

EDEN EMBER

WED TO THE

DARK ELF



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ARRANGED MONSTER MATES




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PREQUEL

No one remembers the world before the Shift. It was thousands of years ago, all lost, all forgotten. Scientists and historians say that before, the world was better, brighter, and our planet belonged to us, humans. There were proud countries and bustling cities, and technology was at its highest.

We can hardly imagine all that. There is no proof, no written texts, no pictures of Alia Terra before the Shift. All we know is the face of Alia Terra now. The land haphazardly divided into territories, the walled cities, the poor living on the fringes, barely surviving.

The monsters.

The temples where young virgins can take a DNA test and be matched to one of them. An arranged marriage to a monster is often the only way a woman can save herself or give her family a chance to not starve.

This is Alia Terra. It belongs to the monsters, and we belong to them.

CHAPTER 1



*V*amen

The northern wind howls across the mountain peaks, biting at my exposed skin. I pull my fur cloak tighter, trudging through the deep snowdrifts. This is the domain of my people, the Dark Elves of the North. We are creatures of winter, hardened and tempered by the icy grip of these lands.

My fortress emerges from the swirling snow, imposing black stone against the white slopes. The banner of my clan, House Blak, flaps in the wind above the ramparts. I pass through the towering gates, the guards bowing as I stride by.

In the main hall, fires roar in great hearths along the walls. My captains and advisors gather around the long wooden table in the center, rising to their feet and clasping fists to hearts as I approach. I give them a curt nod and take my seat at the head of the table.

“Report,” I command.

Captain Neroth steps forward. “All is well, my lord. Our scouts have seen no signs of the werewolf clans encroaching on our borders.”

I scowl. Those savage beasts have been eyeing our lands greedily. We drove them back once before, at great cost. They

will not find us complacent if they dare threaten us again.

The other captains give their reports. Our defenses are strong, supplies ample for the long winter ahead. I listen with half an ear, my thoughts drifting. I have guarded these lands since the Great Shift brought our kind to this strange new world the humans call Alia Terra. We carved out the Northern Mountains as our own and crushed any who challenged us. The humans forget this was their planet once. Now the monstrous races rule, humanity scrabbling in the dirt at our feet.

A scratching at the door interrupts the council. A page boy enters, clutching a scroll bound in black ribbon. He rushes to my side.

“A missive for you, my lord. From the Marriage Temple.”

The hall goes silent. Marriage has been weighing on all our minds. Our race grows fewer each generation. I take the scroll, breaking the blood-red seal. A name leaps off the page, stark black ink on crumbling parchment.

Iris Flemming.

My destined bride, if the Temple priests are to be believed. I scoff quietly. A human girl, matched to me by some dubious blood test? Yet I cannot deny the importance of continuing our lineage. That is a ruler’s duty, no matter how distasteful.

I raise my head. “Make preparations to ride for the Temple.”

Murmurs break out around the table. I let them talk. There are no objections. They know better.

The ride to the Temple will be long and grueling. Not that the cold bothers me, but the human lands beyond the mountains will test even my endurance. I must make this journey, to collect my bride and return to my own kind.

The priests claim their blood test is infallible. That the DNA match creates an unbreakable bond, two souls destined for each other. I am skeptical anything could tether me so. But I will play along, secure the girl they have chosen, and do my duty to my people. That is all.

The next days are a blur of preparations—assembling provisions, readying my war destrier, IceStorm, checking weapons and armor. I refuse an escort. For this, I travel alone. Before I depart, my captains gather in the courtyard to see me off, their breath frosting the air.

Neroth clasps my arm. “Safe journey, my lord. The snows will be harsh this season.”

I give a brusque nod. I have weathered worse. Swinging astride IceStorm, I survey my assembled warriors one last time. “Serve faithfully in my absence.”

With that, I spur my stallion through the gates. His hooves spray powdered snow as we descend the winding mountain paths. Soon the fortress is lost from view, and it is only me and the wolf-howl of the wind. I do not look back.

The trees thin as I reach the foothills, replaced by exposed rock and scrub. The mountains give way to rolling plains. Days blur together in a haze of snow and wind. I ration my supplies carefully. IceStorm is tireless, bred for these climes. I doze in the saddle when fatigue sets in.

At night I make cold camps, no fire to alert unfriendly eyes. I keep my elven longsword close, though I have seen no one for days. Once I spot a chimneyed human town on the distant horizon and steer well clear. Their settlements are fortified with spiked walls now, bastions against the monsters that rule their world. I feel nothing but contempt for their weakness.

The land gradually turns green and lush, a jarring change from home. Foreign birds sing in the unfamiliar forests. The snow thins to patches on the ground. IceStorm snorts and tosses his head at the strange scents. I run a soothing hand along his frosty mane, and his muscles loosen. We are far from home, old friend, but almost there.

Finally, the spires of the Temple crest the horizon. My chest tightens at the sight. Here I will find the bride fate has supposedly chosen for me. I shake my head, banishing the fanciful notion. I do this for duty, not destiny.

Still...doubt nags at me. Could there truly be a woman whose soul will intertwine with mine? Born to stand at my side, bear my offspring, join our bloodlines? A human woman? Impossible.

I force down my questions as IceStorm passes under the soaring, intricately carved gates of the Temple. An acolyte in white vestments hurries to greet me. He bows so low his nose nearly brushes the tiles.

“Welcome, Lord Blak. We have eagerly awaited your arrival.” His smile is all politeness, but his eyes hold distaste. As if I am something unpleasant he scraped off his shoe. I bare my teeth in an icy grin. Let the little zealot quake. He scurries ahead, leading me through columned halls lit with braziers, our footsteps echoing off the cavernous ceilings.

He guides me to an arched wooden door then bows again. “She waits within. I will return shortly for the ceremony.” With that, he spins on his heel and hastens off, clearly glad to be away.

I stand alone before the closed door, a strange hesitation coming over me. In a few moments I will meet my intended bride. The girl I am to bind in marriage and take home as my

own. A mystery awaits on the other side. A glimpse of my fated future.

Steeling myself, I reach for the iron handle and pull open the heavy door. Inside, staring out the arched window, stands a slim young woman in a white linen dress. She turns at the creak of the door, hands clasped tightly in front of her. Green eyes meet mine.

Iris Flemming. My bride. Here at last.

I step inside and firmly close the door behind me.

CHAPTER 2



*J*ris

I wake before dawn, as I have every morning for years. The cold bites through my threadbare blanket as I slip from the rickety cot. The other girls in the cramped dormitory are still asleep, curled under their own thin covers. They look so young in sleep, barely grown into young women. But we have all flowered enough to attract a potential match. That is why we are here.

I splash my face with frigid water from the basin and change into my gray temple dress. We own nothing but two spare dresses, undergarments, and shoes that pinch my toes. The temple provides little else. Should a match come about, they give us a white linen gown suitable for a wedding. I have my doubts, as one hasn't shown yet for me.

Down in the kitchens, I gobble down stale bread and stringy meat while helping prepare breakfast. The cook, Mira, slips me a bruised apple with a wink. I thank her quietly and tuck it into my pocket. Mira has had a soft spot for me ever since I came here as a child. My parents died from the red fever, just another orphan cast upon the dubious mercy of the temple. I suspect Mira herself once wore the gray dress of a potential

bride. There is sadness in her eyes when she looks upon us girls.

After the meager breakfast is served, we go about our chores scrubbing endless floors, washing laundry by hand in the courtyard wells, prepping food for the next day. Anything to earn our keep.

My best friend, Lena, joins me in folding linens. Her red curls bounce as she chatters about the latest gossip.

“Did you hear? Katia has been matched!”

I snap alert. “Truly? She never said.” A pang of jealousy rears its ugly head. But I should be happy for her, nonetheless.

Katia slept in the bunk above me for three years. I cannot envision her married off to some hulking beast in a faraway land. A tremor goes through me. One less girl left.

Lena nods. “The ceremony is today! She’s being wed to some dragon lord. Imagine, a dragon!” She sighs dreamily but then catches my expression. “Oh Iris, I’m sorry. I didn’t think...”

I force a smile. “It’s wonderful for her. I hope they find happiness.”

We refocus on our folding, the shadow of the future hanging over us. I have seen girls return from their ceremonies hollow-eyed and sobbing, or worse. Bruises peeking from beneath sleeves. Some barely walk, limping back to whisper to us of their wedding nights. But some come back wistful, shyly showing off gifts from foreign lands and recounting marvels we can scarcely imagine. Those stories keep the chill of fear at bay.

The day passes in a monotonous blur. As we file back to the dormitories before curfew, a servant approaches me, face grim. My stomach drops to my feet.

“Come. You’ve a visitor.”

I glance wildly at Lena. She squeezes my hand, eyes wide. This could only mean one thing. I follow on numb legs, barely breathing. My whole body shakes.

The servant, Cora, leads me to one of the private receiving chambers. I hesitate at the door. She gives me a gentle push. “Go on, girl. Can’t keep him waiting.”

Him. The one who performs the ceremonies. He’s the reason any of us receive a call such as this.

I step inside on trembling legs. A man stands waiting, tall and imposing in a white robe, the vestments of a high temple priest. His smile seems mocking. In his hands rests a scroll bound in violet ribbon. An icon of bones twined into a helix mark it with the seal of fate. Matched.

“Iris Flemming. Congratulations, child. We have found your perfect match.”

The room sways dangerously. This is it. My life is no longer my own.

The priest clears his throat, breaking me from my panicked daze. He holds out the scroll. I take it with numb fingers. “You are most fortunate, Iris. Not all matches align so fortuitously.”

I stare blankly at him, unable to comprehend his words.

He tsks impatiently. “Come now, girl, the scroll! Read it.”

With trembling hands, I break the seal and unfurl the parchment. There, etched in bold lettering, is a name:

Lord Vamen Blak of the Northern Mountains

My knees nearly buckle. One of the dark elf lords? Their kind are said to be ruthless and cruel. None who venture into their

domain return. Fear rises in me like bile. The priest's satisfied smirk tells me he finds this match exceedingly suitable.

"Lord Blak will arrive in three days' time for the ceremony. You'd best prepare yourself, girl." With that he sweeps from the room, leaving me clutching the scroll like a death warrant.

Three days. Three days before I am bound forever to a monster. Anguish threatens to choke me. How could the fates be so cruel? This marriage will be my doom. Unless...

A desperate plan forms in my mind. Perhaps I could flee the temple, make a life on my own however humbly. The rhozari planes to the east have nomad tribes...I could join them, disappear into their numbers.

But even as the wild thoughts take shape, my shoulders slump in defeat. Where would I find food or shelter? The nomads care nothing for beggar girls. Beyond the temple walls lies only hardship and despair for my kind. At least here I have a roof, a bed, enough to eat. Out there I would be dead in weeks, if not taken by slavers first.

No. My fate is sealed. In three days I will meet the monster I am bound to. I can only pray his heart is not as cold and harsh as the mountains he hails from. With slow steps, I return to my dormitory. The other girls cluster around, buzzing with questions, but I brush past them and climb into my bunk, pulling the covers over my head. Sleep does not come, my mind spinning with dark imaginings of the future in store.

The next days pass in a haze. I go through the motions—work, meals, sleep—feeling hollow and adrift. Lena tries her best to keep my spirits up, but her encouraging smiles slip when she thinks I'm not looking. She knows as well as I that this match does not bode well.

On the second day, Katia appears in the laundry yard, smiling wanly. A necklace of sparkling gems adorns her throat, finer than anything we have seen. I hug her gently. "I wish you every happiness." She thanks me, but there is sadness in her eyes.

That night I cry myself to sleep, mourning the carefree girl I will never be again. Tomorrow I meet my fate.

Morning comes too soon. I scrub myself head to toe in the bathing room until my skin is raw. The servant women bathe me in sweet oils and perfume, then dress me in the fine white linen gown of a bride. I hardly recognize the hollow-eyed girl staring back from the bronze mirror.

At last, they lead me to the receiving chamber and bid me wait. My knees knock together as tremors wrack my body. Any moment the dark elf lord will walk through that door. When he takes me from this place, I will never return. I stare longingly at the open window, briefly entertaining visions of escape. Futile, I know. Even if I slipped these walls, I would not get far on foot in this dress.

Heavy footsteps sound outside, then the door creaks open. I spin from the window, heart in my throat as a tall figure strides in. He wears leather armor covered with intricate metalwork. A longsword and axe hang at his hip, and a billowing cloak of white fur drapes his broad shoulders. But it is his face that roots me in place, unable to tear my gaze away.

His skin is midnight blue, inset with sharp cheekbones and a strong jawline. Long white hair spills down his back in a braid, though from the front he looks completely bald. His pointed ears stand out, pierced with onyx studs that match his glittering black eyes. Those eyes assess me now, keen and calculating. My knees wobble.

He steps further inside, pushing the door closed. The click of the latch seems to seal my fate. I clench my shaking hands, unsure what to do or say.

With slow, purposeful steps, he approaches me. His eyes glint in the torchlight, seeing through me, weighing my worth. I suppress a shudder at the power emanating from him in discernable waves. This is a warrior not just in body but in spirit. A leader of his people, demanding obedience.

He stops mere inches away, towering over me. This close, I can see each angle of his exotic face, the way his pupils constrict then dilate strangely, with vertical slits like a cat's. His ears twitch and swivel as if sampling the very air around us. Alien. Other. I shrink back, heartbeat thundering in my ears.

A smile twitches his full lips. "So you are the bride fate has chosen for me." His voice is low, a pleasant rumble. He reaches out and grasps a lock of my hair between his long, clawed fingers. I tense, frozen. With delicate care, he rubs the strands contemplatively. "Strange that they match me with a human waif. Still, the priests insist you are my destiny."

I find my voice shaky but resolute. "If the fates have bound us, my lord, then I am yours." The oath brings bile to my throat, but I force it down. My fate no longer belongs to me.

He drops my hair, eyes intent on my face. "What do you know of fate, girl?"

The question catches me off guard. Does he doubt the priests' blood tests too? I realize suddenly how bizarre this entire ritual must seem to him also. It is little consolation that we both find ourselves trapped by forces beyond our understanding.

I lift my chin. “I know nothing of fate or destiny, my lord. I am a humble girl. I go where I am led.” I didn’t add that I have no choice in the matter unless I want to run away and face death worse than whatever this dark elf could give me.

He studies me a moment longer, as if puzzling out a complex problem. Then he turns abruptly for the door. “Come. It is time.”

My stomach drops, but I smooth my expression into calm acceptance. With slow steps, I follow him from the chamber to face my destiny.

