

NEVER TOO MANY

Chapter Four

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“Well,” Amanda said slowly, “we always knew this wasn’t the life for you.”

“Mother,” said Callan.

“No, it’s fine. Everyone needs to find their own way and I never meant to keep you here. I just didn’t think your life beyond home would be, er... this.”

Pleasant weather and numbers made the table outside a more comfortable choice than talking inside the house. At one side, Amanda sat next to her new lover; Callan and all *three* of his took up the other sides. Arrangements left Cora closest to him, subtly holding Jaclyn’s hand under the table. Naexi and Callan had the same idea.

Amanda and Tegreth either didn’t notice or didn’t mind. They took in the whole story, told without the salacious details... until Amanda had to ask. “So you’re all, erm, together? Together?”

“Yes,” Cora said as if to assure it wasn’t an odd question.

“Yes,” Naexi said with a quiet smile.

“So far,” said Jaclyn. Proudly. That got a raised eyebrow from Naexi, but she said nothing.

Callan blushed—not for the first time—and glanced away as if to defer to his lovers.

“Alright. Well. However that works—er, I mean, good for you. I mean *that*, too,” said Amanda. The next thought prodded her onward. “Not to rush anything, but you should be mindful at least... what of children?”

“Khíra said I’d have none,” said Callan. “It was a condition between her and the other gods. They didn’t want this turning into a whole legacy or going on forever. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry on my account. That’s all about your feelings. You’ve said you didn’t want children, but you’re young and you might change your mind. If you don’t feel bad about it, then I don’t. I never needed grandchildren. I need you to be *happy*. If this is happiness for you...” Not for the first time, Amanda took in their company with an overwhelmed glance. “...then I’m happy for you. Truly. I only imagined welcoming one newcomer to the family someday, but I’m happy to add three... or seven. Apparently.”

“You can joke about it. We do,” said Cora.

“Good,” Amanda laughed. “I can’t say I ever expected the direct word of gods, either. Not to say I doubt them, but you’re all mortal. If someday soon, or years from now, this doesn’t work out...?”

“Then I let go and ponder where I went wrong and move on,” said Callan. “Maybe I come home and be sad for a while. Maybe I’ll already be back here by then. Who knows. Even with Khíra’s help, I’m not entitled to anyone or anything.”

“Good,” Amanda repeated. She looked to the others. “I always planned to treat whoever Callan brings home as family. And if you’re family, could I impose upon you to ask for your help getting all of this settled?” She gestured to the wagons and animals nearby. “I never had my hopes up about Callan coming home from his adventure with treasures. This is a lot.”

“Happy to,” said Cora.

“Sure,” said Jaclyn. “Soon as the fight was done, he wanted to bring all this home to you.”

Naexi noted that with a quiet smile, but didn’t linger on it. “We had one other matter bringing us here, too.”

“Yes. My mind caught on that part of your story,” said Tegreth. “Easier to get a hold of than talk of gods, I suppose. You said one of the guild masters works for the Black Road?”

“I wouldn’t say we’ve got proof,” said Cora. “We have an encoded letter, but I’ve broken this code before. Circumstances line up, too.” She flashed Callan a glance for consent or warning before she said, “Grey hair, initials DH?”

Tegreth and Amanda’s brows rose. The former leaned back from the table, arms folded. “Derwith Hemshire? Really?”

“Leader of the stonemasons, Callan said,” added Naexi. “*If it’s him.*”

“Does that sound plausible to you?” asked Cora.

“Well, I don’t know him personally,” said Tegreth. “Most of the guild masters are the sort to meet everyone in town once or twice. I’ve worked a couple of his projects over the years, but I doubt he’d remember me. He puts coin and labor into the community, helps with holiday festivals, gets the roads clear before market fairs. I’ve never heard a rumor against him.”

“Some people are good at keeping their names clean. We know a cleric who had no scandal until we discovered his affair with your wife,” said Amanda.

“Oh, I’m thinking of that. And other betrayals,” said Tegreth. “Plenty of decent images are only a blanket over something foul.”

“I’ve met him, too,” said Amanda. “Even flirted with me once or twice, but never seemed serious. The grey in his hair is early. He’s our age. Fit, confident. Claims to be a working man despite his wealth.”

“I’ve seen him work on the walls,” said Tegreth. “He knows mason work and he has the arms for it, but he’s much more about trade and council matters. What would he do for the Black Road?”

“We don’t know,” said Cora. “Helping their agents on the move, at the very least. Perhaps running supplies or coin. If he’s a guild master, he’s connected. Callan says they govern the town?”

“No, that’s Baroness Tishal and the sheriff,” said Amanda.

“Mother,” Callan prodded skeptically.

Amanda shrugged in concession. “At least in name. But yes, the guild masters wield a lot of influence. The baroness sets law and decrees, but the guild masters hold more weight in anyone’s daily work and trade. Sunderford has seven of them.”

“They’re having a celebration tonight,” said Tegreth. “It was originally a meeting to address town matters, but that changed with the return of the gods. Hemshire is host. Leaders and guests only, not the whole town. I only know because my daughter is apprenticed with the brewers. They’re rushing to provide for the feast.”

“Are they?” Cora asked with interest.

“Yes. The moment all this godless turmoil eases, the upper crust throws a feast for themselves.” Amanda shook her head. “I suppose it gets coin moving.”

“If Hemshire’s hosting, where does he live?” asked Callan.

“You don’t know?” asked Tegreth.

“I can name the town leaders, but it’s not like I follow their gossip.” Callan shrugged. The smirk of approval from Jaclyn surprised him.

“Hemshire moved into the old manor on Eagle’s Hill. Sunderford is old,” Amanda added for the newcomers’ benefit. “This was an outpost under the Gantal dynasty. They built the inner walls and set the roads. Lords lived in the Gantal manor until Baroness Tishal came and built a new castle on Beacon Hill across the river. It’s barely a decade old now.”

“I knew that part,” Callan mumbled.

“Manor house on a hill? Used to be the ruler’s home?” asked Cora. “Would that Gantal stronghold have a lower exit, perhaps? For servants, or escapes? The Gantals had a thing for that.”

“Yes,” said Tegreth. “There’s an old servant’s door dug into the base of the hill, near the stream. Partly hidden, but not really a secret anymore. I’ve seen it on a job cleaning up after a storm. They keep it barred and jammed from the inside.”

