



Mecklenburg
Monsters
Holiday
Novella

ORC
THE
HALLS

A MODERN MONSTER ROMANCE

JOVE CHAMBERS

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[i.](#)

[ii.](#)

[iii.](#)

[iv.](#)

[v.](#)

[vi.](#)

[vii.](#)

[viii.](#)

[ix.](#)

ORC THE HALLS

A Modern Monster Romance
A Mecklenberg Monsters Holiday Novella

Jove Chambers

ORC THE HALLS

© copyright 2023 by Jove Chambers

<http://vjchambers.com>

Punk Rawk Books

For all the reviewers who have complained that the characters in this series are too woke. This one is for you. Happy Holidays! xoxo

i.

WHEN HILJD IVER got divorced, there was a tacit understanding between herself and her ex-husband Valdemar that they'd divide everything up. They didn't talk about this, and they didn't write it down or sign things, but it was understood.

They'd had a shared history, and to make it easier on them both, there were places that belonged to Valdemar and places that belonged to her. She got all the fun restaurants and brewpubs they used to go out to in Frederick and Hagerstown. He got the bars in Shepherdstown.

At the time, it had seemed reasonable.

After all, he was the one who deemed getting drunk the proper way to grieve the death of their infant. Not that she didn't drink, too, in the aftermath of that. But she'd been pregnant and nursing for nearly a year at that point, and she had gotten out of the habit. So, letting him have the bars seemed like the thing to do. She didn't even think she'd miss them.

Hiljd had never been one for bars. She and Valdi had gotten married young, and they'd gone out together sometimes in their twenties, but she'd never had the experience of some other women her age at the time—getting dressed up, going out dancing, having strange men buy her shots, drunkenly hanging on her equally drunken girlfriends as they evaluated the relative safety of said strange men. She'd observed it, but she hadn't needed to go through that, because she had a mating bond.

Fat lot of good that had done.

It had been three years now since she and Valdemar had gotten divorced,

and he was engaged to be married. To a nymph. Who was about as big around as a toothpick, tall and lithe and graceful, nothing like Hiljd herself, an orc woman. He'd met this nymph at one of the bars in Shepherdstown, the Mecklenberg Inn, as far as Hiljd knew.

All of these things were good reasons to say no when her friend Mariana texted her and told her she was running late for their dinner plans. *I'm at the Meck. It's still early. Come have a drink. See everyone.*

Hiljd typed it out, in fact. *No. I don't go there. Valdi goes there.*

And then she deleted it, because seriously. It had been three years at this point. Sure, he was her fated mate, and she was never going to get over him, and she was jealous as all hell of his stupid new fiancée.

But.

She didn't want to be married to him anymore either. Truthfully, the only thing they'd ever had in common was the mating bond. Everything had gone wrong with them, everything. Why would the ancestors have mated them, anyway, if it was actually impossible for them to, well, mate? If they could not have healthy children together?

Of course, Hiljd's belief in the ancestors was more symbolic than anything. She was a medical doctor, and she was a woman of science. Even so, things like mating bonds demanded a mystical explanation, even if she had read all the science on them—oxytocin and vasopressin, triggered by something in the genes, some random adaptation of natural selection that tended to work to make sure couples had a vested interest in each other and their offspring. Nothing mystical at all. Just chemicals.

But if a person had ever *experienced* a bond, she wouldn't believe that. She'd know what it was, that it was powerful, and there were some things science wasn't equipped to explain.

At any rate, she didn't want that man, no matter what the mystical, chemical connection had tried to make her want. She was in control of her own destiny.

So, she typed out, *Be there in ten minutes.*

And when she arrived, it was Lucy tending bar, an old friend from years ago. Lucy was a kelpie, which wasn't a thing you could really see about her at first glance. If you talked to her a while, you might notice the faint webbing at her fingers or the way her nails were a little hoof-like, the way her laugh sometimes sounded like horse braying. Presumably, she could shapeshift into a watery horse sprite, but Lucy definitely didn't do that in the

bar.

The last time that Hiljd and Lucy had interacted, it had been in the grocery store, where they'd somehow started gossiping about Niles Chaudhary, the naga, Valdi's best friend.

Yes, everyone around Hiljd was coupling up into relationships, and she was still here, still single, still childless.

But it was fine, actually.

One day, she'd decided to just give up on it all. Not that she wasn't open to something happening, but that she was just done with the constant disappointment. She was working on being happy with her life the way it was. She actually had a pretty good life.

"Hey," said Lucy, "you're an orc."

Hiljd laughed. "Um, last I checked."

"What do you know about Winternights gatherings?"

Hiljd tilted her head to one side. "It's the analog to Halloween for our people. Celebrated around the same time, but no costumes, just bonfires and a feast and saying goodbye to the light and welcoming the dark and all of that."

"So, it's tame, then."

"I mean, yeah."

"So, if I got invited to an orc Winternights party down by the river, by Tom, you wouldn't think, like, it'd turn into an orgy or something?"

"Tom?" said Hiljd, shaking her head, laughing. "Doesn't Tom try to turn everything into an orgy?"

Lucy considered. "Yeah, I guess he's got that poly group or whatever, but I specifically asked him if this was one of those things, and he said it wasn't, and I thought, if it was one of those ancient fertility rite things, you might know."

"No, you do fertility in the spring," said Hiljd.

"Right," said Lucy. She bit down on her bottom lip, thinking about it. "I guess I just don't want to go alone. What are you doing the Saturday before Halloween? You going to a Halloween thing?"

"No," said Hiljd, laughing. "I don't have plans. Maybe movies and a glass of wine and my couch."

"Oh, come with me!"

"I wasn't invited."

"It's not like that. Anyone can come."

"Are you sure?"

“Totally sure. You can help me navigate the whole orc thing.”

“Yeah, I’m actually confused. It’s an orc party but he asked you?”

“Right?” Lucy shrugged. “Maybe I’m the token other species so that it doesn’t seem like it’s some kind of weird speciesist thing?”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound like Tom,” said Hiljd. “No, you’re right, I’m sure anyone can come.”

“So, what do you say?” said Lucy, giving her wide, pleading eyes across the bar.

Hiljd let out a disbelieving laugh. She glanced down the bar, toward the door to the back room, where Mariana and “everyone,” whoever that might be, probably just some people she’d met while she was having an after-work drink, were waiting.

“Okay, look, you’re meeting people. Just send me a message or something. We’re friends on Facebook, right?” said Lucy.

“Yeah,” said Hiljd. “I’ll send you a message.”

TOM WAS PROBABLY in his fifties. He was an orc businessman who owned a restaurant in town and several rental properties. He was known for holding court late at night in the bars and buying shots for anyone and everyone as a means of making friends. As such, he had a lot of friends in Shepherdstown. He wore his dark hair in a crewcut on the top of his head and was usually wearing the remnants of a suit, but when he greeted them at the door, he was in a sweater and jeans.

“Hiljd!” he said, opening his arms wide.

Hugs all around.

“Can I take your jackets?” he said. “I just want to assure you, the naked part of the party is over there, and I can’t promise that later on, when everyone’s sloshed on meade, you don’t see naked people, but for now, they’ve all promised to stay in the naked area.”

Hiljd and Lucy exchanged a glance.

Lucy turned back to Tom, eyebrows raised. “You said it wasn’t that kind of party.”

“It’s not!” Tom protested. “Nakedness doesn’t have to equate to sex, you know. Nakedness is natural. If you want to make nakedness dirty, that’s up here.” He pointed to his temple.

Hiljd let out a wild laugh. How had she gotten herself roped into this?
Lucy groaned. “I am so, so sorry. If you want to go—”

“Don’t go,” said Tom. “I promise, it’s all fine. Look, here’s how it’s all laid out. This room here, with the meade and the food—it’s the clothing zone. That room through there—through the closed door—and the outdoor porch, that’s the naked zone. There’s meade and food there, too, of course. But there’s no reason to feel pressured, and if you want to go into the naked zone and keep your clothes on, you can. Anything goes, really.”

Hiljd blinked. “The naked zone is outside?”

“I have outdoor heaters,” said Tom, grinning at them both.

Lucy laughed.

Hiljd laughed.

“Don’t go,” said Tom.

Hiljd eyed Lucy. “If you want to go—”

“Let’s have, like, one glass of meade, and then reassess,” said Lucy.

Hiljd nodded. “A marvelous plan.”

They made their way into the clothed room, where there were two male orcs, one with a red beard and one with a very prominent gold bond earring, sitting on a couch and having an animated conversation about motorized scooters. The men didn’t notice when they came in, and so Hiljd and Lucy each took a mug of already-poured meade and settled on two chairs to giggle at each other about the party.

“Oh, briars and tangles,” Lucy whispered to Hiljd, “I think he asked me here to see me naked.”

“Men of his generation have no idea sometimes,” agreed Hiljd.

“He’s way too old for me,” said Lucy, rolling her eyes. “I let him buy me a shot twice and was polite to him, and he thinks I was flirting with him. Like, older guys, guys like him, they think politeness is flirting, and guys our age, you can sit in his *lap*, and he’ll be like, ‘I didn’t want a make a move in case you weren’t into it.’”

“Is it like that?” said Hiljd. “I guess I haven’t done a lot of dating lately.”

“Girl, you need to get back out there,” said Lucy.

Hiljd tensed. This would be when Lucy said something about Valdemar and his nymph toothpick and she was going to have to be gracious when all she wanted to do was let out some version of a primal scream.

She honestly wasn’t sure why it bothered her so much.

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t been dealing with this her entire life. There were

female species that graced the front of bikini magazines or got cast in movies or got recording contracts. And then there were females of *other* species. It wasn't that men didn't find orc women sexy. In her experience, they definitely did, all of them, even the pretty, skinny elf men. It was that whatever that sexiness was, it always had a tinge of deviance to it somehow.

Yes, sure, orc women get me hot, but I can't admit that to my friends without sounding like some kind of freak.

For whatever reason, rightly or wrongly, orcs were coded as masculine, and finding a female orc attractive meant men were taking some sort of hit to their own masculinity, as if she weren't feminine enough to be attractive. Too tall, too tusky, too green, too thick, too strong, too... well, anyway.

It wasn't that it didn't always bother her, because how could it not?

But usually, she was able to let it go, because it was out of her control. She could not change the entire world and she couldn't make most men decide to not be attracted to small, fragile, elfin women. It was a waste of her valuable time and resources to stay angry about it.

But the difference was that this was Valdi. Evolved, feminist Valdi, who spent half of his time ranting about the patriarchy and how it was bad for men *and* women and who could barely conform to any typical male stereotypes. Then, when he decided to act like a stupid, unevolved dick, it was in *this* way.

She hadn't realized she was so insecure about it, she supposed.

It was all stupid. She knew there weren't any women out there who didn't feel it. It was all around everyone, floating in the air—unattainable, impossible ideals of how women were supposed to look and act. Every woman she'd ever met was insecure about her appearance.

Well, for that matter, every man, too, she supposed. It was different for men, but they got the messages also about how they should look and what stupid ideals they were supposed to conform to.

And no one could.

So everyone fell short and everyone felt inadequate.

Surely, that should make it better. *I'm in good company. Even pretty fae girls who are five foot three and shaped like hourglasses look at themselves in the mirror sometimes and worry what they see isn't good enough.*

"I mean, it's been a while, hasn't it?" Lucy was saying.

Hiljd shrugged, waiting for her to say something, anything about Valdi. "Maybe."

But Lucy only cringed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it as a criticism or something.” She sighed. “Honestly, if we could all just stop wanting them, we’d be happier.”

“Them?”

“Men.” Lucy nodded sagely. “If I could change one thing about myself, I’d make myself attracted to women.”

Hiljd laughed. “Seriously?”

“Think about it. Think about what it would be like to date a woman. She’d spent time getting dolled up to come see you. She’d do her makeup and put on perfume, and she’d signal to you with every fiber of her being, ‘You matter to me. I took time for you.’”

“I mean, sure, I guess,” said Hiljd. If Valdi were here, he would launch into a diatribe on the patriarchy right now, about the expectations on women, and the way that women were treated like objects to be attained and—Fuck Valdi, though.

“And then, imagine being in a relationship with a woman. Like, you’d have conversations about everything. You’d both work to keep the house clean and there would be a fair division of labor, and she’d never just get up from the dinner table and wander off to the living room and turn on the TV, just expecting you to load the dishwasher, as if that is, like, your job.”

“Well,” said Hiljd, “to be fair, Valdemar was never like that.” Oh, fuck, she’d brought him up herself. Shit.

“Really?” Lucy raised her eyebrows. “Seriously? Because I’ve never met one who didn’t do it. They don’t even mean to, you know, and I get that. It’s subconscious on their part. It’s like, when you’re a kid, your mom waits on you, and then when you grow up as a woman, a switch goes off and you start trying to take care of things, because you just watched your mom do it, your whole life. And when you’re a man, the switch doesn’t go off. It’s not as if they don’t get responsive to it if you make them responsive, at least most halfway decent men. But... I just don’t want to have the conversation again, you know? It’s not like you have it once either. Again and again and again.”

Hiljd shrugged. “I mean, when Valdi and I were married, he was always in this weird thing of trying to make up for the fact that I made more money than him. Like, he said it was great, and that he wasn’t at all threatened by that, but...” Maybe there were a number of unevolved dickish things about her ex-husband, now that she thought about it, the crowning jewel being when he refused to have a vasectomy.

“Hey,” spoke up the red-bearded orc from the other side of the room, “I definitely want to meet a woman who makes more money than me.”

Hiljd and Lucy both turned to look at him.

He grinned. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to listen in. You guys were in very loud men-are-pigs mode, though, so?”

Lucy rounded on him. “I’ve had this conversation too many times to count. You’re here to sail in and defend your whole gender?”

The red-bearded orc shrugged. “Nah. I think everyone has a right to complain about the opposite sex. What I resent is the fact that I’m not allowed to complain about women.”

“Not allowed,” said Hiljd. “Really? Who’s stopping you? Is there some law saying you can’t say whatever sexist thing that crosses your mind?”

“No,” he said, “no law. But there’s this idea I’m saying it because I’m being sexist. If I’m being sexist, you’re being sexist, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Sure,” said Hiljd, “and if we didn’t live in a patriarchy, and if men didn’t have certain innate biological power advantages over women, maybe there wouldn’t be a difference in complaining about men versus complaining about women.” *Fuck, I just said patriarchy. Out loud. In a conversation.* What was wrong with her? Hiljd considered herself a feminist, but she was already an orc woman. With tusks. So spending a bunch of time being outspoken and demanding, it wasn’t exactly a winning strategy for her. Better to seem at least a little demure. Of course, even thinking that made her want to let out another primal scream.

“I don’t think we live in a patriarchy,” said the red-bearded orc. “I’m not saying we never did, or that there hasn’t been sexism in the past—”

“But it’s all better now?”

“Mostly, yeah,” he said. “And here’s the other thing, the thing no one ever wants to talk about, the fact that men are just considered disposable, you know? Like, who do we send to war? Who do we ask to do dangerous jobs? Who do we ask to do smelly and labor-intensive jobs?”

“Well, that’s because of the patriarchy you claim doesn’t exist,” snapped Hiljd. “And also, it’s because of the innate biological differences between men and women. Look, most men are stronger than most women. There’s an effect that testosterone has on muscle mass and *you* are always going to be stronger than *we* are. And so even if we level the playing field between men and women in every single fathomable way, there is always the fact that a man has the capacity to physically force a woman to his will and the only

thing that's standing between him and that is that I'm just supposed to trust that he won't."

The orc man's lips parted.

Hiljd took a drink of meade, cringing. What was wrong with her?

"I'm Gunnar," said the orc in a very deep voice.

She furrowed her brow. Why was he looking at her like *that*?

Lucy piped up. "I actually was reading that differences within gender groups are larger than the differences between genders? Like, there's a huge amount of overlap in physical characteristics between men and women. Weight, height, all of that sort of thing."

Hiljd turned to look at her. "Yeah, I guess that's true. I hadn't thought about that before." She blinked. "I suppose we spend more time trying to look at the differences between men and women, but we're more the same than different."

"Exactly," said Lucy, nodding. "That's what the article I was reading was saying, too."

Gunnar leaned forward and rested his elbows on his legs. "So, you know, what would you say the patriarchy is?"

Hiljd raised her eyebrows. "What kind of question is that?"

"I'm just getting the feeling we have different definitions," said Gunnar. He glanced over his shoulder at his friend. "Back me up, Erik."

Erik fingered his mating ring. "Oh, no, count me out of this conversation. Some of us are married, dude." He got up. "Actually, I should go find my wife."

"Your naked wife," said Gunnar, looking up at him. "Your wife, who you brought to a party so that she could parade around naked in front of other people."

Erik shrugged. "You been mated a long time, you get bored. You want to try things."

"Not me," said Gunnar, sitting back in his chair. "Because if I was mated to a woman, her body would be for my eyes only."

Hiljd's felt a strange flutter in her stomach. So, she said, "And yet, the patriarchy is dead," just dripping sarcasm.

Gunnar's grin widened. He was still looking at her in that *way*, and she liked it. No, she hated it. It was awful. *He* was awful. He was, well, nothing even remotely like Valdemar. "Okay, so I'll start. The patriarchy is, uh, like when men own everything and women can't have property and they're not

allowed to vote or learn to read or whatever, and it's bad. It's totally bad. But it's been over for, like, a hundred years."

She let out a breath.

Lucy nudged her. "I think I'm going to the naked room."

"What?" said Hiljd.

"I'm not going to take off my clothes, just... it seems like everyone's there," said Lucy with a shrug. "I'll stay if you want. Or you can come with me."

"You going to the naked room?" said Gunnar, still looking at her in that awful-good way of his.

"No, I mean, I think it's my job now to drag Gunnar kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century," said Hiljd.

