

NEVER TOO MANY

Chapter Two

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“Archers! Stand ready!” The captain’s voice carried across his massed troops. Lieutenants echoed his calls. He turned from one group to the other. “Riders, at the ready!”

Skies grey with smoke looked no brighter than at the break of dawn. Across a grassy field, a greater force of enemies gathered, most of them humans and orcs. The captain’s human troops and allied dwarves showed better organization and superior arms, yet the bulk of his infantry were still conscript farmers. No one was sure which side held stronger magic. If the knights and archers did their job well, the conscripts would face little bloodshed. If not, the contest would be close.

“Pikes, ready!” called the captain.

“Is this really necessary?” Khíra stood by the local lord and his pensive advisors behind the archers, but none of them knew of her presence. “Can’t he tell everyone to get ready all at once?”

Only one figure heard her: armored, seven feet tall, and slipping through the ranks with the same anonymity as the goddess. He scraped his sword against the spear of one conscript, passed by several, and scraped the axe of another. At a glance, his selection seemed random, but no such act from Fray came by chance. “Hearing one’s section called awakens the spirit,” he said.

Khíra looked on skeptically. “I think they’re awake. They’re terrified.”

“Terror also awakens the spirit,” said Fray.

“Are you also on the opposite side, blessing some of their troops?”

“A few. Not enough on either side to tip the balance.” Fray glanced to her. “Do you have a preference?”

“No thank you. I had my fill of war a long time ago,” said Khíra.

Fray snorted. “When?”

She answered with a dry frown. His stance toward her would change dramatically if he knew her past. She didn’t think she wanted more of his attention. “I would naturally appreciate favor to the lovers, of course... and the parents. At least for their survival and return home.”

“Hmf.” Fray considered. “I’ll give them a nudge.”

“Thank you.” She let the rest go with a new breath. “I’m here on another matter. This seemed like a good place to find you.”

“Nine battles across the continent deserve my attention. This is only one. I also pursue revenge for our imprisonment.”

“*This* battle is ultimately about a rebellious vassal and a jealous lover, though most of the fighters don’t know it,” said Khíra. “With a secret that potent, I assume Larsen is here? Have you seen him?”

Fray sighed irritably. He looked to the lord and his advisors. “Larsen!”

A robed and hooded figure on a horse turned from the close group, but only the other gods saw him. “What?” hissed the god of secrets and thieves.

“I’ve found matches for our savior from each of your faithful,” said Khíra.

“Already?” grumbled Larsen.

“I began my search near our prison to keep it convenient. As luck would have it, I found a pair traveling together. Larsen, you’ll be glad to know yours isn’t the most devout. She splits her devotion between you and Erudh. You get off easy.”

Glowing yellow eyes narrowed behind black silk cloth. “I’m fond of that one.”

“Oh, I’m sure her mischief will continue,” said Khíra. She turned to Fray. “As for you... I’m afraid she might be a special one to you. Sorry.”

“You are not,” Fray fumed.

“Oh, I am,” said Khíra. “I am definitely choosing her.”

“No. I mean you are not sorry.”

“Ah. You’ve got me there,” she smiled back at him.

The god of war sighed. “Very well. I think you will find this match changes her little.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” murmured the goddess of love.

* * *

Naexi Thazaldi was easily the strongest, most powerful woman Callan had ever met.

She came of age in the shadows and danger of Exxandat’l, of which he knew only the barest details from a scant few history books. People told him of cruelty, treachery, and powerful sorcery, yet none had ever so much as seen a dark elf in person, making it all sound mostly like paranoia and conjecture. Still, Callan assumed dark elf society was harsher than his. Naexi confirmed that much for him. Yet she had walked away from it on her own, facing all that same prejudice and paranoia from the sunlit world... and rose to become a champion of one of the brightest gods.

Tenash, patron of guardians and justice and duty, was not always an easy god to follow. He called for ethics and principle amid his more martial followers. He demanded much more from those he blessed with divine power. Naexi faced danger and threats as a matter of course.

She fought. She bled. She triumphed. Her blades and armor were much more than show. She was nearly a century older than Callan, and seemed stronger than him in every way he could conceive. She left him in awe.

Beneath him and wrapped in his arms, Naexi moaned and writhed and breathed his name. She shivered under his kisses. Her legs wrapped around his and she pulled at his ass, wanting more and more of his cock within her until she seemed exhausted. She came for him again and again, seeming softer and more welcoming to him every time.

Callan came within her more than once, too, but never felt truly spent in stamina or desire. Their first trysts had been more at Naexi's initiative, and wonderful for it. Now, with Callan taking the lead, a sense of power grew within him.

"Fuck me more," Naexi moaned, kissing his neck and caressing his back. Her legs could only rise partly at the knees at his sides. The soft, slow slap of their bodies together at the groin had long become intimately dirty. "All you want, Callan. I'm yours. Oh gods, fuck me more."

That sense and urge of power stirred again. Distantly, he realized it had grown since they first coupled this morning, but he hadn't thought of it. Even now, he was too wrapped up in the pleasures of her beautiful and willing body to think much. Through some blissful blur, all of that awe joined with a new feeling: like she was his. As she said.

Already supporting most of his weight, Callan rose up a little more on the elbows and knees to thrust harder. The soft slap became more emphatic. The grip of her sex tightened, too, while her moans became grunts. "Nnf. Nnf! Yes!"

She didn't ask for it harder, but she welcomed it. Callan obliged. Love grew fierce, and perhaps selfish. Naexi approved all the while. "Yes! Yes!"

He fucked her harder until he caught a plea in her gasps and held that pace. He slammed into her, gripping her hair and kissing her neck, then her lips. Her breasts crushed against his chest like one more statement, one more claim, with every in and out thrust.

Spasms overtook her as she came for him. Not unlike other times, her meltdown prompted his own climax. She was still shaking when he first released, and the tremors continued while he spent and eased off.

Their eyes finally met, both of them intimate and awestruck. A tear fell across her cheek. For Callan, the sight of Naexi so vulnerable seemed almost wrong... except the intimate luxury of her body felt like a triumph.

"You're alright?" he asked softly. "That wasn't too much?"

"No! Gods, no." Her faint grip on his hips emphasized her opinion. "It should be by now. I should be sore or chafed, but... no. Stay? You still feel so good. It's amazing."

"I can't be *that* good. I wasn't for... um." He thought better of it as it fell from his mouth. "Sorry."

"You can talk about them." Naexi pushed a sweaty strand of hair from his forehead. She still writhed faintly beneath him, savoring the contact of his whole body, especially within. "You can talk about anything with me. We need that more than the sex."

"Hah," he grinned... and he, too, savored her. "Alright. I wasn't this good for them."

"I think we have obvious explanations." Naexi grinned right back at him. "First times are awkward for everyone. Partners learn. You didn't spend this much time with either of them, did you?"

"No. Not at all. I couldn't."

"Intimacy builds. Intimacy and trust."

"Yes. Although I guess I meant I couldn't be with them this long in a more visceral sense."

"*Yes*," Naexi purred with delight. "This stamina and potency is unnatural. Perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised. Khíra rewards us for going along with her plans. Both of us." She squeezed him in more ways than one. "I'm overjoyed."

"I had that thought. Everything feels right, but nothing has ever gone *this* right for me. It's all so fast, and there's magic at work. You're not worried I'm taking advantage?"

Naexi closed her eyes and sighed. "Oh, I love you. No. Two gods told me I can trust you, Callan. I'm a paladin. If I had to choose between you or my oaths and my god, I would still choose him... but I would be sad." She stroked his cheek. "And I don't have to choose."

"No. I wouldn't do that to you."

"I know, and here we are." She found the energy to slide her legs around his, pulling him within a little closer. The move prompted him to kiss her lips and softly claim one breast with his hand. Naexi shook with his thumb against her nipple. "No, don't stop," she told him. "Not at all."

"We might try talking more," he laughed. "I hardly know you at all."

"And yet we know each other very well already," Naexi teased. He couldn't deny that. She nodded to their side, where discarded clothing and gear made up a haphazard campsite by the blanket beneath

them. “Everything I own is within reach, yet I feel like the most decadent and wealthy woman in the world right now. I’ll only let this mood go if you promise to return it again soon. And often.”

“As often as we can. I’m not saying we should go anywhere, only... oh. Hrm. Yeah.” He frowned. “I’m off with adventurers a day and a half from home while the gods have returned. My family and friends might worry. I don’t want to spoil this, though.”

“We have a life to build together and a path from your patron. I’m looking forward to it. We’ll also need to stop and rest once or twice along the way,” she taunted.

“I already can’t wait for our next time. This is a come true for me, too.”

“Oh? You dreamed of dark elf lovers?”

“More of... someone who wanted me without needing me. No worries about money or property or support I might provide, or fail to. Just me. Lust and beauty, too,” Callan admitted, grinning.

Naexi returned a brighter, naughtier grin. “Tell you mine?” She gestured again toward her belongings. “In the backpack, you’ll find three small, trashy romances. They follow women swept away with passion and unrealistic sex. They’re terrible. I love them. I’m more than happy to talk about sexual fantasies... and live them with you.”

She wrapped one toned and bare leg around his hips.

“Heh. You know... I told Khíra I didn’t expect some wild sex fantasy in all this. She said, ‘Oh, that’s very much how you will hold all this down.’”

