



The Blacksmith in My Tavern: Tales of Bleakness (Coveted Prey #16)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I've been in love with the local blacksmith for as long as I can remember.

With his big, capable hands and acres of shoulders that I can't help but admire.

Only he's older and a widower. To him, I am nothing but a too-young, too-bold tavern wench.

He has rejected my every advance.

But his eyes tell a different story.

No matter, I'm cursed to be stubborn.

I'm determined to claim my blacksmith and his heart, whatever it takes.

The Blacksmith in My Tavern is a short story that follows the HEA of Betsy and Heath, whom we first met in *The Wolf in My Tavern*.

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Chapter One

Betsy

“P ox on your worthless green hide!”

My jailer only chuckles as I lash out with my fists. He is an orc and freakishly strong compared to me. I do not have a chance.

That does not stop my cursing nor curb my wild thrashing.

But too easily, he stops me before an ominous-looking door amid a long underground corridor. He opens it and tosses me in. The door creaks as it swings shut. I hear the rattle of the keys in the lock.

I fling myself at the door, yanking on the small barred window like it might yield to my hands. “No!”

My jailer walks off, his boots echoing off the stone walls and floor as they fade away.

Despair crawls up my throat until it near chokes me. A sob bubbles up. I clamp my hand over my lips, but it still breaks free.

Sinking to my knees, the cold stone seeping through the skirts of my thick woolen dress, I replay the events that brought me here—a regular day at the markets where I admired the ribbons and bought a new one. The cloaked figure slipping out of a doorway as I took the shortcut back to the tavern where I live and work.

Stupid, Betsy. You know better than that.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the small paper-wrapped bundle. Maybe I can strangle the bastards who snatched me with it?

Beyond the door, I can hear the sounds of crying.

I wipe the tears from my cheeks. My stomach is all at sea, and my mind is frantic. But I will get out of here. My pa will come for me, and he will punish the scum who dared to take me.

At least, I pray that he will.

There is a bucket of water just inside the door and another bucket in the corner where I am supposed to go. I walk over to the far empty corner. Here, I sit and wait.

It is not long before fresh tears come, and the fears I try to keep at bay swamp me.

The jangle of a key in the lock wakes me from a fitful doze. The door is flung open—my heart pounds. A scuffle follows before the door slams shut again.

In the space before the closed door is a small, fragile-looking girl with a ragged dress that has been torn over her breasts.

My lower lip quivers. Bastards.

I kneel beside her, putting my arm around her small, bony shoulders. “I’m Betsy,” I say.

“Ada,” she replies, and then she begins to sob.

I pull her closer, and she clings to me with surprising strength. My tears fall anew for this lass and myself.

“My pa runs a tavern,” I say. “Someone snatched me off the streets as I returned from the market.” I don’t mention how it was my own stupid decision to take a shortcut. “He’s going to get us out, I promise you.”

“I wish I had such a father,” she says. “Mine sold me for coin enough to pay his debts.”

Heath

Bleakness, a city under the control of orcs known as the Blighten, has ever been a desolate place. Tonight, it sinks to levels of treachery.

I have known the lass at my local tavern since she was a little girl. My blacksmith shop is only a few doors down from The Green Man, where Betsy lives with her human-orc hybrid father, and I go there often for supper and a pint.

Someone snatched her on the way back from the market. One of the stall owners mentioned seeing her take a shortcut, and that was the last she was seen.

Still, I have connections in my work as part of the underground rebellion here in Bleakness, and word is she has been taken to the slave markets. The bastards clearly do not know who her father is. The tavern proprietor is a gentle giant most of the time, but Tim is still half-orc and will destroy those responsible.

So here we are, with the help of trained warriors and sympathizers with the rebellion, along with my son, storming holding cells where prisoners are known to be kept.

My hammer beats metal into shape at the forge, but when needs must, I use it to

deadly effect on the scum as does the Blighen's bidding. I slam it left and then right as we breach the inner cells, breaking bones and leaving the filth who guard the prisoners twitching and broken on the floor.

"Betsy! It's Callum, lass. Your pa is here to get you."

Hearing my son's hail ahead, my head snaps up. My chest is heaving. The only guards I can see are the dead ones lying on the floor. A cluster of recently liberated prisoners stands ahead of me, wide-eyed and pitiful.

Gods, the thought of Betsy, the sweet lass who is always quick with a smile, being here, even for a moment, has me shaking with rage. But they have found her, thank the Gods, and I surge for the room to check her for myself.

Tim has Betsy in his arms, inspecting her for injury. Relief crashes through me even as my gut tightens at seeing her filthy, tear-ravaged face. Her eyes flash to mine, then drop to the bloody hammer in my hand, and her lips part on a small gasp.

There is blood splattered all over my clothes, hands, and, likely, my face. I am a messy killer. I wish she would have never had to see me or anyone like this.

"We need to leave," Jacob says. He is a warrior for the fae race and once a prisoner here himself. "We have cleared out this level, but reinforcements are coming."

"Please help Ada," Betsy cries.

"I've got her," my son says, coaxing the tiny lass who is naught but skin and bones from where she hides in the corner. He swings her up into his arms. "We'll get you out, Ada."

Someone has torn the bodice of her dress. "Here," I say. Shucking my cloak off, I

drop it over the young lass. At least it will offer her some modesty and warmth until we can get her to a safe house.

A shout alerts us to the arrival of more guards.

We make haste. Putting down the few men who have been mustered in response, we emerge into the cold Bleakness streets, using the narrow back alleys to take us from the slave markets.

At Betsy's insistence, the young girl from her cell returns to the tavern with us. Here, the staff rush to help the two young women after their ordeal.

It is the first time Callum has joined me in a rescue, and I can see the emotions on his face, along with that of Ada, the lass he just saved. I have ever been proud of my son. Tonight, I am impossibly more so. He handled himself well, put many guards down, and kept a cool head.

"Thank you," Ada says, throwing her arms around my son's neck. "Thank you, Callum."

My son blushes crimson and doesn't know where to look.

Thankfully, the cook urges the young lass away so they can get her cleaned up and warm.

Callum blinks across at me and suddenly sits heavily on the nearby stool.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "You did good, lad. I'm proud of you. We got Betsy back, and we freed many others."

"It's not over," Tim says, his voice rough. "I've yet to pay a visit to those who dared

to snatch my daughter. You can bet I'll deal with them, too."

"Good," I say. "Before the Goddess, it is their due."

When I look up, Betsy is beside me, a blanket over her shoulders. "Thank you, Heath," she says. "I always knew you helped with the rebellion. Until now, I didn't fully understand what they meant."

"I wish you still didn't," I say gruffly.

"Me too," she says, her eyes shining with fresh tears. "But if I hadn't been taken, no one would have gotten Ada out. Her father sold her for coin to pay his debts. What kind of monster would do that?"

I shake my head. I have no answers beyond a bad one—a man who does not rightly deserve to live. I feel the weight of my son's eyes upon us and Tim's, too.

Betsy leans up on her toes and plants a kiss on my cheek. Before she moves away, she whispers, "Promise me you'll deal with him."

I nod.

Her eyes meet and hold mine: pretty blue eyes, the lashes made darker for her tears. There are freckles across her nose, along with little streaks of dirt. How have I never noticed her freckles before?

I want to say something. What, I don't have a clue.

"I'm going to be alright," she says, like she can read my mind and knows I need something—an indication that she has not been broken by what was done. "They don't deserve to take my happiness away or change me."

A small smile lights her face.

And I somehow know that the sweet, resilient Betsy will be okay.

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Chapter Two

Heath

“E vening Heath!” Tim booms. The human-orc hybrid is used to shouting over noisy patrons. His hearty hail never fails to put a smile on my face.

“Evening, Tim!” I call back.

“It’s heaving tonight,” Callum says. “I’ll go to the bar and order. It’ll be quicker.”

“Thanks, son.” I pat him on the shoulder. After hanging my cloak on the hook inside the door, I go and find a table beside the fire.

I enjoy Friday night at The Green Man. After working hard at the forge all day, nothing is better than walking the short distance down the street and stepping inside the tavern. The fire is always well stoked against the bitter weather, and the greeting is always warm.

It wasn’t always like this, coming to the local tavern of an evening. When I was younger, I had a woman putting food on the table and warming my bed of a night—or of a day if I could get the chance. Callum was a young lad then. Now he’s a man, and even though it has been seven years since I lost his mother, memories of her still linger in our home.

“Callum sent this over for you, Heath.”

The husky voice stirs me from my memories—another one that greets me often when I drop by The Green Man for supper and ale.

“Aye, thank you, Betsy,” I say, glancing toward the bar where my son is chatting with the local wheelwright, doubtless also hoping to catch a moment with his lass, Ada.

