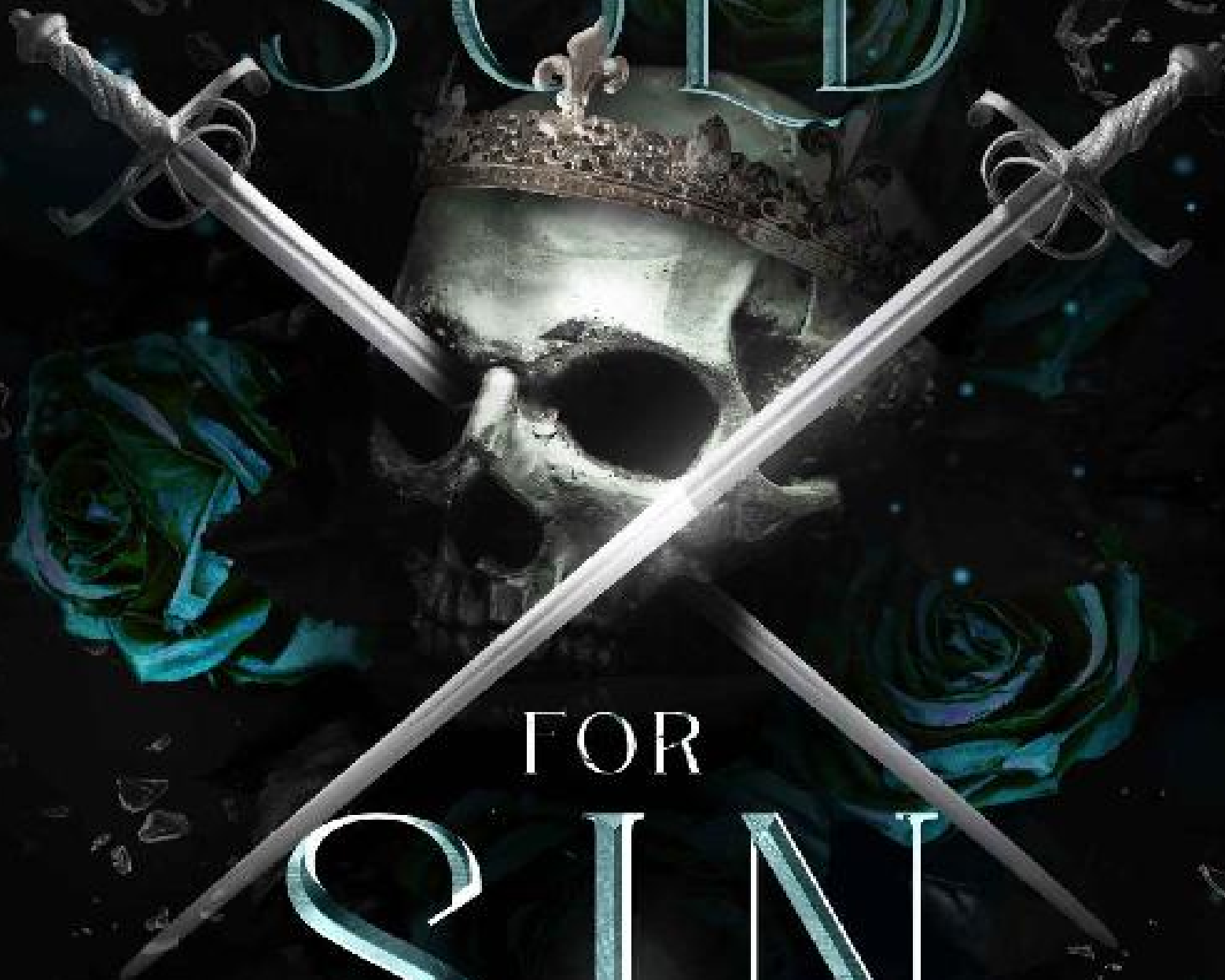




SOLD



FOR

SIN

CELESTE KING

SOLD FOR SIN

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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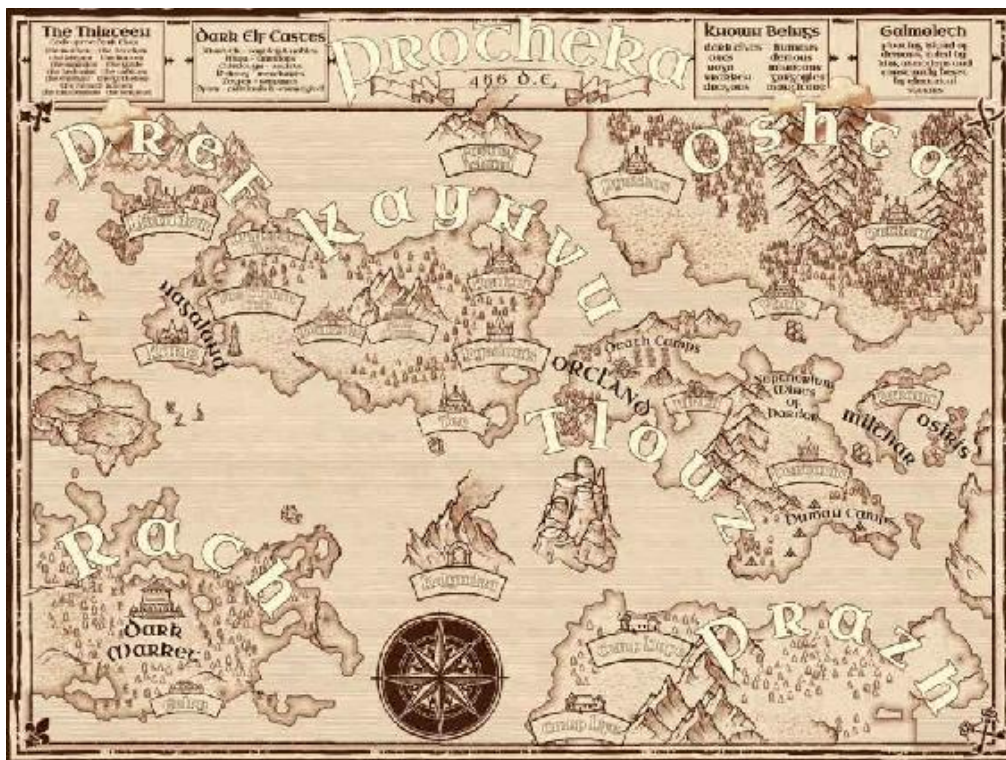
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THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



VALKUS

“**T**his might be the best thing I’ve ever done. Or the worst.” I cock my head to the side as I consider my latest painting.

A low purring roils through the air from below me as Nexus, my pet likar, nuzzles my foot.

I took Nexus in some time ago – I found him half-starved, wandering around the edges of my parents’ large estate. He was completely feral at first. He still is, to be quite honest, but he has certainly warmed up to me. He isn’t fully domesticated yet, and I would never expect him to give up the basest parts of his nature for me.

But having him around has been good for me, I think.

I continue examining the painting as Nexus stretches underneath the table before rolling onto his belly.

The painting is darker than my typical work. As one of Pyrthos’ artists in residence, I usually spend my days painting commissions for the royal family. But I am taking a slight break in between commissions. The darkness of this painting has been calling to me for months now.

I cannot get it out of my head, no matter how I try.

“I just wish I knew what this is about,” I murmur, frustrated.

I stiffen when I hear her coming, her footsteps grating on me long before my mother finally makes her way up the stairs to my studio.

I sigh and stand, walking over to the table to grab the cloth that I use to cover my paintings. This is nowhere near complete, and I cannot let anyone, even my mother, see it yet.

Not that it's any good, I think almost miserably to myself. I glance at the canvas. I have never worked harder on anything than I have on this painting. This painting and the concept behind it have bewildered and angered me in equal measure.

It has been a lot of effort. I'm not sure that it's paying off.

My mother has finally made it up to the landing outside the turret, one of the highest parts of my family's mansion. Her heels click on the floor as she struts towards the door.

Nexus, curled up on the floor at my feet, yawns and lets out a questioning chirrup. When he hears my mother's footsteps just outside the door, he lets out a more frantic chirrup before he stands and scurries away.

My mother despises Nexus with every fiber of her being, and Nexus knows it as well as anyone else. Hiding for a while, even among the most pungent of my paint mixtures, is better than getting an 'accidental' kick in the ribs.

"My darling boy!" My mother throws the door open without knocking and sweeps into the room, her eyes glistening and her arms outstretched.

Burning hatred – the kind of hatred that you can only feel for family members – washes over me as she pulls me into a hug. I lean reluctantly into the hug as my mother's perfume engulfs me, and she pats my back in the least maternal way that she can manage.

"So." I brace myself for the inevitable storm that is coming. "I came here to tell you that Aerius Quinlin just found his mate!" My mother smiles enthusiastically as if she expects me to be excited about the news.

I don't even know who Aerius Quinlin is.

Her bright smile falters slightly at the expression on my face, but she continues on. My mother, Meriana Elenil, is nothing if not determined. She has to be, to maintain her social standing.

“She’s a beautiful dark elf woman. She comes from a very good family, and she will be a great mother.”

“That’s great for Aerius,” I say, my voice devoid of emotion. I walk away from my mother, to my desk where I do all my correspondence.

“I’m sure his family is very happy.”

My mother cracks then, and when I turn back to her, her expression has changed completely. Her mouth is set into a hard line, and her eyes are glittering angrily.

“You’re an absolute disgrace!” She hisses the words. I do not flinch away from her like I once would have. And she doesn’t seem happy that I’m not cowering in front of her. “Do you know how negatively your bachelorhood is impacting this family? Do you know how embarrassing you are?”

“No,” I reply, my voice casual. “But I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

Nexus creeps out from his hiding place then and comes to stand at my side. He growls slightly, his hackles raised, as my mother’s voice becomes more and more shrill with every word that she speaks.

“And look! You’ve got a bloody wild animal in here! No wonder you cannot find a mate! You’re a spoiled little bastard!”

I lean against the other desk in the room where I mix my paints. When I look down at myself, my shirt is completely stained with the dark blue paint I used earlier. Drops of vivid red paint are splattered across the dark blue, and they look faintly like droplets of blood against the darker stain.

“Clearly I am not a bastard,” I say idly, lifting a pencil to clean the paint from underneath my fingernails. “You and Father *did* have your mating ceremony before I was born. Or will you be creating a greater scandal than my bachelorhood is?”

My mother seems to have become apoplectic. I watch her with some interest, because I cannot help but be curious about what would happen if she lets her anger take over.

My mother has a lot of anger.

I think anger is a prerequisite for being of high social standing. The gods know I have a lot of it, too.

“I just want the best for you.” She has taken several deep breaths, and her voice has dropped several octaves. Nexus is still growling.

“That is all I want. And you aren’t making it easy. You need to find a mate, move out, and settle down. It will do you a lot of good.”

My own frustration and anger at my mother’s unwarranted attack bubbles over. I walk past her, grab my coin purse and house keys, and whistle to Nexus.

“You cannot avoid this forever!” she yells as I run down the stairs. I walk through my bedroom with Nexus practically bouncing alongside me.

“Trust me,” I mutter underneath my breath as Nexus and I leave the house. The air in Python is crisp and bright, and my anger dissolves slightly. “I can avoid it as long as I need to.”

Evening has fallen, and the aftermath of the winter still lingers. This year’s winter was particularly difficult, and it isn’t going away without a fight, although the days are warmer and some spring flowers are coming up.

Frost still creeps across our window panes every night, and walking outside without a jacket at night, like I have just done, isn’t the best idea.

Right now, I am dressed in just my painting clothes. An old cotton shirt that has completely lost its original color and a pair of thin trousers. On my feet I wear a pair of beat up taura leather shoes that won’t provide me much protection from the elements.

I decide to walk into town tonight, despite the cold. I could have taken one of the many carriages that line the driveway, but Nexus prefers to walk. Besides, I don’t think I want whatever I do tonight getting back to my mother. I have long known that all the carriage drivers, and all the house staff, report back to my mother about my movements.

I am not sure what she hopes to discover about me. She probably hopes to find some information on me that she can use to blackmail me with.

At this point, she'd do anything to ensure that I find my mate and complete the mating ceremony as soon as possible. She is becoming desperate, and I shudder to think what she is going to do when she reaches her last straw.

Something in me says that she is pretty close to snapping, and I am not quite sure what I am going to do when that day comes.

Nexus leaps through the air in an arc as we finally reach the gates that surround my family's estate. A sudden feeling of euphoric lightness descends on me as Nexus and I walk through the gates.

"What do you want to do tonight?" I murmur to Nexus who chirrup at me. Sometimes I think that Nexus is the only one really listening to me.

I am not sure my mother is capable of hearing anything but her own voice, and my father is never around.

All I have is Nexus.

"All I have is a wild likar and my paints," I mutter. I stick my hands into my pockets as the city comes into view. "I'm as pathetic as my mother."

ALTHIA

“**Y**ou should have gone the other fucking way!” the dark elf noblewoman screams as I carry a bucket of water through the front of her house.

“You’re going to mess up my floors!” she continues, even though I have left the floors pristine.

She’s a fucking dark elf, I think moodily to myself. What did you expect when you signed up for this job?

This particular family is hosting the King at the end of the week, and they have hired extra servants to ensure that their estate is up to standard. However, there weren’t that many zagfers available, or willing to work for them, so they had to lower their standards and hire me, a human.

I personally do not think that she lost anything by hiring me. I have always been a good worker, and I am quite particular about getting things right.

But she’s still screaming when I return with the tub of roses scented wax and cloth.

“I need to do the floors now,” I tell her, my voice blank and my face devoid of emotion.

My matter of fact tone appears to stop her in her tracks because she stares at me silently for a few minutes before she closes her mouth and struts angrily out of the dining room.

The money I earn from this job is only going to get me by for the next two weeks. Maybe the next three weeks if I skip dinner and don’t buy the new pair of shoes I desperately need.

Hopefully I'll find another odd job within the next week or two.

Because if I don't, I'll be totally screwed.

I finish up my chores, leaving the kitchen, dining room, and grand hall spotless and shining, and collect my day's earnings before I leave to walk to the lowtowns.

The nighttime air is cold and brisk when I leave. I shiver slightly as I stick my hands into my jacket pockets, doing whatever I can to keep warm.

The distance between the hightowns and the lowtowns is quite wide, and I inhale deeply as I prepare myself to walk through the entirety of Pyrthos before I am able to get home. Hot tears spring to my eyes at the thought of walking that distance, but I wipe them away angrily.

My body is so sore, but I don't have a choice.

So I set off into the darkness, clutching my money and walking as fast as I can so that I can make it home before morning.



HE'S FOLLOWING YOU. He has been following you for the last few blocks.

The voice in my head is my own. She is unemotional. She is simply stating facts.

And the fact is, I am being followed.

Tonight I decided to take a shortcut through the theater district and across the river. My spirits were exceptionally low tonight, and I thought that listening to the latest songs written by Pyrthos's best thespians would help cheer me up. The only problem with this shortcut is that it isn't exactly the safest route.

The dark elf, an older man who I spotted in one of the bars attached to the theater, is clearly unstable, and his drinking habits show on his face.

He is also tall and thin, and every few seconds I hear electricity crackle in the air.

He knows that I know he is following me. That's why he's showing me his magic, showing me how powerful he is.

I am close to the river, and if I can just make it across and escape into the farmlands that are on the other side, maybe I can make it home without being raped tonight.

I've heard horror stories from other women in the lowtowns – my neighbors – about violent encounters they have had with dark elf men.

There is no going back from something like that.

I speed up, my breath forming clouds in front of me, but I am not fast enough. A hand grabs my arm, and I am jerked backwards, my head snapping forwards painfully.

The dark elf shoves me up against a wall, and I can smell the alcohol, stale and bitter on his breath.

I cannot stop myself from gagging, and as he gets closer, my skin starts crawling.

“A pretty little thing like you shouldn't be out here alone at night, darling,” he croons. He is slightly unsteady on his feet, but even that doesn't help me. He is still stronger than I am.

I shove and kick, but he laughs as his hand, which was around my neck, moves downwards to cup my breast through my clothes.

“I like a fighter. And look, it's just the two of us here now. We can have some privacy, and I can do... whatever I want. I guarantee you'll like it.”

“No,” I whisper, my voice strangled as I choke on the word. “Please,” I sob. “Please no.”

His other hand is on my thigh, and he leans forward. His hair is long, and it tickles my neck as he licks my cheek.

He smells like a bar floor, and I gag as his warm, wet tongue makes contact with my cheek.

“Oh, you already taste so good. I’m going to make you feel so good,” he whispers.

Oh, gods. My eyes are shut as he kneads my body through my clothes. Somehow my skin is warm and cold at the same time. When I open my eyes, it feels like I’ve left my body and am looking down at the scene of my violation from above.

Oh, gods. Please no.

The dark elf seems to lose patience when I show no signs of cooperating. He pulls and picks at my clothing as my body goes slack.

Maybe if I just don’t fight, he won’t hurt me too much. My breath is shallow, every single breath hitching in my throat.

I still have to go to work tomorrow. Maybe if I just don’t fight, he’ll be nice. Maybe he’ll treat me gently.

I just want this to be over.

I shudder when he kisses me on the neck, and I close my eyes again. This might be happening to me, and it might be an inescapable situation, but I don’t think I need to see it.

I am already experiencing it, and that is enough.

Bile rises in my throat as his hands go between my legs. My body jerks away from him, and that makes him extremely angry because he grabs my throat again and slams my head against the wall behind me.

“Ouch!” I shriek, and tears pool in my eyes as I see stars. My ears ring, my head spins, and I can taste blood in my mouth where I bit down on my tongue.

“Just cooperate with me. And I won’t hurt you,” he whispers. His voice is nasally, and I know I’ll never forget it.

“Please,” I whisper one last prayer. “Please, I have to work tomorrow.”

“Then play along. And maybe you’ll get something out of this, too.”

And I try. I try to relax. I try to lose myself in the nighttime air. I try, but my skin runs hot and cold at the same time, my

head hurts, and my hands are bleeding where I have dug holes into them with my nails.

But then I hear it. Something rips.

Something that I am wearing. My pants.

Suddenly, I feel his hands on my bare legs.

“Your skin is so soft for a working girl. Dark elf girls could never match up to the fun I can have with a human. They’re all so uptight. All I want is a little slut.”

I burst into tears, and this upsets my attacker further. He slaps me twice across the face.

“Just enjoy it,” he tries to convince me as he opens the front of my jacket. I can feel his erection against my stomach. “Just enjoy it. You’re upsetting me. I don’t want to be upset.”

He kisses me full on the mouth then, and I nearly stop breathing. There is a lump in my throat that I cannot swallow down no matter what I do.

His mouth is wet and sloppy, and his breath is acrid.

I think I’m going to die here. Tonight I’m going to die.

I don’t know what I’ll do if he doesn’t kill me afterwards. I might have to beg him to.

How could I possibly go on after this? How can I go back to my small shack in the lowtowns where I barely have enough to eat? How can I continue working backbreaking jobs when the one thing I have always held dear to me – my freedom – has been taken away?

Hopefully, he’ll be merciful and kill me.

I am still crying. My body goes slack, my hands loosen, and the lump vanishes from my throat.

What am I going to do? What am I going to do?

Oh gods, someone please help me!

But praying is useless. The dark elf gods do not answer human prayers. Nobody does.

We’re alone.

I am alone.

VALKUS

“It is time to head home, I guess,” I murmur to Nexus when my legs start to strain and the likar begins to lag behind me.

But then everything changes.

Nexus senses it before I do.

Danger.

We both hear the choked, strangled screams.

I catch up with Nexus moments later. I can smell it in the air. Fear and violence.

We’re in the theater district. I’ve been walking for hours, just strolling around Pythos. Sometimes I stop in at a tavern or a bar for a drink. But Nexus is very rarely welcome indoors, so I never stay for long. Besides, I have come to prefer being outside at night, and I can drink at home.

We round a corner near the edge of the theater district and see the source of the danger.

She’s beautiful.

She’s human.

I see her face for only a second as she struggles against a tall dark elf who has her pinned up against a wall. Her skin, creamy and warm, shines in the moonlight. Her eyes are large, brown, and rimmed with thick, dark lashes. Her eyebrows are straight and dark, and I am sure that her face, heart-shaped as it is, is usually sweet.

But now her face is twisted in fear and pain.

And that should not be happening.

She should not be afraid.

No!

Nexus does not only sense her fear and the violence. He also senses my rage.

And he knows exactly what to do.

He goes leaping through the air, snarling, ripping, and clawing at the dark elf, while I dart forward to catch the human girl as she falls to the ground.

The dark elf fights against Nexus, struggling to get back to the human girl he was attacking.

The girl goes slack in my arms, and for one heart-wrenching moment I wonder if she is dead.

But then I feel for her pulse, and it is there, faint, fluttering, and frenzied. Her head lolls to the side while Nexus swipes his claws at the dark elf who is on his back on the ground.

“Hey, hey,” I whisper, stroking her cheek. “Are you okay? Please open your eyes.”

Pythos is almost completely dark. The only light comes from a local bar.

They must have heard her screaming. And they did nothing.

I drag the human girl away from the fight between Nexus and the dark elf.

And then I join Nexus.

My rage knows no bounds at this moment. All I can smell is the human girl. She smells dark, spicy, and slightly sweet. And she smells *afraid*.

The smell of her fear urges on my rage.

“How dare you!” I snarl at the dark elf, who I am quite sure belongs to one of the noble families.

Nexus jumps backwards as my foot makes contact with the dark elf's stomach.

I burst into manic, frantic laughter as I kick the piss out of the dark elf. All I can think of is what is going to happen when Mother finds out about this – if I am right and he is noble.

But that doesn't stop me. Nothing does. Not even when he starts crying out. Not even when he curls up in the fetal position and covers his face with his hands.

I am quite sure that everyone in the theatre district can hear his cries and shouts of pain, but I don't give a fuck.

“Please! Stop!” he screams when I haul him onto his feet and punch him in his stomach.

“Isn't that what she asked you to do? She asked you to stop? And you didn't!” I punch him right in the throat, and his eyes bulge out of his head at the force of the blow.

We are both bloody when I finish with him. Except he is unconscious, and I am not.

I let him fall to the ground, breathing heavily from the exertion of nearly beating him to death.

Nexus chirrup frantically from behind me then, and when I turn, I see that the human girl is conscious and is trying to crawl away from us.

“Hey, hey! Wait, you're hurt! Slow down!”

She is trembling when I reach her and place an arm around her shoulders.

“Please,” I murmur, and my voice is soft. I have never heard myself sound this soft. “Please just slow down.”

She bursts into tears then, and to my surprise, she buries her head in my chest.

“Okay.” I rub her back as soothingly as I can. “Okay. He won't hurt you again.”

I've found her.

I do not know why the words resound through my head with such force, but they do.

I've found her. She is mine.

She is mine. She is mine. She is mine.

I am almost dizzy when she finally pulls away from me. She rubs her face vigorously before she looks at me. Her face is flushed, and her cheeks are bright red. Her eyes are bloodshot, and her lips are quivering.

The first words that she speaks shock me.

“Why did you save me? Are you going to hurt me?”

I pull away from her, though I keep my arm around her.

“Of – of course not,” I stutter. But her eyes are wide with terror, and she is still trembling. “I just wanted to help you.”

I've found her.

She hesitates before speaking. “Thank you.”

I've found her. The one I'm supposed to be with for the rest of my life.

She runs a hand through her long dark hair. I look around for Nexus and find that he is curled up in a ball on the ground with his head on her jacket.

“What is your name?” I ask her curiously as we stand.

I know she wants to leave, but I need to keep her with me for as long as possible.

“Althia,” she says quietly and demurely, ducking her head. “My name is Althia.”

I look at Nexus, who raises his head and stares at me with his glittering eyes. I know exactly what he is thinking. Because I am thinking the exact same thing.

Mother is going to kill me when I bring her home.

Because that is the next thing I am going to do. I am going to convince her to come home with me.

I cannot be apart from her. Not in this lifetime or any other.

I've found her.

“Where do you live?”

She stiffens at the question and looks up at me with her dark, flashing eyes.

“In the lowtowns,” she murmurs. “That’s where all humans live.”

I have never been to the lowtowns, but from what I can tell, the humans who live there live in utter squalor. They live there because they are the poorest citizens of Pythos, and I know that saying they have a home is overstating it.

I can't let her go back there.

“You should come home with me.” I blurt the words out and wince as I do.

Her eyes become even wider.

“It’s getting late and walking to the lowtowns is going to be dangerous. You should come with me because I can protect you from others like him.” I jerk my head towards the prone figure of the unconscious dark elf on the ground nearby.

Nexus purrs in agreement while Althia laughs, but it is mirthless. She sounds almost hopeless.

“I’m not planning to do anything to you,” I tell her, even as I examine her figure. Her body is lush and well-rounded, though I can see that her bare legs are strong and muscular.

A vivid image of Althia with her legs wrapped around my waist while I thrust into her crosses my mind.

My mouth waters at the thought, and I have to force myself to focus on speaking coherently.

“I’ll give you a safe place to sleep, and you’ll have something warm to eat.” Her eyes light up slightly when I mention food, and I have to stop myself from frowning.

She is clearly very hungry, and I hate the fact that she probably hasn’t eaten all day.

She appears to relax, and a wave of relief washes over me.

I've found her. She's mine.

I gently reach for the ripped fabric of her pants, moving slowly like I would with a feral animal. She stiffens but does not pull away, and I manage to pull the fabric tautly enough to tie it securely at the waistband, offering her more modesty than I found her with. After I help her to her feet, we start to walk towards the center of Pythos, where I am sure I can find a carriage to take us home.

I've found her. She's mine.

She is mine now, and there are so many things I want to do with her.

I want to thread my hand through her hair. I want her to shudder with pleasure. I want to wrap my hand around her throat while I'm inside her, and I want to feel her pussy convulse around me.

I swallow as my throat goes dry while we walk.

Althia was clearly hurt by the dark elf who attacked her, and I am sure the metallic scent that has mingled with her fragrance is her blood. Now is not the time nor the place for these thoughts, not when she has clearly been hurt. I want to protect her – but I also have to fight off the urge to force her onto the ground and lick the blood off her.

Images of Althia writhing beneath me follow me all the way home, even as we move together through the streets of Pythos.

I don't think I can let them go.

I now know exactly what I'm going to do to her.

ALTHIA

So much has just gone down in the last few moments, all of which felt like a matter of seconds. Standing here next to me now is no doubt the singular most handsome dark elf I've ever laid my eyes on, certainly a rare sight to behold in this rotting cesspool of a city.

His skin matches the sky behind him as the evening casts a darkening blanket of deep blue over Pythos. His silver hair flows in the light breeze, and for a moment, it's as if the strands are wisps of cloud. Violet eyes jump out like vibrant stars, gazing upon me so studiously.

The likar by his side is of equal grace in its appearance. Its glimmer of purple shines reflectively in the moonlight against its black fur. The creature looks up at me with dilated eyes as its tail gently swishes. I'm no likar expert, but it seems like the animal is deciding what to make of me.

Only now do I comprehend what the dark elf has said, his offer finally registering in my head. Although I'm calming down, my hands still shake even as I clench them in an effort to regain control.

The dark elf reaches for them in a gentle manner, an act that catches me by surprise. Yet I let him do so, surrendering my palms to his grip. He uses his thumbs to stroke the back of my hands in a circular motion, which helps put me at ease. All the while, he looks at me with a slightly raised eyebrow, perhaps awaiting the answer to his proposal.

“I just want to make sure I heard you correctly,” I say. “Did you ask me to be your mate?”

“I did,” he answers proudly. His grip on my hands strengthens somewhat as he draws himself up. He then lets go, taking a small step back. “Pardon my lack of manners. My name is Valkus, Valkus Elenil,” he continues, bowing his head. As he reels his head back up, he wears a proud smile which looks good on him.

“Althia Sinclair,” I reply.

“What a gorgeous name,” he chuckles. “With the formalities out of the way, what do you say to my offer? At the very least, I think you need someone to look out for you.”

I can’t deny that. As brave as I try to be, I’m still a woman, making me a bullseye target in these streets and on this planet in general. Yet as charming as this man is, my gut instincts remind me to be wary and not to immediately give out my trust to a stranger.

