

Chuck vs the Adventures in Buymoria

by Brat55512

Another world, another time. Age of... Nevermind. Morgan tells the story of Chuckles. Epic and silly adventures await!

Rated: T · Genre: Adventure · Chapters: 9

Chapter 1: Chuck vs the Adventures in Buymoria

Chapter 1 and a half: Of beginnings and stuff

Outside, the autumn rain put on a proper performance, drumming a relentless, soggy rhythm against the windowpanes like a troupe of impatient goblins. Inside, however, the world was a cozy sanctuary of snapping pine logs, warm tea, and gentle firelight that stretched three wildly dramatic shadows across the rug.

Three candles flickered on the scarred oak table, their wax pooling lazily as Morgan sat back in his favorite armchair. He leaned forward, stoking the fire in his eyes with practiced theatrical flair.

Across from him, two children were buried under a mountain of wool blankets like a pair of skeptical badgers, staring at him with the fierce, unyielding impatience only children could master.

Luke sighed, tossing a rogue tassel over his shoulder. "Dad. Start it already."

Morgan raised one solemn, storytelling finger. "Patience, young apprentice. Every great story needs a great beginning."

Leila, his four-year-old daughter, narrowed her eyes. "You said that last time."

"I did?"

"Yes."

“And was it a good beginning?”

“No.”

Morgan placed a dramatic hand over his heart, gasping softly. “That hurts. Right in the lore.”

Luke groaned into his elbow. “Dad!”

“Fine, fine.” Morgan cleared his throat, adjusting his posture to look like an ancient chronicler addressing a grand royal court. “Long ago, in a land far... far away...” He paused, his brow furrowing as he stroked an imaginary longer beard. “Nope. Too dusty, too distant and too much family drama. This isn't it.”

Luke covered his face with both hands.

Morgan snapped his fingers with a sharp *crack*. “Okay. I’ve got it.” He leaned in, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Another world. Another time. An age of wonders, wild magic, and terrible choices!”

Leila blinked, sniffing suspiciously. “Is this a kissing story?”

Morgan froze mid-pose. His expression instantly shifted into terrifying, utmost seriousness. “Yes.”

“Ahhh! Not another one!”

Luke roared with laughter as Leila threw her hands in the air. Morgan pointed an authoritative finger at her. “Excuse me, young lady. Romance is a crucial ingredient in any proper heroic tale. It builds character.”

“It’s always kissing.”

“Well, there will also be evil bi—”

“Morgan!” shouted Alexis. His wife’s voice cut through the air like an enchanted blade from the kitchen, accompanied by the sharp clatter of a wooden spoon against a pot. Morgan instantly locked up like a statue in a museum.

“Right,” he squeaked, clearing his throat hastily. “Sorry, honey!”

Leila giggled behind her blanket as Morgan leaned forward again, whispering conspiratorially. “So. There will be evil witches.”

“Better,” Leila admitted.

“Magic.”

Luke leaned closer, the blankets slipping. “Dragons?”

“Possibly.”

“Monsters?”

“Almost certainly—and most of them with terrible hygiene.”

“Cool!”

“And sword fights,” Morgan continued, warming up now. “Dark sorcery. Dangerous quests. Mysterious strangers with suspiciously cool cloaks. Ancient, decaying kingdoms.”

Leila raised one finger. “More kissing?”

Morgan sighed, defeated. “Yes, Leila. There will be *some* more kissing.”

She buried her face deep in her blanket. “Aaah.”

“But there will also be glory,” Morgan promised softly.

That finally hushed the pair. Morgan snatched up a candle from the table, holding it directly beneath his chin so the light cast ridiculous, mysterious shadows up his nose and across his cheeks. “Buckle up.”

Luke frowned at his own pajama bottoms. “We don’t have buckles.”

“It’s an expression.”

“Oh.”

Morgan nodded with absolute gravitas. “Then buckle up anyway.” He turned toward the dancing hearthfire, his voice dropping into the deep, rolling cadence of the true tales.

For a breath, the ambient warmth of the room seemed to shift. The squeaky armchair vanished. The rain outside stopped sounding like rain and started sounding like the thunderous roar of a mountain storm breaking over ancient stone parapets. The humble candles flared into sputtering wall-torches, lighting up a grand, forgotten world.

A kingdom of honorable knights and bickering sorcerers. A kingdom where the land's supreme arch-mage was currently passed out drunk, face-down in a tavern bowl of cabbage soup.

Morgan grinned. "We are entering the kingdom of Buymoria."

Leila peeked out, eyes wide. "And who is the hero?"

Morgan's smile stretched dangerously wide. "Oh, that's the best part." He leaned in until their foreheads almost touched. "His name was Chuckles."

Luke blinked. "Chuckles?"

"Yes."

"That's a terrible wizard name."

Morgan nodded gravely. "The worst. But he was only the wizard's apprentice." A beat stretched. "And he was about to have the absolute worst day of his life. Until the love of his life Sarah entered the Kingdom, but let's not skip so far ahead."

A gentle clatter came from the kitchen as a tea mug hit the counter. Morgan flashed a quick look over his shoulder, then met his children's rapt gaze once more.

"And the best." He blew softly on the flame, making it leap. "Once upon a time..."

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Rain didn't just fall on Buymoria; it executed a full-scale siege. It battered slate roofs, transformed cobblestones into rushing rivers, and blew shutters off their hinges—the precise kind of weather designed to make any sensible creature huddle beside a hearth with a mug of spiced cider.

Chuckles, unfortunately, was a wizard's apprentice, which meant sense was strictly off the syllabus.

Inside the damp, sawdust-strewn taproom of the Rusty Griffin Inn, Chuckles stood beside a grease-stained oak table and stared in profound despair. His master, Roanald the Great—Archmage of the Third Order and legend of the realm—was currently lying half-submerged in a bowl of cabbage soup.

"Master?" Chuckles rasped over the tavern's ambient din.

Roanald didn't twitch. A lone, greasy cabbage leaf rested atop his soggy pointed hat. A thick green bubble rose from the broth, expanded, and popped with a wet *thwip*.

"Please don't be dead," Chuckles whispered, closing his eyes.

A snoring snort erupted from the bowl, spraying broth onto the tabletop.

"Good," Chuckles sighed. He grabbed the drenched velvet shoulders of his master's robes and heaved. With a terrifying slurp, Roanald's face popped free. He gasped, blinked soup from his eyes, and immediately glaring. "You are late."

Chuckles stared. "I am late? You were sleeping in soup!"

Roanald picked a bit of carrot from his graying beard, inspecting it with scholarly gravity. "That explains the cabbage. Besides, I was meditating. Advanced technique."

Chuckles opened his mouth, but wisely closed it. Arguing logic with a man whose hair smelled like boiled brassica was a fool's errand.

Roanald straightened, pointing a dripping finger. "A wizard is never late, apprentice. He arrives..."

"...exactly when he means to," Chuckles finished flatly.

"Right! But you are not a Jedi yet," Roanald countered sternly, reaching into his soaked vestments to pull out a shimmering parchment tied with silver thread. "Your task: deliver this mission essential Older Scroll to Bryce Bigdik immediately. He's beyond the eastern gate, preparing to fight a dragon."

"A dragon?" Chuckles gulped, taking the heavy parchment.

Roanald leaned in, breathing warm cabbage fumes over him. "Whatever you do... do not look inside."

Three minutes later, Chuckles was huddled beneath a stone alcove outside, shivering as gale-force winds whipped his cloak. "Right. Bryce Bigdik. Dragon. Magic scroll. Easy."

The scroll instantly ignited with blinding, radiant light.

"That's... probably bad," Chuckles squeaked.

The silver string snapped. The parchment unfurled like a living snake, blasting glowing golden runes into the stormy night. A terrifying, brain-melting torrent of ancient arcane knowledge—spells, star maps, royal lineage charts, dragon-slaying maneuvers—jammed itself straight into Chuckles' eyes and directly into his mind.

"Ow!" he yelled, grabbing his skull. Another flash. "Ow! My brain!"

The magic burned out, leaving the scroll a smoking pile of ash. Chuckles wobbled, his eyes spinning in opposite directions, before his knees gave out and he face-planted onto the slick, freezing cobblestones.

In the warm living room, Morgan paused his narration, letting the silence stretch dramatically.

"And what happened next?" Leila demanded, poking her nose out from her blanket fortress.

Morgan shrugged blithely. "Well, without the magical scroll, Bryce Bigdik got eaten instantly by the dragon."

Leila nodded in firm approval. "Deserves him."

"Yeah," Luke agreed, crossing his arms. "Totally."

Morgan blinked at them. "I haven't told you a single thing about him yet!"

"Well, I don't like his name," Leila said flatly.

"Fair enough," Morgan chuckled. "We'll skip his tragic ending. So, there lay Chuckles, out cold on the rain-slick streets with ten thousand forbidden spells burning inside his brain... and absolutely no idea what he'd just become." He lowered his voice to a dark whisper. "Fortunately, Jeff and Lester, the court jester clowns, happened to stroll by."

Leila sat up straight. "Clowns?"

"Yes."

"Are they funny?"

Morgan glanced nervously toward the kitchen, where the clatter of dishes abruptly paused. "That depends on who you ask."

"Morgan!" yelled his wife from the other room.

Morgan winced with a grin. "Definitely depends on who you ask."

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"There were Jeff and Lester," Morgan continued, settling deeper into his chair with a dry creak of old leather, "the two clowns known throughout the royal court as the Jeffster the Trickster Act."

Luke grinned. "Were they actually good clowns?"

Morgan considered the question with scholarly gravity. "No." He paused, allowing the silence to stretch just long enough to be dramatic. "They were, however, very good at being Jeff and Lester."

"That doesn't answer it," Luke said.

"It answers it perfectly." Morgan leaned toward the flickering candlelight. "Anyway, the two clowns found Chuckles lying unconscious in the rain. Being loyal servants of the crown, they immediately decided to help him."

Leila smiled, her little face emerging from her blanket fortress. "Aww."

"Yes," Morgan said solemnly. "A deeply touching act of mercy." He lowered his voice. "Unfortunately, their definition of help was somewhat... unusual."

Jeff and Lester dragged Chuckles through the muddy courtyard, his boots plowing long furrows in the silt, and deposited him beside the royal stables. Nestled against the outer timber wall was an enormous, golden haystack.

It was dry. It was warm. And, most importantly, nobody was looking.

“Perfect,” Jeff whispered, wiping rain from his forehead.

Lester nodded. “Absolutely.”

Together, they hoisted the limp apprentice into the straw. Jeff looked down at the shivering, soaked figure. “He’ll freeze in those wet clothes.”

Lester gave a slow, thoughtful nod. “Very dangerous.”

“So we should remove the wet trousers.”

“Obviously.”

A moment later, Chuckles was comfortably buried beneath a foot of dry hay, wearing nothing but his undergarments.

Jeff brushed his hands together with a crisp *clap*. “There.”

Lester nodded with immense satisfaction. “We saved his life.”

They wandered off toward the inviting warmth of the kitchen. Neither noticed the two iron-clad royal guards watching them from beneath a stone archway across the courtyard.

One guard slowly turned his visor toward the other. “Should we stop them?”

The second guard considered it, watching the colorful figures saunter away. “No.”

“Why?”

“They’re clowns.”

The first guard nodded slowly. “Good point.”

The next morning, the storm had passed, leaving behind a crisp, washed-blue sky flooded with golden sunlight.

A tall figure entered through the eastern gate. She wore reinforced leather armor, a dark green traveling cloak, and carried a long spear that gleamed in the dawn light. Her blonde hair was pulled back neatly, and every movement carried the crisp, controlled confidence of a trained warrior.

Sarah. An Amazon warrior, in Buymoria on official business.

She stopped beside the royal stables, her sharp instincts flaring as something rustled in the straw. Sarah immediately reached for her spear.

The giant haystack shifted again.

She narrowed her eyes, stepping closer with silent, deliberate balance.

Suddenly, Chuckles' head emerged from the straw like a confused groundhog. His hair was full of stray wheat, and he blinked blindly against the morning sun.

Sarah stared.

Chuckles stared back.

Neither spoke.

Finally, Chuckles managed a weak, polite wave. "Hi."

Sarah's eyebrow rose a fraction of an inch. "Why are you half naked in the royal stables?"

Chuckles looked down at his bare chest and undergarments. His eyes widened. "Oh." A pause. "This is going to be difficult to explain."

Sarah folded her arms, resting her spear against her shoulder. "I imagine so."

Chuckles tried to sit up, causing three pieces of hay to tumble from his hair. "I can explain."

"Good."

He thought about it for two silent seconds. "I actually can't."

Sarah's mouth twitched. Just barely.

Chuckles noticed immediately. "You almost smiled."

"I did not."

"You did."

"I didn't."

"You definitely did."

Sarah turned away, restoring her stoic composure. "Get dressed."

Chuckles patted the hay around him, his face falling. "My clothes appear to have vanished."

"Take my cloak" said Sarah as she handed the cloak over.

From somewhere behind the stables came the unmistakable sound of muffled, stifled laughter.

Sarah slowly turned her head toward the noise.

Chuckles sighed heavily. "Oh, no."

Morgan paused, letting the moment hang.

Leila immediately raised her hand high. "Will they kiss?"

Morgan smiled warmly. "Sure."

Leila's eyes lit up.

"But not now."

"Aww."

"You see," Morgan continued, "the Amazons of Buymoria believed that strength came from being cold, disciplined, and completely in control of their emotions."

Luke frowned. "That sounds boring."

"It was extremely boring."

"So they didn't fall in love?"

“Oh, they avoided love like a plague.”

Leila giggled, snuggling down into her blanket.

Morgan leaned closer, pointing a dramatic finger toward the candle flame. “The problem was...” He let the silence linger. “...nobody had told Sarah about Chuckles.”

Leila gasped. Luke grinned.

Morgan smiled in the warm firelight. “And that, children, was the beginning of the trouble.”

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Chuckles eventually managed to retrieve his stolen trousers from a patch of weeds behind the stables, though he spent the next ten minutes agonizing over the baffling inner workings of clown logic. How, exactly, stripping an unconscious man down to his undergarments constituted first aid remained one of Buymoria’s greatest unsolved mysteries.

He had just finished pulling on his soggy leather boots when heavy footsteps crunched against the gravel. A shorter man clad in pristine, polished leather armor stopped directly in front of him, exuding the crisp, heroic posture of someone who practiced his striking poses in a mirror.

Behind him glided Sarah. Her expression had hardened from mild amusement back into absolute sub-zero Arctic ice.

“Chuckles,” she said, her voice dripping with dangerous calm.

Chuckles offered a weak, sheepish wave. “Sarah.”

“The scroll.”

Chuckles winced, scratching the back of his neck. “Ah. Right. Well... that’s the complicated part.”

Bryce stepped forward, adjusting his weapon belt. “I was told you had it.”

“I did.”

“Then give it to me.”

Chuckles shifted uncomfortably on his boots. “I can’t.”

Sarah’s hand glided toward the pommel of her spear. “You can’t?”

“I accidentally looked inside.”

Sarah’s eyes narrowed into slits. “You *what?*”

“It wasn’t intentional!” Chuckles squeaked, holding his hands up defensively. “It sort of... unfurled itself!”

Bryce frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. “And?”

“And now all the spells are floating around in my head.” A heavy silence fell over the courtyard. Chuckles tried a hopeful smile. “On the bright side, I learned several very interesting things about fireballs!”

Sarah did not smile. “That was the Older Scroll.”

Chuckles’ smile evaporated instantly.

Sarah stepped closer, her shadow falling over him. “The Amazons have been searching for it for years. We need its magic against the Assassins of Urn.”

Chuckles swallowed hard, his throat suddenly bone-dry. “Oh.”

“You destroyed our chance to obtain it.”

“I didn’t destroy it!”

“You absorbed it.”

“That’s... technically different.”

“Not to me.”

Chuckles cast a desperate glance at Bryce. Bryce looked over at Sarah, stroked his chin, and let out a long, heavy sigh.

“Well,” Bryce muttered, looking toward the sprawling stone towers of the distant castle. “If the scroll is gone, then we’re going to have to find another way.”

Sarah folded her arms tight against her armor. "And what exactly do you suggest?"

Bryce looked back at Chuckles, a slow grin spreading across his face. "We get more muscle."

Chuckles blinked. "Muscle?"

"Someone who can keep us alive while you figure out what all that ancient magic in your head actually does."

Sarah's skepticism remained razor-sharp, but Bryce just chuckled. "Follow me. I know someone."

They found Sir Casey in the gloom of a nearby tavern, surrounded by the heavy smell of stale ale and roasting meats. He sat completely alone in a shadowy corner booth, methodically scraping a whetstone against his broadsword while three empty wooden mugs stood sentinel in front of him.

Chuckles leaned over to whisper. "That is Sir Casey?"

"Aeldefader was the hedge knight?"

Morgan's smile turned delightfully mysterious. "Yes, but that... is a story for another night."

Bryce nodded proudly. "The best hedge knight in the kingdom."

Sarah studied the warrior with a critical eye.

Casey looked up from his blade. His tired, battle-weary eyes moved slowly from Bryce... to Sarah... to Chuckles... and then back to Bryce.

"No."

Bryce frowned. "I haven't asked yet."

"No."

"You don't even know what I want!"

“You brought an apprentice wizard.” Casey pointed a calloused, scarred finger at Chuckles. “And an Amazon.” He flicked his finger toward Sarah. “Whatever this is, it’s trouble.”

Chuckles raised a polite finger. “Technically, I’m not a wizard yet.”

Casey stared at him with deadpan exhaustion. “That somehow makes it worse.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched—she almost smiled again.

Bryce reached into his cloak and slapped a heavy, clinking leather pouch of coins onto the scarred oak table. Casey glanced down at it, then up at Bryce.

“How much?”

“Enough.”

Casey picked up the pouch, weighing the coin with a practiced flick of his wrist. “Who are we fighting?”

“A dragon and assassins.”

Casey sighed heavily. “Of course.”

Chuckles leaned sideways toward Sarah. “Is he always this cheerful?”

“Yes,” she replied smoothly.

Casey shot him a glare. “No, I’m not.”

Chuckles beamed. “I like him.”

Within minutes, the deal was struck. Sir Casey stood up, strapped his massive sword to his belt, and slung his iron-rimmed shield over his shoulder. He cast a flat glance over the ragtag trio. “When do we leave?”

Bryce grinned. “Now.”

Casey groaned, rolling his shoulders. “Of course. Morgan get up, we are leaving!”

Morgan suddenly stopped talking.

In the cozy living room, Luke blinked against the firelight. “Dad, were you there?”

Morgan stared silently into the dancing candle flame. For a long, fleeting moment, his warm smile grew strangely distant, drifting away to some far-off place.

“Yeah, because,” Morgan said softly, his voice thick with memory, “I was the squire for Sir Casey.”

Leila sat bolt upright under her blanket. “You were?!”

Morgan nodded solemnly. “The greatest squire in all of Buymoria.”

Luke raised an eyebrow, dubious. “You were a squire? Were you actually good?”

Morgan hesitated, touching his chin thoughtfully. “I was... exceptionally... enthusiastic.”

Luke burst out laughing.

Morgan smiled, his eyes gleaming in the firelight. “And that was the true beginning of our adventure.” He leaned deep into his armchair, remembering things that lived only behind his eyes—the tavern smoke, the cold rain, the ridiculous wizard, the terrifying Amazon, the grumpy knight, and a younger version of himself, standing beside them with absolutely no idea what he’d just gotten himself into.

Morgan looked down at his wide-eyed children. “And that children is... how I met your mother.”

Leila gasped aloud, her hands flying to her mouth. “Mom was Sarah?!”

“No munchkin, she was a fair maiden that we rescued along the way. And it turned out later she was Sir Casey’s daughter.”

From the kitchen came the sudden, sharp sound of a wooden spoon slapping a cutting board. “Morgan keep it short! The children need to sleep soon!”

He winced, chuckling under his breath. “Okay, okay! One more chapter!”

Luke immediately buried himself back into his blanket, grinning ear to ear. “I knew it!”

Morgan sighed, rubbing his forehead with a lighthearted laugh. “I really should stop ending stories like that.”

Chapter 2: Chapter 2: Bewitched or something

Chapter 2: Bewitched or something

Morgan leaned closer to the sputtering candle, casting long, dancing shadows across the cozy room.

“So,” he continued, his voice dropping into a thrilling whisper, “the newly assembled party packed their gear and headed east.”

“The five of them?” Luke asked, leaning in.

Morgan nodded solemnly. “Chuckles, Sarah, Bryce, Sir Casey... and me.”

Luke grinned. “Did you fight the dragon?”

“Eventually.”

“Eventually?”

Morgan smiled, his eyes glinting in the firelight. “You’re learning.”

The old road east of Buymoria stretched through sunlit, rolling green hills and crumbling, ancient stone ruins. For the first few hours, everything was surprisingly peaceful.

Bryce walked at the front, his polished sword clinking rhythmically at his belt, every step oozing heroic confidence. Casey followed a few paces behind, scanning the tall grass with the suspicious, narrow-eyed expression of a man who fully expected the scenery to attack him. Young Morgan trudged behind, sweating profusely beneath the crushing weight of Casey’s heavy spare shield.

Chuckles walked beside Sarah, looking increasingly like a man marched toward his own execution. And Sarah... Sarah walked as though she owned every single stone along the way.