Betsy smiles. The dimples on her cheeks are like sunshine warming this bleak night. For a moment, the rowdy tavern fades away, and there are only the tavern lass and me.

She sends me a coy look under her lashes. “I get a break in a bit if you wanted to?”

“Just the ale, Betsy,” I cut her off gruffly, but not quick enough to stop the sudden rush of blood heading south. She has been playfully propositioning me for a few years now. I don’t mind it. She is the same with all the patrons. I feared her time in Blighen hands might have taken her natural mischief away—I’m glad that it didn’t even though her ways leave me hot and bothered.

The wench is sweet and pretty, with golden hair, freckles across her nose, and blue eyes that are clear and bright and sparkle in the cheery glow of the fire and lamps. They remind me of the spring flowers that grew in the forests of Hydornia whence I hail.

Fuck, listen to me comparing her eyes to spring blooms?! She is also too young—I’m too old for her. She flirts outrageously with me—she flirts with half the patrons and doesn’t mean anything by it.

Her eyes dance with mischief. Not at all bothered by my rebuff. Leaning over the table to put her ample cleavage on display, she collects a couple of empty tankards from the table before she sashays off.

Fuck!

I adjust my collar, annoyed by how my body responds to her teasing. Maybe she sees my resistance as a challenge and is determined to make me sweat. At least, that is the only conclusion I can reach that makes some sense as to why she continues to proposition me.

“Heath!” Pete, the local carpenter, single like me, slips into the seat beside me. “You hear about that trouble down at the docks?”

“Trouble?” I fake innocence.

“Aye, I heard members of the rebellion liberated some prisoners.”

“No, I didn’t know about that.” I don’t tell him that I was involved in it. Although I reckon that Pete has some inkling as to the other side of me—the secret side that supports the rebellion against the orcs.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Betsy heading out the back door... followed by three sailors.

What the fuck is that about?

Pete is still talking, and I’m mostly listening, but I’m also staring at the door that leads out the back and where Betsy has gone.

I sip my beer.

Pete continues his monologue.

I nod and grunt at appropriate points, but my pint is near empty and Betsy has not

returned.

They have been gone a long fucking time.

My gut tightens and churns. I'm not stupid. She asked me first. I declined. It is my own fault if she takes the sailors out the back where they are doubtless busy pleasuring her.

All three of them.

"Finished that new cabinet for that fancy lord," Pete says, dragging me from my rumination. "Gave me a nice tip."

I was so distracted that I didn't even notice he had moved on from the prisoner's liberation to his latest commission.

"Aye, that was a boon," I offer. "He might want more work if you're lucky."

The door to the back finally opens, and Betsy slips into the tavern, a pretty blush on her cheeks.

A tic thumps in my jaw.

She disappears into the crowded room, collecting empties and taking orders. Meanwhile, the door opens again, and the three sailors enter with a swagger and a grin.

Bastards. I don't even know why this annoys me. Over the last few years, she has offered me all manner of saucy favor with increasing boldness.

What am I expecting? Her to wait around for that elusive day when I pull my head

out of my ass. I'm still not wholly convinced she is serious when she says it to me.

Idiot, Heath. What would a pretty lass even want with you? I'm nothing but an old bastard with issues and who is likely to get myself killed if my ties to the rebellion are found out.

It's not like I have anything to offer the lass. It would be delusional on my part to presume she wants more than a quick tumble. Given it's been seven years since my cock felt anything but my hand, I'd likely just embarrass myself with even that.

"Can I get you another round?"

I am so busy thinking about the lass, staring into the bottom of my empty tankard while Pete talks, that I don't notice her approach.

"Another pint of Pilkington, please, Betsy," Pete says, smiling.

I don't give my order. I'm frowning at her lips, puffy and swollen, and her hair all mussed up. "Are you alright, lass?" I demand—she blushes—my eyes narrow. "They didn't do aught you didn't want, did they?" I don't care if there are three of them. I will fuck them up if they have hurt the lass.

She shakes her head swiftly, a small smile she is fighting on her lips. "No, Heath, they did not." She winks at me. "Three men, but happen they deliver half of what you would with naught but your hands on me."

Pete chuckles.

I remember to shut my mouth.

Gods, the woman is a test. My eyes narrow. "Just a pint of Pilkington, please, lass."

I tell myself it's a trick of the light that I see her face soften as I again reject her playfulness.

She sashays off. I watch, drooling as I take in the sway of her ample hips.

The things I would do to that woman if not for my fool mouth getting in the way. They'd probably kill me, but I'd give it a go.

I'd be good to her, treat her like a queen, spoil her pussy so well she'd never think about a sailor again.

When I turn back to the table, I find Pete watching me with a grin.

He sups his beer before shaking his head. "The lass is sweet on you."

"She's too young," I mutter. "She talks like that to all the patrons."

Pete raises both brows, and a smirk blooms on his face. "Trust me, the lass does not proposition me like that."

Damn right, she doesn't. I would kill him if she did.

Pete chuckles like he can read my thoughts.

Damn, I have got it bad.

Betsy

"He's a thick-headed male," I mutter as I join Ada, my new best friend and fellow tavern lass, at the bar, where she is busy loading drinks onto a tray. Many weeks have passed since we met in desperate circumstances, and she has lived and worked in my

pa's tavern ever since. "I would warm his bed for him—I swear I'd make him forget his own name if only he'd let me."

I would take any scrap he offers.

He offers none.

"Who?" Ada asks, then glances over her shoulder. Her eyes land on Heath before they slide back to me. "You just went out the back with three sailors."

I wave a dismissive hand and huff out a little breath. "They are practice. Heath is the end game."

"Has he ever kissed you?" she asks, all innocent. Given that she slips out the back with Heath's son, Callum, every chance she gets, I'm confident she knows about more than just kissing. Also, a shifter here named Gray cannot take his eyes off the lass. There is a bit of a love triangle simmering in this tavern, although Gray is about as thick-headed as Heath, so Callum likely has no need to worry about the competition.

"Kiss me? He's not as much as patted my ass. I think I might spontaneously climax if he put his hands on me anywhere."

She giggles at my nonsense. Her life was once dark and unhappy, so I love coaxing a smile from her.

"Maybe he thinks you're joking." She shrugs. "You know, flirting like you do with other patrons?"

"Huff! I never say the things I say to Heath to anyone else."

Our conversation is cut off as Callum squeezes through the throngs and snags Ada's hand. "Mind if I borrow the lass for a bit," he says gruffly.

"Callum—" she starts, blushing furiously. "We are very busy."

Callum, cursed or blessed to be a redhead, depending on your view, likewise blushes.

"Go on out the back for a bit," I say, grinning. Who am I to get in the way of true love? "I will cover for you." I wink. "And keep an eye on your pa, Callum, just in case any shameless hussies come around."

Callum chuckles.

Ada bites her lips to keep from grinning and tugs on Callum's hand.

I collect the tray of drinks she was stacking and begin weaving through the crowd.

By shameless hussies, I mean me. I am shameless. Not that it does me any good where Heath is concerned. My words and fool dreams are sheer folly on my part.

Only my heart tells me Heath is worth fighting for. Heath, our local blacksmith, with his big, capable hands, broad shoulders, and acres of muscles that I dream of petting and peppering with kisses.

It is not boastful on my part to say I have skills when it comes to a tryst. If only I could get him alone.

No mind. I'm cursed to be stubborn about getting what I want, even though he has rebuffed my every advance.

At least those words leave his lips, using a stern voice ripe with censure. His eyes tell

me another story, for they brim with lust. Oh, he tries to hide it, but I see through it. I'm a tavern wench, after all, and we are used to the perusal of men. I see beyond his words to the man underneath.

He likes to think he's different, but he is not. He is a man with needs that I could gladly, joyfully, and with love meet.

Only, I am nothing but a tavern wench in his eyes, too young, too bold, and too forward for his tastes. A free spirit, I have enjoyed the pleasures of many men and see no harm in it. They come and go, and we share fleeting moments where we can forget about the dour life living in Bleakness.

It reminds me that my life and pleasure are my own. I won't let this desperate place nor events past take that away from me.

Heath is the only man who makes me wish for more than a moment and crave a deeper connection. He has lived a few doors down for as long as I can remember. When he first arrived, he had a wife, but she died many years ago. He has been alone ever since—seven long years.

But I am on to him. The way his eyes have lingered on my cleavage in recent weeks. I have even caught him checking out my ass. He is not immune to me, although he pretends to be.

Is he weakening?

I like to think he might be.

Either way, I am not giving up.

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Chapter Three

Heath

“ I ’ve finally tracked down the bastard,” Anders, a fellow member of the rebellion and city guard, tells me.

We are standing together at the back of The Green Man, to the side of the stables, where the wall to the neighboring workshop provides some relief from the biting wind.

“Good,” I say. “Happen we can make a move soon.”