Valkus may have saved me from being attacked, and for that I am grateful. Alas, he is still a dark elf at the end of the day, coming from a species of people that prey on my kind. I’ve come to naturally shield off the bastards from coming close to me.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “This is all so sudden, I –”

“Come on, let us not be so hasty with our decisions, hmm?”

I can’t deny just how nice and pleasant he is, but what if it’s all just a front?

“You seem on edge,” he says, gesturing to the goosebumps peppering my forearms. He removes his coat and takes a step toward me. “Here.” He throws it over my shoulders.

Damn it... Surely this isn’t a good idea, a voice inside me says as I begin seriously considering the offer. His gentlemanly actions only make him hotter.

“Sorry.” I chuckle. “My head is just a bit of a mess right now.”

“Then that makes my proposal all the more valid,” he states with confidence. “Someone needs to look after you here, to shield you from the brutality of these streets. And, hey...”

He casts an amused look around him. “To be completely honest with you, I need to bring someone home in order to appease my nagging parents.”

“So what you’re saying is that it’ll be a win-win for the both of us?” I say teasingly.

“Precisely.” He beams with a proud smile. Turning, he points in the opposite direction I’d been walking in when I was attacked. “My place is this way. You’re still coming for tonight, whether you accept my proposal or not.”

I nod, even though it didn’t really sound like a question.

“Come then, let us walk and talk.”

He offers his arm. I feel obliged to take it, linking with him. Together, we break off into a slow stride, his pet likar ambling by my side.

“His name is Nexus, by the way.”

“He’s beautiful,” I remark, extending a hand toward him.

“Be careful, he’s not exactly –”

He stops when Nexus nudges my hand.

“How on Protheka did you get one of these?” I ask, stroking Nexus’s forehead. “I’ve never seen someone have one as a pet before.”

“I found him as a young animal, half-starved. I think he shows me a favor because he remembers all that I did for him. Indeed, he still has a wild side and doesn’t typically take kindly to strangers, save for you apparently, but he and I got along from day one. I must admit, I’m flabbergasted he’s even letting you touch him.”

I continue petting Nexus, curious how such a courageous and strong animal could be trained so well by an elf. It only makes me wonder about the abilities he has. Something

mysterious lies deep within Valkus' character, and I want to stick around and uncover that.

“Your family is blessed by the gods to have such a glorious being in their home.”

“Unfortunately, they don't see it that way.” He sighs. “But that's okay. Nexus is more of a friend to me than my family is.”

Unsure of what to say, I keep my lips sealed.

“Anyway,” he continues. “Nexus aside, tell me more of your typical experience with the people in this town.”

“Oh, where do I start?” I laugh. “Hmm, violent, standoffish, pretty unpleasant all-round. As sad as it sounds, I'm used to unwelcome comments and elves trying to get their hands on me.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” says Valkus. “Nexus and I could certainly help with that. You'll have protection, that and much, much more should you make the right decision and come with me. Life for me is far different from those living here in the filth of the lowtowns.”

“Well, no one here has a likar.” I chuckle. He laughs with me. “Look, I'm just not sure. We just met, but don't get me wrong, I'm really grateful for your help.”

“You need not thank me for doing the right thing,” he says, waving a dismissive hand. At the same time, he runs a studious eye over my body. “But I'm an honest man, Althia. I point things out where I see them.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, halting in place.

“To put it bluntly, you are frail. Do you have a home?”

“Yes,” I answer. By the raise of his eyebrow, I can tell he doesn't fully believe me. “I'll admit that it's far from ideal.”

“What about food?”

I let go of his hand, unconsciously laying it over my stomach.

“I... I usually have to ration it out strictly.”

“So you don’t have enough to buy enough food, is that right?”

“Well, food and everything else is pretty tough to keep on top of. I just barely get by.”

“Althia, I have all of this at my disposal.” He looks on ahead, up a path that leads away from my home. “My place is that way, so this is where you must make your final decision.”

I’m closer than ever to being swayed to go with him. Apart from his good looks and charm, the promise of warm shelter and good food sounds pretty damn enticing.

“I implore you to join me,” he says, extending his hand out. At the same time, Nexus approaches my hand, giving it a sniff before nudging me. “As does Nexus, as it seems. So, what do you say?”

It seems like I don’t have much of an option given how insistent he is... But what do I have to lose in saying yes? The answer is clear, absolutely nothing.

I take his hand. My gracious acceptance spreads that handsome smile across his face once more.

“Excellent choice. You won’t regret it.” He beams. “Just this way then.”

Together, we walk up a slight incline, making various twists and turns until a manor comes into view up ahead.

“Hey,” I blurt. “I used to always see this manor when I walked to work. That couldn’t possibly be...”

“Oh, yes, it’s my home,” he chuckles. “If you’ve had your eye on it for a while, then I would go so far as to say it was fate that led our paths to cross, wouldn’t you?”

The manor gleams like treasure in the moonlight, looking like something constructed out of a dream. I can’t believe it’s about to be my home, at least for the next little while.

“Is this really happening?” I whisper, not intending for my newfound friend to hear it.

“Yes, yes it is.”

I giggle in embarrassment as we approach the manor, making our way up to its front entrance.

“Wait,” I blurt out, stopping in place. “You mentioned your family. Do they also live here with you?”

“Unfortunately, they do,” he groans. It was the second time he used that word when talking about his family, leading me to wonder just how strained his relationship with them is. “But fear not. I won’t introduce them to you just yet. We’ll get around to that in the morning.”

“Where will I sleep?”

He glances seductively at me. Part of me wants him to say his bedroom, but at the same time, intimacy isn’t on my mind after what that attacker attempted to do to me. He seemingly reads this, the look in his eyes reducing to that of a plain, friendly expression.

“I’ll set you up in the guest room tonight so you can have your own space, it’s near my bedroom. You’ll need a good rest tonight. I’ll be coming around for you early in the morning, so be up at sunrise.”

VALKUS

I'm filled with excitement as I rifle through an old closet in search of something for my guest to wear. Over the years, my family has tossed aside old clothing into storage, but today some of it will come in handy.

My eyes land on the perfect garment. It is an old dress that used to belong to my sister Velora, dark red in color with thin padding all around, designed to show off the wearer's figure. I know for a fact that Althia will look good in this.

Having found the right outfit, I briskly make my way to the guest quarters, eager to see what my mate looks like on a beautiful morning. Part of me hopes to find her asleep so that I may gaze upon her gorgeous features for a brief while.

Nexus perks up and trills as I approach the guest room. He had been waiting outside all night, having obeyed my command not to let anyone near Althia.

She is where I want her to be, but if I'm going to make the human mine then I can't afford for others to be poking their noses into my business with her.

I stop at the door, clearing my throat before rapping gently upon it. I then enter, peeking my head through the frame before fully stepping inside. I twist the lock behind me.

Althia sits up in bed, positioned with her back against the frame as she rubs her eyes. Nexus immediately approaches her, his tail curling upwards as he jumps onto the bed.

"Good morning, Althia," I greet. "How did you sleep?"

“It’s the best sleep I’ve had in my whole life.”

“We sleep on only the finest mattresses under this roof,” I tell her with a sense of pride. I step closer, hanging the dress on a nearby rack. “This is your attire for brunch.”

“Wow,” she gasps, stroking Nexus at the same time. “It’s beautiful.”

“You can use that divider in the corner to change. Be swift about it. Meal time is fast approaching, and you must look presentable for my parents.”

“Right.”

She departs from the bed, whisking the dress from the rack before disappearing behind the divider. I had intended on making the bed while she changed, but at that moment, a blinding gleam of sunlight shines in through the window.

It casts itself in the direction of the divider, and through it, I see the outline of Althea’s body in shadow form. My jaw drops at the shape of her curves, tracing the exterior of her body in a hypnotizing fashion. She can’t see that I’m marveling at her, so I take advantage and lean against the wall to enjoy the show.

What a fucking view, I think to myself, imagining what her body looks like up close. I don’t get to relish in my fantasies for long as a polite knock comes at the door. *Who the fuck?*

“I’ll get it,” I tell Althia.

I open the door ever so slightly to the sight of Yiosha. She is a young zagfer who serves my family. Her dark skin is almost as black as her eyes. The sight of her has startled me on more than one occasion.

She’s never been a direct problem and is always courteous and respectful, but that doesn’t exclude her from the resentment I have towards the people in this house. Perhaps it’s the way she is a puppet for my parents, practically living to obey their every whim.

“Valkus, I thought I heard you in here,” she greets with a warm smile. “What are you doing in the guest room? I came to

retrieve you at your quarters for mealtime, but you were absent.”

“I’m just getting ready.”

“Your parents are expecting you.”

“I know that,” I tell her impatiently. “Let them know I’ll be down in a matter of moments.”

Her pupils move to look behind me. She’s nosy and has no problem prodding into my business on behalf of my parents, another trait of hers that gets on my nerves.

“I thought I heard a woman’s voice in here.”

“Who is that?” snaps Yiosha with widened eyes when she sees the shadow behind the divider.

“I will see you at the table,” I hiss, shutting the door in her face.

I’m sick of that fucking slave.

Sighing, I turn around to see Althia step out from behind the divider, donning the dress I chose for her. The sight of her is whimsical, and for a moment, I lose strength in my knees in an effort to behold her beauty.

I become tempted to make a move and take her there and then. I would happily skip brunch as I’m far hungrier for something else.

The things I would do to you right now...

“Do I look okay?” asks Althia shyly.

“Marvelous,” I assure. “Come then, it’s time we meet my parents.”

Luckily, Yiosha isn’t waiting right outside for us as we leave the guest room. Nexus walks a few meters up ahead as if surveilling the whereabouts for us.

Althea’s hand is wrapped around the inner bend of my arm. Through it, I can feel a slight tremor, a surefire sign of her anxiety. I wish I could tell her that my parents are nothing to worry about, but that would be a lie.

“Let me handle the talking,” I tell her. “My parents are admittedly quite the handful and might be a little overwhelming upon introduction.”

“Great.” She sighs.

“Just do as I say and all will be fine, I promise.”

We descend a glamorous stairwell that stretches wide enough for six people, narrowing as we reach the bottommost stop. I guide Althia into the dining room.

It is more like a ballroom hall, stretching far enough to host a small crowd. A long table runs from one end to the other, where my parents are sitting. Peppered evenly along the surface are candelabras, unlit at this time of the morning.

Hanging overhead from the center of the ceiling is a chandelier. Small statuettes of words sit atop it, peering down at the table as if spying on diners. Sconces sit on opposite walls parallel to each other, and in between them are paintings of various royal figures, most of which are my own work.

My parents don't look up as I enter the dining room. It angers me that they lack the respect to greet their son, yet they demand we chase the validation of those outside our family.

I announce my arrival with a booming voice as I approach, startling them. They snap their gazes up in surprise, then their eyes immediately widen at the sight of Althia, who steps forward.

“Mother, Father, this is my mate-to-be. Her name is Althia Sinclair,” I say proudly.

I stand there with my chin raised high, my ears ready for a barrage of praises for bringing home a mate. When silence follows, I peer down at my parents who look at Althia in disgust, causing her to retreat to my side.

“When did the human get here?” hisses Meriana.

“We came back last night.”

“And you didn't think of coming to inform us that a human entered the property?” snaps Elrend.

“You were asleep at that hour,” I say calmly.

I pull out a chair and gesture for Althia to take a seat. As I take mine next to her, I can feel the glare of my parents darting between my guest and myself.

This isn't exactly doing much good for her anxiety, I think in frustration. Nexus trills loudly, nudging Althia. At least I have him here to distract her from my parents.

A side door leading in from the kitchen opens and in steps Yiosha with a fresh pot of rize tea.

“Ah, Yiosha, come fill mine and Althea's cups.”

Yiohsa looks up, confusion flickering over her face at the sight of the human. She approaches as if Althia is a wild animal. As she reluctantly pours tea into the cup, she looks at my guest from the corner of her eye.

“Remind me of your name,” she says.

“Althia, pleased to meet you. Your name is Yiosha, did I hear that correctly?”

She extends her hand toward the zagfer, but Yiosha scoffs at her and returns to the kitchen.

“Even the zagfer know better than to bring home a human,” murmurs Elrend, shaking his head. “Why on Protheka do I bother waking up in the morning?”

“What's that?” I snap at him in a challenging tone.

My father narrows his brows at me in anger.

“I said, why do I bother getting up in the morning to exhaust myself building our family's dying reputation, only for you to go and bring home... this!” he blurts, pointing at Althia.

“Need I remind you that neither you nor Mother would shut up about me getting a mate to call my own? I finally give in and do this for you, yet you still find a reason to complain. I bet that if I became the King of Pythos this afternoon, you two would still take issue with me.”

“Valkus!” snaps Meriana.

“Can’t you be happy for me, just once?”

“That’s not what this is about. Don’t you know how a human mate looks in this day and age? You are still only thinking of yourself in this situation.”

“So you’re calling me selfish. Well, that’s rich coming from you.”

“How dare you?” gasps Elrend.

For a moment, there is only silence save for the purring of Nexus as he tends to Althia. Surprisingly, she doesn’t appear to be paying too much attention to the discussion, but perhaps she knows there’s nothing she can say to appease them.

“It’s alright.” I sigh. “I’ve already gotten used to being the son that always lets the family down. You treated Taveth the same way, and that’s why he barely joins us anymore.”

My parents grunt, rising from the table. Each of them throws down their handkerchief and storms out of the dining room, shooting one final glare at us before disappearing altogether.

“I don’t know what to say, other than you were right,” says Althia. “I’m sorry I wasn’t any help.”

“No, you did the best you could. It is them who didn’t handle it well,” I tell her reassuringly. “Come then, let us indulge in something to eat.”

ALTHIA

After an eventful breakfast, Valkus escorted me back to my room, allowing me some more time alone in order to sort myself out. Moving overnight isn't exactly an easy affair, and I'm going to need a lot of personal space and time to settle in.

Thus far, it's mostly consisted of sitting by my window, gazing out over the city of Pythos. It's like a part of me is still back in the lowtowns. I'm almost afraid to blink in case this is all just a dream and I wake up in my shack of a home.

This time twenty-four hours ago, I was in the middle of my menial job, making barely enough money to get by for the week. Now, I'm donned in a pretty dress, wondering just how I got here in the first place.

"Why me?" I ask myself. "Was I just the right girl in the right place at the right time?"

At that moment, there comes a knock at my door. I turn around to see Valkus enter. He appears to have changed into a different attire for the early evening, wearing a light blue tunic with trousers as black as the midnight sky. The top of his tunic is open, exposing his collarbone.

"How are you getting on?" he asks, smiling that handsome smile of his.

"I'm slowly starting to believe this is real."

"Such a sudden twist in one's life is never a quick change to grasp," he says thoughtfully as if remarking on some

profound philosophy, but I'm glad he understands. "Come then, it's time for our evening meal."

My stomach growls at the mention of food. Despite being used to a lingering hunger, I hadn't eaten much this morning, mostly due to how put off I was by the interaction with Valkus' family.

He offers his hand, and together, we make our way down to the dining room. There, we're greeted by Yiosha, or rather Valkus is. The zagfer barely gives me a look as if I do not exist in her world.

She guides us to our seats. Only then do we notice the absence of Valkus' parents.

"Where are Mother and Father?" he asks.

"I'm afraid they wished to dine alone tonight. They've already retreated to their quarters for the evening."

"What a bunch of children, but good riddance if you ask me." Valkus chuckles.

I can't exactly say I'm gutted to not have them here, either.

"Yiosha, please fetch us two portions of whatever's on the menu tonight. Be snappy with it. My mate and I are hungry.

"Right away," replies the servant, bowing before spinning around on her heels.

Just before she disappears through the door to the kitchen, however, she glares over her shoulder at me. *Gods, she really wants me to know she's not a fan.*

"What's her problem? She's been giving me the evil eye all day long," I remark.

"She likely shares the same sentiment as my parents. She's their little puppet, you see. Worry not, I'll teach her a lesson."

I'm eager to see the zagfer retrieve a verbal bashing. After a few moments pass, Yiosha enters the dining room with a cart. On it are empty plates and cutlery, as well as a serving bowl of what smells like taura bahru.

She gracefully lays out a plate and a generous portion for Valkus, being mindful not to splash any residue. With me, however, she practically throws the plate down in front of me, then flings a serving of food, some of which lands on my dress.

“Yiosha!” yells Valkus. “How dare you act so immaturely? Clean up this mess you’ve created.”

Yiosha mutters an apology then produces a handkerchief from the sleeve of her uniform, cleaning the thick brown stains off of my dress.

“I’ll have this garment cleaned for you when you’re done with it,” says the zagfer.

“That’s right. By the way, Althia here will be living in the manor with us, so you’d better get used to being courteous and respectful to her at all times. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, of course!”

“I will not tolerate such behavior from a subordinate. Consider this your one and only warning. Now get out of my sight.”

I watch in disbelief as the zagfer briskly leaves us. *This chivdouyu really just stood up for me? A human? I never thought I would live to see the day...*

“Wow, you really laid into her.” I chuckle.

“I may not be able to control what my parents say about us, but the last thing I’ll tolerate is others being disrespectful to you. I promised you a place to live, but what good are food and shelter when the people you’re surrounded by treat you like nothing? You deserve the very best. Now, please, eat and enjoy yourself.”

A dark elf showing such kindness is something humans could only dream of. *I’m really getting it all here. Food, a warm bed, and respect.* Reaching over to Valkus, I take his hand.

“Thank you.”

He smiles and turns his attention to our dinner. I'm beginning to acknowledge that maybe, just maybe, I can trust this man after all.

After our evening meal concludes, my host takes me out to the gardens for a cup of tea. The skies have darkened to pitch black but are peppered with many stars to marvel upon.

The gardens themselves are a sight to behold in their own right. I step out of the manor, coming to a small stairway that overlooks the layout.

Sitting at random points are lamp posts that give off just enough light to illuminate the many rows of hedges that live here, arranged in a maze-like formation. They're well tended to, all trimmed flat along the top with no stray branches or leaves on the ground.

Various flower beds sit nearby though I cannot discern their colors, their sections too entrenched in the shadows. In the distance is a statue, but again, it is too far to see.

"This is beautiful," I gasp. "May we take a stroll?"

"We'd best do that tomorrow morning. The daylight will show off more of the garden's features, and I'll happily guide you through each path. Come have some tea."

I take a seat beside him, but my eyes remain glued to the garden. The manor is beautiful, but the garden is quickly cementing itself as my favorite part of the residence.

I cover my mouth in embarrassment as I yawn.

"Sorry," I mutter.

"Don't be. I can see you're tired, so we'll save the talking for tomorrow. For now, let us enjoy some peace and quiet."

I glance at him, marveling at his features, some of which the moonlight really highlights such as his violet eyes. He catches me looking at him.

"Let's have some alone time out here more often. I'd like to get to know you better," I say a little shyly.

“Me, too. I’m sorry about the behavior of everyone. I assure you I’ll do everything I can to control them.”

“You don’t need to apologize for them. Your presence makes up for how they act.”

His violet eyes narrow in on me as if in admiration, and I wonder if he likes what he sees, brewing a melting sensation inside of me.

When Valkus eventually escorts me back to bed, I’m tempted to invite him in for the night, but I decide to hold back for the time being. I want to take my time cherishing every moment of his presence, and not be too eager to do something with someone who I just met.

Yet still, I cannot deny just how enamored I am by his company alone.



IT IS EARLY the next morning when we’re once again dining alone, enjoying a tranquil and filling breakfast. Yiosha noticeably acts differently this time around, even offering me a second helping and a refill of tea when I am finished.

All the while, Valkus watches on with a careful eye, nodding in approval at the zagfer’s efforts to be attentive to my needs.

As promised, I am brought out to the gardens. More than eager to explore, I can’t help but run off into the maze as Valkus laughs behind me. I take various twists and turns, eventually coming around a corner to a strange but interesting sight.

Arranged on easels are pieces of beautiful art, some of them recognizable as parts of the city and the countryside. Each painting is incredibly immersive, and it’s almost like I’m being pulled into their scenery.

“I thought you might like to see what I do for a living,” says Valkus as he walks up behind me. “In our efforts to get to know each other.”

“Wait, you did this?”

“Indeed I did.”

“Valkus, these pieces are amazing! I never knew someone in this day and age could be so artistically gifted.”

“You... really think that?” he asks.

“Of course, I do,” I tell him, then I turn back to look at the art.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. “That’s more admiration than my family has ever given me.”

“Are you working on anything new? You’ll have to let me spectate sometime, I’d love to watch a work in progress.”

“I... I happily will,” he replies, seemingly in disbelief. “If you’re interested, I can show you more of my work later on. This is just a small collection of them.”

“The more the merrier.” I beam.

Valkus comes to my side, casting a studious eye on his work. I shoot a sidelong glance at him. It’s easy to see just how passionate he is about this hobby of his.

A dark elf with an actual pastime that doesn’t involve chasing something to fuck. This is... endearing.

I take a few steps back, retreating to a nearby bench. There, I soak in all that surrounds me, spotting the statue I saw last night standing tall behind the display of paintings.

It depicts a likar looking to the distance. Water shoots out of its mouth, dropping down into the fountain and circling it

As if summoned by the sight of the statue, Nexus jumps out from one of the bushes, greeting me with purrs and nudges.

This whole scene carries the feeling of a dream. The likar resting beside me, the fountain, the paintings, the gardens, and most of all, the beautiful man who turns his head to look at me.

It's right there at that moment that I know I made the right decision to come here with him.

VALKUS

THREE.

I *t has been three weeks since I met Althia.*

Pyrthos is bright today, and I am grateful that the weather turned out beautifully because I have plans with Althia today.

The first thing I need to do, though, is ensure that she is properly dressed for the day.

I called a tailor last week – the most fashionable tailor in all of Pyrthos who dresses all the most fashionable dark elf women – and today, dozens of packages are being delivered from the tailor.

I carry some of them while three zagfers carry the rest, and we walk up to my wing of the house.

I throw the door open to find Althia sitting at the desk, and she is gazing out of the window at Pyrthos.

She turns when we walk in, and her eyes widen as I dump the packages all over the floor and table.

The zagfers follow suit before hurrying out of the room. They return minutes later with other, smaller packages which they put carefully on the table.

“I have something for you,” I tell her. It is still early, and the sun isn’t very high in the sky yet, but it is warm and the air is dry.

“What is all this?” she asks me in a hushed voice as she stands and walks over to the packages.

“I thought you might need some clothes. And this.” I point to the smaller packages. “That is some jewelry that I thought would look good on you.”

It has been three weeks since I met Althia and courting her has been the best experience of my life.

I didn't think I had it in me, and I am quite sure that no one in my family did, either. But I have finally found a woman who makes me want to spend time, money, and love on her.

And I think that after three weeks, I am falling in love.

Her eyes widen as she opens the packages, and I examine her as she walks around the room, admiring the clothes and jewelry.

Althia was quite lean when I met her, but since moving in with me, she has become curvier from eating properly and not working herself half to death.

Her body is still lithe, but now she looks lush and ripe in a way that makes me salivate.

TWENTY.

It has been twenty days since our first date.

It takes us both at least two hours to unpack every item of clothing. Eventually, Althia finds an ensemble to wear on our outing today.

She chooses a pale pink dress with a long skirt that falls to the ground gracefully. The dress is slightly form-fitting, and I would hardly call it modest because it shows off the curves and lines of her body perfectly.

Then she places a large, wide-brimmed pink hat on her hair, which she coiled into an elegant chignon at the nape of her neck.

“Are you ready?” I ask her and hold out my arm. She looks at me slightly anxiously and takes my arm as we walk out of the room.

“What about all the wrappings?” she asks me, and the anxiety in her voice is obvious. “Shouldn’t we pick those up?”

“The zagfers will handle it when they come to clean the rooms,” I assure her.

A carriage is waiting for us outside my family’s home, and I help her into it. As soon as we’re both settled, the carriage pulls away from the estate and toward the center of Pyrthos.

I received my latest payment from the King after having worked feverishly on several paintings over the last two months.

And I have used a good chunk of that money on today’s outing.

Most of the expense came from hiring an entire restaurant for the day.

“Balkan’s Light is one of my favorite restaurants in Pyrthos. They have the best food around and a stunning view of the entire city.”

Balkan’s Light stands on the crest of a hill and is a two-story building with a terrace. Beautiful rirzed herbs and bluefrost flowers are arranged on every table. There are several pots of zabilla, a succulent plant with pink and green petals grown in Tlouz, on smaller tables.

Althia gasps at the beauty of it, and this earns a smile from the dark elf who is the proprietor of the place, a dark elf noblewoman named Charis.

Charis is one of the few dark elves I know who has given up her life of nobility to run a restaurant and who also doesn’t have anything bad to say about me being with a human.

It has been twenty days since my first date with Althia. And I learned a lot about her on that day.

I learned that she needs to be treated gently and with the utmost care. I learned that her life has been incredibly difficult.

And I also learned that she is afraid of my kind, of dark elves, especially female dark elves.

I have always known how vicious the females of my kind could be, but I only really learned the truth of it through Althia's eyes.

No one gets to hurt her but me.

The thought is stubborn and disturbing, but I know I will never hurt her beyond what she asks for.

And part of me believes that Althia likes pain as much as I do.

TEN.

It has been ten days since my parents gave up.

We are seated in the middle of the terrace, and a warm, sweet breeze is blowing in from the west.

Charis brings over some cocktails and a tasting menu for us, before the main course.

“This is all so delicious. But you really didn't have to do this. I know you have paintings to work on,” Althia says softly.

“I need to take a break,” I tell her with a shrug. “My wrists are quite painful. And besides, I want to spend as much time with you as I can.”

“Thank you,” she tells me, and the sincerity in her voice warms my blood.

A sudden vision of Althia in restraints, writhing on a bed beneath me while I cut open her skin as I pleasure her, threatens to overwhelm me.

But I beat the vision away.

There will be time enough for that later, I tell myself and drink some of my cocktail.

It has been ten days since my parents have given up on trying to make Althia leave.

I think they've almost accepted her presence in our household, and my father has even had a few conversations

with her.

They are probably surprised, and maybe slightly pleased, by how intelligent Althia is. Because despite her previous life as a menial, manual laborer, Althia has knowledge about a wide range of topics, including politics, economics, trade, and art.

Being able to have real conversations with her is refreshing. All the dark elf women in my circle are too concerned with the latest fashions, jewelry, or theater productions.

Even my mother cannot keep up with Althia's train of thought, once she gets going.

I lean back and stare at Althia as Charis comes over. They talk, woman to woman, about Althia's dress, the food, and the weather.

By the time we are ready to leave, I know that Althia has made her first friend. Aside from me, of course.

FIVE.

It has been five days of bliss.

After we finish dessert, we take the carriage to the theater district, where a production of Azariel's Curse is being shown.

Azariel's Curse is a famous dark elf play about love, loss, and sorrow, and it has inspired a lot of my art.

We receive a lot of stares when we enter the largest open-air theater on the whole of Protheka, even though Althia is clearly wearing the latest fashions.

A sudden surge of irritation ruins my happy mood, but then I realize that most of the stares we are receiving come from other dark elf males who are looking at Althia because of her beauty.

My irritation disappears, replaced by pride and protectiveness. I place my arm on her thigh when we sit down as the play commences.

It has been five days of bliss. Spending all this time with Althia has shown me what I want to do for the rest of my life.

I've found her.

The thought that rattles around my brain so often echoes through my head again. Because I've found her. I've found Althia.

I've found my bliss.

ONE DAY I'll make her mine.

Now that I've found Althia, I need to find a way to claim her. To mark her. To ensure that she is mine.

I need to ensure that she never leaves me.

I need to ensure that she succumbs to me, submits to me, gives herself to me completely.

I want to break her.

And one day I will do that. One day soon.

I am plagued by images of Althia, screaming with pleasure and pain as I use my fire on her, as I bite her, as I choke her, all while I fuck her.

I shift in my seat as my cock strains against my trousers, and I grip her thigh slightly tighter.

Hopefully, I'll leave bruises for all to see.

We leave the theater after Azariel is killed by his lover in the last act, and Althia and I walk slowly, hand-in-hand to the carriage.

"This was such a beautiful day." She tells me and when I look down at her, her eyes are shining with happiness.

"I just want you to be happy." I blurt out, and her eyes widen with shock.

"I am." She confesses after a while and I smile, knowing that I have achieved what I set out to do today.

"I am happy."

ALTHIA

Valkus is painting all day in his studio above his bedroom, and I know he cannot be disturbed.