CHAPTER 3



*V*amen

The girl trails behind me as I stride through echoing temple halls. Iris Flemming. A delicate thing, barely reaching my chest. Her flaxen-colored hair spills down her back, a stark contrast to her pale skin. She keeps her gaze demurely lowered, though I can sense her quaking.

I too feel the wrongness of this moment. A human bride to a dark elf lord seems blasphemous. Yet when I look at her, an inexplicable resonance hums through my blood, as if she belongs at my side. I clench my jaw. The priest's magic, nothing more. I cannot afford fanciful thoughts about fate. My duty lies with my people. Iris is but a pawn in my quest for peace on this planet.

We enter a towering chamber lit by braziers. Rows of carved wooden benches line each wall. At the far end stands a stone altar draped in violet cloth. The priests gather there, black-robed and solemn-faced. Hundreds have wed here through the ages, human and monster alike. The ancient rites bind all races. Tonight they bind me.

Music swells from reed pipes as we walk the aisle, a haunting ceremonial melody. Iris's hand rests feather-light on my forearm, trembling. I fix my gaze straight ahead, ignoring the

searching glances from the assembled priests. Their magic of blood tests and rituals brought us to this pass. Now they will reap the fruit of their conjuring. For better or worse.

We halt before the altar and bow our heads as the High Priest begins the invocation, his reedy voice echoing off the vaulted ceilings. The lyrical Elvish words rise and fall like a spell, calling on ancient gods to witness the ritual. I tune out the arcane verses, sensing Iris fidgeting minutely beside me. She smells of anxiety, some herbal perfume failing to mask the stink of fear. I wonder if she will bolt for the doors. But she remains still and silent, head bowed. Braver than she appears.

At last the High Priest finishes his incantations. Now the binding begins. An acolyte offers forward an ornate silver box. Iris's breath catches as the High Priest lifts the lid, revealing two rings resting on purple velvet. They gleam rose gold, patterned with intricate knotwork. Her human eyes cannot discern the hidden runes etched into the metal, elven spells of love and fertility. For all her obvious fear, hope glints in her eyes as the priest lifts the smaller ring.

He motions for my hand and slides the ring onto my fourth finger. It glints against my dark skin. A perfect fit. Magic hums from it into my blood, subtle but inexorable. The runes flare golden as the binding takes hold. Iris clutches her skirts, watching raptly.

I extend my left hand and the priest places Iris's ring in my upturned palm. Her eyes flick up to mine, wide and uncertain. I sense her silently pleading for some sign of mercy. But my heart is bound by duty.

I take her dainty hand in mine, feeling her tremble. Gently I slide the rose band onto her fourth finger. She gasps softly as the runes glow and the ring fuses to fit her. The metal warms

subtly on my own finger, Iris's heartbeat echoing through the link. My jaw tightens. The bond is sealed.

"You may kiss the bride."

I start, the priest's pronouncement snapping me from my daze. Iris looks similarly dismayed, clutching her marked hand to her breast. But we are compelled to complete the rite.

Curling a clawed hand behind her neck, I draw her in. She sucks in a frightened breath, lashes fluttering closed. Our lips meet, soft and chaste. Energy cascades through me at the contact, like lightning down my spine. Iris makes a small sound, her body swaying into mine for the briefest moment before I release her. The kiss lasts but a heartbeat, yet I feel its imprint lingering on my skin.

The guests break into polite applause. Iris looks near fainting. She bows her head to hide hot tears I can smell upon her cheeks. I stand rigid, shaken to my core. This girl, this human, has been seared into my spirit through eldritch forces beyond my grasp. We are bound now, forever.

The ceremony concludes swiftly. Iris and I bow to the priests and turn to make our egress. The runes on my ring pulse with her nearness. I offer my arm again out of instinct more than gallantry. Iris's fingers alight there as if drawn by magnets. We walk the aisle in stunned silence through echoing applause and curious stares.

Outside the sanctuary, Iris's composure finally breaks. She rips her hand from mine and backs against a pillar, choking down sobs. I pause, unsure how to react. Comforting a weeping human is as foreign to me as she herself is. But her distress tugs at me from that spot deep within where our souls now intertwine.

“Do not cry,” I rasp awkwardly. “You have a husband to provide for you. A home. You should be pleased.”

She dashes angry tears away, glaring up at me. “And what of love? I do not love you, monster. You’ve stolen my life.”

Her defiance sparks my own temper. “You think I chose this? I act from duty, not desire. The priests decided our fate. Rage at them, not me.” I expect she’ll weep more at my harsh tone, but instead her expression hardens.

“Duty,” she echoes bitterly. “Yes, we are both prisoners of duty now.” Her eyes drop to her ringed hand, shimmering with contained magic. When she looks up at me again, the tears are gone, replaced by cold resignation.

“Forgive my outburst, husband. It seems we are stuck with each other.” She holds out her arm in a grudging invitation. “Let us go.”

I stare, surprised by the steel in her. Carefully I clasp her proffered hand to my arm. She presses close without fear now, bound to me in unbreakable ways. Together we walk out to the stables where my stallion awaits, oddly contented by the heat of her palm seeping through my tunic.

Perhaps this wife of mine is not so weak as she appears.

The grooms bring out IceStorm, saddled and provisioned for our journey home. He tosses his head impatiently, eager to be off. I stroke his neck, breathing his familiar scent. We have far to travel.

Iris eyes the stallion nervously. “He seems...formidable.”

“He has carried me through deep snow and harsh terrain. He will not fail us now.” I take her hand and pull her gently forward. “Come. He must bear both of us.”

Her steps drag reluctantly, but she lets me guide her. I grab her about the hips and hoist her effortlessly astride IceStorm. She gasps, hiking up her skirts to keep her legs modestly together atop the broad steed. I swing up behind her, reaching around to take the reins. She sits rigid as stone between my arms.

I whistle, and IceStorm surges into an eager canter through the temple gates. Iris yelps, toppling back against my chest. I catch her easily, clicking my tongue at the horse to slow.

“All is well, mistress. Just hold to the saddle.”

Iris adjusts gingerly, clearly uncomfortable with the arrangement. But she has no choice but to settle in for the long ride ahead. I guide IceStorm north, toward home. Toward her new life. She does not look back.

The terrain turns rugged as we gain distance from the temple. The temperature drops by degrees. Iris huddles deeper into her cloak, shivering. Each time IceStorm leaps a boulder or stream crossing, she jolts backward into my chest with a muffled shriek. I keep one arm secured around her, absently noting her delicate frame.

As the sun lowers we crest a hill, and my mountain fortress comes into view far ahead. Iris stiffens. I know what she sees—cold, imposing walls of black rock seeming to rise from the craggy peaks themselves. A stark bastion hewn from the unforgiving mountains. My homeland.

“Is that...your castle, my lord?” Her voice wavers only slightly.

“Yes. But we will not reach it tonight.”

She nods, unspeaking. I glance sidelong at her pensive profile.

“You are not what I expected, Iris Flemming.”

She turns sharply. “And what did you expect?”

I shrug against her shoulders. “A timid mouse. You looked near fainting during the ceremony. Yet you have borne up this journey well.”

Pink flush colors her cheeks. “I have endured worse trials. Don’t underestimate me.”

I arch an eyebrow at the challenge in her tone. My little human wife has thorns after all. How intriguing. Perhaps she will find reserves of courage when she faces my people and sees the harsh world she is now part of. She will need such strength, married to me.

Night falls heavy, and a bitter wind kicks up. I search the moonlit hills for a suitable place to camp. Finding a sheltered overhang nestled against a ridge, I dismount and lift Iris down. She rubs her legs gingerly, wincing.

“Forgive the discomfort. You will grow accustomed to the saddle.”

She nods, eyes darting about nervously. I lead her beneath the rock outcrop and gather brush for a fire. Soon flames crackle, casting warmth and light over our stark camp. Iris looks ready to collapse. She watches me over the fire, twisting the rose ring around her finger. I feel its motions on my own hand, like the flutter of butterfly wings.

“Will you tell me about where we go? I know so little of your lands.” Her tone holds a childlike wish for stories. It pricks at my guard.

I stay silent a long moment, weighing how much I wish to share with this stranger called wife. But the firelight softens her youthful features, and I find myself saying, “The mountains can be harsh, but there is beauty if you know where to look. Caverns glittering with quartz veins. Ice storms that

coat the high peaks in silver. The lights of our fortress flickering beneath the moon.”

Her expression grows wistful at my descriptions. Perhaps I can help ease her transition to this new realm. Our realms, now shared.

I clear my throat gruffly, realizing I’ve revealed more gentleness tonight than intended. She does not comment, merely nods her thanks for the meager knowledge. We bed down on opposite sides of the fire, our marriage still strange and tenuous threads between us. I listen until her breathing steadies into sleep, gloves off and arms wrapped tight against the cold. Vulnerable.

As I watch her, the runes on my ring occasionally flare brighter when she stirs. Our souls knitted together by forces beyond my grasp. I close my fist, concealing the strange magic. All my life I have stood vigilant, master of my domain. Now this human has slipped past my guard in unforeseen ways.

Teeth chattering compels me to move to her. With ease, I lie at her back and pull her into my arms, if only to warm her body. A deep awakening stirs within me, my loins burn with desire. But it’s too frigid here to take my wife. For now, I offer her my warmth and protection. My eyes don’t shut full, but my body relaxes with her slight frame melting into my steely muscles. Could I fall in love with such a creature?

I ponder these revelations as I keep watch through the long night.

CHAPTER 4



*J*ris

I wake just before dawn, my breath clouding the frigid air. Every muscle aches from yesterday's endless ride and the unforgiving ground I'd slept on. I peel my eyes open reluctantly.

Across the smoldering campfire, the dark elf lord stands with his back to me, saddling his horse. Vamen. My husband. The word still feels foreign. He moves with easy grace, his warrior's body perfect for this harsh land he calls home.

Home. I will never again see the only home I've ever known. Yet I feel no longing for the temple that raised me like a lamb for slaughter. Still, trepidation knots my stomach at the thought of what awaits me in those distant mountains.

Vamen turns, catching my gaze. "Did you sleep well, mistress?"

The courteous inquiry surprises me. "Well enough, my lord. Thank you."

He nods shortly and returns to securing bags on his stallion. I rise and fold my cloak and blanket, feeling awkward and unsure how to act around this strange man fate has bound me

to. We are strangers shaped by different worlds. Can either of us truly belong in the other's life?

My eyes drift to the rose band glinting on my finger, unchanged despite the long ride yesterday. A reminder of the forces that now tether us. I wonder if Vamen feels the same disquiet I do about our union. His stoic demeanor reveals little. I know so little of him at all. He stayed away from me all night, our union as of yet unconsummated.

Soon we are mounted and riding again beneath the gloomy dawn light. I keep my eyes straight ahead, watching the terrain grow ever steeper and more treacherous. We cross narrow stone bridges over plunging ravines, navigate sharp switchbacks, and skirt sheer cliffs. The air bites my cheeks and chaps my lips.

I shudder every time the stallion leaps some new obstacle, but Vamen's arm braces me securely. His body is a wall of warmth at my back, and I find myself leaning into him reflexively as the temperatures plummet. He mercifully does not comment on my need to cling to him like a burr. In truth, his closeness brings some small sense of comfort in this strange place. His muscles flex and move with grace as I lean into his strength.

By mid-morning, snowflakes swirl through the gray sky. I gasp at their delicate beauty, having seen very little snow before. But my wonder quickly turns to alarm as the flurries blur into a howling blizzard.

"Just a little longer!" Vamen's voice carries over the screaming wind. I huddle into my sodden cloak, hands numb inside my gloves. Each snowflake bites my cheeks like an icy insect. I am lost, adrift in a world of white and wind. A cry threatens to peel from my lips, but I keep it at bay.

At last stone walls emerge from the curtains of snow ahead. Vamen's fortress. He dismounts inside the gatehouse, then reaches up to lift me down. My legs buckle as I collapse into his arms.

"Forgive me," I sputter through clacking teeth. But he only steadies me until I regain my footing. His face softens slightly.

"Let us get you inside by the fire."

He leads me through the courtyard where dark elf soldiers stare and whisper at my passing. Their sharp eyes and alien faces send prickles of unease across my skin. I know their kinds have been enemies of humanity since the early dark times after the Shift. What must they think, seeing their liege return with a human bride?

Inside the stone halls, the air hangs still and gloomy, lit only by flickering torches. Vamen guides me to a chamber warmed by a small hearth. He gestures to a high-backed chair near the fire. "Sit, try to warm yourself. I will have your things brought up."

I perch gingerly on the chair's edge while Vamen busies himself building up the fire. Soon rich furs are draped around my shoulders, and a cup of something hot and fragrant is pressed into my hands. The drink spreads its nourishing heat through my core, chasing away the deathly chill. A serving girl appears and begins unpacking my sparse luggage in the bedchamber beyond. Home.

Vamen stands before me, dark and imposing. "I have duties to attend, mistress. Anything you require, ask the servants. We will speak again at the evening meal." He sweeps out without another word, the door booming shut behind him.

Alone with my thoughts, I take stock of my unfamiliar surroundings. The bedchamber holds just the essential furnishings—bed, wardrobe, vanity, hearth—but all exquisitely carved from black wood. Heavy drapes cover the narrow windows. I note no door accessible from this room. Am I confined here, kept separate?

Unease prickling my skin, I move to test the main door leading out to the hall. To my surprise, it opens easily. Guards eye me with curiosity as I peek into the corridor, but make no move to stop me. I am not a prisoner then. Yet where would I possibly go? Already I feel like a trespasser in this alien world.

With no other options, I let the serving girl draw me a hot bath and afterward dress me in a fine gray gown apparently meant for the lady of the house. The fabric is softer than any I've worn before, if still neutral and plain by their standards.

The girl leaves and returns with a lunch of crusty bread, smoked meats, and more of the revitalizing hot drink. I eat alone, listening to the mournful wind outside. My earlier wonder at the snow has been replaced by dread for this bitter realm I must now survive. And what of my new husband. We shared a single kiss at the wedding and nothing since. Lena and I found old books in a library long forgotten of tales on Earth before the Shift. Love stories that made ones heart beat fast and cheeks flush with pink. My honeymoon was nothing like that. Only bitter icy air with a harsh stranger. I wonder if he could ever show me kindness.

Come evening, the maid returns to lead me to the dining hall. My breath sticks in my throat as we enter the cavernous room and all eyes turn my way. Vamen sits at the head table on a raised dais. He motions me to the empty seat at his right hand. I keep my eyes low as I take my place beside him, painfully

aware of the curious scrutiny from the assemblage of armored elves filling the tables. I stick out like a bright lamp in a very dim room, looking like fresh meat and a curiosity for many who have never seen a human before.

