

## Barbarian Knight

Katla knows the wizard she works for would never want a battle-scared warrior like herself. But when her careless accident in his workroom unleashes a magical Horror, she has no choice but to ask for his help.

The mineral brine of old magic filled Katla's nose as she strode into the workroom. Humming along to the songstone in her pocket, she crouched in front of Wizard Thorn's alchemical table and inspected the glass pipes and vessels for leakage. He'd instructed her to do so twice daily in his absence.

She had yet to find a fault in the fastidious man's work.

As she finished, the song reached its best part. Taken by a fancy, she slid her battleaxe off her back and leaned it against the nearby bookshelf. Gripping the songstone tightly to make it louder, Katla twirled on one leg in the open space of the room.

Thorn's absence made her heart ache. But at least she could act foolish without her employer seeing. Ballet was for southern girls, with their slender elegance. Not for hulking, tough-skinned knights from the north who could barely pronounce the word. Driven by muscle memory, her foot thudded back to the floor in a battle-stance halfway through her spin. With a scowl, Katla launched herself immediately into another turn. She wanted the move to be as smooth as the court dancers Thorn had once taken her to see.

She turned too hard, wheeling. Her kneecap smacked into the table's corner. A red flood of pain.

"Tits," Katla bellowed, grabbing her knee. The songstone fell from her hand. It rolled under the bookshelf.

One of the glass vials on the table, knocked on its side by her idiocy, rolled towards the shelf's edge. She cursed, lunged for it, and missed. With a crystalline shatter, a puff of black, fetid smoke erupted out. Eyes formed in the shadows. And then claws.

It would be hard explaining *this* to Thorn. She could hardly tell him she'd been practicing ballet in his workroom. Jaw clenched tight, Katla lunged for her axe and slammed it through the Horror's center.

The blade head swung harmlessly through the smoke. There was nothing to connect to until it thudded into the bookshelf behind the monster, burrowing half into the wood and half into a priceless spell book.

As Katla yanked at the handle to free her axe, the Horror's claws slashed her cheek. A blaze of dizzying pain tore through her. Abandoning the weapon, she hurled herself towards the rack of spell charges across the room. Tempting as fireballs and lightning sounded, she didn't have the brains to deal with the heavy shadow now dragging itself across the room by its claws. This was a problem for Thorn. Her fingers closed around the metal spell charge marked *Memory*. Clicking in the small nib and twisting it, Katla's eyes locked on the monster now clawing its way up the side of Thorn's desk.

Wizard Thorn lurched into being. He was a handsome sight in his best midnight silks, silver rings on each finger. She drank in his high cheekbones and long black hair.

His gray eyes lit on Katla for a moment with an unusually soft expression. Thorn must have been thinking of something else, something nice, when he'd tucked the Memory of himself into the spell-charge. Despite the Horror currently eating—glass and all—the vials of ichor on the desk, she found herself trapped in the wizard's gaze. Unlike with the real Thorn, she could stare openly. The Memory would be gone long before it could tell on her.

The sight of him made her as sick with yearning as ever.

"Katla," Thorn's Memory whispered. His brow knotted as he reached a hand towards her. "You're hurt."

The Horror crunched the last vial and lunged for the glass mobile of the heavens above the desk. Tiny stars shook free in a tinkling shatter. At the sound, Thorn's Memory turned. His voice lowered to a guttural chant as he stalked towards it, power collecting into his palms. Katla sighed and went to work her axe out of the bookshelf. She heard a painful amount of crushing, ripping, snapping,

and clanging as wizard and Horror tumbled destructively across the room. By the time she freed her weapon, the Horror was shrinking in on itself with a squeal. From beneath the bookshelf, the songstone started over again at the beginning of the ballet.

“What *happened?*” Thorn asked as he strode towards her, eyes blazing.

He had a right to be angry. She’d ruined his things. At least she could clean the worst of the mess before the real Thorn saw it. His Memory, its hair mussed and shirt torn, was already starting to fade around the edges.

“One of the cats knocked a vial over.” She couldn’t tell *any* version of Thorn she’d released a Horror by *dancing*.

With a frown, he reached forward and touched two fingers to her wounded cheek. She let him. The pain cooled.

“Be careful, won’t you?” Thorn’s fingers stayed on her skin even as they faded to see-through. “If anything happened to you, I…” his lips kept moving, but the sound had become so faint she couldn’t hear it over the songstone.

Then he was gone.

“I know,” Katla muttered. “You’d have to hire new muscle, and you’re too busy for that.” The song kept playing, taunting her. She knelt down and groped blindly beneath the bookshelf for it. Dragging the songstone out, she blew on it to make it stop.

“Katla,” Thorn’s voice said again. “What *happened?*”

She jerked up so fast she smacked into the bookshelf. Thorn’s Memory stood in the middle of the room again, studying the destruction.

She gaped for a moment, until her eyes lit on the Memory spell charge sitting in the path of destruction. It had been trampled in the fight. Thorn or the Horror must have jammed it permanently into summoning mode.

“A Horror. You got rid of it,” Katla said bluntly, adding the charge to the long list of things she had to fix before the real Thorn came home.

