

SWEET MONSTERS TREATS



CANDY *for my* ORC BOSS



AVA ROSS

CANDY FOR MY ORC BOSS

SWEET MONSTER TREATS/MONSTERVILLE,
USA

AVA ROSS

CANDY FOR MY ORC BOSS

Sweet Monster Treats

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A note to the reader.

If you found this book outside of Amazon,
it's likely a stolen/pirated copy.

Authors make nothing when books are pirated.

If authors are not paid for their work,
they can't afford to keep writing.

*For my parents who
always believed I could do this.*

SERIES BY AVA

Mail-Order Brides of Crakair

Brides of Driegon

Fated Mates of the Ferlaern Warriors

Fated Mates of the Xilan Warriors

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Beastly Alien Boss

Bride of the Fae

A Sci-Fi Holiday Tail

Monsterville, USA

(Includes Monster Between the Sheets &

Sweet Monster Treats)

Monster on Board

(co-written with Alana Khan)

You can find her books on [Amazon](#).

CANDY FOR MY ORC BOSS

A new life, a new job, a new orc husband ... Wait, isn't he supposed to be *my boss*?

After my ex announces his wedding to someone other than me, I'm eager to leave town. A new life and a new job are just what I need to restore my mojo. On the way to my destination, I stay the night at a hotel where edible unmentionables and a tattooed orc construction worker rock my world. I sneak out the next morning, figuring I'll never see him again.

Until I walk into my new job. That hot orc construction worker?

He's my boss.

He's eager to continue where we left off.

And those symbols on his wrists? According to orc tradition, they mean we're married.

Candy for my Orc Boss is a sweet and steamy monster romance that is part of the Sweet Monster Treats collection. It also fits into Ava's Monsterville, USA world. Each book is a standalone, containing its own Happily Ever After, and they can be read in any order. Be sure to explore the other books in the Sweet Monster Treats collection:

[Cookies for my Orc Neighbor](#)

[Cupcakes for my Orc Enemy](#)

CHAPTER I

CHASTITY



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If only I hadn't encouraged a gorgeous orc to eat my unmentionables. Well, not exactly eat them. I asked him to lick them.

Because they were cherry.

Not my cherry—I lost that years ago. The panties were the edible cherry kind, and they never should've been taken seriously. Except ... I invited him to do so much more than lick them, and now I was in major trouble.

Tattooed orc construction worker trouble.

Leave it to me, a woman who'd been cursed with the sweeter-than-angels name of Chastity, to get tipsy on one glass of wine. If that wasn't enough, I'd opened my birthday gag gift of edible undies (thanks, BFF since junior high school, Violet) in front of the muscular orc construction guy sitting next to me at the hotel bar.

Giggling me had channeled a boldness Chastity didn't possess. I'd waved the garment in the air and brazenly suggested someone needed to eat them.

What a major embarrassment this was. Last night? Let's just say that this was what happened when straight-laced Chastity decided to cut loose and have fun. Of course, I wouldn't have done ... this, if I wasn't still feeling the pinch from being ditched by my now ex-boyfriend. Three months ago, he announced he was getting married—to someone other than me.

Because it hurt to see them together, I'd quit my job and taken one in a small town far from the place I grew up in. En route, I stopped for the night at a hotel and things went in a new direction from there. Tomorrow, I'd settle into an apartment. I'd start my new job two weeks after that.

I'd generated a lot of excitement with my edible undies proposition. I was popular for the first time in my life.

Two vampires offered to suck my blood through the garment at the same time, and a werewolf had taken one look, howled, and bolted from the bar. More yips erupted outside, reminding me the moon was full tonight.

The most interest came from the orc wearing worn jeans, construction boots, and a snug tee outlining his numerous muscles.

He'd urged me on because he was hot. Or I'd *been* hot. No, I hadn't been hot. I'd been determined to show the world I had worth, that guys found me attractive. My ex had ignored me for too long before his surprise engagement.

And ... here I was, about to bail on the guy who'd given me the best night of my life. Waiting for him to wake up felt cringy. Sometime during the night, I'd reverted to being plain old Chastity.

Muted sunlight filtered around the edges of the hotel room's curtains, not quite reaching the bed. A panty-dropping, muscular tattooed arm laid across my chest. It tightened, and my orc construction worker snuggled into my side. His lips—*asleep lips*—spread tingles through me as they brushed from my neck to my collarbone.

Ever since mythical creatures became mainstream, I'd wondered what it would be like to date someone different from me.

Let's just say last night took things a bit further than dating.

I had to get out of here before he woke up or the morning-after conversation could prove awkward. What if I asked for his number, and he didn't want to give it to me? I liked him. I wanted to see him again. But my heart was too soft to take another rejection right now.

If I knew his full name, I could find him online. It was clear his mom had not named him Yes!, More!, or Harder!—the only things I'd been capable of screaming last night.

Heat flooded my face when I remembered how I'd shouted for him to do whatever he'd wanted with me. So unlike the

times I'd been with my ex.

The orc shifted closer. He thrust his warm, buck-naked thigh upward, pinning my legs to the bed. He mumbled, his words igniting my nerve endings. The saying that orcs do it better was totally true.

His fingertips brushed across my nipple, and it responded like it hadn't had more action in one night than during the past six months combined.

My nipple was a needy thing.

Not me, though. I was prim. Proper. Rightly named Chastity.

His big rod nudged against my thigh, sending spirals of heat to the tips of my toes. Feeling its weight gave me an insatiable urge to touch it. Wrap my fingers around it. Wake him and tell him I was open to more licking.

Absolutely not. Get a grip on yourself, girl.

His tongue should be registered as a dangerous weapon. Long and thick, it was split on the tip. His highly creative tip had—

No, no, no. I needed to get out of here. I had important things to do today, things that didn't include banging hot orc construction workers for half the morning. Time was a wastin'.

Once I left this hotel room, I could slink back into my role as a respectful businesswoman who did not wear edible cherry undies, let alone ask strangers to lick them. Chew them. Rip them from her body with his tusks.

I slid out from beneath him and inched to the side of the bed. Promptly falling off the edge, I landed with a dull thud on the carpeted floor in a tangle of flushed limbs and overheated humiliation. Before my curse slipped out, I slapped my hand over my mouth and went still, listening.

He grunted but didn't move. At least he hadn't witnessed my swan dive off the bed.

Scrambling to my feet, I stood there for a second staring down at him, my heart softening at seeing his gorgeous slumbering face. The sheet had slid down to his waist, leaving his tattooed green wonderfulness exposed to my view.

Buff could be his middle name, from his washboard abs to his sculpted pecs to his chiseled-from-granite shoulders. All topped off with long black hair streaked with sunshine, a strong—now stubbly—jawline, and killer dark eyes well set in an orc-green face. It was no wonder it only took one glass of wine to make me rip off my clothing.

If I was honest with myself, something I always took pride in, he'd made me drool before I'd taken my first sip.

Snatching up my dress—a slash of conservative blue lying on the floor—my purse, and my impractical, three-inch heels I'd boldly worn the night before, I tiptoed into the bathroom and shut the door.

After flicking on the light, I glanced in the mirror, my breathing coming to a shuddering halt. Great, great, great. My cheeks were pink, I had a freakin' hickey on my neck, my breasts were perky and swollen and still called for more action, and I had a matching hickey on my upper right thigh close to where all that licking had taken place.

Lava pooled inside me at the memory, as if the hot orc construction worker was here in the tiny room with me, sliding his fingertips along my lower back. Dipping his hand between my legs. Watching me in the mirror while he did it.

“Spread your legs wider, sweetheart,” he'd commanded last night. “I want to see everything.”

I'd done whatever he'd asked, and I would again if he appeared and told me to bend over the vanity.

“Stop it. Get dressed. Go get your things from your room and drive away from the scene of the crime,” I whispered while struggling into my sensible white panties, which I'd tucked into my purse before donning the others. Who knew where the cherry ones had wound up. Burned to a crisp by the volcanic action between us, maybe.

I tugged my dress over my head and wrangled with the back zipper, which hot guy had pulled down with his tusks last night while I sighed and urged him on. I strapped on my heels.

There. Presentable once again. Tidy enough to ride the elevator to the ground floor and walk across the hotel lobby with my head held high.

Check that thought. Leaning over the sink, I smoothed my long, brown hair, doing my best to make it appear like a guy hadn't run his fingers through it, let alone gripped it in his fist while he rode me from behind.

My knees wobbled as I fell back into that moment. A soft moan slipped from my swollen lips. There was no denying that I looked like a wanton, *wanting* woman who'd just had the best fuck of her life. Multiple fucks, that is.

Huffing, I turned away from my reflection. As wonderful as he was, it was time for me to step back into Chastity. I had a new life and job waiting for me, neither of which included a hot guy who made my chest ache after only one night.

I shut off the light, eased open the door, and squinted into the room. Nothing but soft snoring came from the mound under the covers.

I scurried across the carpet and slipped out the door, making sure it shut behind me with a barely discernable click.

Longing coursed through my veins, and it was all I could do not to turn and knock. Beg to be let back inside.

"No, Chastity," I hissed, collapsing against the wall beside the door. "You will not do anything like that."

Elevator. Room. Lobby. *Go!*

I raced down the hall.

I'd never see my hot orc construction worker again, which was just as well, because my heart couldn't take it.

TWO WEEKS LATER, I dressed in a nice skirt and blouse, sedate heels, and pulled my hair up in a tight bun. I drove to my new job and sat in the parking lot staring at the single-story building.

Zahgorim Construction Company, the sign over the front door, said. I'd taken a job as the owner's assistant. In the paperwork he sent over a month ago, he told me to have the receptionist send me down the hall on the right when I arrived. His office was at the end. He'd explain my duties then, though I had a solid idea of what was expected of me.

I would take over the management of the company Valentine's Day Picnic. I'd handle business matters not related to the hands-on construction work. And I'd complete additional tasks as assigned.

An easy position for a woman with years of administrative assistant experience under her belt.

I couldn't wait to get started.

The receptionist waved me to the hall, and I strode up to his door. At my knock, a gruff voice inside called for me to enter.

After shutting the door to the hall, I walked across an entryway and into my new boss's corner office. Pausing, I took in the expanse of windows taking up two walls with a gorgeous view of the distant mountains. Sunlight streamed through the panels, eclipsing a tall male sitting behind an enormous desk covered with various items.

He stood and strode around the desk to greet me, and I finally got a good look at his face.

My eyes widened, and I gulped, backing into the wall as I took in the hot orc construction guy I'd slept with two weeks ago.

"I ... You ..." The small box of candy I'd brought as a little gift slipped from my hands.

I slapped my hand over my lipstick-clad mouth, not sure what to say.

“So, you’re *Chastity*,” he said in the gravelly voice that had haunted me every night since I last saw—slept—with him. The deep tone alone made me wet, but the stormy look in his dark eyes made my knees knock together. “I’ve wondered what to call you.”

He wore a black business suit, and the first few buttons of his starched white shirt were undone to show off the muscular chest I remembered licking. The glorious dark hair with natural highlights that I’d run my fingers through half the night had been pulled back and secured with a strip of leather at the back of his neck.

This was bad news. My heart couldn’t take seeing him again. He *couldn’t* be my new boss!

“Yes, I ... I’m her. Chastity Jones,” I mumbled. “And you’re Maxon Zahgorim, my ...” Hell, what was I supposed to call him? My one-night stand?

“Call me Max.”

“I, um, sure.”


Turning toward his desk, he swept his arm out, sending everything on the polished surface flying to the floor.

His dark brooding eyes shot my way as he jerked open the top few buttons of his starched white shirt. “Lay back on the desk, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER 2

MAX





“Chastity?” I asked.

The lush human female I’d half fallen for two weeks ago gaped at me.

When she didn’t respond, I waved my hand in front of her face. “Chastity? Are you all right?”

Her jaw gapped, and she blinked fast. “What did you just ask me to do?”

“Take a seat?” I lifted the small box of chocolates, handed it to her, and waved again to the chair opposite mine.

“You, um, these are for you.” She thrust the candy my way.

“Thank you.” I placed them on my desk blotter. “That’s nice of you. How did you know I love dark chocolate?”

“Because ... cherries. Shit.” She shook her head. “Back up a second. You didn’t clean off your desk and tell me to ...” Her frown fell on the littered surface.

“Tell you to do what?” I followed her gaze before taking in the feverish pulse in her throat, the flush rising into her cheeks, and ...

The scent of her arousal drifting through the air.

My cock jerked upright, waking from the slumber it had fallen into when I roused from the best night of my life to find myself alone in a cold bed.

She’d taken off without leaving me her number or name. I’d spent the morning trying to talk the hotel desk clerk into giving me the information without success. The woman clearly thought I was a stalker.

“Oh, yes, the chair,” Chastity said, easing toward it. “Of course. Nothing else.” She sunk into the seat and primly linked her hands on her lap.

Her shy, almost straight-laced demeanor hid a woman with a voracious appetite that matched my own. But she was my new assistant. Fraternization between us must be forbidden. I'd ask HR—

Actually, I owned the company. I could do whatever I wanted. Well, whatever Chastity wanted; I'd never force the issue.

Pivoting, I returned to my chair, sitting and watching her while steepling my fingers on my chest.

“Welcome to Zahgorim Construction Company,” I said. “I'm the owner.” When she didn't say a thing, just focused on my neck, I decided to follow her cue and ignore what happened two weeks ago. Where was I? Oh, yup, the job I'd hired her for. I still couldn't get over the fact that my new assistant was ... Well, I'd have to bring it up sometime; ignoring it wasn't a long-term option. “I emailed you a list of your duties, but I'm happy to go through them with you now.”

“Oh, yes.” She sat up straighter, and only the twitch of her fingers when she smoothed her tightly bound hair gave away how nervous she was.

“The Valentine's Day Picnic will take place this coming weekend,” I said. “I realize it's short notice, but I've taken care of most of it already.”

“Okay.” She blinked owlishly behind her glasses—the glasses I'd slid from her face that night and placed on the bedside table. There was something incredibly hot about a woman wearing only glasses, red edible undies, and three-inch heels.

“The park is booked,” I said.

“What about the caterers?” She peered around before grabbing a pad of paper and a pen off my desk. Flipping it open, she made a few notes.

“All arranged. They'll deliver the baskets on Saturday at noon.”

“Activities?” She looked up at me through her glasses.

“I’m leaving that to you.”

“How many people will be attending?”

“Thirty-two, including their families. When my employees RSVP’d, I had them note how many would be attending. Each family will share a basket.” I cleared my throat. “You can share with me.”

“Oh, my,” she said.

She’d said the same thing when I started nibbling on her edible panties, her hands fluttering around my head. Her *oh, my* soon dissolved into *yes, yes, please* when I started ripping apart said panties with my tusks.

My cock ached, desperate to be buried inside her once more.

“Why do I need to share a basket with you?” she asked. “We’re not family. You must have a date.”

“I don’t date any longer.” Not since I was with her.

A frown filled her pretty face, and her cheeks flushed again. “Why aren’t you dating any longer?” Her hand flicked between us. “Excuse me. I shouldn’t be asking you that. You’re my boss. I’m your assistant. You don’t need to discuss your personal life with me.”

Oh, but I did. I might as well bring it up since it was clear she wasn’t going to do so herself. It was time to lay out a few orc-related customs.

“About that night,” I said.

Her sapphire eyes widened, and she sucked in a breath. “What night?”

She wasn’t going to pretend it didn’t happen, was she? That wouldn’t work.

I stood and strode around my desk to lean back against it, putting my body close to hers. Like that night, the mating marks on my wrists flared, rippling beneath my skin.


Yup, I hadn’t been mistaken. She was mine. I just needed to convince her we were meant to be together.

I cleared my throat. “I’m talking about the night we got married.”

CHAPTER 3

CHASTITY





“Wait, what?” Leaping from the chair, I backed around it to put space between me and my orc boss—lover. Whatever. “We’re not married. I’d remember something like that.”

“I didn’t mean we got married like humans do with a church, flowers, and saying vows, though I’m happy to fit that into my schedule if you’d like. I know a troll who could officiate.”

Troll ...

Shaking that off, I frowned. “What are you talking about?” Panic bloomed in my voice, but it wasn’t because I was terrified of him. No, my heart was fluttering around behind my ribcage, shouting *yay, yay*, and heat coiled low in my belly.

I had to be dreaming. He hadn’t told me to lie back on his desk, and he wasn’t telling me we were married.

“According to orc tradition, we’re now wedded ... and bedded.” He removed his suit jacket. He rolled up his sleeves, showing off his gorgeous, drool-worthy forearms, flipping them over to show me the undersides. “These marks prove it.”

“What, your tattoos?” Tattoos shouldn’t look that delicious. I took in the partial sleeves depicting mythical creatures weaving around his arms that almost appeared to move. “You had those already.” I’d licked them, working my way up to his shoulders.

“I meant these.” He traced the etchings encircling his right wrist, then the left. “They appeared when I met you. They intensified when we ... when I claimed you. They prove you’re my mate—wife—if that term is easier to digest.”

None of this was easy to digest. Married?

My hands lifting, I backed toward the door, running into it. “We’re not married. Wedded.” I gulped. “Bedded.”

“*That* we are, sweetheart,” he said with a low chuckle. “I’d be happy to refresh your memory of the bedding if you’d like.”

Flames licked across my bones. I inanely shook my left hand at him. “I’m not wearing a ring. We ... I didn’t even know your name!”

He stalked toward me, not stopping until he was so close I could suck in his yummy scent. It wasn’t fair that he smelled this good, like cinnamon combined with orc male. He tugged something off his pinky finger and lifted my trembling hand, sliding a gold band with a green stone flanked by two smaller blue ones onto my left ring finger.

“Done,” he said. His hands braced on either side of my head, and he leaned in, whispering by my ear. “Would you like to consummate our vows again, sweetheart?”

I dipped out from beneath his body before I melted into a puddle on the floor. I raced across the room, not stopping until I’d reached the windows. “This can’t be happening.” I wrenched at the ring. “It won’t come off.” My wrists started itching, and symbols eerily similar to the ones on Max’s wrists rippled across my unmarked skin.

“Ah, ah!” I shook my arms, trying to dislodge the markings, but they remained, blazing bright green for a second before fading to an intricate weave of vines with tiny flowers.

“And that proves it.” Returning to his desk, he sat in his chair and leaned back, facing me. “We’ll collect your things after work. You can move in with me tonight.”

“I can’t ...” I shook my head. He was hot—I’d give him that. Desirable, too. If I was going to move in with anyone, it would be him. But this couldn’t be happening. “We’re not married, and I’m not going to live with you.”

His thick brow ridge narrowed. “It’s too late. My mother found out, and she’s on her way here.”

“Mother?” I gulped.

“She and my father will arrive in two days.”


“I don’t need to—”

“Tell you what. I’m not a pushy kind of guy.” His intent gaze made me feel like I stood in his hotel room again wearing almost nothing, while his eyes devoured my every curve. “Pretend to be my wife for the time my mother’s in town, and then I’ll give you an orc divorce.”

CHAPTER 4

MAX





She was stunned, and I couldn't blame her. Maybe I needed to back away from my orc-headed approach. But I'd spent weeks looking for her without success, only to have her stroll into my office and deny the bond we'd formed that night.

"Take your seat again," I said in a soft, encouraging voice. "We can talk this through, and you'll have all the information you need to make a decision." I pressed my fist against my chest. "I promise I won't push you into doing anything you don't want to."

She slunk past me and sank into her chair. "The symbols mean we're married?" she asked limply.

"According to orc custom, yes. My mom found out, and now she's coming to town. She's excited to meet you, to welcome you into the family. She and my father will leave the day after the Valentine's Picnic."

"And you want me to pretend I'm your wife?"

"You are my wife, but I realize for you, that's just a technicality."

Her chin lifted, and her eyes narrowed on my face. "Maybe I was already married."

"Are you?" I growled. I'd crush his—

"No."

I sagged back in my chair. "My parents will only be here for a short time. Mom's been sick, and she's excited about having a daughter-in-law."

"Don't use your mother's illness to manipulate me," she said, her eyes darkening.

I loved this woman's fire. It matched the heat blazing within me. "I'm sorry. You're right. I'm asking, not making demands."

Her arms crossed on her chest. “Explain everything.”

Standing, I started pacing, though I remained on my side of the desk, not wanting to scare her away. Because ... I liked her. I couldn't get that night out of my mind. And I wanted the symbols on our wrists to have meaning for her as well, not just me.

“How did she find out? You didn't tell her, did you?” she asked. “You didn't know who I was, where I was, or if you'd ever see me again.” Her voice lifted. “And you just go announcing we're married, and she says, hey, sure, I'd love to meet her. I'll take the next flight!”

“We were voice chatting, and she saw the markings.”

Chastity deflated, rubbing her face with her palms. “I don't understand how this happened.”

“It's rare for orcs to find their fated mates,” I said.

“I see.”

Noncommittal, but I'd take it. At least she wasn't citing irreconcilable differences yet.

“We met. We slept together. The symbols appeared on my wrists, though I didn't see them until you'd run away that morning.”

“I didn't run.”

“Okay, you walked out without waiting for me to wake up.”

Her sigh took all the wind from her sails. “I'm sorry I did that. I thought it was a one-time thing, not the beginning of something permanent. I was worried you'd find it embarrassing to wake up with me in your bed.”

Embarrassing? I'd claimed her over and over, etching her scent into my soul, and she thought I'd ditch her at dawn?

“I wasn't embarrassed. I wanted you there.” I still did, but I was going to have to take this slowly or I'd drive her away.

