

QUA HUDSON



The Queen And The Orc Prince Book Two

THE ORC QUEEN

The Orc Queen

**Book Two of the Queen And The Orc
Prince Duology**

Qua Hudson

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Editor: Morgan Waddle

Cover Design By: Yasmin Oliveria

For my sister, my brightest Star.

Authors Note

This is a work of fiction. As the author, I do not condone some of the situations that take place between the characters. This is simply for entertainment. Some of the content will be triggering for some people. If you have any of the triggers listed, please do not proceed. The book is not to be consumed by anyone under the age of 18. The list of trigger warnings is listed below. Note they may hold spoilers.

Triggers:

Sexually explicit scenes, violence, pregnancy, childbirth, explicit language, decapitation, war, blood, gore, murder, mutilation of a dead body.

Contents

1. The Lost One
2. Human
3. Lean On Me
4. Our Little Bubble
5. I Can't Lose
6. The Orchish Gaze
7. Bygones
8. Bound By The Past
9. Devotion
10. It Has Been Forever
11. Captain
12. The Business Of Kings
13. Vow
14. This Is Everything
15. Remember Who You Fight For

16. You Never Stop
17. Let Me Have You
18. This Is Us
19. Tempting Madness
20. I Will Go
21. Frack
22. A Spectacle
23. We Come In Peace
24. Suspicion
25. Hannah
26. You Promised Me
27. Bound By A Dragon
28. The Okrar
29. Blessed By Odala
30. My Own Love
31. Happy Tossing
32. Different Life. Different Orc
33. Three Birds
34. You Wasted Your Life
35. The Goddess Odala
36. Destiny Runs In Circles
37. I Am A Father
38. The Queen Is Here

39. Queen Aria

Epilogue

What's Next from the Author

Books in the Series

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Find Me

Chapter One

The Lost One

Aria

My muscles don't move an inch. Neither do any of them as they stare at me in curiosity...and fear.

A small orc with small tusks barely protruding their mouth is the first to move.

“Mama, what kind of orc is that?” She asks.

“Hush, Mina.”

My gaze flows to the older orc I assume is the mother.

After the initial shock, they start moving towards me. I shrink a little into myself in fear. All of them look fearsome and are way taller than human women and most human males I know. They are pale like Igor, some almost brown.

The older ones have multiple piercings, some even on their nipples. Some have what I can only describe as tribal markings. Most have a sort of eccentricity about their appearance.

But they are all snarling, looking at me like I'm an enemy.

Frack.

The fiercest of them – who look like she could fight a bear by herself and win – sniffs the air before her voice booms in the large open space that looks like the middle of an open mountain. “What is your business through the portal and what creature are you?”

“I am the mate of Igor of Zad.” I say almost too loudly, very aware that I sound pathetic to these still-very-naked fearsome lady orcs – if their exposed fronts are an accurate tell of their gender.

The women stop their advancing immediately with gasps accompanying it. I’m puzzled, but I wait on bated breath as they all start sniffing the air.

The one who asked me the question comes closer.

She stands over me and glowers down at me. “And where is this *Igor*?”

“He’s in my realm and told me to ask for Masa of Zad.” Right now, I just need to survive until Igor gets here. But there is no visible portal on this side.

Is he coming?

She scoffs. “There is no such orc here. And you never answered my question. What are you? You smell strange.”

“I am a human. My name is Aria.” I offer more, hoping to have the courtesy returned.

“I did not ask for your name.”

“Come on, Azula. Stop messing with the human girl.” Another orc comes from behind her. This one is smaller than Azula and she seems softer. Half of her head is shaved, and she has multiple rings – some spiky – dangling on her exposed pointy ear. Her long brown hair goes down to her elbows only slightly covering her pierced nipples.

“Step back from the human, Mulan. You don’t know what she brings here and maybe she is lying,” Azula says.

“I think we should take her to the office until she returns.” Another comes from behind, startling me.

“Or we could get rid of the threat right now. What if she carries disease? Do you want to be responsible for any ailments she brings with?” Azula glares at me.

Okay, she really doesn’t like me.

“She is pregnant. Can’t you see?” Mulan offers me her hand. It’s bigger than mine but smaller than Igor’s.

Igor, please come and save me from this situation.

She clears her throat when I don’t move, and I get zapped out of my thoughts and I take her offered hand. *This one is kind.*

“Are those his offspring?” Mulan asks.

“Yes.” I answer, trying to focus only on her. Being on my feet makes me even more nervous. I am the shortest one here, only taller than the children. I don’t know what I expected I’d find in Igor’s realm, but it wasn’t glares, growls, and a million doubts.

“Come then, you will wait in the office for the Queen. She has gone to the hunt with the springs.” Mulan starts walking but I don’t miss the glare from Azula as I turn, and the other orcs part for us. I am only too happy to be leaving the stares and the naked bodies.

“What are springs?” I ask when we approach a large oval-shaped opening. I remember Igor telling me about it. I never imagined much of it, but I couldn’t imagine it would be this big and so...real.

I see a long corridor before us lit by lamps as far as the eye can see. And I also see various openings on either side of the long corridor. My interest is piqued. But there is a stiff energy I feel about it, but that may be the fact that I’m in a whole different realm.

“Springs are young male orcs. Too young for battle but not younglings anymore. The Queen guides and oversees their first hunt.” Mulan walks ahead of me and turns to face me. “Three days ago was their first hunt, but they return today.”

I only nod at her, trying to be nice and not too mouthy in case it’s rude in their culture. But I wonder how the rest of the orcs will greet me. Will they be more like Mulan or Azula?

I’m grateful we speak the same language. I never asked Igor if orcs speak my kingdoms language or if they had their own.

My eyes wonder to the entrances we pass along the way. But it seems those entrances are more long corridors and I have no way of seeing what’s inside them. The flooring seems

to be layered with something that makes it smooth, not concrete, but not tiles either.

On the fourth entrance on the left, Mulan gestures me in and I enter. It's another corridor with doors on either side. She gestures me to the first door on the right, and I am a little disappointed I didn't see all the doors.

Just like the other corridors, the space is lit orange with a handful of lamps. I guess without any windows, they need all the lamps they can get. I wonder if they are oil heated and where they get the oil. I am too curious about everything and can't wait to get comfortable enough to ask questions.

The room I am in is spacious and it seems to be a cabinet of some kind. It has a large desk that takes a lot of the space and a large chair with bones on the back and head rest behind it. The other seating seems to be carved from the stone of the mountain with padding on top.

This seating almost goes around the office. Various items hang all over the room. A few animal – at least I hope they are animal – skulls and bones and paintings that look like they are made from animal – again, I hope they are animal – skin. No flowers or...softness.

There is a faint smell that permeates the air too. It's a mix of fresh meat, dry clay and something spicy.

Strange.

“Have a seat anywhere. Well, anywhere but that chair.” Mulan points to the big chair behind the desk, giggling

sheepishly.

I smile at her. “That looks like it sits someone important. I wouldn’t dare.” I say, hoping my humor translates.

The room falls in silence as I take a seat next to the door. I know it will be impossible for me to run anywhere if this doesn’t go well, but still.

Mulan looks around a little nervously and she licks her tusks. The movement reminds me of Igor. Igor licks his tusks a lot when he’s contemplating something.

“I caught all of you off guard, didn’t I?” I start the conversation.

She laughs nervously and scratches the bald side of her head.

“We were sunbathing before the men came back.” She says.

“Sunbathing?” I ask because I’m not sure what that is.

“Yes, it’s the first week of summer and we have missed it after a strong winter.”

I nod like I understand, or I experienced what she did.

“So, everyone here is always naked or that’s just on sunbathing days?” I ask, my curiosity is beyond me. And in a way I need to know. I need to know if I will also be required for this sunbathing.

In my realm, bodies are very sacred to a person and their partner, and we don’t show our nakedness just to everyone. I could be okay with being naked in front of the women, but I

don't know if I can parade around naked in front of everyone in this tribe.

Mulan cackles. "Would it terrify you if I told you we are always naked?"

Yes.

"Uh..." I don't have an answer I don't think will be unoffending.

"Don't worry, little human, it's only when the men are away and it's just the females."

I let out a small breath of relief. In all honesty, I don't know what I would have done if they were naked all the time.

"So, Igor..."

My head turns to her fully and I see her drift off. This doesn't look like a comfortable topic for her. "He really lives, and you are his mate?" She sounds like what I'm saying is impossible, or improbable or...concerning? I am not sure which part though, whether it's the fact that its Igor or that he has a mate.

"Yes, he does. And yes, I am."

"Hm," she says.

"Why, what's wrong? Is that a bad thing?" I hope she answers me honestly.

She shakes her head. "It isn't for me to speak on the lost one."

I frown.

“The lost one? Igor is the lost one?” I may not be from this realm but that doesn’t sound good.

She looks away from me as if she has said something she wasn’t supposed to. She darts her gaze to the door and licks her tusks again. “I...I should get back outside.”

I stand up because I am not entirely sure I would like to remain alone in a foreign place.

“Mulan—”

“I’m sorry, you need to wait for the Queen to return.” She gets to the door. “Good luck.”

Then she is gone. I am left standing there almost gawking behind her.

Okay, that went down terribly and weirdly.

The lost one.

What does that mean? Does it mean they thought Igor was lost? That maybe he would never return. Lost to his community? Lost to what? I want to go out there and demand Mulan tell me everything she is hiding. And that ‘good luck’ at the end isn’t doing anything to ease my nerves that are already on high alert.

I rub my belly when my babies kick.

“You are home, my little orcs.” I exhale loudly. “I just hope this is a good thing.”

This has to be better, right? At least no one is chasing me, right?

I sit down and try to focus on my stomach and not so much on the animal parts scattered around the room that are not doing anything to quail my unease.

Chapter Two

Human

Aria

Two hours or so pass before I hear heavy footsteps stomping in the main corridor.

They remind me of Shepherd's heavy footsteps when he came to give me my accusations at the cell. Though this is that times three.

The steps are as menacing as they are sure. Or maybe it's the cave making everything sound more pronounced. I hear voices as they get closer, but I can't make out anything being said.

I look down at myself and straighten the dress I'm wearing. The dress I've been wearing for two days. Two days I've spent without a bath. No wonder those orcs were sniffing the air, I probably smell like a dying rat.

I contemplate whether to remain seated or stand. What is more acceptable in orc land? Should I stand maybe to show I am ready for whoever that is, or should I sit to show my submission and my meek intentions?

It is too late.

Mulan enters the room first then a bigger female orc in thick – again, I hope it’s animal – skin covering her shoulders like a coat, and laying underneath something like armor, but it doesn’t clink like iron.

If I thought the other females were big, they are nothing compared to this orc. She is even bigger than Azula, but still a little smaller than Igor. Two male orcs fall behind her, but they are not by any means smaller in size, and one is taller.

On instinct, I rise to my feet. All their gazes fall immediately to my belly.

“Queen Masa, this is the human who claims to be the mate of the lost one.” Mulan says.

Igor’s mother?

The two males scoff, but Masa considers me. She appraises me up and down, not looking impressed or pleased.

“Is this true, human?” Her voice is full of authority, and it is the deepest female voice I have ever heard.

I nod quickly. “Yes, I am.”

“Where is Igor and why did he send you here alone?”

That sounds like an accusation more than it’s a question. I am split. Do I tell her my whole life story or just the highlights? Either way, my answers will breed more questions.

“He said he was right behind me, and he was in the middle of a battle.”

“Battle? Is he a fugitive of your realms law?” She asks.

Another accusation. But this time I know whatever answer I give it will be bad. We are fugitives of the law, but I feel like it will be bad if I say yes too.

“I am.”

They seem surprised.

“What are your crimes?”

“Mating with Igor.”

One of the male orcs chuckles. “You may be a brave one after all.” He says, approaching the large round container in the corner with a small sack I hadn’t seen before.

Masa looks me up and down, I can see she isn’t convinced yet.

“Mulan, fetch Soni and tell her to prepare to be at the assembly after lunch.” Masa doesn’t take her gaze from me.

I feel Mulan’s nervous energy without seeing it as I continue to hold Masa’s gaze. Mulan sprints out of the room and I am left with three intense orcs who don’t look like they like me or want to like me at all.

Masa moves around the table and takes her seat on the bone chair. *Of course, someone like her would sit in a bone chair.*

I remind myself; this is Igor’s actual mother. I mean, I didn’t think I’d get hugs and trumpets welcoming me, but I didn’t think I’d get...this.

“Zod, take her to Hani.” She opens a drawer takes out a round shaped container.

“Come, human.” The other male orc says to me, and he turns and goes. It takes me a second to snap out of myself and follow him when I realize he won’t escort me like a lady.

I quicken my steps as I try to catch up with his long strides. He cares nothing for the fact that I am pregnant or that I am human and may need him to walk a little slower.

He takes a right and we go to the direction where we originally came. We exit out the entrance and pass what seems to be a well in the center of this vast space. I hadn’t noticed that before.

Only the children are still running around naked; the female orcs are now in very short pieces of clothing. Igor was right, they are not a people who love clothes. Most of the skirts by the females don’t go beyond mid-thigh.

But it seems the older the female, the more clothes they wear. One of the older females has a skirt that goes to her knees. But the rest of her wrinkled skin is out for everyone to see, and no one notices or minds.

At least all their privates are covered.

Once more I feel awkward. I’m not just a different creature, I’m also wearing a lot more clothes. They all seem excessive now.

I look away finally and I get back to following Zod.

Zod doesn't look like he appreciates being here at all. Like he has more important things to do than accompanying the human. He's probably right.

We enter another large opening. Left, right, and ahead there are stairs. Zod takes me to the one ahead and I climb behind him. He isn't trying to wait for me as he takes two of the already longer than I'm used to steps.

But I try to keep up. Lucky for me the place we are going to is only on the second level. We take another corridor straight ahead. And this time there is a large window at the end of the corridor.

All the entrances here have doors. Some larger than others, some with double doors. I huff behind him until we get to the last door. It's a double door and he pushes the doors open after knocking once.

My mouth opens when we enter what looks to be chambers. There is a large bed here that looks to have a base made of iron and a mattress on top. It's an open space and it has a large window that stretches the length of the room.

This room has plants. Not flowers, but it has fresh plants, and it looks more feminine than any other space I have seen so far. No bones or animal skins in sight. I try not to let my eyes wonder too much.

“Hani, I have a guest for you.” Zod says.

He turns to stare down at me. Again, another one who doesn't like me. But maybe it has something to do with Igor

being 'the lost one.'

I jump when a door I hadn't noticed opens suddenly and a... green female orc emerges.

"Zod, what is this?" She has a thick accent, even for an orc.

I'm shocked.

Igor told me the green orcs are their enemies and they don't mix. But then again, a lot can change in a hundred years.

"Your tribe duty." Zod says as he walks out and closes the doors behind him.

Hani crosses her arms over her generous chest. I don't know much about orcs, but this one is very attractive. She has a curvy body, and her hair looks beautifully combed. Her single braid is fresh, and she looks clean everywhere.

"Are you one they call the mate of the lost one?" She asks but she already knows. It seems news of my arrival has indeed traveled.

"Yes."

"You must be exhausted by all the glares and the questions, aren't you?"

I can't help the smile on my face. She seems almost... human. But then again, she's the only green orc I've seen.

"I think it's natural for everyone to be distrustful of a stranger." I say.

"Do you distrust me then?"

I can tell she's a little amused.

“Maybe.” I choose to meet her playfulness.

She giggles at that. “Lucky for you I was not here during the time of the lost one, so I have no grudges against you. Have a seat. Carrying two orcs can’t be easy for a human.” She turns to go to what I think is a vanity table.

“How do you know it’s two orcs?”

“Bono folk have a keen sense of hearing, tiny human.” She says, turning to me. “What do they name you?”

“I am Aria.”

“Uh Ree Yuh.” She tests it on her lips before she nods. “Sounds like a flower. Soft, squishy.”

I laugh and head to the one-seater near the window. I gasp a little when I look down outside.

We are on a cliff part of this mountain, and it is a long way down. The land is brown and red-ish sand and a mix of black rock and little lumps of hills as far as the eye can see.

I turn back to Hani and watch, fascinated, as she powders her face, and oils herself before showing me the washroom and offering me something else to wear. It’s very short, of course and all my stomach would be out for everyone to see.

I explain to her I am a little uncomfortable with something so revealing and she doesn’t press me. We don’t say much to each other, but she asks for my opinions about this and that before she goes and when she comes back, she has a plate of food and a cup of water for me.

I take it in gratitude and eat. The green on the plate is like spinach and has a taste like carrots, but it isn't bad, then it's meat, a lot of meat. I eat and my children kick.

I may not know what's going to happen but a part of me feels like maybe this is the right direction. If not for me, then maybe for our children.

After food, Hani escorts me. Apparently, it's time to see Soni. Even she won't tell me who Soni is. But I don't have to ask anything when I make it out to the meeting place once more.

Soni is dressed in what I can best describe as a head scarf made of black feathers and a long red coat made of – of course – animal skin.

The space is almost half packed with orcs, and they all turn to me. I swallow as the orcs part for us as we make our way to the center. Hani squeezes my shoulder in encouragement before she lets me go.

Soni stretches her hand to me.

“Come, human.”

I reach out with my trembling hand and as soon as our hands meet, I feel something intense pull from my inside. It is almost painful.

“Indeed, she carries orcs in her belly. But...I see something else. She belongs to another.”

Gasps ring all around us and I want to run and hide.

I don't have to turn to feel the tension.

“Human, it's time to give up your lies. Who are you and who sent you here?” Masa asks.

I open my mouth to answer but something lands with a thud in the distance, and shocked murmurs rise. The crowd immediately parts to reveal the large lump I know so well.

He rises but he looks exhausted, and he is covered in blood from hair to toe. His eyes find mine and he pulls himself to me. It's like he doesn't see anyone else.

“Aria, are you okay?” His voice sounds both relieved and tired. He pants slowly. My brain travels everywhere. *My mother. Wolfie.*

“Aria?” He reaches me and takes my face in his hands.

“You are here.” I look at him and can't help the well of tears in my face. It feels like we have overcome everything, and I am overwhelmed.

“I am. Are you?” He asks.

“I'm fine. They are fine too.” I say rubbing my belly.

“Good.” He says, then he wobbles before he collapses.

Chapter Three

Lean On Me

Igor

I feel my body ache before I come to. But I feel something else.

Her.

She is near.

My senses absorb scents and textures I thought I'd long forgotten. Her face is the first thing I see when my eyes open. She is looming over me and places a damp cloth on my forehead. Her beautiful face is twisted in worry.

Another face comes to obstruct my view and our moment.

"Mother." I say.

"Imp." She calls me the name she always used to call me. Though I doubt now it's out of the same endearment it once held.

The years have taken a toll on her, but she is still strong. I see Aria's questions behind her eyes. She doesn't understand

anything right now and I can only imagine how confused she is about everything.

“Can I have a moment with my mate first?” I turn my gaze fully to my mother now.

She doesn't like that. She is used to always being first, especially to me.

“No, Imp, *we* need to talk first. You are back and you know what that means. You know the custom.” She says in her Queen Masa voice. I wonder what power dynamics are like now.

“Of course,” I answer simply.

“Tomorrow, at dawn.”

“I accept.”

My mother turns and leaves us.

I see Aria's facial reaction in my peripheral, she remembers what I said about orc custom when one reenters the community.

I turn to my heart and pull her close. My body is still battered but I will recover. I still can hardly believe we are really here, and we all survived.

“Igor...”

“I know...” I respond.

She doesn't have to say anything, I know everything she means to say, to ask; everything she feels. My own emotion

overwhelms me when I think my woman and children are alive and they are healthy.

Her face melts in tears and she links her forehead with mine. I exhale a long breath. I feel like I can finally exhale fully. The past month has been hell and both of us suffered much without one another.

But we overcame all that and now we are in my realm. I can only hope she isn't disappointed. I hold her to me as her tears wet my face. She doesn't close her eyes, just continues staring at me like she is convincing herself I am really here.

I have to wonder what happened while I was still in her realm fighting. The battle had been fierce, and even with Luna, we were greatly outnumbered. There was also the case of protecting Aria's mother.

We managed to drive many away when they realized they were dealing with monsters, but my already exhausted body was stretched to its limit, and it was pure luck they retreated.

After taking Luna and Margaret back to another house on another side of the kingdom, ensuring their safety, Margaret opened another portal for me.

I hope they haven't scared Aria with horror stories about me. I know I have a lot to tell her, and I will, but maybe she doesn't need to be introduced to the reputation my own people hold about me just yet.

"You are dirty." She says after a while and her tears are starting to dry.

I chuckle. “What are you going to do about that, Dove?” I tease.

She quips an eyebrow but grins. “I am told there is water in the washroom over there.” She says then she looks to be in thought. I know before she speaks it what she wants to ask. “Igor, what is happening at dawn?”

I look at her and raise my exhausted hand to hold her cheek as I wipe her tears with my thumb. “I have to fight for our place within the tribe.”

“But you are still hurt. Can’t they postpone until you are back at your normal strength?”

I smile a sad smile. “It’s one of the four pillars of our law, my love.”

She nods but more tears well in her eyes and I wish at once I could change things for her. For her to not feel this way. But I can’t. And it must be done.

I need to earn our place back. Our place and that of our children. Orc society is about honor, and we place nothing above the law. The law is absolute. It is the judge of all.

“I won’t lose, Dove. There is too much on the line.” I assure her.

“It’s unfair, Igor.” She snuffles. I pull her to my chest, wishing I could take her aches in my own body.

“Trust me.”

She nods again. Then rises and looks at me. “So, who are you fighting. Do you know yet?”

“The champion chosen by the Queen.”

“Igor, I haven’t seen many adult male orcs. Does that mean they are at war?”

I smile sadly. She remembers what I told her. “Maybe. But I will have to find out.”

My answer doesn’t look like it settles her.

“If they are, does it mean you will also need to leave too?” Her voice is small, and I can sense all her trepidation in it.

I open my mouth but then close it. If there is a war right now, then I will have to go. This is a reality I won’t be able to change if I am an able male in this tribe.

Especially a male in my position. It is going to take a lot of adjusting on her part. I realize now this is maybe going to be an even bigger adjustment to her than mine was when I got to her world. I need to make sure I protect her too. I know my kind; we can be brutal.

“I don’t know everything yet, okay? But I will try my hardest to be here with you and our children. But...we may have to make some sacrifices. Remember what I told you about my people?”

She nods.

“We need to find a way to assimilate. But nothing in me has changed how I feel about you or our children, and I will do

whatever I can to ensure your happiness and comfort.”

She stares at me without an answer.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she whispers, and I pull her face and kiss her lips. The tender lips I have missed a lot.

A flush of annoyance runs through me when we are disturbed by a knock on the door.

She pulls from me with a grin.

“What do you want?” I grit out and she hits my chest lightly.

“It’s Mulan, Prince Imp.”

Mulan. Last time I saw her she was running around barely pubescent chasing after a spring to be her friend. I notice Aria relaxing at her voice. She must have met her then.

“Come in.” Aria calls before I get the chance to tell her she can leave whatever she brings at the door.

The door opens and a now fully grown female walks in with a large tray. Another young female follows her with a basket.

They both bow their heads. “We bring you edibles and some medicine, Prince.” She says.

Aria leaves my side and goes to them, looking relaxed and comfortable as she approaches Mulan.

“Please place them over there and thank you both,” Aria says.

“This goes directly to any swelling, and this is for drinking.” The other female I don’t know the name of says to Aria and she nods. They bow before they leave us.

“Can you sit up?” Aria asks as she bends to pick up some of the herbs.

“Do I have to?” I say.

“Orc, sit up so we can go bathe. And the sooner we start with these herbs, the better your chances may be.” I can hear the unhappiness in her voice. She then turns to me with the basket in hand.

“I am going to place these in the bath water and then I’ll be back for you, okay?” She goes to the washroom that has no door.

In fact, half of it is open. It’s the toilet that is hidden if I remember the design correctly. I take a moment to look around this room. This is definitely not my old room. For one, my room was much bigger than this and I had a proper dwelling.

I must have really fallen from grace. Me and Aria need to go there when I am back in. She may be more comfortable there with more comforts.

I inhale and try to sit up. I grit my teeth as my body fights me. It feels like some of my joints want to remain on the bed, but I sit with a grunt.

Aria scatters the herbs in the water, then places the basket on the bathroom table and comes back to me.

I smile, not believing this is my life. Back in my home realm with a mate I love who is carrying my offspring. We may have challenges ahead of us, but I know there isn't any woman I'd rather have by my side than this little brown skinned human.

"Come, you big orc baby." She touches my shoulder and takes my hand over her shoulder.

"Are you going to carry me, Aria?" I can't help the chuckle.

"You need help."

"I know you are carrying orc children in there, Aria, but they won't borrow you their strength." I tease.

She folds her arms to her chest. "Fine, walk then."

She steps back with a challenging look. I move to place my feet on the floor. I grit my teeth and rise. I am baffled why my body is refusing to do anything anymore.

But I stand. I take one foot and another. She was right I need some help, but I won't admit it. She comes close anyway and places my arm on her shoulders.

"Lean on me, Igor." She looks up to me.

I have never been the weak one in any relationship I've ever been in. I have never had to rely on another.

After a few moments of consideration, I allow her to help me, and we take steps in tandem until we are at the round bathtub.

My armor was already gone. She slides my pants down and then helps me take off the shirt I am wearing that is stiff in now-dried blood. I sit on the edge of the tub before I get in.

I had almost forgotten how great the tubs are here in my realm. They are built for our bodies. The tub back at mine and Aria's house does not compare to this.

I think back on when we planned and built the water system and the basics here.

I was an orc of only 70 after the brutal war. We had just finished carving the first rooms and all of us were refugees.

Me, my father, uncle and the strongest of the males planned and started the building and carving project that took the next 100 years to perfect. Carving a mountain isn't a small feat and designing a waste system in it isn't simple either.

It feels good to know we retained this home, and our people are still safe. My own children will be safe here. I settle in the light green water.

I groan. That feels good. She smiles at me.

“You'd do well to join me, human.”

I miss many things about my woman. And right now, I can think of a few more things I miss about her.

But she shakes her head.

“You have no sense of self-preservation, orc.”

I bellow in laughter. This little human of mine.

Chapter Four

Our Little Bubble

Aria

I take a few leaves from the basket as he continues laughing.

“It isn’t fair that you’re saying that back to me, Dove.” He says when he settles.

I take the mortar and near him. Sitting on the edge next to him, I throw the leaves for him to drink and to cover his wounds in the mortar. I need to make sure he is in better shape for his fight at dawn.

It’s barbaric and insane that they want him to fight someone in the shape he is in. I guess he wasn’t joking, in his realm strength speaks loudest.

“You are practically bedridden but you want to play.” I start crushing the leaves.

His eyes are half hooded, and he smirks a mischievous smirk.

“As you are saying I’m bedridden, so I need you to help me.”

“You won’t let go of this, will you?”

“No.” He says simply.

I sigh. “Fine but let me finish with these herbs so they can release all their healing properties in the water for the swelling.”

He watches me as I grind them together and mix.

Igor was unconscious for around four hours, and thankfully Mulan took pity on me. She was tasked with showing me how to help with the orc medicine. Lucky for me it isn’t much different than human medicine.

When I am satisfied with the mash of leaves in the mortar, I take some and dump it in his water.

I want him to soak in the water for a while, it will be good for him to start taking down the swell in his body.

I go to the tray and pick up one of the cups and put water in it. I come back and add some of the leaves to the cup and stir. His gaze follows me everywhere.

After arranging the cloths, cup, and food tray next to the tub, I am ready. I leave my hair tied and slide the dress off my shoulder letting it fall to a small pile at my feet.

Igor’s breathing changes instantly and I shake my head. His gaze touches every inch of my skin, but he lingers especially on my belly that is much bigger than the last time he saw it. I get in the tub and settle on his thighs.

The water goes up to Igor's nipples but goes up to my shoulders. His hands find me, and he pulls me in a little closer. We both exhale.

"I can hardly believe it's true, Igor." I take one of the cloths. "I woke up thinking I was going to die this morning."

I see the pain behind his eyes. Pain and so much regret and remorse. "I'm sorry, Aria. I—"

"Shh, orc. You don't need to." I place my finger on his lips. I know it wasn't his fault that we ended up where we did. He did everything he could to keep us safe.

His hand covers mine before he takes it down. "No, Aria, listen. I need to say this to you. I know you don't blame me, but I do. My actions put you and our children in the hands of a monster for a month." He pauses. "I can see the fading marks."

Ashamed, I look away from him.

His hand gently turns me back to him.

"What did he do to you?"

I shake my head. "It will only make you angry, and he is dead, Igor. He can't hurt us now."

I feel the slight tremble from his hands, and I place mine on top of it, hoping to soothe him some way.

"You saved us. That's all that matters. You came for us. That's all I will remember." I say as I caress his hand with mine while I swipe my thumb on his lips and caress his skin.

“I vow to never place you in danger in the future. Forgive me, my dove.” He begs.

“Win for us at dawn, Igor. That’s all me and the little orcs need.” He smiles a little and I smile back, but I know I am asking a lot. “Win tomorrow, so we can have a home here and show all of them you are no longer the lost one.”

All his movements halt. But he doesn’t say anything on it, he just nods.

“You’ll tell me about it someday, right?”

He nods again. I see a hint of regret, maybe shame, maybe fury behind his eyes.

“So, is the name Imp part of that conversation?” I don’t know why I find the name Imp funny for him. I take the cloth and rub soap on it. I start rubbing it on his skin. He still needs to get clean.

“My father gave me the name when I was in my 30s after a war. He called me the Impaler.”

My mouth falls open. I don’t know why I expected that to be a funny story. I have never known Igor’s brutal side because he has always been tender with me, but it is becoming more and more evident that others know a very different Igor.

“Do I want to know?” I ask, focusing on a particularly stubborn dried blood blob next to his nose.

“Because it’s you, you probably do want to know. But let’s just say I earned a reputation in this realm after that war and the next war I stamped the reason for it.” He says.

Silence befalls us as he studies my reaction to what he says. I don't know how I feel with my mate being known as a brute even amongst folks as brutish as orcs, but it changes nothing with my feelings for him.

“I was a brutal orc before I was banished, Aria. Venturing into mad, I had become out of control and far from reason. Don't tell them I admitted this, but maybe they were right banishing me in the first place.”

I don't know why I find that funny. “Why would telling them be a bad thing?”

“You will see as time goes but power struggles don't end here, Dove. When you earn your place, you have to work constantly to keep it.”

His face is quite serious. He looks almost apologetic.

I inhale and exhale. “I will learn too.” I pause. “Hey maybe you can teach me to fight too after I give birth.” I grin.

He chuckles. “Who are you planning to fight?”

“Hey, you never know when I might need to defend your honor, Mr. Prince Imp.”

He laughs and his lips caress his tusks in that way I like. I take the bar of soap and rub it on his hair. He lifts me a little so I can reach. I can't even get as close as I would before the babies. I wash him and he lets me take care of him. I rub some of the herbs on his face and some on his shoulders.

“So, I have to ask. I remember you told me that male and female mates don't really share bedrooms...”

He smirks with his eyes closed as I massage his scalp. “Worried you might have to sleep without me there, Dove?”

“You know how needy I am. So, do I need to devise a plan to sneak into your chambers, orc?”

He bellows a laugh and both of us vibrate. This feels good. Like we are settling to us once more. Even the herbs are working fast. I can see and feel the difference in his skin already.

“You would sneak to my chambers even if I am on the other side of the mountain?” He is very much amused.

“Yes.” I answer simply.

“With your very pregnant belly?”

“Yes.”

“Insatiable human.” He smirks.

“Hey, you got me used to everything.” I grab his nose and squeeze, cutting his air way.

He breathes through his mouth. “Might just ask to be separated then. I want to see you sneaking through the assembly in a mountain full of orcs with keen hearing.”

I close his mouth too. He holds his breath until he opens his mouth and play bites me. I giggle.

“Don’t you dare. Your children would never stop kicking me.”

His face slips in elation and pride. “How often are they moving now?”

“More and more. I am convinced it’s two boys and they are always fighting.”

His face falls a little. “Does it hurt?”

“No, it doesn’t,” I reassure him.

“I haven’t told them a story in a long time. You think they still remember my vo—”

He doesn’t finish his sentence before they start kicking.

We both laugh as he feels his children playing around responding to his voice, or at least that’s what he tells me. We are in our own bubble as we bond with our children.

We eat as we wait for sufficient time to pass, he needs to soak at least an hour. After we finish, I see he is less sluggish than he was before. He gets up with better ease. He is still not back to being himself, but he is much better.

He dries my body and I dry him. I prepare the rest of the herbal mixture I’ll smear on his skin. Then I give him another cup to drink before I am satisfied with everything.

Amongst the things Mulan gave me were three dresses. They are a little loose on me, but they will do for now. Apparently, they wear full length dresses in the winter. A time I am not looking forward to if I remember Igor saying its much colder here than in my realm.

Finally in bed, in his sleepy voice, Igor tells me and the babies one of my favorite orcish stories.

The one about his great-grandmother and how she secured marriage by pretending she was a spring and going with them to hunt. During the camp, she snuck into the tent of the Prince in line to rule next and the rest is history.

Dawn comes too soon, and I am woken up by Igor moving around the room. I haven't had the most peaceful sleep. The impending doom of this fight has not given me much rest. "Go back to sleep." He whispers to me.

"No, I am coming with you." I rub my sleepy eyes and yawn.

"No, Dove, you need to sleep. I will be fine. Rest, okay?"

He comes close to me. I open my mouth to protest but he silences me with a kiss.

Chapter Five

I Can't Lose

Igor

I walk out of our chambers and leave her behind. My muscles are not back to their optimum strength, but I can walk without feeling like I am going to die at any moment.

I need to win. For my family. I don't know if I have any kind of choice. If I don't then I resign them to a dangerous life outside of the protection of this fortress and that is just something I cannot do. I am still me and the people of this realm still remember.

There are still Bonos and other creatures outside of the protection of the fortress. I may have laid the humans to waste but even I in all my strength can't fight an orc army on my own. So, win I must.

Aria and my children have had enough suffering.

Light is a mere suggestion in the horizon as I walk to the stairs that leads to where we will have this fight. I notice they placed us in the level with springs. Pure disrespect in my book.

I let all of that fuel me and I feel adrenaline pump through me, giving me much needed vitality.

I can't wait to see who is here, who is alive. When I dropped yesterday, I hardly saw anything besides Aria and her pregnant belly. I mean, I saw my mother and that she-devil Soni.

Soni, the official sorcerer of this tribe, she has never liked me as much as I haven't liked her. She didn't approve me courting her daughter and she never hid that, nor that she thought I was uncultured and rude and immature and selfish.

I never cared for any of that before. But it also means I am back to a realm where I still don't have many friendlies. I didn't care before because I knew I was to be their King whether they liked it or not, but maybe now it matters.

I still don't care for their opinions, but I can't hide from the fact that it's not only me now and Aria may feel different. She may want to belong, and our children will probably want to belong too.

As much as I hate it, I will need to try and gather allies. Aria won't have a pleasurable experience if everybody hates us. And loyalty isn't one of those things one can conjure with their fists and their brutality. I may need to try some diplomacy.

I wonder if my mother still feels the same about it though. And I wonder what her assessment of me will be. Will she think I matured, or she will think I'm still the same violent disappointment?

I arrive at the top of the mountain where all our disputes are solved. Mother is already here and my uncle, Gremlo is on her right. The ring is already drawn, and four poles with large lamps are standing as pillars outside the circle.

A few other spectators are here already but I don't think everyone is. I cross the barrier of the circle and approach my mother and uncle. My uncle is wearing the tribal King's skin made of the extinct dragon skin and his crown of bones and my mother stands next to him like she is his Queen.

I quip an eyebrow. *Is my mother married to my uncle?* Two more females stand five feet from my mother, and I notice one of them is a Bono orc. Not just that but the two females next to my mother also wear ceremonial Queen skins.

Are they also my uncle's mates? I look around and I see another green spring amongst those waiting on the edges waiting for the battle to begin so they can approach.

I stand before my uncle who I suppose is King now and my mother. I remember when I thought my mother would never replace my father. But not only did she replace him, she replaced him with his own brother. It seems there is a lot I need to get reacquainted with. Like why we have Bonos in our tribe.

"Uncle, mother." I don't bow or lower my head. I don't know why I get the sense to remind them that where they are standing is my place. I may not have specific intentions of leading this tribe because my first priority is Aria and my

children, but I have no intention of submitting to another either.

I see my uncle's jaw tick and his tusks press hard on his lips. My mother on the other hand just hardens her face. My mother was always someone hard to get a reaction from. You'd only know of her thoughts once she starts talking.

"Igor of Zad." My uncle speaks. "We see you."

"I see you." I respond.

"The time for your banishment isn't over. You still have two more weeks. Why have you breached the barrier early?" He asks.

"The rune dictated the time of my banishment, uncle. Isn't that right, mother?" I remind them. It's a technicality.

His face hardens. "Very well. You know the law of reentering the community."

I nod.

"What value do you bring to the horde?" His voice is authoritative and strong.

"I heard you have a war, and you may need the Impaler." I am not sure of course, but our kind is always on impending war, and I doubt that would change in a hundred years.

He scoffs and I see a hint of a smirk in my mother's features. I see a grin in my peripheral from the Bono.

My uncle's gaze travels my body and I see a touch of a smirk on him. He doesn't think I can win with my body so

battered.

“Very well. May the gods be with you.” He says, as is customary. “Your Queen will announce the tribe’s champion.” He looks to my mother.

“Igor of Zad, you have returned after banishment to the human realm. What have you learned?” My mother questions.

“I have a family,” I say simply. It might not mean much to many, but my mother knows exactly what it means.

“We shall see about that,” she pauses. “The champion of the tribe is Todo, son of Gremlo.”

I hear happy murmurs and I retreat to the middle of the circle. Last time I saw Todo, he was barely a spring orc. I hear growls and the spectators come closer. The sun is now orange on the horizon.

I inhale the morning air as I prepare to face my opponent. I hear heavy footsteps coming from the stairs. Was he waiting there all this time to make an entrance?

The crowd parts and a massive orc makes its acquaintance with my eyes. He is half a foot taller than me and is hunched by the stony muscles of his shoulders. He looks like a sheer beast. An orcish destroyer.

He comes in the circle, flexing his shoulders. I don’t move an inch as he comes closer staring down at me, attempting to put fear in me. I just look at him, not flinching. I am currently standing at the center, and I don’t move at all.

A tactic to test if he uses his brain in warfare or if he overrelies on his strength. To be an effective destroyer, one needs to not only rely on brawn but brain too. This was long the hubris of the Bono and why they would lose the wars.

Todo growls and bares his triplet tusks to me. I feel the energy shift as he gets angry. I feel the energy around here as they all anticipate my failure.

I see it coming from a mile away and I don't duck as his fist lands on my chest and all air leaves me as I fall backwards.

Frack.

My muscles remind me I am not all the way healthy. He is on me the next moment.

"Todo! You know the rules." My mother's voice rings loud, and Todo's face widens in an evil grin before he steps back. "I hadn't announced the commencement. You both know the rules. Begin."

"The human world rendered you weak, Imp. This is going to be fun." Todo smirks

I pull my face up again. He is standing right where I was standing, at the center of the circle. He is no leader; he is still a child in his head seeking all these orcs approval. Maybe his strength is all he has, and he may over rely on it.

He lifts his hands, and the excited cheers continue. I circle him and he turns with me.

He charges at me and strikes again. This time I duck, and go low, barreling his mid-section. He grunts loudly, and staggers

back but he doesn't fall. He knees me and my chin hits the top of my mouth and I spit blood. He has a wide grin on him once more.

“Is this the great Imp I've heard so much about?” He taunts, overconfidence oozing out of him, he's practically sweating it.

I wipe my mouth and we move around each other again. He attacks once more. I duck and manage to hit the side of his face with a direct punch even as one of his tusks tears through me. He roars but doesn't take time to adjust.

We come blow to blow and he hits me with his power punches but because I am a much older, a more skilled fighter, I get mine in. Less frequent as his, but they are heavy.

We both pant as we circle each other again. I go for it this time as I throw a punch and he moves swiftly and ducks then hits me with a combination of hitting my mid-section and a left and right direct hook.

I don't remember when I get to the ground. The pain in my head is mind numbing. I feel my body move and he looms over me and he starts punching me repeatedly. The cheering crowd barely registers.

He stops and I can barely feel my face. I groan on the ground as I see his feet moving at the edge of the circle. I turn to my side and get up.

The crowd goes wild as we go again. I get punches in, but he gets more, and I spit more blood as he wipes off the blood on his own face. He is panting and he is getting tired because

of his heavier form but he is still at the advantage. If I was at my full strength, this fight would be over by now.

I swing and he catches my fist before it connects with him, and he kicks me so hard I go flying to the edge of the circle.

My head pounds and my body wants to leave me at this very moment.

I open my eyes as the crowd cheers, but my world stops when I see Aria and her pregnant belly. Mulan next to her holding her shoulders.

Aria. My children.

My body screams at me as I stand again. But I can't lose. I can't lose.

My beautiful dove just stands there in all her regality. She doesn't cry as I'd expect her to, but she stands there, strong. She looks at me with so much confidence. Then she undoes me and brushes her belly slowly.

An unspoken violence takes over me. Todo may have strength, but I fight for something more important.

My children. My dove. And losing isn't an option. I inhale sharply.

And Todo charges to me once more.

