



# ORC BOUGHT

THE IMMORTAL SORTING BOOK I

EMMA ALISYN FAE

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AN ORC MONSTER ROMANCE

THE IMMORTAL SORTING

BOOK 1

EMMA ALISYN

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On the run from Fae slavers, the best chance of survival is to submit to the Immortal Sorting.

I'll be claimed by an Orc in exchange for protection. The price? A life of servitude.

But Commander Uther Bachbracht, fearsome warrior with a hidden tenderness only for me, wants more than a concubine; I'm the woman he chooses to be his wife.

My lies may jeopardize our future, but I have no choice but to trust his honor, no chance to rest before enemies find me.

Either I'll live by my Orc blade, or die by it, and the Commander is willing to kill to protect what he has claimed.

ORC BOUGHT is a standalone steamy orc monster romance, for readers who like strong, protective, cinnamon roll heroes, bride auctions, pregnancy, post-apocalyptic alternate earth settings, magic and adventure, and morally gray worlds. Features a pragmatic but vulnerable heroine over thirty-five, a diverse cast, and some potentially sensitive content.

### **CONTENT WARNING**

**While this is not written as a dark romance, the characters live in a gritty, gray world. This story contains sexual assault, and violence.**

# ONE

THE SCENT of roasting meat wakes my stomach, which attempts a pathetic gurgle.

It stopped growling two days ago; there hadn't been time to hunt during our flight up the coast. That, along with the lack of hunger pains and my lightheadedness as I carry a 6-year-old on my back, is enough warning I'm almost at the end of my tether.

Two weeks spent running, a few miles ahead of our pursuers, avoiding the broken remnants of a highway raiders now used as bait for stupid travelers.

I kept the road in distant sight to guide us to the Sorting, but remained in the forest, chancing its animals and monsters until we arrived here.

"Watch it," someone snarls.

"Sorry," I mutter after bumping into them, struggling to remain on my feet, my back bending a little more under the weight of my burden.

Here is a grim stadium nearly re-taken by the forest, the shell of a once cement parking lot choked with plant life and now walked by hundreds of immortals who aren't native to my planet.

Fae, Orcs, Gargoyles—their mixed species spawn, and us Humans, the originals. Every variation reproductively possible, as well as the twisted radiation and dark magic infested monsters lurking deep in the forests, unwilling to attack so many warriors in one place.

The fairgrounds teem with magic, everyone bristles with weapons, and here I am alone with a child, throwing our lot in with the sort who'd as soon eat us as save us.

But turning back isn't an option.

Elif is light. Too light. She also stopped whining about hunger days ago, and that's a mixed blessing.

On one hand, the complaints frazzled my broken nerves, on the other, complaints are proof of life. If not for the faint rise and fall of her thin chest against my back, I'd worry—more.

There isn't much point in worry right now though. I've done everything I can, taking the only risk available to me to protect her.

We'll both wind up dead, but at least I'll have tried.

A pulse of dizziness blackens my vision for a second and I stumble again.

Hands wrap around my upper arms, steadying me, and when I blink away the darkness I glance up, freeze, and avert my gaze, aware of him trying to capture it.

Never stare Fae in the eyes. It's a challenge, or a declaration of either power or intimacy, and if you don't have the strength to back either up, then you're begging for a slit throat. Or worse. Because death is the easy option when dealing with an angry immortal mage.

"Do you require assistance, girl?" the Fae male asks, quiet, like a soft voice will lull me. He must be used to stupid City girls.

Out of the corner of my eye I see him give me a long, slow look, a glint of interest in his gaze.

My muscles tense, pre-fight nausea rising in my throat as my body goes where my mind leads. I throttle back the response; immortals can sense rising aggression and they'll meet it, then up the ante.

I'm not bad to look at even filthy, with my long dark braid a mat at this point. I got enough fat stores that cling to me even though Elif was weaned three years ago. Under the fat is

muscle tone as good as it can be with a lack of nutrients. I'm hoping my taller, broader physique will attract an Orc, who like their women and laborers hardy.

This Fae male is one of many in the cold-eyed crowd I've avoided after entering the fairgrounds for the Spring Sorting.

Any of them could be the one Hartland sold our daughter to. Which means any of them could be the one who will kill me, cause that's the only way I'm giving her up.

"Well?" He repeats his question, still patient, eyes still on my body—then my face. I realize it's taking me too long to respond.

"No, thanks," I say in a low, firm tone, pulling away slowly.

Not fast enough to insult his offer. They're touchy like that, especially the men, who're in denial that their species' bad reputation is their own damn fault. Bet they couldn't get away with that shit on their damn ship.

He touches my braid. "Are you here for the Sorting?"

Another glimpse of calm green eyes is enough to increase the chill biting through my thin, worn clothing.

"Yeah," I say, "and I need to get in line. Excuse me."

My gaze still averted, I drag us away, the back of my neck prickling until I disappear into the milling crowd, Elif still sleeping. I don't relax until the crowd conceals us, and that's probably still too soon.

Outside of one of the few remaining functional major Cities, a Sorting is the only place where you'll see all the species mingled. Immortals are as picky as Humans when it comes to fucking, which means they ain't. It's why most of the contracts to claim a Human servant include sexual service, and breeding.

It doesn't take long to find the line leading to the entrance to the old tournament field; I head toward it. It only wraps around the stadium once, and the aroma of cooking food from the vendors posted in the merchant section of the grounds is torture.

In front of the old, rusted gates is a long, battered table at which sits a dozen minor bureaucrats. I eye them with envy; the color in their rounded cheeks, the casual calorie fueled energy of their motions—even if their eyes are bored—the lack of stains or patches on machine sewn clothing.

But if I'm accepted through this initial screening process, Elif and I will be fed.

Elif stirs on my back. “Mommy, I smell meat.”

“Shh. Not long now.”

My mouth can't water, but my mind waters for me. Even if death isn't hard on our heels, and not just death from starvation, the one day of hot meals is enough of an incentive to apply for this Sorting.

A light drizzle starts as I stand in line, clouds drifting over the anemic sun, but no one complains. It's the Pacific Northwest, it's always drizzling and we're thankful enough planet Gaithea still gets rain in some areas.

My skin crawls despite the shower 'cause I feel like a sitting fowl, but I remind myself that Elif and I look much the same as any unwashed, underfed, hard-eyed Human.

Damn the immortals and their dreadnought. They should have stayed in their own hellsdamn galaxy, not crashed on a planet in ours.

“Name,” the bureaucrat demands when it's my turn.

“Defne Yildiz,” I say, matching his tone.

I might be a Human girl from an outland settlement scratching out a living, I might be ignorant, but I'm not stupid. I'm damn near forty years old, ten whole years past adolescence which means I should get points for surviving, especially childbirth, and I won't be talked to like—

Who the hells am I kidding. I'll let them talk to me any way they want if they pass me into the Sorting.

He peers at my shoulder. “The child?”



I try not to bristle, shifting Elif on my screaming back. Don't piss off the people you want to give you things.

"My daughter. Elif Yildiz. She's not an individual applicant."

He busies himself scrawling out letters on the paper. Maybe if I'm selected, my new master will teach me to read and write. I've heard that all Orcs are educated; reading, writing, math beyond counting fingers and toes. Somehow in the last hundred years in our broken settlements, Humans have lost the train of formal education.

A half-Gargoyle female passes the Human bureaucrat a device. I stare at it, my eyes widening. That device is the reason for both the Fae and Orc guards surrounding this table, and the Gargoyles patrolling high in the air above. There are six of these devices in the world, and they only come out during the Sorting.

"Hand."

I hold out my finger and he jabs it. My blood wells, sucked into the device which lights up in tiny bursts of blue dots. I watch, fascinated.

More letters scroll across its surface and he grunts, scratching the charcoal against the paper some more.

"Healthy Human female, malnourished, mother of one child. Fertile, acceptable muscle tone, dental health above average. Estimated life expectancy, one hundred eighty years without intervention."

He rattles off a series of facts, about my health I guess. Which makes sense because of what we're being screened for. Though it had been our planet, the immortals rule now.

The Orc warriors want healthy, strong laborers for their homesteads.

The Fae Lords want Humans who'd absorbed magic into their DNA and can crossbreed to maintain their aristocratic bloodlines—what nobles were doing on that hellsdamn dreadnought, I don't know.

The Gargoyle scientists and mystics want intelligence and ingenuity to help fuel their remote mountain civilization building.

Their dreadnought can't be salvaged, and whatever anomaly that sent them here in the first place won't happen again, so no rescue. They're stuck here with us, and it took a century of war between the crash survivors to figure their shit out and turn their attention to reordering Humans the way they wanted.

"Accepted." The bureaucrat applies wax at the end of the paper. "Do you want to submit to a battery of intelligence tests?"

I don't like to waste my time—I'd fail. "No."

"Do you want to submit to a magical exam?"

I'm scanning the area, my foot tapping with impatience as more and more ants crawl up my skin, biting. Almost through the damn gates and it feels like he's stalling.

I jerk my attention back to him. "What?"

"The magic tests. Do you want to take the magic tests to qualify you for rank among the Fae?"

What the...hells fecking— "No."

His gaze flicks up at me. "If you do not submit to the intelligence tests or the magical exams, then you are likely to only attract an Orc owner. The Fae want—"

I hate when they think I'm dumb. "I know, sir. Thank you. That's what I want. An Orc."

He pauses, then shrugs. No skin off his back. Just pass me through already, *hells*.

He runs through a series of disclaimers, informing me what rights I'm giving up if I proceed. My heart rate increases when he gets to the part that my daughter will no longer belong to me, though it'd be illegal to separate us.

But with Hartland on our tail, trying to kill me and take her to be sold into slavery, what option is there? At least the Orcs don't sexually abuse their servants. As long as you're healthy

and strong and you work hard, they feed you, shelter you, clothe you, and they don't beat you either.

Both the Gargoyles and the Fae are known to keep unwilling concubines, and they aren't particular about age either, particularly if the concubine proves to have magic.

No, I'd rather work my fingers to the bone to avoid that fate.

...or being eaten by Humans. Which, considering the scarcity of food the further Southwest you get, I can't blame them. But that don't mean I want to be eaten.

"Put your thumbprint here," he concludes when I agree, then hands me a thin leather cord with six green beads on it to put around my neck. "Proceed into the stadium. You will be fed and assigned a fire. There is zero tolerance for fighting, theft, or sexual assault. The sentence for theft or sexual assault is death."

"Can I defend myself with lethal force?" Cool iron rests against my back, under my shirt.

"You may, but if it is determined you are the instigator of the fight, you will be executed, and your daughter confiscated. There are guards. Avail yourself of their protection if need be." For the first time his brisk tone softens. "Keep your head down and the child quiet. Your data is good, you'll find an owner." He nods to my necklace. "The number of beads tell them your value, so don't lose it. Green means you're wanting an Orc."

I glance down. "Is six good?"

"It's not the worst."

I exhale, nod and tred around the long table and through the iron gates.

Just a few more steps and I can sit down.

Just a few more hours, and maybe we'll be safe.

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They really do feed us.

The accommodations ain't fancy, but I decide not to complain to management.

Elif lifts her head, woken again by the smell of food since she doesn't give a damn about the noise, and I let her slide down. She leans against my side.

“Eat now, mommy?”

Her soft voice is a dagger in my gut and it takes me a minute to respond in a normal tone. Last thing she needs is to hear my pain and fear.

But, hells, it's getting harder to hide. If I'm not selected, I don't know what the hells I'm gonna do. Maybe slit our throats. It would be gentler.

“Yeah, baby. In a few more minutes, okay? Remember to be small and quiet.”

“Okay.”

I'd been resigned to sharing my portion with Elif, but at one of the long metal tables set up inside the stadium and laden with food, they hand me a full bowl of stew for her too—and bread.

Bread, with yeast. Old yeast because it's still mostly flat, but I know that scent. I smelled it in Seanna City before.

My stomach growls again, more of a pitiful, hopeful whine.

My eyes prickle.

Still not enough saliva in my mouth for watering, but they give us metal cups and direct us to where the water is being rationed as well.

The Orc female in charge of dosing out the water—I eye her biceps, her dark braids and beaded vest over an impressive bust—is probably in charge of knocking heads together too. She clucks her tongue when she sees Elif. I notice there aren't many children in the stadium.

“Poor mite. Ya both dehydrated. No worries though, dearie. If ya get a master, they'll fatten ya both up.”

Since she took the time to stop and talk to me like I'm a person, and she's friendly enough, I hesitate. "I was hoping to attract an Orc master. Any tips?"

She purses her lips. They're a darker green than her skin, her ivory tusks curved delicately over her upper lip. She's beautiful, cheeks bright with health, and I'm envious. She leans her curved hip on the metal water barrel.

"This your only younglin'?"

I nod.

"You survived the birth." Approval in her voice. "Well, Orcs prize strength, courage, and hard work. Ya want an Orc, when they come through pick one with dirt under his nails. A homesteader is ya best bet. Let 'im know ya enjoys a hard day's labor with no complaint, and are willing to give a lil more at the end of the night, ya know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean."

Just because the Orcs don't rape Humans doesn't mean they don't sleep with them.

She must understand the expression on my face. "That ya've borne one child and you're both still healthy is a plus. You're still young too."

"Thank you for the information."

"Come back in the evening, dearie. Ya get two meals a day and sixteen ounces of water each."

The promise of eating soon gives Elif enough energy to walk on her own to our assigned fire, where a group of about twenty people huddle around the heat, some talking, some sleeping or pretending to sleep, others eating.

We eye each other, wary but hopeful. I keep my gaze on the men, but the women are as dangerous. A woman might not rape you as easily, but if she's hungry enough, she'll slit your throat and roast you for supper.

Elif is tender meat.

Lucky for my daughter, I ain't.

## TWO

WE CAMP in the stadium for a day before the immortals halt the screening line.

During that day we're fed twice, assigned to clean up or latrine or fire building duty.

I watch a scuffle break out among the Humans and nudge Elif. "See those people? They're stupid. They're going to die because they don't know when to follow the rules, and when to break them."

"Why do they do that, Mommy?"

"Because they react before they think."

Orc guards end the fight with fists and good-natured growls. The next fight, started by a woman's screaming, is ended by a beheading.

I want to press Elif's face against my chest so she doesn't see the execution, but this isn't a world where you can raise a child with delicate sensibilities. Not anymore, not outside a City.

I make 'er watch. Make 'er learn.

But if luck favors us—and I pray to whatever Human gods are still alive and can listen—then wherever we end up it'll be warm, dry, and there'll be plenty of game. The Orcs build their settlements in forests near water sources, and I hope my master lets me hunt. Maybe even grow some vegetables if he has seeds.

At the sound of a gong, the Humans are herded into the center of the stadium and ordered to remain standing until the gong sounds again, and the immortals descend.

