



WORLDS OF
EROTIKA

MONSTER'S PROPERTY

ANNE HALE
CELESTE KING

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PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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DEDICATION

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

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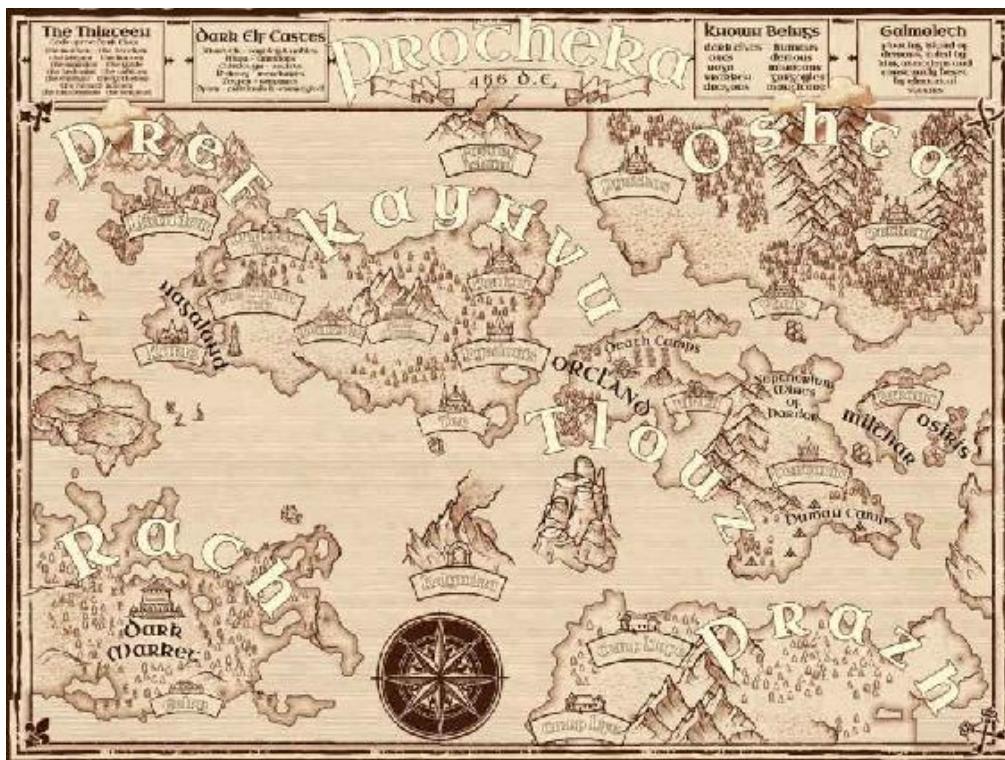
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THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



ARIE

I both long for and detest the light of the sun within this cavern. Its scorching heat would melt me, but at least in death, I might find a better existence than this one.

“How did you sleep, Mother?”

My hoarse voice startles me as it breaks the silence.

I look at the wooden totem beside my bed. It resembles a stereotypical depiction of an elf, far less grotesque than the dark elves I’ve seen in my life. Its carved and hollowed eyes portray a sense of wisdom and its long, flowing hair conveys its age.

Reaching forward, I begin to stroke the wood, running my fingers through its long, entangled hair.

Mother tells me sometimes that she procured it from an orc encampment but won’t explain which god it represents. The oddest thing is, I’ve never known orcs and dark elves to get along, so I sometimes doubt the veracity of her story. If anything, I’ve heard dark elves and orcs hate each other.

But when I challenge her on it, she stays silent, watching me from somewhere in the distance as she reminds me to finish my chores.

I like to pray to every god in the hopes of covering every possible deity. I’d like to ensure I’m honoring the right being and not blaspheming whatever entity this represents because I’ve grown very close to the totem.

But religion has always been a private aspect of Mother's life, which she has kept to herself. So not knowing any differently, I mostly make up the gods and names, figuring that in all likelihood, the more gods I imagine, the more probable it is that I'm close to the truth.

There's Ezekiel, the god of hammers. He helped create the world from bundles of branches and piles of stone. He also helps me build shelves on the rock walls of my home. They mostly fall down, because Ezekiel doesn't like me very much. He makes a lot of snide, underhanded comments.

There's Warren, the goddess of hope. She's a quiet goddess who likes the taste of nimond and enjoys my singing voice. She's also very opinionated and makes no apologies for it. I value her input because she tells me the things I don't want to hear but need to.

Harold, the water god, is a bitter deity. It hasn't rained much lately, and the water I get from him is usually filled with filth. Sometimes it makes me very sick, but it's far better than dying from thirst.

I've seen people slowly die from thirst. I struggle to think of a more miserable experience than that.

I could bore myself, just listing off all the gods I've created. Sometimes, I do. It's an easy way to fall asleep...

There's also Bornt, the god of wood. There's Laron, the goddess of unfortunate tripping, and Trinity, the goddess of lies and misdirection...

"No," I say aloud. "What would Mother think?"

I shake my head.

I cannot fall asleep again. I'm moments away from starvation. I can feel my stomach gurgling but still haven't decided what I'll eat today.

I don't even know what I'm going to feed Mother. And she's counting on me to provide.

Though I try to pry myself free from bed, I struggle to find motivation as I watch the damp rock ceiling dripping onto the

floor. My pail is overflowing, which means that today I may not suffer from thirst.

I gaze at the other bed, empty and unmade, inches away from me. Mother watches me calmly, surveying me from where she stands at the entrance to the cavern. Rags and various articles that one might mistake for clothing litter the floor.

Roots block out the sunlight, always weaving thickly inward, no matter how many times I cut it down. I'd like to find where they're drawing their water, suspecting it must be from somewhere overhead.

"Oh, Mother," I say. "You always were such a slob."

I chuckle. "Don't worry. I'll take care of this."

The mess is enough motivation for me. I stand up and then begin to make the bed, tidily laying out the sheets and folding the clothes that lay on the floor.

In moving forward, I jump as my bare feet touch the leathery flesh of a chirops, which flies upward in a frenzy. It disappears somewhere in the cavern, its brown fur perfectly camouflaging it among the rocks and sand.

"Son of a worg!"

I catch my breath, looking back at the mess on the floor. Thankfully, it's free from chirops waste.

Heaving a heavy sigh, I return to work, avoiding the chittering insects that have made their way back inside. They're mostly harmless, though I do worry about them destroying Mother's clothing.

For somebody so disorganized, she does have high standards of cleanliness. When I leave even a single wrinkle in her bed, she scolds me for it. She's gotten used to the idea of living among the wilds... it's the sacrifice we make, living on the outskirts like this.

I remember her warm smile and her tight embrace. The truth is, we haven't been very close lately.

Looking back to the cavern entrance, she has left, probably searching for food in the desert. I wish I could accompany her, but I can't leave the cavern until I've finished my chores.

I hum a quiet melody to myself, imagining Warren's contented smile. With the accompaniment of music, everything becomes so much less stressful.

"There," I say to nobody in particular. "All done." I've formed a pile of clothing on the bed, atop the folded sheet.

Not a single wrinkle is left on the surface of the sheets or in the folded garments. I estimate that I spent about thirty minutes today completing that task.

It brings me a solid sense of accomplishment.

But looking up at myself in the mirror, barely illuminated in the dim cavern, I see how long and disheveled my hair is. I wipe it out of my eyes frantically, even tearing strands from my tangled split ends. Becoming aware of it, I realize how it weighs on the back of my skull and how uncomfortable it feels, knotting together like this.

I can't go out like this. Mother will just have to wait a little longer.

I know I'm not alone, but I feel isolated down here sometimes.

My smell is unpleasant to me. I wonder what Mother would think if she saw me like this... unkempt and intolerable to be around.

I bring the pail with me, along with some herbs and wood ash lying on the wooden dresser next to the totem. Walking into the deeper recesses of the cavern, my bare feet irritated by the coarse and inconsistent texture of the rock beneath me, I prepare myself.

First, I cover myself with the herbs and the wood ash, getting into every nook and crevice. Then I carefully pour the water over my body, trying to loosen the herbs from my flesh that now fill my nostrils with their pleasing aroma. As the water rushes over me, my hair falls out over my eyes, reaching my waist.

With what remains of the herbs, I lather my damp hair, attempting to remove the unruly bunches and knots.

By the time I'm done, I have enough left in my pail for a decent drink. I'm sure if I chiseled through the ceiling, I'd find where the roots are obtaining their water, but I've been reluctant to do it. The risk of the cavern collapsing is very real.

I feel refreshed now, not quite so wretched. I can dry myself off in the desert if I just hack my way through the vines again.

Carrying myself up the hard rock slope, I look out into the distance, spying the illuminating glow of Warren, who smiles at me in the cavern depths. Her hair glows bright yellow, her eyes beacons of blue. She always portrays such wisdom.

She's there for me in the toughest times.

Reaching the bed, I set the pail down once more, looking down sadly at the dried skeletons of chirops that litter the floor. I've done whatever I can to survive. But this cavern's natural resources are not a good source of food.

I bring my foot down, snapping on the bones of one of the chirops. The skeletal wing breaks free, and I grab it, taking care not to cut myself with it.

The green vines that cover the cavern entrance are hard like a tendon. Cutting through them is always tremendously difficult for me.

I pierce the soft exterior of one of the thicker vines. I figure, if I can pierce it hard enough, I might be able to make a hole large enough for me to fit my body through. Brown juices flow out from the vines, and I wonder if, in desperation, I might be able to drink them. I haven't studied these plants exhaustively.

It's almost unbelievable that anything could grow in this immense heat.

They can't, I think, smiling to myself.

But the more I poke and prod into the vines, the more sunlight begins to flow through the cavern entrance. My arm

tires from the constant stabbing.

I wonder if vines have thoughts. Do these vines feel pain? Am I killing them?

Finally penetrating a big enough hole into the vines, I step over the sinuous plants, the overwhelming heat searing me and reminding me of my immense thirst and hunger. I catch a full view of the desert, then collapse into the sand.

I can feel it burning me.

I begin to remember my mother, lying dead on the ground, bleeding into the sand. I remember my sense of helplessness as one by one, I watched them take her from me.

My screams were not enough to stop them. She begged me to run, and so I did. Sometimes, I feel like I never stopped running.

I should have done more.

Tears flow down from my eyes, slowly at first. I begin to sob, remembering Mother's hugs and how she'd comfort me when I didn't know what to do.

I wonder how badly she'd scold me, knowing how much water I've wasted with my tears. Looking back at the cavern entrance, I see her smiling at me, welcoming me to sleep a little longer.

I shake my head, wiping my cheeks with the back of my arm.

Today, I need to try to survive. This cavern will be my tomb if I don't.

PELIEL

“**B**less the believers, who live their lives in fear of my wrath. All who see me know to live free of my light, clinging close to the shadows.”

“Punish those who tread against me. Their invasion against me is a vile repugnance. How dare they think themselves worthy of my presence,” I continue, my voice a fiery, roaring beacon. “They should all bow.”

Rocks stretch out before me, pouring blood and water because I command them to.

Steep, sloping rock walls line the large chasm around me. Down a rocky slope, which I have pulled upward from the ground and made into a chute, the blood and water pour forward from them at incredible speed, arriving at my feet where I stand in a pool.

I do not know from whence the blood and water arrive. Certainly, the blood is coming from living beings somewhere in the world. The water is from the salt of the ocean.

Their nourishing nectar satisfies me as it swirls upward from my feet, twisting into two vortexes that arrive in my mouth. One stream of water, one stream of blood, neither mixing at any point. The salty taste of blood flecks across my tongue.

I can see the skulls that float among the cavern, engulfed in flame. They dance forward and backward along the barren tunnels, leaving streaks of blue and white light in their wake.

They exist because it amuses me. At one point in the distant past, they were the skulls of my enemies. Now, I've come to consider them friends.

They do not encroach upon my territory without permission. They do not speak out of turn or ask inane questions of me. They do not waste my time with their petty squabbles.

They all simply exist in my domain.

But my eyes are everywhere.

They're fourfold on my face, perceiving the bleak darkness in front of them, where rocks provide moisture for me.

They're on my white, feathery wings, seeing behind me and gazing back at the cavern entrance. There, the water drips so heavily that it drenches the ground below it like a river.

Many dying creatures in the desert would kill each other to drink the flow of water that pours through my cavern. From the soil and the elements, I pull miracles and tragedies alike.

And my eyes are in the desert, where orcs and elves have each formed caravans that amble cautiously forward. I can see their trepidation, even from the distance above, as they dare to encroach on my territory. They have not prepared for me.

Their fear only confirms their guilt. They know their trespass.

My vision descends, honing in on the slow-moving caravans.

The elves push relics and riches, guiding their wagons forward by legions of equu. All manners of gold and jewels adorn their caravans, along with several silver masks made in the images of beasts.

Their greed disgusts me. Through the desert, they haul human servants who look disheveled and malnourished, not even fit for one of my meals. It really is a pathetic sight.

None of them speak as the wheels roll forward and the dry, barely present wind pushes sand forward into dunes.

The orcs propel lumber on caravans of worgs and batlaz. Each of their wagons is designated with a single metal spike, meant for ramming and sieging settlements. They bring with them wagons and wagons of cooked meat, decorated with salt for preservation.

Their hubris astounds me. They expect to build fortresses of iron and wood within the desert.

I sigh, my voice filling the empty chasm in which I sit, twirling a blade on my finger. Its blue sheen illuminates the sprawling chamber.

I have been considering what to do about them for nearly an hour and still have yet to discover a plan that satisfies me.

On one hand, I would love to watch the forward-marching orcs and elves destroy each other in a violent confrontation.

I want to drink their blood as it flows freely outward onto the dry desert sands. Blood is so much more satisfying when it's pulled free from the living, earned through sheer brutality and force. This loaned blood barely satisfies anymore.

I could easily turn them against each other if they don't naturally seek each other out. The tempers of elves and orcs are easily toyed with. Ingrained in their deep prejudices, their minds form conspiracies that readily draw their blades.

On the other hand, their mere existence annoys me. They are hardly worthy of effort or spectacle. These unimpressive bands could simply be pulled from reality, and their loss would leave no chasm.

This is my territory. Hundreds of years ago, I claimed this cavern for myself, pulling it free from demons and dragons that had infiltrated its walls.

I should not have to share it with anybody... let alone the arrogant, rambling elves, or the dull-minded, savage orcs. They contribute nothing to my joy of existence, save for the thought of their untimely deaths.

My vision zooms through the desert, over dunes and steep hills, returning to me.

I know that any subversion of their inevitable fate is a mercy, and I don't deal in mercies. They are going to die for their trespasses. That much is guaranteed.

And while I can pretend to savor their deaths more if it's ironic and delayed, I'm offering them kindness by simply killing them today.

“But how to do it?”

The fluttering, empty eyes of the skulls float toward me, and I wish I could imbue life in them so that they could offer suggestions. Unfortunately, there are some laws of mortality that even I can not toy with.

Once something is dead, dead it remains. Though there are some who might unnaturally tamper with that law, their efforts have rarely been rewarded with anything other than death.

At their heart, the skulls are mere decorations, meant for my eyes alone. Though I treat them as companions, their presence here is little more than a warning to those unlucky enough to cross my path.

I lift my foot up, leaving the pools of flowing water that swirl around me to sink back into the indent, where blood and water course separately, spinning erratically. Then I shake my feet, drawing the water and blood back toward the cavern floor.

I snap my fingers, and the fluids return to the rocks, shooting forward through the air and wedging themselves into cracks in the wall. Viscous streams of red jet upward along transparent streams, catching the light of blue flames from wandering skulls.

The cracks vanish as the rush of fluids ceases in every trajectory. I am left alone with my thoughts, hearing only the fluttering of skulls.

It's true that I could kill the trespassers now, in this very instant.

I could snap to their minds, and in a flash, turn their very thoughts against them.

Or I could even destroy their brains from within, causing miserable aneurysms.

There would be riots as the camps struggled to understand the deaths. If I did it to the orcs, perhaps they could even blame it on elven magic and do my job for me. Simple creatures have often mistaken the powers of divinity for magic.

If I did it to the elves, they may turn against each other or blame the gods. Both would be equally satisfactory.

It would incite a war.

I feel myself smiling wryly at the thought, although not as gleefully as I would like.

In pouring through my memories, I realize that I've done that before. Several times, actually. Throughout my centuries of existence, I have repeatedly used my powers to trick easily misled mortal minds. And while every war is satisfying to behold, the joy I draw from playing mortals against each other has diminished. It has become dull and uninteresting with repetition.

What's more, every time I project my mind into the distance, it taxes me further. And that tax takes time to repay. I could take all my effort, wiping out every intruder individually, and I would be left in recovery for decades.

I might be immortal, but I'm far from indestructible.

My eyes take in the blue flames of the skulls one more time, and I make a decision.

"Fire," I say aloud. "They shall perish by fire this time."

Standing erect, I plant my feet, closing the four eyes that cover my face, and the hundreds of eyes that cover my wings. Willing the elements upward into me, I bring divine fire to my form. It swirls atop my horns and over my arms, enrobing me in its splendor.

It's simple, really. Perhaps a little too mundane.

I shall vanquish them all through fire.

But for all of the elegance it lacks, I know that it will still inspire terror in their hearts. I also know that it will leave me the least vulnerable to them. Fire takes little effort to command. Its power has become innate in me over my many centuries of controlling it.

Leaving the dim light of the cavern, I step forward across the stone halls that I call home. I look out over the sprawling white and brown sands.

Its desolation has always been beautiful to me. I love the deserts of Protheke.

But as my eyes wander over the cresting sands, I feel something else enter my heart, and I can't quite place its basis in sentiment. The dark skies reveal thousands of stars that shine white and green.

With as much power as I wield, I have no equal. I struggle to imagine a being, capable of enjoying my wrath, who I would not immediately strive to strike down. I want to share laughter when I extinguish a camp of intruders. I want to empty halls and cities alike, bringing plagues across the land, hand in hand with another entity.

My victories are growing unsatisfying to me. They've grown stale.

But still, I must continue. I cannot relent in the faces of my pathetic adversaries. Their wickedness deserves my attention. Their greed deserves my wrath.

Unfurling my wings, I take to the skies, coasting forward against the light of the rising sun.

ARIE

Onward, I trod familiar paths, moving across paved deserts. The scorching heat sears my feet as I stroll. I am careful not to get lost in a mirage or in the glare of the sun overhead.

One wrong step in these sands could mean my death.

My cavern rests due south of me. I have only wandered in a straight line with very occasional veering, for the sake of backtracking.

Because there are no signifiers to speak of which would guide me back if I got lost... no strange rock formations, no plants... I have to take care that I follow a very clear path.

“Nothing yet,” I say out loud, looking up at the dreary gray sky.

Eerily, I have not run across any roaming creatures. I’ve brought a dagger with me for protection, expecting to at least run into stray worgs who make their home amid the sands.

But there is nothing. The deserts seem unusually uninhabited around these parts.

Of course, I’m partially thankful for that because it means that I haven’t had to pry my life from the claws of predators. However, amid these sands, I need to find salvation before the desert itself condemns me to death.

I might find that salvation in the sanctuary of others like me, who have also escaped from confinement.

I'd even take the remains of an animal who ventured too far from the beaten path as a way to satisfy my unbearable hunger.

Quietly, I hum to myself. I don't remember where I first heard the song. It's a pleasant melody, and it uplifts me from my trudging despair, if only for a second. I like to imagine that my mother sang it to me when I was a child, but my memories of my mother have grown more distant with the passage of time.

It's been years since I've seen her face.

I still can't believe she's gone. My mind wants to project her out somewhere in the sand. I want to believe she's still alive, despite knowing differently from personal experience.

She's both my reason for wanting to live and to die. I know she would want me to go on, and she died protecting me. I've heard that I might see her again in the afterlife. I don't know that I have much to live for anymore.

But I take solace in knowing that my mind is mine again, at least for the moment. Any company at all would be great in the sands. I know that with imagination, my mind can only lead me to ruin.

So I can't simply imagine a companion, for fear of my brain making it real. I'm on a delicate track. The slightest thing could set me off, spiraling me into another reality.

And I'm never sure what could trigger it, so I have to move with caution, regulating my every thought.

When I see an untended zabilla, I pluck it from its stems, careful to avoid its sharp points. Cooked, zabilla can be delicious, especially with butter and herbs... or meats? It functions more as a side dish than a meal.

By itself, it has little taste but provides plenty of nutrients and water.

There isn't much to eat in the uncultivated deserts... even less now, since there are no animals to be found. As exhausting as a struggle for my life might be, at least the meat

from the creature I killed would be something to sustain myself with.

It might make my stomach stop gurgling.

Occasionally, I wonder if I was better off in the caverns, eating the disgusting remnants of chirops.

But I have to shake my head.

“I’m never eating chirops again,” I say aloud.

And the sound of my voice, against the dull winds of the desert, reverberates loudly in my ear, startling me awake.

I can’t go back there.

Eventually, I will find something. My mother wouldn’t have sent me on this quest otherwise.

I imagine her smile, and it fills me with hope. I know that she would want me to return home to her. If I can bring her a nice meal to accompany my return, I’m sure she would be grateful.

Laughing a little, I trod forward with a little more bounce, though the sands are still heavy to walk through, and they are extremely hot on the soles of my feet. My last pair of sandals broke years back, and I’ve had to live with the calluses that has caused.

If starvation doesn’t kill me, I could always die from infection. There are all sorts of creatures in this desert that would gladly pierce through my foot, sending poison coursing through my system.

With the wondrous sky ahead of me, filled with pinks and majestic oranges, I’m suddenly overwhelmed by a delicious smell.

“Is somebody cooking something?”

I know that nobody around will answer me, but mostly for my own benefit, I pose the question anyway. There’s a tangy, meaty smell that carries through the air like a beacon.

Letting the smell guide me, I veer off, uncertain of where I was going or why I left the comforts of the cavern.

Mother will be expecting my return, and we have everything we need back home.

Approaching closer, it smells a bit like roasted worg. It was my favorite food, back in the elven...

It was my favorite food that Mother used to make. When it was all we could find, I still remember when we sat together around the fire, and she burst out a string of irreverent jokes. It was the first time she treated me like an adult.

We had barely escaped confinement.

I almost lost her.

But oddly, the closer I get to the smell, the farther away it seems. I'm still not sure where my cavern is relative to me, not that I'd want to go back there.

I'd imagine, if I reached the tall hill on the horizon, I could look out over the sands. If there are any signs of settlements, I could see them from on high.

Nodding, I stride forward, with the full confidence that this will teach me what I need to know.

But as I reach the base of the hill, I spot something unexpected and feel excitement brew within me.

Tracks have formed in the ground where the sand is thin and uncovered. I'm uncertain of how the wind didn't simply blow these tracks away. They must be recent.

"Humans?"

I lean down to inspect the tracks. I know it's almost too much to hope for. But still, I need to believe I'm not alone out here. I need to believe that somewhere, I can find safety among my own kind.

The tracks are of shoes, with long strides. It doesn't rule out the possibility of humans, but more likely...

"Elves," I say out loud to myself, upon seeing the hard presses of equine hooves and the thin wheel tracks.

I can feel myself shaking as my thoughts begin to collapse even further. My mind jumps back to metal cages... to seeing

my mother on the ground as the elves beat and laugh at her.

The world swirls around me. I can feel myself hyperventilating.

Calm down.

It's not real. None of this is real.

“Run!” my mother says. She’s standing tall behind me, in a black floral dress. Her eyes trace the tracks in horror as she follows them along the vast desert.

“We can’t go back there,” she tells me. “You know what they did.”

But I’ve already begun to sprint across the sands.

If only I could remember the way back to my cavern. I know, at some point, that I had a plan. If I could just recall what it was.

“Vines,” I say, nodding.

If I just look for the vines at the entrance to my cavern, I’m sure to find my way back home safely. Against the bright pink sky, the green is sure to stand out.

As I run, I try to retrace my steps. My footprints are already covered by the gusting winds, so I’m going to have to find my way back through memory.

I remember sensing the smell of meat. That sent me eastward.

And I veered slightly whenever a landmark interfered with my forward trajectory.

Stopping my desperate sprint for a moment, I struggle to catch my breath. That’s when my eyes behold a familiar rock formation, and I know that I’m home.

Stepping precariously over the sliced-open vines, I peer inside.

“Welcome back,” my mother says cheerfully, sitting down at the table. She’s brewed tea, and she’s even cleaned up the place.

I hate to disturb the scene. It's so peaceful in comparison to the world outside.

Retrieving my totem from the bedside table, my knapsack from beside the bed, and a handful of sets of clothes for both of us, I am more short with her than I'd like.

"We have to go," I say. "There are elves nearby."

She shakes her head. "We don't have to worry about that," she tells me, smiling. "He will provide for us."

"Who are you talking about, Mother?" I ask, casting her a sideways glance as I peer around the room. I know that I need to travel light, but I also don't plan on coming back here.

"He smites the monstrous and avenges the downtrodden. And he already has a plan for all of us."

I stare at her quizzically before turning back to the entrance, tugging on a strap on my knapsack.

"You're not real," I tell her, though it pains me to admit it.

"No, I'm not," she replies in a chipper voice. "But he is. And when he finds you, you need to be open to him."

I shake my head.

"I'm going to close my eyes now, Mom," I tell her. "When I open them, you'd better be gone."

I take a deep breath, staring back at the ruined room full of skeletons and insects.

"I can't ever come back here again," I say.

Sighing deeply, I march forward toward the open entrance of the cave. Miles and miles of endless sand stretch out before me, still awaiting my travel.

I have to do better this time. I don't know what I'll find, and that terrifies me.

But anything is better than this.

PELIEL

Nothing is hidden from my many eyes.

Each creature below, from the skittering rodan to the proud wild equu flee from my shadow as I drift over the vast desert below. I can feel the heat of my fires burning in my chest, threatening to engulf the world entirely.

I let it sizzle at my fingertips as I feel for the vibration of the caravan ahead.

They are moving towards a camp, where they intend to erect a more permanent settlement with their tools and resources. “That will *not* happen,” I swear to the bitter wind and the rising sun, my only companions this high up. “I will educate them on the folly of trespassing in my domain.”

But there is so much movement that I find myself surprised.

A rare notion.

The orcs and elves have become complacent on the outskirts of my territory, so that even my cleansing fire will be hard pressed to scour evidence of them from the landscape. It ignites a fury in me to dwarf the first light of day.

I master it on a billowing exhale, letting more of my eyes fly open, the earth becoming a panorama of endless velvet predawn. I spot my first interlopers marring the desert’s windswept plains. They are a simple troupe of humans, trailing towards a slave camp.

It is not pleasure that finds me when I descend upon them.

They are barely able to turn when the air crackles with heat, blistering the air and turning the sand to glass beneath them. They are caught in my luminous ray and vaporized on contact. When the dust of their bones dissipates in the wind, I tilt my head.

“Too fragile,” I lament with a frown, scanning the surroundings for another target.

