

Warm, soothing darkness. A comfortable bed worthy of a king. Safety beyond measure. All the things a sleeping man could wish for, if it wasn't: by force; under threat of death; concealed in humiliation. Whatever dignity the Khajiit had was eroded already, by hours of... well, the babying behavior he had grown almost numb to.

Every week was a bumpy ride, with each day ending the same. By now, it felt like he grew up past the diaper years many times over. Yet, he was still stuck with one pinned around his waist, made from sturdy, yet absorbent cloth. And it was wet, naturally, as that was where babies did their toilet visits. Despite his pleading to be released from his cloth confines, the Orcs still made sure all his business was done in them.

"Wished I stayed in Elswyr... or at least became a merchant... or didn't steal from them... or at least didn't knock on their door... or at least didn't steal from that prissy piece of royalty." He growled past the resin-stuffed, leather pacifier, which kept him quiet. That, and the fact his caretakers were rather insistent on a good night's sleep.

The scraping of leather on his claws reminded him of how sturdy their stuff was. Those leather mittens could hold a dragon's claw, in his opinion. Even the wood on his crib was strong enough to hold the grown tiger-like kitty, despite his body being in great shape by the diet he was provided. He gave it plenty of attempts to break out. Each was met with resistance, punishment, and reinforcement. They only got rid of the iron crib because he made such a racket with it.

He stretched and squirmed, unable to sleep very well in the tightly tucked sheets. A little freedom always does wonders for bedtime, and his little escapade of the day took away that privilege. One would think he'd learn, but this little kitten was no stranger to tomfoolery. Stealing was in his blood, even if it was the petty victory of uncuffing the mittens. Addendum: five seconds before getting caught.

His eyes, unwilling to sit still, noticed those sleeping shapes. Big, strong, bone-breakers in humanoid form. It was a miracle none of the Orcs broke his bones when handling him. Must be the motherly urges acting up. He grunted quietly, wondering when a real baby would show up. A thing like that would give him the chance to escape unnoticed, or so he wished.

"Why didn't I stay in Elswyr?" He snarled, kicking the wooden crib, which responded with a gentle sway. "Or at least out of the land of burly and violent. Could've stolen hundreds from those idiotic imperials. Or slime up to an elf somewhere, selling them 'exotic goods'. Merchants have it so easy!" He continued, only silenced when he heard the annoyed grunt of a surrogate parent. They didn't wake... but he had to stop pushing it, right now. Hindsight was a bitch, as he learned.

With the crib swaying and his anger spent, the striped kitty couldn't keep himself awake that well. Even the agitating need for a change seemed to lessen as the leather pacifier slowly gained motion as he started to nurse on it, distracting him quite well. He needed some calming down, just a moment to himself, even if it was such a humiliating moment. They weren't awake... they wouldn't know.

There was still plenty of time until the Orcs woke to take care of him, he knew better than to wake them up unless it was a dire emergency. Sighing through his nose, the Khajiit closed his eyes and thought back to the day he had first arrived at this stronghold.

A house, a plan, a fancy jewel and a thief. Truly, the most romantic story, were the thief hunting for wedding gifts on a moonlight night. No, this thief was merely interested in coin, to buy beds and stuffing for his gut. As such, it all seemed perfectly reasonable.

For the thief, it seemed reasonable. For the nobleman, awoken by the ruckus of a stirring table and shaking silverware, it was a call for a public execution. Or just some stockades, if he wanted to invest in future entertainment.

He himself figured he'd make a lovely corpse. Dashing stripes in orange and black, flowing over

his body like a woven gown. Yes, and those aerodynamic arms and legs, while adept in combat, could certainly perform a few acrobatics and persuasive hand-gestures. His legs, so springy, so alive, could easily propel him to the sky, with this footpads softening the landing into a ballerina hop.