“Intriguing.” Cora flashed a look to her partners. “An old Gantal stronghold will have a dungeon or catacombs. Or both.”

“The Road likes that sort of thing,” said Jaclyn.

“You’re not thinking of going in there, are you?” asked Amanda. “Why?”

“We need to know if Hemshire is with the Road,” said Callan.

“If you have this letter and all this other evidence, why not take it to the baroness?”

“Because it’s not certain,” said Cora. “We have a coded message and a trail that rests on our word. I’ll bet my every coin on it, but it isn’t proof. We don’t want to accuse the wrong person, either. If he’s *not* part of the Road, that only embarrasses him and warns the real agents. And it wouldn’t shock us if an agent of the Road as connected as this might have some leverage over the baroness.”

“Or worse. We’ve seen it before,” said Jaclyn.

“In a town like Sunderford?” asked Amanda. “Even the closest goblin village is friendly. We live outside the walls without any worries. You really think the Road is that active here?”

“Safe and quiet towns are useful to them. The missing gods were imprisoned barely two days from here,” said Naexi.

“Well, I...” Amanda frowned. She looked to Callan. “*You* have to make it your trouble? The group of you?”

“Someone has to,” said Callan.

“The Road enslaved my family,” said Jaclyn. She surprised Callan and Cora alike with her steady tone. Her words carried enough weight without need for tears or shouts. “They’re gone now. Died in their mines. I grew up fighting for the Road’s entertainment. They’re doing that and worse to others. The Road may not kidnap anyone from your farms or markets, but the same rotten bastards are here.”

Amanda bit her lip. Though she hesitated, she put a hand on Jaclyn’s. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. You’re worried. I get it.” Jaclyn seemed to mean that, too. “I’m not letting them go.”

“We’re not letting them go,” Callan echoed.

“Paladins,” Naexi told Amanda. “It will be like this.”

“All right,” said Amanda. “I suppose you all know more than I do. But if you’re caught sneaking and searching through anyone’s home, let alone a guild master’s...”

“And tonight he’s got company in any case,” said Tegreth.

“No, that makes it better and gives us less worries about being caught,” said Cora.

“How?” asked Callan.

“We go in like anyone else. They can’t be too upset about guests wandering at a party.”

“You’d need to be invited,” said Tegreth.

“Oh, I can get invited at the door with the right dress and the right story,” said Cora.

“Not this again,” said Jaclyn. “Not me. No.”

“You had a good time,” said Cora.

“I said the food was good. The company was terrible. Half the men slobbered to tell me I looked pretty and none of the women would talk to me because of the men.” Jaclyn caught Naexi and Callan’s looks and folded her arms. “She made me wear a dress. And jewelry. And eyeshadow.”

“You’ve kept the smoky eyes ever since,” Cora murmured.

“Oh, shut up. The point is, it wasn’t me. I don’t know how to act. I was afraid anything I said would give myself or both of us away.”

“You were fine, but you don’t have to come in with me. And a big group probably wouldn’t work. A dark elf companion of any sort might draw too much scrutiny, but a local escort could work nicely.”

“I—wait,” said Callan. “Showing up with me means you’re less likely to get let in. I don’t belong there. Hemshire probably won’t know me but someone will. And I’d invite

you to any party I threw, but how can you be sure they will, too? These are all the leaders of the town.”

“They wouldn’t invite Cora,” said Jaclyn. “They’ll fall all over themselves for Countess Blah-de-blah.”

“You have a council of guilds here, but also market fairs,” said Cora. “It’s crafting guilds, then? Any merchant’s guild? No? Does Sunderford export anything?”

“We caravan out crops, wool, and some livestock,” said Callan. “It’s nothing other towns don’t also have. Our berry season is usually good, but I doubt that matters.”

“Hrm. Not here, no. And the ford through the river is gone, right? Dug out for deeper boat keels ages ago?”

“Yes. That’s what Sunderford has to sell: boats,” said Tegreth. “They’re good and we have more than we need, but the boatwrights won’t come down on their prices. And they’re jealous bastards with the trade.”

“It’s the whole reason I was out on that job with Naexi’s company,” said Callan. “A friend across the lake lost his boat and couldn’t afford a new one. Couldn’t get away with building one, either. They’d sabotage him.”

“So they’re cutthroat, and have a good craft to sell, and they’re not the stone masons.” Cora smiled. “Excellent. That means they’ll be dying for an outside customer with good coin, and I won’t be coming straight at our suspect. Naexi, Jaclyn, would you be insulted by lying low ahead of this party? You both might draw interest within the town. It may be useful to have you unconnected to us.”

“Oh, *now* you’re embarrassed to be with me in public?” Jaclyn smirked.

“Hardly. Either of you,” said Cora.

“It’s fine,” said Naexi. “I’ve faced this before. The attention can inconvenience me, too. Amanda asked for help storing her new goods,” she said to Jaclyn. “Should we stay and help out?”

“Um. Sure.” Jaclyn shrugged. “Figured we were doing that anyway.”

“We were, but now we’ve got plans for tonight,” said Cora.

“We’re leaving the work to them?” Callan asked her. “What are we doing?”

“I’ll need the finest dress we can find, and decent clothes for my escort, too.”

* * *

Though called a town in every discussion and every map, Sunderford could argue for the label of city. Thousands lived on either side of its old walls, with the river Sunder bisecting both the urban core and the surrounding farms. Buildings within the walls rose two and three stories without the crowding of “true” cities. The Autumn Fire of a century ago taught survivors to rebuild with wider streets and brick and mortar rather than wood wherever possible, while friendly terms with the nearby goblins made life outside the walls reasonably safe.

Split homes dominated the artisan quarter, with workshops below or out in front of the artisan’s living space. Though the day fell between the twice-weekly market days, the quarter remained vibrant and active with both creation and trade. Sounds of labor and chatter filled the gaps between passing workers or shoppers. Crafters tended to their products between market days, but few would turn away customers while the sun was up.

Callan had a happy errand to complete before taking Cora where they needed to go. For that, he brought her through the artisan quarter to the river front. Masonry work lined the river’s edge for a deeper draft right to the piers—some wood, and others also of masonry. A low trade ship sat against the pier to load up cargo. Elsewhere along the docks, craftsmen worked with hammers, saws, and more to build smaller boats.