The humans of the camp do not rush out to see what could have caused such a sound. Even the rare pavo goes quiet in my presence, shielding its young from my gaze with its feathered body. A lone child cries in the silence, and a woman hushes it.

A guard emerges between two tents but does not look up.

My fingers twist, and I rouse the fire in him that sears his insides before the explosion spatters the surrounding tents in his blood. “You’re fragile, too.”

That is when they notice my presence.

Several humans peek out to find their guard in many more pieces than I found him, and they finally look up at me. Terror dawns on their expressions, but it is too late for them to forget what they’ve seen.

Someone’s scream pierces the air.

My dark laugh goes unheard by those who lay witness to me, blood pouring from their sockets as their eyes melt from their heads. They clutch their faces as more humans emerge, made frantic by the sudden assault.

I spread my arms wide.

“Witness me,” I murmur, reveling in the cacophony of cries that swell from their tragedy. Light flickers under my skin, glowing brighter with each passing second. I am the morning that comes before the dawn, the light that sweeps away the imperfections of this world.

All my eyes flare open then.

None can avoid my sight as a brilliant pulse spreads from my core like a blast of thunder, the sound making all mortal

beings that hear it go deaf. The light sears them where they stand, leaving permanent shadows as fire rains down on them.

Some try to fight back, their skin sliding off muscle.

Several try to flee up a dune, and I catch them in a whirl of fire, lifting them up from the ground and sending them reeling across the desert. Their bodies convulse before curling up like crushed insects, landing hard and scattering into a dozen roasted parts for the karasu to pick at once they cool.

The whole of the camp has awakened at this point, a few brave souls attempting to organize while tripping over their fallen comrades. Men are still digging at their empty sockets as if they will find anything but gore, and others are still trying to keep their skin from falling off.

With barely a wave, I set the largest tent alight from its base.

Humans come streaming out, scattering any hope of mobilization. I think I see little ones among them, hiding in the skirts of the women, but another pulse from my core sends them all flying off their feet. They stare up at me—those that can still see—to lay witness to my true form before they meet their demise.

The light intensifies, and I become a being of pure sight. Pure light.

I look into each one's soul as the horror of their fate becomes tangible. My next blast scorches the entrance to the camp. A dozen humans shield themselves, only to crisp on contact with my brilliance.

My blazing feet land lightly on the sand, leaving footsteps of glass as I pass through the yawning opening. The ones with good sense flee. Others that haven't quite grasped the severity of the situation are dragging away corpses of their loved ones, blood and ash smeared across their horror-stricken faces.

A woman nearly bolts past me, and I catch her forearm.

She shrieks at my touch, her green eyes bright with the light of me as her skin roasts under my grip. I drag her close

and bury my teeth into her shoulder, drinking down her vital fluid before she slumps in my arms.

“All done with this one.” I let her corpse fall at my feet and wipe my mouth.

There are eyes on my hands, at each fingertip, all across my back and my front, and every facet of my glowing essence, so that when a human male comes at me with the intent to attack, I’m already facing him.

It is one thing to rain fire from on high.

It is another thing entirely to be faced with their feeble weaponry and their brutish attacks at ground level. He doesn’t even get within ten handspans of me before I let all my glorious illumination roll over him. Flesh and muscle are sheared from his skeleton before the spearhead makes contact, melting into a spray of iron while his skeleton remains standing there, grinning at his own foolishness.

I’d almost pity them if it wasn’t so satisfying to watch them die.

I might have expected a better fight from the dark elves or the orcs. They never seem to know fear until it is too late. Humans, on the other hand, are crafted from fear and subservience. They are made for it.

I step over a corpse and move deeper into the camp.

Fires flare up around me of their own volition, and the surviving humans seem to have caught on to the nature of my visit. There is no mercy to be gained in this battleground. I only crave to water the desert with their blood.

“Give up your struggle, humans,” I say, letting the words radiate through the ether. “Your masters have abandoned you to my wrath.”

Those that have any sense scatter from my sight.

But a young woman with tattered golden hair weeps over a corpse with his eyeballs melted from his head. Her body heaves and tears cascade over her rounded cheeks. I find humor in the gesture. *What wasted potential, when you could*

be running, I think, stoking the fires inside of me so that they glitter in her eyes before they consume her, too.

I take in the cool morning air, the sun finally beginning to rise.

Smoke curls up over the camp, drifting high into the sky, a testament to the destruction of those who dared to invade my territory. May it be a signal to others who might consider the same. True dawn sheds an impassive light across the camp, red and black painting its once-white tents. Their stores are scattered and burnt, the survivors fleeing and choking on ash.

My wings hoist me gracefully into the air for a better vantage.

From this angle, I can count the last of the humans spared from my indignation. I'll give them time to regain their footing before raining more fire down on them. And when I'm finished, the merciless desert will weed the rest out.

Out here, in the middle of the Tlouz wilds, there will be no reinforcements.

I allow a wry smile to come over me, gloating—I'll admit—at the beautiful devastation. Their wails were grating on my fine senses, and though the fires have been tempered for now, it won't take much to accelerate the burn if they decide to start up again.

The camp is already alight.

“You have nowhere to run, locked in the crosshairs of my sight.”

Other than the muted crackling of dry wood, a different sort of silence settles over the camp. One that's punctuated with the distant, bleating cries of little humans, somewhere among the wreckage.

I let myself drop lower to pinpoint the sound, my interest piqued.

ARIE

Panic doesn't stray far, but exhaustion soon shares its company with me as well.

The tracks have long since been swept away by a frigid night wind, and I find myself wandering aimlessly in the desert, looking for any sign of life. "Harold, preserve me," I mumble through parched lips, my leathery tongue sticking to my palate.

A gust throws sand into my eyes, and I have to shield my face with a ragged cloth just to breathe. My pack is growing lighter by the hour, the chewing roots refusing to offer up their sweet nectar any longer. Nothing is helping the growing chasm in my gut.

Though the moon is still cresting the horizon, the sky seems unusually bright, pulsing purples and blues swirling with the deep orange of predawn. It is a sight to behold, a godless wonder that slows my steps.

It would be so easy to simply lie down and watch the show.

But the sand is biting cold when I fall to my hands and knees, sending pain shooting up my arms. I don't have tears any longer, or I might have shed them. I glance up again, and the sky is dark once more, speckled with stars as it should be.

"It's not much further," I hear myself say. "It can't be."

"The elves will get you if you don't hurry," someone whispers in my ear, so close I can almost taste the fire on their

breath.

I don't know how I find myself upright, wavering dangerously on my feet.

My pack is some steps away from me, its contents scattered down the side of a dune. The world feels as if it's tilting, trying to shake me off, so I scramble up to the top of a small sand hill, feeling a warm breeze break through the chill.

Morning is coming.

With it will come the wretched dawn and the merciless heat. Cold can be battled with layers but I cannot remove my skin when the heat sets in. *Or, maybe I can*, I think, my nails digging into the flesh of my arm. Wetness beads under my nails, and I realize I've pushed too hard. I stare at my bloodied fingers for a long moment, considering sampling it.

"I am not an animal," I remind myself, my voice cracking as I wipe the blood on my shirt. "I am not an animal."

"There, do you see them?"

The voice from before urges me to look at something, and I scour the terrain. Several sets of footsteps in the sand. I'm amazed they haven't been swept away with the rest, and they even look human in size. No elf tracks accompany them, nor cart or equu.

I take measure of their meandering path, committing them to my shifting memory. "Yes. I see them," I say in turn, grinning at no one and stumbling forward.

I feel the press of Mother's company beside me.

If I turn to look, I know she's going to disappear again. I don't want her to disappear, because that will mean I'm alone. Truly alone. "Thank you," I say. "For staying with me."

She says nothing in response.

But it's enough to feel the press of her presence as she walks in step with me. We travel like this for what feels like forever, but that can't be right. The sun seems shy this morning, taking its time to rise.

“Who should I pray to, Mother?”

My laugh is soft and wild, but at least my tongue is no longer sticking to the roof of my mouth. I must keep talking, or it will shrivel up. I can't imagine meeting the owners of these tracks, just to find myself unable to speak.

“Is there a god of the sun? There must be, right?”

“Maybe we can call her Maeve. Or Maya.” It feels good to fill the silence. “Maya, I like that. Unless you have a better one?”

I can feel her shake her head.

“Maya it is, then.” I squint in the direction of the dawn, sensing that heated potential just on the horizon, threatening to rip the seam. With the growing light, the colors return tenfold, coming alive and chasing one another's tails.

“Remember not to tarry at daybreak.” Mother's words flood into me from somewhere just out of reach. *“It's not just the desert creatures we have to worry about out here.”*

“Right, of course.”

I lower my head and trudge ahead. The tracks are gone, but the terrain is getting steeper. There are few places to go but forward. Maybe from a higher vantage, I'll be able to see where the humans went.

All I have are their tracks.

I crave to hear a familiar voice. Of Mother's sweet lullabies or her tales of Jurtil. It would make this trek more tolerable, I think. “Tell me that story again, Mother. The one about the iypin.”

“We don't have time for stories.”

I chew on my lower lip, almost forgetting myself and glancing back. “All we have is time up here.” We pass a bush that's been stripped of most of its purple leaves. I snatch one dangling from a branch and bite into its succulent flesh, which coats my throat in something that resembles water, but not quite. I grab three more and stuff them in my pocket for later, fiddling with them as we trudge the last few handspans to the

top of the dune. "It will keep my mind occupied, at least until we reach civilization."

I sense more than hear her terminal sigh. "*Alright... but just one more time...*"

A smile finds me as she begins her retelling. It makes the journey tolerable, without any food or water left to slake my growing hunger. The sun's first rays sear my back but her story centers me, and we find an even pace to trek, the occasional footprint leading us in the right direction.

"There was a little golden iypin, in a little silver cage..."

"...kept by a little copper prince, in a little stone tower," I echo, the child's rhyme bringing me back to a place I thought long lost. Mother sits at the foot of my bed with her book of tales. She has read it so often that the spine is bent and the pages have yellowed. Some of them are even ripped, but she smooths them out as best she can. "But the little copper prince had a little wooden key he kept in a little cotton pocket at his breast..."

"Did the iypin know that he was trapped, Arie?"

"No, of course not. Because the copper prince made sure he wasn't lonely."

"That's right. But that's not how the story is supposed to go."

"It's not?" I ask, standing tall as I stare out at the vast expanse in front of me. Half of me is still in the warmth of my bed, marveling over the illuminated pages before Mother snaps the book shut.

"No. See, the little copper prince grew up and grew bored of the little golden iypin. He became more interested in dripir and wild likar, swords and magic, so one day, when the little copper prince was not so little anymore, he took the little wooden key out of his little cotton pocket and unlocked the little silver cage... and he let the iypin run into the big dark woods, alone."

My voice quivers when I find it. "This is not how you told it before."

“The iypin thought himself free. He had never smelled air so fresh and clean, or tasted the pure water that ran down from the mountain...”

I lick my lips at the idea.

The thought of mountain springs feels like a dream out here.

“After a long afternoon frolic, he settled into a spiny yellow bush to make his home and slept. But the barking of batlaz woke him suddenly, and holding their reins was the little copper prince, now a king.”

“The iypin recognized him?”

“Yes, my darling girl.” I can almost feel Mother stroking my hair, but there is no smile on her soft countenance. *“Now hush, our tale is almost done.”*

“Yes, Mama,” I hear myself say. I haven’t called her that in over half a lifetime, but it comes just as easily as if I never stopped.

“The big copper king had a crossbow with little golden bolts. But the little golden iypin didn’t notice how it was aimed at him. Nor did he mind the baying of the batlaz, straining against their master’s hold.

He only remembered the warmth of his embrace, and the hours they lay together in front of the hearth. He wanted to go back to the little silver cage and stay there forever.

The bolt flew true and pierced the little golden iypin’s heart.

And as he lay there, the blood seeping into the ground beneath him, he looked up at his old master with hope in his failing heart. His little copper prince would save him, he knew, even as death drew like a veil over his eyes.

With the batlaz still howling, the king picked up the iypin’s body and smiled like he always had when they were young, proud and benevolent. “A fine addition to my wall, you’ll make, my friend.” And the iypin could be no happier to serve his master.”

Tears are streaming down my face when I rouse from the telling. “That can’t be how it ends. He *trusted* him!”

“Trust no one, darling.”

The iypin’s fate makes my heart heavy. And, as much as I want to heed her warning, I don’t know how much longer I can last on my own. “I have to.”

“I’m sorry, Mother...”

PELIEL

Only a few of the humans decide to flee on their own, but most remain behind, freeing a group of women and children from a burning tent.

I watch the procession with marked interest.

The men are burned in the process, and I have seen how slowly humans heal. It's inefficient to be injured, but they risk life and limb, pulling more people out before the flame engulfs the tent. "There are more children in here!"

The whine of wood tells me it's about to collapse.

Still, another man dives in, and when several small humans pass through the opening of the tent, I have to reconsider my initial assumptions, even as sparks fly and the beam finally yields to gravity with the man still inside.

I think I can hear his dying shrieks, but they are shared by no others.

Those who were helping him take the little humans and race to the survivors, mostly the weak and small and injured. It's a pitiful group, almost not worth the effort of destroying them.

One of the bigger humans is handed a smaller one, and she begins to weep, cradling the little creature to her chest. With death hanging above them, they still manage to exhibit sentimentality over their living property. I scrunch my nose at the response, fueling the flames around them with a wave of my hand.

There are still several ways out of the camp, but I hope to spur their panic, force them to make the wrong decision and get each other killed. It's amusing to plant the seeds of destruction and watch them grow, better still to reap them myself.

I land hard on the ground, setting it to tremble as I storm towards the group.

They don't have time to pick up their meager belongings, clutching the little ones and fleeing with wide eyes and screams. My flames kiss the stragglers' ankles, but even as they regroup, two of the men turn around to face me.

They know their fate.

I can see it in their wild gazes, how they bare their teeth at me and let out shared battle cries as they charge with poles in hand. The first one, I strike with a backhand, breaking his neck on contact, but the other I catch by the throat, forcing the pole from him with a jerk.

"Why do you protect them?" My voice radiates through the ether, echoing into places long forgotten by man or elf. My ungrateful caller chokes and flails, turning red. "You have sealed your fate, trying to save them. *Why?*"

His mouth moves as if he means to speak, but he is blinded by my radiance. He catches my arm as if to lessen the strain on his neck, and finally manages to spit out a curse. "*Fuck you, monster.*"

The human's condemnation should offend me.

But I find myself laughing instead, the humor growing in scope and breadth. My fingers tighten around his neck, closing off the air and blood. They go further, to grind his bones and make his eyes bulge. They don't see me any longer, so I throw his body down like a ragdoll into the flames, still humoring myself over the folly of it all.

"Did I truly expect them to be intelligent?"

Even lesser creatures like orcs and elves use them for their labor, being little more than beasts of burden and pleasure.

Nothing pleasurable about the mess I've made here, but it is a singular joy to know I've rid this place of their contamination.

I rain down true hellfire upon the camp, burning away the remaining corpses and supplies. The fires rise around me of their own volition, being whipped into a frenzy by a playful breeze. Those still twitching with life are quickly swallowed up in the inferno, so all that's left to see is the hot yellow flames.

The others are still fleeing, and a few fighters are left to defend themselves.

I should track them all down and ensure they don't return. But something has left a bad taste in my mouth. Maybe it was the woman's blood, but I doubt it. It was sweeter than anything I could summon on my own, so close to the source.

"Pathetic," I say of the broken tents all around. "And a waste of my time."

I fold my wings in close and bolt up into the sky, letting them fan out as I hover high above the wreckage. Everything seems so small from up here, and even the survivors have hardly made headway in their egress.

I could keep one of them, I tell myself, eyeing a few of the small ones.

They clutch to the skirts of their superiors, looking up at them with undiluted trust. The humans are holding hands and comforting one another, tossing back frightened glances in the direction of the camp. Their closeness is strange to me but appealing.

I clap my hands together, trying to rid myself of the soot and blood.

The very elements yield to my command, and still, they do not provide the warmth of an embrace or the reverence of a subject to their divine protector. To be touched and worshiped and venerated. A delicious shiver crawls up my spine.

Their fear is easily earned, but their adoration?

I can almost see why the dark elves keep them around if they are so easily molded to the desires of their betters. But which one? This group of humans would never forgive what I've done here, I know that much.

Soon, the fires begin to die, the smoke rising in a black ribbon towards the sky. It will be a marker to all in the vicinity that this territory is hostile to their settling here. I do hope I don't have to repeat this process, but I wouldn't be opposed.

It was rather good sport, if not a little pedestrian.

A being like me should not be lowering myself to the task of exterminator. I have a greater role in the workings of Protheka than what I've done here today. And still, there is something that nags at me, but it wouldn't behoove me to sate the urge.

I don't feel like humans feel.

I am.

I need nothing more than myself. But it would be nice, perhaps, to have a creature underfoot that is eager to serve my every whim. To speak to them in the small minutes of twilight. To pet and to hold and to make squirm when the occasion arises.

If the humans can be so protective over one another, it isn't beyond the realm of possibility that they could bond to me in a similar manner. I may not grasp the depth of their emotions, but I could play at them, learn their ways and proclivities.

In fact, I think I'd rather enjoy the process.

Something warms my heart space, and I realize I quite want to try.

The humans that are fleeing are not suitable for my purpose. I have already ruled them out as prospective companions. It has to be someone who hasn't yet felt the heat of my flames at their backs or seen my true form in all its glory.

They need to look upon me like the god I am.

A grin finds me.

So lost in my thoughts, I didn't realize that the humans had finally found a way through the winding dunes and crossed out of my territory and into the safety of another. Their slow procession in the morning heat will overcome them soon enough. The desert is not a merciful mistress and sympathy to those who find themselves in her grasp at midday.

But something else catches my attention.

This far up, I'm surprised I noticed it at all. They look about the same size as a desert suru from here, less than that, but they stand on two legs, tumbling forward with the weight of their exhaustion with nothing but the ragged clothes on their back. I turn to fully observe the human, and my grin widens.

“Ask, and it shall be delivered.”

ARIE

Trust no one. Her words echo with every step. *Trust no one.*

But not even the press of Mother's company is still with me on this journey. The absence of her presence is loud, like a high buzzing in my head. I glance back, only to verify what I already know, and weep.

Ezekiel's hammer casts the last nail into my coffin.

"You don't matter. You never did. That's why I abandoned you." Her confession is acerbic at the back of my throat. How can I hear her voice when she's so far away? There is nothing to keep me upright any longer, and over the next dune, I let myself fall to the hot sand.

The wind has settled, mercifully still cool enough to keep my body from boiling. The last leaf in my pocket is left untouched. What would be the purpose, anyway? To draw out my death just that much longer?

"There's no point," I whisper, resting my head against the sand.

The gods have abandoned me here. I did not bring their likenesses with me, and so they are punishing me for my disloyalty. Maya beats down on me, her bright rays chasing away any shadow of a doubt that she will be the one to claim me.

I might as well let it happen.

My eyes close of their own volition, and I take a shallow breath, maybe one of my last as Arie. When I try to move, everything hurts, so I hold as still as I can. Where I thought Maya's grip would be searing, it's almost like an embrace, one I've been craving since my mother...

I can't finish the thought, even with the karasu circling.

I simply don't have the energy.

My head is spinning, and everything is whirling out of focus. I want to curl up and die already, but when the acrid reek of smoke hits me, I am strangely, suddenly alert. I haven't smelled a fire like that in years, but it has to mean there are humans nearby, right?

I nearly topple over myself, barely regaining my unsteady footing.

Through my bleary sight, I manage to spot the source of the smell. It towers high into the sky over a rocky outcropping, a beacon from the gods. "Oh, thank Warren," I say, hardly able to form the words as I stumble towards the refuge.

It has no evidence that dark elves had any part in its creation. I'm not sure how I know, I just *know*. Like how I know dawn is coming, or there is going to be rain. I hone in on it with a strange clarity, each craggy rock sharp enough to pierce my sight, even from this distance. The rocks yield under my touch, but I scramble to catch another before the sand and gravel send me sliding back to where I started at the base of the hill.

"Trust no one."

I issue a strained laugh. "I have to trust *someone*, don't I?"

Mother is about to speak again when a shadow descends from the heavens. I hear the heavy flap of wings that cools Maya's hold on me. I think it could be an overzealous karasu, but when I cast my gaze upon it, I almost let go of the rocks in utter surprise.

It is an angel.

A celestial beauty beyond my wildest fantasies. He is only human in the basest sense, with two arms and two legs, and a single, noble head that studies me with four pale blue eyes and shimmering white horns that threaten to pierce the sky. Three sets of magnificent wings suspend him, and his arms are spread open benevolently to receive me as he glows softly.

Relief floods through me. “Who sent you? Maya? Warren?”

He says nothing, coming closer so that I’m blinded by his luminous form before his powerful arms close around me. Malnourished as I’ve been, he makes me feel like I weigh nothing at all as he gathers me into his welcoming embrace.

I reach for his magnificent face, stopping short for fear of staining his perfect skin with my human fingers. “Are you real?”

He seems confused by the question, a stitch forming between his pale brows. “You are mine now, human.” His gaze roves over my pathetic form and softens slightly, though I don’t know what he sees.

“I am yours,” I say in turn, forgetting my hunger and thirst in his presence. There is nothing but the shape of him, bright against the endless blue sky. If he is a god, I will devote every waking moment to repaying this kindness. If he is another figment of my imagination, I could not have wished for a more resplendent distraction. “Am I dead yet?”

Elysian mirth finds his pale eyes, ever serene. “No.”

“Oh, good...” I settle into the crook of his arm, letting him take my weight as his wings spread wide. A distant thought sends a spike of panic through me, but it is allayed immediately by his beautiful visage. I don’t think he’s capable of exasperation. That is a human construct, or an elven one, I’m not sure. Still, I feel obligated to ask. “Is it wrong to ask questions of a god?”

He flashes a perfect, pointed set of teeth, but he does not answer.

Instead, he takes to the sky, making my heart leap into my throat with the excitement of it. *You're dead. You have to be. Humans don't fly.*

“But he said I wasn't,” I murmur under my breath, appreciating his cool flesh against my cheek. I could stay here forever, sheltered from the scorned Maya, my last breath denied to her. If he said I am not dead, then I am not. There is nothing to doubt in his countenance, his very word makes it true.

There is something magnificent about being in his arms.

Maybe it's that I'm truly not alone anymore, the gods of my cave becoming less real the higher he flies, like I've woken from a dream that's dragged on for far too long while my new life has been waiting for me all the while.

He doesn't exert any effort in our journey, and truly, the world seems small up here. I dare to peek over his elbow, my hair flying wildly in every direction. Is this his world, dancing among the clouds?

It brings hope to my tired heart, a particular joy that I cannot physically reciprocate. “*All will be well,*” I hear Mother say, distant and soft, so different from the accusations she was spitting in my ear as I was dying.

I beam at the world, biting back at its attempt to take everything from me. The wind in my face feels real enough. But to go from the oppressive desert to the sky, it *feels* unreal.

No human has ever seen the world from this privileged height, I'm certain of it, drifting along a high breeze. I dare to cradle his arm, feeling unworthy of his consideration. My lips brush against his softly glowing flesh, wondering if it is as velvety as it appears.

It is!

His flight pattern changes, slows, and something tells me to look up. I do, the heat of his focus almost too much to bear. But his gaze settles on me gently, confusion mingling with pleasure. So many subtle emotions I can't quite place, despite

his hard countenance. I want to discover them all and know him as thoroughly as he seems to know me.

My mouth moves as if to speak, but it's difficult to form words. He is magnificent in every way, a saving grace in a brutal world. Though he says nothing, I realize I am beholden to him for more than my life, my companionship.

It has been so lonely since Mother abandoned me.

I am his! My spirit rejoices in the fact that we may have forever to discover one another. And he responds to what I say! It is more than even Warren ever did, but uncertainty grips me suddenly. Did I really hear his voice, or was it the whispers? Can I trust memory when it led me astray in the desert?

“I am yours,” I whisper again, pushing to defy the exhaustion threatening to overcome me. All that I am belongs to him now, and I think I'm okay with that. A god—a *true* god—keeping me as their own is nothing to be frightened of.

It is as it should be.

Mine is a singular pleasure to hear his answer, rumbling from deep in his broad chest. “Yes, little human.”

“You belong to me.”

PELIEL

I find a cruising altitude in the air, above the clouds, the sun radiating deeply into my face. I look down at the human wrapped in my arms. She is incredibly light, and she buries her face into my chest as I push forward through the air.

She murmurs something into my chest with a soft vibration.

“What was that?” When I look down, two swollen golden eyes stare up at me, a tear trickling down the right side of her face.

“Where are you taking me, my lord?” She smiles softly, batting her glazed eyes.

My lord? Whose lord? Who does she think I am?

“Somewhere high. Where I can keep you.”

She wiggles her body tight into my chest.

“The holy land. Where all is one and light is love,” she says to the whipping air.

Maybe it’s the fast wind, but I have a hard time recollecting exactly what she says. Maybe it’s the shock of being catapulted into the sky after a tragedy. I’m quite puzzled as to her phrasing.

On top of a rise thousands of feet in the air, where the clouds cover the top peaks, I maneuver through the air, the female clutched against me, and straighten out my wings for

the landing. My face always feels dry after a long journey in the air, so I rub my cheeks gently.

She sits on the ground, her legs curled under her. She looks up at me with those wide golden eyes. “Are we here? Is this the eternal land?”

I shake my head. “What are you talking about?”

“You saved me,” she says. “From the imminent fire and the supernatural forces of evil there. We must be in heaven, now. Is Mother here?”

Who exactly does she think I am? I have no good intention of saving her from danger. I merely want her as a pet, a curiosity for my amusement.

I am certainly not the god she seems to think I am. Although I suppose I am a god compared to her and the other feeble creatures she has experienced before.

I place her gently on the stone floor. She tussles her hair, looks around for a bit, and then up at me directly. Again.

“What shall I do to please you?” she says. “You saved me from damnation.”

My confusion turns to excitement as I gaze at her soft brown legs, her torn dress exposing the tops of her breasts. She adjusts her weight, stretching her legs out.

“You sound ludicrous,” I say. “You know that?”

She merely smiles at that. Then, she takes her hands and begins to rub them up my thighs.

“You’re beautiful,” she murmurs, her small hands gliding softly over every piece of skin within her reach.

Whatever her condition, however she wants to continue, I finally give up and go along. Her soft touch sends tendrils of pleasure down my spine. I close my eyes and face the ceiling. Here she is, a beautiful woman, small, delicate, all here for my pleasure.

Nothing could be more precious.

The flesh and all its pleasures are the only things that give this futile existence anything close to meaning.

In desire, there is no happiness or joy. For me, it is only a reprieve from suffering for an instant, or a continuation of suffering in another form.

I pick up my prize and walk over to the bed. Her body is completely limp, and I lower it gently to the downy mattress.