“That’s my hope, too. It makes sense. Sex and desire might be the best wheel to put on this wagon first.” She hooked her other leg around him. “Maybe the first two wheels.”

* * *

“It’s *two* wagons. I get it.” Jaclyn kept her voice down lest it carry along the lightly wooded road, but she wasn’t too worried. They kept a mindful distance from their quarry. “Two wagons, escorts, blah blah. Must be some operation. I’m just saying, it had better be an important operation, because this is a long fucking walk to come back empty-handed.”

Cora swept a lock of her jet-black hair away from her icy blue eyes to fix it back into the rest of her ponytail. “You’re not the one wearing ten pounds of leathers.”

“Armor gets in my way. You know that,” Jaclyn scoffed.

“It gets in the way of showing off all your tattoos,” said Cora. Her accent hinted at her academic background and proximity to wealth, but her choices and her company suggested otherwise.

“Yeah. That, too.” Most of Jaclyn’s thin, well-toned body was bare from the waist up, save for the narrowest of strapless halter tops and the backpack hanging from her shoulders. Artwork and designs covered one arm and decorated the other, with more scattered down the rest of her body to her simple, somewhat baggy pants. She kept the sides of her head shaved, leaving her dark hair to grow only from the top and back in a ponytail much shorter than Cora’s. She grinned in a flash of the natural beauty some might think her style was meant to avoid. “They’re good tattoos.”

“Well, at least you’re smiling.” Cora had a pack, too, but needed a little more protection in a fight. She also needed blades, unlike Jaclyn.

“I’d smile more if these jerks would split up so we could take them on with better odds,” said Jaclyn. “Thought they’d thin out by now.”

“So did I. The fact that they haven’t makes them that much more important.”

“I’m starting to think the opposite. If the Black Road had something that important to keep secret, they wouldn’t send it on a couple wagons with a handful of escorts,” Jaclyn grumbled. “They’d send it by magic or some flying monster or whatever.”

“The kind of wizard who can work a teleportation spell or a gate doesn’t handle errands. They either serve the big hats or they wear the big hats,” Cora explained. “We talked about this.”

“Yeah, but I’m annoyed. We’re chasing groceries.”

“Groceries worth ten guards, and worth the effort of hiding their allegiance to the Black Road. Anyway, it’s not the groceries. It’s where they’re going. You know I’m right, or you wouldn’t be out here with me.”

“Maybe I like your accent. Or your ass,” said Jaclyn.

Cora’s eyebrow rose. “Taken in context, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“In context?”

“Trapsing out all this way, following my hunch about a couple of wagons, taking the risks.” She grinned. “I suppose do have a great ass.”

“Don’t get smug. I’m not having the rest of that conversation until this mess is finished.”

Cora grinned a little more, but didn’t push it. Knowing Jaclyn was thinking about it was good enough for now. Jaclyn was also right about the timing. They had other concerns first.

Though their quarry was still out of sight, the tracks on the road were fresh. The road bent up ahead. “Coming to a rise,” said Cora.

Taking to the woods as the terrain rose was the obvious choice. It offered cover in case they misjudged their distance and came up too close on the wagons and riders. Thankfully, the undergrowth was mild and the rise easy. The pair traveled light.

The decision proved wise, as the pair of wagons and their four-horsemen escort had stopped short not far from the top. At first, Cora worried they had been detected and the band meant to turn and confront them. Then she saw the pair of travelers approaching from farther ahead. The band of enemies in merchant's clothes had stopped for them.

The escort riders moved to meet them ahead of the wagons. Any random pair of people out on this road at this hour might make for a curiosity. This pair proved even curiouiser.

"Is that a dark elf?" wondered Jaclyn.

* * *

Naexi held his hand as they walked along the road. She was back in her armor, with her hood up to shield her eyes from any rays of sunlight that broke through the trees. Her sword and shield hung from her shoulders. Nothing about her armor and weapons fit with the passionate, uninhibited, lustful fucking of the early morning hours. The smitten smile she wore under her hood seemed a bit out of place with the dark elf warrior image, too.

Though Callan carried a spear and had a shield over his shoulder, his lack of armor probably made him look significantly less intimidating. He matched the grin, though. He couldn't hold it back if he tried. Callan was utterly taken, and still floored that she could feel the same.

"My grandmother came from the Isles to the west," he explained when she asked about his name. "Alaron, the largest isle. She fell in love with a sailor on a trading ship and moved here with him. No big adventure story to it."

"She took a gamble and a journey. Not all adventures involve blades." Naexi's hand squeezed his lightly. "You're already an adventure. You might be my greatest."

"It's been a night and a morning," he said.

Naexi's smile wasn't as humble. "The best I've ever had, and only our first together."

"I hope I can keep making you happy."

"Oh, I think you've got everything it takes," she laughed. "Nobody and nothing has ever made me feel that good. I still feel good. I'm tempted to pull you off the road for more out of wanton gluttony." Her grin persisted. "We get to enjoy that together."

"I'd like that," he admitted. "If it wasn't for my family, I wouldn't even want to be on the road yet. I don't want them to worry with me gone so long."

"We'll have time after that. A lifetime. I intend to take full advantage." She saw his grin fall a bit. "What troubles you?"

"Only the rest of Khíra's plans," said Callan. "I hope they don't leave you wanting."

"I have faith. Do you?"

"Of course."

"Then I'm looking forward to meeting these others," said Naexi. "I'm looking forward to you having them, too. If it's really love, the rest will work out."

"I keep telling myself that. Hard to think too much about it when I'm so hung up on you, but then you being with me only leads back to it."

"Khíra didn't make you who you are, Callan. She didn't tell me how to feel. She only gave me a nudge and helped me figure it out for myself. I'm grateful. The others will be, too. And you."

"I'm already grateful," he said. "You said I wasn't your first, but I could take that a couple of ways. Have you had other lovers?"

"I've had a few flings for the sake of exploring. That taught me I enjoy men and women and sex, but none of it went beyond a couple of nights. It mostly showed me I *really* like playing, but I longed for someone to make the play feel real. What about you?"

"Crushes, mostly. A couple of them became a little more, but not for long. One ended with no hard feelings. We're still friends. The other, um, may have been using me to get over her cold feet when a city merchant asked her to marry. If so, it worked. I haven't seen her in a year."

"I imagine that hurt?" asked Naexi.

"A lot less now," he laughed. She liked that. "It only hurt because I thought she might be serious about me. If she'd just gone off with him it would've been another unfulfilled crush. Instead, I had feelings she never meant to give me. I felt like I had nothing to offer."

"You put up with all my company's nonsense to help a neighbor. You were patient and considerate with a dangerous dark elf. And all that was before the chaos in that temple. Maybe she was the wrong person to see all you had to offer."

He smiled. "That's a lot easier to believe when I hear it from you."

She slowed to a stop in the middle of the road, turning in toward him. "I'm not afraid of what lies ahead. If it's anything like the lives of other adventurers, it will be strange and silly, and we will not be able to speak of it to others without sounding utterly ridiculous."

“With the way Khíra talked, that future seems romantic but also a little exhausting... and also obsessed with sex,” Callan confessed, laughing. “That also sounds utterly ridiculous.”

“Yes. I don’t think that’s a bad thing,” said Naexi.

“It is when we’re walking down a road and I keep wanting to pull you into the bushes and tear your clothes off. It’s a little distracting.”

“Distracting? That sounds like our priorities are in order.”

Naexi came closer to kiss him, but stopped and frowned, turning her attention to the rise of the road not far ahead. Riders appeared over the top, followed by a wagon. “Damn it, the one moment I’m not literally looking forward,” she grumbled.

“It’s the Merchant’s Way,” said Callan. “There are travelers on the road all the time... although not usually with such an escort,” he thought out loud. The riders stopped as the second wagon came into view as if to converse. “I’ve had a couple trade caravan jobs. Guards usually walk. Mounted escorts get expensive.”

“Yes. I was only thinking of strangers meeting my face. Now I’m more concerned,” said Naexi.

“Could be coming from Sunderford, though they don’t look familiar. Could be going to the city. Could be anything.”

“Yes, but we’re on our way back from black robes in a big operation, and they’ve stopped like they’re suspicious... and now they’re coming forward.” Specifically, the four riders moved up, while the wagons slowly trailed behind.

“If they’re no trouble, running off into the woods will spook them,” said Callan.

“Follow my lead? If it comes to a fight, we break right for the woods. Nothing to be gained here,” she added with the riders closing in. Each of them wore chain and leather under dark clothes, and carried more than one weapon. “Let me cover. You have no armor.”

“Then that’s our plan.” Callan was better armed than yesterday, and in theory Khíra invested him with some share of power, but he was in no rush to put either to the test.

“Good morning, travelers,” said the second closest rider, rather than the first. That one guided his mount a bit left and a few steps closer. The other pair mirrored the move to the right. The speaker wore a short, dark beard, and an expression of guarded friendliness. “I’m Bryson. How does the road south look from here?”

“Naexi. It’s busier from here,” she answered. “We’re moving a little faster than the rest, but others will be along.” She lied easily. Callan understood why. It was better to raise the possibility of witnesses than to assure there would be none. “And the north?”

“Empty all the way to Sunderford. Not a common day of the week for travel,” said Bryson.

“Common enough to meet each other.”

“Are the others on the road armored up as well?”