Lucy winked at her. "Have fun."

Shit, was it that obvious that she was attracted to the sexist caveman? Hiljd squared her shoulders. She should go, shouldn't she, not stay here and engage in whatever kind of argument/flirting this was? It was probably the definition of toxic. She gave Lucy a wave. "You have fun, too." Then she turned back to Gunnar as Lucy wandered off towards the naked room. "So, anyway, the patriarchy is, um, it's hierarchy."

"Hierarchy?" Gunnar squinted.

"That means, like—"

"I know what it means. I'm not stupid," Gunnar growled. "I own my own construction business, and that actually requires a great deal of intelligence, contrary to popular belief."

"Is it popular belief that business owners are stupid?" she challenged.

"Hierarchy," he scoffed, not answering her question, which had been rhetorical, to be fair. "That would mean that everything, literally everything, is the patriarchy. The government, the justice system, the Miss America pageant."

Hiljd shrugged.

"So how would you organize things without patriarchy, since it's so bad and evil and everything else."

"Did I say patriarchy was evil?"

"Patriarchy is about *men* being in control of things, which you think is unnatural and—"

"I'm not saying it's unnatural," she said. "It's *primitive*. It's the way primitive societies were structured. We are not primitive anymore, so we can

modify those structures to eliminate elements that are bad for everyone.”

“Eliminate hierarchy?”

“Eliminate the elements of hierarchy that serve to keep the powerful powerful and the weak weak,” she said, lifting her chin. “Yeah, we denigrate people who work in construction. Why do you think that is?”

He dragged his hand over his beard. “Patriarchy?”

She shrugged.

He poked a finger into the arm of the couch where he was sitting. “But look, I’m not a bad guy.”

“Well, that’s debatable,” she said with a shrug.

He let out a disbelieving laugh. “Oh, man.” He clutched his chest. “Right here. You got me *right here*. You don’t even know me.”

“I know lots of things about you from this very brief conversation we’ve had,” she said.

“All men are not pigs,” he said. “And there’s a double standard for women and men, and it’s not about equality, not anymore. It’s about taking men down a peg—”

“It’s about eliminating the structures that keep the powerful powerful,” she countered. “You used to have a certain amount of power in society because you were a man. Actually, you still have power because you’re a man, but less. Just a little bit less. And oh, does it sting! And oh, do you complain about it! You don’t want equality. You just want your power back.”

“Power?” He threw up his hands. “What power? What the fuck are you talking about? Look, lady, everything I have, I *worked* for. I *earned*. Trust me, I don’t have any power.”

She got up from her chair and came over and sat down on the couch next to him. “Don’t call me ‘lady.’”

“You wouldn’t like the other word I was thinking about calling you.” His voice was all deep again.

“You really are a dick, aren’t you?”

“Oh, gloves are off,” he chuckled darkly, leaning across the couch so that their faces were closer. “And here it is, exactly what I’m talking about, the double standard. You can insult me, and I can’t insult you.”

She moved her face closer. Her voice was a lethal whisper. “Everything about this conversation has been an insult.”

“No, no, no.” He was looking at her lips now. “No, I never called you a name, *lady*.”

“It’s Hiljd,” she said, and she was still whispering. “My name is Hiljd.”

“Well, Hiljd, what you need to admit to yourself is that there are differences between men and women.” His gaze flicked to her eyes, and then back to her lips again. His voice had a hoarse quality to it now.

“I *said* there were differences. That was one of my main points, that because you’re stronger—”

He kissed her.

It was like being struck by lightning. She felt it zing through her, the power of their joining, and her whole body lit up. She could feel her bra against her nipples suddenly, and her pants felt tight.

He pulled away. “Bet you’re going to get real angry about me doing that.”

“Let’s go to the naked room,” she snarled.

He let out a breath. “Shit, seriously?”

She got up from the couch and stalked off. “You coming along?” She did not look back.

He caught up to her. “So, to check in, are you, uh, are you feeling this, too?”

She glanced at him sidelong.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “Noted. We’re going to play it like that.” He let out another very noisy breath.

ii.

THE NAKED ROOM was not nearly as well lit as the other room had been. Inside, all the lights had been turned down, and the furniture was swathed in fuzzy throw blankets and covered in throw pillows. There were two double glass doors, opening onto a patio. Out there, fire baskets stood along the edge of the patio, stretching off into the distance, flanking a stone walkway. The outdoor heaters that Tom had mentioned were positioned in several places, and the air felt warm, nearly summerlike.

There were more people in the naked room, but only around half of them were naked. None of them were doing anything besides standing around in clumps, holding paper plates of food or mugs of meade.

It was like a normal party, only there were bare breasts and flaccid penises all over.

Hiljd did not know what she was doing over here.

Gunnar put his arm around her.

She looked up at him, indignant.

He raised his eyebrows, daring her to ask him to remove it.

She licked her lips and said nothing.

He nodded at the table. "You need more meade?"

"Yes," she said. "Excellent idea."

He steered them over there and they exchanged their mugs for freshly filled ones, and then his arm migrated from around her shoulders to the small of her back. "Let's go this way," he said, guiding her over the stone walkway, away from everyone.

They ended up sitting on a wooden bench behind a large pine tree, out of view of the party. There was a heater there, positioned for the bench, which had blankets and throw pillows on it.

Hiljd sat down, shaking her head. “Tom totally wants this to be a sex party.”

“Yeah,” said Gunnar, sitting down. “I mean, that was the impression I got of this thing. My friend Erik, he and his wife totally strong-armed me into showing up here, saying that I should ‘meet someone.’” He drank a big gulp of meade. “I mean, even assuming I’d bang a stranger at a party because neither of us are wearing clothes, how would that be a person you’d want to settle down with, right? Imagine saying you met the mother of your children at a sex party. Like you’d want someone who’d do that to be the mother of your children.”

She drew back. “Everything out of your mouth appalls me.”

“Uh, message received, lady.” He drank more meade.

“Talk about double standards.” She gulped at her own meade. “It’d be fine for you to hook up at a sex party, but not a woman.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. It’d be fine for a woman to have done that, just not one I was going to marry.”

“I have a strong urge to throw this meade into your face,” she seethed.

“Nah, I mean, she could have done it in the past or something,” he muttered into his meade. “Just... I wouldn’t be attracted to someone in that way if she was like that with me at the beginning.”

“So, she could have sown her wild oats, and then—”

“Yeah, and then she’s ready to settle down,” he said. “So, she’d be serious or whatever.” He shrugged. “I don’t mean it to be a thing. It’s just how I feel. I can’t help what I’m attracted to.”

She rolled her eyes. “Helpless, my ass.” She drank even more meade. She bit down on her lip. “Well, here’s the thing. I *don’t* like you, but... you’re...” She let out a breathy sigh. “Do you want to hook up at this sex party?”

He laughed.

“You *kissed* me.”

“You sat down on the couch next to me and practically threw yourself at me.”

“Sitting down on a couch is a signal to kiss me?”

“You know it was,” he said.

Fuck him. Fuck him for being right about that. Fuck him for being

horrible and yet so very sexy in an awful caveman way. Fuck. Him.

Yeah, that was what she wanted to do. “I haven’t been with anyone in, like, a year,” she said. “And it was my ex-husband’s best friend, and I was very drunk—”

“You’re kind of a wild woman, huh?” His voice was husky.

“No!” She wanted to *hit* him. She didn’t. She didn’t hold with that idea that women should be able to shove or slap men or anything like that.

“I mean, can we pretend you are? Because it’s making me really hot. You’re so, um, *confident*.”

She snorted, slugging down the rest of her meade.

“I haven’t been with anyone in longer than a year,” he said. “I’m not exactly drowning in pussy here.”

“Shocker,” she said darkly.

“If we’re going to hook up, can you at least pretend to be nice to me, so that I don’t feel like a pathetic sad sack who lets a woman destroy me if she acts vaguely interested?”

She groaned. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be mean. I can’t even believe I’m thinking about doing this.” She couldn’t. It wasn’t even like her. Well, maybe she didn’t know what she was like. She’d barely had time to sort out her sexual preferences before she’d had a mating bond, which sort of took control of her body and made her, well, *mate*. She was pretty sure that she was usually reticent, however. Except, sometimes... sometimes, she felt as if maybe she did have a little bit of a wild woman in her. Sometimes, the wild woman took control, and she was just along for the ride. “I’m going to need more meade if we’re doing this. Go get me some.”

He cleared his throat. “Uh, first of all, I’m going to try not to be insulted by that. And second of all, if you need to be impaired—”

“Not impaired. This is only my second glass. I just need... liquid courage.”

“Yeah.” He considered this. He stood up. “Good point.”

“And do you have condoms?”

He winced, and then reached into his pocket and pulled out a foil wrapper. “It was a sex party. I thought...”

She snatched it from him. “Good. Go get meade.”

He swallowed. “You’re very bossy,” he said in a throaty voice.

“You love it,” she said, lifting her chin. She was not bossy, and she didn’t say things like that.

He let out a sheepish laugh. “I really do,” he breathed.

“Meade,” she said.

“Okay, okay.” He walked off, laughing.

While he was gone, something brazen rose up in her, and she took off all of her clothes. She folded them and carefully placed them next to the bench and wrapped herself up in the blanket. Then, she sat there, her heart pounding in her chest, having an internal conversation that went something like,

We’re not doing this, are we?

Looks like, yeah.

But we shouldn’t, right? There’s time to get out of it. We should get out of it.

Not getting out of it.

And then he was back. He took her in, wrapped in the blanket, and he dropped both of the mugs of meade he was carrying.

She let out a guffaw.

He bent down and picked up the mugs. They weren’t broken. He groaned. “Fuck, I am so sorry. I don’t know what I was...” He was kneeling on the ground at her feet, looking up at her, righting the mugs. His voice was scoured. “You’re naked.”

She grinned. “Catch up,” she breathed.

“Shit,” he said and stripped off his shirt.

Oh. Look at that man’s *chest*. He was twice as broad as Valdemar. Orcs tended towards muscular broadness anyway, but this guy did some kind of actual physical labor, and his arms rippled and gleamed in the light of the nearby fire basket, and he was a thing of beauty.

She dropped the blanket to reach for him.

He gasped at the sight of her breasts, pulling her into his arms. She ran her fingers over his shoulders, his biceps, letting out little appreciative moans.

And then they were kissing.

She felt tiny in his arms, literally tiny, even dainty. She sank her hands into his red hair and held onto him, sighing into his mouth as their tongues danced.

He kissed both of her tusks.

She shivered.

He kissed her jaw, her neck. “You’re... fuck, is this happening? *Look at you.*” He pulled back to take in her nude body. He gave her a little nudge.

“Sit back down,” he ordered in a gravelly voice.

She sat on the bench.

“Spread your legs,” he managed, his voice getting caught in his throat.

She obeyed. Her skin puckered into goosebumps, but she wasn't cold. She felt... worshiped and admired, and she stretched out, glorying in his hungry gaze.

He bent down and captured her lips again before settling on his knees between her thighs.

She let out a little noise.

“Wider.” He was pushing gently on her thighs. “I want to see everything. Fuck, you're gorgeous.” He cupped one of her breasts, giving it a tiny squeeze.

She shivered again.

He looked up. “Are you cold?”

She shook her head. “No, not at all. Just, um, yeah...” She gave him a shy smile.

“Okay, good. Then, I'm going to lick your pussy.”

Her smile widened.

“I really like licking pussy, and it's been a very long time,” he said, but he was looking at her between her legs now. “So, I don't care if you're one of those women who gets all weird and embarrassed. Turn it off, because I'm going to lick your pussy for as long as I feel like licking it, and I want you to tell me that you know I like it, all right? Can you do that for me?”

She nodded. “Uh, yeah, I can do that.”

“Good,” he said. He looked back up into her eyes. “You one of those women who gets all annoyed about being called a girl? Like, you going to flip out and lecture me if I tell you that you're a good girl?”

“No, definitely not,” she breathed. “I'll be a good girl if you be a good boy and lick me as long as you said you would.”

He grinned up at her. “Shit, Hiljd, shit.” And then he bent and very, very gently kissed her clit.

She let out a huff of air.

His lips were warm and large and she liked the sensation of it as he did it again and again, little gentle presses, all over her clit, just a hint of pressure and then release.

A sigh leaked out of her mouth.

His tongue decided to join the party, as if he was giving her a French kiss

down there. He rolled his tongue softly against her clit.

Sweet trembling bits of sensation traveled through her. She shut her eyes.

He hummed and began to lick long stripes up over her clit, one after the other, the same motion each time, using a perfect amount of pressure.

It felt divine. Every lick felt better than the last. Her pussy contracted and she started to let out tiny, breathy moans. He was good at this.

He pulled back. “What did I want you to say?”

Wait, what? She opened her eyes and peered down at him, and then she remembered. “Y-you like that?” she managed, her voice ravaged.

“No, *tell* me I like it.” He licked her again.

“You like that,” she said, stronger now. “You like licking me, don’t you? You want to keep licking me.”

“Fuck,” he growled, and he was licking her again.

“You want to lick me just like that and drive me *insane*,” she said, tilting back her head, gasping. Honestly, if asked, she’d say that she liked to be more submissive sexually. With her and Valdi—she’d made more money and been sort of in charge of a number of things, but in bed, she liked for him to take over. This, though, this...

He groaned, his tongue going frantic against her.

“You like being on your knees and *worshiping* my pussy,” she breathed at him.

“Fuck yes, I do,” he said between licks, wrapping his arms around her thighs, tilting her towards him, holding her open like she was a feast.

She surrendered to that. “Lick me in circles,” she decided.

“Like this?” He demonstrated. “This what you like, pretty lady?”

“Yes,” she groaned. “Do *just* what I like.”

“Whatever you say,” he agreed.

“*Just* what I like,” she managed, but the circles were taking her off into the stratosphere, and she felt herself tightening, getting ready, a string of tingles going going down her thighs, all the way to her ankles, making her toes curl. She let out a series of sharp breaths, and then a few swear words, and then she wound up and everything went impossibly tingly and good and...

She came.

She gasped out as her pussy contracted in tight little spasms as he kept licking her, and she had to tell him, “Stop, stop, too much, too good.”

He backed off. “Did you come already?”

She bit down on her lower lip, shrugging. “Yes?”

“Okay,” he said, and put his mouth back on her, just avoiding her clit, instead delving his tongue into her opening.

She gasped.

“Not done licking your pussy,” he said.

She let out a disbelieving laugh.

“I told you, I like pussy,” he said.

She threw her head back over the back of the bench, staring up at the stars. “Okay,” she breathed. That had, um, never happened before. She’d just had an orgasm without some kind of accompanying fantasy. She hadn’t thought that was possible.

She used to feel guilty about it, like it was somehow a betrayal, needing something besides her partner to tip herself over the edge, so she’d incorporated Valdemar into her fantasies, sharing them with him in a breathless voice, and he’d liked it fine, she thought, but this... this...

“You taste amazing,” Gunnar was saying.

She let out a little mewl.

“Plus, uh, plus...” Gunnar’s finger was urging itself inside her. “It’s probably better if we work you up to my cock.”

She raised her head, sarcastic again. “Oh, let me guess, your cock is frighteningly huge?”

He pulled his finger out of her and got to his feet, fumbling at his fly. In seconds, there it was, his cock, which was...

Oh.

She leaned forward, and she was now eye level with it. It was, um... “Wow,” she said. He was thick. Long too, but not really much longer than most orcs were, she didn’t think, but he was really, really thick. She didn’t think her fingers were going to reach around that thing.

She tried it, grabbing him with one hand.

He hissed.

Nope, thumb and middle finger were not touching. Nope.

“I mean, I don’t think it’s frightening,” he breathed. “But, uh, sometimes maybe it takes some, uh... relaxing to—”

“I’m an orc. You just out there fucking nymphs or something?” *Why did I say nymphs?* “I can take this, no problem, Gunnar.”

“Yeah?” He reached down to caress her jaw. “Can you?” His voice was soft, cajoling. “You want to?”

She rubbed her hand up and down the thick hardness of him.

He gasped, gazing down at her with half-lidded eyes. "I want that, too. I want you to take my thick cock in that pretty little wet pussy of yours that I've been licking."

"Mmm," she said. She leaned closer, ready to lick the tip of him.

He stopped her. "Wait. I want, uh, I want the first thing I feel to be your pussy."

"You don't want me to put me in your mouth?"

He shook his head. "Not, uh, not yet. Well, I guess this is a one-time shot, huh?" He considered. "No, no." He took her wrist. "Let go," he said softly and dropped back to his knees between her thighs.

She let out a breath.

He kissed her clit again.

She moaned.

"Still too sensitive?"

"No," she whispered.

"I want you to take my finger, okay?"

She nodded.

He looked up. "Answer me. Out loud. Take my finger, yes or no?"

"Yes," she said, and now, she was really, really, crazily turned on.

"Good girl," he said and breached her.

She arched her back, full of his thick forefinger, which was curving inside her, tickling her just behind her clit.

He licked the front of her clit, trapping it between his forefinger and his tongue.

She let out a whimper. "Fuck, Gunnar, that's good."

"Yeah, you like that?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"I want you to take another finger. Yes?"

"Yes," she moaned.

It was sliding into her, thick and warm and pleasantly invasive. He finger fucked her in a slow, languid in-and-out pattern. "Good girl. That's a good girl." He licked her clit again.

She was jelly, all of her limbs, her neck barely holding up her head. All of the sensation in her body was concentrated between her thighs, on the most sensitive parts of her...

Oh, except her breasts were kind of neglected. She reached up and began

toying with her own nipple.

“Hey,” he said, moving up her body and capturing the nipple she wasn’t touching with his tongue. “I take direction well,” he said around her hardening nipple.

