



Tales from the Orc Chasm

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Tales from the Orc Chasm is a collection of short, interconnected romances in a cozy fantasy world, involving orcs, humans, halflings, and fairies.

Snowed in with the Orc

Fawn has seen countless others try to flirt with the handsome orc tavern keeper Erryc, she knows he always turns them down. Unbearably shy, she's determined to keep her feelings for her friend to herself, even when he comes to her with a dilemma— he needs her to pretend to be his lover to gently dissuade a persistent patron. However, a drunken kiss at the Winter Solstice festival might ruin their friendship forever.

Only One Bedroll

Mushrooms, halfling-eating monsters, and orcs, oh my. When Bianca Chanterelle gets lost in the woods, she doesn't expect the orc hunter that finds her to be any help getting back to her traveling party, but with him finds adventure, a secret microbiome, a terrifying monster, and a budding attraction between them. Tanis, son of Dhane the Bloodthirsty, shouldn't be so curious about the halfling woman who is utterly unsuited to living in the woods, but he can't resist the way his blood calls to her, especially when they find themselves hiding in a tent, sharing his bedroll. When the rest of the orcish hunting party decides to raid the traveling halfling troupe of actors' camp, however, a staged kidnapping and a monster intervention may not be enough to make sure everyone gets out of the woods.

What Makes A Firebug Glow?

The problem isn't that the bounty hunter orc is several times the fairy's stature. It isn't even that he's rude, mouthy, and makes Nettle scald with only a look— it's that he might just be what she needs to glow again. She only hires the grizzled Silver to help her navigate a treacherous gauntlet, but between saving each other's lives and getting thoroughly mixed up in each others' drinks and business, they find a way to make it fit.

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“It won’t fit.”

“It will.”

“N-no, it’s too big,”

the young woman gasped.

“Just try. You’ve got this,”

the orc murmured, the words impossibly gentle through his tusks. “There. That’s my girl.”

Fawn’s face flushed possibly the deepest shade of red it had ever been. He called her his girl. It sent a flush of warmth down her belly, making her all too aware of her body beneath her clothes.

“That’s right, just like that,”

Erryc coaxed, his hand closing over the top of hers, and through their combined efforts, the misshapen cork finally squeezed into the mouth of the bottle.

Fawn breathed a sigh of relief. That had been an ordeal.

Erryc held the bottle overhead, signaling to the others in the Hammered N’Aled Tavern that the deed was done. A few good-humored patrons cheered on the triumph, others ignored it.

“Until you have to open that vintage again,”

one at the table toasted him, raising his tankard of mead.

Erryc crossed over to their table, immediately drawn in by chatter and laughter. That was who he was, always starting another conversation with someone he just met. Not a moment later he clapped one of the patrons at the table on the back, laughing heartily, “My good man! You devil, you.”

Fawn, on the other hand, sank back into her seat at the corner table. Perhaps she’d been too excited over being called his girl, if it was a title so easily bestowed. She’d liked to have believed she was special to him, but he was just that way with everyone.

He was a sweetheart. Just not hers.

Even that little interaction had made her warm and a painfully obvious pink all over. It wasn’t a cute, cheeks-kissed-by-the-sun sort of pink. It was everywhere. Her forehead, her nose, her chin and upper lip all turned a concerning red that had multiple times prompted people to ask after her health.

With one hand, she gathered all her long brown hair up off the back of her neck in the hopes that it would cool her down faster, let some of her blush recede. It did nothing to settle the rousings between her thighs, though.

Most days like this, she would set up in the corner with a stein of mead, a lit pipe of dried ditchweed, and her bag of feathers and sticks as she watched the rest of the room, making new arrows to fill her quiver.

And many days like today, whenever Erryc decided she’d sat alone and unbothered for too long, he’d rustle up some odd task he needed her help with, like sticking an unusually sized cork back in a narrow bottleneck. He truly found the oddest of jobs.

Erryc had this way about him, that meant you couldn't help but feel he was doing you the favor by asking you for assistance. Just last week, he had tasked Fawn to get a few silver coins to one of the tavern maids.

“She broke some plates last week and insists on paying for them, but I know she's got kids at home and I budget expecting broken plates every month. She won't take the money back, not from me,”

he had lamented after everyone had gone home for the night, wiping down the bar.

“Say no more,”

Fawn had replied, and he grinned in response, handing her the money.

The rush of sensation that filled her had been like nothing else Fawn had ever felt before. It couldn't just be that his voice was deep and rumble and warm when he said, “You're amazing.”

Fawn wondered if he had known she would get along so well with the tavern maid, that they'd both had relatives in the city on the other side of the Chasm.

On many maps this area was marked as territory belonging to a nomadic camp of orcs following their herd of yakgoats around the split mountainsides. Those who preferred more permanent living quarters often moved to the village in the foothills. Everyone who lived near the Chasm had to travel the single road through the split mountain pass, and almost everyone who did stopped in at the Hammered N'Aled Tavern for a drink and a hot meal, sometimes to re-shoe a horse at the old anvil out back.

Her eye drew back to Erryc, finding with him a beautiful woman leaning over the bar, her bosom nearly tipping out of her dress, her cheek rosy as her lips and her long, long eyelashes batting.

The troupe of actors were only passing through, on their way to the next city over for a performance. Already Fawn couldn't wait for them to leave.

“Wow, your hands are sooooo much bigger than mine,”

the tipsy actress giggled, swinging her legs under the bar, as she snagged his free hand and spread her palm against his, half the size.

“Yeah, it makes cleaning up really easy,”

he laughed, tugging his hand out of hers, and scooped up a number of empty tankards off the bar by their handles, as if to demonstrate.

The actress gave a little squeak of delight, even as he crossed down to the other side of the bar to fill another patron's glass, away from her.

Fawn wasn't surprised that yet another tavern patron was flirting with him, it was an almost hourly occurrence.

Erryc was easily the most handsome orc on this side of the Chasm. Fawn knew this as fact, as she traveled several times a season up the mountain to the orc camp, where they herded their yakgoats, selling the spare rabbits and foxes she'd hunted. She always stopped at the Hammered N'Aled Tavern on her way back down the mountain trail, and was always reminded of how true her assertion was.

Like many of the orcs, he had shaved one of the sides of his head for a smattering of blue woad tattoos, a number of fine metal piercings decorated his long, pointed ears, and his complexion was a hearty sage green. His shoulders were broader than most doorways and he of course, had arms and legs thicker than some tree trunks.

But Erryc was the only orc whose smile could stop a village. One of his tusks was

chipped, giving it a little bit of an unevenness, but who would notice that, or even think it was an imperfection when his smile crinkled his eyes.

But he never accepted anyone's interest.

He would never outright say no, especially not to a customer, or a neighbor, or a stranger. Erryc was well practiced in the art of the side-step, the redirect, and the non-committal answer. Over the years, she had seen him gently refuse the affections of hundreds. She'd contented herself to merely looking on from her view in the corner.

And what a view it was. Just looking at the slope of his shoulders, his well muscled back, the way his loose shirt hung off of him and then tucked into the back of his pants, Fawn once again found herself biting her lower lip too hard.

Erryc was mercifully unaware of her oggling. Rather, whenever he caught her eye on him, he always raised a brow at her and asked if she needed another drink. He was used to people looking at him, trying to get his attention at the bar.

Somehow he'd become callused against the same sharp edge of emotions that pierced her whenever she met someone's gaze by accident. Fawn didn't think she'd ever get used to it, but that was why she preferred the corner table, as it was shielded from the rest of the rowdy patronage and any eyes that might snag on her. If someone did notice her, they might be compelled to smile, ask her a question or two.

One such patron caught her eye, handsome young elf. Fawn's heartbeat pricked in alarm.

"I'm just passing through. Is the local hunting any good?"

he asked her with a gesture to her bow strung over the back of her chair, a charming smile at the ready to draw her out of the corner.

Fawn answered in depth about the wild rabbits in the foothills, but it came out so softly, he couldn't hear her.

When his brow furrowed and lifted, she pinkened, and answered louder, yet still only barely audibly.

The conversation, or lack of one, almost always fell into the pattern of trying to answer loud enough to be heard, and shaking heads prompting her to try again, an endeavor that only ever made her shrink back in embarrassment.

“Fawn! Over here,”

Erryc called, and waved the damp dishrag as if it were a flag, signaling her to cross the treacherous terrain of customers. Something more than butterfly wings twitched in Fawn's stomach when his eyes met hers across the room, and Erryc's smile widened just a bit more for her.

Fawn gave an apologetic look to the man, paired with a shrug as she quickly abandoned their silent awkwardness. She would not have left her preferred corner for just anyone.

She crossed to the bar, ready to pull up a stool, when Erryc shook his head and gestured to the back storage room. “Come around to the back, I need your help.”

“Did something get stuck under the shelf again?”

she asked, rounding the end of the bar.

It did make her feel the tiniest bit special that of all the people in the bar with hands smaller than his, she was the only one (that she knew of) who he'd asked to reach under the dusty shelf. Perhaps because she was already dusty with all the bits of

feathers and splinters from her fletching.

Erryc paused and raised a brow at her.

“The shelf,”

she repeated, adding in a little hand gesture to mime slipping her hand in the narrow crevice.

“Oh, um, well, it’s a little more complicated,”

he said, ushering her into the storeroom.

It was half the size of the tavern’s main room, and yet three times as cramped. Every available space had gone to stacking casks of mead, crates of fruits and vegetables laid on the shelves, the stove in the back that always had something simmering on it. There wasn’t even counter space, just a couple of cutting boards balanced on top of a few barrels.

When Erryc ducked inside and closed the door, the space became only all the more cramped. Fawn shuffled further in, leaning back against one of the shelves. There was barely room to breathe between them.

“I’m in a bit of a pickle,”

he sighed, turning around to face her. “I know I just asked you for a favor last week, but I don’t know what else to do.”

He ran one of those massive, oft-compared hands through his hair, ruffling the dark waves that flopped back over his forehead, framing his soft brown eyes.

Fawn stared a moment, entranced purely by the effect. She blinked and stumbled to answer, “What’s the pickle? Bread and butter, or...”

“Bread,”

he said with a short, tired laugh. His eyes moved to the door. Even though the door was heavy and the main room always filled with chatter, he dropped his voice to the same level as hers. “One of my vendors, the village baker—”

“Oona?”

“Oona. She’s been hinting for a while that she wants to set me up with her daughter,”

he sighed again, putting his hands on his hips. “She’s been getting more insistent lately, too. Every time she comes in she starts lamenting about her neighbor’s new baby. She wants her own grandchildren.”

Fawn didn’t spend nearly the same amount of time talking to people and getting involved in their lives as Erryc did, but she wasn’t sure she saw the issue. Half the problems he found himself tangled in seemed like something better just left alone, with all parties involved a little disgruntled but willing to move past it eventually.

But that was why she thought he was the best person for miles around. He never left ‘well enough’ alone if he thought he could make someone’s day a little better.

Fawn folded her arms over her chest, a posture that more often than not just became hugging herself instead of a confident pose. “Did you tell her you weren’t interested?”

“I’ve tried,”

he insisted, though Fawn doubted he'd actually used the word 'no' in any capacity. "Look, I... any favor I can do for you in exchange, anything you want, I promise, you'll have it."

Fawn worried her teeth against her lower lip. "Anything? What if I wanted the tavern?"

That made him crack a smile, meeting her eyes again. He scoffed, "You'd be begging for me to take it back after a day. An hour, maybe."

"So little faith in me."

"I have all the faith in you, just not your social stamina."

"Fine, I'll think of something else,"

she replied, rolling her eyes.

It wouldn't be the first time he promised her anything and she didn't take him up on it. There wasn't much she wanted, aside from the occasional free drink. Sometimes she thought she should be a little more creative in what he owed her, perhaps a bite of whatever he was eating for the rest of his life. He would do it, too.

Her eyes slipped down Erryc's shirt, a habit of hers he had thankfully not noticed yet, or at least had not mentioned. It was simply easier to let her gaze rest on the worn brass of his belt buckle, than it was to constantly look up and make eye contact.

All too often her resting gaze traveled even lower, shape of the fabric of his pants below, the way it hinted and moved as he walked. Her tongue pressed against the back of her teeth as she bit her lower lip, contemplating.

No, she couldn't even begin to think of what she wanted from him. At least, something that wouldn't mortify her to ask.

"I'm more than willing to help, but what are you even asking for?"

she said, realizing he'd managed to skip right over that. She hugged herself a little tighter, giving him a lopsided shrug, "I don't know that I'm the right person to steal a grandchild for Oona."

"What? No, no."

Erryc's cheeks and ears flushed a dark green before he glanced back at the door again. "Maybe it's a little much to ask, but when Oona comes in to drop her delivery off, if you could perhaps, uh, kiss me? Or maybe if that's too much, just on the cheek? Or maybe just hold my hand or, I mean—"

"It's not too much,"

she said, the words terribly quiet, even for her. She swallowed, holding his gaze a little too fraught. Her heart was hammering in her chest so hard she wasn't sure how he didn't hear it.

"It's not?"

"No."

They stood for a moment in silence, somewhat awkwardly meeting each other's eyes and then glancing away, then meeting them again.

"Well. Thank you, that's um. A relief. It'll be good to nip this in the bud,"

he said, suddenly unable to figure out what he wanted to do with his hands. He filtered through crossing his arms over his chest, digging his hands in his pockets, straightening his shirt.

Finally he settled on grabbing the door handle to leave.

“I-it has been a while since, um, since, I’ve... uh,”

she called after him, stopping him before he opened it. “And you’re so... maybe we should try it out. Just the once.”

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No sooner than she'd suggested it, Fawn regretted saying it out loud. Her cheeks flushed so hot she felt heat rush up her ears and neck, and all the way down her back.

But he had already asked her for a kiss.

Fawn swallowed, looking at his mouth. His ever present smile was gone, but she was already set on this path.

"J-just um, so it doesn't look like it's the first time we've done it when she comes in,"

she added quickly, staring at Erryc's hand still tense on the door handle. "Old ladies are discerning like that."

She wished he would just laugh and roll his eyes at her, tell her she was being ridiculous. Surely no one would have insight on whether it was the first, the second, or the hundredth time they'd kissed.

"Oh. Yeah. Uh, good thinking,"

he nodded, releasing the door handle. He stood there for a moment, his hands flexing at his sides.

The moment drew long between them.

"Um. Do you need me to stand on a box, or...?"

Fawn mumbled, looking around the room. There was a barrel that might have made

her just a bit taller than him if she stood on it. Maybe she could kneel on it.

“That won’t be necessary,”

he said. He seemed to steady something within himself, holding her gaze with an uneasy expression that no doubt matched her own.

Erryc took a step towards her, closing the distance between them in one motion. The sheer crampedness of the room multiplied tenfold as he stepped into her space. Fawn didn’t even realize she moved backwards at all, some knee-jerk attempt to keep a polite distance between them as she usually did.

The storage shelves met her hips, her back, her shoulders. Her hands found one of the wood shelves to grip and try to steady herself.

Though there had never been an occasion that she fainted dead away from her heart pounding so much, Fawn felt this was a likely contender for the first.

She swallowed.

She wanted this. She just was afraid of it as much as she wanted it. She never imagined that it could happen, and that was why it had been easy to want as much as she had, never voicing the desire from her little corner table. But faced with the possibility, it seemed very likely that if she pressed her mouth to his, something in her would untwist, and all of the thoughts she’d had about him over the years might come spilling out.

Erryc didn’t feel that way about her. He had, of course, kissed her cheek before, among several other tavern regulars during holiday revelries, and that had been enough to send her home warm all over.

She wasn't prepared for this, but somehow she doubted she ever would be.

It was just a kiss.

She had been kissed before. Perhaps not by someone so...

Fawn's head tipped all the way back to look up at him.

Erryc looked just as nervous as her, his hands in tight fists at his sides, his mouth set in an uncertain line, framed by his tusks.

It was that moment she realized she had been gnawing into her lower lip. She couldn't help but let out a laugh in spite of herself.

She touched her hand to his, and he loosened his grip, letting her curl a hand around a couple of his fingers.

Fawn tugged him into her space. She let him crowd her against the shelf, easing him in an inch at a time, until there was barely room to breathe.

Erryc's fingertips drifted up her sides, keeping her steady as he leaned down to her. He cupped her face, and the breath was promptly stolen from her. Her lips parted, a sharp inhale when his forehead touched hers and their lips met.

Perhaps she expected a peck, a mere momentary meeting of mouths. What Erryc gave her was so much more.

His kiss was tender as he was, soft as a breath against her skin, as he held her face as carefully as he'd hold a bird. His tusks grazed her cheeks, smooth and blunt, as his lips moved against hers. To have him touch her like this was something else entirely. The heat that seemed to live in her cheeks whenever she was around him traveled

further, spreading through her chest, low in her belly, deep in her nethers. It bloomed into a force unruly and needy.

“Mmf,”

Fawn gasped, as he caught her lip between his teeth, tugging it gently. The sensation of his gentle drag over the place she’d worried raw made her back arch away from the shelf, pushing into him. Her ribs brushed his, and she put her hands on the broad expanse of his chest, to keep herself from falling into him even more. She might not come back if she did.

Erryc pulled back immediately. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, no. That was...”

she gazed up at him for a long moment, unable to think of words when her entire vision was taken up with his long eyelashes and deep brown eyes holding hers.

She forgot she had meant to say anything at all, lost in his gaze.

The sound of a glass breaking startled their attention to the door. Erryc let go of her, stepping back.

Clearly Fawn wasn’t the only one affected– Erryc’s face was flushed a deeper green, his chest heaving with his breath.

“I, uh, think we’ve got it. I think that was good. I mean it was. It was good. It was convincing. And believable. Right? Right,”

he stumbled to say, his voice cracking on his question. He ran a hand through his floppy hair and looked away. “The front. I oughta check the front. I’ll be, uh, over

there.”

He pointed, as if he hadn’t been clear enough.

Fawn nodded vigorously until Erryc ducked out the storage room door again. Her knees finally gave out, and she slid onto the nearest crate. Her heartbeat was so loud it left her body ringing.

She was supposed to do that again, with an audience?

Dazed, Fawn stood and pushed open the door, following him out.

“Another one, barkeep,”

one of the patrons called, raising his broken glass and waving it to show just how empty it was.

His companion was unimpressed. “No, look at him. He’s too red in the face, you ought to cut him off. No more ale, you hear?”

“That’s no way to measure if someone’s had enough. Take Fawn for example, she’s always a naturally rosy color,”

the drunker one said.

“Around him, sure,”

the other patron scoffed, belligerently enough that Erryc paid his words no mind, though it made the red in Fawn’s face renew with a vigor.

“Let’s see if you can walk a straight line first,”

Erryc sighed, taking the cup's handle from the man.

“C’mon, pour me another,”

he called, even as he started to slide from his seat, clutching the counter as he wobbled to stand.

Fawn slipped into one of the seats at the bar unobtrusively. She reached into the common dish of hazelnuts, plucking up a couple to chew on while she waited. It wasn't the first time someone had pointed out Fawn's horrible ruddiness. Any hint of guilt or nerves or fluster announced itself to the room while she tried to shrink back. She'd always been self conscious of how it showed so clearly on her skin, and she'd never been able to train herself out of it.

The tavern door opened again as they were all watching the man stumble his way through a straight line, and a familiar older woman came in, carrying a large woven basket, steam still wafting out of the cloth folds covering the top.

Oona brushed some of the snow off the shoulders of her cloak. “Good day, Erryc! I have tomorrow's rolls. They're hot out of the oven, so they should keep well enough overnight.”

“Oona! What an unexpected visit,”

Erryc said a little too loudly, catching Fawn's eye.

She felt her cheeks flush with heat, as if their ruse had already been found out.

Oona paused at the counter. “Did you forget? I'm not running the bakery tomorrow. I'm spending the holiday with my daughter.”

“Oh, right. I had my days mixed up,”

he nodded, drying his hands off on his apron. “Uh, just give me a second, Fawn, I’ll be right back.”

Fawn stared at Erryc, still a foot taller than her even up on the barstool. Her eyes darted between him and Oona for a heartrending second. She had hoped for a little more time to prepare herself, but it seemed now was the moment.

Fawn planted a hand on the counter and stood on the rungs of her barstool. Erryc’s eyes met hers, and the world seemed to stop for a moment.

She couldn’t do it.

Fawn pecked his cheek and sank back into her chair sheepishly. It was still the boldest thing she’d ever done in her life.

Erryc nodded, a hint of darker green gracing his cheeks again, as he nodded and went to take the basket from Oona. Fawn tried not to catch Erryc’s eye. She could just imagine him saying, ‘that wasn’t what we rehearsed.’

The older woman had an amused look on her face, pursing her lips as if she was holding herself back from asking what that was about.

Worst of all, Fawn knew that expression. It felt familiar, like she had worn it herself many times, accompanied by shaking her head and rolling her eyes at each new foolish girl who had flung herself at Erryc in some bizarre attempt at winning his affection.

Gods, that’s what she looked like, probably.

As soon as Oona left, Fawn was going to leave as well. She needed a week or two of sitting at home, contemplating living utterly alone in the woods, only the local wandering yakgoats to embarrass herself in front of, before she could talk to Erryc properly after this. After time had dulled the sharp edges of today's memory, maybe she could think about being friends with him again.

Fawn counted out three more hazelnuts, chewing through them slowly before she let herself slink away from the counter and to go hide in her corner.

Rather anticlimactic, she thought to herself. Especially for the last time you'll ever kiss him.

It was such a sobering thought, she didn't even react when Erryc put an arm around her again, redirecting her path to tug her to his side. Her body met his, and Oona raised an eyebrow at them.

Oh, we're still doing this? Fawn nearly asked, but thankfully kept the words from tumbling out. This time, she was going to follow his lead, she decided, and simply nod along with the conversation.

"I'm sure I'll see you both at the festival tonight, lovebirds?"

Oona asked as she re-tied her cloak's fastenings, and the pair of them froze.

"Oh. Perhaps. I hadn't thought to ask Fawn if she was free tonight,"

Erryc said, and turned to her with an apologetic look. "Uh, you wouldn't happen to be—"

"I am. Of course. It's a date,"

she added quickly.

In an attempt to be convincing, she leaned into the embrace, hoping they looked like a real couple. She put a hand on his stomach, just a bit lower than her chin. She would have put it on his chest but it seemed a little awkward like this.

Then she felt something move, like a twitch against her side, Fawn held still. It wouldn't be the first time he had put a baby bird or a squirrel in his apron pocket and forgotten about it.

Oona gave a little chuckle, and Fawn wondered how forced it was as the old woman left, the door swinging shut behind her.

Erryc separated from Fawn quickly, immediately turning to the messy table beside them, gathering up the tankards with one hand and adjusting his apron with the other.

“I don't know why I bother procuring glasses. They keep breaking,”

he sighed, scooping up an errant shard of glass and dropping it into his apron pocket. “I'm... sorry you keep getting roped into things with me.”

“It's fine. I mean, you're buying.”

He ran a hand through his hair, and it did that thing where it flopped back over his forehead that made little moth-wing flutters in her stomach.

“I need a few minutes to sort things out in the back before we go. I need to close down the kitchen, send the barflies home, and uh...”

he said, and Fawn waved him off.

“Take your time, do what you need to. I’m always content to sit here for a while.”

He made an expression somewhere between a smile and a self-effacing grimace. “I won’t be very long.”

“I’m not timing you,”

she called after him as he disappeared into the back room again. A stirring like feathers and other fluttery things began low in her stomach, and Fawn swallowed against it. She tried to insist to herself, it wasn’t truly a date, it was just a favor between friends.

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It had been several minutes, at this point. Nearly half an hour alone in the tavern.

She had said she would wait and she intended to, but it had never taken Erryc this long to bank the stove fire and lock up the tavern for the night before. Fawn had half a mind to get her fletching out and work a little more, splitting feathers and whittling arrow shafts. She'd already pulled her winter cloak on, layering the straps of her bag and her bow over it.

She thought she heard Erryc call her name, however faintly, from the backroom.

The tavern was empty, the fire in the hearth burning low. Her heart squeezed to imagine that he had knocked over one of his many stacks of crates, and was buried underneath it, calling for help. She hadn't heard a crash, but Fawn crossed to the back of the counter, supposing he could need her assistance on something less dire.

The door to the backroom was just barely ajar, a thread of candlelight poking through.

She hesitated, her palm on the door. Her heart beat to remember the kiss she and Erryc had shared in there just an hour earlier, the heat it had lit under her skin. She was always willing to do any favor Erryc asked, but perhaps she had taken advantage of his predicament with Oona.

Under the slight touch she gave it, the door drifted silently on well-oiled hinges, offering a few more inches of sight.

The breath caught in her throat.

Erryc's back was mostly to the door. Her eyes caught first on the tension in the broad expanse of his shoulders, then movement of his arm, and the slack in his belt.