His clothes did not lend well to his form, even the tail losing much splendor in the ragged attire. Leather, dusted by wear, robes torn by shortcuts and hasty retreats; there wasn't much greatness to be found in the thief, on a glance. Not to mention that hat, with holes cut so his ears could peek out and hear the noise. The dull beige just blended him into the forest, with his brightest stripes appearing like fungus on the bark.

Though, as much as this seemed back, it saved his life. The guards had lost him in the chase around the town, where he leaped a mighty spring over the wall. In their defense, heavy armor is impossible to climb in. And the forest roads, cobblestone and all, where a little flimsy for metal boots.

Not that he saved himself intentionally. He leaped another fence, tumbled and rolled down, ending up under a rock overhang, where his fur was muddied up quickly. His gloved paws reached to rub it out, lest he spend hours combing that out. While grooming his visage, he heard... passing guards. A weight of gold never stolen fell from his chest, that being considerable, as he sighed relief.

Picking himself out, he looked around. Safety was no guaranteed yet. Noblemen are known to hold a grudge, being so very picky on not sharing with the less wealthy. For a while, bounty hunters would come to skin him alive, while guards would enjoy pounding him unconscious. Ah, the horror of prejudice. Still, he needed to move. Preferably, in a direction perpendicular to the guards. They would return, eventually, in a straight line to the city. Moving parallel was suicide, either way. Thus, away from their path of return was the way to go!

In the middle of nowhere, but still surrounded by patrolled roads, he groaned to himself, holding himself up despite the ache that persisted in his legs, before his nose smelled something he liked most. Meat, civilization... wait he was trying to avoid that, wasn't he? However, it was that this smell drew his eye to a most pleasant place, it being an Orcish stronghold.

Orcs, the solitary chaps, were not known for manners or proper diplomacy, yet their unwillingness to share could prove a fine defense. What guard would risk the blunt side of a blade over finding a run-of-the-mill thief? What guard would even dare upset these men, who, in return for some humble land, kept bandits off the road and made their job easier. Even if they knew he was there, negotiating with Orcs over something they, the outsiders, wanted would resort to a duel in the first five seconds.

Then, he wondered how. Even if the self-sufficient Orcs would let him in, why even let him stay. He didn't need to hide for an hour, at the least a few days until the nobleman had enjoyed some other poor fellow's punishment or the antics of a rustic performer. If he had that necklace, he could pay for protection...

Of course, it struck him quick, perhaps to spin a little tale. Orcs were annoyed by non-Orcs or non-bloodkin, but a man worthy of pity that dragged a worthy fight on his tail could certainly warrant amnesty. Especially traders, who typically brought decorations and lavish tools of war that earned their right in.

With a skip in his step (which he quickly killed quickly for sake of appearances), he headed towards the large gate of the stronghold, until a guard asked him, with the kindness of the cold cliff-side he guarded, to stop and make himself locally extinct before the guard help him along. The Khajit had no tools, but a good lie befitted the catman well.

"Oh, great Orsimer, I merely seek a small, tiny audience with your chieftain. Truly, it wouldn't take more than a blink of his time." The off-skinned humanoid approached the bowing fur and nodded slowly.

"Really? Because you've wasted twice that much of MY time. And those hands just seem to itch

for some trouble.” With a quieted gulp and a fake, childish grimace, he assured guard he was with no intent to take anything worthwhile.

“Oh no, I had plenty... before. Not now, as you can see. Perhaps I would be more trustworthy with my cart and wagon, that I lost just nearby.” While the implication was thin, the other seemed to contract, first clenching around a slender blade.

“Implying we don't tidy our woods? Not to mention most merchants keep a fancy look. You know, to give false impressions.” The other insisted, holding that humming blade ever closer. Orcs did not usually use one handed tools, but this one just reeked of a most foul enchantment.

“Not really... it... it was a bit away, that way! Beyond the river, where those selfish Nords leave the rabble to sort things out themselves.” The Orc chuckled, the Khajiit seemed at tears, but his worries were ungrounded. The sword was relieved from more precarious placements, and sheathed with an unhealthy rasp.

