tracks.

“What?” I ask, but I already know what. She thinks of me as a monster, a despicable creature not worth the blood I spill in battle. I turn away so she can’t see the hurt I feel.

“Why did you do that? He was sorry.”

My mother did not take this kind of insolence, either. With my back to her, she cannot see what I am thinking and feeling. The pain this causes me every time I yell or scream at a zagfer, exercise my will over a servant, or slay an enemy in battle, is not something that can be shared with the world.

It is a weakness. My greatest shame.

I turn to her with a look of pure ice. “If you don’t shut up, you’ll be sorry too.”

She recoils as though I struck her with my hand. If I was my mother, then I would have, but I refuse to do that. I saved her and she is mine now. Why would I treat my things that badly? Why would I save something just to destroy it?

As much as I want her to be obedient, I find that physically beating the obedience into someone does not make them loyal. You have to give them someone to believe in. This is what I will do for her.

“Go to your room and change,” I say. I nod towards her dress. “Your clothes are laid out for you in your room. You will find them much finer than anything I’ve seen you in.” I turn to the guards. “Take care of my property.”

I stalk off towards my bedroom, leaving her to be taken away by the guards. I need her out of my sight. Whatever possessed me to not only buy her but find her beautiful quells the farther I walk from her.

My mother’s voice sounds in my head. *Love is a distraction. Affection is a distraction. These things make you weak. You will never be king until you let go of your weaknesses.*

When I reach my office, I have put all thoughts of the girl, Diane, out of my mind. So what if she is the most beautiful human I have ever laid eyes on? Whatever I feel for her must be squashed before it becomes a problem.

Inside the office, my things are lined up in neat rows along my desk, just how I like them. Everything needs to be in order, because without it, there is only chaos. My mind whirls at the

thought of leaving anything but perfect. I touch each one with care before taking a seat.

My butler raps on the door with his knuckles. A strong and smart man, Darius has served my family since my mother ascended to duchess. He has never let me down, and I can trust him with my life.

“Sir,” he says, to announce his presence.

“The girl. She’s staying with me, here in the mansion, at least until I tire of her. I will be done with her after.”

“Of course, sir.” Darius bows his head once. “And what shall I do with her in the meantime?”

I chew on my lip, a habit that not even my mother could beat out of me. “Prepare dinner for us. I’ll meet her in the dining hall. That’s all.”

Darius bows his head again and leaves me alone with my thoughts. Most of them are consumed by Diane. Her bare skin and blue eyes are like nothing I’ve seen on the humans around here, or even the elves. Tattoos are necessary to show allegiance and she has none.

She interests me like no other woman I’ve ever met. But why? Why her? Yes, she is beautiful, but that can’t be all.

I shake my head. I cannot keep thinking about her like this. She will be out of my life in a few days, three at most. Then I will never have to see her beautiful face, soft lips, or rosy complexion again.

*Fuck.* My anger rises at the thought of it. Once she is gone, I will never see her again. Most likely she will be killed once she pisses off an elf much worse than I. Why is that a bad thing? My mother’s words simmer under the surface of everything I do, and they plague me now.

She’s not *that* beautiful. Is she? Fuck, my thoughts are all over the place.

I stand from my desk so forcefully it knocks several papers to the floor. Stopping to pick them up would take too much time, so I continue on. My gait as I move through the

mansion's halls is quick and merciless. Servants flee from my path, showing deference to their lord.

When I make it to the dining hall, the sight there almost knocks me over.

Diane. She's dressed in the finest silks my patronage has to offer, her hair twisted up and adorned with flowers, and clean of all grime. Her scent wafts to me from 20 paces, flowery, soft, delicate. Her eyes are big and beautiful in the light from the sun streaming in through the windows.

She looks beautiful.

I cannot let her see me like this. I cannot show weakness. I cannot stop staring at her, but it is not for the reasons she probably thinks.

I stop when I realize where she is.

"Who let you sit at the table?" I gain my bearings by asserting my dominance. "I didn't say you could sit there."

"I'm sorry?" The quizzical note in her voice is soft and trembles slightly. Good. She should be afraid of me.

I snap my fingers at the guards. "Who told her she could sit at the table?"

"No one, my lord," one of the guards answers. "It was of her own will."

I march over and stand in front of him. Instead of raising my voice, I lower it to a whisper.

"She is not a guest." The guard's eyes widen in fear. "She is my property. And you will treat her as such."

The guard nods and swallows.

"Good."

I turn back to her. She stands up from the table.

"Smart girl," I say.

I look her up and down. The silk of the dress clings to her in the most sinful ways. Her hips are wide, her breasts full, and her nipples stand out from the chill in the room.

In my head I'm thinking of ways to have her. On the floor, right here, in front of the guards. Or maybe outside in the garden, like animals. Or I could take her to my bed and fuck her on sheets she could never afford.

My pants tighten as I become aroused. She would be so wet inside, so warm. Her mouth is a wet, warm, red hole for me to fuck. She already knows her way around a pleasure house; I could fuck the worth out of her.

The way humans think is clouded by their attachments. If I fuck her for long enough, she will grow dependent on me, maybe even fall in love with me. And it will hurt when I banish her from my mansion and my life—at least for her.

I am not human, so why do I feel this way about her at all? Why am I consumed by the thoughts of having her, of tasting her, of seducing her? It makes no sense why she is all I think about.

“What are you looking at?” She tilts her head in confusion at me.

“I saved you,” I say as I move around the table to her. “You should show me some respect.”

She glances down. “Yes, my lord.”

As I step forward, she visibly shivers. Because of what, though? The anticipation of me touching her? I move my hand to her chin and clasp it, my hold gentle but firm.

A gasp forces her mouth open and I am once again struck by the softness of her mouth and the warmth of her breath on my hand. Is she thinking what I'm thinking? Does she want this, too?

I swipe my thumb across her bottom lip, as slowly and gently as I can without losing myself in the movement. Another gasp forces its way out of her mouth. Her breath gusts over me, smelling fresh and sweet.

As I push my thumb into her mouth, I hold her chin as forcefully as I can without hurting her—too much. She moans but keeps her mouth open wide.



“Good girl,” I say, and let go.

**DIANE**

**H**eat pulses through me at his praise, and when he retracts his thumb, I find myself embarrassingly eager for him to grab me again. Instead, he just observes me, and I decide to dare asking him a question I've been dying to know.

“Did my mother and brother receive the money?”

Instead of answering, Duke Carmichael walks around the room. His gaze wanders as though he is already sick of looking at me. Shame burns through me at displeasing him, my cheeks hot and my eyes prickling.

“Can I do anything for you, my lord?”

He turns to me with a sigh as he takes a seat at the table. I breathe my own sigh of relief and take a step towards him.

He puts up a hand to stop me. “You can sit there.”

“Where?”

He points a finger at my feet. He means the stone floor I'm standing on. It's hard and cold, not a place for civil company.

So this is what the duke thinks of me. A beggar, no better than a whore. I should sit at his feet like a dog.

What else can I do, though? I sink to my knees and shudder as they connect with the stone. My body trembles with humiliation. Even compared to the things that have been done to me by his kind, I've never felt this low in my life.

“Have you word from my mother?”

“I have,” he says.

Duke Carmichael’s words are as deliberate and calculated as his actions. Usually I’m good at reading people, but everything about him is locked behind a 12-foot-tall steel gate.

“And they are well?”

He stares me down. “As well as can be expected.”

What is that supposed to mean? His aloofness throws me off kilter. He may be charismatic in front of his people, but to me he is cold to the point of being cruel.

My body still trembles from the stress and fear. He could end my life with one word to his guards or a swipe of his sword. What is stopping him from cutting me down right now?

I have to believe he can see what I am worth. I promised Mama I would not end up like her, but here I am. If I have to plead for my life, I will. If I have to give myself to him, I will do that too.

It is not just me. Mama and James’s lives are in Duke Carmichael’s hands. Just like his entourage of elves, he has complete power over them. Their deaths would mean nothing to him.

“You look nothing like your mother.”

I tilt my head at him in confusion. “Excuse me?”

“Your mother,” he says, slowly, as though I’m an idiot.

I don’t know how to respond.

“Thank you.”

Duke Carmichael continues, “I considered bringing her into the castle. For entertainment, obviously. My troops need to be entertained.”

I can’t help but be enraged by his cold tone. He’s talking about my mother like she’s an object instead of a whole person. What can I do about it? He has me prisoner. I’m nothing to him.

“I considered bringing your brother in as well. A boy needs a strong hand to raise him right. He is not getting that from anyone else. Clearly.”

What is that supposed to mean?

“My brother is fine,” I snap, against my better judgment. “My mother is the best parent in the world.”

The duke rolls his eyes. It’s the most human gesture I’ve seen from him.

“A whore is good for nothing. Trust me, I’ve met plenty.”

“Maybe because you—”

The look he shoots me shuts me up. “What did you say?”

“Nothing, my lord.” I hang my head in shame. If he sees how meek I am, hopefully he won’t punish me.

“I could have your mother’s head delivered to you.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. It’s more of a gasp or a prayer.

“Do you understand? I could kill everyone you’ve ever loved. Everyone you’ve ever known.” His voice trembles with barely-suppressed rage.

“Sorry, my lord.” My voice trembles, too.

“Stop talking.”

A hot rush of shame and fear pushes through my body. Tears prickle the corners of my eyes. No, not this! If he sees me cry, there’s no telling what he’ll do. I look down at the floor.

“I could end your life at any moment. Do you understand?”

I keep my gaze on the stone in front of me.

“Yes, my lord.”

“It’s only by my unending mercy that I don’t kill you right now.”

I nod my head, too scared to speak.

“Look at me now.”

I look up into the cold flint of his eyes. They are so beautiful that it is hard to believe they belong to one so cruel. His features are soft but underlined by the cruelty he has shown me.

I won't forget this. Even as tears cloud my vision, I can see him for who he truly is. Not a man, but a beast.

"You must be hungry," he says, eventually.

I say nothing. He waits for a few seconds, growing visibly impatient.

"I said, you must be hungry."

I get it now. He won't ask me any questions because he doesn't care about my answers. Would it be wise to refuse to speak? Or will he hurt me worse?

"Answer me, girl."

I can't do anything but answer. The way I've been treated  
"Yes, my lord."

With a flick of Duke Carmichael's delicate wrist, the guard at the door straightens, turns, and hurries away.

I look back at the duke. He is as stony-faced as when I first met him, being tossed around by elves in their playhouse. I asked for salvation, and he gave it to me.

But now? This? I don't even recognise him. His callousness is as much a slap to the face as a physical blow.

How can I redeem myself to him? He saved me once—perhaps he will save me again.

"Perhaps I've been too hard on you."

I am shocked at the words.

"Excuse me, my lord?"

"When I rescued you from that elf, I had no idea what kind of power you had."

I tilt my head at him again. Confusion clouds any clear judgment I have of him. Do I have him wrong?

All my instincts tell me he is bad news. They say to run as far from him as possible.

The coiling in my gut tells a different story.

“You seem to like it when I mishandle you.”

I cannot help the gasp that escapes my mouth. He has seen past the defenses I put up to hide myself away. He sees me for who I am.

Dressed in silver-white robes that cling to him effortlessly, he cuts a fine figure. His hands are delicate and strong. He’s right: I do like it.

I want his hands on me. I burn inside from shame or arousal. I’m not sure which.

“Yes, my lord.”

He leans forward until his face is inches from mine. The wine on his breath does not make me like him any less. The tart smell of it makes me want him more. I could kiss it from his lips.

He looks directly into my eyes as though he knows what I am thinking. I can almost hear his thoughts as well. Our eyes connect in a long moment that stretches across time and the space between us.

As he opens his mouth to speak, the door bursts open and the guard comes in.

The smell of food drenches the room and my stomach grumbles. When was the last time I ate? The guard places the mountain of food in front of me. When was the last time I ate *so well*?

The duke leans back. Our connection is broken instantly and I feel cold again. I watch as the guard plates food for me and sets it on the floor at my knees. Hot tears prickle at my eyes again and in an instant I start to cry.

“Stop,” the duke says.

I can’t help it. Everything is awful! Once again I am a child crying for Mama, and once again she is not here to help

me.

“I’m sorry,” I say through my tears.

I can’t believe myself. I *really* thought he was going to be kind to me? Ha! As if his words were not enough, making me eat on the floor proves how cold he is.

“Eat,” he commands.

I take the offered fork and spoon and shovel food into my mouth. The food is hot and delicious, but every bite stirs more dread in my stomach. I feel leaden and heavy from the first few mouthfuls.

The tears continue to fall, dripping onto my food. The judgment in Duke Carmichael’s stare burns me even though I cannot bring myself to look at him.

Food sits in front of him, but he isn’t eating. A clatter sounds in front of me as his fork falls to the floor. Did he do that on purpose? I look into his eyes.

“Pick that up.”

I glance at the fork, still ringing from hitting the stone.

A long moment stretches between us where I consider my options. I could try to attack him. I could stab the guard in the neck and kick the duke’s knees in. I could smash the plate over his head. Any of these options would be better than obeying.

I do not choose them.

I pick up the fork.





# CARMICHAEL

**D**iane crawls soundlessly, the dull thump of her knees as they make contact with the cold, ridged flooring causes me to tense. Moving in the direction of the fork, she dips her head low. Shrugging her frame underneath the thick cloth covering the dining table, she weaves her lithe body between the massive wooden legs and my own.

I follow the curve of her spine, allowing my eyes to feast on the clear flesh beneath the soft satin I choose for her. Rhythmically, her hips move, slowly shifting from side to devious side, as she fulfills my command without question. The round curve of her ass causes the pale material to shimmy and divot suggestively.

Her movements both consume and madden me. My hands twitch, and I clench them to keep from reaching for her. This is more for my sake than it is for hers. I can't afford to get distracted by childish, inferior temptations. She is a slave, a purchase made to please me while her beauty still holds the rarity of youth humans only access temporarily. She is nothing more, I remind myself.

Even as daggers pierce my chest, I wordlessly watch her cower and submit to my whims. Any resistance she has shown in the beginning was snuffed out at the mention of her mother and brother. My enchanting pet is starting to understand her place. So why didn't I?

Why does the fear in her eyes cause my instincts to war with my mind? My want to protect her from everything,

including me, only grows despite my best efforts. Every command I give pushes me to the brink of insanity. She is a slave, not a bride, yet the sight of watching her submit to me, subjecting herself to the bite of the cold hard stone floors of the dining hall, without question, ignites my disappointment.

There is shrewd surrealism to her obedience. The ease with which she holds her fire, a sacrifice, for whom? Her Mother? Her brother? The very people whose weakness causes her to subject herself to the whims of Elves! She owes them nothing. Why? The thought crawls through my mind. There is nothing left for her after my release, only a line of elves who will scavenge what's left of her.

Disgust clouds my vision, her weakness threatening to expose my own. The virginal minx disappears underneath the table. I can feel the brush of her arm against my leg as she reaches in-between them to grab the fork. Heat erupts at the contact, traveling through my limbs and causing my shaft to swell. An image of her creamy unmarked skin floods my thoughts, making my fingers ache to leave their imprint on her calling figure.

Her slender fingers lift the curtain, she pokes her head out holding the fork in my direction.

“Sir” she urges.

I drink the image in, and for the first time, she is washed and dressed in a fashion that suits my taste. Though simpler than I want for a woman that is mine, fine enough for her temporary role in my life.

I will bathe in the beauty of her bloom; exploring the silk petals she offers until she begs for me. Her angelic heart-shaped face tilts up towards me, an action that only accentuates the vast changing tides of her eyes. Diane's deep-brown eyelashes contrast with the golden strands of her hair, adding a soft golden hue to her smooth skin. The blush-colored satin dress clung to her breasts, holding the decadent mounds of flesh securely in my line of sight.

I take my attention from her chest and look into her eyes. With her arm still reaching out, I notice a tremble in her

fingers. Though a blush stains her cheeks, her smile falters as she faces me, waiting for me to take the fork out of her hand.

I reach out my hand and she recoils. The action is like a slap in the face. Her fear was potent, filling the air of the dining room. My human. How dare she look upon me like a monster? Me! The man who took her in! Sent aid to her family! My pride was hurt, the rational part of my mind understood that Diane was simply behaving the way all prey does when there is a large, unstable predator in their midst.

I am losing control. Rapidly cycling through emotions I can't place in recent memories. For years I have spent every waking moment denying myself the pleasures of the heart, mind, and soul to be the King my mother needs me to be. I remove myself from any experience which uses the lure of love to poison the mind. Women are nothing to me, warm holes that milk my seed when the magic threatens to drown me in my bloodlust.

She is nothing, nothing, I chastise myself. I swallow the lie, pushing the need to be desired by her down, and locking it deep within myself. I allow my heart to freeze, stepping into the iron I wear as a second skin.

