



Ordered by the Orc (Monstrous Deals #8)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I might be the orc's mail-order bride, but I'll be the one giving the orders around here!

Desperate and on the run from my arranged marriage to Bratva boss, Dmitri, I accept an offer to be a lonely orc's mail-order bride. Now I'm alone in a foreign country and engaged to a monster, but that is better than the alternative. I just have to pretend long enough to get my green card and make my escape.

Only my new husband, Erik, makes me feel heard and cared for. He might be huge and hulky, but he's also gentle and considerate even when I push him away. The more I get to know him, the more I realize I've underestimated him. After Dmitri, I vowed never to let another man touch me again. But Erik's not a man. He's a monster...

I find myself wanting to trust my orc husband, maybe even wanting to love him. How could I not when he's eager to do everything I tell him and focuses only on my pleasure

But falling for him is dangerous. My brother and the Bratva have even more reach than I knew and staying in one spot would be a mistake. Can I find a way to make a safe new home with my monster husband?

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Vera

I don't react when I get the news.

No tears well in my eyes. No sadness tightens my throat.

I feel nothing.

It's been many years since the man who fathered me has felt like any more than a part of my name.

I scrunch the letter in my hand until the paper cuts into my palm and try to feel something.

There's still nothing, so I toss it to the table and walk away in disgust.

My brother Yakov's voice seems uncomfortably loud in the quiet room. "Of course you're upset."

I'd like to tell him the truth, that I couldn't care less, but that would be unwise. My brother is a dangerous man just like our father was.

So I say nothing .

In the quiet of my own mind is a little tap, tap, tapping. An insistent noise reminding me of the words of the American agent in the visa office. We could protect you.

I doubted him then. I doubt him still.

I've seen what my father and brother are capable of.

But with my father dead and his men in chaos, this might be my best chance at escape.

“Vera, are you listening? We will need to go ahead with the marriage. If anything, it will need to take place sooner. We need as much stability as we can buy right now.”

I turn back to him and study his face. It's round, with the first hints of lines around his mouth and on his forehead where the skin seems permanently creased into a frown. Yakov is only five years older than my twenty-seven, but it has always seemed like more to me.

It feels bitterly appropriate for him to use the word buy. That's exactly what he and my father planned to do. To use me like a commodity to buy their own rise in power.

“Yes. I know,” I say coldly.

Clearly waiting for any further reaction, he grows impatient when I don't give it.

He sighs. “I will make the arrangements. I suggest you pack your things. You could be flying out as early as next week.” He gives me a small nod as he turns and leaves the room.

This is the extent of any emotion exchanged between us today.

Instead of doing as he suggests, I pull out a hard wooden chair and sit at the table. I don't want to sit on the sofa where plump cushions decorate the sumptuous furniture. It feels somehow more appropriate to sit with my back straight and my bottom

afforded no measure of luxury.

If I go through with my plan, I can forget about luxury. I might have grown up a spoiled Bratva princess, but I'd give that all up in a heartbeat to avoid the fate my brother has planned for me.

Thoughts of Dmitri sneak unbidden into my mind and I shudder. He's not an ugly man. In fact, his high cheekbones and strong features might be called beautiful.

His soul is anything but.

Another Vors in the underworld criminal organization labeled by those in the West as the Bratva. Another prince among thieves, with none of the charm or elegance those words might bring to mind.

My fingers feel numb as I take my phone from my pocket and unlock the screen. My whole body feels close to frozen. My movements are sluggish like my mind.

I need to make a decision. Do I go through with my arranged marriage or do I take a risk that might cost me my life for a chance at freedom?

Not knowing what else to do, I send a message to Inga Romonovna, the lady who reads my tarot every month.

Vera: Do you have time for an extra reading this month? I could use some guidance.

She replies instantly, as she always does.

Inga: For you my darling, anything.

Vera: Today?

Inga: Of course .

There's a moment of quiet before she answers the video call. I set my phone up on the table, propped against a mug of tea, and try to avoid looking at her penetrating gaze.

Eventually she sniffs and shuffles the deck. "This would be better in person, you know, printsessa. There's only so much the cards alone can do."

I nod despondently. I'd like to visit her little shop, but Yakov will question where I'm going if I go out again today. "I know."

There's another pause. She makes a low humming sound as she turns over the first card. "Six of Swords. A journey across the sea."

No surprises there. Dmitri lives in the United States of America on the East Coast. Naturally I'll need to cross the sea if I'm going to marry him. If I have any chance of escaping my family I'll also need to leave Russia and cross the sea. Preferably to get as far away as possible.

Inga turns over the next card. "The Fool. For new beginnings. This card urges you to take a leap of faith."

Again she studies me and I keep my face impassive. I've always been a little more honest with her than strictly necessary, but I still don't let her see my inner thoughts. There's no guarantee she's not working for my brother.

The final card makes her thin brows raise. "Four of Wands inverted."

I frown. I've never seen this card inverted before. "What does it mean?"

“Homecoming. But not the way you expect. This is coming to a new home. To a found home. One where you can be secure. Perhaps the cards are telling you to have faith in this arranged marriage and in your future.”

I look down at my hands clasped on the table in front of me. “Thank you, Inga.”

“Does that answer your question, printsessa?”

I mask any emotion from my face as I speak. “Yes. Thank you. I think it does.”

We end the call, but instead of dressing for dinner, I find my coat and gloves and order a car.

There’s no way a new home that’s secure means anything to do with Dmitri. The cards must point to my escape.

“I had a call from the American embassy,” I tell Yakov before I leave. “There’s a problem with my visa. I have to go back so they can issue a new one. They said they would fit me in this evening, but I will miss dinner.”

His expression darkens, but he nods. “Fine. Do not let this deal fail, Vera. You call me if those Americans cause difficulties about the visa. I know a man.”

With this chilling reminder that nowhere is safe, I tuck my coat tightly around myself and step out into the already dark street. My breath puffs from my mouth in little clouds as I walk from the house to the waiting car. Once in the back seat, I push my hands into my pockets so the driver does not see them trembling.

Any error now will cost me.

At the embassy, I speak the code words to the lady at the reception desk. She

seamlessly nods and invites me to wait in a meeting room to one side of reception. Twenty minutes later, the small thin man who interviewed me when I first applied for my visa joins me in the room. “Gospozha Boreyeva. Thank you for returning. May I hope to be of assistance to you?”

This is it. This is the moment I make my choice.

When he first took me aside and told me the FBI was looking for information about my family’s connection with the US, I played dumb. Told him nothing. Just what is expected from a good little printsessa. He was patient with me. Perhaps this is a game he’s played before and won.

He told me to return if I ever wanted to talk and told me to ask for him with the phrase I used at reception.

Now he folds his hands on the desk in front of him and gives me a wide, ridiculous American grin. “There’s no rush, but if you don’t tell me anything, I’m afraid there’s not much I can do to help you.”

What else could The Fool be telling me other than to take this leap of faith?

So I clear my throat and leap. “Suppose there was certain information I could provide to you,” I begin.

The agent sits a little straighter.

“What protection could your government offer me? You must understand what a risk I’m taking even in coming here tonight.”

He nods grimly. “Of course. Rest assured, I completely understand. I could provide you with a new identity and passage to America where you would be safer—” When

I open my mouth to complain that nowhere is safe, he holds up his hand and continues. “And I know that nothing is perfect. So you have to make the choice. Would a life under the protection of the American government but in relative freedom be better than the life you’re going to live if you go through with this marriage?”

I swallow my retort. “Yes.”

“Then if you can give me twenty minutes more, I have some papers to sign and we will arrange for you to make your statement once your safety is taken care of to the best of our ability.”

On the journey home I can’t shake the feeling of unease that tracks me like a mangy street dog. That was a little too easy. I will have a new passport, a new visa. A visa that lets me stay in the US indefinitely. The only catch: I have to marry someone else.

The agent assured me this would be safe.

It’s better than the future I was facing, but I’m hesitant. What if I’m betrayed? What if this is an elaborate ruse to trap me into revealing my duplicity so my brother can punish me?

There’s something not quite right about this, but I have no choice. Just meeting with this man today was a risk. There’s every chance Yakov will find out about it.

Time is ticking and I need this ticket out of Russia.

Though I’m on edge all the next day, my mask stays in place. I go shopping, I pick out wedding lingerie and new outfits as if I’m really planning on going through with the match to Dmitri. I’m about to enter the fitting room of the fifth shop I visit. In fact, I’m waiting for the shop assistant to push aside the heavy curtain when a young

woman with a freckled face and a bright-eyed rural look approaches me, holding out a fitted jacket. “Excuse me, did you drop this? I thought I saw you holding it before.”

I look at her more closely. Her voice holds the hint of a foreign accent, though it’s very well disguised. So much so that I can’t work out what accent it is. She waits patiently, simply holding out the jacket to me, and though I’ve never seen the item before, something makes me reach out and take it. “Thank you.”

She turns and leaves and I enter the changing room. When the curtain falls and I’m hidden from view, I hang the jacket on a hook and slip my fingers into the pockets. Sure enough, a folded paper note is inside the left one.

How would you feel about a monster husband? It would mean leaving this week. We need your answer today. Leave the jacket on the floor if you agree.

It’s not addressed to me. Despite there being no name, I know it’s from the agent at the embassy.

My head spins and I wish I had more time to consider.

You don’t see many monsters in Moscow. They keep to themselves, usually in remote rural communities. I’ve never met a monster in the flesh. At least not that I know of.

But nothing could be worse than the human man I’ll have to marry if I let my brother have his way.

Without allowing myself to linger on the decision and change my mind, I slip the jacket off the hanger and drop it to the floor at my feet. Then I leave the shop without trying on any of the clothes I had taken in with me.

As I slide into the back seat of the car and the driver pulls away from the curb, I wonder if I've made a mistake.

I guess only time will tell.

Still, this is just another obstacle in my dash for freedom. One more hurdle to be cleared. It would be more unnerving for this to be too easy. Then I would know something was wrong.

I sit back against the cool leather and tell myself it's going to be alright.

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Erik

Snickers pulls on her leash as we get closer to the dog park. Her tiny little tail wags frantically and she lets out small yips of excitement.

It doesn't matter how much I chastise her, she never walks calmly on the leash like the other dogs do.

The second we're in the gate and I let her off, she shoots like a little chocolate-colored streak straight toward the biggest dog in the park, a giant Doberman. With a curse, I chase her, but she's quick. You wouldn't think so with her stumpy dachshund legs, but I have to really run to keep up, despite my size and the length of my stride. I bend and scoop her up in one huge green hand just as her jaws snap inches from the nose of the Doberman, who looks at me like he doesn't know what happened.

I can hardly blame him.

That's basically how I always feel since adopting Snickers from the pound three weeks ago .

My human friend Loren tells me it's my fault for spoiling my dog. I can't seem to help it! Every time I try to get mad at her she gives me such a sweet, sorrowful look that I just melt.

I twist her around in my grip so I can wag my finger in her face. "Snickers! We have to play nice with others."

Her dark brown brows lift and her large eyes blink up at me. She lolls out her tongue to lick my finger, and I roll my eyes.

“Aw, go on. I know you weren’t trying to be mean, I know. But we can’t bite other dogs.”

I spend the next thirty minutes stopping her from causing problems with all the other dogs until she flops at my feet exhausted. The lady who owns the Doberman gives us a glare as she walks away, the Doberman walking obediently at her heels.

“Look at that,” I tell Snickers.

One ear flicks, but she doesn’t move her head.

“That’s how it’s supposed to look. You’re a clever girl, aren’t you? Are you going to be a good girl for Daddy?”

Her little tail thumps the ground halfheartedly.

Feeling hopeful, I reach down slowly to attach the leash to her collar. But when I stand, she won’t move. She lays there while I steps forward until the leash tightens and I’m dragging her.

I stop. “Snickers! Come on, girl. Let’s go.”

She wags her tail.

“Come on.”

Nothing.

With a sigh, I stoop and gather her under my arm. Poor little thing wore herself out I guess .

As soon as I set her down in my apartment though, she races around, gnawing on the arm of the sofa and kicking at her food bowl.

I'm not sure getting a dog was such a good idea after all. I'm not sure I'm cut out to be a dog owner.

I slump onto the cramped sofa and flick the television on just to have some sound.

Truth is, I'm still lonely.

Sure I can talk to Snickers, but she doesn't really listen. Not the way another person would. The way a mate would if I had one.

I'm dreaming of course. Monsters like me might be out in the human community, but that doesn't mean humans want to date us, let alone mate us. At least none of the humans I've met want to date me. I've looked.

I've tried the dating apps.

I've tried approaching people I meet.

None of it works. They take one look at my huge, brawny body and my tusks that poke out of my lower jaw, and they run a mile.

I guess I could move home and have my mom fix me up with a nice orc girl, but I've always been more attracted to humans.

The only thing I haven't tried is paying for company. And quite honestly, I've toyed

with the idea more than once. Somehow I can't get past the thought that even if I liked it—even if I found someone I hit it off with—it would still be a temporary arrangement, which isn't what I want at all.

I want someone to belong to .

I still open the Monstrous Deals app and flick through their list of escorts specially selected to work with monster clients.

I mean, I'm allowed to look, right? And dream.

A new girl catches my attention and I stop scrolling. She's ash blonde with full lips and a determined expression. In fact, her hard expression is so different from the soft smiles of the other escorts that it grabs my attention right away. Then, of course, I keep looking because there's no question she's beautiful.

My gaze flicks down to the caption below her image: Not available for casual bookings. Mail-order bride only.

Mail-order bride!

Why have I never considered this option? I could slap myself.

At that moment, Snickers jumps into my lap and shoves her cold wet nose in my face and I drop my phone. Snickers whines.

I pat her head to pacify her and snatch my phone from where it's fallen, but as soon as I unlock the screen again she wriggles into my way.

“Snick! What are you doing?”

Her little tail thumps from side to side.

“Snickers!”

She yips.

“Would you stop that?”

I finally resort to holding her in one hand and my phone in the other and on the opposite side of my body. I take another long look at the woman in the picture.

Mail-order bride. So she'd stay for good ?

That's too good to be true, surely.

I click anyway. Her name is Russian. I'm not sure how to pronounce it.

She's looking for a husband here in Heartstone! She doesn't mind which type of monster.

My heart skids around in my chest like Snickers doing a lap on the kitchen linoleum. Then I see the cost and it crashes into the side of the imaginary fridge.

I could afford her, but only just. And it would take every penny I have saved to buy a nice house for my mate to nest in.

She'd have to come and live here in my too-small apartment over the railway line. With my spoiled dog. At that moment Snickers begins to chew on my hand in the hope that I'll set her down. What would a beautiful human woman like that want with a big hulking orc like me? I'm not the kind of monster they go for. I know.

The last date I went on with a human ended badly. And Loren ended up with that dragon anyway. Lean and pretty and mean as hell.

No one goes for the big, dumb nice guy.

With a sigh I set my phone down and deposit Snickers onto her paws on the carpet. She tears off to wreak havoc on my bedroom, and I run my hands over my face. Why didn't I put aside more cash? Save harder?

The answer is because I couldn't. I've been skipping meals and working overtime as it is to save as much as I have. Dreaming one day I'd have someone to spend it on.

But that's stupid, isn't it? Because I'll never find anyone to spend it on if I don't take a chance. So what am I saving it for ?

I pace the room for ten minutes while working up the courage to call.

When I finally pick up my phone again and dial the number, the woman's voice on the other end isn't what I expected. I expected sleazy. I expected flirtatious. I didn't expect someone who sounds like my favorite aunt.

"Welcome to Monstrous Deals where we make your dreams come true. How can we help you today?"

I freeze up. Can she make my dreams come true?

Goddess I hope so.

"Hello? Are you there?"

"H-hi! Yeah. I'm here." There's an awkward pause where I try to form the words. "I,

um, I called about the mail-order bride. On your website. On the Monstrous Deals website.”

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Vera

I lock the door behind me and stare at my face in the small mirror of the airplane restroom. I look pale. Dark circles beneath my eyes hint at the sleepless nights I've had since I made the decision to escape.

I try to see Inessa there in my reflection. After all, I'm not Vera anymore. Vera is dead. According to official records anyway.

But behind my lighter, shorter hair and the contact lenses I'm wearing, I still feel like Vera.

It's hard to believe my new life is going to be better than it would feel to get off this fucking plane and throw myself into my big soft bed in my comfortable room.

Why does the guy in the seat next to me have to breathe so loudly? And take up so much elbow room?

Don't people realize how rude they're being?

I wonder if I can just stay in the restroom for the rest of the flight. I don't want to go back out there .

After another few minutes there's a tap on the door. They say something in English but I only catch half of it.

I ignore it.

There are other restrooms.

Eventually there's more knocking. A woman's voice speaks. First in English, then in Russian. "Ma'am, are you OK in there? The captain has asked all passengers to return to their seats and fasten their seatbelts. Do you require assistance?"

With a curse I slide the lock back and open the door. The flight attendant on the other side jumps back.

"No. I do not require assistance." I storm back to my seat and jab my elbow into the meaty elbow of the fat man beside me until he moves his.

I endure another thirty minutes of torture until the plane lands and I can finally get off. My skin is crawling as I step onto the tarmac and hurry to the terminal. Why can't these people give me some personal space?

I stand in line for an inordinately long time at immigration. The man at the window looks between me and my fake passport so many times I'm sure he's going to call it out for being fraudulent. In the end, though, he lets me through and I give him the glare he deserves as I snatch it back and stride though to baggage claim. When my bag finally arrives, I haul it off the baggage carousel and head toward the arrivals lounge.

This is it.

This is the moment I meet the monster I agreed to marry.

Only a tiny flutter starts up in my belly when I consider standing face to face with him.

I've never met an orc before. I've only ever seen monsters in pictures .

Here in the US they apparently roam the streets and run for president.

Or so I've heard.

Nothing could be as bad as the fate I've escaped though. I know that for certain. It doesn't matter. This is only temporary. A final hurdle to overcome before I finally clasp the freedom I've risked everything for.

Brushing my shoulder length blonde hair back from my face, I stride into the arrivals lounge and look around. The huge green figure sticks out like a sore thumb among the crowd of humans in the airport. For a start, he towers over most of them. But it's not just that. He takes up twice the space as well. His beefy shoulders spread wide even though he holds his arms close to his body as if to squash himself into the smallest space possible. Then he bumps the lady next to him when a stupid grin splits his face and he lifts a cardboard sign with the words Inessa Bychkova.

It takes me a moment to remember that's my name.

My new name.

I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it.

He waves and the lady next to him takes a step away. I hesitate for a moment, but there's no avoiding it. I have no money. I left almost everything I own behind in Moscow. I've got no choice but to rely on this brute to take me home and give me somewhere to stay.

With a sigh, I set my shoulders and pull my bag across the tiles until I'm standing directly in front of him.

"Inessa? Hi." He spreads his arms as if he's going to go in for a hug, so I hand him

my bag. “Yes.”

The grin drops from his face. “Ah, you must be tired.” He says something else that I don’t catch and I simply nod.

“Yes.”

“I, um... I guess you don’t know much English, huh? Well that’s OK. There’s time. And I learned some Russian.” He clears his throat. “Dub-ray-de-na.”

He butchers the word so badly I stare at him for almost a full minute before I realize what he tried to say.

Instead of dignifying that with a response, I turn toward the door. “Car this way?”

“Oh, um. Yeah. I’ll get us a taxi. I’m sure you can’t wait to get home and get to bed.”

He babbles all the way to the taxi and I do my best to let it wash over me as I look around and try to get a sense of what life will be like here.

I’ve seen plenty of films set in America. I have no idea if the real thing will be anything like the fiction though.

In the small, shabby taxi his chunky thigh and bulky arm encroach onto my side of the vehicle. Even the heavily masculine smell of him fills the small space. I turn my head toward the window, but I can’t escape the awareness of him. It tightens the muscles in my belly and makes my pulse tap at the base of my neck.

I am alarmed by my reaction to him. I haven’t reacted this way to any man since the first time I met Dmitri. That memory overtakes me for a moment and I have to swallow down bile as nausea rises in my throat.

It's a timely reminder of why I've resorted to this. Anything is better than letting Dmitri touch me again.

The orc's meaty hand closes over my thigh and I jump .

"Here we are."

I turn to glare at him. "No touch."

The oaf snatches back his hand immediately, thank god. We get out of the taxi in silence and he pays the driver and picks up my bag. "Ah, sorry about that. I get it. No need to rush things. We'll wait until you're comfortable."

As he opens the door to the apartment building and holds it open for me, I give him a curt nod. I should make more of an effort to be friendly. At least for a while.

But secretly I'm glad of the excuse to keep some space between us.

I wonder how long I can make use of it.

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Erik

I show Inessa the bathroom and the bedroom, fetch her an extra blanket in case she's cold, and hover, not knowing what else to do. She hasn't said much yet, but I guess that's to be expected. She's had a long flight. She's probably feeling overwhelmed. And English isn't her first language.

It will be easier in the morning.

Thankfully Loren agreed to take Snickers for a couple days while Inessa gets settled, so I don't have to deal with her jumping all over us as soon as we walk in the door.

But moments after we get into the apartment, she shuts herself in the bedroom and I'm left alone in the silent open plan living area feeling a bit useless.

My Russian clearly isn't very good. I don't even think she knew what I tried to say.

I can hardly communicate with my new bride and I have no idea how to help put her at ease.

Perhaps she's hungry .

I could eat.

I mean, I could always eat, but maybe that's a good way to help her feel relaxed.

I open the fridge and stare listlessly at the few items inside. An open bottle of flat

soda, leftover dinner from too many nights ago, a withered looking head of lettuce and some tired tomatoes.

I need to go to the store. I should have done it yesterday except my boss, Kivrayn, said there was an extra shift available and I thought I could get in one more and start building up my savings again.

I was lucky her flight was delayed. I was nearly late.

I tap softly on the door. “Inessa? I’m just going to walk down to the store. Are you hungry? Is there anything you’d like me to get?”

There’s no answer.

I try again.

When there’s still no answer, I turn the door handle slowly and peek into the darkened room.

It takes my eyes a moment to adjust. When they do, I see a small shape curled up on the right side of the large bed. She has her back to me with her knees tucked up toward her chest. I freeze, staring hard, wondering if she’s sleeping or only lying very still.

When she doesn’t move, I dare to take a step into the room.

Knowing that I shouldn’t be doing it, I creep closer, holding my breath and trying to be as quiet as possible.

The second her face comes into view, I let out a long gust of air. She’s so impossibly beautiful in person. Even more than in her pictures. She has a small nose and thick

brows. Her full lips are slightly parted in sleep. They look almost as if she's waiting to be kissed.

Which is ridiculous!

She made it pretty clear she wasn't ready for that sort of thing. I didn't mean to scare her, but the way she jumped when I touched her leg in the cab tells me I'll have to move slowly.

This is all a lot for her and I want to make sure she feels completely comfortable with me.

Still, she's here and she's mine. That's enough for now.

I'm going to take such good care of her she'll be happy and relaxed in no time.

With that thought in mind, I tear myself away and sneak back out of the room. Slipping on my shoes, I snatch the keys and hurry down the stairs. I don't want to leave her alone too long in case she wakes and wonders where I am.

There are only two other people in the store when I squeeze myself in through the door. I have to hunch forward to avoid banging my head on the overhang. When I straighten, the old lady at the counter takes a nervous step back, and in the bread aisle, a satyr flicks his tail and quickly places two loaves into his basket.

I hate making people uncomfortable. I don't mean to.

I try my best to move around the city and not get in people's way. Not to take up so much space.

It's hard, though, when nothing in Heartstone is orc sized. I never fit in any of the

seats on the metro. On the sidewalk people cross to the other side to avoid being hit with my swinging arms. I'm always knocking things over and having to apologize to someone .

I thought I'd love living in the city. I thought I'd meet so many new friends. But people here don't smile at you in the street. They barely even look.