Fawn stood, frozen, eyes wide. Her stomach contracted in alarm, but the rest of her body took other interest.

His breath drew ragged and heavy with each stroke, his large hand bringing his cock into view, the green of his skin flushed a deep purple at the dual-slitted tip, veins pulsing.

Fawn's mouth went dry as she watched the way his thumb circled the head, squeezing out the already dripping seed.

He bit out a groan, body stiffening, shuddering, his head tipping back with his eyes squeezed shut, fist curled around his throbbing length as it twitched and spurted his release, one long arc of seed after another. He stroked his cock until the flow lessened, merely dripping from the tip, his shoulders relaxing.

Fawn tugged the door back to mostly closed, fleeing as silently as she could. Perhaps she'd imagined hearing her name. She had to have.

Her heart and thoughts racing, she crossed absently to the other side of the bar. He'd said he was closing down the tavern, but clearly that wasn't what she'd seen. Alone in her own bed, she might dare to dream, to imagine his self-pleasure while indulging in her own, but this was something else entirely.

It was as much of a trespass on their friendship as the kiss had been, but how could she apologize without first telling him she had in fact witnessed his private moment?

"Ready to go?"

Fawn whirled around. Erryc. Oh gods, she wasn't ready to face him at this moment.

He seemed perfectly normal and at ease, despite having just climaxed a few minutes ago. Perhaps she could have convinced herself it was a trick of the light, she hadn't really witnessed that. His belt was buckled, his pants in their usual state, it could be believed.

But there was just a hint of sweat by his temple.

Her eyes couldn't help but closely follow the way he picked one of the dishrags he used to clean the counter, scrubbed it over his palm and tossed it in the to-wash bin.

She realized, then, that he was waiting for her to answer him. She shook her head, "Sorry, what?"

He gave a little confused chuckle, putting his hands on his hips as he looked at her. "Everything alright? I asked if you were ready for the festival."

"Oh. Um. Yes. I am. Sorry, my stomach growled and I was thinking about what food they might have tonight,"

she lied quickly. She'd rather gather her thoughts for now and figure out how to apologize later. If she even could gather them, it seemed all the blood in her body had ventured away from her head.

Stepping out into the wintery night cooled her body some, but as Erryc locked the tavern door and took her hand in his, the heat low in her stomach quickly rekindled. They followed the other villagers to the festival, Erryc pulled Fawn into the thick of the crowded street. Everyone was walking towards the festival in the heart of the village, talking about what prizes they might win at the games, the prayers they would utter as they lit candles. All she could think was if she held the same hand that

had just gripped his cock.

The lust-addled part of her brain suggested putting one of his fingers in her mouth to see if there was some residual taste, the normal part wondered why she didn't just let go and hold onto his sleeve instead.

She barely wanted to let go to cross the old bridge over the creek outside the tavern, but the local carpenters had warned everyone to cross only one person at a time over it, at least until the new bridge could be installed, when the ground was thawed enough to dig the new supports into place.

She felt herself in a daze as he led her to the village square, lit with bonfires and lanterns strung over intersecting paths, ribbons and snowflakes blowing in the wind. There were stalls filled with little games and others full of hot steaming food and drink, all busy.

There was a traveling troupe of halfling actors that had set up a puppet show out of the back of one of their caravans. Most of them were strangers to her, but she still recognized plenty of faces from the tavern.

A blond woman who came up only to Fawn's middle stood in line for the hot spiced ale, a look of wonder on her face as she hefted a hewn wooden tankard as big as her head.

"It comes in pints?"

she asked, peering down as if to confirm it was full.

"I come in pints,"

an older, grizzled orc nearby joked under his breath with leer, and the halfling

elbowed him. Fawn knew him loosely, a bounty hunter who often stopped in the tavern with a crass joke as he plucked another job off the village board.

Fawn normally rolled her eyes, but her mind was still preoccupied with everything that had happened in that back storeroom in the tavern. Pints. Gods. A ripple of heat drew through her nethers, sending a pulse of pleasures as if to remind her that her body was ready and waiting. Surely not.

“What do you think of that one?”

Erryc asked, leaning down over her shoulder to murmur in her ear. Every hair on her cheek and the back of her neck stood on end. He gestured to one of the games, a stall where people threw rings at various empty bottles, landing over the bottlenecks for a prize.

“S-sure,”

she nodded, immediately biting her mouth closed again. Her tongue felt more of a mind to lick and explore than speak coherent words.

Fawn was too aware of his presence beside her, even as he leaned over the counter to hand the stall attendant a coin for the game.

She played the game badly, tossing the rings even as most of her mind was on other things.

What had fired his blood so thoroughly that he couldn't wait until after the festival to relieve himself of his lust? She swallowed that question back. Then again, if she were alone in this moment, she might have ducked into any alleyway, any dark corner to touch the little needy bud of nerves insistent on making itself known each time she brushed against Erryc.

“Here,”

he said, handing her one of the steaming drinks. “Cheers.”

The moment the cup was in her hands she tossed a mouthful back, hoping the drink would temper her nerves. She never felt this uptight and nervous around him.

The alcohol spread through her throat, her stomach, burning all in its path. Tears pricked her eyes as she choked down against the sensation, knocking most of the drink back in a single gulp.

Erryc raised his eyebrows at her, looking mildly concerned. “Everything alright there?”

“You said cheers, did you not?”

she replied a little hoarsely.

“It seemed like you might have misheard me for ‘chug’,”

he sighed, shaking his head. He still smiled gently around his tusks for her, holding her gaze with his warm brown eyes.

“You’re all rosy cheeked already,”

he murmured, so quietly it was more like a thought than something he meant to say aloud. The heat of his gaze flickered across Fawn’s cheeks, catching like sparks over tinder, spreading down her neck and under her collar.

He brushed the back of one of his large, rough knuckles over the soft part of her cheek. The cool back of his hand against the toasty warmth radiating off her face

suddenly became the only thing in the world.

“It, uh, it runs in my family,”

she mumbled, staring up at him, wondering if she was drifting closer to his face, or if it still was just the wine. “My sister’s kids have it too, last I saw them.”

“I see,”

he nodded, dark brown eyes remaining on her.

The intensity of holding his stare became too much, and she glanced to the side of him. “Look! They’re frying things over there.”

As soon as she pointed them out, she was heading over towards the food cart.

“If you had let me know you were hungry earlier, I could have made you something,”

Erryc said, sounding surprised.

“I said I wanted festival food, didn’t I?”

“They’re not making anything complicated, I’m just saying, I could have made you the same thing and not robbed you half a silver for it.”

“But then it wouldn’t be festival food,”

Fawn insisted. Fair food was always oily and crunchy, or soft and sticky. Whether it was vegetables fried in a flour and herbs batter, or the blackberry-syrup drenched hotcakes right off the griddle, it was deliciously indulgent in a way no other food was.

The sweet smell of simmered and spiced fruit entranced her in a haze until one sticky hot cake wrapped in a large dried out leaf was in her hands, almost too hot to hold.

“I didn’t know you had a wife,”

the hotcake vendor said, eyeing Fawn as she took a bite of one.

She nearly choked on the sweet confection trying to speak and swallow at the same time, her words lost against the mouthful.

“Not his wife,”

she repeated after a painful swallow.

“Not yet,”

Erryc chuckled, tugging her against his side. How many people were they trying to deceive?

“Just how many favors am I doing you?”

Fawn half laughed, if only to conceal what those words did to her.

The vendor spared the two of them a skeptical glance. “How long have you known each other? I haven’t seen you two together before.”

“Oh, years. She’s a little quiet. I’m afraid I overshadow her sometimes,”

Erryc said with a bashful chuckle, running a hand through his hair.

“I don’t mind,”

she replied. She couldn't help herself, or all this giddy energy. She found herself looking up at Erryc with stars in her eyes. It lasted a moment too long, before she remembered herself, clearing her throat and repeating herself for the sake of clarity.

“He can talk and talk. I don't have quite so many things to say,”

she added cheekily, both elated and nervous from participating. “I'll be right back.”

She turned the corner of the little maze of stalls and games, and found the carrot dumpling cart she had smelled from afar. She held up two fingers for the seller as he counted up orders from the people standing around his cart, taking a number of skewered carrots out of one bowl of batter and dunking them in a fired pot of oil, the surface roiling with bubbles instantly.

“You two are a strange match,”

the man selling the hotcakes remarked, apparently not realizing she wasn't out of earshot. Fawn's shoulders tensed, and she stopped behind one of the banners to listen.

The carrot dumpling seller took the coin out of her hand and gave her two dumplings on a stick with brisk efficiency, moving immediately onto the next round of orders.

“He might not have picked her purposefully,”

another villager replied before Erryc could say anything. “Don't orcs have some sort of mating frenzy?”

“Yes, the Blood Fever. I've seen the games in the spring, the hill camp, all the young people participate in roughing each other up,”

the hotcakes vendor laughed loud, boisterously. “I didn't realize it extended to the

rest of us—”

“You can go a whole lifetime without cutting someone,”

Erryc responded rather curtly, cutting him off. “And I left the hill camp. I have no desire to make anyone bleed.”

There was a moment of awkward silence, before the hotcake vendor gave a skeptical laugh, adding with a leering tone, “Well, I wouldn’t mind a bloody fever if it meant I could snag the baker’s daughter with it.”

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“He called this a hotcake? It’s barely even warm,”

Erryc grumbled, rolling his eyes as he took a bite, consuming half the cake in a single bite.

Its light, spongy crumb squeezed out a rivulet of melted butter, running immediately down his thumb, his hand. He rolled his eyes at the mess, holding his elbow up to keep it from running into his sleeve. “Yeesh. Whose idea was it to soak these in syrup? Was it because they’re so dry?”

Fawn frowned. She’d never heard him so immediately annoyed with someone. “Everything alright?”

“Oona keeps catching my eye. She’s been staring at us,”

he said with a huff. “She’s so persistent. I don’t know what it’s going to take to get her to stop. I’ve made myself clear with her on this.”

Fawn rolled her eyes and nearly laughed. No, he hadn’t. She’d bet a lot of money he’d inched his way around actually saying a direct ‘no’.

“Maybe she ought to hear how critical you are about other people’s baked goods,”

she teased softly.

“I’ve never said a bad word about Oona’s baked goods. They’re perfectly respectable, she knows what she’s doing. Simmons, on the other hand, the scoundrel—”

“C’mon. We can still enjoy the festival, can’t we?”

He sighed, then smiled in spite of himself. “Fine, I’ll stop misdirecting my annoyance.”

“Or, here’s a thought, you could direct it at one of those games—”

Fawn mimed throwing something, and the alcohol tipped her sense of balance all at once. She caught a hand against his arm, steadying herself. She let go just as quickly, sensing that if she kept holding on, she might tip bodily into him, and spill all her feelings over him.

Erryc fell quiet, unease melting from his expression.

“Actually, it’s cleared out by the fountain,”

Fawn suggested, pointing to the end of town the crowd had started at earlier in the night, now nearly empty, as everyone had moved their attentions to drinking and games. Dozens of candles floated in the icy water, a tradition once meant to keep the fountain from freezing over.

Erryc sighed, but nodded and started moving towards it. “We can light some candles too, if you want.”

The edge of the fountain was covered with candles as well, wax melting down over the edges. They lit their wicks off the various little flames still burning away, and wedged their candles in with the others.

“Oh, my feet. I should have worn my better shoes tonight,”

she moaned as Erryc took the last bit of free space on the fountain’s rim for a seat. He

planted one foot firmly on the ground, and patted his thigh.

Fawn couldn't help but grin. He didn't need to insist.

His hands were around her waist before she even sat down, pulling her into his lap. She leaned heavily against his body, finally shameless.

This was a wonderful place to sit and view the mountain, she thought, the buzz of alcohol making the starlit night gorgeous against the nearly black silhouette of the land's jagged edge, scraping the clouds.

One might mistake the Chasm, at a distance, for being a single mountain, shrouded by the snowy canopy of the Whispering Woods. Upon nearing it, however, it became clear that some greater force of nature had cleaved the mountain rather neatly in half. It was always beautiful, but the snowflakes sweeping past it, covered the two in a blanket of calm.

"I'm sorry you're out a lot later than you usually are,"

Erryc murmured, his breath warm against her ear.

"No, don't be. I've never been invited to one of these."

"You could come just to be here,"

he pointed out. "You don't have to be invited."

"No, it's more than that,"

Fawn insisted as she straddled one of the orc's thick thighs he had spread out across the ledge. "You see me when others don't."

“Fawn, you’re not invisible. You’re—”

he stopped, swallowing, considering his words a moment before he said with quiet conviction, “You’re very pretty.”

She waved a hand, unimpressed.

Plenty had called her pretty, and all they had done was make her want to shrink back and disappear. She needed to make him understand, it wasn’t about how many heads she turned.

“No, I mean, you make me feel included. You bring me into conversations when I’ve spent too much time inside my own head. You go out of your way to make sure I don’t just stay in the corner.”

“I... hope that’s not a bad thing,”

he said slowly. “I realize you probably pick the corner because you want some time to yourself. I wouldn’t want to leave anyone out though.”

“No, you wouldn’t,”

she nodded, but couldn’t help but to recede back into herself a little as his words solidified a doubt in her mind.

He would just look to make sure anyone didn’t make a wallflower of themselves, because that was the kind of person he was. She couldn’t just assume he was being nice to her any differently than he would with someone else.

But he noticed the almost imperceptible change, the slight dip in her voice, the brief tug downwards at the corners of her mouth. He touched her arm, watching her far off

stare. “What’s on your mind?”

Her eyes dropped to the space between their bodies, the way she was already draped across his lap. She laid a hand over his, then a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“Wow, your hands are sooooo much bigger than mine,”

she said, half in mockery of the woman who had flirted with him before, half in giddy tipsiness. It was so much easier to blatantly flirt, to say something so exaggeratedly enamored that she couldn’t possibly mean it, when she was drunk. Truly, she was jealous of that woman. Fawn knew herself well, and she would never have the courage to be so bold as to declare her affection for Erryc.

To do that was simply to give him the opportunity to reject her, however gently he did it.

He said nothing, only held his hand out for her. Fawn traced a finger up and down his hand, exploring the lines of his palm.

His hand was so much bigger than hers. He was so much larger than herself that of course everyone’s eye immediately went to him first. He towered over people, made himself heard every night in the crowded tavern, could hold everyone’s attention in the palm of his hand.

Her attention wandered elsewhere, shifting between his thighs. Normally when she stared at the loose fitting fabric of his pants, she was trying to interpret the folds for some kind of hint.

There was more than a hint present, an interested bulge cutting a half hard shape down his other pant leg.

It was so big, gravity drew her in. Her stare nearly took her down, her balance off kilter with the mulled wine. Or the spiced cider. Or the... what else had she drunk? Some mushroom flavored liquor?

Before Erryc could follow just how far down her gaze had taken her, she slipped and knocked her shoulder into his, landing against him bodily. He caught her, his massive hands around her upper back, one cupping her elbow.

“I’m fine,”

she said quickly, whether or not it was true. He was holding her so close, and she was still so dizzy, even with her hand splayed out across one side of his chest. Fawn’s beating heart stilled.

He took her chin in his hand, lifting her face to his. “Are you sure?”

Fawn blinked, her heart still catching up to how close he was holding her when he leaned down, nose to nose with her.

His eyes were such a dark brown, but here, the candlelight danced across them, catching and engraving a maze of details within them.

“As long as we’re just pretending,”

she sighed, the thought, the justification, the reason she could do this without putting her heart on the line, and then surged forward.

She kissed him again, deeply. Not the fearful peck she’d given him earlier. Fawn took his lower lip between hers, worrying her teeth against the soft inner side, brushing her tongue just over the sharp line of his teeth.

Fawn pulled back for a breath, and Erryc blinked at her.

For a heart-rending second, Fawn wondered if she'd crossed a line she shouldn't have, until a quiet sort of wonder and understanding spread across his face.

She leaned in to kiss him again, and this time he kissed her back. She threaded her hands in his hair, he adjusted his grip on her, cupping her ass to hold her close against him.

Against her leg, Fawn felt his hardened cock, straining through the fabric of his pants. She dragged a hand down the expanse of his chest, his stomach, to trace the shape of it through his pants.

Erryc's hands slid down her arms, capturing her hands. Fawn frowned, pulling out of their kiss. She swayed a little, realizing he had stopped her. She blinked.

"Fawn, no,"

Erryc sighed, holding her loosely in his grasp as she stood. "We shouldn't. It was wrong of me to let it get this far."

There was something in his tone, as he glanced back towards the festival, the market stalls. Was it simply that their little ruse had gone too far, that it wasn't worth the touching and kissing if their audience wasn't present?

Or was it just that he didn't feel quite the same way as she did?

Heat pricked under Fawn's collar, her heart rate picking up uncomfortably. She swallowed, her throat suddenly tight. So he did know how to refuse people directly, she was just the only one he'd needed it for.

His brow creased in worry, his hand closed gently around hers. “Fawn—”

Hot tears pricked in her eyes, and Fawn pulled her hands out of his grasp, disentangling herself from Erryc. Then she turned and ran.

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The snowfall wrapping the village in white was decidedly less romantic when Fawn was fleeing in embarrassment, slipping on the sporadic patches of compacted ice.

“Fawn, wait!”

Erryc called after her, but she didn’t turn around or slow down.

The festival was still in full swing, most of the distance Fawn was able to put between herself and Erryc was by slipping through the crowd easier. At a brisk pace, soon he was at least a hundred steps behind her.

It wasn’t just that he refused her, that she would never recover from the embarrassment. The worst of it was that she’d still shown her feelings when she thought she knew better. It hurt that what intimacy they’d shared wasn’t real, when she’d wanted it so badly. She had just taken what she could until she took too much.

Felt too much.

A thin, trickling creek wound down the hill, barely ten paces across, intersecting the main village road. The creaky wooden footbridge covered in a fresh layer of snow gave her pause as she reached partway across, her footing sliding uneasily on one board.

She stopped for breath there, leaning hard on the railing. The endless red burning her cheeks blurred her vision as well, her breath sharp and painful as tears fought exhausted gasps.

She didn't want his apology, or an explanation. The rejection stung enough without salt rubbed in it. She didn't need him to break her heart any further.

Despite herself, she looked back to him as Erryc reached her, and stepped up onto the bridge.

His eyes met hers for a heartbeat, his hand outstretched, her name on his lips, when the bridge groaned and the rotted wood finally snapped.

The bridge was not tall, and the creek was not very deep. The fall itself was nothing remarkable.

But the water was unlike anything she'd ever felt.

The plunge was so cold she could barely stand to open her eyes, it knocked all the breath from her chest. It burned, it pierced, it needled with a thousand pricks.

Erryc's hands were under her arms, lifting her out of the water quickly. Somehow it was worse than being in the freezing water. Even a slight wind cut bitter slices through her every staggered step.

Burning with cold, Fawn did not have the wherewithal to argue, when Erryc said around chattering teeth, "Th-the t-tavern's just up ahead. C-come in and dry off."

Each frozen step was barely any better than the last as they made their way out of the creek up the road.

The tavern was still icy and dark inside, but being out of the wind was enough to feel like she could finally take in a deep enough breath.

As soon as the tavern door swung shut again, Erryc went immediately to the cold

hearth, gathering bits of feathers and splinters from the ground under Fawn's usual table and striking flint into the pile.

Though the wood was dry, the smouldering pile of tinder scraps took a long, slow crawl to catch on the bark. The logs wouldn't fully burn for at least the better part of an hour.

Some small warmth emitted from the hearth, but it wasn't enough to permeate the layers of wet clothing. Fawn bent down to blow gently on the young fire, begging it to grow faster.

Erryc shed his cloak and hung it up by the fireplace to dry it out quicker. Then he shucked his boots, tossed them haphazardly towards the fire as well.

Fawn glanced at him between violent shivers, constantly worrying that he was injured from the fall. If not for their current circumstances, she would have avoided looking at him entirely. She had not forgotten his rejection just yet.

However, she forgot to breathe, forgot that she was even cold at all, when she caught sight of him grab a fistful of the back of his shirt, and pull the whole thing off over his head.

The creek might have shocked the drunken gaiety from her, but apparently it hadn't quenched other thirsts.

Fawn watched, rooted to the spot, as his hands began tugging at the laces of his pants, where the fabric was almost entirely soaked, chunks of snow and ice dripping off of him.

He looked up and met her eyes. Fawn blinked, supposed she ought to offer some normal, reasonable explanation why she'd been slack jawed and staring at him

undoing the lacing to his cock, but all she could do was let her teeth chatter.

“You’re soaked,”

he said, and let go of the laces.

For a moment, there was only the loss of him taking off his pants, then he moved to her, kneeling down before her. His hands went to the fastenings of her dress. Fawn closed her eyes as hot tears welled up, turning her back to him.

Countless times she had wanted something like this to happen, and yet it was so hollow after his rejection. Her heart was tearing itself into pieces. She ground her teeth together, and swallowed her tears back. He would not know how much she cared. She would not give him that.

Her petticoat came off quickly, the back of her dress opened up as he unlaced the bodice. She tugged at her sleeves and started to shrug out of it, stopping when she realized she would be naked after removing it.

Holding her cold wet dress to her chest, Fawn turned to Erryc, looking over her shoulder up through her eyelashes. She saw the same realization strike him as the icy weight of the water pulled the dress down, slowly peeling off her shoulders as she tried to hold it up.

“I’ll look away.”

Erryc had volunteered a touch too quickly, Fawn thought. There was awkwardness between them, and then there was him not wanting to see her naked even a little. It reaffirmed the realization she’d had at the fountain, that he had pulled away from her. He didn’t want from her what she had wanted from him.

Feeling all too much like a petulant child who'd been denied a treat, she kicked off the icy, soaked garment, leaving it in a puddle on the floor. She sat down in front of the little fire and hugged her knees to herself.

She might have felt self-conscious of her nakedness if she'd still hung her hopes on the daydream that one day he might see her and be so taken by maybe her tits or something that he realized that she had been worth loving all this time, that all this time she'd only needed to find the courage to take that first step.

But Fawn had known all along how silly a hope it was, nothing more than a fantasy. She just hadn't wanted to believe it. What did it matter now, if she bared her cold and clammy skin to him, with bits of silt and sand still sticking to her?

She supposed she ought to feel equally indignant that he thought she was useful as a deterrent for the other girls with their eyes on him, but right now what stung the most was that she'd gotten so twisted up in their game of make-believe that she'd forgotten it was only that.

"Uh, Fawn? Is it ok with you if I take off my pants? They're freezing."

"Yeah, whatever,"

she muttered against her knee, deciding to rest her attention in the corner of the hearth. The bronze handle of the fire poker was polished from the many times it had been used to stoke the fire. Colors swirled in the warped metal, Fawn slowly began to understand what she was seeing.

She dropped her eyes back to the floor as soon as Erryc stepped out of his pants and she glimpsed the sheer length and girth of Erryc's cock swinging between his legs.

She winced at herself, hating herself for still feeling that little thrill of desire and

curiosity that zipped through her stomach. Years of yearning could not be undone in an instant.

Fawn had glimpsed his cock once before, she'd stepped outside behind the tavern and accidentally glimpsed him relieving himself. She'd spent so many nights stroking herself over a glimpse of his broad, hairy chest or the massive stretch of his torso, the thickness of his forearms and wrists, or even those massive hands, that seeing all of him at once was completely overwhelming.

It was so long and thick, like nothing she'd ever seen on a human man, but on most horses. There was real heft and weight to it, curling down in a gracefully curved pointed tip while it was soft.

"You should lean against me, it'll help you warm up,"

Erryc offered, his tone not unfriendly, but clearly he did not enjoy the idea. Salt in a skinned knee.

"Fine. I don't want to get sick any more than you do,"

she muttered, too cold to imagine refusing, even with her pride. "We will simply bear it, despite the indignity."

"Indignity?"

he repeated, as if in disbelief she would choose such a word.

Fawn stared resolutely at the floor, refusing to elaborate. She held still, shoulders tensed and raised up by her ears.

After a breath or two, the floorboards creaked under him as he crossed to her side, his

joints crackled as he knelt down behind her on the bearskin rug.

Fawn refused to find any sort of pleasure or comfort in the slow-growing tepid temperature of his skin against hers as he stretched his legs out on either side of her, drawing a knee up. She could barely feel the touch of his inner thigh against her side, the hand he rubbed up and down her arm. Her throat grew tight as she felt her skin begin to thaw.

After tonight, they might not even be friends. No, worse. Tomorrow perhaps, Erryc might find it in himself to still offer her friendship, but her pride was too injured to allow her to receive it. She would never visit the tavern again. She would find a different path to walk, she would reroute her entire life around avoiding ever seeing him again.

Erryc's hand rubbing her arm slowed, dwindling down to just his thumb brushing back and forth over her shoulder.

"Can we talk about what happened at the fountain?"

"I'd rather we didn't."