Diane has not moved from in-between my legs. Sitting back on her heels she waits. Uncaring whether her obedience was fear or intuition, I took a moment to revel in her form. I stalk forward, acting on primal instinct. Her pink lips part in response. I inhale, smelling her lust, an intoxicating plume of spices and vanilla. I'm not a man who denies himself what he wants.

Using my legs to push the chair back slightly, I reach out and grab the fork from my pet's hand. I lift my free hand, running the back of my fingers across her blush-stained cheek. Her breath hitches as I move my hand down her neck.

"Good girl," I say.

She leans her neck to the left, exposing the divot between her collarbone and shoulder.

“You are something you know, that your mother was smart to keep you hidden.” I continue.

Moving my touch down her biceps, I use my thumb to gently caress the side of her breast. She lets out a soft sigh and I could feel the gluttonous beast inside me, urging me to feast on more.

“You will serve a singular purpose, and as long as you fulfill your duty, your family will be cared for. Do you understand?” I ask.

“Y - Yes,” she responds, eager to please me.

I could feel the magic coating the edges of my mind, a dark embrace, demanding punishment. I will show her what it is like to be the consort of an Elf. My dick pushes uncomfortably under the fabric of my tunic. I grip her chin, using the other hand to pull at the waist of my pants.

Her eyes go wide as my cock springs free. I continue to grow under her fiery stare. Diane’s lip’s part, and I hold in a groan at the thought of her warm mouth around me. Gripping the base of my member and positioning it in line with her full, pink lips, I gave her a moment to catch on.

“Open your mouth” I order.

“But - I – I don’t know how” she hesitates, the shock evident on her face.

“And how else will you learn to please me?” I mock. “Did you think looking at your beauty would be enough? Even after what you witnessed at Eris House? I may have saved you from the others, but do not mistake me, I intend to take you whenever I please, however, I please.”

I bring my face down until I can feel her breath on my skin, pressing my fingers into her jaw until she has no choice but to hold my gaze.

“I’m going to fuck your mouth until you learn how to suck my dick like the whore you would have been,” I threaten. “Now open wide my sweet, I won’t ask again.”

Diane's body grew tight. Squeezing her eyes shut, she slowly opens her mouth. My cock pulses as the head makes contact with her soft lips. The bead of precum on my girthy member coats her lips as I trace them.

Dipping the head of my cock past her teeth, I groan as the heat envelopes my tip. I push myself in further, slowly moving my hip back and forth.

“Stick out your tongue” I order.

Diane did as she was told, pushing out her long, pink tongue. The moist limb rubs against the thick vein that runs along my shaft. Every atom of my being is centered on the point where our bodies connect. I push myself deeper, and she wraps her lips around me.

I growl, deep and guttural, approving of the way her soft suckles gain confidence. She reaches out her hands, gripping my hard thighs for support. I drop her chin, replacing it with a fistful of blonde hair.

Diane sucks hard, wrapping around my length like a sheath. Saliva spills from her lips as I lose myself, gutting faster in and out. It travels down my shaft like rivulets twisting and winding around the most intimate parts of me, causing my balls to clench.

“Look at me,” I order.

Her blue eyes meet mine and I cannot imagine a more beautiful sight. Her heavy-lidded gaze transfixes me as I watch her full mouth welcome my invasion. A groan escapes her lips, sending waves of pleasure down my spine.

She groans again, digging her nails into the back of my thighs and suddenly, I am her prey.

“Fuck, just like that, pet,” I sigh “Take everything from me.”

Her eyes smolder, gripping the base of my cock, she thrusts my length inside her mouth. She takes me deeper than before, a hunger in her eyes that unravels me. I throw my head back, my balls shooting up as my seed is drained from me. I grip her hair, holding her head in place as I fill her mouth.

The mixture of saliva and cum runs from the corners of her mouth as she swallows the rest. I pull my cock from her, causing her to sigh softly. Despite the blush covering her face, she holds her stance, looking up with a need that begged to be satiated.

I'll never have enough of her.



## DIANE

I can't believe I sucked him off under the table. My promises to my mother truly mean nothing anymore. I'm earning money on my beauty, just like she did. I can feel the pressure of tears at the back of my throat, but I swallow them down. I can't let him see.

My mind won't stop reliving it, the weight of his cock in my mouth, the taste of his cum on my tongue. I couldn't have really done that, could I? It feels like something that happened to someone else, something I just watched.

Except my mouth still aches, my throat is still raw, his cum is drying on my chin. No matter how many times I swallow, I still taste bitterness and salt. When it was happening, all I could think about was the act. It was almost meditative.

Did I... enjoy it? Am I that kind of girl? It feels impossible to deny as I lick my ravished lips, spit slick and swollen. It feels strangely empty now. Who am I becoming?

I don't know how long I'd been thinking, but it seems it was too long. Carmichael grabs me around the waist and pulls me from under the table. He lifts me as easily as a doll, carrying me close to his chest.

"Wait, where are we going?" I cry. My heart is pounding in my chest. His is steady against my cheek, strong and unchanging.

He doesn't reply. I can read nothing in his stoic expression. His dark gray eyes are flat and cold. He's like a stone statue, rigid and unbending, no color in him anywhere.



With one swift kick, he forces the door open. I get an impression of rich velvet curtains and opulent furniture as he carries me inside. He throws me on the bed hard enough that I bounce. I look up at him, looming over me. He's so much bigger than I am.

My eyes sting as the tears push their way past my self-control. Is he going to force me? He saved me before, but that's just because he wants me for himself.

"Stop, please. Sir," I say, almost forgetting to address him respectfully. My voice is small and I cringe. This timidness isn't me, but I can't seem to stop. I blink, willing the tears away. "Would you go slow? Please? It's my first time."

He kneels over me, trapping my body between his knees. His face is so far from me I can barely make out his features. "I know that, pet," he says in his deep, even voice. "You owe me. And now, I am going to collect."

He takes the neck of my dress in his hands and tears it open down to my waist. The silk used to make it alone could probably feed my family for a month. But he gave it to me. It's his to ruin. I bite my lip to keep from crying out.

I can feel his gaze on me, hot and burning. The lust of the elves is so much more potent than what I experience as a human. It's hard to think of Carmichael as uncontrolled, but I can't help the nervousness that flutters in my stomach.

The harsh sound of ripping fabric fills my ears as he tears my beautiful dress to pieces, flinging it carelessly aside. The slip underneath quickly follows, and then he's grabbing at the bindings on my chest and the lace underwear I'd been so unsure about.

He yanks brutally, like he's furious at the clothes he picked out. It takes everything in me not to make more than a small noise as the fabric digs into my skin, stinging and pulling before finally giving under his strength.

Cold air rushes over my skin. The only place I'm warm is where his body covers mine. I'm completely naked, laid bare

before him. The flowers in my hair are long since crushed to death. I feel like the same is about to happen to me.

His hands are on me immediately, roaming my body like he's trying to memorize every inch. His skin isn't rough, but his treatment is, squeezing my breasts like he's testing produce at the market. His slim fingers slide between my lips, poking and prodding.

Lines of fire blaze across my stomach as he rakes his nails over the sensitive skin. He grabs my hips so tightly I can feel the bruises forming under his fingers. It's too much. A pained yelp escapes me.

He stops. "What was that, pet?" It is a demand.

"Nothing, sir," I say, struggling not to whimper. For a terrible moment, there is silence, nothing but my harsh breathing. Then, he touches me again.

I gasp. It's different, so different from before.

His fingers trace along my collarbones as light as a butterfly's touch. He caresses my breasts, thumbs just brushing at my nipples. It's teasing, but it lights a fire between my legs. This time, the noise that slips from me is a moan of pleasure.

Something wet and hot slides over the marks he left on my stomach, soothing. It's his tongue. He's bent over me, so warm, licking his way up my body. Each stroke unwinds something in me. I'm melting beneath him.

He kisses my neck, still carefully stroking my breasts. I'm trembling. I want more. The barest hint of teeth on my skin pulls another moan from me. His lips are soft, his tongue is forceful, and the mix is heaven.

There's an ache between my legs, a void that begs to be filled. I feel like I'll go mad if he keeps tormenting me like this. "Please, sir, please fuck me," I say.

"Is that what you want, pet? You want my cock?" His voice is right in my ear, so deep it's almost a purr and it stokes the fire in me to new heights.

"Yes, I want your cock inside me, please." I plead.

He sits up and the lack of him is nearly intolerable. “I don’t know. I don’t think you’ve asked prettily enough.” He twists one of my nipples, just on the edge of pain. “Is you wanting something enough of a reason for me to give it?”

“I don’t just want it, I need it, please, sir. I need your cock.” I barely know what I’m saying. I never thought I could talk like this. But every word is true. I feel like I’ll die without him.

“Better. But what about my pleasure? You forget your place.” He pinches tighter and I whine at the pain.

I want the soft touches back, want satisfaction after he’s built me so high. I don’t care if he thinks he’s better than me, I’ll say anything. “I’ll be good for you. I’ll make you feel so good, be a good girl. Please, please, please.”

He brings his face back down to mine, chasing the cold away. “Good girl,” he breathes, and my thighs clench. I think those are two of my favorite words now.

I feel his fingers at my entrance again, stroking instead of prodding. They move easily, slick with my juices. I can’t believe how wet I am.

Something replaces the fingers, something large, pressing into me. His cock is hard and impossibly hot. The stretch of just the head burns.

I whimper again. He takes one of my breasts in his mouth and I gasp in pleasure. “Good girl. You can take it. Just relax.” His voice distracts me from the pain, melts me all over again.

He pushes in, inch by inch. It aches, but it also satisfies the need that’s been driving me crazy. I had no idea it could feel like this.

My body slowly opens to him, like I’m being molded to fit, like no other cock will ever be able to satisfy me. Being filled up like this feels right. Feels like what I was made for.

“That’s it,” he says, still kissing along my chest, occasionally nipping at my collarbones. “Take it all. Just like that.”

It's almost tender, sweet, like we're making love and not just fucking. But that has to be my imagination, wishful thinking. I'm his pet. Nothing more.

I feel him pull back, starting to slip out, and I wrap my legs around his waist without thinking. I need to keep him inside. "No, stay inside, I need you," I say.

"Greedy, pet." He bites my neck. "I'm going to fuck you now. Just try and hang on."

He begins to move, slow at first, in and out. The burn fades to nothing and a pressure starts to grow inside me, stronger and stronger as he speeds up. I keep him as close as I can with my thighs, eyes shut in ecstasy.

"Look at me," he says, voice rough.

Our eyes meet. For the first time the gray seems warm, alive. There's something different about his face. The words that spring to my mind don't make any sense. 'Soft'. 'Fond'. Whatever it is, it makes him beautiful.

Warmth blooms in my chest, loosening my muscles. I can breathe again. I almost laugh at the euphoria that sweeps through me. Instead, I moan, loud and long, my walls contracting tightly around him as my orgasm hits me.

I ride wave after wave of it, gushing around his cock. His eyes stay locked on mine the entire time.

Just as I'm winding down, he pulses inside of me, a choked cry escaping him as he spills his seed. It renews my own pleasure and for a moment, we're coming together.

He pulls out of me and this time I let him. I'm satisfied. More than satisfied. I can barely keep my eyes open. He leaves and I hear the sounds of running water in the distance. They lull me to sleep.



# CARMICHAEL

The night has flown by me as I lay awake, trying to cast out the memories of last night. To think of her touch, moans, cravings for my touch, awakens a state in me I cannot afford. Weakness is not something a Duke can possess in these times of strife. A throne was to be had, and I cannot have a human hold me back from my rightful title.

She was nothing before. A human, a servant creature cuffed to my commands. I commanded her, and she obeyed. That was the law, and my perception, until now.

I look over and watch her chest rise and fall. They truly are interesting creatures, humans. Her emotion rose freely from her chest during our intimacy, something I only just began to feel last night. I lightly graze her shoulder with my fingertips, feeling her warmth and light. I can feel an opening in my chest, a magnetic pull toward her being.

I have long dreamt of the night before and have waited for it for centuries. The way she looked at me when she felt my touch, the passion extending from our beings into the other, it was immaculate. Penetration was more than just an act with her, it made me *feel*.

She stirs slightly and groans, possibly in annoyance. I pull my fingers back and gaze at the ceiling. I have always subdued any emotion or twinge that could hold me back from my true nature. I cannot control this, and I cannot push these thoughts away, and I cannot-

My thoughts pause as I feel a shock through my being. I suddenly remember my teachings. Words of elders passed down for centuries. Everything I am feeling, thinking, wanting, and craving is all too familiar. This seems like the process of identifying your mate.

I slowly emerge from the covers and stand up, dressing in my robes. I sigh in disgust. This set has always been particularly tight around my biceps. The butler could never get it right.

Stepping outside, I quietly close the door behind me. Waking her could be detrimental if I don't gather information about mates first. I need to be sure.

"Servant!" I yell deeply once far enough from the room.

"Duke?" His lanky figure begs, sneaking around one of the corners.

"I am departing for the palace." I say firmly.

"But s-sir...t-the girl..." He stammers.

"Yes." I say, looking down at him. "She is to be treated as a master; do you understand?"

"A...mas-"

"Yes!" I bellow in annoyance. "Do as I say. Ask no questions." I loom over him, staring intently at his frail face. "Tell. No. One."

I watch as he looks around the room in confusion, then nods fearfully. Nodding my head, I set out to find the information I need. Walking out, I find myself wanting to find a way to make her my mate, more than wanting it to be untrue.

The library was stacked to the ceiling with ancient tomes and records. Fishing through these would take forever if I wasn't so familiar with these old walls. Thumbing through the tomes on the Eastern wall, I find the first text I had ever read about mating. "*Mates: The Hands of Love.*" Cheesy yet helpful.

I sit down in the red velvet chair and thumb through the pages, finding stories of elves mating, the connections felt, and

marriage rituals. Nothing about humans, but the connection pages...are hitting close to home.

*“A process of identifying a mate is categorized into three stages. Passion, Openness, and Attachment. Once the threshold for these stages has been reached, it is impossible to return to the state before.”*

“Great.” I think, placing the book back on the shelf. I cannot return. I cannot fight this, and I know it is useless. The image of myself on the throne seems to wane with each image of her that crosses my mind.

I look through various tomes endlessly, flipping pages, sighing, and sitting in defeat. No elf has ever mated with a human; if they have, they certainly did not write a romance novel about it. The records were of no help either. Each marriage has been listed as elven, no elf-human hybrid marriages.

I stand up and pace. Asking about this could lead to suspicion and turmoil. I can't afford that.

Images of her pleasure cross my mind once more as I close my eyes. I need to see it again. I need to replay the memory of my lips on her neck, her thighs wrapped around my hips, and her tight pussy gushing for me.

Opening my eyes, I stare out at the city through the library windows. A burning ignites in my chest. I must speak with the elder. If anyone knows the possibility of this turn in my fate, it would be him.

The palace stairs gleam with gold as I take each step confidently. While these new emotions spur in my chest wildly, I cannot lead to any suspicious feelings. I take a silent, deep breath as I prepare to enter his chambers.

The elder is a wise man and highly intuitive. I must be bulletproof in guising my thoughts. I always heard the rumors that he could read minds. While I think of it as nothing but a bedtime story, now, it must be taken into consideration.

The double doors swing open as I enter his chambers. Startled, he turns to face me, breaking his concentration from



his altar. He lifts the black hood of his cloak from his head.

“Duke Carmichael.” He says with a sly smile on his face.

“Elder James.” I say with a slight nod. He walks over to me and nods his head in a bow.

“Quite an entrance.” He says with another smirk. Thoughts of those rumors crossed my mind once more.

“I am in search of some information for my studies.” I say, keeping my voice calm and smooth.

“Oh?” Elder James asks, turning back to his table.

I walk over, each step loud and assertive. Confidence is key here.

“Elves and humans...” I stop at his altar and gaze until he peers up at me. “Mating.”

“Ha!” He laughs, concentrating on his potions once more. “King Rylon would be very shocked by this question.”

“I think it may be a key to defeating some of our enemies.” I say sharply.

“How?” He asks, chuckling and looking at me.

“That’s classified.” I say, peering down on him. “Is it possible?”

He nods his head and turns to walk to his bookshelf, running his fingers over his tomes. “It has been done in Vhoig and Pyrthos...rarely.”

“How does it work?” I ask, folding my arms over my chest. Damn this tight robe.

“That, I cannot tell you.” Elder James says, pulling out a tome and bringing it back to the altar. “I am an elder of Orthani, not Vhoig or Pyrthos. Also...” He places the book on his altar and begins to flip through potion recipes.

“King Ryfon would be appalled at the conversation.”

“Again.” I say, deepening my voice. “It could be a battle strategy.”

Elder James shrugs and opens his mouth before Unkine, the Great Healer of Orthani, enters the chambers.

“What a pleasant surprise!” Unkine bellows, walking over to bow to me. I bow back graciously.