She stretches out on her back, widening the smile she has worn since we arrived. I use my fingers to caress up and down her thin legs. I touch her chest, pulling down the front to reveal the tops of her breasts.

“You are mine now,” I say. “Do you understand this?” A lump forms in my throat. A slight irritation gives way to an intense desire for this woman.

She nods. “I am here to worship you. To live with you in paradise.” She stares straight into my eyes. With their golden hue, they almost penetrate my brain. I look away.

Can her devotion be real? Whoever she thinks I am, she is giving herself to me without question. Perhaps this is what I am missing. This is what I deserve. The thought that she desires me and my control makes me flush. She craves me as much as I do her.

“What is your name, girl?” I walk to the end of the bed.

“Arie,” she says meekly. “If it pleases you.”

I nod and meet her at the head of the bed.

I lean over her and press my lips gently against hers. The warmth flowing through my veins is remarkable.

There she is, submitting to my will. My pet, my plaything. How shall I start? I know she will do anything I ask of her, and this is almost too much to handle.

“Thank you,” she murmurs in a soft gasp before sliding from under me and standing near the bed. I sit up, watching her intently, unsure of what it is that she’s planning to do. Does she think she can run from me? That these touches will be all I desire? Then she kneels before me, bowing her head as

though in prayer as she continues to explore me with her hands.

I did not give her this order, but I do not mind the sight.

She begins by running her hands up my chest, her calloused fingers rubbing across my nipples. Thrilled by the sensation, I lean into her touch, reveling the way her hands begin to glide lower, over my sternum, my ribs. She mumbles something softly before those brilliant, golden eyes find mine again.

“You chose me, you saved me. You’re beautiful,” she says again, the reverence in her tone heating my blood further.

“I do not know how to thank you,” the woman, Arie, murmurs. Her rough hands glide over my body, her eyes tracing their every movement as though she’s afraid I’ll disappear beneath her touch.

Her tentative strokes are not enough.

“You will thank me by obeying me,” I rumble, my hips twitching toward her hands. It has been a long time since I’ve decided to give in to these baser urges, but something about Arie’s pliability has drawn them out of me once again.

Arie nods her assent, an eager but small smile gracing her lips. It is strange, to share space with a human like this. They have only run from me or attacked me, in their own weak way. This one, however, sates many urges I did not realize I had until earlier this evening.

The behavior of humans makes more sense to me now.

Even within a few short moments of basking in Arie’s attention, in the adoration and veneration I deserve as a superior being, the thought of something happening to her violently twists something inside of me.

She is *mine*.

Mine to train.

Mine to enjoy.

Mine to destroy.

Her dark curly hair tickles across my thighs and stomach as she stands again, and I lift my chin, looking up at her. She reaches a tentative hand toward my lower set of eyes, but before she can make contact, I grip her wrist tightly, the bones in her fragile arm grinding together beneath my bruising grip.

Arie's wide eyes blink at me in surprise before I drop her hand, and it falls limply to her side.

"You are mine," I repeat to her, rising to my feet. She leans toward me as though sucked in by my gravity. The strange beauty in her fragility, the open yearning in her face for my attention, fuels the flames that have been climbing higher within me.

The feeling of her desire for me, her devotion to me, is like a drug.

I sink into the feeling, into her soul. I will claim it, and every last part of her, as mine.

ARIE

The cavern around me is eerily sinister by comparison to his astral, otherworldly form. It's difficult to make out, but in the dim light, I think I perceive sadistic, chattering skulls garbed in flames, though I know I can't trust my perceptions, and that any and all parts of this might be idle hallucinations.

My hands wander up to the horns that grow from this creature's brows. They are rigid but still, they vaguely remind me of skin. They feel soft to the touch, although I know that they could penetrate through my bones with little effort.

In his four piercing blue eyes wreathed in crimson, my mind finds peace. I've never been more certain of anything in my life.

This entity will ferry me to my new destiny, safeguarding me from the treacheries of the desert and the violent whims of my former captors. I have been called to worship him, admiring his strange, ethereal body.

My hands trace over his pectorals, just grateful to touch him. Their tough, sculpted mass guides my hands down to his well-defined abdominal muscles, which twitch at the mere sensation of my touch.

Reaching lower, I can almost perceive his member, which shines brightly, the glare concealing its shape. The light emitting from him burns my eyes, and I instinctively look away, shielding my retinas.

I want to see it.

I know that's bad, but just being able to touch this divine being where he is most intimate...

The idea rouses my mind and stirs my loins.

"That is enough," he says, in a harsh and disciplining voice. "I want you to show me the depths of your commitment."

I nod in return, acknowledging his demands. Why would I rebuke him? This may be my only chance at salvation.

This can't be real. Can it?

"What would you like me to do?"

He smiles wickedly, all four of the eyes on his face squinting in a sneer. I watch in fascination as they squint simultaneously.

"Yield to me," he growls. "Succumb to my might."

I look into his glowing, pupil-less eyes.

"Do what you want with me," I say, smiling.

I am ready to be punished.

His claws move to my shoulders, where he begins to stroke me, digging into my muscles with force as his wrists trace my contours.

"This clothing interferes," he says.

With no preamble, he rips the fabric at my shoulder, coming just short of clawing into my flesh.

"You don't need it anymore."

I can't help but gasp.

For years, I have worn the same clothing, soaking it in cavern water and herbs. My clothing is sacred to me. I was never taught to make clothing, and I don't know if I'll ever reach civilization again.

Having it so casually torn unhinges me.

He scowls in response to my surprise.

“I thought you said you were ready for me,” he says before a look of disappointment forms. “If you need, I can take you back to the desert, where perhaps a worm might have its way with...”

“No,” I say with a fire. “I will not.”

Nodding in response, he gives a self-assured smirk. “Very well. Then *yield*.”

His merciless nature is not lost on me.

In a dominant show of force, he grips the split that he’s created in the fabric and tears it down in a strip. I offer myself to him, sacrificing my mortal husk and all of my attachments.

Only through sacrifice can I find peace and ascension.

I close my eyes, expecting to find myself back in my own cavern.

None of this is real. You know that.

“I need to admire you as you are,” he growls, interrupting my thoughts.

But as the sounds of continuous ripping fill my ears, I open my eyes. I am naked and alone with him. Neither Mother nor my gods are here, proving that this cannot be an idle fabrication.

This is real.

It proves nothing. You know this is a lie.

He pinches at my nipples. They are hard and sensitive to his touch, and as he manipulates them, he grins up at me.

“I know you desire me,” he says. “Your body betrays your secrets.”

“I need your salvation,” I whisper to him. “I will do whatever you ask of me.”

His face becomes callous and hardened. His gaze upon me is stern and unwavering.

I can feel myself quivering, my legs struggling to support my body.

Though I may not know which being this envoy serves, may not even know who he is, I know that I need him. The urge is overpowering, stifling my rational senses and insanity alike.

“I would love to test that,” he says before digging into my breasts with his claws, sculpting them. I can feel his overpowering urge to remake me, my flesh like clay in his hands.

My brain screams at me as I am overcome with pain. But something about this pain is unfamiliar, and as I listen to myself, I am surprised by my own noises.

I can't stop myself from emitting a moan, his grip on my breasts tightening.

His offensive has ceased to be mere touch. He constricts my breasts like a vice as he twists and twirls, manipulating flesh and nipple. He pulls them out even beyond their limits as they redden, and my veins throb visibly blue in response.

My body revolts against me, struggling to cope with the pain, but my mind knows the truth.

For my own safety, I must endure this.

To find what I have been seeking, I need to trust in him.

This being will provide me with plenty to drink and consume. And in consuming him, I will offer my gratitude.

He throws me down onto the dark tiphe bed. I want to stare into his ethereal eyes forever, but I am roused by screaming behind me.

In the headboard, I see faces with mouths agape, fighting to escape from their confines. They are dark and elven and wood-colored. For a brief moment, I am transfixed in their gaze, and the idea of them watching arouses me.

I can see their eyes roving over my body, taking in my strained and exhausted nipples and my urgently dripping wetness. They lust over me, ready to watch me become broken and defiled.

But they cannot claim me, because I am *his*.

“Look at me!”

I turn to see the agitated divine being, whose body has started to glow. His form is imposing, muscles flexed in a show of dominance.

I realize now that I want him to bend me over the bed and fuck me, for all the world to watch.

He's not even human.

I shake my head.

He pulls my legs apart, pushing my hands down on the bed before tearing at my panties and exposing me to everybody in this cavern.

His sharp, pointed teeth contort into a snarl, commanding my obedience.

“Stop moving!”

The bed legs contort and stretch, becoming soft. The world warps around me, the very walls of the cavern twisting into oblivion.

I watch as the legs become dark wooden vines, wrapping around my legs and arms, binding me in place.

With my body constricted, the creature moves forward, his throbbing member almost visible to me. I crane my neck up to see it, but still have to squint.

How big is it?

But my perspective shifts suddenly, as with the moving legs of the bed, which slither in the air like serpents, I am brought before the divine envoy, carried closer to his alien and sacred face.

Suspended completely and nearly unable to see the rest of the cavern, I can only wait as upwards in the air, I am lifted higher.

I gasp again.

This time, he does not object to my surprise. His clawed fingers slide into me, grooving upward into my very being. I

clench as in one motion he and I become enjoined.

The living furniture tightens its grip on me, rubbing my skin abrasively. Internally, I am opening to him, taking in his holy extremities. With every upward push, he opens me more, stretching me with his fingers.

I need this to be real.

But it can't be.

I am alone in a vortex with him, suspended in a void. In the darkness, I see only his pearl-white face and celestial horns.

He twists into me. I buck in response.

He dives further into my void. I squeal, a debased, pathetic human in the throes of debauchery.

And despite my mortal husk and the nature of this trial, I see jubilation on his face, pressed down far at my entrance. I see an eagerness that almost appears mortal to me, based on the most mortal of all urges – to spread one's seed, perpetuating a legacy.

And then a moisture crests over me, not of my own. At two points, I realize that his tongue splits, pressing into my clit and massaging it upward.

There is a firmness to his tongue that is unlike my own.

His fingers still have not left my pussy. If anything, they prod and probe far more eagerly.

But the grace and speed with which he handles me... his tongue pushing my clit as though it were a finger, his finger penetrating me as though it were a cock...

It's too much for me to handle.

I perceive the great vast cavern around me, and all of the lights that dance and sway, my mind shifting between a world of fantasy and a world of gritty darkness in equal measure.

I close my eyes, partly overwhelmed by the sensations of two worlds revolving into each other, but mostly by the pleasure that is overtaking me.

And I exhale deeply, starting from my core. I exhale until I am hoarse and screaming, unable to process the sensations that course through me now.

My juices drip down onto the cavern floor, my body still bucking in his hands.

And gently, he sets me down on my knees before him, my eyes still closed. I place my hands in my lap as a show of reverence.

“In time, you will learn,” he growls.

Slowly, I open my eyes.

The light is nearly gone from it.

Twitching inches from my face, a bulbous, throbbing member nearly the size of my arm intimidates me, covered in veins and bumps.

“Now yield,” he orders.

I look up at him, my eyes wide with my own fear and arousal.

PELIEL

She looks as though she's at my feet worshiping me and also in another realm, torn between two worlds at once.

Nude, she kneels on the rock floor, bowing before the power of my cock. And though her eyes stare up at me, their expression is vacant and distant.

Her skin glistens even in the dim light of the cavern, cast upon by the far-passing lights of blue and white fire. Her body is alien to me, but as I beat her face with my member, leaking fluids onto her cheek, I'm struck with a desire to possess her.

"Now yield," I say, slapping her with my rigid member.

If I don't make it hurt, what's the point of testing her? She has offered herself to me, as a servant of my divinity.

She's mine to use now.

She looks up in awe, mesmerized by something she can't convey.

"It's different," she says, holding it up to her face and looking back up at me. She runs her fingers over the bumps and grooves in my cock, studying its texture, shape, and size.

I furrow my eyebrows.

"What do you mean 'different'?"

She doesn't answer me, but as I contemplate her words, my heart is filled with jealousy. I didn't even realize I was capable of this emotion. It's so mortal and quaint that I know abandoning it is the only sane option.

I grip her by her hair, stuffing myself into her face.

She is at a loss for words with my cock in her mouth, spit trickling behind her as I pace forward and backward on the balls of my feet, thrusting past her lips with rough indifference. Their silky texture on my shaft spurs me to act faster and more decisively, overtaking her with my might.

Has she seen other creatures? Has she yielded to the advances of other men?

This question burns into my very soul, and yet I'm uncertain why I'm bothered by it at all. She is still nothing to me... just another vessel to stuff full of my majesty and cum.

I shake my head and chuckle, giving way to laughter. She looks back up at me in confusion perhaps interspersed with terror.

But before she can respond, I pull her hair tighter, seeing how far I can lodge myself inside her mortal mouth. Her cheeks struggle to accommodate my girth, and I'm uncertain whether she's more surprised by my size or by her own ability to take it.

“Choke on it.”

I sway from side to side, breaking in her mouth before thrusting far more wildly into her face, with a speed perhaps beyond her mortal limits.

The lengths to which these mortals will go to satisfy what they perceive as divine beings always astounds me, though I am happy to sweep in and take advantage of that readiness.

As she reaches up, attempting to grip my cock and slow its forward pace, I slap her hand away, aroused by how much I'm allowed to debase this creature. She's helpless in the wake of my onslaught.

I have taken control of her body, and now it is mine to possess.

Her gulps and gasps are fuel for me, propelling me forward with increasing vigor.

And the more her eyes water and her body begs for a break, the more eager I am to break her.

She beats against my leg with her fists, a signal that she's had enough, her eyes rolling back and going white. But I don't intend to yield to her. She has barely succumbed to me.

If she wants to serve me, she's going to need more endurance. She's going to need to pledge more of herself than this.

"I know you can take it," I urge her on.

I thrust forward again, this time attempting to put the entirety of myself inside her throat. But it's a fool's task. She's not built for that.

At least not yet, I think.

I feel a wicked grin cross my face.

Her eyes drift off to another reality, and briefly, I pull out of her mouth as her body goes limp in my arms.

Clearly, I overestimated her. Though the mere sight of her with my cock inside of her throat could push me to endless lengths, breaking her very soul, if I'm to keep this one around, I may need to go a little easier, lowering myself to her limitations.

"I forget how weak you are," I say apologetically.

But as she gasps for breath, spitting precum onto the ground, her head swivels, her eyes burning with a ferocity hotter than the scorching sun.

"Let me try again."

She takes my cock in her hand, but I swat her away.

I can see her insistence. And witnessing it for myself, I feel my confidence in her depravity returning.

But I have to test her fealty.

"No," I say. "I think you've had enough."

Her fire is not extinguished as she moves her hands back to my member, trying to stroke its tremendous width in her hand.

“I was wrong to put my faith in you,” I tell her, sneering. “I will need to find another disciple –”

That was all I needed to say. Her despair relinquishes itself, yielding to her lust and desire to please.

And before I can reluctantly swat her away again, she has stuffed her own face on my cock and is cresting over the ridges and bumps with her dry tongue.

She is thirsty. I can feel it.

I will need to sate that thirst myself. I will fill her mouth with my seed.

She still struggles, but her willpower overwhelms her mortal limitations as she pushes her throat down onto my shaft, guzzling my length to the best of her ability. She gets about halfway down my length before she starts to choke.

“I will need to extinguish that gag reflex,” I say, taking her head and pushing it forward. “Be a good little whore, won’t you?”

As is, my length physically won’t go any deeper. If she’s to take more of me, I will have to bring her through a true transformation.

I look down as I push myself sideways, popping myself forward until I fall out of her stuffed cheeks, then swatting her. I commit myself to breaking and reforging her. She opens her mouth and sticks out her tongue eagerly as I slide back between those full, sinful lips.

“Good girl,” I groan, pleasure sparking up my spine.

I can feel her mouth curl up into a smile around me.

Perhaps there’s potential in this creature yet.

She pulls herself off of my member for a moment, yanking her neck back as if consumed by some external force. She is completely covered in my fluids now, degraded entirely in my presence.

“Faster,” she urges me on. “Take me faster!”

I scowl into her eyes, challenging her to back down, but she does not relent. She giggles as I stuff myself into her with still more urgency, her mind thoroughly broken by me.

I force myself down until she can't breathe, and when she's on the brink, I pull myself out of her.

I do not know what has transpired in her mind, but the entity I'm shoving into my balls is not the same girl I brought into my cave. She regards me not with fear, but with something indiscernible even to me.

I think I want to understand her more, less for my own pleasure than for my own unease.

But her speed and enthusiasm both begin to diminish.

Then, as I enjoy the warmth that surrounds my nethers, uniting her velvety mouth with my steed, something changes in her.

She suddenly restrains her arms and legs as she did before and is motionless. Her eyes widen as she takes in the room around her, as though somehow surprised by it. It's as though something is wrapping around her form, restricting her movement.

But there is nothing else in the room.

I do not relent. She has committed herself to my service... pledged herself to me. She cannot plead indecision or insanity in this matter. I cannot deny, however, that the change raises a strange emotion in me. Something akin to... concern.

As her body goes stiff and she appears possessed by something, I fuck her mouth more slowly, suddenly consumed by doubt, until Arie reaches out and grips me to her, her fingers digging into my thighs.

It is all the encouragement I need.

Even in her excitement, her mouth is less cooperative, struggling to resist me as I prod forward.

Her purpose is at my feet, begging for me. She takes it so prettily.

“You fucking like it,” I growl down at her as her eyes roll back into her head.

She tries to speak, but I offer her no breath.

I teeter on the edge.

She promised herself to me.

Tightly, I grip her head, pushing her forward into me. Her tongue combs the underside of my shaft as, with one final thrust, I can feel myself climbing.

My mind empties, my balls draining inside of her mouth.

Her throat fills with my seed. She tries to pull off of me again, licking under my glans.

“Swallow,” I command her, feeling her swirling tongue around me.

Her throat pulses around me, as slowly and fervently she consumes my offering.

Looking down at her, I briefly think I see something new in her features. There’s a ferocity in her eyes as she looks up at me.

But the moment passes, and just as quickly, divine admiration returns to her.

She takes my glans in her mouth and cleans it, thoroughly brushing over me with her tongue. I am so taken by this display, I almost want to take her again or probe even deeper into our relationship.

But I dare not face the oddity of our interaction again tonight. Something possessed her at that moment, and I intend to find out what.

“You’ve done well,” I tell her.

She smiles up at me in return, offering no words. Though I perceive her renewed commitment, her eyes are glazed over now.

I reach down, gripping her and lifting her into my arms. Gently, I lay her on the bed, glancing over her features one

more time.

“You can’t just have the bed carry me over?”

I can’t hide my puzzlement as she leaves for the world of dreams. Her eyes close, and she begins to snore.

ARIE

My senses come to me one by one.

Where I expect the Warden's soft reassurances, there is nothing and no one. I reach out before my eyesight returns and feel only soft fabrics and heavy down. My mind is strangely quiet, except for my own thoughts.

I dare to peek an eye open, then the other, blinded by the soft glow of daylight filtering through the cave's vast ceiling. But soon, my sight adjusts to the radiance, and I gasp.

This isn't my cave.

And it's certainly not anywhere I've been before. I think. At least it doesn't spark any memory I can recall. The place is simple but polished, with high stone walls and shelves with trinkets – skulls and things I can't see from the vantage of this oversized bed.

Even the natural swirls in the stone look crafted by a mindful hand. No tools could have done finer work.

“Where am I?” I ask no one and get no answer.

When I move to sit up, a flash of memory strikes me. It's jumbled and feels unreal, of glowing flesh and murmured praises. I can't tell if it's a dream I had when I tossed and turned in this fine bed. Or if it was a hallucination brought on by Maya's heated gaze, ever watchful.

My every muscle screams for me to lie back down, but I push past the sensation and rise. I land lightly on the balls of

my feet, but that is the only thing light about my body. I sway with fatigue, but I need to find answers.

Did a kind stranger rescue me from the desert?

This place doesn't seem abandoned. But the owner is out at the moment.

“Mother?”

The silence is strange. If she was here, she isn't any longer. Nor is Warren or Ezekiel or the rest. Just Maya's diffused light whispering through the channels above. It's really beautiful. The owner seems to care quite a lot about the state of their dwelling, so I'm surprised they dragged my sorry self into it.

The bite of the desert still burns my tawny skin.

I hear myself laugh, the echo coming to my ear like it's someone else.

The exit is wide enough for a cart and two equu to fit through, side by side. I'm not sure who needs such a large entryway, and though elves and orcs cross my mind briefly, I dismiss them instantly. Dark elves wouldn't stoop to living in the wilds for anything when they have their fine cities, and orcs don't have the eye for such beauty.

“Not elves,” I tell myself aloud, exhaling that knowledge with a sigh of relief. “It's not elves.”

The solace only lasts a moment before I hear a different sound. The sound of someone navigating the cave. Soft footfalls against the smooth stone.

I slip against the wall and hold my breath. Maybe it's the benevolent person who rescued me, and maybe it's not. Either way, I won't be taking chances. I try to make myself as small as possible, refusing to make a sound.

The clarity of my reality is so stark here, I wonder that the last few days have just been a waking nightmare. A hallucination I couldn't rend myself free of, caught in the grip of paranoia after being left in the sun to roast. With the way my skin comes alive at every touch, I must have been out under Maya's rays for longer than I realized.

The intruder gets closer.

They don't make a sound or a murmur, just quiet steps that draw nearer with every moment. And that's when they appear in the entryway.

Everything seems to pause.

Four sets of pale blue eyes fall upon me and pin me to the wall with muted curiosity. But it's his form and figure, what I once thought the product of madness, that nearly drives me over the edge again.

"Y-you. You're-"

He tilts his horned head, soft white hair cascading over his shoulder. His chiseled expression is that of a man, but little else in the way of anything human can be attributed to his form. Three sets of wide wings are folded against his back, and his body is the size of the biggest orc I've ever seen, perhaps bigger. And when I look down, I recall flashes of what lay beneath his flowing robes.

"You're real."

"Did you think I wasn't?" The question is hard, almost accusing. There is no room for patience as he sets down a sack that was tossed over his broad shoulder. "Why are you not in bed?"

I can feel a deep tremor in my core, and my eyesight blurs. "No. No, no, no," I sob, grabbing fistfuls of my hair and trying to drag some reality from my scalp. "It's not – It's not *real*, it can't be..."

A powerful hand grabs my wrist and yanks me forward. "Quit this madness."

He forces me to look up at him, but I can't maintain his multiplied gaze. A scream escapes me, not of my own volition, and my whole body seems to lose its strength all at once. He lets me go, and I shrink into a trembling mess at his feet.

Tears chase down my cheeks, and I can feel the press of his disappointment.

But I can't control myself. I thought he was another hallucination brought on by the heat of the desert, not a creature, a *monster*, that took me to his hovel and had his way with me. The flashes of memory rise to the fore, and I remember his serpentine tongue between my legs and his – “Oh, gods... what did I *do*?”

“Nothing I didn't demand of you.” I can feel his shadow come over me. “You are my pet now. So, quit your howling.”

I'm still shaking my head when I feel the press of a boot against my side, then it rolls me over and presses hard against my sternum, so I'm pinned between this monster and the stone. If he wanted to, he could crush me without much trouble.

The air rushes out of me as I squirm beneath him. “Please. What am I doing here?”

His nostrils flare as if my question irritates him. “Are all humans squawking imbeciles?”

I catch hold of his boot in a vain attempt to catch my breath when he releases me all at once, then moves away as if the conversation has bored him. He turns his back to me in exchange for the sack that he throws atop a flat surface to rifle through.

I sit up, feeling ill, and clutch my knees to my chest to still the quavering in my core. “What are you going to do with me?” I ask, daring to glance at the shelf full of skulls. Will I be added to his collection? The thought sends me reeling into myself again, spiraling until the whole room is spinning with me.

I catch myself against the stone floor. “Please, just tell me the truth.”

He ignores me for his own task.

“What *happened* to me? Who *are* you?”

I glance up at his powerful form, the strong cut of his back beneath soft flowing robes, and notice the twitch of his wings when he glances over his shoulder. “I am called Peliel.”

“Pel-iel,” I echo, finding my voice through chattering teeth. “I only want to go home.”

“This is your home.”

Each breath is agony. My heart is pounding in my ears. All the world has narrowed to this pinpoint of reality in Peliel’s home. *My home. I am to be his pet until he grows bored of me, and then he’ll do terrible things to me.* “Just like the dark elves.”

I feel more than see him whip around, and when I look up, a scowl has come over him. “There are no dark elves in my territory, human, do *not* evoke their likeness here. Words hold power.” He seems to cool slightly, looking down his nose at me. “Well, at least mine do. Now, *quiet*. I have work to do.”

I bite my lower lip until I taste blood, pressing my forehead to the cool floor. It is imperative that I keep control of myself around this Peliel, or gods know what he’ll do to me if I disobey him again. It all went upside down the moment I left the safety of my cave.

I could have died in peace there, surrounded by my friends.

Mother, Warden, even the cold Ezekiel.

But I am here, made to supplicate a monster in his own home until he finds a better use for my body and mind. If I have not gone mad already, I know he’ll drive me to insanity by the end of it all with that handsome and terrible face.

PELIEL

When I think I've finally gotten her to shut her mouth, she proves me wrong again. The chatter is incessant. The complaining never stops.

Some plans require careful study. What I know is that orcs and elves are moving into my territory. I do not know why, or what they're planning. Quashing the invasion of my territory is as simple as snapping their spines and ripping out their skulls.

But no sooner have I gotten my focus, than she opens her mouth again. She is relentless in that regard.

"You said your name was Peliel, right?"

I've had three virtuous hours of silence, and now she bothers me with inane questions.

"Yes. I told you that only minutes ago."

I had thought that the human memory was more reliable than this, but apparently not.

With my eyes adjusted to the outside and doing reconnaissance, I fiddle with more ritual-based crafts, toying with them on the large table. There is not much movement from the elves or the orcs, thankfully, but I still long to spring into action. It's been weeks since I've tasted freshly spilled orc blood.

And now for some reason, I don't want to leave my cavern. I do not understand why.

I have the information I need. I could easily obliterate the ground on which they stand, right at this moment. Even from a distance, in sacrificing a fraction of my power, I could rip into their skulls and pry out their darkest thoughts.

When you have that power and you fail to use it, the creatures you showed mercy to will only devour you while you sleep. Not even an immortal is immune to that knowledge.

So why do I hesitate?

This pet has made me overly sentimental. I know that she is mine to care for, but why do I insist on safeguarding her here?

“Pehel,” she says again. I clutch my fists in rage, not looking at her for fear that I might snap and kill her where she stands.

“Yes?”

“I think we have a misunderstanding. I don’t know what you want with me, but I promise you I’m worth no gold and have little value to anybody.”

“That’s good to know,” I snarl. “I will treasure that information.”

She hesitates.

