

# Portal To Elethra

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## Sample

The crowd rose as one, a beautiful display of shimmering colours and idyllic shapes in the main hall. Applause filled the space, cut through the rumble of many voices raised in joyous harmony.

The King raised his hands. “My friends,” he boomed, “it warms my heart to see you gathered before me as one unified body. Never in my life have I experienced such joy as I have in this moment. And I am overjoyed that I may share it with you, the people of Elethra!”

Another cheer went out, followed by the stamping of hundreds of feet and the insectile buzz of a thousand pairs of wings. Some of the observers even sprang into the air, fluttering their wings with a softer beat to make their own pleasure all the more visible.

“All hail King Roman!” The cry was almost unanimous. “All hail Queen Melantha! All hail Princess Alyssa and the unity of Elethra!”

King Roman chuckled and glanced to his wife, spying the tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. He nodded. She smiled.

“I had barely hoped this day would come.” She whispered.

“And I. But now, Melantha, we have a daughter. A beautiful, enchanting daughter and our kingdom has an heir. We are safe.”

Melantha turned out to the crowd, sweeping her hands before her in a gesture that was all grace and stately recognition. “My thanks to you all,” she cried, “and my ever lasting love!”

The fae gathered in the main hall, from faerie, to sprite, right through to tiny pixie became louder still and began to sing in once voice. “*Elethra stands, strong and proud. The Fae of Arcadia, we never shall fall. Lead by wisdom and strength and power and grace, we’ll continue our lives as the highest race!*”

Hundreds of voices raised in chorus, the best possible example of Arcadia united.

In living memory, never before had the royal family of Elethra ordered such a large and extravagant party. The main hall, ordinarily kept locked but for meetings of state had

been cleared of its imposing tapestries of rulers past and dressed with garlands of brightly coloured flowers.

The ceiling was decorated with hanging webs of fine silk strands, drawn from the most cunning and skilled of spiders. Through these webs fireflies shone, their gold, green and red lights winking as they travelled unhindered through the maze of purpose spun strands.

In larger sconces on the surrounding walls, flaming brands offered brighter light; orange flames dancing in the updraft of many beating wings further below.

At ground level, tables of sung wood held baskets and trays of food and fine drink. Fruits and nuts from across the land were piled in evenly spaced patches, while between them, urns of wine and clear spring water waited to be poured into waiting goblets.

In amongst the tables moved the serving party, teams of animals and smaller creatures who gave their service to the faerie lords. Foxes, voles, rabbits, badgers, hedgehogs and deer all moved in temporary harmony to carry baskets and buckets with refills for the table.

Above their heads flitted the birds, from eagle to sparrow, carefully maintaining those areas out of reach of the land animals.

The incredible room was the very picture of light hearted harmony and companionship and the song only served to give it voice.

As it continued Roman stepped off the podium, lifting his wings and flicking them outwards to control his descent down to the ground. He landed lightly, bending his knees to take the impact and crossed smartly to the canopied cradle housed on its own low stage.

The soldiers gathered about it stood to attention as he approached, pulling their spears straighter. One or two of them even went so far as to bend to one knee, crossing their right hands across their right knee to expose their tattoos.

Roman smiled and pressed his hands to his chest, right over left to be sure his own markings were exposed. "Thank you gentlemen," he said, "your loyalty and protection is more important now than ever and I personally thank each and every one of you."

The men grinned and shuffled amongst themselves, finally stepping back to form a gap through which their king could step.

He did so, advancing on the cradle and the tiny babe tucked therein.

"Florian!" He exclaimed. "What are you still doing here? Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

The young serving boy curled up beneath the cradle looked up with a start. His eyes grew wide as he identified the source of the voice and he scrambled to reach his feet. "Your

Majesty!” He bowed low, adolescent wings held back and flat to give him balance as he bent his face almost double to his knees. “I just wanted to see her again. Please, are you angry?”

Roman smiled. “Of course not. Why would I be?” He stepped closer, letting one hand fall to rest lightly on the lad’s skinny shoulders. “I’m honoured that you think so much of my daughter.”

Florian’s face flushed to the colour of spring roses. “She’s beautiful, Your Majesty. I want to protect her.”

“Oh?” Amusement made Roman’s wings hum. “And you think you can do that better than twelve of my finest soldiers?”

The lad looked down, twisting the hems of his tunic between his fingers. “No, Your Majesty. I would never....”

Roman laughed. He couldn’t help it. “Don’t worry, Florian, I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable. Of course you cannot do more than my soldiers, but I do have a request.”

The blush rapidly drained from Florian’s cheeks, taking the rest of his natural colour with it as he paled. He looked up again, blue eyes wild, black tattoos of interlocked circles standing out on his pale face. “Of me, Your Majesty?” His voice trembled.

“Yes boy. You and *only* you, do you understand?”

His lips flapped soundlessly.

“Good.” Roman pressed on without waiting. “I know you are my hand, Florian, but I really have no need of an aide. Not to say that your service is not of use, because it is, but there is someone I feel could use your expertise, love and care far more than I.” He raised his eyebrow in question and glanced meaningfully down into the cradle.

Florian took a step back, his thin, under developed body trembling like a leaf in the wind. “Me, Your Majesty? Really?”

“I can think of no better candidate.”

The boy looked into the cradle, his features softening as he gazed at the babe within. Then with a tiny, decisive nod, he dropped down to his knees and lowered his head, hands pressed to the floor palm down.