“Like you, we recognize the importance of protection. Even the Merchant’s Way isn’t always safe,” said Naexi.

“It’s true,” snorted another of the riders, bearing a prominent scar across his cheek. “We could run into a dark elf raider.”

“Or several,” Naexi countered.

“And what of you, lad?” asked another, bald and hard-eyed. “I hear dark elves take human slaves. You’re armed, but not armored. Is that spear for use, or baggage?”

“He could be under a spell,” the last rider joked.

“I’m in no danger. I can’t say I appreciate the cracks about her, either.” Callan saw the chuckles coming, but he knew letting the taunts slide might encourage even more.

“No harm done, lad. We’ll be on our way.” Bryson beckoned to the wagons behind them, getting the rest of his party rolling closer. “You’re armed and alone, and you are unusual in these parts. These are wild times. We have reason to be careful.”

“We’re caravan escorts on our way back to Sunderford. Nothing more,” said Naexi. “We’re not much different from yourselves.”

“Maybe not. One last question, though.” Bryson frowned, looking to Callan. “That spear has a distinctive head. Where did you get it?”

Callan noted Bryson’s meaning with a glance. The shaft was dark. The steel was darker, with small, flat wings below the blade. The rest had looked the same. “In a market, secondhand,” he answered.

Bryson grunted as if it was some casual matter. Then he whipped up one low hand to fling a dagger at Naexi’s head.

She ducked and turned, taking the hit against a shoulder covered by leather and chain mail. “Go!” she shouted, drawing her sword. “Tenash protect you!”

He thought he heard or felt some force behind her words, but he had no time to think about it. Callan’s closest enemy rushed in on his horse, forcing Callan to dodge hooves and a swinging blade. The bald one and the other with the scar dismounted fast. Beyond them, each wagon carried a driver and two men with crossbows raised. Even the drivers looked eager to fight.

Ten to two made for ugly odds, even with Naexi’s power and skill and whatever his goddess had invested in him. He meant to run as Naexi planned, but he’d be too vulnerable to Baldy’s charge.

“Help us both,” he hissed, less in prayer than frustration. It had him ready when the bald one came at him.

Callan wielded his spear in an over-the-shoulder grip like the militia taught. He put its reach to good use in a dirty low blow learned from a Sunderford regular. The thigh was a smaller and harder target than the torso, but also less protected by armor. As the tip struck Baldy’s thigh guard, it rode upward and dug into the joint at his hip. Baldy’s axe came down a few critical inches past Callan’s head while he cried out in pain.

That put Callan squarely in view of the crossbowmen on the wagon to the right... and also the woman who leaped up on the wagon from behind. She wore more tattoos than clothes and kept her black hair shaved down on the sides of her head. With no weapon in hand, she slammed her fist into the back of one crossbowman’s head.

Thunderous force from her punch blasted the crossbowman off the wagon, along with both of the men beside him. Even the ox pulling the wagon staggered and whined under the shockwave. It endured the rush far better than the men, but the ox surged forward in fright. The wagon’s front wheel rolled over one fallen crossbowman’s back. Their attacker wobbled with the sudden bump and fell back into the wagon bed.

The other wagon dropped a crossbowman, too. He fell from daggers held by a second unexpected woman appearing like the first. Her dark hair and clothes were less unusual than her companion’s. She shouted, “Really, Jaclyn?”

“It worked!” the tattooed woman replied. Her wagon continued on toward Callan and his opponent. Thankfully, the ox and wagon blocked the rider from coming back around to charge at Callan again. To Callan’s side, Naexi seemed fine on her own. The scarred rider was on foot, engaging Naexi while Bryson dismounted. Naexi parried a single attack and retaliated with her blade glowing in a divine white radiance. She turned to face Bryson as the scarred man collapsed.

She’s a paladin, Callan reminded himself. *You’re a paladin now, too. Khíra said so.* He had no training and little explanation of what that meant. Baldy rose to limp threateningly at him. The other rider was no longer blocked by that wagon. It was time to find out.

Callan didn’t know how to call upon divine power. He didn’t know the words or any technique. He merely thought about it as the rider came in—less than he thought about hitting the man and not the mount—and thrust upward with his spear.

The glow of his weapon was more golden than the white of Naexi’s, but the results proved similar. Callan drove the spear through the rider’s armor and into his chest, pushing him out of the saddle. He

lost his grip on the spear with the rider's crash into the ground. Cursing his luck, Callan whirled to face his other enemy. He still had the axe tucked behind his belt and the shield slung over his shoulder, but he wouldn't have either out in time. Baldy limped in with an axe of his own, wounded but still threatening.

"Coming through!" The tattooed woman clotheslined Baldy in a rush, having abandoned the wagon and its panicked ox. She left him sprawled and choking in the road on her way back to her companion. The other wagon had stopped, becoming cover for the second woman as she ducked to evade the remaining crossbowman in the wagon's bed. The driver laid dead in the dirt with the other crossbowman.

He never got his shot off. The tattooed woman leaped into the air and took him off the wagon with a flying kick.

"Shit. Shit!" Bryson blocked and gave ground against Naexi's blade, fighting well with sword and shield but aware his numeric advantage had vanished. He didn't like the look of Callan pulling the axe from his belt to help Naexi, either. "Who are you people?"

"You could surrender and find out," said Naexi.

"No, I can't!" Bryson lunged forward, smashing aside her shield and coming in with a high swing. She closed in to spoil his line of attack and put her shin into his groin along the way. The mutual shove that split them apart went better for her than for Bryson. She closed again with a slash across his chest, biting through his armor with divine power.

Even then, Bryson looked like he might rally—before the dagger flew into the back of his neck. Bryson panicked and spun, finding the woman in leathers a good ten yards away with yet another dagger to throw.

She didn't need it. Naexi ran him through.

Wisely, Callan spun to look for any other dangers. The tattooed woman had the last of the crossbowmen down. The knife-thrower gave Callan and Naexi a friendly wave of her empty hand. No one else stood besides the handful of horses nervously keeping their distance... and the other wagon, still rolling down the road at high speed for a laden ox.

"Poor guy," muttered Callan. Absently, his feet took him closer to the runaway than his lover, but he called back to the strangers first: "Are we friends here?"

"As long as you're not with the Black Road," said the knife-thrower.

"What? Hell, no," Callan answered. He didn't know much, but nothing he'd ever heard of the Road was good. "They're a network of slavers and worse, aren't they?"

“Much worse, I’ve heard. I suspect we fought them yesterday,” said Naexi.

The other woman held up her empty hand and sheathed her remaining dagger.

“Naexi,” said Callan. “If we’re good, that poor ox...”

“Oh! Yes. Go ahead,” she said. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

* * *

Callan would have laughed if he wasn’t short of breath by the time he caught up and calmed the ox. He felt like he’d expended more energy on the runaway ox than the fight. “There. You alright, friend?” he huffed.

The ox replied with a long, unhappy noise. Callan didn’t need the magic of druids to understand that. Thick but short hair appeared frazzled all along the ox’s front shoulders, ears, and the back of his head. Callan remembered the flash of energy from the tattooed woman’s blow. It had to be magic, and presumably unpleasant.

“Sssh. Shhh. Poor guy. Can I help?” He was gentle with his hands and mindfully avoided challenge. He wasn’t sure how he could help... until he remembered, again, that he was a paladin. He’d heard stories. *Really need to talk this out with Naexi*, he thought. *Assuming it works the same for her. But maybe...?* “May I?” he asked.

Again, the ox voiced his disgruntlement.

Callan spread out his hands over the wound, hovering less than an inch from contact. He didn’t want to set the ox off again. “Khíra, help me,” he murmured. It seemed like a reasonable way to start. “Show me?”

A cooling sensation swept through Callan’s hands. He stared with awe as the ox’s matted hair settled back into place, no longer frazzled or painfully warm.

“Hrnh?” The ox snorted. He couldn’t understand, but he did—at least enough to nudge Callan with his snout in what seemed like thanks.

A couple more minutes of patience won the ox’s grudging trust. Tricks learned on odd jobs came in handy. Callan soon coaxed the wary animal to turn around. He lead the way back on foot rather than drive. With the fight over and Naexi and the newcomers reining in the other animals, he didn’t need to hurry.

“Have I missed introductions?” he asked once back in speaking range.

“No. Only a check on the fallen and an agreement to split the horses.” Naexi pointed to Baldy, still laying in the road. “That one might have lived, but he bit down on some poison pill. I guess one of the wagon drivers had one, too. I haven’t heard of that sort of thing since I left my people. The rest went down too hard to save.”

“What was that about Black Road?” Callan asked.

“That’s these bastards,” said the knife-thrower. “That’s a Blackguard’s spear you carry. We weren’t sure if you were with them until they attacked. It, ah... didn’t look like an internal struggle.” Her voice sounded sophisticated, while her blue eyes shined with interest as Callan closed in. Rugged clothes and black hair touched with sweat didn’t diminish her striking beauty. Her armor allowed more curves than Naexi’s. Callan hoped he didn’t stare. She put out her hand. “I’m Cora. My friend patting down the departed is Jaclyn,” she added, raising her voice and tilting her head back to include the other.

“Yeah, hi.” Jaclyn didn’t look up from her work.

“Naexi, paladin of Tenash.” She took Cora’s hand firmly. “Thank you for joining in. I didn’t like our odds.”

