



# The War God's Woman

**Author:** *Anne Hale*

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Paranormal

**Description:** They sent her to me as tribute.

But she doesn't kneel. She dares to look me in the eye.

And I decide right then...

She's mine.

Lirienne Marshfield is supposed to be a peace offering.

A fragile little human meant to appease our wrath.

But I'm the chieftain of this fortress. The war god's chosen.

And I don't share what I claim.

She speaks of treaties and alliance.

I see her defiance and want to break it open.

To teach her the rules of this place—my rules.

One touch, and I know no priest, no omen, no clan law will save her from me.

She thinks she's here to end a war.

But she just started one inside me.

And I will raze kingdoms before I let her be taken from me again.

Read on for enemies-to-lovers heat, warlord obsession, human sacrifice, and an orc chieftain who would burn the gods to keep his bride. She came to end bloodshed. He saw her and vowed to never let her go. HEA Guaranteed.

**Total Pages (Source):** 66

## LIRIENNE

Igrip the wooden reins so tightly my knuckles turn white. The cart rocks beneath me, wheels crunching against uneven gravel as it passes under the massive iron gates of the orcish settlement. A cold wind blows across the high walls, tugging at my woolen cloak. I fight to keep my trembling under control, determined not to let them see my fear.

No human willingly comes here. And yet, here I am, jostling forward with my heart in my throat, offering myself up as a living guarantee of peace.

The stench of sweat and smoke fills the air, undercut by a sharper scent I can't quite place—like scorched metal or singed herbs. Torchlight flickers against the dark stone ramparts, revealing glimpses of watchful shapes hunched on the battlements. Those shapes are big. Hulking. Orcs. I can almost feel their burning eyes on me, studying each breath I take, deciding if I'm prey or some sacrificial token best tossed aside.

But I chose this fate—for my village, I remind myself. My stomach churns at the memory of the council meeting where I stood before my neighbors, cheeks flushed with both terror and determination, and offered myself as tribute. The orcs' demandshad been explicit, a representative from the village must be sent to negotiate a peace, or else the next raid would leave no survivors. Everyone assumed it would be an older widow or a prisoner, not me. But as soon as the elders started talking about it in hush-hush tones—volunteering a nameless scapegoat—a hollow ache bloomed in my chest.

No one else was stepping forward. Not the mayor's grown sons, not any of the village's older men. Too frightened, too pragmatic, or perhaps too selfish. When I rose from my seat and said, "I'll go," it was as though a hush had stilled even the wind. Before I fully realized what I was saying, I'd made my vow. I couldn't bear the thought of children starving or my younger sister, Mara, forced into some orc's captivity. The council seized on my volunteerism with desperate relief.

Now, seeing the dark silhouette of the orcish fortress looming all around me, that council feels very far away. The gate slams behind us with an iron clang, cutting off my escape.

A stooped figure at the head of the procession raises a torch, lighting the wide courtyard that stretches before us. A hush seems to grip the space, as though even the wind dares not stir. Shadows flicker across the high walls, revealing glimpses of intimidating spikes and battered shields mounted like trophies. It's a brutal aesthetic—a world so far removed from my tiny farmland that I suddenly feel small and terribly fragile.

The orc driver brings the cart to a halt, and I swallow hard, the dryness in my throat threatening to choke me. He doesn't bother offering a hand to help me down. My left foot catches momentarily on the cart's edge before I find solid ground.

A cluster of orc warriors approaches, their massive builds casting long shadows across the dirt. The largest among them, with deep brown skin marred by jagged scars, sneers in my direction. "So this is the human bride?" he scoffs, voice as rough as gravel sliding off a cliff.

My cheeks heat, but I lift my chin. Bride. That word tastes bittersweet on my tongue. Some say it with scorn, others with pity. I'm no blushing newlywed. I'm a bargaining chip.

Still, I can only stare at the orc who has spoken, half in alarm and half in fascination. His tusks are chipped, and the scar across his face tells me he's seen real battle, not a scuffle in a farmland. He stands almost two heads taller than me. I hear my breath catch in my chest when he reaches out, as though to tug the cloak from my shoulders. I stiffen.

"Watch it," he growls, before actually grabbing a handful of my cloak and yanking it aside. If he wants to see if I'm hiding weapons, he'll be disappointed; I have nothing but a small satchel of personal effects.

I try to control my breathing, try to steady the wild beating of my heart. Yes, orcs are known for their aggression, but my father used to say we mustn't confuse savage appearance for a savage spirit. He believed peace was possible. Just maybe.

I force myself to meet the orc's eyes, refusing to tremble in front of him. "I—" I begin, voice weaker than I intend. I cough and try again. "I come in peace."

He snorts. "You come because your people are afraid."

I can't deny that. So I hold silent, letting him feel victorious in his observation.

A second orc steps forward, pushing the scarred warrior aside with a curt grunt. This newcomer is nearly as tall, with slate-gray skin and long, bristling black hair. He wears an insignia on his chest plate—an ornate symbol etched in gold that looks like jagged lightning. His eyes flicker, a slight orange gleam in the torchlight.

He studies me for a moment and then motions for the warriors to form a half-circle around us. "We have our orders," he says, voice filled with authority. "Bring her to the main hall. The chieftain awaits."

My throat constricts further. The chieftain. The one who announced, through a

swiftly delivered message, that if the humans wanted peace, he demanded a bride to seal it. Some say the idea of forging an alliance through matrimony is progressive by orc standards—others believe it's a humiliating insult. I have no illusions about how complicated this union will be, if it can even be called that.

The orcs march me across the courtyard. Each step I take, my boots kick up dust that seems to swirl around my ankles. The fortress interior, beyond the open yard, is lit by blazing torches anchored into the stone walls. Rough-hewn archways lead off in many directions, some culminating in staircases that spiral downward—perhaps into the dens or training pits. Echoes of orcish chatter and the clang of metal on metal surround us like an oppressive symphony.

I hear a few curses in their guttural tongue. I pick out bits and pieces of the common language woven in. Words like *cursed...unworthy...war god*. My gaze darts from face to face. Some orcs stare openly, eyes brimming with suspicion or curiosity. Others spit on the ground as I pass.

One younger orc woman stands behind a row of barrels, arms crossed beneath her leather tunic, watching with a guarded expression. She seems almost pitying. My cheeks burn in shame. Being paraded through their territory feels like being led to a tribunal.

We stop at a broad doorway made of sturdy oak planks. A carved relief of an orc's face—fierce and snarling—decorates the panels. Two guards stand posted. They swing the doors wide and the orc with the lightning insignia guides me inside.

It is warmer here, though not necessarily inviting. The floors are lined with furs, and the walls are hung with banners in deep reds and blacks. My senses are battered by the smell of tallow candles, the tang of old blood, and the overwhelming presence of power.

In the center of the hall stands a rough-hewn stone throne, illuminated by torches set on iron sconces behind it. Orcish runes crawl across the throne's surface, forming patterns I can't decipher. But the occupant of that throne immediately captures my attention.

He rises to his feet with a deliberate slowness. Tall—no, immense—and broad across the shoulders. His skin is a deep forest-green, marked by swirling tattoos. Each line seems to emphasize the powerful muscles in his arms. A pair of tusks juts from his lower jaw, one chipped at the tip, and a scar swoops beneath his left eye. His long, dark hair is tied back with leather cords and small iron beads.

This is the chieftain, orc leader of the clan that terrorizes the edges of my homeland. I feel the weight of his gaze as if it's a physical force pressing against my chest.

He takes a step forward, and the scattered torchlight highlights the ridges of his face in bronze and shadow. "You are the human who has come to forge peace?"

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His voice rolls through the hall like distant thunder. I swallow, my mouth suddenly bone-dry. "I am," I say. "My name is Lirienne Marshfield."

Behind me, the warrior with the lightning insignia clears his throat, but the chieftain raises a hand and he falls silent. A hush descends on the room, punctuated only by the crackle of flames and my own heartbeat pounding in my ears.

"Lirienne Marshfield." His tone is measured, quietly dangerous, but not cruel. Then he gestures toward a brazier near the throne. "Stand by the fire. Warm yourself."

Cautiously, I step forward, the wave of heat washing over my numb fingers. My reflection wavers in the glowing coals: a disheveled, pale human woman, eyes wide with worry. The orcchieftain studies me for a few seconds more, then turns to his assembled warriors.

"Clanmates," he calls out, voice carrying to every dark corner of the hall, "this is the peace offering from the Marshfield region. She is my responsibility. See that she is treated according to our laws."

A rumble of discontent sounds from a few corners. One orc with a heavily scarred face turns and spits on the ground, but no one openly challenges the chieftain.

He takes a slow breath, as though steadying himself against the tension. "War has cost us many lives. If forging an alliance can spare our warriors and secure our future, then I will see it done." His statement is direct, lacking flowery diplomacy. Yet there's a hint of conviction that resonates in his tone.

A wave of uncertainty passes through me. Alliance. A word that sounds so formal, so structured—yet I’m fully aware it means I belong to him in some capacity. Like property exchanged in a bargain, though he’s dressed it up with the notion of forging peace.

I can’t stop myself from speaking: “I—I want peace, too.” My voice trembles, but I force each syllable out. “I came here willingly so fewer lives would be lost on both sides.”

He turns his gaze on me, the light illuminating the deep scars that rake across his forearms. “Your bravery is... acknowledged,” he says after a moment. Then, as if snapping back to official duty, he commands: “Karzug, see to her lodging. She’ll remain under guard until the formalities are completed.”

The warrior with the lightning insignia nods. “Yes, Chieftain Ghorzag.”

So that’s his name: Ghorzag. It rolls through my mind, carrying unfamiliar weight.

Karzug beckons me forward, and I follow him toward a side corridor. I can’t resist a final glance over my shoulder. Ghorzag is staring after us, but his expression is unreadable. It’s neither pity nor cruelty—just an intense, measured gaze that makes my cheeks flush for reasons I can’t name.

Is this how my life is going to be now? A captive in an orc stronghold, pinned under the scrutiny of a chieftain who’s duty-bound to accept me, but whose people loathe everything I represent?

I swallow hard and tighten my grip on the strap of my satchel.

Karzug leads me through winding corridors lit by torches that cast dancing shadows on the walls. Orcish architecture is as imposing inside as the fortress walls



suggest—tall, vaulted ceilings, stone floors, heavy iron doors. Along the way, I catch sight of other orcs milling about. Most gawk at me brazenly, some snarl softly under their breath. A few younger ones simply blink, as if unsure what a human woman is even doing in their midst.

My entire body is tense, coiled like a spring. We finally stop in front of a thick wooden door banded in iron. A guard stands watch, an orc with pale gray skin and wary eyes. Karzug inclines his head toward the guard, who grunts once in acknowledgment.

“This will be your quarters,” Karzug says without meeting my eyes. He pushes the door open, and I peer inside.

The room is larger than I expect, with a single narrow bed against the far wall. A thick tapestry hangs to the side, depicting what looks like a stylized orc warrior standing victorious over a battlefield. A small fireplace crackles in the corner. It isn’t a dungeon, at least. More like a decent guest chamber if I ignore the iron bars on the window.

Karzug ushers me inside. Before I can thank him or question him, the guard steps forward. “Hand over any weapons.”

I shake my head slowly, opening my empty palms. “I have none. Truly.”

Suspicion flickers in his gaze, but he waves me inside.

“Do not wander,” Karzug says sharply, standing in the doorway. “You have not been cleared to roam freely. There are places in this fortress not meant for your eyes.”

My chest tightens. “I understand.”

“Someone will bring you food,” he adds grudgingly, “and fresh clothes, if you wish. Orc garments will be more practical than... whatever it is you’re wearing.”

I glance down at my simple homespun dress, patched and faded. Indeed, it isn’t suited for a place like this. “Thank you.”

He gives a curt nod and steps back into the corridor, pulling the door closed behind him. I hear a heavy latch slide into place. And just like that, I’m alone.

I move toward the fireplace, wrapping my arms around my torso. My breath catches as I survey my new living space. It’s better than a prison cell, but not by much. The thick walls muffle the fortress’s noises, reducing them to a low hum of voices and clanking metal.

I force a deep inhale, trying to steady the swirl of emotions inside me. “Be strong,” I whisper to myself. “For the village, for Mara.” My sister’s face flashes in my mind—soft freckles, wide brown eyes, tears that welled the night I left.

That memory solidified my resolve. My greatest fear was that I’d be mistreated here, or killed outright once the orcs decided they had no further use for a human bride. But the chieftain, Ghorzag, hasn’t struck me as bloodthirsty. Stern, yes. Dangerous, undoubtedly. But there’s a hint of weariness in his eyes, as though he, too, is carrying burdens.

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I wonder if he truly believes this “alliance” will hold. If so, what does that mean for me? Orc culture is a fog to me—dark, impenetrable. They worship the War God, that much I know. Rumor has it the War God demands constant tribute in blood, but even my people’s knowledge of such rituals is laced with speculation and fear.

Sighing, I pace the room. My gaze snags on a wooden chest set near the bed. Curiosity licks at me, but I have a feeling it might be empty or contain items specifically placed for my use. Could it be a test? I press my palm against the rough wood. It creaks open, revealing a neatly folded set of clothes—an orcish tunic and leather leggings, from the look of them—and a pair of worn but sturdy boots. Practical, indeed.

A flood of relief and discomfort mingles in me. They’re treating me more like a guest than a hostage—at least for now.

I sink onto the edge of the bed. The straw mattress gives slightly under my weight. My mind drifts back to the chieftain’s face, etched with scars and intensity. Ghorzag Stormborn. That name alone sounds like a thunderclap.

The door latch scrapes, and I jolt. A timid knock follows. “May I come in?” comes a quiet, low voice.

I stand quickly, trying to gather myself. “Yes, of course.”

The door opens to reveal a young orc—maybe not much older than me—carrying a wooden tray. Steam rises from a clay bowl of stew, and beside it are thick slices of dark bread. He wears a simple leather vest and has wide, curious eyes.

“I—I brought your meal,” he says. He steps inside and awkwardly closes the door behind him.

“Thank you,” I manage, stepping forward to take the tray from him. Our fingers brush, and he flinches as though scalded.

An uneasy silence stretches between us. Finally, he clears his throat. “I’m Tozu. I help the cooks. The chieftain said you were to be offered the same fare as the warriors.” He glances at the stew, lips twitching in a quick half-smile. “It’s... gamey, but filling.”

“Thank you, Tozu,” I repeat, carefully setting the tray on a small table near the fireplace. I can feel his gaze roaming over me, not in a lecherous way, but with blatant curiosity.

“You’re really... human.” He shrugs, as if to say, Well, that’s obvious, but it’s new to me.

I nod. “I am.”

He fidgets, clearly torn between politeness and interest. “Is it true you’re to mate with our chieftain?”

Warmth creeps up my neck again. “That’s... what they’ve said.” I manage to keep my voice steady, though a million emotions clash inside my chest.

Tozu nods as if I’ve confirmed a rumor. “Some in the clan think it’s bad luck. They say you’ll bring the War God’s wrath.” A flicker of concern crosses his face, like he isn’t sure if he believes it.

My shoulders sag. “I’ve heard that, too.”

He studies me for a moment, then takes a step back. “If you need anything... well, maybe ask one of the guards. But you can ask me, too, if you see me around the kitchens.” He turns as if to leave, then pauses. “And, um, don’t take it personally. Orcs can be mean as a hedgehog’s backside when they’re uncertain. And everyone’s uncertain right now.”

“Thank you,” I say again, forcing a small smile. The kindness in his voice reminds me that orcs aren’t a monolith of hatred. “I appreciate it.”

He ducks his head awkwardly, then leaves the room. The latch scrapes once more, locking me in.

Alone again, I exhale slowly. My gaze falls on the steaming stew, and my stomach rumbles. The aroma isn’t terrible—earthy, rich, with a hint of spice. I realize I’m ravenous. Carefully, I taste a spoonful, half expecting it to be bitter or inedible. To my surprise, it’s quite good. Savory with chunks of meat and vegetables I don’t recognize. I tear off a piece of dark bread and dip it into the broth.

As I eat, my eyes dart around the small chamber. The orcs have placed furs on the floor to soften the stone’s chill. Heavy curtains can be drawn over the small window, sealing in warmth. Compared to the cramped huts of my village, this isn’t so bad—if only it weren’t for the thick iron bars across the window. That grim reminder makes my meal taste less satisfying, but I force myself to eat anyway. Strength, after all, will be crucial in the coming days.

“What now?” I wonder. I have no illusions that I’ll simply talk my way into acceptance here. I might have to prove my worth, somehow. Orcs respect strength—both physical and mental. My father’s stories come back to me once more, about orcish cunning and prowess in battle. If I can’t match them in combat, perhaps I can show courage in other ways.

“Peace is possible,” I murmur, pushing aside the half-finished bowl. “It has to be.”

My voice rings hollow in the empty chamber. But even as I say those words, memories of the orc raids on our village flicker in my mind—homes burned, farmland trampled, neighbors cowering. Back then, I’d hated them all, convinced they were nothing more than bloodthirsty monsters. Now, I’m betrothed—of sorts—to their leader. My heart hammers against my ribcage as I imagine what that actually means. The world feels like it has flipped upside down.

The flicker of the fireplace lulls me, and the exhaustion of my long journey finally begins to settle in. But sleep seems impossible. Instead, I rise and move to the narrow window. I press my fingers against the iron bars and peer outside.

Night has fallen fully. The courtyard below glows with torches, lighting the silhouettes of orc guards patrolling the perimeter. Their guttural voices float up in half-heard snatches. Beyond the walls, distant mountains crown the horizon, their peaks rimed with moonlit snow. It’s bleak, desolate—beautiful in a raw, untamed way.

The open sky reminds me of the farmland back home, how I’d stare at the stars on quiet nights with my sister or slip into the orchard behind our house to watch fireflies dance among the apple blossoms. I ache with longing. Would I ever see home again? If there’s peace, I might, I tell myself fiercely.

But then comes the doubt. Peace demands acceptance—acceptance of me by the orcs, acceptance of them by my people. The gulf between our worlds feels immense.

I let out a shuddering breath. Tomorrow, presumably, I’ll meet with Ghorzag again, or at least someone who can explain what’s expected of me. The wedding? The formalities Karzug mentioned? My mind reels. I’m in a precarious position; too many things can go wrong.

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Despite the swirl of uncertainties, that fleeting image of Ghorzag's face roots in my thoughts. He's enormous, intimidating, exuding a quiet authority. Yet, behind the stoic mask, something else simmers. A man (or orc?) weighed down by responsibility, maybe even regret. Some part of me wonders if that faint spark of empathy could be the key to bridging our worlds—or if I'm foolish to hope for such a connection.

Exhaustion eventually overcomes the chaos in my mind. I curl up on the bed, pulling a scratchy blanket over myself. The furs offer a decent cushion against the wooden frame, though I'm not used to their musky scent. My eyes drift shut, replaying every detail of the day—my trembling steps through the towering gates, the clan's accusatory stares, Ghorzag's deep voice echoing in the main hall.

And, overshadowing all else, that gnawing question: Can peace truly exist between my people and these orcs?

Somewhere in the uneasy space between wakefulness and sleep, I vow: I will do everything in my power to make it possible.

Outside, a distant horn sounds—a plaintive note echoing into the night. Orcish war calls, I think with a shiver. Or perhaps a signal changing the watch. My heart clenches with both fear and fascination.

Eventually, the crackle of the dying fire lulls me into a fitful doze. And in that half-dreaming state, I hear my father's voice, remembering him whispering when I was a child: We are all creatures under the same sky. If there's a chance for understanding, we owe it to ourselves to try.

Eventually, I will find out if that understanding can be forged, or if I'm merely the first casualty in a doomed truce.

For tonight, all I can do is endure the weight of the fortress around me, the chill of foreign stone under my hands, and the flickering hope in my chest that maybe this gamble won't end in bloodshed.

2

## GHORZAG

I stand in the Great Hall, arms folded across my chest, as the first light of dawn seeps through the high windows. The torches still burn, but their flames are pale and wavering, yielding to the glow of a new day. I scan my gaze over the faces of my gathered clan—some stern, some apprehensive, and others outright enraged.

The tension in the air is a live thing, thick enough to taste. It coils around my ankles and snakes upward, constricting my breath. But I can't allow them to sense doubt; a chieftain's composure must be ironclad, no matter how turbulent the undercurrents.

I slowly let my arms drop to my sides, shoulders back, every muscle rigid with purpose. "Bring her forward," I command, voice echoing against the vaulted stone ceiling.

A handful of warriors stand near the eastern archway, shifting uncomfortably. They glance at one another until one steps forward—a younger orc named Tozu, I believe—then hurries off to fetch our new... guest.

My ears twitch, alert to every muttered curse or scornful whisper from the crowd. Orcs of every rank are present: seasoned warriors bearing decades of scars, cunning elders with thick braids of graying hair, a few curious acolytes from the temple. A



hush spreads across their number. They all know what's about to happen, and they've come to witness.

I draw a steady breath, letting my gaze linger on the heavy banners that drape the walls. We chose them—I chose them—to remind us of our clan's storied past. Crimson cloth embroidered with black glyphs tells of old victories. One tapestry shows the War God himself in swirling lines, brandishing a mighty blade against some half-forgotten foe.

I remember a vision flickering in the back of my mind: The War God isn't known for granting direct audience to mere mortals, but sometimes, in the hush before battle, I sense a presence—an acute, burning awareness that guides my sword arm or steadies my heart. Lately, that presence has felt distant. Perhaps that is why these omens of misfortune spread so easily among my people—too many remember the days when the War God's favor pulsed like a living shield around us, and they sense it slipping away.

The crowd parts, and my warriors escort Lirienne into the Great Hall. She looks both determined and uncertain, her hands clenched at her sides as though fighting an inner tremor. Even in the half-light, I notice how pale she is compared to orcs—her skin soft and fair, dotted with faint freckles. Her hair, a dusty auburn, frames her face in loose waves. There's something about her eyes, though, that draws me. I expect fear or resentment. Instead, I see a guarded sort of hope.

She wears the same simple dress from the previous night, but I've heard she's been given orc leathers for future use if she wishes. For now, the rough wool looks oddly out of place amid our clan's coarse fabrics and plated armor. Each footstep she takes on the stone floor seems far too light, a whisper where my people's boots thunder.

I incline my head at her and speak in a voice loud enough for the entire hall to hear. "Come stand with me, Lirienne Marshfield."

Her gaze flickers across the rows of orcs, all of them waiting for a reason to condemn her or chase her out. She swallows, raises her chin a fraction, and approaches. The hush in the hall thickens.

When she stops an arm's length away, I turn my attention to the clan. "By now, you all know who this is. She comes from the Marshfield region, the village at the edge of our territory. We have... a compact with her people."

A ragged chorus of grunts, hisses, and muttered curses ripples through the throng. Several warriors spit on the ground. I can almost hear hearts pounding, tension swelling like a gathering thunderhead.

"Quiet," I growl, letting a hint of my authority show. The clamor dies down to a low rumble. "We have lost too many warriors to fruitless raids. Trading bodies for blood. Our fields suffer from unpredictable weather, our resources spread thin by constant skirmishes. We need new ways to secure our clan's future."

A broad orc with twin braids steps forward, arms folded over a battered leather cuirass. "And you think a human bride is the answer?" he snarls, tusks glinting in the flickering light. "This is madness, Ghorzag."

I recognize him as Gorath, one of the older warriors who served under my father. His voice carries the weight of tradition—the stubbornness that values brute conquest over forging alliances.

I meet his glare head-on. "Madness or not, I will see this through."

Lirienne shifts beside me. I catch a faint whiff of her scent: something floral and raw, a stark contrast to the musk of the fortress. She doesn't flinch, despite the scornful looks. The tension in her shoulders tells me she's scared, but the set of her jaw tells me she won't surrender to that fear.

“And so,” I continue, turning back to the gathered orcs, “I formally proclaim Lirienne Marshfield as my mate—my chosen partner—for the sake of forging a lasting pact with her people.”

The uproar is immediate. A few roar protest, some pound their weapons against their breastplates in frustration. Others simply seethe in silence. One of the orc elders, leaning heavily on a carved staff, shakes his head and mutters something about “cursed unions.”

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I lift a hand, palm out. The hall falls silent once more. “I do not make this decision lightly. But we cannot hold onto old hatreds forever if we are to survive.” My words echo, stirring memories of battles fought for no real gain.

At that moment, an imposing figure steps forward from the crowd—Druzh the High Priest, his rich crimson robes draping over a wiry, muscled frame. Age has streaked his hair with silver, and intricate markings denoting service to the War God twist around his forearms. He never minces words.

“Chieftain,” he says, voice resonating like a deep drum, “have you considered the omens? The floods in the eastern pastures? The livestock falling ill without reason?”

A ripple of foreboding passes through the hall. I notice Lirienne’s brows knit together as she glances nervously at me. The talk of omens has been surging for days.

“Speak, Priest,” I say tersely.

Druzh’s sharp gaze darts to Lirienne, then returns to me. “The War God is not pleased. Our watchers by the river say the waters are rising beyond any seasonal norm. Crops have rotted overnight, and last evening a calf was found dead—no visible wounds, but blood spattered around its muzzle as if it coughed life away.” He pauses, letting the weight of his words hang in the torchlit space. “We have read the signs, and they are dire indeed. The War God’s disfavor hangs upon us. You bring a human woman to our midst under a vow of peace, yet the cost may be our clan’s ruin.”

The hall erupts in a low, collective growl. Fear laced with anger. Some orcs demand

to know how to appease the War God, others curse in savage frustration.

I refuse to be rattled. I step toward Druzh, fists clenched. “You interpret these events as the War God’s condemnation of Lirienne?”

Druzh meets my stare without wavering. “The War God demands strength and victory. He scorns weakness. This arrangement could be viewed as a concession... or a betrayal of our proud tradition.”

I feel Lirienne stiffen beside me. Betrayal, he says. The word cuts like a blade because I know that’s how many orcs perceive it: forging an alliance with humans after centuries of conflict.

I draw in a measured breath. “We do not yet know if these misfortunes are truly the War God’s doing or simply cruel turns of fate.” My voice thunders through the hall, tamping down the rising chaos. “But heed me: I do not ignore your fears. We will seek clarity. We will consult the shaman further, investigate the matter thoroughly.”

“But should the God of War truly be angry,” comes a trembling voice from somewhere in the crowd, “then no mortal can stand in his way. Chieftain, do not doom us because of a misguided plan!”

Resentment churns in my gut. Do they truly believe I would doom the clan I’ve sacrificed so much to protect? I glower at them, letting the old discipline from countless battles reassert itself. “I have fought for this clan’s future since I was old enough to wield a blade. I will not make reckless choices.”

Druzh’s mouth tightens into a thin line. “We must perform the rites to ascertain the War God’s will. And soon.”

A heavy silence follows, thick with tension. The crowd waits, hungry for a definitive

answer, an act of appeasement, or a scapegoat. My eyes flicks to Lirienne. Her pulse seems to flutter at her throat, but she stands firmly, refusing to appear cowed. Our eyes lock, and for a heartbeat, the roar of the hall recedes.

“You have my word,” I say finally, lifting my chin. “I will not turn a blind eye to these omens. But nor will I abandon our chance at peace because of rumors and fear.”

That is my decree. It hangs in the air, unchallenged yet bitterly received by many. One by one, orcs begin to back away, muttering under their breath, unsure whether to stand by me or add their voices to the chorus of anger.

I raise my hand again, beckoning my second-in-command, Karzug, forward. He, too, wears the clan’s lightning insignia, though less ornate than mine. Tall and lean, Karzug has a sharpness to his features—keen eyes, a confident stance. He once told me he’d follow me through any storm, no matter how fierce.

“Escort Lirienne from the hall,” I murmur under the fading clamor. “Ensure she isn’t harassed. I’ll remain to address the rest.”

Karzug gives a curt nod. “Yes, Chieftain.”

Lirienne turns to me, voice hushed. “Ghorzag... is there anything I—” She trails off, uncertainty flickering in her gaze.

The fact she uses my name—without flinching at its guttural sound—surprises me. A quick hush falls around us as a few onlookers realize she dares speak to me directly. I tense, prepared to quell another eruption of protest. But the hall has mostly dissolved into pockets of orcs who are too busy complaining among themselves to focus on her.

“Stay in your chambers,” I say quietly, though not unkindly. “Let the priests and me sort this out. If we’re to have peace, you can help more by... ensuring you’re not the

target of their fury right now.”

A shadow crosses her features, perhaps disappointment or relief. Maybe both. She simply nods, her expression unreadable. Then she allows Karzug to guide her through the parting throng. As she passes, a few warriors step aside stiffly, their eyes dark with suspicion. I catch sight of Gorath spitting near her feet again, and anger flares in my chest. One sideways glare from me silences him, though, reminding him that defiance can have dire consequences.

Once Lirienne is out of sight, I face Druzh again. “Speak your mind, Priest. We cannot let fear tear the clan apart.”

His gaze is solemn, but not wholly unkind. “Times are shifting like desert sands, Ghorzag. The War God’s signs cannot be dismissed. We have the floods, the rotting crops, the sudden sickness among the livestock... All these in the span of a few short weeks.” He lowers his voice. “Our temple watchers claim these are warnings. The God of War doesn’t want our blood mingled with humans’.”

My tusks grind against each other. “You and I both know the War God values strength. This alliance could strengthen us if it means fewer wasted battles. Or do you think the War God demands endless warfare until our clan is whittled away to nothing?”

“That is not for me to decide,” Druzh retorts. “I only interpret. But many in the clan see the timing of these calamities as no coincidence. The day you announce an alliance with the Marshfield village is the day we find half our eastern pastures flooded. Tell me that doesn’t weigh on your mind.”

I rub at the scar on my chin, remembering old battles with dark elves, the hours I’d spent tending wounded orcs, burying my father’s battered body. That bitterness still lingers, fueling my desire to spare my clan from more pointless bloodshed. “It does

weigh on me,” I admit quietly. “But I won’t be ruled by superstition alone.”

Druzh nods slowly, as if he recognizes at least the sincerity of my conviction. He steps back, letting me address the lingering crowd.



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“Listen well,” I command. “Prepare for a gathering at dusk. I want the scouts and the shaman present. We will perform a preliminary rite to see if these signs truly reflect the War God’s wrath or if there’s another explanation. If the War God must be appeased, we will find a way.”

A mixture of nods and uncertain growls ripples through the throng. It’s the best I can offer them—a promise not to ignore the looming threat, coupled with an unwavering resolve to keep Lirienne as my mate.

“All of you, return to your duties,” I bark, watching as orcs begin to disperse in uneasy pockets. “Any attempt to harm our guest will be treated as an attack on my authority. Am I understood?”

A tension-laden silence follows, but I see no direct refusals. The clan eventually melts away into the corridor, leaving me standing in the echoing vastness of the Great Hall with only Druzh, a handful of watchers, and the flickering torches for company.

When the hall is nearly empty, I draw a slow breath and ascend the steps to the stone throne at the far end. Each step carries the weight of leadership—a weight I never anticipated inheriting so soon, but one that fate thrust upon me after my father’s demise.

The throne’s surface is cold beneath my palms, carved from the same black stone that forms most of the fortress. A swirl of runic etchings decorates its back, depicting the War God’s favored symbols: a sword, a raven, a coiled serpent. The seat is both a reminder of our clan’s might and a burden that often feels too large for any one orc.

Druzh approaches quietly, staff thumping on the stones. His stern face softens a fraction as he regards me. “You have chosen a difficult path. The War God rarely blesses an orc who appears to surrender to humans.”

I snort, draping one arm over the throne’s armrest. “This is hardly surrender. If we can broker a permanent peace, we can direct our strength where it truly matters—against the dark elves, for one. Or in rebuilding our clan’s resources.”

His staff taps once. “And if it proves the War God’s disapproval?”

My muscles tense, a distant ache resonating in my old battle scars. “Then we will learn why. But casting out Lirienne or harming her might bring more wrath upon us. I am no coward who cowers at the first sign of trouble.”

Druzh offers a slow nod. “I will prepare the rite. Expect no illusions—if the God of War truly be displeased, we will know it.”

He turns and makes his way out of the hall. I watch his crimson robes fade into the dim corridor, the candle flames dancing shadows across his back.

Alone for a moment, I allow myself to feel the corners of my mind swirl with questions. Could the War God truly be punishing us for bringing a human into our midst? Or is there another force at work? Memories of old alliances and betrayals gnaw at me; sabotage is hardly unheard of among rival clans.

Yet my people have seen tangible signs of calamity. As chieftain, ignoring them would be foolish. The lines on my brow deepen, recalling the haggard faces of orc farmers who came to me in recent days, complaining about the withered crops. Is it truly just random ill luck, or something purposeful meant to sow doubt?

I rub a hand over my mouth, recalling Lirienne’s expression as she stood beside me in

front of the entire clan—nervous, yes, but unbroken. There was a spark in her eyes that belied her vulnerable appearance. A softness laced with steel, perhaps. The orc in me admires that spark, even if I'll never admit it aloud.

In truth, I hadn't expected to feel... anything toward the human. This is a pact, a coldly calculated strategy to keep us from another pointless raid. But some quiet corner of my heart warms at the idea that perhaps she isn't a meek lamb resigned to slaughter. She walked into the fortress with her head held high, even when older warriors sneered.

A frown tugs at my lips. The memory of Gorath spitting near her feet roils my stomach. Disrespect toward me is one thing—I can handle challenges to my leadership—but humiliating or threatening her for merely existing under our roof is another. If we're to have peace, she needs to be safe here.

I exhale and rise from the throne. The War God's effigy carved above me looms in the torchlight, its red eyes an eternal, judging glare. "We shall see," I mutter, turning away.

Outside in the corridor, I find Karzug waiting. His posture is rigid, a sign of unspent tension. "Chieftain," he greets quietly.

"How is she?" I ask without preamble.

Karzug's brow furrows. "As well as one can be, thrown into a den of angered orcs. She's in her chamber; I posted two guards. No one will get near her without your permission."

A small nod. "Good. Make sure they rotate at the first sign of fatigue. I don't need any slip-ups."

He grunts in acknowledgment. We fall into step, boots echoing on the stone. Servants pass, carrying crates of supplies or steaming pots from the kitchens. Every orc we encounter averts their gaze in respect—or possibly fear. Word travels fast through the fortress. They already know I’m doubling down on this alliance.

As we walk, Karzug lowers his voice. “Are you certain this is wise, Ghorzag?”

I shoot him a sideways glance. We’ve known each other since we were barely old enough to swing wooden swords. If there’s anyone here whose counsel I might trust, it’s him. “You sound like the rest.”

He shakes his head, dark hair rustling against the leather of his armor. “I believe in your leadership. But I see the storm coming. The clan is restless, and that business with the War God’s disfavor... it fuels their fear.”

“I know.” My fingers drag through tangled strands, loosening a few iron beads that clink softly. “Fear can be more dangerous than any blade. If they convince themselves Lirienne is to blame, it won’t matter whether it’s true.”

He nods. “And the sabotage angle? Are you still considering that possibility?”

My mind jumps to the times we saw suspicious damage to our supplies—like fences torn down in the night, seeds rotted before they could sprout, water sources inexplicably fouled. “I suspect sabotage could be at play,” I say slowly. “But we’ve no proof. And no orc in this clan would dare such a thing openly.”

“Unless they were backed by someone else, or promised something greater,” Karzug murmurs. “Dark elves have long sought to weaken us.”

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Dark elves. The possibility tastes like poison. They're cunning, manipulative. If they want to sow discord, making it appear as though the War God himself curses us is a clever way to do it.

My steps quicken. "We'll keep an eye on those who protest most vehemently. If any sign emerges of outside interference, we clamp down immediately."

Karzug inclines his head. "Agreed."

When I reach my private chambers, I dismiss Karzug with a brief wave. The corridor near my door is quiet except for a single guard standing at rigid attention. My quarters overlook the fortress courtyard—high windows that let in more natural light than most rooms. I prefer it that way; a small relief from the stone gloom.

I light a fire in the hearth, stirring the coals until they crackle and jump. The warmth spreads across my skin, reminding me that I've been cold for too long. My father's old battle-axe hangs on the wall opposite the hearth, its blade nicked and scarred from countless fights. Sometimes I imagine I can still sense his presence lingering around that weapon.

He would've disapproved of this union, no doubt. My father believed wholeheartedly in brute force and conquest. But his zeal led us into a catastrophic battle with the dark elves—one we only barely survived. I lost him that day. And I vowed never to sacrifice orc lives so carelessly again. If forging peace with humans spares even a handful of warriors from an early grave, it might be worth the stigma.

But the War God, am I truly incurring his wrath? My jaw clenches. Orcs have always

valued strength, yes, but we are not mindless beasts. The War God might test me, demand that I prove our clan is still fierce, still ready to fight if threatened. Perhaps that test is simply beginning.

I pace before the fire, the tension in my chest refusing to subside. I recall Lirienne's pale face and her resolute stance in the Great Hall. A part of me wants to dismiss her entirely as a naive human. Another part recognizes a spark of something I didn't expect to find—an earnest desire for peace, a quiet determination.

A growl escapes me, pressing a hand against the scar on my chest, the one that nearly ended me two winters ago. Could she truly be part of our clan's salvation? Or am I sowing seeds of deeper disaster?

There's no easy answer. All I can do is press forward and see that the War God's supposed wrath is either put to rest or proven false.

My eyes drift to a small shelf where a carved stone idol of the War God sits: a figure with broad shoulders, a conical helm, tusks, and intricately detailed armor. I scoff inwardly. "If you have something to say, War God," I mutter, "say it clearly."

Silence. Only the crackle of flames, the whistle of wind through the high window.

Realizing my anger is pointless, I comb frustration through my hair. This is just the beginning of the trials to come. If the clan is unsettled now, they'll be in full fury once we perform the official rituals to confirm whether our union with a human is truly cursed.

One day at a time. I inhale, letting my spine straighten. In a few hours, I'll meet with Druzh to plan the evening's rite. Then I'll see how Lirienne fares. She must be reeling—thrust into a place where nearly everyone believes she's a harbinger of doom.

But if she can endure the clan's scorn, if she truly longs to create peace, then maybe... maybe we have a chance.

I stare into the dancing flames, the memory of her wide eyes flickering in my thoughts. My mind turns over a realization: not once, despite all the glares and threats, did she break down or beg to return home. She stood her ground.

A kernel of reluctant respect settles in my chest. Orcs appreciate displays of fortitude. Perhaps my clan will see that in her, eventually.

For now, I focus on leading them through the War God's uncertain omens. A chieftain's duty demands that I stand firm—both for my people and for the woman who's pinned all her hopes on a tenuous alliance.

“Let the War God cast his judgment,” I say to the empty room, voice echoing off the stone. “I will not be found wanting.”

And with that, I leave to gather the priests, ready to confront whatever is stirring beneath the surface of these so-called dire signs. Though doubt knots in my gut, I have no choice but to press forward and see whether the War God's wrath is real—or if something far more sinister lurks in the shadows, determined to sabotage us all.

3

## LIRIENNE

The morning sun has barely begun its climb when two stern-faced orc warriors appear at my chamber door. Without so much as a greeting, they gesture for me to gather my belongings—what little I have—and follow them. The corridor we walk through is gray with predawn light, torches flickering and guttering in their iron sconces. It feels like the whole fortress holds its breath, tense and watchful, after

Ghorzag's announcement in the Great Hall.

I keep my head high, shoulders squared, trying not to show the nervous fluttering in my stomach. Orcs cluster in small groups as we pass, their voices low and brimming with malice—or curiosity. A young orc woman glares openly, arms crossed over her leather vest, while an older warrior spits on the ground near my feet, snorting in contempt. I try not to flinch. You volunteered for this, I remind myself, my father's calm admonition echoing in my head. This is for your village—for Mara, for everyone you left behind.

The fortress corridors lead us to a large courtyard that opens onto a dusty expanse dotted with rough-hewn tents. Some of the tents are constructed around thick wooden posts, others lashed to the fortress walls. The orcs seem to favor these outlying areas for communal gatherings or temporary housing for visiting warriors. At this early hour, most of the tents stand quietly, though a few snoring shapes are visible through open flaps.

One of the warriors escorting me—a tall female orc with braided silver-streaked hair—jerks her chin at a brown, tattered tent near the far corner. It has a battered hide flap in place of a door, and sturdy cords secure it to wooden stakes driven into the packed earth.

“In,” she growls.

I open my mouth to protest—wasn't I supposed to remain in the fortress?—but the question dies in my throat. The woman's eyes flash with the promise of retribution if I resist. Realizing I have no choice, I clutch my meager satchel and step inside.

The tent's interior is dim, lit only by a few cracks of morning light filtering through a gap in the hide flap. The earthy smell of raw leather mixes with the faint tang of charcoal from a small brazier in the corner. In place of a bed is a low wooden frame



piled with furs. Nothing else.

I hear the shuffle of boots behind me, then the flap drops. Darkness encloses me like a stifling cloak, broken only by the sliver of daylight peeking under the canvas. My throat tightens, memories of the fortress cell returning in a rush. They really have no idea what to do with me, I realize. Or maybe they do—and this is part of their plan to keep me isolated.

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I inhale, letting the musty scent settle in my lungs until my racing heart finds a steadier rhythm. At least it's not a prison cell, I try to reassure myself. And it could be worse. They haven't harmed me, yet.

Placing my satchel on the ground, I kneel to inspect the fur bedding. It's coarse, but not filthy. Possibly the orcs think this arrangement more "traditional" than a fortress chamber. Or maybe the fortress's rumor mill is so rife with speculation that Ghorzag decided I need to be out of sight. My mind races, piecing together possibilities.

"Lirienne." The unexpected voice nearly makes me jump out of my skin.

I spin around, heart pounding. An orc woman peers at me from behind the flap, her dark eyes luminous in the tent's gloom. She looks younger than the female warrior who led me here, with a slender build and a small pouch slung across her chest. She lifts the flap higher to let in more light.

I try to steady my breathing. "You... startled me."

She inclines her head in apology. "I am Nagra, apprentice to the clan's shaman. I saw them bring you here." She steps inside cautiously, her gaze darting around as if ensuring no one else lurks in the shadows.

My pulse still skitters from the sudden surprise. "Is there something you need?"

Nagra wets her lips, as though choosing her words carefully. "I wanted to check on you." She pauses, then adds with a trace of wry humor, "And to ensure you're not about to run screaming into the hills."

I manage a dry laugh. “I appreciate the concern. But if I tried to run, I doubt I’d make it ten steps beyond these gates.”

The orc apprentice nods, eyes flicking to my left wrist. “They haven’t chained you or forced a guard to hover over your shoulder, but the clan is... watchful. Many blame you for the War God’s disfavor.”

I tighten my grip on the edge of the makeshift bed. “I heard. They think I’m a curse.”

She sighs, stepping closer so we can speak in softer tones. “The clan is scared. We’ve been experiencing these bad signs for weeks—flooded fields, rotting crops, livestock succumbing to strange illnesses. Our High Priest, Druzh, claims it’s the War God’s anger. And now you arrive, forging a taboo union withour chieftain.” Nagra’s shoulders slump. “It’s the perfect storm. Everything that’s gone wrong is pinned on you.”

My face flushes hot. “That’s hardly fair. I’ve been here less than a day.”

“Fairness doesn’t matter when people are desperate.” She exhales. “I’m only an apprentice. My mentor is the official shaman, but he’s grown old and sleeps through half the day. He tries to glean the War God’s will from the bones and runes, but... the clan wants a scapegoat, something to blame for their troubles.”

I run my fingers through my hair, pulling it aside to let the cooler air reach my neck. “So, because I’m a human—an outsider—I’m the easiest target for their rage.”

Nagra offers a half-smile, half-grimace. “That’s how it often goes. Orcs don’t like external meddling, especially from a people we once fought on sight.” She hesitates, searching my face with keen curiosity. “Why did you come, then? Knowing you’d be stepping into a den of hostility.”

The question churns in my chest, dredging up guilt and pride and fear all at once. My father's gentle voice slips into my thoughts, reminding me of the farmland I left behind. "My village was threatened with a devastating raid," I explain, voice tight with emotion. "They needed a volunteer to appease the orcs. I... I couldn't let them force some unwilling girl into this."

Nagra's eyes soften. "So you sacrificed yourself."

"In a way, yes." I force a shaky breath. "But part of me also believed, or hoped, that this alliance might do some good—spare lives on both sides. Perhaps bring a chance for peace."

Her expression shifts, as though my words strike a chord. "You're either very brave or very foolish."

I huff a small laugh. "Probably both."

She places a hand against the wooden pole supporting the tent's roof. "Bravery and foolishness often wear the same face, as the War God's legends say. In any case, you'll find few allies here. Orcs are a proud people, and Ghorzag's decision to... marry you, for lack of a better term, has ruffled many tusks."

My heart flutters at the memory of Ghorzag's imposing figure in the Great Hall—the quiet authority he wore like a second skin. "He said it was for the clan's future. Does he truly believe that?"

Nagra nods. "Yes. Ghorzag isn't reckless. He's never been. He's more open-minded than most, but that's also what troubles the elders. They think he's letting the clan slip from the War God's favor by entertaining alliances with humans."