And it's hard to hold down a job and afford an inner-city apartment while saving enough for a mate and still make time for friends and dates.

I turn sideways to fit into the first aisle and begin delicately selecting items from the shelf. Pancake mix—everyone likes pancakes. Some fresh bread, cheese. Who doesn't like cheese?

Soon my basket is full and I lift it onto the counter and give the clerk a bright smile. "Shopping for two this week."

He grunts and rings up the stuff, shoving it into two paper bags.

I sigh. Not even the clerk will give me the time of day.

The trudge back to my apartment feels longer than usual. I call out softly as I open the door. "Inessa?"

There's no answer.

When I check, she's still sleeping.

Heading for the kitchen, I mix up a batch of pancakes and turn on the stove. I figure if anything will rouse her, the smell of freshly cooked pancakes will. But half an hour later there's a stack of them piled high on a plate and still no stirring from the

bedroom.

I mean, who wants pancakes for dinner anyway?

I pour maple syrup over the stack and sit at the bench, only intending to eat a couple.

Before I know it, the plate is empty.

I guess I'll make another batch in the morning .

With a sigh I push it away and stand. She needs rest. In the morning we'll talk. Or I'll try. I had hoped her English might be better, but she'll learn. She just needs time.

The apartment sure is quiet without Snickers around.

I make up the sofa bed and switch off the light. My feet hang over the edge and I left all the blankets in the bedroom. That's OK. It's not cold.

I twist and turn, trying to find a comfortable position. All the while my head runs through images of me and Inessa together. We could take walks in the park with Snickers. I imagine her small hand in mine, me tucking her close against my side as a cool fall breeze whips around our ankles. I smile to myself as I think of how she might enjoy getting ice cream at the gelato stall by the large iron gates. Or how she will probably love the Christmas market in Town Square.

Now that she's here, it's all within my grasp. I just need to be patient.

Patient and understanding.

I can do that.

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Vera

I wasn't counting on the monster being a nice guy.

I pictured him as socially awkward. As reclusive, as stinky, or with personal hygiene issues. And, of course, I had a plan for what I'd do if he was mean or violent.

I know about mean and violent.

I did not plan for him to be nice.

I crack the door open and peek into the living room and I'm instantly hit with the warm, homely smells of cooking and coffee. Tugging the sweater I slipped over my head down a little lower, I open the door wider.

My orc fiancé is standing in the kitchen with his back to me. His broad green shoulders stretch across the space like ice over a river in the middle of winter. His muscles flex as he flips something in the frying pan, and I catch the hint of a whistled tune I can't make out.

I'm just about to retreat back into the room, but my stomach grumbles so loudly he must hear it. He turns. A huge grin spreads across his face, making his tusks jut out more. "Good morning—uh, doe-bray-uyoo-tra." He keeps grinning at me as if I'm supposed to understand the gibberish that just came out of his mouth.

I stare. "Dobroye utro? No, no, no. Like this." I say it again slowly.

He watches me, his face screwed up into an expression of concentration.

Then he proceeds to mangle the Russian words a second time.

I sigh. “Nevermind. What is smell?”

He tips the frying pan and slides a fluffy pancake onto a plate on the counter. I approach warily. It does smell delicious but looks like I will gain five pounds just sniffing it. “You have kasha?”

His smile falls. “Um. I’m sorry. I don’t know what kasha is, but I have this.” He pushes it toward me hopefully.

I shake my head. “No. Just fruit. You have fruit?”

“Oh sure. I have fruit.” The orc turns and opens the fridge, stretching out one long arm, hardly having to move at all. “I have melon.”

I have to admit his body is impressive. He lifts a huge melon with a single hand and places it on the counter in front of me. I have to use both hands to pick it up. “This will do.”

He hands me a knife and I cut deftly around the outside, peeling away the firm thick skin.

The orc slides a bowl toward me. “Wow. You’re good at that.”

“Hmm?” I look up at him, knife poised in my hand.

“With that knife.” He points .

Do people in America not cut food with knives? I'm left wondering as I slice pieces of melon into the bowl.

"So, I have to work today." He gives me an apologetic look. "I'll have to leave in about an hour. But make yourself at home. The TV is all set to stream and I won't be late."

"That is good." I frown. That's not quite right. "That will be good."

There's a pause.

It will be a relief when he goes and leaves me alone. I can already feel the strain of talking to him bunching the muscles in my neck and giving me a tension headache. "Yes. Is good. Go." I make a shooing motion to indicate that he can leave whenever he wants. I definitely need to practice my English now that I'm going to be living in America. I'm rusty.

"Oh." He scratches the back of his head. "Good. Well, I'm glad you'll be OK."

He fidgets from foot to foot. "So the fridge and the cupboard are all stocked. Oh here, let me give you the wi-fi password." He opens a drawer and hands me a small card with a network name and password.

"Yes. Good." This is good. At least I can study and not waste my time.

He sighs. "You sure you don't want this?" He offers me the pancake again.

I shake my head.

He rolls it up and stuffs it into his large mouth with another forlorn sigh. "I guess I'll head to work."

He shuffles off into the bathroom, and pretty soon I hear the water run .

I cast a wistful look at the pancakes on the plate he set aside and my stomach rumbles. If I ate that sort of thing for breakfast at home it would have been accompanied by disapproving looks from my brother or father. If I didn't keep myself looking exactly the way they thought I must to make myself an attractive match, then what use was I?

I take a bite of melon, and while it's sweet, I'm still craving the fluffy pancakes and syrup Erik made me.

The sound of water running from the bathroom draws my attention. I've upset him. That much is clear.

It's so frustrating not being able to communicate properly.

I think it's more than that though.

I thought he would expect me to cook and clean for him. To do the housework. It seems like he wants to do those things for me and that is throwing me off balance. If he wants someone to spoil and take care of, I suspect that also means he wants someone he can be affectionate with, and that's not what I signed up for.

I remind myself it's only for a while. I can fake it enough to keep him happy until I have citizenship. Can't I?

The FBI agent was pretty clear that my fake fiancé can have no idea of the truth. The fewer people who know my true situation, the safer I'll be.

That's OK. I am used to wearing a mask and never letting anyone see my real feelings.

I sink my head into my hand. That sounds a lot like the situation I was escaping from.

There's nothing for it though. I can't go back home. I have to move forward with my plan and hope it works out .

Despite my resolution, I can't seem to shake myself out of my foul mood all day. As soon as Erik leaves for work, I tuck myself back into bed and watch English language videos until all the new words are spinning around in my head like a whirlwind. Every time I try to compose a correct sentence, I'm missing a word or it's in the wrong order or it just doesn't come out sounding like the presenter in the video.

I'm never going to get any better!

I toss my phone aside in frustration and get out of bed. This apartment is so small. Only a few rooms. They already feel claustrophobic and I've only been stuck here half a day.

I wish I could go for a walk. A ride. Go shopping. Go anywhere. But even drawing back the blinds to look through the window feels risky, as if there's someone hidden nearby, watching.

I draw the blinds closed quickly and sink onto the sofa.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

Maybe there's no way to ever be free of my family and the match they wanted for me.

I'm lost in thought when a sound at the door makes me jump.

Erik calls out as he opens the door and strides through, his big booming voice filling

the small space. “Honey, I’m home! You don’t know how long I’ve waited to say that.” He stops and chuckles, kicking off his thick boots and letting the door slam behind him.

I wince.

He’s so noisy. So large and clumsy.

How am I going to last a year ?

He looks up and must catch sight of my sour expression. The smile drops from his face. “Did you have a good day?” He steps around the half wall and I realize he has a big bunch of pretty pink flowers in his hand. He’s half crushing them with his massive fist, but for a moment my heart really goes out to him.

I jump to my feet and hurry over. “For me?”

He nods shyly.

As I rush to take them, our hands brush. A sizzle of awareness runs through me and I shiver. It’s been a long time since I let anyone touch me. It’s nice, but at the same time it makes the hairs on my arms stand up. I want to drop the flowers and wiggle my arms to shake off the feeling.

Instead I turn away.

“Inessa?” One of those large hands closes over my shoulder and suddenly I can’t breathe. “You don’t have to be scared of me.”

I duck and dart away from him, pulse thudding in my throat.

I dropped the bunch of flowers on the floor. It's only when I look down that I realize I've trodden on them in my haste to escape from his touch.

I shake my head. "Sorry." Without another word I scurry to the bedroom and close myself in like a frightened mouse.

There's a long silence while I lean back against the wooden door and try to calm my shattered nerves.

The sound of a throat being cleared on the other side makes me gasp.

"Inessa?"

I don't answer .

Eventually there's a heavy sigh and his footsteps retreat.

It seems I'm safe for now.

What happens if I can't get it together enough to even fake it? What if he decides he wants to send me back?

I need a way to get a message to the embassy that this will not work out.

I scrub my hands over my face, trying to force myself to go back out there and face my fiancé. It only makes heat creep up the back of my neck and sweat prick my armpits and forehead.

Eventually I give up and throw myself onto the bed.

I need a shower.

I must stink. I haven't had one since getting on the flight. I need a change of clothes, but unfortunately everything I own is in my suitcase, which is sitting in the living room.

So I lie there in the dark until eventually my breathing calms and I fall asleep.

Some mail-order bride I make.

I can't even let my husband-to-be touch me.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Erik

“It’s because I’m an orc, isn’t it?” I whisper into the phone.

I don’t think Inessa can hear me, but I don’t want her to catch me talking about her. As if I haven’t already made things worse than bad.

On the other end of the line, Loren is quiet. Eventually she sighs. “I guess you can’t rule that out, but if it is, then she’s the asshole. She knew what she was getting into. I mean she literally signed up to be a mail-order bride to a monster.”

I twist the tassel on the cushion in my lap until there’s an alarming ripping sound. I quickly set it aside. “But what do I do? She’s so beautiful, Loren. I just want to make this work.”

Loren makes a little humph sound. “Beauty isn’t everything, Erik. Don’t let her be mean to you. Unless you like that. But I don’t think you do.”

“You mean like Kivrayn is mean to you?” I say, forlorn. Loren has an interesting relationship with her dragon mate that I can’t say I understand.

She laughs quietly. “Oh, Erik. One day when you grow up, you’ll understand.”

“I am fully grown!” I protest. “Orcs have the same lifespan as humans.”

“I know that, silly. I just mean sometimes you’re very... innocent.”

There's a pause filled with questions I don't ask.

Finally Loren makes a sympathetic noise. "Listen, just be patient. It's probably just a lot to take all at once. Be your lovely self and she'll come around."

"Yeah. 'Cause that's worked so well for me so far."

"Hmm? Sorry, gotta go. I think Kiv's home." Loren hangs up the phone abruptly, leaving me sitting on the sofa with cushion stuffing spilling out over my knee and no better idea of how to get to know my future wife than I had before calling her.

The apartment feels so empty without Snickers. Which is the whole reason I got her in the first place. Well, that and because Loren said it might help me to find a mate. Apparently women like dogs.

That's it!

I need Snickers back. She'll help me win over Inessa. I jump to my feet, almost send the vase of flowers I bought Inessa flying and catch it quickly, setting it carefully back on the coffee table.

They're a bit squashed, but I can't bear to just throw them away.

I hurry to the bedroom door and tap softly. "I'm going to go for a drive. Would you like to come with me?"

There's no answer .

Hesitantly, I crack the door open and peek inside. My fiancé is sitting on the bed in the dark room. The light from her phone screen illuminates her face oddly, so it highlights her cheeks and nose and makes her look almost like a monster herself.

“I’m going out,” I repeat.

She doesn’t look up. “Yes.”

With a sigh, I trudge to the cupboard and retrieve my sneakers. “What do you want for dinner?”

From her phone, a pleasant female voice says, “Tomorrow I am going to the shop. What will you be doing?”

“I would go to the park,” she says after a pause.

“Will,” I tell her.

Now she looks around. “What?”

“I will go to the park. In English.”

Her brows draw down over her eyes. “Is not easy! I will like to see you try it in Russian!”

I swallow down my correction of that sentence and shift uncomfortably. My Russian is terrible and I know it. I guess I haven’t tried as hard as she is.

Maybe that’s a good sign. She’s learning English so we can communicate better.

With that thought in mind, I stand a little straighter and bump my head on the ceiling light. I wince. “What would you like for dinner?”

“Whatever you will like.” She goes back to her English lesson, and I leave with a heavy heart.

Loren and Kivrayn live on a huge property about an hour outside Heartstone. She's told me in the past I can call and borrow a car from Kivrayn to get out there, but I always feel awkward. I mean, he is my boss after all. I call a rideshare instead and spend the drive out thinking of nice things I can do for Inessa.

She said she would go to the park tomorrow. Does that mean she'd like to go for a walk in the park? Maybe we can take Snickers for a walk tonight. There's a gelato stall down near the dog park and they even have doggy ice cream. I know Snickers would like that. And Inessa and I can have people ice creams.

Snickers is so excited to see me she jumps and yaps and slobbers all over me in the fancy vestibule of Kivrayn's country manor home. Eventually I pick her up and tuck her under my arm.

"Thank you so much for looking after her for me. I hope she wasn't too much trouble."

Kivrayn scowls and Loren laughs. "She's a complete brat, Erik."

A tendril of smoke escapes from my dragon boss's nostril. "I prefer brats who don't chew on the furniture." He squeezes Loren's ass and I have to look away. Is it weird that I could never see myself doing something like that to a woman but that I like it way too much?

When I imagine what it might be like to have a lover, I always imagine being the one getting squeezed .

My cheeks heat at the appropriate path of my thoughts. Snickers yaps. "Ah, I'd better take her home I think. Before she gets in any more trouble."

Loren insists on lending me a car and a driver, and I have to admit it's a relief to be

able to save the extra cash. Anything and everything I can, I'm tucking away into my future fund. I'm still going to buy that lovely nest for my mate. It just might take a little longer than I hoped.

I'm extra inspired now that I've met Inessa because I can't imagine a mate more lovely.

I just have to show her I can give her a good life here.

With Snickers wriggling in my grasp, I climb into the car and we take off. She's distracted for a while when I crack the window. She sits up on her hind legs and pokes her nose out the opening, her long ears flapping in the breeze and a huge grin on her face. It makes me smile to see her so happy. Her little tail whips back and forth and her tongue lolls out.

She's not worried about anything. She's just happy in the moment.

I should be more like that.

Nothing was ever achieved by worrying. That's for sure.

So I sit back and watch Snickers and think of all the things I'm grateful for.

I'm grateful I spotted Inessa's ad. I'm grateful I'd saved enough to afford the fees and the cost of her airfare.

I'm grateful for my good friend Loren and my job and having a roof over my head.

There's a lot to be grateful for.

I don't have to rush things. Loren's right. Maybe if I just be myself, that will be

enough .

Only I should probably try to be a little less clumsy and a little bit smarter. Maybe I should try to be more assertive. Plenty of people have told me I'm too much of a pushover.

Loren tells me all the time.

The trouble is, I'd much rather make other people happy than get my own way.

Half the time I don't even really know what my own way looks like. I'm just happy to go with the flow.

I guess maybe I could try figure out what I want and ask Inessa for it. Maybe that's what she's waiting for.

I think for a while. What I want is to take her out on a date and have a nice time. I resolve to go straight home and ask her to go out with me tonight.

Simple as that.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Vera

“Come for a walk with me!” Erik’s booming voice makes me jump and look up from my phone screen. Probably a good thing. All the English characters are making my eyes cross after a whole day of study.

He clears his throat. “I mean come for a walk, please.”

There’s a yap and my gaze is drawn to a small dog clutched under his bulky arm. I stare.

“Oh! Meet Snickers,” Erik says, thrusting the dog toward me. “She’s mine. Well, ours now. Only I had her stay with friends while you were settling in. But I thought you’d like to meet her.”

The little black and brown dog licks my face and I can’t help smiling. She really is very cute. Badly behaved though. I see that straight away.

Erik sets her down and she immediately scrambles onto the bed, tail wagging frantically so it shakes her whole back half.

“Get down!” I tell her sternly .

The dog freezes, lets out a little whimper, and wags her tail again feebly.

“Down,” I repeat. I fix her with a look.

She jumps off the bed and scurries behind Erik's feet. "How did you do that?" he asks in astonishment.

"Do what?"

"She never does a thing I tell her."

Hmm. I see how it is. This dog treats him like a rag because he's too kind.

"Just tell her as if you mean it. Be firm."

"Huh." Erik looks down at Snickers speculatively. "Snickers, sit."

The dog stares up at him, rump wagging like mad. I can't help laughing.

Standing, I hold my hand up as if I've got a treat. "Snickers."

She shifts her attention to me instantly.

"Sidet ."

Her little behind hits the carpet.

"OK, how was I supposed to know I have a Russian dog?" Erik is laughing but it's clear this is another first. He looks astonished.

I reach down and give her a quick pet to reinforce the good behavior. "Good girl."

"So that's a yes to coming for a walk, then?"

I hesitate. That was a nice moment. I need to try harder to please him and keep him

happy.

I guess I'll be safe if my huge monstrous fiancé is with me, right?

I can't hide forever .

I nod cautiously. "That is yes."

Erik finds a leash and attaches it to Snickers's collar while I put on jeans and slip on shoes. The second we're out on the street, the little dog strains against Erik's grasp, tugging this way and that and nearly tripping an old lady we pass at an intersection.

I reach across and take the leash. "Shhh." The harsh sound makes Snickers jump and she stumbles. I tug the leash until she's walking close to my ankles and keep my eye on her.

The next time she pulls, I repeat the motion until, after only a few blocks, she's walking nicely by my side.

I catch Erik staring out of the corner of my eye. "You really are very good at that."

I laugh. "I think not."

Snickers's little butt wobbles as she trots down the street, and I realize I wasn't worrying about being seen.

I glance around now, but I don't spot anyone suspicious. People are going about their business without taking us in. Which is pretty astonishing given Erik is so big and green.

I should try to make conversation. Now's a good chance. "Have you always stay in

Heartstone?”

He blinks. “You mean lived? No. Not always. I moved here when I finished school ’cause there are way more jobs in the city. Better jobs. More people. I thought it would be fun. I guess it took me a while to work out that the better jobs still leave the same amount in your savings when you also have to pay for better food and better housing. Still. I wouldn’t go back now.”

“No?”

Erik shrugs. “Can’t let Mom and Dad be right, can I? ”

That makes me think. I’m quiet the rest of the way to the dog park. Erik seems sweet on the surface, but he clearly has his own dreams. His own aspirations. Maybe there’s a stubborn streak there after all.

I need to be conscious of this. It might sound horrible, but at the end of the day, my safety hinges on me making him feel comfortable, and I’ve been doing a terrible job.

When we get to the gated park, Erik lets Snickers off the leash. I can see right away this is a bad idea. The little dog springs away, immediately seeking out the biggest dog in the park and snapping at its heels.

This little dog doesn’t seem to realize she’s the smallest thing here. She barks and snaps at every dog she can find until finally a large black Doberman turns and growls at her.

Any sane creature would back down at this point. The Doberman looks like it could eat her for breakfast.

Snickers does not back down.

I have to admire the way she darts around the larger dog, hounding it and biting at his hind quarters until it finally gets angry and lunges for her throat.

Erik moves fast for such a large monster.

He dives in and snatches up Snickers, who is still wriggling and struggling like mad.

When she turns her head to nip at Erik's hand, I can't help myself. "Hey!"

I snap my fingers in front of her face.

She turns to look at me.

"Stop that."

She licks her lips and gives me the puppy dog eyes, which I ignore .

Erik laughs. "You are so good with her. I think you have a special talent."

I dismiss his comment with a wave of my hand. "No talent. Just firm authority."

He looks a little sheepish. "Well, it works. You could tell me what to do any time."

There's a brief moment where neither of us looks away. His cheeks turn a deeper shade of green and he shifts uncomfortably, but the look he's shooting me is full of desire.

Am I reading this wrong? Does this big, strong monster like to be bossed around?

I don't even know how I feel about that, so I snatch up the leash and attach it to Snickers's collar. "Come. Let's go. She is not trained well to be with other dogs."

Erik follows after me and we wander through some quiet streets in silence. I guess we're both lost in our own thoughts.

I've always been told I was too bossy. Too stubborn. Is it possible I've found the one guy on earth who might actually like those qualities? I'm just faking, right? But if that's what he wants...

After a while, I shake it off. I'm letting myself be fanciful. This is just a business arrangement. I never intended it to be permanent. I can't afford to let myself start thinking like that.

Erik clears his throat. "Do you want to get an ice cream? There's a truck near here. They have the best raspberry sorbet I've ever tasted."

I would normally say no. Too many sweets will go straight to my hips. But I guess that's one of the benefits of being married to an orc. I've never once heard him comment about anything I eat since I arrived except to offer me more. So instead, I shrug. "Why not?"

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Erik

I wish I knew what to say to Inessa.

We sit side by side on a park bench while Snickers lounges at our feet with her doggie ice cream. All my words seem to get stuck in my throat or tangled up on my tongue.

She's so beautiful.

I'd like to tell her how pretty I think she is, but maybe she'd get mad. She hasn't responded very well to any of my attempts to touch her or compliment her. I'm a little bit lost.

It was nice when she asked about me. Like she wanted to get to know me.

Maybe I'll ask her some questions about herself.

I clear my throat. "Do you have brothers and sisters? Back home, I mean."

For a moment, a strange look crosses her face, as if a cloud passed in front of the sun. She takes another bite of her ice cream, not making eye contact with me. "One brother. We are not..." She frowns. "How do you say? "

"Close?" I offer.

"Yes. We are not close."

There's a long silence.

I guess talking about her family was a bad move. I should have thought of that. If she was close to them, she'd probably be missing them, and that would have upset her. Probably a good thing she clearly isn't.

I guess maybe that's why she was happy to move to America.

A drip of melted ice cream trickles onto my knuckle and I lick it up quickly.

Why am I so bad at this?

"It is very nice here. In America. I am very happy."

When I look around, Inessa's face is fixed in the neutral expression she usually wears when she's not frowning.

I blink. Could have fooled me.

Does she feel like she has to say that to please me? "Inessa," I begin. Then I pause, not sure how to put it. Another drip from my ice cream makes my knuckles sticky and I grimace. I'm making a mess of myself and our first actual date.

Snickers sits up and eyes the ice cream with a wag of her little tail.

With a sigh, I hold it down for her to lick.

I know it's not good for her, but she's so cute! How can I resist?

Using the opportunity to look at Snickers instead of Inessa, I feel bolder and the words come tumbling out.

“Inessa, you don’t have to pretend. I want you to be happy. I want you to feel like you can talk to me. If there’s something you want or need, I’d be only too happy to give it to you. You just have to ask.”

“No. Is good. I am happy.”

She’s not though, is she?

I wish there was a way to make her believe that this is more than an arrangement to me. I was hoping for real feelings. I know they might take a while to develop, but I still believe it can happen.

“What do you like to do? When you’re not working. Come to think of it, what did you do for work back home? Do you miss it?”

“Back home I do not work,” she says. “What I like is to drive. To uh... to ride. I have motorbike. I go riding outside city. And shopping.”

“Oh wow.” In my head I’m wondering how I’m going to afford to buy her a motorbike. Out loud I say, “So how old were you when you learned how to ride?”

“Fifteen.”

I’m impressed. I’d like to ask her more, but another dog walks past on a leash and Snickers jumps and starts barking so loudly I can’t.

“Shhh.”

She ignores me of course.

Inessa reaches down and yanks on the leash and makes that stern shushing noise

again, and Snickers sits instantly. She lets out a low growl and watches the other dog as its owner leads it past our bench, but she doesn't bark again.

God, is it weird that I find it so attractive when she does that? It probably is. Dog handling isn't usually high on people's sexy list, but there's something about Inessa's firm authority that kinda makes me melt inside.