“Oh, you seemed to do alright. And you?” she asked.

“Callan,” he said, clasping Cora’s hand in turn. “Thank you.”

She didn’t let go of his hand as casually as she had with Naexi. Her blue eyes seemed caught on his. “Callan? Are you both paladins of Tenash? Weapons don’t normally glow, but both of yours did.”

Dear gods, you’re beautiful, thought Callan. *Beautiful and clever and...* He blinked as if to clear the thought, but it took two tries. He’d be happy to watch her breathe. Her smile quirked with some amusement, throwing an extra beat into his heart, and then he remembered her question. “Yes, if you’re asking,” he admitted. “Khíra.”

“Khíra?” Her eyebrow rose.

His heartbeat tripped again. Somehow, he covered it with a chuckle. “I’m new.”

Naexi held back a laugh behind her grin. She watched Cora and Callan look at each other and then asked, “What brought you and Jaclyn out here after these Black Road?”

“Hm? Oh, these twats.” Cora let go of Callan’s hand and her stare. Even then, her eyes flicked back to him more than once as she regained her casual cool. “We trailed them from the city to find out what they’re up to. These are low-level muscle and runners supporting some operation nearby. If I’m right, their cargo is mostly common supplies. I hoped to question some of them, but I guess that sort of thing is why they carried poison. There may be documents or maps, at least. Good job running that other wagon down,” she added for Callan.

“Thank you. I’ve got some experience driving wagons,” he mumbled. Then he wanted to slap himself for feeling like he needed to assure the pretty lady he could hold down a job.

“And kind to animals, it seems?” she asked.

“I try.”

“That’s a nice quality. It speaks well of a man,” said Cora.

“Callan has many nice qualities,” said a quietly grinning Naexi.

Her voice broke Cora from the stare, and Callan with her. “Right. Sorry.” Cora turned back to the mess on the road. “We should see what they’ve got.”

Callan watched her step away, but slowly regained his self-awareness. He became aware of Naexi’s knowing grin, too. *Wait, her? It’s happening again?* Callan thought. Naexi seemed to think so. *Already?*

“Jaclyn? Anything?” Cora called.

Her companion rolled another fallen Blackguard onto his side and patted him down. “Common coin and ordinary shit so far,” came Jaclyn’s scratchy but still feminine voice.

“This one seemed to be the leader. Called himself Bryson and did all the talking,” said Naexi.

“There we go.” Cora knelt beside the body for a search. “The horses all have bags. Did you see which one was his?”

“I lost track, but there are only so many,” said Naexi.

“What else do we do about all this?” Callan wondered. “We’ve just killed a bunch of men. It’s not really a travel day, but anyone who comes upon us is bound to think the worst.”

“Then we’ll tell the truth. We’ve got paladins of Tenash and Khíra here.” Cora winked at him. “What was that about fighting the Black Road yesterday?”

“A cult in the ruins south and a bit east,” said Naexi. “We were with an adventuring company until it came apart after the fight. I realized I’d be in better company with only Callan.”

“Hey, wait.” Jaclyn stood from her search to join the others, looking from Naexi to Cora. “Tenash and Khíra are among the missing gods, aren’t they? I thought none of the missing answered prayers. Not even from paladins.”

Callan rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah, yeah. Speaking of the cult in the ruins...”

The comment drew Jaclyn’s first real eye contact with him. As with Cora, both of them stopped and stared. Like Cora, she was beautiful despite her rugged circumstances—and, in her case, some deliberately rugged style choices. She was rough and intimidating and wild, and made Callan’s heart beat harder. Jaclyn’s lips twitched with something that wouldn’t come out of her mouth. She was struck by looking at him, too.

It lasted no more than a moment, but it was as unmistakable as the first time. “Um. Hi. Callan,” he said. “You’re Jaclyn?”

“Yeah,” she managed slowly.

“The missing gods were trapped in an artifact guarded by the cult. Callan freed them,” said Naexi.

“We freed them,” Callan corrected, blushing.

“What?” asked Cora.

“Bullshit,” said Jaclyn.

“Oh, I was face-down on the floor and bleeding out along with the rest of my band,” said Naexi. “At most, I distracted the enemy while you broke the artifact. You’re the one who realized it was the key to everything. I’m not letting you dodge the credit,” she teased.

“Naexi and her companions did all the real fighting,” Callan said to Cora. “I snuck around the outside of the fight and, um, got lucky.”

“You’re not joking,” said Cora.

“No way,” said Jaclyn. “We’re talking about gods.”

“We’re talking to paladins,” Cora pointed out. “We’ve seen their power. We know that part is true. Do you think paladins of Tenash or Khíra would lie about this?”

Jaclyn frowned at Callan. “You’re telling us all those gods were kidnapped by some schmuck Black Road cultists?”

“No, I gathered Sovor did the kidnapping. The cult was there to guard the prison,” said Callan. “The gods had a whole conversation about it once they were released. I couldn’t follow most of it. Kind of overwhelming to be standing there at all.”

“How did you find them?” asked Cora.

“Blind luck,” said Naexi. “My companions are—*former* companions are adventurers called the Daring Blades. We were only scouting the ruins for hidden loot. This surprised us, too.”

“And you beat this cult yourselves?” Cora looked around the remains of the fight. “You fought well here but this wasn’t exactly an epic battle.”

“A prison for gods is the sort of thing you guard with dragons and demons, not a cult,” Jaclyn agreed. “Did you catch them on their lunch break?”

“Kind of,” mumbled Callan.

“Oh, they stomped all of us flat before the end,” Naexi explained without taking offense. “Callan got around the fight, not through it. Sometimes it’s not power or skill that win. Sometimes it’s just courage and wit. The gods did the rest once freed. I can’t explain the lack of dragons. Sorry.”

Jaclyn and Cora looked to one another. The latter shrugged. “Like I’ve been saying, even the Road has only so much magic to throw around. Maybe they meant to lean on secrecy more than naked strength to guard the place?”

“I want to hear the rest of this,” Jaclyn decided. “The whole story, from the start. I can’t believe there was a whole god-prison close by and we missed the breakout by a day.”

“That sounds like the woman I know,” said Cora. She turned back to searching Bryson and the other Blackguards.

“I’d be glad to tell it.” Callan looked to Naexi and found all the agreement he needed in her grin. “I’m from Sunderford. We’re headed back that way, if you want to join us?”

“Sure, that’d be—” Jaclyn stopped, looked away from him shyly, and reasserted her grumble. “Why not? Nothing better to do here, anyway.”

“Other than search for clues and split the loot.” Cora knelt at Bryson’s corpse with a couple of letters in hand, having found them in a stiff leather purse hidden in his clothes.

“It’s not exactly good loot,” said Jaclyn. “Lots of food and basic tools.”

“That’s not good?” asked Callan.

“I’d prefer coin, or magic if we’re lucky. Do you have any use for this shit?”

“Four horses, a pair of oxen, and two good wagons full of supplies? Yeah. Yeah, I do have a use for all this. It would put my family ahead by quite a bit.”

Jaclyn rolled her eyes and gestured around. “Okay, there are four of us. We split the horses, yeah? You can have the rest of the junk as long as we share any coin that turns up.”

“Like a cult’s payroll, perhaps?” Naexi pulled a small but heavy sack from a saddlebag on Bryson’s horse and grinned. “Does this make the fight worth your while?”

“That helps, yes. Nice of you to offer it up,” said Jaclyn.

“Told you,” Cora murmured. She unfolded the letters. “Paladins of Tenash and Khíra. I think we can take them at their...” Her eyebrows rose. She looked up to Callan. “You say you’re from Sunderford?”

“I live on a farm outside of town. Seems like it’s time to pull up those roots, though,” he said, glancing to his lover. “Life took some turns in the last couple days.”

That made Cora’s smile a bit brighter. “This letter is coded, but I’m pretty sure I know the cipher. By any chance, do you know someone in Sunderford by the initials DH? A grey-haired man, owns a big house within town, presumably someone important or influential?”

“That’s all in code?” asked Naexi.

“Some of it is in little pictographs,” said Cora.

“Derwith Hemshire is the head of the masons, and he’s on the Council of Guilds,” said Callan.
“They govern the town.”

Cora looked from one face to the next with a grin. “We’re too late to free any gods, but how would you like to expose a Black Road spy?”

* * *

“Cora goes after the Road out of curiosity,” said Jaclyn. “Protecting people and all that righteous shit counts, too, but it’s the intrigue that really grabs her. I’m in it for the revenge.”

“Righteousness and protecting people isn’t important to you?” Callan grinned. He held the ox reins loosely. Mostly, he kept watched the road and the wagon ahead of theirs, but he often glanced at Jaclyn. Maybe more than often. He looked whenever he spoke to her, and also at times in between.

She noticed.

“Doing good is nice, I suppose,” Jaclyn shrugged. Though habit would have her leaning back in her seat beside him, Jaclyn found herself seated upright and watching him closely. For once, interest outpaced her usual skepticism about strangers. “I could do other kinds of good if ‘good’ was my goal. Cora, too. But here we are.”

“I’ve never seen anyone fight like you. How did you learn to move like that? Is it magic?”