I wrap an arm around Elif and pull her against me, waiting. Tensing. I estimate two to three tribes worth of immortals, a hundred in total maybe, a good showing.

The Fae glimmer, a sheen in the air around them as they drift through the crowd with their sharp green and blue eyes, hungry eyes.

I've only got green beads on my neck though, six of 'em, and there are a few Humans with eights. Mostly threes and fours, a handful of fives and twos. I work out that it's a ranking system, and I'm towards the top.

Blue is for the Fae, and gray for the Gargoyles. We'll see if the immortal bastards honor the bead colors. Elif doesn't have any beads, but if she did, they would be blue, and eight.

I'm torn between keeping an eye on the Fae so I can avoid them, and keeping an eye on the Orcs so I can put myself in the path of the first one who looks fool enough to take us on.

A Fae male draws close and I blink, recognizing him as the one I'd ran into earlier. Don't believe in coincidences, not me.

Long black hair draped over stupid pointy ears—*what* is the biological purpose of their ears?—shimmery pale skin with a golden undertone, eyes greener than deep forest trees but bright. He's tall, lean and graceful, but not the whipcord lean of no food combined with constant violence. Well-fed lean. Warrior lean.

"Mommy, he's pretty," Elif whispers.

He pauses.

"What have I told you about pretty? And about talking?" I should pinch her, but she can't help herself. Pointy eared bastards are all pretty, and she's little enough to be fooled by 'em.

He draws near, arm distance.

Hellsdamn. His gaze isn't on me, it's lowered to where Elif stares back up at him, her dark eyes wary but wide with fascination. She's got their damn magic. Does she feel their pull?

She doesn't say anything else, though, and turns her face into my side, breaking eye contact. My baby not stupid. But then most children learn how to recognize a predator young, or they don't survive.

"She's not an applicant," I say, keeping my voice even 'cause showing even a bit of temper can lead to death. I push my daughter behind me.

He slowly meets my gaze. "Is she not."

He reaches a hand out like he's going to step around me and touch her. I don't think it's sexual, I don't see that look in his eyes, but it's possessive. She has something he wants. Her *age* doesn't protect her. She's only Human.

I grab his wrist, my skin crawling. "Don't touch her."

Can't start a fight, can't start a fight, but damn if I'll let someone take my daughter and I'm still breathing. At least if something happens to 'er, she'll know I died trying to prevent it. She'll know I cared. Maybe that's the only gift I can give.

He didn't shake my hand away, didn't seem to notice my grip at all. "I mean her no harm. The girl is a water elemental. I am the only other water elemental present, and I scent it, which means she must be strong if at this age..." He studies me, dropping his arm, forcing me to release it. "You are her mother? You are no elemental, but I would take you as well. Or is it her sire who passed down the gene?"

"The gene came from her father," I say, my heartbeat accelerating.

He inhaled. "A lie. Ah...you cannot lie to the Fae, mortal." He smiles gently.

The magic comes from my maternal bloodline, but that's all I know. It skipped me and went to Elif.



“It’s from you. You may yet be useful, yourself, for breeding another.” He tilts his head. “I would take you both.”

I step back, pushing her with me. “No, thank you.”

He frowns. “Why do you refuse? I offer food, shelter, fine clothing...even something of entertainment if you please me. You would not suffer in your childbed. You, or your daughter, when she is of age.”

“I don’t want to breed.”

“Was her birthing difficult? You still live.”

“No, the birthing wasn’t difficult, I just don’t want to be bred.”

I can’t ignore him and walk away, that would insult him and I’ve seen Fae in watering holes respond to insults like they’re death threats. Also, I forgot about the not lying thing.

He continues to frown, though he doesn’t appear angry, more thoughtful. “Well, it’s unfortunate that you’re unwilling, but —”

I don’t have to hear his words to understand his intent. I shove Elif back, and in a flash draw my sword. I’ve practiced sheathing and unsheathing a blade until I’m fast, the fastest person I know. It’s one of my only advantages, those few seconds getting the jump on someone who’s slower’n me.

It’s more a big dagger, curved and made of iron. An Orc dagger, or at least to them it’d be a dagger. To me it’s big enough to be called a sword.

His eyes widen at the sight of the iron blade. “Why do you offer violence? I’ve made no threat.”

“You’re not listenin’. I’m telling you I don’t want to go with you. Neither me or my daughter. I’ll defend us with lethal force. I was told that’s allowed.”

“It’s allowed in cases of self-defense, but I am not a danger to you.”

I must look like a fool. I draw an invisible line in the old, battered ground with the sword. I still look to the side of his eyes rather than meeting his gaze head on, my fingers

clenched around the sword's hilt because otherwise they'll tremble. My stomach churns, anticipating the violent consequences of this defiance. I'd be meek, if meek was the safer option. It ain't.

"I decline your offer without intending insult, and I wish to cause you no harm," I say, "but if you cross this line, I'll take it like a threat of violence. I'll defend myself and my daughter with lethal force. Make your choice. I've made mine."

I won't survive it, but if I can cut him good, it'll be enough. The Fae are deathly allergic to iron. I'll take this bastard out with me.

"The mother-girl has green beads only around neck," a new male voice growls. A moment later Big and Green steps next to my side, 'cause I guess maybe the Human gods still do hear prayers. "Why harass?"

His Gaithean is harshly accented, grating, that peculiar syntax only the older Orcs cling to. The original generation refuses to speak our tongue properly out of a show of contempt for the weakling mortal races, so cobbles together this mash of Orcish and Gaithean and lets us worry about whether or not we understand them.

"I see the beads," the Fae says. "They are a statement of preference, not an order. The child is an elemental. She belongs with the Fae."

I shift to keep both males in my line of sight, Elif still behind me. The Orc is taller than the Fae, who glances at him with raised brows.

"Is girl for Sorting?" The Orc addresses me, not taking his gaze off the Fae. He crosses his muscled arms—covered in thin, curving scars in a clear pattern—over his broad chest. It's bare, but at least he's wearing pants. I'm sure the shirt is disappointed.

"No," I say. "I'm an applicant, she's with me. We'll both go to whichever Orc claims us." Elif's hands are dug into my vest, but otherwise she's still.

“Human mother-girl know how to use Orc knife, or stab in wrong direction?”

“If Human girl *don't* know, she'll get 'erself killed, but at least she'll cut a bastard down on her way out.”

The Orc grins, his expression almost languid. “Mouthy Human girl. Good fun during hard day.”

“Yeah, I'm a hoot. Look, I mean no insult,” I say to the Fae. “I just don't think I'm suited to your people. I'm a beast of burden, not a show pony.”

I don't need to tell him all of that because he's not interested in me. I'm selling myself to the Orc, who's listening with his ear cocked in my direction.

“Perhaps not,” he says, his tone still agreeable. He isn't looking at me. “But your daughter will be of use to us. I find I'm disinclined to let her go. Uther? Will it be a fight then? It's been some time since we met on a battlefield.”

This Uther gives him a long, slow up-and-down look meant as an insult. “Athanmir fled last battlefield bleeding all over pretty armor. Shouldn't be so eager to step onto new.”

Athanmir chuckles. “But that's what made the experience so diverting. The sheer novelty of temporary defeat by a peasant-born brute. Come, I've had little entertainment the last century. I am willing.” But his green eyes darken to black.

My fingers tighten around the hilt of the sword.

“You have more honor than to take unwilling females,” Uther growls. “Never knew Athanmir to make that crime, not during any mission.”

Athanmir assesses him. “If I give my word neither will be bedded against their will?”

“I take them.” Uther shifts to face me, though like me, he keeps the Fae in sight. “Eh, female? Say you want Orc. Here I am. You like look?”

I frown at him. He serious? He thinks I care about how he looks? I want Elif to live, to *eat* regularly. I don't care if he looks like a troll.

“Your looks don’t matter, Sir Orc. How warm is your house?”

“Warm house. Warmer bed.”

His gaze holds mine.

“You could do much worse and it has a view to the sea,” Athanmir says. “The child should be near living water. Will the mother sleep in your bed?”

“Perhaps she will,” Uther says, still not looking away. “If she want.”

“I see.”

That means something to them, but I don’t know what.

I tear my gaze away from Uther and halfway glance at Athanmir, suspicious of his smooth, neutral expression. I hesitate because of that, but maybe that’s why he’s doing it.

“Uther have hunting territory, and gardens,” Uther says. “Milking beast—you milk, I make cheese. Hate that beast. Ocean brings other food, no empty bellies in my settlement. You work, you eat.” He shrugs. “Sometimes you play, we play, eh?”

That don’t sound like a bad deal. He’s willing to provide for us. I don’t know what the workload will be, but he’s not making it sound like servitude slavery.

“Can I see your hands?” I’m not one to ignore free advice.

He stares at me like I’m a talking squirrel, then holds them out. I glance at the nails...well, claws. Long, shiny...and traces of dirt in the cuticles like he tried to scrub but he works too much to get all the ground out.

I nod. “I’m yours if you want me.”

His eyes glint. Dark eyes, with an uptilted shape similar to Fae but not as sharp at the corners. His long black hair is braided at the sides, and tipped in beads. It’s wilder, a rougher texture than Athanmir’s, the bits escaping the braids loosely curled.

“I do want. Brave, mouthy, fine looks female. Know how to talk to Fae Lord and not die.” He glances at Elif, who poked her head around my side. “Other children in settlement,

Human and Orc. Schoolhouse for them. She too young for work, so play and learn, 'till older."

If I were younger, I'd gape. "Can I—can I learn too? When I'm done with my work?"

The glint turns into a dark gleam. "Learn many things, girl. But *I* will teach. Learn to count on my fingers, if you like."

I know what that look, that tone, means. Uneducated don't mean dumb. Learn to count on his fingers...uh huh.

I clear my throat, distant heat in my core promising one well-fed day to turn into something more. I'm nervous but content. He talks to me like a person, he defends Elif and he doesn't plan to use her, at least as far as I can tell.

Clearly, he wants sex, but I was prepared to bargain with my body. Elif can have a real childhood. I'd let him fuck me in the ass, him and his milking beast at the same time, just for that.

Part of me thinks I might like it. With Uther. "Like I said. If you want me."

"I will concede," Athanmir says with a sigh. "But when she is of age, you will allow me to offer for her. I trust she will survive under your protection, and be educated to suit my status."

He's talking to Uther, and I grit my teeth because I don't have a right to protest any more. We belong to the Orc.

Uther nods. "But will be her choice. Will not give her where she not want to go."

"Agreed. She is of the water, Uther. She will need training."

He shrugs. "Deal with when time comes. Not so urgent now. Right now problem enough to keep her alive."

Athanmir...bows. "Commander. I will call upon you when it is time, then. Keep them safe."

It sounds like a threat.

## THREE

UTHER TURNS to me once Athanmir retreats. The warmth drains from his face, leaving a seasoned military officer.

Commander, Athanmir called ‘im.

Killer, in other words. One of the aliens responsible for the near genocide of the Gaithean people.

But I guess they call them farmers these days.

He gives me a cool, assessing look. “What is your experience with bladed weapons?”

I pause, understanding he wants a serious answer this time, and I better not be dumb enough to lie to him. Interesting that he’s dropped the mangled grammar to ask the question, his intonation smooth and crisp.

“I’ve killed with it,” I say.

“Human?”

“Yes. And dangerous animals.”

He grunts, and the military officer retreats. “Fae warrior and Orc warrior not Human. Dangerous if you pull blade. Will skewer Defne with it. But not at first. Very last, you understand? Only pull blade if certain to win, or ready to die slow.”

I meet his gaze, letting a little of my meek neutrality fade to show him the scavenging beast. “I was ready to die. That’s the only way Elif’ll be taken from me. If I’m meat.”

Another hard assessing look, then he nods. “Will teach you to wield proper. By time for Uther to come assist.”

I shrug. What else is there to say to that?

“Defne understand what this Orc want?” he asks, his voice quieter this time, almost kind.

“We’ll sign a contract. You’ll own me and Elif. Me for labor and sex, Elif for...” I’m not sure what Elif’s purpose is, just that we’re a unit deal.

His expression is inscrutable. “Know what contract says. Gargoyle insist on paper. But this Orc will not take female who comes to bed only to honor paper. We make true contract, between us. Writ on honor, not dead tree.”

We face each other. “Don’t know no men who are bound only by honor. Honor isn’t a whip.”

He laughs. “Honor is fiercest whip. Defne young.”

“You want me to trust you.”

“Yes.”

I don’t want to. But I can try, cause trying won’t hurt me, and the potential outcome is the chance at a life I’ve only dreamed about for us.

“Then tell me what you want,” I say. “And I’ll tell you if I can give it.”

Uther is watching my face closely. “Work during day, companion during night. Uther has house, gardens, territory. Time to have wife now, fit to bear young. Wife, not farmhand or sex servant. Mine for life.”

The last three words are said with enough guttural fierceness that I almost wince. And in stifling the wince, understand that any woman bound to this man will find herself cared for and protected with his life.

I relax the hands that curled into fists, and exhale. My gaze hasn’t left his, despite the oddness of him arranging our marriage and the disposition of my womb like we hadn’t met an hour ago.

“Marriage.”

His lips quirk. “In due time, and babies. Defne make pretty one already, Uther think can make more.”

“Well. It...weren’t too bad the first time. Maybe I can be persuaded.” I lift my chin. “I’d want a midwife, and no rations. There has to be enough to eat, and to nurse the baby. I want to rest the last few months before the birth, or do light chores.”

Uther steps towards me and trails a talon along my cheek, lowering his head to whisper in my ear. “Defne grow fat and spoiled while with young. Good food, warm bed. Uther rub feet and lick pussy. When born, Defne receive many pretty things. Make this Orc her servant.”

I shudder. “Oh—okay. That, maybe I can...okay.”

He chuckles. Deep, rich, amused and also tender, pressing a gentle kiss on my ear before straightening.

“Female? Agree to this? Must use big mother-girl words.”

*And* he thinks he’s funny. I got more than a few big mother-girl words I can use, but I’ll save those ‘till after the first baby. Maybe the second. He’ll be good’n trapped by his honor then.

I nod, swallowing, but blink away the tears, my momentary irritation gone. Tears are a waste of water. “I agree. So what kind of work will I be doing on the steading?”

“Same work as always. Tend animals, grow food, make house pretty for mate and babies—both like shiny things. Swim in ocean, hunt in forest. Defend what is ours.” He says the last sentence slower, an edge in his voice. “Any who use Orc blade will be called to defend. You understand? So put down if you want to stay in house.”

I laugh. Laugh some more.

“Female think Uther funny.” A sour note in his voice. Sour, but his mouth curves around his tusks. “Female will see when it’s time to kill.”

“Uther. Female would love killing. Female has lifetime of killing ready to crawl out of skin.”



He clucks. “I saw. Fierce mother-girl pull Orc dagger on Fae Lord. I saw and liked, said that is fine female, will defend our land and our babies. I kill too when must. But also grow things. Make things. Sleep and sing and play. Not always war.”