Anders nods. “I’ll let the lads know. There’s a caravan that leaves every month bound for the mines. As good as a death sentence. And let’s say, nobody questions if there’s an extra body in there... Be seeing you, Heath. Best I get back.”

He slips into the shadows and out the back into the alleyway.

The barman comes out the back to get another barrel of ale. I remain in the shadows, not wanting to advertise the meeting I just had. I promised Betsy I’d deal with the father who sold Ada for coin, and I intend to keep my word. My son will probably want in. He is sweet on the lass, and it is getting serious between them. I can see them getting married.

Damn, doesn’t that make me feel old?

Gareth is quick about it, his boots crunching in the light dusting of snow as he returns to the tavern with a barrel over his right shoulder.

I stare at the fluttering of snow as it settles on the cobblestones, lost in the shadows and thoughts. It's fucking freezing out here. The cheery glow of the tavern visible through the back windows calls to me, yet I don't move just yet.

I'm thinking about her lips against my cheek. Soft . Her eyes, brimming with emotions, fierce yet resilient.

Fine, I'm also thinking about her tits as she leaned over to the table to put a pint of Pilkington before me with a smile.

Betsy is saucy and forward, a handful for sure... In more ways than one, pun intended.

I scrub my hands against my cheeks, reminding myself of all the reasons why I shouldn't be thinking about a tavern wench with pretty blue eyes.

I'm about to head back in when the door opens. Betsy walks out.

Damn it.

She cuts across the courtyard, heading straight toward me.

Frowning, I step back deeper into the shadows while keeping her in my line of sight. What is she doing out here?

A sense of dread slams into me. Is a man or men about to follow her out? If it's a fucking sailor, I will put a beating on him.

I swipe a hand down my face. It's not my place to put a beating on anybody. She's a grown woman. She can do whatever she wants to with whomever she chooses. It is none of my fucking business. And yet I'm seeing red. And green. And why am I so hot?

My dick is very confused between wanting to see her pretty face scrunch up as she comes and killing the person touching her.

I'm convinced they will be substandard to anything I offer. Because I would fucking worship her in ways these boys never could.

My dick finally goes down because she's not coming out here for me... only she is still heading straight toward me with a determined look on her face.

I glance around. There is fucking nowhere to go.

"I know you're hiding there," she says, planting her hands on her hips as she stands at the opening of the small alleyway.

"What are you doing out here, lass?" I step out of the shadows.

Her grin spreads across her face. She comes closer, her hips swaying. "Gareth said you were skulking around back here with one of the city guards."

"Well, Gareth shouldn't be gossiping," I say, folding my arms.

Her eyes lower to track the movement... Is she checking me out?

Lips pursed, she sidles closer.

"It's freezing out here, lass," I say gruffly, wondering how I can be sweating buckets

when it is this fucking cold. “Why don’t you go inside?”

“You are not inside,” she says, stepping right up to me. She strokes her hand over my right shoulder and all the way down my arm. She pauses to squeeze my biceps. “Gods, your arms are a test... and your hands. You’re a very compelling male. I’m a bit obsessed.”

I remember to shut my mouth and glance over my shoulder like there might be somebody else standing there she is talking about.

No, only me.

Then my head snaps around as I feel her hand sliding back up my chest until she finds the V in my shirt. Her delicate fingers slide through the hair on my chest. My hands drop to my sides lest I put them on her, and my fists clench.

“I dream about inspecting this manly chest,” she says, running her fingers down the buttons one at a time.

My cock springs to attention from her light caress through my clothes. My eyes bounce between watching her face as she trails her hand lower and staring at her cleavage. Her tits win. I swear she has the biggest tits I’ve ever seen. I just want to bury my face between them and suffocate there. I’d die a happy man.

I snatch her finger away when they reach the buckle of my pants.

“The fuck are you doing?” I keep her wrist shackled in my big, meaty fist, careful of my strength and not trusting her not to have another go.

“Well, nothing now, clearly,” she says, pouting prettily at me.

Quick as a sprite, she takes her hand back, wraps her fingers around my wrist, and plants my palm on her breast.

“Go on. You look at them often enough. You can touch them. I don’t mind. I encourage it.”

It’s like someone just hit me up the side of the head with a plank of wood. I swear there are no wits left in my brain. I should be taking my hand away. But I don’t. I leave it there, touching her under her direction. There is not a drop of resistance in me when she takes my other hand and squeezes both hands together around her tits... and moans.

My eyes flash to meet hers.

“There, doesn’t that feel better?”

Fucking hell. I squeeze. I don’t mean to squeeze, but it happens anyway. My dick is so hard it’s flexing and leaking pre-cum while trying to bust a hole through my pants. My balls are already drawing tight.

“Fuck,” I mutter gruffly.

She bites coquettishly on her lower lip and peers up at me under her lashes. “I knew these big hands would be the right size.”

I’m lost in a lust coma as I watch her tits quiver and bounce as I squeeze and pet. I swallow thickly—they are not just the right size, though, are they? My fingers have spread wide, and they still don’t quite do the job. But damn, they do look good. Before I can coach myself better on it. I brush my thumbs across her nipples, feeling them bud hard.

She moans and arches up into me. “Goddess, yes, Heath. Please, more of that.”

I’m mesmerized and not paying attention to what she’s doing with her hands. It comes as a shock when my belt loosens, and my pants sag. Her small hand delves into the slack.

“Can I touch your cock?”

“Fuck! What? No!” She already has her fingers wrapped around me, so her question comes too late... unlike me, who is in danger of coming early. I huff out of breath, trying to peel her fingers off. She squeezes over me, and what little blood there is left in my brain surges into my dick.

“Goodness. This is a lot. You’re a lot of man, so it stands to reason. But, damn, you would injure a lass with this. It is definitely going to be a challenge.”

I think she has forgotten I am attached to the cock she is handling. Her other hand goes to the buttons on my pants like she is seeking greater access.

It’s like she has ten sets of hands; every time I capture one, the other is up to some mischief. The necessity of attempting to peel her off before I embarrass myself seems to amplify the sensations. The feel of her breasts is imprinted on the palms of my hand. Her riveted expression and her warm fingers wrapped around my length all conspire against my limited control.

I come.

I come in my fucking pants and all over her hand.

“Oh,” she says, grinning. “My cleavage game is on point.”

I choke back my laughter, still pulsing cum. I could point out that it is the whole of her that is on point, and not only her tits, but I don't want to further encourage her. This has already taken a wild turn. She is not even upset. It's like my complete lack of control is a source of personal pride for her.

"No!" I grab her wrist too late as she shoves my cum-soaked fingers into her mouth. "Fuck! What the fuck is wrong with you, lass?! Spit it out!"

She stares me in the eyes and swallows with a smirk.

I sigh heavily, trying to revive my post-climax wits. Now I have taken her sticky hand away, I don't know what the fuck to do with it.

"It's only cum," she says. "But I agree. Next time, I will take you in my mouth so I don't miss a drop."

My dick, hanging half out of my pants, flexes with savage interest.

Her eyes drop. "Which might be sooner rather than later."

I scowl at her, snag the rag she uses to wipe the tables from where it is tucked in her apron and clean up her hand. "Bad girl. You do not go around sucking men's cocks... or putting your hand on them. What were you thinking? I'm old enough to be your father!"

"So if you were younger, it would be fine for me to suck your cock?" she goads.

"What? Yes. No!" I shove my cock back into my pants... Try to. It is hard as stone and having none of it.... And there is a fucking wet patch.

"Fine. I will only suck younger cocks." She turns and flounces off.

The fuck!

I stare after her, pissed and aroused in equal measure, wondering if I lost or won that argument.

Nope, I lost—no point in deluding myself.

The snow is coming down heavier, settling on my clothes. As I watch her slip inside the tavern, my greatest source of disappointment is that I didn't even get her off.

Betsy

I can't believe he came that quickly. All I did was put my hand on his cock. I barely stroked it more than a couple of times.

He is weakening. He must be.

And he is delusional if he thinks I will walk away. Not a chance. I know when I see a good thing, and Heath is the best of men.

"You look a bit flushed," Ada says as I slip into the tavern.

"I just bumped into a certain blacksmith," I say, smirking.

Her lips form a little 'O'.

"Nothing happened," I lie, still buzzing from the encounter. I'm definitely not going to mention that Heath came in his pants. I don't doubt he's sneaking out the back and high-tailing it home. He was hard again, struggling to put his cock back in his pants... "I need to pop and get something from my room."

“No problem,” she says, smiling. It’s quiet tonight, and only a few patrons are supping beer or eating supper, so I don’t feel bad as I take the stairs two at a time and rush into my room.

The door rattles into the jamb, and I lean back against the wooden surface. My fingers are still a little sticky. I groan, cupping my breasts, putting my hands right where his were , and squeezing together. He barely brushed his thumbs over my nipples, and they still tingle from that light touch. Goddess, the look on his face when he touched me...