She swallowed hard, her gaze tracing across my shoulders and down my chest. “I see.”

“The symbols told me you’re my fated mate. The only woman I’ll ever love.”

She leaned forward almost eagerly. “You love me?”

“I could love you. That’s what fated means in orc culture.”

“And your mother saw the marks.” She nodded. “I’m sorry. It appears we’re both in a bind here.”

“That’s why I’m asking for your help.” I tried not to sound desperate. “My mom is so happy. She’s been sick, as I said, and thankfully she’s getting better, but this made her face light up for the first time since her diagnosis. She’s thrilled for me, and she can’t wait to meet you. Before I could talk her out of it, she said she was coming.”

“What were you going to do when she got here, and I was missing?”

“Tell her it was a big mistake, that we’d agreed to split.”

Her lips thinned. “Split from your fated mate? Is that even possible?”

No. I’d crave her for eternity, but I was not going to tell her that. It would scare her. I’d give her a chance to get to know me first, and then I’d tell her, hoping she’d welcome the news.

“When she gets here, tell her we already split.”

“But you’re here.”

“She wouldn’t know I’m the one you ... somehow locked onto.”

“You think she’d miss the markings on your wrists that match mine?”

She pinched her eyes shut for a second. “Probably not.”

Definitely not.

“What we can do,” I said, “is show her we’re mostly happy and take her to the party.” My ring had locked onto her, and there was no backing out of this quickly, but if she really didn’t want to be with me, I’d accept that. “After she goes

home, I'll wait a bit before telling her we argued and broke up."

"Cheer her up only to let her down?" She nibbled on her lower lip, and in a flash, I was pressing her against the hotel room door again, claiming those lush lips. Stroking my tongue across hers while she clung to my shoulders.

I needed to get a grip on my libido. If I didn't handle this right, I'd lose everything.

"It's the only thing I can think of," I said, watching her face. "Unless ..."

Her head tilted. "Unless what?"

"You decide after her visit that you want to make this permanent."

CHAPTER 5

CHASTITY



[]

Why was I even considering this? He was my boss. I was only three months out from ending a crappy relationship. The last thing I needed to do was hook up with someone new.

Although ... I tapped my chin.

I hadn't been able to forget that night. I could barely sleep. I woke sweaty and worked up, writhing beneath the covers, because I *ached* for him.

And now markings just like his had appeared on my wrists. The ring he'd placed on my finger wouldn't come off, and I wasn't sure I wanted to remove it. I took in the lovely setting with green for his skin and blue for my eyes, as if he'd ordered it special to symbolize us.

All of this meant something, though I wasn't sure what. I was a human, not an orc. It was hard to believe my body could respond to some sort of chemical reaction inherent in his species.

I didn't believe in fate, and after what happened with my ex, I'd begun to doubt it was possible to fall in love.

Would it be bad to see where this could go between us?

He watched me, patiently waiting for me to make up my mind.

"Just until she leaves?" I asked, still unsure.

"That's all I ask. She and my father will be here the day after tomorrow and they'll be gone before you know it. You could move in with me tonight. Then we can get to know each other better before she arrives." His cheeks darkened. Was he blushing?

"I could leave town while they're here. If she doesn't see the marks on my wrists, you can tell her then that we broke up."

He leaned forward. "Is that what you truly want to do?"

Did I? Everything inside me shouted that fleeing would be the biggest mistake in my life. But how could I trust someone new? The thought of getting hurt again made my heart shudder. I already sensed that breaking up with Max would devastate me in a way ending things with my ex never had.

“I guess it makes sense to get to know each other.” My chest tightened, but I couldn’t picture myself doing anything but agreeing to see this through. “I’ll move in tonight. I assume we’ll have separate bedrooms.”

His gaze dropped to his desk. “Until my parents are here.” When he looked up, I swore I read vulnerability in his eyes, but I didn’t know him well enough to determine anything like that. “She’ll believe we’re happy together if we’re sharing the same room. It’s a big room,” he hurried to add. “I’ve got a huge bed. You won’t even know I’m there.”

Oh, I’d know.

How was I going to sleep with his delectable body lying within arm’s reach?

“All right.” I had no idea why I was agreeing to this. I should quit this job and move to a different part of the country. Leave him and his mating symbols behind.

Except ... I didn’t want to do that. That wild side of Chastity who’d showed up two weeks ago wanted to get to know Max better. She wanted to see if there was anything to this.

And she wanted to share his bed.

HE SHOWED me to my office a short distance down the hall from his and pointed to the list of tasks on a piece of paper he’d left on the smooth surface. After giving me logins for the computer and the numbers for HR and his accountant to set up payroll, he left.

I leaned back in my office chair and sighed, but nothing was going to slow down my restless heart. Rising, I walked to

the window and looked out, though I didn't see anything but Max's too-hot orc face.

That look in his eyes. I couldn't forget the need mixed with the determination I'd found there. He wanted to make his mom happy, but I sensed there was more to this agreement than that.

Did he actually care about me?

How could he? Sure, we'd laughed together that night at the hotel bar as we'd cheered on our favorite ice hockey team who won a game while we watched. We'd gotten to know each other intimately after we went to his room. But we were basically strangers.

Married strangers.

I should call him on this, insist he show me proof the symbols meant we were fated. Stuff like that didn't happen to humans, though it might be nice if it did. Imagine meeting someone and knowing right away that they were the one. It would save a lot of angst and heartache.

I returned to my desk and looked through the list, not finding anything too challenging.

When I logged into my computer, instead of exploring games families could play at a company picnic, I started researching orcs and marriage customs.

There wasn't much online. Monsters had only been mainstream for a few years, and while researchers and psychologists were eager to find out how each creature ticked, the monsters were fairly closemouthed about their customs and internal functions. Who could blame them? They must worry someone would pin them to a table and conduct experiments on them, something a few in the government had initially suggested. The monsters threatened to riot, and that quashed any interest in research. Who'd challenge a minotaur in a blood rage to obtain a blood sample?

Scrolling through Google, I found a few blog posts written by a woman who'd mated with an orc. Rylee lived with him in a little town called Screaming Woods. There were photos of

her and her man, Gunner, plus a few with her holding a green-skinned baby.

The symbols on both of their wrists came through loud and clear in the pictures. They didn't match the ones on me and Max, and they weren't mentioned in the posts, but seeing them told me there was something unusual going on between me and my boss.


Was there such a thing as fated mates?

It appeared I was about to find out.

CHAPTER 6

MAX





“Ready to go?” I asked politely at her door.

After leaving her in her office, I’d returned to mine. Instead of working on the housing development I was getting ready to bid, I leaned back in my chair and thought about Chastity.

I bought the ring the morning after she bailed on me at the hotel. Seeing the symbols on my wrists made me incredibly happy. She was mine, and if the fates had brought us together once, they would make sure we met up again.

I’d stopped at the hotel for a night after a weekend getaway in the mountains with a few friends, and what a good decision that had been. When I reached town, I went to a jewelry store owned by a demon. While I waited, he crafted the band with stones mined by a gargoyle, something their species was known for. I’d selected the stones myself from the ones the demon cut, an emerald in the center of the ring to indicate my orc heritage flanked with two blue sapphires that matched her eyes. I’d wanted something that would symbolize the joining of our two worlds, a ring that was simple yet heartfelt.

Heartfelt? I wasn’t being completely honest with her, but how could I tell her I’d half fallen in love with her after one night? That was something straight out of fiction. I had to give her a chance to get to know me before I sprung something like that.

I bought the ring, and I’d carried it around with me since, hoping it would nudge the fates into bringing her back into my life.

I’d been dreaming way more than I should have been. She’d walk back into my life and be thrilled to see me. She’d say she made a mistake by leaving that morning. And I’d get down on my knees and present the ring to her. Slide it on her finger while she gasped with joy.

I was much too romantic.

Lifting the box of chocolates she'd given me, I grinned and slid off the top, selecting one and popping it into my mouth. While the candy melted, I dreamed up ways of convincing Chastity to stay with me after my parents left town.

I wasn't giving up yet. I wanted her, and unless she outright rejected me, I was going to have her.

So, I gave her time to work while I churned through one memory from that night after another.

And now I stood in her doorway, my heart slamming around in my chest.

"I'm done," she said, shutting down her computer. "I've completed what I can for now." She waved to the list with at least a third of the items crossed off.

"I'm impressed," I said.

Her smile came out true, and it made my heart beat faster. "Thanks. But you saw my resume. You hired me because I'm good at what I do."

If she hadn't applied, I never would've met her. I'd be like so many of my kind, living each day incomplete, without a fated mate by my side.

She came around her desk. "Do you want to follow my car? I need to stop by my apartment and gather up enough clothing for the week. I haven't finished unpacking, but I've sorted through most of my things."

"All right."

We left the office and crossed town. I could've waited in my truck while she packed, but I wanted to nose my way into every aspect of her life. Curiosity might be my downfall, but I needed to see how she'd set up her new home.

Bright colors greeted me inside her apartment, splashes of deep blue and yellow in the cushions on her couch and the brightly painted artwork hanging on her walls.

While she went to the kitchen attached to her living room, I crossed to look at one of the paintings, noting her initials in the corner.

“I love your art,” I said, unable to look away from the mountains arching across the top of the painting. She’d set them in a blue sky. They overlooked woods painted in gold, red, and vivid orange. A blue lake took up the foreground, the water so lifelike, it appeared to ripple.

“Thank you.” She pulled a few things out of her fridge. “I putz around with watercolors, but I haven’t taken many classes or experimented with oils yet. I went shopping yesterday. If you don’t mind, I’d like to bring a few things to your place. I don’t want to eat all your stuff.”

“You can eat whatever you want, but I understand the need for independence.”

She sent me a nod. After placing the supermarket bag of food near the door, she walked down a hall and entered the room on the left.

As tempted as I was to follow, I didn’t. I’d crowded into her life enough already. Like a deer poised in a field with a spotlight turned its way, she’d frozen. One wrong move on my part, and she’d bolt. How could I win her if I scared her away?

She returned to the living room pulling a suitcase and gave me a bright smile. “All set.”

I took her case and bag and placed them in the club cab of my truck.

“I should bring my own vehicle,” she said.

“If you’d like.” Again, I didn’t push. I wanted her riding with me. No, I wanted to be so close we could touch, but it was important that she have things of her own around.

I drove to the edge of town and up the road leading to my house, pulling down my long drive and parking beside the home I’d built myself in orc tradition.

“Whoa,” she said when she got out. Her gaze took in the view of the valley below before turning to my two-story house

with grass and wildflowers growing across the rounded top. “It’s gorgeous. It looks like something straight out of the Hobbit only modernized.”

I’d built it this way to fit in. Monsters may be a part of human’s everyday life, but they watched us, maybe worrying we’d pounce and eat them. Orcs hadn’t eaten humans in a very long time but pointing that out didn’t feel wise.

“I cut the lumber on my land and milled it myself,” I said, savoring the setting with the maple trees I’d transplanted that thrived in their new environment. Their leaves shaded my deck in the summer. After their leaves dropped in the fall, sunlight streamed through the windows across the front of the structure, providing passive heat. “I cut the sod. Planted the flowers.”

“I love the windows on the front. I bet it’s pretty inside.”

This was just the excitement I’d been hoping for but did she see herself living here too?

I hooked her bag of food over my forearm, juggling to hold it with the same arm as her case, and held out my free hand. “Why don’t I bring you inside? I’ll show you to your room, and you can get settled while I put together a meal.”

“All right.” Taking my hand, her warm gaze met mine, and the expression there made my pulse surge. She didn’t hate me. Could she come to love me? Time would tell.

I led her up the steps and to the door, across part of the big deck spanning three sides of the building.

“Do you sit out there often?” she asked, waving to the front. “I would. Even when it snowed, I’d bundle up to stay warm while savoring that view. All I’d need is cocoa, a snugly blanket, and ...”

And my arms wrapped around her. Was she thinking the same thing?

“The view is just as nice from inside,” I said. “I light a fire in the fireplace when it gets cold.”

“You’re making me long to be here for more than one week, Max.” While her voice sounded light and friendly, her eyes now contained shadows.

“Is that wrong of me to say?” I had to ask. After unlocking the back door, I opened the panel, urging her to enter ahead of me.

“I guess not,” she said carefully.

That was good enough for me.

I shut the door and placed her groceries on the granite island, taking her case down the wood-lined hall. The interior of my house also contained orc features mixed with human.

As a construction contractor, I built homes for both humans and monsters, the latter to their specifications. I’d learned a lot about human construction in the five years I’d been in business, and I’d incorporated many of the features into my home, building a blend of the best of both worlds.

My bedroom was on the second floor with a view of the valley and distant mountains, but I’d located the other two rooms on this level.

She followed me, her eyes widening as she took in the orc-made weapons mounted above the fireplace and the handmade vases I’d filled with wildflowers. Inside the room she’d use until my parents arrived, she nodded at the king-sized bed and the en suite bathroom. The other room also looked out at the view.

Turning, she grinned. “I’m going to feel spoiled after staying here even one day.”

“You deserve the best, Chastity.” Even I could hear the husky need in my voice.

She sucked in a shaky breath, and her hand lifted toward me.

Taking it, I tugged her close. She was tiny compared to me. It was a wonder we fit. But we did. We had that night.

I wanted to show her all over again.

Cupping her cheeks as gently as a big guy like me could, I tipped her face up. I leaned forward and gently kissed her.

She moaned and pressed herself against me. Her melting into me like that made me crave her even more. Even light, our kiss was incredibly hot. My cock surged upward, making demands I had no intention of giving into.

The sound must've startled her, however, because she burst away from me, breathing fast. When she traced her finger across her lips, my groan rose from deep within me.

“Okay, um,” she said. She scooted around me and out into the hall, calling behind her. “I’ll put my groceries away and ... meet you on the deck?”

Yeah, sure. The deck. I wanted to rip my claws through my hair. My cock was a steel pole in my pants. And ...

Where had my resolve not to push her gone? I needed to back off and take this slowly. Give her the time she needed to see we were meant for each other.

Then I could drag her to my bed and kiss her until she couldn't imagine anything else but being with me.

WE SAT on the deck after dinner, snifters of orc liquor in hand.

“This tastes amazing,” she said, taking a small sip. “Like apricots, but with a hint of,” a frown filled her face, “is that currants?”

“It is. Ular is a popular after dinner drink among orcs. There are regular breweries, but this was made by an old friend. He charges a fortune, but it's made with his whole heart, and you can't put a price on anything like that. I buy a few jugs every year. Drinking it reminds me of holidays growing up when my parents would let me have a tiny bit to taste.”

“They let you drink when you were a kid?” she asked with a teasing smile.

“When I was little, I could dip my finger into theirs. That was it. But after I turned sixteen, they allowed me to have some of my own, though in a much more modest sized snifter. Probably two sips, but it made me feel grown up. Special.” I grinned, remembering those times.

“What holidays do you celebrate?”

“Many. My favorite is a bit like Christmas in that we decorate a tree with lights and handmade ornaments. We feast on that special day. But we don’t do stockings, Santa, or celebrate in the way Christians do, though our hearts are still full of love and joy for each other.”

“How does your holiday differ?”

“Would you believe it’s traditional for us to take a long walk in the woods on the eve of our Fest of Nevard? Sometimes, snow crunches beneath our boots or the scent of fallen leaves fills the air. Often, the moon shines down to light our way or we take lanterns. Some orcs sing traditional songs. Other families move as quietly as possible to keep from disturbing the magic surrounding them.”

“Real magic?” she asked in awe.

I shrugged. “Odd things happen we cannot explain. I think magic is like your Santa. You either believe or you don’t.”

“The walk sounds lovely.”

“We leave treats in the woods for the creatures living there. Corn for the deer, suet and seeds for the birds, nuts for the squirrels, and tiny cakes and miniscule flasks of ular for the pixies.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth formed an O. “Pixies exist?”

“I’ll show you sometime.”

“That would be amazing. Thank you.” Her gaze trained downward. “Pixies. Who would’ve thought?” she lifted her gaze to the view. “I love the lights in the city,” she said softly. “They’re close, but it’s quiet here, like we’re all alone in the world.”

“I love the location of my office, but I can’t live there. Up here, I can still feel nature surrounding me. I need that.”

“I think I do too. I feel a peace here I haven’t experienced before.”

“You moved from a city. What brings you to this part of the country?”

She shot me a smile. “The job you offered.”

“But why *here*?”

Turning her head toward the view, she shrugged. “I needed a change, and I saw your post online. The job sounded like a good fit, and I wanted to see what it was like to live in a town that saw snow every winter. I drove to the mountains once and couldn’t believe how white it was. How much of it covered everything. But I haven’t seen it falling yet.”

“It’s cold.”

Her soft laugh rang out. “I discovered that when I stuffed my hand into a pile of it.”

“You’re going to love it here. There are so many things you can do in the winter, like sledding and cross-country skiing.” If things worked out between us, I could take her for walks on the trails I’d cut on my property around my house.

“Skiing sounds amazing.”

“We’ll bundle you up. There’s something magical about the crisp air and the silence of the world around you, broken only by the squeak of your skis across the snow.”

“I’m going to try it,” she said fiercely.

“I love your enthusiasm.”

“I’ve held myself back for too long, but now I’ve set myself free.”

“What do you mean by holding yourself back?”

She didn’t speak for a while, and I worried I’d asked the wrong question. “Most of my life has been spent just trying to stay afloat. I’d barely pay the rent and then a new bill would

pop up. When I took this job, I decided it was time to enjoy every second without obsessing about the things I needed to do to stay alive.”

Had her life been that hard?

“I might even try hang gliding someday,” she said. “Hiking. Snowshoeing. Deep sea diving. And now I’ve added sledding, cross-country skiing, and leaving cakes for pixies to the list. I’m going to let down my hair and spring into the moment, instead of analyzing what might be waiting to trip me up on the other side.”

“That sounds like the perfect way to bring joy into your life.”

“A person can find joy in doing the things that need to get done, like cleaning your house, going to work, and making meals, but unless you stretch your soul, the rest starts to feel like drudgery. It’s all about balance.”

“I’ve never thought of it like that, but you’re right.”

“What about you?” she asked. “Do you stretch your soul?”

“I can see right now that I don’t do it enough.” I wanted to do it with her. To jump off a cliff into the sea, to have her teach me how to paint with watercolors, and to run a 4k. Her comments made me realize it was past time I stretched my boundaries and found fun ways to balance the things I had to do but didn’t always enjoy.

A long swallow finished her ular.

I held up the jug. “More?”

“No thanks.” She stifled a yawn. “Sorry. I’m enjoying hanging out with you, but I guess I’m tired. First days can be stressful, and I’ve been up late each night getting things settled in my apartment.”

“I hope you didn’t feel overwhelmed today,” I said.

“Actually, no. I appreciate you making a list of tasks and explaining everything to me. I’ll tackle the rest of the list tomorrow.”

“You have plenty of time. Some of the things don’t need to be completed for weeks.”

“Can you tell me something?”


“Sure.” I watched her in the dim light. I’d left only one lamp on in the living room, so the light didn’t block out the stars, but that only made it hard to read her expressions.

“Why don’t you already have a date for the Valentine’s Picnic?”

CHAPTER 7

CHASTITY





He looked down at his snifter glass that still held liquor, and I sensed he was hesitating to answer.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s none of my business.”

“But it is, to some extent.” He looked up, his eyes darkened with emotion.

Seeing the intensity in his expression should scare me. I was on the rebound from a crappy relationship, and the last thing I should do was fall into another. But it felt different with Max and not just because we’d already slept together.

He brought warmth to my life, like he was a big teddy bear I could curl up with. Even more than that, he’d brought passion. I’d never been so bold as I was that night, as if someone completely different stepped into my skin.

I wanted to be that Chastity all the time. That woman went hang gliding. She jumped on a sled with a guy and barreled down a steep hill.

She took his hand and dragged him to bed.

“It’s not just these.” He held up his wrists so I could see the symbols in the muted light spilling from inside the house. “I like you. I enjoyed that night with you. In all honesty, I want more of that, not someone else. Dating feels ... pointless now.”

I leaned toward him before I realized what I was doing. Over the past weeks, I couldn’t think of much else but that night with Max. We had fun together, and not just in bed. At the bar, I felt like we had communicated on a new level.

The warmth and heat I’d found with him had sunk into my soul.

Maybe stretching my soul should include Max.

I traced my finger along the symbol entwining around his right wrist, and he watched, saying nothing. I sensed he was

letting me guide this.

“I should be scared,” I said. “This feels sudden. Yet strong.” I looked up at him, knowing my vulnerability must be shining on my face. “But I’m not scared.”

“Chastity,” he groaned.

He tugged me onto his lap and held me. Some guys would push for a kiss or more, but he didn’t. He kept me warm as the moon rose overhead. Fulfilling a wish I’d made earlier, as if his sole role in life was to make me happy.

And that was when I realized we were not only lovers, but we were also becoming friends.

I WOKE to my phone alarm and showered, dressing for my second day at work, humming while I did it.

For the first time in forever, I felt content, and I knew why.

Max. He’d stepped into my life like a hurricane, but I was finding I enjoyed riding his turbulent waves.

“Would you like to stop for a breakfast sandwich and coffee on the way to work?” Max asked as he drove down the mountain and headed into town.

“Give me all the coffee,” I joked. Heat flooding up from my chest made my cheeks ache.

He pulled into the coffee shop, and we got out of his truck and went inside.

“I’m going to run to the ...” I waved to the hall to the right.