“...Did I?” His Memory squinted at her, then took a step closer, and another, until she could see the flecks of gold in his gray eyes. “You were wounded?” He reached forward, his cool hands settling on either side of her face as he studied the closed wound. Katla sighed.

“You already healed me, too,” she muttered.

“The last thing *I* recall is bottling a Memory. I...” he pulled his hands from her face and studied them. This close up, she could see he was already bleeding away at the edges. “Ah. *I’m* the Memory.”

“Help me clean before the real you sees this and hates me.”

He tore his eyes from his hands and blinked down at her.

“Katla, I could never hate you.”

She glared at him. “Look what I did to all your expensive things. And your spells.”

“I don’t care. I’m in love with you.”

Skin crawling, she took a step back. A hurt look crossed his face.

He was fading faster than last time. Good thing, too, because the Memory was nothing like the real, expressionless Thorn. The real Thorn could never want a battle-scarred, leathery hunk of meat like her, who the southern girls called *barbarian*. He was brilliant, while she fumbled over his language and fixed problems by bashing them over the head.

The Memory was corrupted. Or maybe she was influencing it, since she'd summoned it; making it say what she wanted to hear.

He faded. She gathered his papers off the floor and set them back on the desk. Broken glass lay everywhere.

"Katla. What *happened*?"

The Memory was back. She glared at it, then walked to the crushed charge and picked it up. The nib wouldn't pull back out.

"Are you alright?" he continued. Stalking forward, she shoved the charge into his hand. He frowned. Then understanding lit his face. "Oh. I'm a Memory."

"You might as well help clean while you're here."

"But you're hurt." He reached forward to grip her chin.

"We've already been through this."

"Not this version of me," he said, voice low. "If anything happened to you..."

"You aren't yourself. You'd never want me back."

"Back? You mean you love me, too?"

The hope in his eyes hurt. She'd give anything for it to be real.

His lips pressed softly to hers. She didn't stop him. Thorn tasted like the tea he'd been drinking when he bottled the Memory; clove and black leaves. Heat poured through her. But he wasn't real. And he was fading. Their mouths stayed desperately locked; she kissed him back until there was nobody but a wraith in front of her. The spell charge clattered through his see-through hand to the stone floor.

She smacked the wall in frustration. Nearly shaking with anger at her own idiocy, Katla turned and went back to straightening the room.

“Katla. What *happened*?”

She sighed through gritted teeth.

“Let me guess: you’re madly in love with me, just like all the others,” she growled, and spun to face the Memory.

“Sorry... what?”

A portal-door shimmered on the wall. Wizard Thorn blinked at her, hair tied back, dressed in a simple cotton shirt instead of the black silks his Memory had worn. He studied the chaos in the room, eyebrows raised as her insides curled in embarrassment.

She was going to be out of a job. And worse, he’d hate her. She could still feel the Memory’s kiss on her lips. It hadn’t been the real him. But *this*, the bone-achingly handsome wizard in front of her, was.

Slowly, Thorn bent and picked up the charge off the floor where his Memory had dropped it. He expertly pried the nib out.

“Did someone break in?” he asked flatly.

“No.” She fought to keep the shame from her voice. “I was... clumsy. I broke a vial.”

“How? You’re the least clumsy person I know.” His voice stayed flat.

“I was going to fix the room,” she said, refusing to admit about the ballet. “You were supposed to be gone another week.”

“My plans changed.” Thorn slipped the charge into his pocket. “A chimera attacked. I need help killing it.”

“I’ll find you someone else.”

His eyebrows rose. Thorn took a small step back. “How I feel bothers you that much? You’re *leaving?*”

*Feel?* As far as she knew, Thorn felt nothing. The Memories were wrong. Hadn’t she lost the job by creating this mess?

“What are you talking about?” she asked suspiciously.

Thorn gulped. “What you said, when I entered. I assumed my Memory confessed that I...” his voice trailed off as his pale cheeks flushed. “That I love...”

“But I don’t understand. You never acted that way before.”

“Memory is pure emotion.” Thorn’s voice strained thin. “It does not know restraint or caution. It has nothing to lose. Unlike a living man.”

She gaped at him.

“But *me*, though? I’m just dumb muscle.”

He shook his head. “No,” Thorn insisted firmly, stepping closer. “You are... clever, and straightforward, and reliable. And muscular, yes, which I...” He said a word she didn’t understand. When she squinted, he added: “ah... it means ‘admire.’” He wouldn’t meet her eyes.

It still didn’t seem real, a wizard like Thorn with a battle-hardened northern knight like her. But she closed the gap between them, grabbed him by the collar, and hauled his mouth down to hers. If the real Thorn thought he wanted her, she wasn’t about to talk sense into him.

His eyes widened before closing, but his hands found their way around her body, and his lips parted readily to hers. When she pulled back he was breathing hard.

“Katla, you’re hurt,” he whispered, eyes studying her cheek.

“We’ve been through that,” she said. “Are you sure about this?”



“I have been for ages,” he murmured. “Only, I didn’t want to ruin it all.”

“Fine. Good.” She reached for her axe. “Now, about that chimera.”

With a grin she’d never seen him wear before, Thorn grabbed her hand and pulled her after him through the portal.