Suddenly, Chuckles stopped dead in his tracks.

Sarah took two more fluid steps before noticing the sudden silence and turning around.
“Chuckles?”

He was pale as a sheet, staring intently toward the tree line. Beyond the sunny path stood an enormous, suffocating forest. The trees were ancient, twisted things, their gnarled branches intertwining so tightly above that almost no sunlight touched the leaf-littered floor. Beside the dirt path, a weathered, moldy wooden sign creaked in the chill breeze:

JILL COUNTY

Chuckles let out a faint squeak. “Oh, no.”

Sarah walked over, following his gaze. “What?”

“That.” He pointed a trembling finger. “I don’t want to go through there.”

Sarah looked at the dark forest, then consulted the parchment map in her hands. “It’s the shortest way east.”

“I’m aware.”

“So we go through.”

Chuckles shook his head vigorously. “No. We absolutely, under no circumstances, go through.”

Casey trudged up beside them, resting a heavy hand on the pommel of his sword.
“Why?”

Chuckles pointed at the ominous woods again. “Because that’s Jill County.”

Casey stared at him with flat exhaustion. “That’s your explanation?”

“It’s a very good explanation!”

Sarah folded her arms across her leather breastplate. “Who is Jill?”

Chuckles swallowed hard. “My ex.”

Sarah’s left eyebrow rose a fraction. “Your ex?”

“Yes.”

“And that is the reason you won’t go?”

Chuckles looked toward the dark canopy with pure dread. “She is a witch.”

Sarah waited. “And?”

“And she tore my heart out!”

Sarah glanced critically at his chest, then back at his face. “You seem to still have it.”

Chuckles looked down, blinking. “Oh.” He patted his chest tentatively. “Well... apparently she gave it back.”

In the living room, Morgan groaned aloud. “Oh, my. That was something. Chuckles was down after Jill for months, eating cinnamon buns without end. But back to the story.”

Back in the tale, Casey glanced toward Bryce. “This is going to end badly.”

Bryce nodded solemnly. “I agree.”

Chuckles pointed at both of them in triumph. “Thank you! Finally, some reasonable people!”

Sarah ignored all of them. “How dangerous is she?”

Chuckles opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. “She once turned an entire wedding party into frogs.”

Morgan frowned from beneath his heavy shield. “Were they frogs before?”

“No!”

“Then that’s pretty bad.”

“She also cursed an entire village so everyone spoke in rhyming couplets for three days!”

Casey considered that for a moment. “That sounds extremely annoying.”

“It was!”

“And she tore out your heart?”

Chuckles nodded gravely. “Literally.”

Casey looked over at Sarah. “I vote we take the long way around.”

Sarah studied the gloomy forest, then the map, and finally Chuckles. “No.”

Chuckles stared at her in disbelief. “No?”

“The dragon is east. This road takes us east.”

“But *Jill* is there!”

Sarah shrugged carelessly. “Then don’t annoy Jill.”

Chuckles blinked. “That’s your plan?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not a plan!”

“It is if you’re not annoying.”

Young Morgan covered his face with his free hand. “Oh, this is going to end so badly.”

Chuckles looked around at the rest of the party. Bryce had already started marching into the shade. Casey rolled his shoulders and followed. Young Morgan reluctantly trudged after Casey.

Sarah waited by the tree line. Chuckles remained firmly planted on the sunny road. For several seconds, he stared at the dark forest, then back at Sarah’s calm face.

“You’re really not afraid?” he whispered.

“No.”

“Of the witch?”

“No.”

“The cursed forest?”

“No.”

“Chaos Hydra Pond or a Demogorgon?”

Sarah’s mouth twitched—just barely. “No.”

“If it bleeds, we can kill it,” chimed in Casey.

Chuckles let out a long, defeated sigh. “Fine.” He hurried after her. “I just want it officially noted for the record that I strongly object to this.”

Sarah glanced sideways at him. “Noted.”

“And if Jill appears—”

“Chuckles, don’t freak out.”

“Right.” He lowered his voice. “No freaking out.”

Sarah nodded smoothly. “Exactly.”

They stepped beneath the thick, suffocating canopy. Sunlight instantly vanished behind them, replaced by a cold, whispering wind that drifted through the gnarled branches. Somewhere deep in the shadows, a strange bird screamed.

Chuckles froze in place. Sarah kept walking without missing a beat.

He scrambled to catch up. “Okay,” he whispered to himself. “Everything is fine.”

A twig snapped sharply behind them. Chuckles spun around, hands raised, eyes wide. Nothing was there. He swallowed hard. “Everything is completely fine.”

Sarah stopped and glanced back over her shoulder. “Chuckles.”

“Yes?”

“You’re holding my cloak.”

He looked down. His hand was indeed tightly clutching the embroidered edge of her green traveling cloak. He instantly let go, cheeks flushing crimson. “Sorry.”

Sarah’s lips almost curved into the smallest, genuine smile. “It’s okay.”

Chuckles looked at her, and for a quiet moment—despite the dark forest, the terrifying witch, and the very real possibility of being killed or transformed into an amphibian—he

smiled at her.

Then, something shifted between the ancient trees. Both stopped dead. Casey slowly reached for his broadsword. Bryce quietly drew his blade. Sarah lowered her spear into a low, deadly stance.

Chuckles whispered under his breath: "Okay."

Young Morgan sighed quietly. "Here we go."

And somewhere deeper in the gloom of Jill County... a woman's dark, musical laughter echoed through the woods.

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Something dark and heavy moved between the ancient, moss-draped trees.

Sir Casey froze mid-stride, his iron-soled boots halting on the damp earth without making a sound. His hand instantly disappeared beneath the heavy folds of his traveling cloak.

"Stay back," he growled, his voice dropping an octave into pure, battle-hardened gravity.

Chuckles went instantly pale, his jaw slacking as he took two involuntary steps backward. Sarah's knuckles turned white as she tightened her grip on her spear, her balance shifting effortlessly into a low combat stance. Beside her, Bryce silently drew his broadsword, letting the polished steel catch what little pale light filtered through the dense canopy above.

Young Morgan, carrying Casey's massive spare shield like an oversized iron sled, quietly scrambled behind the knight's broad shoulders, using him as a human barricade.

From behind a tangled thicket of black briars, a small shape hopped out onto the muddy path.

Casey's eyes narrowed into razor-thin slits. With a dramatic, practiced motion, he pulled a strange, spherical object crafted from polished brass and glittering silver straight from beneath his cloak. It was ornate, dangerously shiny, and topped with a tiny golden cross.

Chuckles stared at the metallic orb, his eyes practically bulging out of his head. "Is that...?"

"My Holy Hand Grenade," Casey said flatly, thumbing a brass pin at the top.

Young Morgan blinked from behind the shield. "You actually carry one of those around in your coat?"

"I carry two," Casey replied without breaking eye contact with the brush.

The mysterious creature hopped another inch closer into the gloom. Casey dramatically raised the grenade above his head, ready to unleash divine ordinance upon the forest floor.

The animal stopped.

For five excruciating seconds, nobody breathed. The wind held its breath. The trees stood still.

It was a rabbit.

A completely ordinary, hopelessly fluffy, snow-white rabbit with slightly lopsided ears. It twitched its pink nose, sniffed the damp autumn air, and blinked up at the armored knight with utter indifference.

Casey stared at the rabbit. The rabbit stared at Casey.

With a dismissive twitch of its tail, the rabbit hopped casually past the knight's boots, crossed the path, and disappeared into the ferns on the other side.

Silence descended over the forest once more.

Casey slowly lowered the glowing brass sphere, reinserted the safety pin with a soft click, and slipped it back into his coat pockets. "False alarm."

Chuckles stared after the vanishing white tail in sheer disbelief. "You were seriously going to Holy Hand Grenade a rabbit?"

"I wasn't sure," Casey muttered, adjusting his sword belt.

"It was a rabbit!"

“That’s what they want you to think,” Casey grumbled, stepping forward again. “Could have been shape-shifters.”

Sarah shook her head, letting out a long, exasperated breath as she unstrung her tension and resumed her stride. Chuckles hurried after her, keeping as close to her green cloak as humanly possible without actually tripping over her heels.

For a long while, the only sounds filling the oppressive gloom of Jill County were the crunch of their boots over rotting leaves, the rhythmic clinking of armaments, and the soft sighing of the wind through the high, twisted canopy.

Sarah glanced sideways at the apprentice. “So.”

Chuckles looked up at her, startled. “What?”

“How did you end up with Jill?”

Chuckles let out a long, tortured sigh that seemed to drain six inches from his height. “It was back at the Mage Academy. She was in Advanced Transmutation; I was failing Basic Arcane Geometry. She offered to tutor me; one thing led to another, and suddenly we were sharing enchanted pastries by the fountain and later something else.”

Sarah nodded with deep, empathetic comprehension. “Yeah. I understand making colossal mistakes.”

Chuckles looked at her, blinking. “You do?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Sarah casually pointed a leather-clad finger ahead. A few paces down the trail, Bryce was marching proudly along the path, chest puffed out, shoulders squared, completely and blissfully unaware that he was the subject of conversation.

“Mine is leading the way,” Sarah said smoothly.

Chuckles stared at Bryce’s broad back. Then he looked at Sarah. Then back at Bryce again. A sudden, unstoppable grin broke across his face. “No way.”

“Unfortunately.”

Behind them, young Morgan suddenly trotted up, his stomach making a noise like a trapped badger. “Speaking of important matters...”

Casey glanced over his shoulder, his brow furrowing. “What?”

“Can we have breakfast?”

Casey stopped dead in his tracks and turned around completely. “You already had breakfast.”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you asking for breakfast?”

Young Morgan looked genuinely confused, his arms spread wide over the heavy iron shield. “Because I’m hungry.”

“You ate an entire plate of scrambled eggs back at the inn!”

“And toast,” Morgan added helpfully.

“And three large pork sausages!”

Morgan nodded proudly. “Correct.”

Casey stared at the boy with absolute, unadulterated exhaustion. “So?”

Morgan shrugged, his stomach roaring again. “I could eat again.”

Casey let out a heavy groan, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “There is no food until we reach the next village.”

Young Morgan looked utterly devastated, as though he’d just been informed the sun was never coming up again. “But...”

In the warm, firelit living room, old Morgan suddenly paused his narration. He stared blankly into the distance, his hand hovering mid-gesture over his squeaky velvet armchair.

Leila looked up from her blanket fort, pulling the wool down past her chin. “What?”

Morgan frowned, his brow furrowing with decades-old resentment. "I never had second breakfast."

Luke immediately rolled his eyes, slapping his forehead. "Dad! You're telling the story!"

Morgan blinked, snapping out of his culinary trance, and offered his children an apologetic grin. "Right. Of course." He leaned back toward the warm glow of the three candles. "Anyway..."

"Shhh."

Bryce abruptly raised a gauntleted hand, freezing mid-step.

Everyone stopped instantly. Young Morgan froze halfway through drawing another breath to complain about his empty stomach, his mouth left hanging wide open.

"What?" Morgan squeaked softly.

Bryce pointed directly ahead.

The forest around them had grown strangely, unnaturally quiet. The rustling wind in the high branches had died away to nothing. The distant caw of crows had vanished. Even the tiny chirping insects in the undergrowth had fallen utterly silent. It was as if the woods themselves were holding a terrified breath.

Sarah slowly lowered the tip of her spear, her eyes darting through the thick gloom. Casey's hand glided silently back toward the pommel of his broadsword, his boots shifting into a defensive stance.

Chuckles swallowed hard, the sound absurdly loud in the dead stillness.

Young Morgan leaned toward the knight and whispered softly: "I would just like to point out that the rabbit was much less frightening."

Casey shot the boy a sharp, lethal warning look. Morgan immediately snapped his mouth shut.

The five travelers stood frozen beneath the gnarled, ancient trees, surrounded by an oppressive, suffocating shadow.

Then, somewhere deep in the dark brush ahead...

Crack.

A heavy branch snapped violently.

Chuckles slowly, agonizingly turned his head toward Sarah, his face pale as chalk.

“Please tell me that was another rabbit.”

Sarah didn’t answer. She simply narrowed her eyes and tightened her white-knuckled grip on the shaft of her spear.

And the party took their first hesitant steps deeper into the dark heart of the woods.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3: The little things

Chapter 3 - The little things

"I'm scared!" said Leila, and sank deeper into the blankets.

Morgan immediately lowered his voice to a reassuring whisper, the firelight dancing softly across his face.

"Don't be, little one. The dark forest ended in a beautiful little meadow, bursting with vibrant wildflowers, with a tiny, thatched-roof house right in the middle."

Luke poked his head out from under his blanket, his eyes bright. "Was it creepy?"

"Not at all. It was lovely. Which, in hindsight, should have worried us."

Leila frowned. "Why?"

"Because nothing in Jill County was ever just lovely." Morgan leaned closer to the candle, its soft warmth flickering between them. "We went to the little house and found Ella there."

"Who's Ella?"

"Your Mom!"

"Why are you calling her that?"

"Because the curse's first victim was Enchanted Ella and every time the curse was used the victim became Ella"

From the kitchen came the unmistakable sound of a wooden cupboard door being opened with a sharp *clack*. Morgan ignored it without missing a beat.

"Sooo, she was cursed. A very nasty curse that forced her to obey every command. And when we arrived, she was preparing a steaming, savory dinner for seven people."

Chuckles stopped in the doorway, the warm aroma of stew washing over him. Seven porcelain plates sat on the long oak table. Seven steaming bowls. Seven polished forks.

And seven suspiciously small wooden chairs.

Chuckles counted them twice. "Okay," he whispered. "That feels like a clue."

Sarah looked around the spotless cottage, her hand resting near her weapon. "Where is Ella?"

"Here," said a woman's voice from the kitchen.

She appeared carrying a heavy, steaming iron pot. Her smile was perfectly pleasant. Too pleasant. Unnaturally stiff. "Welcome. Please sit down."

Chuckles immediately sat. Sarah remained standing, every muscle coiled. Casey narrowed his eyes, scanning the rafters, while young Morgan slid nervously into a seat as well.

"Actually," Chuckles said, looking at the empty seventh chair, "I'm beginning to think we should maybe not eat anything."

Sarah glanced down at him. "Why?"

"Because we're in a magical forest, there's a cursed woman, seven chairs, and Casey is the only person here who looks like he could survive poisoned stew."

Casey grunted, taking in the compliment. "Finally, someone appreciates me."

Chuckles stepped toward Ella, his eyes glowing with sudden realization. "I think I can break the curse."

Sarah grabbed his arm in a vise grip. "Do you know how?"

"No."

"Then don't."

"I have a spell for this."

"You've had the spell for thirty seconds."

"Technically, I've had it in my head longer."

"Chuckles."

He gave her an apologetic smile. “Right. Experimental magic. Very dangerous. Probably shouldn’t.” He raised his hand anyway.

Sarah sighed heavily. “Of course.”

Chuckles concentrated, shutting his eyes as golden runes from the Older Scroll flashed behind his eyelids. He remembered the spell—mostly. “Okay... remove enchantment, reverse magical compulsion, restore free will...”

The cottage instantly filled with a blinding, crackling blue light. Ella gasped as the air hummed with raw energy.

Chuckles grinned. “I think it’s working!”

The blue light suddenly snapped backward with a sharp, static *crack*—straight into Sarah. Sarah’s eyes widened in sheer shock.

Chuckles froze. “Oh.”

Sarah turned slowly to look at him, electric blue sparks lingering in her hair. “Chuckles.”

“Yes?”

“What did you do?”

“I may have transferred the curse.”

Sarah’s face went completely blank. Then, driven by an irresistible, mystical compulsion, she turned toward the kitchen wall where a straw broom leaned in the corner. She picked it up.

Chuckles stared. “Sarah?”

She began sweeping the stone floor with furious efficiency.

“Sarah, you don’t have to do that.”

“I know.” She swept faster, clouds of dust swirling around her boots.

“You really don’t have to.”

"I know."

Casey watched the furious display for several quiet seconds. "She'll kill you."

"I know."

Young Morgan nodded thoughtfully. "Good instincts."

Chuckles began pacing, pulling frantically at his hair. "There has to be a way to reverse it. Magic has rules. Every curse has a loophole. A counterspell. A magical technicality."

Sarah dusted a wooden shelf, her knuckles white on the rag. "Chuckles."

"Yes?"

"Find it."

"I am finding it!" He started flipping frantically through a dusty leather tome on the sideboard. "Curse reversal... curse breaking... magical compulsion... True Love's Kiss..." He stopped dead. His eyes widened. "Wait."

Sarah looked over, a feather duster clamped in her hand. "What?"

Chuckles stared at the yellowed page. "That's it."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "What's it?"

"The curse can only be broken by the kiss of true love."

A heavy silence fell over the room. Casey slowly put down his mug. Morgan slowly put down his mug. Even Ella stopped stirring her empty pot.

Sarah stared at Chuckles. Chuckles stared at Sarah.

"Oh," Chuckles breathed.

Sarah's eyes narrowed into terrifying daggers. "Don't."

Chuckles blinked. "Don't what?"

"Whatever you're thinking."

"I'm not thinking."

“That’s worse.”

Chuckles stepped forward. Sarah took one guarded step back. “Chuckles.” He didn’t stop. “Chuckles!”

Before Bryce could step in or Sarah evade him, Chuckles leaned in—and kissed her directly on the lips.

For one suspended heartbeat, Sarah stood completely frozen, her eyes wide with shock. Then, the ambient magic exploded around them in a warm, shimmering wave. The curse shattered like thin glass. The straw broom dropped from Sarah’s numb fingers, clattering against the hearth, and the electric blue glow vanished entirely.

Silence filled the cottage. Chuckles slowly opened his eyes, taking a step back. Sarah stared at him, completely blown away.

“You...” she breathed.

Chuckles swallowed hard. “Hey.”

“You kissed me!”

“I know.”

“You actually kissed me!”

“I was trying to break the curse!”

“You could have warned me!”

“I didn’t really have time!”

“You had time to say duck when Casey threw a chair at the goblin yesterday!”

“That was different!”

Sarah pointed a trembling finger at him, her face flushed red. “YOU KISSED ME!”

In the cozy living room, Morgan leaned toward his children with a theatrical grin.

“Yeeaay! A kiss!”

Leila immediately sat upright. “Will there be more?”

“Sure, munchkin.” Morgan smiled softly. “But this was the kiss of true love.”

Back in the tale, Sarah was still staring at Chuckles. There was something strange blooming in her chest—something warm, fierce, and entirely unfamiliar. She had never felt anything like it before, and she absolutely hated it. Or at least, she thought she did.

Then—**BOOM!**

The thick oak front door flew completely off its hinges, crashing onto the stone floor. Seven stout, heavily armored figures stormed into the cottage, brandishing iron axes and wooden spoons.

Casey stood up, his hand dropping to his broadsword. “Seven.”

Chuckles looked at the seven angry dwarves. Then at the seven tiny chairs. Then back at Casey. “The chairs.”

Casey nodded gravely. “The chairs.”

Sarah’s stunned expression instantly hardened into lethal focus. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

The seven dwarves charged with a collective battle cry—and that was when Sarah started berserking up the place.

Morgan paused his narration. “Berserking. Is that even a word?”

He looked toward the dark kitchen. Alexis’s voice called out sharply: “It is now!”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

Sarah grabbed the lead dwarf by his iron collar and threw him bodily through a pine table, wood splinters flying everywhere. Another came at her from the flank; she ducked smoothly, and his momentum carried him headfirst into the cold fireplace ash.

Chuckles ducked wildly beneath a flying iron frying pan. “Sarah!”

“What?!” she yelled, ducking a swung club.

“You just threw a dwarf!”

“He attacked me!”

“He was holding a spoon!”

“He was still attacking me!”

Casey casually kicked another dwarf into a pile of fluffy velvet cushions, sending him sprawling. Young Morgan grabbed a heavy dining chair, holding it up like a lion tamer. “Why am I always the one holding furniture?!”

The chaotic battle lasted less than a single minute. By the end, the cozy cottage looked as though a localized tornado had developed a deeply personal grudge against interior decoration. Sarah stood smack in the middle of the wreckage, her shoulders rising and falling as she breathed heavily. Chuckles cautiously approached her through the debris.

“Are you okay?”

Sarah looked at him, her eyes fierce. Then she surveyed the ruined cottage, and finally met his gaze again. “I’m fine.” She reached down and calmly picked up her fallen spear.

Chuckles nodded weakly. “Good.”

Sarah walked past him toward the doorway. She stopped for just a split second, and her fingers brushed softly against his knuckles. Neither of them said a word. Then, she stepped outside into the sunlight.

Morgan turned back to his rapt audience. “And we rescued your Mom, who had been cursed by Jill himself.”

“Why?” Luke asked.

Morgan smiled softly. “Because she was pretty.”

Leila frowned thoughtfully. “Why would that make Jill curse her?”

“Because she was the fairest maiden of them all.”

Leila thought about this for a moment. “Prettier than Sarah?”

Morgan leaned toward her, glancing nervously toward the doorway. “Well...” He looked around conspiratorially. “Yes. Much prettier.”

"I can hear that," said Alexis from the kitchen, her tone laced with amused warning.