She moaned. “Well, if someone hadn’t spilled the third mug of meade I needed to have the courage to *give* direction, maybe—”

He was kissing her. His fingers were still inside her pussy, slowly in and out, curved, massaging her clit from behind. He pulled back. “I’m really sorry about that.”

She let out a cry. “I’ll think about forgiving you.”

“Maybe if I fuck you good? Then I’ll be forgiven?”

“Maybe,” she agreed.

He kissed her again.

She ran her fingers over his shoulders, his broad, broad shoulders.

He moved his mouth back to her nipples. He tasted one, then the other, licking them with his tongue, suckling them hard and then going back to running his tongue roughly back and forth over them.

She moaned, her fingers going to her clit, rubbing herself as his fingers moved in her, as his mouth teased her breasts, the sensation swirling around in her.

He kissed her neck. “You keep doing that, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Touching yourself.”

“You don’t like it?”

“You want me to feel inadequate?”

“I can’t help it if you’re insecure,” she murmured.

He fixed her with a gaze, grinning at her. “You’re, uh... wow.”

I’m not even like this, she thought, but she just grinned back.

Slowly, deliberately, he pulled his fingers out of her pussy. “I think you’re ready for my cock.”

“Your *fat* cock,” she said.

“Okay, sure,” he grinned. He sat down next to her on the bench and pulled her over to straddle him.

Her pussy collided with his cock.

They both recoiled.

“The condom,” he muttered.

She bent over and got it from where she’d placed it with her folded

clothes. Then, straddling him, his hard thickness trapped between them, she ripped open the wrapper and put it against him.

Wrong way.

“Here,” he said, trying to take it from her.

“I can do it,” she said.

He snatched it out of her hand. Too hard. It tumbled out of his fingers and landed on the ground.

iii.

GUNNAR BONDE LOOKED at the condom, which was now covered in little bits of dirt, clinging to the lubrication. “Maybe if I—”

Hiljd took it out of his hands and threw it over her shoulder. “It’s fine.”

“It’s really not fine—”

“I’ve been tested since the last time I had sex,” she said. “You?”

“Well... yeah,” he said.

“Clean?”

“Yeah, but I mean, if I got you pregnant—”

“That will never happen,” she said, shrugging at him. “If both of the last two very expensive rounds of IVF didn’t take, this is not going to.”

“You have fertility issues?”

“Um, this is what you want to talk about?” She had her hand around his cock and she was positioning the head of him against her opening. “Do you want to talk at all?”

“Just... are you sure?” He was trying to tell himself that he should not fuck her, that it was a bad call without a condom, and that he could just have her give him a blow job, which she’d seemed eager for. That was clearly the way to go.

She pressed into him, taking the tip of him into her body.

“Hey,” he said. “Have I given you consent here?”

“Oh, you want to stop me? You think you couldn’t stop me if you didn’t want this?” she said. “I mean, I’m pinning you down and just *forcing* you to —”

He pierced her, shoving his cock inside her in one swift, deep stroke. Oh, yes. That felt *amazing*. She was sweet and warm and tight and *perfect*.

She cried out, and it was loud.

He covered her mouth with both his hands. “They’re going to hear you.” Then he realized he was being a jerk and started to move his hands.

She pushed them back, sucking two of his fingers into her mouth, and started to buck against him, making muffled noises around his fingers.

Okay, that was amazingly fucking hot. He left one hand there, in her mouth, and he put the other one on her hip, and then the only thing that felt really real was the pleasure of it. His cock was gripped and surrounded, and he was driving himself in and out of her, and it felt good, so good, and she was practically riding him like a prized bull, and there were her tits—look at her beautiful, bouncing tits—why didn’t he have a hand left to touch those—maybe his mouth?

He tried to suck her nipple and fuck her at the same time. It didn’t work.

He took his fingers out of her mouth and sealed his lips against hers and swallowed her cries and cupped one pretty handful of breast and urged her hips against him and fucked her. Just *fucked* her.

This felt... this felt intensely good.

He’d had no idea it felt this much better without a condom.

Ancestors save him, how was he going to go back to that thin little strip of latex again?

On the other hand, maybe the condom was a good thing, because, he was never, never going to last.

He panted. “We should... slow down or I’m going to—”

“No, come, I want you to come,” she said, throwing back her head, exposing the long column of her green neck, the elegance of her chin, her tiny, feminine tusks glinting in the moonlight. “Come *inside* me, Gunnar, please.”

He was done for.

He could no longer use his brain. He just became his tightening balls, the bright sensation that built and built and *built*.

And burst, as he did exactly that. Came inside her body, emptying his balls into her.

He gasped, sweaty, forehead against her clavicle.

She clutched him to her, worming her finger down between their bodies to find her clit. “Two... two seconds,” she panted, rubbing herself there with

two fingers, circling herself.

And, then, oh shit, he felt her come around him.

He sagged into the bench, eyes closed, lost in a kind of perfection he hadn't even known existed. This *woman*. She was...

Wow.

No, no, you hate her.

Yeah... he couldn't, like, be with her, he guessed. She was infuriating in every way. But he wished he could fuck her again, actually. He didn't know if he'd ever get sick of fucking her.

She lay down on his chest, and he put his arms around her. His cock was still tucked up inside her, nestled there, growing soft with her still gripping him. He'd never ever experienced that before. He was usually pretty freaked about getting out of a woman, getting the condom off and not letting it spill, but he'd just *come* inside her, and... and...

Her pussy contracted against him.

That was almost too much against his sensitive cock. He gasped.

She looked up at him.

He kissed her mouth, running his hand up and down her spine, thinking about how small and sweet and soft her body was, and how nice she felt on his lap, how perfectly she fit against him.

She shut her eyes and snuggled into his chest, letting out a happy, satisfied sound.

He echoed it.

And then voices were approaching, and he sat up straight, crushing her body against his, surrounding her as best he could. "Don't come back here!" he yelled.

She had gone tense against him.

His penis came dislodged from her.

She made a small noise and he made one too, and he missed the connection already.

"Who's there?" called someone on the path.

"Just... we're not... please don't come back here," he said.

Hiljd looked up at him with wide eyes, shaking her head.

"Okay, okay," said the other voice, and then, laughing, he could hear them retreat.

Hiljd hopped off of him, stepping into her jeans, snapping her bra on, not even looking at him as she hurried to get dressed.

Say something to her.

What, though?

“Uh, I’m sorry,” he said.

She looked up at him, arms in her shirt, ready to pull it over her head.

“Nothing to be sorry for.” She gave him a smile, a chipper sort of smile.

Fuck. He started getting dressed, too.

She tucked her shirt in and then tugged on it so that it was half untucked.

Had she had it like that before? It looked haphazard but he could see it was deliberate. Why did women do shit like that? What was the point? She eyed him. “Um... if everyone sees us together...” She pointed behind her. “I’ll just go.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“Did you want us to cuddle?”

His jaw worked.

She bent down and picked up the mugs that had contained the meade.

“I’ll take these.”

“Hey, we should...” He had his pants on but not his shirt, and he shoved both hands into his pockets. “Uh, you want to exchange numbers?”

She gave him a funny look. “I mean... can you see us having a civil conversation?”

He looked down at his feet, shaking his head. “I don’t do this, though. Random hookups like this? I mean, I never have. Fuck, I never had unprotected fucking sex before.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Oh.”

Now, he felt stupid. “Just go. You’re trying to go. *Go.*”

She hesitated. Then she offered him her hand. “It’s been fun, Gunnar.”

He let out a laugh and took her hand. “Yeah, okay.”

They shook.

“You take care of yourself,” she said. “Have a good life. I hope you find some girl to settle down with who would never do something like this.” She gestured around.

“Uh... you know, I didn’t mean anything about *you* when I said that,” he said.

“I know!” She extricated her hand. “Uh, okay. Goodbye.” She scampered around the big tree and off into the darkness, leaving him there alone.

He sat down on the bench and ran a hand over his face. He toyed with one of his tusks.

Well, then.

HILJD LAY IN bed, covers tightly up to her chin, feeling like maybe she'd just done something wrong.

Here were the facts.

She was going to ovulate in two days. She knew this because you can't be a person who goes through IVF and not get very good at understanding your own menstrual cycle. So, she knew her body. She knew when things were about to happen, and she didn't *mean* to keep track of these sorts of things, but she just did, in the back of her head, without even really meaning to.

She should never have agreed to have unprotected sex with that man. She should never have begged him to come inside her.

But worst of all, worst of all, she should never have deflected when he wanted to make it so that they could contact each other if need be.

She didn't know why she'd said they could just do it bareback. She had been thinking that yeah, maybe she was sorta kinda in the fertile zone when she said it, and that was dangerous.

But she wanted a *baby*.

Sure, the desperate phase of the previous spring, when she'd taken wine to Niles's house and asked him to fuck her, just for the purpose of insemination, when he'd been horrified, because it was a ridiculous fucking proposition—how did she think that was going to work, when Valdemar found out her baby daddy was his best friend, even if they weren't together?—that desperate phase was over.

She'd calmed down.

She hadn't done this on purpose, not exactly.

Just...

She hadn't stopped it like she should have.

And then, after it was done, after he had come inside her, she'd felt pretty panicked. Not at the prospect of being pregnant. No, she wanted that. But the prospect of being forced to be pregnant with that guy.

They couldn't be co-parents.

She could not have that guy in her life for eighteen years.

No. *Nononono*.

So, that was why she ran. If she had plausible deniability, that she didn't

know his last name, and she had no idea how to contact him, then it wasn't really her fault when she didn't tell him and raised his child in secret with no input from him.

That's a very fucked up thing to do, Hiljd, she told herself.

Oh, whatever, like that man wanted to have a baby with her. He would probably rather not know if she got pregnant.

Yeah, but you should give him the chance, I think.

Well, too late now. She really could not get in touch with him. She'd never seen him before in her life, and she'd never seen his friend Erik or his wife. And, oh, well! Too late!

Fuck.

She felt ill.

She rolled over on her side.

I won't be pregnant, anyway. This would be too easy.

Not that it had actually been very hard for her and Valdemar to get pregnant with all her miscarriages, though, right?

They'd never had timed sex. They'd never tried to get pregnant. But, it had just happened a whole bunch of times. And then they'd lost all the babies, and then they'd finally found out that it was Valdi's fault, that he was a carrier for Noble's disease.

And then...

Then Abigail.

She rolled over onto her back and her eyes stung.

Little Abigail, her sweet beautiful darling who'd suffered so much, who'd been in so much pain, and for a baby who was dying since the day she was born, the amount of time that she'd *not* sobbed, that she'd stared around at her surroundings and been cheery and sweet... It was a miracle, really, that they'd had any of that.

But, mostly, mostly, the poor little girl just screamed in pain.

Nothing helped.

Hiljd was so tired. Nothing *but* tired. Tired and heartbroken. Already heartbroken.

And she was so angry with Valdemar, because it was his diseased sperm that had caused this, and that was why their little girl was dying. She knew it wasn't his fault, but some part of her blamed him, and he could tell.

Every night, taking turns, up with the poor little girl who was screaming as her body fell apart, walking her, rocking her, nursing her, holding her,

sobbing...

Every few days, back to the doctor's offices, trying things, all kinds of things, anything to help her.

Valdi still not getting it, and she knew he didn't get it. Still thinking there was some miracle that would mean Abigail could survive. He had hope.

And her, nursing the child she was already grieving.

Fuck that man.

She rolled over, face in her pillow, and sobbed.

She'd had to divorce him after that. She couldn't bear *looking* at him. She *despised* him.

At the same time, she knew he couldn't help it. Of course, he wanted there to be a miracle. Of course, he wanted Abigail to live. Of course, anyone would. She hadn't let herself get swept up in it, though. She couldn't afford that hope.

Maybe because she'd been through too much.

Valdemar didn't know what it was like, the toll it had taken on her body, the miscarriages, the entire full-term pregnancy, then the delivery... and there was no time to recover, of course. She was just thrown into caring for a terminally ill infant immediately.

They didn't want to let them take her home, but she convinced them. What did it matter if Abigail was dying, anyway? Why not let them all have some sweet, somewhat normal memories? Why not give Abigail whatever goodness they could give her?

Hiljd was so conflicted, that was the thing.

She was in love with her daughter. She'd never loved anything the way she loved that tiny little baby. She was in awe that Abigail had made it thus far. She wasn't supposed to make it this far. All the doctors had said it was impossible. And then when it was becoming possible, they said she should terminate, and then when Abigail was born...

In some ways, Hiljd *did* hope, of course.

But she couldn't give herself over to the hope the way Valdemar did. She just had to protect herself, just a little bit, prepare herself in case it went badly, because they all knew the odds were that Abigail was not going to make it.

Maybe, when Abigail finally passed, it was simply impossible to go through it together. Maybe they each needed someone to blame.

Maybe that was why she asked for the divorce.

Her shoulders shook. She cried, into her pillow, until her tears turned to dreams and she fell asleep.

The next morning, she was determined to do the right thing about this entire situation.

She got in her car and drove to the Walgreens, where she marched through the place until she found the Plan B on the shelf. She picked up the box and read all about whatever it was. Well, it would delay her ovulation, delay it long enough that any sperm still inside her, belonging to Gunnar Whatever-His-Last-Name-Was, would all die. It would prevent the pregnancy, not end it, and it wouldn't...

Hiljd couldn't end a pregnancy, not personally. It just... she didn't make judgments about what other people did, but *she* couldn't. If she hadn't ended the pregnancy that had produced Abigail, she certainly wouldn't—

The point was that this was not the same thing.

She put the box back on the shelf.

Empty-handed, she left the store.

iv.

“WHAT?” SAID GUNNAR to his father. “I’m here now, aren’t I?” It was dark and cold and Gunnar was huddled into his winter coat, his scarf wrapped around his neck.

It was late December, and he was here, helping his family lighting the huge Yule log for the orc community who all lived nearby. Most of orcs in this neighborhood drove past this little wooded area with a few picnic tables and a pavilion on their way to their houses. It was a centralized location.

The Yule log, decorated with pine cones and red and green paper, would be lit now and hopefully burn all the way through Yule. Someone had to come and check the Yule log at intervals. Someone was scheduled to come by once an hour, to make sure it hadn’t somehow caught anything else on fire. Gunnar was on the schedule to come and keep an eye on it several nights from now, at 2:00 in the morning.

“Where were you?” said Gunnar’s father, folding his arms over his chest.

“He was watching the Barbie movie,” piped up Gunnar’s nephew, Tyr. He was six years old.

“Seriously?” said his father, drawing back.

“Hey,” said Gunnar, pointing at his father. “You’re going to give him ideas, Dad. He’s going to think that there’s something wrong with watching the Barbie movie, and basically, you’re enforcing the patriarchy.”

His father put a hand on his shoulder. “Stop it with that shit, son. I mean it.”

“Grandpa said shit!” said Tyr. “That’s a bad word.”

“I don’t see how pointing out that we’re all stuck in a rat race that’s designed to keep us down and them up—and by them, you know who I mean—elves and fae—and they want to keep it that way,” said Gunnar, “is a bad thing or even something you don’t agree with.”

Gunnar wasn’t *into it* into it.

Just.

Maybe there had been some Google searches. Some long reading of some Reddit posts. Some interesting videos on YouTube. And then, maybe somehow he had decided to watch the Barbie movie, which wasn’t actually bad. He didn’t even get why people thought it was so hard on men. He was pretty sure that one dude who’d been so butthurt hadn’t understood a second of the movie. Most of it had definitely sailed right over Tyr’s head, for instance. Maybe that dude was just about on par with a six-year-old.

Now, his nephew wandered off, singing, “I wanna push you around, well I will, well I will,” tunelessly.

“What is he singing?” said Gunnar’s father.

Tyr turned. “I’m telling Grandma you said a bad word.”

“Don’t,” said Gunnar’s father. “Tell anyone but Grandma, Tyr. Have a heart, kid.”

Gunnar shoved his hands into his pockets. “When are we lighting this thing?”

“Uh, I think someone’s going to say a few words about the end of the light and the coming of the darkness of winter and togetherness and blah-blah-blah,” said his father. “Patriarchy, my ass.”

Gunnar shrugged. “Well, if I stopped calling it patriarchy, would it still upset you?”

“I’m just saying that I’m not a bad guy,” said his father. “You’re not a bad guy. If women want to get all up in arms—”

“It’s a systemic problem, Dad, it’s not about people,” he said. “Anyway, I told you, yeah, when people get all whiny about it, I’m not into it. And when they blame everyone else, like men are evil, that’s dumb. But seriously, there’s some—”

Wait a minute, there she was.

“You done, then?” said his father. “Good, because I’m about sick of it.”

“Uh, I’ll be back,” said Gunnar. He went straight for her, walking with a purpose. Shit, after all this time! He’d talked to Tom about her, but Tom hadn’t been able to get in touch with her. He didn’t have a phone number for

her or anything. He'd been convinced her last name was Thalt.

That's definitely her ex-husband's last name, said Tom. And they had a mating bond, so I don't see how she wouldn't've taken his name.

Except he couldn't find her on social media with that last name. He found three other Hiljd Thalts, but none of them were her.

Mating bond? How do you have an ex if you have a mating bond?

No one knows about that. Neither of them like to talk about it.

Gunnar stepped right up to her. "Hey, long time."

She turned to him. She was wearing a big puffy purple coat, and her long brown hair was braided into two braids. She had a knitted headband around her head, over her ears. She looked, well, adorable. Her lips parted. "Fuck me, it's you."

"I've been trying to find you," he said. "I didn't know your last name, and Tom didn't know your last name, and I even tried to find that Lucy woman who was there. Tom said she worked at the Meck in Shepherdstown, so I've been there maybe five times, but she's never working, and—" He broke off. "I'm just being a creepy stalker, huh?"

"Um..." Hiljd shook her head. "Um, you were looking for me?"