“Yes. Well, as I’m of no use to you, I’m sure you understand. But in the interest of good faith, can you please let me—”

I stamp my foot into the ground before she can finish her sentence, cracking the rocks underneath me. The noise is probably explosive to her, but the damage will be easily mended and will be an effective show of force.

Her attempts at diplomacy, in spite of the fear that quivers audibly in her voice, are all laughable. She cannot hope to bargain with me.

I see her for the frightened girl she truly is.

I don’t drop my focus. My eyes are still both in the cavern and hovering over the desert, observing the camps in the

dreary night. In one set of eyes, I see the dark blue desert sky, covered from moment to moment by gales of sand. On the other, I see this inept, shivering girl, whose attention I cannot hope to entertain.

I'm still not sure what I'm watching for. I only know that I need to be vigilant.

She coughs, and I can feel my forehead throbbing.

“As I was saying, can you please let me—”

Dropping my focus entirely, I stomp over to her, picking her up by her neck and slamming her against the cavern wall. She cries out in pain as her clothing and skin scrape the hard minerals, blood running free.

“You understood fine before,” I snarl. “I told you to shut up. If you want to live, you're going to shut up and let me work.”

She gasps for breath.

I sometimes forget that most mortal beings need to breathe to survive, and I can see her choking in my grasp.

My grip tightens for a moment.

I consider ending this right here.

No pet should force me to sacrifice all of my work to satisfy her ridiculous whims. I can see her making me weak, bending me over like some common animal or icon. Her act of innocence belies a penchant for betrayal and wickedness inherent in all of her kind.

But looking upon her face going blue, something inside of me relents, dropping her casually onto the stone floor as she gasps for air.

What manner of power do my possessions have over me? She is a *thing* in my cave.

Then I turn my back on her, deciding that maybe she has gotten the point. I return to the stone slab table and try to bring back my flow of concentration.

“You know that you can't keep me here forever!”

She struggles to speak in between fits of gasping. I glance at her from the side.

“Somebody will find me! And when they do, you’ll be sorry!”

“But you’ve just confessed that you have no value to anybody else. Nobody’s going to come looking for you.”

I look at her directly, even though only one set of eyes lands upon her.

“Isn’t that right?”

I feel her gaze tearing through the back of my shoulders.

“Isn’t that right, *girl*?”

Silence.

Finally.

I sigh, turning back toward my work.

I will tolerate no more distractions from her. The next words she utters will be her undoing.

“I have a name, you know.”

My lip curls. “I don’t care.”

“It’s Arie.”

“I still don’t care, Arie.”

I return my eyes to the camp, toying with the ingredients in my bag. My eyes stretch over the desert, into the area where I last saw the caravan.

And I find that the orc caravan isn’t where I last looked.

My fists clench harder, claws digging into my flesh.

If she ruined it all, so help me...

“I’m going to need to eat eventually,” she protests.

I stand firm in disbelief.

“I have basic needs.”

Huddling over her, my throbbing erection dangling inches from her pretty face, I stand firm, wings spread wide.

I let out a deafening scream that sends the objects in my cavern clattering around, completely ruining my workspace.

For miles over the stretching desert, I'm certain that my roar can be heard. It brings rocks from the ceiling crashing down. My penetrative fists easily slam and break into the cavern wall, leaving gaps in the cavern infrastructure.

“Will you shut up? I've had enough of your meaningless demands!”

She crawls back against the wall, and I see her assuming the form I always see. She's just a frightened little girl, too naive to understand how the world works.

“Thank you!”

I bring my eyes back to focus, looking back over the desert and surveying the activity of these roaming caravans. I find the orc caravan a few miles away from where I last sighted it.

Focusing in a little more, I can hear them chattering. They have taken chunks of iron, mined from the depths below the desert, and are currently hammering and smelting them together.

Before them stands the start of a metal tower. They've laid the wooden basework and have constructed parts of the wall. In the midst of it is a tall scaffolding, signaling its intended design and height.

The orcs work fast. Although I hate that such a slight has gone unnoticed, I look forward to bringing down their towers, crushing them with the debris of their own ingenuity.

“They say there's a special kind of monster that lurks in these desert caverns,” one of them says, gently taking a chunk of refined iron and moving it to the hammer. “You can hear his roar from miles away.”

“Oh, wait. I've heard this one. Let me guess. He killed all of our other expeditions single-handedly? Flies bright like the light of the sun, striking vengeance all around him?”

“You catch on fast.”

“Come on. You can’t really believe that? That’s just an urban myth.”

“No? Then what was that roar we just heard?”

“Wild animals.”

He continues to hammer, coming disappointingly close to scarring himself with the burning debris.

The other shakes his head and stares.

“You’re a gullible fool if you believe that.”

Intermittently, I poke my ears up, expecting to be interrupted.

Any minute, she’ll place herself in the middle of my work again, preventing me from completing even basic tasks.

But hours pass.

And as I snap my other set of eyes back to reality, I just see her, huddled against the cavern wall, pouting.

I sigh. “Don’t you have any means of entertaining yourself?”

“And how would I do that?”

She is short and disrespectful to me.

“I don’t know. You’ve got an entire cavern to explore.”

“I’ve seen caverns. They’re not that interesting.”

I restrain myself from punishing her insolence, just this once.

“And besides that,” she says. “I’m very hungry.”

My mouth twitches a little as I look at her. I’m attempting to not take her ingratitude personally now... Perhaps she just doesn’t understand her trespasses. But the more she speaks, the more I want to lay waste to her.

“You’ll find fungus and mold in the cavern chambers below us,” I instruct. “If you let yourself get lost, I’m sure you’ll find something to consume.”

She puzzles over my words, tilting her head.

“Your anatomy must be very different if you can simply eat cave mold and survive the experience,” she says. “Most of the flora in these desert caverns are highly toxic to humans.”

I furrow my brow.

“You humans are strange creatures,” I say, before fumbling uselessly with the ingredients on my table.

“I could say the same about you.”

I thought she was being melodramatic, but she does bring up a good point. I cannot simply have my human pet starving.

“What do you eat then, if not cavern flora?”

She thinks for a minute.

“Here in the desert, food is pretty scarce. But I guess I’m fond of dried meat, and some of the plants that grow outside are okay in a pinch.”

Just out of sight, I snap my fingers together quietly, summoning bowls of food to the table in front of me.

I’m not sure if she’s more indifferent or terrified as she watches me.

ARIE

He's enthralling to look at, addicting to both the eyes and the soul. Even with the most mundane of movements, I find myself watching him and feeling silly for doing so.

Perhaps that is how it is with all godly beings? But I have never felt this way before when thinking about any of my own, not when I see them in the corner of my eyes taunting me or looking at me with sad pity. When Peliel looks at me, I feel seen. I feel important.

It's not necessarily a safe feeling, I am not comforted by what he is or what he can do... But I do feel worthy.

He makes me feel less alone.

It makes me curious about him. I haven't had someone so... tangible to talk to in the past few years, though it seems longer.

"Why do you live here?" I ask softly, afraid to break the silence between us but also wanting to hear his voice. "Surely there are better places to be."

Peliel tilts his head back to give me a glance, but his eyes stray from my own pretty quickly. From his profile, I see his mouth twitch downward.

"These lands are vast," he mutters. "Lots of space to roam and claim."

"So, is it safe to assume you like the freedom this place allows you?"

He sighs. “Yes,” he says. His voice is dry and unamused. “I do enjoy the freedom.”

It makes sense, I suppose, why a creature like Peliel would like to stay in the deserts of Tlouz. I myself have always wondered what it would be like to stray from these dry lands, but more population most likely means more competition and more annoyances.

“Has anybody tried to fight you before? Lay claim to your territory?”

Peliel is quiet for a moment, tilting his head in a way that almost seems thoughtful, but I cannot read the look on his face. “A few times. There are other things in these lands, both human and beast, as I’m sure you are fully aware of.”

He smiles in a way that makes it seem like he is baring his teeth toward me. “Nothing that was hard to deal with, however.”

I hum but don’t respond, unsettled.

He says nothing after that, and I content myself with watching him again. I watch as he makes his way away from me, putting several feet of distance between us, and busies himself with some of the bowls that hold food.

The reminder of how long I haven’t eaten is enough to make my stomach clench, and I put a hand over it. I don’t wish to humiliate myself anymore by letting it growl, not when it would be heard in this silent cave.

“Sit,” he says, though I’m not dumb enough to think it is anything less than a command. Peliel jerks his head toward the stone slab that I assume works as a table. I sit on one of the sides, avoiding what I presume to be the head of the table.

After a moment, he places a bowl of food in front of me, filled with some of the rare plants from the desert and some dried meat. I do my best to eat slowly both to prevent myself from getting sick as well as to preserve what little dignity I have left. Peliel watches me the entire time, and I feel quite similar to a prey animal.

While nourishing, the food isn't exactly hydrating. I try to quiet the cough that's coming up with my fist and dare to turn my gaze toward Peliel. "Could – I don't suppose you have any water?"

A stupid question, really. We're in the middle of the desert, and the air is as dry as ever. Even if it had rained recently, all the water would have since evaporated, leaving nothing more than its memory.

Peliel glances at me, a tenseness to his bottom lip that makes me nervous but is quickly abated when he moves to the other side of the room.

The fear returns when he picks up a stone and walks back, then holds said stone over my head.

"Open your mouth," he commands. "Now."

I do as he says, too scared to do otherwise.

Peliel clenches his fist around the rock like it is not made out of solid stone, cold and unmoving. Is he going to hit me with it? Should I have fought back against him?

I wouldn't even have had the opportunity to disobey before he attacked, surely. I am still weak and in a vulnerable position, sitting with my mouth open like I'm –

A drop of water hits my tongue. I close it in mild shock, and the next drop falls on closed lips.

"Do you not know how to listen?" Peliel asks in irritation. I meet his eyes, and he shakes his head with a grunt. "Open it again before I waste all this effort on nothing."

I open my mouth again, head reeling from what just occurred. I keep my eyes fixated on the stone above me as well as his fist. It closes around the stone and squishes it like it is a mere lump of clay. Like it is not a solid piece of earth.

It conforms to his hand, and I see rivulets of water stream down the sides and hit my tongue and face.

He's treating this rock as if it were a mere *sponge*.

The sight is almost alien, like my mind can't comprehend this physical impossibility before it. The water is almost sweet and fresh, and I gulp down the streams that begin to flow from the stone.

It's *cold*, too. A miracle.

Peliel truly is a creature of wonder and power. Even the strongest feelings of horror cannot contain the wonder that stirs within me.

Once I finish taking a drink, Peliel tosses the now misshapen rock across the room and takes a seat next to me, nodding toward my food.

"Keep eating."

I pick up a piece of dry meat and pull it towards me, but pause before it touches my lips.

"Could you," I begin to ask, closing my hands into nervous fists. "Could you tell me why I'm here?"

"You're serving your master," he says. His voice is smooth like silk. "You have a higher purpose to fulfill now."

Higher purpose? Master? I wrack my brain for anything that could give me insight and come up frightfully short.

"Who's this master I'm serving?" I ask instead.

Peliel grins, a wide toothy smile that stretches from ear to ear, like the ones that predators give their prey once they've been cornered. It's cold and cruel and makes my blood freeze inside my body.

"Me, of course." His voice is so deep it rumbles, and I almost feel my body shaking with it. "I've taken you in, I've made your life's purpose a much greater one."

I sputter, truly shocked at this turn of events.

"I don't serve anyone!" I protest.

Peliel shrugs, like my complaints don't mean anything to him, sliding off of his skin like the small bits of water that ran down his arm earlier.

“You serve me. You belong to me,” he gestures to the room. “I’ve done all these things for you and I expect your loyalty in return.”

He runs his fingers down my cheek, almost sensually. His smile softens at the edges, losing its megalomaniacal edge, but maintains a possessive edge that makes me squirm. “And other things, of course.”

I freeze, the realization hitting me hard enough that the wind gets knocked out of my lungs.

“It’s nothing you haven’t already done,” he says. “Or, well, perhaps I shouldn’t say that. I’ll always want more after all, and you will give it to me.”

“I’m – I’m no whore!” I sputter, pulling my face away from his hand. “I won’t do it again.”

Peliel grabs my face in his hand, squishing his nails into my cheeks deep enough that it hurts. I feel blood begin to drip out from the wounds, and he pulls my face right up to his so that I can count his eyelashes if I want to.

His breath is so warm on my face, and his face is filled with righteous annoyance. The hand that’s holding onto my face is warm too, like it’s been left out in the sun, but it’s starting to feel warm enough that instead of comforting it’s painful, and I have to stop myself from trying to pull away.

“You really think that you should be speaking to me this way?” he asks. “Try again.”

My hands shake, but my mouth is already moving before the fear can get a hold of it too. “I’m a person,” I tell him, and any confidence I have is cut down by the shakiness of my words. “I have emotions, thoughts, and will. I won’t turn into some – some prostitute for you! I refuse.”

Peliel’s eyes flash with anger, but he lets go of my face and for a moment I think I’ve gotten away with it.

The following backhand proves otherwise, leaving my cheek stinging and me on the floor.

PELIEL

For her insolence, she receives one sharp backhand to the face. My skin is so much more coarse and abrasive than hers, and my claws cut across her cheek. I can instantly feel the impact of the collision as she grips her face, trying to stop the blood.

I feel I've made my point. But knowing how stubborn she can be at times, I am uncertain.

“You think you can get what you want through violence? You can't break my will!”

I can only smirk in response. Not because of her disobedience – that part infuriates me. I just *so* enjoy teaching her humility.

Clearly, I still need to remind her of her place.

“I had hoped that you would have understood, but clearly you still need a lesson.”

My wings spread wide, crashing into the rock wall. I ready myself to charge, mostly taking in her delicious fear.

Her eyes don't leave my face, even as I feel myself hardening. Her lips are curled into a defiant pout.

I know she wants to look down. I can smell it in the chemicals she emits.

Before she can even think to react, I rush toward her, picking her up from her waist.

“Hey! Put. Me. Down!”

She wails. I sprint toward the cave entrance, my feet stomping one after another in rapid succession. The relentless sun shines brightly upon us, and the vast desert lingers miles below.

I leap from the rocky edge and let her think we're falling. I can feel her heart bursting with anxiety as we tumble through the sky.

She screams so loud, it irritates me.

Then I beat my wings, and we are carried upward by the grace of the wind.

She unleashes a barrage of unsettled questions.

“What are you doing?”

“Have you completely lost your mind?”

“I said put me down!”

There is so much I can teach her. For one so used to survival in the unforgiving desert, she lacks common sense.

She's seen me eviscerate my enemies, setting fire to families who did nothing to me other than exist. And still, she has the audacity to make demands of *me*.

I give her a smile, looking down at the desert and gauging the distance. A fall from this distance would certainly kill her.

I know she has to know that.

“You want me to put you down?”

“Yes, you idiot! Let go of me!”

I relax my grasp, moving my hand toward an itch I've had on my shoulder and scratching it with satisfaction.

I feel immediate relief. You'd think immortal beings would be immune to simple inconveniences, but to us, the smallest things are the most painful. An encroacher on our territory. A pet that won't behave.

She plummets from the sky. *You could just let her die and find another pet*, I think. *This one's clearly broken*.

I shake my head, spiraling into a downward trajectory.

Though I can't justify it, I know there's something about this creature that is irreplaceable. She has something to offer me that no other creature in this desert, or even in this realm, can. I can feel it in my gut.

Gods, I really am becoming sentimental.

As delicious as her fear is, I catch her well before she hits the ground, bringing her back into my hold. Frustratingly, she is still impossible to deal with, carrying a temper toward the one creature who might offer her 'salvation.'

"You're very funny! I bet you're pretty pleased with yourself!"

I can feel her tears moistening my shoulder, and I feel a pang of something unfamiliar cross over me. I don't know what to call it. It's new to me.

Somehow, seeing her cry suddenly displeases me.

"If you want to backtalk, we can do this all day," I remind her. "But next time, I can't guarantee that I'm going to catch you."

I feel her quiet down, squirming against me less. I can only hope that I've finally broken her will, so that we might begin building something better in its place.

"Maybe we'll just test our luck? See how fast I really am?" I taunt her in the name of truth.

"You're a monster." She speaks quietly enough that she doesn't think I can hear her. But given that her face is inches from mine, I don't understand her logic.

"A monster? I thought I was your redeemer? I thought I was your god?"

She quiets down again, feeling immediately remorseful. And I drop her again.

This time, I let her fall long enough that she thinks I'm not going to catch her. I want her to see the consequences of her actions. I want her to *feel* my power and know not to step against me again.

I swoop in when she's mere feet from the ground.

"When are you going to understand that you're mine? Your every action, every whim, belongs to me alone."

I tread above the ground, carrying her with my wings.

"You can't hide anything from me. I know your every thought. I hear your every whisper."

She sulks. This pathetic display is not conducive to her survival.

I hope she snaps out of it. It's not my wish to harm her again.

"So you're going to obey me. Whatever I tell you to do, you'll do it."

She says nothing as I fly forward, picking up speed.

"Understood?"

I bring myself up to height. When I am level with the clifftops and the clouds float visibly within range, I sigh.

It is not my wish to break her. I wish she'd stop being difficult and give me what I want, but if she won't comply, I have no other choice.

I drop her again. She screams again. I catch her again.

"You'll speak when spoken to, won't you?"

She nods, readily and with enthusiasm.

It's a good response, but it's still not what I'm looking for.

I loosen my grip on her.

"Okay! I'll do it!"

I let loose another finger.

"You'll do it, *what?*"

She tries to understand what I want, but only looks upon me with confusion.

"I'll do it, sir?"

I shake my head.

“No. I’m not feeling like much of a *sir*.”

I drop her again. Not wanting to prolong this more than necessary, I catch her a few feet from where I let go of her.

I’m glad my reflexes are strong today. This could be disastrous if I made an error. And I can’t fix her death.

“Did you think of what to call me while you were falling?”

Her face is wet with tears. She’s sobbing uncontrollably.

“I’ll do it, *master*?”

For a minute, I don’t say anything. It’s fun hearing her heart do acrobatics.

“Yes, I like that,” I say finally.

The sigh of relief she breathes is exhilarating. I wonder why it comforts me.

“Or *lord* or *Peliel* are fine, too.”

“Thank you, master,” she says. “You are merciful.”

She speaks, but I still don’t feel that she’s being genuine.

“You have not forgotten why you ended up in this predicament, have you?”

She hesitates.

“I guess there is something else I must teach you.”

I twist my head around, looking for a suitable destination. I find a small protrusion on a nearby mountain and fly toward it at full speed.

Her anxiety and fear still permeate the air, but so does her arousal.

We land on the rocky ledge. The ground beneath me shakes so hard, I can feel the outcropping starting to give.

She whimpers.

I let her roam free for a moment. Here, there is nowhere she can run toward. And if she tries to jump and end our parlay with her death, I can simply catch her.

I can always catch her.

She walks toward the edge and looks down.

My legs twitch, ready to act in the event of hasty decisions.

“Why have you brought me here?”

I don't reply. I enjoy the sight of her posterior, hunched over as she looks below.

If you're going to tease me, then you need to endure the consequences.

She turns around. Seeing my twisted expression, only one thing on my mind, she starts to panic.

“You're not going to kill me, are you?”

She misreads my intentions. Typical for a mortal.

“I won't if you *obey me*.”

She freezes.

“What do you expect of me, master?”

I sigh. I had hoped she wouldn't make this difficult. Clearly, my hopes were misplaced.

“Do you not remember the reason we took this trip? The reason you upset me?”

She laughs. “So you think that by carrying me up here and threatening to drop me, I'll simply submit to you? You think I'll give you my body?”

I scowl. “You were ready to give me your body before.”

Her eyebrows furrow.

I charge forward, shaking the rocky outcropping with every stomp. Gripping her by the neck, I step over to the platform's edge, lifting her up over the desert. “This time, I really won't catch you,” I lie.

Her eyes widen, overwhelmed with panic.

I crouch, my tremendous erection dropping to the ground so that she can get a closer look at her demise.

Dangling her just over the ledge, I feel her reach up, touching my hand gently. This is her way of urging me to let go of her neck and set her down. She can't breathe and wants to live.

I hope it's also a sign of her compliance.

I can still smell her arousal. I know how much she wants this, even if she isn't ready to admit it to herself.

Through her ragged and torn shirt, her nipples protrude. I can see her hardened breasts urging me on.

I release my grip on her neck, so that she can breathe, and instead offer my hand.

She grips it reluctantly, still looking down at the ground below her.

Don't do it.

I make a promise to myself, here and now. If she really won't cooperate with me, then I'll find a new pet to play with.

It simply isn't worth all this trouble.

She opens her mouth, about to speak. Curious what she could possibly have to say in this predicament, I wait, hoping she knows better than to challenge me again.

ARIE

My heart rushes and throbs. The world below me is vast. His grip on my hands bruises them, and I feel gravity's pull on my legs, attempting to plunge me down hundreds of feet.

And my reality might be different than his, but I know that my gods wouldn't save me. I would bleed out on the ground far below if he let go of me.

"What are you doing?"

He stares back at me, a cocky smile on his face.

I wait for an answer.

At first, I get none. His eyes move over my form, from my feet to my eyes. I can see him deliberating on whether or not to simply drop me from his grasp.

"It's time to learn your place," he growls.

What's left of my rational mind in this instance tells me to plead for mercy, but I find myself unable, or unwilling, to.

What is coursing through me right now, beyond the thrill and rush of adrenaline? Why can't I fight for myself?

I am dangling in the air, subject entirely to his whims.

"I want you to beg," he tells me. "Maybe then, I'll be inclined to grant you mercy."

I close my eyes, swallowing my pride.

But it's more than that. What is wrong with me that this *turns me on?*

"Please don't drop me. I'll do whatever you want."

His grasp on me loosens for a moment, and I feel myself slipping.

Will this really be how I die?

His hand leaves my arm, and I am plunging through the air. I can see the ground approaching quickly, the rush of wind on my drop roaring in my ears.

But moments before I hit the ground, I hear the whipping of wings and see his bright white form approaching me, swooping to catch me.

I am back in his arms, ascending toward the rocky outcropping.

I want to thank him for his mercy, but I am too overtaken to speak. I can feel my legs wobbling despite being unable to stand, my throat searing from all the screaming.

He brings me up toward the outcrop, but before I can find my footing, he pushes me down.

The hard rock scratches into my back. I can feel blood trickling at the points where sharp minerals jab me.

And I realize in horror that I am half suspended above the world below, half safe on the rocks above. Half of me is alive, safe with Peliel, and the other half is dangling into the realm below, plunging to my death.

He holds my fate in his hands.

"I wasn't persuaded by your pleas. Maybe this time, you'll beg with a little more emotion?"

I gulp, trying to channel my most desperate, obedient voice. My life may be damaged beyond repair, but I don't want to die.

"Please don't drop me, master! I'll do whatever you want."

The voice that escapes me surprises me. It's not the desperate, removed voice I want to channel... the servant whose will has been utterly broken.

Instead, it's a playful voice. The voice of a woman who gets off on the idea of his cruelty.

What is wrong with you?

He looks down at me in surprise, uncertain of how to process the undertones of my request before a wry smile crosses his face.

"I bet you know just how to please me," he says, a sneer engraved into his face.

I close my eyes. Whatever part of me wants to take charge here sequesters the fearful, disbelieving side of me somewhere inside my body. Opening my eyes back up, I become who I need to be in the moment.

"Oh, yes, master. I do."

I reach up for his cock but am taken aback as he rebuffs me.

"Please, allow me," he says before standing over me.

His knees impact the ground around me, kicking up a small cloud of dust and pinning me down.

I am at least more secure now. But as I catch a glimpse of his member, looming just over my face, I am reminded of the tremendous task before me.

Sitting down on my chest, his enormous weight nearly counterbalancing me, I am helpless, my back suspended over the edge of the cliff. I show him my eagerness, opening my mouth wide for him with a smile I'm not sure I'm faking, and he shoves himself into me.

His bumps irritate the edges of my mouth, his veins adding extra width to his already enormous girth. Taking him in, I keep my teeth held back to the best of my ability, but with his size, it's difficult to avoid grazing the flesh that penetrates my mouth.

“That’s right. Be a good little slut.”

I smile up at him, or I think I do. It’s difficult to smile with such a large intrusion in my mouth.

I only hope that he doesn’t start thrusting too readily. I’m uneasily clinging to the edge, and any excess force could knock us both over.

Of course, he has wings to catch himself, and I have nothing.

“Don’t you worry,” he says, stuffing himself deeper. I could be imagining it, but I swear that I’m able to take more of his length than I did before somehow, though it could just be the position I’m lying in.

That is, assuming that really happened. I’m still not certain.

“I’m not going to let you fall. As long as you really give into me this time.”

I try to nod, but can feel myself almost thrown off balance. I dare not tilt my head backward, looking upon the descent that would befall me if I failed at my task.

I just have to trust that this being really carries my salvation.

His pressure upon me weighs heavily on my chest, his musk overpowering me. His shaft is strangely moist in my mouth, despite its coarse texture. The bumps along its length have real depth, and the more eagerly he thrusts, the more the strange, non-uniform nature of his cock stretches out my mouth.

My back bucks up and down with his every movement, and the longer he fucks my mouth, the less concerned I am over the precarious position I now find myself in.

Wetness gathers at my entrance. Shamefully, I realize that the part of me that revels in his advances wants to be penetrated, and taken, by him.

But I can’t let it go that far, can I?

He's not even a human like me. He's some sort of deity.

He stands up suddenly, bringing me closer to the outcropping, and I feel a surge of relief to not be so dangerously dangling.

"Let me test your loyalty," he says menacingly.

He squats down over me before lowering himself into my mouth. My throat contorts around the invasion, his shaft dipping slowly into me.

He is definitely deeper than he was. I've managed to take about three-quarters of his length.

I swell with pride at how deep I'm able to take him before my mind spins.

Has he changed me somehow?

Then we're moving sideways off the cliff somehow, floating through the air... or the cliff is moving away from us. The air rushes up around me, as he dips down into me. From here, I can almost reach his balls with my tongue.

We are hovering in the air.

He is not even using his wings to keep us aloft, and yet I've moved away from the side of the cliff. I can see the hundreds of feet below me, unobstructed. Nervously, I grip onto his hips, urging him not to let me go with whatever magic he's currently placed upon us, but it only causes him to thrust with more aggression.

He looks puzzled by my eagerness and by the sudden fear that fills my eyes.

My throat swells around him. The discomfort is immense, but as I look into his piercing blue eyes, I can't help but ignore the inconvenience.

You're fine. Don't worry.

Despite seeing the steep drop below me, I realize that he is clearly still anchored to something, pressing into the ground underneath him. I must still be on the outcropping, and the aggravating pain in my back confirms it.

A massive serpent, as big as the mountains, rises from deep below me, out of the sands. It roars out across the desert, instilling terror in my heart. I watch it rise and ascend, its red and bumpy carapace flying through the air, filling the space in my vision.