It’s no use. I need to come. I need to come on the fingers that were wrapped around his cock.

I’ve never done anything like this before, touched a man and then touched myself. It feels a little wild and depraved. It is definitely naughty.

I ruck up my skirts, shove my hand into my panties, and find myself soaking wet.

I groan, pop my head back against the door, and close my eyes. I thrust two fingers in and out. I’m so wet it’s soon trickling over my knuckles. In my mind, I’m back in the alley where Heath sinks to his knees.

“What a filthy lass,” he says as he sees just how wet I am for him. “I just need a little taste.”

The dream version of my blacksmith pushes my busy fingers aside and closes his lips around my clit.

I brush my fingertips over it and go off like a firecracker.

“Yes, Heath!”

My climax is still ripping through me when I plunge my fingers back inside myself and imagine it is his big, thick cock.

I have never given myself fully to a beta male who could get at me with a child—only an alpha whom I loved more as a friend. Everyone knows an alpha cannot get a lass pregnant unless he knots her, and he never did.

Always, I have been waiting for my Heath.

As my breathing evens out and I return to myself, I pray my waiting will not be in vain.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 3:13 am

Chapter Four

Betsy

It is late on a Monday afternoon, and I have dragged Ada out to the market. It's fair to say we both have issues leaving the tavern, albeit for different reasons. I was snatched from the streets not far from here, taking a shortcut home. As for Ada, her worthless father selling her to the slavers for coin is but one of a long list of abuses.

She is my best friend now. I feel like the Goddess herself placed her in my path so I might save her from that terrible fate. I want her to be happy and to experience everyday things—like a trip to a market where she has a few coins from her work in the tavern to spend on something she likes. Her beaming face as she purchases two soft blankets for her bed, is reward enough.

Her father is gone, courtesy of Heath and Callum. Packed off to the mines—as good as a death sentence. I hope he suffers, and after, when he finds his way to the Goddess, she shall surely punish him anew for all his wickedness toward his daughter.

Ada's happiness aside, I have an important matter I have been looking to broach. I know she is sweet on Heath's son, Callum, and I have a mind to help matters along.

Also, Heath has been avoiding me ever since that night, so this helps me too.

“You know he's fighting tonight, don't you?” I say, looping my arm through hers as we stroll back toward the tavern.

She side-eyes me. “Fighting? Who is fighting?”

“Callum,” I confirm, watching her to gauge her response.

“What sort of fight?” she asks, her expression sinking. “Why would he fight? Is it something to do with my pa?”

“Oh, no, lass. You know your father is long gone,” I say quickly lest I worry her unduly. “He will probably be at the mines by now, and there is no escape from there.”

Her face softens some. “But why is he fighting, then?”

A grin spreads across my face. “I used to sneak in, but my pa found out and put a stop to that. He knows me well, though, and at the risk of me sneaking off again, he now accompanies me.”

She shakes her head. The poor lass really has led a sheltered life if she does not know about the fights. “An underground competition,” I say, “It’s held in a warehouse at the docks. You could come with me if you want to. Monday is always quiet at the tavern, especially when the competition is on. It’s the only reason my pa would leave the tavern in someone else’s care. Say you will come, Ada. Also, Callum’s pa is going to be there.”

My jaw sets when I think about Heath. The man is cursed to be stubborn, but no matter, I am determined.

“Does he fight, too?” she asks.

“No,” I say. “Not anymore. But he used to when he was younger. That was the first time I snuck into the fight. I was only eighteen then—I can’t believe that was five years ago. Goddess weep, Heath could handle himself. Those big capable hands and

those thick slabs of muscle... He is older now, but that only makes him more attractive. I would worship him how he deserves if only he would show a lick of sense. He has not been with a woman since his wife died, and that was seven years ago. He has brought up a fine son and deserves a little happiness, don't you think?"

"For sure," she says, but there is a worry line between her brows. "He won't be hurt, will he?"

I snort a laugh and then realize she is being serious. "It's a fight, lass. Unless, by some miracle, nobody lands a blow, he will assuredly be hurt."

"Oh, I cannot stand the thought of him being hurt. I saw his hands after... after my father, and that broke my heart."

"Well, no one forces him to compete. I overheard him and his pa discussing how it keeps his skills sharp. They hold the fights once a month, and he takes part as often as not—and has done so for several years. Do you want to go, Ada?"

We have reached the tavern. I bring us to a stop at the archway leading to the back and the entrance we use.

I see the indecision on her face. Maybe I shouldn't have told her... only how could I not when I am going. She deserves to know. Also, it's fair to say the love triangle plot between Ada, Callum, and Gray has thickened, and I'm inclined to stir the pot—Callum is going to be fighting, and I've overheard Gray will be going as a spectator.

She nibbles on her lower lips, her eyes searching mine before they pull together in another frown. "What is it?"

I shrug. "Well, just so you know, there are always hussies hanging around trying to

get their hands on the competitors, offering all manner of saucy favors. You don't want anyone poaching your claim."

Her eyes go wide. "Yes," she blurts out. "I want to go."

"Good," I say. "I have a mind to keep an eye on his pa, too. Those lasses are shameless. Also, I have it on good authority that a certain Master Gray will be in attendance."

And by shameless hussies, I mean me. Only enough is enough. He wants me too. I know he does. I tried leaving him to come to his senses. Look how that has worked out—poorly. It's time to lay my heart on the line. If the fool man rejects me one more time, I won't try again.

Heath

I used to participate in Bleakness's underground fights when I was younger. The reasons I moved to Bleakness with my late wife are complex. I was already supporting the rebellion. We were in danger, and they helped us. In return, I agreed to support the cause here.

It should have been a few years. But my wife died, and everything changed.

Still, the underground fights are useful in ways more than keeping your skills sharp. It is a good place to meet other like minded men for the latest news regarding the rebellion. Tonight, I come to support my son who is so much more than he realizes.

A son who trains hard with me every evening after we finish at the forge, and who has just obliterated his opponent and won his fight.

The atmosphere is wild. The crowd's roar follows us back down the tunnel to the

changing room.

I'm fucking proud of my boy.

In every way imaginable.

Yet every time I look at him and see his red hair, it reminds me of his mother, my wife, the one I dedicated my life to, who I left my home, and everyone I knew to protect.

And whom I lost.

I shove those memories down, along with the dose of guilt that has assaulted me increasingly of late.

Betsy, with her bold ways, her sashaying hips, and those tits that are a test to any man seeking to think straight. Her smile weakens me every time I see it. It is a lethal weapon every bit as effective as an orc club to the gut.

Callum staggers as we enter the changing room. But it is not from fatigue. No, he is buzzing from the fight. Tonight is the first occasion his mother's heritage showed itself—the worst possible time.

The room has a basic shower, little more than a spout. I pull the lever and shove Callum under the icy spray, still clothed in his pants.

“Fuck!” he mutters, trying to step out.

I shove him back. “You can stay there until you're in possession of your wits.” Gods, there is steam rising from his flesh. He is on the brink of shifting—he doesn't even know he is a damn shifter.

Why is it only now it begins to show? I am no shifter. That comes from his mother. I am woefully unprepared for this.

He chuckles, breaking some of the tension. “I am fucking freezing.”

“Good,” I say brusquely.

I leave him to it. Raking a hand through my hair, I try to do as I just preached and gain control.

I don’t find it. Instead, I pace about, thoughts scattering and surging in a rush. I need to tell him. Only the changing room of an underground fight is not the place.

The shower is still going.

My brows pull together. Snatching up a towel, I head back to check on my son, finding him still under the spout, shivering uncontrollably.

“Here. I pull the lever to turn off the shower and pass him the cloth to dry with.

He doesn’t bother. His flesh is so hot that the water rises in the form of steam, and he shoves the cloth around his waist.

His eyes meet mine. “I’m alright, Pa,” he says.

Only I don’t think he is.

I put my hand on his shoulder, feeling him settle some. “We’ll have that talk later, lad.”

He swallows.

Does he know?

Hearing voices approach—feminine tones—I roll my eyes and turn toward the sound.

Lasses have been known to sneak down here seeking Callum... and even me sometimes. “Sounds like some lasses up to mischief,” I say, smiling. “I’ll send them on their way.”

“They’re expecting us,” a familiar voice says, wiping the smile right off my face. Betsy?

“Fuck!” I make a beeline for the door, Callum hot on my heels, for where Betsy is, so will be Ada.

And there they are. Ada looks on, pink-cheeked as Betsy bats her lashes at the big alpha guard who keeps the peace between the fighters down here.

I see red. Betsy’s fingers are playing absently with Glen’s collar. It is a small consolation that he is blushing crimson and trying to peel her off without great effect. He is a gentle giant for all he deals with trouble among the contestants efficiently, he is borderline useless with lasses up to mischief.