“What can I get you?” he asked.

I frowned at the menu hanging above the counter. “How about a blueberry muffin and ... a medium French vanilla iced coffee with cream. Oh, they can top it with whipped cream.”

“You like whipped cream.” He said it with complete seriousness, but that look in his dark eyes ...

Swoon.

We were faking being married to please his mom, but I was beginning to believe there was so much more to me and him than just pretend.

“I love whipped cream,” I said coyly over my shoulder. “Maybe we should pick up a few cans on our way home.”

When I came out of the bathroom, three chatting women blocked the end of the hall.

“You ask him,” one of them whispered as I walked up behind them.

“No, you!” the other said. “He’s just so ...”

“Tall.”

“Gorgeous.”

“Mega-muscled.”

Easing around them, I wondered who they were talking about. Was there a celebrity in our midst?

Their attention was locked on Max standing at the counter.

I stalled, a grin rising on my face. They were right. Max was tall, gorgeous, and muscular. Even more than that, he was a sweet guy. Someone I could love.

“He’s hot, isn’t he?” I said quietly, joining in on their ogling.

One of the women snorted. “Like he’d pay any attention to you?”

Gee, thanks. I wasn’t model-perfect, but I knew I looked good. I stiffened my spine, not wanting to slip back into the cringe mode I’d experienced one too many times while growing up in foster homes. Too often, I had pretty “sisters”. Most were nice, but too often, I’d felt awkward. Boring. Unappealing when standing next to them.

Like now. Ugh.

“Jeez, Bridgette,” one of them said, sending me a sympathetic look. “You don’t need to be mean.”

Giving her a nod, I cleared my throat. “He’s actually—”

“Boundaries,” the brunette said, glaring at me. “Find some, would ya?”

The nice one sighed; her lips thinning.

Mean girl grinned. “I’m going to go ask for his number. Watch me score, ladies.” She sauntered across the room, wiggling her ass.

I grumbled, following.

Max’s eyes skimmed right past her, lighting up when they saw me, which made me feel infinitely better.

“I’m Bridgette,” the brunette said, thrusting her phone toward *my* mate. “I’ve never sexted before.” She glided her free hand across his tattoos, tweaking the mating symbol on his wrist. “If you give me your number, I’ll let you teach me.”

Funny how jealousy could sharpen my floundering emotions. His mating symbols were there because he’d met me. Only *I* was allowed to touch them. Could I get away with yanking her hair out of her head?

A growl ripped up my throat.

Brunette rolled her eyes my way before simpering at Max.

“Sorry,” he said, though he didn’t sound upset. “I’m taken.”

My heart soared, and I swore I lifted at least a foot off the ground.

“Your coffees, sir,” the barista said, holding two drinks out to Max.

“Thanks.” He moved around Bridgette, handing one to me. Leaning over, he gave me a heady kiss.

Pure joy flooded my veins.

“Is this enough whipped cream, sweetheart?” he asked, totally ignoring Bridgette sputtering beside me. Her cheeks

flamed, and she shot me a glare that should've knocked me against the wall, before flouncing over to join her friends waiting by the front door.

"It'll do for a start," I told him. I curled my arm through his, making sure to touch his mating marks.

We started toward the door.

The symbols sparkled, and my ovaries pretty much burst into flames.

As we walked past the women, the nice one leaned close, whispering, "You go, girl. You go."

I WAS IN BIG TROUBLE. Orc trouble. We were practicing being married to make his mother happy, but even pretending to be married to Max was making *me* even happier.

Feelings I'd never experienced before washed across my skin, sinking down into my soul.

As he drove his truck to the office, my brain ping-ponged around while I tried to decide what all of this might mean.

This is what I got for letting my heart into the equation. If I wasn't careful, I could get burned.

Would I blow it by asking him how he felt? Maybe. He could state this really was just pretend and that would crush me.

"Don't rush," I whispered.

"Did you say something, sweetheart?" he asked, glancing my way before returning his eyes to the road.

See, this was part of the problem. Whenever he called me sweetheart, my heart exploded. I liked it. Loved ... not love, right? I *liked* him. I couldn't be in love with him yet.

That was why I was going to wait and see how this went. We had the rest of the week and the party, and I could work on

him during that time. When the week was over, I might've drummed up enough guts to ask him to share his feelings.

Did I dare take a chance on another guy already? Rejection hurt, and I sensed Max turning me down would be much more devastating than my ex.

I didn't have to decide anything yet.

As he pulled into the parking lot, I tugged off the cover of my drink and licked the whipped cream.

The truck hit a rough stretch of road and jounced, and my chin dipped into the whipped cream.

While I fumbled for a napkin, he parked his truck and turned my way. "Allow me." He carefully licked the whipped cream off my chin.


I shivered and closed my eyes, savoring this simple touch.

See? *Big* orc trouble.

CHAPTER 8

MAX





A female voice broke through my thoughts. “What are you working on?”

I looked up to find Chastity standing in the open doorway of my office.

“I’m putting together a bid for a new development going in on the south side of town. A job this size is a big jump for me. I’ll have to hire more crew, but it’s a chance to take my business to a new level.” I growled as I stared at the pages with long rows of numbers. “I can’t say that I enjoy this part of the job as much as construction.”

She stepped inside and dragged her chair around to sit beside me. Taking a few sheets of paper off the desk, she looked through the columns. “You’ve got twenty-two employees. This project looks huge.”

“Twelve houses. All done on speculation and over six months. As you’ve noted, I’ll need to hire more crew. The bank has already qualified me for the loan I’ll need to get started. With the housing shortage, these places will go fast, and that’ll help me make payments on the loan. The vampire developer hopes to draw more monsters to town, so these houses are designed to fit both humans and monsters.”

“Like your house?”

“Exactly.”

“How many monsters would you say have settled in town already?”

“A couple hundred.”

“Not many yet.” She smiled. “I imagine plenty would love to live in such a pretty part of the world.”

“There’s been some kickback to monster settlement.”

“Discrimination sucks, and it has no place in a decent society. Have you dealt with much of it?”

“Few seem eager to challenge an orc. To challenge many of us, actually. I’m sure a hefty dose of fear holds them back.” I grinned her way. “Would you stride up to a vampire or gargoyle and tell them they weren’t welcome here?”

“Not me.” Her smile met mine. “Our lives are better now that you’ve joined us. I still can’t believe all of you remained hidden.”

“Orcs had their own communities hidden by fae magic. While some monsters appear human and have blended in for ages, most of us are ...” I waved to my green skin and enormous size. “Our lives ran parallel to yours, and we tapped into many human cultural aspects, like television and cell phones.”

“That’s why your house looks like something a human would build, yet different.”

“I hope you feel comfortable there.”

“It’s amazing. I love all the unique features. Wherever I look, I see things that shout out your orc heritage. But at the same time, it feels comfortable, like I could live in a home like that for the rest of my life.”

Her excitement made my chest tighten. “I didn’t incorporate anywhere near as many orc features as my dad would like. He’s very much into maintaining tradition.”

“What you included feels like the right touch to me.”

“I built mine to blend in yet still feel familiar. When I first moved here and started my business, I wanted to fit in.” I shrugged. “I don’t care as much about that now that I’m part of the community. Our appearance makes it clear we’re not human with every interaction, and most welcome the skills we have to offer.”

“What other parts of orc culture are different from humans’?” Taking a pencil, she jotted a few notes on one of the papers related to the development

I leaned close but couldn’t quite see what she was writing. “Most aren’t necessarily visible. Like most monsters, we behave differently. Some species eat unusual foods or raise

their young naked and in the wild. And the mating rituals of gargoyles would make your eyebrows shoot up.”

Her head tilted. “What do they do?”

“Well, they have wings.”

She frowned. “Okay. Are you suggesting they have sex while they fly?”

I grinned. “Yes, but that’s not all.”

A teasing light filled her eyes. “This almost makes me want to meet up with a gargoyle.”

“There are a few in town. Goreg’s in construction as well. He’s a great guy. Quiet, but I find that soothing. Orcs can be boisterous.”

“It’s a cliché, but do gargoyles lurk on the tops of buildings?”

“Some do.”

“I always thought gargoyles were made of stone,” she said. “That they were a myth.”

“That’s what they want you to think. The ones I know have leathery skin in an amazing dusky blue. He once told me gargoyles love looming over those below around Halloween. They release low moans to spook the kids. It gives them a laugh.”

“I feel like magic came into our lives when all of you came forward and announced you were ready to mingle with humans.”

“Magic reinforces the veil between the human world and the elf kingdoms. *They* aren’t as eager to settle here.”

“Why not?”

“Their magic doesn’t work as well here; it’s glitchy. The elves living here had to learn how to do things by hand rather than flicking a finger to ensure a task is done.”

“Sucks to be them.”

I laughed. “I’ve never had magic, but I imagine it had provided a unique challenge.”

“How are orcs different from humans?”

They mated for life, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. “We have green skin and we’re really big.”

“I can see that, but that’s just your surface.” Her head tilted. “How are you different inside, Max?”

We loved for life. I couldn’t mention that either.

“We’re fiercely protective,” I said.

She gave me a pert nod. “An admirable trait.”

“Unless we’re crushing skulls.”

Her eyes widened. “Have you crushed any skulls?”

“Not on purpose.”

Her laugh burst out. “You’re teasing me, aren’t you?”

Mostly. “We don’t anger easily, but when we’re furious, watch out.”

“I can’t see you ever hurting someone. You’re gentle.”

“Sometimes, gentleness can be a façade.”

She shook her head, and I liked that she’d left her hair down to sway along her back in a rich, brown waterfall. I wanted to bury my nose in it and suck in the scent. Then drag my tusks across the sensitive skin on her nape.

“You’ve always been kind to me. Even that night.” She gripped my arm, and my skin twitched. The symbols sparkled before settling down to a low simmer. My cock had other ideas, and jutted upward.

“I’d never hurt you, Chastity,” I said.

“You wouldn’t hurt anyone.” Her fingers stroked my skin, and it lit on fire.

I shifted in my chair, turning so my knees pointed away from her. She didn’t need to see my raw need. The chemicals surging through my veins were getting harder to deny, but I’d

fight them rather than let them control me like they had my ancestors.

When she was ready—and if she decided she wanted to be my mate—I could release my need. I’d love her for weeks if she let me.

“Have you thought about doing this?” She pointed to what she’d written on the paper.

I welcomed the distraction. Otherwise, I’d be tempted to tug her into my lap and claim her mouth.

Taking the paper, I turned it my way to study what she’d written.

I frowned.

“You don’t like the idea,” she said with a sigh, removing her hand from my arm.

I missed her touch already. “I love it. Why didn’t I think of that?”

She gave me the sweetest smile. It made me want to kiss her, hug her, and get down on my knees and beg her to remain in my life.

“Thank you,” I said. “Bidding is one of my least favorite parts of the job.”

“I’d be glad to help you. We can call it part of the *other duties as assigned*.”

“Well,” I said. “There’s another job I was thinking of bidding on ...”

After I’d explained and she’d offered input, she returned to her office.

I continued to work on my bid, things going much faster after her suggestions.

It wasn’t hard to picture us running this company side-by-side before going home together at the end of the day.

When the sun hovered above the horizon, I tidied up my desk and headed down to her office, finding her studiously

working on her computer, squinting through her glasses.

I strolled around her desk and leaned over her, watching what she was doing. I wasn't lurking. I wasn't hovering over her to make her feel uncomfortable. I just couldn't stay away.

"Are you ready to leave?" she asked, leaning back and tugging off her glasses. She blinked up at me, and I was reminded all over again how beautiful her eyes were. But with those glasses ...

"Yes. How about you?" I struggled to sound normal.

"Almost, but I'll finish this tomorrow." She shut off her computer.

We locked up the building and climbed into my truck.

"Does your mother like flowers?" she asked as I pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road.

"I guess so."

Her laugh rang out. "You don't know? Didn't you bring her some when you were a little kid?"

I tried to remember. "Maybe."

"How about candies?"

"Speaking of which, the chocolates you gave me tasted amazing."

"My friend, Violet, worked at a candy store in my old city. When I stopped by to visit her, I picked them out." Her face darkened to a pretty color. "I wanted to give you something in thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"You offered me a job solely from my resume. Not many would do that."

"Your references checked out," I said defensively. What she looked like didn't matter. Still didn't. I was falling in love with the person that shone from her inside.

"It meant a lot to me."

“Sadly, I haven’t yet given my mom chocolates. Orcs don’t usually do things like that for their moms.”

“What do they do instead?”

“Males learn a dance from the time they’re young. They practice it with their mothers.”

“Oh! Like a dance you’d give as a gift?”

Like a dance we’d do for a mate. “Sort of.”

I turned my vehicle onto the road weaving up the mountain.

“I mentioned before we have TVs,” I said. “We picked up human programming and as a kid, I stared at the shows in awe. I couldn’t believe anyone lived like that.”

“Most don’t,” she said. “I assume you mean sitcoms and dramas.”

“My mom loved soap operas.”

“Really? That’s cute.”

“On one of the shows, a kid tried to make food with dirt for their mom, so I did the same.”

She shot me a grin. “Did she eat it?”

“No,” I said as I pulled up to my house and shut off my truck. “And I was quite put out. I expected her to taste each nugget.”

“Boys.”

“Boys,” I agreed.

We went inside.

“I’m going to go get changed,” she said, waving her fingers at the dark blue dress she’d worn today with heels that made her legs pop. Her appearance was only topped by how she’d dressed that night in edible undies, heels, and nothing else.

A polite guy would offer to help her get out of her dress. Or a guy with a dirty mind like me.

I bit back the words.

She went down the hall and I took the stairs two at a time, tossing aside my jacket and unbuttoning my shirt.

“Hey, Max?” she called out from below. “Can you help me for a second?”

I barreled back down the stairs, finding her inside her room, twisting around while trying to unzip the back of her dress.

So she did need help. I wasn't that dirty-minded.

Back in the hotel, I'd undone her dress with my tusks, savoring the whirring sound as the fabric parted, revealing her delectable skin. She'd sighed when I kissed her spine and the curves at the top of her ass.

My cock saluted, stating it was ready to follow any and all commands. *At ease*, I tried to tell it, but it ignored me. Damn thing was going AWOL.

“Glad to help,” I said in a husky voice.

I pinched the tiny zipper pull between my finger and thumb claw and tugged it up, freeing it from the snagged fabric, then eased it down carefully. Her dress parted and shrugged forward across her chest.

Unable to resist, I stroked a claw up her naked spine.

She moaned, and her head tipped back, the silky tips of her hair teasing across the back of my hand.

I turned her and held her face gently, determined never to hurt her. My mate. She was precious to me in every way.

Leaning forward, I slanted my mouth across hers. She pressed herself against me, her fingers pushing aside my shirt to roam across my chest.

It was just a simple kiss. Another taste of what she'd missed out on that morning. But before I could lift her and press her against the wall, a voice rang out from the kitchen.

“Maxon? Where are you, honey?” my mother called. “And where's my daughter-in-law? We came early. I hope you don't

mind!”

CHAPTER 9

CHASTITY



I eased away from Max. OMG his mom was here. I felt like a teenager caught by a teacher while making out behind the high school bleachers with a hot guy.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “She told me she wasn’t coming until tomorrow.”

“Maxon? Honey, where are you? Your truck is in the drive, and I assume the other vehicle belongs to my lovely new daughter. Where are you two hiding?” Laughter rang out in her voice. “BB, do you think we interrupted them at an inopportune moment?” A few claps rang out. “Let’s go sit on the deck and pretend we don’t hear them making babies.” Her voice rose. “You’re making a grandchild for me, right, Maxon? Get to it.” Her laughter trilled out again.

Heat flooded my face, and I gaped at Max. “We’re in trouble.”

He winced. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” I laid my hand on his forearm, savoring his muscles when I should be focusing on anything other than how attracted I was to him.

He’d removed his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves again, and at our touch, the symbols on my wrists flared before settling back to a low simmer, a little too close to the feelings flooding my body. It waited, eager to feel his touch once again.

“Let’s go ... open a bottle of wine and take it out to the deck,” I said. “I promise I’ll make this okay for you.”

He sucked in a breath and released it, his gaze locked on mine. “Thank you. I owe you.”

“For what?”

“Not being mad.”

“It’s beyond your control. Mine too.” I shimmied out of my dress and tugged on pants and a dressier top before starting toward the open doorway. “Why would I be mad at you for something you might be eager to avoid?”

He caught my arm and turned me to face him. “Never believe for a second that I want to avoid you.” He lifted his hands. “These tell me you’re a special part of my life, but even without them, I’d still know you. There’s something ...”

So much of me wanted him to finish the thought, but we barely knew each other. He couldn’t be falling for me already.

He swallowed hard. “I’ll back off if you insist, but know right now that I want you, and I fight dirty.”

Talk about taking the gloves off and laying them on the table.

I should remind him I was here to get to know him, that he’d said his bed was so big neither of us would realize the other was there.

Instead, my mouth watered and flares shot through my veins, the rush centering between my legs.


My heart pattered, and everything inside me told me to melt against his muscular frame.

No, I wanted to drag him to his bedroom and get busy making babies.

CHAPTER 10

MAX





From the way Chastity scooted from the room as if a pack of wolves had caught her scent, I got the idea I'd stepped beyond the boundaries. I couldn't help it. I'd intended a simple kiss, but what started out as sweet and—almost—friendly on my part had quickly ignited my bones.

Her moan did me in.

So, I spilled my plan, dropping it into her palms. Would she clench her hands into fists and crush my heart or gently stroke it?

As I followed her out to the kitchen, I told myself to back down, to give her the time I'd promised.

My cock told me it had a few ideas that might help convince her.

I pulled a big bottle of orc brew from the fridge and placed it and four living glasses—tular moovens in orc language—on a tray. I was tempted to send Chastity outside with them while I gained control of my rigid cock, but that would be unfair.

Mom was the loveliest woman I'd ever known, but she rushed into things with the force of a tsunami. She'd sweep Chastity up, and my wife wouldn't know what hit her.

Wife. I shouldn't call her that other than when I was in my parent's company. This was just pretend to make Mom happy.

But the name skated through my veins. I didn't need to look down to know my mate symbols were flaring. The markings would sink deeply while a chemical reaction continued to work on my body. I'd crave my mate unlike any other. Orcs were prolific and not only because we enjoyed sex. The chemical reactions in our bodies were triggered when we found our fated mate. It made us eager to plant our seed in our mate's welcoming body.

Orc females reacted in the same way, and it wasn't unheard of for a newly mated pair to screw almost

continuously until the seed had taken hold. I'd never heard of a human showing mating symbols on her wrists. Would Chastity's body generate the same lust-filled chemicals to make her ache to be with me?

It was something to talk about later. If I let my brain continue with this track, I'd only feed the release of the chemicals, and my cock would be erect for the entire night.

Despite my mother's wish for grandchildren, I wasn't going to let her see something like that. Pants could only hide so much. I'd need orc leather pants to compress my cock.

"I should've asked before getting dressed," Chastity whispered, looking down at her pants and blouse. "But does what I'm wearing look okay, or should I change into something nicer?"

"Feel welcome to wear whatever you'd like. My mom isn't one for being formal."

Her frown deepening, she studied my face. "Are you okay? You look flushed. Worried. I promise I won't mess this up. I'll do my best to convince her we're a couple. She sounds sweet." Nibbling on her lower lip, she shot a glance toward the deck where my parents sat. "I don't want to hurt her."

Her thoughtfulness made me care for her even more. Despite being uncomfortable with the situation, she wanted to please a woman she didn't even know.

I was lost, and I had no interest in being found. As long as I could hold Chastity's hand, I'd take whatever path she chose.

"I'm okay." I'd tame my cock and behave. No making demands. I'd be soft and pleasing and maybe, just maybe, Chastity would want me. "I'm sorry, but we'll have to put your things in my room tonight instead of tomorrow."

"I thought so." She rubbed my arm. "Go be with your parents." Her warm smile made my skin overheat. "I'll take care of my stuff. They won't even know I was in that room. Everything's going to be okay."

While she hurried down the hall to the bedroom, I added a block of kubar and a bowl of drisps—orc crackers and cheese

—and a knife to the tray, then took it outside.

“There you are, honey,” Mom said, rising from her deck chair. She rushed to me, taking the tray and putting it on the table. Returning to stand in front of me, she curled her finger with a cheery smile stretching her pretty face. “Kisses. I need kisses from my youngling.”

“I’m no youngling, Mom,” I said gruffly, though I obliged her by bending forward to give her a kiss on her cheek. And because I loved her and I’d been scared to death the entire time she was sick, I lifted her up and gave her a big hug.

Dad came over to stand with us, though he didn’t say anything. Always waiting to assess the situation, reserving judgment. Eventually, he gave me a curt nod.

“There’s my youngling,” Mom said, patting my back. “So big and strong.” On her feet again, she peered around me. “Where’s my new daughter? And what’s her name? You ignored me when I asked during my call.”

Because I hadn’t known her name. “Chastity Jones.”

“That’s such a lovely name.”

“She took a job working with me.”

“Wonderful! You need someone to help you in the office, and I imagine there’s nothing better than working side-by-side with your mate.”

I couldn’t stop grinning. It had been just over six months since she finished treatment, and Mom looked great. Healthy with a nice rosy gleam to her green cheeks. She’d regained some weight. Growing up, she’d been nicely rounded. I used to love to press my face into her squishy belly. She’d lost weight when she was sick, and while appearance meant nothing compared to having your mom in your life, I was grateful to see her looking more like herself.