Chapter Six

The Orchish Gaze

Aria

Igor ducks the monster of the orc he is in the circle with. He is in much worse shape than the other orc. They paired him with the biggest orc I've seen here. His body is a weapon. He doesn't even look like he inspires fighting back. If he was after me, I'd just stop and let him maul me to death.

I brush my belly, trying to calm myself as our children kick like they can see their father. I am terrified for us, but I believe in my orc.

Igor punches the massive creature on his side, and he grunts. When the orc recovers, he charges at Igor, and he manages to get him down on his back. My heart pumps even faster and I struggle to take in air as he grabs Igor by the throat.

Igor strikes the orc with two fingers at a very specific place on his side and the orc falters. Igor uses this to his advantage, and he has the orc pinned to the ground the next moment.

Igor roars as he pummels this beast. The orc tries to defend himself, but it is like Igor is possessed by devils. He grabs the orc's head and slams it to the ground repeatedly.

The crowd's cheers start getting lower as we all watch in horror as the orc's body goes slack and he stops fighting.

Igor doesn't stop.

“ENOUGH.”

That voice booms through the open space and sinks under my skin. Igor stops with the lax head of the beast, and he looks like he is the one who just got pummeled.

Igor looks up to the voice, he is panting deeply and emitting low growls like I've never heard from him.

“Welcome back to the tribe, Igor of Zad.” The orc who is wearing – Goddess, not again – skin of some kind steps forward and stretches his hand that has a white horn with beautiful spirals that I'm sure I've never seen where I'm from or in any books.

Igor reaches for it and takes it. Then he looks to me. My feet move to him instantly. He is still standing over the orc who may or may not be dead right now.

He pants, blood sliding down his face. Then he hands me the horn.

“This is for you.” He says, and before I can answer he drops, and collapses again.

I drop next to him. *Oh Goddess, don't be dead, orc. I would beat you back to life.*

I feel his pulse. He is alive.

We are surrounded the next moment and hands pull me up. Mulan pulls me away. I resist because I want to be with him. "They will take him to get help. Come with me."

I hesitate for a second, but I follow Mulan after they carry him and the other orc down the stairs. We head down the stairs after the two unconscious bodies go. I don't know if it was lucky I came or not, but when Mulan came to me earlier and couldn't face me when I asked for details about the fight, I knew I had to see it for myself and I think it is lucky I am stubborn.

I just got a rude awakening to orc culture. I also saw Igor in a new light; the way he banged the other orcs' head on the ground... It shouldn't have surprised me; I saw him separate Shepherd's head from his body and all the soldiers he killed like he was death personified just yesterday.

It hadn't registered yesterday because it was about saving me and our children and hurting the ones who hurt us. But seeing him and his full savagery at a fellow orc. Not even Shepherd in his savagery can reach Igor.

I guess I have a little understanding at the looks people give me now and some of the things they've said in passing. But all that was gone when he looked at me and gave me the horn. I clutch it tighter. He did what he had to do, and I should see it

in a positive light. This is his way of protecting us, of keeping his promise to us.

I can depend on him to do whatever is necessary for us. And that is something I have an inkling we will need.

Mulan leads me to the ground floor before we cross the assembly area that has a few children orcs and their mothers and a few elderly orcs. Some are sitting on the rocks and some in the seating area made of wood and stone. Some of the women are at the six stations getting water from the well – pulling the buckets with full water.

All of them look at me when they notice me. I turn away quickly and quicken my steps behind Mulan to one of the other five entrances I haven't been in.

This one has a small foyer-like space with various artworks. It has actual paintings and even one that looks like a map. There is a big door ahead and my eyes wonder at the big hall space.

This has to be their dining hall. It has many tables. Some round, some square, and some really long. I follow Mulan to another door where a few voices are coming from.

I walk in behind her and it's another big room, but my gaze is fixed on the large table with what looks like three large, skinned deer and many women around the table with large knives cutting meat pieces. *Where is all this meat coming from? Is it from the hunt by the springs yesterday?*

Their gazes pin me immediately. I smile politely, so I don't make things awkward.

Their gazes move quickly from me, and they get back to what they are doing. That's when I feel the presence behind me.

"I thought this would be done by now. Why aren't you finished?"

Azula.

"Sorry, First Mate. We will have your portion finished soon," one answers.

They are almost trembling. So, they all fear her, she wasn't just scaring me.

"I am not coming back here. One of you is going to bring it to my dwelling," Azula commands.

She comes to my side, and I feel her stare on the side of my face. Mulan has totally moused away and is getting a container and a knife. When Azula is finished glaring at me she scoffs and leaves.

The air gets instantly lighter when she is gone although it is still a little awkward.

"Take a seat over there." Mulan shows me a chair.

I hesitate because I am not sure if I'm supposed to be helping. No one has explained anything to me.

I just wish someone would tell me anything. Mulan and I haven't gotten a moment for me to ask her anything.

But I sit there a little anxious because Igor was unconscious last time I saw him and I don't know what to do or where exactly to go. I watch the women work in spotted short conversations. I suspect I am the reason for that.

They cut the meat then distribute it in many smaller containers and pack them. Mulan takes two containers and I follow her out.

We cross to the entrance that houses Hani and Mulan's chambers. Mulan lives on the second floor.

I am a panting mess when I get to the last flight and Mulan—unlike Zod—waits for me.

We go to her chambers and when we get inside, I release a relaxed breath finally. I'm finally away from all those stares.

She heads to her kitchen and places both containers on the table. Every chamber seems to be different. With Hani you enter in a bedroom setting, but with Mulan a sitting area.

I wonder if ranking has anything to do with that. The one me and Igor were in had no kitchen or sitting area. It was just the bedroom with the washroom.

“You must be hungry.” She says as she bends to one of her cupboards.

“A little.” I am never one to be humble about food, but I don't know what's frowned upon in this land.

“Come on, carrying two orcs. They must chew on your insides when they haven't been fed.” She jokes and I chuckle.

“They are a heavy load, yes.” I joke back, rubbing my stomach and she laughs loudly.

She proceeds to pull out different vegetables from the cupboards.

“I have soup and bread. Let me throw this in the pot then I will fix you a plate, okay?” She says.

I nod gratefully. Mulan is so different from the other orcs I’ve met.

“You are really nice.” I say.

She smiles a sad smile. “They will adjust to having you here. You will make friends in no time.” She says.

“I don’t know if Azula will let them.”

She stiffens a little.

“What is it, Mulan?”

“Nothing. I know you are pregnant, but do you know your way around the kitchen?” She diverts me.

“Yes, what do you need me to do?”

“Chop these. I am making this stew for Azula to pick up for her mate’s breakfast when he wakes.” She says. Mulan is a bit timid for an orc.

“Why doesn’t she make food for her own mate?”

“Her mate is Todo.”

I stare at her.

“The orc Prince Imp just defeated,” she says.

“Oh.” I don’t know whether to be sad her mate probably has a concussion or feel a little happy because she is so mean. But I choose peace; I choose silence.

“So where is your mate?” I ask after a few minutes. She knows much about my life and my mate, and I’d like to know about her.

“I haven’t been chosen yet.”

My eyes widen. “Why not?”

“I...It’s complicated.”

“Okay.” I hope it isn’t rude that I asked her.

“So how long have you known Imp?” She asks

“Just over 9 months.” I say.

She stops what she’s doing. “Only 9 months?”

“What is it?”

“Orc kind court for years before we are even allowed to talk to them in a room alone.”

“Why?” My voice comes out a little pitchy.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s a test to the men, you need to see if they really want you as a mate and if they are worthy. That takes time.”

“So, everybody waits for years?” I ask in disbelief.

“Pretty much yes.”

“Then you get married?”

“What is married?” She asks.

“You know, officially being together.”

“Oh, you mean vowed?”

“Yes.”

“With us, a male will approach you and try to win you over and it is up to you to be strong and make him work for you. When he has earned you, he can go talk about taking you with the King and your father. Then he gives you his horn before or during the vow ceremony.”

I look at the one Igor gave me.

“Like this one?”

“Yes. That is Imp’s horn. He left it behind when he got banished, but it is yours now as his mate.”

“Oh.” I lick my lips, I have so many questions. But I’m also a little happy that Igor didn’t just win back his place with his people, he claimed me too.

“Before they are declared men, they need to hunt iyobis for their horn. It’s a way the tribe determines if they are worthy to be allowed to feast with male orcs and to determine if they are ready to provide for their own families.”

Interesting. “So, Igor has never given his horn to anyone?”

She stiffens a little. There is still the case of Igor’s old girlfriend or fiancé, I’m not even sure. This would have been her horn.

“I think Imp needs to tell you those details.” She turns from me to the stove.

I decide to bite my lip because I don't want to upset the only friend I have.

With Igor still getting his way back into his family, I know he is going to be busy for a while and I need to exercise some restraint and patience.

He did say we need to navigate carefully. And I know he will give me the answers.

Chapter Seven

Bygones

Igor

I inhale a long breath before I exhale. There is someone in this room and it isn't Aria, but I still recognize that scent, nonetheless.

"Azula." I call before I open my eyes and I find her standing a few feet from me. I take her in briefly. She still has her leg. Good for her.

"Imp." She says with that attitude I used to think was attractive.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was asked to dress your wounds." She says.

"I have a mate."

She laughs. And it just reminds me of everything that happened between us and how she betrayed me. Does she think I am still in love with her or that I have forgotten what she did?

"That feeble *human*?"

I try to move my body, but it complains, and I feel why when I see the many needles sticking out of my body.

“You laugh like you have forgotten you owe me your head.” I say.

“Just like you to hold a grudge. The humans haven’t softened you; I see.” She says.

“Your betrayal hasn’t been forgotten.” I look at her, and I notice she has a bracelet around her wrist. *She is mated.*

“Who is the unfortunate orc?”

She shakes her head at my mocking. “A hundred years and you are still the rude, spiteful orc you always were. I wish you didn’t come back here.”

She turns to leave, but she halts when I say. “But *I am* back, and you better stay out of mine and my mate’s way, Azula. If I even see or hear you looked her way in a way she didn’t like, I will fulfill the promise I gave you sooner than you expect.”

The door opens and my mother frowns when she rushes out. My mother turns with her to watch her leave before turning back to me, shaking her head in disapproval.

“What did you say to her?” My mother comes to stand next to me.

“That I will hand her everything I promised before I left if she gives my mate or me trouble.”

Her face hardens. “When we sent you to their realm, we didn’t tell you to multiply.”

I look at her, really look at her. This is not the woman I met yesterday, or this morning when she stood next to my uncle.

“And I never thought when I left my tribe in your hands you’d mate with my father’s brother.”

“It’s no longer your tribe, Igor.”

“And just who says that, mother?” I give her a challenge because I think they are all forgetting who I am and my position in this tribe.

“It’s been a century. Things are different. There are many things you don’t know and it’s not as simple.”

“One of the differences being my uncle mating with a filthy Bono?”

She clenches her teeth, and her tusks scrape her skin. “You have no idea what we’ve had to do. We made difficult choices to survive. We went through a famine for fifty years and new enemies.”

“You say that like it’s my fault.”

“May as well have been. If you had been responsible and led this tribe like you were supposed to, like your father asked you to, then I would never...” she stops and holds herself and steps back.

“Never what, mother?”

“Look, a lot has changed. Part of the reason I am here is to inform you that even though you are back, getting your position back is no longer a possibility.”

I laugh. I laugh because this just keeps getting better and better.

“Are you going to stop talking in riddles and tell me what’s going on, mother, or do I need to skin someone?”

I see fear flash in her eyes. And for the first time, I regret it. Before I used to revel in others showing me fear and I accepted nothing less. But now I may want the respect of others more than their fear, and my mother is one of the few people I don’t want to look at me with fear. That needs to be reserved for my enemies, not my kin.

“Everything will be explained by your uncle to you and your mate before your welcoming tomorrow.” Then she takes a step back and moves to leave.

“Wait, mother.” I say.

She stops.

“My old chambers. You didn’t give them away too, did you?”

She looks back at me. “They are there but no one has been there since you’ve been gone. Your mate will have to clean them up herself if you want back in your space.”

I clench my jaw. “She’s pregnant, mother.”

“And that is her prerogative.” She turns.

She stops before she goes and looks at me over her shoulder. “Don’t make this difficult for everyone, Igor. Don’t disturb the peace we’ve worked so hard to get. If you really

have changed, then think of the kind of tribe you want your offspring to grow into. Do you really want them to be born in war, amongst people who hate them because of you?” Then she leaves.

That lands. It finds me right at my location. My children. Aria. My priorities.

I relax in the bed a little. My mind drifts to Aria. She is due in just over 2 months and she or I really don't need any enemies in this tribe. With no easy way back to her realm, I need to tame some of my instincts if I want her to have a happy life.

We still need the community; still need their help. And with the possibility of another war brewing, I may have to leave or be busy strategizing for that. I wish it wasn't so. I am not comfortable leaving her especially since we just arrived.

Sleep takes me away with those thoughts at the fore of my mind.



When I wake, my body is slack. I open my eyes and find two young female orcs. One pulling the needles from my body, the other holding a transparent bowl where the bloody needles are collected.

“Igor, don't move.” My eyes look to the other side of the room and Aria comes close.

“Are you my doctor?” I smile.

She smiles down at me, standing next to my shoulders as she watches the female's work. The door opens and she steps away. I frown when I see Soni walk in. I stifle all the negative emotions I have for her. Maybe I need to let bygones be bygones. It has been a century like her daughter so unhelpfully reminded me.

"Imp, you're finally awake." She says, tone bored.

"How is Todo?" I ask her.

"Oh, you mean my son-in-law? He's better than you." She says it like an insult. My throat bops as I try to swallow the response. Aria looks at me with a frown. Frack. I hope she doesn't think I am angry Azula is mated to Todo.

I open my mouth to say something, but Aria removes her gaze from me.

"Will he be fine now?" Aria asks Soni.

"Define fine, human?" Soni says nonchalantly.

"Will he be back to optimal health?" Aria asks, not deterred by the rudeness.

"I still need to finish the potion, then..." Soni looks down at me. "You will have your...mate."

When I open my mouth to say something again, Aria touches my shoulder. I bite my tongue once more. The two young females finish removing the needles from me.

"Thank you for all you've done for us. We appreciate it." Aria says with so much grace.

Soni stops and turns to her as if she's surprised. She doesn't answer and goes back to her potions. After a minute, she turns with a small bottle and gives it to Aria.

"I will close all his internal wounds. Give him that when I finish." She points to the basin. "He must submerge for 10 minutes. Don't let him come out before. He will be fine after that."

"Thank you." Aria nods then steps back.

Soni lifts her hands and green smoke comes out of her hands and she hovers them over me. I feel my body coming together and my strength returning to me. She finishes quickly. Then looks down at me.

"I hope you have grown, Imp. And I hope you recognize all the acts of kindness we've given you and for the sake of everyone, don't destroy everything we've built." Then she turns and they all leave.

I feel Aria's eyes on me.

I open my mouth to say something, but she speaks first. "Come on, orc. Let's get you back to health." She looks down at me and opens the bottle.

"Aria..." I hold her hand and she tenses a little. That stings. Aria has always seen the better side of me and that's who she fell in love with. I can just imagine what she is thinking about me after seeing how my own people react to me and what I did to Todo in the morning.

"Hm?" She clears her throat.

“I...am not the same orc they know, you know me.” I try to reassure her.

“I know, Igor. I know. It’s just...” She exhales. “Let’s get you back to health and we’ll talk after dinner, okay?”

I clear my throat. “Okay.”

I drink the medicine that makes my insides feel like someone is rubbing salt in open wounds. I groan as I try to swallow the pain. Aria helps me to the basin, and I get in. The thing burns like lava.

But I submerge for 10 minutes, Aria clocking it. When I finally stand up, I am back to myself. I get out on my own and Aria smiles with a towel in hand. I take it from her and wipe myself.

She makes a face. “I love you, Igor, but you need a bath, maybe ten. What is in that thing?”

I chuckle. “So, you won’t even kiss me?”

“Just a peck but make it brief.”

I laugh, pulling her to kiss her forehead.

“Thank you, for everything, my love.” I look at her.

Her eyes glisten, and they don’t fall. “I’m just glad you’re finally okay. Can we go now?”

“Yes, let’s go.”

I get dressed, then take her hand and lead her out. We walk out to the hallway, and she leans on me as we walk, nearing the assembly. Everyone is out soaking in the sun and all eyes

land on us. I haven't really seen many people and some I haven't seen in a hundred years.

I see an old familiar face. He raises his hand and I look at Aria and pull her with a head gesture. She looks at me unsure and nears me again as they all look at her.

Some in wonder, some in fear and some in disdain. It hurts that I can't beat them all into submission or make things better for us in one day. I squeeze her hand a little.

"Son of Zad." Jani trembles and his lips massages one of his remaining tusks.

"Old orc." I smile.

His eyes move to focus on Aria and his brows go up, but he smiles fondly at her.

"You brought an angel back with you." He smiles and he licks his lips. *This old orc.*

"Jani, you are an old friend, but I remember what you taught me." I say.

He laughs loudly. "Ah, yes. My apologies, young one. You look to be back and ruffling feathers."

I look down at Aria and she is smiling politely. She's a little relaxed and I am glad.

"I learned from the best."

"I see you have already tied her down." He looks at her belly and she smiles shyly.

"I had to. You see her." I joke and Aria squeezes my hand.

“Indeed. Well, son of Zad, I think you may not be able to keep her if you don’t wash your body. You smell like death.”

Aria laughs louder than me. I narrow my eyes at her and she looks away.

“I will see you tomorrow at the welcoming, old orc,” I say.

“Be well until then,” he says. “Glad to meet you. I hope to see your dance tomorrow.” He winks at her.

I pat his shoulder and take her inside. I ignore the looks and I clamp down my annoyance. I pick Aria up and I take her up the stairs. She rolls her eyes and I push the door and we walk in the chamber we were in.

Chapter Eight

Bound By The Past

Igor

She makes a face as she watches me scrub my face. This is the third change of water we've used. The herbal mixture was strong, but it's almost gone.

"I didn't think an herbal odor would be the reason you stop loving me." I tease.

She chuckles with a scrunched nose. "Yeah, I'm not feeling this love, orc."

"You will feel my love in just a moment, Dove, and I will make you remember."

"I doubt it, orc. That will be how I know you are a miracle worker." She chuckles.

"You should be getting ready to swallow more than your words, Aria." I lower my register for her, and her body responds like it always does.

"I am going to prepare food for us. I am starving. I think I should do that." She retreats.

“You disappoint me, human. I remembered you as a strong fighter.”

“I am a fighter, but I need my strength I fear.”

“Oh yes you will.” I take a moment as I watch her go.
“Where did you get food?”

“I made it with Mulan.”

“Yeah? So, you made a friend?”

“Yes, she is very nice. Possibly the only friend I may have for a while.” She answers, and I feel more in that statement.

“Why do you say that? How has everyone been?”

She hesitates, not giving me an immediate answer. I get up in the tub.

“Aria?”

“Um, they are okay.”

“Aria...” I step out of the tub and dry my feet and I walk to her with a towel still drying myself.

She doesn't look up and just continues lining the food in the large plate.

“Aria, what's wrong? Has anyone treated you badly?” My blood starts boiling inside of me.

I know I wanted to lay my head down for our family's sake, but if anyone has been unkind to her then all that is out of the window. If there is one thing I won't tolerate, it is disrespect to Aria. Only over my corpse will that happen.

“No, of course not.”

“Then why are you closing off.”

“I’m a foreigner in this land, Igor, not everyone is jumping to give me a hug. I understand.” She says, but she isn’t okay.

“Has anyone treated you badly or made you feel uncomfortable?” I turn her face to me.

“No,” she lies.

“A—”

“Igor, I am fine. Don’t worry.”

I don’t let her go.

She sighs, then she says. “Why is Azula mean to everyone? Does she hate you?”

I tense a little.

“Igor?”

I let go of her face, knowing I need to tell her. “Azula is who I was almost mated to. She’s the one who betrayed me.”

“What?” The stew in the spoon she’s holding spills. “Frack.” She takes a cloth, wanting to rush for it but I hold her.

“Aria.”

She looks up at me.

“Azula? And you?” She asks.

“It was a long time ago. I was a different person and...” My words fail. “I don’t love her. I am not in love with her. I am yours. Only yours.” I hold her gaze.

“I guess it was a hundred years ago and she is mated to Todo.” She says.

I bend down and pick up the spoon from the floor. “Yes, it was, and she is, and I am glad they ended up together. They deserve each other.”

“Why?” She asks and hands me the cloth to wipe the floor.

“They both have big heads,” I say.

She laughs. “They kinda do, don’t they?”

I smile. “Go sit on the bed and I’ll finish here.”

She brushes her belly, making my heart dance, before she gets on her tippy toes, and I bend and kiss her. She goes and takes a seat. It washes over me once more that we are safe now. *They are safe.*

My children are alive and well and we averted everything that has tried to destroy us the past month. But even in my victory, I owe Aria a few heads on a pike.

One day, I will go back to her realm, and I will bring her Shamus and Hanser’s heads. Knowing they still breathe air makes me ill at ease. But one day. Even if it takes me 20 years, they will meet a violent end.

“What are you thinking about there, orc?” Aria’s voice draws me out of my dreams for revenge.

“Would you believe me if I said what I’m going to do to you after we finish eating?” I turn to her, plate in hand, and walk to

her, still naked. Her gaze lowers to my half-erect south and she licks her lips before bringing her gaze back to me.

“Your back was tense; I don’t remember that being the effect I have on you.” She smirks.

Placing the plate between us, I sit down as well before I look at her for a good moment.

“I know we are safe now, but I can’t forget those who harmed you and are still breathing.”

“Shamus?” She asks.

“And Hanser together with his wife.”

The mood changes. But I tear a piece of meat and I bring it to her lips. She takes it and chews.

“I don’t like it either, but we are safe, and they can’t harm us or the babies. Shouldn’t that be enough?” She asks unsure.

“Answer me honestly. If there was a way, if I could, wouldn’t you want me to complete the promise I made to you, to our children?”

She swallows, holding my gaze for a long time.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I don’t wish to take any risks. I don’t know, Igor.”

I nod then reach for her face. “That’s okay, my love. We are safe now and I will make sure we stay that way.” I pause. “But promise to talk to me if things get difficult for you here. These are my people, and it is on me to address it if there are issues.”

She nods and we eat.

“Is the other guy okay? Todo.”

“You heard his mother-in-law, he’s fine.”

She grins. “That woman does not like you much. Why?”

“She is Azula’s mother,” I tell her.

She cracks a laugh. “For real?” I nod. “I guess that makes sense. They both give me bad energy.”

“Soni never liked me even back then. She always said her daughter could do better.” I explain.

“And Todo is better than you?” She asks incredulously. “His name is Todo!” She laughs loudly, and I do too. How I missed this, all of this.

“I know, right?”

“So, Todo took his chance once you were out of the way?”

“He always wanted everything I had even as a youngling, I guess Azula was the logical choice.” I remember my little cousin.

“How old was he when you left?”

“He was 22.”

Her face scrunches in confusion. “And how old was Azula?”

I chuckle seeing what she means. “She was 80.”

She chuckles. “Wow. That’s, uh, wow. Good for them.”

I laugh. “Indeed, it is.”

“So, you and your mom. What actually happened, Igor? And why does everyone hate you so much?”

I knew I'd have to address this soon. I don't want to, but I need to tell her everything.

“At a certain time, after a devastating war, us and the Bonos sought to negotiate for peace. My father was leading the negotiations, and everybody thought it a good idea. Everyone was tired. I was not pleased with it, but it was my father so I went along with it. But I never trusted the Bonos, and we never should have. My father died outside our lands while he was going to the Bono lands. He was killed.

“It was rogues from the Bono tribe. I bided my time for 2 years, and during that time, I found out who sent them. It wasn't random. But it was never an official decree. They told my people the orc acted on his own. Everyone believed them but I couldn't accept it. They had to pay.

“Then one day – leading a small group of my trusted soldiers – I stormed their borders and burned one of their villages, killing many of them. Essentially moving everyone back to where we were before. War. Limited resources. No peace.

“My people were horrified at my actions. But I was so angry at everything, I took no one's counsel. I loved my father, but I acted irrationally and selfishly. The Bono tribe were looking for blood after that and they were desperate, they were planning on something and they were going to go to all lengths to claim their revenge.

“In a last attempt to prevent another brutal war, my mother and uncle met with them in secret and together they agreed that I needed to go. I was their common enemy. They sought the help of Azula and Soni, and they all agreed I be banished.” I pause as I watch her not reacting but taking everything in.

“Many other things happened when I was out of control. I was a different orc then, and I do deserve everyone’s disdain. But I am sorry to you and our children. This isn’t the legacy I wanted for you to inherit.”

She takes me in for a minute before she stands up and takes the plate. My heart squeezes hard. What is she thinking? Does she hate me? Feel deceived? Think I’m a monster.

I watch her place the plate on the small table with the pots before she picks up a cloth and returns to me. I wait on bated breath as she wipes her hands and then takes mine.

“I still love you.” She starts. “You are still the same orc to me.” She purses her lips, looking down at my hands before looking at me. “I am not saying it’s great, but I still love you. I don’t know if they will see you as I do, but I hope they see that you have changed, and you are better. But I stand by you still, and I choose you still. Because you are still the same orc who has tended to me with the utmost care, and you have fought for me and our children even when you couldn’t.” Her eyes glisten. “I love you. Others might see what they see but I see you and I love you and I am proud to be yours. So will our children.”

I stop breathing as she speaks. I don’t know what to say.

She gives me a small smile before she retreats with the cloth. I watch her place it on the table, then she slides her dress off her shoulders, and it bunches at her feet. My body tenses as my need for her consumes me and almost blinds me.

I draw a shallow breath as she walks to me. I see her, I see my whole life, the love of my life. She stands in front of me. Confident. Regal. So alluring.

Her one small delicate hand finds my face. The other travels down to my pecs then down to my full girth and I close my eyes briefly.

“I love you. Now, orc, do you know what I need after the dinner?” she says.

“A drink.” I answer.

She smiles and her gaze lowers to what she wants.

Chapter Nine

Devotion

Igor

It almost feels like I'm in a trance as I watch her take the full step to close the distance between us. She starts stroking my girth and my whole body feels more alive than it's been in a long time.

I had almost forgotten how good she feels. She gets on her tippy toes, and I lean a little and we kiss. I am holding on to my self-control with the last of my will, I want to make our official reunion special.

As much as I want to throw her over the bed and ravage her, she has needs. A second hand joins the first and she twists her hands on me with a tighter grip and releasing a deep growl is all I can do to not go mad.

She pulls from me, and I follow her, not wanting to stop tasting her lips yet. She smiles before she bends, and she spits on my cock. She doesn't stop stroking me and then she connects her lips with my tip, and I growl. Her eyes find mine and I perish right there. I know I am not going to last. She works me harder.

“Aria—” I growl as my balls tighten when she sucks me harder, and I pull her hair expelling my seed involuntarily all over her.

She smiles devilishly as it lands in her mouth and on her face. I take a moment as I pant, looking at her rule my body, as she does everything that is me.

“Look at what you’ve done.” I exhale as the last of my high dissipates and I can get a coherent word out. “You are a greedy girl, Dove.” I smear it on her face when she straightens herself and just take a moment to look at what’s mine; what’s all mine.

“How many times do you want to come?” I ask her.

“Until I can’t anymore.” She says with evident anticipation knowing I am more than able and willing to deliver.

I get off the bed and kiss her tender lips, then I pick her up to lay her down on the bed gently. Pulling away, I go to the washroom counter and get a damp cloth. I wipe her face lovingly then place it not far.

Then I kiss her again needing to taste her once more, game time is over. My girth rages again.

My hands explore her skin, feeling her respond to my touch, she shivers again and again. Unexplainable possessiveness fills my bones thinking about how this is all mine. Every part of her is mine.

I kiss down her jawline and then her sensitive neck. My one hand finds her wetness, teasing her, enjoying her subtle

responsiveness. My mind is running like a shooting star, and I lose my mind as her body writhes under me, needy for what only I give her. Her wetness calls to me and I push my fingers inside her.

I growl. *Yes.*

She moans under me, and her body meets my finger. My mouth latches on one of her hard nipples and she cries out. My other hand finds her other hard nipple and her body trembles, as she clenches around my fingers. Her eyes close, and I watch her shake as she moans my name.

“Igor, I love you...”

“I am not done showing you, my love.” I press down on her clit, and she screams. Right now, nothing else matters but her pleasure.

“Oh yes. Yes.” She moans as I tap her g-spot with my fingers, my thumbs stroking her clit, my lips worshipping her body. I bite, lick, and suck, marking her now unmarked body. I need her wearing my marks again. I need to own her once more.

Her delirious eyes find mine and she tips over again looking at me, but I don't stop. After the fourth orgasm, I need to be inside her.

I pull her to the edge a little. I lean down to kiss her satisfied body up to her lips. Her legs wrap around me, and she pulls me close. She grabs my girth, directing me in her and I can't help the exhilaration in my body.

I know she wants and desires me, but it always floors me just how much. I pull away from her lips a little, wanting to remember what it's like watching her take me. I push in slowly and her eyes go unfocused as her lips form an 'o'.

There is a bit of resistance, but I push in, and she groans in pleasure. Her pussy welcomes me and hugs me like I'm right at home. I shake my head as everything makes my body vibrate in a low growl and am rendered temporarily mad.

"Give it to me, Igor. I need it." Her voice full of need pulls me out of my head and I focus on her.

"You feel like heaven." I pull out completely then I fill her up again, with more force this time and she moans, her inner thighs vibrating.

I start moving and her moans clog my ears as I see only her, only she exists in this moment. I don't want her to come quickly so I don't hit that spot inside of her just yet. I need to prolong this.

"Goddess, Igor. I missed this..." She moans, her nails clawing my skin, making me even more feral. I hit her with a steady but hard stroke and her eyes roll back.

"Don't hold back for me, I won't stop. Just give it to me, sweet Aria."

As if on command, she starts clenching around me, taking me with her. I fill her up as I watch her whole body in ecstasy. She bites her lips as she comes.

She is everything.

I only give her reprieve as I wipe my spill. Then I turn her to her knees. A better angle for her with her belly. I slap my wet girth on her and she smiles, head laying on its side on the pillow.

“Orc, don’t tease me.” She says giving me a lazy eye over her shoulder.

My finger finds her wetness and she is already sticky with new arousal.

“Always so ready for me.” I push in and she moans as her body catches a shudder. “Always so responsive.” I praise.

I grab hold of her hips and drive into her in harder strokes, and she moans with each. Her pussy clenches around me, getting wetter, everything letting me know she is enjoying me.

“Yes. Oh—” She moans. I make her come again and again, and again and then again until she finally goes slack on the bed, completely covered in sweat and her face wet with tears.

I turn her over and I kiss her. I worship her in tender kisses. It is to remind us of what we have. Another seal of my promise to our forever. The demonstration of my love for her.

She watches me eyes half open, her hand is on my hair.

“I love you more than life itself, Dove.”

“We all love you too, daddy orc.” She says and I chuckle.

I reach for the cloth and kiss her belly before I go to rinse the cloth and bring a basin with fresh water close to her. I

clean us up before I change the sheets and pull her to lay on top of me like we used to in our home.

With the lamps out, the moon streams in through the large window. I always forgot how bright the moon can be here. The half-moon in my realm is brighter than the half-moon in Aria's realm. Our arms are interlinked, and we brush her belly.

Another wave of contentment washes over me.

I don't know what my uncle will say tomorrow and what will happen, but I know that there is nothing that comes above my family and for them, I will lay everything to its knees. All that I am is for them and my whole life is dedicated to them.

"What is going on in that head of yours, orc?" She asks as her head lolls to the sides. Her voice is tainted with weariness and impending sleep.

"Tomorrow. The meeting with my uncle." I say.

"Do you think it's going to be bad?"

"Not sure yet. I did leave in unfriendly terms and after what I did to Todo, they may think I'm the same orc."

"Is it hard for you? Forfeiting your position as King to keep the peace?" She asks plainly.

"I don't like it." I answer honestly. "I don't know if I wanted to be King in the first place but having someone else take it from me doesn't feel great. But my family means more to me. You and our children and your safety weighs more than my pride. Especially because I don't know what the situation is right now out there."

“Would you take us away if it was safe out there?” She asks a pertinent question.

“If I had another option, would I allow our children’s birthright to go to unworthy orcs? I wouldn’t. My father was King, so was his father and his father before him. How do I explain to our children I lost what belongs to them?”

She cranes her neck before she shifts and lays on her side, balancing on her elbow she looks down at me. She doesn’t rush to respond.

“I didn’t think about that.” She says after a minute.

“And you don’t need to,” I reassure her.

“So, you will lay your head down for us right now until it is safe then you make your move for their birthright?” She asks another pertinent question. Something I have thought about.

Am I willing to just let the inheritance of my children go to fools? How will I answer when they start asking me those questions?

“Would you resent me if I did?”

“As long as we were safe? No.” She pauses and nears my face, and she lays her head on the crook of my neck and with one hand she touches my tusks like she likes to. “I can’t force you to suppress your inclinations especially where our children’s birthrights are concerned. I will stand by you and your leadership, my King.”

My words get lodged in my throat and I am unable to speak for a minute. A wave of power washes over me at her

submission to me and her recognition of me as a King, as her King.

“One day, I will lay a kingdom at your feet, my Queen, and our children will inherit everything that they were born for.” I give her a promise I have never given to her before. “One day, destiny will lay at your feet, and you will be worshiped.”

She smiles at my words. “I love you today, I love you forever.”

“I love you too, Aria.”

She doesn't stop caressing my face. Then at that moment, our children move.

“I missed these,” I say, my hand moving as they move.

“We have missed you too, daddy orc.” She says again with a grin.

“Do you intend on calling me daddy orc, human?”

“Yes. I like it.” She says with a mischievous look on her.

I sigh, then I remember something. “I had my quarters before I left. They are still there waiting for me. I think tomorrow we need to go check just how dusty they are and enlist help to get them cleaned and refurnished.” I say.

“I thought these were yours.”

“No, these are for young orcs.”

“Are they bigger?”

“Oh yes. They have three bedrooms all with their own washrooms, a proper kitchen, a meeting room, and a proper

sitting room with enough space for the little ones to play.”

“That sounds spacious.” She beams.

I smile. “They are. And we will need all the space with the babies coming soon.”

She lays on me again. “Have you wondered what they’ll look like? More me or more you?”

“Yes. I am hoping for more you because my world can never have enough of you.” I say.

She laughs. “You are such a smooth talker.”

“For you, any day.”

She yawns.

“Sleep, my Queen. Tomorrow is a long day.” I caress her, trying to soothe her down.

“Goodnight, I love you, orc.”

“I love you more, human.”

Chapter Ten

It Has Been Forever

Aria

He brings a piece of bread to my mouth.
“Igor...” I say after I chew.

“Yes.” He looks a little relaxed, as close as to what he used to look like back in our home in my realm. A lot has been on his shoulders since Hanser betrayed us. He has had to keep fighting to keep us alive all this time.

“My mother, how did you meet her?”

One of the biggest gaps in my life has been the one left by my mother, and I still don’t know how to process her being alive, and what it means.

“The last parade...” He starts.

I see shame flash in his eyes, and I hate it there. I take one of his hands and kiss it.

He exhales. “She threw a vial in the cage. She was in the crowd, and she told me to drink, I did when I returned back to the prison. I don’t remember much of what happened, but a

voice called to me to come, and I got a surge of power I've never felt." He pauses. "I didn't remember anything, who I was, what was happening, I just knew I had to get out of there and go. So, I got out and ran until I collapsed outside her cabin."

He brings another piece to me.

"I woke up in the cabin and she told me who she was. She also told me Wolfie is actually Luna, and she is your...sister."

"What!?" I almost leap out of his lap.

He chuckles. "I almost had the same reaction. Yes, she is your sister."

"Wolfie is Luna? How is she a wolf then?"

"Your mother said it was a curse."

"By whom?"

"She didn't answer that and said she would give those answers to you."

A heaviness clouds me. My mother. I have a sister. Wolfie – Luna – is my sister? I have so many questions. Answers Igor doesn't have. The Goddess helped us escape but I am left incomplete with the only family I have left back in my realm.

My children will never know their grandmother, I will never know my mother. Luna, my sister, they will never know their aunt.

I have many questions for her. If she sent Luna to watch over me, does it mean she saw all my suffering, and if so, why

did she never help me? Why couldn't she come for me and my brother and why did she leave us behind?

"I'm sorry." Igor pulls me from my thoughts, and I focus on him.

"What for?"

"For everything; the fact that I can't answer all your questions. The fact that you have been without her and that you never knew Luna as your sister." He says as he brushes my thighs softly and then my belly.

I sigh. "I know you'd give it to me if you could. And thank you for that."

He leans in, still rubbing my belly and he kisses me. A lingering kiss.

"So, what now?" I ask him when we pull apart.

He picks up a sliced apple and brings it to my lips. "We need to see my uncle – I guess, King Gremlo now. Since I am back in the tribe, he needs to tell us about our roles in the tribe and the updates of what has happened and the new arrangements in place."

I nod. "Have you asked your mom about her marriage to him? How do you feel about it?"

"It doesn't make me feel great." He pauses with a thoughtful look. "But she resents me for everything bad that has happened since I was banished. She said if I had been a better son, then she would have never married him."

“Oh, Igor...” I see his anguish and regret.

“It’s fine, Aria. I guess I just need to accept this situation for what it is.”

“*We* will accept it for what it is.” I correct him and he smiles.

“I can’t wait to see you dance for me later.” He smirks

“Wait, I forgot to ask. What did that old orc mean when he talked about a dance?” I hope they don’t actually mean dancing because I don’t dance for people.

He chuckles. “It’s tradition. When a male secures his mate and they are vowed, the female must dance for him in front of the community. A sign of her giving herself to him – her submission – and as a thank you for him choosing her.”

My lips get dry. “You are joking?”

“No, I am not.” He looks amused.

“What kind of dancing?” I am still hoping this is just a joke. He has to be pulling my leg.

“It involves moving your waist and being seductive.” He says with a grin.

“Igor...” I say. “I can’t do that.”

He needs to know that there is a slim chance I am doing that. Dancing is bad enough, dancing seductively in front of other people for Igor is a disaster, especially with my belly.

He laughs again. “I would have to gorge out all their eyes if anyone saw you dancing with your pregnant belly, and even if

you weren't, they would all need to close their eyes." He tells me with ease, but I catch the serious intent behind them.

I find it comforting, not because of all the violence he is willing to issue on my name, but the relief that I don't have to dance. "Will you tell them I'm not dancing?"

"Yes, we will forgo that tradition."

"Then what else is supposed to happen today?"

"I will claim you and I will announce you to everyone and introduce you officially."

"Oh." I manage.

His face turns more serious. "There's also the matter of your past marriage." He pauses. When I don't say anything, he says, "That tie needs to be severed and you need to be officially mine."

"How?"

"A vow ceremony." He says, his eyes not leaving mine even for a second.

"Okay," I answer.

"You sure you ready?"

"I have been ready since I first kissed you." I smile a little at the memory and so does he.

"I still remember that day when you kissed me and demanded me for yourself." He reminisces with a smile.

"I knew what I wanted and if it was up to you, we would still be lusting after each other on the same bed and not doing

anything.”

He sighs. “I’m glad you did. I didn’t think you were ready for what I wanted from you.”

“But my was I ever.” I grin and lean in. I kiss him, remembering everything we have done to and for each other. All the times he has made me cry his name and owned me.

He returns the kiss with his own passion and possessiveness. His hands pull my dress up and hot anticipation of what’s to come makes me want to bounce on him. His tusks graze my collarbone and I exhale as his hand travels up my thighs possessively.

A timid knock disturbs us, and I hear and feel Igor’s angry low growl.

“Who is it?” I call with equal amounts annoyance and amusement.

“It’s Mulan. King Gremlo is ready for you.” Her voice comes out small and unsure on the other side.

I pull from Igor, and he doesn’t let me loose. His eyes communicate his hunger. He wants me now.

“We are coming.” I say loud enough for Mulan.

“You are not leaving this room right now, Aria.” He says, no jokes or teases in his voice.

“Let’s go and hear what your uncle has to say.” I try to move again, and he doesn’t allow me.

I see the contemplations going on behind his eyes. He is really thinking about not letting me go.

“You have all the time in the world to keep me in this room. Let’s go and make nice with the leader. For me and the babies.” I try again.

That clicks something in him, but he still doesn’t let me go. So, I take his face in my hands. “If you do, then tomorrow you can keep me in bed all day,” I say.

He groans, leaning back to the wall, finally loosening his hold a little. “Fine. I will allow it.”

I wanted him to say yes but I am a little disappointed.

He chuckles. “Are you unhappy I agreed?”

I move from his lap and slide down on the bed. “Yes, you could have used your powers of persuasion to take me.”

He laughs. “Oh, I will. But you are right. We need to meet my uncle, or he will take it as a sign of disrespect, and we are new in the community.”

I drop the dress I had been wearing and I change to another. I also freshen up and wipe my arousal. I learned from Igor that his kind have a long nose, and he could always smell my arousal. I wouldn’t want to give his kind a distraction.

He changes as well, and we exit our chambers, heading down to the meeting place. Today feels a little different. We still have looks on us, but more people we meet today bow to Igor in respect. We cross the assembly to the door I used that first day I arrived here.

