



Orc Me, Maybe

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: I took this job to organize a summer camp, not fall for a grumpy orc CEO with tusks, abs, and zero chill.

Now I'm dodging sabotage spells, babysitting goblins with glitter addictions, and trying really hard not to make out with my boss between team-building exercises.

His daughter thinks I'm magic.

He thinks I'm trouble.

And I think I'm about five spreadsheets away from calling this chaos home.

I came here to fix a mess.

Now I'm risking everything for the monsters who made me believe in magic again.

Enemies-to-lovers? Check. Found family? Check. Orc with a soft heart and a hard...everything? Absolutely.

Grab snacks. You're not putting this one down.

Read on for grumpy x sunshine, single dad orc with a clipboard obsession, enemies-to-lovers in a magical summer camp under construction, found family vibes, glitter-fueled disasters, slow-burn tension that finally snaps, and one overachieving heroine who didn't plan on falling... until she did. She came for the paycheck. She stayed for the tusks. Now she's one campfire kiss away from forever. HEA guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 76

CHAPTER 1

JULIE

The gravel crunches under my city-loaned flats as I step out of the charter van, and I swear, the air here smells like pine, dirt, and intimidation. Camp Lightring stretches out in front of me like a half-finished dream: wooden cabins with scaffolding still clinging to them like clingy exes, and giant construction machines scattered across the grounds like forgotten toys from a very ambitious toddler.

I clutch my leather-bound planner against my chest like it might block UV rays or orc stares. My blazer is too stiff, my blouse too tucked, and my hair's already protesting the mountain humidity by frizzing at the temples. Great first impression material.

"Julie?" a voice calls behind me. Male. Low. Firm. Oh, no.

I pivot and almost trip over the gravel. My eyes climb—yes, climb—up the massive frame of the man stepping out of the black SUV. He's green. Of course, I knew he'd be green, but knowing it and seeing it are two different things. His tusks curve like polished ivory out of his lower jaw, his dark hair pulled back into a low knot. His shoulders look wide enough to block out the sun.

"Y-Yes. Julie Wren. Secretary to Mister Torack. That's... you." I extend my hand too fast. "I mean, you're Mister Torack. Sir."

He raises an eyebrow—hazel eyes, surprisingly warm—and his gaze flicks from my outstretched hand to my perfectly typed itinerary still clutched in my other arm.

“I know who I hired,” he says, shaking my hand. His grip is firm but not crushing. “You’re punctual.”

Oh thank God, something I can win at.

“I try to be,” I say with a breathy laugh, already mentally logging his tone, his stance, his demeanor. There’s nothing in my notes about how handsome he’d be, or how much he radiates that dangerous mix of alpha and exhausted dad.

“Lillian,” he says, turning slightly. “Come here, please.”

From the back seat of the SUV, a small girl hops out—green-skinned, blue-eyed, and carrying a glittery notebook with a unicorn drawn on the cover. Her gaze flicks to me, then away, then back, assessing.

“Hi,” she says, flatly.

I crouch a little. “Hi, Lillian. I’m Julie. I’ll be helping your dad get everything ready here. You’re kind of the boss around here, huh?”

She frowns. “He said he’s the boss.”

Torack sighs. “Let’s not argue semantics on day one.”

I chuckle nervously and stand. “We should probably get started. I’ve reviewed the parcel plans, and I have your investor’s meeting notes scheduled for three. The welcome center—well, the skeleton of it—looks like it’s close enough to set up a makeshift office.”

Torack gives me a side-eye. “Already planning to set up camp before camp’s even open.”

I shrug. “That’s why you hired me.”

His lips twitch. I think he might be smiling.

By noon, my blazer’s off, my hair’s up, and I’ve re-pinned the whiteboard three times because the wind keeps knocking it over. The temporary “office” is actually the future arts and crafts cabin with sawhorses for a desk and a hot plate for coffee.

I’m re-reading the supply drop form when the door creaks open.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Lillian declares.

I blink. “Right. Of course. Um... does the site have porta?—”

“There’s a grove of trees.”

“Oh.”

She tilts her head. “You don’t know anything about the woods, do you?”

“I once got lost in Central Park.”

She rolls her eyes and disappears, and I decide this is fine. Normal. Not terrifying at all.

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“Julie.”

I jump. Torack’s voice fills the space like thunder in a teacup.

“Hi. Yes. I was just going over the?—”

He holds up a paper bag. “Lunch.”

“Oh.” I blink. “You... brought me lunch?”

“I brought lunch. There was extra.”

I take the bag like it’s some sacred artifact and peek inside. Sandwich. Apple. Water bottle. Napkin folded into a perfect square. Huh.

“I, uh, really appreciate it.”

He leans against the open door frame. The sunlight casts a gold line down his jaw.

“You’re not what I expected,” he says.

My heart skips. “Is that... a bad thing?”

“Not necessarily.”

There’s a silence that stretches longer than it should. I fidget with the bag, then pull out the sandwich.

“I’m used to people underestimating me,” I say finally. “Or giving me the coffee intern duties and saying it’s ‘great experience.’ I’m not here to fetch lunch or babysit your daughter.”

He crosses his arms, tusks gleaming. “Did I say you were?”

“No,” I admit. “But I’ve interned with enough rich guys to recognize the signs.”

“I’m not like most rich guys,” he says simply.

That’s true. Most rich guys don’t have battle scars on their forearms and speak like they’ve been told too many times to quiet down.

“You know,” I say, “You could’ve held this camp opening in the city. Somewhere safe. Predictable. Air-conditioned.”

“Then it wouldn’t be real,” he says. “Kids don’t change in safe places. They grow when they get scraped knees and see stars.”

My throat tightens. Damn. That’s a better line than I’ve ever written for a pitch deck.

I nod. “Okay. But if a centaur trips on uneven gravel because we skipped accessibility compliance, I’m blaming you.”

He laughs—really laughs. It’s low and rumbles through the room like a warm earthquake.

“I’ll take the hit,” he says.

I open the sandwich, bite into it, and chew slowly.

“So,” I say between bites, “when do the real monsters show up?”

He gives me a sideways look. “You mean the kids, or the investors?”

“Both.”

After lunch, I watch him walk away toward the cabins. Lillian runs to catch up, grabbing his hand without asking. He lets her.

And something in my chest squeezes.

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I'm not sure if it's envy or admiration, but either way, I'm here. Camp Lightring is happening. It's messy, it's loud, it smells like sweat and sawdust and maybe possibility. And I'm not gonna screw this up.

I gather my planner, adjust my bun, and head out toward the mess hall frame. Time to organize chaos.

CHAPTER 2

TORACK

The blueprint keeps trying to escape like it knows something I don't. Wind catches the edge again, flapping it like a taunt. I slam my hand down—hard—and pin it in place against the makeshift table.

I've had enough of things trying to slip through my fingers lately.

"Right, so you're saying the fire pit's going right over the main line?" Renault's voice whines to my left. He's wearing another impossibly crisp jacket, probably elven silk, and adjusting his cufflinks like he's attending a gala, not standing in a construction zone surrounded by pine needles and sawdust.

"It's not ideal," Dena says, tapping the design with a lacquered nail, "but it's the only viable route with the slope and soil we've got. Unless you want to regrade the whole eastern ridge, and we all know the budget's allergic to that."

"It's a logistical compromise," I add, my voice flat. "Not a flaw."

Renault scoffs. “It’s a risk.”

I finally lift my gaze to him. “So is letting kids climb trees, and we’re not paving the forest.”

“Trees aren’t plumbing.”

“They both have roots,” Dena offers, almost too cheerfully. Her wings flutter behind her in amusement.

Renault makes a face like he stepped in something. I bite back the urge to tell him he’s welcome to step off the board if he’s that squeamish. But I don’t. Yet.

“I’m only saying,” Renault presses on, “that this camp is meant to be a beacon. A symbol of cultural unity. If it collapses because someone tripped on a pipe?—”

“It won’t,” I cut in. “Because I won’t let it.”

From the corner of my eye, I catch a flicker of movement—broad shoulders and a sunburned neck approaching with a swagger that means only one thing: more bad news.

“Speak of the devil,” Dena mutters as Groth the goblin contractor stomps up. He’s wearing his usual work belt and a too-small hard hat perched like an afterthought atop his dome-shaped head. He’s chewing something. Loudly.

Groth doesn’t even wait for a greeting. “Torack. We got a problem. West bunk foundation’s a mess. Rock shelf’s closer to the surface than we thought.”

I sigh. “You told me the survey came back clear.”

Groth shrugs one shoulder. “It was clear. Then we started digging.”

I cross my arms. “So you missed it.”

“I’m telling you it shifted,” he insists, wiping sweat from his brow with a sleeve already stained with gods-know-what. “Maybe gremlins, maybe tectonics. You want I should file a motion to the Geomancer’s Guild?”

“Don’t be cute.”

“I’m always cute,” he says, flashing a toothy grin full of fangs and grit.

Renault groans. “Is this the kind of expertise you rely on? Truly?”

Groth turns slowly, dramatically. “Hey, pretty-boy,” he says, “have you ever poured concrete on a floating slab at forty degrees? No? Then shut it.”

I rub my temples. “Groth, go back. Shore it up. Use the tension plates we ordered. If it’s not stable by dusk, I want it leveled and re-framed. No half-jobs. We’ve got kids arriving in less than a month.”

Groth tilts his head, gives me a sideways smirk. “You got it, boss.”

“Not the boss,” Renault mutters.

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Groth grins wider. “Could’ve fooled me.”

He stomps off, whistling something that might have once been a tune but now sounds like a banshee being drowned.

Renault folds his arms, his expression tight. “If your idea of leadership is allowing that gremlin’s cousin to chew up our resources?—”

“I don’t allow anyone to do anything,” I say. “I give orders. They follow. Or they’re gone. Groth knows how to build camps that don’t collapse. His attitude’s just extra packaging.”

“I’m beginning to wonder what the actual product is.”

“You invested in this,” I remind him. “You signed the charter. This camp is your name, too.”

His jaw tightens. “Yes, and I’d prefer it not to become a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

I lower my voice, step closer. “Then stop micromanaging the pipe layout and start backing the vision you bought into. Cultural unity. Safe spaces. Kids who’ve never seen anything but city walls or cultural conflict getting a summer to believe in something better.”

Renault doesn’t speak. He looks down at the plans like they might change if he glares hard enough.

“Meeting adjourned,” I say. “Go log your feedback in the contractor tent. We’ll reconvene at sixteen hundred.”

They scatter, all except Dena, who lingers long enough to offer me a knowing look.

“You could try smiling more,” she teases.

“I’ll smile when this place stops needing miracles.”

She flutters off with a laugh.

I step away, toward the ridge. From here, the camp sprawls below like a sleeping giant still waiting for its heart to wake. A gust of wind carries the sound of laughter—my daughter’s—bright and sharp.

I turn to find her climbing a stump like it’s Everest, her little fists in the air. Julie’s trailing behind, carrying a lunchbox, looking out of breath and out of place.

“You’re gonna fall,” I call out.

Lillian ignores me. Of course she does.

Julie catches my eye and waves with a sheepish smile. “We’re back!”

“Where’d she go?”

“Gave me the grand tour,” she pants. “Very exclusive.”

“She’s eight. Not a tour guide.”

Julie laughs. “You’re just mad she didn’t give you one.”

I huff. “She’s supposed to stay on the main paths.”

“She said she’s wilderness certified,” Julie says, air-quoting.

“She says a lot of things.”

“And most of them are brilliant,” Julie says softly.

Lillian jumps off the stump with a loudthud, then scampers off toward the cabins. Julie watches her go, hands still gripping the lunchbox.

“She’s got a lot of energy,” Julie says.

“She’s got too much time to burn,” I correct.

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“She misses you.”

I stiffen. “That’s not your concern.”

Julie lifts her chin. “She made it mine.”

I hold her gaze. She doesn’t flinch.

“You know, you could’ve done this in the city,” she says. “It’s safer there.”

“City’s got rules. Too many of them. Too many distractions. Here... here, the world’s still quiet enough for something new to grow.”

She tilts her head. “You ever think you’re trying to fix something out here so you don’t have to fix what’s in there?”

Her eyes flick briefly to my chest.

I say nothing.

She steps back. “I’ll go check on her.”

And she does.

I pull out my phone. Twenty-three unread emails. The contractor’s already called twice. No time for heart-to-hearts, especially not with some upstart secretary overstepping her position.

I swipe to answer the third buzz.

“Torack.”

“Boss,” Groth’s voice comes in crackly, “we got arealproblem now.”

I close my eyes, inhale slowly.

Here we go again.

CHAPTER 3

JULIE

I don’t know what hell I signed up for, but it definitely wasn’t this one, where my shoes are plotting against me and the ground makes wet farting noises when I walk.

Groth leads me past the construction fence like a troll-shaped GPS, and every step feels like a betrayal. My boots—I thought they were rugged—are about as useful here as high heels in a bog.

“This isn’t swamp,” Groth says, voice gravelly and way too smug. “It’s engineered sediment. Natural drainage field.”

“It’s moist soup,” I reply, doing a little skip-hop to avoid sinking deeper. “A field of soup.”

He grunts, amused. “Bet your resume doesn’t say ‘terrain tactician,’ huh?”

“No, but it does say ‘fluent in three scheduling apps and capable of hosting a Zoom call during a fire drill,’” I mutter.

“Useful out here.”

“I’m wildly underqualified for nature.”

He gestures to the half-framed bath house ahead. “Boss says you’re project-side now. I figured it’s time to teach you where not to step.”

“I feel like this whole zone is a big screaming NOT HERE sign,” I say, eyeing the ground suspiciously like it might lunge.

Groth chuckles like a garbage disposal swallowing gravel. “You’ll get the hang of it. Or you’ll lose a shoe. Either way, you’ll remember.”

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And like some backwoods prophecy coming to life, that's exactly the moment my foot sinks. Deep. With a sound that can only be described as a burp from the devil himself.

"No. No-no-no—ugh!"

I try to yank my foot back, but the mud isn't having it. My boot stays behind like a soldier fallen in battle, and I stumble backward, arms windmilling, now wearing one sock that instantly absorbs swamp juice.

Groth doubles over laughing. Not even politely—he's wheezing like someone who swallowed a kazoo.

"You said I'd remember!" I shout, stabbing a finger at him. "You didn't say I'd need to file a missing persons report for my footwear!"

He wipes his eyes, face red. "City girl down. Swamp: one. Secretary: zero."

I fish around for the boot, but it's hopeless. The mud has claimed it. It is mud now.

Groth offers me a hand, which I don't take, and I slosh out onto semi-dry land, one foot squelching loudly with every step like I'm part of some demented children's puppet show.

"This was not in the job description," I grumble.

"Sure it was," Groth says. "Fine print. Right next to 'diplomatic wrangler of picky

elves' and 'orc babysitter.'”

“You are a troll,” I declare.

He grins. “Technically, goblin. Troll’s are much taller. But I’ll take it.”

We head toward a tarp-covered bucket labeled WASH STATION (PROBABLY NOT CURSED). I eye it like it might bite.

“You gotta dunk the foot,” Groth advises.

“Can’t I just... let the mud dry and flake off?”

“Sure. But then the pixies might think you're trying to summon their god.”

“Oh good. Pixie curses. Can’t wait.” I roll my eyes and do as I’m instructed.

The water in the bucket is freezing. Like, hello, my soul just left my body cold. I dunk my foot in, yelping like a kicked kettle.

“You okay?” comes a familiar voice behind me.

I turn—awkwardly, still balancing on one leg—and find Torack standing there, arms crossed like he just stumbled upon a sitcom and isn’t sure if he’s amused or horrified.

“I lost a shoe,” I say flatly.

He looks down at my sad, muddy sock, then up again. “Battle scar.”

“I feel like the terrain’s fighting dirty.”

He doesn't laugh, but the corner of his mouth lifts. It counts.

"Groth took you through the drainage zone?" he asks.

I sigh. "I think he was hoping I'd fall in and get swallowed completely."

"Sounds like Groth," he replies, a hint of humor in his tone.

"He also told me salamanders hold grudges."

"They do."

I blink. "Wait, really?"

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Torack shrugs. “One bit me in ‘98. Still won’t look me in the eye.”

I pause, staring at him. “Are you joking?”

He shrugs again.

“Oh my god, you’re not joking.”

He moves closer, picking up my abandoned boot from the ground like it’s a crime scene artifact. “You’ll need new ones. Those aren’t built for mountain soil.”

“I got them on sale,” I mutter.

“They lied to you.”

I sigh, then finally plop down on a flat rock and start wringing out my sock.

“You’re not quitting, are you?” he asks after a beat.

“Over a boot?”

“Over a swamp. Over Groth. Over... this.”

I glance around. At the piles of lumber, the buzzing of saws, the distant sound of Lillian shouting something triumphant to a squirrel.

“No,” I say. “I’m not quitting. I came here to prove myself, and I haven’t even had

the chance to break a printer yet.”

Torack raises a brow. “You’re waiting to break office equipment?”

“It’s a rite of passage.”

His lips twitch. Almost a smile. Progress.

“You’re more stubborn than you look,” he says.

“Is that an insult or a compliment?”

“Both.”

I smirk. “I’ll take it.”

Across the field, Lillian is crouched in attack mode behind a tree, holding out what I think is a granola bar to a butterfly.

“She told me it’s a dryad in disguise,” Torack says when he sees me watching.

“Honestly? I believe her.”

“She’s either going to rule the world or burn it down.”

“She’s already doing both,” I say.

We sit in silence for a minute, the weird, comfortable kind.

“You know,” I say, “this place is a mess.”

“Yeah.”

“But it’s got something.”

He nods slowly. “That’s why we’re here.”

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I nudge my boot. “Still gonna need hazard pay.”

“You survive one more walk with Groth and I’ll double your salary.”

“Deal.”

He walks off before I can ask if he’s serious. Probably not. But hey, at least I still have one boot.

I stand, squelch my way back to the cabin, and decide that tomorrow, I’m bringing extra socks. And maybe knee pads. And peppermints for the salamanders. Just in case.

Because this camp might try to kill me—but damned if I’m not gonna outlast it.

CHAPTER 4

TORACK

The conference tent’s hot. Not just warm—stifling. The kind of heat that makes tempers short and patience microscopic. I smell stress and overpriced cologne before anyone even opens their mouths.

Dena’s already flapping a fan at herself, sitting beside Renault, who’s gone full high-horse in a linen vest that looks like it’s never seen a day’s labor. The rest of the board—less important, more decorative—crowd around a collapsible table littered with glossy pamphlets and my notes.

Behind me, the flap rustles.

Lillian slips inside.

I don't need to turn around to know it's her. The air shifts, like it always does when she enters a space. My chest tightens. She shouldn't be here. Not now.

I glance over my shoulder. She's got that look on her face—the one where her eyes sparkle with mischief but her chin's set like concrete. Trouble brewing. I've seen it before.

“Lillian,” I say quietly. “Back outside.”

She crosses her arms. “I have something to say.”

“Now's not the time.”

Renault chuckles under his breath. “Looks like the public's arrived.”

I grit my teeth.

“I want to talk,” she insists. “It's about the playground.”

My shoulders stiffen. “You've already told me?—”

“I built a model. With sticks. It's better than the one in the plans.”

I catch Julie in my peripheral, standing awkwardly near the side of the tent, half-hidden by a stack of presentation boards. She's watching Lillian with this... softness. Like she sees something I've missed.

“Lillian,” I say, firmer. “Go wait outside.”

Her lip wobbles. “You said the camp was for me.”

“It is.”

“Then why can’t I help?”

My patience is paper thin, and the murmurs from the table only feed the burn rising in my throat. Dena shifts in her seat. Renault smirks. A few others lean in like they’re watching a slow-motion train wreck.

“Because this is not a game,” I snap. “This is a meeting. With people who signed contracts and wrote checks. This isn’t a backyard fort.”

Lillian’s mouth opens like she might say something more, but she doesn’t. Her fists clench. Her chin trembles. And then, without another word, she spins and bolts out of the tent.

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Julie moves before I do.

“Excuse me,” she mutters, brushing past me without a glance, like she’s on a mission.

The tent’s silent for a beat. Then Renault exhales dramatically.

“Well. That was certainly democratic.”

I don’t answer him. I pick up my agenda and flip to the next item, pretending I didn’t just watch my daughter’s heart crack in half.

The meeting drags on.

Talk of margins. Material delays. Fae contractors needing time off for lunar alignment. The usual.

I nod at the right moments. Push for safety over aesthetics. Defend Groth’s latest change order even though I know it’ll be another PR nightmare once the elf forums catch wind.

But my mind keeps drifting.

To Lillian’s face.

To the way she stood there—tiny and furious and right—and how I shut her down like a stranger.

I was trying to keep order. Trying to maintain professionalism. But hell if it doesn't feel like I kicked a puppy in the chest.

By the time the last board member files out, I'm already halfway across the gravel path, headed toward the cabin she and Julie have been using to store art supplies and paperwork.

I hear them before I see them.

"I just wanted him to listen," Lillian says, voice muffled, small.

"I know, sweet pea," Julie replies. "And you were brave for trying."

"I had a whole speech."

I stop outside the door. My hand rests on the frame, but I don't knock.

"Dad doesn't like speeches," Lillian mutters.

Julie lets out a soft sigh. "He's got a lot on his plate."

"I am his plate."

The words hit like a punch. I swallow hard. Why can't she understand?

Julie's voice comes quiet, but steady. "That man loves you more than his own life. But sometimes adults forget how to show it. Doesn't make the love less real."

"She always listened," Lillian whispers.