Morgan immediately straightened his back. "Good choice of words." He cleared his throat loudly. "So we adventured farther into Jill County." He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Sarah was still mad about Chuckles' kiss."

Leila interrupted, leaning forward. "Because she didn't like him?"

Morgan shook his head. "No. That was the real problem." He stared into the quiet candle flame. "It wasn't the kiss itself that bothered her. Sarah had kissed other men before. She had even... Well, let's just say Sarah had never been afraid of complicated relationships." He paused. "But this felt different."

Sarah walked beside Chuckles down the winding forest path, her boots pressing silently into the moss. She kept her chin up and her eyes fixed straight ahead, yet every few seconds, her gaze involuntarily flicked to the wizard's apprentice beside her. And every single time she looked, that strange, tingling sensation returned to her chest.

She had never felt anything like it. Diane, the formidable Amazon Matriarch, had drilled into her from childhood that feelings were weakness. Feelings made warriors hesitate on the battlefield. Feelings made them vulnerable to blade and magic alike. Feelings were the inevitable downfall of their power.

Sarah had believed her completely. So she did what her training demanded: she buried the feeling deep down. *Conceal it. Don't feel it.*

Unfortunately, nobody at the Amazon academy had ever taught her what to do when Chuckles smiled at her.

Morgan slowly closed the old leather storybook on his lap.

"What happened next, Dad?" Luke demanded, sitting up.

Morgan offered a mysterious smile. "The party went to Toshy Station to find some power converters."

Leila's eyes widened. "Really?"

“Nope.” Morgan gently blew out the candle, plunging the room into the soft, warm glow of the dying hearth. “We were thrown straight into prison.”

“What?!” both children cried out in unison.

“But that’s tomorrow’s story.” He stood up, tucking the heavy blankets snugly around their shoulders. “Sleep well, little ones.”

Leila groaned into her pillow. “You can’t stop there!”

Morgan smiled warmly down at them. “Of course I can.”

From the kitchen, Alexis’s soft voice called out: “Morgan!”

“Yes, Dear?”

“Bed.”

Morgan turned back to the kids with a wry wink. “See? The Queen has spoken.”

Chapter 4: Chapter 4: The Buymorons

Chapter 4 — The Buymorons

The party continued through Jill County, following a narrow trail between the trees. They had been walking for almost an hour when Chuckles suddenly noticed two figures sitting beside the road. One was a long-haired blond man wearing a yellow jacket. Beside him stood a fat, bearded man in a long, dark coat.

Casey stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"Oh, no."

Sarah looked at him curiously. "You know them?"

"Yeah." Casey sighed heavily, rubbing his forehead. "Those two Buymorons again."

Morgan looked between them. "What did they do?"

"They've been parking their behinds near the south gate, selling pipeweed to passing hobbits and anyone else stupid enough to buy it."

The two men noticed the approaching party. Jayson immediately grinned.

"Yo, yo, yo! What has the cursed forest spit out?" He sprang to his feet and began dancing around Sarah and Alexis in an absurd, theatrical jig. "Lovely ladies..."

Sarah's expression became increasingly murderous. Alexis stepped away from him with clear revulsion.

"...And some dudes." Jayson pointed a finger at Chuckles. "You look lost, my magical friend."

"We are lost," Chuckles admitted wryly.

Casey closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course we are."

Chuckles ignored him. "Could you tell us which way Toshy Station is?"

Jayson slapped both hands on his thighs. "We got maps."

Silent Hob nodded solemnly. "But not for free."

Jayson smiled mischievously. "A kiss from the ladies oughta do."

Sarah and Alexis stared at him in disgust.

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Back in the cozy, dimly lit bedroom, Leila sat up in bed. "But Mom didn't kiss him, right, Dad?"

Morgan shook his head. "Nope." He paused dramatically. "I had my travel money in my hidden sack."

Luke blinked. "Where?"

"Hidden."

"Where hidden?"

Morgan smiled secretively. "That's the important part."

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He returned to the story. "Fortunately, I had brought a map."

Young Morgan stepped forward. "How about not?" He dug deep into his pants. The others stared at him with growing concern. Chuckles' face turned red. Sarah looked away, groaning under her breath. Alexis raised an eyebrow. Bryce sighed.

"I already regret asking."

Morgan finally pulled out a small coin sack. "Hidden stash," he explained proudly. "Usually there are thieves everywhere, and you can't get robbed this way."

Bryce stared at him with utter disdain. "It robs only your dignity."

Morgan ignored him. "So, how much for the map?"

Jayson rubbed his hands together. "Fifteen coins, little man. Put that stuff in my hand." He held out his palm. "And if the gold doesn't show, you owe me, owe me, oh—"

Sarah stepped forward, her fist clenching. "How about me hitting you?"

Jayson's grin widened. "Whoa there, Smoke Show. I'm game." He pointed at Silent Hob. "But I don't know if Lunchbox here is into that kind of stuff."

Silent Hob slowly shook his head.

Sarah stared at both of them. "Idiots."

Chuckles quickly stepped between them to keep the peace. "Okay. Map. Give us a map and be on your way."

Jayson looked disappointed. "Fifteen coins."

Morgan tossed him the sack. Jayson caught it nimbly.

"Pleasure doing business."

Silent Hob silently handed over the map. Casey snatched it from him harshly.

"If I see you two anywhere near the south gate again, I'll throw you both in the moat."

Jayson waved cheerfully. "Love you too, Sir Grumpy."

Casey stared at him. "Run."

Jayson and Silent Hob immediately disappeared down the road.

Sarah watched them go. "How did you know them?"

Casey grunted. "Unfortunately, they know everybody."

Chuckles unfolded the map. "So... Toshy Station is..." He rotated it. "...this way." He rotated it again.

Sarah sighed. "Chuckles."

"Yes?"

"You're holding it upside down." and she rotated the map in his hands. The touch of skin felt magical.

He looked at the map. "Right." A beat. "That explains the mountains."

Sarah's mouth twitched. Just barely. Chuckles noticed that she tried to hide it. And smiled.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5: Safety

Chapter 5 - Safety

The morning sun was still low on the horizon when Sarah informed him that he needed to learn how to fight. Chuckles at first thought she was joking. Then he saw her face.

She wasn't.

A thin mist hung over the grass in the clearing, the cold dew clinging to Chuckles' bare ankles as he tried to decide why, after yesterday's magical map incident, this was the very next punishment life had in store for him. Sarah stood a few paces ahead of him without her armor, serene and composed, as if she weren't about to practice hand-to-hand combat with a man who, just yesterday, couldn't even figure out which end of a magic wand to hold.

"So," Chuckles began cautiously, "when you said you were going to teach me to fight, did you mean you were actually going to try to hit me?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes."

"Just to be clear, is this some kind of Amazon tradition, or personal revenge for the kiss?"

Sarah's gaze flicked briefly to her hands. "Self-defense."

"Oh. That's much more comforting."

Sarah stepped closer. "Magic won't save your sorry ass if someone jumps you. Get into a basic stance."

Chuckles gave it a try. Sarah looked him up and down. "No."

"No?"

"That's not a basic stance."

"Feels pretty basic to me."

Sarah sighed softly and stepped behind him. Chuckles instantly sensed that she was far too close. He didn't just see it—he felt it. The morning air was cool, yet Sarah's presence made his skin feel strangely warm. A moment later, her palm pressed against his shoulder, gently nudging him back. Her other hand adjusted his elbow.

"Like this."

Chuckles tried to focus on what she was saying. He really tried. Except Sarah was standing directly behind him. He felt the shift of her movement as she adjusted her balance. He heard her soft breathing. He felt her fingers on his arm as she adjusted his posture, and for some utterly nonsensical reason, he was far more concerned with when she was going to pull her hand away than with what she was actually teaching him.

Sarah's fingers finally lifted. And Chuckles was instantly hit by an overwhelming sense of absence.

This is not normal.

"Don't tense your shoulders," Sarah said.

"I'm not tensing."

Sarah looked at him. "You are."

"Fine. But only because there's an elite Amazon warrior standing right behind me, which is slightly stressful."

A tiny movement appeared at the corner of Sarah's mouth. It wasn't a smile. Almost, though. Chuckles caught it. And suddenly, whether his stance was right or wrong didn't matter so much anymore. He wanted to make her laugh.

Sarah stepped back. "I'm attacking."

"Right now?"

Sarah struck. Chuckles stepped back instinctively, but Sarah's next movement caught him right at the wrist. Her fingers locked around his hand, twisting it, and Chuckles dropped to one knee. The pain was sharp. Sarah's hand, however, was warm.

Instead of trying to break free, Chuckles spent a moment simply staring at Sarah's fingers.

"Are you paying attention?"

"Sure."

"Doesn't look like it."

"I'm paying attention to my wrist."

Sarah twisted slightly harder. "Then pay attention to how you get out of it."

Chuckles hissed through his teeth, finally making a move. Sarah let go. He pulled himself back up.

"That hurt."

"Good."

"Not the response I was hoping for."

Sarah had already resumed her fighting stance. And Chuckles realized something.

He didn't want this to end. Not the fighting. Sarah's touch.

The realization hit him so fast that for a split second, he completely forgot about the next incoming attack. Sarah seized the opportunity. A step, then a turn, and somehow this time, Chuckles knew what to do. He dodged to the side, and Sarah's hand missed his shoulder.

Chuckles grinned. "Did you see that?"

Sarah turned. "I saw."

"I did it."

"Yes."

That brief answer somehow meant far more to him than it should have. Sarah was proud of him. At least a little, and suddenly, Chuckles wanted to do even better. Sarah attacked again. Now he was paying attention to her movement, the shuffle of her feet,

the posture of her shoulders. And, at the same time, to the way Sarah's hair moved with every turn, the way the morning light slid across her face, the way her breathing quickened ever so slightly with each repeated strike.

He was paying attention to far too many things, and far too little to the actual fight. With a swift motion, Sarah snagged his arm, and Chuckles stepped back. Sarah's momentum carried her forward.

And before either of them could adjust, Chuckles' arm wrapped around Sarah's waist.

She collided softly against him, almost falling on the moss below.

They froze.

Chuckles' hand rested on her waist, and Sarah's palm rested on his chest. Their faces were so close that Chuckles no longer felt the crisp morning air. He smelled Sarah's scent, the radiating heat from her skin, the faint, fruity fragrance of her hair, and the slow exhale of her breath against him.

Chuckles' heart beat wildly, as if trying to break free from his chest.

Sarah looked down at his hand.

Chuckles followed her gaze.

Only then did he realize he was still holding her. He let go instantly. "Sorry."

Sarah looked up at him; she wasn't angry. Which, somehow for Chuckles, was even worse.

Because Chuckles had no idea what to do with the fact that Sarah had been so close to him, and now she wasn't anymore.

Sarah took a half-step back. Chuckles' eyes followed her.

Automatically, Sarah noticed. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

Sarah stared at him.

Chuckles knew she didn't believe him for a second. "Just..." he began, then paused. "I think I'm starting to get it."

"Get what?"

Chuckles gestured around the clearing. "The fighting."

Sarah's face remained utterly inscrutable. "Good."

She turned around. Chuckles stood watching her for a few beats.

Then he stepped after her. Closer than was strictly necessary.

Sarah stopped. "Why are you following me?"

Chuckles glanced around, as if the answer were hidden somewhere among the trees. "Safety."

Sarah turned slowly toward him. "I'm the only one here who has attacked you."

Chuckles considered this. "True, but at least you give fair warning."

The corner of Sarah's mouth twitched. That almost-smile again, and Chuckles realized that this alone made the entire morning worth it.

Sarah stepped back in front of him. "Again."

Chuckles assumed his stance. He wasn't so afraid anymore of the pain, because he knew Sarah was going to touch him again, and in some entirely baffling way, he was already looking forward to it. The next days, these sparring sessions were the highlight of his day.

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A few evenings later, as the campfire burned down to a soft crackle, Chuckles sat beside Sarah once again. The others were resting scattered around the campsite, and somehow he had wound up right where he had so often over the past few days.

Sarah watched the embers for a while before glancing sideways at him.

"Why are you always right next to me?"

Chuckles stared into the fire. "Safety?"

Sarah looked around. Casey was sitting thirty feet away on a fallen log. Bryce was keeping watch on the far side of camp. And Morgan was rummaging around somewhere in the dark, doing something to impress Alexis. Sarah preferred not to think about it.

She turned back to Chuckles. "Safety?"

"Yes."

Sarah watched him for a few seconds. Then that tiny, familiar smile twitched at the corner of her lips. "Right."

She didn't move away, and Chuckles shifted just a little bit closer. Sarah let him.

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"Dad?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"So... are they in love then?"

Morgan smiled softly. "I think so, yeah."

Leila thought about that for a moment. "Then why were they fighting each other?"

Morgan stared into the embers for a moment. "Sweetheart, love comes in many forms. And not every form is simple."

Luke chimed in: "Was it because of the magic kiss?"

Morgan smiled faintly. "That's what Sarah tried to convince herself."

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Toshy Station looked less like a welcoming inn and more like a place where civilization had simply given up trying. The floor clung stickily to the soles of their boots, and the air was thick with the heavy stench of ale, pipe smoke, and some inexplicably fried meat. In the dark corner, a three-eyed musician was hammering out a tune that Morgan would later describe as "the Mos Eisley cantina, but with even worse life choices."

Chuckles searched the room for Sarah almost immediately upon stepping through the creaking doorway.

He found her instantly.

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“He found her! " Yay, Daddy!” Leila chimed in.

“Hush now!” said Luke, eager to listen to the story.

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Sarah was standing near a corner table, arms crossed over her chest, calmly scanning the crowd as if she weren't in the middle of a dive tavern where a heavily bearded dwarf was currently trying to murder a wooden chair with a pewter tankard.

Chuckles didn't even realize he was smiling until Morgan nudged him sharply in the ribs.

“Don't stare,” Morgan muttered beside him.

“I'm not staring.”

“You haven't blinked in five seconds, buddy.”

Chuckles finally dragged his eyes away. “It's a security assessment.”

Morgan grinned widely. “Riiight. Of course.”

A few minutes later, a minor brawl erupted at the far end of the taproom. It wasn't particularly dangerous—just local drunks letting off steam—but it gave Chuckles his first real chance to put Sarah's morning lessons to the test.

One of the tavern's strays came lunging toward him with a wild, swinging fist. Chuckles took a deliberate step to the side. The man missed entirely, overextending, and Chuckles brought him down with an awkward-looking but surprisingly precise sweep of his foot. The man hit the sticky floorboards with a dull thud.

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“Not ‘the Morgan’ again,” said Alexis.

“Wasn’t ‘the Morgan’, okay?! Let me finish.

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A brief silence settled over their immediate circle. Chuckles looked over at Casey first, then at Bryce, and finally at Sarah.

Sarah met his eager gaze. “Nice work,” she said softly.

That was it. Just two words, but something warm and deeply satisfying expanded in Chuckles' chest. “Thank you,” he said.

Bryce stepped forward, tapping Chuckles' shoulder. “It really was.”

Chuckles nodded earnestly. “Yeah. Sarah said so too.”

Bryce looked at him, his brow furrowing slightly. “Did you need to say that?”

“No,” Chuckles admitted.

“Yes, he did,” Morgan piped up immediately from behind them.

Chuckles turned his head slowly. “Morgan.”

“Just helping!”

Sarah was still watching the three of them bantering. Only then did Chuckles notice that she was smiling —not at him in amusement, but because of them. And somehow, that felt even better than landing the strike.

Sarah turned and began walking toward the exit. Without a single second of hesitation, Chuckles followed automatically in her wake.

Behind them, Morgan let out a low sigh. “Oh, this is bad.”

Casey grunted, looking down at him as he and Alexis returned with the fresh supplies. “What?”

Morgan watched Sarah and Chuckles step out into the night together. “Nothing. Just... I don't think Chuckles is fighting just to stay alive anymore.”

Chapter 6: Chapter 6: The Things We Cannot Control

Chapter 6: The Things We Cannot Control

The pre-dawn chill still clung to the forest when the boot found his ribs.

It was not a gentle waking. The leather was stiff, the pressure deliberate, dragging Chuckles instantly out of a dreamless sleep and into the damp, dark air of early morning.

"Up," Sarah said.

Chuckles cracked one heavy eyelid. The sky above the canopy was still a bruised shade of purple, completely devoid of sunlight. "Is it morning already?"

"Yes."

"Could we perhaps postpone morning?"

"No."

He let out a long, theatrical groan and rolled onto his back, staring up at the needles of the pine trees overhead. "Five more minutes?"

Sarah folded her arms across her chest, her shadow tall and unyielding against the faint twilight. "Then I'll start counting."

Chuckles sat up immediately, his hands raised in surrender. "Right. Morning. Splendid."

A short while later, the frost-dusted grass brushed against their boots as they stood facing each other in a small, secluded clearing. The air smelled of woodsmoke, damp earth, and crushed pine needles.

Chuckles held up both hands before she could settle into her stance. "Before we begin, I'd like to establish for the official record that yesterday I was thrown to the ground approximately fourteen times."

"Sixteen," Sarah corrected smoothly.

Chuckles paused, blinking. "You counted?"

"Yes."

"That's somehow worse."

A tiny muscle in Sarah's jaw twitched. Her lips thinned, fighting back a shadow of amusement that almost—*almost*—softened her sharp features.

"Ready?" she asked, her voice snapping back to business.

Chuckles took a deep breath, rolling his shoulders to work out the lingering ache from yesterday's bruises. "Ready."

She came at him without warning.

This time, his instincts kicked in before his mind could overthink it. He moved. It wasn't effortless, and it certainly wasn't graceful, but he avoided the immediate catastrophe. He ducked beneath her initial sweeping strike, planted his heel into the soft earth, and managed to pivot away from her trajectory rather than stepping directly into her path.

Sarah paused, her stance shifting effortlessly as she reset. A brief, rare nod of approval cut through the dim light. "Better."

"Thank you," Chuckles wheezed, adjusting his grip.

She didn't give him time to savor it. Sarah attacked again, her movements a blur of practiced lethargy-turned-lethal speed. Steel rang against steel with a sharp, deafening clash that echoed through the quiet forest. The force of the blow reverberated up Chuckles' arms, forcing him backward, his boots skidding across the damp grass. He stumbled, caught his balance by a fraction of an inch, and hauled his guard up just in time to catch her follow-up strike.

"Better," Sarah repeated, her voice steady, barely breathing hard.

Chuckles grinned, the rush of adrenaline masking the sting in his forearms. "That's two compliments in two days. At this rate, I'll become unbearable."

Sarah's mouth twitched again.

Then, with lightning speed, her foot swept around and kicked his ankles out from under him.

The earth rushed up to meet him. Chuckles hit the ground with an undignified grunt, the air exploding from his lungs as his back slammed into the dirt. He lay there for a second, staring up at the gray canopy, listening to the quiet rustle of the trees.

"Three compliments?" he managed to ask from the grass.

"Get up."

"Right."

He scrambled back to his feet, dusting off his sleeves and shaking the dirt from his hands. Sarah was already waiting, her weight balanced, her spear held low and steady.

This time, as she began to move, Chuckles forced himself to stop reacting to her weapons and started watching *her*. Really watching her. Not just the obvious tell of her shoulders or the shifting placement of her feet, but the micro-adjustments that signaled her intent before she even took a step. The subtle tightening of her pale knuckles around the ash haft of the spear. The fraction-of-a-degree turn of her hips. The way her eyes narrowed, darkening as her mind selected the exact point of impact.

She was stunning when she fought.

The thought struck him unbidden, sharp and sudden, cutting through the haze of the sparring match. There was an impossible grace to her—a fierce, quiet perfection that seemed to elevate her beyond the messy reality of the world around them. When Sarah fought, she belonged to a domain of absolute control. She was quick, precise, and completely devoid of hesitation. Every movement was a whisper of purpose; no motion was wasted.

Chuckles felt a deep, aching pull in his chest. He wanted to be able to move like that. He wanted that kind of strength. But more than that, he realized, he wanted to understand her. He wanted to see past the armor, to tear down the walls of supreme composure, and discover what happened when Sarah forgot, even for a single second, that she was supposed to be untouchable.

She lunged again.

Chuckles read the shift in her weight, stepped cleanly to the side, and let her momentum carry her past.

"Good," she whispered.

He smiled, a spark of genuine confidence lighting up his face.

She pressed the advantage, striking hard. He brought his parry up, turning the blow. She spun, coming at him low, and he ducked, the wind of her weapon sweeping through his hair.

She struck a third time, a direct thrust, but Chuckles anticipated it. He reached out, his hand closing around her wrist, arresting her momentum mid-strike.

For half a second, the entire world ground to a halt. They stood locked together in the center of the clearing, chest to chest, their breathing ragged in the cold morning air.

Sarah looked up, her gaze locking onto his.

Chuckles instantly forgot his footwork. He forgot his guard. He forgot what he was supposed to do next.

Her face was inches from his. At this distance, he could see the intricate flecks of pale green hidden deep within the brilliant blue of her irises. He could see a single loose strand of dark hair resting against the curve of her cheekbone. He could feel the sudden, radiant warmth of her skin seeping through the fabric of her sleeve beneath his fingers.

The forest seemed to dissolve around them. The trees, the morning chill, the damp grass—it all faded into background noise. There was only Sarah. Her eyes. The subtle rise and fall of her chest. The tiny, involuntary curve of her lips that she tried so hard to suppress whenever she looked at him.

