**Tales from a Lewd Fantasy World – Tale 8 – The Sword Bearer**

A white horse is rarer than most people think.

Mostly because people are uneducated and often illiterate, so they don’t know what a white horse is.

It is understandable, given how short-lived humans tend to be, that they wouldn’t study as much as elves do through our infancy. Knowing that just having a white coat doesn’t make a horse white, that, more often than not, those are merely gray horses, born with a different color that pales with age? Well, nobles and horse breeders would know, but why would the peasantry bother with the distinction?

“Didn’t you hear me, lady? Get off the damn saddle, hand over your coin, and nobody gets hurt.”

Ah, yes.

I’m being robbed.

“I suppose this means you aspire to acquire my mount?” I tell the two men wielding short swords and barring the narrow mountain path meant to take me to the royal capital.

Impudent whelps. The cretins are even trying to pretend there’s not a third man coming at me from behind.

“You’re outnumbered. Be glad we don’t plan to take your clothes as well,” the speaker for this little band of ruffians says with a frankly offensive, exasperated tone.

“You sure? They look quite expensive, not to mention that… well. You *know*,” the second buffoon comments, likely more honest in his intentions.

“Joel, I swear you couldn’t be any dumber if you trained at it. You don’t strip a noble naked and expect to survive the reprisal.”

“How honorable of you. My gallant hero,” I offer with slightly less enthusiasm than his exalted deeds warrant.

“Quiet. You’re already testing my patience, wench.”

“And you’re making me wonder precisely how you expect to survive the reprisal for *that*,” I tell him.

And then, Bausan, my faithful, white-coated mare, twitches her left ear, and I slowly reach for the blade at my side.

“Hands where I can see them!” the leader says, trying very hard not to look behind me.

I cluck my tongue.

And at my signal, Bausan bucks, her hindlegs abruptly straightening into a powerful kick that ends up with a wet squelching coming from behind me as I take advantage of the strength of my mount’s movement to leap over her lowered head, my fingers trailing across her mane in an appreciative caress as I unsheathe a sword that isn’t mine, that will never be mine.

But that, for a few days, and when I really need it, I can wield.

The gleaming steel barely whispers when leaving a sheathe wrought with rich leather that hasn’t needed to be oiled in centuries, the motifs fashioned out of gold leaf depicting symbols that always have their own light when one knows to look for it.

The grip is ivory. Always warm. Always comforting. Always notched precisely how the hand of its wearer needs.

I could cry at how beautiful it is.

And how much of a waste it is to use it on these men.

“Wha—shit! Elf!” the more sincere of the bandits yells, his fingers slackening on his own weapon as my green cloak billows behind me and my hood is caught in the wind of my passage, my sharp ears on display through my golden locks.

At least he will part from this world with a beautiful sight to ease his passing.

My hand barely slows in the arc that bats away his poor guard before cleaving his head from his body, and then I alight on the dirt road, just far enough from the leader of no-one-at-all-anymore that he can steel himself and jump into a proper stance.

An actual *proper* stance.

I narrow my eyes at him. At the man with the heels of his boots stuck together, feet at a right angle, his shoulder, hand, and weapon set in a straight line aimed at my heart.

A duelist’s guard. One meant to face a single opponent, with no regard for ambushing strikes or allies getting in the way.

“That is not a good sword for your style,” I tell him.

He looks at his blade, shorter than my own, an unadorned, *ugly* thing that is, nonetheless, free from any notches or signs of having been used at all.

He winces.

“I don’t suppose you would accept an unconditional surrender?” he offers, the sword still aimed at me, his tone and manners shifting into something far more educated than when there were living witnesses.

“If I did, it would mean, of course, that you would be willing to sell out whoever sent you to steal the Sword of the Hero from me,” I say, tilting my head slightly to the side.

And I don’t bother with any proper stance.

Not when I can pulse a fraction of my celestial heritage down my blade, through the marvelously intricate channels of pure magic woven through the artistry of a master blacksmith following the command of the gods.

When I can make a pure, resonant note of achingly beautiful magic echo from it.

When I can make the man realize just how horribly outmatched he is without having to move at all.

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The thing about white horses, *actual* white horses, is that they are born white. Their coat is never any other color, and the skin under it is a smooth pink.

The eyes… they can be different colors.

But Bausan’s are blue.

I remember when she was born, a foal trembling her way to standing upright.

I had loved her mother for many years, but… she was already getting old, and Bausan reminded me enough of her that I didn’t hesitate to keep her. To train her from birth to understand me as much as Ristre had through faithful service after my own mother entrusted her to me.

People often claim that elves are detached from other races. That our longevity makes it so we cannot forge a proper bond with those who may as well be mayflies to us.

They are wrong, of course, as people often are.

The truth is far harsher than that.

“I can’t keep going—” the human who tried to rob me of my mission starts.

And I turn toward him, my own blue eyes blazing with as much fury as I can muster for the contemptible creature following me on foot, his hands tied to the rope that I hold in my hands like the leash he doesn’t deserve.

Leashes are for faithful animals.

“I just… I can’t keep up this pace,” he pleads, brown eyes scrunching in something too near to suffering for me to be comfortable with it.

I’m not a goblin, after all.

“Very well,” I say, a single tug on Bausan’s reins enough to stop her.

We’re still two days away from the capitol. From the royal palace.

I may as well keep my prisoner alive until I get there.

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It’s not like white horses are special. Out of all the things to breed a horse for, the color of its coat may be the lesser concern.

But I like them.

I like how free Bausan can look when she runs across a glade in bloom, her long, regularly brushed mane flying with the play between her speed and the wind, her tail flaring when she rears up or prances, her blue eyes shining not with intelligence, but with the pure joy of the moment.

It’s… it’s a joy that’s hard to capture. For me.

For us.

Because we start off as innocent as any children of the gods. As new to the world around us as humans, dwarves, or gnomes.

But we see. We live.

And then we keep going.

Some of us learn of exacting disciplines that allow them to revive that joy of first discovery. That thing that is lost to time and repetition. They are profound teachings that not all elves are suited for.

Most of us… we just watch a white horse enjoying a glade in bloom. We take in the beauty of motion, the exhilaration of something pure and simple.

And, when that’s not enough, we treasure each and every chance for something truly new.