Beside Vamen sits a powerfully built elf with long white braids and a stern face. Vamen performs brief introductions. “My lieutenant, Althir Stormblade. And this is Iris, lately of the human realm, now my bride by the priests’ dispensation.”

Althir’s piercing silver eyes bear into me. He inclines his head politely if not warmly. “Greetings, mistress. Few of our kind take human wives. You are...an uncommon match.”

I shift, unnerved by his doubtful tone, but Vamen changes the subject, for which I’m grateful. Serving plates and goblets are set before us, and we fall quiet as we eat. The rich venison stew and spiced wine settle my queasy stomach somewhat. Between bites, I sneak glances at Vamen, still finding his exotic visage arresting. He catches me looking once, and I quickly avert my gaze. Did I detect interest in his stare?

After the meal, minstrels play reed pipes and stringed instruments at the hall’s far end. The music is haunting, evocative of wind moaning over bare stone. Vamen offers me his arm, and I take it dutifully, ignoring the considering looks cast our way as he leads me from the hall.

Back in my rooms, the fire has burned down to embers. Vamen adds a fresh log, staring into the growing flames. We stand awkwardly on opposite sides of the hearth. Two strangers linked by irrevocable bonds yet separated by culture. The gulf between our worlds has never felt so vast.

Vamen breaks the heavy silence first. “I hope you found your meal acceptable.”

“Yes, my appetite has quite returned, thank you.”

He nods. “It is late. You should rest.” He moves toward the inner door but pauses, looking back. “This marriage is... unexpected. But you will be cared for here. Until we grow more accustomed.”

I smile. “Nothing like the present to become acquainted or accustomed to each other, as you say.” I’m nervous, but also can’t ignore the warmth fanning through my belly.

“Iris, I am as new to this as you are. I want to be a good mate to you. If I ever do anything that hurts, just tell me.”

He sits beside me after discarding the remainder of his clothing. Oh! His body, thick with muscles, causes heat to flood into my middle. I gulp and pull the blanket up, my body naked under it, and tremble with fear and excitement. His body shines with bulging muscles in the flame light, dark skin stretching over his sheer strength. He leans in to me, offering a sweet smile.

“I’m new as well.” I look down shyly. His hand moves the blanket from my hands, lifting back and seeing me fully for the first time.

“What should I do first?” He asks, his innocence surprising. He’s the Dark Elf Lord of the Northern Mountains and he’s asking me what to do.

“Kiss me?” I ask softly, wanting his lips upon mine. He smiles wider and leans in, pressing his mouth against mine, tongue sliding between my lips. Vamen’s tongue feels divine as he slips it into my mouth, a deep, purring groan vibrating from his chest.

I reach out and stroke his arms, moaning into his kiss. Vamen gently rests his hand upon my breast and gives it a soft

squeeze, a deep purr rumbling from his chest.

“Are breasts sensitive?” He breaks the kiss and murmurs.

“Only when they are touched,” I reply timidly. “But sometimes, when a woman is excited, her breasts can become tender.”

“Excited how?” His fingers gently knead my flesh.

“When she desires.” I whimper softly, feeling Vamen’s touch move between my thighs. He pets the downy tuft of fur then strokes his finger up and down my slit.

“Desires what?” His breath is harsh and hot.

“Touching. Kissing.” I moan as Vamen kisses me again. His finger dips inside and I mewl against his lips.

“Sex?” He growls.

I nod and moan louder. Vamen chuckles against my lips and pushes his finger deeper. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Sex,” I whine. “Sex. Please. Vamen.” I cling to his strong arm and roll my hips.

He removes his finger and brings it to his lips. He licks then sighs. “It tastes sweet.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment. Vamen smirks and kisses me more. “Don’t be shy. It’s a good thing.” He lays me back and opens my thighs wide. “I want to see all of you.” He rubs my folds then touches the bud at the top. “What is this?”

“Ah-” I gasp and Vamen covers my mouth.

“Shh, Iris,” he whispers to me. “We can’t wake everyone.” He removes his palm and pets the inside of my thigh. “Tell me what that is.”

I bite my lip and tremble. “That is the source of pleasure.”

Vamen smirks and leans down, kissing it and dragging his long tongue over it. I bite down on my knuckles to keep from screaming. Vamen kisses and nibbles. He uses his finger to open me while his tongue laps me up. My thighs begin to kick and Vamen pins them down.

“Iris, shh,” he moans. “Keep still.” He sits up, chin dripping and lips shiny. “You taste so sweet.” He licks his chops then rubs his fingers against my vulva. “This whole area feels good, right?”

I’m shivering and shaking, feeling as if I was hit by a strong bolt of magic. Vamen slips his finger inside again and I whimper. “Yes. Yes-” my voice cracks.

Vamen chuckles and lies on top of me, his weight heavy and warm. “Iris, I’ve never felt a woman before.”

“Me either.” I wrap my arms around him.

Vamen kisses me, rubbing his shaft against my slit. “Is it ok to put it in?”

I swallow and nod. “Please.”

Vamen kisses me more as he guides his shaft inside. He grunts and snarls, slipping himself deep then stilling for a moment. “Does it hurt?” He gasps.

“A little,” I whimper. “But it feels good too.”

Vamen starts to move and my mind begins to go blank. I hold onto him, kissing him and moaning into his ear. Vamen’s snarls and growls become low and powerful. He drives into me, making me melt into the blankets below.

Vamen bites my neck and digs his fingers into my hips. He snarls and howls, trembling then suddenly stopping. He

releases inside me, his thick seed stuffing me full. Vamen he heaves and empties.

“Iris,” he moans. “Did that feel good?”

I nod weakly. “You felt wonderful.”

Vamen kisses me, going back inside and moving slowly. “It feels better this time.” He huffs. “Iris, this is so amazing.”

I giggle and kiss him. “It is.” I pet down his back and lift my hips. Vamen then stills again and releases inside once more.

In the amazing aftermath of our lovemaking, I fall asleep curled up beside him, the blankets keeping us warm as the clouds blow the frigid air. For a honeymoon night, he certainly knew how to please me.

“I promise to learn to love you and treat you how you want. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

I snuggle into his embrace. “You won’t.” For that, I’m sure. Our first time brought a smile to my face and such satisfaction to my body, I can’t help up have hope.

He bids me good rest and releases me so I can use the facility. After changing into a soft nightshift I slide beneath silken sheets beside him. My body melts into the downy mattress after so many nights on hard ground. For a brief moment I feel like a pampered guest. But the howling wind beyond the walls soon reminds me otherwise. Despite the warmth, I shiver.

This is my life now, bound to a strange lord in a strange land. I curl on my side, my back touching his, watching snowflakes swirl beyond the glass. Somewhere out there, the world of my childhood still turns. But I cannot go back.

My hand finds the rose gold band on my finger, still alien yet also a part of me now. Vamen’s ring. Vamen’s world.

As sleep slowly drags me under, my thoughts stray to kinder moments from the journey here. The firm clasp of Vamen's arm supporting me in the saddle. His cloak wrapped around my shoulders by the campfire. Small but sincere kindnesses.

Perhaps in time, more common ground will emerge between us, if we can learn to nurture it. I cling to this spark of hope as I drift to sleep in my new home.

CHAPTER 5



V
amen

I stride through the familiar halls, soldiers and servants dipping their heads respectfully as I pass. Another day overseeing my domain, the only life I've known these long decades since the Great Shift thrust our kindred upon this harsh land. Yet now my thoughts stray to the young human wife waiting in my chambers. Iris. An anomaly in my world.

I still ponder the priests' logic in matching us. She seems so ill-fitted for the brutal climes of the North. A summer songbird among crows. But the rune-marked ring on my hand whispers of arcane forces beyond reason. Fate binds us, whatever doubts assail me.

Returning to my quarters, I find Iris seated by the fire, brushing out the long waves of her flaxen hair. The maidservant I assigned her is nowhere in sight. Iris starts at my entrance, clutching the brush to her breast. Perhaps she hoped to be abed before my return.

“Good evening, my lord. I did not expect you so late.”

“Please, you are my wife, call me Vamen. The days are long here. You will adjust.”

She nods, returning to her brushing with careful focus on the flames. I watch her from the doorway, intrigued by the interplay of firelight on the red-gold strands. So unlike our females' straight, moon-silver tresses.

"Your hair..." I hesitate, unsure how to give voice to my fascination. "Forgive me, I've never seen its likeness before."

Iris blinks in surprise at my awkward compliment. Small bare feet peek from beneath her nightshift. She seems diminished without the fine dresses and shoes. Younger somehow. Vulnerable.

I clear my throat gruffly, recalling propriety has no place here. "But you should be abed. I will withdraw to my chamber."

"No!" She blurts out suddenly. At my raised eyebrow she collects herself, fingers worrying the hairbrush handle. "I mean...could we not sit together for a while? Near the fire?"

Her request takes me aback. We have been careful to maintain distance, unsure how to navigate this forced intimacy. Yet I find myself nodding before I can think better of it.

Iris scoots wordlessly to one side of the fur-draped chair. After a small hesitation, I settled on the opposite end, careful to leave respectful space between us. We both stare fixedly into the low flames, the only sound the crackling logs.

I rack my mind on how to break this stilted awkwardness between us. She is my wife, yet feels more stranger than kin. I know nothing of her beyond the scantest details from the temple missive announcing our match. Her life before then is a mystery. Curiosity loosens my tongue.

No elf maid would sit with me so informally, unattended and in her bed clothes. Yet it feels...pleasant. Comforting, even. I stretch my marked hand before my eyes, remembering the heat

of her soft touch. Whatever fate's purpose in binding us so, I cannot deny she stirs this strange protectiveness in me.

Perhaps that alone shows the magic serves some deeper end. With this revelation warming me, I finally speak.

"You mentioned once you were raised in the temple's care?"

Iris nods, eyes clouding. "Since I was a small child. My parents both died from the red fever."

"I am sorry." Strange to think this woman beside me grew up an orphan. I cannot envision an elfling bereft of family and clan. Such fragility is alien to my kind. Yet she survived, like a weed forcing its way through stone.

Iris gives a small shrug. "It was a hard life, but not unkind. We found ways to laugh, Lena and I." A nostalgic smile touches her lips. "I miss her most of all. My only real friend."

I shift uncertainty, privy now to this intimate hurt I cannot hope to salve. But Iris's expression holds no bitterness or blame. Her quiet resilience earns my respect.

"You have courage worthy of any elven maid. I hope in time you will find a home here."

Iris looks at me directly for the first time since I entered. Something in her face softens. "You are most kind, Vamen. I will try my best."

We fall quiet again, but the silence holds less strain. When the logs burn down to glowing embers, Iris stifles a delicate yawn behind her hand. I stand and offer my own hand in a formal gesture.

"I'm due for a bath." She smiles sleepily.

I check the guards and make sure all is settled for the night. I make my way back to Iris. By now she would have bathed and

should be ready for bed. I pause at my water closet and take care of cleansing. Upon entering the hall, I turn to the servants. “No interruptions for the night unless it’s life or death.” They bow the answer as I walk through the double doors of Iris’s chambers and dismiss her servants for the night.

My angel human relaxes on the bed, her flaxen hair spilling down and over her left breast. Beautiful eyes look up at me and a smile stretches across her face. I come to her, ready to make her mine again.

“My husband, have you changed your mind and decided to join your wife for the night?”

My body relaxes beside her after I remove the robe.

Iris wraps her arms around me, kissing me and touching me all over. I pet down her body, her curves are soft and supple. I lay her back down and open her thighs. Her vulva is plump and ready for me.

“Vamen,” Iris sighs.

“Let me clean you.” I kneel down and lick her folds and slit. Iris gasps and wriggles. I place my hand on her belly to keep her in place. I suck her clit and her legs kick.

“Vamen! I just had a bath, I am clean.” She whines.

“Shh, wife,” I purr. “Calm now.” I kiss her thighs and belly then rise up. I kiss Iris, pressing my cock inside her.

Iris mewls into my ear and holds onto me. I move slowly, wanting to feel every inch of her. Iris feels tight and warm. I could stay inside her forever.

“Vamen-” Iris says. “You’re so big.”

I smile and kiss her. “And you’re so soft.” I kiss her chest and neck. Iris moans more and drags her fingers down my back. I

grunt, driving myself deep inside her.

“I’m about to come,” Iris warns.

“Come then.” I growl into her ear. Iris cries out, trembling and squeezing around me. I snarl and grunt, releasing inside her.

I lay beside her, kissing her and touching her. “Was that good?” I whisper to her.

Iris nods. “It was.” She pets down my front. “I can’t believe you’re my husband.”

“And you, my wife.” I kiss her and sigh. “Such an honor.”

We fall asleep spooning, her slight body curls fitting me perfectly. Before the sun rises an urgent rap on the doors brings me out of the lovely slumber with my new wife. The servant summons me to my chamber where I’m needed. One last kiss on the cheek of my beautiful human and I rise and dress and make my way to my room.

THE NEXT WEEKS pass in a similar vein. Iris grows bolder exploring the fortress, no longer my timid mouse but one who holds her head high as she learns our ways. Some still whisper about the human interloper, but none dare voice their doubts directly, knowing she has my protection.

She takes morning meals privately in her room but joins me often for supper, listening raptly as I recount border patrols and quartermaster reports. The mundane details of rule seem to fascinate her. In turn I learn more of her life at the temple, simple though it was. An understanding builds between us, fragile as new ice over a pond.

One morning I am called to the main hall earlier than usual for an urgent meeting. All my captains stand gathered around the

great table looking grim. I demand an explanation.

Althir steps forward, face like thunder. “Forgive the disruption, my lord. But our scouts have reported back with dire news. The werewolf clans have united under a new alpha. They gather en masse, preparing to strike.”

Cold fear grips my heart. Those vile beasts outnumber us fivefold. Only our defenses have kept them at bay up till now. If they attack united...

I strike my fist on the table, rattling goblets. “How soon?”

“A few weeks, no more. They mean to take us while the passes are still clear.”

I pace, thoughts racing. Our walls are strong, but with enough numbers and savagery, they could overwhelm our gates. We must prepare. Secure food stores for a siege, gather all fighters, send out riders for aid. Perhaps my southern kin will lend warriors.

I turn back to the waiting captains. “Make ready. We have much to do before the wolves are at our door.” They all thump fists over hearts before rushing out to follow my orders. All but Althir, who lingers, brow clouded.

“My lord...perhaps we should send the human woman away? Back to her people, for her own safety.”

My first instinct is to refuse. Iris is my wife, her place at my side. Yet the thought of war, of ravening beasts breaching these very halls... My gut twists imagining gentle Iris at their mercy. Perhaps Althir speaks wisdom. But the selfish part of me recoils from losing her light in my dark world.