He wanted to stay in this suspended breath of time. Just for another second. Maybe ten. Maybe forever.

Sarah twisted her wrist with a sudden, sharp leverage.

Chuckles was thrown off balance, stumbling sideways as the physical connection broke.

"Focus," she commanded, though her breath was noticeably shorter than before.

"Right," he rasped, shaking his head to clear the fog. "Focus."

Sarah began to circle him, her eyes fixed on his. He turned with her, keeping his center of gravity low. She feinted to the left, a subtle twitch of her blade meant to draw a panicked reaction—but Chuckles held his ground, seeing straight through it.

Sarah smiled.

It wasn't a smirk, nor was it a cold, competitive gleam. It was a real, unshielded smile, breaking through her defenses like sunlight through a storm cloud.

It hit Chuckles harder than any physical blow she had ever dealt him. He had seen her smile before, but never like this. This wasn't a defense mechanism or a polite habit. This was genuine, warm, and entirely for him.

Something deep within his chest pulled painfully tight. An overwhelming, terrifying wave of affection surged through him. He wanted more of it. He wanted to spend every day finding new ways to make her smile like that. He wanted more moments where the distance between them vanished entirely.

Sarah lunged forward to continue the drill.

Chuckles moved on instinct. He blocked the thrust, parried the shaft of her weapon, and stepped backward to create space. His heart was hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird.

Driven by the surge of emotion, his hand came up—not as a calculated combat move, but as an unconscious, desperate reflex to reach for her.

The magic inside him, volatile and deeply tied to his emotions, answered the call instantly.

A blinding burst of blue-white light erupted from his open palm.

The kinetic shockwave tore through the air with a deafening crack, like thunder striking a tree. The shock of raw energy struck Sarah squarely in the center of her chest armor.

She didn't just fall; she was lifted off her feet and thrown backward through the air. Her body collided with a heavy stack of fallen, rotting logs at the edge of the clearing with a sickening, heavy thud. Bark snapped, dead branches splintered, and she disappeared beneath the collapse of wood and debris.

Then, absolute silence descended on the forest.

The world stopped spinning. The colors drained from the clearing.

Chuckles stood frozen, his hand still outstretched, wisps of pale blue smoke curling off his trembling fingers.

"Sarah?"

The wind didn't even whisper through the trees. No movement came from the pile of logs.

His stomach dropped into a bottomless void. Cold dread washed over him, drowning out every trace of warmth he had felt moments ago.

"Sarah!"

He broke into a frantic sprint. He vaulted over a decaying trunk, tripped on a tangle of roots, and scrambled through the sharp branches, tearing at his clothes as he searched the debris.

"Sarah!"

He fell to his knees beside her body.

She was lying facedown in the dirt, half-buried under crushed limbs and shattered timber, terrifyingly still.

For one agonizing second, Chuckles couldn't draw air into his lungs. The wonder, the warmth, the soaring hope he had felt moments earlier evaporated into ash. There was only an suffocating, cold terror.

His hands shook so violently he could barely extend them as he reached for her shoulder. "Sarah? Please..."

He swallowed hard around a lump of sharp panic, his vision blurring. "Sarah, come on. Wake up."

He gently slid his fingers to her cheek, clearing away a smudge of dark dirt. Her skin was warm. A faint, shuddering breath parted her lips. She was alive.

Relief swept over him, but it was instantly crushed under a wave of devastating guilt. He looked down at her armor—the metal was scorched, and beneath the leather straps, deep purple bruising was already beginning to bloom across her side.

His face crumpled.

Oh God.

He had wanted to impress her. He had wanted to prove he was growing stronger, that he could stand beside her as an equal. He had wanted to get closer to her.

And instead, he had blasted her across a clearing. He had broken her body with the very power he couldn't control.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice cracking, thick with self-loathing. "I'm so sorry..."

A low, painful groan squeezed from Sarah's throat.

Chuckles almost collapsed right there.

Her eyelids fluttered, heavy and confused, before slowly opening. She squinted against the morning light, her gaze wandering before finally settling on his face.

"Chuckles?" she rasped.

"I'm here," he said, his voice barely a breath. "I'm right here."

"What..." She shifted slightly, wincing as her muscles protested.

"Don't move," Chuckles said quickly, sliding a hands behind her shoulders to gently support her weight. "Just stay still. Don't force it."

Sarah lay there for a long moment, taking slow, deliberate breaths to test her ribs. As the fog in her mind cleared, she took in his appearance—the trembling hands, the pale skin, the absolute, heartbroken horror written across every line of his face.

"I'm okay," she said softly.

Chuckles shook his head, looking away as a knot tightened in his throat. "No, you're not."

Ignoring his protest, Sarah pushed herself up onto one elbow. Chuckles immediately moved to steady her, his hands terrified of exerting too much pressure.

"It wasn't that bad," she grunted, her jaw tightening against the pain.

"I threw you across the clearing, Sarah," he said, his voice laced with bitter self-recrimination. "I could have killed you."

"But you didn't."

Chuckles stared at her, stunned by the sheer lack of anger in her voice.

Sarah raised her hand. Slowly, carefully, her fingers reached up and pressed against his cheek, her touch steady and warm against his trembling skin.

"Look at me," she commanded quietly.

He forced his eyes back to hers.

"I'm here," she said, her voice dropping into a register of quiet, absolute truth. "I'm fine."

His breath caught in his throat. Sarah's thumb lingered against his cheekbone for one heartbeat, then two, anchoring him in the reality that she was alive, that she was whole. For once, neither of them made a joke. Neither of them pulled back to pretend the touch was an accident, or that the electric silence between them meant nothing at all.

Then, with a quiet exhale, Sarah drew her hand back.

She turned away, braced herself against a thick log, and forced herself to stand. Her movements were slow, her jaw tight as she fought through the sharp pain in her side.

Without another word, she began to limp slowly back toward the camp, cradling her ribs with one arm.

Chuckles stayed on his knees in the dirt, watching her retreat through the trees.

There was something in the rigid line of her shoulders, in the heavy, deliberate placement of her boots, that told him she was furious. Not with him—there was no hatred in her eyes when she looked at him.

She was angry at herself.

She had been the one pushing him. She had been the one teaching him to unleash what was inside him. And in that fleeting moment of vulnerability, when she had allowed herself to smile, Sarah had been reminded of the terrifying truth: Chuckles' greatest power was unpredictable, chaotic, and wildly dangerous.

As was that lingering feeling about him, that she tried to suppress. It took more and more effort.

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By midday, the trail had squeezed into a tight gorge before opening up to reveal a natural hot spring, cradled like a secret in a bowl of moss-slicked granite. Plumes of thick, mineral-scented steam drifted lazily into the trees above, catching the harsh afternoon light.

Morgan had immediately declared it the single greatest discovery since breakfast.

While the women took advantage of the secluded pool to wash away the trail dust and thaw the morning chill, the men established camp a respectful distance downwind. A small fire crackled between three flat stones, but Chuckles barely felt its warmth. He sat on a fallen log, elbows resting on his knees, his eyes fixed on the flickering embers while his mind replayed the sound of splintering wood and the sickening weight of his own out-of-control magic.

Heavy, deliberate footsteps crunched through the pine needles beside him. Bryce dropped down onto the log, his massive frame causing the timber to groan in protest.

Bryce sat in silence for a moment, resting his forearms on his knees. He looked at Chuckles. Then his gaze drifted toward the clearing, where the thick veil of white steam rose above the rocks. Then he turned back to Chuckles, his expression unreadable.

He muttered something low and guttural—a brief, harsh string of Klingon consonants that sounded distinctly unsympathetic.

Chuckles frowned, pulling his gaze from the flames. "What?"

Bryce let out a slow, heavy sigh that seemed to rattle in his chest. "I see what you're doing."

Chuckles blinked, instantly pulling his shoulders back in a defensive posture. "What am I doing?"

"Sarah."

Chuckles nearly choked on his own breath, his face flushing instantly. "I'm—I'm not doing anything."

Bryce leaned in a fraction closer, his dark eyes locking onto Chuckles with unsettling intensity. "Stay away from her."

"Why?"

"She'll chew you up, boy."

Chuckles stared at him, his brow furrowing as the word echoed in his ears. "Boy?"

Bryce nodded, solemn and unblinking. "She's an apex predator."

A flash of genuine offense cut through Chuckles' embarrassment. He gestured vaguely between the two of them. "Boy? Bryce, we're the exact same age."

Bryce offered a subtle, dismissive shrug of one broad shoulder. "Still."

Chuckles turned his head, his eyes drawn back toward the plume of steam rising behind the rocks. Through the mist, he could hear the bright, splashing water and the clear, echoing sound of laughter. Among them was Sarah's voice. She sounded different over there—unburdened, free of her heavy armor and the crushing weight of responsibility

she carried everywhere else. It was a soft, human sound, stripped clean of the cold precision she wore like a second skin.

Chuckles forced himself to drag his gaze away, staring back down at his dirt-stained boots.

"She's not going to chew me up," Chuckles grumbled, though his voice lacked conviction.

Bryce gave him a long, pitying look, turning his head back toward the fire.

"That's exactly what prey says."

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Later, as the sun dipped below the tree line and long shadows stretched across the glade, the women returned to camp with damp hair and the clean, mineral scent of the hot spring clinging to their skin.

Over by the gnarled roots of an ancient oak, Alexis was already dead to the world. Wrapped tight in her bedroll with her cloak drawn up to her chin, she slept with a deep, undisturbed rhythm, completely immune to the rustle of camp life around her.

A few feet away, Casey sat cross-legged on a flat rock. A long iron blade rested across his knees, and in his right hand he held a coarse whetstone. The rhythmic, whisper-thin rasp of stone against edge—*shhhk, shhhk, shhhk*—was a steady, mechanical pulse in the evening quiet. He said nothing to anyone. His face remained half-hidden in the gloom, his dark eyes quietly tracing the movements of the camp, taking in every subtle shift in posture, every unspoken tension, before returning to the glint of steel in his hands.

Near the center of the camp, Bryce had prepared a pungent, warming potion, grinding dried roots and oils into a thick salve.

Sarah sat on a low stone near the firelight, her back turned to the main circle. Her tunic had been pulled down past her shoulders, exposing her naked back.

Chuckles happened to glance up from the fire.

He immediately wished he hadn't.

Sprawled across Sarah's shoulders and the small of her back were dark, angry violet bruises—a stark, painful tally of his lost control earlier that morning. But as Chuckles watched, Bryce's broad, heavily calloused hands began moving across her skin, carefully and methodically working the thick ointment into her muscles.

Sarah didn't flinch. She sat entirely unbothered, her head bowed slightly, comfortable with the quiet, practical intimacy of field medicine.

Chuckles felt a sudden, sharp knot twist tightly in the pit of his stomach. A strange mixture of lingering guilt and sudden, suffocating irritation flashed through him. He dragged his eyes away, forcing his gaze toward the dirt with absolute, ferocious determination.

He picked up a heavy oak branch and poked the fire.

He jabbed at a glowing log, shifting it an inch to the left.

Then he thrust the stick directly into the heart of the embers, jamming it down hard enough that a violent fountain of bright orange sparks erupted into the dusk.

Morgan, lounging across the fire pit with his cup of tea, watched the shower of sparks drift up into the darkening canopy. He looked at the mangled embers, then glanced at Chuckles.

"Are you trying to kill the fire?" Morgan asked mildly.

"No," Chuckles snapped, not looking up.

"You've been stabbing it for five minutes."

"I'm thinking."

Morgan raised an eyebrow. "About fire?"

"Yes. Fire."

Morgan shifted his weight, his eyes tracking from Chuckles' tense, white-knuckled grip on the stick, across the clearing to where Bryce was gently working his thumbs into Sarah's shoulder blades, and then right back to Chuckles' stony expression.

"Oh," Morgan said softly, the light of sudden comprehension dawning in his eyes.

Chuckles' head snapped up. He glared at Morgan with a heat that outshone the dying embers.

Morgan held his hands up in silent, peaceful surrender, wisely returning his full attention to his tea and the flames.

Off in the shadows, the soft, rhythmic scrape of Casey's whetstone never missed a beat. *Shhhk. Shhhk.* He didn't offer a word, but the faint, knowing glint in his eyes caught the firelight as he watched Chuckles stew in his own miserable silence.

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Night fell completely over the camp, wrapping the clearing in a heavy, velvet hush. Sleep had taken the others—Alexis lay buried deep beneath her cloak near the ashes, Bryce's slow, rhythmic breathing rattled softly in the darkness, and Casey sat motionless against a tree trunk, a shadow keeping silent watch.

Chuckles sat alone on a frost-slicked rock beneath a sky dusted with cold, distant stars. He rolled a smooth river pebble back and forth between his fingers, his thumb dragging over the polished stone in a restless, repetitive rhythm.

A faint rustle of grass announced Sarah's approach, though her footsteps were so light she moved like a shadow given form. She didn't offer a greeting, nor did she ask if she was intruding. She simply sat down on the log beside him, wrapping her cloak tighter against the midnight chill.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. The wind hummed quietly through the high canopy, carrying the scent of pine and dying embers.

"You feel guilty," Sarah said softly, breaking the silence.

Chuckles glanced sideways at her, the starlight catching the sharp line of her profile. "About the bruise."

Sarah gave a casual shrug, a slight movement beneath her heavy wool cloak. "It's nothing."

"I know," he murmured, his eyes returning to the small stone in his hand.

"But?"

"But I did it."

Sarah studied him, her sharp blue eyes cutting through the dim light to read the subtle tension in his frame. "Tell me about the magic."

Chuckles frowned, caught off guard. "What?"

"Your magic."

He paused, letting the pebble drop into his palm, staring down at his bare hands. "I don't really know how to explain it. It doesn't work like a sword drill or an equation."

"Try."

Chuckles drew in a long, cool breath, his shoulders dropping slightly. "I know the name of the wind," he said, his tone shifting into something surprisingly somber and deep. "I can call it. I can shout dragons out of the sky."

Sarah raised a single dark eyebrow. "Dragons?"

"That's what I said."

A faint, fleeting trace of a smile tugged at the corner of her lips before vanishing back into the shadows.

Chuckles continued, his gaze drifting upward. "I can make fire."

He upturned his palm. With a subtle flick of his fingers, a tiny, brilliant spark ignited in the empty air above his skin. It didn't burn him; it blossomed into a delicate, blue-gold ember that danced lazily above his knuckles.

Sarah watched it intently, the tiny flame reflecting in her irises.

Chuckles shifted his hand, his fingers weaving a slow, hypnotic pattern through the air. The fire obeyed, stretching into a glowing, ribbon-like thread that looped around his fingers. "I can even bend it sometimes."

He twisted his wrist, guiding the light in a sharp, spiraling arc—and then closed his hand into a tight fist. The flame vanished into nothingness.

"But what's the point?"

Sarah turned her entire body toward him, her gaze unwavering.

Chuckles stared bitterly at his empty palm. "If I can't control it, then what good is it? I wanted to help you this morning. I wanted to stand beside you. Instead, I blasted you into a pile of logs."

"You barely hurt me," Sarah said firmly.

"I know."

"Then stop punishing yourself."

Chuckles met her eyes, the raw frustration burning behind his own. "It's not that easy."

"No," Sarah's voice softened, losing its sharp combat edge, dipping into a quiet warmth she rarely permitted herself to show. "But you don't have to learn it alone."

Chuckles blinked, the wind blowing a stray lock of hair across his forehead. "What?"

"I can help you."

"You?"

Sarah nodded. "Of course."

"You can teach me magic?"

"No."

A bewildered look washed over his face. "Then what can you teach me?"

"Focus." She held out her hand, palm up, hovering in the small space between them.

"The Amazons have abilities of their own."

"Like what?"

Sarah's expression hardened into something mysterious and ancient. "Some of them are considered... unnatural."

Chuckles stared at her extended hand, then looked up into her face. Despite the lingering gloom, a familiar, irrepressible spark returned to his eyes. "You realize that sentence makes me want to ask approximately twelve questions. And at least one of them is about some tragic guy named Plagueis the Wise."

"I know."

"And you're not going to answer any of them."

"No."

Chuckles let out a low, breathy laugh, the suffocating guilt finally loosening its grip on his chest. "Very Amazon of you."

Sarah's lips curved upward into a genuine, unshielded smile. "Very Chuckles of you."

He reached out and wrapped his fingers around her hand.

His skin was warm against hers, his grip steady and unhesitating. This time, neither of them pulled back. Neither of them cracked a quick joke to break the tension or made an excuse to pull away. They just sat together, their hands locked beneath the vast, silent expanse of the star-filled sky.

And somewhere deep inside Sarah's chest, that strange, terrifying flutter returned—a sudden, tight pull that defied her discipline, her training, and every wall she had ever built around her heart.

She forced a quiet breath through her nose and stared out into the dark forest, willing her pulse to slow down, commanding herself to ignore it.

For now.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7: Happy Little Accidents

Chapter 7 — Happy Little Accidents

The party emerged from the heavy stone archway of the dungeon just as the sun dipped beneath the horizon, bathing the treeline in a deep crimson glare.

Nobody spoke for several seconds. They simply stood there in the cool, crisp evening air, blinking against the twilight as if their eyes had entirely forgotten what the open sky looked like after hours in the subterranean gloom.

Casey, however, was not inclined to appreciate the sunset.

He marched straight toward Chuckles, his heavy iron plate armor caked in gray dust and damp clinging tendrils of something Chuckles very much hoped was only dungeon moss. His jaw was set so tight his teeth gritted audibly.

"What was that one rule you had?" Casey growled, stopping barely two feet away.

Chuckles looked up at the towering knight, swallowing hard and trying to look as non-threatening as a magic-user possibly could. "Which one?"

Casey stared down at him. "The one rule."

Chuckles thought about it for a long, agonizing heartbeat, running through the mental list of ancient arcane warnings. "Oh." His shoulders dropped several inches. "Don't raise the dead."

Casey's jaw tightened even further. "And what did you do?"

Chuckles rubbed the back of his neck, staring down at his dusty boots. "Raised the dead."

"Exactly."

Before Casey could bellow, Sarah stepped fluidly into his line of sight, placing a gentle, reassuring palm against Chuckles' forearm. Her touch was warm, instantly anchoring him. "It's okay, Chuckles."

Casey whirled his glare onto her. "It's okay?"

Sarah nodded calmly, her blue eyes unwavering. "He meant no harm."

Casey let out a low, rumbling growl in the back of his throat.

"Yeah, come on, Casey. Give the dude a break," Bryce chimed in, stepping forward from the shadow of the stone portal. He attempted a smooth, reassuring wink at Chuckles to lighten the mood. Unfortunately, one of his eyelids refused to cooperate entirely—his fogged, pale eye simply remained wide open while his left eye closed tight. The resulting grimace was significantly less reassuring than Bryce had intended.

"A break," Casey repeated, his voice dangerously quiet. He jabbed a thick, gauntleted finger toward Chuckles. "Yeah. He needs a break, all right." He took a heavy step forward. "I'll break his neck or something in his body."

"Enough, Casey." Sarah moved decisively between them, her posture straight and rigid. "He had no ill intentions."

Casey looked over her shoulder at the figure standing a few feet behind them in the grass. "No ill intentions?" He gestured wildly toward the newly reanimated warrior. "Good intentions, evil activities—whatever the heck you want to call it, what are we supposed to do with a zombie?"

The zombie slowly raised a single grey, stiff finger.

"Hey."

Nobody moved. The forest went dead silent.

Bryce glanced around at the gathered party. "Just so we're clear..." He pointed directly at Casey. "I can hear you."

Casey slowly turned his head back toward him, his eyes narrowing to slits.

Bryce offered an awkward, lopsided smile. "See? He's adapting already."

"He's a zombie," Casey spat.

"Technically."

Casey squeezed his eyes shut, taking a deep, ragged breath through his nose before opening them to lock onto Chuckles again. "How long?"

Chuckles blinked. "How long what?"

"How long is he going to stay like that? Before getting feral, you know."

Chuckles looked past Sarah at the zombieified Bryce. It stared back at Chuckles, tilting its head slightly. Chuckles swallowed hard, shifting his weight. "I'm... not entirely sure."

Casey closed his eyes again, rubbing the bridge of his nose in utter defeat. "Of course you're not."

Sarah gave Chuckles' arm a soft, supportive squeeze. "It's going to be fine."

Chuckles glanced sideways at her, offering a faint, grateful smile. "You're very optimistic."

"No." Sarah looked over at Casey with a small, knowing smirk. "I'm just used to you."

Casey grumbled under his breath. "Unfortunately."

The zombie raised his hand again, wiggling his fingers slightly to catch everyone's attention. "Can we maybe discuss the important question?"

All four of them turned to stare at him. "Which is?"

"Do I still get paid?"

Casey stared. Chuckles stared. Sarah stared.

"That's actually a very good question," said Bryce with a pale face.

Casey slowly dragged both hands down his face, groaning aloud. "I hate this party."

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"But Dad," Leila interrupted from the warmth of her bed, tugging the heavy wool blanket higher around her chin, "you said Bryce was killed by the dragon."

Morgan nodded solemnly from his chair by the hearth, stoking the glowing embers with a iron poker. "Yes."

"And before that, he fell off a cliff."

"Oh..."

"Another time he was crushed by a giant boulder."

