



Her Orc Blacksmith

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: A widow with a broken heart. A warrior seeking redemption. And a love forged in fire.

After the war that tore her world apart, Soraya Ashford is left to pick up the pieces. As a war-weary widow struggling to provide for her young son, she turns to the last person she ever expected—Vorgath Steelbane, a scarred and stoic orc who has traded his sword for a blacksmith's hammer.

Vorgath knows the weight of battle. He's fought, bled, and lost more than he cares to remember. Now, all he wants is peace. But when Soraya walks into his life, her strength and vulnerability ignite a fire within him he thought long extinguished.

As they work side by side in the forge, sparks fly. But shadows from Vorgath's past threaten their fragile happiness, forcing him to take up arms once more to protect the woman he's come to love.

In a world still healing from war, can Soraya and Vorgath forge a future together, or will the ghosts of the past tear them apart?

Her Orc Blacksmith is a steamy, heartwarming fantasy romance featuring a curvy, resilient heroine and a devoted, scarred orc hero. Perfect for readers who love slow-burn romance, strong heroines, and protective alpha males.

Total Pages (Source): 88

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Prologue

Sometimes, he still heard the distant roar of battle, muffled only by the steady clang of his hammer on the forge, the rhythmic strike of metal against metal. In those moments, the ghosts of war seemed farther away.

But there were times, like now, when his brother's war cry echoed across the battlefield in his mind. No amount of steel or flame could silence it. The clash of weapons, the tang of blood on the wind, the haunting look in Gorkath's eyes the last time they met—it all rushed back, vivid and unrelenting.

He had chosen to leave that life behind, to forge peace instead of destruction. The fires of the forge were meant to cleanse him, to burn away the past. Here, in Everwood, he could be just a blacksmith, shaping tools and horseshoes, not a warrior.

Yet the past, like the scars etched into his skin, never truly faded. The weight of his brother's betrayal, the faces of those he had fought alongside and against, lingered like shadows in the corners of his mind, waiting for moments like this to resurface.

Vorgath paused, lowering the hammer. His eyes drifted to the sword hanging on the wall, polished but unused. It was a relic of a past he had promised to abandon, but still, he kept it. A reminder, perhaps, that no peace was ever permanent. That, despite his best efforts, the past had a way of creeping back. And he feared the day when he would be forced to pick up the blade again.

But for now, he worked. Each swing of the hammer was a prayer—one that begged for forgiveness, for redemption, for peace that would last longer than the quiet

between strikes.

Chapter 1

“Isla, stand still!” Lady Hargrave’s voice cut through the chaos of the sitting room, her frustration barely contained as she tried to adjust the hem of her daughter’s dress. Isla, her face scrunched in displeasure, twisted and squirmed, clearly unimpressed.

“I don’t like flowers!” Isla wailed, tugging at the delicate stitching I’d spent hours perfecting. “They’re ugly!”

“Isla, that’s enough,” Lady Hargrave snapped. “Mrs. Ashford, do you hear this?”

I straightened up from where I’d been kneeling, pinning the hem of another garment. “My apologies,” I replied, keeping my tone even, though I distinctly remembered Isla insisting on flowers just last week. “If they’re not to your liking, I can remove them.”

Isla’s younger brother, who had been running circles around the room, crashed into his sister with a loud giggle, nearly toppling her over. “Mama, look!” he shouted, waving a wooden sword. Lady Hargrave barely glanced at him.

“Remove them,” she said, her voice cold. “I can’t believe we’re dealing with this just a day before the delegation from Valara arrives.”

I swallowed the retort that bubbled up in my throat, bending back down to my work as Isla continued to pout. “I’ll have the flowers removed and the hem re-stitched by tomorrow morning.”

Lady Hargrave merely hummed in response, her attention drifting away as she inspected another dress I’d mended earlier in the week. I’d been doing seamstress work for her for nearly two years now, ever since the war left me with no choice but

to find whatever work I could. She was my most difficult customer, with exacting standards and a tendency to find fault in even the smallest detail. But she was also my best-paying one, and the money I earned from her commissions was often the only thing keeping me and Elias afloat.

“Here.” Lady Hargrave’s sharp voice pulled me from my thoughts. She extended a small pouch toward me, her expression unreadable.

I took the pouch, feeling its weight in my hand. My heart sank—this wasn’t nearly what I was expecting.

“My lady,” I began carefully, “this doesn’t seem to be the full amount we agreed on.”

Lady Hargrave’s eyes flicked up to meet mine, a cool smile curving her lips. “Do you expect me to pay you for work that will need to be redone?”

I hesitated but couldn’t let it go. “I understand, my lady, but the price was set, and I’ll make the changes to your specifications at no extra charge.”

Lady Hargrave let out a cold, almost mocking laugh. “Extra charge? Mrs. Ashford, next time, just get it right the first time.”

Nothing I could say would make this situation better. If anything, arguing would only make things worse—would possibly even cost me this job. And as much as I hated the unfairness of it, I needed this work.

I took a deep breath and nodded, keeping my voice steady. “Of course. I’ll have the adjustments made by tomorrow.”

“See that you do,” she replied, already turning her attention elsewhere, dismissing me.

I bit my tongue, forced a tight smile, and turned on my heel, clutching the pouch of underpaid coins as I gathered my bags and saw myself out of the room.

I made my way through the dimly lit hallways of the estate. The grandeur of the councilman's manor always felt suffocating—high ceilings, ornate tapestries, and the constant hush of a house that was more about appearances than comfort. A far cry from my modest cottage on the edge of town, nestled at the border where the forest met the quiet, cobbled street. My cottage was small, a little rundown, with creaking floorboards and a roof that leaked when it rained too hard, but its crooked charm made it feel like home. I'd take that over this hollow luxury any day.

Instead of heading for the front door, I kept going down the stairs toward the kitchen, where the quiet faded into a comforting hum. The distant clatter of pots, the low murmur of conversation, and the occasional burst of laughter drifted up the stairwell.

Finally, I pushed open a heavy door and was immediately greeted by a lively scene. The large, warm room was bustling with activity—servants darting to and fro, chopping vegetables, kneading dough, stirring pots that bubbled over open flames. Heat rolled off the ovens, clinging to my skin. The sound of knives chopping against wood and the sizzle of oil filled the space, punctuated by the occasional burst of laughter.

And there, at the center of it all, was my best friend, Thyri. Her hair was a wild mess of golden curls, barely contained by a scarf, and her apron was splattered with flour and who-knew-what else, but her smile was as bright as ever when she spotted me.

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“Sor!” she called out, her voice cutting through the din as she waved me over. “Don’t linger in the doorway. Come in.”

“Thyri,” I greeted her with a tired smile, glad to see a friendly face. Following her instructions, I stepped inside, letting the door swing shut behind me.

Thyri and I had known each other since we were just schoolgirls, running through the streets of Everwood with ribbons in our hair and dirt on our skirts. We’d spend hours by the river, skipping stones and talking about who we might be one day, back when the idea of the future was still wrapped in the softness of a dream.

When I married Kald, Thyri was by my side, fussing over my dress and making sure my hair was just right. She teased me for choosing the blacksmith's apprentice, saying I was always too practical. But he was kind and sensible, and that was enough for me. We laughed that day, thinking life would just go on like it always had—full of warmth, with Kald at the forge and Thyri sneaking us both rolls from Lady Hargrave’s estate.

But the war came, and life got harder, darker. Kald went off to fight, and suddenly, the streets we used to run through as girls felt colder, and the air, once full of laughter and gossip, grew thick with whispers of loss and fear. Thyri stayed on at the estate, working in the kitchens, while I was left to raise Elias alone.

And now, years later, with everything that had changed, Thyri was still one of the few people who could make me feel like things might be okay. She hadn’t lost her quick smile or her knack for sneaking sweets out of the kitchen. When she called me “Sor” instead of Soraya, like she used to back in school, it was like, for just a moment, we

were those carefree girls again, untouched by war and grief. Almost.

As I settled onto a stool in her corner of the kitchen, I reached into my basket and pulled out the neatly folded apron I'd spent the last evening mending.

"I brought this back for you," I said, holding it out to her. "I added a little something."

Thyri unfurled the apron, her eyes lighting up as she noticed the small, embroidered design near the hem—a cluster of tiny flowers in soft colors, delicate but cheerful.

"This is beautiful!" she exclaimed, running her fingers over the stitching. "You didn't have to do this, but I love it."

"I thought you might," I replied, feeling pleased. "You're always doing things for me and Elias. I wanted to do something for you."

"Speaking of which, I believe a certain little boy is turning seven today, if I'm not mistaken." She reached into the deep pocket of her apron and pulled out a small, cloth-wrapped bundle. "I saved these just for him," she said, pressing it into my hands.

"Thyri, you're spoiling him," I teased, shaking my head but taking the gift.

"Nonsense," she replied, brushing off the comment with a wave of her hand. "Everyone should have sweets on their birthday."

I unwrapped the cloth just enough to see the rolls inside, golden-brown and still warm, the scent of cinnamon making my mouth water.

"He's going to love these," I said, tucking the bundle securely into the basket. "Thank

you.”

Thyri leaned against the counter, folding the apron carefully and tucking it into a drawer for safekeeping. “So, how was the fitting with Lady Hargrave? I swear, every time you come down here, you look more exhausted.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “She shorted me again,” I admitted, keeping my voice low so as not to be overheard.

Thyri frowned. “It’s not right, Soraya.”

“I know,” I said, biting back my frustration. “Today’s payment was supposed to go toward getting Elias a set of paints for his birthday. He’s been asking for them for weeks. It wasn’t much, but it was something. Now... it’s just going to be another year without a gift.”

Another year of promises I couldn’t keep. He never complained, but I saw the disappointment in his eyes, the way he stopped asking after a while. How much longer before the weight of what I couldn’t give him became too heavy for both of us?

“That’s not fair to either of you.” Thyri reached out, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze. “Maybe I can talk to one of the kitchen boys—see if they can carve something for him. It won’t be fancy, but it’ll be something.” That was Thyri, always finding a way, doing whatever she could to make life just a little bit sweeter.

I smiled, though it didn’t quite reach my eyes. “Thank you, Thyri. But you don’t need to trouble yourself. We’ll manage.”

Before she could respond, a sudden commotion erupted from the far end of the kitchen. A loud whoosh was followed by a panicked yelp, and the smell of something

burning filled the air. I turned just in time to see a plume of smoke rising from one of the stoves, where an elven kitchen maid—distinguishable by her pointed ears—was frantically waving her hands, trying to extinguish the flames that had erupted from a pot of soup.

“Not again,” Thyri muttered, her brows knitting together in frustration. “That girl and her spells...”

With a quick squeeze of my hand, Thyri rushed over to the stove, barking orders to the other kitchen staff as she grabbed a jar of enchanted salt from the counter. She sprinkled it over the flaming pot, and within seconds, the fire sputtered out, leaving only a faint wisp of smoke and a slightly charred smell behind.

The kitchen erupted into a flurry of activity as the staff hurried to salvage the meal. Thyri, always calm under pressure, took charge, directing everyone with practiced ease.

Not wanting to get in the way, I quietly gathered my basket and slipped out of the kitchen. The lively chatter and clatter faded behind me as I made my way out the back door. The sweet rolls in my basket were better than nothing but still a poor substitute for the gift I’d hoped to bring Elias.

As I stepped out into the late afternoon sun, I steeled myself for the evening ahead—another late night of mending, another year where Elias would go without the gift he truly wanted. I’ve survived worse, I reminded myself. The war had taken so much, but I still had Elias.

And as long as I had him, I’d do whatever I could to keep us moving forward.

Chapter 2

The soft glow of the charmstone by my front door welcomed me, its gentle warmth a familiar comfort after a long day. I brushed my fingers over it, ensuring the wards were still in place, as I always did without thinking.

The next thing I saw was Elias's wide grin as he sprinted out of the kitchen.

"Hello, birthday boy!" I greeted him, dropping to my knees and holding my arms open.

He threw himself against me, and I hugged him tightly, breathing in the scent of sunshine and the faint hint of sweat that always seemed to cling to him. It felt like just yesterday he was a tiny bundle in my arms, barely able to grasp my finger. Now, he was growing so fast, too fast, into the spitting image of his father—though with my softer features and his own mischievous smile.

"I missed you," I said, pulling back just enough to look at his face. "Did you have a good day?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "We made a crown from the flowers in the yard!" He pointed to the small, woven crown now perched slightly askew on his head.

I smiled, reaching up to straighten it. "You look like a proper little prince."

Elias beamed, puffing out his chest with pride. "Mrs. Crumble said the flowers will bring me good luck."

At the mention of his sitter, I glanced over to see the elderly brownie woman emerging from the shadows of the kitchen, her small, wiry frame almost blending in with the dim light. She was no taller than Elias, her skin a warm brown, with tufts of moss-like hair peeking out from under a cap made of what looked like stitched-together leaves. Her large, round eyes twinkled as she cradled a tiny cup of tea. She had been with us for years now, slipping into our lives just when I needed her most.

“Thank you, Mrs. Crumble,” I said warmly. “Are you sure I can't pay you properly?”

“Don't fuss now,” she said, waving me off. “Just leave me one of those rolls I smell from your basket, and I'll come to collect it tonight after I finish my errands.”

I smiled, shaking my head at our familiar routine. “I could leave you more than that, or... at least stay and eat with us.”

But she shook her head. “No, no. You two have your evening. Don't worry about a thing, Soraya. I'll be just fine.”

I nodded, though part of me still wished she would stay. “Thank you, Mrs. Crumble. I don't know what we'd do without you.”

Her smile deepened, her eyes twinkling. “Well, lucky for you, you won't have to find out.” She patted Elias's head and nodded to me before she gave a little twirl. In a blink, she was gone, leaving behind only the faint scent of wildflowers and the soft rustle of leaves.

“Alright, my little prince,” I said, turning back to him. “How about we see what Thyri sent for your birthday?”

Elias's eyes lit up as he raced to the small table in the corner of the room, climbing into his usual seat. I followed, setting the bundle of sweet rolls on the table and

carefully unwrapping them. The scent of cinnamon and sugar filled the air, and Elias clapped his hands in excitement.

I placed the sweet rolls on the table, their golden-brown tops glistening with sugar, and handed Elias the biggest one. “Now, you remember what to do?”

Elias nodded, his small hands cupping the roll.

We both leaned in, our faces close to the bread, following the birthday tradition everyone in Everwood grew up with—wishing over sweet rolls. It was said that the hearth spirits who made the bread carried wishes to the Alder trees, where the Seven might hear and grant them.

“Close your eyes and make your wish,” I reminded him.

Elias shut his eyes tightly, his brow furrowing in concentration. I followed suit, feeling the warmth of the roll beneath my chin, and whispered my wish quietly into the sweet, sugary surface.

“May this year bring Elias happiness and health. And may I find the strength to give him the life he deserves.”

When our wishes were made, we both opened our eyes and, in unison, gently tapped the tops of our sweet rolls, sealing the wishes inside before happily digging in.

As the evening wore on, I cleaned up the table and helped Elias change into his nightclothes. We followed the familiar routine—brushing his teeth, tidying up his toys, and finally, tucking him into bed.

His eyes were already growing heavy with sleep as I pulled the blanket up to his chin. The flower crown hung crookedly from the bedpost, a reminder of the day's

adventures.

“Want to know my wish?” Elias asked in a sleepy whisper.

I hesitated, not wanting to pry. “Only if you want to share it.”

He nodded, his small hand reaching out to take mine. “I wished that we could have Papa’s forge working again, so we could be like we were before.”

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For a moment, I couldn't find my voice. I'd always been practical, focused on what was in front of us, not on dreams or wishes. But Elias still saw the world with hope, still longed for more. It surprised me—this difference between us. I wasn't used to thinking beyond the day-to-day, but maybe I needed to be.

Finally, I swallowed hard, forcing myself to smile as I squeezed his hand gently. "That's a wonderful wish."

He smiled back, his eyes already drifting shut. "Goodnight, Mama."

"Goodnight, little prince," I whispered, leaning down to kiss his forehead.

I watched him for a moment, his breathing deep and even, before quietly slipping out of the room and closing the door behind me.

Back in the kitchen, I prepared a cup of tea. The dried herbs I'd gathered from the market earlier that week—lavender and moonmint—filled the room with their earthy scent. Once the water boiled and the herbs steeped, I wrapped my hands around the warm cup and stepped outside into the cool night air.

The street was quiet, bathed in the soft glow of moonlight and the faint shimmer of stargrasses that grew along the edges of the path, with only a few scattered cottages nearby, their windows dark. Behind me, the forest whispered, the trees swaying gently in the breeze, while ahead, the town's quiet streets stretched toward the distant glow of the market square.

I leaned against the doorframe, sipping my tea slowly, letting the warmth spread

through me as I stared across the street at the forge. It had stood there, dark and silent, for so long. The chimney, now overgrown with ivy, reached up into the sky, and the tools still hung untouched inside, waiting for a hand that would never return.

The forge had once been a place of life, of fire and strength. I could still remember the sound of the hammer striking metal, the rhythmic clang that had echoed through our days, steady and reassuring. It was where my husband had spent most of his time, crafting weapons and tools, and when he left to fight, the forge had been his parting gift—a promise that he would return, that our lives would go on.

But he never came back, and the forge had grown cold.

I took another sip of tea, the warmth doing little to ease the chill that had settled in my bones. For years, I had avoided that place. It had become nothing more than a monument to what I had lost.

But now... now Elias wanted the forge working again. He wanted something I hadn't dared to even consider—a return to the life we had before. And for the first time in years, I felt a flicker of something deep inside me, something that had lain dormant for too long.

I finished my tea, the decision slowly solidifying as I set the empty cup on the step and crossed the street. The night air was cool against my skin, but I barely felt it as I approached the forge door. My hand hovered over the handle, hesitating for just a moment as the memories threatened to overwhelm me. But I pushed them down, focusing on Elias's wish, on mine. With a steadying breath, I grasped the handle and pushed the door open.

The hinges creaked as the door swung inward, and I stepped inside. The smell of soot and metal still lingered in the air, faint but familiar, and I stood there for a long moment, letting the silence settle around me.

It was just as he had left it. The anvil stood in the center of the room, the tools neatly arranged on the walls now coated with a layer of dust and cobwebs, the forge itself still filled with cold ashes. It was like stepping back in time, into a place that had once been full of life and hope.

With a deep breath, I moved to the forge, my hand shaking slightly as I picked up a piece of flint and steel. I hesitated, the memories still so fresh, so raw, but then I thought of Elias, of his wish, and the resolve within me hardened. Everything I had done since the war had been for Elias, to keep him safe and make sure he had something steady to hold onto.

But now, he was asking for more. He needed something to look forward to, something steady and strong, something that could give him hope. Maybe it was time I stopped thinking about what we'd lost and started thinking about what I could give him.

I struck the flint against the steel, and a small spark leaped into the darkness. I struck it again, and again, until finally, the spark caught in the cold ashes, a tiny flame flickering to life.

It wasn't much, but it was a start. The flame grew, feeding on the dry kindling, and a glimmer of hope sparked within me.

For years, I'd been surviving. Maybe now, it was time to start something new—not just for Elias, but for me. For us both.

Chapter 3

I wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand, staring at the stubborn piece of iron that refused to cooperate. I'd been up nearly all night, finishing the mending for Lady Hargrave, and now, with Elias off at school, I thought I'd get an

early start in the forge.

But this was no needle and thread, and no amount of determination could change the fact that I was out of my depth. The metal on the anvil seemed to mock me, holding its shape with the same resistance I'd felt all morning.

I pumped the bellows again, coaxing the flames to life, but the fire in the forge flickered weakly, as if it, too, was as tired as I was. My muscles ached, and the weight of the sleepless night was catching up with me. Maybe last night's burst of inspiration had been driven by nostalgia and sweet rolls rather than anything real. What was I even doing out here?

Just as I was about to give up and set the hammer down, a familiar voice called out from the open doorway.

"What in the Seven are you doing in here?"

I turned to see Thyri standing there, a basket balanced on her hip, her brow arched in confusion.

"Trying to figure out how these things work," I replied, gesturing vaguely to the tools scattered around the forge.

"Why?" she asked slowly.

"Why not?" I retorted. "I've got this whole forge at my disposal, and it's time I put it to use again."

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Thyri stepped inside, setting the basket on the workbench next to the mended dresses. “You didn’t even like being in here when Kald was alive,” she pointed out. “Remember how you used to complain about the heat? And how he smelled like smoke when he came home?”

I tugged at the front of my shirt, hoping for a breath of cooler air, watching Thyri gather her curls in one hand, lifting them off her neck. “Yeah, well, it’s not like I love mending clothes for spoiled rich kids, either.”

Thyri snorted. “Point taken. But smithing?” she asked, sounding genuinely concerned. “It’s surprising, I guess. It’s just not like you.”

“Maybe not,” I admitted. “But at least this... this feels like I’m trying to build something that’s mine. Something I can pass down to Elias.”

Thyri’s expression softened as she folded her arms, leaning against the workbench. “You’ve been up all night, haven’t you? The dresses are done?”

“Finished them a few hours ago,” I said, nodding toward the neatly folded garments. “But honestly, if I have to spend one more day mending clothes for Lady Hargrave, I might lose my mind.”

“You sure you haven’t already lost it?”

I laughed, though it was more out of exhaustion than humor. “Honestly, I might have. But I figure if I’m going to lose it, it’s better to do it trying something new than sticking with the same old misery.”

“Fair enough,” Thyri said. “Let’s see what you’ve got, then.”

I picked up the hammer again, this time with a little more confidence. But as I tried to lift it over my head, it quickly became clear that confidence wasn’t enough. The hammer swung down, nearly pulling me along with it.

Thyri burst into laughter. “You’re going to need more than enthusiasm. Didn’t Kald work under Master Ironsmith? Maybe you could talk to him about an apprenticeship?”

I paused, considering her suggestion. Thorne Ironsmith was the most renowned blacksmith in Everwood, and Kald had trained under him for years. But I had never been particularly fond of him. He always seemed... cold. Distant. The man hadn’t even offered his condolences after Kald’s death, never once checked on me or Elias. Instead, he’d just carried on as if Kald had never existed. That didn’t exactly fill me with the confidence to ask him for anything now.

“I don’t know, Thyri,” I said, chewing on my bottom lip. “He’s never exactly gone out of his way to be helpful.”

Thyri raised an eyebrow. “You sure? Maybe you just have to ask.”

Maybe Thyri was right. Thorne was a man of few words and even fewer displays of warmth, but if I was serious about this, I needed to at least consider every option, even if that meant swallowing my pride and facing Thorne.

“It’s worth a shot, I guess,” I finally conceded.

Thyri nodded, satisfied with her suggestion. “See? You’ll be hammering circles around everyone in no time.”

As she reached for the basket of mended dresses and hoisted it onto her hip, I tugged off my apron and gloves, tossing them onto the workbench. My hair was falling into my eyes, so I slid the goggles up onto my head to hold it back.

“I’ll walk with you as far as the Artisan’s Quarter,” I said, heading toward the door. “I’m eager to get started, and I’ve only got a few hours before Elias comes home.”

Thyri adjusted the basket and followed me outside, the cool morning air a relief after the stifling forge. “You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?”

“I have to be,” I said, my tone firm, even if doubt still lingered underneath.

There were easier paths I could take—mending, odd jobs—but those would only keep us afloat. This was different. This was my chance to take control, to shape something for the future, something that was ours.

We walked in comfortable silence, the city alive with the midday bustle. Shopkeepers were busy tending to their stalls beneath the wooden awnings, their voices mingling with the clatter of carts and the chatter of customers filling the cobbled streets.

As Thyri and I reached the edge of the Artisan’s Quarter, the streets grew livelier, bustling with tradespeople, apprentices, and merchants unloading their wares. Colorful banners fluttered from shop fronts, displaying the guild crests of blacksmiths, weavers, and stonecutters. The familiar clatter of carts, the murmur of conversations in various languages, and the distant clang of hammers striking metal blended into the steady rhythm of Everwood’s day. A gnome scurried past us, arms laden with scrolls, while a dwarven jeweler rearranged a display of gleaming bracelets. Nearby, an alchemist carefully unwrapped a crate of shimmering vials, their contents glowing faintly as he examined them.

Thyri shifted the basket on her hip and gave me a quick, reassuring smile. “Good

luck, Sor.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

With a final wave, Thyri turned and headed toward Lady Hargrave’s estate at the far end of the Riverside District, her steps light and confident as she weaved through the crowd.

Taking a deep breath, I adjusted the goggles on my head, hoping they made me look more official, and made my way toward Master Ironsmith’s forge. It wasn’t hard to find—his was one of the largest and most established in the quarter.

The forge was bustling with activity, vibrant and chaotic. The air was thick with the scent of hot metal and the rhythmic clang of hammers striking anvils. Apprentices of different races—humans, halflings, and a tall elf with intricate runes glowing faintly along his arms—moved back and forth, carrying materials and stoking fires with the aid of subtle magic, while a gnome tinkered with a complex mechanism in one corner. There was even an orc in the back, haggling with a dwarven supplier over the price of enchanted ingots.

Of all the sights in the forge, that one surprised me the most. Orcs had traditionally kept to themselves in the mountains, though I’d heard of a few settling into towns after the end of the war. They had fought and died for Alderwilde, and now more of them were beginning to integrate into the communities they had helped protect.

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This orc was huge, with broad shoulders and muscles that strained against the dark leather apron strapped across his chest. His green skin glistened faintly in the forge's firelight, and the deep lines of his face, sharp jaw, and dark beard made him look as if he were carved from stone—strong, unyielding, and timeless. There was something undeniably magnetic about him. Something powerful.

And very, very hard to look away from.

But now wasn't the time for such distractions.

Steeling myself, I approached the main entrance, where Thorne stood overseeing his apprentices. He was a stout man with arms thick from years of swinging a hammer, his once-dark hair now streaked with silver. The deep lines around his mouth and eyes gave him a perpetually stern expression. As I grew nearer, his sharp eyes flicked toward me, and for just a moment, I thought I saw a flash of surprise there.

“Master Ironsmith,” I called out, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Mrs. Ashford,” he acknowledged curtly. “This is a surprise. What brings you here?”

“I was hoping I could speak with you about something... important,” I began, trying to find the right words.

Thorne glanced at the work being done around him before focusing back on me. “Of course,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

I hesitated, my fingers fiddling with the hem of my sleeve. “Well, you know, the

forge has been empty since Kald... well, since he's been gone," I started, feeling the awkwardness creep into my voice. "And I was thinking..."

His expression softened, and to my surprise, a hint of understanding flickered in his eyes. "Ah," he said, nodding slowly. "Yes, of course, I should have thought of this sooner. I've been meaning to reach out. I'm sorry I didn't offer assistance earlier."

I blinked, not expecting that. "Oh, yes, um, well, thank you."

"Of course, of course," Thorne interrupted, glancing over his shoulder. "Tom! Come over here, lad."

A young apprentice swaggered over, wiping his hands on his already dirty apron. He was tall and lanky, with a cocky grin. He didn't bother hiding the way his eyes swept over me, sizing me up.

"Tom," Thorne said, clapping the apprentice on the back, "this is Mrs. Ashford. Her husband was Kald Ashford, the blacksmith who passed in the war."

Tom nodded, and it was my turn to size him up. His wiry build and soft hands did nothing to suggest he had any real experience behind him. What was Thorne thinking? To apprentice me to this kid?

"Well," Thorne continued, "Tom here has been looking for space to rent. Somewhere he can really get his own work going. And your forge might be just the place. A perfect arrangement—he can handle the heavy lifting and keep things running."

My eyes snapped to Thorne. "Wait—what?"

But the kid, Tom, was already making plans. "Yeah, I could put that old forge to good use. Probably needs a bit of a revamp, though," he added with a casual shrug.

“Maybe some upgrades to keep up with the times.”

“No,” I said firmly, cutting them both off before the conversation spiraled further out of my control. “That’s not why I’m here.”

Thorne and Tom both blinked at me, surprised by the edge in my voice.

“I’m not looking to rent out the forge,” I continued. “I wanted, well, I thought maybe I could... I mean, I want to learn. To take up the craft, you know? Get the forge running again... myself.”

Thorne’s eyebrows rose slightly, confusion flickering in his eyes as he tried to make sense of what I was saying. “Yourself?” he repeated back at me.

I nodded.

Tom let out a short, disbelieving laugh. “You?” He exchanged a glance with Thorne, then shook his head, clearly amused. “You’re serious?”

“Yes,” I said, forcing myself to meet his gaze. “I know it’s not what anyone would expect, but I already have everything I need. Except, well, a teacher.”

Thorne let out a small, patronizing chuckle. “Blacksmithing is no simple task. It’s grueling work, requiring strength and skillthat... well, let’s just say it’s not exactly suited to someone like you.”

Someone like me? A woman, I guessed. I forced myself to stand my ground. “I know it’s hard work, but I’m ready for that. I’m willing to put in the effort.”

Tom snickered, clearly enjoying the exchange. Thorne glanced at him, then back at me, his smile widening slightly as if he were about to indulge a child in a harmless

fantasy.

“Mrs. Ashford,” he said slowly, “I understand you want to do something productive, something to fill your time, but blacksmithing isn’t for everyone. It’s not just the physical demands—though trust me, that alone would be enough to make most people think twice. It’s a man’s trade. One steeped in tradition, passed down from father to son, from master to apprentice. It’s not something you just... pick up because you want a project.”

The other apprentices, overhearing the conversation, began to murmur among themselves, their voices tinged with laughter.

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I clenched my hands at my sides, my pulse quickening. What did they know about me? About what I'd been through? What I'd done to survive since the war tore everything apart?

He didn't know about the sleepless nights, how I'd kept Elias fed and sheltered on my own. He didn't know how much I had already given up, how much I still stood to lose if I didn't find something more.

Who was he to tell me no? Well... he was the guildmaster, wasn't he? Of course, he had that right. But that didn't mean I had to accept it quietly. That didn't mean he was right about me.

"I don't see why I shouldn't be given a chance," I insisted, keeping steady even as heat rose in my cheeks.

"What's she gonna do? Knit the iron into shape?" another man chimed in, eliciting a chorus of chuckles.

Thorne didn't bother to reprimand them. Instead, he looked at me with equal parts amusement and pity. "I think it's best you stick to what you know—sewing and mending. Leave the heavy lifting to those who are more suited to it."

His words hit me like a blow, the finality in his tone crushing the small spark of hope I'd carried with me. The apprentices laughed openly now, mocking and dismissive.

Before I could muster a response, another voice cut through the laughter, deep and commanding. "That's enough."

The apprentices immediately fell silent, their laughter dying in their throats. I turned to see who had spoken and found myself staring up at the orc I'd noticed earlier. Up close, I saw that a scar cut across one of his eyes, a jagged line that gave him a rough, battle-worn look. His tusks, shorter than I thought they'd be, peeked out from beneath his lower lip. He was standing too close, towering over me with a broad chest and thick arms that made me feel about half my size.

And maybe a little breathless.

He stepped forward, his gaze shifting from the apprentices to Thorne, then finally resting on me. "Let her learn," he said, his tone firm and deep.

For a moment, I could only stare at him. His presence was overwhelming—raw strength and something darker, a dangerous edge that wasn't entirely unappealing. I swallowed, trying to regain my composure.

The orc's gaze didn't waver, and after a tense moment, Thorne sighed and shook his head. "Vorgath, this isn't—"

"I said," the orc—Vorgath—interrupted with undeniable authority, "let her."

Thorne's face reddened, and he took a step forward, the tension between them thickening the air. "This isn't up for discussion. Need I remind you—again—that you are a guest in my forge?"

Vorgath gave an approximation of a smirk, baring his tusks. "I see you, Thorne. First, an orc outdoes you, and now, you're worried a woman might show you up, too."

The master's hands clenched into fists, his knuckles white. The apprentices exchanged uneasy glances, caught between their loyalty to him and the sheer force of Vorgath's presence. The tension between the two men was thick and suffocating, and

I shrank back, feeling like I was caught between a hammer and an anvil.

“Watch your tongue,orc,” Thorne hissed. “You may be skilled, but don’t forget your place. Everwood is my home, and I won’t have you—or anyone else—stirring up trouble.”

Thorne’s gaze flicked to me. Instinctively, I stepped back again, only to collide with something solid and unyielding.

Before I could react, a heavy hand landed on my shoulder. I froze, every muscle tensing as I realized I had backed right into the orc—into Vorgath. His grip was firm, his big, green fingers curling around my shoulder. It was like standing against a wall of stone, yet there was a gentleness to his touch, startling and unexpected. His presence was overwhelming, his hand large enough to engulf my entire shoulder, and yet, instead of feeling crushed or confined, I felt... protected.

It was disorienting, the sudden sense of safety beneath a hand that could easily break me. I had braced myself for rejection, for another blow to my already fragile resolve, but Vorgath’s hand on my shoulder kept me steady.

“Everwood is my home, too,” Vorgath said, his voice low and steady. “And maybe it is time I took on my own apprentice.”

Was he talking about me? The shock scrambled my thoughts, excitement warring with doubt. Orcs were known for being solitary and fierce, not the kind you’d expect to offer help. And my own prejudices had me wondering... was it even safe? Could I trust him to teach me, to be patient with my mistakes, to understand why I needed this so badly?

But before I could process it all, Thorne let out a sharp, mocking laugh. The apprentices followed suit, their laughter echoing through the forge as if the very idea

was ridiculous.

“Sure, Vorgath,” Thorne sneered. “Take her on. Teach her what you can. I’m sure she’ll last all of a day.”

Determination flared within me, fueled by the laughter around me. Maybe this wasn’t what I had planned, but it was a chance—a real chance—to prove myself.

“Actually,” I said, raising my voice to cut through the noise, “I think I will take you up on that offer, Master...”

The orc glanced at me, his expression unreadable. “Just call me Vorgath,” he said

The laughter faltered, the forge falling into an uneasy silence as all eyes turned to me. Thorne’s smug smile faded, replaced with a look of genuine surprise. Vorgath’s hand still rested on my shoulder, warm and solid, and I drew strength from it as I faced Thorne.

“I’m serious,” I continued, holding my ground. “And if Vorgath is willing to teach me, then I’m willing to learn.”

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For a moment, no one spoke, the tension hanging thick in the air. Then Vorgath's hand squeezed my shoulder gently, a silent acknowledgment, before he released me and stepped forward, standing between me and Thorne.

"It's settled, then," Vorgath said, his voice cutting through the silence. "You'll start tomorrow."

Chapter 4

My muscles screamed in protest as I tightened my grip on the hammer, sweat trickling down my back beneath the cursed shift I wished I could tear off. Vorgath's gaze weighed on me, silent and watchful, as I struggled to mimic the fluid motions he had demonstrated earlier.

But what had seemed straightforward when he did it now felt like an impossible feat. Frustration bubbled dangerously close to the surface as the forge's heat pressed down on me, but I refused to give in to the urge to walk away. The hammer was heavy, and the pain in my arms was real, but it was nothing compared to the weight of the future I refused to let slip away.

"Higher," Vorgath demanded gruffly. "More power behind the swing."

I nodded, gritting my teeth as I attempted to lift the hammer higher, fighting to keep it steady, eager to be a good student. But as I swung it down, the momentum threw me off balance. I tumbled forward, barely catching myself before tumbling face-first onto the anvil.

Vorgath's eyes narrowed as he watched me struggle, but he made no move to help. "That hammer was not made for you," he observed.

Pushing a loose strand of hair from my face, I straightened up. My pride stung at his blunt assessment, even though I knew he was right. "It was my husband's," I replied, unable to keep a hint of defensiveness from creeping into my tone.

For a moment, he was quiet, his gaze fixed on the hammer in my hands. "He is dead," he stated bluntly.

I rolled my eyes at his helpful observation. "Yes, he is."

"The hammer should have gone with him to Grulthar," he said without pity or apology.

Grulthar, the Ancestor's Tree—one of the Seven Sacred Alders, where orc warriors brought their loved ones' weapons after death as a tribute. But I couldn't afford such rituals. This hammer wasn't a relic; it was a lifeline.

"If it had," I bit back, "I wouldn't be here today. It's not like I can afford custom-made tools."

Vorgath grunted, his expression unreadable. As I stood there, hammer still in hand, I wondered—not for the first time today—if I'd made a terrible mistake.

This morning, when I arrived at Vorgath's place in the Moonshadow Forest, I wasn't sure what to expect but was immediately struck by how different it was from the busy, crowded workshops in town. The cabin was sturdy, built from dark stone he must have quarried himself, and the beams supporting the roof were thick and rough-hewn, likely cut from the towering trees nearby.

He'd answered my knock with a grunt, barely sparing me a glance before gesturing for me to follow him around the side of the house. I caught a glimpse of the heavy wooden door leading inside but got no invitation to enter. Instead, he led me directly to the forge that was tucked just behind the cabin, open on one side so the smoke could escape into the clearing beyond.

The forge itself was an extension of the cabin, sturdy and purposeful. The stone walls were blackened with heat, and thick wooden beams framed the open space. The ground was packed dirt, worn down by his heavy footsteps, with an anvil positioned front and center. Tools hung neatly from pegs on the walls, and I noticed they weren't only orcish. A hammer with a dwarven maker's mark rested beside a set of fine elven tongs, their delicate etchings standing out against the more utilitarian orcish weapons.

I guess I'd imagined something more primitive. But this place was a blend of worlds, much like the post-war life we all lived in. And it was his. Built by hand, stone by stone, as much a symbol of survival as skill.

Not at all like the stories I'd heard. Then again, what did I really know? I'd never met an orc before Vorgath, and had nothing to go on but my own assumptions. Even Thyri, who I'd filled in on every detail of the encounter at Thorne's forge over dinner last night, had been reassuring about the whole situation.

"Orcs were a large part of the fighting force in the war," she'd reminded me. "Without them, we'd likely be living under Maldrak's shadow right now. You owe it to him—and to yourself—to give him a chance."

So I did, but as the day wore on, his standoffish demeanor hadn't thawed. His silence felt heavier with each passing hour, as if he were constantly evaluating me, waiting for me to give up. His expressions were hard to read—frustration? Disapproval? Or maybe this was just how he taught, pushing me to figure things out on my own. Either way, it was hard not to feel dejected, like I was failing some unspoken test.

My heart sank further, frustration gnawing at the edges of my pride. What had I expected? That he'd step in with words of encouragement? That he'd show me some secret technique to make everything easier? No, that wasn't his way. I could feel his eyes on me, not pitying but assessing. Judging my ability—or lack of it.

“Maybe Master Ironsmith was right,” I said dejectedly, finally letting the hammer clatter to the ground, glad that it at least missed my toe. “I should stick to needle and thread.”

Vorgath straightened up from where he'd been sharpening a blade and tilted his head slightly as he studied me. “Thorne?” he scoffed. “Thorne is never right.”

I swallowed hard, not just from embarrassment but from something else—something about the way he stood there, so sure of himself, his presence filling the space. His arms, thick with muscle and dusted with dark hair, folded across his chest as he watched me. There was a steadiness in his gaze that drew me in, making it hard to look away.

Finally, he reached for the hammer I'd dropped. “Take it,” he commanded, hefting the tool with ease.

I wrapped my fingers around the handle, but before I could pull it from his grasp, Vorgath's hand closed over mine, the rough calluses on his palm brushing against my skin. His fingers wrapped all the way around the handle and mine, making me acutely aware of just how much larger he was than me. I'd never felt small before—my curves ensured that—but standing so close to him, I felt a new kind of small, a different kind of awareness of my own body.

Vorgath didn't step back or give me any space to retreat; instead, he gently guided my hand up the handle. His fingers enveloped mine completely, the rough, powerful grip making my own seem delicate by comparison, my pale skin standing out against

his dark green.

“Hold it here,” he said. “Balance. Let the hammer do the work.”

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My heart raced, not just from the effort but from his closeness. The warmth of his breath lingered near my ear, and I couldn't ignore the way his touch affected me—steady my hand but unsettling everything else.

“Now, lift,” he instructed. “Slowly.”

I did as he said, my muscles straining as I lifted the hammer again, but this time, it felt different—easier, more controlled. Vorgath didn't release my hand, keeping it steady and making sure I understood the movement.

“Better,” he murmured, his breath warm against the top of my head. “Feel the difference?”

I nodded, swallowing hard, my throat dry, my eyes on our hands. I couldn't bring myself to speak, afraid that my voice might betray this unexpected attraction, this sudden awareness of him that I hadn't anticipated.

Vorgath lingered for a moment longer before finally releasing my hand. He stepped back, the space between us widening, but the tension hung in the air, thick and heavy.

“Again,” he commanded.

I swung the hammer down, its weight no longer feeling quite as overwhelming as it had just moments ago. The clang of metal against metal echoed through the forge, and this time, instead of frustration, I felt a spark of something else—triumph.

“Again,” he repeated, his voice as steady as ever.

I lifted the hammer once more, the motion coming a little easier now, the rhythm starting to make sense in my body. I could feel the power in the swing, the way the hammer did most of the work as it crashed down onto the anvil. The sound it made was strong, resonant, like a song I was starting to understand.

“Again.”

I couldn't help it—suddenly, I was laughing. The sound bubbled up from somewhere deep inside me, surprising even myself. I was doing it. I was actually doing it. The realization filled me with a kind of giddy exhilaration, and I swung the hammer down again, harder this time, just to prove to myself that it wasn't a fluke.

“Again,” Vorgath said, a little more insistent, but there was a different note in his voice now—a hint of something lighter, maybe even amused.

I looked over at him, my breath coming in quick, excited bursts, and caught the smallest glint of something in his dark eyes. Was it understanding? Or maybe pride? Whatever it was, it made my laughter grow louder, the joy of this moment flooding through me, pushing out the doubt and frustration that had weighed me down earlier. I swung the hammer with all my might, the clang ringing out clear and strong. My arms were burning, my muscles trembling from the effort, but I didn't care. I felt powerful, like I was channeling all the strength I had into this one simple act.

And despite his stern commands, despite the unyielding expression on his face, I could see it now—the twinkle in his eyes, the slight curve at the corner of his mouth. Vorgath was pushing me, testing me, but he was also watching me succeed, and in that moment, there was a connection between us, an unspoken understanding.

The hammer came down again and again, each swing building on the last, each one a step toward something new, something I hadn't believed I could do before. My laughter mingled with the sound of metal on metal, and before long, I was breathless,

tears pricking at the corners of my eyes—not from sadness, but from the overwhelming rush of finally, finally feeling like I could do this.

“Again,” he said, but this time, his voice was almost gentle.

I turned to look at him, my chest heaving, my face flushed from exertion, and I saw it clearly—Vorgath was smiling. It wasn’t a big smile, just a small, satisfied quirk of his lips, but it was there, and it was real.

And I swung the hammer. Again.

As the day wore on, my initial excitement gave way to a bone-deep exhaustion I'd never experienced before. Every muscle in my body ached, and my hands felt like they'd been through a meat grinder. My clothes—a simple linen dress, its sleeves rolled up to my elbows, and worn leather boots that pinched at my toes—were covered in ash and streaks of soot despite the thick apron Vorgath had given me. My hair, usually tied back neatly, had escaped its braid, strands sticking to my sweaty forehead and neck. But I kept at it, determined to prove to Vorgath—and to myself—that I could handle this.

Vorgath moved around the forge, his presence a constant reminder of why I was here. He didn't hover, exactly, but I could feel his eyes on me, watching, assessing. Occasionally, he'd grunt out a correction or demonstration, his movements fluid and practiced where mine were still clumsy and uncertain.

“Elbow higher,” he'd say, or “Watch your stance.”

I'd nod, adjust, and carry on, trying to ignore the way my arms trembled with fatigue.

As the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the forge, I finally allowed myself to lower the hammer. My hands, calloused from years of needlework but

unused to this kind of labor, ached fiercely. The blisters that had begun as tender pinpricks that morning had burst open, leaving raw, angry patches, and I couldn't quite stop them from shaking. I tried to hide it, clenching my fists at my sides, but Vorgath's sharp eyes missed nothing.

He grunted, disappearing into a back room for a moment before returning with a small clay jar.

“Sit,” he commanded, gesturing to a nearby bench.

I didn't argue, collapsing onto the worn wood with a grateful sigh and leaning back against the wall, letting my eyes close for a brief second. The sweat on my brow cooled in the evening air, and I could feel the dust settling on my skin, mingling with the lingering heat. Every muscle in my body throbbed, but the pain felt strangely satisfying, like I'd earned it.

When I opened my eyes again, Vorgath was kneeling in front of me, the jar in one hand. I hadn't expected him to be so close, and the suddenness of it made my breath catch in my throat. Without a word, he took one of my hands in his, turning it over to inspect the damage. His touch was gentler than I had expected, careful even, his fingers warm and rough but not uncomfortable.

“You should have said something,” he muttered, unscrewing the lid of the jar.

I shrugged, wincing as the movement sent a fresh wave of pain through my shoulders. “I didn't want to seem weak.”

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Vorgath's eyes met mine, and I saw, for the first time, flecks of gold in his dark irises. "Admitting pain is not weakness. Ignoring it is foolishness."

Before I could respond, he dipped his fingers into the jar and began applying the salve to my battered hands. His fingers moved with surprising care, tracing the lines of my palms, smoothing over each blister. The slow, deliberate way he worked made it impossible to ignore how close we were, how intimate this moment felt.

"What is it?" I asked in an effort to diffuse the tension, gesturing to the clay jar that now sat on the bench between us. "The salve, I mean. What's in it?"

Vorgath's eyes remained focused on his task, his large fingers surprisingly deft as they worked the cool ointment into my skin. "Aloe. Comfrey. Witch hazel," he replied. "Old orc remedy."

"I didn't know orcs had their own medicinal traditions."

He glanced up at me then, one eyebrow raised. "There's much you don't know about orcs."

Heat rose to my cheeks, embarrassment tightening my chest. "You're right," I admitted. "I'm sorry if I've offended you."

Vorgath shook his head slightly, returning his attention to my hands. "No offense taken."

After a pause, he spoke again. "There's an orc healer in Everwood now. Kazrek."

I glanced up, surprised. “Really?”

Vorgath nodded. “He was a battlefield medic, but he’s found his place here now, in the peace.”

“Why didn’t I know that?” I muttered, more to myself than to Vorgath. The orcs had played such a pivotal role in the war, yet I realized how little I knew about them, about their culture, their traditions.

“You’ve never needed to,” Vorgath said simply. “But if you do, Kazrek's not far from the Artisan’s Quarter. He’s a good one to know.”

I processed that, turning the thought over in my mind. Orcs were warriors, fierce and solitary—at least, that’s how I’d always heard them described. But here was Vorgath, a craftsman, and Kazrek, a healer. What else didn’t I know?

As Vorgath continued to tend to my hands, I found my gaze drawn to the intricate patterns etched into the skin of his forearms, dark lines swirling and intertwining. Without thinking, I reached out with my free hand, my fingertips hovering just above his skin.

“And your tattoos?” I asked. “Are they also an orc tradition?”

Vorgath's hands stilled, his eyes flicking to where my fingers hovered near his arm. For a moment, I thought I'd overstepped, but then he slowly turned his arm, allowing me a better view.

“They are... reminders,” he said finally.

“I understand,” I said softly, thinking of my own reminders—the empty side of the bed, the forge that stood silent for so long, Elias's eyes that looked so much like his

father's. The grief I carried wasn't marked on my skin like his, but it was no less permanent.

"Pain shapes us," he said. "It is not to be forgotten but learned from."

I looked up at him then, really looked. The scars crisscrossing his face, the weariness in his eyes—they spoke of a painful past. I hadn't asked about his role in the war, hadn't dared to, but now, sitting here beside him, I could see how much it had cost him, how it lingered beneath the surface. I saw beyond the gruff exterior to the man underneath, someone who, like me, was trying to rebuild a life from the ashes of the old one. The forge, the weapons, even the solitude of his cabin—it was all part of that rebuilding, the same way I was trying to find my own way after everything I'd lost.