“Let me think on it, old friend. We have some time yet.” Althir bows in acquiescence and takes his leave.

I stand alone now in the hall, tormented by impossible choices. Iris endangers me in ways I never foresaw, slipping past my guard when I can least afford weakness. With invading enemies poised to strike, I need clarity of purpose, not tender feelings for a human girl.

But the thought of sending Iris away into the bitter winter clenches my heart like a fist. She would never survive the long journey on her own. And I cannot spare men as escort, not now. Conflicting instincts war within me as I stare sightlessly at the stone walls.

A soft footfall draws me from my brooding. Iris stands framed in the doorway, smelling of anxiety.

“Vamen? Forgive me, but I heard grim tidings...is it true invaders threaten?”

I master my face to careful neutrality. There is no hiding it now. “Yes. But fear not, you will be well protected here.”

“Of course.” She steps closer, and I see her throat work as she swallows hard. “But my place is at your side, husband. Through all that comes.”

Her determined gaze spears me. She already knows the difficult road ahead, yet declares her loyalty plainly. I read no hesitation in her eyes, only quiet courage. Perhaps more than I myself can claim.

I close the distance between us and clasp her shoulders firmly. “You honor me, wife. Whatever fate befalls, we face as one.”

Iris lays her hands over mine, her ring a point of warmth against my skin. In that moment any doubt falls away. She is meant to walk this path with me, into darkness or light unforeseen. Our fates are now woven together, unbreakable. Let come what may.

CHAPTER 6



The fortress transforms overnight into a bristling armory preparing for siege. Everywhere I look, soldiers march past carrying timber and stone to shore up walls, push loaded carts toward the barracks, or sharpen weapons ringing the training yards with the shrill kiss of grinding stone. The very air feels charged with tension, pressing down like an invisible hand.

My own misgivings fade into insignificance beside the tangible fear hanging over the Northlands. These people, now my people, face invasion by ravenous enemies who will show no mercy if they breach these strongholds. And Vamen leads the coming fight, bearing the full weight of responsibility on his shoulders alone. I cannot add my own petty worries to his burdens.

So I explore where I can, helping prepare medicines, checking armor straps, and cooking in the steamy kitchens, trying to make myself useful. The servants eye me curiously but accept my aid once they realize I pull my share. Hard work keeps my mind steady amidst the dread.

At meals in the great hall, I listen to Vamen and Althir recount troop numbers, supplies, and defense plans, committing their words to memory. If evil times come, I will need to know

every detail to help bear my new clan through. One evening after supper, Vamen requests my company on an inspection of the inner keep. I take his arm gratefully, heartened he still desires my partnership in this.

We stroll the parapets encircling the courtyard, breath fogging the night air. Soldiers on watch nod respectfully as we pass. Vamen's face appears carved from stone in the flickering torchlight, only the clench of his jaw belying the anxiety I know simmers beneath. But his voice remains steady, pointing out the well house, smithy, and granary that will sustain us in a prolonged siege.

At last we halt atop the north tower, staring out at the icy mountains fading into darkness. Vamen braces both hands on the icy merlons. "If the outer walls fall, we retreat here to the inner keep. It will not fail." His tone brooks no doubt, yet I hear the silent fear. If the wolves break through, there will be nowhere left to run, only a final desperate stand in these very stones.

Before I can think better of it, I step close beside Vamen, mimicking his posture with my hands on the chilled stone. "You underestimate the courage of your people, husband. And your own strength." I turn my head to meet his shadowed gaze. "Have faith."

Vamen searches my face in silence. Then his expression softens by the barest degree. "You have wisdom, wife, despite your youth." His fingers brush tentative over my knuckles. "Thank you."

I feel absurdly warmed by his gratitude. I know he still thinks of me as a girl playing with wisdom. But if I can help steady him even a fraction through the coming storm, it is enough for

now. My heart pounds for the dark elf, sparks of love bubbling from the depths of my soul.

Too soon we are called back inside by the deepening cold. As we walk, Vamen's strides seem less heavy. By the time we return to our chambers, some of the creases around his eyes have smoothed. I consider it a small victory.

We collapse onto the soft bed, our clothes falling away as we draw together. Vamen's deep chuckle resounds through his thick muscles, making my body come alive.

Vamen kisses my cheek and neck.

I wrap my arms around his strong neck. Lovemaking comes easily for us now, and after such a long day, it's a welcome reprieve. Vamen kisses down my chest, licking my breasts and taking one into his mouth. His strong tongue swirls around the tip and his sharp eyes flash up at me.

He kisses my breasts and ribs. I squirm and giggle while my middle melts with the heat flooding into my pelvis.

Vamen kisses down further, his long tongue lapping up the line of my belly. I bite my finger, rolling my hips to try and find him.

Smirking and rising up he meets my gaze. He kisses me, pushing me down into the pillows and opening my thighs. The grin stretches wickedly across his face. "Hold still."

"Then stop teasing!" I fuss at him.

Vamen chuckles, kissing my thighs and mound. "I just want to enjoy you." He kisses my vulva, his sharp eyes cast back up to me. I lick my lips, biting my finger again as Vamen opens me with his fingers. His tongue laps me up and Vamen moans against me.

He lifts up and places my legs over his shoulders. He kisses my rear and bites it. “Delicious.”

“Vamen!” I fuss again.

Another chuckle rumbles through his chest and nuzzles to my thighs. “So impatient.” He rises up, kissing me and placing himself inside. I gasp and Vamen grunts.

He moves slowly and deep, watching me closely and studying my expressions. His powerful arms cage around me while his tail wags happily behind him. Vamen kisses me, breathing labored and heavy.

I claw down his arms and back, mewling and sighing to him. He kisses me again as my voice begins to rise.

“Quiet wife,” he pants. “Someone will hear.”

I whimper and Vamen smirks, going harder and faster. He snarls and grunts, crying out and releasing inside. He stuffs me full and collapses on top of me.

Vamen kisses me and chuckles. “I love you.”

I touch his strong cheek and smile. “I love you.”

I wake the next morning to sunrise glowing red through the frost-limned windows. A bad omen, or so the old village women always said. Blood on the snow by day’s end. I mutter a quick prayer against evil visions. But the day passes uneventfully enough.

Come evening, Vamen is called away after supper to the barracks for a strategy session. The hour grows late with no word. I pace our chambers, waiting anxiously. My eyes stray often to the windows where the night stays black and still.

When the door finally groans open well past midnight, I fly to Vamen’s side without thinking. “Thank the heavens! You were

gone so long, I had begun to fear..." I falter, seeing his haggard expression. "Forgive me. Is something amiss?"

Vamen rubs both hands over his face. "All is well. The council dragged on, debating matters long settled."

He makes no motion to withdraw to his own room, so I guide him gently to the fireside chair. He lets me remove his cloak and boots in silence. I offer a cup of mulled cider warmed on the hearth. Vamen accepts it with a weary nod of thanks, eyes lost in the dancing flames. He looks utterly drained.

Settling on a stool by his feet, I ask, "Is there any way I might help ease your burden?" He gives a rueful shake of his head. "You do help, Iris. Your light in these halls is a balm in dark times."

His candor touches me deeply. On impulse, I lay my hand over his where it rests on the chair arm. His clawed fingers twitch in surprise but then curl lightly around mine. Neither of us pull away for a long moment. When Vamen finally sets down his emptied cup and rises, reluctance weighs my tongue.

"Will you not stay, my lord? It's late to retire separately..."

Vamen pauses, weariness warring with propriety on his face. But then he nods and allows me to lead him into the bedchamber. I turn my back to change into my shift as he removes his outer layers, then slips beneath the blankets on my designated side. Vamen joins me after a brief hesitation, the mattress dipping under his weight.

I murmur soft wishes for his rest, then let sleep pull me under. Throughout the night I gradually became aware of Vamen's warmth against my back, his knees tucked behind mine. It feels comforting rather than untoward, a shelter against gathering storms.

Dawn comes muted through heavy curtains. I peel my eyes open to find Vamen already risen, pulling on his tunic. He pauses seeing me wake.

“My thanks for your company last night. You were right, I rested better.” He looks aside, more vulnerable in the admission than I’ve ever heard from him. “I hope I did not unsettle you.”

I sit up, tugging the blankets close against the chill. “Of course not, husband. Did you sleep well?” At his confirming nod I smile softly. “Good. Let us face this day’s trials with renewed spirits.”

Vamen steps over to the bedside, expression earnest. “Your grace and wisdom are a credit to your spirit, Iris. I am most fortunate for my wife.” He squeezes my hand briefly, then takes his leave to begin the day’s duties. But his tender words linger long after.

From that night onward, we shared the marriage bed without awkwardness. In truth, I sleep better with Vamen’s steady presence beside me. The innocent intimacy fortifies me against the creeping dread stalking the halls. Hard times are coming, but we will weather the storm together.

Several days later, a rider gallops through the gates in a lathered sweat. Vamen rushes to the hall and I follow close behind. The scout delivers his report amidst heaving breaths.

“My lord...wolves mass at the border... Prepare for siege—”

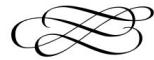
He collapses before he can utter more. But the message is plain. War has come to the Northlands at last. A hand grips my heart like a vise, but Vamen’s face shows only iron resolve. He turns to his captains.

“Make ready. Seal the gates and man the walls. Archers to your posts. Tonight we defend our lands against the howling dark.”

His voice rings with authority, kindling fierce courage even in my breast. The forces of evil may be at our door, but we shall meet them with strength and valor. Vamen’s clan will not fall easily.

As soldiers rush to obey Vamen’s commands, he seeks my eyes across the hall, brow etched with solemn promise. Nodding back, I lay a fist over my heart. I am his and he is mine. Let the wolves come.

CHAPTER 7



*V*amen

The waiting frays the nerves worse than battle. Soldiers pace the parapets, staring into the gloomy twilight hills. Any moment the wolves will crest those ridges, baying for blood.

I keep Iris close by my side in the central keep, her arm linked through mine. She stands tall and steady, but I feel her pulse racing where our limbs press together. She is terrified yet masks it valiantly. My brave lioness. I know she will never flinch from duty, even if war and death terrify her.

Dusk bleeds away, replaced by the void of full dark. Torches blaze along the walls, lending the night an infernal glow. Still we wait, breath frosting the air. Then a rumbling like thunder shakes the stones beneath our feet. Howls erupt from the black hills, unearthly and chilling. I turn to Iris one last time.

“Stay here. The inner gate will hold them.” My greatest fear is being separated from her in the chaos about to erupt. But Iris shakes her head fiercely.

“I will go to the healers’ tent and help tend the wounded.” At my protest she grabs my hand, eyes blazing. “I cannot cower uselessly! Let me serve where I may.”

Pride swells in me at her courage, despite my instincts screaming to keep her safe behind barriers of stone and steel. Reluctantly I nod, clasping her shoulder. “Your work will be valued tonight. Stay wary.”

Iris presses something into my palm—her silver comb set with pale gemstones. “For luck,” she whispers. Before I can respond, she turns and hurries away across the yard. I tighten my fist around the delicate object, praying this is not our final parting.

A deafening crash draws my eyes to the outer gates. The wolves have brought a battering ram and now splinter the thick wood like dry tinder. We have only minutes before they breach the first defenses. Drawing my blades, I stride toward the chaos, battle-thirst rising in my veins. The waiting ends—now we fight.

What happens next blurs into a nightmarish miasma of blood and steel. The wolves pour through the shattered gates, hacking and slashing at our armored ranks. We hold our wall, swords and axes ringing as they meet resistance. My own blades cut down one snarling beast after another, bodies piling at my feet. But still they keep coming, a dark tide intent to drown us all.

One mountain giant smashes through our flank, towering over the fighters. I bellow a challenge and leap onto its back, driving both blades into its burly neck. It crashes down, flattening foes underneath, before I wrench my weapons free. Looking up from the carnage, I freeze at a familiar flash of flaxen gold.

Iris helps drag a wounded soldier back from the front lines, heedless of the battle raging dangerously close. As I watch, a

wolf breaks through and lunges for her exposed back, claws slashing.

“Iris!” I am too distant to intervene. She spins at my cry, eyes wide as death descends.

A whistling arrow takes the beast through its gaping maw. Althir lowers his bow, face livid. “Get her inside, my lord! We hold them!”

No longer caring about glory or duty, I carve my way to Iris’s side and urge her back toward the central keep. She does not argue this time. The inner gate slams shut behind us, muting the sounds of slaughter. Iris sags against the wall, chest heaving. I crush her into my arms, uncaring of who might see. She clings back just as fiercely.

“Foolish girl, I warned you to stay protected! Why must you be so stubborn?”

Iris shakes her head against my chest. “I had to help save lives, not hide like a coward. But I am sorry to cause you fear.” Her hands twist in my tunic as she trembles.

I gentle my tone, stroking her hair. “You were courageous, wife. But these monsters would rend you apart. I could not bear that.” The admission escapes before I can restrain it. Iris looks up, eyes shining in the torchlight.

“Nor will I if harm befalls you. But we are both safe now.” Rising on tiptoe, she kisses my cheek lightly. “All will be well.” Her sweet faith pierces my heart. I wish I could believe so purely that we will come through this darkness unscathed by dawn’s light.

For now, the inner walls still stand. The fighting rages outside but no longer threatens to spill into these halls. I lead Iris to our chambers where we shed our bloodied garments and

collapse into bed. We do not speak, but cling close beneath the furs. If these be our final hours, I want her scent and warmth beside me.

Sometime deep in the night, the sounds of battle fade. An eerie quiet settles, broken only by groans of our own wounded now safely behind the central gates. The wolves have retreated with the sun's rise. We have survived the first onslaught.

In the morning light, I learn the cost of our victory. Dozens injured or slain, our gates and outer fortifications smashed. It will take weeks to rebuild. But the beasts suffered losses too. Perhaps enough to make them reconsider their defeat.

In the following days, we have proof of it. Scouts report the wolf army fracturing again, tribes withdrawing across the border. They gambled on one massive attack succeeding. Now their failure has shattered their tenuous pact. The Northlands are safe again.

But we are irrevocably changed. I still wear Iris's silver comb on my belt, the metal stained dark with blood. We came through the quenching fire together, bonded by shared hardship. What awaits us now in these uneasy times, none can say. But we continue on, side by side.

The last wolves are gone, we gather in the great hall for a victory feast. Iris sits proudly at my right hand, smiling tiredly but joyfully at the rowdy soldiers recounting their heroic deeds. As servants clear the remains of the meal, a minstrel strikes up a spritely tune on the lyre. Men push back benches, pulling willing maidens into lively dances. Laughter rings out, the sound of dark times banished.