“Unkine. My pleasure.” Unkine held a great deal of power and could be useful in my future endeavors as King if I could win his trust.

“What brings you to Elder James?” He asks, leaning on James’ table. James looks disgusted, and I rack my brain for the correct answer.

“Battle strategies.” I answer, standing firm.

“He wants to know about elves and humans.” James says, chuckling.

“Ah. How we can better use them? Avoid them?” Unkine asks with a smile on his face. I feel my chest burning thinking of him *using* Diane.

“Mating!” James says, breaking out in laughter.

A look of shock crosses Unkine’s face. “Mating?” he shouts.

“Keep it down,” I order, stepping closer to him. “This is confidential.”

Unkine throws his hands up and smiles. “As you wish.” He says mockingly. His face falls from a grin as he turns to James.

“It has been done, though, hasn’t it?”

James nods. “In other cities, yes.”

“And they have lasted?” Unkine asks.

“That I would not know. If their mating process is the same as ours...”

James drops an herb into a cauldron on his altar. “The process you can not fight...”

I watch as he drops a bat wing in alongside it. “The process that will bend your will...”

Lastly, I watch him add a liquid to the cauldron, making it smoke. “The process that determines your fate...then yes.” He says, looking up at me. “They have certainly lasted.”

I look in his eyes, scanning for any sign of suspicion or skepticism. I realize it is better to take what I have now than give him time to assess me more.

“Thank you both for your time.” I say, walking out of the chambers and down the steps. I hear them talking behind me but pay it no mind. Battle strategies are one of my specialties. Everyone in the kingdom knows that.

The nervous feeling in my chest climbs as I think of the words in the book, the success stories of other cities, and my knowledge of what is happening. Diane is my mate. She is human. She has awakened something inside me and can weaken me with one glance. She is the one I have waited for my entire life, and no one must know.



# DIANE

I sigh as I look out the window at the sky. Another day with no answers. If my mental calendar was correct, Carmichael has been gone for two weeks now without warning. The same thoughts swirl in my head day after day, an anxiety wormhole I am unable to stop.

*“Did I do something wrong? Was I too loud when I screamed his name? Did he think I was ugly?”*

I shake my head, hoping the thoughts will dissipate. He is my captor. He took me hostage. I grimace as I think of myself falling for such a despicable creature, a madman, a cunning manipulator.

I can't help but wonder, if he is all those things, why don't the thoughts stop? Memories of his impeccable body, tracing his tattoos with her tongue, down and over his hips. The way he asserted himself on top of me, grasping my hands above my head as he thrust his cock into me with a surge of power I had never known before.

*“There I go again,”* I think, sighing. Turning from the window, I face the library. These ancient tomes contain wisdom I have craved to learn for so long, yet in captivity, they seem rather dull. The butler had been kind enough to teach me how to read, but like all things, the nuance has worn off.

“My lady?” I hear the butler call me from the entrance to the library.

“Yes?” I say, turning towards him in my new satin gown.

“Lunch is served.”

I smile widely. “Thank you, butler,” I say happily. Sometimes he is the only thing that can brighten these days.

I walk along the halls of the castle to the dining room, a table stretching as far as my imagination. Heaps of food lay in front of me as they do every day more than I could have dreamt of back home. I sit beside the head of the table as I gorge on delicacies I had been told of when I was a child.

“My lady,” I hear a servant woman say as she pours water into my glass.

“Thank you,” I say through a mouthful of fruit.

She says nothing and walks away. I eye the other servants coming and going through the room. None of them have slighted me in any way, nor have they looked at me sideways. I often find myself suspicious of their mannerisms. They know I am beneath them, unworthy, undesirable. Conspiracy theories have amounted in my head throughout these long days, and I have a couple of ideas as to what they’re up to.

One could be that they are planning some sort of attack. They’re keeping cool and calm until the day the strike finally takes place. This narrative seems to be the most likely, knowing the elves’ cunning nature.

After lunch, my day truly begins. Another day of... nothing. No work, no friends, no family. On the plus side, I have freedom to roam the castle and do as I please. Unfortunately, there’s not much to keep me entertained here. Probably why my thoughts of Carmichael can’t stop spinning.

Along with the reminiscence of his seductive touch, intense whispers of commands, and assertive stance in every position, I can’t control the thought that it might not be good if he’s not here. What does that mean for my family?

As I get up from my chair, I hear a kind voice calling out to me from the hallway.

“My lady?”

I smile. The butler probably wants to assist me more in my reading.

“Yes, butler?” I say, walking out of the dining room. He stands with a slight smile on his face and leads me to the library. I sit down in my favorite chair and look up at him, wondering what today’s lesson will be.

The butler pulls a tome from the bookshelf, old and bound in leather. It looks worn and tattered. I realize a feeling creeping in my chest. This must be something important.

“The Oshta Cities and Warfare.” The butler says, smiling. I grimace. History of the continent was not on my reading list for today.

Stifling my displeasure, I smile at him. “Great!” I say with false enthusiasm. He opens the book and sits across from me reciting words of the ancestors that fought for this continent and the nobles who took their rightful thrones in the cities.

My mind wanders to my family. My mother would have loved to know I am learning to read. She would be overjoyed if I could read a book to her while she rested in bed. I can’t shake the thought of the money.

Did he ever send it? Was it all a lie? If it hadn’t been sent, if they hadn’t been cared for, then Carmichael would truly be the monster I know him to be in my mind; and I would be a fool for thinking of him so often.

James crosses my mind as the butler drones on about ancient warfare. He is such a kind soul, so caring and loving. He would be taken advantage of if I couldn’t teach him how to stand up for himself. He has so many life lessons to learn, and with my mother on her deathbed, without the potion, he may not be able to learn from anyone but his peers.

“Diane?” I hear the butler ask.

“Yes?” I say, my vision snapping back from images of James’ smile.

“Who won the battle of Eastern Orthani?”

I rack my brain for the words he spoke during his reading. I sigh and look at him.

“I apologize, butler,” I say with disappointment. “My mind is elsewhere right now.”

He nods and closes the book. “Perhaps something more... intriguing, then?” He asks, putting the tome back and selecting another. This one was large with green binding, not nearly as tattered as the previous one. He waves it at me as he sits down.

“Monsters of the Dark Forest?” He asks, holding the book up.

My eyes brighten and I nod my head. This was something relevant. Something that could be useful. Something I could really latch onto.

He sits down and opens the book. “Chapter one,” He says, clearing his throat. “Habitats of the beasts.”

The day turns to afternoon as I listen to descriptions of habitats, characteristics of various monsters, and their weaknesses. I realize I am retaining some information, when I am not thinking of Carmichael commanding me to suck his cock beneath the dining room table.

Once the library darkens and the sun begins to set, the butler places the book on a nearby table.

“My lady, I must tend to dinner,” The butler says, standing up and bowing. He begins to walk out of the room as I stare out of the window.

“Oh,” He says, turning around to face me. I look up at him with an intrigued look.

“If you would like to pick the next book,” He says, motioning at the walls. “We can quiz you on something you find,” He pauses to find the words. “Truly fascinating.” He says with a smile. I smile back fondly.



“Thank you, butler.”

He nods once more and leaves the room. I stand to pace along the bookshelves, looking for something that could whisk me away from my monotonous days here. Perhaps a story, even a kids story would suffice. Anything to stir my imagination and rid me of my thoughts.

I find a tome with an interesting title. “An Elf of Grace.” While I wasn’t fond of reading about elves, I didn’t think they would have any human stories in these shelves.

I sit down and try to immerse myself in the pages. The main love interest is named Hagren, a noble elf who falls in love with a female elf from the k’sheng caste. Merchant elves and nobles normally don’t interact. A forbidden story for the ages.

My heart begins racing as I read. From the night with Carmichael, I got the sense that elves could be raunchy. I never imagined they would document their escapades.

*“Her breasts were lovely, with petite nipples. Just large enough for me to nibble on. Judging from her body twitching with pleasure, I could tell she liked a slight bite. Working my way down to her thighs, I heard her moan deeply. She didn’t have to say it, but she was begging for more. I lick her pussy lightly and I feel her legs tense. I reach up to twirl her nipples between my fingers, a sensation almost overpowering for her. She screams out, cries of passion, and I ready my cock to slip inside her tight, wet-“*

“My lady?”

I jump in my seat, closing the book quickly. “Yes butler, I’m sorry,”

“Dinner.” He announced with a smile.

“Actually,” I say, pointing at my book. “I think I’ll stay and read more.”

He nods and leaves the library. I continue my exciting journey through the book until the night comes. The words blur on the pages, and the narrative lulls me to sleep.

I stir uncomfortably, feeling myself sweat. I look around the library in confusion. Had I slept all night?

Peering down, I see I have been covered with a jacket. A fancy one at that. The smell fills my senses, a dark, seductive aroma. It felt familiar, warm, intense. I flash back to the bedroom kissing Carmichael's neck. I shoot up in excitement. This jacket smells like Carmichael.

Was I crazy? Could I be imagining things? Or had the man I've been thinking of for weeks finally returned to me?



# CARMICHAEL

**M**ate. I still scoff at that word, before the feelings of remorse set in. I've been gone for weeks now and wonder what she must think of me.

How soft I've become. A human has plagued my mind, which should be focused on strategies to defeat our enemies in the dark forest. I came here to clear my head, cast out the memories of her, to no avail.

I regain my focus on my footwork. Soft and quiet was the only way to walk the boundaries of the dark forest. The King needs information about the boundaries and sent out five volunteers to look for weak points. We were not to return until we found a weak point. Of course, I was chosen as lead.

Being away from the palace is the only thing I knew to do. Being near her, feeling that magnetic attraction to everything about her. It isn't a physical pull I feel, it is a call to know her soul. The tethers that seem to be forming between us weaken the longer I am away, but I still haven't been able to eradicate them.

The sticks creak softly beneath my steps. It was rare for the monsters to traverse near the city lines, but that doesn't mean that they won't if they sense danger. I crouch to examine an opening through the trees. A clear path into the forest, a worthy report for the King.

The King. The throne I must take to rule this city. The only thing I've wanted since I was a child, until I met her. My life path seemed to be shifting, and discord raged in my chest. I

have always been well-prepared for battle, but not against myself.

I hear rustling leaves deep within the forest. Now is not the time for a battle. I back up quietly, retreating from the forest line. We had an answer for the King, which meant I would be returning to my palace.

I think of prepared food and my bed, luxuries we were not provided on this mission to the boundary. While my creature comforts sound glorious in this moment, the ties I feel to her make me reluctant to return. To be close to her, hear her, touch her could mean defeat for my hopeful reign.

A twig snaps beneath my feet. My heart pounds as I hold my breath. I furrow my brow as I focus my gaze deep into the forest. My head clears, and ears open for any sign of danger.

I hear a low grumble for a second about a mile ahead of me. All is silent but the breeze. Between the wind, I listen intently. Silence is broken by a shriek shaking the trees.

“Retreat!” I yell to my fellow warriors fiercely.

Running far from the boundary, we do not look back for the monster. The miles separating the city and the boundary are long, and I hear my warriors struggling to keep up. I feel my armor pounding against my chest as we sprint far from danger. My legs carry me far, and I feel my chest begin to drip with sweat.

Behind the walls. That was the only safe place to rest.

“Head for the walls!” I yell to my warriors.

Sprinting through the gate, I watch my warriors rest their hands on their knees, panting. I scoff and wonder if they have undergone thorough training. If they couldn't handle that, they were surely not ready for battle.

The guards close the gates behind us as I watch my warriors recover. I see the panic in their eyes and exhaustion on their bodies. We had been looking for answers for weeks now, and they were malnourished.

“I found an opening,” I say to them as they recover. “We have the information the King has requested.”

“Does that mean we can go back?” One of the warriors asks me with hopeful eyes. I roll mine before responding.

“Yes, we can go back,” I say, leading them on the road back to the palace.

The King was pleased with my report. Another step in my plan to gain his approval. Proving myself not only as a warrior, but a confidant, was paramount to gain his endorsement.

I arrive at the mansion and look at the doors with skepticism. The slanted roofs are illuminated by the sunrise, giving my home an eerie appearance. I feel a tingling in my gut, the same I get on the rare occasion when I am about to face a worthy opponent. Shoving the tingling down and clearing my mind with a shake of my head, I enter the mansion.

I walk to the bedroom we shared weeks ago, slowly opening the door. The bed was made perfectly. I felt a spike of panic in my chest. Where had she gone?

Walking through each room the panic strikes more and overcomes my logic. Each bed is made, every room is cleaned thoroughly with no sight of her. Thoughts of her escaping, or worse, getting caught by some monster shot through my mind.

With the servants and butler still asleep, I hurry downstairs to check more rooms. Had they been so stupid as to let her wander the city at dawn with no supervision? I would have the butler’s head if they had.

Making my rounds in the rooms, I enter the library. My heart stops, and the panic fades. There she is.

Sleeping soundly in a chair by the window, wearing a gorgeous gold satin gown. She couldn’t hide her beauty in this moment even if she tried. Her dirty blonde hair was wrapped in a bun, with light strands hanging around her face.

I approach her and watch her chest rise and fall, her bosom peering slightly above the gown's deep neckline. I thought of the feel of her breasts on my hands, the taste of her skin as she gripped my biceps. The memory that caught me most was her eyes. While the physicality of that night had been incredible, there was something deeper to her than a body.

I peer down at the book in her lap and smile. What a little minx, reading romance novels in her free time. I pick up the book slowly and place it on the table, looking back down at her face. Her features couldn't be any more perfect.

She stirs slightly and wraps her hands around her arms. She could be cold. Winter was coming, and the winds of fall chilled the mansion.

I take off my jacket and lay it on her, my hands brushing against her collarbones. Even a slight touch was enough to send my heart pounding. I look through the window at the sun rising. She would wake with the light soon, and I needed sleep to regain my strength.

Looking at her once more, I smile slightly as I turn to walk out of the room. Closing the door gently behind me, I hear an excited voice call to me.

"Duke!" The butler says enthusiastically, walking to the library doors to greet me.

"Butler," I say calmly, walking in through the main hallway. I adjust the cuffs of my sleeves as I look at him. "You're awake at an early hour," I comment.

"Yes, sir, preparing the kitchen," He says with a smile.

"What reports do you have for me?" I ask, pretending to be preoccupied with my sleeves.

"The oak trees have begun to drop their leaves, sir! Our new servant Miriana is doing quite fine. She has taken quite a liking to cooking, and,"

I couldn't care less about the new servant or the oak trees. I want to know how she is. Has she said anything about me? Where does she go when she is alone? I can't rightfully ask the

questions upfront-he is already suspicious of me asking him to treat her like a master.

“The Eastern wall has been repaired beautifully. It’s almost as if it had never been,”

“The girl?” I ask sharply, my patience wearing thin.

“Oh yes,” The butler says excitedly. Why was he so happy to speak of her? I turn to face him, crossing my arms over my chest. “Well, she has learned to read! It’s quite astonishing, actually, given her upbringing.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, locking eyes with him intensely.

“Oh, nothing sir, just that she,”

“She’s smart,” I say deeply. “You’ll do good to remember that,”

The butler bows his head at me. He knows better than to insult her. “Of course, sir.”

I look around the mansion and turn back to him. “What does she do when she is not under supervision?”

“Oh, nothing sir,” The butler says with a fearful look on his face. “She reads and walks the grounds. She has eyes on her at all times, I assure you.”

I debate asking him if she has asked about me. That would be too suspicious. Best to divert the conversation before he senses I have a desire to know more of her.

“The mansion is cold,” I say with a sigh. “Winter is coming, and we must be prepared.”

The butler nods. “Of course sir, I will make the necessary arrangements.”

“Good.” I reply, before turning to make my way to my chambers. “And butler,” I say, turning around.

“Yes, sir?” He asks with a smile.



“You must make sure she is not exposed to the cold,” I say firmly. “Humans are fragile creatures, we can’t forget that.”

The butler nods once more before turning back to the kitchen. I make my way up the stairs, thinking of her reading a romance novel. I silently chuckle to myself.

“Sir?” I hear a servant girl call to me.

“Yes?” I ask, turning around in annoyance.

“Diane would like to speak with you.”

## **Chapter 15**



## DIANE

I race down the hall in search of Carmichael. Each corner and door holds a slight chance that he had returned. After checking multiple rooms, a call startles me.

“Can I help you, miss?” She asks with a false smile on her face.

I gasp and back up against the wall, regaining my breath.

“I’m sorry my lady,”

“No,” I say, holding up a hand. “It’s fine, I’m alright.”

“Can I help you find something?” She asks again.

“Carmichael,” I say, out of breath. “Is he here?” I ask in between breaths.

“I haven’t seen him myself, but I will see if I can find him,” She said with another false smile. I smile graciously in return, wondering if she could tell my distaste for their fake kindness.

“Thank you.” I say kindly.