“After they dug out the ford, river trade never rose to the dynasty’s hopes,” Callan explained. “A hundred years later, the dynasty built the docks to unload bigger ships from the coast—and again, the ships never really came. This is as big as they get.”

“The builders would be Queen Liseth and Edgard III?” Cora grinned. “Liseth sacrificed all of her grand projects to fight the Dead Legion. She passed before trade and taxes recovered. Edgard had big plans, too, but he was terrible at details. Nice ideas, poor execution. Including his own, in the end.”

“The books I’ve read say Edgard was robbed by his younger brother,” said Callan.

“The books you named were written by Edgard’s supporters as the dynasty crumbled,” said Cora. “Most of their history is fair, but they had a contemporary slant.”

“Huh,” Callan considered. “I hadn’t thought of them that way.”

“Every book is written for a purpose. I could recommend better ones.” Cora made a subtle, playful tug at his sleeve. “I like that you read what you could get.”

“That seems like a small thing,” said Callan.

“And yet many people barely read at all, even when they’re able,” said Cora. “It’s nice to be heard by a smart man who doesn’t immediately try to match or correct my knowledge.”

“That also sounds like a small thing,” Callan grumbled. “How smart are these men?”

“Very, to their thinking.”

Glances and second looks came their way, increasing as they reached the docks. Cora’s confidence and lovely face would have drawn attention in any case, but her rugged leathers over breeches and boots stood out even more on a woman in town. Callan didn’t walk too closely, let alone hold her hand. The story she’d worked up for her presence didn’t include romance.

Either she forgot that or didn’t care as she slid a hand across his ass. Callan inhaled sharply but kept his stride rather than leaping in surprise.

Workers passed in a line carrying barrels off the trade ship. Someone else slipped by in the other direction with a bucket of fish. Callan knew faces if not names, until Steen and Frem followed off the trade boat with a rolled-up carpet over their shoulders and

one of them said hello by name. None of them seemed to notice Cora's move or Callan's stifled reaction.

"I like how you take a compliment, too," Cora murmured.

Callan bit back a laugh. By "compliment," she clearly meant her groping hand... and he did like it. "I like a *lot* about you," he replied.

Not far away, a foreman barked orders. Cora's voice stayed low, but not as playfully now. "Remember, no introductions unless asked," she said. "Let me do my own talking if needed, but you're hoping not to draw attention to me. Not so different from the truth."

"I understand," said Callan.

"Where should we find your friend?"

"Somewhere here," Callan shrugged. "He took up work here to help pay for a new ferry boat. The dockmaster and the head of the boatwrights are brothers, so this is supposed to earn him a break on the price."

"Does he ferry over the river within town? I see plenty of competition," said Cora.

"No. He's not on the river at all. There's a lake two homes past ours. Hugo's village is on the other side. Working here has to be tough. There he is," said Callan. They slipped past another pair of dockhands and aimed for a broad-shouldered figure scrubbing the masonry deck with a stiff brush and soapy water. "Hugo? Hello," he greeted.

"Hunh?" The worker turned, his face broader and greener than anyone else's on the dock. Black hair wet from work hung around the hobgoblin's black-on-yellow eyes. "Callan? Hello," he said with a low, scratchy voice, but he didn't rise despite his curiosity. Instead, he flashed a look toward the foreman at the trade ship's gangway. "Can't really talk now. Working."

“I know.” Callan looked from the dockhands to Hugo again. His age showed in his voice, hence his “Old Man” nickname, but he was as broad and strong as any of the men moving cargo. “They have you scrubbing?”

“Barrels are full of fish sauce. Somebody dropped one. Someone had to scrub it. Stinks before long.” Hugo shrugged as he scrubbed. “Not a regular here. Work is work.”

Callan could guess why Hugo was the one on his hands and knees rather than a younger man—and not using a brush on a shaft that would let him stand. “Did Mile or Teeg tell you I took a porter job?”

“Haven’t seen the kids in a couple days. Been here in town.”

“It’s time to go see them.” Remembering Hugo’s modesty, Callan shifted to goblin speech. “My job paid in gold. It’s enough to buy you a new boat.”

“Gold?” Hugo paused with a curious look. “That’s kind of you, but they want fifty for a good boat. The cheaper boats are a waste. I have only earned six gold so far.”

“Six? How long...?” Only skilled laborers could hope to earn a gold or more in a day in Sunderford, but Hugo should have done better than this by now... or more to the point, his employers should have done better by him. The whole town benefited from trade with the goblins across the lake. “I have fifty for you. Keep the rest. Use it.”

“Fifty?” Fully distracted now, Hugo straightened for a longer look at Callan. He noticed Cora, too, but she stayed one step back for the conversation. “Where did you get fifty gold?”

“I got lucky on that job. I was working for adventurers, and they got lucky. I have it with me.”

“That’s so much. Don’t tell me you’re a rich man now? No. I can’t take that much from you.”

“Hugo, please. It’s why I took the job. You taught me boat work and how to fish. Your children are my friends. You’ve all helped on our farm. This helps trade with your

village, too.” Callan worried he might choke if he said it, but he did not: “You helped bury my father.”

The older man looked away and let out a breath. He’d barely known the family at the time. It was only a connection made in passing and on a trade run from his village. Hugo merely heard and made the offer out of simple kindness. There on the dock, he nodded and stood. “All right. Thank you.” Hugo glanced again to Cora and returned to the common tongue. “Who’s this?”

“Corinne of Gardeaux. Pleasure.” Cora hadn’t revealed the sharp yet elegant accent to Callan before now, but she sounded completely natural. Her clear signals of sophistication didn’t stop her from extending a hand to Hugo regardless of his hard labor and soap-and-water state. “I met Callan on the road. He guided me here.”

“Oh. Not from the porter job?” Hugo asked Callan.

“After,” said Callan. “One thing led to another.”

“Hey, Hugo,” called the foreman. He stood near the gangway to the trade ship, stocky and bearded with a grey vest over his tunic. “Are you working, or talking?”

“You have it with you?” asked Hugo. Callan produced the little sack from his belt and put it into Hugo’s hand. The older hobgoblin squeezed it once as if feeling its weight and estimating the coins within, then looked to the foreman. “Spot’s clean. I’m done. Time to buy the boat.”