I turn to Iris, heart suddenly buoyant. "Dance with me."

She blinks in surprise but accepts my hand. I sweep her into the raucous steps, spinning her deftly beneath my arm. Her skirts fly out, hair coming loose from its braid to dance like flaxen gold about her flushed face. She is grace and beauty itself, a phoenix rising from horror and loss.

As the music reaches a pounding crescendo, I lift Iris high, her face thrown back in exhilarated delight. For this one gleaming moment we are triumphant, victors over the long night. Her clear laughter chases the lingering shadows from my soul. Let them return someday, we will drive them back again, together.

CHAPTER 8



*J*ris

In the weeks following the wolf siege, life in the fortress settles into a new rhythm. Repairs dominate the days as we labor to rebuild shattered gates and reinforce walls against future assaults. I join each morning's work crews fetching tools and materials for the masons and carpenters. The physical work exhausts me each night into dreamless sleep, sparing me from reliving the battle's horrors when I close my eyes.

Vamen oversees all the reconstruction efforts while also attending to the hundreds of details required to keep his domain functioning. We see each other mostly at meals or briefly at day's end before sleep claims us. But the easy rapport established before the war continues, our trust in each other proven in crisis. The shy intimacy growing between us before is now a steadfast bond neither takes for granted.

One afternoon when slushy spring rains confine us indoors, I wander the fortress halls aimlessly, restless with pent-up energy. Few others brave the chill drafty corridors during the downpour. As I pass a certain unused guest chamber, faint sounds give me pause. Pressing my ear to the door, I make out

a muffled thump, then a metallic clink. Curiosity piqued, I soundlessly turn the handle and slip inside.

Boxes and old furnishings clutter the modest room. Heavy curtains cover the window, leaving the space dim even midday. It takes a moment to spot the source of the noises—a section of the wood-paneled wall stands ever so slightly ajar. A secret door, undetectable from outside in the shadowy interior. Now open just enough to reveal a sliver of deeper darkness beyond.

I glance behind me, chewing my lip with uncertainty. Whatever lies on the other side is likely not meant for my eyes. But the mystery prods at me. Perhaps just a peek, enough to satisfy my curiosity, then I will quickly take my leave.

Heart fluttering, I tug the hidden door open a few more inches and slip through the gap. Beyond lies inky blackness. I run my hands along the right wall blindly until I feel a torch in an iron sconce. Striking my flint until it sparks, I manage to light the pitch-soaked torch and lift it from the bracket. Firelight spills over rough-hewn walls of natural stone. A narrow stair descends into the earth below the castle's foundation.

I consider turning back. This feels wrong, sneaking around in secret passages. Yet if it were truly forbidden, why leave it unlocked for any to find? Emboldened, I begin creeping down the worn steps, bracing one hand against the chill damp walls.

The stairs end at another wooden door reinforced with iron bands. Unlocked, it groans open onto a small chamber with a dusty desk and more torches in brackets. My pulse skitters nervously. This must be some kind of hidden study. But why conceal it at all?

I light more torches until the room glows warm and bright. The desk holds sheaves of parchment covered in scrawling

script. Not common Elvish runes, but some harsher spiky language I don't recognize. Maps and diagrams fill the rest of the pages. None of it means anything to me.

I sift through the papers, increasingly certain this study hides dangerous secrets. But I can read nothing, ignorant as I am of the foreign script. About to turn and flee back up the narrow stair, voices from the hall above freeze me in place.

Heavy boot-steps tromp directly overhead. I dart my eyes around the shadowy room, panic rising. If I am found here, what punishment might I face? The desk chair stands against the far wall. Dropping my torch to the stones, I scramble beneath the desk, cramming myself into the tight space and pulling the chair in to conceal me. Not a heartbeat later, the hidden door rasps open. Two sets of footsteps enter.

I clap my hands over my mouth, scarcely daring to breathe. The intruders move around the chamber, speaking in low tones. I pick out words of the Elvish trade dialect used commonly around the fortress. Pressing my eye to a gap in the chair slats, I glimpse two elven men in dark studded leathers. No sigils or colors identify their allegiance. They could be anybody.

One rifles through the stack of parchments while the other leans against the wall cleaning his nails with a dagger. "This will be the perfect place," the first mutters. "Once the lower tunnels are finished, we can move freely to and from the valley."

The other grunts in agreement. "Slip in some of our people disguised as traders. Then we'll see how well these walls stand against infiltrators." He spits contemptuously on the floor. Revulsion twists my gut. These elves plot against their own

kinsmen, meant to let enemies inside the fortress itself. Saboteurs and traitors.

They continue discussing plans to sneak forces inside, weakening defenses. I etch each treasonous word into my memory. Vamen must be warned. But I am trapped here until they leave. Minutes drag by endlessly until finally the conspirators depart, taking the torch and reclosing the secret door. Darkness shrouds me once more.

I huddle motionless in my cramped hiding spot, praying they don't return. What felt like daring curiosity now threatens deadly peril. But I've learned secrets that could doom us all if left unexposed.

An eternity later I creep from my refuge on trembling legs. The torch remains unlit, so I feel my way up the stairs through absolute blackness. At the top I crack the hidden door and peer out. Seeing and hearing nothing, I slip into the dusty guest room once more. The empty hallway similarly shows no signs of life. I fairly run back to my own chambers, bolting the door securely behind me.

I paced the rug before the fireplace, sick dread congealing in my stomach. I don't know if those elves spotted me. And even if my presence goes undetected, I now carry knowledge of a plot that could bring down Vamen's entire clan. But how to reveal it without admitting I breached forbidden places? Vamen would surely cast me out for such defiance.

But the thought of treachery festering unchecked turns my blood to ice. I can't sit silently. There must be some way to expose the threat yet keep my own actions concealed. I sit and begin carefully drafting a vague warning, praying it will be enough to save us all. Fear of speaking it out loud where

others may hear has me scribbling it on the paper. Writing it down makes more sense.

When Vamen returns that evening, he finds me seated stiffly by the fire, my unsigned letter folded tightly in hand. His brows furrow in concern as he takes in my unease. “Mistress, is aught amiss?”

I lick my dry lips, choosing my words with care. “Vamen, I...I believe you are in grave danger. Here, within your own halls.” Standing hastily, I offer him the letter. “I cannot say more. Just please, beware.”

Vamen frowns deeply as he scans my cryptic warning. When he looks back at me, suspicion smolders in his black eyes. “What do you know of this?” He punctuates the question by shaking the letter.

I stare fixedly at the floor. “Nothing more, husband. I only wish to protect you.”

He is silent so long I fear he will demand more answers I dare not give. But then he folds the letter and tucks it in his belt with a curt nod. “I thank you for the warning, my lady. Rest now. I will make discreet inquiries.”

Relief nearly buckles my knees. He does not press for information I cannot reveal. Perhaps he assumes I simply overheard loose gossip from the household. Whatever he believes, I pray it is enough to uncover the vile conspiracy before too late.

Vamen gathers me gently into his arms, smoothing my hair. “Hush now, do not fret so. All will be well.” His tenderness nearly breaks my resolve to speak nothing more of what I witnessed. But the risk is too great. I simply cling to him,

trusting he knows best how to turn my veiled knowledge to our protection.

The next days pass tensely as we both listen intently for any stirring of unrest in the ranks. But the fortress carries on as normal, unaware of the viper in its midst. I begin to fear my warning fell on deaf ears. Perhaps the hidden study has been moved, its damning contents spirited away. Desperation wars with caution in my mind. I may have waited too long.

Over a week after I delivered the mysterious letter, Vamen requests I dine privately with him. Fear spikes my heart, wondering if he has ferreted out my deceit. But his expression remains warm and untroubled as we sit together over honeyed porridge and spiced wine. Vamen lays his hand over mine where it rests near my platter.

“I have good news, wife. The traitors you warned of have been seized and imprisoned, awaiting judgment.”

Joy lifts me from my seat into his surprised embrace. “You discovered them! Then we are safe?”

With a chuckle, Vamen returns my sudden affection. “Indeed so. Your warning sent me digging in the proper direction. You may have saved this entire clan, Iris.” He cups my cheek tenderly, all reservations forgotten for the moment. “No matter how you came upon this knowledge, I owe you all gratitude. You are truly a daughter of these halls now.”

His heartfelt praise overwhelms me with relief and pride. I protected my newfound home and kin. And perhaps in some small way finally proven worthy of the faith Vamen showed making me his bride. Not merely the foreign human forced upon him, but now valued in full as his lady and partner. The threats may not have ended tonight, but at least they will face them together.

CHAPTER 9



*V*amen

My ears still ring with Iris's cries of elation at the news. Her warning note catalyzed the chain of events that exposed a viper in our home. Though she refuses to share her sources, Iris has more than proven her devotion and courage. Each day binds us closer, erasing old doubts.

Yet unease still chews my marrow. The conspirators in our dungeons speak little, but the interrogation continues. Whatever their foul purpose, it runs deeper than a handful of rogues and malcontents. I must root out the source threatening my rule.

THESE THOUGHTS BURDEN me as I make my nightly rounds of the sentry posts. Frost glazes the stones, winter sinking its teeth once more into the Northlands. I hardly feel the cold anymore. A leader standing vigil, same as countless nights before this. But now there are warmer fires waiting in my hearth and bedchamber. Home calls me back.

Iris sits brushing her hair by the fire when I return, lost in thought. She starts from her reverie at my entrance, lips curving in her gentle smile. But the persistent crease between her brows reveals her own lingering disquiet from recent

events. I settle on my knees before her chair, taking both her small hands between my own.

“You are still troubled, my love. I see it plain on your face.”

Iris’s fingers tighten on mine. “It’s just...why would any elf plot such evils against their own? What deeper purpose drives them?” Her eyes plead for answers beyond my grasp.

I wish I could erase all fears. But I share them. “You speak wisely. There must be some guiding hand behind these puppets’ strings. I aim to cut them all.”

“But take care, husband.” Iris leans close, her floral scent enveloping me. “Evil that hides in shadows can strike from any unseen angle. Be wary.”

Such innocence, still convinced justice and light must prevail if only the hero stands stalwart. She cannot fathom the blackness creeping at the edge of the firelight. I stroke her soft cheek, wishing to shield her from life’s harsh truths a while longer. Some burdens are not meant for her shoulders.

“All will be well, Iris. With you at my side, I feel renewed purpose.” The admission comes unbidden. This young human girl has awoken feelings and vulnerabilities foreign to me before our fateful match. I find myself craving her nearness beyond the demands of fathering heirs or quelling gossip. A true partner, lighting my way.

Impulsively I gather Iris into my lap. She comes willingly, arms twining around my neck. The simple joy of holding her slender form against me is balm for my battered spirit. I breathe her in, filtering out the world’s darkness for this stolen moment.

“You give me strength,” I murmur into her flaxen hair. Her lips find my jaw, a delicate caress full of unspoken emotion.

We cling together, two souls united against gathering storms. Let them crash against these walls, we will not be shaken.

A cough at the chamber door shatters our fragile peace. I glance up to see Althir shifting his weight awkwardly, clearly discomforted intruding on such intimacy. I flatten my expression, lifting Iris gently as I stand.

“Yes? What brings you at this hour?”

Althir shoots Iris an apologetic look. “Urgent tidings, my lord. More dissidents have been seized trying to flee the valley.” His mouth twists in distaste. “They wore the king’s own royal crest.”

Ice grips my heart. The northern king who shares our borders has ever bristled at my autonomy in the mountains, regarding my hall as a vassal state rather than independent domain. But outright treason against me is a brazen escalation.

Iris’s hand flies to her mouth in dismay. I gentle my response for her sake. “I see. Thank you for informing me. We will continue this discussion on the morrow.”

Taking my dismissal, Althir departs with another bow. As soon as the door shuts, Iris turns anxious eyes up at me. “The king himself turned against you? Then you are sorely outmatched, husband.”

I crush down my own spiking fear. The northern king could bring twenty thousand swords against my one thousand if he so desired. But thoughts of open war must wait for solid proof.

“Peace, Iris. We do not know his direct involvement yet. I must handle this delicately.” I brush aside loose strands of her hair, seeing immediately my platitudes do not satisfy. Her gaze bores into me, demanding truth. I owe her that much.

“If the king has turned on me, things could become...difficult. But do not lose heart. We will weather this storm as we have all others.” I take her small chin between my thumb and knuckle, gently. “Trust in me, wife.”

Iris’s eyes shine in the firelight, but she blinks back frightened tears and nods bravely. “I do trust you. We will face whatever comes, side by side.” Rising on tiptoes, she kisses me firmly if chastely. A caress imbued with her faith and devotion. I can only strive to be the man she believes me to be, to guide us through this suddenly uncertain future.

Over the next few days I interrogate the dissidents personally, Iris insisting on attending to bolster my resolve. Her presence proves a surprising boon. While my questioning elicits only smug silence or laughable falsehoods, Iris’s deceptively gentle probing teases out several threads of truth not apparent to me. Whatever taint of deception once marked her, she aids me now with an open heart and cunning intellect. Watching her match wits with the prisoners, I feel only fierce pride in the peerless woman she becomes before my eyes.

Gradually a picture emerges. A network of agitators sent by the king himself to infect my court, weakening faith in my leadership. The plan went beyond mere infiltration and sabotage. More seek to undermine and replace me entirely with a puppet ruler who could better control my unruly mountain fief. It seems the wolves at my door come not just with teeth but garbed in friendly skins.

This campaign of silent treachery stabs deeper than any battlefield defeat. But Iris remains undaunted. “Lies and deception cannot stand before truth and courage,” she declares boldly to me one night. “We will drag this corruption into light and cut it out at the roots.”

Her resolute optimism heartens me. But privately I acknowledge the odds mount beyond our current strength. If the king has turned against me in truth, even courage may not suffice. He could march an army tomorrow and raze my fortress by year's end. I must secure allies and prepare my people for the harsh trials ahead.

Firstly, I send out riders to my neighboring lords, subtly hinting at stirrings of discontent in the north. A wise man strengthens his friendships before necessity forces his hand. I also double the guard at our borders, recommission emergency rationing plans, and fast-track soldiers' training for the younger generation. We will not face our enemy unready.

Lastly, I present Iris with a sheathed dagger, small but viciously sharp, its hilt set with our house colors. She jerks back at first touch like it's a viper.

"Husband, I cannot...I do not know how..."

"You must learn. I will have our finest trainer instruct you." I close her fingers around the leather-wrapped hilt. She blinks up at me, accepting the weapon reluctantly.

