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Isla Marenwick

A Curvy Woman for the Orc



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«Издательские решения»

Marenwick I.

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In the human world, I was considered fat, but I always dreamed of finding someone big and strong who would love my curves just the way they are.I wanted to enter the world of orcs, but when I finally saw them in the flesh, I lost my nerve.But what am I supposed to do now? I'm already in their world!What you'll find in this book:A curvy heroine transported to another worldAn orc she'll try to seduceA dangerous secret hidden in this strange new worldA happily ever after!

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Chapter 1. A Third Chin and Elven Princes

The cat was taking a dump in his litter box with an almost ceremonial lack of haste. He knew I was watching. He sat there, eyes narrowed, waiting for me to turn away so he could bury his business with dignity. We were alike, the two of us: both pretending we were perfectly happy with things, as long as no one was looking. Only he could purr, while I could lose myself in my phone as the damned walls closed in on me.

My kitchen measured four and a half steps from wall to wall, provided you walked sideways and held your breath. A stove, a table, a windowsill cluttered with jars of leftover jam that I opened at precisely two in the morning, when my conscience was already asleep but my hunger wasn't. It was Wednesday night. Outside, the rain was either drizzling or crying along with me. I sat with my legs tucked up on an old, creaky chair, a mug of cold tea in one hand and my phone in the other. The screen glowed like a portal to another universe. The irony was that this was exactly the sort of universe I was diving into: a world of perfect figures, other people's smiles, green smoothies, and cheerful absurdity.

I scrolled through my feed. Alisa, a twenty-two-year-old fitness blogger, stood in front of palm trees, showing off her perfect abs. A dazzling, toothy grin, every tooth perfectly white. "You can do anything — all you have to do is start!" the caption proclaimed. I instinctively sucked in my stomach. It went in easily. My stomach was soft, obliging, and used to these games. But the moment I breathed out, it happily returned to its place, spilling over the waistband of my sweatpants. I looked down at the black screen of my phone; it had locked while I was contemplating my fatness. In the reflection: my round face, my potato nose, cheeks that were somehow still baby-plump at thirty, and my chin. Or rather, chins. I counted them when no one was watching: the first, a classic; the second, a soft little roll just starting to form; the third, the one that appeared when I lowered my head to look at my phone. Three. Like in a fairy tale. Only instead of three mighty heroes, it was three chins and not a prince in sight.

I unlocked the screen. Alisa was still smiling. I closed the app and automatically opened another. Recipes. "Low-calorie dessert in five minutes: cottage cheese, a banana, and a drizzle of honey." Ha. Low-calorie. I knew how that ended for me: the banana went into the fridge, and the remains of a Prague chocolate cake came out of the freezer. Then there I was, sitting in the dark, breaking off chunks with a spoon, because using a knife would be too deliberate. With a spoon, it was almost accidental. Afterward, I'd tell myself, "One little piece doesn't count." Then, "Neither does the second, because I've had a hard day." By the third, I'd have stopped counting; by the fourth, I'd be crying; and by the fifth, I'd be opening yet another diet website and swearing to start on Monday, still chewing because I couldn't stop.

Monday had been a while ago. I'd dutifully bought buckwheat, kefir, and a bunch of celery. The celery smelled of sadness, the buckwheat turned out to be tasteless, and the kefir was sour, as kefir was supposed to be. That still upset me. By Wednesday, the celery had wilted, I'd gulped down the kefir to quell my hunger as quickly as possible, and I'd cooked the buckwheat and eaten it with a meat patty so enormous that even the cat meowed in respect. My cat was an independent expert on late-night eating. He was always there when I opened the fridge. His name was Marquis. Because he was ginger and shameless. And he didn't give a damn about my chins.

I scrolled through the feed again. This time, an ad appeared: "Get in shape for summer! Liposuction. Payment plans available." I snorted. For summer. By summer, my shape was usually a sphere, and it was a very stable one. Maybe to hell with the bloggers? I switched to my reading app. Romance, magic, elves. There, in the world of make-believe, everything was simple: beautiful elven women with slender wrists and ringing laughter invariably fell into the clutches of muscular barbarians who growled, "You're mine," and carried them off into the sunset. I'd never pictured myself as an elf.

I was about as much of an elven maiden as Marquis was a ballerina. I was more the sort of innkeeper who served the heroes ale in novels and offered them advice. Warm, soft, and well-rounded, with a third chin and a heart full of affection that had nowhere to go.

I opened another book. An elven princess, thin as a coat hanger, was just being rescued by an enormous northern warrior. He swept her into his arms, and she probably weighed about as much as a bag of buckwheat. I sighed. In my world, nobody swept anybody into their arms. At best, they asked you to move over on the bus. And even if someone did pick me up, he'd put his back out, and the romance would turn into a drama involving sick leave. I giggled and scrolled on. The barbarian told her she was "beautiful and dangerous." Dangerous. Must have been those sharp collarbones.

Somewhere between the lines of my own despair and someone else's fantasy, a thought crept in, as old as time and as foolish as I was. If only there were a world where people like me were normal. Where my body was something to be proud of, not ashamed of. Where the bigger the woman, the greater the honor for her husband. Where people approached you with armfuls of food and the words "You're beautiful," instead of suggestions that you lose weight. I sighed so heavily that Marquis rolled onto his other side in annoyance. Dreams. I had a job — boring, but remote, thank goodness for progress — a cat, pastries in the fridge, and forty extra kilos. And I had the night. And my phone.

I left the reading app again and absentmindedly scrolled through my social media feed. Sometimes I visited groups. "Curvy Ladies," "Body Positivity Without the Fanaticism," "Happy at Any Weight." The girls posted swimsuit photos, left supportive comments, and gave one another hearts. It was comforting, of course, but it still felt like a consolation prize. We all knew that the world outside the group considered us a problem. Sometimes we thought so ourselves.

I kept scrolling until I came across a strange, almost funny hashtag: #BodyPositivityInFantasy. Beneath it, a girl with the username "ChubbyElka" was musing: "I've been thinking — if orcs existed, they'd definitely love fat women. Strong men need strong women. Let the elves love their dragonflies." I smiled. The post had attracted plenty of comments: some people joked about green musclemen, others argued in earnest that every culture had its own standards. And someone had posted a link to a forum called "World_of_Orcs."

The name caught my eye. Fool that I was, I took the bait. Clicked. A forum page loaded, dark green, styled to look like rough parchment and hides. In the header, a burning torch and a logo: a snarling, tusked mouth and the words "Orcs rule. Down with scrawny men." I snorted with laughter. "What a name. Sounds like a cult." I decided to read a couple of posts to pass the time and then close the tab, but I ended up hooked for three hours.

This wasn't just a role-playing game. People — or not people? At the time, I thought they were people — were discussing the finer points of orc culture, everyday life, and hierarchy with real expertise. Terminology, legends, even a dictionary. Seriously, it was like reading an encyclopedia. Someone would ask, "Is it true that female orcs are bigger than males?" and receive a detailed answer with explanations. But what really caught my attention was a thread in the "Culture and Customs" section titled "On True Beauty, or Why a Skinny Wife Is a Disgrace to an Orc."

I snorted into my mug, nearly spilling the cold tea. Opened it. Read slowly, moving my lips like an old woman.

"Among our people, a woman's true beauty is measured not in delicacy, but in strength. Broad hips promise sturdy offspring. Full arms can rock a child and keep a household together. A soft belly is a sign of prosperity and health, proof that a husband can feed his family. The larger the woman, the more respect her husband commands among his kin. Thinness is considered a sign of illness, poverty, or a foul temper — a girl like that will be pitied rather than chosen as a wife. When an orc lays his hand on his woman's side, he wants to feel warmth, abundance, and life, not count her ribs."