“The princess will see you now, Daphnaie,” the guard says, bowing his head with the deference of someone using a title rather than a first name.

Because I don’t have titles or family names.

None of us do.

“The princess?” I ask, slightly raising my eyebrow in mild surprise as I take my time to stand from the bench I’ve been sitting in by the side of a tall window with an ogival arch that overlooks the palace’s courtyard and the stable where Bausan patiently waits for my return.

My face is warm on the right side from the morning sun, and I’m tempted to run my fingertips across my cheek to take that slight bit of sensual pleasure that old friends once told me may be one of the keys to their philosophies.

I don’t.

I turn away from old glass with watery patterns of uneven thickness trapped in squares of black lead and finally stand tall to turn to the young boy with the start of a thick beard that—

Oh.

He has grey hair.

“Yes, the princess wants to receive you in person,” he insists while trying to look like he doesn’t.

So I nod in deference and paper over my brief bout of disorientation with long practice. With that old reflex that so easily disguises unease and…

And something else.

He returns the gesture and turns on his heel for me to follow after a small back covered in padded armor that I could’ve sworn belonged to a man yet to reach his twenties, moving with a grace and ease that makes it hard for me to place him anywhere on the wrong side of thirty.

Maybe he was an adventurer. Maybe he trained for long enough to unlock that secret strength that allows some of them to—not important.

I’m going to meet a princess.

The princess of Galatea. The one who took the lead in summoning the hero of this age.

Someone new.

I’ve… I’ve met royals before, but never one of her lineage.

And never a hero.

So I try to hold onto my mind for this moment. I try to breathe deeply and consciously, as Aegle told me I should if I ever wanted to master her own discipline, my childhood friend’s smile radiant as it ever was no matter how long the years or the decades—

And I fail.

Again.

I hold back a bitter smile as my distracted thoughts once again take me away from what’s right in front of me and find myself standing by tall oaken doors decorated with gold leaf in patterns quite similar to those of the sheath of the Sword of the Hero, the magic shimmering in them clear to my trained eyes.

The guard turns to me.

I don’t know his name.

“If you will,” he says, pulling a single sheet of dark wood open and bowing to me, his left arm across his chest as his eyes abandon mine.

I, for lack of something better to offer, give him another nod and walk past him into the throne room of the country that succeeded the Palatian Empire, ready to meet its current heir.

And she’s radiant.

There’s… She sits on her throne upon a raised marble dais with five steps covered by a red velvet carpet. The throne of her absent father.

I can’t conceive that he fills it half as well as she does.

Not with the wave of power that greets me, the almost tangible light that overshadows even the ancient protections on the doors guarding this place. Not with how shafts of light from windows set high above us seem drawn to golden hair a shade darker than my own, the waves of gleaming locks cascading over her bare shoulders and down a white dress with cerulean blue lace and trim that holds up her bust, offering as much decolletage as is decorous.

I lick my lips.

And savor the first truly unique moment I’ve experienced in too long.

“Your Majesty,” I say, bowing down to a human despite… because of the human I’m bowing to.

“Daphnaie,” she answers, her voice smooth even over the foreign syllables. Because they borrowed so many names and words from us, but all of them have been bastardized with the local accents and tongues.

I clutch at the left side of my cloak with my right hand, my arm crossing over my own bust, more modestly covered than hers, more… outright modest under the tight leather bodice and airy linen blouse that are my travel clothes.

And I wait.

Because I don’t know her. Haven’t met her. Nor any of her line.

But I know human nobility and the games they like to play.

“Stand,” she finally says, and I don’t hurry to obey, slowly straightening up from a bow less pronounced than those that she’s used to.

Because the Undying Isles may have fallen from what we once were, but we’re still *high elves*, and none of us will ever be shamed in a human court.

“I take your journey here was more eventful than you expected?” she says.

“You’ve already been informed of all that I know,” I counter.

Her eyes are blue. Like Bausan’s.

Like mine.

But it’s a deeper blue. Royal blue, if I’m being honest, and the pun of it all pains me almost enough for it to show on the stern face I’m trying to present.

But those royal blue eyes of hers don’t stray from mine. Don’t show a single sign of holding anything for me other than—

Something races up my spine, and I don’t know why.

“I’m surprised you aren’t reprimanding me because of the lacking safety of our roads. I’ve been led to believe that elves relish the chance to teach.”

“We never hoarded knowledge. Some of us regret not doing so,” I answer.

Her eyes blaze.

The aura of power pulses.

And I know. I know it’s only this strong, this intense, because of how this throne was crafted for her lineage. I know that, outside of these walls, she may not be as impressive as a highly-rated adventurer.

But I *am* in this throne room.

And so my eyebrows rise a minute amount, and an impish smile briefly appears on her lips.

“Approach me,” she says, and I find myself walking toward her before I acknowledge her words.

“Where is the hero?” I finally ask when I reach the first of the marble steps.

“You don’t know? No divine guidance to take you to him?” she asks, her head slightly tilted, her lips finally showing something more than a flash of amusement.

“Not since we received the call.”

“The call?”

I tilt my own head, my eyes narrowing without a shred of my own amusement.

“You know *precisely* what I’m talking about.”

“Humor me.”

I take a deep breath, Aegle’s mirthful laugh passing through a blooming field inside my memories, and I try not to sigh.

“The Shrine of the Hero sings when he steps into the world. It is then our sworn duty to carry his blade to him before he can start his voyage.”

“To him?”

“To where he was summoned.”

“Ah. So you don’t know where he is.”

“Why would I have bothered asking if I did?” I say, my patience for this young woman already straining no matter how the light of this place plays over her silhouette, the sun itself lending magic to a frame built for beauty rather than power—

“You can carry it, then. You aren’t here to lead him to the sword,” she states.

Once again, my eyes narrow.

“As it’s always been,” I say.

And she laughs.

It’s… it surprises me. It’s a laugh I haven’t heard before, nothing at all like Aegle’s airy joy. It has bitterness, a hint of cruelty, self-reproach—

“You’re under arrest,” she says.

“What?” I ask, blinking my surprise and not knowing how to react other than by taking a step back and dropping my hand to the ivory pommel of a blade that isn’t mine.