"Dangerous days are coming, Iris. I cannot always be at your side. But I will feel better knowing you can protect yourself, if needed."

Swallowing hard, she nods. If events continue their grim trajectory, Iris's courage and resolve will face even harsher tests. But her spirit is tempered steel beneath silk. However the next months unfold, we will cleave together and see our clan through the storm. Of that I am now certain.

Iris begins sword lessons the very next day.

CHAPTER 10



*J*ris

I awake well before dawn, stomach churning with anxiety. Today I begin training at arms, a skill I never imagined would become necessary in my new role as lady of these halls. But Vamen was right to insist. Dark tidings circle like carrion birds, threatening everything we hold dear. I must become steel, not just silk.

Donning loose trousers and tunic, I creep silently from our chambers not wanting to disturb Vamen's rest. He kept late hours again these past nights, brooding over maps and missives, the weight of leadership clearly wearing on him. But he refuses to share the full brunt of the burden, trying to shield me from the worst possibilities now in motion. My heart aches, wishing I could truly stand beside him as an equal through this crisis, not a helpless damsel needing protection. Perhaps these training lessons will be a first step toward that dream.

The barracks yard stands empty save for Althir awaiting me by the NAS gate as ordered. I dip my head respectfully to the grizzled weapons master. His stern expression softens a fraction at my approach.

“My lady. Ready to begin your instruction?” At my nod, he turns and unlocks the small gate leading into the narrow training circle enclosed by towering wooden walls. Well-worn weapons racks and wooden post dummies fill the hard-packed space. I trail behind Althir, nerves rising in my throat. This respected warrior now holds my education and very life in his scarred hands.

Halting at the center of the ring, Althir turns with sword and shield in hand. “First, we must assess your abilities. Take up those practice blades and come at me.”

I balk at the suggestion of attacking him, but Althir nods encouragement. Swallowing my anxiety, I select a dulled shortsword and dagger, gripping their leather-wrapped hilts in sweaty palms. They feel solid and dangerous, unlike kitchen or garden tools.

Althir beckons me forward. “Do not hold back. I must see your instincts before we can shape them into skills.”

Taking a deep breath, I charge him with a yell meant to bolster my courage. At the last second Althir sidesteps my wild slash easily, my blade whistling through empty air. I stumble past, completely off balance. He makes no attempt to counter, merely watches me catch my footing.

“Good lung capacity, but you must see your opponent’s movements better. Again.”

I reset several paces away, rolling my stiff shoulders. Eyeing Althir warily this time, I circle to his left, seeking an opening. I feint low then twist right, aiming a strike at his shoulder. But again he anticipates me, catching my sword neatly on his shield edge and shoving me back.

“Better. Be unpredictable, don’t telegraph your thoughts.”

I huff in frustration. Rushing him blindly will never succeed. This time I move carefully to his left and drive my dagger at his knee, stopping just short of contact. When he shifts to parry, I bring my shortsword around in an arc toward his right side. But even as he neatly deflects this blow too, I see his eyes crinkle in satisfaction.

“A fine attempt. You learn swiftly.”

Warm pride swells in my chest at his praise. We continue trading blows, with Althir calling out pointers and encouragement when I demonstrate any flash of skill or instinct. Under his guidance, I slowly begin working past my fears and unfamiliarity toward proper technique. My initial flailing gives way to actual footwork and guarded strikes rather than mere flailing. We spar until my tunic is soaked with sweat and my arms burn with exertion. But my spirit feels lighter than it has in weeks.

At last Althir calls a halt, setting aside his shield. “Well done today, my lady. With practice you will become quite proficient.” He squeezes my shoulder firmly as I beam under his approval. This hardened soldier offers what guidance he can, though the world he has always known now shifts on uncertain tides. Perhaps that is partly why he shows such patience with a woman who by all rights should not be gripping naked steel at all, much less learning to wield it. Rules and traditions no longer hold sway in these chaotic times.

From that day onward I rise every morning before the sun crests the hills and make my way to the barracks yard. Under Althir’s rigorous but benevolent training, I slowly gain competency with my paired short blades. The movements and forms turn from awkward shambling to instinctive extensions

of my own limbs. My wrists strengthen, my reactions quicken. I am no shieldmaiden yet, but weeks of daily practice instill a sense of quiet confidence I carry back with me into the day's domestic duties.

Vamen remarks on the changes at supper one evening. "You move differently now, Iris. Less a mouse scurrying and more a sleek wildcat stalking." His smile holds approving amusement. "I should not be surprised. You have the heart of a warrior, my lady."

I duck my head, flushed with pride at his praise. "I still have far to go. But your steel has awoken something in me, husband. When darkness closed in, I felt so helpless, weak. No longer." Spearing a slice of roast meat, I add ruefully, "Of course, I am not sure how much use two eating knives would have been against a horde of wolves."

Vamen's expression turns solemn. "Battle was never my wish for you, Iris. But the world shifts and old rules fade. We must change with it." He lays his clawed hand over mine. "I only wish to keep you safe, whatever comes."

"I know." I squeeze his hand in return. "And I would say the same of you."

His thumb traces slow circles on my wrist. "With you at my side, I feel I could challenge the gods themselves."

High words, but the sentiment behind them warms me to my core. Whatever the coming days hold, we will face them together, with brave hearts and trust in each other to see us through. Tomorrow's evils cannot diminish the light between us tonight. I have no other purpose but to stand by my husband's side and fight for our world. I can't imagine a world without him in it. His people are now my people. I may look like a frail weak human, but my resolve is very real.

Over the following weeks, patrols report increasing numbers of unknown elves lurking in the mountain passes. Skirmishes flare as they try probing our borders. Vamen doubles the marchwardens and sends out his own war bands to counter each incursion. But the frequency only increases. We both know these are no mere independent raiders. The hands guiding them have set events in motion that cannot now be easily halted.

I overhear whispered arguments between Vamen and Althir late one night as I pass by the hall on my way to our chambers. Althir urges preemptive action, but Vamen insists on continued restraint.

“We must hold them off, wait and see what larger strategy emerges.” Vamen’s tone brooks no dissent. Their voices fade from earshot before I can glean more.

Despite Vamen’s wishes to shield me from politics, I understand much rests on delicate balance. If we strike first, the king could claim justification to invade in force. Vamen walks a tightrope, trying to appear neither weak nor provocative. But those gathering our enemies are not so constrained.

My own training progresses slowly but steadily. The endless drills and sparring matches begin shaping muscle memory in my limbs, ingraining the fundamental forms into instinct. I still spend more time flat on my back than upright, but Althir grins and hauls me to my feet again each time.

“That bare patch of dirt likes the taste of you, my lady. Perhaps we should sew some padding onto your trousers.”

I stick my tongue out, knowing his teasing means approval. My skills might never rival lifelong warriors, but maybe I can at least avoid being a complete liability. Vamen was right to

insist I learn more than needlework and household sums. I swear silently to keep practicing until my hands bleed and my clothes turn to rags. Whatever conflicts loom at our borders, I refuse to be a helpless damsel shielded behind the courage of others.

Both Vamen and I walk on brittle glass as winter deepens and patrols report ever bolder incursions. We still share our marriage bed, but most nights he comes late and leaves early, face haggard from ceaseless efforts to contain the volatile tensions. I offer what encouragement I can, but my own helplessness eats at me. Womanly empathy will not win this bloodless war. I must become more than I am.

One night after Vamen has left, I rise silently from our bed. Shivering in only my shift, I creep down to the barracks yard beneath the icy stars. The training ring stands empty, shadows clinging to its corners. Wrapping my arms against the cold, I stride to the racks of practice swords. If sleep evades me, I will put the hours to use. My blistered hands close around familiar leather grips. I slide into the first forms, then the second, bare feet gliding smoothly over sand and straw. No holding back or hesitation, just the clean precision of Althir's teachings engraving themselves into my memory.

When I return to my chambers just before dawn, I feel more prepared for the day ahead, whatever it may require of me. Vamen stirs as I crawl back under the heavy furs. He lifts himself on one elbow, blinking sleepily.

“Where did you go, my lady?”

I brush back his mussed hair, kissing his forehead. “Just catching my breath. All is well.”

He accepts my murmured words and pulls me close again. I rest my cheek against his shoulder, breathing deep his familiar

scent. Together we have strength enough for what is coming. I must trust and believe that.

CHAPTER 11



*V*amen

My domain stands poised on the knife-point brink of war. Skirmishes flare daily along the borderlands, my patrols clashing with unknown raiders wearing no colors or sigils. But we all know whose hands guide them. My southern neighbor and ostensible king has shown his true ambitions at last. These calculated provocations test my reactions, seek the flashpoint to unleash open battle. And still I hold back our swords, strive for steady hands, though it tears my instincts asunder.

The pretense of legitimacy cloaks the king's actions, even as each new incursion steals further over the line of sovereignty. I cannot prove his intent. Yet each passing week frays my patience, and my domain's trust, thinner. They crave action, justice, and a leader's resolve. Each night the accusations and doubts cast in whispers behind hands flay me raw.

Only Iris remains steadfast, my anchor in this flood. But even she chafes at standing idle while unseen forces circle ever tighter, probing for weakness. I see it in the set of her shoulders when each day's dark tidings weigh heavier across our supper table, and in her haunted eyes that stare past walls and borders. Still, her faith does not waver.

“You walk the right path, husband,” she whispers against my chest each night. Her slim arms twine fiercely around me, our bed an ark floating amidst swirling chaos. I cling to her in return, to the sound of her breathing and the moment’s illusion of sanctuary. War is coming, inexorable as the tide. And I fear its first casualty will be all pretense of peace or mercy on either side. Or worse, the loss of her. She’s my heart now, and I can’t fathom it. I will kill the entire enemy army to protect the one I love the most.

The maelstrom breaks on a deceptively tranquil morning. I stand alone on the border watchtower, gazing over rolling foothills carpeted in mist. Scout reports hinted at activity further south through the night. Perhaps another meaningless sortie, or the reaction I have been holding breath for.

A lone rider crests a far ridge, angling straight for our gates. No colors or armor mark him. An emissary, then. As he draws within hailing distance, I call down for the guards to allow him to approach. He reins up beneath the tower, face inscrutable beneath a drawn hood. Wordlessly he extends a parchment, gazed fixed ahead. Then he wheels his mount and gallops back the way he came without pause.

Dread pools in my gut as I crack the blood-red seal. The contents scrawl but one stark sentence:

You are summoned to kneel before your rightful king.

The paper crumples in my white-knuckled fist. So it begins at last. Feigned courtesy cast off, the naked truth of the king’s ambition stands revealed. He would see me bend knee and neck beneath his boot, forfeit my long-held sovereignty in these lands. Perhaps I should feel some relief that subterfuge gives way to honesty, however brutal. Now we can dispense

with dancing around truth and draw swords openly, as warrior kin ought.

Still, grim acceptance does little to cool my fury as I stride the halls that same hour, bellowing for my captains. I find Iris hurrying toward me, face bloodless with worry. I cup her cheek briefly in reassurance before pressing on to the assembly hall where my forces gather, thunderclouds of outrage on their brows. I mount the dais, fists clenched to still their tremor. For long seconds I meet each captain's eye, seeing my own dread and resolve reflected back. At last I draw breath to speak the words Fate has hounded me toward with inexorable certainty.

“Men of the mountains! Long have we stood vigilant, secured our people's future with blood and sacrifice. But greed covets what honor has built. The serpent in the south would have us kneel, forsake all for which we have bled. But we will never yield!”

Fists hammer the air with wordless fury. I raise my hand for quiet, though their outrage and thirst for justice burn hot as a forge in my own heart.

“Thus I call upon you now, brothers and sisters, to defend our lands, our clan, and our children's future! We will go to war, so that we may have peace.”

A roar shakes the rafters. Already my captains turn on their heels, shouting orders. The machinery of war lurches into motion, inexorable now. What was long simmering will soon spill forth fire and blood. Valorous songs and triumphant deeds in the chronicles obscure the ugliness about devouring lives beyond counting. But regret has no place in a ruler's heart any longer. I made my choice, and unleashed the whirlwind. Now we must see our course through, come what may.

Preparations and muster consume the brief bitter weeks before snow blocks the passes. Patrols withdraw in stages from the borderlands, baiting the enemy to follow. Supply trains and messengers clatter along icy roads day and night bound for allies whose swords I now seek openly. The clangor and chaos of the garrisons swallows all else, drowning thoughts of cost or consequence. We are soldiers with a purpose. All else must wait.

Amidst the tumult, Iris remains my tether to calm. She attends each war council, listens to my raging uncertainties late each night with equal parts empathy and conviction. Her clear gaze pulls me back from the brink when fury threatens to overwhelm reason. And her soft lips give me stolen moments of innocence and trust, even as harsher instincts take root in my heart. I know the coming bloodshed will scar us both. But her light remains true, her course unwavering. Whatever black stains my hands must bear, her love will remind me there is still hope beyond.

The day before we march, Iris comes to me as I brood alone in the map chamber. Wordless, she takes my hands and guides me to the bed we have shared this past year. Our love is tender, achingly aware it may be our last untainted union. No vows or fervent promises pass our lips. We simply give ourselves to each other, bodies and hearts entwined against the bitter winds ahead.

Tonight we still belong only to us; tomorrow we march toward uncertain fates. Tomorrow, all oaths and duties hold sway except this: I will find my way back to her arms, across whatever fields of blood and fire. This I seal upon my soul as we collapse in spent silence. What awaits with the dawn, not even gods can say. But through it all, back to her arms again someday.

Too soon we wake, the world already marching on toward chaos. Messengers pound on the gates, regiments muster in the lower bailey, pikes and armor glinting in the weak sun. All so familiar, yet nothing I have known before this day. Iris dresses me in my war plate piece by piece, checking each strap and buckle. When she lifts my helmet, tears shine in her eyes, though her voice remains steady.

“Come back to me, husband.” One last kiss as gentle as the first. Then she places the helm upon my brow, and I become steel and stone. What remains of man or mercy in me must yield to sword and shield. On the killing fields, all honor and grace bow before might and fury.

From the battlements I survey the serpentine ranks coiling down the valley, a sea of spearpoints fleeing into misty oblivion. Vastly outnumbered, but terrain and defensive lines favor us. We need only hold until the teeth of winter force their withdrawal. My captains pound fists to hearts and turn to their final preparations. Teeth bare beneath my faceless helm, I descend the stairs toward my waiting destrier. The beast of war stirs within me, hungry for blood after its long slumber. I loosen its reins, and we ride unto the slaughter.