“Wait, what? No.” The foreman came forward from his spot. “The day’s not half over yet. You’re not getting paid for half a day, and you’re not close to buying any boat from us.”

“I am.” Hugo held up the coin purse. “You don’t need me here to scrub. You’ve got boats. You owe me six. Take that off the price and I’ll pay the rest now.”

“I’ve got other tasks for you. What’s this? Where’s this gold from?”

“Does it matter?” asked Cora, still in her sharp accent and take-charge stance. “You are the foreman? You sell for the boatwrights, too?”

“I—yeah. Who are you?” he asked.

“Another buyer. How much for the boats?” She gestured to the line of finished boats along the dock. “Fifty for his? What of others?”

“Mostly fifty, give or take. Some to sixty, the biggest to seventy.” The foreman’s brow knit somewhere between curiosity and suspicion. “Why?”

“How many more?” asked Cora.

“How *many*?”

“Yes. I see these boats. How many more are for sale?” Cora waved it off with an air of impatience. “Who is the boatwright? Your guild master. Is he here?”

“He’s...” The foreman’s curiosity turned wary. “Who are you? And how many boats are you hoping to buy?”

Cora grinned.

* * *

“Jaclyn, that’s so much. You filled every barrel? Already?” asked Amanda.

“Sure.” Jaclyn rolled her neck and shoulders, then shook out her arms. Her simple chest wrap showed off both an enviable figure and muscles like cables now as prominent as her tattoos. “Most of them I could manage on my back. I could only fill the couple big ones a bit past halfway, so I made a few trips with your buckets to fill the rest. Farmers need water, right?”

Amanda glanced again in awe from Jaclyn to the six barrels lined up at the outer wall of her home. Jaclyn had made one last trip to keep the buckets filled, too. “I wouldn’t use all of this up over a whole week,” said Amanda. “I grow herbs, not corn or tomatoes. I’m grateful, truly. A day’s water for the plants is chore enough. This saves us much work. And you did it so fast!”

“They trained me with this sort of thing,” said Jaclyn. “Buckets on a pole over my shoulder, just like this. *Run it up the hill. Don’t spill a drop or you’ll start over.*’ They’d send me back even if I didn’t drop any, just to be assholes. Day after day. Jackasses would line up to watch... oh. Um.” Her casual bitterness faltered as she saw Amanda staring. She tried to wave it off. “This was easier. No jerks. Good exercise.”

Almost as if coming to Jaclyn’s rescue, Naexi rounded the corner of Amanda’s house carrying a bundle of wood. Her armor was gone, leaving her in a simple low-cut tunic and pants under that light cloak and hood she wore to hide from the sun. The house wasn’t big, nor their surroundings noisy. She must have heard. Yet rather than speak up, Naexi merely acknowledged Jaclyn with a nod and a raised eyebrow.

No rescue after all, Jaclyn realized. Just me with my dumb mouth saying too much my new guy’s mother. Still practically a stranger.

“I’m glad you’re free now, and with people who care about you,” said Amanda. “I don’t know what else to offer but that. I want to crack the skulls of all who wronged you, but that’s not my talent. If that’s yours, and now my son’s, forget whatever worries I had this morning. Go to it.”

“That’s, um. Nicer to hear than you might think.” Jaclyn stammered. “Thank you.”

“We can talk more if you want,” Amanda said with a hand on her arm. “Or not. It’s up to you. I could understand both urges.”

“Maybe not now,” said Jaclyn. “Anyway, your lake is closer and easier than what I used to deal with. Flatter ground. And it’s nice to use that training for someone who’ll appreciate it.”

“Oh, I do appreciate it. All of this.” Amanda gestured with both hands to include Naexi. “You four showed up with literal wagons of gifts, and now the two of you have done days of heavy chores in only a few hours. I don’t know what to say.”

“We’re likely to pull Callan away from home for some time,” said Naexi. “We wanted to help make up for his absence. It has been on his mind.”

“He was always bound to roam away, and now I’ve got Tegreth and his family.” Amanda waved it off. “I’m grateful. And I expect I’ll be comfortable for some time to come.”

“Someone as kind as you should be rich.” Jaclyn nearly blushed as soon as the words left her mouth. *Stupid. Too much. Clumsy twat.*

Amanda only gave that warm smile again. “It’s not even summer and I’m already set for winter. I’ll be taking care of neighbors with all those supplies. We found glowstones in the wagons—constant light, no danger of fire. I don’t know anyone with magical lights. A week ago, I had only my son and our friends. Now I’m as rich as I’ve ever wanted to be. You’re the ones who’ve been kind.”

“I think neither of us take a warm welcome or an open mind for granted.” Naexi’s smile turned. “Also, you taught your son to cook well. That is no small thing to people who live on the road.”

Amanda laughed. “He grew up in an herb garden. He’d *better* know a thing or two. Speaking of that, I should probably tend to the bees. That’s not something I can ask of a stranger. They know me. Please, you’ve both done more than enough work. Make yourselves at home.”

“I might go back to the lake to rinse off, actually,” said Jaclyn.

“May I join you?” asked Naexi.

“Sure.” Once again, Jaclyn hoped she didn’t blush, but not for anything like the awkwardness she felt with Amanda. This was an entirely different awkwardness.

Though Jaclyn walked quietly enough to think most people made a racket, Naexi seemed to move beside her in near silence. As if by magic, the hood of her cloak caught just enough breeze to reveal a bit of her face. She seemed to be smiling.

“The lake shore is rocky near here,” said Jaclyn. “It’s not too rough, but there are other people there. Fishing, washing, chores and such. A few boats.”

“Naturally,” said Naexi.

“Just saying we won’t be all alone. Plenty of space to ourselves, but we’ll be seen.”

“Good to know,” said Naexi.

I fucked her, thought Jaclyn. Or she fucked me. A lot. We’ve played together. We talked on the ride here. In truth, Jaclyn felt only a little sweat from her tasks. She’d been working with water and it was a beautiful day. Her body was much more affected by the damp, growing heat between her legs and the butterflies in her stomach. *It all felt good in the rush and with Cora and Callan. Gods, we even share lovers. Now we’re alone and she’s gorgeous and magical and I’m so—*

“You’ve been quiet,” said Naexi.