As she walks away, I turn my attention back to the corridor. She may not even try to find him, knowing that I’m a lowly human. I continue to search each room and crevice to no avail. Defeated, I make my way back to the library.

“My lady.” The butler says, standing by the library doors.

“Butler!” I say excitedly as I approach him. “Is Carmichael here? I need-“

The butler places his hand on my shoulder lightly. “He is, my lady, but he does not wish to speak at this moment.”

“Doesn’t wish to speak?” I say, irritated at the thought of him refusing to talk to me. “Why?” I ask, trying to calm the rage rising in my chest.

“My lady, I-“

“No! He’s been gone for weeks. I need answers about my family. I need,”

“Diane.” The butler says firmly. “The Duke has just returned from a tiring mission, and he must regain his strength. He will be with you when he is rested.”

I roll my eyes. What the Duke needs. A mansion and riches can’t compensate for being treated like a second-class citizen, even though I am a second-class citizen to them.

“Well, when will he be ready?” I ask, placing my hands on my hips. The very least I could do was seem somewhat demanding.

“That I don’t know, my lady,” The butler says, sighing. “In the meantime, why don’t I fix you some breakfast?”

Food is the last thing I want right now. To take part in any of their offerings seems like an insult to my family. Winter is coming, and I need answers about them now.

“No thank you, butler,” I say calmly. “I think I’ll rest in my room.”

I walk down the hallways towards my room, my mind racing. I should be at Eris house, frantically sewing clothes for my mother and brother. I should be preparing them for the cold, dressing them in whatever furs I could find in the marketplace.

Lowtown death rates skyrocket in the winter. Without proper planning, the cold can overtake our residents in a second. I think of those we’ve lost to the wretched season and feel my stomach cramp harshly. I hunch over in shock.

I never feel sick from thoughts. I’ve been eating well here, better than I have most of my life. I think of the library chair I

slept in last night and wonder if the positioning had been bad for my body.

I haven't slept well in days. Though I fall asleep and stay resting for the recommended number of hours, I never feel rested. I don't dream anymore, either. My nights used to be filled with fantasies of living in far away lands. Now that I'm in one, it doesn't quite feel like a dream.

Closing the doors to my chambers, I shiver. I notice my window is slightly ajar, letting in the cold air. I shiver as I undress, laying my clothes on the nearby dresser. I climb under the sheets and wrap myself up in them as I did when I was young. There was always a sense of safety in my bed.

I think of Miranda Holt, my childhood best friend. Memories flashed through my mind of showing up to our usual meeting spot at the agreed time, only to wait for hours. I remember going home with a sad ache in my chest.

I recall walking to her house the next morning, only to find the town gathered around their house. Frostbite, they said. Her parents and boy brother had perished along with her. I cried for weeks.

I couldn't let that happen to my family. I wouldn't. I know that Carmichael had to feel something the other night. If I could play on his emotions and plead for an answer, maybe I would get one.

My stomach cramped again as I writhed in the sheets, stifling a scream. As my muscles relaxed, I sighed. I had never gotten sick before. The cold never affected my bodily processes.

My mind snapped back to my plan, but other thoughts infiltrated. Why didn't Carmichael want to speak to me? I have thought about him every day for weeks, and he wants nothing to do with me.

I think back to the look in his eyes the night we made love. The predatory stance he had taken seemed to wane away. I know there was something more in that moment. Even a flicker of a feeling.

Elves pride themselves on power. Even if he did feel something, he wouldn't tell me. I come to the conclusion that war and demands do no good here, so emotions are all I have to use against him.

I rub my head with my hand. It's beginning to throb above my right eye. Headaches like this only hit me after I've gone swimming in my hometown lake. Swimmer's head, they called it. I close my eyes, hoping lack of light will aid in my recovery.

As I begin mentally scanning my body, I notice my muscles feel like lead. It's as if my being has been tied onto iron blocks and strapped to this bed. Even moving my leg an inch feels like a chore.

Maybe my body was adjusting to the free time. With work, my muscles were exercised each day. I was mentally stimulated during the day, every day.

I think back to my daily routine at Eris house. Wake up, care for my mother, feed my brother, go to work. Come home, wash up, feed them dinner, and spend time with them on the edge of mother's bed.

"My lady?" I hear the butler say as he knocks on the door.

"Yes?" I ask, bundling myself up in the sheets. I leave only my face visible. The last thing I need is for the butler to see me naked.

He enters slowly. "Oh!" He says, turning around. "My lady! I am so sorry I didn't know you were resting."

"No! No, it's alright," I say. "What is it? Is Carmichael available?" I say, trying to stifle my fluttering heart. Thinking of even seeing him made me swoon.

"Unfortunately not at this time," The butler says, avoiding staring at me. What a polite man. Why couldn't all elves be more like this?

"I will be sure to let you know the second he calls for you," He says kindly. "In the meantime, I was wondering if

you had found any new books you would like to go over with me?”

I hold back a smile. His kindness and generosity made captivity seem less damning.

“You choose this time,” I say excitedly. I see a smile cross his face.

“Of course, my lady, rest well.” He says before closing the door gently.

I roll over and groan at the pain in my limbs. I wondered if this is how mother felt every day. How awful it must be to never stand up firmly, to have each muscle in your body feel like a dull shooting pain.

I find myself coming in and out of consciousness throughout the day. My waking moments are filled with thoughts of money, my family, and Carmichael’s disdain for me. My restful state still holds no dreams. How freeing it would be to escape, even for a moment, into a new world.

I rub my eyes and stare out the window. It’s dark now, and even colder than before. I turn to my side and find a platter of food on my nightstand along with a note. My heart jumps. Maybe this is Carmichael saying he’s ready to speak with me.

*“Dinner is served, my lady.”*

I groan and roll back over. My stomach is still cramping heavily, but I know I have to eat. I reach over for one of the delicacies and chew away, staring at the ceiling. I taste sweetness and saltiness on the pastry, and close my eyes in appreciation. I could have never had something like this at home.

I reach over and grab more food, stuffing my face until I feel like I need to vomit. Rubbing my full stomach, I lay on my back and stare once more out of the window. I wonder what else is out there beyond these walls. What the city looks like, smells like, sounds like.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of someone passing by my door. I listen intently for loud, paced out steps. Instead, I hear a quickened, light pace. Still no Carmichael.

My stomach cramps again, lighter than before but still excruciating. I roll over and a tear sneaks down my face. Whether from mental or physical anguish, it is enough to tell me I am not well. I try to calm my mind, praying whatever this is will pass by morning.





# CARMICHAEL

**S**he makes me breathless. And that is my largest problem now.

I had my regular assembly with the King an hour ago, and I know he must have noticed that I was not paying attention to anything he said. But His Highness rarely says anything of substance, so I am quite sure that I did not miss much.

All I can think of, all I dream of, the thing that consumes me every second of every day, is Diane. She is my mate. I am surer of this than I am of my own name!

But to mate with a human, to be with a human, would be akin to blasphemy. Any hope I might have of becoming King, something I have worked all my life for, would fade far into the distance very quickly.

There is no hope for us and yet I cannot forget her. And I cannot accept that we cannot be together. I will not accept it. Maybe it is simply that the King was especially tedious this morning. But the thought of giving up Diane to become King makes me itch with annoyance.

The mansion is quiet when I walk in and stride through the entryway. I fling my coat hastily onto the coat rack before turning to the small parlor near the front door.

Even though I cannot accept giving up Diane, I also cannot stomach the thought of giving up my life's work. I have worked virtually all my life to become King. My mother sacrificed everything she had to make me who I am today.

Perfect. Poised. A great warrior and negotiator. And if she were alive today, bless her soul, she would have a coronary. But she is not alive though, is she?

She is long gone, and I am alone. How long am I expected to live this solitary life? And when I become King, am I expected to take an elven wife? A woman who does not make me burn with passion?

Am I expected to live out the rest of my days with a bore by my side?

Instead, I could have Diane, my mate. The woman chosen for me by some power unknown to anyone. I could have a future with her and be happy.

As I sit down at my study desk and pull my papers towards me, I consider the word. Being happy sounds like a foreign concept. It is not something I have ever thought too hard about. Probably because it has nothing to do with my purpose.

To become King.

But I could be happy. And I would not have to be alone any longer.

I let out a sharp exhale as I sign the documents in front of me. My chest almost aches at the thought. The thought of not being alone. The thought of having a companion. A friend. A lover.

I have never allowed myself to think of it too closely. Until Diane. But she consumes me. All of me.

I shove the papers aside, unable to focus on them. Then I get up from the desk, straightening my collar. I start pacing around the small room as I consider what to do. As I consider what to give up.

What am I willing to lose?

I am walking out of the study before I know it. Heading up the stairs to the first floor I hear low voices. They murmur in the distance. As I stride down the hallway, Reynolds hurries to meet me.

I know immediately that something is wrong. I know Reynolds better than he knows himself. He raised me as a child and has maintained my household all my life.

“Sir?” An obvious undercurrent of concern ripples through his low voice. It has to be Diane and my own pulse picks up. My heart is thudding erratically before I even say the first word.

“Reynolds? What is it?” My voice, though gruff, wavers slightly.

“Sir,” he takes a deep breath. “Your guest, Diane. She has not woken up from her nightly slumber,” My skin twitches and my blood pounds, deafening. I can hardly hear Reynolds.

“And she seems to be in pain, Sir, even though she is asleep. She cries out all the time. The servants are starting to become spooked,” Reynolds continues.

Of course, they are. I love my servants dearly. But they are extremely superstitious.

“It is as though she is having a nightmare Sir. She cries and sobs for her mother and younger brother.”

I am a fool. I had received reports while I was away. That Diane was urgently looking for me. That she was worried about something.

She had refused to leave my office until the servants forced her to leave. Whatever she was worried about must be plaguing her now.

A situation involving her mother and brother. I have not even considered her family. I have not even considered that there is more to her.

“Reynolds, I need all the information you can find me on Diane Blaze.” I snap the words at him, and he stands to attention.

He nods curtly, and strides away efficiently.

She is suffering because of me; I know she is. I had neglected her because of my own cowardice. My fear of her. My fear of us.

I am walking towards her bedroom before I know it. The servants hear me coming and scuttle away. They do not want to be caught gossiping. Even though gossiping is what keeps this place alive.

The servants have been the lifeblood of the place. Until Diane came, they were the only reasons I maintained the mansion. I could have lived in a smaller home. But then they would have had nowhere to go.

Having them around was almost like having a family. It was almost like I was not really alone.

I have to steel myself and take a deep breath before entering Diane's room. I am not sure why the door seems so imposing now. But I need to see her.

She is asleep when I walk in. Curled up in a ball underneath the silk sheets. I can hear her moaning and murmuring from where I am. I stay in the doorway for a moment. Then, taking a breath, I walk forward.

When I sit down on the bed next to her, she is shivering. Her skin is pale, and her brow is furrowed. She is frowning in her sleep. Then I notice them.

Tears. They stream steadily down her face. Her eyelids twitch as she cries mostly noiselessly. But every few seconds I hear an audible murmur. A cry for her mother. For her brother.

She has changed in the time since I last saw her. Since I have been ignoring her.

She is thin, her skin stretched tight over her body. Like she isn't eating.

The instinct to heal her cannot be fought. I am reaching for her before I am conscious of it. My hands go to hers, and I clasp her smaller ones in mine. Then I murmur the words to an old healing spell. My own eyes close as her body goes still.

I can feel her pain like it is my own. I am not sure if it is the mating bond that connects us. It might be the spell. Or maybe her pain is just that palpable.

But just like I can feel her pain, I also feel her relax. The tension leaves her body, but she remains asleep. My eyes open, and I watch as the tears dry up. But I only exhale with relief when the shivering stops.

She turns onto her back, pulling the sheets with her. Her forehead is smooth instead of furrowed. Diane looks almost peaceful. Almost happy. Her breathing is also less erratic as I lean down and kiss the palms of her hands.

The only thing that has not returned is her color. She is still deathly pale. But I can handle that.

When she wakes, her entire world will be different. And I am quite sure her color will return. She will regain the weight she has lost. And her stress will vanish.

I refuse to accept anything less for her.

“I am so sorry.” The words slip from me involuntarily. I seem to have no control over myself around her. Around my mate.

“I am so sorry for making you suffer. But I know what to do now.”

The Kingship has fallen away from me. The power does not matter any longer. The hard work was for naught all along. I will remain a simple Duke as long as Diane is by my side.

This has been the future from the moment she was chosen as my mate.

She is the only thing that matters. The only thing I can care about.

Nothing else.



## DIANE

**T**he dream I'm having suddenly shifts, in line with the absurd illogic of sleep, augmented by my fever. In the dream, a wormhole rips me out of a flashback from the Winter of Woe, as they later called it — the year we survived on a thin gruel made from the paste of our stripped wallpaper.

Now, I'm somehow in a room tinged with golden light. The gauzy halo illuminates my mother and James, whose faces are right next to me.

I'm dead. I must be. My family must have died, too. I guess this is what heaven looks like. But it can't be heaven. I know this because Dad isn't here.

I wipe the sweat from my eyes and recognize the sumptuous four-poster bed and a wall-size tapestry chronicling the military victories of a noble elvish dynasty.

I am not dead. And this is not a dream.

The angels of my life, the precious family I had rented out my body to save — they're really, actually, here. Flesh and blood, in person.

Is this real life? Somehow, miraculously, it is.

I choke on my words. All I can manage to croak out is, "How?"

My mother and James smother me in kisses and squeeze me — before remembering they should be gentle. I'm sure my gaunt cheeks and jutting collarbones make me look like a different person from the hale girl who left them a lifetime



ago. Probably good preparation for introducing them to the entirely different person I've become.

"Mom, James. I just can't believe it. When I woke up, I thought we must have died, because I couldn't imagine seeing you anywhere but heaven," I say to my mother.

Tears well up in all of us.

"Sweetheart, it was like a dream when it happened," my mother says. "All of a sudden, trumpets were blaring outside the house. We saw this elf in clothes that cost more than our little shack, probably more than the whole neighborhood, and we were sure we were about to be kidnapped, or killed. But it was Carmichael."

My words descend to an even more unreachable place in my throat. My mom knows me so well that she can recognize that quizzical look that says: "I'm sorry. I know you just said those words, but there's no way they can be true."

She laughs. We always joked about our telepathy.

"I know, I know. It was so scary at first. But as soon as he started talking about you, and how much you needed us, our gut told us that this elf was okay, he seemed like he wasn't quite as bad as the ones —"

We exchange a glance. Mercifully, James' words fill the room before silence takes over.

"Diane, Diane, Diane," James says, barely able to speak from wanting to say everything at once. "We rode in a carriage, and Carmichael gave us the most delicious chocolates, and he gave mom roses. Then he did some crazy magic, and then mom was mom again."

Even more than the bliss from feeling the warmth of her arms, I'm stunned by the rosy glow of her cheeks. The life force that I had forgotten ever existed in her now animates her entire being. Only magic could have done this. Only my Carmichael.

Even though I'm so much thinner from not eating, I have no stomach pain. Instead, my body feels like I could fly. I don't know if that's the influence of my family, or if

Carmichael administered magic to me too, or if my passionate adoration of Carmichael started filling my veins and pumping through my heart.

“I just can’t get over Carmichael, Di. I really didn’t think elves could be nice,” James says. “It’s like, if a spider descends on a fly, it’s not because he’s about to ask it to tea. But, Carmichael, he’s, like, nice. Normal. Sort of.”

He looks around the room as he’s saying that, giving it the side-eye — not angry, but as if you just discovered there’s another planet hidden below the surface. It takes some getting used to, this place.

Their clothes are immaculate, like someone decked out dog-eared paper dolls in gold leaf ensembles. James is wearing a velvet royal blue outfit, nearly black, with a tailored jacket to match, and a velvet hat with a streak of velvet ribbon.

Mother looks radiant. You can see why she was obsessed with accumulating layers of filth. There’s no way she could have gone unnoticed when she was a pleasure girl. I can’t imagine what she went through when she was a pet, too, but under the purview of less beneficent owners.

Her dress is an opalescent silver the color of the moon. Her red curly hair bounces against her chin. I wonder if Carmichael told one of the servants to wash, cut, and style her coiffure.

“Carmichael tells me you’ve been working for him for a few months now,” Mom says with an arched brow, and I can tell by her expression that it’s a pole vault for launching into the gnawing anxieties she’s always had for me not to become her. “Is there something you’re not telling us? We had no idea where you were, and come to find out, you’re working for an elf?”

I guess that’s a word for it — “working.” He’s told me so many times that I’m lower than the zagfer. The servants aren’t told that they’re not good enough for a chair, at least as far as I know. So, why was he making like I was his prize squire, his right-hand human? I don’t get it.

“It’s been so different from what I expected, the city,” I say, knowing that it was true, but also knowing it wasn’t the whole truth. Because in so many ways, it’s been much, much worse — with harbingers here and there of something better. “What matters is you’re here now, and we’re together.”