Don’t know why he keeps trying to sell himself, as if I have better options. I’ll have the energy to be amused later—it’s almost sweet, but I’m not sure I’m using that word the right way. Right now, I want to get the hells outta here, but I force myself to wait, standing still. He’s my master, he’ll tell me when he’s ready to go.

I let Elif come out from behind me, and take her hand. “We’re ready to go when you are.”

He chuckles. “Good. Several days travel to settlement, get Defne and Elif food and warm clothing, maybe pretty bauble in market? Then set out.”

Maybe I can nudge him to hurry that timeline up a bit. “I’m so excited to get going and see my new home.”

He glances down at Elif, who is tugging me down so she can climb on my back. “Girl-child tired? Can carry her. Mother-girl’s legs look tired.”

I shake my head. “I’ll carry her. I have. On my back to get to the Sorting. Are we leaving now?”

My throat closes for a minute as I wonder if I should tell him about her father. But if Hartland finds us, I guess he’ll find out the hard way why you don’t try to steal from an Orc. And though Uther is talking about babies and marriage and honor, I don’t want to give him a reason to second guess his choice.

“Not yet,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Icarians demand paperwork. Registration of ownership, though we on primitive planet. Who cares for registration? Icarians care. Foolish. Mountains full of useless paper. But fine, keeps gray wings busy. Less whining about standardized planetary judicial system. Uther’s ears bleed. Would rather more practice to make babies.”

Is this the fifth time he's said the word babies? What, is he repeating it over and over to make sure I understand?

*I get it, I really do, Uther. You're a man, you ain't got no imagination. Fat wife, barefoot, pregnant. Milk the surly cow so you ain't got to. Can we go already?* But I'm more amused than irritated.

"Mommy, I'm hungry," Elif says, and I'm happy she has the energy to whine rather than falling into sleep.

Uther looks like he wants to dither a bit more, eyeing my placid expression, but he must realize I don't need further clarification of his end game.

"Come, we go," he says. "Finish up, then shop and eat."

Uther weren't lying about the paperwork.

We approach exit orderlies on the opposite side of the field and stand in a short line, Uther hulking at my back as I carry Elif. Another bonus; his massive presence blocks me from sight so well I start to relax. Even if my ex tracked me to the fairgrounds, it's possible I'm nowhere in his line of sight. This side of the grounds is reserved for the immortals who've chosen their Humans. Their pets, their laborers, their concubines, their scribes. Whatever we are to them, the Gargoyles—Icarians, I remember—demand paperwork.

"I have no idea," I say for the fifth time when the Human-Icarian orderly asks me my date of birth. "Sometime in the summer. I think it's been forty years."

She sighs, pinching the bridge of her light gray nose. "And your daughter?"

That's easier. "She's six. Summer birth."

She peers up at me. "Can you possibly pick a month?"

"I can if you don't mind me making it up. Weren't never good at keeping calendars." Who bothered, these days? Counting by seasons was good enough. "The end of summer, a few weeks before the leaves start to turn brown?"

She picks a month for me.

“I like Auguthe 15th,” Elif says, bouncing on her tip toes. “Can we have meat this year? I’ll be seven.”

“Meat and cake,” Uther tells her, and when she beams I have an unreasonable instinct to strangle him with a hug.

“What do I get?” I ask. “I did the work.”

He smiles, lazy and amused, and tugs on my braid. “Something else to eat. Or maybe Uther do all the eating.”

The Icarian halfling snorts.

I also give our full names, our rough place of birth. Their device has our medical information and now she takes Elif’s, since my daughter comes under the terms of the contract.

The orderly reads a standard labor contract to me which I thumbprint with a prick of my blood, and I’m pleased and surprised that the contract details what kind of food, shelter, and clothing Elif and I are entitled to in exchange for becoming indentured servants. It’s a shame it’s still a better living than what you can get in the outlands, but the immortals knew that when they created the Sorting.

Uther keeps his word and directs us back through the fairgrounds to the temporary markets, talking the whole time, his large hand resting on my waist, a casual proprietary gesture that won’t be lost on anyone who decides me or Elif look tasty. I don’t think even another Orc would challenge Uther.

He’d retrieved his weapons, his bare chest now crisscrossed with sheathes that hold blades, an ax at his side. He stands several inches taller than many of the other males, his shoulders broader, arms thicker. There isn’t an ounce of fat on his frame, and he walks with the relaxed but simmering aggression of a warrior who won’t start a fight, but if you’re dumb enough to bring one to him, he’ll take your head and your friend’s too, just for a good time.

In a watering hole I would have took one look at ‘im and found another spot to wet my throat. In the next town over.

The other Orcs steer respectfully clear, though a few salute when he passes. The women eye him, but don’t approach.

He tells me about the spring planting, and how they're letting the southern field go fallow this year. But don't worry, they'll harvest plenty of blood from this season's raiders to nourish the soil with, so it will be ready by next planting for a crop of beans.

"Blood?" I repeat.

"And bone. Grind it into fertilizer. Many nutrients."

"And...we eat the beans grown in this blood and bone soil?"

Uther snorts. "Humans eat Humans."

He's got a point.

"You're the chatty type, ain't ya?"

The Orc shrugs, unabashed. No wonder he wants to marry, probably wants a fat girl to babble at in the evening, pinch her rolls so he can feel smug about being a good provider, her belly too full to complain about never getting a minute of silence. Though I could be exaggerating.

My growing tension as we get to the thick of the crowd must communicate itself, because he glances down at me, the hand on my waist tightening. "What bothers Defne? Second thoughts?"

"No." I'm starting to feel like the grumpy side of this duo.

My mood is deteriorating 'cause we're on the verge of safety, but it seems like it's out of reach the longer we linger.

I could come clean now. I should come clean now. He's offered me potentially a lot more than the life of a servant, even if I'd be a fool to trust his word. But I should do my part, take him at his word until he proves his honor don't mean shit.

"Uther. Question. Once you claim a Human, you can sell them, but can you abandon them?"

He peers down at me. "Once claim, keep year and a day before selling. Fined if Human set loose to run around countryside making havoc and breeding more ill-bred Humans."

Makes sense. We used to have the same rules about stray pets before everything went to the hells. After all, part of the

purpose of the Sorting is to harvest the best genetics Humanity still has to offer and integrate us into immortal communities.

Which means he's stuck with us. "And you can't beat us?"

He stiffens. "Defne think I need beat defenseless females? Think am Orc with no honor?"

"I'm not defenseless."

Uther stops, stares down at me, expression stony. "I do not beat my women and children, no matter what foolish provocation escapes their mouths. Kindly don't ask me that question again."

Oh. I know that tone now, the frostily perfect diction. "I apologize, sir. I meant no insult."

We keep moving, though he's quiet for a few minutes. But not for long. Can't keep a good Orc down.

What the immortals plan to do with the rest of us once they've decided they've skimmed the cream off the top, I don't know. The unexpected thought gives me chills, but not enough chills to do anything but shrug and feel a moment of sadness. A worrier over people I don't know, I am not. Me and my daughter, my daughter and me.

I glance up at Uther, now my master. Possibly my husband one day.

And...it don't sit right with me. Starting our relationship out with a lie.

I stop. "I guess there's something I should tell you."

He halts as well, looking down at me with no evidence of impatience.

Elif shifts on my back, wriggling, and I put her on her feet. "Stay next to me."

She points at a nearby tent. "Toys, Mommy. I want to go see them."

Distracted, my gaze follows her pointing finger and I sigh. Of course, even half dead from starvation and exhaustion, she identifies the one toy tent on the fairgrounds.

“Stand here and be quiet, and maybe if we have time Uther will let you look.” I give him a brief, warning glance not to call me out on the bluff.

Then I exhale, tugging at my long braid. My scalp itches, I haven't washed my hair in ages, or even bothered to unbraid and comb it out. No comb. Fingers don't count. Not no more, with how matted it is.

“One of the reasons I came to the Sorting was because of her father,” I say, nodding my head at Elif. “He sold her to slavers. I objected and well, that fight went about how you'd expect.” I take a minute, swallowing my anger so my voice doesn't shake. “I managed to get free and take my daughter. We fled, but he's tracking me. He knows she has elemental magic. She's worth money.”

“Poor strategy to tell Uther now,” he says. “Not even a day and night travel from fairgrounds.”

I swear under my breath, staring at his booted feet. There's no anger in his voice, but no amusement either. He's simply pointing out that my strategy is terrible.

“I know. I wasn't going to say anything. Thought if you knew we came with complications, you wouldn't want us. But you need to know we have a predator.”

He snorts. “One Human not qualify as predator. Barely even meal.”

I look up at him, almost but not quite glaring. I don't like arrogance. Arrogance gets you killed. I pause, giving Uther a thorough one over...Uther and his weapons.

“Maybe,” I allow. “But he won't be tracking me alone. He's a bit of a coward, and I've got an Orc sword.”

Uther grins. “That knitting needle?” The expression fades and the look he pins on me would have me taking a step back if my legs weren't frozen. “Better if Human come now, feed the meat to my ox. Defne not worry any longer. Only male Defne think of is Uther.”

“That's a positive perspective. You're not mad I lied?”

He shrugs. “Tiny female with tiny female child to feed. Not worst lie in world, when starving and in need of protection. Don’t blame Defne,” he adds, voice kind. “Defne smart to give warning. Besides, paperwork signed.”

Yeah, it is, isn’t it?

A thick green finger tipped in a black claw slides underneath my chin, and he tilts my head up so I meet his gaze again. “Defne learn to trust Uther. Will not abandon. Must have trust in battle, and in love.”

I nod, blinking again, though I’m too dehydrated for actual tears and too grim to grimace at the word love.

“Now we go do what females all over galaxy like. Shop.”

He says that word like he knows full well it’s a fat drumstick he’s dangling in front of me as bait. But for what? I’m on my best behavior and I don’t plan on giving him any trouble. At all.

Especially not when he buys Elif a rag doll, and not one that’s seen a couple of decades but looks new and clean. The doll, and a set of wooden blocks with letters and numbers carved into the sides.

For me he buys a long strand of polished stones to go around my neck, and the matching bracelet. They’re teal, and uneven, but the prettiest little baubles I’ve ever seen and useless, so I know the gift is meant purely to please me.

As childish as my daughter, I admire my decorated wrist, a mother-crow entranced by something shiny. As we walk through the crowd, I rub the individual stones, ignoring Uther’s occasional indulgent glance.

He don’t expect no different, so I see no reason to pretend I’m not a crow.

Uther buys Elif and me two sets of new clothing, repurposed denim pants from the old days and tunics of the kind of woven linen like fabric whose fibers the Fae produce. No self-respecting male wants to walk around with a mother-girl, as he calls me, and a girl-child who look as raggedy as we do. From

what I understand, our condition reflects poorly on him, whether he's only owned us for an hour or not.

After we've picked through the bins of already made clothing, he pauses, gives us both a once over and grimaces.

"Not wear clean clothes on filthy skin," he says, almost huffy.

He snatches the clothing from us, wraps his thick fingers on my upper arm, and ushers us to an area of the fairgrounds where there's tents.

"Mommy, I'm hungry," Elif says, a higher pitch to the demand this time.

"Clean first," Uther says. "Eat after." He lifts a finger when she opens her mouth. "If good girl and not terrorize mother, will get candied apple with meat and bread."

She shuts her mouth.

"I want a candied apple," I say. "I'm a good girl too."

"I am certain you are, Defne. And you will be rewarded." He looks at me, unveils the lust in his gaze and punches me in the gut with it, then turns away. I'm left silently wheezing.

As he haggles with the bored looking woman at the tent flap, I gather this is a communal bathing house. It rained so there's fresh water, but when tokens exchange hands and Elif and I are ushered inside, I realize we're meant to strip, oil and scrape, and sit around steaming stones after a soak.

There's also hip baths of warmed water and to my shock—that couldn't have been cheap—Elif and I are given one to share.

One of the attendants helps me untangle Elif's hair. I keep it long enough to braid though I've chopped it almost to the scalp a time or two. Mine as well, but I always let our hair grow back. One of my only vanities. Since we've only been on the run for two weeks, our hair isn't as bad as I've seen on others. After Elif is clean, hair rebraided and as shiny as it can be, it's my turn.

Mine is a little more difficult, since my braid comes to the middle of my back and is thicker.



“Keep it long, and have him get you some scented oil,” one of the female attendants says. “Orc men like to wrap it around their fist and ride ya like they’re breaking ya in, if ya know what I mean.”

“You’re so lucky,” a genderless adult sliding into the bath next to us says. They have the look of a multi-species to them; Human, Orc, and some Fae in their bloodline. They flip their long honey hair over the lip of the tub and settle back. “Commander Uther Bachdracht. We’ve been wondering for years when he was going to take a concubine. I’ve been coming since I was in my doubles, hoping to get a chance. At least now I have closure. I’ll accept my Icarian suitor after all.” They laugh.

“Uther’s an ori-gen?” I ask. “Not second or third generation?”

“Yeah, he’s pure Orc, from the original crash landing.” My attendant pauses brushing. “You don’t know?”

“Don’t get out the outlands much.”

“Well, he does keep a low profile,” the mixed-species says, eyes closed. “He was one of the dreadnought commanders, and played a role in ending the war. He’s been quiet for decades now.”

We get the job done with my hair. One day it might be nice to linger, but after Elif and I are clean we dress and I pick Elif back up, as exhausted as she is. The bath, and the minutes of rest near the steaming stones have all but done me in. Yesterday and today’s idling on the sports field weren’t enough rest.

Uther gives me a sharp look when I exit, and takes Elif from me. When I don’t protest, he’s pleased, but also concerned. I’m at the end of my tether.

“Take you to wagon,” he says. “My people watch you while I replenish supplies, then we leave.”

“And Elif’s father?”

“Either he comes, or he comes not. Uther not concerned. Soil can always use more blood and bone.”

That would be ironic. To nourish the crop feeding the daughter  
he sold.

I smile, suddenly more energized.

## FOUR

WE APPROACH a large wooden wagon with metal wheels hugging the side of the main road just outside the fairgrounds, two oxen grazing nearby, their leads detached.

Their species was extinct until the Icarian scientists got hold of their DNA, finagled, passed it along to the Fae to finagle some more with their life magic. So now Gaithea has oxen again. They're used as beasts of burden and food. Eyeing the huge, meaty creatures with their long shaggy manes and short tails, I'm torn.

I see supper, but I also see a ride to the settlement. I'm tired of walking.

"My people," Uther says. "Cousin and lieutenant."

Lounging next to the wagon are two Orcs. A female leaning against its side with her arms crossed over her generous chest, and a young male who's sitting on the edge, his elbows braced on his knees in a pose of boredom.