“H-have I?” Jaclyn asked. “Er. Well. Working. You’ve been quiet, too.”

“Ah. I suppose I have. My people seem more comfortable with silence than most I’ve met above ground. People here tend to fill silence. Perhaps it’s from living brighter lives. Do you know much of dark elves?”

“Barely anything, and mostly from meeting you. I knew dark elves existed, and I’d seen one or two in passing among the Black Road. Mostly I’d heard scary murder stories. Stealing babies, that sort of shit. Sounded dumb to me.”

“Stealing babies is a bit much, but sadly the truth is rather ugly. My people are sophisticated and powerful, and also harsh and ruthless.”

“Ugly, when they look like you?” Jaclyn tried to sound casual. Not forward. They were only talking about her people.

“Oh, there is great physical beauty. It’s odd how that can be common yet still striking. I mean their behavior and their hearts.”

“Glad you’re on our side, then.”

“I ask these things because I wondered if you’ve been avoiding me today.”

“What? No. Uh. No, I’m... was trying to help out.”

“As soon as Cora and Callan left, you found chores that would separate us.” Naexi smiled. “I make no accusation. I wonder if that was your goal, and why.”

“No, I, erm. Uh. Found stuff that seemed useful. Sorry. Didn’t mean anything by that. I mean, we’re, uh...”

“We’ve been intimate. Passionately intimate, and happy together,” said Naexi.

“Yeah. It’s great. You’re amazing.” That was true. If anything, she undersold it. Naexi’s smile seemed to know that, too. *Damn it, that’s hot. And I’m a goon*, thought Jaclyn. *Why would she want someone like me?* “And we talked in the wagon on the way here. Talked a lot, I thought. I didn’t get the impression you were the quiet type, so when you didn’t have much to say here...” She shrugged.

“That would explain some,” said Naexi. “We did talk. Mostly, I told you of the Blades and the battle that brought Callan and I together, and you told me of the trail you followed with Cora. We didn’t speak much about us.”

Jaclyn didn’t know how to reply. The heat at her core and the stupid raging butterflies tied up every thought that could become a word. She glanced to the trees and bushes all around. They walked a narrow path toward the lake. No one else was within sight or earshot. The isolation only made Jaclyn’s silence all the more pronounced. Thankfully, Naexi went on.

“I ask what you know, and if you’re avoiding me, because I thought they might be connected. I didn’t think of it at first. Foolish, perhaps, or just swept away with the moment. I still should have thought more before I acted.”

Oh gods, did I fuck this up already? Jaclyn wondered. Her throat felt dry. “Foolish how?”

“Slavery is everywhere in dark elf society,” said Naexi. “It is foundational to their power, and runs so deep that it is taken for granted. They take slaves above and below ground in raids, in war, or by trade. Humans, goblins, dwarves, other elves. Only other dark elves are exempt. They want the implicit statement that no dark elf could fall to such a lowly state.”

Jaclyn’s silence turned thoughtful rather than merely shy and awkward. “You went from ‘my people’ to talking about ‘them,’” she noticed.

“The practice always disturbed me. My family had no slaves, though sadly not out of principle. It was mere practicality and economics. We were... respected, but not wealthy. My mother and sisters served the matron of a powerful house. There was constant intrigue and unspoken threat from rivals. My mother feared a slave might be subverted, and not worth the money in any case when she had her magic and her family to handle most tasks.”

“Huh. And you left them.”

“As soon as I felt strong enough and thought I would get away, yes. For many reasons, including this one. I couldn’t live like that, and I couldn’t tear it down on my own.

“I didn’t think of any of this when we first came together. I was too taken with everyone and our fortune, and you seemed so confident and independent. It was only when you said so little in coming back and forth from the lake that it struck me. You lost your family and your childhood to slavers. I come from the other side of the practice. I wonder if that complicates things between you and I, or if it should.”

“What? No. Hell, I didn’t even know,” said Jaclyn.

“I’m not sure how to ask this respectfully, or if I should ask at all. It may well be private,” said Naexi. “Your captors abused you horribly. Was that ever...” She frowned. “I don’t want to open wounds or come too near old hurts in any way, but most of all not intimately.”

“Oh, you’re asking if they did *that*? No,” said Jaclyn. “Hard as it is to believe, no. Shitty words, some hands now and then, but never worse. I definitely heard of worse for others. They wanted me to feel different. Untouchable. Undesirable, Cora says. We talked this part out years ago.”

“If there are scars to avoid, I would be glad to know,” said Naexi.

“No. Not an issue. I’m long past that.” *Gods, please, don’t avoid me*, Jaclyn wanted to say. *Don’t avoid anything. Touch all the scars you want. Touch me a lot.*

“Good. It is one more thing I rejected, too. It never felt right, no matter what anyone said. It was one of the clearest signs that I did not belong... and, as I said, one of the things I should have thought of when you told us of your life. I am sorry.”

“None of anyone else’s garbage is yours. What matters is you walked away from it.” Jaclyn shrugged. “Now that I think about it, that couldn’t have been easy.”

“It was not, but it also seemed like the only choice. Also, I walked away from a position of privilege. You had to fight your way out.”

“I’m guessing they didn’t just let you walk, right?” Other thoughts fell into place like one footstep after the next. “If you saw how fucked everything is, probably others have, too. But dark elves are rare above ground. Your people are secretive, right? I’ve heard that much. It adds up.”

“Yes,” said Naexi. “I risked much. I don’t think my risks measure up to yours.”

“If it was your life, then you risked everything you had. Same as me.”

Naexi smiled, though probably not in agreement. She raised her eyebrow and looked more directly at Jaclyn as they walked. “You speak more comfortably now. Not so shyly.”

“That’s—oh gods,” Jaclyn grumbled. Now she was sure she blushed. She felt an impulse to turn away, or maybe crawl under a rock. Something nudged her the other way, like a hand at her arm or a turn in the path. Maybe it was only her imagination. “We were talking about you and about other people. That’s easier than...”

When the rest of the admission stuck in Jaclyn’s throat, Naexi put a hand on hers. A gentle pull asked Jaclyn to step off the path. A pair of trees with thick trunks stood only a few steps away with bushes nearby. Though they already had the path to themselves, the spot increased the sense of privacy. Jaclyn’s heartbeat picked up as Naexi faced her, still holding her hand. “You can say anything to me,” said Naexi.