“You know I’m open to anyone who brings joy to my youngling’s life,” she said. “I was just telling BB that.”

My dad’s name was Brebock, but she’d always called him BB.

“How are you, Dad?” I asked, wanting to give him a hug too but holding myself back as always. Growing up, my parents were polar opposites. Mom, demonstrative. Dad, almost cold. It pinched that he never showed warmth, but there didn’t seem to be anything I could do about it. “How are Felice and Jenny?”

“Your sisters are doing well,” he said. “Both getting straight A’s in college, as they should.”

Yes, yes. They wouldn’t want to disappoint him with a B, now, would they?

“I need to give them a call,” I said.

Mom nodded pertly. “Yes, you do. You said Chastity’s last name is Jones? Not Zahgorim?” Her brow furrowed but quickly smoothed. “No, I understand. She’s a modern female. It’s only right that she keeps her own name.”

“Our mating was rather sudden,” I said. “We haven’t discussed names yet. Maybe I’ll take hers instead.”

My father sucked in a breath. “She should be proud to take our name,” he said sharply. “Zahgorim is a solid name. One that represents an esteemed family.”

Dad was a descendent of an orc king, as he was quick to tell everyone he met. While the throne had long since been set aside, he made sure everyone around him knew his bloodline was better than theirs. It made me cringe when I was young. Now, I was just resigned. Some people changed as they aged, while others let their prior behavior create deep grooves they never escaped.

His gaze traveled past me, and I didn’t need to turn to know that Chastity had come outside. His growing scowl gave him away, and his grunt of disgust soon followed.

I glared, but he wasn’t looking at me.

Mom tugged on his shirt, but he wasn’t paying any attention to her, either.

I stepped back, making room in our small circle to include my mate.

When she walked up beside me, I put my arm around her, tugging her close. “This is my mate, Chastity,” I said proudly, beaming. “And these are my parents.”

“How dare you?” my father growled. “This is not an orc with an illustrious bloodline. This ... This is a damn human!”

CHAPTER II

CHASTITY



[REDACTED]

Things were going well already—not.

It appeared I'd offended Max's dad just by existing. No, not by existing, but because I wasn't of their species. I was a "damn" human.

I'd grown up in foster care from the time I was three, so I barely knew what my roots were. But they didn't contain orc blood.

"Now, BB," Max's mom said, tugging on his sleeve. "Don't be like that."

With a little distance between us, my spine would stop twitching. I didn't think he'd attack me, though I suspected from his clenched fists that if this was a time in their orc past, he might be quite willing to take this to a physical level.

Ugh. I'd told Max not to worry, that this would work out fine. Now one of his parents hated me. Well, maybe both of them. The jury was still out about his mom.

"I'm Ulgritte," she said, rushing forward to engulf me, dispelling that notion right away. "My husband is Brebock, but I'm sure you can call him BB like me."

He grunted, leading me to believe I'd fare better calling him Mr. Zahgorim.

I'd only met a few orcs over the past few years, and she was smaller than them, though she was still a head taller than my five-seven.

Max towered only a few inches over his dad, though the males were equally burly.

"It's so nice to meet you," Ulgritte said, leaning back in my embrace, dimpling me a smile. "Delightful."

"Thank you." My pulse eased to see only excitement in her eyes. "I'm happy to meet you too." My voice came out limp, and I didn't like it. Sure, this was a fake marriage—other than

that heady kiss we'd just shared—but I was determined to make sure Max's parents didn't suspect we'd only recently met.

“Brew?” Max asked me, lifting a bottle of pale golden liquid.

Yes, yes, please. Could I chug all of it in one gulp?

I nodded while his mother bustled over to open the bottle and pour dark liquid into wooden mugs that almost appeared to quiver, though I had to be mistaken.

His father's glare deepened, and he made sure to include his son in his heavy look. “How could you breed with that?” he spat.

Really needed that brew. Now.

Max's growl rumbled in his chest, and birds that had been chirping merrily nearby went silent. “She's my mate. My wife. You will give her the respect she deserves.”

Brebock had enough sense to look embarrassed. He said nothing, shoring up his spine with a huff. He turned to his wife, who was lifting mugs of brew to hand out to us.

I pinched my eyes shut for a second and pushed down the sadness coating the back of my throat. Sure, this might be a short marriage, but it would've been nice to be welcomed by both of his parents. Mine were dead, and I'd always hoped the parents of whoever I ended up with liked me.

“Here you go, honey,” Ulgritte said, handing me a mug. “Ignore my husband. He's got a stick up his ass. I'll pull it out later and beat him with it if you'd like.”

My laugh snorted out, and I was grateful her pretty dark eyes twinkled. Maybe one parent would be enough.

The moment my fingers tightened around the wooden mug, however, it squealed.

I shrieked and dropped it, and it plunked on the deck. Somehow, the glass didn't break or spill, but the cup ... I rubbed my eyes. I had to be imagining things.

The cup sprouted legs and scurried to the side of the deck, leaping off onto the lawn below.

“See?” Mr. Zahgorim shouted. “She isn’t an orc, and she will never understand our ways.”

This was going to be a very long week.

CHAPTER 12

MAX



I wanted to kill my father or banish him to the farthest reaches of the Earth. And I wanted to gather Chastity in my arms and hold her. Tell her it was going to be okay. That my mom would more than make up for my father's deficiencies.

I took her hand, and she looked up at me gratefully, something that made my heart clench tight. This was my home. She was welcome here, even if she wasn't my mate.

My father? Right now, he wasn't welcome at all.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I should've explained about the brew and the tular moovens."

Her brow knit. "Tular ..."

"The glasses. We use them only for special occasions like tonight. They keep the brew at the perfect temperature."

"They're alive?"

"More or less. They're crafted from fallen trees in a fae forest—with their permission, of course. They're quite collectable, rare."

Her face fell. "And I let mine escape."

"It won't go far before it'll stop to drink the brew. Drunk, it'll sleep off the effect, and I'll retrieve it in the morning."

"Living cups are kinda cool."

I was glad she sounded relieved and not too upset. As for my father, I glowered his way, but all he did was huff.

"Let's have a seat, shall we?" I said, tugging her over to a wooden chaise lounge with a thick, squishy cushion. I sat and urged her to settle on top of me.

Her eyes widened, but she dropped onto my lap.

When I offered her my mug, she stared at it for a long moment before carefully taking it. Its limbs projected out and curled around her fingers, but she barely flinched. She took a

long sip and gave me back my tular mooven, which I set on a nearby table.

I wrapped her up in my arms and leaned close to her ear. “Ignore my dad. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

She gave me a sharp nod and leaned back against my chest.

“They’re so cute together,” Mom said, beaming. “Don’t you think so, BB?” When he didn’t say anything, she elbowed him in the side, making no effort to hide the poke.

He grunted, drained his brew, and refilled the mug before dropping into an Adirondack chair on the opposite side of the deck. He stared toward the valley, his jaw harder than granite.

Mom settled near us. “Tell me about how you two met.” Her grin took us in. “Was it romantic, funny, or just ordinary, like you fought over a bag of carrots at the supermarket?”

Chastity froze, and her swallow seemed to get stuck in her throat, generating a cough.

“We met at a hockey game,” I said, stroking her thigh. The gesture was solely for me, not to convince my mom we were together. “When she sat beside me, that was all it took.”

“Look, BB,” Mom cried, pointing. “She has mating symbols too!” Leaning forward, she gushed. “I’ve never heard of humans having them, but I’m delighted for you both. And don’t worry about us.”

“Worry?” Chastity asked, her gaze shooting to my father. “I’m sure there’s nothing to be concerned about.”

“I meant the reaction roaring through your body,” Mom said. Her warm gaze took in my dad, and for the thousandth time in my life, I was amazed that she cared so much for him. Sure, they were fated; their matching symbols appeared the first time they met. But he was cranky all the time. Did he hide a secret warmth he only shared with her? He must because she still loved him. “I remember back then like it was this moment. So much fire. I couldn’t keep my hands off him.”

“That’s um, sweet,” Chastity said. I felt her relax in my arms. “What reaction are you talking about?”

“The mating surge.” My mom laughed. “It’s quite something, isn’t it?”

“What mating surge?” Chastity asked, leaning away from me to gaze up at my face. “Is there something else you haven’t shared with me yet?”

My father rose and stalked over to loom over us, directing most of his scowl at Chastity. “Are you saying you do not feel mating lust for my son?”

“Um.” Chastity’s hands floundered before clutching my forearms. “I, um ...”

“Perhaps she *isn’t* feeling it, BB,” Mom said. She gave Chastity a soft look. “When orcs meet their fated mates, symbols appear on their wrists. But that’s not all that happens. A chemical is released within them that ensures procreation.”

“Procreation,” Chastity said dully. “Like some kind of aphrodisiac? I don’t think I ...” She shook her head. “I like Max. I ... Sure, I,” her eyes pinched shut before opening, though she looked everywhere but at me, “I feel a lot of lust for Max.”

I’d explain this later when my parents weren’t around.

Mom clutched my father’s hand. “Oh, dear. If she’s not surging, this could be a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Chastity asked shrilly.

“Why don’t I make dinner?” I announced in the silence that followed. “I have some steaks in the fridge I can grill.”

“Why grill them when meat is best raw?” my father asked.

Chastity’s eyes widened. “I don’t mind rare but ... Tell you what. I’ll just stick with the side dishes tonight.”

“We’ll cook them,” I said firmly. “Mom, maybe you’ll wash some potatoes to throw onto the coals. Dad, why don’t you grab the bag of carrots from the crisper drawer and put them in a pot to boil?”

“I don’t like cooked carrots,” he said grimly. His gaze dropped on Chastity like a cast iron weight, and his meaning came through loud and clear.

He didn’t like Chastity any more than he liked cooked carrots.

“That sounds wonderful, honey,” Mom said. “Doesn’t it BB?” She elbowed him again, but he didn’t budge an inch. “We can make dinner together once we’ve finished our brew and had a few snacks. There’s no rush, now is there?”

“No,” I said, sagging back against the chair. I was a boulder rolling down a hill and nothing was going to keep me from smacking into the cliff at the base.

“Perfect,” Mom said, dragging a chair close to ours and sitting. She took Chastity’s hand and flipped it back and forth, studying the mating marks.

I wanted to kiss them. Lick them. When they appeared in my office, fire roared through me. The primal part of my soul I kept on a tight leash went feral. *Mine*.

Perhaps I wasn’t as domesticated as I’d assumed. Orcs used to be quite vicious, rampaging through human villages. Some of my people would still be behaving this way if our rulers hadn’t seen that rampaging resulted in us being hunted and told us to stop. Now, with a treaty between monsters and humans, everyone had to behave and do their best to fit in, though no one expected us to ignore our own customs. We just couldn’t impose them on others.

Mom’s gaze met mine. “We should do a ceremony as soon as possible.”

“Mom,” I said in warning. Could she give me ten minutes to discuss what this meant with my wife before plunging her into the ceremonial waters?

“How can you deepen your bond, let alone impregnate her, if she doesn’t share the mating lust?” Mom asked.

“She’s human,” my father said, his hand tightening on Mom’s shoulder. “We can’t expect her to behave like an orc.” For one second, I was grateful for his intervention. My

gratitude fled fast. “I doubt her inferior form is capable of generating even a drop of lust, no matter how many ceremonies you conduct.”

In that he was wrong. My memory of our night together made that completely clear.

“This is between me and Chastity,” I said, rubbing her back. “When orcs find their fated mates, they release a chemical inside that makes them ...”

“Horny,” Chastity said. Her gaze met mine, but I couldn’t read her emotions. Was she remembering the kiss we’d just shared and our night together when we hadn’t been able to get enough of each other? We hadn’t had the symbols then. That had been pure us. “I’m sure this ... lust will kick in soon,” she said.


“You’re human,” Dad said in disgust, turning away. “Deficient.” He strode to the rail and leaned against it. “Get used to the idea of not having grandyounglings, Ulgritte.”

Mom scowled at his back. “They’re fated. Of course she’ll feel overwhelming lust for Maxon.” She tapped Chastity’s arm. “Don’t worry one bit, honey. We’ll do the ceremony, and then you won’t be able to keep your hands off my son.”

CHAPTER 13

CHASTITY





Mating lust, huh? If they meant the overwhelming urge to climb Max, spread my legs wide around his waist, and beg him to claim me, that feeling was already churning inside me. But I sensed there was something else to this, some sort of orc thing that I, as a human, lacked.

It was all I could do to keep my shoulders from sagging.

His mom was great. I could see we'd get along well. As for his dad? He was rejecting me just like the three sets of foster parents had before I turned thirteen. They hadn't known me before turning up their noses, and he was just the same.

"Tomorrow night, after dark," Ulgritte said. "I'll prepare the fire." Her gaze met Max's. "I need to go into town tomorrow to pick up the supplies, otherwise, I'd insist we do this right away." She frowned at BB who continued to lean against the rail. "Does Maxon have a fire pit down there?"

"He does, but it's foolish to bother. She'll never be the right match for our son."

Talk about laying it right out there. The rejection hit me in the solar plexus like a fist, stealing my air.

"Dad," Maxon said, starting to shift me to the side. From his reddening face and blazing eyes, I sensed he would storm over to his father and rip his throat out. Well, the tame orc equivalent of ripping out a throat, if such a thing existed.

"It's okay," I said. "I understand. I'm human, as he said." Not worthy.

I thought I'd put my past behind me. I'd finished high school and gotten my own apartment. I'd supported myself for ten years. I'd done all I could to make my nonexistent parents proud even without someone cheering me on.

"No, it's not okay," Max said, his gaze seeking mine. He stroked my arms, and I appreciated his support. "We're all people. It's what inside us that matters."

He was sweet to say that, and I could tell he actually meant it. It was clear he'd inherited his kindness from his mother.

"I don't mind doing the ceremony," I said. But dammit, I hated the look of scorn BB shot me when I said it. "I'm not sure it's necessary, however."

"It'll ensure fertility," Ulgritte said. "It's not only about making you crave my son, which I'm sure you already do. It's about younglings, assuming you'd like to have them."

We hadn't discussed children. Why would we when we were breaking up soon? I needed to keep that in mind. I didn't need his parents' approval when we were going to end our orc marriage.

"Do you want me to go through with a ceremony?" I asked Max. I was human. I doubted it was going to make me crave him any more than I already did, and that was just as well. But it would please his mother, my goal here.

"You don't have to," he said.

"I want to." My gaze met BB's, and when he flushed, I could tell he read the challenge in my eyes. This wasn't a competition. Winning didn't mean beating someone else verbally into the ground.

I didn't expect him to like me, not when it was clear he'd already made up his mind before he got to know me. But if nothing else, I was worthy of respect, and I'd show him even if I had to shove it down his throat.

"Wonderful." Ulgritte clapped. "I imagine you two have to work tomorrow, but after dinner, we'll do it." She rose. "We haven't had our snack, but I guess we can skip that and get right to dinner. I'm excited to help our new daughter perform the ceremony tomorrow night, aren't you, BB?"

Even I who barely knew her could hear the warning in her voice.

"Of course, Ulgritte," he said, his thick, pale green lips twisting. "I'll be happy to help in any way I can."

I doubted that.

We went inside. While Max's mom and dad got the vegetables ready and he got the steak out to warm it to room temp and started the grill, I set the table, marveling at how pretty everything was.

"Did you help Max pick all this out?" I asked Ulgritte when she came over and set a vase full of flowers in the center of the dining room table.

"His home is lovely, isn't it?" she said with a smile. "I love the combination of our old world and our new. But no, I didn't have much input. I mean, I tried, but he told me he had certain things in mind." Shadows flitted across her face. "Did he tell you I've had cancer?"

"He mentioned something about it."

Her eyes swam. "It was scary. We all die eventually, but I'm not ready yet. I want to see my younglings happy with mates, and I'd love to hold a grandyoungling in my arms." Her hand darted out to touch my wrist. "Please don't think I'm trying to rush you. For all I know, you and Maxon don't wish to have younglings. My daughters want them, so I'm sure they'll give me enough to rock and sing to sleep whenever I please."

"I want children—younglings," I said almost wistfully. Remembering the blog post with the human woman holding her half-orc child made longing surge inside me. What would me and Max's child look like? Gorgeous, of course, because it would be a mix of him and me, but ...

Damn, what was I doing? This was a pretend marriage. We were going to end it in a week or so. I shouldn't be dreaming of having his child.

"Chastity," Ulgritte said, tugging me into her arms. "I hope you don't mind that I'm touchy-feely. I love to share hugs."

"Me too," I said, giving her a shy smile. "I didn't grow up with a mom."

"Why?"

"My parents died when I was three. I grew up in foster care." It was all I could do not to choke up. You'd think after a


lifetime of taking care of myself, the hole in my heart would've healed.

“Oh, honey.” Ulgritte patted my back. “No worries now. I'd be honored if you'd call me your mother.”

CHAPTER 14

MAX





After dinner, which I'd purposefully kept as human-oriented as possible, we cleaned up and sat in the living room. A hockey game was on, and we were all soon engrossed in the play. Many orcs loved ice hockey, having watched it even before we joined the human world. The rough play reminded many of the rampaging we'd been denied.

I watched Chastity, savoring the animation on her face when our team won. Even Dad watched as she jumped around and cheered when the team scored the overtime goal. I wanted to know what he thought about her now but asking would get me nowhere. He'd brush me off like he'd done all my life, telling me feelings didn't matter. And he'd follow that up with a verbal kick, reminding me that Chastity would never fit into our lives because she was human.

"You can sleep in the third bedroom," I told her as we took the stairs to my suite after saying goodnight. "I doubt they'll notice."

She stopped at the top of the stairs and kept her voice low. "Is that what you'd like me to do? If we appear to be having problems, that'll make our future breakup more believable."

I was going to do all I could not to break up. I wanted her in my life. How could I encourage her to feel the same?

"I don't want you to feel uncomfortable." That was a neutral enough answer.

She smiled. "I'm okay. I checked out your room when I brought up my suitcase earlier, and you're right. Your bed is huge. We won't bother each other a bit."

"All right." I wasn't going to argue about it. I wanted her in my bed tonight.

I shut the door. Glass along the left wall gave us a great view of the lights in the valley. The new moon was rising, and I doubted we'd need a light.

“I’ll speak to my father tomorrow.” While he’d made an effort to be polite, probably because my mother pulled him aside and threatened him before dinner, it was clear he wasn’t willing to meet Chastity halfway.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“He needs to treat you like family.”

Her sad sigh rang out. “Your mom is wonderful. That’s enough. I feel bad that we’re being dishonest. She’s welcomed me into her life. This feels like a betrayal.”

It wouldn’t be a betrayal if I could convince her to stay with me as my mate.

A wistful smile curled her lips. “She hugged me and told me I could call her Mom.”

“That’s my mother. What you see is who she is. When she said she was excited to meet you, she meant it.”

“It means a lot to me. I’ve pretty much been on my own most of my life.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

She strode over to look out the window, and I followed. “The valley’s even pretty at night. All the lights in the houses. People are inside, warm and laughing. In my old city, there’s a section of town with big old houses from the Victorian era. I used to ride my bike past them after work and wonder what it was like to live inside with a family.”

“You don’t have a family?” The thought crushed me. I put my arm around her shoulders and tugged her into my side, grateful when she didn’t pull away.

No, she kept staring forward. The neutral tone in her voice told me she was reciting something she’d told others, keeping it simple and not inserting feelings. “My parents died when I was three. I was raised in foster care. I left the last house the day I turned eighteen.”

“On your birthday?” There was something incredibly sad about that.

“That’s how it often is. Some foster homes let you stay longer, but not my last.”

“Wait.” I growled. “You’re saying that they kicked you out on your birthday? They didn’t have cake and presents or celebrate with you?”

“I didn’t really celebrate any of my birthdays. Not after my parents died. I mean, sure, the foster parents would sometimes get a cake and a little gift, but it’s different when the one doing it is a person who loves you completely.” When she looked up at me, I swore she held herself still, expecting a negative response from me.

“That’s wrong.”

“It’s like that for a lot of kids. I moved around a lot. My new parents were often busy. I’m sure it just slipped their minds.”

“I’m sorry.” Anger burned through me. I bitched about my dad and how he wasn’t affectionate or affirming, but I still knew he cared in his own way. And my mom was amazing. My sisters loved me as much as I loved them.

Chastity had been denied anything close to that.

“It’s not your fault.” Her posture loosened, but sadness lurked in her eyes. “I was okay. I worked from when I was sixteen and saved most of my wages. They didn’t take that from me. It was enough to rent an apartment. I went full time at my job, and my boss was nice. She trained me to be her assistant.”

“And you left that job to come here?” I fingered a band of her hair that had slipped free from its restraint. So soft, like Chastity.

“I needed a clean break.”

“New job, new town.”

“I didn’t want to hang around and watch my ex get married.”

Another blow. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s for the best, and it was months ago. I’m pretty much over it.”

Pretty much. Was that part of the reason she left that morning after we were together? I could understand running to avoid being hurt.

I had a few days left to show her life could be different with the right person. And I was the right one for her; I was convinced of that.

Ideas ricocheted through my mind. This wasn’t just about the sexual aspect of what we’d found together, though that was amazing. I wanted her to see that life with me could be wonderful. I’d celebrate every day with her, not just her birthday. I’d show her how much she was coming to mean to me.

“The bathroom’s through there,” I said, pointing. “Why don’t you go first?”