"I can go away," he said. What was wrong with him, anyway? When she'd run off from him at that party, he should have gotten the hint that she really didn't ever want to see him again. He'd just sort of convinced himself that maybe she wanted to see him again, too, because he really wanted to see her again.

"You don't have to go away." She gave him a smile. "Why were you looking for me?"

"Uh..." He let out a laugh and looked off into the distance. "Well, if you have to ask that, I really *should* go away."

"Because, like, you wanted to... date or something?"

"Hey, the way you make that sound—"

"Really?" she said. "Shit."

He turned to look at her. "Okay, look, I'm sorry that I ran into you again. Let's pretend that I didn't, okay?" He offered her his hand. "We'll shake again, and that'll be the end of it."

"I feel horrible now," she said. "Fuck." She gave him a very pained look.

"Well, don't feel horrible," he said. "You don't feel the same way, which is now really obvious considering the way you left, and I—"

"I'm pregnant."

His body turned alternately hot and then cold. His tongue swelled up and stuck to the bottom of his mouth. He let out noisy breaths that whistled against his tusks.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, putting a hand to her forehead. “I felt so guilty when I ran off like that. So guilty, but I just... I didn’t think... and you’ve been *looking* for me. I’m an awful, awful person.”

He tried to speak. Nothing came out. He licked his lips. He put a hand against his chest. “Mine?” he said, his voice barely there. “You’re saying it’s...”

She nodded.

Shit.

“Like, when I told you to just come in me like that, I swear I wasn’t trying to get pregnant,” she said. “I mean, okay, I sort of was, but... I was also in the moment, and it was all so hot, and you are... I mean...” She gestured to encompass his whole self. “I mean, you obviously have great genes, right, so?”

“You said you had infertility issues.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I just said I’d done IVF.” She hugged herself. “It was my ex. He had... well, it’s a long story.”

Now, his heart decided to pound. Now, the back of his neck started to sweat. Now, his chest felt incredibly tight.

“I didn’t mean to trap you,” she said. “And you don’t... I’m totally fine to do it on my own. I wanted... that’s what I wanted. You can walk away and pretend you don’t know, and it’s fine. I’m a doctor, you know. I make great money, and I’m going to give our child a really great life, and you don’t need to worry, and—”

“No, no,” he said, cutting her off. “You don’t get to just lop me right out of this. I have rights. It’s half mine, that baby.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said, sighing heavily.

“You *want* me out of it, though,” he muttered. “You wanted a baby and you came to a party and hooked up with the first guy who showed interest in you—”

“No, I swear it wasn’t like that. I wanted you to use the condom, remember?”

His shoulders sagged. “Actually, yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“No, *I’m* sorry,” he said. “You shouldn’t have to do this alone.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Which you want to do, of course, actually.” He bowed his head.

“Gunnar!” yelled the gruff voice of his father. “Get over here. They’re about to start the ceremony.”

He held up a finger. “One minute, Dad,” he called. He turned to her. “I have to go light this Yule log. Do not run away.”

She shifted on her feet, uncomfortable.

He looked her over, gaze getting snagged on her middle, which looked normal to him. Well, it hadn’t been that long, actually, only about a month and a half. Then he tore his gaze away and struggled over to his father.

“Who was that?” said his father.

Gunnar shook his head at his father. He could not find words.

“Fine, don’t talk to me,” said his father with a shrug. “What should I expect from my son except diatribes about the patriarchy, after all?” He snorted.

The ceremony started.

Algar, who was an old orc, his white hair curling around his ears, his beard white and curly, too, spoke at long length about Yule and the ceremony and how the community would weather the winter together.

Gunnar tried to come to terms with the fact that he was going to be a father.

And he wasn’t actually displeased.

After Yenna had left him two years ago because he didn’t have any time for her while he was building his construction business, he’d just stayed busy with work. He reasoned he didn’t have time for a woman. It wasn’t as if Yenna didn’t have a point. He worked a lot.

It was only that he liked his work, and he was a little bit of a perfectionist. He needed things done and done right, and that took time and effort.

But before Yenna had been angry and naggy and needy all the time, he’d definitely considered being with her. He’d thought about asking her to marry him and having children with her. He *wanted* that.

Now, Hiljd was pregnant with his child.

Maybe...

She hates me. She very clearly hates me. She didn’t even want me to know she was pregnant.

Yeah, but maybe he could change her mind.

Eventually, he and his dad and four other orc men all came together and

lit their lighting sticks off the same flame and then all went to light the Yule log.

The gathered orcs all cheered and then someone struck up “Deck the Halls” a cappella and he went looking for Hiljd, only to have her appear at his elbow.

“We need to talk,” he said to her.

“Okay,” she said.

“You can come back to my place,” he said. Then he cringed. “Would that make you feel uncomfortable, though? Sorry, maybe a public place, like a restaurant or—”

“I’ll go back to your place,” she said.

v.

HILJD LIKED GUNNAR'S house.

It was close by, halfway between Shepherdstown and Kearneysville, down a long, tree-lined driveway. It was a remodeled farmhouse with clean lines and black accents. She couldn't make out much in the darkness, but it looked very nice in the illumination of her car's headlights.

She got out of her car and gazed at the place, at the large yard and the two stories and the pergola over the deck off one side. She touched her belly. It was a girl, and she already knew that, because after her history, she was given a test right off to determine if there were any genetic issues. The test also determined gender. If her little girl had to spend some time in this house growing up, it might not be so bad.

The front door of the house opened, and Gunner motioned for her to come inside.

She walked over and stepped into the house. No Christmas decorations. Typical man.

"I, um, what can you drink?" he said. "I thought a glass of wine, and then no. And then coffee. No. Right? No tea either. Can pregnant women drink anything?"

She laughed. "Not really, no. It's just nine months of joyless beverages."

He winced. "I'm really sorry."

"No, it's..." She smiled at him, the way she'd been smiling since she found out that she was pregnant, the smile that seemed to overtake her entire body, to lift her spirits. "It's great. I'm... thank you."

He nodded. “You wanted to be pregnant.”

“So much.”

“Well, that’s good,” he said. “I mean, overall, if a woman’s having your baby, it’s a good thing if she’s pleased about it.” He lifted a finger. “Hot chocolate? Herbal tea?”

“Either, yes, I could do either,” she said. “Herbal tea sounds good.”

“Okay, I have this Christmas sampler stuff.” He gestured with his head for her to follow him, and they went through the house—which was clean but bare, not much in the way of decoration—into the kitchen.

She stopped in the doorway, gaping at it. “This kitchen is…”

“Yeah,” he said, grinning at her as he went over to one of the cabinets.

“Sorry, this place, I just moved in, maybe a week ago? I was living in Maryland, actually, near Boonsboro, but my family lives here, and I like this area. It’s good to be five minutes away instead of twenty minutes, you know?”

“Sure,” she said, unsure of what this this had to do with the kitchen.

He kept talking. “It’s been a project I’ve been working on in my spare time, and I was supposed to be further along, but things came up, and I still have, like, the whole upstairs… Anyway, point is, my lease in Maryland was up, forced my hand, had to move in. At least I got the kitchen done, though. I like it, too.”

“Do you cook?” She gazed at the white cabinets with their black handles and the light gray granite countertops and the deep sink. There were modern, sleek appliances and a big island in the middle of the room.

“I’m not great at it.” He shrugged. “But, like, if you eat, you cook, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m not great at it either, honestly. My ex did all the cooking. I was too busy being the breadwinner.”

He laughed, coming over with a box of teas—peppermint, gingerbread, sugarplum. He handed them to her and went over to put a saucepan of water on the stove. “Yeah, I guess I should have figured that about you.”

She sorted through the tea and selected sugarplum. “What can I say? I live to threaten men and make them realize how pointless they are to, well, everything.”

He snorted, coming back to her with a mug that said, *If You Touch my Beard I will Touch your Butt*. “Put your tea bag in here?”

She dropped it in.

He went and set her mug down next to his. He selected gingerbread and

put it in his cup. “How pointless could I really be? I mean, you needed me to get knocked up, didn’t you?”

“This is going to be a long eighteen years,” she said.

He turned to look at her. “So, that’s how you want to do it? Like, uh, like we’re divorced and doing some kind of shared custody thing?”

“Is there another way?”

He fixed her with a look.

She had to admit it made her stomach turn over. All of the air whooshed out of her lungs.

“How not into me are you?” he said.

“What?” She was laughing.

“I mean, like, would you be willing to maybe entertain the idea of, uh, of...?”

“Of dating?” She was stunned. “You don’t mean that. Do you mean that?”

He put a hand on his chest. “I watched the Barbie movie.”

She let out a guffaw. “You did not.”

He nodded. “I did.”

“Because of me?”

He spread his hands.

“Tangles and briars,” she breathed.

“You swear like them,” he said, and went back to the stove. He gazed down into the saucepan.

“Oh, excuse me,” she said. “Ancestors preserve us. Better?”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. “I’m not signing up to be a villain, okay? I’m not accepting blame for anything at all, just because I happen to be male. And I’m not all about being whiny, either. But anyone who wants to keep perpetrating unfair power structures that serve to hurt innocent people... like... well, that’s not me either.” He turned back to the stove.

She wandered across the room. “Because of me?”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. You know what they say about echo chambers. We all just talk to people who agree with us all the time and we get stuck. And I’m not... I’m not a *feminist* or something now.”

“Of course not.” She chuckled softly. “What would this dating be like?”

The water was boiling. He took the saucepan off the stove and poured the water over the tea bags in the two mugs. “What kind of question is that? It would be like dating. Except, you know, we already know that we find each

other attractive and that we have great sex and you're, you know, already pregnant with my kid, which..." He looked up at her. "It's a shock, but I like it."

She raised her eyebrows. "You know, we don't really know any of those things."

"It feels like, uh, just getting something I wanted without having to do all this stupid work for it, kind of like a Christmas present—wait, what? What don't we know? You don't think I'm attractive?"

She let out a helpless laugh. She liked him, actually. He was... why did she want to *touch* him?

"Because," he said, "I know you thought the sex was great."

"Oh, you do?"

"I mean, you had two orgasms," he said. "I only had the one, so I think you came out ahead of me there. Milk in your tea? Sugar?"

"No milk," she said. "Do you have honey?"

"Nope, definitely not," he said.

She laughed again. Of course not. "Sugar's fine."

"How many teaspoons?"

"One," she said.

He fixed her with a look. "One? Seriously? What's that about? You're pregnant, and I think you need sugar for, like, a number of important bodily functions, so how about three teaspoons?"

"One," she said, imperious, but sort of melting inside. She inched closer to him. "I don't really like super sweet things."

"Huh," he said, gazing at her. "Okay, as long as you're not going to tell me sugar's not healthy. Like, you know that our bodies run on glucose? If you eat something else—fat, protein, what-have-you, your body's just got to turn it into glucose, so... yeah."

"Are you mansplaining sugar to me?" She was teasing him.

He pointed at her with a spoon. "I am explaining, and I happen to be a man, but I'm not doing it because I think you don't know things, because *trust me*, I am well aware that you are more intelligent than me. And you're, um, a doctor, right? A *doctor*, so..." He scooped out sugar, shaking his head. "What the fuck is wrong with me?" he muttered.

She reached out and put a hand on his huge, firm, round bicep.

"Nothing's wrong with you," she whispered.

He turned to look at her.

She gazed up into his eyes. “Uh, talk to me more about how, um, how you like that I’m pregnant?”

“Yeah?” His voice was husky. “You want me to talk about that?”

She nodded.

“Okay,” he said, giving her a smile that seemed gentle and admiring and hers—just for her. “But in the living room, because I don’t think you should be on your feet.”

She liked this, too, liked being fussed over, liked being close enough to him to smell him. He’d smelled good the night they’d been together, but he smelled better now. Was it because he’d, like, bred her or something? Did that even make sense?

He picked up the tea. “These need to steep. Follow me.”

The living room had one black leather sectional couch in the corner and a Christmas tree in the other. The Christmas tree was half-covered in lights but otherwise unadorned. The lights were burning, though, the only lights in the room.

“Can you hit the switch for the lights?” he said. “My hands are full.”

He pulled over a matching ottoman with a tray sitting on it and set the tea on it.

She found the light switch and bathed the room in light.

“Sorry, I haven’t…” He gestured to the bare walls. “I’m not really moved in.” He nodded at the couch. “Sit down?”

She sat down. She reached for her tea.

“It needs to steep,” he said.

“You’re very bossy,” she told him.

He snickered. “Right, do whatever you want with the tea.” He settled back on the couch and looked her over. “Tom said you were mated.”

“That’s what you want to talk about?” She snatched up the tea and held it between her breasts, and she hunched in her shoulders. “We have a spell, all right? No more back-and-forth with our emotions, nothing like that. He’s moved on, anyway. And it was my idea to get divorced. We never really meshed, truthfully.”

“Didn’t mesh with your fated, biological mate?” He obviously thought this sounded ridiculous. “That doesn’t happen. If you mate someone, you don’t get divorced. That’s—what did he do?”

“Nothing.” She tried to drink the tea. It was too hot. She set it back down on the ottoman. “I don’t want to talk about that yet.”

“I can kill him for you if you want,” said Gunnar. He considered. “Let’s downgrade to punching him, maybe? I don’t know if I’m any good to you and the baby in jail for the rest of my life. But, uh, yeah, I’ll beat him bloody if that needs to happen.”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t his fault. It just...” She sighed. There was only one way to get Gunnar to drop this conversation, she thought, and that was to tell him the truth. She didn’t want to have to say it out loud, didn’t want the rush of awful emotion that came with it, especially now, when her hormones made everything more intense.

“Could I take him in a fight?”

“Definitely,” she said, letting out a laugh. “No, he’s an English professor. He’s not even remotely good at fighting.”

“Huh,” said Gunnar. “And you guys didn’t mesh? Isn’t that the sort of guy you’d want?”

“You know, I’m not actually like this. I’m not...” She picked up the tea again. “He’s the feminist, he’s the one who works the patriarchy into every conversation. I’m the one who’s cringing and wishing he’d leave well enough alone.”

Gunnar sat up straighter. “You’re still into him.”

“No.”

“Of course you would be,” he muttered, sweeping up his own tea. He picked up the tea bag and dunked it in and out of the mug, then squeezed it out and toss it on the tray on the ottoman. “You’re mated to him.”

“It’s not like that,” she said. “We lost an infant.” There, there it was.

He went still. “Oh, shit,” he breathed. “Shit, I’m so fucking sorry, and here I am, just digging into the whole thing—”

“No, it’s okay, you didn’t know, and I—”

“Actually, my brother and his wife, they—their son, he was seventeen, it was a car accident—they split up. Right now, I spend a lot of time with their younger son, my nephew Tyr. He’s gotten kind of lost in the shuffle, and it’s one of the reasons I wanted to move back here, to be close to everyone, because everything’s just been—”

“Seventeen? Really? I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, it’s...” He nodded. “It’s been hard. But compared to an infant, to a baby—”

“Well, this was a long time ago, years ago, and this sounds recent?”

“Spring,” he said, nodding. He drank tea. “I didn’t bring it up to be like,

hey, let's compare grief or something, just... that I get it, how it breaks you apart in a relationship, losing a kid. You wouldn't think it would, but it..."

"You think it's common?"

"I actually was looking into it for my brother," said Gunnar. "It's not common, exactly, but it happens to, like, sixteen percent of couples who lose a child."

"Really?" She took a drink of tea, feeling somehow lighter, as if someone had suddenly informed her the biggest failure of her entire life was no longer a failure, but just a thing that sometimes people did—normal people did. That when an awful, heartbreaking thing happened, sometimes, the way she reacted was just a normal way to react. "Sixteen percent?"

"It's not, like, it's not a big percentage, true," said Gunnar. "I don't think it made my brother feel better. He didn't want her to leave, but she... my sister-in-law, she wanted it. She wants it over. She doesn't want to live in that house anymore, and she doesn't want—I mean, to be honest, I don't think she likes *looking* at my brother. I think he reminds her of their son."

She nodded. "Yeah, I was kind of that way. I wanted to pack up the nursery and redo it and he didn't want that. Because I wanted to get pregnant again, actually."

"Yeah." Gunnar nodded. "But he didn't want you to?"

"He... it, um, it was his... He's a carrier for this disease that only affects orcs, and it..." She drank more tea, shaking her head. "He was supposed to get a vasectomy and we were going to use his brother's sperm, and it was going to be fine. And he... just... wouldn't move on. He wouldn't do any of it."

"Seriously?" said Gunnar. "What a dick. He wouldn't get the vasectomy? Like, he knows he could knock you up again at any point and the baby would die again, and he wouldn't?"

"No."

"No wonder you left his fucking ass. What kind of...?" Gunnar slammed his tea down. "Fuck that guy."

Tears pricked her eyes.

Gunnar noticed. "Oh, hey, sorry—"

"No, you're just..." Her breath hitched. "I think you're the first person I've ever talked to about this who was unequivocally on my side about it."

"What other side *is* there?" Gunnar shook his head. "No question about it, not getting the vasectomy is a dick move."

“He’s with this nymph now.”

“Oh, shit,” said Gunnar.

She remembered saying that thing to him about nymphs, and she felt herself flush. She hid behind her tea. “Which I don’t even care about is the thing. I’m not, like, insecure about my... I’m proud to be an orc, and I would never get my tusks filed down or removed or do those weird bleaching things to make my skin a lighter green color or anything like that. I’m not—”

“Hey,” he said. “I didn’t accuse you of—”

“I’m just embarrassed, because you remember that thing I said to you—”

“I’ve never even been with a woman of a different species, though.”

“Never?”

He spread his hands. “It’s not like *that*. I’m not... you know I *would*. There’s nothing *wrong* with it, obviously. I’m not some kind of bigot, I just... Ancestors preserve me, what you probably *think* about me.” He turned his hands over and examined his palms.