“It would be best for the locals to leave it all to us.” He answered, spitting upon the floor to show how careless he was. “But tell me, where there many? Or are you as squishy as you look?”

“At least a dozen, I swear.” He insisted, already starting to peer into the encampment. “Armed by years of robbery. Certainly no match for yourself, but my guards were just Imperials and Bosmer, more worth their lungs than their sword.” The Orc let out another hearty chuckle. The Khajiit was certainly bribing his way in now, with a string of words that amused and struck confidence. The Orc smelled a fight, already aching to head over with a patrol, just to start swinging, given the chieftain allowed. But why believe him when he could just have the Khajiit do the talking.

“Head in, furball. BUT, keep your hands in your pockets. If I see one loose hand, I'll loosen it even further.”

The wrought iron gate was levied up, just enough to the Khajiit could squirm under. Certainly not the place he wanted to be in, yet it already struck more homely than any dungeon. Busy it was, too! Enough pots to hide in, plenty of steel to take and hide behind.

Every Orc his eye caught seemed absorbed by a single duty. There was a smell of burning coal, ground herbs and damp laundry. Yes, a very isolated place, where no guard would peek without the king's sword in his back. If he could just stay inside most of the time, not even the sneaky bounty hunter would notice him before getting caught.

It occurred that he wasn't THAT far yet. The chieftain needed a stern talking to. A good pair of kitten eyes, maybe a little tale of blood and heroism, something to get Orcish sympathy. Or just lay out a few good skills so they'd just put him to work and never look back. Anything goes when your neck's on the block.

The chieftain's house was... the antithesis of modest. Whoever killed the last got what equated to a mansion, and what a mansion. It occupied at least a third of the camp, larger than at least two thirds of the buildings together. Many wives inside, of course. Only the chieftain held the right of marriage, to propagate the strongest Orc blood, and thus took full 'advantage' of that.

On that note, they seemed restless. The women around the camp were busy, yes, but still seemed distracted. Something was missing, yet he could not guess what. All he knew was that he needed to get inside and spin a lovely tapestry of lies that no dim Orc could see through. Then, once the hunters stopped knocking on the door, he'd go where the wind took him. Hopeless as it seemed an hour ago, it almost seemed too easy now!

Inside that impressive longhouse was the chieftain, as is to be expected. Him, and a herd of women. Him, and a herd of women, and a hefty bit of bounty. Sharp tools, beaten armor, the kind of things a dead man carries after meeting the local neighborhood Orc while mugging a bystander.

Not to mention that thick air. Heavy with warm, delicate aromas or caught and spiced meats, the sign of a giving cook, the slight breeze of fresh booze. A table sprawled out, decorated with masterwork

carvings in mahogany, truly a table fit for a king's king. On top of which, a bloodied rug, for decorations. Though judging by it's hygienic disadvantages, it was likely part of the latest coup, kept to scare off potential duels.

When ogling the others with his shifty eyes, he felt rather wimpy. They were tall, burly, built; even the women could easily toss his scrawny form over the walls. Especially with the chieftain, who was more mountain than man, or a volcano with how heavy he breathed, smoke from his pipe exhaling from his nose in an art of showmanship.

He never really felt... fluffy. His tiger-like stripes and sleek feline form always added that hint of athlete, manly thievery. Or perhaps the slick merchant who sells at triple price and buys for free, represented by his naturally smooth fur. Or maybe just a charming fellow, since his colors were quite streamlined and lively! But with such tall and less furry fellows, he felt small... soft... squishy... fluffy. Kinda like a teddy bear, but alive... and himself. It made him nervous, but heeded that cool! That sleek, dashing cool, else he'd end up on that table for dinner. He shook off his jittery, grabby fingers, cracking his knuckles to add a little cool, and took forward.

