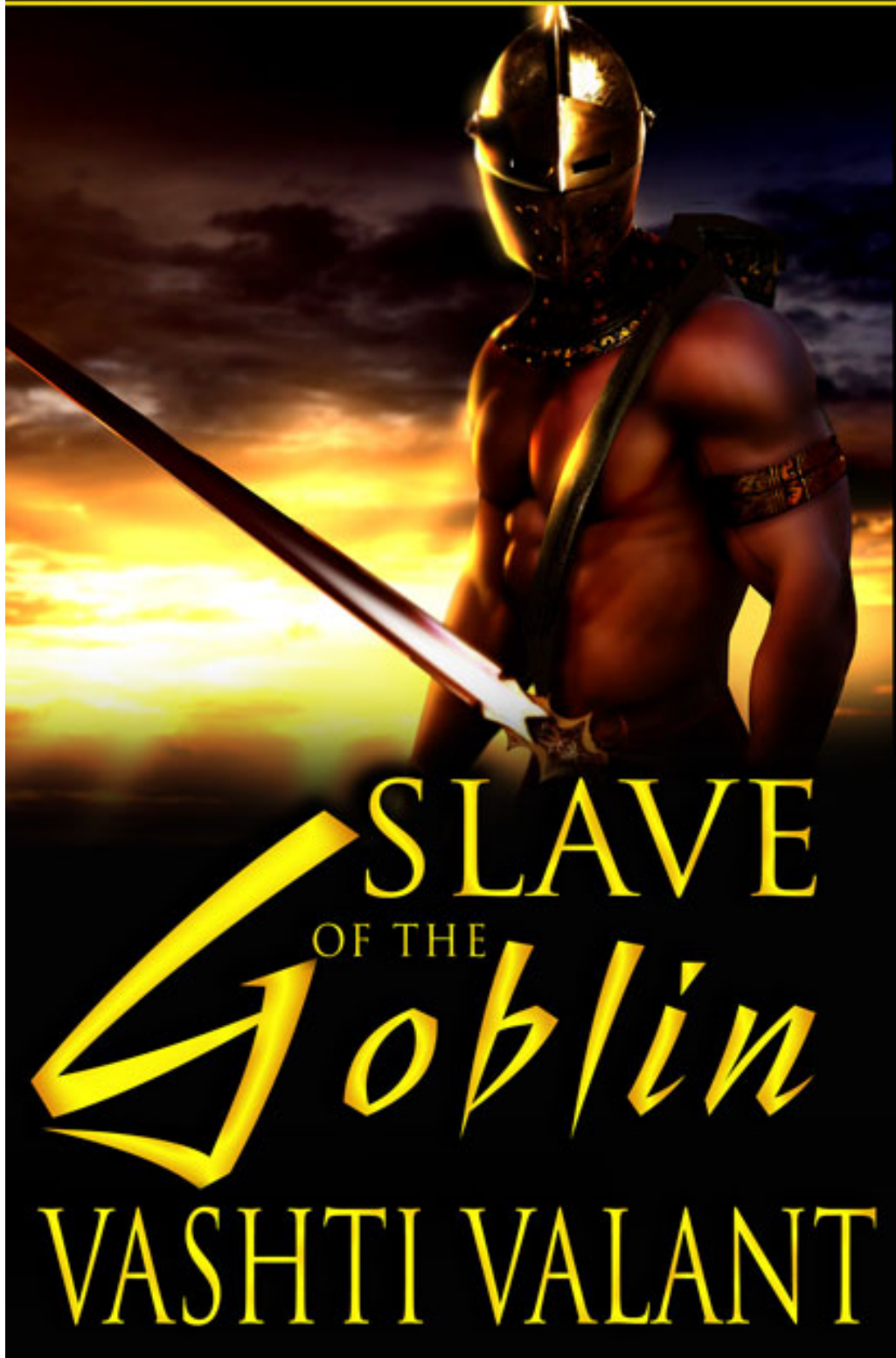


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Slave of the Goblin

ISBN # 9781419909405

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Slave of the Goblin Copyright© 2007 Vashti Valant.

Edited by Jaynie Ritchie.

Photography by Les Byerley, cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: March 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Content Advisory:

S - ENSUOUS

E - ROTIC

X - TREME

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic.

S-ensuous love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

E-rotic love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable – in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

X-treme titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

SLAVE OF THE GOBLIN

Vashti Valant

Chapter One

Concealed in a cocoon of silence on a bosky prominence overlooking the human village, Laya cocked her bow and awaited her prey. To her goblin enemies, the elf woman was known as Nemesis—or sometimes, even more crudely, as Cock Kicker, because of her habit of taking out goblin warriors while they attempted to rape their battle captives.

This time she stalked the most audacious target of all. Akraz the Terrible, the Goblin General himself.

Once their pants are down, they're all the same, Laya dismissed the slight frisson of fear she felt. *I'll take him out while he's fucking, as I did with all the other rutting goblin beasts.* She slung her bow and quiver over her shoulder. *Just so long as Hunter can marshal these human farmers to fight long enough to keep the rest of his army off my back.*

With the exception of her friend Hunter, Laya did not place much confidence in humans. Even now, she could hear their rustlings and whisperings from the other hill. Of course, her elven hearing was superb, but goblins too had excellent hearing.

"Why do they not come?" growled one of the human men. Clovis, she recalled, the leader of the village. He was a farmer trying to be a fighter.

"Quiet. Patience." That terse command came from Hunter. A human orphan raised by elves, Hunter knew as well as any elf how to be still, even if the other humans did not.

The human village in the valley below them looked peaceful enough in the gentle glow of moonlight. As the minutes built into another hour, even Laya began to fear that Akraz the Terrible was too cagey to fall into her trap. Though he was a brute of a goblin, Laya had learned the hard way not to underestimate his cunning. When it came to war, he knew his business.

Laya mulled over her failure to ignite passion with Hunter. It was not indifference, but fear that made her freeze. Or was it because she did not fear Hunter that she felt nothing in his arms? She gripped her bow all the more tightly. The Seeress had been right. Only by confronting her fear could Laya overcome it. *Tonight I will do it,* Laya promised herself. *Tonight, after I spring my trap, I will make one of the goblin brutes suffer what Taniya suffered all those years ago. That will free me from the fear – and the fascination – of them.*

Clouds drifted across the moon, darkening the valley. The goblins at last made their move.

On the other hill, Clovis gasped. *He's never seen real goblins before,* Laya reminded herself. To him, they are but stories told by his grandmother on Harvest Eve.

"I thought they would be smaller," Clovis nearly whimpered. "Little, twisted creatures, with teeth like raccoons. But these — these look just like real men!"

Some humans made the same mistake about elves, thinking that elves were diminutive, cutesy creatures like bunny rabbits, instead of the tall, slender race of demi-human they were. If Clovis harbored any such misconceptions, however, his first glimpse of Laya had cured him of it. She stood taller than Clovis himself, though her build was much more delicate and shapely. Like many elves of her tribe, her long, pale gold hair held a touch of green, while her jade green eyes sparkled with specks of gold.

Hunter must have taken pity on the farmer. Instead of shushing Clovis, he replied softly and grimly, "Look more closely. They have the size of men, but they are more than men."

As the goblins began to pour into the defenseless village, setting fires as they ran, the flames cast their silhouettes into sharp relief, revealing their powerful chests and ghastly, beastlike faces. A human wrestler or blacksmith might aspire to the muscles that every goblin male casually displayed. Not even a hyena would envy a goblin's snout.

With a shudder, Laya remembered another distinguishing feature in which goblin men were more than men. As if it were yesterday, Laya saw the tiny woodsy elven hamlet she had lived in as a girl. She saw the goblin horde overrunning it, burning and smashing, just as this army was doing now. But the scene in her mind played at double time, speeding forward to when the goblins had slaughtered all the elven warriors, and rounded up the young women, girls and the sweetest-faced boys to entertain them for the rest of the evening. Their battle chieftain had taken his first pick, then the others had squabbled over divvying up the remainder of the prisoners. One gargantuan, ugly fellow had grabbed both Laya and her best friend Taniya by the hair and dragged them off into the still smoldering ruins of a tree house to abuse them.

Both girls had just entered puberty, which, among elves was usually a long, luxurious length of decades of giggles, shy stolen kisses and gentle explorations with other young elflings.

The goblin warrior had stripped off his armor. Nothing in her sheltered life prepared Laya for the sight of his bulging thews or the huge, protruding male organ that met her eyes. For a frozen moment in time, Laya forgot all else and her first experience of desire, unasked for, unbidden, unwanted, coursed through her veins like wine. Then all was shattered, ruined, tainted. Pure terror shoved desire aside when he forced the throbbing, oversized member into Taniya's mouth. Sobbing with fear, Laya used the moment of his distraction to run away into the woods.

Later, self-loathing at her own cowardice mingled together with that image, and haunted Laya's nightmares for a century.

Even though Laya's escape allowed her to warn the other elves about the goblin attack, she never forgave herself for abandoning her friend. The elves from neighboring hamlets rallied and counterattacked the goblins, wiping out the beasts down to the last

man. Many of the elven prisoners had been rescued. But not Taniya. She had been so brutally used they found her dead, blood between her legs, bruises mottling her breasts and thighs.

Like many of the survivors of that night, Laya became a dedicated goblin-hunter. She took a new name, Nemesis, and swore an oath of celibacy until the distant, unknown day her self-imposed task could be completed. It was easy to foreswear intimate relations and other distractions that a warrior could not afford. For her, sex became twisted by what the goblins had done to Taniya. Male had become a hyper-masculine but unspeakably brutal goblin more-than-man.

Only the Seeress had seen the truth. That for one moment, after the goblin male had removed his clothing and stood there, gloriously muscular and stupendously endowed, but before he had ruined it by his cruelty and force, Laya had been fascinated by the sight of him. She had been aroused.

Oh the shame of it.

But the Seeress had told her what to do. Laya had to turn the tables. She had to take control.

The goblins had looted and burned most of the village's small cottages by now. The brutal beast-men grabbed the women out of the houses and forced them all together in the cobblestone clearing by the well at the center of the burning village. There were no human men or children among them. The women wailed in fear.

"Those bastards are about to dishonor the women," Clovis whispered too loudly, his desperation growing. "We must move now!"

Hunter kept the human leader in check, but Laya felt a tug at her heart. This was the hardest part of the plan, using innocent women as bait. Even if they had volunteered, Laya knew they had not really understood the danger. However, nothing else would distract the goblins long enough to close the trap.

Officially, the purpose of her trap was to kill the goblins' wildest leader, the Goblin General, Akraz the Terrible. He had risen rapidly in the ranks of the dark army and the elves knew him to be the most dangerous of all Zathstragomal's evil minions. In addition to killing Akraz, Laya had her own plans to take a more personal captive, but she shared her private scheme with no one. Except for the Seeress, none of the other elves would approve of fighting the goblins with a taste of their own fare.

On cue, a new figure emerged from the billowing smoke and flame. Laya drew in a sharp breath. She had seen plenty of goblins before, and she had crossed wits with Akraz the Terrible before, but this was her first glimpse of the goblin commander in the flesh.

As befit so notorious a war leader, he stood out even amongst his burly troops. There was something in his bearing that bespoke his superiority to all those around him. It was not merely his height, though he was taller than most men. It was not merely the amazing physique of his muscular chest, though his pecs and biceps embodied a perfection of male anatomy more befitting a seraph than a minion of

darkness. It was the purpose in his stride, the sharp, decisive tilt of his jaw, the utter confidence in his gestures of command. It helped, Laya reminded herself wryly, that she could not see the bestial features of his goblin face, for they were covered completely by the faceplate of his horned iron helmet. Without having to stare into the typical misshapen leering mug of a goblin, she could almost imagine Akraz to be one of the mighty demigod heroes out of the mists of the First Age, rather than her sworn enemy. He may have looked to be half god, but it would be closer to call him half beast.

Everything about him was superbly, excessively, terrifyingly masculine. Laya felt her loins tighten and suddenly she knew.

He was the one. If she could conquer Akraz the Terrible, she could conquer any goblin, and any male. She need never again feel the fear, self-loathing and shame she felt on that night of Taniya's death. She would prove to Akraz and thus to herself that his kind held no more power over her.

She smiled tightly. Look at him. He expects to taste the fruits of his easy victory, to have first pick of the human village women to use at his leisure. Laya knew something of his taste in captives from rumors of his conduct after previous raids. Akraz the Terrible always chose the youngest, most fragile of the nubile girls for his own pleasure—girls the age Taniya and Laya were that awful night so long ago. While some girls who were captured and raped by goblins were later sold back to their families for a ransom, the girls that Akraz chose disappeared forever. No doubt after he had his way with them, he found it easiest to simply discard them permanently.

Little does he know his worst enemy is about to turn him into a toy to be used and enjoyed...and then discarded. Permanently.

* * * * *

Akraz the Terrible strode into the burning village, sniffing for his enemy. He ignored the stench of smoke, of blood, of fear and lust. He ignored the other goblins who were busy hunting for booty and rounding up human women for "fun" throughout the rest of the night. Akraz wanted to know why the real enemy had not shown up—the elves. The leader of the elven strike force, known to Akraz only by the battle moniker "Nemesis", had proven sly and relentless in tracking down and slaughtering the goblin bands who strove to overrun the land of Chavana.

This victory was too easy, too rewarding. Why had the human village been empty of men? Why had the elves not come to the aid of their human allies when the two groups had worked so blastedly hand in hand before?

Akraz suspected a trap.

It didn't matter that Akraz had advised against the raid. Even a high-ranking goblin such as Akraz, who as general, commanded the entire goblin army, was treated with no more respect than the lowest grunt by the master of them all, the ambitious and evil wizard, Zathstragomal the Malicious. After all, Akraz was no more than a slave. Like all the other goblins in Zathstragomal's army, Akraz had been sold by his own people as a

child to the wizard. Akraz wore Zathstragomal's mark burned into his palm by Zathstragomal's magic fire from deep in the pit of Mount Murk.

The troops began to hoot at the huddle of female captives in the center of the village. The goblins' lust would not be contained much longer. The grunts, all slaves, received no pay for risking their lives in battle year after year, except what they could siphon from the general loot pile—and the payoff of having their way with captives. Indulging in torture and rape helped them forget their own miserable lives for a few hours. Even if Akraz could have prevented them from abusing the captives, Zathstragomal would not allow it. The wizard enjoyed spreading terror throughout the countryside through the unspeakable atrocities of his troops. Only villages which surrendered to Zathstragomal without a fight were to be spared pillage and rapine.

Still frowning behind his helmet, Akraz reluctantly went to inspect the captives. He had one prerogative. He might choose the largest number of the captives for his own, to do with as he pleased. He surveyed the women and girls, noting that most of them were more mature than usual, though there were no truly elderly matrons among them.

First, no men. Now no children, no elders. What kind of village was this? His frown deepened. Only half his mind attended to the task of pointing out five of the youngest women to be set aside for him. The rest of his mind worried at the knot of the trap he suspected. When would it spring? Who would spring it? How could he force his troops away from their lust-induced stupor back into battle readiness?

He scanned the wooded hills that overlooked the village on three sides. A hundred human men could be hiding there, and he would not know. A thousand elves, with their better woodcraft, could be hiding in the same woods. Blast and blood!

His palm burned. He held it before him. The face of his master and owner, Zathstragomal the Malicious, appeared in his hand.

"Report!" snapped Zathstragomal.

"Victory, Master," replied Akraz. Zathstragomal did not react well to bad news. Nonetheless, some stubborn pride goaded Akraz into adding, "But I believe it to be a trap. I think we should—"

Burning pain shot through Akraz's hand, up his arm, sinking vipers of agony all the way down the rest of his body.

"Did I ask you to think, you lumbering ox? Goblins don't have brains. Your kind of scum exist to do as I bid!"

"Forgive me, Master," Akraz said through grated teeth.

The pain ceased. Zathstragomal smiled magnanimously.

"I forgive you. Go enjoy your victory. I want to hear about the villagers' misery in the morning. It will serve as warning to those other human mudscrappers who think the elves will help them deny me the Crown of Chavana. On the morrow, I shall have new instructions for you."

Akraz bowed his head. As always, hate lay hard and hidden like a stone in his gut, hate he did not dare show.

"Yes, Master. You are generous, Master."

The illusion in his palm faded; his hand was his own again. His mood foul, Akraz shouted at his soldiers to bring him his women. At least Zathstragomal would not interfere with what Akraz had planned for them.

* * * * *

Once Akraz the Terrible picked out five of the captives for his own, and began to move off to the privacy of a ruined house to enjoy them, Laya became the shadow that followed him.

She knew Hunter would be readying his ram horn to give the humans their signal as well.

* * * * *

Akraz took the cowering women out of sight of the others. He looked sadly at their pitiful, tear-streaked faces, and thought of his sister.

"This is the deal," he said. Even to his own ears, his voice sounded harsh. "Run. I will follow. If I catch you, I will rape you, then beat you, then eat your guts one loop at a time while you are still alive to watch. If, however, you run for ten days and I haven't caught you, then you will be free as long as you never admit that you met me. If I hear that you yet live to boast that you escaped Akraz the Terrible, I will hunt you down and kill everyone you know and then you. Do you understand?"

They stared at him in stark terror.

"Run!" he barked.

They scattered like chickens.

He didn't follow. He never did. He always gave his captives the same ultimatum, and thus far, he assumed that all of them had been sufficiently frightened of his threats that after their escape they had told no one of how they escaped or whom they had escaped. One day, he knew, his mercy might backfire on him. If Zathstragomal were to find out that his favored commander allowed unarmed women to simply run away, the wizard's scorn and wrath would be painful to endure. It was a chance Akraz was willing to take. He had to protect his reputation for ruthlessness in order to command the most ruthless troops in Chavana. But though he might be a slave and a warlord and a monster, he still strove in the secret areas of his life to maintain his own sense of dignity and honor.

As long as no one ever found out, he would be safe. Certainly, it would never cross the minds of either his master or most of his subordinates that Akraz hid a secret sentimental side. In battle, he neither gave quarter nor asked it. Against armed opponents, Akraz was as ruthless in fact as in the nightmares of his foes.

For instance, he thought grimly, let him but once meet the elven warrior Nemesis, and what a great reckoning there would be. Nemesis had handed Akraz some humiliating defeats in the past, and Akraz burned to avenge them.

As if summoned out of the smoking darkness by his thoughts, a ram's horn pierced the night. Instantly, Akraz knew the trap was sprung, and that Nemesis was behind it.

With a roar of rage, he drew the mighty iron sword across his back and charged back toward the village, and the sudden sounds of battle.

* * * * *

Something was wrong. Akraz had sensed the trap before it had been sprung, and hadn't dallied with his female captives after all.

No matter. The Goblin General stormed right into the range of Laya's arrows. One, two, three, four arrows left her bow. So perfect was her aim and timing that she hit him exactly as she planned, in each arm and each leg. That should prove enough to incapacitate him without killing him in order for her to capture him.

He tumbled to the ground. Satisfied, Laya ventured closer.

Akraz the Terrible leaped up. His fall had been staged, to lure her near. He shrugged off the prick of arrows that spiked into his armor as if they were of no consequence and commenced to bear down on Laya with great two-fisted swipes of his immense sword.

Fortunately, this time Laya had not underestimated her enemy. She had anticipated both his stamina and strength. Pulling the arrow the Seeress had given her, Sleepmaker, from her quiver, Laya notched her bow and let it fly. The golden arrow soared true, and hit Akraz right in the heart, piercing his armor as the Seeress had promised. The masked goblin lord staggered toward Laya in disbelief.

Though she expected him to collapse any moment, she drew her own sword and faced off with him.

What a sight they must have made, circling one another in the smoldering ruins. He was a figure of towering darkness, his steel and black leather armor further blackened by smoke and ash, his face masked with an iron-horned helm. She was a slender figure in shining leaf-shaped plates of gold, her face also hidden behind a masked helmet of matching gold filigree. She wore the green and white sigil of the True King of Chavana on a snowy white surcoat over her armor, whilst his armor was graven with the twisted runes of the dark wizard Zathstragomal.

"You must be Nemesis," he gasped. His voice, even rough with pain, was deep and powerful. Laya was amazed he could still stand, never mind talk.

"I am," she said.

"How fitting we should die by each other's hands!" he cried, lifting his sword. It had twice the reach of her own slim blade. Her blade rose to meet his, and deflected his

blow, but only barely. Laya was an unparalleled archer, and an excellent swordswoman, but she knew that in hand-to-hand combat, he outmatched her.

Oh gods. Despite everything, she had underestimated him. Though he bristled with her arrows, including the Seeress' enchanted arrow, he harried her to exhaustion with relentless strokes of his sword. The stubborn bastard obviously refused to collapse until he killed her.

Finally, she tripped and stumbled to her knees. Her helm of golden leaf tumbled to the ground, revealing her heart-shaped face and braided hair of palest gold.

"By the Dark God!" He stopped short the killing stroke that would have decapitated her and just stared.

"You – Nemesis – you're a –"

Then Akraz the Terrible, servitor of the evil wizard, bane of elves and men, commanding general of the goblin horde, collapsed backward with a resounding thud.

* * * * *

Hours later, Laya retired to the private tent she had sequestered away from the rest of the camp. She helped her companions who were wounded, gone to the aid of the human villagers as they finished routing the goblins, most of whom had fled like cowards when their commander disappeared, and spent time soothing the frightened women who had served as bait for the successful trap.

She had held aloft his sword to the gathered elven and human warriors, and announced in ringing tones, "Akraz the Terrible is dead!" She drank in their cheers.

However, Akraz the Terrible was not dead. The enchanted arrow, Sleepmaker, had only cast him into a deep and dreamless state that mimicked death. At Laya's request, several human males had helped her carry the "corpse" to the place of her choosing, an isolated grotto dominated by a huge, twisted tree. She had them place his body on a flat rock at the base of the tree. If they thought her request strange, they did not question the mysterious elf woman who had led them to victory.

After the humans departed, Laya addressed the tree in the Ancient Words of Making, the language of gods and wizards. "Friend! Awaken from your sleep and come to my aid. Bind my enemy in your branches!"

The tree groaned into animation. The tangle of branches and roots came alive and wrapped around Akraz's arms and legs. Soon the rope of living wood pinned him spread-eagle on the rock.

She would have to wrestle alone with removing his helm and his armor and his clothing. She wanted him to awaken naked, bound and helpless. However, she was exhausted, and as she stared at his ugly masked helmet and filthy armor, she wondered if she could go through with her plan after all. No matter how splendid his body, he still had the heart of a monster. And, like all goblins, he would have a bestial face, with bulging purple eyes, an over-wide fleshy mouth full of toothy fangs, rough skin

covered with warts and crags, and on top of all that, a misshapen lump where a nose should be. Laya did not know why all goblins were ugly, but they were, and the more powerful they were, the uglier they were.

Perhaps she should remove all his clothing except his helmet. After all, he was to be her sex toy, she might take him any way she pleased. What did she need his face for? The thought made her giggle.

With a sigh, she bent over her unconscious captive and removed the helmet masking his face.

Oh. Gods of the Five Lands.

He was beautiful.

This, this goblin, this creature of darkness, had a face as fair and symmetrical and smooth as any elf lord or human prince. His skin was quite pale, his hair quite dark, his features quite perfect. It was more than unexpected, it was unfathomable.

Perhaps the rest of him was ugly?

His armor certainly stank. The metal plates reeked of foul magicks, while the leather pieces were wet with blood. Even his undertunic had been soaked with blood and dirt and sweat. Once all of that was pulled away, though, the body beneath rippled with muscle and masculine perfection.

And as for the essentials...Laya drew in a little breath. The attacker who had impressed her in her youth, before forever dousing her self-confidence in her sexual choices by his brutality, had nothing on Akraz the Terrible. The sword of Akraz was mighty indeed.

Indeed.

Laya was so busy staring at his nether region that she paid no attention to the fluttering of his eyelashes.

Too late, she felt a fist encircle her slim wrist in an angry clench.

"What in the name of the Thirteen Hells have you done to me, elf wench?"

Chapter Two

Akraz awoke naked, bound and in pain. He reacted out of instinct, grabbing the hand of the captor who bent over him, only to realize that he could not move any farther than that because he had been bound flat on his back. His head swam, which suggested he had been drugged or spelled, or both.

Through the haze of his confusion, though, he clearly recognized the elf beauty. Nemesis. His nemesis.

She looked at him now with the same startled green eyes that she had frozen him with during the heat of their duel. Her helmet had fallen away, revealing the most beautiful, ethereal face he had ever seen in his life. A halo of gold hair surrounded that pale face and two of the largest, deepest green eyes imaginable. There had been no fear in those eyes, only resignation along with the knowledge that he was about to kill her.

Only, he hadn't been able to kill her. And now he had to pay the price for his folly, for now she had taken him back to her people as a prisoner. Elves could be kind or cold to strangers outside their own kind, with one exception. Akraz had never heard of any elf being kind to a goblin. For that matter, no one was ever kind to a goblin. With good reason – goblins were never kind to others. That was simply the way of things.

The elf maid glanced at where he had grasped her wrist. His own hand strained at the edge of a coiled branch to reach hers.

"Clearly," she said, "The branches are not tight enough."

She spoke to the tree in an ancient, musical tongue. The branches coiled tighter around his wrists, yanking his hands further over his head. However, as Akraz had no intention of releasing his grip, her arm was pulled along with his.

She glared at him. "Release my wrist."

He half snarled, half grinned in response. He knew that with the monstrous, boar-like visage the wizard had endowed him with, the expression would look even more demonic.

She spoke another word. This time, a woody tendril tightened around his neck, choking him. He let go of her hand. Satisfied that she had made her point, she spoke and loosed the neck coil again. However, he noticed with his only speck of triumph in an otherwise humiliating situation, that she took care to step back several steps once she was free. Good. Let her learn she must fear him even if he was a chained captive.

"So. You are awake already," she said unnecessarily.

Elf and goblin regarded one another. He had the better view, he knew. Looking down at him, she must see the monster that Zathstragomal had made of him. Looking up at her, Akraz could see the template for the feminine form as the gods no doubt

intended it to be in the Pure Land Yet To Come. She had taken off her golden armor and unbound her hair. She wore only a yellow tunic, tied up beneath her breasts and at her waist and hips with a gold cord. Her flowing hair, he saw, held exotic tints of pale green among the pale corn silk blonde strands. She still had a smudge of ash on her cheek from the battle, the only sign of her potent warrior side. The reminder that she was as dangerous as she was beautiful should have chilled him. Instead, he found it adorable. Though she might soon make his life a living hell, for now he chose to enjoy simply grazing her beauty with his glance. It was the closest a darksome thing such as he would ever come to paradise.

Yet reality intruded on his ruminations. If the elf warrior maiden kept him alive, she must have a good reason, and not one he would enjoy, Akraz suspected. But what could it be? They would not waste time trying to ransom him. They must know that Zathstragomal would never bother to salvage a warrior who had failed him by allowing himself to be captured.

Information. They must want some information from him about Zathstragomal's plans for the war. They would torture him endlessly, never believing that Akraz would gladly sell out his hated Master, but knew literally nothing about the war strategy except what Zathstragomal commanded him to do day by day and battle by battle.

The unpleasant thought of Zathstragomal made Akraz think of the brand in his palm. Through the mark, the wizard knew Akraz's whereabouts at all times. It was one reason Akraz could not simply flee his servitude. Zathstragomal must also be watching him now.

"My Master will know where I am," Akraz said boldly, for the sake of the unseen ears of the wizard. "He is all powerful, and all knowing. He will soon crush your pathetic band of elf and human worms and become the rightful ruler of this land."

The elf maiden's lip curled in a knowing smile. She reached out and turned over Akraz's left hand, displaying the mark.

"If you mean that he can trace you through his magic in order to rescue you, abandon that hope," she said. "My magic has already cancelled out his spell. You have no possibility of escape, goblin. Two thousand elven warriors surround this grotto, out of sight behind the trees, with a third aiming their arrows at this tent at all times. Even should you escape your bindings, you cannot escape the archers."

She leaned forward to gloat in his ear, "Your beloved Master thinks you dead, as do your own troops."

His heart began to pound. Zathstragomal thought him dead?

I am free! he thought for one insane wild breath of joy. Then he had to laugh at himself, as he yanked uselessly at the helix of wood wrapped around his arms and legs. He was far from free.

"You belong to me, now," said the elf maiden, echoing his thoughts. "Just as you would take a slave from your battle captives, so I have taken you as my slave. You will be my toy, my pet. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mistress," he said. Hatred flared to life inside him, a familiar friend.

A frown formed a cute wrinkle on her brow. "I do not wish to be called that."

"Then how do you wish to be addressed by your slaves?" Akraz could not quite keep the irony out of his voice. He hoped that she would not notice and have him whipped for it. He should be careful until he knew what kind of tortures and punishments the elves used to keep their slaves in line.

She noticed his irony; her frown deepened. However, she did not punish him, or even comment on it. Instead, she said mildly, "You may call me Laya. That is my real name."

He had to look away from her intense green eyes. Initially, he had congratulated himself on his good fortune in his exchange of masters. It would only be a matter of time before he escaped his bonds and slit her pretty throat. Now he wasn't sure. She would be harder to deal with than Zathstragomal. She seemed to do something to make his gut churn that made him feel defenseless in a way that Zathstragomal, even on his most vicious days, had never managed.