I read the last sentence three times. "Lays his hand on her side… wants to feel warmth, abundance…" An image rose before my eyes: an enormous green hand, rough, with short claws, and my side. That soft fold at my waist that I hated, the one I usually prodded awkwardly in front of the

mirror while thinking, What a horror. And now someone had told me it was a treasure. Even if that someone was an anonymous forum user called “Thunder-Claw” with a boar for an avatar.

I scrolled on. Photographs of drawings and sculptures — clearly amateur work, but all the more touching for it. Orc women: mighty, with sweeping hips, heavy breasts, strong backs. No “Suck in your stomach.” No “Lose weight for summer.” In one picture, a huge orc carried a boar’s carcass over his shoulder and had his other arm around his wife. She was a head shorter than he was, but broader. And his face… the artist had tried to give the orc a tender smile. It was so strange, so unfamiliar, that a lump rose in my throat.

I remembered riding the subway the week before, when a man passing by had snapped, “Fat cow! One person taking up two seats!” I’d shrunk into myself without a word. And here on the forum, they were saying my figure was perfect for an orc.

Marquis jumped onto the table and lay down right on my arm, demanding affection. I scratched behind his ear automatically, my eyes still on the screen. The forum drew me deeper: “Otherworld Travelers: Myth or Reality?”, “How to Locate a Portal at the Full Moon,” “Crossings: Collecting Accounts.” Serious discussions, coordinates, calculations. I knew perfectly well that this was probably a mass hallucination shared by a bunch of enthusiasts, role-players, and lonely dreamers like me. But something inside me clicked.

It was already three in the morning. My phone showed seventeen percent battery. Tomorrow — or rather, today — was a workday. My eyes were closing. I, Lyuba, a thirty-year-old chubby woman with three chins, a cat, and no love life, was sitting in my cramped kitchen, staring at a screen where the words flashed: “Welcome to the orcs. Strength. Care. The worship of full-figured women.”

I closed the tab. Put down the phone. Then opened it again. Bookmarked it. Embarrassing. Ridiculous. And yet it felt as though someone had wrapped a warm shawl around my heart.

“What if…” I whispered into the darkness. The cat looked at me as though he understood. But I didn’t care. Somewhere at the edge of my world, in the depths of a dense forest I’d never walked through, there might be a portal. And orcs — not villains in books, but living men who appreciated full hips. And perhaps I’d lost my mind. But for the first time in a long while, I felt less alone.

I turned off the light. Marquis began to purr. There was only one chin reflected in the black screen now, because I was sitting with my head held proudly high. Maybe I was a fool, but it warmed my heart to think that, even in a make-believe world, women like me were treated with tenderness.

Chapter 2. Aligned Stars and GPS Directions

A week passed, and I still couldn't tear myself away from the orc forum.

I honestly tried to resist. I'd delete the bookmark, tell myself it had been a moment of late-night madness — and an hour later, there I was in the "Life and Customs of the Green Clans" thread again, poring over a discussion of wedding rituals among different orc tribes. Weddings! I devoured accounts of northern orcs giving their brides belts made of bronze rings. Only a week earlier, I hadn't given orcs a thought. Now I knew how the mountain, steppe, and forest tribes differed; I knew that the mountain tribes prized metalwork, the forest tribes their shamans' magic, and the steppe tribes horse breeding and conquest. And all of them, without exception, loved fat women.

Marquis watched me reproachfully. He was used to being stroked in the evenings, and now I sat with my nose buried in a screen, absentmindedly scratching his side with one hand — and only when he came over on his own — while scrolling through the forum with the other. The cat took revenge: knocking a mug off the table one day, ostentatiously sharpening his claws on the sofa the next. But I couldn't tear myself away.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but the forum became my secret life. I registered as "Lyuba_ChubbyBun" — imagination isn't my strong point — and even wrote a couple of posts in the newcomers' thread. The replies were warm, without a trace of mockery. They asked which city I was from, whether I believed in portals, and whether I'd ever had "strange dreams with a greenish tinge." I joked it off, but inside, everything went still. What if? What if some of these people really did know something?

The "Otherworld Travelers: Myth or Reality?" thread held a particular fascination for me. There were more than three hundred pages of discussion. Some claimed they'd crossed over themselves but returned because they couldn't get used to life there. Others insisted portals opened only during lunar eclipses. Others argued that you needed blood, or a sacrifice, or a special artifact. It all sounded like nonsense, but such warm, comforting nonsense that I sank into it like a feather bed.

Then one night — night again, because all my madness happened under cover of darkness — I saw a private message.

Sender: "Moonmane's Shadow." The avatar showed a black wolf against the moon. The message was as brief as a heartbeat:

"The portal opens at the full moon. You need the desire to leave and the exact coordinates. If you're not all talk, if you really want to leave, listen."

I stared at the screen. My fingers went cold. It felt like the opening of a bad horror film, where the heroine receives a sinister invitation and goes into the woods, only to be found in a ravine three days later. But I was a grown woman with a cat at home who hadn't been fed. What the hell did I want with anything supernatural? I gave a snort and typed a reply:

"I'm listening. But if you offer me a weight-loss course or a cult pamphlet, I'm blocking you."

The answer came a minute later.

"Pine Grove municipal forest park. Northern section, past the ski lodge. There's a ravine, and on the other side, three oaks in a triangle. From the northernmost one, head due west. Every tenth tree has an arrow notched into it. Follow them to a crossing of paths, where you'll find a small marsh. Go around it to the left. You'll find a circle of four boulders with two oaks in the middle. At the full moon, stand exactly between them at midnight. If the portal doesn't open, it means you're not meant to go there."

I read it three times. "Forest park," "ravine," "notches" kept spinning through my head. Unbelievable. It was too detailed for a prank. And too strange to be true. I opened the map on my phone. Pine Grove really did exist, on the northern outskirts of the city.

I asked:

“Who are you? How do you know the coordinates?”

“I’m someone who’s already left. And I didn’t come back empty-handed. Enough questions, Lyuba_ChubbyBun. Do you want a world where your body is a treasure? The full moon is in four days. Make up your mind.”

Then silence. Not another message. I wrote three more times, but there was no reply. The “Moonmane’s Shadow” account had been registered on the forum for a long time, but had almost no posts: just a couple of vague messages in the portal thread. Nothing specific. No clues.

Four days. I had four days to decide whether to give in to madness.

Chapter 3. The Decision

I spent those four days in a strange, shifting fog. Working remotely saved me: I could sit at my laptop, mechanically answering emails and editing spreadsheets, while running through the route in my head. Northern section. Past the ski lodge. Three oaks in a triangle. Notches. A marsh. Boulders. Two oaks. Midnight. A full moon.

I even wrote it all down on a scrap of paper, like an old woman who didn't trust technology. The scrap lay under my keyboard. Every so often, I took it out to confirm that I'd actually written down directions to a portal. I couldn't believe I'd grown so desperate for love that I was contemplating leaving the human world.

On Wednesday, I finally made up my mind. Or rather, I didn't so much decide as realize that if I didn't go, I'd never forgive myself. I'd already spent my whole life afraid: afraid of being judged, afraid I wasn't beautiful enough, afraid of being laughed at. I hid in books and work, escaped into the internet, into forums and dreams, and ate pastries to soothe my stress. And now someone had offered me a chance — however elusive, however mad — and I had to at least try. For myself. For the girl who skipped PE at school because she was ashamed to wear shorts. For the woman who hid her stomach under shapeless clothes and smiled when she wanted to cry. For all of us chubby girls who dreamed of a world where we were valued, instead of merely tolerated.

And so, one evening, I put the cat in his carrier and dressed in something comfortable. I didn't own anything but comfortable clothes anyway. I wasn't in the habit of dressing up, though for some reason I wanted to that day. Perhaps to mark the occasion of my own madness.

Chapter 4. The Dark and Frightening Woods

The forest greeted me with silence and wet pine needles.

I got out at the park gates, waited for the taxi to disappear around the bend, and stood for a minute, gathering my courage. My phone showed eleven at night. Sixty percent battery. I had a signal, but a weak one. I turned on the flashlight and followed the path toward the ski lodge.

