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Darvok

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Cold and bitter, the wind blows south. Staring up at the cloud-covered sky, not a single star, the moon hides behind its ghastly shroud. Stoke the dying flame, curl closer, pull the blanket tight. *Gah, no help. Damn it, Dawn, where are you?*

Close behind, a noise, crunching. *Footsteps!?* No, hooves. *Another deer. Damn them, third one tonight. What prowls in the woods to drive them so?*

The wind howls and the fire crackles, but the cold bites deeper. More shuffling of hooves, restless sounds from a nervous steed. The birds squawk, but it's a distant tune; eyes to the horizon, east.

The birds, why they're out so early? Bah, damn crows! What feast stirs them from their slumber? Looking west, beyond the cliff below; there it is, my house. "My sweet Evey, dearest Evan. Three more days, then it's home again, just you wait. My relief arrives tomorrow."

Standing tall, stretching, staggering up upon the edge, looking over. *All clear.* Another self-report, more disciplined insomnia. Nothing but brush, and rock, and... *there, in the stream!*

A stump, a sack? No, it's a man. Markus! Watching him climb from the frigid water, he struggles to find his footing, so eager to run; from the woods behind, a rider comes charging, sword drawn.

Look up! *More crows. They're closer now.* Eyes squinting east, so dark. *There!* A shimmer, a glint, a growing silhouette, as if the forest itself marched down the mountainside; flowing, a river of darkness approaching, like a creature with a will its own. A wave, which would not break upon the rock face below and recede in peace, but had only one possible course; to turn westward, to ravage the soft timber frames and stacked stones of the village beyond.

Fire! The fires! Grabbing a smoldering branch, barely lit; singeing, burning, blistering. Thrusting at the first pyre, the tinder kindles. Running for the second, that damned witty ditty instinctively spilling forth, "One for riders, keep your calm, two for..." Stop, don't breathe! The flame dies. *Damn.* Drop it, back to the first; a fresh branch, on to the second pyre; now lit.

Evan, be strong. Avoid the fight, keep Evey safe. I'm coming.

Fumbling with the reins, cursing, "Stupid horse, stand still!" Unhooking bundles, one-handed; several sliding to the ground, an ominous thunk resounding. Turning the steed and mounting, seeing pyres bursting, both ablaze; fueling horseflesh to frenzy, "Now Marduke! Heeyaw!"

Off at a full gallop, covering the short stretch of earth. Looking back, signals aflame; hoping that the warning has not come too late. Now, only one thought consumes: *Evan, Evey!*

Down the twisted mountain trail, increasing speed, putting rider and mount at risk. The chance is taken, and years of riding coalesce, man and horse as one. A silent voice echoing: push

through the brush, here; your secret route, it's faster. Careful! Rocky, treacherous, slow down!
Damn reins. Damn hands, flesh still smoldering; an embedded ember taints the wind, choking every breath. The stream lies ahead. Wait! *Markus! That rider...*

Reining in to listen; silence, not a sound. That damned voice: An ambush could lie ahead; you must push on, for Evey, for Evan.

Around a bend, and there he is. Apparently dazed, in an ignorant bliss whilst rummaging through a dead man's bag, his back turned; a bloodied body lays motionless beside. Again it comes, thundering: Draw your sword, do not hesitate, charge! Swing fast, swing hard!

With galloping, thundering, daze-breaking hooves, the clash sings out, metal meeting metal, so shrill and sharp with blades shredding, sparking. The steeds come crashing together, the sheer force deafening; Marduke shouldering hard into the exposed flank, halfway unseating the other rider. Recoiling, landing swiftly, sword-arm swings through a well-practiced arc; the slash striking true, blood bursts free its captive veins. Breaking loose, reining around; looking on with blood-soaked blade held high, dripping. The rider falls, grasping at the air; he'll ride no more.