Maybe they can learn to read, and James could play outside in the garden. I remind myself not to get my hopes up. Remember: you are not special, and there’s no happy ending — not for you.

He has said that like a mantra, that I’m nothing. Why is he dragging my family into this? He must see them as even more of nothings than the nothing that I am. And why is he telling them lies about me being his employee when I’m not?

I’m his property, bought and paid for, with the receipts to show for it. Lord knows he never lets me forget it. How does it feel to be the most high-class whore in Orthani, available to the highest bidder? Not much different from the one who costs one ipia, I’d guess.

Still, above all else, what I can never forget is that he saved me. And I know it’s crazy, but it feels like he’s starting to take pride in it, too. I remember the way he looked at me, the way he’s been getting closer every day, and every night. Then he left.

I think about that day in the library. He could have put a blanket over me, but he didn’t. There are a million quilts in the closet hall, duvets with enough feathers to cover the tops of mountains if they run out of snow. He wanted me to know he was there. He wanted his arms around me. Him being him, he did the next best thing. He wrapped me in his sleeves.

Suddenly, the mansion is buzzing, and footsteps on every level of the mansion thump rapidly, as if a jolt to the engine put all the gears into motion.

This can only mean one thing. He’s back.

My entire body flushes in anticipation when I hear the cadence of his boots on the stairs. Although I hate admitting it, he brings every part of me to life.

I smile so big that my face hurts. When I try to suppress it before he comes upstairs, my face hurts even more. I was mad at him for leaving, but none of that matters now that he's back. I know it's almost winter, but with Carmichael home, it feels like spring.

His footsteps send horses' hooves galloping through my body, especially down there, to her, that place where his beautiful dick entered in and out, and stretched me, marked me as his. My nipples get harder at the thought, and my breath grows shallow. I look down to check the fullness of my breasts in the blue silk gown, the color of my eyes, with buttons in the back matching the gold of my hair. I know what he wants, and I want to make sure he gets it.

"Diane. And good afternoon, Mrs. Blaze, and young Mr. Blaze," Carmichael says. He's slightly out of breath, as if he broke into a run the closer he got to this room. He gives a slight bow, then realizes what he's done. He looks taken aback by his impromptu gesture of respect, but, oddly, not repulsed.

"Diane, I need to talk to you — privately," he says.

He always gets right to the point, doesn't he?

I think this is the first time he's asked me himself, rather than recruited the butler or a servant to fulfill his lowliest of chores. His eyes look kind, as if some valve had been released during his sojourn. His voice is sweet, soft. I missed him so much. I try to stop myself from wondering if he missed me, too.

"Yes, my lord. I would be delighted to have a private audience with you," I say.

I give mama and James a huge hug and kiss, and I follow Carmichael out. I feel like I'm about to walk through the threshold of my destiny, and I have no idea what fate holds.



# CARMICHAEL

**M**y thoughts are racing. I don't want her to go. What if she never returns? I would never force her to stay with me, but I need to keep her with me. The only thing that would make me happier is for her to be happy too. She deserves the world.

I am standing in my living room, hands gripping the back of a chair, staring into space, about how things might be with her in my life.

"I want to invite your mother and brother to stay here with us. I don't want you to be alone or bored here and I know how much you miss them. It is far too dangerous out there for you to leave so it seems like the only logical conclusion. You will all be safe. They will have everything they need here. They will never have to worry about hardships again," I say, not wanting to admit my fear that if she leaves she might never return.

The silence that follows this statement makes me think that I've done the wrong thing and made an awful mistake. I don't know how else to explain it and I wonder if I have upset her. But then I see her expression change from confusion to joy.

"I'm so happy you said that. I do miss them very much. And yes, we should ask them."

Her voice is full of excitement and I can tell she's going to cry again but at least now I understand where she was coming from.

It has taken me a while to figure out what her happiness truly is, and to realize that she wasn't trying to hide it. That she did want her family around her. Now that I know that though, I do not doubt that our relationship will be stronger than ever.

I lean over and kiss her, hoping to convey all the love and support I have for her. The words dance around my tongue, but never leave my mouth, for fear that she may not feel the same. I'm thankful she stayed here with me, despite knowing what kind of person I can be. It takes a lot of courage to put yourself above someone else. To sacrifice everything for them. But that is just part of loving someone, the way I love Diane.

Diane laughs softly at first, then cries. "Oh, Carmichael," she says through tears. "They'd love that! You're right. I think they should come here. You're a good man, and I'm thankful to you for this."

She hugs me again, and I hold her tight. We kiss passionately. I feel something new inside. When I touch Diane, when I look into her eyes, I realize there is so much more than lust or passion. There's affection, caring, friendship, devotion. It's an emotion I have never felt before. This feeling is what I've been missing my whole life, and it feels wonderful.

"I am happy to hear you say that. Why don't we take a walk outside for a bit?" I suggest, grabbing her hand.

She smiles at me as if it were something that she always wanted to happen and follows me out of the house.

We step outside together and walk around for a while. I hold her close, smelling her hair and feeling the warmth of her body. I kiss her again and again, wanting to make sure she knows how I feel about her.

"Can I ask you a question, my lord?" she asks.

"Sure," I say, still holding her hand.

"Why are you so rough with me?" she asks.

"Well, Diane, when I was young, my mother was very clear about how I should act. I took great offense when she

called me names, criticized everything I did. It made me angry, so I lashed out in anger. It was the anger and strength she respected. Emotions were for the weak and I was not to show them. That's why I was always angry, and why I got myself into trouble so often."

There's a long moment of silence as Diane absorbs the words. When her voice finally breaks the silence it has taken on a hard edge.

"She told you that?" Her tone is sharp as she asks the question. There is nothing soft or gentle about her voice at the moment, and her eyes glow bright with emotion. "Your mother said that to you?"

I look down at the ground before, hands wringing together nervously as I try to think how to respond.

Diane takes a deep breath. She lets it out slowly, lets herself calm down a little bit. She needs to be coolheaded, because this is going to get ugly if she doesn't. And yet, here I am, spilling all my guts over her lap.

"I guess," I say quietly "That wasn't what you wanted to hear though."

"No, that wasn't what I wanted to hear, but I'm not sure what I was expecting to hear either. That must have been very difficult for you as a child," she says. The tone in her voice changes, just slightly, and suddenly she's looking right at me. There's something there, an understanding of what I'm going through that isn't quite visible, but there nonetheless. Her face softens a little, she puts a hand to my cheek and rubs gently back and forth with her thumb.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"It was a lot to take in, okay? But I'm glad you opened up to me."

"I am sorry for how I behaved. I shouldn't have been mad at you," I tell her. She gives me a small smile, and tilts her head just enough so that our lips brush ever so lightly. "And I know that. Thank you for being patient with me."



This time, when we kiss we are slow, soft kisses, gentle, comforting. Diane pulls away after a few moments, and then holds onto me tightly. She buries her head in my neck, arms around my back, holding me close. For a moment I feel like crying; this feels really good. I let go of my own tension by wrapping my arms around her and squeezing just a bit.

“You’re welcome,” I mumble against her ear.

I inhale her scent. I love the way she smells. The scent reminds me of roses, sweet and light and lovely, the kind only the most pure and caring soul could have produced. I press a soft kiss to her ear.

“Showing emotion isn’t weakness,” she says. “I’m glad you finally understand that and I’m thankful you have allowed me to see this side of you.”

I smile. “Thank you, Diane.”

We kiss again, and I put my arm around her waist.

“We will send word to your family tomorrow morning. I hope they will agree. I want nothing more than to know you are happy, Diane,” I say.

“I am! I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy. I can’t wait to see them. I miss them so much,” she says as she looks up to the sky. “It’s starting to get dark. I guess we had better get back inside.”

“Yes, we should. You should get your rest,” I agree.

The sun is setting behind the trees, almost completely disappearing in the horizon. The sky slowly changes from splashes of orange and pink to dark violet as it sets. The cool evening breeze sweeps through her hair, causing it to float all around her. As we walk back towards the house, I look over to see her walking on her toes, as if to seem taller next to me. I watch her hips sway as she walks, and I begin to imagine what it would be like to see her everyday for the rest of my life.

The thought makes me chuckle to myself but suppress the urge, not wanting to upset Diane. She is perfect as she is and I could never ask for more. I just wish I knew she felt the same about me.

“Goodnight, Diane,” I whisper as we settle into bed for the night.

“Goodnight,” she replies, her voice barely a whisper as she is drifting off to sleep.

My heart swells in a way I’ve never experienced before and I wonder if she thinks about me the same way.

I wake up early the next day. I can’t sleep anymore. My mind won’t stop. I lie in bed for hours, thinking about last night, and what to do now. I am hopeful that having her family join her will help her to feel more at home. Perhaps she’ll feel more comfortable with me. I hope they’ll accept me.

When I look at Diane, I see how lovely she is. She’s beautiful, smart, and strong. She’s everything I ever wanted. I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I want to be able to show her that she is loved. I want to protect her from all the hurt and pain she has suffered.

I want to make her happy.

It’s time for me to start making some changes in my life. It’s time for me to become the person I’ve always wanted to be.

I get out of bed and walk to the bathroom where I splash cold water on my face. I run a brush through my hair, and after a few minutes I feel refreshed. I dress in the clothes I left out the night before.



## DIANE

**A**t dinner, I sit with my mother and James, waiting for Duke Carmichael to join us. My mother is trying her hardest not to look disappointed while James keeps giving me a look of concern. When he turns to his brother, the worry in his eyes is obvious. “What’s wrong?” He asks quietly. I give him an exasperated sigh, as if it will ease his fears.

Instead, though, I just smile wryly and shrug noncommittally. I glance down at my empty plate when a server passes by and then look back up at James again. His mouth quirks into a small smirk, like a cat that has caught you staring at the floor rather than your food.

“So where is this Duke of yours?” he asks, looking around the room.

“He will be along shortly,” I assure him, nervously glancing around the room as well.

Suddenly, he appears and relief sweeps through my body. I smile politely as he approaches the table, with a satisfied look on his face.

“How is everything?” Duke Carmichael asks as he looks around the table.

“Everything is wonderful,” my mother replies with a nod of her head. The rest of us all look down at our food, and I watch everyone’s reactions.

Duke Carmichael takes a sip from his drink before continuing. “Well then, it’s great to see you again.” Everyone else at the table nods in agreement, and then silence falls upon us again. It is silent for about three minutes, until my brother turns to me and says, “I don’t like him.” My face goes slack before I snap out of it and turn to my mother.

Her eyes are closed, and she doesn’t even have to acknowledge what he said. He continues anyway. “He’s pretentious. I feel sorry for anyone that has to deal with him.”

His words are harsh, but I can tell that this is how he always thinks; harsh words and an attitude towards people who make you feel bad. My mother opens her mouth to respond to him, but I know she isn’t going to. She lets it happen, and just keeps eating her meal as if he hasn’t spoken. After a minute of staring at both of them silently, we move on.

For my part, I try not to take offense, and let the words roll off my back rather than respond. As long as my brother does not speak more on the , I will remain relatively quiet. I am not sure how well this arrangement is working though. For now, it seems he is content, and I hope that this means we’re done here.

Duke Carmichael talks with my mother, respectfully nodding as she answers his questions. I see James start to relax and hope this means that his opinion is changing. We tell stories and laugh about childhood mishaps while indulging ourselves with desserts.

We finish dinner without incident, and after saying goodbye to my mother, we leave.

“Thank you for your company,” the Duke graciously says. “I have truly enjoyed tonight.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” my mother replies, bowing her head in respect.

She turns to me, our embrace is brief but it’s something that I have been missing.

“It’s getting late,” she says to James after saying goodbye. “Let’s go back home.”

For a moment, I see him; the elf I knew. He's still in there, hidden deep inside. The kindness and generosity I had seen wasn't merely a dream. It was real. And the person who had given it to me... was the man I thought I'd lost forever.

And now, he is standing before me, alive and whole and in front of me, his face as clear and bright as it was when we first met. There's no trace of bitterness or anger on his countenance. His eyes are full of warmth and love and concern for me. It feels like time has stopped, like I'm frozen in place and he's the only thing that matters.

I've heard people say that they can tell someone's true nature by looking into their eyes, but I have never believed such a thing. But looking at this version of Duke Carmichael, at the man I had known so briefly, I believe it's true.

"Stay with me tonight," he whispers and this time I don't hesitate.

"I will," I reply, feeling nervous and scared all at once. But there's no time to think about it. Instead, he takes my hand and leads me into his home, into his bedroom. His room has always been clean, almost sterile compared to our house; but today his things smell like him. Of sweat and smoke and leather.

He sits down on the edge of the bed, holding my hand tight between his own, while he looks at me expectantly. This makes me even more nervous because I know what he wants, and I know how badly he needs it, so I take a deep breath.

"Duke Carmichael," I begin, slowly and carefully. "I'm sorry."

He smiles sadly at me and squeezes my hand tighter before saying, "No need to apologize. If anyone should be apologizing, it should be me. I'm afraid I haven't been making any of this easy for you. I want to spend more time with you to get to know each other better. I hope that you will allow me to."

Before I can answer, he leans forward and kisses me lightly on the lips. It barely lasts longer than a second and then

he pulls away again.

“Come on, you’re not going to get any sleep if we both stay here like. Come on.”

His words are enough to make me realize that he’s right. He lays back on the bed, pulling close to me and I rest my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart beneath my ear. It’s not long before I feel myself drifting off, lulled into a light doze by the sound of Duke’s slow breathing. Before he falls asleep himself, I whisper something else:

“I love you.”

Moment after moment, day after day after that, is filled with something so different from what I’ve known.

He’s kind and gentle and patient and understanding. He teaches me everything he can, from how to fight to how to survive. He makes me feel safe and loved despite my many worries and insecurities.

His gaze settles on me, and I feel my cheeks flush. My head is spinning with thoughts of what could be. A feeling I had never known before, a feeling that was both exciting and terrifying at the same time.

I take another glance at his handsome face then turn my eyes away quickly as he catches me staring. His expression turns quizzical and I realize this might look awkward to him. I feel my cheeks flush and I shield my face as a smile creeps across his.

I can’t help myself though. He looks so good and it feels like such a privilege to get to see him like this.

To be able to hold his hand, or talk to him on any normal day, let alone one where the two of us have been spending more and more time together.

It wasn’t even a lie when he told me that he wanted to spend more time with me. He is making every effort to do so. I feel something pull at my heartstrings knowing how much he enjoys talking to me. Even when he isn’t saying anything he just seems comfortable enough around me to keep going. I think he may have even grown fond of me a little.

And I love it.

The way the corners of his eyes crinkle when we make eye contact. The way they light up with a genuine smile when he sees me. How warm he always looks when our hands are touching.

It almost didn't seem fair.

He's taken notice too, it seems. His cheeks flushed when our skin touched. I wonder if it was because he thinks about me doing the same thing. But even as I entertain the notion I don't want to believe it. I can't believe he really cares about me like that.

So I kept the doubts to myself. They weren't worth risking losing him over.

"You look like you have something on your mind. What is it?" He asks, breaking the silence.

I shake my head. "Nothing important."

That wasn't entirely true. It would take a lot more than some stupid feelings that made sense to understand them.

Still, he doesn't press further. Instead, he gets up and offers his hand for me to take. I take it immediately.

"Let's go," he says.

"Where are we going, my lord?" I ask as I follow him.

"It is getting late and you need your rest."

We fall asleep together that night and it's the best sleep I've had in a long time. Maybe ever. He's warm and solid and strong, and it 's exactly the right way to feel. Like I'm wrapped up in the most wonderful blanket. And the best part about it? I feel nothing but happy.





## DIANE

**M**y life with Carmichael is turning into something I never imagined I could have. It has slowly turned into a dream I hope I never wake up from. But no matter how happy I am with him, it still feels bittersweet, because I know this is all there is.

The change I have seen in him is overwhelming. It seems too good to be true. His kindness and gentleness only makes me love him more, and I wonder if he might ever feel the same for me. This arrangement of ours leaves me longing for more, but I fear it will never happen.

This is what is best for my family's sake and I know I am doing this for them. I just can't help but want something more.

I want to be someone he would call his wife, and I want to do anything to show him that I really, truly appreciate being here with him.

He knows, but he doesn't say much about it. Maybe he knows I already feel that way.

He doesn't talk about it much either, but every morning when we wake up together, he kisses my forehead and tells me how beautiful I look in the mornings. The words are kind, even though they aren't necessary. He has started to do more of those kinds of things to me.

"I have something different for us planned tonight. Something I hope you will enjoy," he says with a nervous smile.

I follow Carmichael outside, where I see a blanket and picnic waiting for us. It looks cozy enough as he sets everything up. He sets out three different bottles of alcohol then lays the table and prepares the food for our dinner. We sit on the blanket together to eat.