They wear the same black leathers as Uther, none of the typical clan beading or decor, though the female has on a vest that covers her breasts and the male is bare chested. Their arms and shoulders are covered in the same curving, sigil swirl scars that adorn Uther's.

"Only two?" I ask.

"No need for more. Three Orc warriors enough."

Against Fae, though? Maybe Human raiders, yeah, but not Fae, and there are other dangers in the dark forests.

I'm not fooled by their apparent boredom; they bristle with as many weapons as Uther. Their ears swivel, scanning the area for any out of place sound, their gazes sharp. They hold themselves with the same relaxed but simmering aggression as the Orc at my side.

Three war trained Orcs against Hartland and whoever he fast talked into coming on this child hunt.

The odds are turning in my favor again.

But. "Do I got to do what they say?"

"Do what they say?"

Let me use different words. "The chain of command, sir. Am I required to obey their directives?"

He looks down at me, a flash of the military officer emerging. "In a combat situation where I am not present, you'll obey their orders as you would mine."

Little do he know, I'm not asking so I can be cooperative. I'm asking for the opposite reason, in fact. To know how much uncooperativeness I can get away with. A life with more than one master would be miserable, and the first dynamic I need to establish is that ain't no one the boss of me except Uther. And I'm thinking more and more that he's going to be easy enough to manage.

"Outside a fight?"

He shrugs. "Defne obey only Uther. Mother-girl and girl-child mine, not theirs. Also not slaves."

Oh, my mood improves, though that's not quite what the paperwork said—or he's splitting hairs. "Aye, aye, cap'n."

"Commander, mouthy female, not captain. Or maybe, master, when riding Uther's—" he stops, eyeing Elif.

I grin—on the inside. From the way he slants his gaze at me, he's thinking about how he's gonna use my mouthy mouth. I'm going to encourage those thoughts, cause the more he likes me, the safer Elif and me are.

Before I can dust off my flirting skills, such as they are, the young male looks in our direction and straightens, jumping down from the buggy to approach with a loose, fast loping stride.

My heart jackknives in response to the charging Orc. I jerk back, thighs bunching, then catch myself.

Uther looks at me.

Not charging. Not a threat.

“Cousin!”

I judge his age by the open mischief in his expression and that his bare chest and arms are leaner than Uther’s. His gray-green skin is less scarred outside of the ritual markings they all share, his chestnut brown hair in one thick braid over his shoulders, a strip of leather woven through it with beads dangling at the end.

There’s also beads on both of his ears. I scoff, but he must not be worried some drunk idiot in a watering hole will snatch one of those off him. He’s missing a tusk, but by the grin on his face and the sly expression in his dark eyes, I wonder if that’s from childhood mischief rather than losing a fight.

“Finally.” His grin widens as he stalks a circle around us, giving me a slow up and down inspection. “I like.” He reaches out, picking up a lock of hair that escaped my braid. “Is she for me?”

I stiffen, going still. “Uther.”

“You have her in exchange for balls,” Uther says, his voice a low grumble. Also a warning, but the kind of warning you’d give an irritating relative.

“You don’t want this grizzled old veteran,” the male says, giving me a winsome look under his lashes. “He’s very boring. Aren’t I much more to your taste, sweetbun?”

He speaks flawless Gaithean, another clue he’s second or third gen, probably third. Only the younger ones have abandoned the original generation’s stubbornness about Gaithean grammar.

I begin to relax. “If you don’t get your hand away from my face, I’ll chop it off.”

Uther chuckles. “Good fun. Uther watch.”

Perfect. Some men don’t like you threatening their friends and relatives either from pride, or because they think a woman has no place rebuffing the advances of anything with a cock.

The young Orc sighs, lowering his hand. Probably because Uther is staring at him, waiting for an excuse. He warned the boy once, after all. “I’m Kaithen. The old grumpy one really is my cousin. So if you’re his, that makes you kin.”

I know better than to show it on my face, but I soften. The introductory flirting was harmless as well as good-natured, and he accepted my rebuff. Besides, I have a feeling this one will flirt with anything that has bumps on its chest.

Kaithen sees Elif, who’s peeking around my shoulder, and loses interest in me. “What’s this? A little sweetbun?”

“My daughter,” I say. “Not a pastry. And if you think I’ll chop your hand off for messing with me, imagine what I’ll do if you mess with my child.”

“Yes yes, of course, peppercorn.” Kaithen wiggles his fingers, and there’s a flower in his hand. Well, a bright yellow weed, but it’s pretty enough that as children we’d pretended they were flowers, and ate them sometimes too.

Elif gasps, taking the bait as six-year-old girls who don’t know any better will do. Kaithen flicks his fingers again and more yellow weeds appear in his hands.

“If you climb down off your mother’s back, these are for you,” he says, cajoling.

Elif wiggles, and I sigh, letting her slide down. As she sidles around me, Kaithen lowers himself onto one knee, hunching until he’s closer to her height, and holds out the...bouquet... with a solemn expression.

“But we don’t accept presents from any one else, sweetbun. Only kin. Anyone else, you stab them in the eye and run.”

I’m liking Kaithen a little better now.

She glances at me and I nod, crossing my arms over my chest. “We’re gonna have a long talk when we’re settled,” I mutter.

The day has taught me she’s not as immune to a pretty face as I’d thought—or maybe it’s the bribery? That weakness will always get a girl in trouble. It’s why she exists, after all, though in my defense I’ve known Hartland my entire life.

“I’m Ratha,” the female Orc says, approaching.

She studies me, straddling the line between cold and companionable; the best word I come up with is assessing.

I nod a greeting. “I’m Defne. This is my daughter, Elif. It’s nice to meet you.” Women can be the best allies, or the worst enemies. The problem with girls is that we pretend to be one when we’re the other. Men are simpler.

She grunts, not unfriendly, but she’s gonna wait and watch, and see who I am and what I do.

“Ratha stay with mother-girl and girl-child while Uther and Kaithen source supplies,” Uther says.

“We got half that was on the list,” Kaithen says, straightening, “they should be delivering them any minute now. I knew you’d want to do the bottom half yourself.”

Uther nods and glances at me. “Make no trouble for Ratha, yes?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ratha snorts while Kaithen gives me a side eye and thinks something smart—which he doesn’t say. The males leave and I climb into the wagon with Elif to rest and wait.

Glancing at Ratha once the males leave, I settle Elif down for a nap before unsheathing the iron blade, to lay it on my lap.

When I glance at her again, she’s staring at me. “What?” I ask when she doesn’t look away.

She points. “You know how to use?” She’s icy, almost indignant.

“Well, ain’t for to make me look pretty.”

Ratha stares at me another moment. “You came to the Sorting alone with only your daughter?”

I nod.

“Where from? Southwest?”

I nod again. It isn’t really a question.

“Why?”

Uther knows about Hartland. But I think maybe I should wait and let him decide whether or not that’s information his people need. Or maybe I don’t want to tell her now ‘cause when Uther comes back, she’ll take him aside and explain how much trouble I’m going to be.

I shrug. “It’s dangerous in my tribe for a woman alone with a child. Not a lot of food. Looking for a better opportunity, is all.”

“And Uther choose you.” Her gaze dips to the six green beads still resting on my chest. “Six,” she murmurs. “Fine. Get down. See what you do with that blade.”

I know the sound of malice, and she doesn’t have that, so I hop down and let her put me through my paces for a good twenty minutes before she disengages, nodding, her general demeanor a lot more pleased.

“You can fight. Your skills are rudimentary, but stay alive against Humans.”

Obviously. I don’t say it though.

“Can you teach me to fight against Orcs?”

She barks with laughter. “Like your ambition, even if keeping something from me.” Her smile is smooth, hard. “If whatever you’re keeping from me puts my clan in danger, we will fight again, but it won’t be in a training circle.”

“I understand. I don’t—I don’t want to put your clan in danger. I want to settle down, make a life with good people. I’ll do my part. And I can learn to fight like an Orc,” I add. “If someone will teach me.”



Ratha questions me on my training and experience in combat and grunts when I'm done outlining what I know. Which is, whatever I picked up from haphazard tutorials, real time experience keeping myself and Elif alive, and experimentation.

"I'll teach you. If going to wield Orc blade, you must wield it properly so you're not an embarrassment. There are a few things I can teach you now which will stand you in good stead against a bigger opponent. Not formal training, but guttersnipe fighting. Not honorable."

"Surviving is honorable. I'm not too good to learn dirty tactics."

"Sensible. Let's begin. The males will be another few hours."

## FIVE

WE TRAVEL for two days before the ants on my back prompt me.

The road leading Northwest where Uther's community thrives has long since been cleared of its former paving, and the forest on either side hasn't been allowed to encroach. Fewer raiders along this route; there are several Orc communities and further North, Fae. The parties who travel Northwest are usually more dangerous prey.

South, the raiders are bolder. We're alert, and the males scout behind and ahead while Ratha remains at my side, guarding the creaking wagon laden with supplies, and carrying my daughter.

"Should we be traveling a little faster?" I ask, jumping and nearly tripping at the sudden shriek of an eagle high overhead. They're man-sized now, big enough to make off with a child for supper, their wingspans rivaling that of a Gargoyle, and I frequently scan the sky.

"Why you ask?" Ratha says.

I hesitate, then explain about Hartland.

She frowns, raising her voice. "Commander."

He lopes back to us.

"The Human male following Defne, you've seen no sign?"

Uther glances at me. "No sign yet."

“He knows how to hide,” I say. “And move with stealth through the forest. If he picked up on my trail, he’ll hang back until he thinks he has a good spot for an ambush.”

He replies after an extended silence, “Will send Kaithen back to scout for Defne peace of mind.”

Clearly, he’s not worried about Hartland, but I don’t wanna press my unusually good luck.

Kaithen’s gone long enough for Ratha to choose a camping spot for the evening, where we set up bed rolls inside Orc sized tents and build a fire as Uther hunts.

“He won’t go far,” Ratha says, intercepting my fifth uneasy glance into the forest where Uther disappeared. “He’s taking the threat seriously, but no more seriously than he has to.”

I sigh. “I guess he knows what he’s doing.”

I’ll drive either myself or them crazy with my anxiety, so I shut my mouth and help with the evening chores, waiting. Uther returns, dropping six fat rabbits in front of the fire then crouches in front of me.

With me sitting, I still have to look up at him. If I didn’t know Human women have come through alive on the other side of birthing a half Orc baby, I’d be worried.

“Kaithen say no pursuit, but Uther prefer mother-girl and girl-child sleep in his tent. More protection. Mother-girl agree to this? Uther not touch.” He pauses, and the edge of his lip quirks up, then firms. “May look. But not much to look at, only Defne’s face.”

The regret in his voice is so genuine I almost want to laugh. Males are males are males. But we’ve been traveling for almost three days and he hasn’t touched me other than the occasional hand on the small of my back. It’s starting to irk me. I don’t stink so bad.

“Time for bed,” I tell Elif, and usher her into the tent.

She curls up on a bed roll on her side of the tent, and falls so deeply asleep I can barely hear her breaths. She’s a deep sleeper during the best of times, and the last two weeks have

been draining. I fold my legs, shoulders slumped as I stare at her.

Ratha pokes her head in the tent. “Why you still awake? Tomorrow will be long, and we will train early. You need rest.”

She’s a bit of a den mother, I’ve noted. Uther lets her handle me and Elif, not interfering in the decisions she makes regarding our care and my duties on the journey. And my training. Once she realized I could fight, and I weren’t going to be parted from my blade, she set about to teach me to use it to her satisfaction.

Her satisfaction includes bruises. Broken bones too, I suspect, if she thought Uther wouldn’t object.

But I’m learning, and her teaching is making me more vicious, and less stupid. I’ll survive most fair fights with a Human of my skill or a bit above, and many more unfair fights. Against Orcs, I’m still meat, but I’m not to directly engage Orcs, I’m to use guerrilla tactics and stay alive until the battering ram—Uther—comes.

“Do you have children?” I ask.

“Two. Grown now.”

I gesture to my daughter. “Do you think something’s wrong with me? I look at ‘er and think she’s seen more than any girl her age should, but all I can think is that it’ll make her stronger. I should be thinking about shielding her.”

Ratha’s expression doesn’t change. “Get some rest, Defne. We’ll talk when we’re home, but on the road, we only worry about survival.” She pauses. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

After she leaves, I think about when I caught Hartland trying to sell Elif.

I push that thought away or I’ll be too angry to do what I must.

Dozing, I wait for Uther’s watch to end. I asked if I could help, and they laughed at me. No skin off my back. I can use a few peaceful nights’ sleep.

When I peek out of the tent, he's sitting in front of the flap. There's a low fire still burning, and a part of me cringes because it's a beacon but at the same time it's a warning to four legged creatures at least.

Uther glances at me. "Go back to sleep," he rumbles. Just this side of brusque, like someone who's too busy focusing on big boy problems and don't want to deal with the children right now.

"No."

Turning his head slowly, he gives me a long look, gaze steady on mine as if he's asking what right I have, or where I get the pussy, to tell him no.

I stand my ground, but soften my voice. "Something's wrong. Can you tell me?"

Uther sighs and shifts to face me. "Defne tired. Much travel in the morning. Go back to sleep."

I cross my arms over my chest, planting my feet. "You need to rest too."

Even in the dark, his black eyes glint. I'm not sure with what emotion, but there's thought in that head.

"Mother-girl have child. No need to mother Uther."

"I ain't in no way, shape, or form interested in mothering a grown immortal male. But if I'm your betrothed, I got the right to fuss."

"Not betrothed yet," the beast says, like he's needling me. "And Orc are not immortal. Long lifespan. But not Fae."

"I knew that. And the Gargoyles, the Icarians I mean, they're long lived too but not immortal like the Fae." I shrug. "Easier to lump you all in together."

"Do not lump Orc with Fae." He says each word slow. "Orc is not Fae."

I still. "Understood. I'm sorry if I offended you."

He watches my face for a minute, then nods. "Defne tell Uther what really want. Did not come outside in cold night for tea

and conversation.” Uther’s tone is patient, but a little dismissive. Like he’s talking to a farmhand, and not his concubine.

He’s going to be a hard nut to crack. Any other man would be getting down to business—he owns me, he don’t have to ask.

“We’re going to be traveling together for a few days, before we get to your homestead,” I say. “You said you’d find me another master if you and I don’t suit. I’d rather know now.”

Uther tenses.

“So I figured we could get the meet and greet out of the way. See if we like each other.”

He’s staring at me now, eyes narrowed, his head tilted as if he’s never seen an insect quite like me before, the black, beaded braids falling over his chest and shoulders.

“Defne bold like Orc female. Was told Human females require more...” he waved his fingers in the air.

“Finessing? I think you have to go to one of the Cities for that. Us outland girls have the finesse roughed out of us pretty young.”

His expression darkens, though I’m not sure what I said that upsets him.

“What you want to do?” he says after a moment.