“Sure, thanks. I was thinking.” She sat on the bed. “We should ride to work together tomorrow. It would look weird if we didn’t. But I’m not sure what you want to tell your staff at the office.”

I wanted to introduce her as my wife. There was no one else I wanted standing by my side.

“I assume we should pretend even there,” she continued. “Otherwise, we’ll bug out some eyes at the picnic when we share a basket.”

“That’s a wise idea.”

It fit with my plan. Seduction wasn’t everything, though I was eager to give it a try. I needed to win her heart, not just her body.

“I don’t mind doing it.” She directed her gaze down to her fingers entwining on her lap. “I like you, Max. This is no hardship for me.”

“I like you too.” That was an understatement but dumping feelings into her lap would scare her away.

Liking could turn into more, right? The symbols on her wrists said we were fated. And while I doubted Mom's ceremony would make a difference as far as Chastity's sexual interest in me was concerned, I sensed what we had between us was going where it should.

"I wasn't wrong when I said we needed to get to know each other better," I said. "We jumped into this without me giving you flowers or taking you out to dinner. Dating stuff. I like that we've backed off, that we're taking time to get to know each other."

She rose, grabbing a small bag from her case. As she walked into the bathroom, she spoke over her shoulder. "Just so you know. I don't have any regrets about that night."

No regrets, huh? What did she mean by that? I paced my bedroom until she emerged from the bathroom along with moist steam scented like her.

She hummed as she passed me, and I gaped at her nightie skimming across her upper thighs. Her breasts jiggled—no bra. Her cute ass swayed.

"I'll, um, go shower," I said, pretty much running to the bathroom.

Despite telling my damn cock to settle down, I had a hard-on the entire time I stood under the spout, wishing she was beneath the spray with me. I'd lather her up, making sure to "clean" every speck of her skin until she was gasping my name, then bend her over and drive myself deeply inside her welcoming sheath.

Instead, I showered alone and brushed my tusks. After, I stared into the mirror. While my chest was bare, I'd wrapped a thin cloth around my waist and groin, realizing after I'd toweled dry that I'd forgotten to grab something to wear from my bureau.

There was nothing wrong with sleeping naked, but I didn't want to offend Chastity.

What did she see when she looked at me? For the first time, I almost wished I had rich brown skin or pale cream like

a human, not the medium green of an orc.

Chastity had seemed to enjoy my muscular shape. I stayed fit with regular exercise and work. But while my dad might think she'd never measure up as my mate, I worried I wasn't enough to be hers.

Not liking that train of thought, I shut out the light and opened the door, stepping into the darkened bedroom.

I paused, listening, and only her soft breathing greeted me. Assuming she was asleep, I approached the bed on tiptoes. Spying her shape under the covers on this side, I went around the bed to the other. We hadn't discussed who'd sleep on which side, but I'd defer to whatever pleased her.

Tossing aside the towel, I slipped beneath the blankets and lay on my back. My unruly cock tented the covers but at least she couldn't see that in the dark.

I fell asleep thinking about all the ways I could show Chastity how wonderful our life would be if we were together.

CHAPTER 15

CHASTITY



I woke to someone shouting “Bacon!”

Max’s bed was big, but I’d still found a way to climb all over him. I was pretty much lying across his chest, my legs straddling his hips.

He wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing.

And he had a hard-on. Could I blame him? Despite my lack of orc lust surges, we’d proven a week ago we are sexually compatible.

“Bacon! Eggs! Muffins!” Each of Ulgritte’s words were punctuated with a chuckle. “I think they’re doing it again, BB. And here you are, insisting they won’t procreate. The ceremony is going to put them both into overdrive.”

BB grumbled.

Max’s arms tightened around me, and he rolled us until I was beneath him. His lips skimmed along my jawline, and my body caught fire.

He nuzzled my neck and nudged his knee between my thighs, spreading me. “Bacon or me?”

“Man, what a choice,” I breathed. “Bacon or you? I’m not sure anything can top crispy, salty bacon.”

What were we doing? What were we doing?!

Having a bit of fun. That was it.

He grinned before lowering his head, giving me a kiss that sunk into me like melted honey, sweet and unbelievably satisfying.

“Is that a challenge?” he asked with a growl.

Gosh, was it?

“What would you do if I said it was?” I held my breath. He’d hinted he wanted me, but did his need go beyond sex?

“I’d do this.” He trailed kisses down my neck to the top of my breasts peeking above my nightgown—the one that had ridden up, exposing my panties. If only they were edible so he could rip them off with his tusks again.

“I’m not sure this is better than bacon,” I said, all breathy. I doubted we had long to play. His mom could be pretty persistent, and if she had breakfast ready, she wouldn’t want it to get cold.

But we had a few minutes. Was I open to seeing where this might go?

Hell, yeah.

“What about this?” his fingers slid up under my shirt. He cupped my breast and ran the smooth side of one of his thumb claws across the nipple.

It peaked. I gasped.

“I’m beginning to think you’re teasing me, Chastity. This must be better than bacon,” he said in a low, husky voice. “If you want, I’ll show you.”

His gaze met mine, and I knew this was it. I could tell him to back away or take things in a heady direction.

“Show me,” I said in a husky voice.

After flashing me a grin, he tugged up my nightshirt and crawled down along my body. He sucked one of my nipples into his mouth, and I pretty much lost track of what we were talking about. Where we were. What might be going on downstairs. All I could focus on was the stroke of his tongue and the way he rolled my other nipple between a claw and finger.

He looked up, watching my face as his hand slid down my belly. He cupped my mound, and when I licked my lips, he groaned. The light hum tingled through my nerve endings, shooting sparks between my legs.

Maybe he was better than bacon. I needed my memory refreshed, and he seemed quite willing to do so.

We'd jumped into bed fast that night, and what we did was amazing, but knowing him better added depth to what we were doing right now. This wasn't only about the pleasure of our bodies but the pleasure of our souls.

He slid my panties down and tossed them off the bed, spreading my legs wide.

"Bacon or me?" he asked, and there was no mistaking the soft vulnerability in his voice. He was a big, strong construction dude, but his tough façade hid a sweetness that called to me in a way no one else ever had.

"You," I breathed. "You."

His lips twitched up in one corner. "Good choice, sweetheart."

He moved lower on the bed and teased a finger down my slit.

I bucked up toward him, surprised at how much I craved his touch. I may not have chemicals shooting through me, driving my lust, but who needed anything like that when I had Max?

"Bacon or me?" he asked, gliding one finger inside me.

My moan was wrenched from me. Really, what was bacon?

"Chastity?" he asked. "Bacon or me?"

He pushed two fingers inside me while his thumb claw made lazy circles on my engorged clit.

"Forget bacon. I want you, Max," I whispered. "Want you so much."

"Show me how much."

He pumped his fingers inside me, stroking my inner walls while his head lowered. When he nibbled on my clit with his tusks, I bit back a shriek.

He rode with me, his mouth a wet, hot thing on my clit, his forked tongue coiling around it, tugging. His fingertips glided

across my G-spot with each pump, and I could've happily laid here while he did this for the rest of my life.

Then he switched, his tongue driving deep within me, the tip flickering my inner walls while he dragged the smooth side of his claw back and forth across my clit.

My eyes crossed, and the world went still. Nothing existed but the feelings he drew from deep within me.

An orgasm ripped through me, and I shuddered and cried out, pushing up to meet his mouth.

He brought me down, his fingers stroking me while he muttered something lilting in orc language against my overheated skin.

After my brain was able to function again, he looked up at me and grinned, obviously satisfied with his efforts. "I'd say bacon comes in second, now wouldn't you, sweetheart?"


Still breathing fast, I nodded.

I was beginning to think nothing was ever going to come in first when compared to Max.

CHAPTER 16

MAX





“T here you are,” Mom said with a smile as we entered the kitchen. “I was beginning to think I’d have to send BB up to rouse you two. Imagine! Sleeping in until seven.” Shaking her head, she clicked her tongue.

I did not point out that we were nicely roused already, thank you very much.

My father looked from me to Chastity, and I was sure he noted her flushed cheeks and the way she held my hand, but he didn’t say anything.

I hadn’t taken my own pleasure with her, deciding to wait as long as I could. This wasn’t about sex. I wanted to win her heart and soul. My cock could wait. Having her agree to be my forever mate was my only goal. The rest would follow.

There was something to be said about giving a woman a hearty orgasm first thing in the morning, however. My skin was on fire, and the mating symbols on my wrists kept flaring, coiling around my wrists. Hers did, too, though I wasn’t sure she’d noted that yet.

Even Dad’s grumbled greeting couldn’t ruin my sunny mood.

“Morning, Mom,” I said, grinning. I scooped her up and whirled her around while she laughed, giving her a big kiss on both of her cheeks before placing her back on her feet.

“Now, now,” she said, patting my arms, beaming. “You’ll distract me. I got up early to make you both a hearty breakfast, and you need to eat it. Sit.” She waved to the dining room table laden with platters full of eggs, bacon, and ...

“Mom,” I crowed. “Choocar chip wisparoos?” They were similar to human waffles, only better.

“I know how much you love them, Maxon,” she said, urging us toward chairs. “Fill your plate.” She tucked her arm

through Chastity's. "What about you, honey? Do you enjoy wisparoos?"

"I don't believe I've had them before," she said, frowning at the stack of thick green treats. "However, I've discovered I love bacon." She shot me a smoldering look. "It's probably my second favorite thing in the morning."

Good one. Feeling her exploding from my touch actually topped wisparoos in my book.

"If you're like most humans," my father said. I was grateful to hear no snideness in his tone. "You probably wonder what orcs enjoy eating."

"I love learning about new cultures," she said, her bright gaze sliding to me.

"We might be monsters, but we eat things very similar to what humans enjoy," he finished. "And we don't eat humans, contrary to popular belief."

Chastity gulped, her eyes widening. "That's good to hear."

"Monsters haven't eaten people for ages," Mom added, taking a seat beside my father.

Chastity looked up at me as I held out her chair.

"Most orcs just nibble every now and then." I winked, reminding her I'd just eaten her.

Color rose into her pretty face, and I gave into the urge to kiss her.

Mom was beaming when I looked up.

"Here you go, honey," she said, handing Chastity the plate with bacon and eggs. "Wisparoos coming right up." She shook a finger my way as I forked a big pile of them onto my plate. "Don't be greedy, now. Leave some for your mate."

I slid one onto Chastity's plate.

"Put some of this on it," Mom said, handing my mate the small jug of synvar, an orc syrup with a sweet and spicy flavor.

We ate, and I moaned and groaned about how wonderful it all tasted.

“These chips taste a bit like Nutella,” Chasity said, forking another bite of wisparoo into her mouth. “And the sauce makes it pop.”

Mom grinned and nodded. “Lately, it’s been hard to get wisparon flour, but I picked some up at an orc market.”

“Is wisperon a type of grain?” Chastity asked, popping the last bite into her mouth.

“It’s an insect,” my father said, his lips twitching upward before smoothing. He watched her intently, anticipating how she—like most humans—would react.

She sucked in a breath but kept chewing, swallowing her bite and washing it down with coffee.

“Do you enjoy insects?” he asked.

“Dad,” I said in warning. I stroked Chastity’s thigh in reassurance.

“I ...” Chastity’s gaze flicked to my mother. “I enjoyed the wisparoos very much.”

“See, BB?” Mom said, her voice tight. “She fits right in.”

He grunted but said nothing further.

“Are we finished?” Mom asked brightly.

Chastity blinked fast, looking down at her plate, and placed her hand on mine.

I turned mine over and linked our fingers, marveling at how tiny she was compared to me.

It appeared a conversation with my father was on the agenda. It would be too much to expect him to extend a warm welcome to her, though I wished he would. As long as he treated her with respect, he wouldn’t get a taste of my anger. But it appeared he wasn’t even capable of that. I wouldn’t tolerate digs or him being unkind to her.

“Don’t,” Chastity whispered, sensing my thoughts. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” I grumbled.

She shook her head and looked across the table at my father, daring him to do something else to make her life miserable.

“The entire meal has been delicious,” she said brightly. “I can’t remember when I ate such amazing food.”

Her cheeks darkening, Mom patted Chastity’s arm. “Thank you. You’re sweet and much too kind. Tell me, what are your favorite cookies? I’m one of those orc moms who shows love with food. I’d like to make something we can enjoy after the ceremony tonight.”

“I love all cookies,” Chastity said, draining the rest of her coffee.

“Then I’ll make my favorite recipe for you while you’re at work today.” When Mom grinned at me, my bones loosened.

My goal was to make Mom happy, and she was. As for my father ... I shot him a glare. We weren’t finished, but I’d put off the conversation until we could be alone.

I didn’t want to ruin Mom’s perky mood.

CHAPTER 17

CHASTITY



[REDACTED]

I swear, since what happened in Max's bedroom this morning, all I could think of was doing it again.

Even BB's snide attempt to upset me didn't do more than put a ding in my mood. So, I ate bugs. It wouldn't be the first time. Besides, the wisparoos had tasted amazing.

Tonight, we'd complete the ceremony, but after that, I had some licking of my own to do. Max's cock was big, but I was sure I could take enough into my mouth to make him bellow. It was only fair since he'd made me shriek this morning.

Funny how his dad seemed to think I wasn't capable of craving his son. Who needed orc mating chemicals when lust for Max made my skin tingle and my body hum 24/7?

We climbed into his truck, and he drove into town, but when he would've turned onto the street with his office, he took a left.

"I'd like to stop by one of my jobs this morning if you don't mind. One of my crew called before I left work yesterday, stating there was a problem. We're just a subcontractor on this job, hanging and taping the sheetrock, but he said the general contractor had an issue with one of my suppliers. I'd like to get it straightened out right away."

"No problem," I said, then laughed. "As long as my boss doesn't complain that I'm late."

"I'll put in a good word with him." He shot me a grin that still held a hint of satisfaction. We'd shared something wonderful this morning, and there was no turning back. I was beginning to feel I should give in completely and find out where this "pretend" marriage with Max might lead.

Parking, he stared toward the enormous structure that looked like it would eventually be a gorgeous hotel complete with big verandas on the front of the second and third floors and steep rooflines that came to peaks. I could picture little

flags flying at the top of the points one day, and people and monsters sitting on the porches sipping cocktails.

“Whoa,” I said. “It’s amazing.”

“It’s going to be beautiful; don’t you think?”

“With the mountains behind? Yeah. The view is incredible, and the structure fits in. It reminds me of buildings I’ve seen in the alps.”

“Just the effect the owner is looking for. We can come back on a weekend for a tour if you’d like.” His gaze took in my short skirt and heels. “It’s muddy, and the subfloors might be hard on those shoes. Do you mind waiting in the truck while I go inside?”

“Will you be long?”

He shrugged. “Ten, fifteen minutes, tops.”

“Sure.” I unbuckled.

He got out and strode inside the building.

The sun beat down, making it hot inside his truck, so I got out and strolled around to the front and leaned against the grill. Bangs rang out from the building, plus the occasional screech of an electric tool.

An older human guy came over and joined me, bracing his hand on the black hood behind me, his fingers too close to my shoulders for comfort.

“You lost?” he asked. “Because I’m more than willing to help you find your way.”

“I’m waiting for Max.”

“Max who?”

“Zahgorim.”

He frowned. “The orc dude? You his sister?” His deep, grating chuckle rang out. “You don’t look much like an orc, but what do I know? Can’t ID vamps very well either.” His hot breath hit my face. “Are you a vamp? Because I’d be happy to let you take a bite.”

Yuck.

“I’m Max’s assistant.” I eased away from his arm. “He’s inside, and I’m waiting for him to come out.”

“You can call me Sam. You’re his secretary, huh?”

“*Assistant.*”

His heavy gaze slid down my body. “I need to hire a new “assistant,” though I’m not sure my wife would agree.” He grunted. “Go get me some coffee, would ya, sweetheart?”

When Max called me sweetheart, it made my bones melt. When this guy did it? I wanted to knee him in the groin.

“Get your own coffee,” I said.

“I like mine sweet.” He grabbed my arm and tugged me close. “Lots of cream.” His hips pumped against mine. “And plenty of sugar.”

I tried to wrench away, but his grip was too tight. Shooting a frantic look toward the building, I snarled. “Let me go.”

A growl ripped out from the side of the truck.

“Get your hands off my wife,” Max bellowed. Storming over to us, he wrenched the guy off the ground and shook him. “Touch her again, and I’ll bite your head off.”

“Sorry!” the guy shouted, his booted feet flailing. “Really sorry! I didn’t know she was—”

Max tossed the guy onto the ground. He scrambled to his feet and shot us a glare before bolting for a car parked in the big open lot. With a screech of his tires, he drove the vehicle out onto the road.

“Are you all right?” Max asked, breathing hard. “I ... I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“He’ll be fired. I’ll make sure of that.”

I wrapped my arms around him. My body shook from reaction. I hadn’t truly worried the guy would harm me with

so many people within shouting distance, but the jerk had scared me.

Someone dropped down from the air beside us—a gargoyle.

“Is everything okay?” he asked, looking from me to Max.

“I think so, Goreg,” Max said. “Thanks, though.”

Goreg nodded before taking flight again.

Max cupped my face and leaned over to kiss my nose. “Are you *sure* you’re all right?”

I buried my face in his shirt. “I am now.”

CHAPTER 18

MAX



[REDACTED]

I was literally shaking with a mix of anger and horror for Chastity. I'd only overheard a bit of what the other guy said, but it was enough to make my protective instincts blaze hotter than an inferno. It was all I could do not to rip the jerk's head off; something orcs in my past would've done in a similar situation and without thought.

"Let me take you home," I said.

She looked up at me and while shadows lurked in her eyes, her face was no longer cratered with fear. "I'm okay. Let's go to work, assuming you've finished here?"

"I have, but are you sure?"

Her chin lifted. "I am."

I took her hand and led her to the passenger side of my truck, then lifted her up into her seat, buckled her, and leaned in to give her a kiss on her forehead. I wanted to sit in the shade and hold her all day long, protect her with my arms and my heart until she no longer trembled.

"I need to go inside the building for a sec," I said. "Lock the door after I shut it?"

Biting her lower lip, she nodded.

It didn't take long to tell the job supervisor about what happened. With flint hardening her deep green eyes, she told me the guy—Sam—would be fired the moment he returned to the jobsite.

"Thanks," I said, returning to the truck and filled Chastity in on what the job supervisor said.

She gave me a warm smile. "You're my hero."

Heat filled my face. "I shouldn't have left you alone."

"*He* should've left me alone. He didn't, but I believe you showed him the error of his ways."

I was horrified by what happened, but I didn't want to keep harping on it.

“How can I make it up to you?” I asked.

Taking my hand, she linked our fingers. “You already have.”

When we reached the office, I got out and hustled around to her side of the vehicle and opened her door. I was tempted to lift her out and carry her into the office. Sit in my chair with her on my lap. Work with her there all day so I could make sure she was safe.

She slid from her seat, her bag and iced coffee filling her hands.

I took them from her. “I can carry these in for you.” It was the least I could do.

“Thank you.”

We went inside, and I placed her drink on her desk. I wanted to linger, to stand by her door like her bodyguard. And I wanted to talk to her about everything, from where she'd love to travel to where she saw our relationship heading, but this wasn't the time.

Hovering implied she couldn't take care of herself. She was a strong woman. Yes, I'd slammed the guy around and made him leave, but I had a feeling Chastity would've handled the situation if I hadn't been there.

I wanted her like no other, and that wasn't going to change, but part of wanting to be with someone was backing off so they could be whoever they wanted to be all on their own. Clinging implied I wanted to absorb her into me rather than give her the chance to stand on her own two feet beside me.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked, standing in her open doorway despite my inner pep talk. She started her computer and took a sip of her drink.

“No, thank you,” she said, giving me a soft smile. “I'm going to work on the final details for the picnic. I can't believe

it takes place the day after tomorrow. Is there anything else you'd like me to include?"

A plane flying past with a banner reading *Will you be my true mate?*

—I kept that to myself.

"No, nothing else," I said.

I had it bad. I floundered in feelings, unsure of what to do with them. Part of the intensity came from the chemicals soaring through my veins, but most of it came from Chastity. She was everything I could ever want in a mate.

"I'm looking forward to the picnic," I said.

"I haven't been to the park yet. I should drive over and check out the area you rented." Frowning, she shot a glance to the window behind her. "Except I don't have my car."

"I'll take you."

"Oh, no. You don't need to do anything like that. You must have work to do. I could call an Uber."

I had nothing that couldn't wait. But ...

I couldn't push.

"Why don't I take you over during our lunch break?" I said, trying to sound neutral and boss-like when all I wanted to do was tug her up from her chair, remove her glasses, and kiss her senseless. Lay her back on her desk and remind her of how great it was between us.

There was no way I could do that. Hopefully the time would come when I could.

"All right," she said. "Thanks."

"Noon, then? I'll order something, and we can have a picnic at the park."

"That sounds fun." Her gaze remained on her computer, though I didn't sense she was dismissing me. She was busy, and I was keeping her from her work.

With a wave, I left, striding down the hall to my office. When I sat in my chair, I tried to focus on the bid I needed to turn in soon, but I kept picturing the way she'd looked at me after I licked the whipped cream off her chin. Like she wanted me to keep licking.

She'd enjoyed herself in my bed this morning. I needed to remember that.

I was one step closer to winning her heart.

I CONTINUED WORKING on the job that needed to be sent to the developer by the end of next week. Eventually, I sat back in my chair, rubbing my face. I'd ordered a meal for lunch and would pick it up on our way to the park, but I needed a moment to decompress before I went to her office. Bidding was never my favorite part of the job.

