



The Orc's Bonded Bride

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Description: Knowing that he's too big and scarred to ever find a mate, Egon takes on the task of hunting down the plot against the orcs of Norhaven. But when a mysterious woman appears out of nowhere, he must finally confront the scars he's carried for years. Can he find the strength to fight for what he wants, or will the shadows of his past consume them both?

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CHAPTER 1

“Going somewhere?”

Egon froze at the sound of his brother’s voice, gripping the worn leather straps of his travel pack. He’d deliberately waited until the moon was high, when the village had settled into darkness and silence. Apparently not silent enough.

“I told you I was planning on leaving for a while—to see what I could find out about Lasseran’s plans,” he muttered, shooting a glance at Wulf from the corner of his eye.

His brother leaned against the doorframe, but his expression was nowhere near as casual as his pose.

“That was almost two months ago, when Lothar first returned with Jana.”

Lothar’s mate Jana had needed time to adjust to the village and his cottage on the outskirts of the village had seemed like the perfect solution. His jaw tightened, his tusks pressing uncomfortably against his lower lip. He secured the final buckle with more force than necessary, the metal clasp snapping loudly in the quiet cottage.

“And I had every intention of leaving, but you kept finding tasks for me to do.”

“I needed you—I still do.” Wulf sighed, the weight of his position as clan leader clear on his face. “You’re the best trainer we have.”

He shrugged, uncomfortable both with the praise and the knowledge of how he’d

acquired his skills. His years in the fight pit and then as a mercenary had left more than the physical scars which covered his body.

“I didn’t have much of a choice.”

Wulf’s face tightened, and he nodded. Their father had had a short passionate affair with Egon’s mother during his service in Lasseran’s army and had returned to Norhaven unaware that she was pregnant. Egon’s mother had managed to keep him out of Lasseran’s clutches but she’d died when he was young, and his life had been harsh and unpleasant until he’d finally found his way to Norhaven and discovered his brothers.

Neither of them liked to talk about that part of his past, but the knowledge of it lingered. Wulf and Lothar had welcomed him with open arms, but a part of him had always felt unworthy of their acceptance.

“The clan doesn’t need me here now,” he said finally, turning to face Wulf. “You have things well in hand.”

Wulf crossed his arms, his stance wide and unmovable. “Is that what you tell yourself to make running away easier?”

“I’m not running,” he growled, slinging his pack over his shoulder.

“No? What would you call it then?”

“Hunting. Investigating.”

“Alone? Without telling anyone?” Wulf gave him a steady look. “Without telling me?”

Something twisted in his chest. The bond between them, forged late in life but no less strong for it, pulled at him. Still, he looked away.

“I left a note.”

“A note.” Wulf’s laugh held no humor. “Like we’re strangers.”

“What do you want from me?” he growled again, his patience fraying. The night air sweeping in through the open door suddenly felt too close, too warm.

“The truth would be a start.”

He looked out at the distant tree line. The forest beckoned with its promise of solitude, of purpose uncomplicated by the tangled mess of belonging.

“You know we need more information about Lasseran’s plans. I should have tracked Khorrek while the trail was still fresh.” Khorrek was an orc loyal to High King Lasseran who had made his way into Norhaven, reaching Port Cael as part of a plot against Queen Jessamin. He’d almost abducted Jana before Lothar had found her.

Wulf stepped closer, close enough that he could see the concern etched in the lines around his brother’s eyes. “And that someone has to be you?”

“Yes.”

“This isn’t your responsibility, Egon.” Wulf’s hand landed on his shoulder, warm and heavy. “You don’t have to carry every burden alone.”

How could he explain that the burdens were all he knew? That they defined him in ways his brothers would never understand?

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“If not me, then who?” He stepped away from Wulf’s hand. “I’m the best tracker we have. Even with a cold trail I should be able to find something.”

His throat tightened as his brother’s expression softened. He recognized that look—pity mixed with understanding—and it made his skin crawl. He’d rather face Lasseran’s entire army than this conversation.

“That’s not all of it, is it?” Wulf asked, his voice gentler now. “This isn’t just about Lasseran’s plans.”

He turned away, staring up at the mountains surrounding the village, the weight on his shoulder unrelated to his pack.

“I’m happy for you,” he finally said, the words rough. “For you and Kari. For Lothar and his mate too.”

“But?”

His jaw clenched. “No ‘but.’ You both deserve happiness.”

“And you don’t?”

The question hung in the air between them, and his fingers tightened around his pack strap until the leather creaked. He was genuinely happy for his brothers, but it only made his own situation that much harder to bear. Returning to his cottage after Lothar and Jana had moved into a new home had somehow made it that much worse. The cottage felt cold, empty, solitary. After a week of sleepless nights he’d decided he

had to leave.

“It’s not about deserving a mate,” he muttered. “It’s about reality.”

Wulf waited, patient as always. Damn him for that.

“It’s too much right now,” he admitted, the words like stones in his mouth. “Watching you both with your mates. The way they look at you. The way you...” He trailed off, unable to find the right words.

“The way we what?”

“The way you fit together. Like missing pieces found.”

He turned back to face his brother, forcing himself to meet Wulf’s eyes. “There are so few females, Wulf. Even fewer who would look twice at—” He gestured at his scarred face, his huge body—he was built for war, not romance. “At this.”

The admission cost him, each word torn from somewhere deep and carefully guarded. He’d never spoken of this emptiness before, this hollow ache that grew sharper with each passing day, even though he was sure his brothers had guessed.

“Why would any female choose me when there are others? Others who aren’t...” He couldn’t finish. Broken. Damaged. Haunted.

“You don’t know that,” Wulf started, but he shook his head.

“I do know. I’ve always known.” He adjusted his pack, needing to move, to act, to escape this moment of raw vulnerability. “And that’s fine. I have other skills—like tracking—and I intend to use them for the good of Norhaven. Turmol will keep up the training while I’m gone.”

The night wind carried the scent of pine and frost, stirring memories he usually kept buried. Before Norhaven. Before Wulf and Lothar. Before he'd found anything resembling family.

He automatically traced the jagged scar that ran from his left temple to his jaw. The first of many. He'd been seven when his mother died. Too small to fight, too slow to escape. The blade that marked him had been meant to kill, not scar, and for no other reason than his orc heritage. He survived only because they thought he was already dead.

The years that followed taught him what true scars were—the ones no one could see. Surviving alone in the slums of Tel-Vara until he joined a gang of street kids. The fight pits. The mercenaries. Learning to kill before he'd learned to trust.

By the time fate reunited him with his brothers, the damage had been done. He was a weapon, not a man. Useful for war, not for love.

“You don't understand,” he added, his voice low. “It's not just about finding a mate. It's about...” He struggled, words failing him as they always did when it mattered. “Some things break and can't be fixed. I know what I am,” he continued, the words bitter on his tongue. “What I've done. The blood on my hands. No female deserves to be bound to that.”

The memory of screams—some from his victims, some from his nightmares—echoed in his mind. The mercenary years had hollowed him out, leaving something rough and jagged where his heart should be.

His brother's face shifted, the familiar look of stubborn hope replacing concern.

“The Old Gods are not done with us yet,” Wulf said firmly. “You've seen what happened with Kari, with Jana. They were brought here for a reason.”

He turned away, unable to bear the certainty in his brother's eyes. The Old Gods. As if ancient, slumbering deities concerned themselves with the happiness of one scarred orc warrior.

“The gods have better things to do than find me a mate,” he muttered.

“You don't know their plans.”

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“And you do?” The words came out harsher than he intended and he sighed, trying to soften his tone. “I’m happy that they intervened—for you and for Lothar. But it’s different for me.”

“Just give it time. Be patient.”

Patience. As if that was the problem. As if waiting long enough would somehow erase the decades of violence etched into his soul. He almost laughed at the absurdity.

“I’ve been patient for years,” he said instead. “But I know what I am. What I’m meant for.”

“And what is that?”

“This,” he said, gesturing to his weapons, his armor. “Fighting. Protecting. Not... loving.”

The word felt foreign on his tongue, awkward and ill-fitting, and his brother frowned at him.

“The gods work in ways we cannot always see. They brought Kari to me when I thought?—”

“You are not me.” He cut Wulf off, his voice low but firm. “You never were. Even before...” He trailed off, unwilling to revisit the years of their separation. “You were always meant for leadership. For family.”

He looked up at the stars, cold and distant above them. “Some of us are meant to stand guard at the edges. That’s my place, and I’ve accepted it.”

The certainty in Wulf’s eyes didn’t waver. “I don’t believe that. And neither should you.”

He shook his head, a bone-deep weariness settling over him. His brother’s faith had always been a mystery to him—beautiful but incomprehensible, like a language he’d never learned to speak.

“The Old Gods don’t hear warriors like me,” he said quietly. “And even if they did, some things can’t be fixed with divine intervention.”

He adjusted the weight of his pack one final time, his decision unchanged.

“Three months,” he conceded, the words hanging between them like a fragile bridge. “I’ll see if I can pick up Khorrek’s trail. If not, I’ll travel into the Old Kingdom and see what I can discover. I’ll be back in three months.”

Wulf sighed, then nodded, acknowledging the finality in his words.

“Three months,” he repeated, a hint of warning in his voice. “Or we’ll come looking for you.”

He nodded once, grateful for his brother’s concern. No more needed to be said between them. With practiced efficiency, he checked his weapons—knife at his belt, axe strapped to his back, short sword at his hip. The familiar weight of steel against his body centered him, reminded him of who he was.

He clasped Wulf’s hand, his brother’s grip strong and reassuring, then turned and strode toward the tree line, moving with practiced silence. The forest welcomed him

with its familiar symphony—the whisper of night wind through pine needles, the distant call of a hunting owl, the soft rustle of small creatures in the underbrush. Here, at least, he knew his place.

Khorrek had been heading south towards the Old Kingdom when Lothar had tracked him down. It was as good a place as any to start. The path would take him through the Sentinel Mountains—a treacherous route, but nothing he couldn't handle. He set a steady pace, his eyes automatically adjusting to the darkness beneath the trees, forcing himself to focus on the trail instead of the raw conversation with his brother.

As the village lights faded behind him, he felt the familiar tension in his shoulders begin to ease. The forest asked nothing of him but vigilance. It didn't expect him to be anything other than what he was—a warrior, a hunter, a solitary figure moving through the shadows.

The mountain path rose before him, silver-touched in the moonlight. His stride lengthened, his breathing steady as he began the ascent. Three months. He'd given his word, and despite everything, his word was one thing he'd never broken.

CHAPTER 2

Lyric pressed her hand against the side of the wooden hive, listening to the contented hum within. The vibration traveled through her fingertips, a language she'd come to understand over the years. Her bees were happy today.

“That's it, little ones,” she murmured, sliding the frame back into place with practiced care. “Another good harvest coming.”

The morning sun warmed her shoulders as she worked, casting long shadows across her small plot of land. Three beehives stood in a neat row beside her vegetable garden, bordered by wildflowers she'd cultivated specifically to nourish her winged

companions.

She paused to stretch her back and admire the rest of her modest holding—the small stone cottage with its thatched roof, the garden beds bursting with late summer crops, the cluster of fruit trees heavy with ripening fruit. A far cry from how it had looked when she arrived. The beds had been abandoned and overgrown, the cottage roof leaking, and the door almost falling off the hinges. It had taken her most of the first year to make it look more like the home she had always dreamed of, and she'd continued to improve it ever since.

Serena would have been pleased. The old woman had been one of the few bright spots in her past, but she'd taken Lyric under her wing when she joined a traveling merchant caravan. She'd insisted on sharing her wagon with Lyric, had warned off the caravan master when he'd tried to insist that her employment included serving his needs, and filled their evenings with stories about her cottage and garden.

Then one night Serena had handed her a document bequeathing her the small holding—her lined face gentle but sad.

“You don't belong here, child.”

“But—”

“And once I’m gone, they’ll be no one to protect you from him.” She nodded towards the front of the caravan where the caravan master rode. “This is mine to give and it would have been lost if I hadn’t met you. Take it, child. Take it and build the life you deserve.”

A week later and Serena was gone, passing away peacefully in her sleep. Lyric had covered her face with a mourning veil and said the ritual prayers before slipping away in the night, the document carefully packed with her meager belongings. It had taken her two weeks to reach her destination and she’d walked through the village, tired and dusty but hopeful. As she’d set to work on the cottage and gardens, she kept expecting someone to challenge her, to tell her she didn’t belong and send her away.

Instead the villagers had been cautious, but not unfriendly. As she’d continued to work on the property, they’d start to drop by with offers of help, although she’d been reluctant to accept. Inher experience, nothing was ever offered for free. Despite her reticence she’d found a place here.

Sometimes the reality of that still struck her as impossible.

She’d been sent away from Kel’Vara when she was eighteen, but the memory of its slums still clung to her like a shadow—the narrow, filthy streets where she’d spent her childhood dodging trouble and scrounging for survival. The stench of too many bodies pressed together in crumbling tenements. The constant vigilance required to avoid the Dusk Guard’s attention. But at least she hadn’t been alone then. She’d found a family of sorts with a gang of street kids until their leader, the recipient of her

childish affections, had deserted them and she'd found herself working in the kitchens of a wealthy noble.

In many ways it had been a better life—enough to eat, a safe place to sleep, and even an education of sorts—but it hadn't been enough to ease her sense of betrayal. Even now the thought of him made her chest ache, a bruise that never quite healed.

She shook off the memories and turned back to the hives. From slum rat to beekeeper. The journey between those two lives contained enough pain to last several lifetimes, but standing here now, she couldn't bring herself to regret a single step. In Kel' Vara, she'd been nothing—less than nothing. Another hungry mouth in the lower quarter, easily forgotten, easily discarded. She had a new life now, a new purpose, and the past belonged where she'd left it—in the dust of that brooding city, far from the simple beauty of her home.

She closed up the last of the hives, careful not to disturb the diligent workers. A bee landed on her wrist, its tiny feet tickling her skin. She remained still, watching as it explored before taking flight again.

“Go on then,” she said with a small smile. “The lavender's blooming by the eastern wall.”

The sun climbed higher, promising a warm day ahead. Perfect weather for the beans she needed to stake and the new row of cauliflower waiting to be sown. She'd just finished storing her beekeeping tools when she spotted a familiar figure making her way up the narrow dirt path from the village to the cottage. Marla Tanner, plump and perpetually cheerful, waved enthusiastically as she approached, a basket swinging from the crook of her arm.

“Morning, Lyric! Glorious day, isn't it?” Marla called out, slightly breathless from the uphill walk.

She wiped her hands on her apron and offered a small smile. “Morning, Marla. What brings you by so early?”

“Early? Sun’s been up for hours, dear!” Marla chuckled, setting her basket down on the wooden table outside the cottage. “Brought some fresh bread and that cheese you liked last time. Thought we might trade for some of your honey, if you’ve got any to spare. And maybe those lovely snap peas I see climbing your trellis?”

“I can spare a small jar. Let me fetch it for you.”

Inside, she selected a jar of amber honey from her shelf and gathered a basket of the ripest peas. Marla’s trades were always fair, and the woman had been kind to her ever since she’d settled here. Still, she kept their interactions brief, preferring to remain cordial but distant.

When she returned, Marla was admiring the beehives with obvious appreciation.

“Such clever little creatures,” Marla remarked. “Much like their keeper.”

She smiled as she handed over the honey and vegetables. “The bread smells wonderful.”

“My mother’s recipe.” Marla beamed, then her expression brightened further. “Oh! Nearly forgot why I really came. The harvest festival starts next week in the village. Three days of music and dancing and more food than anyone can eat. You should come this year.”

Turning away, she busied herself arranging Marla’s offerings in her own basket. “I appreciate the invitation, but?—”

“But nothing! You missed it last year, and the year before.” Marla’s eyes twinkled.

“Besides, Harlin the cooper has been asking about you specifically.”

Harlin was a nice man, simple and honest—and far too innocent for someone with her past. Even if she had been interested in him, she wouldn’t have encouraged him.

“I’m not much for crowds,” she said softly. “Or dancing.”

“Nonsense. Everyone enjoys a good festival.”

Not everyone, she thought. Not those who’d seen how quickly celebration could turn to violence in Kel’Vara’s crowded quarters. Not those who’d learned that drawing attention meant drawing danger.

“I’ll think about it,” she offered, knowing she wouldn’t.

Marla sighed. “That’s what you said last year, dear. Whatever happened before you came here—it doesn’t matter to us.”

If only that were true.

She watched Marla disappear down the path, the woman’s invitation still hanging in the air between them. The harvest festival. Another opportunity to pretend she belonged here, among these simple, honest people who had never witnessed the darkness of Kel’Vara.

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Sighing, she turned back to her garden. The cauliflower wouldn't plant itself.

As she bent over, a flurry of movement caught her eye—a small figure racing up the hill, all flailing limbs and determination—and she couldn't help smiling. Samha was barely eight years old with perpetually scraped knees and a gap-toothed smile that could melt the coldest heart.

“Miss Lyric! Miss Lyric!” he called, waving frantically as he bounded toward her cottage.

“Slow down,” she called as he almost tripped over a rock to one side of the path.

The boy skidded to a halt before her, chest heaving, face smudged with dirt. His dark hair stood up in wild tufts, and a fresh scratch marked his left cheek. Despite this, his eyes sparkled with the unbridled enthusiasm only children seemed capable of maintaining.

“How are the bees today?” he asked between gulps of air.

The corner of her mouth twitched upwards. “They're just fine.”

“Can I see them? Please?” He bounced on his toes, barely containing his excitement.

“Not today. They're busy making honey.” She studied his disappointed face, feeling a familiar warmth spread through her chest. “But I might have something else for a brave explorer.”

She reached into the pocket of her apron, retrieving a small wrapped candy—honey mixed with herbs from her garden, hardened into a golden treat. She'd started making them last winter, partly out of boredom during the long, cold nights.

His eyes widened. "Is that...?"

"A honey drop." She placed it in his palm. "For the bravest adventurer on the mountain."

The boy clutched it like treasure, his smile radiant. "Thank you, Miss Lyric!"

Without another word, he spun around and took off down the path, arms spread wide like wings, making a buzzing sound as he went.

A smile lingered on her lips as she watched him go, his childish buzzing fading into the distance. Children were easier than adults—they asked simpler questions, expected straightforward answers. They didn't probe into her past or wonder why she lived alone on the edge of their village.

The smile slipped from her face as she turned back to her garden, picking up her trowel again. Her fingers worked automatically, digging neat furrows in the dark soil for the cauliflower seeds. The steady rhythm usually brought her peace. Today, it couldn't quiet the hollow feeling spreading through her chest.

Samha's joy was so pure, so uncomplicated. Even with his patched clothes and perpetually dirty face, he radiated a sense of belonging that she'd never known. He and his sister were orphans—barely scraping by on Lina's meager earnings from the village tavern—but they had something far more valuable than gold.

She pressed a tiny seed into the earth, remembering how Lina always mended his clothes with colorful patches, turning necessity into art. How the miller hoisted him

onto broad shoulders during village gatherings. How the tavern keeper's wife braided flowers into his hair when she thought no one was watching.

She'd never known such simple tenderness.

In Kel'Vara's lower quarter, children were burdens or assets, rarely treasured for themselves. Her own mother had died at birth. The woman who raised her afterward—a midwife with her own brood of hungry mouths—had done so with grim efficiency rather than affection.

"Stop daydreaming," she muttered to herself, moving along the row. "Seeds won't plant themselves."

But the ache persisted. She'd built this life with her own hands—this garden, these hives, this small sanctuary. She'd learned to survive, to provide for herself, to find beauty in solitude. Yet watching Samha race home to waiting arms made her aware of all she'd never had. All she might never have.

The rest of the day proceeded as it usually did—quiet, busy, the work hard but satisfying—and yet the memories continued to haunt her. As she struck flint against steel to coax a small flame to life in her hearth that evening, her restlessness remained. The familiar ritual of bringing warmth to the cottage usually brought comfort, but tonight her movements felt mechanical, disconnected from the peace she typically found in her evening routines.

She added kindling, watching the flames grow and catch. Outside, crickets began their nightly chorus while the lastbirdsong faded into darkness. The cottage walls glowed amber in the firelight—the same walls she'd repaired with her own hands, the same roof that sheltered her from rain and snow.

Yet tonight, the security of these four walls pressed against her like a cage.

Stop it, she scolded herself as she moved to her small wooden table, where she'd laid out a simple dinner—bread from Marla, goat cheese, and vegetables from her garden. She cut a slice of bread, spread goat cheese across its surface, and took a bite without tasting it.

The hollow feeling from earlier had expanded, becoming an ache beneath her ribs that food couldn't satisfy. She pushed her plate away half-eaten.

“This is foolishness,” she muttered to the empty room. “I have everything I need.”

She did have everything she needed—shelter, food, safety. The life she'd built here was more than she'd ever dared hope for in Kel'Vara. Her cottage might be small, but it was clean and sturdy. Her garden flourished. Her bees produced sweet honey. No Dusk Guards patrolled her path. No nobles looked through her as if she were invisible—or worse, as if she were prey.

She moved to her window, pushing open the shutters to gaze at the valley below. Pinpricks of light dotted the darkness—lanterns in village windows, families gathering for evening meals, children being tucked into bed with stories and kisses.

The ache intensified. She pressed a hand against her chest as if to contain it.

“Stop this,” she whispered to herself. “Be grateful for what you have.”

But gratitude couldn't fill the emptiness that seemed to expand with the night. Here in her peaceful little cottage, there was nothing to distract her from the truth—she was alone. And she wasn't sure how much longer she could bear it.

CHAPTER 3

In the foothills below the Sentinel Mountains, Egon knelt by a narrow stream. He'd made good time, covering most of the mountain pass in just a few weeks, each step taking him further from his brothers and the painful reminders of what he could never have. The sun was still high, but his eyelids felt heavy, and his steps had grown sluggish. He'd decided to stop early for the day.

He scooped up a handful of water and splashed his face, enjoying the coolness on his skin. It was crisp and clean, unlike the muddy sludge he'd so often been forced to drink in Kel'Vara, or even the musty water from his waterskin during his mercenary years. Such a simple thing, clean water, and so easily taken for granted.

Refreshed, he glanced around the small clearing and decided to push forward a little further. He'd reached the border between Norhaven and a narrow spur of land that was part of the Old Kingdom, and the forest grew denser as he descended into the ancient land. Sunlight filtered through the canopy in broken shafts, illuminating patches of ground covered in moss and fallen leaves. He moved silently beneath the trees, his warrior's instincts never fully at rest.

He paused at the base of a massive oak, its trunk wider than three men standing shoulder to shoulder. Something glinted through the foliage ahead—stonework, weathered by time. Curious, he pushed forward.

An overgrown clearing opened before him, dominated by a crumbling stone shrine. Vines embraced the ancient structure, and moss carpeted its base. Despite the decay, he recognized the unmistakable symbols of the Old Gods carved into the weathered stone and sighed.

Wulf's words echoed in his mind. The Old Gods are working on our behalf.

He snorted. The gods had never seemed to work on his behalf before. Why would they start now?

Despite his skepticism, he circled the shrine, studying the faded carvings. The sacred animals belonged to Wulf, but the small spring that bubbled up from the base of the central stone undoubtedly belonged to Freja.

He dropped his pack and sat heavily on a fallen column, running a calloused hand over the scar on his face. The silence of the clearing pressed in around him.

"I don't seek what I cannot have," he muttered to the empty air. "I'm not a fool."

A breeze stirred the leaves overhead, whispering words he couldn't hear, and he found his gaze drawn to the shrine again. With a resigned sigh, he approached the altar stone at the center. Clearing away debris, he knelt in front of it, his movements slow and cautious.

"I ask nothing for myself," he said softly. "But... guide me to be useful. Let me protect what my brothers have found." He paused, swallowing hard. "Let me be worthy of the clan that took me in when no one else would."

The words felt strange on his tongue—prayer had never been his way. But as he spoke, something settled in his chest, like the weight of his axe in his hands before battle. Not comfort, exactly, but purpose.

He remained kneeling in front of the shrine until the sun began its descent toward the horizon. The forest had grown quieter, the daytime chorus of birds giving way to the occasional rustle of creatures preparing for evening. His muscles ached from days of travel, but he pushed on, determined to cover more ground before making camp.

The trees thinned gradually, and he slowed his pace as the valley opened before him, bathed in the golden light of late afternoon. Below, nestled against a gentle slope, lay a small village—a cluster of modest dwellings with thatched roofs and gardens.

He frowned. He hadn't intended to encounter any settlements so soon. Humans were unpredictable—Norhaven had always had an amicable relationship with the Old Kingdom but after years of Lasseran's propaganda they might reach for their weapons rather than tolerating his presence. Best just to observe and keep moving.

He skirted along the tree line, keeping to the shadows while studying the layout of the village. Smoke rose from chimneys, and figures moved between buildings, their voices carrying faintly on the breeze. No signs of armament or soldiers. Simple folk living simple lives.

Something about one particular holding caught his eye—a small cottage on the outskirts of the village, surrounded by well-tended gardens and a cluster of fruit trees. Beehives lined the southern edge of the property, and a stone wall, low but sturdy, marked its boundaries. He couldn't explain the draw he felt towards that particular dwelling—perhaps it was just its isolated position, so similar to that of his own cottage.

A flash of movement caught his eye, and he watched, unexpectedly mesmerized, as a

woman moved gracefully between the trees, gathering fallen fruit into a basket.

“Foolishness,” he muttered to himself, yet he didn’t turn away.

The wind shifted, bringing with it the scents of the village—woodsmoke, baking bread, livestock. But underneath those familiar smells was something else—something that made him freeze in his tracks.

His nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply. Sweet, like honey and summer flowers, but with an undercurrent that stirred something primal in his chest. The scent seemed to emanate from the very cottage he’d been watching.

His heart pounded suddenly, his body tensing as if preparing for battle, though no threat was visible. He’d never encountered this particular scent before, yet something about it felt achingly familiar, like a half-forgotten memory, a richer, sweeter version of something he’d once known.

His breath caught in his throat as the woman turned, basket balanced against her hip, and the last rays of sunlight illuminated her face. Recognition hit him like a physical blow.

Lyric.

Impossible.

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But even as he tried to deny it, he couldn't escape the truth. The child he remembered had fulfilled the promise of beauty that had hidden beneath the dirt and lack of food. Even from here he could tell her eyes were the same soft green, although her hair had darkened to a rich chestnut brown. Her features had sharpened into elegance, her body filled out with soft curves and long limbs. The years had transformed the girl he'd known into a woman in her prime.

He closed his eyes, willing himself to turn away, to continue down the mountain and forget what he'd seen. But the moment he did, he could see another memory—Lyric as he'd last seen her, her thin face tear-streaked and terrified, calling for him as she was dragged away, even though she couldn't have seen him in the darkness. The image was as vivid as if it had happened yesterday, not over a decade ago, and his throat tightened at the memory.

He'd been assured that she was safe, that she would be cared for and protected—as long as he obeyed, and as long as he'd stayed away. He'd searched for her when he finally escaped the fight pits but she'd been long gone. He's never expected to find her again, let alone in the tiny corner of the Old Kingdom.

He wanted to know what had happened to her, how she'd come to be here, safe from harm. His Beast growled approvingly as he took a half step forwards, urging him to go to her, but instead he retreated deeper into the shadows, his mind racing. What twisted game were the gods playing?

His fingers dug into the rough bark of the tree he leaned against. Why would she be here, of all places? A remote village at the edge of the Old Kingdom, far from the sprawling markets and stone walls of Kel'Vara?

He watched as she straightened, suddenly alert. She scanned the tree line, as if sensing his presence. For a heart-stopping moment, he thought their eyes met across the distance, and he shrank back instinctively. Even if she could forgive him for what she undoubtedly considered his betrayal, what would she think of him now—huge and scarred, the violent life he'd led etched on his face.

She frowned, and then returned to her work, yet he couldn't tear his gaze away. Everything about her called to him, tugged at something deep in his chest. That scent—sweet and warm—filled his senses again, making his head swim.

Had the Old Gods actually heard his awkward prayer? Was there a reason he was here?

He shook his head, dismissing the foolish thought. Coincidence, nothing more.

Still, that sweet scent filled his nostrils, distracting him in ways he'd never experienced. Honey and wildflowers, with something else beneath—something that made his blood rush hot through his veins. His usual hunter's focus scattered like leaves in a storm.

He shifted his weight, meaning to retreat deeper into the forest's shadows. His foot moved backward, searching for solid ground, but his attention remained fixed on her slender form as she worked in her garden.

A dry branch beneath his boot gave way with a sharp crack that echoed in the air.

"Fool," he hissed under his breath, instantly freezing in place.

Across the clearing, her head snapped up. She set down her basket and straightened slowly, eyes warily scanning the tree line.

He pressed himself back against the rough bark of the ancient oak, cursing his carelessness. Decades of warrior training, countless battles and hunts, and he'd made a mistake a first-year scout would be ashamed of. All because he couldn't control his reaction to her.

His heart hammered against his ribs as he held his breath. The forest had gone silent around them—even the birds seemed to wait. She took a deliberate step toward the trees where he hid.

“Who's there?” Her voice carried clearly across the distance, firm and unafraid.

He weighed his options. He could vanish into the forest—he was still skilled enough to disappear if he moved now. Or he could reveal himself and face whatever came next.

Neither option appealed to him. The first felt like cowardice, the second like madness.

He remained frozen, his muscles tense with indecision. The rational part of his mind urged him to retreat into the forest depths—to continue his mission without this complication. Yet something stronger held him in place, rooted him to the spot as surely as the ancient oak he leaned against.

She took another step toward the tree line, her eyes narrowing as she peered into the shadows.

“I know you're there,” she called, her voice steady despite the slight tremor in her hands. “Show yourself.”

The command in her tone stirred something in him—respect, perhaps. She stood alone, facing an unknown threat without backup, without weapons. Brave or foolish,

he couldn't decide.

With a resigned grunt, he stepped forward. Sunlight spilled across his scarred face and huge body as he emerged from the forest's edge. He straightened to his full height, knowing the intimidating picture he presented—a towering orc warrior, battle-worn and grim, his axe hanging at his side.

He braced himself for the inevitable—her scream, her terror, her flight. These days it was the way of things between their kinds, especially for a single human female encountering him alone.

But Lyric didn't scream. She didn't run.

Instead, she went utterly still, her eyes widening as they locked with his. The basket slipped from her fingers, forgotten as apples tumbled across the ground.

Confusion flickered across her face, followed by something that made his chest tighten—recognition.

“Egon?” His name fell from her lips in a whisper, soft and disbelieving.

She remembered him.

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Before he could respond, the color drained from her cheeks, and her knees buckled beneath her.

He moved without thinking, covering the distance between them in three long strides. He caught her before she hit the ground, her slight weight nothing against his strength. She lay limp in his arms, her head falling back, exposing the vulnerable line of her throat.

That scent—honey and wildflowers—enveloped him, stronger now with her pressed against his chest. It made his head swim, his senses sharpen and blur all at once.

Mate, his Beast purred, but he immediately shook his head. No, it wasn't possible. Damn Wulf and his talk of the Old Gods. Damn his own foolishness. But kneeling there with Lyric in his arms, he couldn't deny the effect she had on him. She was beautiful and brave, and he'd abandoned her to a fate that still haunted him.

And now she was unconscious in his arms.

He cursed himself, his past, and the tangled web he seemed to be caught in. But as he gently lifted her against his chest, as her soft hair spilled over his forearm, he couldn't bring himself to regret this unexpected reunion.

CHAPTER 4

Lyric's world swam slowly back into focus, a kaleidoscope of green leaves and dappled sunlight above her. Something solid and warm cradled her body. Not the ground—arms. Strong arms that could crush her but instead held her with surprising

gentleness.

She shifted her head and found herself staring up at a face she'd never expected to see again.

"Egon?" she whispered again, her voice barely audible.

He looked different—so different from the young orc she remembered. He looked so much older, harder, with new scars etched across his green skin. He'd been big when she'd known him but he was huge now, his shoulders broader, muscles more defined beneath the worn leather of his armor.

But his eyes... those amber eyes remained unchanged. The same intensity, the same careful watchfulness. The same hidden depth that had always made her feel as though he saw more than others.

"You're real," she murmured, reaching up hesitantly. Her fingers hovered near his face but didn't touch, afraid he might dissolve into nothing. "I thought I was dreaming."

A breeze rustled through the trees, carrying the scent of her garden—rosemary and sage, honey and earth. The familiar smells anchored her to reality. This was happening. He was here.

"How did you—" She tried to sit up too quickly, and her head spun. His arms tightened slightly, steadying her.

"Easy," he rumbled, his voice deeper than she remembered.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she became acutely aware of their proximity—the warmth of his body, the careful way he held her, the slight tremble in

his hands that belied his unreadable expression.

“I never thought I’d see you again,” she said, finding her voice at last.

Those familiar amber eyes brought a rush of memories—a younger, less scarred version of him standing between her and danger all those years ago. For one breathless moment, joy surged through her veins like wildfire.

Then reality crashed down.

He had disappeared. Without explanation. Without goodbye.

She pushed against his chest, struggling to free herself from his arms.

“Put me down,” she snapped.

He hesitated, then carefully lifted her to her feet. His hands lingered for a moment, as if making sure she was steady, before he stepped back. The space between them felt both too vast and not nearly enough.

“What are you doing here?”

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold despite the afternoon warmth. He’d vanished the day they dragged her out of the hideaway concealed beneath a burned down building. She’d screamed for him, called his name, even as the burly man who had hauled her away had ignored her cries.

He’d been nowhere.

For months afterwards, she’d convinced herself that he’d been dead. That it was the only possible reason he’d left her. Even then her mind had conjured a thousand

images of him, bloody and wounded, dying alone in some forgotten corner of Kel'Vara. Those first few months in Lord Sarnak's household she'd been watched too closely to escape, but eventually she'd found an opportunity to slip away and had immediately gone in search of him.

Their hideaway was still abandoned with no sign that anyone had been there. She'd combed the streets and back alleys, the Hollow Market and the Warborn District, the places she'd once called home, looking for him, looking for any trace of him.

Instead, she'd found Paxton, one of the kids who'd stayed with them for a while. Paxton told her that Egon had been alive the day she had vanished. That he was a fighter now. She'd yelled at him and run away, crying until there were no more tears left. Alone in the darkness she'd finally accepted the truth—he was gone for good.

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Eventually she'd returned to Lord Sarnak's household, knowing that it was safer than remaining on the street. Eventually she'd stopped thinking about him, stopped dreaming about him. But she'd never forgotten the pain of his betrayal.

"I didn't know you were here," he said finally, his deep voice stirring memories she'd tried to bury. "I was passing through."

"Passing through," she echoed, the words bitter on her tongue. "Like you passed through my life before?"

He flinched almost imperceptibly. Good. Let him hurt too.

"You left me," she continued, unable to stop now that the words had started flowing. "I thought you cared about me, but you just vanished. Do you have any idea what happened after? What I had to endure?"

The years of struggle flashed through her mind—the work, the struggle, but most of all the crushing loneliness of having no one to trust, no one to turn to.

Despite her anger—despite the years of abandonment and the bitter taste of betrayal on her tongue—she found herself missing the security of his arms around her. The warmth. The strange sense of rightness that had washed over her, even in her confused state.

She hated that feeling. Hated how easily her body remembered what her mind had fought so hard to forget.

“I should go,” she said, turning toward her cottage. Her sanctuary. The place where no one could hurt her.

But her legs felt unsteady, and she stumbled slightly. He steadied her, then immediately stepped back, respecting the distance she’d created between them. The restraint in his movement made something in her chest ache.

“Lyric,” he said, her name sounding different in his deep voice than it ever had from anyone else’s lips.

How many nights had she lain awake, imagining hearing him say her name again? How many times had she convinced herself that he must be dead—because surely nothing else would have kept him from returning?

Yet here he stood, very much alive, looking at her with those intense amber eyes that seemed to see straight through to her soul.

“Why are you here?” she asked again, softer this time, hating the vulnerability in her voice.

The wind picked up, carrying the sweet scent of her apple trees towards him. Her bees hummed in the distance, going about their work, oblivious to how her carefully constructed world had just been shattered. The life she’d built—her garden, her bees, her quiet existence—suddenly felt like a fragile illusion.

She wrapped her arms tighter around herself, trying to reclaim the sense of security she’d felt in his embrace. It was foolish. Dangerous. She’d learned long ago not to depend on anyone but herself, but she couldn’t deny the treacherous longing that spread through her chest like honey—warm, sweet, and impossible to contain.

“What happened to you?” she demanded. “You disappeared without a word. I...I

looked for you.”

The admission cost her, each word like a shard of glass in her throat.

His massive shoulders sagged slightly, and his tusks caught the late afternoon light as he sighed

“It’s a long story.”