“We’ll handle them, Glen,” I say. Taking Betsy by the arm, I yank her to my side, which calms me some. I have never known Glen to rut a lass, but I’m breaking out in a sweat that his hands were on her. “The lass has not been disciplined enough in her short life.”

Betsy coos and smirks up at me.

Damn woman. I have played right into her game.

Callum poorly disguises a cough as he retrieves his blushing lass.

“What are you two doing down here?” I say gruffly... like I don’t already know.

“Ada wanted to check as no hussies were here trying to get their hands on Callum,” Betsy says boldly.

Ada gasps.

Not that I need any help figuring out that this mischief is all on Betsy. This lass slays me with her nonsense. “There is only one hussy down here, and her name is not Ada.”

Betsy pouts up at me.

I sigh heavily, trying to temper the possessiveness coursing through me to have her pressed up against me like this. Thankfully no other nosey fuckers are around eyeballing my woman.

My woman?

I cannot lie to myself. There are a thousand and one reasons I should steer well away from the saucy tavern wench. My mind is currently blank for every one.

Have you ever wanted someone so much that it hurts? A tight pain in the center of your chest? A hunger, a craving that never seems to end.

That is me with Betsy. She is the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning. She is the last thing I think about when I go to bed at night. She is who I imagine in those weak moments when I take my cock in hand and seek relief.

“I’ll deal with this one,” I say ominously. “I’ll leave you to take care of your lass, Callum, and see as she is taken safely back to her home.”

I don’t wait around to see what my son does. I trust him completely, even with his changes riding him.

I have my own lass to deal with. Jaw set, I haul the brat into the nearest empty room. Most do not have doors on, but this one does, and I slam it shut before putting her back to it and rounding on her. My chest is heaving. I can’t see straight.

She blinks up at me, all fake innocence.

My eyes drop to her ample cleavage, and suddenly, my vision is crystal clear.

“What the fuck are you doing down here?” I demand, dragging my lusty gaze back to her eyes. Which I think might be worse as I get lost in her pretty blue orbs that dance with her fire and yet hold a guileless quality. She has suffered tragedy in her life, been snatched from the streets, and made a prisoner. I was part of the team who got her out, and damn if I would erase that terrible event from her life.

Yet she does not let that hold her back nor down.

She is a thing of wonder, from her pretty face to her indomitable ways. And her body with curves made to bewitch a man’s mind.

She’s the one. The one I think about, always. The one who’s too fucking young. Too fucking saucy. The one who has a pick of any man—I’m not the only tavern patron lusting after this particular wench.

My fists tighten on my side as I try to gain control of the raging beast inside me. I take a step back.

She steps up to me and lifts her hand, reaching out to me.

I step back again. Her hand falls away.

“Ada just wanted to check on Callum,” she says, repeating her earlier words softly, looking away, making me miss her eyes on me. I don’t like that my actions have taken the smile off her face.

“As if I’d let some other lass call on him,” I say. “As if he has eyes for anyone but Ada.”

She peeks at me from under her lashes.

“So this was only about Ada and Callum?”

A tiny shake of her head.

Well, I did go and ask...

My cock approves and starts to beat against my pants for an out.

I step backward, sweat popping out across my brow. She steps forward. The lass is a predator and does not take no for an answer.

Am I mad about this?

Nope.

Her fingers find and seek the buttons of my tunic. They crawl upward until they rest at the V near my throat, and then her fingertips slide into the dusting of chest hair peeking out.

She smiles sweetly at me. “I was not only looking after Ada.”

My eyes narrow. I pluck her hand off, putting it at her side. I’m disgusted with myself even as I tell myself I must stop this. I should have already escorted her out, not brought her into a room and shut the door... Trapping her alone with me?

Gods help me. I must be out of my fucking mind. She is pure, undiluted temptation and is now trapped in a confined space with me.

I put my hand on her arm, thinking I’m going to direct her outside.

She makes a sweet cooing sound. My intentions and my actions are at cross purposes. What I want to do is open the door and march her back home. What I actually do is haul her into my arms. My hands have a mind of their own, moving to her waist and then straight down to cup her sweet ass.

“Oh! Yes!”

I’ve got a handful of plump ass and it’s like my hands are glued there. My dick goes from semi to full hardness in an instant. It does not help me revive my wits when I look down and notice how her tits are mashed up against my chest.

I’m fucking lost, staring at her plump flesh quiver under her unsteady breaths.

I tell myself not to. I tell myself I won’t—I shouldn’t. Remind myself that she is too young. And I’m too old. I’ve been married before. The catalog of reasons piles up high.

She slipped out the back of the tavern with three sailors last week. How the fuck am I supposed to compete with that?

None of this matters. My lips are lowering, my mouth slanting over her—just a little taste. I can stop anytime.

And then our lips touch. A small, needy whimper escapes her, followed by a deeper moan that shoots hot and urgent into my veins. So soft. So sweet.

She moans against me. Our lips part in synchronicity. My tongue slips along the seam before it delves in to taste her. Her arms slide around my neck, fingers tightening in my hair, tugging. I clench her ass, cleaving her to me with one hand and burying the other in her soft hair.

I heave a ragged breath as I further slant my mouth over hers and deepen the kiss.

I'll stop in a minute. Just taunting myself with what can't be mine.

My dick throbs, leaking pre-cum like it might be getting a look in.

It is not getting a fucking look in. I'm not rutting the lass. I'm not going to do anything to her.

I'm going to stop this kiss soon.

Only my hands are shaking. My whole body's trembling. I think I might spontaneously climax from just this kiss.

She breaks the kiss first.

And I stand there, chest heaving, trying to work out what I did wrong, why she stopped.

Her face breaks into the sauciest grin before she slides her hand down my chest. Her

sigh is one of contentment as she pauses to pet the muscles, her eyes hooded and deeply admiring.

Mine don't know where the fuck to look. I've still got my hand on her ass, cupping it. I give it another little squeeze: plump and perfect. I imagine how it would jiggle while I pound into her from behind, just as her hands reach my belt.

Fuck! Think of something else.

She nibbles on her lower lip. "I need this," she says.

I think she's talking about the kiss that has ruined me. I've been dreaming about kissing here for so long. Now that I have sampled her lips and felt her body against mine, I'm doomed.

Then she surprises me by sinking to her knees, her small, nimble fingers on my buckle, undoing it with dexterous ease.

"Gods, lass! What are you?—"

All thoughts leave my brain as the buckle comes free with a clank. She tugs my pants down and liberates my cock.

"Oh!" she says, her eyes widening.

It looks fucking huge in her dainty little hands. I'm momentarily stunned.

"Gods. Fuck!" My brain is scrambled. I need to pull her off. I need to stop her. Before I can better think through my actions, I have fisted her hair—to pull her off before she....

“Oh, yes!” she moans. “Pull my hair just like that.”

I’m still reeling from her words when she lowers the weeping tip of my cock and swallows me down her throat.

“Betsy! Lass.” Pulling her off would be the right thing to do. I’m so fucking primed, I’m about to blow. Yet somehow, my hand tightens, and I’m pulling her deeper on. “Good girl.” My brain empties of all thoughts. There’s only the pleasure engulfing my cock as her hot, wet mouth caresses my length. My balls are already tightening. She does something with her tongue on the underside of the head that has me seeing stars. “I’m going to... Fuck!”

I come down her throat like a green fucking whelp. I’m a mature man with a grown son. She barely took me down her throat before I unleashed.

She swallows, not missing a fucking drop.

As she promised.

My legs threaten to give out under me. I slap my hand against the nearby wall. My other hand is still in her hair as her lips slowly pop off.

She brushes her thumb over her puffy lower lip and sucks it into her mouth. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited to do that.”

A growl of pure masculine satisfaction escapes me. I lean down and plant my mouth over hers, kissing her, trying to pour everything I feel that I cannot put into words into the kiss. Control is utterly lost. I hoist her into my arms and stagger for the long bench lining one wall. I sit. She is on my lap, facing me with her legs spread around me.

Her tits are at the perfect height. I yank the bodice of her dress down on the right and feast.

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Chapter Five

Betsy

His hands are on me—finally.

He yanks down the bodice of my gown. Closing his hot mouth over my nipple and a good portion of my breast, he sucks vigorously, pulling me closer as he does.

His cock is still out, sticky and hard between us.

His taste is still in my mouth.

With one big hand on my ass and the other in my hair, he holds me to his liking as he suckles greedily on my flesh. The sweet, tugging sensation drives dizzy pleasure straight to my core. I have dreamed of this man so often. He has starred in every fantasy I've ever had—a big, capable blacksmith with acres of shoulders and muscles everywhere.