“I use a few magic tricks. Mostly it’s training to move your body, same as with a sword and shield. It’s also the reason for the revenge. The Road killed half my family and enslaved the rest when I was a child. Everyone went to the mines except me, because they saw I had a spark of magic. Not enough to be a wizard, but... enough. They trained me to fight in the arena in Talavor. I didn’t dare try to escape while I had family still alive, but one day one of the guards let the news slip about the last one dying. I didn’t have anything keeping me, so I got out.”

“That’s terrible,” said Callan. That look changed. No longer so bright, not so easy... but gentle. Genuine. “I’m so sorry, Jaclyn.”

Her eyebrow rose. He said it sincerely, which was good, but without any of the gushing or the overwrought emotion that drove her up the wall. That was also good.

“It’s years past,” she said. “I cried enough. I don’t feel like crying today.”

“That’s fair,” he said, and looked away... and back again, but not too long.

Not long enough, either, in a way.

“I don’t want to make this my whole life,” she went on. “I’m not fixated on destroying the whole stupid network. Would if I could, obviously. But I’m good at kicking ass and they deserve it. No need to work all day every day if I can just punch the nearest Road agent until all his gold falls out, you know?”

“I can’t see anything wrong with that.” Callan brightened a little. He let the family trauma and loss drop as she asked. “I’ve heard of the Talavor arena, but only that it’s spectacular and brutal. The city’s supposedly the same. Does everyone there fight like you? Is that common?”

“All that big spectacle is built on a lot of blood and shit, both for the arena and the city. And no, my skills are rare. People who fight like me usually learn in monasteries and it takes most of their youth. The trainers in Talavor knew how to skip all that. I like what I can do, but I wouldn’t thank them for it. The talent didn’t come from them, anyway.” She held her tongue about the rest. Even a paladin might not be the audience for her beliefs. It wasn’t like she had spoken directly with her god or any other.

“And the tattoos? Are they from the arena?”

“No. Is that why you keep looking at me?”

“Er, I—sorry. I hope I’m not making you uncomfortable.”

“You’re not.” Uncomfortable wasn’t the word. Inwardly, she conceded she might even like it, but that made her suspicious. “Why do you look?”

“Being polite, I thought. We’re talking. The tattoos are interesting. Is that insulting?”

“No.” She folded her arms. She almost told him it’s fine, that he could keep looking, that she wanted... but older habits pushed against that urge. Still, she got out something: “They mean different things. A couple of them cover up tattoos from the arena.”

“Oh. Good.”

“Good?”

“It’s your body. No one else should get to mark you.”

“Yeah.” She caught him stepping on his instinct to turn. “You can look. It’s fine. But we’re off the subject. We *were* talking about *you*, not me.”

“Sorry. I’d like to know you better, is all,” said Callan. “You’re... well. You’re like no one I’ve ever met before. And you’re amazing.”

He said it easily. Sincerely, not overwrought. Not as flattery and not as flirtation, no matter what that renewed tingle in Jaclyn's limbs and the yearning in her gut said. She pushed the feelings away again. "So, we're staying off the subject?" Jaclyn frowned. It wasn't an offer.

"One more thing first: how old were you when you escaped?"

"Seventeen. It's been about five years. Cora and I found each other a year ago, both sneaking around stealing from the Road. We've done this stuff. We've done other stuff."

"Ah. That makes us about the same age."

"And that's not back to the subject, Callan." Jaclyn was blunt and direct with most people and didn't smile easily. She didn't care how they took that, either. Something told her Callan might take it better, like Cora did. His grin seemed to prove her right.

He seemed... different.

Jaclyn pushed away some unspoken feeling in her gut. "Fray. Tell me."

"Fray wore plate armor like I've never seen. Bigger than any mortal man, but not a giant. He wasn't on fire, either. Not then, at least. No need. He tore the enemy apart with empty hands. I suppose fire would have been overdoing it."

He had already told her the story about the cult and the orb. Now she had questions. "Did he speak to you at all?"

"He looked at me and said, 'No warrior, but enough.' Wait, no," Callan reconsidered. "No, he was looking at me, but he was speaking to Aragha. *She* had a couple direct exchanges with me. I'm surprised I'm still alive. And that I still have my soul."

"You fought like a warrior back there. You're a paladin?"

"Only as of last night. And only sort of a paladin. Khíra made it clear she didn't hold me to any obligations or quests or whatever her paladins usually do. I'm faithful and all, but she only wanted to make sure I could protect myself. I'll fight if I need. I never considered fighting as a lifestyle." He grinned a little. "A paladin on his first day probably shouldn't put on airs, right?"

Jaclyn snorted and caught herself holding back a grin. He didn't boast or try to impress, and yet he did impress her... maybe even more because he wasn't trying. She liked that. She liked the look of him, too. In fact, she liked that a lot. And his voice. And his open manner.

She wasn't used to liking people this much, and certainly not so fast. But she felt it.

"Was it protection, or a reward?" she asked.

"I guess it was both. Protection for the reward, if we want to string it all together."

“You did free a goddess from a prison.” She still found the story incredible, but *he* was not so hard to believe. “What about the other gods? They didn’t reward you?”

“They had a whole debate about it. At first, they bickered and talked about revenge against Sovor and others, but I couldn’t follow. I don’t think they like one another all that much. Then Khíra said they all owed her, and they countered that they owed *me*, which Khíra said suited her fine. I guess there’s some ancient deal between them that made it binding instead of something they could blow off. Khíra made an offer on how to handle it and they accepted.”

“You’re almost blushing, so I know something came of that,” said Jaclyn. “What’s the deal?”

“She wanted to match me with one lover from each god’s faithful,” said Callan. “She said it’s not an enchantment or a curse or a quest, just her matching people as she always does. But the other gods have to accept it, no matter who she chooses.”

“You mean all at once?” Jaclyn blinked.

“Hah. That’s what *I* said. That’s what they said, too. She said yes, more or less. She didn’t have a list or somewhere to send me. She said it would happen in its own time, but soon. Right away, in fact. And then there was Naexi, so I guess that speaks to what she meant by soon.”

The admission threw Jaclyn’s feelings for a loop. Her heartbeat grew heavy. Her arms trembled. Butterflies beat their wings in her stomach. She realized absently that those sensations might have been with her for a few minutes already, but they were stronger now. Jaclyn swallowed her nerves along with another greater emotion. “How many?”

“Seven. Khíra already owed favors to a few others, so they called it even. And Erudh. He sort of adjudicated.”

“How’s this supposed to work?”

“She said I’d know the same way other people know when there in love. She joked about all the ways people fall in love. I couldn’t follow it all. Long burns, enemies to lovers, something about One Bed like it rules all other beds? Like an inside joke and I’m on the outside.” Callan shook his head. “She said it would probably be a lot of love at first sight.”

“Huh.” Jaclyn bit her lip. Her feet twitched nervously against the wagon.

“The tricky thing is, I believe her, but I don’t want to presume the wrong things about anyone just because I find them attractive, you know?”

“But you and Naexi...?”

“Yes.”

That pleasant breeze helped less to cool her than a few minutes ago. She felt warmer, especially between her legs. She scolded herself about jumping to conclusions, but then, what if...? *Gods, wouldn't it be nice if it was that easy to find someone? Someone strong and hot and caring and...*

No. Easy isn't the word. “How’d that happen?” asked Jaclyn. “You just went for it?”

“Before the battle, she was shy, and I didn’t want to intrude. After the battle, when she came to find me, we both felt differently. The shyness was gone and things started to click.”

“Just like that? Like magic?”

“I’d be worried about magic, but... this is direct from the goddess, right?”

“Naexi’s a paladin of another god. And a dark elf. Elves aren’t as taken by charm magic.”

“I’ve heard such. That part made me feel more confident. And her, too, I suppose.” He caught her expectant stare. “So then we, um. Went for it.”

Jaclyn shuddered again, but covered it. “You’re happy together?”

Callan’s eyes widened with four or five different answers he didn’t speak, but they all pointed to “yes.” He nodded meaningfully to the cart ahead of them. “I mean...”

“And she’s good with this? With six others?”

“Khíra promised love and joy for all. Naexi’s a paladin. She’s already used to this kind of, um, direction from deities. I think she’s looking forward to it.”

“She’s beautiful,” said Jaclyn.

“You’re beautif—um. Sorry.” He flashed something between a grimace and a smile.

“What?” she pressed.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Then tell me what you were about to say.”

“You’re beautiful,” said Callan.

Jaclyn folded her arms again—this time over the shudder through her core. A *pleasant* shudder. Again, old habits spoke up. “Nobody thinks that. I get passes and looks, sure, but that’s either curiosity about my style or ale filling someone’s eyes. Maybe they like my shape. They don’t like me.”

“If that’s true, they’re idiots. Your style is great, though.”

“Ffh. I wear old pants and a wrap over my chest. I shave away most of my hair. Naexi’s beautiful. Cora’s beautiful.” He had to nod at that, but she kept going. “There’s no beauty here.” She watched his mouth open and close again. “Talk. Don’t worry about making me uncomfortable. Say it.”

“Your face is beautiful and so is the rest of you,” said Callan. “I wouldn’t lie about that. There’s no reason. I’d rather be honest with you—which is why I’m telling you about Khíra and all the rest. You deserve that. You’re striking, and it’s one of the reasons I keep looking. If I shouldn’t, tell me.”

She didn’t. That soft shudder ran through her again. This kind of excitement usually disappointed her, so she didn’t trust the feeling. Not often.