The lodge was closed: a wooden building with a metal roof, dark windows, the smell of wet bark and old leaves. I went around it to the left and deeper into the forest. The path narrowed, became barely visible, then disappeared entirely beneath a layer of leaves. I opened the compass on my phone. North. I was heading north.

I found the ravine quickly: a long hollow with a stream at the bottom. I scrambled across, clinging to bushes and swearing under my breath. My sneakers slipped on the clay.

Beyond the ravine, the forest grew older. The pines stood tall and straight as candles. I counted trees. Peered into the darkness, shining my flashlight on the trunks, and had almost given up when I saw the first notch. Deep and old, certainly not made yesterday, shaped like an arrow pointing off to one side, into the thicket. My heart lurched. I'd found it.

From there, I followed the notches. They zigzagged around fallen trees and tangles of thorny bushes. With every arrow I found, my doubts grew smaller and my belief stronger. This couldn't be a prank. Would anyone go to such lengths for a joke? Who would spend months — and the notches were clearly more than a couple of days old — marking a trail through dense woodland for some random fool like me?

The marsh smelled of rot and stagnant water. I skirted it on the left, as "Moonmane" had instructed. My phone beeped. No signal. I flinched and stopped for a second. Silence. Just the wind and an owl hooting somewhere far away. I was alone in the woods, with no way to contact anyone, following instructions from a mysterious stranger on the internet. If that wasn't the definition of madness, what was?

I went on anyway. Because it was too late to turn back. Because all that waited at home was buckwheat, diets, and loneliness. And here, however unlikely, however foolish, was a chance at something different.

I spotted the boulders from a distance: four gray stones, sunk into the earth and covered in moss. Beyond them, in a small clearing, stood two oaks. Enormous and gnarled, their branches intertwined. Moonlight fell directly into the space between them, as though a stage were waiting for its actor.

I stood between the oaks. Tightened my grip on the carrier's handle and whispered:

"Don't judge me, Marquis. If you were a lonely fat woman who'd spent her whole life dreaming of love, you'd understand. But you're a cat. Everyone always loves cats, so you couldn't possibly understand."

The phone showed midnight. The full moon hung directly overhead, bright and pale, as if someone had painted it there.

I stood for a minute. Two. Five.

Nothing.

The wind rustled the leaves. The owl hooted again. Somewhere, a branch snapped. Perhaps an animal; perhaps just the forest breathing. I stood and waited. My feet grew cold. No change. No magic.

I don't know how much time passed. Half an hour, perhaps.

Nothing shimmered between the oaks. The air didn't hum. There was no smell of ozone or magic. Only pine needles, damp, and my own despair.

And I really had believed. A grown woman, taken in by a fairy tale. I'd allowed myself a dream. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what might have happened if it had all been true.

There I was, arriving in another world, where a big, strong, but caring orc saw me. He was so delighted by me that he couldn't even speak! He swept me into his arms and carried me to his tent. But the moment I said, "Stop," he let me go, because he respected my wishes, because I mattered to him, because he was too strong and too wise to hurt a woman. There was nobility in his character and love in his eyes.

That was what I wanted, what I dreamed of. The thoughts filled me with growing hope and warmth.

And when I opened my eyes, the moonlight suddenly seemed tangible. As though it had thickened and fallen over my shoulders like a wet blanket. A humming filled my ears. The air trembled. The grass between the oaks began to ripple with cold silver. I didn't even have time to be frightened. I only drew a deeper breath, feeling the whole world turn inside out. Everything blazed with dazzling light.

Then, abruptly, everything went dark.

Chapter 5. Real

Consciousness returned slowly. First came the smell of damp and juniper. Then the cold crept under my clothes, making me wince. I opened my eyes and stared at the sky. The stars seemed brighter, but the same trees stood all around me.

I sat up, leaning on one elbow. My head hummed as though I'd gone three nights without sleep. The carrier stood beside me, with Marquis shuffling indignantly inside, demanding an explanation. I opened the carrier door and reached in to soothe him.

"Easy, easy, furball. Looks like we're alive."

The cat poked his face out, sneezed, and gave me a reproachful look that said, Where exactly have you dragged us?

I looked around. Oaks. The same two oaks. The same forest. Pines, spruces, ferns at their roots, wet leaves underfoot. No shining portals, no green skies or orc strongholds on the horizon. An ordinary forest at night. Ordinary mud. Ordinary me — a complete fool sitting on wet grass in the middle of the woods at half past midnight.

The realization hit me a moment later, like a slap. Nothing had happened. It hadn't worked. All that supernatural nonsense had turned out to be just that, and "Moonmane's Shadow" was an ordinary troll who was probably sitting somewhere in a warm apartment, laughing his head off at the thought of a fat woman trudging into the forest at night to look for orcs.

I got to my feet and brushed off the leaves and moss clinging to me. My hands were shaking. Whether from cold or hurt, I couldn't tell. I wanted to scream, kick a boulder, burst into tears, but I didn't even have the strength for that. All that remained was a hollow, ringing bitterness.

"Well, Marquis, let's go home. The buckwheat's waiting. Apparently, there's no other way for us to find a mate."

I picked up the carrier and trudged back, mentally cursing everything in existence. The forum. Moonmane. Myself. Especially myself. Miracles didn't happen. I should have realized that even if orcs existed, they certainly weren't waiting for thirty-year-old me and my third chin. In their world, they'd probably take me for a female goblin anyway.

I pushed branches aside with my shoulder. I'd have to find my way out from memory, and my navigation skills in the dark left plenty to be desired.

Ten minutes later, I began to notice odd things.

First, the path. On my way to the clearing, I'd passed through ferns and fallen trees. Now there was a broad, well-trodden track under my feet that definitely hadn't been there before.

Second, the smell. That same juniper scent, with a hint of smoke, was growing stronger. Now the mouthwatering scent of roasting meat mingled with it, so delicious that my stomach gave a traitorous growl, even though I was supposed to be grieving.

Third, the trees. They seemed to be the same pines, but taller. More massive. The bark was thicker, the branches grew at different angles. And the grass underfoot was unfamiliar: bluish-gray, with tiny white flowers that shone in the moonlight like little light bulbs. I stopped and bent down to look. No, I wasn't hallucinating. They really did glow a little.

My heart began to pound so hard I could feel it in my temples. I slowly straightened and looked around. This was a different forest. Not a fantasy sort of different — no giant mushrooms or purple moss — but definitely no longer my city's forest park.

"Marquis," I whispered, "are you seeing this?"

The cat stayed silent, but when I peered into the carrier, his ears swiveled like radar dishes, picking up something I couldn't hear yet.

Then voices reached me. Apparently, I hadn't heard them before over the noise I'd been making as I pushed through the forest.

Low. Guttural. Deep in the chest, like an enormous drum rumbling far underground. I froze, afraid even to breathe. I couldn't make out the words; all I caught were fragments, rough, rumbling sounds that didn't resemble human speech at all. But the tone was peaceful, even lazy. The way people usually talked around a fire in the evening after a good meal.

I pressed my back against the nearest pine and moved slowly toward the sound, trying not to snap a single twig. I carried Marquis in his carrier, praying he wouldn't decide to yowl.

"Don't meow," I whispered through the carrier door. "Please. Act like a mouse. Do you understand? A dead mouse."

To my astonishment, the cat really did fall silent. Either my speech had moved him, or he was frightened too.

The voices grew louder. I edged around one thick trunk, then another, then a third, and peered out from behind a tree.

What I saw made me forget how to breathe.

A small clearing opened before me, lit by a bonfire. Flames leaped high, almost to the lowest branches, dancing and throwing orange flashes over the trees. Hide tents loomed in the distance. And everywhere — everywhere! — there were orcs.

I stared at them, and my entire being seemed to shrink into a single point somewhere around my solar plexus.