“A kiss?” I suggest, hesitating. I’ve gotta let the beast hunt me down at least a little bit, make this interesting for him. A kiss and maybe a little more is all he’s going to get tonight. Just enough to solidify my position, not enough to make him lose interest. “I think that’s a good place to start.”

He lifts an eyebrow, lowers it. “Then come closer.”

We’re close enough, but I see he’s going to be difficult, and say as much.

Uther smiles, a slight curve of his lips, and even in the darkness of night I can tell his eyes warm. “Maybe Uther requires courting.”

What kind of coy monster foolishness is this? I frown at him, stepping forward. “You’re playing games.”

“Mother-girl started it.”

I slide my arms around his neck, conscious that even sitting he’s not shorter than me. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

Males like that, don’t they? A touch of flattering feminine fear about how big their giant cock is. I try not to roll my eyes, because ain’t nothing bigger than a baby head.

“What work?” he asks, pretending to be obtuse.

I flutter a hand up and down, indicating his body. “You’re pretty damn big and I’m not. I mean...are you certain that you won’t hurt me?”

“No, not certain. Maybe Defne enjoy pain.”

It’s that coy tone in his voice, the look in his eyes as he tilts his head that tells me I’m right—Uther knows what I’m doing and he’s playing along. He doesn’t care if I know he knows. Why should he? He has the upper hand here.

“Fine,” I say, dropping the false sweetness and stepping away from him, a touch more irritated than I want to display. “I’ll go back to bed. You don’t have to tell me twice.”

Well, sometimes you do, but who’s counting.

But as I turn away to enter the tent, his arm snakes around my waist and he yanks me down into his lap. I swear as I tumble down, but it’s not a hard landing.

He studies my expression as I glare up at him.

“Defne don’t want kiss,” he murmurs. “Defne afeared.”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

He brushes his mouth against my forehead, then straightens, still holding me. “Must learn to trust Uther. Said would protect you, give you to good owner if not like. No need to seduce Uther. Already half seduced,” he adds, voice dry.

“Then you’re kind of easy, ain’t ya?”

He chuckles. “Not easy, no. Orc know what is his when see it.” His thumb caresses up and down the curve of my cheekbone. “Will take Defne more time, though. As say, hard life for outland girls. Hard life in Uther’s settlement too, but safe hard.”

“Nowhere’s safe.”

“Uther makes as safe as possible. So either is safe, or we’re all dead. If dead, doesn’t matter any longer.”

“I guess that’s one way of looking at it.”

It’s almost comforting, sitting here cradled in his arms. He’s warm, and strong, and his skin as I rub the side of my face against his chest, is smooth. You’d think it would be like tree bark, but he’s not a troll, I guess.

Experimentally, I touch the tip of my tongue against that satiny skin and taste the faint salt of perspiration along with a subtle foresty flavor that’s all him, and not unpleasant. I lick a delicate wet line up his chest. The male holding me stills, the muscles under my touch tensing then relaxing.

A quick shift in his arms and I’m straddling him, a vague thought I’m going to need to stretch more because Uther is a big boy, and I lean in to nuzzle his neck, pulling the long dark braids out of my way.

His hands slide around me to cup my waist, but otherwise he doesn’t move, content to let me explore.

So I explore.

It’s not unpleasant touching him. At all. His scent is better than I got any right to expect, and as I caress my palms over his shoulders and arms, kissing my way up his jaw, a low thrum of genuine pleasure begins deep in my core.

Well, it’s not like he’s not a fine specimen of a beast. That won’t be an issue. His own lust won’t be an issue either, in evidence as I undulate against him, rubbing the hardening erection.

“Does Defne have plan?”



I undulate again, breathing against his neck. “Just wanted to taste you. Everywhere.”

As I say this, I realize that now, it’s the truth.

I push at his shoulders, and he falls back onto the ground, a look on his face that’s universal the galaxy over.

“Taste,” he repeats.

I’m straddling him, thankful for the natural heat of his body because even with the low fire and my new clothes, it’s chilly out. At least, on my backside; the front side that’s pressed down against him is pretty warm.

I slide down his body, kissing and tasting and when I get to the simple waistband of his britches, I pause, running my cheek up and down the hard, tented length.

He doesn’t move, completely still as if I’m the master and he’s the servant. Or maybe he knows better than to interrupt a good thing.

I chuckle, and when I straighten to unfasten the pants and release him, he moves, a hand tangling in my hair, halting me.

“Defne skipping steps,” the Orc says, half amused, half something else.

“I’m willing.”

“That much is quite obvious.”

I blink at the sudden shift in his intonation, but he continues in his normal tone. “Uther wants courtship, Uther and Defne will court. Kisses only for now.”

But he lets me trail my free hand up and down his length, keen gaze on me to make sure I don’t go any further, I guess.

“What I had in mind is a kind of kiss. Just not on the lips.”

Uther’s eyes flare.

And then he pulls me up his body and spans me. A quick, hard tap on my ass. I gape at him, because not only did it startle me, but it hurt.

“Behave,” he says. “Mother-girl not too old for spanking.”

I had no idea that sort of thing could turn me on. The last time a man tried, I did my best to gut him.

But it does.

I'm obeying because the note in his voice is serious; he isn't prolonging the evening's game. I hover my mouth over his, and he wraps a hand around the back of my neck and tugs me down until our lips meet.

I haven't kissed an Orc before, of course. Navigating around his tusks takes a bit, and I get the hang of it.

He deepens the kiss, his tongue peeking out to caress my bottom lip, slips inside my mouth to begin a leisurely duel, the relaxation of his deadly body arrogant. I'm not a threat, though I can have a blade at his throat in a second. Especially since he never patted me down for weapons.

Someone moans deep in her throat, probably me, and the hand on the back of my neck increases pressure, fingers sliding into my hair and forming a fist.

The kiss is suddenly a lot hotter, and he answers my moan with a soft growl.

I feel a little smug because I'm certain if I press things, he might change his mind about this whole courting b.s. and give me what I want. Leverage.

But Uther pulls away, ending the kiss.

Scowling, I lower my head for more, but he huffs and jerks his head to the side. I follow his gaze to see his young cousin leaning against a tree in a casual pose, arms crossed over his chest as he munches on a strip of meat. He's been watching the show and enjoying himself.

I shrug. It wouldn't be the first time.

"I've got to say," Kathien says, "I'm with Defne on this one. Skipping steps seems like the way to go."

Uther is unmoved. He sits up, bringing me with him. "This why Kathien has no female of own. Does not know how to play courting game."

“It’s my watch,” Kathien says. “You two go rest.” He snickers.

I roll my eyes, unbothered, and slide off Uther then crawl back into the tent. He follows after me and settles down onto his bed roll before reaching for me and settling my back against his chest, his arm draped across me.

His heavy arm.

“Sleep,” he says, and pinches the curve of my waist. “No play. Much travel left and Defne will need strength for what Uther has in mind.”

I’m not so sure about this courting thingy, because it sounds vaguely sinister with the little hints he’s given that he’s into pain, but I’ve done enough for the evening. If I try to push back against his boundaries, it can backfire, and besides...I’m still young enough to like the idea of being seduced for something more than quick sex.

Weird, and unnecessary in these circumstances, but I think I might like it.

I let myself go to sleep, and for once in my life I feel safe in a man’s arms.

## SIX

WE'RE UP EARLY the next morning. There's dried strips of meat, and berries with hard flatbread for breakfast. By the end of the simple meal, color returns again to Elif's cheeks.

Kathien intercepts her frequent glances with grins and funny faces and by afternoon she's tossed away everything I've taught about pretty males and lets him carry her on his back. He makes a game of it with skipping and leaping and singing and roaring.

How old is he? No one is that carefree anymore.

"If we're being pursued," I say, "we're more or less giving away our position."

None of the Orcs seem concerned.

I try again. "If we're being pursued, the enemy could have projectile weapons."

Some of the Human settlements have retrofitted rifles and developed crude ammunition. Others have fashioned bows and arrows, which the supplies for making are much easier to come by. The immortals don't like the rifles, and confiscate them whenever they're found which means there's a thriving black market industry trading weapons, but they let us have bows and arrows.

"Does Defne's pursuer have rifle?" Uther asks.

I shake my head. "No. But they have longbows and short bows, and we're known for our skill with both."

“Hear Humans coming two miles away. No longbow has such range.”

“When we hear them, we’ll stash peppercorn and sweetbun away somewhere safe,” Kathien calls over his shoulder. “We’ll make even more noise, so they’ll get to us faster. Then we’ll kill them and go on about our day. Simple.”

“Wish I would have thought of that,” I say.

“Not mother-girl’s job to think.”

I grind my teeth, but when I turn to give Uther a censored piece of my mind—I’m not that comfortable with him yet—I stop at the glint of humor in his eyes. He likes to tease me, and I haven’t quite gotten used to his brand of dry humor.

“Mommy!” Elif shouts from ahead of us. “Cousin is a frog!”

“Don’t kiss him. You’ll end up with more trouble than he’s worth.”

My foolish daughter shrieks with laughter between fits of sneezing—allergies—and proceeds to shower kisses all over what she can reach of Kathien’s face, ignoring my instruction as only a six-year-old can do.

I stare at her, then turn to Uther. “Did he give her something? Berries or smokes?”

Uther glances at me, eyes narrowing. “Don’t like Defne’s suggestion.”

Spare me from a sensitive male. “I’m not accusing him of crappy intentions, but she doesn’t play with strangers like this.”

Uther shrugs. “Is cousin. Girl-child recognize her equal.”

“I heard that,” Kathien calls back.

“Yes. Orcling hearing good.”

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I argue with Uther a little more, taking care not to insult either his masculinity or his intelligence. Hartland likes to lash out with his fists when he thinks he's been undermined, but he doesn't always do it right away. Sometimes he'll wait days, weeks even, then punish me for the infraction.

I watch Uther for those signs, but really, Hartland didn't give himself away. Not when he knew I'd punch back if I had enough warning. I don't expect an Orc to be easy to read either.

"I understand you're an Orc warrior," I say with forced patience. It's a little hard because I don't think he's taking the threat seriously. "But her father is a skilled tracker, and he is shifty as feck. Orcs are not invulnerable."

Uther pats me on the head. "Defne's concern is heard."

I turn to Ratha. "Is this arrogance deserved or is he—" I shut my tap off before I say stupid.

Ratha laughs, her full, throaty sound of mirth. "Deserved, *and* Uther is hardheaded. Must tell Orc male same thing six or seven times and accompany lesson with pain if you want him to take you seriously."

"Great," I say. "What you're saying is, it's like raising a child."

"Uther think Defne will find Orc male is nothing like child," he says in his rumbling purr.

I give up and shift my attention to the forest. Hartland won't give much warning before he attacks. He's not stupid, he knows I know all the current signals, so he'll change them. Still, I keep my ears open, listening for incongruous bird sound, or any other warning. I don't think there'll be much.

"Kathien," Uther says several hours later, the tone of his voice different.

Kathien wheels and trots back to us, his expression grave.

"Ratha, take Defne and girl-child to hiding," Uther says. He points at me. "You hide. You stay until Uther comes. Understand?"

“Did you hear something? Are they coming?”

“Defne understand?” He says this more slowly, expression hardening.

“Stay where Ratha puts us.”

“Good girl.” He jerks his head at Ratha, who gestures, and we veer off the road and dive into the forest.

I start to tell him the dagger on my back is for more than decoration but catch that idiocy in time. Three Orc warriors are more than enough to take care of however many men my ex brought. It’ll be the same five as usual. We’re raiders, we travel light, hit fast, and get out of dodge. We aren’t battering rams.

“Ratha, how does Uther know the Humans are coming?”

“Human hearing not so good,” she says. “Can hear them a mile away, making much noise.”

“I know he said that’s how he’d have warning but...Ratha.” I halt, grabbing her arm. She swings around, staring at me with snapping black eyes, the flex of her muscle under my hand making clear she’s *letting* me hold her. “Listen, please. My tribe isn’t noisy. We know how to hunt, how to raid. We know how to navigate the forest. If they’re making noise, it’s for a reason. Warn Uther it’s a misdirection.”

She grunts, nods, and stashes us under a thick cover of bushes, which I guess is meant to be better than nothing.

“You have Orc dagger, you use it if need to, but otherwise you stay put.”

“I heard him. I’m not going to leave Elif alone, and I’m not going to bring her into a battle either.”

Ratha nods again and turns, dashing off, her footsteps light and silent for a woman of her size. Elif is quiet, she knows the drill, and we covered our tracks on the way here, so I’m confident we’re well hidden.

But overconfidence kills a lot of people. I unsheathe my sword and rest it next to me, keeping my ears open.

I counted my footsteps as we were jogging, so I estimate the distance from our former position to be about a mile. We wait in silence until the first sounds of battle drift through the air.

“Mommy, is Daddy coming?” Elif whispers, proving she’s been paying attention. She knows better than to speak, but she’s still only six, and the fear in her voice twists my heart.

I slide my arm around her thin shoulders and squeeze her next to my side.

“You’ll be okay, baby,” I say in her ear. “Remember to stay small and silent and still. No matter what happens.”

I understand Human nature, so I’ve spent time drilling her in what to do if she sees me go down. Her instinct will be to reveal her hiding place, to come to me. I’ve hammered into her little head that what can kill an adult will make mincemeat out of her, so her priority is to save herself.

I’m teaching her to survive. Every cruelty is a kindness, because someday she’ll be an adult with children of her own, rather than six feet deep or a Fae slave.

In the distance a roar, the sounds of Human death, Orc rage. Uther’s deep, gravelly voice, Kathien’s rich medium tones, and Ratha’s wild, undulating cries a few shades higher than Kathien’s. I hear more Humans than I’d thought Hartland would bring; maybe he’d hired more crew at the Sorting once he’d realized I traveled with Orcs. It’s what I would have done, knowing five wouldn’t be enough.

I try to estimate numbers using my ears, and my heart sinks ‘cause this fight isn’t gonna be over as quick as we all thought.

Elif curls in on herself, sniffing. “Mommy, is Kathien okay?”

Hearing that roar, I’m not worried about the Orcs. “He’s very strong.”

The forest around me goes a little too quiet.

I tense, because I ain’t no fool.

Hartland’s here. He’s tracked us, and he’s here. The lesson I’ve taught Elif came harder to me as a girl.



I remind myself to stay small, still, silent. To not let the pressure of his presence flush me out of my hiding spot. I used to be a confront head on kind of person, but since having Elif, I've had to about face and learn another way.

Knowing she'll feel my tension, I turn my head and look down at her, giving her a little smile and make a shushing motion with my lips. I don't dare make any noise. My ex's hearing is very, very sharp, sharp enough we've often wondered if there was Fae or Icarian in his bloodline. I've wondered; it would explain Elif. Her power, when she shouldn't be any stronger than my mom, who can find water and squeeze it out of dirt, but that's it.