My heart turns to stone.

Julie doesn't ask whoshe is. Doesn't need to. She just says, "I bet she would've loved that playground idea."

Lillian snuffles. "I used the bendy sticks."

"The bendy ones are the best."

I step back. My chest feels too tight. Like something's pressing from inside, trying to break free but not quite strong enough.

Later, I find Julie alone near the admin tent, sorting through sign-in forms and camp wristbands. Her hair's down today, loose and curling at the ends from humidity. There's mud on one knee of her pants. She's humming. She stops when I approach.

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“She’s fine,” Julie says before I can ask. “Back with her bugs.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“She just wanted to be heard.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do.”

That gives me pause. I narrow my eyes.

“She’s grieving too,” Julie says, stacking papers. “And she’s eight. She doesn’t have emails to bury herself in.”

“I’m not burying?—”

She looks up. Cuts me off with her stare alone.

I sigh. “I didn’t mean to?—”

“I know you didn’t. But you did.”

There’s a silence between us. Not cold. Not angry. Just... heavy.

“You’re doing the best you can,” she says, softer now. “But sometimes, the best thing isn’t building a perfect camp. It’s letting her feel like she matters more than the next

blueprint.”

I drag a hand down my face. “I don’t know how to do this part.”

“Then let her teach you,” she says. “She’s got a lot to say.”

I look at her for a long moment. The woman I hired to be a secretary is looking at me like she knows me. Not the public-facing businessman. Not the guy with perfect balance sheets. Me.

And I don’t hate it.

I nod once.

“Thanks,” I say again.

“You say that a lot.”

“Means I mean it.”

Julie smiles, just a little. “Then maybe next time, listen to her playground pitch.”

I smirk. “Only if you sit in on the next budget call.”

Her smile widens. “Deal.”

CHAPTER 5

JULIE

It starts with a phone call.

Torack's eyes flick to his vibrating phone like it's trying to ruin his life on purpose, which, honestly, it probably is. The guy juggles more chaos in one afternoon than most people do in a year.

We're outside near the half-built amphitheater—well, “amphitheater” is generous. It's a circle of logs and some marked-off stones that might someday become a firepit. Lillian's poking at a pile of sticks like she's deciding which ones are worthy of combustion.

“Can you keep an eye on her?” Torack asks, already pulling the phone to his ear.

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I blink. “Seriously?”

“I won’t be long.” His tone says he doesn’t have time to debate. “Don’t let her light anything she can’t un-light.”

And then he walks away. Just like that. Leaves me with a fire-happy eight-year-old and a half-eaten bag of marshmallows like that’s a normal Tuesday.

Again.

I glance at Lillian. She glances at me. We regard each other like two suspicious cats.

“So,” I start, crouching beside her, “what’s the firepit plan? Are we summoning something, or just cooking marshmallows like mortals?”

She snorts. “We’re doing a ritual.”

“Oh. Cool cool cool. Should I be concerned?”

She grins. “Only if you’re scared of pixies.”

I lean in, whispering, “I’m terrified of pixies.”

That gets a laugh, and I take it as a win.

She gestures to the pile. “We have to build a shape. A moon circle.”

I nod seriously. “A moon circle. Got it. I am very qualified for this.”

“You don’t know what a moon circle is, do you?”

“Not a clue.”

Lillian sighs like a tiny professor dealing with the village idiot. “You use bendy twigs to make a circle that catches moonlight. Then you put something inside it to make a wish.”

“What kind of wish?”

She shrugs. “Anything. But it has to be something real. Not, like, a pony.”

“Well, there goes my entire plan.”

We start building. The twigs are not cooperative. They snap when they shouldn’t, and poke when they really shouldn’t. I end up with a splinter in my thumb and a piece of leaf in my hair.

“Do you miss your mom?” Lillian asks out of nowhere, voice quiet.

I freeze. My hands still mid-circle.

“Yeah,” I say, just as quietly. “I miss her a lot.”

She nods. “I miss mine too.”

There’s a silence that settles between us—not awkward, not heavy. Just real.

“She used to tell me stories,” Lillian says, sticking a twig into the dirt. “About fae

who lived under roots and gnome kings that rode bunnies into battle.”

“Okay, I’m gonna need to hearallof those.”

She giggles and leans back, brushing her hands off on her shorts. “She made up new ones every night.”

“Your mom sounds incredible.”

“She was.”

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And just like that, we go quiet again.

I glance over at the camp box nearby—one of those big plastic totes labeled "EVENING PROGRAM MATERIALS." Inside, there's a bag of marshmallows, a chocolate bar half-melted in the sun, and a suspiciously smooshed sleeve of graham crackers.

"You ever made s'mores?" I ask.

She lights up like a lantern. "Real ones? Not microwave ones?"

"Girl, I don't even own a microwave."

"That's a crime."

"Probably," I grin. "You got any fire magic in that little backpack of yours?"

She jumps up. "We've got a spark charm!"

"Is that legal?"

She shrugs. "It's effective."

Fifteen minutes later, we've got a little fire going—contained, safe, and monitored, I'd like to note for insurance purposes. Lillian's squatted on one side, I'm on the other, and we're both holding sticks like we're performing a culinary ceremony.

“Mine’s on fire,” I say, staring at the marshmallow torch I’ve accidentally created.

“Blow it out! Quick!”

I do, flinging bits of charred sugar across my lap.

Lillian cracks up. “You’re terrible at this.”

“I’ll have you know I graduated top of my class in Marshmallow Theory.”

“What class was that?”

“I made it up.”

We toast a few more, layering them onto crackers and chocolate like gourmet chefs. The first bite is molten bliss, and I let out a noise that probably isn’t safe for polite company.

“Worth it,” I mumble.

Lillian nods, already smeared with chocolate. “Ten out of ten.”

She flops back on the grass, mouth full, eyes aimed at the dusky sky. Stars are just starting to poke out—shy and flickering.

“You think she can see me?” she asks.

I glance over. “Your mom?”

She nods.

I follow her gaze, the sky stretched wide and endless above us.

“Yeah,” I say. “I think she sees you. Especially when you do stuff like this. I think she’d love the moon circle. And the marshmallows.”

“And the fairy stories?”

“Especially the fairy stories.”

She’s quiet for a second, then turns toward me. “You should make a wish too.”

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I blink. “I don’t know what to wish for.”

“You don’t have to tell me. Just... wish.”

I stare at the glowing embers. At the little moon-shaped twig ring we made, the burned chocolate on my fingers, the way her hair curls around her ears when she’s smiling.

I wish I could make this feeling last. This warmth. This weird, lovely little peace.

I don’t say it out loud. Just let it float.

A shadow moves behind us, and we both turn to see Torack returning, phone no longer in hand. He stops when he sees us—me with one graham cracker in hand, Lillian covered in marshmallow.

He blinks.

“Did you build a shrine?”

“No,” Lillian says sweetly. “We summoned moon spirits.”

I wave. “They brought snacks.”

He eyes the fire. “That safe?”

“Safe-ish.”

He steps closer, kneels beside his daughter, eyes softening in a way I haven't seen much. He brushes her hair back from her forehead.

"She did good," I say before I can stop myself. "Real good."

He looks at me, like he's trying to figure something out. His jaw flexes, but he nods.

"Thank you," he says.

I shrug. "We were just waiting for you."

And then I feel it—that click. That tiny, shifting thing that says we're not just coworkers in a weird woodsy project anymore. We're something else now. Co-conspirators. Maybe something even more dangerous.

People who care.

CHAPTER 6

TORACK

Idon't like surprises. They usually mean fire, lawsuits, or elves whining about their dietary restrictions again.

But this morning, walking into the camp's makeshift HQ, I get hit with one that doesn't make my teeth itch. It makes me pause.

Julie.

She's in the center of the storm, headset around her neck, hair tied up like she's been through three crises already—and won all of them. She's got clipboards hanging off

her arm like armor, and she's mid-argument with a twelve foot tall troll delivery driver who looks like he'd rather face a banshee than contradict her again.

"No, I don't care what the manifest said," she snaps. "Those folding chairs were meant for the arts cabin. Not the canteen. There's a whole difference between crafts and carbs."

The troll nods like his life depends on it, hauling the chairs toward the right spot.

Julie spots me, points a pen at me like it's a weapon. "You're late."

I blink. "Didn't realize I had a curfew."

"I gave you a verbal one. Yesterday. During the plumbing review." She taps her toe like a frustrated mother who's said this too many times.

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“Did you now? I don’t recall giving an assistant that level of authority. Besides, I was distracted by the fact our toilets might drain into the faerie glade. I have priorities, you see.”

“That’s a tomorrow problem,” she says. “Today’s problem is getting three investors seated in the correct quadrant without offending anyone’s political ancestry.”

As I ready a retort about who’s job that is, I step in fully, eyeing the setup. A folding table with blueprints, colored tabs, labeled folders, three walkie-talkies, and a pot of very black coffee. Not the sterile efficiency of a city office, but not far off either.

“You made all this?” I ask, genuinely impressed.

She glances over her shoulder, shrugging. “Someone had to. You were off handling fire code updates and fighting Groth over waterproof shingles.”

“He was trying to use mushroom spores as filler.”

“Biodegradable doesn’t mean structural.”

I chuckle despite myself. “You’re scary when you’re like this.” And I admit, quietly, that impresses me.

She smirks. “Like what?”

“Efficient. Organized. Vicious.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” she says, walking past me to grab another stack of papers. “I only go for the jugular when people bring me decaf.”

My eyes follow her as she moves. It’s involuntary. Shorts today—practical, rugged, good for climbing over fencing or, apparently, climbing up my thoughts. She’s got a scratch behind one knee and mud caked on her boots, but she’s commanding this space like she’s royalty.

Seems the city girl is adapting.

Took her long enough.

“Stop staring at me,” she says without looking up.

I freeze. “Wasn’t.”

“You were.”

“You’re imagining things.”

She finally looks at me, lips twitching. “You’re very bad at denial.”

I clear my throat, flip the top folder. “Did you seriously prepare allergy profiles for all the investors?”

“Do you want to explain to the centaur from Finway why he’s seizing in the clover patch because of your tuna wraps?”

“You’re scary and thorough. A terrifying combination.”

She beams. “Thank you.”

And damn if I don't feel something tug in my chest. Not the usual weight. Something lighter. Restless.

"I didn't think this would be your thing," I admit. "This camp. The dirt. The chaos."

Julie pauses. Her fingers linger on the edge of the coffee pot. "Honestly, I didn't either. But... I like it. There's something about it. It's messy. But it matters."

"It does."

She looks at me for a second too long. "And you matter to it."

I feel those words settle deeper than they should. I'm used to people wanting my money. My approval. My logistics. Not... me. Not like that.

A knock on the doorframe cuts the moment.

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Renault steps in, as dramatic as a curtain call.

“Julie, darling, I simply must know—have you arranged for a shaded seating area? I’m not about to subject myself to woodland UV exposure.”

Julie doesn’t miss a beat. “You’re at table C. Left side, under the birch tree, with a parasolanda misting charm.”

He blinks. “You misted my chair?”

“Just the chair,” she says innocently. “You’ll have to bring your own ego cooler.”

Renault gives a tight smile. “Delightful.”

Once he’s gone, Julie turns to me with a sigh. “He keeps calling me ‘darling.’ If he does it one more time, I might become a criminal.”

I take a step closer. “He calls you that because he knows you’re the only one here with an actual grip on the project. Fae folk love buttering people up before they strike.”

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind.” She turns to me and raises a brow. “And you?”

I shrug. “I don’t call you that because I think you’d throw me into the compost bin.”

Julie laughs—real, full. “That’s fair.”

There's another pause. She tugs at her shirt collar. The tent's stuffy. Or maybe it's just the proximity.

"You're good at this," I say finally.

Her voice softens. "I want it to work. Not just for the paycheck. For the kids. For what it means."

I nod, and for some reason, I want to touch her. Just her hand. Her wrist. Something to ground me. I don't. I just hold her gaze a second longer than necessary.

"Are you planning to take over the whole camp?" I ask.

"Depends," she says. "You gonna stop me?"

I shake my head slowly. "I'm starting to think I'd rather watch."

She blinks. Her mouth opens. Then closes again.

I turn to the table. "Now hand me the layout. We've got fifteen minutes before the first investor lands."

"Right." Her voice wavers slightly. "Fifteen. I can do fifteen."

"Of course you can," I murmur.

And as I watch her move, papers rustling, boots scuffing across the wooden floor, I realize something I hadn't before.

Julie Wren isn't just keeping this camp running.

She's starting to run circles around me.

And I'm not sure I mind one damn bit.

CHAPTER 7

JULIE

The meeting starts with a chair that wobbles and a clipboard that sticks to my thigh.

We're crammed into the half-finished main hall—some kind of future multi-use space that currently smells like pine and freshly dried paint. The board members are seated around a makeshift table cobbled together from two saw-horses and what I'm pretty sure is part of the kitchen countertop. Groth is perched on a flipped-over crate, chewing the stub of a pencil. Renault has his legs crossed like we're at a tea salon. Dena's floating. Literally. Hovering a few inches off the floor, wings twitching in irritation every time Groth drops sawdust on her shoes.

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And then there's me. In the corner. With my notes, my carefully printed itinerary, and the growing itch between my shoulder blades that says I'm about to do something I wasn't technically hired to do.

Torack steps in last, clipboard in hand, expression somewhere between thundercloud and tax audit.

"All right," he says, voice low and clipped. "Today's goals—confirm the infrastructure timeline, finalize the food logistics, and figure out why the hell Cabin Seven still doesn't have plumbing."

"We're waiting on the elemental inspector," I say automatically.

He glances at me, nods. "Julie's tracking that."

I straighten slightly. A glow warming in my chest. Recognition. Not bad.

Groth raises his hand. "Also, we need to deal with the supply reroute. The mushrooms are gonna spoil in the sun."

"Shouldn't be serving them raw anyway," Renault mutters.

"They're a snackanda weapon," Groth says proudly.

Dena sighs. "Can we not start the spore war again?"

Torack cuts through the chaos with one look. Everyone quiets. "Let's move through

the priority items. Julie, what's first?"

All eyes turn to me.

I take a breath. Big. Bold.

"First up is the revised bunk scheduling matrix. I made adjustments to the sleeping arrangements to better accommodate the newer cabins and reduce the risk of interspecies tension."

Renault sniffs. "Do you have any actual qualifications in conflict zoning?"

"Nope," I say, flipping the laminated chart around for everyone to see. "Just common sense and an absurd number of late nights reading intercultural behavioral case studies. Here's your visual breakdown. Color-coded. With legend."

I pass out copies.

Groth blinks at the chart. "What's this circle mean?"

"That's your designated mushroom storage. Away from the bunks that can house centaurs. Because they hate fungal spores. You're welcome."

Dena raises a delicate hand. "And this red triangle?"

"Ah. That's the no-fly zone. We don't want the fairy wings getting scorched by the wood stove flue."

Torack leans back in his chair slightly, watching me. I can feel it. That assessing, unreadable stare. He's doing that thing again—trying not to smile but failing just a little.

I forge on.

“I also made adjustments to the food vendor rotation. Renault, I subbed out the dryad bakery for the kelp co-op since you flagged the nut contamination issue.”

He looks surprised. “I... appreciate that.”

“And I added signage for dietary codes—color-coded bracelets per camper so the kitchen doesn’t have to memorize two hundred preferences.”

Dena claps softly. “That’s brilliant.”

“Wait, so we’re keeping the mushroom kebabs?” Groth asks, hopefully.

“If they’re grilled and kept in a sealed container,” I say. “On odd days only. You’re not poisoning anyone on my watch.”

I expect Torack to cut in. Redirect. Commandeer the room again.

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Instead, he grunts. “That’s efficient.”

And maybe it’s the heat, or the adrenaline, or the fact that I haven’t eaten since breakfast—but that sounds dangerously close to a compliment.

“And finally,” I add, clicking to the last slide on the projector, “I reorganized the daily schedules to make room for downtime. Quiet hour, post-lunch. Structured silence. Kids need time to process.”

Renault leans forward. “That wasn’t in the original outline.”

“Nope,” I say. “It wasn’t.”

Dena’s eyes narrow, thoughtful. “You’re not just managing logistics.”

“I’m not just a secretary.”

Torack speaks then, low and deliberate. “No. You’re not.”

The words land like a warm weight in my chest.

When the meeting ends, the others drift out—Groth muttering about fungus rotations, Renault double-checking his scarf’s wrinkle ratio, Dena levitating off with perfect grace.

I linger.

So does he.

Torack leans against the edge of the table, arms crossed, gaze still locked on me like I just performed a magic trick and he's not sure if he wants to applaud or interrogate me.

"You hijacked my meeting," he says.

"I optimized it."

"You outmaneuvered my contractor."

"He left a soggy bag of shrooms in the communal fridge."

"You organized a full operational pivot without telling me."

"I was going to tell you," I say. "Right after I did it."

He tilts his head, eyes scanning my face. "You always work like this?"

"Only when people assume I don't know what I'm doing."

There's a beat.

"I don't assume that anymore," he says.

Silence stretches, taut and strange and full of something unspoken.

"You're sweating," he says.

"I'm working," I reply, reaching up to swipe at my forehead.

Torack takes a step closer. My pulse stutters.

“You need water?”

“I need people to stop doubting me.”

“I don’t,” he says again. Lower now. Closer.

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I swallow. “Good. Because I’m not going anywhere.”

Another breath. Another beat.

He leans in slightly, but doesn’t touch me. His gaze flickers over my face like he’s reading something I haven’t written down.

“Neither am I,” he says.

And just like that, I feel it again.

That tension. That possibility. The crackle of something building between us like a storm just starting to roll in.

But then he steps back, grabs his clipboard.

“Dinner’s at six. Try not to scare the chef.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You should warn him you’re coming.”

He smirks. “Touché.”

And then he’s gone.

I stand there for another full minute, staring at the slide that still reads “Conflict-Free Meal Planning” and wondering if I just dreamed that entire interaction.

Not just a secretary. Not just a meeting.

Maybe not just a job anymore either.

CHAPTER 8

TORACK

I make my rounds through the camp, my conversation with Julie the previous day still churning through my mind. The girl has a way of getting to me, both good and bad. It's not something I'm used to.

It clutters up my thoughts. So much so, that it takes something drastic to pull me back from them.

The sharp, eye-watering smell of chemical failure hits me five paces before I see the disaster. By the time I round the bend, it's too late. There's glitter in the grout.

Literal glitter.

The arts cabin foundation is frothing. Foam bubbles churn up from the base like a sugar-fueled swamp, coating the sideboards in a thick, iridescent sludge. It smells like burnt glue and toasted regret.

I grind my tusks, slowly, as I take in the three goblins standing in front of it—Groth front and center, arms crossed, looking like a toddler proud of a spilled cereal box.

“Boss,” Groth says cheerfully. “You’re early.”

I stop in front of the bubbling cement.

“You used shimmerdust.”

Groth lifts a shoulder. “Just a pinch.”

“You mixed shimmerdust with trollcrete,” I say flatly. “Which reacts violently with organo-based substrates.”

“Experimental blend,” Groth replies, tapping the heel of his boot against the foundation’s edge. “I was testing a theory. Might make it self-leveling.”

Behind him, one of the junior goblins—Snert? Skid?—pipes up, “We think it’s trying to form a third tier.”

“A third tier of what?” I snap, tension pulling in my face.

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“Ambition?” he offers with a nervous smile.

My pulse thuds behind my eyes. My temple twitches.

“It’s forming a volatile crust,” I say tightly, kneeling to examine the slick bubbling mass. “This isn’t innovation, Groth. This is a lawsuit waiting to crystallize.”

Groth huffs. “We’re pushing boundaries. The kids’ll love it.”

“The kids are not going to play dodge-the-toxic-foam, Groth.”

“Debatable,” he mutters.

I stare him down so sharply his ears twitch.

He tries again. “I can stabilize it. Easy fix. Bit of neutralizer from the storage shed and some heat charms.”

“You have one hour,” I say, voice like stone. “If it’s not neutralized by then, I’m reporting it to the Engineering Guild and stripping your badge.”

Groth’s grin falters. “That’s a bit harsh.”

I stand to my full height. “So is this acid party you threw in the dirt.”

He mutters something under his breath about “creativity stiflers” and stomps off, hollering for someone named Bleez to “grab the foam tarp and two buckets of hope.”

I turn on my heel, jaw aching, ready to get back to real problems when I hear footsteps behind me: light, measured, unbothered by the chaos.

Julie.

She steps up beside me with her usual clipboard, a pen behind one ear, and a granola bar wedged between two folders like emergency rations. Her brow lifts as she takes in the glimmering mess.

“Well,” she says after a pause, “this doesn’t look up to code.”

I exhale slowly. “They turned the foundation into a glitter volcano.”

Julie squints, a strange smile pulling at her lips. “Is it... breathing?”

“Possibly.”

“Do we call a priest or a chemist for that?”

“Depends on how much it screams when it sets.”

She hums, tucking her clipboard under her arm and stepping closer to inspect the frothing base. “I’ve seen less horrifying things in subway bathrooms. Not by much.”

I grunt. “This could push us behind schedule.”

She glances over her shoulder at me. “Or it could push them to not use unsanctioned fairy dust in structural materials again.”

“They said it would ‘enhance texture.’”

“It’s enhancing my nightmares.”

I rub the bridge of my nose. “It’s a mess.”

Julie studies me for a beat, then speaks softly. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I mutter.

“You say that like it’s a challenge.”

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“I don’t have time to fall apart, Julie.”