“Our dwelling is in that passage.” He points to the last passage here. And I am only grateful they are not on a different level. “I’ll show you once we finish here.” He says and I nod.

He leads me by the small of my back to a meeting room with a large table and large chairs mounted with skulls on top surrounding it. I need to ask Igor what’s with the obsession with skulls and skin.

They could use cloths and wood and they wouldn’t die. Igor’s uncle, mother, Hani, and another female orc, as well as Zod, Azula, Todo and three other male orcs are already seated.

They all halt the chatter, and they turn to us.

“We see you,” Igor says.

“We see you.” They all respond in unison and Igor leads me to a seat and helps me on it because it’s a little high. I feel dainty as the table goes up to my breasts. But I lean back and pretend I don’t see it. I remember my Queen Aria face and mannerisms. *Be polite but stand in your power.*

“Nephew, it has been forever.” Gremlo starts. The orc is fearsome and instead of only two tusks protruding from his mouth like Igor, Gremlo has three on each side and he doesn’t look like he knows what smiling is. He isn’t a creature you would beg mercy from. If you were face to face with him, you’d just surrender.

“Indeed, *King* Gremlo,” Igor responds next to me, his words sounding more like a taunt than a sign of respect.

This orc of mine.

I turn to him to remind him I'm here and we need these orcs acceptance more than his need to prove he is still better than them. At least for now.

But Gremlo doesn't seem touched at all. Like he was expecting nothing less, and so does everyone else.

"A hundred years. Tell us about your adventures in the human world. Of course, other than impregnating the wife of the ruling king of the land." Gremlo says and my insides solidify. My gaze finds Igor and he is also a little taken by surprise.

"You sent a scout?" Igor asks.

"I had to know what my nephew has been doing for the last hundred years. You remember the conditions you left under." He explains.

"How many times?"

"A few years after you left, a month ago, and after you returned."

I look back at Igor and he doesn't answer immediately. He looks around the table. Rage obviously boiling inside him. He bawls his fists, and his chest starts rising and falling quicker and he breathes loudly. Then he looks at me. His reaction softening a little.

"Zod." Igor looks at Zod and Zod actually smirks a little. Not the least concerned by Igor's reaction.

“You were living in paradise. Hardly a punishment if you ask me, cousin.” Zod says looking directly at Igor.

“No wonder he went soft.” Todo taunts next to Gremlo at the head of the table. Everyone finds it funny.

“Are you challenging me to the Ring of Dawn, Todo?” Igor’s smirk is evident even if my face is not on him.

“That’s enough.” Igor’s mother says sternly.

There is silence for a moment before Igor speaks. “Mother talked of new enemies and famine. Would somebody explain to me also why we have Bonos in our tribe?” his voice is clipped for that last one.

“From across the Dali River, 80 years ago came another tribe of orc we’ve never encountered before. They are called the Soko.” Gremlo starts.

Chapter Eleven

Captain

Aria

“**T**hey live deep in the Jaji forest, have dark grey skin, are smaller than us but they are faster. They started killing and taking a few of the Bonos and some of ours who ventured far for hunts. We still don’t understand much about them, and they only show up after a few months. As a result, we made an alliance with the Bono. And we have a perimeter secured next to the great river together with the Bono.” Gremlo explains.

“There are others?” Igor asks the very question I have.

“It seems so, and they aren’t friendlies. They don’t speak our language, and they don’t share our values.” Gremlo says.

“The Bono boy, is he yours, uncle?” Igor asks.

“Yes, he is. His name is Taja and he is a spring. Hani is his mother.” He gestures his hand to Hani. “She is my third wife.”

Gremlo has three wives? Wow.

Hani and Gremlo. Not to judge but I just imagine them kissing. Hani is poised and regal and glamorous – even for an

orc – and Gremlo is – as best as I can describe it – a brute, even for an orc. Rough in many places.

“What happened to Maja?” Igor asks and I see a few people tense.

“Sickness a few years after you left, and she didn’t make it.” Gremlo says. Evident that this is still difficult for him. None of his wives look like they care that he still has feelings for his dead wife. It makes me remember what Igor used to tell me about female orcs not being clingy to their males and only meeting in mating. I wonder if that’s what is happening here.

“She was a strong female. My family and I send you our condolences, uncle.” Igor says.

“The past.” Gremlo says.

“So, son, tell us about your mate.” Igor’s mother says.

“Her name is Aria. She is a former queen of the Gango kingdom where I settled for the past century. We met over nine months ago, and she is my chosen and we are expecting our first children, twins.” He says, notes of pride very evident in his words, his chest puffing as proof.

“How did you end up with a Queen, Imp?” Todo asks.

Igor stiffens next to me. Everyone’s eyes fall on me, and I turn to Igor.

“That is a long tale, and not one I am interested in retelling,” Igor says in an authoritative and hard tone, encouraging no more questions. There is silence for a few moments.

Hani licks her tusks, her eyes trained on me, and I know she will pry when we are alone.

“Welcome to the family, Aria.” Igor’s mother says. “We will do the vow ceremony together with the welcoming tonight. Mulan will assist you with anything you might need to get ready. And with regards to Igor’s old dwelling, Mulan will assist as well but you can take any of the young females too to help. It has been vacant for a century, but many hands will help.”

“Thank you,” I respond, grateful. I just hope this getting ready doesn’t mean learning to dance. I am still not dancing in front of everyone. But I am glad things seem to be getting easier. At least, I hope.

After a few seconds, Igor speaks. “Tell me, now that I am back and you all have decided to strip me of my birthright, what happens now uncle?” Igor asks.

“The resistance at the border needs strong captains. I think you will be impactful there.” Gremlo says.

I stay stuck in the same place, afraid to even breathe. Captain at the border? Where the Soko tribe attacks? Do they hate Igor that much? What if something happens and he doesn’t return?

“Of course, uncle,” Igor answers after a moment. I want to turn to him to ask what is he thinking. I am due in two months. And he is leaving. I feel betrayed. We are supposed to be doing this last stretch together.

But I know better than to disagree with him in public. I need to talk to him. Zod smirks my way with his dagger in his hands – that he keeps playing with – like he can see my conflict.

Gremlo has his eye intent on Igor next to me while the other eyes are on me, waiting for my reaction. I see it then; they are waiting for me to disagree with him publicly. It's all a game. To see what the weak human will say.

They know I am his weakness, and they think I also make him weak.

Igor is right; we are fighting here.

We are at war and everything we do and say is going to have to be careful. These orcs are counting on Igor to fail, for him to go back to his old ways and mess everything up.

Do they want to banish him again? Maybe something worse this time? He makes them nervous, I see that, but it is hard for me to see what they see.

I see now coming back here may have been great for the moment, but our life is going to get more difficult.

“Good. Zod will brief you on the rest of the situation at the border.” Gremlo says then stands up. Igor's mother, another female orc and Hani stand up next. “Welcome home once more, nephew. And congratulations on your mate and coming children.” He says like he is just passing words he has to speak. No emotion or fondness behind them.

Igor rises next and he offers me his hand and I take it and rise.

“We will see you in the afternoon.” Gremlo nods and Igor nods too, tightly. The wives walk out after Gremlo in a line. I notice Igor’s mother was first, and Hani is last. I turn back to the room.

“Welcome back, cousin.” One of the males says with a grin. “I still need you to tell me how you tricked this ethereal being to be yours. I may need to cross the barrier to take one for myself too.”

“Agreed, brother. Maybe we have been looking for mates in the wrong tribe.” The one next to him says.

“Like human women would agree to mate with you. Do you see yourselves?” Zod says in disdain. And the room laughs. So does Igor.

“A hundred years and you still aren’t funny, Kaja.” Igor says.

“You used to laugh at my jokes, Imp.” The one I think is Kaja says.

Igor looks at me. “This is Kaja, his brother Faz, you’ve met the little ingrain Zod and Todo, and that is Hergo, the only decent one and also the oldest. They are all my uncle’s sons from his first mate.” He says.

“Pleasure to meet all of you,” I say with a small, hopefully polite-looking smile.

Kaja returns it with too many teeth and all his tusks.

“Kaja...” Igor warns.

He just laughs. “Come on, cousin. I will not snatch her from your grasp.”

“I will see you in the afternoon. Me and Aria have to go to my old dwelling.” He starts going.

“I will ask Nani to come help as well.” The one they call Faz says.

Igor nods. My eyes don't fail to notice Azula is quiet. Too quiet for all the mouth she always has on her when the males aren't around. Then we walk out.

We walk to the end of the corridor. It is a longer passage than I realized. At the end of it, there is only one corridor to the right and we take that. The corridor isn't lit so Igor takes a lamp, and we walk the passage to two large and high double doors. They are bigger than other doors I've seen indoors. This place looks secluded too.

The doors are secured with chains. Igor hands me the lamp then proceeds to break them. He walks in first. There are a lot of spider webs, and I jump when one runs out. It is dusty. I close my nose as I walk in. The windows are very dirty.

“Well, dusty was one way to put it.” I say as I walk behind him. Most of the furniture looks ancient and unlike all the furniture I've seen here. But some of it looks to only need cleaning. We need to change a lot.

“Everything needs to go.” He says as he pulls me to a beaded curtain that seems to be leading to a passage. The place

is properly lit because it has large windows, and it looks like it was made to have as much light streaming in as possible. I like that most about it.

We see the kitchen, the bedrooms, the washrooms, and all the other rooms. The bathtubs are all in pristine condition, it's just the wooden furniture that needs maybe painting, cleaning or replacing.

“What do you think?” He asks when we return to the main room, a spacious front room with a lot of potential. My mind starts placing everything I want it to be.

“I think I need to speak to Hani. We need a lot of plants.” I say and he smiles.

“You like it?” He asks with his hands on my hips.

“I love it.” I answer honestly. It feels like a step in the right direction. And it is more than enough space for us and the babies.

“I'm happy you do.” He kisses my temple before he hugs me. “Just the beginning, my Queen.”

My heart smiles. He takes me out when I start sneezing.

“Can you go to Mulan while I see a few people?” He asks.

“Yeah. I think I can talk to her about the plan for the new place and we can get a head start maybe gathering help from the orcs who will remove the things we don't need first.” I answer.

“That's great.”

“See you at lunch then?” I say when we come into the assembly and the warm day touches us once more.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” He ushers me into where Mulan’s chambers are. He kisses my forehead before I ascend the stairs.

I knock on Mulan’s door, and I hear a few voices inside and feet shuffling before she opens the door for me.

“Aria.” She says with a bright smile.

“Hello,” I say awkwardly.

She looks back before she looks at me. “Come in, but I have guests. I hope you don’t mind it,” she says and widens the door.

I see Hani and Faz. He is sitting comfortably in one of the chairs.

“The bravest creature I know,” Faz says with a wide grin. I can’t help the chuckle. Igor isn’t as bad as they are all saying. If they knew just how soft the orc is.

“Fancy seeing you here,” I say as I walk in, feeling surprisingly relaxed. I think the fact that Igor seems to like his cousins – well, all except Todo – and they are fond of him makes me feel ease.

“I am just here to scrounge for food. Mulan here cannot resist feeding me,” he says.

“Don’t you have a mate?” I realize once I’ve asked that it is very forward, but his smile says he doesn’t mind it.

“Not yet, but like I said maybe my hope is in your realm. Plus, ruffling father’s feathers with another human woman would do good for my soul.”

We all laugh.

“The King will banish you some day.” Mulan says.

“I hope he does. Look what it did for Imp.” He gestures to me, and I chuckle.

“Anyway, Aria, so how did everything go?” Mulan asks as she rounds the counter, grabbing a jug of a cream slurry.

“We are still both breathing, so I’d say very good,” I answer.

Their grins tell me it’s the right answer.

“You must have magic powers or something, human,” Faz says a little curiously.

“Why?”

“That is not the Imp who left a hundred years ago. He was...something completely different. Now he is....” Faz has a proud look in his eyes even as he doesn’t finish. Then he looks at me. “Thank you for what you did for my cousin. He was always a good orc inside and strong.”

“I didn’t really do anything for him. That’s how I found him. I think hundred years in solitary will change anyone.”

Everyone nods. Then I tell them about Igor’s old place. I help Mulan cook and dish food for me and Igor. Leaving Faz eating everything in Mulan’s kitchen, we go with Hani to check out the place.

They promise to get a few orcs to help, and we will start the next day. They also help me with the ensemble for the afternoon and I am grateful for them.

Chapter Twelve

The Business Of Kings

Igor

I knock on the door I remember so well. I hear weary footsteps come before the door is ajar and a face a little older than I remember comes to view.

“As I live and breathe.” Owa gives me a smile. One of the most genuine and friendliest I’ve encountered since I’ve been back.

“I come bearing gifts.” I reveal a container of figs I got for her.

She beams. “Only you would remember my luxuries. Come in, young one.” She moves and I come in. We take seats.

“How could I forget you, old orc?” I say.

She chuckles. “Jani tells me you have been ruffling feathers again and you brought back something curious with you.” She takes one of the figs and swallows it.

She has a few teeth left but she is still vital. It’s strange that I left her in almost the same state, she is almost a thousand years old, and she hasn’t changed much in the last 200 years.

“I came back with a pregnant mate. She is beautiful. Her name is Aria.” I tell her.

Her eyes glisten and I know where she is headed before she speaks. “I’m sorry about what happened. I didn’t know what they planned.”

I close my eyes briefly. Owa is the oldest sorcerer of the tribe and she taught Soni and Azula. She is a great herbalist and healer too and when I couldn’t sleep before, she made a potion for me, and it helped. Her and her husband, Jani, were like second parents to me.

They raised me as much as my own parents. Jani taught me more than my father about being an orc, the lessons on honor - though I didn’t listen a lot - but they have always had plenty of patience for me.

Their only child died in their 20s and they have never had another child. But they are happy, and they were always the models of a love that I wanted for myself.

They were the only couple that stayed together in our tribe, and everyone made fun of it, but when I was growing up, I admired it. I’ve always found the idea of keeping your mate at arm’s length absurd, and they were the biggest reason for that.

So, I can never be angry at her or Jani, and I have never held any ill feelings for them.

“I did deserve it, Owa.” I say. Her eyes widen, making me chuckle. “Don’t tell them I admitted it but being away with no way to return gave me a lot of time to think. And believe me I

spent decades thinking I was coming back to exert my revenge on those who betrayed me, but meeting Aria has given me a new perspective.” I pause. “What’s more? I love another more than I love myself. So, tell me, old orc, what do you think about that?”

“I’d say the humans have sent us a ghoul because there is no way you are son of Zad.” Jani says from behind me, and I turn to find him wearing a fond smile.

“I have to agree with my mate. Reveal yourself, ghoulish imposter.” They both laugh.

“No imposter, old orc, just growth.”

Jani comes to take the seat next to his mate and he takes one of the figs in the container. It always fascinated me that Jani doesn’t necessarily like figs in general but will eat them if she’s eating them. I see it with new eyes now, a better perspective and I understand.

“It is good seeing you, young one. How were your travels? Besides taking the wife of a ruling king and running away with her.” Jani grins and his vowed elbows him, but she thinks it’s funny too.

News of that sure has traveled fast. I think I need to speak to Zod. He said he went a month before I came back, that makes me wonder what he saw and if he saw me before I was taken. Or he got there when I had already been arrested and if so, why didn’t they come for me.

“They were long. Lonely. I missed my people.” I say honestly.

“And you were missed too.” Jani says, but they look at each other.

“Has your uncle told you about the new threat?” Owa asks.

I nod. “The Soko? Yes, he told me. What do you know about them?” If anyone maybe knows more about them it’s these two.

Owa looks at her mate who nods at her before she comes back to me. “My great grandmother told me about them when I was a girl. We thought they were extinct or died off, and it’s because of how vile they were that their history was erased and banished. They are magic users. Most of our practices come from them, from long ago when the tribes lived together before the first migration, a few thousand years before. They are practitioners of esoteric magic and they like using orc parts for their potions.” She says.

I am left stunned. “I don’t understand.”

“None of us do.” Jani says.

“So, is that why they were taking Bonos?” I ask.

“I believe so. Their rituals favor the Bonos because of their physical features but we can’t relax either. A few of ours have also been taken.” Owa says.

“Does my uncle and the leader of the Bonos know of this, old orc?”

They look at each other again, before Owa shakes her head.

“Why haven’t you told them?” I ask, voice lower like someone may hear.

“There is nothing he can do about them.” She says.

“Why?”

“Only the rightful King can save us and keep them on their side of the great river and bring us all peace. That’s what the spirits say.”

I am left hanging. “What does that mean, old orc?”

“You know what it means, young one,” Jani says.

The room falls in silence for a few minutes as I look at them; a part of me hoping they are playing. I don’t know what I will do if it’s correct and I don’t know how everyone is going to react if it’s true.

The Soko problem is mine to solve? I know for a fact my uncle and mother will never understand or receive this news. They’ll think we are all lying. And my uncle has a tight grip on power, he would never vacate my chair in peace.

This is bad.

This is bad for me. I had hoped for a life of peace, at least for now. This will give me no peace. What about my children? If I take this to my uncle, it means I turn this tribe on its head again and I am already seen as the same manic orc who is power hungry.

This wouldn't be an issue if Aria wasn't pregnant, and I was alone. If she wasn't here, I would have taken my throne back. I would have taken my place and shed blood if I need to. But my family and I have no back, nor forward.

I thought I'd bide my time for a year or two until I can find a safe place to move my family before I claimed what is theirs. But this will have me fight well before then. Especially if this tribe aims another attack. And according to the reports they haven't attacked the borders in six months, meaning their attack is due any moment.

"They will all call us liars." I say.

"Last time I remember you did not care for the opinions of irrelevant orcs, son of Zad." Jani says.

"I have a family. I have a human mate." I say. "She is due in less than three months. My uncle has placed me at the border to captain, I will have to leave my children here while I am away."

They don't answer me, they just look at me with faces full of compassion. I understand.

They can't tell me what to do.

"How do I do it?"

"You are asking a slither how to fly." They both stare at me. It is clear, I have to figure it out.

"I will say this, your destiny will meet you when you meet yourself again. The past and the present. Stay true to the orc

you are. To the orc you have always been. To the orc you are still to be. That's what the spirits say." Owa says.

That sends me in an even bigger confusion. When I meet myself. I open my mouth and close it. *When I meet myself?* What does that mean?

After some time, I understand there is nothing more they can offer me. I remember something I wanted from Owa.

"Old orc, I need your favor." I say trying to remove my mind from that big bowl of confusion.

"Tell me your story, son of Zad," she says

"You welcomed me to this world; I would like you to welcome my spawn."

She and her husband smile. "It would be my honor."

"Your fruit is already blessed by the Gods, son of Zad. We haven't had twins in this tribe in over millennia." Jani says.

I hadn't really thought deeply about that.

"So, when are you bringing me your mate so I can meet her? You know I hardly go out to the sun anymore. It harms my eyes." Owa says and her mate looks at her with so much softness, but also pain. Like he wishes he could take it in his own body. Exactly what I would do for Aria.

"Will you not attend our vow ceremony and our welcoming celebration tonight, old orc?"

"I will but I cannot be out for a long time. Even so, everyone will be crowding her for her attention. Bring your

human to me so I may bless her.”

“I will bring her tomorrow,” I say.

I spend another hour with them catching up before I leave. I promised Aria to meet her for lunch, but I have some time before then. So, I climb the stairs and head to talk to Zod. I knock on the door. No one answers. I decide to knock next door to Faz and I am not surprised he isn't there.

Faz is a friendly and open orc. He talks to everyone, and he is always surrounded by female orcs. He cannot stay away from the females. It is absolute luck he hasn't chosen a mate, otherwise, I don't know how much she would appreciate that. When I don't find them, I decide to go find Aria at Mulan's.

I cross the assembly again, passing the children as they play in the few big trees that were planted here and they run around. In a few months and years that will be my children too. Although my children may be a little different, but they will grow up amongst my people and they will have a piece of their heritage with them.

I climb the stairs to Mulan's quarters. As I near, I am drawn by noise, and I hear Aria's voice amongst the laughing ones. I knock.

The voices get lower before I hear footsteps and my uncle's Bono wife, Hani, appears.

“Prince Imp.” She says. I sense some animosity in her voice. I was beginning to think I was the only sane one who remembers that us and the Bono hate each other.

“It’s just Igor now,” I say, making effort to be friendly.

She moves from the door, and I see Aria sitting down next to Faz and I walk in. She smiles at me. They all smile at her like they are sharing a joke I don’t know.

“Are you ready for lunch?” Aria asks.

“Yes. I am ready.”

“Okay, let me get your pots then.” Mulan rushes to the kitchen.

I stretch my hand to help Aria up. The people in this room chuckle and she rolls her eyes a little.

“Mind sharing the joke, Faz?” I look down at my cousin.

“Nothing, cousin. We were just getting to know your mate here. She is a wealth of wisdom and tricks.” Faz grins widely.

“Definitely full of character too. She is long-suffering indeed.” Hani says.

I turn my glare to her when Aria looks like she wants to hide before I take our containers and we leave. Aria doesn’t say anything on our way to where we are staying. I dish for us and bring it to the bed where she is already sitting.

“So, are you going to tell me what that was about?” I ask when we start eating.

She sighs. “They think I have human powers I use to control you. They wagered on you not being able to stay away from me for long.”

I quip a brow. “That’s all?”

“They told me how that is unusual, and everybody has noticed how much you...dote on me.”

“And that makes you feel ashamed?”

“No,” she says quickly.

“But?”

She looks at me before she sighs again. “It makes me remember how different I am.”

“Did they make you feel uncomfortable?”

“Oh no. They thought it was hilarious. You were more the subject of the jokes than me,” she says.

“Faz is an imbecile. Don’t mind much of what he says. He slammed his head in a rock when he was little.” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

It works, she laughs.

Chapter Thirteen

Vow

Aria

Igor helps me in the ensemble I got from Mulan and Hani. It is mostly beaded clothes with a skirt that is shorter than anything I've ever worn in public. Apparently, if I need to belong, I need to start dressing like I am one of them too.

“Are you sure you are comfortable with this?” Igor asks from his knees. He is tying the belt below my stomach.

“It's just a body, right?” Lucky for me I don't have marks in visible places and the one behind my neck I covered with my hair. So, I can wear this short thing.

“You don't have to do anything you aren't comfortable with, Aria.”

“I appreciate your words, but I want to. I want to try to blend in and learn your culture.” I say. “Others will accept me easier if I try, Igor.” I hold on to his shoulder as he helps me in the sandals.

“Okay. But promise me you will tell me if you are uncomfortable with anything?”

I run my fingers through his untied hair and link my forehead to his. “I will. Now, let’s go get married, orc. I am weary of being unclaimed.” I tease.

“Aria, I was claiming you just this past hour.” He says with his own tease.

I snort as I laugh.

The sun is already down, and we are now waiting for someone to fetch us when everything is ready. I am fortunate there aren’t any pre-vow rituals or traditions like in my culture. Me and Igor didn’t have to stay away from each other.

Hani is sent to fetch us. I notice she and Igor don’t have the best energy around one another. I haven’t found the time to ask what that is all about. Igor hasn’t said anything on it and neither has Hani. But I know Igor does not like Bonos. He despises them, in fact. But I am finding a friend in Hani, and he needs to bury that. If not for his personal peace, then for me.

Igor ushers me by his hand and we follow Hani who has a headpiece covering her face. I only know it’s her because she is green. When we get to the assembly, it is beautiful with many lamps along the perimeter of the area. Everybody is seated on furs, on the ground, and everybody has their faces covered.

Me and Igor walk to the front where Soni stands face uncovered. Igor’s mother and Gremlo also sit on either side in front in their royal garb, complete with all the skin and the

crowns made of bones. The moon is already out shining brightly. Me and Igor stand in front.

“Igor, son of Zad, you brought a mate with you. Present her to the horde. State your intentions.” Soni says.

“This is Aria, daughter of Nathaniel of the Gango kingdom. I present her as my mate. I am here so she is severed to her previous mate and becomes mine in all realms. In high heaven and in the lowest purgatory.” He says, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Aria, daughter of Nathaniel, do you accept Igor, son of Zad as your mate, and sever yourself from any previous connections in front of the Gods of all creation?”

“Yes, I do.” I answer.

“Good.” She says. “The symbols.” She calls to someone behind me, and Hani comes forward with two items, a bracelet and a dagger. Odd, but I say nothing. Igor hasn’t told me what we will actually do or why we need daggers. She hands them to Soni.

“Your marks for each other. Son of Zad, you will go first.” She gives Igor the pieces. Igor slides it into my hand. It feels like I can finally breathe. I know I left Shepherd long ago but being still married to him in my world felt heavy and I never quite felt like I had gotten rid of him. But now I will really belong to Igor.

“Repeat after me: I choose you amongst many.” Igor follows, his eyes steady on mine and filled with so much pride.

Our children kick and I blink as fresh tears threaten to spill but I hold them back. “I give you my name. I give you my vow. I give you my strength.” He repeats, “This is the symbol of my commitment to you. Today you leave your mother and your father, and you become mine. Death to anyone who tells me otherwise.” I almost laugh. So orcish of them to include something about death.

“Aria, it’s your turn. Take the dagger.” She hands it to me. I hesitate for a second before I look up at Igor a little worried. Do they expect me to stab Igor to show that I love him?

Igor doesn’t seem worried at all, in fact, his face is full of anticipation. She comes closer and demonstrates with her hands. “You will mark him here, then repeat these words after me,” she says.

I nod because it seems this is what everybody expects, and I try to not show I am a little worried about cutting Igor. I inhale a deep breath and Igor nods lightly, giving me courage. The dagger is quite sharp because when I press it, it goes deeper than I think.

I almost gasp but Igor just smiles. I cut him again, two lines crossing each other. His blood slides out of him and to the ground. My heart sinks for him.

“Cover his wound with this and repeat after me as you do.” She comes closer with a mixture of green herbs.

“Thank you for choosing me amongst many.” I repeat. Then I pick the sludge and start covering. “I will honor you. I will carry your name with pride. I will serve only you. I will feed

you and your offspring. And I will comfort you at night.” I repeat but I almost laugh loudly. They put that in the vows. These orcs are more forward than I thought. I see the hint of amusement in Igor’s eyes too. I finish covering the cuts.

“Aria of Nathaniel, you now belong to Igor of Zad. Let no one ever tell you otherwise. Go forth and be fruitful.” She smears something red on both our foreheads.

The crowd roars with applause. And they all rise. Igor winks at me before we turn to face everyone. He lifts my hand with the bracelet and there is more joyous noise. Igor’s mother and Gremlo join us on each side.

“Welcome to the new members of our tribe. The lost son and his mate. Tonight, we will eat and drink in their honor as we accept back in our ranks one of our own.” Gremlo says next to Igor and the crowd cheers.

I feel Igor’s hand squeeze me a little and I turn to him. He looks fine but I sense something wrong.

“Igor fought for his place back with us. As you may remember, he was banished to the human realm. But he is back. And there are changes from what has been previously expected. I would like to put you all at ease and assure you there will not be any changes in leadership. Igor has seen that he will be more effective in the fight against The Soko at the border. He will lead the team of *soros*.” Gremlo turns to Igor with a smile.

The look I see on Igor’s face is beyond cold. So cold that I only hear murmurs in the crowd, and no one cheers. Igor keeps

his gaze firmly on the crowd and the creature that stands next to me is nothing like the one who was smiling to me just a few minutes ago.

“And my nephew has agreed to join the team that is leaving tomorrow in the afternoon. As you all know we are waiting for an attack any day now, and we need all able hands we can find. And I have trust in my nephew, as I’m sure all of you do.”

Instead of happy claps again, there are awkward murmurs, but nobody says anything. I choose to focus on the crowd.

“Enjoy the meat and drink your throats under and may the Gods fill you with glee.” Gremlo finishes with a twisted grin on his face and Igor is holding me a little tight, but I don’t say anything.

But he is leaving tomorrow. Why are they taking him away so soon? Did he know?

“Drink and be merry!” Igor’s mother says next to me, and she lifts a chalice. The crowd claps with cheers.

We go into the crowd and many pat us in congratulations. We stand around as we receive everybody’s congratulations and Igor introduces me to many orcs with their mates. I can barely concentrate, most as my mind is frantic thinking about him leaving tomorrow.

I don’t know if I’m ready to be without him here yet, and with my birthing day expected in just over two months, should he even be leaving for such a dangerous place? Maybe if I ask

him to not go he won't. He has never denied me anything. I should ask.

The elderly orc we met yesterday comes walking with an elderly female orc. I am a little surprised they are holding each other's hands. That is the first time I am seeing orcs show each other any kind of outside affection.

"Aria, I am Owa, Igor's godmother." The female orc speaks first before Igor or Jani do.

Igor has a fond smile on his face.

"Nice to meet you, Owa. So does that mean you helped birth him?" I ask, needing to know if that tradition is the same as our realm. Feeling plenty comfortable with these orcs for an unexplained reason.

"Yes. I was the first to touch him and see him. I can even relay to you how he cried the first time." She giggles.

I laugh. "I am looking forward to it."

"This is my mate, Jani. He has told me much about you. You are like a feast for the Gods, child." She smiles.

I smile back. I feel Igor chuckling, relaxed when he is around them.

Owa suddenly stops blinking for a second and she gets an intense look on her, looking at me like she is seeing through and beyond me, and she touches my face with utter concentration. The mood shifts instantly. I throw my eyes nervously at Igor, but he doesn't have any alarm in him.

“The Goddess Odala is with you.” Then she looks at Igor.
“Son of Zad, you really found the Queen.”

I swallow. I *was* a queen. Didn't she hear I just got severed from my old life? Is she okay? Odala? Isn't she the Goddess of witches? When I was a child, my mother used to tell me and my brother about the Goddess of witches. Maybe it's because my mother is a witch. Maybe that's what she sees. It's in my bloodline.

“Old orc, I don't understand,” Igor says next to me, his hand steadies me by my back. I hear the concern and curiosity in his voice.

“You will.”

“Owa, Odala is the Goddess of witches. I am not a witch. How is she with me? Am I going to be a witch like my mother?” I ask.

“You are not.” She says simply. Then like nothing happened her face and eyes go back to normal and her hand falls from me.

She smiles.

“Owana, let's go lie down. The moon is high.” Jani says to his mate, looking concerned.

I look around and luckily orcs are moving around, many are headed in the direction of the big eating hall.

“Bring me the Queen tomorrow, young one. I must go rest. Happy festivities.” She says with a warm smile to both of us.

“Go rest, old orc. I will bring her to you in the morning.” Igor says and we bid both of them farewell.

I turn to look at Igor. As I am fixing my mouth to ask him for clues, Azula catches my eye as she approaches. She doesn't spare Owa or Jani any friendly looks, and I don't know why I'm surprised she doesn't like one of the few nice people here.

Igor stiffens next to me when he turns and sees her.

“We aren't going to wait for you in there forever, Imp.” Her tone isn't friendly, and she spares me no glances at all. All her energy is focused solely on Igor. I don't know if she wants me to ask about it or she is doing it because I won't do anything to her. But every time I come in contact with this orc, I realize more and more why I don't like her.

“We'll come in when we are good and ready.” Then Igor turns to me and tunes her out.

I sigh because she just stands there not going anywhere. I take his hand. “Let's go, *Imp*,” I say.

He chuckles. Azula stomps ahead of us and it starts raining just as we enter.

The night is long. The festivities are loud and beautiful, and I get my first glimpse of the orc culture Igor always told me about. There is dancing of various groups. Mostly the children and the young women who are still looking to be chosen.

Luckily, I got away with not dancing. But it was a good night and the first since I've been here where I felt like I

wasn't the center of the talk or attention, and everyone had a sense of community.

We went outside and watched the performances. Igor drank a little as a challenge from his cousins and is a little drunk by the time we leave.

Chapter Fourteen

This Is Everything

Igor

We slept fine last night. It had been a while since I had real ale. She was happy for the first time, and I was so happy she felt safe enough to relax.

But when I woke up this morning she was already up and moving around the room.

Me and Aria finish brushing our teeth. She still isn't talking as freely to me as she normally does. She has been giving me one-word answers and I have an idea of why, but so many things happened last night that it could be anyone of them getting to her more than the others.

My uncle's ambush with the announcement of me leaving today, or what Owa said to her, or Azula. I want to comfort her, but I don't know how to help any of those things.

She unties her hair and I know she is going to wash it. The water was ready before I got up.

"Aria?" I call to her. I know once she undresses, I won't be able to think. I regret saying I'd take her to Jani and Owa after

breakfast because I want to keep her here all day.

She halts as her hands latch onto the hair tie. She looks over her shoulder. “Hm?”

“Are you angry at me?”

She continues what she was doing. “Why would I be angry at you, Igor? You did nothing wrong.”

That sounds like I definitely did something wrong. “What did I do, Dove?”

She proceeds to undo her belt. I stand at her front and grab her hands. My body is already taut with anticipation. We hardly ever not make love before we wake up. My body is already crying for what it is used to. So, I need to talk with as clear a head as possible.

She sighs and pulls her hands from me. “How long will you be gone?” She asks, eyes not lifting to mine.

Frack. “Will you hate me if I say I don’t know?” I have always been honest with her and even though I want to ease this for her, the reality is it will be tough times for us, especially right now. I know my uncle has his eye on me and we are being watched.

“Yes,” she responds, but smiles joylessly after. My heart sinks when she lifts her teary eyes that she is smiling through.

“Dove...” I lean in and place my lips on top of her head. I wish I could take her somewhere safe, and we can raise our children alone like we had planned.

What I wouldn't do to give her the life we once had. If only we could return to her realm and get back to our home and our life. But I have to believe that things will be good here. I need to. Otherwise, why am I doing everything I hate?

I touch her shoulders and drop her dress. Then I pull away. I unknot my pants and they drop to the floor. I smile a little when her gaze lands on my girth that is very ready.

"Come, let me help you with your hair." I lead us to the tub, and we settle in. She sits on me as I soap her hair.

"Tell me what you are thinking..." I say when she doesn't start any conversation.

"Last night was good." She says softly.

My hand halts a little before it continues. This was not where I saw this conversation going. "It was?"

"I saw it, the sense of community and the culture." She pauses. "It felt like I wasn't an outsider." Her voice is still low. But she isn't sad, just reflective.

"The ale is still as good as I remember." I reminisce fondly.

She looks over her shoulder with a face. "Your taste buds are all wrong or I must have not tasted the correct one."

"You didn't," I confess. She had wanted to have the ale, but I had Mulan prepare another drink for her.

"Igor!"

I chuckle.

“You are carrying orcs in there; you saw what it did to me.”
I joke, making her roll her eyes.

Then she smiles. “Faz is insane.”

Faz had two young female unmated orcs fighting over him last night. Apparently, he has been sneaking to their chambers on alternate nights and both of them thought they were in line to be chosen. That’s when I took my mate and we left.

“They all are,” I tell her.

“They are pleasant, most of your cousins. A departure from their father.” She pauses. “Even Zod isn’t as bad as I thought he was when I first met him. I thought it was me he disliked at first, but he isn’t very social, is he?”

I start massaging her scalp and she cranes her neck with closed eyes.

“He has his moments, but he is a little reclusive and he often likes doing things by himself.” Zod has always been like that. He is the second son after Hergo – the quiet one – but he has always been mature and long thinking, even as he is manipulative and self-serving.

He doesn’t like most getting too close and he keeps everyone at a safe distance. I also noticed that he wasn’t there at our vow ceremony, but he merged during the assembly celebrations. Strange but maybe he was with a young female. He is a sneaky demon.

“I’ve noticed. He shows up and slips away without a word. You see him, you don’t. Talks just enough to ensure someone

knows he's there but seems like he is always on his personal time," she says.

"How did you notice all of that? You've known him barely a week." I haven't been around Aria with other people. I've always known she is intelligent but her reading of him is spot on.

She shrugs. "When you are seen and not heard for most of your life, you learn...people."

"Okay, do...Jani."

She is silent for a few moments. "Honorable, honest, stubborn. I mean, this is a tribe of orcs where I have not seen them touch, never even hug, let alone smile freely at one another but he was holding his mate and caring for her in the midst of all that and living in his convictions." She pauses. "I like them."

I pick up the jug I use to rinse her hair and collect water in the tub and start pouring it on her. She sighs a content sigh.

"He is a stubborn orc." I find a grin on my face.

"Is that where you get it from?" She says with a small smirk on her face.

"I am a combination of him and my father." I say, fond memories bubbling of both orcs training me and teaching me as a young orc. They often argued about many things. Jani was my trainer who wanted me to have heart with axe, where else my father wanted a physically capable orc for his throne.

I was often stunned to grow because while my father wanted me to repress my emotions and be more controlled, Jani wanted me to express them but also apply mind and heart and patience and foresight. And I wanted to do it my way.

I see the merit in all their teachings now even though most times I never wanted to.

I notice that Aria hasn't responded when I fill the jug with water once more.

“Aria?”

“Igor, what did Owa mean yesterday?” She sounds deep in thought, and I feel a little concern.

In truth, the events of yesterday when Owa met Aria were strange. And I don't know what to make of them. But Aria is my Queen as I am the rightful King of this tribe. I haven't told Aria. But do I want to?

If I tell her she will worry about me more when I'm gone. The thought that this Soko problem could be for me to solve will worry her and I am trying to unburden her as much as possible as we get closer to her birthing date.

“I am the rightful heir, and you are the correct Queen.” I say instead.

She doesn't answer immediately, and I know she is overthinking it. I place the jug because her hair is done and now, we can change the water and have a real bath. I pull her closer and the water moves making its way for her.

“One day, Queen. One day, it will all be yours.” I stretch my hands over her belly, and I say it to her ear. Her body goes soft instantly, and she moves her face to me slightly. Her eyes are dripping with lust. With my toe I press the button to start draining the water out. We need fresh water.

“You know, orc, I don’t need all of that. I just want us, just me and you. Just...love, our love. Just you next to me and making me yours again...and again.”

My balls tighten and I have to shut my eyes for a moment before I let go of my seed.

“My love is all you need?” My voice comes out in a lower register, and she leans into me like she wants to melt in me.

When the water is halfway down on my legs, I turn on the fresh water and move the faucet to be on the side of her and the water starts flowing in. I slightly rinse my hands.

Then my hands find each of her hard nipples and I want to drool as her body reacts.

“I need you everywhere.” She says in a low, sultry voice. The register that is only for my ears. A part of her she reserves only for me.

She throws her head to my shoulders as I twist and pinch her nipples, listening to what she wants. Her breasts got a lot more sensitive when she got pregnant, but it also meant I could pleasure her in more ways.

She moans my name right in my ear and I feel a squeeze of precum squeeze out. She spreads her legs and one of her hands

reaches below. *Good girl.*

“That’s it.” I praise.

She moans a little louder when she starts stroking herself and I feel her body tighten as her hips adopt a rhythm and she loses her mind with closed eyes.

This is everything.

“You are such a good little human,” I growl low in her ear, and she bites her lower lip as her eyes flutter with an eye roll.

“Again...” she whimpers breathlessly. Her hands picking up the motion.

“You want me to call you a good little human?” I find that sexy.

“Again, Igor, again...”

“I want you to rub that clit in circles just like that and come for me. Do you think you can be a good little human for me?”

“Yes!” She moans loudly and detonates when I latch on the side of her neck, sucking hard, pinching her nipples harder as she writhes on top of me. She closes her legs and stuffs her fingers in her mouth to stop another loud moan.

This is everything. That’s all I can think. Having Aria in my arms, watching the pleasure on her face is all the joy I could think off. It’s what true happiness is for me. After a minute, she goes lax in my arms, her eyes still closed.

“Okay, orc, we are not leaving this room until you must go.” She tells me. I agree but we do have to see the old orcs.

“Jani and Owa, we promised to go to them...” I remind her.

“I will go by myself later or you can take me before you go, but I don’t know how much time you’ll be gone, and I don’t want to spend any second elsewhere.” She opens her eyes for the last part. My resolve melts instantly.

How could I ever deny my wife?

Chapter Fifteen

Remember Who You Fight For

Aria

My head lolls as sleep slips from me. I smile when I find the closed eyes of the napping orc whose head is on my belly, large arms are holding me tightly. But the sun is on its last stride headed for the horizon and I know he will have to leave soon.

Today felt like we were back to us again, like we were at our home. We made love all day, breaking for food. It was like we were filling each other's cup for the separation that is upon us.

In this very moment, I am content, and I have everything I want. And my life is indeed perfect.

I get a wave of anxiety when I hear the footsteps outside our door before the knock completely pulls me out of paradise. I don't have to ask to know, that is our sign to stop...fondling... and go and join the community.

Igor moves instantly, his eyes finding mine quickly and I smile down at him. He doesn't. He knows its time. He leans

down and kisses my belly.

“I have to go, little orcs, but I will return. Honor your mother while I’m away, okay?” He speaks to my stomach, something he hasn’t done before. I run my fingers through his longer hair. He didn’t cut it the past month or so and it grew a little. At the house he ensured to trim it every second week to keep it just shoulder length.

“We all love you. And remember that we will be right here waiting for you when you return.” I say. He pulls his weight from me and kisses me a lingering kiss.

The knock goes off again, time is really over. We both get dressed. Luckily, we bathed before the nap, and I don’t have to worry about everyone smelling everything we did today.

We leave the chambers, and we find two waiting springs at the door. Igor’s demeanor changes completely.

They follow behind us and we descend the stairs to the assembly area. Most people are going on their days, doing this and that. It seems I’m the only one who was making a big deal about Igor leaving. Igor takes me to Owa and Jani. They welcome us.