Elif is much, much stronger, strong enough that one day I wonder if she'll be able to squeeze water out of men's blood.

It's why her father tried to sell her. She's a danger to us because he won't be able to control her, but it would be a waste to kill her.

Another pang of guilt. Another secret I should've told Uther.

Who Hartland sold Elif too. Who will be hunting my daughter if my ex can't retrieve and deliver her as promised.

I know he's here, I feel his malevolent presence. The others are giving the Orcs a go while he hunts me'n Elif down.

Small fingers brush my hand, and I glance down into a slightly panicked face. She's pinching her nose and holding her breath. Hellsdamn.

She sneezes.

The sound gives away our position. I freeze. I want to flush him out and get this over with. But I can stall until one of the Orcs gets here too, that would be the smart thing to do—I don't think I have time to stall.

Hartland drops out of a tree. "You might as well come out, Def, and bring my daughter with you."

He's not a bad looking man, and he was cute as a boy too. Tall, whipcord lean with muscle, golden brown skin and shaggy

dark brown hair, eyes a lovely hazel-green that makes me think Fae, not Icarian.

I breathe through my mouth as Elif struggles not to sneeze again, her face white.

We'd been friends once, and it took me a long time to accept the boy I'd grown up with had turned into a monster. He's let the things we've done to survive twist him into something selfish. Something that can look at his own daughter and see nothing but a commodity.

My childhood friend takes another step forward, cautious; he'll know I'm armed.

"Come out, Def," he says again. "I understand you're attached to our kid, I get that. The buyer doesn't know she's gone, so we can salvage the situation. You come out now, and I won't kill you."

He lunges, crossing the remaining distance between us in six quick steps. I burst out of our hiding place, the sword in my hand, and meet the downward strike of his machete.

I can't match him strength for strength, he's a man. There's certain biological facts. But I'm fast, and vicious, and I have a child to protect. That counts for something.

"Run, Elif!" I scream.

I can hold him off long enough for her to run and maybe hide or get the attention of an Orc.

Hartland curses, and now I shift to a bitter defensive, doing everything I can to keep him entangled with me.

It's enough that she disappears in the forest.

"Fine," he says, "we'll do this—" he stops, eyes widening, and snarls at something over my shoulder. "Fucking Orcs!"

Riding a surge of triumph tinged with smugness I have no right to feel, I turn, hating myself for the split second it takes to remember how shifty Hartland is. But I guess a four days in Uther's protective presence has made me soft.

There is no Orc.

Pain bursts upside my head.

## SEVEN

I WAKE, the rough bark of a tree pressing against my back, my arms wrenched backward at an awkward angle. Lifting my head, I grimace at the pain, but at least I'm alive.

I know without moving my arms that they're tied behind me around the tree trunk. I contemplate the rope around my ankles, the other rope wrapped around my torso.

Then look up.

Hartland is crouched several feet away, playing with a stick in the dirt. He glances at me.

"Hey, Def. Didn't mean to hit you that hard. I'm glad you're awake now, we need to talk." He stands, comes closer and sits next to me, folding his legs. "That Orc is looking for you. The big one."

I don't say anything.

He sighs. "Look, Def, I know you're upset about the kid. But you know she can't stay with us, not after what she did."

"She didn't do anything wrong."

"No, self-defense ain't wrong. But she'll only get stronger, and we can't control her. The others will turn on us. That makes her dead weight, Def. We can try again. Maybe get a normal kid this time."

I lean my head back against the tree. There's no point talking to a sociopath. He's always been a little off, a little cruel. I guess since I grew up with him, I kind of shrugged it off.

Because he was also always a little bit mine. Until he sold Elif, he never turned on me.

“What does the Orc want with you? I’m guessing he bought you at the Sorting. Clever move, Def.”

I still don’t say anything.

Hartland backhands me. It ain’t gentle, and I knew it was coming. I taste blood in my mouth, but my teeth are fine.

“Will he trade you for Elif?”

I stay silent, and he hits me again.

And again.

“You should be grateful you’re useful, Def, or I’d have to kill you.”

Hartland continues to interrogate me, but I don’t make a sound, and I don’t talk. This ain’t the first time I’ve been beaten, and I think that maybe I only have to hold out long enough. Hartland couldn’t have got far carrying me. If Uther is searching, he’ll find me.

“Fine,” Hartland says, and begins to pull down my pants.

“What are you doing!” I begin to buck. I know what he’s doing. He knows one of the few tortures I fear.

“Gotta get you to talk, Def. I have to know the hand I’m playing with.”

“Don’t do this, Hartland. Please.”

His expression doesn’t change, not that I thought it would. Begging doesn’t move him. He can watch a dog, or a woman be tortured and not feel a thing. He can sell his own child and not feel a thing.

He can rape his childhood friend, the mother of his child, and feel less than a thing.

My pants are yanked down to my ankles, but he’s not dumb enough to untie me, he doesn’t need to. There’s enough give between my thighs for rough, invading fingers.

I squeeze my eyes shut, stifling the sounds I want to make. Of pain, of fury, of betrayal. Of frustration because this always happens to me and I want it to stop.

“It’ll stop, if you tell me what I need to know. I don’t have to use fingers, Def. I’m trying to be nice. I understand you’re a mother and you need to be convinced to do the smart thing.”

Except I can’t tell him what he needs to know, not yet, because I need him to untie me. I need him to think I’m broken, or he *won’t* untie me. It’s not hard to let the tears leak out, it’s not hard to slump, and begin begging.

It’s not hard at all. To sell the lie all I have to do is let myself feel.

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, please stop.”

I’m sobbing now, but not from the physical invasion. No, I don’t want it, but it ain’t the first time he’s been inside me when I didn’t want it, and the pain isn’t that bad. No, I’m crying because he can do this to me. He can hurt me in this way and look me in the face and not blink.

That hurts, more than anything else except knowing he’d do the same to Elif. I’d loved this monster, and...

I mentally slap myself. No point going down this road.

“I’ll tell you anything, please stop,” I say again, defeated.

He withdraws, pulling my pants back up. “Will the Orc trade Elif for you?”

“I don’t know. He has honor, I think. She’s a child.”

Hartland nods, looking thoughtful. “Good. You’re telling the truth.”

He knows me well enough; he’ll know if I lie.

“But he’ll come for you, right?”

I nod. I don’t know how long I was unconscious but it can’t have been long. Uther has to have survived. Uther has to be on my trail now. Has to, or...I don’t know. For the first time the savage instinct to survive begins to fray, even knowing Elif is

out there in the forest. Maybe death would be easier, for both of us. I'm so tired of this shit.

"Right. This is what we'll do. I'll trade you for Elif. It's a good deal. He might have honor, but she's a child, and she's not much use. Does he know about her magic?"

"I don't know. She's been listless lately, so there haven't been any sparks. I haven't told him."

"Why not?"

"Didn't want him to get rid of us. Like you said, she can't be controlled."

He rubs his chin. "All right, he'll probably trade then. You're useful, and you're no real threat to an Orc. Has he fucked you yet?"

"No."

"Does he want to?"

"Yes. He wants to marry me."

He lifts both his brows. "That's fast work, Def. Maybe we didn't use you in the right way."

Staring down at the ground, I don't respond. A few more tears leak out of my eyes, what a waste of water. Don't know why I thought I was safe from this.

"I'm going to untie you so you can get up and walk, but if you try anything, I'll stab you, Def, and let ya bleed out."

I nod.

First, he unties my arms from around the tree, then re-ties them behind my back.

He loosens the rope wrapped around my torso and creates a kind of leash. When that's secure, he unties my ankles, giving me a warning glance because of course this would be a fabulous time to kick him and run.

I would if I thought I could get my legs back in position, shift and kick forward towards his jaw all fast enough to knock him out without him jumping out of the way.

But I know I won't be fast enough. He'll stab me, Hartland don't bluff.

He pulls me to my feet and I hobble the first few steps, muscles sore. Ignore all the places I'm sore. My jaw, the ribs that are fractured at the most, deeply bruised at the least. Between my legs.

Hartland walks us through the forest, I assume back towards the road though we're so deep in now there's no glimpses of it.

After a time he stops, gaze unfocusing for a brief minute.

He glances at me. "He's not far. We're going to wait here."

Hartland slashes me, a shallow slice on my arm, and the blood begins to drip down. "Do you know they have a hound's sense of smell? Better than a hound. Better than a Fae. He'll smell the blood, it'll lead him right to us."

This demon.

He takes a position at my back, looping an arm around my torso and pressing a knife against my neck.

This is how we're standing when Uther appears, lips pulled up over his teeth, his tusks stained with blood. There's a savagery to his expression, a red glaze of rage in his eyes and for a minute I'm afraid he don't recognize me, that he might kill me too.

Uther straightens slowly, the emotion draining from his face as he stares at us.

"Human." One word. Chilled. Impassive.

But I know death when I hear it.

"Pleased to meet you," Hartland says. "No need for pleasantries, let's get down to business. I'd like my daughter back. You can have her mother, she's no use to me. Fair trade, yeah?"

Uther stares. "No trade."

My shoulders slump. Until those two words, I've been afraid Uther will trade me for Elif. Oh, he'd intend to go after my



daughter once the trade was made, but he won't be able to. Hartland has already told me he plans on extracting an Orc oath.

*"They take those oaths on their honor seriously,"* he'd said, talking quietly in my ear as we'd walked to this point. *"If they break the oaths, they fall on their swords, or have a buddy ax their heads clean off their necks."* Hartland had snorted. *"Stupid shit. But I guess it's in my favor today."*

"I'll kill her if you don't make the trade," Hartland says now.

Uther shrugs, crossing his arms over his chest. "Once the female is dead, you'll have no more leverage."

"No, but I figure she'll still be dead. You don't want that. Your future wife."

Uther's gaze sharpens.

"Def, tell him I mean business," Hartland says.

I don't say anything.

He sighs. "You have thirty seconds to agree to the trade, and then I'll slit her throat."

"Agreed."

"No!" I shout. "Uther, no!"

Hartland yanks my head back, shaking me. "Be still. Right, so now that we're in agreement to make the trade, you're going to swear an oath on the honor of your clan that ya won't come after me or Elif, neither you or any of your people. Me and Elif walk away, clear and free, no pursuit. You don't kill or hurt either of us."

"Uther, don't make the oath. Don't do it." I beg him, because I see the truth in his eyes. If he swears on his honor, he'll abide by it. He'll let this monster walk away with my daughter in order to save my life. "Please don't. I trust you. I trust you, Uther. Please don't sacrifice Elif."

"I trust you as well, Defne. With our daughter, and with my honor." Uther looks at me and after a prolonged silence, nods at Hartland. "On the honor of my clan, I will trade you the

girl-child Elif for this female Defne, who you will give to me unharmed—” his eyes darken “—harmed no further, and neither I nor my clan will kill you, or come after Elif.”

“Uther, you bastard,” I breathe. “How could you?”

There’s no words to describe how I feel, so I don’t try. I let the blackness, the redness, wash through me.

“Ratha.”

His lieutenant emerges from the woods, Elif in her arms. Elif, who remained silent the entire time, probably on orders. Good girl.

I give her a smile. “Good girl. You did very well, baby.”

“Mommy.” She glances at Hartland and buries her face back in the curve of Ratha’s neck.

I almost crumble to my knees, but Hartland’s blade is still at my throat. “Uther, please.”

“I made an oath, Defne. I cannot kill him or go after Elif. And neither can anyone of our clan.”

I glance at Ratha imploringly and meet her intent gaze. Her eyes are narrowed a little, and she stares at me hard, but I don’t know her well enough to know what she’s trying to tell me.

She sets Elif down.

“Go to your father, Elif,” Uther rumbles.

I start to inhale to tell Elif to run, but Ratha grabs my daughter’s upper arm. Not rough, but Elif’s not going to be able to break that hold.

“Now give me Defne,” Uther says.

“You first.”

Uther’s expression smooths. “I’m already bound by my oath, but you are bound by none. Give me Defne first.”

Hartland takes a minute to think, then nods. He shoves me forward and I stumble, going down on one knee, but I’m up,

running towards Elif. Kathien leaps out of nowhere, tackling me.

“No, he swore oath. Neither he or Ratha or I can intervene. Do you hear me, Defne? We are clan, his honor is ours.”

I stop struggling, thinking about the fierce words whispered in my ear. Kathien would *never* abandon Elif.

Kathien pulls me to my feet as Hartland picks up Elif; Ratha had escorted the child to him.

“We are clan,” Ratha says. She doesn’t look at me, and she doesn’t say anything else.

And I understand.

## EIGHT

I'M NOT CLAN.

What a stupid, little mistake. Because I'd overlooked it, it makes it easier to believe Hartland has overlooked it too. Either he made some stupid assumptions, or he's more nervous than he lets on.

*"I trust you as well, Defne. With our daughter, and with my honor."*

I'm not clan.

So I can fight, and Ratha's been training me.

Uther is trusting me to rescue Elif myself; the only way he can keep his oath. I understand the nature of the stares the Orcs' are giving me; if I don't rescue Elif, he'll intervene...but by his own hand, he won't survive that intervention.

"Hunt," Kathien whispers, "kill."

He lets me go, Ratha throws me a blade I catch by the hilt as if we've practiced this toss a hundred times, and I run towards Hartland, already jogging away with Elif in his arms. My baby struggles, yelling and pulling at his hair, and that complicates the situation.

He has to drop her, and as he's raising his fist to slam into her jaw, I jump on his back, tackling him to the ground, wrapping my arms around his neck. He staggers backwards, then leans forward, trying to flip me off him.

"Run, Elif!" I shout.

I land on my back with a thud, the air knocked out of me. He kicks my hand and I release the blade reflexively, rolling to avoid his kicks.

A swipe at his ankles interrupts his momentum long enough for me to fling myself at him, tackling him to the ground.

We roll, grappling in the dirt. Hartland gets a handful of my hair wrapped around his fist and punches me in the face.

I slam the meat of my palm against his jaw.

The sound of bone cracking echoes through the forest as Hartland's head snaps to the side from the force of my blow. But he doesn't let go of my hair. He tugs, hard, and pain shoots through my scalp. I follow it with another, aiming my other hand at his eyes.

He howls, releasing my hair. Blood trickles down his face. I wedge a knee between us as he goes slack and drive it with all my strength into his gut, attacking his eyes again and again.

Hartland rolls away from me, staggering to his feet. I leap up, grabbing the blade I dropped and lunging forward.

He stumbles back, bloodied eyes wide in shock as the blade sinks deep into his gut. He screams, guttural, writhing in pain as blood gushes out from the wound.

Drawing on my strength, I swing the blade in an arc towards his neck.

It doesn't take his head, I'm not strong enough for that, but it bites deep. I look up, snarling, but the Orcs are standing several feet away, far enough away that they can't easily intervene.