They were enormous. Not simply big, but so huge that the earth seemed to bend beneath their feet. Nearly two and a half meters tall, probably. Broad shoulders clad in coarse fabric and leather. Thick arms ridged with muscles like ropes. Backs like mountains, covered in dark, greenish skin.

Two sat closest to me, their backs to the forest. I froze behind the tree, afraid to move, and studied them, cautiously peeking out.

The first was a little shorter than the second, though "shorter" was a relative term when he was over two meters tall himself. A broad head, a powerful neck hung with leather cords strung with bone beads. Dark green skin, the color of moss. His shoulder blades stood out beneath a rough sleeveless vest, each the size of a decent baking tray. Muscles rolled with every movement: he was tearing meat from a bone with his teeth, and I could see the muscles in his neck tense.

The second was bigger still. Broader, heavier. He sat half-turned, so I could see his profile. A broad forehead, a heavy brow ridge, a flattened nose. His jaw jutted forward, bearing two massive lower tusks. They protruded past his full lip even with his mouth closed. Tusks that could probably snap a bone in two.

Both had pointed ears like elves, only coarser and longer, pierced with simple metal hoops. From the second one's ear — the larger one's — dangled a whole cluster of fangs, apparently trophies.

The two of them were eating a deer from a spit. They tore pieces off with their hands and teeth, occasionally exchanging short, guttural phrases.

I stood behind the tree, watching them, with one thought going around and around in my head:

"Lyuba, you're an idiot. A complete, absolute, hopeless idiot."

I'd dreamed of orcs! Of a green giant falling in love with me, curves and all, sweeping me into his arms and calling me his treasure. But idiot that I was, I'd never once considered that orcs weren't simply "guys who like chubby girls." They were orcs. Real ones. They could probably break someone's back with a single blow. Mine, for instance. Their tusks were as big as my fingers. And their hands were so enormous that one palm could cover my whole head the way mine covered an apple.

And I'd come to them myself. Voluntarily. With a cat in a carrier. I'd even thought that it might all work out, in which case I shouldn't leave Marquis at home. I loved my cat. How could I abandon him? And now he was in danger too. Because of me.

Hilarious.

I pressed my forehead against the bark, trying to stop my knees from shaking. What should I do? Turn back before they noticed me? But back where? I had no idea where the portal was now, or

whether it worked at all. Perhaps it opened once every hundred years, and I was trapped here forever — a plump little snack for the first orc who came along.

Marquis stirred in the carrier, and I went still.

"Quiet," I mouthed, barely breathing. "Please, be quiet."

I peered around the tree again. The larger one rose to add wood to the fire, and I saw him at his full height. My heart dropped into my shoes.

He was a mountain. A living, green mountain. Nearly two and a half meters tall, a chest like a truck tire, shoulders like two cannonballs. His forearms bulged with such muscles that I couldn't help thinking he could carry me on one arm without even noticing my weight. Only what would he do with me afterward? Drag me to his lair? Did orcs eat people? The forum hadn't mentioned that.

I pictured myself standing in that very clearing, in front of those very orcs, announcing, "Hello, I'm your visitor from another world. How about falling in love with me?" And I began to shake with nervous, hysterical laughter, which I barely managed to suppress by biting my lip.

Then, at the worst possible moment, Marquis opened his mouth.

"Mee-ooo-ooow!"

The sound sliced through the night air like a siren. Loud, demanding, outraged. Apparently, he'd decided he'd had enough of hide-and-seek and it was time to demand dinner. Especially with that incredible smell of meat reaching us. I could understand Marquis, but I couldn't forgive him. He'd given away our position to the orcs, and I hadn't even decided what to do next. Now I had to think fast, and I couldn't.

I froze.

The orcs froze.

The world froze.

The larger one turned his head toward me slowly, very slowly. His nostrils flared as he sniffed the air. The other turned too, and I saw their faces. Yellow eyes burning in the firelight. Heavy, watchful gazes piercing straight through the forest.

It took them an instant to locate the sound.

For several endless seconds, time stopped. I looked at them; they looked at me. Everything flashed through my head: my parents, work, the cat, the uneaten celery, the forum, Moonmane, my third chin. Everything.

The orcs exchanged a glance. The shorter one said something guttural; I was too agitated to make out the words. The big one didn't answer, turning his stare back on me. Then, slowly, lazily, but with every movement proclaiming his strength, he took a step forward. The second followed.

I stood paralyzed, clutching the carrier to my chest. Run? Where? Those enormous legs would catch me in three strides, even if I sprinted flat out. If they wanted to catch me, they would. If they wanted to kill me, they would. If they wanted to… what did they want?

The first orc stopped ten paces away and tilted his head. Exactly like a cat studying an unfamiliar object. His nostrils flared again, and he made a low, rumbling sound, almost questioning.

The second stepped closer. I could see his tusks gleaming in the moonlight. See the steady rise and fall of his chest. He didn't look aggressive, but that frightened me even more. He radiated such calm, assured power that one thing was clear: if he decided to do something, nothing could save me.

Marquis meowed again, more quietly this time, as though he'd realized what he'd done.

I stood clutching the carrier like my only anchor and thought, Well, Lyuba. Here's your chance. Here are your orcs. Standing there, looking at you. You can step out and explain that you're a visitor from a world where people don't love fat women, and you've come looking for happiness.

Chapter 6. Orc Hospitality

The silence split open like an overripe plum.

"Meat!" roared the shorter one, his voice rolling across the clearing. "Kha, look! They've sent us more meat through the portal! The spirits do have a sense of humor after all!"

He burst into booming laughter, slapping an enormous hand against his thigh. His laughter was like a rockslide: loud, clattering, utterly unstoppable. I stood with my head hunched between my shoulders, feeling every cell in my body turn to cold jelly.

Meat. He'd called me meat. I knew people could laugh at me, could think me ugly, fat, clumsy, but no one had ever called me food before. It was so monstrously simple, so savage, that tears sprang from my eyes.

The second orc, the mountain-sized one, drove his elbow sharply into his friend's side. The other grunted, choking on his laughter.

"Shis," the giant growled, his voice like the buzz of an enormous bumblebee trapped in a jar. Somehow, it resonated deep inside my rib cage. "You're frightening her. Settle down."

The one called Shis wiped a tear of laughter away with a callused finger, its claw the size of my little finger, and gave a broad, sharp-toothed grin. His yellow eyes shone in the firelight with undisguised amusement.

"That's the whole point, Khargakh!" And he started laughing again, though less thunderously this time, more contentedly, like the rumble of a well-fed predator.

Khargakh didn't answer. He simply watched me. His pupils widened slightly as he studied me from head to toe, but there was no greed in his gaze, no appraisal of "meat." More a weighty, calm curiosity. The way someone might look at an unexpected guest, wondering whether they were a friend or simply a traveler delivered by the night.

That was when I fell apart.

All the bravado I'd built up over four days vanished. The boldness with which I'd read the forum and thought, Oh, orcs! They'll carry me in their arms! shriveled into a dusty little ball. These weren't illustrated characters standing in front of me. They were predators. Their smell — smoke, sweat, musk, and animal fur — filled my nostrils. Up close, their skin wasn't merely green; it was textured, dense, with a faint tracery of old scars. I could see muscles rolling beneath it.

One foot betrayed me, slipping off the root I was standing on. I swayed. Marquis's carrier swung in my hands, and the cat meowed in protest.

Shis stopped laughing. He tilted his head to study the carrier, and his tusked face took on an expression of intense interest.

"Khargakh," he said, with no mockery in his voice this time. "Look. She's got some kind of beast with her. A little one. Making quite a racket."

"It's a cat," I whispered. The first words I'd managed to force out. My voice shook and broke.

The orcs stared at the carrier, where Marquis was pacing about.

I hugged it to my chest. This was my cat. I loved him, and he was not for eating. The whole situation, which had seemed like an adventure only that afternoon, had become sheer, clinging terror in the moonlight, in the presence of those two giants. This was all real. Not a dream. Not a hallucination.