She pauses, then drops her voice to a whisper. "There are rumors that a pilgrimage or

a rite will be performed soon, to determine whether you are truly cursed in the War God's eyes."

A chill skitters down my spine. "A rite?"

"An invocation, perhaps. Druzh and the priests will demand signs—something from the War God to confirm or deny your presence here. If they deem you a curse, the clan might insist on your removal—" Nagra's eyes dart downward, as though reluctant to speak the darker possibility.

I swallow. Removal. Exile. Or worse.

Silence stretches. I clench the folds of my dress in my fists, frustration building behind my ribcage. I can almost hear my younger sister's voice calling me a dreamer, the one who always believed in gentleness. Now, I wonder if I've strolled into a lion's den blindly.

"Thank you for warning me," I manage, voice wavering. "I'm not sure there's much I can do, though."

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Her dark gaze flicks around the tent, then returns to me. “Survive. That’s what you must do. Show them you’re not weak, that you won’t be easily broken. If His divine favor remains, the truth might surface eventually.”

If, I repeat inwardly, the uncertainty stinging.If.

With a final nod, Nagra turns to leave. “I’ll bring you food later, if no one else does. I can’t promise it’ll be good, but it’ll keep you alive.”

I muster a small smile. “I’d appreciate that.”

As she slips out, the hide flap falls back into place, leaving me alone in the dim light. Her visit is a kindness I haven’t expected; the flicker of compassion in her eyes reminds me that orcs aren’t mindless beasts or identical in their hatred. There’s nuance here—factions within the clan that might side with or at least pity me. But will that pity be enough to save my life if the War God’s priests condemn me?

I set my satchel in a corner and crawl onto the wooden bed frame, settling onto the scratchy furs. Each hair prickles against my ankles. The tent feels claustrophobic, but it’s better than being marched through a corridor of hostile stares.

Debate. That’s the word flitting through my mind, that quiet voice urging me to weigh my options. I came here willingly for the sake of my village, but the magnitude of the clan’s anger makes me reconsider.Was I truly saving anyone, or had I simply delayed the inevitable?If these omens continue, if the God of War is as wrathful as they believe, Ghorzag might lose control over his own people. Then nothing would stop them from pillaging my village out of spite.

I press my palms against my eyes, trying to block out the swirl of negative thoughts. Could I escape? My practical side quickly shuts down the idea. The fortress walls are high, the surrounding lands teeming with orc scouts. Even if I did slip away, how many hours would I survive on foot before they tracked me down or a wild beast found me? And what of the promise I made to my village, the people who count on me to maintain this precarious peace?

That vow weighs heavy on my conscience, reminding me of why I'm here: to prevent bloodshed. If I flee, the orcs could very well retaliate by sending an even larger war band to exact revenge. My escape might buy me a few hours of freedom, but it would likely cost my village countless lives.

Outside, I hear the clang of metal and gruff voices—perhaps a guard changing shift. The muffled stomping of boots on dirt reminds me that I'm surrounded. Truly trapped.

I force my mind back to Ghorzag's words in the Great Hall. He stood by me, at least nominally, claiming that we need a new path for the clan's survival. He seems so certain, so unyielding in his stance—even with all those hateful glares turned on him. A kernel of unexpected admiration flickers in my chest. Is he risking his own position and reputation by not denouncing me the moment the crowd clamors for blood? If so, what does that say about him?

He must have a reason. Orcish culture is built on strength, on dominance; so forging an alliance with a weaker, smaller race seems the opposite of typical orc behavior. Yet, Ghorzag does it anyway. Perhaps he believes deeply that a break in the cycle of violence is possible. Or perhaps he sees me as a pawn for some grander scheme. I don't know him well enough to parse out his true motives.

Torn between my duty and the fear gnawing at me, I close my eyes and let my thoughts drift to the what I left behind: wide fields of barley, neat little cottages. My

sister smiling at me from our front porch, her hair braided in twin plaits. If I endure the clan's hostility—if I find a way to survive these suspicious rituals—maybe, just maybe, I can spare everyone that next raid. Maybe Ghorzag and I can form some sort of real understanding.

But the images in my mind blur, replaced by the memory of orcs roaring in condemnation, Gorath spitting at my feet, and the sneer of that silver-haired warrior who escorted me here. Reality weighs too heavily, overshadowing any naive illusions.

A voice outside the tent startles me. "Human." It's a deep male tone, older and raspy around the edges. "Awake, are you?"

I sit up, heart thumping. "Yes?"

The flap lifts, revealing a stooped orc with lines creasing his brow. He wears a tattered brown robe belted at the waist, and a single bone amulet dangles from his neck. "I am Ragzuk," he says. "Shaman's apprentice to the apprentice, you might say." A rueful smile tugs at his lips. "Nagra mentioned you might need extra blankets for tonight. The wind can cut through these tents like a blade."

I blink, startled by the second visitor in one morning. "I'd appreciate that."

He shuffles inside and hands me a folded length of wool. "Not the best quality, but it will keep the cold at bay." He pauses, eyeing me curiously. "You're smaller up close than I realized."

Heat pinches at my cheeks. "I suppose I am."

He grunts, crossing his arms. "Our clan is on edge, in case it isn't obvious. You've heard the talk of curses. The War God is at the forefront of every orc's mind,



especially now that Ghorzag has brought you here.”

My teeth worry at my lower lip. “You disapprove?”

He doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, he lowers himself onto a small wooden stool near the brazier, like his old bones need the rest. “It is not my place to disapprove or approve. My place is to read the signs, interpret the War God’s will, and guide the clan in spiritual matters. But the environment is rife with fear. Fear drives orcs to do ugly things.”

I pull the wool blanket over my lap, the scratchy texture grazing my fingers. “Nagra said something similar. That if the warrior deity is angry, many here will believe I’m to blame.”

He stares at me with tired eyes. “She’s correct. Truth rarely matters once the clan fixates on a scapegoat.” Ragzuk drums his fingers on his knee. “But not everyone is convinced. Ghorzag, for one, believes we must uncover the real cause of these disasters, whether they’re divine or man-made. If it is indeed the War God’s wrath, we will see it in the upcoming rites.”

I feel a wave of unease roll through me. “These rites... what happens if they declare me cursed?”

His wrinkled face tightens. “Best not dwell on that just yet. Often, such rites are inconclusive, or at least open to multiple interpretations. Druzh, our High Priest, might push for a definitive outcome, but the War God can be subtle—or contradictory. That said, if too many ill omens appear, the clan could demand your banishment... or sacrifice.”

My breath stills, terror lancing through me. “Sacrifice?”

Ragzuk stares at me. “Do not mistake me, Ghorzag isn’t keen on harming you, or we’d not be having this conversation at all. But if the clan unites in their belief that your presence is dooming us, they might override his will.”

The possibility sends my thoughts spinning in all directions. Is it worth staying if I’m in danger of a sacrifice? Could Ghorzag truly protect me?

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“I don’t want any more bloodshed,” I whisper, forcing down the lump in my throat. “That was the whole point of my coming here.”

Ragzuk rises slowly, bones creaking. “Then hold fast to that reason. Let it strengthen you when orcs snarl in your face or call for your head. The War God tests not just orcs, but all who stand in his domain.”

He shuffles toward the tent flap. “I must return to my duties, but if you need me, ask Nagra. She’ll find me.”

I nod, trying to hold onto a flicker of gratitude. At least I’m not wholly alone amid a sea of hostility. “Thank you, Ragzuk. I appreciate your candor.”

A quiet snort of acknowledgment, then he steps outside, letting the flap drop behind him. The tent rustles in the resulting draft, edges flapping faintly.

Alone again, I stare at the brazier’s dying embers, mind churning. My sense of entrapment deepens. Run? The question refuses to stay silent, echoing in my mind. But I quell it once more. Running isn’t feasible, not without dooming my village—and possibly myself in the process.

I think of Ghorzag, the way he faced his people and refused to cast me aside. He must have known the scale of the backlash that would follow. And yet he did it anyway. Why?

Despite the dread, a faint warmth stirs in my chest, recalling how he commanded the Great Hall’s attention, how his deep voice resonated with unyielding resolve. It was a

fierce, protective aura, born from genuine belief in saving his clan. Part of me wonders if he extends that protection to me as well—or if I'm just a means to an end.

I sink onto the bed again, pulling the new wool blanket over my legs. Get it together, Lirienne. If I'm to endure this, I need more than naive optimism. I need a plan.

Thoughts trickle in, maybe I can speak to Ghorzag directly, glean some insight into how he plans to handle the clan's suspicions. A quiet prickle of worry tugs at me—would I even be allowed an audience with him? With the entire fortress labeling me cursed, it might be dangerous for him to be seen granting me favor.

Still, that might be my only chance. I can't remain silent, hoping the clan loses interest in me. I need to show I'm not the worthless burden they assume. Herbal knowledge, a small voice reminds me. I grew up gathering plants in the forests around my village. Orc shamans rely on spiritual healing, but maybe I can prove useful in treating mundane ailments.

That idea gives me a slender thread of hope to cling to. If I can demonstrate practical value, some orcs might see me as more than a scapegoat. Better than doing nothing, I reason.

A sudden clamor outside the tent startles me—shouts, the clang of metal. My pulse jumps, and I lurch upright, bracing for the worst. But then the noise fades, replaced by gruff laughter. Likely a sparring match or some warriors blowing off steam.

The aftershock leaves me trembling, adrenaline spiking through my veins. It's too easy to imagine them clashing over me, deciding my fate with a slash of a blade. For all the fortress's grandeur, life here feels precarious, as if the entire clan balances on a knife's edge of suspicion and faith in their War God.

I swallow, looking up at the tent's low ceiling. Maybe I was a fool to think I could

survive in this environment. But I remember Mara's face when I said goodbye, the desperation in her eyes as she clutched my hands and asked if I'd ever come home. I swore I'd try. If forging peace with these orcs can spare Mara, or any of the innocent farmers in my village, from feeling that same terror, I have to stay.

Duty. Resolve. Fear. They all churn together, forming the storm inside my chest. I'm no warrior, no cunning strategist. I'm just... Lirienne Marshfield, a girl who read too many bedtime stories about bridging differences and healing wounds. But I can't let cynicism choke out that spark of faith. If Ghorzag is willing to stand against his entire clan's outrage, then I can endure the hateful glares for my people's sake.

I draw in a shaky breath, forcing calm into my limbs. "This arrangement is worth the risk," I murmur to the empty tent, voice trembling with the weight of my decision. "Because if I don't try, who will?"

The words settle into my bones with surprising steadiness. I press a hand over my heart, letting the beat remind me I'm still alive, still capable of choice. Maybe Ghorzag's unorthodox leadership can pave a new path. Maybe I can find allies who believe in peace, like Nagra and Ragzuk—even if they're too frightened to speak openly.

I exhale slowly, pushing away the frantic fear that gnaws at the edges of my mind. The only way forward is to gather my courage, make myself indispensable, and prove I'm not a curse.

No sooner have I resolved this than the tent flap rustles again. Three visits in one morning—am I that popular? My pulse kicks up, but it's only Nagra, as promised, balancing a wooden bowl of stew and a few strips of cured meat.

"Still alive, I see," she teases, though her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. She hands me the bowl, the aroma of spiced broth fills my senses, making my stomach

rumble. I realize I haven't eaten a real meal since arriving.

"Thank you," I murmur, accepting the warm bowl. "I'm grateful."

She squats on her haunches across from me, studying my face with a directness that makes me squirm. "You look less afraid than you did this morning."

I shrug, swirling the spoon in the stew. "I'm still afraid. But I'm trying not to let it rule me."

A flicker of respect crosses her features. "Wise. Orcs respect those who show courage, whether they're orc-blooded or not." She pauses, fiddling with a small bead woven into one of her braids. "I heard more talk. The High Priest might push to schedule the initial rite tonight. A quick reading of the bones, or a lesser sacrifice of livestock to glean the War God's mood."

Tonight? My breath catches. That leaves me almost no time to prove anything or gather support. "And if the reading goes... poorly?"

Nagra's lips thin. "It depends on how the signs are interpreted. Druzh has significant sway. If the signs are inconclusive, Ghorzag can stall. But if the bones show ill omens..." She doesn't finish, the implication hanging between us.

I force the spoon to my lips, sipping the stew to hide the tremor in my hands. The liquid scalds my tongue, but I welcome the distraction. So soon. My heart hammers, fear clawing at my composure.

"I'll have to speak to Ghorzag." The words tumble out before I can second-guess them. "I need to?—"

"Speak to him?" Nagra's eyes widen, as though I've just announced I'll climb the

fortress walls in a single bound. “You can’t just waltz into his quarters and demand an audience. He’s the chieftain.”

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My throat feels tight. “Yes, but I’m supposed to be his... bride. That must grant me some right to speak with him, yes?”

Nagra’s gaze drops to the ground. “In theory, the chieftain’s mate is second only to him in rank. But you haven’t been formally recognized by the clan. Many still think of you as a prisoner or a sacrificial lamb. Approaching Ghorzag might draw more suspicion.”

I swallow hard. “I can’t just hide in this tent, waiting for them to decide my fate, either. If they’re performing this rite tonight, I need to at least know what it entails.”

After a long pause, Nagra sighs. “I might be able to help. If you truly want to see him, I can try to slip you a chance later. But it’ll be risky. Some orcs are still fuming from the morning’s uproar.”

My heart leaps at that sliver of possibility. “Please. I’ll take the risk.”

She studies me for a moment more, then gives a reluctant nod. “Fine. Finish your meal and gather your courage. If fortunes smile on us, I can lead you to Ghorzag before the evening gathering.” She rises to her feet, brushing dust from her leather leggings. “But be cautious. If we cross paths with Gorath or any of the chieftain’s rivals, your presence might provoke a confrontation.”

I clutch the bowl of stew like a lifeline. “I understand.”

“Good.” She starts to leave, then pauses at the flap, tossing me a fleeting, sympathetic look. “Do you regret coming here, Lirienne? You must have known it would be



hard.”

A wave of conflicting emotions wells inside me—fear, nostalgia, longing for the simplicity of my old life, but also a stubborn spark of determination. “Sometimes I do,” I admit, “but regrets won’t fix anything. I have to see it through.”

She inclines her head, an almost-grin tugging at her mouth. “You might survive, human. You have the right spirit for it.”

With that, she slips out into the daylight, leaving me alone with my racing thoughts and the stew steadily cooling in my hands. I lift the spoon again, sipping absently. I have the right spirit, I repeat to myself, half in amazement. No one has called me strong or fierce before. But maybe, in this brutal place, a seed of defiance is blooming inside me.

I press my palm against my sternum, feeling my heartbeat and reaffirming my vow: I’ll do whatever I can to make this arrangement worth the risk—to protect my village, and maybe even to show these orcs that not all humans are their enemies. And that I’m not the scapegoat they think I am.

Outside, the fortress thrums with activity, the clan preparing for the day’s tasks and the looming evening rite. I set aside my bowl, square my shoulders, and draw in a lungful of the tent’s leather-scented air. The debate in my mind—the one that pulls me between fleeing and standing my ground—has reached its conclusion: I stay. I endure.

Because if I don’t, everything I’ve sacrificed will be for nothing.

Dawn breaks with pale light creeping through the high windows of my private quarters. I stand near the narrow balcony overlooking the clan's courtyard, arms folded as I survey the fortress below. Orcs bustle about—some preparing the morning's training sessions, others hefting crates of supplies or tending small fires for cooking. From up here, the scene appears almost orderly, as if the tension roiling within the clan is hidden beneath the routine. But I can feel the undercurrent of unease like a low, thrumming drumbeat.

My gaze drifts to the far corner of the courtyard, where a cluster of rough tents sprawls in haphazard rows. Somewhere among them, Lirienne has been taken. I tell myself the arrangement is only temporary, that I'll find a more suitable space for her once the initial uproar dies down. Yet guilt tugs at me, a persistent, nagging bite. A small, human woman—my mate, supposedly—tucked away in a drafty tent under watchful, often hostile eyes. It isn't the alliance I pictured when I first offered the proposal to her people. It feels... precarious.

A firm knock on my chamber door interrupts my brooding. "Enter," I rumble, pulling away from the balcony's edge.

The door swings open to admit Karzug, my second-in-command, clad in his usual leather armor etched with lightning insignias. His face is as tight as a drawn bowstring. "Chieftain," he says by way of greeting, inclining his head briefly.

I gesture for him to speak. "What news?"

He lifts one hand, holding a small wooden carving—a whittled figurine shaped like a raven, but the edges are darkened, scorched by flame. "We found this near the Eastern Pasture fence, tied to a split beam," he says, voice tinged with annoyance. "A sign. Possibly from the priests, or from someone wanting to look like they're aligned with the War God."

My tusks grind together. “I take it the fence was damaged?”

He nods. “Broken during the night. And the water channels that feed into the eastern fields look tampered with—rocks piled, deliberately diverting the flow. Could explain the flooding that’s ruining crops.”

Heat flares in my chest, somewhere between anger and grim satisfaction. I’ve suspected sabotage for days, but each new discovery makes it harder to ignore. “So not a natural overflow,” I say quietly, turning the figurine over in my hand. The scorched wood smells faintly of pitch. “Someone wants the clan to believe these disasters are divine punishment.”

Karzug’s mouth twitches. “And we both know the clan is more than willing to believe it. Cursing the human woman is simpler than accepting that someone within our ranks could be betraying us.”

My fists clench around the figurine. This confirms the roiling doubt I’ve felt since last night’s confrontation: the omens might not be the War God’s doing, but a deliberate ploy. But by whom—and why? It could be some misguided orc who loathes the idea of an alliance with humans, or a more sinister outside force, like the dark elves, sowing discord among us.

I exhale, setting the wooden raven on a nearby table. “Have you confronted the priests about this?”

Karzug shakes his head. “Not directly. Druzh is preparing tonight’s rite. You know how he is—he’ll say this sign is yet another warning from the War God. We’ll have no proof it’s otherwise, not unless we catch someone in the act.”

A bitter taste fills my mouth. Druzh has preached about these ‘cursed omens’ with fervor, only fueling the clan’s paranoia. “And how are the people responding?” I ask.

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His gaze flicks to the floor, then back up. “Some are panicked, worried about losing more fields. Others are furious. A few talk in hushed tones, questioning your judgment for bringing a human under the War God’s roof.” Karzug hesitates, then adds, “Gorath’s been stirring up dissent again. I overheard him telling a group of younger warriors that you’ve doomed us to watch our children starve.”

I growl. Gorath has long been a thorn in my side—a staunch traditionalist who believes alliances weaken orcish pride. “If he incites open rebellion, you know what to do.”

Karzug nods. “Of course. But I’d prefer not to spill orc blood over rumors.”

“So would I,” I mutter. “Better to root out the real saboteur before the clan devolves into chaos.”

Karzug shifts his weight. “There’s another matter. I saw the shaman’s apprentice, Nagra, slip into the human’s tent earlier. She left in a hurry, looking worried.”

A spark of curiosity rises. “Nagra’s young, but she has sense. Possibly she’s sympathetic. I won’t fault her for that.” A wry twist touches my lips. “At least it means Lirienne isn’t entirely alone out there.”

He studies me a moment, brow furrowed. “If you plan to keep her safe, best do it soon. This evening’s rite could turn the clan even more against her if Druzh claims the bones speak ill.”

I square my shoulders, tension radiating through them. “I intend to stand by my

decision. If a handful of runes or bones declare otherwise, I'll question the interpretation. Let them call me heretic or fool—I won't cast Lirienne aside to appease superstition."

A flicker of approval lights Karzug's eyes. "Then we should be prepared. Some of the more devout might see that as defying the War God's will."

I can't suppress a small snort. "The War God values strength. Allowing my clan to be manipulated by fear is the opposite of strong. If he truly scorns this alliance, let him strike me down himself. But something about these omens reeks of mortal hands."

Karzug inclines his head. "What's our next move, Chieftain?"

I glance again at the charred raven figurine on the table. My thoughts churn. The clan stands at a crossroads—remain locked in old feuds and die a slow death, or try a new path that risks angering tradition. In my heart, I've already chosen. I turn to my second-in-command, letting the quiet flame of resolve show on my face.

"Summon a meeting of the trusted warriors—those who haven't publicly opposed this alliance. Tonight, after the rite, we'll compare notes. No more waiting for signs to solve our problems. We find the saboteur, or the conspirators, ourselves."

Karzug's mouth curves into a grim half-smile. "As you command. Shall I send a guard to bring Lirienne into the fortress before the rite?"

An image of Lirienne crosses my mind—her slight form standing defiantly in the Great Hall, eyes wide with a mixture of fear and resolve. I recall the hush that fell when she spoke my name without hesitation. "Yes," I say. "I want her present. If we're forging a genuine peace, she deserves to witness how we do things—and to defend herself if needed."

Karzug salutes and turns to go. Before he reaches the door, I speak again, my tone softening. “One more thing.”

He pauses, glancing back.

“Ensure no harm comes to her on the way in,” I order. “If Gorath or any of his cronies try to intimidate her, remind them that I’ve forbidden such actions.”

A spark of respect dances in Karzug’s eyes. He gives a curt nod. “Understood, Chieftain.” Then he slips out, leaving me alone with the echo of my own heartbeat and a swirl of conflicting emotions.

The hours leading up to the dusk rite crawl by. I spend most of them pacing the fortress corridors, checking in with various orc sub-leaders—taskmasters for the farmland, quartermasters for the armory, and a few older warriors who served under my father. The fortress itself stands as a sprawling testament to orcish might: heavy stone walls, tapestries flaunting old victories, and corridors carved to funnel intruders into kill zones if ever we’re attacked from within.

Despite the imposing architecture, cracks of worry are visible everywhere. In the storerooms, sacks of grain have been soaked by the incessant flooding, leaving them mildewed. The armory’s forges face delays because a section of the fortress roof near the smithy still leaks from the last rain, corroding tools. The sense of creeping crisis weighs on the air like an invisible chain, binding every orc’s mind to the question: Is the War God punishing us?

I grind my teeth. If I believed that entirely, I wouldn’t bother suspecting sabotage. Yet the more I examine the damage—the deliberate stacking of rocks in irrigation channels, the systematically broken fences—the more I feel sure. This is the work of an orc or a group of them. Possibly with outside help. If that comes to light, the clan’s faith in the War God’s condemnation will shatter. But until then, they’ll keep

scapegoating Lirienne.

In the early afternoon, I stop by the training yard, where a throng of younger warriors spar with wooden staves. I recognize a few as promising recruits—tall, eager orcs with a hunger for skill. Usually, I'd watch them train, offer critiques on footwork or remind them to keep their guard high. But today I have little patience for formalities.

“Chieftain,” barks one of the instructors, a muscular orc with a broad chest and a long scar running down his cheek. He bows his head. “Come to test the recruits?”

I shake my head. “Not today, Hrug. How's morale?”

He hesitates, scanning the sweaty forms of the young fighters. “Varied. Some are restless, wanting to pick fights with humans or rival clans to prove our strength. Others are uneasy, claiming the War God is turning his face from us. Either way, they're on edge. Training helps them vent, but rumor spreads faster than I can break them from it.”

My gaze follows a pair of orcs crashing staves, their grunts echoing off the courtyard walls. “Look out for talk of sabotage. If you hear anything—anything at all—bring it directly to me. Do you understand?”

Hrug looks uncertain, but he nods. “Understood, Chieftain.”

With that, I leave him to his duties, ignoring the curious stares of the recruits. No doubt they have been whispering about my human bride behind my back. Let them whisper—I have no time to coddle them.

By late afternoon, the sky deepens to a hazy gold, and the fortress takes on an ominous glow. Fires are lit in wall-mounted braziers, each flame dancing in the stirring breeze. I head toward the War God's shrine—a small, circular chamber

carved into the fortress's heart. The walls are lined with depictions of battle: orc warriors locked in combat against monstrous shapes, swirling lines meant to represent magical storms or the War God's presence. At the back stands an altar of black stone, etched with runes spelling out the War God's name in our ancient tongue.



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Druzh, the High Priest, is there, along with two acolytes who busy themselves arranging bowls of incense and offerings. Druzh wears crimson robes adorned with bone charms, his posture rigid as he surveys the final touches for tonight's rite. When he senses my presence, he turns slowly, his weathered face creased in an unreadable expression.

"Chieftain Ghorzag," he greets, inclining his head. "Have you come to ensure everything is in order for the War God's reading tonight?"

I let my gaze sweep across the chamber. "I want to understand how you plan to interpret these so-called signs. My clan is on the brink. If your performance tonight stokes their fear further, we risk a riot."

He bristles, the bone charms clattering softly. "My performance? The War God's message is not a carnival spectacle, Chieftain. I will read the bones. If they reveal ill tidings, I will speak them plainly."

My tusks flex. "I'm not asking you to lie, Priest. I'm reminding you that with the clan's mood so volatile, your words hold power to shape their beliefs."

"I know my duty," Druzh says curtly. "The War God's will is paramount. If he is displeased with your arrangement"—his lip curls slightly—"then it must be addressed."

My pulse throbs, but I keep my tone steady. "Very well. But if these signs are questionable or inconclusive, do not rush to condemnation."

Druzh stares back at me, eyes narrowed, as if sizing up my resolve. “I serve the clan and the War God,” he says at length. “Not fear, and not you.” Then he turns away, robes swishing, dismissing the conversation.

A low growl rumbles in my chest, but I stop myself from pressing further. If I antagonize Druzh too much, it might push him to fan the flames of orcish paranoia. I need to remain measured, to let him see I’m not cowering—nor am I blindly defiant. It’s a precarious balance, one I wish I didn’t have to maintain.

Dusk arrives with a blood-red sky, the sun dipping below the horizon as if retreating from the fortress’s mounting tension. Fires crackle in the Great Hall, where the clan has begun gathering. Orcs stand in clusters, speaking in low tones. Shadows waver across the walls, giving the impression that monstrous shapes lurk just beyond the torchlight.

I take my place near the front, where a makeshift dais has been set. The clan’s elders occupy seats on one side, while warriors and watchers crowd the hall’s perimeter. At the dais’s center stands a stone bowl filled with sanctified water, prepared by the acolytes. Beside it lies a small pile of bones—likely from a sacrificial goat or lamb. Druzh and his assistants hover nearby, serious and solemn.

A hush falls as Karzug enters with Lirienne in tow. She wears the orcish leathers we provided, the dark material hugging her arms and waist. Though sized for her frame, it’s still clearly designed for orcs—heavy, rough-hewn, and practical. Her hair, a shade like burnished copper, is tied back in a low braid. Despite the flush on her cheeks, she carries herself with quiet dignity.

Every orc eye locks onto her. A wave of muttering ripples through the hall—sneers, scowls, the occasional hiss of disapproval. I notice some glancing at me for a reaction, waiting to see if I’ll regret my choice. I stand taller, crossing my arms, letting them see I have no doubts. Even if part of me feels uneasy, I refuse to show it.

Lirienne's gaze finds mine across the dais, and there's a moment of startled relief in her eyes, as though seeing me gives her a flicker of hope. We haven't spoken since the day before, but some unspoken understanding passes between us. I dip my chin in acknowledgment, beckoning her to join me near the front. Karzug escorts her the rest of the way, ignoring the clan's hostile stares.

An elder's staff thumps against the floor, signaling the official start of the rite. Druzh steps onto the dais, arms extended, the bone charms on his robes tinkling. "Gather, children of the War God," he intones, his voice resonating off the walls. "We come to seek clarity amid these troubling signs. The War God alone knows whether the curses be real or contrived."

He turns to me, beckoning me forward with a crooked finger. "Chieftain Ghorzag Stormborn, present your cause."

I advance, Lirienne following close behind, her posture taut. I can feel the clan's collective stare drilling into us both.

"I stand here," I declare, voice echoing, "to reaffirm my commitment to forging peace between our clan and the human settlement. Lirienne Marshfield is my chosen mate, that we might spare further bloodshed."

A chorus of grumbles and mutters rises. Lirienne stiffens at my side, but I sense her determination. She lifts her chin, scanning the crowd with cautious resolve. Good. She won't cower.

Druzh nods slowly, turning to her. "And you, human—do you vow to uphold this alliance with sincerity and faith, respecting our traditions?" The question practically drips with suspicion.

Her voice, while softer than an orc's, carries a surprising steadiness. "I came here

willingly, to protect my people and yours from needless conflict. I don't claim to know your ways fully, but I'm willing to learn and respect them."

A faint hush spreads, some orcs blink at her willingness to speak so plainly. Others look unconvinced, arms crossed in scorn.

Druzh approaches the stone bowl and beckons an acolyte. The younger orc places three small bones into Druzh's outstretched hand. "We ask the War God to guide us," Druzh proclaims, lifting the bones high. "If ill omens plague us, may the bones reveal the truth. If sabotage or mortal trickery is at work, let it also be shown."

He scatters the bones into the bowl of water, where they float and bob. I suppress a scoff; the "reading" is always ambiguous, reliant on how the High Priest chooses to interpret the final arrangement. The entire clan holds its breath.

Druzh peers over the bowl, lips moving in silent incantation. A hush so absolute falls that I hear the crackling of distant torches. Lirienne stands rigid at my side, tension in every line of her body.

Then Druzh's shoulders stiffen. "The bones... speak of conflict," he pronounces, voice heavy. "A crossroads. Two paths entwine—one leads to renewal, the other to devastation."

A surge of murmurs ripples through the hall. Even the elders lean forward, expressions grim.

"Is the War God angered by Lirienne's presence?" barks Gorath from the crowd. His voice carries menace. "Do these ill omens come from the human?"

Druzh stares into the water a moment longer, swishing it with his fingers until the bones drift into a new pattern. "There is darkness in the shadows," he says, eyes

narrowing. “But I do not see a direct condemnation of the human woman. The bones show choice—a precarious one, teetering between blessing and curse.”

Confusion blossoms among the onlookers. Some scowl, perhaps disappointed not to hear a final decree of Lirienne’s guilt. Others exchange baffled glances, uncertain how to interpret a reading that promises no immediate scapegoat.

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Gorath, chest heaving in frustration, steps forward. “The War God does not see humans as equals. If these omens are not condemnation, what are they, then?” His tusks bare, he jabs a finger at Lirienne. “She stands here, an outsider, with no claim to orcish blood or tradition. Are we truly expected to accept that as a blessing?”

I feel Lirienne tense. Before she can respond, I speak up, voice booming. “Gorath, you question the War God’s sign? Druzh said the bones reveal choice, not certain doom. That means the War God has not turned fully from us—nor from her.” I shift my stance. “And I, as chieftain, declare that we will choose to fight for a new path, rather than cower behind superstition.”

A hush envelops us. My heart hammers, adrenaline coursing through my veins. This is the moment I fully step into defiance against those who demand I bow to tradition.

Druzh clears his throat, ever the ritualist. “The War God tests us, Ghorzag. If the clan is being sabotaged by mortal hands, find the culprit. Only then can we be certain we remain in the War God’s favor.”

I nod, meeting his gaze. “We will. This clan will not tear itself apart chasing illusions of curses and omens. Our enemy lies in the shadows—perhaps an orc who hates this alliance enough to sabotage us, or perhaps an outside force. Until we know, I expect the clan to follow my decree and not harm Lirienne.” I pause, letting my next words ring clear: “Anyone who does so will face my full wrath.”

A ripple of intimidation wafts through the hall. Several orcs lower their gazes, uneasy. Even Gorath flinches, though he tries to hide it with a derisive snort. “I hope for your sake you’re right,” he growls. “Because the War God has little patience for

arrogance.”

I don't bother dignifying that with a reply. Instead, I offer a curt nod to Druzh, signaling that the rite's formal portion is over. The High Priest turns and gestures to his acolytes, who quickly begin gathering the bones and extinguishing the ceremonial incense.

Slowly, the clan begins to disperse, pockets of whispered conversation blooming along the edges of the hall. The tension feels like a coiled serpent still poised to strike, but no immediate outbreak of violence follows. I can only hope my public stance steadies some of the waverers. At least for now, I think grimly.

As orcs peel away to return to their quarters or converge in small gatherings, Lirienne lingers near me. I hear the quiet scuff of her boots on the stone floor, and when I turn, her gaze seeks mine.

“That was... intense,” she says softly, glancing around at the still-simmering crowd. “Thank you for defending me.”

Her voice carries exhaustion, but also a flicker of relief. I study the lines of her face, noticing faint dark smudges beneath her eyes, likely from stress and lack of sleep. Despite it all, she hasn't broken; she stands tall under those hateful eyes.

“You're part of this clan now,” I say, keeping my tone firm but not unkind. “I won't let them tear you apart over a half-baked omen reading.”

A faint smile tugs at the corners of her mouth. “Still... it means a lot. I'm not exactly popular here.”

I nod, scanning the receding orcs warily. “Popularity is overrated. Surviving is what matters.”

She almost laughs, but the tension in the hall stifles it. Then she lowers her voice. “Is it true you suspect something else is causing these... disasters? I’ve heard rumors. An orc who tampered with your fields or water supply, making it look like a curse.”

I let out a slow breath, confirming my suspicions that she’s heard about the sabotage. “Yes. At first, I couldn’t be sure. But now I’m nearly certain. The War God’s wrath doesn’t usually manifest as such precise sabotage. Someone is orchestrating it.”

Her eyes flash with concern. “Why?”

“To force me to abandon this alliance,” I reply, scanning the hall to ensure no eavesdroppers linger too close. “Or to weaken the clan from within. The more they believe you’re cursed, the less stable my position becomes.”

She exhales, glancing at the dais where the stone bowl still stands. “Is there anything I can do? I don’t want to just... hide in a tent and wait for everyone to decide my fate.”

Her earnestness surprises me, warming something in my chest. “Stay alert,” I say finally. “Pay attention to anything unusual—whispered conversations, suspicious movements near your quarters. Report them to Karzug or me. You might notice things the clan overlooks.”

She nods resolutely. “I will.”

A hush steals over us for a moment, tension replaced by a tentative understanding. Outside, the hallway grows quieter as orcs shuffle away. Torches on the walls flicker, casting her features in shifting light. There’s a softness to her eyes that tugs at a guarded corner of my heart—a corner I’ve sealed off since I first took up the mantle of chieftain.



Focus, I scold myself silently. Now is not the time for such distractions.

I clear my throat. “You should return to your tent. I’ll have Karzug or one of my warriors escort you.”

A trace of disappointment flickers across her face—gone in an instant. “Of course. Thank you.”

Before she steps away, a thought emerges. I lower my voice. “If you’d rather not stay in that tent, I can arrange quarters in the fortress. It might be safer.”

She weighs her response carefully, then offers a small, grateful smile. “I’ll keep that in mind. For tonight, I’ll bear with the tent—no sense stirring more gossip.”

I give a curt nod. “As you wish.”

She hesitates, as if she wants to say more. Then she turns, heading toward the archway where Karzug waits. I watch her go, that swirl of conflicting emotions following me like a shadow. On one hand, this is a political move—an alliance. On the other, I can’t deny the unexpected pull of her presence, the flicker of admiration in how she faces a hall full of enemies without collapsing.

When the hall is nearly empty, I catch sight of Druzh conferring with a pair of elders. Their discussion is hushed, but as I approach, they fall silent. The elders bow stiffly to me, stepping back. Druzh folds his arms, chin tilted.

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“I’m relieved you did not interpret the bones as condemning Lirienne,” I say quietly. “It would have made things... complicated.”

He gives me a long, contemplative look. “Do not thank me yet, Chieftain. The War God’s will is far from settled. If these calamities continue, and if we find no proof of mortal sabotage, the clan will demand a heavier sacrifice.”

My jaw tenses. “We will find the saboteur.”

He dips his head, an ambiguous gesture that might mean agreement or doubt. “Let us hope so.”

Much later, the hall stands empty, its torches burned low. The fortress corridors echo with a quieter hush, broken only by the occasional footsteps of guards on patrol. My mind whirls from the evening’s events—the half-victory of not condemning Lirienne, the knowledge that sabotage still festers within our walls, and the question of how quickly I can expose it.

I pause in a shadowed alcove, leaning against the cold stone. A memory tugs: my father, battered and bleeding on the battlefield against the dark elves, his final words urging me to keep the clan strong. I remember my own vow not to waste orcish lives chasing futile conquests. This alliance, unorthodox as it is, feels like the only path that might halt the endless cycle of war—if I can keep Lirienne safe and the clan from devouring itself.

I straighten, exhaling a long breath that reverberates in the still corridor. My path is clear, if treacherous: find whoever is manufacturing these omens, expose them before

they goad the clan into turning on me—and on her. And, the God of War is watching, let him see that orcish strength isn't always about blind aggression. Sometimes it's the courage to break from old patterns and fight for a different future.

5

## LIRIENNE

The new day's light filters through the thin canvas walls of the tent, sending dappled shadows across my face. I stir, blinking awake to the realization that my bedding is too coarse to ever be mistaken for the soft straw mattress of my home. I can't pretend I'm anywhere else but here—in the midst of an orc fortress, an outsider precariously balanced on the edge of acceptance and hostility.

I exhale a shaky breath and sit up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. My mind swirls with lingering tension from the previous night's rite. The High Priest's ambiguous reading of the bones spared me from outright condemnation, but it leaves the clan teetering on a knife's edge. "A crossroads," he called it—one that could tip into catastrophe with the slightest nudge.

As I stretch, the tent flap rustles. Nagra's familiar silhouette appears, blocking the early morning sun. "You're awake," she greets, her tone gentler than the typical orc gruffness.

I press a hand to my chest to quell my startled heartbeat. "I am." A rueful smile graces my lips. "Not much chance for deep sleep under these circumstances."

Nagra steps inside, letting the canvas fall behind her. She carries a small bundle of cloth that smells faintly of roasted grains and something sweet. "I brought breakfast," she says, handing it over. "Figured you'd need your strength today."

My mouth waters at the scent. Gingerly, I unwrap the cloth to find a piece of dense, nutty bread drizzled with a bit of honey, and a small wedge of dried fruit. A wave of gratitude washes over me. “Thank you.”

She shrugs, as if to brush off any notion of kindness. “Eat. Then, if you’re feeling up to it, Ragzuk wants to see you.”

I recall the older apprentice, though he seems more like a half-shaman in his own right. My heart gives a faint lurch. “Why does he want to see me?”

Nagra folds her arms. “You’ve been asking how you can help. He thinks he has a task for you—something about gathering herbs for a wounded warrior. The official clan shaman is too old to traipse around the outskirts, and Ragzuk’s knees won’t carry him far these days.” She pauses, then adds, “It’s not a trick, if that’s what you’re wondering. This warrior’s been complaining of an infected cut that the usual salves can’t fully fix. Ragzuk believes some local plants might help. Your knowledge could prove useful.”

I take a bite of bread, the taste brightening my mood for a moment. “I’d be happy to help,” I say, swallowing carefully. “I do know a bit about herbs—back in my village, I used to gather them for our local healer. She taught me which ones can disinfect wounds.”

Nagra’s lips curve into a small smile. “Then maybe you can do some good here, show the clan you’re not just a burden. Finish eating. I’ll wait outside, and we can head to Ragzuk together.”

I step out of the tent to find the fortress courtyard already bustling with morning activity. Orc warriors lug crates of supplies, blacksmiths stoke their forges, and a few younger orcs spar in a makeshift ring. Each clang of metal sets my nerves on edge, but I remind myself that not everything here revolves around me. Orcs have daily

lives and chores, too.

Still, I feel stares prickling my back as Nagra leads me along a winding path between tents. Some orcs openly glower, others mutter under their breath. A few merely regard me with guarded curiosity, as though unsure if I might sprout fangs any moment.

We soon reach a low stone structure attached to the fortress's eastern wall, near a small herb garden enclosed by crude wooden fencing. Inside, the building is dimly lit, smelling of dried flowers and pungent spices. Bundles of leaves dangle from the rafters, swaying gently in the draft. Earthy mortar and pestle sets line a wooden workbench.

Ragzuk sits on a three-legged stool in the center of the room, poring over a stack of thin, tattered parchments. He glances up at our approach, his wizened face creasing into something like a smile. "Ah, Lirienne, good to see you in one piece."

I muster a wry grin. "I can say the same to you."

He chuckles, a raspy sound. "I heard you endured quite the spectacle last night. Druzh can be dramatic when invoking the War God's will."

Nagra casts me a sidelong glance, then slips away, presumably to handle other tasks. I step closer to Ragzuk, eyeing the parchments. They are covered in scrawls—orcish runes, maybe notes on different healing techniques. "Nagra said you needed my help with an injured warrior?"

He nods, setting the parchments aside. "Yes. One of our scouts has a nasty gash in his calf. He claims the standard poultices aren't helping, that the wound remains hot and inflamed." Ragzuk shrugs. "I suspect it's infected more seriously than we realized. The official shaman can recite plenty of incantations, but his knowledge of practical

treatments is... lacking nowadays.”

An unexpected surge of purpose threads through me. “I’ll do what I can. But I might need specific herbs—ones that help draw out infection. In my village, we used goldenseal or something similar.”

Ragzuk taps a crooked finger against his chin. “Goldenseal... I’ve heard of that. Don’t think we have it in the fortress garden. You’ll likely need to search outside the walls. There’s a glen to the east where the soil is damp and warm. Suitable for such plants.”

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Outside the walls. My pulse kicks. The notion of leaving the fortress, even briefly, both thrills and alarms me. But if it means helping and proving my worth, it's worth the risk. "All right. I'll go. Should I—?" I hesitate, glancing around. "I might need a guard or escort, right?"

Ragzuk gives a short nod. "Traditionally, yes. You're still under scrutiny here. Ghorzag made it clear that no harm should come to you, which means you won't be permitted to wander alone." He pauses, eyes flickering with subtle amusement. "But it seems he's assigned a certain protective detail to you anyway."

"Protective detail?" I echo, heart thudding.

Ragzuk angles his head toward the door. "Go on out and see."

Puzzled, I follow his gesture, stepping back into the courtyard. Sure enough, standing by the rough wooden fence of the herb garden is Ghorzag himself, arms folded across his broad chest. He cuts an imposing figure, as always—forest-green skin glinting in the sunlight, the swirling tattoos on his arms partially visible where his leather vest parts. He is speaking in low tones with Karzug, who nods and then strides off, leaving Ghorzag alone.

For a moment, I freeze. We've barely exchanged words outside the ritual last night, but my memory conjures the steadfastness in his gaze when he publicly defended me. The vow that no one would harm me under his watch. A flush of warmth courses through me, swiftly followed by awkward uncertainty. What do I say to the orc chieftain who has effectively claimed me as a bride for political reasons?

Gathering my courage, I approach, carefully skirting a cluster of rowdy orc soldiers who practice with axes near the wall. Ghorzag notices me instantly; his gaze flicks my way, and I sense tension coiled in his posture—like a predator ever ready to pounce. But there is no hostility in his eyes, merely a guarded curiosity.

“You’re out early,” he rumbles, voice low.

I clasp my hands together to keep them from fidgeting. “I came to see Ragzuk. He says there’s an injured scout who needs certain herbs not found in the fortress garden.” I glance over my shoulder at the towering walls. “So it appears I’ll need to venture beyond the gates.”

His brow furrows. “And you’re going alone?”

I shrug, heart hammering. “I was told I shouldn’t wander unescorted, but... I do want to help. This is my chance to prove I’m not just a burden.”

He lets out a slow exhale, eyeing me with a mix of assessment and something else I can’t name. “I’ll take you,” he says at length. “No one else has time or the inclination, and I don’t trust half the clan to keep their tempers in check if you’re out of sight for too long.”

My nerves tighten. He personally wants to escort me? The notion simultaneously comforts and unsettles me. “That’s... fine. Thank you,” I manage, trying not to sound too breathless.

An orc blacksmith hammers at an anvil nearby, sending sparks flying, as if punctuating the tension between us. Ghorzag jerks his head toward the main gate. “We should go now, before it gets too hot. The glen’s about half an hour’s hike east if we take the direct path.”



He starts walking, his strides long and confident. I hurry to keep pace, noticing how orcs in the courtyard pause what they're doing to stare. Some look at us with blatant disapproval, others with faint curiosity. I can practically taste the rumors swirling in the air: The chieftain leading his human bride out of the fortress?

But Ghorzag doesn't seem to care. He moves through the fortress with single-minded purpose, and orcs part before him like he's a force of nature. I swallow my nerves, grateful for his commanding presence—at least no one dares harass me with him around.

Crossing the fortress gate feels like stepping into another world. Where the courtyard teems with noise and the pungent smells of orc life, the landscape beyond is a rugged stretch of rolling hills and patches of wind-swept grass. The early sun gilds the horizon, casting the land in warm hues. My chest loosens, as if I can finally breathe without stone walls pressing in.

We descend a sloping trail that winds between rocky outcrops. Ghorzag remains a few paces ahead, silent. The clang of the fortress recedes, replaced by the soft rustle of wind through knee-high grass. In the distance, I see hints of a forest line, where tall pines rise like sentinels.

I pick my way over a small creek, shoes skimming over slick stones. Ghorzag pauses, glancing back to ensure I don't slip. "You're sure you know what you're looking for?" he asks, voice echoing faintly in the hush of open air.

I nod. "Goldenseal or something similar. The leaves are broad, with ridges and a yellowish tinge near the roots. Might grow in moist soil by the water's edge."