"Almost ready?" Chastity asked from my open doorway, sending me a sweet smile.

I stacked all my papers and heaved a sigh. "I am."

"Still working on your bid?"

"Yup. I'm almost done."

"I have time later if you'd like some help." She said it hesitantly, as if she thought I'd turn her down.

"I don't have to bribe you?" I asked, rising and coming around my desk to lean against it.

Frowning, she tapped her chin. "You might, actually."

My laughter burst out. Damn that mischief in her eyes. "What will it take?" I hoped she'd name kisses or something equally personal.

"How about I get to be in charge of the whipped cream tonight?"

My jaw hit the floor as she turned and strode into the hall. I was stunned by her words and the delightful sway of her

hips.

This female was going to be the death of me.

I chased after her, catching up in the hall. “Did you mean it?” I whispered, not wanting the receptionist or my accountant to overhear.

“I guess you’ll have to bring some to the bedroom if you want to find out.” She held open the front door for me to walk outside, and I pretty much stumbled, because my heart was leaping around in my chest and my cock had decided now was the time to knock on my pants, begging to be let out.

“Chastity,” I said in warning as I opened the passenger door of my truck. “I’m not sure my heart can take this.”

She paused, her brow knitting. “You may need to spell it out for me, Max, because I’m not sure where you’re going with that statement.”

Once she was seated in the truck and buckled, I leaned in. “I’m going to pick up two cans of whipped cream.”

“Ohhh.”

I took pleasure in surprising her for a change.

Her door shut, and I pretty much galloped around the hood of my truck and climbed inside. Could we skip the park and head home instead?


I gnashed my tusks. Mom and Dad were there. I doubted we could sneak in and up to my room without them seeing us.

But tonight, mate. Tonight was going to be amazing.

CHAPTER 19

CHASTITY





“You said something about lunch? I’m starving,” I said, watching out my side window as he drove to the enormous park in the center of town.

Maybe I was being too bold by telling him I wanted to have sex, but I’d been thinking over the past day or so.

Despite my determination to keep my heart locked up tight, Max had found the key and turned it, then stepped inside.

I was falling for him and instead of telling myself it was too soon after my ex or that I didn’t deserve someone like Max, I welcomed the feeling. Life didn’t hand a person miracles like him often. I’d be foolish to push him aside.

I wasn’t completely sure of his feelings, but he wanted me. Wanting could turn into caring, right?

He pulled his truck into an empty spot and shut off the engine.

“Lunch is being delivered,” he said.

“Like pizza?”

The grin he shot me melted my bones. “Something like that. Come on. I’ll show you the section of the park I’ve rented for Saturday.”

We got out and walked around the wooden fence encircling the big open area. The park itself had to take up at least forty acres. Groves of trees peppered the lush grassy sections, and I spied picnic tables and grills both in the shade and in the sun.

A river wound along the back end with a strip of trees beyond, and a couple of kids stood on the bank, fishing.

Moms and a few dads pushed baby carriages along a paved path encircling the park. Other paths wove through the grass-covered areas, and a few people jogged along them. Kids

shrieked with joy as they raced among slides and climbing structures.

“This is pretty much utopia,” I said with a heady sigh. “I can’t imagine why you haven’t set up your office here.”

“Now that’s a great idea,” he said, taking my hand and leading me down the hill and onto a flat, open area.

We took a path weaving through the middle of the park, ending up on the far-right side, near the river. We stood on the bank, watching the water rushing past us. A cute bridge arched over this section, leading to a mini-park on the other side with gorgeous flowerbeds. We strolled up onto the bridge, stopping in the middle to stare down at the water flowing downstream.

“Watch out for this section,” he said, urging me to the left. He pointed to a few rotting boards on the railing. “I’ll let the town maintenance crew know they should give the bridge some TLC.”

We leaned against a sturdy section.

“From the current, I’d say this isn’t a regular swimming spot,” I said.

“The water’s higher than normal. We got four inches of rain last week. It washes down from the mountains, and sometimes, the banks of the river overflow, flooding parts of the park.”

“I used to swim in rivers like this near where I grew up.”

He looked down at me, puzzled. “Why?”

I grinned. “I was on the swim team. The coaches frowned at it, but I always thought rivers with a swift current presented a nice challenge for training.”

He shot a frown at the water. “You’re not going to swim in this one, are you?”

“I didn’t bring my suit today.”

He shook his head. “Orcs don’t swim.”

“Why not?” I couldn’t imagine not enjoying the water.

“We just don’t.”

We walked around the small park on the other side, then returned to the main area.

“I’ve rented this section for the picnic.” He pointed to the big open area spotted with picnic tables and trees near the bridge.

“The guitarist reconfirmed this morning,” I said. “So, we’ll have music.”

“Everything else is set?”

“Just about. I still need to come up with a few more games. I also opted to order trinkets we can give the kids. They’ll be delivered to the office later today. And I’ve arranged for a helium tank, balloons, and someone to inflate them.”

“Great ideas.” He dropped down onto the grass and stretched his legs out, leaning back and propping himself up with his palms.

I joined him, sitting against a nearby tree, hitching my legs up on his thighs. It felt good to sit with him, like we were a regular couple visiting the park for our lunch break.

Speaking of which. A tall, muscular ogre comically dressed in a renaissance costume complete with black boots, pants, and a silver vest over a ruffled white shirt strode toward us holding a white paper bag. A jester hat perched on his head, his four-inch horns jutting up from beneath it.

Ogres and orcs looked a lot alike, except ogres had blue skin instead of green.

“That’s not pizza,” I said.

He grunted, and his face twisted, giving me the impression he wasn’t thrilled to be here. Dressed like that, I wouldn’t be either. “You’re right. It’s not pizza. I take it you’re Max.” He thrust out the bag.

Max’s head tilted, and I swore he was struggling not to laugh. “Raze? Is that really you?”

“You didn’t see me,” Raze growled. “Please.”

“Sure thing.” Max barely held in his snicker. “Raze owns a business in town. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen him when he’s not wearing a suit.”

“You did not see this!” Raze said. His big shoulders slumped. “My mom begged me to make the delivery for her, okay? Her elf delivery guy is out sick. I wouldn’t be caught dead in this get-up otherwise.”

“His mom owns the shop where I bought our lunch,” Max said.

“I was told to find an orc and a pretty lady on this side of the park and give them this food.” Raze’s eyes skimmed down my front in an appreciative manner, and I could see why ogre males were in hot demand.

He shook the bag, which Max took and dropped onto the grass beside him.

“Would you like me to sing?” His gaze never left my face. Our gazes locked, and heat roared up into my cheeks. Max was hot, but so was this ogre. “Please don’t make me sing, though, for *her*, I might just be willing to do it. My voice is horrible. You don’t want to hear it.”

“No singing,” Max said, his humor gone.

“Thank the fates,” Raze sighed. He bowed to us both. “Now I can get the he—err, heck—out of this stupid outfit.”

He dipped forward in another bow. “Enjoy your lunch. Mom’s an amazing cook.”

Turning, he stalked across the park.

“Was he supposed to be a jester?” I asked.

“The outfit looks better on an elf. They do cartwheels and sing.”

“Raze offered to sing,” I pointed out.

“This isn’t quite what I planned for.” He grumbled, settling beside me again.

“It’s fun!”

He took my legs and laid them back on his thighs. “His mom’s restaurant is highly recommended. I didn’t like how he was looking at you, though.”

I shrugged it off, not offended. It was simple appreciation. He hadn’t made a play for me.

“Were you worried he’d steal me away?” I scooted over to Max and climbed fully into his lap. “Don’t you know already? There isn’t anyone I want but you.”

CHAPTER 20

MAX



I must've misheard her. She hadn't said ...

"Repeat that," I growled, watching her face.

Her eyes sparkled, and I began to believe I'd imagined it.

She glanced down, but I tipped her chin up, meeting her pretty eyes. "I said there isn't anyone else I want but you."

"Chastity."

I lifted her up and kissed her, turning to lay her on the grass. I braced myself over her and kept kissing her while she moaned and clung to my shoulders. When I lifted my head, she gave me the sweetest smile.

"I hope it was okay to say that," she said.

"There isn't anyone I want but you, either." My voice came out husky. Needy.

"I don't know where this is going, but I want to find out."

What she offered was precious. I wanted to savor this moment.

A yeti female walked by, pushing a stroller, her toddler peering out. The yeti coughed and shot us an eyebrow-lifted glare. "I mean, I get it. But PDA, folks. PDA."

We laughed.

"Later?" Chastity whispered; her gaze locked on mine.

"I can't wait."

We shared a grin that held so much promise it made my chest ache. I sat up and tucked her onto my lap, and we ate our lunch. Despite the irritating ogre, the restaurant was not overrated.

"It's all amazing," Chastity said around a bite. "I love the sauce on this sandwich." Peeling back the thick bread, she

showed the amber sauce. “I can’t place it, but I could sit with a spoon and eat a container full.”

Bespelled sauce? Maybe. I wouldn’t complain. Anything that pleased my mate was good in my book.

Unsure of what she’d like, I’d ordered a variety of sandwiches. We could bring the leftovers home.

After we finished, we laid back on the grass. I tucked her beneath my arm, and she sighed and snuggled against the side of my chest.

“Clouds are curious creatures, aren’t they?” she said.

“They’re clusters of water droplets and ice crystals floating in the sky.”

“You.” She tapped my chest. “You’re taking all the romance out of it.” She pointed. “Oh, that one looks like you.”

I squinted at the cloud, seeing a minotaur more than an orc.

“And that one looks like your dad,” she added.

It looked more like a demon, but perhaps she was right about that.

“Thank you for the gorgeous lunch break,” she said, snuggling closer. “It’s been one of the best days of my life.”


“I want to make every day your best.” Emotion made my voice tight.

“I feel the same.”

CHAPTER 21

CHASTITY





We went back to the office and finished out the day, leaving at sundown to drive back to Max's house.

Our house?

Time would tell.

"Dinner in half an hour," Ulgritte said when we arrived. She tapped Max's arm when he reached for the fridge. "No snacking."

Grinning, he gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Wouldn't dream of it, Mom."

His father huffed.

I watched BB—Brebock—Mr. Zahgorim, unable to determine if he was irritated, a demeanor he'd worn like a second skin the past few days, or if he had a very dry sense of humor. With a shrug, I let it go. He'd fly back home in a few days, and I wouldn't need to be on guard any longer.

"Tell me more about the work you do with my son," he said, following me when I took frosty glasses of iced tea out to the deck for all of us. I sat, gazing toward the mountains. Dropping into the chair beside mine, he glared.

"He told you that the other day. I'm his assistant," I said.

"What kind of assisting do you do?" Pure mockery came through in his voice. "The kind that lures him into your bed?"

"I didn't know him when I took the job. It's a good job, and I'm qualified to do it." My eyes stung, but I refused to give into tears. He was a bully, and the best way to handle them was to ignore their mean comments. Rising, I moved around Max, who stood in the open doorway to the living room, chatting with his mom. Dropping into a chair on the opposite end of the deck, I stared forward, hoping no one saw my trembling lips.

"Dad," Max said, disappointment clear in his voice.

“What?” BB said, his gaze shooting down to the iced tea glass in his hand.

Max strode over to his father. “You need to leave.”

BB stood. “What? Is that any way to talk to your father?”

“Is that any way to talk to a woman who has been nothing but nice to you? I heard what you said to my mate.” Max crossed his arms on his chest. “I won’t stand for it. Either behave or leave.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, standing. The last thing I wanted to do was come between them. I was the usurper here, just like I’d been in every foster home growing up. “I’ll ... I have things to do inside.”

I fled—okay, ran—inside and up to the room I shared with Max, where I collapsed on the bed. I hated to think I was creating conflict in their relationship. He had parents who loved him, and he deserved to be with them without me adding stress.

I didn’t need his parents to like me, but I’d always hoped

“I would like to apologize,” Ulgritte said, standing in the open doorway to Max’s bedroom.

“Oh, please don’t,” I said, sitting up. I swiped my eyes and tried to smile. “You’ve been the nicest person, and I appreciate it.”

She crossed the room and climbed onto the bed, joining me. “I still feel the need to apologize, though I have no excuse for BB’s behavior. I won’t ask you to try to see his good side, the one he shows me. After how he has treated you, he doesn’t deserve any effort on your part.”

“I appreciate you saying that.”

“He’s much too stubborn. Too set in his orc ways.”

“I’m human, very different from you.”

“Different in a good way, as my son has shown me many times already,” she said. “BB was one of those who opposed

the treaty between monsters and humans. He felt we should remain hidden. His parents were killed by humans.”

“What?” Shock filled me. “How?”

“When he was a youngling, they were shot while walking in the woods. Human hunters, perhaps mistaking them for wild beasts.”

“He’s an orphan like me, then.” My heart softened to him despite how harshly he’d treated me. “I can understand why he feels that way.”

“It is no excuse. You’re not them. You’re a lovely young female who has claimed my son as her mate.” She traced the symbol on my right wrist. “You do not need to prove you have worth to us. It shines in your eyes and in the way you treat my Maxon. That is good enough for me.”

Sadly, it would never be enough for BB.

“We leave in two days,” she said. “And the next time I come to visit; I’ll tell him he must remain home.”

“No, please don’t. That would make Max sad. I’m sure he loves his dad.” I sighed. “I’m sorry I’m driving a wedge between all of you.”

She gave me a quick hug. “You’ve done nothing wrong. Believe me, he’ll hear about it from me after the ceremony tonight.”

Would her chastising him make any difference? He had a solid reason to dislike humans, though it would be wonderful if he could see who I was inside instead of barking at the exterior I had no control over.

He’d made up his mind about me, and nothing was going to change it.

“I just wanted you to know that I think you’re amazing, and I’m grateful you’ve mated with my son. And tonight, we’ll perform the ceremony. He’ll see you’re the perfect mate for our son.” She hugged me again, speaking by my ear. “As for Max, he loves you. I can tell. Nothing and no one will sever the bond you’ve formed.”

“I’LL KILL HIM,” Max told me later. We’d eaten and gone to our room to get ready for the ceremony.

Ulgritte had left a floor-length, gauzy gown for me to wear and what looked like a simple leather loincloth for Max. She and BB were outside, getting everything ready.

Instead of dressing, Max paced.

“Please don’t kill him,” I said with raised brows. “I like your mom and it might hurt her feelings.”

“He has no right to treat you this way.” Stopping in front of me, he took my hands. “I hate it. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not you. Your mom explained what happened to his parents, so at least I understand what motivates his behavior.”

“He taught me to value an orc’s worth by how he treated others, but look at him, being mean to you for something you had no role in.” He tugged me into his arms. “I’m going to speak with him after the ceremony.”

“Please don’t. He’s leaving in a few days, and then it won’t matter.” I wouldn’t come between them. Max had parents who cared for him, and if I drove one away, I would never forgive myself. I smiled up at him, though smiling didn’t come easy. “Let’s go do the ceremony so we can come back here and be alone.”

He stroked my hair. “You’re an amazing person.” Leaning forward, he gave me a sweet kiss. “We don’t need a ceremony. I want you. You want me. And nothing else matters.”

My mood was lighter as I dressed in the bathroom.

We went downstairs, joining his parents on the back lawn. Max looked amazing in a simple loincloth, and while BB’s body had aged, I could see where Max got his gorgeous looks. Ulgritte wore a gown like mine.

A fire crackled in the center of the stone circle.

Ulgritte bowed to me. “It is traditional for the mother of the male in the mating to conduct the ceremony, but I want you to know that this is an honor for me.”

“Thank you so much for putting this together.” I took in a table with bowls holding small objects and powder in various colors.

“First,” Ulgritte said. She lifted one of the bowls and approached the low, flickering flames, dumping the contents onto the fire.

It blazed up, fingers of flames licking toward the sky as green as orc skin.

“Ahh,” I breathed.

Max put his arms around me from behind and leaned over to kiss my cheek. “Do you crave me yet?” he whispered, and I heard the tease in his voice.

“Maybe I’m craving whipped cream or bacon,” I said softly.

He growled playfully.

I watched Ulgritte. She returned to the bowls and started placing a bit from each one into an earthenware mug. After adding a bit of water, she stirred the concoction with a thin stick. Steam rose from the solution and a scent reminiscent of sage swirled through the air.

Holding the mug with metal tongs, she took it over to the fire and held it down close to the coals. The fire flickered around the cup, and the flames turned bright orange before flashing back to the same green.

BB watched; his face impassive.

Ulgritte spoke in their orc language, and Max and BB murmured along with her. Their voices lulled me; my mind sucked down before it projected up to the sky. Like I was tethered to my body by a thick elastic band, I snapped back down, centering into myself.

“Drink, daughter,” Ulgritte said, standing in front of me holding out the mug. Her smile warmed me through. “Do not

fear anything. Not this beverage, my youngling son, my surly mate, or even yourself. What you need is buried inside you already. With this gift, I will help you unlock it.”

I took the mug and gazed down at the murky contents.

I was a part of this family, whether I wished for it or not, but I found only kindness and warmth in Ulgritte’s eyes. Even BB’s face held no scorn. I sensed he watched and waited to see if I’d drink. No, to see if the drink would spark something inside me that would show I belonged in his family.

I took the mug without hesitation and drained the contents. It tasted like mint, grass, and something reminiscent of dirt, and it hit my belly like a flat stone on smooth water, skipping along. Heat burst within me, and an electric current shot from my core to my fingertips and toes.

My gasp was wrenched from me.

Ulgritte smiled and dipped her head forward. “So it is, and so it shall be.” She held out her hand to BB, and they walked slowly into the house.

“What do you say, mate?” Max asked, a touch of worry in his voice.

I turned in his embrace. “I feel the same, but better. And ...”

He cocked his head. “What?”

“I think it’s time for you to take me to bed.”

He lifted me into his arms and strode toward the house, taking the door on this level and climbing the stairs up to his bedroom. A kick, and his bedroom door shut behind him.

He climbed onto the bed and settled, holding me in his lap. “You feel all right?”

“I feel wonderful.”

“Do you crave me?” A bit of humor came through in his voice.

“I already did. The drink isn’t going to change that.” I didn’t feel any different inside, but I was touched that Ulgritte

had performed the ceremony. Maybe it would help BB soften.

But I didn't want to think about him in Max's—*our*—bedroom.

I liked sitting with Max like this. He was like a muscle-bound teddy bear. With great lips and tongue. And creative hands. And his cock ... I felt deprived, not having seen it or felt its length in almost three weeks. "I'm starving here."

"Far be it from me not to feed you whatever you need." He reached under his pillow and held up a silver can. "That's why I stocked up on whipped cream."

CHAPTER 22

MAX



[]

She took the can from me, popped off the top and, tipping her head back, squirted a big glob of cream into her mouth.

“Mmm, yum,” she said, gyrating on my lap. “That drink made me hungry.”

My cock, sensing eminent action, perked up and lifted to bang against her butt. My loincloth did nothing to disguise it.

“I like getting sticky,” Chastity said around a second glob of cream. She grinned. “How about we both get sticky?”

“There’s nothing I’d rather do.” I flipped her around until she was on the bottom, I liked her there where I could take the cream from her hand, tug up her loose dress, and squirt cream onto her right breast. She’d gone braless. “Oh, darn. Look what I’ve done. I’ve spilled cream on you, love, and now I’ll have to clean it off. How do you think I should do that? I could get a cloth or ...” I licked up from the bottom of her breast and across her nipple, moaning more from her taste than that of the cream. Nothing could be sweeter than my mate.

She writhed beneath me as I licked every last drop off her breast. “I’m worried about getting this pretty dress icky. Your mom gave it to me.”

I didn’t want to think about my mom while licking Chastity’s nipples, so I helped her tug it off, leaving her wearing nothing but panties.

“I’m neglecting your other nipple,” I said, studiously squirting that breast. I grinned, noting the nipple had already beaded.

“We’re going to make a mess of the bed.”

“How can you think about something like that?” I huffed in pretend dismay. “I’m not trying hard enough, now am I?”

When I sucked her nipple into my mouth, her eyes rolled back in her head. She thrust her hips up. I’d get to that area

soon. Heady satisfaction filled me already, and anticipation simmered in my bones. Soon, I'd claim my mate fully once more, and it would be even purer than that night in the hotel, because we knew each other. We cared. I couldn't wait to connect on a whole new level.

I massaged the breast I wasn't licking, loving how responsive she was, how she panted and strained upward, seeking more.

I sliced through her underwear with a claw and tossed the scraps aside, then spread her hips, loving how she glistened with wetness already. That night when we first came together was perfect in my mind, like it had been the start of something amazing. I suspected tonight was going to be even better.

Because I loved her. Pleasing her was my sole goal tonight. Tomorrow, on Valentine's Day, I'd woo her further, but tonight was for convincing her I was her match in bed, that I could make things wonderful for her any day of the week.

"I want you, Max," she moaned. "Like before."

"Which way, mate?" I asked. I'd claimed her body in every position I could imagine back then, though there were a few more I'd dreamed up since that I was eager to try.

"Any way."

"But we still have a lot left in the can." I held it up.

She tried to swat it. "I want your cock, Max. Now."

I loved it when she made demands. "Let me do a bit more tasting, and I'll be happy to oblige."

My mating symbols flared, but it was a warm glow this time. My body knew I'd be with her soon, and the chemicals would slow to an ongoing simmer rather than flaring inside me to drive my lust.

Even without chemicals, I'd crave her forever.