I'd really like to reach over and take her small hand in mine just to hold it. I imagine us walking Snickers back to the apartment hand in hand and it gives me this huge warm feeling inside my chest.

I'm too shy though. So Inessa takes Snickers's leash and I walk beside her, trying and failing to summon up the courage to ask her.

When we get to the top of the stairs, she turns to me and there's just a hint of a smile on her lips. "Thank you. That is very nice."

Maybe I've finally done something right.

"Would you like to watch a movie?" I blurt when Snickers is off her leash and I've kicked my shoes off at the front door.

"Yes. I will like that. Thank you."

Two in a row.

Maybe there's hope for me yet.

I hurry over to the sofa and fold it back so we can sit down. Then I switch on the TV. "What would you like to watch?"

She shrugs. “Whatever you would like.”

Feeling just a little pressure, I scroll until I find the romantic movies. I’m just about to select Notting Hill when she points. “What is this? This with the car.”

I blink. I quickly scroll up to Gone in 60 Seconds . “This?”

“Yes. Let us watch this.”

I switch it on immediately, glad I didn’t make another blunder. And I file away the information that Inessa likes action films more than romance. Of course. She likes fast cars and bikes .

We watch in silence, but it’s a peaceful silence. It doesn’t feel awkward.

Daring to shift a little closer on the sofa, I carefully lay my arm against the backrest until it’s stretched out behind her, not quite touching.

She says nothing, so I leave it there, enjoying the feeling of almost having her in my arms.

We are making progress. I can tell.

At the end of the film, she turns to me, and I get my first full smile. “That is very exciting.”

“Was,” I correct, before I can stop myself.

Then I could kick myself when her smile turns into a frown.

Only the next moment, she nods. “Yes. That was very exciting. I am enjoying.” She

lets out a little huff of breath. “I was enjoying.”

Poor Inessa. She’s doing so well. I want to tell her but maybe she’ll think I’m being condescending. “I’m glad,” I say instead.

There’s a pause. She leans a little closer. “You would like to kiss me now.”

I stare. My heart is suddenly beating a million miles an hour in my chest and my palms feel all sweaty. Is she serious? “I—yes! I mean yes. I would. Is that OK?”

“Is OK.”

Oh shit. What if I screw this up?

I have kissed females before. I’ve even kissed a human woman. That feels like an awfully long time ago and I have the horrible feeling that maybe I’ve forgotten how it’s done.

Inessa tilts her chin up like she’s waiting and I gather all my courage .

Leaning in, I put one big hand on her cheek to make sure I don’t miss. Then I close my eyes tight and bring my lips to hers.

She holds perfectly still. I might be imagining it, but her jaw seems tense. Maybe she’s nervous too.

Somehow that makes me feel worse instead of better. I wish she would tell me how to do it. How she likes to be kissed.

She is silent, so I have to fumble along on my own. I brush her lips with mine softly, savoring the silky smooth texture.

Impossibly smooth. More perfect than anything I've ever felt. Her scent fills my nostrils. It's sweet and floral, with an undertone of musky richness that has my head spinning.

Daring a little more, I move my lips gently. Thank god she hasn't recoiled or told me to stop.

My fingers tremble with the urge to pull her closer. I'd love to feel her soft body against mine. To drink her in.

I content myself with a few more soft brushes of my lips against hers until I eventually drag myself away and sit back. "That was..." I sigh. How do I even put it into words? "Thank you."

"You will be my husband, after all," she says. Then she stands. "I will go to bed now. Thank you for a lovely evening."

"My pleasure." I'm swimming in those big warm feelings again. When I go to brush my teeth half an hour later, there's still a dopey grin stretched across my face.

My fiancé is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. And she's going to be my wife.

This seems too impossibly good to be true.

Snickers didn't even interrupt. In fact, she's been quiet for a long time.

When I poke my head around the door, I can't see her .

I have a moment's worry until I sneak into the bedroom and find her curled up at the end of Inessa's bed asleep.

Well how can I blame her? That's where I'd be tonight if I could.

That big warm feeling sticks around all night, even when I have to squash myself onto the sofa bed in the living room again.

I wonder what it would be like to sleep beside Inessa in my bed, to wake in the night and listen to her breathe. Only I'm pretty sure humans frown on that type of behavior. I have to make sure I don't come on too strong.

I feel so lucky she let me kiss her tonight.

We are making good progress.

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Vera

Erik's kiss was impossibly soft.

I don't think I've ever had a lover touch me as reverently and gently as this huge monster did. It wasn't like being kissed by a human. For one thing, his lower tusks jut out from his mouth so that when we kissed, they nudged at my lips and shaped them into something unfamiliar.

But I didn't hate it.

In fact, the constant reminder that Erik is a monster and not a human kept me in the moment.

I know all too well how human men can treat a woman. How they can demand and take without consideration for what she wants. Isn't it strange that the monster wasn't like that at all?

When Erik kissed me, none of those dark memories returned. Not until after when I was reflecting on it with wonder .

Perhaps I can do this. After all, the cards foretold a homecoming for me across the sea. Is it too much to wonder if maybe this is what they meant?

I drift into a more peaceful sleep than I've had since deciding to leave my old life behind me. When I half wake to roll over in the night, it's with my face buried in a pillow that smells of him.

The next morning when I crack the door and emerge into the living room, Erik grins at me from behind the kitchen counter and slides a bowl of fresh fruit salad toward me. “Breakfast? I’m sorry, I couldn’t find any kasha at the store. And if I’m completely honest, I don’t really know what it is, but maybe if we look together, you can help me find some.”

I catch my own lips curving into a silly smile and have to look down to avoid his gaze for a moment while I compose myself. “You smile a lot.”

He laughs softly. “I’ve always thought that was a good thing.”

I climb up onto the stool at the counter and stab a piece of melon with my fork. “In my country, it is not so good. Makes you look stupid.”

I look up to see the smile drop from his face and immediately feel bad. “Well. This is not my country. So maybe I will learn a different way.”

He’s quiet for a while and I worry I’ve upset him. I really have to watch what I say. I’ve got to find a way to make him feel like I’m trying here. I’ve obviously got to keep my position as his fiancé secure, but more than that, I’d like to make him happy. Erik is such a nice guy. I saw that plainly yesterday in everything he did to please me .

He deserves as much happiness as I can bring him. For as long as I stay at least.

A little knot of guilt twists in my gut at the thought of running out on him.

I already know how much it’ll hurt him when I do.

There’s no help for it though. I can’t risk being honest with him in case he won’t go through with the marriage. There’s no way I can return to Russia now. I’m in enough

danger as it is.

When Erik begins to clear the dishes and tidy up, I stand and hurry around into the kitchen. “Leave it. I can do.”

He looks around in surprise. “You don’t have to!”

“I like to. Please.” Holding out my hands, I wait for him to give me the dishes. He seems to do so reluctantly, but I catch him smiling again as he goes to take a shower.

That’s a good start. When he leaves for work, I start thinking about how else I can please him.

I begin by tidying the house. It’s challenging since I don’t know where many things go. I take the load of towels from the dryer in the laundry and fold them after finding the cupboard where he has others stacked.

I wipe down the kitchen and finally unpack my bag onto the shelf in the bedroom Erik has left for me.

It feels strange to stack my folded clothes in his closet. Like I’ve officially accepted that I’m really doing this. At least for now.

That’s what Erik needs from me too, I think.

He needs me to show him that I want to be his wife.

Well I know what most males would immediately think of as the best way to show that. Just thinking about doing that has a cold chill settling over my skin. Irritated, I brush the feeling away and root through my belongings to find the nice lingerie I brought with me. I lay the different sets on the bed and consider. The black feels too

harsh and the red strappy set too sultry. I think the mood I need to set is sweeter than that. I select a lacy white set and tuck the others away for another time. I was careful to use the excuse of preparing for my marriage to Dmitri to purchase plenty of sexy underwear before I left Moscow, conscious that it wouldn't hurt my cause to have that sort of thing on hand for my monster husband.

I take a shower, making sure to shave my legs, my pussy, and under my arms. I meticulously go over every inch of skin until I'm smooth and presentable. All the while I tell myself I can do this.

This wasn't the plan. I wasn't going to let him touch me. The trouble is, after that kiss it's clear that is what Erik expects. And to be honest, after that kiss I'm beginning to feel it could be alright after all.

Besides, I don't have to let him touch me if I stay in control. I'm sure people think a woman on her knees has given up her power to the man she's servicing, but I'd rather be on my knees than on my back, having that power forcibly taken from me.

I shudder at the memory of hot, cruel hands forcing my thighs apart.

Better if I am the one with his cock and balls in my hand. That way I stay in control.

My mouth is inexplicably dry when I hear Erik's key in the lock. "Honey, I'm home!"

I wipe sweaty palms down my thighs as I stand from the sofa. I'm wearing a silky robe over the white lacy lingerie, my hair done in soft curls and blush on my cheeks to give my pale skin some color.

Erik drops his satchel onto the floor in the doorway and grins. "You look pretty. Did you put on makeup?"

I shrug. “A little.”

He pauses, watching me. “D-did you have a good day?” It might be my imagination, but he seems nervous.

That makes two of us.

I’m not going to let him see though.

I reach decisively to the tie at my waist and give it a yank, sliding the robe over my shoulders and letting it fall to the floor.

Erik swallows. “Did I already say you look pretty? Fuck. I should have said beautiful. Amazing.” His eyes rake over nipples I know are taut and poking through the translucent fabric, over the curve of my hips and down to where the lacy panties reveal a hint of the dark hair I’ve shaved into a strip. “Is this... does this mean...” He trails off and his mouth hangs open as his gaze does the full lap of my body again.

Well, it’s a promising start. I keep my hands behind my back so he won’t see how badly they are shaking and nod. “We are going to be married. Is allowed to sample first, yes?”

He lets out a shaky breath. “Yes.”

“Then take off your pants.”

His hands hurry to his button and fly and the pants drop to the floor a moment later. “Like this? ”

I nod. “Like this.”

Beneath the trousers, which are now bunched around his ankles, he wears navy briefs with a short leg. The briefs are bulged and stretched at the front so much that I can trace the outline of a bulbous head and veiny shaft straining to be released.

“And those pants.” I gesture to the underwear.

He pulls the waistband of the briefs out and over the enormous bulge, and a thick green cock drops to sit perpendicular to his body.

I have to fight to keep my expression neutral. This might be the largest dick I’ve ever seen. It’s certainly the thickest. I have no idea if I’ll be able to take it all into my pussy and I certainly can’t get it far into my mouth.

I guess I’ll have to improvise.

Striding across the room, I drop to my knees in front of him and Erik lets out a soft whimper.

“Don’t you want me to kiss you a little first? To touch you?”

I shake my head. Taking his heavy cock into my hand, I bring it to my lips. “No. This is what I want.”

Then I open my mouth and lick from the base of his hot shaft all the way to the moist tip. Erik shudders. When I sneak a look at him from beneath my lashes, I note the way his eyelids flutter closed before he opens them again and stares down at me in wonder.

I repeat the motion, this time swirling my tongue over the sensitive head as I reach the top.

Erik moans .

I guess maybe I don't need to get the whole thing in my mouth. He seems pretty sensitive.

Tentatively, I close my lips around the tip and draw him into my mouth a little way, pulling back when my lips are stretched as far as I can manage. I've not even taken him halfway and I'm at my limit. I wish I'd practiced this skill more, but the truth is it's never been something I've been particularly fond of. I'd rather have his face between my thighs.

Frustratingly, the thought of letting anyone touch me activates my gag reflex and I have to pull back, stroking down his shaft while I catch my breath.

His cock is thick and firm in my touch and he tastes good. Almost sweet. A little salty. On the next dip of my head, the taste is stronger as drops of moisture bead from the tip. It's not so bad with Erik I suppose.

I am enjoying the little sounds he makes as I grip him firmly and work his cock with my hands and mouth. He lets out a long moan as I cup his heavy balls in my other hand, so I give them a little tug. I'm rewarded with a burst of salty sweetness as his cock throbs, spilling more liquid onto my tongue.

"Inessa, you uh—" He trails off as I hollow my cheeks and suck him hard. "Your mouth feels amazing, but don't you want me to please you too?"

"Shh." I take my mouth from him for only a moment before redoubling my efforts, squeezing with my hand on his balls, drawing his saltiness out from the leaking tip.

"Oh fuck!" He doesn't seem to know what to do with his hands. When my hair falls across my face though, blocking my view, he tenderly brushes it away.

He's so sweet, this orc. So gentle. So different from the men I have known back home.

I thought a monster would be scarier than my past. That he'd be able to defend me if it came to that.

Now I wonder if this gentle giant would ever lift a finger in anger.

“Inessa—shit! I don't know how much longer I can last. Let's stop, I—”

I cut him off with a firm tug of his balls and he lets out a strangled cry. His eyes close and his head falls back as I suck on him hard, hollowing out my cheeks. At the same time I work my hand down the base of his shaft and slip a finger to the smooth, sensitive skin between his balls and ass.

He shudders.

He lets out a long jumble of broken curse words.

Then his cock throbs in my hand as my mouth floods with his spend, and I keep working him until the last of it has trickled onto my tongue.

I swallow his salty cum quickly, expecting not to like it, but actually I don't mind the lingering flavor. I think I have made good progress here.

I could certainly do that again. And from the noises he made, and the look on his face, he enjoyed it.

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Erik

The utter bliss of Inessa's mouth on me makes my mind go blank for half a minute. She keeps slowly pumping my cock until the last drop of cum has been milked from me and my brain feels like it's pooling on the floor at her feet.

Oh, but that wasn't how our first time was supposed to go.

I was supposed to kiss her softly. To hold her in my arms and tell her how beautiful she is. I was supposed to worship every part of her body until I couldn't think of another way to bring her pleasure.

Her beautiful body.

God, she's beautiful.

I hope she doesn't think too badly of me. I'll last longer next time.

She wipes a drop of me from the corner of her mouth, and I reach down quickly to help her up .

She ignores my hand and gets to her feet without assistance. Oh, I have disappointed her. "Let me return the favor. I would love to taste you."

"Is not necessary." She stoops to pick up her robe and my heart flops around in my chest.

My cock stirs at the sight of her rounded ass when she bends, but I ignore that. Now it's her turn.

“Please, Inessa. I didn't mean to disappoint you.”

Her gaze snaps to mine and her brows draw together. “You? Disappoint me?”

“I was too fast. I couldn't hold on.”

Her expression softens, but seconds later she looks away. “I worry that I am disappointing.”

I'm already reaching for her when I remember how she reacted to my touch in the cab. I just manage to stop myself before it's too late. I can't believe it's only just occurring to me now. Has something happened to her to make her distrust males? To make her distrust me in particular?

The thought of someone hurting or scaring her makes me sick, but I have to ask. “Did someone hurt you?”

Her eyes widen and I catch a look of panic on her face before she skirts around me and dashes for the bedroom. “Inessa, wait!”

I resist the urge to chase her. That won't make this better. So I have to let her run and slam the door between us, balling my hands into fists at my sides so I don't punch something. I'm pretty sure that's a clear answer to my question. The kind I wish she didn't have to give.

No wonder she's so jumpy every time we're close. No wonder she was prepared to be an orc's bride .

I pull up my pants and retreat to the kitchen, scrubbing a hand over my face and thinking hard. She needs to know she can trust me. That I'll never force her to do anything she doesn't want. I think she needs to know I'm not angry with her.

Fifteen minutes later, I set the tray down outside the door and tap lightly. "I've made a tray for you, if you're hungry. You don't have to come out yet, but I wanted you to know I would never do anything you don't want. I don't ever have to touch you if you don't want that."

I'm turning away when a soft noise makes me spin. The door opens and she peeps out.

"Never?"

I give her my most serious, solemn expression. "Never."

"But you don't want that?"

I swallow and shift uncomfortably. I'm sure a lie would be what she wants to hear and I don't want to scare her, but I can't bear being dishonest with her. "Well..."

There's a horrible silence and I think she's going to go back into hiding, but she surprises me. Opening the door all the way, she ducks and picks up the tray. "Thank you. You are a good husband. I am terrible wife."

My heart nearly melts inside my chest. "You're not terrible at all! You made me feel amazing."

She holds my gaze for a long beat, searching my face. Then she sighs. "Can I tell you something?"

“Of course.” Wanting her to be comfortable, I lead her to the sofa and sit on the floor beside it so she has enough room. She sits with the tray on her lap and it makes me relieved when she picks up a piece of toast and nibbles on it .

“Back home. Before I left, I was engaged to someone. A man.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure how I feel. On the one hand I’m glad she’s opening up a little, but what if she’s about to tell me she was in love with him and that’s why she doesn’t want me to touch her?

“I do not love him.”

Thank the stars.

Inessa toys with the toast on her plate, not lifting it to her mouth but not making eye contact with me either. The pause makes a knot tighten in my belly.

“He touches me. Touched me. Forced me. My brother was in the next room. He must have heard. He did nothing.”

I stare. She was raped?

Well no wonder she doesn’t want anyone touching her. I feel awful for having reminded her of that experience. “Inessa, I’m sorry.”

“What for? You did not do this.”

I sigh. I’d love to hold her, but that’s the last thing she wants right now.

“Is OK. I am OK. But I do not want it to be like that with us.”

I nod slowly. “Me neither.”

She’s quiet for a while. Eventually she lifts the cup of tea to her lips and takes a sip.

“Already is better. With you. You are very different from him.” She looks up and her expression softens. “I like how different you are.”

There’s a pause.

“I like how different you look and feel. ”

“You do?”

She lifts a hand to my face and I hold my breath, afraid to move while she softly touches my cheek and the place on my lip where my tusks jut from my mouth. “It is good.”

The way I look is good to her? My heart is doing backflips in my chest and I probably have a stupid grin on my face. “Well, you just tell me what you need. I’d do anything to make you happy, Inessa. Anything. Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

She’s thoughtful for a moment. Then she nods. “This will work.”

What will? Us?

I’m overjoyed. She sits with me while I make a grilled steak and salad for my own dinner. When I offer some to her, she even takes a small slice from my plate and tells me my cooking is good.

After dinner we sit together on the tiny sofa and she doesn’t pull away when our legs touch.

When Snickers comes sniffing around, Inessa strokes her long ears until she curls herself into a ball at Inessa's feet.

My heart feels full to bursting and I sneak looks at the two of them all through the show we're watching about the history of the United States. I'm not really following it anyway, but Inessa says she needs to learn.

She's so smart, my mate. Beautiful and smart.

I know I can make this work somehow.

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Vera

I smooth my hair in the mirror one final time as the doorbell rings then run a hand over my floral skirt. Everything is neat. Everything in place. I pray my cool facade is as flawless.

I join Erik by the front door as he opens it to greet the immigration agent. The thin man is dressed in a navy suit and tie with a crisp white shirt. His hair is brushed in a side part and his black shoes are shiny. He holds out his hand to Erik with a smile. “Mr. Thorvarsson? So nice to meet you. I’m Stephen Carmichael. I’ll be conducting the interview today.”

“Nice to meet you.” Erik steps aside and gestures to me with a smile. “This is Inessa.”

I greet Agent Carmichael with a handshake and we lead him into the tiny living room. Of course I offer him the sofa, but he declines, accepting a wooden chair instead. So I sit beside Erik, conscious with every breath of the place my thigh touches his and the placement of his hand in his lap .

I wish I could reach out and take it. That would look good in front of the agent. I think it would also feel comforting, but it feels too intimate somehow, as if I’m not entitled to seek comfort from him that way after everything else I’ve asked of him.

Stephen places his phone on the coffee table in front of him. “As long as it’s OK with you, I’ll be recording our interview in case I miss anything in my notes today.” As he says this, he opens a folder with a notebook and writes the date at the top of the page.

We both nod.

“Good. Thank you. How are you finding things since your move?”

“Very good. Thank you.” I’m not sure how much to add. Is this just small talk to open the conversation or is this part of the interview?

“Inessa is settling in well,” says Erik happily. “She has been studying English every day. She’s very dedicated.”

Agent Carmichael nods and writes something in his notebook. “That’s good to hear. So tell me how you two met.”

I look at Erik, hoping he’ll take the lead here, but he simply gives me a big smile.

Do I admit to the marriage being arranged? As far as I know, that’s not illegal. I clear my throat. “There is a website. Monstrous Deals. I am—I was—looking for a husband.”

“Hmm. And that’s how you met Erik?”

I can’t read his expression, but I stick to the truth, hoping if I include as much genuine detail as I can he might overlook anything I have to lie about later. “Yes. ”

“And tell me, how did that work? You posted some pictures, a profile?”

I try not to fidget. In Moscow, I had a message filling me in about some of the details of my match, but I’m a little hazy on some. “Ah, yes. This is right.”

“And I saw it,” Erik adds. “Well, I just knew. There she was, looking so beautiful, looking for a husband. And I thought, that’s me! Well, I hoped.” He shoots me a shy

look, and I see the agent smile from the corner of my eye. I couldn't be more grateful for Erik's happy charm. He's putting everyone at ease here, including me.

"So did you talk online first? Get to know each other?"

There's a pause. I'm not sure how much to reveal.

"A little," Erik says. "But it's hard online. Talking in person is much better, wouldn't you agree?"

This surprises me a little, but I keep quiet. I guess the FBI agent who lined up the match must have pretended to be me and chatted to Erik. Unless he just lied, but that seems so unlike him that I immediately dismiss the idea. I feel a bit bad that he thought it really was me, but I don't dare tell him. I only hope it didn't make him expect something I'm not delivering.

The agent makes another note. "And how was it when you met face to face? Sometimes people are a little different in person."

"Oh that's true," Erik says and my heart sinks. Then he grins. "Inessa is even more beautiful in person and so lovely. I just hope she isn't disappointed in me." He turns those big eyes on me and my heart just about melts. Of course I'm not disappointed! I don't think even Inga could have found a better match for me in the cards .

"Not disappointed," I tell him. On impulse, I reach over and take his hand. My own is immediately swallowed by his huge warm palm and his eyes widen. The smile on his face only grows wider too.

It's hard to shift my focus back to the interview. I have to ask the agent to repeat his next question.

“And what made you seek a husband, Ms. Bychkova?”

I blink. I can hardly tell the truth. I clear my throat. “At first I want to move out. To have a home of my own.” I’m thinking fast. I should have prepared this earlier. “Then I meet Erik and I could tell it was a good match.”

The agent asks if I intend to work in America. He asks about my prior work experience—none. He asks about any family I have back in Russia, and I tell him I have grandparents, but my parents are dead. I stick to the truth as much as I can, hoping not to betray any hint of the lie I’m really telling.

I worry I’ve said too much. That the agent or Erik will be suspicious.

Most of all I worry I’ve bought into my lie to Erik too much.

The truth is, I like the way he looks at me, the gentle way he is holding my hand in his as if it’s a precious gem he’s guarding. I like the wide smiles he gives me when I compliment him in front of the agent. And the compliments are true.

I just worry that I’m going to break his heart when he finds out it wasn’t real. When he finds out I lied to him.

I hope he can forgive me, because the more I get to know him, the more I think he’s the sweetest, most generous person I’ve ever met. The more I wish it really was real.

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Vera

Despite my cool performance with the immigration agent, I spend the next two weeks lying awake into the night thinking about exactly how I will make this work. It's clear Erik wants so much more than a trophy wife, and the more I get to know him, the more I want that for him. The only problem is I don't know if I can be her.

He wants a wife he can hold and make love to.

He also wants a wife who will stick around longer than a year, but I can't let myself worry about that or the guilt will consume me. I should try to be what he wants while I am with him.

It doesn't help when I roll over for the hundredth time and check my phone, only to see that it's past midnight and has officially turned from April into May, which means we have, at most, two months to get married and solidify our union so I can maintain my visa and stay in the country.

And I can't even let him sleep in the same bed !

I'm being ridiculous. I know I am. I've had his dick in my mouth for the love of God!