“A long story?” She gave a humorless laugh. “Years of my life wondering if you were dead or alive, and all you can offer is ‘it’s a long story’?”

She turned away, unable to bear the sight of him standing there—so solid, so real—when she’d convinced herself he was lost to her forever. Her cottage beckoned, a sanctuary she’d built with her own hands. She could retreat there, shut the door, pretend this encounter had never happened.

But she couldn’t make her feet move.

“How did you end up here?” he asked quietly. “It’s so far from Kel’Vara.”

The question caught her off guard. How could she possibly explain the journey that had brought her here? The slow, painful process of building a life from nothing, not just after he left, but after Lady Sarnak had sent her away. Of eventually finding a home in this village and learning to trust—or at least to coexist—with the villagers. She turned back to face him, suddenly aware of the irony.

“It’s a long story,” she echoed, the fight draining from her voice.

Their eyes met, and something unspoken passed between them. A shared understanding that neither of their paths had been easy, that the years had changed

them both in ways that couldn't be explained in a few simple sentences.

The realization didn't erase her anger or heal the wound of his abandonment, but it created a small crack in the wall she'd built around herself—just enough to make her wonder what force had kept him away, and what twist of fate had brought him back into her life now.

Every instinct honed from years of self-preservation told her to send him away, to protect the fragile peace she'd built here. Yet beneath the hurt and anger, a more primal feeling stirred—a memory of trust, of safety in his presence.

“You should go,” she said, but the words lacked conviction.

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The sun dipped lower on the horizon, casting long shadows across her garden. Soon darkness would fall. The thought of him disappearing into the night, perhaps forever this time, created an unexpected ache in her chest.

“At least tell me why you’re here first.”

He shifted his weight, the leather of his armor creaking softly. His eyes scanned the perimeter of her property with the watchfulness of someone accustomed to danger. Some habits never changed, it seemed.

“I’m investigating something,” he said finally. “Reports of... unusual activity in the Old Kingdom.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Unusual how?”

“Lasseran may be building an army. Beast warriors.”

The name sent a chill down her spine. Memories of Kel’Vara flashed through her mind—the towering black citadel, the Dusk Guard patrolling narrow streets, the whispered disappearances.

“And you’re doing this alone?” she asked, unable to mask her concern.

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “I work better alone.”

The statement hung between them, laden with unspoken history. Had that been his reasoning all those years ago? That whatever had taken him away from her was

something he needed to face alone? What had happened to him in the years since she'd last seen him? Where had he been? What scars—visible and invisible—had he collected along the way?

Despite everything, she found herself wanting to know this older, more weathered version of the orc who had once saved her life. The realization was unsettling, like discovering a door she thought permanently sealed was actually just slightly ajar.

“You look tired,” she said abruptly. “And hungry, probably. Where were you planning to stay?”

His gaze drifted towards the darkening horizon. The sun was setting faster now, painting the sky in deep oranges and purples. Night would fall soon, and with it the chill that always seemed to seep into her bones this time of year.

He shrugged. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

Of course he hadn’t. Some things hadn’t changed. She remembered how he’d always lived in the moment, focused on the immediate task rather than what might come next.

“The village has an inn,” she offered, then frowned. “Though I doubt Marken would rent to...” She trailed off, not wanting to finish the thought.

“An orc,” he said flatly. “I’m used to it.”

The resignation in his voice tugged at something in her chest. She knew what it was like to be unwelcome, to have doors closed based on nothing more than what others perceived you to be.

She glanced at her cottage—small but sturdy, with its thatched roof and stone walls.

Her sanctuary. The one place in the world where she felt truly safe.

Was she really considering this?

“You could stay here,” she said, the words tumbling out before she could reconsider. “Just for tonight.”

Surprise flickered across Egon’s face, quickly masked by his usual stoic expression. “I don’t want to impose.”

“It’s not an imposition if it’s an invitation,” she replied, doing her best to keep her voice casual despite her doubts. Was this wise? After everything, after all the years of silence, to let him into her home?

But the alternative—sending him into a night where he’d likely find no shelter—felt wrong. Whatever had happened between them, whatever explanation he owed her, she couldn’t bring herself to be that cruel.

“I have a spare pallet,” she said, making her decision. “You can sleep by the hearth.”

She turned toward her cottage, not waiting to see if he would follow, but the soft pad of footsteps behind her confirmed he had accepted her offer.

Her heart raced as she approached her door, suddenly seeing her home through a stranger’s eyes—through his eyes. The carefully tended garden, the neat stack of firewood, the small bench where she sat on warm evenings. All evidence of the life she’d built alone.

A life he knew nothing about. A life that, until today, had not included him.

CHAPTER 5

Egon watched Lyric march to her door before stopping to glare back at him. His heart hammered against his ribs. The offer of shelter—her shelter—felt like more than he deserved.

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“I can make camp,” he said awkwardly. “The woods are?—”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She cut him off, her voice sharp but with an undercurrent of something softer. “It’s going to rain tonight. I can smell it in the air.”

He glanced up at the darkening sky. No clouds yet, but the air did have that heavy stillness that preceded a storm. Still, he hesitated. It would hardly be the first time he’d spent a night in the rain.

He shifted his weight, acutely aware of his size, his otherness in this human village. “People might talk if they see?—”

“Let them.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I’ve never cared what they think before, and I’m not about to start now.” Her eyes narrowed. “Unless you’re worried about your reputation?”

The absurdity of it—him, an orc warrior, concerned about village gossip—almost made him laugh. Almost.

“Come on.” She turned and opened the door to her cottage. “I have questions, and you’re going to answer them. All of them.”

He took a deep breath and followed. Each step felt like crossing a boundary he’d convinced himself would remain forever closed. The cottage was small by any standard, but well-kept with flowers lining a neat stone path and drying herbs hanging from the eaves.

She paused and looked back at him. For a moment, her expression softened, and he caught a glimpse of the girl he'd once known.

"You'll have to duck," she warned as she stepped inside.

He bent his head and stepped across the threshold, immediately conscious of how his big body dominated the small space. His shoulders nearly brushed the doorframe on both sides, and he had to stoop to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling beams. He shouldn't be here—every instinct told him so—yet he couldn't bring himself to turn away.

The cottage was warm, inviting in a way that he'd never achieved in his own cottage. More dried herbs hung from the rafters, filling the air with an earthy fragrance that mingled with honey and the faint scent of fresh bread. A small hearth glowed with embers in one corner, casting a gentle light across simple wooden furniture. Everything had its place—jars of preserves lined neatly on shelves, a small table with two chairs, a rocking chair beside the fire with a half-finished blanket draped over it.

"You can put your pack there," she said, gesturing to a corner.

Egon carefully removed his weapons and travel pack, placing them gently against the wall, trying to make himself smaller somehow, less intrusive. His calloused fingers, built for battle, seemed too rough for this place of peace she'd created.

"It's... nice," he managed, the words inadequate. "Your home."

She couldn't quite hide her smile as she followed his gaze around the cottage.

"It suits me."

She was right. Even after so long, everything felt intensely, intimately Lyric.

Turning away she stirred the fire to life and hung a kettle over the flames. Her movements were fluid, confident—she belonged here. He did not.

He remained standing, afraid to sit on furniture that might break under his weight, afraid to touch anything that might shatter in his hands. The domesticity of it all felt foreign, like a language he'd never learned to speak. This was a world of gentle things, of small comforts carefully tended. His world had always been one of survival, of blood and battle. Even after he'd come to live with his brothers, he'd never quite managed to achieve that level of quiet comfort.

“Are you just going to stand there?” she asked without turning from the fire.

“I...” he started, but couldn't find the words.

With a sigh, she turned to face him, her expression unreadable. “Sit down. You're making me nervous.”

He hesitated, then gingerly sat on the edge of a wooden chair, ready to leap to his feet if it showed any signs of buckling under his weight.

She shook her head, a hint of amusement in her eyes. “You're not a ghost. Stop hovering.”

The kettle whistled, and she busied herself preparing tea. He watched her, fascinated by her sure movements, the grace in her hands. She was so different from the waif he'd known before. He'd found her on the street, held down by two males three times her size and age. Despite that she'd been fighting with every ounce of strength in her small body. He'd pulled them off of her, sending one head first into the alley wall, the other smashing to the ground.

She'd looked up at him, green eyes wide, and he'd expected her to flee—even then he

was big and scarred. Instead she'd smiled up at him.

"Thank you," she said, as politely as any noble lady.

Then she'd held up her arms and he'd found himself picking her up and carrying her back to his hideaway. He'd spent the next six years protecting her—until he couldn't protect her any longer. The painful memory made his shift uncomfortably and the chair gave an ominous creak.

Another hint of amusement crossed her face before she sliced a loaf of bread and ladled a fragrant stew from a pot that hung near the hearth.

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“It’s mostly vegetables,” she explained, not meeting his eyes. “And the rabbit that tried to steal them.”

The normalcy of it all—this quiet domestic scene—felt surreal after years of blood and battle. His hands, scarred and calloused from wielding weapons, looked out of place against the worn wooden table.

“Thank you,” he said as she placed a bowl before him. The stew smelled rich with herbs and root vegetables. Simple fare, but his stomach growled appreciatively.

They ate in silence for several minutes, and he tried to remember the last time he’d shared a meal like this. He’d come close a few times—eating around the campfire with his brothers, or dining in Wulf’s private quarters with his brothers and their mates—but he’d always felt just a little bit on the outside. He’d never had just a quiet supper across from someone who knew him... or had known him, once.

“So,” she finally broke the silence, gazing at him across the table, “you disappeared.”

He swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“I heard you became a fighter.”

Her voice was absolutely neutral but he flinched nonetheless. How could he explain how that had happened, let alone explain the years that followed? The blood, the pain, the things he’d done to survive.

“At first,” he said cautiously.

“And after?”

“A lot of places, but eventually I headed north.” He hesitated again. “I found my brothers.”

Her neutral expression was replaced by shock.

“You have a family? How did you find them?”

“Accidentally. After I left my... job, I went to Norhaven to find out how other orcs lived. Wulf recognized my pendant.” It was the one thing he’d held onto since he was a child. “Both he and Lothar had a similar one.”

“Two brothers?” She shook her head. “I always assumed you were as alone as I was.”

“I was. Then.” It had been a shock to discover otherwise. Sometimes he still found it hard to believe, especially as most orcs were lucky to father one child, let alone three. “They said my father—our father—hadn’t known about me.”

She gave him a skeptical look. “And you believed them?”

“Yes.” Wulf and Lothar were good males. He chose to believe that his father had been as well. “My mother told me the same thing, even though she never gave me any details about him.”

“And you?” he asked, desperate to shift the focus. “How did you come to be here, with...” He gestured around the cottage. “All this?”

“I left Kel’Vara after...” She hesitated. “When I was eighteen. I ended up here and I wandered for a while. I met someone on the road—she bequeathed this place to me when she’d died. She’d been gone a long time. It needed a lot of work.”

He nodded, imagining her rebuilding, piece by piece. Creating something from ruins. He understood that, at least.

She broke off a piece of bread and he found himself studying her hands. They were strong hands, marked with the evidence of hard work—calluses from garden tools, a small burn scar on one thumb, fingernails kept practical and short. Not the soft hands of the noble ladies in Kel’Vara, but capable hands that had built this life for herself. Not perhaps what he had hoped for but she seemed content.

“It’s remarkable what you’ve created here,” he said, meaning it. “This whole village seems... peaceful.”

Something in her expression shifted, and she set down her spoon.

“It looks that way, doesn’t it? Peaceful. Simple. But things are never entirely what they seem.”

He frowned at her across the table, alert to the change in her tone. “What do you mean?”

“Lord Trevain,” she said, lowering her voice even though they were alone. “He controls these lands. At first, he seemed fair enough—collected reasonable taxes, kept bandits away. But lately...” She glanced toward the window, as if checking for eavesdroppers. “Things have changed.”

“How so?”

“New taxes. Stricter rules. Men in armor we’ve never seen before, coming and going from his keep.” Her fingers traced a pattern on the wooden table. “And there are rumors that he’s pledged allegiance to Lasseran, not King Aldran.”

He felt a cold weight settle in his stomach. This was exactly what he'd feared—Lasseran's influence spreading beyond Velmora's borders, into the Old Kingdom and perhaps elsewhere.

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“Has anyone from Kel’Vara visited? Officials, soldiers?”

She nodded. “Twice in the past month. They came with sealed documents for Lord Trevain. No one knows what was in them, but after each visit, things got worse. More restrictions, more demands. The harvest festival next week—it used to be a celebration. Now a quarter of everything must go to the lord’s keep.”

“And no one resists?” he asked automatically, then winced. These people were not soldiers.

“With what? Pitchforks against trained soldiers?” she asked, confirming his assumption. “These are good people who simply want to live their lives.”

The familiar weight of responsibility settled on his shoulders. This was why he’d left Norhaven—to find evidence of Lasseran’s plans. He hadn’t expected to find it here, in this small village, with her.

She abruptly pushed back from the table and started picking up the dishes, gesturing at him to remain in place when he started to rise. After placing them in the sink, she pulled down a clay jug and two pottery mugs and brought them to the table. The cider caught the firelight, glowing like liquid gold as she poured it onto the mugs.

“From my own trees,” she said with a hint of pride. “Last autumn’s batch.”

The cider tasted of sunlight and crisp fall days—sweet with a tart finish that lingered pleasantly. So different from the harsh spirits warriors drank to forget battles. This was a drink meant to be savored, to celebrate life’s small victories.

“It’s excellent,” he said, surprised by how much he meant it.

She smiled, the first real smile he’d seen since their reunion. It transformed her face, softening the wariness that had settled there. For a heartbeat, he glimpsed the girl he’d known in Kel’Vara—before everything had changed.

“The orchard takes work,” she said, her smile fading as she gazed into her cup. “Everything does, really. The bees, the garden, keeping the cottage from falling apart again...” She sighed, rolling her shoulders as if to ease an ache. “Not that I mind. It’s mine. All of it.”

She said it with such fierce pride that he felt something stir within him—admiration, and something else he couldn’t name.

“You’ve done all this alone?” he asked.

“Who else would help me?” The question wasn’t bitter, just matter-of-fact.

He stared into his cup, his thoughts racing. He needed to learn more about Lasseran’s activities in the region. The village’s location—close enough to gather intelligence, far enough to avoid immediate detection—was ideal. And Lyric clearly knew the local situation.

But beneath these tactical considerations lay something deeper, something he was reluctant to examine too closely.

“I could help,” he said abruptly, surprising himself. “With your holding. Just for a while.”

Her eyebrows rose. “You?”

“I’m stronger than I look,” he said, trying to strike a humorous note.

“You look plenty strong,” she countered, studying him. “But why would you stay?”

“I would like to learn more about Lord Trevain’s connection to Lasseran. And...” He hesitated, then decided on honesty. “And I owe you. For leaving.”

She held his gaze for a long moment, her expression unreadable.

“Just for a short time,” he added quickly. “In exchange for shelter.”

He watched her face as she considered his offer, noting the small furrow that appeared between her brows. Her eyes—those green eyes he remembered so clearly—searched his face. He did his best to keep his expression open, willing her to see the truth, even though he wasn’t entirely sure what that truth was anymore.

“Two weeks,” she finally said. “You can stay and help for two weeks. Then we’ll see.”

Relief flooded through him, although he couldn’t explain why it mattered so much that she’d agreed.

“Two weeks,” he echoed with a nod.

She rose from the table and moved to a small chest in the corner, pulling out a couple of folded blankets and what looked like a threadbare quilt.

“I don’t have a proper bed for you,” she said, not meeting his eyes. “But I can make a pallet here by the hearth. It should be comfortable enough, and you’ll stay warm.”

What am I doing here, he wondered again as he watched her create the pallet. This

peaceful place, this woman with her garden and her bees—they belonged to a world he'd never known. A world he had no right to disturb.

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Yet when she glanced up at him, something in her expression—a flicker of the past, perhaps—held him in place. He couldn't leave. Not yet.

"It's not much," she said, giving the makeshift bed a rueful look.

"It's more than enough," he answered truthfully. After years of sleeping on rocky ground or in crude military barracks, the simple pallet looked like luxury.

She nodded, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear—a familiar gesture that sent an unexpected pang through his chest. "We should get some rest. Dawn comes early on a farm."

He knew he should walk away. Stay for the information he needed about Lasseran's activities, then disappear again. That would be safest—for her, if not for him. But watching her prepare a place for him in her home, he realized he couldn't bring himself to leave. Not tonight. Perhaps not for the full two weeks.

And that realization terrified him more than any battle ever had.

CHAPTER 6

Lyric sat on the bench in front of her cottage, pretending to sort through her herb basket while stealing glances at Egon. His massive hands, which should have been clumsy, manipulated the wooden fence posts with unexpected precision. Sweat glistened on his green skin as he hammered a nail into place with one hard strike, muscles rippling beneath his tunic.

“You planning to fix that fence or murder it?” she called, immediately regretting the playfulness in her voice. She wasn’t supposed to be warming to him.

He looked up, a half-smile tugging at his scarred face. “The fence deserves what it gets. I think it’s been plotting against your chickens.”

The easy banter caught her off guard. Last night, after preparing his sleeping pallet in the main room, she’d retreated to her bedroom certain she wouldn’t sleep a wink. An orc warrior under her roof—the same one who’d vanished from her life years ago—should have kept her wide awake with anxiety. Instead, the steady rhythm of his breathing had lulled her into the deepest sleep she’d known in years.

She watched him straighten a crooked post with a single powerful push. The fence had been on her repair list for months, but she’d never found the time between tending bees, harvesting vegetables, and preserving food for the upcoming winter.

In spite of her resolution to keep her distance, she found herself dipping a bucket of water from her well and bringing him a cup.

“Would you like some water?”

He paused, wiping his brow before accepting it. As he did their fingers brushed, and she pulled back too quickly, sloshing water onto his hand.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

“No harm done.” He drained the cup in one swallow.

The morning sun highlighted new scars she hadn’t noticed in the dim evening light. What battles had he fought? What horrors had he seen? Questions burned on her tongue, but she swallowed them down. Better to keep a distance between them.

“Sleep well?” he asked, returning to his work.

“Better than I expected.” She folded her arms. “You?”

“Your floor’s more comfortable than most places I’ve slept.”

She tried not to think about what that meant. The hardships he must have endured. The places he might have been while she was building her little sanctuary.

“I’ll bring you some breakfast,” she said abruptly, turning back toward the cottage. “It’s the least I can do for...” she gestured at the nearly-repaired fence.

“Lyric.” His voice stopped her. “Thank you. For letting me stay.”

She nodded without looking back, unable to trust her voice. The genuine gratitude in his tone threatened to crack something she’d carefully sealed inside herself long ago.

She returned with a basket of freshly baked bread and a small crock of honey butter. She set the basket on a nearby stump, taking a moment to appreciate the progress he’d made.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, breaking off a piece of bread and spreading it with honey butter before offering it to him.

He devoured it quickly, then nodded his thanks before reaching for the plank beside him. As he positioned it against the posts and hit it with the hammer, the weathered wood splintered with a sharp crack, breaking clean in two. The pieces clattered to the ground at his feet.

She tensed, instinctively bracing herself. The Egon she’d known years ago would have cursed, maybe even thrown the remaining piece in frustration. His temper had

been quick then—never directed at her, but flaring hot against objects and circumstances that defied him.

Instead, he laughed. A deep, rumbling sound that caught her completely off guard.

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“This wood has more fight in it than it looks,” he said, shaking his head. He crouched down, examining the broken pieces with careful fingers. “Too dry. It’s been out in the sun too long.”

He set the broken pieces aside and calmly reached for another plank, measuring it against the gap with the same patient precision as before.

She realized she was staring. This wasn’t the reaction she’d expected. The Egon in her memories would have taken the wood’s failure as a personal affront.

“You’ve changed,” she said before she could stop herself, and he tensed.

“Had to.” He resumed his work, not looking up. “Some lessons come harder than others.”

She watched him test the new plank, his movements deliberate and careful. The years had changed him in ways that went beyond the scars and increased muscle. There was a steadiness to him now, a measured patience she didn’t recognize.

She found herself wondering what experiences had tempered his rage into this calm determination. What had happened to the impulsive young male she’d once known?

Still puzzling over the changes in him, she picked up her beekeeping tools, planning to check the hives while he worked on the fence.

“What do you do with those?” he asked, genuine curiosity in his voice. “I’ve never seen it up close.”

“Would you like to see?” she asked before she had a chance to reconsider it.

When he nodded she handed him the spare veil, watching as he carefully fitted it over his massive head. His tusks made it sit awkwardly, and she bit back a smile.

“The trick is to move slowly,” she explained, lighting the smoker. “Bees don’t like sudden movements or loud noises. They’re sensitive to mood too—they can sense fear or aggression.”

He nodded solemnly. “Like most creatures worth knowing.”

She’d never thought of it that way, but he was right.

As they approached the hives, she expected him to hang back. Most visitors did, intimidated by the buzzing clouds. Instead, he followed close behind her, his footsteps deliberately measured.

“I’ll open this one,” she said, puffing smoke at the entrance of her oldest hive. “The smoke calms them, makes them focus on the honey rather than us.”

She worked the tool under the lid, prying it up carefully. Bees rose in a gentle cloud as she lifted the cover. To her surprise, Egon didn’t flinch or step back. He leaned forward slightly, eyes wide with interest behind the veil.

“They’re smaller than I imagined,” he murmured.

She pulled out a frame heavy with honey and brood. “See here? The queen lays eggs in these cells. The workers tend them until they hatch.”

His big hands, which had hammered with such force on the fence, now hovered with impossible gentleness near the frame. A single bee landed on his gloved finger, and

he held perfectly still, watching it.

“You’re good with them,” she said, surprised. “Most people get nervous, make the bees agitated.”

“They’re just protecting their home. I can respect that.”

She studied him as he carefully observed the bee crawling across his glove. The intensity of his focus, the controlled stillness of his body—it revealed a patience she’d never associated with him before.

“Would you like to hold the frame?” she offered, extending it toward him.

He gently took the frame from her hands, handling it with exquisite care. The bees continued their work, undisturbed by the transition.

“They’re so calm. They must trust you.”

“We have an understanding.” She shrugged, but she found herself smiling despite her determination to keep her guard up. “I protect them, they provide for me. It’s simple.”

But nothing about this moment felt simple. Standing beside him in her apiary, watching him handle her bees with such reverence, stirred emotions she’d locked away years ago. The contrast between his intimidating exterior and the gentleness he displayed confused her carefully constructed defenses.

“How did you learn this?” he asked, carefully returning the frame when she reached for it.

She slid it back into place, grateful for the familiar task that gave her hands something to do. “After I was—after I left Kel’Vara, I wandered for a while. For a

while I found work on a farm where the old woman kept bees. She saw something in me, I guess, and she taught me everything she knew.”

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She closed the hive, remembering Matilda's weathered hands guiding hers, the old woman's patience as Lyric fought through her fear of the stinging insects.

"I had to move on when she died," she continued, her throat tightening unexpectedly. Matilda's son had lost no time in disposing of the bees. He'd made it clear that the only way she was welcome to remain was in his bed.

He remained silent, but she felt his eyes on her through the veil. She hadn't meant to share that much—hadn't talked about Matilda to anyone in the village. Something about his quiet attention drew words from her that she usually kept buried.

"The bees were my first real accomplishment," she admitted, moving to the next hive. "Even before this cottage. They taught me that I could build something, protect something. That I had value beyond..." She trailed off, unwilling to venture into darker memories.

"Beyond what others saw in you," he finished softly.

She looked up sharply, meeting his eyes through the mesh of their veils. He understood. Somehow, despite everything that had changed between them, he still understood.

As she closed the final hive, a familiar bleating sound caught her attention. She turned to see Barnabas, her neighbor's goat, trotting determinedly toward her garden with mischief in his eyes.

"Oh no you don't," she muttered, hastily setting down her smoker. "That's the third

time this week.”

Before she could move, Barnabas changed direction and charged straight for the newly repaired fence. The goat launched herself at Egon’s handiwork, front hooves landing on the top rail with a decisive thud. The wood creaked ominously.

“No!” she cried, but it was too late.

Barnabas’s weight sent the top plank crashing down. The startled goat bleated in alarm, then somehow tangled himself in Egon’s tool belt, which he’d left hanging on a post. In his panic, he dragged it through the mud, scattering nails and sending the hammer flying.

Once again she expected his temper to flare. Hours of careful work undone in seconds by a wayward goat would test anyone’s patience.

Instead, he looked at the destruction, then at the goat—now wearing his tool belt like some bizarre harness—and burst into laughter. The sound rumbled from deep in his chest, rich and unexpected.

“Your village has some strange warriors,” he said, still laughing.

The absurdity of it hit her then—this massive orc warrior brought low by a stubborn goat barely reaching his knee. A giggle escaped her, then another, until she was laughing alongside him, harder than she had in years.

“That’s Barnabas,” she managed between breaths. “Terror of gardens everywhere.”

He approached the goat with slow, deliberate movements. “Easy now, little warrior,” he murmured. “Let’s get you untangled.”

She expected Barnabas to bolt—the goat barely tolerated her touch on the best days. But something in Egon’s calm demeanor seemed to soothe the animal. He knelt beside him, his big hands gentle as he worked the leather strap free from his horns.

“You’ve caused quite enough trouble for one day,” he told the goat conversationally, as if they were old friends. Barnabas responded by butting his head against his palm.

She shook her head in disbelief. “He hates everyone. How did you do that?”

He shrugged, scratching behind Barnabas’s ears. “Animals know when you respect them. Even the troublemakers.”

Reaching for the goat’s frayed harness, she smiled at Egon. “I’ll take him home before he decides to fight any more fences.”

His laughter followed her out of the garden.

Late that night she tossed in her bed, the sheets tangling around her legs as the night deepened. The cottage creaked and settled, punctuated by Egon’s deep, steady breathing from the main room. She’d left her bedroom door cracked open—for safety, she told herself, though she knew the truth was more complicated.

She rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling beams barely visible in the darkness. Why couldn’t she sleep? She’d worked even harder than usual today, and she should have been exhausted. Instead, her mind raced with images of Egon’s scarred hands gently cradling the honeycomb, his unexpected laughter when Barnabas destroyed his work, the way his eyes had softened when she mentioned Matilda.

This wasn’t the Egon she remembered. The young male who’d disappeared from her life had been volatile, passionate, unpredictable. This Egon moved with deliberate care, as if constantly aware of his own strength and the fragility of everything around

him.

What had happened to him in those years between?

She turned onto her side, punching her pillow into a more comfortable shape. It shouldn't matter. Whatever life had done to reshape him wasn't her concern. He was just passing through, helping with repairs in exchange for shelter. Nothing more.

Yet she couldn't stop remembering how it felt when their fingers brushed over the water cup. The strange sense of recognition that had nothing to do with memory and everything to do with something deeper, more primal.

A log shifted in the fireplace, sending a brief glow through the crack in her door. In that momentary light, she caught a glimpse of his sleeping form. One massive arm was thrown above his head and his face was relaxed in sleep, vulnerable in a way that he kept carefully concealed in waking hours.

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She closed her eyes, but the image remained and she pressed her face into the pillow, frustrated with herself. She'd built this life carefully, brick by brick, creating safety where there had been none. The last thing she needed was to let herself get drawn into his orbit, knowing he would disappear just as suddenly as he'd arrived.

No matter how familiar his eyes were. No matter how gentle his hands could be.

CHAPTER 7

Egon stood in Lyric's garden, watching her gather vegetables. The soft light of the morning sun burnished her hair and skin, giving her an otherworldly glow. She moved with an easy grace between the rows, her fingers brushing gently over the leaves and stems as she selected the ripest offerings.

She hadn't noticed him watching her—a rare moment of peace in her usually busy day. He'd woken before dawn, a habit formed from years on the road. When he'd seen her slip out the cottage door, he'd followed, curious.

The garden was her domain, that much was clear. The careful placement of plants, the trellises and supports for the vining varieties, the neat rows and paths—all spoke of careful planning and constant maintenance. Yet the results looked anything but rigid. Flowers bloomed in riotous colors and shapes, drawing bees and butterflies to their pollen-laden depths, and birds sang from the branches of the small fruit trees.

She moved as if she were part of the garden itself, her presence natural and right among the verdant growth. She belonged herein a way she had never belonged in Kel'Vara. He'd hoped for a better life for her, but he'd never pictured this. Then

again, he was a product of the city—he'd hadn't known that such a life existed.

When she looked up and found him watching her, she smiled, her face soft and open for a moment before it shuttered once again.

"I'm taking these to the tavern," she said, holding up the basket, and he had to bite back a protest. The village was safe, and she was in no danger just because she was out of his sight.

And I gave up the right to protect her, he reminded himself as he retrieved the post digger and set to work—but he still watched her slender body move gracefully down the path until she was out of sight.

He hefted the post digger, his muscles bunching as he drove it into the ground. He was determined to finish repairing the chicken coop before the end of the day, the memory of her smile yesterday when he'd fixed the fence lingering in his mind.

A twig snapped behind him and he whirled, cursing himself for his inattention.

A small boy stood at the edge of the clearing, perhaps seven or eight years old, with a mop of unruly brown hair and clothes that had seen better days. His face was smudged with dirt, but his eyes were bright with curiosity.

He froze. Children always feared him. His size, his tusks, his scars—they took one look and ran screaming. He braced himself for the inevitable terror, the shouts that would bring angry villagers with pitchforks and torches.

Instead, the boy grinned, revealing a gap where his front teeth should be.

"You're really big!" The child approached without hesitation. "Are you helping Miss Lyric?"

Egon lowered the post digger slowly, unsure how to respond. “I am.”

“I’m Samha.” The boy stuck out his hand with the confidence of someone twice his size. “Miss Lyric gives me honey candy sometimes. Are you her friend?”

He carefully extended his hand, gently engulfing the boy’s tiny fingers in his big palm. “I’m Egon.”

“Your teeth are amazing!” Samha pointed at Egon’s tusks. “Can you eat really tough meat with those? My sister says I can’t have a knife yet, but you don’t need one, do you?”

A startled laugh escaped before he could prevent it.

“They can be... useful,” he admitted.

He watched the boy bounce on his toes, eyes wide with curiosity. Children had always given him a wide berth—their instincts telling them to fear the scarred orc warrior, but this one seemed to have missed that lesson entirely.

“What are you doing?” Samha peered at the half-dug post hole. “Is that for the chicken coop? Miss Lyric said the foxes got in last week.”

“Yes.” Egon gripped the digger tighter, unsure how to navigate this unexpected conversation. “I’m reinforcing the fence.”

“Can I help?” Samha was already rolling up his sleeves, revealing skinny arms that looked barely capable of lifting a woodenspoon, let alone a shovel. “I’m really good at digging. Once I found a buried treasure in the creek bed. Well, it was just an old horseshoe, but Lina said that’s lucky.”

He hesitated. The boy would only slow him down, but there was something in those eager eyes that made him nod. “You can hold this steady while I dig deeper.”

Samha’s face lit up as if Egon had offered him the moon. He grabbed the post digger’s handles, his entire body tensing with the effort to keep it straight.

“Are those battle scars?” Samha asked, eyeing the jagged mark across Egon’s forearm. “Did you fight in a war?”

“Something like that.”

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“How many men have you killed? A hundred? Two hundred?”

Egon frowned. “Killing isn’t something to boast about.”

“Oh.” Samha’s brow furrowed. “But you protect people, right? Like in the stories?”

The question caught him off guard. “I... try to.”

“That’s what warriors do.” Samha nodded sagely, as if confirming a universal truth.

“Are you protecting Miss Lyric now?”

He paused, the digger halfway into the earth. “I’m just helping with chores.”

“Where’d you get your sword? Can I see it? Can you teach me how to fight? Do orcs eat different food than humans? Why are your teeth so big? Can you?—”

“One question at a time,” he said, surprised to find his lips twitching toward a smile.

Two hours later Samha finally departed, the boy’s boundless energy still not exhausted after helping—or trying to help—with every task Egon undertook. Despite himself, he’d grown fond of the child’s endless questions and earnest attempts to assist, even when those attempts created more work.

“Can I come back tomorrow?” Samha asked.

“If you want.” The words surprised him as much as they seemed to delight the boy.

“Really? I can help you sharpen your sword?” Samha bounced on his toes.

“We’ll see.”

He ruffled the boy’s hair, marveling at how natural the gesture felt, and went back to work.

As evening settled over the valley, he washed up at the outdoor basin, scrubbing dirt from beneath his nails. The day’s labor had been satisfying in a way that battle never was. Creating rather than destroying. Fixing instead of breaking.

Inside, Lyric had prepared a savory dish of grains and roasted vegetables. The rich aroma filled the small cottage, making his stomach growl appreciatively. They ate in companionable silence for a while, the awkwardness of the previous night somewhat diminished.

“Samha seemed to enjoy himself,” she said finally, breaking the quiet. “I think he looks up to you.”

He grunted, uncomfortable with the implication. “He’s a good kid.”

“He is.” She smiled at him, and something in his chest tightened.

A sharp knock at the door cut through the moment. She frowned, setting down her spoon, as she rose to answer.

“Who could that be at this hour?”

He tensed, his hand automatically dropping to the knife at his belt, and shifted his weight, ready to move if necessary.

Lyric opened the door to reveal two elderly villagers—a gray-haired man with a face like weathered leather and a thin woman whose sharp eyes immediately fixed on Egon.

“Evening, Lyric,” the man said, his voice neutral but his posture rigid. “Word reached us that you’re housing a... visitor.”

“Elder Tomas, Elder Harta.” Lyric’s voice remained calm, though he could see her tension in the set of her shoulders. “This is Egon, an old friend of mine. He’s helping with repairs around my holding.”

He stood, conscious of how his height forced him to duck beneath the ceiling beams, and nodded politely. He did his best to keep his expression neutral, though he recognized the fear and suspicion in their eyes. He’d seen it countless times before.

“We don’t often see orcs in these parts,” Elder Harta said, her thin lips pressing together. “Especially not since Lord Trevain aligned with Lasseran.”

“I’m just passing through,” he said, keeping his voice low and non-threatening. “Helping Lyric with some work before I move on.”

The elders exchanged a look that spoke volumes, then politely asked Lyric to step outside. Once again he bit back a protest and simply moved to one side as they left. They didn’t close the door completely, and fragments of their conversation drifted back to him. He remained perfectly still, his enhanced hearing catching every word.

“—harboring an orc?” Elder Harta’s voice was sharp with disapproval. “Have you lost your senses, girl?”

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“He’s not just any orc,” Lyric replied, her tone clipped. “I’ve known Egon for years.”

He moved closer to the door, careful to keep his footfalls silent. He didn’t want to eavesdrop, but he needed to know what they were saying about him.

“You can’t trust his kind,” Elder Tomas said. “Just last month, the Hollowbrook settlement was?—”

“You said yourself that no one knew what happened there,” Lyric cut him off. “And anyway, he’s from Norhaven.”

“That makes it worse!” Harta hissed. “They’ve turned their backs on civilized ways.”

His jaw tightened, his tusks pressing against his lower lip. The ignorance stung, but he’d heard worse. Far worse.

“He knows all about your so-called civilized ways,” Lyric snapped. “I met him in Kel’Vara, long before I came here. And he helped me when no one else would.”

“Kel’Vara?” Elder Tomas’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You never speak of that place.”

“I don’t have many pleasant memories,” she said firmly. “Bug Egon is one of them. I know him. He poses no threat to this village.”

“The council will want assurances,” Harta insisted. “Especially with Lord Trevain’s men watching our every move.”

“Then I’ll give them assurances,” Lyric said. “But I won’t turn away a friend because of your prejudice.”

He stepped back from the door, something warm unfurling in his chest at her defense. Friend. The word shouldn’t have meant so much, but it did. He had so few of them.

Egon quickly returned to his seat at the table as the door creaked open. Lyric stepped inside, her cheeks flushed with anger. She closed the door with more force than necessary, the wooden frame shuddering against its hinges.

“I apologize,” he said quietly. “I’ve brought trouble to your door.”

Lyric shook her head, lips pressed into a thin line. “You heard?”

“Enough.” He traced a finger along a knot in the wooden table. “Your elders have reason to be cautious. Especially with Lasseran’s influence spreading.”

She dropped into her chair with a sigh. “They’ve never even met you. They have no right to judge.”

Egon’s chest tightened at her defense of him, even as guilt gnawed at his conscience. The last thing he wanted was to cause problems for her in a community she’d worked so hard to build a place in.

“Perhaps it would be best if I left tonight,” he suggested, the words bitter on his tongue. “I can make camp in the forest. Continue my journey tomorrow.”

Her head snapped up, her green eyes flashing. “Absolutely not.”

“But your standing here?—”

“Is my business.” She crossed her arms. “I still have work for you to do. The chicken coop isn’t finished, the north field needs clearing, and the roof leaks when it rains.”