The chieftain was hard to get around. He sat in his chair like a bull, sturdy in his seat but ready to leap. Not mentioning the hand resting right on the butt of a light, scorched hammer, which his bare arms could fling all the way across the room to nail any sneaky kitties. His armor was impregnable, made in firm, burly, bulbous forms, accentuating his already rounded muscles and flowing posture. That fierce, fiery hair, red like a burning village, dragging attention away from the coldest blue stare the Khajiit ever saw.

His metal boot tapped, slowly, carefully, tauntingly. Though it was more a thud, a heavy hit, than a tap. His patience wore thin as he ordered his women to give him room, lest he hit and sterile the wrong individual with his rough knuckles. Yes, the chieftain earned his place more than any noble could ever claim. And any who thought they could convince him otherwise would meet those extra sharp teeth that stuck out like sore, sharp thumbs.

The Khajiit approached, slowly and carefully, trying to remain harmless and unassuming. Such imposing figure was best approached carefully, like one lines up the attempt at a picked pocket. Luckily, the room wasn't too dark, with many braziers and candlesticks making it easy to spot folds in the carpet and uncleaned bones, lest he trip and startled anyone.

"G-good day, great and almighty chieftain of this stout and formidable estate. I have only a humble request, one that would sooner insult your presence than honor it, but in my current condition, I have no other choice but to plea for your great hammer. I was taken by bandits, unaware, who took the lives of my guards and made off with much merchandise. Well armed, they were, skilled and sharp like the fangs of a vampire. I would sooner bet them werebears than mere men!" He said, catching a bit of speed and breath, as he made a humiliating bow.

"I merely ask, in all humility, that your grandness can provide a meager protection, if only for a day or two, until this horrid risk is cleared and resolved. I am a mere merchant, unable to fight them off, would they like to try my life. Your men, no, just your presence, would scare death into their hearts." He asked, peeking up from his bow.

"I... WE do not deal with outsiders. You are nothing but trouble, but not of the kind my men would be entertained with. The last thing I want in MY stronghold is outsiders!" He argued, his voice seeming to shake the entire building as he growled. "Give me a reason to care!"

"Well..." He gulped, unable to hold his cool against such fierce rage. His legs felt like butter, sticks of melting butter. "Keep this Khajiit, if only as bait! Such fierce forces would likely carry fine tools for your warriors, and a challenge for any near tactics you may wish to try." He continued, his ears flattened out as fear and stress overtook. Would he rather face the Orc in dialogue, or the hunters in combat.

"A young little runt like you can only be good for bait. Are you even old enough to run a

caravan?" The brutish Orc snarled, crossing his arms, a terrible sign for the doomed kitty cat. But, like any sad looking kitty cat, he got the attention of the main wife, the first, or just the most lavishly dressed. She sneaked up on the larger Orc and whispered many words about her life into his ear. A few recommendations. The cat's feline ears could catch a few scraps.

"So young... a little too young to know any better... unrest around the camp... consider it from both sides." She insisted, her voice just as gravelly as the male. Yet her dress was silk, refined, nothing alike the others. Perhaps she had seen more of the world, or merely wanted to distinguish herself with many sparkly accessories and articles, which her figure showed off like a painting shows its colors. Taking just a handful of her goods would fetch hundreds on the market!

"Gah! Leave!" The Orc snarled, pointing down to the door. "Guard, bring him to the blacksmith and keep him there. My wives are acting up, and this furball is getting on my nerves." Even his guard, the well armed woman in steel, seemed to quiver at his voice alone. The tone and stature just made it worse. He was twice as big standing up, and thus the guard quickly pushed the Khajiit outside, to the blacksmith.

The steeled guard pressed him down onto a crutch by the blacksmith's anvil, before twisting his ear and muttering something about "not moving". She left afterward, with good enough reason to trust the blacksmith. All he wore was an apron and matching pants, both blackened by hours at the forge. His chest glistened by tiny specks of metal, unharmed by their previous searing heat. That's not even touching that each strike of the hammer sent shivers down the feline's spine, quaking his fur and tail.

