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Isla Marenwick

Captured by an Orc



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Аннотация

I never believed in magic or dreamed of other worlds. Then the ground opened beneath my feet and cast me into a world of blood and iron. I became the captive of an orc chief. Where can I run when danger lurks everywhere in this world? And should I listen to a rough green giant who promises to take care of me? What does such a promise even mean to an orc?

A rough but caring hero

A strong heroine

An orc chief

He protects her, but he will not let her go

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Chapter 1. The Fall

I had never believed in other worlds.

You know the kind of people I mean. They watch fantasy movies, read stories about women whisked away to other worlds, and think, "I wish something like that would happen to me." They dream of dragons, magic, and handsome princes with pointed ears. I wasn't one of them. I had an ordinary life: a boring job in the IT department of a chain store, a tiny apartment on the outskirts of town, and a cat who hated me.

Every morning I made coffee. I believed in deadlines — and in the certainty that I would spend yet another summer vacation at home binge-watching TV shows.

So when the ground opened beneath my feet, my first thought was, "Great. A pipe must have burst and washed away the ground beneath me."

And then I was falling.

It didn't feel like a miracle. I felt weightless, with no sense of gravity at all, and heard no dramatic whoosh — just the sensation of plunging through something cold and sticky, like molasses. My ears rang. Fragments flickered before my eyes, some of them dreams, others perhaps someone else's memories. Forests. Mountains. Blood on snow. Enormous shadows marching to war.

I screamed, but the sound was swallowed up.

The fall ended abruptly. Something hurled me onto solid

ground. Pain shot through my back, elbows, and the back of my head. My lungs burned. I'd swallowed some of that molasses-like substance. Was it the air here? Or magic? Or something that didn't exist in my world at all?

I lay on the ground. The air smelled of pine needles, rotting leaves, and animal fur.

"It's moving," someone said close to my ear. The voice was deep and guttural, edged with a growl.

"A female," another answered. "Alone. Unarmed."

"Where'd she come from? She's awfully pale."

"Who cares? We'll show her to the chief."

I tried to open my eyes. My eyelids felt as though someone had glued weights to them. But I forced myself to look.

Two figures stood over me.

No. Not just two figures.

Two monsters.

Green-skinned. Huge. At least eight feet tall. Broad shoulders, powerful jaws, protruding tusks. Yellow eyes with slit pupils, like a cat's — or a snake's. I wanted to curl into a ball and freeze.

Orcs.

I'd seen orcs before. In computer games. In comics.

But those were pictures. These were alive. Sweaty. Smelly. And staring at me like I was a piece of meat.

"Doesn't look like the others," said the first orc, the one on the left. An old, deep scar crossed his cheek, cutting through his eyebrow and lip. "Too pale. Too small. And her hair's different.

Never seen one like her."

"She's small, all right," the second snorted. "Doubt she'd even reach my waist."

They burst out laughing. It was a horrifying sound: low and rumbling, like rocks tumbling down a mountainside.

I tried to crawl away. My hands shook and my knees threatened to buckle. My sweater snagged on a root and tore; dew soaked through my jeans. I felt like a mouse discovered by a pair of cats. And those cats were very, very hungry.

"Stay where you are," the first one roared after I'd managed to crawl half a yard. He stepped toward me, and the ground seemed to tremble under his weight. "We said you're going to the chief. So you're going."

"I haven't done anything," I whispered. My voice cracked into a squeak. "I don't know how I got here. Please let me go. Please."

Who do you think the orcs are comparing our heroine to? Any guesses?

Chapter 2. The Big, Scary Orc

The second orc bent down. His face was barely eight inches from mine. I could see every pore in his green skin, every coarse bristle on his unshaven jaw, every glint in his yellow eyes.

"Makes a funny little squeak," he said with a grin. His tusks gleamed. "Maybe the chief will like her."

He grabbed me by the scruff of my neck like a kitten and lifted me into the air.