It left me with a sense of kinship I hadn't expected to feel. Maybe we weren't so different after all.

We sat there for a moment, and there was something comforting in the stillness, in the way neither of us felt the need to fill the space with more conversation. It was enough, this quiet acknowledgment of what we both carried.

Then, almost reluctantly, Vorgath turned his attention back to my hands, applying the last of the salve with gentle strokes. The cool ointment soothed my raw skin, easing the sharp sting that had been biting at me for hours.

As he finished, I flexed my fingers experimentally, marveling at how the pain had already begun to subside. "Thank you," I said, offering him a small smile. "For everything."

Vorgath nodded as he screwed the lid back onto the jar. "Rest," he said, rising to his feet. "Tomorrow will be harder."

I stood as well, wincing as my muscles protested the movement, every ache reminding me of how new this work was to me. “I’ll be ready,” I assured him, even though the stiffness in my limbs made me doubt the truth of my own words.

As I gathered my things and prepared to leave, I caught Vorgath watching me, his face revealing nothing.

“Soraya,” he said, just as I reached the door.

I turned back, a flutter of nerves in my chest at the sound of my name on his lips.
“Yes?”

“You did well today,” he said.

The praise warmed me, a rare acknowledgment that left me nodding, words of gratitude stuck in my throat.

As I stepped out onto the path that would take me back to town, the sounds of the forest surrounded me—soft rustling leaves, the distant hoot of an owl, and the steady whisper of the wind through the trees. I pulled my shawl tighter around my shoulders as the warmth of the forge faded into the cool night.

It would be a long walk home, winding through the quiet forest before I reached the outskirts of Everwood. I could already picture my small cottage waiting for me, the soft glow of the charmstone lighting the way, its wards offering a familiar sense of security. Despite the distance, the thought of it brought a small measure of comfort.

As tired as I was, despite the aches and blisters and the lingering uncertainty, I found myself looking forward to tomorrow’s lesson—and whatever else might come with it.

Chapter 5

“Tighten your grip,” Vorgath instructed, his deep voice cutting through the haze of my concentration as the iron rod buckled slightly under my hammer. Five days into this, those words had become a mantra, echoing in my ears long after leaving the forge.

Tighten your grip. Widen your stance. Higher. Harder. Faster. Better.

Five days sweating in Vorgath's forge. Five nights staying up well past midnight mending just enough garments to keep food in the pantry. Five mornings rolling out of bed with sore muscles and swollen eyes just to do it all again.

If I'd learned anything, it was that Vorgath didn't expect perfection, but he did expect progress, and I was as eager to show it to him as I was to prove Thorne wrong.

“You're overthinking again,” Vorgath said, his voice breaking through my thoughts as I prepared to strike.

I paused mid-swing, turning to look at him. His massive frame was silhouetted against the forge's glow, the play of light and shadow accentuating the strong lines of his face. The heat of the forge bore down on me, sweat dripping from my forehead. I wiped the back of my hand across my brow, smearing soot onto my already dirty sleeve.

“How can you tell?” I asked.

“You are a woman,” he rumbled. “That is what you do.”

I blinked, prepared to be offended, when I caught the glimmer of amusement in his eyes. My jaw dropped slightly. “Did you just... tease me?” I asked, trying to cover my shock with a bit of sass. “I didn't know orcs had a sense of humor.”

Vorgath raised his eyebrows at me, the corner of his mouth lifting behind his beard. “There is much you don't know about orcs, like I said before.” He paused, his eyes holding mine for a moment longer than necessary. “But you are a fast learner.”

A flush crept up my neck, and this time, I couldn't blame it on the forge's heat. Was this flirtation? I wasn't sure, but I found myself enjoying the uncertainty, the subtle tension that had been building between us over the past few days. I couldn't

remember when I'd last felt this kind of distraction, this flutter of attraction. Part of me wanted to push it away, to focus solely on my goal of reopening the forge.

But another part, a part I'd thought long dormant, reveled in the feeling.

“Well,” I said, hefting the hammer again and flashing him a smile, “I have a good teacher.”

Vorgath grunted, but I could've sworn I saw his cheeks darken slightly beneath his beard. He shifted his stance, folding those thick, muscled arms across his chest. I imagined what it would feel like to be held by those arms, the roughness of his hands steadying me.

My heart fluttered at the thought, and I quickly turned back to the anvil, biting my lip to keep from smiling. What was happening to me?

“Less talking, more hammering,” he grumbled.

“Yes, sir,” I replied, bringing the hammer down with renewed focus, though I imagined I could feel the orc's dark gaze on my ample backside. The ample backside that I thought might fit just right in his big, green hands...

The sudden bang of the forge door startled me, causing the hammer to slip in my grasp. I turned quickly to see a stout figure silhouetted in the doorway.

“Vorgath! You great green lump, where are you hiding?” a gruff voice called out.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I recognized the newcomer—Grimble Ironfoot, a dwarf I hadn't seen since before the war, when he and Kald worked together. His wild, fiery red beard was as untamed as ever, barely contained by the intricate silver clasps that clinked with each step of his stout, barrel-chested frame.

Vorgath stepped toward the visitor. "I'm right here, *ghruln*. No need to shout."

But Grumble wasn't looking at the orc. "Well, Mrs. Ashford!" He raised his bushy eyebrows as he spotted me. "What in the name of Fizzlebrit's beard are you doing here, lass?"

I lowered the hammer, wiping my sweaty palms on my apron. "Hello, Grumble. I'm learning the trade."

The dwarf's eyes darted between Vorgath and me, surprise and curiosity etched on his weathered face. "Learning the trade? From this overgrown troll?" He jerked a thumb at Vorgath, who merely grunted in response.

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“I am,” I said. “Vorgath's been kind enough to take me on as an apprentice.”

Grimble stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Well, I'll be...” Turning to Vorgath, he said, “Vorgath, did you ever see young Kald's setup? Now that was a fine place for a fine craftsman.”

Vorgath shook his head. “No, never.”

“Ah, you missed out,” Grimble said. “If not for the war, I'd have bet my money on Kald taking over the blacksmith's guild.”

I smiled at Grimble. “Remember how he used to talk about revolutionizing the apprenticeship program?”

“Aye, the lad had grand plans, he did. Always going on about making the craft accessible to all.” He turned to Vorgath, gesturing at me. “Looks like his widow's carrying on that torch, eh?”

Vorgath met my gaze, something flickering in his dark eyes—admiration, perhaps? “She is... determined,” he said.

Heat crept up my cheeks at the unexpected compliment. “Thank you,” I said softly.

Grimble cleared his throat. “Right, well, as lovely as this reunion is, I've got business to discuss.” He turned to Vorgath, pulling a rolled parchment from his belt. “I need a set of ceremonial axes for the upcoming Tinkerer's Faire. Think you can handle it, greenskin?”

Vorgath's expression remained impassive, though annoyance briefly darkened his eyes at the nickname. "I can handle anything you throw at me, Ironfoot," he said.

As Grimbale laid out the details of his order, my thoughts slipped back to the moments just before the dwarf's arrival. Vorgath's words, his subtle teasing, the way his eyes lingered on mine longer than necessary. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be noticed by someone.

It wasn't just his gaze or the way he loomed over me with that quiet intensity; it was the way he paid attention, the way he pushed me to be better. I'd spent so long focused on survival that I hadn't allowed myself to think about anything else. Love, attraction—those were luxuries, weren't they? Reserved for people with room to dream. Not for widows with tired hands and a son to raise.

And yet, I couldn't deny that I'd started to look forward to our time together. There was comfort in his presence, a silent strength that made me feel... safe.

But it wasn't just safety I craved anymore.

I glanced at Vorgath as he nodded at something Grimbale said. His broad shoulders were relaxed, but his expression was serious and focused...

Was it foolish to feel this way? To hope for something deeper between us? Did he even feel the same way, or was I only seeing what I wanted?

Part of me scolded myself for even entertaining the thought. I'd built walls around my heart for good reason, convinced myself that love was impractical, something I'd already had—and lost. What was left for me now was the grind of hard work, of making a life for Elias and protecting what little we had.

Still, I couldn't ignore the voice in the back of my mind, whispering it was okay to

open up again. For the first time, I let myself imagine it. Maybe it was time I did something for myself. Something reckless. Something bold.

Grimble's voice broke through my thoughts, pulling me back to the present. "Think you and your new apprentice can have those axes ready by next fortnight?" he asked.

Vorgath nodded. "We'll have them ready."

"Good, good," Grimble replied, rolling up his parchment and tucking it back into his belt. "And Soraya, if you ever want to talk shop, you know where to find me. I've got a new steam-powered bellows idea that could change the whole game."

I smiled at the dwarf, appreciating his enthusiasm. "Thank you, Grimble. I'll keep that in mind."

With a final nod to both of us, Grimble turned to leave, his heavy boots clanking against the stone floor as he made his way to the door. As it swung shut behind him, I found myself alone with Vorgath once more.

He turned to me, his expression unreadable. "Grimble is a good customer. Reliable."

"Yes, he is," I agreed. "He was one of Kald's regulars, actually."

Vorgath grunted thoughtfully. "Your husband's forge must have been impressive, from what Grimble said."

"It was, but that was a long time ago." I paused. "Would you... be interested in seeing it?"

Vorgath's eyebrows rose slightly. "Your old forge?"

“Yes,” I said, ignoring the flutter of nerves twisting my stomach. “I’ve been thinking about how to get it up and running again, and I’d love your input.”

Vorgath was silent for a moment, his dark eyes studying me. Then, to my surprise, he nodded. “I would like that,” he rumbled.

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Remembering my earlier thoughts—something bold, something reckless—I blurted out, “Great! Why don't you come by this evening? I could show you around, and maybe you could stay for dinner?”

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, and immediately, heat rushed to my cheeks. What was I thinking, inviting him to dinner?

But as I watched Vorgath's expression soften—just slightly, in the curve of his lips and the almost imperceptible shift of his shoulders—I couldn't bring myself to regret it.

“Dinner?” he repeated, sounding almost uncertain for the first time since I met him.

I nodded, trying to sound casual. “Yes, just a simple meal. Nothing fancy. It would be nice to get to know you better.” Something bold, something reckless—I kept repeating the words in my head, determined to drown out the surge of self-doubt.

Vorgath was quiet for a long moment, and I feared I'd overstepped, misread the growing connection between us. My hands fidgeted with the edge of my apron as my mind raced for a way to take it all back.

But then, his lips twitched into a faint smile. “I'd like that.”

“Wonderful,” I said, unable to keep the grin off my face. “I'll expect you at seventh bell, then?”

“I'll be there.”

For a moment, something electric passed between us, humming just beneath the surface. But instead of lingering on it, I reached for my hammer, hoping to steady the flutter in my chest.

“So,” I said, focusing on the task at hand, “about those ceremonial axes...”

Chapter 6

The moment I stepped through my front door, I was hit by a wave of panic. Seven save me, what had I been thinking? Inviting Vorgath to dinner? My home was a disaster, I had nothing prepared, and—

“Mama!” Elias's excited voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. He barreled toward me, his small boots thudding against the creaky floorboards. His face was smudged with dirt, and his hair stuck up in wild tufts. “You're home early!”

I scooped him up, grunting slightly at his weight. “I am,” I said, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “And we've got work to do. We're having a guest for dinner.”

His eyes widened. “A guest? Who? Is it Aunt Thyri?”

“No, it's... it's Vorgath. My teacher from the forge.”

Elias's jaw dropped. “The orc? He's coming here?”

“Yes, he is. And we need to get this place cleaned up before he arrives.” I set him down, a knot of anxiety tightening in my chest as I surveyed our cottage with fresh eyes.

The small kitchen table was still cluttered with the remnants of breakfast—bread crusts, half-eaten apples, and Elias's wooden toy sword lying forgotten among the

plates. The pile of mending in the corner had grown into a small mountain, with fabrics draped haphazardly over the worn chair. The hearth, cold and ashy, hadn't been lit since morning, and a thin layer of dust coated the shelves that held Elias's books and a handful of keepsakes.

The cottage was cozy to me—warm, lived-in, full of memories—but what would an outsider like Vorgath see? It wasn't grand like Lady Hargrave's estate or even well-kept like his cabin in the woods. It was small, cluttered, and worn by years of struggling to make ends meet. Would he think less of me, of us?

There was a soft rustling behind me, and I turned to find Mrs. Crumble materializing out of thin air, leaves swirling around her tiny form.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, clutching my chest. "Mrs. Crumble, you startled me."

The brownie's eyes twinkled. "Apologies, dearie. These old ears of mine couldn't help but overhear. An orc for dinner, you say?"

I gave her a sheepish smile, my cheeks warming. "Yes, I know it's last minute, and the house is a mess and—"

Mrs. Crumble waved her tiny hand, cutting off my rambling. "We'll have this place spick and span in no time." She winked at Elias. "Won't we, young man?"

Elias nodded enthusiastically, already reaching for the broom that was taller than he was. "I'll sweep, Mama!"

Affection welled up in my chest. "Thank you," I said. "I don't know what I'd do without you two."

"Now, now. No time for sentimentality. We've work to do." She clapped her tiny

hands together. “Elias, you start sweeping. I'll tackle those dishes. And you, my dear,” she fixed me with a knowing look, “best get started on dinner. I imagine an orc's appetite is not to be trifled with.”

I nodded, suddenly uneasy at the thought of cooking for Vorgath. What did orcs even eat? All I knew about their cuisine came from wartime rumors of raw meat and strong spirits. Somehow, I didn't think that would make for a comfortable family dinner.

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As I moved to the kitchen area, my mind raced with possibilities. I had some venison left and plenty of root vegetables. A stew, perhaps? Simple, hearty, and easy to make in large quantities.

The decision made, I began chopping vegetables. Behind me, I could hear Elias chattering away to Mrs. Crumble as they cleaned, his excitement about meeting a real orc evident in every word.

“Mama,” he called out, “do you think Vorgath can lift our whole house?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “I don't think so, sweetheart. And please don't ask him to try.”

Mrs. Crumble's tinkling laugh joined mine. “Oh, I don't know,” she said, her voice full of mischief. “I've heard tales of orc strength that would make your hair stand on end.”

I turned to give her a mock glare. “Don't encourage him, Mrs. Crumble. The last thing I need is Elias asking Vorgath to benchpress our furniture.”

“And why not?” she asked. “It might liven up the evening.”

I rolled my eyes, but as I turned back to my cooking, I felt some of my anxiety ease. Yes, this was unexpected and potentially awkward, but also exciting. No man had stepped through this door since Kald, and certainly not one like Vorgath—an orc, a man I'd barely known a few weeks ago, who was now... what? My teacher? My friend?

Or something more?

I caught a glimpse of myself in the small, dusty window—hair in wild disarray, apron dusted with flour and soot. I wasn't polished or perfect, and suddenly, I felt vulnerable in a way that had nothing to do with the state of my cottage or the meal I was preparing.

“Mrs. Crumble,” I said softly, not turning around, “am I crazy for doing this?”

There was a pause, and then Mrs. Crumble appeared at my elbow, her wizened face kind. “Crazy? No, dearie. Brave? Perhaps. But there's nothing wrong with opening your heart to new possibilities.”

“I don't know if I remember how to do this,” I admitted, adding the vegetables and chopped venison to the simmering pot.

Mrs. Crumble patted my arm. “The heart never forgets, my dear. It just needs a little encouragement sometimes.” She glanced at the stew. “Now, how about I add a pinch of my special herbs? They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, after all.”

I laughed, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders. “Even if that man is an orc?”

Mrs. Crumble winked. “Especially if he's an orc, dearie. Especially then.”

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Time flew by in a flurry of cleaning, cooking, and last-minute preparations. Before I knew it, the sun was setting, casting long shadows across our newly tidied home. I stood in front of the small, cracked mirror in my bedroom, fussing with my

appearance for what felt like the hundredth time.

I'd changed into a dress I'd mended earlier in the week using the delicate flower embroidery that Lady Hargrave had rejected. It hugged my curves in a way that made me feel both self-conscious and oddly empowered. The neckline was a touch lower than I was used to, and I found myself constantly adjusting it.

"You look lovely, dearie," Mrs. Crumble's voice drifted up from somewhere near my elbows. I looked down to see her beaming up at me, her tiny hands clasped in approval.

"Are you sure?" I asked, smoothing down the fabric nervously. "It's not too much? Or too little? Seven save me, what if he thinks I'm trying too hard?"

Mrs. Crumble chuckled. "My dear, he'll be too busy picking his jaw up off the floor to think anything of the sort."

Her words sent a flush through me, a strange blend of embarrassment and pleasure. It had been so long since I'd dressed up for anyone, yet here I was, fussing over a dress, over how I looked. For him.

For Vorgath.

A sharp rap at the door made me jump. "He's here," I whispered, suddenly feeling like a young girl again, nervous before her first date. Not that this was a date. It was more like... a working dinner.

"Then let's not keep him waiting," Mrs. Crumble said, giving my skirt a gentle tug to straighten it.

With one last glance in the mirror, I made my way to the door, my hands trembling

slightly as I reached for the handle. I opened it to find Vorgath standing there, his massive frame filling the doorway. He wore a brown tunic that strained against his broad chest and shoulders, and dark leather breeches. His hair was brushed back, revealing more of his face than I was used to seeing, and his beard seemed to be combed.

“Soraya,” he said, his dark eyes widening slightly as they took me in. “You look... different.”

My confidence faltered for a moment before I noticed the appreciation in his gaze. “Good different, I hope?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Very good,” he said in a way that confirmed I hadn’t imagined the spark between us.

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We stood there for a moment, the tension between us almost palpable, before I remembered my manners. “Oh! Please, come in,” I said, stepping back.

Vorgath ducked his head as he entered, his shoulders nearly brushing the doorframe on either side. He looked around, taking in the modest surroundings with interest. From the corner of my eye, I saw Elias peeking out from behind the kitchen doorway, his eyes wide. Mrs. Crumble stood beside him, her face alight with curiosity.

“Elias,” I called, “come say hello to our guest.”

Elias hesitated before stepping out, his small hand clutching Mrs. Crumble's. Vorgath turned, his imposing figure seeming to grow even larger in the confines of our small home.

“Hello,” Elias said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Vorgath crouched down, bringing himself closer to Elias's eye level. It was a surprisingly gentle gesture from such a formidable figure. “Hello, Elias,” he rumbled. “Your mother has told me much about you.”

Elias's eyes widened. “She has?”

Vorgath nodded solemnly. “She says you're very brave and smart.”

A small smile crept onto Elias's face, some of his nervousness fading. “Mama says you're teaching her to be a blacksmith.”

“That's right,” Vorgath said. “She's learning very quickly.”

Mrs. Crumble stepped forward next, offering Vorgath a deep curtsy that was somehow both respectful and slightly mischievous. “Welcome to our home, Master Vorgath,” she said. “I'm Mrs. Crumble. I help look after young Elias here.”

Vorgath blinked, clearly surprised by the tiny brownie's presence. “It's a pleasure,” he said, inclining his head slightly.

I smiled at the scene—my son, the towering orc, and the diminutive brownie, all navigating their introductions. It was so different from anything I could have imagined even a few days ago.

Mrs. Crumble glanced between me and Vorgath. “Well, now, Elias and I have a few finishing touches to put on dinner,” she said. “Why don't you take Master Vorgath out to see the old forge, Soraya?”

Elias looked like he was about to protest, but Mrs. Crumble tugged gently on his hand, steering him toward the kitchen with the promise of letting him help stir the stew. His eyes showed a flash of reluctance before he gave in, allowing himself to be led away.

I turned back to Vorgath, who was still crouched down, his gaze lingering on the spot where Elias had stood. There was a softness in his expression, a glimpse of something tender that made my heart ache just a little. He looked up at me then, and the tenderness was replaced by curiosity.

“Shall we?” I asked, gesturing toward the door.

Vorgath rose to his full height, nodding. “Lead the way.”

Chapter 7

As we stepped into the cool evening air, the old forge loomed ahead, its squat stone structure suddenly seeming smaller and less impressive compared to Vorgath's. I could almost hear Grimble's voice praising its once grand stature, but now it felt like a relic of what it had been.

I glanced at Vorgath, suddenly self-conscious. "It's... well, it's seen better days," I said, trying to keep my voice light as I pushed open the creaking door.

Moonlight filtered through the dusty windows, casting long shadows across the workspace. I fumbled with the lantern by the door.

"Let me," Vorgath said, his large hand easily lighting the wick. The warm glow illuminated the forge, and I saw it anew through Vorgath's eyes.

The anvil stood at the center, its surface dulled with disuse. Tools hung on the walls, some rusted, others gleaming where I'd recently cleaned them. The forge itself was cold and dark, a far cry from the roaring heart it had once been.

"It's small," Vorgath said, his deep voice echoing slightly in the quiet space.

"It served us well enough," I replied, then winced at how sharp my words sounded. "I mean, it's not as grand as Thorne's, but..."

Vorgath turned to me. "I meant no offense," he said softly. "It has... character."

"It does, doesn't it?" I moved further into the space, running my hand along the workbench. "I've been trying to get it back in working order, but there's so much to do."

Vorgath nodded, his eyes taking in every detail as he moved through the forge. I watched him, noticing how his eyes lingered on certain tools, his fingers ghosting over the anvil's surface. "The layout is efficient," he said. "Your husband knew his craft."

"He did," I agreed, smiling softly.

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He paused by the forge itself, crouching to examine it more closely. “The bones are good. With some orc forging techniques, you could increase its heat capacity significantly.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Orc techniques? Like what?”

Vorgath stood, turning to face me. The lantern light cast half his face in shadow, accentuating the strong line of his jaw and the gleam in his dark eyes. “Stones that hold heat better, special clays for insulation. I could show you, if you'd like.”

I nodded eagerly. “I'd like that very much.”

“Good. We'll start next week, after the axes for Grimble are done.”

Excitement stirred in my chest at the thought of restoring the forge, breathing life back into what had become little more than a monument to dreams paused. I could almost hear the rhythmic clang of a hammer on the anvil, feel the heat of the fire on my skin.

And surprisingly, in this vision of the future, I saw Vorgath by my side.

The realization startled me, and I glanced at him, studying his profile in the dim light. When had I started including him in my long-term plans?

When had I started imagining a future where I wasn't doing this alone?

As if feeling my eyes on him, Vorgath turned to me. “You're quiet,” he said.

“Just... remembering,” I said softly. “And thinking about the future.”

He took a step closer, and I was suddenly very aware of his presence in the small space. “And what do you see in that future?” he asked.

“I see... possibilities.” I moved to a workbench covered in a thick layer of dust. “I’ve been thinking about redesigning this area,” I said, running my hand along the worn wood. “Maybe adding a workstation for more intricate work. There’s a market for jewelry and decorative pieces that most blacksmiths overlook.”

“Trinkets?” he asked, his tone skeptical.

“Not just trinkets,” I countered. “Functional art. Things that are both beautiful and useful. It’s an untapped market, especially among women.”

“And you think you can make a living from such things?”

“I think I can make a good life,” I said, meeting his gaze steadily.

He was quiet for a moment, his dark eyes studying me intently. Then, to my surprise, he nodded. “You have vision,” he rumbled. “It’s... admirable.”

A warm flush rose to my cheeks at his words. “Thank you,” I said. “That means a lot, coming from you.”

Vorgath grunted, looking slightly uncomfortable with the sentiment. He turned back to the forge, running his hand along the cold stone.

“Tell me about your husband,” he said suddenly. “What kind of man was he?”

The question caught me off guard. I leaned against the workbench, feeling memories

rise up, but they didn't hit as hard as they used to.

"Kald was... kind," I said with a small smile. "He loved his family and his work. Always said a blacksmith's forge was like their heartbeat—when it's cold and silent, something important is missing."

"Your husband was wise," he said, nodding in approval. "You must miss him."

"Yes," I agreed, my gaze drifting to the corner where Kald's old tools still hung. "But it feels different now. The sharp pain fades. It's more like a reminder, a part of me, but not something I carry with sadness anymore."

Vorgath's eyes were on me as he moved closer. "Loss is... familiar to me," he said, his deep voice carrying a weight of experience.

"What happened?" I asked gently, not wanting to pry but eager to understand more about this enigmatic orc who was quickly winning me over, grunt after noncommittal grunt.

He was quiet for a long moment, his dark eyes distant. Then, with a deep sigh, he spoke. "I lost my brother in the war," he said. "It was... complicated. We made different choices. In the end, I couldn't save him."

I felt my heart constrict, recognizing the pain in his voice. I knew the loss of a loved one, the guilt that lingered after, the constant what-if that sometimes surfaced in quiet moments.

"People call orcs monsters," Vorgath continued, his tone bitter but controlled. "But the real monster is war itself. It takes and takes until there's nothing left but scars and memories."

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His words hung heavy in the air, and I felt an unexpected urge to comfort him. Without thinking, I reached out, gently touching his arm. “I’m so sorry, Vorgath.”

He looked down at my hand, then back at me, his eyes softening. “It was long ago. But it is why I left, why I sought a different path. I could no longer be the warrior they wanted me to be.”

His shoulders, usually so steady, seemed weighed down by a burden he rarely let others see. He spoke of loss with quiet resignation, and for the first time, I saw the loneliness behind his strength, the isolation he carried.

It struck me, then, that we weren’t so different. Maybe that was why I felt this growing connection with him—because he understood what it meant to start over, to carve out something new from the ashes of the past. His journey made me feel less alone in my own.

Without a word, I stepped closer, wrapping my arms around his broad chest in a hug.

At first, Vorgath stiffened, clearly surprised by the gesture. Then, slowly, his arms came around me. I felt almost tiny in his embrace, my head barely reaching his chest. His arms, thick as tree trunks, encircled me gently, as if he was afraid of crushing me.

I pressed closer, splaying my hands across his broad back, feeling the hard muscles beneath his tunic. The heat of his body seeped through my dress, and I pressed my ear to his chest, listening to the steady, powerful thump of his heart.

The world seemed to shrink to just the two of us. The forge, with all its memories and

possibilities, faded away. There was only Vorgath's warmth, his strength, the surprising gentleness of his touch.

I tilted my head back to look up at him and found his dark eyes fixed on me. My lips parted slightly, a silent invitation I hadn't realized I was offering until I saw his gaze drop to my mouth, and the space between us seemed to shrink, charged with a new tension.

My thoughts raced. This was Vorgath—my mentor, an orc, so different from anyone I'd ever known. And yet, standing here now, he felt like the most familiar thing in the world. His solid frame, the way my curves seemed to mold perfectly against him, as if we were two pieces that had always belonged together.

I knew I should step back, break this spell before it went too far. But I couldn't bring myself to move. I didn't want to. For the first time in so long, I felt awake, every nerve alive with awareness.

Vorgath's hand moved, ever so slowly, to cup my cheek. His palm was rough, the skin weathered by years of work and war, but the warmth of his touch seeped into me, and I leaned into it, my eyes closing to savor the feeling.

“Soraya,” Vorgath said, his voice low and rough, deeper than I'd ever heard it. The way he spoke my name sent a thrill through me.

I opened my eyes to meet his gaze, trying to decipher the emotions I saw there. Desire, certainly, but also a hint of uncertainty, maybe even fear. It struck me then that this was likely as new and overwhelming for him as it was for me.

“Vorgath,” I whispered back, my voice barely audible even in the quiet of the forge.

He leaned down, painstakingly slow, as if giving me every opportunity to pull away.

But I didn't want to pull away. I tilted my chin up, my heart pounding so hard I was sure he must be able to hear it.

Just as his lips were about to meet mine, a loud crash from outside the forge shattered the moment. We jerked apart, both of us turning instinctively toward the sound, the spell broken.

“Mama!” Elias's voice called out. “Mrs. Crumble says dinner's ready!”

I stepped back, a rush of cool air filling the space where Vorgath's warmth had been. My cheeks burned as I smoothed down my dress, avoiding his gaze. “We should go inside,” I stammered, my voice shaky and not at all like the level-headed woman I prided myself on being.

Vorgath cleared his throat, nodding. “Yes, we shouldn't keep them waiting.”

As we walked toward the house, I couldn't resist stealing glances at him. His face was stoic, composed to the point of seeming deliberate, but the subtle tension was there—in the way his jaw clenched and his hands flexed at his sides.

What had just happened? And more importantly, why did I feel so disappointed that we'd been interrupted?

I paused just before we reached the cottage door, the reality of it all sinking in, making it hard to take the next step.

“Soraya,” Vorgath's deep voice cut through my spiraling thoughts, and I blinked, realizing he was watching me. “Are you alright?”

I inhaled slowly, then forced a smile. “Yes, I'm fine. Just a bit overwhelmed, I suppose.”

His gaze held steady, his hand flexing at his side as though caught between action and restraint. “We don’t have to talk about what happened,” he said. “If you’d rather let it go—”

“No,” I interrupted, surprising myself with the vehemence in my voice. “I don't want to forget. I just... need time.”

A small, almost imperceptible smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and I felt some of the tension ease from my shoulders. He gave a quiet grunt, more like an acknowledgment. “Alright.”

With one last deep breath, I pushed open the door, and we stepped into the warm, fragrant air of the kitchen.

Chapter 8

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The scene that greeted us inside the cottage was so wonderfully, absurdly normal that I almost laughed. Elias was perched on a stool, his face scrunched in concentration as he carefully ladled stew into bowls under Mrs. Crumble's watchful eye. The brownie herself sat on the counter beside him, directing the operation.

“Ah, there you are!” Mrs. Crumble chirped, her tiny face breaking into a wide smile. “We were beginning to wonder if you'd gotten lost in that old forge.”

I could feel the truth of what almost happened written all over my face, but before I could stammer out a response, Elias piped up.

“Mama! Mr. Vorgath! Look, I helped make dinner!”

“It smells wonderful,” I said, ruffling Elias's hair. “You've done a great job, sweetheart.”

Vorgath cleared his throat. “Yes, very impressive, young Elias.”

Elias beamed at the praise. “Mrs. Crumble showed me how to stir without splashing,” he announced. “And she let me add the secret ingredient!”

I raised an eyebrow at Mrs. Crumble, who merely winked in response. “Nothing to worry about, dearie,” she said, jumping off the counter and wiping her hands on her apron. “Just a pinch of brownie magic to make the flavors sing.”

“Well then,” I said, clapping my hands together. “Shall we eat? And don't you even think about disappearing, Mrs. Crumble. You're invited, too.”

As we settled around the table, I couldn't help but notice how Vorgath's massive frame dwarfed our modest furniture. He sat gingerly on a chair, his knees nearly touching his chest.

"I'm sorry," I said, wincing as the chair creaked ominously.

But Vorgath waved off my concern as Mrs. Crumble bustled around, setting out bowls and utensils. I noticed that she'd brought out the good silverware that had been a wedding gift from Thyri's mother. I hadn't used them in years.

As Mrs. Crumble placed a set in front of Vorgath, his brow furrowed. He picked up a fork, holding it between his thumb and forefinger.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"These are... very small," he said, the fork looking absurdly delicate in his hand, like it might snap with a single twitch of his fingers.

"I suppose they would be for you," I said with a smile, the tension from earlier melting away. "We can find something sturdier if you'd like."

Mrs. Crumble snorted a laugh. "I think we have a rake in the shed."

I gasped, scandalized, not sure how Vorgath would take the joke. But to my surprise, he went right along with it.

"No need," he insisted. "Though it is always good to have a backup plan."

Laughter bubbled up among the three of us, but Elias watched with wide-eyed fascination.

“Do orcs use different forks?” he asked, his curiosity overcoming his earlier shyness.

Vorgath turned to him, seeming relieved by the distraction. “We do,” he said. “Orc utensils are larger. Made for bigger hands and even bigger appetites.”

“Cool!” Elias exclaimed. “Can I see them sometime?”

“Perhaps I’ll bring one next time,” he said. “If I am invited back.”

His eyes found mine, a silent question hanging between us. I hesitated, feeling a quiet warmth settle in my chest before I smiled and nodded. “Of course, you’re welcome back,” I said. “Anytime.”

Vorgath held my gaze for a moment longer, his expression unreadable, before he turned back to Elias. “Then I will bring the biggest fork I have,” he promised.

Elias grinned wide, practically bouncing in his seat. “I can’t wait!” he said.

As we began to eat, the conversation flowed more easily than I’d dared to hope. Emboldened by Vorgath’s kindness, Elias peppered him with questions about orc life and customs.

“Is it true that orc children learn to fight as soon as they can walk?” Elias asked, brandishing his butter knife like a sword before I reached across and snatched it from him.

“Not quite as soon as we can walk, but we do start young,” Vorgath answered, unfazed. “It’s less about fighting, though, and more about discipline and knowing your strength.”

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Elias nodded sagely, as if this made perfect sense to him. “Like when Mama teaches me to be careful with her sewing scissors?”

Vorgath looked at me, an amused twinkle in his eye. “Exactly like that,” he agreed.

With the meal in full swing, I found myself relaxing more and more. The awkwardness from our moment in the forge faded, replaced by a comfortable camaraderie. Vorgath proved to be an engaging dinner companion, regaling us with tales of orc customs and traditions that had Elias hanging on his every word. Even Mrs. Crumble joined in, and I listened intently as she and Vorgath debated the finer points of fae etiquette, their unlikely friendship blossoming before my eyes.

Laughter and easy conversation filled the room, and a quiet contentment settled over me. My small, cobbled-together family had expanded, if only for this evening, and it felt... right. Complete in a way I hadn't realized we were missing.

As the evening wore on, the clink of spoons against empty bowls signaled the end of our meal, but none of us seemed eager to break the spell that had settled over the table. Even Elias, usually quick to wriggle away when dinner was done, sat contentedly in his chair. But as I watched him blink slowly, his head dipping slightly, I knew it was time to call it a night.

I smiled, watching Elias fight against his heavy eyelids. “I think it's time for someone to head to bed,” I said.

Elias's head snapped up. “But I'm not tired!” he protested, even as another yawn escaped him.

“I can see that,” I chuckled, standing up. “Come on, little prince.”

“I’ll help clean up,” Vorgath offered, already starting to stack the empty bowls as I reached for Elias.

Mrs. Crumble fluttered over, her tiny hands on her hips. “Nonsense! You’re our guest. I’ll take care of the tidying.”

I shot her a grateful smile, but before I could lead Elias away, he turned to Vorgath with pleading eyes. “Mr. Vorgath, could you tell me an orc bedtime story?”

Vorgath glanced at me. “If your mother agrees.”

I nodded. “If you’re sure you’re up for it.”

Suddenly wide awake, Elias reached up, his small hand wrapping around one of Vorgath’s thick fingers. “Come on!” he urged, tugging the orc through our cottage, the floors creaking under Vorgath’s weight.

Elias’s room was a cozy nook at the top of the stairs, barely large enough for his small bed and a chest of toys. The walls were adorned with childish drawings and a few pressed flowers we’d collected on our walks. A small window let in the soft glow of moonlight, casting long shadows across the worn floorboards.

As Vorgath ducked through the doorway, I smiled at the sight of him trying to fit his massive frame into the tiny space. He looked almost comically out of place, like a bear in a rabbit’s den. Yet there was something undeniably sweet about how he carefully maneuvered around Elias’s belongings, mindful not to disturb anything.

I lingered in the hallway, not wanting to intrude but unable to resist listening. Elias scrambled into his bed, pulling the patchwork quilt up to his chin. Vorgath settled on

the floor beside Elias's bed, his broad back against the wall.

“So,” he rumbled, his deep voice gentle. “You want an orc story, do you?”

Elias nodded eagerly, burrowing deeper under the covers.

Vorgath was quiet for a moment, gathering his thoughts. When he spoke, his voice took on a rhythmic cadence, like the steady beat of a drum. “Once, in a clan not so different from my own, there lived a young orc named Grokk. Now, Grokk was strong and brave like any other orc, but he had one small problem—he couldn't roar.”

Elias's eyes widened. “But all orcs can roar!” he objected.

“That's what everyone thought. But poor Grokk, no matter how hard he tried, could only manage a tiny squeak...”

As Vorgath's story unfolded, Mrs. Crumble appeared, floating silently next to my shoulder.

“Well, isn't that a sight,” she whispered. “Who would've thought an orc could be so sweet?”

Something settled inside me at her words. Watching Vorgath, his massive frame somehow fitting into my son's tiny room, I realized how right it felt to have him here—like our lives had always had room for him.

“You know,” Mrs. Crumble continued, her voice soft but mischievous, “it's nice to see a man around the house again. Especially one who knows how to stoke those old fires, if you know what I mean.”

My cheeks flushed at her words. “Mrs. Crumble!” I scolded in a whisper.

She chuckled softly, patting my arm. Then, with a knowing wink, she vanished in a swirl of leaves, leaving behind only the faint scent of wildflowers.

I turned my attention back to Vorgath and Elias as the orc's deep voice continued to weave the tale, his words painting vivid pictures of Grokk's adventures.

“...and so, Grokk realized that his small voice wasn't a weakness at all. It was what made him special, what allowed him to speak to the forest creatures and learn their secrets. And from that day on, Grokk was known as the wisest orc in all the land, for he had learned to listen before he spoke.”

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As Vorgath's story came to an end, I saw that Elias was fast asleep, his small chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm, a contented smile still lingering on his lips.

Vorgath reached out, his large hand gently patting Elias's head. "Sleep well, durgha," he whispered.

I stepped back from the doorway as Vorgath rose, careful not to bump his head on the low ceiling. As he exited the room, closing the door quietly behind him, our eyes met.

"What does durgha mean?" I asked, stumbling slightly over the unfamiliar guttural orcish sounds.

He smiled at my attempt. "It means 'little one'."

"That was a lovely story," I said softly as we moved back down the hallway. "Did your mother tell you that one when you were young?"

"No," he answered, his voice low and thoughtful. "My mother was a warrior. She wasn't one for stories. It was my father who told me and my brother tales like that."

I blinked, surprised. The image of a young Vorgath, listening wide-eyed to his father's tales, was almost too much to bear. It was a reminder that beneath the warrior's exterior was a shared experience of family, love, and tradition—things I hadn't expected we would have in common.

As we reached the front door, a comfortable silence settled between us. The evening had been full of surprises, each one revealing a new facet of Vorgath that I found

increasingly intriguing. I leaned against the doorframe, reluctant to see him go.

“Thank you for coming,” I said.

“It was pleasant,” he said with a nod. “It's been a long time since I felt...” he paused, searching for the right word, “...at home.”

His admission lingered between us, heavy with unspoken meaning, and I felt a quiet sense of joy stir inside me.

“You're always welcome here,” I found myself saying.

Vorgath took a step closer. I could feel the heat radiating from his body, smell the faint scent of smoke and iron that clung to him. My breath caught in my throat as he reached out, hesitating for a moment before gently tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

For a heartbeat, we stood there, teetering on the edge of something profound. I could feel the weight of our shared moments—in the forge, over dinner, with Elias—pressing us closer together.

But then, as if remembering himself, Vorgath took a small step back.

“I should go,” he said. “Goodnight, Soraya.”

“Goodnight, Vorgath,” I replied, my own voice barely above a whisper.

As he turned and walked away, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the moonlit night, I found myself watching until he disappeared from view. Only then did I close the door, leaning against it with a deep sigh.

Chapter 9

The familiar crunch of gravel beneath my boots echoed in the stillness of the forest, a steady rhythm that matched the calm of the morning. The air was crisp, carrying with it the faint, earthy scent of pine and wildflowers. It was market day in Everwood, and though I wasn't heading to town, the distant hum of voices and the occasional clatter of carts floated up to meet me.

My path led me toward Vorgath's forge, but my thoughts wandered to the night before. The almost-kiss in the forge, the warmth of his presence during dinner, the gentle way he'd told Elias a bedtime story... My cheeks flushed at the memory, and I found myself both eager and nervous to see him again.

As the trail wound around a low ridge, the view opened up, revealing Everwood tucked in the valley below. From this vantage point, the town appeared like a living painting, the market square bustling with color and movement. I paused, listening to the faint echoes of laughter and haggling from the vendors, a distant but steady reminder of home. It wasn't perfect, but Everwood was resilient—just like the people who'd chosen to rebuild after the war.

“Soraya.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the sound of Vorgath's deep voice. I turned to find him standing a short distance up the path, his massive frame blending into the shadow of the trees. How I'd missed him entirely was beyond me, but the sight of him, solid and steady, made my pulse quicken.

“Seven curses, Vorgath! You scared me half to death,” I scolded, pressing a hand to my chest.

He frowned. “I didn't mean to startle you.”

As my heart rate returned to normal, I took in the sight of him. He was dressed in his usual leather and cloth, but his clothes were free of the usual smudges of soot, and his boots looked polished.

“I thought we might run some errands today,” he said, watching me take all of this in. “We need some things from the market for Grimbles order.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And here I thought I would spend another day being yelled at to 'tighten my grip.'”

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Vorgath's lips twitched slightly. "Your grip is improving. But even the most dedicated apprentice needs a day of rest."

"Well, in that case, my poor, blistered hands thank you."

Instead of continuing toward the forge, he turned toward the town, and I fell into step beside him. His long strides matched my quicker pace, and together, we made our way down the winding path into Everwood.

"How was Elias this morning?" he asked. "Tired after a late night?"

"Oh, he was full of energy as usual. In fact, he spent breakfast regaling Mrs. Crumble with his own version of the story you told him. Apparently, Grokk gained the ability to breathe fire by the end of it."

Vorgath let out a low chuckle. "A creative child. He reminds me of my brother when we were young."

I glanced at him, surprised by the casual mention of his brother but pleased that he felt comfortable saying things like that around me.

"He wants to know when you'll visit again to tell him more stories."

He cut his eyes at me. "What does his mother say?"

I bit my lip to hide the smile threatening to break through. "Well, his mother thinks that could be arranged. Perhaps for dinner again soon?"

Vorgath nodded. "I'd like that."

"As long as you don't forget your giant fork," I reminded him, bumping him playfully with my shoulder and earning myself a small smirk in response.

We walked in comfortable silence for a while, the only sound the crunch of gravel beneath our feet and the distant chatter of birds. I found myself stealing glances at Vorgath, admiring the way the morning sun caught the highlights in his dark hair and made his green skin glow. It was strange how quickly I'd grown accustomed to his presence, how natural it felt to walk beside him.

As someone approached on the path, I instinctively pressed closer to Vorgath, my shoulder brushing his side. His arm came around my waist, pulling me just a little tighter against him. The closeness was electric, my pulse quickening at the feel of his solid frame beside me, the scent of smoke and iron that clung to him filling my senses.

The passerby—a human woman carrying a basket of vegetables—glanced warily at us, offering a murmured "Good morning" before hurrying past. As soon as she was out of sight, Vorgath's arm slipped away, the brief moment of contact gone as quickly as it had come. The silence that followed felt heavier now, the comfortable ease replaced by tension.

Clearing his throat, Vorgath spoke. "Your form is improving," he said. "In the forge, I mean. You're learning quickly."

I blinked, surprised by the unexpected compliment. "Thank you," I said. "I never thought I'd enjoy it so much, but it's more than just brute strength. It's... creating. I'm not just making pretty dresses—I'm making things, useful and beautiful things, too, if I get it right. I didn't know how much I needed that."

Vorgath nodded, a hint of pride in his eyes. “Strength comes with time. But the heart for it—that you’ve already got.”

The simplicity of his praise struck something in me. I opened my mouth to respond, but the words died on my lips as we crested a hill and the bustling market of Everwood came into view. The square was alive with color and noise, stalls overflowing with goods from all corners of Alderwilde. The scent of fresh bread and exotic spices wafted through the air, mingling with the shouts of vendors hawking their wares.

I turned to Vorgath, a grin spreading across my face. “Shall we?”

He nodded. “After you.”

The market bustled with life—vendors shouting to sell their wares, children darting between stalls, the clatter of carts rolling over cobblestone. As we wove through the crowd, I noticed how people parted for Vorgath, their glances quick and uncertain. Children stared with wide eyes, their faces torn between fascination and fear, while adults exchanged furtive glances. The war had changed so much, forcing us to see beyond our differences and fight side by side.

But peace, it seemed, was a different kind of battlefield.

I felt a pang of protectiveness, my mind flashing to the orc who had offered me a glimpse of his own vulnerability the nightbefore. It wasn’t long ago that I, too, might have hesitated at the sight of an orc walking down the street. But Vorgath wasn’t just a symbol of the past or of his people; he was a man with his own scars, someone I was beginning to see more clearly with each passing day.

“Mama,” a young elven boy called, tugging on his mother’s sleeve as we passed. “Is he a hero from the war?”

His mother's eyes widened, and she shushed him quickly, her gaze darting nervously between me and Vorgath. I caught the briefest flicker of discomfort on Vorgath's face, his jaw tightening at the question. The urge to reach out and take his hand was almost overwhelming, but I held back, unsure if such a gesture would be welcome.

Instead, I squared my shoulders and walked closer to him, my arm brushing his. "What's first on the list?" I asked.

Vorgath glanced down at a small parchment he'd pulled from his pocket. "Bronze tongs from Ruk's stall," he said, pointing to a weathered tent on the far side of the square, where large wooden totems and carvings were displayed. "After that, more iron ingots from Olan. And then..."

He trailed off, looking a bit too long at the pastry stand that sat just at the edge of our path. I stifled a grin.

"And maybe a pastry after we're done," I suggested, feigning nonchalance.

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“Maybe,” he said gruffly. “If there's time.”

We made our way through the market, Vorgath handling each vendor with quiet, straightforward efficiency. He kept it simple—a few words, a nod, an exchange of coins, and the parcel in his hand. The vendors, seemingly accustomed to his presence, responded with ease.

After making a few more purchases, we found ourselves back beside the pastry stand. The smell of sugar and cinnamon was like a siren call, and I noticed Vorgath eyeing the display again, making me wonder about his sweet tooth.

“Try one,” I suggested, nudging him lightly with my elbow.

“Not necessary,” he said, but his gaze lingered on a particular roll that seemed to be dipped in a glowing, golden syrup.

“Oh, come on,” I urged, leaning in a little closer. “Treat yourself. And maybe your apprentice has earned one, too.”

With a resigned sigh, clearer to me as amusement than annoyance, he relented and purchased not one but two of the glowing sweet rolls. The vendor, an elderly woman with deep laugh lines and a scarf knotted at her neck, eyed Vorgath with open curiosity but didn't hesitate to pocket the coins.

I tore off a piece from my roll and popped it into my mouth, the flavors bursting across my tongue. “Wow,” I exclaimed around a mouthful. “I haven't had one of these since I was a girl. It's an Elandor roll.”

“Elandor?” Vorgath asked, his brow furrowing as he took a cautious bite.

He chewed slowly, the muscles of his jaw working as he processed the flavors. I watched him, waiting for his reaction, pleased when his eyes widened with appreciation.

“There’s warmth,” he murmured, more to himself. “Like holding a hearth in your hands.”

“That’s Elandor’s magic,” I explained. “Simple, comforting—meant to remind us of home, no matter how far we are. The sap is harvested from seedlings of the Hearthkeeper's Tree.”

Vorgath fell silent, taking another bite. He didn’t say anything more, but he didn’t have to. There was a shift in his expression—a softening, a flicker of understanding—a moment where he, too, seemed to find comfort in something as simple as the taste of home. And in that moment, I wondered—what was home to him? Was it still the mountains, with his clan? Or had he found it in the quiet solitude of his cabin in the Moonshadow Forest? Or maybe...

Could it be... me? My cottage, my dinner table, the laughter of a child who had so easily accepted him?

I swallowed the thought quickly, shaking it off before it could take root. Yet it lingered beneath the surface as we finished the last bites of our sweet rolls in silence.