He studied her face, searching for any sign of doubt or hesitation. He found only stubborn determination. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure I need help with those chores,” she said, her tone softening slightly. “And I’m sure I don’t care what the village council thinks about who helps me with them.”

Their eyes met across the table. The firelight caught in her hair, turning the chestnut strands to burnished copper. He swallowed hard, hope flickering dangerously in his chest. Was it possible she wanted him to stay for reasons beyond manual labor?

“Then I’ll stay,” he said, his voice rougher than he intended. “For as long as you need me.”

Her expression softened. She stood and began clearing the dishes. Egon rose to help, their hands brushing as they worked side by side in comfortable silence.

When the kitchen was clean, she paused beside him. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “For understanding. And for staying.”

Before he could respond, she rose on her tiptoes and pressed a quick, gentle kiss to his scarred cheek. His skin burned where her lips had touched.

“Goodnight, Egon,” she whispered, then turned and disappeared into the bedroom.

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He stood frozen for a long moment, his fingertips touching the spot where her lips had been, his heart thundering in his chest. Eventually he made himself move and went to the pallet she'd prepared for him, but he couldn't sleep. He stared at the ceiling beams instead, his mind racing. The warmth of her lips against his cheek lingered like a brand. Such a small gesture, yet it had shaken him to his core. No one had shown him such tenderness in... he couldn't remember how long.

The cottage creaked and settled around him, but beneath the familiar night sounds, he thought he detected movement outside. Whispers. Footsteps that approached, then retreated.

He rose silently, years of warrior training allowing him to move without sound despite his size. Careful not to wake Lyric, he slipped his tunic over his head and buckled his sword belt, the weight of the weapon reassuring against his hip.

Outside, the night air carried the scent of wood smoke and damp earth. He scanned the perimeter of her property, his night vision picking out details that human eyes would miss. Nothing seemed immediately wrong, but the prickling sensation between his shoulder blades told him they were being watched.

"Fools," he muttered, circling the cottage. What did they think he would do? Attack in the night? Steal their children? The old prejudices ran deep, and he'd been naive to think he could stay here without consequence.

He did another circuit, then settled on a stump near the edge of the property, positioning himself where he could see both the cottage and the path leading to the village. He would stand guard tonight. Not because he feared for himself, but because

he wouldn't let harm come to her because of him.

The memory of her fierce defense before the Elders warmed him against the night's chill. She had stood her ground, refusing to bend to their prejudice. For him. A scarred, broken orc warrior who had no business bringing trouble to her door.

And that kiss...

He shook his head, trying to clear it of foolish thoughts. It had been a gesture of friendship, nothing more. He had no right to hope for anything beyond that. Still, his hand drifted to his cheek, tracing the path her lips had taken.

What was he doing here? He should be tracking Lasseran's influence, gathering intelligence for his brothers. Instead, he was fixing fences and digging post holes, pretending he could belong in this peaceful corner of the world.

CHAPTER 8

Lyric tossed in her bed, sheets tangled around her legs from hours of restless turning. Moonlight streamed through the window, casting long shadows across her small bedroom. The Elders' concerned faces kept appearing in her mind, their thinly veiled warnings about harboring an orc in their peaceful village.

She hadn't planned the words that tumbled out in Egon's defense. They simply emerged, fierce and certain. But now, staring up at the ceiling beams, she realized every syllable had been true. The Egon she'd known in the capital had been reckless and wild, but even then, he'd shown flashes of the gentleness she witnessed now. The way he handled her bees with such care. How patiently he'd answered Samha's endless questions.

Something rustled outside her window, and she sat up, straining to listen. Through

her window, she caught a glimpse of Egon's broad silhouette pacing the perimeter of her cottage, his movements precise and watchful. He was guarding her home.

Her chest tightened. How many nights had she lain awake in this bed, feeling utterly alone? She'd built walls around herself even in this village, kept everyone at a careful distance. Yet in mere days, he'd slipped past those defenses.

"What are you doing?" she whispered to herself, pressing her palms against her eyes.

The kiss she'd planted on his cheek burned in her memory. It had been impulsive—a gesture of gratitude for his willingness to leave rather than cause her trouble. But the warmth of his skin, the startled look in his eyes afterward...

She slipped from bed and padded to the window. Egon had stopped moving and stood facing the forest edge, alert and watchful. The moonlight silvered his scars, transforming them into something almost beautiful, as if ancient runes were etched upon his skin.

The villagers were wrong about him. They saw only what they expected to see—a dangerous creature from frightening tales. They couldn't see what she did: the male who fixed her fence without complaint, who made her laugh for the first time in years, who now stood guard while she slept.

"They don't know you," she whispered against the glass. "But I do."

She watched him for a while longer before finally returning to bed and falling into a restless sleep.

Some time later she woke with a start, unsure what had roused her. The cottage lay silent, wrapped in the peculiar stillness that came just before dawn. Remembering Egon pacing outside her window in the moonlight, she slipped from her bed, pulling a

shawl around her shoulders against the morning chill. The floorboards creaked beneath her bare feet as she approached her bedroom door. Pushing it open just enough to peer through, she froze.

The pallet she'd made for him beside the hearth lay empty, blankets neatly folded.

Her heart sank. He'd left without saying goodbye—just like before. A familiar hollowness spread through her chest, the same emptiness she'd felt years ago when he disappeared.

“Not again,” she whispered, pushing the door wider, her eyes fixed on the abandoned sleeping space. After everything—after the way she'd defended him to the Elders, after that impulsive kiss—he'd simply vanished. Perhaps he'd decided the village's suspicion wasn't worth enduring, or perhaps he'd never intended to stay at all.

She wrapped her arms around herself, fighting against the ache of disappointment. She'd been a fool to let herself believe things could be different this time. A fool to imagine that the connection between them might be strong enough to overcome the barriers of their separate worlds.

“I should have known,” she murmured, moving toward the cold hearth.

Her fingers traced the edge of the folded blanket, catching a hint of his familiar scent. Had he left during the night after guarding her home? Or waited until first light to slip away unnoticed?

It didn't matter. The result was the same. Once again, she stood alone in a space that suddenly felt too large, too quiet.

She sank onto the pallet, pulling one of the blankets around her shoulders and breathing in his scent. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself one moment of weakness,

one moment to acknowledge how much his presence had meant to her.

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When she opened her eyes again, her gaze caught on something in the corner. His pack leaned against the wall, partially hidden by the shadows. Relief washed through her so powerfully that her knees nearly buckled. He hadn't left after all.

Climbing quickly to her feet she rushed to the door and pushed it open. The early morning air chilled her bare feet as she stepped onto the porch, quickly scanning her property.

He stood near the fence he'd reported, his massive body silhouetted against the pale dawn sky, his shoulders hunched slightly as if under an invisible weight. He hadn't heard her open the door, lost in whatever thoughts consumed him.

She watched him for a moment, studying the way the rising sun highlighted the contours of his face, the scars that hadn't been there when she'd known him before. What battles had he fought? What pain had carved those marks into his skin?

When she took a step forward, a porch board creaked beneath her weight and he turned instantly, his posture shifting from contemplative to alert in a heartbeat. As soon as he saw her, something in his eyes softened, though the wariness didn't completely fade.

"I thought you'd left," she said, hating the vulnerability that crept into her voice.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't leave without saying goodbye."

The simple statement settled something inside her. Of course he wouldn't—not this Egon, who repaired her fences and guarded her home while she slept. This wasn't the

impulsive male she'd known in the capital. The years had changed them both.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked, wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders against the morning chill.

His gaze drifted back to the forest. "Thinking."

She went to join him, the dew-soaked grass chilling her bare feet. "About what?"

"About the past, I suppose."

"You never answered my question," she said quietly, staring out at the same tree line that held his attention. "Why did you leave me all those years ago?"

The question had burned inside her since the moment she recognized him in her garden. Every shared meal, every casual conversation had only intensified her need to know. She'd built a life from the ashes he'd left behind, but the wound of his disappearance had never fully healed.

His jaw tightened, but his eyes remained fixed on the horizon, as if the answer lay somewhere in the distance.

"I didn't have a choice," he said finally, his voice low and rough, but she shook her head emphatically.

"Everyone has a choice, Egon."

She turned to face him fully, no longer content to share his view of the forest. The morning light revealed new scars she hadn't noticed before—a thin line across his neck, another near his temple.

“I searched for you,” she continued, the words spilling out before she could stop them. “I thought something terrible had happened. Then I was told you’d become a fighter, and I realized you’d simply... left me.”

He finally looked at her, his expression pained. “It wasn’t simple.”

“Then explain it to me,” she demanded, crossing her arms. “I deserve that much, don’t I? After all this time?”

The wind rustled through the nearby trees, filling the silence between them as she watched emotions war across his face—reluctance, regret, and something deeper she couldn’t name.

“Yes,” he finally conceded. “You deserve the truth.”

Despite his agreement, he seemed to be struggling to find the words. The morning light caught in his amber eyes, revealing depths of pain she hadn’t seen before. Whatever he was about to tell her, it cost him something to speak it aloud.

“I made a deal,” he finally said, his voice so low she had to lean closer to hear him. “A deal I thought would protect you.”

“Protect me?” Her breath caught. “From what?”

His gaze dropped to the ground between them. “From the life we were living. From me.”

The words hung in the air between them, and she shook her head, not understanding.

“I was broken, Lyric.” His big hands clenched at his sides. “Broken and angry. You were growing up and you deserved better than what I could offer you then.”

A strange ache bloomed in her chest. All these years, she'd imagined countless scenarios—that he'd grown bored of the city, that he'd found someone else, that she simply hadn't mattered enough for him to say goodbye. Never once had she considered that he'd left because he thought it was best for her.

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“You didn’t think I deserved to make that choice for myself?” she demanded, and he flinched as if she’d struck him.

“I was trying to do the right thing.”

“The right thing would have been to talk to me,” she said, wrapping her arms tighter around herself as the morning chill seemed to seep into her bones. “Not disappear without a word.”

“I know that now,” he admitted. His eyes finally met hers again, filled with a regret so raw it made her throat tighten. “I’ve learned many things since then. Too late for it to matter, I suppose.”

She wanted to stay angry—anger was safer than the other emotions swirling beneath her ribs—but something in his expression made it impossible. The Egon who stood before her now was not the same one who had left her all those years ago. The scars that marked his skin seemed to extend deeper, to places she couldn’t see.

She studied the lines of his face, seeing both the boy she’d once known and the male he’d become. The anger she’d nursed for years began to dissolve, replaced by something more complicated—a recognition that they’d both been shaped by pain and circumstance.

“Did you ever think of me?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “After you left?”

His expression softened, vulnerability replacing the guarded look he usually wore.

“All the time. I... I hoped you were happy.”

The simple admission sent warmth spreading through her chest. She took a step closer, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his body.

“I thought of you too,” she confessed. “Even when I tried not to.”

His eyes searched hers, as if looking for some trick in her words. Finding none, he exhaled slowly, his breath visible in the cool morning air.

“I never meant to hurt you, Lyric.”

She sighed, then reached up hesitantly, her fingers hovering near the scar that ran along his neck. “May I?”

He nodded, almost imperceptibly, and she traced the raised line of tissue with gentle fingertips. His skin was warm beneath her touch, and she felt him tremble slightly.

“What happened?” she asked softly.

“A reminder,” he murmured, “of the price of carelessness.”

Her hand drifted up to another scar near his temple. Each mark told a story of survival, of battles fought and endured, and she found herself wanting to know them all.

“We’ve both changed,” she said, her hand coming to rest against his cheek.

He leaned into her touch, his eyes closing briefly. When he opened them again, the vulnerability there took her breath away.

“Some things haven’t,” he said, his voice rough with emotion, and she felt the truth of it down to her bones.

Despite the years and distance between them, despite the pain and misunderstandings, the connection that had drawn them together was still there.

“No,” she agreed softly. “Some things haven’t.”

But their connection was no longer quite the same. It was no longer the worshipful admiration of a child for her protector—it was something more. Her heart hammered against her ribs as her thumb feathered across his scarred cheek. The morning air seemed charged with something electric, a current she could no longer resist. His eyes held hers, filled with a longing that mirrored her own.

Without allowing herself to overthink, she rose on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his. The instant their mouths met, heat exploded through her body. What she’d intended as a gesture of understanding transformed into something far more powerful, years of unspoken feelings igniting between them like dry tinder catching flame.

He froze for a heartbeat—just long enough for doubt to flicker at the edges of her mind—before his arms encircled her, pulling her against the solid wall of his chest. His mouth moved over hers with an intensity that made her knees weak, a low growl rumbling from deep in his throat.

Her fingers threaded through his hair, anchoring herself to him as the kiss deepened. He tasted like her honey and something uniquely him that made her head spin. The gentleness she’d witnessed in his care for her bees and patience with Samha contrasted sharply with the barely restrained passion in his kiss. Her body responded with a hunger that shocked her, every nerve ending suddenly, gloriously alive.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, she kept her eyes closed for a

moment, afraid to see regret on his face. But when she finally opened them, she found only wonder in his gaze, as if he couldn't quite believe what had just happened between them.

“I didn’t—” she began, then stopped, unsure what she meant to say. She hadn’t planned this, hadn’t allowed herself to imagine crossing this line with him. Yet now that she had, it felt inevitable—as if every moment since his reappearance had been leading them here.

His hand came up to cup her cheek, his thumb tracing the curve of her lower lip with a tenderness that made her heart ache. She should step back, should reconsider what she was doing, but her body refused to move away from his warmth.

“I didn’t expect this,” she whispered, finding her voice at last. “When you appeared in my garden, I thought...”

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She trailed off, unsure how to explain the tangle of emotions his return had sparked. Anger, hurt, confusion—and beneath it all, a stubborn, persistent hope she'd tried desperately to extinguish.

His eyes searched hers, uncertainty flickering in their depths. "Do you regret it?"

The question hung between them. She considered the years of hurt, the abandonment, the life she'd carefully built without him. All the reasons she should step away.

Instead, she shook her head. "No."

The simple truth of it surprised her. Despite everything, despite the rational voice in her head warning her to protect her heart, she couldn't regret the kiss they'd shared.

A tentative smile transformed his face, softening the harsh lines of his scars. His hand slid from her cheek to the nape of her neck, fingers threading through her hair with exquisite care, as if she were something precious he feared breaking.

"Neither do I," he murmured.

The admission sent warmth flooding through her chest, and she leaned into him, resting her forehead against the solid plane of his chest. His heartbeat thundered beneath her ear, as rapid and unsteady as her own.

"What happens now?" she asked, the question muffled against his shirt.

His arms tightened around her. "I don't know."

The honesty in his voice was oddly comforting. Neither of them had expected this, neither had a plan for what came next. They stood together in the growing light of dawn, surrounded by uncertainty but unwilling to let go.

CHAPTER 9

Egon carried a wooden crate filled with jars of honey to Lyric's cart, his muscles flexing easily under the weight. Three days had passed since their early morning conversation, and each hour felt like stepping into a dream he'd never dared imagine.

"Is this the last one?" He set down the crate, careful not to disturb the meticulously arranged goods.

She smiled up at him, her fingers brushing against his as she adjusted the jars. "Perfect. I think we're ready."

Ready for the harvest festival—the type of gathering he would have avoided at all costs just days ago. Now, watching her growing excitement, he couldn't imagine being anywhere else.

"You'll outshine every other vendor there." The words slipped out before he could stop them, and she blushed.

"It's just honey and vegetables."

"Nothing about you is 'just' anything."

Their eyes locked, and he felt that familiar pull—the one that had drawn him to her years ago and somehow found him again. His Beast stirred within, hungry and impatient to claim their mate, but he quieted it. This fragile thing between them deserved time to grow properly.

She went to check on the bees and he picked up his axe just as he heard a chorus of high-pitched voices and the unmistakable sound of small feet trampling through the underbrush. Samha emerged first, his unruly hair sticking up in all directions, followed by three other village children. The boy's face lit up when he spotted him.

"I told you he was real!" Samha announced triumphantly to his companions, who huddled behind him with wide eyes, and Egon suppressed a smile.

"Back again, trouble?"

"We came to help!" Samha declared, puffing out his chest. "These are my friends—Nia, Tomas, and Beni."

The children stared up at him with expressions ranging from awe to trepidation. He'd grown accustomed to Samha's fearless curiosity, but these new faces reminded him how unusual his presence truly was in this small village.

"I'm splitting wood," he explained, keeping his voice gentle. "Not a task for small hands."

"We can stack it!" Samha insisted, already moving toward the pile of split logs.

Nia, a girl with braided hair and skeptical eyes, stepped forward. "Are you really an orc warrior? Samha says you fought a hundred men at once."

He shot Samha a look, and the boy grinned sheepishly.

"I've fought when necessary," he said carefully. "But I prefer peaceful work, like this."

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He gestured to Lyric's garden and the repaired fence.

Tomas, the smallest of the group, finally found his voice. "Can we see your tusks up close?"

Before he could respond, the children crowded around him, their initial fear forgotten. He knelt down, allowing them to examine his features with unabashed curiosity. Their innocent acceptance loosened something in his chest—a knot of tension he'd carried for so long he'd forgotten it was there.

"Right," he said finally, standing up. "If you're helping, there are rules. Stay clear when I'm swinging the axe. Stack only what you can carry safely. And no climbing on the woodpile."

The children nodded solemnly before scattering to their self-assigned tasks, chattering among themselves. Samha stayed closest to him, mimicking his stance as he worked. He looked over and found Lyric smiling at him from beside the bee hives. He smiled back and returned to work, keeping a careful eye on his new assistants.

The children departed just before sundown, glowing from his praise and clutching the honey drops Lyric had given them in small, grubby fists.

"You're gathering quite a group of helpers," she laughed as they watched them go.

"I enjoy their company. But do you think we'll get another visit from the Elders tonight?"

She shrugged as she led the way into the cottage.

“I don’t think so. Everyone knows you’re here. And from what Harta told me this morning, Samha has been singing your praises all over the village.”

He winced.

“I hope that doesn’t include more stories about me fighting a hundred men at once.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me, but your kindness to him is more important—it says more about your character than a thousand apocryphal battles.” She smiled up at him and squeezed his hand. “Now how about slaying some vegetables for me? I thought we could make some stuffed peppers for dinner.”

He nodded, and they worked together in companionable silence. He’d always enjoyed cooking, but it was different with Lyric at his side. The domesticity of it all struck him as both foreign and achingly familiar—as if he’d been waiting his entire life to experience this simple peace.

She caught him watching her and smiled, that easy, unguarded smile that had been appearing more frequently these past few days. His chest tightened. He’d never imagined anyone, especially Lyric, could look at him that way.

“You’re staring again,” she said, but there was no reproach in her voice. Instead, she crossed the room and brushed her fingers across his arm as she passed, the casual touch sending warmth through his entire body.

“It’s hard not to,” he admitted.

She laughed, the sound clear and bright in the cottage’s warm air. She’d been doing that more too—laughing. Each time felt like a gift he hadn’t earned but treasured

nonetheless.

“Set the table?” she asked, her hand lingering on his arm.

He nodded, going to fetch the wooden plates and cups and marveling at how easily they’d fallen into these rhythms together, as if the years apart had been nothing but a momentary interruption.

Throughout their meal, her knee pressed against his beneath the small table. She reached across to wipe a crumb from his shirt without hesitation, her fingers gentle against his skin. These small touches—unthinking, natural—meant more to him than she could possibly know.

After dinner, they sat on her porch, their shoulders touching as they watched the sunset paint the sky in brilliant oranges and pinks and fireflies came out to dance across the garden. When she leaned against him, his heart thundered so loudly he wondered if she could hear it.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been to the festival,” she admitted. “It never felt right before.”

“And now?”

“Now I have someone to come with me.”

She turned her face up to his, and he couldn’t resist bending down to kiss her. Each kiss they’d shared over these past days felt like reclaiming something lost—something he’d convinced himself he didn’t deserve. Her lips were soft against his, her hand coming up to rest against his chest.

When they broke apart, he traced a finger along her jawline. “I’ll be there as long as

you want me.”

“That might be a very long time.”

His Beast growled with satisfaction, but he kept his touch gentle. They had weathered years apart. Now, they had the luxury of patience—of discovering each other slowly, deliberately. His brothers had found their mates, but he’d found something he’d thought impossible: a second chance.

She leaned her head against him again and he carefully wrapped his arm around her, still half-expecting her to pull away. Instead, she nestled closer.

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“This is nice,” she murmured.

The simple words struck him deeper than any battle wound. This—her warmth against him, her contentment in his presence—was more than he’d ever allowed himself to hope for.

His thumb traced lazy circles against her shoulder as the evening breeze drifted past carrying the scents of her garden—lavender, thyme, and the sweet perfume of late summer blossoms. For the first time in his life, he allowed himself to imagine a future beyond battle and duty. A future with her.

“I’ve been thinking about expanding the garden next spring,” she said, her voice soft against his side. “Maybe plant some fruit trees on the eastern side.”

“I could help clear the land,” he offered, already picturing himself working the soil, building something lasting instead of destroying.

She tilted her face up to his. “You’d still be here in spring?”

The question hung between them, fragile and hopeful. He opened his mouth to answer—to tell her he’d stay as long as she’d have him—when his enhanced hearing picked up a new sound.

Hoofbeats. Multiple riders approaching at speed.

He tensed instinctively, and she must have felt the change because she straightened, pulling back to study his face.

“What is it?”

“Riders coming,” he whispered, already scanning their surroundings. “At least four, maybe five.”

He gently disengaged from her and melted into the shadows beside the cottage. The movement was fluid, practiced—the product of years spent learning how to disappear despite his size. He pressed his back against the wall, automatically positioning himself where he could still protect her if needed.

“Egon—” she began, but he raised a finger to his lips, eyes fixed on the road, and the question died on her lips.

The riders appeared moments later—five armored men on horseback, their mounts lathered from hard riding. Even in the fading light, he could make out the emblem on their shields: Lasseran’s falcon insignia.

His jaw tightened. These weren’t simple messengers or travelers. These were soldiers—elite guards, judging by their equipment and bearing.

They passed her cottage without slowing, but he remained motionless in the shadows, counting their weapons, assessing their formation. Old habits. Necessary habits.

The peaceful bubble he’d allowed himself to inhabit these past few days burst. Reality crashed back with the thunder of hoofbeats and the glint of steel in the dying light. His muscles coiled with tension as she rose from the porch and gave him a sharp look.

“Stay here,” she whispered. “I need to know what they want.”

Before he could protest, she was heading down into the village, following the path the

riders had taken. He growled low in his throat, his instincts screaming that those men brought nothing but danger. The emblem alone told him enough—High King Lasseran’s elite guard didn’t ride into backwater villages for pleasant conversation.

He gave her a ten-count head start, then followed her. Years of training had taught him how to move silently and invisibly despite his size. He kept to the deepest shadows, using buildings and trees as cover, tracking her while remaining invisible to casual observers. His heart hammered against his ribs—not from exertion but from fear for her safety.

The riders had stopped in the village square, their horses’ flanks still heaving from hard riding, and he positioned himself behind the tanner’s shed, close enough to hear but hidden from view. Lyric stood at the edge of the gathering crowd, her posture deliberately casual, but he could read the tension in her shoulders.

“By order of High King Lasseran,” the lead rider announced, his voice carrying across the square, “you are required to provide information on any strangers passing through these lands.”

The crowd murmured, and he saw several villagers glance up the hill towards Lyric’s cottage. His hand instinctively moved to where his weapon would normally hang but no one spoke up.

“Anyone failing to report such information,” the captain’s voice hardened, “will face High King Lasseran’s justice.”

He watched Lyric’s spine stiffen at the threat, and every protective instinct in his body roared to life. These men would cut her down without hesitation if they believed she stood between them and their quarry. The cold calculation in their eyes told him everything he needed to know about how little they valued human life.

He pressed his back against the tanner's shed, nostrils flaring as he caught the distinct scent of expensive oil used to polish high-quality armor. These weren't ordinary soldiers—they carried themselves with the arrogance of men accustomed to power. The kind of men who took what they wanted without consequence.

Elder Tomas stepped forward and bowed his head respectfully. "We're preparing for our harvest festival, my lords. We have few travelers through our humble village."

"I'm glad you mentioned that. Lord Trevain sends his... regards." The pause made it clear these were anything but well-wishes. "He reminds you that festival taxes are to be collected in full this year."

His jaw tightened. So these were the local noble's men, not Lasseran's direct forces as he'd first thought—though the falcon insignia confirmed the alliance. The crowd's collective tension told him everything he needed to know about Lord Trevain's reputation.

"But we've already paid our seasonal dues," someone protested from the crowd.

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The captain's hand moved casually to his sword hilt. "Lord Trevain has determined that previous collections were... insufficient given the abundance of this year's crops."

He watched villagers exchange worried glances. Tables half-decorated with festival bunting stood forgotten in the square. Women pulled children closer. Men looked at the ground, anger and helplessness etched in their faces.

The man's gaze swept the crowd again, lingering on Lyric. His Beast snarled, recognizing the predatory assessment in the man's eyes. His muscles bunched, ready to spring forward despite every rational thought screaming against it.

CHAPTER 10

Lyric's stomach knotted as she stood at the edge of the village square. The emissaries' polished armor glinted in the torch light, a stark contrast to the villagers' worn clothing. The five men sat tall on their horses, looking down their noses at the gathering crowd. Their demand for information on any strangers was bad enough, but then their captain, a thin-faced man with cold eyes, unrolled a parchment.

"By decree of Lord Trevain, loyal servant to High King Lasseran, the harvest tribute is hereby increased to forty percent of all yields."

Gasps rippled through the crowd, and her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"That's double last year's amount," Elder Harta protested, her voice wavering. "We won't survive winter with what remains."

The captain's lips curled. "The High King's forces require provisions. Lord Trevain suggests you work harder." He glanced at the decorations for the festival. "You seem to have enough to celebrate."

"Those decorations cost nothing but time and care," she found herself saying, stepping forward. "Taking forty percent will starve our children."

The captain's gaze slid to her, eyes narrowing. "And who might you be?"

"Just a beekeeper," she answered, lifting her chin.

"Then mind your hives and leave matters of state to those who understand them." He turned back to the Elders. "Additionally, Lord Trevain requires three able-bodied men from each village for service."

"Service?" someone called out. "You mean for High King Lasseran's army!"

The captain ignored the interruption.

"Collection begins tomorrow. Any resistance will be met with... appropriate measures." His hand rested meaningfully on his sword hilt. "The High King's influence grows daily. Those who support him now will find favor when the old order falls."

These people had so little, yet Lasseran would take even more. She thought of Samha, of the other children whose families would go hungry. Behind her, she sensed movement and knew without looking that Egon had followed her. His presence steadied her, even as rage coursed through her veins.

"This isn't tribute," she said clearly. "It's theft."

The captain's eyes flashed. "Watch your tongue, woman, or?—"

She swallowed hard as the captain's threat hung in the air, and chanced a quick look over her shoulder. A large shadow moved in the darkness behind the tanner's shed and she knew Egon was positioning himself at her back. The comfort of his nearness steadied her racing heart as she turned back to the mounted soldiers.

Elder Harta stepped forward, her weathered hands spread in supplication. "Captain, please. We've always been loyal subjects. Surely there's room for discussion."

"The decree isn't a negotiation," the captain replied, rolling up his parchment with deliberate slowness.

Elder Tomas joined Harta, his normally jovial face grave. "Twenty-five percent would still be an increase from last year. We could manage that, with difficulty."

Lyric watched the captain's face harden. These men had no intention of compromising. She glanced around at the villagers—people who had taken her in, who had eventually accepted her despite her strangeness. Samha stood with his sister, eyes wide with fear.

"High King Lasseran's patience with this region grows thin," the captain said. "The Old Kingdom's days are numbered. Those who resist the inevitable change will not be treated kindly."

"We're simple farmers," Elder Harta pleaded. "Not politicians. We just want to feed our families."

The captain leaned forward in his saddle. "Then I suggest you become very efficient at farming what remains to you." His gaze swept over the crowd. "Forty percent. Three men. Tomorrow."

Unease rippled through the crowd, and her heart ached for them. These were good people who worked hard for everything they had. They didn't deserve this.

"The High King is most generous," the captain continued, straightening in his saddle. "He could take everything. Remember that when you count your blessings tonight."

Elder Tomas tried once more. "If we could perhaps spread the collection over several weeks?—"

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“Enough!” The captain’s voice cracked like a whip. “Lasseran’s word is final. Be grateful I don’t take someone now for wasting my time.”

Her heart pounded against her ribs as the captain’s cold gaze bore into her. She held her ground, though every instinct screamed at her to back down. The square had fallen silent, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife.

“What’s your name?” the captain demanded.

Before she could answer, one of his men—a burly soldier with a pockmarked face and rust-colored beard—urged his horse forward. He circled her slowly, his eyes traveling over her with insulting thoroughness.

“This one’s got spirit, Captain,” he said, lips curling into a smirk. “Might be worth remembering when we return tomorrow.”

Her skin crawled under his scrutiny, and she heard a low growl from the darkness behind her.

The red-bearded man leaned down from his saddle, close enough that she could smell stale wine on his breath. “Pretty little thing, aren’t you? Too pretty to be just a beekeeper.” His voice dropped to a whisper meant only for her. “Lord Trevain appreciates spirited women. Perhaps I’ll mention you specifically in my report.”

Her mouth went dry. She knew exactly what such attention would mean.

“Or perhaps,” he continued, fingering the hilt of his dagger, “I could teach you some

manners myself. Right now.” His eyes glittered with malice. “It would be a shame to mark that pretty face, but sometimes lessons must be... memorable.”

She stood frozen, her defiance warring with cold fear. The soldier’s threat hung in the air between them, his meaning unmistakable. She could feel the village watching, their collective breath held.

“Think carefully about tomorrow,” the man said, straightening in his saddle. “When I return, I expect to see you with your head bowed and your mouth shut. Or we’ll have a very different conversation.” He tapped his dagger meaningfully. “One that ends with you understanding your place.”

Her blood ran cold at the soldier’s threat, but a deeper sound sent a different kind of chill through her body—a low, rumbling growl from the shadows behind her. She didn’t need to turn to know it was Egon, his rage barely contained, but she risked a quick glance over her shoulder. She caught the amber flash of his eyes, his massive form half-hidden but poised to spring. The set of his jaw and the tension in his shoulders told her everything—he was seconds away from charging into the square.

She gave a slight, sharp shake of her head, locking eyes with him. Don’t. She tried to pour every ounce of warning into her gaze. If Egon revealed himself now, attacked these soldiers... her mind raced through the consequences. The village would be punished. People would die. Egon would be hunted.

The red-bearded soldier noticed her distraction.

“Something caught your eye, female?” He twisted in his saddle, following her gaze.

Forcing a neutral expression, she quickly looked back at him. “Nothing. Just... considering your words carefully.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs as another soft growl reached her ears, too low for the soldiers to hear but clear enough to her. He wasn't backing down.

She shifted her weight slightly as she bowed her head, angling her body to block the soldier's view of the shadows where Egon lurked. One wrong move, one glimpse of an orc in their midst, and everything would explode into violence.

"Smart girl," the soldier sneered, misinterpreting her compliance. "Tomorrow, then."

The captain turned his horse at the edge of the square, raising his voice so all could hear. "Remember this, peasants. Those who refuse the High King's generous terms will face the consequences." His lips curled into a cruel smile. "He has a special... army with an appetite for disobedient villages. Beast warriors. I've seen what remains afterward—or rather what doesn't remain. Trust me when I say you don't want that fate."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, and her blood ran cold. Beast warriors. The very thing Egon had mentioned investigating. Her eyes darted to the shadows where he remained hidden, wondering what knowledge he possessed of these creatures.

"To ensure your cooperation," the captain continued, "Dorn and Vex will remain until our return tomorrow." He gestured to two soldiers, who dismounted with smug expressions. "They'll keep watch and report any... difficulties."

The two guards took positions at opposite ends of the square, hands resting on their weapons. Their presence transformed the once-welcoming village center into an occupied territory.

Elder Harta approached her as the crowd dispersed, her weathered face lined with worry. "This is bad, child. Very bad."

“I know,” she whispered, acutely aware of Egon still hidden in the shadows. She needed to get back to him without drawing attention.

“That soldier marked you,” Harta warned, her voice barely audible. “Be careful.”

She nodded, her throat tight. “What do you know of these... Beast warriors?”

Harta’s eyes widened with fear. “Only rumors. They say Lasseran has found a way to twist men into monsters—creatures with the strength of ten warriors and no mercy in their hearts. Some say they’re half-orc abominations, bred for war.”

Her heart skipped a beat. Half-orc. Was this why Egon had been traveling this way?

One of the guards—Dorn, the broader of the two—spat on the ground and glared in her direction. “Move along, women. Nothing to see here.”

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She gave Harta's hand a quick squeeze and turned away, her mind racing. Forcing herself not to look back at the shadows where Egon waited, she moved away from the square with deliberate casualness. Her skin crawled with the weight of Dorn's gaze following her, and each step required conscious effort not to run.

She took a circuitous path through the village, stopping to speak briefly with neighbors, feigning normalcy while her heart hammered against her ribs. When she finally ducked behind the baker's shed, she broke into a sprint, keeping to the tree line that bordered the village.

"Egon?" she whispered urgently, scanning the deepening shadows.

A large hand emerged from the darkness, pulling her behind a massive oak. His eyes burned with barely contained rage, his massive body vibrating with tension.

"I nearly tore that soldier's throat out," he growled, voice rough as gravel. "The things he said to you?—"

"You would have gotten yourself killed along with half the village," she cut in, though she squeezed his forearm in silent gratitude. "There are two guards staying overnight. We need to get back to my cottage without being seen."

He nodded quickly. "Follow me. Stay low."

They moved through the forest rather than the village paths, his woodland skills guiding them safely around the village's perimeter. When they finally reached her cottage, she bolted the door behind them, her hands shaking.

“Forty percent,” she hissed, fury finally breaking through her careful composure. “They’ll starve this winter. And those men they want to take—” Her voice cracked. “They’re talking about farmers, not soldiers. They’ll die.”

The rage that had been simmering inside her since the square boiled over. “I won’t let them do this. I can’t.” She slammed her palm against the table. “This is my home now—my people. I’ve spent my whole life feeling powerless, and I won’t—I can’t feel that way again.”

She gave him a fierce look. “Whatever it takes, whatever I have to do—I’m going to protect them.”

CHAPTER 11

Egon moved through the woods with practiced stealth, silent despite his size. Dawn had barely broken, casting long shadows across the village outskirts as he completed his third circuit since rising. Sleep had eluded him after yesterday’s confrontation, his mind churning with both rage and strategy.

He paused behind a thick oak, watching as one of the guards yawned at his post on one side of the village square. The man’s posture betrayed his boredom and contempt—clearly not expecting trouble from simple farmers.

His jaw tightened. These weren’t trained warriors keeping watch. They were bullies with swords, meant to intimidate rather than protect. His fingers flexed instinctively, remembering the smirk on the emissary’s face when he’d threatened Lyric.

A twig snapped nearby and he spun, dropping into a defensive crouch.

“It’s just me,” Samha whispered, appearing between two bushes. The boy’s hair stuck up wildly, dirt already smudged across one cheek despite the early hour.

“You shouldn’t be out here,” he growled softly. “Those men are dangerous.”

Samha shrugged. “My sister says you’re watching over us. Said I should bring you this.” He thrust forward a small cloth bundle that released the aroma of fresh bread and cheese.

His chest tightened. The village knew he was here, patrolling. And instead of fear, they’d sent breakfast. Something powerful and protective surged through him. These were good people. And Lasseran’s men threatened everything they’d built.

“Lyric’s looking for you,” the boy added. “She’s worried.”

“Tell her I’m fine.” He unwrapped the bundle, breaking off a piece of cheese for the boy. “And that I’ll be back soon.”

After Samha nodded and scampered off, Egon continued his circuit, noting the positions of both guards, the village’s vulnerable points, and potential defensive positions. The village wasn’t built for protection—it was open, trusting, vulnerable.

Just like Lyric’s heart had been.

He spotted her at the edge of her garden, hands on hips, eyes scanning the tree line. Even from this distance, he could see the tension in her shoulders, the determined set of her jaw. She’d grown into her strength since he’d known her, no longer the frightened waif he’d left behind.

He knew she was looking for him but he couldn’t allow himself to be distracted. He melted deeper into the forest, continuing his patrol. He would not let harm come to this village. To her.

He’d kept to the shadows outside the village, but something suddenly pulled him

towards a street leading away from the village center—an instinct he'd learned never to ignore. The sound reached him first—a girl's frightened protest, followed by cruel laughter. His muscles tensed in preparation as he rounded the corner of the village granary.

The two guards Lasseran's emissaries had left behind loomed over a village girl—barely seventeen, with a basket of spilled apples at her feet. One guard had her wrist in his grip while the other blocked her escape route.