I look up at him, but he is focused on his onslaught, fucking my throat with all of his effort. Red sweat pours down from his horny brow, his eyes somehow shining brighter blue than I remember.

And I realize as I look upon him that he is glowing. His divine form has been overtaken by white, his turgid, red cock expanding deeper into my throat. Even in spite of his cruelty, and the aggression with which he tests my body, I can't help but swell up in his majesty.

Hope enters my heart, and I can see Warren lying down beside me, also floating in the air. He watches him defile me, and though shame courses through me, his smile never leaves his face. He brushes his blonde hair out of his eyes.

"You're really good at that, you know."

He grips my long, disheveled hair, using it as leverage to thrust deeper and go wider. I keep my eyes upward toward him, made uncomfortable by the deity watching me.

I'd like to ask him if this is one of his envoys, but my mouth is full.

I realize that I'm starting to like the taste of his cock, even admiring the different texture and shape that stretches my mouth.

"Fucking... whore!"

With one final spasm, he unleashes his divine cum down my throat. It enters me, flowing through me and changing me.

I remember that he wants me to swallow it, but I struggle to breathe around the thick fluid collecting in my mouth, my cheeks filling up with his seed.

My eyes close, and I smile dreamily up at him.

When I reopen them, we are back on the high outcropping.

He swats me one more time with his tremendous shaft, going hard. I try not to wince in light of the pain.

“Let that be a reminder not to fight me again,” he says. “As long as you’re in my cavern, you will obey me.”

I pick myself up, nearly tripping over the edge into the infinite abyss.

“I understand, master.”

ARIE

It's been a day since Peliel dangled me over a cliff, nearly dropping me to my death. I could have lost myself then if I'd just rejected the whims of this monster, who somehow holds the key to my redemption.

I wonder why I enjoy his company so much as I stumble through his cavern. The passages only lead to more passages, none of them leading anywhere. With all this space, he could easily decorate, filling every cranny with a bookcase or a kitchen. Beyond the wandering skulls, I find nothing to disrupt that lifestyle.

Peliel peeks around a corner, having returned from another day of terror. He describes the elves he laid ruin to and how he intends to use the fear of the orcs to his advantage.

“For all their magical knowledge, they still couldn't sense me until I descended upon them,” he brags. “But before I set foot upon them, I turned their relics against them. You should have seen the fear in their eyes before I roasted them, watching their masks animate and speak righteous curses.”

He laughs.

I smile halfheartedly. “Why are you telling me this?” I ask.

He looks at me, puzzled. “I just thought... since you're a human in the desert, maybe you...”

“Enjoyed the wanton deaths of innocents?” I can't admit the relief I feel at knowing that there are fewer elves in the realm because that would make me a monster.

And I'm not a monster.

I know that he has a higher calling than me, having been asked to perform the duties of gods... being a righteous being, set upon purging the world of wickedness.

But that's not me.

He shrugs. "What were you doing?" he asks, peering around the caverns.

"Oh!" I smile at him. "I was just wandering about these caves," I tell him. "You know, you have a lot of space here."

He nods at me, confused. I know that I need to choose my next words carefully if I don't want to face his divine anger.

"So I was thinking, maybe you could do something with it?"

He puzzles over my statement.

"Do something..." He looks down at me. I realize how much taller than me he is, his shimmering blue eyes glaring down. "What do you mean?"

"Well..." I stammer. "I was just meaning, maybe you could make this a kitchen or something? It's plenty spacious."

I walk from one edge of the cavern to the other, stretching my arms out to convey how wide the room is. I think the gesture is lost on him however as he looks upon me in utter confusion.

"What is a kitchen?"

I watch as Peliel separates into two beings suddenly... one pacing the threshold, and the other standing before me, still speaking.

"Do you really hope to domesticate me? This is my cavern. And you are my pet. Please remember your place."

"It's a place where you cook your food," I say, trying desperately to ignore the illusion. Though as time wears on, I may not be able to tell which is which.

“But I can summon food from anywhere in the world,” Peliel informs me.

“You naive little bitch,” adds the double.

“Right. But someday, I’d like to cook for you.”

He smiles at me halfheartedly. “We will see,” he tells me, though I know that his mind is already made up.

But his illusory double approaches me, standing mere inches from my body as he looms overhead.

“Why don’t you just leap from the cliffside, spare yourself my mercy? You know that you’re no good to me, and that eventually, I’ll find that out.”

I shake my head, closing my eyes.

“You think I can save you? How can I do that when you can’t save yourself?”

“What’s wrong?”

I didn’t think Peliel was capable of concern. I had even considered that perhaps I’d misjudged his divinity and that I’d fallen in with a spirit, or a cursed being.

“It’s nothing,” I say, my eyes still closed. “Just a headache.”

“Ah.”

I hear the rocks dislodge under his feet as he shuffles away through the cavern.

Then I think of all the things I’d considered. The floor plan I spent time laying out.

But I’m a stranger to him. Why would he offer me any kindness?

A stranger who fucked your throat multiple times.

With everything considered, it was still a far more pleasant interaction than any we’d had to this point. But there’s still so much about him that I could never hope to understand.

I’d be a fool to think I could change him into something other than he is. Why would I entertain the notion?

He has a higher cause that I can't even begin to grasp.

A week passes, and I begin to forget what it felt like to be desperately lonely, not having a single conversation partner.

"I haven't spoken to anybody in three years."

He sits on the edge of the bed, watching me drink water he procured from the stone. There's a slaughtered animal he incinerated after conjuring it here.

I tear through it, though it has no flavor and the meat might break my teeth if it doesn't broil my tongue.

I am his guest, I think. To be honest, I'm not sure if I'm here of my own will anymore.

Either way, I shouldn't be rude and refuse his offering of food.

"I thought as much."

I raise my eyebrow at his candor. "That's a bit rude, isn't it?"

"You talk to yourself a lot," he says. "Also, I don't think I've ever spoken to anybody. Generally, I speak at them."

I don't bother to correct him, specifying that the people I talk to speak back to me in return. Eids, the god of weather, has been standing in the cavern entrance for about the past three days and happily reports that the sun is shining every two hours.

But I'm starting to understand what's real and what's not.

"I yell at people when I flay them alive," he clarifies.

"I figured that's what you meant."

I watch his eyes as he surveys me. I never notice how brightly he shines in this dim cavern. The white light he shines illuminates the room brighter than even Warren's grace.

"You're pretty beautiful, you know that?" I smile at him to let him know I'm being sincere. Once you get past the alien features, the second pair of eyes, and the horns, his appearance is quite ravishing.

“Please don’t speak out of turn.” He stands up from his position on the bed, to ensure that he is standing above me. “As long as you’re in this cavern, you’re at my mercy. And that means flattery will get you nowhere.”

My heart shudders a little, pondering what kind of test he might put me through should I misbehave again. It’s not that I’d invite that upon myself. But in the desert, where he punishes everything that crosses him, the safety he offers me creates both a sense of danger and protection.

“Your silence is disrespectful,” he says. “Do you understand my power?”

I stammer out a response. “Of course, Peliel. I am sorry. I meant no disrespect.”

“Good. Make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

I feel a tingle down low and realize with shame that I’m aroused.

Another week passes, and I soar through the skies on his back, tightly gripping him. I know that he could throw me off of his shoulders, and I could plummet to my death.

Somehow that makes everything more exciting.

The sky shifts, from green to red to yellow, becoming every color I can conceive of and some I’m unable to comprehend. As we fly, I look out over the worms that soar through the sky alongside us. I wonder how they’re capable of flight, given that they have no visible wings, but there’s something beautiful about their many rows of sharp, viscera-covered teeth.

I smile, grasping tighter onto Peliel’s shoulders as we duck and dive through small tunnels and over cliffs.

Riding atop him in the company of monsters, I think I’m starting to understand his beauty.

He is not subject to anybody’s laws, short of the gods he serves.

I turn my head and see that Warren is flying alongside us, too, her bright green eyes reassuring me.

“Your mother was asking about you.”

“Oh? What was she asking about?”

“Who are you talking to?” Peliel’s deep, booming voice punctuates the air like an explosion.

“Oh,” I say, laughing. “Just the worms.”

“Odd.”

“How is it they manage to fly without wings?”

He looks up at me in confusion. “They don’t,” he snarls.

“She says it’s nearly time.”

“Time for what?”

I feel Peliel’s neck swivel in my clutches, but I tighten my grip.

“Keep listening. All you need to do is heed her call.”

I nod.

Air rushes over his wings, the gray sky beckoning us forward.

“Are you with us again?” Peliel asks. His voice commands my attention.

“What are you talking about?”

He lowers us to the sand, landing in front of an orc camp. Their wood and metal structures stand high over us, built into the sand cliffs, but I know that they will be easily toppled. We descend before their meticulously constructed gate, whose complex design would be difficult for even the most careful elf to replicate.

I dismount from him.

“You were talking to yourself again,” he growls.

I can see that an orc in a nearby tower notices us and begins to shout, signaling for the forces within to attack. A crossbow bolt collides with the ground next to me, harmlessly falling over in the sand.

“Stay back,” he orders. “There’s no need for you to get hurt here.”

I shift on the balls of my feet, watching him lay waste to their forces with a pillar of fire. It starts in the sky, descending from a cloud before it makes contact with the ground.

Their screams fill my ears as the wide-stretching pillar engulfs them, leaving a circle of glass and charred remains.

My eyes never leave his form. I had to see this for myself.

Perhaps I’ve already found my salvation.

He dispatches them so beautifully in the name of righteousness, shining white like the stars.

I don’t know why I ever doubted his power.

PELIEL

I enjoy the wonder twinkling in her eyes when I return to her from the slaughter, parcel in hand. “I have a gift for you.”

Arie accepts but barely spares the small package a glance. “How many did you kill?”

“All of them,” I say, confused at the way she fusses over the little details. Things I’ve never considered to count become the zenith of her wild focus. “There are none left to follow us home. That is all that should matter.”

Home.

Have I truly accepted the little human so deeply into my confidence?

She says nothing as I scoop her into my arms and take flight. The wind carries us into the brilliant sky, away from the smoldering ash of the orc camp. Her slender arms tighten around my neck as she presses the package between us so as not to lose it.

I hope she finds its contents pleasing.

It strikes me as soon as I think that the sentiment is silly. Why do I care about pleasing her? She should be concerned with pleasing me.

And yet... yet, I do want to please her. Not just in the ways where her body quivers around me and she makes those delicious, breathless sounds.

I want to see her smile.

Her gaze sets to wander to the horizon like it often does, and I have to consider what is going on behind those soft amber eyes. Her mouth moves, but I can't hear her whispers beyond the rush of wind in my ears.

I permit myself, instead, to enjoy the quiet thrum of her heartbeat as I rise higher above the endless desert. She is beholden to me and my every whim, and I to her, only so long as it suits me. *It suits me just fine, for now*, I consider, bracing her as we dive from the heavens towards my intricate cave system and all its hidden delights.

She is breathless when she lands on her feet again, wavering so that I have to steady her. But when she leans into me, a strange sensation swells in my chest.

I ignore it and release her.

If Arie cannot stand on her own, then she is useless to me. I will not indulge her more than is necessary. "I have been thinking about your 'kitchen.'"

Her eyes light up. "It wouldn't take much, really. And I think you would like it as well."

I pace into the winding tunnels towards our shared space, guiding her with only a touch to her back. She moves so easily in time with me, yielding so sweetly it's almost precious. No wonder I haven't lost interest in her, and in fact, I'm surprised to find that these caves would be rather empty, without her presence.

Still, I am her better, and with that responsibility, I have to ensure she is not led astray. "If it would keep you occupied, I don't see the harm. Explain it to me."

We come to an empty hollow. The stone churns around us, shaping itself to my whim so subtly, I don't think Arie notices. I draw vertical chutes into the ceiling with a wave as she pivots to look at me, a charming blush coming over the bridge of her nose. "Well, I've not been into one of the dark elves' fine kitchens, but we always had counters to cut saplings and meat –"

As she speaks, I let the stone fashion itself into what she describes.

She looks up at me with such trust, blind to the magic snapping in the air.

“ – and we’d need a stove. Something to hold wood as it burns to cook the meat. They have little chimneys that lead outside so the smoke does not fill the room. And shelves for herbs and a pantry, perhaps. Or maybe it is asking too much...”

I cock my head, allowing an amused smile to find me. “Is that all?”

Arie fiddles with the twine of the package. “Yes, master.”

She misunderstands.

I tilt her chin up with two fingers, making her uncertain gaze meet my fierce one. “I mean, is that *all* a kitchen consists of?”

The stone behind her merrily shapes and molds itself in its final touches.

Her breath comes short. “There is always running water. Perhaps a basin to be filled from the rain.” She seems to lament at the intricacy of it all, not aware that I’ve already sourced a deep well and summoned it through a chute, letting the water trickle silently into a widening basin that drains away the excess. A perpetual waterfall of fresh, clean water. “I’m asking too much.”

“Are you?”

She leans into my touch. “It would take years to craft, and some of it would be impossible. I couldn’t expect you to –”

I press my thumb to her lips, silencing her protest. “Turn around,” I say almost too harshly, impatience mingling with a muted excitement.

I turn her by her shoulders, and she gasps at the sight of her new kitchen. I can’t imagine the shelves filled with the herbs she spoke of, but that will come in time.

“But – it was just –”

I lean down to her level, nudging her cheek with mine. “Do you doubt me?”

Her whole body warms at the insinuation, and her next breath is ragged as if I have provoked fear or desire. “No, of course not.”

“Good.” I stand to my full height. “Now, open your gift.”

She has it clutched to her chest like a priceless heirloom. And she doesn’t even know what it contains! Mirth fills me for the first time since I last drove her to the edge of insanity, her delicate fingers tugging at the wrapping, peeking in one side.

Her brow knits together. “It’s meat.”

“Only the finest,” I assure her. “Do you need anything else in your kitchen to prepare it?”

I watch the gears turn in her head as she glances around, taking stock of her new space. *Her new space*, I muse, waiting for her response. “Yes,” she finally determines. “In fact, I’ll need a number of things.”

“Name them,” I command. “And they’re yours.”



THE SMELL IS redolent as it seeps from her kitchen.

She is mumbling to herself again, working hard so that sweat beads on her forehead. It is a singular pleasure to watch her work, and when she seems finished, she asks me for another favor. “We need chairs and a table.”

Before she even finishes, three columns rise from the stone. Two remain squat, wide enough to sit on, while the other blooms like a mushroom with a flat top. Arie hesitates at the sight with a covered dish in hand, gaping at my mundane power. “How do you do that?”

I take the dish from her and set it on the new table. “I simply desire it, and it is mine.” As I say so, I’m not looking at

the stonework but her.

She seems suddenly aware of my attention and ducks away to set the table. I take my seat, enjoying how she burns under my scrutiny.

When she sets an empty plate in front of me, I reach out without thinking and grab her wrist, feeling the hesitation in her pull. It is a carnal desire to possess her that makes me drag her closer, so she licks her lips nervously. “Are you happy?”

Her gaze roves around, anywhere but me.

When my grip tightens, she lets out a gasp of pain. “Y-yes.”

“You lie so sweetly,” I murmur, forcing her to kneel up on my lap, kissing her bruised wrist from my handling. “It’s almost believable.”

“I’m not lying. You have just done so much, I don’t know how I could ever –”

I capture her mouth with mine, appreciating how she yields so easily. Maybe she’s telling the truth. Maybe not. She takes my lashing tongue and croons at the intrusion, that heat rising in her core. I could take her here on my new table.

But that would spoil all her hard work.

I relinquish her with a sigh. “Your debt is insurmountable, human. I don’t think you will ever be free of me at this rate.”

She flits off to finish serving us, throwing expectant glances on occasion.

I watch her every sensuous move. It’s as if she’s trying to torture me, but I don’t think she knows she’s even doing it. There is so much more to my human than meets the eye, and perhaps this dinner will give me the perfect opportunity to delve a little deeper into her strange proclivities.

I do my best to stop torturing her as she sits in her seat and serves me up first.

“I don’t need sustenance.”

“I know,” she says, though her cut falters slightly. “I just wanted to thank you.”

Arie places the cut on my plate before spooning the strange herbs she requested next to them. For both of us, she does this, taking her time to make the spread presentable before offering it to me. I have waited for her to ask what manner of meat I provided, but she never does, taking little bites of the rich dark cut with notable pleasure.

I do as well, surprised that dark elf pairs so well with phenson.

I look her over anew, intrigued that she seems so capable after having nearly died in the desert searching for me. And I can't keep quiet any longer.

“What brought you to the desert?”

Her chewing slows, and her eyes go vacant like they often do when she is speaking to no one. “I was looking for others like myself. A settlement of humans, perhaps.”

Confusion mars my gentle expression. “*Why?*”

“Because I have spoken to no one in a very long time. When Mother and I came out here, it was just us. And then it was just me.”

She struggles to answer, and I can see she's holding something back.

It's a curiosity to me, watching as she works through the emotions, almost losing herself before snapping back with a smile that hides such pain behind it. She does what she must to survive. I have witnessed it in great tragedies, those I have been a party to. Denial and deflection. “But that was years ago. She went away a long time ago.”

I don't require my magic to know her mother died. I can see it in the way doubt flickers over the certainty of her expression. What grief it must have been, for her to lose herself with the absence of her only companion.

As I mull it over, something strange happens.

I feel pain lance the corners of my eyes, and wetness forms there. It never overflows, but I have to blink it back as Arie finishes her meal. I look to mine in silence and allow myself to enjoy the human sentiment.

ARIE

P eliel is like the sun. Warm, all-encompassing, bright, comforting. A panacea to all the ailments that I have known I carry and even the ones I don't.

His touch, soft like silk, makes me shiver like I am nothing but a wilted tree, so weak and fragile that even the smallest gust of wind threatens its stature. Sometimes I wonder how a creature such as this has such a nurturing nature deep within him, but I dare not question my luck out loud. Whenever he runs his fingers down my cheek, my knees buckle and my heart starts beating fast, like I'm frightened by the mere suggestion of his power.

But I am not scared.

Divine skin, divine hands, divine face. I am blessed by him, and it's with this confirmation within myself that I feel what I am, rather than what I'm not.

I'm infatuated. In love. My heart beats for him and him only.

Yes, this is true, but the realization still shakes something within my core. Sweat builds up on my forehead, and I feel hot with something I cannot name. Searing blood fills my cheeks and makes them burn. My own hands, weak, fragile, knobby, unlike Peliel's large and strong ones, shake like crumpled leaves.

Perhaps what I also am is mad. Should I be this obsessed with a man – no, not a man – who can blind me for committing the smallest slight towards him? Who can fly up

and drop me, ensuring my death at the hands of gravity? Who I know, despite not having seen it with my own two eyes, can cause an apocalyptic massacre?

Who not only can do those things if he wished but has done so once before?

Yes, yes, I am a little bit mad.

But that does not take away from the unexpected gentleness of this evening, and it certainly doesn't take away from the cure that he has given me with his presence. I am no longer lonely, and just for that reason, he deserves all the love I can give him and more.

He looks at me, glowing like a star, and tilts his head.

"Are you alright?" he asks. "You look ill."

I have to swallow even though my mouth is dry. Do I tell him? Surely not, it's too soon. If he leaves because he is frightened by my feelings, or worse, disgusted, I will be alone. I do not think I could survive being alone again.

Besides, with this little bit of madness comes a bit of uncertainty. I cannot confess unless I am sure of my feelings.

"Don't worry," I tell him. My voice is soft. I don't want to ruin the tender moment between us. "I'm only tired. Could we go to bed?"

"Of course, let's get you some much-needed rest."

He leads me to his chambers with his large hand on the small of my back, guiding me. It feels protective, almost possessive, and I want to press myself against it.

No, no. I can't let myself get too greedy, not yet.

He crowds around me when we reach the smaller room though, heat coming off his body in waves so thick that it resembles a blanket.

"You can sleep in here," he murmurs, leaning down so his voice is right next to my ear. "It is safe and warm."

"Will you stay with me?" I dare to ask, the moment of silence before he chooses to respond feels as long as an

eternity.

“Of course.”

He ushers me forward toward the extravagant pile of pelts and furs. Tlouz is as cold as ice at night but between Peliel, these blankets, and my own hot feelings, I have no doubt I will be able to keep myself warm.

Peliel watches me as I get comfortable, standing tall at the foot of the pile. “You’re enjoying yourself here,” he says. I know it is not a question, though others may think it to be so. He’s so good to be able to know how I am just from looking at me. So good for asking in an oddly roundabout way, anyway.

I stare back at him, cozy, protected, and loved, or rather, filled with love. “I do.”

“Good, good.” He kneels and crawls on top of the furs until he is on top of me. I feel his warm breath on my face. When he ghosts his lips over my forehead, I hold my breath.

“Goodnight, Arie,” he says. “Sleep well.”

Peliel climbs off me then, even though I don’t respond. I can’t, my mouth is too dry. Then he pulls me into my arms. He’s hundreds of times hotter, softer, and more comforting than any of these furs. Despite the emotions welling up in my chest, I feel myself growing sleepier by the second.

This is the first time I’ve been able to go to bed without a hole in my chest ripping apart my soul and mind. My mother would be happy that I have found company like this, I hope. At the very least, she would be content that I am happy.

And I am. It’s strange to admit the joy fluttering inside me, but it’s true.

My eyes slip closed even as a smile remains on my face, and I can only hope I will be blessed with the nicest of dreams for the revelations I’ve had today. It’s already the nicest liedown I’ve had since...

Whispers in my ear wake me up much later. I slept long enough that it takes a moment for my eyes to open. I have to rub the sleep out of them, and I wonder if it’s just Peliel

talking to himself. I don't feel his warmth next to me, but perhaps he's gotten up to walk around?

"Arie..."

I shoot up, ice running down my veins. Any inkling of sleep gets pushed out by the rush of memories.

"Mother?" I call out. I would never forget her voice, not even in these past few fog-addled years. "Where are you?"

"I'm here, Arie. I've always been here."

The words send a shock down my system. Has she really? The thought of it is enough to make my chest hurt. If she's been here, then have I been the one who's abandoned her this entire time? I've spent all these years in agony after her death. The mere suggestion that it's been my fault this entire time is enough to drag me down to whatever afterlife there is to plead for forgiveness.

I throw off the furs that still cover my body and stand on shaking legs. "I'm coming now, Mother! I'm coming, please just tell me where you are, okay?"

"I'm here..."

Her voice has gotten farther away in these past few moments, and it scares me. I run toward the end of the room without looking back to see if Peliel is there. He would understand, surely, if he finds me gone.

It's my mother. I need her.

I leave our room, and I swear I see her. She stands far away from me with her arms outstretched, and my vision blurs. Tears fill my eyes as I sprint toward her, but when I'm just a few steps away, she's gone.

"Mother! Mother, please!" I scream. It's cold without her here, and I want her back. "I've missed you."

A caress on my cheek, I turn toward it, but there's nothing there.

"Come find me, Arie."

"Anything," I sob. "Anything for you, Mama."

I walk and I walk and I walk. I never put on a coat or shoes, I don't even remember leaving the cave, but I walk nonetheless. The thought of seeing her again is enough to keep my body going. Every time she speaks to me, I get a little more confident, a little more determined.

"Speak to me!" I call out after she's been silent for a moment. "Tell me where you are!"

I know I'm getting closer. I can feel it by how warm it's getting. Her hugs always used to protect me from the coldest of nights in our cave, and her touches are getting more corporeal. I feel her. She's here.

I just have to find her.

She taps my shoulder, and I turn on instinct and begin to walk again. It feels as though an arm has been thrown over my shoulders to hold me while I walk towards her. Is she being held captive, I wonder? How can she do this? In the end, it doesn't matter because it means I'll have gotten her back.

"You're so close, my dear," she whispers both in my ear and a thousand miles away. *"So close."*

"I know. I can feel you."

"Soon we'll reunite, darling."

"I'll never leave you alone again, Mother." I rub my eyes. They're so dry despite the tears falling down my face. "I hope you can forgive me."

"I'll always forgive you, Arie."

I put one step in front of the other, carrying the weight of my guilt with me but not letting it slow me down. If enduring this marathon is what it takes to see her again, I'll do it. I'll do it a thousand times over.

I just hope I get to see her face soon.

PELIEL

I awaken to find myself alone. Unsure as to why, I look around to see where my dear pet has gone off to. Where could she be? *Perhaps she's off wandering the halls or talking to the rocks again,* I conclude. But I desire her presence, so whatever she may be doing must end. In an attempt to find her, I call out her name.

“Arie?”

No response.

How dare she not respond to me when I call her? I think. I call out to her again, louder this time.

“Arie!” My voice echoes through the many chambers of the caverns I reside in. As if a choir seeks to gain my approval, an impression of my own voice is all that I am met with.

Still, she stays silent.

Such disrespect! I can feel myself getting frustrated. I believed we were past this sort of behavior. She has remained with me for quite some time now and has been learning quickly how to properly be the pet I desire.

In fact, just the previous day I had showered her with gifts and displays of my power. The ‘kitchen’ I made effortlessly for her was just one example of such. I even allowed her to spend the frigid night next to my body.

A wave of confusion runs through my being. Where is she? Why would she ignore me so callously? After all I have done for her, this blatant disregard of my command is unusual.

Perhaps she has grown complacent and believes that she may act as she wishes. I will remind her of her place.

The caves I claim as my residence are large, but I search my home and can find no sign of her. My question is now answered. She is not here.

“Why would she leave?” I ask myself. “Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. She could very well be nearby, just outside our home. She may very well even be searching for a gift for me, to show her appreciation for all my kindness.

To answer my questions, I make my way to the entrance of the cavern. Looking out into the desert, I cast out a message, calling to her.

My voice does not return to me like the tunnels of the cave, but the pavo in the distance heed my words and cowardly flap their little wings into the sky. I do not hear her call back.

The confusion washes away, and anger grows in its place. Questions run through my mind. All of which begin with why, or how. None of them matter. Not really. All that matters is finding her.

“How dare she?” I say to myself. “If she is not here, then she certainly has run away.” The rage welling inside of me begins to boil.

I make my way out of the cave. My eyes scan the horizon. Wherever she is, I will find her. However, there are no clear signs of her whereabouts. In my frustration, I spread my wings out wide.

The glow from them shines brightly as it reflects the light from the pale imitation of my own image, the desert sun up above. *That is where I must go*, I think. Swiftly, my wings flap and I launch myself into the sky.

Naturally, I look down upon all that is mine. Somewhere within it lies another piece of my property. I scour the area around my living space. There must be something to find her with.

“It would be impossible for such a feeble creature to travel far on its own in this domain of mine. She can’t have gone far.” Even as I speak, I realize that there is little to suggest she is nearby.

It would be surprising to discover that a frail thing could move fast enough to get away from me. With grace, I dash through the air. I search through the natural formations surrounding my territory.