He grunts, turning to continue. For a while, neither of us speaks. I struggle to read the tension in his shoulders. Is he uncomfortable around me? Or simply cautious? The memory of last night's rite flickers—how he stood firm against Gorath's challenge,

how he insisted I belonged under his protection. It's an odd contradiction: I'm not sure he welcomes me personally, but he refuses to cast me out either.

Eventually, the trail opens onto a small glen nestled between two rocky ridges. A thin stream trickles along the edge, feeding clusters of reeds and a patch of thicker vegetation. The scent of wet earth and decaying leaves wafts on the breeze.

"This is the place Ragzuk mentioned," Ghorzag says, nodding at the lush ground near the stream.

I crouch, scanning for the familiar shape of leaves. Sure enough, a cluster of broad, serrated foliage catches my eye near a rock half-hidden by moss. "There." I point, excitement creeping into my voice. I move quickly, pushing aside damp ferns to reach the plant. Mud squelches beneath my boots, and a swirl of gnats buzzes around my head, but I press on.

As I carefully dig around the plant, a faint rotting smell stings my nostrils—likely old vegetation. I retrieve a small knife from the belt I borrowed. Ghorzag watches from a few steps away, arms folded. His presence weighs on me, but not unpleasantly.

"Do you truly believe these herbs will help?" he asks after a moment.

I glance up. "I do. If the infection is bacterial or festering, this plant—or something close enough to goldenseal—can help cleanse the wound. In my village, we used it to make a poultice that we'd apply to cuts, especially if they started turning red or swollen."

He studies me, the vertical lines of his forehead easing slightly, though he doesn't smile. "We rely on spiritual healing and simpler salves, but... clearly we're missing something if the infection lingers."

“It might not always be about missing something,” I say gently, extracting the root with care. “You do have a shaman who can use incantations. But sometimes, good old-fashioned herbs can complement that. Especially if your magic is weaker these days.”

The mention of orc magic—long diminished, I’ve heard—seems to strike a chord. His mouth presses into a line, as if I’ve touched on a sore subject. “Our clan’s magic waned generations ago. The War God’s blessings have mostly turned to spiritual guidance and martial strength.”

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I pause, uncertain whether to probe further. But I want to understand. “So the shamans... they still practice incantations, but they don’t have the raw healing power they once did?”

He shifts, glancing at the horizon. “Exactly. Rituals, blessings, reading signs—these remain. But they can’t re-grow limbs or cure lethal wounds by chanting a phrase. Some orcs resent that loss. They see it as the War God’s punishment for failing him in the past. Others claim it’s a natural ebb and flow of power.”

I carefully place the uprooted herb in a small leather pouch, wiping mud from my fingers on a rag. “And do you have an opinion on it?”

He hesitates. “I think we shape our own destiny more than we realize. Relying on divine magic alone can weaken a clan. We must adapt, learn, and survive by our own means if necessary.”

A faint smile warms my lips. He’s more pragmatic than I expected.

I rise to my feet, slinging the pouch over my shoulder. Surveying the glen, I spot a few other plants that look promising—small clusters of wide leaves with red berries. “That might be useful too,” I murmur, stepping closer.

Before I can bend down, my foot slips in the slick mud near the stream’s edge. My arms flail, heart jolting. A muddy tumble threatens—but Ghorzag’s reflexes are swift. He lunges forward, his large hand grasping my forearm, steadying me before I can go sprawling face-first into the muck.

His grip is firm, almost bruising in its strength. My breath catches at the sudden contact, and I look up into his face. Despite his gruff demeanor, concern flickers in his eyes, swiftly replaced by that guarded stoicism.

“Careful,” he admonishes, releasing me once I’ve found my balance.

Heat creeps across my cheeks. “I—thank you. Slippery.” My voice comes out softer than I intend.

He merely nods, stepping back. But the moment lingers, an undercurrent of awareness crackling between us. My pulse thuds, not entirely from the near fall.

I duck my head, focusing on the next plant. “Right. Let’s... gather a few more, then head back.”

He grunts agreement, yet I sense his gaze lingering on me. A strange warmth settles in my chest, a quiet spark of gratitude that he caught me—and something else, a swirl of unspoken tension. This is the orc who basically claimed me as a strategic mate, I remind myself. He’s bound to me by necessity, not necessarily by affection. But in that moment, it’s easy to forget the complexities.

We spend the next half hour collecting assorted roots and leaves from the glen’s shaded nooks. I show Ghorzag which plants might serve as antiseptics, and he helps dig them up with the efficient skill of a warrior who’s spent his life handling blades. Soon, my pouch bulges with greenery, the smell of damp soil clinging to our hands.

“We should return,” he says, scanning the sky. “The clan will be suspicious if we’re gone too long. Besides, these should be enough to attempt Ragzuk’s poultice.”

I nod, wiping sweat from my brow. The sun climbs, the day’s warmth growing insistent. My boots squelch in the mud as we make our way back up the rocky trail

toward the fortress.

At first, we walk in silence, but I feel a subtle shift in Ghorzag's posture—a lowering of tension, like he's no longer quite so prepared for ambush. Or maybe that's my wishful thinking.

"I never expected to be rummaging through plants with an orc chieftain," I admit with a tentative laugh. "But... thank you for coming with me. I'm sure you have more pressing matters."

He gives me a sidelong look, tusks gleaming in the midday light. "Protecting the clan is my duty. If this helps keep a warrior from losing his leg—or stops further suspicion from the clan—then it's worth it."

Right, duty. I swallow the faint sting of disappointment. But I can't blame him for seeing everything through the lens of leadership. "I'm still grateful," I say quietly. "For letting me do something useful."

He doesn't reply, but a glimmer in his gaze suggests he hears me. We continue on, cresting a small rise. The fortress walls loom ahead, the dark stone stark against the bright sky. My mind drifts to the scout's injury, how I'll mix the herbs into a poultice—an opportunity to prove, if only in some small measure, that not all humans are worthless in orc eyes.

We return through the main gates. An orc guard with a scar across his brow eyes me distrustfully, but offers Ghorzag a respectful nod. The courtyard is busier than ever. A group of older orcs clusters around a sturdy table, apparently debating resource allocations, while a line of younger ones practices archery with short, sinew-backed bows.

Several orcs pause to watch as Ghorzag and I cross the space toward the stone

structure where Ragzuk waits. Their stares cling like burrs, but Ghorzag's presence keeps them at bay—no one dares approach or hiss curses at me when he's by my side.

Inside the herbal workspace, Ragzuk looks up from grinding a paste. He exhales in relief. "I wondered if you'd manage to find anything."

I hold up the bulging pouch. "We found quite a bit. The ground near the stream was perfect for these plants."

He beckons me over to a rudimentary worktable. I spill the contents across its rough surface—roots, leaves, and stems. Immediately, the pungent aroma fills the room, earthy and slightly bitter. Ragzuk's brows rise. "Impressive haul. Now let's see if it does any good."

With Ghorzag standing near the door, arms folded, I set to work separating the pieces I recognize: a cluster that resembles goldenseal, some broad-leafed plants with berries that might enhance the antimicrobial effect. I explain to Ragzuk how to crush them into a moist poultice. He grunts in acknowledgment, occasionally sprinkling in bits of dried orcish herbs I don't recognize.

We have a thick, greenish paste that smells sharp enough to clear anyone's sinuses. Ragzuk nods in satisfaction. "That should do. Let's apply it now."

He beckons me to follow him into an adjoining chamber, smaller and darker. A single cot rests against the wall, occupied by a young orc warrior with a bandaged leg propped on a rolled blanket. His skin is clammy, his breathing shallow, and pain etches deep furrows in his brow.

"This is Kratun," Ragzuk says quietly. "He took a blade to the calf during a scouting mission. The wound was shallow, but something got into his bloodstream."

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Kratun glances at me with glazed eyes, confusion and a tinge of hostility flickering across his features. “Human,” he rasps. “W-what?—?”

“She’s here to help,” Ragzuk says firmly, cutting off the orc’s protest. “Trust me, you’ll want any relief you can get.”

I kneel by the cot, heart pounding at the sight of the bandage stained with yellowish seepage. The stench of infection makes my stomach turn, but I force myself to remain calm. Carefully, Ragzuk and I unwind the bandage, exposing angry red flesh around a swollen cut.

Kratun hisses, jaw clenching. My mind races with the steps we’d take in my village: cleaning the wound, applying the poultice, changing dressings regularly. “We’ll need clean water,” I say, turning to see Ghorzag in the doorway. The fact that he’s followed us in gives me a strange sense of reassurance.

He nods, stepping out to fetch water from a barrel in the main room. Ragzuk hands me a small rag while I gently dab at the edges of the wound, trying not to cause more pain than necessary. Kratun watches me warily, but he doesn’t protest—perhaps he’s too exhausted to object.

When Ghorzag returns with a bucket of water, I rinse away the worst of the pus. Then, using a wooden spatula, I spread the herbal paste across the wound. Kratun lets out a guttural groan, fists gripping the cot’s edges. I murmur apologies, applying just enough pressure to ensure the mixture adheres.

Ragzuk hands me fresh strips of cloth, which I use to wrap the leg snugly. My hands



shake slightly, a swirl of adrenaline and empathy churning in my gut. In my village, I did small treatments—splinters, minor cuts—but never something this dire. Still, I have to try.

After we finish, Ragzuk places a palm on Kratun's forehead, murmuring a low incantation in Orcish. The rhythmic chant rises and falls like a drumbeat, infusing the cramped chamber with a sense of solemnity. Even Ghorzag inclines his head, as if acknowledging the spiritual effort. Though I don't fully understand the language, I recognize a plea for healing, for the War God's oversight in the warrior's recovery.

The chant ends, and Ragzuk exhales slowly. "Rest," he tells Kratun, who drifts to a half-conscious state, sweat beading on his brow. "We'll reapply the poultice in a few hours if needed."

I rise, wiping my hands on a clean rag. My knees feel shaky from crouching, and my heart hammers with relief tangled with lingering uncertainty. Have I done enough?

Ghorzag's gaze finds mine, unreadable in the dim. "Impressive," he says quietly. "I've seen orc healers flinch at a wound that foul."

Something in my chest flutters, a spark of pride. I press a hand to my own chest, steadying my breath. "I only hope it works."

Ragzuk gestures for us to leave the chamber, letting Kratun rest. We step back into the main workspace, the aroma of drying herbs replacing the stench of infection. Ghorzag's presence looms at my side, an unspoken tension passing between us. Outside, the day is well underway—the fortress buzzing with the clamor of orc life.

Ragzuk clears his throat. "I'll keep watch on Kratun's condition. With any luck, we'll see improvement by nightfall." He turns to me, a hint of genuine respect in his eyes. "That knowledge of herbs... you may have saved him from losing that leg."

I swallow, touched by the wave of gratitude. “I’m glad I could help.”

The older orc nods, expression thoughtful. “It’s easy to see why Ghorzag offered you protection. You might prove more valuable than most here realize.” Then, after a pause, he adds in a lower voice, “And not all is as it seems with the War God’s displeasure. Keep that in mind, Lirienne. Fear is often twisted by those who benefit from it.”

My pulse ticks faster. “You suspect sabotage too, don’t you?”

He shrugs noncommittally, but his gaze flicks to Ghorzag. “One can interpret ill omens many ways. Sometimes, if we look deeper, we find mortal hands behind the disasters. Our clan’s future hinges on discovering the truth.”

I absorb his words, remembering Ghorzag’s suspicions from the previous night. Ragzuk’s tone suggests a caution: that the War God’s name could be invoked to mask manipulations from within. The thought makes me uneasy and oddly determined. I refuse to let fear or superstition tear down whatever fragile hope for peace I’ve come here to forge.

Footsteps sound behind us. Another orc arrives, peering around the doorframe, likely a messenger. Ragzuk excuses himself, nodding curtly to Ghorzag before leaving to handle clan matters. That leaves me alone with the chieftain in the shadowy workspace, the heady fragrance of herbs enveloping us.

For a moment, neither of us speaks. I fidget with a stray leaf from my pouch, memories of Ghorzag’s strong hand on my arm replaying in my mind. The silence feels charged, as though something simmers beneath the surface—an unspoken curiosity neither of us quite knows how to address.

He breaks the quiet. “You did well,” he says again, quieter than before. “Kratun owes

you thanks, though he may not admit it until he's in less pain."

I manage a small laugh. "I'm just glad I wasn't useless."

He studies me, brow creasing slightly. "You think I consider you useless?"

I shake my head, heat creeping over my cheeks. "I—I'm not sure what you consider me," I admit honestly. "Our arrangement isn't exactly built on normal circumstances."

His mouth presses into a line. "No. It isn't." A pause. "But I won't deny that your knowledge surprised me. And perhaps the clan needs that. We've grown too reliant on old rituals. If fresh ideas can help save lives, so be it."

My heart thumps a little faster at the hint of acknowledgment in his tone. "Thank you," I murmur, not quite meeting his eyes.

He shifts his stance. The distance between us feels both vast and infinitesimal. "If this proves effective, some orcs might start seeing you in a different light. They might realize you're not the cursed bringer of doom."

I bite my lip. "I suppose that's progress. But what about the sabotage? Until that's exposed, I'll always be suspect."

He lets out a low growl, frustration evident. "Yes. That's why I'm determined to find whoever is fueling these false omens. The War God's name is too convenient a disguise."

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I recall Ragzuk's parting words, the subtle hint that mortal meddling is at play. "Do you have any leads?" I ask softly.

His gaze darkens. "Not yet. But I suspect some among my clan with reason to resent me, or resent the peace I'm trying to build. I'll need time—and a careful eye on everyone who might gain from sowing chaos."

My pulse pounds at the gravity of his task. "I'll help however I can," I offer, voice barely above a whisper.

He appears taken aback for a fleeting instant, but then a flicker of something—a grateful acceptance, maybe—lights his eyes. "I appreciate that."

We linger there, the hush thick with possibility. Outside, an orc barks orders at a worker hauling crates, jolting me from the moment. I clear my throat, stepping back. "I... should clean up," I say, gesturing to the bits of leaves and soil on my hands.

He nods, tension easing from his shoulders. "I'll ensure no one disturbs you." Then, more softly, "If you find yourself threatened, come to me or Karzug. Don't trust anyone else's protection."

Though his words are brusque, a note of genuine concern underpins them. I offer a small smile. "I understand."

With that, he moves toward the doorway and steps aside so I can pass. As I slip by, the proximity of his large frame makes me acutely aware of his physical presence—warm, solid, a potent reminder of how easily he outmatches me. Yet

somehow, in that moment, it doesn't feel terrifying; it feels... safe.

My heart flutters, confusion and gratitude warring within me. I have to remind myself that this is the same orc who, days ago, demanded a human bride as part of a peace bargain. And now, here he stands, ensuring I find my footing, figuratively and literally, within his clan.

I continue outside into the courtyard. The midday sun feels brighter than ever, and I squint against it. Even so, a small smile lingers on my lips, an ember of hope flickering in my chest. Maybe orcs aren't all monsters. Maybe Ghorzag, stoic as he is, truly wants unity.

As I head back toward my tent, my mind swirling with the events of the day—I can't help noticing that some passing orcs give me narrower glares than usual. The rumor mill will churn, no doubt, whispering about how I aided in healing a wounded warrior. Perhaps that tiny shift in perception will grow, one saved life at a time, one conversation at a time.

And in that swirl of hope, I realize something: I want them to accept me—not just to keep me alive or spare my village, but because a part of me believes that bridging our worlds might be possible. If He is not cursing us, if sabotage lies behind these “omens,” then maybe the dark gulf between orcs and humans can shrink enough for something genuine to form.

Including, perhaps, a deeper bond with the fierce, complicated chieftain who caught me before I could fall.

I stand at one of those windows, leaning on the rough sill as I survey the courtyard below. Orc warriors move in steady rhythms—some returning from night patrol, others stoking fires in preparation for the day's meals. A low hum of voices mingles with the crackling of torches.

Yet my gaze drifts, unbidden, to the far side of the courtyard where the tent row begins, just beyond the main hall. That is where Lirienne sleeps—where she has been given quarters close enough for watchful orc eyes, yet distinct enough to remind her (and the clan) that she is not truly one of us.

A pang of unease gnaws at me. Only yesterday, she worked tirelessly alongside Ragzuk, gathering herbs and treating an infected wound. She proved herself resourceful and calm under pressure. Some orcs took note of her efforts, curious enough to withhold further judgment. Others still harbored suspicion or resentment, convinced that every rotted crop and suspicious flood traced back to her presence.

We stand at a crossroads, I remind myself, echoing the High Priest's cryptic words. The War God's omens—whether true or manufactured—still loom over us all. And yet, I can't help recalling how she looked at me, eyes bright with unspoken determination, after we saved that warrior's leg. There was a sincerity there, a willingness to help my people in ways neither side expected.

I exhale, pushing away from the window. Time for the day to begin.

In the central hearth chamber, the clan gathers for breakfast. Long wooden tables stretch across the hall, laden with chunks of seared meat, loaves of coarse bread, and steaming bowls of grain porridge. Typically, this is a lively affair—orc voices booming in conversation, utensils clanging against metal plates. But as I step in, an undercurrent of tension flickers through the crowd. Conversations dip in volume, eyes darting my way with a mixture of respect and unease.

I ignore the hush that follows me and claim my usual seat at the head of a table near the hearth. Karzug, sits to my right, picking at a hunk of roast with methodical bites. Across from me, two older warriors murmur in low tones, pausing when I arrive. I offer them a curt nod, and they incline their heads in return—acknowledgment, but not warmth.

A moment later, the crowd parts near the entrance, and Lirienne appears. She wears the same practical orc leathers we provided days ago, now dusted with faint streaks of earth from her herb-gathering exploits. As soon as she enters, the hall's noise dips further, nearly to silence. She stands uncertainly, glancing around, as if unsure where to seat herself.

A handful of orc children crane their necks to see her better, one youngling whispering something to his mother. Some warriors openly glower, while others show grudging neutrality. My jaw tightens. I can't have her shunned at every meal.

So I raise a hand, beckoning. "Lirienne. Sit here," I say, my voice carrying over the hushed hall.

She hesitates only a heartbeat, then moves toward me. The clan's stares weigh heavily on us both—like a tangible presence pressing on my shoulders—but I keep my expression neutral. A chieftain doesn't cower before disapproval, I learned that lesson early.

She takes the seat beside me, offering a polite inclination of her head to Karzug, who returns it with a terse nod. "Good morning," she says quietly, her voice swallowed by the hall's looming silence.

I tear off a chunk of bread and hand it to her. "Eat," I say. "You'll need your strength today."

Karzug clears his throat, making a show of focusing on his own meal. “We have training exercises scheduled this morning,” he says, glancing my way. “The younger warriors are honing their axe technique.”

“Good.” I seize on the opportunity. “Lirienne should see them. Better she learn how we fight.”



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At that, several orcs within earshot shift uncomfortably. One of the older warriors snorts, leaning forward with an audible creak of his leather armor. “Why let a human watch our combat drills?” he rumbles, tusks protruding. “She could be feeding information to other humans.”

His name is Vargul, a staunch traditionalist who believes all humans are weak and cunning in the worst ways. I meet his gaze without flinching. “If we’re forging an alliance, there should be no secrets,” I say evenly. “If you trust me, you trust my judgment in inviting her.”

Vargul grunts, scowling at his plate. Lirienne’s posture goes rigid, but she says nothing, merely taking a small bite of bread as if it might steady her nerves.

Trying to defuse the tension, I turn to her. “Orc training can be... intense. I want you to see it firsthand, so you understand what it means to survive in this clan.”

She nods, swallowing carefully. “I appreciate the chance.”

A young orc child, no more than eight summers old, sidles up to the table, eyes wide and curious. She clutches a worn wooden spoon in her hand, evidently too shy to speak. Her gaze flicks between me and Lirienne.

Lirienne notices. Smiling softly, she greets the girl, “Hello.”

The girl’s cheeks darken, a flush that, on orc skin, takes on a faintly mottled hue. “H-hello,” she stammers, then darts away.

An amused murmur ripples among a few of the onlookers. Children are often less encumbered by prejudice, and seeing that small interaction, I can't help feeling a flicker of hope. Maybe in time, the clan could view Lirienne without suspicion.

But the hush that follows reminds me we're not there yet. The clan is deeply divided, and it will take more than a few cordial exchanges to mend centuries of distrust.

After breakfast, I lead Lirienne to the open-air training grounds adjacent to the fortress's east wall. A tall wooden palisade encircles a wide, packed dirt arena, where orcs practice in rotating drills throughout the day. Dark scuff marks on the earth bear testament to countless hours of sparring, and a rack of dull practice weapons stands at the arena's edge.

A dozen orc warriors—mostly younger, newly blooded fighters—are already there, brandishing wooden axes or padded spear staves in short, brutal arcs. Now and again, a barked correction from an older instructor rings out, punctuated by the dull thud of weapon against shield.

As soon as Lirienne and I step into view, the activity pauses. Orc gazes land on us with an almost physical weight. A few warriors scowl, but most simply stare with cautious curiosity.

I clear my throat. "Continue," I order. "We're here to observe."

Slowly, the drills resume. Lirienne drifts toward the perimeter, and I walk beside her. She watches closely as pairs of orcs circle each other, testing footwork. "They look so... precise," she whispers. "I've seen brawls in my village, but this is different. It's disciplined."

Pride flickers in my chest. "We train from the time we can lift a blade, so that discipline becomes second nature. Without it, orcish ferocity can devolve into chaos."

We stop near the weapons rack. Lirienne's gaze flicks over the battered training axes, the broad-bladed spears, the shields bearing chipped paint. She reaches out, almost hesitantly, to run her fingertips along the haft of a wooden axe. A moment later, she draws her hand back as if uncertain.

"I've never wielded something like this," she admits.

"Would you like to try?" I ask, the idea forming before I can think better of it.

She blinks, surprise and a hint of apprehension crossing her features. Around us, I sense the attention of the younger warriors intensifying. They pause in their drills, openly watching now.

"I—I'm not sure I'd be any good," she says softly, glancing at the watchers. "Besides, I came here to observe, not to disrupt."

My mouth curves into a faint half-smile. "Observing is one thing. Understanding is another." Then, louder, so the onlookers can hear, I add, "Bring me a practice axe."

One of the instructors, a lean orc with braided black hair, hastens to comply. He hands me a wooden axe weighted to mimic the heft of steel. I test its balance, satisfied, then offer it to Lirienne.

She hesitates, glancing around at the scowls and whispers. But when she meets my gaze, she takes a breath—steadyng herself—and accepts the axe. I recognize the flicker of determination in her eyes. She might be wary, but she won't back down from the challenge.

"Hold it like this," I instruct, stepping behind her and guiding her grip. "Keep your elbows slightly bent."

Her posture is stiff, tension thrumming through her small frame. The handle, even in its practice form, likely feels heavy to someone unaccustomed to orcish weapons. She tries to adjust her stance as I direct.

A muted ripple of chuckles rises from a few of the younger warriors. One mutters, “She’s going to drop it on her foot.”

Lirienne’s cheeks color. I shoot the warrior a warning look, and he clamps his mouth shut. Then I turn back to her. “Ignore them. Focus on the feel of the weapon.”

She exhales and tries a tentative swing. It is clumsy—unbalanced. The blade of the wooden axe wobbles. A fresh wave of snickers arises. Lirienne winces but braces her stance.

“Again,” I say.

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She swings again, a bit more controlled this time, though still too slow. “Loosen your shoulders,” I coach. “You’re holding your breath. Let it flow.”

Her next attempt improves, the wooden head slicing through the air in a ragged arc that at least resembles a proper strike. Some of the onlookers seem bored, but others watch with grudging interest.

“She’s persistent,” Karzug remarks from the sidelines, having arrived to oversee the drills.

I can’t help a small nod. Lirienne’s brows furrow in concentration, and sweat beads at her temple under the morning sun. She refuses to give up, even as her arms tremble with the unfamiliar weight.

“That’s enough,” I finally say, placing a hand on the haft to lower the weapon. “We’re not trying to make you an orc warrior. Just letting you feel what it’s like.”

Relief and disappointment mingle in her expression. She hands the practice axe back, cheeks flushed. “Thank you,” she murmurs, voice breathless. “I— I appreciate you letting me try.”

I incline my head. “Courage isn’t about being the strongest. It’s about facing what you fear anyway.”

Her gaze flicks to mine, softening. A moment passes between us, awareness crackling like static. Then I turn my attention back to the training yard.

“All right,” I bellow, addressing the assembled warriors. “Form pairs! Let’s see standard drills. Practice your timing—listen for your opponent’s breathing, watch their footing.”

At once, the orcs snap into motion. Wooden axes clash against wooden shields, staves thud in practiced rhythms. Lirienne stands beside me, still catching her breath, observing the synchronized chaos.

“They take this very seriously,” she notes, scanning the fighters.

“We must,” I reply. “Life in the clan isn’t gentle. If we don’t hone our skills, we perish. Orcs have survived this long because we won’t be outmatched, not by beasts, not by humans, not even by dark elves.”

She nods, a distant shadow crossing her features at the mention of dark elves—likely recalling the clan’s history of bloodshed against them. “And yet, you’re trying to make peace with humans,” she says softly, as though the contradiction lingers in her mind.

I tense. “Humans aren’t the only threat out there. If forging peace with your kind keeps my clan from bleeding itself dry, I’ll take that chance.”

Her expression gentles. “That’s... admirable, Ghorzag.”

I shrug, uncomfortable with praise. “We’ll see if it holds.”

When the sun crests overhead, the training session ends, and the warriors disperse to cool down or fetch their midday meal. Karzug oversees the distribution of water skins and rations, while Lirienne and I linger near a bench beneath a scraggly oak tree that offers meager shade.

A small group of orc children wanders over, as they often do when training concludes. Their wide eyes fixate on Lirienne—her hair, her smaller frame. One particularly inquisitive child, a boy called Sargu, points to the wooden axe resting in the rack.

“Did you really try to swing that?” he asks, voice high with curiosity.

Lirienne nods, smiling. “I did. I’m not very good at it yet.”

The children giggle, and one girl chimes in, “It’s heavy, right? I can barely lift it, and I’m an orc!”

They crowd closer, asking questions that range from innocent to surprisingly probing:

“Are all humans as small as you?”

“Do humans eat raw meat, too?”

“Why do humans wear such thin boots?”

She answers with patience, sometimes laughing at their wide-eyed astonishment. I observe from a step away, arms folded, noticing how easily she adapts to their curiosity. Unlike some older orcs, these children harbor less hostility. They haven’t been fully shaped by the clan’s wariness or tradition.

At one point, a little girl with pigtails tugs Lirienne’s hand. “Are you really gonna marry Chieftain Ghorzag?” she asks, mischief shining in her eyes.

A hush falls. I tense, cutting a sharp glance at the child, but she stares back with guileless innocence. Lirienne’s cheeks turn pink. She glances at me briefly—our eyes meeting in a flash of shared unease—before replying gently, “I… well, your chieftain

and I have an arrangement for peace.”

It is a diplomatic answer, the best one can offer in front of children. Sargu wrinkles his nose. “That means yes,” he announces, much to the others’ delight.

They giggle, and Lirienne musters a sheepish smile. I clear my throat, stepping in. “Enough questions,” I say, though not harshly. “Go get your midday meal, or you’ll miss out.”



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With squeals and laughter, they scamper off, occasionally glancing back at Lirienne as if she is the strangest and most intriguing creature they've ever encountered. Perhaps she is, in their eyes.

As the children disappear, Lirienne lets out a slow breath, touching the back of her neck. "They're... enthusiastic."

I arch a brow. "They're less jaded than their elders. They haven't seen decades of conflict."

She nods, eyes drifting to the fortress walls. "It's refreshing, in a way."

A short silence falls, but it isn't uncomfortable. I watch her out at the fringe of my sight, noticing how she brushes hair from her forehead, how her fingertips still bear faint stains from yesterday's herb gathering. She has integrated small habits from orcish life—like wearing a short-sleeved leather vest for ease of movement—but she is still very much human, an outsider forging her own path.

"You handled that training axe better than expected," I find myself saying, surprising even me.

She gives a short laugh. "I'm sure the orcs were impressed by my clumsy flailing."

"You didn't give up," I counter. "That's more than half the struggle."

A faint blush colors her cheeks at the compliment. "Thank you, Ghorzag."

Before I can respond, a familiar presence approaches: Ragzuk, the older apprentice to our clan's aging shaman. He inclines his head. "Chieftain. Lirienne."

"Ragzuk," I acknowledge. "Something you need?"

He glances between us. "I came to see if Lirienne might assist with a minor injury—another warrior complained of a sprain after training." His gaze flicks to her with cautious respect. "Your herbal remedies proved effective last time."

Lirienne's expression brightens with purpose. "Of course, I'd be glad to help."

Ragzuk nods, turning to me. "Do I have your permission to take her, Chieftain?"

I suppress a faint smirk at his formality. He's making a point that I'm responsible for her safety in the clan. "Yes. Go."

He leads Lirienne away, leaving me alone under the oak tree. The patch of shade feels oddly emptier without her. I watch them cross the yard, weaving among warriors, some of whom still wear suspicious scowls. But no one interferes. My directive is clear: harming Lirienne would be met with my wrath.

Late afternoon finds me in the fortress's main hall, conferring with a small group of elders about the latest resource tallies. The conversation is terse—harvest yields have dropped in some areas due to the unexplained floods, and suspicion lingers that "omens" indicate the War God's displeasure.

"Chieftain," mutters one elder, tapping a gnarled walking stick on the stone floor. "Our fields continue to rot in patches, and scouts have found strange carvings in nearby trees, as though mocking our clan."

My jaw tightens. "Have you seen any sign of trespassers? Dark elves, or otherwise?"

“None confirmed,” the elder admits grudgingly. “But many fear it’s a curse. Or sabotage from the human.”

A low growl rumbles in my throat. “Lirienne is not our enemy. She’s helped more than she’s harmed.”

An uneasy silence follows, the elders exchanging meaningful looks. Eventually, one with a braided beard says, “We respect your command, Ghorzag, but you must understand the clan’s fear. It won’t vanish overnight. If these misfortunes persist, more will demand her removal.”

Blood pounds in my ears, but I keep my voice level. “I’ll find the culprit behind these disasters, or prove them natural if that’s the truth. Until then, the clan abides by my decree.”

No one dares openly defy me here, though the tension is palpable. They fear the War God’s wrath more than they trust me. That realization stings, but it also hardens my resolve. I won’t bow to illusions or sabotage.

The elders eventually disperse, leaving me at the middle of the hall’s polished stone floor. Torches flicker on the walls, their light dancing over tapestries that depict orc victories of old. I find myself recalling the fleeting flash of Lirienne’s determined gaze, how she faces orc hostility with a quiet inner strength. She’s braver than most give her credit for.

The clan assembles in smaller pockets throughout the fortress: some around cookfires in the courtyard, others in the main hall, sipping a fermented drink from large clay vessels. I make my rounds, ensuring disputes are settled quickly. The presence of sabotage has heightened tempers—every minor spat threatens to escalate.

Eventually, I return to the courtyard’s largest bonfire, where Lirienne sits on a log,

awkwardly balancing a wooden bowl of stew in her lap. A few orcs hover at a distance, not quite hostile but not friendly, either. She looks up at me as I approach, relief softening her features.

“Mind if I join?” I ask, though I hardly need permission in my own clan.

She shifts to make room, tucking her legs beneath her. The bonfire’s glow lights her face in warm hues, accentuating the dusting of freckles across her nose. “I was just... observing. Orc gatherings are so different from my village’s festivities.”

I settle beside her, inhaling the stew’s savory aroma. “We have festivals, too, though less frequent since resources have become strained.”

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A group of orc women sit across the fire, occasionally glancing our way. One of them, older and thick-armed, gives a slow nod—perhaps acknowledging that Lirienne treated her nephew’s sprained ankle earlier. Small gestures, small cracks in the wall of distrust.

Lirienne’s voice drops. “I noticed the tension today—some orcs still blame me for the floods, don’t they?”

I pause, staring into the dancing flames. “They do. They see you as an easy target, ignoring the evidence that something else might be at play.”

She touches the rim of her bowl, fidgeting. “I keep telling myself if I can show them my sincerity, they’ll accept me. But it’s not that simple, is it?”

“No,” I admit quietly. “Generations of hatred don’t vanish overnight. But you’ve done more than most humans ever have to bridge the gap—treating injuries, learning our ways.”

Her eyes flick to mine, searching. “And you? How do you feel about a human in your midst?”

That question makes my chest tighten. How do I feel? Torn, perhaps, between duty to my clan and a growing admiration for her tenacity. I recall the moment earlier when she tried the practice axe—her refusal to buckle under the warriors’ scorn. She has courage.

“I made this alliance for strategic reasons,” I say, voice deliberately steady. “But... I

don't regret it. At least, not yet."

A faint smile tugs at the corner of her lips. "High praise, coming from an orc chieftain."

I feel the corners of my own mouth lift, a wry amusement stirring. "Don't let it go to your head."

The crackle of logs and the low murmur of orc voices surround us, creating an almost intimate bubble of conversation. She finishes her stew, setting the bowl aside. "Thank you," she says suddenly.

"For what?"

"For giving me a chance. For letting me watch the training. For not tossing me to the wolves the moment your clan demanded it."

A pulse of guilt mingles with pride in my chest. "If you prove an asset to the clan, you deserve a place here. It's as simple as that."

She nods, her expression pensive. The conversation lulls, replaced by the crackling of the bonfire and the distant sound of an orc flutist playing a low, haunting melody. The tune tugs at old memories of nights spent in war camps, preparing for battles that cost us too much blood. Am I leading us to a better future now?

Later, when the flames have died down and most orcs have retired to their tents or rooms, I find myself standing near one of the fortress ramparts. The wind carries the faint scent of pine from the forests beyond. Far below, I see the outline of our walls, the watchtowers lit by intermittent torches.

Footsteps sound behind me. Karzug approaches, posture rigid. "Chieftain," he greets,

stopping a pace away. He stares out over the ramparts alongside me, the two of us silent for a moment.

“You disapprove of my letting Lirienne watch the training,” I say, reading the tension in his stance.

He exhales sharply. “I wouldn’t say disapprove, but I’m cautious. Many orcs are complaining that you’re giving her too much leeway. They fear she’ll betray us.”

I grunt. “And yet she’s done nothing but help. If the clan can’t see that?—”

“I understand your perspective,” Karzug cuts in, voice measured. “But you’re pushing them faster than they’re ready for. They need time, reassurance. And the sabotage continues, fueling their fear.”

I drum my fingers on the stone ledge. “Fear can be more dangerous than any real threat. I won’t pander to it.”

Karzug hesitates, then nods. “Just... be mindful, Ghorzag. You’re the chieftain, but a chieftain’s strength also lies in knowing the pulse of his clan. If you lose them by appearing too lenient, that might cause more damage in the long run.”

His words sting, but I recognize the kernel of truth. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

He lingers a moment longer, as if wanting to say more, then bows his head and leaves. The hush of night reclaims the ramparts.

I lean against the cool stone, thoughts churning. Scenes from the day replay in my mind: Lirienne’s awkward presence at breakfast, her grit while hefting the practice axe, the way orc children flocked to her with wide-eyed questions. Quiet courage, I muse. She doesn’t have the brawn or aggression typical in orcish life, but she has a

resilience I can't ignore.

Despite the clan's division, something about her presence feels... right, or at least necessary. Perhaps the War God's true test is whether we can break old patterns of fear and hatred. A test for both orcs and humans.

Glancing over the battlements, I catch sight of her slight figure crossing the courtyard toward her tent, the torchlight throwing elongated shadows behind her. She pauses once, turning as if sensing my gaze on the ramparts. Even from a distance, I imagine I see the brief reflection of torchlight in her eyes before she slips inside.

A slow exhale escapes my lips. We stand on uncertain ground, I think. The clan's acceptance of her remains tenuous, sabotage still lurks, and the War God's supposed omens cast a long shadow. Yet amidst all that, I find myself wanting to see her succeed—wanting to see her earn a place here by more than just my decree.

I push away from the wall, the wind tugging at my hair and the iron beads braided into it. Tomorrow promises more trials: investigating the sabotage, quelling clan unrest, and continuing the fragile process of integrating Lirienne into our daily life.



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But for tonight, the memory of her quiet determination and the warmth in her gaze remain with me. I can't ignore the stir of admiration, nor the seed of something deeper that has taken root in my chest.

Turning from the ramparts, I head back inside, the fortress corridors dark and cool. Orcish life is savage, pragmatic, unyielding. Somehow, Lirienne is finding her way into it, and in doing so, reminding me that perhaps our clan's future can be broader and more hopeful than we've ever allowed ourselves to believe.

7

### LIRIENNE

I wake to the hollow echoes of wind murmuring across the fortress walls. Pale morning light seeps through the small gap in my tent flap, revealing the modest space I've come to call my own. The previous day's events play over in my mind: my awkward attempts at wielding an orcish practice axe, the children's unabashed curiosity, the lingering stares of suspicious warriors. And, most of all, the quiet moments I shared with Ghorzag.

Tension still clings to me. Each passing day reminds me that my presence here is precarious. Yet, for the first time since arriving, I feel something like cautious optimism. I glimpsed small signs of acceptance—Ragzuk trusting my healing knowledge, orc children peppering me with questions, and Ghorzag himself inviting me into the rhythms of clan life. It isn't perfect, but it's more than I dared hope for when I first entered these gates as a reluctant peace offering.

With a steadying breath, I rise from the bedroll and lace up my borrowed leather boots. I tie my hair into a low braid, securing it with a thin strip of hide. The fortress might be a place of jagged stone and warlike tradition, but I am determined to keep forging connections—especially if it means dispelling the fear that I’m nothing more than a curse in human form.

Outside, the courtyard glows with early morning light. Orc warriors pass by in pairs or small groups, speaking in gruff undertones. Some give me wide berth, as though my very presence might be tainted. Others offer curt nods, which I return politely.

A few orc children are already out and about, chasing each other around the perimeter. One of them—Sargu, I recall—notices me and waves with the unrestrained excitement only children possess. I give a small wave in return, warmth blooming in my chest. Their acceptance, though unschooled by adult prejudices, is a tiny ember of hope I cling to.

“Lirienne!” a familiar voice calls. I turn to see Nagra, the shaman’s apprentice, striding briskly across the courtyard, skirts swishing around her ankles. She wears her usual satchel of herbs slung across her torso. “Ragzuk wants your help with a small matter. Another warrior’s complaining of a toothache, and he’d like you to take a look.”

I smile, suppressing a flicker of nervousness. I’m not exactly an expert in dentistry, but maybe my herbal knowledge can at least soothe the pain. “Sure. Lead the way,” I say.

Nagra guides me to a quieter alcove near the eastern wall, where a burly orc with salt-and-pepper braids sits hunched over, hand pressed to his jaw. Ragzuk hovers nearby, examining him with narrowed eyes.

“There you are,” Ragzuk says, spotting me. He gestures me closer, stepping aside to

let me inspect the warrior. “He’s complaining of sharp pain near the back molars. Swears it’s worsened since last night.”

The warrior, name unknown to me, grunts in acknowledgment. His tusks are chipped in several places—likely from countless battles. I carefully ask him to open his mouth and tilt his head, using the sunlight to glimpse inside. Sure enough, one of his lower molars looks inflamed, with swollen gums pressing around it.

“I can’t do much about an infected tooth without more advanced tools,” I say softly to Ragzuk, “but I can try to reduce the swelling and numb the pain. A poultice or rinse, maybe.” I recall how my village’s herbalist used clove oil and other astringent leaves to soothe aching teeth.

Ragzuk nods, motioning for Nagra to gather the needed plants from her satchel. As I mix a makeshift rinse, the warrior grimaces but watches me intently. Once I finish, I hand him a small cup containing a bitter-smelling concoction.

“Swish this around gently,” I instruct, “then spit it out. It should numb the ache a little.”

He complies, hissing at the strong taste. After a few moments, he spits into a bowl Ragzuk provides, then smacks his lips. “Tastes like swamp water,” he mutters, but the tightness in his brow eases slightly. “Better than the pain, though.”

Ragzuk looks at me, a faint glimmer of respect in his eyes. “One more warrior who owes you thanks,” he says quietly, low, secretive, for my ears alone.

I offer a modest shrug. “I’m just trying to help.”

“Your efforts aren’t going unnoticed,” he replies. “Even if not everyone admits it.”

A hint of warmth flutters in my chest. Maybe I can carve out a place here after all, I think. I thank Ragzuk and Nagra, then head off to see what other tasks the day will bring.

Later, I find myself in the communal eating area for a midday meal. Orcs sit at long tables, bowls of hearty stew steaming in front of them, hunks of bread and smoked meat piled on rough wooden platters. A riot of voices rings through the chamber, though the volume dips noticeably when I enter.

I try not to bristle under the weight of so many eyes. They won't all accept you overnight, I remind myself. Focus on the ones who've shown even a shred of openness.

Spotting a small space on a bench near the end, I make my way there and slide onto the seat. A few orcs shift uncomfortably but don't protest. I murmur a quiet greeting, receiving stiff nods in return.

An orcish woman with scars crisscrossing her forearms glances at me sidelong. "Heard you fixed old Hargir's tooth," she says, her voice gruff but not hostile.

I swallow a spoonful of stew before replying. "Tried to, anyway. He should see the shaman if it gets worse, though."

She gives a considering grunt and returns her attention to her food, apparently content with my answer. I let out an inward sigh of relief. A warrior from across the table, face shadowed by an old burn scar, eyes me but says nothing.

As I eat, the conversation around me gradually resumes, though now and then I catch snatches about "omens" and "bad harvest." Occasionally, my name drifts through the low hum—sometimes with curiosity, sometimes with skepticism. I keep my gaze on my bowl, focusing on finishing the meal while projecting an air of calm I don't fully

feel.

At length, I notice Ghorzag enter the hall. His presence commands attention; hushed conversations pause as he crosses toward me. Without ceremony, he claims a seat beside me, muscles coiled beneath his leather armor. Orcish eyes shift to watch. The chieftain sitting with the human is hardly a common sight.

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“How’s the stew?” he asks, voice quieter than the wind.

“Better than I expected,” I admit, offering a small half-smile. My nerves flutter under the scrutiny of everyone else, but I cling to the memory of Ghorzag’s unwavering support in the training yard yesterday.

He nods, grabbing a bowl for himself. We eat in silence for a while, yet the silence around us feels thick with unasked questions. Eventually, the normal hum of mealtime resumes, albeit more muted than before. It is a small victory: at least they’re not collectively glaring at me anymore.

As we finish, Ghorzag wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I need to check on the orchard,” he says abruptly. “A section of it was damaged by floods—some claim it’s the War God’s wrath, others suspect sabotage. Come with me.”

A surge of nerves dances in my stomach. “All right. I’ll come,” I answer, ignoring a few raised eyebrows from nearby orcs. Ghorzag’s invitation feels more like an order, but also like an unspoken testament that he trusts me enough to include me in clan affairs.

The orchard lies beyond the main fortress gate, nestled on a gentle slope where rows of stunted fruit trees struggle to grow in the rocky soil. Evidence of the recent flooding mars the ground—channels of mud cut through the orchard, some trees leaning precariously where their roots have been partially washed out.

A few orc farmhands—or as close to “farmhands” as orcs allow themselves—inspect the damage. They pause as Ghorzag and I approach. One of them, a middle-aged orc

woman with a stern brow, waves us over to a large furrow in the earth.

“This was done overnight,” she says, voice rough from years of fieldwork. “Water poured down from the hillside. Too much, too fast. Lost four saplings and some of the older trees are drowning.”

Ghorzag’s brow furrows. “Any sign that it was sabotaged? A dam broken upstream, or channels dug?”

The orc woman shakes her head. “Hard to say. Could be heavy rain from the mountains. Could be meddling by an unseen hand.”

He folds his arms, scanning the orchard with a hawk-like gaze. I walk beside him, noticing the small rivulets that seem unnaturally directed through the orchard’s center. My father once explained how farmland could be deliberately flooded if trenches were dug in the right places. This looks suspiciously deliberate. But I keep my thoughts quiet, uncertain if the orcs want to hear a human’s opinion.

Ghorzag, however, seems attuned to my hesitation. “Speak,” he says softly, tilting his head so only I can hear.

I clear my throat. “I’m no expert, but it looks like something diverted the water here. Perhaps a small barrier upstream was broken to release the flow all at once.”

He nods, lips pressed thin. “My thought as well.” Then, louder, to the orc woman: “Search upstream for any signs of tampering. If you find fresh cuts in the land or recent digging, bring the news to me immediately.”

She grunts in acknowledgment, gesturing for a few others to follow her as they trudge up the slope. Ghorzag turns back to me, eyes narrowed. “If this is sabotage, we have a traitor—or an outside agent—undermining the clan from within.”

I recall Ragzuk's hints that mortal hands might be behind the omens. "Do you suspect a rival clan? Or dark elves?"

He exhales. "Possibly. Or it could be a disgruntled orc within our own ranks who hates the idea of peace with humans." His gaze moves to me, and I see the unspoken complexity in his eyes: by forging a bond with me, he opened the door for those who'd do anything to keep the clan from joining hands with humans.