Laya. Even her name was impossibly beautiful. How could he mangle it with his grotesque, deformed tongue without instantly exposing to her all the impossible dreams she aroused in him? He groaned with the insane urgency of his yearning for her, praying to whatever god would listen that she would not notice the physical symptoms of his distress.

* * * * *

The prisoner groaned in pain, reminding Laya that he had been wounded in the battle. Though he was her enemy and now her slave, she could not bring herself to deliberately let him suffer.

"I will tend to your wounds," she said to him. He refused to look at her. The tension in his glorious body was palpable. He hated her, but what else had she expected?

Akraz's stone bed rested on one side of the massive tree, while on the other, out of his sight, Laya kept her sleeping mat and personal effects. She circled the tree, to rummage through her rucksacks for the jars of medicinal salves the elves used to heal. She returned with these to Akraz.

Before she began, she ascertained that he was securely bound to the rock slab. She did not want to be taken by surprise again, as she had been when he'd awakened so much sooner than she expected.

Akraz turned to watch her again. Something disturbing lurked in his gaze, as if he saw her as naked as she saw him. It unsettled her. *It's just a symptom of the fear of males that you brought him here to help overcome*, she told herself.

"What is that?" he asked, eying the jars. "Poison? Acid? Scorpions, perhaps."

"Don't be absurd," said Laya. "What would I want with scorpions? Nasty little things. I told you, it's a salve for your wounds. It will reduce the time it takes your wounds to heal from weeks to mere hours. The magic of my people is in such lotions."

"Why bother to heal me, when you only intend to torture me afterward?" he asked. From his casual tone, one would have thought he had only a passing curiosity in the matter.

"I have no intention of torturing you," Laya said. She scooped out a dollop of cold cream onto her fingers and began to sooth it into the puncture wounds where the arrows had bruised him through his armor. The magic arrow that she hit him with had left no physical mark, as that was part of its enchantment.

"Ach," he gasped in response to the cream.

"Does it sting?" Laya asked. Elven cures were not supposed to sting, but she did not know what effect they might have on a goblin.

"It...feels strange," he said. "Unlike anything."

Laya didn't know what to say to that. She continued with her ministrations. He squirmed beneath her fingers. When she reached down to stroke a bruise along his inner thigh, his already impressive cock began to swell. She paused. In an effort to avoid staring at the fascinating organ, she inadvertently met his gaze. His inexcusably handsome face was flushed, with what emotion she could not tell.

"You said I was to be your pet, your toy," he said in a low, rough voice. "Did you not mean that you wished to force information from me, or did you only want to degrade me for the amusement of your elf friends? The great goblin general brought to his knees and made to beg and grovel?"

Her heart hammered in her chest. Was she as terrible as all that? Was she as horrid as any goblin had ever been to a helpless captive?

Yes, she reminded herself. She must be. She must treat him exactly as he would have treated her had their positions been reversed. She must mete out to him exactly the sort of sexual humiliation which he had forced upon all the captive women he had taken after his every successful raid.

"Perhaps you will find it degrading," she said, forcing herself to speak callously. "But it is no different than what you have done to hundreds of helpless women. Perhaps you will not enjoy it so much when you are in the position of the captive."

Steeling her determination, Laya reached out and took his cock in her hand.

He drew in a sharp breath. His member instantly came alive in her hand, throbbing and growing in her palm. Tentatively, she began to stroke up and down, which elicited a further hardening and reddening of the excited cock. Akraz groaned. He began to strain against his chains, rattling the whole bed with his effort.

Frightened by her own audacity, Laya released the cock. It bobbed after her, as if hungry for her to renew her touch.

Somehow he had wrenched the twines enough to lift himself up onto his elbows. "Is that what you meant? You mean to use me for sex?"

He sounded incredulous. For some ridiculous reason, his disbelief affronted Laya. Did she not seem dominating enough, or sensuous enough to him to be the kind of woman who could force a man to be her sexual plaything?

"I do," she said, trying not to sound rebellious or uncertain. "You have no choice in the matter."

His eyes narrowed. "Will I have to service just you, or will others, perhaps some of the elf lords, see fit to use me as they wish as well?"

"Just me." Laya was scandalized by his suggestion at first. Then she tried to imagine gentle Lathaniel trying to use the magnificent hunk of a goblin as a sex toy, and the absurd impossibility of it made her smile. "Unless," she concluded loftily, just to keep the goblin in his place, "You displease me. In that case, I might share you with my minions as a punishment."

Akraz's lips tightened. He took her threat much more seriously than she had issued it, which made Laya recall that among goblins, such a threat would not have been a joke, but an all too real possibility. He judged elves by the same vile standards.

However, if he felt any fear, he did not show it. Instead, he ran his tongue salaciously around the edge of his mouth and leered at her.

"If that is all you want of me, there is no need to tie me up, Mistress."

"Laya."

"Laya." He laved his tongue around her name as though it were a luscious fruit in his mouth. "I will gladly pleasure you according to your every whim, without chains or whips." His smile grew ironic. "Unless, of course, whips and chains are your tastes."

"No..."

He raised a skeptical brow, glancing at his own bindings. "Then untie me. I will do no more to you than what you want anyway."

"No," she said, more firmly. "I do not trust you, goblin. You will pleasure me on my terms. I won't let you hurt me."

"Is that what you fear? Or what you desire?"

Laya refused to answer. She finished applying the salve to his body, rubbing the cream over his smooth, hard skin. When she finished, and knew that his wounds would no longer be paining him, she began to caress the rest of his body. She ran her hands up and down his broad chest and powerful thighs. His breath came quicker under her brushing fingers. His cock remained upright, shiny and pulsing with need.

Laya wondered what it would taste like in her mouth. Would she hate it, as poor Taniya had? Or, if she took it of her own accord, with herself in control and not the naked brute shackled before her, would she enjoy the exotic feel of that male essence in her mouth?

She bent over his cock, her breath hot against the head, yet not touching it. A drop of liquid emerged, glistening, from the head of the cock, like a drop of dew on a dawn flower.

“Dark God of the Thirteen Hells!” cursed Akraz, thrashing in his bonds.

Laya jumped back guiltily. He stared at her with such fervent emotion in his dark eyes, she suddenly knew she could not go through with it. She couldn’t take him against his will, with him staring at her with such wordless hate.

What a mess. What could she do with him now? She could not simply let him go to wreak vengeance upon her and her people. Nor could she kill him in cold blood.

“Akraz,” she began, but stopped. He would throw any attempt at apology back in her face. She bit her lip. Without his armor and his weapons, especially with that all too fair face, he looked like an ordinary man, only more man than most. A part of her longed to unbind him as he had requested, and let their union be one of mutual desire.

That, however, was a dangerous line of thought. She must never forget what he was, despite his handsome face.

This line of musing made her curious, and helped her wrench her mind from the thought of taking his cock into her mouth. She moved forward enough to stroke his cheek with her finger.

“There is something I must know,” she said.

* * * * *

Ah, here it comes, he thought. The request for information I cannot provide, followed by days or weeks or years of torture.

The real reason she captured me.

During her sweet torment of his body and cock, he had almost begged her to torture him with whips and brands instead. Her innocent caresses had driven him to the brink of desperate desire.

Now that she had stopped, leaving him in an agony of unfulfilled arousal, he cynically decided she could not actually want him for that purpose. A woman such as Laya could have any man, human or elf, that she wanted, on his feet, on his knees, in chains or in armor, however she wanted. Men would die for her just to receive one smile from those pink lips, never mind the heat of her mouth on their cocks.

If their positions were reversed – if she were my slave – what a lot of uses she could be put to by a goblin willing to exploit her. Only, Akraz knew that he could never bear to see those pretty green eyes filled with pain. He knew of no other way to be with a woman. Goblin women held no appeal for him, and no other woman, certainly no elf or even human, would ever willingly surrender herself to a goblin.

She herself had said it. I do not trust you, goblin. I won’t let you hurt me.

“Your face,” Laya said. As she spoke, she traced his jaw with her finger. Her feathery touch sent sensations straight to his groin.

"A monster's face," he said bitterly. "I know. Don't you think I know I am ugly?"

Laya laughed in surprise. Akraz began to hate her, finally. He could not help what he was. Her laughter at his ugliness struck him as crueler than all of Zathstragomal's most sadistic torments.

"Is that what passes for ugliness among goblins?" Laya asked in amusement. "I suppose to goblins, what we consider beautiful is considered ugly and vice versa. How very strange! I have to admit, I always wondered how goblin men could stand the sight of goblin women, but now I realize how parochial that was of me. To you, I suppose that warts and fangs are quite the thing. I am considered passing fair by my own people, but by goblin standards, that must make me an eyesore!" She laughed again. "Don't worry, I think I understand now."

Her words baffled him. After all, if goblins found elven beauty so offensive, why would they prize elven slave girls as booty above all others?

"Mistress, I don't think you do understand," Akraz said stiffly. "Goblins are not toads, even if we resemble them. We have the same standards of beauty as the other demi-human races. However, we do not have the same luxury to indulge in beauty as other races. We have found ugliness to be more useful."

"Are you saying you chose to be ugly?" she asked in disbelief.

"Goblins choose very little about our own lives," Akraz said. "In my case, for instance, I was given my face by my Master—I beg your forgiveness, Mistress, my former Master—when I was six or seven, and first sold to him. He cast me into the magic fire of his forge, which burnt away my true face and gave me the animal-like face and fangs that I bear today. Later, after I had risen in the ranks of his army, it was with a brand heated in that same forge that he branded my palm with his ensorcelled mark."

"But that's barbarous!" Laya said. "Why? Why would anyone do such a thing?"

"To make us more fearsome to our enemies, I suppose," Akraz said coldly. "Or perhaps to set us apart from those who serve the Light, which is why our womenfolk are also forcibly disfigured. After all," he paused and stared at her with a strange, powerful hunger, "Elves and goblins once belonged to one people. In the First Age, the Dark God captured many elves, took them away to Mount Murk and burned them with his mark in the forge of the fires beneath the mountain. Thereafter, they served him and the cause of Darkness, while your ancestors remained in the woods and dells of the fair world above, serving the Gods of Light."

"Yes, I remember the ancient tales," Laya said in a subdued voice. "But I did not realize it was still being done, even today. I did not realize that goblins were each born fair and then marred one by one."

Akraz shrugged. He had long ago learned that there were injustices which could not be righted, only endured.

"Akraz," Laya said softly. "Your face is not monstrous. I believe that the same magic I used to block your Master from tracking you through the mark on your palm must have reversed whatever the fires of Mount Murk did to you."

Akraz went very still. "What?"

"I will show you," she said. She went to the other side of the tree, which apparently demarcated her private section of the grotto. She returned after a moment with a hand mirror, beautifully tooled in mother of pearl after the elvish design.

She hesitated, then with a decisive nod to herself, she adjusted the branches of the tree twisted around Akraz's limbs. This enabled him to stretch and sit up. He regarded her warily.

"Look." She held the mirror before Akraz. "Behold your true face, your face as it was meant to be before Zathstragomal stole it from you."

He stared into the face of a stranger. A handsome stranger. Weird emotion roiled inside him. A man so fair of face could easily be the kind of noble hero of the Light that a woman like Laya could love.

Impossible. He knew exactly what he was and what he had done in his miserable existence, if only just to survive. He was no hero from an epic. He was the villain.

With an animal growl, Akraz smashed the mirror out of Laya's hand. Before she could stop him, he grabbed her and pinned her arms behind her back. He leaned his face close to hers and breathed down her neck.

"That is not my true face," he hissed. "My true face is that of a monster, because that is what matches my heart. You have forgotten that to your own peril, my pretty elf. Now I could snap your neck with one twist of my hands. Tell this accursed tree to release me, and I may let you live."

She squirmed ineffectively against him, rubbing against his loins and exciting his already stiff member. He could feel her heart patter wildly against his chest, but her words were brazen.

"You will never leave this grotto alive. It does not matter what you do to me."

Akraz thought of the archers waiting out of sight. Beyond that, there was only a return to enslavement to the dark wizard and his dark god. He knew she was right. There was no escape for him. He had been doomed from the day of his birth, condemned to serve evil as a monster.

Why continue to fight fate? Why bother trying to be noble when he knew the truth? Why not just take what he wanted, for the few bittersweet moments when he had it in his arms?

"In that case," said Akraz with a wide leering grin, "I will do exactly as I please to you, and finish what you started doing to me."

Chapter Three

All of Laya's nightmares came to life. The goblin she had meant to control had somehow wrested control over her. Though he was still entangled with coiled branches, he pressed her back against the very stone slab she had designated to hold him. His strength overpowered her. With ease, he kept both her hands pinned over her head with just one of his hands. His other hand roved over her body. He ripped open her tunic to let her breasts tumble into his groping hand.

"Let me go!" Her struggles only caused her breasts to jiggle against his hand. He chuckled throatily, and continued to tear at her tunic.

"You had your chance to see me without my armor, I think I deserve the same." He tossed away the last shred of clothing. "Let me look at you, pretty little Mistress."

He kicked apart her legs and held them open with his own. The stone slab bit into Laya's buttocks, a slight cold pressure. She was bent backwards against the rock, her breasts thrust upward and her arms trapped over her head. Every shameful part of her was thrust out, spread wide and exposed. Her struggle to free herself only undulated her body before him, exposing her pink and private parts all the further. Laya felt her face flame under his intense perusal, his soft, mocking chuckles.

His hand stroked her face, as she had earlier caressed his. "I can touch you anywhere I like, Laya. Where shall I begin? Shall I pinch your breasts between my fingers?"

His hand hovered over her breasts teasingly. She made another motion, meant to be a negation, yet the movement somehow brought her breasts heaving closer to his large, warm hand.

"Yes, Mistress," he taunted. He pinched her nipple lightly between his thumb and forefinger. He rubbed and rolled the nipple between his fingers.

"No," Laya whimpered, hating the weakness in her voice. "Please."

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" he demanded. "Didn't you give me this handsome face so you could enjoy the ruthlessness of a monster with the face of an angel? You are no different than Zathstragomal; the details are different, but the motive is the same. You want to use the evil in me, not the good."

"No," she protested, but then he lowered his mouth to her other nipple and all rational thought fled her mind.

Despite his bitter indictment, he sucked gently on her breast. His tongue flickered across her left nipple, while his other hand rubbed the right, and she felt the delicious sensation tingling not just in her breasts but between her legs. She writhed in his arms,

still pinned and helpless to stop him when his hand began to rove again, this time stroking the inside of her spread thighs.

He lifted his face. A sheen of light sweat dewed his ebony hair, causing the damp tendrils to curl around his forehead.

"Shall I spread you open and play with you until you come in my hand?"

"Please," she begged, no longer sure what she pleaded. "Oh please, Akraz."

His hand lighted on the outside lips of her private parts. He petted the gold fuzz there, then slowly parted the lips. A rush of cool air tingled against her inner labia.

"What a perfect cunt you have, little elf," he said, hoarse with desire. "Perfect for plunder."

She shuddered, half in fear, half in anticipation. She no longer had the strength to fight the sensations he aroused in her.

His fingers pried further into her secret parts, this time finding the nub of pink flesh that made her gasp when he touched it. A wicked grin spread across his face.

"Oh no, no," she cried, mortified at her body's instant response. She suddenly had a vision of how wanton she looked, thrashing like an animal in heat in response to his expert touch. She could not succumb so easily to his seduction. It would be proof of her carnal nature, when her whole purpose in capturing him had been to refute the power a man such as he could wield over her.

"If you want to stop me, all you have to do is cry out for help to the archers," he said. "One of them will surely put an arrow through my throat before I can ravish you any further." He leaned forward, and whispered against her neck, "But I don't think you will."

Archers? It took a moment for Laya's lust-drugged brain to register what he meant. Of course—he had believed her lie about the archers. Unfortunately, there were no archers. She had not dared tell any of her people her real plans for her goblin prisoner. Now she had to suffer the consequences of her hubris.

* * * * *

Perhaps if she screamed, she could bluff him regardless. He did not want to die, he had too much vitality in him, too much life. He might release her just under the threat of outside interference.

He watched her carefully, confirming her suspicion. His fingers inched back between her legs, closer and closer to her clit.

"No," whispered Laya. "Oh gods, spare me this."

But she did not scream.

His fingers flickered against her clit. Her whole body jolted in reaction. He tightened his hold on her as he moved his fingers faster over the jewel of flesh. She melted in his grip. Her whole body rippled beneath him, from her breasts to her hips.

The muscles in her legs clenched, but he would not allow her to close her legs or to thrash away. His grip was relentless, but his touch between her legs was feather soft, teasing her into unbearable waves of pleasure.

She climaxed in a frenzy and then contracted in on herself. He withdrew his hand and let her pant in exhaustion against the stone bed. Laya realized he had relaxed his grip. She tried to roll away, out of his reach, but he quickly recaptured her.

"Oh no, little elf, I haven't finished using you yet," he said. "In fact, I've just begun."

He lifted her onto the stone and elevated both her legs over her head, pinching them against her wrists in his indefatigable grip. This exposed her cunt to him in a wholly new vista. If anything, this ignominious position, which seemed to turn all of her into exposed cunt and buttocks, was even more humiliating than the last. Laya struggled to free herself, or at least change her position, but, as before, to no avail. He slapped her bottom for her efforts.

Now he explored the various nether openings pertly offered up to him. He traced the rim of her tiny anus, tapping and teasing. He did not enter her there, but walked his fingers further on, until he reached her furry mound once more. He slid two fingers into the opening there, which was now slick with the juices of her orgasm.

No one had ever touched her there; no man had ever entered her, not even with just his fingers. His hand inside her awakened her to sensations inside her sheath that she had not imagined existed. Unconsciously, she clenched the muscles there, squeezing his fingers. She heard him groan in response.

"Are all elf maidens so tight?" he asked her.

She could not have answered him, but in any case, he did not wait for an answer. He began to move his fingers up and down inside her sheath. Then, just when she thought the feel of him inside her was more than she could stand, his thumb began to simultaneously rub in small circles over her clit. She could not believe that the pleasure she had felt earlier could be so multiplied as it was this time through this double stimulation. Her orgasm built and flooded her and built further and drowned her in an eternity of ecstasy that seemed to go on and on.

He eased her legs down over his shoulders. He still held her arms trapped above her head, but he needn't have bothered. Laya had fallen into a dreamy state halfway between satiation and a growing hunger for some further, deeper kind of fulfillment, the nature of which she could not fathom. She had almost felt it as his fingers had moved inside her, but something was still missing. Her prisoner had somehow become her master, yet she was content to lay spread open before him, awaiting whatever he saw fit to do next to her.

He leaned forward between her legs, which still straddled his shoulders. This lifted her hips up off the bed at an angle toward him. His new forward position crushed her breasts beneath his massive chest and brought his hips to meet hers. Something nudged up against her oversensitive clit, sending her into new thrashes of pleasure.

It was his cock. Hard and soft at the same time, the head of the member rubbed against her clit, causing her to reach another small climax in just a few seconds. Yet still the other hunger gnawed at her, and she moaned her wordless plea for what she needed but could not name.

His cock nudged into her harder, parting the lips of her cunt and digging deeper into her feminine folds. At first, it felt not unlike his fingers, smooth hot flesh that spread and speared her. But it was so much more immense, hard and thick. Her tight sheath could not accommodate the girth and size of it so easily as his fingers. She felt something tear and something burn. A cry of pain mingled with panic escaped her.

The cock paused on its inward journey, even easing out somewhat. Akraz lifted himself up on his arms over her and searched her face.

“Laya?” he asked softly.

Laya bit her lip. She knew that if she cried out in pain, real pain, that he would stop. Even now. Not because there were archers outside, and not because she had the strength to stop him from taking whatever he wanted from her. Just because he would. And somehow that made her determined to continue.

“Akraz,” she whispered. That was all. She could not bring herself to beg for what she wanted. She did not even know what it was.

He drove his cock between her wide spread legs, piercing her and filling her. Laya squeezed her eyes shut against the sharp, sudden pain, which was soon subsumed beneath building pleasure as he moved in long, deliberate strokes inside her. Her climax this time differed from the previous waves of pleasure that he brought her, but it also convulsed her whole body in waves of bliss. At the same time, Akraz shut his eyes and roared a wordless howl of triumph.

* * * * *

Akraz came to his senses too slowly. He had collapsed on top of Laya, probably half suffocating the delicate elf maid. Wincing, he lifted himself off her. He was surprised that his animal bellow of pleasure had not drawn any hostile attention from the guards outside. Perhaps, he smiled wryly to himself, they assumed that she was torturing him.

He wanted to stretch, to pace off his sex haze, but the woody chains still twined his wrists and ankles, and that prevented him from leaving the vicinity of the stone. He eased away from Laya, who sprawled limply on the bed, her legs still spread wide and wanton.

Akraz frowned. Her thighs were stained red with blood. Her face was flushed nearly as red, stained with tears.

He froze in horror. He had never imagined, with all her talk of turning him into her sex toy, that she might be a virgin.

“Laya?” he said uncertainly.

She blinked up at him, her expression bleak. Then she rolled onto her side, covering her face with her arm. "Oh, gods," she said in despair. "I am lost. I am damned."

"Why did your people not stop this?" Akraz asked harshly. Anything to deny his own guilt, anything to deflect the blame, no matter how irrational. "Why did they leave you at my mercy? Why did you not cry out to them to kill me?"

"My people?" She laughed bitterly. She gestured to her bloodstained, naked body. "Do you think I would have them see me like this? Revealed as a goblin's whore?"

His chest clenched. He was a fool. All the while he had convinced himself that this elf woman was different, that she knew the game, that she wanted him as much as he wanted her, he had only been deceiving himself. She hated and feared him as much as any beautiful woman would, as much as any of his prisoners had. Shame, not desire, had stifled her voice when he turned the tables on her. He had been too full of his own passion to see her lack of it. In the end, then, he had taken her as brutally as any other goblin would have taken a helpless virgin.

At least retribution was likely to be swift, he reflected. If she did not want him to be able to tell the others what he had done to her, she would kill him quickly.

Laya pulled herself off the bed. Loathing etched her face with pain. For him? For herself, for having been soiled by him? He did not know. She fled to the other side of the tree and hid from his view. Only her weeping drifted clearly across grotto.

* * * * *

Laya wept as she cleaned herself. Oh, gods, she kept thinking. Everything she had suspected about herself was true. She would never be able to find satisfaction with a genteel, chaste man like Lathaniel. Lathaniel's platonic kisses had bored her. Hunter's kiss had left her cold. It took the kisses of her worst enemy to move her to mindless ecstasy.

Her plan had been to conquer him, toy with him, then discard him to prove to herself how little he meant to her. Instead, he had conquered her, not with his brutality, but with his unexpected tenderness.

Oh, gods, she was damned.

* * * * *

She must have slept. Dawn awakened Laya the next morning. She prepared breakfast from the storage bins she had stored in the grotto near the tree. She also refilled her water vase with clear, cold liquid from the stream. She washed herself, wincing a bit at the soreness between her legs.

She would have to face him. If nothing else, she owed him breakfast.

With a sigh, Laya carried a platter of fruit, dried meat, nut mix and cheese to the rock where Akraz was bound.

It did not surprise Laya to see that he had already awakened, if indeed he had ever slept. He had no clothes, so he could not dress himself. Magnificently naked, he stood beside the stone slab, still shackled by branches, yet as untamed as ever.

Laya felt suddenly shy of him. He could have killed her the night before. He could have hurt her. He had done neither. She still did not know why.

She set the platter between them, and nudged it closer to him with her foot, so that she could stay well out of his reach. An ironic smile touched his lips as he noted her caution. However, the light in his eyes was strangely flat.

"Is this my last meal?" he asked.

"This is breakfast."

"I assume," he said, "That you intend to kill me this morning."

"Kill you?"

He cast her an oblique glance. "For what I did to you."

"Ah," she said.

"You knew all along what I was," he said harshly. "No matter what changes you made to my face, you knew my true nature must shine through."

"I didn't do anything to change your face," Laya said, seizing on this issue to avoid discussing last night's events. "All I did was undo the spells laid on you by Zathstragomal. This is your true face, not whatever he did to you in that fire he used to enslave you."

Akraz frowned.

"Why is it so hard for you to accept your true face?" she asked.

"Because I do not know that man you showed me in the mirror. I know only what Zathstragomal made me to be. What you saw of me last night, that is what I really am."

Laya blushed and wiggled her toes. "Perhaps what I saw was what I really am."

"You are no goblin's whore," he said instantly.

"Perhaps it is what I want to be," Laya said. She took a step closer. If he strained at the branches, he could reach her now.

"No."

"When I was a girl, barely on the threshold of womanhood, I was almost taken by a goblin. Ever since then, I wondered if a part of me regretted escaping before he ravished me. That is why I captured you." She took a step closer. "To see how I would react, if..."

"Don't." Pain contorted his face. "Please. Don't say you brought me here to rape you."

"I would have thought you would have been proud to have another conquest," she said. She took a step closer. "Did all those other captive women you took dance in your arms as I did? Did all of them surrender as easily as I did?"

"There have been no others," he said. "I was as much a virgin as you, Laya."

She laughed. "You don't have to lie to me, Akraz. You knew exactly what you were doing."

"No doubt I have witnessed many more...couplings...than you have," he said dryly. "I have probably embraced more women, elf, human, goblin, in my imagination than any man alive. I have been tormented by dreams that felt so real I awoke wet with my own passions. But I have never touched another woman as I touched you."

"But all your captives, your booty." Laya put her hands on her hips. "Don't deny it."

He shrugged. "Assume what you want, then." He looked away. "Everyone else assumed as well. As a consequence, it was one area of my life where I could do as I wished, even if what I wished was to pretend that in one small way, I could choose what was right, and good and noble. Yes, scoff if you want. I know I am a dark thing, fashioned out of pain to serve a dark god. But I kept myself pure in that one way. I never forced a woman. Never."

Another wave of pain washed over his hard face. "Until now. You drew me into the last evil, which even Zathstragomal had failed to do. Did I ruin you, Laya? Maybe so, but in doing so I ruined the last thing that was good in me as well."

"Akraz." She closed the last step between them and reached up to touch his face. "You did not force me. You could have. You had the strength, and I was foolish enough to give you the opportunity. But in the end, you left the choice to me. If I am as damned as you, it is only because I could not bid you no. I could not resist you. I wanted you too badly. I needed you too much."

Wonder crept into his face. "Are you toying with me? Can you mean that?"

"You never kissed me, Akraz. Why did you never once kiss me on the mouth?"

"Because my face..." he began, then paused. Again, a glow of wonder lit inside him. He pulled Laya to him and pressed his lips down on hers.

Eagerly, she kissed him back. When at last they separated, he said, "All I ask is to remain your slave forever, Laya. That would be enough for me."

"Kiss me, Akraz," Laya replied, to hide the sinking feeling in her gut. She could not keep him forever, that was the only thing she knew of a certainty. "Kiss me and never stop."

* * * * *

It had to be someone. It just happened to be Lathaniel who interrupted their passion-filled idyll a mere handful of days later.

Lathaniel possessed a magic sword, Sworntrue, which glowed in hot blue light when goblins were near. Lathaniel marched on Laya's grotto with his sword unsheathed and shimmering furious blue.

Laya and Akraz were splashing together, only half dressed, in the pool in the grotto. She had unleashed him from the tree after the first day. True to his word, Akraz had shown not the slightest inclination to escape her company.

"Stand aside and be warned, Laya!" Lathaniel bellowed in righteous anger. He pointed an accusing finger. "That thing is no elf, despite his false face. He is a goblin!"

Without another word, Lathaniel flew at Akraz with sword swinging. Akraz, unarmed and unarmored, ducked out of the way of the first blow. Akraz rolled on the ground and came back up holding a random stick from the ground as if it were a fighting staff. With this, Akraz parried Lathaniel's shower of blows.

"Stop, Lathaniel!" cried Laya. "Stop! I know he is a goblin!"

Lathaniel paused long enough to regard Laya as if she had lost her mind. But the elf lord did not lower his sword or relax his stance. Akraz also stopped fighting and stood watching both of them warily.

"He is my prisoner," Laya concluded lamely.

"Your prisoner?" Lathaniel compared their state of undress. "He looks more like your lover."

Akraz's lip curled up in amusement.

"You think that is funny, you lowly cur?" shouted Lathaniel. "That you have seduced and ensorcelled an elf maiden?"

"He did not ensorcell me," Laya said in exasperation. She could hardly claim that he had not seduced her. But that was really none of Lathaniel's business. Whatever the elf lord had hoped, she had never accepted his pledge of betrothal. She was free to dally with whomever she pleased, be her choice prince or troll.

"Prove it," challenged Lathaniel. "Let me bring the Spellsbane Stone to this grotto, to disperse whatever foul magic he has used on you."

"Bring it, then," said Laya. "After we have that nonsense about spells out of the way, perhaps you will listen to reason."

"Come with me while I fetch it. I do not want to leave you alone with this monster."

"I am staying right here. I do not come and go at your beck and call, Lathaniel."

With a snort, Lathaniel stomped away.

"Perhaps you should return me to the tree," Akraz said once Lathaniel had departed.

"I won't hear of it. I won't let Lathaniel enchain you either."

Akraz paced in the grotto. He slapped his hand with the stick he had picked up to defend himself. "Your people will never accept me."

That was true, but Laya did not want to say so.

"They are right not to do so," Akraz said seriously. "I have been their bitter enemy. The blood of many an elf lord such as your friend there is on my hands. Many things I

was forced to do during my servitude to Zathstragomal, but the joy I took in battle was my own. The darkness in me is real, Laya. You still will not see that."