“No, I can’t.”

“You can. I want so much more of you than our play.”

Jaclyn's heart thumped with an extra beat that reached all the way down. *Like just playing isn't incredible enough. Oh gods.* She wanted more, too, and knew it. "I don't want to fuck this up."

"How would that happen?" Naexi seemed almost amused.

"Are you kidding? My best kick puts my foot in my mouth. You saw how I was with Amanda back there, and that wasn't even rom... well, this. I told Callan the best fling I ever had before all of this came from someone on a dare. I don't know what to say. I push people away."

"That eases with time. Especially with people who care about you. I've been there."

"Pff. Maybe. You're also a paladin and gorgeous. Like a fucking queen if that word actually meant something. I'm all scars and tattoos and curses and rags."

"Three of those are by choice and with pride." Naexi's hand softly tightened around hers like approval. "You are beautiful, too. Your face and your body hold my gaze, but that would mean less if I did not know your courage, or your selflessness." She tilted her head back the way they'd come. "You owe Amanda nothing, yet you've gone out of your way for her. And I see how you wish to help others escape what you suffered. If you are a bit rough, that only makes you more intriguing. And exciting."

Jaclyn's breath shook. She didn't know how much she wanted to hear such things until Naexi said them. She also didn't know how to respond. "I'm... thank you."

"And a woman with no awe for queens is a woman after my heart." Naexi grinned.

"That's... yeah. Guess I can see that, from where you've been."

"You have no need to turn shy with me. Not when we have already been intimate."

"That's..." Jaclyn let out a huff. "It's *because* of that, actually. Cora and I have been together for years. I've felt *something* for her for a while, but didn't know what to do about it and I was afraid I'd fuck everything up. But then Callan happened, and she happened, and it turned into that orgy where everything felt right. We barely knew each

other, but you felt right and you're..." She made an almost matter-of-fact up-and-down look at Naexi. "You. If *you* wanted to fuck, why would I not?"

"The sun came up and it was still magical horny time. But after that, I started thinking and... I don't want you to think I wanted you just because I could have you. Does that make sense?"

"Of course," said Naexi. "Is it enough to say I had similar thoughts?"

"Then how did you work that out?"

Grinning, Naexi mirrored Jaclyn's look and her words. "You wanted to fuck, so why would I not?" The turnabout stole a grin from Jaclyn, but she was too rocky to laugh. "I knew we would talk later. Perhaps not this conversation, but one like it. I admired and wanted everything I saw in you, Jaclyn. I want you more now."

That heat rose in Jaclyn's core. The butterflies remained, but they turned pleasant now. Perhaps even welcome. "Good, 'cause I want you more than I can say. But I don't know what I'm doing. I'm kinda hoping you know."

"Many think elves are graceful and wise, but my age and my blood mean less here than they would guess," said Naexi. "With you, I'm only an equal with more confidence. I'm happy to take the initiative, if that's what you want."

"Oh gods, you can just offer that? Or I can ask?"

"Not commonly, I think," Naexi admitted. "Many might be put off. Everyone is different. I believe it's good to be open with what we want... or how we want it."

She chose the perfect moment to kiss Jaclyn, softly and slowly. Jaclyn trembled from her chest to her head. The butterflies were definitely welcome now. When they parted, Naexi stayed close enough to taste her breath. Their breasts still touched. It seemed silly, even dumb to Jaclyn, *stupid boy nonsense to even think about*, but that touch felt good. Really good.

"I don't know how I want it," she said. "People talk about being romantic enough or submissive or dominant and I don't know any of that is me. I just know I want lots."

“I don’t think you’re submissive at all, but it need not be one or the other,” said Naexi. “Your energy is rough with passion rather than pain. We all seem to like that. But if you’d like me to take the initiative...”

Jaclyn nodded. Excitement threatened to make it a big gesture, but they were too close. Too hot. She found herself kissing Naexi again, unaware who started it and hardly caring. Her lips felt too good. Her tongue awakened all that intimacy of last night all over again. Jaclyn moaned into that kiss, tugging Naexi closer by her hips.

Then she felt the deft fingers below her navel. Fabric slackened around her waist. Jaclyn’s drawstrings—on the inside of her pants—were undone before she knew it. Naexi’s caress slid beneath the fabric and turned low. *Oh sure, even grace has nothing to do with any of this*, Jaclyn thought, but all that came out of her mouth with a whimper was, “Oh fuck.”

Naexi had Jaclyn’s pants around her ankles in no time. She pressed more of her body against Jaclyn’s. Trapped between the tree at her back and that glorious body, Jaclyn could only kiss back and soak up all of Naexi’s touch. The caress between her legs had her shaking even before Naexi’s first touch against her wet, yearning cunt.

“Oh fuck,” Jaclyn moaned again. Practically begging. That kiss had moved to her neck, then her collarbone. Naexi’s hair smelled good—despite life on the road, only washing on a stream at dawn and then after farm work through the late morning, she smelled good. Felt good. *Streams. Washing. Right.* “We were *guh*—” The stroke of two fingers split her between her legs. “Guh... gonna wash. I’m s-sweaty.”

“You are delicious,” Naexi said against her neck. As if that wasn’t enough, she claimed one of Jaclyn’s breasts under her chest wrap, too.

Oh fuck, Jaclyn moaned in her very soul.

“Relax. Enjoy,” Naexi said between kisses. Her fingers slowly invaded as if that was any way to make a woman relax. The curling stroke within Jaclyn belied even more words: “We’ll learn to please one another together.”

“Unh. You. Already. Know.”

“You’ll catch up. Or maybe things may be one-sided for a while. I’ll be happy with that, too.”

“Mnh. Not... really fair?”

“If you knew how much I enjoy doing exactly this, you’d have no fears at all.” Naexi pulled Jaclyn’s chest wrap away, freeing her breasts—still one handed, and never relenting on her cunt. Naexi’s kiss descended to one full and yearning breast.

Jaclyn gasped. She felt deeply vulnerable, and all the more pleased for it. The moment didn’t last, but only because it descended. Naexi trailed soft kisses down Jaclyn’s bare, hardened belly until her lips joined her fingers at Jaclyn’s cunt. One lick sent a shudder of ecstasy through her body and soul.