“I know what you were trying to say.” She wanted to reassure him, so she found herself touching his bicep again. She rubbed him there.

He looked up at her.

She pulled her hand back. She picked her tea back up and became interested in that.

“Uh, I haven’t... I don’t have a big and varied sexual history, that’s really kind of the thing,” he said.

She shrugged. “Me either. I, um, mostly orcs for me, too, really. Only a naga this one time. But, really, I’ve only had three sexual—four, I guess, because you would be four.”

“Oh,” he said, swallowing. “Well, uh, me, too. You’re number four.”

“Oh,” she said, smiling.

“And, like, so, two girls in high school, and one was this awful hookup thing at a party, and it was really, really bad. Just embarrassing and, uh, premature. And I had a girlfriend, and then another girlfriend and then...”

“Yeah,” she said. “Boyfriend in high school. *Mated*. Then, um, after that... just one night stands, really.”

“You *are* still into him.”

“I’m not,” she said.

“But, uh, if you tried to go back to him, he could never give you children, so... so, I’m not going to be insecure about it.”

She drank her tea. Now, she was amused again. “You just keep acting

like this is all decided with us.”

“No,” he said. “No, not decided. But I’m looking for reasons why it won’t work, I guess? If there’s a glaring reason why it won’t work, better to know that up front before we both are attached and it’s all painful.”

“I mean, shouldn’t you ask if I even want to date you?”

“I did.”

She considered. “I guess you did. But I haven’t really answered.”

“So, answer. If you’re saying no, tell me that before I keep going on and on like an idiot.” He picked his tea back up.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Before I saw you again, I *would* have said no.”

He gave her a look that was so vulnerable, it made her stomach turn over again, and it also made her like him more. He drank some tea. “Okay. Something changed?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s nice. You’re…” What *was* he? She settled on, “It’s harder doing it alone than I thought it would be, maybe.”

“So, you want to use me,” he said into his teacup. “That’s okay. I can handle being useful.”

“No,” she said. “I didn’t mean it like that. If you really want to date, we should, I guess. Just to see how it goes. But the purpose of dating is not to commit to another person immediately, it’s to see if you *want* to commit to them, and so that’s what we should do.”

He nodded. “You’re right. We can’t decide it all in a night.”

“No, we can’t,” she said, setting down her tea. “We could, um, we could kiss again or something, just to see how that feels. If you want.”

He laughed. “How do you think it’s going to feel?”

“Okay, I *want* to kiss you, Gunnar Whatever-Your-Last-Name-Is. Do you want to kiss me.”

“Bonde,” he said. “And yes. And also, what’s your last name?”

She told him.

He set down his tea and came for her.

She let him draw her into his arms. Oh, this was nice. He was strong and his skin was warm and he smelled good and she felt good here. She sagged into him.

His lips were thick and warm and sweet against hers.

She grasped a fistful of his shirt and flattened herself into him.

He clutched her close.

She climbed onto him, straddling him on the couch.

He hummed his approval, cupping her backside, crushing her close, parting her lips with his tongue.

She ground against his pelvis. He had an erection. She sometimes read ridiculous romance novels about horny pregnant women, but she'd never met a woman who was actually horny while she was pregnant. She certainly hadn't been, not with Valdi, not now. Sex was the furthest thing from her mind these days. She usually masturbated once a week or so, but that had stopped since she'd gotten pregnant. All of that had turned off.

But with the feeling of that thick hard cock under Gunnar's jeans, prominent and insistent, suddenly, she woke up. It felt like it flowed through her, starting at her crotch and traveling through her torso and out her limbs. She gasped into his mouth.

She reached between them and stroked him through his jeans.

He let out a whimper, breaking the contact between their lips. "This is, um, some kiss, Hiljd."

"You want to fuck me?" she whispered.

"Obviously, but... I mean... should we...?"

"Please fuck me," she said, her voice going to a higher, pleading tone.

He groaned. "Whatever you want." He stood up, both of his hands going under her ass, holding her against him. He just picked her up as she was clinging to him, like it was nothing.

She touched his face. "You're very strong."

"Am I?" He was giving her a look of adoration. "Can I take you to my bed?"

"Please do," she said.

He did. His bedroom was just as bare as the rest of the place. His bedspread was white. His headboard was black. He liked black and white, didn't he?

He tossed her on the bed and started stripping off his clothes.

She writhed there. "Do you, like, have decorations, or did you just create this blank slate of an amazing house for a woman to nest in as, you know, pregnant-woman catnip?"

He tossed his shirt. "What?"

"Your chest," she groaned, reaching for him. "Come here." He was more muscular than she remembered. His arms were enormous. The breadth of his chest, the way his pecks moved...

He climbed onto the bed. "You like my house?"

She ran her fingers over his pecks. Down over his abdominal muscles. “I like a lot of things about you, Gunnar,” she said in a throaty voice.

“Can I see *your* chest?” he said, grinning.

She half sat up and tugged off her shirt, and then reached back to unsnap her bra.

“Whoa,” he breathed. “You... you’re... they’re huge.”

She looked down at her breasts. “Are they?”

He put his mouth on one of her nipples.

“Just be gentle,” she whined. “Because they’re sore.”

“*Oh.*” He lifted his head. “They’re huge and sore because you’re pregnant.”

“Well, duh.”

“I just, like, ejaculated in you and it made your boobs different,” he said in a low voice. “That’s very fucking cool.”

She rolled her eyes. “You *are* a caveman.”

He snickered. “Maybe. You like that, though, right?” He kissed her nipple gently. “You like caveman Gunnar.” He kissed her other nipple. “There aren’t enough cavemen in your life.”

She giggled, sinking her hands into his hair, holding him there as he began to nip and lick and suckle her into a new sensation of phenomenal pleasure.

“I mean, coming inside you made a lot of things different.” There was no bottom to his voice. His mouth went lower and he kissed her above her belly button.

She shivered.

He settled down on his knees and put both of his hands on her stomach.

She shut her eyes, sighing. That was nice. This was what had been missing, what she’d been craving. It hadn’t been like this, not quite like this, since the first time she was pregnant, before all the miscarriages, when Valdemar had been pleased and excited and she hadn’t really believed anything could go wrong.

Gunnar dragged his fingers over the swell of her belly, sighing, too. “You’re pregnant,” he murmured.

She hummed, snuggling into the bed. “This is not how I would have predicted you would have reacted.”

“Me either,” he said. “Maybe if you’d told me over the phone or something, or via a text, I could have had this intellectual reaction or

something. But you're just *here*, and small and pretty and I'm touching you..." He kissed her belly again. "Stay with me tonight. In my bed. In my arms. I want to hold onto you."

She opened her eyes. "Yes," she whispered. "I want that, too."

His hands slid up to cup both of her breasts again. "Good." He teased her nipples stiff.

She shut her eyes again, letting out a moan.

"Can I, um, can I lick your pussy again?"

"Definitely," she breathed.

"Also good," he said, sounding very pleased. He went to work on the button of her jeans. He pulled her pants and her underwear off together, while she giggled and only helped by wriggling her legs.

Then, there was his tongue again.

He groaned.

She groaned.

"Oh, fuck, I forgot how good you taste, and you're so freaking wet already." He planted kisses all over her mound and her clit. "Take my finger while I lick you?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Two fingers."

"That's my girl," he said, breaching her immediately.

She cried out.

His tongue was gentling itself against her clit as his thick fingers made space for themselves inside her.

She clenched on his fingers.

He liked that, whispering praise into her clit as he kissed and licked it.

"Fuck, I like licking your pussy."

"Yes, you do," she agreed, remembering he wanted her to say this before.

"You really like licking me, don't you?"

He grunted. "Yes."

"You'd like it if I just made you lick me until I come and then do it again and if I don't even let you fuck this pussy," she said, eyes closed, snuggled into his white bedspread, jammed full of two of his huge fingers which were curved and teasing her *just* how she liked it.

"You think I'd like that?" he gasped, and she could hear just how turned on he was.

"You'd love it. You said you like being useful, right? You want me to just *use* you, don't you?"

His tongue went erratic on her clit. “Yeah,” he managed, his voice guttural, “I do. Use me, pretty lady, just use me. Fuck, you have no idea how hard I am right at this instant.”

She smiled. “Do you think I’m going to let you fuck me with that hard cock of yours?”

“I...” A sloppy clit kiss, his fingers slamming in and out of her. “Have no idea.”

“You better make me come, Gunnar,” she breathed.

“Help me, tell me what to do. I’ll do whatever you want, pretty lady.”

“Circles,” she said. “Nice, slow, gentle circles.”

“Right, right,” he said and then began executing the slowest and gentlest of clit circles, his breath tickling her sensitive skin.

And she tightened into some frozen point, like the end of the crystal of a snowflake—immaculate and sharp and beautiful...

And hung there, white in a dark, frozen sky...

Until the heavens burst and she was coming and coming, like a rush of snow from the sky, burying her in its blanket of goodness.

He felt her coming and stopped moving, riding it out with her as she crested and crested and the pleasure slowly faded. He rained kisses over her, licking her all over, kissing her thighs and her mound and then coming up to kiss her belly all over. “So, how many months can I do this? Lick your pussy, I mean? You think you’ll want your pussy licked the whole time you’re growing the baby?”

“You know, I kind of do,” she gasped dreamily.

He was at her breasts again, sucking on a nipple. “And right now, do I get to put my cock in you? How’d you describe it? My *fat* cock? Did I earn the right to fuck this pretty pussy with my fat cock?”

“Mmm, I’m thinking about it.” She touched his muscular back. “You do have a nice, fat cock, don’t you? Fills me right up, I seem to remember.” His cock was next-level *fantastic*. Such a nice cock, and she remembered how good it felt. She remembered how it dragged against so many nice places inside her.

“Let me fill you up.” He caught her gaze.

“Maybe,” she said.

He grinned, enjoying this. “Should I beg?” He winked at her.

She toyed with his shoulder. “Yes.”

“Please?”

“Please what?”

“Please can I fuck your pussy, Hiljd?”

“You really want to, don’t you?”

“More than anything on earth at this moment. But if you want me to make you come again first...”

She thought about it. It sounded wicked and delicious and she thought he’d do it if she asked. She thought he’d put his head right back between her thighs and lick her to another climax. But then, out of nowhere, she yawned.

Right.

Being pregnant meant it was hard to stay up too late.

“I’m boring you?” he said.

She giggled. “No, no, I promise. Your bed’s just comfy. Fuck me, Gunnar.”

“If you’re tired—”

“I want your cock,” she said. “Your fat cock, filling me up, and then...” She felt shy. “Then I want to fall asleep in your arms, like you said.”

He growled, claiming her lips, their tusks clashing. “Yes. I want...” He kissed her neck, under her jaw. “I know we’re just figuring things out, but I want to hold you like you’re mine, like you’re both mine.” He touched her belly. “And now I want to fuck you like you’re mine.”

“Please,” she groaned.

He reached between them, lining himself up, and the head of his thick cock wanted entry.

She gasped. Oh, right, he was just that thick. And it was *good*, but he was... wow.

“Good girl, take my cock,” he crooned. “You can take it, spread your pretty thighs, and breathe.”

She did that, touching his face, turned on, affected.

“That’s it,” he groaned. “See, I fit just fine. Just fine, pretty lady.”

He did fit just fine. He was stretching her in the best of ways. She gasped, tilting back her head, clutching at the bedspread as he worked his way in, all the way in.

“There,” he panted when he was balls deep. He just sat there, all the way in, looking into her eyes.

She panted too, breathing with him. She was crammed full right now, so taken, so claimed. “Yours,” she whispered.

He caught her with his fingers and thumb, holding her chin, forcing her to

look at him. “You like that.”

“Gunnar, fuck me,” she moaned.

“No, look at me and say it,” he said. “You like belonging to me? While you’re under me, while I’m deep inside you, and while my baby’s growing in you? You like it.”

She was going to fucking come from his *words*. “Oh, shit, please, fuck me.”

“Say you like it,” he said, his voice gravelly. “Tell me you like it, and I’ll fuck this tight, wet pussy of yours.”

“I like it,” she breathed. “I really like it.”

“What do you like?”

“Being yours,” she said.

His hips moved, dragging his thick cock against her body.

She arched her back, her mouth open in a silent scream. No cock had ever gotten her quite *there* before.

“Good?” he said, sounding panicked. “I’m not hurting you?”

“Very good, fuck me, you jackass, don’t *stop*,” she cried.

“Oh, shit,” he said, seizing her hips. “Shit, shit, shit, you’re the sexiest woman in the entire world, do you know this?”

“Fuck me,” she whined.

He *was* fucking her now, fucking her and dragging himself against her, and she was going to come, like this, from just his cock, in the freaking missionary position, and how was this even possible?

She stopped being able to make sounds that were identifiable as words. They were just mangled noises as she climbed up the ladder of her pleasure.

It build and built, each rung higher and better than the next, little warmup tremors going through her.

He felt those and let out wheezing breaths. “I’m going to come if you—”

“Don’t you *dare*,” she snapped. “Fuck me just like this, and you do not stop, do not come until I tell you to, do you understand me?”

“Yes,” he managed. “Fuck, yes, I understand, and I... do you know how sexy you are? Do you have any *idea*?”

She came.

It was like a rubber band snapping, her whole body twanging out the sensation. Her nipples went tight and hard. She couldn’t make noise. It was so good.

He was still fucking her through it.

She had to gasp it out, touching his thigh. “I’m good, I’m good, baby, go ahead.”

“Oh, I can come?” he grunted.

“Yes, come, please come.”

“Thank fuck.” He dug his fingers into her hips and slammed into her, and she felt him twitching inside her.

Then they were kissing, and the kisses were too much, too big, tongues everywhere, hands seizing whatever they could.

Somehow in the course of this, he came out of her body, and they rolled over, him on his back, her next to him.

Eventually, they settled.

She was tucked in against him, one of his burly arms holding her against him. She had a hand in his red beard, toying with his facial hair.

They were still kissing.

They kissed and kissed, and she was yawning, and they were still kissing, and then he was yawning and then...

Sleep.

HE WOKE UP with her body tucked in against his, like it belonged there. She was still asleep, her head pillowed on his shoulder, her eyes closed, and he shifted, just a little, barely, in the scant light of the early morning, to brush her hair away from her face.

She stirred, but not too much. She sighed into him.

He gazed down at her and thought of being an orc in ancient times, when the orcs were just traveling clans up and down England and in parts of Scandinavia and some parts of the continent, too. When they had animal skin tents they put up and took down. He thought of holding his woman—his pregnant woman—like this, his larger body the only thing that would protect his family from the cold and the predators and the invaders and the rival clans...

He thought of being that, mattering to her.

I don't matter to her, he thought.

It was fucked up, the thing he'd done when he was fucking her, making her say that she liked belonging to him. *What the hell was that?*

It had been hot, sure, but he probably made her do it because he was insecure in some way.

Look at this woman. She was beautiful and smart and talented and she didn't need anything from him. She'd been willing and ready to go through the pregnancy without his ever knowing.

He shouldn't have taken her to bed last night, he realized. That hadn't been smart. It made everything about this sordid and all about sex. Yeah,

they'd seen each other twice and both times, they'd gone at each other like rabbits in heat or something.

Did rabbits go into heat?

Maybe the phrase was "bitches in heat" except he was not a female, but of course, he wasn't a dog or a rabbit or anything else either.

Was this what he wanted to be thinking about?

I want this to be more than sex.

How much more did he want, though?

He'd gotten this trill of pleasure when she'd said the nice things about his house, and he liked impressing her. Truthfully, when he'd bought the house, he'd done it with Yenna's approval, and he'd thought someday, they'd move into this house together.

But then things hadn't worked out with Yenna, and he was left with the house, the one he hadn't finished work on, the one that felt like a badge of his failures.

How was a man supposed to do it all, anyway? How was he supposed to provide the sort of life that a woman needed and then also be all the other things women wanted—an emotionally supportive partner and her best friend and a giving and unselfish lover and have any time for any leisure activities on top of that?

Well, at least with Hiljd, some of the pressure would be off, he thought. She wasn't as needy as Yenna. She was totally capable of taking care of herself.

Yeah, with Hiljd, as if there's something here. She doesn't want me.

Or, no, was that true? Maybe she did want him, but she didn't need him.

Or maybe...

She'd said it was harder being pregnant all alone than she had thought. Maybe she did need him.

He was confused. He wanted to be needed, but he wasn't sure he could deliver what she needed—what anyone needed.

Why was being alive so hard?

Carefully, he got out of bed and got dressed. He went down into the kitchen and started coffee. He wanted to make her breakfast, but he also didn't want to wake her up to ask her important questions like, *How do you like your eggs?*

Turned out not to be important, anyway, when she bustled down, dressed, hair in a sloppy knot on top of her head and ran for the door, saying she was

going to be late for work.

He tried to apologize, but she was on the move.

She went right out the door, but she did pause on the way out and stuck her head back through. “Text me later?” She gave him a grin.

“Do I have your phone number?” he said.

“Shit!” she said. “I don’t have time. I know your name. I will find you on social media. Are you on Facebook or Instagram or both?”

“Both,” he said.

“I will find you,” she said and shut the door.

He went to the window and watched her drive off. Then he called his brother and told him everything.

“Thank fuck you’re having some kind of issue and I can help you for once,” said his brother, whose name was Fron. “So, you gotta get a paternity test. She could be lying to you.”

“Yeah, hiding it from me, trying to make sure I never found out, but she’s just using me,” he said with a sigh.

“Fuck women, man,” said Fron.

“I can’t wait for you to meet her,” said Gunnar.