“Interesting what they call morning in the human realm, son of Zad.” Owa says.

“We see you. The day got away from us, old orc.” Igor replies.

Owa and Jani give each other knowing looks, and they try to hide their amusement.

“Of course, young one.” Jani says.

“Come this way and let me give you something to drink, King.” Owa says.

King?

Igor moves behind her and no one seems to notice. Maybe she forgot and is speaking like she did yesterday. She is endearing but a little strange, but Igor loves them, and he seems closer to them. He treasures them very much.

He lowers himself to his knees, and I watch in fascination as the old orc brings a basin of unknown concoctions to Igor’s mouth and he drinks. He does all this in his heavy armor that looks just as terrifying as the one he came wearing to rescue me; he looks intimidating and full of authority.

“Good.” Owa says when Igor finishes whatever she gives him.

“Tea?” Jani asks me, and I nod absentmindedly as I watch the scene before me.

Owa dips her thumb on a small mortar, and she smears something that looks like oil on Igor’s forehead.

“There. All ready.” She says, sounding proud of herself. Igor rises with ease, and he gives her a meaningful look. He then comes to me, places my tea on a table, and pulls me to a nearby room.

He stands in front of me, and I can’t help the pride. Igor is really mine and I am his. I lift my hands and touch his face. He closes his eyes briefly.

“Remember who you fight for. I will never accept anything less than this from you, Igor.”

He receives my words then he takes my hands and kisses my wrists and the bracelet. He places his now healed scar on my wrists over the bracelet.

“I will always come back to you and our children. Nothing will ever stop me.” His eyes are on me, and I nod.

I lean in on my tippy toes and he comes close. I kiss him and he grins. He leaves, Jani walks him out.

It’s strange. I didn’t want him going but instead of the sadness I thought I’d feel, I just feel proud. He is going out there to fight for us, to work for us. To ensure me and the babies have a good life here.

“Come this side, Queen.” Owa pulls me from my thoughts.

“Um, old orc, why do you call me Queen?” I ask, picking up my tea.

“Shh, the walls have ears, dear. Come this side. We can talk.” She whispers and darts her eyes around like someone will jump out or is sneaking around.

I follow her. She leads me to another room. This one is full of plants almost everywhere. Even on the floor. But so much sunlight streams from the large windows.

We are on the east side of the mountain, assuming the sun rises in east here. I’d have to ask. Now that Igor is gone, I need to learn things and be competent.

She has two chairs here. No doubt hers and her mates. I take one, and she pulls out a yarn and needle. I assume she will start talking. But her gaze goes to the great desert opening right in front of us and she starts sewing mindlessly.

She sways to the left and to the right as if a tune plays in her head and she is dancing. And I observe her for a few minutes.

Her aura is calming. She may look and speak a little strange, but I feel calm and still in her presence, especially in this room.

“Your mother, tell me about her.” She says out of nowhere.

My mother? Then I remember what she said about the witch goddess. Maybe she’s trying to make that connection.

“She...” I drift off. I don’t think I have ever talked about my mother to anyone who wasn’t Igor before. But I look to the great beyond, the red-ish brown desert, and I bring the tea to my lips.

“She was a great mother before she up and left me and my brother one day.”

I can’t help the bitterness from returning. I haven’t had a moment to think because I have been worried about everything since we arrived here. I saw her and she told me she loved me. My brows knit together. Luna is my sister. I have a sister who is a wolf.

“Is that all you remember about her?” Owa asks. Her eyes still looking far herself. She looks sadder for me than I would think anyone who doesn’t know me would.

“She is a witch. I just found that out last week as we were escaping death, me and Igor.” I pause in reflection. “She is the reason me and Igor survived. I was on stand for execution for being pregnant with Igor’s offspring.”

I realize when I am finished that her gaze is now on me and by the wideness of her eyes, I may have revealed more than I should.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to unload my sorrow on you. I was supposed to—”

“I’m sorry.” She blurts out.

“There’s no need to be sorry, old orc. It’s the past. At least I know she lives, and I have a wonderful younger sister.” Tears sting the back of my eyelids. Luna. My sister. I wish I’d known. I wish so many things.

“You have a sister?” She asks curiously.

I decide that revealing she is a wolf is probably a lot for this first meet. I have already revealed so much.

“Yes, and she is beautiful,” I say simply.

The room descends in silence. After much time in comfortable silence, she says, “Everything has a bigger purpose, Queen. Remember that.”

I feel the heaviness of her words and I don’t turn. But I hear them.

My life has been a series of events I had no control over. It always seemed others were controlling it and moving me

around like a doll. It wasn't until I met Igor that I felt like I gained a sense of control. It felt like I was making choices and directing my life.

Maybe that's one of the reasons our love feels so good; because I chose it. I chose him. Against everything else, I chose him. I chose us. And with him is where I feel like I am finally on the correct path.

He really is my destiny.

Chapter Sixteen

You Never Stop

Igor

I get off my *karaji* and the soros and I walk through the gates of the camp after the three days of travel. I can already feel my skin itch.

There are many of ours I see here but I also see a lot of Bonos too. I hope they know what they are doing. One of ours that I don't recognize leads us to the big structure built here that goes up a few levels.

I don't miss the hateful glares from the Bonos and even many from my own tribe. Maybe they think I'm here to disrupt them. I don't see that as a negative.

I would have to see what they are working with and see how much work we need to do and the strategies they are using. I was told in the last two attacks, the Sokos have taken at least 3 orcs with them. They never see when they take them until they are escaping or head counting after the dust settles.

I just hope to the Gods I won't be working with incompetent soldiers. I am here to work and see how we can eradicate this

Soko problem as quickly as I can manage. I have a wife and children to get back to.

I like the word mate, but I am finding I like the human term of wife also. Though they mean much of the same, but here in my realm orcs are allowed to make their pickings of female orcs and take more than one. In the human realm, it is one man and one woman, and therefore the two enter in a covenant where they promise to only be with one another forever.

I prefer that than Aria having to have another female as her second. I will never give or borrow to another what belongs to her, just like she is mine alone. In this life or the next, in all realms.

The large solid double door opens before we get to the tower and a stacked green orc that I recognize much too well makes himself known.

“Igor the coward.” He says when he stops, and he straightens himself so he’s standing to his full length. Bono soldiers on each side of him. I stand approximately 10 feet from him. It would take two strides to get to him.

“Hettar the weak.” I don’t bother moving my gaze from his. The whole energy darkens as we stand there. No doubt both of us remembering our last encounter.

Last time he saw me I had my dagger deep in the guts of the orc who killed my father, his useless uncle. I spared Hettar because he begged for his life, and I found it pitiful. It would have been a mercy to kill him, but I wanted him to live with that moment and remember how he begged.

“You seem to think this is still the same realm you left. You are in for a realm of shock.” He says. “Soldiers, retreat.” He calls and all the soros I just came with leave my side. They go stand on each side of him and I am left alone.

What the hell? I look around and harden my face.

“I am your captain.” I remind them. They say nothing but many look anywhere but at me. Fracken cowards.

“Address the traveler, Bara.” He orders one of my soros.

“Leader Hettar is supreme authority in camp.” He says without looking at me. He fears my reaction. I look around at all of them, they all do.

I stuff my anger down. *Remember you are here for your family, Igor. You have to return to your family. It's just for a little while then you will remind them all why they bowed to you.*

“Alright, *leader*, I am reporting to camp with the soros. What is your instruction?” I say evenly.

I see it not just in Hettar's face, but they are all surprised. Hettar looks at me for a second only before he says. “Soros, find your peers and your dwellings. Training starts at first light. Igor, come with me.” Then he turns and walks back in the tower. I follow after him and walk through the open door.

I find a round table that has about 30 chairs and halfway filled. Half of my kin and half Bonos.

Faces fall, and some twist in disgust, as some in delight and amusement, but none say anything.

“Brothers in arms, welcome Igor of Zad. The captain of the soros who will be trained for the north, near the overflow,” Hettar says.

I see their faces relax with pleasant reaction. *That can't be good.*

“Finally out of purgatory, Imp.” Cello, the hunched-in orc who was once my mentee says with a mock. He was once one of my most trusted soldiers.

“I had to. I heard you are being humiliated by tiny orcs.” I say. Although I want to show my amusement, I keep my expression neutral. This is not friendly ground.

I take a seat.

“I am going to enjoy watching you against those slippery devils, *captain.*” He responds.

Just as I am fixing my mouth to respond, Hettar interjects. “Enough. We are here on serious business.” He looks at both of us in annoyance.

Hettar did well for himself. Me and him are from the same generation but he's a few decades younger than me and we met in battle a few times. We ended up being somewhat of acquaintances when we met hunting one day. For the first time I saw more than a filthy Bono, one who wasn't all brawn and no brain.

We were well on our way to being friends when his uncle, one of the elders of their tribe killed my father. Then years later when I went to exert my revenge, I found him with his

uncle. I may have been on a path of vengeance, but I couldn't kill a friend.

I promised him an honorable death one day when he was my power equal. Even in my savagery I couldn't kill a weeping orc. So, I spared him. But he seems to have grown from that, not surprising, he showed much promise. I guess I am about to see just how much.

“The last attack was 6 moons ago. And according to their patterns in recent years, they will be attacking again soon. We have extra weight because of the new soros on both tribes who just arrived but as captains, you are to ensure your group is competent.” Hettar pauses. “Those filthy creatures took four of our own last time.”

“I don't remember many of our own being taken, in fact, not too many in recent years. I'm starting to think they really are after you...” a snickering voice sounds from under the breath of Kido, a Modo who even I as leader always had problems with. Kido thrives in chaos, and he likes starting problems.

“What did you just say?” Hettar snarls.

Kido snickers. “I said few of ours were taken last time I account. Mostly it's you Bonos.” He says and some of my tribe comrades are amused.

Contrary to what I thought at first, there is no love amongst us still and from this we would still turn against each other given the chance. It should make me feel good to be justified in my residual hate of the Bonos but for some reason it doesn't.

“You will stand down, Kido.” I speak up. My chest is tightening with anger. We don’t like each other but you don’t speak against the collective, especially in the battlefield. That’s how you lose. After we get rid of the Sokos, we will get back to hating one another but a divided army will never conquer.

“And you will stand down, *captain*. I don’t need you controlling my camp.” Hettar turns his ire to me. I hold his gaze.

But even in my annoyance, I nod. He is right. As leader of this camp, it is his authority to get all in line.

“The wall needs reinforcing at the Northeast border. The orcs are reporting that that is a weakness, and we should fix it with haste. What is the status on getting the material?” One of the Bonos asks, breaking the previous moment.

“It should be here by dawn, Joha. But in the meantime, we will allocate 10 more soldiers for the area. Maybe Imp can borrow you some of his since the areas are close to one another.” Hettar says.

The Bono captain just nods. No question or protest. The rest of the meeting goes in updates and questions, and I sit quiet, absorbing as much as I can. I am shown to my dwelling - a hut - when it is over. It is not much but I can lay my head.

I close my eyes with plans for the next day. I need to be up before dawn so I can scout the area. I need to get reacquainted with the land and its riffs and atmosphere. I need to feel the

soil beneath my boots. And I am not so overconfident that I don't think I need training too. And I will work hard here.

Owa's words ring in my head before I am down.

"Only the rightful King can save us..."



I barely get much sleep before I am up, and it is time to get to work. I fold the mat I slept on, but I don't wear my armor yet. It will only slow me down. I have a lot of ground to cover before I meet my team and see what the expectation is when everyone is awake. I find the camp dead silent. The watchers open the gate for me, and I leave.

I inhale deeply and exhale slowly as my eyes adjust to the darkness. There isn't much green or trees here even though it is along a big river. The air is noticeably different. It's not as crisp as Aria's realm.

I go on the outside part of the wall and run, passing the Northeast borders. I go up North to where my station will be. At the end is an enclosure. But if you stand on the small hill, you can see the bubbling green springs.

I try to climb the wall. I fail a few times and I cut myself, but I finally climb the 20-foot-tall wall. I land on the small landing near the springs. They are just as captivating as I remember. And just like anything beautiful in this realm, the golden rule is if it's beautiful don't touch it.

The springs are toxic and underneath them lives one of the most dangerous snakes of this realm. A two-headed simp

snake that spits acid the color of blood. The poison is deadly, almost instantly, unless someone with magic can help you.

I walk the small path until it opens up a little and I pass my station which is on another enclosure that has a waterfall. There are underwater caves under the river that lead to the other side where the Soko like sneaking into.

Us and the Bono stay away from swimming here because of all the other creatures that inhabit this particular part of the river. And it is just as well that Hettar put me here. They think I will mess it up and hopefully get myself killed.

I pass the Northeast waterfall and check the broken wall that needs reinforcing. I pass all the patrollers without saying much. We nod to each other. By the time I am back at camp, many people are up, and my team is one of them.

Hettar is going around shouting orders.

I am on time. I play nice. I listen and I follow instructions. We train with the group. We have breakfast. Then more training. The days go by and before I know it the week is over. And then another.

We are in our station on the third week patrolling when we hear the horn from camp.

“They are here!” One of my soros says in evident panic and fear.

They start running in that direction.

“Soldiers, hold down this station. Don’t leave. I am taking you and you. Let’s go.” I order before I take the two. On our

way there I notice a lot of teams running in their entirety back to the horn. Just as we are almost there, I hear a large splash before I round the corner and see the river. Dusk is on the horizon, and I only catch a black tail disappearing in the water on the bank next to the main camp.

“They took them!” Someone shouts.

Without thinking, I jump in the river. Unspeakable rage boils my insides. These filthy creatures. Taking one of ours on our watch. I dip under and I see legs paddling. I swim faster and just before they get through a petite opening that is all but dark, I grab their legs and yank back.

They scream underneath, only evident by the bubbles and they fight. They try. We fight underwater. They kick me back, but I grab their hand. Something else pulls them from behind. I see red eyes behind this creature before there is more force. I hold on harder and when they are yanked from me, I am left holding something. They are gone and I contemplate following them.

But my lungs burn, deciding for me, and I swim up. There will be another day. I find many standing at the bank. They look worried. I fist the item in my hand. I don't even know what I found. Then I am face to face with a furious Hettar.

“Imp, you shouldn't have risked your life. The soro they took was already still.” Hatter says.

“Do you hear yourself?” I roar as my feet touch the hard ground on dry land.

“They were gone. No reason to lose you as you attempt being a hero.” He reprimands.

“A young orc just got taken, and you are telling me to do nothing! Are you all cowards? Am I in the camp with cowards? A few decades and you bow to them? No wonder they keep coming back. You keep giving them everything they come for.”

“I will not take that tone with you, Imp.” Hatter shoves me.

I shove him harder, and he falls on his ass. “Those filthy creatures will keep taking one by one until they finish all of you. Your defenses are weak, your plans are flawed, and none of you have the heart for this. No wonder you are losing. You never stop until the enemy is vanquished. All of you have forgotten who we are. We are orcs and the battlefield is our home. We don’t fight, we annihilate. We don’t run, we are the terror. And those orcs know all of you fear them. You won’t even swim to save one of your own? None of you are worthy.” I spit on the ground as I seethe before I walk away.

I don’t go back to camp; I go back to check on my team. I cannot help feeling guilty for the Bono orc they just took. It could have been one of mine. I may have a son or two in the near future and if this isn’t solved when they are grown, they will be here, and it could be them.

Something needs to change and if I have to fight the leaders of the high table to fix this mess then I will.

Chapter Seventeen

Let Me Have You

Aria

I plate the tray with fruit slices and fresh fruit juice on the table. Kaba finally finished making the table for us. Another piece of furniture for me and Igor's very spacious new home.

It has been a little nightmare going around everyday asking the many orcs here to find time to make me the furniture after the others finished helping me clean it. That took a week on its own, but everything is clean, and our home is cobweb free.

After they got us the new bed and a few cupboards, most retreated to other jobs. And I have been making nice, using Mulan and Hani to help me get orcs to build our furniture. It didn't help that I wanted specific things.

While most orcs care nothing for home decoration, I care. I want Igor and our children to have a beautiful home, one they yearn to come back to every time.

In this vast sitting and guest area, I have two sofas. One a two-seater and another a three-seater, the new table and all the

plants I have been trying to grow. I took some from Hani and some from Owa.

I miss Igor every day. But throwing everything I have in this project has been a good distraction. My days are packed full; breakfast with Jani and Owa and the rest of the day is cooking and decorating my house with Hani and Mulan. Some days we spend at Mulan's and some at Hani's.

In all this I've learned there is animosity in this tribe for Hani, and in as much as she is the third wife of Gremlo and has been for well over 30 years, she is treated like a stepchild. She doesn't cook for Gremlo. And Gremlo only summons her if he wants to bed her. I know all this because Hani isn't exactly private.

I have heard more than I hoped I would about Gremlo and his 'skills' in the mating bed.

Owa and I have only gotten closer. Although she still asks me strange questions about random details about my life, particularly my mother and Luna. She is a darling who dotes on me like a mother-in-law.

And my mother-in-law is just her. She's Masa. She's neither friendly nor cold. She asks me about the babies every few days when we run into each other but otherwise she keeps to her affairs.

I don't know if I wished we had more because she intimidates me, but it feels like I should have more. But it's no love lost. It isn't my first experience with a mother-in-law.

Even though Masa is eons better than that demon of Shepherd's mother.

"You are going to say yes, right?" Hani looks Mulan in the eye with much anticipation, so do I when I remember the conversation we were in the middle of.

She sighs. "I don't know." Her voice is small and unsure.

"Why? Take his horn, Mulan. Hergo is responsible and far better than the other eligible males. If you don't snatch him, you will be left with the likes of Faz...Faz!" Hani exclaims and we all laugh.

Mulan looks at me for help.

"I agree with Hani. From the little I've seen of him he's... responsible." I say, bringing an orange piece to my mouth.

"I just think that I need tim—"

She doesn't finish when the door opens and my heart leaps to heaven when Igor stands in all his majesty at the door. I leap forth and we meet in the middle.

"You're back!" I am so excited I can't even mind the fact that he doesn't look like he's had sleep in days. His gaze takes all of me in before he collects me in an embrace. He picks me up and kisses me.

"Hello." He grins at me, and I grin back.

It is only the throat clearing behind us that reminds me I wasn't alone. Igor looks behind me before he sets me down gently.

“Good afternoon.” He says with less enthusiasm. He is a little grumpy.

The girls don’t wait for him to say anything. They rise quickly and rush by saying, “See you when you...” Hani doesn’t finish but they both giggle before they close the door.

As soon as the door closes, he pulls me in a long kiss, and I melt in it. It feels like my soul is sighing happily. My mate is home. When we finally pull away, I really look at him.

His armor has dents, and he looks like he needs sleep. My eyes find his again and he is staring at me like I am the world and all its precious stones.

“Come.” I pull him to the bedroom.

“It’s beautiful.” He says and I look back to find him looking around. I turn so I am walking backwards.

“I love it.” He says with less enthusiasm than I like.

“How long haven’t you been sleeping?” I ask. “Is there something wrong? Are you okay?”

He gives me a small smile, but it’s meaningful. “I am fine, Dove.”

I walk into our bedroom with his heavy boots that sounds like they are made of only iron. “Why are you back then?”

“I missed you. I had to see you.” He exhales. When I am in the middle of our bedroom, I turn to him once more.

His hands come to cup my face and he kisses me once more. When he kisses my neck, I feel something about this moment:

he needs me.

“I missed you.” He says roughly and his hands undo the straps of the dress that I am wearing, and it falls to the floor.

I pull away before it goes any further, and I hold his face. “Igor, you sure you don’t need to sleep first. I can wait.”

“I will sleep after. I just need you.” Sincerity shines in his features. My gaze lowers to his armor.

“Then let’s take that off, orc.”

He smiles a crooked smile before he undoes it and he is left standing there gloriously naked, anticipation brimming. I bite my lower lip.

“On the bed. Now.” He commands.

The sheer authority of his voice pools wetness to me and my heart rate spikes as I am seized by it. I don’t ask any questions and I turn, climbing on our bed that’s a little higher than the others we’ve had in the past.

I sit on the bed and spread my legs for him. He takes a sharp intake of breath as his gaze gets darker. Erection pointed to me, he comes closer and drops to his knees.

He is the perfect height. He smiles as he grabs my thighs and spreads me a little wider. “I like the new bed.”

He darts his tongue and tastes me. I am too sensitive; it doesn’t take me much to come.

“I missed you so much.” I pant as two of his fingers work their magic in and out of me while his mouth is around one of

my nipples and I pull him harder to me as I feel unexplainable euphoria.

“It’s so good, Igor.” I moan, trying my hardest to grind on his fingers.

“Show me how good it is and come for me.” He goes to the other nipple and does the same, sucking harder. My orgasm makes my eyes twitch as smooth tears of joy flow. “I miss this body.” He purrs.

I smile and hold his face as he slowly pulls his fingers out.

“It misses you too...so much,” I say.

“Lie back.” He tells me after he pulls from my lips. I lie back and support myself by my elbows. Igor lines himself to me and pushes in through the resistance. We both moan. He wastes no time and starts moving. His fingers find my clit and he rubs in electrifying circles.

I writhe under him, eyes not leaving his and his not leaving mine. I see all that he isn’t saying to me. His strokes are hard and deep, and I keep clenching around him, losing my mind.

“Who do you belong to?” He growls.

“To you. I am yours.” I scream as my orgasm takes control of me. He punishes my body, increasing his strokes, not giving me a break. I moan through one of the longest orgasms he’s ever given me and at some point, I stop moving with my mouth a perfect ‘o’ but nothing coming out audibly. I am freed by him growling my name as he comes too. I pant loudly.

“I love you.” He says then pulls out and kisses my belly then me.

He strides to damp the cloth and wipes us both. He pulls me to the bed after.

We are spooning when he says, “Things will get better someday, my love. I promise.”

Then I feel his cock on my entrance again and he lifts my leg.

“You need sleep, orc.” I moan as he starts stroking me at a leisurely pace.

“I need you more,” he says in a low voice. “Just let me remind...”

He makes love to me, and I come again. A few seconds after I hear his light snore and I know he is asleep. I relax with him inside me, and it feels like the world is right again.



I wake up to a feeling of fullness that is maddening as he begins thrusting into me shallowly. I moan but when I wake up, I realize he is still asleep. He must be dreaming. I choose to not wake him but receive his ministrations. A few minutes later, he wakes up, he stops.

“I almost forgot how that feels.” He says with evident amusement in his voice.

“I didn’t.” I say.

It is now dark outside and none of our lamps are lit so we are in darkness. He continues stroking me, but it is unrushed. Just love.

“Are you okay, orc?” I ask.

“No.” He says honestly.

I turn to him with my face, and I can't see him clearly in the darkness, but I feel him.

“Tell me.” I say.

He halts, then with one hand brushes my cheek tenderly. “There was an attack a week ago and they took one of the soros.” He says and I feel his anguish.

“One of ours?” I am alarmed.

“A Bono.” He answers but I can feel his anguish the same.

“I'm sorry.” The situation it is worrying, but it is all I can say.

“It feels like we are fighting an enemy who is more cunning than I thought.” He says.

That doesn't sound good. “Why do you say that?”

“They are organized. They make sure to not attack directly. They come with a mission and no matter how much stronger we are, they are slippery, and they always take what they came for.”

“You don't think our army can stop them?”

He exhales, his hand lowering to my belly. “There is still a lot of animosity among us. We don't engage as one.”

That is surprising. In all my talks with Igor I never thought he would want to be one with the Bonos. Perhaps this enemy is more dangerous than I know because he seems like he is willing to let the Bono in.

“Is that why you are back?”

“Other than taking a little assignment so I can see you? Yes. And I need to have a talk with Owa and Jani.”

“Why?” I ask.

I feel him tense a little. “I just need to ask something from them.”

“Okay.” I decide to not pry much because I know if it was important, he’d tell me.

We turn to silence again.

“I want to feed you, orc.” I say after some time passes, my hands brushing his big arm that’s draped over me.

He chuckles. “You’ve fed me plenty.”

I elbow him. “Don’t be naughty, orc.”

I try to move but he holds me. “You will feed me but just stay here for now.” He starts pushing in again and I clench. “Let me have you.”

Chapter Eighteen

This Is Us

Igor

I watch Aria as she relaxes on the sofa with her head on the head rest as I massage her swollen feet. I can't wait for our children to arrive not only so I can see them but so her body can travel lighter. She has been doing a lot. Our home is better than I thought it would be.

“Is there no way you can spend the night and leave tomorrow, orc?” She asks, her arms still covering her eyes.

“I wish there was, love.” I really do. Being here with her has unburdened me a little. But only a little. Too much is happening in this realm the more time I spend on it, especially seeing the state of the border.

But I must meet Owa because I have no clue how I'm supposed to do what she said I must. How am I supposed to conquer against this enemy? And I am hoping she can do something with the piece I got from the Soko.

Aria removes her hands over her eyes and looks at me with sadness marring her features. “Igor, does this mean you will

never be home for long now?”

I want to lie. But right now, even I don't know how everything is going to happen. What if it's another 5 years before we can defeat the Sokos? How much will I be gone from her then? Can she understand that? Do I wish her to?

I open my mouth to say something, but someone knocks on the door. I am embarrassed to be a little relieved. I didn't know what I was going to say anyway.

“Who is—”

Before I can finish, the door opens and who but Owa walks in with a basket in hand. Aria smiles and moves her feet down.

“Son of Zad, I didn't know you were home.” She says as she stands near the door.

I get up. “I came yesterday to see Aria and the orclings.”

She takes me in but says nothing. I take the basket she is holding.

“I think I must leave you two then. Are you here long?” Owa doesn't advance into the house. Aria comes closer to her.

“I am leaving in the afternoon.” I respond as I walk to place the basket with all manner of fruits and her special leaves for tea.

“See me before you go then young orc,” Owa says.

“You can come in, Owa. Let me make you something to eat, we were just finished,” Aria says.

“Oh no, I don’t want to intrude. I know how much you missed him.” Owa giggles a little at the end and I narrow my eyes at her before I smile.

“Come on, I am going to feel bad if you don’t eat with me.” Aria takes her hand in hers.

“No, dear, I insist. Spend time with your mate.” She squeezes Aria’s hand before she retreats. Aria isn’t happy with her not eating and I have to smile.

I am happy she has gotten closer to Owa. But it makes me wonder a little how she and my mother are doing. I wonder if they talk or are getting close. An orc can hope but it wouldn’t surprise me if they aren’t close because I know my mother isn’t open with most people.

Aria sighs. “Okay, don’t cook later, I will be making that charred goose you like.”

“With the ani seeds and red potatoes?” Owa asks.

Aria smiles. “Yes, how can I forget. Hani brought me some yesterday.”

Owa smiles fondly at Aria before she turns and leaves. Aria turns to me with a fond smile. “That old orc is a treasure.”

“Did I disrupt your plans for breakfast?” I pick up the basket and go to the kitchen, and she follows.

“Yes and no. We have breakfast almost every day. I actually had forgotten she was coming here.” She says.

The kitchen is cleaned with most of the cupboards changed, but the structure is the same and they currently have no doors. The steel table was nailed to the floor, and it is standing as strong as the last time I saw it. Luckily, I had the foresight to source the rare stainless steel. When I return, I need to source more of it.

“I am happy you two get along.” I say, placing the fruits in their rack.

“We do. She is amazing and she makes the best tea. Want me to make you some?” Aria nears the stove.

I smirk at her. “Tea later. Come and let me give you a massage. You need to keep your feet off the ground as much as you can.”

She doesn't answer but lets me lead her to our bedroom.

“I'm serious.” I say.

“But moving around is getting more important as I near my date of birth. I'm told it'll help with the delivery. Especially since the babies are bigger.” She crawls on the bed. Once more I am a little worried that her human body has to carry not just one, but two orcs. I just hope she is fine.

I decide to not argue because she is right, but I worry about her body. I worry about a lot.

We spend the day indoors, and by the time the sun starts going down and it nears time for us to leave, Aria's face is sadder. I watch her rub her belly as she watches me put on my armor. The sound of metal is the only sound in the room.

“Aria?” I call to her even though she is looking right at me.

“Hm?”

“Do you think you can be happy here, like we were back in the forest?” It’s something that has been a bothering question for me. Can I make her as happy as she would have been back in our home? And what will I do if she can’t be?

She takes a moment before she licks her lips. “I have things that I like about here, and I have things I don’t. I don’t know if any place could ever compare to me and you alone in our beautiful home. But Igor this is our life now. And as long as I have you and our children then I will adjust. The plus side is I have friends now.” She smiles and I give her a meaningful one back.

I guess that’s all I can ask. It’s not like there is a way for us to have our old life anyway. This is us.

I pick up my helmet from the table.

“Let’s go see the old orcs.” I stretch my hand to her as I near her.

She gets up with a long groan.

“I could carry you.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “So the children of this tribe could have a good laugh at me, orc?”

Her attitude is endearing. “Why do you care about them?”

She side-eyes me as she passes me.

We walk to the old orcs quarters and the sun is almost gone. Day light is almost wasted.

Owa lets us in, and she beams when she sees the basket with the containers Aria packed for them.

“Is that Aria?” Jani asks from somewhere in the house.

“Yes, dear. She and the young one are here.”

When we walk in, Jani emerges from the passage, and he has a mortar in hand, like he was busy with something. It comes with the job of being mated to a powerful sorcerer, I suppose.

“Son of Zad, how is the border? We heard what happened.” He says to me.

“Yes, I finally encountered the Sokos.” I say.

Aria’s eyes turn to me. I told her about what happened, but I don’t know why I haven’t told her about what I retrieved. I am hoping it can be something. But it seems a useless detail.

Jani and Owa both solidify with mild fear on their faces.

“Indirectly, when I got to the river, they had taken the soro but I fought the last one underwater,” I say. Aria did not like hearing I did that.

“You fought one of them?” Jani questions.

“Yes, but another came and yanked their comrade and they slipped from me,” I explain.

Owa and Jani sit on the other sofa. Owa nods. When they don’t respond immediately, I say, “Owa, can I please have a

word with you? Alone.”

I feel Aria’s gaze on the side of my face, and I turn to her. “It’s just a little something I need to ask, Dove.”

She nods and we get up. She leads me to her room of plants. Most of these may seem like regular plants to the unperceiving individual but here lies some of the most powerful herbs I have ever encountered. Powered with magic they are even more powerful, even deadly.

“You have my audience, son of Zad.” Owa goes to her chair, and I follow.

“When I was fighting the Soko, I got something.” I pull it out and move closer to her. Her eyes widen when she stares at the severed finger that is now starting to rot.

She gets up and takes it from my hand. “You ripped it from them?”

I nod. “I don’t know if it’s anything, old orc, but can we do something with it? I don’t even know what I am asking you. Maybe something to help us protect ourselves from them?”

She looks at the finger like it’s the most interesting thing she’s ever seen. “I don’t know what I can do with it. I will consult the spirits.” She says in a voice that tells me she is invested in the item and done speaking with me.

“Another thing, Owa, I don’t know how to do what you said I need to do. I need guidance, great one.”

Her eyes find mine, and she focuses on me for the first time since she saw the finger. “I cannot tell you that, King of the

orcs, only you know. It is your destiny. It is only *your* path.” Then she looks to the other side of the room where she has a small cupboard.

“I need a jar. Be a good orc and tell my mate I need a jar with cold water.”

She is done with this conversation, so I retreat and deliver the message.

We sit afterwards and eat. Just after the sun hides from the land, a knock comes to the door. Zod walks in.

“You are a bad orc, Zod. I haven’t seen you in forever.” Owa says.

Zod just shrugs. “I will come see you next time, Owa. I miss your tea too.” He smiles a little fondly.

Owa shakes her head. “I hope your travels have nothing to do with me not seeing you so much.”

He stiffens but he quickly masks it.

“I want to stay, old one, but we must go. Imp, we are leaving.”

“I’m going to catch up to you.” I say before turning to Aria, pulling her to the little corner I pulled her into last time.

She holds my face and I remember her words from last time.

“I will always come back to you.” I say, my one hand on her belly and another one on her back.

She smiles with pride. “I know.” She pauses. “I will dream of you every day until you return. Dream of me too.”

I lean in, our lips dance in a loving kiss. She runs her nails on my skin and I pull away when a purr rises from me.

“What?” She asks but her small smirk tells me she knew what she was doing.

“You are being a temptress,” I say.

“A human can try.” She leans in and we kiss again.

“I love you, orc. We all do.” She smiles.

“I love you all more.”

I feel a little better than I arrived yesterday. It’s like I acquired new energy for this mountain of a fight in front of us. And as the door closes behind us and me and Zod start walking, I can’t help the hope. I can’t see how but we will conquer the enemy. We may need to try new things. And that means I need to step into my power.

Chapter Nineteen

Tempting Madness

Igor

My feet carry me almost instinctively. I must speak with my uncle. I know he thinks he is my better as he wears and parades my crown, but maybe it is time I reminded him his boundaries. The more I think about the night of my vow ceremony, the madder I have gotten. And the more distance I go from Aria, the more I know I need to bring me and my uncle to an understanding.

I am not beaten down. I may have my head down, but he must not mistake it for my submission or think I have gone soft. If I don't stop them from gallivanting now, then they will not stop treating me like I am nobody.

I ignore Zod quietly following me, though I don't know why he is following me. Tension rolls off my shoulders and I wouldn't put it past Zod to know where I'm going and why.

I climb the stairs to the royal office and find two guarding orcs with axes crossed.

One of them, Gija, once one of my trusted soldiers, bows slightly and the other doesn't.

"Prince Imp." Gija greets.

"I am here for a private conversation with my uncle." I don't look at the other guard.

"I'm afraid we can't allow that, Prince." He says, annoying me to no end.

I know they mean it respectfully, but them addressing me as prince, the name of my youth feels like a mock. It enrages me that my uncle really took what was mine from me and expects me to play dead.

"Announce me, before I mow through you. I am running late, me and the team need to get going." I state.

Before the other one fixes his mouth to answer, the twin doors of the royal office open and my mother stands on the other side, her face fixed in a slight scowl.

"What is the meaning of this, Igor?"

"I must have a word with King Gremlo, Queen Masa." I say calmly.

She looks to the guards and then to my rear, and before she speaks, my uncle's voice comes from inside. "Let him come in."

The guards move but my mother doesn't move immediately. I stand in front of her.

“Queen Masa, may I have a word with you?” Zod says behind me.

My mother gives me one last suspicious look before she exits, and the guards close the door behind me. I find my uncle in his wide throne. A memory of my father sitting on the very chair comes to me and I have to force my feelings down.

He doesn't look up from the ghoulish sculpture he is refining with his sculpting knife. It is a similar one to one he made me when I was a boy. It reminds me of when I was growing up and my father was alive, and he was my beloved uncle.

He was the best wood sculptor in our tribe and his skill was unparalleled. He designed a lot of the mountain and was with me and my father's team when we built everything.

He looks so far from me now. So different even as he is still the same. The crown of bones he dons on his head surely looks like it doesn't belong to him.

I am not surprised he took over, but I am surprised he is clinging to my crown. I never thought he had any intentions on the throne. He was always happy in his workshop and with his projects. He wasn't even a keen soldier; he went because he was the King's brother. But I guess power does corrupt.

“Do you plan on making me disappear with your stare, nephew, or you will say what you mean to say?” He doesn't lift his head nor miss a beat as he slices little pieces of the wooden ghoulish.

I don't know why but words dissolve on my tongue, and I stare at him a little longer.

Silence settles longer between us.

"The day is slipping." He says after a few minutes.

"I thought we were kin, uncle." I say finally.

"Speak your mind, Igor." He says, still with hyper focus on his ghoul.

"You have known me since birth, uncle. You were there when I skinned my first kill and in my first war. Why tempt my madness?"

To that he stops, and I see the slightest of stiffening, but he raises his head steadily, eyes hard and challenging like someone who knows they have the upper hand. He moves slowly and places the ghoul on the desk in front of him and he slowly leans back and settles in the power of the seat, like he is provoking me.

"Because I can." He answers calmly, confidence oozing out of him.

"I could still challenge you."

"But you won't," he says. And upon seeing the question on my face, he continues. "The human girl, she makes you soft. Zod told me how you allowed the humans to humiliate you for her." He spits on the ground before he stands up. "You disgraced yourself and you expect me to hand you the crown? The crown of our ancestors?"

Shock and embarrassment wash over me in waves and waves.

The way my uncle is looking at me fills me with so many overlapping emotions, I have no idea which one to pay attention to. I knew Zod went a month before, but we didn't discuss what he saw. And it is clear they knew everything, and they left me there to die at the hands of the humans.

"You aren't worthy of leading this tribe anymore, Igor. And you should have stayed with the humans," he says.

I clench my fists, stubbornness from deep within and my pride surfacing at just the right moment.

"You are wrong. My mate and my children don't make me weak. They make me even stronger than I was. I accumulated wins in the human world, but I also admit to my losses. I accept my lowest points. But that doesn't give you any rights to my throne." My voice comes out with the rage I feel inside.

"From what I've seen, it's doubtful. You are still just doing what benefits you and you care nothing about this tribe."

"It is still mine. I will challenge you for it." I state.

"Even if you did, and even if you won, you still won't be accepted as King here. You ran from the humans with your tail between your legs and you think our people can still respect you?"

I take a step for him, my anger threatening to blind me. "They will bow to me."

“And that right there is your problem. You say you are different, but look at you shaking, wanting to beat us all into submission. Have you truly learnt nothing?” He says calmly, too calmly. Then I see it. I see him, his intentions and my face contorts in a myriad of emotions and I have to steady my breath.

“Have you even taken a look around since you’ve gotten here? Have you gotten a real look at our people? Have you seen their fear? Their anxiety? Their hopelessness? Or you are too busy in the garments of your mate?”

I charge at him and bring my hands down on the table and the hard wood smashes under the force of my hand. I am on him the next moment and my hands are around his neck as I shove him on the wall. He makes no moves to stop me.

“What have you done?! At least I was gone, but what have you done except sit on your rear and make dolls!” I growl.

The door swings open but I can barely hear anything as I pant, trying to reel in the red that is in my vision. Hands grab onto me, and they yank me away from him, but my eyes don’t leave my uncle.

What am I doing?

“They await you.” He says before he bends down and picks up the ghoul and his knife and sits down, resuming what he was doing like I am not there.

“Never attempt that again, Igor. You will face the appropriate penalty.” He dismisses me with those words.

I send the guards flying before I leave the office. I can't think or see anything as I descend the stairs. My cousin barely registers behind me as I stomp to the gate.



The sun is setting the next day and we elect to dismount the *karajis* and rest. It is an area with a small pond and caves so we can rest for the night. We light a fire in the cool air and sit for dinner.

In my company it was me, Zod, Kaja, and 3 others. I volunteered so I can check on Aria while the others reported back to my uncle. It settles me a little that she is settling well. At least that's one less thing to fret about.

The others talk about this and that, and I don't fail to notice the distance from those who were once close comrades. I hadn't really taken it to heart before but now I am noticing more and more. When they finish and they take to their resting corners, me and Zod are left.

Long silence settles between me and my cousin.

"I planned to come and get you, but you were already free when I returned." He starts. "I wasn't going to leave you."

His words catch me with surprise. I had planned to ask him.

"It wasn't your job to get me out of a mess I got myself in, cousin." I state. In truth, I do not blame my cousin. Yes, I would have appreciated help, but it was my fault I put my family in danger.

“We are kin still, Imp.” He says.

Zod and I have always had a relationship based on mutual respect. Because we are both hot heads and we like carving our own paths, we mostly stayed out of each other’s way, but there has never been bad blood. And he always was beside me when I needed him. He even followed me in my quest for revenge on Hettar’s uncle.

But after everything, so much brings me feelings of shame. And on top of everything I don’t know how to bridge the gap between me and the people I once loved. Every time I try to do something I think is good, it is the wrong action. Before it was for selfish reasons and arrogance, but how am I still wrong trying to do right by my family?

After a long silence, I let out a long exhale. “I feel like everything I am doing is wrong, Zod.”

He takes my gaze fully, not rushing to answer. “Caught between your mate and the tribe?”

“I am not *Imp* anymore,” I state.

“That is as clear as daylight.” He answers with a small smile.

“Do they want the raging maniac back? I don’t understand. I thought I came back a better orc. Isn’t that what everyone wanted?”

“Orcs don’t know what they want, cousin. That’s why they have leaders to tell them what they want.” He says

“Explain.”

“After you left, everyone thought you were our problem, and everything would be dally after. The truce with the Bono wasn’t as easy as everyone thought it would be. Another war ensued 5 years after you left. Bonos had not forgiven, and you were proven correct in not trusting them when plans were found aimed at destroying the mountain and killing all of us inside after the truce. But when the Sokos came, everything changed. The leaders were out of their depth, and they went back to the negotiating table for a new truce. Famine came after. I think many thought you would come with solutions and give them the hope and strength they need. Hope to finally end this thing with the Soko so life can move forward.”

“I worry about my family’s safety, Zod.” I state honestly.

“I know, cousin.” He pauses. “For what it’s worth, you are a much better orc then you were before. I didn’t see it then but maybe sending you away was the right choice. And you have my support no matter what you do. As always.”

Then something else comes to my mind. “Why did you choose to not succeed your father? You, Hergo, or one of the others would have been better fits. Todo is a child.”

“We all know our place, cousin, and we know yours. The confusion and fear of the tribe has never been our reality. We know the rightful King,” he says simply, even though his words are heavy.