“Pretty thing like you shouldn't be all alone,” the taller guard said, his fingers tightening on her arm as he yanked her blouse down off her shoulder.

“Please, I need to get home,” she whispered, eyes wide with fear.

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The second guard kicked an apple away. “We’re just being friendly. Don’t you want to be friendly?”

His Beast clawed at his control, rage building in his chest. He thought he recognized the girl—she’d helped Lyric with the beehives once. His claws emerged but he faced them back and put his hand on the knife at his belt instead, but before he could step forward, a small figure darted between the guards.

“Leave my sister alone!” Samha planted himself between the girl and her tormentors, his small chest puffed out despite the terror in his eyes.

The shorter guard laughed. “Look at this. A little hero.”

“Get out of the way, boy,” the other growled, shoving Samha roughly.

The child stumbled but didn’t retreat. “I said leave her alone!”

The taller guard’s face darkened. He released the girl’s wrist only to backhand Samha across the face. The boy crashed to the ground with a cry that sliced through him like a blade.

His Beast’s protective fury exploded through him, his body growing larger and more powerful as he threw back his head and roared. His vision edged with red as he surged forward, no longer concerned with stealth or consequences.

His world narrowed to a single point of focus—Samha’s small body crumpled on the ground, a trickle of blood from his lip. Three long strides brought him from shadow

to sunlight. The guards barely had time to register his presence before he was upon them, knocking the legs out from under the shorter one with a sweep of his leg.

The second guard released the girl and drew his sword, but he moved too slowly. Egon grabbed the man by the throat and lifted him off the ground. The guard's eyes bulged, wide with terror, and his mouth gaped as he struggled uselessly against the grip on his throat. Blood began to seep from the man's neck where his claws dug into the skin.

His Beast screamed for blood, for vengeance, for the man's death as payment for harming the child. Every instinct demanded he tear out the man's throat, to protect, to destroy. But another part of him, a quieter voice that sounded like Lyric, reminded him that killing a King's soldier would have consequences.

With a snarl, he threw the guard to the side. The man collided with the stone wall of the granary, bones shattering. The soldier's limp form slumped to the ground, leaving a bloody streak on the stones.

Egon's attention turned to the other soldier, who had been scrambling backwards on the ground, trying to escape. He grabbed the man by his ankle and dragged him closer, claws digging in deep enough to draw blood.

The guard tried to fumble for his sword, eyes wide with terror. "Beast! Help?—"

Egon seized him by the throat, lifting him off his feet with one hand. The guard's boots kicked uselessly in the air as his face purpled. Egon felt the rapid flutter of the man's pulse against his palm, heard the desperate wheeze as he fought for breath.

It would be so easy to squeeze tighter. To end this threat permanently.

"Please," the guard choked out.

Samha's whimper penetrated his rage. The boy was watching, eyes wide with fear and something else—awe. The girl had gathered her brother into her arms, both staring at him.

He growled, low and dangerous. "You touched a child."

He slammed the guard against the wall of the granary, holding him there with brutal efficiency. The man's sword clattered to the ground, forgotten.

"I should tear you apart," he snarled, his voice barely recognizable even to his own ears. "Give me one reason not to."

"We were just—" The guard's words died as Egon's grip tightened.

"Wrong answer."

With a precise, controlled movement, he slammed the guard's head against the wooden wall. Once. Twice. The man went limp in his grasp, blood trickling from his scalp, and he released him, letting the body crumple beside that of his companion. His chest heaved with each breath, the Beast slowly receding, although his vision was still tinged with red and his claws extended.

He stood over the unconscious guards, his breathing still ragged, heart pounding in his ears. The red haze of battle-rage receded slowly, leaving him exposed in the harsh light of day. He became aware of a growing silence—the normal sounds of village life had ceased.

He turned to find a circle of villagers had formed around him. Their faces registered shock, fear, and something worse—recognition of what he truly was. A Beast. A monster. A creature of violence.

The blacksmith, a burly man who'd nodded respectfully to him just yesterday, now pulled his daughter behind him. An old woman clutched her shawl tighter. Even the villager who traded for honey with Lyric took a step back, eyes wide.

His stomach twisted. He'd seen that look countless times—the moment when humans realized what an orc was capable of, when they understood the true nature of the Beast Curse. The moment they decided he didn't belong among them.

“He was protecting Samha and Lina,” someone whispered.

“Did you see how fast he moved?”

“Like an animal...”

Each word struck him like a physical blow. He’d forgotten himself, forgotten where he was. In his rage to protect, he’d revealed the savage creature that lurked beneath his carefully constructed control.

Samha struggled to his feet, wiping blood from his lip. The boy’s sister clutched his shoulders, her eyes darting between Egon and the dead guards.

“Are... are they dead?” a woman’s voice quavered.

He nodded his head, unable to find words.

A man stepped forward cautiously. “What do we do with them now? When Lord Trevain finds out?—”

“When he finds out, he’ll bring more men,” another villager finished. “They’ll punish all of us.”

“What were they even doing here?” someone demanded. “They’re supposed to be guarding the square!”

His jaw tightened as he looked over at Lina. “Hunting.”

He saw understanding dawn on the faces around him as they took in the girl’s pale face and ripped blouse. For a moment, the line between man and monster blurred in their expressions. These villagers knew the guards’ intentions—they understood what

would have happened if he hadn't intervened.

The crowd shifted nervously, their fear finding a new focus. But their wary glances still returned to him, to his massive body, to his hands that had so effortlessly dealt violence.

He'd tried to protect them, but in doing so, he'd become the very thing they feared most. The irony tasted bitter in his mouth.

CHAPTER 12

Lyric raced towards the commotion, her heart hammering against her ribs. Harta had come to find her, breathless and worried.

"Trouble," the Elder gasped, and she'd known immediately that Egon was involved.

The crowd had gathered in one of the side streets leading away from the village square—two crumpled forms on the ground, villagers gathered in a wide circle, and at the center, Egon. His big body heaved with each breath, and blood—not his own—spattered his forearms.

Lina was clinging to the miller's wife, sobbing, and Samha stood at her side, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and awe as he stared at Egon.

She pushed through the crowd, aware of the whispers that followed her path.

"Beast..."

"...not natural..."

Egon's head snapped up at her approach, his nostrils flaring. His eyes were solid

black, his features a savage mask. His gaze darted between her and the frightened villagers, his jaw clenched tight enough that she could see the muscle jumping beneath his scarred skin.

“Egon,” she said softly, stepping closer while everyone else maintained their distance.

His nostrils flared again as he inhaled sharply.

“Don’t,” he growled, voice rougher than usual. “Stay back.”

But she’d never been good at following orders. She closed the distance between them, her fingers brushing his trembling hand. His skin was hot to the touch, still fevered from the change. Claws still protruded from his fingertips, his knuckles swollen and bruised.

“Look at me,” she said gently. His eyes remained locked on something over her shoulder. “Egon. Look at me.”

When their gazes finally met, she saw a flash of amber in those black pools. It flickered, then began to grow, gradually swallowing the blackness.

“They—” his voice caught, and his fingers curled inward, claws digging into his palms. “They hurt Samha.”

“I know.” She cupped his cheek, feeling the tension in his jaw. “And you protected him.”

He glanced over at the boy, at the blood on his lip, and she felt him shudder. His gaze drifted to the bodies on the ground and she sensed him struggling to push words past his lips. “I didn’t want...”

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“You didn’t have a choice.” She stroked her thumb across his cheekbone, tracing the lines of his scars.

“They would have hurt them,” he said, so quietly only she could hear. “Samha. Lina. I couldn’t?—”

“I know.” She slipped her hand into his, ignoring the blood and the claws. “You protected them.”

His eyes flickered—amber to black and back again—as though the Beast within him hadn’t fully retreated. “Look at them, Lyric. They see what I truly am now.”

She glanced at the villagers’ faces—fear, uncertainty, confusion. But also relief. Lina and Samha were safe. The threat neutralized.

“They see someone who saved two of their own,” she insisted, squeezing his hand. “Give them time.”

Elder Tomas stepped forward, his weathered face unreadable. “Lord Trevain’s men?—”

“Would have done worse,” she interrupted, still holding Egon’s hand. “You know it’s true.”

His fingers twitched in hers, his amber eyes clouded with doubt. A knot formed in her throat as she watched his shoulders hunch forward, his massive body somehow seeming smaller under the weight of the villagers’ stares. The whispers continued to

ripple through the crowd, and with each one, she saw him retreat further into himself.

This wasn't just about today. This was years of rejection, of being seen as nothing but a monster, etched into every scar on his body.

"Egon," she whispered, stepping closer while everyone else maintained their fearful distance. "Look at me."

His gaze remained fixed on the ground, his breathing still uneven. Blood dripped from his knuckles onto the dirt.

She reached for his face, her palm gentle against his cheek. The contrast between her small hand and his scarred green skin made something in her chest ache. His skin was still feverish from the transformation, but he didn't pull away.

"I see you," she said, her voice steady despite the emotions threatening to overwhelm her. "Not what you think they see."

His eyes finally met hers, filled with a vulnerability that she suspected few had ever witnessed.

"You protected them," she continued, her thumb brushing across his cheekbone. "That's who you are."

He swallowed hard, his voice a ragged whisper. "I lost control."

"You acted when no one else could or would." She moved her hand to rest over his heart, feeling its powerful rhythm beneath her palm. "This is what matters. This is what I've always seen in you."

Around them, the villagers' whispers began to fade as Samha broke away from his

sister's grasp and approached them cautiously. The boy stopped a few feet away, his small face solemn.

"Thank you for saving my sister," he said, his voice clear in the sudden quiet.

She felt Egon's heart stutter beneath her hand, saw the flicker of disbelief cross his face. She kept her hand firmly against his chest, anchoring him to this moment, refusing to let him drift away into the darkness of his own thoughts.

He looked down at Samha, then dipped his head in acknowledgement. The boy's usual grin flashed across his face for a second before he returned to his sister.

She laced her fingers through Egon's and tugged gently.

"Come," she whispered, her voice steady despite the hammering of her heart. "Let's go home."

Home. The word slipped out so naturally, as if the cottage had always been meant for both of them. He accompanied her without resistance, his big body casting a long shadow as they walked the familiar path. The silence between them felt charged, electric with unspoken emotions.

Once inside, she closed the door and leaned against it, watching as he stood awkwardly in the center of their small home. His shoulders remained hunched, his eyes darting around as if seeking escape. Blood still stained his hands—evidence of what he'd done to protect those who now feared him.

"They'll never accept me here," he said, his voice rough. "Not after what they saw."

"I accept you," she said simply, taking his bloodied hands in hers, feeling the lingering heat of his transformation. Without looking away from him, she reached up,

cupping his face between her palms. His breath caught as she rose onto her tiptoes, bringing her lips to his.

The kiss was gentle at first, a whisper of contact. A question. His response was hesitant, restrained, as if afraid of breaking her. She pressed closer, deepening the kiss, her fingers sliding into his hair. She poured everything she couldn't say into that kiss—her trust, her desire, her acceptance of all that he was.

A low growl rumbled in his chest as his massive arms encircled her, lifting her slightly off the ground. His kiss turned hungry, desperate, before he abruptly set her down and pulled away, breathing hard.

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“Lyric,” he warned, his voice strained. His eyes flashed gold in the dim light of the cottage. “My Beast is still too close. I can’t—” He swallowed hard. “I want more than just kisses.”

Her heart raced, but not from fear. She recognized the look in his eyes—hunger, desire, and beneath it all, that ever-present restraint.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said, her voice steady despite the heat flooding her body. “I never have been.”

He shook his head, his massive body trembling with the effort to control himself. “You should be. After what you saw?—”

“You protected two people who couldn’t protect themselves.” She stepped closer, erasing the distance he’d put between them. “Just like you once protected me.”

She reached for him again, her fingers tracing the scars that marked his face, his neck, the exposed skin of his arms. Each one told a story of pain, of survival. Her touch was deliberate, claiming every part of him that he believed made him monstrous.

“I want this,” she whispered, rising on her toes to press her lips to the corner of his mouth. “I want you.”

Something broke in Egon then—the last thread of his restraint snapping as he gathered her against him. His mouth found hers, hungry and demanding, his massive hands spanning her waist as he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed. His claws emerged again as he tore impatiently at her dress, and he froze.

“Sorry,” he said gruffly. “I’ll get you a new one.”

Despite the apology, his gaze was hungry as he focused on the bare skin exposed by the torn dress. She smiled and kissed him again, her fingers tangling in his hair. She arched against him, heat pooling between her thighs as his touch grew more confident. The weight of his massive body pressing her into the soft mattress sent a thrill down her spine.

“Lyric,” he breathed her name like a prayer, his lips finding the pulse point at her throat, his tusks scraping lightly over her skin.

She gasped, her back arching as his hand slid beneath her torn dress to cup her breast, his thumb teasing her nipple into a hard peak. His touch was gentle despite the callouses and scars that marked his palms.

“Mine,” he growled against her collarbone, the vibration of his deep voice sending a fresh surge of arousal through her.

Her hands explored his broad chest, tracing the planes of hard muscle and the ridges of his scars. He was a warrior, fierce and protective, and yet he trembled beneath her touch, his breath catching when her fingertips grazed the sensitive skin of his nipple. She filed that knowledge away, determined to learn every part of him that gave pleasure instead of pain.

He claimed her mouth in another searing kiss, his tongue exploring her, claiming her as his own. She felt the hard length of him press against her thigh, hot and insistent. Her finger trailed down the defined ridges of his abdomen to where his massive erection strained against his pants.

His hips bucked against her touch and he growled low in his throat, his control slipping with each stroke of her fingers over the thick shaft. Impatiently, he shed his

clothes, kicking free of the confining fabric and baring himself to her gaze.

Her breath caught as she took in the sight of him. His body was a work of art, chiseled from years of training, but it was the evidence of his desire for her that stole her breath. He was huge—long and thick, flushed a deep, dark green. She wrapped her fingers around as much of him as she could and he groaned, his head tipping back as she explored him.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, little bee,” he growled, but there was no threat in his voice, only desire.

His mouth found hers again, his tongue claiming her as his hands roamed over her body, tearing the rest of her dress away until she lay bare beneath him. The cool air of the room whispered over her skin, raising goosebumps that had nothing to do with the cold. She’d never felt so exposed, so vulnerable, and yet so safe at the same time.

He kissed his way down her body, his lips blazing a trail of fire over her skin. When he reached the juncture between her thighs, she gasped, her hips bucking involuntarily at the first stroke of his tongue against her swollen folds. He growled against her, the vibration sending shockwaves through her body. Her hands fisted in the sheets as he explored her, his tongue circling and teasing her clit before dipping lower to thrust inside her.

Her breath came in short, sharp gasps as he worshipped her with his mouth, his hands holding her hips steady as she writhed beneath him. Pleasure built inside her, coiling tighter and tighter until it snapped and wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over her, leaving her trembling and panting.

He held her until she stopped trembling, but when she reached for him, he caught her wrist gently, stilling her explorations. “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“I... There’s something you need to understand about what I am.”

She placed a gentle palm on his cheek. “I’ve seen your Beast, Egon. I’m not afraid.”

“You should be. The Beast wants things. Primal things.”

“What if I want those things too?”

He shook his head.

“You don’t understand. What if I hurt you?”

“You won’t,” she said firmly. If there was one thing in this world she was absolutely sure of, it was that he would never hurt her.

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“You don’t know that.” He caught her hands between his massive ones as she reached for him again. “My brothers... their mates are human, but they’re different. They’ve had years to learn control. I’ve been alone, fighting this.”

Her heart ached as she looked up at him, at the fear written across that scarred face. He’d endured so much pain, so much unhappiness—perhaps it wasn’t surprising that he was afraid.

“I wish you could trust yourself as much as I trust you.”

“I’m trying,” he said, his voice tortured.

“We’ve waited this long. I suppose we can wait a little longer.” The mixture of sorrow and relief on his face made her heart ache again, but she smiled up at him. “And I have an idea. Perhaps if we... practice a little more, you’ll realize you’re not going to hurt me.”

“Practice?”

She took his hand and drew it down to cover her breast. His eyes immediately darkened as his thumb found her nipple, sending a streak of pleasure down her spine. She arched into his touch. “You could touch me here. Or maybe... a kiss?”

She brushed her mouth lightly over his, and his lips parted hungrily under hers. As his tongue explored her mouth, she squirmed beneath him, the friction of his hot, hard cock against her thigh driving her wild. She could feel her body responding, growing slick with arousal once again, and she cried out as his thick length started to settle

between her legs. But instead of pushing into her, he slid down her body once more, his mouth fastening hungrily over her clit, his hands on her thighs spreading her wider as he devoured her. His tongue circled and teased, drawing gasp after gasp from her throat until her hands were buried in his hair, her hips rocking against him.

When her climax hit, it was like a lightning strike, her body arching off the bed as she screamed his name.

He held her through the aftermath, his arms encircling her and drawing her against his broad chest. She could feel the steady pounding of his heartbeat, the rise and fall of his breathing as they lay together in the darkness.

“I like this practice,” he said softly.

She laughed, her fingers tracing idle patterns on his skin. “I do too. You’re welcome to practice as much as you’d like.”

His chuckle rumbled through her. “Careful what you’re asking for, little bee. My appetite for you is endless.”

She snuggled closer, her leg draping over his as she pillowed her head on his shoulder. “Good.”

As she drifted off to sleep, she realized she’d never felt so safe, so cherished, and she wondered how she’d ever lived without him.

CHAPTER 13

Egon lay on his side, one arm tucked beneath his head, watching the gentle rise and fall of Lyric’s chest as she slept. They’d spent a long time ‘practicing’ before she’d fallen asleep in his arms, and it had been the most exquisite torture—but he’d

remained in control. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps he could trust himself.

He traced a finger along her collarbone, marveling at the softness of her skin, the delicate flush that colored her cheeks. He'd thought he was protecting her by bargaining for a new life for her, and perhaps he was, but he suspected that he'd been trying to protect himself as well. He'd been afraid of losing control, of hurting her, of becoming the monster he feared he was.

He stared at their intertwined fingers, her smaller hand nestled in his massive green palm. The contrast was stark—her sun-kissed skin against his battle-scarred hide. Yet she'd reached for him without hesitation, even after witnessing his Beast. Her breathing shifted and he looked up to find her watching him.

“You’re not afraid of me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Should I be?”

His thumb traced a small circle on the back of her hand. “Of course not. But there’s more I haven’t told you.”

“I suspected as much.” A hint of amusement colored her words.

He took a deep breath. “You saw what happened to me. We call it the Beast Curse. The orcs accepted it many years ago in order to protect the Five Kingdoms.”

She nodded slowly.

“I think I remember hearing about that.”

His jaw tightened. “I’m surprised. Lasseran has been doing everything possible to erase that knowledge, to paint us as little more than savage animals. But that’s not all.

My brothers and I have reason to believe he's building an army of Cursed warriors, but ones without choice or conscience."

Lyric's fingers tightened around his. "Beast warriors."

"Yes. But corrupted versions. Twisted by dark magic and broken to his will." He looked towards the forest, its shadows deepening with the night. "If what we suspect is true, he engineered meetings between orcs serving in his army and eligible females, then took the children to raise himself."

"That's why those men mentioned Beast warriors as a threat."

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He nodded. “I’m trying to verify these rumors, to understand what we’re facing.” His voice dropped. “I volunteered. Partly because I’m suited to the task, but also because?—”

“Because you were running away,” she finished softly.

The truth of her words stung. “My brothers have found their mates. Their happiness is... difficult to witness when you believe such joy will never be yours.”

Her free hand came up to his face, fingers tracing the scar that ran from his temple to his jaw. “And now?”

“Now I’ve found something I never expected. But I’ve also confirmed our worst fears. Lasseran is planning to use them against the other kingdoms—to bring them all under his control. My guess is that is why he’s also collecting additional tribute—to fund his wars.”

He watched her face carefully as she processed his words. The moonlight cast half her features in shadow, but he could still read the determination in her eyes. He’d seen that same look when she’d defended him to the village elders.

“There’s more you need to know,” he said, his voice rough. “About what I am. About what those males might bring down upon your village.”

He released her hand and climbed out of bed, needing distance to reveal this truth. His Beast stirred uneasily, sensing his discomfort.

“When the Beast inside takes over, we are still ourselves. Despite the rage, the power, we are taught the discipline to control it.” He paced the room restlessly, but she remained silent, watching him with those perceptive green eyes.

“We don’t think Lasseran is teaching them control. He is turning them into mindless Beasts loyal only to him.” He turned back to face her fully. “The males they’ll send won’t be like me. They’ll be hollow shells, filled with rage and pain. They won’t recognize friend from foe. They’ll destroy everything in their path.”

“That’s why you came.” It wasn’t a question.

“It’s what I was looking for.” He knelt before her, bringing himself to her eye level. “I never expected to find you here. Never thought I’d have something personal at stake in this mission.”

She reached out, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw. “And now?”

“Now I can’t walk away,” he admitted, the truth of it settling heavy in his chest. “Not from you. Not from these people. Not when I know what’s coming.”

He watched her face transform as she absorbed his words. Where he expected fear, he saw calculation. Where he anticipated despair, he found determination. The moonlight caught in her eyes, turning them to polished jade.

“No,” she said simply.

“No?” he repeated, caught off guard.

She stood as well, brushing past him to pace the small room. Her movements were quick, purposeful—a stark contrast to his resigned stillness.

“I refuse to accept that this village is doomed.” She turned to face him. “These are good people, Egon. They accepted me when I showed up with nothing. They deserve better than to become fodder for some power-hungry lord’s ambitions.”

His chest tightened with a painful mix of admiration and dread. “Lyric, you don’t understand what we’re facing. These aren’t ordinary males?—”

“Neither are you.” She stepped closer, the scent of honey and flowers enveloping him. “You said it yourself—in Norhaven, your people preserved the old ways. The true ways.”

Her certainty unsettled him. He’d come here expecting to gather information. He hadn’t anticipated the need to warn the villagers, let alone to inspire resistance. Certainly not to give hope where there could be none.

“We have time before they return,” she continued, her mind clearly racing ahead. “The festival isn’t for a few more days. That’s time to prepare, to plan.” She touched his arm, her fingers warm against his skin. “You know their weaknesses. You understand what we’re facing better than anyone.”

“I’m one warrior,” he protested, though something in him responded to her unwavering belief. “Against how many?”

“You’re not alone.” Her voice softened. “The villagers might not be warriors, but they are stronger than they appear.”

He shook his head, unable to match her optimism. Yet he couldn’t deny the spark of possibility her words kindled within him.

“And we have something Lasseran doesn’t,” she added, her lips curving into a smile that caught him off guard.

“What’s that?”

“We have you—a warrior who remembers what the blessing truly means.” Her hand found his again. “A protector, not a destroyer.”

He stared at her, stunned by her unwavering faith in him—in what they might accomplish together. The weight of her trust settled on his shoulders, both burden and blessing.

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“There’s something else,” she added, her eyes brightening with sudden inspiration. “Someone who might help us.”

“Who?” he asked, skepticism creeping into his voice despite himself.

“There’s a woman in the mountains.” She gestured towards the shadowy peaks visible beyond the forest’s edge. “The villagers call her the Crone of Elmridge. Some fear her, others seek her wisdom, but they all respect her knowledge of the old ways.”

He frowned at her. “A wise woman? What could she possibly?—”

“She knows things, Egon.” Her fingers tightened around his. “Ancient things. The elders say she was old when their grandfathers were young. She speaks of the Old Gods as if she’s met them personally.”

“You think she might know how to break Lasseran’s curse? How to free his warriors?” The possibility seemed remote, yet he couldn’t dismiss it entirely. He remembered his brother Wulf’s certainty that the Old Gods were working on their behalf, and the strange pull he’d felt toward the abandoned shrine.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But she once helped heal a man from this village who’d been poisoned by dark magic. The healers had given up, but she knew a ritual that cleansed his blood.”

He considered the idea, weighing the risk against the potential reward. “The mountains are at least a day’s journey. If we go, that leaves the village unprotected.”

“We’d need to leave at first light to return before the festival,” she agreed. “But if there’s even a chance she knows something that could help us fight Lasseran’s corrupted warriors...”

The warrior in him balked at leaving the village vulnerable, even briefly, but the strategist recognized the value of gathering more information, more weapons for the coming fight. But it was the part of him that had prayed at the forgotten shrine—the part that desperately wanted to believe in something beyond brute strength—that made his decision.

“We’ll go,” he said finally. “But we leave before dawn and travel fast.”

For the first time since he’d left Norhaven, he felt a sense of purpose beyond mere reconnaissance. Her unwavering faith in him—in what they could accomplish together—awakened something he’d long thought dead. Hope flickered in his chest, fragile but undeniable.

“We’ll leave before dawn,” he repeated, already calculating the fastest route through the mountains. “But first...”

His gaze drifted towards the village, thinking of the two guards still lying. The villagers had retreated to their homes after the violence, shock and fear written plainly on their faces despite their gratitude.

“We can’t leave until we deal with what happened today,” he said, his voice low. “Those men will be missed. When they don’t report back, Lasseran’s forces will come looking.”

Her expression sobered. “You’re right. We need to clean this up.”

He rubbed his jaw, the reality of their situation settling heavily on his shoulders. “The

bodies need to be hidden. And we need a story for the village—something they can tell if questioned.”

“Something believable,” she agreed. “Something that won’t lead back to you.”

He appreciated her quick understanding. Most humans would be overwhelmed by such grim practicalities, but she’d survived the slums of Kel’Vara, she had a survivor’s practicality.

“The guards were drinking heavily at the tavern,” he suggested. “Perhaps they wandered into the forest, fell afoul of wild animals.”

“Believable enough.” She nodded thoughtfully. “The woods beyond the northern fields are known to be dangerous. We could leave evidence there—torn clothing, blood.”

He studied her face in the moonlight, struck by her calm pragmatism. “You’ve thought about this before.”

“Survival requires preparation,” she said simply. “I’ve lived too long looking over my shoulder not to consider all possibilities.”

The admission sent a pang through his chest. What had she endured in the years since he’d left her? What dangers had she faced alone?

“I’ll handle the bodies,” he said, pushing those thoughts aside for now. “You should return to the village, check on Samha and his sister. Make sure everyone understands what to say if questioned.”

They dressed quickly and headed back to the village. He left her with Elder Harta, then slung the guard’s bodies over his shoulder and slipped into the darkness, moving

with practiced stealth. Their weight was nothing to him, but the responsibility of what he was about to do weighed heavily. He'd killed before—in battle, in defense of his clan—but disposing of bodies like this felt different. Necessary, but grim.

The forest thickened around him as he ventured deeper, far from any village paths. He'd chosen this spot carefully—a rocky ravine where scavengers would find the remains quickly. Nature would erase his handiwork, completing the illusion of a wilderness accident.

As he arranged the scene, his mind drifted back to Lyric again. Her unwavering faith in him both honored and terrified him. What if he couldn't be the protector she believed him to be? What if his presence only brought more danger to her doorstep?

He placed torn clothing on jagged branches, spilled blood in strategic patterns. The scene told a story of men who'd wandered drunkenly into dangerous territory and paid the price. It wouldn't withstand intense scrutiny, but it didn't need to—it just needed to be convincing enough to buy them time.

When he finished, he stood back, scanning the area one last time. It was close to midnight and they needed to be on the mountain path before the village stirred. The Crone of Elmridge was an unknown variable—perhaps a waste of precious time, perhaps their only hope. Either way, he couldn't deny the pull he felt toward the mountains, as if something beyond his understanding was guiding his path.

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His Beast prowled uneasily, sensing his nerves. For once, it didn't feel like a curse or burden, but a strength he might need in the days ahead. If she could accept this part of him without fear, perhaps he could finally make peace with what he was.

With one last look at his grim handiwork, he melted back into the forest, relieved to be heading back to his mate.

CHAPTER 14

Lyric woke to the smell of smoke. Her eyes flew open, heart hammering against her ribs before she fully understood why. The cottage—normally dark at this hour—glowed with an unnatural orange light filtering through the shutters.

“Egon,” she whispered, reaching across the bed for him but finding only empty space.

She scrambled from bed, bare feet slapping against the wooden floor. The crackling sound grew louder as she threw open the door.

The night sky blazed. Flames leapt from the roof of the village storehouse, hungry tongues licking upward into the darkness. Silhouettes moved against the inferno—villagers forming a desperate bucket line from the well.

“No,” she breathed, her voice lost beneath the roar of the fire.

A figure broke away from the chaos, running toward her cottage. Egon. His massive frame was outlined against the flames, face grim and streaked with soot.

“They’ve returned,” he said, voice rough. “The lord’s men. More this time.”

Her throat tightened. “The children?”

“Safe. Elder Harta took them into the woods.” His golden eyes reflected the distant flames. “This is a message. They’re burning the harvest stores first.”

The village’s winter supplies. Without them?—

“They mean to starve us into submission.” Her hands balled into fists. “Where are they now?”

“Watching from the ridge.” His jaw tightened. “They want us to know they can take everything.”

A distant scream cut through the night. Not pain—rage. She recognized the miller’s wife’s voice.

“They’re moving to the east fields,” he said. “The grain?—”

She didn’t wait for him to finish. She grabbed her boots, yanking them on with trembling hands. The peace they’d found, the tentative hope they’d built—all of it crumbling like ash. She reached for the knife she kept by the door.

“What are you doing?” Egon caught her arm.

“What does it look like? I’m fighting back.” She tried to pull away, but his grip held firm.

“Lyric, there are too many. They’re armed?—”

“This is my home.” Her voice broke. “Our home. I won’t let them burn it to the ground while I hide.”

The flames climbed higher, painting the night in hellish orange. All their work, all their plans—consumed in minutes. But as she stared into the inferno, something hardened inside her. This wasn’t just about survival anymore. This was about standing against the darkness.

Her heart hammered against her ribs as she sprinted across the yard, Egon’s heavy footfalls close behind her. The smoke thickened with each step, acrid and choking. She pulled her sleeve over her mouth, eyes watering as she rounded the corner of her cottage.

The sight struck her like a physical blow.

Her apple trees—the ones she’d brought back to health—writhed in flames. Orange tongues licked up their trunks, consuming the branches that had been laden with ripe fruit. The fire danced from tree to tree, a cruel, living thing with purpose.

“No,” she whispered, the word catching in her throat.

Those trees had been her first act of permanence, her declaration that she belonged somewhere. That she was staying. She’d spent countless hours among them—pruning, watering, whispering encouragements when no one could hear.

A tall figure darted between the burning trees—one of the noble’s men, torch in hand, moving to set another ablaze.

“Stop!” she screamed, surging forward, but Egon caught her arm, his grip gentle but unyielding.

“Lyric, wait?—”

She wrenched free, blind rage propelling her forward. The man turned at her approach, his face illuminated by firelight—young, barely more than a boy, but his expression held a casual cruelty that chilled her even through her fury.

“The lady of the orchard,” he sneered, waving his torch. “Come to beg for your precious trees?”

She stopped ten paces from him, chest heaving. “This is my land. My home.”

“Not anymore.” He gestured toward the ridge where dark silhouettes of mounted men watched. “Lord Trevain sends his regards. And a message—pay the tribute or lose everything.”

The heat pressed against her face as another tree caught fire with a whoosh of igniting leaves. These trees had fed her. Would have fed the village children through winter.

“You’re burning food,” she said, voice shaking. “Children’s food.”

The young man shrugged. “Not my concern.”

The soldier’s callous indifference snapped the last thread of her control. In two strides, she closed the distance and slammed her knife into his thigh. He screamed, stumbling backward, the torch falling from his hand.

She didn’t hesitate. Years of fighting for survival took over. She drove her elbow into

his nose, feeling it crunch beneath the blow. Blood spurted, and he staggered, clutching his face.

She dove for the fallen torch, rolling to her feet and swinging it at her attacker. He reeled back, avoiding the flaming weapon. She thrust again, forcing him farther from the burning trees. Her breath came in ragged gasps, but she kept advancing, eyes locked on her enemy.

“Stop!” The soldier held up his hands. “Please, I’m bleeding—” His words cut off as the torch connected with his shoulder, searing cloth and flesh.

As he cried out, she turned and flung the torch as far as she could, back into the burning orchard. It spiraled through the air before landing in a shower of sparks. She faced him again, fists raised, adrenaline pumping.

“Leave,” she spat. “And tell your lord he’ll never have my land or my loyalty.”

The soldier scrambled backwards, clutching his injured thigh. He opened his mouth, but whatever he was going to say was lost as a dark blur tackled him to the ground. The soldier screamed and thrashed under Egon’s weight.

“You dare?” Egon’s voice was a low growl. “You dare attack her land, her trees?” Each question was punctuated by the solid thud of fists against flesh. She watched, chest heaving, as the soldier’s resistance weakened and his cries quieted.

Egon dropped him, his hands flexing as his claws emerged. Beyond him, she could see other men approaching, drawn by their companion’s shout of alarm. They wouldn’t stand a chance against Egon if he transformed fully—he would tear through them like parchment.

But the aftermath... she could already see it. The stories would spread. A monster at

Lyric's farm. The Beast that slaughtered the lord's men. They would hunt him, fear him.

Fear them both.

She stepped between Egon and his prey, her back to the terrified soldier.

"Egon," she said, keeping her voice steady despite her racing heart. "Look at me."

His eyes had turned black again, but they focused on her, his big body trembling with barely restrained violence. The soldier behind her whimpered, and she felt his fear like a tangible thing in the smoke-thick air.

"Egon," she repeated, keeping her voice steady. "It's me. It's Lyric."

His gaze remained fixed over her shoulder, a growl rumbling deep in his chest. She wasn't sure he even recognized her anymore. The Beast had taken over, driven by rage and the need to protect. If he attacked now, there would be no going back for either of them.

"Please," she whispered, taking a tentative step toward him. "This isn't the way."

The sound of approaching hoofbeats cut through the crackling flames. She glanced back to see a group of riders galloping toward them, torchlight glinting off drawn swords. Her stomach dropped. More soldiers meant more danger—for everyone.

"Stand down!" A commanding voice rang out across the burning orchard as an older man on horseback broke away from the group, riding hard towards them. Unlike the others, his bearing spoke of years of discipline and authority. Silver streaked his beard, and a weathered scar ran across one cheek. Lord Trevain's original captain, before Lasseran's soldiers had arrived

He reined his horse sharply, taking in the scene with narrowed eyes—the cowering soldier, her protective stance, and Egon’s rage. To his credit, the captain showed no fear at the sight of the enraged orc, only a grim understanding.

“Enough!” He dismounted with surprising agility for his age. “Douse those torches. Now!”

The younger soldiers hesitated, exchanging uncertain glances.

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“I said now!” the captain barked. “This ends tonight.”

To her astonishment, the men obeyed, stamping out their torches against the dirt. The captain approached slowly, his hands visible and empty of weapons.

“Forgive me, mistress,” he said to her, his voice rough but sincere. “These men acted without orders.” He cast a disgusted look at the young soldier who had torched her trees. “Lord Trevain demanded tribute, yes, but this—” he gestured to the burning orchard, “—this was never sanctioned.”

She stared at him, disbelief warring with desperate hope. Behind her, she could sense Egon still poised to attack, still on the verge of transforming.

“My men have dishonored themselves,” the captain continued. “And me.”

She struggled to process the captain’s words through the haze of smoke and fear. Behind her, Egon’s ragged breathing continued, each exhale a rumbling growl that vibrated through the air between them.

“Your men burned our winter stores,” she said, voice steadier than she felt. “They destroyed my orchard.”

The captain’s weathered face tightened with what might have been genuine regret. “And they will answer for it. But—” His gaze shifted to Egon’s massive body, menacing in the firelight. “We both know what happens next if I don’t return with some form of resolution.”

Lord Trevain would send more men, better armed, with orders to hunt the Beast that had threatened his soldiers.

“There must be consequences,” the captain continued, his voice dropping lower. “But I can offer you a choice.”

Something cold settled in her stomach. “What choice?”

“The orc leaves.” The captain’s eyes held hers, unflinching. “Tonight. He disappears back into the wilderness where he belongs, and in return, I give you my word that the village will remain unharmed.”

Her eyes closed in silent despair. One sacrifice to save everything else.

“And if he doesn’t?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Then I cannot control what happens next.” The captain glanced at his men, who stood watching with hands on sword hilts. “Lord Trevain fears nothing more than losing face. A Beast attacking his men? He’ll burn this entire village to the ground rather than appear weak.”

She turned to look at Egon. The rage in his eyes had dimmed somewhat, awareness seeping back into his gaze. He was hearing this. Understanding it.

“I need your answer,” the captain pressed.

The choice was clear. Painfully, brutally clear. Everything she had built here—her home, her place among these people, the fragile peace she had carved out for herself—weighed against Egon’s presence. Against the tenuous, newborn thing growing between them.