"She's scared," Shis concluded. He scratched the back of his head with a clawed hand, looking puzzled. "I was only joking."

"Your jokes…" Khargakh looked at me again, his heavily tusked jaw shifting slightly. "The skinny thing will die of fright before we get her to the elder."

"I'm not skinny," I breathed, for some reason. Apparently, the instinct to contradict people still worked even when the rest of me had shut down.

Shis chuckled again, much more quietly now, and with something like approval.

Khargakh exhaled and took a step back. Then another. He was giving me room, showing me that he wouldn't attack. It was strange, and it didn't fit the image of a mindless monster I'd already formed in the minute we'd been talking.

"My name is Khargakh," he said distinctly, placing his enormous fist against his chest. "And this is Shis." He jerked his head toward his companion. "He talks a lot, but he doesn't kill without a reason. Nothing will happen to you. We'll take you where you need to go."

It wasn't a request, but it wasn't a threat, either. It was a statement of what would happen next.

I gave a short nod, because my voice had deserted me completely.

Shis picked up a bag from the ground. Khargakh gestured for me to follow, and they set off. Away to one side of the tents, where a broad, well-used track showed between the trees.

I went with them. The carrier bumped against my thighs. Marquis was silent, and that silence made it even more frightening. I felt that if I fell, these two would simply pick me up by the scruff of my neck and carry me slung over a shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I still wasn't entirely convinced Shis had been joking about the meat. What if they were taking me somewhere where they butchered people? But so far, everything was all right.

As we walked, Shis glanced back several times. He clearly couldn't stand silence for long. Apparently, orcs didn't like silence in general.

"So where did you come from?" he finally blurted out. "What were you doing in the woods? There's nothing there except that stupid portal."

"A long way away," I managed, hugging the carrier protectively to my chest. Naming my city or telling them about the forum seemed mortally dangerous just then.

"Where's a long way away?" Shis persisted. "Beyond the mountains? The coast? Your clothes are strange. Maybe you did come through the portal?"

I said nothing, hunching my head between my shoulders. Shis grunted and exchanged a glance with Khargakh, who was walking a little ahead, leading the way.

"Maybe there's something wrong with her, and she can't talk for long?" Shis asked his companion as though I weren't there. "Or the spirits knocked the wits out of her? It happens."

"She said her animal was called a cat," Khargakh pointed out reasonably.

"Well, that's all she said. Maybe that's the only word she knows. 'Cat.' Useful word in a strange forest, sure."

Despite the terrible cold inside me, I felt a tiny spark of irritation. This Shis was talking about me as if I were a dumb cow being driven to market. I opened my mouth to object, but just then Marquis meowed again, plaintively this time.

"That little creature is crying again," Khargakh observed, and I thought I heard a note of concern in his stony voice. "Is he hurt? Hungry?"

"No, no," I said quickly, sensing that the cat was my only safe subject for the moment. "He just isn't used to long journeys." I'd only ever taken him to the vet before. We'd never traveled any distance together, let alone to other worlds. "He's nervous because he's been in the carrier so long. I found him on the street. When he was little. A ginger kitten. Well, beautiful, but dirty and hungry. I washed him and named him Marquis. It was meant to be funny."

I caught myself babbling, haltingly and nervously, clinging to the story like a lifeline. Shis and Khargakh slowed down. They were listening.

"Mar-quis?" Shis repeated, rolling the unfamiliar word around. "Is that a name? What does it mean?"

"Well, a marquis is a title," I explained, not knowing how to explain it to two tusked giants. "A high rank among the nobility. Someone very respected and important, more or less. And he was so skinny and scruffy that I gave him a grand title as a joke. Do you understand? A joke."

A pause settled over us. I looked up and saw both orcs watching me with exactly the same baffled expression on their green faces. They didn't understand. The title "marquis," the nobility, the play on words — it had all sailed past them like a pebble flung into the sky.

"We don't understand," Khargakh confirmed honestly. "We have no such words. But I understood the important part: you gave a weak creature a mighty name so he would seem stronger. That's a good custom. Our shamans sometimes do that."

Shis snorted.

"I don't see why a cat needs a title at all. He's still a cat. But you're amusing. And you talk funny, like a wasp buzzing."

I couldn't think of an answer.

The path led us out of the forest. The trees parted, and ahead, in the light of the enormous moon, I saw a wall.

Built of dark, almost black stone, with massive buttresses and towers at the corners. Torches burned steadily along it, their flames untroubled even by gusts of wind. Figures moved about beside the huge, iron-bound gates.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to make them out. The orcs were taking me to a settlement. But as we drew closer, my breath caught. The guards at the gates weren't orcs. Ordinary human faces showed beneath their helmets. Tired, rough with stubble. Their shoulders were half as broad as those of my escort, but the weapons in their hands looked formidable.

I stopped abruptly.

The orcs noticed at once, as though they'd been listening to my footsteps. Shis turned around.

"Hey!" he protested. "What've you stopped for? We're nearly there."

But I couldn't move, trying to take in what I'd seen.

Could orcs and humans really live together here? The thought flared and throbbed in my temples. My two escorts, two green cliffs, were heading quite casually toward gates with humans visible beyond them. The humans didn't scatter in terror at the sight of the orcs; they merely gave Khargakh a brief salute.

The world turned upside down again. Everything I'd read about savage orc conquerors had been nonsense. Or what on earth was happening here?

"Come on," Khargakh urged in a low voice. "It's warm in there. And your cat needs a hearth."

I looked back at the forest one last time and stepped forward on stiff legs, toward the torchlight.

I'd thought I would be the only human among orcs, but now I was glad I'd been wrong.

Chapter 7. The Elder and a Cat's Right of Entry

Elder Mirey's house was squat, built of dark, almost black logs. Inside, it smelled of dried herbs, wax, and old age — that particular sharp smell found in the homes of the very old. Embers were dying in the hearth, casting crimson reflections on the walls.

Mirey himself sat behind a massive table, looking at me as though I were neither the first nor by any means the most welcome surprise he'd had that month. I'd certainly landed the old man with a problem.

He clicked his tongue. Steadily, disapprovingly, like an old clock ticking off my foolishness.

"So, another one," he said at last, in a voice like dry wood creaking. "Why do you keep coming? A por-tal opened for them, you see. And then I'm left to sort it out."

Another one? Keep coming?

I shifted from foot to foot, hugging the carrier to my chest. Inside, Marquis gave a quiet but extremely expressive yowl. He clearly shared the elder's displeasure.

"I didn't know I wasn't the first," I managed.

"First, second, fifth…" Mirey waved a hand. "We've had them before. Often enough to give me heartburn. First one comes, then another. Always looking for something, the lot of you."

I went still. My heart missed a beat.

"So there are other women here who came through? From my world?" My voice trembled. I didn't know whether the question held more hope of finding my own people or more fear. "Where are they? Can I talk to them?"

Mirey pursed his lips. His heavy gaze swept over me and settled on the tabletop. He clearly didn't want to answer. That silence was worse than any direct reply.

"Come along, then. Nothing for it," he muttered instead of explaining, heaving himself up from the table.

He took an oil lamp from a shelf, unhurriedly lit it from an ember in the hearth, and headed for the door, limping on his left leg. I noticed that he leaned on a thick, carved walking stick.

I hesitated for only a moment, then hurried after him. For a man his age, he moved surprisingly quickly, limp and all.

"Wait!" I was almost running to keep up, the carrier banging against my thigh, Marquis meowing indignantly at every jolt. "If you've had women from other worlds here before, perhaps you know how to get back? To my world? Is there some way?"

The elder stopped so abruptly that I nearly crashed into his broad back. He looked over his shoulder, and in the lamplight I saw his face: tired, irritated, but with a flicker of dry amusement. He snorted, making it perfectly clear that he thought my question was idiotic.