So I spend most of the day alone, only leaving his wing of the house for breakfast and lunch.

Valkus's parents are nowhere to be seen for both meals, and I cannot help but feel relieved.

They seem to have given up on terrorizing me into leaving, but they are still quite hostile towards me.

I've had several long conversations with Valkus's father about politics and art, using the information I gathered from books in the large houses I have cleaned in the past.

I think that both his parents were quite surprised that I could hold my own during the conversation, but they haven't done anything more to make me feel welcome, even though Valkus has made it clear that I am here to stay.

How did I get here? How is this my life now?

Sometimes it is disconcerting, waking up in this massive mansion after having spent the majority of my life living in what was little more than a hovel.

But I also know that now that I have gotten used to living here, I'll never be able to go back to another kind of life.

I have gained a lot of healthy weight, and my body is filling out the clothes that Valkus bought me well. The calluses

on my hands have disappeared with help from the lotions and salves provided by the healer that Valkus took me to see.

I also sleep soundly every night, now that I do not have to worry about where my next meal is going to come from.

I am walking back up to his wing of the house when I see him coming downstairs. His clothes are covered in paint and his hair is disheveled, but his eyes brighten when he sees me.

Valkus hops the rest of the way down the stairs and comes at me quickly. He takes me by the waist and lifts me into the air, swinging me around.

I shriek with surprise before bursting into a fit of giggles.

I think I'm falling in love with him.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he tells me breathlessly as he puts me down on the floor with ease. “We’re going out for dinner tonight. Get ready.”

And with a swift kiss on my cheek, he disappears down one of the many hallways of the house.



I HAVE NEVER BEEN PARTICULARLY FOND of getting dressed. Maybe because I have never had any beautiful clothes to wear.

So for the first time tonight, I am excited about getting ready for my dinner with Valkus.

I still have piles and piles of brand-new, tailored clothing to go through. But for the night, I find a pale blue blouse and a long white skirt with a slightly frilled hem.

I get dressed after I bathe and do my hair. After I am dressed, I put on some of the jewelry that Valkus has bought me.

The necklace and earrings that I am wearing are delicate and are made from hidium. Emerald zanthenite stones hang from both the necklace and earrings.

I look at myself in the tiny mirror in the bathroom, and I realize that, for the first time, I look perfectly happy.

And it isn't just because of the things that Valkus has bought me or what he has done for me.

I am happy because someone is taking care of me for the first time since my parents died when I was a child.

“Who knew that not having to worry and scrounge for food and shelter would be a stress reliever?” I mutter to myself as I slip my feet into a pair of soft, velvety pumps. Then I leave Valkus's quarters and go downstairs to meet him.

Valkus is waiting for me at the bottom of the staircase, and I take his hand when I reach him.

I do not miss the two zagfers that stand to attention nearby. They're both carrying large baskets, and they follow us out when Valkus starts to lead me out of one of the side doors.

“Where are we going?” I ask him curiously.

“You'll see.” Valkus smiles at me mischievously.

I enjoyed our time out at the restaurant and theater the other day, and I assumed we would be going out into town again.

But instead of leading me to a carriage, Valkus leads me out into the grounds of the Elenil estate.

I hear my breath hitch in my throat when he leads me into the forest surrounding the large mansion.

“It is so beautiful.” I haven't been outside on the grounds of his family's home yet, and I am sure that it must be stunning in the daytime, because right now after sunset, as the city's lights are flickering on, it takes my breath away.

The air is warm and sweet, and the scents of nimond beans and bright, tart rirzed herbs hang in the air.

We continue walking until we reach a small grove, where the zagfers spread out blankets and unpack the baskets while Valkus shows me a little ornamental tower where he used to paint.

“This place is lovely. It must have been amazing to grow up here,” I cannot help but gush.

Valkus smiles slightly distractedly as we sit down on the blankets. He hands me some delicious finger foods, and we talk about his childhood.

“Yes, it was lovely. But once I started painting and my parents noticed my talent, I spent more and more time indoors. They wanted me to be more disciplined because I used to spend my days just walking around the grounds. They didn’t understand that it helped me find more inspiration.”

“I’m sorry that you had to spend so much time indoors.”

He feeds me some cake and cheese, and I groan at the decadence of the food.

“I got used to it after a while. It wasn’t the worst thing in the world, because I have always loved painting. I think painting indoors made me a little crazy, though, and eventually my mother learned that she had to open the windows while I was painting. Especially after I started mysteriously passing out at the dinner table.”

I burst into a fit of giggles, and I find myself shifting closer to Valkus. Any hesitation that I may have had before has disappeared in the last week.

Now all I want is for Valkus to touch me. All I want is to learn more about him. All I want is to spend a very, very long time with him.

“What was your childhood like?” he asks me, and I pause before answering. He feeds me another piece of cake.

“Um.” I swallow with some difficulty. “My parents died when I was very young. I grew up running around the lowtowns with the neighbors’ children. It was nice until I had to start working.”

Valkus is silent for a while and then he places his arm around my shoulders.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he whispers.

I laugh, and this must surprise him because he pulls away.

“You don’t have to apologize. That is just how life works. And it all worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

“Yes, life brought you to me,” Valkus says with a delighted smile on his face.

This time, I feed him some roasted dripir meat on a cracker, and he eats it, his eyes still on me.

“So what do you want to do tomorrow?” Valkus asks me, and we start talking about the things we enjoy.

“I used to spend the little free time I had reading,” I tell him as we finish up the food.

“Then I need to take you to the royal library!” he says excitedly. “You’ll love it there. That library has the most books in Pyrthos.”

“But isn’t it just for the royals?” I ask him cautiously.

But Valkus just smiles at me and then winks, before leaning forward to kiss my nose.

“This is what comes from being with a royal painter! I’m one of Pyrthos’s artists in residence, so I spend a lot of time in the palace, anyway. They’ll let you in, don’t worry.”

The thought makes something bloom in my chest, something I don’t understand.

I think I’m falling for him. Now that I know who he really is, I think to myself.

I settle against him, and he puts his arm back around my shoulders.

“I could fall asleep here,” I murmur a little later as we watch the city’s lights twinkle on. “It is so peaceful here.”

“That’s what my parents were going for,” Valkus tells me conversationally. “They may not be the nicest people, but they do have a good eye for landscaping.”

“They really do,” I agree before I sit up.

Valkus turns to me then and brushes an errant strand of hair away from my face before he leans in to kiss me.

And I don't stop him.

Because I know now that this is exactly what I want.

VALKUS

I'VE FOUND HER.

When Althia and I first kiss, I shudder from the pleasure of it, of *her*.

Everything about her consumes me, envelops me, and threatens to drive me insane.

Her mouth is soft and generous, and she kisses me back as passionately as I kiss her.

She wants me.

I've found her.

My family's property sprawls on for acres and acres. And I think tonight, I am for the first time admiring the handiwork of the dozens of zagfer gardeners my parents have employed over the years.

Althia and I sit in a little grove on the crest of a hill, overlooking the city of Pyrthos. The bulk of my family's estate sits at the base of the hill behind us and is surrounded by a small moat to prevent flooding.

This grove has always been my favorite place. I used to paint and sketch here, in a little tower that still stands a few feet away from where we sit when I was a child.

I have always associated the tower with the strong scent of paints, and the sweet, tart scents of nimond bean and rirzed herbs, which grow all over the Elenil property.

But now, as Althia and I cling to one another, those vivid memories dissolve from my mind.

And I know that now, and for the rest of my life, whenever I think of the grove and the tower, I'll think of Althia's mouth, too. I'll think of her perfume and the feel of my hand threaded through her silky hair.

For the first time in my life, there is something more important to me than painting.

When Althia and I pull away from one another, we are both trembling, both gasping, both still reaching for one another.

I swallow, my throat going dry as I look at her. I reach for her face, and her eyes flutter closed when I cup her cheek with my hand.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper to her.

Somewhere close by, we can hear the sounds of a flock of pavos singing in unison.

When Althia opens her eyes again, they are bright and glossy with tears.

"Don't cry, darling," I say and then reach for the plate of fruit that I had the zagfers prepare for the picnic.

I feed her some of the cut-up tizret fruit, and a shiver of arousal ripples throughout my body as I watch her lick her lips after she swallows.

Althia seems to become more bold because she leans in to kiss me then, and when she does, I can still taste the tizret fruit on her lips.

"You're so perfect." The words come out in a growl, and the growl rumbles, reverberating in my chest as Althia falls to the grass and pulls me down on top of her.

I have been imagining her like this, on her back, vulnerable, arching, needy, and all for me, from the minute I saved her from the dark elf that attacked her.

Her hands go to my neck while I slide a hand underneath her back and then to her hip so that I am lifting her slightly.

I can feel every line and curve of her soft body as I press myself against her. We are still kissing when she lifts her legs and wraps them around my waist.

And I feel it then. Her need, her desire, is as strong as mine.

She has let go of every inhibition and is offering herself to me as though I am a god and she is a willing sacrifice.

I pull away then, and small whimpers of frustrated desperation escape her as she looks up at me, her brow furrowed with confusion and disappointment.

But the look clears from her face when my hands go to the front of her shirt and rip it away in one fluid movement.

She isn't wearing anything underneath her shirt, and her breasts, perfect, round, and tipped with the prettiest light brown nipples, are revealed to me.

Her nipples are hard and tight, and I cannot stop myself from leaning down and taking one of them in my mouth while I remove her skirt with my free hand.

Althia arches her back, and her skin is warm and soft against mine. All I smell is her, the scent of her warm and heady arousal, and the warm fragrance of the nimond beans and rirzed herbs that hang permanently in the air.

My cock is hard and aching to be released, and precum starts leaking from the tip when I find my way between Althia's legs with my hands.

I move away from her breasts, reaching to kiss her again when I find her clit. She lets out a small scream, her body twisting away from mine when I start to stroke her.

Her inner thighs are wet, her pussy is drenched, and her clit is hard and swollen.

“Do you like that?”

I very rarely talk during sex. I have never found a woman interesting enough to converse with more than necessary.

But now all I want to do is talk. I want to watch her shudder and tremble. I want to watch her *break*, and I want to talk her through it all.

Maybe I want to talk now because sex has never felt holy before. But this does.

Althia nods, her eyes half closed, her mouth hanging open slightly as I slide a finger inside her pussy while my thumb remains on her clit.

“Yes, please don’t stop.” The words come out in a low, throaty moan that goes straight to the tip of my cock.

I slide another finger inside her, and then another, and then another, until her eyes shoot open and I am sure that it must be almost painful for her.

Her hips buck around my hand, and she rocks herself against my fingers as I press down on her clit.

“Please!” she screams, and I don’t care who can hear us. “Please!” But she doesn’t say more than that. All she does is plead with me and murmur senselessly.

I pull my hand away from her, and she slams her fists on the ground in frustration, sending dirt and grass flying.

The flock of pavo goes crashing into the sky overhead at the noise, but Althia’s disappointed screams turn to mewls of pleasure when I place my head between her legs.

I want to eat her until she screams, I think to myself, even as my cock presses against the front of my trousers.

I slip a finger back in Althia, and she wraps her legs around my head and presses a hand down on the top of my head, forcing me away and keeping me trapped at once.

I lick up and down her creamy slit and swirl my tongue around her clit, spitting on it while I stroke her.

I stop when her legs start to tremble, and I know she is close to her first climax.

She screams with disappointment again when I pull away, almost crying, her body shaking and hot and ready for release.

Althia's hands move between her legs. She reaches for her clit, ready to do it herself, but I growl at her.

"You'll wait for me!" The command in my voice is clear, and she reluctantly pulls her hands away as I pull my pants off.

I reach down and close my hand around her throat, keeping her pinned to the ground. Her eyes widen with surprise and shock. Her mouth opens, but she doesn't protest, especially not when I line my cock up with her entrance and press into her.

We both groan when I thrust into her. She is wet, and her juices drip down between us as I stretch her slowly.

She is warm and wet around me and soft and tight all at once, and she arches her back, lifting her legs in the air.

I tighten my grip around her throat as I pull back and then thrust into her, up to the hilt, hard and fast.

I let go of any of my own inhibitions then and plunge into her faster and faster, bracing myself with my free hand on the ground next to her head.

She is human. You can hurt her, I have to remind myself. I have never hurt a dark elf woman during sex before, because they aren't as delicate as human women.

And maybe I am hurting Althia, but the thought that she is feeling pleasure mixed in with pain just makes me harder, just makes me go faster.

And when I listen to her, to the little noises she makes, I realize that she isn't begging me to stop.

All she is saying is one word.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes." She hisses the word out so that it becomes a string of nonsense.

I pull my hand away from her throat and lean down. I bite her on the shoulder, and then on her chest, and then bite down hard around her nipple.

I keep biting down on her nipple while I move my hand down to her clit, and that sends her over the edge. I can

practically feel her climax explode throughout her body.

Her pussy, tight and warm, convulses around my cock. Her body shudders as she tries and fails to pull away from me.

I reach my own peak soon after that, and I suck on her nipple as I spill inside her, my cock pulsing inside her.

When we are finished and I pull away, I can see the bruises and bite marks start to form under the light of the moon, on her shoulder, chest, and breast.

“You’re even more perfect with my mark on you.”

ALTHIA

I wake up after experiencing the most refreshing sleep I've ever had. Immediately, I notice the toned arms draped over me, holding me close.

I relish the peace, laying there for a few minutes while I wait for Valkus to wake from his slumber. After a while, he comes to, and the first thing he does is greet me with a gentle kiss.

“You know something, Valkus?” I ask him, motioning for his ear. I nibble on his lobe before continuing. “I think I like sleeping here better than in the guest room.”

“Well, I suppose we'll have to get you moved in here then.”

As we get ready for the day, I make a full effort to parade my body around in front of him. We take a bath together, and I lay my body back against his. He runs his hands over my skin as I melt into his arms.

Gods damn, this feels good, I think to myself. In fact, I've been feeling pretty damn great about everything since last night. The only thing that could make all of this better is if we had this entire manor to ourselves, but Valkus helps me forget about his family's presence.

I'm chewing my last bite of breakfast when an idea hits me.

“Valkus, I want to go out to the gardens again today.”

“Oh, yeah? Is there anything in particular you’d like to do together?”

“I’m glad you asked,” I say with a smile. “I want to watch you paint.”

“You do?”

“Of course. I was blown away by your display the other day. Your passion for the arts is... Well, I’ve never seen anyone so invested in their own work before, especially a dark elf.” I throw a hand over my mouth, realizing I’ve overstepped. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it offensively.”

“Don’t worry. I’m well aware of the humans’ perception of our kind, and, well, I can’t exactly fault you for thinking that way.”

“Anyway, I want to see what you look like in your element, so how about it?”

“I’d be honored. Quite frankly, I never thought anyone would ask to see how I work.”

“Then I’m the one who’d be honored to see it through.”

Yiosha comes to clear our plates as we make our way to his studio. There, he gathers a blank canvas and an easel. He allows me to hold his brushes and paint while Nexus carries a tin of primer in his mouth.

The three of us wander through the gardens as Valkus leads us to the quietest spot. Coming around a hedge, we’re met with a small incline of a hill, at the top of which looms a towering tree.

As we make our way up the incline, I look back at the manor, seeing we’re quite far from it.

“Come take a look,” says Valkus, having reached the peak.

I join him and Nexus, coming to the edge of the hill where I’m met by a glorious view of the city. Pyrthos looks nicer than I’ve ever seen it, and for a moment, I forget just how bad the experience of living in it was.

If only its residents were as beautiful as the city itself...

“To think I plucked a human woman from the lowtowns and am now about to paint in her company,” he remarks.

“I’m a lucky woman,” I say seductively.

“Come then and lend me a hand in setting all of this up.”

I pass him each piece of equipment as needed, full of gratitude for letting me handle it. He positions the easel into place, wearing a look of deep focus on his face as he does so. When everything is ready to go, he turns to me, holding a paintbrush in hand.

“Come here.”

What does he need me for?

He offers me the paintbrush.

“Wait, aren’t you the artist here?” I laugh nervously.

“Trust me, hold it the way I am.”

With a shaky hand, I grip the paintbrush. Valkus puts his hand on my body, positioning me in front of the canvas.

“You’re going to apply this for me. One simple coating,” he says, gesturing to the primer.

“I don’t know if you should trust me with this.”

“Well, I do.”

He takes hold of my hand, guiding the bristles into the primer. He then plants a kiss on my nape before bringing the brush to the canvas, applying the clear liquid across it in clean, horizontal strokes.

He lets go of my hand as I near the top of the canvas. I can’t help but laugh in glee.

“I’m not half bad, am I?”

“Not at all. Now do you see what happens when you let yourself go and throw out fear of failure?”

He takes over, gripping the paintbrush with far more confidence than I displayed. I sit down by the tree, reclining against its trunk as Nexus curls up by my legs. Here, I have a perfect view of the city, the canvas, and, of course, Valkus.

I listen as he explains everything about what goes into creating a painting. Some of it I do not understand but he is patient in answering my every question.

A wave of overwhelming happiness comes over me as I watch passion pour out of this man. He executes each stroke with precision and finesse, his style of painting so mesmerizing.

Every so often, he takes a step back, evaluating how the picture is coming along. Soon, he completes the first layer of the city before him.

I watch in awe not only of the work but of the dark elf himself. As he rambles on about the mixing of colors to create new ones, I'm hit with a stark realization that drones out everything around me.

I'm obsessed with everything about this man. His looks, his talent, his personality, the way he treats me, the way he fucks me.

I recall how he had stood up for me in the face of another dark elf, something unheard of amongst the human race.

Could it be that I am... falling in love with Valkus?

As if hearing it, I swear I hear the voices of my heart and mind agree with a resounding "Yes!"

There's no rational voice of reason, nothing inside of me that can deny the revelation, but it only begs the following question. *Should I tell him? I wonder if he even feels the same way about me.*

Just then, someone clears their throat. Both Valkus and I whirl around, greeted by the sight of another dark elf. He bears a striking resemblance to Valkus.

"Ah, hello, brother," he says to the newcomer.

"Working on another painting?" asks the stranger. His eyes seemingly spot me for the first time as they widen in a manner of surprise. "Oh! Hello there!"

"Taveth, this is my mate-to-be. Her name is Althia."

“A mate! Look at you, Valkus!” Taveth extends his hand to me as I rise to my feet. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I reply. “You’re brothers then?”

“Indeed, though I’m not around very often. You see, Althia, I don’t get along very well with my parents.”

“You two have that in common.” I chuckle nervously.

“Well, it’s good to see you’ve found yourself someone special. I’ll leave you two be then. I’m off to the city.”

Taveth bows and takes his leave. I watch as he disappears back into the gardens.

“A member of your family that doesn’t hate me on sight. How refreshing,” I comment.

“Like any siblings, we have our quarrels, but he’s the most tolerable.”

“He’s handsome like you. Does he have a mate?”

Valkus looks up at me, the happiness on his face suddenly replaced by something cold.

“He did. Something happened, though, and I don’t wish to get into it.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I understand,” I say meekly.

I ponder what might have unfolded in the past regarding Taveth’s mate, but I avoid prodding. I get the feeling that some tragic misfortune struck Valkus’ brother, and in that moment, I feel sympathy for him.

It’s a shame the rest of his family aren’t perfect, but it doesn’t matter to me, because Valkus is.

“Would you like another try?” he asks.

I’m more eager to join him this time. He wraps a hand around my waist, instructing me to make a horizontal stroke across the top of the canvas. I try to focus as a trail of blue emanates from the brush, but I find myself distracted by Valkus’ kisses along my neck.

“You’re good with those hands,” he whispers, sending a wave of pleasure down my spine.

“Only good?” I retort playfully, turning around to face him. “I’m more than good, and you know that.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m afraid I don’t, so you’re going to have to show me.”

“Happily.”

I slide my hand down his pants, taking pleasure in his moans. Just then, a shrill voice pierces the air around us. Nexus jolts awake, his ears flat and tail low as we all turn to look at Yiosha.

“My apologies for interrupting your private affairs,” she sneers with a smirk.

By the gods, I want to slap that grin off that stupid face of hers.

“Valkus, you are needed in the manor. It’s urgent family business.”

Sighing, Valkus gently pushes me off of him.

“If it’s a family thing then I advise you to stay out here. Feel free to roam the gardens if you wish, and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

I plant a kiss on his cheek. He winks at me before leaving, Nexus trailing beside him. I return to my seat, frustrated that the zagfer bitch interrupted us.

At least with everyone gone, I can take some time out here to contemplate my brewing feelings for Valkus.

VALKUS

The day had been going incredibly well right up until the point of Yiosha's interjection. I'm not happy to be following her, but I know better than to keep getting on my family's bad side.

I only wonder what could be so important that I had to be pulled away from Althia so abruptly. Nexus trots along beside me, his tail hanging low.

"Go return to Althia and keep her company. Good boy."

The likar trills and spins around, breaking into a jog to head back the way we just came. I continue walking behind Yiosha as we enter the manor. There, she takes me through various twists and turns, eventually leading me to the common room.

It is where the family often convenes for meetings and tea time. Yiosha opens the door and steps aside. She doesn't follow me in.

The decor in the room creates a darker atmosphere. Usually, it is used closer to night when the dim light of the evening accentuates the maroon-colored walls. A chandelier hangs down from the ceiling, though it is nowhere near as large as its counterpart in the dining room.

A small table sits centrally in the room with five chairs gathered around it. Three of them are occupied, their takers rising at my entrance. My mother greets me with a faint smile.

The second woman steps forward, pulling me in for a hug.

“Velora!” I quip. “Forgive me, sister, I forgot that you were scheduled to visit today.”

“Forgiven, though I must say, you do not seem so pleased to see me, dear brother.”

It’s true. As much as I love my sister, I only get along with her slightly better than I do with my parents. She often ate up their criticisms of me and regurgitated them with the blanketed disguise of sisterly advice.

Not in the mood for a fight, I feign a light chuckle in response and gesture toward the third person in the room.

“I see you brought Dravank with you this time. How are you?” I ask, shaking his hand.

He is the mate of my sister, a wealthy nobleman who makes his money importing cheap goods and reselling them for a high, and often ridiculous, price. He too shared the same sentiments of looking down his nose at me simply because of my single status.

I haven’t exactly made it a secret that I do not like him, but I make an effort to maintain a friendly appearance so as to not start an immediate quarrel on sight.

“I’m very well, thank you for asking,” he says, shaking my hand. I can tell his smile is fake.

“Tell them of your successes,” chimes Meriana, coming closer to join us.

“Oh, no. I don’t want to sound like we’re bragging,” laughs Velora.

I need to find a way to get out of this and return to Althia. The idea of sitting here all day and conversing with them makes me want to put my head through a wall.

“Son, as you can see, your sister is doing marvelously.”

“I can talk to her myself,” I snap, much to everyone’s surprise.

I know exactly what my mother is trying to do. Each time my sister comes to visit, she plays up her achievements in an

effort to belittle me and my passions. It'd be worse if Father was here, but he's thankfully off on errands.

Regardless, I didn't come to be subjected to a condescending session of singing praise for my sister.

"Well," chuckles Velora, adding to the tension in the air. "Join us for some tea."

I guess one cup won't hurt. The sooner I am out of here, the better.

"Alright."

We all take our seats. I stroke the hot mug in my hands, spotting my reflection in the tea. It only serves as a reminder that I'm a disappointment to my family.

"So," I begin. "How are things in the countryside?"

"Business is booming for Dravank, so much so that we are planning on purchasing more property, though we're unsure if that'll be in the countryside or city."

"The city sounds good," comments Dravank. "We can turn it into a members-only resort, that'll bring us some good money."

I hate being a part of this discussion. Never ever was my art a subject of conversation, unless it was some snide remark made by Father, despite his lack of knowledge about painting.

I spot my mother's prideful grin beaming across from me. I can tell she's eating every mention of success up. I know there's a part of her mind subconsciously looking for a way to make a comparison to me.

"What about you, Valkus?" asks Velora. "How are your commissions going?"

"Good. I'm hoping that the royal family will have me do another portrait for them soon."

"Wonderful, and is there any other news to share?"

At that moment, I contemplate telling her all about Althia. Chances are that she'll share the same feelings as my parents,

but there is only one way to find out. Before I can even open my mouth, however, my mother blurts all the details.

“Your delusional brother has gone and brought home a human mate! Callista is her name!”

“Her name is Althia, get it right!” I snap.

“A human mate?” retorts Velora, an expression of disgust coming over her face. “Brother, is this true?”

Here we go again.

“Yes,” I state, my chin held high.

“This is far from ideal!” she says, raising her voice. “Valkus, you need to find a better mate than a human woman! I know some suitable candidates if you’re willing –”

“Enough!” I yell. With a shaky hand, I place my untouched tea on the table. “I have heard enough from Mother and Father already. The last thing I need is to hear the same words from my own sister.”

“Valkus!” gasps Meriana. “Velora hands you a golden opportunity to find a mate, and you brush it off? Now I’ve seen it all.”

“Mother and Father are right to voice their concerns. Have you thought of how a human mate will reflect on the family in the eyes of the public?”

I clench my fist, the temptation to attack my sister rising rapidly within me.

“If I have to hear one more word about how outside eyes will view the family, I swear to the gods...”

“Take it easy, Valkus,” interjects Dravank.

I take a deep breath.

“Besides, I am an artist, a chivdouyu of the highest standard,” I say after calming down. “A defining trait of all the great artists in history is that they care not for the opinions of others.”

“I remember you were always like this, even as a kid,” scoffs Velora. “Always thinking –”

“About myself?” I interject. “Save your breath, dear sister. You are all the same.”

“Let me impart some important information on you,” says Dravank. “We’re not talking about some art piece of yours that will be forgotten about in the space of a week. This is a mate, something that will impact the family for a lifetime.”

“What the fuck did you just say about my art?” I shout, rising to my feet.

“Stop!” yells Velora, stepping in front of her husband.

“If I wanted advice from a pompous asshole, I would have asked!” My eyes remain locked on Dravank. “By the way, nice job wearing the pants.”

If I stay here any longer, I’ll do something that I regret. I spin around in an effort to leave the room, but my mother calls out to me.

“Hold it right there!”

“Just leave me be!” I shout, turning around to face the opposition once more. “Let me live life on my own terms! I hate how this family tries to hold my damn hand through everything. I do not need your fucking help, got it?”

“This is over the line!” says Dravank, having the audacity to square up to me.

For a moment, I question if he’s insane. The magic inside of me is about to burst at any moment.

“I expected all of Velora’s family to exude honor and respect, but you! You, Valkus, have all the grace and decorum of a walking taura! You ought to be grateful that your family has such high expectations, to not want you to resort to some human whore –”

My hands around his throat prevent any further words from leaving it.

“You watch your fucking mouth when you talk about my mate!” I hiss through clenched teeth. Something dark rears its head within me. Fury and a desire for violence unlike anything I’ve ever felt before pulses through me.

He needs to die for speaking of her that way. His tongue should be ripped from his mouth for daring to even shape her name. His blood should paint the fucking floor for this.

“Unhand him!” demands Meriana.

“Dravank!” cries Velora.

The voices of my family members force me to drag back some modicum of control. I shove him away, causing him to trip over the table. Mugs smash, and tea pours all over the carpet.

“You’re such an asshole!” yells my sister.

She and my mother rush to Dravank’s side, helping him up. There is a look of burning fury in my mother’s eyes as she looks up at me.

“Get out of my sight!”

“With pleasure,” I snarl.

With that, I do what I should have done in the first place and make a swift exit. Upon closing the doors behind me, I sink against them. Sighing, I run a hand over my hair, surprised that I didn’t end up burning down the entire damn manor.

I need to calm myself down before I return to Althia. She cannot see me like this.

I dust myself off and take a deep breath. There is a mating ceremony to be planned, and I need to be sharp in mind in order to manage it.

I don’t find myself shocked that Velora echoes Mother’s sentiments. She is merely a pawn, a perfect child in their eyes because she does everything that is asked of her.

Sighing in disappointment, I walk away from the common room, keen to rejoin Althia. Right now, she is the only person

that I can stand.

ALTHIA

The afternoon heat is a little higher than usual for springtime in Pyrthos but is more than welcome. A feeling of tranquility washes over me as I sit by the treeside on the hill with Nexus. He purrs lowly as he curls up beside me.

Such a stillness I've never experienced before. I glance down at my open hands, wondering if this is where I truly belong.