“No one said you had to fall apart,” she replies, stepping in front of me. “But you also don’t have to grit your tusks into gravel every time someone screws up.”

I don’t answer.

She watches me for another moment, then sighs. “Let me guess. This was supposed to be the one thing today that didn’t explode.”

“It was a small ask.”

“Which means the universe said no.”

My jaw tightens. “Groth’s good at what he does. But he needs boundaries. Hard ones.”

Julie nods. “Then give him boundaries. Just don’t give yourself a hernia in the process.”

I turn toward her. “Are you always this calm when the ground’s melting?”

“Only when I’m trying to keep you from flipping a picnic table.”

I pause. “I wasn’t going to flip anything.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You’re two seconds from bench-launching rage.”

I glare, but not at her.

Then she does something unexpected.

She gently nudges my elbow with hers. “C’mon, Big Bad. Let me get you coffee before you start breathing fire.”

I look at her. Really look.

There’s paint on the edge of her shoe, ink smudged on her thumb, and a look in her eyes that tells me she’s already calculated how long it’ll take to fix this mess and reschedule the entire investor preview around it. She’s steady, but not cold. Organized, but not distant.

And she’s standing next to me like she belongs there.

“You’re too good at this,” I say.

She smiles faintly. “I’ve been told I make an excellent disaster wrangler.”

“No,” I say, softer. “You makemebetter at it.”

Julie blinks. “Torack...”

But before either of us can say more, Groth yells from the edge of the site.

“Boss! We got it contained! Sort of! I mean, it's twitching, but not maliciously!”

I sigh. “Define ‘maliciously.’”

“It hasn’t eaten anyone!”

“Yet!” chimes in another goblin helpfully.

Julie snorts. “I’ll get the investor list ready. You handle the sentient cement.”

I grunt. “I preferred the spreadsheets.”

“You’re lying.”

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“Only a little.”

She turns to go, then pauses. Looks over her shoulder.

“Hey, Torack?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re doing a good job.”

The words land hard.

For the first time all morning, I feel my jaw relax.

Even with tusks.

CHAPTER 9

JULIE

The storm rolls in like a beast that’s been waiting to strike. One second I’m sorting inventory for tomorrow’s supply check, and the next, I’m jumping at the sound of thunder so loud it rattles the windows.

I don’t scare easy.

But this one? This one’s got bite.

Wind howls outside like it's trying to rip the mountains in half, and the rain slams against the admin cabin in thick, chaotic bursts. The lights flicker once—twice—then everything goes black with a sharp pop that makes me let out a definitely-undignified yelp.

“Fantastic,” I mutter. “Just perfect.”

I fumble for my phone. No bars. Zero. Even the “SOS” signal gives up. I’m mid-eye-roll when the cabin door opens, wind blasting through, and a flashlight beam blinds me.

“You good?” comes Torack’s voice, rough and steady.

“Define good,” I say, shielding my eyes. “Because if it includes functioning power, dry socks, and basic human dignity, then I’m solidly failing.”

The door shuts with a solid thud behind him. Torack’s silhouette is big in the dark, shoulders tense, flashlight tucked in one hand. “Generator’s out. Backup battery’s probably fried. It’s too rough out to fix anything until the morning.”

“Well, that’s great,” I say, flopping back onto a folded-up sleeping bag on top of a crate. “I always dreamed of being stranded in a power outage with an orc who scowls at thunderstorms.”

He huffs. “I don’t scowl.”

“You glared at the lightning like it owed you money.”

“It interrupted my comms check.”

“Still. Very personal vendetta vibes.”

Torack sets the flashlight on a table, angling it upward. The beam throws shadows across the low-beamed ceiling and wooden walls, casting everything in moody flickering light. Cozy, if you ignore the wind screaming like banshees outside.

He glances around. “At least we’ve got supplies.”

“Mm-hmm. Romantic glow sticks and granola bars. Peak ambiance.”

He raises a brow. “Are you cold?”

“Nope,” I lie, tugging the sleeves of my hoodie down. The air’s damp and sharp, but I’m not about to admit weakness. Not while sitting across from a man who looks like he could arm-wrestle a bear and win with emotional repression alone.

He reaches into the bin and tosses me a blanket. “Take it.”

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I catch it, just barely. “Are you always this chivalrous?”

“Only when you’re turning blue.”

“I’m fine,” I insist, even as I wrap the blanket around me like a burrito of stubborn pride. “Thanks.”

He sits on a crate across from me, elbows on his knees, flashlight shadows making his tusks gleam faintly. For a moment, all I hear is the rain, the creak of the cabin settling, and the sound of my own heart beating too loudly in the silence.

“You’re always like this,” he says suddenly.

I blink. “Like what?”

“Talking. Filling the quiet. Even now.”

“Better than sitting in awkward silence waiting for the roof to cave in.”

“It’s not awkward.”

“You say that like awkwardness is a weakness.”

He looks at me then, eyes locked, voice low. “It’s not. Just... unfamiliar.”

The words settle between us like something heavier than storm clouds.

I don't respond. I can't. Not when he's looking at me like that—like he's seeing me for the first time and also the hundredth. Like I'm both a problem he wants to solve and a puzzle he wants to keep unfinished.

I clear my throat, trying to focus. "You ever do this before?"

"What?"

"Get stuck somewhere. With someone. In the dark."

His expression doesn't change, but something in his posture softens. "Once."

"Was it a total nightmare?"

"It wasn't this quiet."

He says it like a confession, and I don't press. But something in me unfolds, just a little.

We lapse into silence again, but this time it's softer. Easier. The kind of quiet that holds weight without pressure.

Then he says, "You handle storms better than most."

"I grew up with chaos," I reply. "You learn how to either steer it or surf it."

"Which one are you doing now?"

"Bit of both."

He chuckles, just barely. "I thought you'd panic."

“Ineverpanic. I catastrophize proactively.”

Torack leans back slightly, arms crossed now, watching me. “Do you always deflect with humor?”

“Yes. And caffeine. And spreadsheets.”

“You’re not just funny,” he says. “You’re... good. Steady.”

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I laugh, but it's not as sharp as usual. "I'm a mess."

"You're messy right now."

That stops me cold.

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't look away. Just sits there, waiting for me to catch up.

"I'm not yours," I say, breath catching slightly.

"No," he says, softer now. "But I'm thinking maybe I want you to be."

And the silence after that... It's electric.

My heart stutters. My skin buzzes. I lean forward before I think better of it. He meets me halfway, slow, deliberate, eyes dropping to my mouth—and for one perfect second, the air between us cracks with possibility.

He smells like cedar and wet pine and something warmer. Something steadier. I want to touch his jaw, feel the rough line of it beneath my fingers, trace the edge of something that might, just might, be tender under all that stone.

His hand brushes my cheek, fingers barely grazing skin, and I forget how to breathe.

knock knock knock

We freeze.

The door rattles. The storm wails.

Then comes the small, unmistakable voice: “Daddy?”

Torack pulls back instantly. Not harsh, but fast. Like he’s yanked back to earth.

I stand too quickly, blanket slumping off my shoulders, pulse still roaring in my ears.

“It’s okay, Lil!” I call, voice too bright. “Come in!”

The door creaks open and there she is—Lillian, tiny and disheveled, pajama-clad and clutching her pillow like a shield.

“There’s a bug in my cabin,” she says, voice grave. “It had eyes on its knees.”

Torack moves. Gentle now. Steady. “I’ll check it.”

Lillian grabs his hand without hesitation. “And it hissed at me.”

He looks back at me—one beat, one breath—then disappears into the night, her small frame tucked close to his.

I sit back down, fingers trembling, heartbeat refusing to settle.

So close.

So nearly.

Almost.

And now I’m just sitting here in the dark, a storm still raging, wrapped in a blanket

and wishing I hadn't closed my eyes quite so soon.

CHAPTER 10

TORACK

I wake up before the sun, like always, but this time it's not from habit that kicks me out of bed—it's that gnawing feeling under my ribs. Like something's unfinished. Or maybe wrecked.

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The kind of ache you only get when you almost had something worth breaking the rules for.

I make coffee with hands that feel too big and a mind too loud. The camp is still asleep, wrapped in the kind of hush that only comes after a storm. Like the world's holding its breath. Outside, fog clings to the treetops in soft, ghostly drapes, and every pine needle sparkles under the dawn light like it's been gilded in regret.

She's plaguing my thoughts once again. Not even the bitter sting of hot coffee can snap me out of it. Last night's encounter was less than professional, and I don't just mean her wet clothing sticking a bit too much in some places.

She reads me too well. And I'm starting to enjoy it.

I cross the camp slowly, dragging my boots across gravel damp with last night's tantrum. The paths are littered with fallen branches and leaves, and the air smells like turned earth and wet ash. I breathe it in like I'm trying to fill the part of me that still feels hollow.

I don't expect her to be in the mess hall this early, but I should have. Julie's always there. First in, last out, clipboard in hand and hair pulled tight like armor. If anything, I should've known she'd be even earlier today. Get a head start on pretending like nothing happened. Like the near-kiss in the dark, the hand that brushed her cheek, the sharp inhale right before...

No. That's over.

Done.

Except I walk through that door and there she is.

Exactly as I pictured: sleeves rolled, mug clutched in one hand, eyes locked on some document in the other. She's dressed practical—work boots, hoodie, scarf—but she still manages to look like something warm you'd find on purpose. Something real.

She doesn't look up.

“Morning,” I say, keeping my voice low.

“Morning,” she replies, flat and clipped.

The word hits like a wall. She doesn't turn. Doesn't glance over. Doesn't do that thing where she half-smiles like she knows I'm watching.

I pour my own cup of coffee, standing awkwardly at the side counter like a guest in my own mess hall. The silence stretches long and tight. I clear my throat.

“Storm didn't hit the west ridge as bad as we thought. Mainline power's steady. East water line's up.”

“Good,” she says, scribbling something. “Then the welcome tent reopens at ten. We'll have power in time for the morning briefing.”

I wait for something else—some snark, some spark—but there's nothing. Just cool, even words like she's reading off a spreadsheet.

I walk around the table, facing her directly. “Julie.”

She finally looks up. Her eyes meet mine, and damn if it doesn't sting. She's holding herself like a fortress today. Tidy. Controlled. Like she reinforced her walls overnight.

"We need to talk about last night," I say.

Her gaze sharpens. "No, we don't."

"I think we do."

"No," she repeats, firmer this time. "Because I already got the message."

"I didn't send one."

"You didn't have to," she says. "You backed off so fast, you nearly left skid marks."

"I was trying to be smart."

"Well, congrats," she snaps. "You were. Gold star for professionalism."

I cross my arms. "Julie?—"

"You kissed me with your eyes, Torack. You reached for me. You leaned in. I wasn't imagining that."

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“I wasn’t going to act on it.”

“You were already acting on it,” she says. “Then you stopped. And now you’re here trying to mop it up like it was a dropped file.”

I step closer. “It wasn’t nothing.”

She laughs once—sharp and dry. “Sure feels like nothing now.”

I hate this. I hate how she’s right and how I can’t tell her that without making it worse. I hate how her shoulders look tighter and her eyes colder and how all of it’s because of me.

I hate that I want to grip that ponytail of hers in my fist and-

“You work for me,” I say, quiet, crushing down those thoughts.

She rolls her eyes. “There it is.”

“It matters.”

“Why?” she demands. “Because you think I can’t separate feelings from function? You think I’d derail this whole camp because of a kiss that didn’t even happen?”

“No,” I say quickly. “No. I think I would.”

She blinks. “What?”

“I’m the one who can’t separate it. You walk into a room, and I stop thinking straight. You smile and I lose track of whatever crisis I was trying to solve. I’ve run battlefields with less chaos than what you put in my head.”

Her lips part, but she doesn’t speak.

“I’m responsible for all of this,” I say, voice low. “The kids. The land. The board. My daughter. If I let this... whatever it is between us... run wild, I’m not sure I’ll come back from it.”

“That’s not protection,” she says after a beat. “That’s fear.”

I look down. “I know.”

She steps toward me. “You’re allowed to want something, Torack. You’re allowed to feel. Not just for her. For you.”

“I can’t risk it.”

“And I can’t stay in a place where every honest thing I feel gets treated like a liability.”

Her voice breaks, just slightly. She turns away before I can see the rest.

“I’ll keep doing the job,” she says, straightening. “I’ll plan the events, wrangle the goblins, keep your chaos running. But I’m not apologizing for wanting something that felt real.”

I step forward, but she’s already moving—papers gathered, mug in hand, scarf wrapped too tight.

She pauses at the door, just for a second.

“You’re not the only one carrying this camp,” she says. “You just forgot I was strong enough to help.”

And then she’s gone.

I’m left standing in a quiet room that feels like it used to be full of something that mattered.

And now it’s just me, and rules.

And a storm that didn’t even do the real damage.

CHAPTER 11

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JULIE

Disappointment is manageable. I know disappointment. You can wrap it up in logic, tape it with rationalization, and stack it in the neat storage boxes of your brain, labeled "not this time."

Disillusionment doesn't fit in boxes. It spills. It sours everything.

It starts as a twist in my stomach, sometime after my third inventory recheck of the supply cabin. I've already fixed the typo on the talent show sign-up sheet, restocked the hydration packs, and labeled the gluten-free snack bins again. It's the kind of work I usually love—order in the chaos. But today, I can't focus.

Because no matter how many times I rearrange tarps and check solar lantern batteries, I can't shake the echo of Torack's voice from this morning.

"You work for me."

Not, "I don't feel that way."

Not, "This can't happen because it isn't real."

Just: "You work for me."

Like that's all I am.

Like that's all I ever could be.

It shouldn't hurt this much. But it does. Because for a minute last night, in that storm-lit quiet, I thought he saw me—not just the efficiency or the binders, but me. The woman beneath the job. The one who wants things. Soft things. Real things.

Now I feel like I was reading a script from the wrong genre.

I step outside the cabin and start walking, half on autopilot. It's mid-morning, the camp already alive with shouting, hammering, the rhythmic clang of goblin tools and centaur hooves on gravel. It should feel comforting. Familiar. Instead it's all too loud. Too much.

I pass the conference cabin without really meaning to. It's supposed to be empty—no scheduled meetings till tomorrow's budget review.

But the door's open a crack.

And I hear voices.

I shouldn't stop.

I do.

I shouldn't eavesdrop.

I definitely do.

“...if we restructure in phases, we'll be positioned for a full launch by fall.” Renault's voice. Crisp. Smooth. The audio equivalent of an expensive fountain pen.

Inside, chairs scrape. A glass clinks.

“The community housing component is bloated,” he continues. “It’s costing us more than it’s delivering. What we need is to rebrand the wellness curriculum. More targeted language. Less ‘recovery,’ more ‘optimization.’ We market to exhausted executives and burnt-out mid-tier managers. Fae-run wellness enterprises are the next goldmine.”

“You want to commercialize trauma,” someone says—Dena, I think, her voice tight with unease.

“I want to streamline our purpose,” Renault replies, voice cooling just a touch. “Look, Torack’s heart is in the right place. But he’s not a strategist. He’s a glorified camp counselor with delusions of nonprofit grandeur. We need vision. We need structure.”

“You mean control,” Dena mutters.

I hold my breath.

Renault presses on, unbothered. “I’ve already drafted a proposal. The north woods are zoned but underutilized. We build premium lodges. Seclusion. Enchanted spa access. Retreat events. Tie-ins with name brand healing services. Fey-touched energy cleanses. Maybe a licensed nymph running aromatherapy rituals.”

Silence.

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Then: “And what about the existing programming? The kids? The veterans? The rebuilding of families?”

“We keep enough to maintain optics. Press-friendly photos. A few scholarships. Maybe a once-a-month campfire memory circle. Everything else pivots upscale.”

Another pause.

“Torack will never agree to this,” Dena says finally.

“Then we make sure he’s too distracted to notice,” Renault replies smoothly. “Let the human keep him occupied. She’s cute. Competent. That clipboard obsession can be weaponized. Keep her pointed at checklists and she won’t see the big picture.”

I feel my face go hot.

And then cold.

My fingers tighten around the edge of my clipboard until the plastic creaks.

They’re not just replacing Torack.

They’re using me to do it.

I back away. One step. Two. My boot scuffs a root, and I freeze. But the voices don’t change. They didn’t hear.

By the time I'm halfway back down the trail, my ears are ringing.

Renault sees me as decoration. A functional, tidy distraction. A tool.

And he thinks Torack is disposable.

I should go find Torack right now. I should tell him everything. But a voice in my head stops me—the same one that's helped me navigate every deadline, every disaster, every board meeting with landmines.

Be smart first. React second.

I turn down a side path and find myself at the entrance of the old amphitheater. It's half-eaten by ivy, its stage cracked and warped from disuse. The tarps that half-covered it after last summer's windstorm are still flapping weakly in the breeze. Nobody comes here anymore. It's too far from the mess hall, too quiet.

Perfect.

I sit on the edge of the broken bench and stare into the trees.

I thought this place was messy but earnest. A scrappy little camp with soul. Now I wonder if I've just been rearranging the chairs on a sinking ship, pretending my little systems could float us all.

I want to cry.

But I don't.

Instead, I let the fury settle in. Because it isn't true.

The camp is messy, yes—but it's working. The kids are thriving. The staff are rebuilding lives, not just resumes. Groth taught a dryad to use budgeting software last week. Lillian made friends with a shy minotaur kid yesterday. This place matters.

And Renault wants to slice it up like a real estate parcel and sell it back to the fae and elven elite for twice the price.

Not on my watch.

I stand up, suddenly too full of energy to sit. I pace the overgrown stone steps, breath fast and sharp. My mind's racing now—thinking in logistics, in plans. Not just reactive. Strategic.

I have eyes on every system in this place. I know who's loyal. Who's struggling. I've fielded more questions from the counselors and kitchen staff than the board ever has. I know how to organize resistance. Quietly. Cleanly.

I can rally the staff. Get ahead of Renault's pitch. If we move now—before his proposal goes to vote—we can make it too messy, too public for him to steamroll through.

And if Torack doesn't believe me? I'll show him. I'll put the truth in black and white, line and column, with footnotes and fire.

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Because I am not a clipboard with legs.

I'm not a pawn.

And I'm damn sure not his "asset."

I'm Julie Wren.

And I am going to save this camp.

CHAPTER 12

TORACK

Idon't realize I'm staring at her until Groth says something stupid and I have to pretend I didn't miss half the meeting.

Again.

Julie's across the clearing, mid-conversation with the grounds team, animated and focused. She's pointing at the south boundary on the oversized camp map, gesturing with her entire arm like she's painting direction into the air itself. A lock of hair's fallen from her braid and it dances along her cheek with every movement.

And I can't look away.

"What if we repurpose the north supply shed?" Groth repeats beside me. "Or we can

just enchant it into a pop-up taco stand. Multi-functional. Think of the morale.”

I grunt. “No tacos.”

“Harsh,” Groth mutters, making a note anyway.

I cross my arms and look back toward Julie. She’s still talking, now crouched near the trail entrance with one of the teen volunteers, showing them how to reflag the safety markers. She’s not just giving instructions—she’s teaching. Investing. Making every moment feel like it matters.

And the worst part?

It does.

Julie matters.

More than I’m comfortable admitting.

She’s threaded herself into the pulse of this place without asking. Without demanding. She just fits. Where I’d been bracing for conflict, she stepped in with clipboards and structure. With follow-through. With kindness that wasn’t fragile. And somehow—without magic—she’s enchanted the very structure of this camp.

And now?

I need her.

More than I expected. More than I want to.

And that pisses me off.

Because I built my life on control. On being the one who doesn't falter. Doesn't depend. Doesn't want.

And then she walked in with her sarcastic commentary and ink-stained to-do lists, and I haven't had a steady thought since.

"Boss?" Groth says again, eyeing me like I might combust.

I blink. "What?"

"You just rejected tacos and forgot to insult my construction estimates. Are you dying?"

I shoot him a look sharp enough to cut steel. "Go check the storm drain filters."

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Groth retreats, muttering something about emotionally constipated orcs.

I exhale, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

Julie's voice drifts over the clearing again. Confident. Bright. But there's something else beneath it. Steel.

I haven't seen her in two hours without a folder in hand or a mission on her face. She's moving like she's preparing for battle. Focused. Tight.

And I hate that I notice the change.

Hate more that it's not just her efficiency I'm drawn to—it's the fire. The quiet fury I can feel radiating off her even across the camp.

Something's shifted.

She hasn't spoken more than three words to me since breakfast. A clipped "meeting at noon" and "left you the vendor log" were the sum of our interactions. No banter. No sidelong glances. No wry little smirk when Groth says something ridiculous.

It's like she's flipped a switch. Locked something down.

And for some reason, that scares the hell out of me.

Because I've seen Julie passionate. I've seen her flustered. Even teetering on furious.

But this version? Controlled. Quiet. Intent.

This version is dangerous.

I stalk toward the central cabin, heart ticking harder than I want to admit. Halfway there, I spot her again—mid-discussion with Mira from comms, her fingers tapping rhythmically on a laminated schedule.

“Mira, I’ll reroute the check-in line through the east grove,” she’s saying. “Keeps us away from the mud zone, and I can redirect the staff kiosk setup while we’re at it.”

“Got it,” Mira says, visibly impressed. “You already redrew the site map?”

Julie hands her the folder. “Color-coded and contingency planned. If the board tries anything slippery, we’re already five steps ahead.”

Something cold drips down my spine.

Board?

Slippery?

Julie looks up then—just for a second—and our eyes meet.

There’s heat there. But not the usual kind. This isn’t the awkward tension from the storm cabin.