"So... you do much work?" The slim young adult inquired, though not much came his way. The male seemed very occupied by his work, yet still gave an occasional glance. A quick, annoyed glance. As if he was being watched by a burnt gingerbread-man. With a steel frame underneath. "Is the weather any good?"

Again, the Orc did not ooze the breath of a talker, instead flinging a lump of metal into the forge and blasting the bellows. Even at his distance, the feline felt his whiskers toasting in the heat. With a little luck, he didn't have to sit around this buzzkill for much longer.

While it wasn't a great idea. Or even a smart idea. Or any positive idea. It crossed him to maybe peruse the man's wares upon leaving, to take one of the more hidden items to fetch a quick price. Pay for accommodation elsewhere, of course. In his flight, the coin-purse on his belt was left in the inn, and going back there was asking for (and receiving) a disaster.

Luck have it, he only sat there long enough for his ears to curl inward out of pure agony. The loudness of a busy hammer was not as enjoyable as the silence of a moonlit night, more so to the sneaky thief.

The busy hammer would gong until his ears rang like the alarm bell his antics had caused in yesterdays. Then, by pure luck and chance, the steeled-clad guard returned. Now that she wasn't pushing him around, he could see the statuesque female, who earned her place in the longhouse by both beauty and build. By Orc standards, mind you. There were still heavy dentures poking out of her lip, combined with tightly bound locks of hair and impressive 'guns'. Guns being muscles, and the armor was much better at hiding the typical female bulges and curves than these impressive things.

Impressive they need be, to lift the kitty back up, like a chair being slid to a table. Slid towards the longhouse, where the chieftain had made a decision over his fate, the very idea of meeting that man again turning his legs to jelly. And like a chair, he was pressed tightly against the table, facing the chieftain, with the heavy guard holding him by the shoulders. It was an Orcish tradition, a means to intimidate when negotiations were being held. It took a few heavy breaths to focus that sharp mind.

"While I'd rather toss myself down the cliff than help you... there is a small, but rather difficult task you could take care of. During your stay, that is. Until those bandits decorate my bedroom." The chieftain said, using his suave bluntness to hide his act of compromise. "A problem my men and

women couldn't tend themselves.”

“Oh, I would gladly perform any task you wish, mighty chieftain!” He said excited, knowing whatever these Orcs could not manage was likely just a test of wit, of which he had aplenty. Though he would like to leave the chair, as it did not accommodate his tail.

“The women... you might have noticed a lack of children. While we have no need for skilled hands, women and their... 'lady problems' want nothing but something to smother in spent up maternity.” The mighty Orc frowned, as if he was the next in line, should he fail to coerce the kitty. “You get to stay, for a week, seven days, if you 'attend' those needs. It's nothing big, surely wouldn't be exhausting or requiring any useful abilities.”

A mockery, that's all it was! But the Khajiit had little choice. And by the sound of it, it might actually be a bit of fun. Lady 'problems' were always something he wanted to look into. Romanticized novels claimed thieves always get lucky, and perhaps it was so. Perhaps. Very unlikely. Regardless, it's not like the world outside those walls wanted to offer him anything other than sharp implements.

“Very well. For seven days of protection, that's hardly an unfair request.” He said, wanting to bow, but chairs aren't known to accommodate such etiquette. “Point me in the direction and I'll be off.”

“Oh, no no no. I'm not the one to point.” He grinned, quite glad that this nagging post would be far in history soon. The Khajiit soon found himself surrounded by the Orcish women, all of whom were the pinnacle of bashing-skull genes and Orcish 'beauty'. A man had to be picky around here. “Just follow their orders and you'll out be in one piece. Don't... and I'm sure the bandits would love to pick the body of a broken furball.”

The Khajiit opened his mouth to say something when a pair of hands gripped his shoulders from behind and he was pulled from the chair, the chieftain laughing as the thief was pulled away by the women.