"Really?"

Leila frowned, her forehead creasing in deep concentration. "How is he alive?"

Morgan opened his mouth, clearing his throat as he set the poker down. "Well..." He began counting off on his stubby fingers. "He was killed by the dragon, fell off a cliff, got crushed by a boulder, was eaten by—"

"Morgan," Alexis' dry, amused voice echoed gently from the kitchen across the hall.

Morgan snapped his mouth shut. "Sorry, honey."

He turned back to the children, leaning in close with a conspiratorial whisper. "So Bryce was..." He gestured with his hands. "...kind of undead."

Luke looked thoroughly confused, tilting his head. "Kind of?"

Morgan nodded sagely. "Imagine being dead, but still having opinions."

Leila pondered that for a second, her eyes brightening. "Like Dad?"

Morgan looked deeply offended, sitting back up straight. "Hey!"

From the kitchen, a sudden burst of Alexis' laughter echoed across the room. Morgan pointed a dramatic finger toward the doorway. "Your mother is supposed to be on my side!"

"She is," Luke said sweetly.

"Then why is she laughing?"

"Because you're funny."

Morgan let out a long, theatrical sigh, a small smile breaking through his pout. "Thank you, son."

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Back in Buymoria, Morgan and Alexis were doing what any sensible, self-preserving members of an adventuring party would do when confronted with an angry knight, a confused wizard, an Amazon warrior, and a newly resurrected corpse.

They sat back on a fallen log, pulled out their rations, and thoroughly enjoyed the show.

Chuckles, unfortunately, was having considerably less fun.

He stood several feet away from Bryce, watching the pale man poke experimentally at his own forearm with two fingers, testing the resistance of his own flesh.

"Does it hurt?" Chuckles asked quietly.

Bryce considered the question for a moment, rolling his shoulder. "No."

"Can you feel anything?"

Bryce reached up and pinched his own cheek firmly. "Apparently." He paused, frowning slightly. "Although I can't feel my cheek."

Chuckles pinched the bridge of his nose. "That's contradictory."

"I know." Bryce shrugged effortlessly. "Being undead is complicated."

Casey marched past them, hoisting his heavy sword onto his shoulder without looking left or right. "I'm going to bed."

Sarah watched his retreating back. "You don't have a bed."

Casey stopped dead in his tracks, staring into the dark woods. "...I'm going to find somewhere to be angry."

"That sounds more like you," Sarah called back softly.

Casey grunted a response and vanished around the bend of the trail.

Bryce turned back to Chuckles, pointing a thumb in the direction Casey had gone. "See?"

Chuckles let out a heavy sigh, shifting his staff to his other hand. "What?"

Bryce grinned, his single uncooperative eye giving another bizarre half-twitch. "Happy little accidents."

Chuckles stared at him blankly. "I really don't think that's what those words mean."

Bryce shrugged. "Close enough."

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"Actually, after his change, he became a very laid-back and almost nice guy," Morgan said with a warm grin.

"That he was," Alexis laughed, shaking her head fondly as she set her tea down. "Oh, Morgan, you've got to tell them about the boulder..."

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Night had fully fallen over the mountains by the time the embers of their small campfire began to pop and glow.

Chuckles sat alone on a large, flat granite boulder at the far edge of the clearing, his elbows resting heavily on his knees and his face buried deep in his palms. The crisp wind rustling through the pines did nothing to cool the lingering flush of embarrassment on his face.

He could still hear Casey's thunderous voice echoing inside his head like a reverberating battle horn: *What the heck are we going to do now with a zombie?*

Chuckles let out a quiet, muffled groan into his hands.

He hadn't meant for any of this to happen. Arcane spells were notoriously finicky, but this was entirely out of hand. He had only wanted to help. He had seen someone in need, panicked, and reached for whatever thread of power he could grasp.

A moment later, the tall grass shifted softly beside the rock.

Sarah sat down next to him on the stone. For a long while, she said nothing at all. She simply settled into the quiet space beside him, close enough that the leather of her sleeve brushed warm against his shoulder, creating a small sanctuary against the dark.

"Don't mind Casey," she said eventually, her tone calm and steady. "I know you wanted to save him."

Chuckles slowly lowered his hands, staring blankly down at the dirt between his boots. "Yeah."

Sarah glanced sideways at his troubled face. "And you did."

"I just thought..." He let out a heavy sigh, rubbing the back of his neck. "I thought if I could heal him, then maybe we wouldn't have to lose him."

Sarah's vigilantly guarded expression softened, the hard lines of the warrior giving way to something gentle and deeply human. "You were trying to help."

"Apparently my version of helping involves creating undead people," Chuckles muttered bitterly.

"Apparently it did."

Chuckles looked up at her, caught off guard by her bluntness.

A tiny, irrepressible smile was curving the corner of Sarah's mouth. Seeing it, Chuckles couldn't help the small, helpless smile that tugged at his own lips in return.

She nudged his shoulder lightly with hers. "You know what?"

Chuckles frowned in gentle confusion. "Not a clue."

Sarah looked toward the center of the camp, where Bryce was currently engaged in a spirited debate with Morgan over whether his lack of a beating heart technically qualified him for a discount at local taverns.

"Bryce is now your mistake too," Sarah remarked casually.

Chuckles turned to stare at her. "My mistake?"

Sarah nodded, her blue eyes gleaming with faint amusement in the starlight. "You brought him back."

"But he's not exactly..."

"Alive?"

"Yeah."

Sarah considered this for a moment, tilting her head. "Not exactly."

Chuckles let out another long sigh, sinking an inch lower into his robe.

Sarah leaned just a fraction closer, her voice laced with quiet humor. "So we both share him in some wasys."

Chuckles glanced back over toward the fire. Bryce was sitting comfortably on a mossy log, calmly using a small hunting knife to peel an apple, seemingly unbothered by the fact that he had been dead just an hour ago.

Noticing Chuckles watching him, Bryce looked up and raised the apple slice on the tip of his blade in a friendly gesture.

"Want some?" Bryce called out with gravy voice.

Chuckles gave a quick shake of his head. "No, thanks."

Bryce shrugged easily, popping the piece into his mouth. "More for me."

Chuckles turned back to Sarah, utterly bewildered. "He's really taking this well."

Sarah's smile widened just a little bit more. "I told you."

"What?"

"Your mistake too."

Chuckles groaned dramatically and buried his face back into his hands.

Beside him, Sarah laughed softly—a bright, clear sound that echoed warmly through the dark trees. And somehow, sitting there in the cold mountain air, her laughter made the entire catastrophe feel just a little less disastrous.

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Next day they wandered onward through the sun-dappled canopy of the forest, following a narrow, overgrown dirt trail that wound deeper and deeper into the heart of Jill

County.

Behind the lead scout Casey, Sarah kept a vigilant eye on Chuckles.

She wasn't entirely sure why her gaze kept anchoring itself to him. By all rights and tactical logic, she should have been furious. Or at the very least, profoundly annoyed. Bryce—her former boyfriend, a man she had once cared deeply about—had been reanimated into a walking zombie by Chuckles. Whose primary talent seemed to be turning every simple, straightforward solution into a completely terrifying, unpredictable problem.

And yet... as she walked the winding forest path, a quiet, strange sense of happiness rested in her chest.

It made no sense. Not even a little bit.

Bryce was undead. Casey was practically vibrating with apocalyptic rage. Their already perilous quest had somehow become ten times more complicated than it had been three days ago. A few paces ahead of her, Chuckles kept tripping over exposed tree roots, catch-stumbling, and muttering frantic, nonsensical bits of arcane theory to himself as he adjusted his oversized robes.

None of it should have made her happy.

But it did.

Sarah watched him take another awkward, overly careful step over a patch of moss.

There was just something about him—something fundamentally honest and gentle that she couldn't explain or rationalize away. It felt like a growing, quiet pull between them. Almost magnetic. Every time he turned around and flashed her one of those warm, hesitant, earnest smiles, something tight in her chest loosened and tightened all at once. Every time he launched into a long, fast-paced ramble about spellcraft, she found herself leaning in, listening to the cadence of his voice. Every time he did something utterly ridiculous, every instinct in her body urged her to smile.

And that was entirely unacceptable.

Sarah the Amazon warrior did not get distracted.

She did not blush like a little girl. She did not develop inconvenient feelings for a bumbling wizard's apprentice who could barely manage a basic light spell without nearly setting his hair on fire. And she certainly did not find herself wondering, in the quiet pauses of the march, what it would be like if he looked at her again with the breathless, electric focus he had shown right after their kiss.

No. Absolutely not.

Sarah forced her gaze away, staring hard at the mossy trunk of an ancient oak tree beside the path.

Focus.

Her heart, unfortunately, appeared to have received none of these strict operational instructions. It continued to beat with a stubborn, erratic rhythm.

Sarah almost slapped herself right there on the trail to break the spell. Instead, she clenched her jaw, tightened her grip on the hilt of her spear, and drew in a long, slow, grounding breath.

Concentrate.

She gathered every single ounce of hard-won discipline she possessed. She was an Amazon—trained from youth to master her mind, to control her emotions, to conceal them under armor, to ignore pain, and above all, to never let personal feelings interfere with the mission.

She looked at Chuckles again.

He was now walking completely backward down the trail, gesturing animatedly with both hands as he explained some overly complex theory of necrotic magic to Bryce. Bryce was trailing lazily behind him, listening with the placid, mildly curious expression of a man who had completely forgotten he was technically deceased.

Chuckles took one more backward step and walked directly, headfirst, into the solid trunk of an ironwood tree.

"Ow."

Sarah bit the inside of her cheek so hard she nearly drew blood.

Don't laugh. Don't you dare smile. Don't—

A tiny, helpless smile escaped anyway, curving the corner of her lips before she could stop it.

Sarah immediately averted her eyes, staring down at her boots as a sudden, betraying flush of warmth bloomed across her cheeks. She closed her eyes for half a second, cursing the afternoon sun.

No!

When she opened her eyes again, Chuckles had turned around, rubbing his forehead with one hand while looking right at her. He caught her watching him, and his face instantly lit up with a soft, irrepressible grin.

Sarah's heart skipped a heavy beat against her ribs. She wanted to desperately fold her arms around him... And kiss him.

She hated that. She hated it almost as much as she liked idea.

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"Yo... Chuckles."

Bryce's easy, relaxed voice materialized out of thin air right beside Chuckles' ear.

Chuckles flinched, glancing sideways. Bryce had somehow managed to catch up with him without making so much as a rustle in the underbrush—a remarkably stealthy feat for a reanimated corpse. Before Chuckles could take a step back, Bryce casually draped his heavy right arm over Chuckles' shoulders.

Chuckles frowned, trying to adjust under the dead weight. "What?"

Bryce offered a crooked, pale-lipped grin. "I see what's going on here."

Instinctive suspicion immediately washed over Chuckles. "What's going on?"

"You like her."

"What?" Chuckles nearly tripped over a gnarled root in the trail, frantically scrambling for his balance. "No."

Bryce raised a pale eyebrow, his unblinking eye bright with amusement. "You want to be with her."

"No, don't be ridiculous!"

"Cut that crap, Chuckles."

Chuckles shot a terrified look up the trail, double-checking to make sure Sarah was far enough ahead not to hear them. "Keep your voice down!" he hissed.

Bryce's grin widened. "I'm gonna help you get that girl."

Chuckles stared at him in sheer, unadulterated shock. "I didn't see that coming."

"As neither did I that little foker." Bryce tapped the handle of the rusted goblin knife still casually embedded in the center of his leather cuirass. He flicked the dull blade with a pale forefinger.

Ping.

The sharp, metallic sound rang clear through the quiet forest canopy.

Chuckles stared at him in horror. "Bryce..."

Bryce flicked it again.

Ping.

With a dry, brittle snap, the wooden handle snapped off completely, dropping into Bryce's palm. Bryce looked down at the broken piece in his hand with mild interest.

"Oops." He tossed it carelessly over his shoulder into the ferns. "Wasn't me."

Chuckles shook his head, rubbing his temples with his free hand. "You're really taking being undead surprisingly well."

Bryce shrugged easily. "Not much I can do about it." He tightened his cool arm around Chuckles' shoulders again. "So. Chuckles."

"Oh no."

"I'm going to help you make her fall in love with you."

Chuckles stopped dead in the middle of the dirt path. "You are?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

Bryce looked at him as though the answer were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Because I'm dead."

Chuckles blinked. "That doesn't explain anything."

"It means I have time."

"That's somehow worse."

Bryce nudged him forward, continuing their steady march. "But you don't have time. So we'll get her to love you. Till happily ever after."

Chuckles hesitated, keeping pace alongside him. "Or?"

"Or a long time."

"That's not nearly as romantic."

"I'm fresh undead, man. Manage your expectations."

Chuckles let out a long, weary sigh. "And what exactly is your plan?"

Bryce grinned, a flash of his old charm showing through his pale skin. "You don't even have to pull a Montgomery on her."

Chuckles frowned, searching his memories of ancient bardic tales and field maneuvers.

"Which one?"

Bryce counted on his fingers. "The one where you drink until you black out?"

Chuckles nodded quickly. "And the other?"

"The rose."

Chuckles' face instantly changed—the color draining slightly as the significance of the words settled in. "Oh."

Bryce smiled softly. "Now we're on the same page."

Chuckles looked up ahead down the winding forest path. Sarah was walking several yards in front of them, her golden braid swaying with her steady stride. As if sensing their eyes on her, she slowed slightly and glanced back over her shoulder.

Their eyes met for a breathless fraction of a second.

Chuckles immediately jerked his head away, staring intently at a completely uninteresting patch of wild clover.

Bryce leaned closer to his ear. "See?"

"See what?"

"She's looking at you."

Chuckles swallowed hard, his throat dry. "She's probably just making sure I don't accidentally resurrect another person."

Bryce shook his head with absolute conviction. "Nope." He grinned broadly. "You're doomed."

Chuckles sighed, staring up at the canopy. "I have a feeling you're going to make this much worse."

Bryce patted his shoulder reassuringly. "That's what friends are for."

From somewhere behind them in the dense brush, Casey's gruff, menacing voice carried clearly through the trees.

"I heard that."

Bryce looked over his shoulder without missing a beat. "See? Everybody wants to help."

Casey materialized between two towering pine trees, his broad hand resting heavily on the hilt of his broadsword and his expression downright murderous. "I don't."

Bryce flashed him a brilliant, untroubled smile. "You're just shy."

Casey stared at him with pure, unadulterated venom. "I hate undead."

"Welcome to the club," Bryce replied smoothly.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8: A Question And An Amazon

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"Kids, your father can't tell the story right."

Alexis appeared in the doorway, leaning gracefully against the warm wooden frame. An amused, affectionate smile played on her lips as she shook her head, watching her husband. Stepping softly across the woven rug, she walked over to the wide wooden bed and sat down gently on the edge beside the children.

"He tells it as if it were a comedy."

Morgan sat up straight in his armchair, puffing out his chest with mock offense. "It *was* a comedy."

Alexis offered him a slow, lingering look that silenced him better than any spell. "Children, it was romance at heart. The greatest love story there is."

Morgan pressed a hand over his chest, leaning back into the leather cushion with a theatrical, heavy sigh. "But my version was still a better love story than *Twilight*!"

Alexis completely ignored the pop-culture quip, not even turning her head as she reached down to tuck the heavy wool quilt snugly around Leila's chin. "I'll continue from here."

"But Mom!" Luke immediately jumped up onto his elbows, his brow furrowing with genuine concern. "This won't be *only* a kissing story, right?"

"A kissing story!" Leila chimed in gleefully, clapping her small hands together under the blanket.

Alexis let out a warm, melodic laugh, reaching over to brush a stray lock of dark hair from Luke's forehead. "My dear son, it won't be only a kissing story. It will have grand, dangerous adventures."

"Right!" Morgan said quickly from his chair, pointing an approving finger into the air. "Lots of adventures!"

Alexis turned her head, shooting him a pointed look over her shoulder. "Without the silliness."

Morgan opened his mouth, ready to indignantly object—

She smoothly raised one slender forefinger, pausing him mid-breath. "Most of the silliness."

Morgan conceded with a slow, solemn nod, stroking his chin as if weighing a grand geopolitical treaty. "That's more realistic."

Alexis smiled, her dark eyes reflecting the golden embers dancing in the hearth, and turned her full focus back toward the eager, wide-eyed faces on the pillow.

"So," she began, her voice dropping into a rich, captivating hush that instantly filled the room, "where your father left off, Chuckles and Sarah had entered the realm on their long journey toward Eastend. What your father conveniently left out is that Buymoria wasn't merely some simple, quiet little kingdom. It was vast—a sprawling, mighty empire that covered nearly half the known continent."

She leaned in a fraction closer, her tone steeped in ancient lore.

"It was ruled from the grand high spires by High King Michael the Third—though among the common folk, tavern bards, and traveling sellswords, he was known simply as 'Big Mike.' And under his iron crown sat seven distinct kingdoms, each with their own lords, monsters, and secrets..."

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The passage beneath the mountain had stopped looking like something built by men several hundred years ago.

Chuckles had spent the last hour trying to determine the exact moment that shift had occurred. At first, there had been clear architectural intent—ancient ashlar stone blocks, worn spiral stairs, and carved pillars half-swallowed by creeping moss. The occasional

faded symbol flickered in their torchlight, its meaning long forgotten beneath centuries of dampness and mineral deposits.

Then the stairs simply ended, shearing off into the air where the mountain opened up beneath them.

Chuckles stopped dead at the brink of the abyss. "Oh."

Sarah stepped up beside him, her boots coming to a soft halt on the wet stone. For once, she didn't tell him to keep moving.

Far below them stretched an enormous, cathedral-like cavern. Its ceiling vanished into total darkness far beyond the reach of their flickering torches and storm lamps. Water fell from the heights in dozens of silver ribbons, cascading from one rocky shelf to another before finally collecting in a vast, black underground lake. The sound was deafening—a continuous, reverberating roar that shook the stone beneath their boots. It wasn't frightening. It was simply ancient.

The party stood silently along the ledge for a long moment, listening to the roar of the deep earth.

Morgan raised his storm lamp, squinting into the gloom. "Okay."

Casey glanced sideways at him, his hand resting on his sword pommel. "What?"

"Nothing. Just... this is significantly bigger than I expected."

Casey looked down into the black abyss. "And this is the shortcut."

"Oh," Morgan muttered, pulling his collar tighter.

Chuckles barely heard them. His eyes were locked on the center of the subterranean lake. There, where several towering waterfalls converged in a cloud of white mist, sat a small island covered in deep, luminous moss.

And growing from its center was a tree.

It wasn't some dead, twisted subterranean pale thing struggling for sunlight. It was a real, magnificent tree. Ancient and towering, its massive roots curled around the island

like gnarled fingers before disappearing beneath the moss and dark water. Its trunk was so thick that three full-grown men might have struggled to encircle it, and its pale, silver-green leaves shimmered softly in the dark, catching and reflecting the ambient light of the spray.

There was no sky above it. No beam of sun. Yet the tree glowed with a soft, persistent radiance.

Chuckles took a slow step forward. "That's impossible."

Sarah turned her head to look at him. "What?"

"That." He pointed a trembling finger toward the island. "Trees need sunlight."

Casey let out a heavy sigh behind them. "Magic."

"Yes, obviously magic," Chuckles shot back, looking over his shoulder. "But magic isn't an explanation!"

"It is in this world." Casey grunted.

Chuckles looked deeply offended. "That's a terrible attitude toward magical botany."

Sarah's mouth curved into a faint, fleeting smile. Chuckles was too busy glaring at Casey to notice it.

They began their descent. The ancient builders had carved a narrow, treacherous path directly into the cavern wall, though wide sections had collapsed into the lake long ago. In places, the party had to tread carefully across natural stone shelves slick with icy spray.

Their storm lamps and torches felt absurdly tiny against the cavern's overwhelming darkness. Sometimes they passed directly beneath towering waterfalls where the wind pressure threatened to snuff their torches out entirely. Other times they walked along ledges hidden behind the falling water, where the translucent curtain formed a shimmering screen between them and the rest of the vast cavern.

Chuckles stopped behind one of those roaring water curtains.

For a breathless moment, the world beyond the falling water looked entirely distorted. The distant torches of the party became blurred orange stars, and the great glowing tree shimmered like an enchanted relic behind the glass.

Sarah waited several paces ahead on the trail, her silhouette framed by the golden lamplight. "You coming?"

Chuckles looked back at her, his eyes wide with unshielded wonder. "Yeah." He broke into a soft, breathless smile. "This place is incredible."

Sarah looked toward the glowing cavern, then turned her eyes back to his face. "Yeah," she said gently.

There were no monsters lurking in the shadows. No assassins, no traps, no dragons. Just the eternal sound of water and the rhythmic crunch of their boots. For a few quiet minutes, it felt as though they were the first two people ever to step foot in the world.

Eventually, the narrow path opened onto a broad stone platform beside the subterranean lake before continuing straight into another man-made hallway carved directly out of the mountain's core.

They stepped into the high-arched corridor, and the thunderous roar of the waterfalls instantly dropped into a muted, hollow echo.

They continued downward, slowly pulling ahead until the footfalls of the others faded into the roar of the water behind them. The deeper they descended into the heart of the mountain, the warmer the air became. Moss carpeted the ancient stones, and strange, pale flowers bloomed beside the water's edge. Tiny, bioluminescent insects glimmered under the rocks, vanishing the moment the light swept over them.