I screamed. I thrashed and pounded his arm with my fists. I might as well have been punching the trunk of an ancient oak. He didn't even notice.

"Quit squirming, little thing. I'll break you."

He slung me over his shoulder. Upside down. Blood rushed to my face and my vision darkened. All I could see was the ground and enormous bare feet, each almost the size of my head.

The orcs set off at a brisk, steady pace without a word.

I dangled over his shoulder like a rag doll. I felt sick. Fear overwhelmed everything, filling my throat, my stomach, my lungs. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Only one thought hammered in my head:

This isn't a dream. This isn't a dream. This isn't a dream.

The forest ended without warning. We emerged into a settlement built in a trampled clearing. Fires burned in the center, and the air smelled of roasting meat and something sour, like

kefir. Tents stood all around — not ordinary camping tents, but large shelters made of hides and coarse cloth. Orcs wandered between them. Lots of orcs. Dozens.

Every one of them turned to stare.

At me.

I heard their deep, rumbling voices as they talked, laughed, and pointed clawed fingers in my direction.

"They've brought in a human…"

"What a scrawny thing…"

"Not much fat on her. Won't taste good…"

"Maybe she's for the chief's amusement…"

"Something odd about the way she looks…"

I squeezed my eyes shut so tightly that sparks danced behind my eyelids.

Without warning, I was set back on the ground. I lost my balance and dropped to my knees. I looked up.

A tent stood before me, larger than any of the others. Bones hung over its entrance: skulls, horns, vertebrae from some enormous beast. There was light inside, a strange greenish magical light that pulsed in time with my heartbeat.

"Chief!" bellowed the orc who had carried me. His voice rang across the clearing. "We found a human female in the forest. Alone. No clan. No weapons."

Silence.

Even the fires seemed to stop crackling.

The tent flap moved aside.

And out came…

No. He didn't merely step outside. An orc loomed into view.

He was enormous. Huge even by orc standards. Nearly ten feet tall. Broad shoulders. Arms as thick as my waist. Dark green skin, his torso crisscrossed with old scars. He wore no armor, just rough leather trousers held up by a belt. His mighty chest was bare, rising and falling with every breath like a blacksmith's bellows.

But none of that was what made me go still.

I was staring at his face.

Hard. Angular. A square chin shadowed with stubble. A broad, slightly hooked nose. Thin lips pressed into a line. A scar above his right eyebrow ran up into his hairline. His hair was divided into dozens of thin braids threaded with bone beads.

But most of all, his eyes.

They burned. Literally burned, with a wild, predatory amber light. His vertical pupils narrowed when he looked at me, and I felt that gaze through my whole body. It swept over me like a knife blade, from head to toe. Assessing. Weighing.

I couldn't breathe.

He took one step. Just one. And suddenly he was right in front of me.

His scent hit me. Forest, smoke, leather, and something animal and masculine. A scent that made my head spin. Or was that fear? Or something else? I didn't know. I didn't want to know.

He bent down. Slowly. Making sure I could see every movement.

I sat on the ground with my head tipped back, feeling like an insect under a magnifying glass.

"Stand," he said.

His voice was low. Rich. Naturally raspy, as though he had been born to growl. His vocal cords seemed designed for growling, for giving orders, for making thousands obey him.

I didn't stand. I couldn't. My legs refused to work.

He leaned closer, took my chin between his fingers — enormous, rough fingers with calloused skin and short claws — and turned my face toward the light. He studied me, eyes narrowed.

"Human," he said slowly, as though tasting the word. "Where did you come from?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

"I don't know. I just fell. I don't know how I ended up here. There aren't any orcs in my world. Please let me go. I won't tell anyone. I just want to go home."

He was silent. One second. Two. Three.

Then his lips twitched. Not a smile. No. Something else. Predatory. Dangerous.

"Home," he repeated. "This is your home now."

He released my chin and straightened to his full height. Above him, two moons were rising in the night sky. Enormous. Crimson.

