

Elora: A character introduction (Dungeons & Dragons 4th Edition campaign)

Elora perched straight backed on the edge of her bed, passing an eye over her bedroom one last time. She had thought that perhaps at the last minute nostalgia would blossom in her heart, and trigger tears behind her eyes, but she knew now that wasn't going to be the case.

She was glad to be leaving. For 18 years she had been trapped in this town, experiencing nothing but humiliation, hatred and frustrating loneliness. Now, finally, she was officially of age and no matter how much her parents threatened disownership, it didn't matter. They couldn't stop her. There wouldn't be any guards hauling her out of a hiding place in one of her father's wagons, and half dragging, half marching her home. Not this time.

Of course, her father could try. He was a successful and influential merchant after all. However, Elora doubted that his tendency to throw gold at problems would deter the Arcane Brotherhood from recruiting her if they had their cold, analytical minds set on including her in their ranks. And she was confident that once she met their robed representative tomorrow they would acknowledge her value. That would certainly show all the whispering, slit-eyed villagers. The number of times she had heard 'freak' hissed behind her back, or caught a splatter of horse dung in the face. Or, most recently in the past two years, come across a poorly duplicated, poorly illustrated leaflet of herself on all fours, rutting gleefully with gaping mawed demons.

Elora got to her feet and checked the lock on her bulky satchel. It felt criminal to carry only three books with her considering the effort it had taken to acquire her personal library over the past five years. Her entire allowance, a few minor sexual favours and some teeth-gritting niceness towards the most trusted and discreet men in her father's service had ensured a regular trickle of hard-to-find magical tomes – always deposited in a loose lidded crate just outside the servants' entrance to her house.

Hopefully the Brotherhood would allow Elora to send for her books once she was more established. The thought of leaving them, however well hidden, in the home of her narrow-minded, hopelessly superficial family sickened her. The knowledge contained in the tomes would be wasted on people whose reading habits were confined to a fat set of volumes on the glory days of the half-elf empire, and two religious texts devoted to the worship of half-forgotten goddess Erathis. Elora's mother pored over the books on a nearly daily basis, lapping up the bias and mindless propaganda to vomit back onto her children at dinner time.

Although Elora had never been close to her older sister Lucia, or young brother Lockwood, they had shared many pained glances over the dining room table when they were trapped listening to their proud mother berate them for some action of theirs that she felt let down the half-elf race, and, more importantly, their apparently once noble family.

Alessa Tirian was in fact much admired in Silverpass for her ladylike demeanour and faultless manners but her daughter had lost respect for her a long time ago. First her mother had sent away Elora and Lucia's private tutor when Elora was 14, adamant that the girls knew everything they needed to make respectable wives for wealthy merchants or aristocrats. Too much education leads to a smart mouth and inappropriate behaviour, Alessa had commented at the time, scowling down her nose at a tearful, fist-clenched Elora. Then barely two years later, in punishment for the incident that had forever changed Elora's life, her mother confiscated all her books. Fortunately her parents had felt there had been enough burning at the time because

they didn't toss the tomes onto a bonfire as they had threatened. This allowed Elora time to steal them back.

It grated Elora that no matter what she did to differentiate herself from her parents; to rebel against them, she could never escape the fact that she bore a striking resemblance to her mother, with her waist length raven hair, sculpted features and violet eyes.

It was one of the few things Alessa approved about her daughter, even if she couldn't understand how Elora was so stunning without subjecting herself to the tedium of daily skin and hair care routines, which she herself had been performing since youth.

The truth was that in the past two years Elora had grown more beautiful, even if it was in an unnerving way. Light would frequently slither in her hair, regardless of whether or not the strands caught the sun's rays or flickering illumination from a candle. Elora's eyes too had developed the unusual tendency to reflect her moods. When angered or upset, her irises darkened from violet to maroon; while on those rare occasions she felt happy, they tinted azure blue.

Even without her recent changes, Elora's beauty was, like her mother's, severe, as opposed to her sister's amiable prettiness. While wannabe suitors would swarm around Lucia like bees on honey comb, they kept their distance from Elora. It was true that men and boys would forget to inhale when she walked into a room, but fear and discomfort remained in their eyes whenever she was around. And unfortunately those few men who could reclaim control of their tongues in her presence were rarely the type she would condone eating a meal with, let alone permit to be inside her. Normally one of her glares was enough to send them scuttling away. Sometimes a stronger verbal rebuke was required, delivered with a practised look that mingled boredom and disdain.

The ideal reaction was the man's retreat, as he muttered 'Arrogant bitch' under his breath. Sometimes though, Elora miscalculated the intensity of her rejection and her suitor's mood, particularly if he had been drinking. Once or twice she had almost been struck. At that point, Elora's brother Lockwood would normally stride forward. Although he wasn't motivated by any great affection for his sister, and was way too slight at 17 to be a fighter, Lockwood loved a good brawl. And having a known oddity for a sister gave him innumerable opportunities to lash out with his fists and feet.

Of course, every time Lockwood returned home bloody, bruised and ragged the blame fell on Elora. She was the one punished while her mother and the household staff flitted around Lockwood, dabbing at and binding his wounds. It made sense. He was precious; the heir to the family business empire. Within months of Elora being born her parents had set out to rectify the disappointment of producing a second daughter. The son they had always wanted finally arrived on the third try.

Elora sat down on the sill of her bay window and gazed across the rooftops of Silverpass, dull in the moonlight. No one would miss her here. Beauty did not ensure popularity. That was a lesson she had learned early. Those few childhood friends she had roamed around with, smoking pipe weed, and drinking undiluted ale, were long gone. They had vanished around the time puberty set in and their social differences solidified. While her friends were forced to don blacksmith's aprons, cleave at meat and remain on their knees all day in the temple, Elora's days were empty. And frustratingly boring. It was just no fun when alone to clamber onto the tavern roof and snicker down on barmaids in the service alley; their skirts hiked up as a pub regular or boozed-up transient thrust into them.

Elora wasn't even welcome to tag along with her older sister and her friends. Lucia had no time for Elora, and in truth, the more she thought about it, Elora didn't want to be in her sister's entourage of giggly teenage girls. Lucia was a hypocrite. Although she would sneak out of the family home more often than Elora, to drink and dance and flirt – and probably much more – her rebellion was superficial. She was always going to settle down; a dull eyed bovine under the yoke of family expectations. In fact, she was already on the cusp of an engagement to a merchant's son in the next town. And any time Elora made reference to the truth of Lucia's after-dark escapades she received a glare, or, if they were at the dinner table, a kick to her shin.

Elora was alone; the only one alert to the lies and trivialities that the townsfolk inhaled as they sleep-walked through the haze of their daily lives. It was one of the reasons Elora had turned to magic. Although the only mage in Silverpass was a mad hermit slipping around in his own filth, Elora knew that he was an exception to the rule. Outside of her town's borders existed magic users – wizards and warlocks and sorcerers – of great insight, intelligence and power. Their days were spent grappling with the great mysteries of the universe; not debating whether soup should precede the salmon starter, or what sash best matched her new gown.

Of course it was unlikely that these great mages would have anything to do with Elora – a 13 year old girl, and a merchant's daughter who had never shown any magical proficiency. This was despite years of being associated with odd happenings around her home, such as the unexplained movement of heavy furniture, trashed larders with the highest cupboards flung open, and the occasional fire, always caught before the flames could outgrow the tinder stage.

The household staff made sure to spread the word about town that surly troublemaker Elora was involved, even if it was completely nonsensical. The inhabitants of Silverpass grew increasingly wary of Elora, but their fear was fuelled by the superstition of stupid peasants. She knew that the same stories wouldn't even catch the ears of the world's mages, especially members of The Arcane Brotherhood. The Arcane Brotherhood was one of only two magical organisations in existence, and offered protection for towns and their trade routes in exchange for unhindered access to local libraries, magical wares and ruins. All in pursuit of lost knowledge; lost power.

At the age of 13 Elora longed for such an exciting life, but she knew she was invisible to the Brotherhood. And if mages would not share their wisdom, then she would just have to acquire it on her own. She was proud of her self-sufficiency after all.

So she had started with the single magical tome in her family's library. It was a hide-bound heirloom passed down for several generations; now on display as a powerful illustration of her family's long and illustrious lineage. Clearly there had been mages among Elora's ancestors even if her mother didn't like discussing such a gnarled root on the family tree.

After dinner one evening Elora had pried the book from its shelf and crept upstairs to her room. Lying on her bed with a candle, and writing materials within reach on the side table, she began thumbing through the book. Its contents were largely incoherent – a muddle of Common, Eleven and some other languages that Elora couldn't place. However, there were several incantations that were clear enough and she began reciting them.

Every night she would practise, standing or sitting in a middle of ritual circle she copied from the tome and chalked on her floor. And although nothing ever happened; nothing or no one reached out from across the planes to communicate with her, she

felt different. From the first day. Even if she stayed up all night in the circle, or eventually fell asleep draped over the tome just before dawn, she rarely felt, or looked, tired the following morning. Dark rings under her eyes were nonexistent and her hair was sleek whether she brushed it or not. Although these strange physical changes were a perk, helping her escape the time-demanding tedium of personal care, Elora was more pleased by the fact that the chanting made her feel more confident; more centred. Men noticed the changes too. Lewd comments about Therald Tirian's daughters became a serious punishable offence at the warehouse.