“He’ll go,” she said, the words like ash in her mouth.

CHAPTER 15

Egon watched the captain’s retreating back with a mixture of rage and resignation. The man’s offer was clear—leave, or the village would pay the price. Lyric’s orchard still smoldered, the charred remains of fruit trees a stark reminder of what could happen to the rest of her home.

“I have to go,” he said roughly. “There’s no other choice.”

She looked up at him, her face illuminated by the dying embers. “You don’t have to decide tonight.”

“Every moment I stay puts you in danger.” He clenched his fists, his Beast straining against his control. “I won’t be responsible for burning down everything you’ve built.”

She reached for his hand, her fingers sliding between his. “We should still seek out the wise woman.”

“We?” The word caught him off guard.

“Yes, we,” she said firmly. “I can’t stay here knowing what I know now about Lasseran, about what he’s planning, not if I can help.”

He shook his head. “Your home?—”

“Is just a place.” She gestured toward the damaged orchard. “They’ve already shown what they think of my claim to it.”

“You’d leave everything behind?” He studied her face, searching for doubt. “Your bees, your garden?—”

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“The bees will survive without me. The gardens will grow wild again.”

He turned away, unable to bear the thought of her sacrificing everything for him. “I won’t ask that of you.”

“You didn’t ask.” She stepped in front of him, forcing him to look at her. “I’m choosing. Just as I chose to take you in when you appeared at my door.”

“This is different.”

“Is it?” Her eyes flashed. “I’ve spent years hiding here, pretending I could build something permanent. But nothing is permanent, Egon. Not for people like us.”

He couldn’t deny the truth of her words. They were both outsiders. They always would be.

“When do we leave?” she asked, already turning back to the cottage.

He followed her, watching in disbelief as she packed a small cloth bag with essentials—herbs, dried meat, a change of clothes. Her movements were swift and efficient, as though she’d been preparing for this departure her entire life.

“You’re certain?” he asked for the third time.

She paused, hands resting on a jar of honey she’d carefully wrapped in cloth. “If you ask me that one more time, I might change my mind out of spite.”

A reluctant smile tugged at his lips. “I just want you to be sure.”

“I am.” She tucked the honey into her bag. “Besides, the village needs to protect itself. They can’t do that if Lord Trepan’s men are watching me.”

Outside, the soft murmur of voices grew louder, and he tensed, his hand instinctively moving to the knife at his belt.

“It’s just the Elders,” she said, touching his arm. “I asked them to come.”

The three village Elders entered without knocking. Their faces were solemn but not hostile as they regarded him.

“We’ve discussed matters,” said the oldest, a white-haired female he hadn’t encountered before. “The village agrees your departure is... necessary.”

He nodded stiffly. “I understand.”

“Not just yours,” Elder Harta added. “Lyric’s too. For her safety.”

Elder Tomas stepped forward, holding out a small pouch. “Seeds from our best crops. For wherever you settle next.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as she accepted the gift. “Thank you.”

“Samha asked us to give you this.” The white-haired woman handed him a crudely carved wooden figure—an attempt at an orc warrior. “He says it will protect you both.”

His throat tightened as he took the small carving. “Tell him...” He struggled to find words.

“We will tell him you were grateful,” the Elder said gently.

As they left the cottage, villagers lined the path, their expressions a mixture of gratitude and concern. Some nodded respectfully to him. A few reached out to touch Lyric’s arm or press small tokens into her hands.

“They’re thanking you,” she whispered. “For protecting Samha and his sister.”

He kept his eyes forward, uncomfortable with their attention. “I only did what was necessary.”

At the edge of the village, where the path wound upward into the mountains, Samha suddenly jumped out of the bushes and ran towards them.

“You’re really leaving?” The boy’s eyes were wide and red-rimmed.

Lyric bent down and hugged him. “We have to. But we won’t forget you.”

Samha returned her hug, then turned to him, small chin trembling but determined. “Will you come back someday?”

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He stared down at the boy, feeling a strange tightness in his chest. Samha's question hung in the air between them, weighted with hope that he wasn't sure he could bear. The small wooden carving pressed against his palm, surprisingly heavy for such a simple thing.

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. Lies came easily to warriors in the field, but not to this child who looked at him without fear. "The world is... complicated."

Samha's face fell, but he squared his small shoulders. "Then I'll come find you when I'm bigger."

The declaration startled a laugh from his throat—rough and unpracticed. "You're a brave one."

"You taught me." Samha's eyes suddenly looked far older than his years. "When you saved my sister. You didn't run away even though you were scared."

He knelt, bringing himself to the boy's level. "I wasn't—" He stopped himself from denying it. "How did you know I was afraid?"

"Your hands were shaking after. Like mine do." Samha demonstrated, holding out his small fingers and making them tremble. "But you still did the right thing."

He swallowed hard, unable to find words. This child had seen through him in ways that warriors and kings never had.

"Keep looking after your sister," he finally managed, resting a hand briefly on the

boy's shoulder. "And the others. They'll need your courage."

Samha nodded solemnly. "I will." Then, without warning, he threw his arms around Egon's neck in a fierce hug.

He froze, then awkwardly returned the embrace, careful of his strength. Over the boy's shoulder, he caught Lyric watching them, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

When Samha pulled away, he pressed something else into Egon's hand—a small, smooth river stone. "This is for luck," the boy whispered. "My father gave it to me before he died."

"I can't take this?—"

"You have to." Samha closed his fingers around the stone. "It's the rules. For heroes."

He felt something crack inside him, some wall he'd built long ago. He tucked the stone carefully into his pocket, next to the wooden carving.

"Thank you," he said, the words inadequate but all he had to offer.

He watched as the boy darted away again, disappearing back into the bushes, then took Lyric's hand as they started up the narrow mountain path. He matched his pace to hers as the village had disappeared behind the trees, leaving only wilderness ahead. The weight of the stone in his pocket and the carved figure tucked safely in his pack grounded him in a way he hadn't expected.

"You handled that well," she said, breaking the silence. "With Samha."

He grunted. "Children are... difficult."

“Not for you, apparently.” A smile played on her lips. “He adores you.”

“He shouldn’t.”

“Reminds me of another boy who used to follow you around.” Her voice softened. “Do you remember Taro? The baker’s son?”

The name unlocked a door in his mind he’d kept firmly shut. “The one who kept stealing bread for us?”

“And blamed it on the mice.” She laughed, the sound bright against the forest quiet. “He was so determined to impress you.”

“I remember.” The corner of his mouth twitched upwards. “He brought you those sticky buns on your name day.”

“He brought them for you,” she corrected. “But you told him I needed them more.”

He hadn’t thought of that day in years. The memory came back with surprising clarity—Lyric’s delighted face as she’d bitten into the sweet pastry, the way she’d closed her eyes in pleasure. He’d gone hungry that night, but it had been worth it.

“They were the best I’d ever tasted,” she said, as if reading his thoughts.

“Better than the ones we stole from the festival cart?”

“Gods, I’d forgotten about that!” Her eyes widened. “You distracted the vendor while I?”

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“—slipped six buns into your skirt pockets,” he finished. “We ate like royalty that night.”

“Until we both got sick from eating too many.”

They shared a look, and suddenly they were laughing—his deep rumble mixing with her lighter tones. The sound of their shared mirth echoed through the trees, startling birds into flight.

It struck him then, how easily they’d fallen back into this rhythm. As if the years between had been nothing more than a brief separation. The realization both comforted and terrified him. He’d spent so long convincing himself he was better off alone, that bonds were weaknesses to be avoided.

Yet here she was beside him, matching him step for step, sharing memories he’d buried deep. And despite everything—the danger behind them, the uncertainty ahead—he felt strangely whole.

Since they no longer had to make the trip in a single day, he didn’t try to hurry their journey. Instead he watched her obvious pleasure in their surroundings. She gave an excited murmur when she discovered a cluster of wild berries growing along the path. She sorted through them quickly and efficiently, adding the ripe ones to the small pouch at her waist. The afternoon sun filtered through the canopy above, casting dappled light across her face. She looked different here than she had in the village—more alert, less guarded.

“It’s strange,” she said, straightening up. “I should be terrified, but I’m not.”

“The wilderness isn’t as dangerous as people think,” he agreed, although he remained alert to their surroundings. “Not if you know how to read it.”

She brushed her hands on her skirt and fell back into step beside him. “It’s not just that. I thought leaving would feel like...” She searched for the word. “Like losing everything again.”

He glanced down at her, surprised by her candor. “And it doesn’t?”

“Parts of it do.” She gestured back toward the way they’d come, though the village was long out of sight. “I’ll miss my garden, my bees. The rhythm of the seasons there.” A small smile played on her lips. “But there’s something freeing about this too. I haven’t traveled since I found that place.”

They climbed over a fallen log, Egon automatically extending his hand to help her. She took it without hesitation, her grip firm and sure.

“I never thought I’d say this,” she continued, not letting go of his hand even after they’d passed the obstacle, “but I’m glad you’re here. With me.”

“Even after everything?”

“Especially after everything.” She squeezed his hand once before releasing it. “You’re not the boy I knew in Kel’Vara anymore, Egon. You’re... more.”

“More?”

“Stronger. Steadier.” Her gaze was direct, unflinching. “The boy I knew was kind to me but angry at the world. Quick to fight, quick to run. You’re neither of those things now.”

He looked away, uncomfortable with her assessment. “I still fight.”

“Yes, but not because you’re angry. Because you’re protecting something.” She touched his arm lightly. “There’s a difference.”

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps the time he’d spent with his brothers had healed him more than he’d realized.

He watched her from the corner of his eye as she moved along the trail ahead of him. He caught himself studying the curve of her neck, the way her hair fell across her shoulders when she bent to examine plants along the path. Each time their hands brushed during meal preparations, a jolt passed through him that had nothing to do with danger or survival.

“We should reach the foothills by nightfall,” he said, clearing his throat. “The old woman’s cottage is supposed to be near the waterfall beyond. We’ll reach it tomorrow.”

She nodded, falling back into step beside him. “Do you think she’ll help us?”

“I don’t know.” He stepped over a fallen branch, automatically reaching back to steady her as she followed. His hand lingered on her waist longer than necessary. “The old magics are... unpredictable.”

“Like you,” she said softly, not pulling away from his touch.

His breath caught. Her scent—honey and flowers and something uniquely Lyric—filled his senses. His Beast stirred, not with rage but with a different kind of hunger.

“I’m not—” he began, but she turned to face him, so close he could see the flecks of

gold in her green eyes.

“You are,” she insisted. “Unpredictable. Fierce. Gentle when I least expect it.”

Her hand came up to touch his face, fingers tracing the scar that ran from his temple to his jaw. He should step back. He should maintain distance. He should remember all the reasons why this was impossible.

Instead, he leaned into her touch, his eyes closing briefly as her thumb brushed across his cheekbone.

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“Lyric,” he whispered, her name a warning and a prayer.

“I know,” she answered, understanding everything he couldn’t say. “I know what you think you are. What you believe you don’t deserve.”

She stepped closer, eliminating the space between them. “But I see you, Egon. I’ve always seen you.”

CHAPTER 16

Lyric paused at the edge of the glade where Egon had decided to stop for the night, her breath catching in her throat. The setting sun filtered through the canopy of ancient oaks, casting dappled golden light across a carpet of wildflowers. A small stream trickled over moss-covered stones, its gentle burbling the only sound breaking the silence.

“It’s perfect,” she whispered.

Moving with surprising grace for someone his size, he took off his pack and set it beneath a broad oak. His massive hands, capable of such destruction, now worked with careful precision as he arranged stones for a fire pit.

“Found it on my way to your village,” he said, not looking up from his task. “I thought we might need somewhere safe to rest.”

She sank onto a fallen log, her legs grateful for the reprieve after hours of hiking. She watched him work, struck by the contradiction of him—this warrior who had torn

apart armed men now humming softly as he gathered kindling.

“How do you do that?” she asked.

He glanced up, golden eyes questioning. “Do what?”

“Find beauty in all this chaos.” She gestured vaguely at the world beyond their sanctuary. “After everything that’s happened...”

His hands stilled. He straightened, rolling his broad shoulders before meeting her gaze.

“When you’ve seen as much ugliness as I have, you learn to notice the good things.” His voice was low, intimate in the quiet glade. “Otherwise, what’s the point?”

She nodded and looked around the glade again—truly looked. Tiny blue butterflies danced over purple coneflowers. The stream caught the last rays of sunlight, turning to liquid gold. Above them, the first stars appeared in the eastern sky.

For years, she’d focused only on survival. Even her garden had been practical first, beautiful second. But here, miles from everything familiar, she felt something long-dormant unfurling in her chest.

“It reminds me of a story I heard once,” she said softly. “About sacred places where the Old Gods still walk.”

He smiled—a rare, unguarded expression that transformed his scarred face.

“Maybe they do,” he said, striking flint to steel. Sparks caught the dry tinder, and a small flame bloomed between his hands. “There is a shrine high in the mountains dedicated to the Old Gods. My brother went there to pray for an answer for our

people.”

“Did he find one?”

He smiled again. “In a way. His mate fell out of the sky and into the lake next to the shrine.”

“Really?”

“Really. He believes that the Old Gods are at work in our lives.”

“Do you believe that?”

He shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with the question. “I’m not sure I believe they are that interested in my life, but I did ask them to give me a purpose.”

“A purpose? Not a mate?”

“I didn’t think I was worthy.”

Her heart ached for him, and she hugged her knees to her chest, watching the flames dance in the growing darkness. Memories flickered like the shadows around them—of a younger Egon, of herself before life had hardened her edges.

“Do you remember the night we snuck onto the merchant’s roof?” she asked, her voice barely audible above the crackling fire.

His eyes gleamed in the firelight. “To watch the summer stars.”

“You knew all their names.”

“I made most of them up,” he admitted with a soft chuckle.

She smiled despite herself. “I believed every word.”

The silence between them felt fragile, weighted with unspoken truths. She traced patterns in the dirt with a stick, gathering courage.

“I thought about you,” she finally said. “After you left. I’d see something beautiful or strange and think, ‘I need to tell Egon about this.’” She swallowed hard. “It took me years to break that habit.”

He remained still, his massive form silhouetted against the flames.

“We were just children,” she continued, “but what I felt for you wasn’t childish. It was...” She struggled to find the words. “It was the first real thing in my life.”

The stick snapped between her fingers, and she tossed it into the fire, watching sparks spiral upward.

“I used to imagine you’d come back. That you’d appear one day with that crooked smile, and everything would make sense again.” Her voice grew steadier as the words finally escaped. “When you didn’t, I convinced myself I’d imagined what was between us. That it had meant nothing to you.”

She finally looked up, meeting his golden gaze across the flames. The vulnerability in

her own voice surprised her.

“But it wasn’t nothing, was it? Not to me, and I don’t think it was to you either.”

She held her breath, watching his expression shift in the firelight. His massive shoulders hunched forward, as if bearing an invisible weight. When he finally spoke, his voice was rough with emotion.

“I didn’t leave because I wanted to.” He stared into the flames, refusing to meet her eyes. “I left because I had to.”

Her heart hammered against her ribs. She’d imagined this conversation a thousand times over the years, but now that it was happening, she found herself terrified of what might come next.

“I don’t know if you remember what it was like in Kel’Vara at that time. Lasseran’s lies had started to take hold. Orcs were treated with suspicion, fear, even hatred.”

“I remember,” she said softly. He’d tried to shield her from it but she’d heard some of the hatred flung at him and seen the nights he’s come back hurt and bleeding.

“The night before I disappeared,” he continued, “I was arrested—not because of any of the things I had actually done, but simply because I was an orc. They threw me in a cell under the Black Keep. I was terrified, not so much for myself but because I knew you were alone, unprotected. A nobleman came to see me. He offered to arrange for my freedom—as long as I fought for him.”

“That’s why you became a fighter?” she asked slowly.

He shrugged, looking back into the flames.

“I agreed, on one condition—that he provide for you. That you were fed and clothed and educated.”

The pieces suddenly fell into place, and a small, wounded sound escaped her throat. All these years, she’d believed herself abandoned, unwanted.

“It was Lord Sarnak, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You never said goodbye,” she whispered.

“He wouldn’t permit it. And once he knew I cared about you, he had a weapon to hold at my throat.” He gave her a tortured look. “But he didn’t keep his word, did he? I finally earned enough coin to buy my freedom but when I went to his house to find you, no one even knew who you were.”

“Oh, they knew who I was,” she said bitterly. “He did keep his word—I became a servant in his household but I was also fed and clothed and educated.”

“I don’t understand. Why did no one admit that they knew you?”

“Because Lord Sarnak had a son—a very charming, handsome son—and I was lonely.” And she’d wanted so desperately to be loved.

His growl reverberated through the glade, and she gave him a startled look. His eyes had turned black again.

“He wasn’t unkind to me,” she said quickly. “He may have even loved me a little, but that only made it worse as far as his mother was concerned. She wasn’t about to let her precious son become involved with a nameless servant. She sent me away—that’s

how I ended up in the old Kingdom.”

“When was that?”

“Five years after you left.”

“And a year before I came looking for you.” He growled again. “They were so fucking convincing. ‘Oh no, sir. We never heard of a Miss Lyric.’”

“What did you do then?”

“Orcs were even less popular by then so I joined a group of mercenaries. I was convinced that all I was good for was fighting. But it ate away at me and one day I just couldn’t do it anymore. That’s when I left and headed to Norhaven.”

“And found your brothers.”

“Yes.”

She rose from the log, her legs unsteady as she circled the fire. He remained motionless, watching her approach with an expression of raw vulnerability that made her chest ache.

“So it wasn’t that you didn’t want me with you,” she said softly.

A bitter laugh escaped him. “Lyric, leaving you was like cutting out my own heart. Every day I wondered where you were, if you were safe. If you hated me. Eventually I convinced myself it was better that way—that you deserved someone whole, someone human.”

She stood before him now, close enough to see the firelight reflecting in his eyes.

“It wasn’t rejection,” he said. “It was the only way I knew to love you.”

Her heart thundered in her chest as she moved closer to him. The heat from the fire warmed her skin, but it was nothing compared to the warmth spreading through her at his confession. All these years, she’d built her life around the certainty that she’d been abandoned—that she hadn’t been enough. The truth changed everything.

He tracked her movement, wary and hopeful all at once. She saw the tension in his broad shoulders, the way he held himself perfectly still, as if afraid any movement might shatter this fragile moment between them.

She reached out, her fingers trembling slightly as they brushed against his scarred cheek. His skin was warm and rough beneath her touch. He closed his eyes briefly, leaning into her palm with such naked vulnerability that her throat tightened.

“Look at me,” she whispered.

When he opened his eyes, she saw the same boy she’d known—the one who’d named stars for her, who’d given her his food when she was hungry, who’d made her laugh even in the darkest corners of Kel’Vara. He was still there, beneath the scars and the pain and the years between them.

The realization washed over her like spring rain, washing away years of doubt. This wasn’t the impulsive longing of her youth or the desperate need for connection that had haunted her lonely nights. This was deeper, steadier—a recognition of something that had always been true.

“I want to be with you,” she told him, her voice steady despite the fluttering in her chest. “Not because of who you were then, or who I thought you might become. I

want to be with you now—scars, Beast curse, everything. All of it.”

His expression transformed, disbelief giving way to something like wonder. The firelight cast half his face in shadow, but his eyes glowed with an intensity that made her breath catch. She’d never been so certain of anything as she was of the words she’d just spoken.

“You can’t mean that,” he said, his voice rough. “You don’t know what I’ve done, what I am.”

“I know enough.” She kept her hand against his cheek, feeling the subtle shift as he swallowed hard. “I’ve seen your gentleness with Samha. I’ve watched you rebuild my fences and tend my bees. I saw you transform to protect that girl.”

His big hand came up to cover hers, engulfing it completely. The contrast should have frightened her—his strength could break her without effort—but she felt only safety in his touch.

“I’m not the boy you knew,” he warned.

“And I’m not that girl anymore.” She smiled at him, feeling tears prick at the corners of her eyes. “We’ve both changed. But some things remain.”

She leaned forward, close enough to feel his breath against her face. The world narrowed to just this moment—the crackling fire, the night sounds of the forest, and his golden eyes reflecting the flames.

“I spent so many years convinced I was better off alone,” she whispered. “Building walls to keep everyone at a distance. And then you walked back into my life, and suddenly those walls didn’t seem so necessary anymore.”

His free hand hesitantly rose to brush a strand of hair from her face, the touch so gentle it nearly broke her heart.

“I never stopped caring for you,” he admitted, his voice barely audible. “Even when I convinced myself I had no right to.”

She closed the remaining distance between them, pressing her lips to his. For a heartbeat, he remained still, as if afraid to shatter the moment. Then his arms encircled her, drawing her against his chest as he returned her kiss with a tenderness that belied his strength.

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The past that had haunted her—the abandonment, the loneliness, the unanswered questions—dissolved like morning mist under the sun’s warmth as she melted into him. For the first time since he’d reappeared in her life, she wasn’t kissing a memory or a ghost of what might have been. She was kissing him as he was now—scarred, powerful, and somehow more real than the boy she’d once known.

When they finally broke apart, she kept her hands on his broad shoulders, unwilling to lose the connection. The weight that had pressed against her heart for so long had lifted, leaving her breathless with unexpected lightness.

“I’ve imagined this moment a thousand times,” she confessed, her voice soft in the firelit darkness. “But the reality is so much better.”

His laugh vibrated through her where their bodies touched. His golden eyes, once so guarded, now shone with open wonder as he looked at her.

“I never let myself imagine it,” he admitted. “It hurt too much to hope.”

She traced the edge of a scar that ran along his jaw, no longer seeing it as a mark of what had changed but simply as a part of him—the male who had chosen her safety over his own happiness.

“No more secrets between us,” she said. “No more noble sacrifices. Whatever comes next, we face it together.”

The smile that spread across his face transformed him. In that moment, she saw clearly what they could be to each other—not just echoes of a shared past, but

partners in whatever future they might forge.

“Together,” he agreed, the word a promise that resonated in the quiet glade.

CHAPTER 17

“Did you really mean it?” Egon asked a short time later, staring into the flames, almost afraid to look at Lyric.

She was curled against his side and she raised her head, giving him a confused look.

“Mean what?”

“That you want to be mine? Completely?”

“Of course I mean it. I told you I want to be with you.”

Four simple words that shattered the fortress he’d built around his heart. She wiggled closer, her scent wrapping around him—honey and flowers and something uniquely her. The firelight caught in her chestnut hair, turning the waves to liquid copper. His hands trembled as she reached for him.

“Are you certain?” His voice emerged rougher than intended. “I’m not?—”

“Don’t tell me what you’re not.” She pressed her fingertips gently to his lips. “I know exactly who you are, Egon.”

His Beast stirred, not with violence but with a primal need that threatened to consume him. When she lifted her face to his, he met her halfway, gently cradling her face in his big hands.

Their kiss deepened, years of longing poured into a single point of contact. Her hands slid up his chest, tracing the ridges of scars with acceptance rather than pity. Each touch burned through him, melting away layers of doubt.

“I never thought—” he whispered against her neck.

“Then don’t think.” She smiled, tugging him toward their bedrolls. “Just be. Be with me.”

He lowered her to the furs, his massive frame caging her in. Her eyes shone bright in the firelight, reflecting the same longing he felt.

“I’ve dreamed of this, you know,” she murmured. “So many nights, I’d lie awake and imagine...”

His lips traced the curve of her jaw, savoring the taste of her skin. “What did you imagine?”

“You,” she breathed, her hands tangling in his hair. “Touching me, holding me, making me yours.”

His control hung by a thread. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her, to see fear in her eyes when she looked at him.

“I don’t want to rush this,” he murmured. “To take anything from you.”

Her laughter danced in the night air. “Egon, you’ve given me everything—my freedom, my past, my future. Let me give myself to you.”

Their eyes met, and he knew in that instant that she meant every word. With infinite care, he undressed her, his calloused hands skimming over silken skin, worshipping

each newly revealed inch, so small and sweet and perfect. Her breath caught as he lowered his mouth to her breast, teasing the sensitive peak with his tongue until she arched beneath him, her fingernails digging into his shoulders.

“Too much?” he rasped.

“Never enough.”

She pulled his face back to hers, their lips meeting with a hunger that bordered on desperation. He lost himself in the feel of her—the softness of her curves, the warmth of her skin, the little sounds she made as his fingers explored further. He traced the curve of her hip and gently parted her legs. She was slick with need, and his heart thundered as he stroked her, learning what made her gasp and shiver, what made her whisper his name.

“Egon,” she pleaded.

“Let me please you,” he whispered against her neck, his fingers circling and teasing.

Her hips bucked against his hand, urging him on, demanding more. He obliged willingly, sliding one thick finger into her heat. She clenched around him, so tight and perfect he nearly lost his grip on his control.

“More,” she demanded.

He added a second finger, stretching her gently, preparing her to take him. He stroked and teased, coaxing waves of pleasure from her until she writhed beneath him, her cries echoing through the forest. Only when she lay spent and shivering did he withdraw his hand.

“Are you ready?” he murmured, his voice rough with the effort of holding back.

“Truly ready?”

She met his gaze, her eyes heavy-lidded with desire. “I’ve been ready for this since I was sixteen.”

Her words broke the last remnants of his control. He positioned himself between her legs, his cock thick and throbbing with need. She reached for him, guiding him to her entrance.

“Slowly,” she whispered. “You’re very... large.”

“For you, always.” He pressed forward, his breath hissing between his teeth as her body yielded to him, inch by agonizing inch. He paused, letting her adjust to his size before moving again. Every instinct urged him to thrust, to claim, but he held back, unwilling to cause her any pain.

“More,” she demanded.

He obeyed, sinking deeper into her heat, feeling her body stretch to accommodate him. The rush of pleasure threatened to overwhelm him, but he forced himself to go slow, to make sure she was ready. Only when he was fully sheathed in her did he allow himself a moment to breathe, to savor the way she fit him like a second skin.

“Lyric,” he whispered, his voice ragged.

“Egon,” she answered, her eyes locked on his.

He began to move, pulling back until just the tip of him remained within her before sliding back in, long, deep strokes that made them both groan. Her nails dug into his back, urging him on, and he increased his pace, thrusting harder and faster, his hips snapping against hers. She arched into him, taking everything he gave, her cries rising

in pitch until they shattered the night.

His control faltered, his rhythm becoming frantic as his orgasm built. He reached between them, finding her swollen nub with his thumb, stroking her in time with his thrusts.

“Now,” he growled. “Together.”

She cried out his name as her body clenched around him, triggering his own release. He poured himself into her, his hips jerking with the force of his climax, his roar echoing through the forest as his knot expanded, locking them together. They clung to each other, trembling and gasping, riding the wave of ecstasy until they lay spent and breathless.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, her cheeks, her lips, whispering words of love and devotion he’d never spoken to anyone else. She curled into him, her fingers tracing idle patterns on his chest. For the first time in his life, he felt whole—complete in a way he hadn’t thought possible. His Beast purred with contentment as the mate bond hummed between them. He’d felt it snap into place as soon as he’d entered her, but it wasn’t the sudden shock his brothers had described. It was more a confirmation, an acknowledgment of something that had been there all along.

“Rest,” he murmured. “I’ll keep watch.”

She nodded sleepily, her breath warm against his skin. He tucked the furs more tightly around her, shielding her from the cool night air. His knot would remain for a while, binding them in the most intimate of ways, and a fierce surge of possessiveness swept through him.

My mate.

Had the Old Gods sent him to her, he wondered as he started to drift off to sleep. Had they heard the prayer he'd been too afraid to voice?

"Thank you," he whispered into the night. "I will do everything I can to prove myself worthy of this gift. Nothing will ever harm her—not as long as I draw breath."

As his eyes closed again, he thought a hand touched his cheek, as gently as his mother once had, all those years ago.

CHAPTER 18

Lyric's muscles ached—both from the day's journey and the long night of love-making—but she couldn't bring herself to regret it as she followed Egon up a narrow mountain path. A smile kept curving her lips and every time he looked back at her, he returned it.

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The forest had grown denser, the trees more ancient, as they climbed, their branches weaving together to form a canopy that filtered the afternoon sunlight into dappled patterns on the forest floor.

He suddenly came to a halt, his head tilting. “Do you smell that?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. A faint sweetness hung in the air—herbs and smoke and something else she couldn’t name. “Yes.”

They rounded a bend in the path and the trees opened to reveal a small clearing. At its center stood a stone cottage, its walls covered in climbing vines dotted with tiny blue flowers. Smoke curled from a chimney of stacked river stones.

Before they could approach, the wooden door swung open. An elderly woman emerged, her silver hair braided with colorful threads and small bells that chimed softly as she moved. Despite her age, she stood straight, her eyes clear and piercing.

“The orc and the beekeeper,” she said, her voice surprisingly strong. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

She gave the woman a startled look. “You knew we were coming?”

“The Old Gods whisper many things to those who listen.”

As she came to join them, Lyric recognized the pendant hung round her neck—a spiral carved from bone.

“You’re a Sister of Freja,” she whispered.

The woman inclined her head. “Yes, although few remember us now. I am Amara, keeper of the old ways.”

Egon stepped forward, placing himself slightly in front of her. “We were told you might help us.”

“With the Beast curse,” Amara nodded. “Come inside. The forest has too many ears.” She turned, her long skirts sweeping the ground as she retreated into the cottage.

She glanced over at Egon. His face was carefully neutral, but his eyes betrayed his wariness. She reached for his hand, squeezing it gently.

“Together,” she murmured.

His fingers tightened around hers. “Together.”

They crossed the threshold into a room filled with hanging bundles of dried herbs and shelves lined with clay jars. A fire burned in a stone hearth, casting warm light over a table already set with three wooden cups.

“Sit,” Amara commanded, gesturing to the bench. “We have much to discuss.”

She perched on the edge of the wooden bench, acutely aware of Egon’s warmth beside her. The cottage felt both welcoming and unsettling—the familiar scents of herbs and honey mingled with stranger, earthier odors she couldn’t identify.

Amara poured a steaming amber liquid into their cups. “Drink,” she said. “It will clear your minds.”

Lyric sniffed the brew cautiously. It smelled of chamomile and something she couldn't identify. She took a small sip, surprised by its pleasant taste—sweet with a hint of spice that warmed her throat.

“The Beast Curse,” Amara said, settling across from them with her own cup. “An ancient magic twisted to serve greed.” Her weathered fingers traced the spiral pendant at her throat. “Lasseran thinks he’s discovered something new, but he merely corrupted what was sacred.”

“You know about Lasseran?” she asked.

“Of course. His shadow grows longer each day. Villages that once honored the Old Gods now bow to his false promises.” Amara’s eyes narrowed. “He offers power through pain, strength through separation from one’s humanity.”

Egon’s hand tightened around his cup. “Is there a way to break it?”

The old woman studied him, her gaze penetrating. “I don’t believe that is the question you should be asking.”

“What is the question?” he demanded.

“Is it the Curse itself you wish to break, or simply the ability to produce children?”

She could feel the tension in his body as he frowned at Amara.

“Aren’t they related?”

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“Yes, but not in the way you think. There must always be a balance.”

“Then how do we find that balance?”

Amara beamed at him.

“Now that is the right question.”

They both waited expectantly but all Amara did was to sip her drink.

“Well?” Egon finally asked impatiently.

“Oh, I don’t know the answer, dear,” she said cheerfully. “I just know that’s the question.”

“Then what should we do?” Lyric asked.

“Another excellent question, but I suspect that in your case, Freja may have decided to... help things along.”

“So there’s nothing you can do?” Egon asked, his voice resigned.

“For Norhaven? No. But Lasseran is a different matter. He must be stopped.” Amara’s voice dropped to almost a whisper. “The curse has three anchors—blood, bone, and breath. Lasseran bound the first of his Beast warriors at a sacred site, corrupting an ancient stone circle. The power flows from that place still.”

“And if that connection were broken?” she asked hopefully.

Amara’s eyes glittered. “Then those who wish to be free of the Beast might find release.”

“Might?” Egon’s voice rumbled with skepticism.

“Magic this old offers no certainties,” Amara replied. “But I believe it is possible.” She reached across the table, her fingers brushing Egon’s scarred forearm. “Especially for one whose heart remains his own.”

She squeezed Egon’s hand under the table, hoping that Amara was referring to him.

“The balance was never meant to be this way,” the wise woman sighed, her gnarled fingers tracing ancient symbols on the wooden table. “The Beasts were guardians, not weapons. Lasseran corrupted what was sacred.”

Before Amara could add anything else, Egon’s head snapped up, his nostril flaring.

“Someone’s here,” he growled, rising to his feet.

Amara sighed. “They’ve found us sooner than I hoped.”

“What do we do?” she whispered, but before Egon could answer, an arrow whistled through the open window, embedding itself in the wooden beam inches from the wise woman’s head.

“Stay down!” Egon ordered, pulling her behind him as he moved to the doorway. “Five of them.”

“How did they find us?” she asked, and Amara gave a bitter laugh.

“The old Gods stir and Lasseran feels it.”

Another arrow struck the doorframe, showering them with splinters.

“There’s a tunnel,” Amara added urgently, moving to a woven rug on the floor. “Behind my hut, beneath the great oak. It will lead you to the sacred pool. You should be safe there.”

“What about you?” she asked.

The old woman smiled grimly. “I’ve played my part for centuries. Now it’s yours.”

“We need to move. Now.” Egon grabbed her hand as the wise woman pulled back the rug, revealing a narrow opening in the earthen floor.

A voice called from outside, deep and mocking. “Come out, brother. We know you’re in there.”

“Khorrek,” Egon growled, and dropped her hand.

CHAPTER 19

Egon’s Beast growled as he recognized Khorrek’s scent and Lyric gave him a worried look.

“Do you know him?”

His jaw clenched. “Yes. He’s one of Lasseran’s favorites. A Beast warrior.”

Outside, Khorrek laughed. “The High King sends his regards, Egon of Norhaven. Did you think your little quest would go unnoticed?”

The wise woman was already lowering herself into the tunnel. “This was always a possibility. Khorrek has hunted many who sought to break the curse.”

Egon peered through a crack in the wall. Five warriors surrounded the hut, but it was Khorrek who drew his eye—leaner than most orcs, with tusks filed to sharp points and a deep scar across his face. Dark armor enhanced his menacing presence.

“Your brother plays at being chieftain while the real power grows,” Khorrek called. “The High King has plans for you, Egon. Surrender now, and the woman lives.”

His heart hammered against his ribs. How did they know about Lyric? How long had they been watched?

“We can’t outrun them,” he whispered to Lyric.

Her fingers tightened around his. “We don’t need to outrun them. Just reach the sacred pool.”

The wise woman’s head disappeared into the tunnel. “The stone circle. Remember.”

Khorrek’s voice grew closer. “Your time runs short, brother. The woman or your life—choose.”

Egon felt his Beast rising, demanding release, demanding blood. He fought it down. Not yet. Not with Lyric so close.

“Go,” he urged her toward the tunnel. “I’ll hold them off.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but to his relief, she closed it again and disappeared into the tunnel.

His veins burned with the familiar heat of transformation as soon as she was out of sight. His Beast, so carefully restrained, now demanded release. He took a deep breath, then stepped outside to face his enemy.

Khorrek stood in the clearing, flanked by his warriors. His lips curled into a cruel smile, revealing jagged tusks filed to deadly points.

“The prodigal son returns,” Khorrek sneered. “You could have been one of us, Egon. Lasseran’s finest.”

“I’d rather die.” His voice deepened as his body began to change, muscles expanding beneath his skin.

Khorrek dismissed his men with a flick of his wrist. “Leave us. This is between brothers.”

The warriors melted into the forest, but he knew they hadn’t gone far. They were simply giving their leader room to enjoy the kill.

“We are not brothers,” he growled, feeling his bones shift and crack.

“No?” Khorrek’s own transformation began, his lean frame bulking with corded muscle. “We share the same curse. The same Beast blood.”

He lunged forward, his partially transformed body a blur of motion. His fist connected with Khorrek’s jaw, sending the warrior staggering backward. But Khorrek recovered quickly, twisting away from his second blow with unnatural speed.

Pain exploded across his back as Khorrek’s claws raked through his tunic, tearing flesh. The scent of his own blood filled the air, triggering a deeper transformation.

Khorrek matched him change for change, his body contorting until he stood half-orc, half-Beast—the perfect hybrid warrior that Lasseran coveted.

They circled each other, two apex predators assessing their prey. Khorrek moved first, feinting left before driving a clawed hand toward his throat. He blocked, bones cracking under the impact, but used the momentum to slam his knee into Khorrek’s ribs.

The fight became a savage dance—neither fully Beast nor man, caught between worlds as they tore at each other. Blood slicked the forest floor. Trees splintered as bodies crashed against them.

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“She’ll die screaming,” Khorrek taunted between blows. “Lasseran has special plans for your little mate.”