I dabbed my fingers against a cloth, clearing away the sticky remnants of syrup, and gave a light-hearted smile.

“So,” I said, clearing my throat gently, “what’s next?”

Vorgath took a moment before responding, still savoring the taste of the Elandor roll on his tongue. “There’s one more thing we need to get.”

Without further explanation, he steered us off the main market path, heading into narrower, shadowed lanes. The vibrant energy of the market faded away, replaced by a quieter, almost mystical ambiance.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“The Runery,” Vorgath replied. “It’s on the edge of the Shadows.”

The Shadows. Just hearing the name of that part of town made me tense. The district had a reputation—half of it deserved, the other half embroidered by the village gossip mill. Either way, it wasn’t exactly known for its welcoming atmosphere. Thieves, smugglers, and underground dealings had earned it a place in whispered warnings, and I’d heard more than one rumor about illegal fighting rings. If someone wanted to disappear—or make trouble—the Shadows was the place for it.

I tried to mask my unease with a side-eye of mock sternness. “Sounds like the exact kind of place you shouldn’t take your apprentice if you plan to keep her around.”

A low rumble of amusement escaped from Vorgath. “It will be worth it.” His gaze softened as he added, “Trust me.”

Well, damn. How was I supposed to argue with that? With a reluctant nod, I fell into step beside him.

Chapter 10

The path grew narrower as we walked, the familiar sights of Everwood slowly giving way to a more unconventional landscape. The buildings here were older, their

wooden façades weathered by time but adorned with intricate carvings and symbols. Lanterns flickered with an otherworldly blue flame, casting ghostly reflections on the cobblestone streets. There was a hush here, as if the very air held its breath.

Finally, we arrived at a small, nondescript building tucked between two larger ones. The door was carved from dark wood and etched with symbols I didn't recognize but that gave off a faint glow in the dim light. Runes, perhaps. They seemed to pulse with a quiet energy, as though the building itself was alive, watching us.

Vorgath pushed the door open without hesitation, gesturing for me to step inside first. "After you."

I hesitated for a moment, but curiosity soon won over apprehension. As I crossed the threshold, a shimmer caught my eye—a faint ripple in the air, like heat rising from stone on a summer's day. The air tingled as I passed through, brushing against my skin like silk. For a split second, I felt a strange resistance, as if something was probing me, searching for something deeper. Then, it released, allowing me through.

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I glanced back at Vorgath, who had already stepped through with ease.

“What was that?” I asked quietly.

“Protection.” He paused, his eyes scanning the room ahead. “There are wards to keep out those with ill intent.”

I nodded, impressed but suspicious. Whoever commanded this kind of power didn’t need guards or locks, but why hide in the Shadows?

Vorgath stepped toward a low counter at the center of the room, and I followed, taking in the Runery’s wonders. Shelves that seemed to stretch up endlessly were filled with every imaginable kind of rune stone, enchanted inkwells, and ancient scrolls. The walls were adorned with hanging tapestries depicting battles and rituals, all woven with threads gleaming in the dim light. It was as if we had stepped into a secret library of magical relics hidden away from the rest of the world.

A figure appeared from behind the counter, moving with a fluid grace that made me do a double take. The elf had long, platinum hair that hung down his back like a sleek curtain, starkly contrasting his deep, rich brown skin. His pointed ears were adorned with delicate golden chains, and the robes he wore, open at the front, revealed a bare chest marked with runes etched directly into his skin, casting a soft glow on his muscular frame.

“Vorgath,” the elf greeted us. “I see you’ve brought company this time.”

Vorgath inclined his head. “Sylwen, this is Soraya Ashford, the new apprentice I

mentioned.”

“So, this is your student,” Sylwen mused, studying me with an intensity that was both unnerving and mesmerizing. “A pleasure to meet you. Vorgath speaks highly of you.”

“Does he?” I tried to keep my voice light, unsure what to make of this entire situation.

I thought back to the first time I’d noticed the elven tools in Vorgath’s forge. It had struck me as unusual then, but now, seeing him here in this place, it made sense. Where others saw differences, Vorgath saw possibilities. In his forge, in his life, there was room for anyone willing to work beside him. Elves, dwarves, humans—he accepted them all with the same quiet respect, just like he accepted me.

“Indeed,” Sylwen replied, his gaze shifting to Vorgath with a knowing look. “Come, I’ve prepared everything as requested.”

I exchanged a questioning glance with Vorgath, but he merely nodded toward a nearby table where Sylwen laid something wrapped in a rich, crimson cloth. With delicate care, Sylwen unveiled the cloth to reveal a hammer. But not just any hammer. This one gleamed with an ethereal light, the handle carved from the finest Alderwood, tipped with silver runes spiraling down its length.

The elf and I both looked at Vorgath, but he was looking at me. “Pick it up,” he commanded.

“Me?” I asked, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. What business did I have touching such a fine instrument?

But Vorgath nodded encouragingly. “It’s for you, Soraya.”

My heart skipped a beat at his words. With trembling fingers, I reached out and grasped the hammer's handle. The moment my skin made contact with the wood, I felt a surge of... something. It wasn't a jolt or a shock, but rather a gentle warmth that seemed to flow from the hammer into my arm and then throughout my entire body.

The hammer, which I had expected to be heavy, felt perfectly balanced in my grip. It was as if the tool had been crafted specifically for my hand, responding to my touch in a way that felt almost alive.

“How does it feel?” Sylwen asked.

I struggled to find the right words. “It's... incredible. Like it's an extension of my arm.”

Sylwen nodded, a pleased smile playing on his lips. “Indeed. Vorgath forged this hammer himself, but he brought it to me for a special purpose. The runes you see aren't just for decoration. They're designed to focus and channel your inherent strength.”

“The runes don't make you stronger,” Vorgath explained. “They ensure that none of your strength is wasted. Every strike counts.”

I looked at him, questions bubbling up inside me, but they stalled on the tip of my tongue. His words from earlier echoed in my mind—Strength comes with time. But the heart for it—that you've already got. This wasn't just a tool. It was a part of him, crafted with care and imbued with his strength. His belief in me.

“The magic within responds to you, Soraya,” Sylwen added. “It amplifies your natural abilities, allowing you to effectively channel your energy. In essence, it helps you shape your strength, much like you shape the metal in the forge.”

I hefted the hammer, marveling at how it seemed to harmonize with my movements. “It's perfect,” I whispered, overcome with gratitude. Before I could second-guess myself, I stood on my tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss to Vorgath's cheek.

The moment my lips touched his skin, time seemed to slow. I was acutely aware of every point of contact between us—my lips on his cheek, my hand resting lightly on his broad chest for balance. I could feel the steady thump of his heart beneath my palm, a rhythm that seemed to quicken ever so slightly at my touch.

As I pulled back, my lips grazed the edge of his tusk. Our eyes met, and his intense gaze made my breath catch in my throat. There was surprise there, yes, but also a heat that made my skin tingle with awareness. For a heartbeat, we stood frozen, the air between us crackling with unspoken tension. I found myself wondering what it would be like to kiss him properly, to feel those strong arms around me, to—

Sylwen cleared his throat softly, breaking the spell. I stepped back, my cheeks burning as I remembered we weren't alone. Vorgath's expression flickered—surprise, something softer, before he drew himself back to his usual steady composure.

“I see the hammer has found its true wielder,” Sylwen said, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

I clutched the hammer to my chest. “Yes,” I managed to say, my voice sounding breathless even to my own ears. “Yes, it has.”

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As we left the Runery, the atmosphere between Vorgath and me was thick with unspoken emotions. It wasn't discomfort or regret, but a fear of how real this was starting to feel—at least for me. Each moment was building on the last, creating something between us that felt as if it had always been there, waiting. I wasn't certain where it was leading, and choosing to follow felt as natural as breathing—but that didn't make it any less terrifying.

We walked in silence for a while, the distant sounds of the marketplace growing louder as we approached. Just as the silence was becoming unbearable, I cleared my throat.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. “We could grab some food.”

Vorgath's steps slowed, and he looked down at me. “I'm not sure that's wise,” he answered. “The locals might not appreciate...”

“I know a place,” I said. “You'll be welcome there—I promise.”

Vorgath gave me a long, searching look before nodding. “Lead the way, then.”

With my new hammer swinging at my side, I led the way through the winding streets toward the Heart District. Here, townhouses with rooftop gardens clustered around communal squares, and I could smell fresh bread baking from a nearby bakery. The air hummed with the lively chatter of tradespeople, children's laughter, and the occasional musician strumming a lute.

As we ventured deeper, I noticed that the curious glances and whispers were fewer

here. The Heart District was known for its diversity, and we hardly stood out. Even Vorgath seemed to feel it—his shoulders eased after the second time a passing merchant greeted him without a second thought.

Finally, we arrived at our destination. The Cozy Hearth Inn stood before us, its weathered sign swinging gently in the breeze. Ivy clung to the stone walls, and the steady murmur of voices within hinted at a lively gathering.

I turned to Vorgath with a smile. “Here we are. The best food and company in all of Everwood.”

Vorgath raised an eyebrow. “Bold claim.”

“Just you wait,” I said, pushing open the door. “You’ll see.”

Chapter 11

We stepped into the Cozy Hearth Inn and were greeted by the warmth of a crackling fire and the rich scent of roasted meats and fresh bread. The space was cozy, with low wooden beams and walls adorned with old maps and hunting trophies. Long wooden tables filled the center of the room, where patrons laughed and shared meals, while smaller, more intimate booths lined the walls. A halfling woman bustled between tables, her apron dusted with flour, offering quick smiles as she balanced trays of food and drink.

“Soraya!” she exclaimed, spotting me.

Milla was a fellow widow of the war, and we'd formed an unlikely bond in the aftermath. She'd often brought me meals when times were tough, and I'd mended her clothes in return. Sometimes, her stew had been the only thing I'd had to eat for days.

“Back again, and with a new friend, I see!”

I had to grin at her easy acceptance. “Milla, this is Vorgath. He's my... mentor.”

Milla's eyebrows shot up, her gaze darting between us with undisguised interest. “Oh? Well, any mentor of Soraya's is welcome here. Come on, let's get you two settled.”

She led us to a corner table where the chairs—even for someone of Vorgath's size—were crafted to accommodate all kinds of patrons. It was one of the few places in town that went the extra mile to cater to everyone.

“See?” I said, unable to keep the hint of smugness from my voice. “I told you you'd be welcome here.”

“So you did.”

Milla returned with two large tankards of sweet mead and took our order. As she walked away, I caught her throwing a wink in my direction. I felt my cheeks warm, wondering what assumptions she might be making about Vorgath and me—and realizing she might not be entirely wrong.

I took a sip of my mead, savoring the honeyed flavor. It was rich and smooth, with just a hint of spice, brewed with herbs from the local apothecary.

“So,” I said, meeting Vorgath's gaze over the rim of my tankard, “what's the plan for the rest of the day? Back to the forge?”

“If you're up to it,” Vorgath replied. “Though I'd understand if you'd prefer a break.”

“Not at all,” I said quickly, the eagerness in my voice catching me off guard. I cleared

my throat. “Besides, now I have my new hammer to try out.” My fingers drummed lightly on the table where it rested.

“I’m glad you like it,” Vorgath said, glancing down at the tool. “It suits you.”

Before I could respond, Milla returned with our meals. She set down two steaming plates of roasted venison, rootvegetables, and thick slices of bread, along with a small dish of spiced apples. The aroma was mouthwatering, and my stomach growled loudly in appreciation.

The tension from earlier in the day had all but dissolved by the time we dug into our food. The conversation flowed easily, centered around lighthearted topics—like the latest mishaps at the smithy and amusing stories from the market.

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“Word is that Ruka’s youngling got himself stuck in a barrel last week,” Vorgath mentioned, his eyes crinkling slightly at the corners. “Took two elves and a half-pint of butter to get him out.”

I laughed, picturing the scene. Ruka was a gnome from the Artisan’s Quarter, known for her magical contraptions—and her mischievous son. “Poor Leniux. He goes to school with Elias. Always climbing into places he shouldn’t.”

“Aye. I’m surprised they didn’t leave him there, just for a lesson,” Vorgath replied, amusement lacing his words.

“Oh, give it a year or two, and they might just start doing that,” I said, shaking my head. “Kids can be a handful. You should have seen Elias’s tantrum last week when Mrs. Crumble tried to get him to bathe. Nearly drowned the poor brownie with the bucket.”

Vorgath’s laughter was deep and rich, and absolutely delightful. It was the kind of laugh that came so rarely from him, and it warmed something inside me. I wanted to hear more of it. More of him. Seeing him like this—relaxed, comfortable—made me realize how much of himself he kept guarded. He had walls, not unlike my own, built to withstand the scars of war and loss. But here, in this small inn, those walls seemed to soften.

As we lingered over our meal, I thought back to the Elandor rolls we’d eaten earlier. The warmth, the sense of home they evoked—simple, comforting, a reminder of belonging, and I found myself wondering again—what was home to him? Could he feel it here, in the quiet moments over shared meals, the laughter of people who had

accepted him? And was it too much to hope that maybe home was becoming something more to him than a cabin in the woods?

Maybe it could be us.

“Tell me,” I said after finishing the last delicious bite of my meal, “are all orcs as bad at gardening as—”

Our conversation came to an abrupt halt as a crash echoed through the tavern—the unmistakable shatter of glass followed by a bellowing laugh that set my nerves on edge. Across the room, a hulking orc stood, holding the broken remains of a tankard, its contents dripping off the unfortunate human seated beside him. He tossed the handle aside as though it were worthless, a sneer twisting his lips.

A murmur of unease rippled through the crowd, but what truly set my pulse racing was the way Vorgath tensed beside me. Gone was the relaxed mentor I had been laughing with. In his place was the warrior—calm, poised, and exuding a dangerous stillness.

Vorgath stood, chair scraping against the stone floor. “Dregor Bloodclaw. Is that you?” His voice cut through the din, low and commanding.

The orc turned, his eyes finally locking onto Vorgath, and he barked out a laugh. “Vorgath Steelbane,” he said, his voice dripping with mockery. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Come, sit with us,” Vorgath offered, his tone calm, but there was an edge beneath it, making it less of an invitation and more of a command.

Another humorless laugh. “You’d break bread with your sworn enemy?”

“I have no enemies here,” Vorgath replied evenly, his gaze steady. “Only old friends.”

For a moment, Dregor’s eyes narrowed as if weighing his options, and then, slowly, his grin shifted into something more dangerous—compliance. He strode toward our table, the floorboards creaking under his massive weight as he dropped into the chair across from us.

Up close, this orc was as formidable as a wall of stone. His skin, a mottled deep green, was marred by scars, and his golden eyes gleamed with a wildness that made me grip the handle of my hammer more tightly.

“Well,” Dregor started, his voice raspy, “who might this be?” His gaze landed on me, intense and probing, making me feel small under its weight.

“This,” Vorgath interjected before I could respond, “is Soraya.” The speed at which he cut into the conversation was intentional—protective—and that did not go unnoticed by Dregor, who let out a knowing chuckle.

“A human? Keeping interesting company these days, eh?” Dregor mocked, taking a lewd glug of his ale. “Tell me, drakzul, have you forgotten the thrill of blood for the simple pleasure of—”

“That’s enough, Dregor.” Vorgath’s tone was icy, the cold professionalism of someone who knew exactly when a blade had gone too far and needed to be checked.

Dregor leaned back in his chair and grinned, revealing thick tusks. He appeared unconcerned by Vorgath’s command, yet something in his eyes glinted with malice. “Ah, did I strike a nerve, then? Or is it just that you’ve gone soft? Trading in war cries for whispers? This peaceful life—among humans, no less—it doesn’t suit you.”

“You mistake peace for weakness,” Vorgath replied, his voice as calm as the still surface of a lake—but I knew still waters could run deep. “It takes more strength to choose a different path, especially among our kind.”

Dregor’s lip curled in disdain as he reached for the tankard Milla had set in front of him before scurrying away.

“That so? Funny, it doesn’t look like strength to me. Looks like fear. Fear that this ‘peace’ is nothing but an illusion.” He took a long drink, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he watched Vorgath over the rim of his tankard. “But then, you’ve always been sentimental, haven’t you? Sparing those who should have been crushed... like your brother.”

I felt the blood drain from my face as I glanced at Vorgath. His shoulders had gone rigid, and though his expression didn’t change, something dangerous flickered in his eyes.

Dregor’s smile widened, knowing he’d found the wound. “That’s right. I remember how you hesitated—how you let thatgrakhulrun off.” His eyes flicked to me, lingering for a beat, and then he repeated, “Grakhul. Traitor.”

The word landed like a challenge, as if Dregor wanted to ensure I understood exactly what he was calling Vorgath’s brother, even if I didn’t know the whole story. But I couldn’t linger on that. I could sense the danger building between them, a tension that teetered on the edge of violence. I couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Well, Dregor,” I said, forcing a smile that I hoped masked my nerves. “Forging is tougher than I expected, but you know what? It suits Vorgath perfectly. He’s teaching me everything—and I’m lucky to have him as my mentor. Strong, talented, honorable. You could learn something.”

Dregor turned his eyes on me, amusement flickering at the edges of his smile as if I'd said something laughably naive. "Honorable, is he?" he drawled, his voice thick with skepticism. "Honor doesn't win wars. That's something you soft human folk will never understand."

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Before I could summon a biting retort, Vorgath reached over and gently covered my hand with his.

“Soraya understands more than you ever will,” Vorgath said, his voice steady. “And she’s right—there’s more to honor than the violence you cling to.”

Dregor took another swig of ale, eyes never leaving Vorgath’s as if measuring whether he truly believed his own words. When he finally set his tankard down, he let out a loud, exaggerated sigh and leaned back.

“Maybe,” he said with mock indifference. “But don’t think for a second that your ‘peaceful’ life here will protect you. The past isn’t like the steel you bend to your will. You can’t reshape it with a few swings of the hammer. It lives, it breathes, and it will come for you when you least expect it.”

“Maybe,” Vorgath repeated, unbothered by Dregor’s theatrics. “But I no longer let my past dictate my future. Can you say the same?”

Dregor shook his head slowly, almost pityingly, and stood up from the table.

“Be careful, Vorgath.” His eyes flicked briefly to me. “The past isn’t something you can run from. Remember that.”

And with that, Dregor turned away, leaving the tavern as abruptly as he had entered, his heavy footsteps echoing in his wake. I watched him go, still gripping the handle of my hammer as if it were a lifeline. As his bulky form disappeared through the tavern door, my gaze wandered to the window, where a familiar figure caught my

eye—Thorne Ironsmith.

He stood outside, his arms crossed and his face unreadable as he watched Dregor vanish into the street. For a moment, something flickered in Thorne's expression—something that made me uneasy. It wasn't anger or surprise, but a cool, distant calculation, like he was piecing together a puzzle.

When his eyes met mine, he hesitated, the barest flicker of recognition passing over his face before his lips curled into what could have been a smile. Then, without a word, Thorne turned and headed off in the same direction Dregor had gone, leaving a hollow feeling in my chest that I couldn't quite shake.

I wasn't sure what to make of it—maybe it was nothing. But after the way Thorne had brushed me off at the forge and his obvious disdain for Vorgath, seeing him now, lingering in Dregor's shadow, left me with a gnawing sense of discomfort.

“We should go.”

I tore my gaze away from the window to find Vorgath watching me. Around us, the lively hum of conversation had dimmed, the patrons casting nervous glances toward the door as if half-expecting more trouble to follow in Dregor's wake.

Just as I stood, Milla appeared at our table. “Don't let him run you off, Soraya.”

I smiled weakly, grateful for her words but knowing Vorgath had already decided. He was on his feet, ready to go. “I'm sorry for the trouble,” I said. “It wasn't meant to happen like this.”

Milla waved a hand dismissively. “It's not your fault. If anything, it's a good thing he was here.” She glanced at Vorgath with a nod of respect. “He handled it better than most would've.”

Vorgath gave a curt nod, already heading toward the door. I followed, the knot in my stomach still tight. As we stepped outside, I could hear Milla behind us, muttering to another patron about how it could've been much worse.

Chapter 12

Sitting in Lady Hargrave's bustling kitchen, I placed the intricately carved spoon on the table, a quiet smile tugging at my lips as Thyri raised an impressed eyebrow.

"You made this?" she asked, taking it between her fingers and holding it up to the light.

I nodded, unable to keep the pride from my voice. "I did. It's my first real attempt at combining metalwork with... well, something a bit more delicate."

Thyri turned the spoon over, admiring the flower patterns etched into the handle. "It's beautiful. Reminds me of your embroidery work."

"That was the idea," I said. "I wanted to see if I could bring some of that old skill into my new work."

Behind us, a maid bustled past with a tray stacked with dishes, nearly bumping into a scullery boy who was struggling with a basket of vegetables. The kitchen was alive with the clatter of pots and the hiss of steam rising from the stove.

"Well, you've certainly succeeded," Thyri grinned, placing the spoon on the countertop between us. "The orc must be a good teacher."

I felt a flush creep up my neck at the mention of Vorgath, my mind drifting back to the morning we'd spent together at the forge. He'd been focused on Grimble's commission, hammering out the broad, weighty blades with the quiet intensity I'd

come to expect from him. Meanwhile, he'd tasked me with something that seemed simple on the surface but felt monumental: making the perfect spoon.

"Precision and care," he'd said. "Show me how your hands shape something small."

It had taken hours. The heat of the forge was familiar by now, but the patience required to create such a delicate piece was something new. I'd used every tool at my disposal—chisels, needle files, and my new hammer. There were moments of frustration, times when the metal didn't bend to my will, and the design blurred beneath the heat of my impatience.

But when I finally got it right, when the flowers blossomed under the careful guidance of my hands, I felt a rush of satisfaction unlike anything I'd ever known.

"He is," I admitted, twirling the spoon between my fingers. "Vorgath has a way of pushing me to be better without making me feel inadequate."

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Thyri leaned in, a mischievous glint in her eye. “And is that all he does for you?”

I felt my cheeks grow warm. “Thyri!”

She laughed, the sound bright and infectious in the busy kitchen. “Oh, come on, Sor. I've heard the way you talk about him.”

I opened my mouth to protest but couldn't quite form the words. How could I explain the complexity of my feelings for Vorgath? The way my heart raced when he was near, the comfort I found in his quiet strength, but also the fear that threaded through it all. I'd come to rely on him, as a mentor, yes, but wasn't there more to it? I couldn't deny the way my gaze lingered or how a single look from him made my skin hum. Yet the thought of letting him in, of allowing myself to feel more, threatened to unravel everything I'd carefully built. What if I lost him, as a teacher and as... as something more?

“It's complicated,” I finally managed, my voice soft. “There's Elias to think about, and the forge, and...” I trailed off, gesturing vaguely with the spoon.

“And the fact that he's an orc?” Thyri finished gently.

I sighed, setting the spoon down on the table. “That's part of it, yes.” I leaned closer to Thyri, my voice dropping to a whisper. “And, well, how would it even work?”

Thyri's brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

I glanced around, making sure no one was eavesdropping. “You know... physically.

He's so... big.”

Thyri's eyes widened, and she stifled a laugh. “Soraya! Are you talking about...?”

I nodded, feeling my face burn hotter than the forge. “I mean, have you seen the size of his hands? They're like dinner plates!”

Thyri snorted, trying to keep her composure. “Well, you know what they say about men with big hands...”

“Thyri!” I hissed, half-scandalized, half-amused.

She grinned wickedly. “What? I'm just saying, where there's a will, there's a way. Besides, I hear orcs are very... adaptable.”

I buried my face in my hands, peeking out between my fingers. “Seven save me, I can't believe we're discussing this in the middle of the councilman's kitchen.”

Just then, a loud crash echoed through the room. We both jumped, turning to see the scullery boy sprawled on the floor, surrounded by a sea of potatoes. Thyri and I looked at each other, then burst into laughter, the tension of our conversation breaking like a dam.

“Well,” Thyri said, wiping tears from her eyes, “at least we know one thing for certain.”

“What's that?” I asked, still giggling.

She picked up the spoon, waving it in front of me. “If all else fails, you can always make him tiny utensils.”

I chuckled at Thyri's jest, but the laughter faded quickly, replaced by a familiar ache in my chest. My fingers found the spoon again, tracing its delicate curves as I spoke softly, almost to myself.

“That's assuming he'd even want anything I make, let alone... more.”

Thyri's smile softened, her eyes filling with concern. “What do you mean?”

I sighed, struggling to put my swirling thoughts into words. “It's just... Vorgath is so... composed. Stoic. Half the time, I can't even tell what he's thinking.” I paused, swallowing hard. “What if I'm reading too much into things? What if he's just being kind?” The bustling kitchen seemed to fade away as I voiced my deepest fears. “I'm a widow with a young son, Thyri. I'm not exactly... desirable.” My voice cracked on the last word, and Thyri's warm hand covered mine.

“Oh, Sor,” she said, her voice gentle. “You don't see yourself clearly at all, do you?”

I shrugged, unable to meet her gaze. “I see the truth. I'm not the young girl I once was. I have responsibilities, baggage. Why would he choose me?”

Thyri squeezed my hand. “Because you're strong, beautiful, and brilliant. You're raising a wonderful boy on your own, and you've taken on a trade that most would run screaming from.” She paused, tilting her head. “And from what you've told me, it sounds like Vorgath sees all of that in you.”

I looked up, hope warring with doubt in my chest. “You think so?”

She nodded firmly. “I do. And while I haven't seen you two together, I've seen how your eyes light up when you talk about him. That's not nothing.”

I bit my lip, considering her words. “But what if—”

“No more 'what ifs,’” Thyri interrupted, her tone brooking no argument. “Stop overthinking everything.”

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A maid approached the table to collect Lady Hargrave's afternoon tea. "Is this ready, Miss Thyri?" she asked with a polite nod.

Thyri glanced at the tray of cups and teapot, giving a quick nod. "All set, Margit. Take it up while it's still hot."

Margit smiled, deftly gathering the tea service before slipping toward the door.

Thyri stood up, smoothing down her apron. "Well, I'd better get back to work before Lady Hargrave starts wondering why her kitchen smells like gossip instead of tonight's roast."

I laughed, rising from my seat. "And I should head out. Vorgath let me leave early today, so I thought I'd surprise Elias by picking him up from school."

"Oh, he'll love that," Thyri said warmly. "Give that little rascal a hug from me, will you?"

"Of course," I replied, reaching for the spoon to tuck it safely away. My hand met empty air. Frowning, I glanced around the table. "Do you have the spoon?"

Thyri's brow furrowed. "No, I thought you had it last."

We both started searching the immediate area, checking under napkins and between plates. The spoon was nowhere to be found.

"That's odd," I muttered, a twinge of worry creeping into my voice. "I could have

sworn I put it right here.”

Thyri placed a reassuring hand on my arm. “It's a busy kitchen—things get moved about all the time. I'll keep an eye out for it and bring it round to you when I find it.”

“Thanks, Thyri,” I said, giving her a quick hug. “I appreciate it.”

“Now, off you go,” Thyri said, gently steering me toward the door. “You don't want to be late for Elias.”

As I stepped out of Lady Hargrave's kitchen and into the bustling streets of Everwood, a crisp breeze tugged at my cloak, carrying the scent of damp earth and sun-warmed wood. The murmur of nearby vendors haggling over produce mixed with the soft clatter of a horse-drawn cart passing by. Overhead, birds flitted between the rooftops, their songs momentarily drowned out by the call of a street performer drawing a small crowd.

My mind drifted back to the forge, and as I walked, I wondered how the swords were coming along. The image of Vorgath, brow furrowed in concentration as he shaped metal with his powerful hammer, sent a flutter through my stomach. I shook my head, trying to clear the thoughts, but then Thyri's teasing words echoed in my ears, and I couldn't help but smile.

That small moment of peace shattered when a familiar voice cut through the noise of the street. “Well, if it isn't the orc's pet project.”

I turned to face the speaker, my good mood evaporating. It was Tom, Thorne's cocky apprentice, leaning against the wall of the nearby smithy.

“Excuse me?” I asked, my voice sharper than I intended.

Tom pushed off the wall, swaggering over to block my path. “I heard you've been playing blacksmith with that orc. Tell me, does he let you hold the hammer, or are you just there to look pretty?”

Heat rushed to my face, but I kept my expression neutral. “I'm an apprentice, learning the craft like anyone else.”

“An apprentice?” Tom snorted, folding his arms. “Seems to me you're just another lonely widow looking for someone to stoke your fire.”

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. “You don't know anything about me or my work.”

“Work?” he scoffed. “What work could a woman possibly do in a forge? Polishing the anvil, perhaps?”

I felt a retort rising in my throat but swallowed it down. Tom wasn't worth it. He was a child trying to get a reaction. “If you'll excuse me,” I said coldly, stepping around him, “I have somewhere to be.”

As I turned to walk away, the apprentice's mocking voice called after me. “You know, Master Ironsmith's been keeping an eye on that little operation of yours. He's not too pleased with how things are progressing.”

I glanced back, catching the smug look on the apprentice's face. “What's that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged, a cruel smile playing on his lips. “Just that some people in this town take their craft seriously. They don't appreciate outsiders mucking things up.”

“If Thorne has a problem with my work, he can speak to me directly,” I said, my

voice even.

“Oh, I'm sure he will. Sooner or later.”

I quickened my pace, feeling the anger simmering under my skin as I put distance between myself and Tom. But his words echoed in my mind, stirring up the unease I'd felt a few days ago when I'd seen Thorne outside the tavern. The look in his eyes had unsettled me then, and now, Tom's taunts only deepened my suspicion.

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What did Thorne care about my ‘operation’? He’d brushed me off once already. So why this sudden interest?

I pushed the thought aside for now. I’d be with Elias soon, and that was the only thing that truly mattered. I’d deal with the rest when the time came.

The schoolhouse was just ahead, nestled between two large oaks whose branches formed an archway over the path. My steps slowed as I scanned the small crowd of children, expecting to see Elias’ familiar figure bounding toward me.

But... nothing.

My eyes narrowed as I scoped the area again. No Elias running toward me.

I felt a prickle of unease and hurried over to Mrs. Quill, the school’s teacher, who stood with other parents as they collected their children.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I don’t see Elias. Have you—?”

“Oh, he left some time ago,” she said. “I assumed Mrs. Crumble had come to fetch him, as usual.”

My heart sank, disappointment washing over me. “Oh, I see. Thank you, Mrs. Quill.”

I turned away, mentally kicking myself for getting delayed by that insufferable Tom. I’d missed my chance to surprise Elias. Still, the thought of his face lighting up when I walked through the door at home brought a smile to my face. I quickened my pace,

eager to see my boy.

But as I approached our home, I noticed the windows were dark and closed. Strange. Mrs. Crumble usually flung open the shutters to get air circulating when they were here.

I pushed open the door, calling out, “Elias? Mrs. Crumble?”

Silence greeted me.

“Elias?” I called again, my voice echoing through the empty rooms. The house felt unnaturally still, devoid of the usual bustling energy my son brought with him.

A tendril of worry started to curl in my stomach. Where could they be? Perhaps Mrs. Crumble had taken him to the market for a treat? But she always left a note...

I searched the kitchen, finding nothing but clean dishes and unlit candles. The worry in my gut grew, transforming into a cold, heavy weight. Rushing back outside, I scanned the street, hoping to catch sight of Mrs. Crumble's diminutive form or hear Elias' laughter. But the road was empty save for a few passersby, none of them my son or his caretaker.

“Elias!” I called out, my voice carrying a note of desperation. “Elias, where are you?”

I started down the street, my pace quickening with each step. Had he wandered off? Or... had someone taken him? My blood ran cold, and in a flash, I saw Dregor's mocking grin, heard Tom's cryptic threats echoing through my mind. Their words twisted and coiled, tightening around me like a noose.

I broke into a run.

Chapter 13

My footsteps pounded over the rough path as fear clawed at my chest. Elias's name rose to my lips, but I bit it back, terrified of what calling out might confirm. I searched every familiar spot as I raced past—the clearing where he liked to play, the old fence he'd often climb—scanning for any glimpse of him. The quiet edges of town blurred around me, my mind spinning through every awful possibility, each one worse than the last.

Just as the panic rose to a breaking point, a flicker of movement caught my eye. I skidded to a halt, heart hammering, only to feel a swirl of leaves and the scent of wildflowers surround me. Mrs. Crumble materialized at my side, her large eyes brimming with concern.

“Soraya,” she said, her voice calm, like a balm against the storm raging inside me. She placed a small hand on my arm, steadying me, but the silence stretched unbearably, the terror in my chest refusing to settle.

Finally, she spoke, her gaze softening. “Master Vorgath has sent word. Elias is with him, safe at his home.”

The relief hit me like a wave, so overwhelming that I had to brace myself against a wall to keep from collapsing. “He's... he's at the cabin? With Vorgath?”

Mrs. Crumble nodded. “Yes, dear. The boy is perfectly fine.”

As the panic ebbed away, confusion took its place. “But... why? How?”

Mrs. Crumble patted my arm. “I'm sure there's a good reason. Why don't you go see for yourself?”

I nodded, still reeling from the emotional whiplash. After a quick word of thanks, I set off toward Vorgath's forge, my heart still racing, though now for different reasons. Elias was safe. But what had happened?

The familiar route to the forge stretched before me, but each step felt heavy, my legs still shaky from the panic. By the time the silhouette of the cabin appeared through the trees, the rhythmic clanging of metal on metal reached my ears. What once seemed intimidating now felt like a beacon, pulling me closer.

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My feet moved faster, nearly breaking into a run as I followed the well-worn path around the cabin until the forge loomed ahead, smoke rising in lazy tendrils from its chimney.

And there, sitting on a sturdy wooden stool next to Vorgath, was Elias. His small face was alight with wonder as he watched Vorgath's powerful arms bring the hammer down on a glowing piece of metal. The sight of my son, safe and utterly captivated, nearly brought me to my knees with relief.

“Elias!” I called out.

Both Vorgath and Elias turned at the sound of my voice. Elias's eyes widened, a flicker of guilt crossing his face.

“Mama!” he exclaimed, jumping down from the stool and running toward me. I scooped him up in my arms, holding him tightly against me.

“Do you have any idea how worried I was?” I scolded, though the relief in my voice softened the rebuke. “What were you thinking, coming here on your own?”

Elias squirmed in my arms. “I wanted to surprise you, Mama. I didn't know you wouldn't be here. I thought maybe I could learn some things from Master Vorgath, too.”

I loosened my grip on Elias, setting him down gently but keeping a hand on his shoulder. “Oh, Elias,” I sighed, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead. “I appreciate that you wanted to surprise me, but you can't wander off like that. You

scared me half to death.”

“I’m sorry, Mama,” he said, his lower lip quivering slightly. “I just... I wanted to learn about the forge and make things like you do.”

His words hit me like a punch to the gut as his innocent wish from weeks ago came rushing back to me—I wished that we could have Papa’s forge working again, so we could be like we were before.

I knelt down, bringing myself to eye level with my son. “I’m so sorry. I should have included you more in what I’ve been doing here.”

His face lit up at my words. “Really? You mean I can come and learn, too?”

“Yes, but only when I’m with you. We’ll learn together. And,” I added, glancing up at Vorgath, who had been watching our exchange, “as long as Master Vorgath doesn’t mind.”

Vorgath’s deep voice broke the quiet. “The boy is welcome here always, as is his mother.”

I glanced up at him, his steady gaze meeting mine, and for a moment, my breath caught. His words weren’t just an invitation—they were a reassurance. Reassurance that my worries about Elias and myself fitting into his life weren’t as complicated as I’d feared. Would he ever want me, with all my baggage? I couldn’t know for certain, but his acceptance of us both, without hesitation, felt like a step in the right direction. The tightness in my chest softened, a spark of something I didn’t need to second-guess—for now.

Elias bounced on his toes, his earlier guilt forgotten in the face of this new excitement. “Can we start now, Mama? Please?”

I chuckled at his enthusiasm. “Well, I suppose we're already here. What do you say, Master Vorgath? Shall we give him his first lesson?”

Vorgath nodded, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Indeed. Come, durgha. Let us begin with the basics.”

Time seemed to slip away as the forge became our classroom. Vorgath, with infinite patience, guided Elias through the fundamentals, showing him how to handle each tool with care and explaining its purpose. I marveled at how still my son was, his usual boundless energy reined in by sheer fascination.

“Now, remember,” Vorgath said, kneeling beside Elias, “we always respect the fire. It breathes life into our work, but if we're careless, it can take as well.”

Elias nodded solemnly, his wide eyes reflecting the glowing coals as Vorgath stoked the flames, sending sparks into the air like tiny stars.

“Mama, look!” Elias called out later, holding up a small piece of metal he'd been working on. It was misshapen and rough, but the pride in his voice was unmistakable. “I made a... well, I'm not sure what it is, but I made it!”

I laughed, ruffling his hair. “It's wonderful. Your very first creation.”

Vorgath nodded approvingly. “Well done, Elias.”

As dusk began to settle in and long shadows crept across the floor, I noticed Elias's movements slow, his eyelids growing heavy.

“I think someone's had quite the adventure today,” I said softly to Vorgath.

Vorgath's expression softened as he looked at my son. “He has worked hard. A true

apprentice's first day.”

As if on cue, Elias yawned widely, stumbling slightly. Vorgath reached out, steadying him with one large hand. “Perhaps it's time for rest, durgha.”

Elias mumbled a protest, but his body betrayed him. He shuffled over to a nearby bench and, within moments, was fast asleep. I sighed, bending to pick up his metal masterpiece, which had only gotten more misshapen through the lesson.

“I don't know how I'm going to get him home now,” I mused.

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“I can carry him,” Vorgath offered.

I looked back at him, surprised. “It’s a long walk,” I reminded him.

He nodded. “I am a strong orc.”

I stifled a laugh. “But are you sure it’s not too much trouble?”

He gave a small, almost imperceptible shrug. “No trouble at all.”

“Right,” I smiled, feeling oddly relieved. “Thank you.”

With that, Vorgath effortlessly gathered Elias into his arms, cradling him as though he weighed nothing. The sight made something soft and warm coil in my chest. It was the tenderness of it, maybe. Despite all of his raw strength, Vorgath held my son carefully, like he was precious.

It was—well, it was something. Probably best not to think too hard about it.

The path ahead was dimly lit, and the trees loomed on either side, their branches casting intricate shadows in the fading light. The earthy scent of pine and damp soil filled my lungs as we walked, our footsteps muffled by the carpet of fallen leaves. In the distance, an owl hooted, its call echoing through the stillness of the forest. I shivered slightly, pulling my shawl tighter around my shoulders.

“Are you cold?” Vorgath asked softly, mindful of the sleeping child in his arms.

I glanced up at him. “A little,” I admitted. “But it's not far now.”

He nodded, then surprised me by shifting Elias to one arm and draping the other around my shoulders. The warmth of his touch sent a jolt through me, and I found myself leaning into his side almost instinctively.

“Is this... acceptable?” he asked.

I nodded, not trusting my voice for a moment. “Yes,” I managed. “It is.”

We walked in companionable silence for a while, the only sounds our footsteps and Elias's soft breathing. As we neared the edge of the woods, the trees began to thin out, revealing glimpses of the town's twinkling lights in the distance.

“Vorgath,” I said softly, breaking the silence. “I wanted to thank you... for today. For looking after Elias when he snuck away. I hope he wasn't too much trouble.”

Vorgath's deep chuckle rumbled through the night air. “He was no trouble. The boy has a keen mind and eager hands. A natural smith in the making.”

“He takes after his father in that regard,” I said softly, a bittersweet smile tugging at my lips.

Vorgath was quiet for a moment, and I worried I'd made him uncomfortable by mentioning Kald. But when he spoke, his voice was gentle. “He takes after you as well. Your determination, your spirit—I see it in him.”

His words caught me off guard. “I... thank you,” I murmured, slightly flustered by the compliment.

I stole a glance at Vorgath's profile, illuminated by the soft glow of the moon. The

strong line of his jaw, the curve of his tusks, the gentle way he held Elias—all of it combined to create an image that stirred something deep within me. He fit so seamlessly into this moment, into our lives. Maybe more than I ever expected.

But as soon as the thought crossed my mind, I remembered my earlier conversation with Thyri, and I was glad for the cover of darkness to hide my blush. It's not like I was some innocent maiden; I had been married, had a child for goodness' sake. But Kald had been my first and only, and I hadn't given much thought to being with anyone else since he passed.

And now, here I was, walking alongside an orc, his strong arm around my shoulders, and my mind was racing with thoughts that would make a sailor blush. I snuck another glance at Vorgath. He was so... large. His hands, his muscles—everything about him was massive and powerful. A shiver ran down my spine, and it wasn't from the cold.

If things were to... progress between us, how would that even work? Would he... fit? I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. Were there actually happy human-orc couples out there? And if so, how did they manage the, well, logistics?

I tried to shake off the thoughts, to focus on the path ahead. But my mind was a whirlwind, filled with images of Vorgath's hands on my body, his mouth on mine. I stumbled slightly, surprised by the vividness of my own imagination.

Vorgath steadied me, his grip tightening around my shoulders. “Alright?” he asked.

“Fine!” I squeaked, my voice embarrassingly high. “Just... tripped on a root.”

Thyri would be having a field day if she could hear my thoughts right now. I could almost hear her voice in my head, “Where there's a will, there's a way!”

I bit my lip, trying to stifle a nervous giggle, earning a curious look from Vorgath. I just shook my head, not trusting myself to speak. Instead, I focused on putting one foot in front of the other, all the while very aware of the warm, strong arm around my shoulders.

A few minutes later, he released me to follow me up the narrow steps to the front door of my house. The moon had fully risen by now, casting a soft glow across the cobblestones beneath our feet and bathing the little cottage in muted blue light.

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The door creaked slightly as I pushed it open, and we stepped into the familiar warmth of home. I led Vorgath up the narrow stairs to Elias's small bedroom. When we reached the door, I moved aside, letting Vorgath enter first. He carefully entered, ducking slightly to avoid hitting his head on the low beam.

Gently, Vorgath lowered Elias onto the bed, cradling his little body until it hit the pillow with a soft thump. Elias barely stirred, his face relaxed in the deep, heavy sleep of a child who'd played hard and learned much. Vorgath tugged the blanket up to Elias's chin and then stood there for a moment, staring down at my son as if committing the scene to memory. A soft smile tugged at his lips—barely noticeable, but I caught it.

Then, without a word, Vorgath stepped back, straightening as he turned toward me. I caught his eye over the bed and gestured toward the door.

I followed him out, and once again, we found ourselves standing in the quiet warmth of the entryway, where we both paused uncertainly. Vorgath turned, looking back at me. A warmth sat behind his eyes, but other than that, his face remained unreadable. I licked my lips—nervous? Definitely. But there was something else. Something that made the room seem smaller, the space between us almost tangible in its weight.

He turned his gaze toward the door, a subtle shifting of his weight that suggested he meant to leave. "I should go."

"Right," I whispered, my voice sounding far too small for the moment.

Neither of us moved.

Yet, I could feel the pull—an invisible thread binding us, drawing me nearer, daring me to close the distance.

And then, before I could stop myself—before the rational, careful part of me could scream her usual protest—I stepped forward.

My pulse thundered in my ears as I pushed up on my toes, my lips pressing against his with a fierce, almost reckless urgency. The kiss was scorching—as if all the tension, the unspoken words, the stolen glances—had suddenly found their release. His lips were warm, surprisingly soft beneath his beard, and the taste of steel and smoke clung to his mouth, foreign but intoxicating. I hadn't kissed anyone in so long, and this... this wasn't like anything I'd known before.

His tusks brushed against my cheeks, strange yet thrilling, scraping ever-so-slightly against my skin. I heard a low rumble in his throat, a sound that seemed to ripple through me, igniting something primal and dangerous. His hands—those enormous hands that had once seemed so intimidating—found my waist, pulling me closer, and the rest of the world dropped away.

He held me like I was something precious. Like I was desired.

And Seven save me, it felt like nothing else mattered in that moment. Like I was exactly where I needed to be, in the consuming heat of him.

My hands tangled in the fabric of his tunic, the strength of his chest solid beneath my fingers, the rough texture of his muscles hard and unyielding under the press of my palm. I could barely reach his collarbone, but it didn't matter. I rose onto my toes more, needing to bury myself in the kiss, to lose myself in the way the world seemed to tilt and spin around us.

Had I ever felt like this? With Kald, it had been simple and soft, familiar. But this?

The rawness of it soared through my veins, making me feel out of control in the very best of ways.

His size overwhelmed everything—his muscles, his presence, the sheer strength of his arms. Every inch of him dwarfed me, and the warmth that radiated from his body seeped into me, pulling me further into the moment, into him. My fingers clawed for purchase, sliding up the brawny slope of his arm until they hooked onto the tight muscles of his shoulder. It had the texture of leather, hard and unyielding, yet under it all, I could sense the latent gentleness lurking just below the surface.

His kiss grew fiercer, matching the intensity running wild between us. A growl rumbled low in his throat, vibrating through my entire body as his hands tightened. I inched closer, the feel of his large form pressing all around me. I couldn't think. I could only feel. Every stroke of his lips against mine, every squeeze of his hands, every blazing moment seemed to unravel something knotted deep inside me.

I wanted more.

Needed more.

But with every second that passed, reality came creeping in.

What am I doing? This is too fast. Elias is in the next room...The thoughts clawed to the surface, piercing the haze of desire. Fear and doubt slammed back into place like a tidal wave. What about my life? What about our careful, balanced existence? Elias. The forge. What would happen if I let this continue? We'd get used to having him around—complacent, comfortable—and then... what would happen if I lost him, too?

Suddenly, the intoxicating heat became too much.

Gasping for air, I ripped my lips from his, stumbling back a few steps as I pressed a

hand to my mouth. My lungs burned, struggling to catch up with the sudden rush of oxygen that filled the space where our kiss had been.

“What—?” Vorgath’s eyes, wide and wild, stared at me, and I saw the concern there—the softened edges of his otherwise stoic features, warring between want and confusion.

“I—I can’t,” I stammered, my voice barely a whisper. My hands fumbled against my own skin, arms folding protectively around myself.

Vorgath’s brow furrowed, uncertainty flickering in his gaze. He was still standing where I’d left him, his arms slowly dropping back to his sides. “Soraya,” he began, his voice tinged with a tenderness I wasn’t sure I deserved in that moment. “If I—”

“It’s not you,” I interrupted in a frantic rush. “It’s just... it’s everything. It’s Elias. It’s—” I swallowed hard, the weight of my thoughts pressing down on me. “My life is complicated. You deserve something... easier.”

Vorgath’s lips pressed into a thin line, his face an unreadable mask again. But he didn’t argue. He didn’t push.

We stood in the heavy silence of my tiny living room for a long moment, the weight of what had just happened looming between us. My heart still raced, my body still humming with the remnants of the kiss, but my mind... my mind was warning me—no, shouting at me.

I had a son to think about. I had lived through the pain of loss, and the thought of opening my heart—to him, to anyone—terrified me in ways I couldn’t quite put into words. I couldn’t take that step. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

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“I’ll go,” Vorgath said at last, his voice softer and more measured.

I nodded, my throat too tight to say anything. He moved toward the door, his steps slow and deliberate, perhaps giving me the chance to call him back—but I didn’t. I stood frozen, watching him reach for the doorknob.

He turned just slightly, enough for me to catch the side of his face framed by the flickering lamplight. “Soraya...,” he started, voice low and gruff, as if fighting with the words. “I don’t expect easy.” His hand tightened on the knob, muscles flexing beneath his worn tunic. “And I am not afraid.”

With that, he pulled the door open. The cool night air rushed in, mingling with the lingering heat that clung to my skin—the remnants of our kiss, of him. And then, without another word, he stepped outside, disappearing into the shadowed street beyond.