HILJD HAD A bounce in her step at work. She mostly liked her job. Before getting pregnant, she’d been thinking about trying to start her own private practice, but now that the baby was coming, she was happier here, in a medical group that was affiliated with a bigger conglomeration, one that owned the local hospital and a bunch of other hospitals throughout the state. She was going to stay there, because it was going to be easier not to be in charge of everything.

It was going to mean she had to endure for a while, however. All the things she hated about her job were basically because of bureaucracy, whether it was coming down from the top of the organization she worked for, or from the insurance companies, or from government interventions—wherever it was, bureaucracy was evil.

The smaller and more independent she was, the less she’d have to worry about that sort of thing.

Maybe someday, she thought. For now, the most important thing was the baby.

She sped through all her morning appointments—not because she wasn't attentive or because she was breezy and preoccupied, because she was just, well, better at her job. She was in a good mood, and she felt like her brain was functioning better for the first time in a long time. Maybe it was the orgasms or something.

She looked down at the answered questions of a woman who was there for her third appointment, and she suddenly realized the symptoms were because of the way her meds were interacting. “Good news,” she chirped. “We can put you on this instead, and everything should clear up.”

Then, when she was dealing with a man who was there for his first appointment in years, she found herself really empathetically tuning into how nervous he was. She said a few things to put him at ease right off. “Oh, sure, everyone gets a little nervous at the doctor's, even me, and I *am* a doctor,” was one of them.

After that, he opened right up, and she was able to easily diagnose him.

He shook his head. “That's it? I've been stressing about this for six months, and that's it?”

“Sometimes, it's easy,” she crowed.

At lunch, she opened up her phone and there was a message from Gunnar on Facebook.

I found you first, it said.

She grinned. *Aren't you resourceful? Shouldn't have expected anything different.*

Are you busy tonight?

Right to the point, I see.

If we're dating, we need to go on dates.

She laughed, delighted. *I'm actually going to a Yule lunch this evening. The one out at the Community Center. It's a tradition, night after the lighting of the Yule log.*

A Yule lunch was usually not held at lunchtime, but it did tend to feature lunchy-type foods. Typically sandwiches with pickled herring and a bunch of sides, plus *lots* of beer. She would not be indulging in the beer, of course. Lunches started in the afternoon or evening and went late. There were lots of them held in the orc community during the season, and she usually made it to more than one.

Let me take you to the Yule lunch.

She considered, grinning at her phone screen, feeling alive in a way she

hadn't in... in... had she ever felt like this? It was somewhat reminiscent of the beginning of things with Valdemar, but the mating bond had been somewhat oppressive in its demands on them and everything about it had been utterly certain, which she realized was different than this feeling, this feeling that was possibilities.

The uncertainty made it exciting.

My mother will be there, she typed back.

You don't want me to meet your mother?

I don't know what to tell my mother about you.

A pause. Three dots came up. He was typing. Then, *I'm the father of your child regardless, yeah? We're going to be in each other's lives because of that. Tell her the truth.*

I can't tell her we fucked at a naked party!

Yeah. How does she think you got pregnant?

I said I got ghosted on an app.

So, I'm the ghoster, huh?

You could say you lost your phone and then you couldn't do two-factor verification and then you couldn't log back into the app. So, it's not your fault. And that now we're back in touch.

I can work with that. Another pause. So yes? It's a date tonight? Can we set a time to pick you up?

You're picking me up? She grinned. She didn't think she'd ever had a date come and pick her up, like it was the 1950s or something.

If that's all right.

Yes, please. She gave him her address.

GUNNAR WASN'T SURE if he should be touching Hiljd.

She was wearing a red sweater and a headband with reindeer antlers. Her earrings were little dangling tear-shaped ornaments. She had put one finger in his face when he picked her up and said that if he had anything negative to say about wearing festive clothing, to keep it to himself.

He did not, though. She was adorable. He wasn't good at that kind of thing, at decoration. He said so, and she said, "Obviously."

What was that about?

"You want to deck my halls, is that what you're saying?" he said.

She giggled. “Yes, yes, you are just the hopeless bachelor with the big, beautiful farmhouse in need of a woman’s touch. You’re like a woman’s HGTV wet dream.”

He furrowed his brow. “That’s a good thing, right?”

She ended up tugging him through the room where the Yule lunch was being held. There were several long tables set up in the middle of the room, but there were also a number of smaller round tables around the periphery, in front of huge windows that gave a view of the surroundings outside—a pond surrounded by pine trees, all decorated with lights and garlands.

Then, she pushed him in front of her mother and introduced them.

Hiljd’s mother looked like Hiljd but shorter and with more gray in her dark hair. She had a number of golden rings on her fingers, each sparkling with jewels. She gave him an assessing look as she said, “I’m still confused about this. He’s asked you on a date now, when before you said he wasn’t in the picture.”

“Well,” said Hiljd, “you know how when you sign up for stuff, it sends you a text to your phone, and you have to enter this code to get back in? Well, he lost his phone, and so—”

“Why didn’t he port his phone number over to his new phone?” said Hiljd’s mother.

He exchanged a look with Hiljd, who wrinkled up her nose. He turned back to Hiljd’s mother. “I couldn’t. I wanted to, but I started the process without that, and then I couldn’t get it undone. I was on the phone with customer service for seven hours. I mean, it seemed like that. It was this huge pain. I don’t recommend it, actually. Don’t lose your phone.”

Hiljd’s mother chuckled. “And then, why didn’t he start a new profile and look you up again?”

Hiljd glared at her mother.

Her mother clucked her tongue. “Oh, Hiljd, just admit you cut him off and ran.”

Hiljd twisted her fingers together. “Look, it wasn’t a good date, Mom.”

“I’m working to win her over,” he put in.

Hiljd sighed. “You guys are going to gang up on me, I see.”

“I told you that you can’t do that,” said her mother. “I told you that you can’t just go off and have someone’s child and not tell him about it, and—”

“That’s not what she did,” said Gunnar, putting his arm around Hiljd.

“No, it was my fault, really. I should have insisted on some way of getting in

touch.”

“The app?” said her mother.

Hiljd and Gunnar exchanged another glance.

“I see,” said Hiljd’s mother.

“This is going spectacularly,” said Hiljd dryly.

Hiljd’s mother wagged a finger at Hiljd. “Give this man a chance, Hiljd. Really, I asked you how bad he could be, didn’t I?”

“Mom, women have children on their own all the time,” said Hiljd.

“Let’s go get some food,” Gunnar spoke up, deciding it was better to halt the family argument before it even got started. “You’re hungry, right? You need to eat?”

Hiljd grinned at him. “Starving, of course.”

She babbled apologies for her mother in the line to fill their plates, talking about how much her mother worried, about how her father had passed away several years ago, and that it was just her mother now, and she was the only child in the family, and her mother didn’t want Hiljd to be alone. Her mother was traditional and she didn’t think Hiljd could do it on her own.

He said there was no reason for her to apologize, and he totally understood traditional parents. He had this urge to... he didn’t know... rescue her. But he thought she probably wouldn’t appreciate it if he did. He wanted to sail in and be her knight in shining armor and take care of all her problems.

Why, he wasn’t sure. To prove to her that he wasn’t worthless? To prove that to himself?

Because that was just what men were *supposed* to do if they got a woman pregnant?

He hadn’t even processed this information, he didn’t think. *I’m going to be a father.*

Fuck.

Anyway, then they sat down at one of the small circular tables with Hiljd’s mother and with her friend, whose name was Mariana, and Mariana’s husband, and everyone else drank beer—he abstained with Hiljd, even though she told him he could drink if he wanted, and he said no, he was driving, and she was pregnant, and no.

This made her smile at him in a way he liked.

He wanted to touch her.

Her mother said that Hiljd was too independent.

He jumped in and said that he understood because he was independent,

and that he and Hiljd had that in common.

Her mother said that Hiljd should never have left her fated mate.

He jumped in and said her mate sounded like a jackass. “Really fucking selfish, if you ask me.”

Hiljd beamed at him.

Hiljd’s mother looked at her daughter with sympathetic eyes. “You have been through so much, haven’t you, sweetie?” she whispered.

“I just want to take care of her,” he said.

“Exactly,” said Hiljd’s mother. “That’s what you need. I like him, Hiljd.”

“Me too,” said Hiljd, grinning at him.

He put his arm around her again.

She snuggled in close.

And everything was perfect, so—of course—he ruined it.

Hiljd’s mother was complaining about how no one had come by to clear out their used plates. It was a buffet, but there were people working here who would come by to take away the dirty dishes and to refill the water pitchers in the middle of the table and fetch things like sugar for the coffee and extra salt and pepper shakers. “No one wants to work anymore, that’s the thing,” said Hiljd’s mother. “Whole entire generation, just lazy.”

“Mom, people aren’t lazy, they just don’t want to do crappy jobs,” said Hiljd with a sigh. “I mean, we have this whole pandemic, and no one has to come in and work for assholes and they all find better things to do, things where people don’t take advantage of them, and then, when everyone’s all, ‘Come back and be abused again,’ they’re like, ‘No, thank you,’ and—”

“I don’t know, I see your mom’s point,” said Gunnar.

Hiljd chuckled dryly. “Oh, of *course* you do.”

Gunnar winced. “You know what? Never mind. I didn’t mean to jump in there—”

“Yeah, you interrupted me,” said Hiljd.

He winced again. “Did I? I’m sorry.”

“I want to hear what Gunnar thinks,” said her mother.

“Yeah, you and Gunnar can just date,” said Hiljd. “My mom’s single, too, Gunnar.”

He sighed.

Hiljd looked him over. “Well? What were you going to say?”

Mariana’s husband spoke up. “Say nothing, man. That is a trap.”

Hiljd pointed at him. “Oh, you did *not*.”

Mariana drank some beer, laughing. “Baby, baby, baby, you have so much to learn.”

Hiljd folded her arms over her chest. “I want to know, though.”

“Well, so do I,” said her mother.

“Look, I have a construction company,” he said. “I hire kids who are around eighteen or nineteen all the time, and they’re all...” *Pussies*, was the word that came to mind, but he wouldn’t have said that in polite company, so the next word was *wusses*, but he had a feeling how that would go over, so he simply didn’t finish the sentence.

“What are they?” said Hiljd.

“They’re lazy,” said her mother.

“It’s more than that,” he said. “There used to be this idea—we were all taught this idea? That, uh, adversity makes you stronger? That you might try something, and it might be really hard, and it might push you to your limits, it might even break you, but that... that it was worth it to do it, anyway. And I feel like this younger generation doesn’t see any advantage in suffering.”

Hiljd scoffed.

“*Exactly*,” said Hiljd’s mother. “You push yourself, that’s what we all believed, that’s what we were all taught, from a young age.”

“You don’t need to be taught that,” said Hiljd. “And how hard? For how long? And when do you get to stop?”

“When you get where you’re going,” said Hiljd’s mother.

“Which is where?” said Hiljd. “Where are we supposed to get?” She looked at Gunnar. “Are you there?”

He looked away. Actually, maybe pushing himself like that had kind of fucked up his whole life. Because Venna had left, and he hadn’t even really tried to stop her, not if it meant working less. He liked working, that was the thing. But spending time with Venna while she complained constantly about every aspect of her life? He didn’t even want to do that. If that was what she required from him, he’d rather just have work, and not have her at all. He rubbed his forehead. “I don’t know. I mean, I have my business. I worked really hard to get my business up and running, and it’s amazing, and I’m proud of it, but, uh... there’s no one to really share it with.”

Hiljd softened, eyeing him.

“Well, in my day, that’s what couples did,” said Hiljd’s mother. “The wife helped a man get his career going, because it was for *both* of you.”

“Oh, ancestors protect us, Mom!” said Hiljd. “You’re not serious.”

Hiljd's mother considered. "It was a sacrifice. I didn't get to have a career or pursue things I wanted, not like you got to, but I had... I mean, you're all alone, Hiljd. I'm going to die, and it'll be you, on your own, and is that what you want?"

Hiljd groaned, rubbing her forehead.

"Well, I mean, that's kind of what we did," said Mariana, linking her hands with her husband's. "Not that our business is yours, though. It's ours. We both work at it, but we're a team, you know. We work together. I think that's kind of the key. You need to work together." She turned to Hiljd. "You and Valdi, you were both just... I don't know if you guys ever got the chance to talk about whether you wanted the same thing. That bond just had its way with you guys. You were so young."

Hiljd's mother shrugged. "I was younger than you were with Valdemar when I married your father. And you, Gunnar, did you have some woman run off on you while you were working hard for her because she didn't feel like you were supporting her enough?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, I mean, she... we didn't..."

"I knew it," said Hiljd's mother. "This is our job as women. We are the glue that holds it all together, and if we all get selfish like this, everything falls apart."

"Well, what if men take a turn at being the glue?" muttered Hiljd.

"They're not good at it," said Hiljd's mother. "Women are naturally better at—"

"At what?" said Hiljd. "At being subjugated to other people's will?"

"You always make it sound like it's a bad thing, but it's a beautiful thing, giving to your husband and your children," said Hiljd's mother. "It's the way we all feel connected to each other. It's how we find our purpose."

"You're saying that being a doctor, healing people, that's not being connected or purposeful?" Hiljd said to her mother. "You're saying that I should, what? Quit my job and just be satisfied with whatever my husband does? Valdemar's job was reading archaic literature and talking about it with nineteen-year-olds. That's more purposeful than what *I* do?"

"No, you should do both," said Gunnar. "I don't see why you're talking about quitting your job. Do both."

"Because that's easy," said Hiljd to him. "Because you're doing both. Running a business and keeping a relationship going."

"Well, I-I *could* do it."

“Could you? So, why didn’t you?”

He let out a breath.

“If that woman of his wouldn’t have been so demanding,” spoke up Hiljd’s mother. “Then it wouldn’t have been a problem.”

“No, no,” he said, and he rubbed his forehead. “It wasn’t her fault. She was just asking me to be there more often, to prioritize her, and I...”

“You were raised in a culture that told you it was okay to prioritize yourself,” said Hiljd, “because you’re a man, and your needs are important, whereas we—women—are all raised to prioritize everyone except ourselves—our husbands, our children, our parents, our siblings, and perfect fucking strangers—”

“No!” He glared at her. “No one is raised thinking it’s all right to be selfish. I feel it, too, what you’re talking about. And I don’t think women should do more than men. I really don’t. I don’t even think women do. Like, women don’t even understand what it’s like to be a man, how much is on your head. You don’t even get it. Like, the first time there’s a spider, what do you do?”

Hiljd’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

Mariana was laughing. “No, no, it’s true. I am a strong woman, and I can handle anything. But not creepy-crawlies.” She lay her head on her husband’s shoulder. “Then I need a big, strong man to save me.”

“I know what you’re talking about,” said her husband to Gunnar, nodding. “I know exactly what you’re talking about. It’s like, there’s a noise, and she wakes you up in the middle of the night, and she’s like, ‘Go check that out.’ Like, that’s your *job*. Go check out the dangerous noise in the middle of the night. Go put yourself out there and... it’s not just about how you could get hurt—which no one asks *women* to do. It’s about how it’s your responsibility to make sure *she* doesn’t get hurt. And that’s never on women. Never.”

Gunnar nodded. “Yeah.”

“You men *like* that protective bullshit,” countered Hiljd. “And anyway, newsflash, been living on my own for years—killing my own spiders, setting my own mouse traps, investigating my own strange noises, and opening my own peanut butter jars.”

“But sweetie,” said her mother, “it’s not natural for a woman—”

“Sure it is!” said Hiljd. “I don’t need a man to protect me. I don’t need a man for anything.” She turned on Mariana’s husband. “And, anyway, when

has that strange noise *ever* been something *actually* dangerous?”

Mariana’s husband shrugged. “Okay, never.”

“It’s a hypothetical,” said Hiljd. “Your hypothetical male-bravado-role that never materializes—

“The stress is real,” said Mariana’s husband. “I’m running through the house in my boxers, clutching a baseball bat, thinking through whether or not I’m going to be able to keep some crazed, druggie creep off Mariana, thinking that I can’t let her down. So, okay, he’s never actually there, but—”

“And you think Mariana is not having stress in bed, waiting for you, worried about your safety?” said Hiljd.

“I mean, I’m not,” said Mariana. “If I thought someone was really out there, sweetie, I wouldn’t send you. I didn’t know it was freaking you out so much. Next time, let’s just check it out together.”

He turned to her. “No, baby, you got to stay in bed. I wouldn’t make you get up.”

“Well, I don’t mean to take advantage of you.” She rubbed his arm.

They gazed into each other’s eyes.

“We should go,” said Mariana, not looking up.

“Yeah, Merry Christmas, everyone,” said her husband.

The two, arm in arm, got up and excused themselves. They were clearly going home to fuck, and Gunnar felt like a dick for turning this conversation in the way he had.

Hiljd gazed after them.

Hiljd’s mother shook her head. “And this is why you’ll never find a man,” she said to her daughter. “Because you’re like *this*.”

“I like how she is,” said Gunnar.

Hiljd looked at him, shaking her head. “No, you don’t. This was a really dumb idea.”

“I do,” he said. “I like you.”

“This whole thing with us,” she moaned. Then, she yawned. “Can you just take me home?”

“Hiljd!” said her mother. “What are you doing? Don’t chase him off.”

“Trust me,” said Hiljd to her mother witheringly. “He knows about the baby now. He’s not going anywhere.”

vii.

HILJD WAS SITTING the passenger seat of Gunnar's truck (because of *course* he drove a pick-up truck) in the driveway to her place. She lived in a townhouse that shared walls on both sides, nothing like his isolated huge farmhouse. She liked it here, but she had to admit it was mostly because she didn't have a lot of upkeep to see to. She was required to pay money every month for someone to see to the landscaping and keeping up with the roads. She only had to worry about the indoors. She liked it here because she could do it on her own. She wondered what it would be like to have relationship like Mariana's, with the shared goals, doing things together. Not having to do everything on her own. She wanted that. But she was never going to have anything like that with Gunnar. "Look, I'll get in touch with you after the holidays, all right?"