But it is not only about that. Heath is so much more than a hot man I lust for. He is a good father, kind, and generous of his time. Steady. He is like a rock standing against life's troubles in this bleak city, while I am a tempestuous storm crashing through life, for it is precious and has shown me its fragility.

I live voraciously, for I live in fear that these moments of joy might be snatched away.

We are opposites, Heath and I, and yet to be in his arms is to find a place where I fit.

I loved him even before he helped to save me that night. Stormed the infamous cells where I had been taken. A part of the rebellion, he is no stranger to violence in the name of the cause. Such a man would protect me always.

Such a man would keep me safe.

With such a man, I could let go and know he would be there to catch me.

“Betsy, Betsy, Betsy,” he mumbles against my throat.

His nose draws across my skin to the other side, where he yanks the bodice down and begins to torment me anew. He pinches and rolls my nipple between his fingers then closes his lips over it and sucks too sharply. It hurts a little—a sweet, achy sensation that ignites flames in my core. My hands burrow in his hair, pulling him closer. I arch up into his touch, wanting more, craving him and only him.

His lips pop off, and his dark eyes clash with mine. “These tits are a test,” he says. He cups them in both big hands and squeezes them together, grasps both my nipples and pinches them cruelly.

His lips seek and find mine as we share another lusty kiss.

Heath

I am out of my mind for her. A man possessed with one need alone. Her scent fills my senses. Her soft skin under my rough palms. My fingers are shaking as I grasp her dress and thrust up her skirts... or try to. My lips are still locked on hers; the dress is trapped between us, but she seems to get the idea of what I want and lifts her hips, fumbling to help me drag the skirt out of the way, making her tits jiggle against me in

the most arresting way. All the while, we are kissing, our tongues tangling like we are trying to consume one another.

Finally, the skirt comes free in a rush. My lips slide off hers. My chest is heaving like the bellows in my well-stoked forge. I lower my gaze past her quivering tits to where her skirts have gathered up, keeping her most intimate place from my sight.

I push them aside roughly, exposing the thin material of her panties.

“Fuck, lass,” I mutter. “You have drenched your panties through.”

There is an unmistakable dark patch. I slide my fingertips over it gently. I can feel her fat clit poking through the thin material. She jolts when I scrape my nail across it and arches up against me.

“Is this for me, Betsy? Or is this for any man who touches you?” My fingers make a fist over the wet material.

“Only you, Heath,” she pleads.

So many fucking men. She taunted me with what I thought I could never have, slipping out the back with them. Then, returning bright eyed and pink cheeked after they had touched her and made her feel good.

I quash down fears that I am not enough, that I couldn’t possibly satisfy her. My dick is hard again. Damn it all. I want to seed this pussy for myself. I want her feeling all sore inside where I have been.

These feelings are new and untempered. They slam into me like waves battering down my resistance. I don’t know my intentions; I just hear the tearing noise as I rip her panties in two.

“Heath,” she murmurs.

“Quiet, lass. You asked for this, and now you’re going to take it.” I slide my fingers through the wet folds of her pussy, and then, with my eyes on hers and my other hand locked around her throat, holding her steady, I push two thick fingers inside.

Her breathing turns choppy. Her eyes are glazed as I slide my fingers in and out.

“Does that feel good, lass?”

“So good.”

She is so hot and tight inside. I already know it’s going to feel amazing when my cock gets in here. There are specters waiting on my periphery, taunting me. Telling me this is a taste and all I’ll ever have. She’ll move on tomorrow. Find somebody else. I’m just a challenge, one she has now conquered. But damn it, I want to leave an impression upon her so potent she will never forget.

I pick up the pace of my fingers plunging into her a little rougher.

“Oh gods.”

“That’s my good girl. Are you going to come for me? Are you going to come all over my fingers?”

“No.” She shakes her head defiantly.

I squeeze my fist around her throat a little, reminding her that she is under my control, however fleeting this is. “No? You want me to stop then?” I still have my fingers inside her. I might lose my mind if she says yes.

“I want to come over your cock. Please—Oh!”

So that is her game, is it?

“You don’t get to control this, Betsy. You have controlled everything else.” I begin to pump my fingers in and out again, catching her clit with my palm every time I fully penetrate her. “Forcing me to fuck you when I was trying to do the right thing.” Defiance rising inside me. This lass has got me wrapped around her finger.

I need to claw some control back.

“If I want you to come like this, you will.” She will come again, after, and around my cock.

“Please, Heath! I want to feel you inside you. Oh, please don’t make me come like this...”

It is too late; I am on a mission. Her eyes roll back in her head, and she emits the filthiest moan. She turns utterly rigid. Her pussy clamps over my fingers, and a heavy gush floods out.

Her face is a picture of torment and lust. I could watch her climaxing all day.

She comes down from her theatrics, all limp and sated in my arms. My lips curl up in a smirk. I slide the fingers out and stuff them into my mouth. Damn, she tastes good.

“I’m going to need a proper taste,” I say. “Next time.”

I am getting ahead of myself but can’t pull myself back. My cock has got a mind of its own. I wipe the last of her cum from my fingers over my length and point my dick upward between us.

“Sit on it,” I say.

Betsy

The little warning voice in the back of my head says this is not the end game I am hoping for, that Heath is still a man with deep reservations.

I push that voice down. I have fallen for this man. Tonight represents the culmination of every dream and hope I have ever had.

Tomorrow is for regrets. Tonight, there is only him.

I tell myself that this is the opening I have been waiting for, one that will lead to a deeper understanding between us. And although it breaks me, for I sense the lie, I cling to it anyway.

I rise onto my knees, uncaring that they dig into the hard wooden bench. I don't care about anything but getting him inside me and where I know it will feel so good. I close my hand around his length, lift up, and put him where I need. Then I sink slowly, feeling the stretch as he fills me all up until his flesh is one with mine, and I feel him in my very soul.

A sob breaks from my chest. My inner walls clamp and flutter around him.

He tightens his arms around me. “Hush, sweet lass,” he says. “Am I hurting you? Do you need to stop?”

I curse the stupid male. “You are not hurting me. Do not dare stop. I swear I will liberate you of your balls if you try to take my prize away.”

He chuckles, a low husky sound, and I love that I am the one who caused it.

“It feels a blissful level of good to have you inside me. It will feel better if you loosen your hold enough so I can move.”

“Aye,” he says gruffly. His hands are shaking where they hold me. But mine are, too, where they are wrapped around his neck.

His lips find the crook of my shoulder and throat—his beard tickles.

“You feel fucking amazing,” he says before his voice lowers to a whisper. “You feel like home.”

A tear trickles down my cheek. I brush it away before he can notice.

I want to believe this means as much to him as it does to me. This is not just a quick tumble. Not in my eyes, anyway.

He clasps his arm tighter around me and slowly lifts me up and then down.

“Oh Goddess,” I say. My pussy grips him so tightly that it is a toss between pleasure and pain. He has a beautiful, thick, cock and it feels like he touches me everywhere. “I’m going to come.”

“Go ahead, lass. I’m going to be right behind you.”

He thrusts me off and on him, lifting me as though I’m naught but a doll and not a hale beta woman with ample curves. He takes me with ease, making our flesh slap together, and my breasts bounce. Sparks of pleasure shoot all the way through my core.

“Gods, you are so beautiful,” he says thickly. “Beautiful and lusty with a hot, tight pussy that is greedy for my cock.”

He speaks true, my pussy is greedy for him.

I am on top. I should be the one taking command. Only he doesn't give me a chance, and I love it. His immense strength is evidenced by the way he slams me on and off his cock.

The emotions and sensations swirl together. I am a vessel for his lust. One taking pleasure for herself. One claiming her dues. I love this man. I have loved him for a long time. A young girl's infatuation that has become so much more. I even love that he resists me, for in his eyes, he is noble and trying to protect both our hearts.

But my heart is my own, and I have already given it to him gladly and without reservations.

I give it with gratitude, for there was a time when I was taken prisoner when I might have been ripped from my loving home and life and my freedom gone.

His teeth scrape lightly against my throat. The quickening sensation inside tells me he is close, sparking a new thrill.

I want him to come inside me. I would give everything to carry his child within me.

How I want him to feel all I do.

A climax so powerful it robs me of breath slams into me. My pussy falls into sweet, heavenly waves. He growls and stills, whispering words I cannot quite hear against my throat.

I swear I feel his essence join with mine as his hot seed fills me all up.

Our gusty breaths make a cloud in the air. Sweat cools against the surface of my skin.

He lifts his head from my throat and cups my cheek. And then he kisses me. And as if I am not already utterly smitten with him, that sweet, hot kiss brimming with emotion and poignancy is my utter undoing.

He lifts his head slowly, his lips breaking from mine. Our eyes meet, and I see so much emotion and understand little.

“Thank you, Betsy,” he says, the formal version of Heath once more in place.

I want to make demands. To tell him how I feel.

