

# The Elves' Realm

by Alaina Dean

The door creaked as it was slowly pushed open. A dark shadow emerged and slunk down the marble staircase. Green eyes darted around, taking everything in. Creeping down the long corridor the dark shadow slipped through the main doors and gracefully ran through the shadows of the palace gardens. The slim figure of Princess Mayabelle danced through the dark, towards the stables.

Pushing on the heavy, oak doors the princess cursed like a gutter kid, they were locked. Testing the windows, and finding them shut, Mayabelle threw a large pebble through the high window. The glass smashed into tiny shards, making a spider web of sharp, unforgiving daggers.

Mayabelle fitted her slender body through the hole, the glass slashing on her hands. She elegantly leapt from her perch onto the soft straw below. Landing lightly on the balls of her feet Mayabelle crept along the aisle. Her flaming red hair was held by a strip of woven leather across her brow. She wore a white cotton shirt and brown leggings covered her legs. She wore dark, knee high, riding boots and a brown leather cloak, with a deep hood, tied at her neck.

Mayabelle paused outside the stall of a magnificent white stallion, gleaming in the moonlight that filtered through the broken window. Setting a saddle on his back and a bit in his mouth she led him out. Her foot caught on and uneven pavement and she fell, yanking the horse's reins. The stallion half reared and a piercing whinny echoed through the stables.

The princess froze, and lifted her head to the ceiling. Someone was stirring. A young stable hand emerged from the loft, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"Anybody there?" he mumbled, his eyes widening as he took in the sight before him. The princess, dressed as a man, a sword at hip and a bow and quiver across her back, was leading the king's warhorse out of its stall.

The stable hand pinched his wrist, thinking he was dreaming. When he realised that the princess was actually real he mustered up his courage and spoke hesitantly, "Yer royal 'ighness, you shoul' not be 'ere."

The princess blinked, not used to the rough cant of the ordinary citizens. "When I leave you shall go back upstairs and not say a word about this until the king asks. Do you understand?"

The stable hand clumsily bowed. "Yes, yer 'ighness."

Swinging herself on to the horse's back, she flicked a silver coin at the stable hand, dug her heels into the stallion's side and cantered out the doors. The steed's shod hooves rang on the cobble stones as the princess flew out the castle gates. A sentry on the castle's wall studied the lone horseman. His eyes widened as he saw the mane of red hair flying in the breeze.

"Merciful Gods, it's the princess!" He put a white horn to his lips and blew three clear notes.

The princess glanced back and saw the scurry of movement as soldiers hurried to saddle horses. She smiled grimly to herself; they weren't going to catch her.

A sudden ear piercing roar caused the stallion to stumble. Mayabelle knew that sound and urged the horse on faster. Looking back, she grimaced as she saw a huge, blood-red beast rise from behind the grey castle. Flapping its wings, the dragon and its rider tore after her. The castle gates burst open and five black clad riders galloped out, cloaks flying behind them.

Hurrying off the path, she drove her steed into the dense forest. Riding blindly, Mayabelle criss-crossed through the tall trees, trying to throw her pursuers. Deep in the forest she paused at a large oak, its gnarled bark twisted and warped.

She rapped on the bark and unsure of what to do next, hesitantly spoke, "I am Mayabelle, Royal Princess and heir to the Daimi throne."

Her voice echoed around the old forest. There was no reply. She tried again, "I am the Princess of Daimi and I need your help."

No reply. Mayabelle tried again frantically, "I need your help." She paused and then added desperately, "*Please.*"

"Now, that was the word I was looking for." The princess gasped and whirled around. Before her stood a handsome youth with merry blue eyes and long blond dreadlocks.

"I think we may be able to help you. Come." As he turned, Mayabelle's suspicions were answered. His ears were pointed.

She had found the elves.

Mayabelle followed the young elf, her horse trailing behind her. They wound through the ancient trees and soon Mayabelle had lost all sense of direction. She was tired and cold when they reached a small clearing. The sun that filtered through the trees surprised the princess. It could not have been a whole twelve hours since she escaped from the castle, could it?

The elf, who had introduced himself as Tsar, led Mayabelle onto a barely visible trail.

“You should get up on that horse of yours. It’s a while before we get there.”