"Clearly,"

he grumbled, blowing out a breath. "You would rather we shiver on the darkest, coldest night of the year than have a conversation."

"I'm not the one who broke the bridge."

"You couldn't stop and just talk to me anywhere else?"

"I stopped there because I thought it was the only place I thought you wouldn't

follow me! We fell in the creek because you did!”

“Fawn, I– no... you’re right. I’m sorry that I brought this on our friendship. I shouldn’t have involved you in my problems. I wanted to spare the feelings of others without even making them self conscious. I thought our friendship could withstand a little embarrassment. When I make a fool of myself in front of you, it’s easy to bear. You always just laugh it off, think nothing of it. I had imagined... perhaps you felt the same way about me.”

Fawn gritted her teeth together, then sighed. “I’m sorry, I don’t.”

He might have been the only person in the world she couldn’t stand to think of her as foolish, even in the slightest. It stung to hear how he perceived their relationship as so inconsequential that it didn’t matter what she thought of him.

She kept her gaze adamantly in front of her. The fire was starting to catch the rest of the log, its radiance finally permeating the room. The pair of them fell into silence, the room filled with only the crackle and occasional popping sound from the fire.

Her defensiveness died down as the moments stretched on, nothing said between them. It wasn’t true anger, only shame and regret. It cooled into sadness, the realization that even now, Erryc’s first priority was making sure she was warm and safe. She didn’t know how to put aside her damaged pride and just be truly vulnerable with him.

Drier, somewhat thawed, she suddenly felt more aware now of her nakedness than she had when she had first peeled her clothes off. Her body had been so cold it hadn’t felt like being exposed, but now that her blood had heated she felt every sensation that had been dulled before. His skin brushing against hers, the hair on his legs bracketing her, her naked pussy against the fur of the rug. Her nipples drew tight as he shifted behind her and something grazed her lower back.

Fawn swallowed back a moan as the sensation rippled through her, every part of her body becoming aware that she was sitting directly between his bare thighs— her clit pulsed awake, butterflies zipped through her middle, her core achingly empty and suddenly slick.

It was torture for him to keep touching her like this, to continue lighting sparks in her veins, to keep kindling lust with each caress. It shouldn't have aroused her the way it was. She hugged her knees in tighter to herself, putting the smallest sliver of space between her body and his, just to keep from touching.

“Do you really hate me that much?”

Erryc sighed, and she thought she felt his hand tense against her, before he removed it from her.

“I don't hate you,”

she murmured, “But I... wish I had not revealed so much of myself to you.”

“If I had a change of dry clothes here, I would—”

“Not my body, Erryc. My... feelings towards you,”

she said haltingly. Even beginning to voice it made her stomach contort with discomfort. “I don't know how I can ever face you now.”

“I thought I had stopped things soon enough—”

“You couldn't have prevented me from making a fool of myself.”

“Fawn, no. You did not.”

“Didn’t I? I did what all the rest of the girls do, flirting with you. I’ve seen so many try and fail. It was a mistake.”

Fawn dared a peek over her shoulder at Erryc. His mouth was set in a hard line, his hand balled up in a fist on his knee. “The fault is mine. I was selfish.”

She closed her eyes in exasperation. The last thing she wanted was Erryc to think he should have let her kiss him just to keep the peace between them. “It is not selfish to say no—”

“No, I... I was selfish in that I wanted it to go on. I waited over a year trying to find the right moment, and then you kissed me. You were stumbling down drunk, I didn’t know if you would even remember what you did in the morning and I let you go as far as you did because I wanted it. I wish I’d been stronger to do the right thing.”

Fawn frowned. Were they even speaking of the same thing? She had kissed him, and she had drunk a lot more than she usually did. She hadn’t realized how inebriated she must have looked to him, that he was concerned she couldn’t truly consent to her actions.

She held still, trying to swallow back the hope fluttering up her chest.

“You... wanted me to kiss you?”

She watched his expression carefully, how his pupils darkened and his nostrils flared, the way his eyes dipped briefly from her face to her bare breasts, and then pointedly away from her.

“Yes,”

he admitted, lashes dark against his cheeks, “Badly enough that I would even take a

meaningless drunken kiss.”

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Erryc

“Meaningless?”

Fawn twisted around fully in her place between Erryc’s legs, turning her knees onto the rug.

She had been as agitated tonight as he’d ever seen her, but the way her teeth gnashed down on that word, with true outrage in her eyes, he wondered how that was what had upset her the most.

Erryc’s mouth tightened on a frown, concern reaching his eyes as he realized she was facing him now, and though she had been naked this entire time, it felt somehow even more inopportune at this moment than others.

He tried, valiantly, not to look too much, even as his cock took interest. “You were drunk, you couldn’t have meant it—”

Again he couldn’t keep his attention from dipping to her breasts, hanging deliciously from her as she crawled towards him. Erryc moved to scoot backwards, but Fawn was faster, situating herself between his legs, sitting up on her heels so that she was nose to nose with him.

“Fawn,”

he breathed, something not unlike a whimper in his voice as he closed his eyes. The sight of her naked body so close to his was an exquisite torture. He suppressed a

groan as the blood rushed to his cock. Between their bodies, it grew longer, thicker, as it hardened.

It seemed absurd that there was any blood left for his cheeks to flush a deep, vivid green.

For all of the times Erryc had thought he was taking liberties with their friendship, none seemed quite as inappropriate as the way his heart quickened with lust as she frowned at him.

She was always so quiet, so reserved, he had never imagined she could be stern and fiery. The thought of her taking him to task was oddly thrilling, and completely ill-suited to this moment.

The firelight flashed against her eyes as she demanded, in the angriest of murmurs, “How could it not have meant anything when I was telling you how important you are to me?”

“I—that— you didn’t say that!”

“How can I say it when everyone’s saying how much you and the baker’s girl so clearly deserve each other, and no one thinks we’re suited for each other—”

“What? No, Fawn. I don’t want her.”

He covered her hand with his, twining their fingers together, holding her palm against his chest.

“You are special to me. Every time I see your cheeks turn red, I wish it was for me, that I might raise your pulse like you raise mine,”

Erryc murmured, hoping she understood how much she meant to him. “Every time I come into this room, I check the corner for if you’re here. When you’re not, I watch the road for you to come by, and when you are here, I’m hiding behind the bar trying to think of anything at all to get you to talk to me.”

She shook her head, as if this was impossible for her to believe. The orange glow of the fire caught in the tears lining her lashes.

“That was what started all this. I just, it didn’t seem like the right moment, at the festival. You were drunk, we were still pretending. I wanted to wait for a moment that it could be real.”

Fawn gestured wildly and seethed in a hushed whisper, “Are you fucking kidding me? You’ve been waiting for me to tell you I’m in love with you? This whole time?”

Never in a hundred years did he think she’d say those words, or that it would be so maddeningly adorable from the way she didn’t seem capable of actually raising her voice.

“You are?”

he gasped, realizing exactly how much of an idiot he had been. At the festival, he thought perhaps she was merely playing along in their charade. He had thought he had simply seen what he wanted to see when she looked at him with stars in her eyes. And when she’d tried to palm him at the fountain...

It was all genuine.

Erryc, completely disappointed in himself, failed to hold back the possessive growl that erupted from him as a wave of need and hope and want sent his cock twitching. His breath ragged with need, large beads of pre-cum welled up on his tip from his

dual slits, dripping down the length of his cock.

It bobbed, hard and needy between them. He saw her eyes dip towards it momentarily. “Can you stop that? I’m yelling at you!”

“You are whispering at me, at best.”

Fawn sat back on her heels with a look of disbelief, before she rubbed the heel of her hand against her eye. “How are we both this dense? Why couldn’t you say it first? You’re the one who actually knows how to say things to people!”

“I didn’t want you to just say yes because you always say yes to me—”

“But I would have said yes in a heartbeat,”

she moaned, squeezing her eyes shut.

Erryc couldn’t help but wince at his own foolishness, and laugh. Maybe they both would have kept misinterpreting each other forever if they hadn’t fallen in the river.

“Come here. I love you,”

he said, grinning, reaching towards her and cupping her cheek in his palm. “You can keep whisper-yelling at me if you want.”

Her eyes were as dark as the brown bear fur rug beneath her, and he loved the way they crinkled at the corners when she smiled. He lived for these moments where she truly lit up.

Fawn put her arms around his neck and pressed her mouth to his. Erryc fell back on the ground with an arm around her, holding her tight, his cock trapped between them,

her fire-warmed skin incredibly soft against him.

Her knees fell on either side of his torso, a hot, slick sensation dragging against the shaft of his cock as she straddled him. He saw the flicker of pleasure in her eyes as she felt it too, steadying herself with her hands on his chest.

Suddenly, every foolish thing he'd asked of her today had been worth it, even when she finally stopped on that damn bridge.

"I can't believe you were waiting for me to say something first,"

she sighed, shaking her head.

She moved herself forward, rocking her hips against him. Erryc let out a hiss of breath as her wet cunt nestled against the leaking tip of his cock. There was pleasure in exploring her rosy, wet folds against him, and at the same time, low in his stomach, agony that it was not enough.

"I can't believe you'd only kiss me if you thought it didn't count,"

he returned, gritting his teeth against a moan.

Fawn leaned back to toss her still damp hair over her shoulders, the fire silhouetting her in gold and orange. "Pretending was your idea."

Between their bodies, the flushed purple head of his cock peeked out from just under the crux of her legs. Her hand swept down his chest, her fingertips tracing his tip.

His brows knit together and he let out a slow, gravelly breath as each sweet, teasing motion made his whole body tense under the pleasure. Her thumb passed over one of his slits and his hips jerked, bouncing her a few inches into the air.

“I don’t know, I thought, maybe in another six months or a year we would look back on it and laugh. Maybe one day you’d say something about our little charade that would tell me if I had a chance with you or not.”

“A chance with me?”

she repeated with a giggle, as if that was so absurd. “Erryc, I have wanted you for years.”

Years. Gods, he’d been so dense.

Fawn sat up on her heels, her delicate fingers guiding his cock head to her entrance, parting her slick folds with it. She let out a little needy whine as his tip pressed into her, already a narrow fit. Fawn rocked her hips, trying to take in more of his cock than was probably wise. She was so different from him, he wasn’t sure how much she would be able to pleasurably take.

“Fawn, I’m not sure it’ll fit—”

Already she was spreading her legs as wide as she could just to accommodate the width of his torso. “It will. Just try.”

Erryc propped himself up on an elbow, cradling a massive hand under her bottom. He lifted his hips into hers again. She was teasing him in, an inch at a time, until there was surely barely room to breathe.

“Fuck, you’re so tight.”

“Now you know how the cork felt,”

she gasped, wincing through a smile.

“You’ve got this,”

the orc murmured, the words impossibly soft through his tusks. “There. That’s my girl.”

Her cheeks burned in the flush that reached her ears, her neck and shoulders. The firelight glinted through her hair, wreathing her in gold. She was so beautiful, he couldn’t believe he’d been missing all the times he could have seen her like this.

The wet sounds of her cunt taking his cock to capacity as he tenderly thrust his hips into her were nearly enough to push him over the edge.

Each time it was answered by the slow drag of his tongue over one of her breasts, catching her nipple in his mouth for a hard suck.

“Erryc, oh, just like that,”

she whined, threaded her fingers through his hair and held him in place against her. He understood instantly, and held on for a long suck, flicking his tongue rapidly over the tight bud of flesh between exhales. She gasped, and soon he felt her core contract around him.

Her pleasure was evident, her body jerked, her core twitching around his cock. She gave a strangled gasp as her hands fisted in his hair, clinging to his shoulders. He sucked her nipple harder, spurring on her release.

Erryc couldn’t hold back, not when she was in his arms, soft and cozy, the smell of her hair, the sound of her cry as her warm cunt squeezed, tight and fluttery around him. He lost himself, groaning, rutting into her with reckless abandon. The sensation raked down his middle, his balls tightening as the current of his release took over.

His cock pulsed once, twice, hard, as he let out a deep throaty growl, answered with a brazen cry from Fawn. She moaned as each hot spurt of his seed filled her, again and again. Her hips bucked at the sensation, her knees drawing tight against his torso. His arms crushed her body to his until it was over.

Fawn melted down on top of him, sprawling out across his middle, still twitching from the aftershocks of her orgasm.

“You still owe me a favor, you know,”

she panted. “‘Anything in the world,’ you said.”

Erryc couldn’t help the dazed, lovelorn look that crossed his face as he gazed upon her.

“Name it,”

he laughed.

Erryc rolled her over to lay on the bearskin rug between him and the fire. Her thighs were a drippy mess as his softening cock eased out of her.

For a moment there was only the sound of their breath between them and the crackle of the fire over them, its heat enveloping them. By now it had grown, filling the room with dancing shadows.

“I want this. Every day. And a bite of whatever you’re eating for the rest of your life.”

“That’s two things. But I’ll allow it,”

he murmured, burying his face between the side of her neck and her shoulder. That was a bargain he thought he might be getting the better end of.

Fawn settled further against him, stifling a yawn in his hair. She drew a hand up and down his shoulder, tracing little circles against his skin until her breath deepened and slowed.

With wind howling outside, the logs on the fire were burning well, sleep was a terribly convincing argument to the warm, exhausted bodies inside.

Erryc woke first, blinking awake as a ray of light from the frosted windows poked him in the eye.

Somehow, during the night the bearskin rug had become more blanket than mattress, the pair of them curled up together in front of the fading embers of the logs.

Erryc pushed himself up on an elbow, careful not to disturb Fawn or detangle himself from her just yet. Her head rested on his forearm, likely the culprit of the prickly sensation in that hand.

How long had she been just within reach? How long had he been in his own way?

It didn't matter now. They had all the time in the world left to make up for all the moments they'd missed out on waiting across the room from each other.

He couldn't help but grin at nothing in particular when he realized the snow piled up along the window meant he had at least a few more hours with just her, before they had to worry about regular life. A slow, snowy morning with her sounded like the most perfect thing in the world right now.

Fawn yawned and stretched, rolling over in Erryc's arms. She raised an eyebrow at

the rug that was now more blanket than mattress, but shook off her concerns to press a kiss to Erryc's mouth instead.

“Morning.”

“Morning yourself,”

he grinned back, without a care in the world that he looked like a lovelorn fool. And the way she stretched and settled in his arms, grinning blearily back, he hoped she didn't either.

“Can I interest you in breakfast?”

“Always,”

she smiled, sitting up to kiss him. “I seem to recall you saying something about making the best hotcakes in the whole Chasm.”

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Bianca

Bianca nudged the snow-covered stone with the tip of her boot. She frowned at the way dirt clung to the underside in clumps. There was likely going to be all sorts of huge pill bugs and beetles underneath.

Normally, she would have screamed at the sight of insects. But Valspire had instructed all not to disturb the quiet with even too loud a breath while the Hyphae traveled through this part of the Whispering Woods. Their revered, all-knowing, benevolent director had repeated this sentiment to Bianca with a stern glare and a forceful poke with the blunt end of her staff. Nothing would interrupt their travels to perform for the Winter Solstices at the next six cities or so.

Thus, she chewed the corners of her mouth shut and swallowed a gagging feeling in her throat back as she nudged the stone again and shifted it enough for it to roll downhill, carving a path through the blanket of snow on the ground, and releasing a small swarm of insects to flee in all directions.

Behind her, Horace nickered, sniffing at the ground for any bit of vegetation.

“Shh, oh, you are not helping,”

Bianca waved a hand at the impatient nag. She wasn’t supposed to be letting him snack on the job, but she couldn’t handle both a horse and the bugs. Besides, what sort of cruel person was anti-snack?

“Ew. Eww, ew, ewwwwww. Oh Silvan don’t let any of them come near me,”

she mumbled, a small prayer to be saved from her current peril.

Horace gave a little snort, it sounded oddly judgemental and derisive, as if to say, ‘Whoever heard of a Halfling afraid of bugs!’

Look for mushrooms. Always look for mushrooms, always unpack the caravans, always repair costumes. It had been months since she’d been promised the chance to shine on stage, her dark skin glowing under the stage lights, her hair twisted with bright, gorgeous ribbons. It sounded marvelous, but she’d yet to even once experience it. Silvan forbid, Bianca be allowed to do anything else for their troupe. She’d only ever caught their campsite on fire once, and that was ages ago!

Valspire had spent the better part of an hour lecturing their traveling theater troupe about new rules for behavior in the Whispering Woods. ‘Be on your guard,’ the director had warned the lot with a glare, and Bianca had done her best impression of Val’s stern pout from just behind her. She only got caught when one of the younglings snorted. Child actors.

Valspire had continued, after a brief recess, to reprimand Bianca that there were a great many things to fear in the Whispering Woods. Things that a traveling band of actors could not hope to defend themselves from, like thieves, murders, assassins, and most fearsome of all, spiders.

It wasn’t fair. Bianca grumbled to herself under her breath, setting her basket aside to crouch down and root her fingers through the frozen soil.

Soon enough, but not so soon to prevent dirt from caking under her nails, she found the soft, delicate mycelium she was searching for. The fungal roots were clustering thicker and thicker as she traveled west, and would hopefully reveal a few blooms somewhere. This morning had given her little luck with foraging. Though in her opinion, going out to forage for mushrooms in winter was a fool’s errand. Especially

when saddled with the camp's worst horse. She couldn't be expected to produce much under these circumstances, truly.

Partially satisfied, she stood, brushed her hands off, and froze.

It would have been one thing if she had spotted the orc far off in the clearing, so she could hope to melt into the ground and hope her mottled cloak would be enough to camouflage her against the white terrain. But he was hardly a few yards from where she stood, staring right into her.

Bianca had seen orcish people before, often the merchants or wandering trader variety. As a Halfling they were all tall to her, but she didn't think they were supposed to be quite that large. But this one, cloaked all in deerskins, stood at least twice her height.

Surely, a hulking brute like that one ought to make more noise? She hadn't heard him approach, not so much as a crusted ice crunch underfoot, nor a branch snap, nor a breath—

A breath. She was holding hers like she had forgotten to use it to scream.

Move on, move on, move on, she willed silently as the orc stared her down, unmoving.

Her heart stuttered to a near stop when the orc took a lumbering step towards her. She couldn't tell if the earth shook or if it was just her knees quaking as he approached.

She should have taken off in the other direction the moment she saw him, but she knew she would never outpace him, even with a head start. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced to Horace, steadily plodding away from her in search of grass. Dammit.

The most she could ever hope for was to hold still and hope the orc had worse cataracts than the troupe's director. Maybe he would mistake her for some sort of shapely, well-dressed sapling, she tried to console herself, even as she despaired.

Then, Silvan save her— the orc reached for her.

Bianca curled in on herself, closing her eyes tight and flinching. Of course this was how she died, a lack of vigilance and an excess of her own foolishness.

She waited several moments for death. It took its sweet time.

Ever impatient, she opened an eye. The orc's hand hovered just by her face, letting a centipede as long as her forearm crawl off her shoulder onto his hand.

For once, Bianca's revulsion of bugs did not overtake her senses. She couldn't blink, her heart could not beat, until the horrid thing was removed from her person.

The orc tossed it aside. Distantly, Bianca registered the bug hit a leaf before it wriggled back under into the dirt, the only sound in the whole forest.

She held the brute's eyes, deep set and dark under wild brows. His expression was impossible to read between the blue streaks of paint across his face and the shadowed cowl of his deerskin. This close she could see the bones of smaller beings stitched into his leathers, the tooth earring, the long scars across his nose.

"Your gods may not have heard you,"

he said in a low voice. "But I did."

It was that hint of amusement in his voice that made her realize he was looking at her as if she was some silly curiosity, a Halfling complaining about grubs in the forest,

while she might as well have been a rabbit trapped in a snare. She had been so focused on the sharp points of his tusks she couldn't see his smile.

A shaky breath started to tumble out of her, but a large green finger pressed quickly over her mouth.

She watched the orc's eyes shift further in the clearing.

Suddenly, there was something larger and much scarier in the woods than an orc.

Bianca heard the faint rumble of its breath before she saw it. She almost didn't realize what it was, she'd never seen one not made out of paper.

A huldira, drooling over dagger-long teeth, a thick plated hide down its massive back and fur more matted than a bear or boar's, sniffing through the underbrush. Searching, likely, for little morsel-sized creatures like herself.

Not even a breath.

Bianca took a step away from the beast without even realizing, crouching down into the weeds, snatching her basket up off the snowy ground. She didn't know why, it wasn't any good as protection. She didn't have anything else with her though, no weapons, nothing besides a little pocket knife, blunt from use and best for hacking at roots.

She glanced between the huldira and the orc, and took in the longbow and quiver full of arrows slung around the orc's shoulders that she hadn't noticed before. He drew one, sharp and nasty with some kind of pitch coating the tip, notching it in his bow, not yet taking aim.

Perhaps there was less immediate peril beside this danger, than there was the one that

could swallow her whole.

Bianca bit down on her tongue, willing herself to disappear into the ground. Maybe there was a safe, unusually large rabbit burrow she could curl up in.

No such luck. The orc met her eyes again, and Bianca held a hand over her mouth. He gave her a brief nod, before taking aim at the beast.

His arrow parted the air almost silently, carving a path through the thick falling snowflakes.

With a screech that shook a hundred birds from the trees, the huldira reared back on its haunches, tearing swipes through the nearby greenery with its massive front claws. It was reacting as if it had been bitten by something, she realized, only a second before the orc's hand grabbed the cowl of her cloak and started dragging her to a nearby bush.

“That wasn't enough to kill it?”

She whispered, looking frantically at the orc. He pulled another pitch-tipped arrow, notching it as the beast raged on.

He didn't answer, keeping his attention trained on the huldira. The beast continued to scream and snap and stomp around, looking for what could have pierced its shaggy hide, and the cover of the bushes felt like little more protection than wet paper. Bianca whispered, “Where do we go?”

He looked back at her, assessing a moment, before he glanced up at the trees nearby.

“What am I, a squirrel?”

It fell out of her mouth in indignation, before she even realized it was a mistake.

She caught the way his eyebrows raised in surprise before the beast roared, and began stomping towards them. In less than a heartbeat, he was standing, drawing the string all the way back to his cheek.

She couldn't stay here, in the beast's path. The orc took aim again, as she shuffled back in the brush. After a few steps, Bianca got to her feet and ran, not caring what direction her camp was in. Assuming he didn't get eaten, the horse could figure it out too.

She heard the arrow whistle through the air a second time before the huldira gave another piercing scream.

Bianca ran for several minutes, until she saw another, deeper thicket she could hide in, crawling under the branches. She sunk down onto her haunches and put her head between her knees. Then she choked out a cough as her heart tried to figure out how to resume normally, having already presumed the death of her.

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The hairs standing up on her arms were finally starting to go down.

Bianca waited a while in her hiding spot, listening intently for anything that might have followed or found her. When her heart finally stopped thudding in her chest, she hoped it was safe enough to make her way back to her troupe's camp.

Horace wasn't anywhere in sight, and neither were any of the tracks he'd made on the way into the woods.

For the next hour or longer, she scrambled through full, prickly bushes with the quickly fading light, stumbling shin-first through many plants.

One thicket of trees was so dense and so wide she supposed to herself that she had turned entirely around the other way trying to get around it.

She wouldn't really. She had only been walking a few moments, and as long as she continued in a straight line, she would be able to find her way around the thicket.

Or, no, that wasn't it. It would be a curved line, hugging the edge of the thicket.

Bianca frowned, glancing around. No, she had lost the edge of the thicket too.

Oh no.

It was so dark. If only she'd thought to bring a torch and flint earlier. She turned around in circles frantically, looking for any bit of campfire light to peek through the treeline. It was dark in every direction. She could barely see her hand before her.

Worst came to worst, perhaps she could curl up in a tree for the night if she had to, and find her camp in the morning. Though that heavily depended on whether she could actually climb a tree.

She turned around again, hoping she was headed back where she came from. She kicked through the undergrowth, trampling one plant after another as she made her way forward. Finally the first glimpse of a flickering light caught her eye in the distance, and she hurried towards it.

Normally the Hyphae circled their camp in fallow fields barely off the main road when there were no nearby towns to find a bed at. There was no such open space here. When she'd last seen it, trees stood even in the middle of the camp, and to fit the circle some caravans were awkwardly placed almost flushed against trees and rocky outcrops, some angled drastically against the tumultuous landscape.

Her relief was short lived, however, as she drew nearer and realized the light was from a single campfire tucked against the underside of a small cliff.

Bianca stopped short, hiding partially behind a tree as she looked on.

The orc from before.

Finally she let herself exhale, just a bit. There was a fallen log he had made his seat at as he turned a skewered giant rat over the fire. The rat looked almost normal sized next to him.

His cowl was pulled back, revealing the little tuft of tied back hair, the shaved sides of his head, the pointed green ears, little tears and piercings decorating the edges.

The fire crackled and popped. Every few seconds a bit of fat melted from the blistering rat and dripped, sizzling onto the fire. It was making her stomach grumble

just looking at it, and she'd never liked eating charred rats.