Unfortunately Elora had to visit her father's business every time she acquired enough money to make a new book purchase. Her chosen suppliers were reliable men in her father's service, but they were not especially bright. It was easier for her to corner them somewhere at their workplace and explain exactly what she wanted, face to face, as opposed to writing instructions for them. As the years passed, her shopping list had grown increasingly complex as she sought texts that helped to decipher her family's book, and expand on the knowledge that she had already gleaned from it – as hazy passages suddenly sharpened into clarity.

Elora was 16, sitting in her father's office; feigning interest in his work while she waited irritatingly for the arrival of her most recent recruited supplier. That was when she saw Ebban for the first time.

Elora had always been attracted to human men. Although her racist mother would dismiss her behaviour as pure rebellion, that wasn't the case. If Elora had really wanted to anger Alessa she should have pursued a dragonborn, but not even her desire to provoke a reaction could overcome her dislike for scaly flesh. Just the thought of running her fingers over that cool hide and pressing her mouth to lizard lips made her retch.

Humans, however, fascinated her. This was especially true of the men she watched hauling around crates and barrels at her father's warehouse. With their muscled shoulders and broad chests they seemed so much more powerful, and solid than half-elves. Tree trunks as opposed to reeds. There was no comparison between them and the well-groomed young half-elves – the sons of successful traders and well-to-do families – who continually ended up sitting next to her at the dinner table. Even if Alessa hadn't been unobtrusively scrutinising her daughter's interaction with the boys from over her wine glass, Elora would have found them boring. Amiable, but as dull as ditch water.

There was a rap on the office door frame. Therald Tirian looked up from his papers and his daughter turned from the window she was glaring through. A young human male stood in the doorway, with a backpack slung over one shoulder. He looked to be about Elora's age, but it was hard to tell. He had the expansive upper body of a grown man, but his features were boyish, as was the dusting of stubble around his mouth. Then again, with the shaggy dark hair that cast most of his face in shadow, even this was difficult to tell.

'Mister Tirian? I'm Ebban Hardwicke.' His voice was young, but firm.

'Of course.' Therald stood up from behind his desk and outstretched his hand. Ebban strode into the room and seized it. 'Welcome. I was so pleased to hear that you decided to join us.'

'Thank you, sir. Your offer was so generous that I would have been a fool to pass it up. Especially when it meant an opportunity to work directly for the great Therald Tirian.'

Elora didn't need to listen to any more of the sycophantism. She understood the situation clearly now.

Her father was not a bad man. As far as his children were concerned he was always busy; distracted with work, but the situation was understandable, even if hurtful. Elora's father was much admired in Silverpass, and well respected among the world's merchants for his shrewdness and fortitude. He had been absent for much of Elora's childhood, personally leading his carts of merchandise through the corpse-strewn no man's land between towns. His business had thrived, and as he grew older he had been content to oversee proceedings from his warehouse, leaving the physical danger to hired help. Like Ebban. Therald Tirian was no fool. If ever a young man emerged who had the potential to be a rival one day, Therald would absorb him into his own business, luring the lad with a trail of gold. And from there Tirian could keep an eye on his vassals, plying them with more coin should they ever show a twitch of rebellion.

'Ebban, this is my daughter, Elora.'

Elora was jolted from her thoughts. Ebban was moving towards her. Instinctively she held out her hand.

Ebban took her palm in his and half bowed as he shook it. 'Hello,' he said, a quiver in his voice.

Elora nodded in response and as Ebban stepped back, his hazel eyes met hers for a moment. Was she mistaken or had the confidence of his entrance completely evaporated? Elora was used to having such an effect on men, but this time she didn't feel a surge of superiority as she usually did when looking down on weak, all too easily manipulated, lust-struck males.

Ebban smiled weakly and Elora was disturbed to find herself smiling back. Then Ebban turned to Therald. Elora was once again invisible. She excused herself and strode out into the warehouse grounds.

In the following weeks Elora reverted to the skulking and spying practices of her childhood. As a new man in her father's employment, Ebban would be onsite for the next month at least, learning the ropes before he was dispatched on his first escort mission. That would give Elora plenty of time to gauge his character.

Ebban was welcomed readily by the other men. He clearly had a way with others, fitting in almost immediately as they worked side by side in the yard, shirtless, laughing and joking. Most evenings he was at the tavern with her father's men, and Elora was pleased to note that while he regularly got drunk, he never staggered out into the back alley, draped over a barmaid.

The only curious thing about Ebban was that he often sat alone during the midday meal break, eating with his back against the warehouse loading ramp. His co-workers seemed to respect this isolation but the apparently uncharacteristic behaviour grated Elora. She resolved to discover the truth.

Elora was sitting that day in her father's office. She snatched an apple from his lunch platter and headed out into the yard. She pretended to stroll around nonchalantly, every so often biting into the apple. Eventually her wanderings brought her within a few feet of Ebban. He was glaring at the ground before him, the muscles of his jaw flexing as he chewed determinedly on a crust of bread.

Elora cleared her throat, and his head jerked up. 'I didn't take you for someone who preferred to be alone?'

His eyes were still wide. He swallowed hard on the crust and then said, 'I like time to process my thoughts.'

Not the usual brainless grunt then.

'Then I apologise for disturbing you.'

‘No –’ A smile twitched into shape on his lips. ‘No, I don’t mind. Please?’ He gestured to the crate next to him. Elora swirled her robe around herself and sat down. As she turned, she noticed some of her father’s men pulling their faces at her and Ebban. And not in an encouraging way.

Ebban frowned, ‘They don’t like you very much.’

‘No one does. They think I’m... strange.’ Out of the corner of her eye she caught one of the men pumping his fist by his groin. ‘Among other things.’

Ebban scrutinised her face for a moment and then added, ‘I don’t think that.’

She smirked, ‘You’re new here.’

‘And in time I’ll see you for what you really are?’

‘Yes.’

For a moment he seemed taken aback by her grim facial expression. Then he started laughing. Heartily. ‘By Pelor, you’re so serious.’

She wasn’t sure how to respond to that. With blood burning her cheeks, she eventually forced out, ‘Some things aren’t laughing matters.’

He was still chuckling. Then he started choking. He took a swig on his water skin to calm his throat and passed it to Elora. Adamant that she was going to retain her dignity, she raised the skin to her lips and inhaled. Water gushed out of her nostrils. Yet despite the shock and humiliation she found herself sniggering as she wiped at her nose with the back of her sleeve.

‘You’re a lot more beautiful when you smile.’ Ebban had stopped laughing but he still had a big grin. ‘You don’t smile nearly enough.’

‘I don’t often –’ She looked up then to see that a group of her father’s men had gathered across the courtyard. Their tasks momentarily abandoned, they were watching Elora and Ebban keenly, and not without amusement.

Elora could feel her muscles stiffening; the frosted restraint instinctively setting in. She got to her feet and strode for the gate.

‘Hey!’

Ebban was calling after her. She ignored him.

She stayed away from the warehouse for a week after that, content to lock herself in her room with devote herself entirely to her studies. Still, the damage had been done.

Descending the staircase for breakfast a few days later, she found her brother loitering in the entrance hall.

He leered at her. ‘Well, well, sis, seems you have a serious admirer.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Ebban Hardwicke.’ Lockwood’s eyes narrowed as he scrutinised his sister’s face, greedy for any sign of embarrassment. Elora kept her mask of annoyance firmly in place as she waited for him to continue. Eventually he did. ‘The fool got into a fight last night at the tavern. Over you. Caldem was joking with his friends... well, mocking you, and Ebban floored him.’

‘Was –?’ Elora wasn’t sure how to camouflage her concern. Eventually she gave up. Her brother was welcome to join the rest of the town in ridiculing her. ‘Was Ebban hurt?’

‘He took a beating. Caldem and his crowd don’t fight fair. But he got in a few good blows, and I was there to back him up.’ Lockwood stroked the grated, swollen knuckles on his right hand.

There was a screech from the dining room. Elora’s mother. ‘What is going on out there? Get in here right now for family meal time.’

Elora sat silent at breakfast, simply pushing the egg and ham around on her plate. She didn't have an appetite. On the one hand she felt immensely self-satisfied that Ebban had stepped forward in her defence, publicly and despite physical and reputational risk to himself. On the other hand, shame stung her eyes at every single thought that she was responsible for his injuries.

Eventually though, the battle between her emotions was decided. Shame crushed her sense of pride. She forbid herself from rushing down to the warehouse to see how her human was doing.

A week later, well after dark, Elora was groping around inside the covert delivery crate behind her house. It was empty. She cursed her book supplier for breaking his promise and she cursed herself for forgetting a lantern.

'Looking for something?'

She jerked upright, clipping her crown on the crate as she forced her upper body free. Ebban stood behind her, a cloth-and-string-bound package dangling from his hand. His left cheek was still discoloured; his left eye circled purple.

'Sweet gods, what are you doing here?' Elora winced. She clutched the back of her throbbing skull as she desperately tried to regain the breath shocked from her lungs.

Ebban smiled, 'Jocal asked me to drop this off for you.'

The ache in her head faded. Anger flared in its place. 'Jocal shouldn't have done that!' She snatched the book from Ebban.

