Love’s Price

Pale moonlight filtered through the trees, and I sniffed the light breeze that brushed my face. Moss, pollen and the other smells of the forest registered, but I ignored them. I caught the faint traces of something flowery, something that had no business being here. The source was upwind, and I made my way along a low spot in the forest where a small stream ran in the rainy season.

This was elven territory, where I was not welcome, so I moved carefully through the trees and brush. I gripped my battleaxe, although I had no intention of killing if I could avoid it. I stepped around a small tree, not allowing it to brush against my leather breastplate, and possibly make noise. I was stealthy, but I was no elven hunter. If there were some of them around, my first warning would be the hiss of an arrow.

I sighed at my own bloody-mindedness that had led me here. I was a war leader, and my clan depended on me in our struggles against other clans – and practically everyone else we encountered, it seemed. Our chiefs said that it was our lot to be against the humans, the elves, and even other clans of our supposed brothers.

I carried war trophies of my own in the necklace I wore. The teeth of my enemies made an impressive totem, and a few locks of hair decorated my axe’s haft. Though I told no one, I was tired of the fighting. I had no mate, and the females in my clan held no interest for me. I sighed and paid attention to where I was going.

Finally, I had worked my way around to the edge of a small clearing. Powerful magics had been worked here - I could feel it through my boots. Now, though, there was no magic at work, but a power greater still, it seemed. At the center of the clearing stood a stone post twice my own height, with an iron ring set in it. Chains hung from the ring, stretching down to a lithe figure standing at the post’s base.

I sighed again, sheathed my battleaxe across my back, and stepped into the clearing. The post was a dozen strides away, and I quickly covered the distance. As I approached, the slim figure turned toward me.

“You came.” The voice was high and sweet, like the songbirds that inhabited the forest. She seemed glad to see me, and that lifted my hopes.

I stopped in front of her and looked down from my imposing height. “Melodrin, we can’t do this.” She was slim and tall for an elf, though her head barely reached my chest. Her skin was pale and pink, and the thin dress she wore showed a lot of it. Violet hair spilled down her back to her waist, thick and luxurious. She looked up at me with a crooked smile, her light brown eyes dancing with merriment.

“Oh, don’t worry so much,” Melodrin rejoined as she released the chains and tried to wrap her arms around my waist. “I told my family that I was hunting, which is true enough. Though, I neglected to tell them exactly what I was after.”

I leaned down to carefully wrap her into a hug, hiding my surprise. “I do worry, my love. You have so much life ahead of you, and it would be more than I could bear to see it taken from you.”

“You saved my life, remember? I would have been used up and killed if you hadn’t intervened.”

That was true enough, I thought. She had been taken by a patrol from another clan, and I had happened upon them soon afterwards. I was alone, and there were five warriors in their band. I had scouted against them, and, when I saw Melodrin, she had also seen me, and the look of terror in her face was more than I could bear.

The battle was epic, or would have been if I’d been able to tell of it. Our clans were supposed to be on friendly terms, so I was defying my chiefs to fight for this elven girl to whom I owed nothing. In the end, all five lay dead on the ground. I lay on the ground, too, as the last warrior had driven his spear though my body just as my axe took his head. I heard the girl scream as I closed my eyes and prepared to die.

When I awoke, I saw her looking anxiously into my face. She had used her magic to heal me, and we had spent several days together as I regained my strength. One night, she crawled into my bed, and we mated. Too soon, the time came for us to return to our own homes. Before we parted, she gave me a small coin that I hung on my necklace. With it, she could summon me, and know where I was if she sought me.

Time passed, and we would meet each other in the forest as often as we could. Sometimes the meetings were brief, and sometimes we could bed down together for several days. She was an ardent lover, and my heart was full when she was near.

Then, her father found us together.

He was one of the elven hunters, and he had suspected that Melodrin was involved in something he’d not approve. The meeting was less acrimonious than I’d feared, especially with his daughter’s impassioned defense of me and our bond. He summoned his wife, and the four of us talked for an afternoon. The result was something less that I may have hoped, for her parents told me that, if we had a child together, Melodrin’s life would be greatly shortened. I loved her too much to inflict such a thing on her, and so I swore that I would not lie with her again.

Melodrin had been furious, and she disappeared into the forest. I said my goodbyes to her parents, and then I went home.

Two months later, I felt her summoning me, and so I had come. Holding her ate at my determination to honor my oath to her parents, and I closed my eyes as her scent washed over me. “Why did you call me?”

She released me and stepped back. “I have news, Kalr. I am with child.”

My heart sank, and I sighed. “You have taken a mate, then.”

“What?” She studied me with a shocked expression. “No, I did no such thing! It’s your child!”

My head swam as if I’d been clubbed, and I sank to my knees in front of her, bringing her face level with mine. “Please, Melodrin, no,” I whispered. “You will die.”

She grasped my pointed ears with her hands, and brought her face close to mine. “I have told you, my life is yours. It would have ended if you had not rescued me. I will still outlive you, and that pains me greatly. This way, I will have a part of you with me after you are gone.”

I reached out and gathered her into a hug. “I love you, and I am sorry.”

She straightened to look at me with a stern expression. “You’re sorry that you love me?”

I shook my head. “I am sorry that we face this circumstance. I love you enough that I would trade my life for yours.” I looked at her. “Your family will not accept our child, and neither will my clan.”

She nodded. “Then, we will go away together. The lands to the south are more hospitable, I think.”

“Even to orcs?” I regarded her skeptically.

“Even to elves, and that is even more amazing. My brother lived there for years, and then returned to tell me of it.”

“But a half blood,” I said. “What of him?”

“Or her. We will just have to make our own family, Kalr. We will have many children.”

“It seems we have no other choice.”

“Does that dismay you?” She reached for my hands.

“No, not really.” My mood lightened as I considered her suggestion. “In fact, I think I like the idea.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said with a smile. “In fact, we can leave in the morning.”

“I have nothing but my armor and weapons,” I told her. “And, what of your parents?”

“I told them that I would return to visit,” Melodrin replied. “They were sad, but they wished me well.”

I looked at her dress. “Do you have clothing to travel in?”

She stepped back and spun gracefully in a circle. “You don’t like this?”

“I do, but you will be cold at night.”

“Not if you hold me,” she replied saucily.

“That is a burden I will gladly bear,” I said with a smirk.

She slapped me on the arm. “I bear our burden now, you know. You will have to endure the horror of my presence. All of the time.”

I laughed heartily. “Come, we should be on our way.”

“I left my traveling gear at the edge of the clearing,” Melodrin replied. We walked there, and she carefully packed her dress away, and donned her traveling clothes. Smiling, she took my arm and pointed south. “Shall we?”