Part of me still feels as though I have to be entrenched in menial work at this time of the day. A concept like rest and relaxation is bizarre and new to me. The only repose I've ever known is the three or four hours of sleep I'd get every night while still in the lowtowns.

I look back at the city. While all of me still needs to catch up to living here in the manor, there is one thing I certainly cannot deny.

"I could get used to this life." A wave of joy overwhelmingly washes over me. It's as if I'm living in a dream where I have everything I could ever want, one which I do not wish to wake up from.

The food, the warm beds... Not to mention not having to look over my shoulder half the damn time.

My eyes come to rest on the unfinished painting, reminding me of its artist. The talented, handsome, and considerate chivdoyu who, like a saving grace, had swept me up from the dirty streets.

“Being his mate... That is still something I am not so sure of. Is it too soon, I wonder?” I ponder to myself for a moment before smiling. “It’s not even supposed to be a legitimate partnership, just a ruse to annoy his parents. So why am I thinking about it so hard?”

At that moment, Nexus perks his head up, tilting it back to peer at me. He trills.

“Yeah, you’re right, Nexus,” I tell him, scratching behind his ear. “I should stop overthinking things, but I have to be sure about the choices I’m making for myself. You know what I mean?”

I imagine the creature’s voice talking back to me, wondering what wisdom such a beautiful animal would impart to a human like me. In Valkus’ absence, his companion more than makes up for it as good company.

After a short while, Valkus eventually reappears. I turn my head back to the slope leading up from the gardens when I hear his familiar footsteps. I spring to my feet and leap at him. My heart melts when I hear him laugh.

“How was everything?” I ask.

“Oh, it was fine,” he mumbles, shrugging his shoulders.

“May I ask what pulled you away?”

“Nothing too exciting.”

“Valkus.” I chuckle. “I’m from the lowtowns. Anything that goes on here is quite thrilling for me. Don’t be shy, share with me!”

“Alright. It was just my sister, Velora. She came to visit.”

I part from him, turning my body back in the direction of the manor. “Should I go say hi? I don’t want to be rude.”

Valkus’ face drops as he casts a downward gaze. *Did I hit a nerve?*

“It’s best that you don’t,” he tells me. “She’s having tea with my mother so she’s occupied.”

“Valkus, is there something else that you’re not telling me?”

He sighs before answering. “Unfortunately for us, Velora tends to share a lot of the same opinions with my mother, including her view on humans as mates.”

“Ah,” I mutter, hit with a stinging disappointment. “I see.”

“It’s even worse that she’s brought her snobbish mate, Dravank, with her. He’s everything that my parents look for in their children’s mate, so if we were to go there together, it’d be an open day for comparisons.”

I remorsefully gaze at Valkus. Words are hard to find for just how badly I feel for him. I may not have been here long, but I’ve already witnessed how hard he works to help ensure my safety on the manor grounds.

His relationship with his family serves as a reminder that I have no one to call my own. He may as well not have one, and in that sense, I feel I have a duty to make him feel better. He deserves his happiness just as much as anyone else does, no matter what his family thinks of him.

I return to face him, stroking his cheek. He peeks up at me, his frown curling up into that handsome signature smile of his. Wrapping an arm around my waist, he pulls me in for a quick kiss.

“Enough painting for now. How about we retreat to the gardens and have some tea?”

“I could do with that,” I say with a smile.

Soon, we find ourselves seated on a blanket by the fountain. The aroma of the plants reinvigorates my energy, and the peace is undisturbed with nothing but the sound of the water flowing to complete it.

A zagfer – luckily, not Yiosha – drops off a delivery of nimond pastries and tea and leaves us to our rest.

Together, Valkus and I eat in comfortable silence. Occasionally, we feed each other, smiling and giggling as we do so. I allow myself to soak in all of the ease these gardens

bring me, even imagining what I would do with the place should the future hold that opportunity.

“Althia. You really like it out here, don’t you?” asks Valkus.

“It’s my favorite part of the manor grounds. It’s so tranquil. I could spend all day out here.”

“Luckily for you, there’s nothing to get in the way of that.”

“True. It doesn’t seem like your family comes out here that much. I mean no offense by that, just so you know.”

“None taken. Maybe I should take a page from your book and retreat out here more often.”

“It helps me forget about the kind of people living here. It’s the one place in all of Pyrthos where I’m not judged for who I am.”

“Kind of people?” chuckles Valkus.

“Yeah, you know... Dark elves.”

“Ah,” he mutters, nodding in understanding. “I can’t disagree with you. I know many of my kind are quick to throw the matters of humans aside for their own gain. I certainly hope I haven’t made you feel that way.”

“No, no, you haven’t,” I reassure, laying a hand on his arm. “In fact, you’ve been more of an escape than anything. I just wish more elves were like you. Thank you for seeing me as more than garbage.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” he says, holding his penetrative gaze on me for a moment. I’d fall to my knees from that look if I wasn’t already kneeling down. “Now then, speaking of escape, it’s best we start discussing part of the reason why I brought you here.”

“The wedding?” I ask, being the first thing to pop into my head.

“Indeed. Carrying through with it would ensure your security here and make you untouchable by any of the other residents in the manor.”

I ponder to myself for a quick moment, envisioning this life being a permanent fixture following the completion of the mating ceremony. It would fully put my past behind me, and I'm not about to hesitate to do that.

The only big question that remains is what happens between Valkus and I. I had come here on the notion of a fake marriage, but feelings are undoubtedly developing for the dark elf who saved me.

Valkus pours us another cup of tea. He then unrolls a fresh parchment of paper also delivered by the zagfer and dips his quill into a small pot of ink.

“This wedding was my proposal, but you, of course, have a say. My first question to you is where would you like for the ceremony to be officiated?”

For a second that lasts as long as a minute, I'm distracted by his lips. Kissing Valkus is no new idea, but doing so at the wedding carries a seal, a stamp that will forever bond us two together.

The idea of being tied to the artist sitting in front of me makes me hot under the collar, hotter than the heat of the afternoon sun.

“Well?” He chuckles, raising an eyebrow. “Today would be nice.”

“Ha, very funny,” I remark sarcastically. “Let me think for a moment.”

“Take your time.”

Stroking my chin in deep thought, I think about where he and I should get mated. Coming from the trenches of the lowtowns with no friends or family, I never even thought that getting mated would be a possibility.

Then the answer hits me. I'm in the middle of it, my eyes widening with joy as I glance around the gardens, nodding in approval.

“It seems as though we have our answer,” remarks Valkus. “Care to share?”

“How about right here in the gardens?” I propose.

“I should have known you would pick that.” He laughs.

“So can it be done?”

“Althia, anything can be done for you.”

At that moment, two things melt. My heart for this man, and the tension he carried on his face when we were talking about his family.

I wonder if I make him feel the same way... Does he know the effect he has on me?

What if it is true that Valkus knows my feelings for him? Could it be that he has me right in the palm of his hand?

There is a darker side to him that I've only seen a glimpse of.

“I like the way you're looking at me,” he says, snapping me back to reality.

I blush, completely unaware of the fact I'd been admiring him so openly for the past few seconds.

“Sorry.”

“One might think that you fancy me,” he remarks with a playful smirk.

Dark side or not, I know two things for certain. This man has me right where he wants me, and I'm loving every minute of it.

VALKUS

Today, Althia and I are going to speak to the King's royal floral designer, as we continue to make arrangements for the mating ceremony.

Althia and I are becoming closer and closer every day, and even my mother and father seem to have stopped harassing her for her presence in their house.

Progress is progress, I think to myself as I pull on my shirt, while Althia gets ready in the bathroom.

Just then, the door to the bedroom creaks open, and Nexus slinks in, his tail between his legs as he looks around furtively.

"Where have you been?" I ask him, kneeling to stroke his fur, which is slightly matted and covered with mud.

Nexus chirrup and then sinks tiredly to the ground.

"Is that Nexus?" Althia calls from the bathroom, the door swinging open only a moment later. At the sound of his name, or perhaps at the sound of Althia's voice, Nexus' ears perk immediately, his large eyes swiveling to find Althia.

"Aw, poor baby! Did those mean old mynahs give you the run around again?" Althia asks, walking straight past me to kneel beside Nexus. I stifle an incredulous laugh at the image her words conjure up.

Nexus is one of the most fearsome predators on the planet. A measly mynah bird could hardly get close to him without being shredded to pieces, much less upset him the way Althia is insinuating.

At least, that's what I think until Nexus lets out a high-pitched whine that sounds an awful lot like a tone of piteous agreement.

The likar lets out another woeful mewl and tosses his mud-covered head into Althia's lap as though lamenting his loss. Althia fawns over him, making unintelligible sympathetic sounds as she strokes his face.

What in the gods' names am I watching right now?

Nexus strikes fear into the hearts of everyone he comes across, even the most powerful of dark elves. I've seen him take out entire steeds for fun, and I have had to pay for more than my fair share of damages when he was still young because he decided he was hungry.

And yet here he is, bawling and whining like a youngling in the arms of my delicate, brave, absolutely maddening Althia.

The parallels are almost too strange to think about. Rather than taming my wild side as she has for Nexus, however, Althia drags out something much darker in me. Something possessive, insidious, and demanding.

I like it – and I know she does, too.

I blink to myself a few times, shaking that line of thinking out of my mind as I refocus on Althia. She pushes herself up to her feet, giving Nexus an affectionate pat on the butt and promising that they'll get those 'mean old mynahs' next time.

Nexus huffs his agreement, slinking back off, presumably to get some water as Althia's attention lands on me.

Althia must see the surprise on my face because she gives me a pleased smile.

"You didn't think he'd take to me, did you?" she asks me, laughing as we both stand.

I offer her my hand and help her to her feet, and then I turn to face her.

"Nexus is a wild animal, despite all outward appearances," I tell her seriously. "He can barely be around the zagfers, who

are all afraid of him and pose no threats. My mother also terrorizes him whenever she sees him. So, no, I never thought I'd see him act so... docile. Only you could tame a creature like that, Althia."



WE SPENT all of yesterday choosing flowers for the mating ceremony. We're having paradise blossoms imported, and the floral designer has promised us even more exotic blooms if we're willing to wait.

"I just want to be mated to you already. I don't particularly care about flowers." I grumble as Althia fixes my collar before we head for dinner.

I spent all of my day painting, and Althia and I still need to catch up with one another.

"What did you do today?" I ask her as she straightens her shirt and skirt.

Nexus comes bounding in from outside then. And instead of running up to greet me, as he always does, he goes straight to Althia and walks around her in an excited circle.

I cannot help but burst into shocked and pleased laughter as Althia kneels to pet the likar, who purrs and chirrup lovingly, after which he buries his head in her skirt and inhales deeply.

"What happened between yesterday and today?" I ask, and the disbelief in my voice is blatant.

Althia smiles up at me as she continues petting Nexus.

"I just spent some time with him. We went on a walk around the grounds early this morning after you got up to paint. I fed him, brushed him, and gave him a bit of a washdown. He even had a thorn in his paw, and I think removing that for him really got me in his good books."

I sigh with relief as Nexus slumps to the ground and rolls onto his back.

Everything might actually work out.

“Okay, well, are we still going to dinner?” I ask her.

“Why don’t we stay in? I’m sure Nexus misses you, now that you’re spending all your time painting or with me.”



I AM PAINTING up in the turret when I see them.

My view from the turret shows me most of the grounds of my family’s estate, as well as some of Pyrthos.

And now, as I sit in my chair and inhale paint fumes, I see Nexus and Althia running through the long sweetgrass on the far side of the estate.

Althia’s face is stretched into a broad smile, and Nexus is practically bouncing in the air as I stand from my chair, and go to lean on the windowsill.

I watch as they disappear into the woods at the edge of the estate, before they reappear moments later, covered in twigs and leaves.

I look over at the painting and then make the decision before I am even really conscious of it.

Within seconds, I am jogging down the stairs and through my quarters, toward Althia and Nexus.

I meet them as they’re coming up to the mansion.

“I saw you from the window,” I tell Althia before I brush a kiss against her cheek.

Nexus winds in and out between my ankles, his tail high in the air, and he lets out loud, high-pitched chirrup every few seconds.

“We’re going to the other side of the estate now. I think Nexus wants to teach those mean old mynah birds a lesson,” Althia says breathlessly. I take her hand in mine with a smile. “Why don’t you join us? You’ve been painting since before dawn.”

The three of us start to walk to the east side of the estate, to the grove where we had our picnic, as the day heats up more and more.

The sun is hanging fat and heavy in the sky when we reach the grove, and we're sweating and gasping when we make our way under the tower for some shade.

"We'll need to go back soon," Althia says, her face flushed and red. "All three of us need water."

"Yes, but the walk was nice, though," I reply.

When I look around, Nexus has disappeared, so I grab Althia by the waist and start to plant soft kisses all over her sweaty face.

But a high-pitched chirrup from outside makes me pull away from Althia, and we both walk outside to see what Nexus is up to.

"Oh, Nexus, that's wonderful!" Althia exclaims with a laugh as Nexus brings a large mynah bird and drops it at her feet.

"I think that's a gift for you," I tell her and reach down to pet Nexus, who throws his head back and opens his mouth in a yawn.

"Well, I'm pleased, but I don't think the zagfers will be willing to cook this up."

We start to walk back to the mansion, and when I look back, Nexus has the dead bird in his mouth and is trotting to catch up.



ALTHIA and I are in the market district, and we've both stopped caring about the stares we receive from the dark elves who look down on us for being together.

I cannot take my eyes off her today. Her long hair is loose and hangs to her waist, and she is wearing a pale blue dress

that falls to the middle of her calves and shows off much more of her body than is considered fashionable.

The dress's neckline is also lower than what is considered proper, but I am certainly not complaining.

"I think we've gotten everything we need," Althia says, huffing slightly as she wipes sweat from her glistening forehead. "I didn't realize mating ceremonies are this expensive," she continues.

I shrug. "If we need it, we need it. No sense worrying about money."

I slide my arm around her waist and kiss the top of her forehead as an older dark elf woman – clearly a noble – frowns at us.

Althia stares right back at the woman before reaching up to kiss me full on the mouth. The woman practically spits at us before storming off.

My hands wander to her ass as we kiss, and I slap it a few times before she pulls away, smiling.

"That feels good," she tells me, and her voice is a low gasp.

"I could do that all day. Your ass is made to be slapped," I whisper in her ear.

In fact, there are so many things I could do to Althia right now. I'd fuck her in public if we weren't both carrying a load of items for the mating ceremony.

Something about her has made me lose all inhibitions. She has unlocked something in me, something dark and spiked that has always existed, but has never come to the surface.

And the thing inside me, the thing that only Althia can access, is becoming more and more demanding day after day.

It wants to own Althia. To hook her on its spikes. It wants to swallow her in its darkness.

I need to make her mine, and I need to do it soon.

ALTHIA

“We can always just run away together. That would really piss my mother off,” Valkus says almost eagerly as we walk through the streets of the largest market in Pyrthos.

Every dark elf who can trade has a stand or a store there. Right now, it is busy and noisy, and the sun burns down on us as we try to navigate our way from one store or stand to the next.

We have a long list to get through today, and Valkus is starting to become tetchy.

It is quite difficult to ignore the dozens of dark elves, and even some of the humans, staring at us as we walk through the market together.

Valkus insists on having me take his arm while we walk, and with Nexus, his pet likar following us, we look even more bizarre.

“Your mother already hates me,” I admonish him lightly. “Let’s just do the traditional ceremony and get it over with.”

More and more dark elves are mating with humans, so Valkus and I aren’t that strange. But apparently, the noble dark elves of Pyrthos are slow to catch on because they do not hide their looks of disgust or anger at the sight of us.

I know that only Valkus’s family reputation and his own personal reputation are what keep many people from coming up to him and yelling at him for the mistake he is making.

The gods know that I cannot help but think that we're making a mistake, too. Although that is something I'll never say out loud.

"I don't think I like the dress we just chose," I say musingly as we stroll through the markets, towards the jeweler that Valkus wants us to see.

"You can change it," he says immediately and lifts my hand to kiss the back of my palm. "You can have whatever you want, darling."

"Thank you." I smile and feel the tension I have been ignoring dissolve from my shoulders.

Being with Valkus is a strange experience, but there is a lot of good to it. I actually do like him a lot. And he takes care of me.

I can't remember the last time I lived without fear twisting my stomach into knots. I cannot remember the last time I lived without anxiety sending jolts of shock through my body in the dead of night, forcing me awake.

I have been sleeping soundly since I met Valkus.

"My parents might not approve of you, at all," Valkus says as we enter the jeweler's store. "But they will want to make this whole mating ceremony work for them. That is why we are doing it the way we want to. Because if we don't, it'll end up being a mess of things we don't like."

Inside the jeweler's store, Valkus orders a lot of jewelry, including a golden circlet for my hair, two golden armlets, and several rings.

I am exhausted when we finally leave.

"I think it is time for us to go home," Valkus says, looking down at me with a soft smile on his face.

"Yes," I say immediately. "I don't think I can take any more hostility anyway."

We both laugh as he flags down a carriage that takes us back to his family's home.



VALKUS'S HOME is empty when we arrive. We can tell right away. There is no sign of life. There aren't even any zagfers around.

"They have a luncheon with the King, I think," Valkus answers my unspoken question. "And the servants have a day off."

He moves quickly as we reach the base of the stairs that leads to his wing of the house. He lifts me into his arms as Nexus slips out of a side door and disappears into the wilderness that surrounds the house.

I giggle as my shoes nearly fall from my feet. They are the softest shoes I have ever worn, made of silk and satin and pure cotton. I clutch onto all our purchases from the day even while he holds me over the floor.

"You don't have to come with me into town again if it makes you uncomfortable. I'll pick up the dress and jewelry," he tells me seriously as we reach his chambers, which take up an entire wing of the large mansion.

"I want to come with you." I lean towards him and kiss the tip of his nose. "We need to do this together or not at all."

I kiss him again, this time on his mouth, as he kicks open the door to his bedroom and living area.

I have grown used to the slightly acrid smell of paint and chalk that has taken up permanent residence in his rooms.

Valkus walks straight over to the bed as we continue kissing, and by the time he has thrown me onto the bed, my dress has come off.

I lay back, gasping when he kneels at the foot of the bed, spreading my legs and thrusting his face between my thighs.

My skin prickles, and tingles of pleasure race up my spine as he pulls away the underwear I am wearing and licks up and down my slit.

My thighs are already slick with my arousal, and I am sweating slightly. I reach for my nipples as a trickle of sweat trails down between my breasts.

I twist and pull at my nipples, my head falling back as Valkus slips three fingers inside me while he tongues my clit.

I shudder, twisting on my nipples almost painfully, when he angles his fingers upwards inside me, and then I cry out with frustration when he pulls away.

I reach for him now, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling his clothes off. He stands frozen as if no one has ever done this for him before, and he practically trembles when I close my hand around his hard member.

I stroke it up and down before I place my mouth around it, swirling my tongue around the tip that is leaking precum and then licking up the underside of the shaft.

Valkus threads his hands through my hair, and when I look up, he is looking down at me with shining eyes as I swallow him deeper and deeper into my throat.

He presses a hand down on the back of my head, forcing me to take him deeper and deeper until I choke, but he doesn't let go until I start kicking, unable to breathe.

I cough when I pull away, but then within seconds, he is forcing me down on his cock again.

I swallow up precum as my saliva gathers in my mouth, and I reach around to grab his ass, inhaling deeply through my nose so that I can take him properly in my throat.

He groans, and the noise ripples down my spine, skittering across my skin.

Valkus starts to fuck my face then, his hand closing around my throat and forcing my head down on him as he thrusts into my mouth.

He only lets go when I start choking on him. He pulls away and before I have a chance to breathe, he flips me over onto my stomach.

“Come to the edge of the bed. Arch your back,” he orders me, his voice rough and hoarse.

I obey his command, and he spreads me open from behind, keeping one hand on my waist while he thrusts slowly inside me.

I moan as he stretches me out, filling me up, before he grabs my long ponytail and jerks me up.

“Stay up!” His voice is almost harsh. But I am not afraid. Instead, his voice makes my pussy pulse with pleasure.

“Yeeess!” I moan, my voice low and hoarse like his as he fucks me slowly, gripping my hair, and then plunges into me faster.

All I can smell is the scent of his paints and the scent of our combined arousal.

And all I can hear is the sound of our bodies slapping together. He lets go of my hair and I fall forward, but then he reaches around and closes his hand around my throat, gripping tightly and choking me.

He slaps and smacks my ass with his other hand, hard enough that I know that my ass will be bruised purple and blue by tomorrow.

I have a brief vision of walking naked through the streets of Pyrthos, so that every resident of the city, including his parents, can see Valkus’s marks on me.

My climax comes so suddenly that I do not expect it, but soon my legs are trembling and waves of pleasure explode from my core. I collapse onto the bed.

Valkus flips me onto my back and grabs my legs, lifting them into the air and spreading them so far apart that it hurts.

He chokes me again as he plunges into me, his cock hard and veiny inside me. I can feel every single one of his ridges inside me, and every one of those ridges seems to rub on every one of my nerve endings.

“Please. Don’t stop,” I whimper. Orgasm after orgasm ripples through my body, small and hot, bouncing off my clit

and nipples, my pussy pulsing and convulsing around him.

“Please,” my voice becomes a needy, pathetic whine when Valkus slows down and leans on me. “Please fuck me!”

I wrap my legs around his waist as he reaches for my left breast with his mouth. It is completely unblemished, free of bite marks, unlike my other one.

But I know that that is about to change.

I scream my release, not caring who hears us, when he bites down on the flesh around my nipple, hard and almost feral.

My body shudders, and I twist away from him, trying to pull away from the overwhelming pleasure of it.

But Valkus pays me no heed until his own release comes. He pulls out, spilling onto my stomach and making me lick his cum off his hand.

ALTHIA

When I woke up this morning, the first thing I did out of excitement was ask Valkus what was on our agenda for the day.

“I can’t tell you,” he said. “It’s a surprise, you’ll find out soon enough.”

He certainly made sure I felt the wait. Not even with much enticing and baiting during breakfast did he budge, only wearing his signature smile.

He got on my nerves no doubt, but at the same time, there was no way I could have been annoyed at a man like him.

After a hearty breakfast, he took my hand and escorted me to the stables where a readied carriage awaited us.

“I think we could do with a day of relaxation, no wedding prep necessary,” he said teasingly.

I was unable to stop myself from shaking with exhilaration the whole journey. Even now as I browse through the fine fabrics at a clothing store, my arms are still riddled with goosebumps.

“I see you’re enjoying yourself,” remarks Valkus, gesturing to the many garments I already have picked out for myself.

“You have no idea,” I say with a giggle.

This is insane to me. Here I am, shopping for items that, at one point in time, I didn’t even stop to look at, knowing I

could barely afford food, let alone high-priced clothes.

I try on each piece, modeling them all for Valkus.

“So, which one will you go with?” he asks.

“I don’t know if I can decide!”

“Then you will have all of them,” he says with a warm smile.

As we continue our day out in town, we turn a lot of heads who look over their shoulders when we pass them by.

No matter how progressive a city grows, there are still those who oppose the pairing of a dark elf and a human, and we get plenty of them today.

“Oh, look, another trendy pairing. When will this whole fad die out?” I hear someone say, but it doesn’t bother me.

There’s nothing that can take me away from enjoying this moment. A life like this was only a dream not long ago, so the people of Pyrthos had better believe that I am going to take full advantage of it.

I have one man to thank for this, looking at him longingly as we stride through the streets. It feels so right to be holding his arm. I want everyone to see how good we look together.

Most of all, though, I love how unafraid he is to show me off. With him around, no opposers dare say a thing right to our faces.

Yet, there is still a strange fear lingering, the fear of being attacked in the same manner as I was on my last night near the lowtowns.

Valkus squeezes my hand, perhaps feeling how tense I am in his grip.

“Do not worry about a single thing, Althia. You are safe here with me.”

“Thank you. I just hope that one day, humans can walk these streets without the need of a dark elf for protection’s sake.”

He makes every effort to reassure me when I need it, allowing me to truly let go and have the best of times with him.

We stop for a quick kaffo break with baked goods and even wind up dining in a restaurant designated only for the chivdouyu caste and upwards. We laugh when we receive more than our fair share of odd looks, even from the staff.

The time comes for us to ride home. On the way back, I gaze out of the window, wondering what lies beyond the horizons of Pyrthos.

“How are you?” asks Valkus.

I look over at him as he sits opposite me. Beside him are various bags and boxes full of goods that he purchased for me. He smiles with complete glee.

“I’m on top of the world,” I tell him.

“Are you excited for the ceremony? It’s coming up very soon now.”

“More than anything.”

I twirl a small vase I bought today, inspecting it as we chat back and forth about the ceremony.

“I was thinking that – Ow!”

I throw a hand to my stomach as I’m hit with a searing pain like someone just punched me in the gut. I drop the vase, the delicate structure smashing to pieces on the carriage floor.

“Hey, you okay?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry about me,” I say, feigning a smile. “That came out of nowhere.”

“We’re almost home, will you be fine for the journey?”

The pain reduces to a numb stomach ache as I draw a deep breath.

“Yes, I just need to get to bed and relax for a while. Could have been something I ate at that restaurant.”

We eventually get home. Valkus orders servants to stow away our purchased goods as I get a head start to the bedroom. Once I step inside, I get hit with a sudden wave of fatigue, and I retire to the chair by the desk.

“Fuck, what’s happening to me?” I ask myself, now struggling to breathe.

My chest becomes heavy as if someone has anchored an anvil to it. I lay my head on the desk, using my arm as a pillow. That’s when everything starts fading.

“Hey,” says Valkus’ sudden voice. “There’s a bed for sleeping right next to you.”

“Hmm? Oh, right. Silly me.” I laugh, forcibly trying to conceal my pain.

An early night’s sleep helps me forget about it.



THE NEXT DAY, Valkus and I are relaxing with some tea in his studio. We sit side by side as he gives me a painting lesson. I mimic his strokes, following his expert advice as I glide the bristles along the canvas.

“You’re doing very well,” he says.

“Don’t tease me, yours looks far better than mine.”

“Even if it does, you’re still remarkable for a novice.”

“Well, I suppose I...”

No further words leave my mouth as Valkus hangs on for a reply. His smile slowly drops as the color from my world fades to black.

“Althia, are you alright?” I hear his voice speak, but it has become echoed.

When I open my eyes, I’m back in bed, glancing in confusion at the group of people watching over me. Valkus stands there with Nexus, casting a worried look my way while

a healer scribbles some notes on parchment. Behind the healer is Yiosha.

“Can you hear me?” asks the healer.

“Yes... What happened? One minute I was conscious and then...”

“Hush now, you need some rest.”

“Were you able to find anything?” asks Valkus impatiently.

“I didn’t detect anything. Just seems to have been food poisoning, but I’m not sure. Humans are very fragile, you know.”

“Not sure? You’re a healer, isn’t there anything you can do?”

“Calm down, there’s nothing to be worried about. Althia should be back to normal in no time. Now if you excuse me, I must be returning to my office.”

I watch in bewilderment as the healer spins around on his heels and makes for the door. Yiosha gives him a bag of coins for payment as Valkus comes to the bedside.

“I hope that healer is right,” he snarls. “You were feeling ill yesterday as well, but maybe this is the worst of it.”

“I’ll be okay. The healer said so,” I tell him reassuringly.



I’M on all fours trying to breathe. It hurts to the point where each breath sends a wave of agony through my body. I’m supposed to be getting ready for breakfast. Valkus expected me to be in the dining room ten minutes ago.

A tear falls from my eyes. My lungs feel as though someone is holding lava to them. I hear Valkus’ quick footsteps approaching, turning towards the door as it swings open.

“Althia, what’s taking you so long?”

His eyes widen in fright when he sees the state I am in.

“Help me,” I mutter. “I can barely breathe.”

“Fuck!” He rushes over and carries me to the bed.

“I think... I’m still sick.”

“Fucking healer said you’d be fine,” he growls.

I peer up at him and see a look of pure, unadulterated rage in his eyes. I thought I had witnessed the extent of Valkus’ anger when he attacked the man who tried to violate me but this is something else, like a predator begging to be unleashed onto its prey.

“I don’t understand what’s happening to you. The food we eat here is fresh, everything is cleaned daily, and no one got near enough to you to give you an illness while we were in town.”

“Maybe the healer could...”

“No, fuck him, he was useless. I’ll do this myself.”