“You’re under arrest for conspiring with an enemy of the crown.”

And, before I can even decide to pull the sword out of its sheath…

It refuses.

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Taming a horse is… easy and not.

Each beast has its own temperament, and most of them have been bred for generations to be as docile as needed, but they’re still prone to startling. They scare easily, and they need to learn to trust their confinement.

One of the more common methods is to plant a stake in the middle of a corralled field and tie them to it with a rope long enough to reach the farthest confine. They are free to roam inside the fenced soil and run until they tire.

And they do.

Then you shorten the rope. Just the slightest amount. Just enough for the fence to be out of their reach.

And they keep running. And tiring.

And the rope grows ever shorter.

Until, in the end, they can only walk at a sedate pace around the stake planted in the middle of the field, the horse having learned the limits imposed on it. Having yielded to them.

I never did that to Bausan.

I… I never liked the idea of breaking them, and Mom knew. So we just used Ristre. We allowed Bausan to learn from her mother that we could be trusted. That we would feed and care for her.

That we would love her.

And I do. I love my riding mare, and I wish I could pet her long neck and tell her to be patient. That I’ll be there for her as soon as I’m able.

But she’s in the palace stables, and I’m in the dungeons.

“You must be the first prisoner who’s been allowed to retain a sword in this place,” the woman wearing a white dress that cuts a sharp silhouette against the black stone behind her tells me from the other side of thick iron bars.

I raise my head from between my bent knees, and I look at her.

At the human looking down on a high elf sitting on a blanket over a mound of hay, back against the corner of walls older than I am.

I don’t answer.

“I would’ve expected a question,” she says, her head yet again tilted in that suggestion of mild curiosity she offered me before dictating my imprisonment.

“Why?” I ask, humoring her.

Her eyebrows quirk, and so do her lips in that very same smile. The one tinged with a bitterness that I can only guess at.

“Why? Why would I jail you? Why would I claim you’re aiding an enemy of the crown? Why would I receive you without guards or witnesses if I had anything to fear from you?”

This time, it’s my eyes that narrow.

“I *gave you* the traitor. I have no reason to conspire with him.”

She *chuckles*.

And the anger that nestles in my bosom is not new. Not quite. But it’s very much novel.

“That’s not who you conspired with,” she finally says.

“Then—”

“The hero.”

My jaw shuts mid-sentence, and I stare up at her.

And things start making sense. Or as much as they ever do in human courts.

“He fled from you,” I say.

Her smile fades.

And royal blue eyes stare piercingly at me.

Then, without a parting word, she turns around and leaves me alone in a darkness only broken by tallow candles filling the underground chambers with the perennial stench of burning fat.

Bausan would’ve hated it.

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Aegle always talked to me about… anything and everything.

She wasn’t overfilled with joy and enthusiasm, not always, but she’d found a serene happiness that she never hesitated to share, and she’d often litter our conversations with hints for me to follow. Little lessons disguised as passing jokes or idle musings.

She was so much wiser than I ever gave her credit for.

And now, when I’m stuck in a small, underground room with night and day set by burning candles, when I’m reduced to the dreary lack of novelty that defines an elf as we grow older and jaded, as memories blur into one another, and we lose the capacity to remain in the present, I try as hard as I can to rescue her wisdom from my inadequate recollections.

*‘We always talk about focusing on the breath, don’t we? How painfully boring that may seem,’* she said as we rested under a laurel tree, shafts of afternoon light playing upon her fair brow as Ristre grazed on the yellow grass of midsummer.

*‘Seem? How can breathing* ***not*** *be boring?’* I asked, more to keep the sound of her voice playing over the brook behind us than because I really cared for what she was trying to teach me.

*‘It is. And then it isn’t. That’s the secret, Daphnaie; we come to see every moment, every year, as the very same thing playing all over again, but when you get down to something as simple and repetitive as breathing…’*

She drifted off, staring into my eyes, and then one of her brighter smiles took her, shining bright enough to make my heart race, and she stood, grabbing my hand to pull me up.

*‘What are you doing?’* I asked with a laugh I didn’t understand as she led me to the brook. To the song of water sparkling under a bright sun.

*‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it? The way the water washes over every pebble, the rippling disturbances that scatter golden light… but look at it long enough, and it blurs into the same few notes repeating again and again.’*

*‘Yes,’* I said*. ‘Like everything else.’*

Her smile widened, and she bent down, picking up a small, grey pebble and throwing it right into the current, a burst of droplets shining bright as they rose, only to inevitably fall.

*‘Breathe, Daphnaie,’* she said without explaining what she’d done. *‘Breathe and let the notes blur until you find those that emerge.’*

I looked at her. At that smile of hers going from bright joy to serene happiness.

And now I sing.

I sing without words, just letting my breath turn to song, echoing in the stones around me, my heritage brimming out of me as I am forced to notice my breath. As I take air quickly between ancient musical phrases to avoid disturbing the flow of a brook pouring out of me and shining brighter than tallow candles would ever warrant.

I sing, the volume rising as I find the answering breath of the world in the melodies I learned from my mother. As I pour as much of me as I can into the prison that holds me, letting my magic search for a weakness, an opening—

“That’s beautiful,” she says.

And I stop.

The air holds my song for just a bit longer. Just enough for me to turn toward her and see her framed not by orange flames but by my light still hanging around us.

And then it fades.

“Thank you,” I answer, for lack of anything better to say.

“No. No, thank you. I’ve… Many speak about your songs. That it takes centuries to master them…” she trails off, her eyes inviting me to follow.

And I, alone, beneath an ancient castle built around an older throne room, prisoner of the magic of the gods, have nothing better to do than answer her.

“Exaggeration. We’re taught from birth that the world was built of song, and we merely aspire to join its chorus.”

“The music of the spheres?” she asks.

This time, it’s my turn to laugh with something bitter.

“We taught you all so much, and this was how you repaid us. I shouldn’t ever be surprised.”

“I’m not my ancestors, Daphnaie,” she says with a poise that is trained rather than inborn.

“No? Then *why*?” I ask.

And she… sighs.

“Do you know how hard it is to sit with this ridiculous thing?” she says, gesturing at the skirt flaring from her hips, barely narrower than the corridor in front of my cell.