CHAPTER 12



*J*ris

I watch from the tower until Vamen's banner disappears into the distant chaos of battle. The bone-shaking din of shields clashing and men screaming their fury recedes behind the bulk of the fortress. But the acrid smoke rising over the hills keeps dread coiled tight in my chest.

In the leveling light of dusk, the ranks of house guards and citizen militia take up positions along the towering walls, grimly silent. The straggle of wounded from the initial vanguard clash are still being carried through the gates on bloody litters. I steel my churning stomach and go to offer what aid I can in the healer's tents.

The air beneath the stretched canvas hangs heavy with groans of pain and the reek of voided bowels from dying men. My hands tremble as I bind gashes, pack poultices against crusted burns, offer sips of water to those coherent enough to drink. For each man I treat, two more are carried in or ease their last breaths nearby. Death's shadow creeps steadily closer amid the rows of pallets.

I labored countless hours over needlework in these same hands. Now they stitch torn flesh and soak up the blood of the living. I mourn the gentle girl who once occupied my skin. She

could not have borne such sights or steels. But she is gone, burned away by the forge-fires of necessity.

Dawn's gray light seeps through the tent flaps, followed by the fetid smells of fever and gangrene blooming in the night's wake. I pass a fitful hour napping in a corner before rising to check the wounded again. More have died, their bodies hauled away to be burned before sickness spreads. The survivors cling stubbornly to pained consciousness, awaiting any word of the battle's tide. But no messengers have returned yet.

Around midday the ringing clashes of metal drift over the distant hills once more. I mutter a prayer under my breath. Let it be the enemy host shattering against our walls and shields. Vamen's and Althir's cunning must prevail. I refuse to consider otherwise.

I spend the day assisting a harried healer stem bleeding and ease the worst sufferings as best we can. The tents overflow with the fevered and dying. When darkness falls, we begin triaging the least likely to last the night, focusing our waning supplies and energy on those with some flickering hope. It is brutal mathematics, weighing lives like coin. But the onslaught of broken bodies does not abate.

Late into that long night, the young page Gantre comes puffing up to my side. "My lady! You're needed urgently." I follow his lead toward the towering gate, despair gnawing my marrow. Nothing beyond this wall but death awaits. Who could I possibly...

Then I see the hulking shape of Althir being lowered gingerly from a cart filled with other battered soldiers. His left leg ends at the calf, the stump stained dark with crusted blood. But his flint-gray eyes find me across the yard, bright with fervent purpose. Fear clutches my heart as I rush forth.

“My lady Iris! We held them, broke their flanks and scattered their hearts. But other tidings...” He grasps my wrist with fervent strength when I reach his side. “You must go to him. The king’s own hand has struck him down.”

Dread drops a black veil over my sight. Not Vamen. Gods above and below, do not take him now, not when we are so near to peace. I force frozen words from stiff lips. “Where?” My heart pounds endlessly, a deafening hiss fills my ears.

Althir gestures to another cart piled with shrouded bodies. “The king’s pavilion, behind the lines. Boil knows the way. Ride swift as wind, my lady. Before his light leaves this world forever.”

I squeeze Althir’s shoulder, unable to utter the thousands of sentiments crowding my heart, then sprint for the stables. Throwing a saddle on gentle Amber, I gallop into the night without a backward glance. The wise mare needs little guidance, following Boil’s mount unerringly toward the lingering smells of blood and death ahead.

We pass scattered corpses and abandoned siege towers stark against the snow, remnants of the day’s carnage. I do not slow even as we pass beyond the farthest sentry fires into eerie darkness. At last Gantre reins up beside a sprawling pavilion lit from within by guttering torches. He dare not go closer, these tents likely still sheltering enemy wounded. With a whispered word of thanks, I slide off Amber and steal forward alone.

Shadows flicker ominously inside the broad tent’s sagging folds. I slip under a back flap, blade ready in my fist. No movement or sound within. Cautious, I creep deeper past a table strewn with maps and goblets. The musky animal stench grows thicker...until my foot catches a furry obstruction. I

stifle a shriek. An enormous wolfhound lies sprawled on its side, throat slashed open in a crimson grin. Guarantor of the royal line, but useless against an assassin's knife.

Past its bulk, a curtained partition hides the main chamber. I slip through the heavy drapes, steeling my heart for what awaits. Braziers cast lurid light over a scene from a twisted nightmare. Torn tapestries and furniture lay smashed and strewn across bloody rugs. And amid the wreckage, a body pinned beneath the massive corpse of a horned auroch.

I rush to Vamen's side with a choked cry. Blood mats his deathly pale hair in the back, pooled beneath him from vicious gashes across his chest and shoulders. But miraculously, his breath still flutters shallowly past blue lips. As I kneel close, his eyes slit open, clouded with pain.

"Iris..." His ragged whisper barely stirs the air. "You came..."

"Hush. Don't try to speak." I rip cloth strips to press against the worst wounds, fighting the urge to scream and weep. But he grips my wrist with desperate strength, forcing my attention.

"You must go...now. Not safe. His creature...still lurks..."

I glance wildly about, but we are alone. "There is no one here, just ghosts. Now be still!"

He shakes his head weakly. "The shadows...see..."

His eyes fix over my shoulder in sudden alarm. I twist around, following his frightened gaze toward the dark corner behind me. Where a shape detaches itself from deeper gloom, striding forward with resolute purpose. A slender elf robed all in black, his hand dripping crimson from a freshly wicked dagger. The king's assassin come to finish the carnage.

“Run, Iris...” Vamen’s fading voice spurs me to action. I brandish my own knife, placing myself squarely between the stalking figure and Vamen’s helpless form.

“Come no further, hellspawn!” My shout echoes tremulously in the confined space. But the assassin only smiles, an expression utterly devoid of warmth or conscience. He raises both bloody hands, relishing my instinctive revulsion.

“Begorah, she’s a fiery wee spit of a thing, is she not?” His lilting accent mocks civility. “But your prince is done for, lass. Stand aside.”

I don’t waver. “Lay one finger on him and I’ll slit your throat.” I pray my quavering voice does not betray the terror icing my veins. But I will die before I yield my husband to this monster’s knife. Let it be so.

The elf tsks through his grin. “Brave, brave. But you only prolong the inevitable.” He begins to circle slowly, cat-like, forcing me to turn and keep Vamen shielded. “Let his light go peaceful, and no more need suffer this sad night.”

His words nearly shatter my resolve. Perhaps compassion would grant Vamen a swift end rather than days of suffering in my amateur care. But the thought of surrendering his fate to this wicked creature tastes like ashes. I blink fiercely against tears. Behind me I hear Vamen’s breath slowly failing. I am out of time.

When the elf lunges, I meet him with my own snarl of desperation. His knife grazes my arm but I slip past his reach. Closing the gap, I hack and slice wildly, driving him back from Vamen’s prone form. We collide against a bedpost and crash to the floor, my dagger skittering away. Snarling, the elf pins me under his greater weight, his own blade pricking at my

throat. Rage and scorn twist his once-fair face into a rictus mask.

“I would have ended him gently, dove. But now you can share in his agony.”

His weight suddenly vanishes as Vamen’s sword explodes through his chest in a spray of hot blood.

I roll free, gaping at Vamen on his knees behind the assassin, face etched with ferocious purpose. He yanks back his crimson blade as his killer topples with a gurgling wail. My husband’s massive form trembles with the effort, but his eyes find mine, full of desperate love and gratitude.

“Iris...go...” He slumps forward, clinging to consciousness by fraying threads. Sobbing, I cradle his head in my lap, heedless of the tacky blood soaking us both. His lips shape silent words I cannot decipher. I know he is right, we must flee this abattoir before the killer’s allies find us. But I cannot bring myself to leave Vamen’s side now. Not even if I could lift his dead weight alone.

Shadows flicker outside, voices and footfalls drawing inexorably closer. I cling to my fading husband, prepared to meet our entwined fate. But then amber torchlight spills over us, and strong arms lift Vamen from my lap. I stare up through frozen tears at a ring of grim mountain elves, Althir limping at their head.

“Up lass, gently now. Gantre reached us just in time.”

I can only nod brokenly, too numb to feel relief. As the warriors hurry Vamen outside, Althir wraps me in his woolen cloak against the chill. But even his kindness cannot thaw the ice in my breast. I follow our solemn procession in silence, averting my eyes from the limp form on the makeshift litter.

The king's pavilion blazes behind us, put to the torch by Althir's men. We melt into the shadows, a whispered rumor fleeing the damning truth.

Yet even as we win free of the battlefield, hope remains chained back in the ruins of that tent. I cling to the scraps of life in Vamen now through blind instinct alone. The auroch's crushing bulk should have snuffed his light instantly. That it did not feel like a miracle, but what good mere flicker against his grave wounds now? All my vague healer's arts seem useless against sunken eyes that no longer find mine.

Back behind our walls, the healers shake their heads in grim prognosis. By rights he should already have passed into the next realm. Perhaps it is only the anchor of my touch still binding his spirit close, for whenever I withdraw he slides further away. The herbs and poultices seem useless to staunch the seeping shadows within.

Thus I keep constant vigil at Vamen's bedside, reciting half-remembered prayers and smoothing back his bald head of sweat and the damp silver hair at the back. His waning heartbeat and shallow breath become my obsessed world. All else recedes, inconsequential. The war, the kingdom's fate, our people's hopes and fears. What matter, if their lord now teeters at death's door? Let me bargain with gods and demons alike if they would but grant him back to me, hale and whole. Just a little more time together, to see our tender newborn joy grow strong.

My own exhausted mind conjures such feverish dreams in the small hours between midnight and dawn. I long for blissful oblivion, but each time my eyes close, bloody images await. My husband's pale, still face won't relent until I rouse enough to feel his feeble pulse still tapping my fingertips. Then we

slip back into the half-world between one heartbeat and the next, neither dead nor properly alive.

It seems we languish in that torturous limbo for lifetimes. But finally the day comes when Vamen's eyes open clear and lucid, finding my face like a lifeline. When his cracked lips shape my name, my heart stutters and restarts, flooded by dizzying euphoria. Beneath the blankets, his calloused hand seeks out mine, squeezing gently. I bring his palm to my wet cheek, projecting by touch alone all the roiling emotions my raw voice cannot begin to express. Tears leak from his own eyes to match my own.

The worst has passed. Dawn breaks in truth through the sickroom's narrow window.

CHAPTER 13



*J*ris

I awake to weak sunlight filtering through the frosted window panes. The familiar chill of the castle seems sharper this morning, winter's bite sank deep into the ancient stones. I burrow deeper beneath the furs, reluctant to leave their warmth. But duty calls as it does each day, mistress of these halls or no.

With a resigned sigh, I peel back the coverings and slide my feet into waiting slippers. A maid must have crept in while I still slept to stir the hearth fires and lay out my clothes. I wash my face in the chilly basin, donning the simple woolen gown. Vamen insists I dress finely now, in keeping with my station. But within our chambers, comfort wins out over formality.

Speaking of my lord husband, his side of the bed lies empty, the sheets long cold. I press a palm to the indentation left by his head. Roused even earlier than I, no doubt to attend the seemingly endless matters of state required to steer our domain. In the months since nearly losing him to an assassin's blade, Vamen has poured all his legendary tireless vigor into securing lasting stability for his people.

While I admire his dedication, unease pricks at me. He pushes himself relentlessly, allowing scant time for rest or the tender

new joy blossoming between us. I know he believes it his duty to rebuild order swiftly, repay his warriors' loyalty. But still I worry for his health, and the strain I see etching new lines across his brow each passing night. The war won, he cannot surrender himself wholly as a peace offering upon the altar of governance. Rule must leave room for living.

I wrap my fur-lined cloak around my shoulders and make my way slowly down the winding stairs. No savory scents of bread and roasting meat rise from the kitchens yet—it is still early. Perhaps I can surprise Vamen with a private morning meal in his study, give him a needed respite from endless councils and petitioners.

But when I rap softly on the sturdy oak door, no answer stirs within. Further down the corridor, the guards at the council doors shrug when I inquire if the lord has been seen abroad this morning. Mystified, I aimlessly wander the main halls, exchanging greetings with bleary-eyed servants just beginning their daily work. But none know where Vamen might be closeted away. Some matter must have summoned him urgently from our bed well before dawn. But what?

I complete my circuit back to our chambers half-expecting to find Vamen returned. But only ashes fill the hearth, the room still and silent as when I left it. A touch of unease pricks at me. A year ago such unexplained absences meant grave danger encroached on our lands. But the mountain passes have remained calm these long months since war's end. What urgent task could claim my husband's focus so early on a bitter winter morn?

With no clear purpose, I find myself drifting toward the winding stairs leading up to the north tower. As children exploring the forgotten corners of the temple, my friend Lena

and I would pretend we were princesses imprisoned in a sorcerer's castle. We would take turns playing the daring hero, climbing endless imaginary stairs to some high parapet where the maiden waited for rescue from monotony.

A wistful smile touches my lips remembering Lena's dramatic antics and the extra chores our imaginings earned us. I have not thought of her in some time. Doubtless she found a match herself and now brightens some far corner of the realm with her warm spirit. I miss her keenly in my new role, so isolated from the few true confidants I once knew. But the wheel turns as it must. I can only make the most of the thread granted me, and take heart others have found their own happiness.

The winter wind cuts straight through my cloak and gown as I emerge onto the tower roof. I spot no cloaked figure standing vigilant at the crenelated ledge, as my childish fancy half-pictured. With a self-conscious shake of my head I move to turn back—but pause at a familiar bellow drifting up from the courtyard below.

I hurry to the waist-high wall and peer down, breath puffing white. There in the square I spy Vamen in earnest conversation with the stablemaster, their words lost to the wind. He gestures emphatically toward a wagon loaded with timber lengths and a huge pine trunk lashed lengthwise that overhangs the tailgate. I frown, befuddled by this mysteriously urgent load requiring such secrecy this chill dawn. But before I can hail Vamen, he strides off toward the hall's side entrance, disappearing from view beneath the barbican.

I descend the tower steps swiftly, mind churning over unanswered questions. Why has Vamen concealed some project requiring such cumbersome materials? And why the hushed urgency so early on a day of rest and reflection for our

people? For the first new moon hence begins the Twelve Days of Renewal, the yearly festival to purge grief's shadow and kindle hope's flame in every hearth. Songs and feasting mark its joyful span...but today heralds the solemn Day of Remembrance before those bright celebrations can commence.

Skirting along the colonnade overlooking the rear courtyard, I spot Vamen directing servants as they unload the pine trunk into a wagon hitched for travel beyond the walls. Perhaps he makes preparations at some village whose own Yule chandlers suffered loss during the war. My initial unease fades at this reminder of my husband's enduring care for his people, even depleted as our resources remain. Whatever urgent errand calls him, compassion must guide his course.