"I'm sorry I said what I said," he said. "I'm sorry I said any of it."

"Did you misrepresent what you think?" she said.

He hesitated. "No."

She reached for the door handle. "Well, then—"

"But," he said, reaching out to stop her, "maybe I need to change my mind about some of it."

She pulled her hand back, turning on him. "Why would you say *that*?"

"I don't know," he said. "I guess it's because I like you more than you like me. That's blindingly fucking obvious. Story of my life. Fine, yeah, we'll talk after the holidays." He sank both of his hands into his hair.

She glared at him. "You don't like me more than I like you."

“Let’s look at the facts,” he said. “You haven’t pursued me at all, and I’ve done all the pursuing, and you’re just clearly not into me.”

“You’re not into me either.”

“Oh, okay. I guess you know me better than I know myself.”

She let out a frustrated breath and opened the door. She got out of the truck. “Come inside with me,” she ordered. “We’re finishing this conversation.”

“What?” He leaned forward. “Seriously?”

She slammed the car door shut.

Moments passed. He got out.

“Finally,” she muttered. She turned on her heel and stalked over to the door. They went in together. She led them to her living room.

He was looking all over. “Whoa, this is a Christmas wonderland.”

“I have three throw pillows and a couple blankets.”

“And a tree, and those candles, and look at the little village of snow people. That’s so cute.” He stood over it, looking at the little mirror pond and the snowy houses and the array of different snowmen and women and children.

“That’s up all winter,” she said. “Valdemar hated it. Everyone else buys me snowmen figurines for Christmas, and he just grumbled about it.”

“Valdemar’s your ex.”

“Didn’t I tell you his name?”

“I just... didn’t register it, if so.” He took in her Christmas tree, which was covered in sparkling ornaments. “Tree’s nice. I thought I had ornaments, but then... maybe Venna took them. I haven’t bothered with a tree in years, but at my new house, I thought...”

She sighed. “I would love to decorate that house of yours,” she said in a tiny voice. “But, Gunnar, come on. We don’t fit together. We disagree about very fundamental things.”

He came over and sat down on the couch. “What do we disagree about?”

“I bet we vote for different political parties.”

“Let’s not talk about politics,” he muttered. “I think I have PTSD about politics.”

“It colors everything,” she said.

“Doesn’t have to,” he said.

She yawned again.

“We can talk another time,” he said. “You’re tired.”

“You won’t admit it,” she said.

“Admit what?”

“It was the first conversation we had,” she said. “You said, ‘What power?’”

He groaned. “This? Seriously? Come on, Hiljd, I don’t have any power.”

“Privilege. You have privilege, and you can’t admit it. And why not? Because then you’ll have to admit that some of those things you think you earned, you didn’t earn. You got them because things were easier for you.”

“Things have never been easy for me,” he said, running a hand through his beard.

“Well, things haven’t been easy for me, and it’s been harder because I’m a woman. And if you can’t just own up to that basic fact, then I can’t do this with you.”

He let out a breath. “Well, shit.”

She hunched up her shoulders. “And we’re having a girl, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” he breathed. “Really?” His expression was so vulnerable and hopeful, it cut her.

She turned away, her eyes stinging. “And if you’re just going to raise our daughter, when she’s with you, as if there’s nothing in her way—”

“Why wouldn’t I? Why wouldn’t I tell her she can do anything she wants? Why do you people have to keep acting like there are insurmountable obstacles? How does that make you feel anything good at all?”

She groaned. “You don’t get it.”

“You know what I think?” he said. “I think you just want an excuse. I think you just want to tell yourself that there’s some reason why you didn’t get whatever it is you wanted. You don’t want to blame yourself.”

She lifted her chin. “That’s what you think of me?”

“Not you personally, but people like you.”

She laughed softly. “What if I had cancer, and I was dying? Would you say to me, ‘This is your own fault, that you have cancer.’”

“Well, how did you get the cancer?”

“For fuck’s sake,” she groaned.

“I’m just saying, if you smoked cigarettes for ten years or something—”

“I was in a car accident and I lost my leg,” she said. “Is that my fault?”

“No?” he said, furrowing his brow.

“So, there are some things that are not your own fault, some things that are outside of us, sometimes we really *are* victims.” She was sarcastic.

“Look, so maybe you don’t have a leg,” he said. “You could look at yourself like a victim, or you could—”

“The patriarchy is real,” she said.

“I actually agree with you,” he said. “I mean, you pointed it out to me, and there are a lot of things where men of certain species who have certain advantages get ahead when other sorts of men—”

“But all men, *all* men, have it easier than women,” she said. “And you won’t admit that. Why?”

“Because *I* have not had it easy,” he said with a little laugh. “And if you think... I know for a *fact* there are women with an easier life than me.”

She sank back into her couch. She could not even think of anything to say to him. She yawned again.

“And look, I think there are roles,” he said. “And maybe traditionally, it made more sense to divide them along gender lines, but now, we don’t have to do that, so if you want me to do some of the female roles of things, like cooking and laundry and shit—”

“Those are not female roles!”

“Well, I just mean—”

“And they’re definitely not natural. It’s not like, in the hunter and gatherer societies of our ancestors, there were washing machines.”

“You don’t think women washed the clothes back then?”

“If so,” she said, “then women have been doing *all the work* since the dawn of time.”

“Well, men had to hunt—”

“Here it is,” she said. “Men have to kill the spiders. Men had to hunt. Men like glory and they like big, splashy dangerous jobs that involve killing things, and meanwhile, women are over here, doing all the unglamorous things and men are taking advantage of us.”

“You have a huge chip on your shoulder,” he said. “Maybe your ex-husband—”

“How many times do I have to explain that he was a feminist?” She got off the couch. “This is not a personal vendetta for me, okay? This is about *society*.”

“So, you admit that you haven’t experienced all this awful disadvantaged stuff,” he said. “Or that men can be good sometimes.”

“Did I even say anything other than that? When did I say men were bad?”

“Two seconds ago when you were talking about how glamorous hunting

was. Have you ever *been* hunting? Do you know what it's like? It's not glamorous. It's mostly boring. It's very cold. If you do kill something, you think doing a field dressing is a walk in the park?"

She blinked at him, feeling a little off balance.

"I don't know what your deal is," he said. "But here's what I think. Everyone's doing the best they fucking can. Men *and* women. And it's hard for everyone. Maybe... maybe sometimes men are kind of stupid and thoughtless, but you know, I don't think we do it on purpose. We're just sort of preoccupied. It's not as easy for us as it is for you to be doing, like, twenty things at once—"

"That's not actually easy for women either," she protested. "It just *has* to get done, and no one else is going to do it, so—"

"Okay, well, you do this, though," he said. "You take it on and then you just explode later, and we didn't know it was a problem."

"And if I tell you it's a problem, then I'm a nag."

"No," he said. "No, not with you and me. Never. You have to trust me on that."

"This isn't *happening* with us."

"Because I won't admit to being some asshole male chauvinist? I'm not a bad person."

"It's subconscious."

"So, I'm subconsciously evil?"

"You're not evil, it's just... it's the way society makes us," she said.

"Nobody's making me—"

"I'm not blaming you!" It was a harsh whisper, a revelation.

"Seriously, I make my own decisions, and there's no one out there making me do anything that I don't want to do."

"It's not your fault," she said, sighing. "It's no one's fault. It's all internalized, though, and we have to recognize it and root it out."

He snorted. "Look, maybe you have internalized shit, but *I* do not."

"And you're never going to admit this to yourself," she said.

"Why would I admit something that's not true?" he said.

She shrugged. "Fine. Get out."

He shook his head at her. "Fine. If that's the way you want it."

"It is."

He turned and shuffled out of the room, shoulders hunched over, clearly annoyed.

She made faces at his back. She could never be in a relationship with a person this committed to being utterly blind about himself and society and *everything else* in the world.

Which was why she did the next thing.

Well. No.

The next thing she did, it didn't make any sense.

She went after him and pressed her body into his from behind, and he stopped walking and went still.

She hugged him.

He turned around, in her arms.

She sighed against him, laying her head against his huge, huge chest. "Do you want to stay? I'm not working tomorrow. I took off for the holidays."

"You're really confusing me right now, Hiljd." His voice was raw.

She looked up at him. "Oh."

He cupped her face. "Uh... I think I'm going to go."

"Really?" It was like a slap. She recoiled from his hand.

He pulled his fist into his chest. "It's only... if you don't think this could ever work, and I... Fuck, Hiljd, I'm halfway in love with you already, but you don't even like me, and you think I'm this horrible person who can't even admit it to himself, and... I think I gotta protect myself a little bit here. You're already fucking me up. A lot."

"Oh," she breathed. "I'm sorry." She pressed in close to him, putting her hand over his curled-up fist. Had she forgotten he had feelings? He was a *person*. He was huge and strong and he projected all this bravado and he had infuriating ideas, but... he had feelings.

He swallowed hard.

She shook her head at him. "I don't think you're a horrible person at all."

"But you just said—"

"I think *everyone* has it internalized," she said. "Do you get that? Like, it's not something wrong with you personally, it's just wrong with everyone."

"That's supposed to make it better?"

She tried to think about how to explain this, since he seemed to be intent on not understanding her, but seemingly just out of some defense mechanism, not because he was too stupid or too willful to get it. He was just protecting himself. She worried her bottom teeth against her upper lip. She thought of three ideas and discarded each of them, furrowing her brow even deeper. It wasn't just him, she realized, it was everyone. It was just society, people in

general. They wanted to blame other people.

“What?” he said.

“I was going to say, like, war crimes? You know, if you were a Nazi, and you were just following orders—but then I remembered that we punish people for war crimes.”

“I’m very confused right now.”

“So, then, I was going to talk about imperialism, the spread of the Greco-Roman world to Britain, and the rise of the elves and the fae, and all the things they did hundreds of years ago, but I realized... we all—those of us who aren’t fae, anyway—blame them.”

He took a step back. “That’s how you feel? As a woman? You feel like that? Like all men are elves?”

“Obviously,” she said with a little laugh. “How could you have not realized this before?”

He stroked his beard. “But that’s not even the same thing. I mean, men aren’t—” He broke off. “Wait, what if the elves don’t mean it either?”

“Why would they?” she said. “No one asks to be born into privilege. And suffering is universal, so it’s not as if living in a privileged position means you never suffer.” She shrugged. “It’s not as if being an orc is, you know... it’s not like we don’t have privilege too.”

“Do we?” he said.

“Obviously,” she said. “And I’m privileged because of being brought up in a middle class family, and because of having a family that encouraged me to further my education, and because of all sorts of things. I have a lot of advantages I was just born with. Not everyone has all the advantages that I have.”

“Well, sure,” he said. “But what are you saying? Because if you’re going to say that we just need to make everything equal between everyone, I think I’m going to have to point out that those kinds of social revolutions never work out in the end. Someone always builds a guillotine.”

“Here we go, back to politics,” she said.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “We’re getting lost in the weeds.” He shrugged. “Okay, look, you want me to admit that some parts of my life were easier than other people’s lives? That’s it?”

“That’s it,” she said.

“You want me to feel guilty about that?”

“No,” she said. “I don’t. It was out of your control, and you didn’t have

any choice in whether you got advantages or disadvantages. There's no reason to feel guilty about something that's not your fault."

"Okay," he said. "So, just admit it? That does nothing."

"Acknowledge it," she said. "Notice it. And if you can do something about it, and you want to, do something about it."

"Do something how?"

"Not a guillotine. Not cutting off the heads of the privileged. Nothing violent and splashy. Just... not thinking of doing the laundry as *my* role, maybe?"

"But I just told you that I *don't* think of it as your role. I do all that shit myself. It's just called taking care of your damned self."

"Yeah, you called it the female role."

"I said traditionally, but we don't have to follow the tradition anymore—"

"I don't want you to act like you're doing me a big favor if you're just doing the bare fucking minimum a human should do—"

"Hey, I'm not that kind of person, and I don't know why you think—"

"Well, you keep saying these things—"

"And you keep not giving me a chance to show you anything different. Why don't you judge how I act? I feel like we actually agree about almost all of this stuff. We're just coming at it from different directions and with different words and slightly different perspectives."

She considered. "Maybe."

He sighed. "Okay, look, it's late, and we should... I'm going to go."

"I want you to stay," she whispered.

He took several steps backwards. "You know, I don't think you do."

She did. She really *did not* want him to leave. "Stay," she said again, taking those two steps towards him.

He held up a hand. "But *why*?"

It knocked all the wind out of her. She didn't *know* why. She had just recently determined that going after him didn't make any sense.

"You're pushing me away," he said. "Hard. And then when I try to go, you just pull me back."

"Is that what I'm doing?" she whispered.

"That's how it feels to me," he said.

"The stuff about men and women and society and all of that... it's not *about* you."

He let out a little disbelieving laugh.

“I mean...” She spread her hands. “You say things that make me furious, but actually, the sense I get from you is that you’re a *really* decent guy. And the fury, it tends to fuel... other things with us, which I like.”

“I mean, I’m with you.” He nodded, shoving his hands into his pockets. “On the fury-fueled fucking, that is. Or whatever the sex is—the dynamic there is...” He blew out a whistling breath.

She grinned. “So. Stay.”

“But I want this to be about more than sex. It *is* about more than sex for me. And I don’t think it is for you.”

She opened her mouth to disagree with him. Nothing came out.

“Okay, I’m going,” he muttered, chagrined. He shook his head and turned away. He walked out of the house.

She watched him go, feeling as if something inside her was pounding against a brick wall she’d erected. *Let me go after him*, it screamed.

But she just stood there.

viii.

SHE WATCHED HIM walk down the hallway. She watched him open the door.

He was leaving, and she didn't want that, but part of her was relieved. It was going to be so much easier without him.

Is it, though? Is it going to be easier to raise a baby all alone? Is it going to be easier to watch him fall in love with someone else? Because I can just tell he will someday, and if we're co-parenting, I'll have to watch it happen.

No, she was wrong. It wasn't going to be easier without him.

It was going to be *safer*.

She was terrified, in the end.

Terrified of giving herself to someone again, anyone at all.

Not because women were owned in a relationship—at least not owned in a way that men weren't—because that was what a relationship was.

It was becoming part of something else—the relationship came first, and both individuals came second.

It wasn't that she didn't like the idea. That was the entire reason she wanted to be pregnant, actually. She wanted to give herself to someone else entirely. She wanted to have a baby, someone to love, someone to devote herself to.

She knew... life didn't *mean* as much without someone else to devote yourself to.

That was part of being a person, was having love, having bonds, having connection.

But, well, she was afraid of it with a man.

Maybe because last time, she didn't feel like she had a choice.

She'd been so young, and she'd seen Valdemar for the first time, across a crowded room. He'd looked up. Their gazes had met.

Her nipples had tightened. Her pussy had clenched. She was instantly wet and instantly horny for him.

And he had been coming for her, fighting his way through people, looking at her like she was everything he wanted in the entire universe.

One minute, she was on her own. The next, she was mated.

She got pregnant right away.

She lost the baby.

And then... it was just happening, the series of miscarriages and then Abigail and then the divorce and...

Voluntarily letting that happen to her again?

Love?

She wasn't sure that wasn't just *stupid*.

She took off after Gunnar. "Wait!" Her voice cracked.

He was closing the door, and he stopped, just a sliver of his powerful orc body visible. "Hey, Hiljd, whatever this is, let's just sleep on it, and in the morning—"

"Can you promise me you won't hurt me?" she whispered.

He opened the door wider. "Can you promise me?"

"Come to bed," she said. "I don't trust you, but it's not *because* of you. It's..."

"It's men," he said. "You don't trust *men*. You go on these diatribes about society, because you think all of us—"

"I don't trust *people*," she said. She reached through the door and tugged him back inside. "It's not just men making the patriarchy. Women make it work, too. Society makes it work. We're all complicit, and we all sometimes just succumb to these primitive parts of ourselves, and love is just one of those stupid, stupid things that our instinct makes us do and that... that... even without a bond, do I really have a choice? What kind of choice is it? Safe and alone? Or constantly in danger of heartbreak and together?"

He shut the door. "If I commit to you, I'm not going anywhere. That's not the sort of person I am."

"Liar," she said. "We're all capable of hurting each other. That's why it happens every day."

“I’m not a liar,” he said. “You... it’s not me you have a terrible opinion of, it’s like *everyone*, huh?”

She shrugged. “I don’t trust people, but maybe I want to. And I don’t know if you figure out *how* to trust again if you don’t, you know, risk it? I want to risk it with you.” Her eyes were welling with tears.

He crowded her into the wall, sweeping one huge hand under her jaw to cup her face. “I’m not a risk,” he said in a gravelly voice.

“Stay,” she said. “Don’t abandon me.”

He put his mouth on hers.

She clung to him, tongue moving desperately against his.

He pulled away. “I’m not going anywhere,” he breathed. “If you want me here, I’m here.”

“I want you here,” she said. “I’m not pushing you away. I’m just scared.” His thumb feathered against her cheekbone. “I’m scared, too.”

SO, THEN THEY went to bed, but they didn’t have sex. They didn’t even take off all their clothes. They slept in their shirts and their underwear. She burrowed into his chest and he wrapped his strong, strong arms around her and tucked her in against him. He traced the pads of his thick orc fingers over the back of her neck, over her shoulders, down the notches of her spine.

She plastered her face into him and breathed in his scent. She soaked up his warmth.

It had been a very long time since Hiljd had admitted to anyone that she wasn’t entirely *fine* to do *everything* herself. Maybe not even with Valdemar. Maybe that was why Valdi had been so sensitive about not making much money—not because he was comparing himself to her, but because he wanted to matter to her, and he could tell she just wasn’t interested in making herself vulnerable.