Jaclyn glanced to the white-haired elf in the wagon ahead of theirs, seated beside Cora. The pair seemed engaged in conversation and banter. Apparently, they were getting along. Cora glanced backward and offered a grin when they made eye contact. Then Cora was back to focusing on her conversation with Naexi, and wouldn’t pay much attention to the pair behind her.

Or maybe she would. Maybe Jaclyn didn’t care. Maybe she didn’t need to worry about it.

“Part of me thinks I should shut up about this,” said Callan. “But we’re traveling together and dealing with the Road and all, so... maybe being honest and up front is the best choice, especially if someone shares danger, right? Even if it is a little awkward or weird.”

He said it casually and gently, but also thoughtfully. Like he didn’t want to imply anything. Like he could ignore or forget anything she wasn’t comfortable with. None of the pressure of men who thought they had leverage over her, or even just strangers in taverns... and yet, he did have that face, and that voice, body...

“I’m not exactly religious, but my patron is Fray,” said Jaclyn.

“Oh?” he asked, and assumed nothing. But he hoped.

Her eyes narrowed. She *knew* he hoped.

Jaclyn grabbed his shirt to turn him toward her and kissed him. His mouth wasn’t ready in that first instant, but his lips immediately felt good on hers—and then they opened. He kissed back. Smooth, warm caresses met her mouth outside and in. Excitement ran from that kiss through the rest of her body. She’d tried being with men before, but the vulnerability never felt this *right*.

She felt like she lost control. Importantly, she didn’t feel Callan try to take control from her.

Jaclyn swung her leg over both of his to straddle his lap. Her kiss grew fierce and possessive. She wanted more of him, but she felt much better about that desire now.

* * *

“Oh. No. I’m wrong. She’s in his lap.” Cora’s backward glance lasted longer this time than her first. “They’re going at it.”

Hooded, Naexi had to make more of a turn to look back, but it was worth the effort. She smiled and settled forward to drive their ox and wagon onward. “Then back to your question: yes, we are lovers, but no, we aren’t exclusive. If you’re interested, I suspect you’ll have more to work out with her than with me.”

Cora bit her lip, looking to her companion. “Yes. I think I am. Er, interested.”

“Obviously, I don’t blame you.” The breeze caught Naexi’s hood to reveal a glimpse of her serene and amused grin.

“Hah. I suppose that part follows.” Cora gave the other wagon another look. “Good thing that ox is inclined to follow us. We might want to call out if we have to stop for anything.”

“Are they shedding clothes?” asked Naexi.

“No. Not yet, anyway.” Cora relaxed back into her seat, half chagrined and half laughing. “I’ll admit I’m a little envious. I’ve been trying to break this ice with her for months. We’ve known you two for a couple hours. And you’re not bothered at all.”

“Months, you said?” Naexi asked. “And you’ve been together for a year?”

“A lot happened between now and then. She was traumatized, and I had a lover, and then he turned out to be trash. It’s only been recently that I’ve really felt the spark. And with Jaclyn being Jaclyn, I haven’t wanted to rush anything.” She took one more look over her shoulder and smirked. “Wouldn’t have thought of going from a first meeting to groping and kissing on a wagon in two hours.”

“You don’t sound upset.”

“From what you’re telling me, we can all have our cake and eat it, too. Sounds like it might be fun to give it a try, at least.” Her eyes slid to watch Naexi. Despite the hood, Cora knew that grin was still there. “I would think you have more reason to be bothered. You’ve had only one night together.”

“I’m a paladin. I’m used to the direct involvement of a god in my life, and I know he approves of this. Most people have to guess and take risks in love. If Khíra herself has arranged this and assures our happiness and Tenash supports it, I’m happy to trust her. I don’t see any drawbacks yet.”

“None, eh?”

“None at all. Only benefits.”

Cora rubbed the back of her neck. Another glance caught Callan checking the reins and his direction while Jaclyn licked his neck. “I’m no wizard, but I know enough about magic to know enchantments and mystic charms don’t work like this.”

“Not the manipulative kind, no. He’s definitely enchanted somehow. It’s been hours since this morning and I still feel aftershocks.” Naexi seemed to catch Cora’s double-take out of the corner of her eye. “I trust him and the one who enchanted him.”

“Af..? Aftershocks. You just say that.” Cora laughed.

“You said you’re interested. And you seem like a fun woman.”

“I am. I don’t expect others to speak so freely. We just met. You’re a paladin.”

“I repeat my statement,” Naexi said. “Tenash doesn’t forbid fun with men or women.”

Cora’s heart skipped another beat with that last word. Naexi kept her eyes on the road, seeming unbothered... no. Not merely unbothered. Naexi seemed to *know*. Whether she knew from the heavier breath in Cora’s lungs or the flushed feeling she felt in her skin, Cora couldn’t tell. “Does that include the six others he’s supposed to find?”

“I hope so. Who says this is only about him?” Naexi watched the road in feigned serenity. “You and Jaclyn are both very beautiful.”

Cora’s thighs pressed together. She bit her lip. Her breath stayed low and deep. She knew her looks worked to her advantage, but she didn’t hear praise like that from cool and confident dark elf beauties... “We need to keep watching the road, don’t we?”

“Yes. For now.”

“Damn.”

“We could make a plan for our next stop,” said Naexi. “Something devious?”

“You know... I seem to recall passing by a big stream off the road not far from here...”

* * *

“Callan! Jaclyn! Turn to the right.”

Cora’s call broke through the distractions of Jaclyn’s body and lips against his. Jaclyn sat bolt upright in his lap. Their eyes met in shared embarrassment... and then they realized they had been at it for more than a few minutes. Each moment felt too good to do anything but kiss and grope and explore into the next. Even now, both were all too conscious of the delicious grind of her groin against his. Now they realized they’d been driving their wagon practically blind.

The ox apparently had it handled. The horses trailing behind with reins hitched to the back of the wagon seemed undisturbed. Naexi and Cora were barely any farther than they had been at his last

glance. Cora waved to a branching path going off the road. She smiled, but didn't laugh or make any commentary.

"Sorry. Um." Callan still held her steady. "I'm, ah... swept away."

"Yeah." Jaclyn swung herself off of him and back into his seat.

"If they're bothered, they'd say something."

"Uh-huh." Jaclyn hunched over at first, and Callan saw a fretful glance toward her adventuring partner. Then that fret turned to a frown. "Yeah. Hell with it." Her left hand slid over his thigh, shamelessly close to his groin. "They'd find out, anyway."

Her bold caress surprised Callan, but he liked it. They were a little past teasing touches.

The oxen took the turn at Callan's guidance. He twisted around to make sure all four horses followed along without trouble, which brought him closer to Jaclyn again. She took advantage, leaning in and inhaling against his neck. "Yeah, this is some kind of magic," she said. "You seem natural, but you smell too good. And you feel too good. It's all my senses."

"As long as you're fine with all I told you. I wouldn't want to mislead," said Callan.

"Think I'd like you without the incentives anyway," she decided. "If I get a magical kink, too, that sounds like a bonus. Bring it on."

The forking trail descended from the road, coming behind a line of shading trees. Noise from the wagons and their animals covered up the sounds of the big stream ahead, but Callan knew the area well enough to expect it when they came close. The fork and the strip of flattened brush on this side of the shore spoke to how often travelers stopped here to water their animals or camp for the night. Thankfully, the small party found the space deserted.

Callan considered the road and the time of day. If no one else was here now, they'd likely have complete privacy until tomorrow at least. Then he put that thought in check, not wanting to get ahead of himself... no matter how hard he'd gotten, or how heavy his anticipation and desire grew, or the signals he sensed from Jaclyn, and especially how *sure* he felt about it all.

They brought the wagons to a stop in a stable spot mostly cleared of undergrowth by previous visitors. Trees provided plenty of shade. The water ran only steps away. It was a great spot to give the animals care and rest, take a break, and talk out all this serious stuff about the Black Road with new companions. *Necessities and chores first*, Callan told himself as he got off the wagon. *Don't rush these things and make a fool of yourself.*

Cora walked right up, eyes fixed on him and flashing a crooked grin, and kissed him.

Her body slid close, hand hooking around his neck while he felt her chest against his. Cora's kiss invaded his mouth like he was defenseless. She was skilled, sultry, and passionate. He felt completely swept away... just like with two other women already.

"Wow," said Jaclyn beside them.

Their kiss parted. Silently gasping for breath, Callan watched Cora pull away from him to look at her companion with that same crooked grin. "I saw you two."

"Obviously." Jaclyn seemed unbothered despite her raised eyebrow.

"Naexi and I have been talking," Cora continued, still close to Callan. "We figured he was bound to tell you all the same things."

"Seems like it," said Jaclyn.

"You haven't punched me away from him."

"Nah." Jaclyn snatched Cora by her collar, instantly tugging her out of Callan's light embrace to plant a kiss on Cora's mouth.

"Mmph!" Cora exclaimed into Jaclyn's lips, and then kissed back with need.

Callan blinked. The words fell out of his mouth softly, stunned by Cora's first kiss and then again watching this one: "What is happening?"

"That part is a long time coming," said Naexi, beside him before he knew it. She held a pair of bedrolls in her arms, and with them a rolled blanket. "*Most* romances build with time."

"Well, yeah, they..." Callan stopped. She knew he knew that. She grinned at him, too. His heart beat harder as he looked at her—like it beat harder for the other two women.