My chest tightens with empathy. He carries the weight of leadership, of a thousand decisions that could either strengthen or doom his people. "Let me know how I can help," I offer quietly, meaning it.

His jaw works, tension rippling across his shoulders. Before he can respond, we're interrupted by a young orc farmhand jogging toward us, breathless. "Chieftain! We found footprints—small, like a child's or a lighter adult's—near the creek. They lead away from the orchard. Could be nothing, but... it's odd."

I frown, sharing a glance with Ghorzag. Small footprints might indicate a cunning saboteur, or simply a child playing near the water. But in times like these, any anomaly feeds the clan's paranoia. "Show us," Ghorzag orders.

We follow the farmhand across a muddied patch of ground to a shallow stream. Sure enough, faint footprints trail along the bank, then vanish into the undergrowth. My heart pounds at the implications—someone has been here, likely orchestrating the flood.

Ghorzag's eyes darken, fists curling at his sides. "Whoever is doing this... I will find them."

By late afternoon, we return to the fortress, minds still churning with the orchard's mystery. Karzug awaits Ghorzag in the courtyard with urgent news of supply



inventories, and they stride off together, leaving me momentarily alone by the main gate.

I am about to head toward Ragzuk's workshop—maybe he has more tasks—when a small voice calls my name. Turning, I see Sargu, the orc boy from earlier, standing shyly a few steps away.

“Lirienne,” he repeats, more softly. “Are you busy?”

I soften my expression. “Not at the moment. What do you need?”

He shuffles his feet, eyes darting around as if making sure no one else listens. “We’re playing a game,” he says, as though admitting a secret. “A running-and-hiding game near the side yard. Could you... watch us? Make sure no one gets hurt?”

A pang of surprise flutters in my chest. The orc children want me to supervise their play? Such a mundane, normal request. “I can do that,” I agree warmly. “Lead the way.”

He beams and scampers off, beckoning me to follow. I trail behind him, weaving between tents and smaller outbuildings until we reach a walled-off side yard where half a dozen orc children play. They dart around crates and stacked barrels, squealing with delight as they attempt to tag one another.

“Make sure no one climbs the high crates,” I caution gently. “It’s too easy to slip.”

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They nod, though I suspect the adrenaline of the game might override caution. Still, I stand watch, calling out an occasional warning if someone pushes too close to a precarious stack. The children seem startled, at times, to have a human scolding them for reckless behavior—but they also don't argue, apparently acknowledging my genuine concern.

Midway through their rambunctious play, a tall orc youth wanders by. He looks about fourteen or fifteen in human terms—halfway to an adult in orc culture. Upon seeing me, he slows, scowling. “Why is she here?”

Sargu answers proudly, “She’s watching us, so no one gets hurt.”

The older youth snorts. “We don’t need a human babysitter.” He turns his glare on me. “Go back to your potions or whatever it is you do.”

I feel a flush creep up my neck, but I steady myself. “They asked me to supervise. If you’d rather me leave, you can take responsibility for them. Make sure they don’t break a limb.”

He falters, uncertain. Looking at the younger kids, he shrugs dismissively. “Fine. Do what you want,” he mutters, stalking away. The children don’t seem fazed; they resume their game immediately, chasing each other in circles.

It’s a start, I think, exhaling slowly. It isn’t acceptance, but at least he hasn’t tried to chase me off or pick a fight. Little by little, I’m coming to see that orcish aggression often masks deeper emotions—pride, insecurity, fear of the unknown.

As dusk falls, the children drift back to their families. I return to my tent, wiping sweat from my brow. The day has been surprisingly full: tending a toothache, investigating orchard sabotage, supervising a cluster of playful orc kids. It is a bizarre tapestry of tasks, yet it all feels... oddly natural.

I light a small lantern within my tent, its warm glow illuminating the sparse interior: a bedroll, a chest for my belongings, and a sturdy table where I keep my few herbal supplies. My stomach growls—I missed the typical evening meal in the main hall.

Just as I contemplate heading out to scavenge some leftovers, a sharp rap sounds on the tent post. “Lirienne,” a low voice calls.

“Come in,” I reply, surprised.

The canvas lifts, revealing Ghorzag. He steps inside, ducking slightly to accommodate his height, the lantern’s light catching the tattoos on his broad arms. My heartbeat quickens at his sudden presence—he rarely visits me directly. Usually, we meet in public spaces, wary of the clan’s watchful stares.

“Busy?” he asks, scanning the tent’s interior. His deep gaze flicks from the table to my bedroll, then back to me.

I shake my head, stepping aside to give him room. “No. Just thinking about food, actually.”

He half-smiles—a small twitch of his lips. “I thought you might be hungry.” He gestures behind him, and I notice a small, cloth-wrapped bundle in his hand. “Cook saved a portion of stew and bread. I asked him to set it aside for you.”

Warmth floods my cheeks. “That’s... very considerate of you.”

He shrugs as if dismissing my gratitude, yet I catch the flicker of pride in his expression. “You’re part of the clan now, even if some refuse to see it.”

I take the bundle, unwrapping it to reveal a steaming chunk of savory meat, a slab of dense bread, and a small bowl of stew that smells heavenly. My stomach growls in earnest, and I shoot him a sheepish look. “Thank you,” I repeat, more softly this time.

He inclines his head, stepping to the side so I can set the food on my table. My tiny tent feels even smaller with him inside it. His presence looms—towering and muscular, carrying an air of quiet authority.

I find myself wanting to fill the silence, to ask about the orchard investigation or to express my gratitude for including me in the day’s activities. Yet words tangle in my throat. Instead, I motion to the table, offering, “Do you want to share any of this? If you haven’t eaten yet, that is.”

He shakes his head, crossing his arms. “I’ve eaten. The orchard kept me busy.”

Right. Concern tightens my chest. “Any new leads?”

His expression darkens. “We found evidence of deliberate digging upstream—tools left behind, footprints that might belong to a smaller orc or a halfling of some sort. Nothing conclusive, but enough to confirm sabotage.”

A chill runs through me. “So it’s definitely not just random disaster.”

He meets my gaze, eyes narrowed with grim certainty. “It seems we have a saboteur determined to incite fear and blame you for it. Or blame me for forging this alliance.”

I swallow hard, the stew’s aroma suddenly less comforting. “Are you... in danger?”

He huffs a low breath. “Danger is part of my existence as chieftain. But you—” He pauses, voice dipping. “I worry they’ll try to corner you. If you see anything strange, come to me or Karzug immediately.”

I nod. “I will.”

For a moment, we stand there, the faint glow of the lantern highlighting the etched lines of his face, the swirl of inked tattoos on his forearms. Tension and something else crackle in the air—the same pull I felt in the training yard, the unspoken awareness that neither of us can fully articulate.

“You’re handling clan life better than I expected,” he says at last, voice quieter. “I saw you with the children. And you’ve helped more warriors than I can count.”

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My cheeks warm at the compliment. “I’m trying,” I whisper. “I never imagined I’d be here, in a fortress of orcs, but... I want to do right by your people, Ghorzag.”

He studies me, tusks gleaming faintly in the lantern light. “They’re our people now, if this alliance holds.”

The weight of his words presses on me. Our people. Perhaps that is the crux of everything—transforming “yours” and “mine” into “ours.” My heart hammers in my chest, a rush of conflicting emotions swirling: gratitude, admiration, fear of the unknown.

Impulsively, I reach out, resting a hand on his forearm. The leather bracer beneath my palm feels warm from his body heat. I see the flicker of surprise in his eyes but also a lack of recoil. “Thank you for seeing me as something more than a burden,” I say softly. “Your acceptance—or even partial acceptance—means a great deal.”

He doesn’t speak, but his arm tenses under my touch, a subtle wave of tension rippling through his muscular frame. For a heartbeat, I think he might pull away, but he doesn’t. Instead, he places his free hand lightly over mine, rough palm pressing gently against my skin.

I draw in a shaky breath. The walls of the tent seem to close in, or perhaps it’s just the sheer intensity of his presence that makes the space feel smaller. His gaze lingers on my face, flicking to my lips before returning to my eyes. Something unsaid passes between us, fragile and electric.

But as quickly as it sparks, he seems to catch himself. He releases my hand and steps

back, clearing his throat. “Eat your meal,” he says, voice a shade rougher. “I’ll let you rest.”

Disappointment mingles with relief in my chest. “Right,” I murmur. “And... thank you for the food.”

He nods curtly, then slips out of the tent, the flap closing behind him. I stand there, heart pounding, wondering what just happened. The memory of his warm palm covering my hand lingers, sending little jolts of awareness through me.

I force myself to focus on the stew, devouring it in slow bites until my hunger is sated. Outside, the fortress quiets as night settles in, a hush broken only by the distant clang of a smith working late or the low murmur of orcs conversing near the watchfires.

Eventually, I settle onto my bedroll, lantern flickering softly. My thoughts spiral around Ghorzag’s visit—his cautious acceptance, the vulnerability in his eyes when he speaks of sabotage. He is a chieftain, burdened by responsibility. Yet he brought me food, took a moment to check on me personally.

He’s a puzzle, I muse, untying my braid and letting my hair fall around my shoulders. An orc shaped by battle and tradition, yet open-minded enough to risk forging peace with a human. He admires strength, and I’m learning to show him I have my own brand of it—quiet determination in place of brute force.

Sleep tugs at me, promising a respite from the day’s tensions. But as I drift off, I can’t help remembering how his hand felt against mine: strong, calloused, and unexpectedly gentle. In that fleeting touch, I sense a spark that goes beyond mere alliance, stirring an odd mix of hope and apprehension in my heart.

## GHORZAG

The fortress never truly sleeps anymore. Not with tensions roiling beneath every stone. Evening is a time of temporary respite—when the day’s labors end, and the night guard begins their watch—but in recent weeks, rest has become a fragile thing. It’s almost a month since Lirienne’s arrival here.

My mind whirls with questions of sabotage and uneasy alliances, leaving me prowling the corridors when others try to find sleep.

I am returning from a late meeting with Karzug and a few trusted warriors—another fruitless debate about who might be causing these so-called omens—when an urgent shout breaks through the dim corridors:

“Chieftain!”

I spin, heart pounding. One of the younger orc scouts, face pale with anxiety, sprints toward me, nearly colliding with the torchlit wall in his haste.

“Steady,” I bark, halting him with an outstretched hand. “What is it?”

The scout draws in a gasping breath. “The eastern cistern. We found something foul in the water—an oily sheen on the surface that stinks like rot. It’s—” His eyes flick to me, wide with dread. “Some orcs have already used it for cooking. We suspect it might be poisoned.”

My pulse kicks, a surge of cold anger washing over me. Another sabotage. Another blow designed to stoke fear and chaos. “Show me.”

In minutes, we gather a small band of warriors—Kartzug among them—to investigate. Torches flare in the dark courtyard as we trek past the orchard path and descend stone



steps leading to the cisterns. The air grows cooler underground, lantern light revealing damp walls coated with moss. A stale, metallic smell clings to the tunnels.

A pair of guards step aside when we reach the sealed entrance to the eastern cistern. One guard looks at me, worry etched into his features. “We only just discovered it, Chieftain. A few orcs complained of the water tasting off during dinner, so we came to check.”

Karzug grimaces. “Any ill effects yet?”

“None reported,” the guard replies. “But the smell is rank.”

I motion for him to open the heavy wooden door, dread twisting in my gut. If the water supply is compromised, we face not only poisoning but also further accusations that the War God’s wrath is upon us. Worse, the clan could turn that suspicion on Lirienne again, no matter how baseless.

The door swings open with a creaking protest. Inside, lantern beams reveal a still pool of water surrounded by carefully shaped stone walls. Sure enough, a greasy film glistens across the surface. The odor of decay hits me like a blow. My tusks grind together. No natural occurrence did this.

I step forward, footsteps echoing on damp stone. Karzug follows, expression dark. “This is definitely sabotage.” His eyes sweep the area, searching for any sign of forced entry.

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My jaw clenches. “Someone poured something into our cistern.” Fury coils in my chest. We already had floods in the orchard, livestock dying mysteriously, missing seeds from the granary. Now, this. The saboteur’s boldness grows every day.

We test the water using a long ladle. The foul, oily substance clings to the metal. One whiff confirms it’s rancid enough to sicken anyone who drinks it. I turn to the others. “Seal this cistern. No one uses it until we purge whatever’s in here.”

Karzug snaps to attention. “We’ll do so immediately. The question is how quickly we can clean it—and how long before rumors spread that we’re cursed.”

“Rumors are likely already spreading,” I say grimly.

From the side, I see the scout from earlier shuffle nervously. “Chieftain,” he ventures, “some orcs are claiming it’s yet another sign that the War God condemns the human’s presence.”

A growl rumbles in my throat. “Enough. This is no divine act. We have a traitor or an infiltrator undermining us.” I force the words out, though part of me realizes how few orcs want to hear it. Blaming Lirienne—the convenient outsider—is so much simpler.

Karzug lays a hand on me. “We’ll do our best to contain the panic,” he says quietly, “but you know how they are. They’ll talk.”

I nod. “Let them talk. I’ll handle it.”

But how, I wonder, when every sign of calamity is pinned on her?

I leave Karzug to organize a cleanup crew, trusting him to keep the clan calm for a few hours. My own mood is a storm of frustration and concern as I climb out of the underground cistern tunnels and step into the torchlit courtyard. The fresh air does little to quell the heat in my blood.

I need to warn Lirienne, is my first thought. She has a right to know this new sabotage will likely raise suspicions against her yet again. Part of me hates that her name might be linked to every misfortune. Another part boils with resentment at the possibility that her presence truly brings a curse upon us. No, I admonish myself. I can't waver now. I've seen enough evidence to suspect mortal interference, not divine wrath.

Her tent is dark. Only a faint glow seeps through the flap—a single lantern, perhaps. I hesitate at the threshold, mind swimming with the memory of how I pinned an aggressive orc to the corridor wall just a day ago, stopping him from harming her. She is still not entirely safe here. A protective impulse flares, tangling with something deeper, more complicated.

I raise a hand and rap softly on the wooden post. “Lirienne.”

After a moment, her muffled voice answers. “Come in.”

Inside, the lantern casts gentle shadows across her tent's canvas walls, revealing her kneeling by a small table strewn with plants and bandages. She looks up, eyes widening at my grim expression. Concern flashes in her gaze. “Ghorzag? You look—what happened?”

I step forward, the enclosed space feeling smaller than ever. “Our eastern cistern has been fouled. Tainted with some rancid substance. Could be poison.”

Her eyes widen. “Poison?” She rises, the faint rustle of her clothes underscoring her

alarm. “Are orcs sick?”

“None yet,” I say, raking a hand through my hair. My beads clink softly. “But if word spreads that our water is unsafe, panic will follow. That cowardly saboteur has struck again.”

She exhales shakily. “But why poison the water? That affects everyone here, including the saboteur.”

I laugh humorlessly. “Some might not care if it weakens us. Or they might have an antidote prepared for themselves. All I know is this will feed the clan’s fears that you are behind it.” The words land heavier than I intend, but frustration ripples through me. I refuse to blame her, yet I can already hear the rumors.

Her posture stiffens. “And do you believe them?” she asks in a quiet, hurt tone.

A flash of guilt pricks my chest. “No,” I say, voice strained. “But the clan does. Or at least a sizable portion that’s swayed by superstition.”

She shakes her head, hair catching the lantern’s glow. “I’m doing everything in my power to help—treating wounds, assisting in the kitchens. It’s never enough.”

My temper, already frayed, ignites. “No matter what you do, they see only an outsider,” I reply, not meaning to sound accusatory. “Every day, I fight to keep them from turning on you. But each new disaster—” I break off, fists clenching at my sides.

She squares her shoulders, eyes flashing. “I never asked you to protect me if it’s such a burden, Ghorzag.” The tremor in her voice betrays how deeply the situation cuts.

A growl builds in my throat. “You think this is easy for me? Leading a clan that fears

the War God's anger, trying to prove sabotage, all while you?—”

“While I what?” she demands, stepping closer, indignation flaring. “Live at the mercy of orcs who might kill me at any moment? Try to be useful while half the clan hisses curses behind my back?”

Our gazes lock, tension crackling in the confined air. Torchlight flickers across her features, highlighting the defiance in her wide eyes. My anger wars with an overwhelming surge of protectiveness. She's braver than most orcs I know, daring to stand up for herself even when she's dwarfed by orcish power.

She is not the enemy, I remind myself, but frustration batters me from every side. The sabotage. The clan's suspicion. My own inability to end this crisis swiftly. My chest tightens as I struggle to form words.

Our raised voices fill the tent, the argument swirling from sabotage to the deeper undercurrents of mistrust and fear. At one point, my tusks bare in anger, but she doesn't back down. Instead, she glares at me, chin tilted high in a show of stubborn resilience.

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“You accuse me of bringing chaos,” she says, cheeks flushed, “yet you’re the one who demanded this alliance. You pushed for peace, so stop blaming me for the consequences!”

“I’m not blaming you,” I grind out. “I’m blaming the saboteur. But you—” My breath comes in ragged bursts. Words fail as raw emotion wells up, frustration knotting my throat. This is impossible.

She exhales a trembling breath, tears glimmering in her eyes. “I’m trying, Ghorzag. I’m trying so hard.” That vulnerability cuts through my anger like a blade. Suddenly, the reality of how precarious her position is—caught between orcish hostility and her own desire to save her village—slams into me.

I stare at her, chest heaving. My pulse hammers. She stands so close, her mouth parted with unspoken words, and I can’t tear my gaze away from the softness of her lips or the faint sheen of tears threatening to spill.

The tension builds to a breaking point. Anger, fear, and an undercurrent of something pulsing deeper—some gravitational pull we’ve been fighting for weeks—collide in a flash of reckless urgency. I hear myself growl low in my throat before I reach for her.

We slam into each other, the force of our frustration and pent-up longing fueling the collision. Our mouths meet in a bruising kiss that is all heat and desperation, every ounce of anxiety poured into that heated contact. She gasps, fingers twisting in the leather straps across my shoulders, and I press her back against the table laden with herbs.

The lantern's glow trembles as I pull her back against me. Her breath catches—softer this time, unsteady with want instead of fury. My calloused hands trace the length of her spine, then play at her waist, anchoring her as if I might lose her in the heat between us.

“Tell me to stop,” I murmur against her jaw. My tusks skim her cheek as I speak. “If this isn't what you want?”

“I want this,” she whispers, the words trembling but sure. “I want you.”

She cups my face, her fingers brushing the scar beneath my left eye. That simple touch, so unafraid, burns through me like a sacred fire. The look in her eyes isn't just desire—it's defiance and faith. In me.

I growl, deep and low, not out of anger but reverence. Then I take her mouth again.

This time, it's slower—drawn out, deliberate. I savor her. Her lips open to me, warm and pliant, her body molding to mine as if it's always known this shape, this need. My hands roam—over the curve of her hips, the slope of her thighs, the fabric separating us a nuisance I intend to strip away inch by inch.

I slide her tunic upward, baring skin that makes my chest seize. Sun-kissed and flushed, her belly trembles beneath my touch. She gasps when my calloused fingers graze just beneath her breast, and I pause, letting her decide if I go further.

“Don't stop,” she breathes, arching toward me. “Please.”

I press my mouth to the underside of her jaw, then down her throat, letting my tusks drag along her skin until she shudders beneath me. My tongue finds the hollow of her collarbone and lingers there, tasting salt and something uniquely her—sun and wildflowers and defiance. Her nipples pebble through the linen, and I reach between

us, tugging the fabric down until I see her—bare, flushed, beautiful.

Her breath hitches again when I take her breast in my palm, thumb brushing over the hardened peak. She moans softly, her hips shifting beneath me. Her fingers trail down my abdomen, unbuckling the heavy leather at my waist with purpose I didn't expect.

"I want to see you," she says, voice low. "All of you."

I sit back on my knees, my cock already straining painfully against the bindings of my pants. Her eyes widen as I begin to undo the ties. When I finally let the garment fall away, she stares—not with fear, but with awe and something hungry. My cock is thick, dark, veined, the head already slick with need. Her gaze dips lower, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

"I've never..." she starts, cheeks coloring.

"I know," I say, voice rough. "You don't need to say it."

"Will it... fit?" Her voice is barely a whisper.

I chuckle, but there's no mockery in it—just reverence. "I'll make sure it does. I'd never hurt you, Lirienne."

She nods once, swallowing hard. I reach for her again, settling between her thighs. I slide her undergarments off, dragging them slowly down her legs, taking my time to admire the soft, glistening heat waiting for me.

"Fuck," I rasp, breath catching at the sight of her pussy, flushed and already wet.

Her thighs tense when I lower my head, but I give her one long look, waiting for a word, a nod. When she grips my shoulder and bites her lip, I dive in.



She cries out when my tongue meets her, a sweet, strangled sound that has my cock throbbing with need. I groan against her folds, tongue parting her slick heat, exploring her with greedy precision. She tastes like sin and surrender, like the sweetest offering I've ever been given.

"Ghorzag," she gasps, fingers tangling in my hair. "Oh gods?—"

I wrap my arms around her thighs, holding her open, grounding her as I lap at her with a hunger that feels endless. Her pussy clenches with each flick of my tongue, and when I find the bundle of nerves at her center and suck gently, her back arches in a perfect bow.

"You're shaking," I murmur, dragging my mouth up her stomach, tasting the trail of her climax. "I haven't even fucked you yet."

"I—I want you to," she says, breathless, pulling me up until we're chest to chest again.

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Our bodies align as I position myself at her entrance. My cock throbs as I rub the head through her folds, watching her eyes flutter closed.

“Breathe,” I tell her. “Stay with me.”

She nods. I ease into her slowly, my jaw tightening as her slick heat stretches around me. Inch by inch, I push forward, giving her time to adjust. She gasps, nails digging into my shoulders, but she doesn’t tell me to stop.

“Lirienne,” I choke out. “You feel—fuck—you’re perfect.”

She clutches my arms, thighs trembling as I bury myself to the hilt.

“Oh gods,” she whispers, eyes glassy. “You’re so deep.”

I groan, pressing my forehead to hers. “I know. You’re taking me so well.”

For a moment, we don’t move. I let her adjust, let her body recognize mine. Then she shifts her hips and moans.

“That’s it,” I grit, starting to thrust slowly. “Tell me how it feels.”

“Full,” she gasps. “It’s... intense. I can feel everything.”

“That’s because you were made for me,” I growl, voice low and rough. “Your pussy—gods, it’s gripping me like you don’t want to let go.”

Her breath shudders. I thrust again, deeper this time, and her eyes roll back.

“Harder,” she pleads.

I obey. My hips snap forward, and the slap of skin against skin fills the tent. Her moans grow louder, more desperate, matching each driving stroke. Her walls flutter around me, and I know she’s close again.

“Come for me,” I snarl. “Let me feel you.”

She cries out, her body seizing around my cock, trembling through her release. The sight of her—eyes wild, mouth open, body arched in pleasure—undoes me.

I thrust a few more times before my own climax barrels through me, fierce and unstoppable. I bury my face in her neck and groan as I spill inside her, hips bucking, every muscle taut.

Caught in the throes of sensation, we cling to each other, anger giving way to relief, fear turning into a vulnerability we share with no one else. For a heartbeat, it feels like a sacred vow—far deeper than the alliance the clan demanded. Here, in the hush between gasps, we confront the raw truth: we are more than chieftain and captive bride, more than orc and human. We are two souls colliding in the midst of chaos.

Eventually, our frantic pace slows, the crescendo ebbing into a trembling aftermath. Her body sinks against mine, heartbeats thudding in unison. My forehead presses to hers, sweat mingling on our skin. No words come, but none are needed. We stay like that for a long moment, breaths ragged, the lantern’s soft light throwing our shadows against the tent walls.

As the haze of passion lifts, reality seeps back in. My arms still wrap around her, I feel her breathing steady, but the tension returns like a creeping chill. The clan’s

crisis hasn't vanished. The sabotage is still real, the water still tainted. The War God's rumored wrath hovers over everything, and we have just tangled ourselves in a new, complicated bond.

She lifts her head, eyes shining with a mix of wonder and unease. "Ghorzag," she whispers, voice thick. "What did we just?—?"

I close my eyes briefly. "Something neither of us planned." My own heart hammers, the enormity sinking in. I'm the chieftain, and this act carries massive consequences. If the clan discovers how deeply our alliance now runs, suspicion might intensify rather than ease.

She seems to read my thoughts. Carefully, she lifts herself from my arms, tugging the edge of a blanket to cover her shoulders. "They'll suspect," she murmurs, half to herself.

"They already suspect everything," I say, bitterness creeping in. "And this... might give them new fuel."

Her face pales. "I never wanted to make things worse."

I push upright, forcing the swirling mess of emotions aside. "We'll handle it." The words feel hollow, but I try to inject confidence. Carefully, I reach for her hand. "What happened here... it doesn't solve the sabotage or the clan's panic. But it changes—" I pause, grappling for the right words. "It changes us."

She nods, biting her lower lip. "It does." Her gaze flickers with a swirl of tenderness and worry. "I won't regret it," she adds, softly. "No matter what happens."

My chest tightens at the admission, a warmth flooding me. "Nor will I."

Yet the sense of urgency remains. I can't linger in this fleeting intimacy while my clan is in peril. Swallowing hard, I begin reassembling my clothing—buckling my vest, adjusting the bracers on my wrists. My mind already churns with how to handle the tainted cistern and quell rumors that might explode once the clan learns their water is unsafe.

Lirienne mirrors my motions, dressing quietly. The air between us still vibrates with unspoken longing, but the pragmatic orc in me recognizes we have no time to dwell. Once fully clothed, she turns to me, arms wrapped around her middle as if to ward off the chill.

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“Stay,” she says, voice trembling. “Just... for a moment.”

I yearn to. But a chieftain’s duty won’t allow it. “I must reassure the clan before chaos takes root.” My tone is gentler than usual, though. “But I promise you—I’ll come back.”

She searches my eyes, then nods. “All right. And Ghorzag... please be careful.”

A grim smile forms on my face. “Always.”

Stepping out into the courtyard, I find the night sky cloaked in stars—a serene contrast to the storm in my heart. The fortress stands in shadowed vigil, torches flickering along the walls. Every watchful gaze seems to burn into me, as though the sentries sense the shift that just occurred.

I clench my fists. Focus. There is no place for guilt or second-guessing, not when the clan needs leadership. I move to the main hall, where I expect to find Karzug and other warriors finalizing plans to cleanse or seal the cistern. As I pass a group of orcs huddled by a brazier, their conversation stills, eyes tracking me with an intensity that prickles my skin.

One orc, a woman named Raagha, frowns openly. “Chieftain,” she greets, yet her tone is loaded with unasked questions.

“Trouble?” I demand, stopping short.

She hesitates, exchanging looks with her companions. “They’re saying the War God

grows more wrathful each day. First the orchard floods, then the livestock deaths, and now the water.” She shrugs, voice dropping to a hushed note. “Some think your decision to... keep the human is provoking his anger.”

My temper flares. I force it down, giving a tight nod. “We have an enemy among us, not the War God’s anger. Spread the word. Anyone found stirring panic will answer to me.”

Her eyes flick away, uncertain. “As you command.”

I leave them behind, aware that no matter how firmly I deny the War God’s displeasure, many orcs want to believe in a curse. It’s easier to blame the unknown than to accept that one of our own might be a traitor.

I reach the main hall to find Karzug pacing before a large wooden table spread with maps of the fortress. A group of warriors hovers, faces drawn with fatigue and worry. At my entrance, Karzug glances up. “Chieftain,” he says in relief, stepping aside so I can see the maps.

“Any progress?” I ask, scanning the rough sketches of tunnels and cistern networks.

He shakes his head. “We’ve blocked off the eastern cistern. A few orcs will begin draining and scrubbing it at first light. But rumors are already churning. Some claim the War God himself spat into our water.”

My teeth grind. “Let me guess: they blame Lirienne?”

A tense silence answers. At last, one older warrior clears his throat. “They do. Even some who were neutral before. The idea of curses runs deep among our people.”

I pin him with a glare. “She’s not the cause. We suspect foul play. Keep searching for

footprints, hidden passages—anything that might reveal how someone accessed the cistern.”

The warrior nods reluctantly. “Yes, Chieftain.”

Karzug’s gaze flicks over me, faint suspicion in his eyes, as though he senses a shift in my demeanor. “You were... absent earlier,” he says, measured. “We could’ve used you to calm the initial panic.”

I stiffen. “I was checking on something,” I answer curtly. The memory of Lirienne’s tent, her body pressed against mine, flares hot in my mind. I force my expression neutral. “Now I’m here.”

An awkward pause. Then Karzug turns back to the maps. “All right. We’ll keep searching.”

The others quietly disperse, leaving me and Karzug alone in the vast hall. Torches sputter on the stone walls, their light dancing across the tapestries that depict orcish victories of old. Karzug studies me for a long moment.

“Ghorzag,” he says at last, voice low enough not to echo. “Be cautious. The clan is on edge, and anything you do—anything that appears soft toward the human—will magnify distrust.”

My jaw tightens. “I know.”

He tilts his head, eyes narrowing. “Is there... something else going on with her? You seem more unsettled than usual.”

A spark of protectiveness flares. I force a scoff. “I’m unsettled because of sabotage, Karzug. That’s all. Stick to your duties.”



He exhales, clearly wanting to press but refraining. “Understood.” Then he turns, leaving me alone with the flickering torches and the weight of my own secrets.

I prowl the fortress corridors, checking on guard posts, quietly listening for rumors. Everywhere I go, I find the same undercurrent of unease: whispered speculations about what might be driving these “omens.” Some orcs voice open hostility toward Lirienne, saying the clan should cast her out and appease the War God. Others pin their hopes on me to uncover a mortal saboteur.

Uncertainty gnaws at my insides, fueled by the memory of the frantic, consuming desire I just shared with Lirienne. A single night’s passion doesn’t magically solve anything; if anything, it raises the stakes—for me personally, and for her. Now, I can’t separate my duty to protect the clan from my protective instinct toward her. If the clan discovers the intensity of our connection, those who doubt me might take matters into their own hands.

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But walking away from her now, pretending we haven't just shared something profound, feels impossible. I won't lose her to their ignorance or fear. That vow burns in my chest, fueling my determination to root out the saboteur once and for all—no matter the cost.

9

LIRIENNE

Lanternlight bathes the fortress corridors in a wan glow as I emerge from my tent. My limbs feel sluggish, as though I haven't truly slept. Even without the constant drumbeat of sabotage rumors and clan tensions, my mind is a whirl of conflicting emotions.

The memory of what happened—of Ghorzag's fierce embrace, our anger and fear transforming into a fiery connection—hovers at the forefront of my thoughts. Part of me still can't believe it has happened. The rest of me braces for the fallout. He's the chieftain, I remind myself, and I'm the human the clan blames for every ill. If anyone finds out about the intimacy we've shared, suspicion will only multiply.

As I make my way across the courtyard, I feel eyes sliding over me, some openly hostile, others merely curious. A group of orc warriors leans against a barricade of stacked crates, weapons clutched in restless hands. Their low-voiced murmurs cease when I pass, replaced by sneers and sidelong glances. My pulse quickens.

I will not cower, I tell myself, squaring my shoulders. I come here to help forge peace, not to hide. Yet the tension in the air is palpable, pressing down like a

gathering storm.

I head toward Ragzuk's workshop, hoping to check on any new injuries and keep busy. The fortress's battered hallways and courtyard corners are rife with anxious clusters of orcs, exchanging grim gossip in hushed tones:

"The water problem... definitely the War God's curse."

"Or else she's bewitching Ghorzag to ignore the signs."

"He has been acting strange lately..."

My stomach knots as I catch snippets of conversation. Whispers of "human witchcraft" rise among them, echoing more loudly than before. I heard it in passing recently, but now the accusations are sharper, more pointed. I grip the strap of my satchel, forcing myself to keep walking. Let them talk. They don't know the truth.

Still, a cold sweat breaks out along my temples. Human witchcraft. The idea is laughable—I have no magical powers beyond the herb-lore I learned at home. But to orcs, who believe in curses and the War God's wrath, such a rumor might be dangerously plausible.

Near one of the side passages, I glimpse an orc woman gesturing emphatically to a group of listeners. Her voice carries in the still air: "I heard she used her illusions to trap him. Ghorzag defends her at every turn, doesn't he?" Another orc spits on the ground in agreement. The pungent reek of suspicion clings to the hallway like old smoke.

A hollow feeling settles in my gut. If the clan believes I'm using sorcery to manipulate their chieftain, how long will it be before the more militant warriors decide to "free" him by eliminating me altogether?

In an attempt to quell my nerves, I divert to the kitchens—my new routine, where I can at least appear useful. The moment I step through the heavy door, a hush spreads among the cooks. Some set down utensils; others pause mid-chop, eyes sliding in my direction.

I muster my best polite nod. “Good morning,” I say quietly.

No one replies. The tension is thicker than old stew left to congeal. My cheeks burn. I take a few steps toward the wash basin, intending to tackle the pile of dishes stacked there. A burly orc male, the one who once sneered at me for potentially “burning the bread,” looms over the sink, arms folded.

“You,” he growls. “Stop.”

I freeze. My heart thuds. “Is there something you need?”

His lip curls, revealing chipped tusks. “We heard rumors. That you’re bewitching Ghorzag, twisting his mind. Some say you’re using human potions or spells so he’ll protect you. Is that what your little herbs and salves really are?”

Blood drains from my face. “No, that’s—I’ve never?—”

“Don’t lie to us,” hisses a female cook from behind. Others murmur in agreement. They form a loose semicircle, as if preparing to corner me. My breath catches. They’re not all hateful, I remind myself, but the suspicion in their eyes is unmistakable.

“I don’t have witchcraft,” I repeat, voice shaking with anger and hurt. “I only know basic healing remedies. Nothing else.”

“Lies,” spits the male cook. “We’ve seen how Ghorzag defends you—more fiercely

every day. You must have done something to make him so blind to the War God's omens."

Heat flares in my cheeks. If only they knew the actual reason. A swirl of shame, fear, and indignation laces my thoughts. "If that were true, would I be scrubbing dishes and peeling potatoes?" I demand, trying to keep my voice steady. "I want to help. Nothing more."

The orcs exchange uncertain looks, the tension thick. One or two seem less convinced of my guilt, but none speaks in my defense. Finally, the female cook thrusts a wooden ladle into my hand. "Fine. Stir the stew," she snaps, pointing to a giant pot. "And watch your potions. If we see anything suspicious..."

She lets the threat hang, unspoken and deadly. I swallow hard, managing a jerky nod. My hands shake as I clutch the ladle. The hush recedes into resentful muttering, but the taste of hostility lingers in the air. They truly think I have Ghorzag under a spell. My chest constricts with a wave of helplessness.

I stir the stew mechanically, biting my lip to keep tears of frustration at bay. Yesterday, working here felt like a step toward acceptance. Now, I'm an outsider among them again, rumors swirling that I hold the clan's chieftain enthralled by magic. The irony—my genuine bond with Ghorzag—only makes it more painful to hear. They won't even believe we share mutual respect or something deeper, I think grimly. To them, it must be sorcery.

I don't stay in the kitchens long. After fulfilling a few minor tasks, I slip out, the tension strangling my every breath. If I'm going to keep my sanity, I need to find a calmer place to think. Ragzuk's workshop, I decide. At least there, the old shaman's apprentice might not treat me like a plague.

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But as I round a corner, I nearly collide with a pair of warriors engaged in heated conversation.

“—Chieftain’s lost his mind—” one snarls.

“—should exile the human—” the other snaps, voice thick with rage. “War God or not, she’s trouble.”

I freeze behind a stack of crates, holding my breath so they won’t see me. My heart hammers. They have no idea I’m here, eavesdropping from mere steps away.

“She’s undermining us,” the first warrior continues, voice echoing in the corridor. “She pretends to help in the kitchens, but I bet she’s stirring curses into our food.”

The other lets out a derisive laugh. “And Ghorzag? She’s twisted him around her finger. She needs to be cast out, or better yet—” He trails off with a vicious grin, letting the implication hang.

My blood runs cold. They want me gone, by force if necessary. My mind races. Exile is one thing; a sentence to wander the wilds until I starve or am hunted by orcs or worse. Death, meanwhile, is a permanent solution. If enough warriors demand it, how would Ghorzag stop them? The clan reveres strength and tradition, and if they believe I’m truly cursed, they might challenge Ghorzag’s leadership.

Suddenly, a third voice—familiar, arrogant—cuts through the tension like a blade. “Patience. We’ll handle this carefully. The Chieftain’s cousin stands with us.”

I peer around the crates to see that the newcomer is an orc clad in armor bearing faint familial markings—similar to Ghorzag’s, but stylized differently. His cousin, I realize with a jolt. So there is a rival commander among Ghorzag’s own blood. He’s tall, with braided hair laced with small iron beads, a cunning glint in his eyes.

His tone turns conspiratorial. “If Ghorzag keeps ignoring the War God’s displeasure, we’ll unite the dissenters. Claim the clan demands her removal. He won’t be able to stand against us all.”

A chill ripples through me. So they plan a coordinated push to oust me. Possibly a direct challenge to Ghorzag’s authority. My throat constricts. He’s your own kin, Ghorzag, and he’s plotting to undermine you.

The trio moves off, their footsteps fading down the corridor. I stay hidden until I’m certain they’re gone, heart pounding with a mix of fear and betrayal. If the Chieftain’s cousin is orchestrating the clan’s hostility, that spells deeper trouble than random sabotage.

I move steadily to Ragzuk’s workshop, shaken. My every footstep feels heavier than the last, my mind replaying those chilling words: Exile. Possibly kill her. Twist Ghorzag around her finger. Fear throbs at my temples like a headache I can’t shake.

I push open the workshop door to find Ragzuk hunched over a table of herbs, carefully sorting dried leaves into neat piles. He glances up, watery eyes narrowing. “Ah, Lirienne,” he says softly, voice raspy with age. “You look... unsettled.”

I draw a shaky breath, shutting the door behind me. “You could say that. Where’s Nagra?”

“Out gathering supplies,” Ragzuk replies, gesturing me forward. “But you’re trembling. Sit.”

I sink onto a low stool, resisting the urge to bury my face in my hands. If I tell Ragzuk everything, will that place him at risk? He's been relatively sympathetic to me, but is he loyal enough to stand against Ghorzag's cousin if it comes to confrontation?

He must read the turmoil on my face. "I may be old, but I'm not blind," he says, setting aside his herbs. "What's happened?"

I force my voice to steady. "Some of the warriors are calling for my exile. They think I'm... using witchcraft to control Ghorzag. I overheard them plotting with someone claiming to be Ghorzag's cousin."

A flicker of alarm crosses Ragzuk's features. "His cousin. That would be Gaurbod. Ambitious orc, always jockeying for position." He drums his bony fingers on the table. "He's never openly challenged Ghorzag, but if the clan truly believes the War God's wrath is upon us, Gaurbod might see an opportunity to unseat him."

My chest constricts. "And it's all pinned on me." A wave of hopelessness swells. "If Ghorzag can't protect me—if the clan storms my tent—they'll kill me, Ragzuk. I won't even have a chance to defend myself."

He shakes his head, eyes grave. "Ghorzag is strong. He'll stand against them. But the clan's fear is a powerful weapon. Gaurbod's cunning enough to exploit it."

My heart twists at the memory of last night's intimacy with Ghorzag, the sense that we'd forged a bond transcending orc-human boundaries. Now, that bond is being used as evidence of my manipulation. "So what do I do?" I whisper.

Ragzuk sighs. "You have few choices. You can try to flee, but that would confirm their suspicion that you're guilty of something. Or you can trust Ghorzag to shield you while we keep searching for proof of sabotage—something that convinces the



clan it's not the War God's wrath."

I hesitate, tears burning the backs of my eyes. "What if the sabotage continues? They'll only see more omens, more reason to blame me."

A haunted look crosses his face. "Then we must hope we catch the saboteur soon, or the clan will inevitably turn on you." His blunt words sting, but I appreciate his honesty.

I spend the next hour helping Ragzuk with minor tasks, though my mind is elsewhere. The hum of the fortress beyond the workshop's walls is a constant reminder of the rising hostility. My trust in Ghorzag—once so resolute—is wobbling. Not because he's abandoned me, but because the forces arrayed against him are so formidable.

Can he truly protect me from his own cousin, from a good chunk of the clan? The question gnaws at my insides. Part of me flares with a stubborn faith in him. Another part whispers that I might be condemning both of us to ruin if I stay.

Eventually, I can't stand the workshop's walls any longer. The cloying scent of herbs makes me dizzy. Bidding Ragzuk a subdued farewell, I leave, hoping to gather my courage and find Ghorzag to discuss what I've overheard. He needs to know about Gaurbod's plotting.

I find him in the main hall, standing near a cluster of warriors who pore over maps of the fortress's water supply. They speak in low tones, expressions grim. My pulse quickens at the sight of him—tall, muscular, tattoos swirling across his green skin. Memories of last night's heated embrace flicker, but I shove them aside in the face of urgent danger.

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He glimpses me at the edge of the meeting and holds up a hand to pause the conversation. The warriors exchange glances, some scowling as I approach. I force myself not to shrink under their gaze.

“Lirienne,” Ghorzag says, voice calm but tinged with concern. “Is something wrong?”

My throat feels tight. “I need to speak with you.” My eyes flick to the watching warriors. “Privately.”

A faint tension ripples across his jaw. He nods, dismissing them with a curt gesture. They retreat, though not without suspicious glances at me. Ghorzag leads me to a quieter alcove near the hall’s corner, where a flickering torch casts warm light on the stone walls.

“What is it?” he asks, crossing his arms. Though he tries to appear stoic, I sense the underlying worry in his eyes.

I swallow. “Your cousin—Gaurbod. He’s plotting with some warriors, stirring them against me. They’re saying I’ve bewitched you. That every calamity is the War God’s punishment for your decision to keep me.”

His expression darkens, tusks gleaming under the torchlight. “Gaurbod,” he growls, voice laced with disdain. “I suspected he might try to use the clan’s fear for his own gain. But to openly threaten you...?”

“They want me exiled,” I whisper, recalling the orc’s vicious grin. “At best. At worst,

they're discussing more violent solutions. I overheard them say you're being 'too soft' and that I've enthralled you with human magic."

A muscle in Ghorzag's jaw flexes. His hands ball into fists. "They dare?"

I exhale sharply. "I'm telling you because I need to know—can you truly protect me from them? If Gaurbod gathers enough support, will you stand alone against your own clan?"

His eyes bore into mine, an unspoken challenge. "You doubt me?"

I flinch, shame coiling in my gut. "I don't want to. But the clan's hostility grows daily. And I saw how big that group was. They called for my exile. Some demanded blood. If it comes to an open revolt..."

His nostrils flare in a harsh exhale. "I'll fight them if I must."

A swirl of emotions—relief, fear, gratitude—wars inside me. "You can't do this alone," I say softly. "And I can't keep living in fear of every shadow. Maybe... maybe I should leave, to keep the clan from falling into civil war."

The thought of leaving him, after the bond we've forged in adversity—and in the throes of raw passion—feels like a blade slicing through my chest. Tears prick my eyes. I don't want to be the cause of strife between him and his people, but I also fear becoming a scapegoat for all their woes.

"No," he snaps, voice harsh. "Don't speak of leaving. It would only confirm their suspicions. Besides..." He hesitates, gaze flicking away. "Besides, I won't lose you so easily."

A trembling breath escapes me. Part of me soars at his protectiveness, the unspoken

hint of something more in his words. Another part worries that by staying, I'll push the clan closer to rebellion. "Then what do we do?"

He falls silent, brow furrowed. Torchlight reveals the tension etched into every line of his face. He's struggling with this. Possibly for the first time, Ghorzag faces a threat that can't be solved with brute force alone. The sabotage only fuels the clan's paranoia, and Gaurbod stokes the flames from within.

At length, Ghorzag speaks. "I'll gather loyal warriors—those who see reason. We'll double patrols, watch for any sign of infiltration. We will catch this saboteur. Once we prove the misfortunes are man-made, not divine, the clan will have no grounds to blame you."

"And Gaurbod?" I press.

His jaw hardens. "If he's behind this, I'll deal with him." A subtle quiver in his voice betrays the personal pain of confronting a cousin. But he sets his shoulders. "He won't move openly without more proof you're a curse."

I nod, though my mind still roils. "He's cunning, Ghorzag."

"I know," he mutters. Then he reaches for my hand, a gesture that nearly brings tears to my eyes. His palm is rough, calloused from years of wielding weapons, yet his touch is warm. "Trust me, Lirienne. We'll weather this."

I want to trust him. But the lingering memory of orcs whispering my name in hate-filled tones refuses to vanish. My heart aches with uncertainty. "I'll try," I whisper, voice trembling. "But if it comes down to your clan or me... I know your duty lies with your people first."

He tenses. "Don't pit me against them."

“I’m not,” I say softly, sorrow lacing my tone. “But Gaurbod is, and so are the others calling for my blood. If they force a confrontation...” I trail off, leaving the grim possibility hanging in the torchlit space.

His hand tightens on mine. “No one touches you while I breathe.”

For a moment, we cling to that vow, precarious as it is. The fortress’s hum of activity seeps back in: distant footfalls, the grind of stone on stone, the muffled ring of a blacksmith’s hammer. The orcs in the main hall, wary of me, might be just a few steps away.