This is war-readiness.

And I know her well enough now to recognize that she’s about to do something big.

I intercept her as she turns down the main path.

“Wren,” I say.

She stops. Turns. “Torack.”

Formality. Not “Boss.” Not even “Hey.”

A wall I didn’t put there is now firmly in place.

“We need to talk,” I say, keeping my voice low.

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Her chin lifts. “About?”

“You’ve been moving like you’re planning a siege.”

Her expression doesn’t shift. “Maybe I am.”

“Julie—”

“I know,” she interrupts. “I work for you. That’s all.”

“No,” I growl. “That’s not what this is about.”

She stares at me, arms crossed. “Then what is it about?”

I hesitate, because I don’t have a clean answer. Not one that fits in a meeting memo.

“You’re hiding something,” I say instead.

She doesn’t deny it. “Maybe.”

“Is it something I should know?”

“Are you asking as my boss or... something else?”

That pause is deliberate. And it burns.

I move closer. Close enough to see the lines of tension at the corners of her mouth.

“Julie, talk to me.”

Her eyes search mine for a moment—like she’s weighing the risk.

Then she says, softly, “I heard Renault. In the conference cabin. He’s making moves. Real ones. He wants to rebrand. Strip it down. Build luxury units in the north quarter. Push out the original mission. Pushyouout.”

I blink.

The ground shifts under me.

“What?”

“I heard everything,” she says. “Including how he called me your distraction.”

A silence stretches between us, thick with everything I should have seen.

Julie exhales. “I’ve already started preparing a resistance. Gathering documents. Re-mapping logistics. If we’re going to stop him, we need a plan.”

“We?” I ask.

She meets my gaze again. “I’m not letting them take this place.”

I take a breath.

And then another.

Because she’s right.

And because the wave of relief that hits me—knowing I’m not alone in this—is almost enough to bring me to my knees.

“Julie,” I say, quieter now, “I need you.”

Her eyes widen slightly.

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“Not just for paperwork. Not just for efficiency.” I pause, the words scraping out. “You’re part of this place now. You’re part of...”

She swallows, visibly flustered, but she doesn’t look away. “That doesn’t change what’s coming.”

“No,” I agree. “But it changes how we face it.”

CHAPTER 13

JULIE

Torack thinks he's good at hiding.

He’s not.

He wears silence like armor and efficiency like a shield, but his tells are everywhere—tight shoulders, clipped words, the way his jaw flexes when he’s trying not to react. Today, that tension is worse than usual. It follows him like a shadow, coiled and heavy.

And I’m done watching it from the sidelines.

Facing the board’s sabotage together is one thing. Practically a battle; he's more than comfortable fighting it. But after the morning I just had, I have another fight to pick with him.

And I know he doesn't want to hear about it.

I follow him across the camp, boots crunching quietly over the gravel path. He doesn't know I'm tailing him. Or maybe he does and just doesn't want to deal with me. Either way, I'm not backing down.

The trail past the bunkhouses curves sharply into a dense copse of evergreens, where the underbrush is high and wild and the trees block most of the early afternoon sun. There's still moisture clinging to everything from the storm two nights ago—mossy rocks, tangled brambles, even the air, thick with the scent of pine and something deeper, older.

“Torack!” I call, breath catching.

He doesn't stop, but his spine stiffens.

I pick up speed, boots slipping a little in the soft earth. “Torack, wait!”

He halts at the end of the old footbridge, hands on his hips. Doesn't turn.

So I step right up beside him, heart pounding with adrenaline and a whole lot of other things I'm trying not to name.

“You're doing it again,” I say.

“Doing what?” he growls, not looking at me.

“Carrying the world on your back and calling it a Tuesday.”

His jaw ticks, a storm cloud hovering just behind his eyes. “Julie, I don't have time for this.”

“No,” I snap. “You don’t have time to hear this.”

Finally, he turns toward me, and I meet his stare without flinching.

“You’ve been ignoring her,” I say, quieter now.

His brow furrows. “Who?”

“Lillian.”

I don’t miss the flash of guilt in his eyes.

“She asked where you were three times during the mural session. She painted a sun and left it blank in the middle because she said she couldn’t remember how your eyes look when you’re happy.”

That lands hard.

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His arms fall to his sides, fists unclenching.

“She’s a kid, Torack. She doesn’t understand board meetings and zoning permits. All she knows is her dad keeps disappearing behind a clipboard and a mission she can’t see.”

“I’m trying,” he says, and the way his voice cracks a little? It breaks something open in me.

“I know you are. But trying doesn’t mean cutting yourself off from everyone who wants to help.”

He looks away, out toward the lake where the mist still rises in soft curls from the water’s surface. It’s quiet out here. No radios. No hammers. Just the low rustle of pine needles and the distant sound of something small scurrying through the brush.

“I’m not sure how to do both,” he admits.

I take a breath, step closer. “You don’t have to know. You just have to stop pretending that needing help is weakness.”

He blinks like I just smacked him.

“You keep putting yourself last,” I continue. “You’re terrified of failing everyone, so you fail yourself first. That’s not noble, Torack. That’s self-sabotage in a fancy package.”

He exhales slowly, hands balling into fists again. “If I let go—if I let anyone in—it all falls apart.”

“Or maybe,” I say softly, “it starts to fall into place.”

His eyes find mine again, and the look there? It knocks the wind out of me. Like I just stepped into the center of something sacred and volatile and real.

“I see you,” I whisper.

And I do. All of him. The man who built this camp from ruins. The father trying to raise a daughter in a world that’s still learning how to hold tenderness in strong hands. The soldier trying not to break under the weight of peace.

“I see how hard you fight. How much you sacrifice. But you don’t have to do it alone.”

The silence between us stretches, taut and pulsing. I swear I can feel my heartbeat in my fingertips.

Then he takes one step toward me.

“You want in?” he murmurs.

“Yes,” I breathe. “I want in.”

His hand rises, brushes along my jaw, thumb grazing the edge of my mouth like he’s checking to see if I’ll break.

I don’t.

I lean in.

And then he's kissing me.

It's not tentative. There's no hesitation. It's heat and hunger and months of built-up tension exploding into something I can't explain but never want to stop. His mouth is warm, his tusks brushing gently along my cheek as he deepens the kiss, hands gripping my waist like I'm the only thing anchoring him to earth.

My hands go to his chest, feeling the thrum of his heartbeat beneath the solid wall of muscle. Everything about him is big and steady and fierce, but the way he kisses me? It's tender. Like a question he doesn't know he's asking.

When we break apart, I'm breathless.

So is he.

We don't move right away. Just breathe each other in.

Then he lets his forehead rest against mine. "I don't want to lose this camp."

"You won't," I whisper. "We won't."

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His hands are still on my waist, and mine have drifted to the collar of his shirt, fingers resting against the heat of his neck.

“I meant what I said,” I add. “Let me help you.”

He tilts his head, kisses the corner of my mouth—softer this time, more promise than passion.

“You already are,” he says.

We stand there a moment longer, wrapped in the sounds of birdsong and breeze, the world holding its breath around us.

Then I grin. “I should go. We’ve got a rogue goblin trying to repaint the archery signs in glitter.”

He smirks. “Again?”

“Yep. This time with unicorn decals.”

He groans, but his eyes are softer now.

I step back, but I don’t go far. “Come find me later?”

His gaze darkens just a bit, voice low and rough. “I will.”

I start to turn, then pause, glance back.

“Maybe this time,” I say, teasing, “you can come with an actual plan.”

His reply is a growl and a look that leaves no room for confusion.

Let’s just say the rest of my day?

I’m not gonna get much done with that look echoing through me.

CHAPTER 14

TORACK

The screen door slams behind me with a twang of spring metal. Pine resin and citronella candles cling to the humid air of Julie’s cabin. She’s perched on the edge of her desk, fingers drumming a staccato rhythm against the permits for tomorrow’s bonfire. Her blouse wrinkles where she’s been twisting the fabric.

“Lillian’s bunking with the CITs tonight.” I lean against the doorframe, watching her jump at the sound of gravel in my voice.

Her pen clatters. “The—the junior counselors? But the orientation packet says trainees need three more certifications before?—”

“Relax, Miss Spreadsheet. They’re teaching her campfire songs, not performing open-heart surgery.”

A moth batters itself against the desk lamp as she stands, smoothing her skirt. “I should’ve been informed. The liability waivers alone require?—”

“You’re off-duty.” I step closer, catching the way her pulse jumps in that delicate human throat. Her scent cuts through the woodsmoke—vanilla hand cream and

ambition. “Unless you’d rather discuss insurance premiums.”

She huffs, but it’s undercut by the flush creeping up her neck. “This is why your last three assistants quit.”

“They quit because I don’t pay them to mother me.” My thumb brushes a stray curl behind her ear. She doesn’t pull away. “You’re different.”

“Different how?” Her voice cracks. “Because I let you drag me into the woods to build your daughter’s monument to corporate diversity?”

“Because you haven’t run.”

The permit papers flutter to the floor. Her hands find my shoulders, small and fierce as she rises onto toes. Our first kiss tastes like coffee and poor decisions. She nips my lower lip, all teeth no apology, and suddenly I’m backing her against the wall. Her laugh vibrates against my chest.

“This is?—”

“Complicated?”

“Unprofessional.”

I trace the shell of her ear, grinning when she shivers. “You’re temporary staff.”

“And you’re my boss.”

“And you’re stalling.”

Her retort dissolves into a gasp as I lift her onto the desk. Maps and safety protocols scatter. The lamp tilts, throwing shadows across her parted lips. Somewhere beyond the cabin, cicadas scream in the pines. Closer, Julie’s fingers tangle in my shirt, pulling me into the kind of chaos no liability waiver covers.

Her mouth moves like she’s still forming arguments, but I swallow every half-formed protest. The desk creaks under our combined weight, her legs locking around my hips as she yanks me closer. Her fingernails scrape the shaved sides of my scalp—human-sharp, not claw-sharp, but it still makes my breath hitch.

“Temporary staff,” she gasps when I bite the hinge of her jaw. Her hips arch off the wooden surface, sending a staplerclattering to the floorboards. “Means this... ah... expires in six weeks.”

I laugh against her collarbone, fumbling with the tiny pearl buttons on her blouse. “You keeping a timer?”

“Section seven, subsection B of my contract.” She tugs my shirt free from my waistband, palms skating over scar tissue from old clan markings. “No fraternization with... megalomaniacal... orc CEOs...”

“Megalomaniacal?” My tusk grazes her earlobe as I speak. She shudders, all that meticulous posture dissolving. “I built a goddamn equestrian center because Lily mentioned liking ponies once.”

Julie’s laugh turns into a moan as I find the zipper on her skirt. “You’re... distracting me from inventory spreadsheets.”

“Spreadsheets.” I nip her bottom lip, grinning when she fists my hair. “That why your pulse is racing? Or the fact I’m the first person who didn’t treat you like a coffee fetcher?”

She stills, breath hot against my cheek. Her eyes flick to the safety manual splayed open beside us, pages crumpling under her elbow. “This is a terrible idea.”

“Not arguing.” I slide my hand up her thigh, watching her pupils blow wide. “But you’re still here.”

Her retort dies when I kiss the hollow behind her ear. She tastes like ink and the spearmint gum I’ve seen her blow bubbles with when she thinks no one’s watching. The lamp tips further, casting amber light across the emergency evacuation plan now wedged under her shoulder blade.

Her pearl buttons pop off one by one, pinging against the steamer trunk in the corner. Julie’s breath hitches as my claws snag her lace-edged bra. “That’s—ah—Third Tailor’s blouse you’re mangling.”

“Bill me.” The fabric splits with a noise that makes her thighs clamp around my

waist.

She claws at my belt buckle, all business even now. “Section twelve of the?—”

I bite down on the protest, her back arching off the desk as the bra gives way. Her skin glows whiskey-gold in the lamplight, moles mapping constellations across her collarbones. She smells like panic and arousal, that vanilla cream smeared where my tusks graze her sternum.

Her skirt zipper jams halfway. Julie’s laugh comes out strangled. “Not so easy when you’re not tearing through fabric like a?—”

I press two fingers against her clit through damp cotton. Her head thuds back against an orientation packet. “Finish that sentence, Miss.”

Her hips stutter. “Bastard.”

The zipper yields. I hook my thumbs in her underwear, dragging them down her legs as she kicks off ballet flats. Her ankle knocks over a coffee mug. “Predictable human underthings.”

“Predictable orc impatience.” She reaches for my cock, all defiance until her fingers wrap around the girth. Her gasp tastes like victory. “Gods. OSHA should regulate this.”

I sink into her slowly, watching her lips part around a silent curse. Her legs lock behind my back, calf muscles trembling. The desk groans as I set rhythm—deliberate, punishing.

“Still worried about—nngh—liability waivers?” My words slur against her throat as I dive into her deeper.

Her nails carve half-moons into my shoulders. “You’re... crushing... the emergency protocols.”

“Are you asking me to stop?” I ask, driving into her harder and harder.

“You better not!” she snaps back, hips bucking up to meet me.

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“Ah, but this might tear the risk assessment report if we don’t move.”

I flip her onto the avalanche of paperwork. Pages stick to her sweat-slicked skin as she braces against the wall. Her choked moan when I thrust deeper sounds like surrender.

“Fuck your—ah!—risk assessment matrices,” she says, barely getting the words out between gasps of pleasure.

“Language, Miss Wren” I bite her shoulder, feeling the vibration of her laugh-turned-whimper. “This is a family camp, after all.”

Her hand flies back to grip my tusk, yanking my mouth to her ear. I indulge her unspoken demand, licking slowly at the shell of her ear, feeling the uncontrollable shiver she gives me in return.

“You’re paying for the dry cle...cleaning...oh!” Julie’s head wrenches backwards, air coming in shallow gasps as she gets closer and closer to sweet release. Her nails dig deeper, legs pull me tighter, lungs breathing rapider.

She’s close. So close. Right where I want her.

I shift so my pelvis rubs against her clit, and finally she’s completely undone.

The lamp topples as her climax hits, her own hand knocking it over like a were-cat. shadows lurching across the bulletin board’s safety diagrams. Her back bows, a map pin stabbing my palm as I pin her hips down. She chokes out something between my

name and a swear, throat working like she's still debating spreadsheets.

"To...Torack,mmm, don't...don't stop yet!" she practically begs. It's unbecoming of a professional, modern woman like her.

I can't get enough of it.

"Come again," I demand in return. "Come for me, Julie. I'm not going to rest until I feel you tighten around my cock again."

"Yes, yes, Tor- Ah!"

I can feel the exact moment her frenetic calculations short-circuit. Her muscles clench, all that meticulous control unraveling as she comes again with a ragged cry that scares the moths off the windowsill.

It's enough to make me unravel. And then finally, I do just that.

The moment I spill into her, Julie's fingers tighten in my hair hard enough to sting. Her breath scalds my neck—quick, shallow gusts that echo too loud in the ransacked office. The scent of sex and split pine planks coats my tongue. Her hips jerk once, twice, still chasing the fading tremor between us.

We don't move. Don't speak. Her cheek sticks to my clavicle where sweat glues us together.

And as the endorphins wear away, realization of what I've just done replaces them.

I just fucked my assistant.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 15

JULIE

The early morning fog curls low along the tree line, still clinging to the edges of camp like it doesn't want to let go of the storm. Dew glistens on the grass, coating everything in a shimmery wet sheen. Even the wildflowers look a little drunk on the moisture—bowing under it like they partied too hard last night and are now questioning their life choices.

Kind of like me.

My boots squish faintly through the soft earth as I move along the outer path toward the admin tent. The clipboard in my hands is already full—notes, updates, a sharpie list that's half logistics and half aggressively written affirmations like **YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL, JULIE. DO NOT GET DISTRACTED BY ORC MUSCLES. YOU'RE NOT GONNA DIE FROM ONE GOOD NIGHT OF SEX, STAY COOL.**

Spoiler alert: It's not helping.

Because here I am. Heart jittery. Lungs tight. Still hearing the way Torack whispered you already are last night. Still feeling the heat of his hands at my waist, his lips on my neck. Still seeing the way he looked at me like I wasn't just helping hold his world together—I was his world.

And I've been pretending all morning like none of that happened.

Because I'm responsible.

I am the glue. The fixer. The overachiever. The girl who once laminated a schedule

for her own break-up just to “streamline the grieving process.”

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But now?

Now I'm the girl who fucked her boss and is trying to pretend her heart isn't rewiring itself around the idea of a grumpy orc with kindness behind his scowl and a daughter who looks at me like I invented magic.

Speaking of magic...

"Julie!"

The voice cuts through my spiral like a ray of sunshine aimed squarely at my ribs.

I turn just in time to catch a blur of purple hoodie and messy braids barreling toward me down the gravel path from the art tent.

It's Lillian, carrying something in both hands and wearing a look of triumph that makes my knees weak before she even opens her mouth.

"I made this for you!" she shouts, skidding to a halt like a tiny, freckled comet.

I blink, hands instinctively rising to accept her offering—which turns out to be a wild bouquet of... something. It's an explosion of color and shape: daisies, thistles, bright blue campanulas, what I think is a sprig of mint, and... is that a stick of chewing gum?

She's beaming.

"It's a Lillian Special, for being so awesome," she says. "And because Groth said you

made my dad 'less murderly' yesterday."

I choke. "Did he, now?"

"Mmhmm," she nods. "He said Daddy smiled and didn't growl once during morning rounds. And he didn't even yell when the goblin crew tried to paint a raccoon on the side of the mess hall."

I cough into my fist. "High praise."

Lillian tilts her head. "Are you okay? You look all red in the face."

"I'm fine," I lie. "Just, um, pollen."

She shrugs and shoves the bouquet into my arms. "You're my favorite grown-up, Jools."

That nickname again.

"Not everyone gets the honor of a Lillian Special."

"Oh?" I ask. "And may I ask what makes it special?" Other than it being offered from the sweetest kid I've ever met.

Shw beams proudly. "It's special because it's made of anything I think looks cool!"

"Well, that explains the caterpillar."

I smile, but my heart is doing weird, fluttery things that make breathing kind of a chore. "Thanks, Lil. This is... wild and dangerous and probably contains three allergens, but it's perfect."

She beams. “I knew you’d like it.”

She grabs my hand with her tiny one and tugs me off the trail, dragging me toward the communal garden without warning.

“Wait—where are we going?”

“I have to show you my fairy trap!”

I laugh. “You built a trap?”

“Uh-huh. Don’t worry. It’s humane. Just sparkly. I made it with string cheese and glitter glue.”

I try to stay present. I really do. But I can feel the tension building behind my eyes. The longer I walk with her, the more my carefully constructed denial house of cards wobbles.

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Because the truth is—I'm not just fond of her.

I adore her.

And worse?

I'm starting to want things I have no right wanting.

Like falling asleep next to the sound of Torack's voice instead of emails. Like helping Lillian with science homework. Like building a life here that isn't just contracts and logistics and laminated policies but family dinners and fairy traps and someone who touches me like I'm something precious.

The garden is a riot of green and gold and color, overgrown in the way only magical spaces can be—like nature got bored of symmetry and just decided to vibe. Lillian leads me to a patch of overturned stepping stones, each one ringed in glitter and hollowed out like bait stations.

“This one's the deluxe trap,” she explains proudly. “It's got banana chips and emotional validation.”

I blink. “What?”

“I left a note that says ‘you are enough.’ Fairies like that. That's what Daddy says when I get mad about coloring outside the lines.”

I sit down hard on the nearest rock.

It's damp. I don't care.

Because now I'm crying.

Not sobbing. Not noisy. Just tears leaking without permission while Lillian chatters about fairy etiquette and glowworm lighting strategies.

Because her dad—this battle-scarred, stoic orc—tells her she is enough.

Because she's quoting it to me.

Because I kissed him last night, and somehow I think I'm already halfway in love with this place, this child, this impossible man, and I haven't even let myself say it out loud.

Lillian looks up, frowning.

"Are you leaking?"

I laugh through the tears. "Yeah, I guess I am."

She climbs into my lap without asking, settles there like she's always belonged, and pulls my arms around her.

"It's okay," she whispers. "I leak sometimes, too. It's not a bad thing."

I nod, arms tightening around her. "No, sweetheart. It's not."

And just like that, all my denial cracks.

I'm not just pretending nothing happened with Torack.

I'm pretending like I haven't already started building something here.

Something messy. Something real.

And now?

I think I want all of it.

CHAPTER 16

TORACK

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Mornings hit different out here.

Not like in the city, where dawn chokes through diesel fumes and half-baked ambition. Out here, it's clean. Raw. Honest.

Birdsong cuts sharp through the trees like a thousand conversations happening all at once, most of them loud and useless—just like the board meetings. The mist burns off slow across the lake, curling off the water like a shy lover, reluctant to leave.

This is my time.

Before the chaos. Before the fires I didn't start need putting out by hands that are already too full.

I take my first lap around camp with coffee in one hand and a checklist in the other. Black. No sugar. Same mug every day. It says "Don't Make Me Use My Orc Voice." Julie added it to the break room shelf two weeks ago, and nobody's had the guts to use it but me.

Smart.

Groth passes me on the trail, nodding. "Boss."

"Groth."

"Scare off the troll scouts?" he asks. I chuckle.

“They learned to knock.”

He snorts.

“I’ll have your punch list by lunch.”

“Make it ten. We’re tightening rotations.”

“Something wrong?”

“Not yet.”

He frowns, then jogs off toward the new staging platform. The goblin crew is already arguing about whose turn it is to enchant the rivets.