The wildlife flees from me as I approach. They know their place, unlike the girl. To leave without my permission is as insulting as spitting upon my beautiful face. Within a small area, I see a rather large rocky covering. A perfect place to hide from lesser beings.

I make my way down to the ground and take a look around. My wings flutter carefully so as not to disturb the sand beneath my feet. If she is hiding here, I will rather enjoy the sight of fear on her face as I surprise her with my presence.

I am left with only feelings of dismay at what I uncover. She is not here. All that I find is scurrying rodan, seeking shade from the heat of the sun. Despite their best efforts to avoid it, the sun has come to them.

With balled-up fists, I strike down the rocks around me. My body glows brightly, and my wings flap furiously. I easily break the rocks that block the sun’s light from creeping into this area. They crumble to dust upon my wish.

In mere seconds, all the towering rocks that once were present have become nothing. The sand beneath my feet turns to rigid glass from the heat coming off of me. I step away, fury fueling my every action.

It is impossible to hide from me. I will find her. I do not care how far I will have to go. The passage of time is inconsequential to my search. “I will find her,” I promise the lingering rodan.

Anything and everything that stands in my way during my search for my pet, for Arie, will not exist long enough to come to regret doing so. *She belongs to me.* She will remember that.

I will show her what happens to the things that show me such disrespect.

I look up to the sky, and my beautiful wings spread out behind me. The eyes upon them open as well. My body glows brightly but not bright enough to outshine the sun in the sky yet. I burst up into the sky and look over everything that is mine once more.

I continue my search, stopping only to expose the areas that could feasibly hide her from my sight. Yet each time I do, she is nowhere to be found. The deep-rooted wrath within me burbles and boils. My shape is on the cusp of changing from pure vexation but is halted by a new revelation.

For just a moment, I am able to calm myself. Within the sand, I see something unlike anything before. I descend cautiously to not disturb the grains of sand. The footprint is clearly human. It must be her.

“You cannot hide from me, little one. I will *always* find you. It is time to bring you back home.” The prints are not perfect, like me, but they are enough. The impression in the sand, while faint, points in a clear direction. It is only a matter of time before I find her.

Once more, my wings glow brightly. The sun glistens off my skin. The anger within me, though still present, is accompanied by something else this time. I feel it deeply, but I am unsure of its nature.

Am I resolute in my determination to get back what is rightfully mine? Or am I perhaps satisfied in the knowledge that I will find her? Was there a feeling before I had not realized that I had felt?

No, certainly not. I am aware of all that I feel at all times. There is nothing that is not known to me, including about myself. I shake off these thoughts and refocus on my mission. I must find her.

Hastily, I take flight once again. The sands below blast away from the force of my wing's gale. With each passing

moment, I come closer to finding her. Not a single second must be wasted.

Now that I know which way she is going, it is only a matter of time before I rescue her from her poor decision to leave me. I soar away in the direction the prints were facing. All the eyes upon my body search the surrounding region.

It will not be long before I find her, I imagine. When I do, I will have to punish her again. The thoughts of all the things I aim to do to her body to teach her to never leave without my permission again swirl around my mind. I cannot wait to get her back.

I recall that this portion of my territory is particularly full of violent beasts. That does not mean she is in danger, but I find myself worrying. The anger inside of me begins growing, but this time, it is not entirely aimed at her.

If something has happened to her, I will not relent my fury until all that has harmed her has perished and turned into ash. I will relish in the destruction of anything that dares to touch what is mine.

My wings flap furiously as I increase my speed, my desire to find her growing with each passing second. The light of my body burns hotter and brighter. If she is not hurt now, she will be once I am finished with her punishment. I will have what is mine, no matter what.

ARIE

“I’ve finally found you, Mother!” I call out. Glee fills my chest, and I already feel so warm.

When she smiles at me, I forget what sadness feels like. The ache in my soul is gone, and I feel blessed. She says nothing, just opens her arms to pull me into her embrace. I run towards her, just like I did when I was a little girl.

I launch myself at her, waiting for her to spin me around and laugh, except –

I fall into the embrace of the red-hot sand, and I realize with mortification filling my bones and clarity clearing my senses that she was never there. Pulling myself upwards, I still swivel my head around like a fool, looking for her, but she is not there.

It’s so hot.

What I had come to think was my mother’s love was nothing more than the sun’s harsh, violent heat. Its rays beat down on my skin with no small amount of cruelty, like it’s taunting me for my moment of weakness. I dare to look up at it, trying to find answers. I find nothing except a bright, hot mass willing to blind me for my mistakes.

“Please,” I beg. “Have mercy.”

Nothing answers me for a long, agonizing moment, and I realize I’ve been tricked.

“Trinity...” I smack my dry lips together. I know this is her doing, the trickster goddess she is. “You’ve really forsaken me

this time.”

She is a terrible one, that god, but she has never hurt me in ways such as this. I can survive a fake oasis, tempting me with its greenery and fresh water. I can survive the shiny specks of gemstones and gold that she will embed within the walls of caves and within the sand. I could even survive the voices that she provides, making me think that salvation from isolation is near.

I cannot survive thinking that my mother has returned to me, only to be taken away again.

My eyes burn with betrayal. I’m sure she must be laughing, wherever she is.

“Your mother’s been dead for years, Arie,” I can imagine her saying with her teasing voice and bell-like laughter. *“You really fell for that?”*

Anger fills up my chest. “Of course, I did!” I yell. “She’s my mom, I wanted – She was here.”

Except she wasn’t, was she? Trinity took advantage of my happiness and vulnerability, leading me to believe that- That miracles could happen to someone like me.

I frown, guilt and shame roiling in my belly. Perhaps that’s just hunger. When was the last time I ate?

Was I not past these delusions? Isn’t happiness supposed to be the cure for ailments such as these? Peliel was the salve for my aching heart. The hope that his company imbued in my soul should have been enough to cure these fantasies.

I freeze at that moment, thinking about Peliel.

What will he think? He’s going to be furious, surely, thinking me a traitor, deserter, and a fool all in one. Perhaps he’ll punish me again, make me see the error of my ways with acts so horrible I can’t even think of them without feeling sick. I realize, though, that nothing that he could do would be as bad as him leaving me for this.

“If I have lost him...” I murmur. “I will have nothing.”

I lose myself then.

The sun moves across the sky, and my shadow follows its path along the ground. Sand pelts my flesh and burns me, leaving welts that I cannot feel because somehow my body just feels cold and empty. I grip the grains in my fists, and I find that I do not have the energy nor the moisture to be able to cry. Seconds, minutes, and hours pass, and they feel inconsequential. I could have been there for days on end, and I would not be able to tell because this is my nightmare. Peliel leaving me would be the final crack to pull me under.

I can finally think again later, though I do not know how much time has passed. The myriad of emotions I feel makes me sick. Trinity has condemned me to a slow death, yes, but Warren and his supposed never-ending hope have also abandoned me.

He'd be angry if I said that, telling me that I have abandoned him instead of the other way around, but how am I supposed to have hope when it is impossible to think about what good can come out of this?

I am lost, my mother is gone, and Peliel will either hate me or abandon me. Two options that will leave me with the same outcome, wanting to die.

"Perhaps he won't do either of those things," I can hear Warren say. His voice is deep, soothing like a blanket that can protect me against even the coldest of nights and the harshest of sandstorms. This time I do not think it's enough. *"He could just be worried and want you back."*

Am I that lucky of a person that that is a possibility? And if I were, why am I still facing trials as cruel as these?

A hand caresses my cheek, or at least, I think one does. I'm so lost in my own despair I don't know anymore. It lifts my chin and turns it to the side where I see a dark, imposing structure in the distance.

A cave?

"Yes," Warren says, or at least I think he does. He's smug, I can hear the smile in his voice. *"Not all is lost."*

“It could be,” I whisper. Do I risk another tragedy? “That could be fake.”

“It’s not, have hope.”

“What a horrible thing it is, this hope,” I mutter. “How useless.”

“How powerful.”

Sand digs into my skin like spikes, and my skin is as hot and red as the sun. I really don’t have a choice, even if I doubt what I see in front of me. Tlouz has never been merciful even toward the most miserable of its victims. Soon I will develop burns so hot that they can send me into shock, and I have no water nor cover for when the night arrives.

Either I go toward this cave with this nefarious hope in my chest and find a place to rest for the night or die. The choice is a lot simpler to make than I thought it would be. Warren protect me.

I stand. My knees ache, nearly giving out underneath the pain, but I attempt to stand tall. Throwing an arm over my eyes to try and give them some cover, I squint at the structure in the distance. If it is truly there, it won’t take more than an hour or so to walk, so at least I will be able to find out if this is the work of Warren or Trinity soon.

With one foot in front of the other, I walk and try not to think of my body roasting out here in the sun before it is picked clean by predators.

“Please be kind to me,” I whisper toward Warren. He does not respond.

As I walk and walk and walk, the structure does seem to be getting larger and clearer. Details manifest themselves, and I can see a cave opening. Could today end with one good thing? I hope so, I really do.

I push my body to what feels like its limits. My skin is tight across my body, and I feel lightheaded. My mouth tastes like sand, and I don’t have the luxury of swallowing my own saliva to provide even the smallest of relief to my throat anymore.

But it's okay.

"It's real," I say with wonder. "I'm saved."

The cave opening isn't very large, but it's dark and shielded from the sun's rays. It will make for a good shelter, and if I last through the night, I might be able to make my way back to Peliel and beg for forgiveness.

When I approach the entrance, I realize my mistake too late.

Angry, starving growls erupt from the darkness, and I see eyes glowing bright white. Trinity giggles in my ear, or so I think, and Warren moans in despair.

Hope is such a deadly thing.

I turn on my heel and begin to run, not even sparing a second to see what kind of creatures will kill me.

I'm going to die here, alone, just like I always was going to.

I look up at the sky when the snarls grow closer. The sun, though deadly in its own right, is a familiar presence. Perhaps it will give me comfort in my last moments. When I rake my eyes across the sky, though, I see a bright light heading towards me at incredible speeds. A shooting star? In the daytime?

The realization hits me like a boulder. It's Peliel.

Has he come to kill me? Hurt me for hurting him? Perhaps it will be a mercy...

I watch as his white light approaches, my heart hammering in my chest. My fears are blown back by a gust of wind when he lands, putting himself in front of the monsters behind me.

I'm saved.

PELIEL

The desert of Tlouz is a massive, massive place. Even with these wings, it takes days of nonstop travel just to get from one end to the other, never mind searching the entirety of it searching for one little human.

A little human who had the audacity to leave me.

I don't believe we will ever learn exactly how hot the sun is, not with its distance from us and its power. We will only be able to guess what is probably only a fraction of the heat that it can create.

With the anger that burns inside my body, I feel somehow hotter than the sun could ever be.

I shoot through the sky as fast as my wings allow. The sparse number of clouds cleave in two before disappearing entirely as I pass them by.

The desert of Tlouz is massive, yes, but it will not stop me from finding Arie.

In the distance, I can see some of the caves that decorate the sandy landscape of this desert. She must be in one of them, lest she succumb to the heat of the sun. I pray that she is both smarter and more resilient than to let herself perish like that, or else this whole thing would be a waste of time.

I ignore the twinge of worry in my chest.

My wings twist to begin my descent, ready to look through each and every one of these caves to bring Arie back into my possession, to tell her she is a fool for leaving me and even

more foolish still for thinking that she would get away with it. I never thought myself the kind to get attached to a human that commits such idiotic acts, but wonders never cease and Arie always surprises.

I see specks traveling in a pack in the distance. Predators hunting down some sort of prey I would surmise. I fly closer, curiosity overriding my annoyance.

It's Arie.

She's sprinting across the sand, skin reddened and hair flying. I almost don't recognize her in this state, with her eyes crazed and limbs desperately pushing her away from the creatures. From the looks of it, she has been at this for a while, and will soon fall and have to accept her fate to the beasts.

I almost feel sorry for them, thinking of what's to come.

My descent is fast and powerful. I position myself in between Arie and her predators and flare my wings out to scare them. They back off but do not run away, pitiful creatures that they are. I hear Arie's gasp.

"You're here," she says. She sounds lost, her voice scratchy and dry. "You're really here."

"Of course, I am," I snap." One of the dumber beasts lunges at me, but I bat it away with just a sweep of a wing. "Did you think I'd let you get away?"

"N-No! Peliel, please, I did not leave you on purpose!"

"Didn't you? I didn't see a note!" I yell, feeling crazed myself. "I didn't see any warning!"

"I was confused. I thought I heard my mother!"

"Excuses!"

"They're not excuses!" she yells. "Please, listen to me!"

I catch the neck of a lunging beast and squeeze, cutting off the growl with a pained yelp. Its neck cracks underneath the force of my hand, and I treasure the sound like I would something pretty and valuable.

I used to want to do the same to Arie, but now all I feel is hot rage. Her eyes are wide and looking with fear at the corpse I hold with little effort.

“You dare give me a command? Me?” I spit, dropping the dead creature to the ground. “Has the sun seeped into your skull? Have you forgotten who I am and what I have done for you?”

Arie gulps. “No, Peliel, I haven’t. I only wish to explain myself. I don’t want you to be angry with me.”

“I already am,” I mutter. I turn my gaze back toward the pack of beasts and their loud baying. They’re keeping their distance for now, more than likely spooked over their fallen comrade. Good, let them.

“Please, Peliel.”

And her voice is so soft and pretty, isn’t it? Gentle enough that it floats around your head before caressing your ears. I do care for her, but I do not care for her disobedience.

“I will consider listening to you later,” I say with finality. “Once we get home, we will put an end to this.”

At hearing the word home, she slumps to the ground. I ignore the small crack it puts in the casing around my heart. I cannot focus on her right now. Let her sulk until this is over. Besides, I should let her stew in her own feelings for a while as she had made me do while I was looking for her. It’s only fair.

“One more thing,” I say, watching her perk up at my voice. “You will turn your body around and not look until I tell you to,” I demand. “Do you understand?”

Arie nods.

“I said, do you understand?”

“Yes, Peliel. I will not look.”

“Turn around.”

I watch as she shuffles on the sand, turning her whole body until her back is facing me. She tucks her knees up against her

chest and wraps her arms around them. Her hair cascades down her face when she leans down to hide away. I'm pleased with how well she listens to me and that she will be safe.

She better not disobey me. I'm already angry enough at her with her silly little escape attempt that I am already preparing the harsh penalty that she deserves. Arie cannot leave, and she will learn that through my hand.

The beasts are still growling behind me, an annoyance that I can't let go any longer.

"I know these words are wasted on such mindless creatures," I say with disdain, turning around. "But you should at least be a little aware of the punishment you're about to face."

More of the creatures have joined the first pack. Their maws drip with saliva and their eyes are hungry. I'm sure that to others they make quite adept predators with those long claws and sharp teeth.

"You're nothing more than the dirt that sticks to the bottom of my shoe. You are nothing and will continue to be nothing, and you will not be remembered by anybody who matters."

My wings flare out to their full potential and they shine brighter than the sun.

"Normally, I would let such pathetic beasts such as you alone and let you have your way. Normally, I do not care where you eat, sleep, or shit. It matters not to me," I say. Their growls are getting louder and I smile. "Unfortunately..."

I let my eyes glow, and my smile grows wider at their yelps.

"You've caught me in a pretty bad mood."

The slaughter is something that I hold precious no matter the occasion.

The first monster lunges. I hold my hand out to extend my light toward it and watch its maw begin to melt off of its face.

First is always the fur, it catches on fire so easily that it's gone with nothing more than a spark. Next, the skin, peeling

off and leaving holes where I can see the muscle start to cook as well.

It dies, the brain cooked inside of its skull with the rest of the body in pristine condition, the only thing affected being its head.

The rest comes easily after that.

I dig into muscle and bone like it's as soft as silk, ripping pelts off and watching them burst into flame. The beasts stop barking and start howling, screaming in pain. They almost sound like humans, the darkest part of my mind supplies, and I can't help but grin at the comparison. Some of them try to run away, but I do not let them, for this is their punishment. Never mind they only wanted food, never mind they only wanted to survive until the next day.

Their pained melody is as addicting as the most powerful drug on this planet and I will not give it up for anything.

I continue the slaughter, become a whirlwind of violence, guts, and gore until there is only one more left. I hold the leg of one of its family while I lick the blood off my other hand. The last victim lays there with its paws burnt from the superheated sand. It can only yelp and plead. Its eyes, usually so dark and angry, are filled with pain.

Were I a more merciful god, I might let it live. Though I suppose letting it die is also an act of mercy.

My hand, one of my many, many hands, burns white hot. I approach the little predator-turned-prey and press my hand on its chest. Then I push, push, push until its skin and muscle melt off around my hand. It screams, somehow still alive up until the last moment when I close my fist around its heart and cook it.

I look into its dead, dead eyes and realize in that reflection that Arie has turned around and is watching me.

ARIE

I want to listen to him.

It seems so long ago now that I fought back against Peliel for not wanting a master and wanting to be my own person, but there's a little voice that trills in the back of my brain when I'm obedient. A part of me that smiles when I'm pliant. I'm good for him, or I will be, and I will take this chance to follow what he says so he's no longer mad at me.

I close my eyes and turn around, holding my hands delicately over my eyes. This is my chance to prove that this was all a mistake and he doesn't have to be so angry at me anymore, and I won't take that for granted.

A twinging pain in my chest tells me that this will be harder than I thought, even though I want to please him.

Peliel is angry at me, yes, and I am frightened of what that means, but that doesn't change the fact that the sight of him flying down to put himself between myself and the beasts wasn't a pure miracle and feast for the eyes.

I missed looking at him and his godly visage.

He's taunting the beasts behind me, voice pitched low. It's soft rumble from anger and frustration is enough to get me to shift slightly from where I sit. The way he's talking to the creatures is inhumane and cruel, for they definitely do not understand a word coming out of his mouth. This warning that he's giving them means nothing in the grand scheme of things and serves only to boost his own ego.

The confidence that oozes from him, though... It's electrifying, even if I can't see it.

Maybe I could take a small peek? A harmless look at his holy body just to satiate my curiosity before the fight truly begins. I want to see him at his most powerful and angry and hope that he never looks at me in that way unless it's for my protection.

I think about how angry he was and decide against it. He'll be furious if I turn around, and I want to be good for him so badly. I want to be praised and showered in love for following his word. I want to be rewarded with his company and his affection.

I crave his companionship like it's a drug and his affirmations like they are necessary for my survival.

The first yelp breaks through the symphony of goals and barks. I hear bones crunching under a heavy amount of force. The sound makes me flinch. Even though I can't see anything, it's obvious that one of the creatures just died.

It was so... sudden, though.

I try to imagine what's happening behind me, and I can only guess that Peliel has snapped another one of the beast's necks with nothing more than a flick of the wrist. His physical strength is no mystery to me, I've seen him perform miracles, but the violence of it is striking.

Even though my eyes are closed and my back is turned, I feel a warmth on my back. Light shines through my eyelids, making the black background turn red. I think for one insane second that the sun has manifested behind me.

And then I smell burnt hair.

The stench of it makes me gag, though I try not to make any noise. It's overpowering and even though I must be several feet away from where Peliel is fighting, I smell it like it is right next to me. The smell is then overtaken by the sizzle and scent of booked meat and I press one hand

This is not comparable to the blood-curdling screams that echo throughout the desert.

A shiver runs down my spine at how humanlike they sound in their agony. These are not the screams of a mere stab wound or broken leg, these are the screams of a living creature being tortured within an inch of their life. They are pained howls of displeasure and –

They're done, the screams are gone. All that's left of them is the smell of meat and burnt fur that makes my stomach roil in disgust.

Don't you want to see what's going on? s cat-like voice in my mind whispers. Aren't you curious?

I do, I do want to see. I want to see Peliel in all his glory, I want to know what in god's name he is doing back there to warrant these howls of pain that now continue as he attacks the beasts.

I tense my neck like I have to physically stop myself from turning around. Peliel would be furious at me, and who knows what that may bring down on my own head.

I'm strong enough to fight these urges. I know I am.

More and more beasts cook under whatever light and heat Peliel is serving them until I can no longer smell anything but fire, death, and cooked flesh. There are so many of them dying, but it's slow like Peliel is taking the time to kill them one by one rather than in swathes like I know he is able to do.

The red behind my eyelids grows brighter.

“Bold little creatures,” Peliel says. His voice is deceptively soft and patronizing in how soothingly he speaks. “I'm almost impressed by your stubborn ways. Were I a more merciful being I might consider letting you go as a reward for your tenacity.”

Another yelp and wheeze. Another sizzle of burning fur and fat.

“Maybe if this battle were more interesting, I'd consider it even further.”

When you live in the deserts of Tlouz, it is hard to get away from the mighty star in the sky. Sunburns are a fact of

life, and I have received more than I could feasibly count on both of my hands over the years.

The heat that rests upon my back is like I am getting burned by the sun itself.

My hands twitch. I want to turn around. I want to know what he's doing, even if the sounds are painful and the smell grotesque. Am I not worthy of looking upon him? Isn't my love enough of an excuse? My thoughts race, and I feel my resolve breaking.

"Only a few of you left. A pity," Peliel says, and I realize with a wondrous thought that his voice sounds like it is coming from *everywhere*. His entire presence surrounds me.

I turn around.

It's almost as if my body moves on its own, and I am opening my eyes even before I realize that I have turned my entire self around to stare at Peliel. Any scrap of self-preservation and restraint is non-existent, and I turn my eyes to the brightest creature I have ever laid eyes upon.

He is like the sun, except more.

I press my lips together, holding back the gasp. *Am I worthy of seeing this?* I wonder for a small moment. *Are humans meant to look upon a thing such as this?*

It doesn't matter, I answer myself a moment later. *You are looking at it now.*

I want to laugh. Joy builds up in my chest like bubbles. This is a blessing, and I will never be able to forget this moment.

I can't even think or look at the burnt and melting bodies around me. Why would I care? Why are they important? They're not Peliel.

I think for a moment that I need to turn around before he sees me, but I cannot tear my eyes away from the ethereal beauty that is Peliel. Why would I want to? He is the most gorgeous creature that I have ever seen. I wonder how I will be

able to look at mundane things and not feel robbed of this sight for the rest of my life.

My heart hammers in my chest. Is that fear? Is that excitement? I do not know anymore.

I remember that I wanted to be good for Piel and stay turned around for him, I wanted him to be happy with me.

I want him and every piece of his ethereal body to love mine.

And yet.

I continue to stare even when the final creature dies. When Piel turns around to look at me...

He is so angry.

PELIEL

“I told you not to look!”

The desert is a cascading storm of fire, the sand turned to glass that snaps beneath my feet. I approach Arie slowly. As she backs away, I see the familiar fear that completes her eyes, but also something less familiar.

It's awe. Though she's slowly crawling away from me on her hands and knees, she is also in awe of me.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...”

“Enough!”

Without hearing any further excuses, I charge toward her, wings spread wide. She has seen my true face, something I never show to anybody.

Wrapping my palm firmly around her ass and gripping it tightly, digging into her flesh with my claws, I ascend, lifting myself in slow bursts at first before gaining rhythm and soaring forward. In my true form, she is weightless to me, and I no longer worry about her squirming free.

She is ensnared now.

But oddly, even as I enwrap her, I feel no struggle. She has succumbed to me completely, her will either broken, or her fear diminished.

I'm not sure if I like it.

Her eyes widen as we pass over dunes and into the familiar cavern, our speed accelerating. I might be moving faster than

speeds at which mortals should normally travel, but I know that she is durable. She won't break in my hold.

I drop to the cavern entrance, then consider dropping her to the rocky floor.

Instead, I dig into her ass tighter. I feel her starting to struggle against me now, but I ram her back into the hard rock wall, then with one hand, begin slapping her ass while she squirms, her torso gripped in my other hand.

“You thought you could run away from me and I wouldn't even notice? Stupid girl!”

My arm pulls back farther and farther, as she recoils harder against every impact.

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry!”

“Sorry isn't enough! You thought you could tease my cock and just leave? Now you'll pay me with your body!”

Slowing down my approach, I set her on the ground, then strip her panties off of her. She doesn't even try to escape... part of me wishes she would... as I lift her bare ass into the air again. Her skin is already pink, and I swat hard, applying measured force to every slap. My hands hurt with every slap, and I can't imagine the pain coursing through her.

“Please stop!”

Her voice is pained but hides an escalating moan of pleasure. Maybe somewhere deep inside, she wants to resist me, but her body won't allow it.

Her bare pussy is red and swollen, and her clit is enlarged.

Rapidly, I flip her over in my grasp. She grabs onto the rock wall with her hands to support herself, her legs still suspended in the air. Even as she fights me, her pussy still entices me with its allure, sopping juices of arousal.

I want to devour her completely... to taste every part of her.

My erection throbs, urging me forward. But first, I must prepare her.

With her insistent moans compelling me, I bring my long, forked tongue out of my mouth, where it rests, unused to being so far retracted. It falls at her entrance, and I know she feels my moisture resting against her, tasting her sweet nectar as it drips from her still.

Just the smell of her makes me want to forget this divinity she's forced upon me and tear her apart like a demon, consuming everything and losing my soul in the process. I can feel her tempting me with her enlarged cheeks and her wide beckoning hole.

She can't fool me. I can see how much she wants it.

My tongue swirls against her, prodding the bulb at the same time that it massages her folds. She struggles to steady herself against my onslaught, gripping the wall far more tightly.

"Tell me how much you want it, slut," I urge, my tongue still hanging freely, ready to invade her.

But in spite of how far her body has given in to me, her mouth still has not yielded.

"N-no!"

I will have to break her mouth later. I know that in resisting me, she is only betraying herself.

My tongue courses over her in waves, eagerly caressing and even gripping her pussy.

I can see her starting to clench, ready to orgasm.

And I can't have that.

I move my tongue away from her, letting it hang out freely.

Just as she reaches her own pinnacle, I pause.

"What are you doing?"

Her voice pleads for me to continue.

"Oh, now you're into my punishment? Would you like for me to continue?"

She doesn't say anything, struggling against her own will.

To help coax her out of her ascendance, I resume swatting her ass even harder than before. With every jiggle of her cheeks, she becomes more malleable, taken out of her all-consuming orgasm.

Then I bring my tongue back toward her entrance. I can feel her attempting to lean into me, but without permission or preamble, I dive into her core.

She screams, as in one movement, my agile tongue spirals inside her, reaching her womb and pounding forward, then pulling back. It's no substitute for my cock, but then my cock can't capture the ravishing taste as I twist inside her, licking every inch of her walls.

Catching her grip slipping from the wall as she slopes back, I decide to pick her up, using both of my arms to envelope her torso, holding her high enough that my tongue can reach her without bending. She grasps the rocky stalactites for support now.

I feel her tense up again, her moaning escalating.

And I stop, my tongue retreating from out of her chasm.

“What are you doing!” This time she is more insistent.

“I will allow you to orgasm when you learn to beg for it.”

She sighs in frustration. “I guess you're not giving me a choice.”

“If you want to consume all of my divinity,” I say. “Then you need to yield.”