“She is mine,” the chief said.
He did not raise his voice.
Yet the words carried across the whole clearing, to every tent.
My heart skipped a beat.
Because there had been no question in his voice.
Only a verdict.
What do you think Alisa should do?

Chapter 3. The Chief

They dragged me into the tent.

The orc chief simply grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and stepped over the threshold. Once again I dangled in the air, struggling to breathe.

The inside was more spacious than I'd expected. The floor was covered in skins: bear, wolf, and some I didn't recognize, with long black fur. A small fire burned in the center, its smoke escaping through an opening overhead. Chests stood along the walls, beside weapons and bundles of dried herbs. And there was a bed. An enormous sleeping platform piled high with furs.

He set me on my feet as casually as a sack of potatoes. I swayed and caught the edge of a chest to keep from falling.

The chief circled me, slowly. I could feel his heavy, hot gaze burning through my sweater. I shrank into myself, hunching my shoulders.

"What is your name?" he asked.

His voice seemed to come from everywhere, echoing from the tent walls, growing louder and pressing in on me.

"Alisa," I managed.

"A-li-sa," he repeated, drawing out the vowels. He pronounced it with a strange, throaty growl. "An odd name. A human name."

"I am human," I said, and regretted it immediately. There was

a hint of defiance in my voice. Not the useful kind that might protect me, but the kind that comes from terror, when your brain has shut down and your mouth keeps working.

He stopped directly in front of me. I stared at his chest, because looking any higher was too frightening. Sweat glistened on his skin. Muscles shifted beneath it with every movement. Heat radiated from him like a stove.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"No," I answered honestly.

"I am Kargat. Chief of the Blood Axe clan. These lands are mine. These orcs are mine. And now you are mine, too. You yourself said you came from another world and appeared on my land. That means you belong to no one here."

"I'm not an object," I whispered. "You can't just…"

"I can," he interrupted, calm, almost lazy. "You appeared on my land with no family, no clan, and no protection. By the laws of our world, you are a prize. And a prize belongs to whoever finds it."

"Your warriors found me," I pointed out. "Then I'm their prize."

For the first time since we'd met, Kargat smirked. It wasn't friendly; he looked pleased with himself. He reminded me of a giant cat playing with a mouse and savoring every moment.

"They brought you to me. Because I am the chief. Everything that comes onto clan land belongs to me. The warriors are mine, too, along with anything they find."

His logic was rock-solid in its monstrous simplicity. I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it. Pointless.

"What are you going to do with me?" I asked very quietly.

Kargat leaned down. Now only inches separated our faces. I felt his hot breath, saw every tiny crack in his lips, heard the steady, powerful beat of his heart, like a drum.

"That depends on you, A-li-sa," he said.

"On me?"

"You can be useful, or you can be a burden. I keep those who are useful. Those who become a burden, I hand over to my warriors."

I remembered the looks the orcs in the camp had given me. Hungry. Greedy. Curious. My insides turned to ice.

"I can be useful," I said quickly. "I know how to cook. Clean. I studied programming, but that probably won't… I can sew! A little. And… and…"

I fell silent, realizing I was talking nonsense. Sewing? Cleaning? In a world without washing machines or the internet?

Kargat watched me. And I could see in his eyes that he knew I was grasping at straws. For some reason, though, he didn't interrupt.

When I finally ran out of things to say, he studied me for a long moment. Once it was clear I had nothing left to say, he stepped away and sat on the edge of the bed. It sagged beneath his weight, the furs rustling. Kargat gestured to the space beside him.

"Come here."

I didn't move.

"I said come."

My legs took a step. All by themselves. My body was apparently better at obeying than my mind. I approached the bed and stopped a couple of feet away.

"Sit."

I sat on the very edge. My knees trembled.

Kargat turned toward me. There we sat, side by side: he was enormous as a mountain, while I was tiny and terrified, clenching my hands into fists to keep them from shaking.

"You fear me," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I admitted.