The door shut with a soft thud that echoed in the empty silence. I exhaled shakily, my knees finally giving way as I sank onto the nearest chair. My fingertips brushed my lips, still tingling. My gaze drifted toward the stairs. At the top, behind Elias’s door, my son slept. Safe. Innocent. Uncomplicated.

And then there was me... standing on the precipice, almost ready to jump, to bring it all crumbling down.

Vorgath’s final words hung between the walls, lingering like a challenge. I am not afraid.

But I was terrified. Terrified of what this meant. Of what I could lose. Of what I already wanted.

I stared at the door as though it might offer me some kind of solace—but it didn't. The only thing on the other side was the empty street and the space he had left there, lingering like a shadow.

Chapter 14

The wagon rumbled along the winding path, jostling me with each bump and dip in the road. I sat rigidly on the wooden seat, acutely aware of Vorgath's large form beside me. The morning air was crisp, carrying the scent of pine and damp earth. Strands of hair escaped my bun, tickling my cheek as the wind whipped past us.

I snuck a glance at Vorgath, noting how carefully he maintained the space between us. His hands gripped the reins loosely, his posture relaxed yet somehow distant. The silence stretched between us, broken only by the steady clip-clop of the horses' hooves and the creaking of the wagon.

The past few days had been a blur of hammering, shaping, and polishing as we raced to finish Grimble's commission. After that night—after the kiss—everything had shifted. Each moment beside him left my skin humming with tension, each accidental brush of his arm sent a jolt through me.

And yet, neither of us spoke of it. Vorgath had respected my retreat, never once pushing, never once questioning. His words were brief, measured—just business. And though his presence remained steady, solid as ever, it was as if there was now a chasm between us, wide and impossible to bridge.

It wasn't resentment or hurt that I sensed from him, though. No, it was something else—patience. He was giving me space. Space to breathe. Space to figure out what I

wanted. And the worst part? I wasn't sure what that was anymore. I was terrified I'd ruined everything.

But now, as we made our way to Stonevale for the Tinkerer's Faire, a flicker of excitement pushed aside my nerves. I'd never been to the village before, let alone its famous artisan festival. Stonevale wasn't large—more of a quiet, industrious town where dwarves and other races had settled after the Shadowfall War. It wasn't just known for survival; it was known for innovation. The dwarves, especially, had earned a reputation for their ingenious inventions and craftsmanship, even after being forced to abandon their ancestral home near the Crystal Caves when dark magic made the land uninhabitable.

Still, they hadn't let that stop them. Stonevale had become a hub of ingenuity, with the Tinkerer's Faire at its heart—a gathering where their latest inventions were displayed, celebrating both craft and progress. And we, with our ceremonial axes tucked in the wagon behind us, were about to contribute, which made my stomach churn with both excitement and nerves.

“Are you comfortable?” Vorgath's deep voice startled me from my thoughts.

I forced a light laugh. “Oh, yes. Though I'm not sure my backside will ever forgive me for subjecting it to this seat.”

A ghost of a smile touched Vorgath's lips, but he didn't turn to look at me. “We can stop to stretch our legs if you need.”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “I'm fine, really.”

“Are we there yet?” Elias's voice piped up from behind us.

“Almost,” I called back. “You'll know when we arrive because you won't be able to

stop your eyes from popping out at all the interesting things the dwarves have made.”

A small, conspiratorial giggle rose from the wagon’s back. Elias, wedged between our supplies and Grimble’s axes, was too excited to sit still—his legs swinging and his head darting side to side, trying to catch a first glimpse of the settlement.

“Like what?” he asked, his voice awash with genuine curiosity.

It was Vorgath who answered: “Tools. Machines that help with mining. Artifacts that can store energy.” His brow furrowed in concentration as he mentally rifled through examples. “I use one of their forge-stokers in my workshop. It pulls in air from below and funnels it through the fire, keeping the flames steady without needing someone to constantly work bellows.”

“I’m also a tinkerer,” Elias said, and I heard him clambering through the wagon to get closer to us until, finally, his little face popped up between us.

“That so?” Vorgath asked.

“Yup!” Elias nodded enthusiastically, his brown curls bouncing. “I’m really good at making things. Like... like Mrs. Crumble’s flowerpots! I put holes in them with a stick, and now water gets out the bottom when it rains.”

“Ingenious,” Vorgath agreed.

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He tugged the reins a little, steering the horses down a slightly rockier path as the trees began to thin, and Elias slid back down into the bed of the wagon.

“How much farther?” Elias's voice floated up to us again after just a few moments of silence.

“Not long now,” Vorgath rumbled, keeping his gaze ahead. “You'll know when you smell it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Smell what?”

Vorgath grunted, that almost smile making another ghostly appearance. “Fresh-baked bread and enchanted sulfur.”

“Enchanted sulfur?” I asked with a raised eyebrow, already imagining the disaster Elias would cause if he got his small hands on anything volatile at the Faire. I pictured myself running through Stonevale after my boy while he gleefully lugged a bag of mystical rocks behind him, yelling, “They pop in all colors when you throw 'em, Mama!”

Vorgath must have sensed my concern because he added gruffly: “The sulfur's contained. Only released by the magic smiths during demonstrations. No danger as long as everyone is careful.”

I blinked up at him. “Have you met my son?”

There was a strangled sound that might have been a laugh, though Vorgath covered it

with a cough. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

Reassured by Vorgath's presence and words, I let out a long breath, leaning back against the hard seat, only slightly jealous of Mrs. Crumble's brownie ability to apparate.

Minutes later, Vorgath slowed the reins as we approached the entrance of Stonevale. Large stone pillars flanked a half-constructed gate, the intricate carvings already hinting at the skilled hands of dwarven artisans. Dwarves weren’t the only ones here, though—elves, humans, and a few fae moved about the outpost, working alongside the guards dressed in stout boots, leather aprons, and helmets that seemed both protective and ceremonial.

A dwarven guard stepped forward, squinting up at Vorgath. “Ironfoot’s guests?”

Vorgath grunted in affirmation. “Aye. We’ve brought the ceremonial axes.”

She gave a brisk nod. “Carry on then. Grimble’s set up in the far square.”

As soon as we passed the gate, the scents hit me all at once. Vorgath had warned me, but I wasn’t prepared for the overwhelming blend of overheated metal and fresh-baked goods. Sticky buns, stews, and what had to be an entire farmyard’s worth of sizzling meats mingled in the air, drawing my attention as we navigated the bustling streets.

Stonevale teemed with life, a colorful clash of shops and stalls pressed together, their owners shouting over the noise of the crowd. Humans and elves haggled with dwarven merchants, while fae artisans displayed their wares next to dwarven inventions—crossbows that could fire multiple bolts, enchanted pendants that hummed soft tunes, and delicate silver-wire spinning tops that seemed to defy gravity—just to name a few.

One tall apparatus—a thin pole attached to a rotating gear with small metallic birds fluttering in perfect synchronization—caught Elias's eye. “Whoa! Mama, look! Those birds are flying!”

“They’re not real, sweetheart,” I said, leaning closer over the edge of the wagon to get a better view. “They're machines. Beautiful little machines.”

“Can we make one at home?” Elias asked.

I laughed, but before I could answer, Vorgath responded in his quiet, steady way. “Takes years to perfect. Precision gears. Specialized metals. But...” He glanced down at Elias. “We can try to make something simpler. Start small. One step at a time.”

Elias practically vibrated with excitement. “Really? Could we?”

“It appears you’ve roped yourself into a fine tinkering mess now, Vorgath,” I teased.

He grunted slightly. “Not a mess if it’s made properly.”

We kept going, Vorgath expertly guiding the horses through the town. Tents sprouted like mushrooms among the buildings—colorful, mismatched fabrics tied onto wooden frames, flapping in the breeze. The air buzzed with activity, the clattering of gears and the incessant hum of machinery. Steam hissed from what I could only guess were miniature boilers powering all sorts of fantastic inventions, and countless tinkerers bustled about, making last-minute adjustments.

Just then, a familiar booming laughter echoed through the square, and a whirlwind of red beard and leather barreled toward us with all the grace of an animated boulder.

“Vorgath Steelbane, you ol’ brute! And you’ve brought the widow blacksmith!” Grimble Ironfoot hollered, loud enough to make heads turn.

Grimble was his usual self—delighted and slightly chaotic, with bits of ash in his wild red beard and singed eyebrows that told me he'd been toying with something explosive.

“You know, most people just wave,” I called out with a grin, hopping down from the wagon.

Grimble threw his head back with a hearty laugh. “Not in Stonevale, lass! Not where hugs put you back together after a long day dodging fireballs at the forge!”

“Gracious, Grimble,” I chuckled, dodging a too-enthusiastic pat on the back as he turned his attention to Vorgath and slapped him on the shoulder with enough force to knock over a smaller man. Vorgath simply grunted in return.

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“You’ve outdone yourself again, haven’t you?” Grimble said, eyeing the wagon’s contents. He inspected one of the polished ceremonial axes, his fingers brushing over the intricate carvings. “These will more than do the job,” he muttered in awe. “More than do it.”

Elias, of course, couldn’t care less about the ceremony. He was already hopping around, eyeing the dwarven inventions scattered throughout the square, barely able to contain himself. I was about to tell him to calm down when Grimble turned toward him.

“Ah, little master Elias, is it?” Grimble grinned. “Ever been to a Tinkerer's Faire?”

“No, sir!” Elias puffed up his chest. “But I’m ready to see everything!”

Grimble let out a booming laugh. “Lad, I’ll make sure ye see it all! But first, you’ll be needin’ a bit of steady feet if you’re planning to explore everything without gettin’ lost in the crowd.” He pulled a small, gleaming device from his pocket—what looked like a mechanical compass with a tiny silver bird perched on top.

Elias’s eyes widened. “What’s that?”

“This here’s a Finder. She points ye to wherever yer heart wants to go.” He winked, then held it out to Elias. “Why don’t ye tell her what you seek, lad?”

Elias reached out cautiously, fingers brushing the gleaming device with reverence. Then he screwed up his face in concentration and whispered, “I want to see the enchanted sulfur.”

The tiny bird spun around, its beak shifting until it pointed directly toward one corner of the sprawling Faire. Elias gasped in delight. “It worked!”

“So it did!” Grimble crowed, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Now off with ye!” He caught my eye and added with a wink, “But not too far, alright?”

I smiled, though my instincts already wanted to chase after him, to keep him within arm’s reach. “Stay close where I can see you!” I called after him, waving as he followed the bird’s beak, weaving through the gathering crowd.

“He’ll be impossible to settle down after this,” I said with a mock glare toward Grimble.

“That’s the beauty of it, lass,” he said with a shrug. “Let the boy run wild. It’s the best way to learn.”

Vorgath, having busied himself with the rest of the axes in the back of the wagon, finally approached, casting a subtle but sharp glance toward Elias’s retreating form before shifting his focus to Grimble.

“Is the ceremony still this afternoon?” Vorgath asked, his deep voice cutting through Grimble’s jovial chatter.

“Aye, right before sundown,” Grimble confirmed, rubbing his hands together. “Come find me before the ceremony starts. There’s plenty to explore in the meantime!” With that, he trundled off through the growing throng of festival-goers.

And suddenly, in a crowd of hundreds of people, I was alone again with Vorgath.

He cleared his throat, scanning the crowd. “We should... explore,” he said gruffly. “Make sure Elias doesn’t get into any trouble.”

I nodded, grateful for the excuse to move. “Yes, of course.”

We set off, weaving between excited festival-goers and elaborate displays, but I was aware of Vorgath's presence beside me the whole time. His massive form seemed to part the crowd effortlessly, creating a path for us both.

“Look,” Vorgath said, pulling me from my thoughts. He nodded toward a nearby stall where a female dwarf was working intently, her skilled hands weaving intricate patterns into what looked like gleaming metal fabric.

I stepped closer, mesmerized by the artisan's deft movements. “It's beautiful,” I breathed, watching as she threaded impossibly thin strands of silver and gold together.

“Mithral weaving,” Vorgath explained, his voice low and close to my ear. “Stronger than steel, lighter than silk. Used for armor, mostly.”

The dwarf looked up, a smile crinkling her eyes. “Aye, that it is,” she said. “But it's not just for battle, mind you. Watch this.”

She held up a completed piece of the fabric, no larger than a handkerchief. With a murmured word, the metal threads began to shimmer and shift, forming intricate patterns that danced across the surface like living art.

“Oh!” I gasped, delighted.

The dwarf nodded, clearly pleased by my reaction. “Woven with enchantments as well as metal. Here, feel it.”

She held out the fabric, and I reached for it hesitantly. As my fingers brushed the surface, I was struck by its impossible softness. It felt like touching a cloud, yet I

could sense the strength beneath.

“Beautiful and functional,” I commented.

Vorgath caught my eye, reaching past me to rub the fabric between his fingers. “Are you getting ideas?”

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I tapped a finger to my lips thoughtfully. “Actually, yes.” I turned to the dwarven artisan, excitement bubbling in my chest. “Have you ever considered collaborating with a blacksmith?”

The dwarf's eyes lit up. “Aye, I've thought about it. But finding the right smith with the vision for it? That's been the challenge. Most smiths I know are brutes interested only in making the biggest, sharpest weapons.” She cocked her head at me. “Don't tell me you're a smith, lass? Not with that pretty face.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I can swing a hammer just as well as the best of them.”

“Is that so?” The woman set aside her work and crossed her arms over her ample chest. “Well then, you've got my attention. What did you have in mind?”

I leaned in, lowering my voice conspiratorially. “What if we combined your mithral weaving with other metalwork, appealing to women and mothers, a demographic usually overlooked by blacksmiths?”

“Like what?” she asked, stroking her beard.

“Like... a necklace that changes color when danger is near. For when a woman is out on her own.”

She snapped her fingers. “Or a bracelet that could warm or cool the wearer based on her needs.”

Thinking of Elias, I added, “Or a pair of tokens bound to each other, one for the

mother and one for the child, for easy tracking.”

The dwarven artisan clapped her hands together. “I like the way you think, lass! It's not often I meet a human with such vision.” She thrust out a calloused hand. “Name's Brilda Steelweave. How about we set up a proper meeting to discuss this further?”

I shook her hand enthusiastically. “Soraya Ashford. And I'd love that, Brilda.”

As we exchanged details and made tentative plans, I could feel Vorgath's gaze on me. When I glanced up at him, the corners of his mouth had turned up in the barest hint of a smile.

“What?” I asked, suddenly self-conscious.

He shook his head slightly. “Nothing.”

Before I could respond, a commotion from the center of the square caught our attention. “Ladies and gentlemen!” a booming voice called out. “Prepare yourselves for a spectacle of fire and magic!”

Brilda grinned. “Ah, that'll be Fizzlebang. Best fire elementalist this side of the Crystal Caves. You won't want to miss this show.”

Vorgath's hand settling on the small of my back startled me. “Shall we?” he asked, nodding toward the gathering crowd.

“Lead the way,” I managed to say, my voice only slightly breathless.

As we made our way through the crowd, Vorgath's hand remained steady on my back, guiding me. The warmth of his touch seemed to seep through my clothes, leaving my skin tingling. I found myself leaning into him slightly, craving more of

that contact.

We found a spot with a good view just as Fizzlebang, a dwarf with wild hair that seemed to defy gravity, took center stage. With a dramatic flourish, he raised his hands, and suddenly, the air was filled with dancing flames. The fire twisted and spiraled, forming intricate shapes and patterns. Dragons made of embers soared overhead, their fiery wings beating in perfect synchronization. Flowers bloomed from sparks, their petals unfurling in a dazzling display of reds and golds.

I gasped in wonder, unconsciously pressing closer to Vorgath. His arm slipped around my waist, holding me steady as we watched the mesmerizing performance.

“It's beautiful,” I whispered.

“Yes,” he murmured, but he wasn't looking at the show anymore. I could feel his eyes on me, on my face, watching me as intently as I watched the show in front of us. “It is.”

My heart thundered in my chest, and for a moment, as I turned to meet his gaze, I forgot how to breathe. The world around us seemed to fade away, leaving only the warmth of Vorgath's embrace and the intensity of his gaze.

But just as the moment stretched between us, a small, excited voice cut through the haze.

“Mama! Vorgath! Did you see that? The fire turned into a dragon!” Elias suddenly appeared at our side, his eyes wide with wonder and his cheeks flushed with excitement.

I jumped, surprised, and turned to him with a smile. “It's quite spectacular, isn't it?”

“I should...” Vorgath started to pull away, but I caught his hand, holding him in place.

“No,” I said quietly. “Stay. Please.”

He hesitated for a moment, then nodded, his arm tightening around me once more.

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Elias didn't seem to notice, his gaze fixed on the fire show. "It's amazing! How do they do that? Can we learn to do that? Oh! And guess what I saw earlier! There was this dwarf who had a machine that could predict the weather! He said it's going to rain tomorrow, but only for an hour in the afternoon. Can you believe that?"

I laughed, ruffling his hair. "That does sound incredible. Hey, how did you know where to find us?"

Elias beamed and held up the small device Grimbale had given him earlier, the silver bird on top glinting in the firelight. "I just asked," he said proudly. "The Finder told me."

As Fizzlebang's performance reached its crescendo, with a massive phoenix rising from a sea of flames, I found myself thinking that perhaps the most magical thing at this faire wasn't the enchanted metal or the dancing fire.

Perhaps it was this moment, right here, safely tucked against Vorgath's side with my son's sticky hand clasped in mine, the three of us watching in awe as the fiery phoenix spread its wings, showering us with harmless sparks that danced and twinkled before fading away.

The audience erupted in thunderous applause, and I found myself cheering along with them, caught up in the magic of the moment.

Chapter 15

The sun had long since dipped below the horizon, but Stonevale was far from quiet.

Lanterns cast a warm, golden glow over the festivities, their light dancing off the polished metal of dwarven inventions and glinting in the eyes of merry-makers. The air was thick with the scent of roasted meats, sweet pastries, and the earthy aroma of dwarven ale.

I sat on a wooden bench, my fingers wrapped around a tankard of said ale. The heavy brew settled warmly in my stomach, softening the edges of the world around me. Vorgath sat beside me, his large form a comforting presence in the bustling night.

We'd found a quiet corner of the festival, away from the most raucous celebrations. Elias was safely tucked away in our wagon on the edge of the fairgrounds, sound asleep after a day of wide-eyed wonder and endless questions. Grumble's oldest daughter, Thora, had volunteered to keep an eye on him.

I'd been surprised when the young dwarf had offered. Thora was a curiosity among her kin—more interested in books than tools, with ink-stained fingers and a faraway look in her eyes. She'd waved off my concerns with a wry smile.

“Trust me,” she'd said, pushing her spectacles up her nose, “I'd much rather spend the evening with a sleeping child and a good book than trying to dodge my father's attempts to marry me off to every eligible bachelor in Stonevale.”

So here we were, Vorgath and me, sharing a moment of relative peace amidst the chaos of the fair. The strong dwarven ale made my head spin pleasantly, warmth spreading through my limbs and loosening my tongue. Vorgath tapped his fingers against the side of his tankard—an absent, rhythmic motion I mimicked with my shoe against the cobblestones.

I took a small sip of the ale, letting the warmth bloom in my chest and rise to my cheeks.

“You know,” I began, “I think this ale is stronger than some of the weapons we've forged.”

Vorgath snorted and took a long drink, his eyes flickering with amusement. “Dwarven craftsmanship is unmatched.”

The embers from the nearest brazier crackled, sending dancing shadows stretching long across the cobblestones and painting a soft light across Vorgath's face, making his scars glow, turning them into silver threads crisscrossing his skin. They were the marks of a life far different from the one he lived now—a life I knew so little about.

“Do you ever miss it?” I asked.

Vorgath, who had been focused on the sky, turned those intense dark eyes on me. “Miss what?”

“The fighting. The war. The life you had before Everwood?”

His expression darkened for a moment, shadows threading through his features. “No...” He shook his head, his gaze focusing somewhere far off in the distance. “I don't miss that.”

“And your brother?” I asked cautiously, aware I was stepping somewhere painful.

Vorgath's fingers tightened slightly around the tankard, but his face remained impassive. “The last time I saw him, we stood on opposite sides of a battlefield.”

I watched him closely, the weight of his words hanging between us like the thick clouds overhead.

“It didn't matter that we grew up together,” Vorgath continued, talking more to the

night air than to me now. “He wasn't my brother anymore. Not the brother I remembered.”

His jaw tightened, his hand flexing into a fist on his knee. My heart ached in response, the pain in his words sharp and palpable.

“What was his name?” I asked.

After a slight pause, he answered, “Gorkath.”

I placed my hand on top of his. “I'm sorry. About Gorkath.”

Vorgath's hand twitched beneath mine, but he didn't pull away. For a long moment, he stared down at our hands, his brow furrowing like he was deciding what to say—if there was anything eventosay. His fingers flexed, thick and calloused, and I could feel the strength there. The hesitation.

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“He made his choices,” Vorgath finally murmured, his voice rough like gravel. “But sometimes, I wonder if I should’ve tried harder. Maybe if I had...”

“You can’t,” I interrupted gently, tightening my grip. “You can’t get lost in the what-ifs.” And I would know. I was the queen of what-ifs.

His deep brown eyes flicked to mine, locking me in place. There was so much weight behind that gaze—years’ worth of regret, guilt, and the ever-present shadow of someone he couldn’t save. The same way I sometimes caught my own reflection in the mirror and found ghosts looking back at me—the ghost of Kald, my husband, gone with barely a trace. The ghost of the life we’d had, buried beneath the ashes of a forge long cold. The ghost of the woman I once was, a woman who thought her heart had frozen alongside that forge.

But it hadn’t, had it?

Not entirely.

Because I was here, with my hand atop an orc’s, at a dwarven festival, feeling entirely too warm for an autumn evening.

I shifted to face him, my body turned slightly toward his. “Vorgath—”

“I don’t miss battle,” he interrupted, his voice dipping low. “But sometimes... sometimes I miss losing control. Just... letting go. But I stopped allowing myself that luxury a long time ago.”

Heat spread along my skin, and not from the ale. His confession was raw, unfiltered, and echoed in the hollow places of my own heart. It hurt to see him hold so much of himself back. To watch him wrestle with the restraint he put between us.

But I was the one who had asked for that restraint. I had pushed him away, told him I wasn't ready. And he—so strong, so patient—had respected that. He'd given me the space I'd needed, held himself back because I had been too afraid to face what I truly wanted.

He was brave—brave enough to let me go when I wasn't ready, brave enough to offer me his quiet strength even as he battled his own scars. And now it was my turn. I could be brave, too. For him. For me. For the future I hadn't allowed myself to imagine.

The night folded in closer, the world around us shrinking until it felt like there was only him, only me. I could barely breathe as I asked, "What if you didn't have to hold back?"

His hand tightened around mine, and I could hear the struggle in his breath, the tiny hitch in his throat. For a moment, he didn't say anything; he just watched me intently before his voice emerged, quiet and rough, like stone grinding against stone.

"I will not touch you, Soraya," he said.

I blinked up at him in shock, confusion writ across my features. Of course, I had ruined it. The realization felt like plunging into ice water.

I stood so abruptly that I nearly tipped the tankard. "I—I'm sorry. I should just—"

I spun on my heel, heart pounding in my ears. Embarrassment engulfed me, burning hotter than the forge fire we'd tended together, hotter than the molten regret pressing

against my ribs. My feet moved on instinct—one step, then another.

Just get away, Soraya. Get away before you make it worse—

But I barely made it a few steps before a massive hand caught my arm.

Vorgath was fast. Too fast for someone his size. He pulled me—gently but firmly—into the shadows of a nearby alley, so quickly that I didn't even have the breath to protest. Damp stone pressed cool against my back, the noise of the festival muffled beyond the alley's narrow walls. The smells of night air and cooling metal clashed with the scent of him—leather and forge smoke, the intoxicating, earthy scent of the man who held me now, caging me in with his body.

“You didn't let me finish,” he growled.

I stopped struggling, though my heart did not. “What else is there to say?” I whispered.

His hand came up faster than I could process, not to my shoulder or wrist, but to the side of my face. His fingers hovered just a hair from my cheek in a way that almost undid me right then. It was surprising just how gentle this giant of an orc could be, the same hand that could bend metal brushing against me as if I'd break if touched too harshly.

“I won't touch you unless you tell me to, Soraya,” he rumbled, his breath ghosting against my temple. “And unless you tell me how.”

Chapter 16

Tell him how?

That strange warmth ignited again, burning low, starting in my stomach and spreading up my spine. For a moment, I just stood there, breathless. Every muscle, every nerve in my body on edge, desperate to move but unsure if I dared cross the line he'd drawn.

And then—I crossed it.

“Kiss me,” I demanded.

Vorgath's lips hovered a mere breath away from mine. “How do you like to be kissed, durlan?”

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I gazed up at Vorgath, my heart pounding so hard I was sure he could hear it. My breath caught at the endearment. Durlan. I didn't know what it meant, but the way he said it, low and reverent, made my skin tingle.

“Slowly,” I whispered, my voice barely audible even to my own ears. “And then not slowly at all.”

For a moment, he simply looked at me, his gaze roaming over my features as if committing them to memory. And as he did, something inside me settled—like an iron bar set into a molten forge, finding its place after being adrift in fire.

Why wasn't I hesitating anymore? Because... I was tired of hesitating. Tired of standing still at the edge of cliffs that terrified me.

I'd done that already. I'd been there when Elias was born, full of hope and love but also fear—fear of all the things I wouldn't get right, the ghosts I couldn't chase away. I'd stood at the edge as I held the crumpled letter that told me Kald was never coming home, and when I'd decided to take up his hammer, cold and brittle in my unsure hands, because I had no other choice.

This was another one of those moments, wasn't it? A moment when life stretched into “before” and “after.” The kind where I stood frozen, knowing that stepping forward would change everything, but standing still felt even worse—the kind where there was no turning back.

Only this time, I wasn't frozen in fear.

I wanted this. Him.

Vorgath, with his formidable strength, his scars, his quiet intensity. And underneath all that—layers more—his gentleness that could soften even steel. He made me feel safe, yes, but more than that, he made me feel alive. Like I was still capable of creating something, of building something new, something real.

Even after all that had been broken.

This wasn't just about a touch or a kiss. This was about trusting that I could fall and Vorgath would be there to catch me. Maybe not with tenderness—though, it seemed he'd mastered that, too—but with a trust built on fire and force and...him. All of him.

I was ready now.

So, instead of waiting, instead of holding back... I leaned in.

And with a courage that felt both reckless and sure, I repeated, "Kiss me."

A growl rumbled low in his throat, and his mouth descended on mine, slow at first, just as I had asked. His lips brushed against mine, warm and firm, holding back the storm he was clearly capable of unleashing.

And Seven save me... it wasn't enough.

I tilted my head, gripping the front of his tunic, tugging him closer, pressing harder. "More," I whispered against his lips.

His restraint shattered.

Vorgath's hand slid to the back of my neck, pulling me deeper into the kiss. He tasted

like smoke and ale, but there was something else—something utterly him that made my knees weak. He kissed me like he was forging me into something new: deliberate, powerful, absolute.

His other hand braced against the wall behind me, his massive frame shielding me from the world beyond the alley. Heat radiated from his body, mingling with the warmth already coursing through me. His tusks brushed the corners of my mouth, a sharp contrast to the softness of his lips and beard, and it sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

I melted into him as his touch roved from my neck down my arm, the roughness of his callouses a reminder of the strength contained in his hands. Somehow, that made the gentleness he was still capable of even more intoxicating—a beautiful contradiction in every brush of his skin against mine.

My hands moved of their own accord, fingers gripping his broad shoulders, feeling the muscles ripple beneath his tunic as he held me close, as though afraid I'd disappear if he let go.

“Vorgath...” I whispered into his mouth, the word halfway between a plea and a prayer. I wasn't entirely sure what I was asking for.

But he heard it, whatever it was, and growled in response—a low, reverberating sound that felt more like it belonged in his chest than his throat. His hand slid lower, tracing the curve of my waist and down, until it landed on my hip, fingers nearly spanning the entire breadth of it.

By the Alders, his hands could probably lift me without issue. I had no idea if I liked that or if it terrified me. Maybe both?

No, I definitely liked it.

Vorgath kissed me harder, tugging me closer, so close the only thing between us was the rapid rise and fall of my chest as I struggled to catch my breath. His thumb brushed the side of my throat, just below my jaw, sending a fresh wave of heat rolling through me—not that I wasn’t already burning, but this... this was a different kind of fire. This was the kind that sparked and flared until it consumed everything in its wake.

Then he pulled back, just an inch, his breath hot against my lips.

“Is this...” His voice was deep, rough, like he had to drag it from somewhere buried inside. “Is this what you—?”

“Yes,” I blurted, not caring what he was about to ask. I didn’t need a question. We didn’t need words right now. “Yes, just—don’t stop.”

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I barely finished the sentence before his mouth was on mine again, lips parting, tongue sliding against mine, and I moaned softly, fingers digging into his shoulders like I needed him to steady me, to keep me grounded or else I might float away in the storm of feelings that were rushing through me. I had never been kissed like this. It wasn't just passionate—it was...intentional. Like he was telling me without words all the things I had never dared to dream someone would say.

My back arched against the cold stone as he pressed me harder into the wall, his hand moving from my waist to the small of my back. His other hand went to my hair, fingers tangling in the loose strands that had escaped my bun. He tugged gently, just enough to make me tilt my head back slightly, giving him better access to my lips.

And he took it, his mouth moving fiercely against mine with a possessive edge that left me breathless. I'd never felt so wanted...never. That realization hit me like a hammer to the chest—not in a painful way, but like a truth I hadn't allowed myself to see until now, in this moment, with this orc who held me as though he'd die if he let go.

I was alive. I was alive, and I could feel again. Want again. Be wanted.

Vorgath pulled back just enough for me to see his eyes. They were molten now, dark and intense. His breathing was ragged, his chest heaving, and I could see the restraint in his tense jaw as though he was waiting for me to stop him, to tell him this was moving too fast.

I didn't want to stop.

My hand slid down his arm, tracing the dips and grooves of his muscles, until it reached his hand still clutching my waist and dragged it up, up, along my side, until I pressed his palm against my breast. His massive hand cupped me, fingers splayed wide, and I marveled at how perfectly I fit in his grasp, like I was made to be there. He brushed his thumb across the peak, sending a jolt of pleasure through me, hardening my nipple beneath his touch.

A small gasp escaped my lips, and Vorgath growled low in his throat, his eyes never leaving mine as he did it again, slower this time, deliberate. His thumb circled the bud, teasing it until it stood taut and aching, begging for more. I arched into his touch, pressing myself firmer into his hand.

He took the invitation, squeezing gently, testing the weight and softness. Each movement sent sparks of pleasure coursing through me, pooling low in my belly, making me ache.

“Vorgath...” His name left my lips like a secret, whispered into his mouth as I leaned up to kiss him again.

He met me eagerly, his lips claiming mine with a hunger that matched my own. His hand continued to work its magic, kneading and caressing, his thumb brushing against my nipple again and again until I was panting into his mouth, my body alive with sensation.

His other hand trailed down my side, tracing the curve of my waist and hip before sliding around to grip my backside. He pulled me tight against him, and I could feel the hard length of him pressed against my stomach, extending up to almost nestle between my breasts. Seven save me, he was enormous—his arousal a thick, solid presence. I shifted slightly, rubbing against him, and he groaned into my mouth, his grip tightening. His hips moved instinctively, pushing against me, and I could feel the sheer power and size of him. It was intoxicating, the knowledge that he wanted me

this much, that I could drive him to this point of need and desperation.

His hand moved from my breast, trailing down to the laces of my bodice. With a deftness that surprised me, he began to unlace it, his fingers working quickly and expertly. I could feel the cool night air against my skin as the fabric loosened, and then his hand was sliding inside, cupping my bare breast, his thumb brushing against my nipple.

I moaned softly, arching into his touch. His mouth left mine, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses down my neck, lingering on the sensitive spot where my shoulder met my throat. I tilted my head back, giving him better access, and he took full advantage, his teeth grazing my skin, his tongue soothing the sting, until finally, his mouth moved lower, kissing the swell of my breast, his tongue circling my nipple before drawing it into his mouth. I cried out softly, my fingers tangling in his hair, holding him to me as he suckled and teased.

“Vorgath,” I gasped, my head falling back against the wall, my breasts bared to him and anyone who dared to walk past.

He looked up at me then, eyes dark in the shadowed alleyway. “You keep saying my name, durlan.”

I laughed breathlessly. “It’s your fault,” I teased, my voice barely above a whisper. “You keep doing... that.”

A small smirk played on his lips, and he leaned in, his breath hot on my ear. “Doing what?”

I shivered, goosebumps prickling my skin. “Making me feel... everything.”

He chuckled, a low rumble that vibrated through me. “Good.”

His hand moved from my breast, sliding down my side, tracing the curve of my hip. He gripped the fabric of my skirt, slowly pulling it up, inch by inch, his fingers brushing against my thigh. I held my breath, anticipation coiling in my stomach. His touch was deliberate, each movement calculated to drive me wild.

And it was working.

My heart pounded in my chest, my body aching for more. I gripped his shoulders, my nails digging into the leather of his tunic. His hand moved higher, pushing my skirt up around my waist, his fingers tracing the edge of my undergarments. I sucked in a breath, my eyes fluttering closed.

“Look at me,” he commanded.

I opened my eyes, meeting his intense gaze. His fingers slipped beneath the fabric, brushing against the soft curls. I bit my lip, a small gasp escaping as he delved deeper, his fingers finding the sensitive bud that ached for his touch. I squirmed, my hips moving instinctively, seeking more. He leaned in, his tongue sliding against my lower lip. I opened for him, our tongues tangling as he continued to tease me, his fingers moving in slow, torturous circles.

“More,” I pleaded, my voice a breathy moan.

He growled, his fingers moving faster, applying more pressure. I squirmed, my hips arching to meet his touch, the sensation building as he stroked and teased. Each circle sent jolts of pleasure through me, making my breath hitch and my body tremble.

I gasped, my breath coming in short, desperate bursts. “Vorgath... I... I’m...”

He nodded slightly, his eyes locked onto mine, and it was as if he could see every part of me—not just the surface, but the depths I kept hidden, the fears and hopes I

barely dared to acknowledge. For a moment, everything else faded—the sounds of the festival outside the alley, the world itself—all that remained was his touch, unraveling every thread of composure.

My body tensed, coiling tighter and tighter until I burst into a wave of pure sensation, a cry slipping past my lips. I clung to him, my fingers digging into his tunic as his touch sent me spiraling over the edge.

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Vorgath held me through it, swallowing my moans, his hand slowing but not stopping, guiding me gently back to him. I sagged against him, my breath coming in ragged gasps, my body trembling with aftershocks.

For several moments, the world was still, the only sound the hammering of my heart and the distant clamor of the festival.

And then I laughed—soft at first, dazed and breathless, but growing louder as the laughter bubbled up uncontrollably. I pressed my forehead against his chest.

“That... that was...” I couldn’t even form the words, a giddy, post-orgasmic warmth coursing through me.

“Good?” he ventured, that rough voice of his dancing with amusement.

I lifted my head, still grinning in disbelief. “More than good.”

But as the haze of bliss began to clear, a new hunger flared. I needed more of him—the feel of his skin against mine, his weight pressing me into—

I tugged at his tunic, whispering urgently, “Vorgath, I need you. Now.”

But instead of leaning in, he stilled completely. Every muscle in his large frame tensed as if he was holding back an internal war. His hand, the one that had just sent me into orbit, rested firmly on the wall beside my head. His brow furrowed with something caught between desire and restraint.

“No,” he said, his voice thick with an edge of torment.

I blinked, my body still humming, trying to process the word, the sudden withdrawal.

“No?” I echoed, confusion lacing my voice.

“You’re not ready,” he said firmly, his voice rough yet unyielding.

Not... ready? I was practically dripping for him. “What do you mean?” I said breathlessly, my lips barely keeping up with the rapid thrum of my heartbeat. “Look at me! Look at what you just did to me. How can you say—?”

Vorgath shifted, tilting his head forward so that his brow pressed gently against mine, his breath heavy against my cheek.

“You are a human woman,” he said in that deep rumble. “Beautiful and strong, yes, but I am an orc. You need patience—practice—before your body will accept mine.”

His words hit me like a bucket of cold water, but not in the way that snuffed out the heat still throbbing through me. No, this was... startling. Confusing, even.

“Practice?” I asked, my eyebrows shooting up. I wasn’t some blushing maiden! I was a widow, a mother. I knew what I wanted, and right now, I wanted him.

But before I had a chance to argue, he slid his hand down from where it had braced against the wall, looping his fingers under my chin. He tilted my head back so that our eyes met fully, his gaze intense and smoldering.

“Yes, practice,” Vorgath muttered in that low, gravelly voice of his, the word coiling in my stomach.

As if to prove his point, his fingers traveled down my body again. This time, there

was no rush. His fingers were slow, deliberate, as if they had all the time in the world. They dipped between my thighs, brushing through the slick heat between them, teasing me once again.

I gasped, legs trembling as his hand pressed firmly against me. He grunted softly, as if my body's response was something that settled his internal conflict.

“You're wet for me, durlan, but still... too tight.”

I blinked up at him in disbelief, my cheeks flushing hotter with every word. “Too tight?”

“Aye,” he growled, leaning down so that his tusks grazed the shell of my ear. “An orc male is not like the men you're used to, Soraya. We are... bigger.” His voice dropped an octave, sending shivers down my spine. “Stronger.”

My breath hitched in my throat, imagining just how vast the difference might be—which wasn't hard, considering the length I'd felt pressed against me earlier.

“So,” he continued, voice rough with desire but laced with tenderness, “you need proper preparation.” His finger circled me again, making my body hum. “You need to get used to this... first.”

This? My brain fumbled to keep up with whatever it was he was suggesting. And then, without waiting for further discussion, Vorgath slid one thick finger inside of me.

Seven save me.

I dug my nails into his shoulders, my entire body arching into the sensation as he filled me with just that single finger. I had never... never felt anything like it.

Just one finger and I already felt stretched, a delicious pressure building inside me, coaxing little gasps and moans from my lips. He moved so slowly, so deliberately, and I realized with a wave of heat that he was right... I wasn't ready. Not yet. But sweet Seven, I wanted to be.

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Vorgath's eyes never left my face as he pushed deeper, watching my reactions carefully, gauging how my body responded to him. His other hand came up to stroke the side of my face, a contrast of tenderness against the sinful pleasure building below.

“See?” he rasped, his voice barely containing the strain. “You're already taking me so well... but this is just the beginning.”

I moaned, unable to form a coherent response. Instead, I rocked my hips against his hand, desperate for more, desperate to fully give in to the sensation.

His finger began to move then, sliding in and out of me with a pace that was almost torturous. He added a slow, twisting motion that made me clench around him, my breath hitching again as that unbearable heat coiled low in my belly, growing hotter and tighter with every stroke.

“You're doing so well,durlan.” The way the word rumbled from his throat made warmth spread through my chest even as the ache intensified.

His thumb brushed deliberately against the swollen bud between my legs, and stars—actualstars—flashed beneath my eyelids.

“I... I can't—” I gasped, arching into his hand, feeling myself unraveling again at the edges. He tugged gently on my hair with his other hand, the sharp sensation only adding to the recklessness bubbling inside me.

“You can,” Vorgath whispered, his tusks brushing against my temple.

With another twist of his thumb, the pressure snapped, releasing a torrent of heat and pleasure that rushed through me, wave after wave. My body tightened around his finger, gripping him as if I couldn't bear to let go, every nerve igniting in a firestorm of sensation. I cried out, the sound swallowed by the night's cool air and the solid wall of muscle that was Vorgath, holding me steady as I shattered in his arms.

My head fell back, my breathless laughter once again bubbling up uncontrollably. "By the Alders, Vorgath..."

He withdrew his finger slowly, reverently, as if savoring every second. His hand stayed warm where it rested against my hip, grounding me as my pulse slowed, returning me to reality.

"If that was practice..." I began, still out of breath, "I'd like a lifetime of it."

He chuckled low in his throat but shook his head. "You'll tire of lessons if you're not careful."

I raised an eyebrow, emboldened by the heat still pooling low in my stomach. "I don't think that's possible."

Vorgath kept his hand firm on my waist and leaned in, his lips hovering just above mine, his breath hot. "We'll see just how strong that claim holds up when the real work begins, durlan."

I shivered at the promise behind his words. His tusks brushed against my cheek, hinting at future pleasures I could barely begin to contemplate.

But then, with a sigh that had weight to it, Vorgath took a small step back. His body still radiated that intoxicating warmth, but now there was resolve etched into his features, even deeper than the scars that marred his skin. He helped me straighten my

skirt and then lace my dress, tucking all parts of me away again.

“Come,” he said, guiding me away from the shadows of the alley and back into the ambient glow of the festival. “You should rest.”

I frowned, reluctant to lose even an inch of him. “Rest?”

“Aye.” His deep voice rumbled against the backdrop of the crowd, now more distant as the stalls and fire-eaters continued their revelry without us. “You’ll need your strength tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I blinked up at him. “For what?”

His lips twitched up in a knowing smile—the kind of smile that was rare from him, but when it appeared? Well. It set my entire body ablaze all over again.

“For more practice,” he finally replied.

I stared at him for a moment, my mind still foggy, muscles weak but eager, pulsing from everything that had just happened. A laugh—soft, tired but undoubtedly content—escaped me as I shook my head.

“Well, I suppose practice does make perfect,” I teased.

Vorgath’s eyes glimmered in the soft light of the festival, and for a fleeting moment, I could see it—just under the surface of his quiet, stoic demeanor. The craving. The pulling weight of restraint and the tug of something he wanted just as much as I did.

But instead of giving in to it, he merely nodded, that ghost of a smile still on his lips as he placed a warm, steadying hand at my back and guided me through the drifting crowd.

One glimpse over my shoulder, back at the shadowed alley, and I knew something inside me had irrevocably shifted. The forge wasn't the only thing feeling the heat these days. The idea of what tomorrow might bring made my pulse kick up all over again. And oh, Seven... I wanted to see just how many more lessons there were to learn with him.

Or, at the very least, how many times we could go over the first one.

Chapter 17

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Vorgath took up two-thirds of my bed, but I couldn't exactly complain when he was so skilled at making every remaining inch feel like paradise. He lay on his back, one massive arm slung over me, his warmth radiating through the faded quilt like he was a living furnace. I wasn't cold. Not even close. And judging by the slow, steady rise and fall of his chest, Vorgath was perfectly content where he was.

Carefully, I shifted a little, just enough to get a better look at him. The soft morning light filtering through the curtains played across his features, casting shadows over the bold black swirls of his tattoos. The intricate patterns curled over his arms and chest, dark marks of both heritage and the life he'd lived before we ever crossed paths. I let my eyes linger on them, marveling at how they seemed to follow the natural strength of his muscles, accentuating the power that came so easily to him.

His hair, shaggy and thick, lay tousled across the pillow, and his beard framed his face, giving him a rugged look that suited him all too well. One arm rested protectively across me, his hand spanning half my waist like it belonged there.

I should get up. There were things to do. Elias would be awake soon, and breakfast wasn't going to make itself. But the idea of moving from this spot felt like an impossible task.

Just a few more minutes.

"Planning your escape?" Vorgath's deep voice rumbled.

I yelped in surprise, only to have his grip tighten around me, pulling me closer until I was practically lying on top of him. "You're awake?"

“Have been.” His eyes fluttered open. “I can hear you think, you know.”

“Well, I was not planning my escape,” I mumbled, leaning down to press a kiss to his massive shoulder. “I’m just considering breakfast.”

“Mm. You were thinking about food?” he teased, squeezing my bottom through my nightgown.

Heat rose to my cheeks immediately. “Among other things,” I shot back.

Vorgath grunted, a sound that was half amusement, half disbelief. His hand moved up to my hip, and just like that, my pulse started to sprint like it had been doing every morning for the last week.

Had it really only been a week since the Tinkerers' Faire? Since the alley and the heat between us that had nearly melted me into a puddle? Somehow, it felt like Vorgath had always been here, and not just in my bed. Sure, there had been a fair amount of practice, but there were quiet moments, too, like after dinner when Elias fell asleep on the couch while we read together. Vorgath would carry him to bed, and then we’d sit by the fire, sipping tea in companionable silence before retiring.

Retiring. A word I never thought I’d use for sharing a bedroom with an orc—one who now nuzzled into the crook of my neck with a low, satisfied growl that sent shivers down my spine.

“So,” I murmured, running a hand across his broad chest. “Are you going to help me, or are you planning to keep distracting me?”

Vorgath leaned up on one elbow. “Distracting you seems more enjoyable.” His lips brushed against my neck, making me shiver.

I swatted him playfully on the chest, though it felt a bit like smacking a brick wall. “You’re impossible,” I huffed, though the way my pulse skyrocketed when his lips skimmed my skin told a different story.

“I am, yes,” Vorgath confirmed. His hand lowered, subtly squeezing my waist, and I thought of what those fingers did to me last night...

“Alright,” I muttered, forcing myself to slide out from underneath his arm. “We have to get up before Elias catches us.”

Vorgath groaned. “As if he doesn't know.”

“Know what?” I asked. “He's seven. He doesn't know anything.”

Vorgath chuckled softly, rolling onto his back and stretching in a way that made his muscles bunch and ripple under the blanket. “Seven isn’t as innocent as you think.”

Rolling out of bed and tugging on my robe, I shot him a look as I tied it around my waist. “I choose to believe that he doesn't know what his mother and her, er—”

“—orc boyfriend—” Vorgath offered.

“—mentor,” I corrected, though my voice betrayed a playful note, “are doing behind closed doors.”

The bed creaked as he stood, his heavy footfalls following me toward the kitchen. As he entered behind me, his presence filled the small space, his broad shoulders nearly touching both walls as he moved to the stove. Without a word, he began stoking the fire while I gathered ingredients for breakfast. We moved around each other with an ease that felt both new and familiar, like we'd been doing this dance for years instead of days.

I cracked eggs into a bowl, stealing glances at Vorgath as he sliced bread.

“You're staring,” Vorgath rumbled without looking up.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “I'm supervising,” I quipped back, earning a low chuckle from him.

Vorgath leaned in, his breath warm on my neck. “Supervising, hmm?”

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I swallowed hard, trying to focus on whisking the eggs. “Someone has to make sure you don't slice your fingers off.”

“Oh? Do you like my fingers?” he asked, his tone heavy with suggestion.

Before I could respond, there was a soft pop and Mrs. Crumble appeared in the kitchen.

“Oh my!” she said, glancing between us, no doubt noticing the color on my cheeks and Vorgath’s mischievous half-grin. “Am I interrupting something?”

I jumped back from Vorgath, nearly dropping the bowl of eggs. “Mrs. Crumble! I, uh, we were just making breakfast.”

“Mmhmm,” she hummed. “Well, I'm just here to make sure everything's ready for your big day.” Her knowing gaze swept over us. “I'm sure you've been preparing diligently,” she added with a wink.

I busied myself with the eggs, hoping my face wasn't as red as it felt. “Since you're here, do you want to get Elias up for me?” I asked, refusing to make eye contact with the brownie.

As Mrs. Crumble bustled off to wake Elias, I turned back to the stove, determined to focus on breakfast. But Vorgath's presence behind me was impossible to ignore. His warmth radiated against my back, and I could feel his gaze on me.

“You're nervous about today,” he pointed out in a low voice.

I sighed, my shoulders slumping slightly. “Is it that obvious?”

His large hand came to rest on my shoulder, a comforting weight. “Only to me,” he assured me.