“Carmichael, what are we doing here?” I ask once we’re sitting down with our food.

He gives me a smirk and says simply, “I want to spend time with you.”

He then takes my hand in his.

After that comment, it is all too easy to be dragged over the cliff edge with him, even though it has been a long day. The wind sweeps through my hair, causing it to dance around me while I try to keep it out of my face.

“You look beautiful, Diane,” he whispers into my hair as he pulls me closer to him.

I find it impossible not to get lost in the moment with him as I do so often. With his arms wrapped around me, I feel safe and cherished, but it is hard not to think about how it can all end at any moment. The thought that he may grow tired of me and send me away still haunts me.

My heart is torn between knowing my love for him and the heartbreaking truth that he will never feel the same about me.

That we could both be happy if it were ever given a chance. It makes me feel vulnerable, though I am sure no one would suspect it when they look upon us together. It just hurts more than I want to admit.

He has been nothing but kind and loving with me this past week, yet the pain from the loss of everything that once was gnaws relentlessly at me. It is a struggle to keep myself together, let alone make him aware of my pain as well.

Around us, the wind is rustling the leaves. It’s starting to get darker and the evening is quiet. It feels so peaceful and calm.

We have eaten mostly in silence when I look up, realizing that Carmichael isn't really looking at me anymore. His eyes are fixed somewhere else entirely; staring into space as he chews, his thoughts clearly far away. "Are you alright? You seem a bit distracted today." I ask, my voice betraying my nerves.

He looks down at me, and his gaze softens. "It's nothing. Let's finish dinner first before we get into anything."

The silence that follows is stifling. The tension between us grows until it feels like my lungs can barely breathe. I need to speak, to say something! Anything! To stop the deafening silence! My lips move to form words, but I don't know what to tell him. What words are even capable of expressing such overwhelming feelings? There's an ache that I feel in my chest. A deep sadness that threatens to drown me if I can't get out of its grip. But the longer it lasts, the harder I try.

But when he brushes a stray piece of my hair from my eyes, my thoughts scatter. His gaze falls on my lips and he seems transfixed by them before leaning forward slightly, his hands moving to cradle my cheeks. We both stop breathing when our lips connect. It feels like I am floating and nothing else matters except how soft his lips are. His mouth tastes sweet, but also slightly bitter. There is something else as well, something that I can't put my finger on until my body reacts before I have time to process my emotions. My tongue traces over his bottom lip as my hands cup his neck, pulling him close, as if I could disappear in him. The world goes silent except for the sound of our lips meeting one another.

As we kiss, the world disappears, leaving only us, until I can feel my heartbeat slowing down.

Finally, I pull back slowly, my breathing erratic as we stare at each other. His eyes are captivating and I wish I could stay in this moment forever.

A smile spreads across his face when he realizes I wasn't going to pull away and that I am looking deep into his eyes. As always.

At this moment, we don't need anything.

We don't even need to talk. This is a connection, an understanding that is just ours. It has always been there; it just needed to be acknowledged.

We both lean in again, this time more gently. He wraps both arms securely around me and pulls me against his chest.

His breath fans my face when we break apart, but neither of us moves. His grip is reassuring as he kisses my forehead and rests his head against mine. His lips brush mine again, and I know there is something on his mind. Something that he needs to say. Maybe I could help. Or maybe I don't want to hear it. But I'm desperate to hear it anyway. If not from him then maybe from someone else.

When he speaks, I feel the way his breath hitches, and I wonder who it was, if anyone, that had such a hold over him that he couldn't tell me. What is it that is occupying his thoughts?

“Diane...”

And finally, my name comes from his lips. Like a secret passed between friends for years. A secret kept so close that you would think no one else knew about it.

That it wouldn't ever leave this place. Because it wasn't meant for others' ears, right?

So I give him my full attention. And I wait.

“Diane, I have had something that has been weighing on my mind. For some time. I didn't think it was important or that I would ever be able to bring myself to talk about it because I wanted to save it for you...”

I nod for him to continue. It's better to have an open mind and trust than to have your hope dashed. After all, I am in love with him. Nothing and no one else could make my heart beat faster than Carmichael.

He closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths as if gathering the strength to continue. When his eyes return to mine, they sparkle with unshed tears. My heart sinks to my stomach, unsure of what to think.

His emotions are playing with me like a symphony in which I can't escape. The silence becomes too uncomfortable so I try again to speak but he shakes his head. I'm confused and even more afraid because he never refuses a request from me.

After another moment, he continues. "It's just that there is something that I have wanted to talk to you about but I don't know where to begin."

My heart pounds harder against my ribcage and my breathing quickens. Whatever it is, it must be important to cause Carmichael to look this apprehensive. I want to ask but somehow that makes me more scared than not knowing what the matter might be. He looks up at me and sighs.

"This isn't easy for me to say so please bear with me," he says before he opens his mouth again.

Carmichael begins speaking, trying hard to hold back the emotion welling up inside him. Even though he has already started talking, he pauses and gathers his courage once he sees how nervous I am.

He reaches forward and grabs both of my hands in his then gently runs the pads of his fingers across my palms soothingly. A smile appears on his face as he continues.



# CARMICHAEL

**T**wilight is all around us and the Earth is quiet. All I can hear is the echo of my own heart. I stand up from the ground and I take her hand, leading her along as I walk to clear my cluttered mind. I have already started this. I know I must finish it. Every second she is becoming more disheartened.

My head is a mess, filled with thoughts of the future, regrets from the past, and the fear that she won't be able to separate the two.

She glances at me with a cumbersome look upon her face, but refrains from asking me what's wrong. Before I have completely discouraged all hope for the moment, I take a deep breath and stop as I turn to face her. The look in her eyes is one of fear and confusion but there is still a little hope as well.

"I'm sorry for being so distracted. I have something on my mind recently and I have not been able to think of anything else."

"What is it?" she asks, her voice slightly trembling. "Is everything okay?"

"There is something I must tell you," I say as I take her hand in mine, my voice sounding a bit nervous, a bit breathless.

She nods in acknowledgement and turns towards me with a slight smirk on her face, looking at my expectant eyes as she waits for me to continue. My heart skips a beat as I find the words in my mind; words that I've rehearsed hundreds upon



hundreds of times when I thought about telling her about my feelings for her, about how I felt about her. But there was never the perfect time for them to come out, and now, with only seconds between us, it's becoming harder and harder for me to find the right opportunity. I am finding that I have never feared anything more in my life than the thought of losing her. And, well, it might just have something to do with this moment.

I take one last deep breath before continuing, "I have been trying to think of the right way to say this and it's been hard to find the right words. Nothing I have come up with ever sounds right, but I can't wait any longer. It's about... about how I feel about you."

Her expression immediately softens into surprise, but there is a smile playing on her lips. "How do you feel?" She whispers. Her gaze doesn't leave mine and for some reason this makes me a little less anxious. The tension starts melting away from me and I manage a small chuckle as I look at our hands locked together. Nothing has ever looked or felt so natural to me.

I inhale deeply and gather my thoughts, ready to confess my love for her. "The truth is...I am in love with you, Diane. You are my soulmate. You are what has been missing in my life. I don't ever want to live my life without you in it." The words sound so much more romantic when said aloud and, if anything, I'm getting even more nervous by the second. It feels like we're the only ones in this world except for us.

She smiles slightly and says nothing, her gaze focused solely on me. I can see tears forming in the corners of her eyes but it doesn't distract me from my declaration any longer.

"I don't ever want to be without you. I need you in my life. I want you to be my wife. You don't have to answer right now. I don't want to rush you. We have all the time in the world. I just want to make you happy." I reach up and wipe one of her tears away, then the other, until the tear that has been rolling down her cheek finally falls. My fingers still gently hold hers against her own will but I'm careful not to let go.

I hold my breath as I wait for her response. My heart feels like it is about to jump out of my chest. She smiles slightly and says nothing, her gaze focused solely on me. I can see tears forming in the corners of her eyes but it doesn't distract me from my declaration any longer. There is so much I have wanted to tell her. I've been waiting for so long.

"I'm just so happy that you are a part of my life. You have changed my whole world. You have changed me. I am a better man with you by my side. Please consider my proposal. Let me spend my life making you as happy as you have made me."

Still, she remains silent and I start to worry that I may not be what she wants. My stomach is knots and there's a pain in my chest as I wait for her to speak. Her silence is torture but she does not relent. That is, until she leans down and kisses me.

Her lips are soft against mine and taste sweeter than honey. The kiss is short, sweet, and everything I ever imagined kissing her would be. A warm feeling envelopes my body and I feel every part of me tingle.

"Are you sure about this?" she asks. Her brows meet over her nose and she gives me an uncertain frown that I return with a smile.

"Very. I want to marry you, Diane." A grin spreads across my face and I bring one hand up to cup her cheek. "Is that okay with you? I have already sent a letter to the king abdicating the throne. It means nothing to me. You are all that matters. I have asked for his permission to marry my mate." I gently stroke her cheekbone with my thumb as I watch her eyes grow impossibly bigger.

Diane brings her hands up to clutch my face. She lets out a laugh that sounds close to hysterical and presses herself against me. "Yes," she says. And then she kisses me again, hard and messy. When she pulls back after several moments, there are tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You're crying," I say softly, a confused frown furrowing my forehead. "What's wrong?"

Diane reaches up and takes one of my hands from her cheek, bringing it to her lips to kiss it. “Nothing is wrong. Nothing could make me happier than to become your wife, Carmichael. I want that as much as you do. I have loved you from the moment you saved me. My heart is yours, just as it has always been. I knew you would be the one I’d spend my life with. Even when you were rough, I saw the real you. I saw who you were, hidden beneath the surface. I hoped that one day you would be here with me again and I am happy that you are.”

“I feared that you might hate me after everything I’ve done. I wouldn’t blame you if you did,” I admitted as a wave of relief swept over me.

“I did try to hate, I’m sorry to say. At times I wanted nothing else, but something always stopped me from feeling such things. My heart just wouldn’t allow me to hate you. I saw how kind and how gentle you could be. I knew in my heart that was the real you. There were moments that I feared I may never see that part of you again, but I never gave up hope.”

With a bright smile on my face, I pull Diane closer to me and give her another quick kiss. Then I lift myself off the ground and hold out my hand to help her to her feet.

“Where do you think you’re taking me?” She laughs quietly as she stands next to me and takes my offered hand.

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” I reply and give her hand a gentle squeeze. Then I spin her around on the grass so that we’re facing each other. I lean in and whisper, “To get married.”

And then I press my lips against hers once again. I pull back far enough to ask, “Do you believe me?”

A grin spreads across her face as she looks down at me and she shakes her head. “No,” she replies and kisses me once more. “But I will follow you anyway. I will never leave your side. It is where I belong and where I will stay.”

Then she cups my face once more, pulling me even closer to her so that we're chest to chest. Our arms wrap tightly around each other, and I can almost hear her pulse beating beneath my ear. Her breathing grows shallow as I lean into her, feeling a sense of satisfaction knowing that I managed to make her happy.

After what seems like an eternity, we break apart. I rest my head against hers for just a moment, enjoying the feeling of holding her body against mine before pulling away. She giggles a little and wipes her eyes free of her tears, which had long ago dried.

There is no time to lose, according to the law we can marry immediately. In my letter to the king, I failed to mention that my mate was a human and I intend to marry Diane before it is discovered. It is the only way we can be together and I refuse to risk losing her.



## DIANE

The wedding is a secret of course, and preparations take place in the dead of night, though Carmichael arranges for everything, insisting that I rest and spend time with my family. It is absurd how he proves his love to me every day, and this wedding is simply another example of his love.

I can't quite believe that we're mates, and somehow, I think that a part of Carmichael cannot believe it either. He marvels at the fact that we are mates all the time we are together, even as he plans the wedding.

It will take place in secret, at noon, on the highest floor of his mansion. Only my mother, my brother, and two of his closest confidantes will be in attendance to witness the union.

Our union.

When I wake, sunlight filters through cracks in the flowing curtains that cover the windows of our bedroom. Rolling over, I realize right away that Carmichael is not next to me. A groan escapes me as I sit up, lifting the pillow he sleeps on and pressing it to my face.

I had hoped to wake up to him. To his body pressed against mine and his lips pressed against mine. But it isn't easy planning a wedding in secret, especially one that would be met with disapproval by the King.

I get out of bed quietly, padding across the room to get my robe when the brilliant white silk bag catches my eye. It hangs from a hook on the hall, a hook that was not there the evening

before, and through the slightly sheer material of the bag, glimmers of color sparkle through.

Abandoning my robe, I head for the bag, pulling apart the ribbons that keep it laced up, allowing the silk to fall open. The sunlight streams in beautifully as the bag is falling open, hitting the lavish, iridescent fabric that comes, spilling out of the bag.

My body grows still with shock and wonder as I take in the beauty of the dress, my mind wandering to the night before. The slight hairs on my body rise as it remembers the way Carmichael traced his fingertips up and down my skin.

He seemed determined to plot out every square inch of my skin, determined to memorize every freckle, every indentation, every landmark on my skin.

I fell asleep like that, after we made love, with his fingers trailing up and down my body, lulling me to sleep.

Now I look back at the dress, which is actually bigger than the bag it is in, and I know he chose it for me. I would not be surprised if he had confessed to making it himself, knowing the care that Carmichael takes with things.

The material of the dress is soft and the dress itself seems to contain every color in the world. Though when I examine it more closely, I see that the fabric of the dress is ivory with thousands, if not millions, of tiny crystal beads.

The beads create prisms of light that sparkle and bounce off each other, making the dress look like it carries the rainbow in its folds. Sudden excitement sparks across my skin, as I pull the dress off the hook and out of the bag, running over to the long thin mirror in the corner of the bedroom.

Just then a knock sounds on the bedroom door, and I carefully place the dress on the bureau as my mother comes into the room. My heart blooms to see her so happy, and more importantly, healthy. For years, watching her wither away, my heart felt paralyzed. But now it can finally beat again, because with Carmichael's help, we found the healing potion that would cure her sickness.

I quickly pull my robe on as my brother follows her inside, an equally large smile on his face. He must have experienced five growth spurts living here, with all the food he is eating.

“So, are you ready?” my mother asks me, a gentle smile on her face.

Maybe it is a latent reaction to the dress or simply seeing how happy my mother and brother are, but I am lost for words.

My mother lets out a soft chuckle at my silence before going over to throw open the curtains, something she used to do every morning before she got ill. Sunlight floods the room and some of the light hits the dress, sending sparkling light twisting up into the air and bouncing off the ceiling.

“Come.” My mother claps her hands together briskly, efficiently. “There are only a few hours until the wedding and you need to get ready. I’ve left some bathing salts in your bathtub, so take a long bath and wash your hair.”

I do what my mother says obediently, grateful that I do not have to do anything except follow instructions. Now that I am actually getting married, I am so overwhelmed by thoughts of the future, and the past, that I can barely think of the present.

My stomach flutters with nerves as I go through the motions of bathing myself and washing my hair that has grown longer since I have come to live with Carmichael. But as I wash, my stomach settles. In reality, there is nothing to be anxious about. I am marrying the love of my life.

My mate who loves me and cares for my family as though they are his own. My mate who is braving the sure wrath of the King simply by marrying me, a human.

After I finish bathing, my mother takes over, settling me on a seat in front of her where she sits on the bed and brushes through the long golden tresses of my hair. Just the way she used to when I was a child. She brushes through it until my hair is dry before starting to braid and twist it.

Afterwards she helps me into the dress and when I look out the window, I see it is even higher in the sky. It is almost noon, almost time for me to get married.



“Wear these,” my mother hands me a silk bag, and I pull out golden slippers. “They were mine.”

I slip into them wordlessly and together my mother, brother and I leave the room. The mansion is several stories high, with dozens of bedrooms, kitchens, and confusing, winding hallways. The wedding will take place on the topmost floor of the mansion, in Carmichael’s favorite room, his library.

When we reach the hallway of the highest floor, my mother stops, turning to me and gently brushing down the front of my dress. The delicate fabric falls from my waist in a rush of fabric, where it brushes the floor. I can just see the tips of my mother’s golden shoes underneath the hem of the dress.

“You’ve grown up so quickly.” The words escape her in a whisper, along with tears. I can’t stop myself from crying either. “Thank you for taking such good care of us.” I nod, unable to do much more as she leans forward and brushes a kiss against my cheek.

Taking James’s hand and allowing my mother to steer me forward by the elbow, we walk down the hallway and through the double doors that lead to the library.

The air is fragrant with bunches of flowers that stand on every flat surface in the library.

Carmichael and the two elves he trusts most stand, waiting for us. My mate is standing with his back erect, his head proud, as always, and he looks breathtaking. He is wearing his traditional Orthani elf attire. When he sees me, a small smile crosses his face. Then it settles into its usual stoicism.