I keep walking, boots crunching over pine needles, gravel, and the occasional broken crayon. Kids drop things. Staff forgets. Nature reclaims.

It’s a cycle.

And every day, I try to keep it balanced.

Lillian’s voice floats through the treetops as I round the corner near the dining tent—bright, chattering, entirely too early for anyone not hopped up on sugar cereal.

She’s with Julie.

Of course.

They’re knee-deep in glitter and some kind of monstrous arts-and-crafts explosion. A half-finished structure that looks like a shrine to chaos and shiny trash. Lillian’s got a

crown of moss and beads on her head. Julie's got paint on her neck. Neither of them looks remotely sorry. And somehow... it works.

They work.

I start to turn toward the rigging zone, but my steps slow. Something in my gut twists. A warning I don't have words for yet.

Something's off today.

Too still.

Too bright.

Like the forest is holding its breath.

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Like the wind knows something I don't.

I finish my coffee, crush the cup, and slide it into the recycle bin by the gate before heading toward the east tower.

A bead of sweat rolls down my spine as I cross the clearing. The sun's not high yet, but the heat's already building. Magic always runs hot when it's been disturbed.

I don't run, but I do move faster. Something's wrong, and I need to find out what before something irreversible happens.

Boots strike the ramp. I take the stairs two at a time. At the top, everything looks normal—ropes coiled, safety spells humming faintly.

I crouch beside one of the main support brackets.

And that's when I see it: a shimmer.

Not strong. Not glowing.

Wrong.

My heart slows as I test the bolt. It comes loose too easily. Too fast. Too clean.

And that's when the slow burn in my chest catches fire. "Groth!" I shout down. "Shut it down. All lines. Now!"

His head pops up a moment later. “What? Why?”

I hold up the bolt. “Sabotage. Magical.”

His face darkens, then disappears as he barks orders. Goblins scatter. Ropes are yanked down. Harnesses dumped. A few choice curse words float up the tower.

I slide the bolt into my pocket and take the stairs down two at a time. My jaw is tight, tusks grinding. I can feel blood pumping through my temples as the worst possible scenarios keep running in my mind.

This wasn’t an accident, this was a message.

And I know damn well who sent it.

Renault.

He’s been pushing since he slithered his way onto the board. Wanted to “optimize programming,” which is rich coming from someone who once suggested we rebrand the goblin obstacle course as “low-stakes spiritual therapy.”

I storm across camp, past the main trail, through the trees. I need answers. Fast.

I round the bend and there she is: Julie. Still in the clover patch with Lillian, bent over what I now realize is either a fairy trap or an avant-garde compost heap.

They’re laughing.

It guts me.

Because this is what’s at stake. Right here. Joy. Safety. A future that smells like

sunscreen and pine sap instead of sterile boardrooms and risk reports.

“Wren,” I call.

She looks up. Her whole face changes.

“Something’s wrong,” she says immediately.

“Sabotage,” I grunt. “Zipline gear. Magic-weakening charm.”

Her eyes go sharp. “How bad?”

“Would’ve snapped under full weight. Could’ve killed a kid.”

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Lillian's smile vanishes. A smile I would kill to protect.

I crouch beside her. "You're okay, baby. But I need your help. Groth needs backup at the equipment shed. Think you can give orders without yelling?"

She nods seriously. "I'll try really hard." Then she bolts off before I can say another word. Julie's already standing, eyes narrowed. "You're sure?"

I nod. "It was cast to fracture but look like standard wear. Sloppy spellwork, but intentional."

"Renault."

"Who else? He's pushing for a breakdown. A reason to suspend me. Maybe get emergency powers through the board."

Julie's pacing now, hands clenched. "He's got interns on-site. One of them's his nephew. I've seen him loitering around gear areas with no assignment."

"You think the kid's doing it?"

"No. He's nowhere near practiced enough to cast that kind of magic. But I think he's covering for it. Or being used."

I watch her think. It's like watching a fire map itself.

"We need him to talk," I say.

“I’ll get him,” she says. “If I push too hard, he’ll fold.”

“I don’t like you in the line of fire.”

She stops. “You trust me, don’t you?”

I do. That’s the problem. “You’ve got an hour,” I mutter. “I’ll prep for fallout.”

She brushes her fingers against my hand. Just once. Barely a whisper. “We’ll stop him,” she says. “We’ll save this place.” For the first time all morning, I believe her.

CHAPTER 17

JULIE

My heels sink into the soil. I told myself not to wear the suede ones. But “don’t wear suede” somehow lost to “look competent and unbothered in front of magical investors,” and now I’m standing next to a fire pit surrounded by chairs carved from reclaimed oak while my shoes soak up mud like it’s tea time.

Perfect.

Across from me, Renault is holding court with his usual smug tilt, dressed like a budget Bond villain—sleeves rolled, enchanted cufflinks, and a smile that says he thinks he already won.

He doesn’t see the trap yet.

I breathe in through my nose. Count four seconds. Exhale through pursed lips.

This campfire preview is supposed to be a soft launch. Just a low-key meet and greet

for the board's top funders and their family reps.

"No pressure," they said. Sure. If you ignore the fact that we're thirty-six hours out from a near-fatal equipment failure and one slippery elf in a power tie is trying to burn this place down from the inside.

I smooth down my blouse and give the clipboard a firm pat. Focus, Julie. Across the fire pit, Lillian sits in her designated "Fairy Queen" chair, blissfully unaware that she's become my emotional support child. She's wearing a new flower crown and humming to herself.

The fire crackles between us, a slow dance of orange and blue. The chairs start to fill. One by one, they take their seats—shifting, settling, murmuring.

The rustle of pressed robes, fine leathers, and glimmering personal wards woven into shawls. This is the old-money magical crowd. The kind who fund university libraries just to rename them after themselves.

"Miss Wren." A board member named Thistle gives me a courteous nod.

"Glad you could join us, Mrs. Thistle," I say, voice even. "The moonfire cider is just to the left—non-alcoholic until five p.m."

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“I assumed as much,” she says coolly. I smile and mark her as “cordial but judgey.”

Then Renault glides in and my spine tenses. His nephew follows him. I spot the kid lingering near the edge of the chairs, uncertain, pale, a little sweaty. His tie is slightly askew. He avoids my eyes.

Interesting.

The program begins with a welcome song from the campers, followed by a skit involving some extremely enthusiastic sock puppets. I manage a few nods, a couple polite laughs, but mostly I watch Renault.

He doesn’t fidget. He doesn’t react. But I can see the tick at the edge of his jaw whenever Lillian shouts something unscripted or when the crowd claps for Groth’s security presentation.

He wanted chaos. But we gave them camp.

And then it’s my turn.

I step forward, clipboard tucked behind my back like a shield. I look up at the firelight flickering across expectant faces. I meet Torack’s gaze across the ring; he’s standing just behind the last row of chairs, arms folded, unreadable. But his eyes are locked on mine. And somehow, that’s enough.

“Good evening,” I start, voice firm. “My name is Julie Wren. I came to this camp as an assistant to oversee some transition paperwork. I expected spreadsheets and spell

audits.” A pause. “I didn’t expect to fall in love with the people here.”

A few brows lift. A few murmurs. I keep going.

“This place isn’t just cabins and cauldrons. It’s a sanctuary. For kids who’ve never been believed. For staff who were told they were too strange to succeed. For families who need space to breathe magic without fear.”

There’s a ripple of nods. Even Thistle straightens in her seat.

“And yes, we’ve had setbacks,” I say, gaze flicking to Renault’s nephew. I look at him knowingly, bearing into his soul. Searching for a conscience I know is in there. “But every challenge has made this place stronger. Because leadership doesn’t run from trouble. It owns it.”

That one lands. Renault shifts. And right on cue, his nephew stands.

“Actually,” the kid says, voice shaking, “I have something to say.” Every head turns. He’s pale. Trembling. But standing tall. “There’s been tampering,” he says. “With the equipment. The zipline bolts. I—I didn’t know what I was helping with at first. My uncle said it was just a test. A way to monitor resilience.”

The crowd murmurs louder. “But it wasn’t. He asked me to enchant fasteners to fail under stress.” His voice cracks. “I thought if I didn’t do it, he’d say I was soft. That I didn’t deserve the internship.”

Renault stands too. Calm. Too calm. “That’s quite an accusation,” he says silkily. “And an unfortunatemisunderstanding of workplace responsibilities. Nepotism is a tricky line, after all.”

I step forward before anyone else can. “This is a magical confession,” I say. “You’re

under ambient binding.”

Renault’s smile twitches.

“Miss Wren?—”

“You knew,” I say. “You orchestrated it. Sabotaged equipment with the intent to frame this camp as unsafe.”

“Prove it,” he says coolly.

Groth appears beside him and silently hands me a folder. Inside is a copied rune map. The enchantment trace from the bolt. The spell matrix signature. I hold it up.

“You signed your work.”

Gasps. Outrage. Torack starts moving, slow and steady like a storm you see coming from miles away. Renault tries to slip out, but Groth blocks him.

“We’ll be submitting this to magical authorities,” I say. “Effective immediately, Renault is to be suspended from all board activity pending investigation.”

The crowd nods. I hear Lillian clap like she’s watching a superhero movie.

And across the fire, Torack’s eyes are still locked on me. There’s something in them I’ve never seen before.

Pride. And something else. Something warmer. Hungrier.

Later, when the crowd has dispersed and the stars are blinking across the treetops, I find myself standing alone near the fire pit. The chairs are half-empty. The cider’s

gone warm. He finds me there.

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“You handled that,” he says. I shrug.

“Overachiever reflex.” He steps closer. Close enough I can see the firelight in his tusks. “I’m not surprised.”

“I was scared out of my mind.”

“I’m still not surprised.”

I look at him. At the guarded heat behind his eyes. At the gentleness he tries to bury with every gruff word and schedule revision.

“You looked proud,” I say softly.

“I was.”

“And... was that all?”

His jaw clenches. “No.” He reaches up, tucks a curl behind my ear. Then lets his hand linger there, just long enough for me to feel every ounce of tension he’s still holding back.

“I’ve never needed anyone like I need you,” he says quietly. “That terrifies me.”

I step in, press a hand against his chest. “You don’t have to be afraid.” And for once, he doesn’t pull away.

CHAPTER 18

TORACK

The shouting starts before breakfast.

I hear it on my walk from the bunkhouse to the admin tent—low, angry voices at first, then louder, sharper, clustered at the front gate like wasps around sugar water.

Groth is already there when I arrive. His bulk blocks the main gate like a wall of granite, arms folded, expression flat.

“Humans,” he mutters. “Local ones.”

I grunt, step up beside him. Beyond the gate, a crowd’s gathered. Fifteen, maybe twenty. Older folks mostly, with picket signs in one hand and distrust in the other. Some of the signs are neat. Most are hand-scrawled.

KEEP MAGIC OUT

As if their technology is any safer.

NO MONSTERS NEAR OUR CHILDREN

As if we ‘monsters’ don’t have children of our own.

WE REMEMBER DARKMOOR

That last one hits.

Darkmoor was two towns over. Twenty years back. Human child wandered into a

hexed forest during a game. Didn't come back.

We're not that forest.

But to these people? We're close enough.

I unlock the front gate and step through.

The tension is immediate. Like a rubber band pulled too tight across all their shoulders. Half of them look surprised to see me walk out. The other half look ready to yell louder.

I don't raise my voice.

Don't need to.

"State your concern," I say roughly. I only have so much empathy on a good day, and these people have made this day turn sour.

A woman with cropped gray hair steps forward, eyes blazing. "We heard what happened. About the equipment. The sabotage. That someone could've died."

"That was internal," I say. "Handled. The threat's been removed."

"You expect us to believe that?" a man growls.

"You've got orcs and goblins teaching children! You think a few press statements cover that?"

"None of our campers were ever in danger," I say.

"That's what that wizard group said too," another woman snaps. "And now there's a memorial stone outside the woods."

I feel the rage rise, tight and sharp at the back of my throat. My hands curl, but I don't clench them. Not yet.

"We're not them."

"But you're still here. And that's the problem."

They want me gone.

Want the camp gone.

And I get it. Humans don't trust what they don't understand. We build safe places out here because we're not allowed in theirs.

But they're not going to win this.

Not today.

Julie shows up like a lightning strike; clipboard, blazer, fire in her eyes. Her steps crunch gravel as she brushes past Groth and plants herself beside me like she's always belonged there.

She takes a breath. Then another.

"Hi," she says, bright but firm. "Julie Wren. Head of operations."

No one speaks.

"I understand your concerns," she continues. "And I won't insult your intelligence by pretending nothing happened. There was sabotage. It was caught. The culprit has been removed, and safeguards are stronger now than ever."

They bristle. But they're listening.

She presses on. "This camp serves magical youth from all over the country. And yes, many of them are nonhuman. But that doesn't make them dangerous. That makes them underrepresented."

“Easy for you to say,” someone spits. “You’re human.”

Julie doesn’t flinch. “Yes. I am. Which is why I can tell you, as a human, that this camp doesn’t threaten your town. It supports it.”

“How?” someone scoffs. “Your campers don’t shop here. You’ve got your own supply lines. You’ve never invited anyone to see what goes on behind those trees.”

Her eyes flick to me.

Then back to them.

“Because that’s going to change,” she says.

I stiffen.

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She smiles tightly. “We’ll open the grounds once a month for local businesses to set up booths. Our staff will shop. Our campers’ families will be encouraged to visit and explore. We’ll offer free enchanted goods to local schools—nonvolatile, of course. Custom garden runes.

Charm-engraved pencils. Wards for the firehouse.”

She’s making promises. And she hasn’t cleared any of this with me.

But damn if she doesn’t have them leaning forward.

“You can boycott us,” she says. “Or you can work with us. Let your economy benefit. Let your kids learn. Let this place prove it’s not a threat.”

Someone whispers to someone else.

Another lowers their sign.

I stare at her.

This woman who walked into my world full of laminated forms and overachiever guilt and has somehow become the one who holds us all together.

The townies start murmuring, not all agreement, but less pure rage.

Then the first voice says, “We’ll think about it.”

And they start to leave.

Not quickly, but they leave.

Groth exhales slow. “That was... something.”

I look at her.

I don’t smile.

But I nod once. “Come with me.”

We walk back to the admin tent in silence. The camp is quiet now, but a wind stirs in the trees like it’s proud of us.

Inside, I close the door. Turn.

“You went off-script.”

She doesn’t look guilty. “I had to.”

“You leveraged services we haven’t even confirmed we can provide.”

“But we will.”

“You’re assuming?—”

“I’m assuming we’d rather make allies than enemies,” she snaps. “They were ready to burn us down, Torack. I gave them a rope to hold onto.”

I step close.

Close enough she has to tilt her chin up.

“You risked a lot.”

“So did you,” she says, quieter now. “When you hired me.”

My throat tightens.

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I study her face, too sharp for comfort and too kind for safety.

I let myself say it.

“I’m proud of you.”

Her breath catches. “You’re not mad?”

“I’m pissed.”

She stiffens.

“But not at you.”

And for one wild second, I think I might kiss her.

But I don’t.

Because there’s still work to do. And she just reminded me that she’s as much a leader here as I am.

CHAPTER 19

JULIE

The first rule of public relations: nothing melts adult skepticism like giggling children with marshmallow-sticky faces and glitter on their shoes.

I didn't invent the rule, but I've mastered it. And today? Today's the test.

I'm standing near the crafts pavilion with a clipboard in one hand and a damp towel in the other, watching a goblin child—Snitch, who is extremely allergic to rules—happily paint runes on a rock while two human kids from town crouch beside him like he's showing them how to unlock treasure.

"Yours glows!" one of them exclaims.

"Yours sizzles," Snitch says smugly. "That's the good kind."

I mark it down. Rune painting: successful. No sparks. No property damage. Minor transfiguration risk: acceptable.

I wipe a smear of enchanted paint off the picnic table and glance across the lawn. It's a full outreach day, and we've got every staff member on rotation.

The meadow between cabins has been transformed into a chaotic, colorful mix of game stations, treat tables, spell-safe zones, and folding chairs that absolutely should've been replaced last year. A local vendor is selling pickled troll cucumbers. Another is hawking mood charms shaped like puppies.

But what really matters and what makes my heart clench, is the way the kids look at each other. Not like strangers. Not like enemies. Just like... kids.

"I gave him my wand bracelet," a young witch whispers to her mom, who stares like her daughter just handed over a loaded gun.

"He earned it," the girl adds.

I don't interfere. Some things you let unfold on their own.

Behind me, Groth is very carefully pretending not to hand out caramel apples. His disguise consists of a sun hat that looks like it belonged to a 1950s tourist and a pair of sunglasses perched on the bridge of his nose like they're protecting national secrets.

"Don't say anything," he grunts as he hands a goblin toddler an apple the size of her head.

"I wasn't gonna," I murmur. He grumbles but doesn't move.

I check my watch.

Torack's late.

Not surprising. He hates spectacle. Hates optics. Hates anything that smells like performance over purpose.

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But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping he'd show.

I glance toward the archway gate and there he is.

Oh.

Okay.

So maybe my stomach flips. A little.

He's not dressed like he's trying to impress anyone, which somehow makes him look more commanding—black henley rolled to the elbows, cargo pants, utility belt strapped with spell fuses.

He walks like he owns the dirt under his boots and has no intention of making small talk about cupcake displays.

But he's watching the kids. I know that look. Not assessing. Appreciating.

I wave him over. He raises a brow but heads my way.

“Did you approve the pixie petting zone?” he asks, deadpan.

“Yes,” I say. “They're on a leash system.”

“I didn't know pixies could be leashed.”

“They can’t. It’s symbolic.”

He eyes the giggling chaos near the hedgerow. “One of them’s juggling frogs.”

“They signed a consent form,” I say brightly. He huffs something that might be a laugh. I hesitate.

Then, quietly, “They’re getting along. The kids, I mean.”

He nods once. “I see that.”

“And the parents aren’t throwing things,” I add.

He glances around. “Yet.”

There’s silence for a second too long, which is always dangerous for me because it makes me say the things I usually filter out.

“I know you didn’t love the outreach idea,” I say.

“I didn’t,” he agrees.

“But it’s working.”

He doesn’t respond immediately. And then: “It is.” He looks down at me. “You were right.”

I blink. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I said you were right.”

I put a hand to my heart. “Do I get a trophy? A badge?”

“Don’t push it.” But his mouth twitches, and that’s enough.

A group of kids stampedes past us toward the snack tent, and one of them stops in front of Torack. It’s Lillian.

“Daddy,” she says, breathless. “Come see the dragon egg hatching! Julie said it’s not real fire, but I saw sparks and everything!”

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He lowers into a crouch. “Are you keeping them all in line?”

“Obviously,” she says, arms crossed. “But they need backup.”

“Lead the way.”

She grabs his hand, tugging. He goes with her, and something in my chest loosens—like I’ve been clenching a fist I didn’t know was there.

I return to the event perimeter, checking in with volunteers, answering questions, calming one frantic dad who thought rune paint might permanently stain his toddler’s skin (it doesn’t, unless you activate it).

I’m in my element. Halfway between panic and purpose.

An hour later, as things start to wind down, I find myself at the lemonade stand, sipping a cup that tastes like victory and maybe a hint of lavender.

The sky’s gone golden, and the shadows stretch long.

The town delegation is still lingering, chatting with parents, swapping recipes, holding enchanted bracelets like they’re considering belief once again. And across the lawn, Torack is talking with one of the local dads.

Not glaring. Not grunting. Talking.

The dad claps him on the back, and Torack doesn’t flinch.

I don't think he knows I'm watching. But I don't look away. Because this was the whole point. Not just surviving scandal or neutralizing Renault or winning over funders.

This is healing.

I believe it's possible.

I tell myself to focus.

There's still tear-down to coordinate. Thank-you bags to pass out. Someone needs to collect the enchanted ducklings from the sensory garden before they unionize.

But my eyes keep drifting toward him.

Torack stands near the now-empty snack tent, talking to the dad who brought three kids and left with two hand-crafted shields and a questionable wand permit. They shake hands. The dad smiles. And Torack—gods help me—almost smiles back.

I take a breath and cross the lawn. My heart beats faster with each step.

Not because I'm nervous.

Because I want to be seen. And he sees me.

The second I'm in his periphery, his shoulders shift like he's already read the thought behind my approach.

"That looked civil," I say.

"It was."

“Did you lose a bet?” His tusk tips with a half-smirk.

“He complimented the obstacle course. Asked about sending his son next season.”

I blink. “Seriously?”

“His exact words were ‘I didn’t expect my kid to get along with a troll, but here we are.’”

I laugh. “Progress.”

“Small miracle,” he mutters, but he’s watching me now. Really watching. It does things to me.

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Standing this close to him in the amber dusk, the scent of magic still lingering in the air like honeysuckle and heat. His eyes dark and unreadable. His presence magnetic in that serious, self-contained way he has. The kind that says I will carry this whole world if I must.

And I want to say something witty, something professional, but what comes out is, “You look good today.”

His brow lifts. “That so?”

“Don’t get smug,” I mutter.

“I wasn’t aware I could look anything other than terrifying.”

“You usually aim for terrifying.”

“And you usually aim for perfect.”

That catches me. I look away, fingers tightening on my clipboard. “I just want things to go well.”

He’s quiet a moment. Then, softer than I expect, “They are.”

When I glance up, his gaze is gentler. The kind of look that brushes against skin and bone and makes you forget every list you've ever written.

My heart stutters. I swallow. “Torack?—”

“Julie.”

He steps closer. Barely an inch. But it changes the air.

“I keep trying to stay professional,” he says, voice low. “But every time I look at you...”