“Your Majesty,” his muffled voice was strong, firm. “I was and always will be unworthy of your attention but I thank you from the bottom of my heart. In this I will do as you bid and swear before you and all the powers of Arcadia that I will not fail. I will protect Princess Alyssa with my life.”

Roman frowned. He opened his mouth to explain that he had only meant a servant for the young baby, but, as he looked down at Florian and the pale expanse of his empty hands, he knew he couldn't do it.

He closed his hand around the dagger at his belt, long, ceremonial and dressed in sparkling silver. When he pulled it free, the metal sang and he saw Florian shiver from his prostrate position on the floor. "Florian Endride," he whispered, "I accept your pledge of behalf of Alyssa Chrysanthos, Princess of Elethra and future queen."

Bending down he pressed the point of the dagger against the back of Florian's left, pushing until the blade broke flesh.

Florian whimpered, but he did not move, his head pressed firmly to the floor.

Roman worked quickly, cutting the back of the lad's hand with hard, firm strokes to form three interlinked circles above a seven rayed star.

Blood poured freely, staining the floor until Florian's left hand lay in a puddle of his own life blood. Still he did not move.

When Roman was finished he wiped the dagger against his robes and tucked it away again, cocking his head to survey his handiwork. "Good." He said at last.

He checked over his shoulder.

His soldiers continued to face the crowd, occasionally glancing back towards the cradle and its precious cargo. None of them were paying overt attention; giving their king the space and privacy he required to go about his affairs.

Just the same, Roman was careful to shield his hands as he plucked the next tool from his belt. It was a small wooden bottle, capped with cork and fastened to his belt by a single thong of leather.

Deliberately non-descript and below notice, Roman kept within it, the waters of the River Of Shil'ith with all the magical properties it brought.

He unstopped the bottle and tilted it until three purple drops spilled free onto Florian's maimed hand. The water spread over the wounds and spread, trickling through the dagger marks.

Florian hissed softly, whimpering under his breath. He looked up, glanced at his left hand and gave a sudden loud shout.

The points of four sharp spears appeared almost immediately and Roman flung himself backwards as his soldiers swarmed to protect him. Three more gathered protectively around the cradle while the remaining five continued to watch the crowd.

The boy snatched his left hand against his chest, hiding it with his right and lowering his head. "Sorry!" He exclaimed in a rush. "I didn't mean to frighten anybody." His voice became very small. "Please don't hurt me."

The spear points moved closer to his throat. "How did you get here?"

"I've always been here."

"Don't be foolish! We've been on guard since the ceremony began; how did you get passed us?"

Florian whimpered like a cornered animal. "Please, it's the truth. I just came and stood here. You didn't notice me. No one notices me."

Roman cocked his head. "Do you mean that, Florian?"

"Yes, Your Majesty! I might not have deliberately sneaked behind your guards, but I didn't announce I was here. I'm good at being quiet when I need to be, Your Majesty. I told you; I wanted to see her."

The soldiers sneered. "A dirty runt like you has no right to look on the Princess. You're lucky to be allowed in Elethra at all."

The boy frowned. "You shouldn't say that to me."

"I'll say what I like to a *shev* like you, boy. Now come here."

"Enough!" Roman raised his hand. "He has as much right to be here as any of you and I will *not* hear that word again in my presence."

The soldiers visibly bowed their heads, alarmed and ashamed.

"You will apologise."

"Your Majesty?"

"Now!"

Uncomfortably silence reigned until a reluctant; "My apologies, boy," was repeated through the cluster of soldiers.

"Good." Roman sniffed loudly, disappointed at his men, though no less understanding of their concerns. "Please return to your positions."

"Your Majesty?"

"Return to your positions." He repeated. "We are perfectly safe."

The soldiers at once returned to their semi circle about the cradle, though now more than one of them turned to peer back at the scene behind him.

A sigh slipped from Roman's lips. "You'll have to keep secrets better than that, Florian. That is the point of the Seal."

Florian stammered. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. I was just-” he uncovered the left hand and gazed at it, his eyes wide.

Roman also looked and smiled when he saw that the dagger marks were gone. No sign of them remained. “*Alyssa sepora*,” he whispered.

This time, instead of shrieking, Florian bit his lip, but his shock was still very much evident. The back of his hand flared white like the sun, the hidden marks sealed by the water of Shil’ith temporarily visible as a purple tattoo against his skin. It vanished after a few seconds, but not before Florian had taken a very good look at it.

He bowed again. “I’m honoured, Your Majesty. I really am a *shev*; I don’t even have a name... I have nothing to give, I-”

Roman raised his hand. “You have loyalty, strength and honesty, Florian. That is enough. And I can think of nobody better to protect my daughter.” As he spoke, Roman took Florian by the hand and pressed his fingers to the puddle of blood pooling on the floor.

He didn’t resist and Roman tugged the boy over to the cradle to use his bloodied fingers in tracing a seven pointed star on the sleeping child’s head.

“You are bound to her, and she to you.” Roman whispered. “Take care of her.”

“I will, Your Majesty, count on me. I’ll never let you down!”

A slight frown puckered Roman’s brow as he looked at Florian.

Thirteen years old, abandoned at birth and taken into the palace through a fit of Melantha’s maternal pity. He remained underweight and frail despite unrestricted access to food and drink and his skinny body appeared lost in the folds of his ceremonial servant garb. The sleeves and hems were turned up and carefully stitched into place so as not to trip him or lose him the use of his hands. Even his wings, membranous and fine, though just like, Roman’s looked small and underdeveloped. They could never carry his weight.

Roman sighed. “I know you won’t.”