The bond had ripped into them and taken them over.

The bond had done serious traumatic violence to them both.

They were both scarred forever from it.

It was no wonder she was wary of love, in the end, no wonder it scared the fuck out of her.

But here she was, falling for Gunnar. He fit against her, around her, inside her. And he felt like hers.

GUNNAR TURNED TO Hiljd, who was coming down into her kitchen, wearing his t-shirt and nothing else, which he liked more than he could quite explain. “So, I didn’t know how you liked your eggs, so I cooked one sunny side up and one fried and one scrambled and then I realized I shouldn’t have wasted all your eggs, and I’ll buy you more and—”

“No, I’ll eat them all,” she said, sweeping in and sitting down at her little round kitchen table. There was a lazy susan in the middle with little snowmen figurines on it. She really did have snowmen everywhere, and he liked it. He couldn’t say why, it just seemed cozy and domestic and exactly the sort of thing the mother of his child should do. “I’m very hungry. Whenever I’m pregnant, I’m so hungry in the mornings.”

Right, she had experience. She’d given birth and then her baby had died. And then she’d been alone in it. He had this lurch in his chest, this sensation of never wanting to leave her alone, wanting to protect her from that sort of pain ever again.

“Well, all the eggs for you, then,” he said.

“Did you cook some of the sausage? In the freezer? The little links?”

“I did not, but I can,” he said. “I was concentrating too much on eggs, I think.”

She beamed at him. “Thank you for breakfast.”

“Yeah,” he said, shrugging. He went over to her freezer and got out the frozen sausage links. “Can these just go right in the skillet?”

“Mmm,” she said. “They actually cook up pretty quick. I do them in the microwave sometimes, but they’re much better in a skillet.”

He put a few in and they sizzled and browned. “I know you’re not drinking coffee, but I was wondering if there is any?”

“I’ll do that,” she said.

“No, it’s fine. I can make my own coffee—”

“It’s just easier for me to do it. There’s a whole bunch of things to dig out. I hid the coffee maker because it made me too sad.”

“Why can’t you have coffee when you’re pregnant, anyway?”

“Well, you can, actually. But right now, it makes me ill, so I don’t even want it,” she said. “But I might be able to stomach it in the second trimester. You shouldn’t overdo it, but you can have a little caffeine. Right now, I just

remember coffee and feel sad, though. And sadness, when you're pregnant, it can be kind of intense. You know the cliches about sobbing over diaper commercials."

He smiled at her. "Right. I'm sorry about the coffee."

"Me too," she said with a sigh. "But I want this baby so much." She bent over and opened a cabinet and got out a coffee maker and a bag of coffee. She went to work next to him on the counter, getting it percolating. "So, I realize we've talked a lot about random things like society and the patriarchy and not enough about ourselves."

"Hey, we talked about our pasts and stuff. It's all connected."

"I don't know things about you," she said. "Who's Venna?"

"That's my ex."

"And really, why did you guys break up?"

He went back to the skillet. "We went over this last night."

"Not really. I was being defensive." She shrugged. "Maybe we both were."

He considered. "It's an easy thing to be. Man, romance is like a contact sport. You risk so much, put so much of yourself into it, and then... when it doesn't work out, it's like half your heart gets ripped out."

"I was *just* thinking this," she said.

"Yeah? Because I was, too, last night, while I was holding you, while we were falling asleep."

"Me too!" She grinned at him. "We're thinking the same thoughts. It's like a bond."

"Is that what the bond was like? Thinking similar thoughts?"

"Mostly emotions, really," she said. "It could get confusing—which things were your feelings, which were his. It was intrusive and I hated it."

"It kind of sounds awful, actually." He thought about it.

"Maybe it was always meant to be us," she said.

"I don't believe that shit," he said. "I believe in choice. I believe in working towards getting the things you want. I don't believe in fate."

"Me either," she said, still smiling at him. "Anyway, falling in love is brutal. Your heart gets destroyed, and when it heals, it's not the same."

"Yeah, I think everyone feels like they just don't want to risk it again," he said. "They want to be sure... this time..."

They just gazed at each other.

"What happened with you and Venna?" she asked.

“She wasn’t happy that I was spending so much time at work, at my business.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve been accused of being a workaholic,” said Hiljd, nodding. “I’m just passionate. You’re a business owner, so obviously you have to be at work. I think that makes sense. The important thing is simply that we both make sure to take time for each other and our daughter and for relaxation. But I think it’s a good thing to like your job, honestly.”

He turned the sausage. That actually wasn’t the reaction he’d been expecting.

“When I thought that I was going to be having this baby on my own, I had to do a lot of thinking about what I was going to do.” She poured out his coffee, since it was done. “Cream? Sugar?”

“So much sugar,” he said. “Four teaspoons, maybe five.”

She laughed. “Okay, so this is why you wanted me to sweeten up my tea.” She went off to see to the coffee, still talking. “And I had this idea that I was maybe going to start a private practice, but it’s not the time for growth, not with a baby, so I’m tabling that. And also, I really want to be here for the baby, you know? So, I need to be home as much as possible.”

“A private practice, huh? That sounds awesome. But then we’re both going to be in business for ourselves, so that’s, uh, scary, too.”

She came back with the coffee. “Yeah, I can handle that kind of risk, though. I’m pretty self-disciplined, and I can sacrifice if I have to.”

He took the coffee, nodding. “Venna, uh, was not that way. But that’s how I am.”

“Maybe it feels right with us because we have things in common,” she said. “You know, I was thinking about Mariana and her husband, how they have this shared goal, and how nice that is.”

“We can have a shared goal,” he said, plating up the sausage.

“Yeah?” She eyed him. “But it can’t be with our jobs.”

“No, my job’s my thing. Your job is your thing. That’s fine and healthy, honestly. And besides, I need something that’s mine.”

“Me too,” she said.

“But, uh, the baby, obviously, that’s a shared goal.”

“Or the house?”

“You mean, *my* house?”

“We’re obviously moving in there,” she said. “It’s much better than this one and much better for a baby to grow up in.”

“Obviously, huh? Were you going to ask me about this?”

“Oh, please, later on this morning, I’m going to tie you to the bedposts of my bed and you’re going to lie there with your cock pulsing and so hard it’s turned purple and *beg* me to decorate every square inch of your house with snowmen.”

His cock went from zero to full mast immediately. He coughed.

She grinned at him.

He laughed. “So, you’re going to do that a lot, aren’t you?” His voice was gravelly. “You’re going to order me around.”

“Well, it makes you really hot,” she said with a wicked grin.

“It does,” he said, nodding. “It definitely does.” He pulled her into the circle of his arms and kissed her.

She clung to him.

He cupped her face with both of his hands. “So, seriously? You want to move in with me?”

“You *do* want me to decorate your house.”

“Uh...” He kissed her again. “Will you still find me very ruggedly handsome and manly if I say yes?”

She was grinning widely at him.

“Look, this might sound... wrong,” he muttered. “I think the thing is that I got that house for a wife and a family. I want that. I want to prioritize that, and... you might not like this, but the business is part of it. Like, if I don’t have a thriving business, I can’t afford the things I want to give to a family —”

“No, I get that,” she said, sounding confused. “That doesn’t sound wrong.”

“No? You don’t think it’s the male-role thing? Being the provider?”

“Oh,” she said, understanding. “No, that’s good. You *should* provide. But we’ll both do that, just like we’ll both cook and do laundry. I think it’s fine, as long as you’re not threatened by me.”

“No, no, not even... no. Just gives me a boner.”

She snorted.

He kissed her again.

She dragged him over to sit at the table with her.

He put all the eggs on her plate. “Look, I want this to work. I really want it to work, and I’m the kind of person who goes after what I want. So, I guess I don’t spend a lot of time entertaining the possibility that things could go

wrong. But, uh, maybe... maybe you're more realistic than me?"

She thought about this, as she chewed a mouthful of eggs. "That's why you said having me pregnant was like a Christmas present. You want it. You want a wife and family, and here I am, baby on board."

"Yeah, it's exactly what I wanted, all gift-wrapped and left on my doorstep, and I just feel giddy about it. But maybe it's not going to be easy. Maybe we have issues to work through. But I'm not taking back what I said last night, not at all. I'm not going anywhere."

"I know what you're saying." She nodded, lifting another forkful of eggs towards her mouth.

"I can be realistic," he said. "Some people you don't mesh with, and you never will."

She chewed on her eggs and swallowed. "Sometimes you mesh at the beginning and then you stop meshing."

"Sometimes you really think you're going to mesh, and then you realize, as you get to know them better... you just don't."

She nodded. "So, any of those things could happen to us. I mean, we barely know each other."

"You're not wrong," he said. "But I just want to go for it."

"Me too," she said. "Only, be patient with me. Assume we're on track for turning that farmhouse into the nesting explosion of my dreams. And unless we run into something that is a big stop sign, we try to work through anything that gets in our way. I want to trust you."

"You can."

"And, okay, maybe we have some disagreements about all kinds of things —"

"I don't think we do, though. I think, about the really important things, we agree."

"We share values, I think," she said. "We value independence and hard work and sacrifice. The difference is you want to just foist your values on everyone else and I'm willing to let other people have different values if they want to have them."

"Oh, that's the difference?" He leaned back in his chair.

She shrugged. "First, I tie you up and make you beg to let me decorate your house—*our* house. Then you can punish me for saying that you're an insensitive male chauvinist pig."

His mouth curved into a smile. "Punish you, hmm? How would I do

that?”

She tapped her chin. “I mean, spanking is probably standard.”

His cock jerked. “Yeah, you could stand a good spanking.”

“Oh, definitely.” She ate more eggs, smiling beatifically at him. She swallowed. “I’ve been a bad, bad girl, haven’t I, Gunnar?”

“I have a strong feeling this is going to work out fine,” he said.

“Me too,” she said.

ix.

THEY SPENT THE morning in bed and most of the afternoon, too.

It wasn't all spanking and begging and attempted bondage with shoelaces. They talked, too.

Sometimes, they argued.

Sometimes, she sat up in the bed and gesticulated as she made point after point—all of them good ones, because he was frustratingly stuck in thinking certain things she thought were ridiculous.

But by the end of the day, they were planning out how they were going to make two appearances, one at each of their family's Christmas Eve dinners and how the day of Yule itself was going to work out perfectly because his family did a big meal at lunchtime and her mother wouldn't want her over there until evening for dinner.

The next day, they went out and bought ornaments for his tree.

Only a fourth of them were snowmen, which really showed great restraint on her part, she thought.

And the next day, they didn't argue at all. The next day, they spent it in his bed, in his perfect farmhouse, and she lay tucked into his strong arms, stretched out against his huge, strong body, and they made plans together.

They wanted her moved into the farmhouse before the baby was born. They would spend the first three years—while she was breastfeeding—with her cutting back hours at work and him concentrating on his business. Then she'd start working on her private practice, and he'd take a step back and hire someone to come in and run things for him so he could spend more time at

home.

“What if we want another baby, though?” she murmured. “I don’t have tons of time left, really. It gets harder to conceive as you get into your late thirties.”

“If so, we’ll make a new plan,” he said. “We’ll make it work.”

She looked up at him, in his bed, and she believed him in a way she’d never quite believed a man. Gunnar was the kind of man who did that, made new plans, made things happen.

“You know,” she said, “I think we will.”

“Of course we will,” he said.

SHE MET HIS family on Christmas Eve.

“We met on one of those apps and it didn’t work out,” he said. “But now she’s pregnant, so we’re giving it a go.”

If people had questions about that premise, no one asked them.

His nephew Tyr was very excited about the baby. “That’s going to be my cousin,” he informed her. “Did you know that? When your uncle has a baby, it’s your cousin.”

“I did know that,” she said to him, grinning. “But you’re very smart to know it, I have to say.”

“It’ll be my only cousin,” he said. “How many cousins do you have?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever counted.”

“Is it a lot?”

“Maybe five,” she said, thinking about it.

“That *is* a lot,” said Tyr. “It’s good, you know, a cousin? Because I used to have a brother, but…” He hunched up his shoulders, lower lip trembling.

“I heard about your brother,” she said in a soft voice.

“I don’t know why I told you,” said Tyr in a whisper. “I don’t actually like to talk about it.”

“It can be good to talk about it,” she said.

“It’s just weird this year,” said Tyr. “Because usually my brother would be here, and so would my mom. You should have a bunch of kids, so I have a lot of cousins and more people come to Yule.”

She laughed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Tyr nodded sagely. “Thanks,” he said, very seriously. “I appreciate that.”

It *was* good, the baby, she thought. Good for Gunnar's family. Healing. Because there had been so many rifts for them, so much loss, so much change. This was hope for them, and she liked it.

Besides, she understood. This baby was hope for her, too.

As they passed the platter of roast goose around the table, she felt the hope ignite, along with the candles there and the Yule log, still burning, days after being lit, burning into the cold grayness of winter, hope and light and warmth.

Later, her mother welcomed them into her home and served them more roast goose and caramelized potatoes and red cabbage and lots of gravy. She said she was sorry for what she'd said at the Yule lunch. "I don't think I should drink that much! I could hardly get out of bed the next day." She shrugged at Gunnar. "Thanks for not writing us all off already."

"Never," said Gunnar.

Hiljd believed him.

Yule came and went and the days grew very short, and the nights very long. Gunnar went to check on the Yule log on his night on the schedule, making sure it wasn't burning down the forest. It wasn't. Then, the Yule log eventually burned out. It was nothing but ash and blackened bark, broken into bits and tossed off into the nearby woods.

But nothing extinguished their hope.

Somehow, once she'd decided, it was simply easy to trust Gunnar, as if she'd only been waiting, all this time, for permission to relax and stop taking care of everything on her *own*. Having Gunnar there to help her, it was what she'd always wanted and had been afraid to admit to herself. She'd thought she *had* to go it alone. Finding out she didn't have to, it was the sweetest and best feeling on earth, the perfect Christmas present.

Months passed.

Sometime in February, she and Gunnar ran into Valdemar and his nymph shopping for cribs. There was no justice in the world, because Hiljd looked as far along as the nymph was, and she was obviously practically ready to deliver.

She said this to Gunnar afterwards, and he said that she barely looked pregnant, but she knew that she was showing a lot, because she'd had numerous pregnancies, and her body just *did* that now, even if she was barely four months pregnant.

It would have hurt her before, she thought, knowing that Valdemar had

his perfect happy ending with the nymph, but...

What had she said before?

Suffering was universal.

Privilege wasn't anyone's fault.

The nymph couldn't *help* being a nymph, right?

Why waste that energy on all of it, really? She didn't want to think about anything except her own future.

She did move in with Gunnar in his farmhouse, and she did nest like she'd never nested in her life. The nursery, for instance? Owls. All adorable owls and woodland creatures. Gunnar *made* the furniture to her exact custom desires—the dresser and the crib and the changing table, with his *hands*. He cut the wood and nailed it together and it was *beautiful*.

She took down all her snowmen when spring came and then informed Gunnar the house was about to become covered in sunflowers.

“You do themes for the seasons, Hilly-babe?” That was his nickname for her, and he spoke to her in this fond voice, this awed voice, this happy voice.

“I haven't before,” she said, “but this house...”

“Go nuts,” he told her.

And so. She did.

And then the baby was born, and all ideas of decoration were summarily abandoned. No, then it was simply a triumph to have a floor clear of baby toys and blankets and—how did someone so small need so many *things*?

They named her Mabel Amica Bonde, and she was the bright center to their world.

Immediately, they had to change all their plans. None of the things they had thought about being new parents were true. For two people who were quite used to making and executing plans, being independent, and just getting things done, it was a bit of a rude awakening.

Oh, Hiljd thought, *it's just very hard, even when your infant is healthy.*

The following Christmas brought a very lovely, half-decorated, baby-proofed farmhouse. They sat up late, wrapping presents in the glow of the Christmas lights, drinking meade out of coffee mugs, and she teased him about how he'd met the mother of his child at a sex party, and he said that he didn't know what she was talking about, because as *everyone* knew, they'd met on one of those apps.

Then he handed her a tiny little box with a red ribbon on top and he said, “You're not an idiot, so I'm sure you know what this is, and also I had a

speech prepared, but I'm weirdly nervous now, so...?"

She tugged off the ribbon and opened it up and there were their matching pair of earrings, orc mating earrings. She ran her fingers over them, speechless.

"You make me a better man is the thing," he said. "You challenge me in a way that I like. I like rising to your challenges, and you set the bar higher and higher with the way you handle being the most amazing mother and doctor and, uh, *decorator* that I've ever met, and you're so fucking beautiful, and... I just want to lock you down, so..."

She looked up at him. "Yes."

"Will you marry me?"

She grinned. "I want to get married here. At the farmhouse. A small wedding with just our families. Next summer, so Mabel will be toddling. And Tyr and Mabel can be our only attendants. And you have to wear a traditional tunic with embroidery at the collar, and don't argue with me about that, because it's the aesthetic I'm going for and—"

He kissed her, swallowing all her words, and she wound her arms around his neck, and he pulled her close, and—even though she was not nearly as small as she used to be before the baby—she felt tiny in his arms, engulfed and supported and *loved*.

Outside, the air was crisp and cold and there was a whisper on the breeze that promised the sharp bite of frost. Overhead, the sky was a deep, dark midnight blue, broken by the brightness of stars overhead, which glittered with a promise of all that was to come and all that would be.

Thanks so much for reading!

If you like realistic wish-fulfillment and you want your romance to hurt so good, then you don't want to miss any of my new releases.

Click [here](#) to sign up for my email list.

I write Victorian and contemporary monster romance. First books of each series:

[Hoofbeats](#)

[Fake Dating the Orc Professor](#)

I also write science fiction romance. Start with [Star Savage](#).

Or try my recommender page, [here](#).