"Good. Fear is respect. And I value respect."

He took my hand. I flinched, but his grip held firm. Not painfully, just inescapably. He turned my palm upward and traced the life line on my palm with one finger. Carefully. Almost tenderly.

"You're no warrior," he said. "No hunter. Not even a peasant. You're delicate."

"Is that bad?"

"It's dangerous. My world does not forgive weakness."

He released my hand and looked into my eyes. For the first time, I saw something beyond cool assessment in his gaze. Curiosity. A desire to understand. As though I were a book written in an unfamiliar language and he were trying to decipher the opening words.

“Tomorrow I will present you to the clan,” Kargat said. “You will live in my tent. You will do what I tell you. Eat what I give you. Sleep…”

He stopped. For a second. Just a second.

“You will sleep beside me.”

My breath caught.

“No,” I blurted. “I won’t. I don’t… I don’t agree.”

Kargat didn’t grow angry. He tilted his head, and something flickered in his eyes. Surprise? Respect?

“You’re brave,” he said. “Foolish, but brave.”

“I’m not foolish,” I protested, though everything inside me was shaking. “I just don’t want to be somebody’s plaything.”

“You’re not a plaything,” Kargat replied. “You’re mine. There’s a difference.”

He stood and went to a chest. From it he took a large cloak of thick black wool and draped it around my shoulders. It was heavy. Warm. It smelled of him.

“Get some sleep, A-li-sa,” he said. “Tomorrow will be a long day.”

He lay down, taking up more than half the bed, and turned his back to me.

I sat there clutching his cloak to my chest, not knowing what to do. Run? Where? Beyond the tent flap were hundreds of orcs ready to tear me apart. Stay? Beside him? Beside the man who had said “She’s mine” as though it were law?

I lay down on the very edge, curled into a ball, and pulled the

cloak over my head.

Sleep took a long time to come. I listened to his breathing. Slow. Deep.

And when sleep finally claimed me, I dreamed of his eyes. Amber, glowing in the dark.

And of a voice repeating over and over:

"She is mine."

What do you think of Kargat?

Chapter 4. The Bargain

Mornings in the orcs' world were loud.

I woke to someone shouting at the top of his lungs across the camp. No, not someone — dozens of orcs, all yelling at once. Calling to each other, swearing, laughing, clanking their weapons. Animals lowed somewhere. Elsewhere, axes thudded as someone chopped wood or hacked apart carcasses.

I lay beneath Kargat's heavy cloak, afraid to open my eyes.

Because the moment I woke, everything came rushing back. All at once. Like a punch to the stomach.

Another world. Orcs. A chief. "She is mine."

Slowly, I opened one eye.

The tent. Light. Not sunlight, but that strange greenish magical glow I'd seen yesterday. It came from a stone hanging on a chain above the fire pit. The stone pulsed slowly, as if alive.

Kargat was gone.

I sat up, and the cloak slid from my shoulders. The tent was warm. The fire had burned down to embers, yet the air still seemed thick and heavy.

A bowl stood on a chest, filled with something hot. Steam curled over its rim. Beside it stood a cup of water and a piece of bread. Rough, dark bread, nothing like what I was used to.

I wasn't hungry. My mouth was dry and my stomach was in knots. But my body needed strength. I forced myself to drink

some water. Then some more. Then I broke off a piece of bread. It was bland, with a bitter aftertaste, as though it had been made from acorn flour.

I didn't eat any more. I stood. My legs were shaking, but they held me.

I went to the tent entrance and lifted the heavy, rough flap, which smelled of leather and smoke.

And froze.

The camp was alive. Truly alive. Orcs moved between the tents. They were huge creatures who seemed clumsy only at first glance. In fact, they moved with frightening ease, like large predators. Orc women — nearly as tall as the men, broad-shouldered and powerfully built — carried buckets, butchered carcasses, and bickered in low voices. Orc children chased one another, squealing and throwing stones.