Dismounting by the stream, rinsing; the cold water soothing. Thirsting, there is no time to drink; back to the trail, the hard ride: no food, no water, no time; starts now. Hurling through groves and over creeks, crossing makeshift bridges, and traversing meadows riddled with ancient boulders and fresh rockslides; the wind shifts, foul and hot, smothering with smoke and ash, burning nose and throat. Gasping, panting, the great Marduke stumbles, falls and dies. Pressing onward afoot, clothes snag each branch in passing, damn sword bites with every step. Whilst losing cloak and arms for speed, the voice resounds again: for Evey, for Evan.

The ash thickens, daylight fades, and the skyline begins to dance with firelight. Heart pounding, chest heaving, ears troubled with muffled screams and frightened cries; ringing, crashing, the sounds of battle, of men still fighting. Drums! *Damn them and their drums!*

Climbing the ridgeline at the edge of home; dropping down, chest to the ground. Crawling forward, looking; the horror, sheer terror, all is lost. They were everywhere; no fighting, only slaughter. “Evey, Evan, where are you?” the sounds coming out were strange, diminished and muted beneath the howling chaos.

Watching, helpless, the swarm consumes the village; raping, pillaging, and torching, nothing escapes a Darvok raid. Midst the turmoil, a burning building collapses; dust rolls forth, a cloudy haze. Deep inside, a shape begins emerging; growing, approaching, the blackness of death rushing forth. Reaching to the hip for a hilt no longer there; now realizing a mistake already made. Crouching, peering between the tall stalks of grass; frozen stiff, awaiting the hell to come. The demon encroaches, darkness mixing with the haze of firelight; black death surrenders to shadow and from the bowels of death a young girl escapes, taking flight.

Standing, crying out, voice choked, “Over here, quick! Hide!”

She froze. *She must be terrified.* “Over here, quick!” The girl turned sideways and fled into the woods. Whilst scanning the wild scene beyond, the voice boomed out: There is nothing you can do. You cannot save them, but you can save the girl. *The girl? Who cares? Evey, Ev... Go! Now!*

Thrashing through the brush, the path lay clear, with broken twigs and dry half-crushed leaves tousled about. The foliage thins and the pursuit ends in a quiet, serene clearing; a small meadow, lush with short grass and wildflowers, a place normally tranquil and serene. Striding

out a few paces, crouching and scooping up the small, frail girl; her body convulsing as the tears flowed, her golden mane matting to her cheeks as she buries herself deep into the consoling arms.

“Everything will be okay. You’re safe with me now. I know a place nearby. We’ll stay there until it’s safe to come back.”

Finding the small shelter proved difficult in the fading light. Used for hunting, its walls were made from stacks of foliage being bound together, making it almost impossible to spot amongst the thick forest underbrush. Trudging carefully, whilst taking care not to leave too noticeable a path, finally having a chance to nestle down and rest. Kicking the fallen leaves into a pile to serve as a makeshift bed and laying the child down upon it; she had long since cried herself to sleep. The whole ordeal, a nightmare, an eternity of torture within a moment’s breadth, was over; the reality of it all still hidden by the dark of night.

Sunlight trickled through the foliage barricade like long prying fingers as the sun began its ascent over the eastern ridgeline. Booming, like a call from the dead: Wake up! Get moving!

A nudging sensation, pestering. “No, Marduke, settle, it’s too early.” *Damn horse.* Continuous, annoying, pushing away violently; a scream calls out. Eyes opening, still fatigued, barely focusing; golden maned, blue eyes glaring, clothed in red, with white trim. *Poor girl.* “It’s okay, I won’t hurt you.”

She relaxed but little, her hands clenched defiantly; she curled tight against the wall, having nowhere to run she held her fists up, a coiled snake ready to strike. Her clothes weren’t red, they were soaked, partially dried; they moved unnaturally, clumping, binding. “You’re safe with me, nothing will hurt you, I promise.”

What's your name, girl? What happened?"

"Ma.. Ma.." her voice failed her. Calm words soothing her fright, her hands drop. Her glare diminishing, replaced by tears, "It was terrible! They were everywhere, they killed everyone! They killed mom! And Dad, everyone" with the sobs choking her, she trailed off.

Reaching out, embracing the grief-struck child, "You'll be okay, they're gone now. We'll be alright." Holding tight until the tears stopped, "we have to go child. What's your name?"