It was only the first.

“I’m more than happy to take the lead.” Naexi stared up from between Jaclyn’s legs to give her yet one more thrill. “In fact, I hope to lead you often.”

She licked again. Kissed. Jaclyn panted and nodded vigorously. She risked putting one hand on Naexi’s head, then another. Her lover understood the encouragement and licked deeper. Jaclyn leaned her head back against the tree trunk and moaned louder.

“Embrace this. Enjoy,” whispered a voice neither of them consciously heard. Khíra stood beside them, invisible and unknown, yet entirely welcome. The goddess wore a flowing, sheer white robe, parted down the middle for her own pleasure. Her fingers traced and probed her own sex much as Naexi treated Jaclyn.

Khíra had countless lovers, from immortals and the occasional god to no small portion of the mortal souls who had passed into her keeping. As a goddess, she was with many of them even now. She could turn to those lovers at will, and surely would. But sometimes this was nice, too. Often, in fact. All across the mortal world. Every tryst was special in its own way, but some held more of her attention than others.

She'd barely guided or nudged Jaclyn at all. At most, she'd paused Jaclyn from turning away from her desires. Khíra favored them both with beauty and new sensuality to enhance their love, but the words and decisions were all their own.

"Savor this. Savor knowing that tonight will bring more, and tomorrow," she told them as Naexi drove Jaclyn wild. "You give all that I ask. This decadence is yours. It is my gift. Make the most of it. Always."

* * *

"Oh, I'm happy to come with you all day long, milady." Mildra walked alongside her companion with a bright, jovial smile. "None of this is any trouble. Bit of a break from party preparation, if I'm honest." She was shorter and appeared a decade older, wearing an earth-toned dress in one more contrast to the tall blonde in the belted, mid-thigh white tunic beside her.

They caught plenty of second looks and even a few accidental stares on their way through town. Laska had met that sort of thing before and took it in stride. Sunderford's streets were more polite about it than some other places she'd been. "The party is an added workload to the house staff, then?" she asked.

"You could say that, but these things happen," said Mildra. "The household servants do what the household needs. More goings-on means more work. Master Hemshire hired on extra hands for tonight, too."

"Then I feel a little better about having you here." A thought lifted one eyebrow. "He prefers 'Master' Hemshire?"

"Among the servants. Master of the house, at least. I've heard others use it, too."

"Hm. Well, I'm only off to find a dress for tonight. Not much to carry or assist with, but I'm grateful to have a guide."

"This way," Mildra said as if to make good on that. The lane was wider and hosted more buildings of masonry and mortar than Laska expected. Someone kept the busier

streets clean, too. Townsfolk moved to and fro on their own business. Mildra paused until they had a little more space.

“Between you and me, I think Master Hemshire sent me for more than guidance,” she shared quietly. “He wants me seen with you so no one gets ideas.”

“Does Hemshire fear I’ll be harassed?”

“Oh, women can walk this town without fear. You walk and carry that staff like you can take care of yourself, too, and that’s without the magic. No, my guess is Master Hemshire wants to ward off competition. My instructions came second-hand and without any such hints, so I’m only guessing. Two other guild masters are unmarried men... and I’ve heard one other doesn’t let marriage hold him back,” she added.

“Ah.” Laska smiled. “Now I’m very grateful for your company.”

“I hope you’ll keep this to yourself, then?” asked Mildra.

“If the topic comes up, it will be all my own idea,” Laska assured. “Do these men ‘compete’ often?”

“They’re men of means without wives, so they get up to things,” said Mildra. “I don’t suggest anything sinister. They have an eye for the ladies. Master Hemshire’s wife passed a few years ago. If you’re not the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, I must have forgotten a fall on my head.”

Laska laughed. “Thank you. That’s very kind. Any other advice you might pass on for tonight?”

“The ale may be stronger than it tastes and the wine milder,” said Mildra. “Trivial things to the likes of you, I imagine. I’ve little more to share than that sort of idle gossip.”

“Actually, this advice helps quite a bit. I’m fond of parties, but I don’t know this sort.”

“No? You? A powerful sorceress? You strike an image at least as impressive as any noble. Looking at you, I just assumed.”

“That’s a little luck of heritage and even more magic,” said Laska. “It’s easy to look good when you can do an hour’s chores with a simple spell.” She noted a moment of relative privacy and space. “Would you like me to show you?”

“Magic? Certainly,” said Mildra.

“It’s fast,” said Laska. “Take a look at yourself: clean and neat as can be, yes? Mindful. Nothing to complain about.” The motion and words were simple. She turned her left hand toward Mildra, not even truly raising it, still holding the staff in her right. “Veshshezk,” she said.

Laska knew everything Mildra felt: a rush like a sharp, warm breeze lasting only the space between heartbeats, the subtle rustle of her clothes and hair, the tingle of her skin, and then nothing. When Mildra looked down at herself, she saw the difference immediately. The fabric of her dress brightened and smoothed out, losing every wrinkle and speck of road dust all at once. Every inch of her clothes seemed as good as new, if not better. Her hands and wrists lost the dryness of the day. She couldn’t see it herself, but her hair settled without a strand out of place, yet looked perfectly natural.

“Oh. Oh, wow,” said Mildra, looking herself over. “I feel like I just stepped out of the bath. And my clothes are right off the line. Better than that.”

“It’s the same with cleaning spaces,” said Laska. “Magic does it all at once, without getting sore knees or a tired back, and the bristles of the brush never give out.”

“Goodness. I’ve heard the baroness keeps a minor magician on staff for cleaning, but I thought that was absurd.”

“Not at all. For some, this is all the magic they ever learn, and it’s no small blessing. It does make life easier.”

“Then why do you sound ashamed of it? I’d be thrilled.”

“Ashamed is the wrong word, but it can create the wrong impression. It’s something of a cheat. I learned magic as a child through talents of birth rather than study. I’m

grateful, don't get me wrong. But as you say, I *seem* to others like I should be someone of wealth with servants and luxury. That can lead to other trouble."

"Well. I'd be hiring myself out for good coin with a talent like that."

"You live in the servants' quarters of the manor, yes? We'll find an excuse to slip me in there before the party. I'll give it a spring cleaning like you'd all spent days at every nook and cranny. It'll be nice to repay you for your guidance and your company."

