

## **The Goddess and The Stag**

### **Chapter 1 - Death of a Princess**

The sudden brightness as the hood over Andra's head was removed left the mage dazed. He was bound to a chair but had no idea where he was. The walls were outside of the circle created by the single overhead light. What he could see of the floor was wood paneling. The air was damp like he was close to the docks.

The last thing he remembered happening was--

"Comfortable, I trust?"

A massive cloaked form stepped into the light. Tall and broad almost to the point of absurdity, the figure dominated his view. A mass of black hair braided with what appeared to be satin ribbons emerged from their raised hood and draped past their chest. A gold ring clamped the end together.

Green-skinned arms, thick with muscle, pushed back a hood to reveal a face he knew from wanted posters. It was a look one could not forget. Shattered tusks repaired with liquid silver and an eyepatch bearing the skull and bolt runes. It appeared he had been captured by Lo'thek, Pirate Queen of the Emerald Sea.

Andra clenched his fists and began to draw power from the water in the air around him, but Lo'thek moved faster than he expected. She broke his concentration with a backhanded slap that knocked the chair on its side a few feet to the left of where it had been. The captive mage saw stars as his temple smacked into the wooden floor and a blossoming headache snuffed any hope of mustering enough focus to cast a spell for a few hours at least.

Was this the end for him then? He had come close to completely leaving his old life behind, and now he was captured by one of the most notorious bounty hunters of the four seas. Did this mean he would be taken back to his uncle and forced to take up his discarded identity once more? Was being Princess Cassandra and some lord's wife an inescapable fate for him?

“My apologies, highness,” the pirate queen growled in a tone that was more sophisticated than Andra expected. “I did not mean to damage you, but I figured a love tap was better than me removing your hands.”

Lo'thek grabbed the chair by its front right leg and hoisted Andra aloft so that their faces were only inches apart. His gaze darted to the left to keep from meeting her eye, but that might have been a foolish decision. The flexed muscles of her arm seemed to contain more mass than he had in his whole body.

“After all the trouble I went through to acquire you, I need you whole and healthy for the task ahead of you.”

“Acquire?” he asked, trying to his emotions under control. He squirmed in the chair, his confidence waning. Without magic to aid him, he had no chance to free himself and escape. He gulped. Was this going to be the end of Prince Andra?

“Yes, acquire--and 'tis a rather permanent arrangement.”

Braving a glance at her face, the Elvish royal noticed that Lo'thek's many scuffed and damaged gold piercings had been replaced with those made from crystals as green as the seas she ruled. That it was a style common for Orcish weddings crossed his mind and two impossible ideas merged into a possibility.

“What do you mean permanent? I have obligations! I have--”

“Nothing at all left to your name,” Lo'thek said, smothering Andra's protests with her much deeper voice. “Nothing except the debt you owe me.”

As he inhaled to retort, it dawned on him how pleasant the air between them was. Instead of the harsh sting of salt and tar he had expected from an Orc of the high seas, Lo'thek seemed to exude the soft scent of rose petals and sage.

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Had she—? It boggled his mind, but the truth was right there before him. The Dread Emerald had gone out of her way to be presentable for this encounter. Andra's world tilted around him. Not a single one of the knightly lords who had come to court Cassandra could say they had made the same effort, so why had Lo'thek?

His pulse was pounding now. Not just from fear or the headache, but something... else. Something hazy just at the edge of his awareness. It was obvious there was more going on here and his mind was offering all sorts of outcomes. All things considered, it seemed like this exchange was not about intimidation, at least, not of the physical kind.

"What does *that* mean? What debts could I possibly owe you."

"The authorities will find a dead Elf in the surf tomorrow morning."

"I'm not sure I follow..." Or, perhaps it *was* about threats of violence.

"By week's end, all of your enemies will believe their princess in hiding has met an untimely end. They will stop searching for you."

"Wait-wait-wait! Are you going to kill me after all?" he stammered, his affected baritone rising into the soprano he had worked so hard to replace.