I squirted whipped cream onto her clit, watching as it dribbled down across her folds. I wasn't sure about putting any inside. Had to look that one up online sometime—not now.

Leaning forward, I commenced licking, dragging my tongue across every bit of her, groaning at the sweet cream mixed with her lusty flavor.


She bucked against me, urging me on, and I added more cream just because the combo was so amazing. Her cute little clit tightened, and her moan rang out in the room. But instead of falling apart like I wanted her to, she scrambled out from beneath me, snatched the whipped cream can from my hand, and gave me a feral grin.

“Take off that sexy loin cloth, lay back on the bed, and be prepared for me to show you what you’ve been missing, *mate.*”

CHAPTER 23

CHASTITY





My body ached for fulfillment, and it would've been so sweet to lie back and let him give it to me, courtesy of his tongue and the whipped cream. But I wanted to do some licking myself. No need for him to have all the fun.

“Always willing to oblige you, sweetheart.” With a grin, he climbed off the bed. He hummed an inane tune that tickled along my bones. He swayed his hips and slowly undid the first knot of the tie wrapped around his waist. I'd never seen anyone hotter than Max. My heart pounded, and my mouth went dry.

I reached toward him, unable to resist touching, but he stepped backward, shaking his finger my way. Slowly twirling, he tossed aside the strip of leather, leaving a loose one behind. He dipped his thumb claws beneath the top of the loincloth, hitching it down across on hips. He spun to present his back to me and tugged it the rest of the way down, slowly shifting his delectable ass.

“You are such a tease,” I said, half in exasperation because I wanted to be in control of this part of our fun, and half in admiration. This guy took whatever we opted to do to a new level. He took me to a place I'd never imagined, and it was all wrapped up in him.

I'd fallen hard, and there was no turning back. The best part about it was that I wasn't scared. I knew Max wouldn't hurt me like my ex.

The weight I'd carried since I broke up with my ex fell off me, and I had a feeling I'd never bear that burden again.

“You like teasing?” he asked, spinning back around to face me. He straightened, watching me as I stared at his big cock.

I'd had him in many ways that night, and I'd begun to believe I'd imagined how gorgeous it was. I'd been wrong. It was as delectable as I remembered, and I couldn't wait to savor the feel of it again tonight.

“Stop playing with me and lay on the bed, sweetheart,” I said, all breathy. I lifted the can. “I’m eager for my treat.”

He slowly danced over to me, his cock jutting up toward his amazing abs.

“You’re such a tease,” I said in mock disgust. I pointed to the bed. “Lay down and let me have fun.”

“Anytime, sweetheart. Anytime.” He climbed up around me and dropped onto his back.

I took in his muscular body, marveling at how built he was. Part of that came from his orc heritage, but the rest came from the guy who worked out in his basement most days of the week. I’d tiptoed downstairs yesterday morning to watch—and fan my face.

I could happily stare at him always. But right now, I needed to have dessert.

I squirted cream up the underside of his cock.

He released a shiver, but the grin never left his face. He placed his palms beneath his head, uber relaxed.

I couldn’t have that, now could I? He needed to be on edge just like me.

I licked up his length, smacking my lips at the sweet and spicy flavor. I swore he tasted like cinnamon, though that couldn’t be possible. When I took the head of his cock into my mouth and swirled my tongue across it, he groaned. He cupped my head, gliding his fingers through my hair.

Holding his cock away from his abs, I licked and nibbled up and down his length while he bucked up to meet me, growling.

When I took as much of him as I could into my mouth, he almost leapt off the bed. He wrapped my hair around his fingers and held on, lifting his hips to pump into my mouth.

I loved how thick he was, plus the nubs along the sides. The head had tiny thin bands that stroked the inside of my mouth, tickling. I remembered them doing the same within me and couldn’t wait to experience it again.

When I'd sucked all the cream off him, his true flavor came through. Yup, cinnamon. Complete yum.

His growls grew louder. "You need to ..."

I loved how he was losing control, losing himself in me.

"I need you," he said. "Now, Chastity."

I lifted my head, and he popped from my mouth. "Shouldn't we finish off this can of cream?"

He shook his head.

I kissed my way up his body, finding his mouth.

With a growl, he rolled us until I was beneath him, then flipped me over so I was on all fours and tugged up my butt. He spread my legs and started licking, soon driving me near the edge again.

Then he seated his head at my opening and plunged inside me.

I moaned into my pillow, struggling to hold back my orgasm. I wanted to feel him moving within me, those firm nubs along the sides of his cock shifting, plus the strands on the head teasing my inner walls.

He held my hips up with one arm while the fingers of his other hand stroked my clit.

I was falling apart, splintering into a billion fragments, and I couldn't seem to hold it back.

I thrust my hips back to meet him, his thick length stretching me in a way no one else ever could.

We writhed together, moving faster, our bodies in synchronicity. My heat soared higher, and in my mind, I took his hands, holding him with me as we flew all the way to the stars.

There was no one more amazing than Max. He'd be my everything forever, and I couldn't imagine a better way to fall apart than with him.

My body gave in, shuddering. My moan rang out as I let go, and his groan echoed my cries.

He moved faster within me, his cock driving all the way to the hilt. A hearty groan, and he shot his seed inside me.


My body released again, shattering me with an even stronger orgasm.

We collapsed together on the bed.

CHAPTER 24

MAX





After changing the sticky blankets, we climbed between the sheets. I held her all night, making love to her in every way possible. By morning, her scent and taste were imprinted on my mind.

I didn't know where this was going, but I felt good about us. We'd find a way to make this work, and our lives would be complete.

After my parents left, we'd talk. I'd been worried during the week, fearing if I asked her to stay with me, she'd turn me down. But how could such an amazing night end in rejection? I wouldn't believe it. My heart couldn't believe it.

With the smell of bacon in the air, we showered, then went down to eat the breakfast Mom had prepared.

"I'm excited for the picnic," Mom said. Sitting next to Chastity, she leaned against my mate's shoulder. "You did all the organization, right?"

Chastity smiled at Mom. "Max arranged most of it. I just stepped in this past week to tie it all together."

"I'm sure you've given the event a polish it wouldn't have had otherwise."

I loved seeing how much they already cared for each other.

Dad watched them as well, and I sensed he was still judging Chastity. But the anger had gone from his face, and he held his tongue, speaking civilly to her for the first time.

Mom and Dad were fated mates just like me and Chastity. He adored Mom; I'd never doubted that. And he loved me and my sisters as much, though he wasn't always good about showing it. Maybe this would smooth out.

I read only indifference in his eyes, which was an improvement over scorn. Would he ever warm up to her? The fact that I cared for her, that I wanted her in my life, should be

enough. She shouldn't have to prove to him she was worthy of affection and respect. She deserved to have that given to her freely. I knew why he acted this way; his family history still haunted him. But surely, he realized that Chastity had played no part in that?

An ache filled my chest. She'd lost her family when she was young, just as he had, but she didn't spend her life trying to place blame. She'd accepted what the world gave her and made it better.

Dad wallowed in the life he felt he'd been denied.

"What exactly have you done to help my son with the event?" Dad asked, his voice neutral, though I didn't miss the hint of mockery in his eyes. "Because it sounds like he's done all the work."

"She did everything I haven't," I said, standing. I wasn't going to sit here and let him pick her apart.

Chastity stood so fast; her chair tipped back before righting itself. "I'll go grab a sweater in case it gets chilly at the park." She fled the room.

My belly burned with irritation. I held it back only because they were leaving soon, and Mom deserved a meal without him and me arguing.

Mom shot Dad a glare, but she held her tongue. "You and Chastity go along to the park. We'll follow in a bit." She started stacking dishes on the table. "You're washing," she told my dad, the tone of her voice making it clear this wasn't a question.

"Of course," he said. He took platters with leftovers into the kitchen.

Mom sighed and left the stack of plates on the table, coming around to my side to give me a hug. "I'll speak to him again."

"I'm not sure it'll do any good."

"I'll still tell him my thoughts. Again." She leaned back in my embrace. "I like her a lot. You've done well, son."

I gave her a kiss on her cheek. “Thanks, Mom.”

“I hope the ceremony helped her feel like she was a full member of our family.”

“I’m sure it did.”

“It’s tradition. I’m not worried about her craving you or you feeling the same for her. If you have love for each other, that’s all that matters.”

“Thank you, Mom.” I gave her a kiss on the cheek, then went to see if Chastity was ready to leave.

She didn’t say much as we drove into town. I stopped for coffee on the way.

“Do you need anything in the office?” I asked as I shifted into gear, pulling out of the coffee shop parking lot. “Or can I go straight to the park?”

“I put everything in the back of your truck.” She stared forward, biting her lower lip. I hated seeing sadness on her face. She deserved days full of happiness.

“I’m sorry about how my dad has behaved this week,” I said. Irritation burned through me. I never expected a relationship to be perfect, but Chastity was everything I could ever want in a mate. Why couldn’t my father see that?

“It’s not your fault, but thanks.” She stared down at her hands clasped on her lap before turning to look out the windshield again. “I’m sorry I’m causing conflict between you. That’s the last thing I want to do. You’re a family. I’m splitting it apart.”

“*You’re* not. He is.”

She shrugged. “It’s the same thing.”

I took her hand and squeezed it but had to let go to turn into the park entrance. Ahead, I spied the tent she’d arranged to have set up, providing shade for the picnic tables.

After parking, I got out and helped her carry boxes and bags to the tables. I helped her set up the games and cover the

tables with patterned cloths. When the suppliers arrived with drinks and coolers, we placed them underneath the trees.

In no time, my employees and their families started to arrive.

Chastity soon had the kids playing games. I watched how she kept them entertained. Giving each kid a prize was a brilliant idea. This way, they all felt like they were winners.

My parents arrived and sat at the table where I'd dropped Chastity's sweater and bag.

I went over to greet them, giving Mom a kiss and Dad a nod. His gaze remained on Chastity, watching as she interacted with the kids but instead of satisfaction, I still found irritation in his eyes. Did he want to see her fail? The thought made me sad. He shouldn't try to force a choice. It was unfair, and he wouldn't win. I loved my dad, but he was the past. Chastity was my future.

"The baskets should be here soon," Chastity said, coming over to join us. Her cheeks bloomed pink from sunshine, and the wind had played with her hair, tousling it. I'd never seen anyone as lovely, and I couldn't wait to take her to my bed, and not only for sex. I wanted to hold her and tell her the feelings growing in my heart.

"I ordered two baskets for our group," I told Dad. "One for you and Mom and one for me and Chastity."

"Shouldn't she be eating with the other employees?" Dad asked with a sour twist to his lips.

"Jeez, Dad," I said in warning. "Could you stop?"

Chastity blinked fast, and I tugged her into my arms.

Mom turned to face Dad and a snarl ripped up her throat. "I tell you, BB, there are times when I feel as if I don't even know you."

Dad blanched, and maybe for the first time in his life, he realized he'd gone too far. He shot me a look I couldn't define, but studiously avoided looking at Chastity.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “I ...” He sighed. Rising, he walked away from the table, his shoulders curling forward. He took the bridge spanning the river but stopped in the middle to stare down at the water. Good. Maybe heavy contemplation would result in better behavior.

“I’ll go talk with him,” I said.

“Don’t,” Mom said. “Give him a chance to think. Your father doesn’t welcome change, but with time, he usually comes around to the right point of view. I’ve certainly made the right point of view clear to him. He needs to find a way to reconcile his past with our combined future. We can’t keep living if we’re hidden away, and he knows that in his heart.”

“I won’t let him talk to Chastity this way.”

Chastity looked up at me, and the sorrow in her eyes was like a kick in the chest, stealing my breath.

She stepped out of my arms. “Would it be all right if I spoke with him?” she asked my mother. “Alone.”

Mom slowly nodded. “Of course, honey. But if he doesn’t behave, don’t feel you need to take whatever he’s eager to dish out.”


“You don’t need to do this,” I said, wanting to protect her, even from my father.

She gave me a sweet smile. “I think I do.”

CHAPTER 25

CHASTITY





“Hi,” I said, stopping to lean against the bridge rail beside BB. The sun sparkled on the water rushing beneath us, the trickling sound going a long way toward soothing my soul. If I could make peace with BB, my life would be complete.

“What do you want?” he asked, though he didn’t sound angry.

“To talk.”

He turned to face me. “I don’t believe I have much to say to you.”

“Well, I have something to say to you. It’s up to you if you want to listen, though you need to know right now that I’ll chase you down until you do.”

“You’re a human, not a full-blooded orc like me and my family,” he said with a trace of disgust and a stiffening of his spine. “I don’t need to listen to anything you have to say.”

“I love Max.”

He snorted, one eyebrow lifting, but at least he remained beside me.

“I don’t know where our relationship is going, but I want to give it the best chance possible,” I said, staring forward, barely taking in the minty green leaves on the trees or the wildflowers growing along the banks of the river. The water looked deep here, maybe over ten feet. A true challenge even for an experienced swimmer like me.

“What can I say or do to get you to quit your job and leave town?” he asked, turning to face me.

I sputtered for a second. “You’d try to pay me off to make me leave Max?” The gall of him. Where did he get off thinking—

“You wouldn’t be the first.” He huffed. “Let’s face it. You don’t have anything to offer my son.”

“I’m smart. I’m determined. And I love him. That’s enough.” But was it? I didn’t like thinking less of myself, but Max said his family was essentially royalty. I was anything but aristocracy. “I might come from nothing and have few valuables to my name, but what I do have, I possess because I earned them.”

He turned to face the water. “I’m not putting you down.”

“Sure you are. It’s mean and snobby.”

“If you tell him you don’t want to be with him and leave, those will fade.” He tapped the symbol entwining my right wrist. “You could say the ceremony didn’t work. He’d accept that.”

“You’re never going to accept me, are you? Whenever you and Ulgritte visit us, you’ll pick me apart. If we have children, you’ll do the same with them.” The thought melted into my soul like a hot blade destroying a candle.

“I’m sure you’re a decent person,” he said. “You’re just not the right one for my son.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” I wasn’t sure how to take this. I loved Max, and I wanted to be with him, but—

“He’ll come to resent you,” BB said. “You don’t understand our customs or traditions. You’ll mess things up, and he’ll come to hate you.”

Would he? He seemed to care for me, but BB was right that I didn’t understand how to be an orc’s wife.

I didn’t bring him money or prestige. I was floundering around, trying to fit in with orc traditions.

I was human.

And I’d eventually fail him.

Sorrow overwhelmed me, and I slumped against the rail.

“Go,” BB said, nudging my hand. “Pack your things and leave town. I’ll tell him you don’t want him if that makes this easier.”

But would it make this easier? I wasn't the only one in this relationship. Max should have a say in what happened between us.

Stomps on the bridge sent me spinning.

Sam, the jerk who'd tried to grab me at the construction site, raced our way. "You're going to pay," he bellowed.

"Watch out." BB grabbed my arms and pushed me behind him.

Sam slammed into BB, and the two hit the rail hard. It gave way, and the two males fell, splashing into the water below.

I raced to the other side of the bridge, watching as they were swept downstream. Sam swam toward shore.

BB floundered, blubbering as he kept going under.

Orcs didn't swim. He was going to drown.

I leapt off the bridge and into the water.

CHAPTER 26

MAX



I watched as Chastity spoke with my dad, hoping whatever she had to say would sway him. I knew her. She would be nice. She'd try to help him see reason.

Would my father give her a chance?

"Sit," Mom said. "He won't hurt her."

"Not physically."

"I wish I could say he wouldn't hurt her emotionally, but you know your father and his stubborn ways," she said with a sigh. "I'm sorry. I had so much hope for this when I traveled here. A new daughter! I love her already. Know right now, I won't allow him to continue to behave like this."

I dropped down onto the picnic table bench opposite her. "He's his own person. Stubborn."

"He *will* see reason."

"I hope in time."

"I like her," Mom said softly. "She's perfect for you, honey. Don't ever forget that."

"I love her, Mom."

She took my hands and squeezed them. "Aw, Maxon. Things are going to turn out okay. Your father will come around and everything will be—"

Chastity cried out, and we both turned toward the bridge.

Sam ran toward her and my father. Dad put himself between them, and the guy slammed into Dad. The bridge rail gave way, and Dad and Sam fell into the water.

"Get help," I bellowed, rushing toward the river.

I reached it in time to see my crew running down the bank to grab the guy from the construction site.

Chastity jumped into the water and swam toward Dad.

Leaving the bridge, I ran along the shore as she grabbed onto my father. While he flailed and sputtered, she tugged him to shore.

I plunged into the water, floundering toward them as she brought him closer. He wasn't moving, and the thought of losing my dad pierced through my heart like a blade.

"Got him," I said, easing him away from her while making sure she had solid footing.

She panted and gazed at my dad frantically. "Is he okay? I had a hard time grabbing him. He was fighting. Drowning!"

"He's breathing. You saved him." I hefted my father onto my shoulder, no easy task since he was almost as large an orc as me and held out my hand to Chastity. "Let me help you."

She waved. "I'm okay. Let's get him out of the river. I'm right with you."

We splashed through the water and climbed the bank, where I lowered my dad carefully to the grass.

Mom whimpered and dropped to her knees beside Dad, stroking his forehead. "BB? Speak to me, mate. BB!"


I turned to thank Chastity but spied her running toward the parking lot.

I called her name, but she didn't turn back.

CHAPTER 27

CHASTITY





O kay, so I was a fool for running away, but all I could think of was BB telling me I wasn't worthy of Max. Sam's attack reinforced everything BB said. I'd not only brought conflict into their family, but I'd also brought trouble in the form of an angry human. How horrifying for BB to be attacked after what happened to his parents.

I was to blame, and there wasn't anything I could do but flee to give myself time to think.

I reached the parking lot at the same time a cab was pulling into the lot. A family got out of the back, and I grabbed the door, ducking my head inside.

"Can you take me somewhere?" I asked, giving the man the address.

He scowled at my dripping clothing. "You're wet."

"Yeah, I should've brought a swimsuit." My voice choked off with tears. "Can you give me a ride? Please?"

Grumbling, he tossed a plastic bag into the backseat. "Sit on this."

I climbed in and shut the door, staring across the park. BB sat up, and Ulgritte collapsed in his arms. Max was looking my way.

I was running, but I wasn't running. I couldn't think with them around. At least the food had arrived, and the picnic could continue without me.

The cab dropped me off at Max's house. Inside, I stripped off my saturated clothing and tossed them into the washer, taking the stairs two at a time to his room. *His* room? This morning, I'd thought it was my room too.

I took a hot shower and dressed in warm clothing. Downstairs, I poured a glass of tea from the fridge and took it out onto the deck. I sat and propped my heels up on the railing,

staring toward the mountains. It was so pretty here. I thought I'd fit in, that I could grab onto the future Max and his home provided and make them mine.

How could I stay with Max if I only dragged him down? I'd always considered myself a decent person, but what kind of woman remained with a guy if she was having a hard time fitting into his life?

The kind who loved him.

Was my love enough to make up for ruining his relationship with his dad? Family was important. I'd lost mine, and there wasn't a day when I didn't miss having them with me, supporting me.

Max dropped down into the chair beside me.

I sipped my iced tea.

"You didn't stay for the picnic," he said, and I couldn't read anything from his tone. I didn't dare look at him. I didn't want to see the disappointment on his face.

"I'm sorry." That was neutral.

"Can you tell me something?"

I nodded.

"Do you want to stay with me, or do you want me to let you go?"

I pinched my eyes shut, and when I opened them, they stung from tears. I kept my face turned away so he wouldn't see them. "What do you want me to do?"

"I need to know what *you* want, Chastity."

What did I want?

Max. More than anything. Maybe even more than my self-respect.

A whimper slipped from my mouth. "How can I ask you to be with me if it causes conflict between you and your dad?"

"Do you want to stay with me, or do you want me to let you go?" He repeated.

I still couldn't meet his eye. "I love you, Max, which is why I don't want to mess things up between you and your family."

"Chastity, I love you. I want you in my life. My dad's an asshole, but please don't let him come between us. Losing you would gut me, and I'd never recover from the blow."

He reached out his hand.

I could take it, or I could stand and stride out of his life.

There really was no choice.

I took his hand.

CHAPTER 28

MAX



I thought I'd lost her. She was safe; I'd seen that. But she ran away.

"Go to her, son," Mom said, her arms around Dad. Someone visiting the park for the day was an EMT, and he came over to check Dad out, pronouncing him fit and suffering no lingering effects from his fall into the water.

As for the guy who'd tried to harm my father and mate, he'd been arrested and taken to the city jail. Dad agreed to go in and fill out a report for assault charges.

Even without Mom's urging, I would've gone after Chastity. It was time for us to talk.

And now she'd taken my hand. I linked our fingers, holding tight. She held everything that was me, my very heart, in her small hand.

"Stay?" I asked. I'd told myself I wouldn't beg, but she was meeting me halfway, wasn't she?

She said she loved me.

"I love you, Max. So much," she said fiercely, finally facing me. "I'm not going anywhere. We'll find a way to make this work. I'll try harder to please him. He'll eventually see who I am inside."

It crushed me that she'd keep reaching her hand out to my dad, but he'd brush it aside, but my sadness was replaced with anger.

I tugged her out of her seat and onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her. When she leaned into my chest, my anger fled, replaced with love. When I was with her, there was no room for anything else.

To think I'd nearly lost her. How could I go on with only half of my heart?

“You’re everything to me, Chastity.” I wasn’t ashamed about the tears trickling down my face. When she got into that cab, I thought she was leaving me. I truly expected to arrive here to find her clothing and car gone. To learn weeks from now that she’d left town.