When we finally separate, Ghorzag returns to the group of warriors with a resolute expression, telling them to intensify the watch and watch out for conspirators. I hover nearby, observing the way orcs stiffen or avert their gazes whenever my presence registers. Rumors about me must have reached every corner of the fortress by now: the “human witch,” controlling the chieftain with spells or potions.

In the hall’s echoing expanse, I turn away to avoid another wave of suspicious stares. My heart feels heavy, thoughts circling the possibility that all my efforts—cooking, healing, forging connections—are unraveling under the weight of superstition. The clan is on the brink, sabotage continuing unchecked, and Gaurbod’s manipulative plot threatens to spark outright rebellion.

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A dull ache settles in my chest. Perhaps the greatest wound comes from the wedge these whispers drive between me and Ghorzag. While I believe his intentions, the question haunts me: Could he truly uphold his vow against a tide of orcish hostility? If the clan demands blood, tradition might compel him to yield—or risk losing the chieftain's seat. And if he lost the seat, the next leader would surely cast me out anyway.

Catching me in my spiral of dark thoughts, Nagra approaches, concern etched on her face. “Lirienne,” she murmurs. “I heard some orcs calling for your exile. Are you all right?”

I force a brittle smile. “I’ll survive. I just... I’m not sure how much longer the clan will let me stay.”

Her expression grows pained. “I’m sorry. So many of them cling to fear. They’d rather blame you than admit a traitor walks among us sabotaging us.”

I swallow, forcing down the lump in my throat. “Thank you for caring, Nagra. I appreciate having at least a few orcs who don’t see me as a monster.”

Her hand squeezes mine. “If Ghorzag stands with you, maybe that’ll be enough.”

Her words try to soothe me, but the seeds of doubt have already taken root. Even the chieftain's power has limits. If Gaurbod rallies enough orcs to his cause, might Ghorzag have to choose between his clan's demands and me?

By late evening, the fortress's tension reaches a fever pitch. Word of the “fouled

water” has spread like wildfire, and rumors of “human witchcraft” along with it. Everywhere I go, I hear hushed arguments, see warriors exchanging guarded looks, and sense the roiling undercurrent of potential violence.

The knowledge of Gaurbod’s involvement weighs heavily on me. I toy with telling Karzug or another trusted warrior, but Ghorzag has said he’ll handle it. Yet do I trust that’s enough? The question gnaws at my insides.

In the courtyard, I catch sight of Gaurbod himself, flanked by two warriors, walking with a swaggering confidence. His eyes slide over me without pause, betraying no fear—only a cool, calculating satisfaction. My stomach lurches. He knows I overheard something, I suspect. Or he doesn’t care who overhears. His posture radiates the arrogance of one who believes he’ll soon seize power.

I turn on my heel, retreating before he can confront me. My hands tremble. He’s so certain he can topple Ghorzag. If that’s true, then no vow from the chieftain can save me. I bite my lip, a swirl of panic threatening to overwhelm rational thought.

No. Calm, I tell myself. You have to be strong, or the clan will devour you.

I avoid the communal gathering spaces, ducking away from the suspicious glares. My feet lead me, almost unconsciously, to a secluded passage behind the storage rooms—one of the few quiet corners I’ve found in this fortress. A small torch sputters in its bracket, casting dancing shadows on the walls as night comes.

I sink against the cold stone, letting out a shaky breath. My eyes close, memories of home flooding in—the farmland, the day I volunteered to come here, how naive I’d been about forging peace.

“Running from ghosts?” a voice rasps, startling me.

My eyes snap open to see an orc figure looming at the corridor's far end, half-hidden in shadow. My heart leaps to my throat, terror spiking. Has Gaurbod sent someone to corner me?

But as he steps forward, the faint torchlight reveals an older orc with a ragged scar across his mouth, wearing the clan's warrior leathers. "Didn't mean to scare you, human," he says, though no warmth laces his tone.

I straighten, fists clenched at my sides. "I—I'm not running," I lie.

He gives a short, mirthless laugh. "Could've fooled me. Rumor is you'll be gone soon enough—one way or another."

Cold dread slides through my veins. "Is that what they're saying?" I ask, voice trembling despite my resolve.

A slow nod. "Warriors gather in secret, forging alliances. Gaurbod might make a formal challenge if Ghorzag won't cast you out." His eyes flick over me with something akin to pity. "The clan's in turmoil. You're at the heart of it, whether you want to be or not."

I swallow, throat dry. "What do you believe?"

He shrugs. "I think the War God's wrath is real enough. But sabotage could be part of it too. Doesn't matter. The clan's fracturing. If you stay, more blood might spill."

My chest tightens, tears threatening. "I came to prevent bloodshed," I whisper, more to myself than him.

He offers no comfort, only a grim shrug. Then, with a final hollow look, he turns and vanishes down the corridor. I stand there, breathing ragged, the weight of the clan's



hostility crashing down around me like a collapsing wall.

I can't keep living like this, the words echo in my mind, an anguished refrain. I think of Ghorzag, of how he insists he will protect me. But more and more orcs are calling for action—some for exile, some for outright violence. Gaurbod's cunning manipulations threaten to spark a mutiny. Even if Ghorzag wins a direct confrontation, the bloodshed might be immense.

A sob chokes my throat. I slap a hand over my mouth, refusing to break down fully. No. I'll talk to him again, one last time, and then... I'll decide. If leaving spares him a civil war, maybe that's the path I must take. But how about my village? What should I do?

Yet as I force myself away from the shadows, heading toward my tent, the specter of distrust looms large. Could Ghorzag truly stand against the tide of fear rising in his clan? Or am I clinging to a sliver of hope that might drown us both?

10

GHORZAG

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:38 am*

The first pale rays of dawn find me in the fortress courtyard, leaning against a stone parapet as I survey the waking clan below. A gentle wind tugs at the beads woven into my hair, creating a softclink-clinkthat somehow underlines the tension coiling in my chest. Sleep has been elusive these last few nights—no surprise, given the rising calls for Lirienne’s exile and the unrelenting sabotage that continues to plague us.

From where I stand, I can see the main gates, guarded by two grim-faced warriors who look about as tired as I feel. Beyond them, the horizon glimmers in hues of orange and pink, heralding a new day that will likely bring more conflict. We can’t go on like this, I tell myself, pressing a palm against the cool stone. We need answers.

A figure approaches from behind. I turn to see Karzug moving with purposeful strides. His face is drawn, the lines around his eyes deeper than I remember. He’s been up nearly as long as I have—hours spent combing through reports of suspicious activity, trying to pinpoint the saboteur. When he reaches me, he inclines his head in a curt greeting.

“You called for a meeting at first light,” Karzug says, voice low enough that it won’t carry. “Shall we gather the advisors now?”

I nod. “Yes. Best not delay. We have too many issues demanding immediate attention.” I hesitate, gaze drifting toward the fortress’s interior. “Make sure only those loyal to me are present.”

Karzug’s brow furrows. “You suspect infiltration among our own ranks?”

I exhale slowly. “I do. Some orcs fear the War God’s wrath so blindly, they’ll do

anything to rid us of Lirienne. And Gaurbod..." My jaw flexes. "He stirs that fear for his own gain."

Karzug lowers his voice. "We both know Gaurbod's been restless ever since you took up leadership. But to encourage sabotage... it would be a step too far."

"Desperate orcs do desperate things," I mutter. "He might not be the saboteur himself, but I'm certain he's fueling the hostility—and that's bad enough." Pressing off the parapet, I jerk my head toward the fortress's main hall. "Come. Let's not keep the others waiting."

We convene in a small chamber off the main hall, a place normally used for storing ceremonial weapons. I've had a few torches lit, casting wavering shadows on the bare stone walls. A round wooden table takes center stage, scattered with maps, bits of parchment scrawled with notes, and a few half-burned candles. The air smells faintly of tallow and old steel.

My closest advisors trickle in one by one. There's Karzug, of course, standing near the door. Then Ragzuk—technically the shaman's apprentice, but in practice often the clan's primary spiritual counsel. Next come Harzug and Vardu, two seasoned warriors who fought alongside my father. Both men are fiercely loyal to the clan, though they eye Lirienne's presence with caution. Finally, a handful of orc watchers, younger but dependable, crowd the edges, ready to relay any intelligence gleaned from nightly patrols.

I wait until they all stand in a tight circle around the table before speaking. "Thank you for coming," I begin quietly, letting my gaze sweep across them. "We're here because we face a crisis. The orchard floods, the livestock poisoning, the fouled cistern. We suspect sabotage—someone is orchestrating these disasters."

Ragzuk nods, arms folded inside his worn robes. "There can be no doubt now,

Chieftain. Too many unnatural events in too short a time.”

Harzug’s scarred brow furrows. “So it isn’t the War God punishing us?”

I take a measured breath. “No. Or if it is, then a mortal agent is helping the War God’s wrath along.” A murmur ripples through the group—some incredulous, others grimly accepting. I continue, voice harder, “But until we prove it’s sabotage, half the clan still clings to the idea that Lirienne is behind our woes.”

Vardu shakes his head in frustration. “They see how you protect her. Many suspect bewitchment.”

Anger flares hot in my chest. “She’s done nothing except heal our warriors, help in the kitchens, and try to earn her place. If the clan chooses to see curses instead of facts, I’ll not stand by it. But rumor is a powerful foe.”

Karzug clears his throat. “Which is why we must find concrete proof. We’ve stepped up patrols around the fortress perimeter, doubled the watch near the cistern and orchard. Yet no one’s caught anyone red-handed. It’s as if the saboteur knows our movements.”

A hush follows, the weight of that implication sinking in. Perhaps our traitor works within these very walls—someone with enough cunning to evade detection.

Ragzuk regards me thoughtfully. “Even so, we can’t wait forever. The clan grows restless, demanding a sign from the War God. The elders speak of a?”

He pauses, but I finish the sentence for him. “A sacred pilgrimage toward the sacred altar of the War God.” My voice tastes bitter. I’ve been dreading this moment. The War God’s priests mentioned it in passing before. Now, the demands are deafening.

A grim nod from Ragzuk. “Yes. They want you to petition the War God directly for clarity or blessing. They claim only then will the clan know if Lirienne truly curses us.”

Harzug spits on the ground, dissatisfaction etched into every line of his face. “I hate it. Bowing to superstition at a time like this. But the elders have a powerful voice.”

Vardu rumbles agreement. “If the clan demands it and we refuse, many might side with Gaurbod, believing we defy the War God’s will. We risk civil strife.”

I close my eyes momentarily, the flicker of torchlight dancing behind my lids. So it’s come to this. “We must go, then,” I say. “If a pilgrimage is the only way to quell rumors of the War God’s wrath... I’ll do it.”

Karzug exhales, relief and worry mingled. “And Lirienne?”

Tension coils. “She must come with me.” A murmur of shock ripples around the circle. I lift a hand to forestall objections. “If this is truly about proving or disproving her presence as a curse, she must stand before the War God too.”

Harzug frowns deeply. “That journey is fraught with dangers—bandits, wild beasts, not to mention potential interference from dark elves if they catch wind. You want to bring a human on that trek?”

I hold his stare. “We have no choice. The clan demands the War God’s verdict on us, not just me. Lirienne’s part of the alliance. If we leave her behind, we prove nothing.”

Silence follows, tense as a coiled spring. Ragzuk eventually speaks, voice subdued. “The temple is a week’s travel into the mountain passes. We’ll need supplies, skilled warriors to defend against ambush. And, if we’re being honest, your cousin Gaurbod might attempt to use the pilgrimage for his own ends.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:38 am*

I stiffen, recalling Lirienne's fearful recounting of Gaurbod's plotting. "Yes. Which is why I want you all to keep a close eye on who volunteers to join the pilgrimage. We'll need to gather loyal orcs who truly want resolution, not sabotage."

Karzug claps a fist to his chest in salute. "We'll start preparations immediately, Chieftain."

With that, the secret meeting ends, a swirl of tasks assigned among the watchers and advisors. As they disperse, none looks entirely reassured. The idea of traveling toward the sacred altar with half the clan suspecting Lirienne as a curse—and the other half suspecting sabotage—seems like an invitation to violence. But if we do nothing, the clan tears itself apart here.

Not an hour after the meeting, a group of clan elders confronts me in the main hall. Thick pillars bear old runes dedicated to the War God, the floor scattered with animal furs for seating. These elders, hunched and grey-haired, seldom venture from their usual corner unless they want to make a point. Today, they clearly do.

One elder, draped in tattered ceremonial robes, shakes his staff so violently the carved bone charms rattle. "Chieftain, we have come to demand you heed the War God's will!" His voice echoes off the stone walls, drawing curious glances from orcs passing outside.

I cross my arms, maintaining a steady posture. "I've already decided on the pilgrimage."

A ripple of surprise flickers across their lined faces, quickly replaced by stern nods.

“Good,” says another elder, her braided hair grey with age. “We can’t abide this uncertainty any longer. The clan’s survival depends on the War God’s favor.”

I suppress a flash of irritation. You so easily assume it’s the War God’s anger, ignoring the sabotage that stands right in front of you. But I bite my tongue. “We’ll prepare to leave within the next day or two,” I tell them evenly. “You’ll have your sacred petition.”

The first elder’s gaze shifts, a flicker of cunning. “And the human? She goes too?”

My tusks grind together. “She must. Otherwise, how else will we discover if the War God condemns or spares her?”

A few elders exchange wary glances. “If He truly hates her presence,” murmurs one in a voice dripping with foreboding, “she won’t survive the pilgrimage. We hope you’re prepared for such a possibility.”

Anger roils in my gut, but my voice is measured. “That’s for the War God to decide. Not you.”

They bow stiffly, hobble out, leaving me grappling with the urge to slam my fist into a pillar. If they’re so sure the War God demands blood, they might provoke an ‘accident’ themselves. I have to ensure Lirienne’s safety on this journey at all costs.

I’ve just finished that tense exchange with the elders when an even more unwelcome figure appears near the main hall’s threshold—Gaurbod, my cousin. His braided hair glints with iron beads, the same shade as mine, though he’s slightly leaner in build. A smug half-smile twists his lips as he approaches, flanked by two warriors who share his sly air.

“Well, cousin,” Gaurbod drawls, inclining his head in mocking courtesy. “I hear you

finally caved to the elders' demands. Taking that human to the temple to beg forgiveness?"

I resist the urge to bare my tusks. "I'm doing what's necessary for the clan. You'd do well to fall in line."

He clicks his tongue, feigning pity. "You cling to that woman so fiercely. The clan wonders if you're bewitched. Perhaps you hope the War God's temple will break her hold on you?"

My rage simmers, but I force a cold smile. "If you truly believed I was under a curse, you'd challenge me openly. Yet here you stand, spouting rumors instead of facing me in honorable combat."

A tense silence pulses. The two warriors at his side bristle, clearly loyal to him. Gaurbod's gaze flickers. "Careful, dear cousin. The War God might not appreciate your arrogance. If I do challenge you, it will be when the clan stands fully behind me."

So that's his game. He wants a bloodless coup, an entire clan demanding I step down, rather than risk losing a direct fight. I laugh softly—an empty sound. "You won't get that chance. Once I prove these omens are mortal-made, your conspiracies crumble."

He shrugs, confidence undiminished. "We'll see, Ghorzag. Enjoy your pilgrimage—if you return." With that veiled threat, he pivots on his heel and strides off, entourage in tow.

My hands shake with the urge to seize him by the throat right there. But doing so would only fuel his claims that I'm unstable. Calm, I order myself. We need cunning as much as brute force to root out his scheme. If the War God's verdict—real or perceived—comes back in Lirienne's favor, Gaurbod's propaganda collapses.



By midday, I've ordered the fortress guards to prepare a travel detail—picking a select group to accompany me. Karzug oversees the logistics, ensuring we have enough supplies for a week's journey. We agree that only the most trustworthy warriors will come. Anyone with even a whiff of Gaurbod's influence is pointedly excluded, though we can't be certain we've weeded out every spy.

At last, I walk to Lirienne's tent. My chest tightens at the thought of seeing her again. After our furious, desperate night together, everything has changed. But the clan's suspicion leaves us with little time to explore that new bond.

I find her sitting on a low stool outside the tent, carefully tending to a small herb garden she's cultivated in wooden boxes. She glances up, tension in her eyes immediately giving way to cautious relief at my presence. "Ghorzag," she says softly.

"Busy?" I ask, voice gentler than usual.

Her gaze flicks to the half-pruned herb stalks, then back to me. "Just trying to keep my mind off the rumors." A shadow crosses her face. "They're getting worse."

I nod, stepping closer. "We're leaving soon," I tell her, keeping my tone firm yet calm. "The War God's priests demand a sacred pilgrimage to the temple. And you must come with me."

She stills, fingers tightening around a leaf. "I was afraid you'd say that," she murmurs. Then, squaring her shoulders, she meets my gaze. "What does that mean for me?"

"It means we walk a hard road," I admit. "The temple is about a week's journey through the mountain passes. If the War God truly despises your presence, so the elders say, you'll face his condemnation."

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Her jaw sets in a mix of resolve and fear. “And if we discover sabotage is behind the clan’s misfortunes? Will that be enough to prove me innocent?”

I exhale. “I hope so. The clan is desperate for a sign. A pilgrimage could either quell their fears or confirm them, in their eyes.”

She rises slowly, the wooden box shifting as she brushes the dirt from her hands. “What if something goes wrong, Ghorzag? If your cousin or his followers sabotage the pilgrimage?”

A muscle in my neck twitches. “We’ll be prepared. I’ve selected orcs who are loyal to me.” I pause, stepping closer, my voice dropping. “I’ll stand between you and every threat. We’ll see this through.”

Her eyes search mine, doubt flickering. Then she nods, a trembling sigh escaping. “All right. When do we leave?”

“The day after tomorrow,” I say, mindful of how short the timeline is. “Pack enough to keep you warm at night. The mountains can be cruel.”

She nods again, turning her gaze to the horizon. She’s afraid, I realize, seeing the tightness in her features. But she’s still standing here, ready to go. I reach out, letting my hand brush hers lightly, a fleeting touch. Her fingers curl against my palm in silent acknowledgment.

Neither of us says anything else. Words feel woefully inadequate to address the swirling chaos we face—Gaurbod’s looming betrayal, the clan’s suspicion, and our

own fragile relationship. After a long moment, she pulls away, returning to her herb box as if organizing something mundane could steady her whirling mind.

“I’ll be ready,” she whispers.

I incline my head. “I trust you.”

With that, I leave, the sense of unstoppable momentum building in my chest. The clan will have its pilgrimage. If the War God doesn’t answer as they hope, or if sabotage rears its head again... everything might come crashing down.

The rest of the day passes in a fevered blur. Karzug updates me on supply inventories—dried meats, hardtack bread, medicinal herbs, and water skins carefully stored. The night patrol doubles as watchers scout for any hint of Gaurbod’s men tampering with gear. Some of my chosen warriors question why we keep the pilgrimage group small, but I insist that fewer bodies mean fewer potential traitors in our midst.

Ragzuk corners me in the courtyard near dusk, his weathered face pinched with concern. “The War God’s priests plan to perform a sending-off ritual at dawn,” he informs me. “They’ll ask for the War God’s guidance on your journey. No small irony, given half of them blame your bride for these troubles.”

I snort, exhausted. “Let them do their ritual. So long as it doesn’t impede our departure. We can’t afford delays.”

He nods. “Just be wary. They’ll want Lirienne to bow in supplication—some form of public humility that proves she accepts the War God’s authority.”

My tusks grind together in frustration. “They want her on her knees to appease their pride.” The image sparks a fierce protective impulse. “I won’t force her to humiliate

herself.”

Ragzuk grimaces. “That might anger them more.”

I wave him off, a headache pulsing at my temples. “She’s done nothing to deserve humiliation. If they want a sign of humility, I’ll stand with her. But I won’t let them degrade her in front of the clan.”

Ragzuk inclines his head, respect in his eyes. “May the War God guide your steps, Chieftain.”

He turns to go, leaving me alone to wrestle with the knowledge that not only Gaurbod and his minions threaten us, but the priests themselves might push Lirienne into a corner. One step at a time, I remind myself. Survive the send-off, travel the mountains, reach the temple. Then hope the War God or common sense reveals the truth.

As the moon rises over the fortress, silvering the stone walls, I stand atop the ramparts, hands gripping the cold merlons. Torchlight flickers along the battlements, orcs patrolling with tense shoulders. They’re all afraid, I realize, scanning the yard below. Fear of curses, fear of sabotage, fear that everything we’ve built might collapse.

My mind drifts to Lirienne. The memory of our night together—raw emotion, unbridled desire—runs like an undercurrent through my every thought. That intimacy only heightens my determination to protect her, to prove she isn’t the cause of this chaos. But is that my personal resolve or my chieftain’s duty? The line blurs.

“Ghorzag?” a soft voice calls from behind.

I turn to see Karzug again, concern etched into his features. “All is set for tomorrow’s final errands. We depart at dawn the next day,” he says.

I nod. “Good.”

He hesitates. “Chieftain, are you... sure about bringing Lirienne? If the War God rejects her publicly, or if someone orchestrates an accident...”

“I’m sure,” I growl, sharper than intended. Then I soften my tone. “We have no choice if we want to quell the clan’s suspicions. She must accompany me.”

Karzug nods slowly, scanning the horizon. “The clan’s mood is a tinderbox. One spark could set everything aflame.” He casts me a sidelong glance. “Just... be careful, Ghorzag. We follow you, but if half the clan rebels, we’ll be outnumbered.”

I exhale. “Let them try. We’ll stand for what’s right, or we’ll fall. Better that than letting false fear rule.”

A ghost of a smile tugs at Karzug’s lips. “Spoken like your father, in his younger days.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:38 am*

My chest constricts at the reminder of my father—once a proud chieftain who led the clan through bloody skirmishes, only to die too soon. “I aim to do better,” I say quietly. “No more pointless bloodshed, if we can help it.”

Karzug sets a hand on my arm in silent solidarity, then turns away, footsteps echoing down the rampart steps. I remain there a while longer, letting the cold wind whip at my hair. Tomorrow, the clan will witness the War God’s priests performing their pomp, demanding we embark on a pilgrimage that might prove or disprove Lirienne’s worthiness.

Beneath my frustration, an uneasy flicker of hope stirs. If this pilgrimage goes well—if we survive the mountains and the War God’s temple doesn’t condemn her—maybe we can finally unify the clan around the truth. Or, if sabotage intervenes, or the War God remains silent, the clan might tear itself apart. Gaurbod’s ambitions loom like a stormcloud on the horizon, threatening to overshadow everything.

I find myself unable to sleep that night, pacing the corridors like a restless spirit. Thoughts of Lirienne’s anxious expression haunt me—her question, “Can you truly protect me?” echoing in my mind. I can’t guarantee anything in this precarious environment, but I’ll fight tooth and nail to shield her from harm.

Eventually, I make my way to the dimly lit main hall. A single torch burns near the far wall, illuminating a massive tapestry depicting the War God in stylized battle. The woven scene shows him wielding a great blade, standing triumphant over monstrous foes. The sight is meant to inspire strength, reminding orcs that victory comes through courage and unity.

Standing before that tapestry, I let the flicker of flames dance over its threads, thinking of all the times I prayed for the War God's guidance. Where are you now? I wonder silently. Do you truly demand we cast out Lirienne, or is this chaos born of mortal hatred and fear?

No answer comes, of course. The War God never speaks plainly. Perhaps that's the reason for the pilgrimage: orcs need outward signs, rituals, dramatic gestures to quell their doubts. My hope lies in making it through the journey unscathed, proving sabotage rather than divine wrath behind our misfortunes. Then maybe the clan can begin to heal, I allow myself to think.

Exhaustion presses in. I leave the hall, returning to my quarters for a few hours of restless sleep, fully aware that the next dawn will herald the official decree: We depart for the War God's temple—and Lirienne's fate hangs in the balance.

11

## LIRIENNE

If dawn marks the clan's anxious anticipation, then dusk brings something far darker. Late evening shadows stretch across the fortress courtyard, the torches sputtering as though reflecting the clan's collective dread. I stand near the main gates, arms crossed tightly over my chest, feeling the chill in my very bones. The hush in the air carries a strange weight—like every orc has paused, waiting for some sign of hope... or doom.

We are supposed to depart at first light, traveling toward the place the War God claims as His sanctum in a last-ditch effort to dispel the swirling accusations of curses and sabotage. I've spent the day gathering the few belongings I'd dare bring on a perilous journey. Yet no one approaches my tent with final instructions. Instead, an eerie stillness has settled upon the fortress, broken only by tense whispers in the

corridors.

I spot Karzug hurrying across the yard, his broad shoulders hunched. He looks haunted, eyes darting around as if searching for someone to share terrible news. My pulse quickens. Something's wrong.

When our gazes meet, Karzug beckons me over, expression etched in concern. "Lirienne," he says quietly, voice oddly muted. "Come with me. There's been... an incident."

A knot forms in my chest. "What kind of incident?"

He swallows hard, hesitating. "An orc youth is found near the western watchtower—dead."

My heart drops as though a pit yawns beneath my feet. Dead? That single word pounds in my skull, stoking dread. Orc youths might see their share of bruises or training injuries, but dead under suspicious circumstances is practically an invitation for the clan to scream curses. "Who—who was it?"

Karzug grimaces. "A young warrior-in-training, name was Rakan. Some claim they saw him alive only an hour before. Then he turned up with no visible wounds, foam at the mouth... People are saying it's poison. Or a curse." His voice trails off.

Poison. My stomach clenches, recalling the sabotage we've been battling: fouled water, livestock dying. The clan already sees me as a harbinger of ill fortune. This only adds fuel to the blaze. "Where is he now?"

"In the training yard, near the eastern rampart," Karzug says, dark eyes flicking to the ground. "Many have gathered. Tensions are high. Ghorzag's trying to keep order, but... they're calling for your blood, Lirienne."



I follow Karzug at a brisk pace, my heart hammering an erratic rhythm. As we near the training yard, the crowd's angry buzz reaches my ears—low and ominous, like a swarm of hornets stirred from their nest. Torchlight dances on the fortress walls, illuminating grim-faced warriors, elders, and onlookers. An undercurrent of panic stokes their voices.

They part slightly when Karzug and I approach, though not out of respect—more out of shock, as if they can't believe I'd dare show my face. I brace myself, scanning the throng until I spot Ghorzag standing in the midst of it, tension evident in the rigid set of his shoulders.

At his feet lies a small, shrouded shape. The orc youth, Rakan, presumably. My stomach twists at the sight, heartbreak mingling with fear. Orc children and teens have been the only ones to offer me curiosity without unbridled hostility; the notion that one so young is dead under suspicious circumstances is a blow that feels deeply personal.

Ghorzag lifts his head as I arrive. Our eyes meet, and something in his expression makes my chest tighten. Anguish, anger, and—worse—an undercurrent of disappointment I can't decipher. Is he disappointed in me, or the clan, or this entire tragic situation?

Several orcs shift, revealing the shrouded body. A few of the watchers hold torches, their flames casting flickering shadows on the youth's pale face. Foam still crusts at the corners of his lips, telling a silent story of a quick, brutal end. My throat constricts.

One of the elders—an older orc woman with deep grooves etched in her cheeks—rounds on me, eyes blazing. “You!” she hisses, voice thick with rage. “Another death, right before you leave with our chieftain. Is this your doing?”

A wave of murmurs sweeps the crowd, carrying the hateful refrain: Witchcraft. Curse. Human meddling. My pulse thunders. I force my voice to steady. “I have nothing to do with Rakan’s death. I—I’m as shocked as any of you.”

A warrior with a braided beard snarls, “Lies! The War God curses us for harboring you. Rakan’s blood is on your hands.”

Shock pulses through me, fierce and bitter. “That’s not—” But my protest is drowned out by the chorus of angry voices.

The throng presses closer, an oppressive ring of bodies. Torchlight reflects off sharpened tusks and glinting metal. Over the chaos, Ghorzag’s voice rings out, harsh and commanding. “Enough!”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:38 am*

Silence falls, thick with hostility. He stands protectively in front of Rakan's lifeless form, shoulders squared. "We do not know what happened yet. And you will not lay blame at Lirienne's feet without proof."

One orc scoffs. "Proof? She's the only new factor in our midst. Ever since she arrived, death and ruin follow. That's all the proof I need."

A roar of agreement rises, fueling the tension. My heart pounds like a war drum in my ears. I glance at Ghorzag, desperate for a sign of confidence, but the flicker in his eyes is unreadable—frustration, anger, sorrow, all swirling together.

From the peripheral view of my eyesight, I see Gaurbod stepping into view, arms folded across his chest, an eerie calm in his expression. He doesn't shout with the rest. He doesn't need to—he's already sown enough seeds of doubt. The crowd's fury turns into a tempest, and we both know it.

"Chieftain," comes a booming voice from an elder near the front, "this is the final omen. The War God punishes us for your refusal to cast out the curse. The clan demands justice!"

A wave of shouting erupts, several orcs brandishing weapons. "Exile her!" they cry, while others snarl, "Spill her blood for the War God!" My stomach churns, dizzy with terror. They want me dead right here, right now.

Ghorzag lifts both arms, commanding silence. It takes longer this time for the crowd to obey. When their yells finally subside, he turns, gaze locking on me. In the dancing torchlight, I see the tension in his face, the faint tremor in his jaw. My breath

catches. He's hurting too, but... is he doubting me?

He takes a step forward, placing a broad hand on my shoulder. The crowd stirs at the intimate gesture, interpreting it in a myriad of ways. "We stand on the eve of our pilgrimage," Ghorzag says, voice resonating through the yard. "We'll seek the War God's verdict on Lirienne. Until then, no one raises a blade against her."

Several orcs spit or mutter curses. A handful seem relieved by his command. But the majority glares, voices filled with wrathful suspicion. Gaurbod, standing at the back, smirks coldly, as if seeing his plan unfold.

One of the younger warriors points accusingly. "What about the youth we lost? Is that price worthless to you, Chieftain?"

A furious snarl escapes Ghorzag's lips. "Rakan was my kin as well, all orcs are. His death will be avenged—but not by shedding innocent blood." He turns abruptly, jerking his head at Karzug. "Remove the body. We'll examine it more closely for signs of poison or other foul play."

Karzug hurries to comply, while the crowd grudgingly steps aside. A hush settles, thick as tar, as Rakan's body is lifted away. My heart shatters at the sight of that young orc, so full of potential, now lost to this madness. Why must everything revolve around me?

Ghorzag's hand slides off my shoulder, the weight of it vanishing along with any sense of security. In that fleeting moment, I glimpse something dark in his eyes—disappointment, sorrow, perhaps at the clan's unstoppable rage or the fact that we keep stumbling from one tragedy to another. I swallow hard, tears stinging my eyes. He doesn't blame me... does he?

But how could he not? The entire clan demands my head. If he shows any sign of

doubt, that swirling tide of fury will swallow us both.

The crowd disperses slowly, grudgingly, each orc casting me hateful or fearful looks. I stand there, trembling, as though the ground under my feet might dissolve at any moment. Rakan's death hammers home just how powerless I am to stop this avalanche of suspicion.

I see Gaurbod linger near the courtyard exit, watching me with hooded eyes. There's no triumph on his face, only quiet calculation. A chill races down my spine. He's waiting for me to break.

Only Ghorzag and I remain in the flickering torchlight. He turns, arms folded, expression shuttered. The tension rolls off him in waves.

My chest feels hollow. "Ghorzag," I venture, voice scarcely more than a whisper. "You don't believe them, do you?"

He closes his eyes for a moment, a pained sigh escaping. "No." Yet the single syllable rings hollow, not entirely convincing. He opens his eyes, revealing flickers of anguish. "But the clan's fear weighs heavily. Another death, right before we depart... it's the worst omen possible in their eyes."

My lips tremble. "I want to help them, not hurt them," I say, voice breaking at the end. "Everything I do, it's never enough. Now a child is dead." I swallow, tears threatening. "I feel like I'm—like I'm poison to your clan."

He inhales sharply. "Don't say that. The sabotage?—"

"What if it's not sabotage?" I interrupt, the question bursting from me unbidden. Fear has twisted logic into doubt, gnawing at my sanity. "What if—somehow—the War God is punishing your people for harboring me? Wouldn't the sabotage be easier to

stage than all these vile curses? Maybe... maybe I am the problem.”

He reaches for me, large hands clamping on my shoulders. “You can’t believe that,” he growls, eyes dark. “I refuse to.”

A half-sob escapes me. “The clan sees me as a curse. Another young life stolen. If I go through with this pilgrimage, and the War God condemns me...” I trail off, shuddering. “I don’t want to drag you into a revolt, Ghorzag. They’ll tear you apart for defending me.”

His grip tightens, tusks bared. “Stop. I’ll handle my clan. The War God’s temple will prove your innocence.”

A bitter laugh catches in my throat, tears burning hot. “How can you be so sure?”

For a heartbeat, his resolve wavers, the storm in his eyes betraying uncertainty. Then he steadies himself, releasing me. “We have no other choice,” he says quietly. “Don’t break now, Lirienne. We leave at dawn, and once the War God sees the truth, we’ll quell this madness.”

I bow my head, tears slipping unheeded down my cheeks. “And if the War God remains silent?”

He says nothing, and that silence is answer enough. All is lost if we can’t prove sabotage. Even Ghorzag’s fierce loyalty might not withstand the clan’s fury forever.

After Ghorzag leaves—summoned by Karzug to inspect Rakan’s body for any clue of foul play—I wander the courtyard in a daze. The flaming torches stab the darkness like angry tongues, revealing orc warriors scowling in every corner. No matter which way I turn, someone glares at me.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:38 am*

Two older orcs, huddled beside a brazier, stop talking the moment I come into view. One spits on the ground near my feet, eyes hard. I clench my fists, hurrying past. A hush accompanies my steps, as though I carry a plague no one wishes to catch.

Eventually, I find myself near the orchard's edge, where the battered fruit trees stand silhouetted against a moonlit sky. This place has once offered a sense of calm. Now, the orchard bears scars from sabotage: half-flooded rows, broken fences, stunted saplings. A reflection of how my presence has battered the clan's faith.

I slump against a half-toppled fence post, burying my face in my hands. My thoughts turn to Rakan—an innocent youth, life snuffed out. Whether sabotage or something worse, it lends credence to the clan's darkest fears. A shudder wracks me. Maybe leaving is the only way to spare them further tragedy.

Footsteps crunch on the orchard path behind me. I stiffen, turning to see Nagra, Ragzuk's apprentice, approaching hesitantly. Relief and dread mingle; she's one of the few orcs who have shown me kindness, yet I can't bear more bad news.

She comes closer, the torch in her hand illuminating her worried expression. "Lirienne," she says softly, voice trembling with concern. "I heard what happened. I'm so sorry."

Tears brim again. "They want me gone. They say Rakan's death is the final sign. If Ghorzag stands by me, the clan might tear itself apart."

Nagra's eyes glisten. "Many are indeed calling for your blood. But some of us—Ragzuk, me, a few others—believe in you. We think sabotage is afoot." She sets

her torch aside, reaching out to gently grip my arm. “Stay strong. Ghorzag’s leading you to the shrine where He waits. That might be your only chance to prove your innocence.”

A sob rises in my throat. “What if the War God remains silent? Or if the saboteur strikes again on the journey?”

She presses her lips together, sadness evident. “Then... the clan may force Ghorzag’s hand. I hate to say it, but you know how orcs can be. Fear drives us to extremes.”

My tears finally escape, sliding hot down my cheeks. “I don’t want more orcs dying because of me, Nagra.”

She pulls me into a clumsy hug, the gesture so unexpectedly comforting that a fresh wave of grief pours out. “Shhh,” she murmurs, stroking my hair. “We’ll find the truth. Don’t give up yet. Ghorzag—he cares for you, more than you know.”

A pang of guilt twists through me. Yes, he does... and I might be dooming him.

With gentle pressure, she releases me, wiping my tears with the corner of her sleeve. “We should get you inside. Dawn comes soon, and you need rest before the journey.”

I nod, letting her guide me away from the broken orchard. My limbs feel leaden, every step a monumental effort. All is lost, the words echo in my head. How can a pilgrimage to some distant temple possibly fix this avalanche of hate?

Returning to my tent, I find it bleakly empty. The small lantern I left flickering casts dancing shadows on the canvas walls, each shape reminding me of the swirling chaos outside. I sink onto my bedroll, heart pounding with the question: Should I run?

If I flee tonight, I can vanish into the wilderness. Perhaps the clan will calm, blame



me from afar, but at least they'll stop demanding Ghorzag fight to protect me. My presence wouldn't spark further sabotage. Or so I tell myself—though I suspect whoever orchestrated these “omens” would continue to exploit the clan's fear, with or without me.

Still, the thought of leaving stabs my chest with longing and dread. Leaving means giving up on everything: on forging peace, on trusting Ghorzag, on believing we could change this clan's future. But staying means risking more orc lives, potentially condemning Ghorzag to a civil war.

I bow my head, tears dripping onto the bedroll. My father's old crest, a threadbare cloth I keep in my satchel, peeks out. I came here to prevent bloodshed, I remind myself, recalling the vow I made when I left my home. Now, orcs are dying anyway. My noble intentions feel like a cruel joke.

A soft knock on the tent post jars me from my misery. I freeze, wiping my face. “Who is it?”

The tent flap shifts, revealing Ghorzag's broad form. He steps inside cautiously, his imposing height dwarfing the cramped space. His expression is guarded, the lines of his face cast into sharp relief by the lantern glow.

We regard each other in silence. My eyes burn from tears, and I sense the turmoil roiling under his stoic facade.

Finally, he speaks, voice hushed. “I check Rakan's body. The foam at his mouth suggests something akin to the poison used on the livestock.” His fists clench. “It's sabotage, Lirienne. Someone is orchestrating these deaths, feeding the clan's hysteria.”

I let out a shuddering breath. “That means it's not divine retribution,” I say, half-

relieved, half-crushed by the knowledge that it won't change the clan's mind.

He nods grimly. "But the clan won't believe that unless we catch the saboteur in the act. They're whipped into a frenzy, demanding immediate answers." His gaze flicks to me, softening momentarily. "I won't let them harm you."

A bitter laugh escapes my lips, tears threatening again. "How can you stop them when so many believe I'm behind it all? Gaurbod is pushing them to demand my blood. I heard him plotting with some warriors. They're determined to remove me from the clan by any means necessary."

Ghorzag's jaw tightens. "I know. But tomorrow, we leave. Once we reach the War God's temple, there'll be no turning back. I'll need you to stand with me before the priests. We'll prove this sabotage is mortal, not divine."

I stare at him, despair welling. "And if the saboteur attacks us on the road, or the War God doesn't speak, or—or—" My voice cracks, the weight of it all too much. "I don't want to cause more deaths, Ghorzag. I'm just a human trying to protect my village and your clan. And I keep failing."

Silence stretches. His eyes dart over my tear-streaked face, and something in his expression breaks. He moves closer, kneeling beside me on the bedroll. The tent's fabric rustles, the lantern flickering. He's so close, I think, recalling the fierce intimacy we've shared. Now that closeness feels tainted by tragedy.

He lifts a hand, gently cupping my cheek. "You're not failing," he murmurs, voice gruff yet tender. "This is bigger than either of us. Sabotage, fear, clan tradition... it's a war on many fronts. But I'll stand between you and that war. I promise."

I exhale, leaning into his touch. "You said that before. But—what if your clan revolts?"

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His hand trembles. “Then I’ll face them. I’m their chieftain; it’s my responsibility to see reason prevails.” His gaze searches mine, a storm of emotion swirling. “Lirienne... I know it seems hopeless. But I won’t give up.”

For a heartbeat, I consider telling him about my fleeting thoughts of running. The words catch in my throat. He’d be furious, I realize. He’d see it as a betrayal or a sign of no faith in his vow. And yet, I can’t banish the lingering notion that flight might spare him more bloodshed.

His thumb brushes away a tear on my cheek. That simple gesture nearly undoes me. My chest aches with a desperate mix of gratitude and heartbreak. Why does his devotion feel so heavy now? Because it means he might die defending me if the clan turns violent.

I swallow hard. “I—thank you.” My voice is a shaky whisper. “For... believing in me.”

He presses his forehead to mine, eyes drifting shut. The warmth of his breath fans across my skin. We stay like that, an island of quiet amid the swirling chaos, hearts pounding in shared grief and uncertain hope. I cling to him as if he’s the last stable point in a collapsing world.

Eventually, he pulls back, shoulders sagging with exhaustion. “Rest,” he says softly, rising to his feet. “We depart at dawn.”

I nod, tears gathering again. “All right.”

Just before stepping out, he pauses, glancing over his shoulder. “Lirienne... Rakan’s death isn’t your fault. Don’t let them make you believe otherwise.”

I open my mouth, but no words come. He slips out into the night, leaving me alone with my turmoil. Though his parting reassurance lights a small spark of comfort, the shadow of despair remains. I can’t escape the clan’s fury or the sabotage that clings to my footsteps.

I don’t sleep. Instead, I lie curled on my bedroll, staring at the wavering lantern flame, the darkness beyond. The fortress’s night sounds carry faintly—distant footsteps, hushed murmurs, the occasional clang of a weapon shifting in some watchful orc’s hands.

Rakan’s lifeless face haunts me. No matter how many times I close my eyes, I see the foam at his lips, hear the crowd’s accusations. This will only intensify tomorrow. Even if I survive the pilgrimage, the clan’s trauma won’t vanish overnight.

Sometime near the darkest hour before dawn, an odd calm settles over me, the hush of utter despair. Maybe I should leave. Slip away while everyone’s busy preparing. My heart throbs painfully at the thought of abandoning Ghorzag. But if my departure means the clan might focus on finding the real saboteur, would that not save them from further tragedy?

Tears burn my eyes anew. But if I run, Gaurbod wins. The saboteur still lurks. Ghorzag might be blamed for letting me escape. Guilt wars with self-preservation. He vowed to protect me, but can I really let him risk everything?

I press my face into the bedroll, stifling a sob. All is lost. The words echo through my mind like a dirge, final and merciless. Yet dawn will come regardless, and with it, the forced march toward the War God’s temple. Perhaps fate will decide.

I lie awake, hollow-eyed. No matter how bleak the night has felt, it's time to face the clan's wrath once more. My head pounds from exhaustion, but I push to my feet, preparing for a pilgrimage that might seal my fate.

12

## GHORZAG

I stand beneath the sputtering torchlight in the main hall, my armor half-fastened, fists clenched at my sides. Around me, the fortress pulses with the echoes of unrest. Orc warriors stride hurriedly through corridors, faces grim. Advisors mutter in low voices. Even the stone under my boots seems to hum with tension. The clan teeters on the brink of chaos—and I feel every tremor in my bones.

Just hours ago, a young orc named Rakan was found dead, apparently poisoned. Even as I force the clan not to lynch Lirienne on the spot, the outcry nearly turns into a riot. The demand for her exile—or her blood—beats at me from all sides, so loud I can scarcely think. Sabotage, I tell myself. A cunning plan to break the clan's unity and place the blame at Lirienne's feet. But the clan sees only "omens," further proof that the War God punishes them for harboring a human bride.

I exhale, pressing a hand to the cold surface of the great stone table at the hall's center. My breath comes in ragged bursts. Control, I remind myself, but the swirling anger and grief inside me refuse to settle. Everywhere I look, I see only suspicion, distrust... and the shadow of my father's failures.

The night has deepened to a point where the torches burn low, their flames snapping at the slightest draft. Huddled at the far end of the hall are a handful of my loyal warriors—Karzug, Harzug, and a few others—exchanging worried words about the morning's imminent pilgrimage. Beyond them, I hear echoes of orcs shouting in the courtyard. Word of Rakan's death spread too quickly, stoking fury among the clan's

easily provoked members.

It is near midnight, yet none of us have any hope of true rest. Dawn will bring the official departure for the War God's temple: a trek meant to prove or disprove Lirienne's cursed presence. That is the official reason, at least. In truth, I feel the tension coiling like a loaded crossbow. Many in the clan see the pilgrimage as an opportunity to press for Lirienne's exile—even final judgment. Should any further tragedy strike on the journey, they'll claim it's the War God condemning her. The thought turns my stomach.

Karzug notices me staring. He peels away from the others and crosses the hall, armor scraping. "Chieftain?" he asks, voice subdued. "You look like you're about to fight a war."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Aren't we? The clan stands on the knife's edge, ready to mutiny if I don't bow to their demands to cast out Lirienne. Our enemy is fear, Karzug—a fear so deeply rooted it drowns reason."

Karzug nods, face grim. "You said you suspected sabotage. But none have been caught, and that leaves the clan no tangible foe to blame. So they blame her."

A muscle in my jaw ticks. "We have no choice but to endure the pilgrimage. If the War God himself can't quell their superstition, then no mortal logic will."

He holds my shoulder. "The clan follows you, Ghorzag, even if some are too afraid to show it. At dawn, those loyal to you will stand by your side." His gaze flickers with uncertainty. "But the rest—like Gaurbod's faction—may cause trouble."

I grit my teeth. "If Gaurbod tries anything on the road, I'll personally see he pays." Cousin or no cousin, I won't let him turn my clan into a lynch mob.