'Well, too late. He did. What's in the book?'

'I –' She felt prickly; exposed, and she hated that feeling. 'I can't say.' She steadied herself. 'It's none of your business.'

'Oh.'

She could see his radiance dimming under the force of her glare.

'Well, I just volunteered to act as a delivery man because it was a chance to maybe see you again. You haven't been down to the warehouse lately.'

'I've been busy.'

A merchant's 16 year old daughter? Busy? The obvious lie killed the conversation. They stood looking at each other, each growing increasingly flushed and fidgety.

Elora broke the silence first. 'I'm sorry about your –' She flapped her hand in the direction of his face.

'You heard about that?'

'My brother.' Even if Lockwood hadn't have been at the tavern, local news always spread quickly in a town of barely 200 inhabitants.

Ebban shrugged, 'I just didn't think what they were saying was, you know, right.'

'It was very kind of you, but unnecessary. I'm used to what they claim about me.'

'That doesn't make it acceptable.'

'No, it doesn't.'

Silence between them again.

Elora cleared her throat. 'Well, thank you for bringing me this.' She lifted the book to her chest, and folded her arms over it. 'I hope you have a good evening.'

With a nod of her head, she turned from Ebban and took a few steps towards the servants' entrance.

'Wait. What about my payment?'

'Excuse me?' She turned back to Ebban.

'Surely I deserve a little... something?'

As he spoke he closed the gap between them. His right hand was extended, palm up. She backed away only to knock into a water barrel. She was trapped between it

and the cold stone wall. She clutched the book tighter as a shield. Ebban was right in front of her. She could feel the heat radiating from his skin.

‘I –’ she faltered. ‘I only get my allowance next week.’

‘I wasn’t talking about money.’

Ebban brought his hand up to Elora’s face. She froze wide eyed as he stroked her cheek. Then his lips replaced his fingers. With his arms braced either side of her on the barrel, she was entirely engaged as his mouth gently traced her jaw line. He inhaled her skin and her hair before drawing back. He grinned, ‘There. That was all I wanted.’

With that, he dropped his arms and sauntered off.

That night, Elora skipped her incantations for the time in three years. She couldn’t concentrate. Her skin felt hyper-sensitive – she kept feeling the tickle of Ebban’s stubble against her cheek, and it made her shiver. Accompanied by the frenetic throbbing of her heart, sleep was impossible. She spent the entire night face down on her bed, her new purchase unopened at her feet.

The next day she confronted Ebban as he sat down to his afternoon meal in the warehouse grounds. He was sitting with two local boys his age, and they were debating an inventory parchment while they sipped on bowls of soup. They looked up when her shadow fell on them.

Ebban had forgotten to swallow; his cheeks bulged with a mouthful of food. He was clearly the most surprised. The others were surprised too, but their shock couldn’t completely smother the urge to run their eyes over Elora’s svelte body. They didn’t often receive the opportunity to be so physically close to Elora Tirian. She didn’t care.

‘Ebban Hardwicke, come with me.’ She kept her face and voice expressionless.

He looked worried as he lowered his bowl. ‘Is there something wrong? Does your father want me?’

His friends shared quizzical looks. She knew what they were thinking. Elora had never lowered herself to act as a messenger before.

‘Come now, please.’

She strode off, hoping that her nerve would last for a few moments more. Already her emotions were tugging at her mouth. She could hear Ebban scrambling to his feet behind her and then he was behind her.

‘What’s going on?’

She didn’t answer him.

Therald Tirian’s premises consisted of two warehouses situated on either side of a paved courtyard. The bigger of the two buildings was the busiest, and was fronted on one side by the office of Elora’s father, allowing him to survey daily business proceedings when he wasn’t hunched over accounts and orders. The second smaller warehouse was reserved for goods that didn’t move as frequently, or were too fragile to leave within reach of the oafish workmen.

Elora led Ebban into the second building’s entrance and immediately darted down a narrow side passageway dotted with doors on either side. These doors led to several small stockrooms. Including Therald Tirian’s private store chamber. Elora stopped in front of a door halfway down the corridor and drew a key from her money belt. As she unlocked the door, she glanced back over her shoulder. Ebban’s brow was knitted as he looked around the gloomy space. Clearly he had never been in this part of the warehouse complex before.

The door slid open and Elora ushered Ebban inside ahead of her. She looked once in either direction of the passageway, content that nobody had followed them. None of the five men working in the main body of the warehouse had apparently spotted her

when she entered with Ebban. She walked into the storeroom and closed the door behind her.

What light there was entered the chamber through a utilitarian single pane window close to the ceiling. The illumination was just enough to make out that the narrow space contained several crates, a wine rack and at least three chests, all pushed up against the walls.

Ebban was taking it all in. Then he turned to face her. He was still frowning. 'Just what is going –?'

Now or never.

Elora grabbed the lapels of Ebban's shirt and tugged him towards her. She kissed him.

Almost immediately he seized her shoulders and pushed her back, keeping her at arm's length.

He was as breathless as she was. 'No!' he growled.

She knocked his arms aside and kissed him again. Deeply. Her tongue parted his lips.

He shoved her back again. The force was enough that she staggered backwards, and almost fell. He looked ashamed at what he'd done but didn't reach for her. 'This is wrong. You're Therald Tirian's daughter. He cou –'

'I don't care.' She lunged forward.

This time Ebban didn't stop her. Her statement has apparently freed him from restraint. He was hungry for her mouth. And the rest of her apparently. His hands automatically found the curves of her waist and buttocks, as he pulled her against him. Elora could feel something hot and hard pressing against her pelvis. Coming up for breath, Ebban shifted his lips to her throat. Elora could only cling to his shoulder blades, gasping, as he sucked at her collarbone.

She was half a head shorter than him, and he was fast growing frustrated by the height difference. Gripping her by her hips, he lifted her and drove them both back against the storeroom door. The intensity of the collision knocked the air from their lungs. There was little time for recovery though. His mouth found hers again.

Their kissing grew more frenzied. Just as her legs escaped the slits in her robe to climb over his hips, they heard footsteps outside. And voices. The noise grew louder and then passed them. Workmen.

Elora and Ebban froze, waiting for the men to retrieve something from one of the other chambers. Eventually they did, and, grunting about the weight of their burden, headed back down the passageway to the entrance.

The interruption had been long enough for sense to wrestle bodily control away from lust.

'Gods,' Ebban moaned into Elora's neck. She could feel his heart pounding against her chest, the sweat of his brow against her cheek. 'I've wanted you so badly.'

'Me too,' she whispered in confession.

He lifted his face and looked into her eyes. 'Can we do this again?'

'I would like that very much.'

'When?'

'Tonight. Tonight, here, after the 8 o' clock watch.'

The tension finally drained from Ebban's face then, and he smiled. He gently lowered Elora to the ground, running his hand one last time over her exposed thigh as he did so.

She reached up and smoothed his hair; his collar.

He would have done the same for her, but she didn't need it. Instead he seized her hand and kissed it. 'M'lady.' That brought colour to her cheeks, and a smile to her mouth. He bent over and kissed her chastely on the lips.

Elora took a step away from Ebban, before things could escalate again. 'Wait for me by the side entrance tonight. In the shadows, under the overhang. I'll have the key.'

'Right. Now what about the guys who saw me come in here with you?'

Elora hauled a hideous porcelain vase from an open crate near the door. She brushed the dust and cobwebs from it and deposited it in Ebban's arms. 'I needed you to carry this for me.'

With that ruse in place, they were able to walk out of the warehouse together, parting at the entrance as Elora went to dutifully visit her father, and Ebban delivered the vase to her house – no doubt to drop it in the delivery crate.

Elora's afternoon passed in a haze. She didn't hear what the kitchen staff said to her as she pawed through the pantry, nor did she register her parents' words at dinner. As soon as the meal was complete, she excused herself and bounded up the stairs to her room. She changed her robe and brushed her hair. As she examined herself in the mirror she realised her eyes were azure blue.

Ebban was already there when she arrived. The warehouse grounds were quiet. Guards would be patrolling but they were hardly the most thorough men – Elora slipped straight past them. Therald Tirian's reputation was far more effective protection for his wares than armed brutes anyway.

Ebban leapt up with a smile as Elora approached. He had a bedroll under one arm and a backpack over his shoulder.

Neither of them spoke as she opened the side door and locked it behind them. Once safely inside, Elora lit a lantern she had brought with and they used it to navigate to her father's storeroom. Still, there was no talking. Ebban laid out his bedroll, as well as a blanket. Elora removed a bottle of wine, a bottle of ale and two goblets from the basket she carried.

Their separate domestic tasks completed, they found themselves standing barely a foot apart, facing each other. Suddenly they were both embarrassed. It was so much easier when they were ravenous with lust.

Elora couldn't meet Ebban's eyes. Her gaze darted around, refusing to settle on his hazel irises. Eventually she was staring at his boots. She stammered, 'There's something you should know. I've never done anything like this before, despite what everyone says about me.'

Ebban cupped her chin and raised her face so that she that was looking at him. 'I don't do this often myself.' He kissed her gently on the lips. Elora's eyes were still closed when he stepped back. 'Oh, that reminds me...'

He dove for his pack and returned with an ice rose, one of the rarer flowers of the mountainous Silverpass region. Its petals were hard, blue-tinted crystal instead of soft blossom. Ebban closed Elora's hand around it. 'It's not even half as beautiful as you, Elora.'