He looked up from the skewered rat when she approached. He said nothing, but regarded her cautiously. Of course.

"Thank you for...earlier. And sorry for um, any inconvenience right now,"

she whispered, eyes downcast to the fire. She went ahead and sat down on the fallen log next to him.

His frown deepened. He didn't say anything, just grunted. "Hm."

Bianca swallowed to get her fear under control. She needed to show a brave front. "Scared me half to death with that silent act of yours. Coulda let me know we were allies."

"We're not,"

he said quietly, and Bianca suddenly felt that she was far too close to him for comfort.

She pleaded with her eyes silently, hoping that whatever reasons he had spared her in the woods would also preserve her now. Maybe halflings were more trouble than they were worth to orcs. She didn't really know, being only a traveler through these parts.

"W-we could be allies,"

she stuttered, trying to think desperately for anything. "What's your name?"

He was quiet several long moments, to the point she did not think he would deign to answer her further. At last he sighed and nudged the campfire with the tip of his boot,

rolling a log deeper into the flames. “Tanis, son of Dhane the Bloodthirsty, son of Dhullen the Unwise, kin of Garac the Bonecrusher, daughter of Res—”

“Bianca,”

she interrupted him before he could trace his entire lineage and their exploits. She was half afraid he would list someone in his ancestry named ‘Halfling-Eater’.

After a long moment of staring, he prompted her, “...Kin of?”

“Just, um, Bianca Chanterelle,”

she shrugged. She could try to name her parents to him but it wasn’t like he would know who a couple of random Halflings were.

Tanis lifted one quizzical, near judgmental eyebrow. Oh, so the weirdos that don’t do second names at all will judge her for a perfectly common Halfling name? She wasn’t about to let that pass.

She dug through her basket until she found the particular orange floret she was looking for.

“Chanterelle,”

she said, waving the mushroom that shared her name.

Tanis’ eyes followed her hand as she waved it. She tore the chanterelle in half and offered one to him, biting into her piece.

He took it, and tried a nibble. She watched as he contemplated it, then added it to the long thin skewer with the singed rat.

“Kin to mushrooms,”

he said, a grimace of a smile playing on his face, like he had a fishhook caught in the corner of his mouth. He made amusement look positively morbid.

“I... yeah,”

Bianca nodded, trying not to back away suddenly. The firelight dancing across his tusked grin was definitely not helping with her heart rate. She returned her gaze to the basket, though only a few mushrooms were left in it. “I like finding them all over the Warlock’s Coast. It makes new places feel like home, y’know?”

He didn’t answer, and for several moments there was only the sound of the wind and the fire before them, crackling as more fat sizzled off the giant rat. Maybe it was a little silly to talk to an orc about mushrooms. The Hyphae troupe could talk endlessly about all the different variations and species and where they’d spotted some, but that was easily interesting to most halflings. And Silvan forbid— if there was a pair of lookalike species, that would spark debates for weeks.

“Do you have uh, friends in the area? Or family? Are uh, Dhane and Garac there?”

Bianca tried, looking earnestly at her orc companion.

The light from the fire flickered across his stoic face.

“There’s a camp. Northwest. Some other rangers in the wood.”

“Oh! That’s nice. It’s so good to have people to keep you company. Were you all hunting for food?”

“No.”

Bianca huffed a breath. This guy was like making conversation with a wall.

After a few moments, he added, unbidden, “There were some... betrothal rituals I wanted to avoid today.”

“Like a friend’s? Or ex lover?”

She asked a little too quickly. It was hard not to have a nose for gossip in her own acting troupe, where there was always someone being cheated on or broken up with.

“My own.”

“Oh.”

Oh.

It looked like a touchy topic. His face had darkened somehow even more than its usual less than cheery state. His hands had curled into fists. Bianca quickly tried something else.

“...Did you end up bringing down that huldira? From before?”

she asked. Those in her acting troupe with training in stage fighting often liked to dissect the choreography of a fight they’d seen, even spontaneous ones. “How many, uh, arrows did it take?”

He shook his head. “I wounded it, but it got away.”

Suddenly, the impenetrable dark depths of the Whispering Woods seemed that much more hostile, with the thought of a wounded, angry huldira skulking about.

“Oh. Are you going to... get it tomorrow?”

she tried, hoping that it might be that simple. The beast seemed a lot more ferocious than any game she'd eaten, but maybe it wasn't unusual for this neck of the woods.

“I was never going to kill it alone. We were tracking it so a larger hunting party might stand a chance of bringing it down.”

On that, Bianca scooted a little closer on the log to her orc companion, allies or not.

This forest might become home if she didn't make it back to her acting troupe's camp. And considering this evening's events, she would not make it very long.

Bianca felt a pang of guilt for Horace – the poor old thing didn't deserve to get eaten by a vicious monster.

She wondered if they were worried about her, if they had realized she was gone too long. Would they look for her? Or was she one less mouth to feed as their supplies ran low? If she could find her way back, would they care about all the brushes with death she'd had today, or just that she came back empty handed? It wasn't like she was bringing a lot of value to their shows. Anyone could open and close the curtains on cue.

“You were looking for these?”

Tanis asked, suddenly a conversationalist. She followed his gaze to her near-empty basket of foraged mushrooms. “Before.”

She nodded.

“I know a clearing full of them, stone's throw from here.”

Bianca couldn't disguise the hope that leapt into her chest. If she could bring some back with her, then she wasn't useless. Her head whipped around. "Will you show me?"

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“HOW FAR CAN YOU ACTUALLY THROW A STONE,”

Bianca griped, because they had been hiking around the mountain deer paths over a half hour, tripping over roots and rocks in the dark, trudging through slick snow and ice. It was hard to keep up with him, seeing as every step he took spanned about the distance that three of her's would take. She'd gotten tired of calling out to him to slow down or wait up, and had resorted to holding onto the end of his cloak.

“I'm starting to think you're as lost as I am,”

she grumbled, readjusting her grip.

“Am not.”

“Really?”

“I'll get back to my camp before you find yours.”

“If you can find your camp you should be able to find this mushroom deposit in at least a much closer amount of time, unless you can throw a stone that will stay in the air for hours at a time,”

Bianca lamented, not helping the fact that even clutching onto his clothes she was out of breath from keeping up.

“Is that a riddle?”

Bianca stopped, letting out an irritated huff. She put her hand on her hip as the orc turned around to look at her. Her sense of self preservation, if she ever had one, evaporated when she saw his displeased frown in the light of his torch. “What, was that too many words in a row for you?”

“I don’t like riddles.”

“Tough.”

“Tough?”

“Too bad. Riddles should be answered. It’s rude to leave a girl hanging,”

she said as coolly as if she were scolding someone she had at least a chance of successfully tackling.

Tanis scoffed again as he turned around to continue leading the way. “It’s not, because I’m not rude.”

Such sound logic.

“Then answer my riddle.”

Bianca caught a glimpse of Tanis rolling his eyes. “My kind are not the tricky, sly ones. Yours are.”

“My kind,”

she repeated, narrowing her gaze at him. Orcs didn’t exactly have a reputation for being charming either, but she chewed her tongue on the retort. There was some benefit to survival in not antagonizing him, surely.

Then again, Bianca didn't have much in the way of survival skills, as today had already proven.

"You're so sure of that? Maybe you're tricky. Maybe this is all a ruse to lure me into a false sense of complacency before you snap me in half and use my bones to pick your teeth."

That got a laugh out of him.

She opened her mouth again to fashion yet another retort, but it died on her inhale, as she stepped around a large tree and a clearing came into view.

Unlike the rest of the forest, blanketed in a heavy snow, this was like a patch of spring had been forgotten. It was lush and green, lit up by luminescent flowers and fungi that curled up trees and carpeted the ground.

"How is this possible?"

"There's an underground river that vents to the surface every few miles. My party's camped by the springs a half mile or so north. We call these Fey Wells."

Bianca wasn't really listening. She had never seen so many chanterelle blooms out of season. This part of the Whispering Woods was oddly and unseasonably warm. Her heavy winter cloak felt hot against her shoulders.

She hurried into the clearing, going up to the biggest yellow floret. It was twice as big as her hand. Her basket wouldn't be big enough to take as many as she was seeing, but she would stuff it to capacity. She took out her little pocket knife and began harvesting immediately.

There were other mushroom species in bloom as well, some she recognized, others

that were strange to her.

After a few minutes of cutting the blooms and stuffing them in her basket, she felt Tanis' shadow fall over her again, and when she turned to look he was crouched beside her.

The corners of his mouth were downturned, but there was something about his eyes and the way he lifted his brows that made her think he was trying really hard not to smile. Then his eyes returned back to the ground, and a true grimace took place.

He was frowning at the mushrooms, like they were personally offensive, though there weren't any of the stinkhorn variety present. "How do you know they're not poisonous?"

"Well, you're not supposed to do it like this. I have gotten sick from this method, but it hasn't killed me yet,"

Bianca shrugged, ripping a mushroom in half. She held its newly exposed flesh against her tongue, and grimaced. "This one is bad. The taste is like it's stabbing my tongue."

She offered the other half to him, expecting him to take it. But he took her wrist in his hand, putting the back of her hand against his tongue. "Tastes like a halfling."

Bianca stared, wide eyed, frozen. The devilish smile faded from his face. He dropped her wrist and stepped back.

"I'm not actually going to eat you,"

he rolled his eyes.

Somehow that wasn't actually what she was concerned about, at the moment.

Wasn't there supposed to be some kind of instinct to flee or throw a punch? All Bianca was feeling was a wave of warmth and flutters low in her stomach.

What a strange orc. She'd really only heard about how they were viscous in battles and not to fight one if she could avoid it. And she'd never really questioned that, because it made some sense not to go toe-to-toe with someone literally twice her size.

"Thank you for bringing me here. I don't think I would have found this place at all on my own,"

Bianca started to say, before she shook her head. She had already spent too much time chatting about pointless things with him, when she should have been more concerned with getting back to her troupe. "Can you help me find my friends? They have a camp somewhere in the woods, probably closer to where you found me."

He nodded slowly. "It'll be easier to get back there in the daylight. I'll take you to them in the morning."

That was something, and it felt good to have that settled. Even if he did make her heart beat wildly in all sorts of places it shouldn't, she did feel safer with him than she would have on her own.

Bianca returned to piling up different mushrooms in her basket, more than half full now with everything from morels to boletes and king trumpets. Every time she turned to toss a couple more in, she felt him watching her. The silence stretched between them, and Bianca had never been great at silence. Even during her troupe's plays, she often found herself whispering and giggling backstage. "Hey. Um. Tell me more about the whole betrothal ritual thing."

He lifted an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because you mentioned it earlier, and I don’t know what else to ask about?”

She watched him cross his arms and lean against a tree. At first she didn’t think he would answer her, but then he sighed and shrugged.

“I don’t know how halflings do it. It’s a... courtship by combat thing. Drawing first blood. If it starts the Blood Fever, you’ve found your mate. But that rarely actually happens.”

Bianca couldn’t conceal her surprise. Not exactly how she pictured betrothal normally. But at the same time, there was something nice about the idea of having a mate. Knowing where you were meant to be, a real answer instead of hoping this path was the right one.

He shrugged and continued on. “At this point it’s mostly custom. But someone who may want to join their lineage to yours might start picking fights.”

“They really want in on the whole Son of Bloodthirsty, Kin to Bonecrusher line?”

“Some find it valuable.”

“Yeah, but, people randomly fighting you? That sounds exhausting. I’m sorry you’re going through that,”

she said, sitting back on her heels. She watched his posture soften, the tension leaving his crossed arms.

Bianca sighed and hefted her much heavier basket to the next patch of morels. “Being wanted for the wrong reasons sucks. It’s almost like not being wanted at all, because

they don't really see you."

She stopped picking mushrooms for a moment. She had that same problem with a few members of her acting troupe, usually the leads of their productions. They probably didn't even realize she was gone.

"The actors who invited me to travel with them said that I had talent for the stage—but I haven't been on it once in a whole year. I'm just another pair of hands around the camp, now."

She glanced at Tanis again. Even if he was a bit rude for her taste in company, she wanted him to know she was grateful. "I know you were probably just trying to make sure I didn't scare off that huldira you were tracking, but I'm glad you didn't just let it... trample me, eat me, or whatever."

She wasn't sure how to word her question without actually asking if orcs ate halflings. Why did you save me, why are you putting up with me, why aren't you like the orcs I've been warned about?

"I'd never seen a Halfling before,"

Tanis offered, as if he gleaned her question from her face. "Only heard stories."

She dared a coy glance back at him as she advanced into the grove. "Oh. Do I live up to them?"

"No. You're not nearly as...ugly as we're told."

"What! That's rude. We're not that different from orcs, just proportioned a little differently,"

she stammered on. Well, no halfling she had ever met had tusks, or been green.

“You are short,”

Tanis allowed with an eye roll.

“Maybe you’re just oversized. Everyone insists on calling us ‘Halflings’, but maybe you should just call yourselves ‘Doublings’, and us by our proper name.”

She leveled a look at Tanis then, and she saw him try to do the math in his head. Perhaps the art of sums was not valued among orcs, since he seemed to struggle with her logic.

“Because we are twice the... proportion?”

he ventured after a moment, tilting his head.

Bianca opened her mouth to answer, but stopped short. Her eyes dipped below his belt.

She might have been a little too obvious because Tanis followed her gaze, brushing off his pants as if he thought she might have seen another bug.

“Anyway, don’t you know saying ‘you’re not as ugly as you might be’ to a girl is rude? I mean, I’m not saying you should compliment me but this alliance won’t go very far if you’re going to insult me,”

she prattled on, cheeks heating, turning her face away so her fluster wouldn’t be so obvious.

“Our alliance,”

he repeated, like it was still news.

Bianca huffed, “Yes, that. Because we’re allies. Keep up.”

She turned away, reaching for a pinkish cluster of fungal shelves rooted in the bark of a nearby tree. It was just a little too high for her, but she could see a sturdy branch just under her prize.

Before she could even begin to plan how she would scale the tree, she felt that shadow fall over her again, and Tanis was reaching for the cluster of chicken-in-the-wood mushrooms before she could even ask for help.

He cut the mushroom from the tree with his own knife, leaving as little as possible of the base behind, in a manner that suggested he had been carefully watching how she had done it. Then he turned back to her, coming down to kneel on one knee before her, level with her for the first time.

Bianca pretended to eye the mushroom he offered her, though she was much more interested in the hand that held it. “If we’re not allies, aren’t you being a little too nice? This morning’s fright was nearly spot on, but I think now you’ve exhausted your helpfulness quota for the month.”

“I can be unhelpful and tip your basket over,”

he offered with a tusked grin. The flashes of teeth had been giving her little pricks of panic ever since she’d first seen him, but they were starting to feel a little differently. Less in the middle of her chest and a little bit lower.

“Not what I meant.”

Bianca stepped forward to take the chicken-of-the-woods bloom from him, but her

foot skidded out to the side, sliding in the mud beneath her. She leaned back quickly, overbalancing, finally catching a handful of his shirt to steady herself.

It was barely a second, but now she was standing so much closer to him, nearly fallen bodily into him. His large hand was against her hip, arm nearly curled around her as if he would have pulled her into his chest, if she'd been any less sure of her footing.

There he was again, likely to win most helpful orc of the month.

He let out a breath, nearly a laugh, perhaps at how much trouble she was just to be around. "Sometimes curiosity gets the better of me."

Bianca blinked a few times. She almost forgot she'd asked him a question in that heartbeat. "What were you curious about?"

One corner of his mouth ticked up. "Halflings. I told you, never seen one before."

"And now you've seen me."

And tasted. She tilted her head up just enough to look him fully in the face, to see the deep, earthy brown of his eyes. "Still curious?"

He was quiet for a moment, eyes unfocused before his gaze dipped just to her mouth. He met her stare again. "Still."

Goosebumps.

“Are we there yet?”

“Just a bit further.”

Bianca stifled maybe the hundredth yawn of the evening. As much as a nice warm tent with blankets and soft furs to sleep in sounded, curling up on the ground clutching her cloak tight around her was starting to sound good enough.

Tanis was carrying her basket because he started insisting Bianca was walking slower with it so full. It was a good deal heavier, but nothing she couldn't manage. She'd had plenty of lifting and carrying heavy boxes for setting up her troupe's stage and costumes with their life on the road, but it was... nice.

“Are we going to have to say hello to people or—oop!”

she squeaked, as her face became immediately acquainted with his thigh, and the world became dark, his fur cloak covering her entirely as she clung to his leg.

There was the sound of crunching snow underfoot as someone approached, and she kept still and quiet. Wide awake now. Clearly introductions were not part of his plan.

“Son of Dhane,”

an unfamiliar voice growled, rougher than Tanis', but with the same orcish drawl. “A bit late to be out.”

“I lost track of time, stalking the Huldira.”

“Unwise. A huldira would likely sneak up on you again in the dark.”

“I did realize that. I’ll do better tomorrow with some sleep in me.”

“Not much sleep left to get this night. There’s plans for a larger hunting party when the rest of our rangers return...”

The voice trailed off. Tanis was still holding her basket, Bianca realized. She could practically feel the attention of whoever had stopped them eyeing it with as much suspicion as Tanis had when she’d first given him one, if not more.

“I found this,”

Tanis offered after a moment. “Next to some scavenged remains.”

Too long a beat of silence went by.

“I thought, why bring it back empty?”

Tanis offered, and Bianca winced. Perhaps she hadn’t noticed it before because she had been too afraid of a stranger, but he was a terrible liar. “And... maybe we could find some use for these.”

There was a noise Bianca recognized all too well, the I’m-not-dealing-with-your-nonsense sort of groan that her troupe director was so fond of making.

“Fine. Give it to the stitchers, but I don’t want to see you wasting your time like that again.”

She only had a moment to wrap her arms and legs around his leg, as he took a careful step forward, shuffling around whoever they had encountered.

Bianca clung to his leg as best she could, but even she could tell this was not how he usually walked.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

the other orc called after them.

“Nothing the stitchers can’t fix,”

Tanis answered over his shoulder.

Through the movement of his cloak, she occasionally spied glimpses of the orc camp. It was not caravans like Bianca’s acting troupe’s, but tents with patterns woven in the waxed canvas, a number of small campfires sprawled and spread throughout the woods. Occasionally by a cluster of larger, sturdier tents there was a huge bonfire, where more orcs gathered.

His tent was stationed nearly alone as a watch on one edge of the camp. She slipped quickly from the confines of his cloak through the flaps of the tent, with hopefully no one noticing. There was a pile of animal furs on one side of the tent, stacked on top of a wooden chest to keep them off the ground. A small leather and wood box laid near the edge of the bedroll, a little pot of a blue veined plant mostly crushed to ink in it. There was a little metal crucible with its lid askew, a couple still warm coals that heated the tent some.

Bianca could only sightsee for a moment before she had to scurry out of the way, as Tanis dropped to his knees and moved inside after her.

“It was already crowded with only me, so,”

he grimaced, an apology for the cramped space. Slowly they worked around each

other, until he sat on his bedroll, long legs bracketing her as she knelt in the small space.

It was hardly spacious. Even though she, a halfling, could stand fully in the tent, he could barely sit up without grazing the top.

“Were you at any point going to let me know you didn’t want the others to see me?”

“I thought more would be asleep by now,”

he sighed. “Didn’t plan on chatting.”

Meaning, he hadn’t thought about it at all until he encountered someone. “And that back there wasn’t chatting?”

“There’s a rule about bringing strangers to the camp during the betrothal rituals’ season,”

Tanis muttered, and then did not elaborate. He hadn’t mentioned before he’d be breaking rules to help her. Maybe the problem was really that he didn’t want to have to explain anything at all.

Bianca cast her eyes around the tent. Still, it was warmer inside without the wind, and the bedroll was soft to sit on.

“We can return you to your camp when the patrol falls asleep. Usually around dawn.”

“What till then?”

she whispered, nowhere to look but straight into his eyes.

That might have been the first true bit of unabridged emotion to cross Tanis' face, just a hint of panic, as he seemed to process the idea of the next few hours alone.

In a tent.

With Bianca.

Not that they hadn't just spent several hours alone together, but there was something about the tightness of the space that seemed more immediate.

"What indeed,"

he said, glancing away from her.

Already, sitting on her knees was beginning to bother her. Bianca chewed her lower lip, shifting her weight.

"We could talk a little. Not too loud,"

she offered.

"About?"

he returned. He seemed to put all their differences and lack of similarities into that one little word.

"Fine,"

she huffed. "We don't have to talk about anything."

"So... we make faces at each other?"

He stuck his tongue out at her, and Bianca blinked a moment, realizing she had never seen anyone stick their tongue out so far. It occurred to her with a flush rushing up her cheeks that orcs might need to get past their tusks for one thing or another.

Suddenly the tent was over warm, and her heart was beating too fast again. “There was a notion to sleep, wasn’t there?”

Then again, as he nodded and moved to lay down, the bedroll seemed to fit Tanis and not much else. Bianca tried to find a better way to fit in the little space left to her, tucking her legs under her and curling her body against his middle. She laid her head against his outstretched arm. As good a pillow as anything, maybe.

“It is odd to be...level with you,”

he offered after a few moments.

She snorted a laugh. She thought about saying something about how it was nice not to have to crane her neck all the time.

This close, she liked the way his nose canted to the side, the jagged line of where it had probably been broken once or twice. She reached out to touch his cheek, tracing over the blue paint that was already wearing off.

Bianca didn’t know what compelled her to do it, but she brushed some of his hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ear. She pecked a kiss over his mouth and giggled at his stunned expression.

“You know, there are some things I’m curious about too.”

She watched the curiosity bloom in his expression, the interest in his eyes as she pushed herself off the ground again.

“Devious little thing,”

he murmured, a glint in his eye. She gave him her sweetest smile in response.

After all the time they’d spent together today, she was beginning to sort out the feelings he stirred up in her. Maybe it was a bit weird for a halfling to appreciate a bit of height. She wondered if it had ever happened before, that there might be a few sparks, a brief flame even, between an orc and a halfling, or some equally strange pairing. By his expression, it seemed that there had been a growing interest in him as well.

He propped himself up on his elbows to lean up and let her kiss him again.

The top of her head barely grazed the brow pole of the tent as she leaned her entire body against his, putting an arm around his neck. She sank down to her knees again, this time straddling his middle.

It started gentle and curious, soft grazes that were careful to avoid his tusks. It wasn’t overly difficult, she learned, as they curved upwards rather than out, and she could press her face to the blunt sides comfortably. Each touch of lips grew deeper, their breathing becoming shallow, more touches exchanged, exploring. His hands were on her back, stroking through her hair, grasping her ass.

That same heat she felt low in her belly was rousing her clit awake. She shifted her hips against his as they kissed, searching for some relief to the needy ache in her cunt until she felt his cock harden through his trousers beneath her.

She ground her hips against his, and before she knew it his hands were working down her winter leggings, rucking up her tunic, his large rough hands finding the softness of her inner thighs, the wetness growing between them.

She broke from their kiss for a breath, wondering how far curiosity might take her. Was it so out of bounds that she might want to bed an orc just the once, to see how it was?

“Let me taste you,”

he growled, dragging a finger through her folds.

She shivered. This was quickly becoming a lot more intimate than she'd thought it would, but she had no wish to say no to that.

She shifted up on her knees, pausing to pull off her leggings and shuffle forward until her knees were on either side of his head, her thighs in his hands.

His tongue was scorching hot against her cunt, his tusks bruising her pelvic bone as he delved his tongue deep inside her without ceremony.

“Oh, oh, you really meant that,”

she gasped, covering her mouth with her hands to contain the moan of pleasure that followed. Not that she hadn't done this before, but there were some key differences in the sheer magnitude of the tongues she'd been licked by.

Tanis seemed truly ravenous to taste her, that every time he dragged his tongue through her folds he savored it even more, and was desperate to have it again. She found his hand on her hip, pulling up her tunic to reveal her breasts. The roughness of his callused fingertips toying with her nipples while he laved over her clit was almost too much to bear.

Normally Bianca might worry about rutting her hips too harshly against someone's face, but with the intensity that he gripped her hips it didn't seem to be a problem.

She ground her hips against his mouth, whimpering with each movement desperate to push their tandem efforts into a more cohesive pattern, something that could finally push her over the ultimate edge.

“Wait, slow down, or I’m going to come and then smother your face,”

she whispered between hushed moans of pleasure. She was so close and she didn’t think that she’d have time to say it. He gave another couple of rough licks that nearly sent her over the edge.

“Tanis,”

she almost exclaimed, only hushing herself when Tanis put his hand over the top of the one she had over her mouth, to keep her from crying out too loudly. She whimpered against his palm with each hot stroke of his tongue over her clit.

He gripped her pelvis and lifted her just enough off of his mouth to mutter, “What am I trying to accomplish here?”