"If I knew that, girl," he said slowly, emphasizing every word, "would I be bothering with you now? I'd be asleep like a marmot in its burrow, instead of hobbling through the whole village in the dead of night. How do you manage to come here without giving the slightest thought to getting home?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. I had no answer.

He was right. Completely, one hundred percent right. I'd read three hundred pages of the forum. I knew the difference between mountain and steppe orcs, knew the ritual with the bronze-ring belt, but not once, not for a single second, had I considered the practical question: What if the portal only works one way?

We walked on. Mirey hobbled ahead, lighting the way; I trudged behind, digesting what I'd heard. The same thought kept going around my head: he was right. But somewhere in there, deep beneath the fear and self-reproach, another thought stirred. Quiet, timid, but stubborn.

I hadn't believed. Until the very last moment, until the second the moonlight became tangible, I hadn't believed it would work. Yes, I'd wanted it to. Yes, I'd followed the notches, obeyed the

instructions, stood between the oaks. But it had been like a children's game. You know, when you close your eyes and make a wish, nurturing a tiny, warm hope deep inside, while your mind already knows that miracles don't happen.

How many times had I made wishes like that? As a child, that Mom would buy me a doll. At school, that the boy a desk away would notice me. At university, that my exams would somehow pass themselves. As an adult, that I would meet someone who loved me as I was. And every single time, my wishes had shattered against reality. The doll wasn't bought, the boy looked at the thin girls in class, exams required cramming, and love still didn't come.

I'd grown used to my dreams not coming true. It had become part of me, like my third chin or my habit of eating away my sadness at night. And when Moonmane's Shadow sent me those directions, I probably hadn't believed it was real even ten percent of the way. It was a beautiful, mad gesture. To go into the forest at night, stand beneath the moon, prove to myself that I was still willing to do something. Prove that I could still act. That I hadn't yet turned completely into that innkeeper from the novels who only sighed and served the heroes ale.

I'd felt much the same when I bought a gym membership and a new workout outfit because I couldn't fit into the old one, bought in an earlier burst of motivation.

And here I was. In a world where orcs called me skinny. Where my cat attracted more interest than I did. Where the elder grumbled at me for failing to arrange a return ticket.

Mirey stopped outside a small cottage. It was smaller than his house, but neat. Clearly well cared for. He knocked on the door: three short, commanding blows.

The door opened almost at once. A young woman stood on the threshold, wrapped in a coarse woolen blanket. Disheveled, sleepy, her eyelids puffy, clearly dragged straight from sleep. In the dim light of Mirey's lamp, I made out her face: ordinary, pretty, scattered with freckles. Wheat-colored hair in a loose braid. Her eyes were kind. Even half-asleep.

"Here's another one," Mirey grunted without preamble. "Her name's Lyuba. We'll work out what to do with her tomorrow."

"Good evening," I faltered, feeling utterly pathetic. What was I supposed to do? Apologize for the disturbance? Explain what I was doing here? My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

Mirey nodded, turned, and hobbled back without even saying goodbye. His lamp bobbed in the darkness until it disappeared around a bend. The girl and I were left alone on the doorstep.

"Lira," she introduced herself, and her voice was gentle. "Come in. It's cold out. Autumn, after all."

"Thank you," I said, stepping across the threshold. "I'm sorry we woke you. I know this is all very unexpected, and…"

"What's that you've got?" she interrupted, nodding at the carrier.

I looked down. Marquis sat with his ears flattened, staring at Lira like an offended king who'd been kept waiting for an audience.

"A cat. Marquis. I couldn't leave him behind, you see? He'd have been all alone. He wouldn't have survived. And I do try to be a responsible owner."

Lira smiled. Not the smile people use to be polite, but a real, warm one, as if I'd said something exactly right.

"Then let him enter the house first," she said simply.

"What?"

"There's an old belief. My grandmother used to say that if you let an animal into a new home first, life there will be good." She shrugged beneath the blanket. "Animals drive away evil spirits. Keep misfortune at bay. May you have a good life here, Lyuba."

My eyes stung. Such a simple gesture. Such simple kindness. I bent down, opened the carrier, and carefully took Marquis out. Sensing freedom, he didn't bolt as I'd feared, but stepped majestically

onto the threshold. Sniffed. Looked around. Then, slowly, fully aware of his own importance, crossed into the cottage.

Lira helped me pick up the carrier and closed the door behind us. Inside, it was warm, almost hot after the damp night. Embers still glowed in the hearth, casting a soft light over the furnishings: a table, a couple of benches, a chest, a broad sleeping platform covered with a fur blanket.

"Make yourself comfortable." Lira nodded toward the bed. "We'll work things out in the morning. It's dark anyway, and troubles always seem smaller in daylight."

I nodded, pulled off my wet sneakers, and sat on the edge of the bed, watching Marquis inspect the corners. He moved slowly, sniffing every ledge, every crack. Tail straight up. Whiskers bristling.

I watched him and thought how strangely things had turned out. Only that morning, I'd been Lyuba the loser, hiding from the world in her kitchen. Now I was sitting in a stranger's cottage, a girl named Lira had just wished me a good life, and real orcs had brought me to the village.

Marquis stopped in the middle of the cottage. Turned. Looked straight into my eyes with his imperturbable feline gaze.

"Meow," he said distinctly.

Perhaps a complaint. Perhaps approval. Perhaps a demand for dinner.

Lira laughed softly.

"I think he likes it here," she said.

I nodded and, to my own surprise, smiled back.

Chapter 8. The River and the Wet Hide

I woke with the strange feeling that someone was studying me. Not the way Marquis watched me when he wanted food, but with the intense curiosity of children seeing an unfamiliar animal at the zoo.

I pried my eyes open.

Four girls stood over me, crowded around the bed. Four! All staring at me and whispering like conspirators. Lira stood a little apart, her arms folded across her chest, smiling. I didn't know the other three.

The first was sturdy and big-boned, her light brown hair tucked beneath a kerchief. Her shoulders would have made some men envious, and the arms she had planted on her hips looked capable of lifting a sack of grain in one movement.

The second was shorter and slight, but with a sharp, keen gaze. Dark hair cropped almost like a boy's, a trail of freckles across her nose.

The third was very young, perhaps sixteen, with flaxen braids and eyes as round as saucers. She looked at me with such delight that you would have thought I was at least a princess from overseas, not a plump woman from another world.

"Look at her," the big-boned one whispered to no one in particular. I went rigid, bracing for the familiar "fat," but what followed surprised me. "Those are strong arms. Shoulders, too. Bet she's got plenty of strength. She'll carry water and firewood."

"And she's got a kind face," added the freckled one. "You can tell she's not a nasty sort."

"Her skin's so smooth," the youngest breathed enviously. "How do they manage it, those people from beyond the portal? No scars, no pockmarks."

I lay there, afraid to move. They were discussing me like a pedigree heifer at a fair. But strangely, there was no mockery in their voices, no sneering. Only a practical interest in where I might be useful. Beside me on the pillow, Marquis gave a deep purr, as if to say, Don't shit yourself, human. They're all right.

"Girls," I said at last, sitting up and holding the blanket to my chest, "I'm actually awake now. You can ask me things instead of talking about me in the third person."

All the girls drew back, and the youngest even squeaked. Lira laughed softly and came closer.

"Let me introduce you, Lyuba." She nodded toward the big-boned one. "This is Kira."

Kira nodded with dignity.

"And this is Veya." Lira pointed to the freckled girl. "A hunter. Nobody sets snares better than she does."

Veya grinned, flashing a row of small but even teeth.

"And this is Pia." Lira nodded at the youngest. "Her grandmother's an herbalist. She's teaching her. She's mostly watching and learning for now."

Pia blushed and made something like a bow, which looked a little ridiculous. Why bow to me?

"We've been thinking," Kira cut in again, in her low, practical voice, "where to put you to work. Your arms and legs are sound, your back's straight. You look strong. And it's turned out warm today. Everyone's going to the river to do the washing. Will you help?"

"Me?" I repeated stupidly.