Karzug leaves me to confer with the others, the clank of his armor receding. I stand alone in the cavernous hall, the worn tapestries on the walls rustling in a stray breeze. My eyes drift to the largest tapestry: a scene depicting my father leading orcs against dark elf raiders. It is woven in colors of deep crimson and obsidian, capturing a moment of triumph. But I know well the truth behind that threadbare illusion.

I can still recall being a boy, hiding behind stone pillars, watching as my father roared about our clan's unstoppable might. He believed no enemy could best us, that the War God's favor guaranteed victory. Yet he died in a disastrous battle against cunning dark elves—surprised, outmaneuvered, trusting too easily that brute force alone would crush them.

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Even now, I can see him sprawled in the mud, mortally wounded, telling me with his last breath to protect the clan. His blood staining the earth, his eyes filled with regret. He was strong, but not wise enough. He let pride overshadow caution, and we paid a heavy price.

Now, as I clutch the table's edge, that old fear wells up: Am I repeating his mistakes? By clinging to Lirienne, a human, am I letting personal feelings blind me to the clan's best interest? My father's downfall came from hubris, from ignoring threats he deemed beneath him. But sabotage and the clan's terror are no lesser foes, I remind myself. And Lirienne is no enemy.

Yet doubt gnaws at the edges of my resolve. The clan's near-mutiny forces me to question whether I'm ignoring the majority's will. Perhaps a lesser orc chieftain would cast Lirienne out to appease them. But the thought twists my gut. I can't do that. Not now.

My breathing turns shallow, and I lean against the table, eyes squeezing shut. Images of Lirienne surface unbidden: her tear-streaked face when I found her after Rakan's death, the warmth of her body pressed against mine in a desperate moment of longing. My heart pounds at the memory of that night we shared in her tent—anger, fear, and desire tangling into a potent knot.

I let out a ragged exhale. I've fallen for her. The realization is as terrifying as it is undeniable. A human bride was meant to be a mere political arrangement, a tactic to secure peace. But she is far more than that—spirited, compassionate, determined to help my clan despite the hatred thrown at her.



Every time I picture the clan turning on her, cold dread lances through my chest. So it's not just about forging alliances or preventing bloodshed. I care for her beyond reason. That admission hammers at the fortress of my orcish pride, making me feel exposed, vulnerable in a way I've never known. How do I reconcile that with my duty to the clan?

I open my eyes, the tapestry coming into focus again. My father's memory looms. He died believing he was invincible, ignoring the warnings of cunning foes. Am I ignoring warnings, too—clan warnings that Lirienne is a liability? Or am I seeing truth where they see illusions?

A bitter laugh escapes my throat. If my father's ghost could speak, perhaps he'd demand I rid the clan of any risk. But he once told me that orcs should adapt to survive, that the world changes, and our greatest strength is the will to change with it. Perhaps that's the lesson he never fully learned, I think with hollow irony.

A faint commotion drifts in from the courtyard—more shouting, the clank of weapons. The clan is restless, on the verge of riot. My decision is clear: I will not cast Lirienne aside, no matter how many demand it. I'd risk repeating my father's mistake if it means forging a truer peace. Or failing that, I'd fail on my own terms—defending the woman who dares to stand by me despite every threat.

I straighten, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension. The War God might judge me for defying orcish tradition, but I'll face that judgment head-on. Better than living as a coward who betrays his own heart.

A soft knock on the hall's side door announces Ragzuk's arrival. The aging shaman's apprentice steps inside, robes swishing. His eyes flick to me, concern etched in his lined face. "Chieftain," he says, voice low. "I've spoken with the priests. They insist on leaving at first light. They also insist Lirienne partake in certain cleansing rites before we go—prostrations, if you will."

My tusks grind together. “Cleansing rites,” I repeat flatly. More humiliations they want to heap on her. “And if she refuses?”

Ragzuk sighs. “Then the priests might interpret her reluctance as an admission of guilt. I fear it would turn the clan’s hostility explosive.”

I close my eyes, wrestling with the urge to break something. “Fine,” I say at length, voice taut. “We’ll endure their rites. But I’ll not have her subjected to public humiliation. Let them see I stand with her.”

A flicker of relief softens Ragzuk’s gaze. “I’ll make the arrangements as discreet as I can. The priests know you’re dangerously close to losing patience.”

I allow myself a terse nod. “Thank you, Ragzuk.”

He lingers, studying me. “Ghorzag... you bear this clan’s weight on your shoulders, as your father once did. Don’t let the clan’s fear overshadow your judgment. If you see sabotage, trust your eyes.”

A pang shoots through me at the mention of my father. “I will. But the clan demands a sign from the War God above all else. So let them have it.”

Ragzuk nods, turning to leave. “I’ll ready the priests. Rest if you can.”

Sleep is impossible. Instead, I spend the remaining hours of night quietly selecting a small band of warriors to join the pilgrimage—those I trust not to turn on me if Gaurbod incites violence. Karzug helps finalize the list, crossing out names of any orc who showed open hostility to Lirienne or who fraternized too closely with Gaurbod. By the time we finish, we have about a dozen orcs—enough to defend ourselves from raiders or beasts, but not so many that sabotage from within would be hard to contain.

The War God's priests, meanwhile, insist on their own retinue. That raises my hackles, but I allow it, knowing the clan would demand some spiritual oversight. If the War God is indeed displeased, they believe the priests will interpret any "signs." We'll see about that, I think grimly. Perhaps we'll unmask the real saboteur on the road; the priests' presence might inadvertently help or hamper, but we have to accept it.

Harzug, an older warrior who once served my father, approaches me in the fortress armory while I check gear. He hesitates, then offers a quiet bow of respect. "Chieftain, I've heard the clan's... mood. Some claim we're all cursed. But if you say sabotage, I'll follow your command."

I pause, a battered metal helm in my hands. "I appreciate that, Harzug. I only ask you keep an eye out for anything suspicious on the journey—any orc acting strangely, any sign of tampering with our supplies."

He presses a fist to his chest. "You have my word."

As he turns to leave, I catch a flicker of hesitation on his face. "Something else?" I prompt.

He sighs. "Gaurbod's influence grows. If he tries to sway your warriors against you on the road?—"

"I'll deal with him," I interrupt, voice tight. "He wants the chieftain's seat, but I won't let him take it with treachery."

Harzug nods gravely, then leaves. The armor in my hands feels heavier than steel, weighed down by the knowledge that Gaurbod threatens everything from within.

At last, the torchlight pales, giving way to a faint silver glimmer on the horizon. I

grab a moment's respite in a deserted corridor, leaning against the cold stone to gather my frayed composure. This is it, I think. Dawn approaches. We either begin the pilgrimage or risk the clan's total collapse.

Footsteps approach, and Lirienne appears at the corridor's bend. She wears traveling leathers, a cloak draped over her shoulders, tension evident in her posture. Our eyes lock, and for a moment, the swirl of fear between us seems to hush. I step forward, unable to keep from offering a hand.

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She hesitates, then lets me gently clasp her fingers. They are cold, trembling faintly. “You’re ready?” I ask, voice subdued.

Her lips part in a shaky breath. “As ready as I can be. The clan is... restless outside.”

I nod. I can practically feel the fortress’s pulse of anxiety through the stone. “I know. We need to face them.”

She swallows hard, stepping closer until I can see the faint shadows under her eyes, the pallor of exhaustion. For a split second, I want to draw her into an embrace, reassure her. But the corridor is no place for open displays of tenderness—any passing orc might see it as “witchcraft.” I suppress the urge and let go of her hand.

The courtyard is packed with orcs, the earliest sunlight illuminating a sea of tense faces. A hush falls as Lirienne and I emerge from the fortress interior. Ahead of us stand the War God’s priests in their crimson robes, bone charms clattering at their wrists. Ragzuk lingers behind them, expression pinched with worry.

One priest—a tall, wiry orc with silver-streaked hair—steps forward, raising a carved staff. “Chieftain Ghorzag Stormborn,” he intones, voice resonating off the walls, “you embark on a sacred pilgrimage to petition the War God for clarity. The clan demands to see if this human bride stands cursed or blessed.”

A low rumble of agreement courses through the gathered orcs. Gaurbod lurks near the back, arms folded, eyes gleaming with cold satisfaction. My gaze sweeps over the throng, noting the fear in many faces, the simmering hatred in others. Lirienne hovers at my side, her composure brittle as glass.

The priest's staff thumps the ground. "Before you depart, the War God's servants require a cleansing rite to ensure no ill omens travel with us."

I stiffen. Here it is. They want Lirienne to prostrate herself, beg the War God for mercy. My spine tightens at the thought of humiliating her. But the clan's stares feel like blades pressed to our throats.

One of the priests gestures for Lirienne to step forward. She casts me a glance, fear flickering in her eyes. I dip my head in permission, silently mouthing it's all right. She moves to stand before the priests, chin lifted in defiance even though her hands tremble.

The older priest glares down his hooked nose at her. "Kneel, human," he commands. "Pledge yourself to the War God's judgment."

Lirienne wavers, a flush creeping across her cheeks. For a moment, I fear she might refuse out of sheer pride, which would incite the mob instantly. My heart pounds. Then she exhales and sinks to her knees. Her voice, when it comes, is strained but steady: "I—pledge to accept the War God's judgment."

A tense hush settles, broken only by the torch crackle and heavy breathing. Some orcs seem mollified by her display of subservience. Others wear sneers. Gaurbod watches with narrowed eyes.

The priest extends a shallow bowl of water, swirling with pungent herbs. He drips a few droplets onto Lirienne's head, muttering an orcish chant. The crowd shifts, uneasy. Then the priest lifts his gaze to me. "Chieftain, you, too, must partake in the cleansing—an acknowledgment that you shoulder the clan's fate as well."

I nod stiffly, stepping beside Lirienne and kneeling to match her level. The priest repeats the chant, sprinkling herb-laced water over my hair and tusks. The sensation

is cold, biting. My tusks twitch in annoyance. At least they're not demanding a full humiliation. From my peripheral vision, I see Lirienne's shoulders trembling as she kneels. Anger sparks in my gut that we must degrade ourselves. But if it keeps the clan from an immediate mutiny, I'll swallow my pride.

When the ritual ends, we rise in unison, water dripping down our faces. The priest turns to the assembled orcs. "The War God's path opens. May he guide our chieftain—and judge the human as he sees fit."

A rumble of uneasy agreement spreads. I eye Gaurbod, who wears an impassive mask. This won't satisfy him, but for now, he remains silent.

Karzug leads the small band of warriors, each carrying supplies. The priests form their own cluster, handling ceremonial items and chanting softly. Lirienne stands near me, face pale but resolute.

Without a word, I start forward. The gates groan open, revealing the rough-hewn road snaking into the distance. Beyond lie the mountain passes leading the temple—a journey of nearly a week. A hush falls as we pass the gates, orcs watching from the walls, some with grim hope, others glowering in suspicion.

I feel every step like a hammer on my heart. This is it, I think, a swirl of trepidation and fierce resolve igniting my blood. The clan wants answers. The War God might—or might not—provide them. Meanwhile, the saboteur lurks somewhere, possibly even among us. Lirienne's presence is as precarious as a single candle in a raging storm.

My father's voice echoes in memory—Protect the clan, Ghorzag, at all costs. But I've found someone else to protect too, a human woman who stole my heart when I least expected it. I won't forsake either. Even if it means risking the same downfall my father endured, I'll face it on my own terms.

As the fortress recedes behind us, the morning sun climbs higher, bathing the winding road in stark clarity. Our band walks in cautious silence. Priests chant under their breath, Karzug and two warriors scout ahead, and Lirienne matches my stride with determined grace, refusing to lag despite the tension coiling in her every muscle.

Gaurbod is nowhere to be seen in our party—he remained behind, presumably rallying supporters in our absence. That leaves an uneasy question: Who among us might be his agent, ready to sabotage the pilgrimage from within?

My eyes sweep over the orcs around me, but none show obvious signs of treachery. All I can do is remain vigilant.

We travel most of that day, the winding road leading us through rocky hills and sparse forests. Conversation remains minimal, tension thrumming like an unstrung bow. By late afternoon, we make camp near a shallow river, its waters glinting in the waning light.

Once tents are pitched, the priests busy themselves with evening prayers, and my warriors set a rotation for night watch. Lirienne takes a moment by the river's edge, and I follow at a distance, letting her have a sliver of peace. We're bound in this ordeal together, yet the clan's hostility rests on her shoulders more than mine.

A quiet voice jolts me from my thoughts. "Chieftain, you should rest," Karzug says, appearing at my side. "We'll keep guard."

I shake my head. "I can't rest. Not until we unravel this treachery." My gaze slides to Lirienne as she kneels to rinse her hands in the river. She looks haunted, as though each breath reminds her she's one misstep from the clan's wrath.

Karzug follows my line of sight. "You truly care for her."



A beat of silence, then a short nod. “It’s beyond caring, Karzug. The clan sees a demon; I see... something else.” My chest tightens, the admission heavier out loud. “I won’t abandon her.”

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Karzug sighs. “Then we fight for her as well as the clan. But if sabotage strikes again, or the War God remains silent, I fear half our people will demand her head. I only pray we uncover the truth in time.”

My jaw clenches. “So do I.”

He leaves me to my vigil. As shadows lengthen, the weight of responsibility presses down. My father’s cautionary tale, the saboteur’s cunning, the War God’s inscrutability, and Lirienne’s precarious safety all converge in my mind. This is my darkest hour, I realize. I’m an orc chieftain standing on the brink of internal war, with no guarantee of salvation.

Yet as I look at Lirienne’s silhouette by the river, I find a flicker of resolve. I might be drowning in the clan’s demands, but I refuse to let fear or tradition decide her fate. I choose her, and I choose the clan. If that means forging a new path—one that risks everything—so be it.

13

### LIRIENNE

The dawn sky over the fortress is a pale wash of lavender and rose, lending a deceptively serene backdrop to the storm of tensions brewing within our small caravan. Orc warriors stand in uneasy clusters, checking their weapons and eyeing me with open suspicion or contempt. The War God’s priests huddle around a battered stone altar, muttering incantations for safe passage. At the far perimeter, Ghorzag looms like a pillar of determination—tall, arms folded, jaw set in a firm line.

It is the morning after the darkest night I can recall. We're truly doing this, I think, a tremor running through my limbs. We're leaving on a pilgrimage to decide if I'm a curse or not.

I shoulder my meager pack, swallowing the knot of dread in my throat. If the War God decrees I'm unworthy, or if the sabotage continues and pins blame on me, it could be my end. Yet a twisted resolve coils in my chest: I'll face that fate rather than run again. If my presence is truly tearing this clan apart, better I learn it now than drag them further into bloodshed.

The priests conclude their final morning rites, snuffing out a row of candles that flicker in the early light. One by one, the orcwarriors chosen for this pilgrimage file out of the fortress gates. Karzug leads the vanguard, checking the road ahead for threats, while a pair of guards carry the few supplies we can manage on this rushed departure—dried meats, waterskins, basic medical herbs.

The courtyard feels hauntingly empty without the usual bustle. Only a skeleton crew of orcs remains behind to guard the fortress itself. I catch glimpses of suspicious eyes peering down from the battlements, watchers whose expressions range from wary to hostile. They probably wonder if I'll ever come back.

Ghorzag stands at the threshold, greeting each warrior with a clipped nod. When I approach, my palms damp with nerves, he meets my gaze, something like quiet resolve shining in his eyes. He doesn't speak, but the hint of warmth in his posture tells me he remembers our conversation last night—the vow that he'll protect me, come what may.

He extends a hand to help me mount the small wagon that carries the priests' relics. The gesture might seem polite from a distance, but the weight of his grip on mine feels like an anchor—a silent reassurance he won't abandon me. My heart lurches with a mix of gratitude and dread.

Once the priests are settled, each wearing crimson robes embroidered with arcane symbols dedicated to the War God—we set off. The fortress gates groan shut behind us, sealing away the only home these orcs have known. For me, it is the closest thing to a home I've had in weeks. If we succeed, perhaps I can truly belong. If not... I can't finish the thought, a chill creeping down my spine.

Morning light gilds the sparse fields and rocky outcrops as our caravan rumbles along a winding dirt road. A hush lies over our group—no lively banter or war songs that orcs might typically share on a journey. The tension is too palpable, an invisible chain binding each warrior's shoulders.

I walk near the rear, letting the orcs maintain their formation. My mind churns with memories of Rakan's death, the clan's fury, and the humiliating cleansing rite that forced me to kneel for everyone's scrutiny. No more running, I remind myself. I'll earn the War God's favor or die trying.

My father's old crest, a ragged cloth embroidered with a simple leaf—is tucked into my bag. I brought it to remind myself of why I first came here: to spare my village from further raids, to find a path of peace between orcs and humans. The plan spiraled into something more personal, more dangerous. Now, it might all hinge on a temple perched in the wild mountains.

A flicker of motion draws my attention: Ghorzag slows his pace, allowing the orcs ahead to widen the gap until he walks beside me. He speaks quietly so only I can hear, "How are you holding up?"

I force a small, wry smile. "Considering half your clan wants me dead, I've been better."

He exhales, turning his gaze to the distant hills. "We'll find the truth," he says, voice rough. "Whether it's sabotage or divine wrath, we'll learn it at the temple."

I wonder if he truly believes the War God will speak, or if he's simply hoping to buy time until we catch the saboteur. Either way, I nod. "I'm with you."

His eyes flick to my face, and a subtle tension eases in his shoulders. He offers no further words, but the moment feels like a quiet vow: we face the unknown together.

The first day of travel passes under a glaring sun. The terrain gradually shifts from rolling plains to rocky inclines, the earth tinged with iron-rich soil. Jagged outcrops jut from the land like broken teeth. Our caravan slows to navigate treacherous slopes where a misstep could send a wagon tumbling into a ravine.

By late afternoon, an eerie fog creeps over the road, far too thick for the season. Karzug halts the caravan, scanning the mist. "This shouldn't be here," he mutters, tension rippling through his stance. "At this altitude, in this weather? It's unnatural."

The orc priests exchange uneasy glances, bone charms jingling. One of them, a lean priest with a silver-streaked beard, recites a brief incantation to ward off malicious spirits. But the fog thickens, swirling around us like a living shroud.

Ghorzag's jaw tightens. "Slowly," he commands. "Kartzug, take point. Keep your eyes open for a trap."

We advance at a crawl, wagon wheels grinding against loose gravel. My heart pounds, the enveloping mist choking any sense of direction. Shapes flicker at the edges of my vision—strange silhouettes vanishing when I turn to look. More illusions, I suspect. A hush settles, each breath strained.

Then, without warning, one of the orc warriors lets out a startled cry. I whip around to see him stumbling, eyes wide as though he's glimpsed something terrifying in the mist.

“What happened?” Ghorzag barks, striding forward.

The warrior, panting, shakes his head. “I—I saw a figure—a tall shape with eyes of flame. But it vanished.”

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Unease courses through the caravan. The priests resume frantic chanting, as if to ward off ill omens. Ghorzag swears under his breath. Illusions. My pulse thuds. Someone is complicating our path, feeding the clan's fear.

The fog persists for nearly an hour, gnawing at our nerves. By the time it finally lifts, the sun has dipped closer to the horizon. We make camp in a small clearing near a trickling stream, exhausted from the slow progress.

As Karzug and a few warriors tend to the horses, I help the priests set up minimal wards against further illusions. My fingers tremble whenever I recall that warrior's panicked face. If illusions can rattle seasoned orcs, the saboteur is dangerously skilled.

After we build a modest fire, Ghorzag calls a brief counsel. We gather around the crackling flames: me, Karzug, Ragzuk, and two warrior-captains named Harzug and Gurtha. The priests linger at a slight distance, chanting quietly.

Ghorzag's gaze sweeps the circle. "That fog was unnatural," he states. "We suspect sabotage, illusions. But we must keep the clan calm. We can't afford another panic."

Harzug grimaces. "Many are on edge. The illusions in the fog—some claim it's the War God testing us, others whisper it's your bride conjuring more curses." He glances at me, not unkindly, but worried.

My jaw tightens. "I have no magic," I say quietly. "I'm as rattled as anyone. This sabotage—these illusions—someone wants us to fail."

Karzug taps his sword hilt. “I suspect infiltration, possibly allied with dark elves. Magic and illusions are their forte, and they hate orcs enough to meddle in our affairs. If they can discredit Ghorzag by making him appear powerless, they undermine the entire clan.”

A cold chill stabs my spine. Dark elves? I’ve heard they’re cunning and manipulative, known for their magic. If they’re fueling the sabotage, it explains orchard flooding, poisoned water, illusions. And the clan conveniently blames me.

Ghorzag’s fists clench. “We must remain vigilant. We’ll set up double watches tonight. If someone in our party is feeding illusions or signaling dark elf agents, we’ll catch them.”

Gurtha snorts. “And if we don’t? The illusions could get worse, driving us mad.”

I swallow, remembering that terrified warrior. “We have to try,” I murmur, desperation creeping into my voice. I won’t let them destroy Ghorzag’s leadership.

The counsel ends. Orcs scatter to tasks—patrols, camp chores, uneasy attempts at rest. Despite the wards, fear lingers. I doze fitfully, waking at every rustle of wind. Damn illusions, I think. The possibility of them stalking outside our circle keeps me on edge.

Deep into the night, a distinct crunch of gravel jolts me fully awake. I hear it near the supply wagon. Heart hammering, I creep toward the sound. There’s no guard visible there. Footprints lead away from the wagon, deeper into shadows beyond camp. Large, heavy orc prints, possibly in a hurry. My mind races. A traitor? Gaurbod’s agent?

I bite my lip, torn between fetching Ghorzag or investigating. The footprints are fresh—I might lose them if I delay. Clutching a small dagger, I follow the tracks



cautiously, weaving between boulders. The further I go, the more uneasy I feel. The moonlit rocks shift in my peripheral vision, shadows lengthening ominously. Stay focused, Lirienne, I remind myself. If this is a trap...

Suddenly, the night air warps. Mocking laughter echoes from behind a boulder—disembodied, malicious. My blood runs cold. Another illusion?

“Who’s there?” I call softly, dagger tight in my grip. No answer. Only the low whistle of wind. I edge forward, determined to see if an orc or something else lurks behind the rock.

Laughter returns, closer, eerie. My heart skips. Dark elf illusions, or a traitor conjuring fear. My knees threaten to buckle. Breathe.

I inch around the boulder, and the world blinks out. A nauseating vertigo slams me. I stand in a corridor of swirling mist, the reek of sulfur in my nostrils. Phantom shapes skid at the edges of sight—tall, red-eyed forms. Terror chokes me.

An icy voice whispers, “You don’t belong here, human.”

It’s not real, I tell myself, chest tight. But the realism is overwhelming. The shapes lunge, and I scream, slashing the dagger in futile arcs. Then the corridor melts away in a surge of color.

Abruptly, I collapse to my knees on rocky ground, panting, sweat cold on my brow. No corridor, no monsters—just open night air. My dagger clatters from my hand.

Blinking in shock, I see a faint figure retreating behind a distant rock. The footsteps are real enough, gravel crunching. That must be the one controlling illusions. My pulse races. A saboteur with dark elf ties—possibly an orc or an outsider trailing us.

“Stop!” I shout, scrambling upright. But the figure vanishes. My knees wobble with leftover terror. I realize I can’t chase them alone. I must warn Ghorzag.

I stagger back to camp, chest heaving. The revelation pounds in my mind: illusions this potent come from dark elf magic or a specialized artifact. And those footprints near our supplies—someone is confirming or tampering with our route. They want to sabotage Ghorzag, discredit him with more “omens.” If illusions worsen, the clan might blame me.

Hot anger burns in my veins. We can’t let them win. Ghorzag is risking everything to defend me, and I won’t let a traitor orchestrate more tragedy.

Reaching camp, I collapse into a cluster of alarmed orcs. Ghorzag rushes to me, eyes flashing. “Lirienne!”

I nearly fall into him, breath ragged. “There’s—someone. A traitor. I followed tracks—illusions ambushed me.” My words pour out. “They fled.”

Ghorzag’s gaze darkens. Karzug, Harzug, and others gather, hearing the commotion. “Show me,” Ghorzag commands, voice tight.

“I lost them,” I admit, voice trembling with fury at my helplessness. “But it’s real. They used illusions to confuse me. They’re creating these signs to discredit you. Possibly dark elves.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

A tense hush. Orc warriors exchange grave looks. The priests, drawn by the noise, cluster near the firelight, bone charms rattling. They sense illusions.

Ghorzag's expression is thunderous. "So the sabotage continues, even on this pilgrimage." He turns to Karzug. "Double the watch until dawn. No one goes alone."

Harzug growls, "We should hunt that traitor now."

"Yes, but we're in unknown territory," Ghorzag replies. "Sending half our force stumbling after illusions in the dark is too risky."

Karzug nods, frustration etched on his face. "We'll stay vigilant. At first light, we'll search again."

My adrenaline still roars, hands shaking. Ghorzag's gaze softens when he looks at me. "Are you hurt?"

I shake my head, lungs still catching up. "Just—terrified. The illusions felt so real."

He covers my hand with his, anchoring me. That gesture reminds me of his vow—he won't let them take me. Yet the danger has never been clearer.

The next hour is chaotic—patrols re-formed, priests chanting prayers, Ghorzag urging calm. But I see the orcs' eyes brimming with suspicion. They fear illusions are a sign of my curse. I remain by the fire, arms wrapped around myself, reliving that hallucinatory corridor. If illusions strike the entire group, we may lose many to panic.

Eventually, Ghorzag approaches, face grim. “We leave at dawn. We can’t wait here. The temple is still days away, but we have to move on or risk more attacks.”

My throat is dry. “You think they’ll strike again?”

His jaw tenses. “Yes. They want to break us, and me, by stoking fear of you.” He glances at the priests chanting. “They still think the War God might be testing us. More illusions only fuels that belief.”

A cold knot twists in my gut. “Then we keep going. If we turn back, they win. The clan tears itself apart.”

He nods, a flicker of admiration in his eyes. “You’re braver than half my warriors, Lirienne.”

Heat warms my cheeks. “I—I just don’t want more death.”

He squeezes my shoulder gently, then turns to organize the watch. Even in crisis, he tries to hold the clan together. My heart aches for him—torn between duty and sabotage, determined not to abandon me.

Night wears on without real sleep. Every rustle sets nerves alight. The priests chant softly, but tension remains. I drift in and out of uneasy dozing, nightmares of illusions snapping me awake.

At last, the sky lightens to dusky gray—dawn. Ghorzag rouses the camp with quiet urgency. We have miles to go, illusions or not.

Breaking camp, I notice some orcs look at me with wary pity—they see I’m as rattled by illusions as they are. Others scowl, certain I’m behind it all. Another wedge driven deeper.

“Everyone ready?” Ghorzag calls, voice echoing among the rocky slopes. A ragged chorus of agreement.

Karzug takes point again, guiding us into increasingly harsh terrain. I stay near Ghorzag, scanning for suspicious movements. My nerves remain raw, hyper-vigilant after last night. We must be nearing a true turning point. The War God’s temple is still far, but sabotage escalates daily.

One more push, I think, clinging to Ghorzag’s steadfast presence. We refuse to back down now.

As the sun rises fully, bathing the peaks in a radiant glow, I can’t help a spark of hope. Maybe illusions can be beaten, maybe we’ll unmask the saboteur. But that lurking threat shadows our every step. In the coming days, the real fight isn’t just about the War God’s favor—it’s about whether Ghorzag’s clan can survive a betrayal from within.

We march deeper into the rugged passes, each step a test of endurance. The priests mutter under their breath, eyes flicking at every gust of wind. Orc warriors clutch weapons, scanning crags. Ghorzag sets a relentless pace, posture firm despite the gloom around us.

I inhale the cold mountain air, steeling myself. I won’t let illusions or sabotage stop me. If I die, it will be for this chance that orcs and humans might stand together one day. And if I live—if we expose the traitor and earn the War God’s blessing—then all this suffering might prove worthwhile.

Lost in thought, I nearly trip on a loose stone. Ghorzag catches my elbow, steadying me, worry flickering in his eyes. He says nothing, just nods for me to go on. My pulse flutters at the memory of that heated night we shared—fierce desire overshadowed by unrelenting danger. He believes in me, and I can’t let him down now.

Somewhere above, a saboteur might watch us, waiting to unleash illusions at our weakest. Maybe they intend to lure priests into blaming me further, or isolate Ghorzag. But I vow to stay alert, note every odd shift. They won't vanish so easily next time.

With the day brightening, the caravan presses on, winding higher. Break Into Three, I recall ironically, as though our fate enters a final act. The War God's temple lies ahead, beyond these perilous passes. Illusions, traps, sabotage—none of it dissuades us. We step into the final crucible.

I forge my heart into resolve: no more yielding to fear. If sabotage aims to discredit Ghorzag, we'll counter it. I'm not some captive bride or cursed omen—I'm Lirienne Marshfield, a woman who crossed worlds for peace. If that quest requires braving illusions, betrayal, and even the War God's judgment, so be it.

### GHORZAG

The mountains loom like jagged teeth against the pale sky, their ridges cloaked by a milky haze that stubbornly refuses to disperse. I lead our small caravan along a narrow pass, each step weighed down by the tension we carry from the previous nights. Behind me trails a band of orc warriors, the War God's priests wearing crimson robes, and Lirienne—her human figure dwarfed by the rugged terrain but shining with a determined light of her own.

Karzug marches at the vanguard, eyes sweeping every outcropping. Our numbers are modest: a dozen warriors plus a handful of priests, each acutely aware that illusions and sabotage still stalk us. A stiff wind rattles the loose stones, flicking grit into our faces. My breath clouds in the cold air.

I pause at a bend in the rocky path, scanning the route ahead. A steep slope descends into a canyon shrouded in thin mist, the road winding downward until it vanishes in swirling gray. The smell of damp earth mingles with a faint tang of decay—a foreboding sign. Something about this canyon sets my nerves on edge.

Karzug joins me, brow furrowed. "Chieftain, the path narrows below. If we're ambushed, we'll have little room to maneuver." His voice is hushed, as though fearing the canyon might overhear.

I set my jaw. "We have no choice. The War God's temple lies beyond these crags." A flicker of memory surfaces—an old map from the fortress library describing the path to the War God's domain. It warned of wildsponts, monstrous beasts. "We'll proceed with caution. Form a tighter formation. Keep the priests in the center."

“Understood,” Karzug says, relaying commands to the others.

When I turn, I find Lirienne standing at the edge of the group. She hugs her cloak against a bitter wind, face etched with worry. Despite her exhaustion, a resilient gleam fills her eyes. I give her a brief nod, trying to convey steadiness. We will not falter, not here, on the cusp of the War God’s domain.

We begin the descent into the misty canyon, single file. Rocks clatter beneath boots, echoing in the tight spaces between sheer cliff walls. The priests mumble prayers under their breath, each step seeming heavier than the last. My father’s old stories of these mountain passes come to mind—tales of hidden predators and illusions conjured by vile magic. It strikes me how myth has become reality.

The fog thickens as we go deeper, swirling around our legs in ghostly tendrils. The temperature drops, beads of condensation gather on our armor. I wipe a drizzle of moisture from my brow, glancing back to ensure the caravan remains cohesive. Lirienne trudges behind Karzug, posture tense, one hand resting on the small dagger she carries for protection.

A hush blankets the canyon. No birds, no scuttling critters. Even the wind sounds distant. It is the kind of silence that speaks of waiting jaws, a predator’s lair. My tusks grind together. This is a perfect spot for an ambush.

Sure enough, a low rumble breaks the quiet, reverberating through the ground. I throw up a hand, signaling everyone to halt. The orcs freeze in place, weapons half-drawn, scanning the mist. My heart thuds. Something’s here.

The rumble intensifies into a deep, guttural roar. Suddenly, the canyon floor erupts. Massive shapes burst from rocky crevices, sending shards of stone hurtling. I catch a fleeting glimpse of reptilian skin, scaled limbs as thick as tree trunks. A grotesque beast lunges forward—some twisted cross between a lizard and a bull, dripping with



slime.

“Form ranks!” Karzug bellows, brandishing his sword. “Defensive circle around the priests!”

Warriors scramble into position, shields rising. The War God’s priests huddle in the middle, chanting frantically to the sky. Lirienne is jostled to one side but manages to slip behind a boulder, knife clutched in white-knuckled fingers.

I roar, unsheathing my battle-ax. The monstrous creature—one of at least three—charges, jaws agape. It reeks of decay, drool hissing on the ground as if coated in acid. My arms brace for impact. They’re not illusions this time. They’re flesh and blood.

The first beast slams into our shields, sending two warriors stumbling. I leap forward, ax cleaving through the thick hide, but the blade only partially sinks in. Its scales are tough, and my arms rattle from the force.

Karzug and Harzug converge on the second creature, a writhing mass of snapping limbs. The third lurks in the mist, skirting the fringes as if searching for a weaker target. Around me, orcs shout, steel clangs, and the priests’ incantations rise in desperate arcs.

“Ghorzag!” Lirienne’s voice, shrill with warning.

I spin in time to see the third beast lunging from the side, elongated jaws snapping at my flank. Without thought, I dive low, rolling across the slick stones. Teeth clash inches above me, the breath of the creature stinking of rot. Too close.

I regain my feet, swinging the ax upward. This time, I find a gap in its scales—a vulnerable patch near the throat. The blade bites deep, hot ichor spurting. The beast

shrieks, thrashing. I roar, doubling the force. With a final twist, I sever part of its neck, sending the monstrous form crashing to the ground in a shuddering heap.

Glancing around, I see the second beast tangling with Karzug and Harzug. Blood spatters the canyon floor as the orcs batter its carapace. The creature swings a spined tail, smashing Harzug's shield, nearly snapping his arm. Then, in a swift surge, it lunges for Karzug's throat.

"Kartzug!" I shout, charging toward them. But the monster's jaws snap shut, pinning Karzug's sword arm. He cries out in agony.

I grit my teeth, hurling my ax at the beast's side. It embeds in the scales, not enough to kill. The creature bellows, releasing Karzug to thrash in my direction. Karzug stumbles away, clutching his injured arm, and Harzug leaps onto the beast's back, plunging a spear into its eye. With a sickening squelch, the monster spasms, collapses, and stills.

Meanwhile, the first beast has cornered two priests against a rocky wall, acid drool sizzling on the ground. One priest's robes smoke where a droplet landed, and his screams echo. I roar, sprinting to intercept, but an orc warrior named Gurtha reaches it first, driving a halberd into the creature's flank. The beast whirls, snapping at Gurtha, but that gives the priests time to scramble away.

Blood thunders in my ears. We're pinned. We must finish this quickly. I yank my ax from the second beast's corpse and rush the final monster from behind. With Gurtha's halberd in its side, it howls in rage, unable to decide which foe to target. I seize the moment, swinging my ax in a two-handed blow at the base of its skull.

Scales part beneath the steel, and the creature roars, twisting violently. My arms jolt from the impact, but I hold on, forcing the ax deeper until bone crunches. Then the beast goes limp, sliding to the canyon floor with a final gurgle.

Silence falls—save for the ragged breathing of battered orcs, the hiss of acid dissolving stone. The creatures lie dead, their hulking forms a testament to the savage forces lurking in these mountains.

Slowly, we regroup. Karzug clutches a bandaged arm, grimacing at the deep punctures. Several other warriors sport gashes or acid burns. One priest nurses a burned patch on his shoulder, robes torn and stained. My own body aches, bruises forming where I rolled on the rocks. Blood not all my own speckles my armor.

“Is anyone... dead?” I rasp, scanning the survivors. A tense hush. Then a halting “No.” Relief wars with exhaustion. We’ve escaped with injuries but no fatalities. By orcish standards, a near-miracle.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

Lirienne emerges from behind a boulder, face pale. Her eyes dart over the wounded orcs, the monstrous corpses, and finally land on me. “You’re alive,” she says softly, voice trembling with both shock and relief.

I nod, swallowing. My heart pounds from the close call. “We all are.”

One by one, we help each other limp to a safer nook in the canyon wall, clearing a space to tend injuries. The priests resume chanting, partly in prayer to the War God for survival, partly in an attempt to ward off illusions if the saboteur tries to strike again. The stench of the beasts’ blood hangs in the air, mingling with the acrid bite of acid burns on the stone.

Lirienne crouches beside Karzug, carefully examining his wounded arm. Her mouth presses into a determined line as she reaches into her satchel for herbs and salves. I watch, shoulders taut. She is no orc shaman, but her healing knowledge has saved us more than once.

While the priests murmur, I guide Harzug and Gurtha in building a makeshift barrier around the campsite, hauling broken rock to form a low wall. My mind reels from the ambush, from how near we danced to ruin. Sabotage or not, these beasts nearly finished us.

Eventually, the immediate tasks slow. Orcs rest against the rocky slope, panting, while the priests fuss over their injuries or recite blessings. I stand near the far side of camp, leaning on my ax for support, adrenaline fading into bone-deep weariness. My right shoulder throbs, where a glancing blow from a beast’s claw cut my armor.

Footsteps approach—Lirienne. She carries a small pot of salve, hair askew, face streaked with sweat and grime. Her eyes flick over me, worry evident. “You’re hurt?”

I grunt, nodding to my shoulder. “Just a scratch.”

“Sit,” she insists. “Let me see.”

For a moment, I consider protesting—there is still so much to do, illusions to guard against, orcs to check on. But the pain twinges, and I exhale, dropping to a makeshift seat on a flat boulder. Lirienne kneels behind me, unlatching my chest plate to reveal the slash beneath. Her gasp tells me it is more than a shallow graze.

“Ghorzag,” she murmurs, voice tight. “This is deeper than you claimed.”

I breathe heavily, ignoring the sting. “I’ve had worse.”

Her fingers brush my skin, and a hiss escapes me. The gash burns where the beast’s claw raked across muscle. Warm blood trickles, though it isn’t gushing. I force myself to remain still, letting Lirienne dab at the wound with a damp cloth.

Silence stretches, the only sounds her careful breathing and the distant moans of injured orcs. My heart hammers, not just from pain but from the intimacy of her touch. We nearly died today. The significance weighs on my chest.

She applies a pungent salve, stinging sharply. My muscles tense. “Sorry,” she whispers, voice trembling with empathy. “I have to make sure it’s clean.”

I grunt in acknowledgment, letting her proceed. As she works, her hands grow gentler, the tension in her posture easing into a focused care. My mind flickers back to the night we first yielded to the powerful undercurrent between us—anger turned to desperate passion. Now, in the aftermath of battle, a different kind of intensity fills

the air: relief, gratitude, a shared sense of precarious survival.

When Lirienne finishes bandaging my shoulder, she reaches around to inspect a bruise along my collarbone, leaning close. The breath catches in my throat. Her warm presence envelops me. The rough stone beneath my palms suddenly feels far colder by comparison.

Her voice comes softly, “You push yourself so hard, Ghorzag. Always charging into danger to protect everyone. Who’s protecting you?”

I swallow, a wave of unspoken emotion rising. “I protect myself,” I say, but it sounds unconvincing even to my own ears.

She shifts, eyes searching mine. The closeness of her face sends a jolt through my chest. “Sometimes even the strongest need help,” she whispers.

A swirl of conflicting impulses batters me. Duty demands I remain vigilant, keep watch for magic or traitors. But the warmth of Lirienne’s closeness offers a fleeting moment of solace. I nearly lost her to the clan’s fury once. We both nearly died. The raw vulnerability of that thought loosens the walls around my heart.

Gently, almost tentatively, I let my fingers brush the side of her cheek, smudged with ash from the beasts’ remains. Her eyes flutter shut at the contact. “I—” I begin, unsure how to articulate the swirl in my chest. I can’t lose you, not when the entire clan demands your head.

She places a hand over mine, turning her face into the touch. A tremor races through her. “Ghorzag... every time we fight, I fear it’s the last I’ll see of you.” Her voice wavers, tears threatening.

Emotion surges. I pull her closer, ignoring the sting in my shoulder. My breath

shudders as I press my forehead to hers, soaking in the simple comfort of her presence. We survived another trial. The world beyond us—the orcish stares, the priests’ chants—fades into insignificance for one stolen moment.

Her mouth opens under mine with a soft gasp, and I drink her in like it’s the last time I’ll ever taste her. Maybe it is. The way danger dogs our every step, we can’t afford to waste any moment—not with the War God watching, not with traitors in the mist.

“Ghorzag,” she breathes, her hands sliding over my bare chest, fingertips tracing the inked spirals of my tattoos. Her touch is reverent, not fearful. Each pass over my skin sends a tremor through me, as though she’s rewriting the meaning of every mark I bear. Not war. Not blood. Just... her.

“You’re beautiful,” she whispers, brushing her fingers along my jaw, one grazing the chipped tusk that has made too many warriors flinch.

I huff a breath against her lips. “I’m a monster, Lirienne.”

“No.” Her eyes blaze with certainty, even as her voice trembles. “You’re mine.”

A growl claws up my throat. I crush my mouth to hers, trying to hold back the need roaring through my veins. But it’s no use. My cock is already hard, throbbing against the seam of my trousers, begging for her warmth, her slick heat, her trust. Still, I don’t rush. She deserves more than brute strength. She deserves to be cherished.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

Her cloak slips from her shoulders, revealing the soft curves and bruises beneath—earned from battle, not weakness. I lower her gently onto the blanket we spread over the flattened stone, a poor excuse for a bed but the only sanctuary we can claim. The torchlight flickers across her skin, painting gold over the swell of her breasts, the rise and fall of her belly, the faint shimmer between her thighs.

“I need to taste you,” I rasp, voice raw.

She nods, breathless. “Please.”

I slide down between her legs, parting them with large hands that nearly span the width of her thighs. Her pussy glistens, slick and ready, and the sight nearly undoes me. I press a kiss to the inside of her knee, then the crease of her thigh. She twitches beneath me, hands fisting the blanket.

My tongue finds her center, and her whole body arches. Her flavor is sweet and salt and smoke, like something forged in fire. I groan against her pussy, lapping slowly, letting my tusks frame her as I work her with my mouth. She’s so fucking soft here, so responsive, gasping with every stroke of my tongue.

“Oh—oh gods,” she cries, one hand flying to my hair. “Don’t stop, Ghorzag, please...”

I don’t. I suck her clit gently, then slide two thick fingers inside her, curling them until she shudders. Her pussy clenches around them like she’s trying to keep me inside. My cock jerks at the feel of her.



“You’re so snug,” I growl against her. “So wet for me. You’ll take me, won’t you? Every inch.”

She moans, legs trembling. “Yes. Fuck, yes—I want you inside me.”

I move back up her body, licking a path along her belly, pausing to kiss the swell of her breast. Her nipples are peaked, flushed, begging for attention. I draw one into my mouth while palming the other, and she gasps my name like a benediction.

I sit up, undoing the bindings at my waist. My cock springs free—thick, veined, nearly black in the torchlight. Her eyes widen, but not with fear. She reaches for me, fingers brushing the base, wrapping around my length. I nearly lose it right there.

“Tell me what it feels like,” I demand, watching her hand stroke me.

“Hard... hot... like you’re carved from stone,” she whispers. “But alive. Burning.”

I hiss through my teeth. “You make me burn.”

I settle between her thighs, rubbing the head of my cock through her soaked folds, coating myself in her slick heat. Her breath hitches.

“Look at me,” I say roughly.

Her eyes lock with mine, wide and shining.

“I won’t hurt you,” I vow, voice shaking. “If it’s too much?—”

“It won’t be.” She cups my face, drawing me down for another kiss. “I want all of you. I trust you.”

That word hits me like a warhammer to the chest. I push in slowly, gritting my teeth as her pussy stretches around me. She's so narrow—gods, she fits me like a glove—warm and wet and welcoming. She gasps, mouth parting in surprise as I sink deeper.

“You're—oh, gods,” she pants. “You're thick and long, Ghorzag.”

I pause, trembling with restraint. “Too much?”

She shakes her head fiercely. “Just... let me adjust.”

I kiss her temple, her cheek, her lips. I murmur against her skin, waiting for her breath to steady.

Then she wraps her legs around my waist. “Move.”

I start to thrust, slow and deep, watching her reaction with every inch. Her mouth falls open, her head tipping back.

“Fuck,” she moans. “You're everywhere inside me.”

“You're perfect,” I groan. “You're mine.”

Our rhythm builds, each stroke more urgent than the last. Her pussy clenches around me, milking my cock with every thrust. My name falls from her lips like prayer.

“Ghorzag... yes... don't stop?—”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

I don't. I thrust harder, the slap of skin-on-skin muffled by the distant chanting of priests, the crackle of firelight behind the rocks. But here in this hidden space, it's just us—orc and human, bound not by politics but by something feral and real.

Her nails score down my back. I snarl and dip my head, nipping the curve of her throat. She arches into me, crying out as I hit that spot deep inside her.

“There,” she whimpers. “Right there—gods, I’m going to?”

“Let go for me,” I growl. “Come on my cock, Lirienne.”

Her whole body tenses, and then she falls apart. Her orgasm rips through her in waves, pussy spasming around me, drawing me deeper. Her cries are muffled against my shoulder as I pound into her, chasing my own release.

I follow seconds later, cock twitching as I spill inside her, warmth flooding us both. I bite down on a groan, trying not to roar loud enough to draw attention.