Elif is buried against Kathien this time and Ratha watches, arms crossed over her chest.

Uther nods.

I finish the death, then limp towards my daughter.

"You dropped your blade," Ratha says.

"I won."

“Don’t care. You dropped your blade.”

From ‘er tone of voice, I’m going to pay for that next training session.

Elif won’t come to me at first. I stop, staring at her in shock. It occurs to me that she watched her mother savagely kill a man—her father.

I set aside my need to hold her. “Is it fine if Kathien carries you?”

She nods.

Good enough.

“Give her time,” Ratha says.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.”

Besides, as the rage in my blood dims, the pain of my injuries pushes to the forefront, so I doubt I can carry Elif right now anyway. It’s painful to breathe, painful to walk, and I blink back tears, loathing myself because even if my daughter isn’t watching, she’s still watching. I can’t break down in front of her. I deserve to break down, but not in front of her.

Uther says nothing.

He paces behind me, as if he’s ready at the spur of a moment to catch me if I stumble. That’s all I want right now, is the dignity of staying on my feet, walking back to camp under my own power.

Everything hurts.

I ignore the signs of battle when we reach the wagon. Kathien murmurs something to Elif, his hand pressed on the back of her head.

“She should see,” I say. “Delicate girls don’t make it in the outlands.”

“This isn’t the outlands,” Kathien says quietly. “And she’ll have plenty of time for that.”

It’s a gentle rebuke. For a minute I feel chastened until I remember Kathien has never been a woman in the outlands. I

stand my ground, opening my mouth, but Ratha shakes her head.

I sigh, giving up the fight; I didn't want to fight that battle anyway. "Fine. Pamper her."

In the back of my mind, I know I'm being unreasonable. Lashing out, latching on to the most ridiculous thing possible so I take another deep breath, let it out, and walk towards the wagon.

I still don't look at Uther, who follows and stops, staring down at the top of my bent head. I only know this because his gaze is a weight.

"You're injured," he says.

Shrugging would make it worse, so I don't move.

"Defne..."

"Don't. Please."

"Are you angry with me?"

I look up at him, because yes, I'm angry. "You gambled with my daughter's life. You gambled that I'd be able to take Hartland down."

That's what enrages me most of all. Uther wanted his meat *and* cake, and he got both. He gets to keep his honor, without sacrificing Elif.

"What if I'd failed?" I hiss. "What if I had failed?"

He holds my gaze. "You did not fail. You proved yourself worthy of the clan."

"So am I part of your clan now?"

Ratha stomps towards us. "He's male, that's not for him to decide. Come, we'll treat your injuries and then we'll travel a bit and find a place to camp."

I assume Uther will intervene, but he doesn't, giving way to Ratha, who takes charge of me.

I expect more criticism, a critique of the fight, but she treats my wounds in silence.

“You did well,” she murmurs when she’s done. “If it weren’t for far nastier things than Human raiders in the forests, I’d let you rest now. But we need to get away from the bodies.”

I nod.

“You can rest in the wagon with the child.”

Because she says that, I walk.

That’s what she wanted me to do anyway.

Elif sleeps with Ratha in her tent.

I’ve kept it together as long as I can, but as soon as I climb under my own tent flaps and onto the bed roll, I curl up on my side in a ball and begin to weep. The tears fall, my breath hitching sobs I struggle to keep quiet.

Uther crawls in after me, settling down and pulling my back against his chest, his arm a very careful weight around me.

“Was only small battle,” he murmurs. “Why Defne cry?”

His voice is too calm, too even.

“I don’t—I don’t—want to talk...about it.”

After a minute he gets up again, leaves the tent and returns holding a steaming mug.

“Helps with pain,” he says, handing it to me.

I sit up gingerly and take the mug, making a face because I recognize the bitter scent wafting up from the steam. But the best way forward is always to barrel through. I down it in one go, although it’s almost still too hot to drink.

Uther curses, which I ignore.

“Still hot, female!”

I blink back more tears, setting the cup down.

He reaches for me, but lowers his hands. “Defne. Why cry? This not Defne’s first battle.”

I don’t want to tell him, but I recognize the struggle on his face. He knows he should respect my need for silence, but he’s



also a man, a commander, and they're always trying to fix things.

So I tell him.

Watch as his pupils dilate and his lips draw up over his teeth. He closes his eyes, going still, and when he looks at me again he's tranquil.

"His death too easy. Should have cut off balls first, then hands."

I snort with laughter. "I wasn't thinking that clearly at the time, just trying to survive."

"Yes. Uther put honor of clan in Defne's hands, and Defne proved strong. I'm sorry. My oath, this will not—"

I hold up a hand, shaking my head. "No, don't make an oath on that. That ain't nothing you can promise. No one ever knows what life will hold."

He presses his lips together in a thin line, but he knows I'm right.

"For tonight, hold me. But mind my ribs. In the morning we'll continue on the journey home."

## NINE

SINCE I PROVED I know how to stick the pointy end of an Orc dagger into an enemy and not a friend, Uther lets me keep it unsheathed. I walk next to Ratha—my babysitter—but they’re trusting me to handle myself well enough.

If it wasn’t for Elif, I’d almost hope for another fight, because it’s another way to prove my worth.

“Defne training going well,” she tells Uther. “Is small, will make good sentry.”

“I want to be a farmer’s fat concubine, not a sentry,” I say because I know Uther doesn’t believe me.

I ask him to spar with me, and he laughs, patting me on the head. “Defne learn to crawl before fly, hmm?”

“I’m dangerous. I could slit your throat in your sleep.”

He gives me a sensual smile. “Defne can try. Sounds like good fun.”

Orcs.

Kathien and Uther scout ahead a half mile as we come closer to the settlement. The road narrows into a cart path, the terrain rough, which is probably deliberate. I catch rustling in the forest and the trees above. Sentries. I’m left for a time with Ratha, and I have questions.

“Ratha,” I ask, pitching my voice low so I don’t wake up Elif. Between riding on Kathien’s back and in the wagon, she’s been getting good sleep lately. The meals we’ve been eating on the road are better than our normal fare, especially since

the Orcs take turns hunting. I can't remember a time when we had so much fresh meat. There's color in her cheeks, and I'm hoping she'll put on weight once we settle down. "Can I ask you something?"

"Defne can ask," is the companionable response.

She's relaxed but alert, ears swiveled forward and gaze scanning the surroundings. She walks with the natural grace and power of a warrior, her braids swinging down her back.

"Why did Uther come to the Sorting? He said he was looking for a wife. Ain't no women he likes in your settlement?"

What is my competition, in other words, or...what the hells is wrong with him? It makes no sense why one of his own hasn't tied him to her bed and seduced him into paperwork.

Ratha snorts. "Plenty of women who would be a suitable wife. But they all fat, happy, well cared for. Boring."

I frown, because I'm not quite understanding, until it hits me. "Are you saying he has a savior complex? That he wanted to rescue and reform a stray?"

That tells me what kind of kink I'm dealing with, and there are worse ones. He was a ranked officer, and now he's forced to settle down into the life of a farmer? No missions, no one to rescue, no battle.

He must be bored out of his mind. It's been a century since the wars ended, the novelty of peace and quiet worn off.

Also, he fusses, a lot. I learned after the third day on the trail that he enjoys it. Well, no one ever does anything they don't enjoy, but he enjoys fussing over me'n Elif like we're his new favorite hobby. Ratha watched all of this with amused contempt, Kathien with a friendly sneer.

"Am I a pet?" I ask.

Ratha barks with laughter and claps me on the back. "Defne not stupid."

No, I'm not. I think harder about what she said. Plenty of women, but they don't need rescuing. Elif is six, scrawny and cute until you piss 'er off; she pulls off pathetic naturally.

It's harder for me, but I can be a damsel if that's what he wants.

I slant my gaze at Ratha. "He was a commander. He don't like his women bossy? You know, so he can be the bottom for once?"

"Uther? His female too commanding, he thinks of her as soldier, not mate. But a little might amuse him."

Maybe I can figure out who the settlement bully is—there's always at least one—and make them set their sights on me... it'd give Uther someone to rescue me from, especially if I do the long-suffering thing for a while and drag it out.

At least until I get pregnant. Then I can revert to my true nature 'cause he's not the type to abandon a woman with his child.

"What if he likes another female when he already has a mate?"

"That not happen in Orc clans. Males know they won't keep their balls if they cheat."

Good to know. So if his eye wanders, get myself into some kind of trouble he can extract me from, and maybe have another baby? Never had to think about how to make a man fall in love with me before. It's going to be tedious, but depending on the state of his homestead, worth it.

"He said he wants babies. Should I get pregnant right away, or give him time to get to know me? He might not like me once he do." Do I need to baby trap him now, in other words.

She gives me a keen glance, a half-smile on her lips that's a little too knowing for my taste, and I give up the fantasy that she's any more stupid than I am.

"Once you catch baby, you stay whether he like you or not." She shrugs. "Will be good for him. Too fickle, has tasted many females in the settlement and none to his liking. Time to make a choice and live with it. Not good to let the males play too long. Makes them think they're worth more than they really are, then the female's circle has to correct their misassumption." She grimaces. "Then deal with their whining and hurt feelings for whole season. Unpleasant."

“Do you think I’m a good choice?” Will she be an ally or an enemy?

“Time will tell, Defne. I will observe.”

I can’t mistake that for anything but a gently delivered threat, and I’m fine with that. She’ll stay out of my way as I wrap Uther around my finger, but if it looks like I might harm him, or I don’t have at least half of his best interest at heart, she’ll step in.

“I just want a safe home for me and my daughter, Ratha. I’m willing to work hard, to follow the rules, to be a good... wife.” I shake my head. “In exchange for safety, he can have any version of me he wants, and I’ll fight for him too.”

Another woman, raiders, Fae...well. We’ll see about that, I know my limits. But if he lets me lay some claim to his home, I’ll bleed for that claim.

Because decent people are hard to find these days, and I’m starting to hope this Orc who bought me is one of those rare decent people.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

“Defne has good bones. Made and raised and protected child, had a good sense to seek out Orc protector, not pretty, treacherous Fae. Follows directions and doesn’t complain. Not annoying. Uther could do worse.”

I grin, a little startled because it’s something I rarely do, but coming from her, this is a rousing endorsement and it’s nice to have an ally. Another woman.

Uther lopes back towards us. “Be home soon. What you two talk on? Have look on faces.”

“Female’s circle business,” Ratha retorts. “Mind yours.”

We’re exhausted by the time we make it to the settlement. Well, Elif not so much. She spent the trip on Kathien’s back, and since I refused to be carted in the wagon like an invalid, I walked with the Orcs. It was slow, but they honored my decision by not complaining, or going faster than my injuries allowed.

I almost regret that decision, but I kept up so I hope it earned me some respect.

We halt, and I stare blankly at my surroundings as Uther engages Ratha and Kathien in a short conversation. Those two veer off, and Uther gestures for me and Elif to follow him. Kathien takes the wagon.

“Kaithen will take goods into town and sell or trade,” Uther rumbles. “Mother-girl and girl-child need more clothes, hair things, etcetera.” He waves his hand in a vague motion. “Ratha will tell Kathien what is needful.”

I nod. “Thank you for outfitting us. I hope it’s not too expensive.”

He shrugs his broad shoulders. “Females are always expensive. If cannot afford, do not claim.”

A sentiment I wish all men shared.

The forest thins against the beach, and the afternoon breeze lifts the scent of ocean, waves crashing against the shore. If I had the energy I’d run towards it. The ocean is my favorite place, looking out over the expanse of water, imagining that this world is different. You can lay in the sands and stare up at a clear blue sky and for a few minutes pretend you’re in paradise, and not purgatory.

“I hear the ocean, Mommy!”

Uther points. “House up this hill. Elif can play.”

“Is it safe?”

He gives me a look, as if to say, “of course it’s safe why would you even ask?”

“This is Orc territory, I rule. Is safe.”

I give him a look back... “because I’m her mother, and it’s my job to ask.”

“Nothing comes out of the ocean?” I ask.

He pauses for longer than I find comfortable. “Nothing for some time.”

“Uther.”

“Defne.”

“If anything happens to my child because—”

“Show you house alone.”

I narrow my eyes at him. This beast knows how to bribe me, but if he thinks the promise of kisses or even sex is going to distract me from making sure Elif is safe while she plays, then he don't know me very well.

He sighs. “You'll see. Sentries on beach, patrol waters and entire boundary of territory. One day Defne have scouting rounds too, though not yet.”

“How much training do I need?”

He purses his lips. “For watch duty? Not much. To fight? Much. But for now your main duty will be to see to me.”

There he goes, slipping into perfect Gaithean again. I side eye him, my lips twitching. He does that when he wants to be certain I don't mistake his meaning.

And I don't.

I look out over the ocean, Uther's homestead at my back. I haven't gone inside the house yet, or explored the grounds though I caught glimpses. Elif and I are struck by the ocean.

Well, Elif, not so much, because as soon as she realizes it's not a cliff but a steep hill, she begins scooting down on her butt.

“Slow down!” I yell. “Go carefully.”

Between her excitement and Uther's assurances, I'm giving up a little of my anxiety induced control. He won't tell me it's safe if it isn't, and if it isn't safe and we're standing right in front of his home, nowhere is.

She makes it to the bottom of the hill and dashes forward, plunging into the ocean. I tense, jerking a step forward but she stops as soon as it's up to her knees, remembering my rules. Good girl.

“Can she swim?” Uther asks, coming up behind me.

His arms slide around me and he pulls me against his back. It feels natural. Despite my instinctive flinch, it feels right. I know he feels that flinch, cause he never presses for more. The trip here, he didn't touch me again until I asked him to, and then it was just this. Hugs, comfort. Hartland never—

Fuck Hartland. Not thinking about him no more.

Almost, I can stand here and pretend we're two parents watching our daughter play in the ocean below. We'll watch for a few minutes, then I'll go into the house to get some more chores done, maybe start a soup for midday meal.

I sigh.

Uther turns me in his arms, looking down. I think the expression on his face is tenderness, but I'm not sure I'd recognize that emotion in a man.

“Defne want to see the house?”

“And you can explain my duties to me.”

Amusement lights his eyes. “Time enough for that. Defne and Elif rest for a few days first.”

Rest sounds good, but... “I can pull my weight, I'm fine.” I pause. “You mentioned something about school for Elif?”

I'm uncomfortable reminding him, because that's almost close to a request and so far I haven't done anything to justify making even subtle demands.

His arms tighten, one hand sliding down my back to cup my buttocks. He doesn't squeeze, just lets it rest there, light and possessive, the arm around my back tensing as he lowers his head. I slide my hands up his chest, resting them on his shoulders, and tilt my head back.

Uther's lips brush mine, and I open. I want his warm breath, the stroke of his tongue, the strength and comfort of his arms as he holds me against a body with the power to crush my enemies.