Pushing aside the covers, I stride from the bed and open the door. Snickers lifts her head to open one eye and look at me before tucking herself back up into a ball and going back to sleep.

I pause in the doorway to peek into the living room.

The soft sound of a snore coming from the sofa tells me Erik is asleep. Feeling more confident but a little disappointed, I creep closer. Erik sleeps on his back, one arm flung over his head and one slung across a thick, green, chiseled torso. The thin sheet which is the only covering on the bed is draped low across his hips, leaving most of him exposed to my view. And I can't help standing here staring at him, tracing the wide, firm shape of him. I'd love to touch him. To explore his strong body and satisfy all my curiosity about him while he sleeps on, unaware. No pressure, no expectations. I could take what I want from him.

I step forward. I'm close enough to touch, but I hold back.

It's wrong of me to want this.

I know that.

But in my mind's eye, I imagine sliding off my pajama shorts and panties, pulling back the sheet to reveal his enormous cock, and straddling him, sliding down over him.

I pull my hand back just before I can actually touch him, smothering a gasp when he rolls over with a snort.

It's been nearly two weeks since the night I sucked him. Ever since then, I've been frozen, unable to take another step forward.

But it's not for lack of wanting .

I want him. I want to explore his big body. I want to feel him over me, moving inside me.

It's been far too long since I felt a man I wanted inside me. I miss that feeling.

Only I worry I won't be able to let go of the memories that have me frozen every time I get close.

I'm still standing there staring down at him when his eyes blink open and his wide mouth curves into a smile. "Hi. Am I dreaming?"

I can't find the words to answer, so I just shake my head. I shouldn't have been here looking at him while he slept. Now he's caught me and I feel bad. Just not quite bad enough to turn and go back to the bedroom.

Two different sides of me are battling it out inside my head while I stand frozen, silent.

Erik's thick brows draw into a frown. "Is everything OK, Inessa?"

He goes to sit up, and that snaps me into action. "Stop. Stay there."

"OK." He settles onto his back, watching me.

Am I doing this?

I reach down slowly and take hold of the sheet. As I draw it away from his body, the bulge at his crotch grows until the last corner of the sheet catches on a very obvious erection.

My mouth feels dry. Between my legs, my pussy throbs with awareness of him.

He does nothing to stop me when I yank the sheet free and drop it to the floor.

I can't stop staring as the bulge tenting his black underwear grows even more under my gaze .

He doesn't even stop me when I reach for the waistband of the briefs. I pause, waiting for him to say something, but he's silent. It might be my imagination, but for a moment I think I can see the pulse racing in his neck as fast as mine.

When I free his cock, it stands rigidly to attention, pulsing as if begging for my touch.

I lick my lips.

I need to stop thinking about this and do it, before I waste another two weeks dreaming of it.

Before I can second guess myself, I lift my tank top over my head and bare my chest to him.

Erik's mouth drops open and I see him clench his fists at his sides. He doesn't reach out for me, though, which gives me a strange sort of thrill. "Stay just like that," I tell him.

Sliding my pajama shorts over my hips, I stand naked in front of him, heart pounding in my chest. Now or never.

I'm conscious of just how wet my pussy is when I climb onto him and straddle his hips. The air kisses my damp slit, and I moan softly when the head of his cock nudges my slick folds. He's so big and his body is so wide, there's no gap between us even though I'm still up on my knees.

I have to lift onto my feet to raise myself enough so I can take his cock in my hand and guide the tip to my entrance.

He watches in wonder as I rub him over my sensitive place over and over until I'm drenched.

God I want this.

I'm already anticipating the solid feeling of him sliding inside me when I lower myself onto him. An unsteady curse bursts from his lips as the entire head sinks inside .

He's thick and it's been a while. The more I struggle, the harder it becomes until I'm so tight around him it stings.

He's so huge.

I want this, but I don't think it's going to work. I can see the strain in the muscles in his neck, his taut expression, but he does what I asked and doesn't move.

I'm ruining this just like I ruined the last time. So I do the only thing I can think of in the moment. I slide off him and let his thick cock drop to rest heavy against his belly. Then I relax onto him until my slick pussy is kissing the length of his cock.

Experimentally, I rock my hips. He's hard and hot, and between my legs his cock feels amazing as I reach the angle that brushes the tip against the base of my clit.

I moan.

As if he's afraid to break the spell, he watches without speaking, letting me do what I want with him.

My pussy throbs with need. I can't bear to stop now. So instead I use his body like a toy, riding him until I'm aching with the need for release. Sliding on the slick mess I've made of his dick.

I already feel the pressure of an orgasm rising, threatening to take me over. The

reverent way he watches me brings me that much closer to the edge.

He's doing nothing, simply lying there in the dim light, waiting to be used like my toy. The rush of power that gives me makes my pussy tighten, and I wish once again that I'd been able to take him.

Erik groans when I speed up. My breath comes in short little pants and sweat trickles between my breasts .

My legs are tired, but I don't want to stop. I plant my hands on his chest and take what I need from him over and over. It's still not enough. Though the feeling of his bulging cock hitting that sweet spot is bliss, it's not enough to send me over the edge.

Desperate, I lean back, holding his muscular thighs, searching for a different angle.

Erik moans, and beneath me, his hips buck.

When it's still not enough, I let out a growl of frustration.

This has to work. I need this to work. I need to erase the memory of the last time I was intimate with a man.

"Touch me!"

Erik freezes. That only makes me more desperate.

"Touch me." I grab his large hand and place it over my clit. The moment his thumb presses down, I feel it all through my body. My tension lifts instantly even as my cunt tightens.

A low, guttural noise comes from Erik. "Oh fuck. Inessa, you're so beautiful. Your

pussy feels so good.”

“Keep going.” My voice sounds strangled. I’m riding him frantically.

“Yes. I am. Only, it’s so good. I’m going to—”

“Don’t you dare!” I fix him with a fierce stare.

He shudders and grits his teeth. “I won’t. Keep going. I won’t.”

I ride him until it takes me over.

Until I spasm as I come. My thighs tremble. Wetness gushes from me and coats his cock.

When I lift my head again and look down at him, he’s staring transfixed. The hand on my clit shakes. “Please, Inessa.”

My pussy squeezes .

He whimpers.

Oh, I like this. Experimentally, I roll my hips. “You want to come?”

“Yes. Yes, please.”

Leaning forward again, I bring our faces close together and watch him as I pick up the pace again. “Are you going to come, Erik? I want you to come.”

I grab his hands and hold them down against the mattress. Then I grind my pussy against him until the moment I feel him break.

Trapped between my pussy and his body, his cock throbs. He lets out a long low sound.

Then his hands squeeze my fingers and he shudders beneath me as he erupts. His seed spurts from him to pool on his belly and chest. White and thick, it trickles into his naval and forms little droplets all the way to his collarbone.

I slow my movements, giving him enough for the final bursts of pleasure to recede.

We both still.

Then his eyes widen and he looks down at himself. “Ah, sorry about the mess.”

“Is fine. I will clean it up.”

“No, Inessa. Wait!” I’m in the process of slinging my leg over him to get off, but he simply lifts me and sets me on the floor. Then he stands. “Let me.”

I wish I could tell him that’s not really my name. For some strange reason, that feels important right now. But the mess he made is dripping down his stomach, and anyway, this isn’t real. This is just making sure the deal is good for him too while it lasts .

He fetches a towel and cleans up. When he offers to clean me too, I let him, waiting for the moment I freeze up, but it never comes. I like the way he touches me softly with his huge green hands. I like the way he treats me like a princess without ever putting any expectations on me. It’s like the best of all worlds.

In fact, there’s not a lot I don’t like about my monster fiancé.

When I return to the bedroom after a whispered goodnight, I find myself wishing I’d

invited him to come too.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Erik

I wake up with a smile on my face. I don't know what made Inessa come to my bed in the middle of the night, but I'm sure glad she did.

I guess she's growing to trust me.

I'm whistling as I chop the fruit for her fruit salad. Today I add a small dollop of yogurt and a sprinkle of toasted nuts to the top for an extra flourish. I forgot to tell her a letter arrived for her yesterday from USCIS. I set it next to her bowl so she'll see it when she wakes.

I've already finished my breakfast when the bedroom door opens and she peeks out. Snickers barges past, tail wagging furiously, to nip at my heels until I set a bowl filled with dog kibble on the floor for her.

When I look up, Inessa is reading her letter. Her brow is furrowed into a deep crease. "Three years!"

"Something wrong? "

She looks up, blinking. I can almost see her compose her expression into a neutral smile. "No. Nothing. Good morning."

"Good morning." I'm a little sorry she won't confide in me, but I don't push. It makes me feel a little better when she takes a large bite of her fruit salad and lets out an appreciative noise. "This is very good. It is different today."

I nod. “Yeah. I added some nuts.”

There’s a pause.

I should be getting ready for work, but I always linger. Kivrayn’s way less grumpy these days, so he won’t bite my head off for being a few minutes late. Then an idea hits me. “Would you like to come with me today? Meet everyone? See what I do? You wouldn’t have to stick around the whole day of course, but it would be nice to show you.”

She’s reading the letter again. She doesn’t look up. “Hmm?”

“Would you like to come with me to work?”

“Ah, no. Thank you. I will stay here. I have some things to do.”

I had hoped today would feel different. But even after the breakthrough of last night, there’s still distance between us. It’s like she’s got a wall up, and I got a glimpse over it last night, but the structure’s still in place.

I sigh. “I guess I’ll get ready then.”

“Erik?” She sets the letter aside and I pause in the act of walking to the bathroom. “Yeah?”

“The letter says we must get married soon.”

This perks me up. “Of course! I made up a whole scrapbook of ideas. And I made a few bookings of places which might be nice, just because I wasn’t sure what you’d want. But you know we can choose anywhere. Only it might be hard to book now if we have to do it soon. How soon did it say?”

“Thirty-five days.”

My heart sinks. “Oh, that’s hardly any time.” I rush to reassure her. “But don’t worry. I’ve got this. I’ve already researched. I know a great place for flowers and a secondhand dress shop that’s really great, and you know we can probably order some pretty shoes for you online if we do it tonight.”

“Erik,” she stops me.

I hold back the urge to blurt out the five other ideas about to roll off my tongue. “Yeah?”

“We don’t need a big wedding. We can do it at the city hall or the courthouse. I looked it up.”

“Oh.” She’s right of course. I just didn’t want her to think I can’t give her everything. I want her to feel like she had the special day she deserves. Doesn’t every bride want that?

“I will ring today and book.”

“Sure.” I slump to the shower and try to shake off the feeling of disappointment as I shampoo my hair. I should be happy. This is one step closer to happily ever after.

Only when does the ever after start? I still feel like I’m walking on eggshells. Which is not a good feeling. Especially for someone as large as I am.

I’m going to grind up all those shells into paste with one step!

As if to highlight my negative thoughts, I bump my elbow on the shower screen getting out and stub my toe on the bath.

I'm crestfallen on the metro to work, and when I get in and see a sticky note attached to my desk, I'm almost afraid to look.

I need to talk to you .

No name. It doesn't need one. The only person who would be that blunt is my boss. I set my things on my desk and trudge across the warehouse, pressing the button on the elevator to take me to the top floor. I hope Loren is in today. He's always less tetchy when she's around.

Unfortunately, it's only Kivrayn in the big office. The glass windows in here look out over the city high-rises rather than the harbor on the other side of the building. Kivrayn has a scowl on his face, which draws his dark orange brows down over his eyes, but at least there's no smoke wafting from his nostrils.

I perk up a little. "Hi, boss."

"Would you like to sit down?" He gestures toward the chair opposite his desk and I squeeze myself into the squeaky leather, tucking my arms in tightly at my sides.

"You wanted to see me?"

He sighs. "Erik, I've had complaints from two different customers about bangs and dents on otherwise unblemished items last week. What's going on?"

I grimace. I was definitely rushing more than usual transporting stock from the auction floor into the shipping containers and onto our trucks. I wanted to get home to Inessa. "Sorry, boss."

"You have an excellent record, Erik. This isn't like you. I've sent them vouchers to cover the cost of shipping and hopefully that will be enough to satisfy them. But

don't let it happen again. You know I always factor in plenty of time to allow for gentle handling."

I nod. "I know. I'll do better. "

We sit there in awkward silence for a while longer and I know he's waiting for me to explain what went wrong. The trouble is, I have no excuse. Not really.

I hang my head and ride the elevator back to my office where my chair protests with a loud screech when I sit in it, and I bang my knee on the drawers when I spin around to check the date the big shipment is coming in from Europe.

I'm unloading boxes in the basement storage area when a thought occurs to me. Maybe Inessa is lonely. Maybe she's sad because she has no friends and family to invite to the wedding.

I'm torn about whether to invite my family. They're big and noisy and I get the feeling they won't get along very well with Inessa. They've never been super keen on humans. And I definitely think she'll find them intimidating.

Maybe a small wedding would be good after all.

I finish work later than usual because I take extra care. I don't want to let Kivrayn down again. When I get home my belly is growling angrily and I wonder to myself if Inessa would like me to take her out to the local burger joint. It's not much, but they do the most amazing curly fries. She'd probably like somewhere classier. She strikes me as a classy kind of lady.

I'm getting tongue tied finding the words to ask her when I walk into the living room and catch her wiping at her eyes. She looks up quickly, her cheeks flushed and her eyes red. "Inessa, what's wrong?" I drop to my knees in front of her.

She sniffs. "It's nothing."

"No really. You can tell me. Is it something I've done?"

She gives me such an agonized look I think she's about to tell me that it is, but she shakes her head. "No, Erik. You're lovely. I am not a very good wife, I think. I'm afraid you're disappointed in me."

"Never!"

"Even though I just used you last night to take what I wanted and then I left?"

I instinctively reach out for her and have to stop myself. She doesn't like to be touched. At the last moment, I divert my hand to her ankle and she doesn't flinch. "Inessa, I want you to take whatever you want from my body. Whenever you want to. I'm going to be your husband. Your mate. That means it's my job to satisfy you always. If all you want is to ride my face every day and come in my mouth, then it would be my pleasure to give that to you." Doesn't she understand I'd do anything?

She stares at me. "Even if you don't get to touch me or hold me?"

I nod. "Even then. I just want to make you happy."

She's quiet for a while, but I'm not sure what to say other than what I've already said. Once or twice she opens her mouth as if to speak but then changes her mind.

I wish I knew what to do to put her at ease.

Eventually she wriggles her toes with a scowl. "Look at these nails! I do not think I have ever been so long without a pedicure. They look terrible."

I stare at her feet in my lap. “They look perfect to me.”

“Look at this.” She puts her foot in my lap and wiggles the big toe, and I can’t help myself. I reach out and touch it before I can think better of it.

To my surprise, she doesn’t stop me.

I carefully begin to massage them. She leans her head back on the sofa and sighs, her eyelids fluttering closed. “I could give you a pedicure. You’d have to tell me how to do it, but I’d love that.”

She sighs again. “You are good at this part.”

I love that soft sound. The sound that says I’m pleasing my mate.

I keep going, kneading gently at the places where she’s tense. She makes more soft moaning noises and I can’t help the reaction of my body. My cock grows harder in my lap, and though I ignore it, eventually it swells so much it nudges at the arch of her foot.

She looks up. She moves her foot experimentally and it throbs in response.

The corner of her mouth curves. “You really do like pleasing me, don’t you?”

“I do.”

Breaking free from my hold, she rubs the side of her foot along the swollen flesh of my cock over my work shorts.

I groan.

This was supposed to be about her, but I can't help how good that makes me feel.

“Would you do anything I asked you to?”

My pulse jumps in my throat. “Yes. Anything.”

“Then take off your clothes and kneel here. Show me what a good boy you are.”

Erik

I do what she says with a thundering heart and a rapidly swelling cock. I didn't think it was possible for my dick to grow any larger, but the way Inessa orders me around gets me every time.

I guess I've learned a lot about myself in the few weeks since she's been in my life.

I drop my shirt , shorts, and briefs into a hasty pile and get to my knees again. "Like this?" I don't know what to do with my hands, so I hold them awkwardly at my sides.

Inessa slides to the edge of the sofa, her long legs bare and tempting.

"Behind your back."

I do as I'm told.

My cock is standing out from my body, so swollen and thick with blood that it's too heavy to rise more than horizontal .

When Inessa lifts one perfect foot and traces a single toe up my thigh, my muscles jump and pleasure surges up my spine. That simple touch from her is enough to scramble my senses.

By the time I realize what she's doing, she already has one foot on either side of me, sliding them up and down my length. I never would have thought a foot could feel as good as this does. Inessa has the most beautiful feet I've ever seen. Petite and lovely.

Shapely toes which taper into tiny points with pretty pink nails. My own ugly clodhoppers look ridiculous next to hers. But I think she could touch me with any part of her body and I'd be ready to come in my pants after a few seconds.

Lucky I'm not wearing any pants, I guess.

A toe curled over the tip of my cock makes me gasp. I can't even look anymore without exploding, so I shut my eyes tight and grit my teeth as she teases and works my shaft and tip with all ten delicate toes.

Oh fuck.

It's too much.

But I can't come yet. She hasn't told me I can.

I'm shaking so badly when she pauses, it takes me a moment to realize.

"Lie down."

"Hmm?"

"Lie down, Erik. You look like you need to."

I hastily do as she says, avoiding making eye contact, a little ashamed of how quickly she's brought me right to the edge.

"You like this." There's a smile in her voice. Now I'm not making eye contact because I don't want to embarrass myself when the sight of her smiling down at me tips me over .

I groan as she trails soft toes up my thigh.

She hesitates just as the big toe of one foot reaches my balls. “Don’t you?”

“Yes, Inessa! Yes I like this. Please don’t stop.”

“Do you like it when I tell you what to do?”

She slips one foot beneath my cock and rubs up the shaft with the other, trapping me in a firm grip.

A garbled sound flies from my mouth. Somehow I keep my hands by my sides, though I’m desperate to reach up and touch her pretty foot.

“Do you?”

“Yes, Inessa.”

“Then open your mouth.”

My eyes blink open as I do what she says, just in time to take in the sight of her beautiful foot descending toward my face, toes curling to slide into my open mouth.

I groan at the first taste of her.

Fresh and clean with the slightly salty taste of her skin and the floral perfume that lingers in the back of my mind even when I’m not with her.

Oh stars, thank you!

I’d like to speak, but I’m too busy sucking on her delicious toes, going mad from the

movement of the foot she still has riding up and down my aching cock.

After a few more minutes I'm whimpering.

Slick drips from the end of my cock. I feel it in the way her foot slides over my swollen flesh.

I'm going to come. I'm going to. There's no hope for me now .

With every skillful movement, every time she presses my cock into my belly and slides the foreskin over the tip, I can barely remember my own name.

With regret, I twist my head away from her foot to tell her. "Inessa, please. I—"

Too late.

It hits me all of a sudden. With the weight of three shipping containers full of goods, pleasure slams into my lower belly and sucks away my breath.

It steals my words and my wits, and I'm left shaking and spurting, making a mess of Inessa's foot, my belly, the carpet.

When I can finally bring myself to look at her, I wonder what I'll see.

I expect disdain, disappointment.

Instead, what I see looks more like flushed amazement.

"I'm going to come?" I finish lamely.

She actually laughs.

The sound is breathless, throaty. Perfect.

I've never heard a sexier sound in my life.

"Yes, you did. Didn't you?"

We stare at each other for a moment.

Then slowly, as if she's not sure what I'll do, she lifts the foot covered in my sticky spend from my cock and raises it to my lips. "Then you'd better clean your mess, hadn't you?"

There's never even a question in my mind about how to react.

I draw this foot into my mouth as greedily as I did with the last. The salty musky taste of myself only adds to the sweet flavor of her skin. I suck the last of my come from her big toe and grin. "Just give me a minute and I could be hard again and you can ride my cock to make yourself come. I won't move a muscle. I promise."

Her pale cheeks flush.

It's then I notice the hand stuffed inside her pajama shorts. "I already did."

I blink up at her in wonder.

She did?

I sit bolt upright so fast my head spins. I only just remember in time to stop myself simply pouncing on her. "Oh, please let me clean that up too. Please?"

I think she's going to deny me.

After all, that was hardly an impressive performance.

Only I'm aching for the taste of her pussy. Her sweet and salty perfection. So much that I forgot myself.

Instead, Inessa pulls the hand from her shorts and holds it out to me. The fingers are glazed with a clear slick that smells delicious and feminine and addictive even just coating her hand.

I lean forward with an open mouth and slowly take them onto my tongue.

The sound that comes from me is not a voluntary noise. There's no longer any doubt in my mind. That rich, subtle flavor is my proof.

Inessa did like that too.

So maybe I'm not the only one that had a new kink unlocked today.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Vera

Do I like this?

Way, way too much. But I feel like I'm entering dangerous waters exploring something that holds far too much appeal in a relationship that's supposed to be temporary.

That's supposed to be fake.

Somehow I can't bear to look into his big rich brown eyes and do anything but care for him. Erik is the sweetest, kindest person I've ever met. He's going to be heartbroken when he finds out I was using him. When I leave.

I'm going to be heartbroken too.

I chew on that thought for a while after our encounter while Erik showers and I make us a simple dinner of boiled eggs on a dense rye loaf I found at the local bakery.

I actually ventured out on my own today. Well, with Snickers. Her happy little wagging tail somehow made me feel less anxious about all the eyes on me. About who might be watching from around street corners or behind bushes .

Of course there's no one. Because no one knows I'm here.

It's worked. I've escaped. And maybe I've found what I've been looking for all along. A place and a life that makes me happy. Erik included.

What if I don't have to leave?

What if I stay and make this my life permanently?

I was feeling so unhappy before he came home, doubtful and uncertain if he would be upset with me. But as soon as he walked through the door, I felt better. Secure.

And what we shared still makes me tingle all over and smile to myself at the memory.

With that happy thought in my mind, I slide onto the bar stool at the counter next to Erik. "I should get a job."

He turns to me in surprise. "Why?"

"I would like to help. To pay for things. For the wedding." It's really the least I could do after he paid for my flight and my visa and everything I needed to emigrate.

His eyes widen. "Oh! Then you want to do the dress and the function and everything?"

I nod slowly. "Just a small thing, but yes. I would like to."

I love his goofy smile as he leans over to take a huge bite of eggs on toast. I love the way his wide mouth stretches around his tusks and the way his broad, square chin is so strong and solid and dependable. Just like the rest of him.

It makes me feel like he could help carry the weight of my past. Of my fears.

It would be unfair to burden him with them though, wouldn't it?

"Do you have a dress picked out?" He lifts a finger to stop me when I lift my phone.

“Don’t tell me! I forgot it’s supposed to be a secret. But this weekend we could go looking for places to have the ceremony. Would you like to look through my folder?”

I agree and we spend the rest of the evening comfortably, flipping through brochures Erik has collected, me listening to him talk about his ideas for the day. Seems like he’s been planning this for a long time. I do love how much thought he’s put into it.

In the end, we settle on three likely places. A small café by the river just out of town, a vineyard in the hills to the west, and an old church in town that’s been converted to a function room.

I like the idea of the vineyard. There’s a big garden where Snickers can run around without disturbing anyone, and it seems right for her to be included. She’s kind of the closest thing to a friend I have since I moved to Heartstone.

But when it’s time for bed, a guilty knot settles into my gut and I don’t invite Erik in. He acts the way he always does—patient, calm. He wishes me goodnight and settles himself onto the sofa bed, and I retreat to the bedroom.

I should keep my distance until I’m certain. I shouldn’t risk letting him get more attached than he already is.

What I need is a way to be sure.

I think again of the tarot reading I had before I made the decision to become a monster’s mail-order bride. Back then, I couldn’t have imagined that the predictions Inga made could have fallen this way, but now everything she said sort of fits into place. A new home across the sea. A homecoming. A leap of faith.

All of it could mean Erik .