I turned to face him, looking up into those deep, understanding eyes. “What if Thorne refuses to let me reopen the forge? What if he convinces the guild I’m not worthy?”

Vorgath's expression hardened slightly at the mention of the guildmaster. “He won't,” he said with a confidence I wish I felt. “He cannot. That is why there is a guild.”

“A guild that he's in charge of,” I reminded him.

“A guild that values skill and honor above all else,” Vorgath countered. “They will see that in you.”

His words warmed me more than the stove ever could. I leaned into him, resting my forehead against his broad chest for just a moment. “Thank you,” I murmured.

A few moments later, Elias joined us for breakfast. We sat around the kitchen table, elbows too close together, dishes and cups shoved to the edges to make room for everyone. Elias was bubbling about a new history lesson—the battle between the fae queen and the first Alderwood Guardian, narrated with his signature flair and enough sound effects to give the kitchen a reenactment.

“...and then the Guardian roared, holding up his staff like this!” Elias leaped into his chair, clutching an imaginary weapon.

“Careful,” Vorgath said, reaching out to steady Elias as he wobbled on his chair. “Save some of that energy for after school.”

Elias beamed at Vorgath, clearly basking in the attention. “Will you teach me more orc fighting moves later?” he asked eagerly.

I raised an eyebrow at Vorgath. “Orc fighting moves?”

Vorgath had the decency to look slightly sheepish. “Just some basic stances,” he explained.

“Uh-huh,” I muttered, but I couldn't hide my smile.

As we finished breakfast, I made my way to the door, Elias bouncing ahead excitedly, and Vorgath bringing up the rear. The morning air was crisp as we stepped outside, the streets of Everwood just beginning to stir with life.

Elias skipped between us, one hand in mine, the other reaching up to grasp Vorgath's fingers. Seeing my son's small hand engulfed by Vorgath's big green one made my heart flutter. Moments like these made everything else—the uncertainty, the judgment from others—fade away.

“Remember,” I said to Elias as we neared the school, “Mrs. Crumble will pick you up today. I have that... meeting.”

Elias nodded solemnly. “The big forge meeting, right? Are you gonna show them how good you are?”

I squeezed his hand. “I'm going to try my best.”

“You'll do great, Mama,” he said with all the confidence of a seven-year-old. Then, turning to Vorgath, he added, “You'll make sure they see how awesome she is, right?”

Vorgath nodded, his expression serious. “Of course.”

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As we approached the school, I couldn't help but notice the curious glances from other parents and children. It wasn't every day they saw a human woman, her son, and a towering orc walking together like a family. But to my surprise, I found I didn't mind the stares. Let them look. Let them see how happy I was.

We said our goodbyes to Elias, watching him run off to join his friends. When we turned to leave, Vorgath's hand found mine, his large fingers intertwining with my own.

“Ready?” he asked, his deep voice rumbling with reassurance.

I took a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. “As I'll ever be.”

Chapter 18

We made our way through the bustling streets, Thorne's forge looming closer with each step. It was a familiar sight, its stone walls darkened with soot and age, the entrance marked by the guild's symbol—a hammer crossed with flame. The clang of metal and the low murmur of conversation drifted out from inside, blending with the sounds of the city beyond.

My pulse quickened as we neared. I hadn't been here since my last run-in with Thorne, and the memory still clung to me—his sharp eyes, his dismissive tone, the way he'd practically laughed me out of the room.

But this time, I wasn't coming in alone. Vorgath's quiet strength was a constant presence beside me, and I held onto that as we stepped into the forge.

Inside, the heat hit me first, thick and familiar, along with the smell of molten metal and sweat. Blacksmiths and apprentices moved between anvils, their conversations low, but I could feel the ripple of attention as we entered. People noticed. They always did.

I squared my shoulders. "Alright, here we go."

Vorgath squeezed my shoulder slightly. "You belong here as much as any of them."

Before I could say anything else, Thorne straightened and turned toward us, wiping his hands on a rag. His eyes settled on me, then flicked to Vorgath, and his mouth twisted into a thin, amused smile. "Well, well, look who's returned. Thought you'd have given this up by now."

My stomach twisted as I glanced around at the other blacksmiths, some of whom paused in their work just long enough to watch the spectacle Thorne was undoubtedly about to make of me. His apprentices, Tom included, already clustered nearby, exchanged snickers and side-eyed glances in my direction.

Vorgath's hand tightened on my shoulder, meant to be a reminder, maybe, or reassurance, but I could feel the tension humming through him, too.

"I'm here to register," I said, keeping my voice steady. "I want to join the guild and reopen my forge."

Thorne's eyebrows rose, and he folded his arms over his chest, leaning back against the workbench. His gaze was sharp, assessing, but there was a glint of condescension behind it. "And what exactly makes you think you're ready for that?"

"I've been working hard to earn my place here." I took a deep breath, steeling myself against Thorne's mockery. "I've been training diligently under Vorgath's guidance.

My skills have improved significantly, and I believe I'm ready to contribute to the guild as a full member.”

Thorne's mouth twitched, and for a moment, I thought he might actually laugh. He didn't, but his smile was worse—patronizing and pitying all at once.

“Oh, I'm sure you've been ‘training diligently’ under the orc,” he sneered, his implication clear. “You've swung a hammer a few times, made some nails, maybe a horseshoe or two. But that's not the same thing as running a forge. And it's certainly not enough to earn a place in this guild.”

My ears burned. I opened my mouth to defend myself, but before I could get another word out, the door to the forge creaked open.

In walked a woman.

And not just any woman—her presence commanded immediate attention. She was tall and elegant, with sleek black hair twisted up in an elaborate style. Her sharp, cat-like eyes gleamed with curiosity, scanning the room as if she already owned it. She wore a dark emerald gown that shimmered when she walked, the soft thud of her shoes against the stone floor echoing in the suddenly stunned silence.

Whispers began to ripple through the room.

“Is that...?”

“It's a...”

Thorne straightened immediately. “Mistress Wildclaw,” he greeted, his tone shifting to one of exaggerated professionalism. “To what do we owe the honor?”

The woman—Tynsera Wildclaw, my brain finally supplied, trying not to panic—raised one slender, manicured eyebrow and let her gaze sweep over the room. She held something in her hand, but I couldn't quite make it out from where I stood behind Thorne.

“I'm here about this,” she said, holding up the object for everyone to see, and my heart nearly stopped.

It was my spoon, the one I had lost at Lady Hargrave's estate.

My spoon was in Tynsera Wildclaw's hand.

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Every blacksmith and apprentice craned their necks to get a better look at it.

Thorne's smile faltered slightly, unsure of where this was going. "A spoon?" he ventured, blinking.

Tynsera's gaze flicked to him, narrowing slightly, and just like that, Thorne visibly shrunk. "A spoon," she repeated, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "A very finespoon that was served at a friend's tea. A spoon with detail that rivals anything I've seen before."

She held the spoon higher, letting the light catch the delicate floral carvings winding up the handle.

"My mother," Tynsera continued, her voice silky smooth, "has her sights on this work. She plans to commission a full set for her birthday celebration, possibly more. But..." She let the word hang in the air, curling the spoon around in her fingers, "I need to know who crafted it."

Thorne looked around at his apprentices, and right on cue, one of them—of course, it had to be Tom—stepped forward with a smug grin.

"That would be mine," he announced, sauntering up to Tynsera's side.

Tynsera's sharp eyes flicked over him, clearly unimpressed, but she handed him the spoon anyway. "Hmm," she mused, crossing her arms as several other apprentices shuffled eagerly to get a closer look.

They passed it around, muttering in classic blacksmith fashion—using words like balance, grains, and flow like it was some sacred mystery of the universe.

A vein in my temple throbbed, and I opened my mouth, but Tom kept talking, puffed up with fake humility as he continued to bask in the attention. “The detail, the precision—all of it, learned under Master Ironsmith’s expert guidance, of course.”

Thorne beamed, dragging this charade out like they were both auditioning for some district drama performance. The apprentices around him nodded in faux agreement.

I inhaled sharply and stepped forward before I could think better of it. “That’s a lie,” I said.

The forge went silent. Even the clanging hammers in the background seemed to pause—like the entire world held its breath. All eyes turned to me, wide and disbelieving. Thorne’s smug smile faltered, and Tom froze, still clutching my spoon like it was his prized creation.

“I made that spoon,” I said evenly, stepping further into the circle, though my knees felt like jelly.

Tynsera’s cat-like eyes locked onto me, pupils narrowing in on her target. She raised an eyebrow, tilting her head slightly, intrigued by the disruption.

Thorne made a noise that could only be described as an exaggerated scoff, his features twisting into mock surprise. “You?”

“Yes. Me.”

The apprentices exchanged glances, snorting into their sleeves, clearly not taking me seriously. Tom puffed out his chest again, fingers flexing around the utensil as if he

might casually snap it in two just to keep this from me.

Thorne gave his best condescending grin, addressing Tynsera as if I wasn't even in the room. "Don't be fooled, Mistress Wildclaw. The woman is the orc's apprentice. She can barely lift a hammer properly, let alone craft with this level of detail." He shot me a scathing look. "She's not capable of such fine work."

My stomach twisted, and for a moment, I felt the familiar urge to shrink back, to let his words push me into the shadows. But as I glanced at Vorgath, his unwavering presence reminded me of the promise I'd made to myself.

No more hiding behind doubt or fear.

"And yet," I said, louder now, feeling boldness surge up like fire, "the marks of my craft are evident in the details."

That earned a surprised pause from Tynsera. Her gaze flicked to the intricate floral designs etched along the spoon's handle, then back to me. "The marks?" she asked.

I nodded, stepping forward and meeting Tynsera's eyes directly. The Wildclaw family was known throughout Everwood for their wealth, influence, and unique shifter heritage. They were patrons of the arts and crafts, and their support often made or broke artisans' careers. And here was Tynsera, the matriarch's eldest daughter, her feline eyes watching me with keen interest.

"Every craftsman leaves their mark," I said, my voice steady despite the blood pounding in my ears. "It's in the strokes of the chisel, the pressure applied, the angle at which the blade drags along the heated metal."

Tynsera studied me for a long, tense moment, her cat-like eyes gleaming with something unreadable. Then, with the slow precision of a predator considering its

prey, she turned back to the spoon still clutched in Tom's hand.

“Show me,” she commanded, her voice lined with the unmistakable arrogance of nobility. “Show me where you see those marks.”

I stepped forward, unable to ignore the surge of vindication rising in my chest. “Here,” I said, gently but firmly taking the spoon from Tom's fumbling hands. I raised it for her to see. “Look at the base of the handle, near the roots of the flowers. See the overlapping grooves? That’s from the smaller chisel I used to add texture—similar to how I used different stitches when I wanted to add depth to my embroidery.”

Tynsera leaned in, her sharp gaze following my finger as I traced the intricate lines I had carved with painstaking care.

“The way the flowers curl toward the top,” I continued, “that’s the result of how I learned to create motion and flow in patterns—an eye for detail you don’t get from someone who just flattens iron all day.”

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She glanced up at me with a spark of interest, her lips twisting into an amused smile. “Fascinating.”

At that, Tom looked as though he might actually choke on his own tongue. His face flushed, but before he could stammer an excuse, Tynsera reached for the spoon. This time, she handled it with the awe and consideration it deserved.

“And you—” she paused, her eyes narrowing slightly as they drifted from me to Vorgath and then back again. “You learned this technique from...?”

“Soraya is my apprentice, and a quick learner,” Vorgath rumbled, his deep voice resonating through the now-silent forge. “She combines her skills from embroidery with metalwork in ways I’ve never seen before.”

Tynsera's eyebrows arched elegantly. “An orc teaching such delicate work? That's unexpected.”

I felt a flare of protectiveness. “Vorgath is an incredible mentor.”

A small smile played at the corners of Tynsera's mouth. “I'm sure he is,” she purred, her gaze flicking between us.

Thorne, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, suddenly found his voice again. “Mistress Wildclaw,” he began, his tone oily and placating, “surely you can't believe—”

“What I believe,” Tynsera cut him off smoothly, “is that I've found exactly what I

was looking for.” She turned to face me fully. “My mother's birthday is in three months. I want a full set—dinner spoons, dessert spoons, serving utensils, the works. All with this level of detail and craftsmanship.”

My heart leaped into my throat. “You mean...?”

“I'm commissioning you, of course,” Tynsera said with a smile that was equal parts charming and predatory. “Under your mentor's supervision, naturally.”

Thorne sputtered, his face turning an alarming shade of red. “But... but she's not even a full member of the guild! She can't take commissions!”

Tynsera's gaze snapped to him, suddenly cold and sharp as steel. “Then I suggest you remedy that situation immediately, Master Ironsmith. Unless you'd prefer I take this issue to the council.”

Thorne's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, but no sound came out.

“Well?” Tynsera prompted, her tone deceptively light.

The guildmaster's shoulders slumped in defeat. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, ornate key. “Fine,” he growled, stomping over to a locked cabinet near his workbench. “But don't come crying to me when she can't deliver.”

He yanked open the cabinet door and rifled through some papers before pulling out an official-looking document. With obvious reluctance, he scrawled his signature across the bottom, then thrust it at me. “There. You're registered. Now get out of my forge.”

I took the paper, my hands trembling slightly as I read the words that officially declared me a member of the Blacksmith's Guild of Everwood. It felt surreal, like I

might wake up at any moment to find it was all a dream.

Tynsera clapped her hands together. “Excellent! I'll have my steward draw up the contract and bring it by your forge tomorrow. I look forward to seeing what you create, Soraya.”

As she turned to leave, her gaze lingered on Vorgath for a moment. “And you, Master Orc. I trust you'll continue to guide your apprentice well. Who knows? Perhaps we'll find use for your particular skills as well.”

With that, she swept out of the forge, leaving behind a stunned silence and the faint scent of jasmine.

I stood there, clutching my guild registration paper, hardly daring to believe what had just happened. Vorgath's hand came to rest on my shoulder, solid and reassuring.

“You did it,” he murmured, his deep voice filled with pride.

I looked up at him, a grin spreading across my face. “I did it.”

Chapter 19

“Hold still, dear,” Mrs. Crumble muttered as she gently shifted the halo of daisies on my head. “Yes, perfect! A queen needs her crown for such an occasion.”

I laughed. “A queen of sweat and soot.”

“Has there ever been a ruler more deserving?” Thyri asked, popping the cork on a bottle of wine that she undoubtedly pilfered from the Hargrave manor. I didn't know how she got away with as much as she did, but when I'd told her about my victory with the guild, the reappearance of the missing spoon, and my first official

commission, she'd insisted on a proper celebration—and a made-up ceremony she was calling the Lighting of the Forge.

And that was how the four of us, Vorgath included, had ended up sneaking out to my smithy after Elias was in bed, with only a few candles to light our way.

Moonlight filtered through the dusty windows, casting long shadows across the familiar tools and workbenches. The glint of my hammer—Vorgath's gift—caught the light, a reminder of my journey and the hard work ahead. Despite our irreverence, it really did feel almost sacred, like we were about to perform some ancient rite.

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Vorgath stood by the cold forge, his massive frame seeming to fill half the space. He'd been quiet since we arrived, but there was a softness in his eyes as he watched Mrs. Crumble fuss over my flower crown.

“Now, don't tell me I forgot the glasses,” Thyri groaned, digging through her basket.

“It's okay,” Mrs. Crumble said. “I can pop over to the house—”

“Wait,” Vorgath interrupted. “I have something.”

We all turned to watch as he reached into a pouch at his belt and pulled out four intricately designed drinking tins. They clinked softly as he set them down on the workbench.

“What are these?” I asked, picking one up and examining it. The engravings on the tins were unmistakably orcish—bold geometric patterns and spirals etched deeply into the metal, each one different but forming a complete set.

“The symbol here,” Vorgath pointed to an orcish symbol at the base, “represents unity in the old tongue. These tins are traditionally used for toasts during celebrations or significant moments. When my people raise their cups, it's a way of honoring those we trust and commemorating our bonds.” His eyes shifted to me. “I thought it... fitting.”

Thyri let out a low whistle, picking up one of the mugs. “Fitting? Vorgath, they're beautiful!”

I watched Thyri admire the craftsmanship. Seeing the two of them—my best friend and the man I was falling for—actually connect for the first time made me happier than I could have imagined. Thyri had been my rock for so long, and now, having her and Vorgath in the same space, laughing and toasting together, felt like everything was finally falling into place.

“Well,” Thyri said, grinning as she dumped a generous amount of wine into each tin. “Looks like we're doing this orc-style!”

She placed one cup in front of Mrs. Crumble, who had to stand on tiptoe to reach it, the mug towering over her tiny frame. Another tin went to me, and while it felt large in my hands, it was manageable. Vorgath took the last, his fingers wrapping easily around the cup designed for an orc's grip.

“To Soraya,” Thyri announced, lifting her drink. “Who didn’t just fight for her place in the guild but won it with grace, skill, and a good ol' orc at her side to knock heads when needed.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “It wasn’t that dramatic.”

“Mistress Wildclaw would disagree!” Mrs. Crumble chuckled. “And let's not forget the little spoon that set it all in motion.”

I grinned, lifting my tin. “Well, I’ll toast to that. And to friends, to family... and to new beginnings.” My voice cracked slightly on the last words as I glanced around the room—at Thyri’s mischievous grin, Mrs. Crumble’s wise eyes, and Vorgath, standing solid, like the anchor that had held me steady through this whole storm.

The tins clinked together with a soft, metallic ring. The wine was tart, but in such fine company, it tasted like the finest vintage in all the realms.

Before I could take another sip, Mrs. Crumble leaned forward, her eyes gleaming. “You know, I was just remembering the first time I met Soraya, when she almost set her kitchen on fire with a tea towel. You remember that, dear?”

I groaned as Thyri cackled, nearly spilling her drink, while Vorgath's brow raised in silent inquiry.

“That was ages ago!” I protested.

“Ages? I seem to recall it was right after Elias was born,” Mrs. Crumble continued with a sly grin. “She was so sleep-deprived she didn’t notice the tea towel wrapped around the kettle. I had to pop in before half the kitchen turned to cinders.”

I laughed along with them, but Mrs. Crumble’s story tugged at a memory I hadn’t visited in a long time. I could still picture the scene so clearly, the exhaustion like a weight on my chest. Elias had been barely two months old, and Kald had been so busy with his work that I was left alone with the baby for long stretches of time. Between his endless projects and the war that loomed in the distance, we’d grown accustomed to operating in different worlds.

Elias had been colicky that day, refusing to sleep, his cries relentless. I barely noticed when I wrapped the tea towel around the kettle, just trying to get something, anything, done while Elias fussed in the next room.

Then, out of nowhere, Mrs. Crumble appeared. I hadn’t known much about brownies then, and for a split second, I wondered if she was some sort of hallucination. But there she was, wrinkled and wise, swooping in to save me from my burning kitchen. It wasn’t just the tea towel—she had saved me from the spiraling feeling of being utterly overwhelmed.

I had thought then that Elias would be the first of many children. Kald and I had

planned for it, but as time passed, the war had pulled him away more and more. Then, it had taken him for good.

It was odd, now, standing here in this forge—our forge—and thinking back on that time. I had been so certain that I would never feel whole again after Kald's death, but as I looked across the room at Vorgath, something shifted. He wasn't watching Mrs. Crumble or laughing at the stories. He was watching me, his dark eyes soft in a way that caught me completely off guard.

I quickly looked away, embarrassed by the sudden flush of emotion as I realized where my thoughts had wandered. Babies? Orc babies? Sweet Seven, where had that come from? The thought of children—of a future that felt impossibly distant—made my mind spin. The idea of orc babies seemed absurd and wonderful all at once.

I chuckled, trying to shake off the sudden wave of emotion. "Well, I've come a long way since then. No more flaming tea towels for me."

"Indeed you have," Mrs. Crumble said. "From a frazzled new mother to a guild-certified blacksmith. You've always had that spark in you, dear."

A sharp knock at the door startled us all. I exchanged a puzzled glance with Thyri—who else knew we were here?

"Come in!" I called, curiosity overtaking caution.

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The door swung open, revealing a tall, slender figure silhouetted against the night sky. As he stepped into the flickering candlelight, I recognized the smooth ebony skin and flowing platinum hair of Sylwen Darkleaf, the elf from the Runery.

“I hope I'm not intruding,” Sylwen said. He was dressed in robes that seemed to shimmer like stardust, a stark contrast to our more practical attire. Golden earrings glinted in the dim light, and I noticed intricate designs etched into the jewelry he wore—runes, perhaps, or some form of elven script.

“Not at all,” I said, recovering from my surprise. “Please, join us. Though I have to admit, I wasn't expecting...”

“Vorgath mentioned your celebration,” Sylwen explained, his eyes finding the orc in our midst. “I hope it's not presumptuous, but I wanted to offer my congratulations in person. Your work has piqued my interest, Soraya. I believe there may be some fascinating collaborations in our future.”

My eyes widened at the prospect. First, mithral-weaving with Brilda, and now, the possibility of working with Sylwen's enchantments? It felt like my world was expanding in ways I'd never dared to dream.

“That would be incredible,” I managed, still a bit starstruck by his presence.

“Well, don't just stand there,” Thyri said. “Come in and have a drink with us! We're toasting to new beginnings.”

Sylwen's lips curved into a smile as he stepped fully into the forge. “New beginnings

indeed. And I come bearing a gift to celebrate just that.”

From within his shimmering robes, he produced an elegant, deep indigo glass bottle. Its surface was etched with delicate runes that spiraled around the neck of the bottle, culminating in a flourish at the base that formed an intricate symbol, suggesting some kind of enchantment.

“Moonwine,” Sylwen explained. “An elven specialty, crafted under the light of a full moon. The process involves infusing the wine with the essence of the sacred Alder trees, drawing upon their restorative magic to enhance its properties.”

I took the bottle, admiring the craftsmanship. “It's beautiful, Sylwen. Thank you.”

Thyri peered at the bottle. “What does it do?” she asked warily, having been cautious about magical potions since a mishap with a less-than-reputable herbalist left her speaking only in rhymes for a week.

Sylwen accepted a drinking tin from Vorgath. “It reveals one's aura, making it visible to all.”

“Our auras?” I asked, both intrigued and slightly nervous.

“Indeed,” Sylwen nodded. “The colors and patterns that surround us, reflecting our emotions and inner selves. Usually only visible to those with the gift, but this wine...” He gestured to the bottle. “It allows everyone to see them, if only for a short time.”

I hesitated for a moment, glancing at Vorgath. The idea of having my innermost feelings on display was a bit unnerving. But his steady gaze met mine, and I felt a surge of courage. If I was going to bare my soul to anyone, it might as well be to this group.

“Why not?” I said, uncorking the bottle. The scent that wafted out was intoxicating—moonflowers and starlight, if such things had a scent.

I poured a measure into each of our tins, the liquid shimmering like molten silver. We raised our drinks, the anticipation palpable.

“To new beginnings,” Sylwen toasted, “and to seeing each other in a new light.”

We drank, and for a moment, nothing happened. Then, slowly, the world around us began to change. It started as a faint shimmer in the air, like heat rising from the forge. But as I blinked, trying to focus, I realized it wasn't just the air—it was us.

Colors bloomed around each person in the room. Thyri was surrounded by a vibrant orange, warm and exuberant. Mrs. Crumble's aura was a soft, comforting green, like moss in a sun-dappled forest. Sylwen's aura was shifting hues of pink and purple. Watching the colors swirling and dancing around him like a living aurora was mesmerizing.

But it was Vorgath's aura that truly caught my breath. Deep, rich reds and golds pulsed around him, like the heart of a forge. There was strength there, and passion, but also flickers of softer hues, hints of blue. As I watched, transfixed, I saw tendrils of his aura reaching out toward me.

“Oh my,” Mrs. Crumble whispered, her eyes wide with wonder as she looked around at us all.

Thyri let out a delighted laugh, twirling in place to watch her orange aura swirl around her. “This is amazing! Soraya, look at you!”

I looked down at myself, finally noticing my own aura. It was a swirl of deep purple and silver, with occasional flashes of fiery red. As I watched, fascinated, I saw the

colors shift and change, responding to my emotions.

“The purple represents creativity and intuition,” Sylwen explained. “And that silver... it's rare. It speaks of potential, of great change on the horizon.”

I felt exposed, but as I glanced around at my friends, their warm gazes and the beauty of their auras filled me with gratitude. “This is incredible,” I breathed, watching as my aura brightened with joy.

Vorgath stepped closer, and our auras intertwined, forming a tapestry of red, gold, and purple. “It suits you,” he said.

Thyri cleared her throat, a mischievous glint in her eye. “Well, well, looks like some auras are getting cozy.”

Heat rose to my cheeks, but before I could respond, Sylwen spoke up. “You know, aura reading is an important part of many rituals,” he said, gracefully drawing attention away from Thyri's teasing comment. “There's a coming-of-age ceremony where young elves first learn to see auras. It's considered a vital skill for understanding oneself and others.”

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“Fascinating,” Mrs. Crumble said, her eyes twinkling. “We brownies don't need magic to sense emotions, you know. It's part of what makes us such good caretakers.”

I latched onto the change of subject gratefully. “Really? I never knew that.”

Mrs. Crumble nodded, her green aura pulsing softly. “Oh yes, dear. It's how we know when a baby needs comforting before they even cry.”

“And orcs?” I asked, turning to Vorgath. “Do you have any traditions around... well, souls or emotions?”

“We believe the strength of one's soul is reflected in their actions. Our leaders are chosen not just for their physical prowess but for the strength of their inner fire.”

As he spoke, I noticed his aura flaring brighter, the gold becoming more prominent. It was mesmerizing to watch, like seeing a glimpse of the passionate warrior beneath his usual stoic exterior.

Thyri twirled around again, her orange glow swirling magnificently. “Look at this, Soraya!”

I grinned, watching her aura flare brighter with every laugh. “Orange suits you. Loud, vibrant—completely impossible to ignore.”

“Impossible to ignore?” Thyri placed a dramatic hand over her heart, the orange and gold swirling around her like fire. “I think you'd look amazing in orange, too. Here, take some of mine!”

She twirled close to me, and as if by magic—or fae wine—her aura began to flicker at the edges of mine, mixing playful dabs of orange into my purple.

“Is that allowed?” I joked, taking a step back to test the limits. The orange faded slightly but lingered.

Thyri shot me an exaggerated wink. “You could stand to be a little more festive.”

“Well, in that case,” I said, slanting my eyes over at Mrs. Crumble, “I think this room could use some of your serenity.” I nudged closer to Mrs. Crumble until her sage-green aura started drifting toward me, brushing around my edges in soft curls of calm.

Mrs. Crumble chuckled, and her aura responded, thickening and twining around mine like vines. “Be careful. You might find yourself wanting to take up knitting and sitting by the hearth all day.”

“I could use some of that,” I admitted. “And wouldn’t Elias love all the sweaters?”

Vorgath, standing slightly to the side, had been watching the playful exchange with quiet amusement. His fiery red and gold aura pulsed in time with his low chuckle. It was mesmerizing, actually, how the intensity burned around him yet softened when his gaze fell my way. My skin heated under his attention, and more of his warmth—quite literally—started to bleed into my own space, mixing gently into my purples and silvers.

“Vorgath,” I teased, raising an eyebrow. “Am I just that irresistible?”

His eyes locked with mine. “More than you know.”

Thyri cleared her throat loudly. “Well, as fascinating as watching you two make eyes at each other is, I believe we have a forge to light!”

I blinked, suddenly remembering why we were all here in the first place. “Right, yes. The forge.”

Chapter 20

We gathered around the cold forge, our auras creating a kaleidoscope of colors in the dim light. Sylwen stepped forward, his starlight aura shimmering.

“In elven tradition,” he said, “we often mark new beginnings with offerings. Each person contributes something meaningful to represent their hopes for the future.”

Thyri's eyes lit up. “Ooh, I love this idea! I'll start.” She rummaged in her pockets and pulled out a small bundle of dried herbs. “Rosemary, for remembrance of where we've come from, and sage for wisdom going forward.” She tossed the herbs into the forge, her orange aura flaring brightly.

Mrs. Crumble was next, sprinkling what looked like glittering dust into the forge. “A touch of brownie magic,” she said with a wink. “For luck and protection.”

Sylwen contributed a drop of the moonwine, which sizzled as it hit the cold metal. “For clarity of vision and purpose,” he intoned.

Vorgath stepped forward, placing a small piece of metal into the forge. “Orc-forged iron,” he explained. “For strength and resilience.”

They all turned to me, expectant. But what did I have? On a whim, I reached into my pocket, and my fingers wrapped around a slim piece of metal—the spoon. The one that Mrs. Hargrave inadvertently served with tea to Tynsera Wildclaw.

“This spoon...” I offered with a sheepish smile. “For... serendipity.” I placed it gently into the forge.

Mrs. Crumble hummed approvingly, “Serendipity, yes. I like that.”

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The room was silent for a few beats, each of us seemingly lost in our thoughts. Then, Vorgath moved toward the bellows, and with practiced ease, his strong arms worked the bellows, sending a gust of air into the heart of the forge. The symbols on the orc metal glowed softly, and the offerings within began to shimmer, sparking to life.

And in a quietwhoosh, a flame flickered to life in the forge.

There it was—our fire.

The colors of the flames reflected in each of our auras, and for a moment, it felt like the whole world held its breath. The forge glowed like it hadn't in years, but it wasn't just the warmth I felt.

It was hope. My hope.

Tears swelled in my eyes as I looked around at the people who had made this moment possible. My friends. My family.

“Looks like you’ve got a well-tended fire here,” Sylwen said quietly, his starlit aura swirling as he smiled at me. His gaze softened when it lingered on our interwoven flames.

Thyri, wiping away a dramatic tear, sniffled. “Well,” she said, “it’s about time! I was getting cold.”

The tension lightened immediately, laughter bubbling up unchecked amongst us. Even Vorgath chuckled, his deep laughter rumbling through the smithy, a sound that

sent a comforting shiver down my spine. It was like the flame had reignited more than just the forge—it had brought us all a little closer together.

###

Time slipped away unnoticed after that, fueled by lively conversation and more of the delicious moonwine. To my surprise, Sylwen seemed genuinely captivated by Thyri, despite their stark differences. He listened with rapt attention as she recounted her wild escapades in the Hargrave kitchen, hanging on her every word.

When she got to the part about nearly setting the councilman's pants on fire, he interrupted her with a long-fingered hand on her arm. “While I’m no fan of the councilman, perhaps you’d be interested in learning a rune or two to prevent such mishaps in the future.”

Thyri nudged him playfully with her shoulder. “Only if you teach me how to make those elvencrusts they sell every year at the Moonshadow Celebration.”

“And what do I gain from this arrangement?” Sylwen asked, feigning a thoughtful look.

“All the stolen sweet rolls your elf heart desires?” Thyri suggested.

Sylwen chuckled. “How about friendship instead? I’d like to add a talented human chef to my collection.”

Thyri’s expression turned mock-serious as she raised an eyebrow. “Your collection?”

The room erupted in laughter, the camaraderie between them brightening the atmosphere. Their auras shimmered in response, swirling together—Thyri’s warm oranges dancing playfully with Sylwen’s cool blues, creating a beautiful contrast

As the night deepened, I settled closer to Vorgath, enjoying his warmth. Our auras also danced in unison, the vibrant reds and purples mingling as I nestled against his side, feeling safe and content. It was comforting to be surrounded by friends, their laughter echoing off the forge walls while the flames flickered, casting playful shadows around us.

Eventually, Mrs. Crumble gave a sly smile and excused herself from the group. “Time for me to get to bed,” she said, brushing a bit of ash from her apron. “Someone has to be up with young Elias first thing, and I have a feeling it won't be any of you.” With a wink, she vanished in a swirl of leaves and wildflowers.

Thyri tipped her cup despondently. “What I'd give for another glass.”

Sylwen sighed dramatically. “Alas, I don't have any more with me. It seems the night has turned against us.”

“Well, lucky for us, I know where the councilman keeps his Elderberry wine,” Thyri said, standing abruptly. “What do you say? Are you up for a little sneaking around?”

Sylwen raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “If you were to learn a few runes, you wouldn't have to do quite so much sneaking.”

“Why do I need to learn when I have you?” she quipped with a grin.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “I fear your friendship might be more trouble than I bargained for.”

“That's probably true,” I chimed in. “Do you remember that time—”

Thyri turned to me and pressed a finger to her lips. “Shh! Don't scare off my new friend. I need him now that you're otherwise occupied.” She lifted one eyebrow and

glanced meaningfully in Vorgath's direction.

Vorgath smirked. “Do not discourage her if it means I get time alone with you.”

Sylwen stood now, too, setting down his empty drinking tin and holding out his arm for Thyri. “I do believe that's our cue to make ourselves scarce,” he said.

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Thyri linked her arm with Sylwen's. "Come on, then! Adventure awaits!" With that, they slipped out of the forge, their laughter dancing in the air behind them.

And suddenly, it was quiet.

With a soft grunt, Vorgath stood up, moving toward the forge to stoke the embers back to life. I watched him, mesmerized by the way his muscles shifted beneath his skin, the flickering firelight accentuating the strength in his frame. I took the opportunity to rise as well, stepping closer to the workbench to tidy up.

"Serendipity," he said softly, echoing the word I'd tossed out earlier. "Is that all it is? Just... chance?"

I tilted my head, biting my lip as I considered him—not just the question, but the subtle shift in the air between us. "Maybe some of it," I admitted honestly, thinking of all the thousand little moments that brought me here—to him.

"I don't think it's chance," he said. "I think it's choice. Every day. Every moment. You chose this. You chose to keep going."

He was right. This—us—it wasn't just some random twist of fate. I had chosen him, at the faire, in the forge, in the moments after Elias was tucked into bed, in the quiet spaces where we shared more than just work.

As I contemplated his words, my aura reached for his, tendrils unfurling like delicate fingers. They intertwined with his fiery reds and golds, drawing him closer. It felt like a physical pull as he closed the distance, stopping just inches away. I had to tilt my

head back to meet the dark depths of his eyes.

“I did,” I whispered. “I chose you, Vorgath.”

His voice was thick, almost hoarse. “Do you know what that means?”

My pulse thrummed in my throat. “Tell me.”

Vorgath leaned down, and his tusks gleamed faintly in the flickering light of the forge. His breath was warm against my skin as he spoke, every word reverberating deep within me. “When an orc chooses someone, it’s not something we walk away from... It's forever.”

I didn’t hesitate. I pressed my palm against his cheek, felt the coarse hairs of his beard, the ridge of the scar that cut across his eye. “I choose you,” I repeated.

His hands gripped my waist and pulled me flush against him, like he needed the feel of my body pressed to his to understand that I was real. “Soraya, if I hurt you... If I—”

“You won’t,” I interrupted, my voice breathless but certain. “I trust you.”

Vorgath’s forehead lowered to rest against mine, his eyes closing. I tugged on his tunic, encouraging him, pulling him down to me until our lips met. His body—so large and solid, a wall of muscle against me—created this sense of safety, of being surrounded. His every touch was tender, careful, like he was afraid of how easily he could break me.

“I’m not fragile,” I whispered, my lips brushing against his ear.

He stiffened, his hand stilling on my back. “You're human.”

“But I’m not made of glass.” I leaned back, hands framing his face. “I won’t break.”

He studied me for a long, tense moment. Then his gaze darkened, a hunger sparking behind his eyes, and finally—finally—something released in him.

His lips crashed into mine, searing and intense, exactly what I craved. I arched into him, my hands tangling in his hair, tugging just hard enough to draw a low growl from his chest. He kissed me like I was his air, like he couldn’t breathe without tasting me.

The tension, the unspoken words, the simmering heat between us—all of it shattered, igniting into a blaze we couldn’t control.

Chapter 21

He lifted me effortlessly, turning and lowering me onto the workbench beside us, never breaking the kiss. The hard edge of the bench dug into my thighs, but I didn’t care. Not when his hands were gripping my hips, roaming over my waist, sliding up under my shirt, and leaving a trail of heat in their wake. His palms practically swallowed my body with their size, and my breath hitched as he caressed each curve reverently, as though committing every inch of me to memory.

His lips broke away from mine, trailing down my jaw and lower, planting soft, heated kisses along my neck. When his tusks grazed the sensitive spot just below my ear, a gasp escaped me. My head fell back, offering him more.

Slowly, his fingers traced the curve of my waist before tugging at the hem of my shirt. I raised my arms, helping him lift it over my head and toss it aside. The forge’s warm air brushed my skin, but it was nothing compared to the searing heat in his gaze.

“Soraya,” he murmured, reverent, his voice low and thick with need. “Durlan.”

His large palms skimmed my shoulders, glided down my arms, then traced over my curves, cupping my breasts. Every brush of his skin sent waves of warmth through me, sparks igniting a slow burn beneath the surface.

I closed my eyes, surrendering to the sensations. By the Alders, I'd forgotten it could feel like this—so raw, so consuming. How had I lived without this connection for so long? The way Vorgath touched me, as though I were something precious, and the way he looked at me, as if seeing all of me, made me feel whole again.

His lips found the hollow of my throat, and a moan slipped from my lips as my fingers gripped the edge of the bench. He was everywhere—his presence, touch, scent—surrounding me, pulling me under until there was nothing but him.

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“What does that mean?” I asked breathlessly. “Durlan?”

“Beloved,” he murmured roughly, his breath heated against my skin with each kiss. His lips moved lower, down the swell of my chest, as his hands spanned my waist, holding me steady. “My beloved.”

My hands found their way to the hem of his tunic and tugged, desperate to feel his skin beneath my fingertips. He stopped only long enough to pull it over his head, tossing it aside before his strong arms were around me again, pulling me close.

I ran my hands over the broad expanse of his chest, feeling the ridges of scars beneath his skin—each one a story, a battle fought, a reminder of a life before this. He was still for a moment, letting me explore, before a deep rumble started in his chest.

He took my hands in his, kissing my palms before pinning my hands over my head and leaning down to take a pert nipple into his mouth. I gasped as his warm mouth closed around the sensitive peak, his tongue swirling, his tusks carefully grazing the soft flesh of my breast. I arched into him, desperate for more, as he lavished attention on one breast and then the other, his mouth teasing and tasting. My fingers flexed in his grip, wanting to touch him, to pull him closer, but he held me firmly, taking control.

And Seven save me, it was hot—this dominant side of him, the raw power, used to bring me pleasure.

He released my hands, trailing his fingers down my arms, across my collarbone, and down to my breasts, where he replaced his mouth with his hands, rolling and pinching

the hardened nipples between his fingers.

I moaned, my head falling back, my eyes fluttering closed.

Vorgath's deep voice rumbled, as if the words had been waiting on his tongue forever. "Your breasts are so perfect."

I froze for a moment, caught off-guard. Perfect? That couldn't be right. My breasts were too big, too soft, far from the smooth, perky ones I used to have in my twenties. Years of nursing Elias had left their mark—stretch marks tracing circles around my nipples like little silver rivers, a slight sag that gravity had claimed.

They weren't perfect. Not by the standards of the world, anyway.

But in Vorgath's hands—there, in the forge where the light flickered, soft and warm—his touch, his gaze, made me second-guess everything I'd thought I knew about my body. His large hands molded over me as though I was something exquisite.

His intense eyes locked onto mine when he spoke again. "Perfect."

And just like that, I chose to believe him.

I took a shaky breath, letting myself feel every inch of what he was showing me through his touch. There was no hesitation in the way he pressed soft kisses over the stretch marks that lined my skin, no judgment in the way his big hands caressed the soft swell of my breasts. Just reverence.

And a burgeoning heat building slowly in the pit of my stomach.

I groaned, shifting my hips to press against him, feeling the hard evidence of his

desire through the thick layers of his pants. We were just two imperfect beings, yet he worshipped me like I was the most beautiful thing in the world.

“Vorgath...” His name came out as a soft moan, my hands now tangled in the messy locks of his hair, urging him closer, lower.

His mouth trailed fire down my stomach, his breath hot and heavy as his lips passed the line of my navel, and I couldn’t stop the shiver of anticipation that ran down my spine.

He hooked his big fingers in the waist of my skirt. “I’m going to taste you, durlan. I’m going to make sure you are ready.”

I lifted my hips, helping him ease the skirt down, and when the warm air kissed my bare skin, I resisted the urge to clench my knees together. His eyes never left me, not for a second. The intensity of his gaze, the way it burned into me, was almost too much to bear. But I didn’t dare look away. Not this time.

This time, I wanted to see everything written in those molten, dark eyes.

Vorgath settled between my legs, his large hands spreading over my thighs. “You’re shaking,” he said softly.

“Maybe that’s because you’re about to... you know,” I whispered, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks. One look from him, and I was back to feeling like a maid in the spring of her first romance.

He gave a low chuckle. “I know,” he said, his voice dropping low—steady. “Relax.”

I opened my mouth to argue that I was fine—that I wasn’t nervous—but before the words could leave my lips, his mouth pressed against the inside of my thigh, and

whatever I'd planned to say turned into a breathless gasp.

I gripped the edge of the bench, knuckles white as he kissed his way up, slow, insistent, trailing the heat of his lips higher and higher. One of his large hands slid up to cup my hip, his thumb brushing in lazy circles that made my body arch despite myself. And then, finally, he reached his destination.

The first touch of his tongue was gentle—slow, deliberate, maddening.

I moaned, throwing my head back as my legs tightened around his shoulders. He teased at first, brushing over my most sensitive spot with soft laps of his tongue before withdrawing, only to return again with a flick that sent shudders through me. The contrast was exquisite—the heaviness of his touch followed by the delicate strokes of his tongue.

It was almost as if he was testing the limits of my patience and control, which, at this point, I had none.

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“V-Vorgath,” I gasped, my fingers leaving the edge of the bench to sink into his hair.

The intensity, the fire... it was building inside me, pulling taut like a bowstring ready to snap.

His response was a low growl of approval, the sound vibrating against me, pushing me closer to the edge. He grabbed my hips, firm and sure, holding me exactly where he wanted me—where I wanted to be—and his movements quickened, no longer teasing. His tongue delved deeper, swirling, flicking, until my thighs trembled around him.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered, the breath hitching in my throat as I dug my heels into his back, arching toward him.

Like a command he was too eager to obey, his hands gripped harder, and his mouth worked faster, drawing me closer and closer until the rising heat inside broke free in a wave of pleasure so intense that it left me crying his name into the rafters.

His breath was still hot against my thighs, his tongue just barely tracing over sensitive flesh, teasing out the last tremors of pleasure.

Then came the press of his finger—gentle but insistent—sliding inside me with deliberate slowness. I gasped, still riding high on the force of my climax. The feel of him stretching me, moving in sync with the ebb of pleasure still pulsing through me, stirred something new. Something deeper.

Darker.

“I’ve got you, durlan,” he murmured against my skin.

I heard the softness in his promise, but I felt the heat of it—the raw desire thrumming beneath the careful way he moved. That one finger, slick from my arousal, pressed in again, slow and steady, as he watched me intently, as if measuring every breath, every shift of my body responding to him.

“More?” he asked after a moment, his brow furrowed slightly.

“Yes,” I breathed, voice ragged from the intensity. “More.”

He pushed gently again, adding another finger alongside the first, and though it was slow and careful—achingly so—I couldn’t help but buck my hips toward him, seeking more contact. The stretch was so different from anything I’d felt before—his hands, so much bigger than mine or my late husband’s—and yet, there was no fear. Only the strange, beautiful awareness that this was Vorgath.

My large, scarred orc who knew exactly how much of his strength to give.

His fingers curled inside me, brushing over that perfect spot that made another wave of heat surge through me. I had to bite down on my lip to stifle the sound of the moan that threatened to escape, swallowing it back down, but he caught it all the same.

“No,” he growled, his free hand coming up to my jaw, tilting my face toward him. “No hiding. I want to hear.”

It was bold. Direct. But so was he. Always bold. Always unafraid to say what he wanted, what he needed.

“I’m not hiding,” I shot back, but the words came out breathy, all sharp edges dulled by the molten heat he was coaxing from deep within me. I shifted against his fingers,

wanting more, wanting everything, and damn it all, I didn't care if he heard.

Vorgath's grin, the slight curve of those tusked lips, was both a warning and a promise as he leaned in closer, his breath brushing my flushed skin. "Good."

Then he lowered his mouth again, and all coherent thought was incinerated.

Every sensation was sharper, brighter than before—the slick heat of his tongue, the insistent pressure of his fingers curling just right, the strong, steady pulse of his hand holding me down like I might float away from the sheer intensity of it all.

I could only gasp, my hands clutching at anything to ground myself—his hair, the edges of the workbench—nothing steady, nothing solid enough except him.

And in that moment, he was everything.

He pulled another wordless moan from my lips as he doubled down, his rhythm quickening, perfectly attuned to the building pressure coiling low in my belly. Sweat trickled down my spine, and my chest heaved beneath Vorgath's relentless touch.

His fingers—there were three now—worked deep inside me. The stretch was unfamiliar, full of pressure, but by the Alders, it felt right. Every time he moved, I felt his strength—controlled, measured, calculated to build me up, never to break me down.

"Vorgath," I whispered, lifting my hips more, wanting the burn, wanting him. My voice shook with the strain of holding back, of riding the delicate edge he so expertly crafted beneath his hands, his mouth.

The vibrations of his growl—somewhere between frustration and satisfaction—grew stronger against my skin, and I couldn't help but shamelessly clench my legs tighter

around his thick shoulders in response.

“You're incredible,” he rumbled against me without lifting his head, the heat of his breath skimming the sensitive flesh below my hips. “So beautiful. So strong.”

Those words hit me harder than any caress, further fraying my already tattered restraint. I couldn't find airs or retorts or cheeky comebacks under his force.

Just desire. Raw, unguarded.

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I curled my fingers deeper in his hair. “Then don’t hold back.”

His fingers flexed deep inside me, curling at just the right moment to make me keen softly into the night air. No hesitation this time. No question about my fragility. Vorgath’s hungry lips returned with renewed fervor, fully committing to my downward spiral. Each stroke of his tongue matched the thrust of his fingers, curling, beckoning me further into the gray abyss between pleasure and complete surrender.

And oh, I wanted to surrender. I wanted to let go of everything until there was nothing left but him and me and the fire burning between us.

My stomach tightened, every muscle tensing, and my vision blurred as the pleasure built and built until...

Everything shattered.

I gasped as the release hit me—sudden, all-consuming. Waves of pleasure rolled through me, stronger than anything I’d ever felt. My back arched off the bench, my body bowing toward the man who’d touched every corner of me.

He held me through it, his touch steady as my body quaked. And when the waves finally ebbed, and I caught my breath, he stood—slowly, eyes dark with hunger and something deeper, something possessive. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his predatory gaze fixed on me, like he wasn’t done—not even close.

But I wanted to give him more than just my body. I wanted to feel all of him, in every way.

“Come here,” I breathed, not caring that my voice trembled, not caring that his presence had completely overwhelmed every coherent thought I had left.

He hesitated, just for a beat, and I saw the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. That same, too-gentle wariness from earlier, as though one wrong move from him could destroy everything we’d built.

But I wasn’t going to break. Not this time. Not ever, not with him.

So, I reached for him. Boldly, fiercely. I grabbed onto the hem of his trousers, never breaking eye contact. “Here, Vorgath.”

His nostrils flared as understanding replaced doubt, raw desire simmering just beneath the surface. With a low growl, he hooked his fingers into his waistband, peeling away the last barrier between us.

It was impossible not to gasp when he stood fully revealed before me. Every inch of Vorgath was a study in strength, his broad chest tapering down to a narrow waist and powerful legs, the expanse of his green skin covered in scars and hard-cut muscles that spoke of countless battles. His arms, as large around as tree trunks, bulged as he set his trousers aside, and my gaze followed the rough lines of his abdomen, every ridge visible even in the low light of the forge.