He rolls up his sleeves and lays his hands on the sides of my head. The angered look lingers in his eyes as he commences a healing spell. Already, I begin to feel better.

As the magic flows throughout my body, I peer up at Valkus. To see him so heated and desperate to help me has my body hungry for his touch.

The curve of his mouth coils up into a growl. It’s a stark contrast to the polite smile he typically shows me, causing my mind to wonder about the darker side that lurks within Valkus, a side of him that I’ve only caught mere glimpses of.

Despite how I feel, I want to reach out to him and pull him inside me, so that he could unleash that depravity and claim me as his.

VALKUS

“I cannot wait for her to see this.”

I carefully portion out a serving of crioch, arranging it neatly on the plate where it sits alongside pureed figus with an apis honey glaze. The dish has taken lots of tedious preparation, and I don't want to keep Althia waiting any longer.

I wipe any stray residue off the sides of the plates and take a step back, evaluating the presentation of tonight's dinner.

“It looks good, but something's missing,” I mutter, stroking my chin in deep thought. Realizing what's missing, I snap my fingers. “Just a side of caramelized somana, it'll be ready then.”

I open the cabinet, checking to see if our chefs have a serving ready. I find a box, but it has barely enough for one person. I know they have some more stored away in the back, so I go to the pantry, scanning each shelf until I find a new box.

When I come back, I grimace at the sight of the crioch on Althia's plate. Water seeps out from underneath the portion, a sign that it didn't cook long enough.

“Damn it, I knew I should have let it roast for a little longer, but there was no time... Only one way to tell if it's edible.”

I sample a very small amount from her plate, chewing it thoroughly.

“Tastes fine to me. I’ll just drain off the excess liquid.”

I carefully tip it off and dollop a handful of the caramelized somana on her plate. With everything done, I pick up the plates and head out to the dining room.

I’m greeted by the sight of Althia, sitting with excellent posture as she looks on with a wide smile. Yiosha is serving her some tea.

“Ah! Thank you for that, Yiosha.”

“Of course,” she says with a bow. “Will there be anything else?”

“No, you’re dismissed for the evening.”

“Very well. Enjoy your meal.”

Yiosha makes a swift exit from the dining room, closing the doors gently behind her. I throw my hands together in delight after serving Althia her food.

“Did you make this all by yourself?” she asks, marveling at her dinner.

“Indeed I did,” I say proudly.

“You never told me that you could cook.”

“I’m full of surprises. Got to keep you on your toes.”

“It smells delicious,” she remarks, inhaling deeply as steam rises up from her plate.

I take my seat beside her before replying.

“What many people these days don’t realize is that food is an art form in itself.”

“Hence the fancy presentation?”

“Precisely,” I say with a grin. “I am an artist, after all. Here’s some paquir that goes well with this dish.”

I pour her a glass of red wine, its fruity aroma hitting our nostrils immediately. I can’t help but feel proud of myself as I hand her the drink. I had promised her that she would be taken care of, and the excellent idea of personally cooking our evening meal is certainly going well.

We tuck into our crioich, eating in comfortable silence for a few minutes. My hunger soon becomes satiated enough to strike up a conversation. I pick up my glass of paquir, swirling it around before taking a small mouthful.

“Althia,” I begin.

“Valkus,” she replies, amusement in her voice.

“You’ve been in the manor for a while now.”

“Almost a month at this stage.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” I remark. “It’s safe to assume by now that you’ve settled in, correct?”

“Yes, it’s like this has been my home all along.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Things certainly got off to a rough start here.”

“You can say that again.” She laughs. “At least your parents don’t give us trouble anymore.”

“They backed off quicker than I thought. How about Yiosha? Has she been treating you well whenever I haven’t been by your side?”

“She’s been fine ever since the day you told her off.” She drinks from her glass before continuing. “I still get the feeling that she doesn’t like me, but don’t worry, nothing to be concerned about.”

“No one here has to like you, they just have to respect you.”

“Thank you for standing up for me all this time.”

“Why wouldn’t I? You deserve to be treated just as well as everyone else.”

“I’ll never forget that, not for as long as I live. To go from barely scraping by and living under the threat of daily attacks to living a luxurious lifestyle with the protection of a... very special man... has been, well, literally life-changing.”

She cocks her head, very subtly biting her lip as she refers to me that way. It fuels me with an overwhelming sense of

pride. It's as if she knows of my mission to break her down and truly claim her as mine like she's teasing me.

I raise my glass to her, and she follows suit.

“Let me renew my promises to you that no harm shall ever come your way, not as long as you're living under this roof with me.”

“Good, I don't plan on going anywhere anytime soon.”

We toast one another and drink the rest of our paquir. The rest of the bottle is shared between us as we finish our meal and spend the evening chatting away.

I'm relishing this time we're spending together. While I certainly have my fantasies of what I wish to do to her, I take mental note of how her presence over these past few weeks has impacted me.

I lived life on a constant edge before she came around, subject to constant scrutiny by my parents and my sister, fulfilled only by my passion for art, which was once upon a time my only escape.

With Althia, she's cast a whole different vibe over my daily life. No longer do I wake up every day in dread of what criticisms are coming my way. I have something new to live for, someone that invigorates me. Better yet, I know the relationship between her and myself is only beginning to blossom.

“Phew.” She groans, rubbing her forehead lightly.

“Are you alright?” I chuckle. “Had a bit too much to drink?”

“No,” she mutters before yawning. “I feel tired all of a sudden.”

“Hmm, it could be the dinner we've just had.”

“Sorry to end the night so suddenly, but do you mind if I just head to bed?”

I tilt my head in confusion, narrowing my gaze at her as I spot the sudden appearance of exhaustion on her face. It's as if

someone just drained all the life out of her.

“No problem. Come on then, I’ll walk you up.”

I stroll to her side where she links arms with me. Together, we leave the dining room, proceeding towards the staircase. Reaching the bottommost step, she lets go of my arm to run her hand over her face, yawning yet again.

“Did you enjoy tonight?” I ask.

She nods as we start ascending.

“Me too, I’m glad you enjoyed your meal.” I beam. “I’d be more than happy to cook for us again tomorrow evening if you’d like. Perhaps something lighter though, what do you think?”

No answer comes.

“Althia?”

Alarm grips me when I notice she’s no longer beside me. I spin around, spotting her as she shakily wobbles on all fours on the middle step.

“Althia!” I yell.

The alarm turns to anger as I run back down to her, recalling how weak she had been feeling over the past few days. It looks like it’s not over.

“Talk to me!”

She says nothing, her eyes slowly closing and opening as if fighting to stay conscious.

“Damn it!”

I lift her into my arms and jog up the rest of the way. I look from side to side, briefly forgetting which way her room is in my fit of rage. I break off in the direction of her quarters upon remembering, all the while feeling that something sinister is unfolding all around me.

Is this some type of illness? An allergy? Fuck! It must be my fault... Focus! Got to get her set down so I can help her.

I reach my bedroom, kicking the door open. My legs are crying with pain from the sudden burst of activity but I ignore it, focused on the wellbeing of my girl.

As I set her down, I notice her eyes are completely closed, and even worse, that her chest is still and unmoving.

“Fuck! Breathe, Althia!”

At that moment, Nexus comes running in, his ears pointed outwards as he inspects Althia. His tail falls.

I grab Althia’s face, trying to shake her awake. When I get no response, I realize what I must do. The magic inside of me is buzzing and begging to be put to use, and that’s exactly what I’m about to do.

I lay my quivering palms on her temples and begin muttering a healing spell. Sweat pours down my forehead, my heart pumping with so much unease that I suspect I too will pass out from shock.

Keep it together, she needs you!

A blue glow emanates from my hands as I emit healing energy with every ounce of strength I have in me.

Don’t leave me, please... I can’t be without you.

Her chest suddenly shoots up and then falls, returning to a normal pattern of movement as she begins breathing again. Sighing with relief, I remove my hands from her. She remains unconscious still, her face as peaceful as it normally is when she sleeps.

“What just happened?” I ask myself, clenching my fists. “This isn’t right. She’s well looked after here. She shouldn’t fall ill for no reason.”

Then the epiphany comes to me.

“Something like this happened before... When Taveth brought back that girl all those years ago.”

I recall how my family reacted at the sight of his woman. She, too, was non-elf and of a much lower caste.

Now that I think about it, she too fell ill all of a sudden. Her symptoms were the same as Althia's! That can't be a coincidence.

Worry accompanies my anger when I remember that his woman passed away.

Something very suspicious is happening in this manor... I cannot let Althia suffer the same fate as Taveth's mate did.

Looking back at Althia, I stroke her cheek.

“I promise you that I'll find out what's going on. Nothing's going to take away what's mine, not even death.”

ALTHIA

Something's happening to me. For a moment, everything is dark. There is nothing I can see.

Then a glowing orb of blue casts itself above me. I peer up, wondering why the sky looks like the surface of water.

Then the answer comes to me when I try to breathe. My insides become flooded with water, igniting a choking feeling as water encloses my organs, squeezing them to the point where I'm about to burst.

I look down at my belly, where I see the ocean floor some distance below me. I'm floating above a rack in the floor that opens up into a canyon, stretching down so far that it fades to black.

Fear cripples my already plagued body as I fight off thoughts of what could be waiting for me down there.

"Valkus!" I try to cry out but only bubbled screaming emanates from my mouth.

I can't close my mouth, as if something holds it open. A concentrated pouring of water forces its way down my throat.

I can't remain here, I'll die!

I wave my arms wildly, attempting to swim up to the surface with all of my strength, but instead, I begin sinking.

There's nothing pulling me down. Yet the more I try swimming up, the more I plummet to the dark canyon below me, its crack opening further like a mouth consuming me.

This can't be real!

Part of me becomes aware of how detached I feel from my own body. It's then that I become aware that this could all be an illusion.

Still, it feels real, and even if this is all just a dream, I get the feeling its one I may never wake from.

I fight and fight. For a moment, it seems like I'm ascending to the surface. It fills me with a sense of hope.

But I've been down here for too long. I'm only two or three meters away from the surface, but the little remaining air in my lungs isn't enough for me to breach the surface.

I'm still only human. The words of Valkus' family echo in my head.

Are these going to be the final words I hear?

My vision becomes blurred once more, and I can no longer move my body. I use what little strength I have left to shove Meriana and Elrend's words from my mind, replacing them with the image of their son's face.

I accept my fate and close my eyes.

That's when it comes, the outstretched hand penetrating the surface of the water. It reaches for my hand. I do not have the strength to grip it, but I don't need to, for it grasps my arm.

With force, I am pulled up to the surface. I do not see my savior, for I'm greeted by a blinding white light. All of the sounds become replaced by a loud ringing before coming to a cathartic halt.

My body floats, drifting on clouds. What was all so dreadful is suddenly replaced by a feeling of overwhelming peace, like there was nothing wrong in the first place. Best of all, I can breathe deeply.

Something above watches over me, a fleeting orb. It glows red and moves about violently as though filled with rage.

Despite its erratic behavior, I get the sense its purpose is to protect me. Again though, things slowly brighten until I see

nothing but white.

After a few moments, my vision slowly returns. Becoming clearer before me is Nexus' face in mine. He realizes I am awake, purring as he bunts me excitedly.

"Hey there, Nexus," I whisper weakly, running a feeble hand over his head.

From the corner of my eye is a shifting figure. I turn to see Valkus hunched back into a chair by the bedside, blinking his eyes open.

"Valkus? What happened?" I ask. "Why am I here? Are you alright?"

"Althia, you're awake. Thank the gods."

He rubs his eyes as he leans forward. Dark circles are heavily apparent on his face as he casts a studious look over me. I shakily prop myself up, leaning back against the bed frame.

"You look like you've barely slept," I say.

"I didn't sleep much at all, I was up almost all night. What time is it even?" he replies, checking his watch.

"Why? What happened?" I ask, suddenly aware of how I lost grasp of everything last night. "I remember feeling ill after dinner, but nothing after that."

"You passed out, Althia," says Valkus, standing up. He runs a hand over his tired face. "You stopped breathing soon after that."

"I don't understand." I am alarmed at his revelation. "I stopped breathing? I was dying?"

"That's what it looked like. It's as mysterious to me as it is to you, so I'm not sure exactly what happened. Before we go any further, how do you feel now?"

"Not too great. It feels like I've been run over by a carriage."

"I can help with that."

“Now’s not the time,” I complain.

“I’m not talking about fucking you,” he snaps. “Is that really what you think of me as? Some sex-starved animal?”

The tension in the air freezes everything, including my desire to talk.

“I’m sorry,” he says, pinching his nose. “I’m just on edge after what happened to you last night, and I’m exhausted, too.”

“I apologize for presuming you just wanted to fuck. Sounds like we both had a bad night in the end. Why don’t you take some more rest? You can do with more sleep, and I’m sure I’ll feel better soon.”

“It’s no problem at all. Don’t worry about me.”

He returns to my side, laying a gentle hand on my head. Closing his eyes, he begins muttering to himself as a wave of relaxation washes over me. The same floating sensation from before comes back to me.

I close my eyes, relishing in the newfound energy bestowed upon me by Valkus as he rids me of my symptoms. I marvel at his ability to harness his magic in his current state.

It slowly comes to an end as we both open our eyes, our gazes meeting one another’s. For the first time since waking up, Valkus smiles.

“How are you feeling now?” he asks.

“A bit better. I’m still tired.”

“That’s normal. Some more rest is needed, and then you’ll be back to your regular self in a few hours.”

He takes a few moments to check on my body. As he does so, I’m hit with a choking feeling of just how much I love this man.

I hold back my tears as I think about him panicking over me, staying up all night to see if I would survive.

I’d be dead if not for Valkus. I owe him my life.

My love for him is something I decide not to keep contained for any longer. I need to tell him, all I need is an opportune time.

I almost died last night, and had things gone any differently, I would never have gotten the chance to tell Valkus all of what I feel for him.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I tell him with a smile.

I so badly wish to tell him now, but I don’t want to distract him from healing me. Plus, I don’t exactly feel beautiful given my current state.

“I forgot to tell you today just how marvelous you look.”

Well, shit, he can read my mind.

“We’re done with your healing for now. Is there anything I can get for you? Some food or tea, perhaps?”

“I’m not hungry just yet, but some tea would be good, thank you.”

Valkus excuses himself. Nexus sticks by my side, nestling close to my chest as I scratch behind his ears. He trills as he gazes at me, slowly blinking his eyes.

“I’m alright now. Don’t worry, Nexus. I hope I didn’t scare you last night.”

The likar angles his body to face me. Extending his paws out, he begins kneading my body, his eyes closing.

“You’re a good boy. Sorry for making you fret so much over me.”

Soon after, Valkus returns with a cup of steaming hot rirzed tea. A light, numbing sensation still buzzes in my head as I try shifting around. I wince, catching Valkus’ attention.

“Take your time, Althia. You’re still not a hundred percent just yet.”

“Valkus, thank you for helping me.”

He joins me on his side of the bed, throwing an arm over my shoulder.

“You don’t have to thank me for saving your life, I was hardly going to let you wither away.”

“It’s just...” I groan. My voice gives out as I shed a tear. Taking a deep breath to gather myself, I turn to look into Valkus’ gentle eyes. “If it was anyone else in Pырthos, they wouldn’t have given me a second of their attention, but here you are, exhausted and still looking after me.”

He cups my face.

“Remember when I took you in? I made you a promise that you would always be looked after, no matter what. I didn’t save you so I could still have a wedding, I saved you because...”

Wait, is he about to tell me that he loves me?

“Because you’re my best friend.”

His words still touch me deeply, but both of us laugh when Nexus glares at him over his shoulder.

“You too, buddy,” Valkus says with a chuckle. “All three of us.”

“I won’t forget this,” I say, dashing my tears away. “Let’s talk about something else. I need to forget what happened.”

“Sure. How about we go over the plans for the wedding ceremony?”

“Better yet, how about you kiss me?” I say flirtatiously.

“Don’t have to say it twice.”

And just like that, things are back to normal.

VALKUS

I lay by Althia's side, gazing down at her beautiful face. Her eyes, brown like zhisk, draw me in like telekinetic magic. I fix her hair behind her ear and cup her cheek as I plant a kiss on her.

The kisses turn from small and gentle, to passionate and vigorous in only a few moments. Althia's tongue dances with mine. I'm overwhelmed with relief that she's turned out to be just fine after last night's scare.

Things are about to turn hot and heavy just when Nexus trills. I whip my head up, turning around to face him.

"What is it, boy?" I ask.

He rears up on his hind legs, looking up at the calendar.

What could he possibly be trying to tell me?

Glancing at today's date, I sigh with frustration. Rising from the bed, I run a hand over my hair to fix it as I turn to a confused Althia.

"Apologies, I had arranged to go visit my brother Tavath this morning. It completely slipped my mind."

"Do you really have to go?" she asks, her hand now resting on the spot where I'd been lying.

She looks so tempting with a loose shoulder strap falling down her arm, and for a brief moment, I consider staying back.

“As much as it pains me to go, I promised my brother I would go see him today.” If it were just a social call, I’d stay with Althia in a heartbeat. But I’m hoping to learn more about his mate’s mysterious illness in case it helps me solve what’s behind Althia’s sudden poor health.

“Oh, alright.” She sighs.

“Is there anything you need before I go?”

“I’m feeling hungry now.”

“Get comfortable. I’ll be back in a few moments with something to eat.”

Soon, I’m handing her a bowl of taura bahru. I glance at my watch, realizing I must depart now if I am to arrive on time at Taveth’s residence.

“I must be going. I’ll summon Yiosha and let her know to keep an eye on you,” I tell Althia. I turn to Nexus. “Look after her while I’m gone, alright?”

Nexus settles down beside the bed, blinking slowly at me as I turn to leave. I stop in the doorway, looking back over my shoulder at Althia.

I find myself reluctant to be leaving, but I trust she’ll be safe in my room. At that moment, I consider telling her how I truly feel and how much I love her. Going through what we did last night only made me realize it even more.

Another time, I think to myself, making up my mind. I will tell her on an occasion when I do not have to immediately leave.

“Farewell Althia, I’ll see you soon.”

“Say hello to Taveth from me.”

I close the door, running into Yiosha as I step out into the hallway.

“Ah, just who I wanted to see.”

“Are you going somewhere, sir?” she asks.

“Yes, I’m off to visit my brother at his residence. I need you to do something while I’m gone.”

“Anything for you, sir.”

“Althia is still healing from a health scare she had last night. She’s recovered for the most part, but I need you to tend to her should she need anything, alright?”

“I shall treat her as a true habitant of the manor.”

“That’s what I like to hear. I will be back later.”

With everything sorted, I make my way down to the stables, where I take charge of a carriage. I whip the reins, spurring the pair of equus at the front into gear.

Soon, the manor grows smaller behind me as I head into the city. Taveth lives on the opposite side of Pyrthos, having wanted to get away from our family as far as possible. I couldn’t blame him for drawing a line between him and our parents.

The thought of it leads me to wonder if perhaps I can one day do the same thing and acquire some property for Althia and me. As promising as my career in art is, her emergence into my life seriously forces me to reconsider what my future looks like. I can’t picture it without her.

As I cruise through the city of Pyrthos, I daydream about bringing her out here to shop for whatever her heart desires. I have the money to do what I want, and there’s nothing more I wish to give her a good life. My access to funds can see that through.

“Maybe I can pick up a nice gift for her on the way back to the manor.”

Yet still, what happened last night and the mystery surrounding it all lingers in my mind. I hope that Taveth will have some ideas he can share with me. Everything that he went through with his mate is hazy in my memory at this point, but it is now vital to recall it as best as I can.

Soon, I pull up to his house. It’s smaller than the manor but very much still a magnificent sight to behold.

The structure is a new building. Taveth had purchased it before I met Althia and wasted no time furnishing the place and moving into it. It is a two-story building, with a large, golden double door acting as the front entrance.

Two balconies jut out from the second floor, offering a pleasant view of the city from where the house is situated in the hills. I park the carriage in the small stable building attached to the main structure.

The double doors open as I approach the house. Taveth emerges, stretching out his arms to greet me with a brotherly embrace.

“Good to see you.” He sighs with relief. “I’ve been meaning to get you out here for a while.”

“I almost didn’t make it,” I tell him, thinking of Althia.

“Well, I’m glad you did. Come inside, I have some lunch prepared for us.”

The entrance opens up into a large foyer, with the main staircase straight ahead leading up to the second floor. Taveth wasted no time decorating the place with some of my artwork as well as a generous range of pottery.

He leads me into the dining room, where a zagfer serves us a small meal. He and I begin the visit catching up on each other’s affairs regarding our careers and other trivial matters.

“I’m happy to see how well you’re doing for yourself,” I say.

“More than anything, I’m glad to have gotten out of the family manor. Have you thought about doing the same yourself?”

“I was just considering it on my way here. It’d do my mate and me a lot of good.”

“Speaking of Althia, how are things with her?”

I smile at the mention of her, recognizing that this will be the lead-in I’ve been waiting for to discuss my concerns about her health. I’ve wanted to tread lightly and not ambush Taveth

too suddenly, as what happened to his mate is still a fresh wound for my brother.

“I’m very happy with her. She’s a breath of fresh air in that manor.”

“I bet,” chuckles Taveth. “That’s good to hear though, and it’s very obvious from where I’m sitting.”

“What do you mean?”

“You seem happier than the last time we got together, a few months back.”

“If only the other members of the family recognized that, too, then perhaps we could all get along.”

“We’re a long way away from that,” says Taveth.

“Unfortunately, I have to agree,” I tell him, nodding along before taking a sip of rirzed tea. As I do so, I think again of Althia. I trust my brother enough to tell him what’s on my mind. “Honestly, I’m falling in love with my mate.”

I smile at how sweet my words about Althia sound, for my thoughts are of the complete opposite. I’m already imagining heading home to undress and fuck her the way we both love.

Taveth’s voice snaps me back to reality. I clear my throat and redirect my mind to the conversation at hand.

“Cheers to you, my brother,” he says. “Not everyone is lucky enough to find true love, especially in this day and age. It all seems to be approved relationships and arranged partners, just for the sake of pleasing the elders.”

“Sometimes tradition isn’t always the way.”

“Precisely.”

I pause, considering how to bring up my next subject.

“Are you alright?” asks Taveth. “You seem troubled like there’s something on your mind.”

“It’s just that Althia is ill at the moment,” I offer, since he provided the opening.

“Is she healing?”

“She is but... That’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. She’s showing the same symptoms as Elvie did.”

“Elvie...” he mutters, looking down at the table. “The same symptoms, you say?”

“Yes, and I am sorry for bringing her up, but I am concerned at the sudden emergence of Althia’s illness. It’s all too familiar.”

Taveth’s eyes fill with a mixture of guilt and anger as he leans forward.

“I never believed that Elvie’s illness was naturally caused.”

“It’s the same with Althia! I’m glad to hear someone else thinks the same thing. No one else in that manor would bat an eye even if I had proof of it. Do you have any theories on what may have been the cause?”

Taveth brings his mug closer, peering at his reflection for a few moments. I couldn’t begin to imagine what pain he is feeling at the mention of Elvie.

I sense that he still often blames himself for her death. Though I feel bad for him, it reminds me that I can not let the same thing happen to Althia. Finally, he looks up.

“You saw yourself just how much our family despised Elvie.”

“Indeed, that’s why I’m so worried because they’re the same with Althia. History is repeating itself, I fear.”

“Well, the thing is... I think Elvie was killed. I don’t know by whom for certain, and there’s no evidence that can prove anything, yet... I can’t help but feel that our mother had a hand in it.”

His revelation shocks me to my core as I recall Mother’s similar hatred of Althia. As far-fetched as it all sounds, there’s no part of me that suspects this to be some dumbfounded conspiracy. It would only match in line with how she has treated our non-elf mates.

“You could be right, Taveth. I think I had better get going. I have a bad feeling about all this,” I say, realizing I’ve left

Althia with the enemy.

ALTHIA

I CAN'T BREATHE! I CAN'T FUCKING BREATHE!

Panic surges through me and sends my body into fight mode. I struggle as the hands around my throat tighten immeasurably. Hot, stinging tears roll quickly down my cheeks as I cough and splutter, trying to fight off the person attacking me.

I can hear Nexus close by, nudging me and chirruping anxiously as someone hits me across my face.

The hand makes contact with my face with a cracking sound, and my head whips back.

My chest is burning as I gasp for air, but before I can inhale properly, the hand is making contact with my face again.

“Valkus...” I manage to croak his name out, and all I hear is a cruel laugh.

“No one is coming to save you. Especially not Valkus.” Something wet – not my tears – drips over my lips, and I realize then that my nose is bleeding.

Oh, dear gods! They're trying to kill me!

I do not know who my attacker is, or why they're attacking me, but it is clear that they aren't just trying to hurt me. They want to kill me. *I'm going to die here.*

The truth is, I am not strong enough to fight off an attack from a dark elf. And I am quite sure that my attacker is a dark elf.

I might be strong from all the work I used to do, but dark elves have brute strength, height, and they also have magic.

I continue to cough, almost retching when I swallow some of my own blood. Bile has risen in my throat, and my body jerks as the urge to vomit threatens to overwhelm me.

Then, while Nexus is pawing at me and chirruping, his anxiety obvious, I am yanked to my feet by my hair.

A mask is wrapped around my eyes before I can see who my attacker is. A rope or something similar is snaked around my neck and is pulled tight enough that I start to bleed almost immediately from the friction of it against my skin.

“Please.” I cough as my attacker pushes me forward. I stumble as they walk me out of the room.

“Please!” My voice cracks on the word as I begin to beg for my life. “Please, I haven’t done anything! Please let me go! Please!”

My attacker simply laughs viciously before they kick my ankles and shins.

I am brought to stop and forced to my knees.

Nexus is still somewhere close by, but he is not in the same room as me. The room I am in is cold, and I shiver as the mask is pulled from my eyes.

The room is dark, so I cannot see as I am strapped to the ground with belts.

“Please.” I know that I won’t stop begging. Not until they kill me. Not until my life ends.

I need to beg because it is the only thing I can do. It is the only way I can fight for myself.

And I want to fight because I finally have something worth fighting for.

A sob chokes out of me, and tears gather in my eyes again as I listen to Nexus anxiously purring outside the door.

Memories of all the time I have spent with Valkus and Nexus come at me, overwhelming me, threatening to drown

me.

All I can think of, as a cold wind rushes over me, is the time that Valkus took me to the theater.

All I can think of is learning about dark elf culture. All I can think of is learning to love Nexus, a wild animal.

But then, a hand grips my chin, and my face is forcefully tilted up.

The hand pries my lips apart, no matter how hard I try to keep my lips pressed together.

Then something, maybe a pipe or the neck of a bottle, is pushed into my mouth and halfway down my throat.

I start choking instantly as a liquid that I have never tasted before is poured down my throat.

I do not know what it is. It certainly isn't water, but it could be alcohol. Whatever it is, I think it is poisonous.

I think I am dying.

Tears are streaming down my face, and my head starts pounding as I am forced to swallow the liquid being shoved down my throat.

But whatever it is, it is coming down my throat too fast. There is too much of it, and I cannot swallow all of it.

Some of the liquid goes down the wrong tube and comes back up out of my nose. Some of the liquid somehow escapes my mouth.

There is a hand around my throat, and I try to lift my own hands to fight it off in a vain attempt to try and save my life.

But it is futile. I am not strong enough to loosen the bonds around my wrists.

Valkus doesn't even know where I am, I realize, and the terror of this makes my body go cold. I think I am dying, and Valkus doesn't even know where I am.

I start to shiver then, and I am not sure whether it is from fright or if the liquid is taking effect on my body.

I am quite sure that it is poison and it is fast-acting, because my hands fall to my sides, going numb.

My vision is hazy as the object in my throat is pulled violently from my mouth, ripping the inside of my mouth open as it is removed.

I slump to the ground, unable to hold myself as my entire body goes numb.

I think I am dying.

I wish I could speak, just so that I could say Valkus's name. I do not expect that saying his name would make him magically appear.

But I just want the pleasure of saying the name of the man I love, one last time.

Before I die.

My attacker isn't done with me yet, though. They proceed to tighten the bonds around my wrists and ankles before they land a blow to my stomach.

My body jerks and a shrill shriek escapes me, although I am not sure how because I cannot even feel my mouth.

My attacker continues to kick and hit me as I slowly fall into unconsciousness. And all I can do is lay there.