Whether it was his hot breath against her quivering, messy, dripping, over-sensitive from licking cunt, or the harshly spoken words themselves, she felt another zing of another hot pleasure flush through her body. Bianca let out a whine of need against his palm. He began licking fiercely even more so than before, growling as he tasted her. His hand pressed hard over her mouth as he unraveled her.

She felt herself leave her body, her muscles so hot, so strained from holding herself in this position, suddenly relaxing, feeling that wave after wave of releasing pleasure, until her thighs felt like jelly and she could only fall back upon her heels.

The first thing that brought her back to her body was the tender stroke of his thumb against her cheek. She was clutching his arm to her chest, his hand still against her

mouth.

“Not a sound,”

he rumbled low. She pushed back on her heels, trying to sit up, and caught enough of a glimpse of his wet face, his toothy grin.

“I can’t look at you,”

she mumbled, putting her hands over her eyes. There wasn’t a lot of room to flop over except on to him, as if he were her own personal mattress.

She turned over and sprawled out on her belly against his, coming face to face with his massive erection straining at his pants. She didn’t care that her knees were still by his ears as she began to unlace the leather cords under his belt, to reveal his engorged cock. Her hand couldn’t close around it fully. Tracing her fingers against the veins, Bianca marveled at the thickness, the way the head was shaped, the way that it became almost purplish at the tip.

Her general policy was that whatever could fit in her mouth could also fit in her anywhere. Of course that more applied to finding suitably sized vegetables for when she could steal an hour alone in her caravan. She wasn’t sure she could actually fit his cock within her, or if she’d have to return the favor with some more creative methods.

She stroked up and down, coming up and giving the head a little squeeze. She felt his cock twitch at the stimulation, thick drops of his seed beading at the tip.

“I’m close,”

he breathed.

“Already?”

“The way you taste...”

Bianca gasped as she felt him lick her again from behind, raking through her cunt from clit to taint to spread ass cheeks to hole. If she hadn't just come like an avalanche, she would have gone back to straddling his face. She couldn't help but notice the way his cock twitched, wobbled, and dripped another swell of seed.

“Tanis, if you do that again I will get us caught,”

she hissed. Her nethers were just a touch too sensitive still.

“Don't tempt me,”

came his wry reply, but he kept his tongue to himself.

She gave another few strokes, before his body was tensing beneath hers, and his release spilled over the top of her fist in thick, copious heavy spurts. A concerning amount, actually.

“Oh, that close,”

she whispered in surprise, mildly flustered over the amount of seed that had just glazed over her hand. “And here I thought we'd be rocking the tent.”

“We will, just give me a few minutes,”

Tanis breathed, before passing her a scrap of cloth to clean her hand off.

Bianca nodded, still jelly-boned, and re-oriented herself to lie down with her head on

his shoulder. She closed her eyes for a second, and would open them again in just a moment, she promised herself, before the day's exhaustion took her.

She might have dreamt it, but distantly she felt Tanis curl an arm around her and press a kiss to her forehead.

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The gentle stroke down her arm brought her awake. Bianca stretched, feeling something hard and ready pressing against the curve of her ass.

“I see it’s been a few minutes,”

she murmured, turning enough to look at Tanis.

He gave a soft snort. “A few hours. You snore.”

“Mmm.”

She buried her face back against the soft furs and the springy muscle that was Tanis’ bicep, mumbling sleepily, “When you fuck me, I want you to pin my hands down.”

He pressed a kiss to her cheek. “There may not be time.”

“Is it morning?”

Bianca scrambled to sit up.

She turned around, looking at the orc strewn across his furs, unbothered, watching her with an amused smirk. “Nearly.”

Just moments ago he’d been her entire bedroll and blanket, keeping her plenty warm through the wintery night. Even pulling away this much she felt the loss of his body beside hers, how completely protected and at ease she’d felt curled up against him.

“I guess we should get going soon,”

she whispered, fighting the urge to crawl back into bed with him, to curl up against his chest with his big arms draped over her like the heaviest of blankets.

“Soon,”

he nodded, sitting up, pulling her into his lap to lay kisses along her shoulder.

Bianca closed her eyes and felt herself losing the battle to crawl out into the dark, cold morning. This was so nice. He was nice.

“If you keep this up, I’m not leaving,”

she murmured, tilting her head back to expose the inside of her neck for him. Cuddling hadn’t been on the agenda, but who could have known there was such tenderness underneath that rough exterior?

“Mm. All part of my plan to eat you,”

he hummed against her throat, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

“Again?”

“Mm. There is a spring not far from here, the water runs clear and warm,”

he said as he brushed his mouth against her shoulder. “And you should wash some of the paint from your face.”

“Paint?”

She pulled her little knife half out of its leather wrap, checking her reflection in the metal. Part of the bluish stain that patterned his cheeks had transferred to hers sometime in the night.

A good bath sounded divine. Especially if there was going to be more...curiosity between them.

She watched him sit up, comb his fingers through the longer part of his hair and retie it out of the way. Then he dipped the tip of his finger into the little pot with the blue veined plant. In the bottom some leaves were crushed to ink, which he used to drag the inky stain under his eyes, refreshing it.

“For the harsh light,”

he explained. “You’ll see it when the sunrise hits the snow.”

“Mm. And here I was thinking it was to make you prettier.”

“The prettiest, in fact, in all of the Chasm,”

he smiled, pulling her closer again.

His touches were lighting up Bianca’s skin with need, but her head felt heavy. Already there was some sense of loss that they would not spend very much more time together. Sure, maybe there would be a little time to explore each other’s bodies further before she returned to camp, and then she would be packing up the caravans with the troupe of the Hyphae, and traveling off to the next city to perform for other festivals, ringing in the Winter Solstice. There wasn’t enough time to really explore the extent of the curious thing brewing between them.

The world was just too big. She would never run into him again this easily.

Bianca closed her eyes. How could she even begin to want to stay here, after just a night? Sure, she'd always let life take her where it would, like a leaf on the wind, but there had always been one band of actors or another that had needed a good stagehand to travel with them and even been pleasant company. But the thought of returning to her troupe where she was far less appreciated than she was in Tanis' arms, was less of a relief— even somewhat daunting.

She was so lost in thought, she almost didn't realize Tanis had stilled, his arms tensing around her as the sound of boots against dirt passed by.

“Tanis!”

a rough voice growled from outside the tent, startling them apart. Bianca landed hard on her tailbone on the other end of the tent.

“Dhane,”

Tanis cursed under his breath.

“...as in Tanis son of Dhane the Bloodthirsty—?”

Bianca whispered, eyes wide.

Tanis nodded, and if the exasperated yet panicked look he had was anything to go by, this was the last person she wanted to meet.

Tanis called towards the tent's exit, “One moment, I'll get dressed.”

At that, Bianca tried to slip her leggings back on without rustling the tent. There might not be time to get dressed when the coast was finally clear.

Dhane's voice continued as he paced by the tent, boots crunching against the icy ground. "The huldira has eaten more of our herd. Two more last night."

Tanis swore under his breath as he pulled on a new shirt. "Did the others find the huldira's nest? Are we ready to hunt it?"

"No, but supplies are running low. They found a horse, wandering the woods,"

Dhane said briskly. "No rider. Don't go near it, the thing's bitten three different hands already."

Bianca's head tipped back in exasperation. That would be none other than Horace. At least he hadn't been eaten himself, and even better, been found. At least, not before he developed some rather vicious survival skills.

"...Some scouts spotted a few caravans traveling the lower roads. I'm heading out with another party."

At those words, everything seemed to slow down. Bianca swallowed. Somehow the word 'party' invoked less thoughts of drinking and camaraderie with new friends than it usually did, at this dim hour of the morning.

Bianca watched the color drain from Tanis' face, his hands becoming fists in his lap. "When?"

"As soon as the others are ready. Wait on our return before you go to track the huldira again."

'Stall him?' Bianca mouthed, and Tanis called out quickly at the footsteps starting to walk away, "No, um. I'll— I'll come with you. Give me a few minutes."

Dhane's voice returned dismissively, somewhat distant. "Don't bother. It's full of halflings. Shouldn't take many of us, nor very long."

Bianca felt dizzy as she put a hand on Tanis' knee, squeezing to try and convey her silent panic. She couldn't just burst from the tent and start gnawing on Dhane's ankles to try to stop him, how little it would do.

Tanis covered her hand with his.

Her head was spinning with a dozen questions. How bad would it be? She'd only ever heard stories about orc raids before, and right now she couldn't recall any of the details. Would they hold them at blade point and demand all their food and gold, and everyone would get away without a scratch? Or would ransacking the camp mean she wouldn't have a troupe to return to?

Then again, with an orc whose reputation for bloodthirst named him, perhaps no answer was needed.

When she was sure Dhane was gone, Bianca whispered, eyes wide and brimming with tears, "That's my camp."

Tanis nodded quietly.

"That's my camp!"

she hissed. Her throat was tight with fear, "I have to go find them, they're so nearby, I have to warn them—!"

"We can't return you to them. Dhane will catch up with them, and you could get hurt when they—"

He stopped, shook his head and quieted himself. “First, let’s get you out of here. We’ll plan on the way.”

“We should get Horace— my horse,”

Bianca swallowed weakly. “It’ll be faster.”

Tanis blew out a breath. “That was your horse?”

She nodded, and Tanis scrubbed a hand over his face, finishing pulling on his boots while he muttered something about how of course she would have a terrible horse.

Leaving the tent, mist hung low against the ground. It was still very dark, every shape only a muffled deep blue, but torches and campfires burned low against the early morning light.

Tanis held his cloak around her shoulders, covering her entirely, though this time she walked quickly at his side beneath it as he crossed the camp.

In little glimpses, Bianca spied the length of rope tethering Horace to a tree. He whinnied and took snapping chomps of air at another young orc girl. She swore at him as she tried to get close enough to put a feed bag over his head.

“I’ll take over here. Go help your brother watch the herd,”

Tanis directed when he reached her, tilting his head in the direction of a field. Bianca held herself as close to his side as she could.

“But Dhane said there weren’t enough left to have more than one watch,”

she replied, handing the bag over despite her surprise.

“He changed his mind. More eyes keeps them safer,”

Tanis said, taking the feed bag from her, the movement rustling his cloak. Light rippled briefly across Bianca’s face and she shrunk back as best she could.

The orc girl didn’t notice her, thankfully, she had already turned on her heel and headed to find the yakgoats herd. She clearly didn’t want to spend another minute with Horace.

When the coast was clear, Bianca slipped out and slowly stepped towards Horace. He towered over her, his breath clouding in the air.

She reached out a war hand, ready to pull it back. “Horace, hi, I’m so glad you’re ok, oop, ok, no, don’t do that, hey, Horace—”

The demon nickered and took a cheeky nip at her. He snorted then, as if to laugh at her, at how terrified she looked.

“Try calling him by his name,”

Tanis suggested unhelpfully as he rounded the other side of the beast, giving him a wide berth.

“His name is Horace— forget it. Look, buddy, I’m sorry we got separated—”

While Horace’s attention was on her, Tanis slipped forward and swung a leg over his back. He pulled himself up into the saddle and gathered up the reins in a swift, well-practiced motion.

Bianca waited a heartbeat for the demon to kick, buck, something.

Horace took a few steps forward and back calmly. Between Tanis' legs, he seemed positively well behaved.

Was Horace being just a regular horse for Tanis? Absurd. Honestly, kind of rude. What did he have that she didn't? Besides feet that reached the stirrups.

He leaned over the side a little, holding out a hand to her. "You coming?"

Bianca said nothing, her heart twisting. Now was not the moment to be affronted at Horace's clear favoritism. She took Tanis' hand and scrambled up into the saddle with him.

The ride was fitful at best, and she found herself looking over her shoulder every few minutes at every little sound, seeing only the dark woods. Her troupe likely had no idea they were in any danger, if other orc scouts could move as quietly as Tanis had.

Every so often one of them aired a thought, the beginnings of a plan, but none got much further. There simply was nothing a few halfling actors with stage weapons could do against an attack.

Bianca was grateful when the daylight started filtering through the snowy trees, even if it felt like her head had become twice as heavy and she'd gotten no sleep at all. They slowed when they saw the low-burning campfires of her troupe and the circled caravans.

It was so quiet, and so still.

Tanis dismounted first, helping her down.

Bianca started towards the camp, when Tanis caught her arm. Her head whipped around to find him crouched behind a nearby fallen tree, pulling her down with him.

“We’re too late,”

he whispered, and she followed his gaze.

They were there already— a handful of orcs, snow-laced and quiet as the dawn, making their way towards her camp, weapons on their hips and backs. They had paused just a little ways from it, still hidden from the caravans, talking quietly amongst themselves, pointing around the camp’s perimeter.

“What do we do, what do we do?”

Bianca whispered frantically. Gnawing ankles was about to be back on the table.

She pulled out her little mushroom cutting knife, not sharp enough to fight with, the only weapon she had. Her hands shook as she clutched the blade before her.

Tanis remained silent, but Bianca looked up at the first thought that came to her head.

“What if I kidnap you?”

Tanis stared back at her for a heartbeat they didn’t have.

“... I mean. I’m interested. And very flattered,”

he started to murmur, looking a little confused, “But we need to focus on the matter at hand.”

Bianca shook her head. She didn’t have time for whatever social ritual kidnapping apparently was. “You’re Dhane’s son, would that be anything? Would that be enough to keep my troupe safe? If I hold a knife to your throat and tell him I’ll kill you if they follow us?”

She watched him try to figure out her question like a riddle, unhelpfully as the seconds ticked by, and the orc party crept closer to her camp. She could have screamed with frustration.

She couldn't wait another second. It was this or nothing, now or never. Bianca leapt to her feet, throwing her arms around his neck, scrambling to hold on as he stood.

“STOP RIGHT THERE,”

she yelled across the frozen forest.

A number of birds scattered from their nests.

“I didn't agree to that plan—!”

Tanis was hissing to her when he froze, standing up fully and facing the other orcs.

They stared at each other for many long seconds, assessing. She took them in, so much larger than anyone in her troupe and all their tusks and non-stage weapons in their grips. But they stared on at her, half bewildered, half startled.

“Go back to your camp. Or I'll—, I mean, I'll—”

Bianca stammered, a sort of stage fright taking over. Perhaps she preferred working backstage to having this many eyes on her, actually.

One took a step forward.

“DON'T YOU DARE,”

she bellowed, clutching a fistful of his cloak with one hand and the other her blunt

little knife. She made a show of the knife before she held it just under his jaw.

There was the sound of her troupe's caravans creaking, doors opening as her friends crept out of their beds to see what all the fuss was about.

She couldn't look at them. This was so much more complicated than foraging had ever been. Not nearly enough planning had gone into this.

Already her nails were digging into his shoulder, her grip slipping as Tanis tried to subtly boost her up.

"Back off, I will do it!"

she screeched, though she barely believed herself. Even as she struggled to hold herself up, she didn't want the knife to press too much against his throat.

"Tanis, what is that?"

one of the orcs started to say, as if she looked more like an accessory than a kidnapper to them.

Another orc took a daring step forward, and Bianca slipped, her nails tearing a path of scratches down his arm.

She felt Tanis twist in her grip to try to catch her, and it happened all too quickly to stop it and too slow to look away. The sickening feeling of the blade in her hand dragging and then gliding effortlessly through his skin, the knife falling from her hand, covered in blood.

Bianca scrambled to her feet as soon as she hit the snow. Tanis was on his knees beside her, his hand pressing hard against his neck just under his jaw, drops of deep

green on the white ground.

He pulled his palm away, and she let go of the breath she was holding. It was just a shallow scratch. “Oh, Silvain’s tits, I cut your face. I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t worry about it,”

he muttered, but a deeper shade of green started to color his cheeks and his eyes grew darker as he looked to her from the blood on his palm.

Bianca stumbled as she got to her feet, a wave of some sensation she couldn’t place knocking through her.

Her neck felt hot, and her hands were reaching to undo the ties on her cloak before she could think. How was it this warm all of a sudden?

“Did I hit my head? I’m so dizzy,”

she mumbled.

“It’s the Blood Fever,”

Tanis said, and she had to have heard him wrong. “You drew first blood.”

Bianca squinted at him. Why was he bringing up that ritual thing he had told her about before? Was this really the moment for that?

She looked from Tanis, to her troupe in their sleeping clothes and housecoats, looking terribly confused, to Dhane and the orcs with their weapons cautiously drawn.

All was quiet for a heartbeat, before one of the orcs called out, “This is your mate? A

halfling?”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:46 am

“It’s a little rude to call them half,”

Tanis started to say, when it began to dawn on her. This orc. This random guy she had just met in the woods by accident. Mate? Yeah, he was nice. And yeah he had licked her cunt like a champion last night, in the strangest fling she’d ever had to date.

But mates. Needed, wanted, bound to you forever kind of mates? Like, take a girl to dinner first.

Still, she had wanted a distraction, and so far, minimal blood had been spilled. She had half a thought about gift horses and their chompy-er bits.

Bianca looked to Tanis, and merely meeting his eye made her heartbeat pick up. Fragile, strangely hopeful wonderings started to lift in her chest, and she swallowed them down. She needed answers first.

“Wait. Hang on. Is that possible—?”

Bianca stammered, trying to get some kind of clear understanding before she had any feelings about that, when a shadow fell over her.

The heartbeat that she turned her head during felt drawn out, as her skin prickled with fear, panic lighting up her heart at the sight of the huldira looming over her shoulder.

Something so large and deadly had no business being stealthy, but it descended upon them with barely a sound.

Bianca could only stare at its maw, opening wide above her.

Her sides squeezed sharply, then the world tumbled. For a moment Bianca believed that she had been –swallowed? Knocked over? But when the ground stopped turning over beneath her, the darkness and cold surrounding her was just snow.

She laid on the ground, dazed for a few seconds, realizing she had just been bodily thrown aside.

The group of orcs had scattered, readying their weapons quickly. One already fired off an arrow into the beast's nose.

The huldira's screech broke through the clearing as it did, its thunderous steps crashing through plants and ice into the Halfling camp. The halflings were fleeing back into their caravans for safety, some ducking behind trees, only a few foolish enough to brandish prop weapons. Horace stood a ways back, munching on some grass, unaffected.

And Tanis was– where was he?

Bianca pushed to stand quickly, looking around for cover. She crawled under one of the nearby caravans, not quite knocked onto its side, propped up against one of the rocks.

“Here, over here!”

a voice whispered, and a trembling hand reached out the window that was nearly underneath the caravan's side now. She took it, and was pulled up inside.

It was momentarily disorienting to slip into the caravan where everything was proportionally sized for halflings, after having spent the night in an orc-sized tent.

That, and everything was askew, slid across the tilted floor.

Bianca got to her feet, dusting herself off. Valspire, the troupe's director, was the one who had offered her a hand, her eyes growing wide when she realized it was her. "Bianca?"

There was absolutely no time to explain where she'd been the last day or so, or what the deal was with all the orcs, or the little drama the whole troupe had probably observed when she'd failed to pretend to take Tanis hostage for all of thirty seconds.

Behind Val, in the doorway hanging open, Bianca could see the beast snapping at each orc that surrounded it with weapons drawn, unable to choose which one to smite first.

And Tanis was clinging to the beast's shoulder, his blade stuck in its natural armor, Bianca realized, when it shrieked and turned around again, hissing at all of them.

Gods, no.

"Val! Hang on, I need to borrow something,"

she said quickly, looking for the nearest thing that might qualify as a weapon. A blunt object, at best? Nothing seemed substantial enough that she could also lift.

"No no no, get in here! We'll lock the door,"

Valspire was stammering as Bianca pushed past the director before she could tell her she was fired for missing work or presumed dead.

When the huldira roared again, she jumped and scooped up the nearest object, a basket full of discarded inedible mushrooms. Bianca rushed out of the caravan,

unsure of what exactly she meant to do.

One of the orcs saw an opening, darting towards the huldira and attempting to grapple onto its plated hide. The huldira shook its back, tail swinging to hit. It knocked Tanis' grip loose, and he collided with the other orc, sending them both to the ground.

Her heart could have fallen out of her chest to see the huldira turn, hissing, advancing on the prone orcs.

Bianca dashed across the clearing, legs burning with the effort it took to kick through the snow to get there. There wasn't a plan, there was barely a thought when she got close enough to the huldira, that she was standing before it with nothing truly effective to defend herself with.

She hurled the basket at its side, hoping maybe at best that would distract it long enough for Tanis to get up. The beast whipped its head around, snatching the basket of mushrooms out of the air.

Then it turned its eyes on her.

Its dagger-long teeth shredded the basket in its maw, scraps like ribbons falling out the sides of its mouth.

It growled, low and triumphant, as it advanced slowly, knowing it had all the time in the world and she could never possibly hope to outrun it.

And then it coughed. Or, something like a cough.

Bianca stumbled back, watching carefully as the beast began to dry retch.

She felt after a few moments of watching it wheeze and attempt to vomit the basket

back up, that she ought to look away. Then it growled through a choke and took another threatening step towards her, foamy bits of spittle leaking out between it's teeth.

It gave another mighty flail, stumbling down and tripping over its own feet. The ground shook when it fell, a purplish tinge forming around its mouth, but when Bianca looked up, Tanis was standing there.

She ran to him without another thought. Threw her arms around his waist the second she could, only letting go so he could fall to his knees next to her.

She buried her face in his shoulder, only looking up when she heard the murmuring of others.

The orcs were looking at her and Tanis, some poking at the huldira as it grew still. Others had some cuts and shallow wounds from fighting the creature, but were more intently watching her and Tanis.

The halflings started to creep out of their camp, bruised and shaken from their caravans being knocked over, looking to the orcs, to the huldira, to Bianca, with utter confusion.

After a moment, her eyes fell on Dhane, who stepped forward. Tanis tensed in her arms, but he released her to turn towards him.

Dhane the Bloodthirsty crossed his arms over his chest, frowning deeply. "You have some explaining to do."

Tanis

Dhane stood still, glowering, arms crossed over his broad chest, as the orc camp moved around them, busy with the day's work. Tanis stood by, hands on his hips, pretending not to notice.

It didn't look much different from his father's normal fearsome expression. The camp's stitcher had grudgingly left his loom and taken the few orcs and halflings injured by the huldira to the bathing springs to clean their wounds, and pack freshly pounded herbs into their bandages. Bianca had gone with them, to keep her troupe comfortable with their newly made acquaintances.

"A Halfling,"

Dhane grumbled after what must have been an hour of contemplation.

Tanis closed his eyes instead of rolling them. So it was settling in, then.

"Never in all history has our kind taken a Halfling as a mate."

Tanis chewed the inside of his cheek a moment. He didn't think that even Dhane knew all of history, much less every orc that had ever taken an unusual mate. But he did not contest his father's thinking out loud. It might interrupt an epiphany forming.

"Then again, a fierce halfling."

Tanis could have smiled with pride at that, but he kept it to himself. His mate was

terrifically brave, putting herself on the line for people she cared about with barely a second thought.

He watched his father's expression from the corner of his eye, as Dhane's face became contemplative. "How would that work? It wouldn't. They're too small."

"Do not concern yourself,"

Tanis tried to answer dismissively, and that was his mistake.

Dhane wheeled around, turned his scrutiny fully upon Tanis. "What do you know?"

"Nothing. I... believe that it would not happen if it... wasn't possible,"

Tanis replied, truly reaching for one word at a time as he built an excuse out of thin air.

"You don't seem overly annoyed by this development."

"Well. It's like you always say. Can't get upset at what you can't change."

Dhane grumbled and returned to his silent glowering.

The problem with having a predecessor known for unwise decisions tended to overshadow any choice Dhane made. It did not often aid the quality of those decisions, Tanis had noticed. Rarely did Dhane ever change his mind from his initial course of action.

"But... who says a halfling has to accept our ways?"

There it was. The seed of doubt growing in the pit of his stomach. Tanis remained

quiet.

“If she does not stay, the bond will fade,”

his father continued, sounding very much as if that was the outcome he wished to see. “I spoke with their leader about sending a scout to lead them out of the forest in exchange for food and supplies. We send them off tomorrow.”

The Halflings had felt oddly gratuitous towards the orcs for taking down the huldira, and Dhane seemed to be embracing that narrative.

Tanis pushed off the wall, taking a few steps away. He nodded dutifully, though he wished for nothing more but to snarl back that his father had no business in what happened with his bond, and the Blood Fever’s decision of who was his mate was beyond reproach. Such a retort would not be well received. Dhane had grown too accustomed to deference from others to allow it.

He stopped a few steps away, and looked back at Dhane.

“Her name is Bianca, kin to mushrooms,”

he said pointedly, toeing the line of disrespect. He held Dhane’s stare to emphasize his meaning: Do not call my mate ‘halfling’ again.

With that, he turned on his heel and headed away.

The stitcher had returned, and all of the orcs that had been wounded were already retelling their fight with the huldira with dramatic embellishment to everyone who had already witnessed it anyway, about a dozen Halflings listening intently. But Bianca was not with them.