And then... my gaze lowered.

Between his thick thighs, his cock stood proud and heavy—larger than I had imagined, even knowing how big he was. Orcs certainly had a reputation for size, and it wasn’t just legend. My breath hitched again as I realized the full scale of what I had invited into this night.

“Stars above...” I whispered under my breath, half in awe, half amused at the shock

zipping through me. He was intimidatingly perfect in every way.

“You can still say no,” he muttered, his voice low and guttural, like every single muscle in his body was taut, waiting for my next command.

No?No?Was he mad?

I slid off the bench and took a step toward him. My fingers traced down the taut line of his abdomen, reveling in the tension that coiled beneath his skin.

“Vorgath,” I whispered, feeling the heat rise between us again, “Do I look like I want to say no?”

My hand drifted lower, wrapping around his thick shaft, and I felt the sharp intake of his breath as I touched him. He twitched in my hand, impossibly hard and hot, and for a brief, heady moment, I felt both powerful and vulnerable in the same breath.

I gave him a long, slow stroke, savoring how his eyes fluttered shut, savoring how this mountain of a man, this towering orc, trembled at my touch.

When he opened his eyes again, they were burning, their intensity dark enough to set the room aflame.

“Soraya,” he growled. His hand shot out, gripping my wrist gently but firmly, stopping my motion for just a moment. “You are human,” he repeated, as though desperately reminding himself.

I met his gaze. “And you’re my orc,” I said, my voice filled with a quiet but fierce certainty. “So, stop holding back.”

He let out a shuddering breath, and with one fluid movement, he lifted me off the

ground as if I weighed nothing, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist. His warmth enveloped me, his hands firm at my hips, pulling my body flush against his. The sensation of his hardness pressing against my slick folds sent a shock of pleasure through me so intense, I let out a gasp, my nails digging into his back.

“You need to be ready for me,” he murmured.

He rocked his hips gently, teasing us both, the head of his cock just barely brushing against me, and stars, it was already too much. My body was thrumming with desire—desire for him, for this, for us.

“I am,” I breathed against his lips, kissing him hard, dragging my teeth across his bottom lip until he groaned. “For you... I am.”

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Our auras pulsed around us, swirling together in the dim light of the forge—gold clashing with red, silver whispering between the creases. It was a promise—a vow without words.

And then, finally, Vorgath lowered me onto the workbench and moved between my legs, taking his time, spreading my legs wide, hooking them in the crooks of his massive arms.

“Soraya,” he murmured above me, voice deep, dark, dangerous in its intensity. “Durlan... tell me if it's too much. I need you to tell me.”

I nodded, my breath hitching with equal parts anticipation and need.

Slowly, gently, his thick shaft pushed into me, my body accommodating inch by inch of him. The stretch—the sheer fullness—was unlike anything I’d ever felt, both overwhelming and perfect. I arched my back, toes curling as my breath stuttered in my throat, my whole body trembling under the intensity.

“By the Alders, Vorgath,” I whispered, feeling every ridged vein of him moving deeper inside me, stretching me in ways I hadn’t even dreamed possible.

He froze, his dark eyes blown wide with concern, every taut muscle in his body tense, locked in place as if waiting for a signal. His hands, those big, scarred hands, trembled ever so slightly where they were braced on either side of me, holding him above me like a shield.

“If it’s too much, we stop,” he rasped, his voice low, raw, as though the restraint was

physically painful for him.

But oh, I didn't want him to stop. I couldn't. The pleasure and pressure blurred together, wound so tightly inside me that I needed to go further, to see what more there could be. The sensation of him filling me so completely made me dizzy with lust and something far deeper... something I didn't have a name for yet but felt in every touch.

"No," I managed to breathe out, my fingers curling into his shoulders, urging him on. "Don't stop."

With a guttural groan, he sunk further into me, the stretch now impossibly deep, sending flames licking up my spine, pleasure overwhelming everything else. My body, impossibly full, was screaming for more. I wrapped my legs tighter around him, desperate, needing him closer than seemed physically possible.

His hands shifted to cup my ass, lifting me slightly, angling to press even deeper. When he finally bottomed out, I let out a sound that was somewhere between a moan and a sob of raw need. I felt him everywhere, filling parts of me I hadn't even known existed. The sensation of being so tightly connected to him was overwhelming, yet it wasn't enough.

I wanted more—needed more.

"Yes," I gasped, tilting my head back. "More."

"You're perfect," he rumbled, his voice dark, gravelly, barely restrained. His forehead dropped to mine, his breath hot against my skin. "You were made for me."

And then, he began to move.

Slow at first, each thrust careful, testing, almost reverent. My breath hitched with every shift, every inch of him pushing deeper until I thought I might break under the sheer weight of it all.

“Durlan,” he growled, inching back just enough to watch my reaction when he thrust forward, the sudden fullness ripping a gasp from my lips. “You feel... so damned good.”

I couldn't respond, not with words, at least. Instead, my body did the talking, arching toward him, my nails digging into his arms as wave after wave of pleasure hit me with every slow grind of his hips. I was drowning in him—the heat, the thickness, the way my body stretched to fit him perfectly.

His rhythm grew faster, more urgent, and with each stroke deeper than the last, I felt myself unraveling, an all-consuming ache building in the pit of my stomach, ready to burst.

“Vorgath,” I gasped, struggling to catch my breath. “Don’t—don’t stop. Please.”

His next thrust was harder, rougher, burying himself fully inside me with a growl so feral, so primal, I felt it resonate deep in my bones.

I couldn't help it—I cried out, my head falling back as his strokes became more powerful, each one sending a shockwave of pleasure through me.

“Look at me,” he whispered, his breath hot against my neck.

I forced my eyes open, meeting his gaze. His dark eyes, usually so guarded, were wild now, full of raw hunger. He growled, low and deep, before he surged forward again, his hips snapping into mine with renewed fervor. He was everywhere, all at once, and I moaned, wrapping my arms tighter around his neck, arching into him in

answer to that pounding rhythm.

His hands moved to my hips, gripping hard as he lifted me, changing the angle just enough that when he thrust again, I felt him deeper. I cried out, the sound echoing in the dim glow of the forge.

“That’s it,” he growled, his deep voice sending vibrations through my entire body. “Let me hear you.”

Every word, every low rumble of his voice, pushed me closer to the edge. My skin felt impossibly sensitive, each thrust of his hips sending sparks of pleasure shooting through me. I’d never felt anything like it—the way he filled me, consumed me, yet somehow left me needing more.

“Vorgath—” I gasped, my hands scrabbling for purchase on his shoulders, his arms, anywhere I could hold onto as he pushed me closer and closer to oblivion. I felt the sweat beading on his skin, felt the powerful flex of his muscles with every thrust, the raw strength that could bend iron but right now was focused entirely on me.

His forehead pressed against mine, and his dark eyes drilled into me with such intensity that it felt like he could see straight through to my soul.

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“Are you close?” he asked.

I nodded frantically, unable to form coherent words, barely able to breathe with the pressure building inside me. But he didn’t need me to answer.

“I can feel it,” he rumbled, his breath jagged, his control slipping. “Your body... you’re squeezing me so tight, durlan...”

His pace quickened, his thrusts harder now, each one pushing me to the brink of breaking. My whole body quaked under the intensity, my thighs trembling. The sounds filling the room were animalistic—his gruff groans mixing with my breathless cries, the soft slaps of our bodies meeting over and over.

And then, just when I didn’t think I could take anymore, the pressure building inside me snapped.

My release crashed over me in wave after wave of blinding heat, and I cried out his name, trembling in his arms as my walls clenched tight around him, dragging him deeper into me. He growled, barely holding onto his control as my body convulsed beneath him.

But it wasn’t enough for him—not yet.

Vorgath wasn’t satisfied until he wrung every ounce of pleasure from my body, his strokes never relenting as he pushed me through the aftershocks, coaxing whimpers and gasps from my lips that I didn’t even know I was capable of.

My body was burning, completely overwhelmed by sensation—it was almost too much, the intensity of him, the way his thick shaft pressed into me deeper and deeper, even as I quivered and clenched around him.

“Vorgath—oh yes,” I moaned, trying to catch my breath, my hands raking down his back to anchor myself in the storm of pleasure.

But it was like he knew exactly where I stood—what I could handle—and his movements didn’t stop, didn’t slow, perfectly mindful of my fragility without needing to treat me like glass.

And Seven save me, I loved him for it.

He grunted, his movements growing rougher, more desperate, and I knew he was teetering on the edge of his own release. His grip on my waist tightened as his pace became relentless, each thrust a mix of pleasure and delicious pain as his body met mine.

“Soraya,” he groaned, the word barely a breath, but filled with raw emotion. His face was intense, his dark eyes barely able to keep focus on me, like he was already lost to the pleasure consuming him.

I felt it coming, that moment when he wouldn’t be able to hold back any longer, and my body responded, clenching around him, pulling him closer, allowing him the freedom to let go.

“Take me,” I whispered against his lips, my voice thick and low. “Vorgath, take me.”

A guttural sound ripped from deep in his chest as he plunged deep inside me one last time, his arms like iron bands around me as his release hit, powerful and overwhelming. The sensation of his warmth filling me, his heavy breath against my

skin, and the sheer erotic intensity of his body trembling with need sent another ripple of aftershocks through me, leaving me gasping in his arms.

For a long moment, the only sound in the forge was heavy breathing, the soft crackle of the forge, and the quiet sigh of spent bodies clinging to one another.

Vorgath didn't pull away—he stayed there, nestled deep inside me, our bodies still tangled together, his forehead resting against mine as we both fought to catch our breath. His hands rested on my hips, gentle now, but grounding—holding me like I was the most precious thing in the world.

“Well... that was...” I panted, my chest still heaving, trying to find the right words amidst the haze of what had just happened.

“Incredible?” Vorgath offered, his lips curving into a satisfied smile.

“Definitely incredible,” I agreed, running my fingers through his tousled hair, noting how his dark eyes never wavered from mine. “But now... I don't think I'll be able to walk properly for a week.”

His grin widened, those tusks of his adding a dangerous edge that somehow only made him look more tempting. “We'll take it slow next time.”

I could have melted right there, beneath the weight of his affection, the way his hands lingered over my skin even after we'd both completely unraveled. But no more words were left to be spoken, nothing that could capture what we'd just shared. Not just a moment of passion but a promise.

A future.

“I choose you,” he murmured softly, echoing my own words from earlier.

I smiled, pressing my lips to his, savoring the warmth and certainty that only he could give me. “And I choose you,” I whispered against his mouth. “Every day.”

And as I let sleep take me, wrapped in Vorgath’s arms, it felt like the world outside couldn’t touch us. Not now. Not here.

For a moment, everything was beautiful.

Chapter 22

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Heat slammed into me, dragging me out of sleep.

I bolted upright, my chest heaving. The air was thick—too thick. Smoke clawed at my throat, burning my lungs. The peaceful remnants of the night evaporated as reality crashed down around me.

The smithy was on fire.

“Vorgath!” I choked, my voice barely cutting through the haze. My hands fumbled in the darkness, desperate to find him. Bare skin—there. I shook him, harder than I meant to. “Wake up! We need to go, now!”

His eyes snapped open, confusion vanishing as alertness took over. He was on his feet in a single fluid motion, yanking me up beside him.

“Move!” His voice was a command that cut through the growing panic.

We scrambled for our clothes. I grabbed my shift, not bothering with the laces, while Vorgath roughly tugged on his trousers. We had to hurry. The flames were already licking at the beams above us, a hungry roar growing louder by the second.

Crack.

My eyes shot up in time to see part of the roof buckle. Vorgath moved faster than I could process, his arm shooting out to pull me back just as flaming debris crashed to the floor, inches from where I’d been standing.

“Stay close!”

His grip tightened on my arm as he led us through the chaos. The smoke was so thick now, it blurred everything. I could barely breathe—each gasp felt like inhaling fire. I stumbled, coughing, and in an instant, Vorgath scooped me up, his stride unbroken despite the flames closing in around us.

The door. Just get to the door.

We burst into the cool night air, gasping as the fresh air hit our lungs.

Vorgath set me down gently, his hands roving over my body. “Are you hurt?” he demanded, his voice hoarse with worry.

I coughed again, shaking my head. “I’m fine. But the forge—”

Before I could finish, shouts erupted from the village. Flames danced higher, casting an eerie glow over the darkened homes. The fire was spreading—fast.

“Water! We need water!” A voice rang out, and suddenly, everything was moving around me. Villagers appeared, buckets in hand, forming a line to battle the inferno. But the flames were already too high, too strong.

I stood there, frozen for what felt like an eternity. The forge—my forge—was vanishing into the fire. Everything I’d worked for, everything I had built for Elias and me. Gone. Just like that.

“Soraya!”

Vorgath’s shout yanked me back to reality. A bucket was thrust into my hands before I could think. Reflexively, I tossed the water at the flames, but it felt like throwing a

cup of water into the ocean. Useless.

“Soraya, keep moving!” Thyri’s voice broke through the chaos. She ran toward me, her hair wild and face streaked with soot. She shoved another bucket into my hands, panting hard. Where had she come from?

The heat was unbearable. My skin burned, prickling under the force of the heat.

Vorgath reappeared beside me, a giant in the smoke and flames. His powerful arms hurled water at the blaze, his muscles straining as if he could will the fire to stop through sheer force. By the Alders, he was strong, but even he couldn’t fight a force this overwhelming.

I grabbed another bucket, throwing the water as hard as I could, but my eyes darted to my house, just across the street. Elias. He’s in there. Sleeping. Fear coiled tight in my chest. What if the fire spread? What if I couldn’t—

“I’ve got him!” Mrs. Crumble’s voice cut through my panic like a knife. She appeared beside me, her mossy hair singed at the ends. “Your boy’s safe, love. He’s with Milla.”

Relief hit me like a punch, leaving me gasping. Thank the Seven. I nodded, choking out a “Thank you,” though my voice barely worked. The weight of the fear loosened its grip, but only slightly.

Mrs. Crumble nodded, then vanished in a swirl of leaves, reappearing moments later with an armful of wet blankets. She tossed them over the smaller flames licking at the edge of the forge, smothering them with surprising efficiency.

The bucket brigade stretched out before me, a line of grim faces illuminated by the sickly glow. I recognized old Godfrey the cooper, young Mya from the bakery, and

even Lady Hargrave's gardener. As I worked alongside my neighbors, gratitude washed over me. These people had come running in the dead of night to help. Yet even as warmth bloomed in my chest, a chill of isolation crept in.

They were here now, fighting alongside me, but tomorrow? When the embers cooled and reality set in?

I'd be alone again, facing the ruins of my dreams.

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Vorgath's presence at my side was a constant, his powerful form moving with purpose as he hurled bucket after bucket at the flames. Our eyes met briefly in the chaos, and I saw my own worry reflected there. Without a word, he nodded, a silent reassurance that I wasn't sure I entirely believed.

“Keep it coming!” someone shouted, and I forced myself to move.

Chapter 23

As dawn broke, casting a pale light over the smoldering ruins of the forge, a hollow ache settled in my chest. The structure still stood, but just barely. Charred beams stretched upwards, looking like the bones of something long dead. Metal shards glinted dully in the debris. The walls were coated in soot, the stones cracked from the heat. Smoke still curled lazily from the scorched wood, the faint smell of ash hanging in the damp morning air.

I stood there, arms limp at my sides, staring at the wreckage. The thought of trying to fix it felt insurmountable. I wanted to collapse to the ground and let the ash swallow me whole. But I couldn't even summon the energy to cry. It was as though the fire had burned out whatever spark had been keeping me going.

The light touch of a hand on my arm jolted me back to the present. Thyri stood beside me, her face drawn and streaked with soot. She didn't speak right away; she just surveyed the scene with a quiet intensity that was so unlike her usual vibrant energy.

“What happened?” she asked at last, her voice barely more than a whisper.

I swallowed hard, the acrid taste of smoke still clinging to my throat.

“I don't know,” I rasped, but even as the words left my mouth, a cold certainty settled in my gut. This wasn't an accident. It had to be Thorne or one of his lackeys, eager to remind me of my place and wipe away everything I'd fought for. I just had no idea his spite ran so deep.

Without a word, I stepped forward, toward the heart of the forge, where the destruction seemed worst.

The moment I moved, I felt Vorgath's hand around my wrist. “Soraya, it's unstable,” he said quietly. “Stay back.”

I twisted out of his grip, my frustration bubbling into anger. “Just leave me alone.” The words ripped out of me before I could stop them, harsher than I meant. I didn't look back to see his reaction; I just pushed forward, deeper into the wreckage.

The debris crunched under my feet, each step sending up little puffs of ash, coating my skin and clothes in a fine, gray film. I pushed aside a fallen beam, ignoring the splinters that dug into my palms. My eyes darted around, searching for anything salvageable. My foot caught on something, and I stumbled, catching myself on a scorched workbench. As I steadied myself, my hand brushed against something cool and solid. I looked down, and there it was—the hammer Vorgath had gifted me. It was blackened by the flames, its handle scarred, but still whole.

I picked it up, feeling its familiar weight in my hand. Tears pricked at my eyes as I clutched it to my chest.

“How did I let this happen?” I whispered to myself, the guilt rising like bile in my throat.

I squeezed my eyes shut, clutching the hammer so hard my knuckles ached. This place had been my lifeline, proof that I could rebuild and protect Elias's future. But now, looking at the charred remains felt like a cruel reminder that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep the world from crumbling around me.

Standing in the ruins of everything I'd worked for, I wanted to scream at the universe for being so unfair. But more than anything, I wanted to believe we could still fix this. That somehow, against all odds, we could find a way out of this nightmare.

I looked at Vorgath, my voice raw and unsteady. "What am I going to do?"

"There is something I need to tell you," he said, his words careful and measured.

The hammer suddenly felt heavy in my hands. "What is it?" I asked.

Vorgath's jaw clenched, his eyes darting around the ruined forge before settling back on me. "The orc who confronted me at the inn—Dregor."

My stomach dropped. "What about him?"

"During the war, my brother killed Dregor's son. I had the chance to end Gorkath's life, to prevent more bloodshed. But I couldn't. I let him go."

I clutched the hammer tighter, my knuckles turning white. Dregor's mockery from the tavern echoed in my mind, his accusation of treachery. Grakhul. Traitor.

"Dregor blames me for his son's death," Vorgath continued, his voice tight. "He believes if I had killed my brother earlier, his son would still be alive. And now... I suspect this is his doing."

The memories of Dregor's mockery, Thorne's disdain, and the precariousness of it all

crashed over me like a wave. Dregor hated him. Thorne hated me. Everything felt like it was hanging on a dangerous precipice, and I was scared. Scared of losing everything again, losing Elias, losing Vorgath, losing the fragile hope I'd dared to hold on to. My chest tightened as the fear clawed at me, suffocating.

“Why can't we just have a moment of peace?” I snapped.

His eyes flickered, and I could see the turmoil there, the struggle to find the right words. I hadn't intended to hurt him, but I felt... lost. Torn between my gratitude and love for him and the gnawing realization that I was standing in ruins. Again.

“I'm trying to fix it, Soraya. But I—”

“Fix it?” I laughed, the sound sharp and jagged. “Can you fix this?” I gestured to the charred wreckage around us. “I finally let myself believe that I could have something again. Something more than just survival. And now look.” My throat tightened as my voice wavered. “I thought I could build a life again, but it just... burns.”

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Vorgath's face shifted—pain, there was no other word for it. His thick arms hung by his sides, useless against the fire that had already done its damage. For a moment, he was no longer the fierce warrior I'd come to trust, to crave.

He was just... a man who couldn't fix what was broken.

"Soraya—" He stepped closer, his voice softer now, pleading. I could see it in his eyes: the willingness to fight. For me. For Elias. But I couldn't let him do that. Not when I felt so utterly powerless.

"No, Vorgath. Don't." I held up my hand, stepping back, my throat tight. "What if... what if I was wrong? What if I was wrong to let you in?"

He flinched like I'd struck him. Silence hung between us, a chasm neither of us could cross.

I swallowed hard, hating myself for the words but unable to stop. "I can't... I can't afford to hope for something and watch it be destroyed again. You—this... it's too much." I felt my chest heave, but I forced the next words out. "I don't know if I can do this with you. With anyone."

The words echoed in the silence between us, and I hated how small they sounded, how broken. But letting him in had been a risk, a chance to believe in more than survival.

Now, surrounded by ashes, it felt like an invitation for the world to strike again.

“Maybe I was meant to be alone,” I whispered.

Because if I was alone, I wouldn’t have to watch everything I loved burn. I wouldn’t have to hold Elias close and wonder if I could protect him from the world, or from my own failures. And I wouldn’t have to look at Vorgath and see the possibility of a future that felt too good, too fragile, to last.

“Soraya...” His voice trailed off, the words unsaid, too heavy for the moment.

I looked up at him, knowing this was it. “Just go,” I said.

Finally, he spoke, his voice low and filled with something I hadn’t expected—acceptance. “If that’s what you want.”

The words ripped through me, cold and sharp. He was leaving. Because I had told him to.

Vorgath breathed deeply, the sound thick with unspoken things. Then, with one last look, he turned and walked away. His footsteps crunched through the ashes as he disappeared into the haze of dawn.

And I... I was alone.

The morning fog thickened, and the silence around me stretched, endless and empty. I stood there, clutching the hammer until the metal bit into my palm, but the pain felt distant. The ashes curled around my feet, whispering a truth I didn’t want to face.

All I felt was empty. Cold.

I thought we could rebuild. But now?

Now, I wasn't sure of anything.

Chapter 24

The needle slipped through the delicate fabric with practiced ease, my fingers moving in a familiar rhythm. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows of Lady Hargrave's sitting room, casting a warm glow on the fine silks and velvets spread across my lap.

"I don't like these flowers," Isla, Lady Hargrave's eldest, whined for what felt like the hundredth time. "They're too...pink."

I bit back a sigh, forcing a patient smile. "We can change them if you'd prefer. Perhaps a softer shade?"

Isla's little nose scrunched up in distaste. "No, I want them blue. Like the sky."

"Blue it is, then," I murmured, reaching for a spool of cornflower thread.

As I began unpicking the delicate embroidery I'd spent the better part of an hour on, I felt a familiar pang of frustration. With the smithy reduced to ashes, I'd had no choice but to fall back on my old trade. The meager pay from seamstressing barely kept food on the table, but it was all I had left. Each stitch felt like a step backward, away from the life I'd begun to build for myself and Elias.

The door opened with a soft creak, and Lady Hargrave swept into the room. Her eyes widened slightly as they landed on me, a flicker of surprise crossing her face before she schooled it back into her usual mask of polite indifference.

"Mrs. Ashford," she said, her voice cool and measured. "I honestly didn't expect to see you again after you took up blacksmithing."

My spine stiffened, but I kept my voice steady. “Life has a way of bringing us full circle sometimes, my lady.”

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Lady Hargrave quirked an eyebrow, settling herself into a nearby armchair. “Indeed it does.” Her gaze flicked to the dress in my lap, then back to my face. “I told you last time, she doesn't like flowers.”

“Ah, but that's where you're wrong,” I said with a wry smile. “She likes blue flowers.”

Lady Hargrave's lips twitched, almost forming a smile. “Blue flowers. Of course.” She shook her head, a hint of amusement in her voice. “Children and their whims.”

I nodded, focusing on my stitching. The silence stretched between us, punctuated only by the soft rustle of fabric and Isla's occasional fidgeting.

“I heard about your forge,” Lady Hargrave said suddenly. “A terrible tragedy.”

I swallowed hard, fighting back the sting of tears. “Yes,” I managed. “It was.”

“And yet here you are, picking up the pieces. It must take such courage to strike out on your own, to build something after losing so much.”

I blinked, startled by the unexpected empathy in her voice. “I... thank you. But I'm merely doing what needs to be done.”

Lady Hargrave waved a hand, dismissing my humility with a flick. “Oh, please don't downplay it. You're far braver than you realize.”

I stilled, the needle suspended in midair.

Brave? It didn't feel like bravery.

It felt like survival—barely making it through each day, scraping by with work that no longer fit the person I'd become. The words “striking out on your own” echoed in my mind, mocking me. My forge was in ruins, my hands manipulating silk and thread instead of iron and fire. Was this what bravery looked like?

It felt like defeat—like I was clinging to the edges of a life that had already burned away.

But Lady Hargrave's words stirred something deep inside me. Maybe it was the way she said it—unexpected, almost reverent—or maybe it was just the ache of wanting to believe it was true. Could it be? Could I still be brave, even now?

I lowered the needle, my fingers trembling slightly, but I forced a smile. “I suppose... courage looks different depending on where you're standing.”

Lady Hargrave tilted her head, her sharp gaze softening ever so slightly. “It does, indeed.”

We held each other's eyes for a moment longer than felt comfortable. I wasn't used to seeing her... human. I half expected some cutting remark or instruction on the next bit of work for Isla's dress, but instead, Lady Hargrave folded her hands neatly over her lap, the laces of her embroidered gown shining in the light.

“You know,” she began, and with Lady Hargrave, any thought that started that way was bound to be something I very much didnotknow, “I envy what you have.”

I nearly dropped the needle. “I'm sorry, what?”

She blinked, unaffected by my outburst. “Oh yes. Don't act so shocked. You may

have had setbacks, but at least your life is your own. I may sit here, gliding through dinners and teas, but every movement is watched. Judged.” She raised an eyebrow at Isla’s bouncing figure at the far end of the parlor. “Even decisions as trivial as flower embroidery are scrutinized. You’ve done something...” She paused, searching for the right word, “...bold. To choose your own path after so much loss.”

I stared at her, waiting for the catch. Waiting for the reminder that I could only earn a fraction of her wealth with any path I chose. But she didn’t say it.

“So,” she added lightly, as if pulling a thread through the heavy conversation, “you’ll be rebuilding then?”

“I’m not...” I cleared my throat, willing my voice to stay steady. “I’m not sure.”

In truth, I hadn’t let myself even think about the forge. Only a couple of days had passed since the fire, but it felt like a lifetime. Rebuilding felt impossible. Too close to everything I was afraid to confront. If I faced the forge, I’d have to face it all—Vorgath, my future, my failures.

Lady Hargrave watched me carefully, and for the first time, I wondered if she saw through the fragile veneer I was trying to hold together. Her gaze flicked to the trembling needle in my hands, but she said nothing.

I swallowed, the silence between us growing thick. “It’s been hard to think beyond what’s right in front of me,” I admitted, my voice quieter now.

Lady Hargrave’s eyes softened in a way I’d never seen before. For a moment, she wasn’t the imperious noblewoman, all sharp edges and well-practiced smiles. She was just a woman—a woman who, maybe surprisingly, understood what it meant to carry more weight than one person should ever have to.

“Well,” she said, her voice measured but kind, “you’d better start thinking about it. I hear the Wildclaws have commissioned their own set of silverware. I’ll be needing one, too, of course. Wouldn’t want to fall behind.” She gave a thin smile, but there was something in her tone—a hint of genuine warmth beneath her usual aloofness.

I blinked, feeling as though a rug had just been pulled from under me. “Y-You mean...”

“Yes,” she replied, rising smoothly from her chair and going to a small writing desk. She reached inside a drawer and pulled out a velvet pouch. “Five new settings. Plus carving knives to match.” She held the pouch out to me, dangling it lightly between two fingers. “Consider this an advance on the work.”

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I stared at the pouch, dumbfounded. An advance. An advance? From Lady Hargrave? She of the I'm-not-paying-full-price-for-anything ilk, handing me cold, hard coin like it was nothing.

"I—thank you," I stammered, reaching out to take it. The weight of it dropped with a satisfying thunk into my palm, my heartbeat quickening. Was this really happening? The pouch felt heavy with possibilities.

She waved a graceful hand as if it were no big thing—a casual Tuesday for her, probably.

"You're brave, Soraya. I might not fully understand your world, but I see your courage. So, no more of this nonsense about 'not being sure.' Rebuild your forge. The world will move on with or without you, but if I'm going to keep up with the Wildclaws," she sighed dramatically, "I'll need you to get back to work."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but eventually, I managed a smile. Nodding with more confidence than I felt, I said, "I'll start planning today."

Lady Hargrave gave a regal nod, but just before she could slip back into that graceful indifference of hers, she hesitated.

"I do mean it, you know," she added softly. "You've lost much, but you still built something. And you'll rebuild it again, I'm sure."

"Thank you," I said, the words feeling heavier than they should, laden with the weight of all the things I couldn't quite put into words.

Lady Hargrave gave a final nod, her usual facade sliding back into place as if the moment had never happened. She turned to call Isla and Edward to come for their fittings, slipping effortlessly back into her role as the flawless aristocratic mother.

Hours later, the work done, I gathered my things in silence, the weight of Lady Hargrave's words—and the hefty pouch in my pocket—settling somewhere deep in my chest. She had called me brave. Me. Soraya Ashford, the woman who just days ago had been hiding inside the charred shell of her own forge, too terrified to face the wreckage of her life.

And yet... somehow, hearing it from her, of all people, had stirred something in me. It was like she'd planted a little seed of hope in the cracked soil of my heart, and now it was up to me to see if it would bloom.

As I waved goodbye to the Hargraves, I tugged the coin pouch out again, feeling its comforting weight in my hand. Rebuild. Was I really going to do it? Could I?

The streets of Everwood buzzed with the usual end-of-day bustle. Creatures of all kinds hurried around me—elves, dwarves, humans, and the occasional imp, darting in and out of alleyways—but I hardly noticed. My thoughts were too tangled up with the possibility of starting over, of picking up the hammer and trying again. The idea scared me more than I cared to admit.

But it also... excited me.

I decided to take the long way home, and before I knew it, my feet had led me to Everwood's market square. The air here was thick with the scent of baking bread, fresh herbs, and the sharp tang of magic-infused potions. Fairy lights twinkled from the stalls overhead, and the murmur of laughter and bartering filled the space like a warm blanket. It was alive. Vibrant.

I paused in front of a flower cart, brightly colored petals spilling over the display in a riot of hues. Vibrant fuchsias, blues, and oranges created a striking contrast against the more muted grays of stone streets and wooden stalls around me.

And there, nestled amidst those blossoms like a living part of the display, was the stall's keeper—a dryad, unmistakable in her beauty.

She had skin the color of birch bark, delicate and pale but with lines that resembled the silver veins of a tree's roots. Her hair—long, flowing vines speckled with tiny blossoms—shifted softly in the breeze.

“Admiring the blooms?” she asked in a soft, lilting voice, her lips curling into a gentle smile. Her voice had an ageless quality, as if she had tended these flowers for centuries.

“They're beautiful,” I said truthfully. My eyes grazed over the selection, drawn to a cluster of deep purple flowers that seemed to shimmer slightly, catching the light in an almost magical way. “I don't often get the chance to stop and enjoy things like this.”

Her brow arched curiously as she leaned closer over her cart. “And why not?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, fumbling for an explanation. “Well, I—I'm a blacksmith... or at least,” I gave a dry laugh, “I was. There's not much room for flowers in the forge. Not much room for beauty, really.”

The dryad tilted her head as if considering my words, the motion graceful and slow, like the gentle sway of a tree in the wind.

“Not much room for beauty?” she echoed, tapping her chin with a moss-covered fingertip. “Why not?”

“Because... because that’s just how it is,” I stammered, suddenly feeling a bit silly as I tried to explain. “A forge is hot, loud, dirty. It’s fire and iron, not flowers and soft things.”

A light breeze stirred the delicate vines of her hair, and the dryad’s lips quirked again, this time as if she were holding back a laugh. “Perhaps that’s just how it was for the men who came before you. You are not them, are you?”

“No,” I said slowly. “But—”

She straightened up, a knowing look in her leaf-green eyes, and reached beneath the tangle of vines spilling from her cart, rummaging for a moment before producing a single flower—a stunning crimson blossom the size of my palm, its petals thick and velvety to the touch, like the fires of a sunset caught in bloom.

“Here,” she murmured, holding the flower toward me as if offering up a secret. “This is a firepetal.”

I studied it, uncertain. “Firepetal?”

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“Mm-hmm.” She nodded. “Its bloom is as resilient as it is beautiful. Fire-retardant. It thrives in heat. Perfect for safe work amidst flames.” She tilted her head again, her eyes twinkling with something mischievous. “Perhaps the flames aren’t so different from the flowers after all. They both grow with the right care.”

My fingers brushed the silky-soft petals, a spark of realization flickering in my chest. A flower that could grow beside the flames...

All this time, I’d been thinking I had to rebuild my forge as it was—as Kald’s forge, where weapons had been made. A place of hard steel and brute force. Sweat and fire and clanging iron. But maybe... maybe it didn’t have to be that way.

Maybe I could create a place where beauty and craftsmanship came together. A forge for creation, not destruction. Iron mixed with intricacy, fire tempered with softness. I didn’t need to be bound by old expectations.

This forge... this forge would be mine.

“I can plant these inside the forge, then?” I asked, my mind racing now. Images of a new, more vibrant space blooming in my head, in place of the smoldering ruins. Firelight flickering against glowing blooms. Strength and beauty, side by side.

“Absolutely,” the dryad replied with a warm smile. “Why not fill the space you create with things that inspire you? It is yours, after all. It can be whatever you wish.”

The words brought to mind Elias’s birthday wish—I wished that we could have Papa’s forge working again, so we could be like we were before.

What did that really mean to him, though? I realized he might not remember the forge in its glory but rather the feeling it had given him—the warmth of family gathered around the fire, the laughter that once echoed within the walls. I hadn't just lost the forge; I had lost a piece of what made us whole.

But now, I had the chance to create something new, to fill that space with safety and joy once more. I wanted to give Elias back that feeling, not just a replica of the past, but a bright new future we could share together.

And I wanted to do it my way.

I glanced down at the heavy coin pouch Lady Hargrave had given me earlier. There was enough in there for a fresh start... and maybe even a few firepetals to brighten the way.

I met the dryad's eyes, suddenly feeling like I had just stumbled upon a secret I wasn't supposed to find so easily—but one that belonged to me all the same. Those bright green eyestwinkled knowingly, as if she could see the new currents of hope flowing through my mind.

“How much for a bundle of these?” I asked, my voice steadier now. Sure. Almost eager.

The dryad's smile widened, her vines swaying gently as she handed me several more crimson blossoms. “Oh, don't worry about the cost,” she said with a wink, leaning in conspiratorially. “Consider it a gift. I can tell you have a grand vision.”

I laughed. “I'm not sure how grand it'll be, but thank you.”

With a wink and a nod, I carefully tucked the bundle of firepetals into my bag, the fiery blooms resting against the pouch of coin. The weight of both—possibility and

beauty—felt like the first step toward something new.

A forge filled with flowers.

My forge.

Chapter 25

Adull thud echoed outside my window, pulling me from a restless sleep. I blinked, disoriented, the soft light of dawn seeping through the curtains, chasing away the remnants of an all-too-brief slumber. For a moment, I lay still, willing myself to sink back into sleep, but the sounds from below—the scrape of something heavy being dragged, the occasional clatter of metal—tugged me fully awake.

I rubbed my eyes, the weight of exhaustion pressing down on me. The night before had stretched long into the early hours as I sat hunched over the small wooden desk in my cramped room, scribbling ideas onto parchment. My fingers had been smudged with charcoal as I sketched, erasing and redrawing, lost in a flurry of inspiration. I could still see the remnants of those late-night sketches scattered across the desk, plans for a new forge. I'd written out a list of tools, materials, and costs, every number circled in red ink, the coins Lady Hargrave had given me carefully budgeted next to my meager savings.

But when I finally dragged myself to bed, the doubts had crept in. Could I really do this? Could I rebuild, not just the forge but... everything?

The thud outside repeated, louder this time, shaking me from my thoughts. I groaned, pushing myself upright. Wrapping a shawl around my shoulders, I padded to the window.

Below, the wreckage of the forge was still a charred mess, but there—amidst the

ruin—Vorgath moved with quiet determination. He stood shirtless, sweat already glistening on his chest in the early morning light. In his hands, he gripped a large beam of wood, muscles flexing as he tossed it into a growing pile of debris. Another dull thud followed as the beam landed heavily.

I felt my breath catch for a moment. He was... relentless.

And so damn sexy.

With the distance between us the last few days, it had been easy for me to push aside memories of our night together. But now, looking down at him, sweat slicking his torso and muscles shifting with every precise, powerful movement—I found myself remembering everything. His hands on me, the heat of his breath near my ear. The way his mouth had claimed mine, hot and desperate. The way he had filled me so completely...

My throat went dry.

I swallowed hard, pressing my fingertips to the cool glass of the window as if it could somehow pull me back from the surge of heat rushing through my body.

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But the memories only flooded in faster. The way he had looked at me, like I was the only thing that mattered in the world. His voice, rough and hoarse, murmuring my name as if it was sacred. The way his body had moved over mine, between mine, as if we were forged together in that moment.

Damn him.

I should go down there. Help. Do something besides stand here like an idiot watching him. But the thought of facing him after everything that had passed between us... Seven save me, I wasn't ready.

Lady Hargrave's words from the day before echoed in my mind. "You're brave, Soraya."

I snorted softly. Brave? I didn't feel brave. I felt terrified. But maybe that was the point. Bravery wasn't about feeling fearless—it was about doing what needed to be done, even when I was scared out of my mind.

And right now, what needed to be done was down there, in the ashes of my old life.

"Damn it all," I muttered.

My boots were by the door, and I pulled them on with more force than necessary, as if I could stomp out my doubts along with my feet.

Before I could lose my nerve, I marched down the stairs and out the back door. The crisp morning air hit me like a slap, chasing away the last cobwebs of sleep and

indecision. I strode toward the ruins of the forge, my steps growing more determined with each crunch of ash beneath my feet.

Vorgath turned as I approached, his expression unreadable.

I cleared my throat, willing my voice to sound steadier than I felt. “What are you doing here?”

Vorgath shrugged, tossing another piece of debris onto the pile. “Choosing.”

And with that single word, I was back in that night, but not the heat and thrill of it. The deeper part, the part I’d almost managed to bury. The choice we’d made to be together and what that meant to him. To me.

He was here, despite everything falling apart, despite every excuse I’d given him to walk away. Here he was, standing in the ruins, proving it to me.

A spark of defiance rose in me, mingling with a fear I hated to admit. “I don’t need anyone to do this for me,” I insisted. “I can handle it on my own.”

His gaze flickered to me, his brow arching slightly, but he didn’t stop working. “Never said you couldn’t.”

“So you’re going to just... keep showing up?” I asked, my voice unsteady despite myself.

Vorgath straightened up, rolling his shoulders. “Yes.”

“How do you even know I want to do anything with it?” I asked stubbornly “What if I’m too tired to rebuild? What if I just... can’t?”

His expression shifted, a flicker of pain passing over his face before he spoke. “Whatever you choose, I’ll be here.”

“And if I decide to burn it all down again?” I whispered, barely able to meet his gaze.

“Then I’ll bring the flint,” he said.

His hands stilled at his sides, covered in soot. Those hands had shaped steel, carried burdens, fought in wars, and yet, they were steady now. Waiting. Giving me time to decide. He wasn’t pressing, wasn’t pushing me to be anything but what I was—scared, uncertain, but standing here with him anyway.

He took a slow step toward me. His hand lifted, hesitating for just a second before he brushed a smudge of soot from my cheek. His touch was warm, rough against my skin, and I leaned into it, the tension in my shoulders easing as his thumb gently traced the edge of my cheekbone.

I turned my face into his hand, pressing a soft kiss to his palm, letting my eyes drift closed as I stayed there, letting him hold me. For the first time in days, the world felt steady again, his hand grounding me in a way that words never could. I could feel his pulse beneath my lips, steady and unshaken, like an unspoken promise.

His thumb brushed a little slower, lingering just at the corner of my mouth, and for a moment, I almost forgot about the ashes around us, about the ruins of what we’d lost.

Then, a sound carried from down the path—a faint chorus of gruff voices and the unmistakable rhythm of boots crunching against gravel.

“Ah.” Vorgath’s hand dropped back to his side, and he gave a small nod, gesturing over my shoulder. “Reinforcements are here.”

I turned, following his gaze.

There, framed in the broad opening of the gate, stood Grimble Ironfoot, his bushy, fiery red beard as unmistakably bright as the morning sun itself. Behind him trailed an assortment of dwarves, their short, sturdy figures and gruff attitudes instantly recognizable, hauling everything from hammers to planks of wood and stacks of stone.

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At Grimble's side was Brilda, the mithral weaver, who gave me a knowing, sharp-eyed smirk.

"Sorry to bust up the moment, lovebirds," she said as she crossed her arms, her thick golden braids reflecting the sunlight like molten gold. "But someone here put out a call for help."

"What?" I blinked, still trying to untangle my thoughts. "I didn't—" I started to say, only to be interrupted by Brilda.

"Not you," she said, jerking a thumb toward Vorgath. "The orc. And when one of our own's in need, well, here we are."

I stared at her, at the small army of dwarves gathering behind her, now bustling around like a particularly organized swarm of bees. "One of your own?"

Grimble clapped his hands together with enthusiasm. "Aye. One of our own." He stepped forward, hands on his hips, surveying the ruins of the smithy with a look of approval—as if he already saw potential amidst the rubble. "You're one spirit tough as ol' mithral, lass. You're a survivor, a creator, like us."

I turned slowly toward Vorgath, who was standing with one of his many unreadable expressions. "You called them," I said.

Vorgath's shoulders tensed slightly, but his deep gaze softened as it settled on me. "Yes," he said simply. "Grimble and his clan... they're the best."

My gaze flicked back to the crowd as more dwarves arrived, bustling forward with purpose. Some carried large stones; others had enchanted magical tools, designed to move rubble with ease. And there, in the center of it all, Thora—Grimble's bookish daughter—unrolled a large, incredibly detailed schematic of a forge.

It hit me then: I wasn't alone.

For so long, it had been just me. Me and Elias. Me, stitching until my fingers bled so we'd have enough to eat. Me, keeping the world at bay because it was safer than feeling the ache of wanting more.

But now... now they were all here, shoulder to shoulder, helping me rebuild.

Thora beckoned me over, her ink-stained fingers delicate as they smoothed out the edges of the parchment. The large schematic lay between us, its lines sharp and precise. Grimble grinned proudly beside his daughter, arms crossed over his broad chest.

"Well?" he rumbled, jerking his chin toward the sketch. "What do you think, lass? This is just a rough plan, but the bones are there. We can start as soon as you say the word."

I stared down at the blueprint, my thoughts tangled. It was beautiful, functional. And yet, something stopped me. It felt so familiar—too familiar. Thick stone walls, heavy anvils, wide-open workspaces for weapon crafting.

"It's good," I said, hesitating as my mind sifted through the sketches I'd made the night before. "But... it's not quite right."

Grimble's bushy brows shot up in surprise, but a hint of amusement gleamed in his eyes. "Not quite right, eh? Well then, speak up."

I glanced at Vorgath, who watched me with that steady, unwavering look. Taking a breath, I nodded. “I want to build something different,” I began. “Here’s what I have in mind...”

And as I began to speak, I could almost see it—the firepetals blooming in the warm light, the space open and filled with both life and flame. A place Elias could remember, a space filled with light, vibrant and alive, made to hold both fire and softness.

A place made to last.

Chapter 26

The clang of hammers against wood, the rhythmic swish and pull of mithral wire, and the low murmur of magical incantations filled the air as the new smithy took shape. The sun, dipping toward the horizon, cast warm golden hues across the site, highlighting the fresh timber and newly crafted tools scattered around us.

I twisted another strand of mithral with clumsy fingers.

“Easy now, lass,” Brilda said as she guided my hands. “Don’t force the metal. Let it guide you.”

Taking her advice, I let the shimmering strand slide through my fingers more gently, feeling it respond to the careful pressure. Bit by bit, it wound into the protective latticework we were embedding into the walls.

Walls that had gone up quicker than I ever could have imagined.

Grimble and his clan worked with the efficiency of an army, each dwarf seeming to know exactly what to do and where to be. Wooden beams, stone slabs, and enchanted

iron were moved and positioned with precision, making the entire process seem like a well-rehearsed dance. Just a week into our project, and we were already putting the finishing touches on the structure.

Across the forge, Sylwen etched runes into the doorway with his long, slender fingers, the air shimmering faintly with magic as he worked. He glanced over, his dark eyes glinting with amusement.

“You’re getting the hang of it,” he said, smiling. “Just don’t get too good, or Brilda will try to recruit you.”

Brilda nudged me, grinning. “Aye, there’s always room for a new weaver in the guild.”

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I shook my head, smiling despite my weariness. “One trade at a time, thank you.”

Behind us, Vorgath grunted with effort as a heavy wooden beam settled into position with a dull thud. I glanced up, momentarily distracted by the way his arms flexed, muscles rolling beneath his green skin as he worked with Grimble to set the support.

“You know, if you stare any harder, you’ll bore a hole clean through him,” Brilda muttered.

“I wasn’t staring,” I mumbled, cheeks warming as I forced my attention back to the mithral wire.

Brilda chuckled, clearly unconvinced. “Aye, and I’m the Queen of Alderwilde,” she teased, reaching over to adjust the line of my weave. “Now focus, or else you’re going to end up with a tangled mess on your hands.”

Too late for that, I thought wryly, though I kept the comment to myself and tried to focus instead on the positive.

The forge was taking shape beautifully. Sturdy beams of enchanted oak framed the structure, woven with Brilda’s shimmering mithral, while Sylwen’s softly glowing runes protected the entrance. Surrounding the fire pit, the firepetals added warmth and safety, their crimson blooms blending beauty and purpose.

As I twisted another row of mithral wire, I looked around, feeling a quiet gratitude settle in. Each piece of this forge was a reminder of the people who stood by me as I reclaimed my dreams.

Suddenly, a cheerful voice called out from the direction of the path leading to town. “Is this a private party, or can anyone join?”

I turned to see Thyri approaching, a basket slung over her arm and a broad grin on her face. Beside her, Elias trotted along, his eyes wide with excitement as he took in the bustling scene. Mrs. Crumble followed behind them, her gnarled hands holding a pot of something that smelled delicious.

“Dinner’s on!” Thyri announced, holding up the basket triumphantly.

At the announcement, everyone paused mid-task. Tools were set down, mithral wire was left to shimmer unattended, and even Sylwen allowed himself a contented sigh as he drifted over to the makeshift table.

“Perfect timing,” Grumble bellowed, tugging at his beard. “I was just about to gnaw on this here beam.” He patted the large wooden support with a grin, earning a few tired chuckles from the group.

Thyri approached, already zeroing in on Grumble. “If anyone’s chewing on anything, it’ll be one of my dinner rolls. Sit yourselves down before I start rationing portions.”

Grimble muttered something about dwarves and rations but complied, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

We all gathered around the rough table we had cobbled together days earlier—a mismatched collection of workers, friends, and magic-wielding elves, but somehow, it felt like family. Elias practically jumped into his seat, his small frame bouncing excitedly as he sniffed the air.

Thyri wasted no time dishing out steaming, toasted rolls, roasted vegetables, and savory slabs of ham.

“Eat up, folks,” she said. “Rebuilding forges calls for proper nutrition and maybe... something stronger.” She winked and produced a silver flask, which gleamed in the dwindling sunlight.

Vorgath, seated beside me, devoured the bread in two bites, and I noticed the way his jaw flexed as he chewed. My gaze drifted further south, tracking his powerful neck muscles down to that broad chest... my cheeks immediately heated.

Seven save me, I needed to get a grip.

It had been almost a fortnight since that night in the workshop—since his touch had lit me up from the inside out like a forge at full blaze. Since I’d let the fear win, let the weight of everything that had been torn apart push him away. I’d needed time to get my footing, to rebuild what I’d lost. He’d respected that, but now, I found myself aching for him to cross that gap between us again.