“I’ve met enough nobles,” I say.

“I suppose you have,” she muses.

And then, just to shock me or to make it clear that none of the nobles I met were like her, she *unbuttons her skirt*.

“What are you doing?” I say with as little panic as I can manage while legs clad in white stockings held up by intricately lacey garters come out of the skirt slowly crumbling to the damp floor.

“Being comfortable. For once,” she answers with a hint of a smirk before she grabs a wooden stool and places it in front of the door to my jail, sitting on it with her legs invitingly open.

“I am very much not comfortable,” I answer, my hands still resting right below my knees like when she came to see me yesterday, or however long it’s taken for the candles to burn and be replaced four times.

“A regrettable state of affairs that I’m doing my best to put an end to.”

“You could just set me free.”

She tilts her head, just that minute amount. Just enough for her golden hair to rustle and shimmering waves of light to ripple along it like the sun on a hidden brook.

“No. No, I don’t think I could,” she answers.

And then she just… looks at me. Studies me.

“You speak as if your people were the only ones to ever be betrayed,” she finally says. “As if you are all victims of a great tragedy, the shepherds of humanity who fell to the dumb animals they cared for,” she says.

“I can care a lot for my animals,” I say, trying not to fret about Bausan and how anxious she must be.

“Indeed. And so can we,” she says, leaning forward, her gloved elbows settling on her knees, her chin on her cupped hands.

“What are you insinuating?” I say.

Something shines in those eyes of hers. In royal blue further darkened by low flames.

She leans farther down, rummaging into the folds of her discarded skirt until she finds something hidden among the multiple layers of muslin, cotton, and lace.

And she shows me.

A collar.

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All elves travel, sooner or later.

Mom left… shortly after Bausan first wore a saddle, and I haven’t seen her since.

Aegle… a part of me thinks that she’s waiting for me, under a laurel tree by a singing brook.

And she is. She’ll always be there, with that philosophy of hers that allowed her to always live in the moment, in perennially changing instants that never blurred together, that always stood as sharp as the glint of sunlight on the crest of a rising ripple.

But she also traveled, farther away than I ever will until the day I can meet her under green leaves.

“Something pains you,” she says, eschewing any greeting like she always does.

“A thousand and one things over a lifetime of regrets,” I answer with what may be the oldest elven joke.

Our humor is an acquired taste.

But she still smiles at it.

“Don’t we all,” she answers.

“You can’t be older than… thirty?” I answer.

“I’ll chalk this up to a cultural misunderstanding rather than a deliberate insult,” she says, the smile growing just a tad warmer.

I almost answer it.

“I know what you’re doing,” I say.

“You do? Well, I must say you have me beaten on that front.”

“Don’t pretend. It’s beneath you.”

She stares at me from her stool, once again wearing an intricate white and blue strapless bodice, garters, stockings, and panties that cling to her body tightly enough that alchemy must’ve gone into their crafting.

Her skirt and sleeves lie discarded on the corridor’s floor, and she’s playing with her long gloves in a way that is more distracting than it should be.

Staring at me.

Smiling.

“I’m flattered,” she finally answers.

“What for?”

“That you’d think anything at all is beneath me.”

And there’s that laugh of hers again, the one with the bitter edge, the self-reproach. The hidden nuances that I have all the time in the world to tease out of the melodious sound.

“You’re *royalty*,” I say, losing my patience at the show she keeps putting on for my sake.

It… may have been the wrong thing to say.

“From a line that goes back to the founding of this country,” she says, her eyes as sharp as when I first walked into her throne room. “Descended from the first hero to walk this world, tasked with preserving a balance that has been threatened yet again *precisely* in this generation. Precisely when it would be my turn to take the crown.”

“Would?” I ask.

“Don’t pretend. It’s beneath you,” she says with a hint of self-satisfaction that only fuels my irritation further.

“If you think I ever bothered with the politics of *human kingdoms—”*

“I don’t think you did. I *do* think that you’re smart, educated, and have enough pieces of the enigma to put things together.”

And then, before I can answer, she stands, impossibly regal for a woman in her underwear, her body not as trained as mine, but… but beautiful in its own way, under the shivering candles dancing over the tight line of blue trim pressing her cleavage up and together, with orange flames licking up and down slender ankles and generous thighs.

“I’ll leave you to think on that,” she says before turning around, ignoring me as she bends over to pick up her discarded clothes before walking away from the stretch of the corridor I can see from the corner I haven’t moved from since the Sword of the Hero betrayed me.

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*‘You can’t control what happens, Daphnaie. Only how you react to it,’* she said as her fingers trailed down my cheek, and she looked up at me with serene happiness that made me rage, break, and wish I could do anything at all other than pretend to answer it with my own smile that had no serenity nor happiness in it.

And then Aegle was no more.

No more than the lingering warmth on my cheek, the echo of wise, loving words in my ears, and a smile branded in my eyes that would make the world that much grayer forevermore.

“I worry about you, you know?” she dares to say.

She’s barefooted today, and I have to wonder how she stands it. How does a human not break out in shivers after stripping yet again in this cold, damp place while sitting in front of my cell, watching me in wait for…

For what?

“Did you puzzle it out?” she says.

“No,” I answer.

“Ah. You care that little for your freedom, then?”

I raise my eyebrow, utterly unimpressed.

“No, I’m not saying that I’ll let you go if you guess. I’m saying that when you understand, you’ll know why you’re here,” she clarifies.

“How is Bausan?” I finally ask.

“Well cared for, yet anxious. She’s a docile animal, but she misses her mistress,” she answers readily enough that she must’ve been waiting for the question since she first walked down here.

And I guess that’s part of it. Of this whole… whatever this is. That Her Royal Majesty has been keeping an eye on my mare or, at the very least, pretended to just to…

To what? To appear kinder than she is? To make it seem as if she has all the answers?

As much as novelty and uncertainty are valued among elves, I don’t think many would appreciate it under the current circumstances.

“She’s trained for combat. You’d do well not to approach her from behind unannounced,” I warn her, not knowing why.

“I know,” she says with a smile that still has that bitter edge.

“You know a lot of things,” I goad her.

And there comes her laughter.

“Too much and too little. Isn’t that the curse of knowledge?”

“The riddle, not the curse,” I say, correcting the quote.