Instead, she’d come to our home and remained.

“Things will work out with my dad,” I said with determination. “I’m going to make sure of that.”

“I ...” Dad stepped out the open sliding glass door onto the deck. Mom stood inside the living room, watching through the glass. He walked over to stand beside us. “I—”

“If you’ve come here to be nasty to my mate,” I said. “You can turn around and walk back inside. I won’t let you speak to her like that ever again.”

“I didn’t come for that reason,” he said. If I didn’t know my strong father by his straight shoulders and stiff jawline, I’d read his slumped posture as a male defeated. “I was wrong.” His gaze met Chastity’s. “I’m sorry.”

“Is this because she saved you from drowning?” I asked. “Because someone shouldn’t have to do a heroic thing like that to earn your approval.”

He lowered his head. “You’re right. They shouldn’t. She shouldn’t. I judged her as I have humans throughout my life, choosing not to see who they are inside. I made a horrible mistake, and it nearly cost me the love of my son. But not only that, it nearly cost me the chance to have a new daughter in my life.”

Tears trickled down Chastity’s face. She slid off my lap and went around to stand beside Dad, reaching out tentatively for his arm.

He turned to face her. “I can’t ask you to forgive me. I was mean and snobby like you said. I deserve only your scorn. But can you find it in your heart to give me a second chance?”

As I’d done with my mate just a short time ago, she held out her hand to him.

He took it and tugged her into his arms for a hug.

MOM AND DAD went into town to get takeout food for dinner, leaving me and Chastity alone.

As they left, Mom winked. If I knew her, they were going to take a long time to order and bring back food.

I stood and, with a possessive growl, lifted Chastity off her feet, spinning around with her in my arms. I rained kissed down on her face.

“Mate,” I said with each one.

“Mate,” she agreed. “Who would’ve thought? When I pulled those cherry flavored undies from that package, I never dreamed wearing them could turn out like this.”

“Happy?” I sure was.

“I couldn’t be any happier.” Her brows drew together. “Except ...”


“What?” I wasn’t even worried about what she had to say. From the heat in her eyes, I had a feeling I was going to enjoy whatever she said.

She grinned. “Do you think there’s much whipped cream left in that can?”

CHAPTER 29

EPILOGUE: CHASTITY





A year later, I drove my car up the winding road to my and Max's home. I'd spent the day shopping with Ulgritte, and our bags filled the backseat. I'd even picked up a small box of chocolates like the one I'd brought to Max's office so long ago. I bought them for him often, tucking them into hidden places where I knew he'd find them and grin.

We'd married nine months ago on the deck of our house, and BB had given me away. Not that I needed something old-fashioned like that, but he'd offered, and I'd been so honored, I'd agreed.

Today was a first for me. Not shopping but spending the day with someone on my birthday. A year ago, I would've felt like a pity case. The orc mother-in-law, feeling bad for her son's wife on her birthday and offering to help her pick out some clothes to fit her now-larger body.

Instead, my heart overflowed. I not only had a mate I loved more than anything, but I also had two parents who felt the same. Once he'd torn down his wall of anger, BB and I had continued to grow closer. At this point, it was a toss-up who I loved most, him or Ulgritte.

My life couldn't get any better.

"Oh, who's visiting?" Ulgritte asked, frowning at the cars lining the driveway. "Did you invite anyone over?"

"Not me." I stroked my belly where Max and my baby grew. I was due to deliver in three months, and I couldn't wait to hold our new youngling. The first of many, I hoped.

"There's not a hockey game on today, is there?" I asked. Last weekend, Max and I invited a bunch of friends from work over to watch a game. It was fun nestling in his arms, bellowing at the TV about bad ref calls along with the others.

“You go ahead inside,” Ulgritte said. “I’ll bring in the bags.”

“Uh, sure, Mom.” She insisted I call her that, and it gave me a warm feeling inside wherever I did it.

Because I wasn’t going to leave her to tote everything inside, I snatched a few bags off the back seat while she grumbled.

“They’re not heavy,” I said. “I promise.”

“You know me. I worry!”

I gave her a quick hug from behind, and she shot me a smile over her shoulder. “Thank you for making my day special.”

“*You* are special, Chastity. Never doubt that.” She stroked my face. “You make me happy.”

My eyes filled with tears. It seemed like I cried so easily lately, but that was because my life couldn’t be more complete. My joy overflowed in the form of happy tears.

We strode up onto the side deck, her loaded with our purchases, me feeling like I was shirking by carrying only two small bags.

Max opened the back door. “There you are.”

“Who’s visiting?” Despite my tired feet, I was up for company. Maybe we could make popcorn. I was hungry all the time; a thing Ulgritte said was common when someone carried an orc baby.

“Just a few friends,” he said, taking the bags from my hands and dropping them on the counter. He grabbed my hand. “Let Mom take care of those. Come say hi.”

He led me through the living room and out onto the front deck where ...

“Surprise!” Everyone shouted. “Happy Birthday!”

I was crying again, and nothing was going to stop it. All my friends were here to help me celebrate. My family! I sniffed and couldn’t stop grinning.

BB trotted over and gave me a big hug. “Happy Birthday, daughter!”

Ulgritte beamed from beside us, her face full of love.

My friend, who’d given me the edible undies, came over and leaned into my shoulder.

“Happy Birthday, sweetie,” Violet said. “I’m so glad I could be here to celebrate with you.”

“I’m so glad to see you!” We’d known each other since junior high. “How long will you be in town?” I asked while Max got his mom a drink from the punch bowl on a table sitting close to the front wall of our house.

“Would you believe I moved here?” she asked. “Every time you mentioned Monsterville, I thought, hey, me and Halle should move there too. I took a job at Rylee’s cupcake shop.”

“You and your little sister moved here?” I squealed, then laughed.

“Uncle Bub too.”

Her uncle had bad arthritis and lived with them. Violet’s dad died before she was born, and her mom abandoned her while we were still in high school. She and her uncle had been raising her little sister since.

Violet grinned. “Something exciting has come up, but until I meet with the lawyer, I don’t want to say anything to jinx it.”

“Lawyer? You’re okay, right?”

“I think it’s going to make a big difference in our lives. I’ll let you know after I speak with him.” Her gaze swept the group. “Monsterville is so cute! I can’t wait to ...” Her gaze slanted across the deck, and her jaw dropped. “OMG, who is he? Please tell me he’s not taken.”

“Who?” I peered around.

“The hot gargoyle clinging to the cake table.”

Gargoyle ...

“Oh! That’s Goreg. He runs his own electrical business. He’s kind of quiet.” ‘Kind of’ being an understatement. I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard him say more than a few words in the year I’d known him. Even when our favorite hockey team won, he’d only grinned, not saying a peep. “He’s one of Max’s friends.”

“I’m going to go say hi,” she said, smoothing her long, almost white hair. “Maybe he’d be willing to show me around town. I’d love to see the ... sites.”

“Um, one thing,” I said with a frown. When she stopped and glanced back, I wiggled my eyebrows. “From what I’ve heard, gargoyles like to do interesting things mid-flight.”

“Ohhh,” she sighed, her eyes sparkling. “I’ve never flown other than in a plane before.” She scooted toward him.

I shook my head. She hadn’t quite understood what I said, but I wished her luck.

A little boy toddled over to me, and I scooped him up, giving his cheek a big kiss. “How are you, Josh?” I asked him.

Rylee, his mom, came over. She’d posted the blog I’d read a year ago.

She and her orc husband, Gunner, had recently moved from a little town called Screaming Woods. He hadn’t been born an orc but had been changed. His new genetics had played out in their son, who was a cutie. Strangely enough, it wasn’t until they’d been together a few months that orc mating symbols appeared on their wrist. How cool was that?

Rylee had opened a cupcake shop where Violet now worked, and Gunner was a blacksmith who’d started delving into metal art. His lawn ornaments and weathervanes were already in hot demand.

“There he is,” Rylee said. “Josh, sweetie, I keep telling you not to run off on your own.” She smiled at me. “Thanks for grabbing him.”

He held his arms out to her, and she took him, holding him on her hip. Her husband, Gunner, came over and wrapped his

arms around them both, and the love he felt for his family shone in his gorgeous eyes.

“He’s wonderful,” I said, stroking my big belly. “I can’t wait to have my own child. They’ll be friends!”

“They sure will,” Rylee said. “I’m calling dibs on babysitting already.”

Gunner kissed her cheek and grinned my way. “Rylee wants tons of kids. I’ve got my heart set on a daughter.”

“Which will happen in due time,” Rylee said. She winked at me. “Maybe before you know it.”

Was she pregnant? I couldn’t wait for an announcement.

“Happy Birthday,” she called over her shoulder as she and Gunner took their son to the buffet table.

I smiled after them.

Max came over and gave me a heady kiss. I clung to his shoulders, drinking in the wonder of our love.

“Happy?” he asked, turning me in his arms to wrap himself around me from behind.

“Very.” I watched my friends who’d gathered to celebrate my special day, and tears trickled down my face. I welcomed them because they showed my heart was overflowing with love.

“I can’t believe you did this,” I said, choking up. “Thank you so much.”

“Happy Birthday, love,” he whispered by my ear. “This can’t make up for those you lost, but,” he pressed his fist against his heart, “this is the first of many birthdays we’ll celebrate together.

I hope you enjoyed Max & Chastity’s story!

Need more of the Monsterville, USA world?

Orc Me Baby One More Time, Rylee & Gunner

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ava Ross is a two-time *USA Today* Bestselling author who has written numerous titles, all of them featuring sweet and steamy romance. She fell for men with unusual features when she first watched Star Wars, where alien creatures have gone mainstream. She lives in New England with her husband (who is sadly not an alien, though he is still cute in his own way), her kids, and a few assorted pets.

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While struggling to raise my little sister, I suddenly inherit a run-down B&B from a grandmother I didn't know existed. The only condition to inherit is that I marry and live with my husband for a year.

One problem. I'm not dating, and the only one I want to propose to is the gargoyle I've been crushing on for months. When I explain, Goreg offers a marriage of convenience with a quicky divorce at the end. He's sweet and shy, and with his muscular frame and glorious wings, I'm kind of blown away by his offer even if he does occasionally turn to stone and lurk on the roof.

I've got one year to convince Goreg we have a chance at forever. But then his brothers and wolf shifter best friend move in to help us fix up the B&B, and it's one cultural mishap after another. When the year is over, I'll have to decide. Do I want to be single again or remain a gargoyle's bride?

Gargoyles Just Want to Have Fun is set in the Monsterville, USA world. Each book is standalone and can be read in any order. Expect romantic hijinks with monsters, heat, and a happily ever after.

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CHAPTER I

VIOLET



□

“Today’s da day, right?” my little sister, Halle, asked from where she sat at our tiny kitchen table, finishing up her breakfast. She peered up at me with an innocence only an eight-year-old could hold onto. Mine had been lost six years ago when our mom took off, leaving me to hold things together.

There was nothing like abandonment to teach a girl a lesson. No one could find her, and if Uncle Bub hadn’t moved in and picked up the pieces, I wasn’t sure what would’ve happened to us. I was only eighteen at the time and still in high school.

I gave her a quick hug. “Yes, today’s the day, sweetie.”

“The lawla’s gonna explain evie-thing,” she said added, lifting a spoonful of cereal and milk to her mouth.

This was what I’d told her after I announced to her and Uncle Bub that we were moving to Monsterville.

“Monsterville?” Uncle Bub had sputtered, scratching his head. “Why in tarnation did they name the place that?”

“The town’s original name is Blustery Hills, but after a bunch of monsters settled there, that’s what everyone started calling it. It’s one of the biggest monster settlements in the country.”

“Monsters,” he said with a scrunched face. “Who woulda thought they’d just stroll out of the woodwork like that? Never thought I’d see the day when people and creatures lived together.”

Me either, but after three years, I’d gotten used to seeing centaurs trotting along the sidewalk, vampires sipping burgundy cocktails at bars, and the occasional yeti pushing a cart through the grocery store.

“That still doesn’t explain why we’re moving to Monsterville,” Uncle Bub had said.

“We need a fresh start.”

“If you think it’s best, I’ll pack my things,” Uncle Bub had said. He’d shuffled to his room with his cane to start gathering everything together.

As I’d told Halle, I’d received a letter from a “lawla’s” office. Inside the pristine envelope, I found a note telling me I’d inherited a sizeable estate and asking me to come to Monsterville on a certain date. The message indicated they’d explain further when I arrived. My phone call didn’t yield anything else. The guy who answered told me they couldn’t discuss such a thing until I arrived.

With nothing holding me in my old town, I’d moved us to Monsterville, and today, I’d find out what this was all about.

The only other clue came from a handwritten message on flowered stationary, folded and yellowed with age.

Dearest Violet,

You’ll never know how delighted I was when your mother, my daughter, sent word she’d named you after me. We never found a way to reconcile her running away at fifteen.

Abandoning us wasn’t the first time Mom took off. There was no way I’d be able to reconcile with her, either.

Knowing someone would have my name long after I was gone warmed my heart through.

I hadn’t realized I had a living relative outside of dad’s brother, Uncle Bub. The only time Mom mentioned her and Dad’s parents, she told me they’d died. It hurt to think she’d kept a grandmother from me.

You’ve received this letter because I’ve passed to the great beyond. Hopefully, I’ve lived a long life. Even more, I hope I’ve had the chance to meet you, though I doubt your mother will bring you by. I’m afraid I wasn’t kind when she finally reached out to me after running away.

Let’s get to your inheritance, shall we? To claim it, you’ll need to follow the instructions I’ve given my lawyer.

I know I'm asking a lot of you, but after what happened with your mother, I'll feel better knowing you're settled and secure. Please seriously consider the stipulations related to your inheritance. Believe it or not, this is a tradition in our family. I claimed my inheritance in the same way, and I never regretted cooperating with the conditions.

This will work out as it should.

Sincerely,

Your beloved Grandmother, Violet

I'd initially thought it was a hoax. I never knew why my mother named me after a flower.

After Halle finished her cereal and put her bowl in the sink, I nudged my chin toward her coat hanging on the peg next to our apartment's outer door. "Get dressed. The bus will be here soon to pick you up."

Humming, she danced over to it, tugging it off the peg and stuffing her arms through the sleeves.

"Leaving for school, little one?" Uncle Bub asked, his cane clunking rhythmically as he left the tiny hall leading to the two bedrooms that came with the apartment. It wasn't much; we barely squeaked by with his social security and what I made working at a friend's cupcake shop, but we were a family. We might not have much, but we had each other.

"Yup," Halle said. "I love my new school."

"Now that's good to hear," Uncle Bub said with a grin. He hobbled over to the coffee maker and poured a cup, adding a dash of cream, before taking it to the tiny table and sitting. He buttoned up his thick cardigan sweater, and his soft groan slipped out.

I hated how stiff and sore he was from arthritis. It wasn't fair that a guy seventy-one-years-old should ache as much as he did, but good doctors were expensive.

I also hated that we couldn't afford to turn the heat up in the apartment, because being chilly sure didn't help. But warmth cost money we didn't have.

“Here’s your lunch,” I told Halle, handing her the bag meal I’d prepared for her. I’d include a little note telling her how much I loved her, and I hoped it gave her a smile.

I kissed the top of her head and grabbed my coat, slipping into it and zipping it up to my chin. I stuffed a hat on her head, making her giggle when the tips of her black hair so like my own jutted out from the sides. I helped her put on her gloves.

Fall had arrived to our little town surrounded by snow-topped mountains, and with it came chilly temperatures.

“I’ll see you in a bit, Uncle Bub,” I said, my hand on the doorknob. “There are sausages and eggs on the plate in the fridge. Heat them up in the microwave, and you’ll have a yummy meal.” I’d prepared them while making Halle’s lunch.

“Yes, yes, I’ll eat them, thanks.” He didn’t look up from the newspaper Rylee, the owner of the cupcake shop where I worked, gave me at the end of each day. Rylee just threw them out, and Uncle Bub didn’t care if they were a day or two old. *News is news*, he always said.

I gave him a quick kiss on his wrinkly cheek, and he shifted in his chair.

“Get on with you, now,” he grumbled. “You’re interferin’ with this story.”

With a grin, I scooted after Halle, grateful all over again we had him. Tomorrow, at the end of my shift at Rylee’s, I’d buy Uncle Bub a freshly made cupcake. He loved them, and I loved making him smile.

“I’ll be back after my meeting.” My appointment was in a half hour. Without a car, I had to walk, and I’d have to hustle across town or I’d be late.

Halle and I hurried down the stairs to the ground floor and bustled out the front door.

“Brrr,” Halle cried, scrunching her arms against her chest.

A cold wind swept through town from the mountains, bringing with it a chill that penetrated to the bone. It was relentless, howling through the streets, sending fallen leaves

flying through the air. It was so strong it seemed to be alive, and it had a biting, icy quality that made everyone shiver. To think it was only mid-October. I couldn't imagine what January would be like here.

Why had I said I wanted to move from a city with temps that never dropped below fifty to Monsterville?

Oh, yeah. To be near my best friend, Chastity, and to claim my inheritance. Chastity moved here over a year ago and fell in love with her boss, an orc named Max.

I'd followed a little over a month ago, telling her at her birthday party that I had a meeting with the lawyer in town. I hoped it wasn't a mistake to move the three of us here. Just my luck, my "inheritance" would be a bag of beat-up marbles. Sweet, but they wouldn't buy us dinner.

Speaking of which, I needed to stop at the corner grocery store on my way home to pick something up.

As I followed Halle, I tugged my cash from my purse and squinted down at it, hoping leprechauns had visited overnight and made it multiply. No such luck. A quick scan told me I had less than twenty bucks until payday on Friday. It wasn't Rylee's fault. She paid me more than most would in town.

I'd make it stretch. I always did.

We stomped our feet as we waited for the bus.

Nestled in the mountains, Monsterville was absolutely adorable. The main street was lined with cute shops and cafes, and the houses were charming and well-kept. The people here were friendly and welcoming. They'd have to be with monsters living among us. I could see why Chastity bragged it up.

I hadn't felt scared even once since we moved here, a feeling that clung to my skin when we lived in a city.

The bus pulled up to the curb with a squeal of brakes and a puff of exhaust.

"Bye, Hal," I said. I tucked her coat up around her throat, realizing she was outgrowing it already. After I got paid, I'd

see if I could squeak out a bit of money to buy her something new at the thrift shop.

“She scooted up onto the bus, her bag bouncing on her back, and took a seat beside her ogre best friend. As the bus pulled away, she and her friend grinned through the glass, waving.

A glance at my phone told me I had twenty minutes to walk a mile. Not wanting to be late, I half-jogged, darting around humans and a mama minotaur pushing a stroller holding three minotaur babies.

A swooping sound erupted overhead, and I looked up. I’d seen this gargoyle before, though only briefly. I would’ve met him for real at Chastity’s birthday party if he hadn’t fled out the side door when he spied me approaching.

The memory pinched. I wasn’t gorgeous by any means, but I was happy with how I looked. I had nice black hair, a decent if curvy figure, and my teeth were more or less straight. People complemented me on my big brown eyes all the time.

Pausing, I watched in awe as he flew above the buildings, heading in the same direction as me. I’d seen him around town a few times since Chastity’s party, but hadn’t tried to speak with him again.

Was it silly to harbor a crush for a guy I hadn’t shared even one word with? Probably. So be it. I hurt no one but myself with my feelings.

After I almost met him, I did some online research. Naturally, most of what I discovered about gargoyles came from mythology, and who knew if any of it was true? The real monsters resisted sharing after they stepped out of the woods and from below the ground, joining humans. Before that, they’d lived a parallel life, many building homes like ours, though others kept to their own traditional structures and cultural ways.

I turned a corner and hurried along the street, tugging the collar of my jacket up over my ears. The wind bit through my clothing and seemed determined to freeze my bones.

Fifteen minutes later, I spied the address from the envelope, Mitchell & Smythe, Esquires, on the small sign mounted beside the door.

I hurried up the walk and took the two steps in one jump.

When I pulled the door open, the wind caught it, stealing it from my frozen fingers. It banged against the handrail.

“Oh,” Goreg said, standing in the opening, his dark eyes narrowed on my face. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

This was the most my gargoyle crush had ever said to me. A defining moment for us! I held in my laugh.

“Oh, it’s all right,” I said, my teeth chattering. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” he said, looking anywhere but at me.

Yeah, I got it. Not interested. It shouldn’t sting but it did.

“Nice seeing you, then.” I eased past him, and our bodies brushed together.

He sucked in a breath. I gasped as tingles spreading through me. It meant nothing. I was ... warming up now that I stood out of the wind.

Gerig wore a wool coat, a long black thing that hung to his knees with openings in the back for his wings. They lay against his spine, leathery-looking like his skin and bat-like.

From what I remember from Chastity’s party, he had a tough, chiseled body with large wings that let him soar through the sky with ease, which sure beat having to take a bus or drive a car. A few times, I’d spied him perching atop buildings and even on the sole statue near the center of town, as if he was keeping a watchful eye over his territory.

Flying, he was a sight to behold. His commanding presence had an intoxicating aura that was impossible to resist. His claws would make him a formidable opponent. But I sensed all his strength and power hid a lonely heart.

It wasn’t his gorgeous appearance at my friend’s party that had drawn me near. It was the sadness in his eyes.

That look still lingered.

“Nice seeing you again,” I said, moving toward the inner door.

As I went inside, I sensed he watched me, though I didn’t turn to see if he did.

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