"You have been nothing but light to me," she said stubbornly.

He shook his head in a frustration strangely akin to Lathaniel's.

Lathaniel returned all too soon. By then, Laya and Akraz had both dried off and put on a few more layers of clothing. Akraz had set his face in a stone-hard expression. Lathaniel's visage was no less grim.

The elf lord held a dull gray stone. "This is the Spellbane. When I invoke it, all spells cast within the last fortnight will be dissolved." He lifted the stone aloft. "Spellbane! I invoke thee!"

Akraz gasped and dropped to his knees. A golden arrow fell from his chest, leaving no wound. At the same time, his palm began to glow ugly red. The worst change, though, affected his face, which appeared to warp and melt and bulge. Fangs sprouted from his mouth, which in turn thinned and widened. His nose expanded into a wart-covered lump. His eyes sank into beady violet pinpricks beneath lowering brows. His jowls puffed out, then sank into unsightly loops of hanging flesh on either side of his cheeks.

"You see!" Lathaniel cried in triumph. "You see him as he really is! A hideous fiend!"

"You fool!" Laya said. "All you have done is undo the spell I cast upon him, hiding him from the dark wizard's enslavement!"

* * * * *

Akraz did not have time to mourn the passing of his briefly handsome face. He had never believed it truly belonged to him anyway. He had more pressing problems. The burning in his palm told him that his Master had found him again, and his Master wanted him now. Akraz had no choice, he could not resist the command. He had to lift his palm and allow the face of Zathstragomal to appear there.

"You traitorous dog!" shouted Zathstragomal. "Where have you been? How dare you lead me to believe you were dead if you had the audacity to remain alive! You can be sure that I will remedy that oversight!"

Please, Akraz begged the gods silently. Do not let him see Laya.

But the gods of Light did not heed the prayers of goblins, and the Dark God delighted in pain. The wizard looked out of Akraz's palm and spotted the elves.

"Elves!" spat Zathstragomal. "They captured you, is that it? Never mind what I said before, pet. You will be greatly rewarded for showing me the secret location of one of their settlements. My army is nearby!"

The wizard's face disappeared, but he could still track Akraz. In black despair, Akraz looked up to meet the scornful gaze of Lathaniel, the elf lord.

"Run," said Akraz.

Lathaniel grabbed Laya by the hand. "Come —"

As soon as the blond elf lord's back was turned, Akraz hit him on the head with the wooden stick.

"What have you done?" cried Laya. The stick and the back of Lathaniel's head were sticky with blood.

"Hopefully, killed him," said Akraz flatly. He advanced on her, wrestled her into his arms, ripped off the hem from her tunic and bound her hands and mouth.

"I'm sorry, Mistress," he said while she tried ineffectively to twist away from him. "You are my slave now."

He slung her over his shoulder just as the goblin army of Zathstragomal began to pour over the hills and into the grotto.

Chapter Four

Gagged and bound and carried like a sack of potatoes, Laya cursed Akraz and all his kind.

He strode with her like a prize down the center of the goblin camp. His monstrous troops lined up to cheer and salute him on either side of an impromptu aisle. The goblins also laughed and jeered at Laya. Her tunic had been short but decent before Akraz had ripped off the bottom hem to make bindings. Now the ragged edge of the pale green tunic fluttered halfway up her buttocks, exposing them to all the rabble.

The dark wizard Zathstragomal himself stood waiting at the far end of the camp. Akraz somehow knew this; he walked straight for the wizard. Zathstragomal the Malicious wore trailing black robes embroidered in silver runes, but on his head he wore a horned iron helmet, much as Akraz had once worn. Unlike Akraz's helm, however, the ostentatious horns on this helmet—they had a spread of over two feet—rendered it unsuitable for real battle. Zathstragomal obviously preferred show to substance.

Akraz tossed Laya at the wizard's feet. With her hands bound, she could not catch her balance, and she fell to her knees before the wizard. The wizard smiled like a snake and reached out with his staff to force up Laya's chin. Her emerald eyes flashed at him, but the gag prevented her from cursing him aloud.

"Perfect," leered the wizard. "You have managed to capture one of the elves who captured you. I am pleased with you, Akraz. I will be even more pleased when you tell me that you have already broken her and forced her to tell us where the hidden forest citadel of her people lies."

"Master." Akraz bowed deeply. "I will break her, I promise. She has already learned to fear me. Soon she will crawl at my feet and give me whatever information you ask for."

"She does not look frightened to me," commented the wizard. "Perhaps I should undertake her breaking myself. In my tower."

Akraz's lips thinned. "Whatever my lord thinks best is best. But if he will give his humble servant a chance..."

The wizard laughed. "Yes, I can see why you lust after her. But let us see how far you have come with her before I agree to give her to your keeping. Untie her. Command her to service you."

"Here? Now?"

"Do not try my patience, Akraz."

"Yes, Master."

Akraz bent over Laya to untie her. His face, his fanged and deformed goblin face, was drawn and bloodless. Clearly, he did not know what she would do if he freed her and tried to command her before his dark master and all his men.

"Your choice, Laya," he hissed in her ear. "Me – or him."

Laya clenched her fists as the bindings fell away. She longed to spit in Akraz's face. Yet for all that Akraz had betrayed her, she still feared Zathstragomal's tower more. She sensed true evil in Zathstragomal, evil she had never been able to find in Akraz, no matter what the goblin claimed.

Akraz stepped back. He spread his legs and placed his hands on his hips.

"Stand up, elf wench," he commanded.

Slowly, rubbing her wrists, Laya obeyed.

"Come to me."

She went to stand before him. His face was that of a stranger, cruel, ugly, fanged. His voice, though, his voice had not changed. It was as deep and sexy as ever.

"Pull down the shoulders of your tunic," he said. "Display your breasts to me."

Her face burned. Acutely aware of the hoots and jeers of the assembled goblins, Laya pulled the straps of her tunic down one by one, baring her breasts. Casually, as if it meant nothing to him, Akraz reached out and fondled the pale globes. He rubbed each nipple until it hardened in his hand. The goblins howled their approval.

"Spread your legs and lift your tunic."

Tears pricked her eyes. Too low for anyone else to hear, she whispered, "Please, no more, Akraz."

Those horrid beady purple eyes of his flashed in anger. "Now!"

A tear escaped her cheek at the degradation of it all. Yet again, she obeyed, and lifted the torn hem of her skirt to reveal her private parts to Akraz and all the world.

His hands left her breasts and lowered to her sex. His fingers, so familiar to her now, spread her lips gently and began to toy with her. The small flicks against her clit began to build the unforgettable sensations. Oh but not here, not now. She could not show her wantonness before this lewd crowd. Yet she began to dance helplessly on the tips of his fingertips, shutting her eyes to close out everything but the feel of him.

His fingers plunged deep into her sheath, and she came in his hands. He steadied her with another squeeze of her breast.

Zathstragomal clapped sarcastically. "Wonderful display. I take it back. You seem to have mastered her quite thoroughly. But don't stop now, Akraz. You haven't yet forced her to pleasure you. Why not show us how your little whore can polish your staff with her tongue?"

Akraz stiffened. Laya hoped he would refuse. Instead, he only performed a hateful little bow and murmured, "As you wish, Master."

"Wench," ordered Akraz. "Crawl on your knees before me."

Tears streaked Laya's cheeks. "I can't do this, Akraz."

He knew it. It was the one act they had never done. Despite her strange longing to try it, she had never been able to take him into her mouth.

But this Akraz was not her Akraz. This Akraz was docile to a foul wizard and ruthless with her. This Akraz shoved her down by her shoulders and grabbed her head by her hair to push her face up against his groin.

"Unfasten my pants, wench," he ordered. "With your teeth."

She struggled to obey. His black leather pants laced up the crotch. It was a matter of tugging at the lacing with her teeth to loosen it. When she had the lacings loose, his erect cock bobbed free of its own accord.

By all the gods, he was huge.

"Lick me," he said.

She darted her little pink tongue toward the throbbing red member. The soft licks from her tongue induced a tremendous growth spurt in the cock, engorging it.

"Harder."

Laya made her strokes longer and stronger, starting from the where his staff emerged from his balls and a thatch of dark, coiling hair, up to the glistening head. She heard him stifle a moan.

"Take it in you mouth," he said.

But there she balked. With a flush of pure panic, Laya scrambled away from Akraz, his all too tempting cock, her own roiling emotions. The crowd and the wizard no longer even mattered to her. She had forgotten their existence. All she knew was that she must run away from Akraz and what she wanted to do to him.

Goblins blocked her escape. Akraz caught her from behind and threw her roughly to the ground.

"What in the Thirteen Hells are you doing?" he said furiously.

Her impossible situation rushed back in on her. Laya stared bleakly at Akraz, accusing and apologizing in the same wordless look.

The horrid wizard, Zathstragomal, wheezed in what passed for laughter. "Well, well," he sneered. "I spoke too soon. Your slave is defying you. How will you punish her, Akraz? We will want to see this as well." Ugly pleasure shone in his face. "Even more, I think."

The goblins in the crowd helpfully called out suggestions.

"Roast her alive!"

"Make her walk through a pit of scorpions!"

"Beat her with a hot iron!"

"Perhaps you should whip her," suggested Zathstragomal. "With a rose bouquet."

A rose bouquet? Laya puzzled. That sounded far to tame for the likes of Zathstragomal.

Nor did Akraz like the suggestion. Though he never openly defied his lord, he asked diffidently, "May I chose her punishment, Master?"

"Of course. I am eager to see what you come up with."

"I intend to spank her," said Akraz. "With my bare hand against her bare bottom."

Zathstragomal shrugged, obviously disappointed, but he did not naysay the suggestion.

Laya, on the other hand, was mortified. She did not dare openly defy Akraz in front of the wizard again, but she felt herself already blushing when Akraz commanded her to him as he lowered himself onto one knee. He gestured crudely. Face aflame, Laya bent over his knee like a naughty child.

Akraz flipped aside her brief skirt. He adjusted her position, such that her buttocks were forced higher into the air and thus more vulnerable and more exhibited. Then his broad, flat hand slapped down to spank her flesh.

The simple slap stung so much more than she anticipated that Laya jerked in his arms. He gripped her decisively with his other arm, and spanked her again. Her bottom heated and quivered beneath his steady, stinging blows. Against her will, she began to wag her buttocks this way and that in a futile attempt to evade the slaps, but all she succeeded in doing was putting on a lewd display for the roaring crowd. The more she cried and blushed, the more they delighted in her humiliation.

Yet through it all, beneath the shame of the public spectacle, at some deep level, Laya felt safe, because it was Akraz, and no one else, who dominated her. She knew that he would find a way to keep her for his own, away from Zathstragomal's clutches, away from the crowd of voices that eagerly asked for their own chance to violate her. She would endure this from him, she would endure this for him. Had anyone else tried to do to her what he had commanded, she would have chosen death first. But she had known that if she threw her life away on her pride, she must take Akraz with her too, for he would never let her die undefended.

She did not know how she knew these things. He had never spoken of devotion. Certainly, he had never mentioned love. Perhaps he did not even know what it meant. He had spoken only in the terms he had been raised with, the crude terms of enslavement and servitude and ownership. Perhaps it did not mean quite the same thing as what elves meant by love. Perhaps it was more primal, more carnal, more desperate. All she knew was that she belonged to him, and he knew it too. He would never let another man possess her.

But would that be enough?

She had her answer all too soon.

"You may keep her for now," Zathstragomal told Akraz. "If you can tell me one last thing."

"Master?"

"Do you know who it is that you have captured?"

The tiniest of pauses, then, "Yes, Master. She is the elven warrior Nemesis who has been harassing us all this time."

"Yes!" Zathstragomal leaned forward. "As such she is one of only twelve elves who know the magical passwords to enter the gates of Sylvindell, the secret elven citadel. You will wrest those passwords from her, Akraz."

"Gladly, Master."

Laya hung her head in dismay, with no effort to hide the despair she felt. Let Zathstragomal think her nearly broken, let him think Akraz was still his creature, only let it not be true. Let all of this debasing show have been only a performance put on to fool the dark wizard. If so, she could bear it all, as she must.

The fear that haunted her, however, was that Akraz did not care if he had to force the passwords from her, because her people meant nothing to him. In the end, that was the difference between true love and mere possessiveness. A man who treasured her only as a possession would care for her no differently than he would care for a precious vase. He would keep her safe, out of the reach of hostile strangers, refuse to sell or give her away, prevent her from being broken physically. But he would care nothing for her own wants and needs, her sense of honor, or for the people she loved, or worry if he broke her spiritually. Only a man who truly loved her would take on her own cares as his own.

She would know once the two of them were alone together. Laya only hoped she could live with what she discovered.

* * * * *

Several times during the ordeal, Akraz had thought them both on the point of death. He could not believe that he had survived, with Zathstragomal's good graces no less, and with Laya still his to possess and protect. Yet they had made the grueling many day journey back to Mount Murk without further incident. Laya, as his pleasure slave, was now ensconced in his own cave deep in the goblin warrens beneath Mount Murk.

She had been subdued since her public humiliation. They had not had time or opportunity for conversation during the journey. Not that Akraz would have dared open up to her in any case. He was keenly aware that because of the brand on his palm, Zathstragomal might choose to eavesdrop on his minion's conversation at any time. No conversation would ever be private or safe. From now on, everything he really felt for her must go unsaid. If Zathstragomal were to suspect what Laya meant to him, all would be lost.

The wizard harbored suspicions, Akraz was sure of it. Now that he was home, and liable to grow lax, now was when Zathstragomal would be keeping the closest tabs on what Akraz did in the "privacy" of his own quarters with Laya. A wrong word would kill them both.

The pity of it was that Akraz did wish he could relax with Laya in his home. His cave had been made comfortable with the loot from many raids. Tapestries and overlapping rugs warmed the stone walls and floor. Pillows embroidered with fanciful animals formed little piles to recline upon around engraved wooden tables. He had a shelf stacked with many fine bottles of wine and ale. Candles and even a chandelier illuminated the otherwise gloomy space. It had taken him many years to accumulate so much wealth, and he could not help feeling pride in it.

She looked like a stolen treasure herself. The deep purple, red and gold cushions formed an exotic backdrop for her pale skin, emerald eyes and leaf-light hair. They dined together on mushroom and mole stew, an expensive delicacy in the caves. Laya stirred her soup more often than she sipped at it.

He decided to risk one revelation. "I have a surprise."

She glanced up. He transformed his face, from monster to man.

Her jaw dropped. Akraz grinned. When she started to speak, he cupped his hand over her mouth. "Don't say a word. I can only maintain it for a few hours at a time. I will show this only to you. Do you understand?"

Wide-eyed, she nodded. He dropped his hand.

"What do you think of my home?" he asked Laya, to change the subject.

He thought it compared well with her sleeping arrangements in the grotto, and that pleased him, before he recalled that the grotto had not been her home, only a temporary dwelling. His heart sank. His imagination did not stretch to a vision of the hidden elven forest citadel, Sylvindell. Was it very grand? Much grander than anything he could offer?

"It is less than you are accustomed to having," Akraz probed. He hoped she would deny it.

"Yes."

Her simple admission pierced him to the quick.

"But what I miss most," she added, "Is the sunlight. And the trees. And the fragrance of flowers. And the sound of babbling brooks. But mostly the sunlight."

"You can never be happy here."

"No, Akraz." She tilted her head at him, curiously. "Did you think I could?"

He looked away. He did not know what he thought. He had not been aware of his foolish hopes until she had dashed them.

"Can you be happy here?" she asked softly.

This was a question that brought them too close to forbidden topics.

"My happiness is inconsequential. What matters is the victory of my Master in the war."

"Why must you talk like that when we are alone?"

"We are never alone." He held up his branded palm and willed her to understand the significance of it. She frowned at him. He could not tell if she understood his warning or not.

"My Master has given you to me so that I can extract from you the location of your people's hidden city," Akraz continued. "If you give me the information I need, he may reward me with you as my permanent slave."

Laya gnawed on the edge of her lip. Did she understand the secret layers beneath his words?

"Akraz, I must ask you something," Laya said. "Did you kill Lathaniel?"

"The pretty elf boy? You saw me kill him."

"But..." She twirled her spoon in her mushroom soup. "I thought maybe..."

Before she could blurt out anything stupid, Akraz interrupted her in a harsh and mocking tone. "You thought what, little elf? That a few days between your thighs had transformed me from a servant of darkness into an elf-lover?" He laughed. "By the Dark God, how naïve you are. Did you believe all those lies I sold you while I was your prisoner?"

He stood up and picked up the soup crock. "Have you eaten your fill?" He cleared the crock and the bowls and spoons off the table, replacing them in the cupboard on the far wall.

"It was not my imagination," she said when he returned to the pillows. Tears pricked her eyes. "You care for me, Akraz. On some level, in your own way, but I know you do."

"Laya, I love you," he said. It was a truth cast out in such a careless way as to sound like a lie.

"You do?" she asked dubiously.

"Why, of course. I am mad for you. I adore you. I love you to distraction." He grinned wickedly. "I love the way your hair tumbles down your back, inviting me to run my fingers through it. I love the luscious curl of your lip, asking to be kissed. I love the way your nipples jut against that transparent tunic of elven silk, calling to my mouth..."

He bent her back against the pillows and took a nipple into his mouth, right through the sheer silk. He worked the give in the cloth with his tongue, abrading her nub with the weave.

She tried to push him away, even as her breath came quicker. "Stop it! That's not love, it's only carnal desire."

"I am only a carnal being," he said. He moved to the other breast and subjected it to the same hot, damp friction as the first. She undulated deliciously beneath him.

Akraz reached between her legs and found her already slick. He slid his fingers into her. At first, she yielded. Then her eyes widened, and she pushed him away.

"No! How can you expect me to make love to the murderer of my friend? He was my friend, Akraz! Does that mean nothing to you? Do my people mean nothing to you?"

"Less than nothing. Now come back here and kiss me."

"Never!" she scrambled off the cushions, onto her feet. She lifted a heavy brass candlestick from the table. "Stay away from me! You disgust me. I never want you to touch me again!"

Akraz settled back against the pillows with his hands clasped behind his head. He crossed his legs up on the low table.

"There is the door to my den." He pointed with his chin. "It is locked from the inside. You can open it if you like. Beyond are the warrens of ten thousand goblins. In this wing, mostly soldiers. Go ahead. Brave the corridors. See how far you get before you are dragged into some drunkard's den and gang raped, if you are lucky, or dragged before Zathstragomal, if you are not." His eyes narrowed. "But if you stay here, you will obey me as your master, no matter how trivial or perverse my whim."

Laya took a step toward the door. She peeked at Akraz. He smiled at her with indolent confidence. She took another step toward the door. Paused. Trembled.

"I'm only a thing to you, aren't I?" she asked, her huge green eyes filled with unshed tears. She gestured to the room with the candlestick. "Part of your collection. No more important to you than this brass candlestick."

He could not let himself drown in those eyes, or he would break down and confess everything. She thought he had killed her handsome friend, Lathaniel. Her concern ignited his jealousy and his protectiveness at the same time. He dared not tell her that he had only knocked the elf unconscious, in order that the man would be left for dead by the other goblins.

His only hope was to lose them both in a wordless haze of passion. Fortunately, he knew her weaknesses well enough by now. As she knew his. They would be damned together, as they had been from the very first.

"Come here," he commanded. "Bring the candlestick."

Laya came to him, as he had known she would.

"You must be punished for your impudence," Akraz told her sternly. "First, take off your clothes. Next. Lie back across the table and grasp the legs with your hands. Lock your ankles around the legs on this side. If you move from that position, I will have to tie you down. Give me the candlestick."

"What are you going to do to me?"

"It occurs to me that in the caves, all slaves are branded. You, however, have not yet received a brand. I will rectify that now. I will burn my mark into your flesh."

Laya had started to lie back against the table, but this announcement brought her back upright in a blink.

"You will not!"

"Shall I tie you down?" he asked mildly.

"Akraz, please. Don't hurt me."

He stood up and strolled to the wall where a coiled rope hung on an ugly hook.

"Don't!" Laya exclaimed. "I will obey."

Shivering, she stretched back against the table, which was just long and narrow enough to support her slender frame. Her bare white skin stood out against the polished black mahogany. Her hair spilled down to the floor off to one side. She looked terribly young and vulnerable.

Akraz hefted the candlestick from hand to hand. The candle was long and smooth red beeswax. Smooth ripples of brass formed the design of the holder itself, which although much heavier, was not much thicker than the candle.

He lit the candle. At his leisure, he encircled the table where Laya offered up her naked body like a sacrifice to the Dark God. She entreated him with a mute movement, half plea, half shudder, that cascaded through her entire body.

"You are a virgin to the fire, Laya," Akraz said softly. "This night I will take you as a virgin again, as I did that first night. This time you will be sacrificed to the flame."

He knelt beside the table, showing her the burning candle. From this position, he could hear the wild beating of her heart.

When he deemed that the candle had burned down far enough to accumulate a pool of hot wax at the tiptop, he cupped Laya's left breast in his hand and tilted the candle over her flesh.

A cry wrenched from her mouth as the hot wax dropped directly onto her nipple.

Chapter Five

When the wax hit her nipple, Laya lost control of her voice and her body. She screamed and spasmed, more in surprise than real pain. The burning sensation lasted only a flash, followed by a cool coating sensation that hardened around her nipple. The wax stimulated and tantalized the sensitive nub.

Before she could recover from the sensory overload, Akraz dipped the candle again, now over her right breast. This time she only whimpered when the liquid wax flash burned and began to cool and ooze around her nipple.

She felt the low, sexy rumble of Akraz's baritone purr against her neck. "I burn for you, Laya. I will make you burn for me just as hotly, so I swear."

He dribbled more hot wax onto each breast, coating them in twin shells of molten red. The sting was less and less each time, as the already cooled wax shielded her against the new, hot drips, but as the wax rolled like slow lava down the slopes of her breasts, it brought her flesh alive with heightened sensation. The heat forced all Laya's attention onto her breasts, her nipples, until her universe condensed around this feeling of intense erotic stimulation.

She had shut her eyes against anything outside the feel of her own body. Therefore she sensed rather than saw when Akraz left a cool space beside her, and reappeared again with something new. Her eyes flew open when she felt him press something hard into the soft wax mountain over her left breast.

It was the stub of another candle, no taller than one knuckle of a finger remaining to the beeswax. Akraz pressed another, equally stubby candle onto the wax over her other nipple. When he had satisfied himself of their secure purchase, he lit both. The tiny candles began to sweat wax.

"You are not to let the candles go out by upsetting them," said Akraz. "No matter what."

He took up the original candle again and moved between her widespread legs.

Laya could guess his wicked plans. It took all her willpower not to squeeze her knees together to deny him access to that softest and most vulnerable part of herself. She wished now that she had allowed him to bind her to the table, to spare her the ignominy of disobeying his command not to move. She was not sure she could endure it.

His cool fingers parted her nether lips. Laya moaned in fearful anticipation. She watched, mesmerized, as he tilted the candle over her cunt. A bead of glowing hot wax, luminous red like blood, oozed from between the flame and the rim of the candle tip. The tiny drop fell in agonizing slow motion.

And then it exploded onto her clit.

She could not help herself from slamming her hips up and down against the table in reaction. The lit candles on her breasts jiggled in reaction, sprinkling more speckles of hot wax onto breast flesh yet bare, causing her to thrash again before she finally gritted her teeth and regained her composure.

"Keep still!" barked Akraz.

"Oh but it burns," she wailed.

"Remember this branding, Laya," he said in satisfaction. "Whatever burns now belongs to me and me alone."

He dripped another sizzling tear of wax onto her clit. It seared her with heated pleasure that shot out lightning bolts of echoing ecstasy throughout her body.

If before she had become nothing but breasts, now her whole being pooled in the heat between her legs. The burning, cooling, dripping, oozing wax awakened her need without fulfilling it. Her clit yearned for harder use. Her sheath ached to be filled. Instead, the wax hardened into a shell around her clit and labia, trapping the flesh into an itch that could not be scratched. She prayed he would tire of his game and take her himself, hard and fast, here on the table. From the bulge in his black leather pants, he felt the need as urgently as she.

However, her goblin lover had a will as inflexible as iron and an imagination as slippery as stream-bottom rocks. He had no intention of letting her suffering end so easily. Instead, with a maniacal grin, he fetched the rope from the far wall and looped it twice on the iron chandelier above the table. Laya could not fathom his purpose until he unhooked her left leg from under the table and lifted it into the air, taking care as he did so not to shake the candles still burning on her breasts. He tied the first leg in place, then, with the other end of the rope, did the same to her right leg. Now both her legs pointed to the ceiling, spread by the width of the chandelier, so that her wax coated clit lay open between them.

And still he was not done with her. He found two more candles, long ones, and brought them to her lewdly displayed crotch. He chipped away some of the wax, exposing the hole of her cunt. With a swift movement, he drove the stem of the candle into her sheath.

Unprepared for the assault, Laya emitted a squeal of shock.

"What are you doing?" she cried, only to scream again, this time when he plunged the other candle into her anus.

Laya squirmed in discomfort. The candles on her breasts punished her with hot splatters of burning wax. Tears stung her eyes and she groaned with the effort to still herself.

"What are you doing to me?" she repeated.

"Why, putting you to good use, little elf," laughed Akraz. "You were the one who complained I valued you less than a candlestick. Now you can feel equal to one."

So saying, he lit the last two candles, the one in her anus and the one jutting from her cunt.

"You will not move from this position until all of the candles have burned out on their own. If you snuff out one of the candles, I will spank you and light a new one in its place, until you succeed in following my orders."

"But what are you going to do while I lie here, burning?" she demanded.

"What would you expect me to do by candlelight? Read a good book, of course," he replied. She had not noticed any books in his den, but somehow he had procured one when she hadn't noticed, and he waved it in her face.

"But—" she began.

"Oh I almost forgot," he added, pulling out another candle. "We really must get you over your oral phobia. But until you are able to take a real cock in you mouth, perhaps this will help train you to it."

He placed the end of the candle into her mouth and lit it. "Don't move," he warned again. "I don't like my light to shake while I read. It makes me queasy."

She couldn't believe it until he did it. While she squirmed and itched with unmet needs, candles burning in all orifices, he calmly read a musty old tome written in some dead human language.

The slow meltdown of the candles coated her sexual parts in successive shells of wax. Where it landed on virgin flesh, it caused her to jerk and jump in surprise. Where it built up into cool, hard shells, it caused the flesh beneath to itch. Her furtive squirming grew bolder and bolder, especially since Akraz seemed absorbed in his dratted book. When she was sure he wasn't looking, she finally dared to lift her right arm from its uncomfortable position over her head in order to scratch a particularly bothersome spot on her pubis.

Her knuckles accidentally brushed the candle in her anus, knocking it from its post to the floor with a clatter. Laya froze.

Akraz glanced up from his book. A fiendish smile spread over his face. "Naughty, naughty girl. What did I tell you about how I would punish such an infraction?"

"Mmmmf mmmf mmf," begged Laya around the candle gagging her.

He replaced the candle with a hard thrust that made her grunt. He relit it. "Now for your spanking."

She thought he would use his hand again, but he lifted the heavy book and smacked her raised buttocks with it. The candles in both her nether orifices seemed to sink deeper into her with the impact. All the candles shook along with her body, despite Laya's best efforts to maintain her balance.

Again, he brought down the book on bottom. It flamed with a heat more diffuse than that of the hot wax. She bit hard against the candle in her mouth.

A third time he spanked her with the book. Each time, the feeling built upon the previous smacks, cresting into something greater than any one blow. To her relief, he sat down again and resumed reading the instrument of her torment.

* * * * *

Much later, after Akraz had finally unbound her, Laya snuggled in his arms on a great mound of pillows. His face had reverted by now, and he snored through his bulbous pig-shaped nose. She stared at his hideous profile, reflecting that she hardly saw him as ugly even when in his monster form. She saw only his true face, the face of the man beneath the monster.

It was not his fault he could not love her. He had never learned how. She could not even hate him for killing Lathaniel. To Akraz a person was either a possession, a master or an enemy. She was his possession; Zathstragomal was his master, and that had made Lathaniel his enemy.

She could not hate Akraz; but she dared not love him either. She had a duty to her people, to her dead friend and to herself. She had to live by the rule of honor. No matter how tempting it might be while she writhed under his touch to dream of abandoning herself forever to being his plaything, she had to remember she was a warrior of Sylvindell.

The door unlocks from the inside, he'd told her. She would see about that.

* * * * *

The instant he awakened from a troubled sleep, Akraz knew she was gone. He leapt to his feet and lit a candle to be sure. The cavernous den showed no sign of her and the deadbolt across the door had not been replaced.

She left me.

He fought down panic. Akraz had hoped Laya would have the good sense to be too frightened to try to escape the subterranean hell of Mount Murk by herself. He should have known better. Terrors of all the things that could befall her assaulted him. He must find her, and soon. Before someone else—or something else—found her first.

* * * * *

Grudgingly, Akraz admitted that Laya had come much further than he'd ever expected. She had threaded her way through the densely packed military barracks, through the lower warrens filled with goblin women and children, through levels filled with smoky factories and smitheries and dungeons. He had been so busy enjoying the sumptuous innocence of her body, that he had forgotten she was also Nemesis, expert tracker and stalker.