My breath catches.

“You’re not just holding this place together. You’re changing it. How do I stand in front of that and not reach for it?”

I don’t mean to step closer. But I do. We’re toe to toe now. The world narrows to pine and fading sunlight and his hand, lifting, pausing at my jaw.

“I’ve been scared to want you,” I whisper.

“I’m not scared,” he says. “Not anymore.”

He leans in and we both jump when Lillian runs up with a giant frog in her arms.

“Look what I caught! It burps spells!” Torack steps back instantly, clearing his throat.

“Time to round up enchanted fauna.”

I can’t help it, I laugh. And blush. And almost trip on my own clipboard backing away. But when I turn, he’s still watching. And I know. We’re not avoiding it anymore.

I know I’ll see him tonight.

CHAPTER 20

JULIE

I hold my least wrinkled blouse against my chest—pale blue, three-quarter sleeves, buttons straining slightly because I bought it two stress-snacks ago. “Sexy,” I mutter. “If sexy means ‘capable of filing TPS reports underwater.’”

I swap my practical flats for knee-high hiking boots. Lace them slow, imagining Torack’s eyes following the bow I tie just below my calf. Then comes the belt—thick leather, meant for securing climbing gear. I loop it low on my hips, tucking the hem of my blouse to expose a sliver of stomach when I reach for things.

“Subtlety’s dead,” I tell my reflection. “Long live desperation.”

A knock rattles the plywood door hard enough to make my clipboard slide off the cot. I catch it mid-air, the metal clip snapping against my thumb.

"Coming!"

Torack's shadow stretches across the warped floorboards when I open the door. His tie's already loosened, the top button of his dress shirt straining against that thick green neck. His gaze drags down my blouse like he's appraising a construction bid.

"New field uniform?" He steps inside without waiting for an invite, the cabin shrinking around his broad shoulders. His thumb brushes the leather belt at my hip. "Practical."

I shift sideways, the scent of his cedar cologne making my pulse skip. "Regulation camp attire. Page twelve of the employee handbook."

"Bullshit." His laugh rumbles deep, tusks glinting in the lamplight. He plucks the clipboard from my hands and tosses it onto the cot. "You wore the boots from the supply closet just to watch me notice."

My ponytail whips my cheek when I turn toward the desk. "The mud outside's ankle-deep. Unlike some people, I don't have a helicopter to?—"

His hand fists in my hair, gentle but unyielding as he tilts my head back. My scalp tingles where his calluses catch stray strands. "You want me to say it?" Warm breath ghosts my ear. "That you look like a corporate wet dream wrapped in camping gear catalogs?"

I brace against his chest, fingertips sinking into crisp cotton. "I want you to say the swing set delivery got pushed to Thursday."

"Later." His other arm bands around my waist, hauling me flush against him. The buttons of his shirt imprint my palms as he crashes his mouth to mine—no tentative exploration, just claiming pressure and the faintest scrape of tusk against my lower lip. I bite back a whimper, nails digging into his shoulders as he walks me backward toward the wall.

His knee slots between my thighs, hiking up my skirt as he deepens the kiss. I arch into him, the leather belt digging crescents into my hips when he grinds me against the log wall.

His grip tightens in my hair as I sink to my knees, the cabin's braided rug biting into my shins. I fumble with his belt buckle, the brass cold against my knuckles.

"Regulation camp attire, huh?" His thumb traces my ear, voice graveled. The click of his belt coming undone sounds louder than the generator humming outside.

I glance up through my lashes, the lamplight catching the scar that bisects his left tusk. "Page fourteen. Team-building exercises."

His snort becomes a sharp inhale when I palm him through his briefs. The heat of him seeps through cotton, familiar and foreign all at once. I drag my teeth over the waistband, tasting salt and expensive detergent.

"Christ, Julie?—"

My breath ghosts across his stomach as I hook my thumbs in elastic. His hand spasms in my ponytail, yanking my head back just enough to force eye contact.

Hazel irises swallow their pupils. "You're wearing too many clothes."

I let my skirt hike higher as I shift forward, the leather belt's buckle scraping the

floorboards. “Complaints go through HR. I’ll pencil you in Tuesday.”

His growl vibrates against my palm when I finally free him. I take my time, tongue flat against the underside of his cock until his hips jerk. The hand in my hair goes rigid, controlling the pace as I sink deeper.

“Fuck.” A bead of sweat rolls down his neck, disappearing under rumpled collar. “Should’ve...hired you...sooner.”

I pull off with a wet gasp, thumb circling the tip. “Still time to...negotiate my contract.”

His laughter cuts off into a groan when I swallow him again, fingers scrabbling at the log wall behind him. The ponytail tug turns punishing, but I lean into it—let him feel the chokehold of my throat muscles, the way my nails dig crescent moons into his thighs.

Cedar and musk flood my senses as he mutters something in Orcish, the guttural syllables making my spine arch. I hum in response, the vibration wringing a shattered curse from his lips. His free hand fists in the curtains, fabric ripping as I pick up speed?—

His grip yanks me upright so fast my knees leave rug burns on the floorboards. “Hey?—”

The protest dies as he flips me like I weigh less than his Montblanc pen. The cot screeches sideways, my clipboard clattering against the wall. My palms sink into the scratchy wool blanket as his knee spreads my legs wider.

“Budget didn’t cover memory foam mattresses, huh?” I twist to glare over my shoulder, but he fists my ponytail again, pressing my cheek to the blanket.

His zipper rasps open behind me. "You want upgrades?" Callused hands hike my skirt past my hips, the leather belt's buckle biting my lower back. "Submit a requisition form."

I snort into the wool. "Three copies? Or just the?—"

He slams his cock into my pussy without warning, the cot legs gouging fresh scars in the pine floor. My fingers claw the blanket as he sets a brutal pace, each thrust jolting the clipboard off the mattress. Pens scatter like shrapnel.

No slow buildup, no time for more foreplay.

Gid.

I don't need it.

Nor do I want it.

"Gods you're so wet," he growls against the back of my neck. "So wet for me, Julie. So good for me."

"Fuck, yes." I choke on a gasp as he leans forward, tusks grazing my ear. "Fuck me, Torack, please. Yes!"

"Language, Miss Wren. How many times must I remind you?" His breath scalds my neck, voice all boardroom calm except for the hitch when I clench around him. "This is a family establishment, not a truck stop diner."

I arch backward, forcing him deeper.

"You fucking love it."

His groan vibrates against my spine, proving me right. One hand snakes under me, fingers finding my clit.

I lose myself completely in the sparks of pleasure his fingertips ignite. My hips bucks against his hand, helpless between it and his cock ravaging me from behind.

I'm in heaven

I let out more strained yelps of pleasure, moaning and groaning as he works his magic below my hips.

“So demanding, Julie. You’re never so vocal during board meetings.”

“I –ah!-- can actually think my words –oh!-- through during board meetings!” I protest. Torack chuckles in response.

“I never said that was a bad thing.”

The cot protests as he picks up speed, my blouse riding up to trap my arms. I bite the blanket to muffle a cry when his thumb circles just right between my folds, the wool scratching my tongue. His other hand splays across my stomach, holding me flush against him as he grinds deeper.

His growl shakes the cot springs. The hand at my stomach shifts to the crook of my hip, pressing down until the mattress groans. My vision blurs at the edges, the generator's hum outside syncing with the slap of skin on skin.

I reach back blindly, nails raking his thigh. "I'm gonna?—!"

“I know,” he says roughly. His fingers dig into me deeper, his cock pushing in harder.

“Come for me, Julie. Now.”

I can’t help but obey.

My back arches like a drawn bowstring, every muscle seizing as the orgasm detonates.

Torack’s growl vibrates through my spine. His grip on my hip leaves bruises as he slams home three final times, tusks grazing my shoulder when he stills. Heat floods

me, his breath coming in ragged bursts against my neck.

We collapse sideways in a tangle of limbs and half-undone clothes. My blouse hangs off one shoulder, buttons sacrificed somewhere near the torn curtain. Torack's dress shirt clings to his chest, translucent with sweat.

My fingers trail through the hair dusting his chest, nails catching on the gold chain around his neck.

"Do you...have to run again?" I ask, remembering the cold night I spent alone the last time we did this.

He captures my wrist, bringing my palm to his mouth. The scrape of tusk against skin makes me shiver. His thumb traces the pulse fluttering in my wrist. "No."

CHAPTER 21

TORACK

Lillian tugs on my sleeve for the fourth time. "Daddy. Daddy. Daddy."

I don't look up. The schedule in my hands is riddled with notes—volunteer rotations, spellsite maintenance logs, magical inventory tallies that don't match Groth's latest counts. The meeting starts in twenty minutes and we still haven't figured out who's warding the west cabins since Renault's sabotage upended the entire charm crew's rhythm.

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“Daddy, look!”

I grunt. “Not now, Lil.”

“But I made a badge for you. Look—‘Best Orc Dad!’ I drew tusks and everything.” She’s holding it up proudly. A slice of cardboard with glitter glue and lopsided writing. The ‘B’ is backwards.

My heart should soften. But it doesn’t. Not yet.

Because my head’s a swamp of deadlines and liability waivers and donors breathing down my neck through Julie’s very polite email chains.

“I’ll look later, I promise.”

“But the staff dinner is now,” she says. “And you’re supposed to be my guest.”

I finally glance up. She’s wearing a flower crown—probably from the fairy garden—and a sticky grin. Her boots are mismatched. Her shirt’s on inside out.

She’s beaming.

And I?

I can only sigh.

“Lil, I have work.”

“But you said you’d eat dinner with me.”

“I said I’d try.” My voice comes out harsher than I mean. Her face flickers, just for a second.

She nods, small and quiet. “Okay.”

“Go on ahead,” I say, already turning back to the papers. “I’ll catch up.”

I don’t see her leave. I don’t kiss her forehead or ruffle her hair or check which staffer she goes with.

I just assume.

And that’s the thing about assumptions. They don’t scream when they’re wrong.

—

I’m a warrior. A seasoned businessman. A shining specimen of what an orc male should strive to be.

There are very few things in this world that make me afraid.

Losing my daughter is one of them.

The moment I notice the empty seat at the staff dinner table, my world stops.

Julie’s mid-laugh, Groth is unwrapping a second slice of roast-beast pie, someone’s joking about enchanted compost bins—and all I can hear is the vacuum of space where Lillian should be.

“She was just here,” I say. Then louder: “She was just here.”

Julie looks up. “Torack?”

“She’s not here.”

Groth is already rising. Julie is pushing back her chair. I’m scanning exits, calculating distance to the lake, the trails, the old herb fields.

Julie tries to stay calm. “Maybe she went to the art tent?—”

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“She tells me when she goes somewhere.” My voice is hard now. “Every time.”

Groth is already striding to the door. “I’ll check the perimeter.”

I nod. “Get the tower crew. East and west loops. Stagger the rotations. Don’t wait on eyes—move.”

Chairs screech. Staff scatter. Julie’s already grabbing a radio from the wall.

“I’ll organize teams. We’ll start with a four-quadrant grid. If she portaled, the residual trail should still be active for at least forty minutes.”

We comb the west trails first, Groth taking the north. Julie’s alongside me, sharp-eyed and pacing every step with quiet desperation.

“She wouldn’t go far without telling you,” Julie murmurs. “But if she thought someone or something needed help?—”

“She’s got a rescue instinct,” I mutter.

Julie nods. “Like someone else I know.”

I grunt, not ready for anything close to endearment.

The woods stretch on, thick with summer’s humidity and the scent of pine resin and old magic. Everything buzzes.

An hour passes. Then two.

I scream her name until my voice is shredded bark. Julie radios out directions, reroutes volunteers, casts three different detection circles, and still manages to keep me from coming apart completely. Then Groth's call crackles through:

"Found something. North ridge. Near the willow grove." We run. Boots hammer through the earth. My pulse is a drumbeat of regret.

If she's hurt—if something happened—I'll never forgive myself.

Groth's waiting with her jacket. It's still warm. Julie spots feathers nearby. Owl feathers.

"The baby owl," she says. "It was limping in the barn earlier. I told her it'd be fine."

"She tried to help it," I whisper. We cut through the grove.

And there, finally.

She's curled under the weeping willow, holding a limp owlet and whispering soft apologies.

"Daddy!" she cries, leaping into my arms. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I thought I could help?—"

I clutch her so tightly I feel her ribs move. "You're okay. You're okay."

Julie crouches beside us, checking the owl. "Just dazed. You did the right thing, Lillian—but next time, bring someone."

Lillian sniffs. “You were busy. You’re always busy”

“I’ll never be too busy again,” I promise.

Julie touches my arm. Soft, steady.

“You need to mean it this time,” she says.

And that’s what breaks me.

CHAPTER 22

JULIE

I'm not breathing.

Not really.

There's air in my lungs, sure, but it feels borrowed. Thin. Like the whole world is holding its breath with me, waiting for someone to break the silence that's sunk over this grove like a shroud.

Torack's kneeling in the dirt. Lillian's in his arms. She's shaking—tiny tremors that rattle her spine against his chest—and he's holding her like if he lets go, the entire planet might fall apart. And maybe it will. Honestly, maybe it already has.

I stay still, crouched near the roots of the willow. My fingers itch to organize something. A triage. A schedule. A checklist titled Post-Trauma Protocol: When Your Boss and His Daughter Both Look Like They've Been Emotionally Steamrolled. I don't have that checklist, though.

All I have is this moment.

And the pounding in my ears that won't quit.

"She's safe," I whisper, more to myself than anyone else.

Torack doesn't move. His eyes are locked on his daughter, and he looks... wrecked. Utterly. Like some invisible hand reached in and pulled all the bones out of his backbone.

“I shouldn’t’ve snapped at her,” he mutters.

“She was trying to help,” I say gently.

His jaw clenches. “And I brushed her off. Again.”

Lillian sniffles. “It’s okay, Daddy.”

“No,” he says, fierce and low. “It’s not.”

I scoot closer, slowly, like approaching a spooked animal. Not because I’m scared of him, but because I know exactly how fragile this moment is. One wrong word and he’ll fold back into himself, armor up, act like everything’s fine when it’s very obviously not.

“You know,” I say, “when I was little, I used to make little ‘certificates’ for my dad. You know, like... World’s Okayest Breakfast Cooker or Champion of Bedtime Story Reruns.”

Lillian’s eyes peek out from behind Torack’s chest.

“He hated them,” I admit. “Said they were a waste of paper. I kept making them anyway. Because some part of me hoped that if I handed him enough macaroni and glue, he’d see me. Like, really see me. Not just the good grades and piano recitals and vacuumed carpet.”

Lillian’s lip wobbles.

Torack swallows hard. He hasn’t blinked in ages. “She made me one.”

I nod. “It was a good one, too. You had tusks.”

A breath hitches in his throat. His shoulders shake once. And then again.

“She thought if she saved something, you’d be proud of her,” I say softly.

He finally looks up. His eyes find mine—and gods, there’s so much pain in them, I almost look away.

But I don’t.

Because this is when he needs me most.

“She wanted you to be proud,” I whisper. “And you are. I know you are. But she needs to hear it.”

He lowers his gaze back to his daughter. Brushes hair from her face with a hand that’s rough and gentle all at once.

“Lillian,” he says. Voice raw. Ragged. “You’re the best thing I’ve ever made.”

Her breath hitches.

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“I don’t say it enough. Hell, I barely say it at all. But I see you. I see everything you do. You try so hard to be brave, and smart, and kind, and sometimes I forget that you’re still little. That you still need to be told it’s okay to be scared.”

Lillian blinks up at him, eyes huge. “I thought if I helped the owl, maybe you’d remember I’m not a baby you can ignore.”

“You’re not,” he murmurs. “But that doesn’t mean you have to do everything alone.”

He exhales, shaky. “I miss your mom every day. And sometimes, I forget how to be a dad without her. But that’s not your job to fix. It never was.”

Tears stream down her cheeks. She throws her arms around his neck and sobs into his shoulder.

He holds her tighter.

I reach in, wrap my arms around both of them, and feel something inside me break open.

A piece of my own grief, maybe. A memory of the dad I left behind.

And for one long, quiet minute, the three of us stay there in that glade wrapped up in grief and love and something that feels dangerously close to healing.

When Lillian finally pulls back, her eyes are puffy but clearer.

“Can I still give you the badge?” she asks, voice hoarse.

Torack nods solemnly. “You better.”

She reaches into her muddy pocket and pulls out a squashed, glitter-smeared triangle. “It says you’re the Best Orc Dad. Even when you forget snack day.”

He lets out a broken laugh that sounds more like a sob.

I wipe my eyes quickly. “Okay, team. Let’s get you both home.”

On the slow walk back, Lillian clutches my hand and tells me the entire story of the owl’s “very dramatic spiral” and how she tried to make a healing nest with pinecones and lavender and “a napkin I stole from the mess tent.”

“And it burped at me,” she finishes. “Like, a magical burp. So I knew it was still alive.”

“You’re basically a certified healer now,” I tell her.

Torack walks beside us, quiet, but something in his posture has shifted. He’s still tired. Still heavy with everything he’s carrying.

But the guilt’s not crushing him anymore.

He looks at Lillian like he’s seeing her for the first time in weeks.

When we reach the cabin, I go to turn away—but Lillian tugs my hand.

“Will you tuck me in?” she asks.

I glance at Torack.

He gives a nod. "I'll get her a dry shirt."

As he disappears inside, Lillian leans close. "Thanks for helping Daddy not be dumb."

I stifle a laugh. "Anytime, kiddo."

She hugs me again, quick but tight, and then races inside.

I stay on the porch for a minute, just breathing.

And when Torack comes back out, his eyes find mine.

“Thank you,” he says.

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I do,” he says. “Because you saw her. You see us. And you didn’t let me walk away from it.”

I shift on my feet. “I wasn’t gonna let her be invisible.”

“And you didn’t.”

His eyes linger on me. “You should go get some sleep.”

I nod. But I don’t move.

Neither does he.

There’s something between us now. Something deeper than flirtation. A thread, woven tight.

When I finally turn to go, he doesn’t stop me.

But he watches until I’m gone.

CHAPTER 23

TORACK

There's sawdust in the air and tension in my shoulders.

Old habits. Even after everything—after the panic, the search, the glade—I'm still moving. Still walking site to site, pretending like the creak of boots on gravel and the weight of a clipboard can stop my brain from spinning. As if counting fences and checking spell wards can drown out the memory of Lillian whispering, "Maybe if I were better, you'd smile more."

That memory's carved into my spine now, and I know I can't keep going like this.

This camp was supposed to be a place of healing. A legacy for Lillian. A home for others like us: outcasts, half-bloods, kids with missing parents and bruised dreams. But I've been holding onto it with clenched fists and gritted teeth. Turning it into something it was never meant to be.

Controlled. Guarded. Safe, but suffocating.

Julie's the one who's made it bloom.

She's the one who talks to the interns like they matter. Who rewrote the outreach programs so goblin kids and elf parents finally show up to the same events. Who makes my daughter laugh.

I know what I need to do.

By midday, I find Lillian under the platform deck, digging through what appears to be a suspiciously glittery trap made from twigs, moss, and one of my socks.

"What in the world are you doing?" I ask, arms crossed.

She jerks her head up. There's a streak of mud across her forehead like war paint, and

her eyes gleam with mischief.

“Building a trap.”

“For what?”

“A cloud frog,” she says, dead serious. “He goes ribbit but also floats. Like a frog balloon.”

“There’s no such thing.”

She gasps like I just told her cookies are illegal.

“Just because you’ve never seen one doesn’t mean it’s not real.”

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I grunt. “Pretty sure that’s how I justified hiring Renault.”

She ignores me. “I need another anchor rock. And bait.”

“Bait?”

“Duh. What do frogs love?”

“Water?”

“No. Snacks.”

“What kind of snack?”

“Marshmallows, obviously.” I blink. “We’re luring a potentially magical frog with campfire sugar bombs.”

“Exactly. Can you go get some while I reinforce the perimeter?” I open my mouth. Close it again.

“Are you giving me an assignment?”

“You said you had time.”

Dammit. I did.

Twenty minutes later, I’m crouched beside her, elbow-deep in mud, applying

marshmallow ‘fences’ around the trap while she sings some kind of summoning chant that sounds suspiciously like a pop song from the camp talent show.

She waves a twig wand over the bait. “Now we wait.”

“For what?”

“The frog!” she exclaims with exhaustion.

“Right.” I lean back. “What if we catch something else?”

She shrugs. “Then we interview it and release it.”

“Interview it.”

She nods. “All creatures have rights.”

I stare at her for a beat. “You’ve been hanging out with Julie too much.”

She grins. “Julie says imagination is the key to empathy.”

“She would.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes, watching the bait.

Nothing happens, obviously, but she leans against my side like it’s the most normal thing in the world.

“Did you have imagination when you were little?” she asks.

I glance at her. “I used to pretend I was a mountain.”

She snorts. “That’s not imaginative.”

“I was very committed. I didn’t move for three hours. My mother thought I’d been cursed.”

Lillian laughs so hard she almost knocks over the trap.

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We spend the next hour rebuilding it twice, baiting it with everything from blueberries to a single sock, and arguing about whether fairies would sabotage our mission because of ‘internal frog politics.’

By the time Julie finds us, we’re both covered in leaves and holding hands like secret agents waiting for coded instructions.

“You two look suspicious,” she says, raising an eyebrow.

“We’re on frog watch,” Lillian whispers. I nod solemnly.

“Cloud frog. Very rare.” Julie blinks.

“Of course. Carry on.”