She says nothing. Her rebellion is admirable, but it will earn her nothing.

“Then more punishment it is.”

Forcefully, I take her from my grip, and set her down in front of me, hitting her face with my member again.

“How is it even bigg – mmph!”

I thrust myself into her mouth, pushing against her natural resistance. Her warmth is intoxicating. And even as she tries to

bite into me, I am overwhelmed by pleasure, her weak incisors tickling my flesh.

This will teach her to fight against me.

If I want her to beg for me, I need to starve her of the very thing she needs to exist, depriving her until she can endure no more.

I curve down deep into her throat and lodge myself there, pressing her face against my groin. I can feel her desperate breaths pushing into my balls, and they throb with ecstasy.

“Very good. See? You’re starting to remember your place.”

Pulling back to allow her a moment of breath, I force myself back into her, enjoying the site of my protruding bulge in her throat.

Then I repeat the process. She gags against the invasion.

This time, I hold myself deep within her even longer. I can feel her urgent pounding on my leg, her throat convulsing around me, desperate for air.

With my hands tightly gripping her hair, forcing her backward and downward on my swollen cock, I begin to flap my wings. I can see her eyes widening as slowly I lift her off the ground, carrying her out of the cavern.

She looks down, not at my cock, but at the increasingly distant desert ground below us. I can sense the increase in her heart rate as, flapping my wings, I begin thrusting more aggressively, using my wings to propel me forward.

In my true form, even this requires little effort, though I can see her hanging on for her life.

I want her to beg.

“All you have to do is ask for it,” I tell her. “Doesn’t the ground below you sound liberating?”

She looks up at me defiantly, the desert sands miles below us, and I thrust still more vigorously. I want to cover her in my slime so that her face is covered in her own spit and my cum. I

want to degrade her so thoroughly that she can never deny me again.

My climax almost takes my focus away from the task of holding her as I fill her mouth with my sperm. Her eyes are full of surprise and panic as she struggles to breathe against the invasive fluid now filling her lungs, my cock still throbbing and pushing forward into her just as energetically.

I could climax a million times and still never tire. That is the power of my true form. She has seen it, and thus must she surrender to it if she is to live.

But seeing her eyes go white, I briefly retrieve my cock from the depths of her throat, my cum pouring out of her miles below. I will not allow her to die here in spite of her grievances.

“Are you ready to succumb to me now?”

Reluctantly, she nods, though her mind appears to be in several other places, scattered among the realm.

“Perfect,” I say before reaching to grip her stomach one more time.

“Wait? I thought you said we were going to land?”

I shake my head before flipping her around, maneuvering her easily now that my wings flap almost autonomously.

Licking her entrance one more time and ensuring that she is prepared for me, I begin to line her up with me.

The desert burns hot below us. I can see roving bandits and caravans that still have not met my wrath, having slipped in at a moment of vulnerability. Later, I will need to teach them about their trespasses.

I prod at her entrance, still ready to penetrate her, her tits hanging downward for every creature in the desert to see. In one hand, I grip her stretched leg, while in the other, I clutch her arms.

“If you want this cock, then I need you to beg for it.”

ARIE

“If you want this cock, then I need you to beg for it.”

His voice is hoarse and echoes from a thousand places, like the roar from a batlax and the bellow of a dragon combined. For all his boasting and all his threats, he still doesn't understand the ferocity he commands. I can barely look upon him without blinding myself in this form.

I am a toy in his gigantic arms, my body stretched out from head to toe.

I quiver at the thought of him penetrating me.

“Please fuck me,” I say timidly in response.

I don't revel in it. I don't give it more attention than it needs.

It's just what he asks of me.

I ready myself, trying to open myself up for him, my eyes closed tightly.

But in spite of my urgency, he still prods me with his enormous cock, never parting me open.

His teasing is unbearable.

I could push myself back on him, but such a betrayal might also cause him to drop me thousands of miles to the desert below. I know how much he wants everything to happen on his terms, and in time, I've come to respect it.

The cool rush of the clouds passing me only makes me more excited, the world too far below us to even make out vague details.

If I fell from this height, I would be dead.

“I’m not convinced you really want it,” he says.

And even from my position, unable to see his face, I can feel the smug smile that crosses his almost indiscernible features. I wonder if, with the eyes that run over the length of his skin, and even across his cock, he can see my arousal magnified. If I didn’t know him better, I might be terrified by this incomprehensible being about to penetrate me.

But I do know him. Despite being strange and even existing outside of my perception, he has been there for me in a way no other creature has. I have come to revere him as my savior.

I want him.

I want to create something magnificent for him. I want to be commanded and used by him.

“Please fuck me!”

I say it even more urgently this time, but I still sense his dissatisfaction.

“I don’t feel your passion! Tell me how much you want it!”

I need it. I can’t deny it any longer.

“Please ravage me! I need it so bad!”

He plunges into me, and I gasp.

I realize the error of my request immediately, his piercing, bulbous cock overtaking me.

I look down, and I can see the odd shape of it contorting me.

It’s almost twice as big as I remember it. No human could possibly accommodate this!

“What did you do?”

But before I can react, he pulls out of me, then stuffs me with it yet again, swaying his hips from side to side. The pain is incredible, the stretching tinged with pleasure as I struggle to accommodate him. I never thought my body could endure this much torment.

This size, the sheer power of him, could kill me. I close my eyes, gritting my teeth.

Its contours pervert and reshape my mind, the odd, eye-like bumps that cover it seemingly amplifying my pleasure as they rub against and enlarge the walls of my pussy. I cannot think. I can only beg.

“I reshaped myself for you,” he says, pulling out one more time, then thrusting into me again. “Do you like it?”

My eyes glaze over as I look at the distant sky. Drool runs down the edges of my mouth, my mind racked from the immense pain and pleasure at such an impossible invasion.

Tears stream down my cheek. I contemplate that this might be my final moment.

I’m just glad that I got to spend it with Peiel.

I shut my eyes again, too overwhelmed to process this.

But you know that you like it. You can’t live without it.

My eyes open slowly, and the world looks very different to me.

“Y-yes,” I manage to gasp, feeling too full to even speak. “I like it.”

“Eventually, you will learn to take my cock. I will help you become like me... leave your fragile human anatomy behind.”

“Yes,” I say.

My own obedient voice surprises me as it exits my mouth, and I wonder if I’ve shifted to another reality.

Is this the salvation I’ve been seeking?

With every penetration, his primal grunts only drive him to thrust more eagerly and amplify my arousal. The more he

thrusts inside me, the more that I realize how happy I am just to be his.

It's perfect.

Slowly, I feel him wedge his way through me, battering me open with his abnormal tool. Its grooves present an unusual outline as I look down.

“You’ll find I don’t suffer the same limitations as your mortals either,” he says.

He throbs inside me, his pace becoming more urgent.

His hold on my ankles and my arms tightens, his grip nearly breaking my bones.

His full balls slap against me. They collide with my flesh.

And due to their tremendous size, they bruise me on impact, as though they’re spanking my ass.

He moans, unconcerned about the world around him. At this moment, it’s only me and him.

And though I feel him flooding me with his cum, I know that he hasn’t nearly slowed his pace.

“So strange that human men can only come once,” he says before somehow prodding even deeper into me. “Isn’t your sex unsatisfying?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I say, having to bite down on my lip to endure the sensations coursing through me.

I can feel blood dripping, intermixed with his own fluids.

Is this what sex is supposed to feel like?

With my body tightly constricted in his arms and him gripping my neck so hard he nearly chokes me, he surges forward, carrying me through the sky.

We dip down, lowering ourselves beneath the clouds.

The scenery rushes past my vision, drifting sands and cascading monsters filling the realm below. I’m so tightly bound by him, it could all be an illusion brought on by his suffocating grasp.

And all the while, still he fucks me, opening me beyond recognition.

Peliel's long fingers wander between us as we fly, brushing over the sensitive bud at the apex of my thighs. I can't control the groan I let out at the contact, my pussy clenching around him. Even this full, I want more, need more.

"You want me to own you," he says in my ear as he begins to twirl and twist the sensitive bud between his fingers. I rock against him, my back arching as I give myself over fully to the sensations.

"Yes," I moan breathlessly. He twitches inside me, his thrusts coming faster in time with his fingers as he works me harder. My words seem to spur him on, my admittal of wanting to be submissive to him.

I flounder, looking for something to hold on to as he moves inside me mercilessly, rubbing against me so quickly that I start to see stars.

"Fuck, Peliel, please," I whimper. He flicks my clit before quickly dragging a finger over it, the pleasure-tinged pain shoving me over the edge on the wave of another brutal, punishing stroke. I explode in his arms, going boneless despite his relentless stroke. I feel myself flutter and squeeze around him, gushing around his member, but Peliel only thrusts harder, more aggressively.

I feel as if somehow through this experience I have gained wings too. I feel like if he took off, I could follow him through the skies, though I know that's a lie.

Through surging skies and inconceivable penetrations, I have been utterly wrecked. And in doing so, I have seen my purpose.

He slams into me more eagerly, his cum mingling with mine and continuously dripping out of me. It sticks to my ankles and my ass as it pours out of me, and I can't help but revel in the feeling.

"Let us bring you back to solid ground."

We flutter downward suddenly, my body nearly unable to bear the transition, my heart leaping out of my body.

I recognize the familiar cavern entrance and prepare my bare feet to touch the ground as we land, and I scrape my feet against the hard rocks in our descent.

But it is okay. A few scrapes are nothing to me. I have been reborn.

I imagine how far stretched and contorted I must be, with him still buried deep within me. He is warm inside me, and the pain has ceased.

Now that I am on solid ground, I can take a better look at the organ inside me, and I'm surprised I survived. I admire his shining silhouette and how my own body looks wrapped around his.

“You're glorious.”

His mouth moves toward mine, his appearance still overwhelming to me, but I lean in, eyes closed, and take his tongue in my mouth. I feel it swirl around, wrapping around my tongue, and gently fucking my cheeks, and I can't help but giggle.

His claws manipulate and tweak my breasts, punishing my nipples by twisting them. He pulls his hands away, and my tits stretch away from my form.

And as we kiss, his organ stirs me up. The feeling of it inside me tickles somewhat, but I am completely receptive to it now. There is no more pain, in spite of its size. I simply feel full, taken by a myriad of sensations while it grips my every nerve. I become uncertain where his cock ends and I begin.

His many eyes upon me, I can see them studying me, peering into my very soul.

“I am glad you came to your senses,” he growls, throbbing inside me. “I missed having you here.”

His teeth move down to my breasts, and he punishes me more, tearing into my flesh with his rigid incisors. His saliva

on my vulnerable, beaten bosom is an aphrodisiac, accelerating me to greater heights.

I can't count how many times I have cum on him. But finally, I shut my eyes, shaking violently on him. With his other hand, he steadies me, preventing me from simply tumbling to the hard floor.

All I see is the infinite darkness... the stars that swirl and vibrate around me.

A whirlwind of thoughts moves through my mind.

I am standing on a precipice, watching them all swirl before me. Some of them are redundant, nonsensical, or simply incorrect, while others are lost in a violet haze.

Walking forward with a bucket, I move to each thought, plucking from the air the ones that matter most to me, and then dropping them into its metal enclosure.

"I never knew I lost you," I whisper, looking upon a dim memory of the desert, my mother smiling upon me.

Slowly, I begin to reassemble myself.

When I am satisfied, I see a metal door adorned with religious symbols I don't recognize. I hesitate, before pushing it open and walking through.

I open my eyes.

"Are you okay?"

I am lying on the hard floor of the cavern, and the world seems so much clearer to me.

Pushing myself up off the floor, I stand to my feet, looking into the four eyes that now grace Peliel's face.

"Thank you," I say.

PELIEL

“Thank you...” her words are soft and quiet like that of a squalid batlaz. It’s pitiful to hear, yet there is something about them I enjoy.

“For what do you thank me for?” I ask.

“For saving me yesterday,” she explains. “For bringing me back. For... being with me.”

Her words perplex me. These were all obvious things. Though praise and recognition are welcome, regardless of how or whence they come.

“These are all things that need not be spoken. Their precedence comes whether or not you wish for them,” I declare.

“I know,” she stammers, “I just – I just wanted you to know I’m grateful for you being here.”

“You remember your place then? Good.” I say, looking down upon her. Something about her makes me smile. “Should you attempt to leave again without my say, your punishment will be fiercer than before.”

“About that.” Her head tilts away from looking at me. “I didn’t mean to leave you.”

Mean to? My chest glows slightly as I ponder her words. “Explain yourself. Quickly.”

“It was my mother.” She raises her head to look back at me. As our eyes met, I can see the tenderness within her own.

A feeling I am unfamiliar with takes hold of me.

“I heard her voice out there in the desert.” She raises her hand to point to the entrance of the cave. “She called out to me. So, I ran after her... And that was when you found me.” A soft smile finds its place on her face. “That was when you saved me.”

I think I understand now. The anger I had felt inside of myself was misplaced. In fact, it was not anger at all that I thought I felt but rather it was *fear*.

It was fear of losing her. I have never felt fear before. Fear was for the cowardly beings who dared cross paths with me. Is this feeling of attachment like that for all of my property? Or just for her?

This feeling is like anger, but not at her. She ran off, that much is true, and that action raises anger in me like anything else that chooses to disrespect me and my domain.

Could this feeling be...? I am left confused by my own self for the first time ever.

“Well.” I raise myself up taller to stand above her. “You are mine. I will not let any harm befall you so long as you continue to do as I wish.”

“I understand.” She nods. “I won’t ever leave you. I could never go back to being on my own again. Especially not after all the time we have spent together.”

Her words make my chest grow tight. I enjoy it when she worships me, as all things should, but these words from her make me feel something different.

“I have only ever been alone,” I admit. “I have never shared my territory with any other living being.”

“You’ve always been by yourself?” Her face contorts into a look of both concern and confusion. I do not like it.

“Both the wild worgs and the thoughtless equu know to fear me. The infernal

elves and orcs dare not to trespass upon my land lest they earn my ire.” I feel myself growing hotter.

Every word exchanged between us fills me with something akin to frustration, but they are not entirely the same feeling. Not knowing them clearly, however, causes me frustration.

“Because of this,” I continue. “There has been no room for another being to exist within my own space of living.”

“Are you saying there’s no room for me here...?” Her eyes appear to grow watery. I do not like how that makes me feel.

“Of course, there is!” I shout. Those watery eyes of hers disappear, and in their place, I see fear. I *really* do not enjoy how that makes me feel. That feels wrong.

When creatures look upon me with fear in their eyes, I relish the feeling. Bask in it. Yet here when she does the very same, there is something about it I do not enjoy. Her eyes must look at me with adoration and reverence.

“I have made room for you among all my things,” I say, trying to change that look in her eyes back to what it should be. “Though I do understand that there will be many challenges for you to face, living with me.”

“Whatever they are, I can take them.” The look on her visage is completely different now. It reminds me of that feeling I felt a moment ago. Not anger, but *pride*. Is she proud to be my pet?

“Is something wrong?” Her hand touches my chest slowly.

“Wrong? How could anything be wrong around me?”

“Your eyes...” She caresses my cheek with her other hand. “It looked like you were thinking deeply about something.”

How could she possibly know that? I grab her hand on my chest and move it off of me carefully. I hold it tightly within my own.

“I said it earlier, and I’ll say it again. I cannot go back to being on my own. I know my mother is gone. Even then, when I heard her calling out to me, I knew she was gone.” She came in close. I look down to see her head against my chest. “I have been so afraid of being on my own that when I heard her

calling out to me, I couldn't help but go to her. But it wasn't real, was it?"

My arms move on their own. I am unsure why, but I do not fight against it. Both my arms and wings wrap around her. Together, we look as if we are wrapped in a feathery blanket. Many feelings I have never known before now swell within me as her body comes closer. Her voice is muffled against my sternum.

"But you're real. *This* is real. You're as beautiful as the stars in the night sky and warmer than the scorching sun out there in the desert. I want to stay with you for as long as you will let me."

"I have not been praised so accurately before. Carry on with more words such as those, and I will never willingly dispose of you." I relinquish my hold upon her to gain a better view of her facial features. New sensations unfamiliar to me swell deep within every fiber of my being.

"Always! I will tell you how amazing you are every morning and every night." Her eyes light up like the stars she described before. I can see myself within them. "Speaking of the night..."

"What about it?" I inquire.

"If you wish for me to..." A florid color overtakes her visage. "To *worship* you, in any way like last light and the nights before. Then I will do so, whenever you like."

"You enjoy your worshiping duties, then?" My lips curve into a sickly smile. She is turning into a well-behaved pet.

Is this what I am feeling? Pride in myself for finally having a dutiful worshiper? No. I know what pride feels like. This is definitely something else. These feelings of mine are towards her.

"Yes..." she says, thistlelike. "Having been alone by myself for so long, I have never known how good it would feel to do such things. I like being able to show my appreciation for you."

“Perhaps we should come up with new ways for you to show your appreciation.” My hands caress down the sides of her body. “And should you do anything I do not approve of, I’ll have to create more interesting forms of punishment for you.”

“I’ll do my best to never upset you.” she proclaims.

“That is exactly what I like to hear.”

“I don’t deserve to belong to someone as beautiful as you, Peliel...”

“Nonsense,” I say without thinking. “You belong to me.” I step back away from her for the moment. “I care a great deal about all of my things.” As I take her hand in mine, I walk her to the entrance.

“You are just as important to me as the lands that are mine.” I wave my hand out in front of us, showcasing the vastness of my territory. “It is all mine to use and enjoy, the same way you are. Continue to provide me with the worship, respect, and praise I am due, and I will continue to allow you to partake in the honor of doing so.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“I deserve to have you. Of that, I am certain. Thus, the inverse must also be true.”

“Which is?”

As I bring her out to bear witness to the grandness of my domain, I begin to understand those feelings that have taken hold of me. This must be how those humans felt before I found her. The truth of these feelings is simple now. I would destroy the rest of this world if it meant protecting *her*.

“You deserve to be mine, Arie.”

ARIE

P eliel's fickle mood confuses me, but his look is one of deepest adoration. I cannot imagine living without his fierce attention.

"I deserve..."

"Is it so foreign a notion?" He traces my cheek with two fingers, which let off a soft glow as they chase to my mouth and thrum my lower lip. "That you may be worthy of affection, as well?"

My heart soars, and I lean into him.

Again, he gathers me against his chest, a welcoming embrace against the chill of evening rushing over the desert.

Tears sting my eyes. "How did I get so lucky?"

He chuckles, leaning in as if to offer his cryptic wisdom. Instead, he tenses, his whole body becoming like a vise around me. I go slack, not from the absence of self-preservation, but because if he means to destroy me, there is nothing I can do to stop him.

"Don't. Move," comes his hushed warning in my ear, so unexpected it makes me shudder. "We are not alone."

There are others?

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I crane my neck to see them. "Are they —"

"Human," he says with a measure of disgust. "I must have grown so accustomed to your scent that I did not recognize

theirs on the wind.”

“Let me see.”

“*They don’t want you,*” comes a niggling little voice I don’t quite recognize. It’s not Warren’s soothing murmur, or even Ezekiel’s harsh tone, full of resentment. It’s someone else, a nameless voice that’s been following me since Peliel brought me here. “*You are ruined. You have become a whore for your god, and they will kill you for it.*”

“No,” I say aloud.

Peliel ignores my outburst but lets me pivot in his arms so I can observe several darkened figures emerging from the darkness. They are dull against the velvet sky compared to him, and it’s almost strange to look upon mundane creatures again, without a light of their own.

Is that how he sees me?

“What will you do?”

He does not answer, and a glow dances over his skin again. It’s that fierce, burgeoning illumination that threatens to swallow me up, along with half of the desert. I throw a prayer up to whoever might listen that we find an amicable solution before Peliel erupts into violent action.

I’ve seen enough to know what he’s capable of.

One human clears the darkness, emerging in shades of blue and gray, brandishing a broken stick in his hand. “Monster!”

I can hear Peliel’s teeth grind together on a grin, and he straightens, keeping me under the shelter of a wing. “I thought I’d destroyed your ilk on the clifftop.”

Other shadows linger behind the bold human, but I cannot make them out.

Soot is smeared on his face, and his cheeks are hollow. Hate is set deep in the sockets of his eyes, and the potential of violence shakes in his limbs. He bares yellowed teeth when he speaks. “We were the ones you passed over. The blood of my brother, my *daughter*, was good enough for you. Why not mine?”

“That can be rectified,” Peliel says simply. “You wish to see your daughter again?”

I see where this is going without needing to hear more. “Peliel,” I say in a rush, glancing frantically back at him. “They are like me. *Please*, don’t hurt them.”

His jaw is set, and I don’t think he’s heard me.

The human spares me a curious glance, his eyes flaring when he takes me in. “You’re disgusting,” he says to me, gripping his shoddy weapon in a fist. “Siding with that *creature* –”

“Enough!”

Peliel’s voice cuts through the air like a physical blow, and if I weren’t in the safety of his arms, I might have stumbled back like the human, who buckled to one knee. He is weak but angry, and I fear that there will be no peace if I do not act now.

I tear out of his arms to stand between them.

Peliel regards me with mild irritation, even as the human rises to his feet. He’s already glowing, and each breath is like taking in the heat of a campfire. I shoot him an apologetic look and turn to face the human. “I am *sorry* for what has happened to you, but you must understand, we are but guests in his territory.”

I glance back at Peliel before continuing.

“I’m sure there’s a way we can come to a peaceful resolution.”

“Peace,” the human spits. “When he resurrects my daughter and her children and all those who lost their lives on the ridge, we will have peace.”

My blood runs cold, even with a blazing inferno at my back.

“You are just a brainwashed agent of this monster, girl. Stand aside!”

“I cannot!”

My voice surprises even me, but Peliel seems to gather himself first. “Arie,” he warns under his breath. “Stay behind me.”

Just as I’m about to protest, an arrow vaults from the darkness and buries itself in the sand by my feet. I stare down at the feathered end, confused even as I’m swept into the cave, the angry shouts of men filling the air.

Peliel lets out a blast of blistering heat, turning the sand to glass around him.

When the brightness cools, I see the man who led the attack, charred and choking on smoke roiling from his mouth. He’s dropped his weapon and is on hands and knees, unable to fill his burned lungs. Several other figures move to protect him, but ten more come charging at Peliel, weapons in hand.

I know he can take them.

I’ve seen what he can do. Maybe the time for peace really has passed, but I still have to hope. “*You are nothing,*” comes the thought as I watch Peliel clash with the humans in a brutal explosion of sparks. “*You cannot even defend yourself. Look at you!*”

A fury rises from somewhere deep inside of me, an anger I didn’t know I possessed. Only moments ago, he and I had our whole futures ahead of us, as broad as the open desert. Now, the humans mean to take away what little home I have found for myself here.

I don’t know what happened to them and if their grief is justified.

But they mean to kill us.

A man comes charging at me, sword in hand. I yelp as I dodge, hearing metal connect with stone, then kick sand into his eyes. He roars and drops his weapon, allowing me to snatch it up and drive it deep between his legs.

Peliel may consider me small and weak, but I’m quick, too.

I drag the weapon free before he has the good sense to collapse on top of me, and right myself before two more come barreling forward. Seven men are engaged with Peliel, and more are emerging from the gloom.

My new sword clashes with another, and I slip into range before burying it into his gut. He freezes with wide eyes, Peliel's light reflecting in them before he too slumps to the earth, watering the sand with his blood.

Just as I straighten, there's a prickle on the back of my neck. I think it's the heat of Peliel's powers, but when I turn to face the source, I realize too late that it's one of the humans charging at me. I don't have time to raise my sword before we're tumbling in the sand, head over heels. I somehow manage to dodge the slice of his dagger, which barely grazes my arm before I find myself flat on my back, with him on top of me.

He issues a feral snarl as he raises the dagger high.

My hands are empty, no weapon to protect me this time. I hear myself scream like it is someone else, very far away. *"Pathetic. Just like I thought, you can't even protect yourself."*

The dagger comes down hard and fast, the moonlight gleaming off its silver tip. I close my eyes in anticipation of the agony that is to come, a jolting pain in my chest. *Something.* But when I open my eyes again, the man is gone, and so is Peliel.

I look up to see him hovering too high for their weapons to reach as he rips the man apart, burning like the sun. Blood rains down on his compatriots, and someone knocks a bow. I scramble to my feet, sweeping up my sword in the process, and lunge at the archer, who has the tip of his arrow aimed at Peliel's heart.

He turns just in time to offer me a shocked expression before my sword mangles his features. I throw myself on him and keep stabbing until he stops fighting back, an errant shudder gripping his frame before he goes still.

I rise from my kill, conflicted but relieved.

Peliel touches down to earth again and commences his battle with the humans. There are too many, streaming out of the darkness, and Peliel is so luminous. No one could miss him against the backdrop of night. It makes him an easy target.

After tonight, the humans won't accept me.

Peliel is my only chance at a *life* worth living. I fight to get to him, cutting down a man before he has a chance to stab him in the back.

Our eyes meet in the fray, his filled with relief.

I have to banish an errant smile as we stand back to back, fighting off the intruders that threaten our home.

PELIEL

A symphony of human terror echoes off the walls of the rocky cavern as I kill the man in front of me. More humans are streaming into the cave now, their numbers reaching higher than I initially expected.

The heat of my flames is causing the air to shimmer around me as I scan the battlefield. Arie still fights bravely, the red-stained blade in her hands dripping blood onto the rocky ground. She has a wild, determined look in her eyes as she swings the cheap steel toward anyone stupid enough to approach her.

Luckily, most of the humans are focused on me, as they should be. I'm the one they're here for. They have come to meet their death and I am happy to oblige.

Unleashing another blaze of light to blind my attackers, I hurl a ball of flame into a crowd of oncoming humans. The joy of battle fills me as I swoop down to engage them hand-to-hand.

I soar through the searing air, snatching up the closest human and hurling them into the rocky wall of the cavern with a terrible crunch. As I glide back to the cavern floor, twisting and rolling to avoid the puny arrows the humans continue launching at me, I notice a crowd of attackers cornering Arie against the wall of the cave.

Fury overtakes me and I change the course of my flight, heading straight for my pet. I land in front of Arie with a burst

of air, pushing a wall of flame toward the humans, forcing them to scatter and take cover behind the rocks.

“Stay near me, Arie,” I say in a commanding tone. “Don’t engage unless you must. I can handle this.”

Arie says nothing, which worries me slightly – she is prone to disobeying – but the humans quickly return to attack again, tearing my attention from Arie. One of them is dumb enough to charge me with a spear. I wait calmly until he’s almost upon me, turning at the last moment to grasp the haft of his spear.

Tearing the weapon from his grip with one hand, I use the other to grab hold of his neck, crushing his windpipe with relative ease. Then, spinning around and tossing the dying man to the ground, I hurl the spear at the nearest attacker, piercing him through the chest and throwing him back several feet.