Furthermore, she obviously knew about the Sticky Tunnels, the secret maze of caves that even most goblins knew nothing about. The Sticky Tunnels were the only

underland route out of the valley below Mount Murk. The mountain passes otherwise all crossed beneath the baneful eye of Zathstragomal's tower.

All well and good. But how in the name of the Thirteen Hells did Laya think she was going to pass through the Sticky Tunnels by herself?

Akraz tracked Laya's trail deeper and deeper underground, until he reached the level where noxious fumes more often than not crowded out the breathable air. As a goblin, he could deal with it, but he worried about Laya.

He slowed down when he saw the first wisps of webbing draping the cave walls. The Sticky Tunnels commenced here. The further in he ventured, the more webbing clung to the walls, until soon the stone could not be seen for the hazy curtains of gooey thread. Larger, intact webs crisscrossed the corridors, sometimes blocking the path completely. Red-eyed things skittered in the dark, always out of sight of the torch that Akraz held.

Her spore was harder to follow here. Other, fresher marks, obscured it, a disturbing notion. The only good news was that he was closing on her. Originally he had trailed her by several hours, now less than one.

He traversed several corridors so narrow that he had to crouch to fit his massive shoulders through the crevice. But shortly after that, a large cavern yawned open, illuminated by the glow of iridescent lichen growing on the stalagmites. Hundreds of giant webs connected the cones of stalagmites. Unfortunately, hundreds of giant spiders, each the size of a full-grown goblin, crawled among the webs. Many of the webs boasted of man-sized cocoons as well.

There, near the far left of the cavern, one of the giant spiders busied itself wrapping up fresh prey into its web. The prey kicked and fought, but was already too tightly caught to escape.

It was Laya.

* * * * *

The spider had her legs and arms pinned in the web. The harder Laya struggled to free herself, the more securely she entangled her limbs in the giant web. Ignoring her thrashing, the spider looped strands of sticky silk around her limbs, fastening them securely into place.

Laya's first glimpse of Akraz was actually of his massive two-handed broad sword rising and falling to hack off one of the spider's eight fleshy limbs. He wore his monster face and an enormous scowl.

"Akraz!" she shouted for joy. "Thank the gods!"

The spider, sufficiently annoyed at losing a leg, turned from Laya to advance on Akraz. It spit out a stream of silk. Akraz rolled out of the way. He came back up swinging again, and sawed at a second leg. The spider chattered angrily, and swiped at him with its fearsome mandibles. Akraz spiked it in one of its four, multifaceted eyes.

Puce slime squirted out of the wound, but the spider did not slow down. It charged Akraz again.

Akraz performed another acrobatic roll. This one took him directly under the spider. He lifted his sword straight above his head, into the spider's soft underbelly. He rolled away again in time to escape the sleet of purplish ooze that showered down from the abdomen of the oversized arachnid. The spider collapsed, chittering and flailing and spitting web. With cool butchery, Akraz chopped the dying thing into pieces, until only slime and a few twitching legs remained.

He hurried to where Laya struggled in the web, before he even finished wiping the sweat and purple ichor from his brow.

"Laya, are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, I'm fine, except that damn thing tied me up," she said in a huff.

Akraz frowned at remains of the spider. "I was afraid I might have to take on all hundred spiders in the cavern. Why didn't they come to help it?"

"They aren't like that, they don't give a damn about one another. Each spider only protects its own web. And they are very territorial. No spider will venture into the area controlled by another. We should be safe from the rest of them, as long as we do not stray into their territory, or their webs."

"How do you know so much about them?" Akraz asked curiously. "How did you even know about the existence of the Sticky Tunnels?"

Laya debated whether to tell him, then, with a sigh, decided it could not hurt now.

"Lathaniel and I once planned a spy mission on Mount Murk itself," she said. "In the end, we decided it was too dangerous. But we would have entered by this route." Her jaw set in a stubborn line. "And this is the route by which I will escape now. Do not try to stop me, Akraz."

Akraz tilted his head innocently. To enhance the effect, his facial features slid from bestial and bloated to smooth and seductive. "I? Try to stop you? Because, of course, I can see you are well on your way without any interference from me."

Laya wiggled helplessly in the web. Her arms were stuck to her thighs by one thin band of web, another band secured her neck and shoulders and a thick cocoon encased her legs like a mermaid tail up to her mid-thighs. Her feet dangled a foot off the rocky floor of the cave. She had lost her tunic in the initial struggle with the spider, so her sex, her belly and her breasts were exposed between the tight bands of silk.

"It is not funny! Cut me down at once, Akraz!"

"Why should I?" he laughed. "I rather prefer you in this position, if you recall."

"This is neither the time nor place for one of your depraved games!"

"You said it yourself—the other spiders will leave us alone as long as we are in the territory of this one. We have all the time in the world."

"Akraz!"

He pinched her breasts. "You are at the perfect height."

"Akraz," she groaned. "Please."

"You were beautiful last night," he said in his sultriest voice. "Aglow in candlelight. I grew hard for you but did not take you. I think I will take you now."

At the memory of the night before, her face flamed. She still felt "branded" as he called it, by the bright red wax that had left a stain like virgin's blood on her pubis and nipples.

He circled around the strands of the web, careful to avoid catching himself, until he came around behind her. It made her nervous not to be able to keep an eye on him.

"What are you doing?"

"With you? As always, whatever I want." His arms snaked around her from behind to knead her breasts. With one hand, he gathered them both together and squeezed the nipples into one peak of flesh, while his other hand smoothed down her belly to the crevice between her tightly bound legs. His probing fingers somehow found her hooded clit. With just one finger, he swabbed the nub in tiny circles.

"Why did you leave me, Laya?" he asked. "Why did you not trust me? Couldn't you understand that I didn't dare tell you my true feelings or my true plans as long as Zathstragomal could eavesdrop on us with his magic?"

"I don't...know what...you're talking about," panted Laya.

"We are safe down here. No magic penetrates the Sticky Tunnels. But up there, Zathstragomal can use the brand in my palm to overhear anything we say. That's why I couldn't tell you that Lathanial is still alive. Or that I planned all along for us to escape, by this very route. But not so soon. Not unprepared. Your haste and mistrust may have ruined everything."

He stopped rubbing her and backed away, leaving her bereft.

"Oh, gods," breathed Laya. She tried to turn her head to look at him. "Oh, Akraz, are you telling me the truth?"

"I am now. I could not before."

"I didn't know. I couldn't know."

"You could have trusted me," he said bitterly.

"Akraz, forgive me. Spank me, punish me, but don't stay angry with me."

"Well," he said slowly. "You have been naughty indeed."

She sagged with relief in the web to hear the teasing note return to his voice.

Then the strap hit her buttocks. Laya howled.

He must have doubled his leather belt. She could feel the hot, red welt burn in the aftermath of its kiss against her backside. He whipped her again, and this time, she bit her lip against any outcry, but tears sprang into her eyes. Her buttocks wagged back and forth under the rain of swift, hard licks of the leather. Not once did he relent, but not once either did he hit too hard and break her skin. He whipped her until her whole derriere felt on fire.

She heard him drop the belt and the rustling of his leather pants. It was maddening not to see him, not to know what he planned for her next, pain or pleasure.

With his cool, large hands, he explored the hot welts he had poured onto her nether cheeks. His gentle touch both soothed and tormented the sore flesh. He placed one hand on either cheek and spread them wide.

His cock nudged her from behind. With his hands, he tilted her hips up further, while keeping her cheeks spread. A quick check with his fingers informed him that she had grown wet during the whipping. It was all he needed to know.

His member drove forcefully into her from behind. The cock lifted and spread her, delving into her innermost parts and then teasing back. He kept his strokes slow and deliberate, using her thoroughly. His hands reasserted their position on her breasts as he worked her. He twisted and twirled her nipples into hard pebbles while he pierced her sex open again and again. She climaxed several times before he finished using her.

A final deep thrust and a shudder brought him to climax inside her. He sank against her back, as well spent as she felt owned.

* * * * *

"No more games," Akraz promised when he finally took his sword to hack away the silken strands of the web that entrapped Laya. "We have no choice but to attempt our escape now. Although Zathstragomal can't track us here in the Sticky Tunnels, he will suspect where we have gone. We won't have another chance if we turn back now."

"You will come with me?" Laya asked.

Akraz paused, suddenly unsure of himself. Who was he to presume a place in her life?

"Just until the end of goblin territory," he said gruffly.

"Ah," she said neutrally.

"Put this on." Akraz handed her his surcoat Laya slipped it on. From the front, it passed for a short dress or long tunic, all in all decent enough. But the sides left her slender leg, belly and breast completely bare. He handed her his short sword. "And take this."

He cleaned and shouldered his own sword. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed black shadows creeping toward them from various corners of the cavern. He scanned the eerie cave with growing alarm.

"Ah, Laya? I thought you said that the other spiders would not intrude on the territory of this one?"

Other spiders crept toward them, unmistakably.

"Oh no," said Laya. "They must sense the spider that guarded this territory is dead. They are coming to fight over its place."

"Great. A spider war." He unsheathed his sword again. "Go ahead and say it."

"Say what?"

"'I told you so.' We should not have stopped to dally in this accused place. I endangered you once again because of my petty lust."

"Probably," she said. "But I'll have to spank you later."

He did a double take.

Laya batted her lashes at him innocently. "Right now we have bugs to fight."

* * * * *

The only thing that saved them was that the spiders were just as interested in fighting one another as in eating Laya and Akraz. Otherwise, the couple would have been swamped beneath the swarm of giant arachnids that converged to squabble over the corpse of their dead comrade.

For all that, it was a close thing. Laya killed only one giant spider. Akraz killed three. But the third bit him before he took it out, and poison swelled the bite into a mottled protrusion on his upper chest. He managed to stagger with Laya out of the large cavern into a smaller feeder corridor before he collapsed from pain and delirium.

With grim efficiency, Laya used the short sword to slash open the wound and drain as much of the poison as she could. A man of any lesser physique would have already succumbed to death from either the poison or the blood loss alone, never mind both combined. Akraz was goblin-tough, as hard as the rock bones of the mountain heart around them, but even he had his limits.

He knew it too. "You can still make it," he wheezed to Laya. "Once I am cold, all I ask is that you cover my body with rocks, to keep it from becoming spider food. Then get out of here as fast as you can. Go back to your people. Go back to the Light where you belong."

"Stop talking like that," snapped Laya. "I'm not going to abandon you."

"I'll never make it to freedom now," he said sadly. "It was never more than a dream to begin with. I was born a slave and will die a slave."

"I said, stop that. I know you cannot make it all the way through the Sticky Tunnels now. Our only choice is to take you back to the goblin warrens for aid."

"No!" His face turned ashen. "You will lose your only chance to escape."

"I can't let you die while I save myself. I did that to a friend once in my life already and have regretted it ever since. Who among the goblins acts as a healer?"

"No one. The sick are given a merciful death or else just pushed out into the public corridors to beg for crumbs until they die."

"Marvelous society," muttered Laya. "I do not think I can carry you all the way back to your own den, it's too high up in the mountain, up past too many levels and too many checkpoints. Is there anyone you know, anyone trustworthy, who lives closer to this level?"

"My sister," he said reluctantly. "Her den is on one of the lower levels."

"You have a sister!"

"Yes. Even goblins have families. But I have not seen her for some time."

"Will she take you in? Or turn you in?"

"I don't know."

He was fading fast.

"We will have to risk it," said Laya. "We will go to your sister's."

Chapter Six

The only way Laya could carry Akraz was to create a makeshift travois using his own broadsword and spider webbing gathered from the walls. Fortunately, the older webbing was drier and less sticky than the fresh, though just as tough. Like all elves, Laya knew how to weave. Ironically, in Sylvindell, spider silk fetched a pretty penny, as one of the rarest and most difficult to find materials in Chavana. Laya had no loom, but her fingers worked a net of braided silk cords that she looped over the sword. She also made a harness for herself, to distribute the weight across her shoulders. Then she began the slog back through the dark stone tunnels.

Akraz had given her directions earlier, but now when she checked him, he had fallen into unconsciousness. His face had reverted to its monster shape and the warty skin was pallid, clammy to the touch. Beads of sweat drenched his brow and chest.

Laya feared he would not survive the rough trip. Such was the weight of his massively muscled body, however, that she had no choice except to stop frequently to catch her breath.

She dragged him to the mouth of one of the habited warrens. Every muscle in her body trembled with exertion. When her knees buckled beneath her, she knew she could go no further. She hid him as best she could and continued alone, following the directions he had given her to thread the maze of goblin caves.

The public tunnels had almost no light, which was all to Laya's advantage as she slipped from shadow to shadow. Nor was there much foot traffic. More of a problem was distinguishing one goblin's hole in the wall from another, for the entrances were not labeled and all looked the same, with tiny, square, rusted iron doors hunched under lowering lintels of raw rock wall. Laya counted the ninth door down a certain winding corridor.

She knocked.

There was no immediate response. Laya grew nervous in the thick, black silence of the corridor, hoping no one would pass by while she waited there.

At last the iron door creaked open a smidgeon. A dirty child peeked out from the crack. Boy or girl, Laya honestly could not tell through the encrusted grime on its face and rags.

"I am looking for Hwega," said Laya gently.

Laya had never seen such surly suspicion in so young a child.

"Why?" the child demanded. Snot dribbled from its nose.

"Does she live here?"

"Maybe. Are you going to kill her?"

"Of course not."

"Are you going to throw her in a dungeon?"

"I should say not."

"You're a stranger," the child pointed out. "Strangers are bad. They hurt you. Are you trying to hurt my ma?"

"Is Hwega your mother, then?"

The child, suddenly afraid of having said too much, began to slam the door shut.

"Wait!" Laya grabbed the door before it could close. "I'm not here to hurt your moma. I just need her help. Her brother is sick."

"Uncle Akraz?"

"Yes! You know him."

"He brings me nice things," the child confessed shyly. "One time, he brought me an orange. I never had an orange before. It was the best thing ever." A little pout. "But he made it share it with my brothers and sisters."

Laya's heart melted. What kind of life must this child lead that the memory of a slice of orange was a precious gift?

"Uncle Akraz needs your help now. Will you help him? Will you tell Hwega, your moma, that he's in trouble?"

"She's working," said the child. "I'll get my brothers and sisters. We'll help you."

Laya had her doubts about the wisdom of it, but that was how, a short time later, a small army of goblin children followed her back to where she had hidden Akraz's body. They ranged in age from three to ten, all grubby, scrawny and ragamuffin. But they all seemed to adore their Uncle Akraz and since there were at least a dozen of them, they were able to help Laya lift and carry the big man back to their den.

The den was just a long, narrow hole in the wall, with no furniture, no candles, no adornments of any kind. Ugly iron hooks protruded from the raw stone of the upper walls and ceiling of the den, to hold baskets and animal skin containers. Rats scrambled from one basket to another with impunity. Roaches moved in herds across the walls. A hearth fire burned in a niche to one side and a big clay jar filled with brackish water sat at the very back of the cave. Greasy leather mats, now heaped together in one tall pile, indicated what probably served as beds during sleeping hours.

To Laya it more closely resembled a dungeon than a fit place to raise a dozen children. She could hardly bear the thought of bringing Akraz into this filth. How could she heal him in an environment like this? The very air of the den made her skin crawl and her throat itch. The miasma stank of smoke and dust and urine and rot.

No other options existed. Laya had no choice but to try to find the least soiled of the mats in the corner to form a bed large enough for him to stretch out upon. She poured some of the unsavory water from the back pot into a smaller pot over the fire, to boil.

"You wanna eat?" one of the older children, a girl, asked Laya. The girl grabbed one of the baskets off the wall to show Laya the skinned and dried rats inside. "We also got centipedes, if you want soup."

Laya felt her last meal flip upside down in her stomach. "No, thank you."

Once the water came to a boil, Laya lanced the spider bite on Akraz's shoulder and cleaned out the wound. She wrapped his shoulder in spider silk. Without her people's magical salves with her, there was little else she could do for him but pray to the gods of Light for his recovery.

Please, she begged them silently. I know he is not one of your own, but he is a good man inside, where it matters. Surely you can see into his heart.

"One of the big spiders downstairs bit him, huh?" asked a little boy. He nibbled his thumb. In his other hand, he clutched a toy sword made out of several rat bones tied together with tendons.

No one would ever mistake these scallywag children for elf children, but Laya could see that these young goblins had not yet been deformed by dark fires of Zathstragomal. They had smooth skin, pointed ears and big eyes, like elf children. Under their smudges and snot, they were actually quite cute.

"Yes," said Laya. "But Akraz killed three of the big spiders before they got him."

The boy's eyes lit up and he waved his sword. "I'll bet he did! Uncle Akraz can whop anybody! He's killed more than a thousand elves!"

"Yes," sighed Laya. She caressed Akraz's fevered bestial brow. "I know."

* * * * *

Unholy caterwauling jerked Laya out of an uneasy nap. An adult goblin woman with sagging breasts and a hideous countenance waved a stone club at Laya.

"Thief! Intruder! Invader! How did you get into my home?"

The gaggle of children surrounded Laya to protect her from the attacking banshee.

"Ma! Ma! It's okay! We let her in. She knows Uncle Akraz!"

"Akraz?" The goblin woman hesitated.

"Look!" The children pointed to his form, barely visible in the dim, ruddy light of the cave. "There he is."

"A spider bit him."

"But he killed three of them!"

"We helped carry him here."

"You must be Hwega," Laya said. "Akraz's sister."

"What if I am?" Hwega said belligerently. "What business is it of yours? And who in the Thirteen Hells are you? You're not even a goblin! What are you? A human?"

"A friend."

"Non-goblins don't make friends with goblins. Even goblins don't make friends with goblins. Tell me the truth or I'll bash your brain in. Don't think I can't!"

A cough, low and male, interrupted them. Almost too weak to hear, a wheeze followed, whispering, "Hwega."

"Akraz!" Laya rushed to his side. "You are awake!"

"Akraz? Is it really you?" Hwega also came to his side and searched his face. What she saw in the monstrous abomination there must have reassured her. "It is you. Who is this woman? Why is she helping you?"

"She is my slave," said Akraz hoarsely. "Do whatever she asks as if the order came from me."

"If you say so, Akraz," Hwega said dubiously. "But—"

But Akraz had passed out again.

Hwega frowned. "If Grob comes home and finds Akraz here, weak like this, he'll kill him."

"Grob?"

"My husband." Hwega spat. "A drunken loser. He hates Akraz because Akraz is ten times the goblin Grob will ever be. And Akraz hates him, because Grob beats me and the cubs. All the nice things Akraz gets us, if we don't hide it real good, Grob steals it and sells it for more booze. Normally, Grob would slink away like the coward he is when Akraz comes around, but now..." Hwega just shook her head.

"I would like to return Akraz to his own den, but I can't carry him there myself," Laya said. "Not only is he too heavy, but as a...slave...I would be seen and questioned. Can you help me?"

"Maybe," said Hwega. She chewed her lip and studied Laya. "I recognize what you are now. You ain't human, and sure as the Dark God lies, you ain't a goblin. You're an elf."

"Yes," said Laya.

This simple confession elicited a startling reaction from the children, who had been listening quietly to the conversation. At once the oldest children began to shout curses and the youngest to cry and wail.

"Elf! Elf! Ma, don't let her eat me!" screeched one little one, burrowing into Hwega's lap.

"I'll kill it right now!" cried the boy with the bone sword. He flew at Laya like a whirlwind, hitting her with the toy.

"Shut up and sit down, all of ya!" bellowed Hwega. Cowed, the goblin children shrank into quiet balls. However, they crept so that their mother stood between them and Laya.

"She ain't gonna eat ya," said Hwega. "Didn't you hear? She's Akraz's slave. She's so afraid of what he'll do to her if she disobeys him, that she risks her life to drag his

unconscious body through deadly spiders and miles of caves." Hwega gave Laya a sharp look. "You think she would dare eat her master's favorite nieces and nephews?"

"I ain't scared of her," said the boy with the sword. "I ain't scared of any elf."

"Good goblin," said Hwega. "Now get out of here, all of you. Scat! Go catch rats. We have only a few dried ones left and you know your pa will eat half of those tonight, if he's sober enough to eat at all. What will that leave for the rest of you? Scat!"

The children emptied from the den, leaving a heavy silence in the smoky air behind them.

"I know some of Akraz's boys in the army," Hwega said. "Boys that would side with him even against the Dark God himself. But I gotta know first, before I get them down here to help him, what kind of real trouble he's in."

"I guess maybe you are his slave, because I don't see how else you coulda got to Mount Murk. It ain't no vacation spot. And it ain't hard to see what Akraz would want with a pretty elf slave girl like you, though he ain't never brought one home before. Coulda had plenty if he'd wanted I bet."

"But you coulda left him to die from the spiders if you wanted to run away. Even if you were too scared to run, why bother coming here? I may not be a general like Akraz, but even I got brains enough to see that don't add up."

"Even if I told you," said Laya. "You wouldn't believe me."

Hwega contemplated her with a keen, knowing look. "It's like that, huh?"

"It's like that."

"Huh." Hwega snorted. "I thought only goblin women were stupid enough to fall for blokes who were no good for them. I guess it's all women."

"A universal curse," Laya agreed.

Elf and goblin shared a knowing, bittersweet smile.

"I'll call them boys," said Hwega.

* * * * *

No wonder Akraz exhibited such pride in his den and its few pitiful luxuries, Laya thought as she soaked in a wooden tub in his quarters a few days later. Compared to Hwega's quarters, which, Hwega had informed Laya, were not only typical of most goblin homes, but also how she and Akraz had been raised, Akraz's present circumstances were sinfully indulgent. He was a wealthy and powerful man among his people.

In the more sanitary and well-apportioned conditions of Akraz's den, Laya had made her patient comfortable on a pile of pillows and redressed his wound several times. She kept him hydrated and bathed and tended to his personal needs. He responded gratifyingly well to treatment. His periods of consciousness were increasing

each day. But other times, he thrashed in fevered nightmares, and Laya still worried for him.

When she finished with her own bath, Laya took another kettle of hot water out of the stone oven in the wall and prepared a bath for Akraz. With two buckets of hot and cold water respectively and a sponge, she rinsed the fever sweat from his naked body. He moaned under her ministrations; his eyelashes fluttered; his hands clenched, unclenched and clenched again. His face changed again, from grotesque to fair. The transformation seemed to occur at regular intervals, but Laya had not been able to ascertain what triggered it. For a moment she hoped he would awake from his delirium, but he did not.

What dreams haunted his sleep? Did he dream of the past? Laya reflected on what she had learned of his life. Hwega had inadvertently revealed much. Laya had also picked up a few more pieces of the puzzle from the ugly, battle-hardened veterans who came to help carry Akraz discreetly back to his home.

His youngest years he had spent in squalor, catching rats for dinner or going hungry. His mother, the only one to have shown Akraz and Hwega any real love, had died giving birth to a later sibling. Many of his sibs had died as children as well, some from disease. At least one, Hwega had hinted darkly, had died at the hands of their own father, a drunken lout of the same ilk as Hwega's present husband. Said father had also come near to beating Akraz to death, but in the end had sold the boy into the army at the age of eight instead.

The goblin army had been another place rotten with abuse. Young goblin "recruits" served as slaves, and often sex toys, to the older soldiers. Akraz had escaped this fate only because of his sharp wit, which a grizzled old vet named Narg had recognized. Narg had taken Akraz as his own "boy," but instead of raping the youngster, taught him to read and fight in preparation for becoming an officer. The apprenticeship lasted ten years. By then Narg had become General of the army.

Advancement in the goblin army typically proceeded by way of assassination of one's superiors. A group of ambitious goblin officers under Narg finally succeeded in doing in the old man. In his outrage and grief, Akraz swore revenge. One by one, Akraz ambushed and killed Narg's assassins, and such was the logic of Zathstragomal's army, that this ruthlessness was rewarded by Akraz's own meteoric rise in the ranks.

Zathstragomal valued Akraz because the wizard thought Akraz burned with hate and ambition. The secret truth was that Akraz had sworn vengeance out of his love for the old General, not a desire to usurp his place.

Akraz stirred and moaned again. His cock stiffened in his sleep.

Perhaps it was not of his childhood or of his army career that he dreamed. Perhaps memories of women he had tasted revisited him.

Akraz had once told her that he had never taken a woman by force. Now that Laya knew him, she could believe it, as incredible as it was of a goblin soldier. But how many

of his previous female captives had succumbed of their own free will to his masterful charms?

Laya had washed all of his limbs except his private parts. The half-erect penis tantalized her. She reached and closed her fingers around his shaft. With her other hand, she squeezed a sprinkling of water from the sponge onto the tip. His cock nodded and stiffened in her fist. Still he did not awaken. Only his cock was wide-awake and eager.

She brushed the rough sponge up and down the thick cock. It blushed and bobbed. With the softest of strokes, she sponged his balls as well. She cupped them in her hands and played them over her fingers. She scrubbed and brushed the black hairs at the base of his cock, then rolled both her hands up and down the shaft once more. Between her thumb and the ball of her hand, she toyed with the skin around the head.

The cock gleamed deep pink in her hands, like a delicious desert waiting to be tasted.

Laya lowered her head and kissed the tip. Starting with small tentative licks, she tasted the head, then, growing bolder, she licked up the length of the staff from base to head. Then she slipped the whole cock into her mouth and drew it in as far as she could take it.

He was so long and thick that she could not take more than a third of it before she had to pull up and try again. But she found she enjoyed the game of it, drawing it into her mouth as far as she could then easing back again. Akraz never woke up, but his whole body tensed and thrashed in rhythm with her mouth upon his cock. The faster and deeper she went, the stronger his response.

She should stop. He needed nursing, not a sex-crazed elf maiden sucking on his cock. Decency argued for her to leave his tormented organ alone. Desire argued for her to continue, in view of his body's enthusiastic response. And she had to admit that if he had been awake, she never would have had the courage to play with him so freely.

She gripped the base of his shaft to pull him deeper into her mouth. Her hands worked him roughly below as she bobbed her head up and down on his cock head. She had to straddle his legs to keep him from bucking her off.

An animal groan began to rumble in his throat. The rumble turned into a mindless yowl. Simultaneously, Laya felt something hot and salty spurt into her mouth. She sucked at it eagerly and swallowed it down.

Knowing he had climaxed, she released his cock from her mouth and hands. To her surprise, it remained hard and red for several minutes before it deflated into a state as somnolent as Akraz's own. She hoped she had not abandoned it too soon.

She also hoped she had not worsened Akraz's condition by selfishly slaking her own lust while he was struck down by poison. To her surprise, she found that his fever had broken, and his dark dreams apparently subsided. He still slept, but now peacefully, with a tiny, half-smile at the corners of his mouth. After a few moments, he began to snore.

Well, she thought. I wonder what the healers back home in Sylvindell would have to say about that.

* * * * *

Akraz dreamed. His dreams were evil, of war, and blood and loss. A blackened field. A river red with fresh corpses. A smoke-filled sky.

He dreamt of his future, of his death. He already knew how it would come. Like old General Narg, one of his own subordinates would betray him, possibly, as with Narg, in the heat of battle, if they could not get at him any other way. A knife in the back from his own side, not a sword to the heart from an enemy, that was how Narg had gone, and how Akraz expected to go. A bitter, useless end to a bitter, useless life.

All around him black destruction and gray smoke obscured the horizon. Then he saw a ray of light, and she stood illumined by it.

She wore her golden leaf armor, but her hair swept free in the wind, whipping behind her like a banner of white gold and green. She had a gold sword in her hand. Lifting it, she saluted him.

He lifted his own sword in grave salute back. This was his salvation, he realized. Not that he could ever have her for his own. No. She was as beyond him as the Goddess of the Dawn. But she promised him a clean death, in honorable battle, a blow to the heart that he could see coming and welcome as an honest end to a good fight.

"Come fight me, Akraz!" she called out to him. "It is time to die!"

"Yes," he cried. "Yes!"

But when he tried to cross the blackened field, the bone hands of all those he had slain in battle reached up to tangle his ankles. Every step felt like slow motion. He could make no progress. The light on the horizon disappeared. She had vanished. His salvation had vanished. He wanted to weep. All that remained were the bones of bleak despair.

"Akraz," she whispered behind him. He whirled around.

They no longer stood on a smoke-blackened battlefield, but in the green and golden sunlit dell where she first held him hostage. She wore nothing but a filmy gown of bubbles and sparkles, and then even that dissolved, leaving only her pale, shapely flesh, her pink-tipped nipples and her bronze nether curls around a deep pink cleft.

He tried to move, but something immobilized him. It didn't matter because she moved toward him. Kneeling at his feet, she threw back her hair and stared up at him with brilliant green eyes. She licked her lips in a sensuous circle. Though he wanted to tell her she did not have to kneel before him, he found himself thrusting his loins forward instead. His cock was hard and ready.

She reached up and took it in her mouth.

The hot, wet tightness around his cock felt delicious. Her tongue moved, exciting the most sensitive parts of the head, while her hands stroked his shaft and balls. Unable

to contain himself, he thrust into her mouth harder and deeper, sinking himself forcefully into her. He could no longer hold himself back. He thrust again and again, until ecstasy overwhelmed him and he spilled himself inside her.

* * * * *

When Akraz awakened, he had no idea how long he had been asleep. His body still felt weak, but he had a vague idea that he had been much worse only recently, close, in fact, to death. He touched his face and traced bestial contours. He sighed. Noises on the other side of the partitioned den alerted him that he was not alone. Years of evading assassins caused him to tense automatically, before he heard humming and realized it must be Laya.