But sometimes the cards are fickle.

I want to see again.

I can't call Inga, obviously. Everyone thinks I'm dead.

I need to find someone here in Heartstone who can read them for me.

A few minutes' searching turns up three tarot readers on this side of the city. One looks like an obvious fake, all flashing animations and inspirational messages. Another has no picture on their website and the link I click is broken.

The last website I find has an image of a familiar looking woman. Her short pixie cut leaves wisps of gray hair curling around her ears, and her long dangly earrings have mosaic roses decorating them.

Sophia. Sure enough, there's a link to the Monstrous Deals page at the bottom of her psychic services page. I remember how a brief and mostly unintelligible conversation when she informed me I'd been matched with Erik.

If she works with monsters then she must be connected with the supernatural. I do think there are some unscrupulous people out there who only pretend to read the cards without having any idea what they're doing. I have a good feeling about this Sophia.

Decision made, I click the book button and make a time for tomorrow afternoon.

I can head to the local pawn shop in the morning and sell my diamond earrings and pay her in cash. Somehow it feels wrong asking Erik for the cash to pay for this reading when what I'm asking is whether or not I should betray him.

Sophia hands me a steaming cup of tea and gives me a warm smile as she sits opposite me on a black-and-white-striped loveseat. “How is everything? How are you settling in?”

I clasp my hands in my lap and consider my words. I don’t want her to think the match is a failure. Perhaps coming here was a mistake. I can’t be candid with her. That’s for sure.

The quaint and brightly painted terrace house is not what I would have pictured for a monster brothel. I wonder where the girls take bookings. Upstairs I guess. I wonder if she has specialty rooms.

I drag my thoughts back to the moment. “I am very well. I am hoping to book a place for the wedding and I am looking for some extra guidance.” That seems like a plausible reason to come for a reading.

What will she see in the cards? What if she reads too much of the truth?

Too late to worry about that now I suppose.

She nods. “Fantastic. Well, I’m sure I can help with that. Your aura looks good by the way. The move must have been intimidating, but I think it has suited you. I hope Erik has too.”

I flush. I don’t want to admit just how well he suits me, but I wonder if she can read that in my aura too. Before Inga, I saw a clairvoyant in Moscow who used to talk about auras. I never put much stock in it, but I never used to be engaged to a monster either. I think my perspective on a lot of things has changed. “Yes. He is very good.” I take a sip of tea to cover the way the blush spreads across my cheeks and avoid looking directly into Sophia’s face.

“Good. So you want a tarot reading?”

“Please.”

“Let me fetch the cards.”

She makes a show of getting up and looking through a set of drawers on the wall. She moves slowly and deliberately, as if she’s giving me time to compose myself. If she is, she’s very good.

Either way, I make use of the time. When she returns with a deck of cards, I’m sitting with my hands in my lap again, my face the careful mask I used to wear around my father and brother.

Sophia hands me the deck and I shuffle, keeping my eyes down and my heart focused on what I really want to know: Is he mine? Is he the homecoming the cards foresaw?

When I hand them back to Sophia, my hands are trembling.

She gives me a strange look.

She says nothing, however, as she lays out three cards face up, one after the other.

The Tower, The Star. We both suck in a breath as she turns over the King of Swords.

This card is one of those in the deck I’m always afraid of drawing. The cruel, beautiful face of the man in the picture smirks up at me from his pointed metal throne. His eyes hold no warmth, nor does his smile.

As she lays the card down, Sophia snatches her hand back as if it has burned her.

We both stare in silence for a long moment .

Sophia makes a low sound in the back of her throat. “The Tower signifies a drastic change. This is your past. The home you left behind.” She nods to herself, her voice growing more confident again as she speaks.

I say nothing.

“The Star. A good sign. Healing. A bright light to guide you into your future.”

There’s a pause. She looks up at me and her brows furrow.

“But this one...”

She doesn’t have to say. I’ve had this card before and can still recall the words Inga spoke when she read the prediction. A corrupt and powerful man will try to control you. To hurt you.

I always assumed the card meant my father or my brother.

After Dmitri attacked me, I thought it must have meant him.

But all of that is in my past. This card was drawn in the position representing my future. I swallow around a dry throat. “Could there be another meaning?”

Sophia’s face is grim, her tone soft. “Sometimes things are not what they seem. There is turbulence in your future, that much is certain. But it may not represent a physical threat. It could be a threat to your confidence or independence.”

I snort. “These are the same.”

She reaches a hand across the table, offering it to me. It takes me a moment, but hesitantly, I place my hand in hers. “Whatever you left behind in Moscow is behind you. The Star is a strong predictor of healing. And you’re here now. The Monstrous Deals security team is only a call away. Though I must say Erik passed our screening process with flying colors. ”

I sigh. “It is not Erik. I know that.” And I doubt anyone could protect me if my brother finds a way to get to me.

But perhaps she’s right. Perhaps the card doesn’t signify him either.

As I leave, I try to tell myself all will be well.

Sophia refuses to let me pay for the reading and I use some of the cash to take a cab home just to get off the street. I can’t shake the cold feeling at the back of my neck, as if a small piece of an icy Russian winter storm followed me here to Heartstone.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Erik

It's a half hour train ride from West Bank Station to Oakridge Station, the nearest stop to Blackstone Cellars. The train exits a tunnel, and we're sandwiched between two hills of vines on either side. My eyes can't focus on the rows as we speed past, there are so many.

Inessa is quiet on the journey. As we leave the apartment, she pulls a hat down over her head and puts on dark glasses, though the day is gray.

On the train, she looks out the window and talks about the scenery and the weather, but I can't help feeling as if it's a little forced.

"We're here." As the train approaches the station, I stand to let her out ahead of me. Her shoulders are tense beneath the beige jacket. She seems to hunch into herself. It's a Sunday afternoon, and though there were plenty of people on the train when we got on, only three other people follow us onto the station. The sky is cloudy and there's a chill in the breeze. Probably the reason why there aren't more people taking advantage of the beautiful views down over Heartstone Harbor.

There's a sign at the station exit directing us to Blackstone Cellars. "This way."

She follows close to me and I try to shake off my worries. I'm probably just misreading things. "There are some pretty spots to have our photos taken up here. Looking out over the harbor."

"Yes. It is beautiful."

The path leads up a set of steps and down a ridge toward a large brick building with huge square windows. I don't mind the walk, but if we get married here, we'll need to hire a car. I know Inessa won't want to walk from the train in her pretty dress.

It makes me smile imagining how beautiful she'll look all dressed up in white. Though I hope she decides not to wear a veil. It would be a shame to cover up her face. Her expressive lips. Her deep, soulful eyes.

She surprises me by speaking. "I wish we could just get married today."

"Today?" That's the opposite of what I guessed she was thinking.

"It's just... why wait? We have both agreed we want to be married, and you're right, it's beautiful here. If we do it today, then I am your wife. It is done."

I don't know what to say. I'm glad she still wants to go through with it. But I thought she would want to savor the special day.

"Then you like this place? "

"I do."

We approach the building. There are stone steps leading up to a deck covered with a vine-draped pergola.

Inessa pauses on the first step, turning back to look up at me. Even on the step above me, she still has to look up. Her head barely clears my shoulders. "I like you, Erik. A lot. You make me feel safe."

All the stiff awkwardness of the train ride is erased in a single moment when she hesitantly reaches out and slips her small hand into mine. My heart is dancing a wild

rhythm as we walk up the stairs and into a large dining room together. The tables are set for a wedding later today, with heavy white tablecloths and bunches of flowers in white and pink. The chairs have those neat fabric covers on them with the material bunched at the back and tied with a ribbon.

Inessa looks around. “How many guests are you inviting? I think we will not need such a big space.”

My heart sinks again. “No. I guess not.”

“Perhaps they have a smaller room.”

I’m about to reply, but a tall blonde woman wearing a long black skirt and a white shirt comes out of a door to what looks like the kitchen. When she speaks, her voice is accented like Inessa’s and I realize she must be Russian. “Good afternoon. May I help you? You are looking for a table?”

Inessa goes still and silent, so I answer. “Hi. We’re actually here to meet with your function manager. About a wedding?”

“Ah, perfect. Let me take you to her office.” She gestures toward the back of the large open space where a small door must lead to the office she’s speaking of. “Is this your first time visiting Blackstone? ”

Inessa is still silent.

“Ah, yeah. I’m from Heartstone, but I’ve never been up to the hills before and my fiancé has only recently moved here.”

“Oh really? Where from?”

I open my mouth to answer, but finally Inessa speaks. “St. Petersburg.”

I frown. I’m sure that’s not what she said on her profile, but perhaps I’m getting it wrong. Wouldn’t be the first time I forgot something important.

The waitress says something in Russian, and of course I don’t catch it. Inessa gives her a very short response.

Then the office door opens and an older lady with red-rimmed glasses and bright red lipstick greets us. “Welcome. You must be Erik and Inessa. I’m Crystal, the function manager at Blackstone.”

The waitress is still standing behind us. I can sense the tension radiating off Inessa, and I’m not sure why. Surely it’s nice to meet a fellow Russian. She steps closer to me until our arms brush and I nearly fall down when she slides her hand into mine for the second time in one day.

To clear the tension, I smile and hold out my right hand to Crystal. “Yeah, that’s us. Thanks for meeting us. We were hoping you might be able to fit in something small at the last minute.”

Inessa tugs at my hand. “Actually, you know what? I’m sorry to do this, but I’m not feeling well. Do you think we could come back another time?”

I look around at her in surprise. Come to think of it, she does look a little paler than usual. “What is it? Are you going to be alright? ”

She gives me a grim smile. “I have a headache. I think a—what is the word?”

“A migraine?”

“Yes. This. A migraine. I’m sorry.”

Crystal is still smiling but she looks a little puzzled. “Well I do hope you feel better soon. Would you like to reschedule for next weekend?”

Inessa squeezes my hand and I try to work out what she’s trying to tell me. “Ah...”

“Maybe another time.”

Crystal looks a little taken aback and I can’t say I blame her. We’ve come all this way only to turn around without even looking over the place! But if Inessa isn’t feeling well, I guess we have to go.

“Well, can I call you a cab?”

“No. That’s fine. We will go on the train,” Inessa replies before I can answer yes.

“Are you sure?” I ask her.

“Sure.”

What else can I do but turn and lead her out of the restaurant and back down the path toward the train station? The only comfort I have is that she doesn’t let go of my hand the whole way there.

I’m quiet, trying to puzzle out the situation, but eventually the train arrives on the platform and we get on and my head is still a muddle. “Inessa, is everything OK? Really OK?”

“Just a headache.”

I look at her. “Really? Because I know I’m dense sometimes, but that seemed strange to me.”

There’s a pause.

Then she sighs and looks away. “Yes. Migraine.”

She’s silent all the way home.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Vera

I've made a mess of things again.

I don't need to hear Erik's quiet sigh as he shuts the door to the apartment behind us to know that. I felt it the whole way home.

It's just that I couldn't shake the feeling of foreboding I've had ever since the tarot reading. The King of Swords has haunted my dreams. His sharply pointed features seem etched into the backs of my eyes so that every time I close them, he is looking at me.

In my dreams the painted face of the figure on the card merges with the thicker, more solid features of Yakov and I wake in a sweat.

Why did I think I could hide from him and Dmitri? It's only a matter of time before they find me, and then I can only imagine what they'll do.

I'd like to think they'll kill me. That would be simple .

My greatest fear is that they won't. They'll keep me alive to suffer in service to one or both of them. To be paraded before others as an example of what happens when you cross a ruthless man.

Hearing my native tongue put me instantly on high alert. What if there's a link? What if she owes someone a favor or has family within my brother's reach?

She might be a very nice girl, but all it takes is one good threat and even the nice ones crumble.

I've seen it.

I don't notice I'm shaking until two large green hands take me gently by the upper arms. "Inessa?"

Startled, I look up into Erik's concerned face.

"I'm sorry." He snatches his hands away and I want to tell him to put them back. They're so warm I'd like to wrap myself in his hold. Without his touch, my skin feels icy.

"I'm worried about you."

I hate crying.

Ever since I was a child, I would do everything I could to avoid crying.

Now I dig my nails into my palms and will the tears back as my eyes begin to sting and my throat closes up. I can't speak or they'll escape.

Can't do anything but freeze up under the gentle gaze of my big green giant.

"Inessa?"

All of a sudden, I can't hold it back anymore. It all comes pouring out of me like a flood. "I'm afraid, Erik. I'm terrified."

I'm shaking. I've said too much already, but he doesn't understand. How could he ?

“I ran away from someone back home who will make me suffer if he ever finds out. If he ever catches me. I’m afraid that he’s going to catch me.”

He sort of freezes up too, and we both just look at each other.

“What can I do?” His rich brown eyes are full of compassion. He’s still not touching me and I know why. He’s avoiding it because of the way I usually react.

I think about how warm and comforting his hands felt. “Hold me.”

The next second, I’m wrapped up in a hug so big and warm it feels like I’ve been enveloped in the fluffiest fur blanket. I press my face into his chest and inhale the deep, masculine scent of him. I love the way he smells. It hits me that I’ve loved it for a while and only now am I getting to experience it properly. Up close.

I’m so distracted by the rich spicy scent that the tears I was expecting never come.

Eventually I stop shaking and his warmth bleeds into me so I can feel my fingers and toes again.

I sigh. “Thank you.”

He raises a hesitant hand to my hair and pats softly. “Is this OK?”

I want to snuggle deeper into his broad chest and let myself believe that this will all be OK, but instead I pull back. He deserves to know. “Come. Sit. Let me explain. I should have told you before and I’m sorry for deceiving you. Let me put that right now. ”

He follows me to the sofa and we sit. It’s so small that I have to put my feet in his lap, but I don’t mind that. His warm hands close around them, and I try to find the

words to begin.

“Back home in Moscow.” I frown. I have already started wrong. I correct myself. “Back in Moscow, I was the daughter of a dangerous man. A criminal. In Russian we would say Pahkan. I don’t know if there is an American translation.”

Erik frowns. “What are you saying? You’re saying he was a Mafia boss?”

“Yes. We would say vori v zakone or Bratva. He is a Bratva. Or he was. He was killed.”

Erik’s hands, which have been gently kneading the arches of my feet, pause while his frown deepens. “Man, are you for real? I thought this stuff was just in movies, you know?”

“I wish it was only in movies.”

“Sorry. Sorry. Keep going.” His hands start moving again and the knot of tension in my calves begins to ease.

“When he died, it was an opportunity for my brother. My father had guided him all his life to step into the role when he was dead. Assassinations are not all that unusual. The men accepted him for the most part. Before my father died, he had arranged for me to marry another vor. A man here in the United States who is very rich and powerful.”

Erik is quiet.

“That was Dmitri. The man who—” I break off.

Erik stiffens. “The man who hurt you? And your father and brother let that happen?”

I shrug. “I was going to be his property. And he wanted to teach me a lesson to obey him without question. ”

A low growl rumbles from Erik’s chest. “That’s not right. You’re not anyone’s property!”

“So I ran. I faked my death and created a new identity, and here I am.”

“Then Inessa isn’t your real name?”

I shake my head sadly. “No.”

“Oh.” He looks crestfallen. As if after everything I’ve revealed to him, this is the most difficult part of all.

“I wanted to tell you every time you called me Inessa. But I was too afraid.”

“What is it?” he asks softly.

I hesitate. But I need an ally. It could be a mistake, but I can see the wound already forming in his heart. “It’s Vera.”

“Vera.” He says it slowly, as if he’s tasting the word, trying it out. It sounds so thoughtful in his deep rumble voice. But it doesn’t sound like I thought it would.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Say it again,” I tell him, not caring how silly that sounds.

Erik frowns. “Vera?”

I shake my head. “It sounds wrong. I spent so long thinking how it would sound for you to call me Vera, but you know, all I want is to leave that person behind. She’s not me anymore. I wish I really was Inessa.”

A strong, warm hand slides up my leg, sending ripples of pleasure through my body. “Then be Inessa. You can be whoever you want with me. I’ll keep you safe.”

I want to believe it.

I do believe it for a long time while he massages my feet and legs and tells me how lucky he feels to have me in his life. How he waited for so long.

I want to be the person I think of when I think about Inessa. Free. Strong. Loving. Kind.

Able to give my heart to this beautiful orc without worries, without the burden of my past.

When it’s time for bed, I shyly ask if he would like to sleep on the bed with me.

I expect him to initiate sex. To ask at least.

But all he does is slide under the covers beside me and roll over to prop himself on one elbow and smile at me. “I’m going to like waking up next to you. I might have to do it a few times in the night and roll over and look at you just to make sure I’m not dreaming.”

I laugh. His mind is so blissfully simple. Simple desires, simple pleasures.

I wish I could have a little bit of that.

“Well just don’t move your feet too suddenly. Snickers has taken to that side of the bed and I think she’ll be devastated if we make her move.”

At that very moment the little dog scrambles up onto the bed and pauses to stare at Erik. She looks comically between me and him, back and forth until she finally gives a little snort and curls up in a ball at his feet.

“You’re safe here,” Erik whispers as I experimentally snuggle backward into his hold.

It feels just as good as it did before, and I repeat his words in my head as a silent mantra, over and over until eventually I fall asleep.

I am safe here.

I can trust him.

Everything will be alright.

Erik

I'm drifting in that warm and lovely place between sleeping and waking with Inessa's rounded backside curled into my lap and her breast cupped in my hand when my phone starts to buzz.

Snickers makes an irritated little grunt and stands, turning in elaborate circles before resettling.

With a groan, I detach myself from Inessa and hurry to answer it before it wakes her. I press the answer button and lift the phone to my ear, sneaking into the living room and shutting the bedroom door behind me. "Mom?"

"Oh my goodness, Erik, we thought you were dead!"

I roll my eyes at my mom's dramatics. It's been a few weeks since I called. You can always count on her to blow things up as big as possible. That includes problems, feelings, and people through sheer force of will and excessive feeding.

I blame her for the fact I was head and shoulders above even all the other orcs in the village by the time I was fourteen .

"Mom, you know I've just been busy." If I'm honest, I haven't worked out how to tell her that I signed up for a foreign mail-order bride. It's just not the sort of thing I can see her accepting easily.

She groans. "You're always busy. Ever since you moved to the big city. I tell you it's

no good for you there.”

“Mom, I’m fine.” It’s always the same thing every time we talk. I find it’s best to react as little as possible. “How’s everyone?”

This opens a tirade about my father’s bad knee and how he strained it the other day herding the wyverns after my little brother left the gate open. In Lob’s defense, he’s only twelve. He’s the baby, and he will get away with being the baby for the rest of his life.

I’m sitting with my elbows resting on my knees, so I don’t see the bedroom door open. Mom is on a tirade about the neighbors and how their weeds are encroaching on her garden, and I’m just nodding and waiting for a chance to tell her I’ve got to go.

“Will I make the breakfast this morning?” Inessa’s voice startles me and I jump.

On the other end of the phone, my mom stops mid-sentence. “Who is that? Erik, do you have a female there?”

Unfortunately, her voice is loud enough to be audible even though I don’t have her on speaker.

“Yes, Erik. Who is that?” Inessa’s eyes narrow and I have a moment to appreciate how adorable she is when she’s jealous before my mom launches into the biggest scolding I’ve had since I was my brother’s age and totaled my dad’s car .

“Erik! Is this why you haven’t been calling? How could you? I am your mother and I’m entitled to know if you’re seeing someone. To think that she’s in your apartment, for breakfast no less, and you haven’t even brought her home to introduce her to the family.”

The outraged expression on Inessa's face clears and pretty soon she's laughing as Mom keeps going and going.

When I finally extract myself from the call with promises of visiting soon, she's in the kitchen chopping fruit. "You did not tell them about me."

I lift a hand to scratch at the back of my head. "I meant to... It's just..." How do I put this without sounding like a weirdo? Or worse.

"I am foreign."

"You're human."

Her eyes widen.

I sigh. "My mom would have fixed me up with a nice orc years ago if she'd had her way. Only I've always been more attracted to humans. Back home, that's not exactly something you just come out and say. In fact, I think you're the first person I've ever said it out loud to."

"Ah." There's a pause. Unexpectedly, she smiles. "Well now I have met you, I think I'm more attracted to orcs, so I understand. My family would never have accepted a monster even if I wanted to keep in touch with any of them."

My chest swells to about three times its usual size, and I'm grinning. "Then you don't think I'm weird. Or, um, objectifying you? My first human girlfriend told me I only liked her because she was human, but that's not it. And now I've gotten to know you, I'm not sure I'd be attracted to anyone else, orc or human."

"I do not know this word, but I think it is natural to have preferences. I do not think you should have to apologize for them."

We smile at each other for another long moment. I kinda wish we could go back to bed. I'd sure like another opportunity to hold her, but she finishes the fruit salad and starts frying my bacon, and my stomach rumbles like crazy.

We sit at the counter side by side in comfortable companionship as we eat.

"So how would you feel about a visit to my hometown?" I try. "It's only orcs. There's no humans around for miles, and I'm afraid it's pretty small and basic, but we don't have to stay long."

She looks around at me. "You mean we would be staying in a village full of monsters with no humans? And you would introduce me to your family?"

I wince. "Yeah."

"Then I would love that."

I breathe a sigh of relief. I really thought that would be a harder sell. In fairness, she hasn't met my mother yet. I'm already celebrating the victory, and OK, maybe I get a little cocky. "You almost looked jealous back then. Back when you didn't know who I was talking to."

Her smile turns into a glare, and even though I'm ninety-nine percent sure she's not serious, I still quiver a bit. "Watch it!"

"OK. OK, but, um... were you?"

"Of course. You're mine now. You can't be talking to other women without me knowing."

Oh, that does gooey things to my insides. And firm, pressing things to my cock,

which I ignore for the moment.

Heart thudding in my chest, I clear my throat. I can't believe I'm going to do this, but it's too good an opportunity to waste given the way things have been going between us. "Actually, it's funny you say that. I had this crazy idea. Well not crazy. I just—" I break off. What if she doesn't like it?

What if it's too far?

Instead of wrestling with the words, I unlock my phone and quickly open the page I was looking at a few nights ago. When I turn the screen so she can see, her brows raise.

I want to snatch it back, but it's too late now.

She's already seen it.

"Interesting. It's for male chastity, yes? To stop you from..." She makes a gesture with her hand like she's jerking off a cock, and I groan. Why is that so hot?

"Yeah. There's a key. You could lock me up and keep me like that as long as you wanted."

There's another moment of agony while my cock stiffens in my sweatpants, and I study her face closely to try to gauge her reaction.

Then the corners of her lips turn up. "And I would have the key?"

I nod.

"I like this. Let's buy one."

I cough. “I, um... I might have bought one already. After the first time. I just had a hunch you might like it.”

“Show me.”

Turns out a cock cage is almost impossible to put on, especially with a beautiful woman handling my unruly cock. It refuses to go soft enough to stuff into the small metal contraption with her anywhere in the room.

After several failed attempts, she eventually leaves me to try on my own and I finally manage it. I have a rush of emotions the moment I pull the key from the lock. My cock is already straining against the bars, and the feeling is strange and erotic and makes wearing it that much harder. Every time I think I’ve calmed down again, I think about wearing it for her and the smile on her face when she saw what I had in mind, and I’m right back to agony again.

It’s the sweetest feeling though. Almost as if she’s actually touching me.

When I finally emerge from the bathroom, I’m feeling a little sheepish. I never expected it to be that hard.

But when I hand her the key and she slips it onto a chain around her neck, I nearly burst through the bars. I curse under my breath. “This was either a really good or a really bad idea. And I can’t tell which. I was going to suggest I could wear it for the visit to my family, but I’m not even certain I can last that long.”

Inessa gives me a mock pout. “Aww, you could last that long for me, couldn’t you? I think that is a brilliant idea.”

I could probably fly right now if she told me to, so I nod and we go into the bedroom to pack some things .