As she walks away, I hear her mutter, “That man used to run battlefronts.”

Lillian grins up at me. “You’re fun when you’re dirty.”

“Don’t tell HR.”

She throws a pinecone at me.

Later that evening, I’m chopping vegetables for dinner when Lillian barrels into the kitchen holding three hair ties and a hairbrush like she’s carrying a magical relic.

“Can Julie braid my hair?”

I glance at the clock. “You’re supposed to be getting ready for bed.”

“This is getting ready for bed,” she counters.

“You want me to do it?”

“You always make my braids crooked. Julie does the swoopy ones.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Swoopy?”

She nods solemnly. “Like fairies. You don’t know how.”

Fair enough.

“Go ask her, then.”

She’s gone before I finish wiping my hands. And five minutes later, Julie appears in the doorway, barefoot and smiling.

“Reporting for hair duty.”

“She’s got high standards,” I warn.

Julie steps inside, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. “I thrive under pressure.”

We set Lillian on a stool in front of the fireplace. She chatters the whole time—about spell-charmed frogs and how Mr. Groth sneezed so loud he scared off the nymph who runs the juice stand. Julie listens like everything matters.

Every word.

She parts Lillian's hair with practiced fingers.

"I used to braid my cousin's hair every weekend," she says. "It was the only time she sat still."

"Do I have to sit still?" Lillian asks, squirming.

"Only if you want it to look amazing."

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She goes rigid immediately.

I watch them. The ease, the rhythm, and something tight inside my chest lets go.

When Julie's done, Lillian hops down and runs to the mirror.

"Best one yet!" she declares, spinning. "Can I sleep in it?"

Julie laughs. "Sure, if you sleep like a statue." She turns to me. "You want to tuck her in, or should I?"

"Let's both do it."

Lillian curls up under her moss-green quilt, the one embroidered with fireflies. Her braid fans across the pillow like a crown. She blinks up at me.

"Are you gonna be home more?" she asks softly.

I kneel beside her bed. "Yeah. I am."

She nods once. "Good. 'Cause I like it when we're all here."

Julie tucks the quilt tighter. And I look at her, really look at Julie Wren.

She's not just helping me run this camp.

She's helping me build a life.

CHAPTER 24

JULIE

The morning air smells like pine needles and promise.

There's dew on the grass, a faint shimmer of ward magic across the training field, and for once—miraculously—I'm not rushing. My mug of tea is still hot in my hands. I haven't snapped at a single goblin intern. And the schedule for the day is laminated, color-coded, and organized in triplicate. The Julie Trifecta.

I stretch beneath the overhang of the administrative yurt and breathe.

I used to think control was everything. That power came from preparedness and bullet-point agendas and contingency plans labeled A through M. And don't get me wrong, those still matter.

But now?

Now I know power is also letting go. Delegating. Trusting the people you train to handle it while you enjoy your first sip of green jasmine tea and don't have to pretend you're fine through a stress-induced eye twitch.

Across the quad, the early shift is swapping out elemental wards on the west perimeter. Lillian's chasing a paper charm in her pajamas, barefoot and giggling, her braid swinging behind her like a comet tail. Groth is already yelling at someone in the kitchen—something about “cursed jam proportions” and “if one more sprite eats the butterberries raw.”

All of it hums like music.

And I'm standing in the middle of it, calm as a moonrise.

When I step into the staff meeting fifteen minutes later, three people are already waiting: Orlan with his overstuffed binder, Crisa with her color-coded crystal markers, and young Miri, the new intern who still mixes up teleport runes like a toddler on sugar.

They all turn when I enter.

And somehow, nobody looks surprised I'm the one leading.

"Okay," I say, smiling as I set down my notes. "Let's talk about outreach logistics for the Spring Harmony Festival, and then we'll dive into procurement. We need twenty-five extra sleeping mats, a salt barrier refresh for the fire circle, and someone needs to convince Groth that we don't need seventeen barrels of turnip cider."

Crisa raises a hand. "Do we want mead, then?"

"I want fewer sprained ankles. Last time, half the dryads fell asleep on the archery range." Orlan chuckles.

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Miri looks awestruck.

It feels good.

Not just to be seen—but to be trusted.

The first time I sign a requisition order without checking it twice, I know I've officially lost my mind—or found it.

Depending on how you look at it.

It's morning, and the camp is humming. The kind of hum that makes your skin buzz with possibility. Birds flit between enchanted feeder pods near the dining hall. A pair of gnomes argue lovingly over how to best stabilize a climbing wall charm. Lillian streaks past, barefoot and giggling, chased by a sprite with what looks suspiciously like glitter paste in its tiny hands.

Meanwhile, I'm running logistics like I was born doing it.

Torack kept his word. He stepped back—slowly, stubbornly, like a tree unwilling to accept winter, but he did. He checks in during sunrise patrols, reviews long-term plans by the firepit, but the daily stuff? The on-the-ground, do-or-die decisions?

That's all me now.

And I'm thriving.

Which is strange, because part of me thought that without the pressure of needing to prove myself to him every second, I'd flail. That I was only sharp because I had something to push against. But it turns out I'm sharp because I give a damn.

Because this place matters.

And because it feels like home.

Even if my cabin still leaks when it rains and someone in the fishfolk dorm insists on using my favorite shirt as a napkin.

I'm halfway through reorganizing the supply chain schedule when Torack wanders into my makeshift office—read: a table under a magically air-cooled awning—with two cups of strong black coffee.

He hands me one without a word.

I take a sip. “Still brooding in silence as your primary form of support?”

“It's efficient.”

I smirk. “You're lucky I like brooding.”

“Is it brooding if I brought caffeine?”

“I'll allow it.”

He leans against the support post, arms folded, watching the younger staffers wrangle a trio of teleport-happy goblin twins.

“You've changed things,” he says.

“That sounds ominous.”

“It’s a compliment.”

I look up. “Really?”

He nods once. “People laugh more. Problems get solved before they become crises. You even got Groth to use a spreadsheet.”

I gasp. “You said you’d never tell.”

A flicker of a smile. Barely there. But real.

“I meant what I said,” he murmurs.

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“You belong here.”

Something warm curls in my chest. “Thanks. That means... yeah. Thanks.”

The last investor is a problem.

Not because she’s mean. Or skeptical. Or hates goblins—which, believe me, we’ve had that.

No, Faelin Strongreed is just... precise. She’s been watching the camp’s progress for weeks from afar, and now she’s finally come to see if it’s worth the pledge she’s been holding back like a carrot on a stick.

She arrives dressed in crisp linen, with a pen that looks like it could write someone out of existence. She doesn’t smile. Doesn’t frown, either. Just watches everything like she’s seen better and expects worse.

She tours the buildings. Asks smart, brutal questions. Side-eyes a griffin with hay stuck to its tail. Spends exactly five seconds looking at the waterfall meditation deck before turning to me and saying, “You’re new.”

“I’m not new. Just efficient,” I answer, offering my hand. “Julie Wren. I’m the new operations lead.”

She doesn’t shake it. Just raises a brow. “And why should I trust you with my money?”

There's a pause. The kind of pause that stretches just enough to give doubt a foothold. But I've learned something in the last few weeks, something Torack taught me without saying a word. People trust conviction. Not polish.

So I smile. Steady. Sure.

"Because I know what this place can be. And I've seen what it was."

She narrows her eyes. "Go on."

So I do.

I tell her about the day the storm knocked out the wards and we had to reroute a whole construction crew by torchlight. About the goblin girl who cried when her dorm got a compostable art supply cabinet. About how Lillian braided my hair once and then decided I was family. About Groth crying at the harvest feast because the dryads sang a lullaby from his homeland.

I talk about peace, not as a theory, but as something you build every day with mismatched materials and people who don't always speak the same language.

And when I finish, Faelin studies me for a long, long moment.

Then she nods once and says, "I'll triple it."

I blink. "Sorry, what?"

"My pledge. Tripled. On one condition."

"Which is?"

“That you stay in charge.” That night, we light the big central fire. It’s part celebration, part ceremony, part excuse to burn too many marshmallows and let kids sing off-key under a starlit sky. I’m exhausted and covered in paint glitter, but happy.

Genuinely, deeply happy.

Torack finds me leaning against a tree, watching Lillian teach a centaur kid how to play freeze tag with the wisp lanterns.

“You did it,” he says quietly.

“We did.”

He shakes his head. “No. This was you. I was holding on too tight.”

“Because you care.”

“Because I was afraid.”

I turn to him. “Of what?”

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“Losing the dream. Again.”

I step closer. “It’s not gone. It’s just... bigger now. And it’s still yours.”

His eyes hold mine. Warm. Steady. “No,” he says. “It’s ours.”

And gods help me, I believe him.

CHAPTER 25

TORACK

They whisper when I pass.

It starts subtle. A pause in conversation. A glance over shoulders. That odd cadence people get when they’re pretending they weren’t just talking about you.

At first, I think it’s about the new mage wards, or the incident with the supply goblin who tried to freeze-dry the camp kitchen’s entire inventory. Again.

But then Groth drops a stack of split logs at my feet, grinning like a sabertooth who found honey. “You hear what they’re saying?”

I grunt. “I usually don’t care.”

“Oh, you’ll care about this.”

He wipes his hands on a rag. “Camp thinks you and Julie are a thing now.”

I blink. “A what?”

“A thing. Like... a capital-R Relationship. Lovebirds. Attached at the horns.”

I stare at him. “Because she’s competent?”

“Because she’s everything you’re not and you haven’t shut up about her in days.”

“I don’t talk that much.”

Groth laughs like that’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard.

“It’s not true,” I say.

Groth shrugs. “Doesn’t mean it couldn’t be.”

I pick up the axe. “I have work to do.”

“Don’t split your feelings like you split that wood, boss.”

I ignore him. Mostly.

But later, when Julie walks by wearing that threadbare camp sweatshirt and a glitter sticker on her cheek courtesy of Lillian, I find myself watching her a beat too long.

The rumors don’t go away.

If anything, they get worse.

A fairy calls me “Papa-in-Law” under her breath and flutters off cackling. Lillian asks me what color dress she should wear to our “wedding.” One of the elder dryads leaves a fertility rune under my soup bowl.

I bring it to Julie. “Did you put them up to this?”

She snorts. “Oh yeah, I bribed half the staff and a forest deity for a camp-wide prank. How’d you guess?”

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I scowl. “It’s inappropriate.”

“It’s flattering.”

“It’s distracting.”

“It’s only distracting because you’re thinking about it.”

That stops me cold.

Julie raises a brow, too smug by half.

“I’m not,” I mutter.

“Sure you’re not.”

She walks off, ponytail swinging like she knows exactly what she just did.

And maybe she does.

The problem is, the rumors get into my head.

They wedge in like burrs in a boot: annoying at first, then maddening once you realize they’ve been there for hours. Because the thing is... it’s not a bad idea. Julie’s smart. She’s kind. She cares about Lillian. She’s made this camp stronger, lighter.

She makes me want to be better. That should be terrifying.

Instead, it just feels inevitable.

I find myself wandering through the village market a few days later.

It's an errand run—basic supplies, updated spell scrolls, new boots for Lillian because she outgrew the old ones overnight again.

But then I pass Old Noma's cart.

She sells baubles. Trinkets. Bits of jewelry made from river glass and sunstone and iron melted from meteorites.

And there, in the middle of a velvet-lined tray, is a ring.

Simple. Forged from darksteel with a knotwork inlay. Sturdy. Unfussy. Beautiful in a way that reminds me of Julie.

I don't touch it.

Not yet.

But I ask the price.

And I walk away with a small box in my pocket and my heart pounding like I just leapt from a dragon's spine. Lillian is the first one who notices.

Not the box. I'm not that careless. But she senses something. Kids are good like that. Better than adults, even.

We're sitting under the canopy outside the mess hall, sharing a plate of overly seasoned root chips she insists taste like "peppery dragons," when she squints at me

and says, “You’re being weird.”

I grunt. “I’m always weird.”

“No, you’re being the quiet kind of weird. Like when you’re trying not to yell about plumbing leaks.”

I glance sideways. “Maybe I’m just enjoying the moment.”

She narrows her eyes like a tiny, suspicious warlock. “You never enjoy root chips without a reason. What happened?”

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“I went to the village.”

“And?”

“I bought things.”

“For camp?”

“For you.”

Her eyes go wide. “Did you get me the boots with the unicorn laces?”

I shake my head. “The ones with actual horn dust were banned after the incident with the pixie council.”

“Ugh, boring.”

She grabs another chip. “Did you get anything for Julie?”

The question lands so hard I almost choke on my own chip.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Why would I?—?”

“Because you like her.”

I stare at her. “I tolerate her.”

Lillian gasps, scandalized. “You love her!”

“Keep your voice down.”

She leans in, whispering dramatically. “Did you get her a present?”

“I bought socks.”

“You never buy socks unless it’s serious.”

“I buy socks to avoid frostbite.”

She pauses, chewing thoughtfully. Then, with the serenity of a philosopher king, she says, “If you marry her, I get to call her Mom.”

I sputter. “That is not how it works.”

“Groth said she already bosses you like one.”

“She coordinates me. Professionally.”

“She kisses you yet?”

I blink. “That’s not any of your business.”

She grins. “That means no. Are you gonna kiss her?”

“Lillian!”

Lillian gasps again. “Is this secret courtship?! Is this what the romance novels talk about? Groth lent me one with pirates?—”

“That’s enough.”

She cackles, totally unrepentant. “She’d say yes.”

“Lillian.”

“She already says yes to everything. She only yells when you’re being dumb. And she tells me I’m brave.”

That part softens me, whether I want it to or not.

“She’s not like Mom,” she says. “But she’s... good.”

I reach over and ruffle her hair.

“You’re a menace,” I mutter.

“You’re in love,” she singsongs. I don’t sleep that night. I sit on the porch of the cabin, the box in my hand, watching the stars blink overhead like they know something I don’t. The camp is quiet, save for the occasional hoot of an owl or the magical hum of the perimeter wards adjusting for wind. I think about what Lillian said. About Julie. About us. And I realize she’s right. I am in love. Which means I need to do something about it.

CHAPTER 26

JULIE

I wake up with the kind of dread that hums in your bones.

The sunlight streaming through the canvas wall should be comforting—gentle, warm, laced with birdsong—but today it hits like a deadline. Final. Unforgiving. A reminder.

Today is the end.

My contract expires at sunset.

And the world keeps turning like it doesn't care.

I lie still for a moment, staring at the ceiling of my tent, hoping the feeling will pass. It doesn't. It curls tighter in my chest with every passing second, wrapping itself around my lungs, my heart, my spine.

There's no knock at my flap. No surprise "hey, about that extension" or sudden emergencies to delay the inevitable. Just the quiet certainty that everything I've built here might evaporate before dinner.

I finally sit up and swing my legs over the cot, the floor cool beneath my bare feet. My bag waits at the foot of the bed, half-packed from the night before. My clipboard leans against the nightstand, lonely. Lillian's drawing—me, her, and Torack, all holding hands in front of the camp gates—is still pinned to the post beside my pillow.

I touch it once, gently, like it might disappear if I press too hard.

Then I breathe, square my shoulders, and start folding.

Because that's what I do.

I fold the chaos. I order the fear. I make myself small and efficient and reliable. Even when it feels like something in me is screaming don't go so loud it might crack my ribs.

I start with the socks.

Not because they matter most, but because they're neutral. Safe. Practical. The kind of thing you can roll up and stack without thinking too hard about what they mean. You don't cry over socks. Usually.

My hands fold out of habit. Left over right, cuff aligned, no loose edges. Like every part of me that's spent a lifetime trying to be neat and small and unnoticeable. Efficient.

One pair. Then two. Then the shirt I wore the first day here—blue cotton, still faintly stained with troll mud despite three washes and a desperate lemon charm. Then the camp-issued sweater Lillian decorated with glitter sigils. Then the clipboard I haven't let go of since month one, the edges worn soft by grip and worry.

Each thing goes into the duffel like a silent goodbye.

And still, no one's said anything.

The contract ends today. Not tomorrow. Not in a week. Not metaphorically. Officially. Legally. In real, ink-and-seal, thank-you-for-your-service form.

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No renewal. No offer. No request to stay.

Torack hasn't said a word about it. Not even a grunt of approval or a grunt of dismissal—which, let's be honest, cover 90% of his emotional vocabulary.

So I'm packing.

Because I'm not the kind of girl who waits around to be dismissed. I've worked too hard, proven too much, to beg for scraps of belonging. I saw this coming. Of course I did.

And yet, here I am, blinking way too hard over a pair of rolled-up socks.

The camp is quieter than usual this morning. Not silent—never that. But muffled, like the forest itself knows something's shifting.

The smell of warded firewood hangs in the air. Laughter drifts from the mess hall. Someone's tuning a lute off-key near the dorms. It all feels so normal. Which makes it worse. Groth finds me hunched over a box of inventory ledgers in the storage tent, furrowed and flustered and pretending I'm just organizing.

"Morning, General," he rumbles, arms crossed.

I give a half-smile. "Don't call me that. I'm a civilian now."

He grunts. "Bull."

“I’m serious. My contract’s up.”

“You’re really gonna leave.”

“I’m not exactly being asked to stay.”

Groth steps into the tent. His bulk takes up half the space and all the air. “He’s an idiot.”

“I’m not doing this because of Torack.”

“Liar.”

I shut the box a little too fast. “It’s my job, Groth. It’s over.”

“Jobs can change.”

“Not when the person in charge doesn’t say a damn word.”

He watches me for a long moment. “You think he doesn’t want you here?”

I hesitate. “I think... he doesn’t know how to say it. If he does.”

“He knows.”

“Then why hasn’t he said anything?”

“Because he’s scared,” Groth says simply. “Because he lost too much before. Because letting you stay means admitting he wants something he doesn’t know how to keep.”

I swallow hard.

“He’ll let you walk away if that’s what you want,” Groth adds. “But not because he doesn’t care.” The portal stone hums beneath my hand.

One bag slung over my shoulder. One step away from disappearing.

My fingers hover over the sigil that would open the path back to the city. Back to job listings and coffee shops and tiny apartments with too much tile and not enough heart.

Then I hear it.

“JOOOOOLS!”

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I turn just in time for a blur of curls and fury to slam into me.

Lillian. Breathless. Tear-streaked. Hands fisted in my sweater like it's the only thing holding her together.

"You can't leave!" she yells. "You're not allowed!"

"Lil—"

"No! You don't get to go! I didn't even get to say goodbye!"

My heart splinters. "Kid, I wasn't?—"

"You were! I saw the bag! I saw you talking to the portal!"

"I was just thinking."

"Thinking about leaving me!" she sobs.

I drop to my knees and pull her close. She's shaking like a leaf in the wind, and all I can do is hold her and hate myself.

"I didn't mean to scare you," I whisper. "I just... didn't know if I was still wanted."

"You are. You're wanted. You're mine!"

I laugh, but it breaks. "I don't get to stay just because I want to. It has to be right. For

the camp. For your dad.”

“He’s dumb,” she mutters. “He thinks too much and talks too little.”

“I’ve noticed.”

She pulls back. “Did he even tell you how he feels?”

I shake my head.

“Well, I will. I love you. Like, for real. Not fake camp love. Real love.”

I hug her tighter. “I love you too.”

She wipes her nose on my sleeve. “So that means you can’t leave.”

“It means... I’m not sure what happens next.”

“You stay. That’s what happens.”

I wish it were that simple.

But maybe... maybe it is.

“Just one more day!” she pleads. “No one else is waiting for that cabin. Please?! Just one more?”

I sigh. How can I say no to that?

CHAPTER 27

TORACK

I wake before the sun.

The camp's still wrapped in that half-silence that only comes just before dawn—too late for dreams, too early for duties.

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The fire's out. The kettle's cold. The air holds that hint of woodsmoke and pine and something else I can't name.

It's not nerves. Not exactly. But it's close.

Lillian snores lightly from her bed in the corner, one arm flung over her favorite stuffed wurm, the other twitching like she's mid-battle with imaginary wolves in her sleep. I sit on the edge of my own cot, elbows on knees, fingers threaded together.

Today's the day.

I've built empires. Wielded contracts with a single glance. Led men into dangerous territories, rebuilt this camp from ash and memory. But none of it feels like it matters this morning. Not compared to what I'm about to do.

Because today I'm going to ask Julie Wren to marry me.

And that terrifies me more than any battlefield ever has.

Not because I doubt her, or us. But because when you've been broken once—and lost someone who mattered more than breathing—you start to believe some things aren't meant for you anymore.

Then she showed up. With her color-coded binders, her city perfume and inappropriate footwear, and her soft hands that built more than a system—they built a home.

And now she's leaving, unless I do something about it.

I spend the morning walking the camp. Not because I need to. Julie's had things running smoother than I ever managed since she stepped up. No, I'm walking because I need to breathe. Because motion is easier than emotion. Because stillness leaves room for doubt.

Groth finds me outside the smithy. He doesn't say anything at first, just hands me a mug of something hot and foul-smelling that I'm sure he brewed in a boot.

"You look like a man fixin' to jump off a cliff," he says.

I grunt. "Maybe I am."

"You got the ring?"

I pat my pocket.

"She deserves to hear it, Torack. Not just feel it. Not guess it. Hear it."

"I know."

Groth nods once and walks off like his job's done.

He's not wrong. None of them are. I've been walking around with love for Julie buried under years of grief and discipline and pride. But she saw through all of that. She saw me.

And still chose to stay.

Until I gave her no reason to.

Now, I'm gonna fix that.

—

Lillian's waiting when I get back to the cabin, already dressed, already beaming.