The kiss finally broke. Cora and Jaclyn stood together, wrapped in an embrace with foreheads touching. "Gods, I've wanted to do that forever," Cora breathed.

"Gods is right, I guess," said Jaclyn.

"This isn't weird?" asked Cora. "You and I and... him?"

"Doesn't feel weird to me."

"No," agreed Cora, before leaning in for more.

"We all feel it," Naexi told Callan. "We know what this is. We all want it. We don't need to doubt or to wait." She pushed the bundles of bedding into his arms. "There's a spot under an oak tree a few yards ahead of the other wagon. I'll settle the animals."

"Wait, no. That's my job," said Callan.

Then it was Naexi's turn to claim another kiss, tugging Callan by his collar not so differently than Jaclyn pulled with Cora. The bundle in his arms between them prevented more, but her kiss lingered and savored without inhibition. She took what was hers as a lover who knew she was welcome.

Like Cora. Like Jaclyn.

"I am not making myself secondary," Naexi told him. "Lovers do nice things for each other. You may be better with animals and rigging, but I can handle this. I'll join you soon." A softer, simpler kiss bid him a moment's farewell. Her look past his shoulder turned his attention.

Grinning women tugged at his arm, and his bundle, and his desires.

A short walk took them from the scent of animals and the road. Callan dropped and spread the thick blanket, luckily without need for fuss. He turned to find Cora and Jaclyn deep in another kiss. The former's hand came to the latter's breast while Jaclyn retaliated with a grope of Cora's ass.

He couldn't blame Jaclyn's priorities. Cora had an amazing ass. Callan had only enough time for that one thought before their kiss broke and they turned their attention on him, both grinning. Both beautiful. Both wanting him.

Eager hands unfastened and untied clothes and explored bared skin. Cora and Jaclyn weren't shy about shedding those clothes. Callan's fascination and desire soared with every reveal. That simple band of a top and loose pants Jaclyn wore belied the real allure of her body. Cora's tighter tunic and breeches under leather armor was less of a surprise, but no less enthralling. Callan felt almost worshipful as their clothes came off.

The even wilder revelation, building as an ever-greater thrill, came with the way both women touched and kissed and marveled at his body. His new lovers seemed just as fascinated by Callan as they had him. Maybe more. "Gods, yes," Jaclyn murmured when she and Cora finally freed his raging erect cock from his pants. Both explored and caressed his length, making him shiver. "I want you. I want this." Her eyes flicked up to Cora. "And I want to watch him fuck you."

"You must do more than watch," Cora murmured back, and kissed her again.

"Nothing wrong with watching, and nothing wrong with two sharing one," Callan said in a soft flash of inspiration. He might have thought his first threesome would be a challenge. Instead, he felt no pressure. Only desire. Almost as if something prepared him for this.

"We'll like it more without the dust and sweat of the road." Cora tugged both lovers by the hand toward the river.

Even a few steps at arm's length were another treat for the eyes. None could take their gaze off one another. The stream was naturally cool, but not enough to dull the edge of their desire. Running

water washed away the mild grime of the day. Eager hands stroked and explored. Callan finally filled his grasp with Cora's incredible ass, pulling her close and kissing her. Jaclyn took advantage to grope him from behind with much the same fascination.

"Fuck her," Jaclyn bade quietly into his ear while his mouth still occupied Cora's.

"Mmh. Her first," Cora countered. "She needs this."

"So do you," said Jaclyn.

"I have a plan," said Cora.

"Is this up to me, then?" asked Callan.

"I'm not gonna stop you," Jaclyn said against his neck.

Cora pressed close, keeping his upright cock pinned between her groin and his, talking like she really wanted him to take Jaclyn first but touching and moving with very different desires. "Trust me," she hissed.

Callan kissed her again, hands reluctantly releasing her ass but sliding up her hips like he might have decided one way... and then turned on Jaclyn with a bold and needful kiss. The tough, tattooed beauty melted against him and almost whimpered into his mouth. A clearer note came with the brush of his fingers against the small patch of dark hair between her legs, under the water.

He softly nudged her thigh to widen her stance. She raised her knee to his hip. His cock slid easily into place, teasing her with his length gliding across her lips and then back again. Another such slide made her groan. She couldn't take a third. Callan filled newly possessive hands with Jaclyn's ass to lift and spread her and slowly brought her down on his cock.

"Fuckfuckohfuck!" Jaclyn cried in shock and pleasure. Every inch of him thrilled her more. She wrapped her arms around him and held close, luscious breasts against his chest. Jaclyn whimpered as he took control. He knew when to slow, when to lift to let her back off for a breath, and how to slowly invade her deeper and deeper.

With Jaclyn's beautiful body wrapped around his and his mind lost to the tight welcome of her sex, Callan forgot about any possible care beyond this stream and these women. Only his time with Naexi rivaled this moment, and vaguely he understood Cora would be the same. They would all share this. He knew that. It felt right.

He didn't worry about the rest. He fucked Jaclyn standing in the stream, holding her upright against him and reveled in her moans against his mouth and his neck. All her strength and danger was still there, but she embraced him with that now. She welcomed him, pleased and excited with every thrust of his cock. If they weren't in love from their first kiss, they were wildly so now. Her blue eyes

met his with an understanding she couldn't speak with her mouth full of gasps and moans: they would be fucking a lot from now on.

Hands at his back and lips on his shoulder reminded him of another lover eager for both of them. Naexi wasn't far away, either. The relentless pleasure of fucking Jaclyn held his focus even with the promise of more to come.

"Blankets," Cora suggested. "Take her to shore."

Callan lifted Jaclyn by her ass, trusting her grip around his shoulders to hold her aloft. He carried her out of the stream with sure feet granted by Khíra's grace, fucking her more with each step. Jaclyn leaned her head into his shoulder and enjoyed until they came to a stop at their waiting makeshift bed. She clung tightly to him through the careful but joyous transition onto her back.

She rewarded him with fierce kisses and scratching nails at his shoulders. Another thrust put her right back into panting joy. Callan fucked her harder now that he had a surface beneath them both. He didn't get into a good, driving rhythm before Cora interrupted again, this time with a gentle tug at his shoulder and a welcoming kiss.

"Lean back," she advised. "Fuck her more."

He did. Callan pulled Jaclyn's legs up over his hips, pushing his knees past hers, and drove in deeper yet still slow. As much as he wanted to thrust away and fuck his new lover harder, he saw his other new lover's better idea as Cora knelt and bent toward their intimacy.

Jaclyn gasped and then cried out with a new escalation when Cora's tongue glided across her already overwhelmed pussy. Pleasured by two lovers, the last vestiges of tough girl notes vanished from Jaclyn's groans. Now every gasp thanked and pleaded for more. Callan found even greater appeal to this than his driving need for satisfaction. He fucked Jaclyn slowly while Cora did the rest with kisses and licks and one stroking hand over Jaclyn's chest.

"Love it... love it," Jaclyn gasped. Her lovers took their time driving her wild. Soon, the inevitable approached. Jaclyn writhed and threw her head against the blanket. "So good so good need it harder. Harder!" Callan obliged. Cora couldn't keep up at her game, but she shifted to straddle Jaclyn for some face-to-face time while Callan fucked Jaclyn to her first climax. She tensed and throbbed, crying out in bliss as her body shook and released.

The sensual ride and the emotional rush was too much for Callan even without the sight of Cora's nude form on her hands and knees between himself and Jaclyn. Callan came hard inside Jaclyn, torrents of satisfaction blending with her tremors. Again, as with Naexi and all their first kisses and more, Callan felt the blessings of Khíra mixed in with all their sensual pleasures.

When the rush subsided and the clouds of ecstasy cleared, he still enjoyed the embrace of Jaclyn's welcoming pussy. He was still hard. He could still offer more. He still wanted more, too.

Beneath him, Cora soothed Jaclyn with the all-over caress of her naked body, but teased with soft and dirty words. "You're my slut now," said Cora.

"Promise?" Jaclyn whimpered.

"Yes," Cora whispered and kissed.

"Mutual?"

"Promise."

"Good," Jaclyn hissed back. "Because we're both his sluts, too." She looked past Cora's shoulder with a conspiratorial glint in her eye. With Cora straddling Jaclyn, her ass was already spread; Jaclyn grabbed shamelessly to spread more. She looked over Cora's shoulder to give Callan a lustful, wordless command.

She didn't need to say more. Callan hardly had to move to follow her suggestion, either. It wasn't exactly romantic, but it felt right. Callan's cock pulled free of Jaclyn's white-stained and satisfied sex to slap against Cora's lips. "Ooohhhh!" Cora affirmed. She gyrated back at him to welcome his cock, slick and wet and wanting him badly. Callan pushed into her with a deep groan of new satisfaction.

New love rushed in with all the other sensual wonders of Cora's body. He gripped her hips and pulled and thrust freely, even selfishly. Again, animal need and intimate romance became the same thing. They fucked with the urgency of lovers who'd been kept apart for too long. They also fucked as if all the energy spent and satisfaction found with Jaclyn had never happened. In truth, not a bit of that moment had washed away.

He knew he'd need more of Jaclyn, too. Driving into Cora hard, hips slapping against her ass and gaze enthralled by her body, Callan felt the need for more of both of them. Having both of them now wasn't enough. He would need more, and so would they.