Thyri’s laughter rang out, drawing my attention back to the group. I watched as she offered Mrs. Crumble another helping of stew, her eyes twinkling with mischief. Elias, his mouth stuffed with bread, listened intently to Grimbles’ animated retelling of an old battle, his face aglow with awe.

This—this was what Elias had wished for. Maybe not in so many words, but a life like the one we’d had before: filled with warmth, laughter, people who cared.

As for me? I was starting to realize that I wanted Vorgath woven into the fabric of that wish, as much a part of it as anyone else.

So then, why was I still holding him at arm’s length?

He had chosen me. He’d stood by me when I’d tried to push him away, when I’d buried myself in doubt. And if he could risk everything to stay, the least I could do

was let go of the fear that kept me from fully choosing him.

I drew a breath, the realization settling into something firm and certain. I didn't want to live my life guarded, waiting for things to fall apart. He was here, in the warmth of this gathering, in the laughter that lifted Elias's face, and it was time I let myself believe in this, in him.

If I'd learned anything from the fire, from loss, fear, and heartbreak, it was that some things were worth fighting for.

And this—we—were worth it.

I turned to him, catching his gaze. His eyes, dark and steady, held mine, a silent question lingering there.

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This time, I didn't look away.

Suddenly, Grumble let loose one of his booming laughs, jostling me out of my thoughts. "You staying quiet over there, Vorgath! Worn out, are ye? I betcha I could lift that beam faster than you, even with half a pint in me belly!"

Vorgath didn't even bother turning. "Not a chance, dwarf. We both know you'd fall into the ale barrel midway through."

Grumble let out an exaggerated scoff. "You wound me, friend! Just you wait; after dinner, we'll see who's top!" He whistled, leaning forward to nudge Elias. "Bet your money on me, lad! We don't let orcs win that easy."

Elias looked up at Grumble, wide-eyed. "Mama says we don't bet, Mister Grumble," he said, his face scrunching in confusion before turning to me for confirmation.

I bit back a laugh and nodded solemnly. "That's right."

Vorgath glanced down at Elias, a glint of mischief sparking in his usually stoic gaze. "Good rule to follow, Elias," Vorgath said. "But if you were to bet... always bet on the orc."

The rest of the meal passed in a comfortable rhythm. Thyri regaled the group with stories of kitchen mishaps and strange ingredients brought in from far-flung territories, each tale more exaggerated than the last. Sylwen occasionally chimed in to correct her more fantastical claims, much to Thyri's playful annoyance. Elias couldn't stop laughing, especially when Thyri described a particular incident involving troll

sausage that she claimed tried its best to escape the pot.

Grimble listened with rapt attention before raising his cup to interrupt. “Say what you will about troll sausage, lass,” he bellowed, “but that’s still better than the time we used molten cheese to patch a hole in a blast furnace.” He slapped the table, sending a nearly full cup of ale skittering dangerously toward Sylwen's lap.

The elf didn’t even bat an eye as he flicked his wrist, the cup stopping mid-ski and floating back to its proper place.

“Cheers to exceptionally poor choices,” Sylwen muttered dryly.

Before the laughter could fully taper off, a soft voice broke the chatter.

“E-excuse me...?”

The sound was barely a whisper under the fading chuckles, but it was enough to silence the group. All eyes slowly shifted toward the edge of the clearing, where a figure stood, half-concealed in the deepening twilight.

A girl—or rather, a young woman—stepped forward cautiously from the shadows, clutching a burlap sack that looked far too heavy for her slight frame. Her eyes darted between all of us—Brilda, Sylwen, Vorgath—and then quickly landed back on me. She seemed on the verge of making a run for it, like a startled hare standing too close to a hunter.

Vorgath straightened at once, his expression unreadable, while Grimble froze mid-toast, his cup still raised halfway to his lips. The mood of easy camaraderie dissolved in an instant.

“Are you Mistress Soraya?”

I stood, wiping my hands on a rag, and gave her a gentle nod. "I'm Soraya. What can I do for you?"

Her gaze flitted around nervously before settling on me again. "My name is Lira," she began, her voice barely above a whisper. Her eyes never stopped darting around, like she expected someone to leap out and chase her away any second.

"You're not in trouble, you know," I said. "You can relax."

She nodded and inhaled sharply, her cheeks turning a bit pink. "Thank you. It's just... I'm not supposed to be here."

I tilted my head. "Not supposed to? Who says?"

"My father," she muttered, her hands sailing over each other nervously, clutching the burlap sack tighter. "Thorne Ironsmith."

"Thorne Ironsmith is your father?" The words sounded flat even to my own ears, and for a moment, I wondered if the girl would flee right then and there.

Lira nodded, her eyes darting away, as if wishing she could disappear into the trees. "Yes. But... he doesn't know I'm here."

"Why exactly are you here then?" I asked carefully, studying the girl.

She was maybe seventeen or eighteen, slight and slender, with a curtain of golden hair draped over her shoulders. The way she clutched the burlap sack against her chest made her look even smaller, as if she were trying to shield herself from the world. There was a vulnerability about her, a raw edge of fear that pulled at my heart.

As I took in the sight of her, I realized that I had never once thought of Thorne as

having a family.

She bit her lip, her teeth worrying the skin. When she spoke, her voice was firm despite the nerves still flickering across her face. “I’ve heard him talk about you. You’re... different. You’re doing what he says a woman can’t. What he says I can’t.”

There was a sharp edge in her voice now, something raw and desperate. I felt a pang of familiarity.

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“I want to learn,” she said firmly, her knuckles white around the sack in her hands. “Please... I want to apprentice under you.”

I blinked, taken aback. Of all the things I thought she might say, that hadn’t once crossed my mind. “Lira, I—”

She cut me off, words spilling out like she’d been holding them back for years. “I’ve been practicing. In secret. When he’s gone to market or having meetings at the guild.”

Her voice shook slightly, but her grip on the burlap sack tightened. Then, with a determined look, she thrust the bag toward me. I took it, surprised by the weight, and handed it over to Grumble, who accepted it with a raised brow before reaching inside.

One by one, he and the others pulled out her work: a bracer crafted from thin, overlapping plates, a belt buckle with an intricate knot design, and a small section of chain links, each surprisingly delicate. They passed each piece around, murmuring as they examined her efforts, occasionally glancing her way with newfound interest.

“I’ve tried everything to convince him. But he just keeps saying it’s not a woman’s place.” She clenched her jaw, her voice firm against the thick wall of frustration I could sense rising in her throat. “But I see what you’re doing here... and I know it can be different. I could be different, too.”

Brilda squinted at the bracer’s edges and gave an approving nod. “Thin and light but sturdy,” she said, testing the give of the plates.

“Hmm, chainwork’s a bit loose,” Grumble added as turned over the link in his hands,

“but you’ve got a good eye for detail, lass. It’s clear where you’re headed with this.”

“I know it’s rough,” Lira admitted, “but I want to learn. I’ll work as hard as it takes. I just need the chance.”

I looked down at the pieces in Brilda’s hands, then back at Lira, feeling the weight of her request settle. She was Thorne’s daughter, and taking her on would be like throwing a match into dry tinder. But as I watched her, I saw that familiar drive—the relentless pursuit of something everyone else had said wasn’t hers to claim.

“I don’t know, Lira,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “I’m barely recognized by the guild myself.”

“I’ll sponsor her,” Vorgath’s low, steady voice cut through the air.

I blinked, turning to face him. Of course he would. Vorgath was the first to believe in people, especially those trying to rise above the limits the world placed on them. He’d done it for me when no one else thought I could swing a hammer. He’d seen something in me that day, even before I’d seen it myself.

Lira flinched slightly, peeking up at Vorgath.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” Vorgath added. “No harm will come to you. I’ll make sure of it.”

Lira swallowed, but her posture eased a little. “Thank you,” she managed. “I... thank you.”

Brilda piped up, not missing a beat. “Aye, I say let her learn—ol’ Ironsmith’s feelings be damned.”

“Besides,” Sylwen added with a dry smile, “it could make for quite the stir.”

I shot the elf a look, but he had a point. Taking on Lira would set Thorne ablaze faster than pouring oil on an open flame. And though I didn’t mind ruffling his feathers—at this point, it almost felt like destiny—I didn’t want Lira caught in the crossfire of our feud.

“Lira,” I began carefully, “I understand how much this means to you. Believe me, I do. But there’s a lot to consider here. Your father—”

“I don’t care what he thinks!” she interrupted, her voice rising, a flush of surprise on her face. She composed herself but kept her chin up. “I’m sorry, but... I can’t let him dictate my life. Not anymore.”

I studied her. That fierce determination was familiar, a mirror of what I’d felt not too long ago—the weight of being told “no” because of who you were, the frustration of being held back.

I sighed, feeling everyone’s eyes on me. This wasn’t a decision to take lightly. But as I looked at Lira, I knew I couldn’t turn her away.

“Alright,” I said finally.

Lira’s face lit up. “Really? You mean it?”

“Yes, but,” I held up a hand to temper her excitement, “we need to do this properly. I’ll speak to your father—”

Her expression fell. “But he’ll never agree—”

“Let me finish. I’ll speak with him, but whatever he says, you have a place here if

you want it. We'll make it work, even if it means going over his head to the guild."

Vorgath nodded beside me. "We'll stand by you. Both of you," he added, giving me a quiet, steady look.

Lira blinked, her chin lifting as her composure settled back in place. "Thank you. I won't let you down."

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“I know you won’t,” I said, already feeling a strange pride for this girl I barely knew. “Now, come join us. There’s plenty of food left, and I’m sure you have questions.”

We all squeezed even closer around the makeshift table, making room for Lira as she hesitantly took a seat at the far end, visibly overwhelmed by the friendly chaos surrounding her. Grimble was quick to thrust a plate piled high with food in front of her, and Thyri offered a warm, welcoming smile, sliding a roll onto her plate.

“Eat up, lass,” Grimble said. “You’re gonna need your strength if you’re planning to keep up with this lot.”

The conversation flowed easily around the table. Lira slowly relaxed, joining in the conversation in small bursts, her eyes widening with awe as she listened to the stories being shared. She laughed shyly when Grimble teased Sylwen about his jewelry and even asked Thyri for the stew recipe when the topic shifted to food.

As the last rays of sunlight disappeared behind the trees, the table gradually quieted, the lively chatter fading into a contented hum. Plates were cleared, and the remnants of the meal were gathered with little effort from everyone. Lira’s face was flushed from the warmth of the fire and the good-natured teasing that had slowly drawn her out of her shell.

“Well, I’d say that’s a fine evening of food and company,” Grimble said, pushing back his chair with a satisfied grunt. “But this old dwarf needs his sleep.” He stretched, letting out a dramatic yawn. “Big day ahead tomorrow and all that.”

I glanced around the table, watching everyone stand, stretching tired muscles and

gathering their things.

Thyri offered to walk Lira back into town, gently resting her hand on the younger woman's shoulder. "You'll be fine, love. We'll chat on the way, give you a bit of advice on dealing with stubborn fathers."

Lira gave me a hesitant smile before following Thyri's lead, her nervous energy still palpable but tempered by the camaraderie she'd experienced tonight. Mrs. Crumble had already waved goodnight to Elias and disappeared into the cool evening air with Sylwen, their voices carrying softly as they debated a finer point of spellcraft.

"See you at the crack of dawn, eh?" Grimble gathered his tools and gave a firm pat to the newly assembled beams overhead as the dwarves drifted off toward their encampment.

Elias, eyelids drooping, wandered over with a yawn. "Mama, is it bedtime?"

I smiled at his heavy-lidded expression, brushing a hand through his messy curls. "Yes, sweetheart. Go on inside. I'll be right behind you."

As Elias trudged sleepily toward the cottage, I turned to gather the last of the plates and utensils. The night had settled around us, a cool breeze brushing against my skin. Vorgath remained where he was, leaning against the edge of the table, his eyes following my movements.

"Let me," Vorgath rumbled, pushing off the table. His large hands brushed against mine as he took the plates from me, sending a jolt of awareness up my arm.

"I can manage," I said, though it sounded half-hearted even to my own ears.

Vorgath just gave me one of those unreadable looks as he turned toward the water

bucket by the forge. The muscles in his back rippled beneath his tunic as he crouched down to start the rinsing.

When I didn't move, he glanced back over his shoulder. "Go check on Elias," he murmured. "I'll finish up."

I hesitated, torn between the maternal instinct to fuss over my sleepy son and the pull to just stay and... what? Gawk at my orc? Yes, that was exactly what I wanted to do, and it was far less productive.

With a reluctant sigh, I turned on my heel and made my way toward the cottage door, slipping inside quietly. Elias was already curled up on his bed, his eyes drooping as he watched me from under heavy lids. I knelt beside him, smoothing the blankets around his small frame, and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"Goodnight, my little prince," I whispered.

"Mama..." His voice was thick with sleep, his hand reaching out to grasp mine. "Is Vorgath staying?"

I hesitated, my heart fluttering at the simple question. "Yes," I said softly. "He's going to help me finish cleaning up."

Elias's eyes fluttered closed. "Good," he murmured. "I missed him."

A warmth spread through my chest, unexpected but not unpleasant. "I missed him too," I whispered to the slumbering boy, his breaths already evening as sleep claimed him.

Closing the door quietly behind me, I stood for a moment in the dim light of the cottage, letting the silence settle around me.

I missed him, too.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed away from the door and moved toward the main room, where I found Vorgath rinsing the last of the dishes in the basin. The entire scene had shifted. The glow of the firelight seemed warmer now, more intimate in the quiet stillness. He stood tall, the fire from the hearth casting shadows across his scarred, muscular frame. His movements were slow, methodical, the strong, capable hands that had wielded swords and hammers now washing plates and cups.

I paused in the doorway for far longer than I cared to admit, just watching him. There was something utterly captivating about seeing such a powerful man doing something so mundane.

He placed the last dish on the drying rack, his broad shoulders rolling slightly as he stood up straight. "Elias asleep?" he asked.

"Out like a candle."

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Vorgath nodded, turning to face me, his gaze flickering to mine before dropping to the table. He hesitated, wiping his hands on a rag. “Good.”

I took a hesitant step forward. “Vorgath...” My voice faltered. There was so much I wanted to say. But I didn’t know where to start.

So, I did what any reasonable woman would do.

I stepped closer, closed the gap between us, and kissed him.

Chapter 27

Vorgath froze for just a moment—just long enough for me to second-guess myself.

But then, his hands were on me, pulling me against his solid chest as he kissed me back. The rag he’d been holding dropped to the floor, forgotten, as his hands slid around my waist, gathering me against him.

The weariness of the day fell away, replaced by a swirling tide of heat and need. I threaded my fingers into his thick, tousled hair, tugging him closer. He growled low in his throat, a deep, reverberating sound that made anticipation coil tight in my stomach.

His hand spanned my lower back, warm and possessive, and I arched into his touch, gasping softly as his lips traced down the curve of my jaw, finding the sensitive skin at my neck.

“Are you sure?” He pulled back, just enough for me to see the concern shadowing his brow.

I blinked up at him, chest heaving. “I’ve never been more sure,” I whispered.

His arms tightened around me, and I felt myself lifted off the floor as his mouth found mine again. He shuffled me backward down the hall toward my bedroom, lips never breaking from mine, not until I’d shut the door behind us and pressed a hand against his broad chest. He barely budged under my touch, solid as a rooted oak. Slowly, carefully, I pushed harder until he stumbled backward, his powerful legs hitting the edge of my bed.

He sat, heavy and quiet, his hands gripping the side of the bedframe as I took a step back and reached for the laces at the front of my dress, fumbling with the knots. My heart was a wild thing in my chest, but I couldn’t stop now. I didn’t want to. With each pull of the string, I felt the weight of fear, loss, and all my doubts slowly giving way, unraveling like the thread.

Vorgath’s stare never left me, his body still, waiting. As the strings came free of their knots and the fabric of my dress began to part, his hands tightened on the bedframe, the wood creaking beneath his strength.

I let the dress fall to the floor, a soft rustle of fabric against the wooden floorboards, and stood before him. Vulnerable. Exposed. And not just in the obvious, naked kind of way. I felt like I had laid bare every wound—visible or not. Like I had stripped away the years of survival, of getting by, of keeping my head down because the alternative was being seen, and being seen was too dangerous.

And yet... here I was, standing in front of Vorgath, nothing but bare skin and raw nerves. I had never thought of myself as desirable, not in any grand, sweeping way. Chubby, I’d always thought. Plain. I wasn’t the kind of woman novels were

written about, not the heroine who made men lose their minds with a single glance. Not someone who commanded attention.

But the way Vorgath looked at me now...

His eyes, so intense and dark, roved over every inch of me with such hunger. But not the hunger you'd expect from a man about to take his pleasure. No. This was something deeper. His gaze wasn't greedy; it was reverent, like each curve, each freckle, each imperfect part of me was a masterpiece he had been waiting to touch. Waiting to know.

And it was enough to undo every doubt that had ever wormed its way into my heart.

I took a step closer and lifted one of his huge hands, pressing a kiss to the silver scar on the palm before pressing it against one of my bare breasts. His thumb brushed over my nipple once, then again, the peak stiffening under his ministrations.

"You don't have to be gentle," I whispered, barely recognizing my own voice—thick with desire, low with need.

His eyes still on mine, he leaned forward and took my nipple between his teeth, biting down until I gasped and arched into his touch, my body responding to the exquisite mix of pleasure and pain. His tongue soothed the sting, circling the sensitive peak before moving to lavish the same attention on the other breast.

I slid my fingers to the hem of his tunic and pulled it upward, slowly, teasing the fabric over his muscled chest until finally, I tossed it aside, tracing my fingers over the curve of his shoulders, down his chest, over each scar, each ridge of muscle.

Vorgath let out a sharp breath as I pushed him back onto the bed and fumbled with the laces of his trousers before finally tugging them down, freeing his enormous

length. I stared for a moment, heat rushing through my veins as I took him in—large, thick, and pulsing with need—and a part of me marveled at the absurdity of thinking I could possibly be enough for him.

But when I touched him, the way his breath hitched as my fingers grazed the sensitive skin of his shaft, the soft groan rumbling deep in his chest, I knew I'd already undone him.

“Ah, Soraya,” he rasped, his voice hoarse, barely restrained as he closed his eyes briefly, as if trying to ground himself.

There was power in that. In knowing this orc warrior who had seen untold battles and horrors, who had faced demons both literal and figurative, was here and barely holding onto control because of me. The thought sent a jolt of heady thrill through me, emboldening me, wrapping me in confidence where once there had only been hesitation.

I gripped him more firmly now, my fingers not even wrapping fully around his girth as I stroked him slowly, teasingly. Vorgath let out a low growl, his head falling back against the bed as I worked him with deliberate care. His fingers gripped the sheets so tightly I thought they might tear.

“Stars, Soraya,” he groaned, his voice raw and ragged. “If you don’t stop—”

But I didn’t want to stop. I didn’t want to hold back any longer. I wanted to give him everything. Without a second thought, I crawled onto the bed, straddling him, my body aligning above his.

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He caught my hips and sat up beneath me. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he murmured roughly.

“You won’t,” I reassured him, threading my fingers into his dark hair. “We already know I can take you.”

“Let me make sure you're ready, then.”

With one hand still tight around my hips, the other slid between us, his fingers tracing a path down my stomach and through the soft curls between my legs. I shuddered, my hips instinctively tilting forward, seeking more of his touch.

He let out a low, appreciative growl, his fingers exploring further, parting my folds. When he found the sensitive nub at my center, I gasped, my nails digging into his shoulders as waves of pleasure rippled through me. He circled it slowly, his touch feather-light, teasing out a moan from deep within me.

“Vorgath...” His name escaped my lips like a secret, whispered into his ear. I could feel his smile against my neck, a small, satisfied curve of his lips that sent shivers down my spine.

His fingers dipped lower, gathering the wetness pooling at my entrance. He brought them back up, coating my sensitive flesh with my own desire. My hips moved in rhythm with his touch, and his grip on my hip tightened, his fingers pressing into my skin, anchoring me as he continued to explore, to tease.

Vorgath’s lips brushed lightly over my neck, my shoulder, his tusks grazing gently as

he moved. When his fingers slipped inside me, I gasped, my body stretching to accommodate his thick fingers. He moved slowly, carefully, his thumb continuing its relentless dance over my sensitive nub.

I clung to him, my hands gripping his broad shoulders, my forehead pressed against his as I ground against his hand. The sensation of being filled, of being touched so deeply, so intimately, pushed me closer to the precipice.

“You feel so good,” he murmured. “So warm, so soft.”

He filled the space between us, drawing closer until there was no room left, no distance to hide behind. His fingers never faltered, his movements growing more confident, more deliberate. My breath hitched, the ache for him building into something I couldn’t ignore, couldn’t push down any longer. His lips moved in a slow path down my throat to my collarbone. He growled softly into my skin, his tusks brushing against my pulse, a reminder of just how powerful he was.

My body trembled, my breath hitching as his fingers dipped deeper, his thumb pressing with just enough force to send sparks of pleasure shooting through me. My hips bucked against his hand, my body moving instinctively, chasing that cresting wave, that promise of utter release.

I whimpered, the knot in my belly tightening, winding tighter and tighter until I felt like I might break. My vision blurred, my senses narrowing down to nothing but the feel of him—his hand, his lips, the delicious roughness of his breath against my skin.

And then... oh, stars.

It hit.

My body clenched, muscles tightening as a moan tore free from my lips, raw and

shameless. Pleasure exploded through me in a wild rush so intense it left me trembling and gasping for air. Vorgath held me through it, his strong arms supporting me as I convulsed in his grasp. His fingers slowed, easing me through the aftershocks, until I sagged against him, my face buried in his neck, panting softly, overwhelmed but utterly sated.

As my heart rate began to settle, I became acutely aware of him beneath me—how hard he still was, how tightly he gripped my hips, the faint tremble in his body that betrayed just how much he was holding himself back.

Without a word, I reached down, guiding him to me, gasping softly as the wide head of his cock pressed against my entrance. My body was still humming, sensitive and soft all over. He was so big, but I was ready for him. I wanted him inside me, wanted to feel every inch of him filling me, stretching me, claiming me.

His jaw clenched, and he ground out a soft groan as I pressed my hips down, taking just an inch of him inside me.

“Take your time,” he rasped, his voice strained, thick with need. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

But I didn’t want to drag it out anymore. I wanted all of him, right now, every inch of him buried deep inside me, to fill the empty places I had forgotten were there until he’d come into my life.

I cupped his face in my hands, brushing a thumb over the scar that ran across his cheek, pressing a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“I can handle you, Vorgath. Don’t hold back.”

His eyes flashed, and with a low growl that made the air between us buzz, his grip on

my hips tightened. He thrust upward, hard and fast, filling me in one swift motion.

“Oh,” I moaned, my fingers digging into his shoulders as pleasure and pain burst through my nerve endings like wildfire.

He was so thick, stretching me in a way that felt deliciously overwhelming, his cock throbbing as my body tightened around him. I couldn’t think, couldn’t form a coherent thought beyond the feel of him. I was lost in the way his hands gripped my hips, guiding me, grounding me. With every rise and fall, I felt myself sinking further into that glorious abyss, where nothing existed but the intoxicating press of his body and the heat pooling low in my belly.

Our movements quickened as I rode him, my thighs burning with the effort but the pleasure spurring me on, pushing me ever closer to that peak. His hands traced lines up my thighs, gripping, squeezing, as if he couldn’t get enough of me.

I could feel the tension coiling tight in both of us, building toward something inevitable, something wild and fierce and perfect. His hips snapped up in time with every downward grind of mine, his control slipping by the second, and oh, I wanted that. I wanted him to let go, to let me feel all of that raw, untamed power focused solely on claiming me.

His mouth found the curve of my neck, his sharp tusks grazing the sensitive skin there before his teeth sank in just enough to blur the lines between pleasure and pain. Heat pulsed through me, and I clung to him, my fingers tangled in his hair, as his growls deepened, turning into rough, ragged breaths that thrummed against my skin. His hips bucked up, faster, harder, his control unraveling as he took me with a ferocity that matched the wild rhythm of my own heartbeat. Every thrust, every movement pushed me closer to the edge, and the pressure of his bite only pulled me in deeper, binding us in a way I couldn’t explain, a feeling raw and ancient that left me gasping, needing more.

“Vorgath, I—” I gasped, words breaking apart as the tension coiled tight, too tight. I couldn’t hold back anymore. I didn’t want to hold back anymore.

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“Let go,” he growled, his voice guttural, primal, sending a jolt of electricity straight through me. “I’ve got you.”

And by the Alders, he did have me—completely.

His words were like a lit match to the fuse of my desire, and with a sudden, violent rush, my body exploded into pure ecstasy. I came hard, my orgasm crashing over me like a tidal wave, unrelenting and unforgiving. Every nerve ending ignited, every muscle clenched around him, gripping him tighter as the pleasure tore through me, raw and all-consuming.

“Vorgath!” I cried out as I arched against him, throwing my head back, completely lost in the moment. I could feel him growl into my skin, his own control unraveling, his hands gripping me fiercely as my tightening walls pushed him over the edge.

With a final, deep thrust, he groaned—a sound so primal and desperately male that it sent another rush through me. His body trembled beneath mine, his forehead pressing hard against my shoulder as he buried himself inside me, pulse twitching with every spurt of release.

He was silent for a long moment, apart from the heavy breaths that left him in uneven bursts, his body locked against mine. Then, slowly, cautiously, his grip on my hips loosened—his hands slipped to rest more gently on my sides, their possessiveness melted into something tender.

I let out a long breath, catching his scent, the smoky spice that clung to his skin, and the faint smell of iron that seemed ingrained into who he was. I shifted just enough to

rest more firmly against his chest, the beat of his heart steady beneath my cheek. For the first time in what felt like years, maybe longer, the world outside the walls of this room didn't press down on me, didn't demand or take anything more.

It was just us.

He curled an arm around me, and I couldn't help but smile up at him as I brushed a stray lock of hair away from his eyes. A peaceful stillness softened the intensity that usually burned so fiercely behind those dark irises.

"I wasn't too—" he began, but stopped, running a finger over my neck, a look of horror on his face.

"What is it?" I asked, pushing onto my elbows.

His gaze dropped back to the spot where his fingers hovered, then flicked back up to meet mine. For a moment, he didn't speak, didn't move.

"I hurt you," he murmured, his voice barely audible, thick with regret.

Hurt me? I frowned, confused.

But then his hand shifted, and I felt it—a hot, raw ache pulsing from the spot where his mouth had clamped down in the heat of everything.

I reached up and touched it with tentative fingers, wincing as a fresh sting blossomed beneath my touch. My fingers came away stained with a smear of blood, dark against my skin. I stared at it, surprised by the fierce tenderness that lingered beneath the pain. There was something powerful about it, something that went deeper than a wound.

“I didn’t mean to, Soraya,” he said quickly, his large hands falling to his lap, like the act of touching me was now out of bounds. “I—when things get heated, orcs, we... I should have been more careful.”

I leaned forward, placing both hands on his face. “Vorgath,” I whispered, bringing his eyes back to mine. “You didn’t hurt me.”

His brows drew together in disbelief. “But the bite—”

“I know,” I said gently. “I felt it. But I liked it.”

His eyes widened, and he shook his head as if he hadn’t heard me properly. “You liked it?” The disbelief in his voice wasn’t just flustered—he looked genuinely concerned for my sanity.

I smiled slightly, running my thumb along his jawline, tracing the scar that ran across his cheek. “Yes. We tend to get... passionate in the moment. I wasn’t expecting it, but you didn’t hurt me. In fact,” I added, my voice dropping to a whisper, “I wouldn’t mind it happening again.”

His brow furrowed in that adorably perplexed way, but then, slowly, those dark eyes softened. He let out a low breath, almost like a sigh, his shoulders visibly relaxing under my touch.

“Well, in that case,” he murmured, his voice still thick with hesitation but colored with a hint of teasing now, “I suppose I should warn you. Bites like that aren’t taken lightly in orcish culture.”

“What do you mean?”

“Among my people,” he began slowly, “a bite like that, especially during... intimate

moments, is more than just an expression of passion.”

“Oh?” I couldn’t help but smile at the way his cheeks darkened, the green hue shifting slightly toward a deep, almost embarrassed olive. It was downright endearing.

He nodded, his tone cautious but sincere. “It’s a mark of... claim. Orcs are strong, protective by nature, but when an orc bites their partner like that, it’s a way of marking them as theirs.” He paused, narrowing his eyes as though assessing my reaction.

My heart, already thundering in my chest from our earlier activities, picked up pace again. Marked. Claimed.

“So... Anyone who sees this...” I touched the tender spot on my neck with a smile. “...will know I’m yours?”

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“...they’ll know,” Vorgath replied as his fingers brushed lightly over the spot on my neck again, his eyes following the motion as if trying to memorize the sight of me marked by him. “It’s rare for us to give that kind of mark to someone outside our people,” he said, almost to himself.

“Rare, but not unheard of?”

“My brother, Gorkath, had a bit of a reputation for it.” A faint, almost amused smile tugged at his lips.

I settled back against his chest. “A reputation?”

Vorgath nodded, his gaze turning distant as he recalled the memory. “Gorkath was... well, he had a way with words.” His lips twitched, as if recalling a fond but exasperating memory. “He was the opposite of me in many ways—loud, brash, always the center of attention. And he loved to flaunt his conquests—orc or fae or wolfkin. He’d mark them with these bold bites and then brag about it to anyone who would listen.”

“Sounds like he was quite the character.”

“He was.” Vorgath’s jaw tightened. “He made some mistakes, but he wasn’t a bad person.”

I reached up, cupping his cheek, feeling the tension there. “You loved him,” I said gently, my voice filled with understanding.

Vorgath's eyes met mine, and for a moment, the stoic mask he usually wore cracked, revealing the raw grief and guilt beneath. "I did. I still do, even after everything." He let out a slow breath, as if releasing some of the burden he'd carried for so long. "We were close when we were younger, inseparable, really. But when the war came, everything changed."

I stayed silent, letting him speak at his own pace, my hand moving in slow, soothing strokes against his jaw.

"Gorkath couldn't stand the idea of being just another warrior in the clan. He wanted more—power, recognition. And when the dark mage offered him that... he took it. I tried to stop him, tried to talk him out of it, but he said I was too scared, too weak to understand." His voice cracked slightly, and he swallowed hard. "He was my brother, but on that battlefield, he felt like a stranger. I failed him, Soraya. I failed to save him, and I couldn't stop him from becoming something he wasn't."

My heart ached at the pain in his words. I leaned up, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips, then to his forehead. "You didn't fail him. He made his choices, but you were there, trying to bring him back. That's not failure. That's love."

He closed his eyes, leaning into my touch. "I don't know if I can ever forgive myself for not being strong enough to stop him. But being with you... it's the first time I've felt like I can try to move past it."

"Tell me more about him," I whispered, running my fingers through his hair. "About your brother."

Vorgath hesitated but then nodded, the tension in his shoulders easing as he began to speak. He told me about their childhood, the mischievous pranks Gorkath used to pull, the way he could charm even the grumpiest elders of their clan. He spoke of their first battle together, how proud he'd been of his brother's strength and courage.

And I listened, holding him, until sleep claimed us both.

Hours later, I woke to the sound of silence, the kind that filled a room when everyone else was asleep, but my mind wouldn't let me rest. I was still in Vorgath's arms, his warmth surrounding me like a protective cocoon. His chest rose and fell steadily under my cheek, and the soft rumble of his breath was a soothing, familiar lullaby. I should have been at peace, but something stirred restlessly inside me.

Carefully, so as not to wake him, I untangled myself and slipped out of bed. The night air was cool against my skin, and I shivered as I pulled on a robe and padded quietly through the cottage. Each step sent a gentle ache through my legs, and I brought my hand up to my neck, touching the tender spot where Vorgath had claimed me. I relished these physical reminders of our connection, the way he had held me, taken me, and made me feel alive.

I checked on Elias and found him sprawled across his bed, one arm dangling off the side, snoring softly. His small face was peaceful, innocent, and I brushed a kiss against his forehead, smoothing a stray curl away before pulling his blanket up over his shoulders.

In the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of water, sipping it slowly as I tried to shake the unease that had woken me. I stared out the window, my gaze drifting to the silhouette of the forge against the night sky. It stood tall and proud, the new beams sturdy, the stonework strong.

A flicker of movement caught my eye, and I froze, the glass halfway to my lips. There, in the shadows of the forge, a figure moved. I narrowed my eyes, straining to make out the details, and my heart leaped into my throat when I recognized the broad silhouette and the faint gleam of gray hair catching the moonlight.

Thorne Ironsmith.

It was too dark, and he was too far away for me to see his expression, but the way he just stood there, motionless and silent, sent a chill down my spine.

What was he doing here?

Was he here to sabotage my work again, to tear down what I had built before I'd even had a chance to get it off the ground? Or was he here because of Lira?

I gripped the edge of the counter, my knuckles white, as I watched him. His presence, uninvited and looming, should have sent a chill down my spine. And yet, staring at him now, in the heart of my forge, I didn't feel fear.

I felt anger.

I had worked too hard, lost too much, to let him intimidate me or scare me into giving up what I'd fought so desperately to reclaim. This forge, this life, this chance—it was mine.

With a deep breath, I set the glass down, opened the door, and stepped out into the cool night air, the soft glow of the forge lighting my way as I walked toward the shadowy figure of Thorne Ironsmith.

Because if he thought he could scare me away from what was mine, he was about to learn just how wrong he was.

Chapter 28

“What are you doing here, Thorne?” The words sliced through the stillness of the night like a hammer to anvil.

But Thorne didn’t flinch. He didn’t even turn to look at me immediately. Instead, he brushed a hand over one of the wooden beams, tracing the grain as if he had laid it himself—the audacity.

My knuckles tightened at the hem of my robe, resisting the urge to pick up a nearby hammer and lob it at the back of his head.

When he finally deigned to acknowledge me, he did it with that all-too-familiar arrogance.

“Just trying to understand what everyone sees in you.” His tone was light—conversational, even—but there was a tightness around his eyes.

As I studied him, it hit me—if he meant harm, Sylwen’s runes would have kept him out. He wasn’t here to destroy; he was here to confront something he couldn’t ignore any longer.

That’s when I knew—it wasn’t just the rebuilt smithy he was seeing. It was everything that went into it. Every beam and stone, every rune carved into the doorframe, every piece of mithral woven into the walls was a testament to something he couldn’t quite grasp. He was seeing a community that had come together, people who had once been strangers working side by side. People who had chosen to help

me, to see me succeed, while he stood on the outside, clinging to his outdated beliefs and refusing to bend.

A bark of laughter escaped me unexpectedly. “Are you... jealous?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Don't be ridiculous,” he answered, but a flicker of confusion crossed his features, and I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

Because for all his stubbornness and pride, Thorne Ironsmith was just a man struggling to understand a world that had changed around him, feeling the ground shift beneath his feet. I was standing in the middle of that change, a reminder of everything he couldn't control.

And it wasn't just me.

“Is this about Lira?” I asked.

Thorne's grip on the beam tightened ever so slightly. “My daughter has always been too headstrong for her own good,” he said. “She thinks she can defy me, defy the guild, because you've put ideas in her head.”

I hesitated, my brow furrowing. Me? I'd barely spoken to the girl.

But maybe it wasn't about what I'd said at all—maybe it was what I represented. I was here, building a forge, defying the expectations set for me, showing girls like Lira that there was more to life than the roles people tried to force them into. I didn't even realize I was setting an example, but maybe that was exactly why Thorne resented me. He didn't like the thought of anyone disrupting his carefully crafted world—least of all, someone like me, someone he had written off as incapable.

“Well, then, I'm glad I did,” I finally said. “Lira deserves to know she has choices.

And if that scares you, maybe you should ask yourself why.”

Thorne’s lips pressed into a thin line. “She doesn’t need choices,” he said, his tone clipped. “She has a respectable path laid out for her. Lira is supposed to be planning for a family, carrying on my legacy through blood and name! That’s her role, and there’s order—structure—to it. It’s the way things are supposed to be, and it’s being undermined by you—someone who wasn’t even supposed to be here in the first place.”

I took a steadying breath. Thorne’s version of the world—the one with paths laid out for everyone, with neat, predetermined roles—had crumbled a long time ago. War had changed that, had rewritten the rules.

“I didn’t task to be here,” I reminded him. “Life just happened. You think I wanted this? My husband died, remember? You think I planned on standing in the ashes of everything we built, trying to piece it back together from scraps?”

Our eyes locked, and something shifted between us. For the first time, Thorne was silent—really silent—none of his usual blustering excuses or dismissive remarks.

“You keep talking about order and structure,” I said, leveling my gaze at him. “But what you really mean is control, don’t you? You think you can make Lira into something she doesn’t want to be. But you can’t. No one can.”

Thorne’s gaze flicked to the forge I’d rebuilt with my own hands. “This world... it’s not what it was. The guild isn’t what it was.” He shook his head, as if trying to shake off the truth. “Everything’s changing.”

“Change doesn’t have to be bad,” I said, my voice soft but firm. “She wants to be part of your legacy on her own terms, not just through name and babies. She needs your guidance, not control. If you want to keep her close, let her find her way.”

His gaze snapped back to mine, a flicker of doubt crossing his features. I pushed on, sensing the opening.

“You’re her father. She needs you, but not to control her, to guide her. To let her find her own way.” My voice softened, but I didn’t back down. “You’re scared of losing her. I get that. But you’ll lose her anyway if you don’t give her the chance to choose.”

Thorne’s lips tightened, and for a moment, I thought he might turn and storm out. But then his shoulders sagged, just a fraction, and his voice dropped low.

“You think you know her better than I do?” he said, a tinge of bitterness in his tone, but it was muted now, quieter. “You think you know what’s best for my daughter?”

I shook my head. “No. But I do know what it feels like to be trapped. You want to protect her, I get that. I want the same for Elias every day of my life. But sometimes... we have to let them figure out what they want for themselves.”

Thorne’s jaw worked for a moment, his eyes dropping to the floor, as if he was turning everything over in his mind. Then, almost begrudgingly, he spoke.

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“So, what’s your plan?” His voice was tight, but it wasn’t the outright rejection I expected. He was listening now.

“Let her train with me, with Vorgath, and when she’s ready, she can decide if she wants to take up the forge or follow the path you’ve laid out.” I hesitated, then added, “Maybe she’ll choose both. Why does it have to be one or the other?”

Thorne’s eyes narrowed slightly, clearly thrown by the idea, but I pressed on.

“I was supposed to be a mother, a wife, a seamstress.” I felt the weight of those old expectations settling on me as I spoke. “But I took over this forge because I had to, and I’m still a mother. I’m still... me. Women can be so much more than just one thing. Lira doesn’t have to choose between being part of your legacy and making something new of her own.”

As I spoke, I realized how deeply that truth resonated within me. My whole life, I’d been given labels—roles to fill, expectations to meet. But none of those things had captured the fullness of who I was. I was a widow, yes, a mother, but I had become a blacksmith, a protector, a fighter. More than just one thing. And why couldn’t Lira do the same?

Why couldn't everyone?

“Maybe she’ll want a family, maybe she won’t,” I continued. “But that doesn’t mean she can’t build something else for herself, too. She could have babies and the forge. She could have both, or neither. But it’s her choice, Thorne. Just like it’s been mine.”

Thorne's lips twitched, his jaw working as if he was biting back a retort. I could see the battle going on behind his eyes—the struggle between his pride and his need to protect his daughter. After a long pause, he exhaled sharply.

“Fine,” he said gruffly. “She can train here. But if she changes her mind, you’ll respect that.”

“I will,” I agreed, my voice steady. “But you have to respect her decision, too.”

Thorne didn't answer, but the silence felt like agreement—begrudging, yes, but still an agreement. I allowed myself a small breath of relief, the tension between us loosening ever so slightly.

But there was still something unresolved.

“Thorne,” I began slowly, unsure how to approach it now, especially after this small truce. “The fire here... Was it you?”

Thorne's face twisted in surprise—genuine surprise. He damn near looked... offended?

“You think I'd waste my time burning down your forge? Woman, I'm not a child,” he snapped. “If I wanted to best you, I'd beat you with my skill, not cowardice.”

“You're the only one I can think of who hates me enough to try something like that,” I countered, crossing my arms.

A rough chuckle rasped from his throat. “I don't hate you. You're...” He paused, searching for the right words. “...stubborn. Foolhardy. Proud. But I don't hate you.”

His words left me momentarily speechless. I had been prepared for hostility, for more

of the same dismissive disdain he usually threw my way. But this? Stubborn. Foolhardy. Proud. Those weren't kind words, but the way he said them, there was something almost grudgingly admiring in his tone, as if he couldn't deny the fight he saw in me, even if it frustrated him to no end.

But that still meant someone had come after me, and now I didn't even know who.

"So, if it wasn't you..." I let the question hang in the air, watching for any sign of a lie from the man in front of me.

"Perhaps it was the orc."

"Vorgath?" I asked, confused.

But he shook his head. "Not Vorgath. The other one. The mean one."

"The other—?" I froze. Dregor?

Vorgath's confession from the night of the fire came flooding back. How he'd looked at me with that tortured expression, his voice tight with emotion as he spoke of his brother, of Dregor's vendetta. He'd suspected Dregor from the start. But I hadn't believed him. No, I'd been so wrapped up in my anger at Thorne that I'd dismissed the possibility without a second thought.

But Dregor...

"What's he got to do with any of this?" I asked.

Thorne hesitated, his gaze flickering back to the beam he'd been studying earlier, like it held the answers he was reluctant to share.

“I spoke to him,” he admitted finally. “After I saw him with you at the inn, saw the way he seemed to dislike Vorgath, I thought, well, enemy of my enemy, right?”

A cold dread settled in my stomach. “You thought about working with him? To what... take Vorgath down?”

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Thorne nodded once, sharply. “I thought maybe we could come to some sort of understanding—undermine Vorgath, maybe steal some of your business, give you a little push out of the way.”

I stiffened, my grip tightening on the hem of my robe, but I let him continue. I needed to hear this.

“Vorgath’s never been one to back down, and I figured Dregor had reason to hate him as much as I did,” Thorne went on. “But it didn’t take long to realize that Dregor wasn’t interested in anything like that. He wasn’t looking to tarnish your reputation or take away a few customers. No. He wanted destruction.”

I swallowed hard. “And the fire...”

It hit me all at once, like pieces falling into place. Dregor. The fire had been a faceless threat, a shadow hanging over me. But now, knowing it had been him—knowing—somehow, the fear started to lose its edge. As dangerous as Dregor was, as terrible as the fire had been, at least I had a name for it now, a face to put to the destruction. It wasn’t some unknown force lurking in the dark. It was him.

And maybe that meant I could start to move past it.

“Do you think he’s done?” I asked. “With the fire?”

“Some of my boys saw him leaving town a few days ago.” Thorne’s gaze shifted toward the forge, his expression hard to read. “I think he did what he set out to do.”

I followed his gaze, letting the weight of his words sink in. The fire had been Dregor's message, his way of striking fear into us, of proving that no matter how far Vorgath had come, no matter what peace we tried to build here, the past could still burn through it. It should have terrified me—knowing that someone like Dregor, someone driven by hatred and chaos, had come this close to destroying everything I'd fought for.

But instead, I felt... steadier. Maybe it was because I'd already survived the worst of it. The forge had burned, but it hadn't crumbled. The beams still stood. And so did I. The fear still lingered, but it no longer consumed me.

"So now what?" I asked, unsure of how to move forward.

"Now, you just keep going," he said, his voice rough but not unkind.

I felt a strange sense of understanding pass between us in that moment, an unspoken acknowledgment of the struggles we'd both faced—different, yes, but no less real. He wasn't the enemy I had once believed him to be. Dregor was the one who had brought the fire and the destruction. But Thorne? He was just trying to hold on to a world that was slipping away, same as I once had.

"And you?" I asked, not quite sure why I wanted to hear his answer. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go back to the guild, back to the order I understand," he said, though it sounded more like he was convincing himself than anything else. He turned slightly, as if preparing to leave. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "And maybe... maybe I'll talk to Lira."

There was the faintest hint of an olive branch in his tone, fragile but real.

“Maybe you should,” I replied softly, watching him retreat from the forge, his footsteps crunching softly in the gravel as he disappeared into the night.

When I was sure he was gone, I glanced back toward the cottage, where Vorgath was waiting, his steady presence like the heat of a forge at my back. Thorne and I had reached a kind of truce, Dregor was gone for now, and there was still love and light in my life—a future I could forge for Elias and myself.

And though it wasn’t perfect, though the world was still scarred and uncertain, it was mine to shape.

Chapter 29

When Thorne was gone, I lingered by the forge, my gaze falling to the unfinished silverware on the bench. I’d been stealing moments to work on it while rebuilding the forge, and with my mind racing from the conversation with Thorne, sleep felt like a distant possibility. I was wide awake, and my fingers itched for the steady rhythm of the work, for the distraction it offered, for the calm focus that always came when I had metal under my hands.

I settled onto the bench, tools laid out: chisel, etching needle, a tiny hammer for the finer work. The silver gleamed under the forge light, ready for the last details. Tynsera had asked for something elaborate and elegant—a set that would impress with both function and beauty.

As I leaned over the silverware, I carefully lowered the etching tool, the tip kissing the silver, my mind already mapping out the curves of the petals. With steady pressure, I began the delicate etching, each line forming part of a vine twining around an intricate rose, the kind Elias and Mrs. Crumble always tried to grow in our little garden but never quite managed.

Elias. My thoughts drifted to my son, fast asleep, safe in the warmth of our home. The image of him brought a calm to my heart. He deserved this—peace, stability. He was too young to understand the struggle that had come before, but I thought of the example I was setting for him, the strength I hoped he'd see in me.

I was showing him that no matter how many times life tried to tear us down, we could still rebuild.

We could still create something beautiful from the wreckage.

A small smile tugged at the corner of my lips as I imagined him growing older, taking up his own tools, just as his father had once done. Maybe one day, we could work side by side. The thought filled me with a quiet pride.

This was what I wanted for him—for us. A future where the shadows of the past no longer loomed so large, where I wasn't driven solely by fear of loss but by hope for what we could create together.

I pressed the chisel into the metal, completing another vine as the thought lingered. We were getting there, little by little. The forge was almost rebuilt, Elias was thriving, and Vorgath...

My hand slipped slightly, and I cursed under my breath.

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I adjusted my grip, but my focus had already wandered, much like it always did whenever he came to mind. It wasn't exactly helpful for the fine, detailed work in front of me, but there it was. No matter how much I tried to concentrate on anything else, it was like my thoughts kept circling back to that orc, dragging me off course. It was almost ridiculous how easily I could picture him, sprawled out under the blankets, his broad shoulders barely fitting into the narrow space.

I exhaled, shaking my head with a rueful smile. He wasn't what I'd ever expected—not in the way he looked, certainly not in the way the world saw him—but in all the ways that mattered, he was everything I hadn't realized I needed.

It was almost funny to think that every twist and turn in my life, every heartbreak and misstep, had led to this moment. To an orc—once a fierce warrior—now dozing in my bed.

The absurdity of it made me laugh softly to myself. What were the chances that after so much loss, I'd find someone like him? That I'd find not just comfort, but connection, in someone so different from anyone I'd ever known? He saw me, truly saw me, and in a way I hadn't expected, I saw him too.

We were both broken in our own ways, both shaped by loss and war, but we had found each other in the aftermath, and somehow, that felt like a gift.

Time passed almost unnoticed as I worked. My neck ached from bending over the workbench, and my eyes stung from staring too closely at the delicate lines. Yet, there was still a quiet satisfaction in the rhythm of the work. Each stroke of the chisel against the silver felt like my own heartbeat steadying, calming.

For just a moment, I allowed myself to believe that this peace could last forever.