"I think everyone would like that. And it would make life a little easier for a while. Thank—oh," she said. "Come to think of it, maybe it's not too good for me if the master of the house is as interested in you as I think. If you hit it off, we servants could be out of our jobs."

"Oh no, not at all. Plenty of work still needs eyes and hands. I'd never put anyone out." Laska's brow rose. "You're sure he's that interested?"

Mildra glanced at Laska's face, and then subtly and unnoticed to her chest and then the legs sticking out from her mid-thigh hem. "Pretty sure."

Laska missed the look, but not the comment. "You asked if I'm on some quest. I'm not, exactly, but I was brought here by magic of a sort if you want to hear about it."

"Of course! Why wouldn't I?"

"Sometimes I think it makes me seem unrelatable. Distant, you know? My life can be very different from most people I meet."

"Don't you worry about that with me. We all lead different lives. You're kinder and more pleasant than many of the nobles and would-be nobles I've met."

"Then if you want to know... Mostly I spend my time healing the sick and hurt. I go where I'm needed. Lately, that's been everywhere, so it almost doesn't matter. I was advised on rather good authority—magical authority, of a sort—that I would find the love of my life here in Sunderford. I wasn't looking, but Sunderford probably needed healers as much as anywhere else, so here I am."

"Oh. Goodness," Mildra considered. "Yes. We lead very different lives."

“Hence the hesitation,” said Laska—and hence the things she didn’t share, like the nature of her source or the other things said. “I’d rather not spread that around, for obvious reasons. I was also told whoever I’m supposed to find wouldn’t be at all what I expected.”

“And then you met a handsome and dashing guild master?”

“Taking nothing for granted, yes,” said Laska. “It seems by definition I wouldn’t know what to expect for the unexpected. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Well, he has a fine reputation and he’s done good things for the town,” said Mildra.

“Is he kinder and more pleasant than the nobles?”

The beat of hesitation that followed said as much as Mildra’s tactful answer. “After working for him for many years now, I can’t complain. But a good influence would not be wasted on him.”

“Good to know,” said Laska.

“Well. On to our task. We’re here.” They stood along a building of brightly-painted masonry with high windows of frosted glass and wooden shutters for protection. The sign hanging over the thick door in richly-stained oak presented elvish script with a common translation: *Elegant Ensembles*.

“The owners are sisters,” Mildra explained. “One is master of the textiles guild and the other is, ah, a woman of high standards. My advice? You love everything in here and you need their expertise. They’ll ask our price range, turn their noses at anything we have to say, and then come up with good selections despite our unworthiness. It’s their way.”

Laska took it in with a curious frown. “I don’t want to diminish your home, but Sunderford doesn’t seem to be the place for such elite trade. I wouldn’t expect the coin of the town to support it.”

“They get well-heeled customers from afar, but they have other reasons for being here. I think they may have worn out their welcome in some larger markets. Shall we?”

The ornate wooden door opened without trouble into an arcing hallway. Daylight through those high windows and white paint on the walls made for a brighter interior than the masonry outside would have suggested. Fine outfits and dresses lined the walls, all hung artfully to give a proper view. More clothing filled tables in the center spaces of the interior, along with shelves, clothes hanging from strings on the ceiling, and even a handful of mannequins to show off particular pieces. Laska saw fine furs, finer leather, lace, fabrics she couldn't identify, and even silks from afar.

One example of such silks in shimmering emerald hung as a figure-hugging, belted robe worn by an elven woman with her blonde hair swept back as if wet. She stood by the shelves watching something with disapproval until she turned toward the door. "Why hello." She eyed Laska up and down with mild but undisguised surprise. "And another unusual visit."

"Good day, Milady Ylana," spoke up Mildra. "Please allow me to introduce Laska. She's a guest at the guild party tonight. She's been traveling, so Guild Master Hemshire wanted to offer proper attire. He immediately thought of you, of course."

"Of course," said Ylana. "That's a... striking ensemble to wear in town. Or most towns I could name. But I must congratulate you on having the body for it. And the self-awareness."

"Thank you." Laska heard more veiled critique than admiration, but decided to ignore it. The comment validated Mildra's advice. "You said another unusual visit?"

"Yes. Most of our customers planned in advance for the event, but you're not the only late traveler hoping for assistance."

As if by cue, a door opened at the other side of the room, behind one of the long center shelves. "Take this and this, and add this," said a voice and accent like Ylana's. "No. Wait. Here, servant boy. Take this."

"Alright. Um. It's Callan, actually," said another voice.

“Dear, if you need to remind someone of your name, they really don’t need to know it. Come along. Don’t keep your mistress waiting. Oh, here, take... no, don’t hold it, you’ll tangle the lace. Here. Wear it. We’ll pretend we didn’t see you like this.”

“Um... all right?”

They walked into view, first another blonde elf woman in blue silk like her sister’s and then a slim man in a simple blue shirt and brown trousers, burdened by clothes and shoes in his arms... and a strange black hat with lace like a veil covering his face. “Lady Ylera, I can’t really see in this,” he said.

“Follow my steps,” Ylera sighed dismissively. Then she called out, “Countess Corinne, perhaps an air of mystery tonight?”

“I’m more than pleased with the dress you’ve offered,” answered an accented voice. The apparent countess stepped out from an ornate folding privacy divider and stole Laska’s breath. She wore a corseted scarlet dress accented in black lace, flared subtly at the hips. Her black hair angled away from her lovely face, showing bright blue eyes and a grin that turned amused as she saw the man with Ylera.

Laska’s heart suddenly pounded. The dress, while artful and lovely, distracted far less than the countess’s keen eyes and the clever warmth in that smile, nearly sweeping Laska away—

—and then that expression cracked with the sudden rustle and stumble across the room.

“Oop! Shit,” Callan grunted as he bumped blindly into one mannequin. He caught the dress it wore but not in time to keep it upright. The tidy stack of clothes in his arms unfurled and dangled. Worse, the mannequin tilted into one of the other dresses hanging from the ceiling to pull it down with a clatter.

“Tedious,” Ylana muttered at Laska’s side.

“Oaf. Those dresses are each worth more than you.” Ylera snatched the lace-veiled hat from Callan’s head.

Laska blinked and stared. Her silent wonder renewed, along with a deep, longing pull toward both the countess and the young oaf.