Nexus is still crowing and almost howling outside the door as hands wrap around my throat again and begin to throttle me.

Valkus. Valkus. Valkus.

All I can do is think his name as I lay there and my eyes fall closed. The darkness in the room seems to seep in under my eyelids because I don't see Valkus when my eyes close, as I hoped I would.

All I see is darkness.

Tears are still leaking from my eyes as I hear footsteps pacing up and down in the room. My attacker is muttering to themselves, and it sounds almost frenzied.

At this point, all I want to do is be unconscious. I do not have the strength to stay awake.

I just wish I had seen Valkus one last time before this. I cannot even summon an image of him to my mind. The darkness is so overwhelming.

I know that this is happening to me. I can feel it. I can feel the effects of the poison.

But I also cannot believe that this happened. I cannot believe that someone hated me enough to hurt me like this.

And I cannot believe that this happened before I got to really tell Valkus how I feel about him.

Before I got to thank him properly for taking such good care of me.

Before I got to hear him tell me how he feels about me.

Something painful twists in my chest, the last part of me that seems able to feel something other than the all-encompassing numbness. I let out a gasp.

I am being dragged into the deep darkness without having said goodbye to Valkus. Without having kissed him one last time, without having felt his strong arms around me one last time.

My tears have dried. Maybe, in the state I am in, my body is incapable of producing more tears.

The room is still cold, but I cannot even shiver. My body is so still that I could convince myself I was dead if I wasn't still thinking of Valkus.

My attacker is still pacing frantically, their footsteps pounding against the floor. Nexus is still crowing outside, and the wind has become so loud that I cannot even hear my own thoughts.

Valkus. Valkus. Valkus.

I force myself to say his name. To form the sound of his name in my head.

Eventually, it becomes the loudest thing I can hear.

And I keep saying it as my body grows heavier and heavier, but somehow lighter at the same time. I keep saying it as my mouth goes slack and my fingers unclench from the fists they were in.

I say it like a prayer, because hopefully, if I pray hard enough, I'll be sent a vision of him. Just so that I can see him one last time before I die.

And then everything goes black.

VALKUS

“That’s just what I believe. Some may label it as bitterness or resentment for how she was treated, but I have my suspicions nonetheless.”

“I don’t think that’s a far-fetched claim at all, Taveth,” I say. “Have you shared this with anyone else?”

“Who would believe me?” scoffs Taveth. “Velora would just echo my thoughts to the parents and drive me further away from the family, as would Yiosha, that puppet of theirs.”

He mumbles under his breath for a moment then takes a deep breath.

“I ought to stop talking about it now before my mood worsens. Will you be having more tea? Or perhaps a glass of zhisk.”

I check the time on my watch, knowing it’s well past time to go.

“As much as I’d like to, I’m afraid I must leave. Given what’s been said at this table today, I best not leave Althia by herself for any longer.”

“Let me walk you to the door then.”

Soon, I’m climbing into the driver’s seat on the carriage, carefully guiding the equus out of the stables. Taveth stands in his doorway, waving a hand in the air.

“Fare thee well, brother. Do not wait long to visit again!” he hollers.

“Worry not. I’ll try and make it back sooner next time.”

“Do let me know if there’s anything I can do regarding the ongoing situation in the manor!”

“Will do. Take care, Taveth.”

My brother’s words repeat in my head as I take to the main roads.

Ongoing situation? I don’t like the sound of that.

I begin to really piece together just how long she’s been feeling unwell. For so long, I was willing to excuse it as simply a bizarre or unpleasant coincidence. But if this is really all thanks to someone’s nefarious scheming, they’ve been trying for some time to carry this out.

She’s lucky she’s still alive, no thanks to me. I should have put a stop to this long ago. Though my parents stopped voicing their objections to Althia quite as loudly, I never should have been this complacent, especially when she became sick.

Though in my defense, if there is one, I didn’t think they were deranged enough to try to murder her.

With my mind heavily weighed down by troubles, I decide it best not to stop for gift shopping, instead continuing on course through the wretched streets of Pyrthos.

I should not have stayed for so long! How foolish of me!

I spur the equus to their maximum speed, and by doing so, I cut the journey time home by half. I dismount from the carriage before it comes to a complete stop.

A pair of zagfer rush forward, halting the equus as they take the reins. Eager to see Althia, I run to the front door and barge on through.

“You there!” I call to the nearest servant. “Has anyone checked on Althia?”

“Not that I know of. Yiosha said she would look after her, I believe.”

Grunting, I start up the stairs. I knew that I could count on Yiosha. She has a history of always carrying through on her

promises, but what good is one servant against the matriarch of the family?

I reach the topmost step, where the trilling of Nexus bounces between the walls. I look down the hallway to see Nexus galloping over to me, butting my legs with considerable strength.

“What is it?” I ask.

He chatters and runs down the hallway leading to my quarters, stopping after a few meters. He looks over his shoulder as if to check that I’m following him.

What’s gotten into him?

Nexus runs on ahead, coming to the open doorway of my room. There, he peers inside, his pupils shrinking as his tail drops low and begins to sway. He only does that when something is wrong.

“What’s happened?” I call to him. *I don’t remember leaving my door open.*

I break into a sprint, desperate to reach my room quicker. I run inside, stopping to see Althia passed out on the floor.

“Althia!” I yell out, rushing to her side.

A line of drool trails out from her open mouth, her eyes barely open as her pupils flutter. Her chest rapidly rises and falls with short breaths, and from the sound of it, she’s struggling to take in the air.

“Yiosha!” I shout. “Yiosha, where are you?”

Where is that damned zagfer? She was supposed to keep an eye on her.

I figure that she must be tending to her other duties for the day. Still, my mate is dying in my hands, and if she doesn’t make it, Yiosha will pay.

“Anyone! I need help!”

No one comes to my call.

I can’t rely on anyone else. Right now, Althia needs me!

I hoist her up into my arms and carry her to my bed, laying her down gently. I have no idea what's riddling her body so I must be gentle, but all the while, it takes every ounce of patience within me not to rush. Magic works better when it's controlled.

I loosen her clothing, opening up some breathing room. I hurl a telekinetic spell at the window, throwing it open for air. Laying a hand on her head, a great heat emanates off of Althia's body as if someone had thrown her into a pit of lava.

Just as I'm about to begin healing her, my advanced hearing picks up the sound of distant footsteps from outside. I turn around in the hopes of seeing Yiosha for a helping hand, but all I catch is Nexus standing on guard by the door.

He bears his teeth, hissing at seemingly nothing.

"Is anyone there?" I call out. "I need help!"

You've got this, just do what you did last night!

The familiar blue glow comes to life as I lay hands on either side of Althia's face. I keep an eye out for any changes in her unconscious state, expecting her to shoot up at any given moment.

Alas, nothing comes.

"Come on, come on! Why isn't this working?"

Could it be that her body has developed some sort of resistance against my spells?

"No! I'm not letting you go!"

I ramp up my efforts, concentrating all of my strength on her. My own body is still feeling the effects of my exertion from last night, and it's going to be even worse after all of this.

But none of that matters to me right now. Even if it takes everything I've got, there's nothing I'm going to stop at to bring Althia back to me.

A few painstaking minutes pass as I continue exercising all the healing magic I've got. Although I'm a chivdouyu, a caste without much need for magic, I never gave up practicing in

my own free time, and I pray that it all pays off at this moment when I need it the most.

Sweat runs down my face, dripping onto my arms below me. My own breath begins to falter, each drawing of oxygen feeling like I'm hurtling down from the skies above, yet I do not stop. It'd take everything the world has to bring me down.

A moment comes where I almost slip into an unconscious state, hanging on by a mere thread of energy. Blood falls from my nose, staining the bed sheets below.

I can't tell if my healing is beginning to drain my own life force, but if I have to do that to save Althia then it's a choice I'll accept with no hesitation.

As hard as I try, there's no way I can prohibit the lingering thoughts of failure running rampant in my mind.

She's going to die, just put her out of her misery.

It'll all be because of you and your negligence.

What kind of a man are you? To leave your mate to suffer like this...

"No!" I shrill. "If you die on me, Althia, I'll take out every fucking person in this house!"

The hum of the magic turns into a roar as my efforts amplify, my own voice rising to a scream as I blast every last ounce of magic out of me. Althia's eyes shoot open, her back arching as she gasps like she is starved of oxygen.

"Don't!" she yells, her nails digging into my arm as her eyes dart to meet mine.

"It's me!"

I look her dead in the eyes as hers begin to relax, her grip gradually following suit.

"Valkus." She sighs. "I can't believe you're here... I thought I was going to die."

"Are you alright?"

“Or am I dreaming?” she asks. “Is this what the afterlife looks like?”

Relieved, I grasp her gently and readjust the pillows under her head.

“Stop speaking for a moment and catch your breath.”

As soon as she is stabilized, I lay my head down beside her, my body riddled with exhaustion. Somehow, in some way, I pushed past those terrible voices and brought her back to life.

Maybe I'm the one who is dreaming.

I glance up at her again just to make sure. There she sits, her expression blank and tired. It seems as though her mind is still catching up, but I take comfort in the fact that she's fine for now.

I reach out to her, gently stroking her face as searing pains cramp my arms and legs. This was far worse than last night, and part of me doubted that I could save her.

One thing is for certain, I have to put a stop to whatever is going on. If Althia has another physical breakdown like this, luck may not be so keen to serve me again.

ALTHIA

I'm running as fast as my feet can carry me, yet everything passes by as if I'm on a leisurely stroll. If only that was the case.

It's dark. I can only see two steps ahead of me and the trees in the distance and nothing in between. There is only a faint purple sky above. I can't tell if it's fading, but I can't take the chance to look.

Something is hot on my tail, screaming behind me as I hope to outrun whatever it is.

"Leave me alone!" I scream. "I did nothing wrong!"

"You're a stain on this family!" the voice yells. It's getting closer. "Nothing but trash to be disposed of. I'll feed you to the worgs!"

I pick up speed, hoping it is enough to get away from my pursuer. I dive behind a large tree trunk, holding my breath as I shrink in size.

Please... Please spare me, gods! I have a life now, a man who does not yet know my true feelings for him.

I hear rapid footsteps approaching, hoping they continue past me, but they slow as they enter my vicinity.

"There's no point hiding," says the strange voice. "I know you are here somewhere."

Who is trying to kill me?

I want to peek my head out but fear says my pursuer will spot me. Their laughter cackles and echoes through the chilling air, igniting a wave of goosebumps up my arm. I feel sick to my stomach.

Why do they feel so familiar? Their name is on the tip of my tongue.

I have to escape.

Silently taking a deep breath, I muster the courage to slip out of my hiding spot. I rear my head above the tree trunk, only to be met with my pursuer's face staring at me dead on.

Their mouth opens to let out a blood-curdling scream that stops me from breathing. I cannot see their face, their features are a blurry mess.

I turn the other way and run. This time I'm far slower than before. The faster I pick up the pace, the less I move in reality. Behind me, my pursuer, or soon-to-be killer, teasingly ambles toward me.

I fall to the ground as they suddenly disappear, but the nightmare isn't over. Something pours down my throat, and I have a deja vu feeling that this has already happened before.

The pain is almost too much for me to bear. It is like being drowned from the inside out.

Alas, what hurts more than anything else is not being able to see Valkus again. I can only think of his face, his smile acting as a temporary painkiller.

As life slowly drifts away, I realize that he and I were never meant to be. After all, I am only human.

“Don't!” I yell.

For a moment, I see the blurry face in front of me again.

“It's me!” says a familiar voice.

My vision clears up, revealing a panicked Valkus looking over me. At that moment, a wave of relief like I've never known washes over me. Clinging to Valkus, I mumble about thoughts of dying, but he shushes me, telling me to rest.

I'm afraid of closing my eyes in case the nightmare returns, but Valkus' presence helps reassure me that it's all in my head. I try to relax as he stabilizes my aching body.

"It's a miracle that you're alive," he says after a while. "This case was far worse than the previous one."

"It certainly feels that way."

"How is your head, Althia?"

"Clear and free of pain, surprisingly."

Valkus looks at me intensely as he wipes his hands with a cloth.

"Then now is the time to tell me everything that happened while I was gone."

"That's the part I don't remember." I sigh. He scoffs, visibly frustrated. "Oh, are you going to get mad at me now? I almost died, mind you!"

"And that's why we need to figure this whole thing out. Remember what I said about getting lucky when we saved your life last time? I don't know how I managed to pull it off this time, but there may not be a next time given how this happened again so soon."

"I'm trying to remember, Valkus, I really am."

As I rub my head, he slams a clenched fist on the bedside table and then flips it over. He hisses through his teeth, punching a hole in the wall. His shoulders rise up and down as he catches his breath.

"I'm sorry," he mutters. "I'm angry because there is a terrible danger lurking in the hallways of this manor, right underneath me! And yet I do not know the cause of it, though I have my suspicions..."

I'm frightened by the slowly unfolding chaos. I'm only glad he is on my side.

"Well." I gulp. "What do you think about this danger you speak of? You said you have suspicions?"

“Yes, I have reason to believe that someone in this very building is out to murder you.”

“Why? What did I do?” I exclaim. My words only remind me of my thoughts during the dreadful nightmare I had.

“Unfortunately, you’re doing the one thing most dark elves hate the most about humans. You’re living.”

“Fuck... This can’t be good. There is nothing I’m doing wrong.”

A stray tear escapes, falling quickly down my face.

“Being a human is all it takes to be targeted in this day and age,” remarks Valkus, as if citing a pearl of old wisdom. “You of all people should know that better than anyone.”

“Don’t patronize me!” I hiss. “You’re supposed to be helping me.”

“I’m trying to, Althia, I really am.”

“I thought it was over, that I finally got away from it all,” I cry. “Now I finally see that there’s nowhere I can truly be out of harm’s way, all because some fucking dark elf can’t stand the fact I’m alive.”

“Althia...”

“What did I do?” I ask Valkus as if he’ll know the answer. “Is my existence bringing harm to anyone? Of course, it’s not, so why is someone deliberately going out of their way to murder me? It’s not right.”

“It’s absolutely wrong, but some dark elves don’t see it as going out of their way when they get to torment a human.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Then I need you to try and remember. Think as hard as you can. Was there anyone who entered here after I left?”

He takes a seat on the bed beside me, gazing at me with both love and determination. I can see how desperate he is to get to the bottom of this.

Maybe, just maybe, if we can find out what's going on, we can put an end to this together. Then I might be able to live a tranquil life without fear.

Valkus takes my hand as I close my eyes, digging deep into the inner recesses of my mind to recall anything I can.

“This all ends today,” he says. “Anything you remember will help.”

Bit by bit, I begin remembering, like drops of rain turning into a heavy downpour.

“I went to sleep soon after you left. I wasn't very tired, I just needed to pass the time until you got back. And I figured that rest would help me get back on my feet sooner. There was a knock on the door that woke me up.”

Valkus' eyes widen as the story develops.

“I thought it might have been you so I shot up out of bed. Nexus, though, was growling in a way I never heard before. It alarmed me, but I didn't think that much of it.”

“Who was at the door?”

“I... I don't know. I opened it and was pushed to the ground almost immediately. There was a scuffle, and Nexus was thrown to the side. I'm sorry, Valkus. I don't think I saw who attacked me. My face was held down to the ground for most of it.”

“Fuck,” he snarls. “I bet it was my mother if I'm to go with what Taveth was saying about it all.”

A part of my brain perks up as he continues muttering about his mother.

“The way she's always going on about me having a human mate, and if that wasn't enough, having to put up with that little puppet Yiosha of hers regurgitating everything she says...”

“No, it wasn't your mother!” I exclaim. “Valkus, I think I remember now!”

He spins around in excitement. “Who was it then?” he asks, grasping my shoulders.

“There was a moment I was flipped around, and my attacker tried to blindfold me, but I saw who it was for a split second.” I pause, closing my eyes and trying to picture the scene again.

Valkus’ breath comes to a halt, hanging on desperately for my revelation.

“It was the servant, Yiosha! She tried to poison me!”

VALKUS

“**Y**ou’re a fucking dead woman.” The words come out in a snapping snarl, and if she could, I am sure Yiosha would go pale with fear.

She swallows convulsively as I stare at her. I click my fingers, and the doors in the room slam shut.

Yiosha goes still, and her eyes widen. And I know that I have seen that expression before.

I have seen it on the faces of hunted animals.

She knows that I am about to hunt her. And kill her.

Part of me is almost relieved that this has happened.

Althia has unlocked something inside me. Something dark and ugly. It has always been there, but her presence in my life finally gave it a name.

And its name is *rage*.

Only I couldn’t really let it out. Not in polite society.

But now this, the attack by Yiosha, it gives me a reason to let it out. And I think Yiosha sees it because she scrambles away from me, as if to run away.

My magic escapes me then, and it is as angry as I am. And it moves on its own, not needing any urging from me.

It comes out dark red and violent, in tendrils that grab Yiosha by the waist and drag her back to me. My magic keeps

her still, while I turn to Althia on the bed and ensure that she is okay.

Then I turn back to Yiosha.

“I’m going to kill you.” My voice is surprisingly calm and measured. “You do know that, right?”

Yiosha’s face changes. She seems to become almost angry.

“I’m going to fucking kill you!” The rage whips out of me, and Yiosha flinches, but her brow is still angrily furrowed and her mouth is still pressed into a hard line.

“You’re a disgrace,” she says finally. My hands are clenched into fists, and I know that blood has welled up on my palms where my nails have bitten into my fists.

“I was just trying to protect the family!” Yiosha cries. “You were going to destroy the family name, just like Taveth did!”

“You almost took my mate from me!” I scream at her, and then I pounce. I grab her by the neck, but she manages to fight me off.

“I was just trying to help the family!” Yiosha’s voice has changed. Now, instead of trying to argue with me, she is trying to get me to feel sorry for her.

It will not work. Nothing that she can attempt to do will make me feel any sympathy for her.

I look over at Althia, who is lying still on the bed. I would almost imagine that she is dead, except I can see her chest rising and falling.

Her skin has lost its usual warm glow. Instead, her skin looks pale and almost waxy. There are bruises on her face and her lips are broken.

I turn back to Yiosha. Now her hands are clenched into fists and her eyes are narrowed.

“Did you really think you would get away with this?” I ask her. “Did you really think you would survive this? If you had succeeded, do you think I would have just let it go?”

Yiosha tries to smile, tries to speak softly, sweetly, and calmly.

“You should just forget about her,” she says. The tendrils of my magic tighten around her, and she gasps. “You should just forget about her and get a nice dark elf mate. I’m sure you will be able to find someone.”

She’s begging, I realize, and a wave of warmth washes over me. Because if she’s begging then she know that she’s going to die. And she’s trying to get out of it.

“I’ve found my mate. And I don’t care that she’s human,” I tell Yiosha. A vein is throbbing in her neck. Tears have welled up in her eyes. My hands clench into tighter fists, and the tendrils of my magic tighten around Yiosha.

“I’m proud of her. I’m proud to be with her. I will never want anyone else. And I think that I can safely say that you are the one destroying the family name!”

Yiosha is openly crying now.

And I haven’t even hurt her properly yet, I think to myself with delighted disgust.

I have already thought of a thousand ways that I will kill her. I have already pictured her death, and I know that it will be glorious.

“Master, please. I was just trying to do the right thing. Humans are filthy, useless creatures. She’s just using you. Don’t you see?”

“If you’re trying to placate me, you’re doing a terrible job.” I let out a short, mirthless, barking laugh.

My rage explodes from me then, and the tendrils of magic shatter. Yiosha drops to the floor.

“She’s just after you for your money!” Yiosha coughs the words as she tries to crawl away from me. “She’s just trying to trap you into something you won’t be able to get out of!”

“You need to shut the fuck up!” I snap at her as I reach for her hair. I thread my hand through her hair and yank her up

onto her feet. “You really don’t know who you’re fucking with.”

And then I start beating her.

My first punch lands squarely in her face. Her nose breaks upon impact with my fist. I pull back and then punch her again.

“This is what you did to her, right?” I whisper to her. “I’m going to do everything to you that you did to her. And worse.”

“Please,” she whispers. “I was just trying to do the right thing. I was just trying to save your family.”

“You should’ve just kept your hands to yourself. You should have just kept your thoughts to yourself.”

I let her fall, but my magic catches her before she can hit the ground. My magic is an even darker red than it was before, reflecting my anger.

I pin her to the wall with it, and I know that my magic must be as hot as fire because she starts screaming with pain.

I slap her then, again and again until her mouth begins to bleed.

My rage is doing most of the work. But my fear is also driving me. My fear that I almost lost Althia, the love of my life.

The fear that I almost lost her before I could really tell her how I felt.

The fear that I would lose her before I even got to have proper time with her.

I slow down then from hitting Yiosha, and her head hangs. For a second, I think I have killed her, but then she looks up at me.

Her eyes are bright and beady. I know that by the time this night is over, they will be blank and lifeless.

I keep her tied to the wall while I walk over to Althia.

She stirs then, and I am so relieved when her eyes flutter open that I almost burst into tears.

“My darling,” I whisper to her, careful not to touch her face where Yiosha hurt her. “You are okay now. You’re okay now.”

Althia starts sobbing then and the sound breaks my heart.

“Don’t worry. Here I am. You are safe now. Look at me.”

She obeys me, looking up at me.

“You are safe. Nothing and no one is going to hurt you ever again. I’m here to protect you, Althia,” I tell her as I smooth a hand over her forehead.

“You’re going to protect me?” Her eyes brighten, and I nod.

I stroke her back slowly as her breathing slows down.

I see him then. Nexus, curled up on the bed behind Althia, his head on his paws, his eyes wide open.

As if he is keeping guard.

“And look,” I tell Althia, my voice soft.

“Nexus is here to take care of you, too. But now, darling, I need to kill the woman who hurt you.”

I stand then, and when I turn to Yiosha, she is staring at Althia with such hatred on her face that I have to restrain myself from burning her alive.

She doesn’t deserve a quick death. She doesn’t deserve a quick, easy, painless death. You’re going to give her exactly what she gave to Althia.

I summon my fire. Yiosha’s eyes widen, the look in them frantic, as I get closer and closer.

And when the flames touch her skin, all that can be heard are her screams.

VALKUS

Yiosha has been a servant in our household for a long time. She has always been loyal to my mother.

And now that loyalty has led to her death.

I can tell that her body is already bruised and broken, but that doesn't stop me from kicking her.

It doesn't stop me from punching her until we're both breathless. It doesn't stop me from choking her with both hands until her eyes start to bulge.

"I'm going to fucking kill you!"

I did not know that I was capable of this kind of rage. I did not know that I could care this much.

And now that Althia has opened me up and unlocked the dark thing inside me, the thing that has remained coiled up and festering in me for years, I cannot control it.

All I can do is let it out.

And letting it out means kicking the shit out of Yiosha.

Yiosha has already urinated on the floor, and blood is dripping from her nose. She coughs every time I kick her. It is a deep, wheezing, wracking cough that reverberates throughout the room.

I grab her by the collar of her dress and drag her to her feet, although she cannot really stand on her own any longer.

“I’m going to kill you,” I whisper in her ear. Both her eyes are shut, but I can see her eyes moving quickly behind her eyelids.

I can also hear her breathing become more shallow and more erratic, and I see her shoulders tense up.

“I’m going to kill you for what you did.”

That is when I go over to the bell on the desk and ring it. Within a second, a dozen of our household servants trail into the room.

I hold Yiosha up, practically lifting her into the air as the zagfers stand around us, their heads bowed.

Their fear is palpable, and I cannot help but revel in it.

“Let this be a lesson to you all,” I tell them, and my voice is calm and quiet. “Yiosha disrespected and hurt my mate. And if any of you do that, this will be your fate.”

My mother walks in before I can lay into Yiosha again. And my rage swells, and I can feel it in the angry thud of my heart against my ribcage.

I let Yiosha fall to the ground as my mother walks in with a curious look on her face. I walk right up to her and grab her by the neck.

“You!” I snarl, my spittle flying. Her face is stretched tight with shock, and her eyes are wide and bright with fear.

“You put her up to this, didn’t you? I know you did! Don’t think I won’t rip your head off your body for trying to hurt Althia!”

My mother shakes her head frantically and tries to push me off her.

“No,” she whispers, her voice hoarse, her breath catching in her throat. The room is starting to smell like Yiosha’s bodily fluids.

I’m quite certain that Yiosha actually has shit herself because the smell of feces is overwhelming.

“I didn’t do anything!” My mother’s voice rises several octaves as she tries to plead her case. “I would never do that to you!” Tears are pouring down her face. “I would never go that far,” she pleads with me.

I look at her properly then. My mother, who usually looks perfect and elegant, looks *old*.

Her face is twisted, screwed up with fear and sorrow. Her hair has come undone from its elegant chignon. Her makeup is smeared, and her eyes are bloodshot.

She is hiccupping as she babbles nonsensically, while she tries to convince me that she is innocent.

She actually thinks I’m going to kill her. She’s afraid of me. This woman who has terrified me and angered me in equal measure my entire life is afraid of me.

My mother staggers, stumbling backward several steps when I let her go, and she falls into the arms of the zagfers.

“Okay.” I am breathing heavily as I step away from her. “I believe you,” I tell her, and the look of relief on her face shakes me to my core.

I know then that she is telling the whole, most honest truth.

I also know that she has been less of a tyrant in the past few days. She has also had multiple conversations with Althia and has even helped her connect with several of the royal family’s ceremonial vendors.

I don’t apologize to her but turn back to Yiosha, who is curled up pathetically on the floor.

“Someone still has to pay,” I say loudly. The room is so quiet that I am quite sure that none of them are breathing. The room is warm and stuffy. The smell of feces, urine, and blood has become overpowering.

“And an example must still be made,” I say as I walk up and down in the room.

Yiosha moves then, hoisting herself up with her arms as if she is going to crawl away.

“I’m sorry,” she croaks out.

But then she collapses back onto the floor and curls up into the fetal position. Her face has swollen so much that she is nearly unrecognizable.

I think of Althia then. Of the fear on her face. She wasn’t just afraid, she was terrified.

And Yiosha did that.

All to maintain a family honor that has never really existed.

She hurt an innocent person, *my mate*, because she thought she was doing my mother a favor. All of this is, in a sense, my mother’s fault, even though she didn’t cause this directly.

My mother has spent our entire lives lecturing us and anyone who was in range to listen, about the importance of our status in society. She has drilled it into us that our mates will be a reflection of this family. She has also spent thousands of hours talking about how much she hates humans. It was almost completely inevitable that this would happen.

In fact, now that I think about it, I’m surprised that it didn’t happen sooner.

“It’s a pity,” I say slowly as I look at the zagfers. “That she will have to die. But this is what you get for fucking with my mate. I won’t say this again. It is your job, as our servants, to respect and protect Althia as if she were a dark elf. If you don’t, the consequences will be worse than what Yiosha is about to face.”

Then I lean down, grab Yiosha by her neck, and haul her into the air. And with that, I drag her out of the room.

There are a thousand thoughts rippling through my head as I take Yiosha to the next room.

Will Althia realize that all I am doing is trying to protect her? Will she hate me for killing Yiosha?

No, she will be grateful that you protected her.

Althia knows the darkness in me. She unlocked it, and she controls it. And she let it take control of her.

She will understand exactly why I am doing what I am doing.

And I know that she wants revenge as much as I do.

Yiosha is moaning and whimpering as I drag her to the next room, where Althia is curled up on the bed.

Nexus is curled up next to her, his head in the crook of her neck as if he knows that she is distressed and is trying to comfort her.

The clicking of heels behind me tells me that my mother is following me, and for the first time, I do not want her to leave.

No, this time I want her to see exactly what I am willing to do to protect Althia.

Because maybe if she sees this, she'll understand. Maybe if she sees this, she'll know that I'll tear her face off if she even looks at Althia with anything other than utter happiness.

Althia sits up when my mother walks in behind me, and the look of tired confusion on her face turns to terror, and then relief when she sees Yiosha and sees the state she is in.

“I’m doing this for you,” I tell her.

ALTHIA

“I ’m doing this for you.”

Valkus’s voice is rough as I scramble out of bed, with Nexus close by.

The air in the bedroom is thick with the tangy, sour smell of urine and the coppery, metallic smell of blood, and I think this frightens Nexus because he slinks out of the room immediately.

I think that he is also overwhelmed because Valkus is followed by his mother, Meriana, and about a dozen zagfer servants.

“What is this?” I see her then, and my heart nearly stops in my chest.