The curtain parted and she stepped into his part of the den. She tidied some pillows with her back to him. She wore one of his black tunics as if it were a dress, tied off with a gray sash. The dark colors only emphasized the vividness of her green eyes and gold-green hair. She hummed as she puttered about, a wordless, lilting elven tune that seemed to him a work of art in and of itself.

"Oh!" she exclaimed when she turned around and caught him staring at her. "I did not realize you were awake." She hurried to kneel by his side in order to place her hand against his forehead. "Your fever is gone. Thank the gods."

"I dreamed of you," he said in a deep voice, catching her hand in his.

She blushed deeply, almost as if she could guess the content of the fantasies that had haunted him.

"I dreamed of you," he repeated, wishing he could tell her more. But even if there had not been the danger of Zathstragomal learning their secrets, Akraz would not have known what words to use to describe the light she had brought into his dark life.

Booming knocks thundered against the iron door of the den. Laya jumped. Akraz went cold.

"Help me stand," he said.

"It's too soon—"

"Help me stand!" he snapped. Meekly, she let him lean on her shoulder.

The insistent pounding reverberated again.

"I must meet them dressed," Akraz said tightly. "Even if they have to wait."

Laya hurriedly helped him into a tunic and vest. His leather pants caused him more trouble, but he shoved his legs into them before he staggered to the iron door and unlocked it.

Six burly, feral-faced goblin soldiers shoved into the den. Their armor was jet black, a cut fancier than the usual grunts, for they were no ordinary soldiers. Akraz knew them, and he knew their leader, Yaguz, Chief of the Secret Police.

"General," Chief Yaguz sneered. "You took your sweet time answering our summons. What's wrong? Not feeling good? You look a little sick."

"I'm fine, Chief Yaguz," Akraz said flatly. "If Zathstragomal wishes to see me, why did he not summon me himself?"

"Maybe he wanted to make sure you didn't get lost along the way," said Chief Yaguz. "People have a tendency to accidentally try to go the other direction when they are summoned to the Murky Tower."

"I know the way. I won't get lost. But thank you for the escort," Akraz said. He refused to allow any fear to show in his mien. "Allow me to give my slave instructions for what she is to do while awaiting my return."

The six Secret Police laughed, Yaguz hardest of all. Snot came out of his potato shaped nose. "She's wanted too. Zathstragomal has a special surprise for you both."

Chapter Seven

Laya hoped the vile guards would not notice she had slipped her hand into Akraz's. It was as much to steady her nerves as his steps. Her heart pounded in her chest. Had Zathstragomal discovered their attempted escape? Would poor Hwega or Akraz's fellow officers be implicated too? What tortures waited in the wizard's tower that it made even goblins who took daily poverty and brutality as a matter of course quake at the mere mention of it?

The upper reaches of the subterranean citadel were not hewn from raw stone as were the domestic warrens below. Fitted stone blocks and polished floors, with torches along the walls at regular intervals, distinguished this section of the underground city. Stairs, rather than winding ramp ways, linked one level to another. Almost all the goblins here marched in uniform. Non-goblins also scurried to and fro, humans and elves, slaves whose bony, twisted bodies and lowered eyes bespoke broken spirits after years of brutal captivity.

At the end of one large corridor, an iron portcullis lifted in front of them at a barked order from their guards. A cold breeze swept under Laya's black tunic, raising goose bumps on her bare legs. She had no undergarments and the fresh air tickled her pubis. She shivered at her own vulnerability. Not even Akraz would be able to protect her where they were going.

Only as they passed through the portcullis did the significance of the breeze strike her. Fresh air. Outside. They had emerged into the open air.

Laya drew in a deep breath. She had not been outside since she'd been brought to Mount Murk. The guards did not let her linger to savor the moment, but kept the prisoners moving forward at a brisk pace. Still, Laya turned her head this way and that, drinking in the unexpected and longed for sight of the sky.

The heavens roiled with red and black clouds. The setting sun accounted for the deepening violet on the far horizon, but the thick haze of billowing clouds trailed from the concave summit of the tall, jagged peak from which the citadel was carved.

Mount Murk. Laya had not really absorbed it before, that she was here, in the heart of the dark forces' stronghold. The journey here had seemed short because, merely for a whim of impatience, Zathstragomal had pushed his army to a pace no human or elf lord would ever demand except in dire emergency. They had traveled day and night, killing horses to force the wagons to keep pace, while the goblin foot soldiers had taken the entire journey at a double-time jog with few rests. After they arrived, Laya had spent most of her time ensconced in Akraz's den, deep beneath the mountain.

They climbed more stairs. The tower, actually an entire castle in and of itself, crouched like a vulture over the caldera at the top of Mount Murk, which was an active

volcano. After the fifteenth or sixteenth hundred step up the staircase, ever higher up the ramparts toward the castle, Laya's calves began to cramp. Akraz, who could have taken the exercise in his stride in full health, also grew strained from the ordeal.

At the top of a final flight of stairs, another portcullis lifted to admit them into the castle grounds. The stone here was polished black rock of various types—basalt, marble, obsidian. Though bleak, it had a certain beauty. Laya sighed with relief at the series of flat, interlocking courtyards and corridors. She never wanted to climb another step in her life.

The guards halted in a courtyard indistinguishable to Laya from the others.

"Our Master wishes you to be properly prepared for the surprise he has in store for you," said the lead guard—the others had saluted him as Chief Yaguz—with an evil grin.

Laya didn't understand until the guards yanked her hand from Akraz's that the guards meant to separate them.

"No!" she cried. Chief Yaguz slapped her so hard she fell to the basalt floor of the courtyard.

With a roar, Akraz slugged Chief Yaguz in the snout. The other guards leaped on him, restraining his arms. It took all five of them to barely contain him, and even then, they never would have succeeded if he had not been weak from the spider poison and the grueling climb. Rubbing his nose, Chief Yaguz scowled.

"Hold him, boys," ordered Chief Yaguz. He lifted his black bully club and smacked Akraz across the face. Akraz endured the blow without a sound of pain. He spat at Yaguz.

"Watch yourself, General," said Chief Yaguz. "Your use to Zathstragomal won't last forever. Then you will be mine. I have broken harder goblins than you."

Laya knew Akraz would not want her to give Chief Yaguz the satisfaction of seeing her cry. Still, she had a hard time keeping tears from pricking her eyes as she and Akraz were dragged away in opposite directions. She did not know what she dreaded more, that she would never see him again, or that when she saw him, it would be only to watch him suffer.

* * * * *

The terrible dungeon where Laya expected to be incarcerated turned out instead to be a graceful obsidian tiled pavilion in the middle of an exotic garden. The guards left her there alone and mystified.

Tall, black walls enclosed the garden on six sides, yet there was enough space for an artificial lake surrounded by sculpted, grass-covered hills. Little trees, shrubs and flowers artfully arranged into bowers, dotted the hills. Laya recognized a few of the plants—belladonna or deadly nightshade, hemlock, oleander, black snakeroot, wolfsbane, bloodroot, poison ivy, poison oak...all poisonous plants. The ones she did

not recognize looked, if anything, even more deadly, for they were obviously unnatural growths under some perverse enchantment—flowers with snapping teeth, trees with tentacles, black blossoms that dripped blood. Giant mushrooms and lichens also abounded.

The black pavilion abutted the lakeside. To one side of the pavilion, a playground arose out of a pooled off section of the lake. Laya could not imagine loosing children in this garden, yet there was a slide into the water, a merry-go-round, a large swing, also over the water, and various funny shaped sculptures protruding from the shallows which might be meant for climbing and playing. All the “play” equipment had been mosaiced in black. To the other side of the pavilion, a bridge adorned in the same matching obsidian tiles connected the pavilion with the far side of the lake.

Swans, chained together in a meandering line by slim gold cords and black collars, drifted gracefully in the lake. They looked like white ghosts against the black water. On the grassy hills, peacocks, similarly chained by collars around their slender blue throats, strutted on the grass.

The garden appeared empty of humanoid denizens. Bemused, Laya searched for some sign of watching eyes. The walls of the garden were all blank stone overgrown with climbing thorns, except for one wall, which sported a dozen casement windows some fifty feet above the garden. The windows were all dark, curtained, except one, which was lit. It was too high to tell for certain, but Laya fancied she caught the glimpse of a silhouette at the window, gazing down upon the garden.

Strange.

The last tendrils of twilight gave over to the velvety darkness of night. A break in the clouds showed the full moon on the rise against the starry sky. Another swan, a black one, fluttered from an unseen part of the garden to the grass beside the lake.

The swans left their lake to waddle up to the shore next to the black swan. At the same time, most oddly, the flock of peacocks spread their plumage to its full fan and strutted to meet the swans. Blue and white birds congregated together for all the world as though awaiting the commencement of some grand event of sober concern to both flocks of birds.

When the silvery moonlight touched the garden, an amazing transformation overtook the birds. In place of the swans stood a row of exquisite pale skinned young women, nude except for diamond jewels and white-feathered skirts around their hips. The skirts flared up like tutus without hiding their hairless vulvas. Those pink nether lips were also pierced with diamonds and pearls. Where the pack of peacocks had been stood a row handsome youths. Each youth wore nothing but a permanently erect codpiece held by a harness of sapphires and emeralds and a plumage of peacock feathers somehow affixed to their backsides. Laya stared harder, then blushed to realize that the feather plumage attached to an anal plug held in place by the harness.

One damsel stood out because of her full, formal dress. She wore black brocade embroidered with silver, and a silver tiara and black veil crowned her thickly piled

black hair. Her ruffed collar reached to her chin. Black gloves tucked under long sleeves. Compared with the seminudity of the others, her modesty was ostentatious.

She had been the black swan, without doubt. Unlike the others, who had been chained together as birds and remained chained together now, she moved freely. She also took command of the youths and maidens. At a snap of her fingers, they arranged themselves into twin columns, the order determined by how they were chained. At the front of this parade, she led the two columns across the bridge to where Laya stood.

"Welcome," said the damsel in black. She spoke with cold formality, haughty but oddly neutral, neither friendly nor hostile. Despite her air of authority, she was very young, barely a full-grown woman. "I am Strathgora, Zathstragomal's daughter. Welcome to the Garden of Poisons."

Laya attempted a curtsy, aware of her state of crude dress. "Thank you, my lady. Please tell me, if you would, why I have been brought here."

"No doubt my father wishes to play with you," shrugged Strathgora. It was not a very reassuring answer. Strathgora gestured to the silent men and women behind her. "These are my father's toys, each chosen for her or his feminine or masculine beauty and trained to pleasure him. Perhaps he will join you to their ranks." She cocked her head at Laya. "You are beautiful enough, certainly. For now, he wishes you to join our evening bath. No doubt he will be watching us from his casement window."

Laya glanced up at the single lit window in the high wall and shivered.

Strathgora wore a bracelet around one gloved hand, which tinkled with a dozen tiny silver keys. Using these, she unchained the maids and youths from the line, one at a time. They proceeded into the pavilion and from drawers cleverly concealed in the benches, fetched an assortment of bottles and brushes and jewelry. There, also, they removed their feathered skirts and tails, though not the codpieces from the males nor the little gold and diamond belts from the females.

The girls and boys were of all races. Pale elves, ruddy humans, even a few exotics such as the gilled, blue-haired mermaid—she had legs, though, not a tail—or the soulful-eyed young man with glowing skin who could only have been a fallen seraph. A scar still marked his back where his true wings had been ripped from his flesh, to allow him to be ensorcelled as a flightless pet peacock for Zathstragomal. A few lads and lasses, lovely, as all the rest, possessed a coloring that Laya did not recognize, with jet-black locks and vivid purple or gold eyes.

"They are goblins," said Strathgora, following Laya's gaze. "Believe it or not. This is how they appeared when they were brought to my father to be cast into the Deep Fire and given the heads of beasts. Rather than mar their perfection, he brought them here." With a slightly self-mocking smile, Strathgora gestured to her own deep purple eyes. "I too have goblin blood. My mother was one of Zathstragomal's first pets."

How terrible. But Laya kept the thought to herself. She had a feeling that Strathgora would scorn any show of pity.

The youths and maids crowded around Laya and began to tug at her tunic. She tried to shoo them away.

"I say – what do you think you are doing? – let me alone!"

"They will bathe you," said Strathgora sternly. "You stink of the lower warrens. You cannot appear before my father like that. If you fight, I will have you whipped first, but one way or another, you will be bathed and prepared."

Laya gave in. The throng led her into the shallow pool beside the pavilion, where the playground had been built. Here the water was about waist deep. The tunic was torn from her. They dunked her under the water, and she came back up sputtering. All in all, they were not harsh, only insistent, treating her as doll incapable of doing anything for herself. Someone behind her rubbed shampoo in her hair, someone else poured a bucket of water over her head to rinse it out.

An army of probing hands roamed over her naked flesh, lathering her breasts and belly and thighs with soap, scrubbing, rubbing, scourging, touching. Impudent fingers parted her sex and explored it. Other hands encircled her breasts or pinched her buttocks. When Laya squirmed in protest and arousal, others simply held her arms and legs apart and allowed new sets of curious hands to stroke her in turn after turn.

Laya saw the flash of a knife. It frightened her and she stiffened, but by now her captors held her immobilized. One of the damsels knelt between Laya's open legs and worked a lotion into a thick lather over her pussy. She then took the edge of the knife and began to scrape away Laya's pubic hair. The ginger scraping teased the sensitive flesh around her clit. Laya writhed, embarrassed by her reaction, but helpless to control her excitement.

When finished with the knife, the damsel slapped on some other liquid that caused Laya's cunt to sting. The maid soothed it instantly with a third lotion, cool and sensuous. She rubbed this in with tantalizing circular motions that spiraled closer and closer to Laya's clit. At the same time, other hands began to smooth fragrant oils into Laya's skin. Every part of her felt caressed and massaged and stroked. Her back, her calves, her thighs. Each of her breasts rolled between a pair of different hands, frictioning back and forth as though to start a fire; and she felt as though a fire did start in her hardening nipples. Then swirling fingers finally reached her clit, while other hands slid into her cunt and into her anus. Someone's mouth lowered onto hers. Two mouths took her nipples and bit lightly. Tongues joined hands tickling all the parts of her body. Laya had no weight. Her head lolled back. They supported her completely. She floated on a sea of hands and sucking mouths and unbearable sensation and her orgasm flooded her in waves.

Laughing, the throng left Laya's limp body on one of the sculptures in the pool. Strathgora had not entered the water nor removed her clothing. She stood at the balustrade of the pavilion from whence she had watched the proceedings with indifference. Now she issued a series of mysterious commands, a list of names paired with numbers, which caused the maids and youths to approach her one by one. With

the silver keys on her bracelet, she unlocked the little belts or codpieces they wore, took the belts and handed them new objects in turn.

Laya sat up on the sculpture. The objects alarmed her. She had seen that the girls and boys wore belts, but these were a peculiar kind of belt, affixed with phalluses of various girths, two for the girls' belts, one for the boys'. The lads and lasses lay themselves back with legs spread upon the other sculptures, which Laya could now see were designed to cradle adult bodies in just such a variety of positions, and not for children's play at all. Others then helped the supine ones to insert the phallus into both their openings. Once the belts were refastened, they returned to Strathgora, who locked them into the belts.

Chastity belts. Laya had heard of them, but never seen such things in person. Some of the phalluses on the belts were quite frightening, overly large or covered with rough bumps, and Strathgora's comments made it clear that some were intended to punish. One young man began to plead when he saw the belt Strathgora had ordered for him. The iron phallus was fashioned in the shape of a man's fist, and ridged cruelly around the stalk. He would not accept it without the others holding him down and forcing it into his anus. He wept and for his tears was punished by another young man, at Strathgora's direction, with a beating of his cock by a short leather strap. Once the cock was erect and bright red from this treatment, it was forced into the hard shell of the codpiece and his belt was locked.

"Shall we fit a chastity belt on the new girl?" one of the young men asked Strathgora.

"Yes," she said. "A number five will do for now, I think."

The throng returned, as unworried as before with Laya's opinion on the matter, to hold her down and spread-eagle, while someone wrapped a slender, bejeweled chain around her waist and between her legs. Laya had just a glimpse of the two phalluses, brass penis shapes, before she felt the first cold, hard object slide into her cunt. She was still wet from her orgasm, and though the phallus stretched her, she found its presence more disturbing than painful. The next phallus was another matter. She cried out when they began to force it into her tight anus. After a moment of whispers, long fingers creamed her hole with a slippery lotion, and this time the phallus penetrated her all the way to its hilt.

In addition to the belt, they clipped jeweled clamps on Laya's nipples, and another onto her clit. They fastened jewels around her neck, her wrists and from her delicately pointed ears. A harness of gold chain held everything in place. The harness forced her breasts up, the clamps weighed her nipples down. The belt kept her labia spread, the phallus kept her vagina plugged. Her clit ached worst of all, exposed and stimulated and frustrated all at once.

The sensation of double penetration rendered her too dizzy to walk. The throng had to half hold, half drag her over to Strathgora, who locked the belt. Tears streaked down Laya's face, not from pain exactly, as from a sense of helpless degradation.

"Don't bother, my dear," said Strathgora heartlessly. "In this garden, the only plants to grow are poison, and tears just help them thrive. Go play now. Smile. Show how happy you are."

The throng finally left Laya in peace. They either took Strathgora's advice to heart, or as a command. The young men and women dispersed about the playground to slide down the slide, swing on the swing and twirl on the merry-go-round. They disported themselves with an air of forced gaiety that unnerved Laya. Their laughter rang out through the garden; their dead eyes told a different truth. She could not bring herself to join them in the farce.

Laya looked up again at the lit window. A man's silhouette stood clearly backlit there, and she realized that the playground must be in full view of the watcher. *We are on stage*, she thought, *and these poor creatures are afraid to give a poor performance*. Would this be her life from now on?

She prayed that Zathstragomal would kill her instead.

* * * * *

The Chief of Secret Police Yaguz escorted Akraz directly to the private study of Zathstragomal. Akraz knew it only by reputation, he had never been permitted entry before. It was held to be a rare honor, or else a first step to the torture chamber, and no one invited there ever knew which to expect. Even Yaguz must not know, Akraz surmised, or the Chief of the Secret Police would never have let Akraz's blow in the courtyard go so lightly punished.

"Ah, General Akraz," said Zathstragomal when they entered the study. The wizard's toothy smile answered none of the questions about his intentions. "There you are at last. That will be all, Chief Yaguz."

The goblin guards bowed and departed.

"Have a drink," said Zathstragomal. Another sly grin. "I believe your tastes run toward things elvish. I have here an excellent elf brandy."

"You are too kind to your humble servant, Master." Akraz bowed deeply. His mind raced. What should he make of Zathstragomal's innuendos? Had the wizard divined Akraz's true feelings for Laya?

The study surprised Akraz. Zathstragomal's choice in architecture and fashion usually ran toward the gaudy and overblown, but the study was simply that, a handsomely apportioned library. Books formed neat rows along dark hardwood shelves. The rest of the furniture matched, heavy and sober, but finely carved. Tall-backed chairs encircled a long table. Against one wall, a built-in pub sported a number of rare wines, brandies, whiskies and beers in colorful bottles of all shapes and sizes. A fireplace dominated another wall of the room. A doorway opposite the entrance led into another, smaller room with comfortable upholstered armchairs and drawn drapes that suggested the presence of floor-to-ceiling windows.

Determined not to show fear, Akraz helped himself to the elvish brandy at the pub. He sipped. Fruity, no burn, sensuous afterglow. Zathstragomal already held a glass of something deep and red.

"You were always too clever for your own good, Akraz," said Zathstragomal. "No goblin needs more brains than muscle, and a goblin who does have brains is usually more trouble than he's worth."

"Master." Akraz bowed again, not knowing what else to do. He was certain now that he would go straight from this room to the tower's torture chamber, where Yaguz would be pleased to meet up with him again.

"But I must admit your plan worked beautifully," Zathstragomal continued. "I am well pleased with you. I am curious. Did you stage your capture by the elves as well, or did you simply take advantage of the opportunity to turn the tables on them?"

"I wish I could say that my capture was staged, but it was not, Master," Akraz said carefully. He had no idea what plan Zathstragomal was talking about and dared not reveal the fact.

"If you had said otherwise, I might still have decided to have you killed," said the wizard. "Because I did not give you leave to improvise your own plans without consulting me first. However, since you had no way to contact me while a prisoner of the elves, I will forgive you." The wizard strolled across the room, into the smaller chamber on the other side, gesturing Akraz to follow. "In fact, I will even reward you."

The wizard opened one of the heavy crimson drapes. A casement window overlooked a large garden and artificial lake, sheened in moonlight.

"Do you like the view?"

"It is beautiful, Master."

"You have no idea." Zathstragomal seated himself. "Go on. Sit."

"On the chair or on the floor?"

"Come, Akraz, don't play games. You're not an animal. I know you can act with a notch more culture than most of your conspecifics. I even know that you can change your face to look as handsome as any elf lord when you choose. Do so now."

"Master?" Akraz's heart began to pound.

"That was not a request."

Akraz felt trapped. If he refused, he would be punished for disobedience. If he complied, he would have to admit that he had found a way to partially break the spell of the wizard's brand on him. Akraz reluctantly allowed his face to return to its true form.

Zathstragomal's eyes narrowed. He was not pleased. But he smiled tightly. "Better. You are indeed a fine-looking man. Strange I didn't notice it when you were a boy. Perhaps I would have had other uses for you than the army."

Akraz wondered what that meant. Perhaps he preferred not to know.

"But then, what would I do for my upcoming campaign? This will be my finest hour, Akraz, and you will bask in the glow of my upcoming glory. Although two thirds of Chavana still defies me, in military terms we have but to conquer two cities in order for the whole land to fall into my fist. One, of course, is Stromhod itself. But the other is Sylvindell. Until we eliminate the staging area in the forest provided by the elves, the lords of Chavana will never surrender. The elves hide their secret citadel behind enchantments. We have never before captured one of the twelve elves entrusted with the secret passwords to unveil the spells. Thanks to you, we have two."

"You honor me, Master." *What in the Thirteen Hells is he talking about?*

"Tomorrow night will be the full moon. All of my vassals will attend to me in order to coordinate the upcoming attack on Sylvindell. A fete will be held. I want you there, to display your pet, as you did before the army."

This command, Akraz understood all too well. It took all his willpower not to spit in Zathstragomal's face.

"As to your reward," continued Zathstragomal, "Look out there."

Akraz glanced out the window. In the garden, which he had mistaken for vacant, two dozen naked young women and men splashed in the lake by a pavilion.

"Go on, take a closer look," said Zathstragomal.

Akraz obediently went to stand in the casement window. The water sparkled on the naked bodies of the cavorting playmates. A woman on a swing thrust up her naked breasts to catch the moonlight, and lifted her legs into the air, so that from here, Akraz had a perfect view of her spread pussy. Another trio of girls held the merry-go-round with their pert buttocks facing out, while three young men spanked them as they went spinning by.

A forlorn figure sitting hunched over herself, away from the others, caught Akraz's eye. His heart stopped, then raced. He knew the shade of that hair, the slope of those breasts, the curve of those thighs.

Laya.

"You may have the elf slave girl to keep if you wish," Zathstragomal said from the armchair behind Akraz. "But perhaps you have tired of her and want another. Or perhaps you might want to try a boy. You may have your pick of any of those you see in the garden. I am tired of them and will want a new batch soon anyway." He laughed unpleasantly. "You can even have a try at my daughter, if you like, though I doubt you would enjoy her embrace."

Akraz noticed the girl in black, standing inside the pavilion. He wondered if the rumors about Strathgora were true. It was said that her father had raised her since birth upon a diet of pure poison, so that today her bloodstream flowed with it, and even the pores of her skin exuded it. Anyone who touched her bare flesh died from the contact. It was also said that she was a witch in her own right, and that her heart was even colder than her father's. In any case, Akraz was certainly not mad enough to ask for the wizard's own daughter.

Possibly this was another trick question, another probe to find out how much Akraz valued Laya for herself and not just for her winsome body. He had to admit that most of the girls in the garden were beautiful, but he had eyes only for Laya. It pained him to have to depend on Zathstragomal's whims to ask to keep her.

"If you please, Master, I still find the elf slave amusing," Akraz said. "I would keep her, if you will it."

"Once we conquer Sylvindell, she is yours. Along with what additional elf slaves as may fall to you for your share of the booty."

"Thank you, Master."

"I expect you to put her through her paces tomorrow night, that our guests might share your amusement in her, Akraz."

"Of course, Master."

"And," Zathstragomal leaned back in his chair, "We will have some fun with her right now. You and I and one other."

Akraz's hands curled into fists. There was nothing, nothing he could do to protect Laya from being used as a toy of the wizard.

Unless... Akraz suddenly knew what he must do. But would she do it? Would she tell him the location and pass words into her precious city, Sylvindell?

Chapter Eight

Laya kept her head bowed as instructed, as she followed Strathgora down the dark hall. No other guards accompanied them, and though Laya wore nothing but jewels, nipple clamps and chastity belt, she wondered at Strathgora's confidence. Even if she knew any martial arts, the frail young woman bore no weapons, and those thick brocade skirts must hamper her. All she had changed since the garden was to remove her gloves.

As if discerning Laya's thoughts, Strathgora smiled with weird confidence. "If you wish to try to escape, would not now be a good time? You have only a younger and less experienced woman to contend with, unarmed at that. Well," she laughed at a private joke, "I have bare arms, of course, so I am not entirely unarmed."

Sensing a trap, Laya ignored the challenge. Instead, she tilted her head at the wizard's daughter. "What about you, Strathgora? Do you ever dream of escaping this place, and your place in it?"

Strathgora lifted her hand to slap Laya. The elf maid steeled herself for the blow, but a fraction of an inch from her cheek, Strathgora held her hand in check.

"If I allowed my palm to brush your cheek, even in a caress, never mind a slap, you would buckle over in pain, vomit, bleed from the ears and nose, soil yourself, and finally die." Strathgora dropped her hand. "I am no different from the other poison flowers in the garden. Tears just help me to thrive."

Strathgora pointed to the door at the end of the hall. "That is where you are to go. Take this, but do not unlock yourself without my father's permission, or you will regret it."

The wizard's daughter dropped a tiny silver key into Laya's palm. Laya walked alone down the rest of the corridor. With each step, she was keenly aware of the phalluses penetrating her fore and aft. Her nipples and clit felt stimulated by the jangling of the jeweled clamps. It was worse than being naked.

Gods of Light, she prayed silently. Please protect me.

Stepping through the door, she found herself in one of Zathstragomal's perverse playrooms. A black throne dominated a room of other toys, including a flat black couch, chains on the wall and dangling from the ceiling, a swing of dubious purpose, a garden of stone phalluses sprouting from the floor at various heights. Whips, tongs and paddles hung from hooks. A screen partitioned off one corner of the chamber.

As was to be expected, Zathstragomal sprawled in the throne.

"Let me look at you," he ordered Laya. "Turn around slowly with your arms behind your neck."

She did as he commanded.

"Good, good," he said. "You have the key? Yes? Good. Keep it for now. I have a surprise for you. A reunion of old friends. Go stand behind the screen for now."

This surprised her, but not as much as the fact that behind the screen, she encountered Akraz. She almost blurted his name and hugged him, but he cautioned her with a finger to his mouth. He put his arms around her, but stealthily, so that no sound hinted at what they were doing behind the screen.

"Does he know you are here?" whispered Laya.

"Of course," Akraz said bitterly, pitched so low only Laya could hear. "All part of some sick game he means to play with us. Laya, I know him. Whatever he does tonight, however painful or humiliating, is just the beginning. We have only one chance, and you must trust me. You must tell me the location and entry words to Sylvindell."

"Here? Now?" Laya stiffened in his arms. "Why?"

"By the gods of Light, by whom I have never sworn before," said Akraz, low and fierce. "Trust me. This once, just trust me and tell me."

Laya hesitated. He squeezed her shoulders in a desperate, wordless plea, and she melted. They were already whispering. But Laya drew his ear even closer to impart information she had never imagined she would voluntarily share with any goblin, not even Akraz. As soon as she did it, she saw the triumphant gleam in his eyes, and she regretted her impulse. Exactly because she felt so deeply for him, she could not trust her own judgments him. Many a lover had a lover betrayed. If Akraz betrayed her, it would break more than one elf maid's heart, it would break the crown of Chavana.

She could not undo what she had done. Her fate and the fate of all free elves and humans in Chavana now rested in the hands of a goblin general.

On the other side of the screen, Zathstragomal warned them loudly, "Stay hidden and silent now. Our final guest is on his way. Watch closely but do not show yourselves until I so command."

The door to the chamber opened again. Driven by morbid curiosity, Akraz and Laya leaned forward to peek through the slats in the screen.

"Ah," smirked Zathstragomal. "The guest of honor."

A naked male elf entered the room. He wore a harness and belt, like the playthings in the Garden of Poisons, but his backside bore the welts of many whippings, and there was still a shred of defiance clinging to him.

"Crawl to me, slave," ordered Zathstragomal.

The elf stiffened. With visible difficulty, he mastered his pride, bent to all fours, and crawled like a dog before the black throne.

"Very good, your lessons are finally taking, I see," chuckled Zathstragomal. "Do you forget that you agreed to submit yourself to me willingly?"