Then, I heard it.

“Mama!”

I froze.

A single, sharp breath caught in my chest as Elias’s voice echoed from outside. My heart slammed against my ribcage, jolting me upright, the chisel slipping from my grasp and clattering to the floor.

“Mama! Help!”

It came again, louder—more desperate.

Every muscle in my body tensed as I bolted from the bench. My mind raced, too many thoughts colliding at once—Why is he outside? He was in bed. He should be inside. What’s happened? Is he hurt? Is—

I practically tore the door off its hinges as I sprinted out of the forge and into the coolness of the early morning air. My heart was pounding so hard I was sure it would burst. My feet slipped on the dewy grass as I ran, barefoot and frantic, toward the sound of Elias’s voice.

“Elias!” My throat burned as I called out his name again, hands cupped around my mouth to amplify the sound. “Elias, where are you?”

The air around me was unnaturally silent, a thick, suffocating weight filling the space between shallow breaths. The village was still, asleep, not even a hint of distant life, as if the world had folded inward. I felt a prickle of unease at the back of my mind, a

whisper that something wasn't right.

His voice came again, but farther this time.

How did he get so far? Why didn't I hear him leave the house?

I moved faster.

My legs carried me into the thicket outside the village, the trees pressing in closer, the familiar paths becoming a blur as panic seized reason. The underbrush scratched at my legs, and my lungs burned from the sprint, but I didn't care. Not when my son—my son—was out here, somewhere, needing me.

How could I have been so careless?

The thought slammed into me with the same force as my pounding heartbeat, guilt gripping tight around my chest. I had let my guard down. I'd allowed myself to get comfortable, to feel safe, to believe—just for a moment—that everything was going to be okay. That I could have peace. That I could be happy.

I should've been there. I should've been watching.

“Mama! Here! Please, help!”

The voice was coming from deeper in the woods now, skewing in direction, yanking me one way and then another. I was spinning in circles, disoriented, heart racing so hard I felt it in the backs of my teeth.

What is happening? The voice—it didn't sound quite right. Something was off about it, some strange echo to the tone, a distortion too subtle to pinpoint.

But fight-or-flight had already chosen for me, and fight had won. My limbs moved on their own, instinct taking over. I fled around another thick tree trunk, heart in my throat, my vision tunneling into the gloom.

“Elias!”

Silence.

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No. No, no,no, not silence. Not now.

“ELIAS!”

A shuffle in the bushes to my left.

I turned so sharply I almost tripped on a root. “Elias? Please! I'm here, sweetie. Just come to me, please!”

Nothing.

All that met me was the suffocating weight of stillness and the thrum of blood behind my ears. For a long second, I just stood there, my breath ragged, hands trembling at my sides, scanning the clearing like Elias might step out from behind a tree and laugh. Like he'd say, “Gotcha, Mama,” and this heart-in-my-throat terror would evaporate into thin air.

But no.

Instead, what broke the silence was a low laugh. A deep, cruel laugh.

And it wasn't Elias's.

Before I could even whirl to face the sound, before recognition could spark, something struck me hard from behind. Pain exploded at the base of my skull, sharp and blinding, and the world tilted on its axis. My vision blurred, dark spots blooming and spreading until the forest around me faded into nothingness.

I collapsed to the ground, the cold earth rushing up to meet me, but I barely felt it as everything went black.

Chapter 30

Pain shot through my skull as I woke, bound and aching. The rough stone beneath me was cold, and my head throbbed from the force of whatever had knocked me out. I blinked against the dim, flickering light—a fire crackled nearby, casting strange, jumping shadows on the crumbling walls surrounding me. I tried to move, but my wrists were tied behind my back, the rope biting into my skin. Panic threatened to flare, clawing at my throat.

Elias.

I twisted against the restraints, ignoring the pain in my arms, my breath coming in sharp, ragged gasps as the memory of his screams rang through my head. I'd heard him. I'd run to him. And now... nothing. My head spun, a sickening combination of fear and confusion clouding my thoughts.

And then, across the fire, I saw him.

An enormous figure loomed in the flickering light, broad-shouldered and hunched over, the orange glow casting jagged shadows across his green skin. His muscles were taut beneath the rough, worn leathers he wore, and in his massive hands, he held a blade—dark, heavy, and wickedly sharp. The slow, methodical scrape of steel against stone filled the room, the sound grating in my ears, setting my nerves on edge. His tusks gleamed in the firelight as he ground the blade with deliberate, practiced strokes, like he was savoring the moment.

I knew exactly who he was.

Dregor Bloodclaw.

I swallowed, trying to steady my voice. “Where is Elias?”

The question came out as little more than a rasp, my throat dry and raw. Dregor didn’t flinch. He didn’t even acknowledge me. He just kept sharpening his blade, the scrape of stone against steel steady and unnerving.

“Dregor,” I tried again, louder this time, fighting the panic clawing at the back of my mind. “Where is my son?”

This time, his hand stilled on the blade. Slowly, he lifted his head, his eyes gleaming with cruel amusement as he turned to face me. His lips curled into a twisted, mocking smile.

And with that smile, my blood turned to ice.

Before I could demand an answer, a voice, soft and trembling, echoed through the room.

“Mama... help me...”

I froze.

It was Elias’s voice. But something about it was wrong—distorted, like it was coming from the depths of a nightmare.

I strained against the ropes, my heart slamming against my ribs. “Elias?”

The voice came again, weaker this time, dripping with fear. “Mama, please...”

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My throat tightened, a sickening dread creeping over me as I glanced toward the source of the voice.

But it wasn't Elias.

What stood there, at the edge of the firelight, was something twisted, something... wrong.

A grotesque, hollow-eyed version of Elias—with limbs too long, fingers that twitched unnaturally, and a face that stretched into a grotesque mockery of my son's sweet, round features. Its skin was a sickly, pallid color, almost translucent, like a poorly drawn imitation of a child carved from nightmares. The eyes, though—those hollow, empty eyes—bore into me, devoid of any warmth. Devoid of my child.

“Mama...” the thing rasped again, its mouth—Elias's mouth—curling into a sickening, too-wide smile that split its face like a cracked doll.

I jerked back, bile rising in my throat. “No,” I whispered, voice hoarse. “That's not him. That's not...”

Dregor's rumbling laughter filled the air, the sound dragging like gravel as he finally stood and sheathed the blade. He took a few slow steps toward me, his hulking shadow bending over me like a vulture circling its prey.

“No? Are you sure?” His golden eyes gleamed, almost playful in their malice.

“I know my child,” I snapped, surprised by the raw fierceness that surged from me. “I

know Elias.”

“Mama...” The mimic twitched again, taking a slow, deliberate step closer, its movements jerky, like a puppet dangling from invisible strings.

I recoiled, my chest tightening with fury and terror. “Where is my son?” I rasped.

Dregor shrugged one massive shoulder. “Home, probably. Sleeping soundly under the traitor's watchful eye.”

The traitor. Vorgath. Relief flooded through me, but it didn't last.

“Since the charmstone in your home and the runes on your forge wouldn't let me near, I had to find a way to bring you to me. It might have been better to have the boy. More symbolic. But,” he trailed off, eyes lingering on my neck where I knew Vorgath's mark was still visible. “You will do.”

“Where are we?”

Dregor gave a slow, cruel smile. “An old haunt. A place where warriors fought, bled, and died—just as you will, eventually. But not yet.”

I glanced around, my heart still pounding, taking in the unsettling space. The walls were thick, ancient stone, worn smooth in some places and pocked with scars in others. Rusted iron chains hung from the walls, their links thick and heavy, swinging slightly in the draft that seeped through the cracks in the stone. The air was damp, filled with the smell of mold and something metallic—like blood, soaked into the stone and never fully washed away.

It had to be one of the abandoned outposts left behind after the war. There were several scattered in the woods around Everwood, relics of a conflict that had only

ended a few years ago. Both sides had used them as temporary fortresses, hastily built and then forgotten. I hadn't seen one up close before. Most people avoided them—too many bad memories, too much death.

And now, I was inside one, my hands bound, and Dregor sitting across from me, watching with that cold, cruel smile.

“Why am I here?” I finally managed to ask, biting down the fear crawling up my throat.

“You?” he repeated slowly, voice like thick, grating gravel. “You’re just a means to an end.” His gaze flickered lazily to the mimic still jerking at the edge of the firelight, garbling up another twisted version of Elias’s voice. My stomach roiled at the sound.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means,” Dregor’s smile widened, his tusks gleaming in the firelight, “that this village’s gentle green giant took something from me. Something irreplaceable. Something—” He clenched his fists, the tendons in his forearm flexing under the dim light—“precious.”

“Your son,” I ventured, my voice barely a breath.

That smile was gone now. “Throk,” he hissed. His hands tightened around the blade he was sharpening earlier, fingers tense, white with strain. “Throk was the future of our clan. A warrior—a true orc, unlike him.” Dregor growled. “Vorgath let his brother live. After everything Gorkath did, Vorgath couldn’t finish the job. And because of that...” His grip on the weapon tightened. “I lost my son.”

The weight of his words hung heavy in the cold air, the grief behind them undeniable. Despite everything, I felt a pang of something almost like sympathy. I could see

it—the twisted logic that drove him, the pain that he let consume him until there was nothing left but vengeance. Nothing left but rage and a raw, unyielding grief.

“And he thinks he can just walk away from it all,” Dregor snarled, his voice growing louder, fueled by the rising flames of his fury. “Start a new life. Forget the blood. Forget the loss. Forget my son!” His hand slammed into the crumbling stone wall next to him, the impact violent enough to send dust and small rocks tumbling down.

I flinched but kept my eyes on him. His pain was palpable now, a living, breathing thing that filled every inch of the space between us. It was dangerous, volatile.

Still, I had to say something. Anything that might buy me time. Time to figure out how to get back to my son, to escape this nightmare.

“I... I lost someone, too,” I whispered. “My husband. Kald. The war took him from me, just like it took Throk from you.”

This was the wrong thing to say.

Dregor's eyes flared angrily. "The war didn't take Throk. Vorgath did. And now," he growled, stepping closer, his massive form casting a shadow that swallowed me whole, "I'm going to take you from him."

My heart lurched in my chest. "Dregor, wait," I gasped, trying to pull myself together, to think of something that would get through to him. "Killing me won't—won't bring Throk back. It won't change what happened."

His lips twisted into a snarl, and he slammed the axe into the ground beside me, the blade digging deep into the stone, sending shards flying. "You think I care about changing what happened? This isn't about the past. This is about making Vorgath suffer the way I suffer!"

The venom in his voice was so sharp, I could almost feel it pierce through my skin. I tried to steady my breathing, my pulse racing.

"If this is about Vorgath," I said, as calmly as I could manage, "then take it up with him. He's the one you want. Not me."

Dregor's face twisted into a grim smile, his tusks gleaming menacingly in the firelight. "Oh, I will. Don't worry. But not yet." He leaned in closer, so close that I could feel the heat of his breath. "First, I'm going to watch him break. Just like I did."

I flinched, bile rising in my throat. This wasn't just about revenge. It was about torment, about dragging Vorgath into the same nightmare Dregor had been living in

for years.

And I was the weapon he'd use to do it.

"You won't get the satisfaction you're looking for," I forced out, my voice shaking. "Vorgath—he's stronger than that."

Dregor's laugh was low and cruel. "We'll see."

Before I could respond, a movement caught my eye. The mimic, still wearing Elias's twisted face, had begun to change. Its form rippled and shifted, like water disturbed by a stone, and I watched in horror as it morphed into something new. The sickly pallor of its skin deepened to a rich green, its limbs thickening with muscle. The round, childish features of my son's face elongated, sharpening into a distinctly orcish visage.

Dregor's entire body went rigid. The firelight flickered wildly, casting jagged shadows over the creature as it completed its horrific metamorphosis. What now stood before Dregor was a nightmare vision of a young orc—broad, powerful, but wrong. Too sharp, too distorted, with eyes that gleamed hollow and soulless.

It was Throk. Or at least, the twisted version of him.

"Durak..." the mimic rasped, its voice lower now, more guttural. "Father."

Dregor flinched at the sound of the word. His hands trembled, his breath caught in his throat, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the creature. His son, or at least the mockery of him, stood there, staring at him with cold, accusing eyes.

"You said you'd protect me..." the mimic continued, its tone soft but filled with a cruel edge. "But you didn't."

Dregor's knuckles whitened around the handle of his axe. His chest heaved, and his eyes glistened with a grief that hadn't dulled with time. "I... I tried, Throk. I tried to protect you."

"You let Vorgath choose mercy." The mimic spat the word like a curse. "And now I'm gone."

I watched Dregor crumble, his knees almost buckling under the weight of his grief. His hands trembled, but his grip on the axe tightened. I could see the war raging inside him, a storm of fury and guilt that had been festering for years.

Then I realized something. Watching Dregor unravel under the weight of his own choices—the way his grief had twisted into rage, consuming him from the inside—it felt eerily familiar. It was a reflection of the darkness I had fought so hard to escape, the version of myself I could have become if I hadn't let Vorgath into my life. If I hadn't made the choice to rebuild, to open my heart again instead of letting the pain harden me.

And that terrified me.

More than the fear of love. More than the pain of loss. The thought that I could have surrendered to despair, just like Dregor had, was the scariest thing of all.

The mimic's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "You let me die."

Dregor's face twisted into a mask of agony, his whole body trembling. "I have to... make it right," he growled, though the words sounded hollow.

The mimic laughed, a cold, terrible sound. "You're not doing this for me, durak. You're doing this because you're too cowardly to live with your failure."

Dregor's eyes flickered with something close to desperation. He was on the edge, teetering between falling into the abyss of his rage and letting go of the vengeance that had driven him for so long.

The mimic stepped closer, its voice soft and full of venom. "You're just trying to run from your own guilt."

Dregor's hands shook violently, and for a moment, I thought he might drop his axe. His face contorted with the weight of everything he had lost—his son, his brotherhood, his sense of honor.

And then, with a roar of pure fury, he swung the axe.

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The blade cleaved through the mimic's chest with a sickening crunch, a spray of dark ichor erupting from the wound like a burst of ink in water. The creature let out a terrible, agonizing screech as it split apart, tendrils of shadow and flesh unraveling in a macabre display as it collapsed to the cracked stone floor.

For a long moment, the room was silent. The fire crackled faintly, casting flickering shadows on the walls, but the air was thick with the stench of death.

Dregor stood there, his chest heaving, his axe still raised as if ready to strike again.

And then he turned to me.

His eyes, still wild with the echoes of his pain, locked onto mine. Before I could even react, he was moving—crossing the room in two powerful strides. The axe still gleamed in his hand as he pressed the cold steel to my throat, against Vorgath's mark.

I swallowed hard. “Dregor, please—”

He pressed the blade harder against my skin, just enough to draw a thin line of blood. “Vorgath is the reason my son is dead,” he snarled. “And I will make him pay. Starting with you.”

Chapter 31

The world narrowed to the cold bite of steel at my throat, my pulse hammering against the bloody blade as Dregor's rage pulsed through the air like a living thing.

“Killing me,” I said, fighting to keep my voice even, “is not going to fill that emptiness inside you.”

Dregor’s grip on the axe tightened. His chest heaved with every breath, muscles taut, full of anger and something deeper—something broken. I recognized it because I had lived with it. It was that same emptiness that had followed me, too.

“I know you're hurting,” I continued. “But surely you know by now that hurting others doesn’t ease the grief.”

The blade pressed harder against my throat for a moment, the edge biting into my skin, but then it loosened again, just a fraction. “You think you know what it’s like to lose a son? You don’t. You can’t.”

“I don’t,” I admitted, keeping my gaze steady on him, refusing to look away. “But I know what it’s like to lose someone you love. I know what it’s like to barely get by, to survive when you don’t know how to live anymore.”

His jaw clenched, the tension rippling outward, but the wild fury in his eyes had dimmed. It wasn’t gone—anger like that didn’t just vanish—but it wasn’t as sharp now.

“Vorgath let his brother live,” Dregor growled. “If he’d killed Gorkath, Throk would still be here.”

I heard the war in his voice, the guilt, the blame. It was easier for him to hate Vorgath than to deal with the weight of his loss. Easier to dwell on the “what-ifs” than to face reality. I had been there, too, dwelled in those shadows, but I knew that when I got out of this alive, I couldn’t allow them to shape my future.

“And if you kill me,” I said softly, “what then? Will that bring your son back?”

“No, but it will make him suffer.”

“From what I’ve seen, Vorgath already suffers every day,” I pushed, my voice steadier than my heart, which was beating a furious rhythm in my chest. “And not just for your son. He carries the weight of his choices, of his brother’s fate. He suffers for the war—and for everyone he loves.”

Dregor flinched. Just a twitch, but I felt the axe wobble.

My gaze drifted to the mimic, its mutilated form lying in the ash, grotesque and twisted, skin mottled and decaying, limbs unnaturally long. That thing was more than just a monster. It was the reflection of what grief could do to a person if they let it consume them. It was the thing that fed on everything you didn’t let yourself feel.

“Grief doesn’t make sense. It twists things. Makes you believe the only way to heal is to hurt someone else.” I spoke slowly, my voice hushed, like I was coaxing Elias back to sleep after a nightmare. “But breaking him won’t put you back together.”

His face contorted, and for a moment, I thought I’d lost him. His hand flexed around the haft of his axe, and a low growl rumbled from his chest.

“You know that, don’t you? Throk wouldn’t want—”

“Don’t say his name!” Dregor roared, the edge of his axe grazing my skin again as he lifted it slightly, his golden eyes glinting with a wild, terrible pain. “You don’t get to speak his name.”

The rage in his voice filled the room, and fear tightened around my chest. He was standing on the edge, and I had to stop him from falling.

“You’re right,” I said, voice soft. “I don’t know what your son would want. But I do

know you don't have to die with him.”

Dregor froze, his breath coming in short, sharp bursts. His massive chest rose and fell like a snorting bull, but his eyes locked onto mine. For one long moment, everything hung in the air—all the pain, the loss, the memories we couldn't outrun—and then, the tension in his body slackened until the axe lowered just an inch. Enough for me to breathe without the bitter cold of the metal kissing my skin.

“I don't know how to stop,” he rasped, his voice cracking under the weight of it all. “I don't know how to just... live.”

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I glanced at the mimic again, its contorted, unnatural limbs twisted in the firelight. “You don’t have to forget him. You don’t have to let him go. But this—this path you’re on... it’s not honoring his memory. It’s not bringing you peace. It’s only tearing you apart.”

Dregor’s eyes closed, and his head dipped as if he were finally bowing to the crushing grief he’d been running from. His chest heaved, and for a long moment, he was silent. The axe was still in his hand, but it no longer felt like a threat. It felt like a burden he was finally too tired to carry.

“Then what do I do?” he whispered, broken.

I thought of Elias. Of Vorgath. Of the people who had come to mean more to me than I ever expected—Thyri, Mrs. Crumble, all those who had stood by me. Choosing to live again, to be brave enough to open my heart, wasn’t just for me anymore. It was for them.

For the future I wanted to build.

For the hope I hadn’t realized I still carried.

“You let go of the hate. You honor Throk by living.”

For what felt like an eternity, he didn’t move. The fire crackled in the distance, the only sound breaking the heavy silence. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, Dregor let the axe slip from his hand. It hit the stone floor with a dull thud, and the tension in the air seemed to dissolve with it. I didn’t move yet—I wasn’t sure I could—but

something inside me knew that the battle was over.

In the silence that followed, I could hear the crackle of the fire, the faint hiss of embers burning out, and then something from outside—a distant noise, soft but insistent. Dregor cocked his head toward the sound, and without another word, he reached into his belt and pulled a small knife from its sheath. My muscles tensed, but before I could move, his hand shot out, grabbing the ropes binding my wrists.

With a few deft, almost careless slices, the ropes fell away, and my arms dropped, the circulation rushing back in painful prickles. He lingered for just a second longer, his golden eyes meeting mine, but there was no fury left in them—only exhaustion.

Then, he turned and retreated, disappearing deeper into the stronghold's shadows.

Just then, the heavy door burst open, slamming against the stone wall with a resounding crash. My heart jumped, but I didn't flinch. I knew who it was before I even saw him.

Vorgath.

He stormed into the room, dark eyes wild, scanning every corner for threats before locking onto me. His jaw tightened, and without a word, he stepped toward me, the ferocity in his gaze softening only slightly when he saw I was still standing, still breathing.

In one hand, he held a sword. It was the first time I'd seen him armed with anything other than a hammer, and the sight was both thrilling and unsettling. This wasn't just any weapon; it was the one I'd glimpsed hanging in his forge, like a relic of a life he'd left behind. But now, here he was, willing to wield it again—for me.

In his other hand was a small, gleaming device—Elias's Finder, the one Grimbale had

given him at the Tinkerer's Faire. The bird spun once, then stopped, pointing directly at me. I swallowed hard, the weight of what that meant sinking in. The Finder didn't guide Vorgath to battle, to his forge, or to his past life in the mountains. It led him here.

His heart had led him to me.

Vorgath's gaze flicked toward the open space where Dregor had vanished and then to the twisted remains of the mimic lying on the floor. His shoulders tensed, weapon still at the ready. But before he could give chase, I found my voice.

"It's over," I said. His eyes snapped back to mine, the tension still thick in the room, but I held his gaze, willing him to understand. "Dregor's gone. It's over."

For a moment, his brow furrowed, and I could see the conflict in his eyes—wanting to finish what Dregor had started, wanting to fight. But I could also see the toll it had taken on him, the weight of all the battles he had already fought. Like me, like Dregor, he had carried so much pain, and I wanted nothing more than for him to find peace.

"Let it go," I urged. "You've fought enough."

Vorgath's chest rose and fell with deep, controlled breaths, but slowly, ever so slowly, his weapon lowered. He studied me, searching for any sign of weakness or injury, and then, finally, he closed the space between us in two long strides. His strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me into the warmth of his chest. I didn't resist. I let myself sink into the safety of him. His heart thundered against my ear, and for a moment, everything else faded—the fear, the tension, the shadows.

"I will always fight for you," he murmured, pulling back slightly, enough to look down at me. "No matter how many times you push me away."

“I’m done pushing you away,” I replied, tipping my head back to meet his eyes. “I choose you. Always.”

His thumb brushed over my neck, where he had marked me the night before, sending a shiver of heat through me. “Is that so?”

I nodded, a wry smile tugging at my lips. “Yes, but don’t get too comfortable. I might still need a reminder every now and then.”

“I can think of a few ways to make sure you never forget,” he muttered, his voice low and teasing.

I laughed, playfully smacking his muscular arm. But my laugh came up short when he gathered me against him again. His breath stirred the top of my hair, his broad chest rising and falling, a solid, reassuring wall against the world. I lay my cheek against him, exhaling the last of my tension.

In that moment, it struck me just how far I had come. I had faced loss, fear, and uncertainty, yet here I stood, not just surviving but living. I remembered the days when grief felt like an insurmountable weight, when I thought my heart would never mend. I had been a widow, lost in sorrow, and a mother grappling with the shadows of a painful past.

Yet through it all, I had discovered a flicker of hope—a spark that had ignited during my time with Vorgath.

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He had shown me that vulnerability was not a weakness, but a strength. I had learned to trust again, to open my heart, not just to him, but to the possibility of joy and love. I was no longer just a mother or a widow, no longer a hollow imitation of life; I was Soraya—someone deserving of happiness and fulfillment.

I had reclaimed my voice and my dreams, and I was ready to embrace the future, whatever it may hold.

“Elias,” I said at last, breaking the tranquil quiet. “He must be worried...”

“He’s safe,” Vorgath reassured me. “He’s with Mrs. Crumble. Nothing and no one’s getting past that brownie. Not even me,” he added with a rough chuckle.

I smiled despite everything. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“For what?” he asked.

“For taking care of Elias. For not giving up. For...” I faltered briefly, searching for the right words.

But he didn't wait for me to find them. Instead, he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. A small sound escaped me, a soft hum of contentment, as his tusks brushed lightly against my cheek. I pressed closer, letting myself sink into the sensation of being enveloped by him, his warmth, his strength, the protective way his arms wrapped around me like I was the most valuable thing he'd ever held.

When we finally pulled apart, the world felt a little softer. His forehead rested against

mine, and for a few heady seconds, we simply stood there, breathing in each other's air. I could hear Elias's laugh in my head, see Kald's ghost in my memories, watch the remnants of my old life smoldering in the ashes with the forge that had burned down before I rebuilt it brick by brick...

And underneath it all, I saw Vorgath. Always there. Always steady.

"Let's go home," he rumbled softly.

He released me just enough to grab my hand, threading his fingers through mine, and together, we turned toward the door. The flickering firelight behind us painted long shadows on the stone walls, but I didn't look back, not at the mimic's remains, not at the place where Dregor had vanished. This place was behind us now. The grief, the anger—it didn't own me anymore.

As we stepped into the cold night air, I tightened my grip on Vorgath's hand, feeling the reassuring warmth of his calloused skin. The stars above seemed brighter, the wind crisper, and for the first time in a long time, the future felt wide open.

We weren't just returning to the forge, or to Elias, or to the life we had begun to build. We were stepping forward, into something new, something neither of us could have ever imagined. The path ahead was uncertain, filled with challenges we had yet to face, but I knew one thing with absolute certainty.

I was not afraid.

Epilogue Part I

The soft glow of the charmstone by my front door welcomed me, its gentle warmth a familiar comfort after a long day. I brushed my fingers over it, ensuring the wards were still in place, as I always did without thinking. The faint hum of magic passed

beneath my fingertips—steady, reliable—as certain and quiet as my life had become.

I opened the door and crossed the threshold, entering the home I now shared with Vorgath, breathing in the familiar scents: the rich tang of savory stew simmering on the hearth, the hint of pine from the nearby forest mixed with the scent of the forge that clung to the thick stones of the cottage.

It had taken time, but with the steady income from both of our forges, we'd managed to purchase the land surrounding my cottage. Together, we'd expanded—building onto the existing structure to create something that suited both of us. The cozy cottage had grown into a larger home, blending my sense of warmth with the practicality of his orcish craftsmanship. The rooms were larger, the ceilings higher to accommodate his size, but it still held the charm of the home I'd known for so long.

The forge, too, had grown. While my original workspace remained intact, we added a separate area where we could work side by side, combining our skills in new ways. It wasn't just a place for me anymore—it was a place for us, a reflection of everything we'd built together.

Elias barely noticed me as I slipped through the door, his attention fixed entirely on the small, whirring gadget in his hands. The little wind-up bird he'd been working on looked a little more battered than when I'd seen it earlier, its wings now flapping in uneven, spasmodic jerks.

“Time to wash up, Elias,” came Vorgath's deep, patient voice as he neared. He still hadn't spotted me, focused as he was on trying to wrangle my son.

Elias darted around the table, nimble for a boy on the verge of growing into his lanky, adolescent body. His laughter echoed through the warm walls of our home as he deftly avoided Vorgath's outstretched arm.

Mrs. Crumble, perched near the hearth, was dishing out the stew into large bowls. Each dollop of steaming vegetables and meat tinkled in the ceramic with a magical flourish, a faint sparkle lingering in the steam. She didn't turn but shook her head, a knowing smile curving her lips as her moss-like hair bobbed.

"You'll never catch him like that, Vorgath. Orc though you may be, you've met your match with this one."

Before Vorgath could respond, Lira appeared from the other side of the room, dropping a set of plates on the large wooden table.

"Dinner!" she called with the authority of someone who had grown fond of ordering Elias around, despite being only a few years older. "Sit now, or I'll make you clean every tool in the workshop tomorrow."

The challenge worked. Elias skidded to a stop, eyes widening before he glanced between her and Vorgath. He huffed dramatically, and I took that moment to step further into the room, a soft laugh escaping me as I placed my pack by the door.

"Ahh, there she is," Vorgath said, his deep voice warming as he finally noticed me. He strode across the floor and wrapped his solid arms around me, pulling me close for a quick kiss on the forehead. "How was the market?"

I leaned into him, enjoying both the comfort and the subtle thrill that always came from his touch. "Busy," I replied, smiling up at him. "Sold out of everything."

“Again?” he asked.

“Again,” I confirmed, tapping the heavy coin purse at my hip as proof.

The past year had been a whirlwind, with each week bringing more commissions, more recognition, and more confidence. Word had spread among the townsfolk—particularly the women—that I offered more than just sturdy tools or weapons.

My necklaces, woven with Brilda’s mithral and enchanted to change color when danger was near, had become a favorite among travelers. The bracelets I’d designed, which adjusted to the wearer’s body temperature, had drawn praise from farmers who needed warmth on cold winter mornings or relief from the midday summer heat. But it was the heartstones—the mother-and-child tokens—that had truly captured hearts. It was a simple idea that connected families, allowing a mother to track her child with just a glance. It was born from my own fears for Elias, and now it hung from necks and wrists all over Everwood.

“You’re incredible,” Vorgath said, kissing me once more before leading me toward the table.

Elias finally plopped into his chair, still flushed from his game of outrunning Vorgath, and placed his wind-up bird on the table with exaggerated care. It still sputtered every now and then, the wings twitching like it had a mind of its own, but it was a marvel nonetheless.

“Did you make that?” I asked, leaning down to kiss his head before sitting beside

him.

“I built it with Grimble's help,” he beamed, holding up the small invention. “It can even fly for a bit.”

“Amazing,” I said. “I'm so proud of you.” And it was the truth. While I'd originally thought he might follow me into blacksmithing, he had found his passion in tinkering, inventing gadgets and intricate devices that showcased his incredible imagination.

Lira settled into the chair across from me.

“And look at you,” I said. She wore a lightweight piece of armor—a sleek, intricately designed breastplate with delicate engravings. “That's incredible work, Lira.”

Lira's cheeks flushed a little, and she gave me a bashful smile, her confidence growing but still tempered by her youth. “Thank you. I've been working with lighter armor, trying to make it both strong and flexible. For women who need protection but can still move.”

“It's beautiful,” I said, impressed by the precision of her work.

Vorgath nodded in agreement as he settled into the larger chair at the head of the table. “You're really finding your way.”

She glanced down at the armor and then back at me, her smile soft but proud. “I have you two to thank for that,” she said quietly. “For giving me a chance. And for standing by me when my father...” Her voice trailed off, but the mention of Thorne was no longer filled with the same tension as before.

“Thorne's come around a lot, hasn't he?” I asked gently.

Lira smiled, a bit of relief in her eyes. “He has. It’s been slow, but he’s finally starting to see that this is what I want—what I’m good at. And he’s been more supportive than I expected. Even helped me with some of the designs.”

“That’s good to hear,” I said. “And you, Vorgath? How was your day?”

“Busy,” he answered gruffly, but there was a satisfied half-smile on his face.

Over the past few years, just as I had been establishing myself in Everwood, so had Vorgath. At first, people had been wary of him, but it hadn’t taken long for them to see what I had: that he was more than his appearance, more than the assumptions people made. He was steady, reliable, and, above all, kind.

Now, he was just as much a part of the community as anyone else. He’d become a trusted blacksmith, known for his craftsmanship and his willingness to lend a hand where it was needed. Whether it was fixing a broken wagon wheel or building something new, he was always willing, never asking for more than he was owed. His orcish strength, once a source of fear, was now seen as an asset. And more than once, I’d caught the children of the village running up to him, eager for a story or to watch him at work, completely at ease with the giant of a man who used to be a stranger.

A sense of peace and belonging settled over the room like a warm blanket, and I looked around the table, marveling at how far we’d come. Mrs. Crumble’s tiny figure laden with her stew pots, Lira’s hands moving with practiced care as she adjusted the straps on her armor, Elias grinning up at Vorgath. And Vorgath himself, his broad, scarred hand resting on the back of my chair, his watchful eyes catching mine with a quiet intensity that still made my heart race.

It was simple, but it was beautiful.

Like the ring on my finger—a band of blended iron and silver, with intricate etchings

along the edges that looked like vines curling around a sturdy tree trunk. A gift from Vorgath. And while orcs did not do marriage in the traditional sense, he wore its pair on his own hand, a matching band wrapped snugly around one of his thick fingers, symbolizing our bond in the way that felt most authentic to us.

Dinner passed in a warm haze of laughter, clinking bowls, and the rich, comforting smells of stew and fresh bread. There was a casual rhythm to the meal, everyone settling into their familiar roles around the table—Elias bouncing between bites of food and excitedly tinkering with his bird, Lira quietly smiling at his antics while inadvertently showing off her growing confidence, and Mrs. Crumble, ever vigilant from the hearth, serving seconds and thirds even as she grumbled softly about “young folk never eating enough.”

As twilight deepened outside, the soft glow from the hearth cast flickering shadows across the wooden beams above, the room bathed in warmth and a sense of belonging that lingered long after the last bite had been taken.

When we had all eaten our fill, Mrs. Crumble stood and dusted her hands on her apron, her wiry frame small beneath the cast of her oversized cap. She quirked a brow as she glanced toward the window where the sky had begun to darken, the late summer twilight heavy with the promise of stars.

“Lira, dear,” she said. “Best be heading home before those night winds get too clever. I’ll walk you, and I can show you the best spots to gather those sky-lights. They’re fluttering low this time of year, perfect for the picking.”

Lira’s face lit up, and she nodded instantly, eager for the chance to spend more time with the old brownie woman and learn the tricks of her magical garden.

Mrs. Crumble turned her attention to Elias next, her eyes twinkling as she watched him lazily picking at the final crumbs on his plate.

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“What about you, Elias?” she asked. “I could use a young one’s quick hands. There’s a patch of sky-lights just past the edge of the trees, and my garden’s still crawling with those pesky wingstings.”

Elias’s face broke into a wide grin, his curiosity instantly piqued. “Can I, Mama?” he asked, already half out of his chair.

I hesitated. It was getting late, and despite Mrs. Crumble's watchful eye, I always worried when Elias ran off after dark. I opened my mouth to express my concern, but before I could, Vorgath leaned over the table.

“You have your heartstone?” he asked.

Elias tapped the bracelet around his wrist. “Always.”

“Off you go, then.”

In no time, the trio was on their way out, Elias trailing behind the elderly brownie and Lira with his bird tucked under one arm like a treasured keepsake. The door closed softly behind them, leaving the house in a comfortable quiet.

I stood and began gathering the bowls and plates into neat piles for washing. But just as I started toward the basin, I felt a familiar, looming presence behind me.

“Leave that for later,” Vorgath rumbled, his voice low and teasing as his hands slid around my waist, pulling me back against his firm chest.

I caught his hands, laughing softly. “Vorgath, stop. There’s so much to—”

But my protests were cut short as he lifted me off my feet, his hands firm but gentle beneath my thighs as he hoisted me into his arms. I squealed at the unexpected weightlessness, a laugh bubbling in my chest as I draped my arms around his shoulders, mock-protesting as he started toward the bedroom.

“You can’t—Vorgath, the dishes! The—”

“The dishes can wait,” he growled softly, his voice thick with warmth and that familiar intensity that sent a thrill through me every time. “You... cannot.”

Epilogue Part II

He carried me out of the kitchen and down the hall that led to the bedroom we shared. The doorway had been widened to accommodate his size, the ceiling raised just slightly, but the room itself was still as warm and welcoming as ever. A thick fur rug sprawled across the floor, and the bed—our bed—was framed by a carved wooden headboard. Moonlight streamed through the window, casting soft shadows on the stone walls.

Without warning, he tossed me gently onto the bed, his smile slow and wicked as he kicked the door closed behind him. I let out a breathless laugh, landing in a tangle of blankets and pillows.

Vorgath stood above me, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the soft light spilling in from the hall. “I’ve been thinking about you all day,” he rumbled.

“What have you been thinking about?” I asked, pushing up onto my elbows to look at him.

He tugged his shirt over his head. The firelight cast shadows across the hard planes of his chest, the defined curve of his muscles. Scars and tattoos painted his skin like a map of his life—a story I knew now but still longed to trace with my fingers, to soothe under my touch.

Vorgath's smile was slow, teasing as he stepped closer. “About having you here.”

“Like this?” I teased, letting my knees fall slightly apart.

“Yes,” he answered with a low growl. “But less clothes.”

He grabbed one of my feet and tugged me down the bed toward him, making me shriek. His fingers were deft, working quickly as he peeled the boot from my foot and dropped it onto the floor. The second followed just as swiftly, landing with a muted thud on the thick rug.

His hands trailed slowly up the curve of my calf, calloused palms grazing my skin in a way that sent heat winding through me. Then, with that same quiet intention, he began undoing the laces of my trousers and hooked his fingers into the waistband, gently tugging the fabric down my legs.

“Is this better?” I asked, my cheeks flushed as he pushed my legs apart.

He lowered his head, pressing a kiss to the inside of my knee. “Much better,” he murmured.

His mouth continued its slow, deliberate path up my thigh, the heat of his breath setting every nerve alight. Each press of his lips was a promise, a tease—just enough to make me squirm beneath his touch but never quite enough to fully satisfy the growing ache inside me.

“Vorgath...” I breathed.

He paused his kiss, lifting his gaze to meet mine. “Patience, durlan,” he murmured.

Patience! As if that were something I could manage when every touch of his made me feel like I was coming undone. But I knew better than to rush him.

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“You're impossible,” I groaned, but it came out more like a moan, a soft surrender.

“Yes,” he said simply, dragging his mouth back down, tantalizingly close to where I wanted him most.

His large hands slid up, pushing the fabric of my tunic higher, exposing the soft curve of my stomach. I felt the rasp of his fingertips drag across my skin as he continued to inch the garment up, his mouth following the path his hands had set. He pressed slow, open-mouthed kisses over my navel, my ribs, my breasts, until finally, the fabric was gone, tossed aside with little ceremony, leaving me bare before him.

Vorgath pulled back for just a moment, taking in the sight of me sprawled out on the bed, his gaze smoldering as his breath grew heavy. His eyes traced over me slowly, lingering on the place where his mark stood out against my skin. In the flickering firelight, the scar was barely visible, a faint line just over my collarbone, but to orc eyes, it was unmistakable—a sign of his claim, his promise.

“You are...” He paused, leaning closer. “Beautiful.”

And like always, I believed him, not because of the words themselves, but because of the way he showed me—through every action, every touch, every heated gaze. It was there in the way his hands, rough with the strength of a warrior, softened when they reached for me. It was in the way he knelt before me now, kissing along my hip, reverent, determined.

His hands gripped my hips, holding me in place as he lowered his head, and I felt the first touch of his tongue, a soft, gentle stroke that made me gasp and arch off the bed.

Vorgath growled, pleased with my reaction, his grip tightening slightly as he held me steady, his tongue continuing its slow, torturous dance, each movement deliberate—savoring me.

I buried my hands in the sheets, trying to ground myself as my body trembled beneath his touch. He was always in control—steady, patient—but I felt wild, lost in the storm of sensation he was stirring within me.

“Vorgath, please,” I breathed, my voice barely more than a whisper, but full of need.

He paused just long enough to smirk, his lips brushing against my sensitive skin as he murmured, “I thought you liked it when I took my time.”

“I—” My words faltered as he dragged his tongue in slow, deliberate strokes, and the world seemed to tilt around me. I couldn't think, couldn't breathe. “I do.”

He chuckled softly, the sound dark and tempting, his hands sliding under me to pull me closer, even as his mouth continued its maddeningly slow exploration. I was caught between begging for more and luxuriating in the torment, lost in the heated tension. There was no urgency in his actions—only understanding. He knew me, knew what I needed, even before I did.

He slid one large finger inside me, and I moaned at the intrusion, my body clenching around him. He moved slowly at first, then faster, his finger curling and stroking in just the right way to make me see stars. He added a second finger, stretching me, preparing me. It was familiar now, the way he coaxed my body into accommodating his. The way we fit together.

And every time, it felt like the first.

I reached for him, wanting to feel the heat of his skin under my hands, to pull him

closer, deeper. He growled low in his throat at my touch, his need mirroring my own. He withdrew his fingers slowly, deliberately, and I whimpered at the loss, but then he was standing again, removing his trousers, revealing the full, powerful length of his body. The sight of him—bared, primal, and utterly mine—sent a new wave of heat surging through me.

Vorgath climbed onto the bed, his weight sinking into the mattress, one hand braced beside my head as the other dragged up my thigh, spreading me wider beneath him. His deep, molten eyes locked onto mine, a question hanging there, though we both already knew the answer.

“Yes,” I whispered, breathless. “Now.”

That was all he needed.

He lined himself up, the familiar weight of him pressing against me, and with a slow, all-consuming stroke, he sank into me, his low groan mingling with the sharp gasp that left my lips.

Our bodies seemed to meld together as he filled me. Every inch of him pulsed with restraint, reminding me that even though we had done this countless times, it was never rushed, never taken for granted.

Vorgath stilled for a moment, his forehead gently resting against mine, savoring the way I clenched around him. His breath was warm, ragged, grazing my parted lips. He waited, allowing me to adjust, before slowly pulling back and thrusting forward again, setting a deliberate, torturously slow rhythm that drove every sensation deeper.

“Does this...” He exhaled sharply, his voice a strained rasp, “Feel good, durlan?”

I couldn't form words, the pleasure locking up my ability to speak. Instead, I

responded with a deep, needy groan that made his hips buck just a little harder. I reached up, my hands roaming the firm expanse of his back, tracing the scars and ridges of his skin. These were the marks of his past, of battles won and lost, each one a story that defined him. And now, I was woven into that story.

A part of him.

He thrust deeper, his movements building slowly, purposefully, and I felt the tightening warmth pool at the base of my spine, the pressure building impossibly higher.

“Vorgath, I’m—” I couldn’t finish, but he knew. He always knew.

His grip on my thighs tightened, rough hands pulling me even closer as he quickened his pace, the rhythmic slide of him inside me drawing pleasure from places I didn’t know could feel so alive.

“Yes,” he groaned, burying his face in my neck. “Now.” His pace quickened as he rolled his hips while thrusting deep, the raw intensity of him pushing me straight to the edge.

Pleasure spiraled out of me, engulfing my senses as my body convulsed around him. My back arched with a hoarse, breathless cry as the climax tore through me, waves of heat and sensation radiating from where we were joined.

Vorgath groaned deep in his chest, his pace never faltering as he chased his own release, his hips slamming against me. My hands clung to his shoulders, nails digging into his flesh as I rode out the aftershocks, my legs trembling on either side of him.

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He finally stilled, burying himself to the hilt with a low, rumbling growl as his body shuddered above me. I felt the pulse of his release, his muscles tensing as he let go, collapsing softly against me, careful to support his weight on his forearms.

For a moment, there was nothing but the sounds of our ragged breathing, our bodies entwined, until he pushed himself off of me, collapsing onto the bed beside me.

I lay there, catching my breath, a lazy smile spreading across my face as I stared up at the ceiling. Vorgath's arm slid around my waist, pulling me closer to his side, and I nestled into his warmth, savoring the comfortable silence that followed.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked.

I hesitated, feeling the rush of excitement and nerves bubbling up inside me. I hadn't planned on telling him like this, but now, tangled in his arms, the moment felt right.

“Just thinking about... expanding the house again.”

“Expanding?” He exhaled a deep sigh. “Didn't we just finish the last project? What are you thinking about now?”

I placed a hand over my stomach, feeling the warmth beneath my palm as my smile widened. “Well... we're going to need more space.”

His brow furrowed, and for a moment, he was silent, staring at my hand on my belly. Then, as realization slowly crept in, his eyes widened.

“Wait... you mean...?” His voice trailed off.

I nodded, laughing softly. “Yes. We’re going to have a baby.”

For a second, he just blinked at me, his face frozen in shock. Then, he suddenly let out a booming laugh as he scooped me into his arms, pulling me onto his chest.

“A baby?” he repeated, his voice full of wonder and excitement. “By the Alders,durlan, we're going to have a baby?”

I giggled, feeling the sheer happiness radiating off him as he held me tight. “Yes,durnak,” I said, showing off my limited orcish skills. “We're going to have a baby.”

He looked at me, his dark eyes bright with emotion. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” His voice was filled with joy, and he gently pressed a hand to my belly. “I would have been—”

“More gentle tonight?” I teased, raising an eyebrow.

He gave me a playful growl, his tusks glinting in the moonlight as he grinned. “Maybe. But you didn’t seem to mind.”

I rolled my eyes, smacking his chest lightly. “I suppose you’re right.”

Vorgath chuckled leaned his forehead against mine. “A baby,” he repeated, as if he still couldn’t believe it. “I never imagined...”

I traced my fingers along his jawline, feeling the warmth in his skin. “Neither did I,” I admitted softly, “but it feels... right.”

His gaze softened, his hand resting over mine on my belly. “You’re already an incredible mother to Elias,” he murmured, his voice low and full of admiration. “This little one’s going to be so lucky. Just like I am.”

I grinned, my heart swelling at his words. “We’re all lucky,” I whispered, pulling him closer for a gentle kiss. “I can’t wait to see you with our child.”

Vorgath’s smile was radiant, and for a moment, we simply held each other, savoring the excitement and warmth that wrapped around us like a blanket. His large hand remained on my belly, as if he couldn’t tear himself away from the thought of our future.

Finally, he broke the silence. “So... about that expansion. We’ll need a much bigger crib than Elias ever had.”

I laughed, the sound filling the room, light and free. “Definitely.”

Vorgath smirked, eyes gleaming mischievously. “And perhaps we should make sure there’s room for more, just in case.”

I shot him a mock glare. “Let’s get through this one first.”

“Fine, one at a time,” he teased, pressing a soft kiss to the top of my hair. His fingers lazily traced patterns on my back, his body warm and solid beneath me. “But now that I think about it, I like the idea of a full house.”

I smiled, closing my eyes. We lay there in comfortable silence, the soft breeze from the open window carrying the distant sounds of Elias’s laughter and Mrs. Crumble’s raised voice as they made their way back down the street. The warmth of home and the joy of our family was all I’d ever wanted, and somehow, I’d found more than I ever imagined possible.

I glanced at Vorgath, watching his eyes drift across the ceiling. Then, as if he could feel me studying him, his gaze slid over to mine.

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“What are you thinking?” I asked quietly.

He didn’t answer right away, his jaw shifting slightly as if he was working out something in his mind, choosing his words carefully. Finally, he answered, “I’m thinking... how strange it all is.”

I tilted my head, intrigued. “Strange?”

His hand, still resting on my back, began tracing slow circles. “For so long, I only knew how to tear things apart. Break them down.” His eyes flicked to the scarred knuckles on his other hand, a ghost of his past lingering in the way his thumb brushed over them absently. “It always felt like that was all there was for me. Destruction. I could cleave a man in two, raze a home to the ground... and it was easy.” His voice was raw, the words heavy. “But this, this...” He brought his eyes back to me, his hand pausing its gentle movement on my back. “Creating something. A life. A place that feels like... like it could last—”

He broke off, his throat tightening at the end, but it didn’t feel like fear. It felt like awe.

I lifted my hand to trace the edge of his jaw, feeling the faint roughness of stubble beneath my fingertips. “That’s not who you are now.” The words were soft, but they carried the weight of truth we had both come to understand. “You’re building. We’re building. And it’s strong.”

His dark eyes flickered across my face, and though the look of awe remained, it was now mixed with something deeper, something more certain. He didn’t have to say

anything more. Neither did I.

There were no grand declarations left to make. We had already spoken with our hands, our hearts, every day since we'd met at that forge. No matter what came next, it would be ours. Built, not from stone or metal, but from something far stronger.

I pressed my lips to his chest, breathing in the burning warmth of the hearth from his skin—the scent of steel and ash, of earth and fire—inhaling the makings of home.

And for the first time in longer than I could remember, the future, whatever it was, didn't feel like something to face. It felt like something that was already here. Lying beside me in the flickering light, with dusk deepening around us, and laughter echoing softly outside our window, against the call of the night.