Then, with breathless exhaustion, we collapse into each other's arms, the rocky ground reminding us we are still in a perilous canyon. Sweat-slick skin cools in the night breeze. Our foreheads touch, a quiet intimacy bridging orc and human, chieftain and outcast. For this instant, we are free.

The world trickles back slowly—distant murmurs of the priests, Karzug's voice calling orders. I brush hair from Lirienne's face, her cheeks flushed from both physical exertion and raw emotion. She clutches my hand, eyes reflecting the torchlight with an almost fragile hope.

“What now?” she whispers, voice hoarse. “The illusions, the clan... they still want me gone.”

I gather her closer, trying to shield her from the reality we must eventually return to. “We face them together,” I murmur. “I promised I’d protect you, no matter the cost.”

She blinks back tears, lips trembling. “And I promise I won’t run away, Ghorzag. Whatever stands against us—your cousin, the sabotage, illusions—I’ll stand with you. I’m done cowering.”

My heart twists at her earnest determination. I cup her cheek, pressing a soft kiss to her brow. “You’re braver than you know,” I whisper.

A faint, sad smile tugs at her lips. “Sometimes bravery is just stubbornness, refusing to let fear win.”

I rest my forehead against hers, savoring the closeness. “If that’s so, we’ll outstubborn this entire mountain range.”

She gives a shaky laugh, then falls silent, her gaze searching mine. Beneath her eyes lies the memory of how easily everything could’ve slipped away. My own chest feels heavy with the knowledge that we’ve only won one battle; an entire war—literal or metaphorical—still looms.

Finally, we help each other readjust clothing, mindful of scrapes and bandages. Pain returns to my shoulder, a dull throb overshadowed by the warmth still coursing through me from our encounter. Lirienne touches the bandage gently. “Did I hurt you more by letting you move like that?”

A wry smirk curves my mouth. “No more than those beasts did.” The truth is, the moment we shared chased away the darkness gnawing at me. Pain is trivial compared

to the solace I find in her arms.

We emerge from behind the rocky outcrop to find the camp's attention focused on cleaning up the monstrous corpses, building a small pyre to burn the remains before they can rot and attract scavengers. The stench of acid lingers in the canyon air, stinging my nostrils.

Karzug spots us, relief flickering in his gaze. "Chieftain," he greets, forcing a smile. "We're disposing of the creatures now. The priests say we shouldn't leave them to fester."

I nod, slipping back into the role of commander. Lirienne lingers at my side, head held high despite the watchful stares of some warriors. Let them suspect whatever they want. We are past secrets now—only survival matters.

Harzug approaches, wiping monster blood off his halberd. "That was quite a fight," he says. "Glad we made it through." His gaze flicks to Lirienne, but instead of scorn, it holds a trace of grudging respect. "Your salves helped Karzug's arm. Without that, he might have lost it."

Lirienne offers a slight nod, lips pressed in a determined line. "I'm glad I could help."

A hush lingers in the air. The orcs still view her warily, but the fact her remedies saved a vital warrior might soften a few hearts. One small victory, overshadowed by the looming threat of illusions and sabotage.

Ragzuk sidles closer, staff in hand. "We must keep moving, Chieftain. Another day or two, and we'll reach the path leading to the War God's temple."

I glance at the blood-stained canyon floor, the thick mist swirling overhead. We nearly died here. A shuddering breath escapes me. "Then let's not linger."

We press on after a brief rest. The beasts' remains are set ablaze, a grim reminder of the monstrous perils these mountainsharbor. The priests recite a final invocation over the pyre, calling on the War God to bless our journey—or at least not smite us for trespassing in his domain.

As we trudge along the winding canyon, Lirienne walks at my side. Our shoulders occasionally brush, each contact a subtle reassurance. The memory of our bodies entwined burns bright, a testament to fleeting peace in the midst of havoc.

In the hush that follows the battle, I bend my head toward her. “If illusions strike again, stay close,” I murmur. “I can’t lose you.”

Her voice quavers slightly. “I’ll stay by your side, Ghorzag.” She hesitates, then adds, “No illusions or sabotage will tear us apart.”

A powerful surge of emotion wells in me—love, protectiveness, and a fierce determination to honor my vow. Let illusions come, let traitors plot. I’ll fight them all if it means keeping her safe.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

The road leads us deeper into the mountains, the air growing thinner. A chill wind tears at our cloaks, but after the terror of monstrous beasts, we press on in stoic resolve. The War God's temple awaits, an uncertain verdict looming over our heads.

Yet, for the first time since this pilgrimage began, I feel a sense of unity amid the darkness. The second time Lirienne and I share our bodies, we forge something more than fleeting passion—it is a symbol of unity and trust. Whatever trials these mountains throw at us next, we meet them together.

15

### LIRIENNE

The jagged mountain peaks loom overhead, dark silhouettes against a storm-swept sky. Our caravan finally emerges onto a plateau high above the treacherous passes we've spent days navigating. The air here tastes thin and cold, laced with the sting of altitude and lingering dread. Orc warriors and priests alike pause at the edge of the plateau, gazing at the imposing structure carved directly into the mountainside—a massive archway hewn from ancient rock, adorned with runic symbols that spiral up its flanks.

The War God's Temple.

My heart pounds as I stand beside Ghorzag, exhaustion pooling in my bones. We have survived monstrous ambushes, illusions, and relentless suspicion. But the moment of truth lies ahead. If this temple confirms the clan's fear that I am cursed, it might spell the end for me—and possibly for Ghorzag's leadership. The orcs behind

us, battered from the journey, huddle in tense silence, watching as the priests step forward to claim the sacred ground.

A biting wind whips through the plateau, tugging at my hair and cloak. I brace myself, glancing at Ghorzag's profile. Though he tries to maintain a stoic facade, I sense the currents of worry coursing beneath his calm exterior. He has fought so hard for me, I think, a pang of guilt flashing through my chest. If this temple denounces me...

Karzug catches my eye from across the group, his arm still bandaged from the beast's attack days earlier. He gives me a grim nod, as though to say he'll stand by me, come what may. Nearby, Harzug and Gurtha busy themselves dismounting supplies from the exhausted horses, trying to hide the apprehension etched in their faces. The War God's priests, in their crimson robes, move with reverence toward the colossal archway, bone charms rattling in the wind.

We step forward, each footfall echoing against ancient stone. The temple facade is carved with monumental figures: orc warriors in battle with monstrous serpents, half-forgotten gods looming behind them. Every surface bears intricate runes, some half-eroded by centuries of weather. The orcs believe the War God's presence lingers here, judging all who dare enter.

A hush settles. Even the wind seems to hold its breath, as if we stand on the threshold of a realm beyond mortal comprehension.

One of the older priests, a tall orc named Drahn, motions for the caravan to halt. His silver-streaked hair shines in the hazy daylight, crimson robes flapping around his gaunt frame. "We must cleanse ourselves before proceeding," he announces, voice resonant and formal. "This is the War God's domain. No foot may trespass without proper ritual."



The orc warriors shift in place, some rolling their eyes, others nodding dutifully. Ghorzag stiffens beside me, clearly eager to get answers but forced to respect tradition. He catches my gaze, brow furrowing. Another rite, his eyes seem to say. Bear with it. I incline my head—what choice do we have?

Drahn raises an ornate staff, and the priests form a circle near the archway. They place small clay bowls at each compass point, filling them with pungent incense that sends up curling tendrils of smoke. The wind threatens to snatch the smoke away, but somehow it clings to the frigid air, forming a hazy ring around us. An undercurrent of incantations buzzes at the edge of hearing, a language older than any orcish dialect I know.

I brace myself as Drahn beckons Ghorzag forward first. The chieftain strides into the circle, shoulders squared, jaw set. Another priest dribbles water on Ghorzag's hands, reciting a prayer. Ghorzag dips his head in silent acknowledgement, a figure of stoic pride. For a moment, he almost looks regal, it's like the War God's domain demands his true authority be laid bare. My chest swells with reluctant admiration. He's so strong, but he's carrying such a heavy burden.

Then Drahn turns to me. "Human bride," he intones, staff clattering against the stone. "Step forward."

My pulse throbs in my throat. Every orc eye in the party fixes on me, some with open scorn, others with wary neutrality. I glance at Ghorzag, who offers a subtle nod. Swallowing hard, I move into the circle. The incense thickens, tugging at my senses. I half-expect illusions, but no visions assail me—only the solemn presence of ancient stone and a deep, thrumming stillness that prickles across my skin.

Drahn pours a trickle of water over my hands, lips moving in prayer. Even behind his closed eyes, I feel him judging me, trying to ascertain if I belong in this sacred place. The water feels icy, a shock to my numb fingers. For a heartbeat, time seems to halt,

as though the temple itself contemplates my presence.

Then the priest inclines his head, stepping back. “Enter,” he says, voice echoing. “May the War God judge you justly.”

Passing under the massive arch, we descend a wide flight of steps carved into the mountainside. Torches placed at intervals cast flickering light across the walls. High overhead, the ceiling soars, ornately carved with swirling motifs of battle and conquest. The War God’s emblem, a stylized blade wreathed in flames, repeats again and again in the stone. We are inside a vast chamber, the floor lined with worn mosaics depicting legendary orc victories.

My breath catches at the sheer scale. Statues of old warlords and priests dot the perimeter, their expressions fierce and unyielding. A hush envelops our group as we advance, each footstep echoing dully. The light from our torches mingles with the faint glow of braziers spaced along the walls, revealing a central dais at the chamber’s far end.

Karzug keeps a watchful stance at the caravan’s flank, while Harzug and Gurtha flank Ghorzag. The priests glide ahead, leading us toward the dais. I stick close to Ghorzag, nerves jangling with every step. If the War God wants proof of my innocence, this chamber is where it will happen.

At the dais’s center lies a massive circular platform of obsidian, etched with runes that shimmer in the torchlight. My pulse kicks as Drahn gestures for Ghorzag and me to ascend. This is it.

Ghorzag’s jaw clenches, but he steps onto the platform first. Then he reaches a hand back to me, a silent offer of support. I clasp it, drawing strength from his presence. The rest of the orcs and priests form a wide ring around us, some kneeling in deference, others standing with bated breath.

Drahn and two senior priests raise their staffs, chanting a low, resonant hymn. The temple seems to vibrate with each syllable, as though ancient power courses through the stone. Incense thickens, filling the air with a pungent, heady aroma. I sway, almost dizzy, but Ghorzag's hand steadies me.

The runes on the obsidian platform glow faintly—silver light threading through each groove, pulsing in time with the priests' chant. My heart thuds, fear spiking. Is this real magic? Perhaps orcish spiritual energy is stirring, or illusions conjured by sabotage.

Drahn's voice rises above the chant, echoing through the vaulted chamber. "War God, we implore you to judge this union. See our chieftain's chosen bride, a human in our midst. Are we cursed by her presence? Show us a sign—accept her, or condemn her!"

The gathered orcs murmur, tension radiating in waves. Ghorzag's grip tightens on my hand. My throat constricts. If nothing happens, do they decide that silence is condemnation?

Suddenly, a faint tremor rocks the temple floor, like a subdued quake. Torches sputter. Orcs glance at each other, alarmed. The priests' chant wavers but continues. My stomach flips. Is this the War God's sign, or sabotage?

Drahn's staff glows with a faint aura. The runes beneath our feet pulse brighter. I brace for something dramatic—a thunderous voice, lightning from the temple ceiling. But instead, the tremor subsides into an eerie stillness.

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A collective hush falls. Orc eyes dart around, waiting for the War God's declaration. No voice booms. No flames burst to life. The platform's glow dims to a faint flicker, leaving the chamber in heavy silence.

Drahn exhales shakily, face etched with confusion. "The War God... does not speak?"

An anxious ripple spreads. Karzug looks at Ghorzag, dismay pinching his features. Others exchange dark mutters. What does this silence mean?

That's when a harsh voice shatters the hush. "Enough of this farce!"

I turn sharply to see an orc stepping from the crowd—Gaurbod, Ghorzag's cousin. His braids sway as he advances, eyes blazing with triumph. Around him gather several orcs, each wearing an expression of grim determination.

Gaurbod's lips curl in a sneer. "Look at this temple, empty of divine favor. The War God offers no sign because he's disgusted by her presence!" He jabs a finger at me, tusks glinting. "This human curse has brought only death and ruin upon our clan, and now even the War God refuses to answer!"

An uproar of whispers and gasps ripples through the orcs. Drahn's staff wavers, uncertain. Ghorzag's hand tenses around mine, fury darkening his features. "Stand down, cousin," he growls. "The War God has not spoken. That doesn't mean?—"

Gaurbod cuts him off. "It means we've been led astray by your weakness." His eyes flick maliciously to me. "And I, for one, won't let our clan perish under this curse!"

I swallow hard, heart hammering. Orcs shift, some nodding in agreement, others murmuring protests. He's turning the temple's silence into proof of my guilt.

Before anyone can intervene, Gaurbod lunges, brandishing a wicked-bladed spear. He charges onto the obsidian dais, aiming the spear at me. I let out a shocked cry, stumbling back. Ghorzag roars, ax raised, but Gaurbod's warriors block him in an instant.

A cold spike of terror lances through me. Gaurbod's spear glints, poised to impale. My mind spins: He's going to kill me right here, in the War God's presence, claiming it's righteous.

Time seems to slow as I scramble away from Gaurbod's spear thrust. My back slams against a carved pillar at the dais's edge, breath hitching. Gaurbod advances, eyes wild. "You're the reason for every ill omen, every poisoned water, every monstrous ambush! The War God's silence damns you!"

He lunges again. I twist aside, a feeble dodge, the pillar scraping my shoulder. "I—I'm not—" My voice wavers, terror choking words. This can't be happening.

Across the dais, Ghorzag fights to push through Gaurbod's minions, ax swinging. Karzug and Harzug clash with them too, steel ringing on steel. But they've been blindsided, pinned at the dais entrance, trapped behind a line of snarling orcs loyal to Gaurbod.

My heart thunders. I'm alone. Gaurbod's sneer deepens, the spear's tip glinting ominously close. Around us, priests and onlookers cry out, some in alarm, others in vicious approval. The War God's temple reverberates with chaos.

Stumbling sideways, I try to circle around to Ghorzag, but Gaurbod cuts me off with a savage thrust. I gasp, narrowly avoiding the spear's point. He is faster than I

anticipate, orcish strength fueling each lunge. A single misstep and I will be skewered.

He corners me against the pillar, roaring accusations. “Dark elves might have aided you, or you might be a cunning witch yourself. Either way, this ends now!” His face contorts with rage, the thirst for my blood painfully clear.

My mind races, searching for an escape. “Gaurbod, listen. The sabotage—illusions—someone else is?—”

“Lies!” he spits, thrusting again. My back presses against cold stone, nowhere to run. That spear glints mere inches from my chest. Sweat trickles down my temple. Is this how I die, scapegoated for every misfortune?

Beyond the dais, the temple descends into chaos. Some orcs shout for Gaurbod to stand down, others cheer him on. The priests flail, uncertain whether to interfere. Ghorzag’s roar echoes as he clashes with two of Gaurbod’s loyalists, desperately trying to break through.

My gaze darts to Ghorzag, seeing the raw panic in his eyes. He’s trying to save me, but Gaurbod’s minions form a wall of steel. A stray spear clips Ghorzag’s arm; blood spatters the dais. Karzug strikes at another attacker, roaring curses as he defends the chieftain’s flank.

In that moment, time slows. I realize Gaurbod’s scheme has worked perfectly: incite fear in the temple, exploit the War God’s silence to paint me as a curse, and publicly kill me. The clan, divided, might stand behind him out of sheer panic. No illusions needed now—just raw hatred and a well-timed assault.

My thoughts churn. If I die here, Gaurbod will likely seize power. Ghorzag’s leadership will crumble, undone by my blood spilled on the War God’s sacred floor.

A shaky breath escapes me, tears burning. I can't let him win.

Gaurbod lunges a final time, spear aimed for my throat. Instinct flares. I shove off the pillar, pivoting to the side. The spear grazes my shoulder, pain blossoming in a hot slash. I bite back a cry, adrenaline surging. He overextends slightly, and I seize my one chance.

With a shaky but determined move, I ram my elbow into his forearm. The spear wavers. Then, recalling Ghorzag's self-defense lessons, I kick at Gaurbod's knee. He stumbles, eyes flaring with surprise. I lash out again, adrenaline lending strength. His spear tip squeals against stone, sparks flying.

For an instant, I think I might actually disarm him. But he recovers too quickly, orcish strength overpowering my desperate strike. Gaurbod roars, shoulder-checking me with brutal force. Air whooshes from my lungs as I slam back into the pillar. The spear swings up again, aimed squarely at my chest.

My vision blurs. Pain spears through my ribs, the world tilting as stone presses into my back. Gaurbod's breath rasps, tusks bared in triumph. "No more running, human," he snarls. "Your death ends this curse."

He rears back, preparing the killing thrust. My heart hammers. I'm going to die.

A voice inside screams Fight!, but my arms feel leaden, the spear's lethal point looming. Everything else fades—the clang of battle, the priests' frantic cries, Ghorzag's roars. There is only Gaurbod's face twisted with hateful purpose, and the spear that will end my life.

Time crawls, each breath an eternity. My mind fills with Ghorzag's image: fierce determination, the gentleness in his eyes when he touched me, the pledge to protect me no matter what. I tried so hard to prove I wasn't a curse. Had it all been for

nothing?



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

I clench my teeth, refusing to close my eyes. If this is my end, I face it without cowardice. At least let Ghorzag see I didn't surrender.

Gaurbod's spear hurtles forward.

16

### GHORZAG

The sight of Lirienne pinned against the temple pillar by Gaurbod's spear freezes my blood. Her face is pale with terror, her eyes fixed on the blade's lethal point. A roar of raw fury tears from my throat. I swing my ax in a wide arc, battering aside the last of Gaurbod's men who block my path. Sparks fly as steel clashes with steel. At my side, Karzug drives forward with a snarl, his bandaged arm trembling from the force of each strike.

But the traitor's loyalists are determined, slamming shields to form a wall of metal and flesh. I grit my tusks, heart pounding. I must reach her. Over that barricade of orc warriors, I glimpse Gaurbod pressing closer to Lirienne. He means to kill her—here in the temple. And if he succeeds, all our hopes of forging peace die with her.

"Out of my way!" I bellow, forcing my ax downward in a vicious blow. The jolt of impact reverberates through my arms, meeting the locked shields of Gaurbod's henchmen. These war-hardened orcs buckle but do not crumble. My frustration mounts. If they were only misguided by fear, I might show mercy. But their willingness to murder an innocent woman turns my blood hot with rage.

Karzug fights at my flank. We've been close friends since youth, and I feel his desperation mirroring mine. "Chieftain," he grits out, "they're too many. We can't break through in time."

My eyes snap to Gaurbod. Lirienne's back is against carved stone, nowhere to flee. The spear's tip hovers at her heart. She's going to die unless I— No. That isn't an option. The War God's dais thrums beneath my feet, runes flickering with latent energy. If ever there was a moment to channel everything I have—my authority, my strength, my convictions—it is now.

"Stand aside!" I roar again, voice echoing in the vaulted chamber.

One of Gaurbod's men lunges at me, a short sword aimed for my gut. I twist, letting the blade slide off my ax handle, then bring the weapon back in a savage arc. The orc crumples, howling. Taking advantage of that opening, I surge forward. Another attacker slashes at Karzug, but he deflects the blow, creating a small gap.

"Go," he rasps, voice raw. "Save her."

I need no urging. Heart thundering, I force myself between the last pair of warriors still loyal to Gaurbod. My ax hammers into their shields, driving them apart. Just a little more...

Suddenly, the orc on my left tries to seize my ax shaft. I snarl, smashing the hilt of my weapon into his temple. He stumbles, giving me precious seconds to twist free. The orc on my right recoils, momentarily off-balance. I capitalize on his hesitation, hooking his shield with my ax blade and yanking it away.

"Ghorzag!" Lirienne's scream tears the air. It is all I need. I slam my shoulder into the final blockading orc, barreling him aside in a crash of metal and muscle. The dais under my boots lurches into view, and I spot Gaurbod's spear gleaming an arm's

length from Lirienne's chest.

"No!" My roar shakes the temple walls.

I hurl myself across the runic floor, ax raised. Gaurbod whips around, eyes alight with cruel triumph. He pivots just enough to slash his spear at me instead of Lirienne, forcing me to parry mid-stride. Metal clashes with a teeth-jarring clang, and the shock nearly numbs my hands.

"Cousin," Gaurbod spits, forcing me back a step. "You defend this witch even now?"

I glower at him, tusks bared. "You dare assault my bride inside the hallowed walls of His shrine? Have you no honor?"

His laughter is harsh, echoing off stone columns. "Honor? You lost it the moment you brought a human among us. The clan is in ruin because of you. I'll set it right—by ridding us of her poison."

He feints a thrust at my midsection. I block, but the force radiates pain through my battered arms. The beast fights and illusions from earlier times have left me exhausted. Gaurbod, on the other hand, seems possessed by fanatic energy. Our weapons lock, pressing edge against edge.

"You're the one who orchestrated the sabotage," I growl through clenched tusks. "The orchard floods, the poisoned cistern, Rakan's death—wasn't that your doing?"

His sneer widens. "So you finally see it, cousin. Yes, I helped stoke fear. The clan needed a push to realize you're unfit to lead—enthralled by a worthless human."

A cold fury boils in my veins. I shove him back, ax scraping over his spear. He stumbles but recovers with eerie speed. "You let orcs die to feed your ambition?"

He shrugs, eyes flickering with twisted satisfaction. “Sometimes blood must be spilled for the clan’s future. The War God would understand. You? You’re blinded by her.”

“You’re the blind one.” Anger lances through me. “You think the War God condones your sabotage? Murdering our own youth?”

“I’d do it again,” Gaurbod hisses, striking high. I duck, teeth grinding, and parry. The shock wave of steel clattering fills my ears. “Rakan was a necessary sacrifice to inflame the clan. They all see how you cradle this human above orcish honor.”

“I do it because I’m not a coward,” I snap, clashing my ax against his spear. “You cower behind illusions and poison.”

He snarls, stepping into a lethal thrust at my ribs. I pivot, swinging the ax handle upward, deflecting the blow. Sparks fly. I catch Lirienne’s wide eyes behind Gaurbod, terror and relief warring in her face. I have to keep Gaurbod away from her.

The swirling battle around us intensifies as more orcs realize Gaurbod is behind the sabotage. Some try to break through to help me, while others rally to Gaurbod out of blind fear or twisted loyalty. The dais becomes a churning ring of steel and shadows.

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Gaurbod feints low, then slashes high. Pain flares in my side as the spear grazes my armor, opening a thin line of blood. I grunt, staggering a half-step. He presses the advantage, driving me back until I stand near Lirienne. My breath rasps; the wound stings.

“She dies now,” Gaurbod declares, leveling the spear at Lirienne. “Then I finish you off, cousin.”

My pulse thunders. No. If he strikes again, I might not be able to block it. Lirienne cowers behind me, her dagger useless against the force of a trained warrior. I can’t let her die.

Desperation surges. I fling my ax aside, the clang echoing in the stunned hush. My hands rise, palms outward, facing Gaurbod’s lethal spear point. My voice thunders across the dais.

“Wait!”

He pauses, eyes narrowing. Shock ripples through the onlookers. Lirienne gasps behind me, confusion blazing in her gaze. But a sudden stillness falls in the temple. Even the ongoing skirmishes seem to pause as orcs turn to see what I’m doing.

“Gaurbod,” I say, forcing every ounce of authority into my tone. “If blood is what the War God truly demands, I offer mine. Spare her.”

A collective gasp sounds. Some orcs exchange incredulous looks. Lirienne lets out a strangled cry of protest, tugging at my arm. “Ghorzag, no!”

But I ignore the sting of her nails digging into my wrist. My eyes lock on Gaurbod's, daring him to face me, to reveal his so-called devotion to the War God. "Take my life. End your vendetta. Let the War God see who truly stands for the clan's future."

Gaurbod's sneer flickers with surprise, then he laughs, cold and triumphant. "You'd die for a human? Then you're even more a fool than I thought."

I stand firm, heart hammering. If it saves Lirienne, I'll pay whatever price. I brace, half-expecting him to impale me that instant. Tension crackles in the air. The temple's runes on the dais glow faintly, as if responding to the high stakes of this confrontation.

"Stop this madness," Lirienne pleads, voice cracking with tears. She tries to push forward, but I step between her and Gaurbod, arms spread wide.

"No," I say softly, locking eyes with her. Better me than you. She shakes her head vehemently, tears streaming, but her trembling lips find no further words.

For a heartbeat, time hovers on the brink. Gaurbod's spear hovers inches from my chest. Then, with a sneer, he rams it forward. I close my eyes, every muscle tensing for the bite of steel.

But a thunderous rumble rips through the temple, drowning out all sound. The floor shudders violently beneath our feet, sending orcs stumbling. Gaurbod's spear thrust wavers, the tip clanging harmlessly against my chest plate rather than piercing flesh. Sparks fly, but I remain unhurt.

"What—?" Gaurbod gasps, fighting to keep his balance.

Across the dais, priests cry out, some toppling to their knees. A swirling wind whips through the chamber, snuffing torches and sending sparks dancing in the gloom. The

runic carvings along the walls glow bright, pulsing with uncanny light.

A wave of heat envelops us as braziers near the temple's edges roar to life. Flames leap skyward, painting the entire chamber in flickering red and gold. It feels like the War God's presence descends in a raw surge of elemental fury.

"The War God..." I breathe, heart pounding. He's answering us.

Gaurbod staggers, face contorted in shock. The spear clatters from his grip, dislodged by the violent quake. Around us, orcs freeze in awe and fear, eyes fixed on the swirling flames that rise from unseen crevices in the temple floor.

"Look!" one priest shouts, pointing to the dais. The obsidian runes glow white-hot, lines of light radiating from where I stand, creeping outward in intricate patterns. I feel a surge of energy crackling beneath me, as if the War God has chosen this exact spot to deliver a verdict.

Lirienne gasps, tears on her cheeks illuminated by the blaze. She gazes at the blazing runes, then at me, eyes wide with wonder. The War God... is he truly intervening?

In the flickering firelight, the entire temple trembles. Chunks of stone rain from above, though no large slabs fall to crush us. The roar of flames escalates until I can hardly hear my own ragged breathing. All around, orcs drop to their knees—some in reverence, others in terror. Even Gaurbod stares open-mouthed, backing away as though scalded.

"The War God sees," Drahn the priest exclaims, voice quivering with awe. "He weighs our hearts!"

A rumble rolls through the chamber like distant thunder, reverberating in my bones. I stand, unarmed, arms at my sides, uncertain if this divine force will smite me or spare

me. My gaze flicks to Lirienne, who clings to my arm, her trembling shifting into something like hope.

Suddenly, a pillar of flame erupts from the dais's center, a slender spire that reaches high into the temple's vaulted ceiling, swirling with unnatural brilliance. My gut clenches. Is this the War God's fury or his blessing?

A radiant warmth floods me, not painful but overwhelming, as the War God's power brushes my very soul. I hear Lirienne exhale in a half-choked sob, pressing closer. All around, orcs shield their eyes from the blaze.

Then, as quickly as it came, the pillar of flame recedes, leaving behind a swirl of embers that drift in the air. The runes on the dais simmer down to a soft glow. A hush claims the temple, the crackling of residual flames echoing in corners.

I release a shuddering breath. My limbs shake from the raw energy that just coursed through the floor. The War God... did he judge us?

Priests scramble, dropping their staffs in stunned reverence. One elder priest stares at me and Lirienne, eyes filled with tears. "The War God... acknowledges your union. He did not strike her dead. He saved you both from the spear."



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A murmur of disbelief ripples through the crowd. Some orcs still cower, half-expecting another quake. Others tentatively rise, exchanging astonished glances. Gaurbod remains crouched near the dais's edge, trembling, the spear lost at his feet. The expression on his face is one of raw terror.

“You see?” I bellow, voice shaking but resolute. “The War God has decided. This woman is not our curse!”

A wave of relief crashes over me as I turn, grasping Lirienne's hands. She stares up at me, tears flowing freely. I press my brow to hers, ignoring the gawking orcs, ignoring Gaurbod's trembling. My chest feels light and heavy all at once—a swirl of gratitude, shock, and triumph.

“You... you did it,” she whispers, voice thick.

“We did,” I correct, struggling to keep tears from my own eyes. The raw hum of divine power still resonates in my bones, the War God's acceptance reverberating through the temple.

In the hush that follows, Karzug and a few loyal warriors advance, surrounding Gaurbod's ragged group. Harzug pins one of Gaurbod's men to the ground, growling demands for surrender. The traitor orcs, their bravado shattered by the War God's dramatic intervention, stare at the dais in fear.

Gaurbod himself crouches, gaze flicking wildly between me and the dais's smoldering runes. His chest heaves. “This... can't be,” he rasps, voice hollow.

Karzug steps forward, weapon raised. “You orchestrated sabotage, Gaurbod. Killed our youth, fouled our cistern. You’ve condemned yourself.”

The orcs who once stood behind Gaurbod now hesitate, some dropping their weapons. They realize the War God has undone the sabotage’s purpose—clearly, the deity has not condemned Lirienne, but saved her.

“You played on the clan’s fears,” I say harshly, stepping closer to Gaurbod. My side aches from the earlier wound, but I hold my posture firm, Lirienne at my back. “You dared to stage omens, cost lives, just to seize power.”

He swallows, eyes darting in search of an escape. “I... I did what was necessary. The clan needed a pure bloodline, no human bride. But... the War God...” He trails off, voice quavering in disbelief.

“He does not stand with murderers,” I spit. “You can spew your lies, but the War God’s temple just intervened. And if that isn’t enough proof, we have your own confession.”

An anguished roar tears from Gaurbod’s throat. He lunges, not at me but at the dais’s center, as if aiming to disrupt the runes. Karzug intercepts, bashing the hilt of his sword against Gaurbod’s head. The blow sends my cousin sprawling, unconscious or nearly so.

The chamber falls silent again, except for the heavy breathing of orcs and the soft hiss of dying flames. My heart pounds. Gaurbod is defeated, the War God’s verdict is clear. Is this truly the end of the clan’s turmoil?

One by one, orcs sink to their knees or bow heads, grappling with the magnitude of what they’ve just witnessed. Drahn the priest approaches the dais, trembling with reverence. “Chieftain Ghorzag,” he says hoarsely, “the War God has spared you both.

It seems... he accepts her.”

A tension I hadn't realized was choking me finally eases. I take a shaky breath, turning to Lirienne. She gazes at me with shining eyes, tears welling. Slowly, I gather her into my arms, ignoring the watchful stares. Let them see that the War God himself had no objection.

“Is it over?” she whispers, voice so faint only I can hear.

I press my cheek to her hair, allowing myself a moment's solace. “I hope so,” I manage. “We still have to lead the clan through the aftermath, but... yes, we've survived the War God's judgment.”

Karzug approaches, saluting. “Chieftain, what do you wish to do with Gaurbod and his men?”

My gaze flicks to my cousin's prone form, pity and anger mingling in my gut. He betrayed us for power, yet the War God gave him no favor. “Bind him,” I order quietly. “And those who willingly aided his sabotage. We'll see them judged by clan law.”

Several warriors hurry to comply, cuffing Gaurbod's wrists with iron manacles. The priests hover, uncertain if the War God demands further blood. But the runes on the floor have dimmed to a soft glow, as though the temple is at peace now that the sacrifice has been averted.

I survey the temple dais. Orcs part in a wide circle around us, letting Lirienne and me remain at the center—where the War God's verdict literally shook the stone. A hush falls, broken only by the crackle of residual flames.

“Hear me,” I declare, voice echoing in the grand chamber. “The War God has

answered. He did not strike down my bride. He saved her. She is not cursed!”

A ripple of agreement spreads through the onlookers. Some bow their heads in relief; others stand blinking in awe. Gaurbod’s men, or those who had been swayed by him, look stricken, as if the foundation of their beliefs has crumbled.

Drahn the priest approaches the dais, staff scraping the stone. “Chieftain,” he says, voice subdued, “forgive us. We were blind to the sabotage, quick to blame outside forces.” His regret seems genuine, mirrored in the eyes of the other priests.

I incline my head, the anger in me slowly fading to weary acceptance. “You were swayed by cunning illusions and fear. The War God has revealed the truth. May we move forward from here.”

Lirienne’s trembling subsides somewhat, though her grip on my arm remains tight. She gazes at me with a mixture of relief and raw gratitude. She knows how close we came to losing everything.

I turn to her, heart full. The clan rings us, silent. “I meant what I said,” I murmur, quiet enough that only she can hear. “If the War God demanded blood, I would have given mine freely rather than see you harmed.”

Her eyes shine with tears. “Thank the gods... it didn’t come to that.”

We press our foreheads together in a brief, tender gesture. My chest burns with affection for this human woman who has risked so much to stand among orcs. If not for the War God’s sign, she might have died by Gaurbod’s spear. The memory makes me shudder.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

As if sensing our emotions, the dais's runes flicker one last time, a gentle glow rippling under our feet. A soft tremor shakes the floor—a final acknowledgment, perhaps. It feels like the War God's blessing, intangible yet undeniable. The orcs watch in reverent silence.

Even Ragzuk, the old shaman's apprentice, dares a small smile. "The War God's acceptance," he murmurs, eyes brimming. "No further sign needed."

No one argues. The entire clan—or what is left of our traveling party—has witnessed the War God's direct intervention. The illusions, sabotage, Gaurbod's manipulations: all lie exposed.

Slowly, I help Lirienne down from the dais. Orcs step aside, bowing their heads in respect. We make our way across the temple floor, Karzug and the loyal warriors trailing behind, Gaurbod's men bound and subdued. A swirl of relief, exhaustion, and triumph courses through me. We still must rebuild the clan's trust, but for now, Lirienne is safe.

"Chieftain," Karzug says, voice carrying a note of weary joy. "It's over."

I meet his gaze, a faint smile tugging at my lips. "The War God has given us a chance."

At my side, Lirienne's shoulders relax, a tearful smile hinting on her lips. She glances at me, eyes shining with gratitude. In that unspoken moment, we both know how precarious our journey has been—how close she came to death. The War God's acceptance feels like a new dawn, a chance to carve a future for orcs and humans

alike.

“We’ll leave the temple soon,” I announce, voice echoing in the ancient hall. “Let the clan see Gaurbod tried to manipulate us all. And let them know the War God saved Lirienne’s life, not once but twice.”

A rumble of agreement ripples through the orcs. Several kneel in renewed reverence to the War God, while others exchange nods. The tension that threatened to tear us apart for so long finally begins to unwind, replaced by a cautious hope.

Before we depart, Karzug and Harzug drag Gaurbod—still half-dazed—onto the dais. They kneel him at the center, flanked by loyal warriors. Blood trickles from a cut on his temple, and he glares at me with desperate rage.

“I should kill you,” I say softly, stepping closer. My knuckles tighten on the handle of my ax, though the adrenaline of the fight is draining. “But the clan will decide your fate, cousin. You shall face a tribunal—not for the War God, but for your sabotage and murder.”

Gaurbod bares his tusks, then spits a wad of blood at my feet. “The War God is blind. We should never have let a human slip among us.” His voice is raw, bitterness and fear swirling.

I shake my head, pity touching me despite my anger. “It’s over, Gaurbod. The War God has announced differently.”

He lets out a choked snarl, but lacks the strength to fight further. Harzug and Gurtha yank him upright, binding his arms behind his back with thick ropes. A hush cloaks the dais as every orc present recognizes the final fall of Gaurbod’s coup.

The trek back across the temple floor carries an unexpected solemnity. Priests hurry

to gather any relics they brought, whispering exultations for the War God's display of power. Orc warriors retrieve fallen weapons, aid their injured. Lirienne and I lead them, forging a path through columns carved with the War God's likeness. I feel the weight of ancient eyes upon us, as if the temple's silent watchers acknowledge our triumph.

At the grand entrance, we pause, turning for one last look. Torches along the walls flicker, revealing runes that still glow faintly in the aftermath of the War God's manifestation. My father once told me that in times of great crisis, the War God might intervene. Perhaps this was that crisis, I think, relief warring with a lingering sense of awe.

Lirienne squeezes my hand. "Thank you," she breathes, voice almost lost in the echoing chamber. "You risked?—"

I silence her with a gentle press of my brow to hers. "I'd do it a thousand times," I murmur, letting the raw sincerity bleed through. She is no curse. She's my future.

We step out onto the windswept plateau, the sky overhead clearing from stormy clouds to reveal beams of sunlight piercing through. The crisp air tastes like promise. Behind us, orcs follow, carrying Gaurbod bound in chains, the priests trailing with hushed reverence. Their footsteps feel lighter, as though they've shed a great burden.

Karzug takes a deep breath, scanning the horizon. "The clan must hear of what happened," he says. "They must know the War God delivered a verdict."

I nod, shifting my gaze to Lirienne. She gazes back, her expression soft with relief and something akin to joy. The corners of my mouth curve upward in a small, weary smile. "We'll return home and rebuild. Let them see we are united."

Some of the orcs nearest us murmur agreement. A sense of unity, tenuous but

genuine, blossoms in the crisp mountain air. Lirienne and I stand side by side, battered but unbroken—living proof that sabotage, illusions, or the clan’s deepest fears cannot sever the bond we’ve forged. And now, the War God has shown acceptance of our union in a surge of divine flame.

I tighten my grip on Lirienne’s hand, heart set on guiding my clan—our clan—toward a horizon where orcs and humans might find common ground. The War God has given his sign. Now, it is up to us to prove we deserve it.

17

## LIRIENNE

We emerge from the War God’s temple into crisp morning air, the sun just beginning to crest over the jagged peaks. The entire mountainside seems to exhale with us, as if relieved that the harrowing night is finally over. My heart still throbs with echoes of fear and elation that pounded through me only hours ago.

Standing near the temple’s towering archway, I glance behind at the ancient carvings—a silent testament to the cosmic power we have just witnessed. My knees feel unsteady as the magnitude sinks in: a swirl of orcish chanting, Gaurbod’s enraged accusations, Ghorzag offering his own life in my stead, and finally the War God’s flaming pillar that saves us both. Even now, my mind struggles to piece it all together. He saved us. The War God... truly intervened.

Ghorzag’s strong presence at my side keeps me anchored in reality. He has an arm wrapped around my waist, as though still guarding me from an invisible threat. The orcish warriors step out onto the stone ledge, battered from the confrontation but alive and—if the awe in their eyes is any sign—irrevocably changed by what they witnessed.



A hush clings to the mountaintop plateau. Some orcs rub at their eyes, as though trying to banish the remnants of flames dancing on the temple's runes. Others exhale shuddering breaths, exchanging looks of mingled relief and reverence. The priests—headed by Drahn, their oldest member—move forward in a solemn line, crimson robes flapping in the chill wind.

Drahn lifts his carved staff, bone charms clacking. His cheeks are damp with tears, whether from awe or exhaustion or both. “By the War God’s own hand,” he says, voice trembling with significance, “we have witnessed the sign of acceptance. Let all here bear witness: The War God approves of this union.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

A ripple of shock and relief courses through the crowd. Some orcs let out gasps, others close their eyes in silent thanks. Ragzuk, the old shaman's apprentice, murmurs a prayer under his breath, his shoulders quivering as though a massive burden has slid free.

Karzug, still nursing the wound in his arm, offers me a nod of cautious respect. "It seems... we were mistaken," he says quietly, glancing at the other warriors. Then, more openly, he declares: "The War God has spoken, and the clan can no longer deny what was shown."

My lips part in a silent exhale. No longer a scapegoat. The weight of that realization leaves me almost dizzy. I squeeze Ghorzag's forearm, meeting his gaze. He stares back, exhaustion darkening his eyes, but behind it glows a fierce triumph.

He inclines his head, turning to address the assembly. "You have your sign," he says, voice resonating across the plateau. "We stand here—Lirienne and I—unharmd, spared by the War God's flame. Let no one call her a curse again."

Some orcs in the crowd bow their heads in agreement, still reeling from the temple's quake and the radiant fire that burst forth. Others, though reluctant, wear hesitant acceptance on their faces. The strangling grip of suspicion that once bound them is loosening. Ghorzag casts his gaze around, letting the significance settle. In that hush, my chest constricts with relief—finally, an end to the constant dread that someone would bury a blade in my back.

A commotion draws our attention. A cluster of orcs drag Gaurbod forward, his hands manacled. Dried blood crusts on the side of his head, remnants of the blow Karzug

dealt to knock him out. He wavers on his feet, rage and humiliation twisting his features. A bitter sneer mars his bruised mouth.

“Release me!” Gaurbod snarls, struggling against the iron cuffs. His braids hang in disarray, eyes dull with defeat. A faint tremor of hatred radiates from him when his gaze lands on me, but I hold his stare, refusing to shrink as I once might have.

Karzug tightens his grip on Gaurbod’s arm. “We’ll bring him to the clan’s main camp for judgment,” he says, glancing at Ghorzag. “It’ll be up to our laws to decide his punishment for sabotage, murder, and dishonoring the War God’s temple.”

A hush falls, orcs exchanging uneasy nods. The memory of Rakan’s tragic death sharpens my anger. He orchestrated everything—Rakan’s poisoning, illusions that terrorized the clan, attacks that nearly tore us apart. Now he stands, battered and bitter, forced to face the consequences of his treachery.

Ghorzag steps closer, his expression cold but steady. “You lied, manipulated, and spilled orcish blood for your personal gain. We’ll let the clan see the truth you tried to hide. Let them decide your fate.”

A flicker of unspoken pain crosses his face—Gaurbod is family, after all—but the orc chieftain’s resolve remains firm. Gaurbod spits at the ground, but no one flinches. The War God’s sign has left him powerless; his allies have scattered, or bent the knee to Ghorzag’s renewed authority.

The priests form a half-circle around us, staff ends scraping the rocky floor. Drahn inclines his head solemnly. “ChieftainGhorzag,” he says, “shall we perform any further rites here, or do we depart immediately?”

Ghorzag runs a hand over his scarred chin, tusks tightened in thought. “We came seeking the War God’s verdict, and we received it,” he replies. “We have no reason to

linger.” Then he casts me a quiet look of concern. “We’re all exhausted, battered by betrayals and battles. The sooner we return home, the sooner we can heal.”

A mix of relief and weariness flows through the orcs at those words. The journey here has nearly broken us in body and spirit, but the temple’s dramatic intervention offers closure. Ghorzag’s decree stands—we leave behind the War God’s domain. For once, I sense no murmur of dissent.

Drahn gives a nod, staff ornaments rattling softly. “Then the War God’s temple is satisfied. Let us go in peace.”

A few priests make final gestures of reverence toward the carved images along the temple entrance, muttering final prayers. Then, with Gaurbod in chains and the orcs forming a protective circle, we begin the trek down the winding path that brought us to this lofty realm. My heart feels a thousand pounds lighter.

We descend through the same treacherous passes we navigated before, but the atmosphere feels starkly different. Where once illusions lurked in every shadow, now the mist seems to have receded. My skin no longer prickles with the haunting sense of being watched by unseen eyes. Even the orcs, though weary, carry an undertone of renewed confidence.

At midday, we pause at a rocky ledge overlooking a broad valley. Distant clouds that once loomed ominously now begin to part, shafts of sunlight piercing the gloom. It is like the final piece of a puzzle sliding into place—false omens giving way to clear skies, as if the War God’s intervention has banished the sabotage’s lingering shadows.

Karzug joins me at the ledge, cradling his bandaged arm. “Look at that,” he murmurs, nodding to the valley below. The swirling clouds that once blanketed the terrain are pulling back, revealing green pockets of forest and winding rivers glinting in the sun.

“We’ve never had such a sudden break in the weather. Almost feels... symbolic.”

I exhale, gratitude welling in my chest. “It does.” A sign that the enemies are gone, that Gaurbod’s sabotage can no longer twist the clan’s faith.

Behind us, Ghorzag instructs the priests to rest, letting them tend the orcs wounded during the final temple confrontation. Most have superficial cuts or bruises; nothing like the life-threatening ambushes from days earlier. Even in exhaustion, a note of cautious optimism hums through our party.

I catch Harzug’s eye. He manages a curt smile—a rare sight for such a hardened warrior. “We lost no one in the temple,” he says, as if marveling at the fact. “And now the War God has accepted you. Surreal.”

“Surreal,” I echo, voice tinged with relief and awe. My mind replays the moment Ghorzag threw down his ax at the temple, offering his life if the War God demanded blood. The memory still sends a jolt of heat and fear through me. He was ready to sacrifice himself, and yet we both stand here alive.

When we resume our descent, Ghorzag falls into step beside me. Our shoulders occasionally brush, a comforting reminder that we can walk openly together now, free of the clan’s muttered curses. After so much turmoil, the simplest gesture—our arms touching—makes my heart flutter.

“So,” he murmurs, low enough that only I can hear, “the War God took pity on us, or else recognized our genuine bond. Either way, we have his sign.”

I glance at him, heat blossoming in my cheeks. “It’s still hard to believe. I worried we’d face total condemnation.”

His eyes shift to me, intense. “I told you I’d give my life for yours if that were the

price.”