Yiosha is on the floor behind Valkus. It is clear that the smell of urine and blood is emanating from her.

She has clearly been beaten. In fact, she looks like she has been tortured.

She’s on the floor, bloody and bruised, and you’re still afraid of her.

“Althia.” Valkus’s voice is soft, and I drag my gaze away from Yiosha to look up at him.

His clothes, neck, and face are splattered with blood, and the skin on his knuckles is torn.

“Althia, she cannot hurt you any longer.” His voice is so gentle that something inside me cracks open, and tears well up

in my eyes.

Valkus walks over to me and envelops me in his embrace as I sob quietly, my body shaking in his arms.

“Sshh.” He strokes the back of my head gently. “She can’t hurt you any longer. I’m making sure of that.”

But memories of Yiosha’s attack resurface even as Valkus tries to comfort me, and cold shivers ripple up and down my spine. The hair on the back of my neck stands upright.

“Listen.” Valkus pulls away slightly. He reaches for me and cups my face with both hands. “Listen, everything is going to be okay.”

He wipes my tears away before he steps away from me. Then he leans down and grabs Yiosha by the collar of her dress.

I cannot help but take a step away from her, staggering towards the bed even though Yiosha is in no position to hurt me.

The room is silent, and I scan the faces of the zagfers who stand behind Valkus and me.

They’re terrified. They’re terrified of him.

And I can understand their fear. They’re not just afraid because Valkus is killing one of their fellow zagfers.

They’re terrified because of the crazed look on Valkus’s face. They’re terrified because, at any moment, Valkus could decide that one of them just looked at me wrong and would attempt to beat the life out of them.

He really loves me. He’s willing to do anything for me. Even kill.

Valkus might be fucking crazy, but he loves me. And that’s all that matters.

“Now,” Valkus announces as he tries to keep Yiosha from collapsing to the ground. Her mouth hangs open, but both her eyes are swollen shut.

“I kept you alive until now for a reason. You need to confess your sins. Confess what you did to Althia. And if you do that, I’ll ensure that your death is more merciful than I have been up until now.”

I know that I need to face Yiosha, who lets out a pained shriek as Valkus forces her to stand on her own feet, even though her legs look broken.

So I turn to her, my arms crossed over my chest, and look her in the face.

I am not sure if she can see me, but she starts speaking then. Tears run down her face, and she hiccups on every word.

“I tried to kill Ms. Althia. And I don’t regret it.” She whispers the words. My own breath hitches in my throat as she speaks. “She is shaming this family. She is a disgrace to this family. And Master Valkus will forever live with the knowledge that he made a great mistake.”

Is that what they all think of me? Do they all think I am a disgrace? Will my life always be in danger?

But then I look at Valkus. At this moment, he is tall, strong, and commanding. And he has kept his promise to protect me.

“Thank you,” I tell Valkus as Yiosha’s confession settles down inside me.

That is enough. It is enough to know that he is here with me. That he will be with me for the rest of our lives.

A sense of calm washes over me, and I straighten my posture to look directly at Yiosha.

Yiosha looks up at me defiantly, although I doubt that she can see much in the state that she is in.

“You are the disgrace,” I tell her calmly. “And all you have done is sealed your own fate. You could have had a good life. Instead, you did the most idiotic thing that anyone could do.”

I look at the rest of the zagfers in the room. And when I speak to them, my voice is stern and measured.

“I won’t be removed from my place in the Elenil household. I won’t ever leave the man I love. And I do not care about the differences between us. I might be human, but that doesn’t make any of you better than me. I have spent my entire life working hard for dark elves who abused and disrespected me. I am the same as you.”

Valkus nods along with this, and then his mother, Meriana, steps forward daintily.

She does her best to avoid stepping in the bodily fluids that are dripping from Yiosha’s... everywhere. Instead, she looks at me with an apologetic expression.

Meriana tries to smile, but I don’t think she has had much practice smiling at a human before. But after a few minutes, something similar to a genuine smile crosses her face.

“Althia.” Her voice is almost warm. She lifts her hand slightly as if to reach for me. “I want you to know that I never intended any harm. I just wanted my son to be happy. I love him, and I have spent my life shaping him into someone who deserved a good partner, who would make the family name look good.”

I swallow and nod. The implication is clear. She would have preferred her son to end up with a dark elf.

Valkus opens his mouth as if to speak, but Meriana continues.

“But I see how happy he is with you. I see how much fulfillment you bring him. And I hope you will accept my apology, and the apology of my mate, his father. We treated you poorly, and that is unacceptable. But when it comes to Yiosha, I want you to know that I did not put her up to this.”

Meriana turns to Yiosha as she speaks, and her voice hardens on the last words. The expression on her face is one of disgust.

“I would have killed you myself.” She spits at her servant. Everyone notices that Yiosha’s shoulders sag at her employers’ words.

She was probably hoping that Meriana would intervene and save her life.

“Thank you.” This time I am speaking to Meriana. “I appreciate it. I do believe you. I hope we can work together from here on.”

“Yes.” Her smile this time seems more genuine, and for the first time since meeting her, I see how beautiful she really is. “I am sure that we’ll become the best of friends.”

Meriana looks up at her son then, who towers over her, and there is something like a plea in her eyes.

I catch Valkus’s eyes above his mother’s head, and I nod at him sternly. He understands me immediately and completely.

“Thank you, Mother,” Meriana practically deflates as she exhales. “I appreciate you. I appreciate you for what you said. I know we will all be very happy together.”

“Thank you.” Meriana’s voice is hoarse, and when she looks at me again, her eyes are glossy as if she is on the brink of tears.

“Now.” Valkus turns to Yiosha. “You see what you have done? You’ve heard from me, from my mate, and from my mother. Do you have any last words?”

Yiosha shakes her head stubbornly.

Valkus turns to me, and when he speaks, his voice shakes. I am not sure if it shakes with anger or with love.

“I told you I would protect you. This is me protecting you.”

I step towards him, and we fall into one another’s embrace. I stroke the back of his head.

“If she had killed you, I would have lost the only thing worth living for,” Valkus says, and I realize that his voice is shaking with both anger *and* love.

And fear. The fear of losing me.

“I would have killed myself if she had taken you from me. I would have prayed to the Thirteen to unite us in the afterlife.

Because I cannot live without you. Not in life and certainly not in death.”

“I cannot live without you either.” I pull away from Valkus, and I cup his face with both hands.

Yiosha is on the floor right below us, and as Valkus and I stare into each other’s eyes, she lets out a horrible, gurgling, gagging sound.

She’s choking on her own blood, I think to myself.

“I love you. Thank you for protecting me,” I tell him.

“I love you, too. And I always will,” Valkus replies.

VALKUS

Your death will be my pleasure, I think as I look down at Yiosha.

Althia is still clinging to me, and I inhale the scent of her deeply as I look up from Yiosha's broken face, towards the windows that line the room.

It is dark outside, and I know that by now there must be a slight chill in the air. I glance over at one of the zagfers then, as a thousand thoughts spin through my mind.

This zagfer is young, and I have seen her around the house a lot.

"You!" I bark at her. Her face tightens with fear, and her posture straightens as she looks at me.

"Yes, Master," she replies, bowing her head.

"What is your name?"

"Enilea, Master." She answers so quietly that it is hard to hear her.

"Enilea, do you know Yiosha's family?" I ask her. The question must seem a strange one because a collective murmur rises among the zagfers, and some of them look around at one another.

"Yes, Master," Enilea replies. Her face softens slightly as she continues talking and her shoulders relax. "She lives close by to me, in the midlands. She has a mate and five children."

I feel Althia stiffen in my arms, and I hear her swallow.

But I do not look at her yet.

“Okay, I want you to arrange for her mate to collect her body tomorrow. And explain to him exactly what she did wrong. Explain to him that she disgraced herself and her family. Make sure that he knows why she died.”

I don't particularly care that my reasons for killing Yiosha are justified. But I'd like her mate to know what she did. I want him and his children to feel the shame that their mate and mother can no longer feel after her death.

Yiosha must have heard the conversation between me and Enilea because she starts groaning then.

Her groans become more and more high-pitched until she is letting out a keening scream that is so loud that Althia covers her ears.

“No!” I shout, my voice thunderous. “Be quiet!”

She quiets down slightly, though she doesn't stop.

“My children,” she croaks.

Talking was a mistake, because the corner of her mouth, which was torn in the beating, splits open further.

Now, most of her jaw is visible, and everyone has a view of her broken teeth.

“My children,” she whispers.

I look at Althia then. Her face is white, and her mouth is set in a hard line.

“This is for the best,” I tell her, trying to make my voice as soothing as possible. “She'll die, anyway. And they won't be able to afford to take care of her.”

“I know,” Althia says woodenly.

I know that she feels conflicted. I know she might feel guilty. But I do not. All I am doing is what I am supposed to do as her mate. I am supposed to protect her.

I let go of her when I see Nexus sneak back into the room. He does not come to me but walks up to Althia and stands by

her side.

He butts his head against her leg insistently, until she reaches down and strokes his head.

I hear her breathing steady, and when I hear her croon at Nexus, I know that she will be okay.

“Now.” I talk to the crowd of zagfers. “Let this be a lesson to all of you! Yiosha’s death is an example of what will happen to all of you if you disobey the rules of this household! And those rules include respecting Althia as my mate. If any of you have a problem with me mating with a human, I suggest that you remain quiet and go home. Then do not come back tomorrow for work.”

The zagfers are quiet.

“I will enjoy this,” I say to Yiosha, who is still groaning. “No one threatens or hurts my mate and gets away with it. You do realize how worthless you are? Don’t you? You could have been going home to be with your children now. You could have lived a good life. We would have treated you well. But because of your misplaced loyalty, you have ended your own life.”

I look at Enilea then. She looks directly at me. Her eyes are hard and she has squared her shoulders.

“I am sure some of you won’t be showing up for work tomorrow.” I speak to Enilea instead of to the crowd. She will be my emissary.

“Make sure every zagfer who comes to look for work here knows exactly what they will get themselves into.”

And after those words, I start to kill Yiosha.

My goal is to make her death as painful as possible. And she is already in a lot of pain, so it will not be that difficult.

Althia walks to the far side of the room with Nexus at her heels, finding a window to look out of. She does not look back at me as I begin my bloodletting, and I cannot fault her for that.

The first kick lands directly on Yiosha's lower stomach. A steady stream of urine escapes her as I keep kicking her right above her genitals.

I move onto the rest of her body, and I bring my weight down on each of her limbs.

Blood trickles from her nose and mouth, and her throat must stop working because she starts to cough.

She's choking on it, I think with satisfaction as I kick her in the head.

Some of the zagfers are openly weeping now, not caring if this will get them punished later.

They are crying because they're afraid that this is their future. Not because they loved Yiosha.

I think this to myself as Yiosha's ribs give way beneath my feet. Her broken ribs must pierce something vital because her breathing becomes little more than shudders. Dark elves are made to be sturdy, and while I am certain that I have just dealt a killing blow, her death will not be swift.

I will not hasten it along any further, either. I want her to have time to regret what she's done.

Three of the female zagfers run out of the room, sobbing noisily with their hands covering their faces.

When I look at my mother, her face is strained, the skin stretched tight across her face, and her lips pressed into a thin line.

She looks like she's going to be sick, I think to myself, and I cannot help but smile.

I leave the body alone then. It is crumpled up and looks like a children's rag doll.

I glance over at Enilea, who surprisingly hasn't left the room crying.

"You're going to be Althia's personal servant from now on," I tell Enilea. "You are clearly a strong young woman," I tell her.

Enilea looks at me with dark eyes before nodding emotionlessly.

“Now,” I tell Enilea and two of the zagfers next to her. “Please take the body and clean it up for her family. Then come clean up the room.”

“And open the windows please,” Althia calls from her far window. Her voice wavers when she speaks. “Open all of them.” Enilea nods again, although Althia cannot see her, and turns away to begin her preparations.

“Oh, and Enilea?” I ask, stopping her. “Arrange for a dividend to be paid to Yiosha’s mate and children in the wake of her death. She has dishonored them and herself, but innocent children will not starve because of her spinelessness and stupidity.”

Althia turns as I finish my demand, and our eyes lock across the room. Her surprise is evident, and a part of me takes great pleasure in that shock.

Good. She should know now that nothing is too depraved an action when it comes to her safety.

But she should also know that I will not use her name as an excuse to do something she would not.

That understanding passes between Althia and me in mere milliseconds before she turns back to her window again, and my eyes settle on Enilea, who curtsies before scurrying off to make the necessary arrangements.

The zagfers that remain in the room follow our instructions. My mother looks at me then.

“I want your guest list for the mating ceremony,” she tells me as if I haven’t just killed one of our long-time servants. “I want to send out invitations as soon as possible.”

“Of course,” I tell her and exhale as my heartbeat slows down after the exertion of killing Yiosha.

“And you’ll ensure that every one of those guests remembers to remain respectful of my mate?”

The threat in my voice is clear. I do not want to kill anyone on the day of my mating ceremony, but I will if they give me a reason to.

My mother nods quickly, her face almost frantic as she hurries to assure me that no one at the mating ceremony will be disrespectful of Althia.

We stand and discuss the mating ceremony as the zagfers walk in and out of the room. Four of them lift Yiosha's body, while eight of them hurry to clean up the blood, urine, and feces.

There are also chunks of hair that I tore out of Yiosha's head that get swept up and will later be burned.

"I hope your brother will attend," my mother murmurs. I know that my mother and Taveth have a contentious relationship, and I also know that Taveth will not let my mother forget his suspicions of her.

I do not know if those suspicions have any merit, but I wouldn't put it past my mother. Even if she has changed since Althia came into my life.

I cannot help but feel sorry for my brother. I do not know what I would do if I lost Althia.

You know what you would do. You would kill whoever was responsible for her death and then kill yourself. Even if the person responsible was your mother.

"I'll invite him personally," I tell my mother. "I am sure he will attend if the invitation comes from me instead of you."

Enilea walks back into the room then, after having coordinated the clean up and removal of Yiosha's body.

She curtsies and then speaks. "I have arranged everything as you asked, Master." A cool wind blows in from the windows that have been opened.

I nod my thanks to Enilea as my mother pats my arm before walking away.

Then I'm left to absorb what I've just done.

ALTHIA

I stand amongst the crowd of onlookers as we all glance at Valkus. My dark elf stands over the final bloodstain marking where Yiosha's corpse had lain. His shoulders rise and fall rapidly as he catches his breath, hissing through his teeth like a madman.

If no one was afraid of him beforehand, they're sure to be fearing for their lives now. Blood is soaked all over the garments that Valkus wears, dripping onto the floor that some of the zagfers have managed to clean up.

He peers down at his shaking hands as if he's only just realized he has taken a life. I only wonder now if what he has done satisfies the predator inside of him, the creature I have only seen mere glimpses of.

The way he unloaded everything he had on Yiosha was nothing short of a frenzied rage. I knew all along he had a deeper, darker side to him, but it seemed like it was going to remain dormant.

That's what made his outburst all the more thrilling. It was as if it had all been building inside of him, destined to unleash on this very night under a full moon.

I look again at his shaking hands just before he clenches them into fists. Those hands had touched me ever so lovingly, and now they had taken a life right before my very eyes.

"Valkus," I call out.

Some of the zagfer still working on cleaning the room shoot a worried look my way as if I had just summonsed some great beast. They back away just as Valkus rears his head, looking over his shoulder at everyone around us, his eyes not yet settling on me.

For a moment, I am concerned that he'll lash out and kill every last person in this room, including his mother.

Valkus' eyes finally find mine, and he opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. It seems like the adrenaline from his fresh kill is holding back any form of humanity. Still, some servants seem to understand what he needs, for they approach with a fresh set of towels.

He snatches one from them, burying his face in it. The wet patches of Yiosha's blood become smears as he reveals his face. He then gestures to the final bloodstain at his feet and the splattered droplets from his clothes, prompting others to approach him closer than they'd initially dared to clean up the mess.

The tension in the air still lingers, perhaps only growing as everyone keeps their distance from the chivdouyu, everyone but me.

Valkus looks at me, but in his expression of bloodlust is a glint of fear. He may think that he has scared me away from him, after letting out this unholy beast that ravaged Yiosha for all to behold.

He had shown his dark side to the world, but it's easy to see that I'm all that matters to him right now. All he needs is the truth of whether or not I will still accept him. Little does he know that for him, it was never a choice, only a feeling.

I'll always remember how his eyes light up as I open my arms to him, embracing him tighter than I ever have before. I care nothing for the blood that transfers onto my garments.

When we pull apart, I take the towel from his hands and throw it around him. Together, we walk away from the murder scene.

"I should be the one helping you." He groans.

“Hush, Valkus. Let’s get away from everyone first.”

I take one final look over my shoulder, watching as his mother stands there peering after the two of us with a strange look on her face. Everything is deadly silent.

Tonight will be one that no one in this manor will dare forget. Even if it has cemented itself as Valkus’ legacy, I doubt he cares very much. He did it for me, and that’s all it takes for me to accept what he did with no hesitation.

We begin our ascent up the stairs just as a familiar trilling rings through the air. We turn to see Nexus galloping over to us, greeting Valkus with a nudge and me with a lick.

Valkus opens the door to his quarters and gestures for me to enter first. Once inside, Valkus immediately strips himself of his blood-soaked clothes, tossing them out into the hallway before crossing the room and going into the bathroom.

I follow him like a wraith, not wanting to be away from him for even a moment. He steps under a steady stream of water, allowing the blood to flow off of him for a few moments, before stepping out again and dressing quickly. We don’t exchange words, simply sharing space as he finishes cleaning himself.

I want to do it for him, to tend to him and care for him in a way that’s so similar and yet so different from the expression of care he just showed me. I want him to be able to feel my love for him in each and every one of my movements.

But right now, I know the thing I can do the best for him is simply to hold space for him. To let this hang between us. To help him shoulder this weight, and all of the emotions that come with it.

When he’s done, I take his hand, guiding him back to the bedroom. Together, we take a seat on the edge of the bed. I shoot a sidelong glance at Valkus, spotting his reflective gaze as he looks down at his hands.

They still shake as he clenches them once more. His body vibrates not with tension but with the aftershock of his attack on Yiosha. The adrenaline in his body seems to die down.

When he looks up at me, his hands unfold. He exhales a long sigh, perhaps from relief as I lay a reassuring hand on his face. We stay that way for a few moments, sharing nothing but company for one another.

His hand comes to rest on my face. In his eyes, I see love and exhaustion.

“It’s over,” I say finally. “There’s nothing more for you or me to worry about, and it’s all because of you, Valkus. I owe you my life.”

A tear that had been begging to be let loose finally cascades down his cheek.

“I... I can’t help but carry this guilt inside me,” he mutters, his voice riddled with pain. “I’m so sorry any of this ever happened to you. If only I had been more vigilant, more wary, then maybe I could have prevented—”

I throw a finger to his lips.

“You have nothing to be forgiven for,” I whisper. “If I’m angry at anyone, it’s only myself.”

His brows cross in confusion. “But you did nothing.”

“I just thought about when I was going to die... The only regret I had was because...”

My own tears fall, but I find the strength to continue. “It was because I thought I was never going to get to tell you something.”

“I’m here now,” he whispers.

“Then hear my words, Valkus, and know that they are true. I love you. I love you more than I thought was possible. You saved my life, and I’m never going to take it for granted again.”

His hands find their way to my face, cupping me in his palms.

“Althia, I love you too. You have no idea just how long I’ve been wanting to tell you. I thought you were gone, that

you were never going to know how I felt... But it's all over now."

"Come here," I tell him, pulling his face closer.

Our lips meet in a passionate embrace. Our tongues dance as if it's their final time together, afraid to part from one another. In between our kisses are further proclamations of love, and it goes on like that for what seems like hours, but they're the greatest hours of my life.

Only when Nexus jumps up on the bed to lick my hand do we stop, laughing at the fact. When it dies down, Valkus takes my hands into his.

"Althia, nothing like this is ever going to happen again. I mean it for real this time."

"I know you do, but you've got to let go of the guilt. What happened with Yiosha wasn't your fault in the slightest. You trusted her to take care of me. She did just that in her own sick and twisted way."

I start unbuttoning his shirt.

"You've always gone out of your way to stand up for me, as far back as when that man tried to assault me. I knew I found someone special in you. Do you realize what you've done for me?"

"What's that, my love?"

The look in his eyes seems like I have him totally mesmerized, and I'm enjoying every second of it.

"You made me believe that true love exists," I say, almost choking on the rush of emotions flowing through me. "I would have called someone crazy if they told me a dashing artist would come to sweep me up in the middle of the night and take me back to his glorious manor."

I run a hand over Valkus' bare chest as he smiles.

"I feel at home with you here. I know life has been... hectic, to say the least, but I know tomorrow will be the beginning of forever with you. Even if your parents don't want

me around, there's not a damn thing they, or anyone for that matter, can do to stop me from sharing my life with you."

"Oh Althia," he moans, pulling me in for a kiss, after which he brings his lips to my ear. "I never wish to be without you ever again. Of all the luxuries and material riches I have, none of it can compare to the most valuable part of my life, which is being you."

My heart leaps with joy as he embraces me once more. Our hands run over each other's bodies, removing each garment of remaining clothing.

Soon, we're wrapped in one another's grip. I breathe a sigh of relief as he kisses my neck, knowing I'll get many chances each day to tell him how he makes me feel, but right now, I have my mind on other things.

I cup his face and lift it up to meet his penetrative gaze.

"I missed the way you kissed me. Did you miss it, too?" I ask softly.

"I thought I would never get to relish your body again."

"Then show me and do all that you thought you would never do again."

ALTHIA

Valkus lowers his head, gently skating his lips across mine. Too gently to chase out the thoughts that continue to whirl through my mind.

I can still remember Yiosha's screams. And the evidence of her death being cleaned up just a few feet away from me.

I do not feel pity or regret. Instead, I just feel safe.

I know that eventually, I'll completely forget about Yiosha and the violence of her death. And I don't know what that makes me.

Maybe it makes me bloodthirsty. Maybe it makes me evil.

Maybe, after all this time, I am twisted up inside. Maybe all the years of poverty and backbreaking work ripped the good parts of me away from who I am now.

I don't know.

What I do know, what I am certain of, is that I feel safe. And I have found a man who is willing to kill to make sure I feel safe.

And I am never giving that up.

Valkus' lips part from mine, and I nestle closely into his chest, letting out a contented sigh. His arms tighten around me as though he's afraid I'll disappear, and I relish in the feeling of his strength pressing into me from every side.

Hearing Valkus tell me that he loves me opened up something inside of me that I didn't know existed. And telling

him that I felt the same, that I loved him, was like making a vow.

I know we still need to have the mating ceremony, but at this point, the ceremony is just a formality.

We have already given ourselves up to one another. I have already submitted to Valkus in every possible way.

Now I want him to make me submit to him again. To chase away everything that's happened tonight. I want him to bend me as far as he can if only to prove to both of us that I won't break.

"You'll never go through that again," he tells me, echoing what he said earlier. I nod against his chest, taking comfort from the strong, solid feel of him, and from his scent of spice and paint that has become the most familiar thing in the world to me.

"I just want you to be safe," he tells me and strokes my back.

I close my eyes, which is a mistake, because the first thing I see are images of Yiosha, tormenting me.

"Please," I murmur, my voice low and hoarse. "Please just make me forget." I am begging him, and Valkus knows exactly what I am asking him to do.

His eyes darken with anger, and I know that if he could kill Yiosha again, he would.

When Valkus kisses me, biting down on my lower lip, he is gentle, but I feel some of the abrasiveness of his fading anger.

I am still clutching him and I shiver from the pleasurable pain of his teeth on my lip as he starts to strip my clothes off.

The cool air from the open windows wraps around my naked body like a silk cloth, and my nipples tighten from exposure to the air.

Valkus looks down at me, almost indulgently, and brushes his thumbs over my nipples and every sense in my body heightens, crying out for him to touch me in places I didn't know existed before I met him.

“Please.” This time when I speak, my voice is strained and hoarse. I clutch his arms as his hands trail down from my breasts to my pussy.

“Please just make me forget.”

He nods, almost obediently, as if I am in charge, although we both know that that isn't true.

I thought I was over it, I think to myself, arching my back, slightly dismayed that what Yiosha did to me still has some effect on me.

You need to let go, I think sternly to myself even as I let out a moan as Valkus lifts me into his arms, his fingers finding my clit, and his lips tasting my neck.

I need to let go.

And I don't really know how.

“Please,” I beg him, as warmth races across my skin and deep, wet, heat gathers between my thighs when Valkus replaces his fingers with his tongue.

He uses his magic then, while he flicks his tongue over my clit, clicking his fingers and suddenly I am restrained by the bedsheets that have come alive.

They twist and knot around my wrists and ankles, and for a second, fear surges through me, but then my first climax crashes through me as Valkus slips three, and then four, fingers inside me.

His fingers are angled upwards, and they hit my most sensitive spot. I cry out in ecstasy, and my screams wither away with the spring wind that has started whistling outside.

Valkus continues to lick up and down my slit, and I buck and rock my hips against his mouth, fighting against the restraints even though they make everything hotter.

He stands then, just as I am about to reach my second orgasm, and I cry out with frustration as he walks around the side of the bed.

“Please.” The word comes out in a whine of desperation. My body is coiled tight, and only Valkus can release it.

“Please.”

Please just make me forget.

Valkus takes his cock out then, and I turn my head, taking it in my mouth willingly.

“You want to forget?” He speaks almost kindly to me, the usual growl in his voice non-existent.

I nod as I try to suck his hard shaft as best I can in my restraints.

He lifts his hands into the air and thrusts his hips forward. Forcing himself into my mouth, it begins making me choke, as flames flutter upwards from his fingertips.

My mouth goes slack as twin feelings of pain and pleasure ripple across my body, and I arch my back as Valkus’s flames sputter and crackle across my skin.

The flames circle my nipples, like an unbearably hot tongue. At the same time, more flames push my thighs apart as far as they can go in the restraints, before slipping up and down my slit.

“Fuuuuck!” I scream as the excruciating heat forces me over the edge of my peak, my body writhing but unable to get away from the pleasure and pain of the heat.

Valkus reaches down and forces my face towards his cock. I take it again as the flames continue to flick over my clit and twist across my nipples.

He only stops when I start choking on him, my vision goes black, and my chest starts to heave.

Then he pulls away from me and walks back around the bed, not vanishing the flames, but almost turning up the temperature of the heat until I am screaming so loudly that I am sure that the whole of Pyrthos can hear me.

But I do not care. Because I think the flames have burned Yiosha’s face from my mind.

Valkus grabs me by my hips and drags me to the edge of the bed. He snaps his fingers, and the restraints around my ankles loosen. He forces my legs apart while the fire dances over my wet, hot pussy.

“Yes.” The word comes out in a gasping hiss as he presses into me, his shaft stretching and filling me up, and I know I’ll never feel empty again.

“Yes!” I shriek when the fire dances across the skin on my belly as Valkus slams into me.

Sweat has gathered on my skin, and the bed beneath my hips is soaked. My pussy is puffy and swollen and *needy*, and my nipples are tight and hard.

My mouth is dry, and I have never been this warm, and I have never been in this much pain before, but I have also never felt this much pleasure either.

The heat seems to lessen, although the fire remains as Valkus reaches down and begins stroking my clit with his thumb.

“You’re taking me so good.” He is thrusting into me without inhibition, and I rock my hips, thrusting back at him, trying to take more of him inside me.

He croons the words, and my mouth falls open as pleasure explodes from my core. And just as my mouth falls open, flames slither inside, burning my tongue and throat, while Valkus rubs my clit.

I cannot do anything except swallow the fire and arch my back, tears falling from my eyes until Valkus clicks his fingers and extinguishes the flames.

I collapse on the bed, too tired and burnt to do anything except take him. Small climaxes ripple across my body, as Valkus exhales more magic and cool air settles on my body.

I open my mouth to allow the cool air in, and I gasp with pleasure and relief as the burn wounds on my body heal almost instantly.

Valkus is close to his own peak. I can feel it in the way he is fucking me, and I can see it in the frenzied look in his eyes.

And when he finally spills inside me, he collapses on top of me, and we become enveloped in one another.

And I know I have forgotten.

VALKUS

After what has been a tumultuous twenty-four hours, Althia and I find ourselves getting dressed for a family dinner. Given everything that has unfolded, it feels nothing but strange to be doing something so trivial.