We'll leave tomorrow after I finish work.

I think I'm in for the longest three days of my life.

Vera

I'm not sure what I expected an orc village to be like, but what we find when we arrive is the strangest mix of things.

I think I was expecting stone cottages or caves or something rustic. Instead it's more like a station or ranch with pristine prefabricated buildings in rows in a central grid and enormous netted structures that must be ten stories high stretching out as far as I can see into the distance.

We're about three hours outside the city limits on open plains that sit in a valley between two small mountains. Erik pulls into a driveway by a house in the center of the grid and switches off the engine of the rental car. "Just let me know if anyone gets a little too... enthusiastic," he tells me with a wince. "And I'll have a word with them."

With that foreboding introduction, we climb out and I stretch tired limbs and look around. Snickers leaps from the car and begins sniffing around the bushes in the front yard, wagging her little tail frantically .

A piercing shriek makes me jump, and I pivot to see an enormous reptilian bird plow into the side of the netting, sharp talons extended and beak stretched wide. Snickers growls from my ankles where she's taken cover.

"Don't mind the wyverns," says Erik cheerfully. "They get a little excitable when new people arrive, but they'll settle."

I gape at him. “Those are pets?”

He laughs. “More like livestock. Since monsters came out, my clan started farming them. We used to hunt wild wyverns, but this is much more efficient.”

He looks like he’s about to say more when the front door of the house flies open and a large, burly orc woman with a pink floral apron, green skin, and the longest braid I’ve ever seen trailing over one shoulder strides onto the porch. Her voice booms in the quiet of the village. “Erik! Let’s take a look at this woman of yours then.”

Erik picks up all our bags and slings them over one shoulder, then gently puts an arm around my waist, giving me a sideways look as if to ask if it’s OK. “Hi, Ma. Good to see you. This is Inessa.”

I try to smile. I’m not sure if orcs have the same customs as humans in this country but it can’t hurt to try. She waits on the porch as we climb the three steps, which still only puts me head height with her shoulder. I stand stiffly while she looks me over.

“Hmph. Good hips at least. For a human. Come on. You must be hungry.”

She turns and leads us into the house, and Erik makes an apologetic face at me behind her back .

I wave him off. I’m sure if he had met my grandmother, that comment would pale in comparison to the things she would say about my monster fiancé.

Inside, the house is spotless. The kitchen is large and open plan, with bright white subway tiles on the backsplash and shelves of glassware and tiny dragon figurines on display. When I look a little closer, I see that they are actually wyverns like the creatures in the giant net cages outside, with no legs and large membranous wings and a face like a dinosaur.

On one side of the counter there are several enormous wheels of cheese. One of them is on the kitchen island, cut open with a large knife wedged into the wax. Some of the crumbly pale cheese is cut in small chunks and stacked on a platter beside slices of pickled vegetables, crusty brown bread, and thick slices of ham and salami.

My mouth waters.

I haven't seen a spread like this since I left Russia.

Erik drops the bags and snatches up a plate, piling it high with food. "Mmm, Ma, you spoil me."

She pinches his cheek. "Just a little snack. There's a pot roast for dinner. I can tell you haven't been eating enough. And don't even get me started on this girl of yours." She hands me a plate loaded with food, and I accept it gratefully.

I have to climb onto the tall stool at the kitchen island, but when I manage it and take my first mouthful of bread and cheese and pickle, I let out a satisfied moan.

It's delicious.

The cheese is sharp and bitey, and the bread is still warm from the oven .

Erik's mother plants her hands on her hips, watching me. "Good. Eat up, girl. You'll need your strength for birthing lots of orc sons."

I cough around a second bite of bread and cheese and hurry to regain my composure. I hadn't really let myself think about whether or not orcs and humans can actually reproduce, but the idea of carrying and birthing babies of Erik's is intimidating to say the least.

“Ma! You’ll scare her. We haven’t even talked about babies yet.” He stands and fetches me a glass of water.

Erik’s mother had turned to pull the lid off the pot on the stove, but she turns back with the spoon in her hand and a scowl on her face. “What? You’re going to marry her and not talk about the important things? Erik!”

Erik pulls himself to his full height, which is a head taller than his imposing mother. “Inessa is the important thing, Ma. She’s what matters. We’ll talk about it when she’s ready.”

There’s a horrible pause where I watch her take this in. I have no idea how she’ll react, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen Erik be so assertive.

Yes, it’s adorable that it’s over me. Yes, I am swooning a little that he jumped to my defense, but I also don’t want his mother’s nose put out of joint. And that surprises me.

I guess my mind has changed on this issue. I’m no longer viewing this as temporary even inside my own head.

I have to admit to myself that I want to be here for good. Forever.

Erik’s mother purses her lips, but she tops up my water glass and serves me more snacks until I feel like I’ve had a full meal .

She talks exclusively to Erik for the next thirty minutes, updating him on things on the property and in the village as if I’m not there at all.

“Go relax,” she says finally, dismissing us with a wave of her hand. “Dinner will be in one hour.”

My stomach gives a tired grumble of protest but I smile and thank her. Erik takes our bags and leads me through a corridor to a bedroom at the end of the hall with a sturdy wooden bed and an empty closet. “This is us.”

The walls are covered with sporting trophies and medals and pictures of Erik as a younger orc. I can’t help being curious. “What are all these?”

Erik blushes. “Aw, just stuff from years ago, when I was a kid.”

“Are you embarrassed?”

He laughs awkwardly. “It’s hardly an achievement to win a few races with three contestants,” he says. “The village is small.”

Always so modest. I study the awards and see that he must have won several trophies for every year he was in school. Athletics, football, a sport called Airball which I’m not familiar with.

“You were the best.”

“I had to be good at something and make up for my very average grades in school. We homeschooled, but I was always the slowest in the class, including my younger siblings!”

“I bet that’s not true, but you are too modest. At least I bet you were the most obedient.”

Erik is standing by the bed, watching me, his cheeks colored an adorable deep green .

I can’t help the fact that my mind strays to the cage he has hidden beneath his well fitted jeans and the tingle of awareness I feel at the thought of it.

I take a step toward him, bringing me close enough to place a hand on his broad chest. My heartbeat speeds up just at the firm warmth of his body, the hint of strength beneath my palm.

“I...”

As he starts to speak, I trail my hand down his chest and abs, across the button of his jeans, and down to cup him as I look up into his eyes. “So obedient, aren’t you?”

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. “Yes, Inessa.”

“Do you know how wet that makes me?”

His mouth drops open for a long moment and despite the cage, I feel his package twitch under my palm. “No, but I’d really, really like to find out.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Erik

“Take off your pants. I want to see you in it.” Inessa’s breathy whisper carries the same heady excitement I feel as she releases me and steps back.

I fumble with the buttons on the fly of my jeans in my hurry to have them off, almost tripping as I yank them down my legs.

She doesn’t seem to notice my clumsiness.

When I straighten, she sucks in a breath and reaches for me as if she can’t help herself.

Inside the tight cage, my cock swells impossibly until I feel I might burst through the metal with the force of my arousal.

I shudder when she runs a fingertip over me, the lightest graze of her skin brushing sensitive flesh between the bars.

Fuck.

This feeling is everything. The way she looks at me, the hunger in her gaze .

Still watching me, she undoes her own fly and drops her jeans to the floor. Immediately her scent fills the room. Lush and sweet and thick with desire. She doesn’t even need to tell me. I drop to my knees in front of her just to get closer to the source. When she removes the lacy black panties she had on beneath the jeans, she

balls them in her fist and stuffs them in my mouth.

I want to suck on them to draw the flavor onto my tongue, but I can't. Still, the aroma fills my senses and my head spins like I've had eight shots back to back.

Where has this woman been all my life?

I should have been on my knees before her years ago.

That's the last coherent thought I have for a while because she lifts her top over her head and the bra follows shortly after. She's completely naked in front of me. Completely stunning.

I don't know if I'd rather devour her or just watch with the best view in the world while she plays with herself.

Lifting one foot, she places it on my thigh. Just that tiny movement adds another sucker punch of her scent to knock out my senses.

I groan around the panties as she slowly pushes two fingers into her soaking wet folds and lifts them for me to inspect.

She wasn't lying.

Not that I thought she was.

Her fingers are slick with moisture. As she spreads them, it trails between them in a thin line, and I'm desperate for a taste. With the panties in my mouth, I can't do anything but watch as she wipes her fingers across my lips, wishing my tongue was free to curl around them, to draw them into my mouth .

I never thought I'd regret having her used panties, but now I do.

Until she smiles at me.

Oh god, her smile. It could lift me to my feet—all seven foot of me. It could inspire me to run a marathon, to break world records, to—

“Get on the bed.”

Once again my cock strains at the cage while I leap to my feet and bound to the bed. Not knowing what to do, I sit with my back against the headboard and watch and hope.

Inessa crawls on with me. It's high—it's built for orcs. So she has to climb up onto it. Her breasts dangle like ripe fruit I want to pluck as she moves toward me, and I sit on my hands so I don't give in to temptation.

She stops about a foot from me.

My cock aches.

The smile on her face is positively wicked. “I want you to touch me.”

I feel that instruction right to my fingertips and toes. I blink wondering if I imagined it. She wants me to touch her?

Only the thing I've been dreaming of since I first saw her.

Inessa turns and crawls backward until she's in my lap, her back pressed against my belly and chest, giving me access to so many places on her I feel like a kid in a candy store.

It also has the side effect of putting extra pressure on my cage. Pressure I don't need to feel right now. Gritting my teeth, I ignore it and focus on her. I am not going to mess up this opportunity. No sir. "Where? How?" My voice comes out croaky. My throat is dry .

The need to touch her is a palpable force surging through my veins.

Inessa takes my larger hand in hers and guides it to her body.

I groan as we cup her soft breast together, squeezing and massaging so I can feel the shape and weight of it. The full plumpness, the hard nipple against my palm.

She lets out a soft sigh, and the ache of it tightens my balls and swells my chest.

I can do this. I can please her just the way she wants me to.

Whatever has given her the courage to trust me in this moment, I'm not going to question any longer.

My heart is in my throat as she guides my right hand away from her breast to skate down her belly. The taut flesh dances under my touch. Her back arches as my fingertips push through the soft tuft of hair on her mound.

Finally I'm sinking into wet sweetness. I'm so keyed up, just having my fingers in her pussy feels like I've sunk my cock inside her.

I'm rocking my hips along with her as I find her clit and she shows me how she wants it.

Slow and firm, big circles around her swollen nub. She sighs when I catch her rhythm.

I know I'm doing it right when she releases my hand, gripping my arm instead.
"More."

Oh fuck.

I push deeper, plunging my fingers inside her as she rolls her hips and angles to let me in .

Inessa cries out as I spear two thick fingers into her tight hole. I freeze wondering if I should stop, but she only digs her nails into my arm, sending a spike of sensation through me.

"Keep going."

I thrust inside her.

"Yes."

I pick up speed again, curling my fingers until I find a place that draws a moan from her.

She turns her head, biting down on my upper arm to quiet her sounds.

That's just fine with me. There's no way I'm stopping now. Not without a direct command from her.

My ma and my whole family could burst in here for all I care. The only thing I'm focused on is making this goddess of a woman feel amazing.

Oh fuck, did I think the cage was torture before?

As her pleasure grows, I'm sure I've broken something. The cage. My dick. It hardly matters. I'm trapped by her, in her. A slave to her pleasure and her need, and there's no place I'd rather be.

How can I be both obsessed with the need to come and feel like I'm drowning and her orgasm is the air I need to live?

Dipping my head down to her neck, I reach forward with my other hand. She's so small compared to me that I can wrap myself around her to plunge the fingers of one hand into her pussy while I stroke her clit with the other.

She bucks.

She bites down so hard on me I know I'll have a mark later. My balls tighten in response .

Then her pussy spasms so forcefully my fingers are nearly ejected and a gush of wetness lets me know I've done my job.

I don't stop until she eases her jaw open and releases my arm. I slow my movements and pause with my fingers buried deep inside her.

Inessa lets out a shuddering sigh. "Oh god," she whispers, laying her head back against my chest. "I love that cage on you."

I love it too... and I hate it.

I wear it the rest of the day, only taking it off to shower. I'm constantly aware of her with every movement. I somehow make it through dinner and a conversation with my family, but I hardly know what is said.

Inessa is quiet, but it's not an unhappy silence. Her shoulders lack the tension I've come to expect. Her expression is calm and serene.

I can sense her taking everything in, following the conversation. She replies when someone asks her a question but doesn't elaborate. That's fine, of course, because my mother talks enough for five orcs. Dad gives me a wink from the opposite side of the table when he thinks no one is looking. He has been silent too, watching.

With a smile, he jerks his head in a small gesture toward Inessa. "I like her," he mouths.

I grin. Ma can complain all she likes, but I know those three words will be repeated to her at the end of the day and they'll hold more sway in the matter than anything else.

When we escape back to our bedroom at the end of the night, Inessa is unexpectedly tender with me. She takes longer than I do preparing for bed, of course. What female wouldn't?

When she has brushed her hair and changed into pajamas and moisturized her pretty pale skin, she crawls into bed and snuggles up against my side. "Should we take off the cage now, moye Solnishko?"

I blink. A pet name?

How did I get so lucky?

I laugh softly. "Can I keep it on a little longer? I'm not sure I'm ready to quit yet!"

She makes a contented noise and settles in.

I lie in the dark, one arm wrapped around her, staring up at the ceiling.

After a while, I wonder if she's fallen asleep and breathe the word she said aloud, trying to memorize it. "Solnishko."

Her voice is soft and sleepy and she doesn't open her eyes. "In English it is sunshine."

We're both quiet after that.

I drift to sleep with a grin on my face and sweet ache in my balls, sure in the knowledge that I belong utterly to this woman.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Vera

I'm woken by a piercing shriek.

I sit bolt upright, my heart racing. Snickers jumps from the bed, yapping and running in circles around the room.

Erik rolls over and slings a huge arm around me, drawing me back down. "It's just the wyverns. Ignore them. They probably spotted a snake."

I hush Snickers, but she won't listen. The wyverns don't settle either. When neither of us can get back to sleep, we rise and dress and stumble out into the living area.

Outside, the wyverns are wailing and shrieking and flinging themselves against the netting. The light is gray, and by the door, Erik's father is pulling on the most enormous pair of black boots I've ever seen. He looks up. "Erik. Get your boots and come help me settle them. All hands on deck."

"Can I help?"

Erik pauses in the act of dragging on his boots. "You know how to ride a motorcycle, don't you? "

My heart skips a beat. It's been so long since I've had the chance. I nod excitedly.

"Well the hoverbikes are really just like driving a motorcycle. You'll be a natural."

Eriks's father frowns. "Erik, are you sure?"

He smiles. "If Inessa says she can do it, she can. Trust me."

"Hurry up!" Erik's mother thunders in, pulling her long hair into a hasty braid. "What are you all still standing around for? There's something out there for certain."

We rush out to the shed where the hoverbikes are stored. After a brief instruction, we start the ignition and the bike lifts into the air. It takes me a moment to adjust to the sensation of needing to keep it steady vertically as well as horizontally. Erik's bulky weight behind me is another consideration and it's been so long since I've ridden.

I'm rusty.

The other hoverbike lifts into the air with Erik's parents riding pillion, his mother slinging a long lasso over her shoulder. "Get the queen. She'll lead the others to the dens!"

What could have set the beasts off like this? I can only imagine a creature terrifying enough to threaten a wyvern.

We zoom toward a small domed entrance to the aviary and hurry inside. Once both bikes are inside the airlock and the outer door is closed, the inner one opens automatically and we race through.

Erik leans forward to speak into my ear. "The queen is the female with the red crest."

I don't answer. We're traveling fast now and the wind is rushing in my ears. I kick the bike up a gear and shoot between shrubs and bushes, searching for where the wyverns are circling, throwing themselves into the netting.

There is a cluster of the dragon-like creatures on the far left of their enormous enclosure, and I make for that group, not sure if I'll be able to spot the queen.

They're still shrieking and unsettled. Even I can tell they're not normally like this.

They're acting like they did when we first arrived, only more edgy, more aggressive.

A large blue beast swerves midair to bite at a smaller green animal who screams and retaliates with a snap of sharp jaws.

Could there be an intruder?

Erik echoes my thoughts when he leans forward again. "Must be someone on the property. Probably a human. They hate humans."

But who would come out here to an orc village uninvited?

Of course my mind travels inescapably back to the King of Swords and we drift off course. I have to yank the handlebars around suddenly to prevent us crashing into a small red wyvern who darts in front of us.

"There!" Erik points, his brawny arm thrusting forward over my shoulder at the cluster of wyverns I was making for.

I see her. A female tosses her scaly head, flashing a feathery red crest as she screeches at the others. I make straight for the group of wyverns, completely uncertain what will happen when we get closer. They're not enormous, but they look highly vicious. The largest of them has a wingspan about the length of my arm but their teeth look very sharp up close.

We've lost Erik's parents somewhere in the huge enclosure, but I don't stop to worry

about that now .

Dodging around a startled wyvern on our left, we close in on the queen.

She must spot us. She launches herself off from where she is hanging on the roof of the aviary and dives, tucking her wings against her body to dart beneath the hoverbike before I can turn it.

Once I've maneuvered us around, it takes me a moment to find her again. But the swarm of other wyverns gives her away as they hurry to follow her.

Following, I kick up the speed again, clutching the bike between my thighs, getting a better sense of its balance and torque. This time when the queen tries to escape me, I'm ready for her.

I kill the engine, letting us drop toward the ground, and kick it back on a moment later to swoop toward her as she exits her own drop.

She shrieks at me, gnashing sharp teeth, but I wheel the bike alongside her and Erik tosses the lasso around her neck. "Gotcha!" He yanks the cord enough to tighten it and she flaps wildly, angrily slashing at him with wicked looking talons.

He's too fast for her. He swings the rope like a yo-yo, flinging her off course and up above the bike, and she has to redirect her energy into regaining her balance.

"That way!" He points to a rocky mass that rises from the grassland to our right and I steer in that direction. As we get closer, I see that there's an opening in the rock and make for it.

It's smaller than I anticipated. We're approaching quickly.

I only have a moment to decide whether the bike will fit through the opening with me and Erik on board, and I decide it will .

It's a near thing.

I kill the engine as we make it onto the ledge, throwing my weight to the side to skid the bike to a hasty stop just inside the mouth of the cave.

Up close, I can see that there is a metal gate which can be closed across the opening. This must be where Erik's family keeps the wyverns during extreme weather.

Erik jumps from the bike and hastily releases the queen into the cavern. As soon as he does, he spins and runs for the bike once more. "Quick."

I don't need him to tell me twice. The shrieks of the flock following us are getting louder and I start the engine and push us over the ledge and out of the way just as they arrive with a flurry of wings and squawks.

Just then, Erik's father zooms their bike onto the ledge and his mother leaps from the back to yank the metal gate into place, slamming it shut just as the last wyvern is through.

My heart is racing and I'm breathing hard, but the adrenaline is more from excitement than anything else.

Erik's mother cracks a huge smile and claps me on the shoulder. "You were fantastic. We could use your help around here more often."

I let myself smile back, reminding myself that's a custom in my new home. "I was glad to help."

“We’d better take a look and see if we can find this intruder,” Erik’s father sighs. “Sometimes human poachers think they can come and steal a crest feather or a talon and sell it. Stupid. Reckless. Most times they get themselves badly injured.”

His mother nods .

I’m starting to see why they might be skeptical about humans.

We get back on the bikes and circle the perimeter but find no damage to the netting, no holes. We also spot no intruders, so eventually we head back to the house and give the wyverns some time to calm down.

Erik’s parents say they’ll need at least a few hours in the dark of the cave.

When we sit down to breakfast my stomach is rumbling as loudly as Erik’s, and so I’m glad when his mother puts a huge spread of eggs and pancakes and bacon in front of us. I would never turn down anything my future mother-in-law served me, but she happened to serve exactly what I’m craving. And maybe all my worry about keeping my figure is for nothing. After all, I’m marrying an orc. Apparently sturdy is more highly prized amongst orcs than slim.

Erik gives me one of his broad tusky smiles. “Ma is right. You were amazing. I think I’ll have to save up to buy you a motorbike.”

I laugh. “Why would I settle for a motorbike now that I’ve ridden a hoverbike? I don’t think I’ll ever be able to go back now!”

We eat and talk and I almost forget the King of Swords and my uneasy feeling from before.

It’s only when I’m alone later, washing my face in the bathroom, that I think I catch

something in the reflection of the mirror.

When I turn there's nothing there and I tell myself I'm imagining it, but his sharp features go right back to haunting me every still and quiet moment.

Erik

“So when will you ask her to marry you?” My mom nudges me with her shoulder as we walk the outside perimeter of the wyvern aviary, still trying to find out what set them off this morning.

“Ah...” I laugh awkwardly. “Ma, we didn’t meet by accident. There’s something I haven’t told you.”

“Oh really? Something new and different for you these days.” Her voice is dripping with sarcasm. She grunts as she lowers herself on one knee to check the base of the netting. “Living in the human city has changed you.”

“No,” I protest. “It’s just... Maybe I’ve got a little more space to be the person I wanted.”

The look she gives me is rightfully hurt. I wish I could snatch back the words. My family is important to me. They always have been. They always will be .

But Mom has such a big personality. It’s hard to know who you are when you’re around her. She sort of takes over. I needed some space to realize that.

She’s getting older though. They both are. Dad’s injury and the stiff way Ma moves when she gets back to her feet are a reminder that they won’t be able to keep up the business forever on their own. My little brother is irresponsible. I’m not sure I have confidence in him to be there for them when they need him. And my older siblings all moved away like I did.

Mom sighs. “You have always been my beautiful boy, but you’re right. You’re all grown now. And you’ve chosen well. This human woman, I like her. She’s strong. She doesn’t look it, but she has strong hips for bearing big orc sons.”

“Ma!”

“Alright, alright, but you know I’m desperate to be a grandma.”

I chuckle. “I know. You’ll have to make do with Snickers right now.”

Mom rolls her eyes. “So why not at least make your ma happy and get married?”

“Well that’s what I was trying to tell you. We are. It’s sort of an arranged thing.”

I expect her to tell me off for not letting her arrange one. I know she’s had her eye on the neighbor’s daughter for years, but instead she claps her hands together.

“Perfect! Then it’s sorted. We will have the knot ceremony before you go back to the city.”

I can’t really think of a good answer, except that I don’t know how Inessa will react. I wanted her to have a special day and getting our hands tied together by a fire might not be the sort of special she had in mind.

“Um... maybe?”

Inessa is surprisingly enthusiastic about the orc ceremony when I describe it to her. “Yes. This is perfect. But will it be legal?”

I shrug. “I think so. I thought they passed a law a few years back legalizing all supernatural bonds that could be formally recognized.”

She nods. “Then the sooner the better. Why do we need to book an enormous restaurant when all we need is us?” Snickers, who is sitting on her lap looking smug, lifts her head and gives a little huffing bark.

“But what about a wedding dress and flowers?”

She shrugs. “Not important.”

I guess it’s settled then.

I underestimated my mother’s level of excitement about having me married and settled. In the space of a few short hours she rouses the whole village into collecting flowers, preparing a feast, and trooping down into the valley to the stream that flows into the hot pools.

She shoos me out of the house along with my father and brother and tells us to take the trailer and bring down as many chairs as we can while she gets Inessa ready .

My father pulls the old tent out of the back of the shed and slings that in the trailer. “An orc’s gotta have a little privacy on his wedding night.” He winks at me.

That sends awareness straight to my cock, which is still trapped behind its metal cage. I hope Inessa doesn’t mind a night under the stars for our first night as a married couple. I should have thought this through more.

I’m afraid she’ll be disappointed.

We set up the rows of mismatched chairs and tie some ribbons around the trees along the edge of the creek.