"What, don't you want to?" Veya narrowed her eyes. "Or haven't you got the strength? You look sturdy enough. Am I wrong?"

I straightened. Somewhere deep inside, beneath years of being ashamed of my body and hiding it under shapeless clothes, something new stirred. Something stubborn. Yes, in my world, my build was considered unattractive. But here, they'd called my arms sturdy and my back strong. And it felt good.

"I'd like to," I said firmly. "And I'm strong enough. Where do we go?"

Lira gave an approving nod.

"Good, then. Get yourself ready. Pia will feed your Marquis. Can you manage?"

Pia nodded so hard her braids bounced.

Half an hour later, after working my way through a piece of yesterday's flatbread and washing it down with a warm herbal brew, I was walking with the girls along a path softened by the night's rain. I carried a wicker basket piled with laundry: sheets, shirts, something like footwraps. The basket was heavy, but not heavy enough to complain about.

The air was clear and rather cool, but the sun in the pale blue sky was almost as warm as in summer. It really was a warm day.

The river appeared beyond a gentle hill. Broad and calm, with dark water reflecting the bare branches of willows. The bank was already bustling. Women, both human and orc, knelt by the water, beating laundry against flat stones, rinsing, wringing, and calling to one another. Here and there, orcs stood knee-deep in the river, handling heavy, wet hides. It smelled of river water, wet fur, and smoke from a little fire someone had built on the bank to warm up after being in the water.

"Over here," Kira ordered, pointing to an empty stone. "You lay it out like this, then rub it with this stone. If there's a bad stain, there's ash here. Understand?"

I nodded and squatted beside the water. The work was familiar: as a child, I'd helped my grandmother wash clothes at her country cottage when the washing machine broke down. Of course, there had been much less laundry then, and I'd had store-bought soap.

For the first half hour, I simply worked. The sun grew hot, my muscles warmed up, and I even began to enjoy myself. The girls chatted and laughed, sometimes breaking into a rhythmic song in time with the blows of stone against cloth. I didn't know the words, but I liked the tune.

Then I raised my head and looked downstream.

There, about thirty meters away, two figures stood beyond the other orcs. Shis and Khargakh. I recognized them immediately: one smaller, though still enormous, the other like a cliff. They were rinsing hides. Huge brown ones, with the outlines of legs still visible. Boar hides, perhaps? Shis kneaded his in the water with obvious pleasure, sending spray flying everywhere, while Khargakh beat his methodically, steadily, against a stone.

Then Shis turned around.

Our eyes met. His yellow eyes flashed, and he smiled. Slowly, broadly, showing the entire set of teeth: the upper fangs as well as the lower tusks that stuck out even with his mouth closed. He had excellent teeth. Strong. And very, very big.

I swallowed and hastily turned back to my laundry.

"What's wrong?" Lira, sitting beside me, followed my gaze and gave a little snort. "Oh, you've spotted Shis. Impressive, isn't he?"

"Terrifying," I answered honestly, pounding the sheet with the stone as though it had done something wrong.

Lira burst out laughing.

"Lyuba, I think you're afraid of orcs."

"Shouldn't I be?" I glanced at her. "Have you seen their teeth? Their hands? They could break me in half with one finger."

Seeing them filled me with conflicting emotions. When they had been a dream, they'd seemed like perfect partners. Now I wasn't sure I'd chosen the right dream. I should have wished for something more normal. Like losing weight, after all.

Lira shrugged and went back to scrubbing a shirt hem.

"If they're on your side, they're kind. Khargakh wouldn't hurt a fly, unless the fly went for him first. And Shis… well, Shis is quite an orc. But he's funny. And he's not cruel."

"What if I'm not on their side?" I asked without thinking.

Lira didn't answer. She only gave a polite, restrained smile that sent goosebumps down my back. I realized I might not want an answer. These were the men I'd considered ideal? I definitely had terrible taste.

I sighed and reached into the basket for the next item. My hand found something heavy and thick.

A sheet. An enormous one. Gray, made of coarse linen, hemmed with blue thread. It weighed plenty dry; wet, it promised to be a real ordeal.

"Whoa," Veya commented, glancing at my prize. "That's from the blacksmith's house. Their sheets are like sails. Can you manage?"

I merely snorted. Surely I could rinse a sheet?

I went to the water and stepped in ankle-deep. It was icy, but I put up with it because no one else was complaining. I lowered the cloth into the river. The linen soaked up water at once, darkened, and doubled in weight. Or perhaps tripled. I began rinsing, heaving the heavy, wet mass around, feeling my shoulders ache.

That was when it happened.

Perhaps my foot slipped off a stone coated in slick silt. Perhaps I misjudged my center of gravity; those forty extra kilos I so wanted to forget did affect my gravitational pull, after all. Or perhaps this world's river spirits decided to play a joke on me.

The world tilted.

"Ah!"

I pitched forward and plunged headfirst into the water. The cold burned instantly, worked its way beneath my clothes, reached right into my bones. But my hands kept clutching the damned sheet as though glued to it. Someone — perhaps the blacksmith, whose surname I didn't yet know — had entrusted me, Lyuba_ChubbyBun, with his sheet. And I wasn't letting it go. Not for anything.

After all, however irresponsible I was toward myself, I made up for it by being excessively responsible toward everyone else.

The current drew me downstream, gently but insistently. I flailed, trying to get my feet under me, but the bottom slipped away beneath my heels. The river was shallow but fast, and my wet clothes clung to my body, hindering every movement.

"Lyuba!"

"Swim to the bank!"

"Drop the sheet, you idiot!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the girls spring up on the bank, saw someone running along the water. But the current carried me faster.

Then I collided with something solid.

Or rather, someone.

An enormous green hand caught the sheet I was prepared to drown for. Then it pulled it from my fingers as easily as though it were a handkerchief. Freed of the weight, I finally got my head above water. And this time, it stayed there.

Another broad hand closed around my shoulder and hauled upward. I was pulled out of the river in one movement, like a cork from a bottle.

I found myself on the bank. Water streamed off me. My hair plastered my face. My clothes clung to my body, outlining every roll, every fold, and there were plenty. It felt as if the entire village, every human and orc gathered along the river, was staring at me. And they really were. The washing had stopped.

Shis held me by the shoulder. I looked up and met his amused gaze. His pupils narrowed as he studied me. Wet, shaking, a lock of hair stuck to my forehead. And a vast grin slowly bloomed across his tusked face.

"In one piece," he rumbled with satisfaction. "I thought you were going to drown."

I wanted to say something dignified and witty, but my teeth were chattering so hard that all I could do was click them together.

Only then did I realize how we looked, frozen in place. Him: enormous, green, tusked, in a leather vest wet with spray. Me: a bedraggled hen fished out of the river. His hand on my shoulder. My hair dangling in icicles. The whole scene like a silly romantic comedy where the clumsy heroine falls into the hero's arms.

I giggled. Hysterically, but I did giggle.

Just like those novels I used to read, I thought, looking into Shis's yellow eyes. An orc as the hero, and a thirty-year-old chubby woman as the heroine. So what? Elven maidens have their princes, and I've got…

Then something heavy slapped down across my shoulders.

I flinched and looked down. A boar hide. Still dry.

It covered me like a cloak. The weight made me want to hunch over, but I was warmer.

Slowly, very slowly, I raised my eyes.

Khargakh stood beside me, looking at me. His stony, impassive face, with its massive jaw and tusks, expressed absolutely nothing. But I thought I saw something like satisfaction in his eyes.

You're cold, that look said. Here. Get warm.

It slowly dawned on me what had happened. He'd covered me with the untanned skin of a dead animal. A couple of hours earlier, it had probably been running through the forest away from Khargakh.

Such animal terror, mixed with revulsion, swept over me that I only realized I was screaming when Shis and Khargakh exchanged startled looks.

"Aaah!"