Rage blinded him, and he charged, abandoning technique for pure fury. It was a mistake. Khorrek sidestepped, driving a dagger deep into his side. He staggered, one hand pressing against the wound, hot blood seeping between his fingers. His Beast howled, demanding vengeance, but the injury slowed his movements.

Khorrek circled, savoring his advantage, then abruptly tilted his head, his nostrils flaring.

“I know you,” he muttered. “From the fight pits.”

He froze, the words striking deeper than the blade had. How did Khorrek know about that dark chapter of his life? Those brutal years spent in underground arenas, forced to fight for the entertainment of nobles with appetites for blood and suffering.

Khorrek’s eyes narrowed, recognition dawning in their amber depths. “I know that scent. The Scarred One, they called you. Undefeated in the northern circuit.”

Memories crashed through his mind—chains, roaring crowds, the metallic taste of blood. Years he’d tried to forget, to bury beneath the new life he’d built with his brothers.

“You...” Khorrek’s voice changed, a flicker of something besides cruelty crossing his face. “You killed the Butcher of Khal’Mor. I was there that night.”

He remembered. The Butcher—a mountain of a man who'd slaughtered dozens in the pits. The fight that had finally earned Egon his freedom.

“You were there,” he growled, the realization hitting him. “A boy In the front row.”

Khorrek's stance faltered. “My master brought me to witness true strength. But in your second fight you refused to kill after you won. They whipped you for that mercy.”

Something shifted in Khorrek's expression—confusion, conflict. The perfect soldier of Lasseran suddenly looked uncertain.

“They told me you died in those pits,” Khorrek said, his transformation receding slightly. “That mercy was weakness. That the Beast must always finish what it starts.”

He saw the opening—not a physical one, but something deeper. A crack in Lasseran's indoctrination.

“They lied to you,” he said, straightening despite the pain. “About everything.”

He watched the conflict play across Khorrek's face, sensing a rare opportunity. The warrior before him wasn't just Lasseran's weapon—he was someone who had once been a boy, watching from the shadows of the fight pits. Someone who had witnessed a different kind of strength.

“What else did they lie about?” he asked, keeping pressure on his wound but straightening to his full height. “What else has Lasseran hidden from you?”

Khorrek's amber eyes flickered, his transformation receding further as doubt visibly worked through him. “The High King rewards loyalty. He gave me purpose when I

had nothing.”

“Purpose?” He spat blood onto the forest floor. “Or chains you can’t see?”

Something in those words struck home. Khorrek’s jaw tightened, his gaze darting to the trees where his men waited. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped to barely above a whisper.

“The blood moon ritual. It’s not what you think.” Khorrek moved closer, tension radiating from him. “Lasseran doesn’t fear the curse being broken. He wants it strengthened, altered.”

His heart pounded. “What do you mean?”

“The wise woman was right about the convergence of powers, but Lasseran has perverted the ritual. The first step is a new set of Beast warriors—ones that he can control completely. He has them training nearby.” Khorrek’s voice grew urgent. “Next he plans to channel the old powers through himself, to become something... more.”

“A god,” he breathed, horror dawning.

Khorrek nodded grimly. “With an army that can’t refuse him. Every Beast warrior bound to his will, unable to resist his commands.” His eyes met Egon’s. “Even your brothers.”

The implications crashed through his mind. Not just enslavement—total domination of every Beast warrior. Wulf, Lothar, their mates—all under Lasseran’s control.

“Why tell me this?” he demanded.

Khorrek's expression hardened again, the moment of vulnerability passing.

"Perhaps I remembered something from those pits after all." He backed away, sheathing his weapon.

Without another word, Khorrek melted into the shadows of the forest, leaving him alone with his wound and the terrible knowledge of what was to come.

CHAPTER 20

Lyric moved cautiously through the underbrush, her heart hammering against her ribs as she clutched a sturdy branch in one hand. She'd fled through the tunnel as she'd promised, but she wasn't about to leave Egon on his own to face five warriors. She'd been following the sound of fighting, but her breath suddenly caught in her throat when she realized that the fighting had stopped.

"Egon?" she whispered.

There was no answer and she stopped worrying about concealment, pushing through the underbrush as fast as she could, ignoring the branches that clawed at her skin.

When she reached the clearing, Egon was alone, one knee sunk into the dirt, his big body hunched forward.

"Egon?" Her voice caught as she raced over to him.

He turned, amber eyes finding hers through the pain. Dark blood soaked through his tunic, spreading across his side where Khorrek's blade had found purchase. The earth beneath him had grown dark with it.

"It's nothing," he grunted, trying to stand but faltering, and she quickly slipped her shoulder under his arm for support.

"Don't you dare lie to me." Her fingers pressed against the wound, coming away slick with blood. "This isn't nothing."

He leaned heavily against her, but she managed to brace herself, helping him a short way down the trail to a clearing by a small stream. Each labored breath he took sent a spike of fear through her.

“What happened?” she demanded, trying to distract herself from her fears.

“Khorrek recognized me.” He winced as they moved. “From before. When I fought in the pits.”

Her stomach twisted. The pits. The brutal fighting rings where people were forced to battle for sport and coin. She’d heard whispers of such places, but never imagined Egon there.

“He hesitated,” he continued. “Just for a moment. That’s when I knew.”

“Knew what?” She guided him into the clearing and easing him down to a seat on a fallen log.

“That even Lasseran’s most loyal can doubt.” His hand covered hers, blood seeping between their fingers. “There’s hope, Lyric.”

At the moment all she was concerned about was the spreading crimson stain that demanded her immediate attention.

“Hope can wait,” she said, tearing strips from her underskirt. “First, we need to stop this bleeding.”

Her hands trembled as she pressed the torn fabric against his wound. Blood soaked through almost immediately, the sight of it making her stomach lurch. She’d dealt with injuries before—cuts from farm tools, burns from the kitchen—but nothing like this, nothing so potentially fatal.

“Hold still,” she whispered, her voice steadier than she felt.

He grunted in response, his jaw clenched tight against the pain. Sweat beaded across his forehead, glistening in the fading light. His normally vibrant amber eyes had dulled, and that frightened her more than the blood.

“Just... need a moment,” he managed, his breathing labored.

As the bleeding began to slow, she carefully peeled back the makeshift bandage to examine the wound. The gash ran along his ribs, deep but clean. She exhaled with relief—no signs of poison, at least. She tore more strips from her underskirt, using one to wipe it clean before layering the others over the wound and binding it tightly with a longer piece of cloth.

“You’re good at this,” he murmured, watching her work.

“Serena—the woman who taught me about the bees—was also a healer,” she said softly. “I picked up a few things.”

She worked methodically, doing her best to remember what Serena had done. After she secured the bandage, she rested her palm against his chest, feeling the strong, steady rhythm of his heart beneath her touch. For a moment, she allowed herself to be comforted by that beat, by the warmth of his skin, by the simple fact that he was still alive.

“There,” she said, her voice barely audible. “That should hold until we reach help.”

He covered her hand with his own, the gesture so tender it made her throat tighten.

“Thank you,” he said, his eyes clearer now, focused entirely on her. “But you don’t need to worry—I heal very quickly.”

She managed a shaky smile. “Good, because there isn’t much left of my skirt.”

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He returned her smile, but then his gaze drifted back up the trail to the clearing where he'd fought with Khorrek. His expression had transformed, the pain of his wound seemingly forgotten as something deeper took hold. The fading sunlight cast shadows across his features, making the scars on his face appear deeper, more pronounced.

“What did he say to you?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He didn't answer immediately. His eyes remained fixed on the forest's edge, as if he could see Khorrek's retreating form through the thick trees and encroaching night.

“That Lasseran has been experimenting.”

A chill ran through her that had nothing to do with the night air. “Experimenting how?”

“Creating an army of Beast warriors, but not ones like us, or even ones like Khorrek. Ones that are completely under his control and unable to think for themselves. Khorrek thinks he's going to try and establish control over everyone subject to the Beast Curse.”

She took his hand, squeezing it tightly. There were no words that could ease the pain of this kind of revelation. She simply held on, offering what comfort she could through her touch.

Lyric couldn't bear the hollow look in Egon's eyes. The revelation about his past had opened wounds she hadn't known existed, leaving him adrift in painful memories. She reached for him, her palm against his cheek, turning his face toward hers.

“Egon,” she whispered. “Come back to me.”

His eyes refocused slowly, finding her in the darkness. The firelight caught the moisture gathering there, unshed tears that spoke of a lifetime of suffering.

She leaned forward, pressing her forehead to his. “You’re not there anymore. You’re here. With me.”

She kissed him then, softly at first, a gentle reminder of their connection. His response was hesitant, almost fragile, as if he feared breaking something precious. Lyric wouldn’t let him retreat. She deepened the kiss, her fingers threading through his hair, anchoring him to the present.

“I choose you,” she murmured against his mouth. “Not your past. Not what was done to you. You.”

Something broke in Egon then—the wall he’d built around his heart crumbling as he pulled her against him. His big hands trembled as they cradled her face, his touch reverent despite their strength.

“Lyric,” he breathed, her name a prayer on his lips.

She spread out the bedroll and guided him on to it, mindful of his wound but determined to remind him of what they’d found together. Their bodies met in the flickering shadows, skin against skin, her hands mapping the terrain of scars that told his story.

Lyric moved above him, taking control, showing him with every touch that she wanted him—all of him. His Beast, his past, his scars. She accepted everything he was, everything he had been forced to become.

“Look at me,” she commanded softly when his eyes drifted closed.

When he did, the raw vulnerability there nearly undid her. She leaned down, kissing him deeply as their bodies joined, finding their rhythm together. Each movement was a promise, each shared breath a covenant between them.

In that moment, there was no curse, no Lasseran, no dark past or uncertain future. There was only the two of them, choosing each other despite everything that stood against them.

Lyric nestled against Egon’s uninjured side, her head resting on his chest where she could hear the steady drumming of his heart. The night wrapped around them like a protective cloak, the stars visible through the canopy above. Despite everything—the danger, the revelations, the uncertain path ahead—she felt strangely at peace.

“What are you thinking?” Egon’s voice rumbled beneath her ear, his fingers tracing idle patterns along her bare shoulder.

“That I never expected this,” she admitted, pressing her palm against his chest. “When I saw you at the edge of my garden, I thought you were a ghost from my past. I never imagined...”

She didn’t finish the thought, but she didn’t need to. The warmth of his body against hers spoke volumes about what had changed between them.

Careful not to disturb his bandaged wound, she propped herself up to look at him. In the dying light, his features were softer, the harsh lines of his scars melting into shadow. His amber eyes reflected the embers’ glow, watching her with a tenderness that made her heart ache.

“We should sleep,” she said, though she made no move to pull away. “Tomorrow will

come too soon.”

His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing across her lower lip. “I’ve spent too many nights alone to waste this one sleeping.”

She smiled, turning her face to press a kiss against his palm. “Then we won’t waste it.”

Drawing the blanket over them both, she settled back against him as the night deepened around their small haven.

CHAPTER 21

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Egon fed another branch into the fire, watching the flames devour it. The night pressed in around their small camp, but his thoughts were darker still. Khorrek's words echoed in his mind—Lasseran's plans were more extensive than anyone in Norhaven realized. The High King wasn't just building an army; he was planning to control everyone with the Beast Curse in their blood.

Across the fire, Lyric slept peacefully, her face softened in slumber. His chest tightened at the sight of her. A few days ago, he'd believed he could never have this—her trust, her touch, her heart. Now that he had them, the weight of his responsibilities felt heavier than ever.

"Fuck," he muttered, running a hand over his face.

He needed to get this information to his brothers. If Lasseran succeeded, the consequences would reach far beyond Norhaven's borders. But returning meant taking Lyric from her home, from the life she'd built from nothing. He'd seen how the villagers relied on her, how she'd carved out a place for herself despite everything.

He shifted uncomfortably, his wounds from the fight with Khorrek still aching. He'd survived worse, but the timing was unfortunate. They needed to move quickly, before Khorrek reported back to his master. Although what he would report was another matter.

His gaze drifted back to Lyric. She'd chosen to come with him, chosen him over the safety of her cottage and her bees. But that had been before they knew the full scope of what they faced. Could he ask her to leave everything behind permanently? To

face the dangers of Norhaven, a place that had never been kind to humans?

The fire crackled, sending sparks dancing upward. He watched them fade into the night sky, remembering the prayer he'd offered at the forgotten shrine. He'd asked for guidance, for a way to be useful. The Old Gods had answered with more than he'd dared hope for—they'd given him Lyric.

But perhaps this was their cruel joke. To give him everything he wanted, only to force him to choose between love and duty.

He tensed as a twig snapped behind him. His hand instinctively moved to his blade, but the familiar scent reached him before he could draw it. Lyric. His muscles relaxed, though the weight of his thoughts remained.

"You should be resting," he said without turning, his voice low and rough.

She padded silently towards him anyway, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders against the night chill. "So should you. Your wounds need time to heal."

He grunted, unwilling to admit how much the fight with Khorrek had taken from him. The other warrior had known exactly where to strike, had recognized his fighting style from the pits. That recognition had saved them both—had planted doubt in Khorrek's mind about Lasseran's true intentions.

She knelt beside him, studying his face in the firelight. "You're brooding."

"Planning," he corrected, though his lips twitched at her directness.

Without warning, she rose and settled herself in his lap, her weight slight against his big body. He froze, still unaccustomed to such casual intimacy. Her fingers traced the scar that ran from his temple to his jaw, her touch feather-light.

“Planning looks an awful lot like torturing yourself,” she murmured, then leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

The kiss was soft, comforting rather than demanding. His hands moved to her waist, steadying her as he returned the gesture with careful restraint. When she pulled back, her eyes reflected the dancing flames.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. “You’re trying to figure out how to protect me from all this.” Her hand settled over his heart. “But I’m already in it, Egon. I was in it the moment those men threatened my village.”

He sighed, his thumb tracing circles on her hip. “Lasseran is more dangerous than I realized. What Khorrek revealed?—”

“I know.” She cut him off gently. “You told me, remember? This isn’t something we can ignore, not if we want to protect the people we care about.” Her expression grew serious. “Your brothers need to know what’s happening. And Amara said I have a part to play in breaking the curse.”

His chest tightened as he looked at her, this remarkable woman who’d somehow chosen him despite everything. She deserved better than the chaos that followed him—deserved the peace she’d built for herself in that small village with her bees and her garden.

“Lyric, I...” His voice faltered. The words felt too large for his throat. “What I need to do—where I need to go—it’s dangerous. Norhaven isn’t kind to humans. And Lasseran’s forces may be hunting for us now.”

She didn’t flinch, didn’t look away. Just watched him with those steady green eyes that seemed to see right through him.

“I don’t want to leave you behind,” he finally admitted, the confession ripped from his mouth. “But I can’t ask you to abandon everything you’ve built.”

Her expression softened. She placed her palm against his cheek, her touch impossibly gentle against his scarred skin. “Then take me with you.”

He blinked, certain he’d misheard. “What?”

“Take me with you,” she repeated, her voice calm and sure. “To Norhaven. To your brothers. Wherever you need to go.”

The simplicity of her solution stunned him. All this time, he’d been torturing himself, believing he had to choose between duty and love. Between warning his brothers and protecting Lyric. And here she was, offering him both.

“But your home—your bees?—”

“Will still be there,” she finished for him. “The village will look after things until I return. And if I don’t...” She shrugged, but there was determination beneath the casual gesture. “I’ve started over before. I can do it again.”

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He studied her face, searching for doubt or fear, finding only resolve. This wasn't the impulsive girl he'd known years ago. This was a woman who knew her own mind, who'd survived on her own and built something from nothing.

"You're not asking me to choose," he said slowly, the realization dawning.

She smiled, a small, knowing curve of her lips. "No, I'm not. Because I already made my choice when I left the village with you."

He stared at her, his chest tight with conflicting emotions. She made it sound so simple, as if following him into danger was no different than deciding which vegetables to plant in spring. The naive trust in her eyes made his protective instincts flare.

"You don't understand what you're saying," he growled, his hands tightening on her waist. "Norhaven can be dangerous. And Lasseran's forces... they won't show mercy. Not to you, not to anyone who stands with me."

She didn't flinch at his harsh tone. "I understand more than you think."

"Do you?" He couldn't keep the edge from his voice. "Khorrek isn't the worst of what's out there. The Beasts that Lasseran has created—they're designed to hunt, to kill."

She met his gaze steadily, firelight reflecting in her eyes. "I've survived being hunted before. Maybe not by Beasts, but by men who were just as dangerous."

He closed his eyes briefly, remembering the scars he'd glimpsed on her body, the ones she never spoke about. When he opened them again, he found her watching him with that same unwavering resolve.

"I won't lie to you," she said softly. "I'm afraid. But I'm more afraid of what happens if we do nothing." Her fingers traced the line of his jaw. "And I trust you, Egon. I know you'll do everything in your power to keep me safe."

The simple faith in her words humbled him. After everything he'd done, all the ways he'd failed her—she still believed in him.

"We're stronger together," she continued. "You know that. Whatever this is between us... it matters. Amara saw it too."

He exhaled slowly, feeling something within him settle. She was right. Whatever bond had formed between them—whether fate or choice or some combination of both—it gave them strength. He'd fought better with her nearby, thought clearer with her counsel.

"All right," he said finally, "then we face this together."

Her smile was like the first light of dawn breaking through darkness. "Together," she agreed, sealing the promise with a kiss.

The weight of her in his lap anchored him to this moment, to this reality where he wasn't alone. His entire life had been defined by solitude—even when surrounded by others in the fighting pits, even when he'd finally reunited with his brothers. He'd always held himself apart, convinced it was safer that way.

But here was Lyric, offering to walk into danger with him. Not out of obligation or pity, but choice.

“I’ve spent so long fighting alone,” he admitted, his voice rough with emotion. “Even after finding my brothers, I kept myself separate. Convinced myself it was better that way.”

She ran her fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his face. “And now?”

“Now I realize what a fool I’ve been.” He caught her hand, bringing it to his lips. “Strength isn’t about standing alone. It’s about who stands beside you when the fight comes.”

The fire crackled between them, sending shadows dancing across her face. In its light, he could see every freckle scattered across her nose, every fleck of gold in her green eyes. This woman who had survived so much, who had built a life for herself from nothing, was willing to risk it all for him—with him.

“I’ve never had anyone choose to face danger at my side,” he said, the words feeling strange on his tongue. “Not like this.”

Her smile was soft but determined. “Well, you do now. And I’m not easily discouraged.”

He felt something shift inside him, a weight lifting that he hadn’t known he carried. For so long, he’d believed his path was meant to be walked alone. That his scars, his past, his Beast nature—all of it marked him as someone who couldn’t be loved, couldn’t be chosen.

Yet here she was, proving him wrong with every breath.

“Together, then,” he repeated, the promise settling in his chest like a stone dropped into still water, sending ripples through his entire being.

He drew her closer, his large hands spanning her waist. Time seemed to slow as he looked into her eyes, still not quite believing that she was here, that she had chosen him. Her skin glowed golden in the firelight, and the weight of her in his lap felt right in a way nothing else ever had.

“Lyric,” he murmured, her name like a prayer on his lips.

He kissed her then, not with the desperate hunger of their first night together, but with something deeper. His lips moved against hers slowly, savoring the softness, the taste of her. Her arms wound around his neck, fingers threading through his hair as she pressed herself against him.

The world beyond their small circle of firelight ceased to exist. There was no Lasseran, no curse, no looming war—just her heartbeat against his chest and the sweet sigh that escaped her as he deepened the kiss.

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His Beast stirred within him, not with rage but with possessive satisfaction. Mine. Ours. For once, orc and Beast were in perfect agreement.

He traced the curve of her spine, memorizing the feel of her, the scent of honey and flowers that clung to her skin even days away from her garden. When she shivered against him, he pulled the blanket more securely around them both, creating a cocoon of warmth against the night's chill.

“Cold?” he asked, breaking the kiss just enough to speak.

She shook her head, her eyes dark with desire. “Not anymore.”

She kissed him again, and he lost himself in the sensation. His calloused hands, so accustomed to dealing death, now explored her body with reverent gentleness. Each touch, each kiss was an affirmation—that he was more than his scars, that she was more than her past, that together they had found something worth fighting for.

For the first time in his life, he allowed himself to hope. Not just for survival, but for happiness. For a future where moments like this weren't stolen between dangers, but freely given in peace.

CHAPTER 22

Lyric crept through the underbrush behind Egon, carefully placing each footstep as he'd shown her. The afternoon sun filtered through the canopy, dappling the forest floor with patches of gold. She watched his back as he moved with surprising stealth for someone so large, pausing occasionally to check their surroundings.

“Stay close,” he whispered, his voice barely audible above the rustle of leaves.

“You should wait here,” he’d told her when he first mentioned scouting the camp.

“It’s safer.”

She immediately rejected the idea, giving him a defiant look.

“I’m not staying behind again. Not this time.”

He hadn’t argued, and she suspected he was just as happy for the two of them to remain together. Now, as they approached the ridge overlooking the valley, she felt her old instincts stirring. Growing up in Kel’Vara’s slums had taught her how to move unseen, how to slip through shadows without making a sound. Those skills had also come into use on the road but she hadn’t had any use for them since she’d moved to the village. They resurfaced with surprising ease.

They reached a fallen log, and he motioned for her to stop. He gestured toward a small clearing below with a row of tents. Behind the tents was another row of structures and it took her a moment to realize it was a row of cages, half-concealed beneath the trees. Her heart pounded against her ribs, but she focused on controlling her breathing the way he’d instructed. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Slow and steady.

“Lasseran’s symbol,” he mouthed, pointing to the flag on the largest tent.

She nodded, studying the camp’s layout. A twig snapped somewhere to their left. Egon froze, his body tensing. Without thinking, she pressed herself against the forest floor, becoming almost invisible amongst the ferns and fallen leaves. She held her breath, remembering how she used to hide from the Dusk Guards when they swept through the slums.

There was no further sound from the forest and she cautiously raised her head again. The camp appeared to be completely empty—where were Lasseran’s men?

“I don’t understand,” she whispered, scanning the abandoned site. “There’s no one here.”

He motioned for her to stay put while he checked the perimeter, but she shook her head. She wouldn’t let him face potential danger alone, and she didn’t want to be left behind to wonder. They moved into the clearing together, every sense alert.

Up close they could see that the camp looked as though it had been vacated in a hurry. A pot of stew still hung over an abandoned fire, wisps of smoke curling upward. She pressed her palm near the coals.

“Still warm,” she murmured. “They can’t have left more than an hour ago.”

Around them, more evidence of a hasty departure littered the ground. Discarded weapons—a broken sword, a dagger with a cracked hilt—lay scattered among trampled grass. She knelt to examine footprints pressed into the soft earth, remembering how the herb woman who’d taken her in after Kel’Vara had taught her to read such signs.

“These tracks are chaotic,” she observed, tracing the outline of a boot print with her finger. “Not an orderly retreat. They were running.”

She followed the trail to the largest tent, its flap torn and billowing in the breeze. Inside, maps and documents lay strewn across a makeshift table, some half-burned as if someone had attempted to destroy them before fleeing.

“Egon,” she called softly. “Look at this.”

Her fingers hovered over a map marked with locations throughout the Old Kingdom. Several villages had been circled, including the one they'd left behind. Beside each marking was a number—a tally of some sort.

“What were they counting?” she asked him uneasily.

He shook his head grimly. “I don't know. And I don't know why they ran.”

Warning her to be quiet, he edged cautiously around the tent to examine the cages. Ten of them, the doors forced open.

“Do you notice anything about these cages?”

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When she gave him a puzzled look, he went and stood next to one.

“It’s designed for someone your size,” she said in a horrified whisper, and he nodded.

“Beast warriors.”

Her heart stuttered as she studied the chaotic footprints in front of the cages, following their direction beyond the abandoned camp. South. Definitely south. Her fingers trembled as she pressed them against the damp earth, confirming what her eyes already told her.

“Egon,” she whispered, her voice catching. “These tracks—they’re heading toward my village.”

The realization crashed down over her in an icy wave. Images flashed through her mind: Samha’s gap-toothed smile, the old willow tree where children played, her cottage with its climbing roses and beehives. All of it vulnerable, unprotected, even more so now after the fires.

“Are you certain?” He knelt beside her, his big body casting a shadow over the trampled ground as he examined the signs. “They’re heading south,” he agreed, |but that doesn’t mean they are heading for your village.”

“I know, but we have to try and warn them.” She rose to her feet, already calculating how quickly they could travel. “If we cut through the eastern woods, we might?—”

“Lyric.” His hand encircled her wrist, gentle but firm. “We don’t know what we’re

dealing with. If something scattered armed men...”

She pulled away from him, panic rising in her chest. “We can’t abandon them. Not when I—we—might have drawn Lord Trevain’s attention. We have to try.”

His face hardened as he scanned the abandoned camp, a muscle twitching beneath the scarred green skin. He swore under his breath, the harsh sound carrying in the eerie silence.

“Damn it all,” he muttered, crouching to examine a set of tracks that diverged from the others. His massive fingers traced the outline—deeper, wider than human footprints.

Her stomach twisted. “What is it?”

“These aren’t men’s tracks,” he growled. “They’re Beast warriors.”

The words made her blood run cold. The thought of someone with Egon’s power, but without his compassion and control, descending upon the peaceful village—upon Samha and the elders who had defended her against their own fears.

“If they’ve been unleashed on the village...” He didn’t finish the thought, but he didn’t need to.

“We might already be too late,” she whispered, completing what he couldn’t say. The possibility tore at her heart, but she refused to accept it. “But we have to try.”

He rose to his full height, towering over her. For a moment, she thought he might refuse—might insist they continue toward Norhaven with the information they’d gathered. The rational choice. The strategic one.

Instead, he gave a single, sharp nod. “We’ll need to move fast.” He glanced at the sky, calculating. “If we push hard, we might reach them by nightfall.”

Relief flooded her, so intense she nearly staggered. She reached for his hand, squeezing it tightly. “Thank you.”

His golden eyes softened for just a moment as they met hers. “Your people are important to you. That makes them important to me.”

He hesitated, looking down at her with an expression she couldn’t quite read.

“There’s a faster way,” he finally said, his deep voice barely above a whisper. “I can carry you in my... other form.”

Understanding dawned on her. The Beast. The part of himself he’d tried to hide from her, even after she’d seen him transform to protect Samha.

“Will you trust me?” he asked, his voice tense. “I won’t hurt you, but I understand if?—”

“Yes,” she said immediately, no trace of doubt in her voice. “I trust you, Egon.”

His eyes widened slightly, as if her acceptance had caught him off guard. “You’re not afraid?”

She reached up to touch his face, tracing the scar that ran across his cheek. “Not of you. Never of you.”

He nodded once, then stepped back. “Stand clear.”

He closed his, his breathing deepening. The transformation began—muscles shifting

beneath his skin, bones realigning with soft cracking sounds. His already impressive height increased as his body changed, becoming something wilder, more primal. His face grew sharper, more feral, and when he opened his eyes they were solid black.

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When it was done, the Beast stood before her—massive, powerful, with gleaming fangs and claws that could tear through armor. But even in this form, the eyes were his, watching her with the same tenderness and concern she'd come to cherish.

She stepped forward without fear, placing her hand against his chest where his heart thundered beneath thick layers of muscle. "Still you," she murmured.

The Beast—Egon—lowered himself slightly, then carefully gathered her into his arms. She felt the raw power contained in his body, the strength that could easily break her, but he cradled her against his chest as gently as if she were made of glass.

Then they were moving, racing through the forest at a speed that stole her breath. Trees blurred past as Egon leapt over fallen logs and bounded across streams. The wind whipped her hair, and despite the dire circumstances, despite her fears for the village, Lyric felt a strange exhilaration.

Held securely in Egon's arms, she had never felt safer. Not in her cottage with its sturdy walls, not behind the high gates of Kel'Vara. Here, against all reason, in the embrace of a Beast that would terrify most, she found perfect security.

CHAPTER 23

Egon came to a halt on the ridge behind the village and gently placed Lyric on the ground before transforming back. The Beast receded, a painful shudder rippling through his body as his bones realigned and his claws retracted. The transformation always hurt—like being turned inside out—but he'd learned to endure it silently. He drew in several deep breaths, tasting the air for any hint of danger as his senses

gradually dulled to human levels.

“Are you all right?” she asked softly, her hand on his arm.

“I’m fine,” he said as he scanned the village below them. His heart had been hammering with dread the entire time, imagining what they might find—buildings ablaze, bodies in the streets, the kind of devastation he’d witnessed too many times before.

But the village lay peaceful in the afternoon sun. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys. A dog barked somewhere. Children played in the square.

“I don’t understand.” Her voice wavered with relief and confusion. “There’s nothing wrong.”

He narrowed his eyes, studying every corner of the settlement. No blood. No signs of struggle. No Beast warriors lurking in shadows. No trace of that unnatural scent lingering in the air.

“Could we have misread the signs?”

“No.” He shook his head. “That camp was abandoned in a hurry and the Beast warriors were free. Something happened.”

They made their way down the hill, his muscles coiled tight despite the apparent calm. Villagers nodded at Lyric as they passed, some eyeing him warily but without the terror he’d expect if they’d faced an attack.

When they reached her cottage, everything remained exactly as they’d left it—the garden untouched, the door still latched from inside.

She unlocked the door and they stepped inside as the familiar scent of herbs and flowers enveloped them.

“This makes no sense,” he muttered, pacing the small room. “If not here, then where? Why abandon the camp?”

She sank into a chair at her table. “Maybe they were called elsewhere? Another village?”

He ran a hand through his hair, frustration building. “Or maybe this was never their target at all. But I didn’t see anything else nearby on those maps.”

He caught the sound of approaching hoofbeats and tensed. He moved to the window, positioning himself so he could see without being easily spotted. A single rider approached—the old captain, his weathered face set in a grim expression.

“Stay inside,” he told her, his hand already reaching for the knife at his belt.

“Egon, wait?—”

But he was already out the door, placing himself between the approaching rider and Lyric’s cottage. The captain reined in his horse, his eyes narrowing when he recognized Egon.

“I thought we had an agreement,” the captain said, dismounting with a weary sigh. “You were supposed to be gone.”

He crossed his arms. “Things changed.”

The captain shook his head, looking more resigned than angry. “I can see that.” He glanced past Egon towards the cottage where Lyric now stood in the doorway. “Miss

Everhart. Good to see you're well."

"What happened to the training camp in the northern woods?" he demanded, not bothering with pleasantries.

The captain's brow furrowed. "Training camp? What are you talking about?"

"Don't play games. Beast warriors. Lasseran's men. The camp was abandoned when we got there."

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Understanding dawned on the captain's face.

“Ah. That explains your return.” He gestured around at the peaceful village. “As you can see, there's been no attack. Lord Trevain and his men departed two days ago—called back by Lasseran himself.”

“Called back?” he repeated suspiciously.

“Direct orders. They packed up and left within the hour.” The captain shrugged. “I don't know anything about Beast warriors or a training camp. Whatever you found, it wasn't connected to our garrison.”

He studied the man's face for deception but found none. His years in the fighting pits had taught him to read men—to anticipate their strikes before they landed—but the captain's weathered features revealed nothing but exhaustion.

“If what you say is true, then where did they go?” he pressed. “And why abandon the camp so suddenly?”

The captain spread his hands. “I'm just a soldier following orders, same as most. Lord Trevain might have confided in me once, but not after Lasseran's men arrived.”

Remembering the calculated brutality of Lasseran's men, he didn't find that surprising.

“So, you're back in our village,” the captain added, breaking the silence. “Are you planning to stay this time?”

He hesitated, feeling Lyric's gaze on his back. He hadn't allowed himself to think that far ahead. Every moment since discovering the abandoned camp had been consumed by urgency and dread.

"I don't know yet," he answered honestly.

The captain nodded, seemingly satisfied with the response. "Fair enough." He mounted his horse with the stiff movements of a man who'd spent too many years in armor. "Just keep the peace. That's all I ask."

He watched him ride away, uncertainty gnawing at his gut. Something wasn't right, but he couldn't place what.

"Do you believe him?" Lyric asked, moving to stand beside him.

Before he could answer, a familiar voice called out.

"Lyric! Egon!"

Samha raced toward them, his thin legs pumping as fast as they could carry him. The boy's face lit up with pure joy, a stark contrast to the suspicion that had been weighing on him.

"You came back!"

Samha crashed into him, wrapping his arms around his waist in an unexpected hug. He froze, unused to such casual affection, especially from a child, then awkwardly patted the boy's shoulder.

"We did," Lyric said, ruffling Samha's hair. "How have things been here?"

“Good!” Samha pulled back, bouncing on his toes. “The captain kept his promise. No one’s bothered us since you left.”

He exchanged a glance with Lyric. “The lord’s men have all gone?”

Samha nodded vigorously. “They packed up real quick. The innkeeper said it was strange, them leaving so sudden-like.”

“And the village has been peaceful?”

“Yep! Everything’s been normal.” Samha looked around, then leaned closer, lowering his voice to what he clearly thought was a whisper but was barely quieter than his normal speech. “But I think something happened at the lord’s estate.”

He crouched down to the boy’s level. “What do you mean?”

“My cousin works in the kitchens there,” Samha confided. “She said there was a big commotion the night before they left. Lots of shouting. And the next morning, the lord was acting real strange. Wouldn’t look nobody in the eye.”

Egon frowned, watching Samha run off to join his friends. The pieces weren’t fitting together—abandoned training camps, a sudden retreat, and now rumors of disturbances at the lord’s estate. His instincts hummed with warning.

“I need to see the estate for myself,” he said quietly, turning to Lyric.

Her face fell. “We just got back.”

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“I know.” He reached for her hand, surprised by how natural the gesture felt now. “But if something happened there, I need to know what. This could be connected to Lasseran’s plans.”

Lyric’s fingers tightened around his. “Then I’ll come with you.”

“No.” The word came out sharper than he intended, and he forced himself to soften his tone. “Please, stay here. Talk to the villagers. See what else you can learn. Samha’s cousin, anyone who might have information.”

“You want me to spy for you?” A hint of amusement crept into her voice.

“I want you to be safe.” He brushed a strand of hair from her face. “And yes, gather information. You have their trust. They’ll talk to you.”

She searched his face, concern evident in her eyes. “And what if you find trouble?”

“Then I’ll handle it.” He tried to sound confident, though uncertainty gnawed at him. “I’ve faced worse.”

She sighed, relenting. “Be careful, Egon. And come back to me.”

He nodded, unable to voice the promise aloud. Instead, he pressed his forehead to hers briefly before turning away.

The lord’s estate lay several miles from the village, a journey he made in grim silence, his senses alert for any sign of danger. As he crested the final hill, the stench

hit him first—blood and smoke and something else, something foul that made his Beast stir uneasily.

What lay before him was devastation.

The grand manor house stood in partial ruins, its eastern wing collapsed into charred rubble. Bodies littered the courtyard—guards mostly, their weapons still clutched in lifeless hands. Claw marks scored the stone walls, deep gouges that no human weapon could make.

He approached cautiously, every muscle tense. The silence was absolute—no birds, no insects, not even the whisper of wind through the trees. Just death and destruction.

He knelt beside one of the fallen guards, examining the savage wounds that had torn through armor and flesh alike. These weren't the methodical kills of trained warriors. This was slaughter—wild, frenzied, bestial.

Moving deeper into the estate, he found more evidence of the rampage. Doors ripped from hinges. Furniture shattered. And everywhere, the distinctive scent of Beast warriors—but wrong somehow, fouler, more corrupt than any he'd encountered before.

He knelt beside a fallen guard, examining the savage wounds that had torn through armor and flesh. The man's face was frozen in an expression of terror, eyes wide and staring at whatever horror had descended upon him in his final moments.

Rage bubbled in his chest, hot and familiar. He'd seen this pattern of destruction before—the wild, uncontrolled savagery of Beast warriors lost to bloodlust. But these wounds were different. Deeper. More vicious. The claw marks weren't just meant to kill; they'd torn apart their victims with unrestrained fury.

He stood, scanning the courtyard with narrowed eyes. Bodies everywhere, but not a single noble among them. Just guards, servants, stable hands—ordinary people who had no chance against such monsters.

“Cowards,” he growled, his voice echoing in the empty courtyard.

The lord and his inner circle had fled, abandoning everyone else to face whatever horror Lasseran had unleashed. They’d saved themselves while leaving their people to die. The thought made his Beast stir, hackles rising in fury.

He forced himself to study the carnage, reading the story of the attack in the spilled blood and broken bodies. The Beasts had come from the north, the same direction as the abandoned training camp. They’d struck at night, overwhelming the guards at the gate before swarming the estate.

But these weren’t the controlled warriors he’d encountered before. These were something worse—mindless killing machines driven by nothing but rage. No strategy, no coordination, just pure destructive fury.