Mayabelle wearily climbed into the saddle, her back slumped with exhaustion. The stallion followed Tsar, who danced ahead, whistling to the birds. The sun was high in the sky by the time the two of them reached a crumbling marble arch. Beautiful carvings of mythical creatures and fiery dragons were overgrown with moss and weather worn.

“Mayabelle, no other human has ever stepped into our realm. If you come through here you will keep our secret until the hour of your death.”

Tsar’s eyes held Mayabelle’s until she agreed. “I promise. Is there any food in your realm? I’m starving.”

Tsar laughed and skipped through the arch. As Mayabelle rode the stallion through the ancient arch a sudden lightness came over her, and she wanted to sing and laugh and dance.

“Once you step into the elven realm all the sorrow and sadness from the world outside disappears,” Tsar explained. “Nobody knows why, not even the Elders.”

“I feel so light and happy,” the princess breathed. Tsar smiled and led the princess through the thinning woods. He stopped and turned to the princess a few hundred metres from the arch.

“This is the Valley of the Moon. The people you are seeking dwell here. They will not be happy that I have brought you among us, but it is the Queen’s wishes.”

“The Queen’s wishes?” the princess asked, startled. “She knew I would be here? Do you not have a king?”

“Our king died in the Battle of Daimialateira. Many elves did. I was but a young boy then.”

“The Battle of Daimialateira? That was more than a century ago!” Mayabelle scoffed.

“We elves live a long time. A *long* time,” he added. They emerged on a ridge of soft, lush grass. The Valley of the Moon spread out below them, in all of its splendid glory.

A tall, immense white castle was settled in the footholds of the surrounding mountains, bright flags fluttering from the many towers. Where the forest met the edge of the grass small, petite houses were seemingly grown out of the trees. A herd of

gleaming black horses grazed on the valley grass, small foals chasing butterflies on the outskirts of the group. Beyond the herd a bubbly stream gurgled its way through the valley, small elf children wading in the fresh water.

Tsar took one flying leap off the cliff and floated down to the floor of the valley.

“Mayabelle, jump!” Tsar’s voice came wafting to her on the fresh winter breeze. Mayabelle took a deep breath and urged the horse over the edge. The horse whinnied in fear as they floated down, landing with a soft thud.

As Tsar and the princess made their way to the castles, elves emerged from the wooden houses. The women were dressed like Mayabelle, like men and tiny elven children clung to the breeches. Many of the elves turned away in disgust as Mayabelle looked at them. She lowered her eyes and kept them fixed on her hands. These people, she realised, were not going to welcome her, no matter how much help she provided.

The herd of horses had come to sniff at her horse, which pranced and whinnied underneath Mayabelle. The large black stallion came up and bit into her steed’s shoulder. Mayabelle was flung off as her horse danced and snapped at the black stallion.

“Rantel, be off with you, or I’ll set the dwarves after you.” Tsar had managed to stand between the two horses. With a toss of his black head Rantel gathered up his herd and cantered into the forest.

“Elves aren’t the only ones who are not happy with your presence here,” Tsar explained as Mayabelle soothed her stallion.

“I can see that,” she replied running her hand her horse’s wounds. “I think we should see the Queen before any more misfortune befalls us.”

When they arrived at the castle, Mayabelle had cleaned the dirt off her clothes as best she could. The castle rose before her, greater than any monument made by the hands of men. The ruby encrusted door swung open silently when she touched the handle. At the far end of the grand hall sat a beautiful, elvan maiden, her raven hair tumbling down her back.

“Princess Mayabelle, we have been expecting you.” She rose and was a lot shorter than Mayabelle expected. “Please come closer.”

“Your Majesty, you knew, though I don not know how, that I was to be here at this exact moment. Then you may also know why I am here.” She took a deep breath and continued. “The night before last I found plans for my kidnap and murder, and also plans to burn you out of this forest. They were in my father’s hand, but he has not been himself since he remarried, to someone whom I believe to be an evil sorceress.”

She pulled rolls of thick parchment from her cloak and handed them to the Queen,

who studied them carefully.

“My dear child, you have been through a lot these past days. You must rest after your ordeal. Come, I will see you to your chambers.”

The Queen led Mayabelle through a maze of corridors, stories of the elven history painted upon the walls. She ushered Mayabelle through thick oak doors to a large room, equipped with all the needs of a princess and more.

As the Queen turned to leave Mayabelle spoke, “Your Majesty, tomorrow—”

The Queen cut her off. “Tomorrow is another day.”