The elves that flank him do not look very happy to be there as Carmichael steps aside, revealing a shorter elf, who looks disgruntled to see me. The elf is clearly not of the Khuzuth caste.

“We do not have much time.” The elf grumbles. My mother pushes me forward to stand next to Carmichael. He quickly takes my hand in his. “After noon, your King can

interfere in this wedding, and it will be all our heads once he finds out about this.”

“Who knew I would be presiding over the wedding of an esteemed Elf and a human.” The old elf falls silent as Carmichael clears his throat, glaring at him. I lean slightly against my mate, softening against him, inhaling his scent, looking at the exquisite flowers that he has arranged everywhere in the room.

The short, older elf starts speaking then.

“We are here today to witness the union of the Duke Carmichael, and the Diane Blaze. The union of eternal mates is a sacred meeting of souls and hearts and for all elves, finding and uniting with their mate only happens once.”

Carmichael shifts slightly and now we are leaning into each other as the elf keeps talking. He goes through the history of the elves, the history of Carmichael’s people, and the history of powerful mates.

I almost blink when he reaches the end of his speech, and I straighten up as he looks up at me severely through wire-rimmed glasses.

“Duke Carmichael and Ms. Blaze, it is time for your vows.”

Carmichael and I turned to one another. We had both prepared our vows together, save for the last line, which we had each kept secret from one another.

Carmichael starts.

“I, Duke Carmichael, take thee, Diane Blaze, to be my partner in life. As my mate, you are my blessing, and with these vows I promise to return the blessing one-hundred-fold. I vow to hold your hand as we start this journey. I have loved, currently love, and will love you for who you are.” He took a deep breath before the last sentence.

“And I promise to be by your side for now and all eternity.”

A flash of sunlight passes through the library, as if to confirm Carmichael's vows.

"I, Diane Blaze, take thee," I began my vows. As I begin speaking, I feel the rest of the world slip away. Including the past.

The past where I had struggled. Before meeting Carmichael.

"I take thee, Duke Carmichael, to be my partner in life. As my mate, you are my blessing, and with these vows, I promise to return the blessing one-hundred-fold. I vow to hold your hand as we start this journey. I have loved, currently love, and will love you for who you are."

"Thank you," my voice wobbles as I speak the last, secret, sentence of my vows. "For saving me."



# CARMICHAEL

**B**utler swings the doors to the dining room wide. I look back to Diane, and my breath catches in my throat as her face fills with awe. Her eyes shine with wonder and glitter in the room's dim lighting. The table is filled with food the likes she and her family have not seen before. I want to show her that she'll never go hungry again.

Inwardly, my heart warms in my chest. I so want to make her happy. I want her to understand that although she came here in servitude, this house is as much hers as it is mine.

Elves do not take mating lightly.

Although I don't quite understand what that will mean for us, I can start by sharing everything I have.

James shouts and whoops into the air, "This is amazing!" He runs to the table and down the length of it to see the food up close. He doesn't touch it yet, although I can see his fingers twitching. A laugh rumbles from deep inside me and bursts out of my throat at the thought.

My two old friends jump at the noise. Shock riddles their face, but I can see that neither is angry with my laughter. I even scare myself.

I clear my throat and run a hand through my hair. It brushes against Diane's small frame, and I look over at her. She has tears lining the rim of her eyes.

I raise my eyebrows at her. I don't want to interrupt her thoughts, but I'm unsure if she is overwhelmed or regrets her

choices.

“Carmichael, this is all so beautiful. The smells. ” She sweeps her arms around the table and over the glittering decor. “I’ve never smelled anything like this before.” I place my hand on the small of her back as a sign that she should continue. But a smile crooks across my lips as I see her visibly shutter from my touch. I refrain from kissing the nape of her neck in front of her mother and brother but remind myself to do so later. Even though her family is here, they are taken with the room and the food. I step closer to my beloved and let her feel my breath across her cheek. She smiles and sags against me slightly so I can feel her weight press into me.

I inhale her sweet scent, the flavor of ripe peaches on a spring day, and try to concentrate on what she is about to say.

“This is the epitome of extravagance. We will never be able to eat this food. Even if we had three weeks to do so.”

My eyes sweep over the table. Foods deep with color, flavor, and scents waft over us. Mounds of bread, puddings, and meats glisten with glazes, creams, and juices.

I inhale the deep scent of roasted duck with gooseberries, buns with honey icing, and a hundred different dessert flavors. It did look extravagant. I straightened at the beauty of it, my pride expanding to hear her words.

“It’s just that so many people do not have food.” She bit at her lip. Her expression was worried, which was not what I was expecting. “Perhaps, we can share with those less fortunate than us—humans or elves. We should not let it go to waste.”

I cock my head in confusion. “There is no waste. Magic will take it away.”

Her brows furrow. “But why should it be magicked away when it can help others.”

I consider her words but don’t quite understand. It’s a human trait, wanting to help others. Elves in this world only try to maim and hurt. We show our power by dominance. I clear my throat again, uncomfortable with these thoughts. I’m unsure how it could help me maintain the second position, but

as I look over my new human family, I know I have already made my choice.

I smile. Diane's face is so close to mine. Her peach scent ripples over me in waves of things promised for tonight. Of our future and what is to come. Her features are so fresh and innocent but so determined.

I cannot help but give in to her words. "If it will make you happy, yes. We can. You're right, after all. If I have magic, we can help those who need it."

Diane places her slender fingers and palm on my chest, stopping me from moving further to the table. "Carmichael, it's about helping others. To be king, you'll have to take care of your people. It is more than just making me happy. Do you understand?"

I search her eyes, deep blue like two watery pools, so clear that I can see my reflection in them. I want to give her an answer that makes sense. I want to explain to her that my path to the crown is compromised, perhaps beyond repair. I want to tell her that caring for the Elves and humans is different, but I cannot say anything besides the truth.

"No, I don't understand," I say. "But I want to," I whisper the last words in her ear, and she melts a little more into me. I take advantage of her closeness, run my nose along the length of her neck, and nip at her ear a little.

She turns to me and smiles. "Well, that is a good place to start."

I sweep my hand over the expanse of the room and lead her to the table.

We eat dinner together. James is boisterous and energetic. He spends much of his time trying to make Butler and the other servants laugh. He even starts talking to his mother about getting a pet.

"I always wanted a dog," he says to her. "Maybe now that we have so much space, we can get one."

I raise my brows to Diane again, who is smiling at her family. She turns to place her hand on mine and shakes her

head. “He’s just excited. Once they settle in, we’ll discuss what is feasible.”

I lift her delicate fingers to mine and kiss each tip softly. “Whatever you wish.”

Tears fill her eyes again. “Thank you for taking such good care of my family.”

“Of course,” I say, my voice deepening with desire. I am ready to whisk my bride away and have my way with her. Or, perhaps, have our ways with each other.

Sensing a shift in my mood, Diane looks at me with intense appreciation, but longing bubbles along the surface. I swallow and do my best not to let the growl building in my throat slip out. I look at our guests and excuse myself from my wife.

“We would like to thank you all for sharing this event with us. It is now time for our ceremonial walk through the woods.”

My friends give me a dubious look. They understood my meaning and could probably sense my magic sparking across the room. Humans, even my sweet Diane, do not have those receptors open.

Monique stands up, hugs her daughter, and says, “Yes, of course. We shall see you in the morning.” She smiles at her daughter. “Or perhaps in a few days.” Dian blushes and gives James a hug as well.

“Try not to get into too much trouble searching the castle. Okay?”

“Okay.” James laughed. “But there is a lot to look at.”

Diane kisses her mother on the cheek, and I take her hand. I lead her out of the room and up the stairs. She pauses. “We aren’t going outside?”

I step in close to her and press myself against her body. “We can go anywhere you want.” She gasps as I grow so hard that I’m positive she can feel it even through all the fabric of her dress. “I just need you now.” The growl I was suppressing earlier releases from my throat, and I press her even closer to



me. “You tell me where you want to go,” and I dip my head down to the nape of her neck. My lips open up to taste her skin. My teeth nip barely.

Diane moans. Instantly, her arms run down the length of my chest and hit the laces of my pants. Her fingers brush over the span of me, encouraging me to suck at her skin a little harder, faster, and plunge my head deeper into her hair to get a better angle at the spot making her go crazy.

Her noises excite me, and I make a choice. I pull away from her quickly, her fingers are still pulling at the laces, and I say, “I will take you here. Now. I will use my magic to camouflage us, although we should be safe here.” I don’t wait for her to respond. I can see in her eyes she is ready for it. Wants it. I lift her up as she whispers “Yes,” as consent.

The dress makes it impossible to wrap herself around me. Instead, I release my magic. It thumbs down my body and surrounds us in a cocoon of silence and invisibility. Only we can hear each other’s pleasure. Our lust. Our pure indulgence of each other.

Only she can see me pressing her against the stairs wall and kneeling before her. I stare at her as I trace the hem of her dress and lift it up to reveal her legs. I dive under the skirts of fabric and grab her naked ass. Knowing that she has been without undergarments all day drives me even crazier. I don’t wait. I thrust my fingers up into the warmest, wet part of her. My fingers slid in as though she had been waiting for me. I pull back out and watch her hips start to writhe, up and down against me.

A deep yearning is building inside of me. Centering. Lustful. Need. As Diane works herself on my fingers, I adjudge my head between my legs and find her swollen clit with my tongue. I go to work, moving faster, then slower, teasing her, listening for her breathing. Her screams, and soon she is spasming around my fingers, and I am pressing my face even more deeply into her so she can feel the fullest, longest pleasure I can give her.

When she begins to slow and her muscles cease contracting, I come back from under her skirts. She wilts against the wall, and I pick her up.

“You’re not done for the night, are you?” I asked.

Diane opens her eyes with a dreamy look and says, “Not for one moment. We have all night, and I can’t wait to give you what you gave me.” A spark of desire played across her eyes. “And then even more.”

I swept her up into the bedroom with my magic still in place.

We didn’t sleep at all for three days.



# DIANE

I look over the balcony's edge.

Orthani rises above me in peaks and valleys. I inhale in all its beauty. Buildings, older than humankind itself, loom far off in the distance but still appear giant next to emerald-colored mountains that are stuffed full of greenery.

A breeze kicks up my hair, now grown longer than when I first came to Carmichael's castle. A smile plays across my lips just at the thought of my husband.

I let out a long breath.

I do that often now. I remember to breathe.

My mother is no longer sick. My brother does not have to be a child who grows up too quickly. And I have met my mate. I close my eyes, and a quiet peace settles over me as the golden hues of sunset brush over my cheeks.

My fingertips brush the smooth, cool silk of my dress.

I can feel a flutter underneath my skin. My smile grows.

The baby is not yet big enough for anyone to feel from the outside, but my hand rests on my stomach. Perhaps it is a promise of protection.

Perhaps it can feel my presence already, the cup of my hand, like a warm hug.

Perhaps, it is a reminder that less than a year ago, I was desperate to help my family out, and somehow, I managed to do it—against all odds.

Strong arms snake through my arms and pull me backward toward an equally strong chest. I keep my eyes closed but can hear Carmichael inhale the scent of my hair. The tip of his nose runs over the curve of my neck, and a shiver across my skin follows.

I bite my lip as his lips trace the line back down my neck and my back-end arches against him. He doesn't bother to suppress his pleasure as it slips past his kisses in a groan as I press my lower half into his.

His hands tense around me. So large one of them can almost palm my waist by itself. I giggle, at least for now. If I let him, he would rip through another dress. Marriage suits him well. The prospect of me being his and his being mine forever hasn't suppressed his desire for me. It has only heightened.

I melt against him as the heat intensifies between us.

Perhaps it's an elven trait. Once elves mate, maybe their desire only increases. I sigh again, thinking it's probably why elves don't connect to a mate every day. If they did, they might never get anything done besides messing around with each other.

A low rumble rises from his throat, and he turns me around to face him.

I stare into his eyes. The ones that were once steely, gray, and full of anger.

Now, they are filled with love, passion, kindness, and desire. All for me.

And our love created a new life.

I leaned in close to his ear and nipped at the bottom part of his lobe.

His arms tighten around me, and I wrap my arms around his neck.

"We made a baby," I whisper.

His hands slacken, and he slowly pulls away. I search his face, waiting for the information to sink in.

“What?” he asks, as the knowledge reaches his eyes, they brighten.

“I’m pregnant. We made a baby.”

Carmichael throws his head back and laughs into the sky. His laugh echoes through the mountains and rides over the wind. A deep sound encircles my heart with surprise, love, and passion.

“That is incredible news,” he says as he runs his hands through my hair, cradling the back of my head. He bunches my hair up into his fist and pulls me close. Relief and passion wash over me as he presses his lips to mine.

Electricity runs down my body as his teeth gently nip at my bottom lip. A moan escapes my lips.

I jump into his arms and wrap my legs around his waist. He carries me to our bed.

Carmichael lays me down on the bed with a new sense of caution, although that’s where his patience ends. He grabs at the fabric of my dress and tears it away from my body in one long rip.

“You’re going to have to stop doing that. I am going to run out of clothes,” I laugh.

“I will buy you more,” he says, gracefully whipping his shirt off of his body. I blink, and his pants are removed. The ease of how quickly he removes his clothes without ruining them does not escape me. Although that thought gets lost in my awe of his beauty.

I wrap my hands around his waist and drag my thumbs down the cut line of his hip bones. I pull him close and open my legs up to him. He gets down on his knees and pulls my body to align it with the edge of the bed.

I roll my head back in anticipation of his lips upon my clit, but it does not come. Instead, the weight of his chest presses down on me. I lift my head to see a softness in his eyes I hadn’t before. He leans over and kisses right below my navel. It is such a nurturing and tender moment, I don’t want to miss

it, but I can't help the rolling waves of pleasure that comes from his lips.

I let out a low moan.

He sticks his tongue out and flicks my skin below where he kissed. I look at Carmichael and run my hands through his hair. He gives me a predatory smile and raises an eyebrow. "Right in front of the baby?" He smirks.

I roll my eyes. "Fine. If you don't want to. We can just go tell my mom and bro..." He scrambles up my body, placing a hand over my mouth, and pressing his hard body against mine.

I sigh into his and wrap my legs around his waist, waiting for him to enter me. He peels his hand away from my mouth, replacing it with his lips. As he slips his tongue inside my mouth, he thrusts himself into me. I cry out, echoing my sound into him.

He pulls back slowly as though he is removing a sword for show. Each inch of his withdrawal sent pressure and pleasure radiating through my body. Tension mounts between my legs. I feel each lustrous bump and vein in his dick as he pulls himself from my clenched and wet vagina.

Carmichael pushes himself up to look at me with a lazy smile. I place my hand on his cheek and trace his lips with my thumb.

He kisses my palm and shoves himself into me with such a great surprise and bliss that I yell out, calling his name repeatedly as he pounds into me again and again until both of our bodies are writhing in the sheer anticipation of connected climax.

Soon, we were calling out each other's names. Griping, clinging, and crying out in unison as we came together.

Explosions of ecstasy roll over me in waves with each final lunge from Carmichael. And soon, he is panting. He throws his head back and screams excitedly as he spasms inside me. As his orgasm lessens, his body sags in release. Instead of letting him pull away, I wrap my legs around him and hold him with my arms.

He places his head on my breast, and I stroke his hair.

We lay together, connected, for a few more breaths.

I trace my fingers down his sharp jawline and hum a song my mother sang to me when I was a young girl.

“What is that?” Carmichael asks.

“A song from my mother,” I respond.

Carmichael shifts and pulls away slightly. “I don’t want to be like my mother.” His smile diminishes, and the light in his eyes darkens. “But the elven world is a dangerous place. I don’t think ...”

It is my turn to stop him from speaking. I place my fingers over his lips.

“You will be an amazing father. We are going to figure everything out together,” I say.

Carmichael’s eyes fill with tears. “I didn’t know that I could be this happy,” he whispers.

“Me either,” I said, speaking about him and me.

A thought dawns on me. “See. You’re nothing like your mother already. It doesn’t sound like she was happy a day in her life.”

Carmichael’s smile grows wider, and he says, “True. Very true.”

A few hours later, we are clean and casual. The fireplace is lit, and we sit around its warmth, inhaling its woody aroma.

My mother and James are there with inquisitive expressions on their faces. Their curiosity doesn’t surprise me, though. My message was very cryptic.

I go to my mother and take her hand, saying “We are going to have a baby.”

My mother’s hands begin to shake, and she places one hand over her face. She rocks back and forth, and her shoulders tremble.

“Oh my!” I exclaim. “Mother, what is it?”



She lifts her head with a huge smile. “I’m so happy for you! This is the best news I’ve gotten in a long time.”

“I’m going to be an uncle? That’s amazing!” James jumps up and throws his arms around me.

I laugh and hug James back.

We sit the rest of the night together and plan for a new member of our unique family.

Although he appears happy, I can tell that Carmichael has thoughts rolling around his mind. Those can wait until later.