Lo'thek barked a laugh that filled the room. "Now why would I have need to do that? I have already killed you, after all."

"Why the deception? Was there gold being offered for me?"

"Hardly. I paid the coroner the lion's share of your bounty to ensure they proclaim my fake to be the body of Holy Princess Cassandra."

"That what good--"

"What good?" Lo'thek laughed again. "All of this means you owe me your life, highness. Realize that your very existence is just as much in my hands as the rest of you, princeling."

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Andra could not find the words to respond to that. Lo'thek grunted and let him drop the short distance between the floor and the chair. She strode across the room to pick up her cape. The Orcish queen said nothing as she knocked the dust out of it before returning to his bound form. Then she squatted so they were eye to eye once more.

"Let me put it to you another way, highness. With this false death, I have given you the freedom you sought, have I not?"

"I suppose," he ventured. "Although this was not what I had--"

"I'm sure, but the life you planned was never going to be a reality, highness. Those looking for you knew where you were. The bounty had already been posted. It was only a matter of time before you were captured and hauled back. However, I got to you first," Lo'thek added with an air of accomplishment.

"And I thank you, truly," he replied, pulling his nobleman's voice back into place. "However, I refuse to cooperate with whatever dreadful scheme you are plotting."

"Oh, I think you will," Lo'thek said, the corner of her mouth rising. "I know what you want most and it is something I want as well."

"What are you..." Wait—did Lo'thek know about his experiments to change his form? Was that what this was about? "You want my transformation spell, don't you?"

"Sort of. What I desire is the end result. So much so that I am willing to forego the substantial reward for returning you alive to ensure it happens."

"Why?"

"Because I know you want to be a king instead of a princess." She said it as if wanting that was the same thing as wanting salt for one's soup.

"How could you--"

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“Know that? Did you really think your movements had gone untracked? Do you think no one noticed your attempts at disguise spells?”

Andra had to admit Lo'thek was right. “Okay, then, how can you help?”

Lo'thek pushed off of her knees to rise back to her towering height. Her crossed arms loomed overhead. “I've looked at your notes. I know what you are missing.”

“Really? What?”

“You have failed to account for how far towards the feminine you are. How much closer your line is to Our Mother Underground than other of Elven descent. It should have been a foregone conclusion that no essence of a mundane human man was going to be strong enough to pull you towards the center, much less to the other side.”

“How--?”

“Imagine that you had access to something more powerful. Something tied to the divine masculine as you are the feminine. What if your spell could draw from the well of power which flows from The Wandering Stag?”

Was Lo'thek actually proposing he use Orcish blood to complete the spell? What would that even do?

“I cannot say,” he mused. “The outcome is beyond anything I can fathom at the moment.”

“Then perhaps you should widen your imagination, highness. You never know what answer awaits you behind the door you have yet to open.”

Andra could scarcely believe it. It seemed like Lo'thek was offering to help him shed the last vestiges of the lie named Princess Cassandra. “Why are you--What is the point in offering me all of this?”

“I would do almost anything if it meant my legacy lived on. I want to prove one of Orcish descent can lead and thrive in society just as much as any of the Goddess’ chosen. I want to believe a Stag’s chosen can find a home to call their own.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“When you inevitably move to reclaim what is your from your uncle, I want to be there. I want to stand at your side as you take the crown from his lifeless fingers and proclaim yourself the rightful leader of a country that wished the real you dead.”

She knelt before him, a motion which made Andra nervous. “I can offer you an armada to command. I can offer you an army which measured thousands strong. All that I have can be yours if it means my aims come to pass.”

Andra’s heart skipped a beat. Was this some sort of marriage proposal? Even if the spell worked and The Stag’s power granted his wish, would Prince Andra be able to keep up with The Dread Emerald? What kind of man would he become?

“Well, elf? What is your answer? The choice is yours, but either way, you will provide me an heir. It is just a question if you will do so as my partner or as my slave.”

*(To be continued...)*