'Thank you.' She stroked the petals, not actually sure where he would have found the flower. Fall was fast scouring the surrounding hills and mountains. The rose must have been one of the seasonal last.

This time Elora stepped in and initiated the kiss. Ebban wrapped his arms around her and lowered them both to the bedroll.

They sated themselves exploring each other, somehow resisting the temptation to slide out of all their clothes. Eventually, exhausted, numb mouthed but happy, they turned to laughing and drinking as they lay entwined together under the blanket.

Ebban was 17, just one year older than Elora, but his life had been vastly different from hers. Apprenticed to the lone merchant in his village when he was only 10, he had led a life of continual new experiences. Equally competent balancing accounts in an office and leading carts on trading paths, he had travelled through many of the tumbledown territories of the old empires. Almost every night he had looked up at stars different to the unchanging constellations that had pulsed above Elora's head her entire life. She made Ebban promise that he would tell her about all his adventures outside of Silverpass – just before she dozed off with his arm draped over her waist, and his lips against the nape of his neck.

The next thing Elora remembered was being gently shaken awake. 'Elora,' She could feel Ebban picking some locks away from her face. 'Elora, it's almost morning.' She opened her eyes then and sat up. Sure enough, the sky was tinted pink behind the high storeroom window. As hurriedly as they could despite their grogginess, they dressed and hid away the bottles, blanket and bedroll. Then Ebban crept back to the workers' dormitory and Elora to her family's double-story manor.

The night time meetings, punctuated by some illicit afternoon gropings, became their routine. For a few weeks at least. After one particularly intense kissing session, with Ebban on top of Elora, he grimaced and slid onto his side alongside her. His facial expression was so pained that Elora thought for a moment she had physically hurt him somehow. As usual he was hard – it was possible she had kneed him.

'What's wrong?'

Ebban's one hand had crawled up under her robe all the way to her buttocks. He trailed his index finger over the very top of her thigh and slipped it between her legs. Tentatively he slid the finger inside her and began moving it back and forth in her warm wetness. It wasn't the first time he had done that the past few days either. When Elora responded with a shiver he nuzzled her neck, 'I desperately want to take you.'

'I –' What was she holding back for? The townsfolk, and likely even her own family, already believed she was a whore. More importantly, Ebban was the first man who had ever managed to find a crack in her disdain and pierce all the way through to her heart. She whispered, 'I want that too.'

Ebban studied her face carefully. 'Really? Are you sure?'

Elora rolled so that she was straddling Ebban. She made sure that their pelvises were pressed together, separated only by the thin fabric of Ebban's trousers. 'Yes.' She leaned over, kissed him deeply and then withdrew. 'But not now. It's almost dawn and I'm sure you don't want to rush this.'

Ebban sat up, Elora still astride him. He looked up over his shoulder at the window. 'Damn.'

Elora was so busy watching the lightening sky that she didn't have a chance to counter when Ebban thrust up with his hips, knocking her off balance. She landed on her back and Ebban was immediately on top of her, his entire weight pinning her. 'I could ravish you right now,' he grinned.

Elora laughed, pecked at his lips and slid out from under him. She fanned out her hair; straightened her robe. 'This evening.'

Ebban remained on the ground, watching her. His chin was propped on his fist. 'You're amazing,' he said simply.

Elora was still blushing when she got home. Not even her brother and sister's suspicious scowls over breakfast could dampen her mood.

The day seemed to crawl by. Elora floated listlessly in the bathtub until the water cooled and she began shivering. Then she brushed her hair and thumbed through her wardrobe. It was the most constructive way she could think to do to pass the time. Eschewing her normal black, she settled on an ultramarine robe that emphasised the colour of her eyes. She draped it over her dressing table. She repeated the procedure with her jewellery collection, eventually picking an intricate gold amulet that she had received from her parents for her birthday. After that she lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She must have dozed off without realising because when she blinked and sat up, the sky was darkening. Immensely pleased that she had managed to skip most of a dull day separating herself and Ebban, she hurried downstairs for dinner and to complete her last minute preparations.

When Elora arrived at the warehouse she discovered Ebban had also made an effort with his appearance. His hair was combed back and he was wearing his best shirt – the one he usually reserved for client interactions. They both smiled broadly when they saw each other but kept their greeting embrace silent and modest. Ebban couldn't resist a less than modest moment though while Elora unlocked the warehouse door. Standing behind her, he scooped aside her hair and kissed the jutting knob of bone at the base of her neck. Then his hands slid around to cup her breasts through the cloth of her robe. Elora could feel her movements slowing as she succumbed purely to the sensation of his mouth and hands on her body. 'Ebban, no,' she whispered. 'Wait. Not here.' Not out in the open where at any moment they could be caught.

She managed to rally enough sense to unlock the door and silently slide it open. She turned back to Ebban, seized one of the hands that still lingered on her chest and led him inside. They were so used to the route leading to the private storeroom that they no longer needed a lantern. Once inside the chamber they began their usual preparations – with a few additional special touches.

Elora had taken a bottle of wine from her father's cellar, removing it from the rack reserved for impressing important clients. A special occasion called for something special, and the fact that acquiring the wine required a major act of rebellion against her father made it all the more delicious. Once Elora had uncorked the bottle and was preparing to juggle it with two goblets, she looked up. She hadn't realised it before, but the storeroom was unusually well lit. Ebban had speckled the space with candles. And he was standing waiting for her, looking unusually nervous. When Elora smiled though, his shoulders visibly relaxed.

'Here, let me help you.' Ebban strode forward. As he took the bottle and goblets from Elora he stepped in far closer than he needed to complete such a simple task. Elora inclined her head just as Ebban's descended. Their mouths met in the first kiss of the evening. Tender. Unrushed.

Ebban broke away from the kiss to pour their drinks. They toasted each other and drank. The wine was strong; far stronger than Elora was used to. By the time she had finished her first glass she was lying propped up on one elbow on the bedroll. She was maybe a forearm's distance from Ebban, who mirrored her posture exactly.

Elora could feel her inhibitions melting. She was embarrassingly light headed; giddy. Everything was a lot funnier than it should have been.

She noticed that there was a lot more colour to Ebban's cheeks than was normal. And it was unlikely to be entirely the wine's doing.

Elora raised an eyebrow. 'Are you nervous?'

Unable to meet her eyes Ebban muttered into his goblet, 'Maybe a little.'

If Elora's vice-like self-control had been clamped as usual over her behaviour she would have reached for Ebban, touching him reassuringly on his arm, or face. As it

was, the vice lay gaping. All restraint was gone. At Ebban's answer, Elora collapsed onto her back, hiccupping with laughter. She clasped a hand over her mouth to stifle the noise, just remembering not to upend her wine as she did so.

Ebban was staring at her, partly stunned and partly amused by her uncharacteristic emotional abandon.

Eventually Elora reclaimed herself. Still lying on her back, gazing at the dark, distant ceiling, she sighed, 'What are you nervous about? I'm the one who's never done this before. You're the man of the world.' She turned her head and smirked at Ebban, 'A stud.'

'Stud?' Ebban guffawed into his goblet. 'I've only ever been with one girl before. And it wasn't anything like this.' He frowned, 'I was 16 and the guys I was working with got me drunk and took me to a brothel. It was part of some stupid initiation and I barely remember it. I would never have chosen for my first time to be like that.'

Elora raised an eyebrow, 'Of course, I forgot. Your paladin code.'

Ebban put down his goblet. 'I'm no paladin.'

'Oh really?'

'Yes, really.' As agile and silent as a cat, he leapt. And was astride her. Their pelvises pressed together, he kept his upper body raised on his elbows. As he took Elora's wine from her and set it aside, he said, 'There's actually a lot of rogue in me.'

Elora laughed, 'I don't see that.'

'It's true. For example, I'm about to talk you out of your clothes.' Ebban traced the outline of her face, starting at her brow line before sliding his fingertips down her cheek and then her chin. He bent and nuzzled her throat as his hand roamed further south, onto her collar, her chest bone; her left breast. He stroked his thumb over her nipple through the robe.

Suddenly things didn't seem so funny anymore. Elora's smile froze just as her heart began thumping haphazardly.

Ebban whispered, 'Let me look at you properly.'

'I – um...'

'Come on, I'll make it fair. I'll do it too.' Gleefully, he leapt to his feet and yanked his shirt over his head. Facing Elora he flexed his pectoral muscles, dancing them one at a time.

It shattered the mood so abruptly, Elora started chuckling again. Ebban grabbed her by the elbows and hauled her to her feet. Being pressed against his bare chest instantly sobered her. It was her turn to explore. Tentatively she reached up and trailed a hand over his sinewy shoulder and chest before circling his hardened nipple with her fingertips. Ebban's skin felt so warm in comparison to hers – she decided it must be a human thing.

Ebban was resting his cheek against her hair. He moaned appreciatively under her caress. 'Mmm, but you've seen and touched all this a lot recently.' He added, 'And I'm not even talking about all the times you used to spy on me while I worked shirtless.'

'What?! I most certainly did no—.' Instantly indignant, Elora jerked her head up. Ebban was waiting for her. His lips closed over hers. As his tongue probed her mouth his hands found the belt that kept her robe cinched to her waist.