Now, happiness rules the moment.

# EPILOGUE

DUKE JULIUS ROSENFIRE

**M**y warm lips caress the cold skin of her neck, and I feel her shiver. The goosebumps forming on her body are just heaven for me. Knowing I have this kind of power over someone makes me proud.

Precious moans fill the room while my hips rock against hers. I only crave more. As I caress one elf's skin with my lips, I use my hand to play with a nipple on the other.

My hand slowly slides down the servant's body while I moan and groan, continuing to rock my hips, creating a pleasurable clapping sound. Once my hand arrives at the destination of her sensitive area, I gently rub my fingers against her.

I earn a moan from her with a back arch, making me grin. I slowly move my hand away, beginning hard thrusts that cause the bed to shake.

"Come for me," I demand breathlessly. It doesn't take the servant long as her whimpers become louder and her toes curl. Coming with a loud moan, I pull out of her and leave her as if she is nothing.

Next to her, I spread the legs of the second servant with a pleased smirk on my face. I stare into her eyes as my hands lean on each side of her head. My face moves closer to hers as I push inside of her.

She moans loudly as I groan, my thrusts not taking long to begin. Large, shaky breaths escape her lips every time my hips get into contact with hers.

I take pride in my abilities to please women. Elf women of course. I'm nothing like Duke Carmichael. As I softly place kisses along her jaw I grunt, feeling myself getting closer.

The elf's toes curl as my thrusting increases. Once we hit climax, moans and heavy breathing fill the room. I pull out of the zagfer before standing up, leaving the two elves.

I place my robe over my naked body before walking outside onto the veranda. Pulling out a cigarette before lighting it while it's in my mouth, breathing in the smoke.

Slowly pulling out the cigarette, I let out a circle of puffed smoke. Slowly looking back, I notice the two servants still exhausted from our session, just lying there. A smirk on my lips, I turn back with the cigarette in my mouth.

See me? Duke Carmichael needs to look at me as an example. I have sex with people who I'm allowed to be seen with.

As I look out at Orthani a chuckle can't help but leave my lips. How ridiculous can one man be? How foolish can someone be? You are about to be given the throne! Yet you give it up for a woman?

Not just any woman. A human woman! How dare he give up something so precious like having the throne for someone who will just break his heart?

There is no doubt in my mind that everyone here is talking about Duke Carmichael. Nobody in Orthani doesn't know about him and his human. It's more like a pet than a human.

As I finally finish the last few puffs from my cigarette I squish it in the bowl until it's completely out. I walk back inside where the two elves are beginning to dress themselves back up. I remove my robe and their eyes are on me intently. I can't help but smirk at the adoration from not just them but from everybody; it is quite the view.

I place my suit on, buttoning up my shirt with a smile on my face. "If you two don't mind cleaning up my room while I'm out? I'd really appreciate it," I say with a charming smile. My charm is the number one thing that gets me what I want.

“Of course, Duke Julius,” she replies, smiling as the second elf fumbles while picking up some cleaning supplies, staring at me. It makes me smile as I button up my suit.

I wink at the elf, which makes her all the weaker. I exit my room with a smile on my face, walking down the stairs towards the front door. As I open the door and walk out, I’m welcomed to streets filled with people walking and chattering.

I place my hands in the pockets of my jacket with a smile on my lips. I greet other people, nodding my head politely while I check the time on my watch. Around nine in the evening, the sky is beautiful tonight.

Finally reaching the main bar of Orthani, I push inside. Passing by every table with people whispering to each other that Duke Julius Rosenfire is actually in their presence.

I keep my eyes on the bar table that I finally reach and nod to the bartender. The bartender asks, “What can I get for you?”

“Shot of your strongest please,” I demand more than ask. However, the bartender doesn’t mind. He immediately gets my shot, which I gladly take in one gulp.

I slap the shot glass back down and reach into my suit, grabbing my wallet and placing fifteen ipin on the table.

Once I turn around, I take a moment to take in every person that’s chatting and walking around.

I become preoccupied with checking out two female elves. The women notice me and I begin walking over with a charming smile.

Not really noticing where I am going, I accidentally bump into a much too drunken man. Who of course was approaching the two women just as I was. The man seems to have no plans to take this interaction lightly.

I am proven right in my assumption as the man pushes me, not too hard but hard enough to get me away. He walks up to the women with a weakened stance.

The drunken man proceeds to hit on the women, making them extremely uncomfortable. Anger builds up in my body.

No woman should be made uncomfortable.

I sleep with elf women, but I still make sure they are comfortable with me. I'm a Duke, not some sex obsessed predator.

I yank the man back. I say, "Come on, this isn't proper behavior."

The man stares at me with a dazed expression as if he doesn't know what to do with the Duke telling him off.

He just smirks. "I don't think it's any of your business pal."

The drunken man brushes me off, and tries to walk back to the elves. I grip his shoulder and he gives me a shove I was not expecting.

I fall to the floor, feeling a little wind get knocked out of me. I stand up and the man waits with a grin for me to hurt him back.

The thought of just punching him crosses my mind, however I know it isn't the solution. I brush myself off.

It does not take long for everyone to turn in our direction. Now I have an audience awaiting my response.

I don't allow this to faze me one bit. With a proud stance I stare and face the drunken man.

What I have in mind is much better than any physical harm. I immediately call on guards to force this male to face a night in custody.

The guards are quick to act on the commands of the Duke. I lean towards the man with a smirk on my face. "Harassment is not welcome in Orthani."

The man tries ripping out of the guard's grip, cursing me out like there's no tomorrow. The female elves don't hesitate, coming by my side and linking their arms with mine.

I say, "I will protect Orthani with all of my being and make sure everyone is sustainable. Number one thing I will do as King is never allow something like that to ever happen."

I clear my throat. “Would Duke Carmichael put you all first? Or would he put his human first instead of Orthani?”

Nobody says a word but they can’t take their eyes off me. I continue my thoughts, “Ladies and gentlemen, Duke Carmichael did the worst possible thing to Orthani. You all trusted him to be the best for you yet this is what he does instead? Some human woman?”

Multiple people nod their heads in agreement. I don’t stop there. “Orthani should be led by a responsible elf. Not one who will allow their hearts to control their actions.”

While walking to the front of everyone, I don’t take my eyes off the crowd. “How many of you trusted Duke Carmichael?”

Almost everyone in the room raises their hand. I shake my head. “He betrayed you ... almost every single one of you trusted him and he broke that. Me? I wouldn’t allow such a thing to happen. Falling in love with a human? Why? What purpose do they serve us?”

Everyone murmurs to each other in agreement. I softly let go of the two female elves and stand on one of the empty tables near me.

“When I’m your king you don’t have to be worried about being betrayed. I won’t ever follow in the footsteps of Carmichael. Ever. Not when you all need a king to lead! I will do that with no doubt.”

Cheering erupts as I continue, “I will serve us with the main goal in mind: I will never be Duke Carmichael. He’s a terrible representation of Orthani. Power and courage is what we must prove. I will do that with no sign of weakness by a human.”

Stepping down off the table, everyone cheers and whistles. I thank everyone there with a satisfied grin on my face. Every single thing I said during that speech was true, and I mean every word. Seems like everyone else agreed with me, too. The Duke Carmichael doesn’t appreciate Orthani like I do, and would as a king.

You can't serve Orthani and take sinful actions at the same time. That drunken man had given me that space to give an unforgettable speech, which I am sure will stay in the minds of everyone here.

I am grateful to be the Duke, and will be even better once King. Two beautiful Miou female elves are linked on my arms, and I believe I will be getting lucky tonight once again.

THE END.

To read more about Diane and Carmichael my newsletter here:

<https://www.subscribepage.com/annehalebooks>



# PREVIEW OF MONTER'S MATE

The Worlds of Protheka is a vast and growing world. Check out one of the books, *Monster's Mate*

*Monster's Mate*

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# TANEM

**T**he night is almost as dark as I am.  
Almost.

Maybe nothing is darker than I am. I don't know. I have lived a very long time.

Somewhere in my memory, maybe I can find something as dark as I am.

But I have no interest in searching through my memories for something that doesn't matter.

What matters is that I am darker than night, and I shift and ripple with the shadows of Eelry.

I am not trying to hide. Not really. I am hunting, and maybe I should hide. Be stealthy.

Maybe.

But I have no patience for playing hide and seek with my prey. They will see me coming. They will see their deaths.

They will certainly feel their deaths.

Next time, I will try to be stealthy. The taste of surprise in the blood and flesh of whatever I am eating is quite exquisite.

That, I have to admit to myself.

My favorite meals are dark elves. They taste like nothing else I have ever consumed.

And in my centuries of living...

*Centuries Tanem? Have you truly lived that long?*

In my centuries of living, I have never tasted anything like a dark elf. Their flesh is soft, supple, tender.

Their dark sorcery flows through their veins, providing me with strength and keeping me sated days after the meal.

My fangs are extending from my gums, just think about them.

The muscles in the tentacles that are sealed into my back flex and twist. They are hungry.

“Shh. Be still.” The words slip from between my fangs. My low, guttural voice a growl more than anything else.

I catch the scent of humans when I lift my head to the air. My nose wrinkles involuntarily.

I am not the biggest fan of eating humans. But perhaps tonight I will find something sweet to calm my tentacles.

Maybe tonight, I should do the easy thing and give up on hunting the dark elves who have probably sensed my presence in the city.

The humans are in a hurry, that much I gather from the way their energy sparks and whips in the air.

Their voices are low, their footsteps hurried. I follow them, my footsteps soft and swift against the cobblestoned ground.

My body has remained muscular, strong, and lean, despite my years of living.

I find it fascinating that humans age to become decrepit creatures, unable to help themselves.

The group of humans turn a dark corner, and my tentacles lift from where they were hanging down my back. I loom over them, and the fools still do not see me.

*You are so hungry.* My voice speaks silently in my head, coaxing me on.

I am about to attack, to grab one or two, when the scent reaches me. The fragrance is like nothing I have ever smelled

before.

It is fresh and bright and so sweet. It smells even better than the magical blood of the dark elves.

Whatever it is, it is coming from the humans. I retract my tentacles, against their protests.

I can't eat yet. Not until I have found the source of the scent.

I am aware that my heart is racing and my stomach is twisting. My skin prickles as I follow the humans around corner after corner.

Soon, we come up to a one-story building with a low roof. I can't go in just as I am, so I wait for the humans to enter.

What is this place? I can hear dozens of footsteps crossing the dirt floor inside. A thousand different scents mingle and exude from the building.

I allow the darkness to cover me, slipping inside before the elf guarding the door can see me.

All he notices is a whisper of wind caressing his cheek as I pass.

I remain close to the walls of the building, until a guard catches my scent. The giant creature looks up at me, signaling the guards behind me.

I duck into an alcove to my left, and they follow.

The tentacles stretch from my back and break their necks in seconds. I do not even have to move.

I heft their bodies into the alcove, piling them on top of one another. There are bales of hay close by.

I remain pressed into the darkness as I pile the hale on top of them.

Finding my prey will be impossible now. I can't hunt or else I will be hunted. Hunted to my end.

When I turn, I realize exactly what is happening inside the building. It is an auction. Whoever is running it is auctioning

off precious jewels, animals and the like.

And humans, I quickly discover.

I can still smell the scent that has drawn me here. I can almost smell the fragrance in the air, shimmering like a bright light reflecting off glass.

I inch away from the wall, straining to see the front of the room. Several humans are auctioned off. They are beautiful; young, sweet things.

But right now? They are not enough to sate my hunger.

Not while the owner of the fragrance lingers close by.

The sixth auction item is a necklace containing several jewels of precious origin. I could not care less.

The seventh auction item is slightly more interesting.

“Get your hands off me, filth!” She screeches. Several of the humans and elves gasp at her words.

She is being brought, kicking and screaming onto the stage.

Strange. Usually humans like being auctioned off. They’ll be taken care of instead of remaining in their slums.

An elf close by chuckles with amusement.

The human girl is still struggling on the stage. “Don’t buy me!” She shrieks the words.

“I’ll stay on the streets! I’ll just run away from you!”

The scent is back and stronger than ever. I need to leave and find it. I need it. Desperately.

As I leave, it wafts towards me, and I turn unconsciously.

It is her.

The human girl throwing a tantrum on the auction stage.

*Who is she? And why does her scent set me on fire?*

I cannot answer the questions that flit through my head.

# MOIRA

I have bitten three elves in the arm, and have chewed off an ear.

Dear gods, they taste awful.

The pain does not seem to register with them. They do not seem to even feel pain.

That doesn't matter to me.

I won't stop kicking and screaming until I get away from this place. From the auction house where I am as good as a side of taura.

I am sure I will be prodded and poked like a side of taura too. When I look down from the stage at the room, I see several elves and dark elves nodding at my appearance.

My heart almost freezes with fear, but I swallow through it, because if I do not, I will collapse.

I have been close to collapsing for several days now. I am not sure why. Maybe I am exhausted from worry. Maybe I am exhausted from grief.

I don't think it matters why any longer. I don't think it matters that I am exhausted any longer.

All I can do is keep kicking till they let go of me for one second. Then I can escape.

Both elf servants that hold onto each of my arms twist and I howl with pain. Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to cry.

Not until I have given up all hope.

Betrayal lingers, burning in the back of my mind as I fight for my life.

I was working well before my master, such as he was, decided to sell me off. I was a good worker, attentive, and kind.

I took care of him, his house, and his family well.

I almost cared for the dark elf. But I think that maybe this was all part of his plan.

To use me up and toss me out. Until the only thing left for me was to lay back with my legs spread for whoever bought me.

The elf servant twists my arms again.

This time, tears fall. I am sobbing now, openly and loudly.

Maybe, just maybe, this will deter whoever thought I looked good enough to buy.

I thought at first that my elf master was joking when he said I was to be sold off.

But quickly enough I realized it was the worst joke that I would ever hear. And the other human servants did not help.

I had always known they didn't like me, though I am not sure why.

But they had blamed everything that went wrong on me. So I was forced out.

“This feisty one will be sold to the highest bidder!” A dark elf on the stage grins at me, his sharp teeth glittering in the dim fires that sparkle from torches on the walls.

“NO!” I scream the word until I can feel my vocal chords start to crack.

“Buy me and I will curse you all to your deaths. Don't fucking buy me or you'll regret it.”

Tears, real tears, are falling down my face. Tears of shock and exhaustion and grief.

And there is nothing I can do to stop crying.

My curses deter no one, and neither does my crying, I realize angrily. More hands with paddles on them have shot up.

The dark elf laughs loudly.

I recognize the elf closest to the stage who has now bid the most on me. He is known for his cruelty, and his ugly smile terrifies me.

I blink my eyes that sting with tears, and the room glitters around me. It smells rank, like sweat and drying shit.

Bile rises to my throat, but I know I cannot give up. Maybe I can escape.

This time, my struggles are more violent, and the elves must have lost their patience. They restrain me more forcefully.

And their claws draw blood. I fall to my knees as blood wells up from deep scrapes on both my arms.

My tears, this time, are silent.

The auction room goes quiet.

*Are they shocked? Did these superior creatures think that humans didn't bleed?*

The dark elf has ordered the servants to take me to the back. I will probably be punished there.

But just then, a loud, growling snarl comes from the back of the room.

*Monster.*

Because that is what it is.

It has thrown itself at the stage, a big, dark, hulking figure. It has clawed hands, and red eyes glitter from its face.

The elf servants jump into action, trying to restrain it.

*Why is the monster coming for the stage?*



The thought comes to me distractedly. Because I have seen my chance.

*GO! NOW!*

I slip away from the elves, who are too focused on subduing the beast. I don't care any longer that I am barefoot and bleeding.

But I am not fast enough. Because a dark elf shifts out of the darkness as I run past. He grabs me. He must have been waiting for me.

"You're all mine," he grins down at me. "And I don't even have to pay for you. You will be a nice treat that I keep chained to my bed."

My blood is cold, and I am shivering in his grip.

It is over. I know it is. Dark elves have magic. He will probably disappear with me now.

But someone disagrees.

The growl is low and rumbling and darker than the nighttime.

It is unnatural and the elf hisses.

"Beast." The word slips from his lips in a whistle and he shoves me behind him.

The monster faces us, and slowly, four long, thick tendrils stretch from his back.

The elf doesn't wait but summons a staff and throws magic at it. The beast avoids the magic effortlessly.

He growls again, leaping forward. The elf creates a dark forcefield around us. The beast bounces off it, but doesn't fall.

Our eyes meet. Both his red eyes close and open slowly. As though he is trying to communicate with me.

The elf throws spell after spell at him, swiftly, brutally. The beast is hurt several times but continues forward.

He is relentless, using his arms, legs, claws, and tentacles to fight.

I realize, when he avoids clawing at me when the elf shoves me in front of him, that the beast is trying to help me.

But why?

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)