And suddenly all of them were looking at me.

The instant I appeared, dozens of yellow eyes swung my way. Someone froze with an ax raised. Someone elbowed a neighbor. A low, growling whisper spread through the camp.

"A human…"

"The chief's little toy…"

"Skin and bones…"

"Brought her in yesterday…"

I backed into the tent. The flap dropped, shutting out their stares.

My heart was pounding somewhere in my throat.

"I wouldn't advise going outside without me."

I jumped and spun around.

Kargat was standing at the back of the tent. I hadn't heard him come in. For someone his size, he moved with astonishing silence. Another frightening detail.

"Where did you come from?" I gasped.

"Through the rear flap." He nodded toward the opposite wall. "I hunt at dawn, A-li-sa."

I noticed he was wearing different trousers. And they were wet. A bloodied knife hung from his belt.

"Did you kill someone?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"I killed something. I was hunting, after all," Kargat answered matter-of-factly. "A giant raccoon. Its hide will make you a pair of boots."

"I don't need raccoon boots."

"You need warm boots. Winter is coming."

He walked past me, tossed the bloody knife onto a chest, and pulled off his trousers. Just like that. Without the slightest embarrassment. I turned away, but I still caught a glimpse from the corner of my eye. Muscles. Dark green skin. And something else that sent heat rushing to my cheeks.

"Don't look away," Kargat said, and I thought I heard a smirk in his voice. "I saw the way you were looking at me."

What do you think of Kargat's straightforwardness?

Chapter 5. Status

"I wasn't looking!"

"You were. And you blushed. Cute."

I stood with my back to him, fists clenched, praying he wouldn't notice that my ears were burning. Damn orc. Damn orcish habits.

He put on a dry pair of trousers and a loose shirt made from coarse leather, then came over and took me by the shoulder, turning me around.

"Eat," he said, nodding toward the bowl. "The entire clan council is meeting today. You'll be there."

"What council?"

"The clan council. I'll announce your status."

"My status? I have a status?"

Kargat studied me for a long time, so intently that I wanted to hide.

"You're my captive," he said. "But being the chief's captive is not the same as being a warrior's captive. You are under my protection. No one will touch you without my orders."

"Is that good?"

"It's better than the alternatives."

I looked at the bowl and picked it up. Inside was something like porridge, dark and grainy, with chunks of meat. It didn't smell too bad. I tasted it. Salty. Greasy. But edible.

"And what if I refuse?" I asked through a mouthful. "Your protection. This status."

Kargat gave a short, growling chuckle.

"Then I'll put you outside and announce, 'She's free.' Within a minute, thirty warriors will be tearing you apart. Whoever gets to you first claims the prize."

I stopped chewing.

"You're bluffing."

"I never bluff, A-li-sa. They'd devour you before you could blink."

I looked into his eyes. Amber, calm, utterly sincere. He wasn't lying. He really would throw me out. And watch them tear me apart. He might even take satisfaction in it.

"Why won't you let me go?" I asked softly. "I haven't done anything to you. I'm just a mistake. A glitch. I was never supposed to end up here."

"Perhaps," Kargat agreed. "Or perhaps fate brought you to me for a reason. In my world, we believe in fate."

"Do you?"

He was silent for so long I began to think he wouldn't answer.

"I believe what I see," he said at last. "And I see that you aren't like the other humans I've met. You're no warrior, but you're no coward, either. You're afraid, yet you don't break. You talk back even though you know I could kill you."

"That's stupidity," I said.

"That's strength," he countered. "A different kind. Not the

kind orcs have. But strength."

He took my empty bowl. I hadn't even noticed I'd finished eating. He set it on the chest, then suddenly dropped to one knee in front of me.

I recoiled.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking at you," he replied. Now his face was level with mine. "Really seeing you. For the first time."

He ran a hand over my hair. Carefully. I froze, holding my breath. His rough, calloused fingers slid along a fair strand and curled it around one finger.

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