My cousins have always stood next to me. They fought with me when I went to avenge my father. They tell me when I’m

in error, but I have always had their respect and they have always had mine.

I nod stiffly as I take in his words. And I was glad I still had them. Like always.

Chapter Twenty

I Will Go

Igor

The sun is resting on the horizon two days later when we come to the camp. The site is busy with pale and green orcs going in separate directions because the shifts are changing, and the night patrollers are about to start their shifts.

“I still think it’s suspicious,” Kaja says loud enough for a few of us to hear. He has been goading Zod all trip long and Zod is annoyed out of his mind.

“I thought you were keeping a female in your quarters but it’s like you just vanish. Where do you go, brother?” He continues.

Kaja and Faz are Zod’s biggest headaches in life. They are always trying to annoy him, and he always gives them the reaction they want. They, because they are imbeciles, delight in his annoyance. They live to provoke him some way, but it is nothing out of the ordinary of other brothers.

Sometimes I wished I could have had my own siblings to have such bonds with, but my father always said he will not

have another child because he doesn't want a war in his home. I used to love it when I was a young orc, but that was my hubris and now I know I could use the counsel of a brother or a sister.

"I am ignoring you." Zod sounds obviously annoyed. But I must say, I do find it curious too. Zod has always been a bit of an island, but he has been scarcer since I've been back. But unlike Kaja, I know every orc is entitled to their secrets.

"I will find your secrets, brother, no matter how much you try to hide them." Kaja responds, not worried that Zod is also determined to keep this secret - if it's a secret at all.

"Hanje!" Zod responds with the insult in annoyance.

I hadn't thought much on it the few times he has disappeared because that has always been his style, but his brother is right, Zod has been disappearing more than usual, but I will let it go.

We come up to the gates and they are open immediately. The gatekeepers nod to us and we nod back. I make a beeline to where my warriors are after I secure my karaji, my cousins still in my tail. Feeling surer after the talk with my kin.

I find the group of 40 soros and 15 older orcs waiting for me in our section for my orders for our patrol. Most leaders have their groups they are addressing as well in the open, and I bring back my gaze to my own. All eyes find me, and my uncle's words come back like a vengeful storm.

Have you gotten a real look at our people?

I haven't stopped thinking about everything my uncle and Owa said. His words sliced through me like the clippers of a boroja. After I saw past the anger, I began digesting his words. What they mean for me, what they mean for everyone. And I know I must try and make this right.

I see the fear and anxiety of the soros. Many of them have not known wars like we used to fight and this life of fearing Sokos is all they know. To the older orcs, it's just another war for them, but I smell these young one's uncertainties and fears. Most of them just became full orcs and this will be their first potential war.

I take in the young orcs, both Bono and Modo. They all look the same. They are just young orcs trying to make their respective tribes proud, probably even prove themselves to their fathers.

My feet stop outside the circle, and I shove my previous prejudice to the side. Right now, both Modo and Bono are my people. I scan them and see how they look at me, they don't trust me. More of my uncle's words come back to me.

Have I really been so blind and have my people really lost all faith in me? Have I truly not changed in their eyes? Before it was me and my impulses, and now it's me and my family.

Is it me who is wrong, or it's them? I was a different orc when I left, were they hoping I returned the same and came back swinging? Was I their hope? Are they disappointed in me?

Or are they all right? Is my uncle right? And if he is, how can I bridge this gap? How do I earn my people's trust again? Do they wish me to become the beast again and crush our enemies under my hand? Is that what is even required of this situation? How do I lead them as one to vanquish our enemies and earn their faith? Is this what Owa meant about finding myself?

When I don't find any of the answers in my warriors faces, I know I have to trust myself. I inhale slowly and take the step into the circle.

"I see you." I say.

"We see you." They respond in unison. I nod at all of them as they wait for my words.

"To you, young ones, you are welcome amongst the ranks of all the warriors that paved the way of the axe before you." I start.

They are words my father uttered to me and my group when I became a soro and it was our first war. He would say it every time he began addressing us. I also said it the first time I addressed them but now I say them with a deeper conviction. They are all my people, Bono and Modo.

"Before we move ahead, an error has occurred. It has come to my attention that many of you are in speculation about me and my return. So, I need to address it before we move forward, I would like to lay the matter to rest today. Many of you may have not been born, but you have heard the stories. Indeed, I was disgraced as the Modo Prince because of my

faults. I forgot the way of the orc, the way of community and honor. I forgot what was important and the way of our people, and I followed the bottomless path of bloodlust.”

Low murmurs rise but no one disturbs me.

“Much has happened in the past century. But despite what many may believe or say about my growth, my commitment to our kind; the future of us is still important to me. This is an apology. I lost track of what was important: the protection and prosperity of our kind. But in my travels, I also found more. More to fight for.” I pause.

“I have limited interests in playing power games, but we face an enemy that is ahead of all of us. An enemy that has eluded all our people for eight decades. We have tried defense, but it hasn’t helped. We will not win if we continue as we have been. It’s been 80 years. And those Soko scum are laughing in our faces! We are warriors, but we are being embarrassed by short orcs with tails who aren’t even half who we are! Is that who we have become?” My rage intensifies when I think about the Soko and what has happened. They are really playing in our faces.

“Big words from the orc who was showed by feeble humans?” Hettar’s voice booms from behind me. I turn to find him and many others standing behind me. The crowd that has gathered behind me laughs, even as they do so sparingly.

“An orc is not measured by how or if he falls, but by his rise and what he does when he rises. *You* of all should know that.” I say.

“All you have are fancy words from the humans. While we have been fighting here and defending this land with our lives, what have you been doing?” One of the soros in my team whose friend was taken last time stands and says loudly.

I can feel his anger and bitterness but also a note of defeat. I look around. They all look at me in resentment, but I also see that it is directed at more than me, they feel like failures themselves. We are a proud race and we have been swindled by those we see as inferiors.

“I have been absent, that much was unavoidable. But we can’t twiddle our thumbs, stay in the past, and wait for them to keep taking. They have the utter advantage. We don’t even know what their civilization looks like. We need information. They keep slipping past us. We need to know how. What if they slip and they go to our communities? To our mothers, our mates, our orclings. What then?”

“The order from the Kings said we are not to engage them.” Hettar says sternly. There is a rise in murmurs. Clearly not everyone is happy with that answer either.

“But why?” I demand.

“We have no means of crossing the Red Serpent’s Way, or the north land of Ragu, nor do we know the way of the under caves.”

“What have we tried?” I ask.

Hettar’s face hardens and the mood dims. “We have tried a few times. We sent three separate teams and in those

endeavors, we lost 40 orcs. This is all we are doing.”

“I will go then.” I say, keeping Hettar’s gaze.

Murmurs and gasps rise.

“Go where?” Hettar asks, but he knows.

“I will cross the river and I will go scouting.” I pause. “We can’t twiddle our thumbs and wait for them to come back in more months or weeks while we waste away here.”

Hettar tilts his head. “I can’t allow that.”

That was one of the things I disliked about him. He was always safe. Choosing to rather kneel to preserve his life then take the bold steps and die with honor. Don’t they see we will never win this war holding our sacks in our hands and licking our tusks?

I want to tell him to go climb down a serpent’s tail, but many of the orcs here respect his rule and challenging him right now will be me proving my regression. It would be much easier to challenge him. But there isn’t time for the political unfoldings that will follow that. I must navigate with care.

“I know the way of the river from the old Dalun province.” I try instead.

“I can’t deploy any orcs to go with you. It is too dangerous venturing near the land of the dragons.” He states.

He speaks the truth. But it is the only way.

As dangerous as it is, it is the only way we can cross the Dali River at its shallowest point and make it to the Soko lands

safely.

None of us knew how the sokos were crossing through the caves safely or the serpent's way. None of us had seen any flying beasts. And from years ago, the caves concealed in them terrible monsters that were flesh eaters, that is if you could survive the swim down to get to the underwater caves. Besides no one had seen a dragon in over a thousand years. Last time our elders said their numbers were dwindling and they are all thought to have died off.

Our world was one of unspoken and deadly beasts. It was best if you just remained in your section of the realm. That meant orcs on land, and we leave the rest to the others. But all those cautions had to be stretched. Somehow, we need to get to the Soko lands, and we need to understand what it is exactly we were up against.

Sitting here guarding the border was only going to hold so long. What if they brought numbers next time? The fact that they could slip past the guards at the bank and get what they wanted and only get detected when they were leaving spelled of something much larger and potentially darker than we knew how to handle. And we needed all information we could get.

“I will go alone.”

“No.” Hettar says with finality.

More gasps ring but I hold my center. It is dangerous and reckless, but I have children on the way. If we don't stop this now, then my children will live under this threat too and I don't know if I can allow that.

I just hope Aria will forgive me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Frack

Igor

The reception of me has shifted a little the past few days. Zod was right. Though many still don't like me, I earned the respect of a few when I spoke.

I arm myself as I prepare to leave. It is around midnight and the camp is quiet. Most are either asleep or out on patrol.

I leave my hut and go look for my *karaji*. I utilize stealth in my steps as I don't want to alarm anyone. The past few days Hettar has had an eye out for me, but I needed to prepare. The journey to Ragu, the dragon lands, is a long one. On foot it could be a month but with a reliable *karaji*, it will be 2 weeks.

Kabana, my *karaji* makes a noise as I am freeing him, and I turn to the footsteps. Five silhouettes make themselves known and Zod, Faz, Kaja, Joha and the young bono soro who lost his friend on the last attack—Obani—reveal themselves.

“Isn't it awfully late to be petting your *karaji*, cousin?” Kaja speaks first when he sees my eyes narrowed at them.

“You will go back to your huts. I am going alone.”

Zod whistles and his karaji wakes from slumber. “I’d like to see you stop us,” he says as he nears his animal. The others go to theirs.

“You are too young. This isn’t a journey for the young.” I prevent the young soro from following behind Joha.

“I can’t stay here and do nothing. If I die like others, then I’d rather die fighting or doing something, not sitting here waiting for them to come get me.” He squares his shoulders, standing a little straighter.

I don’t need a young to look after out there but I feel his spirit. I was the one who wanted us to fight. And he may have been young, but he was one of my best.

“There are unknown beasts out there, you might not make it, and no one is going to be sitting you.” I say.

“I am ready.”

I turn from him and finish freeing my karaji. I unloosen the rope from his large horns, and he shakes his neck to loosen the rest. Kabani is an old friend. It was good that even after all this time, he still remembered me. Even though he had a new rider. I had left him with Jani, but he lent him to the soros who used him in hunting. But Kabani was a warriors karaji.

We pulled our karajis to the gate. Everything at camp was eerily quiet. I nod to the gate keeping orcs, and they open. I had already talked to the one who was coming on shift today.

We start slow, riding away from camp and the border first. We have to duck other scouts in the neighboring areas and

ensure we don't cross into Bono territory.

We ride all night and morning, resting at noon to pick our journeys for night when it is better to travel without the sun. Night is still warm enough that we have no need for much of the winter furs.

In the afternoon, we set our karajis for the way once more. This time it would be red desert for long stretches until we reach the white mountains of Saho. A journey that in itself is a week and a half.

We had already encountered *jubas* - land squids - that have nails covering their tentacles and one of the most dangerous creatures found in this realm.

Luckily, they are delicious, keeping us stocked on food. The water was a different issue. We were running on just enough. Our realm was not abundant on clean water sources. And with the abundance of other predatory water creatures, not many were safe.

"I think they were here," Zod says as we near a rock formation that has underground caves we have been looking for.

"There were borojas in this area. Swords at the ready." I announce. Our karajis needed rest. And we were still a week away from Ragu.

"I hope not. I have no—" Kaja doesn't finish.

The screech is accompanied by a sneak attack of three borojas bursting out of a hole in the ground.

They look like spiders in the human realm in appearance, but they have four eyes, one on each side of their face for an all-round view. They were lethal and if you weren't careful, their sharp appendages would get you, or their acid.

We jump back before we have our weapons out.

As if practiced, we separate. I take one.

It swipes at me, and I duck, swinging my sword to strike one of its legs. And it roars coming at me angrier, and I barely make it out of its reach. I duck and dive, taking it apart slowly, leg by leg, making sure stay out of its acid.

I finally get a good angle when I am atop a small rock, and it is still trying to recover from losing the function of its limbs when I jump and pierce my sword through an eye, and it comes out on the other side. Its yellow acid forms in its mouth and all its limbs fail. I pull my sword and make sure to separate its head from its body. You can never be too careful with these creatures.

I go help the others and we have them all down in no time.

“Where is the young orc?” I ask as we all collect ourselves.

“He secured the karajis,” Faz says.

“Good.”

With the caves found, we bring the karajis, who very gladly eat the borojas.

At dawn, we resume our journey again. A few days later, the mysterious snowy mountains of Soha make themselves

known.

it's never been explored much; it is one of the most dangerous places in this realm. Borojas, jubas and the terrifying serpents that dwell in our rivers are nothing compared to the snow beasts.

Before the last migration, when we moved to the mountain, we had lived three days from the mountains, and it was a hostile existence. Too many predators. And we were all fighting for the same food sources.

We were neighbors with the Bono then, only separated by a few mountains and with our wars in between everything, our people decided to find another place. We kept moving South until we found the mountain. It had a few inhabitants and we drove all of them out to make it our home.

We rest again and in three days, we are finally at the border of Ragu. We leave our karajis with enough food to last them two weeks. Hoping it will be enough.

But none of us know how long we will be here.

It is a thick forest and we started making our way. Slow, trying to keep as close to the river as possible.

The slope goes down a little on this side and we can hear the water rushing by. We travel a full day before we see the shallowest part where we can cross to the Jaji forest. The view is magnificent from here.

We stand at the edge of the forest, looking at the open field we must cross to get to the river. That is where the danger is.

We are officially in the dragon's territory.

"I guess we should take it as a good sign that we haven't been found so far," Faz says.

"Maybe they moved deeper to the west. It looks almost barren." Kaja observes.

But I thought it was too quiet. My heart hadn't slowed since we crossed, and I doubt it would until I was back home to my family. This was dangerous. Reckless. If one or all of us die here, then I would not only have failed my family, but my soldiers, and all my people too.

"We need to be careful. Let me go first and let's see if its barren or if we are being herded." I say.

"We could just all run fast and cross the river," Kaja suggests.

We all turn to him with glares, and he grins.

"Alright. I will signal when I am at the bank." I say.

The high hills and steep tops of the land made it evident that this was the land of flying creatures.

"If I get ambushed, run." I tell them.

None of them answer and I know they won't do it. With one last prayer offered to the Gods and clutching my sword tighter in my grip, I start the descent.

The rocks crunch beneath my boots and I try to make as little noise as possible. When I make it on flat ground, I hide behind a rock as I prepare to walk to the river. The open field

is huge, and it would be easy to see any dragon or wyren if one approaches.

With those last thoughts, I start walking. My heart hammers even harder, the sun beating down hard on me under this armor. My ear ticks when I hear movement. When I turn, a surge of anger comes to me when I see my team reaching the landing.

I want to shout but all I can do is glare. They walk carefully, and just as I turn to make the bank, a shadow passes above me with a large whooshing sound.

Frack.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A Spectacle

Aria

I follow Mulan out of my quarters. I am thankful every day to have her by my side. Having her as a friend has certainly eased my transition here. Her, Hani, Owa and Jani have been good to me.

In Igor's absence they have made sure I am always looked after; I am hardly ever alone. Though I do think a part of it is them making sure I'm not alone when I go in labor.

Something I hoped I'd have more of with Igor's mother, but she seems to be determined to not give me much of her affections, not even friendship. Not that I expected – okay, I did – for her to be excited I am his mate, but that has not been the case.

A week ago, I finally decided to bite down on my pride and move ahead. I went to her office, and she barely even looked up at me. I had been crushed.

It was pathetic of me to expect her to welcome me with any warmth considering how she welcomed her own son, but I had

hoped for something. I had hoped that she would be eager seeing as I was her only daughter-in-law, and I needed her.

I had cried a little, but Mulan and Hani tried to tell me that's just how she was. I wish my heart listened then, but it didn't. Mine and Igor's children will be here in a little over a month, and I don't want any animosity between me and their grandmother.

It also isn't great that Igor isn't here to facilitate the relationship. It would be easier to just be as cold to her as she is to me, but I know I want more for my children. I just don't know how to penetrate the hard shell that is Masa.

I always think about my relationship with Owa and how I wished that was the one I also had with Masa.

"Stop overthinking, human." Mulan's gentle voice pulls me out of my thoughts. And it happens to be just when we are about to pass Masa's office.

I force a smile at her and I force myself to not peep to the right. "I am not overthinking, female."

She chuckles as she adjusts the containers on her arm.

My feet stop on their own at the corridor leading to Masa's office.

Mulan stops ahead of me and turns when she senses my stop.

"Aria!" Mulan whisper yells.

I look her way wanting to ignore her and walk. But she doesn't give me the option when she suddenly pulls me to her and I almost yelp.

“What are you doing? I was just saying hi to her.” I whisper, hoping the older woman wouldn't hear us.

Goddess, I felt a little pathetic. I think a part of what has my soul crushed is how she seems to get on well with Azula, and a part of me feels cheated.

I get that she has known her the longest and for the longest time she thought Azula would be her daughter-in-law – and in many ways she still was – but I was actually her son's mate, and she should also seek my friendship.

“Stopping you from making a spectacle of yourself.” Mulan says once we walk out into the open.

“I wasn't going to make a spectacle of myself,” I argue.

“Azula was there.” She hisses through her teeth.

I can't stop my frown. “No one was talking, how do you know?”

“She cleans her office this day, this time, every week.” She says like I was supposed to already know that.

“Oh,” is all I can manage.

“Yeah.” Mulan says in a gentle tone that isn't mocking me.

I am not jealous of Azula or anything, but I hate the fact that she knows my husband intimately. And it's like she knows it

too because she always has a smug look whenever she looks at me like she is mentally rubbing it in my face. I hate it.

While normally I can conceal my emotions, my emotions have been raging lately. And Igor's absence hasn't helped.

"Look, just take it easy with her, okay? She'll come around." Mulan says low enough for me to hear as we walk to the communal kitchen and dining hall.

"Okay."

I don't know what else to say. But it has me thinking a little. Is that why they are so close? Because she cleans after her. Is that what she wants from me? For me to be her servant girl. I frown at the thought.

My inner war vanishes when we walk in the busy kitchen to find the ladies finished with today's meat cutting, already packing the portions in containers and cooling units. I recently learned that this wasn't always the practice of this tribe. Before, each male orc would hunt for his own family, and everything was separate. But the great famine changed everything. They stuck to it.

"Aria, Mulan!" Sami greets us with a wide grin, baring all her tusks.

"Sami, hello." I greet, and we greet everyone else. The females in the kitchen have really gotten acquainted with me and they turned out to be friendly. Well, that is when Azula isn't here.

Most of them are maidens waiting to be picked, some going past their prime and they assist in the tribe kitchen, while some are some kind of concubines for the few high-ranking members of this tribe. Sami, in particular, is Todo's concubine.

I was shocked when I first found out. I mean, Sami is a beautiful female, and to find out that she was the female who was originally supposed to be Todo's mate shocked me. But not just that, Todo changed his mind when he was supposed to pick.

By then he had taken Sami's virginity and she had to cling to him so as to not shame her family. Her parents – not her – begged for Todo to take her as one of his official concubines. That had been the day I saw this tribe with new eyes, and I missed Igor to talk and gossip with properly.

And once more I was glad Igor was a one-woman orc. I don't know how I would have been able to handle competing with another female for his heart.

We get our containers filled expeditiously then take the left to Owa's residence. Jani opens after a few moments, with a worried expression etched on his face. That sends alarm through me. He skims over me then his gaze lands on Mulan.

“Is everything fine?” I ask.

He forces a painful smile when he looks my way. “My mate is having an off day is all, but everything is under control.” He says coolly, but he wasn't fooling me.

“May we come in so we can see her?” I ask.

“Uh, I don’t think so, Qu— Aria. But check on her later, I’m sure she’d love to see you.” He says cryptically.

“Sorry to disturb your peace, old one. We will leave.” Mulan says and I turn to her.

I am not going.

“Um, I was supposed to make dinner, remember? I can come on my own, so it won’t be too much with two of us.” I suggest.

Like I guessed, his face softens a little at that suggestion. But I do feel a little bad for Mulan.

“Okay, we will see you tomorrow, Mulan. Say hi to Hani.” He has a forced smile.

Mulan nods and she goes, though reluctantly. It’s like she can feel she is being left out, but she says nothing. I walk in after Jani, and I follow him.

“What’s wrong, old one?” I ask.

He sighs. “The spirits are not giving her rest.” He says like it is something that is normal.

“Is she alright?” I ask, worried because I haven’t encountered the old orc in that state and I’m afraid a little. I respect spiritual people, but I never know what to do in their presence, as anything could be offensive to the spirits they channel.

“She will be. You can come to the incense dwelling.” He says.

“Okay, let me place this in the cooling unit and I’ll be there shortly.” I say.

I place the meat in the cooling unit. Then I make my way to the room where Owa burns a lot of her incense. It is a holy place for her, she has had me join only a handful of times where she invited the Goddesses protection and divine favor for me.

I find her balled in the corner. Incense burning in its usual place. She is laying on fur, rocking slowly.

Jani takes a seat next to her head where there is a basin with water and a cloth.

Her eyes snap open, meeting mine. Her gaze seizes me, and for a split second I am pulled in and the intensity of what is going on resonates with me. I gasp, holding my tightening chest and stagger forward.

She stretches her hand. “Come, Queen.”

Her voice has a foreign note to it.

I don’t understand but I near her. I bend down and I sit next to her.

Holding my right hand in both hers, she starts speaking to the spirits as the incense burns. She speaks in a language I have never heard. It is almost like a prayer.

I am at a loss. I don’t know what is going on and Jani doesn’t tell me. He just keeps cooling his mate’s forehead with the cool cloth and rinsing it ever so often.

The whole thing is a little bizarre. But it feels important and significant. I can't help but think about Igor. My mind stays on him, even as Owa squeezes my hand at times.

At times she is loud, at times she is trembling, and others she writhes. Almost like she is in a fight or some spiritual battle while holding on to me as an anchor.

Hours later, she finally sleeps and Jani releases me to make food.

With a heavy heart, I leave the room not entirely certain what has just happened. But I know it was significant, and a part of my soul knew it had to do with Igor. And somehow, I knew it wasn't good. How Owa would look at me at times as she prayed. I didn't ask because I was afraid of knowing.

Trying to be positive, I busy myself in the kitchen. Hoping when I finish, she will be awake and lucid enough to let me know what is going on.

I just hope my mate is okay, even though a nagging feeling at the back of my head is telling me to panic.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We Come In Peace

Igor

When my eyes turn to my team, a wyren rises behind them like it manifested from thin air.

“Behind you!” I shout.

Obani falls on his behind with a thud and Joha picks him up quickly as the wyren hisses, spearing its wings on the ground, moving predatory-like, ready to attack.

Fracking frack.

Other wyrens and bigger dragons rise seemingly from the ground behind it. They seemed to have been in some camouflage, and we played right into the trap. I walk carefully to my team as our enemies attempt to surround us.

“We come in peace!” I yell. The only answer is a raging roar from the blue dragon.

“We are just crossing to Jaji. We haven’t come to hunt or harm you.” I try again, facing the two dragons and two wyrens.

We can fight but it will not be an easy win. Lucky for us, dragons have soft bellies. Their scales protect them everywhere else, but the Gods evened the playing field with their bellies. Jani taught me this. Although I've never fought one, but I know I will never just lie back and die.

“Remember what I told you.” I say when I am near enough to my team as we face the creatures, our backs against each other, covering all sides with our weapons drawn.

“I had hoped there'd be no use for your lessons,” Faz says.

I decide now, I won't die. I will never break the promise I made to Aria.

“Run!” Faz shouts when the blue and black dragon flaps its wings and swoops for us suddenly. We scatter, swords ready and we duck talons. Our swords strike on all sides as we fight for our lives.

Metal crashes against hard scales and both us and the dragon's screech. They use flight to their advantage. One of the wyrens scoops Joha by his arm, and Faz leaps for its leg. It screeches but doesn't let him go flapping its bat-like wings and dust rises up.

Something sharp cuts through me. The dragon I'm battling is circling me, and it unleashed another swipe at me with the sharp end of its wings while I was distracted. These things are killing machines.

The dragon gets more fierce when I stagger back, feeling my warm blood sliding under my armor and it flaps its wings

at me, and while I am fighting the dust, I see another talon slash me on my leg, but I clench my teeth as I see an opportunity.

I swing expeditiously and duck as I take one swift step and go for the cream-colored belly. I use all my might and the creature roars in pain. I see a slash of blood, but it flaps its wings and lands a distance from me.

Something hits the back of my head with such a violent force, I fall on my face. Pain greater than anything I've ever felt takes over my whole body.

I can't move.

There is still too much dust to see anything, but I faintly hear the growls from my comrades as a large shadow comes over us.

I try to blink, try to see where my team is. I only see Obani and Kaja. They are both under the talons of wyrens on their stomach. A large wind clears all the dust, and legs larger than any of the dragons we were just in battle with land not too far from me.

Another dragon. Maybe twice the size of the one I was battling. It's one foot could snuff out my life with no problem.

I need to see it.

With all the strength I can muster, even as it feels like my body wants to separate from me, I move my body slightly so my eyes can see.

A thunderous roar fills the large open space, shaking the ground and reverberating in my own bones as the echoes sound in the distant.

Frack.

I need to say something. I know if I don't, we will be doomed. I don't even know where the others are. But I may just save the ones who are here. With great effort my eyes finally take in the massive creature.

It is orange in color and has red spikes covering its back, legs, and tail lining. My eyes finally meet black ones as it stares down at me.

“We come in peace.” I cough out blood. *Frack.*

The dragon bends to me and as I try to move unsuccessfully, black smoke comes out of its mouth. Hot and toxic.

Blackness takes me away instantly.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Suspicion

Aria

“Aria?” Hanu snaps her fingers in my face for a second time.

“Huh?” I look around the room and her and Mulan are staring at me, concerned.

“What happened with Owa? You haven’t been yourself since.” Mulan asks.

“Nothing.” I choose the lie; I don’t know how to explain what happened there. I’m still not entirely sure myself. I cooked for them after and left them with a hot meal before I came to Hanu’s. The sun is hiding from the world, but the intense orange is still in the horizon.

“Just say you don’t want to talk about it, Aria. We know it isn’t nothing.” Hanu scolds me and I flinch a little.

“Something strange happened but honestly even if I were to tell you the truth, I don’t know what happened. Owa was in one of her spiritual episodes and she spoke a language I don’t know, holding my hand.” I try to explain.

“She didn’t say what that was about?” Mulan asks.

I shake my head.

“I am not too familiar with that old sorcerer, but I heard she is never wrong. So maybe trust that the spirits were speaking to her, and she will let you know if it was for you to know.” Han says.

They are taking this lightly, but I know what I saw. I nod anyway. In any case I am not interested in sharing about this.

“Mulan, didn’t you say Nani was supposed to bring the mead for us? Isn’t it already getting late? I want to ease the day away from me.” Han says to Mulan, and me and Mulan both chuckle after giving each other a look.

Though she doesn’t do it often, Han has been taking to the mead more often in the afternoons. I guess being in a loveless union will do that to you.

“You know she was going to steal it in Zed’s quarters, right?” Mulan says.

“I don’t care where she gets it, my throat is getting sandy.” Han complains, making her swallow a show to make her point.

“Fine.” Mulan sighs. “Let me go and find her.” She gets up.

I follow after her. “Aria, you don’t have to. I will be quick. No need.”

“I want to stretch my legs and I am not staying here as Han swallows loudly the whole time.”

Hani just smiles her crooked smile as she lazes in the sofa.

I follow Mulan and we take for Nani's floor. When we don't find her, we head to Zod's quarters. They are in the same section me and Igor stayed when we arrived, just a floor higher.

I am a little regretful when we start climbing the stairs, and as Mulan turns to give me the *I told you so* look, I glare.

Yes, I regret it, but I am not about to be shamed.

There is movement inside, so Mulan knocks.

No one answers.

"You heard someone inside, right?" I ask when no one comes.

"Yeah. Nani." Mulan calls. She knocks again and then again. Finally, feet shuffle and Nani opens.

Nani is the half-sister of Igor's cousins. The only child of Gremlo's second wife. She is young and so very respectful. Her brothers adore her. So much that when they are away, she looks after their quarters for them since none of them has taken a mate yet.

She is a little wide eyed. "Um, Mulan, Aria, I...w-what are you doing here?" she stutters.

Mulan looks at me before she gives me a questioning look and I shrug. "We came for Hani's mead and since you get it from here, we thought we'd come and get it ourselves in case you were still busy with something." Mulan explains.

My eyes try to see the blocked entrance. It's almost as if she is hiding something.

She looks back before she chuckles nervously. "I forgot about that. I will bring it to Hani. You didn't have to come all the way."

"No, it's okay. We can just take it." I say.

"No!" She says too quickly, making Mulan and I are even more suspicious.

"Nani, you are acting strange. Let us come in. We aren't going to desecrate Zod's dwelling." Mulan says.

I am in full support of her, and my senses are telling me Nani is hiding something. What if she is seeing some young orc and we catch her in the act.

"No. It's just Zod doesn't want anyone but me in his quarters. You know how he is." She tries to explain.

"Okay, get us the mead then and we'll be on our way." Mulan says and I want to strike her. I want to go inside and see what she is hiding. Nani relaxes a fraction, her polite smile shining through again.

"Okay, just wait here it isn't far." Nani turns and after she makes a few steps, Mulan pushes the door in, and I follow.

Nani turns with a look of fear. But it's like she knows doing anything more will raise our suspicion.

"What are you hiding, Nani?" Mulan folds her arm over her chest. "You know your brothers will smite any youngling who

even sniffs your way, and they trust us to protect you while they are gone.”

Nani grunts and turns to the kitchen.

Mulan sniffs the air. She looks at me, then she sniffs again. Like a dog with a scent, she takes the right to the passage.

Nani yells behind us.

Mulan quickens her steps and so do I. Mulan pushes the door to the bedroom then Nani pushes me out of the way as she leaps for Mulan but my mouth is already on the floor.

“Hannah!”

What the frack?

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hannah

Aria

The two female orcs look at me and then Hannah. Then back and then again.

Hannah looks like she doesn't know where to run to. Her gaze is fixed on mine. I see her fright, but I also see a little relief.

“Hannah, is that really you?” I walk towards her.

“You know her?” Nani asks.

“This is interesting.” Mulan sounds excited.

“Yes, Queen.” Hannah responds in her small voice.

“H-How are you here? Do you know where you are?” I ask standing over her, her eyes looking to mine glistening.

“Everyone is dead. H-he killed my brother.” She trembles before she bursts out with a sob.

I am on her side the next moment and so is Mulan next to mine. “Who killed everyone?” I ask for confirmation, but I already have a clue.

“Shamus. Or should I say King Shamus.” She wipes her tears.

My insides turn. *Shamus is king?* I don’t know why I am surprised.

“After you and the orc disappeared after the failed execution and the king’s death, Shamus sought out all those who weren’t allied to him. He killed servants, families, soldiers, communities and some of the members of the council. He went mad before he seized the throne by force.”

I feel so many things I don’t know which one to pick at first. So I focus on the present. “But how are you here?”

Last time I checked humans couldn’t cross.

“Zod...he helped me. He saved my life.” She starts shaking her head as if to expel memories. “My brother...the soldiers came for me. He was just trying to protect me...Solomon.” Her hands cover her face as she chokes on another sob. My heart breaks for her.

“I’m sorry.” I murmur.

This may very well be my fault. Shamus is angry he didn’t get me or Igor so he released his rage on everyone else, mostly those who couldn’t fight back. Me and Igor saved ourselves, but we never thought what that would mean for everyone else.

When Shamus ran, I forgot about him. All I could see was Igor and everything happened so fast. My brain just assumed they’d all be fine. I thought Shamus would miraculously

disappear too. He betrayed Shepherd and Shepherd's guard saw him.

Though, now, I don't doubt that any of them remain, he probably started with them. He wouldn't have allowed them to live with something to hold over his head. And even though the people didn't like Shepherd, he was still King and there was law.

I continue comforting Hannah, patting her as she cries for a while at my side. I ask Nani and Mulan to give us space so she can be comfortable. I know firsthand how different it is being in a realm with a whole other species and I would have been more comfortable with another human face. They leave.

"I'm so happy you are well, Queen." She finally says after a snuffle.

I take her hand. It is also good to see a familiar face. Another human. With a small smile, I say, "I am happy you are well too." Then I take a moment before asking. "How long have you been here?"

"Over a month."

I nod.

So that's where Zod has been disappearing to. He was going to my realm. It makes my mind land on others I care for still in that realm. My mother, my sister, and my brother and his family. And even though I turned my back on them, I still have to wonder about my father and his wife too.

“Do you know what happened to my brother?” I ask, my throat getting tight. I realize I may not want to know. If it’s bad, how will I handle it? I didn’t even meet my niece.

Her hand covers mine, “He escaped with his family the day before your execution. He found refuge in the Obu Kingdom.”

A mixture of relief and resentment fills me. Though I do not fault him for looking out for his family, but he wouldn’t be bothered to come to my aid when I was suffering. It seems our relationship was meant to be one of estrangement.

Maybe I should make peace with this reality. I don’t wish him ill and maybe someday he may remember me as his kin, but perhaps I should take from his example and worry about those who worry for me. Like my mother and my sister.

“My mother and the wolf, were they ever found?”

“I don’t think the wolf was ever found. I thought your mother died long ago.” She says.

“Apparently she lives.” When she just looks at me with question, I ask, “My father and stepmother?” It feels obligatory to ask. I don’t know how much I want to know about them.

Hannah shifts a little uncomfortably and my mind goes to the worst.

“They are...servants in the palace.”

“Servants? He didn’t kill them?” My voice sounds more forceful, pitchier than I mean. Why would he not kill them and more than that, keep them close to him?

She shakes her head. “He needed people to fill the staff of the palace after all the executions and apparently, since he couldn’t get to you, they were his next best option. At least that’s what Solomon said. He was still a guard after I stopped going.”

That is a lot to process. Not that I feel any sorry for them, but that doesn’t mean they should suffer at his hand. I sit there for a few long minutes placing one thought on top of the other, trying to understand and wrap my head around the mess that’s back there. I need Igor to come back. We have things to discuss. I want to know what he thinks.

“Okay, enough of that. Let me make you tea. I’m sure Mulan is itching to ask you somethings.” I say as I get on my feet, and I offer her my hand. She looks to be recoiling into herself. Perhaps she is wary of strange orcs. And she has only been in the company of Nani and Zod.

Zod. I have so many things to ask him. Why he saved Hannah. What he was doing back in my realm. Why he never told anyone. Why the secrecy. Why hide Hannah from me? Again, why Hannah? Does he know she used to be my assist in the palace or it’s just coincidence? So many questions.

“They are wonderful orcs. They will not pry if you don’t want to talk but you can’t stay here forever.” I try to reassure her.

Her eyes dart to the floor. “I can’t leave, Queen. Zod said I mustn’t. He will be...upset if I do.”

“He said you mustn’t leave his room?”

“Mostly, yes. He said other orcs will catch my scent and then we’ll get in trouble.” She says worriedly.

I consider her words. She is correct, other orcs may catch her foreign scent. But she also can’t stay here.

“Let me make you tea at least.” I say.

She doesn’t look comfortable with that. “No, I will ask Nani to make me a cup. You don’t have to.”

“I am not your Queen anymore, Hannah. I would like to be your friend instead. Perhaps we can start over?”

Her beautiful, innocent hazel eyes meet mine and she nods after a few moments of consideration.

“Let me place a pot for you then, I’ll be back.” I head for the door. I sigh as I exit, I didn’t know this was something I needed. Human contact. We haven’t spoken about anything joyous, but I feel better.

I find Mulan, Nani, and Hani in the kitchen. “When did you get here?” I ask.

“Where’s the human?” Hani asks with too much enthusiasm.

I roll my eyes. “She is a little shaken so you will need to hold it a bit. I don’t think she’s ready for all of...this.” I wiggle my index to her body.

She rolls her eyes. “Let me bring her the tea. You making her tea, right?”

“I am making her tea.” I place the pot on the already hot stove.

I turn to the orcs who are waiting on bated breath for something.

“How do you know her?” Mulan asks.

“She used to work in the palace.”

“She doesn’t talk much, does she?” Nani asks and I chuckle.

“She is reserved, yes. That’s why you need to give her air to breathe.” I say.

Hani looks around. “But she can’t stay here. All alone.”

“She can’t go. Apparently, Zod said so. There’s also the risk of your people and their long noses.” I gesture to all of them.

“That’s true.” Mulan says.

“Perhaps we can smuggle her in the deep night?” Hani suggests.

“To where? At least here most the males are gone and hardly many come around. Zod was right, it is better here than...anywhere else. Plus, are you prepared to deal with Masa on the issue?” I ask.

“Your dwelling is safest.” Hani suggests boldly.

“I agree.” Mulan says.

“So, I don’t get a say?” I ask.

“Your quarters are the most secluded, only we and the old orcs go there, and I doubt they would tell anyone. Especially if

we tell them she is Zod's. They have a fatal soft spot for him.”
Hani says.

“She is not Zod's.” I protest on Hannah's behalf. He saved her life, but I doubt that orc is interested in human women. Though he seems to be just as disinterested in female orcs as well. He just always seems to be in his head, on his own mission that he barely takes notice of all the flirting young females.

“We'll see.” Hani wiggles her eyebrows.

That decided, I take the tea to Hannah. And after asking her, the others join.

They are respectful and they don't bombard her with many questions other than who she is and general stuff about clothes and shoes.

Although she is hesitant at first, she finally concedes letting us take her to my quarters. We do it in the dead of the night. Lucky for us this part of the dwellings doesn't have many orcs. Those who remained behind, are guarding the gate, monitoring the top and outside to make sure we are protected from all threats.

I settle Hannah in one of our spare bedrooms. The next few days she starts stiff, but she soon gets a little comfortable with the female orcs. Nani also joins our little group and on the days I have to eat with Owa, I go to them. But overall, I couldn't be happier she is here.

Chapter Twenty-Six

You Promised Me

Aria

In the later days, after gathering my courage, and long talks by the women, including Owa, I finally pack a basket of treats and I go do what I have meant to do for a while.

“You will be fine, Aria,” Hannah says, her tea in hand. It is just me and her this day. The others had other things to do. Hani is with Gremlo and Mulan is cleaning Hergo’s quarters. Apparently, she just does it because they are friends, nothing more is going on. Something none of us believe. And though Hergo is not very talkative like his brothers, he is a decent orc and Igor speaks highly of him.

I bite my lip. “You haven’t met her. She’s a little tense.”

“I used to think you were a little tense too, but that wasn’t true.” Hannah says with a small sly smile.

“You used to think I was tense? Why?”

“You were always so serious. Reading, writing. You barely heard my knocks most days. And you hardly smiled.”

“It was the tight corsets you used to almost kill me with.”
We both laugh.

After that passes. I think about leaving again. I am still not too comfortable with leaving her alone. I just get a bad vision of another orc, particularly Azula finding her out and everything going south. I can't hide the concern before she looks at me sternly.

“I will be fine here. Now go.”

I roll my eyes, to which she chuckles again then I leave to my mother-in-law's office.

It is luck it is on the same floor, just a little walk from me and Igor's quarters. With me 8 months pregnant, I am in more discomfort than I want to admit. But these orcs are almost ready to come out and I am ready for them to leave me so they can eat and breathe for themselves.

I make the right into the passage, and her ajar space lets me see her head down in utter concentration on a scroll open before her. Her one ear ticks but she doesn't move otherwise or acknowledge my presence.

Being here makes me remember the fact that Hani is with Gremlo and I wonder if Masa loves Igor's uncle at all. They look more like friends in each other's presence. Which would explain why she has her workspace all the way here and not at the top with Gremlo.

“Queen Masa.” I finally get the courage.

“Yes, Aria. Is there a problem?” She says after her head rises and her eyes meet mine. She isn’t cruel she is just her, neither eager nor annoyed. Her gaze lands on my stomach and she spend one more second there before she brings it to my face.

That makes me more sure I need to try. Our babies are almost here, and I need them to have a relationship with her. When this thing with the Sokos is over, I will need to talk to Igor about their relationship too. Igor told me they used to be closer than they are now. But his father’s death was the beginning of their estrangement.

“Um, I brought us lunch.” I lift the basket, hoping it will work as an in.

“*Us?*” She looks confused. Again, not offended or anything. Just...neutral curiosity.

“Yes,” I clear my throat when it starts feeling clogged. “I would like to have lunch with you.”

“Oh. Is Owa busy today?”

I detect a little more in her voice, not entirely sure what it is, it’s a little dark, but it is just a small spark of something, and I swallow.

“No. I would like to eat with you. If you don’t mind.” I straighten my shoulders and I stand steady.

She looks around the room and I realize she is looking for a place for me to sit. Her table is large, but she doesn’t have visitor’s chairs.

She instantly gets up from her chair. “If I’d have known you had intention on coming, I would have asked for a chair. Wait here and I will get—”

“No!” she halts instantly, and I realize it’s my raised voice. “I mean, I will just sit here its fine.” I gesture to the seating that is built on the wall. It is far from her, but I feel bad having her inconveniencing herself for me.

She now looks at me with offense.

“Don’t be silly, you can’t sit there in your condition. There are good chairs a few rooms away.”