The elf muttered something. Zathstragomal slapped him.

"No, Master," the elf said in a louder voice. His head shot up, and for the first time, Akraz and Laya saw his face full on. Laya gasped so audibly that Akraz clapped his hand over her mouth.

It was Lathaniel.

"You came to me, elf," the wizard continued to gloat. "You gave yourself over to me of your own free will."

"Yes, Master."

"Now you will perform for me, and for some guests of ours behind the screen."

Lathaniel glanced sharply toward the screen.

"Oh you'll meet them soon enough. I just wanted you to know that you have an avid audience. Why don't you start by giving my cock a good licking."

Zathstragomal opened his robes. Underneath, he wore nothing. His organ lay flaccid against his thigh. Lathaniel gritted his teeth. He leaned into the wizard's lap and began to lick the penis. It grew slowly under this attention. Zathstragomal shoved the cock full into Lathaniel's mouth, grabbed the elf's hair and forced his head to bob up and down on the organ.

Laya began to weep silently into Akraz's hand.

"Laya," he whispered. "I didn't know. I swear. I thought he escaped."

She turned her head into his shoulder. "I can't bear to watch."

"You love him, don't you?" he asked softly.

"Yes." Yes, Laya realized. She loved Lathaniel. And at last she understood why she had never been able to take him as a lover, or contemplate marrying him. They had been raised together. She loved him like a brother. She could not stand to see him sexually degraded before her.

"Enough," the wizard said, meanwhile. He had not ejaculated, indeed, was still only partially erect. He pulled a key from his robe and undid the belt Lathaniel wore. With a swift yank that made Lathaniel wince, the wizard removed the phallus that had been plugging Lathaniel's anus. He shoved the phallus into Lathaniel's mouth.

"This is fit only for your mouth. It does not stretch your ass nearly enough. Do you see the stone phallus sticking out of the ground, the one carved like a goblin sticking out his tongue? Go impale yourself on that. You must lower yourself all the way until you can rest your knees on the floor. Then lean back and grab your ankles with your hands."

Lathaniel obeyed. His face turned ashen with the effort to take the entire stone tongue into his ass. Holding his ankles forced his chest back and his hips forward lewdly. The phallus and belt still stuffed his mouth. Zathstragomal, robe flung carelessly open, picked a slim leather rod from a selection on the wall.

Zathstragomal stroked Lathaniel's strained face, then fondled Lathaniel's balls and cock. The member jumped in his hand, much more eagerly than the wizard's own jaded organ had responded to greater stimulation.

"Still so fresh, so eager," chuckled Zathstragomal. Lathaniel's face burned with humiliation.

The little black rod went to work then, snapping at Lathaniel's cock. The elf lord's member engorged with blood. It bobbed and danced eagerly for the rod. Lathaniel thrashed and whimpered on the stone tongue that impaled him, tormented by the sadistic mix of pain and pleasure. His efforts to both escape from and offer himself to the black rod caused him to bounce up and down on the stone tongue. Whenever his excitement threatened to build into orgasm, Zathstragomal slowed the flicks of the rod into taunting caresses, then increased the tempo again if the organ began to flag.

The wizard tossed away the little black rod and picked out a new, longer whip. "Get up. Walk forward with your hands touching your feet. Don't drop the cock in your mouth."

Lathaniel tried to follow these instructions, but it was difficult for him. He was clearly still sore from the stone phallus, and the position was awkward in any case. Zathstragomal drove him forward with slashes of the whip on Lathaniel's upturned buttocks. The wizard chased the elf all around the room with this debasing game. By the finish, Lathaniel ended up before the low black couch. Here Zathstragomal issued new orders, forcing Lathaniel to lie across the couch with his head hanging down one side and his buttocks hanging over the other edge, legs spread.

At some time during the whippings, Zathstragomal had found arousal in the elf's shame and pain, and now hard, he positioned his cock at the precipice of Lathaniel's anus.

"Remind me again how you came to me, elf," mocked Zathstragomal.

"Of my own free will," wept Lathaniel.

"Then you must want this."

"Yes, Master."

"Tell me, slave!"

"Fuck me, Master. Please fuck me."

The wizard laughed and shoved himself rough and hard into the prostrate elf. He slapped Lathaniel's welted, tender buttocks as he pounded his cock deep into his cheeks.

"I think it's time you met our guests," said Zathstragomal. He reached down and grabbed the loose ends of the chastity belt, yanking the chains backward. Since Lathaniel still gagged on the phallus, this forced the elf lord's face to jerk up just as Akraz and Laya stepped out from behind the screen.

"Behold your betrothed and her goblin lover," mocked Zathstragomal.

He did not stop his fucking but continued to ram Lathaniel's ass, while forcing the elf to stare at the two people the elf lord must least have wished to witness his degradation. Laya could not guess what depths of humiliation Lathaniel must have felt in that moment.

His face, which had been flushed and tearstained, first drained of all blood, then deepened into crimson purple. His eyes bugged. Tears flowed again, tears of utter shame and despair.

The elf lord's misery so excited the wizard that he reached his climax. He pulled out at the last minute, in order to do Lathaniel the final disgrace of soiling him with a rain of cum. It splattered all over his hair and back.

"Well, now." The wizard shook off his cock a final time and reseated himself with aplomb on his throne. "Isn't this a cozy reunion? Just as I promised. Of course, we really have Akraz to thank."

Laya expected Akraz to deny this or at least look surprised. To her dismay, Akraz acknowledged the wizard's statement with a bow.

"Now, Lathaniel," continued the wizard, calling the elf lord by his name for the first time. "You hoped to find your betrothed, the exquisite Laya, and here she is. You see that I keep my word. Isn't she luscious? You've played quite a few sex games during your days here, with no relief for your own needs. You've had cocks in your mouth and cocks in your ass, and no sweet cunt for your own cock. Not exactly fair, is it? But here is your betrothed at last, naked and ready for a good fuck."

Lathaniel lifted himself off the couch. His cock stood hard at attention. A wild, mindless mix of lust and hurt and need contorted his expression. He took a step toward Laya.

"Lathaniel, no," said Laya.

"On the other hand," sighed Zathstragomal. "I did promise her to Akraz, didn't I, Akraz?"

"Yes, Master," Akraz said flatly.

"Akraz is the one who lured you here by kidnapping your betrothed, Lathaniel. Or perhaps she came of her own free will. Maybe she enjoys being fucked by a goblin. After all, our Akraz is no ordinary goblin, just look at that handsome mug. Maybe she prefers his cock to yours, Lathaniel."

The elf lord growled low in his throat, like an animal.

"She wears a chastity belt, and has the key to it which she may give to whomever she chooses. I do think we should leave the choice up to her, don't you agree?" Zathstragomal turned to Laya. "You are going to lie down on that couch, spread your legs and take a cock into your cunt. The only question is who shall have the pleasure. Your betrothed? Or the general?"

Laya froze in horror. She looked from Lathaniel to Akraz.

"Laya, why are you hesitating, you whore! You belong to me! I gave up everything for you!" shouted Lathaniel. Enraged beyond reason, he rushed at her, snatched the silver key out of her hands and fumbled open the lock on her belt. With no hint of love, only animal need, he shoved her onto the black couch. He withdrew the brass phalluses

that plugged her, so violently that she cried out. She tried to push him off her, but madness gave him strength.

"No! Lathaniel, you don't know what your doing! You will hate yourself if you do this!"

A beefy hand grabbed Lathaniel by the shoulder and tossed him across the room. Akraz stood protectively between Laya and the furious elf. Lathaniel scrambled back to his feet.

"Leave my betrothed alone!" the elf screamed. "That whore is mine by right!"

"Akraz, don't let him take me," begged Laya. "Take me yourself, but don't let him do something he can never repent."

The look Akraz gave her was inscrutable. He nodded, once. Aloud, he addressed the wizard. "Master, the lady has made her choice. Obviously, she prefers a real man to an elf pretty boy. With your permission, I would like to put the pipsqueak in his place."

"If that's what the lady wants," smirked Zathstragomal.

Akraz stalked Lathaniel and forced the elf against a wall, where Akraz snapped Lathaniel's wrists into a pair of shackles. Tears of impotent rage streaked down the elf lord's face.

Akraz returned to Laya. Though he wore his true face, the handsome features were cold as stone. He pushed her back onto the black couch. Her legs straddled either side of the narrow bed. He pulled down his pants. Without any preliminaries, Akraz knelt between her thighs and entered her.

From the wall, Lathaniel howled.

After hours of the cold metal phallus, Akraz's shaft felt like hot velvet. Laya could not blame Lathaniel for his mindless descent into lust. She too had been tormented with sexual stimulation without relief and could not help shutting her eyes to lose herself in Akraz's powerful thrusts. She knew he wanted to keep his motions mechanical in order to finish the business as quickly as possible, but he too lost himself, and began to knead her breasts with his palms. He removed the nipple clamps and clit clip but the sensitized flesh seemed to vibrate with every thrust of Akraz's cock.

She came in a frenzy of writhing under him. He continued to work her in a relentless rhythm, and a moment later she came again. Her vagina squeezed his cock inside her. "By the Dark God, Laya," he gasped.

"Come where I can see!" snapped a petulant voice from the throne.

Akraz withdrew and spurted his seed over Laya's belly and breasts. Zathstragomal clapped in delight.

"Excellent. Akraz, with me. We have plans to discuss, and I am sure that the two betrothed have some loving words for one another."

Akraz laced up his pants. He followed his master out of the room without a single backward glance at Laya. Even though he had only done what she'd asked, or rather

what he had no choice in doing, she felt suddenly used and bereft. She wiped herself off as best she could with her hand, since she had no handkerchief at her disposal.

Lathaniel dangled in his chains, listless, drained of both anger and caring. His cock remained hard. He would not look at her, and she found she could not meet his eyes either. She had expected tortures of extreme physical abuse in Zathstragomal's dungeons. How little she had fathomed the depths to which he could twist and hurt people's spirits through the manipulation of pleasure.

* * * * *

"That's what the elf wench told you?"

"Yes, Master." They had returned to the wizard's study.

Zathstragomal nodded thoughtfully. "As I said before, you've done well, Akraz. I have a gift of new armor and weapons for you to wear to the fete, which you may keep, as you may keep the wench herself. I have a dress for her as well, but that I want back. It is from my swans' collection. The slave will be dressed by my daughter and sent to join you tonight."

"Yes, Master. I thank you."

"Chief Yaguz will see you back to your quarters."

"Yaguz will be disappointed that I am still alive," Akraz said dryly.

"He gets above himself," said Zathstragomal. "He plays his own little power games behind my back and thinks I do not know about them. Never make that mistake, General Akraz. I always know more than you think I do."

Akraz bowed. "I think you know all, Master."

"Only the Dark God knows all, but next to him, I know more than any mortal in Chavana," said the wizard without a trace of modesty or humor. "One day, I will give my daughter to him as his virgin bride. Although the wench has a whore's heart, I know she is a virgin because any man who touches her, dies. The Dark God will make her his Queen of the Thirteen Hells, and elevate me, as his most faithful servant and father-in-law, to godhood myself as a reward. Then I shall indeed be all knowing."

The mere thought chilled Akraz to the bone. "That will be a glorious day."

The dark wizard snapped out of his reverie. His eyes narrowed. "You will, of course, speak to no one of this. Especially not to my daughter."

"Never, my lord. I will only treasure the knowledge of your future glory in my heart as I work your will."

As Akraz bowed obsequiously, he happened to glance up and across the room to the casement window at the far end of the study. A girl in black stood there, her mouth agape in shock and outrage. She met Akraz's eyes for a brief flash. Then she transformed into a black swan and flew out the open casement window the same way she had obviously entered.

Chapter Nine

This time, Strathgora bid the swan maids and peacock boys to doll up Laya in a ball gown of white and gold. They fashioned her hair in a style popular in the human court. Instead of a necklace, however, they fastened a black leather collar with a silver ring at the back around Laya's throat. Matching black leather cuffs encircled her wrists.

"It's an enchanted gown," Strathgora said, with her usual cynicism. "We call it the bodice-ripper. Try not to tear it."

As usual, Laya didn't understand Strathgora's little inside joke. Laya couldn't be sure—it was hard to tell with such a cold girl—but it seemed to her that Strathgora's mood had turned fouler. The girl in black paced and brooded and the pleasure slaves had to ask her for instructions several times before she remembered their presence and snapped out orders.

"Oh don't mind me," Strathgora said in response to Laya's sidelong glances. "I'm always a bit peckish right before I have to poison someone."

Chief Yaguz and a detail of guards escorted Laya to the door of the Hall of the Dark God. He stopped there, awaiting something. Laya peeked into the Hall.

Over a hundred pillars of black marble supported the vaulted ceiling of this tremendous hall. At the far end, a moat of fire burned around a statue, many stories tall, of the Dark God, Overlord of the Thirteen Hells. The phallus of the statue bridged the moat of fire and also served as the altar bed where each year a virgin was sacrificed to the deity. Smaller statues of the Thirteen Demon Underlords of the hells surrounded their god. These were life-size, slightly larger than a man, and naked slaves of both sexes had been chained, impaled, upon their stone phalluses.

Other naked slaves in nothing but black halters and chastity belts served platters of food and drink to the milling guests. The guests themselves all wore the finest silks and brocades, hats and jewels and beribboned boots that coin could buy. Laya recognized many of the lords and ladies who had gone over to Zathstragomal in order to save themselves. There were also a number of new faces boasting the heraldry of ancient houses of Chavana. These latter must have been the quislings and usurpers installed in the place of lords whom the wizard had conquered, but who had chosen torture and death rather than service to the Dark God.

At the far end of the room, standing high over the crowd in a throne held aloft in the stone palm of the Dark God's statue, the wizard Zathstragomal the Malicious pontificated to the assembly. From this distance, Laya only caught fragments of it, but what she heard was enough to make her blanch. He boasted that he had acquired the secret of the hidden elf citadel, Sylvindell, doomed soon to fall to his army. And

Zathstragomal also gloated that the feared elven warrior, Nemesis, had been captured by Akraz the Terrible.

The crowd parted for a mighty-thewed masked man in a splendid black uniform. Laya's heart skipped a beat. She would recognize him in any mask, in any face.

"I'll take her from here," Akraz said to Yaguz. The Chief of Secret Police shrugged and backed off.

Akraz held a black leash in one hand, a black leather crop in the other. Without ado, he linked the ring at the end of the leash to the rings in the muffs around Laya's wrists. He jerked her forward so hard she fell against his chest.

"You know what's going to happen here," he hissed in her ear. "Endure."

Akraz strode back into the Hall of the Dark God, dragging Laya behind him on the leash by her wrists. His stride was too wide for her to keep up, so no matter how she tried, she ended up half tripping and staggering after him.

"Behold the mighty elf warrior!" rang out Zathstragomal's mocking voice. "Behold the flower of elven maidenhood chained and used as a cheap whore!"

The crowd applauded and laughed. They thronged around the center of the room where Akraz stopped so abruptly that Laya lost her balance and fell to her knees at his feet. The crowd applauded again.

Akraz lifted Laya back to her feet by her hair. He unfastened the leash and instead chained her wrists to the ring at the back of neck collar. This forced her elbows behind her head and caused her breasts to thrust forward. With a swift motion, Akraz grabbed the flimsy white material of Laya's bodice and ripped. The bodice tore open. Laya's pale pink-nipple globes tumbled out for all to see. Her cheeks colored. Just in case anyone did not have a good view of her naked breasts, Akraz grabbed her neck collar and twisted her like a rag doll, this way and that, so that she thrust out her bosom to each section of the audience in turn.

He next grabbed bunches of her skirts and ripped these open. He tore the frilly petticoats beneath, as well, until the entire front panel of her once beautiful gown hung in shreds. Akraz used the crop to flip aside the last tatters and display Laya's bare legs and shaved quim to the audience. They hooted their appreciation in a manner no less lewd than the goblins in the army had done.

She anticipated his next move. He shoved her around, and tore asunder her dress again, this time from the back, to expose her *derrière*. With the riding crop, he slapped her buttocks, forcing her to scamper hither and thither to flee the blows. Each snap of the crop raised a pink welt and a laugh from the crowd. Tears sparkled in her eyes, though Laya fought them, to deprive the crowd of the satisfaction of knowing her humiliation.

"On your knees, slave," Akraz commanded in ringing tones. She sank to the floor before him. He unfastened his britches. His member, already erect, slid out and jutted into the air. "Suck my cock."

Laya shut her eyes. She could do this. She had done it before. She just had to remember that it was Akraz, no matter how cruel or impersonal he had to treat her to fool the others.

She lifted herself up onto her knees. Her arms were still pinned behind her neck, so she had to reach for the cock with her tongue. His skin tasted salty and damp. She licked in long strokes that started from the base and went to the tip, and tiny darting strokes that flickered in and out against the bobbing head.

"Nemesis the Cock Kicker has become Nemesis the Cocklicker!" someone shouted. Laughter reverberated throughout the Hall and many voices took up and repeated the jest.

"Take it in your mouth," ordered Akraz.

Laya captured the tip of his member with her tongue and pulled it down to slide it into her mouth. She began to work the cock deeper into her throat, back and forth, but even so, she could barely contain a third of the staff.

Akraz had other ideas. He tangled his hands in her hair and began to direct the motions of her head. He forced himself deeper and deeper into her. When she started to gag on his thrusts, he backed off, but then began again, slowly training her to take more of him with each forward plunge. He had total control of her head. His cock became her whole world; she shut her eyes and concentrated on letting it overflow her mouth.

"She takes that monster like a real whore," a voice called out over the general din of boorish catcalls.

Akraz let her ease up. Now using just one hand, he rowed her head back and forth only over the end of his cock. With his free hand, he chafed the base of his own member with rough, quick motions.

"Roll my cock head under your tongue," ordered Akraz.

Laya, still nodding up and down on his member, employed her tongue as vigorously as she could inside her mouth. A groan rose out of his chest. He yanked her off him just as his cum spurted out of his cock, creaming her face and naked breasts with his spray. Laya rocked back on her heels, breathless, dazed.

Surely it was over now. The crowd jeered and applauded, but they also began to disperse, and resume their previous pattern of milling about in small cliques. The naked slaves with trays of food and alcohol reappeared too. Akraz attached the leash to the back of Laya's collar, without releasing her hands, and forced her to her feet. Surely he would take her home to his den to sooth and comfort her now.

How wrong she was. The ordeal had only started. Akraz propelled Laya before him as he made his rounds of the crowd. Every petty lord and quisling who had sworn allegiance to Zathstragomal the Malicious wanted to come congratulate the wizard's Goblin General in person—and ogle his conquered elf slave girl. Many of these lords had lost battles to Akraz the Terrible. Or worse, they had surrendered to his army without any pretence at resistance at all, out of gibbering fear. It made them feel good

about their own cravenness to gloat over the elf warrior maiden who had been reduced to sucking the cock of her conqueror.

The hardest for Laya to endure were the encounters with the lords and ladies she knew personally. Here came fat Lord Augutte Umberfall, and his equally vicious wife, Lady Pernicia Umberfall, and their coterie of lesser sycophants. Once, as Nemesis, Laya had ridden three days and nights to warn the lord of Umberfall of an imminent attack by Zathstragomal's army – under the command of Akraz the Terrible, as she recalled – and instead of heeding her warning the disgusting human man had tried to lure, then force her into his bedroom. When she repulsed him with her bow and arrow, he had her thrown out of his castle. Needless to say, he'd ignored her warning, and mere days later had been groveling at Zathstragomal's feet for mercy.

"Well, well," sneered Lord Augutte Umberfall. "The virginal Nemesis proves no better than the harlot I knew her to be all along."

Laya had wondered why she had been dressed in silken finery, only to have it shredded from her body. Why not just force her to go completely naked, like the slaves serving drinks? She realized now that it had been to make a point. She had once been an equal of these lords and ladies. No longer. Now all her most private parts thrust forth prominently, bare and splattered with cum.

"Make the whore suck my cock, too," demanded Lord Augutte Umberfall. His red face beaded with lust. "Right here! Right now!"

Laya shrank back toward Akraz. *Oh gods of Light! Please, no!*

"No," said Akraz. "She belongs to me. But you may watch as I touch her. Spread your legs, slave!"

Heat burned her face – and her pussy. She spread her legs. Lord Augutte Umberfall licked his lips as he examined her splayed cunt.

The black crop snapped across her labia. Laya mewed in surprise at the bite of the blow. The tip of the rod prodded her outer lips open, followed by another quick switch. She bit down this time to keep herself from emitting any degrading whines. The rod prodded again, deeper into her folds. It stroked the insides of her labia. The path it traced teased close to her clit while avoiding the nub itself. Despite herself, Laya swayed on the balls of her feet, undulating her hips to try to rub her clit against the elusive tip.

Instead, the crop took her by surprise. This time the snap and sting found her nipples in quick succession. She cried out. Before the tingling in her nipples could subside, the crop tapped each one several times in turn, lighter blows that merely kept the sensation of the first vibrating.

Something splashed her stinging breasts. Laya, who had not even been aware of closing her eyes, opened them in surprise. Akraz had taken Lord Augutte Umberfall's wine from his hand and spilled it over her bosom. Now red droplets of liquid slithered down her heaving breasts. He brought the crop to them again in a rain of light smacks, amplified by her wet flesh.

None of the blows hurt in and of itself, but the succession of them, the uncertainty of whether they would come as hard stings or soft pats, in fast percussion patterns or slow strokes, on the nipple itself or on the underside or top slope of her upthrust globes, this helpless feeling drove her into a frenzy. She thrashed so wildly that Akraz had to tighten her leash to force her to remain under his lashing. She mewled and begged with wordless squeals for relief. Her breasts swelled. The nipples hardened and engorged.

Just when she began to lose track of the individual blows under the avalanche of sensation in her swollen, burning, throbbing breasts, the crop returned again to her cunt. She flowed with arousal already. The smacks the crop made were wet with her own juices. A few stinging blows sensitized her to the teasing prods. Each tiny poke made her jump and thrust forward with her hips.

Dimly, she could still hear the lewd chuckles of the audience avid for the spectacle she provided. Tears of shame streaked her cheeks at the thought of what she must look like to them, but nothing could stop her from yelping in ecstasy when the crop suddenly drove itself deep into her pussy and began to jog up and down with swift friction. The slender pointed stick was not the kind of impalement she had been used to with either the phalluses or Akraz's own generously sized member, but in its own way it was just as demanding a taskmaster. Akraz sawed it in her cunt very fast, and it was long as well. At times she had to dance on her toes to keep it from lifting her off the ground.

But it could not fill her or relieve her cunt. She hovered on the edge of orgasm without crossing it. Her frustration built into a wail.

"Please! Please, Akraz, please!"

The crop withdrew. Empty, unfulfilled, Laya stumbled after Akraz, who had already bid the lords and ladies his excuses to move on.

Another group of Zathstragomal's pet lords rushed into the opening. Akraz greeted them and began to play Laya like an instrument for their entertainment all over again. This time he forced her to bend over to let her hair drape on the ground, such that her buttocks lifted before the onlookers. He spanked her soundly with the crop until she wagged her tail lewdly for her laughing audience. Then he shoved the tip of the crop into her anus and rolled it between his hands until the heat from the friction began to burn her into a new flurry of tears and pleas for relief.

Akraz continued to circulate amongst the admiring guests, and he seemed to have new tricks to degrade Laya for every new clique. Later in the evening, he unchained her wrists from her neck, so he could make her crawl before him on all fours. He made her try to hold a wine bottle between her clenched thighs and pour it into a glass for a guest, then spanked her when she spilled – and while he spanked her, she still had to squeeze the bottle. He also forced her to touch herself, caress her reddened breasts and rub her clit, in front of the sniggering lords and ladies.

Over and over, he drove her to the point of climax, then denied it to her in the last possible moment. How he knew her so well that he could tell within seconds when she might go over the edge, she did not go. She hated him for it.

But through it all, he never made her service anyone else, nor did he allow anyone else to touch her.

* * * * *

Akraz knew he was a thrice-damned bastard. A part of him enjoyed displaying his raw sexual power over his beautiful elf slave girl. That dark part of his soul thrilled to the way she panted for him, inspiring envy of his ownership of such a woman in those around him.

And another dark corner in his soul wanted to punish her for expecting no more of him. She had made that perfectly clear in Zathstragomal's sex dungeon. She had wanted to protect Lathaniel from debasing himself by raping her. *Don't let him do something he can never repent.* Lathaniel had a soul worth protecting, even from himself.

And Akraz?

Take me yourself. Akraz had nowhere to fall. He was already as low as a rutting beast. So she might as well let him take her, if she must be taken.

Very well then, tonight he had shown her just how low he could go. He had debased her in every way he knew; and in so doing, debased himself as well. And, worst of all, he'd enjoyed it as much as she had.

Finally, he was damned because all he had to offer her was the darkness in him, and though some streak of darkness in her responded to his lustful touch, it wasn't enough. He wanted more. He wanted something from her that could only be born of the gods of Light.

You love him, don't you? He had asked her about the elf lord.

Yes.

She would fuck Akraz. But she loved Lathaniel.

And, as he carried Laya from the Hall of the Dark God, he cradled her body limp from hours of being used and aroused and spanked, he couldn't blame her. Of course she hated him. He hated himself.

Akraz carried Laya into the midnight air of a cool balcony, one of the castle's ramparts. He stretched out her body on a marble bench. Within, the fete continued. *Soon, Akraz promised her silently. Soon I will make it all up to you. Then you will be free, your people safe, and you will have your precious Lathaniel. And I will be out of your life forever.* He had gambled everything that his plan would work, but he did not expect to survive to claim the victory. Victory would be meaningless without Laya by his side in any case, so he cared not.

Gently, he peeled away her ruined dress. Her naked body shone in the moonlight. The stripes where he had whipped her across her breasts, buttocks and thighs clearly

stood out against her pale skin. None of the welts had drawn blood, but he felt ashamed all the same. Her lashes fluttered against her cheeks. She looked up at him with her huge emerald eyes. Hunger burned in their depths.

“Akraz,” she begged. “Don’t leave me like this. Give me what I need.”

He had aroused her again and again, yet denied her climax. He couldn’t stand the thought of those strangers sharing the ecstasy of that most personal of all emotions. Even now, he knew it would be best to wait until he had her back in his den to satiate her. But they were alone on balcony. With her nude body stretched out on the marble bench like a sacrifice before him, his cock pulsed in his britches. He could not wait, and neither could she.

He traced a single finger down the curve of her cheek. It brushed her mouth. She suckled it. He dipped the finger deeper into her mouth and felt her lave it with her tongue. Then the fingertip moved on, down her neck. He traced lazy circles around her breasts. He pressed in one nipple. She gasped. He repeated the featherlight pattern on the other breast, and pressed that nipple too. His touch was light, barely a pressure, but her skin, especially all of her sexual parts, had been so sensitized by the night’s activities, that the least touch felt magnified.

His finger resumed its journey down her hyper soft flesh. He tapped it against her clit, and she buckled from the single touch.

“Please, oh, please,” she begged. She raised her hips, lifting herself to him as an offering. A warm surge of power and tenderness flooded him. She was so vulnerable, so helpless, so desperate for his touch.

He wiggled his finger in the barest of motions, a mere flickering of his fingertip against her engorged clit. She gushed with wetness. Her thighs clenched and spread, entreating his hand to use her harder. He refused the silent plea. The tease continued as the lightest of tickles on her clit. Yet he knew the sensation was mounting. She writhed beneath him in the most delightful fashion. He loved the way her tongue unconsciously lapped her lips, the wild circles traced by her jiggling breasts. Her toes pointed. Her whole body thrashed and bucked in response to the tip-tapping of his one finger. She danced for him. All for him.

With his other hand, he unlaced the front of his britches. He pulled out his hard cock and wagged it in tempo with her rocking hips.

She arched her head back and screamed.

He clutched her knees and spread them to the sides of her breasts, while he silenced her scream of ecstasy with a hard, demanding kiss. His cock was more than ready for her. In he plunged to her hot, yawning pussy. He felt her inner muscles clutch at him, squeeze his cock in welcome. He pressed her knees wider and further, almost to the bench, so that she was spread completely, with no way to hide her charms or control the depth of his entrance. Her cunt opened fully to him. He penetrated to the hilt of his considerable length. He drew back slowly, then drove in again. Slow, sensuous strokes alternated with fierce, rapid thrusts. His cock rubbed every part of her sheath, deep,

deep inside. All the while, his tongue plundered her mouth, in mirror image to the way his cock plundered her cunt.

She wrapped her legs around his back and matched his thrusts with her own. His hands left her knees. Back arched, he clutched her breasts and kneaded them.

"Tell me you belong to me!" he commanded.

"I belong to you."

"Tell me you want only me!"

"I want only you."

"Tell me you love me," he ordered. His voice cracked. Roughly, he said it again. "Tell me you love me and only me! Say it!"

"I love you," she panted. "I love you, Akraz, I love you, I love you!"

To the beat of those sweet lies, rapture poured through him, and out of him, and emptied him of himself as his cum spurted hot and deep into her pulsating cunt.

"I love you, I love you," she said over and over, even after he collapsed on top of her. He buried his face in her hair, wanting to weep. He had ordered her to say it, just as he had ordered her to pleasure him a thousand perverse ways this evening. She had obeyed, to save her life and the life of the elf lord she truly loved. Her compliance, her need for him, addicted him like wine. She awakened in him all his darkest possessiveness and lust. But he could not fool himself. Declarations made under coercion meant nothing.