She likely had stayed behind with her troupe, he reasoned. He wasn't sure how many Halflings there were in her troupe.

Tanis set off, passing the returning orcs, not paying mind to any of the looks they gave him. They likely thought the same as Dhane, but he didn't care. He had to be near her. It wasn't just the dawning effects of the Blood Fever, that his skin felt warmer just thinking of her. He wanted to make sure she was ok, to remind himself that she hadn't been hurt in the commotion.

And to make sure she wasn't about to get lost in the woods again.

The heat of the springs beat back winter from its banks only a few feet or so, melting the snow. It pooled lazily near the edge of the cliff, where fallen logs dammed part of the river before it joined again with a much colder stream.

Tanis paused for a moment, boots crunching the snow as he looked around. He spotted Horse first, tethered to a tree branch, happily munching on grass. He patted Horse's neck as he passed him. How strange, he thought, that she'd never bothered to name this creature.

He spotted Bianca's cloak hanging just off the ground on a tree branch. And then her tunic crumpled up on the side of the bank, and Bianca treading water a little ways beyond it.

It felt like stepping into the hot spring several yards before he even reached it.

She had heated his skin before, but with the Blood Fever, just catching sight of her felt like fire in his veins. Seeing her bare in the hot spring made him want to take her on the mossy carpet of the forest floor, to fully drink her in.

He glanced around. Probably not a good idea if anyone else was watching. "Where

are the others of your troupe?"

She turned around, her face lighting up when she saw him approach.

He remembered the moment he'd first spotted her, muttering to herself in the woods. He'd felt drawn to her then, too.

Every little thing about her caught his attention, the thick, coily ringlets of her wet hair, the sweetness of her smile, the light catching against her dark skin, her nipples pointing through the water's surface, the way she pressed her knees together.

"Oh, them,"

Bianca waved a hand as if it didn't matter. "Re-packing their caravans. I think they're putting together a party as a thank-you with the whole huldira thing. And since it looks like we're not getting to our next performance on time, anyway. I hope your friends are ready to be drunk under the table. We brew our wine with poisonous mushrooms."

He did hear what she said, but mostly he heard that they all left, and she stayed behind, knowing he'd come find her.

Tanis unfastened his cloak, folding it over a low tree branch along with Bianca's outer layers. He kicked off his boots and sat down on the edge of the bank, dipping his feet in the spring.

She swam up beside him, and he tried not to notice too much that she was naked in the water. He couldn't have a hardened cock desperate for her attention during the conversation they needed to have.

"How's your face?"

He lifted his chin, showing her the freshly stitched slice that she had nicked his jawline with. She frowned, and covered her mouth in remorse.

She flicked a little water at him to disguise her discomfort. “So the whole kidnapping you plan was really...”

“Unwise,”

he finished for her, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes. I promise I won’t suggest it again,”

she nodded, wincing in empathy. “I just panicked, I didn’t know what to do. I mean, for Silvansakes, his name is Dhane the Bloodthirsty. I thought I might not have a troupe to return to.”

“Oh,”

Tanis’ eyes could have rolled out of his head. “No. It’s. That’s a whole... it’s like a joke.”

“A joke?”

He sighed and buried his face in his hand for a moment. “If I don’t want people to find that little meadow I showed you, I’ll mark it on a map, Barren Field. And then if I know where a huldira’s nest is, maybe I’ll write that there’s treasure there.”

He was met with an unblinking stare.

“Or, with people. We name the biggest, scariest berserker you’ve ever seen, Rurin the Softhanded. A smaller, frailer man, Sildt the Bonecrusher.”

If memory served, there was an orc who left the camp many years ago, Silvertongue, who had a penchant for never shutting up.

He watched the comprehension slowly dawn in her face. He hadn't really thought that would be the kind of thing that needed explaining, since it was fairly obvious among orcs.

Bianca slapped a hand against his knee, splashing him in the process. "You said orcs weren't tricky!"

"And you believed me?"

She rolled her eyes and made a terribly aggrieved sort of noise, but it made him grin all the more. It made the only-just-stopped-bleeding cut on his jawline nearly open again, but he couldn't help it. She winced in sympathy and reached to touch his face.

"I will treasure this always,"

he said, lifting an eyebrow as he gestured to the cut.

It was the mark that started their bond. But maybe it didn't mean the same thing to her. By his mother's tusks, she had been taking names by their face value.

"Or. I mean. If you want me to, that is. You don't have to."

"Why wouldn't I?"

Bianca asked, eyes sweeping over him with a flutter of her lashes.

Everywhere her gaze crossed lit up with heat under his skin, his heart rate ticking up.

"Should I not?"

She pushed off the bank away from him, twisting through the water in a little, graceful movement that made his heart flutter a little. He hadn't been prepared to see how perfect she was underneath all her layers.

She pulled herself up on the mossy rocks that lined the bank.

He tried valiantly, not entirely successfully, not to notice too much about her bare tits, the water dripping off them. They had a conversation to finish.

But his eyes, the rising Blood Fever in him, and his stirring cock were all too focused on her. The way her breasts were not quite perfectly round, the dark, gleaming wet of her nipples against the full morning light, how they tightened into peaks in the cold air.

Then there was the way her hips, the way they rounded into her ass, her soft, heavy thighs, the little triangle of hair tucked into them. Everything about her body that has previously been too covered in too small a space to properly enjoy.

He needed to close his eyes or look away if he wanted to be able to hear what she was saying.

“If it doesn't bother you,”

he shrugged, quickly and pointedly looking away. He needed to explain it to her. To let her know fully what it meant. He couldn't expect her to want to give up her life to stay in the Whispering Wood with him, as unlikely as his leaving would be.

“How's this going to work?”

“It's um. A little complicated. Usually there would be meetings with families, celebrations...”

“No, I mean. Maybe you can finger me a little first,”

she interrupted. When he stared at her, she rolled her eyes. “Y’know, to get things started.”

The gaze of the Blood Fever in his body seemed to thicken, heat spreading through his middle.

“You did promise me a good, hot bath with you,”

she murmured, as she leaned over to stroke his cock through his pants. In moments it was achingly hard, getting harder with every stroke of her light teasing fingertips.

Tanis tried to hold back a groan, glancing over his shoulder to make sure they truly were alone.

She giggled, pushing herself back into the water. “Take off your belt.”

The way this halfling made him feel like a scandalized crone.

“And your shirt.”

Still, a smile started to creep up around his tusks, and he did as she said.

“Now the pants,”

she commanded, and he watched the way she leaned back, her hands disappearing under the waves, the ripples hinting at the way she spread her legs for herself.

Gods, she was breathtaking. What had started as an idle curiosity had already taken root in his chest. He was here entirely, without reservation.

Tanis stepped into the spring, and in a few strokes crossed it to her side.

She bit her lower lip, her eyes growing wide as his shadow covered her. He couldn't help but grin as he crowded her against a rocky wall, taking her hands and pinning them over her head.

He pressed a kiss to her mouth, gentle at first, but with the way she nipped at his lip and invited his tongue into her mouth, it quickly became more feverish.

He held her wrists in place with one of his hands, the other dipping below the waves, skimming up her thighs. She gasped and bit her lip when he delved a finger within her, stroking until he could fit in another. She felt so perfect, hot and tight and slick. He hoped he would be able to fit his cock inside her.

"Everything just feels so much... more,"

she panted as he curled his fingers into her again, hitting that spot that made her brows draw tight together. Bianca's face was flushed with pleasure, her soft tits perked towards the sky. "Is that what this whole mates thing is about? Are we... bonded, then? This is it?"

Tanis nodded. "Something like that. But you should know, you don't have to be. You don't have to stay if.... if you don't want this."

The words were hard to force out, nearly as hard as holding himself back from licking her to both their completions while she was so tantalizingly spread before him. But she had to know what she was getting into.

She was quiet many moments, before she offered quietly, "Do you want me to stay? You were trying to avoid this kind of situation when we met."

Tanis sank back into the water, cupping her face in his hands. “I’m happy that it was you. But I wanted you to know. You don’t have to. You didn’t ask for it, and it’s not your way. I will... understand.”

Maybe his head would, but his heart wouldn’t. His heart would grieve and bleed for every moment that she was gone. But he tried not to show that, because he couldn’t keep her here if she didn’t want to be here. Too many bugs, or something.

She watched his expression intently for a moment, before rolling her eyes and breaking out into a grin. “Oh please. You were flirting with me before this whole Fevery Blood and mates thing.”

“Was I, now?”

Tanis lifted an eyebrow. He didn’t care if she wanted to rewrite history, he was just so hopeful that she might stay, even if only for a little longer.

“From the moment you saw me.”

Tanis lifted her up onto a rocky ledge, kneeling before her. He kissed his way up her thighs and dragged his teeth across her leg. It had already been too long since he was sated on her taste, and for all he knew this could be the last time.

“In fact, uh, actually. You should know, peeling bugs off a halfling is essentially the same thing, so we’ve been already married for a day,”

she told him between little gasps as he traced the sensitive rim of her entrance with his thumb, unable to suppress both her mischievous grin and her pleasure.

Tanis rolled his eyes. “How fortunate, then.”

His mouth met her sweet cunt, her earthy scent sending a shiver down his back as he tasted her again. Her hips jerked as he passed over that little needy bud, and he brought his full attention to it, tongue working over it as he curled his fingers in and out of her.

Tanis came up for a breath and licked his lips, chin no doubt wet with her nectar. Her insides twitched around his fingers as she looked at him and winced. He grinned, thinking he was the luckiest soul in the Whispering Woods.

Bianca bit her lip and cast a look at his cock, bobbing eagerly between them, a trail of his seed leaking down his shaft already. Their eyes met and he knew she was ready when she tried to spread her legs even wider.

Tanis threaded his arms under her knees, lifting her up against him. He felt her light touch guide him to her entrance and when he lowered her she came down on his cock, hot and tight and perfect.

“But that also means you have to swear to protect me from all bugs. For–forever,”

she managed between heavy breaths, gasping and groaning at every inch she worked her way down his shaft. Tanis had to laugh, half in admiration and half at himself for how he had already decided that on the way over. If all he had to do was kill some spiders to be worthy of her affection, then he'd take that deal. Even if it was a fool's task, living in the woods.

Every bit she took of him he could feel her stretch tighter. He thrust into her, she rocked her hips against him, clutching his shoulders until her insides spasmed, and even after.

“Y-you also have to make me flower crowns. Daily,”

she gasped.

He would see what he could do about that.

Tanis could feel the scar she'd cut into his jaw burn with the Blood Fever, his muscles straining as he pounded into her, blood pumping, heart thudding until his release tipped over the edge. Heat flooded his body wholly as he pumped into her, slicker with each thrust, as her core quivered and milked his seed from him.

For many minutes, it was just her arms around his neck, him holding her close to his body, melting into the hot spring.

He climbed out of the water to cool off on the soft mossy ground, offering her a hand. Bianca scrambled out even with his help, and curled up against his side, laying her head on his chest. After several quiet minutes, he noticed the little clover buds growing alongside the moss. He plucked a few, winding their stems together as the minutes passed.

“No, but for real,”

she trailed off, and for a moment he didn't think she would finish her thought. How mandatory was the flower crown thing?

Bianca looked at him, a quiet sort of openness in her face. “You heard me when no one else did.”

He cupped her cheek in his hand. That meant something important to her, and it made his chest ache to think of her feeling overlooked, and by her expression, for far longer than she had told him. He wanted her to know she made him feel the same way, that he felt more open just by being around her.

In time, he would tell her. If they had time.

“So you’ll stay?”

“The troupe does come through this way every year,”

she shrugged, watching the reservation in his face turn slowly into understanding. “I thought, maybe I’ll catch up with them next Solstice. Maybe you could come with me. We’ll figure it out. But I want to give us the chance we deserve.”

He smiled at that. A year was perfect. He finished off the knot on the chain of wild clover, and looped it over the top of her head.

Horse took notice of her edible circlet and sniffed the top of her head. Tanis shooed him away with a hand.

She scrunched her nose at him, but it slipped into a smile. “So, Tanis Halfling Eater, kin-in-law to mushrooms. How are we going to explain all this to the rest of them?”

“I told you, I don’t like riddles.”

“Tough.”

Nettle

Unfortunately, the best seat in the tavern for Nettlewisp was in the dusty rafters. There, at least, she didn't have to worry about the drunken patrons pulling out the chair she was occupying and nearly sitting on her again. Up here, she only had to fend off the occasional rat crawling across the beams.

Besides, this was the best place to watch the tavern door from.

For perhaps the hundredth time that evening the door pushed open—another stranger dusted with snow. The wind slammed it shut behind him, announcing his presence.

The stranger pulled back his cloak cowl, the icy fabric falling aside to reveal the shaved sides of his head, the scalp filled in with orcish tattoos, his green pointed ears were ragged and torn, suggesting many encounters with sharp claws and fangs.

For a moment, the crowded floor of patrons quieted.

It was him. The orcish bounty hunter. Nettle's heart beat a little faster.

This side of the Chasm, there were many orcs, but Nettle only needed this one. He paid the other patrons no mind and rather crossed to the bar with a single-minded intent.

His shoulders were staggering to behold from even across the tavern as he hefted a full burlap sack over his shoulder. Murmurs crept up around the edges of the room.

Without a word, he tossed it down on the counter, likely containing some rare bird, if the iridescent feathers poking out between tears suggested anything. Within moments, the sack started oozing something black and viscous onto the counter.

The tavern keeper lifted the mouth of the sack a moment, eyeing the creature, then its deliverer.

“Erryc,”

the bounty hunter nodded to him, as he undid the leather tie on one of his belt pouches.

“Silver,”

the tavern keeper nodded in return, trying to conceal his queasiness at whatever gruesome mess was within the sack. “Back for another?”

Silver only grunted in lieu of a reply, pulling out a folded piece of parchment and handing it off to the tavern keeper.

Erryc unfolded the page, browning furrowing as he examined the page.

“One of these days, there isn’t going to be anything left on the job board.”

“Just get me my gold.”

Nettlewisp had heard of the bounty hunter’s prolific accomplishments in the field, but more importantly, she had heard he would take on any job for gold. Still, she was unprepared to see him in person, larger than life, thick muscled arms perfectly complementing his broad shoulders.

The stubs of a few snapped arrows were still embedded in his singular left pauldron, giving him the air of a grizzled, hunted beast. Though he stood a head shorter than the tavern keeper, he was easily the scariest being in a tavern packed full of knives and sharp teeth.

Nettle had been warned about seedy places such as these, where the patrons could range from thieves to murderers, hobgoblins and humans. It was so different from anything from the Court of Morning Mist.

Erryc peered into the bleeding sack on the counter once more, grimacing as he compared it to whatever was scrawled on the page, before he nodded to the bounty hunter again. He reached below the counter to produce a pouch of gold, which jingled as it landed on the counter. Another quest finished.

No sooner had Silver plucked up the payment and given it a couple shakes in his palm to feel its weight, he turned and headed towards the tavern notice board. One didn't acquire a reputation such as his by resting on one's laurels.

Many other scrolls of paper and scraped lambskin sheets were pinned to the wall, smeared with inky details, curling where they weren't skewered by plain daggers and pins. There was even the occasional press-printed wanted poster, from more official decrees.

Nettle watched a moment, transfixed, as Silver extended one green hand, uncurling a roll of parchment to read it better.

Now was her moment.

Nettle couldn't just sit here and wait until he had picked some other job. She'd been in here the other night, and her hesitation had cost her time. Thankfully, his last job hadn't taken him long to complete, but as the tavern keeper had informed her the

other night, sometimes the bounty hunter wasn't seen for weeks at a time.

She couldn't risk waiting that long.

Nettle flitted over to the orc, carving through the chains of hanging lamps— a path of glimmering sparks left in her wake.

Over the last couple of days, Nettle had learned that it was rude to just drop down in front of someone's face, so she settled for hovering just behind him.

"Excuse me—"

He, of course, didn't hear her. The voices of fey were more like whispers to larger creatures.

Face heating with the effort, she repeated herself, louder, more than she was ever comfortable with, "I said, sir, excuse me, SIR—"

He turned his head, meeting her eyes through dark lashes and the snapped arrows on his shoulder armor. "Is there a knight among us?"

The mere act of meeting his eyes seemed to pierce right through her. Nettle faltered, dipping a few inches in the air. Her first thought was to zip away, to flee back to the safety of the rafters.

No, she wouldn't be frightened. She had come too far for that.

Nettle steeled herself, crossing her arms over her chest. "I have a job for you, bounty hunter."

He had a wolfish smile, his tusks looking terribly sharp within it. "Do you, little

flea?”

Nettle frowned.

She swallowed down her offense, not just at being called a bug, but that he felt the need to throw ‘little’ on there. ‘Flea’ already implied as much. Redundancy was not the sort of quality she cared for in a companion. Besides, she was much larger than a flea, nearly as tall as his thumb.

Nettle eyed the rest of the pub. Rowdy as it was, it still did not feel wise to discuss her plans out in the middle of the floor.

“Join me for a drink, and we’ll talk,”

she said, lifting her chin towards the far end of the bar.

Perhaps it was too forward, too assuming, too bold from her. But she held his gaze, and after a moment, he nodded.

“I suppose one drink is enough for the size of you,”

he said, and the corners of his mouth twitched around his tusks. “Do they charge you by the thimble?”

Nettle pressed her lips together, and flitted down to the emptier, quieter end of the bar, taking one of the empty stools for herself. “Unfortunately for me, they don’t. Besides, I don’t know that I trust them to wash the thimbles.”

She watched as he swung a leg over one of the empty wooden stools, a dusting of snow trickling down the folds of his cloak from the mountains of his shoulders.

Then the orc hooked the toe of his worn leather boot under the rung of her barstool. Her seat nearly jolted out from under her as he tugged her closer to him. He settled an elbow against the bar, looming over her and taking up her entire field of vision.

Nettle felt utterly insignificant as his eyes drifted over her, assessing her. She watched a line between his nose and the corner of his mouth deepen as he frowned at her.

“What’s this job, then?”

Silver asked, only to be interrupted by the tavern keeper approaching them on the other side of the counter. The bounty hunter rolled his eyes, waving to Erryc, “Bring me a flagon, and...”

“A sparkling pollen wine?”

Nettle asked, her voice losing whatever edge it had. She had heard another patron ask for it the other night, and thought it sounded delicious.

“A sparkling pollen wine,”

the orc repeated slowly, like he’d never used that combination of words before.

Suddenly, Nettle was all too aware that it wasn’t something a little tougher, like the hops-bitter brews all the brutish adventurers tended to.

“It was on the menu,”

she muttered, more to herself than to him. Her cheeks and the tips of her wings flushed bronze.

“Is this your racket? You trick patrons into buying your drink for the night?”

Nettle did not dignify that question with an answer. Even if she did, it wasn't any of his business. She did not intend to share anything unrelated to her business with him.

Shortly after, the tavern keeper brought over a flagon of ale in one hand, and in the other, her glass of wine.

Nettle was honestly a little surprised that an establishment with as many rough edges as this one could manage to produce a perfectly normal wine glass. But Erryc seemed a little proud, even, that he did.

She wasn't sure how to go about drinking from this. The high-stemmed glass was taller than she was. She could flit up over the edge to lean down over, that was no way to drink. If she choked or gave herself the hiccups trying to sip her oddly dainty drink, she wouldn't be able to maintain her mysterious air in front of the big tough bounty hunter.

She needed him to take her seriously, at least a little.

Silver thumbed the scratchy bristles on his chin, clearly he didn't bother to shave every morning. “So, mosquito. Tell me this job before you bleed me dry.”

Nettle huffed a breath, and tried not to put her hands on her hips like she meant to lecture him. She needed to get along with him until the job was done, at least.

Of course, her self restraint did not keep her from asking, “Do you have to make the same joke over and over? It gets terribly boring.”

The orc lifted his ale to his mouth. “I'm not here to entertain you.”

“Good, because I’m not paying for all these second-hand quips.”

Her wings buzzed, bringing her to hover over the delicate rim of her glass. She placed her hands on the rim, chewing her lip. Perhaps she could scoop up handfuls of it. No, that wouldn’t work.

After a moment of being unable to figure it out, she simply folded her legs under her, sitting down on the rim of her wine glass like some kind of elaborate garnish. It was a precarious balance, but her wings continued to flutter slowly, adjusting as needed.

The orc was watching her closely, she realized when she looked back up at him, probably just as curious as she was on what the best method was for a fey to drink out of full sized stemware.

Not for the first time that night, she felt out of place.

Nettle fumbled for words at first, staring up at the grizzled orc. She had thought the hard part would be getting his attention or convincing him to take on her job over others.

“...There’s an underground gauntlet nearby, only the elders of my Fey Court know its secrets. I’ve been there before, I’ve seen the treasure that it holds,”

she said, finding it much easier to divulge Fey secrets than what she needed him to do. “I’ve made it through the passage safely before, but the final stone door is... well, I’m supposed to, well, you see— it’s um, it’s too heavy for me to move.”

“And what makes you so sure I’ll be able to move it?”

She did not answer out loud, rather glanced over the top of her drink. He followed her gaze, temple furrowing, to his tensed bicep, his arm braced on the bar. It was,

perhaps, more muscle than she had in her entire body.

He straightened in his seat, meeting her eyes again, looking slightly perturbed that she would so blatantly objectify him.

Nettlewisp gave her head a prim little shake. “Perhaps for you, it is simply a regular door. But it manages to keep all little, winged things like myself out.”

At least, now it did. Once upon a time, she’d been able to open the door without any help at all.

He seemed to take the hint from her sour tone. He took another long draw from his flagon, and then set it down with an empty-sounding thunk. “And how do you propose to pay me? It doesn’t look like you carry coin.”

Nettle shook her head and waved a hand. “You’re a treasure hunter, there’s plenty of treasure in the gauntlet’s end. You can have what you can carry. There’s only one thing I want from it.”

Silver raised a brow at that, but made no comment towards it. “When do you need this done?”

“As soon as possible. I’ll show you where the gauntlet starts tonight.”

He grimaced at that, taking another draught from his stein. “You’d have me working the holiday.”

“Is that a problem?”

He grunted. “Guess I’ve got nothing better to do.”

A noise almost like a chicken clucking started from the sack Silver had left further down the bar, drawing the attention of several people. Nettle frowned at the noise, brow creasing as she watched. Whatever had been in the bag wasn't dead after all.

The tavern keeper pulled back the fabric, obviously trying not to touch it too much as he dealt with it.

There was barely a heartbeat between the burlap falling away to reveal the creature and it lurching down the counter, flinging drops of inky black ichor with every slapping footfall. Everyone within reach of it recoiled, wiping the splatter from their cheeks. The creature squawked and flapped its wings, turning this way and that, the spines along its neck raising up. A toadbird, she realized. She had only glimpsed them from afar before.

The instant Nettle realized its yellow eyes were on her was the same second her balance slipped.

For the first time that night she tasted the burn of alcohol, a completely unpleasant sensation up her nose. All the fruity and floral flavors were rather unwelcome.

Nettle sat up in the glass, the wine coming up to her shoulders while she gasped for air and coughed a mouthful of wine out. She had not swallowed too much, but as she looked up again, Nettle realized she had bigger problems.

The toadbird had flapped its way down the counter, leaving an oily path behind it. A couple of patrons tried to grab it with their hands, only for it to slip out, one after another.

Nettle threw out a hand, reaching for her magic, what little of it she had left, but even in her veins it stayed dull and brittle. The pull of magic felt dim within her hands.

The toadbird crouched, readying to pounce. Its teeth-lined gullet open for her, as the creature leapt towards her— only for a handax to slam down on it. Its middle was pinned to the bar, the blade buried deep in its iridescent feathers.

The toadbird croaked, life oozing out of it.

Nettle gasped, and nearly slipped back under the wine again. She looked up at the bounty hunter again. She'd been so concerned with her impending doom that she hadn't seen him move at all. His barstool was knocked back against the ground in his leap to stand, his fist still curled around the handle. A thrum of need pulsed through her body.

Nettle's heart pounded in the quiet aftermath as she and the rest of the tavern watched Silver scoop up someone else's tankard of ale and finish it off on one swig. Then he rummaged through his pocket, grunting and humming something to himself. He produced the little bag of gold the tavern keeper had paid him for the creature, and tossed it back on the bar.

Silver turned his gaze back on her, the glint of adventure in his eyes and a wicked grin revealing the points of his teeth.

The little bubbles in the wine ran up her skin.

He then plucked her up out of the glass by her wings, and a jolt of sensation went through her whole body. His fingertips were rough and calloused, unlike anything she had ever known.

He set her down on the counter, not ungently, but she fell back on her side when he release her, terribly unsteady from the whole ordeal. The living flower petals of her dress were almost translucent, dripping with wine as it puddled around her.