My auntie turns up with a trailer full of flowers, and soon my ten cousins arrive,

laughing and teasing me as they weave small white blossoms into fancy decorations for the backs of chairs and tree branches.

Before long the glade looks festive. Everyone is in a cheerful mood and I'm trying to calm my nerves. This is the moment I've been waiting for. Unexpectedly, my throat is tight and my chest full with emotion at the knowledge that we'll be doing it here with my family around us. At how well Inessa has fit in.

My cousin Larson elbows me in the ribs. "Are you sure you won't break her, Erik? Why'd you pick a human bride anyway?"

I just shake my head. I know better than to tell him she's more likely to break me. That will only lead to an endless round of teasing and questions. Instead I make an excuse to hurry off, washing myself in the stream and hastily putting on the suit my father loaned me before the others can come join me and spot my cage. I could take it off, but I want Inessa to be the one to do it tonight. Besides, I belatedly remember the keys are still hanging around her neck on the chain .

I'm smiling to myself when I walk back up the ridge as the sun slips below the horizon and I see everyone there, torches and candles lit, drinks being handed around.

I didn't notice a car pull up, but I notice the moment my mother leads Inessa down the path between the trees. My breath catches in my throat at the sight of her. Her hair is bound back with bright white flowers woven through the pale strands. She's barefoot, but she looks like a goddess with a long lacy white dress that dips all the way to her navel and somehow manages to cling to her shapely figure. The hem is kept from trailing on the ground by my mother, who carries it in one hand until my three smallest cousins rush forward to hold it up like a parachute above their heads as Inessa takes her final steps along the path and we meet as if by fate in front of the fire.

My mouth is dry.

I can hardly think, let alone speak to tell her how beautiful she looks. How perfect this is.

“Your hair is so pretty,” says Bessa, my youngest cousin, as she blinks up at Inessa. “It’s like moonbeams.”

Inessa gives me a sheepish smile. “I’m too short for your mother’s dress and god only knows how this is staying on me—” She waves a hand at the bust of the dress and I swallow.

Can’t do words now.

“You look beautiful, darling.” Ma leans in and gives Inessa a kiss on the cheek and steps back toward to take a seat at the front.

My brother, dressed in his best clothes, leads Dura, the wise woman, forward. There’s no trace of his usual impish smile on his face. Instead he concentrates on finding the smoothest path .

She leans heavily on his arm. Her back is bent and one of her long tusks is broken, but the smile stretching around it is bright and full of warmth.

The wise woman takes her place in front of the fire, holding out her wizened hands to me and Inessa.

I place mine into hers, and a moment later, Inessa catches on and does the same.

“Erik, it gives me great pleasure to join you with your chosen mate today. How right that you have returned to us to do it in the sight of the village and in front of your

parents.”

Yeah, there’s a little twist of guilt in my gut at that and I look over to my parents with a smile. I hope they haven’t been too disappointed in me. I haven’t been the best son to them.

Their smiles are proud and encouraging though, and I turn back to Inessa feeling reassured.

Dura takes a length of ribbon and winds it around our hands, looping it over and over and tucking it back on itself. She doesn’t tie it. We must hold our hands together for the ceremony to keep it in place.

“Let us join these two beautiful souls together,” she says in her scratchy voice. “May your nest be cozy, your hearth a welcome to all those who need it, and your love be fruitful.”

“May your love be fruitful,” everyone choruses.

I deliberately avoid looking at Ma.

Dura steps back and takes a seat my brother brings for her. I’m proud to watch him carry himself like a responsible member of the village today.

Inessa leans in. “What now?”

“We have to keep our hands like this while they wish us well. ”

I don’t have any more time to explain as one by one, everyone leaps from their seats and crowds forward to hug and kiss us and wish us a fruitful union.

I keep Inessa's hands clasped in mine beneath the ribbon, thinking how I'll hold her tight, how I'll love and protect her.

Though she looks a little daunted, she takes it all in stride.

The wise woman feeds us a bite each of a little cake while our hands are bound, and we drink from a single cup to signify the uniting of our destinies. It's funny. I've watched a few of these binding ceremonies before and they were nice. I love seeing people happy.

But I never thought too hard about the meaning behind the symbols of the ritual. It never hit home for me before how this changes everything.

This is what I wanted. It's what I dreamed of. I'm bound to her for the rest of my days.

I silently vow to be the best husband to her and make sure she never has cause to regret taking a chance on me.

Once the ceremony is over, we're released and we sit down to feast. I can't believe the number of delicious dishes everyone prepared on such short notice. If I didn't know better, I'd think my mother secretly planned all this before we arrived!

When the stars blink in the dark sky and the small ones are yawning, people start to pack up. Leftover food gets stashed in containers and ice chests, tablecloths are folded, and the fire is stoked. Soon it's just me, Inessa, Mom, Dad, Lob, and Snickers, who is fidgeting under Lob's arm.

"Well, son," my father claps me on the shoulder, "don't disappoint your mother. You know she's hoping for lots of grandbabies. "

My brother makes a face. “Can we not talk about that in front of the children?”

I laugh. “I don’t see any children here. You were so grown up today, I hardly recognized you.”

He pokes his tongue out at me like he used to do when he was five, kind of ruining the compliment, but then he laughs. “Thanks, Erik. It’s good to have you home. Can you stay?”

I shift uncomfortably. “I’ve gotta work tomorrow. But we’ll visit again soon, OK?”

“OK. Hey, can I look after Snickers tonight?”

I grin. “Thanks, buddy.”

They pack the last of the things, leaving the empty chairs arranged in rows facing toward the fire and the lone tent standing a little way off, decorated with hundreds of flowers.

I turn to Inessa. “I know it wasn’t much, but I hope it was OK. We don’t have to stay in the tent tonight if you’d rather just go back to Heartstone.”

“Are you serious? It was beautiful. We are definitely spending the night here. I’ve never been camping before. Would you really deny me that experience?”

I’m struck all over again with how absolutely perfect she is.

And then it sinks in that we’re about to spend our wedding night together and I remember that I still haven’t removed the cage and haven’t come in days.

I sure hope she’s ready for me to make a mess, because all of a sudden, the thrill of

anticipation is almost too much to bear.

Vera

I'm excited about tonight. About camping under the stars, about having finally committed to Erik. And I'm very excited about unwrapping him like a present after his having been caged for days.

The last few days have been magical. It feels good to be drawing the last drops of pleasure from our weekend away by spending this final night here. I know it will mean a bitterly early start and a long drive for Erik tomorrow morning before a long day at work, but I'm glad he seems excited too.

"There's a hot spring just down by the river. If you'd like to try it." He gives me a goofy grin and I can't help smiling back.

"Of course I'd like to try it." I take his hand and we walk down toward the riverbank together. We have to take off our shoes to wade across to the other side. When it becomes obvious I'm struggling to hold up the hem of the too long dress and wade through the shallow rocky water, Erik simply bends and scoops me up into his arms, crossing the river in a few quick strides.

He pauses, as if asking whether he should put me down, so I cling tighter and tuck my head against his shoulder, and he carries me the rest of the way to the hot spring.

The steaming pool is tucked away behind a rocky bend in the river. Someone—or some orc—dammed the spring into a round pool by piling rocks around the edges to make a rustic sort of bath. Warm trickles of water run across the muddy ground and flow into the river.

Erik sets me down on a grassy patch beside a large flat rock whose weathered top looks as if it has been smoothed by many bottoms. “You can take off your clothes. No one will come down tonight.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I can’t wait to try the steamy water. It’s so dark now that it’s hard to see, but Erik unexpectedly pulls a little tube from his pocket, lifting the top to reveal a tiny lantern that he sets on the rock.

His pocket lantern illuminates just enough of the area to let me see what I’m doing as I gently slip the dress over my shoulders, keeping it out of the mud as best as I can.

It’s beautiful.

I’m still astonished his mother kept it and had it ready, let alone that she was happy to lend it to me today. The borrowed dress made me feel more special than anything my father’s money ever bought me.

I fold it carefully and place it on the rock. Beneath I have on only panties. The neckline was so low it was impossible to wear with a bra.

I look up at Erik’s audible groan to find him with his trousers half off, staring at me. At my questioning look, he swallows. “Inessa, you are so beautiful. It might sound cheesy but looking at you like that, it’s so good it almost hurts!”

“Mmm.” Thinking of the cage he’s still wearing, I step forward and cup my hand around him over his briefs. “I bet it does. Let’s take care of that, shall we?”

I get to my knees, heedless of the mud, and help him out of his trousers. He yanks off the button-up shirt hastily and then the underwear until he’s standing in front of me naked, save for the cage. I take the key from the chain around my neck and slip it into the lock.

His cock is already bulging through the bars. When I quickly slip the cage off and work the ring from around his balls and over his shaft, he lets out a long sigh.

Soon he's swollen, growing harder every moment. A vein along the thick green length throbs and his cock jumps in my palm. "Oh you have no idea how good that feels."

I laugh quietly to myself. From the sounds he makes as I gently massage him and the look of bliss on his face, I can imagine pretty vividly.

His head falls back as I grip him more firmly and give him a few slow pumps. Then I stop. "Enough of that for now. I want to try the hot spring."

He helps me to my feet and into the pool. The bottom of the spring has been scooped out so that we can sink into the water, and when I try to sit, I find it's too deep. Of course. It's built for orcs!

That gives me the perfect excuse to claim Erik's lap for my seat. I ease into the water, which is the perfect temperature. After a moment, the heat makes all the places my skin is exposed to the air feel slightly cool, and beneath the water, my muscles relax as I settle into a comfortable position and his arms go around me.

Erik's cock throbs against my butt and he gives me a rueful smile. "You're not making this easy for me. Stars above, you are just so sexy."

"You're not so bad yourself." I trace teasing fingertips along the line of his jaw, skate them over his lips. I love his thick neck. The muscled broad shoulders and impossibly brawny chest. I love that his large hands dwarf mine. That I could wrap all my fingers around a single one of his.

I love the shape of his mouth and the way his lower jaw is slightly protruded and

makes him look like he's smiling even when he's not. The way his ears end in a point and the green hue of his skin.

There's no confusing him for human, and I've always found that comforting. As I've gotten to know him, I've become more and more attracted to the way he looks and the incredible power of his body.

I wrap an arm around his neck to bring his face to mine for a lingering kiss. And I love the feel of his lips on mine. The way his hands slide to my waist like he can't help himself, and that, when I finally pull back, he looks at me as if I painted the stars in the sky.

"What do you want tonight?" I ask him.

"Just you. Whatever you want, Inessa. That's all I ever want."

"Do you want me to suck your cock? Do you want to be inside my pussy? "

He nods. "I want that. If it makes you happy. But mostly I just want to make you come. Can I make you come now?"

Well I'm hardly going to complain about that!

I climb higher on him, placing one foot on his strong thigh and resting the other knee beside his head on the wet stones surrounding the spring. Then I guide his hands to my ass and look down at him. "Then go ahead."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:59 am

Erik

I cup her ass and bring her pussy to my mouth. She's wet and warm from the water and there's a slight tang of sulfur, but the sweet slick of her pussy quickly overtakes my senses. I bury deeper, delving with my tongue, lapping up her juices. A moment later she threads her fingers through my hair and I groan.

If I could speak, I'd tell her not to hold back. I'd tell her I'd like to drown in her and never come up for air.

I'm far too busy to speak though.

Now that I've started, there's no way I'm stopping until she tells me to. So I slide my lips and tongue over her sensitive places, noting the way she grinds against me, listening for her little sighs and moans of delight when I find the right spots.

She likes big circles around her clit. I find the little nub with the tip of my tongue and lick around it until her grip on my hair pinches my scalp .

I move to taste her again, sinking my tongue into her, looking up to see her watching me with an expression of fierce enjoyment on her pretty face.

Just looking up at the rounded swell of her breasts and the curve of her belly are enough to have me aching. Not to mention the drugging flavor of her pussy. I growl against her, pulling her closer, suckling her clit until she cries out. "More. Mmm, more like that."

I do exactly what I'm told. I plant my lips around her and work her with my mouth until her hips frantically rock her pelvis against my face.

That's it.

A hundred more just like this and maybe I'd be satisfied. A thousand more moments with her using my body exactly the way she needs to. A million more shattering releases all over my face.

Who am I kidding?

I'll never get enough of this, no matter how many times.

She's close. I know better than to change my rhythm or speed. I hold her tight and keep doing exactly what I'm doing until Inessa lets out a long, keening cry. Her hand grips my hair tight, and I use my grip on her ass to keep her steady as she rides out the pleasure on my tongue.

She goes still for a few moments, then her hips begin to rock slowly.

Finally, she releases her vice-like grip on me and lets out a sigh. "Oh, you do that so well, moye Solnishko."

That warm feeling in my chest expands until I'm ready to explode. I shiver with pleasure and give her slick folds a grateful kiss. I'm so lucky to have found my mate. My beautiful Inessa .

She sinks onto my lap, all loose and relaxed, and lets me pet her hair. My cock is throbbing, but I can wait. Maybe she'll let me make her come again.

Inessa apparently has other ideas though.

After a little while, she wriggles until she can reach down and cup me under the water. I groan as pleasure instantly rockets to new levels. It's hard not to double over with the intensity as her fingers skate up my length. I suck in a breath and try to keep still. After all, she's still in my lap. I'm shaking by the time she rubs her cupped hand over the head. I let out an agonized cry as the swollen, sensitive skin reacts to her touch.

"Sit up on the edge here," she tells me, standing.

Oh fuck, the way the water streams from her naked breasts is mesmerizing.

I scramble out of the water and onto the edge of the pool. I watch in fascination as she steps between my legs and slides her hands up my thighs toward my tortured dick.

It bobs like crazy when her hands get closer, but instead of touching me again, she shifts the direction of her caress and drags her hands slowly back down my thighs, only to start again.

I'm in agony as she makes sweeping motions, massaging up and down, never quite touching where I'm desperate for her.

I want this to end, but at the same time, I don't. I never want her to stop touching me. I try closing my eyes, focusing on my breath, and leaning into the sensation. It's so good. But I'm so wound up, I can't relax. All the muscles in my legs and belly are tight. Every one straining to feel her hands on my cock.

When she finally touches it, I'm not prepared .

I gasp as a firm hand grips the shaft and moan as she strokes me.

I'm close to coming already. I'm not going to do that to her again though.

"Do you like that?"

I nod. I don't trust myself to speak. All my energy is concentrated on not coming in her hand right now.

She laughs softly and the sound almost drives me over the edge. I love that she's enjoying this. I hate how that means I probably have to hold on longer because she's not done enjoying this and I'm not about to disappoint her on our wedding night.

Oh, the torture when she adds a second hand to pump my poor aching cock up and down. She's merciless. She builds up speed. Soon I'm groaning as she works me faster and faster.

I'm shaking. My balls feel like they've retreated into my body, they're that tight. I'm sweating. Every fiber of my being is focused on where she's milking my brains from my body with every rapid movement.

It's too much.

I can't do it.

"Inessa, I—"

She stops. "Shhh. It's OK."

She goes back to little teasing strokes while my cock jumps and bobs against my belly.

My chest is tight. My breath is coming in little puffs, and I can't tell if the steam

rising from us is coming from the hot spring or from me!

Holy shit. I can't believe I held on .

"I want you inside me," she whispers, still caressing my cock.

I moan and don't know whether it's with delight or desperation. Both probably.

"Take me back to our tent, husband."

Oh that word on her lips! It gives me a burst of extra strength. I lift her from the pool, heedless of our clothing, not stopping to collect the lantern.

The campsite is lit with torches and the slow burning fire. We can collect it later.

Right now everything I need is between her perfect thighs. My whole world revolves around that soft, secret place where I should be buried deep.

I have to stop thinking about the moment I sink into her wet perfection or I'll stumble and drop her.

I concentrate on carrying my bride safely back to the tent, to laying her down on the soft blankets and cushions, until finally I can position myself between her legs, looking down at her in wonder.

She smiles up at me. "I want you just like this. I want you to make love to me." To demonstrate, she reaches down and plunges two fingers deep inside, slowly thrusting, stopping to spread and stretch herself out for me.

Oh fuck, what if I'm still too big? What if I hurt her? What if she's not ready?

As if she's reading my mind, she removes her fingers and spreads herself for me.
"I'm ready, husband."

I can't do anything but lower myself toward her. Holding my cock, I gently bring it to her entrance and pause .

Inessa lifts her hand and brings it to my mouth so I can suck the taste of her from her fingers. My hips rock forward without me meaning them to, and suddenly I'm nudging into heaven, the head of my cock pushing into her impossible softness.

She sighs. Wrapping her legs around me, she guides me forward.

As slowly as I can, I move my hips, thrusting and withdrawing, feeling the resistance of her tight little human body.

She reaches between us and rubs her fingers over her clit.

My eyes widen as her body relaxes and I slip further inside.

With an indrawn breath, I sink the whole way into her and hold just as still as I can. My cock throbs, my balls ache, and I shakily brush away the sweat on my brow.

"Keep going." Her voice is firm, but I hate the hint of tension there that suggests I'm hurting her.

I make a tentative movement back and sink forward again.

"Yes." Now her voice is breathy, excited.

Some of my hesitation subsides.

“Erik, no more holding back. I want you to make love to me. To your wife.”

Oh there's no more holding back.

With a groan, I thrust my hips and marvel at the way her body hugs me. She grips me tight when I retreat and welcomes me home as I push forward.

She opens her arms and I lean in until she can hold me close. At this angle, I'm really just grinding against her body, rocking my hips to move myself in and out of her in tiny motions .

It's still so good. It's so damn good I spend a moment questioning if any of the things we did before were as good as I thought they were.

She holds me close and whispers my name, and suddenly, she's trembling, squeezing me tight as she comes around my cock.

I let out a pained cry.

It's too much.

I'm going to burst.

None of the things we did before let me feel her pleasure as if it was my own. Right now, buried deep inside her, I feel the rhythmic contractions squeeze my cock and nearly lose my mind.

Pushing back, I hold myself up on both hands, staring down at her, drinking it in. I'd like to memorize this moment, but I know I'll forget small details.

The shape of her parted lips, the slight crease between her brows, the sweet scent of

her all around me.

I promise myself I'll do this a hundred more times, a thousand! Every day for the rest of our lives if she lets me.

Then her legs tighten around me and I thrust forward and can't fight it anymore. Pleasure leaves my body and I swear it travels from me to her and she comes again as I unravel inside her.

When it's over, neither of us moves. I don't want to leave her body. I'd like to stay here forever, but I'm worried that she's going to be sore.

She lifts her arms and reaches for me. "Come here."

I dip my head and kiss softly up her jaw. She tilts her chin to let me nuzzle against her neck. To breathe her in. Then I roll us so I can stay inside her, holding her against my chest, wondering at this feeling which seems so much bigger than me. Wider and deeper and stronger so that I can't imagine how even my broad chest is big enough to hold all this inside.

"I love you," I whisper, hoping it's not too much. It's not too fast.

To my astonishment, Inessa sighs against my chest, "I love you too."

Vera

The alarm we set goes off after what seems like only a moment. I blink my eyes open in the dim light and fumble for Erik's phone, which is still beeping.

He sleeps on, one muscular arm flung across his eyes, his mouth slightly open. When I shake him softly, he reaches for me and I sink into his hold, not wanting to prize myself away. I should though. We have to get back to Heartstone today. He has to work. Maybe I could go in with him and see where he works.

"Come on." I kiss the parts of his ruggedly handsome face that I can reach until he finally stirs.

"Mmm alright. I'm up. I'm awake."

When I stop though, he rolls right over again.

Laughing, I climb onto his chest. "Hey, sleepyhead, we need to go."

He groans. "I know you're right, but I also want to stay in bed with you all day. "

I make a tsking sound that is probably not very convincing, seeing as I'm having exactly the same thoughts myself.

We drag ourselves out of bed and pack up the tent. It's so early we creep into Erik's parents' house, trying not to wake anyone. Snickers comes racing along the corridor moments later, yipping with delight as her little paws skitter on the floorboards.

So Erik's whole family ends up rubbing tired eyes and yawning as we exchange final hugs and kisses and another round of congratulations.

"You promise you'll come back soon to visit again." His mother holds both my shoulders and fixes me with a very serious look.

I can't help but smile though, and we promise we will.

When we're finally in the car, Erik turns the radio up loud and plays me a selection of his favorite tunes. Soon the sun comes up, and by the time we're approaching the city limits, the sky is blue and cloudless and my spirits are high.

They come crashing down the moment Erik drops me at the apartment before heading to work.

The second the key turns and the door opens, Snickers freezes. Her thin tail sinks between her legs and her head drops. A low growl rumbles from her tiny chest.

"What is it, Snickers?"

She looks up at me and whines, licking her chops.

I really don't want to go further into the apartment. There's clearly something wrong. But we can't stand in the doorway all day until Erik comes home.

I strain, stretching to peek further inside, but I see nothing out of place .

When I take a step forward, Snickers doesn't follow. She plops her little rump on the ground and looks up at me with the whites showing around her eyes.

Oh I hate this.

I wish there was someone I could call. But Erik told me he has been in trouble at work lately. He was running late as it was with our long morning drive.

I don't want to get him fired.

Steeling myself, I throw the door wide open and fumble in my pocket for my phone. At least if I'm about to get attacked by a home invader, I'll capture it on video and the police can catch my murderer.

I know this is not the wisest plan, but really, what else can I do? Dragging Snickers by her leash, I march into the apartment, head held high.

If there's an assassin here to kill me, he's not going to catch me cowering in the doorway. I am Konstantin Ilyich's daughter after all.

With that thought in mind, I make straight for the kitchen and snatch up the biggest knife I can find. I feel better with the solid blade in my hand.

I had to drop Snickers's leash, but now that I'm inside, she trails behind me, tail firmly tucked between her legs.

I search every room. I open all the doors and drawers. I turn down the bed and fling open the curtains.

Nothing looks out of place.

No intruder jumps out at me.

Finally, I turn to Snickers. "What has gotten into you today?"

She whimpers .

With a sigh, I go to her empty food and water bowls and fill them both. What a drama queen. The place probably just smells musty because we haven't been home in a couple of days.

I open all the windows and start a clean down of all the hard surfaces.

By the time Erik comes through the door that evening with his usual cheerful greeting, I have my hair tied up, rubber gloves on, and I'm wiping the baseboards with Snickers as my timid shadow.

She doesn't even run to him when we hear him come in.

"Inessa? Snickers?" He pokes his head around the doorway with a frown which only deepens when he spots me on my knees. "What are you doing? You don't have to do that."

I look up at him, wiping the back of my hand across my forehead. "Something is not right. Can you feel it too?"

Erik drops his bag and walks further into the room. "No. What is it? Is everything OK with you?"

He gets to his knees beside me, so I stop and give him what I hope is a reassuring smile. "Oh, I'm probably being stupid. It's just this feeling I've had all day since I got home. Snickers got funny when we walked in the door and I kept imagining—" I break off, shaking my head. Now that I'm saying it out loud, it's ridiculous. Who would break into our house and leave everything untouched?

If my brother was responsible, there would have been a threat left, surely.

After that, Erik insists on turning the apartment upside down, searching in every

cupboard and doing everything that I did earlier. Apart from a slightly odd smell, we find nothing .

To be honest, by that point I'm pretty sure I'm imagining the smell.

It's still reassuring to crawl into bed after dinner and feel Erik's huge warm presence wrap me up. He holds me close and kisses the back of my neck and I try to relax.

Just a misplaced sense of anxiety. It's probably just my mind looking for things to latch onto.

Because honestly, it's hard to believe I could be so lucky. Look at the life I have now. Look at my beautiful monster, my simple home. My new family. Somehow, I'm surrounded by good, kind people, with the things that matter.

All the things that were missing from my life before.

Of course my brain is searching for a problem. I'm so used to being on edge all the time. I literally don't know what to do with myself now that I don't have to search for danger at every turn.