"I love you," she moaned into his neck. He did not have the heart to silence her.

But he knew better than to believe her.

Chapter Ten

Akraz rolled off Laya. He had fucked her fully dressed, but now he removed his black tunic to give to her. She wiggled into it. The hem reached her thighs. She looked as striking in black as in white.

A flutter of black wings interrupted his reverie. A black swan landed on the rampart and transformed into an ebon-haired beauty with purple eyes. She wore black gloves, a high-collared black dress, and a hooded, floor-length black cape.

In his arms, Laya stirred and tried to collect herself. "Strathgora?"

"I have come to collect," said the wizard's daughter with a weird smile.

"Collect?" Akraz asked sharply.

"The dress, of course," said Strathgora. "It belongs to the Garden collection. It's magic you know. Not easily replaced."

Laya pried herself from Akraz's protective embrace. She picked up the dress where Akraz had dropped it and glanced down ruefully at the tatters of the once exquisite gown. The bodice and skirt had been ripped open. The white silk brocade and frilly petticoats were soiled with wine and semen.

"I'm afraid it's rather ruined," Laya said in a small voice. She glanced sidelong at Akraz. "I'm sorry, I never expected..."

"I did," interrupted Strathgora. "Why do you think I gave you the bodice-ripper? I haven't all night. Give it back."

With a shrug, Laya handed the torn dress to Strathgora, who received it with a black-gloved hand. She shook the tatters in her hands, once, twice and thrice, and the material began to sparkle and billow. Within moments, where rags had been, the shining white gown hung in Strathgora's hands, as crisp and full as new.

"Oh!" exclaimed Laya. "That is magic."

"Yes." Strathgora set aside the dress and drew off her black gloves. "It was a wedding dress fashioned by the wizard Zagor the Cruel, who married a new woman every night and had her murdered in her wedding gown. You can understand that with that many brides, he didn't want to deal with the expense of buying a new dress each time."

"What a charming story," Laya said faintly. "Why are you removing your gloves?"

"Don't worry, my dear, I won't harm you," said Strathgora. "I intend to do you a favor in fact, and kill the brute here who spent the night ravaging you. Of course, after that I will let you take the blame for his murder, and the subsequent wrath of my father."

"You won't get away with it, Strathgora," Akraz warned. He should have seen this coming, he cursed himself. All his scheming would have been for naught if Strathgora eliminated him now.

"Will the brave Goblin General try to run from the touch of a young girl?" mocked Strathgora, advancing on him with her arms stretched out like an eager lover. "Don't forget I also have a winged form."

"If I die from poison, everyone will know you committed the crime, not the elf wench."

"I'll wrap the leash you used on her around your throat to suggest she strangled you. Chief Yaguz will perform the investigation, and if he discovers any discrepancies, he won't care."

"But why?" cried Laya. "Why are you doing this, Strathgora? What have we ever done to you?"

"It's not what we've done," said Akraz. "It's what I know. Isn't it, Strathgora?"

"It's what you know I know, to be precise," she said. "I cannot let you tell my father that I overheard his plans for my future. He must think me ignorant if I am to counter him."

"There's another way, Strathgora," Akraz said, his mind racing. It was not what he had planned, but if he could only convince this heartless bitch... "Help us escape. Me, Laya and the elf Lathaniel who is a prisoner in the tower."

"You must be mad."

"Then we'll be gone, no threat to you."

"You'll be no threat to me dead, and that's quite a bit simpler than trying to sneak three people out of Mount Murk," Strathgora pointed out with undeniable logic. She lifted her hand to his face and held it a mere breath away from his cheek. Akraz stood very still.

"I plan to betray your father to the other side," he said, gambling everything. "I am going to warn the elves about his imminent attack on Sylvindell and offer them a way to counter it."

He heard Laya gasp in surprise beside him, but he did not dare wrench his eyes from Strathgora.

"This is your selling point?" she asked dryly.

"Your father will not dare offer you as a virgin bride to the Dark God in the wake of a humiliating defeat," Akraz said. "It will buy you time to plan your own future. Unless you want to be Queen of the Thirteen Hells."

Strathgora shuddered. She was, after all, Akraz reminded himself, quite young. She let her hand fall away from him. Thoughtfully, she replaced her gloves.

"Why the elf in the tower? I can get you two out right now, but he is under guard. My father isn't done playing with him."

Because Laya loves him. "Three, or no deal."

"Very well. But you two must leave first, now, while I have you here. It will take me longer to reach the third one, but he will join you later."

Akraz hesitated. Nothing would stop her from going back on her word, if she even understood the concept of a word of honor. But he hesitated to push his luck any further.

"Agreed."

Strathgora slipped her hand into a pocket on the inside of her cape from whence she procured two tiny vials. "Drink this. It will turn you each into birds. Fly due west for the rest of the night, but land before sunrise. The magic will wear off with the changeover of the light. If you forget to land, you will plummet to your deaths. I saw it happen to a white swan once. It took us a week to clean up the mess." She wrinkled her nose.

Akraz took the vials. At least he didn't need to speculate if they contained poison. Strathgora would not need to bother. He handed one vial to Laya.

"On the count of three?" He raised an inquiring brow. Laya nodded. "One...two...three!"

They swallowed the potion.

* * * * *

Akraz had expected them to become swans, like the captives in the Garden of Poisons, or Strathgora herself. Instead, they became two eagles. He gave silent thanks for the power and wingspan of eagle form as they flew, for they had but six hours before dawn to fly past the regions of Chavana under the control of Zathstragomal's minions.

They could not speak to one another, but with screams they urged one another on to a final burst of speed as the eastern horizon began to lighten. They could see the campfires and tents of an army in the hills ahead. The question was, whose army? Akraz recognized the banners of several human lords, but that told him nothing. Had the soldiers of these lords submitted to Zathstragomal, or did they represent a strike force loyal to the Lost King?

Akraz wanted to fly past the army, just to be on the safe side. The first rays of light peeked over the edge of the earth already, however, and he could feel his wings tingle. Even if dawn had not threatened them, Akraz could see that Laya was exhausted. They dared fly no further.

The landing of two eagles aroused only minor curiosity in the soldiers who were just waking to prepare their morning grub—until the kiss of dawn fell full on the two birds and they underwent the transformation into elf and goblin.

"Akraz!" said Laya. "I'm sorry... I'm so tired..." She passed out in his arms.

A dozen soldiers with swords drawn tightened a noose around them. Akraz had transformed with his true face showing. Still, what the soldiers saw could not have

looked good—a large man in the black uniform of Zathstragomal holding a naked, whipped woman in his arms.

The soldiers looked grim. They sent one of their number to go inform a leader, someone named “Hunter”, of the situation and then held their vigil around Akraz in silence until Hunter arrived.

As soon as Akraz saw Hunter, Akraz knew this must be *the* Hunter, a notorious thorn in the side of Zathstragomal.

“Nemesis!” said Hunter, upon seeing Laya. He reached to take her from Akraz’s arms. Akraz cradled her against his chest and growled. Hunter paused.

“It’s like that, is it?” Hunter’s eyes narrowed. He jerked a gesture to his soldiers. “Escort them both to my tent.”

* * * * *

Hunter’s tent was larger than Akraz’s den back under Mount Murk, and better furnished. It reminded Akraz of the tent in which Laya had first kept him prisoner. Hunter gestured to a bed—not a cot—a real bed, with sheets and pillows and embroidered blankets. Akraz gently deposited Laya’s naked form modestly between the covers.

“We knew that Nemesis had been captured by goblins,” said Hunter.

Akraz straightened. He faced Hunter. *Here it comes*, Akraz thought. The human will order my death—or torture, followed by death—for what I did to Laya.

“We never expected to see her again,” continued Hunter. He put his hand on Akraz’s shoulder and met his eye. “Thank you for helping her escape.”

Confused, Akraz could only drop his jaw.

“I have never seen an elf with your coloring,” said Hunter. “You are not of Sylvindell.”

He thinks I’m an elf? Akraz touched his own cheek and realized that in his true face, he could pass for a meaty elf. No wonder the human warrior was being solicitous instead of homicidal.

“No,” Akraz said, “I am not of Sylvindell.” He added, “I have been a slave in Zathstragomal’s dungeons since I was a just a child.”

It was the truth, albeit a truth meant to mislead. *But it is the human who has made his judgments based upon skin deep appearances*, Akraz argued with himself. *I’m merely letting him believe what he wants.*

“Was she raped?” Hunter asked softly.

Akraz reddened. He could not answer. Hunter drew his own conclusions from that too. He swore under his breath, cursing Zathstragomal and all goblins. Then, in a wild motion, he whisked his sword out of the sheath across his back.

"I swear by the ancient blade of my forefathers," said Hunter, "I will allow no goblin beast to violate Nemesis again. So witness the gods of Light to my vow! I will escort the two of you myself back to Sylvindell."

This was the last thing Akraz wanted. Yet so strange and otherworldly a light gleamed upon Hunter in that moment, almost like a nimbus of gold, that Akraz could only bow and murmur his thanks.

* * * * *

Laya dreamed of flight. The wind streamed under and over her wings, buoying her aloft. She dipped and dived over a patchwork world of peasants' fields, forests and glittering rivers. In the dream, unlike when she had flown as an eagle, she somehow still had her real body. Akraz flew beside her, also in his real body and with his true face.

Their wings—fingers—touched in the air. He grinned wickedly at her, and then soared above her, out of sight. She banked into a circle in the air, looking for him. Only clouds filled the sapphire horizon.

Skin against skin. Naked, hot flesh slid against her buttocks, settled over her back. Akraz flew over her, touching her, sealing his body on top of hers. She could feel his immense cock prodding the crevice between her ass cheeks. She arched back into him. The wind swept against her breasts, whisking her nipples. The cock pierced her. She emitted an eagle screech of carnal joy. Cock in cunt, they banked and turned together. They glided as one.

"I love you!" Laya cried from the depths of her being. *I love you, I love you.* Even in the darkest hours of her ordeal in the dungeons of Mount Murk, when she had been summoned naked to cater to Zathstragomal's sadistic whims, or when she had been put on display as trophy and a toy to the hateful lords and ladies of the Dark God's hall, Akraz had always been there with her to protect her. She had not minded submitting, if it were to him she submitted. He was the only man who had ever mastered her, and the only man who ever would. "I love you, Akraz."

The warm body filling her and flying with her vanished. She felt empty. Bereft. Where had he gone? Why did he not answer?

Laya began to fall. She flapped her wings, but they were only arms. Horrified, she screamed in terror as she plummeted toward the earth to certain death...

She sat up in a cold sweat. For several moments, she did not know where she was or how she had come to be there. She had been asleep in a comfortable, though narrow, bed. Sunlight warmed the red canvas walls of a tent. In a rush, she remembered Strathgora's potion, the escape from Mount Murk, the journey as birds, the landing within the armed encampment of humans.

Heat suffused her face as she recollected fucking Akraz on the marble bench in the moonlight. Unlike the rest of the evening's sex games, he had not been obligated to satiate her. *Tell me you love me*, he had commanded her.

The falling sensation from her dream returned, as if someone had kicked her stomach. Only now did it dawn on her that he had asked her to vow her love for him. But never, not once, had he told her that he loved her.

A man entered the tent. He wore a human-style scarlet and gold tunic over black britches. The tunic barely fit over his bulging biceps and pecs.

"Akraz?" Laya asked in wonder. "I hardly recognized you in a color other than black."

"I feel like a walking target practice in this garish thing, if you must know. But your friend Hunter seemed to think it would be better to wear this than the armor of a goblin soldier."

"Hunter?" Laya gladdened. "He's here?"

"He mistook me for an elf," Akraz said. He grimaced.

"Ah." Laya's mind raced to consider the possibilities. "That must have avoided certain uncomfortable...ah..."

"It's probably the only reason he didn't skewer me on the spot," Akraz said dryly. "But, Laya, you know I cannot keep up the pretence. I can only maintain my true face for half the day. While we flew here I was pondering what Strathgora said about the magic being broken by the exchange of the sun and moon. Zathstragomal's spell over me is only half broken. I think I must make a choice. I can either wear my true face during the day, or during the night, but not both."

He held up his palm. The wizard's sigil curled there in a ridge of scarred flesh. "As far as I can tell, he has not spied on me since the fete. Probably he thinks I am back in my den sleeping off too much drink and debauchery. But soon he will check on me and track me here. To this camp. To you."

He passed a hand over a furrowed brow. "I can't let that happen. If there is no way to cancel out his spell, as you did last time, then I must leave you, for your own safety."

"Last time, it was the Seeress' arrow which cancelled out the wizard's spell. But I think I may be able to come up with something to keep him from seeing you. I can use a protective shield, less elaborate but similar to the kind that hides our city. However," she touched his hand with hers, "Akraz, I don't think that will free you to wear your true face all the time. I'm not even sure it was the Seer's arrow that broke the spell before. I've been thinking about it, and I don't believe even the Seer has magic stronger than the Deep Fire created by the hand of the Dark God himself."

"And yet the spell was broken. Half broken, at least. If not by the Seer's magic, and not by yours, then what accounts for it?"

"I don't know."

Akraz gazed down at her for a long time. She noticed that he held both his hands in both of hers, as a bridegroom would hold a bride during the handfasting of the marriage ceremony. The simple, unconscious gesture warmed her.

"It would still be best for me to leave you," he said.

"I thought you intended to help my people counter Zathstragomal's plan to conquer Sylvindell."

"Ah, that." His gaze shifted away from hers. "Yes. Of course. Will your people listen to me, though?"

"They think you are an elf. If your plan seems sound, they will listen."

"In that case," he said, "Would you rather I show my true face during the day, to hide that I am a goblin while we are before the eyes of men and elves? Or would you rather I showed my true face by night, when I am alone with you, but admit my goblin nature to the others?"

Laya trembled at the thought of what her own people might do to him if they knew he was the Goblin General, Akraz the Terrible. She might not be able to save his life. Even if she could, she would certainly not be allowed to be with him. How much simpler it would be if no one else knew the truth! Passing him off as an elf from a distant tribe had fallen into their laps like an ideal solution.

"You mustn't let them suspect what you are," Laya said. "Oh—gods—did you tell Hunter your name?"

"He didn't ask. He was more concerned about you. He called you by your battle name, Nemesis."

"Oh thank the gods. We must think of a proper Elven name for you. Something close to your real name, but not so obviously, uh..."

"Goblin?"

"Guttural. Goblins always sound as though they are spitting their names at one another. Elven names should roll off the tongue, like music. How about Acariel? Could you answer to that?"

His expression was strangely bleak. "Yes, Nemesis."

"Why do you call me that?"

"Isn't that the name you would have given in Zathstragomal's dungeon, if I had not already known your true name?"

"Yes," she admitted. Indeed, the wizard had never learned or cared to learn her true name. All he'd wanted from her were the passwords to Sylvindell. "I see what you mean."

For some reason, though, it bothered her. *It doesn't matter*, she told herself. *When he next holds me in his arms and drives his cock into me, he will call out my true name as he comes.* She shivered in anticipation. Already, she hungered to feel him inside her again.

* * * * *

Hunter procured horses for the three of them. Laya would have preferred to do without her friend's company. She wanted Akraz all to herself. However, she hadn't the heart to tell Hunter to leave, and doubted he would have heeded her in any case. Not

even the information she had imparted, that Lathanriel would, with any grace from the gods of Light, be joining them soon, could deter Hunter from escorting Laya to Sylvindell as soon as possible.

They did not press the horses as remorselessly as Zathstragomal had on Laya's trip to Mount Murk, but they did ride well into the night. Akraz had borrowed chain mail and a helmet from Hunter, so if sunset brought a transformation to his features, Laya did not see it. They made a fireless camp and quickly fell to sleep. The next day began before dawn and continued as long into the night. The forth sunset saw them into the skirts of Sylvina Forest, where Elven magicks grew strong. Here they slowed their pace and made camp early and with a fire.

On this night, Laya waited on her sleeping roll, awake, until she heard Hunter's telltale snores. Then she crept over to the ground roll where Akraz slept.

He had given some macho excuse to Hunter about always remaining battle ready to justify sleeping in his helmet. Laya lifted the visor. A monster's mug slumbered within. She let the visor close again, but she did not leave. She hid herself under Akraz's blanket. He slept with no top and his britches unlaced. Laya smoothed her hands over his broad chest. A sculptor in bronze could not have created a landscape of pectorals and abs any more adamantine, yet his skin felt as sleek as heated satin. She loved the sensuality of her skin on his skin as she palmed circles around his flat nipples.

It titillated her to remember how she had sucked his cock the last time he'd been in a somnolent state. She wondered how far she could go without awakening him now.

She slipped one hand down his breeches and found his cock. Like its master, the member slept, a soft roll slanted across his groin. Laya let her fingers brush over it. Careful to keep her fondling ghostly light, she petted the organ.

"Wake up, my lazy little soldier," Laya urged it in a voiceless purr.

Akraz moaned in his sleep, but his eyes remained closed. However, his rod reared in Laya's hand. She closed her fingers around it more firmly, and increased the vigor of her strokes. Within short order, the little soldier stood at attention. She smiled into Akraz's chest. Her pussy creamed with eagerness to give the soldier a hero's welcome. Laya released him long enough to sweep her hand through her wet cleft and drench it in her quim. With her hand motioned by her own arousal, she re-clutched his cock and worked it with slick, brisk yanks.

The anointed staff now lifted itself to her in full salute. Akraz began to thrash. His eyes still did not open, but his breathing changed, and his hands groped for her breasts. Though as far as she could tell, he was still half asleep, Akraz took over control of the interaction. Powerful arms clinched her and rolled her on top of him under the blanket. His hands guided her hips up and down to massage the length of his cock with her wet slit. At the same time he managed to capture one of her teats between his teeth. He tugged the nipple left and right, nipping it enough to cause her a frisson of half-pain, half-pleasure. Sucking the nipple further into his mouth, he drew it up against the upper side of his mouth and wagged the entire breast. The electric jolt from the nipple

shot through her entire body and pooled in her clit. Excited, she rubbed her clit harder against the ridge of his cock, shuddering to orgasm.

Abruptly, he pushed her off him. She did not register his action as a rejection immediately; she was still too afloat on her climax to feel anything but a lingering haze of contentment. She only realized something was wrong when she reached again to caress his cock, and he pushed her away.

"Go back to your bed, Laya," he said tightly. "I don't think you would want your human friend to see you fucking a goblin."

"No one knows what you are," she tried to reassure him. "Hunter knows you as Acariel. Why shouldn't I proclaim Acariel as my lover and my beloved and my betrothed to all the world?"

"Because, damn you, *I* know who I am," he snarled. He sat up and ripped the helmet from his face. His gargoyle face leered at her. "This is what I am, Laya. Not the pretty elf boy Acariel we've spun from sugar to deceive your friends, but this. It doesn't matter what my true face looks like, this is the face I grew up with, and grew up into. A creature of the night. The monster under the bed. A big-cocked beast who can fuck you in the nastiest fantasies of your most perverse nightmares, but not a beloved or a betrothed. Do you want me to fuck you? Is that what you want? I will, but only if you want me to fuck you wearing this face, displayed like a whore in front of all your friends, the way I fucked you in the Hall of the Dark God. Is that what you want?"

Tears streaked down her cheeks. "It doesn't have to be like that, Akraz."

"Call me Acariel, Nemesis," he said in his cruelest, most mocking tone. "And go back to your own damn mat."

He replaced the helmet on his head, and deliberately lay back down with his back to her.

Chapter Eleven

They entered the fabled Elven sanctuary of Sylvindell just as dawn broke the next morning. The rising sun speckled a shower of pale gold light through the leaf tops. Akraz had been reared in squalid darkness. Most of his subsequent years, he had spent knee deep in gore-soaked mud with the points of swords seeking to add his guts to the mire. He had been lucky, at times, to encounter kindness where generally cruelty alone held sway, but of beauty he had little experience. Nothing prepared him for the meld of Nature's delights and artisan's loving craft that was the citadel of Sylvindell.

Towering trees stood sentinel around and amidst a city of spires and balustrades. Branch and building intertwined, with towers and balconies built in spirals around massive trunks. In other places, aging trees leaned into the caring buttresses of adjacent buildings. To Akraz's stunned stare, every house in Sylvindell resembled a castle, complete with its own spires, balconies, courtyards, fountains and gardens abundant with flowers.

And the wealth on casual display astounded him. Every man and maid in the street wore garments of flowing pastel silk, with flowers in their hair and baubles sparkling round their necks and wrists. He saw no beggars huddled in the corners, no cripples who had been cast out of their caves to die alone in the dark, no drunken, used-up veterans shouting abuse at whores. Throngs of elves strolled along broad sunny boulevards arm in arm and paused to laugh and chat with friends. They bustled in markets that flowed with fruits and wine, pottery and brass platters, bolts of silk and necklaces of platinum and pearl.

The trio of travelers reined in their horses before a handsome manor cradled by a brook and shaded with willows. As with many of the Elven houses, a tree formed part of the house, supplying the support for a parapet that twisted up the north tower of the keep.

"This is one of the houses where Nemesis grew up. Lathaniel, his sister Taniya and I often came over to play here as children," said Hunter. "Though we are not blood kin, in many ways we are as close as siblings."

A cozy stable awaited the horses. Inside the house itself, morning light dappled a series of comfortable rooms of polished wooden floors, tapestries and hand-carved furniture. Living flowers grew around the balustrades of the staircases winding from level to level, and fountains flowed perpetually in porcelain basins set into nooks in the walls. The design aimed for solace and harmony, not the ostentatious display of wealth, but the richness of the surroundings struck one all the more for their effortless elegance.

Akraz remembered how he had shown off the paltry, stolen gewgaws in his den to Laya. How she must have sniggered at him behind the back of her hand. His jaw

clenched at the thought. He counted it as good fortune that he wore a concealing helmet, even during the day when his true face showed. He was just as glad, as well, that Laya had not spoken a word to him this morning, nor deigned to look at him. He did not want to speak to her either.

Any fantasy that he might insinuate himself into her world shattered. He had never felt more an imposter than standing in her childhood home.

* * * * *

Several days later, Akraz's war proposal had been approved by the ruling council of Sylvindell. He explained that he had told Zathstragomal a false location of the Elven city. At that decoy location, the human and elven armies of Chavana should set a trap. When Zathstragomal's goblins arrived, thinking to beset the city by surprise, instead they would burst in on a vigilant armed camp.

Akraz would ride to war with the elves. Laya had been avoiding him for the past several days, but now her concern over his life outweighed her wounded pride. She would not allow him to leave her and ride into battle, possibly to his death, with this coldness still between them.

He had been given a guest chamber on the third floor of the manor. The organically shaped room opened onto a balcony overlooking the willows and the brook. It also sported a fountain and a bathing pool in a rounded niche sheltered by a carved wooden screen from the bed and the rest of the room.

Daylight flooded the room, and Akraz looked more handsome than ever totally nude, standing in the pool bathing himself. His black hair curled into damp tendrils about his face. His violet eyes glittered like two amethyst geodes. Ah, and when he sponged the water across the divinely defined muscles of his chest with the bristled end of the scrub brush, the water coursed in rivulets that traced every contour of his bulging pecs and tight abs.

Laya stalked her prey with all her skill as a warrior. Thus he did not hear her enter or cross the room, and did not notice her until she stood a step above him at the edge of the pool.

He froze. "What are you doing here?"

In answer, she dropped her single garment from her shoulders to stand before him totally nude. He swallowed, and his cock nodded up at her. He also scowled.

"Leave me alone," he said.

"My room has no bathing pool. I too must prepare for battle, even though the council has asked me to remain as part of the small garrison force that will stay behind in the citadel."

"You can wait until I finish."

"The call to arms will sound soon. This is no time to be petty."

"Do as you wish then," he snarled. He turned his back on her.

Laya pretended not to care. She stepped down into the water, languidly crossed the pool, and pressed herself under the spout of water flowing from a flower shaped spigot in the wall. A spray of water cascaded over her. She shut her eyes, arched her back and thrust her breasts forward under the gushing droplets. Her hair slicked against her back. Two tiny streams of water coursed off her stiff nipples.

When she opened her eyes, she caught Akraz staring at her.

"Damn you, vixen," said Akraz. Desire roughed his voice. "Do you think you can flaunt yourself before me and get away with it?"

"Can you hand me the scrub brush?" she asked. She lifted her arms and gathered her hair up behind her, aware that this was the same position in which he had led her, leashed, around the Hall of the Dark God. The memory of how he had both mastered her and protected her that night made her nipples tighten and her cunt juice up.

"Is this what you want?" He hefted the long-handled ivory brush in his hand. "You shall have it!"

He surged across the pool in two steps. His left hand darted out to twist itself into a grip in her hair, while his right hand smacked the flat of the brush against her bottom. She squealed. Instinctively, she squirmed to safeguard her pink derrière from the second blow, but it found her regardless, causing her nether cheeks to jiggle under the impact. No matter how she writhed, he found her ass with the brush. The smacks reverberated wetly, as each caught her buttocks under the cascade. Soon her butt cheeks glowed pink and hot. She felt washed in the delicious combination of helplessness and total trust that she always experienced in his hands.

He forced her face against the wall, butt out, breasts smashed.

"I am still your master," he said into her ear. "Even here, in your own home, I own you. Say it, slave."

"You are my master. I am your slave."

"You belong to me. You will always belong to me."

"I will always belong to you, Akraz."

He kicked apart her legs. He performed some complicated action she could not see because her face rubbed the wall. Something parted the folds of her labia. The handle of the brush, she knew it, lathered in soap to make it slippery. He drove it into her slit. She cried out like a wild animal. That didn't stop him, he only pummeled her harder with the handle, until he had jogged it all the way in and the bristles of the brush tickled her clit.

Without removing the brush, Akraz forced her around and down on all fours in the shallow pool.

"Don't move," he said. She heard him splash about in search of something. What other toys could he possibly have here, given that he had already fucked her with the scrub brush?

The answer arrived soon enough. The slim stick of soap, which was tied to a string with a ball at either end to enable a bather to keep better track of it. Two thumbs sank into Laya's anus, spreading it slowly. She groaned in agony that was part and parcel of her titillation. He maneuvered his hand to hold agape the opening, and inserted the soap into her ass with the other. Not content with that, he followed the soap with his fingers, jabbing it deeper and deeper inside her. Tears stung her eyes even as she thrilled at how opened and used she felt, in both passages, totally at his mercy. He could do with her whatever he pleased.

It pleased him to yank the cord on the soap and jerk it out of her with a quick snap that made her scream again and buckle. His hand on her ass steadied her, though once she had stilled, that same hand spanked her smartly for her outburst. He rinsed off the soap in the water and let it float there.

He leaned forward. Echoes of her dream of flying returned to her, to feel the skin of his sleek, broad chest pressed against her bare back. He gripped her breasts like handles to keep his balance while he positioned his cock at the entrance to her ass. His huge member, so much larger than any phallus she had worn on the chastity belt in the Garden, so much longer than the scrub brush handle, so much thicker than the bar of soap, this beast forced its head into her tight opening. Because he had soaped her up, he was able to impel himself forward.

A kind of half-wail of pain, half ululation of desire emerged from her throat. He stretched her so wide in such an unaccustomed place. What made the sensation all the more exquisite was the feel of the handle in her pussy at the same time. Pierced twice over, his twice over, his to use and fill and fuck.

Akraz began to enter her ass, fucking her truly, as he would have her pussy. The inner touch felt completely different, and yet what remained the same was that he branded her with his long, ruthless strokes, claiming the most secret parts of her with the kiss of his cock. His hands milked her breasts. He squeezed and twisted, tugged down and pushed in the nipples.

Faster now. A discovery delighted her. As the pace of his thrusts picked up, the scrub brush jerked in her slit, and the bristles of the brush outside her cleft tickled up over her clit. A scream of animal pleasure built up on her throat. She would not be able to contain it. The entire manor would hear her shameless cries of rapture.

Something gagged her scream. The soap—he had freed one hand from her breast to push the soap into her mouth. He held the string on either side and jerked it up as one would bridle a horse. She now had a bit in her mouth, a handle up her cunt, bristles on her clit, and his cock in her ass. The soap freed her. When she climaxed she held nothing back, though the sound emerged now as more of a whinny than a scream. Since he gave her no respite, after her first orgasm, she came again almost immediately, and then, in an agony of overstimulation, a third and forth time in unbelievably quick succession.

He rode her to a gallop and his own climax. This he did not deposit in her ass. After a decisive withdrawal, his final act was to spank her with his rod in a frenzy of slaps that culminated in a spew of cum all over her buttocks and back.

They both collapsed into the water. Laya floated in a dream of satiation, too weak to even remove the scrub brush, though she did spit out the soap. It was left to Akraz to slip the brush from her cunt. He massaged her cleft, and pressed his thumb into her clit. She came again in his hand. Cooing, she cuddled up against him. He sat against the step and rocked her.

"By the Thirteen Hells, Laya," he said, burying his face in his hands. "I did not mean to turn this sanctuary of innocence and light into a fetish chamber for rites of the Dark God."

"Is that what you think?" she asked in surprise. "That what we do together is a rite of the Dark God?"

"What else? It is a dark, mindless lust that drives me to take you like that."

It stung.

"I didn't know you saw it that way," she said. "It isn't that way for me. On the contrary. Because it was you, because I knew you acted from—" she paused; she had almost said "love" and yet she knew no such thing. "Because I knew you acted from a desire to protect me or pleasure me, or both, I knew that what we had enveloped us in the Light, even when we had to perform in the darkest of places for the darkest of men."