“That one you can have for free, firebug,”

he said, voice low and gravelly, eyes lingering over her. Nettle watched him lick his lips, and wondered if he was contemplating cleaning every drop of wine off her with his tongue. Then she felt that jolt of need throb between her legs again.

Oh, no.

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This was—despite not really having started yet—setting up to be a disaster. Nettle hadn't been prepared for him to be so... virile.

She couldn't help but eye the way the orc bounty hunter's biceps flexed and tensed as he lifted a large fallen branch off the trail, and ugh, those shoulders! She just wanted to... what would she even do, at that size? Fling herself down and roll all over them?

He was easily ten times her size, honestly maybe even then some. She wasn't good with numbers. But even Nettle could tell his cock was likely as big as she was, she could fit in the palm of his hand. There was no way it would work. It couldn't.

It was absolutely the wrong wing to be starting a quest off on.

“Oh, don't even think it,”

she mumbled to herself, eyeing the folds in his pants, the shape of his cock that they hinted at as he pivoted the fallen tree branch to the side.

So there was no point staring at the shape of his arms, the taper of his waist and breadth of his shoulders. He was simply too big to appreciate properly.

Snow crunched underneath his heavy boots as he walked along the trail, deeper into the cleaved mountain pass. “Speak up, Firebug.”

Silver scoffed as Nettle worked her wings backwards, so that she could cross her arms and watch him roll his eyes.

She looked at him, trying not to be too obvious as she pressed her cheek into her hand. “It’s just, I’m starting to rethink this. Surely you’re too... big. You wouldn’t fit.”

Perhaps it would be ridiculous to even try.

Silver’s brow narrowed as he looked at her, uncomprehending. “...Fit where?”

“In the, uh. The passage.”

“Passage?”

“You know, the gauntlet. And even if you do fit, it’s not so simple to traverse; it’s dark, there’s traps and creatures. I’ve only managed to evade them by flying—”

Nettle fumbled for an excuse, waving a hand.

“Well, if it’s just traps and creatures, you needn’t worry. I have other physical advantages,”

Silver said as he rolled his shoulders and his neck. She stared until he caught her eye and gave her a little wink. “They’re gigantic.”

“Pardon?”

For a moment she worried she had been staring too intently at his physique to have heard him properly. Then her cheeks scalded. “...Oh.”

There it was— that smirk. He knew what he was doing to her, he had to. Perhaps he was just trying to unnerve her. Perhaps he just wanted to annoy her with his presence, as she was saddled with it until the job was done.

“Was that too crude for the prim little lady?”

“I’m not prim!”

she insisted, quickly, but it was in her voice, her tone. The very way she pronounced words was careful to enunciate every consonant clearly, make every vowel pristine.

“It looked like it was your first night in a tavern,”

he chuckled, a hint of a grin tucked behind his tusks.

“...It was my second.”

“Pardon. Seems I’ve got you all wrong.”

Nettle felt her cheeks flush hot, but more than that, she felt her glow flare.

Perhaps that itself was more shocking than his scrutiny.

Immediately, she turned and zipped further down the path, though it did nothing for how fast her heart was beating.

Her glow had been dim and inconsistent for months. On occasion a burst of excitement would bring it back, but it would dim until it was gone again. She knew better than to trust its fickle, flickering presence. It wouldn’t stay fixed. Her court could no longer count on her if she didn’t have her magic.

Silver seemed to know just how to ruffle her wings. She didn’t care to be summed up in such a way, as if her life experience was so much lesser than his. He would not survive a day among the Fey Court, she thought viciously. It did bring her some comfort.

The few moments before he caught up to her again was time enough to let her embarrassment fade.

“Slow down, Firebug,”

he called, as she came to a stop before a rocky outcropping covered in brush and roots. “I can’t do the job if you lose me on the way there.”

It seemed he had settled on Firebug more than other names.

His eyes lingered over her lower half, and suddenly she wished for a few more leaves to wrap herself in, or maybe a whole bush to duck and hide in.

Above her knees, her legs glowed with a soft luminescence, becoming brightest at her rounded bottom. The soft glow of light swathed her hips just under the edge of her flower tunic.

Here in the gathering dusk, it was increasingly obvious. Luminescent specs drifted off her, like the sun catching on pollen.

It had been so commonplace at her home in the Fey Court, it had never occurred to her how strange it would be to the other beings of the Common World.

Not everyone glowed.

“My name is Nettlewisp,”

she seethed.

Silver just waved a hand. “I don’t care to remember names.”

“I suppose that’s why you don’t have one, then.”

He stopped walking at that, looking at her, raising a brow like he had a story to tell. “The camp of orcs further North, deep in the Whispering Woods. They used to call me Silvertongue.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek, caught between a snide remark and prompting him further, before she asked, “They found you particularly persuasive?”

He gave a little grimace, shrugging. “To some end, sure. But I’m not there now, so no one calls me that anymore. Mostly just, ‘You there, bounty hunter.’”

She hadn’t thought a grizzled bounty hunter would be particularly chatty.

“You can just call me Silver,”

he offered, his voice a little too soft. She didn’t like what it did to her.

“Fine, sure— this is the entrance. It’s a little hidden—”

she began, gesturing to the thick wall of roots and vines that covered a large gap in the rocks. She frowned. Perhaps she was wrong. Maybe he would be able to enter the gauntlet.

No sooner had she pointed it out, Silver stepped up, waving her off. “Alright, wait here.”

“What—no! You won’t be able to get in without me, it’s locked—”

“You didn’t say there was a lock.”

“You didn’t ask. Besides, this is my task, I have to go.”

“No, no. I’m not a babysitter.”

Indignantly, Nettle buzzed up to his face, stopping right in front of his nose. “I don’t need babysitting, I’ve already been—”

“People don’t hire me so they can find what they need for themselves,”

he said, rolling his eyes. “Look, give me the directions, tell me what it is you’re looking for, and I’ll bring it back out with me. I do better work when I’m not tripping over pixies.”

“No, I need to go there myself.”

“You’re not coming with me. This is not a field trip.”

He made a swipe through the air to grab her again, but she was too fast for him, ducking into the hedge. She tucked her wings and wriggled through the tightest tangles of it and soon was inside the passage. Only a few rays of light poked through into it.

“Keep talking about how I’m not going to be coming along. No, really,”

she called loudly, fully meaning it. Nothing could throw a bucket of freezing river water on her overzealous nethers than a man insisting he knew better than she did.

He grumbled, but took out his ax, and sliced through the tangle of roots in one swift motion. It was enough for him to part them like thorny curtains and duck through. The roots fell back into place, where they had been separated barely visible.

“I’m no chaperone. I don’t protect, I get the job done,”

he said, his voice echoing off the narrow walls of the passage.

You protected me in the tavern, she nearly reminded him. Just the thought of him plucking her up by the wings again was enough to make her feel that full body blush.

Damn him.

“I’m not asking you to protect me,”

she grumbled, more to herself than him. Stooping to asking for help was bad enough, but his company was quickly becoming intolerable.

At least the underground passage was exempt from the chilly climate of the lower Spinal Mountain’s frosty disposition, warmed by the hot underground river. The reprieve from the weather was little comfort, however. It was a treacherous passage.

The tunnel was long and dark. Nettle already knew how endless it could feel. When it was only her little glow that barely made a dent against the heavy darkness, sometimes she felt she lost track of what direction she was going in.

The addition of Silver’s footsteps, rhythmic and heavy, was somewhat grounding. He lit and held aloft a torch, revealing the narrow halls and the tiles underfoot.

Then, a sound joining the pattern of his footsteps. Stone grating against stone.

Silver stopped in his tracks, but he had already triggered the mechanism. A small series of clicks ran under the floor.

Nettle dove, wings beating harder than a hummingbird’s as she grabbed the front of

his tunic and yanked downwards.

Silver followed, falling with her instantly. She let go of his collar, landing in the dirt. He landed just after she did, catching himself on his hands, hovering inches over her as the chamber echoed with metal ringing against stone.

When the noises finally abated, they dared lift their eyes.

Embedded in the stone too close to Silver's standing height was a rusty bolt, fired out of a deceptive crack in the stonework on the other wall.

Nettle let out a sigh of relief. "That was—"

"—Too close,"

he finished for her.

Though she agreed, when she returned her attention to him, Nettle realized that he was nose to nose with her. She watched his throat bob as he swallowed.

"I did say—"

"You'd been here before,"

he nodded, the words riding on a breath. "I... didn't think you'd bother getting your hands dirty for me."

Nettle couldn't help but let out a shaky laugh. "Don't look so shocked. I need you, Silver."

She watched the way his usually tight, furrowed expression slackened, surprise left

behind in its place. She felt her cheeks flush with molten bronze as she realized she had let her guard down around him again.

“To open the door,”

she added quickly. “That’s all.”

“Right.”

Of course he wouldn’t be thinking that. He was probably just glad she knew about the traps. The last couple of times she had come down here, there were rats heavy enough to trigger the false plates. She always tried to fly low enough to stay under the path of the bolts, but not so low that the rats found their next meal.

Nettle felt Silver move to get up again, shifting off of the trigger plate.

“Wait—”

she started to say, but the mechanism had already started again.

The next thing she knew, Silver’s hand was over her, covering her body entirely when the next bolt fired. It deflected off the stone this time, a cacophony of metallic notes following it as it rebounded down the hall. Finally there was only the sound of it rolling across the stone floor.

Only when his hand relaxed around her did Nettle realize she was clutching her arms around his pointer finger.

Silver looked down the passage, and at first she thought he was rattled by the second shot, before a grin crept up around his tusks. He caught her eye, and if Nettle could, she would have clutched her heart with both her hands to keep her glow from flaring

again.

“Light the way, firebug.”

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“There was a shortcut this whole time?”

Silver asked in disbelief, when the first passage came to an end, and the pair emerged into a small circular room, barely ten feet across.

The stacked stones led upwards for a few hundred feet to no ceiling, but a peek at the stars. Not that one could truly admire them from down here.

“It’s not much of a shortcut. You have to get almost to the top of the mountain just to have to climb down,”

Nettle replied with minimal eye rolling. “And you have to be sure you have enough rope to make it back. You see that one dangling, about halfway up?”

He squinted up at the dark ledge for a long moment, and Nettle eyed the better view it gave her of the outline of his neck, his jaw.

“Are we at the bottom of a well?”

“We are. This gauntlet leads to an ancient spring at the bottom of the Chasm. My court has long believed it has restorative powers.”

Silver raised an eyebrow to that. “I didn’t realize there were any Fey still living in the Chasm.”

“I wouldn’t show you where a doorway was, if that’s what you’re asking,”

she scoffed. The entrances, little pockets of forever spring in the woods that were more visible during the winter, but one still needed Fey magic to open the doors. “We don’t let in outsiders.”

Silver rolled his eyes and didn’t respond to her defensiveness, rather taking in their surroundings.

“We’ll camp here for tonight,”

he decided after a moment, his attention dropping to the dry bottom of the well. He walked around the space, gathering up the few branches that had fallen in.

While he built a fire, Nettle flew partway up the well, stopping when she found a familiar wild raspberry bush growing out between some of the stacked stones. The truly strange places some plants flourished in never failed to amuse her. How could it be finding any of the things it needed in this odd place?

She plucked an armful of the raspberries and brought them back to the campfire. Silver caught her eye, a brow quirked.

Nettle held out a berry to him. He took it from her, delicately pinching it between two fingers. Then he held her gaze just as carefully as he brought it to his mouth, licking some of the juice off the tip of his thumb.

For her own sake, Nettle looked away quickly.

In the last few hours of walking and chatting, she’d gotten a little more comfortable with her bounty hunter’s coarse manners. She still wasn’t charmed by them, of course. And if she’d happened to have laughed at even one of his jokes, well, she would just keep that to herself. No one back home needed to know.

She settled on the largest and flattest of a pile of stones rather than sit directly on the dirt. Every few moments, she couldn't help but steal another glimpse at him.

Nettle noted the tears in the sleeves of his rough shirt, the myriad belts and buckles hanging off his hips. He seemed to keep everything he needed on his person. She watched as he undid the buckle that ran over one shoulder and across his chest, removing his cloak. He rolled it up into a makeshift pillow and made himself comfortable.

Sprawled out on the ground across the fire from her, the orc picked up one of the little birds he'd roasted over the fire and started taking careful bites around its delicate bones. He dragged the arrow he'd used to skewer the bird against his teeth, his clever tongue savoring the last scraps of its meat.

"You're not getting any of this,"

he told her when he caught her watching him. "Those kitten eyes won't work on me."

"Oh, we've graduated to small animals now? Did you run out of insects you can name?"

she teased. She couldn't help but giggle at the thought that the gruff bounty hunter might be warming to her.

Silver scoffed and rolled his eyes, but tucked in the corner of his mouth, Nettle spied a hint of a smile.

Nettle turned away quickly. She was spending much too much time just staring at him. She needed to focus on anything else, or he'd start growing on her.

Her attention moved to the berry between her thighs. Not that one, the other one. The

raspberry she'd foraged for dinner.

With her back to him, she separated each juicy kernel from the rest, each one its own perfectly sized bite. She spit the seeds out and tossed them towards the campfire, though few reached it.

The campfire crackled as they fell into a comfortable silence. Nettle yawned, closing her eyes and stretching. She rolled her neck, arching her spine with her palms flat on her lower back. She needed a dip in a hot spring, or at least a hot mug of water back at the inn when this was all over. But a couple of nights roughing it and sleeping on the ground would be worth it to get her treasure back.

She linked her fingers together behind her head, stretching her shoulders out. At first she thought she heard a little sound like her joints popping, but it continued.

She frowned, released her hands, and turned around.

Nettle only had a second to look at the creature, a centipede as long and thick as some snakes, scuttling down the well wall towards her. Its pincers flexed wide as it approached, but before it could finish the threatening motion, Silver's ax came down upon it.

"Ah!"

she gasped, the shock of it all as resounding in her chest as forcefully as the blade that severed the insect's head from its body.

The head rolled towards her feet, pincers stilled.

Silver looked as unmoved as he did when he slayed the toadbird.

“I said it’d be dangerous out here,”

he grumbled, as if it was an arduous task to remind her he was right. But he leaned over from where he laid on the ground, plucking up the rest of the centipede’s body and threaded the arrow through its thorax. He dug the tip of the arrow into the dirt by the fire, letting it dangle over the embers to smoke overnight.

Nettle grimaced at the thought of having to eat that thing for breakfast, but had no time to linger on it, as Silver next reached for her.

She held back a moan as he lifted her, the way his touch lit a path straight to her most sensitive bits. His coarse touch against the delicate tips of her wings was electrifying.

If it weren’t for the firelight, he might have seen her glow flare again, the sensation of it running directly into her most sensitive places.

Then he deposited her on his stomach and laid back down, head propped up by his bundled cloak.

“Don’t worry, I’m not a restless sleeper. You can stay safe from bugs here,”

he said, as if him rolling over and flinging her off in the middle of the night was now her biggest concern.

“I thought I was a bug.”

“We’ve been over this, you graduated,”

he replied as he made himself comfortable on the ground once again.

Nettle was not as quick to find her bedding on his stomach.

Again he had saved her. Again, she found some thrill in it.

Not that she was keeping score, of course. She just wasn't sure she could be responsible for her actions if he was going to keep protecting her like that. The pulsing heat in her nethers seemed to reignite each time it happened.

And now, he could feel her every movement. Every time she turned over, he would know. Every time he spoke, she could feel the rumble in his chest beneath her, cradling her.

“Something wrong?”

“This is rather... intimate.”

He gave half a shrug, a movement that nearly sent her tumbling. “It happens on quests. Sometimes you find yourself cuddling folk you never would have sat next to in the tavern simply because you're trying not to freeze overnight.”

“Really? And who's the strangest being you've ever cuddled?”

“Oh, probably a gnomish cultist old enough to be my grandmother,”

he chuckled.

“I didn't realize you met so many interesting people in your line of work.”

“I do,”

he nodded, some quiet and contemplative in his eyes.

“I'm a little jealous, truthfully. I've known everyone in the Morning Mist Court all

my life.”

He shrugged. “I suppose it’s nice at first. But I’m afraid I’m tired of getting to know people I’m only going to forget about. I hate sitting up at night, wondering where they are now.”

Her brows drew together. It sounded terribly lonely.

Before her thoughts could wander too far down that path, however, he reached over to pluck the half eaten berry up from the stone. “Do you want the rest of your dinner?”

Nettle eyed the horizon of his chest, the rippling floor of abs beneath her. She was lost to the prospect of having to sleep on all this without being able to rock her hips against it. “No, I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Suit yourself,”

he replied, and popped the berry into his mouth.

For a second time, Silvertongue licked the tip of his thumb clean of juice. This time, Nettle didn’t look away. She watched shamelessly, and drank in every detail of his mouth closing over it.

It made her shiver, the sensation creeping over her. It flushed from her cheeks, over her shoulders, down, tightening her nipples into little peaks, caressing her belly and settling deep in her nethers.

She could have bit down on her fist at the way he threaded his fingers together and put them behind his head, his arms flexed in either side. It was too much.

She felt the low, gravelly rumble of his voice, as he lazily quirked a brow and asked, “So, why did you leave your Fey Court? Did you get tired of everything being perfectly suited for you?”

She swallowed.

“...I wanted bigger things for myself.”

He rolled his eyes, unsated. “That’s a simple answer.”

“Ask me something more complicated.”

His dark, hungry eyes held hers, rooting her in place. “What makes a firebug glow?”

She could feel his stare warming her up, from her cheeks to low in her belly.

“Hard to say,”

Nettle shrugged, rolling onto her stomach. She propped one hand up under her chin and trailed the other over his stomach. Immediately she felt too forward, and pretended to brush some dirt off his shirt. “But I have some theories.”

She watched his nostrils flare before he asked, “What theories?”

Nettle nearly flared, knowing she held his attention in the palm of her hand. It was her last few nights outside of the court, she thought again. And likely, she would never see him after this.

“Well, it’s not every time something excites me,”

she offered, her voice soft, “But I can feel the glow all the way up to my navel.”

Just fucking hump his abs already, she told herself. It felt inevitable, like she was set on a course to flare so bright and so hot she would combust in it. It would either happen now, or in her sleep while she dreamed of straddling his lips and clinging to his tusks.

As she spoke, Nettle traced a hand up her thigh, over the swell of her bottom, over her hip to her stomach. She watched his throat bob as he swallowed, his gaze focused hard on her as he licked his lips.

Silver clearly knew an invitation when he saw one. He reached out, and she couldn't help but notice the way his hand shook a little as it neared her. Was the tremor from nerves, or the effort it took to be careful with her?

She laid back against his palm, and before she knew it, his thumb had slipped up under her petal dress, finding her breast to tease. The calluses on the tips of his fingers dragged over her nipples, making her gasp out loud, "Oh, Silver!"

With a tug, he pulled her petal dress off, and she stood naked in his palm. Then he dragged the tip of his finger through her folds. She was already slick between her glowing thighs, the evidence glinting off his fingertip. Gently, he transferred her to his other hand and tasted her wetness off his finger.

She glimmered, she flared, she flashed, hot and tooth-grindingly needy. She had to look away when his head tipped back in a groan, and caught a glimpse of his arousal.

The tenting in his pants would likely have been enough shelter for her, if not for the beast contained within. His cock gave a lively twitch, and Nettle immediately began pulling at the leather ties to free it.

In a moment, the fabric of his pants fell away.

Nettle stared up at it, the shadow it cast over her. It was taller than her certainly, and too wide to even consider, but still she ached to climb atop it.

With a flutter of wings, she brought herself closer. She laid a palm against his cockhead, felt the heat radiating off him, the pulse in the veins that decorated it, and the softness of its skin. A polished edge of gold pierced through the dual slits.

Best of all was the shudder Silver gave at her touch. She landed primly, straddling the shaft the way some might sit on a fallen tree trunk.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

Silver gasped, as she laid her body down over it.

“Riding you,”

she answered, rolling her hips against him. She pressed her body fully to his velvety hardness, wrapping her arms around the head, rubbing her tits on it. It was so warm and soft, and humping her body against it was making her wetter. Silver's grunts of pleasure spurred her on.

“Firebug,”

he murmured, grinding his teeth together as he held back another noise. “You feel so good.”

She licked a long, wet stripe up the cockhead, and his hips bucked. She clutched her arms around his cock as the world shook for her.

“Gods, your fey touch,”

he panted, his brows drawing together. “You’re so warm.”

Nettle glanced back at him, a mischievous grin spreading across her face. She flexed her wings, trailing her hand up the length of his shaft as she brought herself to hover over that sensitive tip. It was flushed deep purple, its strangely shaped head seemed like the perfect seat, its dual slits begging for her fingers to trace their edges.

His fist curled around the base of his cock, holding it steady. Her foot found purchase resting on his knuckle, her legs clamped around the shaft.

She knew she couldn’t take him inside her, but she could still get a little friction between them. She settled her cunt against his cockhead, moaning lightly as the ridge of his piercing fit perfectly against her. Precum beaded between them, hot against her vulva.

Nettle rolled her hips again, and nearly sighed in relief at how good it felt to smother her cunt against something so warm and wet, the gush of his hot seed beading out of his slits. There was something about the intimacy of another body, the humid heat of skin to skin, that she hadn’t been able to find at the Fey Court lately. Though the lovers she might take there were more appropriately sized to her, there had been something missing from the experience.

And he was just so large, his presence utterly overwhelmed hers.

She rocked her hips wildly, grinding her cunt to his massive cock head, his piercing pushing deeper into her with every thrust. She watched Silver’s brows draw together as his head tipped back in a groan.

“Firebug—!”

He started to say, voice becoming a deep growl, and then his eyes squeezed shut and

his teeth ground together.

She felt his seed flood against her cunt first, flowing hot and hard through her folds. The sensation reminded her of the lily pond pools of the Fey Court, the clear waterfalls catching the sunlight, laying under one of the tiny waterfalls with her legs spread wide, to feel the current of water wash hard against her clit until an orgasm overtook her. The rest of the fountain of his seed spurted straight up, catching against her stomach, her breasts, her chin, painting her body with hot white jets.

It came once, twice, three times, each time a scaldingly perfect and still too brief sweep of sensation radiating pleasure through her.

And then it was just her and Silver, his chest rising and falling with every hard breath. His eyes moved from the spilled drops of seed across his stomach to her, painted from cunt to chin in it, straddled across his wobbling cock head.

Silver's chest heaved with his breath, as he scooped her up into his palm, cleaning her off with the edge of his shirt. Soon she laid back down on his chest, starting to doze off.

Silver's voice, low and tender, rumbled under her. "What's so special about this treasure of yours?"

"It's... personal,"

she answered after a few moments. She tried to tell herself that she didn't care what the orc thought of her, because they would simply part ways at the end of this adventure the way they had started: as strangers.

"You don't need to tell me."

“No, it’s just... it’s hard to explain. There’s a lot of doorways to the fey realms in the Chasm. Spots that are warmer, always in bloom. Of course, though one might stumble upon the doorway, few have the ability to turn the key. And without my glow ...”

She swallowed then, a lump in her throat that made the words too hard to speak aloud. I can never go home. She nodded. “There’s a magic spring at the end of this gauntlet. It’ll fix me.”

Silver was quiet for a long moment, before he asked, “What will you do when you’ve got your glow again? Go right back to your Fey Court?”

“I must.”

“Why?”

“Truthfully... I got my glow back the moment I left,”

she admitted, and the glow deep in her being seemed to burn lower as she lingered over the memory. How excited she’d been to find it that quickly again, only for it to fade just as the novelty of being outside did.

“But when I tried to go back it disappeared again. I lost it as soon as I had it. I haven’t been able to get it to stay permanently since.”

she added, with a bit of a forced laugh when she caught sight of his frown.

She had thought at first her glow had dimmed because she had grown bored with all the fey she’d known since the first dawn. That she couldn’t get away from every version of herself that she’d outgrown. But it had persisted as she struggled to find her footing in the world.

Despite her reassurance, Silver's face remained unchanged.

“If your glow goes out every time you try to go home, maybe...”

he didn't finish the thought out loud, but he didn't need to. Nettle had wondered it herself, but the world was different out here. She was alone, and apparently the right size for most creatures to snack on. It was too frightful and dangerous. She was nothing without her glow. And she couldn't even go home.

Her heart ached with a terrible pang then, the burden of home. She tried to shrug, to scoff in an irreverent tone, “You said it yourself, before. I'm too prim. I'm not built for these adventures.”

She watched the dim cavern light dance across his face as a muscle tightened in his jaw. She looked away quickly. It was dangerous for her heart to suppose he might care.

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Nettle had been enjoying the cozy warmth of sleeping on top of Silver, his large hand gently caged over her, his thumb under her cheek. It had been a while since she'd slept so well.

There was a sense of security, even gentleness, in feeling the rise and fall of his chest under her. His presence simply enveloped hers. She had heard other fey speak of the world falling away when they were with their lovers, but she hadn't heard anyone say how a lover could become the world.