“Not in my translation.”

“Are you arguing with *me* about the proper translation of an elven saying?”

“Riddle leaves out the nuance. Curse is arguably too strong a word, but people are more used to puzzling out curses than to fearing riddles.”

“Then your people are insane.”

“Maybe,” she says.

And then she falls into silence, the smile shortening into something almost impish as she keeps staring at me until I feel self-conscious about the dust of the road and the lack of a bath in this place, even if I, thankfully, don’t have other hygienically human concerns to deal with.

“What? What is it that you want from me?” I finally ask after the flames of the tallow candles have fallen lower and lower.

“I’m a princess, Daphnaie, soon to be queen,” she says, her eyes burning into mine. “I want it *all*.”

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I breathe.

I never got the trick of it. I was… too anxious. I kept focusing on my breath and steadying it, controlling the flow as I did when singing, smoothing it, and making it as regular as the rising of the tides.

Aegle was always amused by it.

By my inability to just let go. To sit back and observe how breathing just… happens. How life moves beyond our control, shifting minutely in ways we won’t ever notice unless we pay attention, each moment as unique as serene smiles under laurel leaves.

“Do you have an answer?” she says.

Today… Today she’s almost naked. Her bodice has been discarded, and her breasts are bare, two pink nipples standing hard in the cold of the dungeon, her pale chest crisscrossed by blue veins that lead the eye around her sculpted curves, her bare belly moving slowly with a single line running down the middle, telling me of softness mingled with firmness.

“You fear for your position,” I finally answer, forcing myself to meet her eyes.

“Why?” she asks, head yet again tilted in the barest show of curiosity.

“Because… The hero has abandoned you, and other nobles are making moves. Ambushing me to take the blade? That should have never happened. That means somebody is planning a revolution or to sell the country to the Demon Lord.”

Another impish smile.

“Close. But ultimately wrong,” she says.

And I sigh.

“I don’t have a head for intrigue, Princess. Elves don’t care too much for that.”

“Democracy, yes. What a surprise that you got conquered and enslaved,” she says.

And I rear back until my shoulders hit the corner behind me.

“Take that back,” I warn her.

“Why? What will you do, *elf?* What *can* you do?”

I look at her. At royal blue eyes staring at me with all the insolence of human nobility.

And, finally, after so many burning candles that I stopped keeping count, I stand up.

The wards resting on the earth around me press down on my body, but I breathe in, taking all the magic of the world inside of me, letting the melody start inside my head.

And I sing.

I sing of loss. Of days turning to years. Of absence that endures and grows as more and more things join it. Of family that drifts away, friends lost, dead pets. Of childhood toys turned to dust, words faded from books, and first kisses that taste of ash.

I sing of a life that went on for longer than could be endured until it stopped being a life. Until it was mere repetition. Until there was nothing but the yearning for what once was. For what can no longer be found.

I sing of brooks beneath laurel trees.

My throat hurts with every note, with every iota of pain I pour into the ballad of The Fall of the Undying Isles, making it mine as I shape the ancient syllables.

And the world answers me.

The stones weep, condensed water flowing over them. The candles flutter low, too bashful to shine brightly upon my loss. Upon the loss of all of us.

And metal bars rust.

I can see the red powder flaking off with every verse. With every bitter reminder that we will all join that very dust. That enduring for as long as we do only means that we get to see that much more of it.

She stands.

She stands and watches me, those royal blue eyes of hers once again darkened into something far deeper, her lips set into a thin line.

And she walks near to the corroding bars my magic clashes against, a slender, elegant hand rising up to brush delicate fingertips along cracked red the color of old blood.

She keeps watching me. Keeps listening to my song.

And she joins it.

My eyes widen as her words dance around mine. As she offers the answering song, the one that no human should know.

As she speaks of finding not what was lost, but what comes after. Of the secret shame of elves. The pain we all carry.

Of hope.

And I weep.

My voice is steady after decades of training, but my eyes blur with tears I can’t hold back. Not after so many days in the dark, my drifting thoughts going from their usual daze of idle musings to the sharp pain of vivid memory.

It hurts.

It hurts so much, Aegle.

But I keep singing. I keep offering line after line for her to refute. For her to tell me of the seeds blooming in ash, of new friends met, of families born.

Of making new toys for the children to come, writing books that continue the works of faded words.

Of first kisses.

And brooks under laurel trees.

The iron bar crumbles under her touch, rust going all the way through it, and she just…

Just pushes the door open as the lock falls apart.

And she walks toward me.

Her fingertips brush against my cheek, and the trace of powdered iron feels like a brand of betrayal. Like something that should never happen to me. Not again. Not with another woman.

And so, finally, I lose my song.

It endures for a single moment, hanging between us like when I called my magic to me during a past visit, and it, yet again, allows me to see in a light that comes not from tallow candles.

So I see what light can’t show.

The princess. Beautiful. Full of something that’s tied to the castle above me.

Sad in her own way.

Her head tilts, and she leans forward to lay a single kiss on my brow that makes me shudder. That makes me fear what’s about to happen.

But I don’t stop her when she reaches down and takes the Sword of the Hero out of its sheath.

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Her room is of new construction, the magic of the throne room still reaching through the thick walls, but not as radiantly vibrant as when she sits in the center of power of an entire kingdom.

It’s decorated in soft whites and cerulean blue, like her dress, the royal colors of her dynasty that are familiar enough to any elf who has lived in houses with walls whitewashed to protect them from sea and wind, behind blue doors that call out to that very sea.

Because all elves travel, sooner or later.

“I won’t apologize,” she says, standing by the side of a tall window that streams irregular, shifting light over her, shining through her golden hair as she fusses with loose locks.

“You’re insufferable,” I finally tell her.

She smiles.

“I know. It’s one of my greatest charms.”

“I fear for the future of your dynasty if that’s the truth.”

The smile sharpens.

“There’re plenty of reasons to fear for my kingdom, Daphnaie. My charms aren’t one of them.”

And she stops fussing with her hair to turn toward me, yet again unbuttoning her skirt and letting it drift to the floor below, though this time it’s covered by a royal blue carpet that contrasts with the softer accents painted on the walls and ceiling, the fabric thick and plush enough that, when she walks forward and over the fallen piece of clothing, the tips of her feet sink noticeably with every step she takes toward me.