Peering up, her watery eyes glinting, "Marlene"

"Marlene? That's beautiful." Stretching, the last day's exertions pulling and aching, "We have to go back."

"No! I'm not going back there! They're dead! All of them!" a fierce fire flushed through her face, burning from her eyes like the hot midday sun.

"Then stay here. I need to go find someone. I'll come back soon, I promise."

Smoke rising, several buildings still burning, smoldering. The butcher was the first, slumped over a trough; axe buried deep into his back. The cobbler's boys were next; lying by the well, motionless. Outside the armory lay the smith and his apprentice, sprawled. The same stench of dread and gore permeates from every hut and stall. The house stood, half burnt but empty. The tavern reeked, total chaos; tables turned, shattered pottery strewn about the floor. The hostesses body was slung across the counter, dress upturned, buttocks bared; clothes and body pinned in place with carving knives, marks of ravishing betrayed her pose. The kitchen lay bare, empty; the cooks were missing, as was the food. Only scraps and stale bread remained.

Damn it all, where are they? Shouting, panic setting in, “Evey, Evan, where are you?”

They were not amongst the dead, nor was there any living soul. The voice returned, commanding: They aren’t here. Do not be a fool, calm yourself. Take the food, arm yourself and go. Marlene is all alone.

Creeping through the brush, returning; in that tiny haven nests a golden egg. Pulling back the foliage, there she is, sleeping sound.

“Marlene”...

She stirs, “I have some bread, and I brought a clean tunic. It’s a boys’, sorry, all I could find in the armory.”

Breakfast was quiet, and far from satisfying. *They must have taken them both. But where?* North, toward Osgard. *Damn it, fucking slave trading scum.*

“Who’s Marduke?” the silence broke, Marlene’s voice a sweet reprieve.

“He’s my horse. Was, he was my horse. He died, bringing me here.” *I rode him to death. After all those years, I...no I had to, it wasn’t my fault.*

“He died bringing you here? To save me? Then I guess that makes him my hero, and so are you! Will you tell me about him?”

“Come, we must go. We’ll head north, to Osgard. Maybe we’ll find survivors there.”

“Please? Tell me everything!” she persisted.

“It’s a long walk, best to start at the beginning anyway. It was nine years ago when my father and I foaled him.”

It took three days to reach Osgard. The rations were meager, catching a fish the first night, a game bird snared the second, a small saving grace. Nearing the outskirts of town, a wretched, familiar scene unfolds. Smoke clings to the air, and smells of burnt flesh waft with the breeze; the bodies were being stacked on small pyres outside the city. The times had changed, the Darvok were no longer pillaging; now, they came to conquer.

Two guards at the gate, but neither made a move. Walking through, they gave no shout, no call to halt. Ahead, a stockade of scrap had been constructed. Inside, dozens awaited doom; battered, bruised, and bleeding. A gallows, where several lifeless figures hung; the crowd huddled near, Darvok encircled, forced to watch in horror. Pushing through to the front, finding a clear view as the axe fell and a head came rolling off the stage. Screams broke out and the crowd gasped, all were shocked and terrified. The executioner heaved his giant axe, watched the blood flow down its edge and laughed, cold and menacing.

Watching, helplessly, as the last four were pulled from the makeshift corral; two men, a woman, and a boy near twelve. Forced by whip to pull down the hanging corpses, and drag them to a wooden cart; topped it next with the headless man, and the boy was sent, whip chasing, to find the missing piece. Frozen, captivated by the scene, unable to move; the two men and woman noosed and hanged, the boy’s head and shoulders parted.

Fury raging, anger swelling; rushing forth, leaving Marlene to the crowd. Leaping onstage, blade drawn, lunging; driving deep into the heart of a cold man, justice takes a bite.

“Get him! Kill him! Shoot him!” the calls rang out. Arrows flew from the piers, and without protection, several found their target, piercing.

Looking out upon all those gathered, it was not Marlene’s golden mane that caught attention; behind her were two familiar faces. *There they are, my beautiful, my sweet. Live free, Evey, Evan. I love you.*