Satisfied with this deduction, I am prepared to leave Vamen to his work and seek my own tasks that might brighten this reflective day. But as I turn for the hall, I glimpse a basket of pine cones and bundles of bare sticks among the discarded lumber. Intrigue roots me in place. Why such humble materials, if this venture serves some grandly solemn state function?

Before my curiosity can override courtesy and send me prying into the full mystery, hurried footfalls sound on the passageway stones behind me. I spin around to see Vamen approaching, looking equal parts amused and annoyed at my discovery. I dip my head demurely, clasping my hands.

“Apologies, my husband. I did not mean to intrude on your preparations...”

But Vamen waves aside my contrition, taking my chilled hands between his own gloved palms. “No matter. I had hoped to keep your surprise intact a while longer, but I suppose you would have unraveled it eventually.” His exasperated tone

holds an undercurrent of fondness that warms me more than any brazier could.

“Surprise, husband?”

He presses a finger to my lips before I can question further. “All will be revealed tonight. For now I ask only for your patience, curious wife.” His smile crinkles the corners of his eyes as he draws me close, brushing a kiss over my brow. I melt into his sturdy frame, comforted as always by his nearness. This past year of shared confidence has seen the last walls between us crumble to dust. No secrets exist to blight our union now.

Which makes his evasiveness all the more perplexing...but I set aside my doubts and return his embrace, relishing the feel of his heart beating against mine. This fleeting moment of affection steels me for a day of sorrowful remembrance ahead.

Too soon Vamen draws back, expression solemn once more. “Now I must see to preparations. Will you join the procession to the memorial cairn?”

Sadness creeps back around my heart’s edges at the thought of the duty ahead. So many yet mourn those lost in the bloody clashes of the war now one year past. No healing comes without lancing old wounds first.

“Of course. I will gather with the other women there.” Peering up at his beloved face, I brush the back of my fingers against his chiseled cheek. “Do not carry every burden alone today, husband. Loss haunts us all.”

Vamen turns his head to press a fervent kiss against my palm. “We will remember together, as we do all things now.” With a lingering caress of my shoulder, he strides off to attend his mysterious errand. I watch until his tall form disappears

around the barracks corner, warmed by the knowledge that light still prevails against cold grief in both our hearts. A rare blessing, in such dark recent times.

The mournful procession to the Ring Hills begins at mid-morning beneath iron gray skies threatening snow. The wind keens a dirge through naked branches to accompany the solemn drums as we walk the winding path to the memorial cairn atop the tallest hill. There the bones of the fallen rest, honored by immense carved stones. Their names will be read aloud before their spirits receive the ritual farewell until next year. Just one small comfort for those left behind.

I take my place beside Althir's widow, blinking back tears as the honor guard begins the recitation. So many voices I knew and loved lie silent now forever, my world emptier for their absence. But when little Filora, Althir's precious daughter, toddles up to me, I gather her close, letting her giggle and pull my braid. Life continues on, whatever the cost. We only fail when grief stops our hearts. I fix this truth in my mind like a lit candle as we make our way back through the rustling dry leaves of the necropolis path.

The day continues muted and gray, all tasks and conversation subdued in deference to this solemn time of reflection. I yearn for the bright ceremonies tomorrow that will rekindle mirth and hope. But even after shadows comes dawn. We need only hold fast until then.

I spend the late afternoon with the other noble ladies, stitching memorial silks and baking spice bread for tomorrow's feasts. Simple tasks soothe my melancholy spirit. But Vamen remains absent from both the midday and evening meals, increasing my earlier curiosity. Whatever covert project so preoccupies him must be vital indeed to demand such unceasing industry.

When I inquire of the guards at the barracks gate, they only smile knowingly and assure me all will be revealed tonight. I huff in good-natured frustration at being so excluded. But I cannot begrudge any sincere effort that might lift our people's spirits in this grief-stricken time. Vamen guides his domain with deep love; I must only trust in his vision.

My patience meets its final test after supper concludes and still Vamen does not appear. The feasters begin dispersing to mourning vigils or home hearths, ready to lay this bleak day to rest. But all know tomorrow's dawn heralds glad tidings. I tamp down my simmering inquisitiveness and make my way toward our bedchamber to await Vamen and demand an explanation for this very irregular secretiveness.

But when I reach the corridor holding our quarters, the elf captain Tarath stands sentry outside the double doors. He thumps a fist to his chest in salute. "Good eve, mistress. I am bid to keep you company a short while longer." His tone brooks no disagreement. I peer over his shoulder at the closed doors, chewing my lip.

"Has the lord not finished his mysterious work yet? I will rest before the late hour..." It comes out more petulantly than intended. But Tarath only smiles, unbothered by my impatient foot-tapping.

"Soon, mistress. Patience but a few minutes more."

Sighing, I force genteel stillness and ask Tarath about his new baby son to pass the time. But my thoughts keep returning to the closed doors behind him. What could Vamen possibly be arranging that requires such privacy?

After an interminable wait, hurried footsteps finally echo down the empty hall. Vamen appears around the corner, looking endearingly tousled from his extended labor. He nods

thanks to Tarath, who marches smartly off to leave us alone. As soon as his rangy form turns the far corner, I round on Vamen, swatting his shoulder.

“Now will you explain this vexing mystery, husband?”

Laughing, he captures my hands and brings them both to his lips. “Peace. Your curiosity will be relieved anon.” With a playful wink, he places himself behind me and lays his hands over my eyes. I stiffen in surprise but do not resist as he guides me forward slowly. His warm breath tickles my ear.

“Just a few more steps...there. Now, look.” His hands lift away. Blinking, I find myself in the center of our modest living area. My jaw drops.

Garlands of pine boughs and glittering silver tinsel drape every door and sconce. The vaulted ceiling beams have been strung with ribbons and...candles? Dozens of fat tapers blaze merrily in polished sconces above the room’s main feature.

Before the great window stands a towering evergreen, branches laden with gold nuts, strings of beads, and tiny lit candles nestled on the boughs. Beneath its fragrant boughs lie colorfully-wrapped parcels and cunning straw ornaments. I stand stunned, overwhelmed by this spectacle from faded stories of my childhood.

“Vamen...a Yule tree?” I turn to find him watching me anxiously. At my breathless delight he sags in relief.

“The oldest carols spoke of them. I wished to surprise you.” Taking my hands, he guides me closer to the magnificent fir. I breathe deep its exhilarating scent.

“How did you ever manage this without my noticing?”

He chuckles. “I confess Tarath and Gantre made poor excuses your way while I brought things through the passage.” At my

amazed laugh he spreads his hands. “Midwinter should be full of magic. We have had so little true joy for so long. Now with the war won, I wished to kindle something special between just the two of us.”

I blink back sudden tears at his earnest words. That even amidst the enormous burdens of rule he would remember an idle fancy I once shared, a fragment of something lovely lost...it leaves me speechless. I can only pull his face down to mine in a fierce kiss. For long moments we lose ourselves in a world with only the two of us.

When we finally ease apart, Vamen keeps me folded close against his chest. “This is but a small token. In years to come I hope we might have many bright memories to share.”

My earlier melancholy seems banished entirely by his heartfelt gift. But now comes my turn. I take a small steadying breath and smile up at him. “Then let us begin this very night.”

Taking his hand, I press it gently to my still-flat belly. His eyes widen at my meaningful look. I laugh through joyful tears to see dawning wonder and elation paint his features.

“We will be a family.”

With a whoop, Vamen lifts me into his embrace and spins us both in giddy circles. I cling to him, sharing his infectious delight as the candle flames blur around us. A bright spark now burns within me, kindling hope for the future. Whatever joys or trials come, we welcome them together.

EPILOGUE - IRIS

I pause in hanging the laundry to watch my daughter, Elia, toddle unsteadily across the grass. Her pudgy hands grasp at humming insects and swaying flowers alike, examining each new discovery with equal measures of caution and delight. Despite winter's bite still clinging to the mountain mornings, life has returned to these lands. And with it, joy and light.

Smiling, I return to pinning up the wash. Nearby in the courtyard, Vamen oversees the recruits at their training, barking the occasional correction when a spear thrust goes awry. The echoes of steel and youthful shouts are sounds of renewal. Many months have passed since the war's end, enough for even the deepest wounds to begin mending.

We suffered painful losses both within these walls and without. Fathers, brothers, children. The tragedies ripple onward through generations. But finally the days of mourning give way to celebration of new life and hard-won peace.

With the treacherous king cast down and a wise council of allies shaped under Vamen's steady hand, the Northern Mountains have entered a prosperous era. Our borders are secure, our peoples united in purpose. There are still rifts of suspicion and old hatreds between races. But for now, we have forged bonds strong enough to shoulder shared burdens,

defend common interests. The rest will come slowly, through patience and compassion. My human eyes see the future clearer each morning as we rise together beneath these peaks.

Vamen appears near the kitchen gate, skin glistening from his own training. His smile flashes white against midnight-hued skin as he scoops up our squealing daughter and tosses her skyward. Her giggles echo off the stones. No castle child was ever more doted upon than our little star.

Curling his strong arms around my waist, Vamen draws me close for a lingering kiss. When we finally break apart, his catlike eyes shine with well-earned contentment.

“Will you walk with me, wife? I’ve a matter to discuss.”

Intrigued by his cryptic smile, I take his proffered arm and let him guide me toward the forest paths beyond the outbuildings. Our daughter hops between us, pausing to inspect every pebble and flowerbud along the way. The sun filters hazily through new growth leaves, warming layers shed for spring’s return. Vamen keeps me guessing with idle chatter until the trees open up to reveal a clearing brightly lit with mid-morning radiance.

Ahead sits a charming cottage built of timber and river stone. My breath catches at its rustic beauty. Vamen leads me up the path to the carved oak door.

“It still needs work, but solid enough for now. What do you think?” He suddenly looks boyish.

“You...built this for us?” I whisper in wonder.

“For you.” He brushes my cheek tenderly. “You’ve brought light back to these halls, Iris. Given me blessings I never dared dream of. Now I wish for you and our child to have a peaceful place of your own, away from the pressures of court.”

Tears prick my eyes. I fling my arms around his neck, nearly shouting with joy. "It's perfect! A haven for our family."

Our daughter squeezes between our legs, straining her little head back to take in the roof's peak. "House!" she declares happily, and we laugh.

Over the next weeks, we slowly furnish the cozy cottage and discuss plans for a small garden and perhaps eventually animals. All simple comforts I never knew I craved so profoundly. It is a gift beyond price, this little haven.

On the day we move in our meager belongings, Gantre comes to bid us a gruff temporary farewell. He embraces me like a bear.

"You'll be missed in the halls, lass. But we'll still see you often."

I smile through my tears. "Of course. Neither of us could long bear to be apart."

Vamen lifts me over the threshold as dusk's gold light washes our new walls. Inside the combination sitting and dining space, a vase of wildflowers perfumes the air. Our child immediately begins exploring every corner and cupboard, leaving small fingerprints on every surface. Her joy lifts my heart.

Later that night after she finally drifts off to sleep in her tiny bedroom, Vamen stokes the timbers in our own hearth. I slip my arms around him from behind, resting my cheek against the steady thrum of his heartbeat.

"Never could I have imagined such happiness would be mine, when last we stood within these walls awaiting war. Now each morning's light feels a renewed gift."

Vamen turns and cradles my head against his chest. "You brought me back from the very brink of death, gave me a new

purpose when all seemed lost. This peace we've built belongs to you, Iris. My guiding light.”

His tender words stir fresh tears. I look up into the face of the man fate matched me to so unexpectedly. The face of my husband, lover, soul's companion. The road that led us here held such pain and uncertainty. But given the chance, I would walk it all again for this moment in his arms.

We have so much yet to experience our family together in this place of refuge. The future now shines brightly as a flawless gem, holding light and hope within its crystalline depths. Whatever comes, we will face it arm in arm.

EPILOGUE - VAMEN

My lady wife waits below as I make one last survey of my domain from the tower heights. All appears in order, the courtyard bustling with purposeful activity, patrols riding out on schedule to maintain the watchful peace we've fought so hard to achieve. For nearly a year since the war's end, I have continued my vigilant stewardship, unwilling to relinquish control even for a day. But the time feels ripe at last to step back and pass the reins to my trusted advisors. I rule not just from duty now but also the heart's impulse, reminder that life offers gentler joys than only rigid service. Iris taught me that truth. Now together we will write the next chapter, wherever it may lead.

With a satisfied nod to myself, I make my way down the familiar winding steps. Iris stands in the bailey beside the horses loaded with our modest possessions. Her smile holds the promise of future felicity, once unimaginable to my long-armed spirit. But her love split me open, awakened softer longings beneath the iron will to protect what is mine.

Young Elia scampers excitedly around the packed luggage, tugging loose straps and buckles faster than her nursemaid can refasten them. Chuckling, I swoop her up over my head while she squeals in delight. How can I feel melancholy at

relinquishing authority's lonely vigils when laughter and light now await my homecoming each day?

I pass my squirming daughter into Iris's steady arms and mount my destrier. He prances, impatient for the road after so long confined behind guarded walls. I calm him with a pat, feeling much the same eagerness. We are neither made to stand static. The open horizon calls.

Iris handles the pony cart's driving reins deftly now. Elia perches beside her, chattering nonsense songs. But as the fortress gates recede down the winding mountain road, Iris glances back, face clouding briefly. I guide my stallion closer alongside the cart so she can hear me over creaking wheels.

"You will miss it still, for a time. This was your first true home."

Iris nods, lips quirking wryly. "It seems so long ago I first passed beneath those gates, a timid mouse clinging to your arm. How far we've come."

"Further than I dared dream. You were a compass, steering me back from dark reefs when all seemed lost." I capture her small hand, pressing a fervent kiss to her palm. "Now we chart the course together."

Iris gifts me her glowing smile, banishing the melancholy. She lightly flicks the reins, setting our little caravan moving downhill under lazy spring sunlight. "To our next adventure then, husband. The road ahead awaits."

I guide my stallion to follow Iris's lead. The way forward lies open, filled with possibilities. Our tale of monsters and maidens has passed into a peaceful new era for ourselves, our family, and our united peoples of the Northern Mountains. Not without cost or sacrifice, but emerging stronger for having

weathered the crucible together. Now we look ahead with joyful hearts, come what may. Wherever the road leads, we walk it hand in hand toward the rising sun.

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EDEN EMBER

Eden Ember found her passion in writing sci-fi romance. She spends her days either pounding on the keyboard or dreaming up the next stories. Her active imagination never lets up and the perfect outlet comes through in her books.

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