Oh, what was she thinking? How could she let her heart be so easily swayed by a night together? Nettle winced in memory. She had been naïve before, and she knew the consequences.

She had not meant to cuddle up to him, but what had started as a precaution was quickly becoming far more personal.

As she blinked awake in the dim morning light, she found herself watching Silver's throat, the long, slow breaths nearly putting her back to sleep.

Then a glint of light off a gossamer strand, and a black and yellow striped spider dangling near his cheek, lowering itself.

She pushed up on her elbows immediately and flitted upwards. The spider started scrambling in midair as she plucked the silk a few inches up the strand, lifting it away from the bounty hunter's face. It failed to climb back up the silk as she flew it over the diminished campfire, and she watched it curl up into a ball as she dropped it on the embers.

Silver wouldn't know she just saved him from a poisonous bite, not that she was keeping score.

She glanced back at him, still asleep on the ground.

There was something almost sweet about the way his face looked, relaxed instead of glowering. The night before had been something else. It scorched her cheeks and flooded her belly with heat to remember riding his cock piercing.

If she was at her Fey Court, it would have been her utmost priority to find a mulberry bush and find one berry that was ripe to bursting, so that even the lightest touch stained her fingertips. She would have dabbed its color on her cheeks, her lips, the way she did whenever she had wanted to make another fey jealous with the illusion of being freshly kissed.

What do you care? He's not going to be jealous of anything. Not for you. Silly fey.

Still, she found a puddle in one corner of the dried well bottom to watch her reflection as she combed her fingers through her hair.

Behind her, Silver groaned and woke, pushing up on an elbow. She met his eye and dropped it just as quickly.

She'd been so brazen last night, but something about the flicker of firelight had emboldened her. Now she could barely look at him without blushing. Something about the morning light made it seem presumptuous to just land atop his morning wood and ask if he'd like another round.

Nettle dared a glance at him when he separated the remaining embers of the fire with the leather toe of his boot. His eye caught hers again, and he raised his brows at her. "Ready to get going?"

A tension that had been building between her shoulders eased.

“Sure,”

she said, standing and brushing herself off. She was about to take to the air when he offered out a hand. She took a step up to his palm, balancing herself with a hand on his thumb.

He brought her up to his shoulder. Nettle might have leaped out of his palm a touch faster than she should have, but she'd only been eyeing the expanse of his shoulders since first setting eyes on him.

Nettle sprawled across his shoulder, looking at the world from his height.

Or that's what she pretended, as he set off down the winding tunnel, the carved ruins of the gauntlet becoming tall and expansive. But her attention kept returning to his tusks, wondering what it would be like to sit herself between them.

It was extremely disorienting to wonder how she would make that a reality. When would she find the time to burn incandescent under his precise and careful attention? The thought of returning home loomed, along with the knowledge that she'd never know an experience like that again.

There also wasn't any good way to ask if he'd consider desecrating a pile of gold with her. Perhaps that wasn't done.

“Silver, um. Was last night the sort of thing that normally happens on adventures?”

She watched the profile of his face as he raised a brow. “You mean do I make a habit of sleeping with clients?”

“No,”

she said quickly, and stammered to add, “I’ve... never, I mean, not someone I knew only so briefly.”

Silver chuckled. “Sometimes all it takes is being two bodies alone in the wilds. I stopped letting people come along. Only took jobs from the board.”

“Oh. I’m... sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault I’m easily persuaded. Something lonely in me thought: it’s been a while since anyone knew me long enough to remember my name.”

She wasn’t sure what she had expected his answer to be, and perhaps it didn’t really matter. There was always going to be an ocean of differences between him and her, and all her question had done was widen her view of the gap. She’d hoped, perhaps, for a moment, that it would have been as special and unique an evening to him as it had been to her, that she wasn’t alone in all the fluttery feelings she’d been starting to have.

It was just another thing she wasn’t suited for outside the Fey Court.

They walked in silence a long while, until the final chamber door came into view. Nettle slipped off of Silver’s shoulder, zipping through the air to it.

The door was smaller than Silver, but several times larger than herself, a circle carved into the wall. A pinprick hole in the center let out the smallest amount of light, an unfocused peek into the chamber.

Nettle placed her hands around it, working her magic into the lock. She grit her teeth, summoning her glow. It was like trying to light damp tinder.

“Easy does it, Firebug,”

Silver murmured. “We’re not in a rush.”

Her wings drooped, despite his reassurance. “And if I can’t unlock it?”

He shrugged, and flashed that tusked smile at her. “We break it down.”

Nettle couldn’t help but smile back a little. She doubted her Fey Court would look kindly upon it if they learned she vandalized the sacred spring, but she appreciated his vote of confidence all the same.

It took several more moments to summon her magic, but like stagnant blood into cold hands, finally it came. Leaves of mistletoe, in the palest of greens, unfurled inside the lock.

A heavy grinding noise came, stone against stone as the magic worked, and the shape of the door pushed out from the wall.

It should have kept opening, but like last time, the door stopped.

This was as much as she’d accomplished the previous time she had reached this far, but it hadn’t been enough. Even though this was the whole point of bringing someone else along, she couldn’t help but feel she had failed again.

“That’s my girl,”

Silver said, even as her wings drooped again. His words wicked off her like water on duck feathers. He stepped forward and grabbed the stone door.

A mean thought pierced her for a moment, as he pushed and readjusted his hands on

it, that he wouldn't be able to open the door either. She didn't truly want it, but maybe it would have made her feel better about failing.

But Silver's sheer muscle succeeded where her magic had not. A shiver ran up her skin as the entire wall at the end of the tunnel shifted, a mechanism taking the weight of it and rolling into an underground pocket. Silver looked to Nettle with a grin, and gestured for her to go in. She felt an overwhelming swell of gratitude.

The spring was just as she'd been told. The cavern was large, the ceiling obscured by a swath of hanging roots and vines. They were deep under the Whispering Woods, close to the heart of the Chasm. A few stray beams of light shone through the mass, the largest of them highlighting the spring on the far end of the chamber, shining on the Fey Spring. Small rivulets of water glimmered as they ran down a raw amethyst wall, gathering in a carved basin below.

She looked back at Silver, ducking through the low door behind her, watched his face as he looked around, taking the scattered piles and chests of gold doubloons, bejeweled rings and crowns spilling out across the ornate stone floor, carved in the same style as the gauntlet leading to it.

She flitted down the path, landing just on the edge of the basin. Nettle tucked her wings in. Her heart beat rapidly.

This was it, everything she had been waiting for. Finally, she could stop worrying about what was wrong with her. She would glow again.

Nettle scooped up a handful of the water, drank it, and waited.

And waited.

"It's not working. It's not... it didn't fix me."

Her voice choked on the words.

She hadn't found what she had wanted out in the world. She couldn't go back, and she couldn't move forward. Maybe when she first set out on this pointless quest, she'd wanted adventure and new experiences, only to discover she wasn't built for them.

All of this had been for nothing.

Silver's footsteps echoed off the cavern walls, the crackle of gold under boot. With every passing heartbeat, she felt smaller, less.

"Nettle, what can I do?"

"Go. Take your treasure. Your job is done."

"Nettle..."

"I said go."

He stayed.

"You can't help me. I should have done this alone. But...it's all too much for me. I can't get anything right out here,"

Nettle said, her voice wobbling over every word, sobs threatening to break past the dam in her chest. She was truly nothing without her glow. She couldn't even speak right.

"C'mon, Firebug. We got this far, haven't we?"

He took another step forward, his expression soft and full of concern, trained on her.

Click.

He froze. “Well, shit.”

Click click click. The sounds grew louder, deeper, running beneath the chamber, gears winding, mechanisms being triggered. The floor began to shake, the soft jingle of coins as the piles of gold rattled and spilled into the cracks between tiles. Soon the tiles themselves were becoming unmoored, falling away as easily as the treasure.

Silver dashed back towards the entrance tunnel, diving for the doorway as all but the last steps of the floor crumbled away. He caught himself on the edge, his legs dangling off the edge.

Nettle zipped after him, catching hold of his sleeve just as one of his hands slipped.

She knew she could never hope to lift him, but she didn’t know what else to do but try. Her hands burned as the fabric of his sleeve yanked through her hands. Squeezing her eyes shut, her wings worked furiously. Every muscle screamed, but she couldn’t stop.

“Nettle!”

Silver exclaimed, causing her to look up.

The roots from the ceiling, the ones that had been bare and dry and craggley, were suddenly a vivid green— no, something else had sprouted from them. A thick tangled mass of little oval leaves on crisscrossing stems, peppered with little waxy white berries.

When Nettle saw them growing down to her, aided by the coppery sparkles of her magic, she nearly let go of his sleeve.

“For the love of— don’t stop now,”

Silver growled. He grabbed a fistful of the hanging plants. Some branches snapped, but most of them held. He let go of the ledge and grabbed another handful of the mistletoe growing down to meet him.

Nettle clutched his sleeve as he hefted himself onto the ledge, back into the gauntlet.

A thousand apologies on the tip of her tongue along with worries that he’d gotten hurt, she flitted to his side as he laid on the tunnel floor and caught his breath.

“My pixie protector,”

Silver grinned between heavy inhales. Nettle blinked. She hadn’t been prepared for that.

After several more breaths, Silver propped himself up on his elbows, glancing at the massive fissure in the ground. “I doubt ‘sorry’ covers all that. But also, who rigs an entire cavern to collapse?”

“You’re sorry? I risked your life for nothing,”

she said, her throat growing tight with tears.

“You also saved me. We’ll call it even.”

“We’re not even. You’ve saved me many times already. The centipede, t-the toadbird at the b-bar would have eaten me in one gulp if you hadn’t stopped it—”

Even as she listed them, her voice started to falter with emotion.

“Needing a little help isn’t a sign that you can’t handle being out in the world. I brought the toadbird inside,”

Silver reminded her. He glanced from the spring behind her, back to her. “Look, you’ve led us through the gauntlet. You’ve saved me from blunders I would have made without you here.”

Nettle didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure what response she could give but an unconvinced hum. She stared deep into the chasm numbly. The amethyst wall and the spring were buried under the rubble, as well as all the treasure.

“Did you at least get some gold out of it?”

“A few coins. A bit below my day rate,”

Silver shrugged, “But it happens. Least it’s not less than what I started with.”

She closed her eyes, counting down the seconds until she felt Silver pinch the tips of her wings, pulling her up off the ground to perch on his chest. She couldn’t help but lay down on him as well, after all that chaos. His heart beat fast underneath her.

“You’ve got your glow,”

he said, running his thumb absently along her knee to her hip.

Nettle looked down. She hadn’t even realized, she’d been so concerned with getting out of there alive, she hadn’t thought one bit about her glow.

It was there, flickering with the heart pounding thrill Silver kept bringing out in her.

Silver

Silver watched Nettle stare at her hands, the way her glow took over her whole being. She laughed, she shrieked in joy, her wings beating so rapidly they were a blur of glinting light behind her as she zipped around the chaos.

She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. She was the pinkish gold hue of sunrise and sunset, she was a searing hot summer day bearing down against a cold, clear river. Every plant in the large, crumbling chamber seemed to turn and lift its leaves to face her, to sun themselves in her presence.

Silver knew that feeling all too well by now. He pushed himself to stand, feeling her zip past his cheek, the brief note of her laughter as she carved through the air.

It wasn't just the plants, the very light in the cavern seemed to shift, shimmers and threads of light in every color twisting in the air, and then parted like curtains over a doorway.

Then she was gone.

Nettle flitted through the portal without a second of hesitation, diving straight into the center, leaving a trail of sparkles in the air behind her.

Silver almost called out after her, taking a few steps towards it, before his sense of self preservation took over. The crumbling ledge continued on in iridescent shimmer, but he wasn't sure it would hold his weight. He stood at the edge and craned his neck towards the portal.

Silver had to blink several times before he realized what he was seeing.

Hundreds of fey were peeking out of lush living plants, grown into elegant shelters. It seemed partway between a forest and a castle. All kinds of mushrooms sprouted up between the fallen rocks, circling the doorway, blurring the line of where it started. It was odd, the way he felt he was in two places at once, watching their features overlap.

A number of the fey gasped as they saw her, dozens taking to the air to greet her, a swirl of glittering sparkles surrounding her, each calling out to her, “Lady Nettlewisp is back!”

Lady Nettlewisp.

She hasn’t said she was a noble Lady of the Morning Mist Court.

Of course she was. He hadn’t been able to picture it before, but this place was clearly suited entirely to her, she had a whole life and connections here. Everyone knew her name. He didn’t know all that being a Fey noble entailed, but he imagined it didn’t involve sleeping around campfires or looking for work in seedy pubs.

And now that her little detour was over, she was right back where she belonged.

She was so beautiful, especially with that wide, effervescent smile. She glowed. A bitter happiness bloomed in his chest. He was glad she found what she was looking for, truly.

A few dozen of the fey nearest the door stared at him, wide eyed and in shock that he was there at all, looking in.

“Silver!”

Nettle called out, wreathed in a neverending cascade of glittering sparks. She was looking at him with that wide, beaming smile.

“That’s my dear friend, Silver,”

she explained to the hundreds of fey surrounding her, and before he knew it, a quite literal handful of them were gathered around one of his boots, tugging him a step into the mushroom circle.

Several of them flitted up to his eye level, offering him acorn caps wilted with mulled wine, others pushed little baskets woven out of pine needles, filled to the brim with berries, into his palm. A couple of them might have crawled into his pockets, by the feel of his cloak rustling.

She looked at him with bright, excited eyes.

He tried not to let his next words cut into her triumph of having her magic back, to not let the way his heart had sunk when he’d realized this was their parting moment. She had a life to get back to, and it was right here.

“Back to your Court, then?”

“I... well, yes,”

she said, and a little round of cheers went off, running through the towering trees, echoing through the mystical woods.

“Good. I’m... happy for you,”

he nodded, and tried not to grimace as the tiniest round of applause went off around his feet. This was no way to have this conversation, but he didn’t think he could ask her for a moment alone. There were so many eyes on the pair of them. Too many.

Nettle was silent for a long time, long enough that the little sounds of applause had faded entirely.

Silver cleared his throat and rummaged in his pocket, scooping up and tossing out the pair of fey that had invaded his personal space a little too closely. “Well, I have a long walk back.”

“Surely, you’ll stay for a while? We’ll have a feast to celebrate, I owe you that much,”

she said quickly, and even though she tried to keep her smile in place, he could see she looked confused.

Silver shook his head, and leaned down to scoop a few more coins up off the ground. “No, no. Consider the job paid for.”

Before she could protest, before she could persuade him to drink the fey wine, to step fully through the portal and spend a dozen nights feasting and experiencing firsthand the famed fey debauchery, he turned and left.

He felt like his heart might fall out of his mouth if he tried to voice any of the ways she was falling for him, bit by bit. Already he had to let what had been building between them go.

Each step back through the gauntlet, he insisted to himself she wasn’t his type. He preferred a more rugged girl, rubbed dirt in her wounds, sort. He didn’t care too much for shiny things, anyway.

The hike back from the depths of the Chasm was quiet and uneventful. He made it to the Hammered N’Aled Tavern a little after nightfall. It was the last evening of the winter festival in the village, candles burned down to little melted stubbs on every available surface, a handful of snow sculptures that didn’t look like much of anything

outside.

Silver settled in at the bar, waving to Erryc for his usual pint. Erryc nodded and kissed the top of Fawn's head,

Silver's brow creased. When the fuck did that develop? He shook his head, deciding that he didn't care enough right now to go find which barflies he owed money on that for.

Erryc nodded a greeting toward Silver as he began filling a tankard. "Back for another job? I've had some people asking about you. Heard there was a huldira further up in the Whispering Woods that needed slaying—"

"Not tonight. Someone else can take that one,"

Silver said, shaking his head. He knew it was doubtless better to throw himself headfirst into another job, to let the work fill his waking moments so he didn't mope around uselessly. But the mere thought of going back out into the dark, the long, endless empty road, made him too tired to even consider it.

Erryc looked a little surprised, even a little concerned. "Everything alright?"

"Slept badly on the ground,"

Silver grimaced, giving his neck a little roll as if to suggest the pain lived in a different muscle.

"Oh, that's the worst. I had a floor board that disagreed with me the other night,"

Erryc nodded sympathetically and slid the pint of ale down the bar. It passed over a faint stain down the length of the counter, left behind by the toadbird's black ichor.

Silver found himself staring at it even as he lifted the tankard to his mouth. It made him think of that night he had met her. Worse, it made him think of her sitting in that glass, drenched in pollen wine, flaring bright and beautiful.

He swallowed hard, wishing he'd known what that had meant before. Maybe he wouldn't have spent so much of his time with her being a prickly idiot.

Silver glanced up, realizing Erryc was still standing by, staring at him expectantly.

“So?”

“What do you mean, so?”

“Are you not going to tell me about the last job? What did the fey lady want?”

“Finished the job, end of story. I'll move onto the next one, and,”

Silver interrupted himself with another swig of his drink. And so would she. They were just briefly passing through one another's lives, a singular intersection of paths that went on in opposite directions.

“And?”

“And that's it,”

Silver sighed with a bit of finality. Erryc always asked questions to keep him talking, and he appreciated that. It tended to be good for business to talk loudly about his adventures, and even occasionally charmed someone to his bed for the evening.

“Maybe the next one will have a better ending,”

Erryc shrugged.

“A better beginning, too,”

he muttered, and drained his drink in one long draught,

No shortage of concern in his expression, Erryc began, “You know, Silver, maybe the real treasure is—”

Silver belched, effectively cutting him off. “Being alone.”

Erryc nodded, taking his point. “Another ale?”

“No, bring me some of that sparkling pollen shit.”

Erryc stared for a moment, and seemed to think to ask a question, but closed his mouth when Silver lifted his eyes and met him with a glare.

“You don’t have to bother with the fancy glass, this time,”

Silver called after Erryc’s retreating back, before he disappeared into the storage room.

Silver sighed and sank a little further into his seat. He didn’t consider himself to have many friends. Perhaps some amount of his loneliness was his own doing. He wasn’t trying to overlook the one he had here, but this wasn’t something talking about could ease. A few more drinks might help, though.

He’d meant to stop letting people come along on quests, and this was just another example to prove he should have stuck to that. He’d grown tired of having to watch people leave when they didn’t need his services anymore.

What was it worth to keep wanting to be someone’s everything, when it left such a hollow in him to be discarded after being only one or two things to someone?

Erryc returned, dropped off that single delicate wine glass again, and fled down to the other end of the bar to speak with someone else before Silver could complain.

Whatever, he'd try the wine in the vessel it came in. Though, he'd had a thought or two about licking it off the little fey that had managed to occupy every inch of his mind.

It was sweet with a sharp little bite, the drink nipping back with every taste. He grimaced at the thought that it was just like her, in every way.

He set the drink down on the bar. He should have known better than to linger over the thought of her. It would be better to do away with all his thoughts of her, now that she'd gone back to be part of the Morning Mist Court again.

But he'd liked her. He had really liked her. She was magnetic, drawing his eye back to her every time she laughed or darted through the air. Yet so effortlessly elegant, it was in her long eyelashes and the curve of her neck when she glanced at him over her shoulder.

It wasn't just that she had saved him almost effortlessly a number of times, or that they'd shared a firelit evening together.

She'd gotten under his skin. A taste of companionship, easy as it was exciting.

He'd likely have driven her away eventually, with all his chatter.

The bar creaked across from him as Erryc leaned against it. "Hey, have you heard something about a betting pool—"

"Absolutely not,"

Silver said, standing up immediately, taking his pretty drink outside for some fresh

air.

Outside was cold and quiet, the sky a deep blue fading into purples, only interrupted by the black outline of the mountains, the Whispering Woods, the whole of the Chasm. As he rounded the building to the back where fewer patrons would stumble upon him, he noticed the moon was barely a sliver in the sky. It seemed fitting that it wasn't able to light the snow.

Silver stood there for several moments, his breath clouding the night, hoping for a star that twinkled more than any of the others. When he found none, he stared deep into the glittering wine, specs of golden pollen settling to the bottom. When he stared into the murky depths of whatever grog was on tap, he never saw much but his own lonely reflection.

He hadn't expected their night together to be particularly special to her, but when he'd realized their time together was at an end, it was far more disheartening than he'd been prepared for.

"Excuse me,"

the sweetest voice he'd ever heard rung out, clear as a bell, "Is this seat taken?"

Silver barely blinked once before he saw the shower of sparks that came with her ashe descended out of the air. Nettle sat down on the rim of his drink, kicking a foot across the surface of it, sending a few sparkling drops scattering. Gods, he didn't even care. There was enough gold in his pocket from the fey spring that he could buy a whole cask of it, pour it out and buy another.

"I- Nettle,"

he stammered, unsure how to respond. He hadn't thought there was even a small chance of her following after him.

She settled primly on the glass rim, her soft thighs creasing against it. “What happened to ‘Firebug’?”

“Sure,”

he said slowly. “Bug.”

Her mouth opened for a retort, but she paused, her gaze narrowing at him. It made a brief smile tug at the corner of his mouth, though it came with a twist of pain, like trying to flex a broken toe.

Nettle lifted one gossamer wing, giving it a slight shake. More delicate than a butterfly's wing, spun of dewdrops and spider silk and sunrise. Bits of her fairy dust drifted off it, specs of pink and gold.

“Silvertongue,”

she returned to him after a beat. Her eyes seemed unusually bright, as she said softly, “You left. You barely even said goodbye.”

He closed his hand into a fist at his side to keep from reaching out for her.

“I had to make it quick. I hate long, drawn out goodbyes. It makes leaving all the worse than it already was,”

he admitted, throat tight around the words. “It’s better I didn’t stay. I would have accidentally stepped on someone, it would have been a whole thing.”

He wanted to leave it at that, but her lower lip trembled and he blurted out, voice hoarse, “I thought if I stayed a second longer, I’d have fallen in love with you and been broken hearted when you decided you were done with me. I mean, you were already done with me. The job was done, we move on, that’s how it goes.”

He had thought it would be like tearing his heart out to admit it to her, but the way her expressive wings twitched and her face softened,

He knew he was a fool, a bounty hunter confessing feelings to a noble lady, a towering orc and a delicate fey, completely unsuited to each other, but he didn't care. He had known the ways they could fit together perfectly, and it was the only thing he wanted now.

“You were home. That was what you wanted,”

he insisted, a little less fervently. He hated that a note of hope slipped into his voice. He couldn't afford that.

She shook her head, and his treacherous heart skipped a beat.

“You left, and I realized I didn't want to be there. Living in a court I'd long outgrown, that was why the passion in my life had faded. Going back there wasn't going to fix anything. And when I thought about going after you...”

she trailed off, but she didn't need to speak the thought out loud as a coppery flare ran up her cheeks. “I really enjoyed getting to know you. I'd like to keep getting to know you.”

Silver blinked back at her, stunned. He was at a loss for words.

Instead, he held her stare, lifting the drink to his mouth. Her wings fluttered to steady herself she lowered herself into his drink.

Silver suppressed a smile, badly.

“You know... there's a crypt not too far from here. It's got a lock I haven't been able to pick,”

he offered, voice low and soft. He gave the wine glass a little shake, swirling the contents of it around her.

“I suppose I could do you the favor. I mean, if you need the help,”

she offered in a low, sultry voice. She pulled her little flower-petal dress off, letting it float away in the wine.

“You’re sure? It’s awful dangerous,”

Silver asked, tilting the glass a little.

She slid down to the rim of the glass closest to him, her body mostly submerged in the drink. The way she pressed the softest parts of her against the glass as she rested an arm on the rim made his cock grow long and hefty in his pants.

“That’s ok, you can protect me.”

“Volunteering my services, now, am I?”

“While you’re at it, you should buy me another drink when we go back inside,”

she hummed, flicking a few drops across the surface.

He raised a brow to that, and lifted the glass to his mouth. Nettle grinned, and rose out of the wine, her glow reflecting against where her body was coated with it.

Her delicate little thighs parted as she placed her foot, no larger than the pad of someone’s finger, against his chin. He could just glimpse her cunt, rosy and wet for him. She was so close he could smell her arousal, sweet heady scent of her stealing the rest of his thoughts.

She climbed over the rim and hooked a knee over one of his tusks, and Silver parted her folds with the tip of his tongue, finally tasting her.

She moaned as his tongue dragged through the crux of her legs in a long, heavy stroke. Silver couldn't help but lick over her belly, up to graze the impossible softness of her breasts, to catch the almost imperceptible points of her tightened nipples.

She rolled her hips needily against his lip, trying to grind her pleasure against his mouth.

Her wings twitched as he traced the tip of his finger up and down her leg. Her glow flared again under his touch, at the thought of more adventures to come.

“You know, I never aspired to be a doormat.”

“And yet life has provided you inspiration?”

Silver grinned wide. “I'll drink to that.”