Sarah raised her storm lamp high, her eyes narrowing. Something glinted in the beam. A micro-thin line of silver dust was slowly drifting down from a hairline fracture in the stone ceiling.

She froze. "Wait."

Chuckles came to a stop beside her shoulder. "What is it?"

Sarah lowered her lamp, scanning the floor. Beneath the light dusting of moss, the cobblestones were laid in a suspiciously regular, unnaturally raised grid.

Her hand shot out toward his arm. "Don't—"

CLICK.

The heavy stone beneath Chuckles' right boot sank half an inch into the floor.

Chuckles froze, staring down at his foot. "Oh."

Sarah's eyes widened. "Don't move!"

The color drained from Chuckles' face instantly. "I'm not moving. I am entirely, completely stationary."

Sarah dropped to one knee beside him, her fingers carefully probing the moss around the edges of the plate. "Okay, good news. You are still alive. Bad news: I don't know what mechanism triggers when you lift your foot."

"Great," Chuckles squeaked, his voice pitching high. "I really hope it's not poisoned darts. Or slashing blades. And I'd really prefer no spears either—"

Before he could finish the thought, a series of hidden brass vents hissed open along the baseboards of the corridor walls. A dense, pale cloud of silver dust exploded into the passage with a pressurized hiss. Before either of them could react or draw a breath, the thick, grey powder swallowed them whole.

Sarah instinctively pulled her heavy cloak over her nose and mouth, coughing violently, but a thick layer of the silver dust had already settled across her hair, her bare shoulders, and her face.

From further back down the passage, Casey's muffled shout echoed off the stone. "What the hell was that?"

"Stay back!" Sarah yelled, her voice raw. "Do not enter the hall!"

The oncoming footsteps of the party ground to a sudden halt.

Chuckles stumbled backward off the pressure plate, waving his arms blindly through the shimmering silver haze. "Sarah?"

She looked down at her cloak. The silver powder wasn't just sitting on the fabric—it was clinging to it, sparkling like a violent, chemical frost. A sharp, stinging heat began to prickle across her exposed cheeks and neck. Sarah lunged forward, her hand clamping around his wrist like a vise. "Water!"

"What?"

"We need water. Now!"

Sarah unbuckled her cloak and ripped the heavy fabric from her shoulders, hurling it to the stone floor. "Get it off! Take your clothes off!"

"What?"

"We need water. Now."

Chuckles stared at her through the haze, his eyes wide. "Okay!" He began frantically fumbling with the brass clasps of his heavy wool cloak.

Sarah didn't wait. She seized him by the wrist and started pulling him in front of the others.

"Sarah, where are we going?" Chuckles gasped, trying to keep his footing as she pulled him toward the roaring edge of the lake.

"Water."

She dragged him straight to the base of the nearest roaring waterfall, where icy torrents smashed into the rock shelf.

"That looks incredibly cold."

Sarah was already pulling him toward it, without hesitation, she started to strip herself from the leather armor with terrifying speed. She unbuckled her leather cuirass and let it drop into the mud, pulling her linen shirt off in one swift motion. "Strip!"

"Sarah—"

She kept stripping herself from her layers. Chuckles staring in wide-eyed panic as she stripped down to her thin undergarments.

“Sarah, I'm getting a very strong *‘this is a terrible idea’* feeling.”

“Chuckles, there is no time!” She tried to shout over the sound of the water and once she saw that Chuckles was still paralyzed by embarrassment and confusion, she stepped in close, grabbed the collar of his tunic, and forcefully ripped it over his head, leaving him in only his trousers and linen undershirt. Once they reached the undergarments Sarah pulled him directly beneath the waterfall.

The icy mountain water slammed into them like a physical blow.

Chuckles shrieked at the top of his lungs. “OH GOD!”

Sarah gasped sharply as the freezing torrent struck her bare shoulders, driving the air right out of her lungs, but she refused to budge an inch. “Hold still!”

“I'm trying! I just didn't realize the waterfall was going to be made of flying knives!” Chuckles bellowed, shaking violently under the pressure.

Sarah grabbed his shoulders, forcefully turning him into the falling stream. “Wash your hair! Get it off your skin!”

Chuckles ducked his head beneath the roaring cascade, scrubbing wildly at his scalp. Sarah reached up, her wet fingers tangling in his hair to help scrub the shimmering silver residue free, while Chuckles reached out with trembling hands to help unfasten her sodden braid, washing the glowing powder from her blonde locks. The silver dust streamed off their bodies in shimmering cloudy rivers, swirling down into the dark depths of the lake below.

For several agonizing seconds, neither of them could speak. They stood locked together beneath the crushing spray—soaked to the bone, freezing, and gasping for air.

Sarah reached up, wiping the blinding water from Chuckles' eyes. “Any powder left?” she asked, Chuckles blinked through the torrent, staring down at her. “No.”

Her trembling fingers swept through his hair one last time to be certain. “Good... good.”

“Sarah... you're freezing,” Chuckles managed to say, his jaw clicking wildly.

“So are you.”

“You're shivering.”

“So are you.”

“That doesn't make it better.”

A tiny, breathless laugh almost escaped her lips. But then Sarah noticed something wrong.

Chuckles' face wasn't pale from the icy water. His cheeks were flushed—a deep, unnatural crimson that was spreading rapidly down his neck to see her almost naked. “Chuckles?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you feel strange?”

Chuckles squinted at her, his breathing turning shallow and fast. “A little.”

“How?”

He looked directly into her eyes, his pupils completely dilated. “Hot.”

Sarah's expression hardened into pure alarm. She reached out and pressed her wet palm against his forehead. His skin felt like a burning stove.

“You are hot,” Chuckles remarked softly, reaching out with a clumsy, heavy hand to touch her arm.

Her own skin was burning just as fiercely from the inside out, a scalding fever roaring through her veins to counter the icy air.

“Damn it,” Sarah hissed.

“What?”

“The powder.”

They stumbled backward out of the pounding waterfall onto the slick stone ledge just as the rest of the party came sprinting around the bend. Chuckles looked back toward the ruined passage. Just when the others caught up.

Bryce stopped short, taking in the sight of the two of them—dripping wet, half-dressed, shivering violently, and flushed bright red. “What happened over there?” Chuckles pointed a trembling finger at Sarah. “She kidnapped me.”

“Sorry.” She said softly to Chuckles and pulled water out of her hair..

“You two look terrible,” said Bryce.

Sarah completely ignored him, clutching her arms around her chest as a violent shudder wracked her frame. “Casey... we need to find out what that powder was.”

Casey was already crouching several yards back near Sarah’s discarded, dust-covered cloak, sniffing the air cautiously. “Already checked. It's silverium.”

“Is it poison?!” Chuckles shrieked, his teeth chattering so hard his words slurped together. “That would have been extremely useful information to have before the freezing knife-water!”

“Sarah did the right thing,” Bryce said gravely, stepping forward. “If that was pure silverium, leaving it on dry skin would have chewed right through your flesh in minutes.”

Sarah looked over at Chuckles. Suddenly, the biting cold of the cavern didn't seem to matter anymore. Because Chuckles was burning up, his skin radiating intense heat, and her own core felt as if it were being consumed by fire.

Casey stripped off his heavy fur-lined cloak and draped it tightly around Sarah’s bare shoulders, while Morgan quickly unclasped his own cloak and wrapped it over Chuckles. The hem barely reached Chuckles' knees, but he clutched the warm wool around himself with clattering teeth.

“Thank you,” Chuckles whimpered.

Casey took command in an instant, his voice barking out orders that echoed across the cavern walls. "Get the bear hides and the extra blankets from the packs! Spread them out now! We need to lay them down."

He led them quickly towards the hallway. Chuckles and Sarah leaned heavily on each other as they walked, every step becoming an agonizing ordeal as their bodies alternated wildly between At a safe distance from the trap, Casey smoothed down the thick bear hides while Morgan spread out every wool blanket they possessed.

"Lie down. Together," Casey instructed sternly.

Chuckles and Sarah collapsed onto the thick furs. Alexis immediately stepped in, tucking them beneath a heavy mountain of blankets, pulling the layers up to their chins. In the background, Bryce was already gathering dry driftwood from the shore, effortlessly sparking a roaring fire to heat the damp air.

Alexis adjusted the furs around Chuckles' burning neck, her face drawn with worry.

Casey turned to Morgan, Bryce, and Alexis, his expression dark and grim. "Silverium enters through the pores. It burns through the bloodstream, cooking the organs alive if it isn't neutralized internally. Sarah's quick thinking saved their skin, but the residue is in their blood now."

"If the ancient builders put a silverium trap in these corridors, they had to keep *galwan root* nearby as a safety counter-measure for themselves," Casey explained, looking out toward the dark, overgrown edges of the subterranean lake.

"Casey, these caverns are thousands of years old," Morgan pointed out nervously. "How do you know there's still galwan root growing here?"

Casey's dark eyes fixed on the pale, sweat-slicked faces of Chuckles and Sarah huddled together beneath the furs.

"We better pray there is," Casey said quietly. "Or we lose them both."

Without another word, the party scattered into the gloom, searching frantically along the mossy banks for the life-saving root.

Left alone beneath the mountain of bear hides, Chuckles and Sarah lay pressed tightly together. The violent chills made them tremble, but where their bodies touched, a deep, unbearable heat radiated between them.

Chuckles shifted weakly, his dazed brown eyes finding hers in the dim firelight.

Sarah reached out beneath the heavy blankets, her warm, feverish fingers finding him and locking firmly into place. Neither of them let go.

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Sarah was burning.

Her skin felt impossibly hot beneath the mountain of heavy wool blankets and thick bear hides, yet every time a stray subterranean breeze rustled through the cavern, a sharp, shivering chill ran straight through her bones.

She hated this feeling. She hated the heavy, suffocating weakness pinning her to the stone floor, hated the uncertain clock ticking on the silverium poison pulsing through her veins, and hated most of all that every time she tried to force herself up, the great cavern tilted violently around her.

Then Chuckles moved beside her beneath the furs.

Just a tiny, hesitant shift, but it was enough for his broad shoulder to brush against hers. Sarah closed her eyes, her long lashes resting against her flushed skin. For any other person, her warrior instincts would have demanded she pull away, erect a wall, maintain distance.

She didn't move an inch.

Beside her, his breathing was uneven—ragged, shallow gasps occasionally interrupted by a quiet, wheezing cough. His dark hair was damp with sweat, curling in untamable strands against his fevered forehead.

He looked utterly terrible.

Sarah almost smiled despite the gnawing ache in her limbs. *He always talks too much*, she thought fondly. Even now. Especially now, when his mind was drifting in the haze of

silverium fire.

Through his cracked, dry lips came a steady, disjointed stream of feverish murmurs. He was mumbling about a house. A cozy hearth with crackling oak logs. Shelves upon shelves of ancient leather-bound books. Quiet, lazy mornings. Fresh breakfast on a sunlit wooden table. A life.

Sarah's fever made the words feel distant, floating across her consciousness like a dream wrapped in golden light.

She shifted closer to him beneath the layers. Just enough that her shoulder rested properly against his, sharing the burden of the heat. The temperature radiating between them was almost unbearable—two fires merging in the dark—and yet... she liked it. She liked knowing he was right there beside her. She liked the solid, comforting weight of his arm pressed next to hers. She liked the rhythmic, gentle cadence of his breathing against the quiet roar of the cavern.

For a woman who had spent her entire life being taught that needing another person was a fatal weakness, the sudden realization should have terrified her.

Instead, wrapped in his warmth, it made her feel profoundly, unconditionally safe.

Chuckles stirred weakly beside her, his eyelids fluttering open. "Sarah?" he rasped softly.

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay?"

She opened her eyes, looking sideways into his face. He was gazing back at her through half-closed, glassy eyes.

"You're burning up," he whispered, his brow furrowing with dazed concern.

"So are you."

"Oh." He paused, his fevered brain slowly trying to process the information. "That's... probably bad."

Sarah let out a soft, breathy sound that was almost a laugh. "Probably."

He shifted a fraction closer, as if instinctively seeking her presence in the cold dark. Neither of them seemed to notice—or care—how little space remained between them beneath the hides.

Without overthinking it, Sarah lifted her head slightly and rested it gently against the crook of his shoulder.

Chuckles went completely, utterly still, his entire posture locking up in shock. Minutes went by that felt like hours.

"You okay?" she murmured into the soft linen of his shirt.

"Yes," he squeaked softly.

"Really?"

"Yes." A long, quiet pause stretched between them, filled only by the crackle of Bryce's campfire nearby. "Because... you're very close."

Sarah closed her eyes again, letting her cheek press into his warmth. "I know."

Chuckles swallowed hard, his throat moving against her forehead. "Okay." He sounded immensely nervous, his pulse hammering against his collarbone.

Sarah smiled faintly in the dark. "You can stop thinking, Chuckles."

"I don't know how," he admitted with a quiet, raspy chuckle.

"I know."

Beneath the heavy wool, his hand fumbled blindly until his fingers brushed against hers. This time, Sarah didn't wait or hesitate. She turned her palm and took his hand deliberately, weaving her warm, slender fingers through his.

The silverium fever blurred the jagged edges of the underground cavern once more. The damp stone walls seemed to fade away into mist, and the flickering campfire morphed into a warm, golden hearth. For a brief, breathtaking moment, Sarah imagined that they weren't poisoned at all. They weren't hiding beneath a mountain from traps and

monsters. They were somewhere else entirely. Somewhere warm. Somewhere safe.

There was a modest wooden house. A fireplace roaring softly in the corner. Stacks of books. Jagged mountain peaks visible through a rain-dappled window. And Chuckles right beside her, holding her hand.

She opened her eyes. The dark cavern ceiling was still there. The sound of distant falling water still echoed through the gloom.

But she didn't let go of his hand. "Have some rest."

And when Chuckles' heavy eyelids finally closed and he drifted back into a fitful sleep, Sarah remained awake for a little while longer—not because she feared the fever burning in her blood, but because she wasn't quite ready to lose the feeling of having him beside her.

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The cavern had become strangely, suffocatingly quiet.

The echoing footsteps of the rest of the party had long since faded into the subterranean gloom as they ventured deeper into the ancient ruins in search of the elusive galwan root. Left behind beneath the crumbling stone archway, Chuckles and Sarah lay side by side on the thick bear pelts. Their twin storm lamps had been set on either side of the makeshift bed, casting a fragile, amber circle of light across the rough cavern floor and painting long shadows against the damp rock walls.

Chuckles lay flat on his back, staring up into the dark abyss of the high ceiling. His fever had not completely overwhelmed him yet, but the edges of the world were already softening, making the rough stone above feel distant and slightly surreal, like a half-remembered dream.

A violent, involuntary tremor suddenly wracked Chuckles' frame, rattling his teeth together so hard his jaw throbbed. Beneath his drenched linen undershirt, his skin felt like the lining of a forge, pouring out a slick, feverish sweat that immediately turned into needles of biting ice against the cavern's damp draft. His heart hammered in his ears—a frantic, ragged pulse—while inside his chest, his lungs felt as though they were inhaling

molten lead with every shallow gasp for air.

Beside him, Sarah lay wrapped in her heavy leather cloak, her posture still carrying the shadow of her warrior's vigilance even as the fever simmered in her blood.

She was fighting her own agonizing war against her failing body. The Amazon's hyper-disciplined pulse was wildly out of control, racing against her ribs like a trapped beast. Beads of cold sweat pooled along her brow and rolled slowly down the arch of her throat, gathering at her collarbone where the frigid air bit like frost. Yet beneath her heavy cloak, her blood felt as though it were literally boiling—a terrifying, radiant heat that turned every exhale into a ghost of hot steam against the dark.

For several long minutes, neither of them spoke. The only sound was the faint, steady drip of water somewhere in the distant darkness and the rhythmic rise and fall of their breathing.

Then Chuckles slowly turned his head toward her on the pelt. "Sarah?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask you something?"

Sarah opened her blue eyes slowly, staring straight up at the archway. "You're going to anyway."

A faint, tired smile tugged at Chuckles' lips. "Fair." He hesitated for a heartbeat, gathering his thoughts through the haze in his mind. "What's your home like?"

Sarah's expression shifted, an almost imperceptible tightening around her brow. "My home?"

"Yeah. Where the Amazons live."

She turned her gaze toward the cavern ceiling, her eyes softening as memory pulled her back across hundreds of leagues. "The Amazon lands are high in the western mountains."

"That's not really what I meant," Chuckles muttered softly.

She glanced back over at him, her pulse catching slightly at how earnestly he was looking at her.

Chuckles shrugged beneath his cloak, his shoulders lifting weakly. "I know what mountains are like. I want to know what it's like there."

Sarah was silent for a long moment. For a second, Chuckles thought she was going to shut down, to retreat behind the impenetrable wall of discipline she had built around herself since childhood.

Instead, her breath hitched softly, and she spoke into the quiet amber light. "There are three great settlements."

Chuckles smiled warmly. "See? We're making progress."

Sarah pointedly ignored the banter, though the faintest curve touched her mouth. "The largest is built around an old mountain fortress. The walls are carved directly into the living granite. Most of the houses are grey stone."

"Sounds cold."

"It is."

"Do you have fires?"

"Of course."

"Food?"

"Chuckles," she said warningly, though her tone lacked any real edge.

"I'm establishing the operational basics," he insisted, a dazed glint in his eyes.

A tiny, genuine smile broke through her guard. "Yes. We have food."

"What kind?"

"Meat. Root vegetables. Mountain berries. Wild herbs. Fish when the rivers aren't frozen solid."

Chuckles let out a soft sigh of relief. "Okay. So you're not secretly living on raw wolf meat."

"No."

"Good. I was worried."

Sarah's eyes softened completely, taking in the absurd, sweet concern written across his flushed face. "There are massive training grounds in the center of the settlement. Every Amazon trains there."

"Every day?"

"Every day."

"Even children?"

"Especially children," Sarah said, her voice dropping an octave as her mind drifted back to her own youth—to cold dawn air, bruised knuckles, and heavy iron practice swords.

Chuckles frowned slightly, shifting a bit to his side to face her better. "What do they teach them?"

Sarah's gaze drifted away, fixing on the steady flame inside the nearby storm lamp. "Strength. Discipline. Hunting. Combat. Survival." She paused, her breath catching in her throat. "And control."

"Control of what?"

Sarah didn't answer immediately. The firelight flickered across the sharp, elegant lines of her face. "Everything."

Chuckles understood instantly, reading the quiet pain beneath her words. "Emotions?"

She gave a single, faint nod. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because emotions make you hesitate," Sarah said softly, reciting the ancient axiom as if it were etched into her bones. "And in battle, hesitation is death."

"Sometimes," Chuckles gently countered.

"Sometimes is enough."

Another wave of intense, violent chills swept through Sarah, a bone-deep tremor that she couldn't suppress no matter how tightly she locked her jaw. Her muscles seized in sudden spasms, shivering so hard that the heavy bear pelts above them rustled against the stone floor. Beneath the furs, the physical contrast between them was suffocating: where their bare arms brushed, the heat was blinding, a scalding burn of pure silverium poison; where the draft snuck in, ice seemed to settle directly into her bones.

Chuckles pulled his arm free from his cloak, resting his head on his hand as he looked at her. "Who taught you that?"

Sarah's posture hardened slightly at the memory. "The Matriarch."

"What did she teach you?"

Sarah was quiet for a long, heavy moment, the subterranean chill settling deep into the space between them. "That an Amazon cannot afford to belong to someone else."

Chuckles' brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Because duty comes first."

"Always?"

"Always."

He considered that, processing the harsh, unyielding reality of the world that had formed her. "So... you can't have a relationship?"

Sarah looked back at him, meeting his steady gaze. "We aren't forbidden from feeling."

"That sounds like a technicality."

"It is."

Chuckles offered a weak, melancholic smile. "So you *can* fall in love."

Sarah's eyes flickered, a sudden, electric intensity passing between them in the dim light. "Some of us have."

"But?"

"Duty comes first."

"Meaning?"

"You leave," Sarah whispered, the word heavy and absolute. "You walk away."

The faint smile vanished completely from Chuckles' face. "Even if you love them?"

Sarah turned her eyes away, looking into the surrounding darkness. "Especially then."

The stark, painful truth sat heavily between them, stifling the quiet air. Chuckles lay motionless, feeling the full, crushing weight of the code she lived by.

Then, his voice softening into a gentle, hesitant whisper, he asked: "But there are cases, right?"

Sarah looked back at him, her blue eyes wide in the amber glow. "There are always cases."

"Cases where they don't leave?"

"Sometimes."

Sarah almost smiled—a sad, quiet expression that reached her eyes. "You don't understand."

"No," Chuckles murmured softly, reaching out an inch closer. "I really don't."

She studied his earnest, open face for a long moment, taking in the complete absence of malice or cynicism in him. Then she said, barely above a whisper: "Neither did I."

The quiet confession hung in the air, echoing louder than the distant waterfalls. That silenced him completely.