The shriek cut through the silence over the river. I didn't remember wriggling out from under the hide. Didn't remember running back to Lira and the others. All I remembered was running, while behind me Shis roared with his rolling, rockslide laughter, and even Khargakh seemed to make a sound in his throat: either a sigh or a stifled chuckle.

Chapter 9. A Skirt, a Shirt, and a Strategic Plan

I flew back to Lira's cottage. My heart raced, my wet clothes squelched and chilled my body, and I couldn't get the scene out of my head: me, screaming at the realization that I was wearing a boar's skin, and two enormous orcs laughing at my reaction.

The door slammed behind me. I stopped in the middle of the cottage, shaking all over, and only then fully realized what a state I was in. Water streamed from my clothes straight onto the clean wooden floor. Marquis, asleep on the bed, raised his head, looked me over, and lay down again. Sort it out yourself, apparently.

Lira came in after me, briskly dusting off her hands.

"Well, my little river disaster," she began, then saw my face and burst out laughing. "Oh, sorry. I shouldn't laugh. But if you could have seen yourself… Running like a hen from a fox, with Khargakh standing behind you holding the hide, wondering what he'd done wrong. He looked as though his ancestors' spirits had told him he'd offended the great spirit of the waters, and he had no idea how."

"Lira!" I wailed. "He threw a dead boar over me! A freshly killed one! Now I'm… I'm…" A violent shudder ran through me. "I'm covered in something!"

I knew what, but I refused to admit it.

"Right." Lira turned serious at once and stepped toward me. "Stay there. Stop talking. Undress!"

I froze.

"What?"

"Undress, I said. You're soaked through. You'll catch your death. Come on, get those clothes off. I'll rub you dry. No time for being coy. We've only one healer in the whole district, and nobody likes going to her. She makes sick people drink bitter poison. So hurry up, before you fall ill."

I had to obey. A minute later, I stood in my underwear, teeth chattering, arms wrapped around myself. Lira pulled a coarse but clean coverlet from the bed, threw it over my shoulders, and began rubbing me vigorously with a towel. It was rough, and I felt as though I were being scrubbed with sandpaper. But I was getting warmer.

"Arms up," she ordered. "Now turn around. Good heavens, you're ice-cold all over! You fool, you fool. Fancy diving into the river after a sheet."

"Someone else's sheet," I muttered through chattering teeth. "I thought they'd beat me to death if I sank it."

"Our blacksmith's a kind man. He wouldn't have beaten you quite to death," Lira said reassuringly. "There, done. Sit by the hearth."

She wrapped me in the coverlet and sat me on a bench closer to the fire. Then she took her spare sheet from the chest. Soft, old, clearly washed many times.

"Here. Wear this for now. Your clothes are soaked right through; they won't be dry until tomorrow. And you" — she gave me a stern look — "aren't going anywhere without clothes. It's autumn here, you know."

I wrapped myself in the sheet like a cocoon and sat by the fire. Gradually, the shaking subsided, leaving dull exhaustion and shame in its place. I was ashamed of everything: falling into the river, screaming loud enough for the whole bank to hear, sitting here now like a helpless child, unable to look after myself.

As though she'd read my thoughts, Lira sat beside me and handed me a clay mug of something hot and fragrant.

"Drink. Herbs. To keep a chill away."

I took the mug and sipped. A little bitter, but it warmed me from the inside at once.

"Thank you, Lira," I said softly. "And I'm sorry I'm causing you so much trouble."

"What trouble?" She waved a hand and smiled. "Your having no clothes, though — that is a problem. You can't go around in a sheet for long. So we'll have to sew."

"Sew?" I looked at her in surprise. "But you've got plenty of your own work to do."

"The work isn't going anywhere," Lira said firmly. "And you won't get anything done without clothes. So sit there and warm up. I'll be back soon."

She threw a shawl over her shoulders and slipped out the door. I was alone, apart from Marquis. At last, the cat deigned to come down from the bed. He approached, sniffed the edge of the sheet, and settled right on my bare feet. Warm, furry, purring.

"You're a good boy, Marquis," I whispered. "At least you don't think I'm hysterical."

The cat looked at me with an expression that could be interpreted as, I do. I'm just keeping it to myself.

Lira returned quickly. She carried an armful of things: men's shirts made of coarse gray linen, lengths of cloth, skeins of colored braid, a wooden box of bone needles and thread.

"There!" she announced from the doorway, dumping all this wealth onto the bench. "Now we'll make a beauty of you."

"Me?" I stared doubtfully at the pile of fabric. "Lira, those are men's shirts."

"They're big, yes, but we'll alter them," Lira agreed. "Look: cut here, take it in there, braid along here, ties over there." She spread a length of cloth on the table and began marking it with chalk. "Just don't worry. Grandmother used to say, 'Sew your heart into a thing, and it'll fit well.'"

I doubted that putting my heart into it would do much for my sewing skills, but I had no choice.

We worked far into the night. Lira cut, and I hemmed. At first, the needle seemed uncooperative and the thread kept tangling, but gradually I got into it. The cottage was warm, smelling of herbs and hearth smoke; Marquis purred, curled into a ball, and Lira quietly hummed some local song. And in that simple, unpretentious comfort, I suddenly felt something I hadn't felt for years: peace.

By morning, the first skirt was ready. It was wide and long, almost to my heels, made of soft, dark green cloth that Lira had found especially for me.

We finished the shirt while I was wearing it.

I stood in the middle of the cottage with the shirt pulled over my head, while Lira circled me, pinning, stitching, adjusting ties and ribbons, all with an endless stream of commentary.

"We'll put more ties here," she murmured, deftly threading the braid, "to show off your bust nicely. You've got a bust anyone would envy."

I blushed crimson, but Lira was too absorbed in her work to notice.

"And now a chain here, on the belt." She attached several metal chains to a thin leather belt.

"What are those for?" I asked, puzzled.

"To look pretty." She stared at me. "Don't people dress up where you're from?"

It hadn't even occurred to me. What did beauty have to do with me? There hadn't been anything pretty in my wardrobe for a long time. I hadn't worn skirts in ages, either.

Lira stepped back and looked me up and down. Then she took me by the shoulders and guided me to a large piece of polished bronze, as tall as I was, hanging on the wall in place of a mirror.

I looked, and went still.

A woman I'd never seen before gazed back at me from the slightly hazy metal. No, the face was mine: the same round cheeks, the same potato nose, the same chins — though, to be honest, with my head held proudly high, the third had gone into hiding. But in this skirt, this shirt with ties that emphasized my breasts, with a broad belt at my waist, I suddenly saw myself differently. I looked well-proportioned. Substantial. Feminine.

The shirt fitted my shoulders perfectly. The deep neckline framed my neck beautifully, and the ties beneath my breasts and at my back gathered the fabric exactly where it needed to be. The skirt fell in soft folds to the floor, and it made me want to walk with grace and dignity, rather than hide.

"Oh," I breathed.

"'Oh' indeed." Lira nodded with satisfaction. "Always calling yourself a chubby bun. A bun's something made with flour and filled with jam. You're a woman. Beautiful, with plenty to you. In a good way."

I kept looking into the bronze mirror. In my world, people had laughed at me all my life or, at best, politely failed to notice me. Nobody had carried me in their arms. Nobody had told me I was beautiful — at least, not in a way I could believe.

And here was this girl I'd known for next to no time, standing and admiring me, without a trace of pity in her eyes.

"We'll need to make a couple more skirts," Lira said briskly. "Wear this one for now. It's for everyday. But you'll need a change. And one for celebrations. You never know — you might find yourself at a festival. We have evenings here in the village, with bonfires and dancing."

"Lira," I interrupted, feeling a lump rise in my throat, "please stop."

She fell silent, looking at me in surprise.

"You've spent a whole night on me. And you'll spend another if you keep sewing. You have your own work. Your own life. You barely know me, and you're looking after me like a sister. I feel awkward. I want to repay you with some work. Let me at least chop firewood for you, or carry water? Or wash the floors. Anything, really."

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