I open my mouth to protest but she is out of the room the next moment. I see where Igor gets his mother hen tendencies from. I place the basket on her large table and start unloading the containers and plates. She comes back when I am arranging the fruit containers next to the main dishes.

“Is this fine for you?” I gesture to the food as she sets the chair next to me.

“I eat everything,” she says. And for the first time, I see the corner of her mouth lift and it reminds me of Igor.

“Good to know.” I say.

She is still next to me, so I turn to her.

“You sure you shouldn’t be sitting down, and I do all that?” she asks.

“Um, I’m fine. You can sit.” I say.

With a little hesitation she goes back to her chair. She folds her scrolls, and the room only has sounds of me plating for us and her moving the things she was working with aside. I try to stuff down the rising awkwardness that is choking this room. I can feel her eyes on me. I wish I was more familiar with her to ask her to stop. But I guess this is what I'm here for.

I take her plates to her when I am done. Then I place a cup of juiced kiwi-like fruit called bha next to her. I was very fortunate they have many of the fruits available in my realm here. Most don't look exactly the same, but the tastes are comparable.

When I settle with my own food, we eat in silence. I try to juggle eating and breathing and trying to not overthink about whether I am doing both normally. I just feel awkward. I start thinking about how maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

It's times like these I wish Igor was near. I could use him as an inbetweenner and facilitating the conversation. Right then, my babies kick. My hand goes to my right, and I feel a bump. I can't help the smile. They are so overzealous. I bet they are ready.

I am ready for you too, my little orcs.

"Is that the babies?" Masa's voice makes me almost jump.

"Uh, yes." My eyes find hers.

It is back to awkwardness when I don't know how to proceed. Does she want to feel them? Should I offer? Is that too forward? She's probably just asking. I drop my hand from

it, and she goes back to her food. The lunch is awkward and silent again, but I am determined to try so I stay.

Loud and heavy footsteps echo in the corridor and they seem to be running. Masa seems to be hearing the same thing, her ears tick a few times.

A spring comes in and Masa is already on her feet.

“Queen, you have to come.” He pants heavily.

Before I ask, Masa is out of the door, no questions. My heart accelerates and I find myself on my feet trying to follow them.

By the time I get to the corridor, they are already going out into the assembly. I walk towards the assembly. Something doesn't feel right. I feel uneasy and my palms feel clammy.

I see the gathered crowd and their heads are focused on something. By the time I make it to the assembly everyone is dispersing like whatever they were here to see is gone.

When I step into the light, several eyes avoid mine. I don't know what that is about, but I ignore it. I spot Hani on Owa's side. As I start heading to her, something catches my attention in my peripheral and it stops me dead in my tracks.

My feet move on their own, my head spinning but I am trying to hold on to my wild thoughts.

“Where is Igor?” I demand from a beaten up Zod as Faz helps him walk. Zod is limping. And they both look like they have just fought with sharp stones and the stones won.

Both of them look at me but they don't answer. Their mouths hang open. They don't need to say anything. It's in their eyes. I emit a scream that comes from my very soul.

No.

"Where is he? Did they take him?" I shove Faz and he doesn't budge.

A firm hand touches my shoulders, and my eyes meet Masa's concerned ones. "Where is he? Do you know?"

Her frown deepens before she says, "He's alive."

It doesn't sound like she is convinced either, but because I need it to be true, I hold on to her words for dear life. I rub my little orcs.

He's alive. He is still here. Don't you worry.

"Then where?" I look up at Masa even as she is blurry.

"They took him." Zod says, making me turn speedily to him.

So, it's real, the Sokos took him. The confirmation doesn't make things better. Orcs who have been taken by them never return. *Oh Goddess.*

My hands cover my mouth as tears threaten to melt my whole face and I am trying to keep the despair at bay. But he is alive, that is all that matters.

"The Sokos took him. When?" I need to know.

Faz and Zod look at each other like they haven't told me everything.

“What is it?” I ask in annoyance.

“It wasn’t the Sokos.” Zod says guiltily.

“What?” Masa asks next to me.

“Then who took him?” I demand.

“We should talk in private.” Gremlo’s voice breaks through and he is standing next to his sons the next moment. He walks to the direction of the shelter and his sons follow him. So do I, and Masa keeps pace with me.

I am walking but in truth I can’t feel my legs anymore. The only thing that has my focus is my racing heart. I’m trying not to collapse.

The walk to this private room doesn’t seem to end. Finally, we go into one of the closer rooms.

“Who took my mate?” I ask, impatience I’m not trying to hide evident in my voice. I don’t care for the chain of authority at this moment. I just want them to tell me who has my mate. And then what they will be doing to go get him back.

“The dragons.” Faz says earning a gasp from Masa and even more confusion from me.

“That’s impossible.” Gremlo protests.

“We were there, father.” Zod says in slight annoyance.

“How is that possible?” Masa asks.

“We went on a mission with Imp to scout the Soko lands. We were going to cross at the border of Ragu, but we got ambushed,” Faz explains.

I don't know how to process everything. Dragons? I thought orcs were the only sentient creatures in this realm. How is it possible he has never spoken to me about dragons?

"They had the element of surprise, and they had their *Dagona* with them. He is the one who took Imp," Zod says.

"Who is Dagona?" I ask

"Their leader." Gremlo answers.

"What does this mean? Why would they take him? Why did they let you go?" I realize what I am saying is unfair, but I can't live without Igor.

Faz and Zod look to Gremlo, who then turns to me. "Masa, please take her back to her dwelling."

"No. I want to know. And who is going to get him?" I take on Gremlo's full gaze.

"Aria, come with me. You need to calm down." Masa says in a gentle voice next to me, but it gives me no reassurance.

"No. I am not leaving until you send orcs after him. Look what they did to them. They will kill him!"

Sudden dizziness hits me that instant as my heart shoots up sharply. I sway, eyes going black for a second and I stagger as I try to find something solid to hold on to.

"You need to calm down." Masa says, holding me steadily as I feel my body getting fainter.

I shake my head, more tears dropping to the floor, and I watch them stain the stone floor that looks like it hasn't been

scrubbed in a while.

“He is a survivor. He will come back to you.” I hear Faz’s voice, but it is getting harder to hear anything as my heart rate continues to escalate. I am lifted off the ground and it is then I feel how numb my body is becoming. I can barely feel anything, but I try to keep my eyes open.

My babies.

Igor.

I don’t register any of the trip to my quarters. When I am set in a soft surface, someone places a cold towel on my forehead, and it brings me back to the land of the living. My eyes focus on the room. It was Faz who carried me, and I am on my sofa.

Hannah brings me water and a cold herbal tea and helps me down them. They help a little, but I am still way too aware of all the possibilities.

I open my mouth to protest when she kneels to elevate my feet off the ground, but the door opens suddenly and a frantic Zod enters. His eyes immediately find Hannah and hers stick to him too.

It is like my heart slows when I look between them. I am taken out of my moment, and I get sucked into theirs.

What is going on?

“Why did you leave my quarters?” He asks.

Hannah’s head turns from Zod, and I notice her displeased scowl. “Don’t talk to me like I’m a child. The Queen found

me. I am not harmed.” She says, and proceeds to lift both my feet and place them in cushions on the table. Zod follows the action and I see a hint of disapproval.

I clear my throat. “It’s fine, Hannah. I can manage. You can...talk to Zod.”

She doesn’t look at me, but she stands and turns her full gaze on him. Chin almost fully up with defiance. *Or is it something else?*

“I am unharmed. And you don’t need to worry. I am fine here,” she says.

“No. You are coming with me,” Zod states strongly.

I only remember Faz in the room by the small chuckle. We both watch the two stand on either side.

“Um, Zod. Why is Hannah here and why haven’t you said anything?” I ask when it seems that both of them aren’t keen on talking.

His eyes still don’t leave Hannah’s. “No disrespect, but it was not anyone’s concern. I found this human on my own. She is no one’s business but mine.”

“I am a full adult.” Hannah states defiantly.

Zod narrows his eyes at her, I suspect to get her to submit but my little Hannah doesn’t back down, her hands cross over her chest.

After a few moments, Zod says, “Fine. But I want you back at my quarters. I found you. You are my responsibility. Do you

want Aria to get in trouble for having you?”

That seems to do it for Hannah because she turns to me with a concerned expression.

“I will be fine, Hannah. I’ll talk to Masa about you. You don’t have to go with him.” I try to place her at ease.

“Yes, but I don’t want to burden you.” She says guiltily.

I look at Zod. I want to protest and ask her to stay but his expression makes me say, “Just don’t be a stranger. I will come visit you tomorrow. We’ll have dinner.”

That answer seems to make Zod relax a fraction and I really eye him.

Does he care for Hannah? What are his plans for her? I know I can’t have the conversation I want to have with him right now, so I bite my tongue.

Later that night, he comes to get her.

She didn’t seem uncomfortable with him so maybe they are some kind of...friends?

Time will tell.

When I roll myself in bed, sadness blankets me once more now that I am all alone. He may have been taken alive, but that doesn’t give me full assurance. I pray for his safety.

Igor, you promised me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bound By A Dragon

Igor

I try to open my eyes, but it is hard. I need to wake up, that's all I know. I don't feel restful, and it is hard to remember why. It feels like something is keeping my body still against my will.

I need to remember.

I try to use my nose to gauge my surroundings. Nothing I inhale smells familiar. *Where am I?*

My mind brings everything back and I flinch inwardly. *The dragon.*

With another mountainous effort, I try to open my eyes. I only manage a little peek before they close on their own once more. *This can't be good.*

Footsteps make me still. But what confuses me is they don't sound like the heavy footsteps of a 30-foot dragon. They sound...orcish. Like maybe the size of a spring or a soro. I try to draw in a breath, and I can't catch any familiarity in the scent.

“Good, you’re awake.” A deep voice says, and I can feel the presence not far from my body.

I battle opening my eyes again, but it is brief once more. What have they done to me? Why can’t I move? I hear a second pair of footsteps and this time these ones come closer. I tense inwardly.

I am in high alert when I feel a body loom over me, and cold hands touch my eyes. They slide down to my nose and then mouth. I draw air in a loud gasp like I just came from underwater.

What the hell?

My eyes fly open, face feeling lighter. My eyes land on a Soko. I growl loudly, barring my tusks for them. They are using their magic to bind me.

I thrash trying to get the rest of my body free so I can do away with their pathetic existence, but I am bound so tight, I can’t even move my head. Only my eyes, nose and mouth can move, and I can’t seem to form coherent sentences in my head to talk. They only flinch a little and I see fear in their eyes but other than that, they step back quietly.

“Stop struggling.” The voice that was here first speaks.

My eyes narrow on the figure that emerges from behind the Soko. I can’t keep them from furrowing.

What is this? A human?

His lips lift a little at the corner at my perusal. What is he? I thought I was taken by dragons. But before me stands a

human. A tall human man with brown skin. They lift the garment on their arms and their sleeves reveal scales, orange scales with black highlights. *It's him.*

“You catch on fast. What shall I call you?” He steps closer, now looking down at me and I don't like it. I glare. And I am getting even more furious.

“Unbind me.” I grit through my teeth.

“I don't think I will just yet. I've seen what you can do.” He says, linking his fingers in front of him, regarding me with curiosity but also distance.

“Why am I here?” I demand.

“You may have something I need.” He says. “Though I would like to get it freely before we resort to other means. But that all depends on you, of course.”

“What do you want?”

His lips force a hard line before he shakes his head slowly. “You need to recover from the toxins then we can talk. Apologies for that by the way. It's been a while since I've used my fumes and I may have gone overboard.” He says, then he turns on his heel.

“Come back here!” I order.

His movement stops before he looks me over his shoulder. “We aren't trying to harm you, but you must heal. You have been through much.”

The Soko follows him out like his servant, leaving me with more questions than answers and I don't like it.

I roar after them with all the strength I can gather. I set out to free my people and I end up bound by a dragon.

Hours pass very slowly as my mind runs, asking all the questions I have no answers to yet. After a while, I elect to not focus on my home but on the present and preserving all my efforts on getting free.

I need to figure out what they did to me and try to get free. I could really use one of Aria's mother's elixirs right this moment.

My mind goes over every reason a Soko could be serving as a servant to a dragon. Are the two nations coexisting or is one the dominant to the other? But that would make less sense considering how the Soko have harassed my people.

I need to find answers and a part of me believes some of those answers will be found here at Ragu.

I don't know when, but I fall asleep.



I jolt awake when I feel something cold on my torso. I know instinctively it's not Aria and my hand moves with an incredible fluidity. I latch on to a body part before I try to open my eyes, but they don't.

What the frack?

“Why won’t my eyes open?” I ignore their shriek of pain and dig my nails harder into them. I will break their bones if they don’t remove whatever spell they have on my eyes.

“Don’t kill the help.” The familiar voice comes from somewhere in the room.

“Why don’t you step closer then.” I bark out.

The puny creature continues crying in pain, but I don’t let go.

Something like the pointy side of a dagger touches my stomach flesh and my body goes lax. I try to move but it’s like I have no bones.

What kind of sorcery is this?

“Stop that!” I slur as even moving my mouth is hard. A hand touches my eyes, and they open. Feeling and muscles comes back to my whole face, and I gasp for air.

“What are you doing to me?” I grit my teeth, trying to move the rest of my body but it’s still futile.

“If you stop struggling, this will be over soon.” The dragon says.

“What the hell are you doing to me?”

“Completing your healing.”

“Free me. Now.” I order.

“If you would stop struggling then we can work the poison out of you faster, then we can talk and tell you why you are here.” He says, looking at me with disapproval.

I glare at the dragon even as the Soko moves in this room as a mere shadow, probably getting a covering for the wounds I opened in his arms. His blood permeates the air. But something is wrong with it. I don't know what.

“There is no reason you can't start talking right this second.” I say.

The dragon purses his lips. “You need to be free then I will take you and show you.”

Before I answer, he turns on his heel and he gives me his back. The terrified orc fans my body with a feather-like item and the more he does it, the freer and stronger I feel. My initial instinct is to lunge for them both, but I have a feeling harming me may not be their immediate intention like they've stated. I need to remain clear headed.

I let the orc free me then I take the clothes offered to me when I sit up. I move my arms, toes, and neck to see if my muscles are back to their state and it feels like they are.

The Soko exits the room quickly before I stand up. I take the cue and dress while I take in my surroundings. The walls seem to be the brown-redish stone that covers most of Ragu. But it is cut so straight with high ceilings, it almost resembles the designs in the human realm.

Everything is symmetrical and straight, and clean. The furniture is made of white wood and the chair stainless steel. There isn't much in this room.

I find shoes on the floor, and I think better than leaving them to walk bare foot. I walk to the door with haste in my step, in a hurry to get out of this place.

I find the dragon leaning on the wall opposite the room. My first instinct is to lunge for him, but he is now in the company of three others. He smirks a little when he must realize what I'm thinking.

He pushes off the wall. "We don't aim to harm you, just don't try to harm any of my people either."

I don't respond. There is no need to. I step beside him, his security behind us, as we walk a long corridor. There are big windows lining the walls ahead of us and when we come to the first one, my feet stop on their own at the sight before me.

Dragons of various sizes fly between what seems to be a large nest with multiple levels. Not just large, colossal. I don't see the bottom as green lines the red stone beneath it, covering almost every surface. The lush green reminds me of Aria's realm.

Young dragons fly with their mothers. Though I don't see many young, or many males, but the scene of a very much alive society confronts me. The dragons didn't die out like we were all told.

"Come this way." The voice of the still-nameless dragon says.

"What do I call you?" I don't turn to look at him.

“I am called Kartna. I am the Dagona’s placeholder.” He says proudly, making me turn to him. I thought he was the Dagona based on his size and the feeling that he is in charge around here. And if he’s the placeholder, where is the Dagona? Is he taking me to him?

“Hm.” I muse thoughtfully. In negotiations or hostile environments, it is always best to be the one who talks less. Less likely to reveal yourself that way.

We walk to the end of the corridor then turn to a large open area. It seems to be some kind of foyer. It is elegantly decorated with backless chairs draped in silk-like coverings and paintings that look like they were drawn by tar. I spot intricate maps of the realm and I can’t stop myself from slowing my movements to see.

Most of it is written in a foreign language that looks complicated, granted our orc written language is a lot more... simple and straight to the point. My eyes lift up to the ceiling and I see a painting that looks like nothing but burnt patches and smeared tar. But as I look more, I recognize what it is. I go from picture to picture. The whole ceiling is painted of this event or series of events. *Their history.*

“The Great Sending.” Kartna speaks from somewhere behind me and I don’t flinch. Too engrossed in this story where piles of dragons are drawn picture after picture.

“What is that?” I ask.

Nothing comes from the dragons behind me, so I turn.

“We will be going this way. What I need to show you is here.” He gestures with his hand, ignoring my question.

I contemplate not moving to see just how hostile this situation is.

“We don’t aim to harm you. We need your help.” He says.

I sense notes of...desperation. But why would he take me and then show me his weaknesses. I didn’t get it.

I follow after him and the others follow me silently. I am not at ease here even though they don’t seem to want much from me other than to show me whatever it is they think I have to see.

When we step out of the door, we spill into an outer entrance with pillars surrounding it. Of course, dragons have no need for stairs. He takes me to the left where I see others flying about. When we get to the edge, I am still wondering about what I will see when I am led to a cage. I step back. I do not trust any cages.

But Kartna steps into it first and so do the others.

“I give you my word and that of my peoples. We mean you no harm, son of Zad.”

“Where did you hear that?”

He gives me but a small smile and a shrug. “I’ve heard many things.”

“I thought you didn’t know my name.” I stiffen my back.

But I was not prepared for what I see next.

Our eyes meet at the same time, and he doesn't look as surprised to see me as I am him. He gives me a salute, face full grin.

I blink, looking behind him. *I must be seeing things.*

“Why is a Bono orc on the back of that dragon?” The question shoots out of me instantly.

Kartna chuckles and so do the others. “Careful there. That’s an orc and his wife.”

“What!”

“They are vowed. They are a couple. One of the first successful ones.” Kartna says like I am supposed to understand what he means.

“Dragon, you better just talk right now. I am not getting on that trap with you.”

He purses his lips, resisting, but after a young dragon flies by so fast, screaming happily about something with their mother chasing them, he focuses on me again like he just remembered something.

“We have orcs living with us,” he says too simply for my liking.

“What orcs?” The answer to that I already know, but I need confirmation that my suspicions are correct, and I am not going insane.

This is not what I expected to find here. I expected to be hanging on a cliff, getting tortured for bordering their land

illegally. Not orcs riding the backs of dragons and...being mated to them.

“Come. You have to see for yourself.” He tries once more.

I don't move. Still not trusting him.

“Maybe he'd like a ride, captain.” The blue-scaled dragon says next to him, amusement dancing in his eyes.

Kartna returns a challenging smirk to me. “Well, Igor. Would you rather get a ride on my back?”

“No.” I say quickly, and I get in the cage.

The red-scaled dragon starts pulling a thread of thick rope I hadn't seen, and the thing starts lowering. It is a long way down. But what I see makes me swallow even harder.

We pass homes with a few dragons. By the time we pass the trees, and we get to the ground my mouth is on the floor and I don't doubt my tusks are all out.

“Welcome to new Ragu.” Kartna steps out of the cage, gesturing to the village before my eyes.

My feet follow on their own with no help from me. There are many brown-redish stone houses and structures here. My eyes immediately take in the creatures here who are around what seems to be a village center.

My frown deepens when I see dragons and orcs, and ones that look to be a cross between orcs and dragons.

The ones who look to me to be a mix are green in color. They look more like bigger orcs who can fly. They have wings

that are twice the length of their height, heads that are rounder, have two arms like orcs and normal feet and tusks. But they are clearly not either and their bodies are scaled everywhere.

“They are the mixed breed that are a result of Bono orcs and our kind.”

“What about that other one we saw earlier?” I realize now that that young dragon who was flying with their parent may not look normal either. But he was definitely almost pure dragon.

“That is the closest we’ve gotten to pure breeds. You, *Modos*, and our females produce that...”

He points to a dragon that is almost his size in dragon form descending with a grace I would never expect from a dragon.

The dragon just looks bigger and has large tusks protruding their mouth, they look feral. But they shift in front of us, and they look...orcish. Like a Modo orc. No scales. Normal tusks. But two small horns in front of their foreheads.

After the shock, searing rage begins to burn me. Our kind were stolen from our land for...breeding.

The whole picture begins making sense.

They are the evil.

They are clearly keeping Sokos as slaves.

My hand goes for his throat and the others are too late. I have him pinned on the ground and he doesn't have enough time to shift.

“You are keeping my people here? You will pay for this!”

He shifts in that moment, and I am sent flying away. But I get up to charge at him when a small voice says, “Stop!”

Kartna is now fully dragon, roaring, eyes sharp on me and we are face to face.

“You people are murderers! And thieves!” I growl.

“If you just let them explain.” The blue dragon says.

“Get me back to my people now! They must know of this... abomination!” I turn then and I see the face of the young dragon. It’s a Modo mix. He is just a child, an orcling with caramel skin but he stands tall. Brave.

The faces on the others, the adults – Bono, Modo and dragon – don’t communicate the same. I see fear. They fear me. *Me?*

Can’t they see everything that is wrong here?

Our people are being taken brutally but I am the evil?

Before I answer, something foggy covers my face and I lose balance, and everything goes black.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Okrar

Igor

I wake up in another room. It wasn't the deep sleep this time, and my mind is awake. I can't hear anything, but I have been mentally awake. I am bound to a chair this time. When my body starts feeling like its mine again, I test the strength of the bindings and they are intact.

“That will be no use.” Kartna moves closer from the corner. This time there is no one else.

“My people have been hunted by Sokos for 80 years, and many have been taken. From their families, their homes. Why are they here and where do the Sokos come in?” I ask.

He leans on the wall next to the large door and he considers me, before he says. “The Sokos took everything from us.”

I remain quiet.

He sighs, “You need to meet someone.” He pushes off the door.

I don't fight, and when he unbinds me, I follow him. I notice it is now evening and dim lights glow everywhere like a

town. I can't deny it looking even more beautiful now.

I am led to a dining room with large chairs and many dragons sitting around a cream table.

My eyes scan the room. It's a wide round room with the standard high ceilings and clean, simple but elegant furniture. The ceiling here is painted too, and the cream walls have a few paintings of majestic dragons.

All of their eyes train on me. I take the seat I am offered and Kartna takes a larger chair. Next to him I notice a red-scaled female dragon who is sitting on the biggest chair here, but she looks a little dim. Her scales aren't shining as brightly as the other's colors.

"This is Queen Somo. The remaining daughter of Queen Dota. Hear our story from her lips. And I ask that you listen this time. I said it before we have no plans of harming you but if you try anything, we can defend ourselves." His body is leaning towards this Queen Somo. He seems protective of her.

Her fiery red eyes with a solid black iris inside her eye lifts to me and I see much. She is weary. She shifts in her chair, looking unsure. She is no leader.

Interesting.

After swallowing, she begins. Her voice firm but not powerful. She was not meant to rule.

"We used to never mix in any way with them. But five hundred years ago, they lost...something." She says cryptically. "The Sokos started losing their magic. As the vile

creatures they are, they sought every creature on this realm looking for a way they could help their case. When they didn't find it, or ways of retrieving it back, they turned to us. They turned feral looking for a kaka plant farmed by our people to ease their spiraling. Without this thing...they were out of control and destructive. They ran out of things to bargain with and then one day they came to loot the plant and found my mother walking in the gardens alone and they murdered her. She tucked me in bed that night, but I was to never see her again. They took everything from me. What they do for us isn't even half of the debt that is owed."

After she finishes, I take a moment to process. She is the only line of the dragon's royal blood line. A queen. But where is her king?

"I still don't see how it gets to where your people send Sokos to take mine. You already had slaves." I mutter.

The room gets more tense. Many eyes glaring at me but I don't retreat. I need the truth. The whole truth.

The Queen doesn't cower this time. "Without our Queen, I was not guided properly in our way. I couldn't...procreate for hundreds of years. Our males were dying going out looking for food and the females were getting old unfertilized."

My brows lift in surprise.

"The Soko brought a possible solution. The standing leader was also desperate to save his kind and since they had burned every other bridge and the Saho Mountain savages wouldn't help them, they begged for their survival." She pauses in

reflection, looking disgusted at that. “We found a way to coexist safely. But we are by no means friends. They provide us with what we need since they are unsuitable to breed our females. And we keep them alive.”

I take a moment, not rushing to take in all the information. My head feels heavy. It’s like I learn something new and life altering every day.

“What do you want from me? You already have the orcs you stole. Your society seems to be thriving. What do you want?”

“Peace.” She says.

Licking my tusks, I train my eyes on her. How can she want peace when she has what’s ours, when she stole from us?

“We are orcs. We only know battle.” I say.

“But not you son of Zad. Not you *King* of the orcs.” She says firmly.

“I am not a king.”

“It is your birthright. And you are the only one who can bring all of us peace. Your people will never stop the war. We need an ally.” She pauses. “Someone to bring all sides together.”

I stare at her.

“I don’t need to tell you how advanced our warriors are. We may not have your numbers, but we can hold our side in a battle. But there has been enough war, King Igor.”

“I don’t rule the *Bonos*.” I say.

“One rule rules all orcs. Last time I checked, the Okrar is not elected.”

Her meaning is as clear as sunlight. They want me in charge so they can continue their breeding project. They need an ally.

But can I trust them?

What happens when they breed, and they take us to war and wipe us out?

Their grudge with the Sokos seems to run deep and they have no qualms using our orcs for their means.

“How did you know to capture me? How do you know about me and where are my soldiers?”

“Your orcs were taken back. We heard of your return and your interesting new outlook on life and war. And we also knew about...” she doesn’t need to finish.

They have spies in the camp. So that’s how they are that slippery. They have a lot of help inside. We should have known this.

“How is it that my uncle doesn’t know any of this and neither does Langa?”

“Not everyone is capable of seeing the vision. Theirs are stained by war, famine and loss.”

I hold her gaze, making sure to keep my face impassive.

My mind travels instantly to Aria. I need to talk to her. This changes everything. I wonder what she’ll say. And if she

knows I was taken, she must be worried. With no more attention on this situation, a small panic rises from me. I need to reassure her I am alive. I know she will worry.

I get up from my chair suddenly, looking at Kartna.

“Take me back to my home.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Blessed By Odala

Aria

Everything hurts. It's been a week since Zod, and the others came back without Igor. A week without knowledge of whether my mate lives or is no more.

Masa told me I should prepare for anything three days ago, but I can't. There isn't a world where I am alive, and Igor isn't. What will I tell our children?

I am three weeks from my full nine months, and everything is too much. But I am fortunate my babies are strong. I would simply perish if they too got hurt.

I move my head to the left and I look out the window to the vast skies. To where Igor is. It's another morning. Another day without my love.

What did I ever do to deserve this?

"Odala, is this what you had planned for me?" I don't hide the anger or loathing in my voice.

I am angry at all the Goddesses and the Gods. How could they allow this to happen? Have I not suffered enough at their

hands? And for what exactly? I don't see the reward. I don't see the glory.

“Aria.” Hannah's voice brings me back to the present. It reminds me of my old life. I used to be miserable for different reasons but now it's worse. I am crushed over something real.

I call her in, and the door opens the next second and I turn to her. My eyes are still adjusting to the darkness of the room, but she has a basin in her hand and a towel on her shoulder. It really does remind me of all those years. But nothing is the same.

“Owa just brought these for you. They are to help with your swelling.” She says softly.

I feel new tears burning the back of my eyes and she gets blurry instantly. I turn from her.

“Fine.” I manage even though I want to tell her to leave me to my sorrow.

I want to be left alone. But the load I am carrying with me still needs caring for and I need to help my body. The sound of the water running is a decent distraction and I focus on it. It instantly reminds me of the last bath me and Igor had.

It's strange how the same thing can feel so different. Bath time for me and Igor was one of our most intimate times. A lot of our most beautiful memories involve water.

We met because of water. We found out I was pregnant after an almost deadly session in the water. And our times in the springs and the bathtub.

There is no way I have lost all of that. No way at all.

“The water is ready.” Hannah says.

“Thank you, Hannah.” I say after I sit up. “But you didn’t have to.” I regret it when I see her face. She is just trying to help. “I’m sorry. I just don’t...”

I can’t finish the sentence.

I am too tired emotionally, so I slide out of the bed. And she moves to make it.

I don’t ask her to stop even though I want to. Mine and Igor’s bed is my responsibility. I simply undress and get in the tub.

I am lucky it is hidden from the room as my lips tremble, trying to cover a sob that is about to tear out from me. The washroom here is a large room on its own. It has enough space for the large tub, two cabinets, a clean towel basket, and a clothes rack.

As I wash my hair, the tears fall once more. I hope this is not going to be my life. Washing my own hair forever. He has to come back to me.

But I don’t delay in the water. Getting up from the tub has been a struggle lately, but I struggle on my own.

After drying my body, which takes longer than I wish it would, I wear a long dress that’s a little thicker. Even though the mountain isn’t as cold as I thought it would be.

I pull at my mating bracelet as I exit my bedroom and head to where the low voices are coming from. I find them all in the kitchen with a lovely aroma. I may be sad, but food is still my comfort.

The chatting stops when I enter the room. All four eyes turn to me. And I hate the looks of pity in them. I really hope this is not going to be my life going forward. I truly don't know what I'd do. I don't know if I would be able to live here if Igor really wasn't. *How could I?*

"You don't have to stop on my account." I say, trying to sound steady even though I feel like turning back to go sleep some more.

"Of course. The food is almost ready. Have a seat." Hani says as she pulls the chair next to hers. I now see the full usefulness of the kitchen chairs we had Gar make for us. I thank the foresight of making six of them.

After a long awkward silence, Mulan says. "He will come back, Aria."

I lift my eyes to hers. I don't know why but I hold on to them. I need all the light I can get.

"If anyone can come back, it's Imp." Hani says.

"Igor." I correct. I know Igor doesn't like the name Imp anymore and some of the orcs still call him by it. I don't like the name much anymore either. "He doesn't like being called Imp anymore. Please stop."

I look back down to my belly before I take in anyone's reaction.

The door to the main room opens and I lift my head in an anticipation that is crushed when I see it isn't who I want. A part of me still hopes whenever a door opens. I just think he will come in like he did all those weeks ago when he came to check on us.

Owa walks in, a basket in her hand. I don't even have to look to know it's tea. Since the horrible news came, we haven't sat for a cup, and I feel a little bad. She takes a chair when Hani moves for her.

They plate the food, and we eat. After, we all have tea.

Around noon Owa convinces me to go outside for some fresh air. I follow after her because it feels like she is one of a few who is as invested in Igor's return as I am.

The others stay positive, but I can see it in most of their faces, they don't think he'll come back.

We walk in silence as we head to the assembly. We pass the water hole and go to the seating next to the children's playground while mother's watch over the orclings.

We sit on one of the benches in the far back in silence.

Silences between me and Owa are normally comfortable but not this one. I have so much to ask her. She is supposed to be the one who sees everything. She called Igor King and me Queen.

I would have thought that meant we were going to be alive for a little longer than a few weeks to see that realized. But maybe I gave her too much credit.

“The blessing ritual needs an Odala-blessed sorcerer.” She says out of nowhere.

“What ritual?”

“For the little orcs. In this land, a month after young orcs are born, a blessing ceremony is performed. It is much more critical in your case, and it can’t be just any sorcerer. It needs an ordained sorcerer.” She speaks again but I only understand half of it.

With my head turning to her, I ask, “Aren’t you going to do it then?”

Her eyes turn to me before she shakes her head. “I am not qualified.”

She isn’t qualified? But how is that possible. Owa is the most powerful sorcerer I’ve ever met. Even Soni isn’t half the sorcerer she is.

“Then who is?”

She gives me a small, yet stiff expression and understanding comes to me. “My *mother*?”

“She is ordained yes.” Owa says.

“How do you—”

My words get cut when a shadow moves above us and the screams that follow make me look up. A chill runs through my

body when my eyes land on a blue creature a size I have never seen before as it flaps its fiery orange wings. I barely notice the dust that rises up. *Is this the creature that took Igor from me?*

I find myself standing on my feet. The dragon breathes fire as it attempts to clear the path to land but some of our warriors are out with their weapons. The dragon roars loudly and even I find myself shaken. Zod leaps forward with his axe, but I see a small lump when the dragon is almost on the ground.

“Stop!” I shout as I move closer. “Stop! He is there. Stop.”

I try to rush forward. The creature turns its fiery eyes to me, and it seems a sense of recognition falls on it. It lowers its left wing and tips its left side and an unconscious lump of iron drops.

The creature roars and is in the air with a blinding speed and with one powerful flap it takes flight. In the next moment, it is out of sight.

I get Igor while everyone else is still shocked. My heart soars when I hear a low groan.

“Igor.” I drop on my knees next to him. I take his face in my hands. I try to feel for his temperature. He doesn’t look to be injured at all; he just looks exhausted.

“Igor, can you hear me?”

He groans again before his eyes peel open slowly. The world stops when he looks at me. The brief moment brings me back to life and like our babies know it, they kick.

His eyes close then he smiles. “Did you miss me?”

My whole world turns to rage, and I want to strangle him.
Did I miss him? This orc!

I will have his sack when he wakes, but right now is the time for joy.

We are surrounded the next moment and he is carried to our quarters.

I follow, never leaving his side even as Owa and Soni prepare things for him to drink. They say he is exhausted, but he is fine.

After they leave, he is still not up, so I curl next to him in our bed, and I stay up watching him.

I have so many questions. I need so many answers. And I owe him a long warning about never doing that again.

What was he thinking going to a land with flying killing machines that make orcs look like stone ghouls? But sooner than I want, sleep takes me too and I am carried to an anxious sleep, but it is better than any sleep I’ve had in a week.

Chapter Thirty

My Own Love

Igor

My eyes fly open, and the little panic that I had come to be familiar with gets dampened when I remember where I am, even though I can't see anything. The soft, even-breathing lump next to me reminds me I am back home. I am alive. I made it out of Ragu. I am back home. Back to *her*.

My own love.

The events of the past two weeks would seem like a lie if I didn't live through them myself. But I have so much to tell her and not enough hours in a day.

I know by morning the messengers will have come from Langa, and then I will have to take everything from there. After our meeting, they convinced me to stay a few days longer recovering fully and learning about the dragons.

We had more talks with the dragon Queen, and we have come to an understanding. It is a risky allyship but from the bigger perspective it has benefits on both ends. They will take more orcs for breeding, but it will not be forced and from the

conversations I had with the few Bonos and Modos there, they seem...happy.

No war. A normal life with no anxiety. A far cry from the life we live on this side of Dali.

I was still undecided when I left the dragon lands but flying to Langa solidified my decision. I wonder what Aria will think about what I did. Will she chastise me. Will she think I should have chosen better? Will she think I am acting too rashly? I grapple with those questions most of the night until my eyes close again.

When my eyes open again, it is still night, but a lamp is lit, and I can feel Aria is no longer asleep.

“I should kill you myself, orc.”

I can't help the small chuckle that finds its way up from my chest. “It would be your hand I'd prefer to fall by. I would accept the honor.”

Huffing, she pulls herself up to a sitting position and glares down at me. Her movement isn't as fast or as graceful as it used to. She is due any week now. And I am glad I am here to be with her until she gives birth.

I understand now my place is no longer at the border. All my confusion is gone, and I know exactly what I have to do. I will not continue letting unworthy orcs lead us to more destruction.

I learned a few lessons from the dragons. Even in their plight, they didn't let pride get in the way of saving their

people. And I am going to save *my people*. Both Modo and Bono.

“How do you know a dragon, Igor? And what did it do to you?”

I find her concern for me endearing, and I sit up.

“Can I make you tea as I tell you a story you are not going to believe?” I say.

“I am a little hungry too.” She responds sheepishly.

Joyful and full of contentment at having the opportunity to take care of her once more, I pick her up and take us to the kitchen. After lighting the lamps, I prepare the water. And then I start telling her everything.

She is so engrossed in the tale; she lets her tea get cold as she asks me questions. We meander back to bed and talk until the sun comes.

Lying on her side on top of me, she sighs. “Couldn’t you have waited to tell me before you challenged Langa?”

“Would you have said yes?”

“No.”

I chuckle. “You have your answer.”

“But Igor it’s a big risk. And three challenges isn’t going to be easy. Are you sure you can take them?”

“I guess we’ll have to see if my uncle agrees. But that is the law.”

“I still can’t believe you and the Bonos have a joint law.” She says thoughtfully.

“It’s actually ancient orc law. I didn’t know about the Sokos, but apparently it includes them too.” I say.

I prepare our bath and can’t help but smile. Looking at her carrying our children solidifies my convictions and the decisions give me peace. More peace than I’ve had in a very long time.

This is the right way for us. And I will come out victorious.

For my children. For my people.

And by the Gods, I will be victorious.

I carry her inside the tub and wash her body. I take my time with her hair too and we stay in the tub until the water goes cold. The cold water is no longer enjoyable now that summer has passed.

I butter her body with her oils that are fragranced. No doubt the job of Hani.

Our females were never much into things to soften themselves for the males, but Bono females were known for their vanity. A total contrast from their males who growled for no reason every time they speak.

My mate can hardly bend anymore, and I help her in her clothes. I make breakfast after, feeling her gaze on my back. After breakfast, I massage her body. I am in no rush to go out there and face this.

I'm sure the messengers from Bono will get here soon and I will attend my uncle and the tribe after I attend Aria.

The day goes by and as we sit to eat lunch; a knock comes from the welcoming room. I side eye the intrusion.

"Let's ignore it." I say, lifting a fig to her mouth.

The knock comes again. They seem determined to disturb us. I rise, my face not trying to hide my annoyance.

"Just don't kill my friends, orc." She says after me. I don't know why, but that makes me feel good. My mate has companions. I know it's something she has struggled with in the past and I am glad she can find some here in my land. It means she is settling in well.

I stifle the bounce in my step, and I school myself before I pull the door open. Surprise fills my features when I find my mother and uncle at the door.

"Mother, uncle."

"Nephew. You need to come with me." Uncle's face is hard.

"Why?" I plant myself where I am.

My mother's eyes look behind me and I hear Aria's bare feet pad on the floor.

"There is something you must see." He says, his face serious.

"Can't it wait? Aria and I were eating. I will come after." I say.

“I will remain with Aria. You are needed,” mother says. Something too akin to some softness passes her face when she looks at my mate, my head turns to Aria.

“Go, Igor. I’ll remain with her.” Aria stands next to me, her hand touching my back as if to calm me down.

I kiss the top of her head before I follow my uncle. I am expecting anger and an argument, but he doesn’t say anything. My alarm is spiked as we turn the corner to the main corridor.

“What is this about, uncle?” I ask.

He glares my way briefly before he looks ahead. “What were you doing in Langa’s domain without my approval?”

“I think you know,” I say firmly.

He scoffs. “The challenge? You are going to challenge me too, I’m guessing. The Law of the King has never been invoked. And there is a reason for that.”

“Your point?”

“You can’t win a challenge with me and Langa.” He stops. “Unless those dragons gave you something you aren’t sharing.” He narrows his eyes.

“No. But I finally realized what is wrong with our people.”

He stands there awaiting my answer.

“Its leaders. You and Langa led our people to more pain and sorrow. The Soko problem could have been solved already but you are too comfortable sitting in your high office while our

young go to die out there on pointless missions. It's time for change."

"And what difference do you think you'll make?"

"That is not for you." I say and start walking again.

"So you really think in a moon you will have gotten powerful enough to defeat two orcs?"

"The Gods will decide that." I finish.

He leads me to the level under the tribe community hall and takes the stairs to the dungeon. I only follow after him because Zod, Kaja, and Faz are there. Taking them in, they look fine. They nod at me when they see me, and I acknowledge them back. There doesn't seem to be animosity in them. Just concern. But I don't ask, and we all follow my uncle.

"You brought much with you in Ragu." My uncle says before he commands Todo to open the door to one of the few prison cells here.

Curled up in the corner of the cell is a Soko orc. He jumps to a sitting position when he sees us. His eyes wide with fear as he tries to push himself into the stone wall that will not budge.

"Will you talk now?" my uncle asks, voice furious.

The Soko orc darts his eyes from each of us. They land on me and linger.

How is he here? Was he captured?

"I came to see for myself," the Soko says.

“See what?” I ask.

The orc seems to not want to reveal that information. “I will not talk to anyone but her.”

“Who?”

“The Queen.” He says. The sound of that, accompanied by the look in his face shifts something uncomfortable in my chest and I have no understanding why.

“We already brought you the Queen. You are wasting our time.” Todo says in annoyance.

The Soko turns defiantly, determined to not give us anything more clear.

“How did you get caught?” I ask.

Sokos have been too slippery all this time. It’s a little hard believing that this one got caught accidentally. Especially now that I know they have help inside. I have many questions.

He doesn’t turn to face me, keeping his mouth shut.

“We should kill him and send him to the others to send a message,” Todo says with too much enthusiasm.

“No,” I say firmly.

“I am still King, Igor. Not you,” Uncle says with a harder voice.

He turns to us. “Since he won’t talk, call in Soni to make him.” He looks over at Todo, who turns too enthusiastically and walks out.

When I look back at the Soko, he hasn't moved, and is unshaken.

We file out of the room after uncle, and I am the last to leave. I turn back before I close the door and the Soko is looking strangely at me. Before the door shuts, I hear him say in a low voice, "I know who you are."