The silverium fever was beginning to creep deeper now, a heavy, hot tide rising in his veins. The poison surged again, a cruel, scorching wave that flushed Chuckles' skin dark

crimson and sent jagged spots of light dancing across his vision. Sweat soaked through his hair, dripping from his temples and stinging his glassy eyes. He felt as though he were roasting from the inside out, his skin radiating so much sheer thermal heat that a faint mist rose off his bare shoulders into the subterranean chill, yet a terrifying, icy numbness crept steadily up his numb fingers and toes, stealing his breath in shallow, desperate wheezes.

Chuckles blinked several times, his vision swimming as the amber light of the storm lamps broadened and blurred. The stone ceiling above them seemed to warp and shift like dark silk.

He closed his eyes, letting his head sink back onto the pelt.

"Don't waste your energy Chuckles," she said gently.

His lips moved, murmuring something so soft and slurred she couldn't quite catch the words.

"What?" she whispered, leaning closer.

He forced one eye open, looking at her with total, unshielded trust. "I said... don't let me die."

Sarah's entire expression softened, the formidable warrior surrendering completely to the woman holding his hand. She reached out beneath the cloak, her warm fingers wrapping tightly around his.

Her fingers were shaking with a residual, feverish shudder, but her grip was like forged iron. Even as the freezing subterranean air crept back under the edge of the pelts and cold sweat pooled on their brows, her burning palm remained locked tightly against his, anchoring him against the suffocating tide.

"I won't," she promised softly into the quiet cavern.

His eyes closed again, his breathing steadying as he surrendered to the darkness. And this time, side by side beneath the ancient stone archway, neither of them noticed when the fever finally pulled them both into sleep.

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"Sarah?" his voice rasped out, thin and trembling once he awoke. Chuckles lay on his back beneath the mountain of furs, staring up into the dark, oppressive vastness of the cavern ceiling. The jagged stones above them seemed to shift and warp, rippling like dark water under a phantom wind. He knew, intellectually, that the mountain wasn't moving, but the silverium fever made the line between reality and hallucination blur until he could have sworn tiny, glittering stars were piercing through the ancient rock face.

Her eyelashes fluttered, her blue eyes opening slowly. "I'm here."

"Are we dying?"

Sarah stared at him through half-lowered eyelids, her breath puffing faintly in the chill air. "No."

"You don't know that," Chuckles rasped out, his voice cracking.

A long pause stretched between them.

"No," she admitted softly.

Sarah's pulse hammered violently against her throat, but it wasn't just the silverium burning in her blood. It was the sudden, suffocating knot of terror tightening around her heart at the sight of him so frail. Every Amazon precept she had ever been taught screamed at her to maintain distance, to steel herself against tragedy, to treat him as a comrade-in-arms whose loss was a calculated operational risk. But as she looked into his wide, dazed eyes, those ironclad rules crumbled into ash. She hesitated, her hand trembling beneath the furs, terrified of what touching him meant, terrified of admitting even to herself how deeply he had dismantled her defenses.

He swallowed hard, his throat as dry as ash. "I mean it. What if this is it?" His breathing quickened into ragged, shallow gasps, panic surging through his blood. "What if Casey doesn't find the herbs? What if the fever gets worse? What if we—"

"Chuckles, don't freak out."

He kept spiraling, words tumbling out in a frantic blur. "What if we fall asleep and—"

Sarah turned her head toward him. Even flushed with silverium fever and pinned under heavy hides, she still possessed that unmistakable, formidable presence—calm, razor-focused, and unyielding. It was the same look she wore before stepping into a tavern full of hostile sellswords.

Only now, looking closely into her eyes, Chuckles saw something raw flickering underneath the warrior's focus. Fear. Not for herself, but for him.

"What if they're too late? What if this is one of those ancient magical diseases where you don't even realize your organs are shutting down until—"

Before he could finish, Sarah reached out from beneath the cloak and gently pressed her warm index finger against his dry lips.

"Shh." her look went soft.

For a breathless moment, neither of them moved. The rest of the world faded into background hum.

The panic died in his throat. He went dead silent, his wide, glassy eyes locking onto hers. Then Chuckles' wide, anxious eyes softened, the panic draining into quiet honesty.

"I'm scared."

Sarah didn't pull her hand away. Her finger remained pressed gently against his mouth.

"I know."

He reached up with a clumsy, heavy hand and gently took her wrist, moving her hand away from his face, but he didn't let go of her fingers. "I don't want to die."

"You won't," she said firmly.

"But you don't know that."

"No."

"Sarah..."

Her mind wrestled fiercely against the instinct to pull him close. *An Amazon does not belong to anyone. An Amazon does not let her heart dictate her survival.* The rigid mantras echoed in her head, cold and familiar, yet every fiber of her being rebelled against them. She hesitated for an agonizing beat, staring at his dry lips, terrified that acknowledging this overwhelming connection would make her weak. But the raw vulnerability in his eyes broke down her last remaining shield. When she shifted across the furs and leaned in to rest her forehead against his, it felt like an act of utter defiance against everything she was raised to be—and she did it anyway.

Using what tiny fraction of strength she had left, Sarah shifted closer across the furs, closing the gap between them until her forehead rested gently against his. The heat radiating between their brows was intense, a shared fire in the freezing dark.

"Then don't think about it," she whispered, her breath brushing his cheek.

Chuckles closed his eyes, leaning into the touch. "I was just starting to get good at this."

"At what?"

"Being alive," he hushed softly.

A tiny, genuine smile touched Sarah's lips, warming her pale face. "You are."

He breathed out a weak, raspy laugh that shook his chest. "Good. Because I have plans."

Sarah opened her eyes, looking into his face from inches away. "What... plans?"

Chuckles hesitated, his cheeks flushing even darker beneath the fever. For a moment, he looked thoroughly embarrassed. "Nothing."

"Chuckles."

"I don't want to say it."

"Why?"

"Because if I say it out loud, it sounds... ridiculous."

Sarah waited silently, her forehead still pressed to his, her hand holding his firmly.

He stared down at their joined hands beneath the pelts. "I want a house."

Sarah blinked slowly, her blue eyes soft. "A house?"

"Yeah."

"What kind?"

A faint, fond smile touched the corners of Chuckles' mouth as he pictured it. "Small. Somewhere near the mountains. One with a stone fireplace. And maybe a library."

"A library?"

"A big one," he emphasized weakly. "With shelves up to the ceiling."

The small smile on Sarah's face grew just a little wider, breaking through her exhaustion.

Chuckles looked into her eyes, his tone dropping into a quiet, breathless murmur. "And maybe... maybe someone could live there with me. It's only forever, not long at all."

Sarah didn't answer right away. She simply held his gaze in the dim firelight.

He swallowed hard, suddenly self-conscious. "Someone who likes mountains."

A sharp, electric panic flared through Sarah's chest. *A house. A life. Together.* The concepts were alien, dangerous, utterly forbidden by the code she lived by. Everything inside her trained warrior mind urged her to pull back, to remind him of her duty, to state bluntly that Amazons always walked away. She opened her mouth to deliver a cold, rational denial, but the words died in her throat. She couldn't say it. She couldn't bring herself to destroy the fragile, beautiful hope shining in his eyes—or face the terrifying truth blooming in her own heart. So she compromised with her discipline, hiding her overwhelming longing behind a single, cautious word, fiercely refusing to give her heart permission to admit how desperately she wanted it.

Her thumb began to move slowly, tenderly across his knuckles beneath the furs.

"Maybe."

Chuckles smiled—a soft, completely contented expression that smoothed the tension from his face.

Then the crushing weight of the silverium fever surged once more, draining the last of his physical strength. His heavy eyelids fluttered shut, his breathing steadying into a slow, deep rhythm as he drifted back into sleep.

Sarah remained lying beside him, her forehead resting against his temple, her fingers tightly holding his hand in the dark.

Even now, with his breathing steadying into sleep, Sarah's mind fought a desperate, retreating battle against her own feelings. She tried to convince herself it was just the fever playing tricks on her mind—a temporary madness brought on by poison, darkness, and physical exhaustion. She tried to assure herself that once Casey returned with the galwan root and cured them, she would rebuild her walls, put her armor back on, and return to her duty. But as her thumb traced the warm knuckles of his hand, the denial tasted hollow. She was terrified—not of the dungeon, nor the silverium, but of the realization that she was already completely, helplessly lost in him.

And for the first time in her life, the thought of a quiet little house near the mountains did not sound like a weakness to be purged by discipline.

It sounded like home. It sounded like somewhere she desperately wanted to go.

For several long minutes, only the amber flames of the campfire danced against the shadows of the cave. Then Sarah closed her eyes too, letting the darkness take her.

And somewhere in the sweet, quiet space between waking and dreaming, Sarah found herself standing in that sunlit valley beside the little house as well—not questioning how it had gotten there, not asking whether an Amazon warrior was allowed to have a home, but simply looking at the mountain smoke curling into the sky.

With Chuckles standing right beside her.

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"But Mom," Luke grumbled, slumping heavily back against his pillow with a sharp sigh of disappointment. "Dad told us already that you left the mountain and Bryce was made into an undead!"

"Yes, my dear, that he did," Alexis replied, her voice smooth and measured as she smoothed the patchwork quilt over his chest. A quiet, knowing smile lingered on her lips. "But as I said before, your father has a habit of leaving out the most crucial details."

From his armchair near the crackling hearth, Morgan crossed his arms tightly over his tunic, his brow furrowing into an exaggerated, theatrical scowl. "Are you going to retell *all* of this?"

"No, honey," Alexis said smoothly, without even looking over her shoulder. "Not all of it. Only the most important parts."

Morgan pouted, sinking an inch lower into his chair and staring at the embers. "I don't believe you."

Beside her brother, Leila bounced excitedly on her knees, the heavy wool blanket rustling around her shoulders as she clapped her hands together. "Yeeey! It will be a kissing story!"

Morgan sat up straight, pointing a stern, heroic forefinger toward the bed. "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Alexis chuckled softly, stepping away from the bedside and gliding across the warm rug toward his chair. She leaned down, cupping his jaw with one slender hand, and kissed him softly on the lips—a slow, lingering gesture that instantly silenced his indignance.

"Hush now," she whispered gently against his mouth, her dark eyes sparkling with affectionate mischief. "Let me do the talking."

Both boys immediately groaned in unison, Luke dramatically pulling his blanket over his eyes to shield himself from the romantic display.

Despite their vocal objections, a comfortable quiet settled back over the dimly lit bedroom as Alexis turned back toward the hearth. The amber glow of the fire painted long, dancing shadows across the wooden walls as she drew in a slow breath, gathering the threads of the tale once more...

Chapter 9: Chapter 9: Out Of The Darkness

CHAPTER 9 - OUT OF THE DARKNESS

The fever had blurred the fragile boundaries between waking and dreaming into a disorienting continuum.

Chuckles wasn't sure how long he had been lying awake beneath the mountain of heavy furs. The subterranean cavern had devolved into a world composed entirely of flickering shadows and distant, muffled thunder. Somewhere far beyond the dark stone archway, the underground waterfall crashed into the black lake, spraying a fine, icy mist into the draft. The cool air brushed against his overheated skin for a fleeting second before the silverium fire burning in his blood scorched it away again.

Beside him, Sarah lay cradled beneath the pelts, her breathing shallow, rapid, and uneven.

Chuckles slowly shifted his head on the pelt, the simple motion making the dark cavern spin around him.

"Sarah?" his voice rasped out, thin and dry.

Her long eyelashes fluttered, and her blue eyes opened slowly, fixing on his face. For a long, quiet moment, she simply looked at him.

There was something fundamentally different in her expression—something Chuckles had never seen before. The guarded Amazon warrior was gone. The calculating strategist who measured every room for exits and threats had vanished entirely.

Left in her place was simply Sarah. Exhausted. Frightened. Wonderfully, painfully human.

"You're awake," she whispered, her voice low and raspy.

"Unfortunately," Chuckles grumbled softly.

The faintest corner of her mouth twitched upward. "That wasn't funny."

"I know," he murmured, closing his eyes for a second. "That's how you know I'm actually sick."

Sarah closed her eyes, letting out a soft, shuddering breath against the pelt. Chuckles watched her carefully, taking in the unnatural flush of her skin and the dark shadows beneath her eyes.

"Are you hurting?"

"A little."

"A little?"

She cracked one eye open, flashing a weak glint of her old sharp spirit. "Don't start."

"I wasn't starting anything. I was just—"

"Chuckles."

He stopped mid-sentence, letting out a quiet sigh. "Right."

For a long while, they simply lay side by side in the fragile amber ring of the storm lamps. Neither had the physical strength to move, their bodies locked in an uneasy truce with the poison in their veins.

Beneath the heavy wool blanket, Sarah's fingers slowly drifted across the rough stone floor until they found the edge of the blanket between them. Her skin was hot to the touch.

"Do you remember what you said?" she asked softly into the quiet.

Chuckles frowned slightly, his dazed mind sluggishly sifting through the fevered haze of the past few hours. "About what?"

"Your house."

His expression softened instantly, a flicker of warmth breaking through the exhaustion on his face. "Oh."

The silverium had made everything feel distant, like watching a stage play from across a dark room, but he remembered that vision vividly.

“A little house,” he muttered, his gaze drifting up to the ancient stone ceiling. “Near the mountains.”

Another long silence descended between them, heavy with an unspoken weight. Sarah stared at his profile, her clear blue eyes taking in every line of his flushed face, and the dark stone walls of the cavern seemed to dissolve, replaced by a vision so vivid, so breathtakingly beautiful, that it took what little breath she had left.

She was standing on a wide wooden porch, bathed in the soft, honeyed light of a quiet mountain sunset. The air was crisp and sweet, smelling of pine, wild clover, and sun-warmed earth. In the distance, majestic mountain peaks wore crowns of violet and gold, towering over rolling green pastures where cattle grazed peacefully near a winding stream.

For the first time in her life, Sarah felt no weight on her shoulders. The relentless cadence of Amazon drills, the Matriarch’s stern commands, the unbreakable chain of duty, and the rigid code that forbade her heart from belonging to another—all of it was gone. She wasn't a weapon. She wasn't a princess either. She was entirely, gloriously free. Free to breathe. Free to feel. Free to love without shame or hesitation.

She turned from the sunset and stepped across the threshold, entering the deep, radiant warmth of the little house. A fire crackled softly in a stone hearth, casting a golden glow over timber walls lined with endless rows of books.

And there stood Chuckles.

He turned toward her with a soft, affectionate smile, his eyes filled with a tenderness so complete it made her heart swell to bursting. An overwhelming wave of intoxicating joy and profound, unfiltered love swept through her—a feeling so intense, so absolute, that it shook her to her core. *This* was where she belonged. Not to a fortress of stone and discipline, but here. In his warmth. In his life.

Then, reality crashed back with brutal, violent force.

An agonizing spasm of silverium fever wracked her frame, shattering the golden sunset. The cold stone ceiling slammed back into view. The poison was cooking their organs,

stealing their breath, dragging them toward the dark.

A sudden, suffocating panic seized Sarah's chest. *We are dying*. The realization was a dagger to her soul. She had just discovered what it meant to truly live, to belong, to be free—and the mountain was going to swallow it whole before it could even begin.

Chuckles reached out a trembling hand beneath the furs, his brow furrowing with dazed, heart-wrenching concern. "Sarah... are you okay?"

Something broke in her and tears of desperation pooled in her eyes. She couldn't play the stoic warrior anymore. The fear of losing him, of losing the porch, the sunset, and the life they were meant to share shattered her last remaining defense.

She leaned toward him, her voice cracking as she whispered the raw, heartbreaking truth against his cheek:

"I don't want to leave."

She didn't mean the cave. She meant the sunshine. The porch. The freedom. *Him*.

Chuckles blinked, his dazed eyes soft with confusion. "Sarah—"

She didn't let him finish.

Gathering every last shred of strength in her breaking body, Sarah defied the poison dragging her into the abyss. She forced herself upright, her arms trembling violently as she lunged forward.

She cupped his flushed face in her burning hands and pulled him to her, pressing her lips to his in a fierce, desperate, breathtakingly passionate kiss.

It was an absolute surrender. Every Amazon rule of cold mandate of their duty, and every wall she had built around her heart since childhood shattered into dust. She kissed him as if she could physically anchor her soul to his, pouring all her newfound freedom, her overwhelming love, and her furious refusal to die into the touch.

Chuckles froze for only a fraction of a second before his arms wrapped securely around her waist, pulling her flush against his chest and kissing her back with the same desperate, breathless devotion.

When she finally pulled back, gasping for air, the monumental effort claimed its terrifying price. The world spun black, her vision frayed at the edges, and the last of her physical strength vanished in an instant. With half-opened eyes, she collapsed limply against Chuckles' chest, her body surrendered to total unconsciousness.

“Sarah!” Chuckles gasped frantically, his arms tightening around her slumping, fever-hot form. “Sarah, stay with me—please!”

“GUYS!”

A boisterous, echoing roar shattered the cavern quiet, bouncing off the ancient stone arches.

“I FOUND IT! I ACTUALLY FOUND IT!”

Morgan came barreling around the stone bend, caked in black cave mud from head to toe, waving a knobby, pale silver root triumphantly above his head like a conqueror. Casey emerged right behind him, wiping mud from his brow with an expression of intense, heavy relief.

Chuckles clutched Sarah tightly against his chest, tears cutting pale tracks through the soot on his cheeks as he rocked her limp body, looking up at his companions with a raw, desperate plea in his voice.

“Hurry,” Chuckles choked out, his voice breaking. “Please... hurry!”

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Morgan dropped to his knees beside them on the damp stone, sending a spray of dark cave mud across the edge of the pelts. The pale, knobby galwan root was still clutched tightly in his filthy, trembling hand.

Casey was already moving with efficiency. He reached down, his heavy leather gloves grasping Chuckles by the shoulders. “Put her down.”

Chuckles shook his head wildly, clutching Sarah’s limp, fever-hot body tighter against his chest. “No.”

“Chuckles.”

“She just—” His voice broke violently, tears flowing through sweat on his face. “She just collapsed!”

“I know,” Casey said. He crouched beside the young wizard with a metallic clank of his armored bulk, his dark eyes hard but undeniably gentle beneath his heavy brow. “If you keep holding her like that, we can't treat her. Let her lie flat.”

For an agonizing second, Chuckles didn't move, every instinct screaming at him to shield her from the cold cavern. But as his strength waned, he reluctantly, tenderly lowered Sarah back down onto the bear hides, supporting her head until her blonde hair spilled across the pelts. This was the moment Alexis arrived from her search for the root.

Casey turned immediately toward Morgan. “The root?”

“Galwan. Freshly pulled,” Morgan panted, holding up the strangely twisted and pale root. “I found it beneath the eastern ledge, growing straight through a crack in the ancient stone.”

“Good.”

Casey drew his long dagger in one fluid motion.

Morgan blinked, taking a small step back. “You're going to stab it?”

“No.”

“Okay. Good. Because that sounded wildly counterproductive—”

Before Morgan could finish, Casey drove the steel tip of the blade down into the stone floor beside an altar that kept them watching silently. Long ago there might have been a statue of some sort there, but only the feet stood there and nothing else above the ankles. Neither of them knew for what deity the altar stood, whether it was for a good one or something evil, but the altar had a small basin inside its base.

SPARK.

The sharp flash from the metal impact briefly illuminated a series of faint, etchings carved into the flagstones beneath the moss and dust before the altar.

Morgan leaned closer, squinting into the gloom. "What are those?"

Casey wiped a streak of grime from the stone with his gauntlet, looking down. "Old alchemical symbols."

From where he knelt beside Sarah, Chuckles lifted his head. Despite the blinding haze of the silverium fever making his vision swim, his wizard's mind locked onto the geometric patterns instantly. His eyes focused with sudden, sharp clarity.

"Not alchemical," Chuckles rasped out, his voice thin and dry.

Casey glanced over at him. "What?"

"Runic," Chuckles whispered, swallowing painfully as he forced his heavy body upright onto his hands and knees with his last powers. "It's a purification circle."

"This was here the whole time?" gasped Morgan.

Casey studied the interlocking arcs and sharpened runes. "You can read it?"

"I think so."

"You *think*?"

Chuckles gave him an utterly exhausted, bloodshot look. "I've been exposed to an Older Scroll, and that tells me I can read it."

Casey grunted, stepping back. "Fine. Read."

Chuckles dragged himself closer to the edge of the floor, his trembling fingers hovering mere inches above the ancient carvings without touching them. He traced the lines in the air, his lips moving as he decoded the archaic arcane syntax.

"The circle isn't meant to brew an antidote," Chuckles muttered, his brow furrowing in realization.

Morgan frowned, holding the root awkwardly. "Then what does it do?"

"It separates." Chuckles pointed a pale finger along the glowing silver line. "Silverium binds directly to the blood and tissue. Galwan root doesn't destroy the toxin on contact—it acts as a magnet. It pulls the poison out."

Casey's eyes sharpened as he caught the logic. "And the runic circle contains it so it doesn't re-absorb."

"Exactly."

Morgan looked from the raw root in his mud-stained hand down to the carvings on the floor. "So we only need to activate the circle? Those who made the trap also gave an escape from it; that doesn't make sense."

"It makes sense if you step in your own trap by accident," chimed in Alexis.

Chuckles gave a feeble nod. "Let's hope the magic in the stone still works."

Casey looked down at the ancient, weathered granite beneath their boots. "There's only one way to find out."

Without another word, Casey began scraping away centuries of dried dirt and lichen from the runes using the dull edge of his glove. Beside him, Morgan carefully placed the knobby galwan root directly in the center of the carved circle.