But we are in a changing room beneath the underground fighting club, and I recognize this is not the time. That worse, coming to find him here, letting him fuck me like this, will only reinforce the version of Betsy that I wear like a shield.

A saucy smile blooms upon my face as I call upon the Betsy he knows well and push down—for now—the woman who would give everything to be his wife. “The pleasure was all mine.”

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Chapter Six

Heath

I have been out all morning, meeting with an acquaintance involved with the rebellion. On returning, I find the workshop shut. Matters have progressed between Callum and his lass. A wedding is being planned, and the two of them are inseparable. Thinking my son might have popped around to The Green Man to speak to her, I decide to call in. Either way, I know I need to speak to Betsy. I have been putting off something that needs to be addressed. I have been busy with my blacksmithing work after a rush order came in, and there have been fresh troubles regarding the rebellion.

Yet I know these are excuses.

It has been seven years since illness took a woman I loved from me. Time has a way of softening the pain without ever taking it away. I tell myself I'm not ready for someone else and never will be, and yet Betsy is surely a Goddess-sent test to my resolve. I am honest with myself; I admit that the blonde tavern lass with her freckles and her saucy smile has taken a starring role in my recent filthy dreams long before I fucked her on a rough bench.

The lass is too young for me, too bold, too stubborn, and, further, clearly needs a firm hand applied to her ass just to keep her in line.

A man has a type that is not necessarily measured by how a woman looks.

I like women with spirit who rise above life's hardships and tests, who are indomitable, even as they make me want to try to tame them for nothing more than the hell of it.

She is unexpected.

And already in my heart.

How often I have thought about events after the fight, the wild coupling, and the sense of connection that no matter the angle I view it from, I know I did not imagine.

I have been careless with something precious.

An apology would be a good start.

Telling her how I feel would be an advisable follow-up.

Begging her to forgive me for having my head up my ass these past weeks would also not go amiss.

When I push through the tavern door, I find it quiet. The head cook informs me that Callum called in looking for Ada. He left after hearing she and Betsy had gone to the market.

The short walk back to the workshop only increases a strange sense of foreboding. I find myself frowning as I take my key from my pocket to undo the lock.

Even before I step inside, I feel the prickling of unease and a premonition that something is wrong.

Absent. It is quiet. Too quiet.

I walk out the other side of the workshop and into our house, which lies behind. The kitchen is neat and tidy. My eyes skim over it, searching for the elusive sign that proves or negates the prickling at the back of my neck.

Callum's cloak has gone from the hook by the door, but that is to be expected. It is cold and miserable outside as Bleakness lumbers into the depths of winter.

My eyes alight on a note sitting on the mantle over the fire. A cold sensation settles in the pit of my stomach as I stride over and take the note.

The bastard has taken her. I don't know what the fuck he intends to do. But I am getting my woman back.

Callum

P.S. I took your sword.

My slow smile is followed by a low chuckle that soon turns into a deeper guffaw.

My dear son never forgot about the damn sword I had hidden under my bed, even though finding it was one of the rare occasions that I took the strap to his behind.

I carefully lay the note down on the table.

And then I sit.

A part of me is devastated that my son has gone; in my heart, I already know he will not be coming back.

I am confident Gray is the bastard Callum refers to and equally sure that the big shifter means Ada no harm. He also won't hurt Callum, not without damaging what

he seeks to build with Ada. Callum will prevail, but perhaps not in the way he expects. Gray is a shifter, after all, and they are more inclined toward sharing a mate than humans might. Not that either man has a choice for I sense fate is at work.

I should have had that talk with him. But this and that happened, and there was never any fucking time. Today, I sense the Goddess at work, forcing matters to a head.

There has been a pull between the three of them since the beginning: Gray, Ada, and Callum.

My son is gone. I already feel how fate guides his path, just as it is acting upon me.

My thoughts center on my homeland and the place I have recalled with increasing frequency in my dreams. Callum was still a babe when we left, yet it is where his roots are, too. Eastern Hydornia: where the mountains climb toward the sky, and the forests are lush and thick. There is a village where I grew up, apprenticing to the local blacksmith—my father—and where a pretty shifter lass used to sneak to when she wanted to escape the harsh politics and dangers in her life.

I didn't know her story. She was just a lass with an eye for mischief. It was many years later when I learned about her status, but then we were both maturing, and I was fucking gone for her and only her.

As I carefully close the note, it feels like I am closing more than a piece of paper.

"It is time I moved on," I say to myself. It will take a while to get my affairs in order, to find a buyer willing to take on the shop, although a few have approached me over the years, and I will put the word out.

I feel light like a weight I have carried for too long has been lifted from my shoulders.

I feel free.

Bleakness is changing—the Blighten's grip is slipping—and while my work here might never be done, I believe it is time.

A village is calling to me. A village where I grew up. Far away. A place I only now recognize as home. It will have changed. There will be different people there. Some of those I once knew will have passed over to the Goddess' side. There will be new people, too, who I will meet and learn about.

My heart lifts as I consider the road ahead—the long journey—and the only sorrow at leaving Bleakness is related to the hold a certain lass has over me... and I wonder.

It's time for that talk. If she will listen. If I have not fucked this up beyond recovery.

While I have not yet gone, my mind is already disconnecting, and so it is a sense of nostalgia that calls me to a familiar tavern—The Green Man.

I rise, lock up, and head out the back toward a familiar place. It was quiet when I left, but time has passed, and the patrons will be arriving by now. Although the weather is grim, with snow blanketing the ground, The Green Man is always cheery. The fire is always well stocked, the food always tasty, and I already anticipate Tim's booming hail as I push the door open, for it never fails to put a smile on my face. I want to store it up as a reminder, when I am gone, that I have friends here.

Except, today, as I open the door, Gareth is barreling out and nearly knocks me off my feet.

“Heath!” he says. “Was coming to look for you!”

Inside, the fire is blazing with the usual cheery glow, but that is where the scene

diverges from my expectations. There are no customers gathered in the taproom. Rather, the only ones before me are Anders, Tim, and a weeping Betsy.

Gareth shuts the door behind me and slams the bolt across.

Before I can say a word, Betsy is in my arms, crying her heart out. I soothe her hair back from her tear-ravaged cheeks, feeling that telltale softening in the center of my chest. “Hush, lass. It is going to be okay. I know what this is about.”

“They are gone,” she sobs.

“Aye, I know.” With her still clinging within the circle of my arms, I explain what I know. These people here are part of my inner circle, and I have trusted them the whole time I have lived in Bleakness. Now, it is time to trust them with my deepest secret.

So I do, leaving no part out, for they will need to know everything if I am to ease their concerns.

As I come to the end, Anders shakes his head. Betsy is now tucked at my side, no longer weeping but giving no indication that she plans to let go.

“Eh, this is a tall story, and I would not believe it were it anyone but you,” Tim says, his worry lines softening a little. “You mean to go back to your homelands, then?”

“I do,” I say.

“Well, the rebellion will miss you and Callum for sure,” Anders says, coming over to clasp hands with me. “I better be going. I’ve got a ship full of former captives to track down afore they fall into the wrong hands again. And, Tim, if I might be bold enough, I suggest you open up, lest it draw more attention. It’s quiet at this time of

day, but your regulars will be arriving soon. The fewer tongues wagging, the better.”

As he strides away, Tim gives Gareth the nod to unbar the front door. “Gods, I’m going to miss that young lass and your Callum,” he says with a sad smile. “Won’t be the same around here, for sure. And it’ll be worse still when you go. Betsy, get Heath what he wants: on the house tonight.”

“I will, Pa,” she says. “Just going to wash my face, and I’ll be right back.”

I miss her as she slips from my arms. She rubs her damp cheeks with the back of her hand and plasters on a weak smile before she hastens off.

The door swings open, bringing a blast of cold air, and three dockworkers hasten in, rubbing hands to ward off the chill as they hang cloaks on the hooks beside the door.

“Cold ‘un tonight, Tim!” one man calls. “We’ll have three pints of Pilkington and a serve each of steak and kidney pie, please!”

“Coming right up,” Tim calls.

I take my favored place at the table to the right of the fire.

The door opens again.

“You are early today,” Tim says, with a good-natured smile as he addresses the carpenter and his apprentice, who join him at the bar.

Gods, I want to soak up the moment and the way easy conversation picks up around me.

By the time Betsy returns, the door has opened thrice, and a dozen patrons are sitting

at tables or chatting with Tim at the bar.

I watch her approach, noting that tears still glisten in her eyes. I have been unintentionally careless with the precious gift of a young lass's heart by announcing I am leaving right off the back of telling her that her dear friend has gone and will never be coming back.

Her presence hits me in a way I have forced myself to ignore before. My thoughts shift to that moment of weakness after I caught her and Ada sneaking beneath the fighting pit.

