

# THE ELF & THE SHOEMAKER

*THERE ONCE WAS a story about an elf and a shoemaker, one you might not have heard before, or perhaps you heard it a very long time ago...*



DIEALNOR STOOD AT the edge of the tree line staring at the forest he had called home since his first breath... and never felt a part of for just as long.

He was an elf as his brethren were elves, but he was shunned for the name he bore.

It was a name that had been kept secret: changed, bastardized, and yet still those who he was meant to be part of knew his father and the evil his bloodline was capable of, even though he'd never met the man or his brothers.

Over the years, as he'd grown and his magic with him, the elves who once raised him turned away in fear.

The woman he called mother fled the forest before him. Told him to stay and to learn, but no one wanted to teach him about the Darkness, not when he knew more of the magic of his people than they ever would.

If he bent to the ground, he could move mountains. Veins of precious minerals and beautiful jewels came to his hands from the hard rocks beneath the soil. Stone shaped to his will, trees bent at a whisper of his breath, and elves ran away from his power--because that was the start of his father's madness, and the hell that came after.

The Dienobo, the Sanctuary of the Elves, was not his home.

And yet he was wounded to have to leave it behind.

His heart ached, but he couldn't stay, and before him stood a city made of pink marble walls and soaring spires, one he'd not seen before.

Diea clenched the bag of coins in his hand, his hope for a new start, and began walking down the lone path towards Tornald.

A new day.

What would the City of Man bring?



SHE COULDN'T HELP but stare at him as he moved through the shadows.

The awe on his face was engrossing. Watching him look around himself at the world as though nothing there could hurt him. Everything was new and wonderful. He did not know yet to be afraid of the demons that would strike at the drop of a pin.

In years gone past, she remembered that feeling.

But that was a long time ago and she'd grown up since then.

The man turned at a shouted warning from the people gathered in the street.

Carriages were rare in this part of town, but every now and again one of the nobles deigned to stop in the meagerer shops than visiting their own personal tailors and so forth.

Her breath caught at the crest painted on the coach.

The last time she'd seen it was nearly five years past when she fled its looming presence.

*He* should never come here. There was no call for his presence at all.

The bright sun overhead grew dark and drew chill to the land. A cold breeze brushed against her skin and made her tremble, even through the heavy material of her cloak.

*Do not turn too quickly. Do not draw attention to yourself.*

She wiped the back of her hand across her forehead and adjusted the basket on her hip that held the tanned pieces of leather layered carefully flat for her to work with later.

Her steps wobbled as she walked away, but she thought she appeared steady enough, blasé enough.

The sidewalk tilted out from beneath her shoe.

Her basket flew from her arms and when the screams came again, this time they were for her, cries that she was going to be struck, to get out of the way, to stop the cart that would stop for no one and never did.

*Gods, not again...*

She was struck with the force of a battering ram, her body tumbled backwards onto the steps and not the street where she'd thought to fall.

Though the strike was hard, warm arms wrapped around her, cushioned her from the hard cobblestones she expected to feel.

Her eyes opened in time to watch the carriage roll over her basket, wheels tearing at her supplies within that had cost the last of her pennies and been her only hope left.

She opened her eyes in time to stare up into the face of the man who pushed her aside, topaz eyes holding hers as he "oofed" and hit the ground and she landed on top of him.



IT WAS A moment out of time.

Diea had felt her gaze upon him as he lingered in the street, staring at all the varied wares the humans hawked to one another, calling out prices, shouting enticements. He'd tried a cinnamon tart and hid the turn of his head that spat out the same mouthful when the baker's promise of paradise fell short on his tongue. The silk shirt he'd been handed was the softest thing he had ever felt, softer even than the fresh down of a newly budded flower petal that was untouched by heat or rain, blossoming for the first time.

Almost he had handed the woman the fee for the shirt, but he had no need of it yet, for other matters pressed against his mind more imminent than clothing for the moment.

And the eyes remained upon him, even as he pretended not to notice them.

Her hood was pulled high over her head, hiding all shadow of her face within the dark cloth. The way she stood, hunched by the weight of the basket in her arms, suggested age, yet he did not think she was old.

Skittish, yes.

There was something to her aura that Diea felt suggesting the woman was afraid, but of what, he could not say.

Not of him.

The feel of her thoughts when they were centered on him were not ones of terror.

Bitterness. Regret.

Desire.

He turned to her at the moment of the carriage's arrival. The black cart flew down the street at speeds it should not be attempting with so many people about.

Even Diea, who had never been to the city, knew the danger the coachmen put those around him in with his wayward flight through the streets.

He turned to her and felt a tug of Shadows, of Fate egging him on to move.

She shifted to flee and began to fall.

It was a simple enough feat, to will his body to move as fast as the wind, to stretch out his hand and call forth a pillow of air to form beneath her, cushion her should he arrive late to her distress, to cushion him when he caught her in his arms and turned them, so she fell into his body and not onto the street and its danger.

Merciful Night.

No wonder she hid beneath the covers of a cloak.

Diealnor had thought the sunlight-spun cloth the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in the world.

He was wrong.

He noticed her eyes were the same shade of silver as her hair that billowed around them when her hood came free and the strands drifted about his face. Her youth was such a contrast to her coloring, and yet the striking pallor of her flesh gave her a knowledge that should not be in such young eyes.

The trembling in her limbs eased, her body relaxing against his.

Her fingers smoothed across his chest, warmth spreading through him as her gaze fell to his face, his lips, a kiss so very simple, so very claiming.

Each heartbeat between them was one.

She dipped her head towards his—

“Halt there! You girl! Your name!”

Diea let her go the moment the man's voice called out and she pushed against him to flee.

Not him, he realized, but whatever it was that threatened her from the coach that had nearly claimed her life.

Her hands reached to pull her hood down, true terror washing over her features when she realized the cloth had fallen away, revealing all of her to the world.

A man in a fur coat stepped from the stair of the coach and onto the cobblestones.

Even despite the distance between them, Diea could see the man's expression, the shocked greed that filled the noble's eyes, the sneering smile on his lips.

Diea's lady scrambled on the ground, fighting to rise from her knees though her leg kept giving out beneath her, her panicked cry echoing in the air around him.

It was a simple thing, to cause the ground to shift, the stones buckling beneath the stalking approach of the coachman, rising to lift her to her feet, aid her in the endeavor.

She would not notice the shadows he wrapped around her, the way the Darkness came to cover her and hide her as she limped along the street, fled down an alley and into the streets beyond.

Diea turned his head to face the man standing before him.

“Which way did she go?”

He frowned, pretending not to understand the question, not having to fake his foreignness, even as he’d done all he could to mask it earlier in the day.

The man’s foot struck out and Diea grunted at the strike of a boot to his side.

The attack was unnecessary and unprovoked, yet no one argued against it, no voice was raised in remonstrance.

“Damn you!” The man turned, “Quinton! Find her! She can’t have gotten far. She was limping. Her leg must not have healed well. Get after her!” He bent to the destroyed basket on the ground, the bits of ruined leather littering the street. “Blasted rubbish. Leather scraps. What in the Gods’ names is she trying to do? Little bitch.”

“We know where to look for her now, Lord Lithanu.”

Yes, Lithanu might know where to look for the girl, but Diealnor knew he could find her first.

And whoever this man was, Diea did not trust his intentions toward the woman, and if nothing else, Diea would protect those in danger.

That, at least, he could say he did differently than his father.