Khíra's promises sank in ever deeper. He fucked and thrust with irresistible pleasure and aching love.

"Our slut now," said Jaclyn as she made love to Cora while he fucked her. "All ours."

"Yesss," Cora hissed back. "Mmh! *Mmb!*"

"Excellent." A shadow fell over the trio, though at first only Callan noticed. Naexi stood over them wearing nothing but her cloak and hood, the rest of her clothing shed to display her lithe and gorgeous naked body. "I'm glad we all understand each other."

Callan didn't stop. He knew she didn't want him to. Though she knelt beside him much like Cora had, she hooked her hand around his neck and kissed him with a cooler sensuality than her predecessor. The contrast drove him wild.

This time it was Callan who came first, unleashing another throbbing flood into another lover. The results were the same. One orgasm set off another. Cora shook and clutched at Jaclyn as climax overtook her.

Again, amid rush and satisfaction, they all knew it wouldn't end here.

* * *

The sun set before they considered next steps or the journey ahead. Everyone felt too good to stop. No one tried. The reality of Khíra's arrangements had already sunk in for Callan. Between his openness and hours of passion, it sank in for the rest, too.

Callan didn't worry about keeping three lovers interested and satisfied anymore. Soon, his only concern was discovery by some other passing travelers, though none came. They had the glade and the stream all to themselves, all afternoon and evening. By now they knew the glade was theirs for the night.

Time and satisfaction allowed passions to relax, though it didn't fade. No one pulled on a stitch of clothing, and in fact sunset allowed Naexi to lose her cloak. Play never really stopped. Even once relaxed and sated, Naexi laid atop Jaclyn with lingering kisses and bare skin caressing bare skin. Beside them, Cora spooned against Callan in a soothing afterglow.

"She said all that to you?" asked Cora, alternating between watching their other lovers and studying his hand in hers. "I believe you, it's just... you remember that clearly?"

"Completely." Callan told her everything apart from the matter of Khíra's intimate touch at the end. That seemed like a privacy to would protect between any lover, let alone his goddess. It also still seemed a bit over the top for a story that already had that problem. "I feel like believing me at all is a stretch to begin with."

"After all this? No," said Cora. "I've had other lovers. Good ones. None of those experiences come close. This is *not* natural... and I'm not complaining," she grinned. "It's more than the sex, although the sex may have a lot to do with how I feel. If not for a divine explanation like this, I'd suspect some sinister magic at work."

“Without Tenash to guide me, I might have thought the same,” said Naexi. “My people are all but immune to charm magic, too. It can’t be that.”

“No, I’ve been under a charm spell before,” said Cora. “I tangled with a wizard early in my adventuring days. It’s different. That kind of magic keeps you from questioning it in the first place. When others pointed it out, I got angry and defensive. Yet even then, when the magic made me believe the wizard was a friend I should defend, I’d never have fucked the guy. This is entirely different.”

“Yes,” said Naexi. “Something enhances all this, but it’s based on natural attraction. It only works because it’s welcomed. And Callan may be at the center, but it’s clearly not only about him or for him alone.”

“I’m grateful for that,” said Callan.

“At this point, I’m not sure I’d care if it was some evil magic,” Jaclyn sighed happily. She stroked Naexi’s hair as her other new lover kissed and caressed her breast. “If it’s this good, I’m fine with it.”

Making a face, Cora nudged Jaclyn’s shoulder. “You care more about good and evil than you let on.” Her grumble softened as soon as it came on. “It’s a reason why I love you.”

Jaclyn turned her head to face her. Naexi paused and asked, “Should I give you two space?”

“No, no, don’t stop,” said Cora. “I like seeing her indulged like this.”

“Wait ‘til it’s your turn,” said Jaclyn.

“Soon,” Naexi vowed. Her mouth returned to Jaclyn’s body, drawing out another happy note. “As often as you all like.”

“I like the sound of that,” said Cora. “I like everything I’m hearing.”

“Even about the others? Whoever they are?” asked Naexi.

“When it was just Naexi...” Callan began, and then laughed silently. “Gods, it was only last night. I wanted to give her all my time and attention. Everything. Now I feel that way about all three of you. This feels right. I’m in no rush to find others.”

“But...?” Cora grinned.

“There’s no ‘but.’ I believe Khíra’s words. It’ll happen. I want to do right by all of you, is all,” said Callan. “I want to give you all I can.”

“Sure,” said Cora. “But think about that feeling. If one of us was somewhere out there, waiting for you, wouldn’t you come find us? Because that’s the case. There are four others. You’ll be wild about them, too. And that will be mutual. For all of us, apparently.”

“See, there’s her angle. Cora wants more sluts to play with,” said Jaclyn.

“Like you don’t?” Cora joked back.

Naexi turned slightly against Jaclyn, still wrapped tightly but pausing her attention. “We did not meet by accident. Callan and I might have stayed and played where we were for another day, or you might have missed us on the road. I’m a paladin, too. I recognize this sort of guidance. If Khíra needs Callan to go somewhere, she’ll let him know.”

“And what about being a paladin of Tenash, then? He encouraged you into this, but does he have another agenda for you? One of his own?” asked Cora.

“I’m a protector. I swore oaths to defend the weak and those in need. That sort of need comes up on its own, whether I seek it out or not. If I have a singular duty, it’s here with you. I’m to defend this love, and all three of you—and whoever else awaits,” said Naexi.

“Defend and fuck, huh?” asked Jaclyn.

“Chastity and celibacy aren’t among my oaths. I’m free to be as lustful as any of you. And I am,” said Naexi. A free hand descended along Jaclyn’s naked body to prove it, finding her wet and welcoming between her legs. Naexi only gave Jaclyn a stroke, but Jaclyn’s shiver and groan said the paladin made her point well.

“Oooh I can enjoy this without worrying about tomorrow, too,” said Jaclyn.

“As much as you want, Jaclyn,” Naexi offered with cool confidence. “Again, Khíra’s arrangement isn’t only for Callan.” Her eyes almost sparkled as they turned to Cora. “It’s for all of us.”

“What about the two of you?” asked Callan. “What do you want to do? Not just when we get to town. What about beyond that?”

“That’s sort of in flux now, isn’t it?” Cora replied.

“But what if it wasn’t? That’s what I’m saying. We’re all falling hard, but we barely know each other. If we’re to be together, what’s that look like apart from this?”

“Hm, point,” she considered. “I trained as a scholar, but that way of life wasn’t for me. As much as I love a good library, I never trust them to have all the answers. People try to keep the real secrets out of the libraries, whether ancient or current. I felt more like going out into the world to find them. That’s how I fell in with Jaclyn. But I don’t have a specific burning passion or a lifelong quest. A treasure hunt can be about filling a hole in scholarly knowledge or simply filling my pockets. Nothing wrong with either goal, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Everyone has to make their way,” said Naexi. “I’ve sold a few treasures myself.”

“Jaclyn?” asked Callan. “We spoke about the Black Road. What else?”

She made the slightest shrug, not wanting to jostle Naexi too much. “I don’t know. I want to hurt the Road. I want to make them regret ever messing with me and mine. But I don’t have to destroy

them all. I don't want that to be my whole life. It's just... I hadn't thought much past that until now. I want to live well and have a good time. Seems like maybe I found that, or it found me." That hard edge was still there, and probably always would be, but she didn't flash it at her lovers. Not now. "What about you?"

"It's... um. I don't want this to come out wrong," he said.

"We seem ready work out any misunderstandings," said Naexi. "Say what you feel."

"It's been a wild few days for everyone. None of us are going anywhere on this," said Cora.

"Wild," said Callan. "I'm wild about all three of you. I've fallen so hard. You're all tough and smart and charming—"

"Hah!" Jaclyn interrupted.

"You are," said Callan. "You blow me away. Each of you. You're inspiring. I want this to work, and make you happy, and be worthy of you... and all that is crowded by lusting for you. Each of you. Love is so much more than sex, but..."

"...you feel obsessed with fucking us?" Cora finished.

"Yes," he admitted.

They didn't speak. Cora, Jaclyn, and Naexi all shared a look. A deep, sinking sensation hit Callan at his very core, like he'd failed his new lovers and his goddess and ruined everything already.

"Gods, I was afraid I'm the only one," Cora exhaled.

"Right?" Jaclyn laughed.

"This is all of us, Callan," said Naexi. "This is Khíra's promise. We share it."

"I didn't want to hide anything," said Callan.

"Alright, you want the truth about what I want?" said Jaclyn. "I want to *fuck*. I want more of this. I want my revenge, but I want this more. If I become more slutty lover than warrior, that sounds like happily ever after to me. I want to fuck and play all the time and I hope we stay this horny for life."

"I believe that's the plan," said Naexi. "This is what I mean to protect, and to enjoy."

Cora purred, leaning back into Callan's embrace. "So. A little adventure, a little justice and a little revenge, and above it all lots more of this... along with whoever else is to join us?" She grinned. "We're going to have to get rich."

"Yeah?" Jaclyn grinned back.

"If we want a life of obsessive sex and play instead of working a farm or serving some random rich sod? Yeah," said Cora. "We'll need money to live well. Lots of it."

“I took no vow of poverty,” said Naexi. Like the others, she looked at Callan with a grin—a lustful one. “Callan? What do you think?”

“I think I’m in love.”