She is too young, but fuck it. I admit I am as charmed by her ways as I am by her pretty face and smile... and her tits, and her ass, and her mouth when it is stretched around... Somewhere far above, another lass with forest green eyes and shifter blood is smirking with approval at Betsy's boldness.

"Have a seat, lass," I say, liberating her of the pint and indicating the chair opposite mine. "You are not so busy, and happen an old man has made a hash of matters."

"You are not so old," she says. Her pert chin lifts, and her eyes lose some sorrow, flashing with a little of that fire I love so well.

I set the pint of Pilkington out of the way and take her small hands in mine. It's fair to say my life has taken plenty of unexpected turns. And I'm hopeful that the lass before me is congenial to taking one more turn, with me.

"Do you want to go with me?"

"Go?" she shakes her head.

"Yes, go to Hydornia With me. Would you consider it?"

I am fucking this up.

“What I’m trying to say badly. Very badly. Is will you marry me?”

“Marry? Go? Oh...” Her face is flushed and her eyes are round.

My heart is pounding out of my chest. After all this, have I read her wrong?

Then she suddenly squeals and launches herself across the table at me, peppering my face with kisses. “Yes, yes, yes! Oh yes.”

A cheer goes up from the patrons. I hear Tim’s booming laugh.

I haul my woman into my arms and hold her tight. “Thank you, Betsy. Thank you for never losing faith in me. Thank you for waiting for me to get my head out of my ass. Thank you for being you, the sweetest, prettiest serving lass in all the lands. I am sorry if I caused you even a moment of sorrow. If you will have me, I should love nothing more than to spend the rest of my life loving you. Nothing would make me happier nor prouder than to call you my wife.”

She cups my cheeks, her eyes searching mine.

Then she grins, that perfect, saucy grin. “Pa!” she calls. “Pa, I’m getting married!”

Another cheer goes up.

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Betsy

We wed a few days after Heath's proposal with my father and all my friends from the tavern in attendance. Soon after, he completed the sales of his workshop and business, and we set sail, bound for Hydornia and my husband's former home.

Husband.

How I love the sound of that. How I love the man who is warm and patient and who rocks my world of a night. Every day, I learn new reasons to cherish the man who, as I discovered that fateful day, left his home and sacrificed everything to protect his wife and their son. He already had ties with the rebellion, and in exchange for the death of those who persecuted his wife, he agreed to relocate to Bleakness and fight for the cause in secret there.

It was only meant to be for a few years.

Then his wife died. Everything changed, and he found his purpose in raising his son and supporting the rebellion who had helped them in their hour of need... As if I did not already know he was a good man.

Who deserves happiness in this life, and who makes me happy in return.

Only now, as we leave the port on horseback, our destination, his childhood village, do I appreciate how it must have devastated him to leave this bountiful land with green forests and cheerful communities. After the bleak streets of Bleakness, a place that barely lumbers out of winter and exists under the shroud of Blighen control,

Hydornia is like stepping into a vivid dream.

Then, we arrive at Blue Bell. The name is as lovely as the village itself, nestled among forests on either side of the River Bell, high street with shops, a tavern, and a church. As we ride down the high street, I see his joy. He points out changes and familiar things. Ahead is an open workshop, the clanging of a blacksmith hammer.

He grins and shares a look with me.

“Is that where you grew up?” I ask.

“Aye,” he says. “It is. The bakery, two doors down, always made the best beef pies. I wonder if they still make them?”

His happiness is infectious. Time has passed, and the reasons he was forced to leave have likewise disappeared. He is free.

The Foresters Arms is opposite the village green.

“We’ll stop here,” Heath says. “Take lodgings while we find our feet.”

We pull our horses up into the stables out the back. A young lad comes and takes the horses for a coin. And then we step inside the tavern. With its dark wood walls, glistening bar, shiny pumps, and neatly set tables and chairs, it is a little worn but homely. Being early, there are only a few patrons here yet.

The proprietor is friendly and remembers Heath and his late father. Callum, my dear friend Ada, and the shifter, Gray, live not far away, he informs us, and have mated for life. “Aye, quite a to-do going on in the pack community,” he says, warming to the gossip. “Your pa’s old workshop is still thriving, but happen they don’t need a blacksmith. Are you looking for work?”

“Aye,” Heath says. “But a home is first order.” He wraps his arm around me and smiles down at me. “Betsy is with child. Due in the spring.”

“Congratulations,” the proprietor says, smiling. “Aye, pity, you are not looking to buy a tavern.”

My eyes flash to Heath.

He chuckles.

The proprietor looks between us, clearly confused.

“As it happens,” Heath says, taking my hand in his and squeezing it gently. “I have a bit of coin gathered over the years. I sold the workshop I had in the city. Betsy, here, has lived all her life in a tavern. Her father is a proprietor of one... and well, she might have mentioned a time or three how it has always been her dream to have a tavern of her own.”

I can scarcely breathe. It feels almost too good to be true.

“Well, this is fate!” the proprietor exclaims. “My daughter has been nagging me to go and stay with her. She and her husband have space for me and a brood of kids I’d like to see more of. Lost my wife ten years ago, and it would make me happy to spend more time with them. I’ll set a fair price. It’s been a bit of a bother, to be honest with you, looking after it now I’m getting on.”

We get down to negotiating then and there.

A price is agreed upon.

One month later, once the deeds are drawn, and the proprietor has collected his personal effects, we take ownership of the Tavern.

As we stand in the empty bar area, my mind is whirling with everything I want to do: a lick of paint here, some flower boxes out the front, and renovations to the guest rooms so we can make the best of the passing trade. The staff working here are excellent; all have advised us they wish to stay on.

“Sign is up!” The local joiner says, poking his head in the front door.

We hasten outside to admire our new sign.

“It’s perfect,” I say, grinning at the sign hanging above the door—a gnarly old green man with curved green lettering beneath: The Green Man.

“Aye,” Heath agrees. “Happen Tim would be proud.”

Heath still has contact with members of the rebellion, and our new home and tavern will always be a safe place for those fighting the cause against the warring Blighen.

We thank the joiner, who accepts his payment, and packs his tool bag.

We head back inside.

Heath wraps his arms around my waist and smiles down at me. “I can already see the cogs turning. I’m the novice here when it comes to managing a tavern. But I’m hard working, and you can teach me the ropes.”

Before I can answer, the barman, Pete, strides in with a fresh barrel of ale, followed by the barmaid, Sally, with a tray full of clean tankards.

“Don’t mind us,” Pete calls as he strides past. He winks at Sally. “Newlyweds, eh?”

Heath chuckles and scoops me up into his arms with a distinctly lascivious smirk. “Just going to have a quick word with my wife upstairs. Be down in time for

opening.”

“Heath,” I gasp, fighting my laughter as he heads out the back with me still in his arms. He cuts left at the end of the corridor, taking the stairs for our quarters above the tavern.

“Quiet, woman,” he mutters, not even winded by the effort of carrying me. “We both know pregnancy makes you needy. You’ll never get through the day unless I settle you down now.”

Heath

She giggles as I make it as far as the lounge. “Fuck it,” I say. I have her spread out on the rug before the unlit fire, her skirt is thrust up, and her panties are tugged to the side.

“Oh, Heath!”

Her breathy gasp accompanies me getting my mouth on her pussy and filling my big hands with her ample tits. Her fingers spear my hair, tugging me where she wants.

She is drenched and ready, making those sweet, breathy moans as I eat her out. I swear if I live to a hundred, I will never get enough of her pleasure sounds. My dick is already fighting to get out and threatening to blow. What this damn woman does to me with her mere existence.

“Come for me, wife,” I growl against her pussy. Calling her that is guaranteed to get her off in record time.

“Oh, oh, oh!” Her fingers tighten, making me wince even as I double down. My reward is a flood over my waiting tongue as she comes for me.

I nearly fucking come myself. My hands are at my buckle before I even lift my head. By the time I surge above her and lodge my cock head in her entrance, I am so primed it is a battle of sheer will to get inside her before I spill.

“Fuck!” I thrust deeply once, twice, three times, and then I unload with a grunt.

When I recover enough to open my eyes, I find my wife smirking up at me, pretty hair spread out over the rug, and cheeks flushed. The damn brat loves it when I lose control.

I wiggle my brows and begin to thrust at a more leisurely pace, my eyes lowering to where her tits jiggle about. “Never fear, the sight of my young, beautiful wife, her belly soon to grow ripe with my child, and stuffed full of my cock, has me hard again in no time.”

And it does.

Every time.

She cups my cheek, and I lean down to kiss her as I take her slow and easy, letting the pleasure build this time.

“I love you, Heath,” she whispers against my cheek.

“I love you, too, Betsy. Now, take it like a good girl lest we never get down to the customers in our new tavern.”

Thank you so much for reading *The Blacksmith in My Tavern* .