Until she’s right in front of me, her yet again captive breasts pressed against mine, her lips almost brushing my own.

“Don’t you agree?” she murmurs, her eyes lidded in something that…

I push her shoulders away, and she giggles.

“Stop playing with me,” I say with a voice smaller than I would’ve wanted.

“No. I don’t think I’ll do that,” she says before taking my hand and kissing the back of my knuckles.

“Why are you—”

She takes out the collar.

The leather collar that she showed me jokingly while I was in her dungeon and that I never so much as reached for. The one with a golden, solid buckle with my name engraved on it.

And I freeze.

“You want it,” she says.

“That’s absurd,” I answer.

“The truth often is.”

She opens it, the thin band of supple leather that would feel sinfully soft on my skin draped between her open hands, offered to me as her smile returns, though this time it’s the short, impish one.

“This is madness,” I say, still not slapping it away. Still not striking the woman who imprisoned me for no reason I can discern.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” she tells me.

And my eyes fall from royal blue to what’s still offered to me. To what I won’t ever take, no matter what.

Her smile broadens.

And she reaches up.

I… I shiver when she places it around my neck. When the napped suede brushes against my beating pulse. When her elegant fingers close the catch and cold metal rests against the hollow of my throat.

“Why?” I ask, reaching up with my own fingers to touch what I now realize is solid gold.

Enchanted gold.

“You come from angels. That’s what high elves are, unlike silvan elves and their ancestry found in untamed forests or dark elves and their deepest roots.”

“Yes.”

“What is an angel, Daphnaie?”

This time, it’s me who tilts her head but with confusion rather than feline curiosity.

And I try not to react to her answering smile or the words that follow.

“Angels are intermediaries. Servants of the gods,” she says, the implication clear.

“I’m *no one’s servant,*” I say.

“I know. That’s the issue.”

The gold is now warm beneath my fingers, and I—

“A slave’s collar?” I say, trying to feel what magic has been engraved in the—

She laughs.

A crystalline peal, devoid of the bitterness I’ve always heard from her until now, as she reaches up and her hands rest on each side of my neck, the soft leather interrupting her touch only in a single, thin band that is felt all that much more poignant because of the warmth surrounding it.

I’m breathing too quickly.

And I notice all of it.

“The enchantment is only meant for durability and cleanliness, Daphnaie,” she says, royal blue eyes tingling in front of mine, just a tad lower. Just enough that she would’ve to reach up or I to lean down— “It’s just so it’ll always shine no matter what.”

“Then why—that’s… I don’t understand…”

Her hands slowly caress up my neck, her fingertips briefly brushing over my earlobes as I bite my lip.

“Angels, my beautiful Daphnaie, are, above all other things, *devout*. It can be to a cause, a person, a discipline. It doesn’t matter. None of you can be happy until you find that something to dedicate your lives to. And, once you do, you can’t betray it,” she says.

And then kisses me.

Hands on my cheeks pulling me down as she gets on her tip toes. As she both reaches up and brings me to her. As she makes us meet in the middle, my heart thundering as the air trapped in my chest burns before I give in to sharp, short breaths as her bedroom spins around me.

As what this woman intends to do to me becomes… as obvious as it should’ve been.

“No,” I breathe out, pathetically soft, not even managing to push her away when she pulls back just enough that the only thing I can see are her eyes burning in front of me as the entire palace beats along with her magic.

As I’m surrounded, *embraced*, by the swirling winds of a power no human should have.

“There’s another truth I’ve yet to tell you, Daphanie. Just another tiny, little thing. It barely changes anything at all.”

She reaches up. Higher. Her arms tensing as she pulls herself up on my body. As she all but *climbs me*.

“Such a small thing,” she murmurs. “Such a small thing that could, still, change everything.”

Her chest presses harder against mine, our clothes rumpling, her lips brushing my cheek on her way to my ear.

“The hero’s power… The hero’s power comes from being touched by the Goddess. And I have that power, *Angel*.”

She bites my earlobe between pointed, pearly canines, and I bite my own lip to stifle a pathetic, yearning moan as her hands go down my body to settle on my waist, making me feel…

Wanted. Desired.

*Taken*.

“Don’t call me like that,” I protest far too weakly.

“It’s what you are,” she says in something heated that is as feline as her other gestures, even if I now realize I’ve been dealing with a lion rather than a cat. “An angel who will never stray, never betray, never fall. A gorgeous angel to sing the most beautiful songs in the world. An angel to walk by my side and watch over me. *My* angel.”

I close my eyes and try to hold onto my thoughts, to slow them down enough to understand what the jumbled, burning mess between my pulsing temples even is.

But it was never about that, was it?

So I…

I reach up with my own hands and cup her cheeks, pushing her away from my now wet ear and the persisting tingling she’s left there with tongue, teeth, and words.

I hold her.

In front of me.

And I remember dazzling glints of sunlight over cresting ripples flowing down a singing brook. I remember scattered droplets after a thrown pebble. I remember a thousand and one moments that were sharp enough that I had to turn away from them and fall prematurely into the melancholy daze that always takes my people.

I… I stop doing the thing that Aegle never chastised me for doing.

I stop trying to control that which can’t be controlled.

And so it flows.

Sharp pain in my chest, unfulfilled yearning, nights that will never return.

Childhood toys turned to dust.

It all flows, but it doesn’t stop. It doesn’t linger. It just… happens.

And I, for once in my life, watch it happen.

I watch as she takes hold of my wrist and turns her face aside to lay a wet kiss on my palm, her eyes still on mine through the entire process. I watch as she tugs on me and pulls me toward a bed bigger than I’ve ever seen, lying me across the snow-white silk duvet, on my back, before she climbs on top of me.

“If you tell me to stop, I will. But the next time, I’ll make you want this that much worse,” she warns me.

I believe her.

I believe her as deft fingers run up my sides until they find the lacing keeping my bodice tight on my body, and she pulls on knots that have remained untouched since I last had a change of clothes.

It’s… It’s a good thing that elves—at least high elves—don’t sully our clothing. I’d dread what comes now otherwise.

More.

I’d dread it more.