"Water?" Morgan asked quickly.

Casey pointed toward the small, clear trickling stream feeding into the rock shelf. "Fresh stream water. Not from the lake."

Morgan snatched up a shallow stone basin and hurried off into the darkness.

Left beside the circle, Chuckles turned back toward Sarah. She hadn't moved an inch. Her sharp, beautiful features were frighteningly pale beneath the unnatural crimson flush of the fever, and her breathing was far too quiet and ragged.

He reached out, his warm, shaking fingers stroking her face and temple.

"Come on, Sarah," he whispered into the quiet, his voice cracking with raw emotion. His fingers moved to her hand and closed tightly around hers, holding fast. "Stay with me."

Silence answered him, save for the distant rumble of the waterfall. Chuckles swallowed hard, another stray tear slipping down his cheek. "You don't get to kiss me like that... and then just leave."

Casey glanced over at the young wizard from across the circle. For once, the stern, hardened knight said absolutely nothing, his expression softened by quiet respect.

Morgan sprinted back, carrying the stone basin brim-full of crystal-clear mountain water. He dropped to his knees and set it squarely in the middle of the runic circle.

“Root,” Casey demanded.

Morgan handed the pale silver root over. Casey placed it between two flat, heavy granite stones and leaned his full weight onto them. The galwan root broke apart with a sharp, metallic crunch, releasing a dense, silvery-white powder that spilled straight into the clear water.

Chuckles watched the powder swirl into the basin. “That doesn't look particularly reassuring.”

“Shut up,” Casey grunted, using a clean wooden peg to stir the mixture in slow, rhythmic circles.

The liquid began to react.

At first, it was only a faint, ethereal blue shimmer beneath the surface of the water, like moonlight caught in ice. But then, one by one, the carved runes on the floor answered with a shimmering light blue glow. A soft, pulsing light kindled within the stone grooves and a low, humming vibration passed through the floor, vibrating up through their knees and teeth.

Morgan hastily scrambled back a foot. “Uh... Casey?”

“I see it,” Casey muttered, his hands steady as he backed away from the circle.

The water inside the stone basin began to rotate on its own—slowly at first, then picking up speed. The dissolved silver powder reformed into a bright, luminous spiral, transforming the basin into a miniature, swirling whirlpool of pale blue light.

Chuckles felt a distinct, familiar tug at the very edge of his consciousness.

It was magic. Pure and ancient magic.

It was nothing like the wild, volatile surge that usually erupted from his fingertips when he lost control of his spells. This was structured. Patient. Deep. It felt as though the very bones of the mountain were breathing through the silver veins in the stone.

"I can help," Chuckles whispered, his eyes locked on the glowing basin.

Casey shot him a sharp look. "You can barely sit upright."

"I don't need to stand to channel," Chuckles insisted weakly.

Disregarding the burning agony in his limbs, Chuckles leaned forward and pressed his open, trembling palm directly onto the outer edge of the runic circle.

Instantly, the blue lines flared with brilliant red fire.

Chuckles gasped, his eyes widening as the arcane network connected to his own magical core. "I can feel it..."

"Feel what?" Morgan asked anxiously.

"The silverium leaving," Chuckles breathed.

An answer echoed from somewhere deep beneath the subterranean floor—a profound, rhythmic pulse of raw power.

Suddenly, Sarah's body arched sharply off the pelts.

Chuckles whirled around. "Sarah!"

Beneath the pale skin of her neck, arms, and collarbones, thin, shimmering veins of silver light suddenly materialized, tracing her circulatory system like a web of flowing and glowing lightning.

Morgan froze, his eyes wide with horror. "Is that supposed to happen?!"

Casey didn't answer, his hand resting tightly on his sword pommel as he watched the phenomenon unfold. Alexis stared with bewildered eyes at how the silverium poison was moving. The galwan root and the runic circle were creating a powerful magical vacuum, drawing the heavy metal toxin directly toward the surface of her skin.

Sarah let out a choked, ragged breath, her head rolling back against the furs.

Chuckles gripped her hand with all the strength he had left. “Stay with me, Sarah! Fight it!”

The glowing silver lines beneath her skin brightened to a blinding intensity. Then, with a sharp, shuddering exhale, a tiny, ethereal cloud of fine silver mist escaped from between her lips.

The mist drifted upward into the cold cavern air, caught in the invisible pull of the purification circle. The glowing runes snapped toward it, trapping the vapor in mid-air. The mist twisted, condensed, and was pulled straight down into the swirling blue water of the basin, where it vanished with a faint hiss.

Casey’s eyes narrowed into sharp slits. “It’s working.”

Another shallow breath parted Sarah’s lips, and another ribbon of shimmering silver mist escaped her chest, drawn directly into the basin. Then another, thicker plume followed.

Beside her, Chuckles felt the same invisible force pulling through his own body. The agonizing fire in his chest began to cool, replaced by a strange, tingling numbness as the silverium in his own blood was siphoned into the air, drifting across the short distance into the runic trap.

His vision swam. The oppressive heat of the fever suddenly turned icy cold.

“Casey...” Chuckles wheezed, his knuckles white as he held Sarah’s hand.

Casey’s eyes fixed on the runes. “Keep the circle stable, wizard.”

Chuckles closed his eyes, his mind reeling. In the darkness behind his eyelids, Sarah’s voice from earlier echoed clearly through his memory: *Focus on my face.*

He opened his eyes again.

Sarah lay right before him—pale, fragile, but no longer burning with that unnatural crimson heat. He focused entirely on her face. Not on the hum of the ancient magic beneath his palm. Not on his own failing strength. Not on the terrifying darkness threatening to pull him under.

Just Sarah.

The erratic flickers of the runic circle instantly stabilized into a steady, brilliant blue glow. The swirling water in the basin spun faster, hungrily drinking down the final, thin wisps of silver vapor escaping from both of their lungs.

Morgan watched in spellbound silence as the very last strand of silver light was pulled from Sarah's lips and swallowed by the glowing liquid.

In another second, the same happened to Chuckles. Then, with a suddenness that made them almost jump, the subterranean cavern went completely, utterly still.

The blinding glow faded from the stone runes, leaving only faint silver lines in the flagstones. The whirlpool inside the basin slowed to a standstill, leaving behind a murky, glowing blue potion.

Casey immediately took off his glove and leaned over to press two fingers firmly against the side of Sarah's neck.

A long, agonizing second stretched into two.

"She has a pulse," Casey announced, his deep voice dropping into a register of profound relief. "Steady and strong."

Chuckles let out a long, ragged gasp, his shoulders slumping so hard he nearly collapsed flat onto his face. "Is she..."

"She's alive."

The words hit Chuckles harder than any physical blow ever could. A profound, overwhelming wave of relief crashed over him, washing away the last remnants of panic. He bowed his head low, pressing his forehead against their joined hands, silent tears of pure gratitude spilling onto the bear hides, and with that, in a single motion, he collapsed beside her.

Morgan let out a loud, shuddering breath of awe and terror that seemed to have been holding for the last ten minutes. "Chuckles?"

Casey looked down at the cloudy, glowing basin in his hands. "Leave him to rest."

He pointed a heavy finger toward Sarah. "The circle neutralized and drew out the volatile silverium from their bloodstream. It stopped the poison from cooking their organs." He lifted the basin carefully. "Now we still have to get the refined galwan potion into their systems to heal the internal damage and flush out what's left."

Morgan stared at the glowing liquid, blinking. "Oh."

Casey turned his gaze onto Chuckles. "Alexis, Morgan, help me cook!"

Alexis took a deep breath: "To cook what exactly?"

Casey placed his hand firmly on her shoulder before he blurted. "Broth."

Morgan let out a heavy sigh: "Right, broth. Alexis, help me with the cured meat."

Casey looked over at Morgan. "I'll start to refine the potion over the fire, cut up some vegetables too. "

Morgan nodded quickly, following the order of the knight.

"Where the hell is Bryce?" murmured Casey under his breath.

Behind them, in the quiet amber light of the single remaining storm lamp, Sarah's slender fingers twitched against the bear hide.

Slowly, weakly, her warm fingers moved, curling around Chuckles' hand and squeezing his palm.

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The soup's aroma was strangely metallic, and its colors faded.

"Maybe we need some paprika; that would enhance the colors."

"They are fine, Morgan," said Alexis, planting her hand over his.

"Here goes nothing," grunted Casey, but not a second went by; he ordered: "You two help me with them. Hold their heads up, and keep their mouth open, so they drink it and not suffocate."

Alexis and Morgen helped as instructed, and Casey poured some of the broth.

For seconds, nothing spectacular happened. Agonising minutes went by when, suddenly, almost exactly at the same time, Sarah and Chuckles let out a faint sigh. Their bodies twitched once and let every bit of tension out of their system and lay peacefully beside each other.

Casey silently nodded to their success. “Now they need some rest. You two make sure the fire is going and feed them some broth occasionally.”

“What will you do in the meantime?” asked Alexis.

“I’ll search for Bryce before that idiot wakes up a Balrog or does something similarly stupid, grunted Casey and hurled himself up. With sharp movement, he placed his gloves back on and took a storm lamp before vanishing into the darkness beyond the light’s circle.

Chuckles and Sarah, still with sweat on their foreheads and pale fragility, lay beside each other in a state of what seemed to Morgan as a peaceful sleep.

Alexis took his hand in hers and whispered softly.

“I wonder if they will remember what happened here today...”

“How so?” asked Morgan.

“Never mind. Just musing around,” said Alexis, but deep down she knew these moments would define their journey more than they seemed.

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The fire had burned down to a low, pulsating bed of glowing amber coals by the time Sarah finally stirred.

At first, there was only a tiny, involuntary movement of her fingers against the coarse fur. Then came a deep, slow intake of air—clean and cold, without the scorching rasp of silverium poison tearing through her throat.

Her heavy eyelids fluttered before opening halfway, the world returning in fragmented, sensory pieces: the radiating warmth of the dying fire, the rough, familiar texture of the bear hide beneath her cheek, and the subterranean thunder of falling water echoing

somewhere deep in the dark.

And warmth beside her.

Sarah slowly turned her head on the pelt.

Chuckles was still asleep.

His face looked strangely, wonderfully peaceful now. The terrible crimson flush had vanished from his skin, leaving him pale and exhausted, his dark hair damp with drying sweat and stuck across his forehead. His breathing was deep, rhythmic, and quiet. One of his broad hands rested open on the hides between them.

Her hand was still wrapped securely around his, her slender fingers laced through his knuckles.

Sarah stared down at their joined hands in the dim amber light.

For several long, motionless seconds, she didn't breathe.

Then, like a floodgate opening, the memories came rushing back with terrifying, vivid clarity.

The silverium trap. The agonizing heat in her blood. The vision of the sunlit porch, the rolling pastures, and the little house near the mountains. Her own raw, desperate voice whispering against his skin: *I don't want to leave.*

And then—the kiss.

The fierce, unfiltered, breathtakingly desperate way she had pulled him to her. The absolute surrender of her Amazon discipline. The way his arms had wrapped around her waist, anchoring her in the dark.

Her eyes widened slightly, her pulse giving a sudden, violent thump against her ribs.

Sarah immediately looked away, a hot wave of pure, unadulterated embarrassment washing over her face that had nothing to do with fever.

Carefully, almost reluctantly, she began to loosen her fingers from his grip.

One finger at a time.

She disengaged her hand with painful slowness, terrified of waking him, terrified of having to look into his eyes and explain the madness that had overtaken her. Yet when her last fingertip slipped free from his palm, she hesitated. Her hand hovered in the chilly air above his skin, trembling faintly.

Chuckles made a soft, content sound in his sleep, his fingers twitching as if searching for the warmth he had just lost.

Sarah's eyes flicked sharply back to his face. For one dangerous, terrifying moment, every instinct inside her screamed to reach out and take his hand again, to slide back into the safe, sunlit dream of the porch.

Instead, she forced her jaw to lock. She pulled her arm beneath her blanket and deliberately shifted away from him.

Not far. Just enough.

A few inches of empty, cold bear hide appeared between them. Then another.

Sarah slowly pushed herself upright onto one elbow. Her body protested immediately—her muscles stiff, her head throbbing with residual exhaustion. She froze, closing her eyes and breathing through the spike of pain until the lingering dizziness passed.

The Amazon warrior was returning.

Not all at once, but piece by piece, drawing the shattered fragments of her discipline back around her core like a cloak of iron.

She straightened her back, pulling her posture into a rigid, perfect alignment. She pulled her shoulders back into place. She raised both hands and smoothed her tangled blonde hair away from her face, binding her thoughts behind the cold, familiar walls of duty as she started to braid her hair. With every twist and turn, the vulnerable, terrified woman who had been lying helpless beneath the hides, begging for a life she wasn't allowed to have, began disappearing beneath the invisible armor of her training.

Beside her, Chuckles opened one heavy eye.

He didn't move. He simply lay there beneath Morgan's short cloak, watching her silently in the firelight.

Sarah noticed the shift in his breathing instantly. She didn't turn her head, her gaze fixed straight ahead on the dark cavern floor.

"What?" she asked quietly.

His voice was rough, dry as parchment from sleep. "Nothing."

She narrowed her eyes, turning her head to shoot him a sharp look. "You're staring."

"I was checking whether you were still alive," Chuckles rasped, struggling to pull himself up onto an elbow.

"I am."

"Good."

Chuckles let out a long breath and closed his eyes again, his head sinking back into the pelt.

Sarah looked at his peaceful, exhausted profile for another quiet moment, her chest aching with an unnamable feeling she fiercely suppressed.

Then she stood up.

Slowly, carefully, testing her balance against the cool stone floor.

A few paces away, Morgan had done a surprisingly meticulous job with her gear. Her leather cuirass and gauntlets had been wiped completely free of cave mud and any residue and set out to dry near the embers. Her linen tunic and trousers were folded neatly beside them, still somewhat damp from the waterfall, but clean and wearable.

Sarah stepped behind a makeshift screen formed by two cloaks draped over a low rock shelf and changed out of her undergarments.

When she emerged from behind the cloaks a few minutes later, she looked almost entirely like herself again.

The Amazon warrior was back. The woman who had marched into the depths of the mountain without a flicker of fear. The leather was still imperfectly dry, stiff against her shoulders, but the familiar, heavy weight of her armor seemed to settle something restless deep inside her soul.

She stepped over to where her gear lay. Morgan had even taken a damp cloth and polished the brass fittings on her vambraces until they gleamed softly in the firelight. Chuckles sat up with a dizzy head.

Sarah ran her thumb across the smooth metal. "Thank you," she said quietly into the silence of the cavern.

Morgan, who was sitting near the edge of the pit poking at the embers with a stick, looked up in surprise. "For what?"

She glanced briefly toward Chuckles, then back to Morgan. "For cleaning it."

Morgan broke into a bright, easy smile, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah. No problem at all; that's what squires are for."

Sarah gave him a single, formal nod.

Then her eyes shifted over to Chuckles.

He was sitting upright now, wrapped tightly in Morgan's cloak like a blanket, slowly chewing on a tough strip of dried beef he found in Casey's pack. He caught her looking.

A faint, slow smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

It wasn't his usual nervous, bumbling grin. It was something smaller. Warmer. Something that carried the quiet, shared secret of the porch and the purification circle.

Sarah's blue eyes lingered on his face for a full second, her breath catching softly in her throat. Then she looked away, hardening her expression as she stepped closer to where he sat.

Chuckles swallowed his bite of jerky, his dazed blue eyes tracking her movement. "Sarah?"

She stopped a pace away from his blanket. Her stern expression softened by an almost imperceptible fraction.

"Thank you."

Chuckles blinked, caught off guard. "For...?"

"For saving my life."

He stared up at her, a faint flush touching his neck.

Chuckles shrugged awkwardly, looking down at his hands wrapped around the dry meat.

"You saved mine too. In the waterfall."

Sarah looked down at him for a long, quiet moment, taking in the absolute lack of pretense in his voice.

"I know," she whispered.

There was something in the quiet depth of the way she said it that made Chuckles' heart give a sudden leap. He looked down at his jerky again, suddenly unable to meet her gaze without blushing.

Sarah turned away before he could see the faintest, softest smile touch the corners of her lips. She walked purposefully toward the far, quiet side of the cavern floor. There, beneath the looming shadow of the ancient stone wall, she lowered herself smoothly onto a flat, elevated section of rock.

She crossed her legs in the traditional martial pose. She placed her hands loosely on her knees, thumbs touching index fingers. She straightened her spine, pulling her chin up, and closed her eyes.

Chuckles watched her from across the fire.

Meditation, he thought. Of course. The Amazon way of tidying up the mind, of filing away inconvenient thoughts and putting every rogue emotion strictly back into its proper, ironbound place.

He took another bite of his dried beef.

Chewed.

Watched Sarah.

Chewed again.

Her breathing gradually grew slower, deeper, and perfectly controlled. The dancing amber light of the dying fire traced the sharp, elegant lines of her armor and cheekbones.

Chuckles' mouth curved into another faint, affectionate smile. He reached into his pouch and pulled out another piece of jerky.

Sarah's eyes remained firmly closed, her posture rigid as stone.

"You're staring again."

Chuckles nearly choked on his beef, coughing wildly into his fist. "I wasn't!"

"You were."

"I was... observing," he stammered, straightening his blanket with sudden, frantic energy.

"That's staring."

"It's a wizard thing," he argued weakly. "Arcane observation."

Sarah opened a single blue eye, fixing him with a dry, unblinking glare from across the cavern.

Chuckles offered her an entirely innocent, helpless smile around another bite of beef.

For half a second, the stern line of her mouth twitched, looking as though she might actually abandon her discipline and smile back.

Then the Amazon mask clicked smoothly back into place. Her eye closed.

"Eat your jerky, Chuckles."

Chuckles nodded solemnly, settling back against the stone shelf. "Yes, ma'am."

He leaned his head back, pulling the blanket higher over his chest.

And continued watching her anyway.

Sarah knew.

She simply chose not to say another word.

For now.

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Casey returned several minutes later, emerging quietly from the shadows with his storm lamp held low at his side. The dim yellow beam cut through the subterranean gloom, painting jagged patterns on the ancient walls.

Sarah's eyes snapped open instantly from her meditation.

Chuckles froze mid-chew, the half-eaten strip of jerky hovering an inch from his mouth.

Morgan looked up from his spot by the dying embers, his brow furrowing.

Casey paused at the edge of the firelight, his dark eyes scanning the cavern. "Bryce is gone."

Morgan frowned, lowering his stick. "Gone?"

"Couldn't find him," Casey said simply.

For a long, heavy moment, nobody said a word.

Chuckles slowly lowered the piece of jerky in his hand, a cold knot of dread replacing the lingering warmth of the galwan potion. *Of course*, he thought with a weary inward sigh. *Because five minutes of peace in an ancient subterranean ruin would be far too much to ask for.*

Sarah turned her head toward the pitch-black passage where Casey had disappeared earlier, her warrior's mind instantly mapping out the subterranean layout. "You checked the eastern tunnels?"

"All of them."

"The lower chambers?"

“Yes.”

Morgan looked at Alexis. Alexis looked back at Morgan, her dark eyes narrowing in quiet suspicion. Chuckles looked at Casey. Casey looked back at all three of them.

Nobody had a logical explanation. Bryce was undead, eccentric, and prone to wandering, but he rarely vanished without leaving some kind of ridiculous trail behind.

Then—

BOOOOOM.

The entire subterranean cavern shuddered violently.

The flagstones beneath their boots lurched upward, sending a sudden, sickening jolt straight up Chuckles’ spine. A thick curtain of ancient dust rained down from the dark ceiling, hissing as it hit the dying coals. The fire leaped violently in its pit, casting frantic, elongated shadows across the stone arches. Somewhere deep beneath the roots of the mountain, stone groaned against stone with the sound of a dying giant.

Sarah was on her feet in a fraction of a second. The residual weakness from the silverium fever flared in her knees, but her Amazon instincts completely overrode the pain as her fingers slammed around the shaft of her spear.

Chuckles nearly dropped his jerky, scrambling backward on the bear hides.

Casey’s hand flew to the pommel of his broadsword with a sharp, metallic rascal.

Morgan stared wide-eyed toward the dark tunnel passage. “What was—”

BOOOOOOOM.

This time, the sound didn't just rattle the rocks—it rolled through the catacombs like thunder trapped inside an iron box. The sheer acoustic force vibrated straight through Chuckles’ teeth.

A massive flock of subterranean bats erupted from a distant passage, screeching in a blind frenzy as they swarmed overhead. Morgan ducked instinctively, covering his head with his arms.

“Okay,” Morgan squeaked, his voice pitching high. “That's new.”

A silhouette suddenly materialized at the far end of the pitch-black corridor.

It was sprinting toward them at absolute, breakneck speed. Bryce burst into the flickering circle of firelight like a bat out of hell.

He was coated head-to-toe in a thick layer of grey stone dust. His usually neat hair was an absolute, chaotic mess standing on end. His polished broadsword was nowhere to be seen, and one sleeve of his tunic had been violently shredded nearly to the elbow.

He didn't slow down. He didn't offer any explanation. He didn't even bother to look at them. He simply charged straight through the middle of their campsite like a runaway siege engine.

“RUN, YOU FOOLS!”