The scent was at least a day old. Whatever had done this was long gone, but the stench lingered—a foul, corrupted version of the Beast warrior smell he knew. Something had gone wrong with these males. Terribly wrong.

He made his way back to the village, his mind churning with dark thoughts. The stench of death clung to him despite his efforts to wash in a stream. He’d seen brutality in the fighting pits, had witnessed the worst men could do to one another, but this was different. This was slaughter without purpose—or rather, with a purpose too terrible to contemplate.

When he reached Lyric’s cottage, she was waiting at the door, her face tight with worry. The relief in her eyes when she spotted him quickly gave way to concern as

she read his expression.

“What did you find?” she asked, pulling him inside.

He sank heavily onto a chair, suddenly aware of the bone-deep weariness that had settled into his body. “Death. Destruction. The estate is in ruins.”

Her hand flew to her mouth. “Everyone?”

“The guards, the servants... all dead. Torn apart.” He couldn’t soften it, couldn’t find gentler words. “The lord and his inner circle escaped. Left everyone else behind.”

She sat across from him, her face pale. “What could have done such a thing?”

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“Beast warriors.” His jaw tightened. “But not like any I’ve encountered before. These were... wrong. Corrupted somehow. The scent was fouler, the kills more savage.”

“Lasseran’s work?”

He nodded grimly. “I believe he unleashed them on the estate deliberately, as a test of their power. The timing is too convenient—the abandoned training camp, the sudden departure of the lord’s men.”

“But why attack his own allies?”

“Because he needed to see if they would kill on command.” His hands clenched into fists, fighting to suppress his own rage. “And they did. Efficiently. Brutally. They’re mindless killers now, but Lasseran must have some way of controlling them if he intends to use them as a weapon.”

Her eyes widened with horror. “Where are they now? Are we in danger?”

“I followed their trail for several miles. They’ve moved north, away from here.” He reached across the table, taking her hand. “They’re gone, Lyric.”

For now. The unspoken truth hung heavily in the air between them.

CHAPTER 24

Lyric stood outside her cottage, watching as the morning light spilled across the garden she’d tended for years. The familiar shapes of her beehives, the weathered

fence Egon had repaired, the twisted apple tree scarred by the fire but still alive—all of it painted gold by the sunrise. She traced her fingers along the rough-hewn door frame, feeling every nick and groove she knew by heart.

This place had been her sanctuary, her escape. Yet now it felt like just another stopping point on a longer journey.

“I never thought I’d leave,” she murmured to herself.

Behind her, Egon was packing the few belongings she decided to take, his movements careful and deliberate. He’d asked if she was certain about leaving, and she was—but certainty didn’t make it easy.

She knelt beside her herb garden, pinching a sprig of rosemary between her fingers. Its sharp scent filled her nostrils, familiar and comforting. How many mornings had she harvested these herbs? How many evenings had she sat on that worn bench, watching the sunset paint the sky?

“You don’t have to come,” he said, his deep voice carrying across the yard. He stood in the doorway, hesitant. “I could return for you.”

She shook her head. “We both know it’s not that easy.”

What remained unsaid hung between them. Lasseran’s forces were moving. The Beast warriors were real. The danger wouldn’t wait politely for him to return.

She turned to face him fully, this scarred, gentle warrior who’d stumbled back into her life. The morning light caught his amber eyes, making them glow like embers.

“This place was never truly home,” she admitted. “It was just... waiting. I didn’t know what for until you came back.”

He crossed to her, his big hand engulfing hers. “Norhaven isn’t perfect.”

“I don’t need perfect.” She leaned against him, drawing strength from his solid presence. “I just need to be where I can make a difference. Where we can make a difference.”

They stood together a moment longer, then she kissed him and headed down into the village.

She found Lina tending to the tiny vegetable patch outside their minuscule home—barely larger than Lyric’s chicken coop. The girl was on her knees, carefully pulling weeds from around the cabbage plants. Her hands were already rough from years of work, but her face still held a youthful softness that Samha shared.

“Hello, Lina.”

The girl looked up and smiled at her, brushing dirt from her palms.

“Miss Lyric!” Her eyes darted behind Lyric, likely searching for Egon. She’s already come by once to thank him again for saving her from the guards.

She knelt beside her, ignoring the damp soil soaking through her skirt. This was a conversation that needed closeness.

“I need to ask you something important,” she said, picking up a small trowel and working the soil to give her hands something to do. “Egon and I are leaving the village.”

Lina’s eyes widened. “But your bees—your garden?—”

“That’s why I’m here.” She took a deep breath. “Would you and Samha be willing to

take over my holding? It would provide a good living for both of you, if you're willing to work at it."

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The girl's mouth fell open. Her eyes lit with excitement before uncertainty clouded them. "I—I don't know if I could. I'm not sure what I'd need to do with everything. The bees especially..."

She squeezed Lina's soil-stained hand, her throat tightening as she gave the girl a tremulous smile. "You've helped me from time to time. And Samha has learned more than you realize from Egon. He knows how to check the hives safely now, and what each of the plants need."

"You've done a good job here," she added, glancing around at the tidy rows of vegetables. "And don't be afraid to ask for help. The village supported me when I first arrived, just as they'll support you."

Lina bit her lip, considering. "You'd trust us with your home? With everything you've built?"

She nodded, feeling a weight shift inside her chest. It wasn't loss—it was the passing of something precious to hands that would cherish it.

"I would. I do."

Lina burst into tears, but her smile was radiant as she thanked Lyric over and over. As she returned to the cottage, she felt lighter, happy with her decision.

Later that morning she was sorting through her herbs, deciding which to take and which to leave for Lina, when a knock sounded on the door, startling her. Egon tensed immediately, his hand moving to the knife at his belt, but she placed a calming

hand on his arm.

“It’s just Elder Tomas,” she said, recognizing the distinctive three-tap pattern.

The old man stood on her threshold, his weathered hands clutching a small wooden box. His eyes, normally stern when conducting village business, were soft with something she couldn’t quite name.

“We heard you’re leaving,” he said without preamble. “The council wanted you to have this.”

Inside the box lay a small bronze medallion bearing the village symbol—a tree with roots stretching into flowing water.

“It’s tradition,” Elder Tomas explained, “for those who journey beyond our borders. So you remember your place among us.”

Her throat tightened as she accepted the gift. She’d always thought of herself as separate from the village, an outsider they merely tolerated despite their kindness. Yet here was proof that they considered her one of their own.

By midday, a steady stream of villagers had made their way to her cottage. Widow Merrin brought freshly baked journey bread wrapped in cloth. The blacksmith’s wife pressed a small knife into Lyric’s hands—“For protection,” she whispered. The children came too, led by Samha, presenting wildflower crowns and tearful hugs.

“I didn’t realize...” she murmured to Egon as they watched the baker’s family walk away after delivering a sack of dried fruits.

“What?” he asked, his voice gentle.

“That I belonged here.” She blinked back unexpected tears. “All this time, I thought I was just passing through, that no one would notice if I disappeared.”

Another knock at the door revealed Henna, the midwife who rarely left her home these days. She pressed a small pouch of healing herbs into Lyric’s hands.

“For the road,” she said. “And this—” she added a tiny vial of amber liquid, “—is for when you need courage. My grandmother’s recipe.”

As the sun began its descent, Lyric surveyed the pile of gifts—practical items for travel, tokens of protection, mementos to remember them by. Each one represented a connection she hadn’t fully acknowledged until now.

“I never thought leaving would be so hard,” she admitted, leaning against him, grateful for his steady presence amid the emotional storm of farewells. The cottage that had once felt so spacious now seemed crowded with memories and gifts from villagers—people who cared for her more than she’d ever realized.

“I didn’t think it would hurt this much,” she whispered against his chest. “To leave a place I never truly called home.”

His hand came up to cradle the back of her head, his touch gentle despite his strength. “It became home when you weren’t looking,” he said, his voice rumbling through her.

She tilted her face up to him, finding his amber eyes soft with understanding. Without hesitation, he lowered his mouth to hers in a kiss meant to comfort. His lips were warm, the pressure tender as he sought to ease her sadness.

But something shifted between them—the same electricity that had sparked in the forest, that had ignited when they’d made love beneath the stars. The kiss deepened,

Lyric rising onto her toes as Egon's arms tightened around her. His tusks grazed her cheek, a reminder of his otherness that only made her want him more.

"Lyric," he breathed against her mouth, the word half question, half plea.

"Please," she answered, her fingers already working at the buttons of his shirt. She needed this—needed him—to anchor her amid the tumult of change.

He growled softly, lifting her easily and carrying her into the bedroom. The last rays of the sun illuminated the room as he stripped away her clothes, big hands caressing every inch of skin he revealed.

"Tell me if I'm too rough," he growled, his eyes dark with desire.

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“You won’t be,” she assured him, pushing him down to sit on the bed, then guiding his mouth to her breast.

He groaned, his mouth closing hungrily around her nipple as he pulled her closer. His tongue swirled around the sensitive flesh, his teeth scraping lightly as he suckled. She clutched his broad shoulders, her body arching into him, seeking more.

“Mine,” he rumbled against her skin, the single word sending heat coursing through her.

He was hers—this fierce, gentle orc. He’d saved her, protected her, loved her. And now she wanted to show him exactly how much she cherished him.

Lyric’s hands roamed over his scarred chest, tracing the lines of his strength. Her fingers found one nipple, then the other, circling and teasing until he shuddered with pleasure and lifted her onto his lap. His arousal pressed hard and hot between them, and she reached down to stroke him, teasing the wide head with her thumb. He groaned again, his hips jerking upward as he buried his face against her neck.

“You undo me, Lyric,” he murmured, his voice raw with need. “Everything I thought I knew—about myself, about the world—it’s all changed since I found you again.”

“Because we’re stronger together,” she whispered, guiding him to her entrance as he lifted her over him. “Stronger than any curse or threat we might face.”

Slowly, carefully, he lowered her onto his thick length, filling her until she thought she might burst with the intensity of it. The stretch of him inside her made her gasp,

her body still adjusting to his size. But the slight discomfort quickly gave way to pleasure as he began to move, each thrust sending sparks of ecstasy through her. She wrapped her legs around him, urging him deeper, harder.

“More,” she breathed, nails raking his back. “I need more of you.”

He obeyed, pulling her down to meet each thrust, the bed creaking beneath them. The Beast was there, in the intensity of his gaze, the possessive grip of his hands—but she wasn’t afraid. She welcomed him, matched him stroke for stroke as they raced toward oblivion. Her body stretched around him, adjusting to his girth. They fit together perfectly, two halves of a whole.

“Lyric.” Her name was a plea, a prayer.

“Egon,” she answered, her hands gripping his broad shoulders as she rose and fell above him.

Their bodies moved in perfect harmony, each giving and receiving in equal measure. His hands mapped the contours of her body, finding the places that made her shiver and gasp. She arched into his touch, losing herself in the sensations he evoked.

“Mine,” he growled again, his mouth capturing hers in a kiss that left no doubt of his claim.

“Yours,” she agreed, surrendering fully to him, to the bond between them.

As their pleasure built, he rolled her beneath him, his hips snapping against hers with increasing urgency. His weight pressed her into the mattress, his scent surrounding her. There was no fear, no uncertainty—just the primal joy of being claimed by the male who held her heart.

When her release came, it crashed over her like a storm, washing away everything except the ecstasy of their joined bodies. She cried out, clinging to him as if he were her only anchor in a tempest. His climax followed hers, his powerful body shuddering with the force of it. His roar filled the room, drowning out the distant sounds of the village beyond as his knot expanded, locking them together.

Afterward, they lay entwined, their bodies still joined. Egon's fingers traced lazy patterns along her spine as they caught their breath.

"I love you," she whispered against his chest. "You're the home I never knew I needed."

"And I love you," he echoed, his voice low and rough. "You're the light that guides me."

She snuggled happily against him as he drifted off to sleep. She watched the steady rise and fall of his chest, his face peaceful in a way she rarely saw when he was awake. She traced a finger lightly along the scar that ran from his temple to his jaw, marveling at how something that should have made him fearsome only made him more dear to her.

But sleep eluded her. Tomorrow they would leave this place, heading toward an uncertain future in Norhaven. She should have been anxious, but it felt more like... anticipation.

The air in the cottage shifted, growing inexplicably cooler. She sat up, pulling the blanket around her shoulders as the moonlight streaming through the window seemed to thicken, coalescing into a silvery mist that swirled at the foot of the bed.

Egon didn't stir. His breathing remained deep and even, as though whatever was happening couldn't reach him in his dreams.

The mist took shape—a woman of impossible beauty, her hair like spun gold, her eyes ancient and knowing. A crown of antlers adorned her head, and her gown seemed woven from starlight itself.

“Freja,” she whispered, not sure how she knew.

“Child of resilience,” the goddess’s voice came not from the apparition but from inside Lyric’s mind, musical and terrifying at once. “The threads of fate tighten around you.”

The mist-woman extended her hand, and flames danced across her palm, forming images—Beast warriors tearing through villages, a cruel-looking man standing before an ancient altar, blood running down stone steps.

“A storm gathers,” Freja continued. “The one who twists my gifts seeks to break the balance. The curse must end, but not through his methods.”

“What can I do?” Lyric asked, her voice barely audible.

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“You carry the key, daughter of earth.” The goddess’s eyes fixed on Lyric’s abdomen. “Life calls to life. Protect what grows within. Together, you will find the answers.”

Flames danced across her palm again, forming the image of a pair of jagged mountain peaks. “The Fanged Gate.”

The goddess vanished, leaving nothing but moonlight in her wake.

She jolted awake, her heart hammering against her ribs. It had been a dream after all. Dawn light filtered through the cottage windows, painting the familiar walls in soft gold. She pressed her palms against her eyes, trying to grasp the fragments of the vision before they slipped away entirely.

Freja. The goddess had come to her in the night.

Beside her, Egon still slept, his massive form curled protectively around her even in slumber.

The images remained vivid—Beast warriors, the man at the altar, blood on stone. And something about life. But clearest of all was the warning about their path.

“The Fanged Gate,” she whispered, the words feeling right on her tongue.

She’d heard of it in travelers’ tales—an ancient passage that led through the heart of the mountains into Norhaven, marked by two massive stone pillars carved to resemble tusks—but Lasseran had blocked it as part of his attempt to control

Norhaven.

Egon stirred beside her, his eyes opening slowly.

“What’s wrong?” His voice was rough with sleep, but his gaze sharpened immediately, reading the tension in her body.

“We need to go to the Fanged Gate,” she said, as she sat up, pulling the blanket around her shoulders against the morning chill.

He frowned, pushing himself upright and wrapping an arm around her. “The Fanged Gate? That’s dangerous territory, Lyric. Why would we?—”

“Freja came to me last night,” she interrupted, watching his expression shift from confusion to surprise. “She showed me things... about Lasseran, about the curse. I’m not sure I understand what they meant, but that part was clear. We have to go to the Fanged Gate.”

He gave her a confused look. She understood his reaction—the Old Gods rarely revealed themselves so directly, even to those who served them. That Freja had come to her, a simple beekeeper with no special lineage or powers, felt both terrifying and strangely right.

“You’re certain it wasn’t just a dream?” he asked, his voice low and careful. He didn’t dismiss her outright, which warmed her heart.

“I’m sure it was real.” She reached for his hand, needing his warmth, his solidity to anchor her as the memory of the vision washed over her again. His fingers enveloped hers, huge and gentle. “I don’t know why we need to go to the Fanged Gate, but I’m certain that we do.”

He frowned, the scar along his temple whitening. “That route is treacherous even in good weather. If we get an early winter storm...”

“Freja wouldn’t have shown me if there was another way.”

She squeezed his hand and slipped from the bed, wrapping the blanket around herself as she moved to the window. Outside, the village was coming to life—smoke rising from chimneys, children carrying water from the well. Her garden waited, patient and familiar, for the new hands that would tend it.

Egon joined her, putting his arms around her and pulling her back against his chest. She leaned into him, drawing strength from his presence.

“If the goddess has marked our path,” he said against her hair, “then I suppose we must follow it.”

CHAPTER 25

Egon squinted at the narrow mountain path ahead, a jagged scar against the steep face of granite. The air grew thinner with each step, but he pressed on, occasionally glancing back at Lyric. Her face was set with determination, cheeks flushed from exertion and the biting wind that whipped around them.

“You’re certain about this route?” he asked, not for the first time. “The southern pass would be easier.”

“And crawling with Lasseran’s men.” Lyric’s voice was firm. “Freja showed me flames there—death waiting. This way is clear.”

He nodded, though unease twisted in his gut. He trusted her, trusted the vision that had come to her, but the protective instinct within him balked at leading her into such

treacherous terrain.

They rounded a bend, and he halted abruptly. Below them, in the valley they'd avoided, dark shapes moved between trees—the unmistakable glint of armor catching the late afternoon sun.

“Look.” He pointed. “Soldiers. Dozens of them.”

She stepped up beside him, her shoulder brushing his arm. “The goddess was right.”

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A cold wind gusted across the mountainside, carrying the scent of pine and snow. He wrapped an arm around her, drawing her close against the chill. The path ahead narrowed further, becoming little more than a goat track clinging to the mountainside.

“It gets worse before it gets better,” he murmured, scanning the route. “We’ll need to single-file from here. Stay close to the rock face.”

He led the way, testing each foothold before committing his weight. The drop to their right plunged hundreds of feet into mist-shrouded valleys. One misstep would mean death.

“When we reach Norhaven,” he said over his shoulder, “my brothers will want to know everything about these visions.”

“If they believe me.”

“They will.” Egon paused to help her over a particularly treacherous section. “Wulf’s mate has the sight as well. And Lothar...” He trailed off, remembering his youngest brother’s unconventional mate. “Let’s just say they’ve seen enough strange things to keep an open mind.”

As they climbed higher, the world below seemed to shrink. The soldiers in the valley became mere specks, unaware of the two travelers observing them from above.

His muscles burned as they crested the final ridge of the mountain pass. The air thinned his breath, but the view that greeted him sent a jolt of recognition through his body. Home—or what passed for it. The mountains of Norhaven, wild and

untouched, spread out before them, their snowy peaks glistening in the fading light.

He turned to Lyric, his heart tightening at the sight of her. She stood with her back to him, her face lifted to the wind, hair whipped into a fiery halo by the currents that swirled around them. She'd always been beautiful to him, but here, against the backdrop of the mountains, she looked ethereal, as though she'd been carved from the same wild stone that surrounded them.

“Norhaven,” she breathed, her eyes meeting his. “It’s...”

“Home,” he finished for her. “Or close to it.”

A flicker of doubt crossed her face. He knew her fears—that she wouldn’t belong in the rugged world of the orcs, that her human nature would set her apart—but he had no such worries. She belonged with him, at his side, no matter where they were.

He stepped closer, cupping her cheek in his palm. “You’re sure about this?”

Her eyes held his, clear and steady. “Yes. Freja indicated that we’d find answers here. If there’s any chance we can break the curse, any hope of freeing you and your brothers, we have to try.”

They descended the winding path toward the Fanged Gate, the massive entrance to Norhaven carved to resemble the open maw of some ancient Beast. As they drew closer, he noticed unusual activity along the battlements. Soldiers moved with purpose, setting up additional ballistae and reinforcing weak points.

War preparations.

A cluster of armored figures stood at the base of the eastern wall. Even from a distance, Egon recognized the tallest among them—King Ulric, his broad shoulders

and commanding presence unmistakable.

“Wait here,” he told her, touching her arm gently. “Let me approach first.”

He walked towards the group surrounding the king, aware of the guards’ eyes tracking his approach. Two warriors stepped forward, hands on weapon hilts until recognition dawned on their faces.

“Egon,” one called out. “The king will want to know you’ve returned.”

Ulric turned at the commotion, his weathered face betraying brief surprise before settling back into its customary stern expression. The king dismissed the officer he’d been speaking with and strode toward Egon.

“Wulf told me that you had headed south on a scouting trip. I didn’t expect to see you back so soon,” Ulric said, clasping Egon’s forearm in greeting. His eyes flicked past him to where Lyric waited. “Or with company.”

“My mate, Lyric.” Even he could hear the pride in his voice.

“Another human,” the king said thoughtfully. “She is welcome amongst us. I will have a tent prepared.”

“Thank you, but first we have news.”

“Then bring her.”

He motioned for Lyric to approach. She walked toward them with quiet dignity, her back straight despite the exhaustion of their journey. Egon felt a surge of pride watching her—this woman who had faced so much yet remained unbroken.

“Your Majesty,” she said quietly as she bowed her head, her voice steady despite standing before the imposing orc king.

“Welcome, Mistress Lyric. Egon says you have news?”

She nodded but looked at him. They had agreed that he would begin with the more tangible information.

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“First of all, Lasseran is seeking the direct allegiance of Old Kingdom nobles.”

Ulric’s jaw tightened. “I warned Aldran, but he chose to ignore me. Come, walk with me.”

They moved along the wall, where workers hauled massive stones to repair a section of damaged fortification.

“The Fanged Gate must hold,” Ulric said, gesturing to the reinforcements. “I’ve ordered every available resource diverted to strengthen our defenses. If Lasseran’s Beasts breach this pass...”

“They’ll pour into Norhaven like a flood,” he finished grimly.

“Precisely.” Ulric stopped, turning to face the mountains they’d just crossed. “Tell me everything you’ve seen.”

Egon felt the weight of every word as he relayed what they’d discovered. Ulric’s face darkened with each detail, his weathered features hardening into stone.

“The Beast warrior attack left nothing but ruins,” he said, his voice low to prevent the nearby guards from overhearing. “The lord’s estate was completely destroyed—buildings burned to the ground, bodies torn apart. No survivors.”

Ulric cursed under his breath. “And you’re certain these were Lasseran’s creations?”

“Without question.” His jaw tightened as the memories flooded back. “I’ve seen

combat wounds of every kind, my king. These weren't made by weapons or natural Beasts. The claw marks were too precise, too... calculated."

The king turned away, staring at the distant mountains. "And Khorrek? You're sure it was him?"

"I fought him myself." His hand instinctively moved to the healing wound on his side. "He recognized me from the fight pits. Something changed in him during our confrontation—I saw doubt in his eyes."

"Doubt won't stop him from following orders," Ulric muttered.

"No, but he revealed more than he intended—or perhaps it was a deliberate slip. The first generation, orcs like Khorrek, were trained to be warriors, to believe in everything Lasseran wished them to believe, but they could still think for themselves." He lowered his voice further. "This new generation is different. They are little more than mindless rage, but he controls them completely—a weapon to be pointed at any target he chooses."

Ulric's eyes narrowed. "How many?"

"Khorrek didn't give numbers, but from what I saw at the training grounds, at least a dozen, possibly more." He hesitated before adding, "And he implied Lasseran had found 'the key to the old magic.'"

The king's massive fist clenched. "And he has the winter to prepare."

"There's one more thing," he said. "The village was left untouched. The hybrids specifically targeted the lord's estate—someone who had sworn allegiance to Lasseran—although the lord and his immediate followers were spared."

“A message,” Ulric concluded grimly. “Betrayal will not be tolerated, even from his own supporters.”

He watched the king’s face, trying to gauge his reaction. The mention of the Beast warriors had darkened Ulric’s expression, but there was something else weighing on him—something he couldn’t quite place.

“My king,” he hesitated, then tugged Lyric forward. “There’s more you should hear. My mate has been touched by the goddess Freja.”

Ulric’s eyebrows rose slightly, but he said nothing, waiting for her to speak.

“I wouldn’t presume to bring you a message from the gods if it weren’t urgent,” she said quietly. “Freja has warned that you must return to Queen Jessamin immediately.”

The change in Ulric was instant and dramatic. The stern, controlled expression cracked, revealing raw concern beneath. His big body tensed, every muscle coiled as if preparing to spring into action.

“What did you say?” Ulric’s voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “What about my queen?”

He instinctively shifted closer to Lyric, though he knew Ulric would never harm an innocent messenger. The king’s reaction confirmed what Egon had suspected—beneath the political alliance with Jessamin, there were genuine feelings.

“The goddess showed me flames surrounding her,” Lyric explained. “Danger closes in while she waits alone. That’s all I know, but the message was clear—you must go to her now.”

He watched the conflict play across Ulric’s face—the wariness of a king who

couldn't afford to be swayed by superstition battling with the concern of a man who might be putting his queen at risk. The king's eyes narrowed as he studied Lyric more carefully.

"Many claim to speak for the gods," Ulric said, his voice deliberately measured. "Especially in times of war. How do I know your vision isn't born of fear rather than divine guidance?"

He stepped forward, his protective instincts flaring. "My king, I've known Lyric since we were children. She's never spoken falsely, and she has nothing to gain by inventing such a warning."

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Ulric raised a hand, silencing him. “I would hear it from her.”

Lyric met the king’s gaze without flinching. “I understand your doubt, Your Majesty. I questioned the vision myself. But Freja showed me your Jessamin surrounded by flames, her golden hair like a beacon in darkness. There was a pendant at her throat—a crescent moon set with sapphires.”

Ulric’s expression shifted subtly. He recognized the look—surprise carefully masked beneath royal composure. The pendant was clearly something personal, something Lyric couldn’t have known.

“She also showed me a secret passage,” Lyric continued. “Behind a tapestry depicting a great hunt. The goddess said, ‘The way out becomes the way in.’”

The king’s massive frame went rigid. His jaw clenched so tightly that Egon could hear the grinding of teeth.

“No one outside the royal family knows of that passage,” Ulric growled.

He felt a surge of pride for Lyric, standing unintimidated before the most powerful orc in Norhaven. She had always possessed a quiet strength that few recognized.

Ulric paced several steps, his brow furrowed in concentration. “If what you say is true, then Jessamin is in immediate danger. But I cannot abandon Norhaven on the eve of Lasseran’s attack.”

The king turned back to them, conflict evident in his eyes. “How can I be certain this

isn't a ploy to draw me away when we're most vulnerable?"

He stepped forwards, placing himself partially between Lyric and the king. The protective gesture came naturally, though he knew she needed no shield.

"My king," he said, his voice low but firm. "I've served you and Norhaven faithfully. I wouldn't bring false warnings to your gate."

Ulric's eyes narrowed. "Your loyalty isn't in question, Egon."

"Then trust my judgment." He held the king's gaze, refusing to look away despite the tension crackling between them. "The Old Gods have been silent for generations. If they speak now, through her, we cannot afford to ignore their warning."

He felt the weight of his own words. He'd spent years dismissing Wulf's faith in divine intervention, yet here he stood, advocating for a goddess's vision. The irony wasn't lost on him, but Lyric's certainty had become his own.

"You've seen what Lasseran is capable of," he continued. "If he's found another way to target Jessamin while our attention is divided, we play directly into his hands by hesitating."

The king's massive shoulders tensed, his tusks gleaming in the fading light as he worked his jaw in contemplation.

"And what would you have me do? Abandon the Fanged Gate when Lasseran's forces gather at our borders?"

"Not abandon," he countered. "Divide our strength strategically. Secure both fronts."

Ulric turned away, staring out at the distant mountains. He recognized the conflict in

the king's stance—the battle between duty and personal concern.

“Your men can hold the Fanged Gate,” he urged. “But if Jessamin falls because we failed to act on a divine warning...”

He left the thought unfinished, knowing Ulric would follow it to its inevitable conclusion. The political alliance would crumble. The kingdoms would fracture when unity was most needed. But he suspected that the king was concerned about more than just political alliances.

Ulric remained silent for long moments, his broad back to them as he considered. Finally, he turned, his decision etched in the hard lines of his face.

“At dawn,” the king said, the words clearly costing him. “I’ll depart with a small contingent at dawn. Not before. I need tonight to ensure our defenses are prepared.”

He nodded, relief washing through him. “A wise decision, my king.”

CHAPTER 26

Lyric folded the borrowed blanket, her movements mechanical while her mind raced elsewhere. Dawn painted the camp in shades of gray and pink, but the beauty failed to touch her. That gnawing sensation had returned—stronger now, like fingers of ice trailing down her spine.

“You’ve hardly spoken,” Egon said, his voice low as he approached. “What troubles you?”

She looked up at him, at the face that had become her anchor in a storm of uncertainty. The scars that mapped his history no longer seemed foreign—they were simply part of him, as familiar to her now as her own reflection.

“Something’s wrong.” She pressed a hand to her stomach, where the dread had settled like a stone. “I can’t explain it, but since we arrived, it’s gotten worse.”

He crouched beside her, golden eyes searching her face. “Freja again?”

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“Perhaps.” She shook her head. “But this is different. Not a vision, just... a feeling. Like when you know a storm is coming before the clouds appear.”

Around them, Ulric’s men broke camp with practiced efficiency. The king himself stood at the edge of the clearing, deep in conversation with his captain. They’d be moving soon but the knowledge didn’t appease her growing sense of urgency.

“Perhaps it’s just the weight of everything,” he suggested, though his tone lacked conviction.

She watched a raven circle overhead, its black wings stark against the pale sky. “No. It’s something else.”

Sighing, she carried the folded blanket over to where their horses waited. As she reached for her mount’s bridle, a wave of wrongness crashed over her so powerfully that she staggered.

“Lyric?” He was at her side instantly, strong hands steadying her.

“We need to go. Now,” she whispered urgently, clutching his arm. “The certainty of it rang through her like a bell. “This place—it’s not safe.”

He didn’t hesitate.

“Go to the front of the column with Ulric. I’ll make sure everyone is moving.”

“But...”

She was too late—he'd already disappeared into the still assembling crowd of horses and orcs. As much as she wanted to go after him, this was his world, not hers. The best thing she could do was follow his instructions. With a last worried glance at the column of warriors, she urged her horse towards Ulric's banner, weaving through the column of warriors. The strange feeling intensified with each passing moment, a pressure building behind her ribs that made it hard to breathe. She caught sight of Ulric's massive form at the front, his shoulders squared as he surveyed the path ahead.

"Your Majesty," she called, pulling her mount alongside his. "We need to move faster."

Ulric turned, his eyes narrowing. After one look at her face, he ordered his warriors to greater speed before turning back to her.

"The girl with the visions." His voice carried no mockery, only caution. "What do you sense now?"

"I don't know exactly." She glanced back at the camp they were leaving, anxiety clawing at her throat. "But something's coming. Something?—"

The ground beneath them trembled. Subtle at first, then unmistakable. Her horse nickered nervously, shifting beneath her.

"What in the—" Ulric began.

The rumble grew, a deep bass note that seemed to rise from the earth itself. Her eyes shot to the mountainside looming above their former campsite. A sickening realization dawned as tiny pebbles began to bounce and skip down the slope.

"Run!" she screamed, her voice lost in the sudden roar that filled the valley.

The mountain shuddered. Then, with terrifying speed, the entire face seemed to collapse. Massive boulders, trees, and earth broke free, gathering momentum as they thundered down toward the exact spot that they had left mere minutes ago.

She watched in horror as the avalanche crashed through their abandoned camp, pulverizing everything in its path. Tents disappeared in an instant. The clearing where Egon had held her last night vanished beneath tons of rock and debris. A cloud of dust billowed upward, blotting out the sunrise.

Her heart seized. “Egon,” she whispered, scanning frantically for any sign of him among those who’d made it to the front of the column. Had he escaped? Or had he been caught at the rear, making sure others got out safely?

The thunderous roar gradually subsided, leaving an eerie silence punctuated only by the settling of rocks and the panicked whinnying of horses. Dust hung in the air like fog, choking and thick.

“Egon!” she shouted, her voice breaking as fear clawed its way up her throat.

She slid from her horse before it had fully stopped, her feet hitting the ground hard enough to send pain shooting up her legs. She ignored it, stumbling forward into the billowing dust that hung like a shroud over what had been their camp.

“Egon!” Her voice cracked as she screamed his name, the sound swallowed by the settling mountain. All around her, warriors coughed and called out to one another, dark shapes moving through the haze like ghosts.

Her eyes burned, tears cutting tracks through the dust coating her face. She couldn’t see more than a few feet ahead, but she pressed on, heart hammering against her ribs. A massive boulder blocked her path—it hadn’t been there minutes ago. She scrambled around it, lungs burning with each desperate breath.

“Egon! Answer me!”

Someone grabbed her arm. She whirled, hope flaring, but it was one of Ulric’s men, his face grim beneath a layer of gray powder.

“The rear guard—” he started.

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She wrenched away from him, pushing deeper into the devastation. Her foot caught on something—a broken spear, half-buried in rubble. She stumbled, fell to her knees, and for one terrible moment couldn't find the strength to rise again.

What if he was gone? What if after everything—after finding each other across years and distance—she'd lost him to a mountainside?

“No,” she whispered, forcing herself back to her feet. “No.”

She climbed over a fallen tree, its branches reaching skyward like desperate fingers. Beyond it lay what remained of the supply wagons, crushed beneath stone and earth. Two warriors dug frantically at a pile of debris, pulling a third man free. Not Egon.

Her throat constricted. She couldn't breathe through the dust and panic.

“Egon!” she screamed again, her voice raw, breaking. “Where are you?”

The dust began to settle in patches, revealing the full scope of destruction. Where tents had stood now lay nothing but rock and splintered wood. The clearing where they'd held each other through the night had vanished completely.

“Please,” she whispered, a prayer to whatever gods might listen. “Please be alive.”

She stumbled forwards, her legs threatening to give way with each step. The devastation stretched before her like a nightmare landscape—broken supplies, crushed wagons, warriors calling out names that weren't answered. Her lungs burned from the dust, but she couldn't stop searching.

“Egon!” Her voice had grown hoarse, barely carrying over the sounds of shifting rock and wounded men.

Something moved at the edge of her vision—a shadow among shadows, emerging from behind a massive boulder. Lyric froze, afraid to hope, afraid to breathe.

Then the dust cleared for just a moment, and she saw him.

Egon stood there, covered head to toe in gray dust and dirt, his massive frame unmistakable even through the haze. Blood trickled from a cut above his eye, and he limped slightly, but he was upright. He was alive.

Relief crashed through her like a wave, so powerful it nearly brought her to her knees. “Egon!” she cried, her voice breaking as she ran toward him, stumbling over debris and uneven ground.

He looked up at her voice, golden eyes finding hers through the settling dust. His face transformed with relief that mirrored her own.

She threw herself into his arms, not caring about the dirt or blood. He caught her against his chest, his embrace fierce enough to lift her feet from the ground. She pressed her face into his neck, breathing in the scent of him beneath the dust and sweat.

“I thought—” she couldn’t finish, her throat closing around the words.

“I’m here,” he murmured against her hair, his voice rough. “I’m here.”

She pulled back just enough to see his face, her hands moving frantically over his shoulders and chest, checking for injuries. “You’re hurt?—”

“It’s nothing.” His thumbs brushed tears from her cheeks, leaving smudges of dirt in their wake.

Heavy footsteps approached, and Lyric turned to see Ulric making his way toward them. The king’s face was grim beneath the layer of dust that covered them all.

“Two males,” he said without preamble, his voice heavy with the weight of command. “We lost two in the rear guard.” He looked at Lyric, something like grudging respect in his eyes. “There would have been more—many more—without your warning. And you,” he nodded to Egon, “getting the stragglers moving. I owe you both a debt of gratitude.”

She clung to Egon, unwilling to let go even as Ulric spoke. Her fingers traced the contours of his face, memorizing every feature as if she might lose him again at any moment. The dust settled around them in a fine gray mist, but she barely noticed it coating her skin and clothes.

“This was no accident,” Egon said, his voice rumbling against her where she pressed against his chest.

Ulric’s expression darkened. “You believe someone triggered the avalanche?”

“Look at the pattern,” Egon gestured toward the mountainside. “Too precise. Too... targeted.”

She followed his gaze, studying the ruined landscape with new understanding. The devastation had struck exactly where their camp had been, with almost surgical precision. Her warning had come just in time—not from Freja this time, but from some deeper instinct she couldn’t explain.

“Lasseran,” she whispered. The name tasted like poison on her tongue.

Ulric nodded grimly. “He’s grown bolder than I anticipated. We need to move—now. I... I must return to my queen as soon as possible.”

That hint of vulnerability crossed his face again before he turned to organize what remained of their party. He cares about Jessamin, she realized. Despite that he issued his commands with the same stern control, only the slightest harshness betraying his urgency.

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She turned to look up at Egon. Blood still trickled from the cut above his eye, and she reached up to wipe it away.

“You could have been killed,” she said softly.

“I wasn’t.” His golden eyes held hers, steady and sure. “Because of you.”

“I didn’t know what was coming. I just... felt it.”

“That’s enough.” Egon brushed a strand of dust-covered hair from her face. “Sometimes feeling is all we have to guide us.”

Around them, warriors gathered what supplies had survived, preparing to continue their journey. The wounded were being tended to, their injuries mercifully minor given the scale of the destruction. She knew they should help, but for just a moment longer, she couldn’t bear to step away from him.