Because I can only watch as she tugs on cotton ribbons, and they come undone at the slightest of her touches. As she opens myrestricting leather bodice, and my breasts finally spill over my chest under a blouse that is too thin to keep her eyes from fixating on the motion of my flesh flowing because of her.

To hide two pale, hard nipples standing under her scrutiny.

I bite my lip not to say anything. Not to plead, not to beg. Not to tell her to stop or continue.

She lays a single finger on it. On the bulging, tingling flesh pressured by my teeth. On one of the most sensitive parts of my body, claiming it yet again.

Conquering me.

I close my eyes and push my head back into her soft mattress, trying to flee from her eyes. From a stare that tells me that everything that is about to happen is inevitable. That my last chance to turn away passed when I crossed beyond magical doors and into the center of her power.

She moves. On top of me. Legs and arms by my sides as she deliberately crawls until her golden locks caress my neck and cheeks as she lowers herself nearer. Closer. As she slowly makes it so there’s nothing between us other than our rustling clothes.

“You can still tell me to stop,” she says, her hot breath over my still-wet ear making my toes curl inside my boots. And then she pauses, just… just letting me feel the weight of her contained breasts on mine. Just making me smell her subtle perfume and the maddening scent that lies underneath it. Just making me feel like a woman and not a walking corpse for the first time in decades.

“Can you?” she finally adds.

And I… I…

I shake my head, my hair brushing over pure white silk with cerulean blue trimmings.

“Say it,” she orders in the softest tone anybody has ever demanded something of me.

I free my lower lip from my teeth, a serrated line of pain throbbing along the intense pleasure she’s left behind on my body with a single kiss that echoes harder than her words.

“Say it, *Angel*,” she insists as her hand finds the ribbon keeping the collar of my blouse closed and slowly undoes it as if savoring every hint of my skin that is revealed at the behest of a gesture that feels too much like she’s tugging on my leash.

“I—” a moan interrupts me when that very same finger traces a line of cold fire down my breastbone, pulling down on the next ribbon without undoing it but still freeing so much more of my body to become the captive of her royal blue eyes.

“Tell me. Me, and only me. Nobody else will ever need to know. Nobody will ever understand what’s about to happen. What has already happened. What we will make sure always happens.”

It’s… her words are calm and deliberate. They are… chosen. Crafted for me and only me by somebody who has spent the past few days knowing me better than I could’ve guessed.

They are *insane*.

There’s the fire behind them that she hides behind her self-assured demeanor. The burning need for…

For *me*.

“Why? Why not… Why not any other elf? Why wait until I…”

Her elbows sink on the mattress, over my now bare shoulders, her skin burning her touch on mine before her thumbs rest on my closed eyelids and massage them in slow circles.

“There are gods,” she says. “Demons. Spirits. *Heroes*. There’s a song that runs beneath the world and makes us its instruments. There’s fate, Daphnaie. And, this time, just this once, I don’t want to deny it.”

The thumbs slide off, resting now on my temples with their caring, soft, gentle massage.

And I can no longer stop myself from opening my eyes.

From seeing… her.

Royal blue eyes.

Staring down at me.

Into me.

“I can’t,” I tell her.

“What? What is it that you can’t?” she says in that still slow and deliberate tone.

“I can’t… I can’t tell you to stop,” I finally admit.

And she dives down.

Her lips on mine, taking me, the pain of my own bite flaring up and shooting a lance of red-hot sensation through my mind, scattering all thoughts into further disarray before her tongue enters me and her hands rip my blouse open.

Her white hand is flat on my belly, holding me down when I tremble against her touch, and she pushes. She pushes back toward my pants until deft fingers slide beneath tight fabric, and they play over cotton underwear and the golden curls beneath it.

I moan. I whine. I do a thing very close to crying.

But she keeps touching me, caressing me, kissing me.

Loving me.

And it’s deranged. It’s poison. It’s something I should flee from.

But it’s… mine.

And she’s making me hers.

With every breath that I exhale and she swallows, I fall a bit farther. I fall into the comfort of a firm hold, of a possessive mistress that won’t let me waste away. That won’t let my mind wander down a collection of losses.

That won’t let me be who I’ve been since…

“I loved her,” I say as I push her face away from me to stare up into burning eyes that should not be deep blue when all that there’s behind them is burning red.

“I know,” she answers, her breath scorching on my lips.

“I loved her like I never loved anything else. Like… Like the duet of a hidden brook and playful sunlight. I loved her like the world only made sense because she was on it.”

“I know, Daphnaie. I know,” she says, and for that single moment, I can believe that she’s kind or, at least, knows what kindness is.

“And I lost her. I lost her, and I lost myself, and now… and now I can only care for my white mare and a mother absent on her pilgrimage. I can… I can only… my mission… The gods…”

“Shush,” she says, her finger once again on my bitten lip. “The gods won’t touch you ever again.”

It should be a threat.

“Thank you,” I say as tears bubble over my eyes for the second time in a single day. For the second time in a decade.

But now it’s tears of gratitude.

And she kisses them away.

“Marianne,” I breathe out, surrendering myself when I call her name for the first time.

“Daphnaie,” she answers me with something that makes my heart clench.

And then her lips go to my neck, just to trail down in a caress only interrupted by my collar on her way to the hollow of my throat, where she sucks beneath an engraved buckle until my hands go to her golden locks, and I press her harder against me.

The bed shifts underneath us when she moves, following my breastbone only to make a detour at the last moment to capture a single nipple inside of her scalding mouth, the hard tip of her tongue twirling over me until I rub my thighs together and soil my underwear in one of the very few ways an adult high elf can.

I can feel the warm wetness spreading, seeping into my pants, making them stick to my inner thighs as my eyes roll back, and I keep whispering Marianne’s name like a prayer. Like the prayers she tells me I’ll never again have to offer to the gods who took Aegle from me.

I could give myself up just because of that.

But she won’t let me.

She’ll conquer me, utterly and completely. She’ll make me hers with all the tools and weapons she can bear against me.

She kisses my belly, right below my navel, on the shallow indentation between muscles, and I shudder under her hard enough that my shoulders bounce on her soft mattress, my eyes flying wide open at the sensation of her tongue peeking out past her lips to dig into my skin.

And she finds the string keeping my pants up and undoes it.