I don't linger to ask.

We find the community gathered in the assembly. Clearly waiting for word on all the happenings.

My uncle stands and makes the announcement. "Igor has invoked the Law of the Okrar. It will happen at the border in another moon. Langa and myself accepted the challenge." Then he dismisses us all.

He doesn't take any time to address the murmurs or concerns, but goes to the direction of his office. I am left with the questions. Some asking if it's true. Some commenting on the absurdity of the whole challenge.

"People of the Modo tribe, this is true. The law is there for us all." I let my gaze settle on all of them, my cousins standing strong on each side of me.

Except Todo. He is part of the snickers who are also laughing and mocking.

"It is time for change. For many years we have suffered under backwards leadership. But it is time for us all to have peace. A new day." I finish.

More murmurs, disapproving.

“You think you can give us peace? You are consorting with dragons!” Todo’s boisterous voice breaks through all the noise and everyone turns to him, the crowd parting as he moves through them.

“I am not here to defend going to Ragu, I am here to invoke a law our community is built on. It is open for everyone, Todo. You can invoke it too,” I say.

“You came back different from Ragu. You have gathered an army of dragons to fight for you. We will never submit to your leadership. Not on my watch!” He stomps his foot when he is almost at the front. His gaze challenging.

“I am not consorting with dragons. But there is more to the picture than we’ve been told. The Soko are our enemies. The dragons can be our allies...” I pause. “But there can be peace. All the suffering and fear can end.”

“How are you so sure?” He asks.

“The Sokos have no leader. They are weak.” I let my gaze land on each and every one of them. “But we are strong.”

Todo snickers.

“Together we can end the cycle of violence. We can have peace. Give me one chance to lead you and I give you my word. If I fail, me and my family will leave this tribe...for good.”

Everybody gasps, but it seems to please Todo. His crooked smile highlighting his satisfaction.

When we are away from the crowd, Faz says, “Well, I do believe in you, cousin, but uh, two leader orcs at once, can you even do it?”

“It’s three orcs, cousin.”

The law says one must defeat all three leader orcs at once. They must be defeated, or they must surrender. Either way, I have three orcs to defeat. And Kartna guaranteed me the presence of the third leader. I just need to send him the message.

“How are you going to get the Soko leader?” Zod asks.

“I have my ways.” I smirk.

Kaja steps in front of me, blocking us all from moving forward. “What happened at Ragu? I know you won’t tell father but tell us,” he says nosily.

After not winning the staring match, I lead them to my dwelling.

When I enter, my step freezes.

“Who are you?”

Chapter Thirty-One

Happy Tossing

Aria

Igor's eyes narrow at Hannah, and Zod's hand blocks him from advancing.

"This is Hannah. Hannah, this is my mate – husband – Igor. The one I've told you so much about." I say rising with Hani's help.

"Hi." She says in a shy voice looking everywhere but at him.

"Hello, human." He says warily.

Now it's my turn to glare at him. Only *I* am human. I have claimed that name for just me. He catches the reason for my glare, and he smiles after he winks.

"Your mother told me what arrived. How did everything go?" I ask.

"He's still alive. That's the only sign you must look for." Kaja says.

“Though he might not be for long.” Zod says under his breath and they all chuckle.

But it isn't funny. Igor going against three orcs seems unfair. The only thing I am grateful for is that the other orc is said to be feeble. But you never know what feeble really is to orcs.

“That is not funny.” I say, glaring at them.

Igor takes me by the arm, leading me back to the sofas. Luckily, I had the foresight to have another one built together with more chairs. The conversation is lively, and Igor tells us what happened outside as he massages my feet, with Kaja and Faz interrupting him every other sentence.

Zod is quiet as usual. But he keeps looking over to Hannah. Hani and Mulan notice it too and we exchange looks. I stay tucked in Igor's side until they leave us to be alone later in the afternoon.

“I guess we'll see you after the orclings are here, Aria,” Faz says.

“Are you going back to the border?” I ask, standing next to Igor who is holding the door.

The group seems to understand something I don't because they don't respond but they have amused grins.

“No, not particularly. Imp, you haven't told her?” Kaja says when he is out the door and a safe distance from Igor who is glaring at his cousins.

“Goodbye.”

Before he shuts the door in their faces, Faz says, “Happy tossing!”

Fits of laughter follows after.

“What is tossing?” I turn to Igor when we are alone.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about. It...it’s just a tradition.” He says cryptically as we walk to the bedroom.

“What is it?” I make a face. So far, their traditions have been a shocker and I just hope this one isn’t something strange.

Igor smirks before he gets behind me when we are in our bedroom and he starts undoing my day braid.

“Talk, orc.” I say impatiently.

“Well...” he starts. “When a woman is expecting, her and her mate are left alone for the last month of the pregnancy.”

“Ooh, that’s nice.” I say.

“Indeed, it is.” I turn when he mutters that in a lower register.

Coming face to face with his hunger, crossing my arms over my chest, I ask. “And why is that, Igor?”

He just smirks even harder as he removes the dress from my shoulders in one swoop. His gaze dancing over my generous chest. “Because we have to pave the way for the orclings.”

I quip a brow. I get the point, but why does it have to be an actual tradition?

When I say nothing, he continues. “And since you are carrying two orclings, to make things easier, we need to be doing *a lot* of tossing, human.”

I narrow my eyes.

“It’s not me, it’s tradition.” He shrugs innocently.

“Right. Cause this isn’t your orcish way of getting in my nethers.”

He chuckles as he kneels down to help me off the rest of my clothes. “I was getting in your nethers anyway.”

“If you didn’t come back, how was I going to know of this elaborate tradition, orc?”

He helps me out of the garment before he leads me to the bathroom.

“I was going to come back.” He says firmly. Choosing to not question it, I nod.

I settle on top of him, straddling his legs and he is leaning back, giving my stomach room as he plays with my nipples, seeing how much milk he can squeeze out. He is utterly fascinated by it.

“You know there is another tradition.” He says, his eyes still fixated on my milk-dripping breasts.

“Yeah?”

The corner of his lips twitches, his tusks moving. “Yes. For good luck. The male must drink from the breasts until the orclings arrive and leave only the pure for them. The milk that

comes later makes the orcs stronger and some have said smarter.”

I can't help the laugh that bubbles from my chest. “Is that true? Or are you trying to find a way of stealing.”

“No stealing here. No. It's *tradition*, I told you.” He says with the utmost seriousness.

I open my mouth to say something but he closes his lips on one of the nipples and I moan as my whole body shudders. His other hand massages the other as he lets some milk drops on the water.

It feels good to have the pressure taken off my breasts and he is so gentle, watching me closely to see how I react and what is too much. His other hand travels down to my very aching cunt and he begins massaging me in that way I love. My body jumps a little higher, way too fast.

My arms drape over his shoulders for support as I begin to grind on him as best I can. My gaze is firmly on him as I watch him take turns on each of my breasts, not giving my clit any rest. When he finally fingers me, I lose all coherent thought and I let go of it all, throwing my head back, moaning loudly.

He slows down his finger assault and lifts my body gently, holding me above his girth. He impales me on him, and all I can do is enjoy the ride as he takes control.

My moans are feral, my body gets loose. All the knots tied in my body are being undone with each thrust.

“You. Feel. Incredible. So. Good.” He punches every word with a thrust and all I can do is whimper in pleasure as he holds me still.

“I missed you, orc.” I let the small tears roll down when everything else comes back to me.

He slows the thrusts and brings his face to kiss my tears.

“I’m never leaving you again. Everything will be different from now. I give you my word.”

Then he stops and turns me so I am lying on his chest with my back. He holds my legs open after his girth sinks into me again and this time his strokes makes the water splash everywhere, and all I can do is lie on the crook of his neck and receive delicious pounding.

He gives me everything I need. And he gives it to me relentlessly.

His kisses and words of affirmation keep me high in love and when I am tired, he carries me to bed where he massages me till I fall asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Different Life. Different Orc

Igor

Aria climbs up on me after she finishes me off. Her head tucks on the crook of my neck and I hold her closer to me, my lips kissing her face. The past week has been heaven. The uninterrupted time with each other has been good to mend us and our connection.

Since arriving in this realm, we haven't had a break. We haven't had long times just for us. But in this time, we have talked, finished preparing the rooms for the babies, and made love.

The love making taking most of the time since we didn't even have to cook.

Since Tossing is indeed tradition, the tribe will band together to prepare meals for the expectant couple so they have even less to worry about.

Which is great because even as heavily pregnant as she is, Aria still finds it hard to keep herself away from the kitchen. I have had to make sure she is always too worn out to want to

do it. Because even with the prepared meals, she still likes when I eat her food.

And as much as I prefer her food, I welcome the rest for her. I want to make sure she is as comfortable as she can before the babies come. And although I know that is going to be its own journey with sleepless nights, I am ready. I have been ready for a long time.

“I think I may have finally found a tradition of yours that I like.” Her head lifts to look at me with a saucy grin. “Are there any more like it?”

I balk a laugh. “Dove, have a sense of self preservation.”

She hits my chest but laughs too.

“Don’t act like I’m the one who’s insatiable. You like it too.”

“That I do.”

She starts sliding down from me and I help her down before she rushes to the bathroom. My gaze follows her, taking her in.

Mine.

I sit up.

“I still think Vlad is a great name.” I say to her.

“It is, but I would like for our children to have their own names. Having someone else’s name just comes with expectations and...” She comes out from the bathroom, now wrapped in a towel. “I don’t want our children to be held back or have a ceiling, you know?”

She was making a strong point and one I can't deny.

“So does that mean we are removing Tatyana too then?”

“But it's a great name, Igor.” She pouts.

“It still was supposed to be your name so it may just as well be your ceiling,” I reason.

“Fine, but—”

Someone knocking disturbs us. We both look at each other. We weren't supposed to be getting any more guests. It is afternoon and we received all the meals for the rest of the day together with the snacks.

But I slide out of bed and put my pants and shirt on. I find a concerned-faced Owa at the door.

“Old orc.” I say in surprise.

“I know it isn't a good time.... But we have something to finalise with both of you,” she says.

After letting her in, I get Aria. When we are seated, I make them both tea in the kitchen and Owa's eyes dart between the both of us.

“What is this about, old orc?” I ask when I am finally settled.

She clears her throat first. “Me and the Queen were in talks in your absence. As you know the birth of the little orclings is significant for many reasons. The Ceremony of Shaba must be performed. I explained to her that I am not worthy of such a feat...” Owa's eyes land lastly on Aria.

Aria seems to nod slightly, understanding what she means.

“If not you, then who?” I ask.

“Margaret. Her mother,” she says.

Something passes between Aria and Owa, but when I open my mouth to ask, Aria speaks first.

“My mother isn’t exactly an orc nor is she carrying an orc, Owa. How will she cross?”

“The same way Zod helped the human girl cross. I will handle that. Don’t you worry,” she says. “And once your mother is here, more will be clearer to you. To both of you,” she says cryptically, clearly knowing more than she’s sharing.

“When can I go?” I direct the question to Aria.

“Tomorrow. Can you do it tomorrow?” She pauses. “My sister is a wolf, Owa.” She turns to her. “Do you know anything about that?”

Tension passes between them again. I wonder what else happened while I was gone. Aria hasn’t told me anything out of the ordinary.

Owa tries to hold Aria’s gaze but she soon looks away. And she looks...guilty.

Strange.

“Everything will be explained once they are both here. Please be patient. We will explain everything.”

Much passes on Aria’s face and my head is just as twisted in questions. I want to know everything. “How do you know

Aria's mother, Owa?"

Her eyes turn to me before she clears her throat again. "It's not a secret, young one, but let us wait for us to all be here and then I will tell it." She pauses. "The Goddess' ways may be mysterious but I see everything now. I didn't believe at first but I am glad I listened. You both have had much happen to you, but your glory will be greater. You and your offspring are blessed by the Gods and the Goddesses."

I decide to not ask her to elaborate this time and it seems Aria isn't keen on an explanation either. We see her out with the promise of going to her tomorrow.

That afternoon, I go to my cousins and gather a few of my trusted for the mission. Since my return from Ragu, most of our soldiers at the border have been released to come back. So, many of them are coming in little by little and the mountain has been getting fuller and fuller.

There is an excited buzz about it. Many females are glad to have their mates back and mothers and fathers their sons. Many of the young unmated female orcs are glad to have some of the males back too.

The sense of unease still lingers, but the hope bubbling under is tangible.

And by the Gods, I don't want to fail them. Any of them.

Aria hands me my belt, quieter than usual. I don't have to ask to know that her mother is a sensitive topic for her, and that she is thinking about everything. The questions she must

have for her. How the paths of a human witch and an orc sorcerer met, and the bigger question.

Why?

Because it seems Owa knows her in some way.

I am feeling a little anxious, but it is more for Aria than my own curiosity. I worry what all this new information will do for her mind.

I just have to hope it isn't anything bad or upsetting. Nothing can come in now and disturb our journey.

So, my trust is on Owa; to know what she is doing and to trust she is doing what is best for us.

“At least the babies will have Luna to play with.” I say, trying to get Aria out of overthinking.

She grins, but it's faint. She sighs after. “Do you think I may be a wolf too, maybe?”

“Um... no.”

That is a question I have had myself for a long time but every time I pondered on it, I just couldn't find an answer. A witch giving birth to human children and a wolf? I reasoned it to being something to do with witch business and I stopped it there.

“I can't stop thinking about it, Igor. What if I am something else too and our children end up—”

“They will be perfect.” I don't let her finish. “Even if they were born with four legs or they crawled. They would still be

perfect and we would love them, but I doubt that very much. I don't know what Owa is hiding, but I don't think she would ever harm us or the children. Try and not overthink too much. I will be back soon and then we can listen to the whole story. Okay?"

She nods.

Sitting next to her, I take her hand in mine and I kiss the top of her mating band.

"How are you so positive suddenly? I am starting to suspect the dragons gave you something," she jokes.

I chuckle. "I just feel like we are on the right path. I don't know how to explain it but I see our future. Everything we've gone through has led us here, and I believe in everything we were meant to be. I finally see it. Believe in it. And I don't doubt it. Nor myself. We walk under the favour of the Gods, you and I."

"Oh Igor." She leans on my shoulder and I stay there as she takes comfort from me.

At noon, me and ten of my closest soldiers walk through the portal, equipped with the vials Owa gave us for Margaret and Luna so they can cross. Until she employs what she calls a 'permanent' solution for the portal.

Our boots step into the human realm and the place we land in is not the place I landed last time, nor where I left.

It is in the waterfall. Where I met Aria.

My heart rate quickens. Did Owa place us here on purpose?

“What is this place?” Faz asks from my right.

“This is where I met Aria.”

My throat gets a little tight thinking about Aria’s almost lifeless body. That was a year ago. How everything has changed. I can barely reconcile the orc I was that night I sat on the hill staring pointlessly at the moon and where I am now.

Different life. Different orc.

And I am grateful.

“What was—”

Something moves in the trees and we all turn, weapons drawn.

I look keenly until my eyes meet black ones.

Luna.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Three Birds

Igor

“Relax.” I step forward, my face softening at seeing my old friend. But I can’t help wondering why Owa would open the portal here. It is far from where I left Margaret and Luna. How did she know we’d find Luna here and what is Luna doing *here*?

“Ooh, a fuzzy animal.” Faz steps in front of me.

Luna growls ferociously before she retreats back into the trees. I notice something nervous about her.

“Move. She doesn’t like others and she will guide us to where we need to go.” I nudge him to the side.

“Luna, don’t run. I am here on behalf of Aria.” I say to the trees where she has disappeared. I don’t advance to look for her. She may run, and I am not in spirits to run after an energetic wolf, especially not with this armour. Plus, I would like to leave this realm as soon as possible.

She reappears, eyes sharpening, ears up at the mention of her sister.

“She is about to give birth and she asked me to get you and your mother. Can you please take us to her?”

Luna looks behind me and growls. Faz stands next to me.

“This is the famous Luna. Hey pretty pet.” He goads Luna who growls and bares her canines at him, but the imbecile is grinning.

Sighing, I step in front of him. “Luna, don’t mind him, he’s an imbecile. Please take us to Margaret.”

Luna’s gaze moves back to me. Something panicked passes in her eyes and she turns, leading us to follow her. She takes us a way I know so well. Our old house.

Her ears twitch and she turns to the left like she can hear something. I lift my hand stopping those behind me. We hear movement somewhere. Then Luna dashes aggressively like she is after something alarming and I run behind her.

When we get to the house, she is in even higher alert. They moved here. There is a dying outdoor fire, and a pot atop it.

Luna dashes in the house and the pained noise she makes, makes me realize her mother isn’t here.

A loud horn sounds through the forest; I recognize it immediately. Something uncomfortable settles in my chest.

They have her.

Last time I left them; Margaret had settled them in their backup home. It was on another part of the kingdom and Margaret assured me it was magic protected and they would

never be found. It was a half day away from their old home and she said it was safe. I wouldn't have thought Shamus would have known who she was. But maybe he went looking for the woman with the wolf who helped us.

I should have come sooner. Guilt claws at me as we run behind a now-frantic, out for blood Luna.

Aria will never forgive me if I lose her mother. And it will be worse if her mother suffers just as she did.

Luna jumps in a clearing just as we are about to reach the edge of the forest. We screech to a halt behind her, heart beating in my ears. She jumps on one of the armed soldiers and rips their head clean from them. It all happens too quickly. With the element of shock on the soldiers, we surround them.

I count about 20 humans, all armed but Margaret isn't here. We subdue them quickly, and catch all the runners, tying them to trees. Their eyes look between us and Luna, who is bloody but looks like she is about to take the next one, wanting more blood.

I wonder how long they have been on the run.

"Where are you going and where is the woman?" I ask the one who looks most terrified.

His eyes look to the dead soldier. He is too young to be a soldier. He looks like he is barely a man.

"We were just following instruction. Please don't kill us..." he weeps.

“Shut up, Barry.” The one who looks like the leader chastises him.

“The next time I ask, I will be removing an eye from the tip of my sword,” I say.

Someone snorts from behind me and I turn to see what Faz finds funny. But his attention is on Luna who looks like she is about to rip another head off. A stink of human waste makes my nose and I shake my head. *Pathetic.*

“We were sent for the witch. She is here. That’s all we know,” the young soldier says.

“How many of you are here?” I ask.

The leader scoffs. With one swift move my battle axe finds its way to his neck and I press a little to break skin. An instant flow of blood slides from him as his flesh separates. He screams like a new-born, still not speaking but the fear in his eyes is one of a regretful man.

“How many and why do they want her?”

“She is wanted by the King. She betray—”

Another loud horn sounds through the forest. We are losing time.

“Where are they taking her?” I demand, voice a little less impatient. I am about to lose it.

The leader scoffs again. This time I don’t stop Luna and she rips his throat out with her paw.

“Let’s go.”

We take the soldiers as prisoners and head for the human dwellings.

My heart beats in my ears thinking about what this could mean. It reminds me of the night Aria was taken.

The soldiers tell us where they likely took her. There is an arena today and everyone is going there. Margaret is set to be a display for the foreigners of the nearing kingdom. A token of how Shamus deals with his enemies.

The coward.

We won't be able to find where she is effectively going as a group, so I order us to split in two so we can cover more ground.

Luna leads me to a high point where we can see most of the town below and we see some soldiers entering the palace, one of them carrying a brown sack.

Luna leaps forward but I hold her.

"Luna. Not yet." I order her.

She snarls at me, her tone sharp with anguish. I know by her eyes she doesn't want me to leave her mother.

"We are going. But we need to see where they are taking her." I hold her gaze but she isn't convinced, her eyes glazing with her impatience. "I won't leave her there. But we need to know what's there and why they are taking her."

After an hour of scouting, we notice people going to the arena are finally thinning. With most of them inside, the best

chance we have is taking the arena, not the palace. Too many places to be trapped there. But the arena has many exits and many people to use as shields and not many places where one may hide.

“Are you sure?” Zod asks on my right.

“Are you scared of puny humans, brother?” Kaja taunts.

“We may be stronger but a thousand ants can destroy a giant,” I say.

After laying the plan we scatter.

Luna by my side, we sneak from the side where the townhall is. I use the back entrances Aria showed me last time to sneak into the palace; the easiest way to get to the arena unseen. The humans are caught off guard and we injure the ones we encounter.

As much as I would like to destroy everything I see because of everything they did to us, killing them all would waste time. Me and Luna sever limbs and tear muscles, leaving them screaming. By the time we get to the grounds of the arena, they already know we are here.

We come face to face with the soldiers of the Kingdom that are standing in rows in front of the arena, Shamus behind them in his lofty carriage. Other carriages are arranged beside his. They were parading to the arena. I let my gaze glide over them before it lands on Hanser a few carriages down.

Our eyes meet and everything comes back to me. All the rage, all the promises I made Aria. All the promises I made to

him. *The day is today.*

The Gods really work in mysterious ways. Who knew I would have the chance to take down three birds with one stone?

I turn my eyes back to Shamus and I hold them there. I know even as he looks at me with disgust that he will not see the midnight of this day. My axe itches to end him. It will end them both.

My soldiers stand next to me.

With just one hand gesture, something moves and they reveal Aria's mother in the same cage they bound me in.

"Turn back now, beast, or she dies," Shamus shouts over the crowd.

"General, I thought you were a warrior. Why are you hiding behind a defenceless woman?"

A few shocked gasps rise but nobody's face moves.

"It's King now. And you will pay for that." He stands.

"If you are a King then face me like one. You know I will mow through these—" an arrow I don't doubt is poisoned finds the small opening in my arm, but I don't react. "... humans..." I pull the arrow out and discard it like the mere annoyance it is. Disgusted at the attempt. Owa gave us all vials for immunization just in case. "With ease. Give me the woman. And I *may* let you live."

"Another!" He orders.

More arrows come but my soldiers and I block them seamlessly.

“You are no King. You are a coward. Face me now before I tell these people how you betrayed the former King.”

The reactions aren't hidden this time.

Like he doesn't even see a thing he says, “My people know you killed our beloved King. We will now avenge him.”

“Face me in the arena for the woman if you are as fearsome as you say.”

He looks beside him, to the other carriage that has what seems like important people, but not any I recognize from being here. Those must be the foreigners.

They have their eyes on him and one of them has a small smirk guided his way as if to challenge him. I see Shamus contemplating. So, he is trying to impress these guests. This may just be in my favor. Refusing my challenge will make him weak but he also knows he can't win.

His gaze now turns to the dignitaries and he smiles stiffly. Turning to me with fake confidence, he says. “You can try to earn the woman but you won't defeat our best warriors of this and the next land. But we must even the playing field. You won't use any weapons.”

“I have another I want in the ring.” I say.

Shamus smirks, knowing exactly who I mean before his eyes flint to my treacherous friend.

“Accepted.” Shamus says.

“Accepted.”

Hanser made a mistake not running from here when he was supposed to. Did he think I wouldn't come back for him?

Chapter Thirty-Four

You Wasted Your Life

Igor

My soldiers stand behind the iron gate to the arena so they can't come in and I kneel in the middle. My armor as well as my weapons have been taken and my hands are bound behind me per my request. I don't want this to end quickly. I am looking for blood and I don't need weapons for that.

My eyes are on one. Only one. *Hanser.*

I just stare at him, letting my mind flow with all the fantasies I had about what I would do to him. My lips rub against my tusks as I try to resist the urge to not jump to him now.

“Citizens of Gango Kingdom and Prime Minister of Obu Kingdom, welcome to today's spectacle. An enemy of the Kingdom against our best. Today is the day we finally spear the sword through the beast that took from us our King. Today the blood of our fallen speaks!” Shamus roars and the crowd responds in kind, stomping their feet and making the arena tremble under my knees.

As they do, I wonder, do they believe what he says? Does he?

The three men move in quick. The one at the back stomps his boots too loudly and I roll to my side. I am on my feet next, towering over two of them but the last one is tall too. Definitely big for a human. He must be from Obu.

They surround me like a caged animal. Two of them are competent warriors as they swipe at me, aiming to cut where I will bleed faster and be weakened quickly. With nothing to protect myself, I duck Hanser's sword, kicking him easily. The bigger guy lunges at me from the front, I go low, aiming my shoulder just right so he falls on his back. The other one stabs my shoulder blade. I roar and jump on him.

I need these binds off me.

I duck his attacks and slip from his hits. I face both him and Hanser but they get me on my back and I fall on my shoulder, dislocating it and my wrist twisting painfully.

I grunt.

Hanser moves quickly with his sword seeing me hurt. I move at the last second as he aims for my neck.

The restrains are looser. I try to get free, but I may need to twist my wrists more to be free, so I do.

At the last second when all the men are charging to finish me, I use my now-free hands to catch the sword that was coming to my face.

The crowd gasps. But I don't waste time, kicking the other soldiers.

Sharp pain emanates from my side when Hanser stabs me. Roars of glee flows through the crowd. I kick the big man before I turn to Hanser. Before I can, the other man tries. Standing no chance, I take his sword when he tries to strike me and sever his head in one swoop.

Seeing that, the big man hesitates but he charges at me with Hanser on his side. I run towards them, slipping out of the way at the last-minute, slashing him on his side. He roars and his knees buckle under him. Blood dirtying his armor. I go for him while in my peripheral I see Hanser retreating.

The big one tries to get up but I nail him to the ground with the sword. I fish him from the ground and hold his head in my hand. My eyes see Hanser standing at a distance, and our eyes connect.

I grab the man's lower and upper jaws and I pull them apart.

An instant quiet falls on the arena and the man's body falls with a thud that reverberates in the whole arena.

But I don't dwell on that, and begin walking towards Hanser. He looks on all sides frantically and when he doesn't see any way, he starts running to the gate where my kin is.

I scoop him as he bangs the gate. The arena is quiet. Like none of them can believe what they see. Like none of them wants to move in case I come for them too.

“Igor, we can talk about this. I had no choice. Don’t kill me. My children were sick.”

I hear none of it as I drag him by his feet to the center of the arena.

“No use in begging, Hanser. You know what you owe me and I am here to collect.” I say when I let his leg go.

He scrambles backwards and tries to slither away.

When he realizes there’s no escape, his head shakes, sweat dripping under his armor.

“Kneel to me and I will make it quick.” I say.

“We were friends once. My family needs me. Please. I will run. I will disappear.”

He begs like a disgusting rat and I spit on the ground. I move for him and grab him by the throat this time and I yank the armor from him. I plant his leg with a sword on the ground.

I will need him still for what happens next.

All I feel is unimaginable rage and loathing. Then I take his crying head and I hold him up, making sure he is facing Shamus. I want to show him what I am about to do to him too.

My eyes are on Shamus as I cut Hanser’s head clean from his body like a sacrificed animal.

The silence is deafening now.

Hanser’s body falls. But I bend to him, not finished with him.

Holding his head in my left hand, I punch hard through his chest. Finding the squishy organ and I yank it out. It's not a clean extraction but it doesn't matter.

One down.

I stand, holding both items and I look at the people. These same people who watched me. These same people who called for Aria's execution. I see the fear in their eyes. And I let my gaze slide on them before they go to the Prime Minister of the Obu Kingdom who seems a little entertained, and then they finally land on Shamus.

"This is a debt. There are two humans who owed me their heads. This one...and *him*." I use the hand with the heart to point at the slime.

My steps move closer to the hanging booth that has them. I ignore the gasps and the murmurs.

"Come face me in the ring. Your ancestors have called for you."

One of the council members rises from next to Shamus and he says, "Issues to the throne are permitted but they must be permitted by the council. Is this an official challenge to the King?"

Shamus rises to smite the elderly man, but one look from the Prime Minister and he schools his face. I mildly wonder why the Prime Minister is here. Are they allying with them?

"The council will never agree to this." Shamus says strongly.

“The council permits the challenge.” The other elderly man sitting behind his chair on his left says.

I stand there with the challenge. Either way it doesn't end well for him. If he doesn't accept the official challenge issued and supported by the council, he violates a law. But he knows he's dead either way and nothing will save him. I will go up there and drag him out.

This is a promise I made to Aria and nothing will stop me. Not even if I have to fight each of these humans to get to him. I will have him. I will have his heart in my hand this day.

“You are all sworn to protect the king! This is outrageous!” Shamus shouts.

Nobody seems to want to come to his aid as he looks around for help and all avert their gazes.

When he tries to run, the guards block his path.

“You are the King's guard!” he says.

“A challenge has been issued, King.” The soldier stands firm. I recognize this soldier. He was one of the ones that got away that day. He definitely saw Shamus stab Shepherd.

I start retreating backwards, making my way back to the center of the arena to wait for him. I hope he doesn't run. The chase would be fun, but I am already running late and my mate waits for me.

It takes some time before another gate to the arena opens and Shamus comes out without armor. He is still wearing the King's garb as he walks to me.

His face is stone as he marches to me and I wonder what he's thinking.

Does he wonder how I will do it? Is he excited by the prospect of meeting his lover on the other side?

“You finally got what you wanted. I'm surprised you came back at all. Or is she not what you wanted. Wouldn't be the first time. Poor girl.” He starts, he's goading me. When I don't respond he says, “How is the ratchet whore anyway?”

I decide to not react outwardly even though I am burning even hotter with rage. He wants this over quickly, but it won't be so easy.

“How does it feel that you could never measure up to anything?” I say calmly.

His brow ticks with brief anger before he hides it. “I stand here as a King. What do you have?”

“I have peace.”

He rolls his eyes and looks away, giving me his cheek. “Get it over with.”

“You aren't going to defend yourself?”

“And give you the attention you so desperately crave? No.” He mutters flatly.

“You should take off the cape, it will get in the way of all the blood and the broken bones.” I say.

After a moment of silence he says, “You know, I thought she was who I hated most. But I was wrong.”

I remain quiet.

“It was him. *Them*. All of it,” he says in a reflective tone.

Is he buying time? I don't know why he is confessing that to me but I let him.

“You were never the victim. You made your choices. You chased Aria away. You abused her. You betrayed your mate.”

He chuckles darkly and sorrowfully at the mention of Shepherd. I see a flash of sadness and regret pass before he clears his throat.

Standing straighter, he says, “Let's get this over with.”

He widens his stance ready to fight. It isn't a fight that takes long. We barely spar. He does his best trying to slip and cut me in various places. But he is no match. After I rid him of the sword we come to blows and I rearrange his face. He falls quickly.

However, he won't get to just die. This won't end too quickly.

I send him flying with another blow to his stomach and he lies like he is dead. I follow after him and pull him to the very center of the arena. Thereafter my punches are vicious but they are not meant to crack a skull.

He stands again even though his face has blood running down like a heavy rain and am pleased that he isn't falling quickly.

Using a sword, I place small cuts that aren't fatal individually but are meant to make his body feel even more pain as his pain receptors shoot everywhere at once.

His body finally drops and he falls on his back. His body doesn't move but he is still alive.

Toothless. Bruised. Broken.

His mouth open, face now unrecognisable, and I bend down and stare down at him for the last time. "You wasted your life for naught."

When he tries to speak, he chokes on his blood. And before he can die on his own, I rise to my full length and bring down my foot on his skull and his brain spatters under my foot.

I rip out his heart from him too before I stand finally and face the crowd.

I finally exhale.

It is done.

I don't know how long I stand there looking at the two bodies of my fallen enemies, but a sense of peace washes over me. I have avenged my mate and my children.

"The new King of the Gango Kingdom!" the old man announces loudly, pulling me out of my thoughts violently.

There is a confused quiet at first before panicked murmurs rise.

I walk to the minister.

"I am no King here." I refute strongly.

“According to the law, if you defeat a sitting King in challenge, you become King.” He explains, his head lowered in...submission?

The rest of the council and the Prime Minister rise with him as if practiced. Then they kneel together. It takes a moment but everyone else bends their knee. I am not fooled that it is voluntarily, it is fear. I stand there in the arena looking at all these insane people who just made me King.

Me? King?

King.

King of the Gango kingdom?

Frack.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The Goddess Odala

Aria

It has been a full day since Igor left for the human realm and he isn't back. I am beyond worried. I can't help thinking about all the bad things that have happened when he has left me for some time.

The fact that he said he would be back yesterday and he hasn't been back worries me. My mind can't stop galloping, making all manner of scenarios in my head.

What could be keeping him there?

What if they captured him again?

My mother. Luna.

Did he not find them? Are they alive? What if Shamus got to them and did the unthinkable?

My heart rate has been high all night, overthinking, waiting and he hasn't come back. I couldn't get any shut eye either and even Hannah's presence here isn't helping.

I pad to the window again. The sun still hasn't moved since I last checked it five minutes ago.

“Here's your tea, Aria.” Hannah's gentle voice mutters.

I don't want any tea, but I couldn't protest when she offered to make it for the fifth time today.

“Thank you.” I pad back to the sitting area even though I have a lot of nervous energy and I just want to keep moving.

“Owa says it will be good to calm you down.”

I take the cup in my hand when I sit. I know they all mean me health. And this is a critical time in this pregnancy. I need to keep myself relaxed as much as possible. I know. But I can't stop myself from worrying.

The door bursts open and Nani barrels in. “They are back!”

My hands let the cup go, spilling tea on the floor. Wasting no time on it, I rush behind Nani with Hannah on my side as we go outside. We see the gathered crowd at the assembly even as we walk. Everybody is gawking at something and the people whisper at each other.

When we come to the assembly, I see Gremlo standing looking unhappy. Nothing out of the ordinary there.

“This is not your tribe and I gave you permission for the woman and the beast but not them. They need to leave. Now.” He says.

Nani moves people out of the way and the relief that washes over me translates to my body instantly. But it is fleeting.

I squint my eyes. I must be seeing things.

The murmurs make Igor turn his head and our eyes meet. I frown involuntarily when I see all the blood he is covered in. He checks my body before he gives me a small nod, I return it.

My eyes look at the others he's with – humans. They land next to Owa where my mother and a white furry tail stands just behind my mother.

My feet take me forward. My mother's eyes lift to me and she weens herself from Owa.

“Mama!”

“My child.”

She squeezes me from the side. My heart is overwhelmed. She is real? We pull apart so I can see if it's true.

“Mama? Is it really you?” I ask.

Her eyes glisten as she nods. She places her hands on my shoulders, trembling. We embrace again, for long, much longer this time. Our wet faces mush together and nothing else matters. When we finally pull back, my eyes find Luna next who is now standing in front of me.

“Luna.” I pull her in my arms. “We have a lot to talk about, don't we?”

She vibrates in a purr as I brush her fur.

My eyes find Igor when I look up, my mother on my side and sister on the other. I mouth a thank you to him and he nods.

“Let me take you this way while they discuss...” Owa says and she leads us to her quarters.

I don't protest because it is closer and my feet are killing me.

My hand remains on Luna's neck. It is like having my best friend back. I didn't realize how incomplete I was without her. After all that time we spend at the house, this means more to me. And while I don't know how this pending conversation is going to go, with Luna here, I know I can face anything.

After Owa makes us tea, she comes back, but it is like she doesn't want to. I observe her and my mother and they are exchanging looks I cannot decipher.

“Where do you two know each other?” I ask.

I feel like this is the fair question to put things in perspective for me and I don't want to go around the issue. I think that is the biggest one for me. How do they know each other and what does it have to do with me?

“As you know, I am a servant of the Goddess Odala.” Owa starts. “So is she.”

“I don't understand.” I look between them both.

My mother's eyes fix to Owa before Owa fixes them to me, and she has a sip of her tea before she inhales deeply and exhales and continues.

“I was given a vision a hundred and fifty years ago. There were two roads for our kind. A path of destruction, the one we were headed to as the orc race, but also a chance for salvation.

We were going to wipe each other off the face of the realm. It was going to be gradual, but it was sure. But from the seed of the Soko, the Goddess had made a way.”

Nothing makes sense, so I listen.

“A thousand years ago, a Soko princess ran away from her duty. Leaving the responsibility of The Ring unattended. The fall of the Sokos was gradual but everything started there. They would not survive, she knew, but she left anyway, taking her new-born daughter she had gotten from a merchant Modo orc.

“She left the child in the Modo tribe and crossed to the human realm. She had more children. Generations of them were born with most not appearing too different from the humans. Odala had foreseen it all, and she made a way for our survival.” Owa says reflective, her eyes turning down to her tea, new tears streaming down. The subtle relief in her features.

But I still don't understand.

“So, my mother is an orc not a witch?” I ask.

Owa shakes her head. “Your mother isn't a witch as humans know witches, but she is a Soko sorcerer...” she drifts.

“Like you...” my mother finishes for her.

The puzzle comes together, slowly. “You are a Soko, Owa?”

She nods.

“But...you don't look...”

“What appears is an illusion. Your mother speaks truth.”

Something clicks. “Are you the daughter of the princess?”

She nods again, with a little pain this time.

“Why did you never go back?” I ask.

Her eyes dart behind me, and I turn to see Jani and Igor are now in the room. I don't know when they joined us. I didn't even hear them walk in. But Igor doesn't come close. He is giving me a moment with the women in my family.

I have women in my family.

“The Ring was the princesses?”

Owa nods.

“Is it passed down to blood?” I ask, curious about this one event that shaped a thousand years of a whole realm.

“Yes and no. Though it is blood, but only one is chosen every thousand years. Oga, is the one who has it now, but it was never meant to be hers. But she bore it to try and salvage what she could. But she is too old to bear the weight of the ring and her bones grow weary. She is barely holding on.”

I open my mouth to ask more questions, but nothing comes out. I bite my lower lip instead before I blow a breath.

And in all that time, I almost forgot about Luna who is sitting next to me. I try to bring back my focus on what is important. And the state of my sister is important to me. Those are the answers I need more.

“Why is she a wolf? How did that happen?” I ask.

That question makes my mother wipe a rolling tear. Owa shifts uncomfortably before clearing her throat.

“It was the Goddess. She is not a natural wolf but she was... she had a role. She has played it. And she will be turned human. If that’s what she wants.” Owa dances around the question.

“Mother...” I say, hoping she can explain better. And why my sister has been used as a pawn.

“You might be too young to remember but when I found out I was pregnant with your sister, I disappeared for a week. Your father was furious but that’s when I had stumbled in limbo. The spirits brought me there.” My mother looks at me.

“I didn’t know who I was, what I was, and one day a portal appeared and when I stepped in it, I found Owa. She had been expecting me. She told me I was carrying a wolf in my belly and they had a great destiny. She told me about both of you being chosen for greatness.

“I knew your father would have never understood how I gave birth to a wolf. So, I left. You and your brother. But how could I choose between my children?” She sniffles.

“I never chose myself or your sister over you and your brother but I did all I could. I was coming back for you once you were old enough to understand. Then...I lost you when your father married you off and everything became worse.

“We couldn’t get to you. We tried. But that vile man had you watched like a prisoner. And your father was power

hungry. Luna went without telling me that night she found you. She has always had a connection to you.” My mother breathes.

“I know you may hate me; I have been inadequate, but I would have taken you had I a chance. But a life in the wilderness...you and your brother, I thought I was leaving you with more...normal.”

Luna lays her head on my lap and her low purrs feel like they are for us both as she stares at me. My blurry eyes are weary of crying.

“Change her back. She deserves a life. It is over now. She doesn’t have to suffer for this destiny.”

The room falls in silence.

“Would you like that, sister?” I ask her.

She looks unsure at first. But she stares at me as if asking for my opinion. I nod to her. Then she nudges herself to me and I ruffle her. Hopping off me she goes to our mother’s lap, and our mother brushes her fur.

“It’s okay, my moon child. Everything is over now. You have choices.” She caresses my sister lovingly and Luna purrs softly in her mother’s arms.

My heart squeezes a little at everything I could have had. I am happy for my sister that she grew up with her, but I can’t deny that I wish I had it too. I guess all we have now is time.

Luna agrees with a small nod towards Owa.

Igor stands beside me two hours later as we file in behind Mama and Owa to be with Luna as she begins her transition. Owa told us it may take up to a month or two for her to be fully human and she will be unconscious for most of it because of the power of the reversal spell.

With Igor's hand on my shoulder, I feel strong. Right now, we are here for Luna. Owa had Luna drinking many little potions before Igor helped tying her to a metal bed.

When she is asleep, we leave her.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Destiny Runs In Circles

Aria

“I gor, you are what of where?” I can’t help the pitchiness of my voice.

Instead of answering with speed, the orc laughs. He barks a laugh so loud his shoulders shake. “You heard me. I am...uh, King of your former land,” he says with a shrug.

“Explain.” I gesture for him to make it quick.

“I killed Shamus and apparently your law also says the one who challenges the King, gets to be King if they defeat him in battle.” He shrugs again like it is nothing.

“I’m Queen *again!*” I shout louder than I maybe should have. It feels like a dark cloud is coming on top of my head once more. I never thought I’d have anything to do with those people again.

“Yes. And we are due there in a few moons for the inauguration,” he says in passing.

“Inauguration? Can’t we just...give the throne to the council member you have handling things right now?”

He sighs, his fingers pinching his bridge. I know what is stressing him. He spent a whole day yesterday and night in negotiations with the Prime Minister of the Obu Kingdom. It was that slime, Anton. And apparently, the Gango kingdom was in an imminent war with the Obu and they had lost a lot of allies and resources since Shepherd's death, and the Kingdom is not doing well.

Igor managed to prevent that from happening. And even though the negotiations yielded time for the Gango, the vultures are circling the Kingdom and everyone wants their pound of flesh and Igor is worried about all the people in the land. The same people who treated us like animals.

It came as a big surprise to me that Igor would even consider saving humans, especially my people but he wants to try, I can see he does.