A lump rises in my throat. “You did. And yet we both survived. Thank you.” The words feel insufficient. How do you thank someone for offering up his own life?

He shakes his head, mouth tightening. “I’d do it a thousand times,” he says, echoing the vow he made in the temple. I reach for his hand, and though we walk through a caravan of watchful orcs, he lets me lace my fingers with his. If any whisper or judge, I hardly care. The War God’s sign overrides all doubt.

By late afternoon, we reach a lower altitude where the wind softens and the path widens. We plan to make camp near a mountain stream that bubbles with fresh water. The orcs set about collecting firewood, erecting tents, and treating new bruises from the temple scuffle. Everything feels different, I realize, scanning the camp. The hostility once directed at me has shifted into cautious respect, or at least grudging acceptance.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

A small group of warriors approaches Ghorzag and me, led by a weathered orc woman with braided silver hair. She inclines her head—not exactly a bow, but a gesture of respect. “Chieftain,” she says. Then, more hesitantly, her gaze flicks to me. “Human bride.”

I inhale, bracing for an insult, but she surprises me by speaking calmly. “We... we saw the War God’s sign. If he spares you, we have no right to call you cursed.” Her tone is rough, eyes darting as though unsure how to proceed. “We’re... sorry for the suspicion.”

My shoulders relax, warmth flooding my chest. “You’re forgiven,” I manage, forcing a small smile. “I understand your fear. But I never meant to bring calamity.”

She gives a slow nod, turning away. The warriors with her murmur amongst themselves, but no hateful glares or muttered curses follow. They’re truly letting this go, I think, tears pricking my eyes. Finally.

At the edge of camp, Gaurbod remains chained to a sturdy post, guarded by two grim-faced warriors. He watches the interactions with smoldering resentment, but exhaustion and a bandaged head wound keep him from struggling. A pang of pity mingled with anger roils in me, thinking how close he came to killing me. He’ll face the clan’s justice soon enough.

Ghorzag’s jaw tightens whenever he glances Gaurbod’s way. He’s still your cousin, I remind myself, and that personal betrayal must sting. But Ghorzag’s role as chieftain demands he bring Gaurbod back in chains rather than take vengeance here and now.

Night falls softly, the final shadows of day stretching across the valley. Orcs sit around scattered fires, speaking in subdued tones. The priests huddle together, likely planning how to announce the War God's new verdict to the clan upon return. I sit with Ghorzag near one of these fires, a pot of stew simmering in the embers. The entire scene feels surreal—a calm after a storm that nearly destroyed us.

As stars emerge overhead, I catch sight of Karzug and Harzug discussing travel routes for the next day. We'll likely reach the fortress by tomorrow's dusk if we maintain a steady pace. My stomach lurches with an odd mix of nerves and excitement. Returning to face the clan, but this time with the War God's favor—and the traitor unmasked.

Ghorzag watches me quietly. In the firelight, his green skin glows with a bronze cast, highlighting the rugged contours of his face, the swirl of old tattoos across his arms. I shift closer, drawn by his warmth. He extends an arm, allowing me to nestle against his side. Our eyes meet, a soft hush enveloping us.

"Thank you," I whisper, voice wavering with the weight of everything unsaid. "For believing me, for—" My throat closes on the memory of him throwing down his ax at the temple.

His arm tightens around my shoulders. "You're worth any price," he says simply, a heartfelt confession in each word. "We wouldn't have survived half this journey if not for your courage."

Heat flushes my cheeks, and tears sting the corners of my eyes. "I only did what I could. You risked so much more, Ghorzag. For me. For the clan."

He presses his brow to mine, a gesture that has become intimately familiar. "And I'd do it again," he murmurs, his voice low and tender. "We'll lead them together—no more illusions, no more sabotage. The War God's sign proved we are meant to stand



side by side.”

My heart thuds. Side by side. The future that once felt impossible now stretches before me, no longer a bleak labyrinth of hostilities. Orc watchers eye us across the fire, some with faint curiosity, others with subdued acceptance. Romance is rarely a subject in orcish life overshadowed by war, but Ghorzag’s unwavering devotion leaves me breathless.

Smiling, I lean into him. Yes, I think. We’ll face it all together.

Morning comes with a gentle golden glow. The ominous clouds that once clung to these mountains are gone, revealing a sky of dazzling blue. Orcs rouse early, packing gear and quenching the dying embers of last night’s fires. Ghorzag and Karzug confer about the final leg of our journey home, while I help distribute rations from our dwindling supplies.

Ragzuk sidles up beside me, staff tapping the rocky ground. “You look happier, Lirienne,” he notes, voice crackling with age. “Peace suits you.”

I flush, offering him a genuine grin. “I never thought I’d see acceptance after all that’s happened. But the War God’s temple... it changed everything.”

He nods, eyes reflecting the morning light. “The clan needed a sign. Now that you have it, I suspect we’ll all think twice before doubting the War God’s verdict. Gaurbod’s sabotage claimed too many lives, but at least it ends here.”

A pang strikes my heart. Rakan’s death, the orchard floods, the illusions. “It won’t be easy,” I say softly. “Some wounds run deep. But I’ll do what I can to help them heal.”

His lips curve into a thoughtful smile. “You already are. Orcs respect courage, and you’ve proven yours.”

By midday, we are winding down familiar paths, the jagged mountain ridges behind us. Each step further from the temple feels like shedding another layer of gloom. Gaurbod's sullen presence in chains behind the caravan is a silent reminder of how close we came to ruin.

We break for lunch by a small, crystal-clear stream. Some orcs fish briefly, others repair torn leathers. I kneel by the water to wash my face, letting the coolness chase away lingering fatigue. Ghorzag approaches, crouching at my side, a faint grin tugging his lips.

"Refreshing?" he teases, lightly splashing water over his hands.

I smile, tucking a damp lock of hair behind my ear. "Feels like I'm washing away nightmares."

He nods, eyes flickering with empathy. "We'll carry those memories, but they won't define us." Then, more quietly, "Thank you for not losing faith. Even when the clan's hatred soared."

I place a wet palm on his forearm. "I had faith in you," I say simply. The truth rings between us like a quiet vow.

As we travel, the last remnants of dark cloud formations drift apart overhead, yielding a sunlit sky. Orc warriors pause to crane their necks, marveling at the warmth spilling down. More than one comments that the false omens—storms, illusions, sabotage—have finally dissipated.

I glimpse Drahn, the lead priest, raising his staff to the heavens as if to confirm the War God's shift in temperament. A hush of gratitude ripples through the group. No illusions, no sabotage. It's almost peaceful.

For the first time, the orcs around me speak with something closer to normalcy: passing waterskins, discussing how best to rebuild the orchard once we get home, or replant seeds in the flooded fields. Their distrustful stares have softened, replaced by cautious acceptance.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

Karzug approaches with a grin, nodding to me. “Seems the War God truly parted the clouds for us. Not a single sign of illusions.”

Harzug grunts agreement. “We might actually make it back without another ambush.”

Ghorzag, overhearing, gives a wry chuckle. “After all we’ve faced, a quiet journey home is well-deserved.”

18

### GHORZAG

The high walls of our fortress loom in the light, familiar stone battlements rising against a marbled sky. The sun has not yet dipped below the horizon, but the crimson wash across the clouds speaks of day’s end—and, I hope, the end of the clan’s dark chapter.

I lead the procession toward our home, mindful of the stares from orcs who gather to see us. Their expressions range from guarded curiosity to outright shock at the sight of our prisoners. Bound and sullen, Gaurbod trudges in the middle of the group, irons clamped around his wrists. He refuses to meet anyone’s eyes, but I sense his smoldering resentment all the same.

Lirienne walks near me, posture straight despite exhaustion, her expression equally resolute and wary. Where once I worried the clan’s scorn would settle on her shoulders, now I feel an unexpected calm. The War God has granted a sign so unmistakable no rumor or sabotage can deny it. She’s safe here now—by his decree,

and mine.

A hush spreads among the gathered orcs as I raise a hand for quiet. We halt in the broad courtyard, the same place where Lirienne first arrived to a throng of hostile stares. How different it feels now—many of those same orcs part to give us space, eyes flicking from me to her with a kind of tentative respect. I exhale, letting my gaze travel the ring of watchers. Time to expose Gaurbod's conspiracy and reclaim the unity he nearly destroyed.

Karzug moves ahead, speaking in sharp tones to the gate guards. They open the iron-bound doors wide, allowing the last of our procession to enter fully. Horses snort in relief, newly minted orcish allies from the War God's journey pat down the animals' flanks. A few weary priests, robes torn and dusty from the road, cluster at the fringes, sharing quiet words of final blessings.

Gaurbod stumbles as the guard holding his chain gives it a yank, forcing him into the courtyard's stone floor. Lirienne's gaze flicks to him, an uneasy tension in her eyes. I let my hand brush her arm, a silent reassurance. He can't harm you now.

I scan the crowd, noting some orcs wear expressions of disbelief. Others point openly at Gaurbod, whispering among themselves. They see the iron shackles, the battered face. They sense the shift in power. The rumor mill has churned ceaselessly in our absence, and now the truth is about to be laid bare.

"Gather," I command, voice carrying through the courtyard. Orcs jostle closer, forming a wide circle. My own loyal warriors fan out behind me, forming a symbolic ring of steel. "Bring the elders, bring those who care to know how we survive the War God's domain."

A ripple of motion follows, orcs scurrying to fetch senior clan figures—advisors, cooks, blacksmiths, all manner of folk. Within minutes, the courtyard fills. Torches

flare along the walls, chasing away the purple hues of twilight. Lirienne stands near me, her shoulders squared, not flinching beneath the many eyes upon her. My chest tightens with pride. So different from the frightened tribute who arrived weeks ago.

At last, silence descends, broken only by the uneasy shuffle of boots on stone. The clan recognizes this as a formal reckoning, a turning point. I catch the eye of Ragzuk, the old shaman's apprentice, who gives me a slight nod—an assurance that the spiritual side of the clan is ready to hear the truth.

“Listen well,” I begin, voice echoing. Show no hesitation. “We have returned from the War God's sanctum. We sought his judgment regarding my bride, Lirienne, whose presence many believed a curse.” I pause, letting the memory of that suspicion hang in the hush. “But we discover who truly cursed us.”

A collective murmur rises. All eyes flick to Gaurbod, who stands bound and sullen, flanked by orcs with drawn weapons. His hair, once neatly braided, hangs in disarray. Blood crusts on his temple from the temple scuffle. He glares, but speaks nothing.

“Gaurbod,” I continue, forcing my voice to remain steady, “stoked fear among the clan, orchestrating floods, poisoned wells, illusions—and even murder—to unseat me as chieftain. He used every tragedy to blame Lirienne, fueling your suspicion. With your fear, he nearly seized control of the clan.”

A wave of outrage and shock ripples through the crowd. Some orcs gasp; others let out snarls of anger. I see a blacksmith's jaw drop, a cook's eyes glisten with fury. They remember Rakan, the young warrior whose death was pinned on Lirienne—Rakan was one of us, their faces seem to say, and Gaurbod killed him.

“He singled out Lirienne as the clan's scapegoat,” I go on, “because she was new, vulnerable, and easy to blame for misfortunes. The illusions, the sabotage— they were all part of Gaurbod's plan to turn you against her, and, in turn, against me.”

Anger flares in the crowd, whispered curses directed not at Lirienne, but at Gaurbod. The tide has turned, I think grimly, scanning their reactions. Finally.

At my side, Lirienne tenses. I cast her a reassuring glance. She exhales softly, relief coloring her face as she realizes they no longer stare at her with hatred. A few elders push forward— wizened orcs who once condemned Lirienne as a curse. One, a stooped figure with braided grey hair, fixes Gaurbod with a furious glare.

“You caused Rakan’s death?” the elder demands, voice quivering. “A youth barely old enough to face real battle?”

Gaurbod refuses to answer, grimacing in sullen silence. Another elder spits, fists trembling. “Your sabotage nearly destroyed our orchard. You forced us to fear every omen. How dare you claim to serve the War God!”

Gaurbod raises his head, eyes flicking with the last embers of defiance. “I did what was necessary,” he mutters. “To preserve our bloodline from contamination. But you’re too blind to see.”

A surge of hatred flashes in the crowd. Harzug, standing guard near Gaurbod, snarls. “Contamination? You murdered your own kin, fed illusions to terrify us. That’s no protection— that’s betrayal!”

The elders exchange fierce nods, unity forming behind the condemnation. Fear once aimed at Lirienne now crystallizes into rage at Gaurbod’s betrayal. “Traitor,” an orc hisses from the crowd. Another spits, echoing the sentiment.

In that heated moment, Drahn—leading priest from the pilgrimage—steps forward, staff tapping on the courtyard stones. “I witnessed the War God’s sign myself,” he says, voice resonant. “Lirienne was spared by a pillar of flame in the temple. Gaurbod tried to kill her there, but the War God intervened. Is that not proof of who truly

stands cursed in the War God's eyes?"

Orcs shift, solemn nods affirming the priest's words. Even those who once spat at Lirienne listen. They cannot deny a direct sign from the War God. My chest loosens with relief, seeing how swiftly the clan now recognizes Lirienne's innocence.

"The War God has judged us," I declare, raising my voice once more. "Lirienne stands not as our curse, but under his protection. Our clan sees the truth: sabotage, illusions, and fear were Gaurbod's doing." I gesture to the ring of orcs. "We must hold him accountable for every life lost, every wound inflicted. That is the clan's law."



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A collective murmur of agreement follows. Weapons thump against shields in an orcish gesture of unity, a sign that the clan demands justice. Even the orcs who once aligned with Gaurbod or believed in illusions shudder, bowing heads in shame.

Gaurbod sneers, lip curling. “You’ll regret this. The clan needs strong blood— not half-human?”

“Silence!” I bark, my tusks grinding. One of the warriors cuffs Gaurbod’s head to shut him up. The traitor staggers, hate still burning in his eyes, but he speaks no more.

“We can convene the clan council,” one elder suggests, voice stern. “For a crime so severe, orc tradition demands we weigh execution or exile.”

An undercurrent of tension flickers. In orcish culture, sabotage of this scale typically merits execution— especially if multiple orcs died. Yet Gaurbod is my cousin, which complicates matters. The crowd turns their gaze on me, waiting for a chieftain’s command.

I force my shoulders straight, ignoring the twinge of old wounds. Lirienne’s presence at my side steadies me, reminding me of the sacrifice I was willing to make. If Gaurbod had his way, she’d be dead. Innocent orcs died because of him; the memory of Rakan weighs on my heart.

“We will follow tradition,” I say clearly, voice echoing. “But no illusions of mercy shall overshadow Gaurbod’s guilt. Let the clan gather in the great hall. We’ll hold formal judgment there. If the verdict is execution, so be it. If any argue exile, we’ll see it done swiftly and without chance of return.”

A murmur of respect follows. Karzug and Harzug nod, gesturing to the watchers who hold Gaurbod's chains. Lirienne's hand brushes mine discreetly, as if acknowledging how heavy this decision weighs on me personally. I inhale, pushing aside the pang of familial betrayal. The clan must come first.

Within the hour, the entire clan crowds into the torchlit expanse of the great hall. Banners and trophies hang along the high walls, relics of past victories. Now, they bear witness to a different kind of conflict—the reckoning of a traitor who nearly toppled the clan from within.

I ascend the stone steps to the dais, where I once greeted Lirienne with forced composure amid the clan's hostility. The irony strikes me: back then, she was the one under suspicion, and Gaurbod was a respected relative. Now, roles reverse. The dais looms large, an echo of old rivalries.

A hush envelops the hall as Karzug leads Gaurbod forward, shackles rattling. Orc warriors flank him, weapons in hand. The elders form a semicircle, joined by key advisors like Harzug, who represent the clan's martial leadership, and Drahn, symbolizing the priests' approval. Lirienne stands to my right, posture tense but resolute.

“Clan of Stormborn,” I call, voice resounding. “You know why we are gathered. Hear the charges against Gaurbod: sabotage of clan resources, orchestrating illusions and false omens, murder of Rakan, attempted murder of the chieftain's bride, and defiling the War God's temple with bloodshed.”

A ripple of anger and grief threads through the crowd. Orc mothers recall Rakan's youth, fathers clench jaws at the orchard's memory, warriors hiss at illusions that nearly cost them their sanity.

“What say you, Gaurbod?” I ask, though I suspect any response drips with venom.

He lifts his chin, sullen. “I acted for the clan’s future,” he mutters, half under his breath. “That human—” His gaze skitters to Lirienne, “—disgraces our blood.”

The crowd bristles, a few spitting insults. Harzug steps forward threateningly, but I raise a hand. “Enough,” I say, glaring. “You stand condemned by the War God’s sign. You cannot twist this further.”

Silence thickens. The orc elders exchange glances, each awaiting my decision. I exhale, mind racing with the weight of this moment. If I simply order him executed, it might be swift, but might leave a wound in the clan’s heart. He is my cousin. Exile might risk his returning for revenge. No easy answer.

At length, I turn to the elders. “We honor tradition,” I say, scanning their faces. “For sabotage this severe, the penalty is either the sword or banishment.”

An elder with braided grey hair steps forward. “Execution is standard for orcs who betray their own,” she says quietly, voice trembling. “But Gaurbod is your blood, Chieftain. Does that weigh on your judgment?”

A lump forms in my throat. Lirienne’s hand finds mine, a gentle squeeze. I steel myself. I must choose not as Gaurbod’s cousin, but as the clan’s chieftain.

“He spilled orc blood— Rakan’s,” I say, voice hoarse. “He nearly destroyed us. Family ties do not absolve murder. The clan must see justice done.”

A heavy hush follows, the gravity of my words sinking in. Gaurbod’s face twists, but he offers no defense. The elder who spoke closes her eyes, nodding grimly. “Then we abide by the old ways.”

“Yes,” I affirm, heart heavy. “Execution.”

A collective inhale ripples through the hall, some orcs pressing fists to chests in solemn acceptance. A few lower their heads, acknowledging the severity. This is how it must be, I remind myself. The sabotage was too great, the cost in lives irreparable. If he lives, the clan may never heal.

Gaurbod laughs bitterly, hollow. “So be it, cousin,” he spits. “Enjoy your half-breed future.”

Blood pounds in my ears, but I keep composure. “Take him to the courtyard,” I order, voice stiff. “It will be swift. The entire clan shall bear witness to the end of his treachery.”

Karzug and the guards seize Gaurbod’s arms. He doesn’t resist, possibly resigned or too battered in spirit to fight. The crowd parts in uneasy silence as we descend from the dais. My heart hammers, but I lead them, forging a path through anxious onlookers.

The orange glow of dusk fills the courtyard, long shadows stretching across the stone. Orc watchers join the throng, murmuring as they realize the clan’s final verdict. Lirienne sticks close, her expression pained. I feel a pang of guilt for the familial tie that forces my hand, but the clan demands justice beyond sentiment.

We form a ring in the courtyard’s center, the same place we first returned with Gaurbod in chains. A hush falls as Gaurbod is forced to his knees, arms locked behind his back. Karzug and Harzug stand to either side, swords drawn, silent sentinels.

I inhale, stepping forward. The entire clan, or those who live within these walls, press closer. Tension radiates, some orcs fidgeting, others stoically awaiting the blow. Gaurbod’s gaze flickers, a shadow of fear on his face. He knows there is no escape.

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“Gaurbod Stormborn,” I pronounce, letting my voice ring out. “For sabotage, illusions, the murder of Rakan, attemptson Lirienne’s life, and betrayal of the War God’s trust, you are sentenced to death.”

He sneers, battered pride flaring. “You were always too soft, Ghorzag. The War God?—”

“The War God spared Lirienne and struck down your betrayal,” I interrupt, anger cresting. “Your lies end now.”

Ragzuk approaches, staff tapping softly, eyes lowered in a final prayer. Orc tradition dictates a chance for last words, but Gaurbod only glares, silent. Ragzuk murmurs a brief incantation, calling on the War God to witness the clan’s justice.

“Proceed,” I say, voice taut.

Karzug gives a short nod, stepping behind Gaurbod with sword in hand. The hush is absolute, every orc holding breath. Lirienne presses a trembling hand to her mouth, though she makes no protest. She understands this is our law.

With a single, swift motion, Karzug swings the blade. Steel flashes in the dying sunlight, the blow landing clean. Gaurbod’s body crumples to the stones. The entire courtyard seems to exhale, tension unraveling into stunned finality.

For a moment, none speak. Then, as if on cue, watchers sag with relief, some letting out pained groans. A chunk of sorrow presses on me—I lose a cousin, but it is his own doing. My father’s line was tarnished by Gaurbod’s ambition, and now it ends

on these stones.

I swallow hard, turning to face the clan. “It’s done,” I declare, voice echoing. “The conspirator who nearly destroyed us has paid with his life. Let our clan be united once more, trusting the War God’s sign and each other.”

A wave of agreement, weapons clashing on armor. Some orcs close their eyes in relief and sorrow, but none challenges the verdict. A few approach me, heads bowed, apologizing for mistrusting my leadership or Lirienne. I accept their words with weary acknowledgment—the clan needs unity, not grudges.

Drahn, the lead priest, steps forward. “Chieftain Ghorzag,” he says, voice trembling with earnest devotion. “We stand behind you. Let this day mark the end of sabotage and the birth of a new era.”

A faint, grateful smile tugs at my lips. At last, the clan acknowledges me fully—free of Gaurbod’s manipulations. I exhale, scanning the courtyard where orcs murmur, comforting each other, or praising the War God’s guidance. This is the hardest test of my leadership. Now, the War God himself vindicates our cause.

Lirienne catches my eye. She stands beside Karzug, her expression touched by sorrow at Gaurbod’s body but also a certain peace. We survive illusions, sabotage, and near-mutiny. She’s free from suspicion forever. She offers me a small nod, as if to say, I’m here, and so are you. My chest warms with gratitude.

As dusk settles into true night, orcs light torches around the courtyard, forming pockets of light against the gloom. Despite the somber finality of Gaurbod’s execution, the tension that once plagued us feels lifted—replaced by a cautious optimism for the future. Some orcs even embrace each other, sharing tearful stories of illusions or sabotage they endured.

“Gather again in the great hall,” I announce. “We’ll feast tomorrow, not tonight—tonight we rest, bury our dead, honor Rakan’s memory, and reaffirm our loyalty to each other.” A subdued murmur of agreement follows.

I turn to Harzug. “Clear Gaurbod’s remains with respect to tradition,” I instruct, voice low. Even traitors in orc tradition deserve a certain ritual in death, albeit stripped of honors. Harzug nods, leading a few warriors to handle the grim task.

Karzug approaches, wiping his blade on a rag. His eyes shine with relief. “It’s over, Chieftain,” he says softly. “Truly over.”

I give him a weary grin. “We’ll have to rebuild, quell any lingering hostility. But yes. The sabotage is ended, and the War God’s sign stands.” My gaze drifts to Lirienne again, heart swelling. She’s truly part of this clan now.

That night, the fortress feels both subdued and serene. Orcs light braziers in the great hall, offering silent prayers for the lost. Some huddle around small fires in the courtyard, mourning Rakan, reminiscing about simpler times. Yet in every conversation, I hear mention of Lirienne’s vindication, of Gaurbod’s betrayal, of the War God’s undeniable sign. Rumors can no longer brand her a curse.

In the flickering glow, I navigate the main hall, checking on wounded warriors. They nod at me, no trace of suspicion in their stares. The burden of fear has lifted. Now, we face a future unclouded by illusions or sabotage.

At the far side, I find Lirienne speaking softly with a few orc women, likely recounting how she used her healing knowledge. The older orcs listen intently, not sneering, but impressed. How we’ve changed in so short a time.

“Chieftain,” one woman addresses me, turning from Lirienne. “We’re telling her about how we plan to replant the orchard. Some seeds might still be salvaged. With

her knowledge of herbs, maybe she can advise us.”

Surprise ripples through me. They want her input? They who once spat at her feet? A grin tugs my lips. “I’m sure she’s more than willing. Her knowledge saved many of us on the pilgrimage.”

Lirienne’s cheeks color, a modest smile forming. The orc women nod, exchanging ideas about soil and water. My chest grows warm at the sight of genuine collaboration. This is the orc-human unity I once dreamed of, now made real by the War God’s testament.

Later, Drahn and a circle of priests catch me near the arched corridor leading to my quarters. They bow, staff ornaments clattering. “Chieftain Ghorzag,” Drahn says, voice solemn, “we request permission to hold a ceremony in Lirienne’s honor— to officially welcome her under the War God’s aegis.”

My brows lift. “A ceremony?”

Drahn nods. “Yes. She endured so much suspicion. We, the priests, wish to publicly declare her accepted in the clan’s spiritual sphere, ensuring no one questions her place again.”

A thrill of gratitude surges. “I’d be honored,” I reply. “Speak with her about the details. Let it be a day of celebration, not fear.”

He smiles, relief etched in his features. “May the War God guide us.” The priests depart, staff taps echoing on stone, already discussing how to prepare a ritual that might merge orcish traditions and allow Lirienne to partake.

At last, I slip into the private council chamber— the seat of my authority as chieftain. The large stone throne at the far end stands empty, runic inscriptions winding across



its rough surface. Once, I felt burdened by that seat, a reminder of my father's flawed legacy, but now I see it differently. The War God's verdict overshadows our past failings.

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Lirienne follows me inside, hesitant. The torchlight reveals the worn tapestries along the walls, each telling of old battles. A hush fills the chamber, the guards outside giving us space. I move to the stone throne, placing a hand on its armrest.

Finally, she's standing in front of me. I beckon her to come closer, "Lirienne."

She takes small hesitant steps toward me, and I meet her halfway. I capture her in my arms to her surprise. A beautiful smile blooms on her lips as she asks, "What is it, Ghorzag? What's on your mind?"

I hold her tighter, feeling every part and inch of her. In a shaky, nervous voice, I ask her, "Will you be my mate, Lirienne? In every sense of the word. Not because you're my human bride, but because you want to be?"

Lirienne's eyes open a fraction wider, and she nods. "Yes, Ghorzag," she replies breathlessly.

"My mate," I pronounce, full of love and hope for the future. Then, I kiss her, sealing not just our lips but our hearts and future together.

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## GHORZAG

Three days later, the courtyard glows with torchlight, the last tendrils of evening sky yield to a starlit canopy. Orc warriors, elders, priests, and families fill every corner, a hum of excited chatter reverberating through the fortress walls. In the center of it all

stands a simple wooden platform, draped in bold crimson cloth and anchored by tall braziers at each corner. The braziers send sparks dancing into the night, marking the site of our wedding's final vows.

I stand at the foot of the platform, arms folded to contain my own nervous energy. My father's old battle-ax leans nearby as a symbolic relic, though I no longer need weapons tonight—this ceremony is about forging unity, not drawing blades. My chest feels tight with anticipation, memory flickering back to the day I first saw Lirienne in this very courtyard, trembling under the clan's suspicious glare. How far we've come: illusions dispelled, sabotage vanquished, the War God's direct blessing turning our world from fear into acceptance.

Across the dais, Lirienne approaches in orcish ceremonial attire. My breath catches, heart pounding at the sight. She looks every inch the chieftain's bride, her hair braided with silverbeads that catch the torchlight, the embroidered vest hugging her slender frame. Yet beneath the regal aura is the same quiet determination I once admired from the start. Our gazes lock over the heads of the gathered onlookers, and my heart thunders in my ears. Tonight, we seal our bond with words from the depths of our journey.

Drahn, the lead priest, lifts his staff, ornaments rattling. The crowd's low rumble falls silent. It has been a day of joyous feasting already, an extension of the wedding ceremony begun in the morning. But this final moment—where we speak personal vows—marks the true completion of our union under the War God's gaze.

Karzug and Harzug stand on either side of me, expressions solemn but eyes shining with pride. Orcs press in a respectful circle, some perched on ledges or crates for a better view. The fortress walls bristle with torch-lit watchers. I inhale the faint scent of spiced meat from nearby tables, the tang of the evening air, and the lingering perfume of blossoms draped around the dais.

With a tap of his staff, Drahn clears his throat, voice amplified by the hush. “Clan of Stormborn,” he says, the old words resonating off stone. “We gather to hear the final vows of our chieftain, Ghorzag, and his bride, Lirienne. Their bond began in fear and trials, tested by illusions, sabotage, and the War God’s own domain.” He pauses, glancing around at the sea of expectant faces. “Yet they stand unbroken, blessed by a pillar of divine flame. Now, let them speak the words that will echo among us, binding them in love and forging a new era for the clan.”

An electric anticipation crackles through the courtyard. My pulse hammers, but I square my shoulders and step up onto the dais. Lirienne ascends from the opposite side. We meet in the center, torches casting flickering shadows across her face. She is flushed with emotion, eyes shining with unshed tears.

“Ghorzag,” Drahn prompts, stepping aside to yield the dais to us. “Speak your vow.”

A hush envelops the courtyard, the clan collectively holding its breath. My throat constricts—I have led warriors into battle, faced monstrous ambushes, and defied illusions, but this is an entirely different vulnerability. I draw a steadying breath, focusing on Lirienne’s wide brown eyes. She offers the faintest nod, and in that moment, I find the words I’ve held in my heart since the War God’s temple.

I lift my voice, letting it carry: “Lirienne, from the day you arrived as a peace offering to protect your village, we have walked a treacherous road. I saw your courage in the face of hatred, your compassion in healing orcish wounds, your unrelenting will when illusions and sabotage threatened to break us. When others called you a curse, you never faltered in wanting to help. And when I cast aside my weapon to defend you in the temple, you stood fearless by my side.”

A slight tremor runs through me—to speak so openly in front of the entire clan feels as exposing as any battle, yet I press on. “I vow before the War God and all Stormborn orcs: I will shield you from any threat, share your burdens, and trust in

your wisdom. No illusions shall ever sway me from your side. We are bound by our own hearts, the clan's acceptance, and the War God's sign. Together, we guide this clan toward unity, bridging orc and human in the spirit of hope."

A murmur ripples among the crowd—some orcs dabbing at their eyes, others nodding in approval. My gaze drifts to Lirienne, who stands transfixed, lips parted. I offer her a faint, reassuring smile, letting her see the unspoken love behind my vow. I mean every word.

She inhales deeply, turning to address me, voice quivering at the start. "Ghorzag," she says, cheeks coloring in the torchlight. "From the moment I was forced to step through these gates, I feared orcs would despise me as an invader. But you showed me honor, letting me see the clan's heart. You fought illusions, faced betrayals, and offered your own life if the War God demanded it—all to protect me, a human bride. I once believed we were too different, but your strength and compassion taught me that hearts speak a common language."

She pauses, voice thick with emotion. Tears glisten in her eyes, though she keeps them from falling with sheer will. "Now, standing here under the War God's blessing, I pledge myself to you and to Stormborn. I vow to stand at your side in battles yet to come, to heal your wounds as you've healed my heart, to share in your triumphs and burdens. No illusions or sabotage can force me away. My choice is freely given, born of the love we forged in adversity. I believe in our future, orc and human, united by hope."

A wave of warmth surges through me at her words. My throat tightens, tears pricking the corners of my eyes. I hear the courtyard erupt in a low, approving rumble— orcs acknowledging the sincerity of her vow. She's truly one of us now.

Drahn steps forward again, staff scraping the dais. "Hear these vows, Stormborn clan," he proclaims, voice carrying in the torchlit gloom. "Ghorzag and Lirienne vow

unity under the War God's watch. May we, as their witnesses, commit to supporting their bond, forging a future free of illusions, guided by truth and strength."

A roar of agreement swells. Some orcs clash swords on shields in an almost musical cadence. Others lift cups of orcish brew, shouting words of blessing. Nagra leads a small band of younger orcs in a chant, the syllables echoing with fervor. I glimpse old warriors with tears shining in their eyes—relief that the clan has found solid ground at last.

One of the priests, a middle-aged orc with an elaborate headdress of feathers, approaches carrying a carved wooden emblem—the War God's sword set in stylized flames. He places it at the center of the dais, a symbol for all to see. "The War God's sign stands among us," he declares. "No illusions remain, no sabotage corrupts. We walk forward as a clan restored."

With the vows completed, the courtyard erupts into cheers, drums pounding a triumphant rhythm. Orcs press closer, eager to congratulate us both—some offering hearty slaps on my back, others hugging Lirienne in a swirl of excitement. Lirienne's cheeks glow with happiness, laughter bubbling over as she embraces orcs who once scorned her. The transition from fear to acceptance feels almost magical, buoyed by the War God's sign.

We circulate among the revelers for a time, exchanging words with elders who apologized for their earlier hostility. They press tokens of goodwill into our hands—small carved orcish charms, bits of cloth embroidered with protective runes. Lirienne touches each item with gratitude. My heart soars, seeing the clan rally around her.

Finally, as the night deepens, Karzug and Harzug take over hosting duties, encouraging orcs to feast and dance. Recognizing the final stage of orcish weddings, they guide us from the dais with sly grins. "Go," Harzug teases, clapping me on the

shoulder. “The War God’s flame brought you two together. Let this be your night to seal it.”

Lirienne and I share a knowing look. Among orcs, it is customary for newly mated pairs to slip away from the public eye once the vows conclude, leaving the clan to continue festivities. With the clan chanting blessings and the heavy thrum of drums at our backs, we slip through the corridors of the fortress, hearts pounding at what lies ahead.

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My private lodge—or the chieftain’s quarters—is a space that once felt burdened by duty. Tonight, it glows with a different energy: woven furs laid carefully across the stone floor, a brazier casting soft amber light. A small arrangement of orcish wildflowers decorates a table in the corner, an unexpected gesture from who knew which clan member wanting to celebrate our union. The air holds the faint smell of incense, reminiscent of the War God’s temple but gentler, an echo of acceptance rather than trial.

We step inside, closing the heavy door behind us. The muffled roar of feasting orcs lingers beyond the walls. Inside, it is just the two of us— no illusions, no sabotage, only the bond we fought so hard to create.

I turn to Lirienne, heart thudding. In the quiet hush of the room, the noise from the courtyard diminishes into a distant pulse. My eyes roam over her ceremonial attire, the embroidered vest hugging her form, the belt highlighting her waist. She returns my gaze, cheeks flushed.

“We made it,” she whispers, tears shimmering. “They accept us.”

I place my hands gently on her shoulders, my own breath uneven. “Yes,” I rasp. “And I owe it all to your courage, your refusal to yield even when illusions convinced them you were a curse.”

She lets out a shaky laugh. “I had you,” she says softly, pressing her palm to my chest. “You believed in me even when the clan didn’t.”

We stand like that for a moment, foreheads close, the heat of our bodies mingling



with the brazier's gentle warmth. I close my eyes, inhaling the faint smell of her hair, recalling every frantic moment of our journey: her trembling but unbroken stance when they accused her, the desperate confrontation in the WarGod's temple, the final sign that bound us irrevocably. Now we can share this union in joy, not fear.

Slowly, I reach for the clasps of her vest, unfastening them with care. She lifts her chin, lips parted, no trace of hesitation. Our first joining was spurred by desperation, a primal clash of need after illusions and sabotage threatened to tear us apart. The second time, in the aftermath of a monstrous ambush, was an affirmation of trust. Tonight, it is a culmination of our entire journey—a celebration of the hope we carved from chaos.

Her fingers find the buckles of my own ceremonial harness, carefully slipping them free. Each piece of leather falls away, revealing old scars across my green skin, marks from countless battles. She traces a line across one scar, eyes glimmering with tenderness. My breath catches. No illusions remain—only genuine affection, built on all we've endured.

We sink onto the furs like we've been waiting our whole lives for this moment. No war drums. No poisoned wells. No suspicious glares. Just the flicker of torchlight catching on bronze-tinted skin and silver-threaded hair, the low hum of crackling fire, and the slow, reverent thud of my heart as I watch Lirienne look at me like I am both weapon and sanctuary.

Her lips brush mine—featherlight, tasting of joy and something sacred. “I never imagined we'd get here,” she whispers, her voice rough with emotion. “Not like this. Not with peace.”

I cradle her jaw in my hand, my thumb stroking the high curve of her cheekbone. “You made this peace, Lirienne,” I murmur. “You gave them a reason to believe in something greater than fear.”

Her eyes shimmer in the brazier's glow. "I only believed in you."

A quiet growl rumbles in my chest as I drag my tusks gently along the line of her jaw, coaxing a shiver from her. My bodyaches to possess her, but not with haste. Not this time. I want her to feel worshipped, wanted, safe enough to lose herself without a single sliver of fear.

I begin with her collarbone, kissing a path down the hollow of her throat. She tilts her head back, giving me access, her fingers already threading into the cords of my hair. "Ghorzag," she breathes. My name on her lips still feels like a benediction.

I strip away the last of her ceremonial garb, piece by piece, fingers lingering at every tie, every fold of embroidered cloth. Each inch of exposed skin reveals more of the woman I fought for—not as a symbol, but as something feral and real. Her nipples pebble in the cool air, dusky and perfect. I run my thumb over one as she gasps, arching into my touch.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I growl, voice thick. "You don't know what it does to me... seeing you like this. Knowing you're mine."

"I'm yours," she says, voice breathy. "Completely."

I lower my head and take her nipple into my mouth, suckling gently while her hips writhe beneath me. She moans, legs spreading instinctively, welcoming me closer. Her scent floods my senses—sweet and slick, the smell of desire that's already soaked through the crease of her thighs.

"Lie back," I say roughly. She obeys without hesitation, trust in her every movement. I kiss my way down her ribs, across the soft swell of her belly, and finally between her thighs. I nudge them wider, watching as her pussy glistens in the warm light.

“You’re drenched,” I murmur, dragging a finger through her slick folds. “Do you know how much that turns me on?”

She shakes her head, breath ragged. “Touch me, Ghorzag... please.”

I lower my mouth to her pussy and lick a long, deliberate stripe up her center. Her whole body jolts. She cries out softly, and the sound goes straight to my cock, which throbs against the furs. I devour her slowly, tongue swirling around her clit, savoring every twitch, every helpless moan she gives me.

Her hands find my hair again, tugging with each gasp. “I can’t... gods, I’m so close?—”

“That’s it,” I growl against her, sliding two thick fingers inside her while I suck gently on her clit. “Come for me, bride. Let me taste it.”

She unravels with a gasp, thighs clamping around my head as she trembles through her climax. I hold her there, tongue easing her down, fingers moving in her until she whimpers from the sensitivity.

I pull back and crawl up her body, licking her release from my lips. “You’re perfect,” I rasp. “Every inch of you.”

Her hands fumble at the fastenings of my belt, desperate now. “I need you inside me. Now.”

I let her strip me bare, her fingers trembling as she reveals my cock, hard and heavy and already leaking.

She stares. “You’re so big... and you still amaze me everytime I see it.”

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“You can take me, you know it,” I promise, kissing her again.

Guiding myself to her entrance, I rub the head of my cock through her folds, teasing her clit with the pressure. Her hips buck.

“Ghorzag,” she pleads.

I push in, slowly—inch by aching inch. Her pussy stretches around me, tight and perfect. Her mouth falls open in a gasp as I bottom out, buried to the hilt.

“Oh fuck,” she moans. “You’re... it’s so full. I can feel every part of you.”

I groan, gripping her hips. “You’re squeezing me like you don’t want to let go.”

“Maybe I don’t,” she whispers, wrapping her legs around my waist. “Maybe I want this to last forever.”

I thrust—slow, deep, reverent. Her head tips back, mouth falling open in a moan so raw it nearly undoes me.

“Faster,” she begs, nails dragging down my back.

I give her what she asks for, picking up the pace, each thrust claiming her anew. The furs beneath us shift. The brazier flickers wildly with the rhythm of our bodies. The sound of her slick pussy taking my cock echoes in the room, a melody of need and devotion.

“You’re mine,” I growl, burying my face against her neck. “Every breath, every heartbeat. Say it.”

“I’m yours,” she cries. “I love you, Ghorzag?—”

The words hit me like a spear to the chest. I kiss her hard, a desperate thing filled with too many unsaid truths. I thrust harder, losing rhythm, chasing release. Her cries grow frantic, legs locking around me as she clutches my shoulders.

“I’m coming,” she gasps, body tightening beneath me.

“Come with me,” I command, voice breaking.

She shatters around me, pussy fluttering in spasms as I finally lose control. I thrust once, twice, then come with a roar, spilling deep inside her. My cock jerks with every wave, filling her until we’re nothing but heartbeats and heat and tangled limbs.

We collapse together, her hands still clinging to me. Her breath ghosts across my collarbone, her lips brushing the old scar there.

“I’ve never felt anything like that,” she whispers, eyes wide.

“Neither have I,” I admit, brushing her hair from her face. “Not just the pleasure. The peace.”

She smiles, soft and sated. “The War God’s flame doesn’t burn us.”

“No,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her temple. “It lights the way forward.”

“We... survived so much,” she whispers, eyes drifting closed. “Is this real?”

I kiss the top of her head. “As real as the War God’s flame that saved us. No illusions can mimic such peace.” My voice comes out husky, chest vibrating with each word. “I vow to cherish you, Lirienne, for all the battles to come—whether they be famine, raiders, or internal disputes. We face them side by side.”

Her fingers trace an old scar near my ribs, reminiscent of a dark elf skirmish from years past. “And I vow,” she says softly, “to stand with you, offering what knowledge and compassion I have, bridging orc and human. We no longer fear illusions. We can build a future where outsiders might see orcs not as monsters but as potential allies.”

A rush of emotion swamps me, recalling my father’s last words, urging me to be strong for the clan. He never foresaw a future where humans and orcs might unite in love. Yet here we are, forging a new dawn. Gently, I tilt her face up and kiss her, letting the quiet intimacy speak for us.

Time feels suspended as we doze, limbs entwined. Outside, the clan’s celebration continues, but gradually quiets as the night deepens. A subtle hush settles over the fortress, broken by occasional laughter or the soft strum of an orcish lute in the distance. My thoughts circle the final sign we witnessed—the War God’s acceptance—how it changed the entire clan’s perspective. Even the ominous illusions had vanished, replaced by calmer skies and renewed crops. The orchard caretaker reported new buds sprouting, the rotted seeds unexpectedly reviving. The War God’s final blessing extended to every corner of Stormborn’s domain.

At some point, I rise carefully, mindful of Lirienne’s contented form. Tugging a soft fur blanket over her, I step to the small window slit in the lodge’s wall. Starlight spills through, revealing the courtyard beyond. From this vantage, I see orcs finishing the last of the feast, a group of children lying on the steps, blinking up at the stars in exhausted wonder. The bonfires smolder, sending curls of smoke into a serene sky. A sky free of illusions and storms, a sign of the War God’s peace.

The future unspools in my mind: rebuilding trust among the clan, integrating Lirienne's knowledge of herbs to improve healing, perhaps forging new ties with distant human villages to show orcs no longer raid them for spoils. We can lead them together, forging a new era. Pride and gratitude warm my chest.

Quiet footsteps rouse me from my reverie. Lirienne joins me at the window, the blanket draped around her shoulders. She nestles against me, gazing at the tranquil scene below. "They're... so peaceful," she remarks, eyes shining. "I never dreamed orcs could be so warm once suspicion cleared."

I slide an arm around her waist. "Nor did I dream a human bride could prove so resilient. Because of you, they found reason to set aside old hatred." Our gazes meet, a mutual promise in the hush. "This is our clan now— no illusions, no traitors. A future shaped by courage, not fear."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 3:39 am*

She rests her head on my shoulder, content in the soft glow of starlight. “Then let’s lead them, Ghorzag,” she whispers, voice trembling with conviction. “Let’s ensure no illusions or betrayal, real or conjured, divide us again.”

My chest swells. Yes. Pressing a gentle kiss to her brow, I silently vow to guide Stormborn with every ounce of strength. No sabotage will thrive under our watch, no illusions will manipulate the clan again. The War God’s final sign—clear skies, renewed orchard growth—crowned our journey with a promise of bounty. I will protect them, protect her, forging a unity that endures.

Outside, a gentle breeze stirs the courtyard fires, carrying a faint echo of orcish songs drifting through the fortress halls. The night soars with possibility. Tomorrow we face the clan’s day-to-day demands—new defenses, trade routes, ensuring Gaurbod’s co-conspirators face justice. But tonight, we bask in the wedding’s final hush.

“I love you,” Lirienne murmurs, fingers lacing through mine.

My pulse thrums at those words. “I love you,” I answer, voice thick with emotion. “The clan stands with us now—and I will see that we lead them into a brighter era.”

She smiles, turning to wrap her arms around my waist. I draw her close, inhaling the faint smell of incense and wildflowers in her hair. The fortress no longer feels like a cage but a refuge for hearts once torn by illusions. Above us, stars shimmer in silent witness, the War God’s altar now sealed with genuine devotion. This is it: our happily ever after.

“Come,” I murmur, guiding her from the window. “Let’s rest. Tomorrow we wake to



a clan that trusts in us, and a future we get to shape with our own hands.”

She nods, eyes shining with promise. Hand in hand, we return to the warm circle of furs. Outside, orcs finish their last round of toasts. Inside, in the quiet of our new union, we nestle together, exchanging soft whispers of love, the final echoes of the War God’s blessing drifting in our minds. And as sleep claims us, I clutch that precious vow: No illusions will ever tear us apart again.