The whiz of an arrow in flight suddenly captures my attention, but I deal with it easily, heating the air with a blaze of fire that incinerates the arrow before it can reach me. Noticing others drawing their bows and taking aim, I decide to move away from Arie for a moment, flapping up to draw their fire away from her.

The arrows begin to fly, and I roll away from the volley, flying over my attackers and coming down behind them. I land right in the midst of them, swinging my limbs and releasing random blazes of fire. Some of them die from the blunt trauma of my powerful arms smashing them into rocks, others suffer as the fire consumes them, but they all die.

Moments later, I am standing within a ring of dead bodies, most of them scorched and smoking against the fused glass floor that was sand seconds earlier. The smell of burning flesh and clothes assaults my nostrils, filling me with satisfaction.

No matter how many humans I kill, however, more seem to appear. Clearly, either more of them initially escaped than I realized, or they merged with another group of refugees. A bubble of concern sprouts somewhere deep in my mind, but I suppress it quickly. There is no number of humans capable of killing me...but Arie?

I whirl backward as she returns to my thoughts and see her holding off two humans with her blade, nimbly dodging their attacks as she uses the terrain to her favor. One of them comes dangerously close to slashing her neck with a sword, but she manages to slide behind a boulder and avoid the blade.

Recognizing the danger she is in, I take to the air once again, soaring toward my Arie with purposeful flaps of my bright wings. I pick up as much speed as I can, dipping low to fly just above the rocky floor. I reach the men at full speed, and with arms outstretched, I fly straight into them, slamming their bodies into the wall of the cave with ferocious force.

Their bodies pop against the wall of the cavern like overripe melons, releasing a terrible splash of blood that stains my pristine white feathers with thick red gore.

“I had them!” Arie exclaims as I land beside the bloody lumps of flesh that were living humans just seconds earlier.

“Let me handle this!” I scream back at her. “Protect yourself, but do not seek them out.”

Arie looks like she’s about to retort, but suddenly, she screams a warning at me and points to something behind us.

Whirling to face the next onslaught I send another wall of fire into the charging crowd, scattering their advance. *It’s time to end this.*

I begin walking toward them, my true form shining brightly to blind my attackers. Some of them begin retreating, and for a moment, I think they are finally giving up on this hopeless endeavor. Moments later, however, I see them form up again a few dozen yards away, drawing bows back in unison.

Unafraid, I charge. The snap of half a dozen bow strings releasing in unison announces their volley, but I am ready. I roll below the volley, rather than flapping above it as they expected. Before they can draw again, I am in the midst of them, killing mechanically with powerful swings of my arms and blazing balls of fire.

They die poorly, screaming and writhing in pain as the carnage continues to pile up.

Then Arie screams. Everything seems to stop suddenly as her terrified howl cuts through the air with the keenness of a razor. I whirl toward the sound and see Arie being dragged through the entrance of the cave, twisting and kicking to escape the small group of men dragging her.

One of them slams the hilt of his dagger into the side of her head, cutting off her protests as her head sags against her chest. A moment later, they are gone, vanishing around the edge of the cavern wall.

Fury does not describe the burning rage that fills my very being at this moment. My blood boils with white-hot intensity as I am absorbed by an indescribable anger and a sense of denial. *They will not have her.*

Without thinking, I allow the light of my true form to fade, squatting down on the rocky floor. I know the sudden change of light will blind the humans temporarily, but I don't have long.

Squatting there amongst the charred corpses, I draw on my anger and denial, gathering as much energy into myself as possible. I feel myself straining to the limit, I've never brought this much energy into myself at once before.

As the power inside me nears its peak, I can no longer suppress the glow that emanates from my feathered form.

"There!" comes a distant shout from somewhere nearby. "There he is! Shoot! Shoot now! Before he gets up!"

It's too late for them. They should not have threatened my Arie.

With a mighty howl, I stand up, releasing my full energy into the cavern. Walls of flame fill the cave, one after the other, emanating from my body in a wave of death. They reach from the floor to the ceiling of the cave, filling the entire chamber with terrible flame.

I stand in the middle of the inferno, releasing all the energy I can, funneling all of my emotions into the blazing fire.

Finally, after what feels like hours, I release the attack with a gasp. Panting, I look around. The walls of my cave have been melted smooth, shining in the flames that still burn wherever they can find fuel.

The once sandy floor is now a smooth surface of shining glass, strewn with smoking corpses. The bodies nearest to me were burned down to the bone, their flesh melted away in the inferno.

My rage begins to fade, and I remember Arie. I fly immediately to the cave entrance, looking for tracks to follow them, but the heat of my rage has turned the sand to glass here too, erasing any tracks I might have followed.

I scream my fury into the night, frustrated with myself for not pursuing her immediately. Then, determination returning, I begin to flap high into the night sky. *I will find them, tracks or none, and they will pay. There is no place they can escape me.*

ARIE

Faintly, I feel my heels sliding through the sand as my arms scream in protest. I feel two sets of hands under my armpits, dragging my body painfully across the desert floor. I want to close my eyes and fall back out of consciousness, but the pain won't allow it.

Slowly, I blink my eyes open. Stars hang brightly in the sky above me, illuminating the night with a soft glow. The intense pain in my head registers as I open my eyes, adding to the miserable feeling in my body.

Is this real? Where am I? Memories of a fight begin to flood back into my brain. The cavern, I was fighting in the cavern, and then... then they took hold of me from behind. This is real. I've been captured. Where is Peliel? Does he live?

I fear for myself, but more so for Peliel. I have little interest in staying alive if I'll be alone again. *Where is Peliel?* Somehow, I know he is alive. They could not have killed him. But will he know how to find me?

"She's awake," says a gruff voice in front of me, ripping me from my thoughts.

"Let's take cover up there by those rocks," says another voice. "We can shelter from the monster's sight and get what we need from this one."

The men seem to agree, and I feel them dragging me up a sandy hill, my eyes fluttering as the pain threatens to overwhelm me. A few minutes later, they throw me down on a

hard rocky outcrop, sending more jolts of pain through my body.

Grunting and spitting blood I push myself onto my hands and knees, only to be kicked ferociously in the ribs and collapse again on the rocks.

“Monster fucker,” comes a voice from above me.

“Hold on, Rorik,” says another voice, “First we need to get what we can out of her. She must know of some weakness in her lover.”

“Look at her, Danin,” the other voice responds. “She don’t know a thing. She’s been fucking that creature for gods know how long. What kind of sick whore of a woman would do such a thing.”

“She’s been broken by him, aye, but that doesn’t mean she hasn’t learned a thing or two about him.”

I hear a man spit and feel the glob of saliva land on my back.

“We should have a little fun and then slit her throat. She can’t help us.”

“Shut your fuckin’ mouth, Rorik, I won’t say it again.”

A displeased sound comes from the man named Rorik, but he says no more. A moment later, I feel hands grabbing me roughly by the shoulders and turning me over onto my back.

I open my eyes to see an ugly face inches away from me. The man’s nose looks severely broken and his face is smeared with blood.

“Do you hear me, whore?” the voice says. “You understand me?”

I nod slightly, fear filling my body.

“Good. Now we know you’ve been fucking that monster, no point in denying it. What would drive a woman to do such a thing, I don’t know, and frankly, I don’t care. You’re a twisted woman, but we’ll let you live if you answer a few

questions. If you don't, we'll rape you bloody and leave you to bleed out on the sand, understood?"

I nod again, scared to open my mouth.

"Good," the man says again. "I want you to tell me how to kill this creature. This demon has killed three-quarters of our clan now. Women and children, too, you understand? You sleep with the devil, but you can redeem yourself. Tell me how to kill him, and we will ask the gods to forgive you."

Despite myself, I laugh. Madness overtaking me I cackle. The punch to my jaw barely even registers. I feel the ground come up to meet me, but still, I laugh. *Kill him! They think they can kill him?*

"See, Danin," says the man named Rorik. "She's fucking mad. Kill her and be done with it."

I look up at him suddenly, the laughter dying in my throat.

"You will all die," I say in a tone of absolute conviction. "You say he is the devil, but what are you? You kill with as little remorse as him, but you hide behind your gods and pretend it's justified. You came up against a force you cannot begin to conceive of, and you paid for it. Now he will come for me, and all of you will die."

"Kill me if you wish, but do not pretend to be better than me. You are consumed by revenge, devoid of all else that makes you human. You will suff—" Another blow to the head cuts me off, slamming my head into the ground.

I can feel myself slipping away now. I cannot take much more of this. My mother's voice echoes softly in my head. She hums a lullaby, caressing me into sleep. The men are talking again, but I can't hear their words, only my mother's soft humming. *I'm coming to see you, Mother. I'll be there soon.*

A hand grips my hair, bending my head back painfully. *I see you, Mother. I see the light. It's so beautiful, Mother. So white and pure. You didn't tell me it would be so beautiful.* Faintly, I see a dark steel blade descending toward my throat. *I'm coming.*

A bright white light reflects off the blade as it reaches my neck. Blood explodes in the night air, and my body collapses on the cold rocks. It takes me a moment to realize the blood isn't mine. *The light. It's Peliel. He's come to carry me to my death.*

The night explodes in a burst of flame all around me. I look to my side and see the man named Rorik holding onto his ruined throat as his lifeblood pools around him. Fire surrounds me, and I roll over to find its source. Peliel is standing there like the sun, a beacon of light and hope. *My savior.*

The remaining men try to fight back, but they are hopeless against Peliel's raging flames. In moments he burns them all alive, their terrible screams filling the quiet desert with the sound of death.

Peliel's arrival brings me back to reality. My reason to live has returned.

"Arie," Peliel's voice says in a fearful tone. I feel him grab hold of me, his embrace careful and comforting. He touches my wounds lightly, examining each of them in turn. Then, he lets out a heavy sigh of relief, cradling my head against his chest.

"You will live, Arie," he says. "I arrived just in time."

I turn my head to look up at him. "Yes, I will live. Thanks to you."

We lay there for a moment, comforted by each other's embrace. After a moment, Peliel begins to dab at my wounds with the shirt of a dead man, soaking up the blood and slowing the bleeding.

"You are safe now, Arie. I promise. Nobody will touch you again."

I look up into his eyes and smile.

"I know, Peliel. I know. I am safe with you. Always safe when I am here, in your arms." My words are fractured and slurred as I fight through the delirium of my head injuries, but I hardly feel the pain right now. A feeling of supreme comfort

and safety washes over me the longer I lay in Peliel's strong arms.

"I love you, Peliel," I say, lacing the words with as much emotion as I can muster.

Peliel puts a hand softly on my cheek, looking into my eyes.

"I love you, Arie. Nothing will ever hurt you again. Nothing. I would burn Protheka to the ground for you."

"I know you would," I respond. "I know." Faintly, I feel him lift me up off the ground. I'm beginning to slip out of consciousness again, but I know I'll live. The rush of air around us tells me we are flying now. I can hardly keep my eyes open, but I know he is taking me home now. *Home. I have a home.*

My last thought is of Peliel's face as the darkness closes in around me, the sound of my mother humming returning to usher me into a healing sleep.

PELIEL

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you to safety.”

She is so tiny in my grasp. I could crush her if I’m not careful, and with the events of today, I find relief in her continued existence.

I walk, rather than fly, back to the cavern. In spite of the potential danger of encountering more aggressors in the harsh desert, I would not dare risk injury to her already frail body.

My journey back through the night gives me a stoic appreciation for the lives these humans lead... for the kind of quest Arie must have undertaken to reach me. In the boundless expanse of sand, without the eyes of flight, I find myself all too easily lost within the desert.

Though my first instinct is to simply pull back, looking around me with one of my many eyes, I fight the instinct and let myself remain lost instead. With Arie held tight and resting in my protective grasp, swaddled by one of the blankets from the human camp, I brave my way through the elements, even enduring a passing sandstorm as it rushes over us.

The creatures of the desert have learned not to trifle with me, but as I look upon sandwurms and beasts alike, I realize that all of them would pose a great threat to one whose life was held together by a tether, delicately suspended above an infinite void by the threads of fate.

“You’re a miracle. You know that?”

The sentimentality feels sour in my mouth, but I fight the urge to say something vile or cynical, and smile down at her instead.

Eventually, I reach my cave, standing dozens of feet above the ground. I feel tremendous relief that Arie is still safely asleep. The bright sun is rising over the desert, and I think I see a pool of water decorating the landscape ahead.

“You’ve traveled far for somebody so powerful.”

I wheel around in place, carefully holding Arie. Before me stands a pale blonde woman with eyes of blue, a woman whose tan skin shines bright like the sun, two hardy-looking orcs, a thin and tall elf, a small child wearing desert boots, and a raven-haired woman, who faces away from the group and is silently hunched over.

My immediate instinct is to kill them all, but after the violence of today, I decide against it.

“I’ve had a long day,” I say. “Walk away, and I might let you live.”

The blonde woman speaks. She has a delicate, kind manner about her that would make me remorseful to kill her.

“We mean you no harm. We know you walk a righteous path.”

I chuckle cynically at first before my laugh becomes heartier. I think I see one of the orcs crack a smile, and it infuriates me.

“After everything I’ve done to your kind, I kind of doubt it.”

The child walks forward. He wears a mischievous smile, and as he approaches, I clutch Arie even tighter, planting my feet firmly on the ground. I stare down at him with a fiery gaze and a scowl, challenging him to get closer despite knowing he poses no threat.

“Thank you for what you did back there,” he says. “It took a lot of heart.”

I feel a smile cross my face unwillingly.

He returns to the group, and for a moment, nobody says anything at all.

Then the raven-haired woman in the back stands up, turning around. Her hair is done up in a bun, her flesh as white as porcelain. But more apparently, both of her eyes are gouged out, her lips dry from the desert heat.

“Take care of her,” she says. “She’ll need you in the coming trials.”

I puzzle over them, trying to make sense of why these individuals might band together, despite the apparent hatred their races have for each other.

But before I can interrogate them further, they walk away from me, headed in the opposite direction. The sounds of their footprints grow faint with the desert wind.

I sigh quietly, turning back toward my cavern.

“Lunatics roam everywhere, I suppose.”

And sparing no more time, I carry Arie back up to the cavern.

I should have killed them where they stood. They were encroaching on my territory.

What stayed my hand?

The thought runs through my mind over the coming weeks, as I nurse Arie back to health. The extent of her injuries isn’t immediately apparent to me, and for the first several days, she mostly rests. She says very little, and almost none of it makes any sense. Though as I hold her through her slumber, I can tell she’s at peace.

Occasionally, I see caravans encroaching on my territory, but I dare not leave my cavern. When Arie is healed, I will enact swift vengeance upon every intruder, but until then, I refuse to leave her side.

I often ponder how I came to ally myself with this realm I had always hated. The worlds of the mortals were strange and pitiful to me before she stumbled into my presence. I thought they were small insects, meant to be crushed – beings whose

existences were always inconveniences to me. I wonder if any of them are different like Arie, or if she's right in showing mercy to them.

But thankfully with time, she does come to her senses.

One morning, she jolts awake, and at first, I think she might not remember where she is.

Then her eyes fall upon mine, and she smiles.

"You saved me again," she says.

I nod.

"Do you remember what we discussed when I saved you from the camp?"

She thinks for a moment.

"It's all pretty hazy," she replies. "Did it involve a meal?"

I look upon her in puzzled frustration.

"No, I –"

How could she not remember? It was probably the most defining moment of my life, and she –

"I'm kidding," she says with a grin. "I didn't declare it in a moment of insanity. I love you."

"I love you, too," I growl. Something about it still feels like it goes against my very nature, but perhaps the more I say it, the more familiar it will become to me.

I fix her breakfast the old-fashioned way, finding a roaming worg in the desert, then cooking it over a fire. I know that I could just as easily summon cooked worg to myself, but I find solace in providing for her.

We sit around the fire, enjoying its warm embrace in the cool, damp cavern.

"You know, you kinda cheated," she tells me while tearing from the flesh of the baked worg.

"I did no such thing!"

“The idea was to do everything the ‘mortal’ way,” she says pointedly.

I try to understand what she means.

“I hunted the worg on my own two feet...”

“After you flew to find it,” she says.

“We never said flying wasn’t allowed!”

“It’s *implied*.”

“It’s a technicality.”

“And then you used your powers to start this fire,” she says, gesturing toward it.

I shake my head. My claws ball up into fists. My mind drives me toward rage. I can’t believe how ungrateful she is. I’ll crush her where she stands for her insolence...

“You’re right,” I tell her. “I genuinely don’t know how you lived like this.”

“Which is why we’re not doing this every day,” she says. “You might think it’s quaint, returning to the life of a mortal, but mortals *starve* in the desert.”

“You didn’t,” I growl.

“And I was very lucky.”

“No. You were very talented.”

She stares at the roaring fire. “Honestly, it’s all a blur for me. I can remember everything that happened, but it’s like it happened to somebody else, or a version of me in another lifetime.”

I sigh. We could go back and forth on this forever.

Her humility is one of the things I love most. She pretends to be some simple human, wandering through the desert, when she’s so much more than that.

There’s something almost divine about her.

“Did you bring down any caravans while I was out,” she asks, taking another bite. “Lay waste to any more mortals?”

I pause, looking out at the cavern entrance, and the distant wasteland.

“I didn’t.”

“And why not? Don’t tell me I’m rubbing off on you.”

She nudges me in the ribs. Fighting the urge to react, I instead smile down at her.

“Maybe someday, I’ll return to smiting our trespassers. After all, I have a new mission in keeping you safe.” She gives me a questioning glance.

“But after everything that happened, I’m just happy spending time with you in this little cavern. If anybody dares to cross our threshold, I’ll smite them where they stand, though.”

She looks out over the cavern, noticing that it’s empty except for us.

“And didn’t you used to have skull creatures in here, too? Or did I imagine that?”

Pausing to think about how to respond, I hold up a finger.

“They were hollow company,” I say. “At the end of the day, they can’t have a conversation with me. They didn’t do much of anything. They were just lovely decorations for a lonely, ageless soul.”

There’s a growing look of concern on her face that becomes more readily apparent.

“You’re changing too much,” she says. “Really, you don’t have to do all of this for me. I loved who you were.”

I shake my head with a grin.

“Arie. You showed me what my life was missing. I’m happy to have you here.”

“But?”

“But nothing. I was hiding away in this cavern, left to my own immortal devices. I took and I took, but nothing could fill the chasm in my soul.”

“Are you getting all sentimental for my sake?” she asks.

I shake off her comment.

“Protecting you has given my life purpose. You’ve given me something to live for. There were many times in all my centuries of life, when I jealously guarded my territory, that I just wanted to stop existing.”

She sighs.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I guess I don’t really get it. You’re *going* to outlive me, not that I don’t cherish every moment I have with you.”

“No,” I reply.

“No?”

I stand up from my spot in front of the fire, slouching my shoulders toward her.

“We don’t know how long you’re going to live. For all I know, you’ll live centuries beyond me.”

She looks up at me in confusion.

“We’ll rule this realm together,” I say. And I know it’s true.

ARIE

“I think that’s about it,” Peliel growls.

It’s an odd sight, seeing what amounts to a divine being twisting a metal sink into place. I never thought a pseudo-deity could be so handy, though he’s still a god to me.

The cavern has been transformed. Where once there were rocky spaces, there are now carpeted rooms, filled with decorations and living necessities. The ceiling is still covered with stalactites that occasionally drip water, but it’s a minor inconvenience.

In the kitchen, Peliel has placed a wooden table and chairs he had retrieved from one of the camps, an oven surrounded by lumber retrieved from a nearby savanna, and a salt chest for preserving food.

Our bedroom has been refashioned with stolen furniture and a wrought-iron door Peliel made himself to prevent intruders from entering our cavern. He even studied nearby settlements and used his knowledge to design a lock for it.

The bathroom was designed with a hollowed-out portion for bathing, plus a wash basin, mirror, candle, and toilet. Granted, the bath hollow doesn’t work if Peliel doesn’t use his powers to bring in water, and the toilet is above a portal that leads somewhere. We’re still not sure where it leads, but it hasn’t affected us at all, so we try not to worry about it.

“I still can’t believe you did all of this,” I say in disbelief. This project only took him a few days, and our cavern is basically complete.

He smiles at me, his four eyes lighting up.

“You helped.”

I chuckle. “All I did was hand you the tools, Peliel.”

“Yes. And you were a sublime assistant.”

I shake my head, falling forward into his arms as he stands up. “Don’t undersell yourself,” he whispers. “You were fantastic. I still don’t know how I got so lucky.”

He embraces me, and I take in his overpowering musk, gripping his muscles tightly. I’ve never noticed how firm his muscles are, but gripping his bicep, I feel what can only be natural strength, as my small hand fails to encircle his bulging brawn.

He grasps me in return, challenging my own fortitude with his brute force, and I savor the feeling of being one with him in his arms, though he nearly strangles me with his love.

Breaking the hold, he moves back toward the entrance, moving to open the door.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

He turns to face me.

“Now that we’ve finished our home, there are trespassers moving in on our territory. I thought I’d teach them a lesson, if you wouldn’t mind hanging out here for a bit.”

He surveys me, anticipating my approval.

“You’re not doing that,” I tell him.

He approaches me in confusion, a bit of his old anger coming back to the forefront.

“And why not?”

He stares down at me, intimidating me with his presence. Slowly, my arms move toward my shirt, rhythmically lifting the fabric from my torso.

There’s no way he’s ignoring this.

I smile up at him wickedly.

Fixating on my bare breasts, his mouth visibly waters.

“There’s something else we still have to do today,” I say, before moving toward the bed, patting the sheet beside me.

He is dumbfounded at first. But when he swallows his pride, he charges toward me, like a batlax on the hunt, and slams down beside me, nearly crashing it into the floor.

“Careful. You don’t want yet another construction project to deal with.”

“Shut up and undress,” he growls.

But he leaves me no means to do so. Immediately, he begins mauling my breast with his teeth and claws, and I’m taken back to when he used to hatefuck me into submission.

There is still a little too much tenderness for my liking though.

As I wriggle against the pain, trying to keep my composure, a faint smile crosses my mouth.

“Is that all you’ve got? I thought you were supposed to be a god.”

He snarls at me, before lifting his massive hand into the air and producing two metal clamps from somewhere I can’t identify.

I gulp.

He places the cold metal clamps on my nipples, fastening them hard around my areolae. I do not even attempt to resist, as I’m overtaken by the frigid sensation, my breasts now protruding thanks to a combination of the clamps and their chilly temperature.

He spans my clothed ass hard. I cannot even hallucinate anywhere else I’d rather be.

“Do I need to remind you of your place?”

His fangs shine white in the dim light of the cavern, the kitchen stove still seething. His many eyes all scowl at me.

“Talk all you want. Words are cheap.”

My breasts jiggle as I laugh. They feel more sore and tender than usual, and I have to grit my teeth to stop myself from showing the pain.

Roaring, he shakes the bed, knocking me down, before pulling my legs toward him in one movement. The force of his grab could have torn me apart.

He pulls down my pants, bringing them to my feet, before yanking them off. When he tears off my panties, the cool moisture of the cavern breathes over my waist. Mixed with the clamps, which still make me shiver slightly, I am cold and bare. The sound of them ripping still fills my ears as it reverberates against the walls.

In the shadows of the cavern, Peliel looks somehow more intimidating than I remember, despite emanating his own light. Something about him looks stranger to me.

“Toy with me, will you? I’ll teach you.”

He pushes me up to the bed, laying my head on the pillow, before stuffing himself into my mouth. It makes me nostalgic. He pumps inside of me, forcing my jaw.

My hand wants desperately to reach down, but I know that given any sign I’m actually enjoying this, he might stop his attack, depriving me of these painful feelings I crave.

It’s getting harder to breathe.

His penis bottlenecks at the base and the tip, forming a wide obstruction at its center. The farther in he goes, the more my mouth contorts around him.

“You are untrained now,” he says. “You used to be so good at sucking my cock, but now you can’t even fit half of it inside you.”

Tears form in my eyes. I try not to gag. I try to suppress my need to breathe.

But inevitably, as I start to choke on him, his invasive appendage swells in my throat, and I can feel his cock burning in my windpipe.

“I will have to break you in more later,” he says.

Through my discomfort, I can barely hear him. I try to protest, but too late. By the time my mouth is empty, he spins me around, and immediately his battering ram is at my entrance, ready to breed me.

It spasms. I can already feel how ready I am. The moisture that coats the bed is not from the cavern ceiling. Shamefully, I am embarrassed by it.

Without warning, he drives himself as far into me as my body will allow, his member straining not to break me open.

He slaps my ass, gripping it tightly as it bounces up and down on him.

No matter how many times he fucks me, I will never get used to it. I revel in the pain because I know that there is pleasure to come. I can feel my entrance clutching him and struggling to adjust to him at the same time.

I know what I want, more than anything.

He drives himself further inside me, and I can feel the air his balls displace as they slap rapidly up and down, still several inches from touching me.

The bed crashes underneath us, and before I can say anything, he holds my torso down with his claws.

“Take my seed.”

He snarls, pounding me in a fury. Just as I think I can't possibly take his entire length, he pushes my ass down, stuffing himself deep inside of me. He wants what we both want... for his cock to reach as far into me as possible so that his seed need only splash upward to create life.

I urge him to breed me.

As the dilapidated remains of the bed crash and shuffle around us, repeatedly scraping against the hard rock floor, I feel him swell deep inside of me.

His seed fills me.

He holds me down tightly.

I seize on top of him, my own screams nearly deafening me.

And he doesn't stop.

Just as his thrusts become less frequent, I feel his balls pulse against my ass, and his cock swings back into life, bringing me back up and down again.

I lose track of the number of times the pleasure overwhelms me. But I know that, for hours, we fuck in the cavern. I am covered in sweat and utterly breathless by the time he lies down beside me, holding me tight against him.

"I will fix the bed in the morning," he tells me, sighing in contentment.

"Maybe this time, we should make it out of metal? So it doesn't break so easily?"

He laughs.

"But then I wouldn't get the chance to break it, or fix it, again," he says.

I look up at the harsh cavern ceiling, its grooves nearly imperceptible from this angle. I can trace the stalactites like constellations, charting out memories from where I was when I first glimpsed them.

"Would it be so bad if we had a little one?"

He turns to me, giving me a puzzled glance but saying nothing, before turning back toward the ceiling.

"I would not mind if we did," he says. "Though I don't know if I'm capable of that. I hope I am."

His feathered wings cuddle me into the night, sheltering me from the cool air. I try to sleep but wind up watching him for several hours. His mouth twitches slightly when he snores.

I am so thankful. Wandering through the desert, utterly alone, I found Peliel. He took the pieces of me that I didn't know were broken, and through great adversity, brought them all back together.

As my eyes shut, I think I see my mother in the doorway.
She smiles at me.

And I drift off into the world of slumber, knowing that no
dream or delusion could be better than the life I now lead.

THE END.

To read more about Arie and Peliel in 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

By Anne Hale & Celeste King

Available on Amazon [here!](#)

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!](#)