He seemed to fumble for ages but couldn't get it open.

'Girls,' he rolled his eyes as they surfaced for air.

'Boys.' Elora reached down and with one hand unclasped the belt.

Ebban's fingers were instantly at her hips, scuttling against her skin as he gathered the fabric of her robe. When he had a good handful of cloth, he lifted the robe over her head.

Elora was left wearing nothing but her amulet and a soft, sleeveless undertunic that ended three fingers above her knees. Without Ebban's encouragement or assistance she removed the tunic.

She stood before him, totally exposed.

Ebban took a step back, his face devoid of expression. Doubt pricked Elora then. What if it had all been a horribly elaborate prank? Any moment a gang of workmen or tavern youths would burst in to humiliate her. She suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to turn towards the door and cover herself in preparation for their ambush.

But if Ebban was supposed to give a signal he hadn't moved. He hadn't even changed his expression. Eventually his lips parted and he breathed, 'By Avandra, you are so beautiful.'

He blinked; shook himself out of his daze. He closed the gap between himself and Elora. With one hand in her hair, and the other clasping her buttocks, he tugged her to him. Despite the fierceness of his embrace, his kisses were still surprisingly gentle. Elora was so lost in the sensation of their bare chests gliding against each other that she didn't realise Ebban had discarded his pants until a familiar hardness slid between their torsos. Only this time it felt hotter and more defined than usual.

She looked down. 'Oh.' Colour flooded her face. She couldn't help but stare. Recognising the look of amusement on Ebban's face, she stammered, 'I – I'm sorry. I've never touched a rea—'

His mouth covered hers. The kiss was deep but seconds' brief. Ebban pulled back. 'This is what you do to me,' he growled, seizing her wrist and redirecting her hand to his hardness. It twitched in her palm – the skin feeling so much softer than she expected. Before she could comment, he captured her mouth again. He was trembling too; she could feel that now. Yet somehow he managed to lower them both onto the blanket.

The moment was close. Elora's lung capacity seemed to halve. She could only inhale in short bursts.

'Are you cold?' Ebban asked.

'A little.'

He tugged the blanket over them both. 'Is that better?'

Between the insulation offered by the thick wool and Ebban's body pressed against hers, she was plenty warm.

'Yes. Thank you.'

They grinned at each other then, amused by their politeness at such an extreme moment of intimacy.

Elora reached up and brushed Ebban's fringe behind his ear. Then she drew his head down to hers. Their kissing grew more frenzied. At a certain point Ebban's mouth left hers to explore her curves instead. As his lips closed over the peak of her breast, she felt one of his fingers enter her. She was wet; ready. He tongued her nipple, sucking gently as his finger slid back and forth in her depths. It was too much.

Elora moaned, 'Gods, take me. Take me now.' She brought her knees up to hook over the top of his hip bones, so that she was wide and entirely accessible to him.

Ebban shifted then. His upper body was elevated over hers; their pelvises in close contact. She could feel him pressed against her opening. As he braced his position with his limbs, he slipped a few times. Before he could fumble too much and they

both succumbed to nerves, Elora reached down between her legs. She helped guide him back to the right spot. He pushed a little, and then paused.

‘This will probably hurt.’ Ebban frowned. ‘Just once.’ He cupped the back of Elora’s head and slid his other arm under her back to claw-grip her shoulder.

‘Do it,’ she whispered.

‘I’m sorry.’

He thrust and Elora cried out. An instant of blinding, burning pain. If Ebban hadn’t been holding her, she would have pulled away. But her lover clung to her tightly. ‘I’m sorry,’ he repeated, and he brushed his lips over her cheek and lips.

Gradually the hurt eased. He had opened her.

Sensing that the pain and tension was draining from her body, Ebban dared a single, slow move inside her. It was easier. ‘You feel so good,’ he smiled. ‘I don’t know how I’m going to control myself.’

‘So don’t.’

She seized a handful of his hair and yanked his mouth down to meet hers. Ebban didn’t move, even though he was obviously quivering with the effort needed to restrain himself. He broke breathlessly from the kiss and pressed his lips to her ear. Elora knew it was one of his favourite parts of her body. And his attentions there never failed to produce a reaction from her.

He ran his tongue up from the lobe to her ear’s pointed tip before sucking on it. She half gasped, half moaned at the sensation, especially when it was accompanied by his thumb, still slick with her fluids, finding her nipple.

Ebban began to thrust then, his arms braced either side of Elora. She wasn’t sure what to do with her hands. She ran them over his chest; his biceps. She reached behind him to clasp at his shoulder blades and, lower down, his tight, flexing buttocks.

‘Oh, Gods.’ He was shuddering on the brink of lost self-control.

Elora was concentrating on the physical sensations – in particular, his weight rubbing deliciously against her with every movement. She closed her eyes.

Screams.

Elora’s eyes flew open. Ebban was on fire. He had bolted to his feet and was swatting at his back and shoulders. Flame trickled along the length of his limbs like water. Orange light clustered between his shoulder blades and then the hair at the base of his skull was ablaze.

Ebban shrieked, and reeled backwards into a crate. It caught alight too. Exactly at the point where he stumbled against it. Candles were knocked to the floor in the process, some triggering fires of their own.

Elora was still frozen on the bedroll, trying to process what she was witnessing. Had she passed out? Was she trapped in a nightmare? But a dream could never be this lucid. She could even still feel the discomfort between her legs where she’d been torn.

Ebban was staggering closer again. He was crying out in agony as the rivulets of clinging fire wound their way down his legs. His flesh blistered as Elora watched. Finally she moved.

She leapt upright, the blanket in her hands. She tried to drape the wool over Ebban but he was flailing too much. One of his fists struck Elora and she landed hard on the floor. Looking up at Ebban again, realisation struck a second hard blow against her chest. She couldn’t help him. She couldn’t stop what was happening. She couldn’t even grasp what was happening.

Elora scrambled to her feet. She grabbed her key and fled the storeroom. She sprinted down the passageway and burst out the warehouse into a completely empty courtyard.

‘Help!’ she screamed into the darkness. ‘Help me, please! Someone, help!’

Two burly guards came running from where they had no doubt been napping. They skidded to a standstill at the sight of Elora Tirian naked.

‘Please,’ she gasped, suddenly out of breath. ‘Fire.’ She pointed at the warehouse.

The men stared at her. And then at each other. Their responses were slowed by the spectacle of nubile flesh in front of them. Ebban’s scream jolted them back to their senses. Their heads jerked up, and Elora turned in time to see a surge of flame blast out a high storeroom window. It wasn’t the chamber where Ebban was thrashing. The fire was spreading.

‘Fire!’ both men yelled in unison. One guard ran for the warehouse; the other for the alarm bell on the far side of yard. Within moments, workmen from the neighbouring dormitory were crowding the yard, formulating a plan of action. Bodies in various states of dress ran back and forth slopping buckets of water.

Ignored in the chaos, Elora tried to get back to Ebban. Knocked aside several times, she eventually elbowed a path through the crowd to re-enter the warehouse. As she stepped through the main entrance she found herself sightless, choked and utterly disorientated by smoke. Shapes scurried around in the grey haze, as undistinguishable as creatures skulking on lake bottoms. The noise was as unbearable as the heat and smoke: men yelling, crackling and popping as the flames devoured the warehouse’s rich supply of wood and tinder, and even the occasional hiss as fires were successfully subdued. Along with the fire fighters, workers were stumbling around trying to rescue whatever goods they were lucky enough to encounter in their blindness.

Elora guessed her father’s storeroom was to her left and took a few hesitant steps in that direction. A gust of air was followed by a crash alongside her. Elora was able to work out from the fresh surge of heat and ash in the air that a flaming beam had landed within a foot of her. Just then a thick arm encircled her waist. She was dragged outside.

Elora was still fighting to free herself from her rescuer’s grip when her father rushed into the courtyard. He was pale and dishevelled, still dressed in his sleepwear. He had simply thrown a cloak over his nightshirt. He blinked at the unexpected sight of his daughter standing naked in front of his flaming warehouse. For a moment it looked as if he was going to approach her, but then he turned his troubled face to the workman who appeared at his side. They hurried off together to the other side of the warehouse, deep in discussion.

Elora’s rescuer hauled her across the courtyard and shoved her down on a crate against the wall of her father’s office. ‘You stay here,’ the man growled. ‘Don’t even think about going back.’ Elora realised then that under the soot was Jocal, her most recently recruited book supplier.

Jocal strode off and, surprisingly, Elora found herself obeying him. She didn’t have the will to rebel, or the strength to even stand anymore. The adrenalin that had powered her since Ebban’s first shriek was depleted. She wrapped her arms across herself, pretending it was Ebban holding her. Then she folded over to rest her face against her knees.

A woman’s voice pierced the tumult. Elora looked up to see her mother advancing straight backed across the yard, screeching instructions. Alessa Tirian had taken the time to dress, but shockingly – at least in terms of her typical aesthetic priorities – she

was out in public without makeup. If she spotted Elora she chose to ignore her daughter. Instead she headed straight to her husband's side.

At that moment, a group of men staggered out of the warehouse, carrying something in a blanket strung between them. Elora was upright, running. 'Ebban!' Hands clamped around her arms as she got within a few feet of the cluster. She was restrained, but still close enough to see Ebban. She immediately wished she hadn't.