I shut my eyes and relax into Erik's hold. Snickers jumps onto the bed and turns her series of elaborate circles until she finally settles and tucks her head around to touch her tail.

All is well.

There's nothing to worry about here.

I wake to the blaring of an alarm and Snickers's wild barking.

My eyes sting.

I'm coughing.

When I switch on the light, it takes me a moment to realize why I still can't see .

Thick smoke blankets the room, making my throat close in and my chest ache.

I roll onto the floor with a thud. Thankfully the air down here is a little clearer. I crawl to Erik's side of the bed and shake him. "Erik! Wake up! We have to get out."

He coughs awake and sits, and I quickly drag him onto the floor.

"What happened?"

I don't know exactly, but I do know one thing for sure. "Fire."

"Where's Snickers?"

I look around. I can hear her barking from somewhere over on the other side of the bed.

I point.

Erik crawls around to grab her and returns with an unhappy passenger tucked under his arm. She wriggles and squirms and tries to get free, but he keeps his strong arm wrapped around her. "We need to get out."

I realize that I'm on my hands and knees staring at him, the alarm from the smoke detector reverberating through my brain. I can't seem to make any of my limbs move.

“Inessa?”

Smoke stings my eyes and I blink but I can't clear the tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Inessa!”

I don't know what happens next. My brain feels like it freezes up along with my body.

Then I'm being lifted in strong green arms. Erik presses something against my face. Something soft and fabric that smells comforting. It smells like him .

It's only when we burst into the stairwell I realize it's his shirt. And it's not until he puts me down on the grass outside that it registers he must have put Snickers down to pick me up.

I look around frantically only to find her standing at my feet.

Erik bends forward, hands braced on his knees, breathing hard. Did he go back for her? My god, he is perfect!

A siren screams and flashing lights fill the darkness.

Erik's skin looks gray in the poor light from the streetlamps. I try to ask if he's OK, but all that comes out is a cough. My throat is tight and achy.

A fire engine pulls onto the curb and more people pour out of the apartment building to join us on the grass. Thick black smoke is erupting from windows on the upper floor. The firefighters take charge of the situation quickly, hurrying from the truck, pulling an enormous hose free.

More sirens drag my attention away and I turn to see a smaller vehicle with blue stripes along the side pull up behind the fire engine. Two police officers get out of the car and walk over to the group. A prickle of worry spikes the back of my neck. Why would there be police? Surely this is just an accident.

They move among the people and monsters crowded on the grass, talking and making notes. There's nothing to do except wait, so Erik and I sit on the grass and Snickers crawls into my lap. She's stopped barking, but she eyes everyone suspiciously.

When the police officers approach us, she lets out a low growl.

"You're the residents of number twelve?"

Erik nods. He's been so quiet since everything happened. I shuffle a little closer just to feel his warmth in the cool morning air.

"We'll need you to come back to the station to answer a few questions about the fire. It seems it started in your apartment and we'd like to get to the bottom of how that happened."

We're walking toward the police car when a firefighter jogs from the building and draws one of the officers aside to whisper something.

The police officer is a tall woman with long dark hair tied into a tight bun at the back of her head. "Change of plans," she says to us. "We'll need to talk to each of you on your own."

Erik

The moment they separate us, I know it's not a good sign. A second police car arrives, and Inessa and I are taken to the station in different cars. The last glimpse I have of her is of her pale face as she's guided into the car, her features drawn into a firm expression.

It's squashy in the back of the car. I'm tired from being woken early and my belly rumbles angrily. In our rush to get out, I didn't even get my phone.

After a half an hour of waiting in an interview room, I'm allowed to make a phone call to let Kivrayn know I won't be at work today.

Then it's right back to waiting until finally, a shifter with the telltale flash of orange in her eyes and a crisp red and blue uniform enters the room. "Sorry to keep you waiting. I'm Sergeant Burroghs. I need to go over a few questions with you about the fire."

"OK." I'm not really sure what all the fuss is about, but I suppose they're just dotting i's and crossing t's. I'm sure if I try to be helpful, they'll let me take Inessa home—well, not home, because I don't know what state it's in. But a hotel anyway.

"When did you first notice the fire?"

I scratch my head. "Well, I don't know what time it was. I didn't stop to check. My wife woke me, and that's the first I knew about it."

She makes a note on the paper in front of her. “And when your wife woke you, what did she say?”

I frown. I can’t remember that. “I dunno. I guess she was worried. Our dog was barking. It was real smoky in there.”

She makes another note. “How long have you been married?”

“Only a day. We had an orcish handfasting back near my parents’ place.” I’m smiling just remembering until the sergeant makes a thoughtful little humming noise.

“And how did you meet your wife? How long have you known her?”

I can’t see what this has to do with anything. This feels more like small talk than an interview question, but I guess the sooner I answer, the sooner I can see Inessa. “A few months. We met online. I found her ad and the agency fixed us up.”

“Her ad?” One dark brow lifts as the shifter fixes me with a searching look.

I shift in my seat. There’s nothing illegal about an arranged marriage, is there? “Well, she was looking for a monster.”

“She was looking for a monster?”

Is she just going to repeat everything I say with that skeptical look on her face? I’m doing this wrong. I have the feeling I’m about to land us in hot water, but I don’t know how to avoid it. I’m just being honest. Isn’t honesty the best policy?

“She wanted to marry a monster.”

“I see.”

“I wanted to marry a human. Well, I would have been happy with anyone, I was just lonely. But now...”

I thought this would be persuasive, but the shifter’s brows furrow. “So let me get this straight, you were lonely and she wanted to come to America?”

Oh, I see where this is going. “No. It wasn’t like that. Well it was, but we’ve gotten to know each other. We’re in love.”

“Hmm.”

I don’t like the sound of that noise.

She makes another note. “How often is she alone in the apartment?”

I blink. At least she’s changed the subject. “Well, every day while I’m at work. She hasn’t found a job yet and her visa wouldn’t let her work until we got married.”

“And now that you’re married, what happens if you die? Would she return to Russia? Has she got family there?”

“No, she doesn’t want to go back. Ever.” I’m proud of myself for not revealing the truth of Inessa’s situation. I don’t even realize I’ve said the wrong thing until it’s too late.

“Thank you, Mr. Thorvarsson. You’re free to go. Your wife will remain in custody until we’ve finished questioning her and determined whether or not she can be released.”

“Wait, custody? She’s been arrested?”

“You’ll need to take the dog with you. Thank you for your time. ”

Out of habit, I stand as she does, but she goes to the door and holds it open, giving me a very pointed look that says we’re done here.

“Wait, where’s Inessa?”

“Sir, she’ll be released when we’ve finished questioning her.”

“I need to see her. Please. I just need to be sure she’s OK.”

The sergeant pauses. I see the hint of orange flash behind her eyes as she shifts uncomfortably. “Your kind don’t have mates, do you?”

“Yes we do!” It’s a struggle to keep my voice at a reasonable volume. I take a breath and try again. “Yes we do. It might not be fated mates the way you shifters have, but I promise you I feel it just as much. Please!”

She lets out a long sigh and looks over her shoulder. “OK, but only for a minute.”

The sergeant leads me down a corridor away from the entrance and stops in front of another closed door. There’s a window in the wall. Through it I see a metal table and two chairs. The room is plain and empty. No Inessa in sight.

Beside me, the sergeant pauses with her hand on the door handle. “Oh, that’s strange. I thought—”

She’s cut off by the furious sound of yapping and the scrabble of little paws on tiles.

Shouts echo through the corridor. “Hey! Someone catch that dog!”

Seconds later, Snickers comes galloping around the corner, leash trailing behind her and an older human with gray hair and a rumpled uniform hot in pursuit .

She scurries over, but when I bend to pick her up, she growls. Dodging my hands, she darts in and takes a mouthful of my trousers and yanks hard. “Hey! Snick, what’s got into you?”

She yaps again, spinning in circles and looking up at me.

I’m baffled. I’ve never seen her act like this before.

The older man stops, breathing hard and leaning on his knees.

I stoop and snatch up the leash so Snickers won’t get into any more trouble. She immediately leaps forward, stretching the leash tight, yanking on it with all her might.

The female sergeant who interviewed me turns to her colleague. “Rob, did someone move Mrs. Thorvarsson? I thought she was being held for questioning?”

Rob frowns. “Questioning? No. A fancy guy in a suit came in with an order to transfer her uptown.”

“What guy?”

Rob shrugs. “Beats me. I’ve never seen him before. Looked foreign. Had an accent. The paperwork was all in order.”

“Then she’s not here?” I look between the two of them. Snickers yanks on the leash.

Rob shrugs again. “They just left.”

No. Something's not right here. There's no reason she would be transferred somewhere else. And a guy with an accent? She's been worried all week about her brother.

I leap into action, dashing forward. Snickers yips and breaks into a run with me.

At the corner, I call back over my shoulder, "So you said I'm free to go?"

There's no answer, which I take for a yes. If they're gonna arrest me, they'll have to catch me first. Right now I'm more worried about Inessa.

Snickers and I scramble around the corner and she leads me through corridors back to the station house entrance. We burst through the doors and onto the street, startling passing pedestrians and making a woman on the sidewalk shriek and jump out of our way.

Snickers runs straight onto the road. Normally I'd stop her, but today she's the boss. She's been trying to tell me all this time and I didn't get it until now.

She tugs me into the street. Cars beep and swerve to miss us. I charge after her, keeping an anxious eye on traffic even as I try to scan the area for any sign of Inessa.

Rob said they just left. Will we be fast enough to catch them?

We have to be.

I can't face the alternative.

Snickers charges straight in front of a truck, and there's an awful moment where I don't know if the driver can stop in time. Tires screech. People from the sidewalk scream.

The truck stops so close that I can reach out and pat the hood. I give the driver an apologetic wave and keep running.

On the other side of the road, a black car pulls out wildly from the curb. Snickers whines.

“Is that them, girl?”

She barks loudly.

They’re picking up speed, but there’s no way I’m letting them get away that easily. Stooping, I grab Snickers and tuck her under my arm. Then I gather my strength and drop my chin to my chest. My thigh muscles scream. I pump my free arm and throw all my energy into speed until I’m catching them.

As we come alongside the car, I catch a glimpse of Inessa, bound and gagged, lying sideways on the backseat.

Suddenly my muscles have new power. My lungs draw in more air despite the burn.

I drop my shoulder and barge into the side of the car, knocking it off course. It narrowly misses a red car coming the other way, and my heart jumps into my throat. I don’t want anyone to get hurt.

Well, maybe whoever has tied up my beautiful goddess like that, but not bystanders.

I’ll have to be more careful.

My chest is on fire now. I’m wheezing. Under my arm, Snickers wriggles and barks. It’s not helping. I can’t afford to slow down to put her down though.

I need to stop this car immediately.

Gritting my teeth, I put on a final burst of speed. We're approaching an intersection. The driver shows no sign of slowing. I try to grab hold of the side mirror, but it snaps off in my hand. I toss it away, praying it doesn't hit someone.

In a final desperate move, I throw my body over the hood of the car, keeping the side where Snickers is still tucked beneath my arm out of harm's way.

There's a crunch and a squeal of tires. Metal buckles beneath me. With a jerk, the car skids to a halt and I roll onto the road, jumping up as quickly as I can, expecting to be run over.

I'm safe from that at least .

The car is stationary and the hood completely crushed and caved in. Thick black smoke pours from the engine.

The driver's door is thrown open. I have a split second to react. A man in a suit with a cruel face and blond hair leaps from the vehicle, raising a gun.

I do the only thing I can think of to do.

I drop Snickers and throw my whole weight forward into the door of the car, slamming it into the man with all my strength.

There's a bang.

A sharp sting of pain.

I drop to my knees.

Snickers yelps.

For an awful moment, I think she's been hit. I see blood splattered on the pavement and I look around frantically, trying to work out where it got her only to realize it's not her who's been shot.

There are shouts from up the street, back toward the police station, but I can't process them.

I'm staring at the place on my arm where dark green blood gushes from a wound that throbs. My head feels light and hazy.

I stumble to my feet. The man who shot me is lying on the ground beside his car and his face is not a pretty sight. His hand arm is splayed beside him, the gun lying on the ground. His eyes are closed.

I can't spare more time to look him over now that I know he's no longer a threat. Every fiber of my being needs to know that my mate is OK.

I hurry to the rear door and tear it open. My shoulder protests .

My knees tremble and I almost stumble when I first see Inessa again.

Then she moves and I could weep with relief. She lifts her head and lets out a muffled noise.

She's alive!

She's OK.

She's going to be OK.

With shaking hands, I help her to sit and gently prize the tape from over her mouth.

She winces. “Erik! You’re hurt.” Her hands are still cuffed behind her back.

“It’s nothing,” I tell her. “Just a scratch.” I’m searching for the keys, but of course her kidnapper didn’t leave them in the car.

I hate seeing Inessa like this though. She struggles forward, but she can hardly move.

Reaching around, I grasp the metal chain between the cuffs and simply snap it. She gasps and pulls her hands into her lap, rubbing at the cuffs still fastened around her wrists. I help her from the car.

Then turn to find a gun and a taser both pointed at me and five police officers with riot shields looking like they’re worried I’m going to crush them all.

I hate how much I intimidate people.

A huge werepanther in beast form—almost as tall as I am—growls at me from my left, and when she speaks I catch a hint of the sergeant who questioned me earlier. “Hands where we can see them. Do not move. ”

I sigh. Then I raise my hands slowly into the air. “I’ll do whatever you want and answer all your questions, but can someone please take these cuffs off my wife?”

Vera

My wrists are still sore from the cuffs. I rub them absently while I wait. The floor is uncomfortable, but I'm not moving and Erik threatened to tear down the bars or walls of any cell they put him in if they didn't let me stay near him.

With stiff legs, I rise on my knees and twist to look through the window into the little room they're keeping him in.

He sits on the only piece of furniture in the room—a fold down bed hanging from brackets on the stark white wall. He's too big for it. He has to perch right on the edge, and as he shifts, the whole thing sags as if it's about to collapse.

My heart aches for my big, beautiful monster. Can't they see he wasn't the villain here?

With cold satisfaction, I think again about the limp and lifeless body of Dmitri lying beside the mangled car. He deserved no better .

I can hardly believe he stooped to kidnapping me himself, only I know he would have wanted to draw out my torture and enjoy my suffering in person.

Finally, the kind old officer who has been in and out to check on me returns with a paper in his hand. "Are you still feeling OK, Mrs. Thorvarsson? I've got some good news and some bad news."

He hands me the paper and I stare down at it, trying to make sense of the unfamiliar

English characters.

“The judge set bail. Which means we can release your husband.”

I brighten. This is what Erik needs. He needs me to hold him and reassure him that he hasn't done anything wrong. “That's wonderful.”

“But it's ten thousand.”

I blink. “Ten thousand dollars?”

He nods grimly. “Now I can put you in touch with a loan agent if you want to talk about a loan, but be sure he won't breach the conditions. That's an awful lot of money. If you don't mind me saying.”

I stare at him. Where are we supposed to find that kind of money? “C-can I talk to him about it?”

Officer Adams unlocks the door to Erik's cell and I quickly explain the situation.

When I'm done, Erik grimaces. “That's too much. We can't afford that. I'll just have to wait until the trial.”

I want to say something comforting, but there's no sense lying. I have no idea how a monster will be treated in an American courtroom, but I know how this would go if it were in Russia. I would be saying goodbye to my husband right now .

Erik sighs. “Would you do me a favor, Inessa? Could you ring my work and tell them? I don't know when I'm getting out, but I guess it's not any time soon.”

He shows me how to find the number in his phone and then Officer Adams has to

close the cell again. He offers for me to wait in a more comfortable part of the station, but I know Erik wants me close.

Erik has two numbers saved for work in his phone. The first is the warehouse, but when I call, it goes to an answering machine. The second is a mobile number. A male voice answers after only a few rings. “Yes?” The voice is clipped and I worry for a moment that I’ve called at a bad time.

“Hello. This is Inessa Thorvarsson calling. My husband, Erik, works for you. He asked me to call to let you know he might not be able to make it to work this week.”

There’s a huff on the other end of the line. “And he couldn’t call himself?”

I bristle. There’s no need for Erik’s boss to be so rude. “No. He couldn’t. He’s been arrested after saving me from being kidnapped and tortured, so he’s a bit busy right now.” I have to admit, my own voice is rather hostile.

“We’ll see about that.” The line suddenly goes dead, and I pull the phone away from my ear to stare down at it. Did he hang up on me or was reception no good?

I’m about to ring back when I think better of it. He has the message. If he’s going to be a jerk about it, then that’s his problem.

I’ve lost track of time when Officer Adams returns with Snickers on her leash. It feels like evening, but I doubt it’s even lunch time. My stomach rumbles to remind me all I’ve had to eat is tea and cookies.

“Sorry, ma’am. It’s the end of my shift and the others said they can’t keep her in the office anymore. She’s chewed up two files and peed on the floor.”

I take the leash and shoot a dirty look at Snickers. She wags her tail and gives me that

all-too-sweet look she has perfected for Erik.

Poor thing. I can hardly blame her. She needs a walk.

I can't keep her here all night. Which brings me to the larger problem of where we'll stay. Our home is not an option, and I have no money and no place to go.

At that moment, a tall, green-skinned dragon with wings spread wide comes storming down the corridor, a skinny officer hurrying along in his wake. "I can't understand what all the fuss is about. Nor can I see why he's had no access to a lawyer yet."

"Sir, he declined legal advice."

The dragon rounds on the police officer. "Declined or was bullied?"

I recognize that voice. It's the clipped tone of the guy from the phone call. How did he get here so quickly, though? Erik said he lives out of town.

Oh right. Dragon !

Snickers breaks away from my hold on her leash and darts forward yipping. I can tell she's not being aggressive by the way her tail wags furiously, but I'm also a little bit scared she's going to pee on his shoes with how excited she is.

"Shhh. Snickers! Sidet!"

She sits instantly, looking back at me with a little whine and a lick of her lips.

The bossy dragon finally looks at me for the first time and inclines his head. "Mrs. Thorvarsson. I'm glad to see that someone around here has some sense." He glares down at Snickers. "You are still a brat, I see."

She gives a joyful yap, and I think I see the glimmer of a smile at the corner of his mouth for a moment.

“Well...” He turns to the officers who are both standing open mouthed, watching. “Which one of you is going to open this cell and which wants to lose his job first?”

They practically fall all over themselves unlocking Erik’s cell.

Through the window, I see Erik stand and blink at his boss. “Mr. Kivrayn! You didn’t need to come down here.”

Kivrayn huffs. “Someone has to sort this problem out. We’ve got a very important shipment arriving tomorrow. I can’t trust it to anyone else.”

“You know we really can’t—” Officer Adams begins.

“Oh we really can. Once my legal team arrives, there will be hell to pay, I promise you. How could you let this poor woman sit here on the floor for hours?”

How does he know I’ve been here for hours? Oh right. I’m still in my pajamas.

I’ve forgotten to be embarrassed about it .

“I’ve posted bail for the orc and all further requests for information will go through my lawyer from now on. Is that clear?”

Officer Adams swallows. “Yes, sir.”

Kivrayn turns back to Erik. “Come on. I’ve arranged a place downtown for the rest of the week. You can thank me later. Just make sure you’re there on time tomorrow morning.”

Erik grins at me as he comes for a hug, taking Snickers's leash. "He's not always this grumpy, I promise. But today I'm glad he is."

"Me too." I slip my hand into his larger one and we follow Kivrayn outside the station to where a fancy black limousine is parked, waiting. "Come on, husband. Let's get you home."

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Inessa

A week later, I'm in another waiting room, my hand clasped tightly in Erik's as we wait for The FBI agent who called us for an interview. Finally, he enters with a file tucked under his arm and a grim smile on his thin face. "Please follow me."

He leads us to a small interview room with tiny armchairs barely big enough for Erik to squeeze into. Erik's chair groans as he sits and he shifts uncomfortably.

"Mrs. Thorvarsson, Mr. Thorvarsson, thank you for joining me. I'm Agent Hughes. There are a few loose ends we need to tie up, and Heartstone police have officially handed this case over to the FBI given the circumstances." He clears his throat and gives Erik a sidelong look.

Is he holding back because he thinks my husband does not know?

"There's nothing I'm keeping from my husband," I assure him. "He knows about my past and my reasons for seeking an arranged marriage." I slide a hand onto Erik's thigh, and a moment later, his big warm hand closes over mine.

Agent Hughes raises his brows. "Well that's your choice. It's certainly not what we advised you to do."

I simply shrug.

"Then, if I might be so candid, I have some news for you which should dramatically shorten the length of this interview today and hopefully help you feel more secure."

Now it's my turn to be surprised. "You do?"

"How much do you know about how Dmitri Tychkin found you?"

I shudder just hearing his name, but it's highly reassuring to know I never have to worry about him again.

Erik gives my hand a little squeeze.

"I have no idea. But it doesn't surprise me."

Agent Hughes gives me a curt nod. "No. I can't imagine it did. However, it comes with some news which you may regard as difficult to hear."

I sit a little straighter. "OK."

"Our informants in Russia passed on the information recently that your brother was assassinated last week. It seems there is a potential connection with Dmitri Tychkin, though that hasn't been firmly established yet. It's my belief that Mr Tychkin was responsible."

He pauses. Perhaps he is watching me to see if there is any reaction to the news of my brother's death. I hope he's not looking to check whether or not I could be responsible. I'm afraid my neutral expression might be incriminating .

"It is not unlikely. The two were rivals, and without the connection of the arranged marriage, there's no reason for Dmitri to have been loyal to my brother."

Agent Hughes nods. "It seems there had been some hostile contact so it's possible the two had a disagreement. Likely as you described. It seems there was an information breach at our Moscow office earlier in the week and agents there now believe Mr Tychkin was responsible. We think it's likely someone leaked information to his

connections about your faked death.”

I nod grimly. It’s what I was worried about all along.

Agent Hughes clears his throat. “I know it might be a bad time, but I’d like to have more information, if I could, about the connection between the two families and their business organizations. If you’re up to answering today, that would be best. Now that both men are dead, there will be some inevitable shifts in the power structure, but any information you can provide should help us to prevent more serious crimes being committed on American soil.”

I seriously doubt they can do much about it, but I appreciate that he thinks he can.

I answer his questions in as much detail as possible. Erik sits steadfastly at my side the whole time, giving me strength.

I really don’t know what I would do without my big orc. He’s so patient and kind with me. The whole week he’s done nothing but fuss over me, taking time off work to look after me as much as he could and trying to make sure I was never alone.

Thankfully I’ve had Snickers to keep me company on the days he had to go in, and his mother called several times. I wasn’t expecting to enjoy her conversation quite so much, but at the moment, the silence of an empty room becomes filled with phantom noises far too quickly. And I can’t deny it’s lovely to have family who genuinely care about me.

When the interview is over, Agent Hughes confirms that, though there will be a trial, the results should be a matter of course since CCTV footage from the street shows Dmitri pulling a gun on Erik after driving dangerously and swerving into traffic.

He stands, tucking his notes away into his folder carefully. “Thank you, Gospozha Boreyeva. I suppose there’s no need to use a fake name in this room.”

I frown, withholding my hand when he offers me his to shake. “No. I’m not Vera Boreyeva anymore. Now I’m Inessa Thorvarsson and I wouldn’t want to be anyone else.”

Agent Hughes smiles, and this time it goes all the way to his eyes, in the warm, American way that Erik smiles. “That’s good to hear, ma’am. Good to hear. Thank you once again for your cooperation.”

As we leave the office, I stop Erik, tugging on his big arm until he halts and looks around at me. “It’s still early. Let’s go get an ice cream and then take Snickers up to visit your family for the weekend.”

His features crease into the huge grin that warms my insides. “Yeah. I’d like that.”