“We should go,” she finally said, though her hands still gripped his arms.

“Yes.” Egon nodded, but made no move to release her. Instead, he bent down and pressed his forehead against hers. “Thank you,” he whispered, “for saving me.”

CHAPTER 27

Egon’s heart hammered against his ribs as they reached the pass leading down into the valley surrounding his clan village. Two days of hard riding had left his muscles aching, but that discomfort paled against the knot of tension in his gut. Lyric rode

beside him, her face drawn with exhaustion but her eyes alert. He'd caught her watching him throughout their journey, concern etched in the furrow of her brow.

"Almost there," he murmured, nodding toward the settlement nestled in the valley below.

The village looked unchanged—the longhouses flanking the central plaza with the tall, angular clan house at one end, and the meeting hall at the other. Warriors were training in front of the meeting hall and someone was bringing a flock down from the upper pasture, life continuing as though the world wasn't teetering on the edge of chaos. For a moment, Egon envied their ignorance.

Lyric leaned forward in her saddle. "So this is where your brothers grew up?"

"Yes." How often he had envied them that peaceful childhood, but if he hadn't been born in Kel'Vara he might not have met Lyric and that was a thought too terrible to consider.

They rode through the outer perimeter, the guards raising a hand in greeting.

"Brother!" Lothar called as they reached the central square. "You've returned!"

Before he could dismount, Lothar was there, pulling him into a bone-crushing embrace. Wulf appeared moments later, his usual stoic expression breaking into a rare smile.

"You brought a guest," Wulf observed, his gaze shifting to Lyric.

He helped her down from her horse, his hand lingering at her waist. "This is Lyric."

Kari, Wulf's mate, pushed through the small crowd that had gathered, her belly

swollen with child. Behind her came Lothar's mate, Jana, carrying a basket of herbs.

"You must be exhausted," Kari said, taking Lyric's hands in hers. "Come inside."

Jana gave Lyric a warm smile. "Any friend of Egon's is welcome here."

"She's more than a friend," he said quietly, the words slipping out before he could stop them. "Lyric is my mate."

Silence fell. Wulf's eyebrows shot up, and Lothar let out a surprised laugh.

"Well then," Wulf said, clapping Egon on the shoulder. "This calls for celebration."

He shook his head. "Later. We carry urgent news from Ulric."

His brothers' expressions shifted from surprise to something more knowing. Wulf's gaze traveled between him and Lyric, assessing, while Lothar's eyes sparkled with barely contained delight. The scrutiny made his skin prickle with discomfort.

"We should discuss Ulric's situation," he said, trying to redirect their attention.

"Of course," Wulf agreed, but his eyes remained fixed on Egon's hand, which had instinctively moved to Lyric's lower back. "After you've both rested."

As they walked toward the clan house, Lothar fell into step beside him, leaning close. "So, brother, you found yourself a mate after all. And here you were convinced the gods had forgotten you."

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He grunted, uncomfortable with the teasing. “There are more important matters?—”

“Oh, I’d say this is quite important,” Lothar interrupted. “You’re different. Steadier.”

Ahead of them, Lyric walked with Kari and Jana, already deep in conversation. Something in his chest loosened at the sight of her fitting so easily into his world.

Wulf sent for food, but as soon as they gathered in his private part, Wulf pulled him aside. Unlike Lothar’s playful ribbing, Wulf’s assessment was more serious.

“You’ve changed,” Wulf said quietly. “There’s a peace in you I’ve never seen before.”

He shifted his weight, unsure how to respond.

“She sees me,” he finally admitted. “Not the scars, not the Beast. Just me.”

His brother nodded, understanding in his eyes. “And you trust her.”

It wasn’t a question, but he answered anyway. “With everything.”

“Good.” Wulf squeezed his shoulder. “You deserve this, brother.”

Later, as they gathered around the hearth, he caught Lothar watching him with an unusually soft expression. When their eyes met, Lothar raised his cup in a silent toast.

“What?” he asked defensively.

“Nothing.” Lothar shrugged. “I just never thought I’d see the day when fierce Egon would look at someone the way you look at her. Like she hung the moon and stars.”

He wanted to deny it, but couldn’t. Instead, he glanced across the room to where Lyric sat, her face animated as she spoke with Jana. As if sensing his gaze, she looked up, her eyes finding his. The smile she gave him was small, private, meant only for him.

After their meal, he met with his brothers in what had been Wulf’s private office, although his mate’s presence now filled the room. The small chamber felt suffocating despite its size, the weight of what he needed to share pressing down on him. He paced the worn floorboards while Wulf and Lothar watched, their expressions growing more concerned with each passing moment.

“Something happened out there,” Wulf said, breaking the silence. “Something beyond finding your mate.”

He nodded, stopping his restless movement. “Khorrek found us at the wise woman’s dwelling.”

Lothar growled. “Khorrek? The one who tried to steal Jana? The one who leads Lasseran’s personal guard?”

“The same.” His jaw tightened at the memory. “He recognized me from the fight pits. We fought, but something... changed during our battle. He started talking.”

He ran a hand over his face, the exhaustion of the past days catching up to him. “Lasseran isn’t just creating Beast warriors—he’s building an army. And not just any army. He’s perfected a way to control them completely, strip away everything except a mindless Beast.”

“How?” Wulf’s voice was hard, his leader’s instincts taking over.

“A ritual. Blood magic.” His stomach churned at the memory of Khorrek’s words. “He takes their will, binds them to him. They become weapons, nothing more.”

Lothar cursed under his breath. “And the attack on the lord’s estate?”

“A test.” His fists clenched at his sides. “Khorrek said Lasseran planned to see how they performed against armed men. It was a slaughter. And perhaps a warning,” he added. “To make sure that those who give him their allegiance don’t ever change their mind.”

“Why would Khorrek tell you this?” Wulf asked skeptically.

“I think he’s beginning to question Lasseran’s methods.” He remembered the conflict in Khorrek’s eyes. “He was raised to be loyal, but even he has limits.”

“Can we trust his information?” Lothar leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“I believe we can.” He met his brothers’ gazes. “And there’s more. For some reason Lasseran is determined to stop Jessamin and Ulric’s union.”

“He’s a little late for that,” Lothar snorted, but Wulf shook his head.

“Their marriage was not be consummated until all of the brides that accompanied Jessamin have found mates. Do you think Ulric is in immediate danger?”

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“Lyric had a vision from Freja.” He watched his brothers’ reactions carefully but both of them seemed to accept his statements. “She believes Jessamin is in danger, and through her, Ulric as well.”

Lothar swore. “If it’s true, that’s the second time Jessamin has been targeted. Why is she so important?”

“I don’t know. All Lyric received was an impression of danger.”

“I appreciate the fact that Freja seems to want to help us, but would it hurt her to be a little more clear?” Lothar grumbled.

The faint sound of a female’s laugh drifted through the room, and the brothers exchanged startled looks. Lothar shifted uncomfortably.

“Did you hear that?”

“I’m sure it was one of our mates.” Wulf didn’t appear as convinced as his words suggested but neither he nor Lothar contradicted him. “I’ll leave for Port Cael in the morning,” he added. “You will remain and keep watch?”

The question was directed at both of them, but he nodded.

“I’m home now,” he said quietly, and for the first time the words felt true.

He followed his brothers back to the main room where their mates waited. His mind raced with everything they’d discussed—Lasseran’s plans, the Beast warriors, the

looming threat. But beneath those concerns, a more immediate need pulled at him. After days of travel, of constant vigilance and shared danger, he craved time alone with Lyric.

She sat with Jana and Kari, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug. When she looked up and met his gaze, the connection between them hummed like a plucked bowstring. Even across the room, he felt it.

“We’ve made arrangements for you both,” Wulf said, breaking into his thoughts. “There’s space here if?—”

“My cottage,” he interrupted, surprising himself with his decisiveness. “If that’s acceptable.”

Lothar’s lips quirked in a knowing smile. “Of course it is. Your home has been waiting for you.”

He shifted uncomfortably under his brother’s teasing gaze. “It’s small, but private.”

“I’m sure Lyric won’t mind the close quarters,” Lothar added with a wink.

He shot his brother a warning look before turning to Lyric. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, rising to her feet. “Thank you for your hospitality,” she said to Wulf and Kari.

“You’re family now,” Kari replied warmly. “There’s no need for formality between us.”

The words struck him with unexpected force. Family. Lyric was his family now, bound to him in ways he’d never dared hope for.

They said their goodbyes, promising to return in the morning. As they stepped outside, the cool night air washed over them. His cottage lay at the village's edge, nestled against the forest's boundary—a reflection of his own existence, always straddling two worlds.

“It's not much,” he warned as they walked. “I built it myself, but it's... simple.”

She slipped her hand into his. “I don't need much.”

The quiet confidence in her voice eased something in his chest. They walked in comfortable silence, the tension of the day slowly ebbing from his shoulders. For the first time since leaving her village, he felt as if he could breathe fully.

His cottage appeared ahead, a small structure of stone and timber, smoke curling from the chimney—someone had prepared for their arrival. A lantern glowed in the window, casting a warm light across the path.

“Home,” he said, the word still strange on his tongue. He pushed open the door, suddenly anxious about her reaction.

He watched her as she moved through his cottage, her fingers trailing over the rough-hewn furniture he'd crafted himself. His chest tightened with each step she took, anxiety prickling beneath his skin. The place seemed smaller now, its imperfections magnified by her presence.

“It's not much,” he repeated, rubbing the back of his neck. “I didn't spend much time here before...”

She turned to him, her eyes warm in the firelight. “It's perfect, Egon.”

He blinked, certain he'd misheard. “Perfect?”

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She nodded, moving toward him. “It has everything we need. Walls to keep out the cold, a hearth for warmth...” Her gaze drifted toward the far corner where his bed stood, piled with furs. A teasing smile curved her lips. “And a bed.”

The heat in her eyes sent a jolt through him. His Beast stirred, responsive to her nearness, to the scent of her desire that perfumed the air between them.

“Lyric,” he breathed, her name a prayer on his lips.

She took his hand, her fingers small but sure against his calloused palm. Without a word, she led him toward the bed. His heart hammered against his ribs, equal parts disbelief and longing, as she slowly removed his vest, kissing his scarred chest as she went. He still found it hard to believe that she didn’t shrink or pull away, that her face remained warm and loving.

She reached his waist, trailing her fingers along the waistband of his leathers and leaving a trail of fire behind. Her hand slid down to cup his straining erection and his hips bucked helplessly into her hand. She gave a breathless laugh and fumbled at his laces, her fingers clumsy in her haste. He growled, equally impatient, and sliced them open with a claw, shuddering with relief as his erection sprang free. Her small fingers circled the thick length before she pushed him back onto the bed.

“What are you... Oh, fuck.” He lost the ability to speak as she took the tip of his cock into her hot little mouth. His thighs trembled and his hips arched off the bed. One hand clutched desperately at the furs, the other tangled in the silky strands of her hair.

Her mouth was warm, wet, and so soft. He bit back a groan as she sucked him deeper,

her tongue tracing the thick vein along the underside. His cock throbbed and pulsed, leaking a steady stream of precum that she lapped at eagerly. She pulled back with a soft pop, her eyes glazed with lust.

“You taste so good,” she murmured, licking the broad head. “I love how big you are, how you fill my mouth.”

“Gods,” he hissed, his head falling back against the bed. “Lyric...”

She lowered her head, taking him into her mouth again, her tongue swirling around the sensitive tip. His hips jerked involuntarily and she choked, pulling away. He reached for her immediately, stroking her cheek, but she pushed him back down.

“I’m okay,” she reassured him, her hand pumping up and down his length. “Just need to practice a little more.”

He barked a laugh. “I’m not going to last if you keep doing that.”

“That’s the idea,” she said, her lips curling into a wicked smile.

She swallowed him down again, her head bobbing in a slow rhythm that made his vision blur. He fought to keep his hips still, to not thrust deeper into the wet heaven of her mouth, but it was nearly impossible. His muscles strained and his body thrummed with the need for release.

Her nails scraped gently over his heavy sack, and that was enough to push him over the edge. His cock surged, thickening and swelling before exploding. He roared her name, his hips arching helplessly as he emptied himself into her mouth. She moaned, swallowing every drop, her tongue working him until he lay limp and dazed. Only then did she release his cock and crawl up his body.

She kissed him deeply, sharing the taste of his seed. The knowledge that she had swallowed him only added to his arousal. His cock, which had never softened, throbbed with need. He could scent her desire, thick and sweet, and his Beast demanded that he claim her, mark her, fill her with his seed.

“I want you, Egon,” she murmured against his mouth. “All of you. Now.”

He moved with inhuman speed, flipping them over until she was pressed beneath him. He tugged off her leggings, desperate to feel her naked body against his. She lifted her hips to help him, her fingers tangling in his hair.

“Please,” she whispered, her eyes wide and dark. “I need you.”

He was too far gone to deny her, to deny himself. He settled between her legs, his cock nudging against her entrance. She gasped, tilting her hips up to welcome him, her fingers digging into his back. He pressed forward, groaning as her slick heat enveloped him, inch by torturous inch.

“So tight,” he ground out, his jaw clenched. “So perfect.”

He rocked his hips, pushing deeper, until their bodies were flush and he was buried inside her. They clung to each other, lost in the sensation. When he began to move, it was with a single-minded focus, chasing their mutual pleasure. Her soft sighs and cries urged him on, drowning out the doubts that had plagued him for so long.

“More,” she pleaded, her legs wrapping around his waist. “I want to feel all of you.”

He growled, his hips snapping forward, driving into her again and again. She met him thrust for thrust, her body arching into his. He could feel her clenching around him, her inner walls rippling with the beginnings of her orgasm.

“Come for me, Lyric,” he commanded, his voice raw. “Let me feel you.”

She shattered, her back bowing as she cried out his name. He watched her, awestruck, as pleasure claimed her. She was beautiful in her abandon, her head thrown back, her eyes squeezed shut. Her body gripped him like a fist, milking his cock, and he knew he couldn't hold back. His balls tightened and he drove into her once more before his own release hit. His cock pulsed and throbbed, filling her with rope after rope of hot seed as his knot expanded, locking them together.

He collapsed, burying his face in her neck, inhaling her scent. Her hands stroked his back, soothing him even as her body continued to ripple with aftershocks. They lay tangled together, breathing ragged, hearts pounding. Each touch, each whispered endearment, had transformed the cottage around them. The walls that had merely sheltered him now embraced them both. The bed that had known only his solitary rest now cradled their entwined forms.

When they lay together afterward, her head pillowed on his chest, he stared up at the ceiling beams he'd placed with his own hands. The cottage had always been his, but now, with Lyric's scent mingling with his, with her warmth pressed against him, it was finally home.

CHAPTER 28

Lyric woke to the gentle rise and fall of Egon's chest beneath her cheek. Morning light filtered through the shutters, painting golden stripes across the furs covering them. She kept her eyes closed, savoring the warmth of his body against hers, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. How strange that she'd found such peace here, among people she'd only just met.

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When she finally opened her eyes, she found him watching her, his amber gaze soft with an emotion that made her heart flutter.

“You’ve been awake,” she murmured, tracing the line of a scar that curved along his shoulder.

“Watching you sleep.” His voice rumbled through his chest. “I still can’t believe you’re here.”

She stretched against him, enjoying the way his arms tightened around her. “Where else would I be?”

His smile faded. “I need to meet with Wulf before he leaves for Port Cael.” His thumb brushed across her cheek. “I don’t want to go.”

“But you must.” She pressed a kiss to his palm. “Your brother needs you.”

He nodded, reluctance etched in every line of his face. “What will you do?”

She sat up, pulling the fur around her shoulders. “Explore my new home, I think.” The word felt right on her tongue. Home. Not just a place she’d built for herself, but somewhere she belonged. “Your brothers’ mates offered to show me around yesterday. I might take them up on it.”

“They like you.” He rose from the bed, his massive frame silhouetted against the morning light. “I saw it in their eyes.”

“And I like them.” She watched him dress, admiring the play of muscles beneath his scarred skin. “Go. I’ll be fine.”

He knelt beside the bed, taking her face between his hands. “I won’t be long.”

“Take the time you need.” She leaned into his touch. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He kissed her then, deep and thorough, as if memorizing the feel of her lips against his. When he pulled away, his eyes had turned black.

“I’ll find you later,” he promised, voice rough with emotion.

After he left, she remained in bed, fingers pressed to her lips, heart full to bursting. For the first time in longer than she could remember, she felt truly at peace.

She finally slipped out of the warm furs, her bare feet padding across the cool wooden floor. The cottage was simple but sturdy—much like Egon himself. She pulled on her clothes, fingers lingering over the soft fabric of the tunic he’d given her the night before. It smelled faintly of pine and leather, comforting in its familiarity.

She made a circuit across the main room, taking in the details she’d missed in the whirlwind of their arrival. The hearth dominated one wall, blackened stones speaking of countless fires. Above it hung weapons—not for decoration but readiness. Practical. Necessary. A warrior’s home.

Near the window sat a rough-hewn table with two chairs. Only two. Her heart squeezed at the thought of him sitting here alone, night after night. She ran her fingers along the wood, feeling the nicks and grooves that told stories of solitary meals.

“This needs flowers,” she murmured to herself, already imagining wildflowers in a

clay pot. Perhaps herbs hanging from the rafters, drying for winter. The scent of lavender and mint would soften the masculine austerity.

In the corner stood a shelf with few possessions—a carved wooden figure of what looked like a wolf, a worn leather-bound book, and a small knife with an intricately designed handle. She touched each item gently, learning pieces of Egon through the things he chose to keep, then opened their pack and added Samha's orc statue and the pebble he'd given Egon. With the threat of Lasseran on the horizon she didn't expect it would happen any time soon but perhaps one day they could return to her old cottage for a visit.

The cottage had only one other room besides the main living area—a small storage space with shelves of preserved foods and supplies. Practical again, but lacking warmth. She smiled, already planning how she might organize her honey storethere, perhaps add jars of preserves from berries she'd gather in summer.

She returned to the main room, standing in its center with hands on her hips. It needed color—perhaps a woven blanket for the bed, cushions for the chairs. Her fingers itched to create, to transform this space into something that belonged to both of them.

“It's a good foundation,” she decided aloud. The cottage wasn't just walls and a roof—it was the beginning of something new. Their home. A place where they could build a life together, away from the shadows of their pasts.

She was reaching for her cloak when a firm knock sounded at the door. She hesitated, suddenly aware of her unfamiliar surroundings. This wasn't her cottage where she knew every visitor by their footsteps on the path. Here, she was the stranger.

Taking a steadying breath, she crossed to the door and pulled it open.

An elderly orc female stood on the threshold, her green skin weathered by age, deep lines framing eyes that sparkled with warmth. Her long white hair was woven into intricate braids and, despite her imposing height and the slight curve of tusks at her mouth, her smile was genuinely welcoming.

“So you’re the one who’s captured our Egon’s heart,” the female said, her voice surprisingly melodic. “I’m Merow. I serve as healer for our village.”

She found herself returning the smile. “I’m Lyric. Please, come in.”

Merow stepped inside, her gaze sweeping the cottage with obvious approval. “Jana mentioned you’re a beekeeper.”

“Yes,” she nodded, surprised at the mention of her craft. “I’ve kept hives for years.”

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Merow's face brightened. "The gods have blessed us, then. Just yesterday, I discovered a wild hive deep in the eastern woods. Strong and healthy, tucked away in an old oak." She reached out, patting Lyric's arm with a weathered hand. "A good omen, finding a thriving hive right before your arrival."

"A wild hive?" She couldn't hide her excitement. Starting over would be easier with established bees rather than having to capture a swarm. "Would you show me where?"

"Of course, child. That's why I've come." Merow's eyes crinkled at the corners. "The old ways teach us that bees are messengers between worlds. Finding a hive as you join our community speaks of sweet beginnings."

Warmth spread through her chest at the healer's words. In her old village, her beekeeping had been appreciated only for its practical benefits. Here, this female understood their deeper significance.

"I'd like that very much," she said softly. "But I'll need your help in deciding on the best location for the hive."

A short time later, she and Merow bent over the crude sketch she'd drawn in the dirt with a stick, pointing out where she thought the new hive would thrive best. Merow nodded approvingly, occasionally suggesting adjustments based on her knowledge of the local winds and weather patterns.

"The afternoon sun would warm them here," she explained, indicating a spot near the southern edge of the cottage clearing, "but these trees would provide shade during the

hottest part of summer.”

“Wise placement,” Merow agreed. “Our winters can be harsh. The windbreak will serve them well.”

Her mind raced with possibilities. “And here,” she continued, drawing another section in the dirt, “I could expand the garden. Plant more herbs, some vegetables. Maybe wildflowers to attract the bees.”

“The soil is good there,” Merow confirmed. “Rich and dark. Egon tried growing a few things last season, but?—”

“But I have no gift with growing things,” his deep voice interrupted from behind them.

She turned, her heart leaping at the sight of him approaching through the trees. His big body moved with his usual grace, golden eyes fixed on her with an intensity that still made her breath catch.

“How was your meeting?” she asked, rising to her feet and brushing dirt from her hands.

“Productive.” He glanced between her and Merow, a curious smile playing at his lips. “I see you two have been busy.”

She had a sudden attack of doubt. She’d been making plans, changing his space without asking. “I hope you don’t mind. Merow was showing me where a wild hive is located, and we started talking about where to place it and then about expanding your garden...” She gestured to her dirt drawings, feeling foolish now.

His expression softened as he approached, stopping close enough that she had to tilt

her head back to meet his gaze. “Mind? Why would I mind?”

“It’s your home,” she said quietly. “I shouldn’t presume?—”

“Our home,” he corrected, his voice gentle but firm. One large hand reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “You can do whatever you want with it, Lyric. Plant an entire forest if it pleases you.”

Merow laughed. “I don’t think that will be necessary. But I’ll return later today with those seedlings—and a few willing hands to do some digging.”

“I can—” she began, but the healer waved a hand.

“Nonsense. We all help each other. Besides, it will help satisfy their curiosity about Egon’s new mate,” she added, eyes twinkling.

She watched Merow’s retreating form, her heart hammering in her chest. Mate. The word hung in the air between them, both thrilling and terrifying. She darted a nervous glance at Egon, unsure how he felt about Merow’s casual declaration.

His amber eyes met hers, warm with certainty. “Don’t look so worried,” he said, reaching for her hand. “I’m proud to introduce you as my mate.”

“You are?” The question slipped out before she could stop it, vulnerability lacing her voice.

“More than anything.” His thumb traced gentle circles on her palm. “Unless... you don’t want that?”

“No! I mean, yes, I do.” She shook her head, frustrated by her own jumbled words. “It’s just happening so fast. A few weeks ago, I was alone in my cottage, and now...”

His expression softened and he guided her over to sit on a fallen log near where she'd drawn her plans. He lowered himself beside her, his huge body dwarfing hers, yet she felt nothing but safe in his presence.

"I want a formal bonding ceremony," he said quietly, his deep voice rumbling through the stillness between them. "Not just for the village to recognize what we are to each other, but for us. For you."

Her breath caught. "A ceremony?"

"Among my people, when mates bond, they make promises before the gods and their community." His gaze held hers, unwavering. "I want to make those promises to you, Lyric. I want everyone to know that you're mine, and I'm yours."

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“I’ve never belonged to anyone before,” she whispered, the enormity of what he was offering washing over her. Not just a home or protection, but a place in his world, recognized and honored.

“Neither have I.” His fingers gently tilted her chin up. “But I want to belong to you, if you’ll have me.”

Her heart thundered in her chest as she looked up at him, his amber eyes holding nothing but sincerity. The word “mate” still echoed in her mind, filling her with a warmth she’d never known before. This fierce warrior wanted to bind himself to her—not just in private moments, but before his entire community.

“Yes,” she whispered, surprised by the steadiness in her voice. “I want that too.”

The smile that broke across his face transformed him. The hardened warrior melted away, revealing the male beneath—the one who had carried her heart for so many years.

“When?” she asked, her fingers intertwining with his.

“Soon.” He brushed his lips against her knuckles. “After the village completes preparations for the coming winter. We’ll have time to plan, to do it properly.”

She nodded, imagining what such a ceremony might entail. She knew so little about orc traditions, but the thought of learning, of becoming part of this community, filled her with quiet joy.

“Will you teach me?” she asked. “About your customs, what I need to know?”

“Of course.” His thumb traced the line of her jaw. “Though my brothers’ mates might be better teachers. They’ve walked this path before you.”

A gentle breeze rustled through the trees around them, carrying the scent of pine and earth. She closed her eyes briefly, committing this moment to memory—the solid warmth of Egon beside her, the promise of a future together, the unexpected peace she’d found in this place so far from where she began.

“I never thought I’d find this,” she admitted softly. “A place where I truly belong.”

His arm slipped around her waist, drawing her closer to his side. “You belong here, Lyric. With me. With us.”

She rested her head against his shoulder, allowing herself to believe in the certainty of his words. For so long, she’d built walls around herself, convinced that true belonging was beyond her reach. Now those walls had crumbled, stone by stone, replaced by something stronger—the foundation of a life shared with Egon.

CHAPTER 29

Egon’s hands wouldn’t stay still. He adjusted the ceremonial leather vest his brothers had given him, then smoothed it down, only to fidget with the clasp moments later. The village clearing buzzed with activity as orcs and humans alike prepared for the bonding ceremony.

“You’ll wear a hole in that if you keep fussing,” Lothar said, clapping him on the shoulder.

He grunted. “Never thought I’d be standing here.”

Wulf approached, his expression a mixture of happiness and concern. He'd returned just yesterday from Port Cael, and though he smiled for his brother, shadows lurked behind his eyes.

"How does it feel?" Wulf asked, straightening his collar. "The Beast inside—is he calm?"

"For the first time in my life." He gazed across the clearing where female villagers were helping Lyric prepare. He couldn't see her yet, but knowing she was there settled something deep within him. "It's like he knows she's ours now."

Wulf nodded, but his mind seemed elsewhere.

"Something happened in Port Cael," He said. Not a question.

Wulf's jaw tightened. "Ulric and Jessamin—it's complicated. But today isn't about that."

"Tell me."

"Later," Wulf promised. "This is your day, brother. The day none of us thought would come."

He looked down at his scarred hands. "I still don't understand why she chose me."

"Because she sees what we've always seen," Lothar said. "A warrior with honor. A brother worth following."

Wulf nodded. "The gods brought her back to you for a reason."

The ceremonial drums began, deep and resonant. The village elder stepped forward,

and the crowd parted.

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Egon's breath caught. Lyric walked towards him, dressed in a simple white gown adorned with wildflowers and honeycomb patterns. Her hair had been arranged in the traditional orc braids, crowned with a wreath of flowers. She smiled at him—not the shy, hesitant smile from their childhood, but one full of certainty and promise.

His Beast rumbled with satisfaction, and for once, he agreed completely with its assessment. This female was theirs to protect, to cherish, to love until the end of their days.

His throat tightened as Lyric approached. His Beast—usually restless, dangerous—purred with contentment. She moved with quiet grace, her simple white gown catching the late afternoonlight. The village square fell silent except for the steady rhythm of ceremonial drums.

How had this happened? Weeks ago, he'd been convinced he was meant to walk alone. The scars that mapped his body were proof enough that he wasn't meant for tenderness. Yet here she stood, looking at him as though he were something precious.

"You're staring," she whispered when she reached him, her green eyes bright with amusement.

"Can't help it," he said gruffly.

The village elder began speaking, but he barely heard the words. His focus narrowed to Lyric's face, to the subtle changes time had carved there. No longer the frightened waif from Kel'Vara, she now carried herself with quiet confidence. She'd built a life from nothing, just as he had.

Perhaps that was why they fit together—they were both familiar with broken pieces.

When it came time to speak the binding words, his hands trembled slightly. Not from doubt, but from the weight of what he was being given. A second chance. A future he'd never dared imagine.

"I am yours," he said, the traditional orc vow falling from his lips. "In battle and in peace, in darkness and in light."

He added his own words, ones he'd practiced in private: "I will guard your heart as fiercely as I guard your life."

Her eyes glistened, her smile radiant, as she squeezed his hands, her small fingers strong against his calloused palms.

"I am yours," she echoed, her voice clear in the hush of the gathering. "In solitude and in community, in loss and in gain."

Then it was her turn to add her own promises, and his chest tightened. "I will heal the places you've kept hidden, and hold your secrets as carefully as you hold mine."

She leaned up, her lips brushing his ear. "You've always had my heart," she whispered. "And now you have everything else, too. All that I am, Egon."

He swallowed thickly, overcome. In the distance, the drums continued their steady beat, but all he could hear was the pounding of his own heart, echoing hers.

The ceremony continued around them, but he was lost in her, in the realization that they belonged to each other completely. When the village elder finally announced them bonded, the gathered orcs let out a roar of approval. He lifted Lyric into his arms, her laughter ringing out like music. For the rest of the evening, they would

celebrate with their community, but tonight, when they were alone, he would show her exactly what those vows meant. She was his home now, and he was hers. Nothing, not time or distance or the scars of their pasts, could change that.

He watched the celebration unfold around him, the bonfire's glow painting the village square in amber light. He'd never seen so many of his kind smiling at once. The long tables groaned under platters of roasted meat, fruit, and honeyed bread—a feast worthy of the old tales.

His gaze found Lyric across the clearing, surrounded by Merow, and Amabet, and Jana, laughing as they taught her the steps to a traditional dance. The sight of her—now his mate—still stunned him. The Beast inside him, usually restless and dangerous, lay content for once.

“Your face might crack if you keep smiling like that,” Lothar teased, sliding onto the bench beside him.

He grunted, not bothering to hide his happiness. “Let it crack.”

He accepted a tankard of mead from a passing server, watching as several young warriors approached Lyric with respectful nods. They kept a careful distance, but their eyes shone with hope. Not for her—she was his now, marked and mated—but for what she represented.

“They look at her like she's a sign from the gods,” he said quietly.

Lothar followed his gaze. “She is. We all are. Three brothers, three mates.” He gestured toward the celebrating warriors. “They believe if the gods blessed the sons of the chief, they might be next.”

He understood that desperate hope all too well. He'd carried it himself, buried

beneath layers of resignation and duty. Even now, part of him couldn't believe his good fortune.

"I never thought—" His voice roughened. "I was certain I would die alone."

"Yet here you are," Lothar said, raising his cup. "The most stubborn of us all, with the most unexpected mate."

Across the square, Lyric looked up and caught his eye. Her smile, warm and certain, reached across the distance between them. He felt something tighten in his chest—not the Beast stirring, but something else. Something that had been broken for so long he'd forgotten it could heal.

"Go to her," Lothar said, nudging him. "Your mate is waiting."

He rose, moving through the crowd of celebrating orcs who clapped his shoulders and raised toasts as he passed. He understood their joy, their renewed hope. After generations of dwindling numbers and few females, change was coming. The impossible had happened three times now.

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She was practicing the steps of the dance, her body swaying in perfect rhythm with the drums. When she extended her hand to him, he hesitated only a moment before joining her. His movements were stiff at first—he'd never been one for celebrations—but her smile encouraged him.

“You’re better at this than you think,” she whispered, her fingers intertwining with his.

The firelight caught in her hair, transforming the chestnut waves into liquid copper. His chest tightened. His. She was his now.

His Beast stirred, not with the usual restless hunger, but with impatience. They’d had their ceremony. They’d shared in the feast. But now—now he wanted her alone.

Without warning, he swept her into his arms. She let out a surprised laugh that warmed him to his core.

“We haven’t finished the dance,” she protested, though her arms wound around his neck.

“We’ll finish it later,” he growled, already carrying her through the crowd. Their people parted with knowing smiles and good-natured calls that made Lyric bury her face against his chest.

The path to his cottage—their cottage now—was lined with torches. Inside, someone had scattered wildflowers across the floor and lit dozens of beeswax candles that filled the air with honey-sweet scent. But he barely noticed any of it. His focus had

narrowed to the woman in his arms, her heartbeat fluttering against his chest.

He set her down gently, his hands lingering at her waist. “Wife,” he said, testing the word.

Lyric reached up to touch his face, her fingers tracing the scar that ran from his temple to his jaw. “Husband,” she answered, her voice soft but certain.

She rose on her toes, pressing her lips to his. When she pulled back, there was something in her eyes he couldn’t read. She took his hand, and led him over to the bed. He followed her eagerly, but when they reached it, she didn’t turn to him with her usual inviting smile. Instead she gave him an uncertain look, her fingers twisting together nervously until he wrapped his hand around them.

“What is it, little bee?”

“I—” She took his hand and placed it flat against her stomach. “I’m carrying your child.”

The world stopped. He stared at her, unable to process the words. A child? His child? Their child?

“Are you certain?” he managed, his voice rough.

She nodded. “Merow confirmed it.”

Joy surged through him, followed immediately by fear. His own hands, massive and scarred, could snap a man’s neck without effort. How could such hands ever hold something as fragile as an infant? What if his Beast frightened the child? What if?—

“Stop that,” she said, reading his thoughts. “You’ll be a wonderful father.”

“How can you know that?” The question escaped before he could stop it.

“Because I know you.” She pressed her palm to his chest, right over his heart. “Our child will love you just as much as I do.”

He gathered her close, overcome. Her faith in him—this unwavering belief that he could be more than a weapon, more than a Beast—humbled him. He kissed her deeply, pouring everything he couldn’t say into the gesture.

As they sank onto their bed, his hands gentle despite their size, the Beast inside him settled completely. For the first time in his life, he knew peace.

EPILOGUE

One month later...

Lyric’s fingers intertwined with Egon’s as they climbed the winding path up the mountainside. The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the village below, bathing everything in amber light. A month had passed since their bonding ceremony, and she still found herself stealing glances at him, marveling that this life was truly hers.

“You’re staring again,” he said without looking at her, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Can you blame me?” She squeezed his hand. “I’m still getting used to the idea that you’re mine.”

The path narrowed as they reached their favorite overlook—a flat outcropping of rock that jutted from the mountainside. They’d discovered it weeks ago during one of their walks and had returned often since, drawn by the spectacular view and the privacy it afforded them.

She settled against a smooth boulder, pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders as a cool breeze whispered through the trees. Below, the village looked like a collection of children's toys, smoke curling from chimneys as families prepared evening meals.

A crimson leaf spiraled down, landing on her lap. She picked it up, twirling it between her fingers.

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“Winter’s coming,” she murmured, watching as more leaves drifted from the branches above, painting the ground in russet and gold. “My first winter here.”

He sat next to her and put his arm around her, his warmth a shield against the chill. “Are you nervous?”

“No.” She leaned into him with a contented sigh. “I’ve weathered winters alone before. Now I have you.”

The sun dipped lower, painting the sky in strokes of orange and pink. In the distance, mountains stood like sentinels against the horizon. This was their ritual now—these quiet moments stolen from days filled with preparation and vigilance.

“I never thought I’d have this,” he said, his voice low. He rarely spoke of his feelings, but here, away from watchful eyes, he sometimes let his guard down.

She rested her head against his shoulder. “Neither did I.”

Another gust of wind sent leaves dancing around them. The air carried the scent of woodsmoke and pine, and beneath it all, the first hint of frost. Soon the mountains would be blanketed in snow, the paths treacherous with ice.

But for now, there was only this—the fading light, the kaleidoscope of autumn colors, and the steady beat of Egon’s heart against her cheek.

Lyric woke with a start, her heart hammering against her ribs. The remnants of her dream clung to her like cobwebs—stone walls, crashing waves, and a familiar face

twisted with doubt. She pressed a hand to her forehead, finding it slick with sweat despite the chill in the air.

Beside her, Egon slept peacefully, his breathing deep and even. Careful not to disturb him, she slipped from beneath the furs and padded to the window. Outside, stars pierced the velvet darkness, but they offered no comfort tonight.

The vision had been so vivid. Khorrek—the warrior who had tracked them, fought Egon, then vanished—standing alone on a battlement of Lasseran's castle in Kel'Vara. She'd never been to the castle, yet somehow she knew the stones beneath his feet, the taste of salt in the air, the relentless crash of waves against jagged rocks below.

She hugged herself, trying to shake the chill that had nothing to do with the night air. In her vision, Khorrek's face had been a mask of conflict, his eyes haunted as he gazed out over the turbulent sea. The certainty that had driven him when they'd met was crumbling, doubt taking root where conviction had once stood firm.

She'd felt his thoughts as if they were her own—his growing unease with Lasseran's methods, his fear of what was to come. The Five Kingdoms stood on the precipice of war, and Khorrek was caught between loyalty and conscience.

“What does it mean?” she whispered to the darkness. Was this another message from Freja, like the warning about Ulric? Or simply her own fears taking shape in dreams?

She pressed her forehead against the cool glass, watching her breath fog the pane. Something was shifting in the balance of power—she could feel it. And somehow, Khorrek stood at a crossroads that would affect them all.