Still, it's not like I have anything to complain about. Yet, as thankful as I am that Althia is alive and well, I know that both of us have the same thing on our minds. After all, I couldn't imagine anyone worse to share a dinner table with than my family.

Please gods, just let this evening meal go smoothly.

When the zagfer had dropped by with the invitation to dinner earlier in the day, I had also been informed that my sister and brother were to be present. Taveth I can handle, but I'm not so certain about Velora.

Everything is still so fresh on my mind. I know it's going to take a while to put all of this behind me. As hard as I try to conceal my sour mood, Althia seems to pick up on it, strolling up behind me and laying her gentle hand on mine.

"Hey, are you feeling alright? Or is that a dumb question?"

"A bit." I chuckle. "No, I'm fine, but I can't exactly say that I'm excited for tonight."

"Do you think your family will try and start an argument? I don't see them doing that. Surely even they have a basic grasp of awareness."

“You’d be surprised. Either way, I won’t back down from anything.”

I look at myself in the mirror, staring down the dark elf who had taken the life of the head zagfer not so long ago. Althia appears alongside my reflection.

“I’ll be right there with you, Valkus. We’re stronger together, aren’t we?”

“Of course, we are,” I agree, admiring how we look standing by each other.

It’s at that moment that I feel the power of our unbreakable love. Nexus’ signature trill rings out as we both turn toward the open doorway. He sits politely underneath the clock, where I now see the time has come for the meal to begin.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“Let’s do this.”

We link arms and amble out to the hallways, striding gallantly through them with Nexus by our side. We both laugh to ourselves when we draw a deep breath at the same time, unplanned.

“Here we go.”

I push the doors to the dining room open, marching in with a commanding presence as my family turns around in their seats. My guard is on high alert for the first sign of disrespect, but I’m thrown off when my parents, my sister, her mate, and my brother each rise from their seats.

Taveth is the first one to break away from the table, extending his hand toward me. I take it, then I’m pulled into his strong embrace.

“I heard about what happened,” he whispers into my ear. “I couldn’t be any happier for you and Althia than I am right now. You’ve no idea how glad I am to see her alive and by your side no less.”

He pulls away from me and gestures towards my mate. Taking her hand, he plants a gentle kiss on it and subtly bows to her.

“It’s marvelous to see you again, Althia.”

“Likewise, Taveth,” she replies.

The smiles on both our faces drop ever so slightly when we turn our attention to the rest of the family. I knew Taveth and Althia already got along, but now this is the true test. My chest tenses when Velora approaches us, walking by Taveth as he returns to his seat.

“Althia, I don’t believe we have met before. I am Velora, sister of Valkus. I have to say... You are more stunning than I anticipated.”

What?

“Oh, stop.” Althia giggles. “You’re the stunning one. Valkus is a handsome man so I knew to expect beautiful siblings, but I am completely blown away by you.”

That’s... unexpected, I think to myself. I had been preparing myself for a showdown between Velora and Althia but it seems as though I have nothing to worry about there. While they make each other’s acquaintance, Dravank makes his way towards me.

“Valkus, I would like to start by apologizing to you for my words during our last meeting.”

He extends his hand, and after a moment’s thought, I take it. *There’s no better time for new beginnings than now.*

“It’s quite alright,” I say with a smile.

“Later on, if you have the time of course, I’d love to speak to you in regards to a commission I have in mind.”

“I’d love to hear your ideas.”

It is my parents who come up to us last.

“Oh my son, there’s so much we have to say, and to you, too, my dear,” says Meriana, looking between Althia and me.

“Please, let us all take our seats and have a discussion. Dinner will be served very shortly, and we want to eat our meal without any issues left hanging in the air,” says Elrend.

“Sounds fine to me. Are you alright with that, Althia?” I ask, turning to my mate.

“That sounds good.”

“Very well. Some tea, please!”

In a matter of moments, each of us is seated, our arms leaning forward on the table as if we’re entrenched in a political meeting. I can’t deny that by this point, I’m feeling hopeful that this is more than a simple family dinner.

If I didn’t guess any better, I’d say this is all a big plan for my family to get back on my good side. It is my father who speaks first.

“Your mother and I think it is appropriate that we begin with an apology,” he states, his eye contact aimed at Althia. “The way we treated you was unfair, to say the least. There is something you need to understand though.”

“Alright, what is it?” asks Althia, eyebrows raised.

“No matter how badly we viewed you, not once did we ever wish for harm to come your way.”

Althia glances at me. I subtly nod, allowing her to make the choice for herself. Drawing her posture straight, she raises her chin as my parents watch on anxiously.

“I forgive you,” she says, much to their visible relief. “Though both of you must also understand that I can’t simply forget about all that happened here, even before Yiosha took matters into her own hands.”

“Of course, we don’t think of you as a pushover,” says Meriana. “Especially seeing that you are in a relationship with Valkus.”

I smile at her comment. I’m glad they made amends with Althia. If my mate is happy with their apology then so am I.

“It is I who also owes you two an apology,” says Velora. “Althia, I know we have just met, but you deserve to know the truth. I’ve always been an honest woman, so I made it no secret that I shared the sentiments of my parents when it came to your union with my brother.”

My mate nods along attentively.

“For that, I am so sorry. It was wrong of me to have placed judgment when we had not yet met. I apologize to you as well, Valkus. You always were the odd one out, but I’m sorry I always made you feel bad about it.”

“All of us here agree that, ultimately, you should have the freedom to be able to make your own choices without influence from us,” says Elrend. “Of course, my son, that is what you’ve already done, but know that going forth, the judgment of your choices is something we’re putting behind us.”

“We mean everything we say,” adds Meriana. “Seeing two of you sitting side by side in front of us, well, you make a beautiful couple.”

Through her smile, I see a tear welling in her eye. She is quick to notice, too, for she quickly dashes it away.

“Excuse me. I can’t help but bear this tremendous guilt within me.”

“What’s wrong?” asks Dravank.

“We all had good faith in Yiosha. She was a great servant, but none of us ever anticipated she’d act with such murderous intentions in the name of our service. I’m responsible for all of this.”

“No,” I interject. “As much as we haven’t seen eye to eye, the blame cannot be pinned on you. However, I hope you learn from this that your words echo dangerously.”

“Indeed they do, my son,” she says, nodding.

Althia reaches over and takes my hand, giving me a reassuring squeeze.

“There’s one more thing we need to address before mealtime,” announces Elrend.

My parents and Velora turn to face Taveth, who seems bewildered by the gesture.

“What’s all this then?” he asks.

“Well, we can’t apologize to one of our children about how we treated his mate when we did the same thing to you.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“We know. Nonetheless, we want to take this opportunity to extend an apology to you too. I hope that Elvie is resting easy and that you can move on, now that you know what happened to her.”

“I wish she was here with all of us,” he remarks. “Thank you everyone.”

Meriana raises a glass.

“To new beginnings,” she declares.

“To new beginnings!” we all say.

The rest of the evening goes by smoother than I could have expected. I had thought this would all be some lousy attempt to shove things under the rug, but the whole dynamic I share with my family had been upturned and shifted.

Now I can sleep easy at night, knowing I no longer live in a house with enemies.

ALTHIA

If all I have been through was a storm, today is the clear weather left in the wake of the chaos. The day of the mating ceremony has finally arrived after many days of uncertainty and tension in the household.

With all that unfolded, I remain slightly surprised the ceremony never got rescheduled, yet now here I stand preparing myself for what will inevitably be the biggest day of my life.

I'm ecstatic, thrilled, and nervous all at the same time, and as a result, I find my knees growing weak at various points over the morning. Even now, I sit down in the dressing room, trying to get a hold of my thoughts.

"Are you feeling ill, madam?" asks a polite yet shy voice.

I look up to see a dark elf zagfer by the name of Icitra. She had been appointed as the new head zagfer since Yiosha was disposed of. Unlike her predecessor, however, this elf is far kinder and seems to be anxious about fitting into her new role.

"I'm quite alright, Icitra. How about you?"

"Me? I'm not important," she says shyly. "I'm just trying to do a good job."

"You're doing just fine, more than that actually," I tell her with a disarming smile. "And what's this about not being so important? Everyone here at the manor has a role to play, and without a head to guide them all, what would the zagfer do without you, hmm?"

“You’re too kind.”

“Well, get used to it.” I laugh. “There’s been a shift of attitude here, and it’ll reflect on each and every one of us.”

“I hope so. Are you ready to get dressed?”

“Well.” I sigh, looking at my dress as it hangs from a rack. “I’m not so sure about that garment. The colors seem far too cold and pale for my liking. If I were an elf, maybe light gray would look good on my skin, but I need something warm and rich.”

“That might be hard to procure so close to the ceremony.”

“Yes, you’re right, Icitra. I should have pointed it out far sooner.”

There comes a knock at the door. I recognize it as my soon-to-be husband.

“Althia! Are you still in there?” asks his muffled voice through the wood.

“Yeah! Don’t even think about coming in. It’s bad luck if you see me in my wedding dress before the ceremony!”

“I wouldn’t dare.” He laughs. “I do not wish to come in, but someone else does. May she?”

She? Who could ‘she’ be?

“Alright, but I’ll come after you if you try sneaking a peek!”

The door opens ever so slightly as the surprising sight of Velora slips in through the gap. She holds in her hands the most beautiful dress I have ever seen.

I already see how its deep red would look stunning on my skin. The sleeves are puffy and stop just short of the elbow bend. From here, I spot the tight waistline, meaning I’d be able to show off even if modestly so.

“Hi, there,” beams Velora, placing the dress on the rack. “How are you?”

“Trying to get myself together.” I chuckle.

“I see that. Listen, I saw this dress in my closet yesterday, and you were the first person who sprang to my mind.”

“You came at the perfect time. I was just saying to Icitra here how I don’t like the look of the other one.”

“Yes, I don’t think the colors suit you.”

“That’s what I said! You’ve got a good eye.”

“I know a thing or two about fashion.” Her face drops slightly, and when she brings it back up, she wears a serious expression. “Listen, Althia, I know neither of us can just throw the past behind us and forget about it overnight...”

“I’m slowly but surely learning how to let go of it,” I tell her, laying a reassuring arm on her. “And I’m more than thrilled to have you here with us today. Who else would I have as my bridesmaid?”

Her eyes light up. “Are you for real?”

“Of course I am,” I say confidently.

“I would be honored,” she says, kissing my hand. “I hope this dress makes a good gift for you.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time I wore one of yours. Not long ago, Valkus found an old garment belonging to you that sat well on me.”

“Is that so?” She laughs. “Remind me to take you shopping one day, just us two ladies. I know of all the finest tailors in the city.”

“I could do with some girlfriends. Now give Icitra here a hand in helping me slip into the dress, would you?”

My slim frame allows me to fit perfectly into the dress, and I am flustered by the sight of myself in the mirror.

“By the gods,” remarks Icitra. “You are stunning!”

“I second that statement. Althia, I think this one was made for you, not for me. Believe me, the sight of you is going to remind Valkus just how lucky of a man he is,” says Velora.

As final adjustments are made, Icitra checks the time on her watch. She turns to me, eagerly throwing her hands together. “The time has come!”

Drawing a deep breath, I remind myself of the man I am about to pledge my life to. Feeling invigorated, the three of us leave the dressing room and head for the gardens where the ceremony is to be held.

Velora and Icitra go on ahead, giving me a moment to myself before I make my entrance.

I smile at the memory from a few weeks ago, when I had told Valkus that I wanted to hold the wedding in the gardens, the place I had fallen in love with the moment I saw it.

Like a true gentleman, he gave me his word that everything would be arranged to my liking, and now here I stand, about to step out into the gardens.

“Here we go, Althia. You can do this.”

I push through the doors and come upon a glorious sight. The path ahead has been modified so that it’s a straight path to the fountains.

The gardens jump out with all of their vibrant colors. Even the hedges have been freshly trimmed for the occasion. I’m hit with the scorching heat of the afternoon sun, but having the best kind of weather for a mating ceremony is nothing I’m going to complain about.

The straight path acts as the aisle. Loose petals of flowers line each side. On either side of the aisle are rows of chairs filled with our guests, all of whom beam at me with welcoming, encouraging smiles.

I begin my walk, eyes aimed straight ahead at Valkus who stands proudly at the altar. He looks so handsome in his red epaulet, the same shade as mine.

A priest by the name of Rezak stands behind him, donning magnificent robes of gold and white.

They both stand underneath an incredible white archway, from which hangs a beautiful display of flowers picked from

the gardens.

Behind the altar is the fountain, and for a moment, all everyone can hear is the sound of flowing water. That is, until a group of chivdouyu musicians start playing a melody as I walk up the aisle.

Valkus' eyes run me up and down in a seductive manner as I join him at the altar.

“You're... breathtaking,” he whispers.

The tune comes to a gentle end as we settle into our places. I scan the small gathering of guests, spotting Meriana and Elrend smiling proudly at me from their seats. Velora takes her place as a bridesmaid a few meters behind me as Rezak, the priest, joins us.

“Are you ready to begin?” he asks in a low voice.

I nod. Valkus keeps his eyes locked on me as he answers.

“Indeed I am.”

Gods, I love how he's undressing me with his eyes.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” booms Rezak with a commanding voice that startles me. “We are gathered here today in the Elenil residence to unite two lovers in an eternal bond. In our presence are close friends and family, here to see your intention of entering marriage.”

Amusingly, Taveth whistles and claps, much to the chagrin of his parents. Velora whacks him on the arm.

“In order to ensure the blessing of The Hunter of The Thirteen Who Sleep, I ask you, Valkus and Althia, if you have both come here today through the liberty of choice?”

“I have,” we say at the same time.

“Are you prepared to follow one another through the path called life and stick together through its countless trials and tribulations?”

“I am.”

“I am.”

“I ask you now to take hold of each other’s hands and declare consent to this union.”

I wink at Valkus first, gesturing for him to begin. He grasps my fingers, gently stroking them as he speaks.

“I promise myself to you, Althia, for all of eternity and everything after that. To you, I will be undoubtedly faithful.”

He returns the wink. “I pledge myself to you for all the days that remain on Protheke, and I’ll follow you to wherever we go next. I promise to remain by your side and your side only, no matter what comes our way.”

“Do you, Valkus, take Althia to be your lifelong mate?”

I shed a tear of joy as he takes me as his. I love the smile on his face when I repeat the vow for all to hear.

“Then by the power granted unto me by The Thirteen Who Sleep, this union has been officiated, and you may now kiss the bride!”

I almost lose my hearing when the crowd explodes into a cheerful roar. The next thing I know, I’m enwrapped in Valkus’ arms, sharing a passionate kiss with him.

It’s a moment I will never forget.

VALKUS

I'VE FOUND HER.

The words of the dark elf who performed the mating ceremony echo in my mind as Althia and I walk hand-in-hand into the darkness of Pyrthos.

“You are bound to one another for eternity. Finding one another is a blessing, given by the gods and goddesses, and together you are stronger and more powerful than you would be apart.”

I know that while the dark elf who performed the mating ceremony might not have approved of a dark elf mating with a human, every word he spoke was true.

I know that neither of us could have asked for a more perfect mating ceremony, and when I look over at Althia, whose face is lit up by the glow of the torches surrounding us, I know she feels the same way.

I know that Althia also feels safer and more content now that my family and most of my friends have accepted her presence in our lives.

My friends and family are still gathered around the tables that are heavy underneath the weight of food and drink as Althia and I walk through the darkness and back up to the house.

“I think my feet are swollen.” Althia grumbles as we walk up to the stairs that lead up to my wing of the house.

“Well, you are wearing incredibly high heels.” I tell her, and before she can answer, I have scooped her up into my

arms.

She shrieks with surprise and then bursts into giggles, before she leans forward and plants soft kisses all over my face.

“Just kick them off. The zagfers can pick them up and bring them up later.”

Althia follows my instructions, and the bottom of her dress rises up as she does so, revealing her pretty feet and legs.

I notice then something that I didn't see during the ceremony.

She is wearing two golden anklets around her ankles. They gleam in the golden light of the house, and they make her feet and legs look even more elegant.

“Where did you get those?” I ask her, and she glances down at her feet.

“Oh, those were a mating ceremony gift from your mother. She said that she wore them to bed with your father on the night of their mating ceremony. Which was... more information than I needed.”

We both burst into raucous laughter as I carry Althia into my wing of the house and firmly lock the door.

I place her gently on her feet, and she immediately starts to pull her dress off.

I inhale deeply. I have never been more content than I am now. Part of me cannot believe that we have actually made it here, that we're actually mated.

But the other, larger, part of me is excited for the future and all the years I will spend with Althia by my side.

As I inhale, I notice something curious then.

Usually my wing of the house smells entirely like paint and chalk. Sometimes it also smells like the forest, which is a result of Nexus's wandering in and out of the place at all hours and tracking in mud, leaves, and forest water.

But now, as I examine the air, I realize that the smell of paint and the forest have faded.

Instead, the dominant scent in the wing is Althia's scent. The scent of warmth and spice, tinged with sweetness.

I look over at Althia, who is standing in front of the mirror I had installed for her in the living space of the room.

There have been a lot of changes between Yiosha's death and our mating ceremony earlier today, mostly at my mother's insistence, although I am sure that Althia and I would have gotten around to them eventually.

Extra furniture, cookware, and crockery have been added to the little kitchen and living room that I never use.

My mother also added an extra wardrobe in the bedroom and bathroom, and both are filled with new sets of clothes, towels, and more toiletries than I have ever seen in my life.

A bunch of fresh flowers – bright paradise blossoms imported from Osiris – have been arranged on the brand new table that sits at the center of the kitchen.

The changes are new and slightly uncomfortable, but I know I'll get used to them, and the changes are worth it if I get to have Althia with me for the rest of my life.

“Are you coming?” she calls from the bedroom, and I pull my shirt and trousers off in one fluid motion.

Althia is naked and waiting for me in the bedroom.

Her thighs shine in the light of the room, and her chest is heaving. The scent of her arousal hangs heavily on the air.

I take her in my arms, my cock hardening quickly as our lips meet.

“We're mates. We're mated,” I whisper to her when I pull away, and she smiles up at me with such contentment that I almost feel overwhelmed.

We kiss again, and it becomes desperate quickly as Althia clings to me, grabbing hold of whatever parts of me that she can get her hands on.

I cup her ass as her hand closes around my shaft, and I groan as she strokes me slowly, her hand tightening around the base of my cock.

“Get on your stomach. On the edge of the bed. Arch your back,” I order her. She obeys quickly, thrusting her pert round ass into the air.

I grab her long hair with one hand, pulling it out of its elegant updo, and jerk her head backward before I deliver the fist blow to her ass.

She yelps and jumps, but I hold her steady as I land another blow and then another.

Althia’s shrieks and yelps turn into moans as I stroke her pussy in between smacking her ass, and soon a pool of liquid has gathered on the bed and floor beneath her ass.

I flip her onto her back then, and she lands heavily.

“You’re so perfect. My mate, you’re so perfect.” My voice is hoarse, almost a growl, as I push her thighs apart and admire her pretty pussy.

Her skin seems to glow and become golden, blooming underneath my praise, and I cannot help but smile at her obvious neediness.

“You’re going to take me tonight like a good girl, aren’t you?” I growl the words as I reach down and take her throat in my hand.

I thrust into her before she can really answer me, and I pull out of her slowly before I thrust back in.

She is wet, tight, and soft, and her pussy tightens around my cock as I fuck her slowly.

“Tonight,” I whisper to her and choke her harder. “Tonight I’m going to make you mine. I’m going to mark you as mine.”

Her eyes become hooded with pleasure as I stroke her clit with my other hand.

Althia’s pulse flutters beneath my palm, in her throat, and I grip her throat more tightly, cutting off her air supply.

Her eyes widen, becoming slightly frantic as I plunge into her, still strumming her clit, and her mouth falls open.

Her wet heat envelops me, and all I can hear is the sound of our bodies slapping together, and all I can smell is her thick arousal.

I revel in it. In her.

“You’re taking me so good,” I groan at her as her legs tremble, her back arches, and she tries to twist out of my grip.

“Now, you can hold on a little longer for me, can’t you? You don’t come until I say so.”

The command in my voice is clear. Her eyes widen even further, if that is possible, and she looks almost frenzied.

I pull my hand from her clit and click my fingers, summoning my fire to replace my fingers.

“Please,” she chokes the words out. “I’m going to... Please! Please! I want to come!”

She screams the last word as I let go of her throat and air rushes back into her body. Her body collapses to the bed, a wet, hot, shaking mess.

The fire licks and dances across her skin, and she screams and shrieks from the painful heat of it.

I am still inside her, and the pressure of her climax makes her pussy convulse around me, milking me as I fuck her.

The fire dances around us both, wrapping around us, encasing us, as I lean down and press my entire body weight down on her.

Althia is practically unconscious until I kiss her, and then her eyes flutter open.

She looks up at me, dazed, her eyes hooded as I command the flames to seal her mouth shut.

“Do you want me to bite you?” I ask her, my voice low. She nods furiously, bucking and rocking her hips and pelvis against mine.

“Do you want me to mark you?” She can’t speak, but her eyes brighten. She writhes beneath me, unable to scream as the fire consumes every sound she makes.

I take the soft top of her breast into my mouth, the skin just above her nipple, and suck on it before I sink my teeth into her skin.

The fire extinguishes itself as Althia screams, while her blood flows into my mouth. And I have never tasted anything better than the coppery, viscous liquid that comes from Althia.

I can’t stop my own climax then as Althia’s wet heat massages every ridge and vein of my cock, milking me for every last drop of cum.

I spill inside her then, still drinking her blood, before I pull away and bite down on her shoulder, hard enough that I know a large bruise will develop there.

I’ve found her.

TAVETH

Valkus and Althia's mating party stretches on into the night, even after the two of them slip away.

I cannot help but watch them leave with a hollow feeling in my stomach.

And then I have to turn away.

I cannot keep looking at them, walking hand-in-hand, because while I am happy for my brother, all I can really think of is when I was planning my own mating ceremony.

I need another drink, I think to myself and walk over to the drinks table, and the zagfer pours me another two shots of zhisk.

I know that I am on my way to becoming very drunk because I couldn't bring myself to eat anything, not after I heard Valkus and Althia vow themselves to one another.

All I've been doing all evening is drink.

I sip the burning zhisk and walk away from the crowd of guests, to the top of the hill, inhaling the scent of nimond beans and rirzed herbs.

I am sweating when I get to the top of the hill, and I pull my jacket off, throwing it to the ground where it lands with a heavy thump.

My mother insisted on ordering an entirely new ensemble for Valkus's wedding. I spent a week of my life – that I'll

never get back – in the tailor’s shop, getting fitted for the best silk, leather, and wool clothing.

The clothes are heavy, not just because they’re made from aged taura leather and thistle leather, but because they are a reminder of the past.

My mother, after pretending to accept my mate, also went nearly crazy planning our mating ceremony. And I do not think it is a coincidence that she dressed me in the same colors that I would have worn to my own mating ceremony.

Something painful twists in my stomach as I down the zhisk.

“I’m going to need another drink if I’m going to fall asleep tonight,” I mutter to myself, stumbling slightly as I walk down the other side of the hill.

I might be nearly drunk, and my head might be slightly fuzzy, but when I think of it, my memories of the weeks leading up to what would have been my mating ceremony are as clear as Pyrthos in summer.

My mating ceremony would have taken place at the height of summer, actually, and Elvie, the purna woman I would have been mated to, was the most excited she had ever been.

I was excited, too, even though my family and nearly every other dark elf I knew disapproved of our union.

Dark elves and the purna have a long history of hatred and violence, and Elvie and I really thought that our mating ceremony would be the first step towards overcoming the divisions between our races.

I let out a sharp gasp as I think of Elvie in the last weeks before her death. She had grown so pale and so thin that it was difficult for me to even look at her.

The light seemed to have leached out of her once golden-bronze skin. And her soft curves, the curves I loved so much, disappeared, melting into bone.

Even her hair, her wildly curly silver hair, started falling out.

In the end, I couldn't look at her, but I spent all my time with her. I slept in the chair next to her. I fed her pain medication and soup, which was all she could keep down. I read to her, bathed her, and cleaned her after she soiled herself.

I had already lost two months with her, traveling the whole of Protheke, including going to Prazh, to find a cure for whatever it was that ailed her.

But no one had any answers. No one had any answers about the mysterious fever that overtook her. No one had any answers about her sudden bloodshot eyes, and the even more sudden weight loss.

No one had any answers about her impending death.

So I came home and spent those last weeks with her, ensuring that she was comfortable.

And when she passed after about six weeks of unbearable pain, I was actually happy for the first time in months.

At least she got to wear her ceremonial dress, even if it was to her own funeral.

I decide then to walk back up the hill and down the other side, so that I can get another drink.

"I think it's time to go out into the city. Maybe visit the Red Kiss," I tell myself as I kick my jacket aside. The servants can pick it up later.

The Red Kiss is a club in the Red District, one that I have been patronizing for years now, since Elvie's death.

I don't go there to do anything other than watch, because I cannot bring myself to interact with any of the dancers. I know that Elvie wouldn't mind, but *I* do.

But while I may never use the services of the dancers there, the Red Kiss does have the best alcohol in all of Pyrthos. I know that if I want to get properly drunk, I'll need to go there.

My mother is waiting for me when I come down the hill.

“You’ve been so moody all evening!” she practically shrieks at me, and I wince at the grating tone in her voice.

“Not tonight, Mother,” I growl at her and walk towards the drinks table. The zagfer has the glass of zhisk waiting for me as I arrive.

“I don’t want to listen to your shit tonight,” I tell her blarily as I turn to her.

Her face is dismayed, and the corners of her mouth are downturned.

I would feel almost sorry for her. I would almost regret my words. If I didn’t still think that she had a hand in Elvie’s death.

“Listen,” she says in a gentle voice that I don’t think I’ve heard since childhood. “Your two siblings have found mates. I think it is time you start to think about settling down. Don’t you?”

“I would think about that.” The sarcasm in my voice is biting. “If I didn’t think you’d try to kill them again. You know how picky you are, Mother dearest.”

Her face tightens, and her lips press into a flat line. Her small, elegant hands ball into fists.

It is amusing to see her get upset in public. My mother has a raging temper, but she’ll never let even one of her fine hairs out of place in public.

“All I am saying,” she says through gritted teeth. “Is that you should find someone you can spend the rest of your life with.”

“I had her. And I lost her.” My voice is dull, devoid of emotion. “And I never want to experience that again.”

“You need to move on,” she says, her voice still tight.

“I don’t think this is any of your business. I haven’t relied on you for a long time, Meriana.” She winces when I use her given name. She always fawns when we call her ‘Mother’ in public.

“And I don’t think you have any right to tell me what the fuck I should do. Now leave me alone.”

And with that, I down the rest of the zhisk and walk in the direction of the gates.

Talking to my mother always makes me angry. She just has a way of getting underneath my skin that makes me want to rip my face off instead of talking to her.

“You need to move on.”

I replay the words she said to me over and over again, and I become angrier and angrier as I leave my family’s property and head to the Red District, stumbling over the cobblestone streets as I walk.

Moving on from Elvie, from our relationship, from her death, which almost killed me, which threatens to kill me every day, is easier said than done.

And knowing how my own family betrayed me after her death, by not attending the funeral rites and by telling the entirety of high society that her death brought shame to the Elenil family legacy, makes moving on even more difficult.

How am I supposed to move on when I have no support? How am I supposed to move on when I live with the weight of what could have been every single day?

How am I supposed to move on when all I can see, smell, and hear, after all this time, is Elvie?

My mother’s words just prove how cold-hearted she is. All she really is, is an attention seeking, social climbing bitch, with no regard for the children she brought into this world.

The children she’s supposed to love.

I don’t know how she managed to swallow her disappointment at Valkus’s union with a human woman.

“Althia will need to watch her back,” I say, my voice dark and low as I stumble past a tavern in the direction of the Red Kiss. “I wouldn’t put it past my mother to hurt her or worse.”

I finally arrive at the Red Kiss, and I am greeted by the bouncers, two miou dark elves who I know very well.

They nod at me with friendly smiles on their faces, and when I reach the bar, a drink is waiting for me.

At least I have this, I think to myself as I look down at the alcohol.

Because I have nothing else.

THE END.

To read more about Althia and Valkus my newsletter here:

<https://www.subscribepage.com/celesteking>

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

The 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!](#)