"You ready?" she asks like we're about to take a hike instead of change all our lives.

"As I'll ever be."

She grabs my hand. "You remember what to say?"

I smirk. "I wrote it down."

She groans. "No! Just speak from your heart!"

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I sigh. “That’s the plan.”

We head toward the clearing where I know Julie will be. Where she always goes when she thinks too hard or hurts too deep.

And I carry the weight of this moment like it’s sacred.

Because it is.

Julie’s standing at the edge of the glade, facing the trees like they hold the answers I’ve never been brave enough to say out loud. Her bag’s slung over her shoulder. She’s wearing that worn camp sweatshirt I know she loves, the one with the fraying cuffs and the glitter Lillian smeared across the hem.

She turns when she hears us. Her expression flickers: hope, pain, resignation, all battling for control.

“You came to say goodbye?” she asks, voice quiet, even.

“No,” I say. “I came to ask you to stay.”

I step forward, slow, every movement deliberate. Lillian’s hand is in mine. I feel her squeezing it, like she’s pouring courage into my veins.

“I thought you made your decision,” Julie says, arms crossed tight.

“I didn’t,” I reply. “I just didn’t say what I should have. Because I’m stubborn. And

I've already lost too much to know how to ask for more."

Her eyes glisten. "You think this is easy for me?"

"No," I say. "I know it's not. That's why I'm here now. Doing the hard thing."

I reach into my pocket and pull out the box. It's plain, no velvet, no gold. Just dark wood and iron hinges. I made it myself, a week ago, when I realized what I couldn't let go of.

I drop to one knee.

Julie gasps.

Lillian lets go of my hand and stands proudly beside me.

"Julie Wren," I say, throat tight. "You walked into my world like a storm. And somehow, instead of tearing things down, you built something stronger."

I open the box. The ring glints, simple and solid.

"You make me better. You make us better."

Lillian nods, grinning wide.

"I'm not good at this," I continue, "but I want you to stay. As my partner. As my equal. As Lillian's... everything. As mine."

Julie's already crying. She covers her mouth with both hands, shaking.

"You don't have to answer right now," I say, heart pounding. "I just needed you to

know—if you want to stay, this is your home. We’re your family.”

She drops her bag.

Falls to her knees.

And throws her arms around both of us.

“Yes,” she says. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Lillian squeals. I bury my face in Julie’s neck, breathing her in like it’s the first time I’ve allowed myself to hope.

And just like that... we’re not alone anymore.

We're a family.

We sit in the grass for a while, the three of us, quiet except for the rustle of leaves and Lillian humming some nonsense lullaby as she braids a flower crown from clover and wild mint. Julie leans against me, her head tucked under my chin, her fingers laced in mine like it's always been this way.

"I didn't think you'd come," she says after a while.

"I almost didn't," I admit. "Not because I didn't want to. But because I didn't think I deserved it."

She lifts her head to look at me. "You're allowed to be happy, Torack. You're allowed to want things."

"I want you," I say.

"I know," she whispers.

We make our way back to camp eventually. Slowly. The sun's higher now, warming the dew off the grass. We pass Groth, who's chopping wood and pretending not to watch us, but his grin is as wide as his axe swing.

"About time," he mutters.

Julie squeezes my hand.

By the time we reach the main clearing, half the camp seems to know. Word travels fast when pixies and goblins are involved. There are cheers. Shouts. Someone's set off a confetti charm that explodes overhead in a puff of glitter and rose petals.

Julie laughs. I don't even grumble about the glitter.

Later that night, after the fire's burned low and Lillian's finally fallen asleep wrapped in a blanket between us, I press a kiss to Julie's temple and whisper, "Thank you for saying yes."

She smiles in the dark. "Thanks for asking."

And for once, I don't feel like I'm bracing for the next disaster.

For once, I just feel... whole.

Home.

CHAPTER 28

JULIE

The blueprint for the new arts-and-crafts cabin slips from my hands when Torack's knuckle brushes the nape of my neck. Graphite smudges his cuff as he plucks the pencil from behind my ear.

"You missed dinner." His voice vibrates through the pine-paneled office, all gravel and low thunder. The camp map I've been annotating for two hours flutters under his exhale.

I press a thumb into the knot between my shoulders. "Counselor applications don't

vet themselves.”

He leans over the drafting table, biceps straining his rolled sleeves. Pine resin and bergamot flood my senses. “You’re chewing your lip again.”

“Am not.”

A green finger taps my chin. My teeth release the abused flesh.

“Liar.” His tusks glint in the lamplight as he nods at the half-empty coffee carafe. “Fourth cup?”

“Fifth. Your daughter’s archery instructor called. Again. Something about replacing hay bales with moving targets?”

He chuckles, the sound warm as the whiskey he pours into my mug. “Told you she takes after her mother.” The usual shadow flits across his face at the mention—there and gone, like a bird against thunderheads.

He stills my jittering knee with a thigh like an oak branch. “Julie.”

The world tilts as he lifts me onto the drafting table. Blueprints crinkle beneath us. My fingers find the scar bisecting his eyebrow—a faded hyphen from some boardroom battle or bedtime story gone rogue.

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Buttons ping across the floor. I trace the tribal tattoos swirling down his collarbone, ink older than my college diploma. He hesitates when my nails graze the gold chain at his sternum.

“If you make me wait any longer I might?—”

“Shut up.” I press his hand to the lace creeping up my thigh. “Just... shut up and kiss me, you overgrown?—”

His growl swallows the rest.

The blueprint edges dig into my thighs as his hands find the zipper at my back. My pencil skirt splits like birch bark, the sound louder than his ragged inhale. His claws catch on the lace trim of my stockings—hesitation that lasts three heartbeats before I arch into the scrape of calluses against silk.

His teeth graze the hinge of my jaw. "Still wearing the?—"

I bite his lower lip hard enough to taste iron. The growl that follows rattles the drafting lamps. Blueprints flutter to the floor as he pins my wrists above my head, one massive hand spanning both my arms.

Cold air hits bare skin. His palm eclipses my ribcage, thumb brushing the underwire of my bra. I kick off a stiletto—it clatters against the coffee carafe, sending lukewarm dregs bleeding across supply manifests. His other hand fists in my hair, tilting my head back to expose the rabbit-quick pulse beneath his mouth.

The gold chain around his neck swings into my vision, the pendant catching lamplight as he bends me backward overscattered site plans. My nails score twin crescents into his forearms when he bites the strap of my camisole. Fabric tears.

"Torack—"

He stills, tusks hovering over the hollow of my throat. Hazel eyes meet mine, pupils swallowing the amber irises whole. For half a breath I think he'll speak, but then his mouth crashes into mine again, all heat and hunger and the copper tang of his split lip.

My remaining shoe falls. The heel snaps off. He laughs against my collarbone—a dark, breathless sound—before lifting me clear off the table. Blueprints stick to my bare back as he carries me toward the leather couch. We don't make it halfway.

His knee hits the floorboards first, my spine meeting the braided rug as he strips the ruined stockings down my legs. The tribal tattoos on his chest heave, ink rippling with each labored breath. I rake fingers through his cropped hair, tugging until his tusks press warning dimples into my inner thigh.

Somewhere beyond the office door, a nightjar calls. The camp's new flagpole rope clangs against metal in the wind. His hands map my hips like they're surveying disputed territory, claiming every inch with lips and tongue and the occasional sharp nip that makes my legs tremble.

When I finally claw at his belt, the leather snaps in my grip. My name fractures into three syllables as I work the button of his slacks, the sound strangled when my palm finds what's beneath.

His cock bounces free and I lick my lips, still impressed with its girth. I move to taste him again, but he forces me back down onto the rug.

"Not waiting this time," he growls.

I bite my lips in response, throwing my arms around his shoulders.

"Then take me."

He does.

His cock slides into me so firmly I audibly gasp. His weight envelopes me, securing me against the floor.

The rug burns my shoulder blades. His chain presses a crucible brand between my breasts. Every thrust drives blueprints deeper into the floorboards, graphite smearing our skin like war paint.

The world narrows to the rhythm of his hips turning my gasps into shattered syllables. My fingers find the notches along his tusks—smooth grooves from decades of clenching, of boardroom battles and bedtime negotiations.

"Deeper," I moan. "Deeper!"

"If you want it," he says, "take it."

I hook my ankles behind his knees and roll us sideways. I straddle him, his chain swinging wildly. His hands lock around my thighs, nails pricking skin through ruined stockings.

"Julie—"

I grind down, relishing the way his pupils blow wide.

He bucks hard enough to slam my spine against the drafting table leg. Pencils scatter. I bite back a yelp, nails digging into the tribal swirls over his heart. His smirk dies when I sink my teeth into his pectoral, the taste of salt and pine resin flooding my mouth.

"Feral little?—"

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"Rich coming from the man who just ripped my blouse with histeeth."

His laugh cuts off when I rock forward, his grip on my hips leaving tomorrow's bruises.

His thumb finds my clit swollen and slick, circling once—twice—before I slap his hand away. "Don't you dare rush me."

"Bossy." He licks a stripe up my throat. "Thought you preferred being in charge."

"Iamin charge," I bite back. "And I say don't rush the boss."

The lie splinters as he flips us again, pinning my wrists above my head. His tusks graze my cheek. Our breaths sync, ragged and damp.

"Julie." My name sounds like a prayer and a curse. "Julie, you're soaking wet."

I arch into him, the friction drawing a moan neither of us will acknowledge tomorrow. His rhythm fractures, each thrust driving harder and deeper.

He stills suddenly, forehead pressed to mine. Hazel eyes hold me suspended—eight seconds, nine—before his control snaps.

The climax hits like a backdraft, heat roaring through every nerve. My scream lodges in his mouth as he kisses me through the tremors, his growl vibrating against my tongue.

“Not done,” he growls. “Not done until you come again.”

“I don’t know if I ca-! Ah!” His fingers find me, rough and wet, and pile on the stimulation. I squirm, frantic and unable to control myself.

“Torack please, oh my g- Torack!” I cry.

It’s unbearable.

It’s absolutely delicious.

I come again, harder, and Torack shows how proud he is of his work.

We collapse together, his weight driving blueprints into the rug beneath us.

His breath scalds my neck. "Still think hay bales were a bad idea?"

I swat his shoulder, fingers trembling. "You're buying me a new pencil skirt."

"Add it to the camp budget." His teeth flash in the lamplight as he nuzzles the sweat-damp hair at my temple. "Line item: workplace hazards."

CHAPTER 29

TORACK

There’s a sound I never thought I’d hear again in this place.

Laughter. Real laughter.

Not nervous chuckles from overworked contractors or the half-hearted kind you give

in meetings to smooth tension. I mean belly-deep, wild, too-loud joy. Children shrieking in play as they tumble down the wild grass hill by the central field. Pixie twins chasing a centaur colt with a stream of enchanted bubble spells. A pair of goblins playing tug-of-war with a snake that looks suspiciously enchanted.

And no one's fighting. No one's bleeding. It's chaos, yeah, but it's the kind we planned for. The kind we dreamed of. The kind that feels like victory.

I stand just off the main path, arms crossed, boots sunk firm into the mossy ground. The official camp banners flap behind me, their edges still too crisp, like they're waiting for stories to give them meaning. Everything smells like pine sap and toasted marshmallows.

It's a miracle the fae didn't hex the kitchen after that honey incident last week.

But it's working.

All of it. They came. The kids. The counselors. The village parents. The investors. The holdouts. All of 'em. We did it. She did it.

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Julie's down near the creek, surrounded by a swirl of campers, one of whom—an orange-skinned goblin with a voice like a foghorn—is currently mid-meltdown over a stolen satchel.

“No one's listening!” he howls. Julie doesn't flinch. She crouches to his level, eyes sharp and soft all at once.

“Alright, buddy,” she says. “Let's untangle this. You tell me what happened, and we'll make sure your satchel's safe, yeah?”

He sniffs. “They took it!”

“Who's 'they'?”

He points dramatically at a trio of laughing dryads. Julie glances over, then back at him with the calm of someone who's survived budget meetings with trolls and sleepovers with Lillian.

“Let's go ask them together. But no yelling this time. You got it?” The goblin nods.

Julie takes his hand. And I feel something shift in my chest. Not new, exactly. Just... clearer. I've loved her for a long time. But watching her here, in it, doing the work with that ridiculous clipboard and that unbreakable heart—I feel proud in a way I can't describe. Like I'm watching someone become what they were always meant to be.

“You're staring again,” Groth says, stepping up beside me with a plate full of

skewered eel and roasted turnips.

“I’m watching.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s got the goblin handled.”

“She always does.” I grunt.

Groth elbows me gently. “You gonna tell her again?”

“I already proposed.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t say I love you. Out loud.”

I shake my head.

“What? Don’t get shy now. You’re engaged. Use your words.”

“I’m not shy.”

“You are in love, my guy.”

We linger near the fire after the kids drift off toward their cabins. Julie tugs her sweatshirt sleeves down over her hands, standing close to the flames.

“You know,” she says, “I never thought I’d end up here.”

“At this camp?”

She chuckles. “No, in this world. Surrounded by spell-happy kids, wearing pine-sap in my hair, engaged to a grumpy orc who makes my knees go weak.”

I smirk. “I’m not that grumpy.”

“You glared at a cookie for five full minutes earlier.”

“It was a suspicious cookie.”

“You make me feel... seen,” she says. “Like I can be messy and loud and still worth something.”

“You’re worth everything.”

She turns, eyes shining. “You’re not just saying that because I fixed the enchanted plumbing, right?”

“That’s just a bonus.”

“Say it again,” she whispers.

“What?”

“What you said earlier.”

I take her hand and hold it over my chest.

“I love you, Julie Wren. Fiercely. Entirely. Probably stupidly.”

She laughs, then cries, then laughs again, her forehead resting against mine. “I love you too,” she breathes. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

We sit on a log near the fire pit long after most of the kids have drifted off, their laughter echoing faintly through the trees like the tail end of a spell. Julie leans against my shoulder, and I rest my cheek against the top of her head. Her hair smells like marshmallow ash and pine, and I’d bottle it if I could.

“You know,” she murmurs, voice almost drowned out by the low pop of embers, “I used to think I wanted sleek. Corporate. Something with clean lines and scheduled breaks.”

I huff. “You came to the wrong forest.”

She chuckles. “Apparently, I came to the right life.” Her fingers toy with

mine—absent, instinctual. There’s no tension anymore. No hesitancy. Just her and me and the fire and a world we helped fix. “Do you ever think,” she continues softly, “that love sneaks up on you when you’re not ready?”

“All the time.”

She looks up at me. “And you don’t regret it? Us?”

“Julie.” I sit up just enough to see her clearly. “You could paint glitter on my tusks and I wouldn’t regret a damn thing.”

She laughs, real and bright. “Tempting.”

We’re interrupted by the thundering of tiny feet. Lillian, wide-eyed and wrapped in her favorite patchwork blanket, plops down beside us with no preamble.

“Someone tried to hex the honey again,” she announces, dramatic. “The kitchen is in chaos. I’m hiding.”

Julie blinks. “Wait, right now?”

“It’s under control,” Lillian adds. “Probably.”

I pull her into my lap and kiss the top of her head. “Glad to see you’re still reporting emergencies like a general.”

“I learned from the best.” She beams, looking between us. “Also, I wanted to be here for the smooches.” Julie gives me a sideways look, one brow raised.

“Well?” she says. I lean in and kiss her—slow, soft, no fireworks or frenzy. Just two people who know exactly what they’ve found in each other. Lillian squeals.

“GROSS. But yay!” She flops dramatically back onto the log, arms spread wide like she’s claiming the stars.

Julie snuggles closer. “Is this what you pictured when you started all this?”

“No,” I say honestly. “I thought we’d build a camp. Maybe fix a few things. I didn’t know we’d build a life.”

Julie is quiet for a moment, then whispers, “Me neither.”

And in the flickering firelight, with my daughter dozing beside us and the scent of ash and night blooming around us, I know—this is it. This is the good stuff. This is home.

CHAPTER 30

JULIE

The stars are ridiculous tonight.

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Like the sky decided to outdo itself. Too many to count, not that I haven't tried. Lillian's already declared she saw a constellation shaped like a goat doing yoga. Torack said it looked more like a gremlin doing taxes. And somehow, both seem accurate.

We're lying in the grass just outside the camp circle, far enough to escape the chaos of enchanted bedtime routines and fae glitter emergencies, close enough to hear the soft hum of laughter and music still echoing from the fire pit. The first day of camp is officially over, and somehow no one caught on fire.

That's a win in my book.

Lillian is curled between us, one arm flung across my stomach, the other clutching a mason jar full of glowing fireflies. She's breathing soft and slow, eyelids fluttering with dreams I hope involve fewer snakes than this morning's craft hour.

Torack's beside me, one hand cradling the back of my neck, thumb tracing lazy patterns against my skin. We haven't said much. We don't have to. The silence between us isn't heavy anymore—it's full.

Comfortable.

Home.

"Did you ever think," I whisper, "we'd end up here?"

Torack grunts, which in orc-speak is a complex emotional language. This one

probably means not in a million years, but I wouldn't change a thing.

I smile. "I mean it. This place. This—us."

He shifts, just enough to lean in and press a kiss to my temple. "You saved this camp."

I scoff. "Hardly."

"You did." His voice is low, steady. "I was just holding the pieces together. You turned them into something real."

"You helped."

He chuckles. "I did paperwork. You wrangled investors, reconciled goblin plumbers with fae architects, and taught my kid how to roast a marshmallow without setting the forest on fire."

"I only did the last one once."

"I said without."

I laugh, and Lillian murmurs something sleepy about unicorns and pudding.

We fall quiet again, watching the fireflies drift above the tall grass like floating bits of magic. One lands on my wrist. Its light pulses soft and slow, like a heartbeat.

"Can I ask you something?" I murmur.

Torack hums.

“Do you think... we’re enough? For her?”

He’s quiet for a long beat. “She’s smiling again. She laughs in her sleep. She believes in bedtime stories. I think we’re doing okay.”

I turn my head to look at him. “You’re really good at this.”

“At what?”

“Being her dad. Being mine.”

He freezes for a second, then exhales like he’s been holding it forever.

“You’re mine,” he says, rough and soft all at once. “I knew it the minute you started alphabetizing the spell permits.”

I choke on a laugh. “Romantic.”

“Hey, everyone’s got a type.”

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I roll onto my side, careful not to jostle Lillian. “I love you.”

He doesn’t say it right away. He just leans in, kisses me like it’s the first time all over again, and murmurs, “Forever.”

Lillian is snoring. Not in the gentle, movie-scene kind of way, either. I mean full-on, nose-whistling, one-arm-flung-over-my-face snoring. She’s dead asleep, curled up between me and Torack in a nest of blankets and overgrown grass, clutching her jar of fireflies like it contains state secrets.

I wouldn’t trade this moment for anything.

The stars are still out in full force, scattered like someone shook a box of diamonds over navy velvet. A few of the brighter ones blink lazily, half-hidden by drifting clouds.

The air smells like pine needles, distant smoke, and the faintest hint of enchanted raspberry tea. I press my cheek against the blanket, watching the soft glow of the fireflies reflect in the jar glass. They blink like they’ve got something to say, like they’re singing lullabies with their light.

Torack’s shoulder is warm against mine.

His hand finds my waist and lingers there. Possessive. Gentle. Steady.

“I think she might be part warthog,” I whisper, brushing a bit of Lillian’s curly hair off my mouth. Torack grunts.

“Or maybe she’s just yours now.”

My heart does this weird clench-flutter thing it’s been doing ever since he dropped to one knee and changed my entire world.

“Yours too,” I say, softer.

“Ours.” He doesn’t speak for a minute. Just shifts so our arms touch from elbow to fingertip, like he can’t not be close.

“You make this feel real,” he finally says.

“What? The snoring?”

He huffs, that rare, almost-laugh sound. “All of it. The camp. Her. Us.”

I sit up just a bit, careful not to jostle Lillian. “It is real.”

Torack looks at me like I’ve handed him something fragile.

“You’re staying.”

I nod. “Forever.”

He shifts closer, reaching for my hand. “You sure?”

“You’re the one who proposed, remember?”

“I thought maybe you came to your senses.”

I smirk. “Please. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Even if your

bedtime stories involve a lot more explosions than mine.”

“She likes action.”

“She also likes sparkles and sticker charts.”

Torack raises an eyebrow. “We can negotiate.”

We fall into silence again, the good kind. The kind where your body’s still buzzing from the day, but your mind’s finally still.

Lillian’s breathing settles, and one of the fireflies escapes her jar, hovering just above our heads. I reach out and let it land on my finger.

“Do you think,” I ask, “she’ll remember this?”

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Torack watches the bug's lazy orbit. "She'll remember how it felt."

I smile. "That's enough."

A sudden gust rustles the trees, carrying faint laughter from the camp. Someone's telling a story by the fire—probably Groth. He's been doing impressions of me all week, which are equal parts terrible and horrifyingly accurate.

Torack reaches out and brushes a thumb under my chin.

"You did this."

"I had help."

He nods. "But you believed in it first."

I lean into him, resting my head against his chest. "I believe in us now."

And he says it like it's been tucked behind his teeth for days:

"I love you."

I look up, eyes burning.

"Say it again."

He leans down and murmurs it right into my mouth, kissing me like it's a promise.

Lillian stirs, muttering something about jellybeans and dragon wings, and we both laugh, pulling her in closer.

This is everything I never knew I needed. A snoring kid, an orc with a secret heart, and a night sky lit up by magic bugs. We're a family now. And somehow, that feels like the most magical thing of all.