He lay lifeless in the blanket. What flesh wasn't blackened was red raw and oozing. His beautiful dark hair was gone. Cracked, cooked scalp was all that was left in its place. 'Ebban, no, please...' she whimpered, the tears overwhelming her.

No one was looking at her, or listening. Their heads were downcast and facial expressions grim as Therald Tirian stepped forward. He bent over his newest charge. Eventually he muttered, 'He's still alive. Just.' Then he bellowed to his men, 'Get him to the healer. Now! Quickly!'

As Ebban was carried past Elora she begged, 'Please, please be alright.' She didn't dare reach out to touch him. She could only hope that somehow he could still hear her in his unconscious state.

It was almost sunrise when the last fire was extinguished. Half of the warehouse was gone, taking with it all the precious cargo stored in that part of the building. Therald Tirian's personal storeroom, like the other chambers, was a mess of jutting, blackened planks and ash-crusting puddles.

Elora was standing where Joelan had deposited her. Suddenly she was aware that, without the distraction of the fire, all the men were staring at her. Lust and fear muddled in their eyes. While they were streaked with soot, sweat and water, she was untouched. In fact the only blemish on her entire body was a dark red smear just visible on her inner thigh.

No one came forward with a blanket despite how badly she was shivering in the last predawn surge of cold. Her arms were used pathetically and ineffectively to cover her nakedness as opposed to keeping herself warm. Eventually her father unhooked his cloak and stepped forward to drape it over her shoulders. That was all he did. He didn't put his arm around her. There were no soothing words. As soon as Elora was clinging white knuckled to the fabric he stepped away from her and returned to his wife's side.

Therald Tirian pinched the bridge of his nose. Elora was familiar with the gesture – her father only used it when he was simultaneously exhausted and disappointed. Eventually he announced with a weak smile, 'Well done, men. Outstanding efforts! Now go get some rest. Everyone can have the morning off, then it's business as usual after the midday meal. See you here later. Any issues in the meantime, speak to Regnaar.'

He nodded to his second in command and trudged out of the courtyard. Alessa Tirian's talons seized a handful of Elora's hair painfully close to the scalp. 'Move,' Alessa hissed. She drove her daughter in front of her as she marched from the work grounds.

With her long, elegant strides Alessa easily caught up with her husband. As she joined him, she tugged hard on Elora's locks.

It was still early but the drama of the warehouse fire had roused many of Silverpass's inhabitants. It was only a short walk between Therald's work premises and the Tirian home, but the trio had to pass dozens of curious faces on the street and several countenances peering blearily from windows. Elora would have bowed her head if her mother's grip wasn't forcing her to remain erect. As it was, she was

compelled to look into the eyes of passing townsfolk. Their glares alternated between disgust and horror. She knew the rumour mill would already be grinding.

Alessa smiled at the bystanders while mouthing to her husband, 'She gets this from *your* side of the family.'

'Hmph.'

Once the Tirians were home, their privacy barricaded by stone walls and thick, oaken doors, the façade of civility crashed to the floor. Elora just glimpsed Lockwood and Lucia spying from the top of the staircase before she was shoved into her parents' study.

Alessa slammed the door. Then she backhanded her daughter.

'You stupid slut! Do you have any idea what you've done?'

Elora had never been struck by either of her parents before. The blow was so fierce; so unexpected that she bit the inside of her mouth. Before she could react, her mother had grabbed her shoulders and was shaking her.

'By Erathis, woman, control yourself!' Elora's father was slumped at his desk. He was rubbing the bridge of his nose again.

Alessa snorted. She released her daughter and strolled over to perch, arms crossed, on the edge of the desk.

Elora faced a united parental front. A tribunal. She finally dropped her chin to her chest. With her head downcast, blood and spittle dribbled from between her lips.

Her father sighed, 'I want to know what happened, Elora.'

'I don't know.'

'Oh, I think I know.' Alessa muttered. 'You were with that human boy. Drunk. Whoring. Throwing away your family name. And you knocked over a lantern. The result was thousands upon thousands of gold in damage and lost, probably irreplaceable, goods. Several injured men. That boy near death. And as usual, you don't care.'

At that comment, the emotion clogging Elora's chest threatened to gush up into her face. The tears were right there. Her mouth was quivering. Elora clenched her teeth and swallowed. It was as if she was digesting chunks of rock, but she wouldn't give her parents the satisfaction of breaking down in front of them. Even if every thought of Ebban lying burnt on that blanket chipped at her heart.

If she spoke, she would start sobbing.

Her mother was still spraying her hate. 'Don't for one instant think that boy loved you. You're his employer's daughter. A notch on his bedpost at the least, and a hefty promotion at most if his seed did its job. That's what human men do.'

Alessa's eyes narrowed as she examined her daughter's face. Elora knew exactly what she was thinking. Normally by now Elora would have raged back in vocal, door slamming, foot stomping rebellion. Instead she stood silent, and sullen as each new barb hooked her flesh.

Her mother sunk another one. 'I want you to think about the damage that you've done tonight, to your father's business, to this family's reputation. All because of your selfishness.' She slapped a hand to her forehead. 'You might as well head out in the mountains and find an orc to rut with. Give us some monstrous grandchildren to cap your achievements this evening.'

'Enough!' Therald Tirian slapped his hand down on the surface of his desk. 'Elora, go to your room. You're to stay there all day while we think of a punishment. No food, no talking to anyone and certainly no news of Ebban Hardwicke.'

Elora's head jerked up. 'But I need to know if he'll be—'

‘No you don’t. Now go and put on some clothes for the Gods’ sake. I’m tired of looking at you like that. You’re an embarrassment.’

That stabbed more deeply than her mother’s tirade.

Elora had just enough strength to stagger to her bed. She didn’t dress. She didn’t clean herself. She simply curled into a foetal position under the cloak. She could see her reflection in the dressing table mirror from where she lay. Her skin was pallid; her irises dark maroon. She looked like she imagined vampires looked. Death walking.

Elora was numb. She didn’t cry. She didn’t sleep. She wasn’t sure if she even blinked. Every so often, for a few instants, she would convince herself that she was simply having the worst nightmare of her life. She would wake lying next to Ebban in the storeroom; he would stroke her face, kiss her and they would begin another round of lovemaking. This time without pain. Hers... or his.

Elora’s back was to the door of her room. So she didn’t know who it was that deposited a platter of bread and fruit, along with a jug of water, just inside the entrance. She didn’t touch any of it. She didn’t even turn to face her parents when they appeared to announce their sentence. She was to be confined to her room for the next three months. She would receive no allowance in that time. And all her books would be burnt.

The servants, who were waiting in a row behind her parents, stepped into the room then to remove all of Elora’s tomes from her shelf and desk. They threw them into a chest and carried it from the room. Elora knew that they had missed one. Her family’s sole magical text, the ancient heirloom and the first of her collection, was kept wedged between her mattress and bed frame.

Not that she cared about magic at that moment. She had deliberately paralysed herself. She knew that at the slightest movement her emotions would overwhelm her. Stillness and silence were her only protection. When she did fall asleep her dreams were of fire. She woke feverish, sticky against her bedding and disorientated.

On the third morning she felt calm enough to wash and dress herself. She had lost weight. Her robe was definitely looser around her arms, waist and chest.

She was picking at a piece of bread when she realised Lockwood was watching her through the gap between the door, which was slightly ajar, and its frame.

‘Go away.’

‘I just thought you’d want to know how Ebban is doing?’ he whispered.

Elora’s head spun towards her brother. The movement was too quick in her weakened condition. Pain pulsed behind her eyes and she felt dizzy. She willed herself to concentrate on Lockwood’s face. The illicit conversation could be malice on his part – poking at her wounds – but he wasn’t smirking as usual.

‘He’s alive.’

Tears instantly blurred Elora’s vision. She dropped her gaze.

Lockwood continued, ‘It’ll be weeks before he’s well enough to return to work, but he’ll survive. Father is very impressed with Kedera’s healing. We honestly didn’t think Ebban would pull through given the extent of his burns. Gods, sis, what did you do to him?’

Elora slammed the door in his face.

That night, after her parents retired to their chamber, Elora crept from her room. Careful to avoid Lucia, who was entertaining her beau in the parlour, and the housekeeper pattering around the kitchen, Elora slipped out the servants’ entrance. She sprinted to the home of Kedera the healer, which also doubled as his practice. The double story building was the closest Silverpass got to the hospitals found in the larger settlements.

Elora sneaked inside.

As expected, at that time of night the healing ward was deserted of staff. There were lanterns slung about to provide soft, reassuring light for the patients, and bells sat on bedside tables in case the ill needed to call for assistance before morning. Ebban was the only one in the ward. He was lying on a cot at the far side of the room. Various poultices were applied to his body. As Elora drew closer she could see that his flesh was still red, and in parts oozing, but Kedera's efforts had already grown a substantial amount of scar tissue over the worst of the damage.

'Ebban,' she whispered once she stood alongside him. His eyes opened, and widened when he realised who his visitor was. His mouth instantly clenched into a straight line.

'Ebban, I was so worried.' She reached for his cheek but he jolted his face away, and tried to shuffle back in his cot.