"You keep saying you are a creature of the darkness," she went on, passionately, "but I have seen no evidence of that. I have seen in you a creature of the Light, raised in darkness, shackled in it, even, yet not subdued by it, not subsumed."

He hugged her and kissed her hair. He sighed. "I wish I saw what you saw, Laya. But there is so much you still don't know about me. One day, I will disappoint you and then you will see the truth about me. You said it yourself. The Deep Fire of the Dark God has tainted me, and there is no magic we mere mortals can wield that can overpower the magic crafted by the hand of one of the gods."

With this despairing speech, he stood, dried himself with a cloth draped over the wooden screen, and dressed himself quickly. He looked heartbreakingly handsome in his scarlet and gold tunic and armor.

"Akraz!" Laya clutched the drying cloth around her torso. She raced to his side. "Be careful. You must come back to me."

"No, Laya," he said quietly. "Whether I fall in this battle or no, I do know this. You shall never see me again."

He bent to press his lips like a prayer against hers. He smiled a sad little smile. "I love you. I have loved you from the start. I will love you beyond the day the Dark God consumes my soul in hell."

And then the Goblin General, Akraz the Terrible, marched away to war.

* * * * *

Laya did not expect trouble—all her fears centered on Akraz and the others at the site of the trap set for the wizard's army—but she donned her leaf-link chain mail and took up her bow to keep vigil with the other two dozen elves of the home defense garrison. They were all the force left to defend Sylvindell. They worked in pairs, stationed high in the trees, upon special platforms built to survey the surrounding forest.

Out of habit, Laya scanned the horizon. A glint caught her eye. Only metal reflected back sunlight like that. She touched her companion's shoulder and pointed.

"I don't see anything," he began. Then more glints sparkled through the tree cover and it was obvious to both of them what it must be. His face turned ashen. "Gods of Light! How many are there?"

"An army's worth," Laya said grimly. Even as she spoke, she notched an arrow into her bow. "Zathstragomal did not direct his goblins to the decoy point. He sent them straight here. He knew exactly where to find our city. We have been betrayed."

I have been betrayed.

Only Akraz could have informed his master of the location of Sylvindell. And then, to rub fat into the fire, he had lured the bulk of the citadel's defenses away on a wild goose chase. No wonder he had warned her that he would soon disappoint her. No wonder he had promised he would never see her again.

You bastard. You bastard. How long had he planned this betrayal? How deep did his plotting go? That melodrama with Strathgora—had they staged it together, the wizard's general and the wizard's daughter, to provide a plausible means to let the dupe elf maid seemingly escape? In Zathstragomal's dungeon, when he'd begged her to trust him with the city's secrets, had he even then served only his master's will?

When he had made love to her in his den, had he already been laughing secretly at her gullibility?

You love-blind fool. You made yourself his willing slave, though he warned you of his true loyalties again and again. Fool, fool, fool! All of Chavana will pay the price for your lovesick naivety!

Laya's first act was to order the walls raised about the city. These were no ordinary walls, of stone or wood, but living walls, magic vines that sprang out of the ground in a protective circle around the city. The vines grew in mere minutes, thickening to the size of tree trunks, and each one bristled with spear-long and sword-sharp thorns.

The goblins rode upon giant wolves. Both the beasts and the beast-men yowled as they loped toward the citadel. The rearing thorn barrier gave them pause. They milled in front of it, gnashing their teeth, growling, and in the case of the goblins, cursing. A few enterprising spirits tried to set the vines on fire, to no effect.

The leader of the army pulled out in front of the others. Laya knew him. It was not Akraz, but one of his sub-chiefs, one of the goblins who had come to help move Akraz

when he was sick. Zathstragomal must have instructed the goblin leader what to do, for the goblin spoke a word of power.

The thorn vines trembled and curled away large enough to form a gate through which several horsed men could pass abreast. That was all, but it was enough. The goblins had a breach through the barrier into the city.

Laya and the other elves had their work cut out for them. With arrow after arrow, they defended the breach. Goblins pierced with arrows fell like pincushions, but the elf defenders numbered too few to hold back the horde forever.

* * * * *

Smoke choked her and blinded her. The goblins had failed to set the thorn barrier on fire, but they succeeded in setting the trees ablaze. Now the magnificent, ancient wood billowed orange flame and black smoke. The elves still held the breach, but their numbers were dwindling. Laya herself had suffered several injuries and barely stood on her feet.

A horse charged through the goblin ranks from behind.

"Let him through!" shouted Laya. "It's Hunter!"

Hunter slid off his horse and stood side by side with Laya. He had a bow in his hand in place of his favored weapon, the sword.

"Did I miss all the fun?" he asked with a lopsided grin.

"How did you know?"

"Lathaniel arrived. He warned us that Zathstragomal knew the real location of Sylvindell and also that the 'elf' Acariel was really a goblin. We would have seized the goblin at once, but he had already disappeared. The army turned around, but I fear they may arrive too late to prevent the goblins from taking the city." Hunter put one hand on Laya's shoulder. "Nemesis, I'm sorry. I know you had feelings for Acariel, but—"

"But I feel nothing for him now," she said. She nodded out toward the goblins. "The monsters should have tried another assault by now. Something is agitating them."

"Your elven eyes are sharper than mine," he admitted. "Can you see what is going on in that knot of soldiers?"

"There is a newcomer. He is addressing all the officers. They are arguing. He...oh, gods. It's him."

"Acariel?"

"His real name is Akraz."

"Akraz?" Hunter whistled. "As in Akraz the Terrible, the Goblin General?"

"That would be the one, yes," she said bitterly. *Terrible doesn't begin to describe it.* "Now he's mounting a wolf. Now he..."

"What? Laya, what?"

"Look at them," she said, stunned. "Look at the goblins."

"By the gods of Light!" Hunter said in shock. "They're fighting each other."

Indeed, the goblin army had fissioned into two halves, which fell on one another with merciless abandon. Akraz led the smaller but more cohesive cohort. They positioned themselves between the others and the thorn walls of Sylvindell.

"Hunter, don't you see?" cried Laya. "Akraz is leading the officers loyal to him against Zathstragomal! They're rebelling against the dark wizard! He and his troops are defending our city!"

* * * * *

Akraz could not convince all of his men to turn on their cruel overlord. No goblin harbored Zathstragomal any affection, but many feared him too much to betray him, not even in the cause of their own freedom. However, the troops that remained loyal to Zathstragomal lost all heart when the elf and human armies returned. Finding themselves trapped between Akraz's rebels and two fresh armies, the goblins scattered.

Akraz knew he could not expect the newcomers to distinguish between his own troops and those still loyal to Zathstragomal, so he ordered his sub-chiefs to sound the call for surrender. His soldiers put down their weapons and the flag bearers lofted white flags in place of the black banner of Zathstragomal the Malicious. Unfortunately, goblins had used such tricks before with no intent of honoring the truce. Would the elves trust Akraz to keep his word? Or would they decide the safer course might be to let their peerless archers pick off the rebels one by one?

One of his loyal sub-chiefs, clearly plagued by the same worries, drew his wolf up alongside Akraz.

"At least your sister's family is safe, as you requested," the other goblin said gruffly. "Well, all but that ass of a husband of hers. Sorry, he was drunk as a mosquito in a beer mug and wouldn't budge. But we rounded up all the little rascals, sure enough."

"I'm sure Hwega will be equally grateful that you brought her children and left her husband," Akraz said. "Thank you."

"I expect we'll all be in pots soon," said the sub-chief. "The elves are cannibals, you know."

"If you were so sure of that, why did you agree to follow me in this crazy plan?" demanded Akraz.

The sub-chief grinned. "Because it was you that asked it. That's enough for me. Besides, being et might not be so bad. Maybe they'll at least fatten us up first."

"Whatever happens to us, I don't think we'll be 'et'," Akraz said. However, he knew no more than his companion what he could expect.

For himself, Akraz expected no forbearance, and he did not care. Any future without Laya by his side would be empty whether he was formally punished or not. He only hoped that he had not made a disastrous choice for his men. Would the elves

enslave them, or slay them in cold blood? Had his band of would-be rebels exchanged one overlord for another fate just as cruel?

Chapter Twelve

They had blindfolded him, stripped him to a loincloth and bound him in cords. He waited on his knees in an empty room to hear what his fate would be. The council, Akraz had been told, would discuss and decide what to do with him and the other goblin rebels.

Footfalls alerted him that the elven warriors had come for him. They prodded him to his feet with the tips of their spears. They escorted him from one building to another. While they were outside, he felt the coolness of the air and gauged that sunset drew near. How appropriate. When they meted out their judgment upon him, he would revert to a monster.

* * * * *

A bell reverberated throughout Sylvindell, calling all public citizens to attend to the ceremony in the Palace of Justice in the center of the citadel. The clanging caught Laya already on her way up the steps into the Palace, but she paused for a moment in horror when she recognized the pattern of the chimes.

Treason. Disgrace. The highest punishment.

No, she begged the gods of Light. How can they still blame Akraz for giving away the location of the city after what he did to defend it? Surely they must realize that Akraz couldn't have been the one who betrayed us after all!

The streets outside the Palace of Justice began to fill with curious elves. No one had been sentenced to the highest punishment in the land for over three hundred years. Some elves, who had seen this before, had come prepared with slender wood rods. Opportunistic vendors sold sticks and arrows to the rest of the crowd for use in the upcoming ceremony.

The guards at the Palace gates stopped Laya. "It's already full inside."

"I am Nemesis," she said, drawing herself up to her full height. His eyes widened.

"I beg pardon, my lady Nemesis," he said with a bow. "Please, enter."

The council met in a large oval chamber. Against one wall, in a semicircle, the council members, the king and queen and their closest advisors, sat on graven thrones. The Seeress had no throne, but she stood to one side near the front of the room, veiled to hide her face which was forbidden to the eyes of any but the gods. Her mother had been a seraph and her father an elf prince, and she had inherited her mother's feathered wings.

Opposite the Seeress, also with no official throne, Hunter leaned against the wall, with his arms crossed. A sunset shadow of stubble darkened his unshaven face. He had

not yet cleaned the grime of battle off his mud-splattered leather tunic and britches, which made him look more human and disreputable than usual.

Laya went to stand near him. She said in a low voice, pitched only for Hunter, "Surely they won't go through with this?"

"What else can they do?" Hunter asked. "He confessed. I was in the council during the trial, Laya. It was damning. I couldn't believe it – and yet I could. I even understood what drove him to do it." He gave her a piercing look. "He thought it was the only way he could have you. As perverse as it sounds, he did it out of love."

Laya's heart pounded. "But surely, what he did to turn the tide of the battle must make up for any earlier mistakes."

"I'm sorry, but even though he changed his mind in the end, it doesn't excuse him, since he was the one who put Sylvindell in danger in the first place. The queen was only barely able to call enough rain clouds to extinguish the fires. Otherwise, the blaze alone might have accomplished what the goblin army could not."

The blow of a horn demanded the attention of the assembly. The crowd parted to form a central aisle from the doors to the podium of thrones. Lathaniel walked down the aisle first. Like Hunter, Lathaniel still wore the stained and torn garments he had worn into battle. He even still wore his bow and quiver across his back. However, unlike the human, the elf lord still managed to look elegant. His shoulder-length blond hair was tied back from his face with small braids and his face was clean-shaven. He was handsome, Laya had to admit. If his sister Taniya had lived, she would have been a great beauty, with the same brilliant blue eyes and gold hair.

Laya supposed Lathaniel must be there because he had served as First Witness against Akraz during the trial. She had also been called as a Witness, but later on, and she had not been permitted to attend the entire proceedings, as Hunter had.

Finally, the guards arrived with the prisoner. Laya hissed in an angry breath. Why had they felt it necessary to degrade him by making him walk through a room filled with his enemies blindfolded, bound and almost entirely naked?

At the same time, if their intent had been to make the Goblin General look weak and powerless, it had the opposite effect. He stood taller and broader than any elf male in the room. The magnificence of his physique put every other male in the room to shame. His muscles bunched and bulged in his biceps and thighs. He took confident steps although he could not see the path before him. The square jaw of his handsome face lifted with a pride uncowed.

The guards shoved Akraz to his knees when he reached the floor just in front of the podium.

"That won't be necessary," said the king. "You may let him stand. And remove his blindfold."

The guards untied the cloth binding his eyes. Just as they did so, the last rays of sunset slanted to shadow in the windows outside. Akraz's face seemed to melt and

bloat. His snout elongated, then broadened. His teeth grew into fangs. His eyes bulged, then retreated under the shade of thick brows.

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd.

"So it is true," the King of the Elves said thoughtfully. "But which is his true face, and more importantly, which is his true nature? For what is beautiful is not always good, and what is good does not always look as we expect it to. Seeress? Can you tell us?"

The winged maid in the veil stepped forward. She had a breathy, harmonious voice, which nonetheless carried to all in the large room with ringing clarity.

"His true face is as fair as his heart. The Deep Fire created by the Dark God ensorcells him with a spell that makes him look like a monster. That spell is half broken, but only half. He must still remain the monster either by day or by night."

"But how came the spell to be half broken to begin with? For you told us it was not by your magic, nor by any charm or potion."

"I may not say," the Seeress replied in a low voice. "Else, all chance for the rest of the spell to break would be lost."

The king inclined his head. "In that case, I will not press you. His face, fair or foul, makes no difference to what I have to say. The council has rendered its judgment, on many matters. First—"

"No!" The cry wrenched from Laya's throat without any forethought. She could simply bear no more. She shoved past the guards surrounding Akraz and entwined her arms around his body. He growled at her with his animalistic face.

"Laya, what are you doing?"

"Whatever they do to you, they must do to me as well," she said. "I love you, Akraz. I will not be parted from you."

"Don't be a fool." He tried to shake her off. He bowed to the king. "Your Majesty, I appeal directly to you. Do not let this young woman throw away her life."

"My niece has seldom listened to my good advice, I fear," the King of the Elves said. His eyes twinkled in amusement. "But I do not intend to kill you. I have a much worse fate in store for you. It will please me greatly to watch you suffer it, I think. Alas, before I deal with you, I must deal with a matter that pains me far more. You see, General Akraz, the Seeress has already shown us through a vision who truly betrayed Sylvindell. We know it was not *you*. Prince Lathaniel, step forward and kneel."

Laya blinked. Lathaniel had been watching her with his blue eyes hooded by some dark emotion. Now he knelt before the king.

"This is the last time I will ask you these questions, Lathaniel," said the king. Laya had never seen the king so grave. "Did you give the dark wizard, Zathstragomal the Malicious, the location of our city and the magic words to breach our defenses?"

"Yes, Father," said Lathaniel, his face cold as stone.

"Did you do this willingly, of your own free will, not under the threat of coercion?"

"Yes, Father," said Lathaniel.

"Did you then lie about what you had done and try to cast the blame onto the goblin beside you, Akraz by name?"

Lathaniel shot Akraz a look laced with hate. "Yes, Father."

"Call me father no more," said the king. "For as surely as I lost my daughter, Taniya, I have now lost my son. I wish that you too had been raped and murdered by the goblins rather than learn that you dishonored yourself willingly. I will be the first in Sylvindell to pronounce the highest punishment upon you. You are now anathema. No one from Sylvindell will acknowledge you as kin or friend or ally. You must leave us forever. If you return, any elf who takes your life will not be held guilty of murder."

The king stepped down from his throne and held out his hand. "Give me your bow and your arrows."

Lathaniel dragged his bow and quiver from his back. He gave these over to the king. The king broke the bow across one knee. Then he returned to the other thrones and passed the quiver to each of the others seated on the podium. Each of the council members picked out one arrow and snapped it in two. The queen cradled her arrow the longest, weeping silently. At last she broke it and buried her face in her hands, racked with sobs.

"Go now, traitor," ordered the king. "Never return to Sylvindell."

Lathaniel hung his head. He turned around and walked back down the aisle, alone. As he went, each of the assembled elves took up an arrow, or just a stick, and broke it in two. Many tossed the pieces at him, so that he had to put his arms before his face to protect himself from the shower of sticks. Outside, the crowds lining the boulevards all the way to the edge of the citadel would do the same. Lathaniel would leave his home with the entire citizenry throwing debris at him and cursing his name.

Laya had been prepared to face that fate with Akraz, but it shocked her to see the anathema inflicted on Lathaniel. She wanted to protest on his behalf. At the same time, just before he had turned to leave, he had thrown a look of such hate at her, even more poisoned than the way he had glared at Akraz, that Laya wondered if she still knew him at all.

The King of the Elves had aged visibly in the time it took Lathaniel to leave the Palace of Justice. He shook himself and straightened with an effort.

"That had to be done. Now we may proceed to less bitter matters. General Akraz, you requested sanctuary on behalf of your soldiers who surrendered with you, and also for their womenfolk and children. However, it is not our policy here in Sylvindell to admit strangers."

Akraz bared a tusked smile in his warty face. "Especially not goblins, I imagine."

"Our seraph Seeress and the human known as Hunter are the only non-elves who live in Sylvindell. These are special cases. We might allow a third such special case. But we cannot accommodate hundreds. Therefore, I propose that we settle your people in

an area in the far reach of Sylvina Forest, a place where there are many caves. You did say that your people felt more comfortable underground."

"Your Majesty." Akraz seemed overwhelmed. "You would really do this for us?"

"As long as you are good neighbors, we bear you no ill will. We are grateful that you changed sides during the battle."

"Then all I can do is thank you, Your Majesty." Akraz bowed deeply.

"You yourself are no ordinary goblin, however," said the king. "You have been cleared of the accusation that you gave our secret magic words to Zathstragomal the Malicious. But still, you know them. This makes it too dangerous for us to let you loose without binding you to our city. Furthermore, you were high in the service of the Dark God, and his taint is still on you. For all these reasons, you must undergo a ceremony, a kind of sacrifice, in the temple of one of the gods of Light."

Laya felt the biceps in Akraz's arm tense. "Have I any choice in the matter?"

"Normally, one would, but in this case, considering your actions..." The king let his gaze slid to Laya. "No. I do not think you do."

* * * * *

Akraz vaguely knew the names and attributes of the gods of Light, but not well enough to recognize the life-size white marble statue in the temple. The sculptor had endowed the deity with a physique that merely mortal men must indeed aspire to and women worship. Two silk red ribbons had been wrapped around the god's wrists after the fact. The god himself had been carved to display his magnificence without the interference of clothes, unless the gold coating on his erect and generous member counted as a garment.

Like every building Akraz had seen in Sylvindell, the temple exuded grace. Flowing fountains, living flowers, slender pillars netted in gold filigree, these he had come to expect. He did not expect to find a bed veiled by a bower of lace directly before the gaze of the smiling god. The crimson satin sheets had been covered with a layer of red rose petals. A window directly overhead bathed the bed in a beam of moonlight.

Nor did he expect to find a luscious, naked green-eyed blonde in the bed. Rose petals had been pooled over her shaved pubis and balanced on the tips of her breasts. Her skin gleamed as alabaster as the marble statue.

"Laya," he said her name hoarsely.

He had never seen her look more beautiful. She lay with her arms over her head and her legs spread like a virgin sacrifice. Suddenly, he remembered the elven king's ominous talk of rites and sacrifices. Akraz was not a religious man. Worship of the Dark God involved rape, torture and death. He did not know the god of this temple, but the god's randy statue gave Akraz little reassurance that matters were much different. Akraz did not like the idea of involving Laya in such a rite.

"Why are you here?" Akraz asked.

"I am yours to take. That is the ceremony, Akraz."

"No." He pressed his hand against his scabrous jowls. He had never cared how ugly he looked as long as he had only had to deal with other toughs in an equally raw environment. Whenever he was with Laya, however, he wanted to be something finer.

"I won't do it," said Akraz. "Not like this."

Laya sat up. Rose petals fluttered from her breasts. Her own nipples were as rosy as any buds however, so the loss did nothing to diminish her allure.

"You heard the king," she said, her green eyes innocent. "You must go through with this ceremony."

"If you wish, we can wait until I have a chance to reverse the timing of the spell. I will look like this during the day, and come to you at night as my true self. Is that what you want?"

"Oh, Akraz." Laya stroked his cheek. He flinched at the idea of her sweet fingers rasping his scraggs and warts. "I realized that it isn't up to me to pick and choose which aspects of you to love. I love all of you. If you want to be a monster by night and a man during the day, or if you want to show the monster to the world at large and come to me with your face fair, I do not care. Take me in either form, for I belong to you."

"I will not take you, Laya." Akraz folded his arms and clenched his jaw mulishly.

One of her hands stole between her legs. She began to stir the petals on her cunt. Akraz stared, mesmerized. Most of the petals slid down her cleft back to the bed. Laya captured one and brushed it back and forth over her clit. His breath quickened.

She spread herself even wider. The folds of her labia opened like a blossom. Now with three fingers, she rubbed her clit in tiny circles. Soon it was as red as the petals. Creamy dew accumulated in her slit. Laya trailed her fingers in her quim and then, once they were sticky, she slid her fingers into her pussy.

Akraz fought his arousal. Thinking of how atrocious he must appear to her—that helped quash the rebellion in his loins.

"It won't work, Laya."

She sighed. "Then I must offer myself to Chamalon."

"Chamalon?"

"The god."

"You would kill yourself?" Akraz had no intention of allowing that.

"Chamalon is not that sort of god, Akraz. Remember, he is a god of the Light."

Laya stretched her nude body in the rose petals. Akraz watched her suspiciously when she went to kneel on a red velvet cushion between the legs of the life-size statue of the god.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

He could see what she was doing. She was taking the realistically sculpted golden phallus into her mouth. His groin tightened. She licked and kissed the gold cock with

sensuous abandon. Akraz could not watch. He didn't look away either. His cock grew jealous. Damn, he didn't have shred of clothing on to hide the effect she had on him.

Laya stood up, turning, so that she faced Akraz and had her back to the god. She grabbed the crimson scarves looped around the god's outstretched wrists. Using these for leverage, she pulled herself up and then plunged her wet pussy down onto the phallus. She yowled, arched her back and thrust out her breasts.

Akraz turned on his heel and marched in the opposite direction. *Let the elves lock me in a pit, kill me, rip out my tongue, whatever they will. It can't be worse torture than this.*

He had his hand on the handle to door of the temple to leave, when he heard Laya yelp in real surprise and alarm.

* * * * *

The gold phallus slid into her cunt. It felt delicious. Cool, hard, smooth. But it couldn't compare to Akraz's own flesh and blood cock. Laya had hoped that the sight of her cleaved by the white marble god would goad Akraz into taking her himself. Instead, the infuriating male turned his back and abandoned her.

Gods of Light, please help me! And since she was in Chamalon's arms, impaled upon his divine rod, she did something she seldom did and pleaded directly with the god of love and truth. *Chamalon, I beg you to help me win my beloved from your dark brother!*

The metallic phallus jumped to life in her pussy. Jogged up and down upon the rod, she could only gasp in surprise. But when two cool marble hands closed on her breasts, she screamed in real fear.

Akraz ran back to her. He scrambled to draw a sword. That didn't work too well, since he was as buck naked as she was. Laya could see her own fear and astonishment mirrored in his dropped jaw and wide eyes.

The marble statue had come to life. Oh it was still stone. The relentless pounding of the gold phallus in her cunt told her that. But the statue now controlled Laya instead of the other way around. The marble god massaged her breasts with his stone fingers. The gentleness of the touch, despite the unforgiving material, surprised her. Marble fingertips pinched her nipples between them with just the right amount of pressure to taunt her with a hint of pain, but not enough to damage. In fact, now that her initial fright had worn off, Laya found herself responding to the marble god's vigorous use of her body.

Akraz must have noticed the change, the way she relaxed into the god's embrace. His expression shifted too, to furious jealousy. The grotesque cant of his features made his rage look all the more ferocious.

The marble god lifted Laya up and off his phallus, then plunged her down again, this time ass aimed to receive his rod. The gold slicked up her anus. She shuddered at the ruthless penetration and would have fallen from a sudden wave of weakness, except that the marble god held her up by her breasts.

The marble god beckoned to Akraz.

"She belongs to me," snarled Akraz.

Then take her, echoed the thought words in both their minds. *I am but a tool, a magic toy left here by the touch of Chamalon to bring to life the fantasies of those who worship him.*

The fact that the marble god was not truly a god but only a god's elaborate sex toy mollified Akraz. Laya hoped it wouldn't mollify him too much. She did not want him to leave her again.

The marble idol imprisoned Laya's wrists in grips of stone, and forced her arms out above and behind her. This thrust her breasts forward into Akraz's face. The nipples had been worked into hard knots of aching flesh by the idol's prior ministrations. Akraz lowered his toothy mouth onto her breast and suckled hard. He bit down just hard enough with his sharp beastlike teeth to make her nipples prickle.

A long, snakelike tongue whipped from his mouth. He snapped this across her other nipple. She squirmed in the fists of stone that imprisoned her. Her efforts only succeeded driving her ass deeper onto the continued thrusts of the idol's gold phallus. Akraz grinned at her reaction. He flicked the forked tongue out again and again, scourging her nipples one after the other.

Akraz dropped to his knees on the red cushion. That infuriating whip of a tongue now lashed her clit. She had never felt anything quite like it. The whisking drove her into a frenzy of pleasure. She tried to clench her thighs closed, but the stone legs of the idol intercepted her to keep her feet kicked far apart. She came in a spasm that rocked her against the cold stone body of the idol.

Panting with as much arousal as Laya herself, Akraz slid back up Laya's sweat-slicked body. A meaty, very much living, cock nudged Laya's thigh. Akraz grabbed his organ and pushed it into her dripping cunt. He began to pound her in counterpoint to the strokes up her ass by the stone idol.

None of her previous experiences of being filled in all holes prepared her for this, for this time two cocks, one metallic and cold, one hot and hard, actively worked her in unison. Everything between her legs burned with sensation.

"No," Akraz groaned into her neck. "I don't want to finish you like this. I want... I don't know what I want."

He withdrew and stared at Laya in mute frustration.

The stone idol seemed to think it knew what Akraz wanted. The idol withdrew his golden rod from Laya's ass and released her arms. Laya fell weakly against Akraz's chest. The idol took one of the crimson silk ties from its own arm and wrapped this around Laya's left wrist—and then also around Akraz's right wrist, binding them tightly together.

"What in the Thirteen Hells is this rockhead up to now?" demanded Laya.

Will you love this woman for all eternity, from now until the coming of the Pure World?

The marble god's question reverberated unexpectedly in their minds.

"Yes," said Akraz. He looked at Laya out of the face of a monster, but all she saw were his deep amethyst eyes, the same eyes as the man she had fallen in love with.

The idol took the other sash and tied their remaining wrists together.

Will you love this man for all eternity, from now until the coming of the Pure World? The statue asked Laya.

"Yes," she said softly.

Then consummate your union with the blessing of the Light.

Akraz backed Laya down onto the bed, with himself prone over her. They could only move in mirrored unison because of the bindings.

"Kiss me," whispered Laya.

"Not as a beast," he demurred. But he submerged his cock between her legs. She opened to welcome him. He worshiped her with lingering strokes. Meanwhile, the marble god leaned over the bed and blew. Magically, all the rose petals billowed into the air, swirled and descended in a gentle rain on their intertwined bodies. Laya leaned back her head and parted her lips.

"Oh, sweet Nemesis," moaned Akraz. "I cannot resist you any longer. You must accept me as I am, monster or not. You are one prisoner of war I will never set free."

He flicked his forked tongue into her open mouth and pressed his monstrous, slaver lips onto her mouth. She didn't recoil. She kissed his ugly mug full on the lips. He plundered her mouth in brutal, bestial kisses that sucked her breath from her. Yet, strangely, she felt his mottled cheeks turn smooth against hers, and the mouth that ravaged hers was not tusked or fanged, but the familiar pair of sensuous lips that she remembered from so many nights.

They reached their climax together.

Later, they giggled to find themselves still bound together. They made no attempt to untie themselves, but only snuggled together. The moonlight illuminated the bed and its skirt of scattered petals. The marble statue had returned to its former stillness and its former position, as though nothing untoward had ever occurred.

"Laya," asked Akraz. "Was that a marriage ceremony?"

"Of course. Why do you think my uncle found so much amusement in condemning you to this fate? If you wish to live here in Sylvindell, you now have the legal right. But Akraz, if you wish to leave, I will follow you wherever you go."

"I don't know yet. Sylvindell is beautiful. But I also want to make sure that my people are settled in their new home."

Laya gazed into the deep violet eyes of her beloved for a long time before she realized how handsome he looked in the moonlight. She touched her hand to his cheek, and because they were still bound, his hand moved with hers to brush it as well.

"My true face." He looked up through the window at the moon. He turned his hand to look at his palm. The wizard's rune was gone as well. "But... The spell is broken. How is it possible?"

“Akraz,” she whispered. “You once asked me what was stronger than the magic of the Dark God. I think we know now. It is a power given to mortals that comes directly from the Light.”

“Of course.” He kissed her softly. “Love.”

About the Author

Vashi Valant has been a mermaid, a forklift operator, a humanitarian aid volunteer and a homeless shelter counselor. She has yet to try her hand at bioengineering, a stint in the space station, or international espionage, although these activities are on her to-do list. She is married to a love machine, and with him has recently created an adorable cyborg baby named after a Norse god. She now writes full time.

Vashti welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com