"I know this is hard for you, love..." He places his hands on my shoulders. "You don't have to involve yourself. I do prefer you as far away from the humans as possible. You are safer here and I need to have mind rest that you are safe at all times." He pauses. "They treated you badly, but the orclings are still half of you and...that is their home too. What if one day they want to explore that side of them? What if they can no longer travel safely and they will be treated like me... maybe this is...a chance."

"A chance?"

"To create a new world." He says.

A new world.

That was a new possibility. But was it possible? Orcs and humans living side by side? What could a kingdom like that look like?

Our children could have a place in both their worlds. They could walk and travel without fear. That was very tempting.

It would take much for my people to accept orcs but everyone gets used to anything if they see it long enough. Right?

I giggle when a thought enters my mind. Igor quips a questioning brow.

“I’m just thinking this is exactly what Kaja and Faz have been hoping for and now they can go freely to the human realm and plunder the human women.”

He laughs. “Merciful Gods. I will need to make a law to keep those two away from the human maidens. I don’t need headaches.”

“I can’t wait to see you trying.” I start climbing in bed. Then I remember something I have been wanting to ask him. “Hey love.”

“Hm?”

“What do you think Zod wants from Hannah? Has he said anything to you?”

He regards me for a moment before he says. “I haven’t asked him.”

“Why not?”

“A male and his pet is none of my business, Aria.” He says lightly like he hasn’t just called my friend a pet. A pet.

“A what? Hannah is not his pet.”

He quips his brow. And it is then he realizes where he messed up. “I don’t mean that. Not like that.”

“Then how did you mean it?”

I can’t believe him. Why are males such imbeciles? And I thought Igor was immune to the foolishness.

“Not that I think females are pets, or human women are pets...”

“Then what did you mean?” I fold my arms, feet dangling, making it clear he isn’t coming to this bed with those opinions.

He takes a step back as if retreating. “Zod doesn’t keep anything. As orclings where we would have...interests, Zod only cared for one thing, his pets. He cared for them till they would die of old age and then he’d get another set. Even when we started noticing females, he never seemed that interested in them. He kept his pets until we became soros. But now he suddenly has this human he...” he exhales. “I am not saying he thinks she’s his pet but he has only ever had pets and based on how he...” he drifts. “He won’t harm her.”

“He better not because Hannah is my friend and if he thinks she’s his pet I won’t stand it.”

He snorts. “You would jump in and save her from his hand feeding?”

“Hand feeding? You’ve seen him hand feeding her?”

Igor just laughs. “I don’t know what they do, Dove. I am with you when I’m not doing anything.”

“Let’s go to their quarters tomorrow then.” I suggest, finally moving to give him space in the bed.

He shakes his head, looking at me with justified suspicion. “No.”

“If you are confident that your cousin isn’t doing any funny business to my friend then why say no?”

“Because your feet will get swollen and you will refuse for me to carry you all the way. You will walk and get tired anyway and I will have to carry you, but then you will get mad at me for all of it because I should have said no in the first place.” He says easily as he climbs on the bed.

“When have I ever done that?”

He gives me a side eye, and I roll my eyes. It was only one time when we went to Hani’s.

When he is laying on his back, I scoot closer to make myself comfortable.

“So, how do you feel about everything?” He asks after a brief silence.

I take a moment and I really let everything wash over me. And then I talk without trying to think. “My life has been one of a pawn, moved for the purpose and will of the Goddess.” I pause. “I am part Soko. I don’t know how to feel about that or

what to do with it. I am related to Owa. That is just...so much makes sense but still. My sister is going to be asleep for a long time and she probably won't be here when the babies come." I sigh.

"My mother and I, we lost so much time." I exhale. "Then there's you, King of the Gango kingdom. I am just going to repel that as a bad dream. I am not enthused by it. I thought I was done with that world, but...the Seer. I didn't think of it at the time. But the last day I stood in front of the court and the Seer, she told me I was to have two powerful offspring and one would be the future ruler.

"It hasn't come back to me all this time. But...here it is. Destiny works in circles. I didn't think I'd end up right where I started. I ran so fast from my past; I didn't know I was running towards it too."

His lips connect with my forehead, his own eyes taking in my reflections. He doesn't rush to answer too.

He gently caresses my shoulder. "Destiny does run in circles. Before I was born, I was prophesied to be a powerful King. One who would change everything. When my father raised me, he always taught me I was built for bigger. He didn't even risk having another child beside me. But none of us knew what the spirits meant. I thought I was doing everything right. Brutality being the mark of a great orc.

"But I would have never imagined this is where my life would end. With a love better than the promise of heaven, a family, and a destiny bigger than life itself. The growing pains

were excruciating. When I got banished, I couldn't understand. I thought it was an end. Fuelled by rage, because everybody was wrong, I could see nothing else.

“It took a hundred years to prepare me to receive the promises of the Gods. The Gods are cruel in their lessons, but I see now, there may not have been another way. We had to go through it all to find each other. And the stars aligned that night we did. You make me a better orc. And your love makes me better. I love every part of you, everything that makes you.”

Our foreheads link as we bask in each other's love. A prayer for each other, to each other.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I Am A Father

Igor

My boots thump on the floor as I rush to our dwelling. I should have not left her. And I should have not listened to her when she told me she was fine. I thought since it would be little time. I only had to help free the Soko who was still imprisoned. It has just been an hour.

But she is in labour.

I feel everything.

Fear. Excitement. Happiness. Terror.

So much terror.

I want to barrel through this whole mountain so I can get to her quicker. My ears are hot, and the boots and presence of my cousins don't even register as I run for my life through the corridor. I screech around the corner to our dwelling where I can hear the loud screams.

Oh no.

She sounds like she is dying. I barrel through the door where I find my mother pacing up and down. I don't stop for her but she blocks my way to the room where Aria sounds like air will leave her as her cries tear through the whole dwelling.

“Mother...”

I know I can't go in as per tradition but I want to forsake it. I want to see her. I want to be with her. The plan all along was I was going to deliver the children. We were going to do it all just us, but now I can't even help her through it.

“You know you can't, son.” My mother says, taking my hands in hers. The action makes me slow down.

“How long has she been like that, mother?”

“She is strong. And she is in great hands,” she says.

I know what she is saying is true because Owa is there, but I want to see it for myself. I don't trust anyone with Aria. Even if two of the women in there are her mother and Owa, her family.

“She is going to be fine.” Mother says but another heart-breaking scream comes from inside and when I advance to pass my mother two hands grab me from behind.

Zod and Faz drag me out.

I let them because I don't want to add stress to the situation. They are with me as I pace up and down.

Listening to her wailing for hours gets me more and more scattered but my cousins stand for me even when I almost

marry them with the wall a few times when they won't let me in.

The double doors finally open and my mother gives me one look. I leap for the door and find Hani at the corridor waiting for me. She leads me to the room where two distinct little cries are coming from.

My heart almost stops when I walk in. My eyes find Aria first and she is panting slowly, face covered in sweat, holding two crying little orcs. The world fades as I move closer, feeling like my body isn't mine anymore and not understanding how I am still upright.

“Don't cry. Your father is here.” Aria says not looking up at me.

When she finally does, her eyes are glistening with tears.

“Dove.” I finally stand next to her, not knowing what to do with myself.

“Daddy orc.” She says and my heart jumps with pride.

I am a father.

“It's a boy and a girl.” Owa comes next to Aria to wipe some of the sweat on her forehead.

“Take them.” Aria says. Her smile hasn't faltered as she looks at our children with so much love.

I lean down to kiss her lips first then I take the babies one at a time. The boy on my left and the girl on my right. They only have the birth strings around their wastes and ankles that is

tradition for all orc new-borns to strengthen them and keep them safe from all bad spirits.

The boy has his thumb in his mouth, his eyes closed. The girl keeps making little noises like she wants to cry but she stops herself.

The world and the meaning of everything shifts. It is like I am seeing everything anew. Suddenly, I have never known the meaning of life and love before because what I feel for these two is beyond anything I thought was possible.

“Do you want to give us their names?” Owa says as she brings a mortar that has the incense she will be burning as is customary.

Me and Aria look at each other and we smile.

“Gordian...” she says.

“And Valeria.” I say.

“We thank you for these gifts, great spirits. Today we welcome Gordian and Valeria into our tribe.” Owa chants as she blows incense all around the room. “Thank you for the majestic destiny you have planned for them. May you guide their steps and may they grow in wisdom.”

After that I watch Aria breastfeed them for the first time, both of them are very eager. It fills my heart with pride as I watch them latch on to their mother. I blink ever so often to make sure I am not dreaming and that this is really my life now.

I am a father.

After they eat, I take them to sleep in our room where we have their cots prepared. The girl is more energetic than the boy and I foresee many sleepless nights ahead. But I have been ready since I knew about them.

I am only excited, looking forward to everything.

After the females are finished mending Aria and the post birth ritual she must do is finished, they help me settle her in our bedroom.

I close the door and let them do the rest of their jobs around the dwelling. My mother is in charge of telling them where they go.

The next few days go by in a blur between taking care of Aria and the babies. We have a lot of help but I am glad to be present. Aria is very tired for the first few days but she wakes up to feed our children and she watches me as I bathe and clothe them.

I ensure she is taking her herbs and she is soaking to heal her body. It breaks my heart when she winces in the water but every day she gets better. Her brown color comes back to its natural glow the more days go.

When she is a little better, she does little things too. And by the time the week is over, she is the one telling me to sleep. We take shifts when one needs to sleep.

I am over the moon. It feels like I am in a new world. I was happy when she got pregnant but the reality of them is different.



A coo wakes me from my sleep and I jolt awake. Since they arrived, I am more sensitive to any little noise. I don't find anyone when I open my eyes. I pull myself out of bed and it is now afternoon. I must have slept for a while.

I haste to the other room where Valeria is doing that thing where she isn't crying, just making noise. Me and Aria have reasoned that she likes attention. She always cries after Gordian does and it's like she always wants to win.

I find Aria feeding Gordian, Valeria in a swing in front of her in their room.

I stand at the door for a second and just watch her as she feeds our son.

"You are staring, orc." She says, her gaze still fully on our son who is staring up at her in his unimpressed stare.

The boy isn't impressed by anything. On top of not being fussy as a child, he just wants to sleep the rest of the time. Valeria is the one who is always moving, energetic.

"Are you going to fight me, human?"

Her beautiful face finally turns to me and her soft smile is even more beautiful than it has ever been. I wouldn't say something is different about her face but she looks...more. More beautiful, her aura is fuller and brighter. She looks happy.

"I can still do damage, orc," she says.

I chuckle. “You doing damage is the reason we have two new-borns.”

She laughs loudly, startling Valeria who was getting sleepy. She starts crying and I pick her up.

“Shh, little one.” I try to calm my precious. Our eyes meet and she reaches with her tiny hand and when I give her my finger, she touches it. I take a seat on the other chair in the room. I play with her and she settles down. When I lift my eyes, Aria is staring at me in her chair.

I look back down at our daughter before I say, “You are looking at me like you want another set, Dove.”

“Ha!” she says. “In your orc dreams. I am never opening my legs for you again. I hope you enjoyed it.”

My eyes widen to her even though I know she is joking. At least I hope she is.

She gets up and exits the room.

Wait, is she serious?

I get up and follow her to the kitchen with Valeria.

She giggles when I come in the kitchen and takes a bowl of fruit from the cooler. The women have been coming in everyday to help around the dwelling and continue preparing our meals and helping with the babies when we need to bathe and eat.

Aria takes a seat and I stand leaning on the wall. Her face turns serious but she says nothing.

“What is on your mind?” I ask.

“I’m thinking about a lot of things. The challenge for now.”
She pauses to look up at me.

“Are you worried about me or leaving the kids?”

“All of it. It’s three orcs, Igor. I believe in you. But there are more against us than those with us. Many still don’t see your vision. What if they still refuse you after you win?”

I take a moment to consider her words. I have had little time to think about the impending challenge. Her points are valid but I can’t explain how I know, I just do.

“The Gods are on our side, my Queen,” I say.

She sighs before she takes a piece of fruit to her mouth.

I try to calm Valeria who is now crying louder in my arms, probably hungry. Aria gets up.

“I know...I know, orc but...I just want everything to be over. I am tired of this...everything.” She says when she stands in front of me checking on our daughter who is squirming in my hands.

“Let me feed her.”

I give her to her and take the boy. I pull her chair and she sits. Then I take her food and feed her as she feeds our daughter.

“Do you wish me to postpone? Do you think it’s too soon?”

The challenge is in a week and I wish I didn’t have to do it either but postponing now will make me look weak. But I was

hearing her and ultimately, I was going to listen to her counsel.

“No. Postponing won’t change much. We will still go.” She exhales. “Let’s just finish this, Igor, then our big adventure begins.” She smiles at me fondly and I rise and kiss her lips.

Valeria cries when I do and both me and Aria laugh.

While Gordian doesn’t care what I do, Valeria doesn’t want me kissing her mother. She will bare her tuskless, toothless gums at me.

My baby girl.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Queen Is Here

Aria

I balance myself on Igor's shoulder as he helps me in my Modo attire for today. I can bend and do everything again but he still insists on giving me as much help as he can. Sometimes to the point where he neglects himself.

He has been sleeping less than me since the babies came, and no matter how much I try to get him to take more rest, he doesn't sleep more than four hours a time. I have had to trick him into the tea Owa gave me to help him rest.

It is like we are both mothers. He hears the slightest of noises. I thought he was a mother hen before...

He is ready to end the world when Valeria even makes the slightest of noises. And it's like the girl knows. She likes attention and Igor is ever too eager to give it to her.

But our time away from the world and our responsibilities has come to an end.

Ancient law was invoked, challenges were issued, and now my husband must go fight for us once more. This time, the fate

of not just one realm is in the balance, but two.

Igor has taken only one meeting with Charles - the council member who is looking over things while we get our children cared for - but he hasn't gone back to Gango. And out of everything that has transpired in our lives, going back there is something I am not looking forward to. We are due there in a few days for a meeting with the rest of the council for an update.

After Igor left, he dispersed a few of his trusted soldiers to the human realm to make sure his instructions were being followed and the Obu Kingdom was playing ball with the agreement made. Igor being King by default is insane. Everything is insane and everything is about to be a lot for him.

I worry about him. I believe in him; I've seen him in battle but I worry. But I also understand it must be done. And I am going to stick beside him. My job being to make his days easier. He is my number one priority.

"All done." He says before rising finally.

"Thank you." I sit on the bed while I add more bracelets to my arms. Owa made me all kinds of protection bracelets. She said it's more crucial now since I just gave birth and more vulnerable to bad spirits. For my protection and the protection of our children.

Owa has been wonderful. Her, mama, Jani, Igor's cousins, and my friends have really come together to make sure we

lack nothing and are always ready with help. Masa also comes in everyday to check on her grandchildren.

The development of that relationship has been gradual, but it is headed to the right direction. We still don't have a lot to talk about when we are alone, and at the moment we just talk about the babies. Gordian is her favorite to look after. She often tells me stories about how Igor was the same as a baby. Igor wishes the stories weren't told but they are. And they are hilarious.

Owa also made me a concoction that has helped me heal faster in between caring for Luna in her transformation. A transformation that is weeks in the making and she hasn't been up once. I worry about her, but Owa has assured us she is fine.

My mother comes to check on us from time to time, and I check Luna every second day. Mama and Owa have been working on a few things of their magical kind and I haven't had time to query some more on the things they do.

A part of me is a little terrified of discovering yet another life shifting truth. I don't want lies but all these truths have been a lot. I haven't even began fully digesting and accepting the fact that I am a Soko too. A small part of me, at least.

That it is my people partly responsible for so much pain in the tribe I now belong to. But those are things I try to not dwell on unnecessarily most days. My joy is my family in this moment. Taking things easy and keeping my children alive.

Me and Igor aren't back to being as intimate as we used to be but we started making time for intimate time, those

consisting of napping only these days. It is the best time of the day when one of our close people watch the babies while we sleep.

It is also a great way for me to make sure the orc is sleeping too. And none of us is rushing anything. I still am not as confident in my body as once before, but Igor has been trying to remind me every day how much he loves me and building my confidence back up.

And even though I was not back to my normal health, today had to happen. It was a long way but I would survive the journey. With everyone already gone ahead of us, Igor requested the assistance of the dragons for our trip. Something that Gremlo did not appreciate but he had bigger things to worry about.

And I wasn't completely comfortable with dragon travel either but it would reduce travel time from the three days in a karaji to only a few hours on a dragon's back. That was advantageous considering we were going so far from the twins.

"Aria." Hannah's voice comes from the other side of the door bringing me yet again out of my thoughts.

"Yes."

"Your, um, dragons are here." She says and I hear Valeria making a fuss.

"We will be there now." I say.

Igor looks war ready and I take the horn and stand in front of him. I place it on his chest but I don't let go of it, his hands cover mine and we just stare for a moment.

“Today changes everything.” I say.

“It does.”

“You have never faltered on your promises to me, but today I make you one. I will be by your side always; you can always count on me. The road ahead is going to be steep but I am going to be right next to you for all of it.”

He smiles softly at me, his face relaxing a little more as he lowers his forehead to meet mine. “The Gods knew exactly what they were doing.”

I smile and we meet in a kiss.

He takes his horn and his hands circle me and he pulls me close. It feels like heaven to finally be able to be this close once more. Our lips taste one another as we cement our bond. The meaning much deeper than we can ever express.

After we pull apart, we find everyone in the welcoming room. Faz is holding Valeria and my mother is rocking Gordian slowly. The whole scene is still unreal.

I go to my mother who is closest. “Mom. How are you and how is he?” I place my lips on his forehead and he makes a little noise at me. My heart sings.

Oh joy, you beautiful thing.

“An angel as usual.” She says with so much fondness. I smile at her appreciatively, brushing her arm.

My mother may not say it but I can see it in her eyes whenever she is looking at me at times, her guilt. She hasn't forgiven herself for leaving me and my brother.

Even though we've had a few conversations about it. She practically had no choice in the matter and as a parent, I have a different perspective now. If my absence was going to save my children and I thought I was doing the best for them by being absent, then I would.

I don't agree but I understand. We were all pawns to the Gods and Goddesses, all just pieces to be moved. But it is the portion we have been dealt and dwelling on things that started a millennium ago won't help.

“Thank you, mama.” I kiss her cheek before I move to Valeria. She cries when she sees me and I take her. Igor appears next to me then, and he kisses the top of her head. Only deep fondness for his daughter.

The door opens then and Zod walks in. “We are late.”

Igor turns with a glare to his cousin. But I hand the baby to Nani's waiting hands.

We are out soon after, Owa next to us. She is coming to the event. She came very early in the morning to prepare Igor and myself and you can still smell the faint incense on Igor if you inhale him close enough. The children are left with Hani, my mother, and Nani. They volunteered to remain behind, saying

they have no interest in the long journey and they are more than content to remain behind.

Hannah walks beside me and Zod walks on the other side of Igor.

We find a blue dragon and a brown-ish one waiting at the top of the mountain. The citizens of Modo are in the assembly. And it is wise the dragon did not come down until it's safe.

Igor escorts me to see my sister before I leave. I need to let her know we are leaving. Though she is still not awake, I keep her updated with everything that's happening. In a way, my sister was my first friend.

Igor's hand on my back keeps me upright as I walk into her recovering room, but he remains out of the door. She is in Owa's incense room. Her body is almost completely transformed. Only paws remain.

Watching the transformation has been hard. At first it was witnessing her shedding all her fur until she was just skin everywhere. Then her features turned gradually. Her caramel skin no longer looks like a chicken everywhere and it is turning smooth and there is now color in her lips and her eyebrows finally took shape. I take her one paw that is laying on her stomach and bring it to my lips.

"Hey, beautiful girl." I say. "I hope you are still well in there. I hope mom told you, today is finally the day. Igor is going to fight for all our futures." I swallow before I continue. "I'm a little nervous, sister. I still don't trust others here."

I continue telling her about my hopes and the day before I finally kiss her goodbye and I leave.

All too quickly we must leave and we set for our journey.

The high skies are a different experience as Igor holds me steady to his chest. And I find that I enjoy the view from top. I get to see part of the vast Dali River and we even see some sea creatures. One of them a serpent creature as big as a tree.

By the time we inch closer to the venue and the wall begins appearing, I have an even greater appreciation for Igor and what he has been doing. The atmosphere is different out in the vast barren lands of this realm. And I have seen more than my share of strange new creatures.

The venue is already full of orcs and the arena is separated clearly from this vantage point. You can clearly see the green of the Bonos, the pale to browns of the Modo, the dark grey of the Soko and the dragons, all in dragon form.

It makes me wonder why they aren't shifting. It is very interesting that these creatures have been in this realm forever without their neighbours knowing they can shift to a human-like form.

We can hear the rumbling of the arena all the way from here, and as we descend, each part is engaging in what I can best describe as a competition in war cries.

Gremlo and Langa sit like the Kings they are amidst their warriors, commanding them in their war cries, axes and spears in hand, armoured and armed to the teeth. The Sokos are quiet

in comparison. Most of them don't have sounds in their section.

I sense the tension between the two orc tribes towards the Sokos. It is truly dangerous that they are here. As I wonder how they are so calm; I notice the Bono and Modo orcs sitting amongst the dragons.

The dragons are just watching, quiet, eyes vigilant, clearly waiting for anything to happen. Maybe these fire breathing beasts have a job after all. If they can keep these orcs from fighting each other before Igor has a chance to fight for all of them, they will be good in my books.

The heaviness of this day resonates with me the closer we get to the arena. I clutch our horn tighter in my hand. The tradition says that if the challenger doesn't succeed, he forfeits his position in the tribe and is at the mercy of the winner. The horn represents much in orc culture. It is everything an orc is.

I can sense the scoff some of Igor's people afford to him. It is the first time I am facing it in this kind of war zone setting and it doesn't make me less anxious.

When our dragons finally arrive on the ground, Igor helps me off and the dragons head to their section. The noise has not gone down, but we are the latest distraction as all eyes fall on us.

I give Igor a small nod, I don't smile because I don't know what these creatures consider weak or strong and right now this is about Igor. He nods back. Then he looks over my head and frowns.

I hear a scream behind me. Then I hear gasps and murmurs. Igor places his hand on my shoulder protectively. I turn slowly, feeling heavy. They are whispering to each other. I feel everyone in the arena turn to me when they start pointing.

“I knew it was true! I knew it!” A female Soko orc jumps from the crowd and she sprints towards me and Igor. A look of elation in her features.

Owa is not far from me and I look at her. But her gaze is with the Sokos. All the Sokos rise as if they are all of one mind.

The Soko throws herself on the hard ground and bows to... me.

She is crying as she blubbers on in a language I don't understand. That language Owa uses at times.

That alarms everyone and I feel everyone getting up as if they want to see what is going on and no one can see what the Sokos are seeing.

But it feels like my world is going even slower when the Soko orcs all kneel in unison.

One of the orcs, the one who looks oldest, she is bent on a walking stick, rises amongst them. She looks like she will fall over any moment and her skin is barely hanging on to her bones. She is adorned in what looks like traditional attire. A long black skirt and a blanket covering her shoulders and most of her body. It is simply too hot for such an attire. But I know who it is without confirmation.

Oga.

When her eyes land on me, the walking stick abandons her and she falls on her knees.

“Ah!” she bellows.

I look at Owa. And her gaze is on me too. She nods as if I should understand everything. Then she kneels, joining the first female.

But my feet don't move.

The female orc who hasn't stopped crying finally speaks, and she speaks words that turn my whole life on its head.

“The Queen is here.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Queen Aria

Igor

The leaders of the three tribes of orc stand opposite me on the other side of the drawn line. Gremlo, Langa and Aria.

Her thumb running over The Ring she has just been handed. It is too big not to notice and it sparkles with a ruby gem. I hear the snickers and the jokes of everyone who knows I won't beat my own mate.

But I can't deny it feels preposterous that I *must*. She might just be the new Okrar in that case. The thought bringing a wave of happy humor to me. But I don't express anything outwardly.

Hettar is circling us rallying the crowd with his war cries. The spectators – mostly Bonos and Modos – erupting in roars and stomps, making the whole place shake under my feet. The dragons are keeping a watchful eye to make sure they will be aligned with the victor who will take the day.

And in all that my soul is calm. I am anxious about it but I am rested too. I know it is either I walk out of here victorious or I don't walk out at all. And no one is taking my horn away from Aria. At the end of it all, that is what I am fighting for. Gremlo and Langa are fearsome warriors but I simply cannot lose. It is not an option for me. Too much is at risk.

Leaving Valeria and Gordian fatherless? I don't think so.

Hettar finally stops, standing between us in the middle of the arena and he raises his hand, commanding silence.

“Today we are present because the law that binds us all has been invoked. The Law of The Okrar. It is the first time this law has been invoked. One Igor of Zad invoked the law and today we witness history no matter the outcome.” Then his eyes land on me and they linger. “May the Gods make their will clear.”

“Gah!” All the orcs says in unison and they stomp their feet, making the whole arena tremble.

“I remind you the rules as they are written. The leaders have accepted the challenge. The challenger only has two roads. Victory or death!”

The crowd roars again, the excitement of my death obviously something they would very much enjoy. Because some of them still want me humbled.

“For the leaders, they too have options. Since the challenges were accepted, they can either kneel before the challenger in surrender or they fight for their place.”

Aria's eyes almost twinkle in glee and I almost grin at her. The idea of her winning still dancing in my head. A part of me really wanting to make it so. The idea of Aria ruling over all of us makes my cock strain in my armor in an inopportune time.

Aria's lips part slightly as if she sees what I'm thinking and her eyes narrow slightly. I move my eyes away from her, turning them to Hettar.

Igor, you need to focus.

Before I close that part of my mind, I promise myself to worship her body when we return back home.

The crowd boos over that rule, knowing exactly the outcome.

"The challenge begins now. May the will of the Gods prevail!" Hettar announces before he starts backing away slowly.

My muscles all tense instantly, looking at Langa as he looks at Aria. My eyes narrow at them. A smirk stretches on Langa's eyes and fury burns up inside me. Gremlo also turns his face to Aria who is standing in the middle looking every bit regal.

But I sense the danger. I sense their plan. I step forward. It happens in slow motion and Langa grabs Aria by the neck.

I leap forward and Gremlo blocks my way. I swing for him and he staggers back but Langa already has Aria in his hold.

These cowards.

“I will kill you!” I growl, my uncle still in my way. He recovers quickly and he tries to launch at me but the punch he lands on my face only makes me angrier. I duck the next one before I jump back.

“Langa, let her go. That is not part of the rules.”

Everybody waits on bated breath. He just laughs. “Why not? No rule against fighting each other too. How I see it, you have a choice.”

The crowd boos.

My gaze turns back to my uncle who is panting slowly. “Uncle, do you endorse this?”

“No, but what are you going to do about it, *nephew*? Are you going to let him place his hands on your mate, and how far will you go?”

My eyes crinkle in confusion. But understanding fills me. The understanding comes with a gut punch. But I move fast, my eyes going red. I let myself fall in the strength and brutality of all my ancestors.

Everything happens in a blur, it is like I am watching everything behind the curtain as I pummel my uncle on the ground, both our faces bloody.

Langa kicks me off him with a roar. I don't stay down long and I face both the orcs as they circle me.

The fight is long, both of them refusing to yield but yielding isn't an option. As they circle me someone throws a spear in the circle. We all go for it but my uncle gets to it first. That

turns the tide of the battle when Langa has me distracted and the metal pierces my side.

My eyes go blank for a second. It is then the picture of both my children flashes in my eyes and I hear Aria's scream from somewhere.

The spear is yanked out of me and my knees buckle under me. My eyes snap open, just in time as Langa's foot is heading my way. I let my body fall to the ground and it misses me. He uses that opportunity to bring his foot once more to smite me and I grab it, gritting my teeth to push through the pain. I yank him and he falls in a thud next to me.

I use that opportunity of surprise to bring my hands on his face, specifically his eyes so I can blind him. With speed and force I stab his eyeballs with my index fingers and they pop easier than I thought.

He growls but I can't hear it as Aria screams from somewhere. My eyes find her now in Gremlo's hands, the spear at her neck. Flashbacks of her in Shepherd's hand overtake my mind. Someone throws a spear in the middle of the ring.

Without hesitation I take it. The spectators hardly register to me anymore. I can't see anything besides Aria and the hand that is on her shoulder and the spear on her neck.

With a war cry I throw the spear. My uncles eyes flashes and for a split moment he sees his fate. He is too late when he tries to move out of the way and it goes through his eye. My

feet carry me to him. I grab him as he struggles to pull the spear in his eyes, writhing like a snake in boiling water.

I pull him to the center. Langa is trying to find his way up, feeling the ground, cursing my name.

“You didn’t have to do that.” I growl, angrier than I’ve ever been as I pummel my uncle to the ground again, then I hold him by his head. His end having arrived.

My hands tighten solidly around his neck.

“I d-d-did.” He struggles.

The one eye opens and he looks at me as his life slowly slips from him. When he wheezes his last breath and all light leaves him, I don’t feel peace.

But my work isn’t finished, I find Langa attempting to get out of the pit. Picking up the spear, I limp after him. Zod comes closer and kicks him back inside. Our eyes meet for a brief moment and he nods at me. *I just killed his father.*

Langa is a pathetic kill. I have him on his knees as I use the spear to finish him by strangling. When his body drops to the ground, an eerie silence falls on the arena. Their eyes behind me. I turn to find Aria standing in the middle of the circle, Gremlo a few feet from her.

I limp back to her. She looks fine except for the little blood and dirt of her shoulder. And she stands there so beautiful, so regal.

Maybe a kingdom under a Queen is the change we need, I think to myself. I find a small smirk tipping my lips. If this is

what the ancestors meant, then who am I to deny a Queen?

I remember that first time I saw the lump next to the bank. The first time I saw her face and my world stopped. The same feeling visits me now. And just like then my knees will bend for her, I know it.

Her face widens as if she sees my thoughts. She shakes her head. “Don’t do that, orc.” She says not loud.

I stand a few feet from her. We are standing on opposite ends of the line and we face each other. In the end, it could have only ever been me *and* her.

“Why not, Queen?”

“Because I will kill you if you do.” She says through closed teeth.

“So, this will be the time you kill me?”

“Yes.”

“They would enjoy that show. Want the spear?” I tease.

The world forgotten. I only realise when I hear boos over us and stomps. I look at the crowd who are waiting to see what we do.

She forgets herself and she rolls her eyes and I almost laugh loudly. I love this woman.

“Let’s get this over with. I want to leave. My breasts need to be alleviated of the pressure.” She says in a low voice only for me to hear and I frown. My concern for her overtaking the humor of the moment. We need to finish this.

She lowers to the ground. The whole world disappears to this very moment.

“Me and the Sokos submit ourselves under your leadership, Okrar.” She says before her forehead touches my boots.

I hardly hear Hettar say, “The Gods have chosen. Every knee bow to The Okrar. Igor.”

I feel the aura changing but my eyes are still on Aria. I bend down and I lift her up. I pull her to my arms, my hands finding her waist. Her eyes lift to mine glistening with what I can only describe as pride.

She mouths an *I love you* and I can only smile back, letting my eyes tell her exactly how I feel. Her eyes turn to the crowd and my eyes follow hers. Every knee on the ground. I turn with her in my arms.

After all the sweat, the struggle, the setbacks, the fights, the loss, it is done.

It is finished.

Epilogue

Aria

I squeeze Igor's hand as we wait in Owa's common room. A messenger was sent for us, my sister is finally awake. I last saw her yesterday and she has been fully transformed for some time but she wasn't waking up.

Igor's warm lips touch my temple and I give him a grateful smile. He was on his way to a meeting with the dragon representatives who are here on behalf of their Dagona.

Discussions of the details of the breeding arrangement between the orcs and dragons have begun. And Igor is torn on many sides. Though many approve of the idea of opening the opportunity for breeders for the dragons, others want the dragons to be brought to justice for what they did. What they set in motion essentially.

I don't disagree with that sentiment but like Igor I am done with war. My poor mate has early days and late nights. Alternating his time between the three orc tribes and ensuring the human kingdom doesn't fall in a vulnerable position with the Obu Kingdom.

And even in all that, he is still here with me because it's important for me and our family. He still comes back to check on us throughout the day when he gets some breaks. I am blessed.

The door opens and I stop breathing. I don't know what I am expecting.

Mom comes out first, her hand helping steady Luna.

She finally comes out. Our eyes meet and we are locked in a moment. Exactly like the first time we met when I was on the porch.

I leap forward, not able to stop myself.

"You're awake." I say loudly.

She flinches and I halt halfway. Does she not want me to come close?

Seeing my expression, she touches her ear. I look at mom confused.

"Her ears are still sensitive." Owa says from behind me.

Luna's lips lift a little and mine follow. My sisters first smile. She is so beautiful. I close the distance and she parts from mom and we meet in a hug.

I squeeze her. She hisses and I try to pull back but she doesn't let me, she holds me tightly. I close my eyes, my love for my sister overflowing. I owe a lot to her.

"I'm so happy you are awake, sister. I have been so anxious to have you here." I say to her. The words break me down and

tears fill my eyes.

We pull back and I hold her hands. “Are you okay?”

She nods.

“How are you feeling?”

She opens her mouth but she closes it quickly and she turns to mom.

“She can’t speak yet.” Mom says.

“She will, she just needs time to practice to utter what she knows.” Owa offers.

“That’s great.” Then I chuckle. “It seems you will be learning with your niece and nephew then.”

We laugh together, hers soundless.

Her eyes look behind me and I look to find Igor standing awkwardly a few feet from me. He comes close and I move to stand next to her, facing Igor.

They both stand there awkwardly.

“It’s nice to meet your...human self, Luna.” Igor says. The orc actually sounds sheepish.

Luna steps forward. Igor’s eyes widen slightly. Luna offers him her hand to shake. Igor takes a moment before he takes it.

Luna nods. She opens her mouth like she will say something before she sighs. Igor chuckles like he understands what she wanted to say.

“I’m sure you must be hungry.” Igor says and my sister narrows her eyes at him before they both chuckle.

“Food is ready at our quarters.” I say.

“I also cooked.” Owa says.

We all look at Luna to choose. She looks at mom.

“Let’s go meet my grand babies.” My mother says.

I take my sister’s hand and we walk out. The stares are intense when we step out into the sun. Whispers soon follow but at least now the orcs are a little more respectful. And being next to Igor always helps.

I let her in our chambers and we find Nani and Hani watching over the babies, Hani with a mead cup in hand.

Ever since Gremlo died, we haven’t had lengthy conversation about how she was taking the news. It wasn’t an easy thing that my mate killed hers. I knew she wasn’t in love with Gremlo, but she was still his mate and father to her son.

She has taken to indulging in more mead, saying she never wants to be tied to another male again. But she is still a good friend.

The twins are rocking in their rocking chair. My heart melts when I see they are intertwining their hands. They are playing. My babies.

“As I live and breathe.” Hani stands, placing her cup on the table.

“Luna!” Nani squeals.

Luna flinches next to me.

“No loud noises. She’s still sensitive in the ears.” I say.

“Come here, you beautiful wolf.” Hani picks my sister in an embrace.

They both embrace her. After getting the initial greetings out of the way, Luna stands in front of the twins. She looks at me nervously.

I step next to her and I place my hands on her shoulder.

“That one is Valeria, she’s the girl I’ve told you many stories you probably don’t remember, and that one is Gordian. He is the peace to Valeria’s chaos.” I say.

She smiles fondly before she looks at me for permission and I gesture with my head.

But she hesitates still and I bend and pick up Valeria.

My girl behaves and she coos at Luna as I hand her to her. Luna takes her, eyes wide. She rocks her niece and I all but forget everyone as we sit with the babies and she gets to know them.

It is still surreal that my sister is human.



Today is the big day. The twins blessing ceremony. We had to postpone it by a month because of all Igor’s commitments and Luna’s sleep. It didn’t feel right to not have her for it. She is too important to us and the twins. And as the twins godparent, it wouldn’t have been right at all.

We have had some time alone and she is still learning to speak. She only says a few words but it is enough for all of us right now. No one is in a rush to force her to be more. But her dedication to the twins is sweet and it warms my heart at how great she is as an aunt.

“How is he doing?” My feet take me to my sister first and I sit next to them. He is taking the bottle and my breasts feel sore instantly.

My sister just nods her answer. And I brush his forehead.

Luna looks up at me finally and her black eyes with an iris larger than normal looks at me. She hands Gordian to me and I take him.

“Thank you. I appreciate you for helping while I get ready.” I say to her.

She just nods again. I feel a pinch of guilt. It has not been too far from my mind that Luna may have been a victim of destiny. She lost the whole first part of her life and she can never know what it’s like to be a normal human child because the Gods placed the needs of everyone else above hers.

It’s not my fault but I feel guilty. She doesn’t seem to be angry at me at all, in fact she has been wonderful but I can’t help the guilt every time I look at her.

Her hand reaches for my cheek and she caresses me gently, holding my gaze firmly, communicating with me the only way we ever have. I see it all in her eyes. Her love. She sees what I’m thinking.

I only nod and she does too.

Igor walks out from the passage, his new kingly skins fitting him in all the right ways. The pads of the shoulders make him look godly and his loincloth should be a sin to wear. The belt around his waste is of the Soko tribe. The pads from the Bono and the loincloth from the Modo.

A new crown was made for him and me. I myself am donned with skins and precious jewels. The Sokos have much more refined precious stones as part of their culture and adornments than the other tribes and I couldn't be happier.

Our children are in their ceremonial skins and beads.

Igor's chest is out and it puffs with pride when he nears us.

That very chest is the reason we are a little late. When he first dressed, I just couldn't resist him, I had to have him.

His gaze finds me first and he catches me drooling and winks.

I roll my eyes playfully.

He picks up Valeria where she is asleep at the moment. She needs to wake up anyway.

The door opens and Kaja and Faz walk in.

"For the thousandth time, knock when you come in my dwelling." Igor chastises them.

"We forget, King Imp." Kaja says.

I shake my head after Igor. They in truth just do it to annoy him. They tease him like he is one of their brothers.

“Are you ready, little wolf?” Faz directs the question to my sister. Just her in a room full of us.

She meets his gaze before he looks at Kaja.

“Yah.” She answers.

That pleases him and Kaja rolls his eyes.

“Well, the rest of you are late.” Faz looks at us.

“Yes, the old one says the spirits grow weary of waiting for you, your kingliness.” Kaja mock bows to Igor who is glaring at him.

I chuckle and I get up with Gordian.

Igor holds Valeria and we go to bless our children and officially introduce them to our tribe.

THE END

What's Next from the Author

Vidar's Heart

Pre-Order

Thalia's life is already laid before her; when she turns 18, she will marry her best friend and the love of her life, and she will live happily ever after.

But the fates have other plans when Vidar, the formidable and legendary god of war, follows the song of his soul mate to a sacred ceremony in Midgard. He finds the young maiden at the altar marrying another man.

Vidar, consumed by an overwhelming desire to claim his soul mate, crosses lines that must never be crossed and he ends up shattering Thalia's world completely, leaving her with nothing but anguish and heartache.

In the wake of her soul mates' destruction, Thalia must confront the very real aftermath of Vidar's actions and the realities of being bound to such a cruel god as it wars with her soul's deepest desires.

Will the connection bestowed by the Moon Goddess be sufficient to pull them through? Can she forgive the one who took everything from her and shattered her whole life? And just how far will Vidar go to keep Thalia?

***The book is based loosely on Norse mythology.

Books in the Series

The Orc Prince

The Orc Queen

Acknowledgements

Thank you for reading my work. Without you taking a chance on my work, I would not have realized a dream. I hope you had a good time reading. I hope you laughed, gasped, was shook, irritated, and threw the book at least once in this duology. My gratitude is with you. I hope you will stay, follow as I embark on this journey.

This book is dedicated to my sister. In another life, I think we may have been twins. Nobody gets me like you do. I am shook everyday how alike we are in some ways. Thank you for your words of encouragement and thank you for always thinking I could be a champion no matter what I do. I want nothing but good things for you.

Lastly, to everyone who gave me feedback, helping me make this project the best I could. My readers from Wattpad, Inkitt, my editor, the lovely Morgan Waddle, the illustrator for the covers, Yasmin, the advanced readers for their input, and the one who drives me, Hela, my muse. The dream isn't possible without all of you.

Oh, sorry for that cliffhanger in book one. As a chief hater of cliffhangers, I honestly didn't think it was that big. But a lot of you hated it and I feel bad. This is not a promise to not write cliffhangers in the future - because I probably will - but I promise to feel bad about it.

About the Author

Qua is a South African author, born and still lives there. Although she has always enjoyed reading books, writing was never something she thought she had the talent for. In her earlier years, she penned poems and random lines she thought of. But she always had stories occupying her mind, she always had characters living their lives in her head taking up most of her days.

It wasn't until she thought she was going mad, because these characters that had been living in her head started taking over all her faculties, that she furiously opened a Word document to get rid of them. But as soon as she put finger on keyboard, she was lost to the world. The stories would not stop coming and she has not stopped writing since.

At her core, she loves romance. Every subgenre has its place and time. She is a mood reader that turned to a mood writer. The vibe determines her interest. Writing is an outlet for her and a happy place. And as long as her mental health permits, she will bring you stories written with love.

Her favorite subgenres are: fantasy romance, dark romance, monster romance, alien/sci-fi romance, and a good reverse harem romance. She will mostly rotate between these subgenres too.

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Email: AuthorQuaHudson@gmail.com