Elora inhaled deeply in an attempt to stabilise her voice. 'I – I don't know what happened the other night. One moment we were making love, the next... I don't understand it and I can't explain. I just feel that I have to say sorry. Somehow this was my fault.'

'Get away from me,' he croaked.

'Ebban, please.' She reached for him again.

'Don't touch me!'

Elora withdrew her hand. Her chest began heaving and she sobbed her confession, 'Ebban, I – I love you.' It was the first time either of them had used the words.

She looked into his eyes. They were impassive. Eventually his lips formed the words, 'You're a freak.'

As Elora's shoulders slumped, Ebban lunged for his alarm bell. He howled in agony as his movements cracked open the tracts of scabbing across his body.

Elora staggered backwards.

Voices and footsteps were coming.

Ebban's bell competed with his shrieks. He channelled his pain into a set of yells, each requiring its own breath to expel. He spat, 'Get. Away. From. Me. You freak whore!'

From cool disinterest, his glare had heated to boiling hate.

Ebban dropped the bell then and began writhing around on the cot, still screaming. Elora sprinted for the door, knocking into Kedera and his assistant as she fled. She doubted that they got a good look at her in the dark passageway. That was fortunate, because stunned as she was, she couldn't flee very far.

Elora ran past maybe a half dozen buildings and as many townsfolk before her legs turned to jelly. She just managed to stumble into an alley behind the apothecary before vomiting. She retched and retched until white points of light flickered in front of her eyes. The cobblestones tilted violently beneath her feet, and her legs collapsed. Elora sprawled on all fours, partially in her puddle of sick. She was trembling uncontrollably. Her gasps were panicked as she failed to draw enough air into her lungs. Then she began to cry. Spittle and mucus mixed with bile. Her throat, burnt as it was from waves of acid, was slashed again by her violent sobs.

Elora clutched at her chest. She couldn't do it. She couldn't endure the pain, the humiliation, the hatred and the utter loneliness. Better to be dead than to suffer such misery. She wanted it all to stop.

But perhaps she could stop it. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. Still shuddering and unsteady, she forced herself upright. Germinating was the seed of a plan.

When Elora returned home, she found Lucia standing on the landing with a glass of wine and a love bite on her neck. She raised an eyebrow at the sight of her vomit-splashed sister. 'You better not be pregnant. Mother will kill you.'

Elora shouldered past her sister into her bedroom. She closed and locked the door. She hauled the magical tome from its hiding place, along with the ceremonial dagger she had slotted beneath the book. Sitting on her bed she thumbed through the pages until she found the ritual that had leapt from her memory while she sprawled in the alley. It demanded blood sacrifice. She had only summoned the courage to prick her finger before. Now she was beyond squeamishness.

Elora flung aside her bedroom rug and chalked a ritual circle on the floor, chanting as she did so. Once the sacred incantation area was ready, she stripped off her soiled robe, and rubbed her face clean. She had to be an attractive offering.

Nude, she sat cross legged in the circle, with the book and dagger arranged in front of her. Before she began the ritual, she prayed to the Raven Queen. Elora was not religious – scepticism clogged her veins. Many times she had sneered as her parents, and others, continued to worship Erathis, the goddess of civilisation, progress and authority, even though it was her abandonment of this world that had in all likelihood shattered the old, warring empires.

The Raven Queen, on the other hand, was a figure that had always intrigued Elora. As she sat in the circle, she finally embraced the deity of death fully. The Raven Queen offered peace, coolness, eternal calm. An escape from the emotion searing Elora's insides. For the first time in her life, Elora called out to a god. She asked for the Raven Queen's touch; her gift of liberation. In return, Elora promised regular worship. 'Your will be done,' Elora whispered as she lifted the dagger with trembling fingers.

She consulted the ritual in the book. A series of cuts as she chanted. If she was translating correctly, the end result would be complete cerebral control over her emotions. Or death. Either outcome would be preferable to how she felt at that moment.

Having memorised the incantation, she made the first incision. She applied the blade to her left inner thigh, pushing through the layers of skin until she felt the first sting. Maintaining the same pressure she drew the blade towards her knee. A stripe of red appeared. She repeated the procedure on her other thigh, chanting as she sliced. She cut two arcs over her hips, and then straight across her breastbone. The two most important incisions were reserved for her forearms. They had to be deep, from her wrists to her elbow. They hurt the most. Several times Elora felt her fingers go limp on the knife as her resolve faltered and the blood flowed, so much darker than from the other cuts. She tightened her grip and redirected her thoughts to the chants.

Eventually she finished, her flesh sticky with sweat and blood. She dropped the dagger and let her arms fall to her sides. She could feel liquid trickling steadily to the floor, tickling her skin as it dribbled. Puddles were growing to either side of her. She redirected her gaze to the empty space of her room. The air was prickly. She blinked away the haze and resumed her incantations with more force.

Elora wasn't sure how long she was lost in the ritual. Her room was dark, the candles long since gutted in their holders. She surfaced from her trance for a half-second. That moment was all it took for her stamina to fail. Her will wasn't strong enough to keep her upright anymore. The room swirled. Nausea billowed up her throat. Still she kept chanting, even as an irresistible sparkling lightness filled her head. Her body lurched forward in the circle. Her forehead struck the floor. Blackness splattered across her vision.

Cool, tranquil darkness. Elora exhaled and relaxed. She felt gloriously numb except for the sensation of cold smooth wood against her cheek and fingertips. She could stay like this forever. She smiled.

‘Elora, Elora, Elora.’ Someone was whispering her name over and over again, almost singing it.

‘No,’ she moaned. She didn’t want to be dragged away from her bliss.

‘Well, well, the prodigal daughter is finally here.’ The whispering was more distinct now. It sounded like three different voices rasping over each other, although they repeated the same thing.

‘Go away.’

‘But we have been waiting so very long for you, Elora.’

‘What?’ she croaked. Groggily, she opened her eyes. Only blackness.

The voices ignore her question. ‘Watching, we always hoped that it would be you. The first real potential in so many generations of your family. And so beautiful.’

Something stroked her hair. It didn’t feel like a hand.

Elora was suddenly aware that that she was too weak to move. She was naked and helpless, while something non-human knelt over her. Panic flared.

‘We were so happy when you embraced us, Elora. After so many of your line refused to admit we were in their blood – driving their success in business, in the Great War.’

Realising she was trembling, the voice added, ‘Don’t be frightened now, Elora. We love you.’ Again, a stroke of her hair.

‘I – I don’t understand.’

‘We were so sure that you would understand after the other night. In the warehouse. With your human.’

Her eyes widened. What had she done? What nightmare was she trapped in now?

‘You understand now, child? Your body belongs to uss,’ the voice hissed.

Another stroke of her hair, before the caress settled on her shoulder. She gasped. It was clawed. ‘We don’t like the undeserving touching you, Elora.’ She felt the claw trail down her side and slip between her legs. The creature’s digits probed there for an instant before withdrawing.

Elora clenched her eyes shut but not before tears escaped. What felt like a cat’s tongue flicked across her cheek. ‘More of your delicious fluids offered in tribute. I believe we have tasted them all this evening.’ It wheezed a chuckle.

‘Please. I don’t want this.’

Talons slashed her back and Elora cried out.

The voice snarled, ‘You are ours now. Completely. Your actions tonight ensured it.’

Elora sobbed, ‘Please, I didn’t know what I was doing. Just leave me alone. Please!’

‘We will grant you great power. We already have. But you are ours forever now, foolish Elora.’

A claw tickle of her cheek, followed by the cat’s tongue lapping at her shoulder. A second claw parted her legs and began rubbing her with the smooth, cool curve of its nails. It couldn’t feel more different from Ebban’s warmth pressed against her. The creature was breathing heavily as it slurped at her skin, like a fat-lipped tavern drunk slobbering over a beer. It interpreted Elora’s shudders as pleasure. ‘Prove to us your worth, your power and *WE* will pleasure you. No mortal boy can compare to us.’

Elora could hear her own desperate voice inside her skull. It pleaded with her just as she had pleaded with the creatures. Do whatever was necessary to escape. Promises. Lies. Get them to leave.

Completely frozen, Elora whispered, 'What must I do?'

The voice sounded content. 'Return to your studies. Learn. Grow your abilities.'
'I – I obey.'

The creature removed its limb from between Elora's thighs. Its mouth found her earlobe and began sucking. The teeth that grazed her flesh were sharp. Animal fangs. Or something else. Between its gasps the creature added 'Your studies will be easier from this point onwards; your progress faster now that you have accepted us as your masters.'

Tears flowed from Elora's still clenched eyes. She whimpered, 'Yes, masters.'

'The rites are complete. The pact is sealed in blood. Go now.'

When Elora dared to open her eyes again, she was limp in her bed. A damp cloth weighted her forehead. Blankets were pulled up to her chin. She thought of trying to sit up but her limbs were completely devoid of strength. Men were talking at the foot of her bed. Her father was consulting with the town healer. They hadn't realised she was conscious.

Kedera's arms were folded. He shook his head, 'She should really be at my house, Mister Tirian. I can offer her better care there.'

'I fully grasp that but you need to understand our position. It is vital that we keep this situation private.'

'I hate to say it, sir, but your daughter is damaged. She's a danger to others and, after the events of two nights ago, apparently a danger to herself as well.' He sighed, 'It's a pity, sir, because she is truly one of the most beautiful young women Silverpass, if not the entire region, has ever seen.'