Just a gentle prodding on my right buttock makes me lift my hips, letting her pull my pants and underwear down, Marianne leaving the bed to stand between my open legs as she peels my clothes and boots off me.

And she looks down at me, naked from the waist down, a torn shirt and open bodice lying by my sides, a collar on my throat.

And smiles.

Then… then those deft fingers of hers strip her once again, showing me her body like she’s done over the past days while I waited for her daily visit on my cell, white flesh offered to me, pale enough that beating blue veins stand on the circumference of full breasts, flirting with the edge of pink areolas, almost as noticeable as those running down the inside of her slender forearms. The inside of a thin wrist that leads my eyes down long, agile, cruelly loving fingers.

Fingers that rest on the inside of my ankles for a single moment before turning touch into burning caress, the surprised gasp that I barely manage to swallow yet another proof of her mastery of my own body.

I can feel her claiming me.

The power that flows from her throne along the castle walls, that fills her with a strength she won’t have outside of here, touches me, and she was right when she claimed it was the power of the Goddess and that high elves come from angels. She was right when she thought it would be something to lure me in.

But it’s *nothing* compared to the hungry madness I see in her eyes when she takes in my whole body as her dancing fingers leave blazing trails on my legs.

She doesn’t even need to push my thighs apart. I do it all on my own when she leans forward, crawling on her elbows over the snow-white duvet, her pale breasts dangling beneath her, the wonderfully full shapes turning slightly conical as they sway side to side with every shift of her shoulders.

She looks at me with such desire, such hunger that I can’t stop myself from wanting to be devoured.

That I *can’t* stop myself from…

She turns aside when she reaches my knees, her lips on my left one for a moment before she traces yet another wet line on my body, along the inside of my thigh, kissing and lapping over the traces of my own excitement that my dirty clothes have left for her to consume.

I try to close my eyes. To dive into the warm darkness behind my lids.

But I can’t look away from her. Won’t look away from her. Don’t ever want to look away from her.

Not when she smiles at me with such pure joy as her breath washes over the open folds of my sex.

I reach down with my hands, burying them in golden locks, not because I fear that she will pull away but because I need to show her that I won’t let her. That, as much as she’s binding me to her…

A rope.

A rope and a wild horse slowly learning of limits as it shortens. As the tamer teaches a beast that there’s freedom and joy in servitude.

But a rope is tied to a stake set in the ground. When one holds it… that’s no longer a rope.

That’s a leash.

And a leash will bind us both together.

So I tug on her hair, and she lunges, open mouth meeting my folds and making sparks fly behind my eyes as I keep staring at royal blue that never looks away from me even as our leash shortens. As she drinks my pleasure and gives me more of it. As she breaks me and makes me moan without a care for anything other than *more*. More of her lips, her tongue, fingers, and eyes.

More of *her*.

She captures my pearl with her lips, sucking on it harder and harsher than I thought I wanted, but now she’s made me desire precisely this. This thing that only she can give me that lies buried beneath a madness nobody else but me will ever see.

The madness that would lead a human princess to claim an angel of her own.

And my own insanity in becoming that angel.

Her fingers sink into my flesh, parting me like so few men ever did before I discovered that I preferred women and then a single woman. Like nobody has done in too long. And my body surrenders to it.

I don’t even notice my first climax until it’s over, and I, exhausted, drop down on her bed and finally escape the hold of eyes that should be crimson flame.

As I shudder, as I gasp up into the bed canopy of wood painted white and blue, sinking into the silk duvet… the mattress shifts.

And she’s once again on all fours, over me, filling my eyes with royal blue and golden hair a shade darker than my own.

Then she slowly leans down, and her lips impart my love juices on my own, the mild fragrance of my sex spreading over the open, stinging sore.

“You are mine,” she says. “And I’ll never let you go.”

“Thank you,” I answer.

\*\*\*

What I missed the most about sex wasn’t the sensual pleasure itself. That… That was nice. Good. Something that I obviously enjoyed.

But what I missed the most were the talks that came after. Lying beside a lover, both of us drowning in the illusion of openness. In… believing, until the night passed and dawn came, that two could really become one.

“What do you want from me?” I ask the woman threading her fingers through my hair with exquisite care and devout attention.

“I already told you; I want it all.”

There’s a hint of laughter in her tone, but it’s the laughter that carries self-reproach. The laughter of somebody who doesn’t like looking at mirrors.

“Marianne…” I tell her with a voice that… that is more familiar than it should be, as if reprimanding an old friend for a joke that stopped being funny long ago—if it ever was.

“Sorry,” she says with suppressed grimace. “It’s… To make a long story short? I want to survive.”

I don’t answer. I just look up at her while she keeps soothingly carding my hair after days without a brush or comb. As she keeps up this performance of caring and intimacy.

And then she speaks and tells me things that nobody else has heard from her lips. Not her closest confidants or allies.

And I just…

I listen. Like I did hundreds of times before when I heard about the secret of breathing without repetition.

\*\*\*

She rides on a blue roan horse, a war stallion that outweighs Bausan like a troll does a goblin.

Bausan.

She was calmer than I expected. Well cared. Brushed daily by the royal princess herself.

She almost leaped out of her stable when she saw me, bucking against her restraints to get at me until I broke down into a run just to shorten her anxious bid for freedom and caress her long neck, whispering ancient words into her ear as she nuzzled me and whinnied like she hadn’t in… in years, I think.

And now I am once again riding her.

But with a blue roan horse leading the way.

Because that’s the freedom that Bausan and I enjoy: the one that our mistress allows us.

“How long until your absence is noted?” I ask, looking over my shoulder at the last white spire of the castle that I can see from this bend of the road.

“I don’t know. Until a mage requests an audience? Body doubles only go so far when they can barely sit on the throne,” she says, shooting me a smile that should have, at least, a hint of worry.

“This is horribly reckless of you,” I tell her, briefly considering spurring Bausan so I can ride by Marianne’s side rather than behind her.

“I know. But it’s not like my wayward fiancé has left me much of a choice,” she says.

And I roll my eyes at what is both true and a terrible excuse.

Because if there’s one thing that I have learned after so many decades…

It’s that there’s always a choice.

Even if, sometimes, that choice is to stop making choices.