Damaged. Such a perfect assessment.

Elora's father frowned, 'Her mother and I are at a loss about what to do with her.'

'Well, she does have youth in her favour. She may still grow out of this *phase* and settle down. She's at a very difficult age right now. They feel so much more strongly, and then they tend to overreact to every upset.'

'She has been distraught lately.'

'The warehouse incident?'

'Hmph, yes, unfortunately. She was there. And we believe she and Ebban Hardwicke were, well, intimate. She hasn't taken his injuries very well.'

'The shock could easily have been too much for her.'

Elora's father nodded.

Kedera shouldered his work bag. 'Well, your daughter needs lots of rest, and plenty of time to heal physically... and mentally. You should keep her calm as much as possible. She's in a very delicate place right now, clearly, having tried to kill herself in such an unpleasant way. You're lucky your housekeeper found her when she did.'

'I know.'

The healer added, 'I'll be back tomorrow to work on her wounds again.'

'Thank you again for your discretion.'

Kedera cast a glance in Elora's direction. She dropped her eyelids just in time. 'Gods, young people,' he muttered before stepping from the room.

Elora lay staring at the ceiling for a long time after that. She knew she should feel terrible, but apart from the physical weakness, her heart was beating a slow, steady rhythm for the first time in weeks. Her eyes were dry and her chest felt unconstrained.

The nightmare was over. And the ritual had worked – she had complete command of her emotions.

Elora was still smiling when her mother peered in through the doorway. ‘Therald, she’s awake!’ she called, and soon both her parents were sitting on her bed. Whether they were happy Elora had survived she couldn’t tell. They sat silent, barely able to meet her eyes. They didn’t embrace her but neither did they berate her. The closest they got to the latter was when Alessa muttered ‘You stupid girl’ as she spooned soup to her daughter’s lips.

At first Elora thought they were just following the healer’s instructions, but then the truth sharpened before her eyes. She understood. Her parents were going to pretend that her ritual, or, as they saw it, her suicide attempt, hadn’t happened. They couldn’t deny her presence at the warehouse fire because of all the witnesses but nobody apart from the household staff had seen her sprawled near death in a pool of her blood. And if the Tirians were masters at anything, it was keeping embarrassing secrets. They had been doing it for generations.

Things were different after that.

Within a day of her waking, Elora’s wounds had healed completely. Kedera was visibly fearful as he undid the bandages. His hands shook as he plucked the stitches from Elora’s forearms. Her skin was pristine. With the exception of her back.

While dressing after her first bath in days, Elora spotted the welts in her bedroom mirror. Her right shoulder blade was streaked with three parallel scars in a furious pink. Claw marks.

Elora dropped to the floor. She needed to feel stability beneath her at the discovery that her nightmare was real. Too many strange and inexplicable things had happened for her not to suspect that her blackout exposed her to something real and dangerous. Her mind however had encouraged her to believe that she had suffered enough. After the fire and Ebban’s hateful outburst she couldn’t possibly experience more horror within the space of a few days and hours. But it was true. The encounter had taken place. And she had sworn things to the creature, or creatures, simply to escape; not thinking of the consequence.

Elora clambered to her feet and ran to the magical tome on her desk. Her parents, for whatever reason, hadn’t thrown it out, despite the fact that its hide binding and several page corners were blackened with her blood. Elora found the ritual. As she read her heart fluttered. It made more sense now. Her interpretation had been completely wrong. The ritual didn’t provide control over emotions. When translated correctly it explained that the spell triggered control over her, in exchange for arcane power. She had forged a pact with... something demonic.

Elora closed the book. If it had been a few days previously she would have been hysterical. Yet, she felt strangely resigned to her fate. The pact came with power. Gifts. She could use those gifts; follow the demons’ instructions to grow her knowledge as she served them. If such dark magic existed, somewhere out there was its antithesis – a powerful ancient ritual that could free a person from demonic influence. She simply had to find the spell before she was ‘rewarded’ by the creatures. It was all a matter of timing. And the ultimate test of her self-sufficiency.

The first thing she did was retrieve her books from the locked chest hidden in the cellar. She studied and practiced and recited her incantations in the privacy of her room. Sometimes she even cut herself to enhance her offerings, in return for surges of arcane ability. After her three months of confinement were over, she grew bolder. On afternoons when she could sneak outside the town walls, she practiced her more startling and destructive abilities in secluded groves. She could move man-size

objects, expel bolts of purple-tinged energy from her palms, and when she concentrated, set things on fire a field's distance away – simply by pointing at them.

At the same time as her powers developed, Elora's physical changes accelerated. By the time she was 18 the effect her beauty had on men was nearly hypnotic. Lewd comments about Therald Tirian's wife and daughters leapt from a disciplinary matter to an on-the-spot fireable offence.

Of course, all lust and fascination was tempered by growing suspicion and fear. Elora was well aware that if her father wasn't such a prominent, popular figure in Silverpass, she would have been expelled from the town. She was the walking equivalent of sizzling stove top. The temptation to touch was great despite the fact the blistered fingers were a very real possibility. Mothers warned their young children about crossing her path. When dared, braver youths would throw dung clods. To them it was like pulling a caged cat's tail.

For the most part though, people kept their distance. Since the fire, everyone pussyfooted around Elora, terrified at what she would do to them. In addition, her own family was terrified about what she would do to herself. They typically suppressed their emotions around her, or, because it was less strain, simply ignored her presence to carry on with their normal routine. So her father was absent, and her mother lectured at every meal while her brother and sister rolled their eyes.

That was Elora's twisted normality. She convinced herself that she could endure it, seeing as she now inhabited a plane far above the small-minded and hateful. Her troubles were so much greater than theirs.

But no matter how much Elora distanced herself from the petty concerns of the town, Ebban remained her emotional weakness – her tie to feeling. Frequently she would dream of him. They were in Elora's bed, or stretched out in a sunny field. Ebban was inside of her. She held his head against her chest, revelling in the sensation of his warm body covering hers. Their lovemaking was leisurely and exploratory. Often they would climax together, looking into each other's eyes. Ebban would mouth 'I love you' before kissing her again.

On a bad night, the demons would invade her dream. Blurred, dark beings, they whispered and caressed her face, shoulders and torso with their claws while Ebban moved within her. And sometimes, if their presence wasn't enough of a distraction, they assumed a far more active role in the dream. Sometimes mid fantasy, Ebban transformed into a mawed, eyeless creature. Trapped beneath its weight, Elora screamed and thrashed powerlessly. The demon took her violently, wanting her to cry out in pain. If its thrusts weren't doing enough damage, it would slash her body with its talons. And when it was done, after it had experienced its pleasure and filled her with its searing black seed, it would rip out her throat, grinning all the while.

Whether the dreams were good or bad, Elora would wake tearful and slick with sweat. Frequently her sheets were scorched. Fortunately the servants were discreet about her night time 'accidents'.

As for the real Ebban, the boy Elora loved had become a disillusioned man. The fire had aged him, mentally and physically. His hair had grown back iron grey, and he kept it cropped close to his skull. His skin was mottled and as angry looking as his facial expression – particularly when he spotted Elora walking the streets or on the very rare occasion that she visited her father's work premises.

Elora had been terrified to approach Ebban. Every time she summoned the courage to walk towards him, he turned his back. Once, she encountered him drinking in the tavern with a gang of young workmates. On spotting Elora, Ebban immediately whispered something to his friends. They all started laughing and leering at her.

That was the only time Elora faltered emotionally. She fled home where she sobbed herself to sleep. That night it was the demons, and not Ebban, swearing their love as they ravished her motionless body.

Eventually Elora's father excised the tumour from her heart. Apparently still feeling guilty about his daughter's handiwork, and wishing to bury the incident once and for all, he stationed Ebban at a distant but burgeoning town on the Tirian trade route. The position was essentially a promotion, and Ebban thrived in his new situation. The last Elora heard from gossiping workmen, he was engaged to a miller's sweet but bland daughter.

Instead of crumpling at the news, Elora hardened. She couldn't control her dreams but love and intimacy faded as priorities from her conscious mind. She had accepted the reality that for her there would only be suffering. Her condition, however, was admirable. While others were weak and fled that which they feared, she pushed through the terror; the agony; the humiliation. She stood proud despite the demons clawing at her daily. The way she lived her life was worthy of respect.

Elora turned from her bay window and the rooftops of Silverpass. She gazed down on her floorboards, which had never fully recovered from her first blood letting two years previously. She could identify the off-pink tint and the rusty streaks in the wood grain, even in the weakness of the lamp light.

Elora had sacrificed, and she would continue to sacrifice. If the Arcane Brotherhood didn't want her tomorrow, she would still stride away from the repressive greyness and narrow-mindedness of her hometown. She had exhausted her education at Silverpass and now she would take her chances on the perilous roads between towns and villages that she had never visited. Death did not frighten her. The arms of the Raven Queen were preferable to those of the beings that tormented her. Death was another form of freedom after all. And even if she didn't rush to its embrace, it existed as a reminder of how temporary everything was, including love.

Liberation of her body in life, or death – that was how Elora would ensure things ended before the demons came to claim her. She folded her set of ritual daggers inside a velvet cloth and tucked them into her satchel. She was ready.