I close my eyes, accepting the kiss and returning it, hope and desire evil twins hooking their claws into my gut. I want more,



but as usual he's the one to break away, his eyes dark, a smile on his lips.

"Take Elif into town tomorrow afternoon," he murmurs. He lifts a hand to graze his fingers across my cheek. "Defne meet other females too."

"And the men?"

His eyes narrow. "What interest Defne has in other men?"

"Well, you said if you don't like me, you'll find me and Elif a suitable master, one who won't abuse or starve us." I blink up at him, widening my eyes. "Should I meet some of the others, just in case? If they like me, it'll be easier to sell our contract for a good price."

Uther stares down at me, lips thinning, then pulls away, taking my hand. "Come see house."

## TEN

WHEN UTHUR TURNS his back to all but drag me towards the house, I can't help but smile. He's taking the bait.

The smile evaporates as soon as we step inside the cottage.

Right inside the entrance, I stop and stare as he moves around, opening curtains and shutters, letting the sunlight flood inside.

It's made of the warm pinewood of the Pacific Northwest's rainforests, this room big and open with high ceilings and beams at an angle. The kitchen is off to one side, a long counter with a deep sink and a brick oven, cabinets that my fingers itch to open and inspect. On the other side of the room is a corner fireplace made of stone, and surrounding it pieces of furniture with stuffed cushions, big enough for Orcs to be comfortable. Either they bring the furniture in, or the settlement has a woodworker, and someone who sews.

He stands near the kitchen, his arms crossed over his chest as I began to prowl the room. I pick up a knick knack, hesitate and glance at him but he nods, giving silent permission which is all I need.

I explore at will, picking things up and examining them, bits of carved wooden decor like figurines, stuffed pillows, some of them beaded, a pile of fur rugs on the floor near the fireplace. Most of the dishes in the cabinets are wood as well, though there are iron skillet and metal pots.

The first floor has a good-sized bedroom, which I poke my head in, but don't enter. It's the only bedroom in the house, but

there's a loft. When I climb up the ladder, I'm pleased to discover it's the perfect size for Elif.

"You like?" he rumbles, watching me like my opinion matters. Like I'm a fancy City bride he brought home, and not an outland girl he bought.

I turn in his general direction, not quite seeing him because there are too many emotions choking my throat.

Safety, a sense of home, the beginning of a sense of ownership. As I stand there on the wood plank floors, it's as if I can feel the soles of my feet sinking into the ground beneath the house, setting down roots. I hear the ocean outside, and Elif's high-pitched laughter. The sun is streaming in through the open windows, warming the wood and casting a beautiful afternoon glow on the lived in colors surrounding us.

"I like," I say when I'm certain my voice will remain steady. I look down, plucking at my pants. "I guess most of my chores will be in the house?"

He approaches, his footsteps surprisingly quiet for a man who's so large. A big hand cuffs my face.

"Is that what Defne want? Chores in the house?"

He's asking me? I want to point out that I'm the servant here and he's the master, but I pause. It's easy to slip into defensiveness, but he's not treating me like I'm a servant, he's treating me like I'm the betrothed he's brought home to inspect the house.

"I mean, I guess there's no way around chores in the house, but I'd rather be outside," I say.

"Learn Orc blade?"

"I don't want to be a warrior, but I want to know how to defend my family. You mentioned a milking beast?"

He grunts. "All for Defne. Uther washes hands, or it becomes dinner. Be careful, it kicks. Stupid beast."

There's a story behind his antipathy, but I'm not going to ask.

“Uther spend much time outside, much work,” he says, his voice soft as if he’s trying to paint me a picture. “Spring planting, and build another room on house.”

I look up, sliding my hands up his bare chest. At some point when I was wandering around, he got rid of the weapons so now there’s nothing to impede me touching him. His nostrils flare as I slip my palms over his hard pecs, the male nipples pebbling, then caress his strong shoulders and down his arms. I’m not trying to seduce him, not really, but it’s a pleasure to touch him, to feel his strength, the heat of his skin.

To know that with a little time, if I don’t screw this up, he’ll be mine.

A good man. A warrior who can protect us, but is content to stay home and to live a simple life. I won’t have to worry about him traveling, or raiding, or getting into mischief.

He’s looking down at me with that intent, banked heat gaze, so I take his hand and lead him towards the couch.

Traveling with him the last several days has become torture. Watching him during the day, sleeping next to him at night. Fighting my instinctive revulsion, which I know is because of Hartland. I won’t let that control me, though, won’t let it ruin me. Uther allowed kisses, petting, but he wouldn’t let me touch him below the waist, and he kept his hands above my waist too, a sad knowledge in his eyes I wanted to rail at, and hide from.

I don’t want what Hartland did to ruin Uther either. I don’t want him to look at me and see my violation. Especially since it ain’t like that was the first time—and I’m never going to tell him how soiled I am. How jagged.

I’m going to try to be the female this Orc deserves, at least unless he betrays me.

“Defne.” His says my name on a sigh.

“Trust me.”

He stops, not allowing me to tug him any further. “Defne. I can wait.”

“What if I don’t want to? Don’t I get to decide?”

Uther looks at me, head tilted in that way he does when he’s thinking. “Is this fear, or desire?”

I won’t lie to him. “Both. But I still want to make the choice.”

He hesitates. “I can wait. Defne understand? I can wait, won’t go anywhere. Will wait. There is time. But if this what you want, will not tell you no.”

“If you’re waiting for me to be healed, then you’re wasting your time. I’m healed enough. I know you want me.”

“Want you whole.”

“Uther, I will never be whole. Never, do you understand? You’ll be waiting forever.”

Shouldn’t have said that. Should’ve told him what any man would want to hear. But as I started to lie, the truth pushed its way to the front. I blink back tears.

“If you don’t want me ‘cause of that, I get it.”

He cups my face, lowering his head to touch his forehead to mine. “Want you. Want you with fierceness. If only pieces, will take them. Will be *my* pieces. But we go slow. For Defne’s honor, and mine. So Elif see proper courtship, and know her worth, how warrior should treat her.”

I swallow sorrow and elation, tangling my fingers in his braids. I don’t know how I’ll be able to protect my heart from this man; don’t know if I want to. Ratha trusts him, Kathien too. Neither of them is mean, or deluded.

The couch is a wood frame with thick stuffed cushion seats and more cushions at the back for reclining. It’s Orc sized, which means it’s sturdy, big enough to be a comfortable bed for someone my size which I noted during my self tour.

“Are you sure Elif is all right out there by herself?”

He nods. “Not by self, are always watchers.”

I pull him down as I lie back on the couch, my hands on his shoulders as he braces his arms on either side of me, staring at

my face. He does nothing else, and I slide a hand around the back of his neck and tug his head down so I can kiss him.

He doesn't resist, and soon the kiss I start he takes over, as he always does, almost passive while I initiate, reclaiming control as desire flares.

I turn my head away from his, bearing my face against his chest. "Touch me," I say, voice muffled.

"If touch Defne, won't be able to stop."

"Isn't that why I'm here?"

His body stiffens. "Not my whore."

A part of me that's still girly is pleased at his curt indignation. I push my hips against his, deepening my voice. "No, but I'm your concubine. Your servant. You own me, I'm yours to do with as you please."

"Defne playing games again."

I smile against his chest, kissing him.

He shudders, body tensing more and it's not as if I don't feel the heavy erection pressing against me.

"I don't understand what's holding you back," I say. "I'm willing."

He snorts. "Defne makes that clear. Maybe Uther is shy."

"Maybe Uther is playing hard to get."

Is that what it is? Maybe I'm coming on too strong. But I thought about that on the trip here, and he seems to like when I approach him, when I kiss him, when I straddle him. His eyes flare and his hands tighten around my waist or my hips, and he'll return my kisses, growling and beginning to lose control...until he stops, pulling back.

"Once Defne in Uther's bed, Uther will never let go. Give mother-girl time to know her own mind."

I sigh, wriggling beneath him. "Uther. I don't need to window shop. I like you."

"Want more than like," is the quiet reply.

“You’re a romantic.”

Stubborn silence.

I laugh.

The commander tangles a hand in my hair, pulling my head back and rearing up a little so he can glare at me—so I can see him glaring at me.

He eyes me, clearly displeased. “Defne laugh now. Won’t laugh when split in two on my cock.”

“I don’t know, Uther, I’m starting to think—”

He shuts me up with another kiss, masculine ire in his rough, scorching touch.

I want to feel his skin against mine so I reach for the hem of my shirt, pulling it up over my head. My breasts are wrapped in a binding cloth so even if Elif walks in, she’s not going to get too raunchy an eyeful.

His hand covers one breast, his talons gripping the binding cloth as if he wants to tear it away, and his mouth is on my neck, teeth scraping my skin though he’s careful with his tusks.

“Uther,” I say, my voice a whine. “Please.”

He mutters something in his harsh, guttural language, and his hand is on the waistband of my pants, loosening them, tugging the cloth down enough so he has access.

I arch my hips into his touch when he slides a thick finger between my folds, moving up and down the slit, his breath coming out in a hot puff of air.

“Defne wet,” he mutters. “Do this to torture Uther.”

“It’s self-inflicted torture.”

He touches my clit, rubbing, his fingers on my body skilled, certain, his lips on mine as he finally, finally offers me some relief.

When he slides a finger into my opening I moan, bucking, riding that single digit because it’s been so long since I’ve let a

man touch me willingly, for my pleasure. Not since I knew I was pregnant with Elif.

The single finger is thick, and he slides it in and out of me as he shifts a thumb to my clit.

His tongue plunges in my mouth, tasting me and I hang on to him by his coarse black braids, riding two fingers now. They're deep inside, and I gasp, moving my hips faster as he slides a third in.

I realize I closed my eyes and open them, meeting the burning gaze staring down at my face. He'd broken the kiss, maybe because he wanted to see my expression as I came.

And I let him see it, I don't hold back, I'm not shy. I cry out, shuddering, biting my bottom lip hard enough to draw blood because this man knows exactly what he's doing and by the hells, I know I haven't made a mistake. If he can do this with his fingers, his lips on mine...

"Thank you," I say. "You don't know how much I needed that."

"Any Orc will do," is his terse reply.

"But you're not any Orc, you're Uther. My Orc."

His expression doesn't change. "Am I yours?"

It's a challenge, this flat question, though I'm not quite certain what he's challenging me to do or say.

"Let me taste you? If you won't put your cock in my pussy for some hellsdamn reason, then put it in my mouth."

His pupils dilate, his lip drawing up in a snarl.

I undulate against him as best I can because his body is pressing me into the couch though the hand down the back of my head is still gentle. He's very, very careful of his talons.

"Don't you want to fuck my mouth, master? Don't you want to come down my throat? Don't you want to—"

He mutters a guttural curse and pushes off me. I laugh as I scramble into a sitting position, then slide to my knees in front of him, pushing his legs apart.



Uther leans back against the couch, giving me a dark glare from underneath his black braids. “Keep laughing, girl. Won’t be laughing when I have you on your hands and knees. Be screaming for me to go slower.”

I start to tell him that’s not a threat, but I pause, eyeing the size of the bulge tenting his pants as I run my hands up his thighs into the waistband. It occurs to me that I’m basing a lot of my teasing on a lack of actual facts.

I’m starting to wonder if he meant split me in two literally, and my brows furrowing, I take his length out and stop.

Sit back on my haunches, stare.

“Uther, we may have an actual problem.”

I’ve never seen an Orc cock, and I haven’t been worried about it because, you know, baby heads come out of vaginas.

I’m a little worried now. My pussy still throbs from his fingers, though it’s a good ache.

“Defne scared now?” he purrs, arms draped across the back of the couch. “Talk lots of shit all day, tease Uther at night, but see big Orc cock and go quiet as little mouse.”

“I’m not going to take that challenge lying down, you know.” I will, eventually, but not right this minute.

I have no idea how I’m going to fit him in my mouth, but deep in my core I begin to burn, a dark part of me enjoying this particular problem.

Besides, I want to wipe that smug look off his face. He thinks I’m a soft City girl, but I was born and raised in the outlands and though there’s a lot in my life I’ve learned to be afraid of, Orc cock ain’t one.

I rise slowly on my knees, taking his erection with both hands and meeting his gaze. “If you want to scare me, you’re going to have to dig a little deeper, Uther.”

It’s a struggle to get him in my mouth. I pause to massage my jaw and loosen it up to get the first thick inches of his satiny head past my lips.

He chortles, enjoying my dilemma, but when I start jerking my hands up and down his length and manage to get him another inch deeper, he stops laughing, the sound turning into a deep, harsh groan.

“Fuck,” he curses.

I do my best, but there’s only so wide a girl’s jaw can go before it starts to crack, and though his hands are in my hair now, and he’s guiding my head up and down, he’s careful.

I breathe through my nose, because his cock is strangling me.

Must have made some type of whining sound, because he barks a short laugh. “Defne tease, Defne gets what she deserves, sore jaw from big Orc cock. Defne sorry now? Maybe no more shit talk and more sweet talk.”

Rolling my eyes up at him, I squeeze his cock with my hands, pressing my nails into his skin in a warning. He only grins, showing his shiny teeth.

Then the bastard pinches my nostrils. The instinctive need to breathe has my jaws loosening another fraction of an inch, and he bucks his hips upward. I gag, but that’s all I can do because he’s wedged inside me.

He lets my nostrils go, maybe because tears are leaking out of my eyes and I’m beginning to instinctively flail for air. Something tips him over the edge, and he shouts, coming in a hard, salty spurt of thick creamy liquid.

I swallow as best I can because I can only move my throat, not my jaw and when I ease off him, he’s a little softer but not by much. Come and saliva flow out of my mouth, and I swipe my tongue around my lips, swallowing it all back down.

I look back up at him. Then I smile. “Is that all you’ve got?”

Uther’s smile echoes mine, but it’s slow, shadowed, edged with a lot more experience. I realize he knows the plan; seduce him to secure my and Elif’s place. He’s been humoring me.

I shove to my feet, eyes pricking, and turn away though I don’t know where I’m going to go. He snakes an arm around my

waist, yanking me down into his lap, though he hisses when my buttocks hit his still hard cock.

“Why Defne mad?” he asks in my ear, his voice kind again. He cups my breasts, kneading them. “Uther rough? Defne is crying.”

“You’ve been toying with me,” I say.

He clucks. “Uther told Defne, she will learn to trust.” I feel him shrug. “If Defne must play game to feel safe, Uther don’t mind.”

My dreams of managing him die. Won’t be no managing this male unless he allows it.

“I want Elif to be safe.”

His arms tighten around me, and he nuzzles my neck. “I know. I know, Defne. Uther will make safe. Promise.”

I’m not done playing. He needs a damsel to rescue. “But what if you don’t want me anymore?”

He snorts. “Your scent drives me insane, and every time you open that smart mouth to say something disrespectful in that bland, falsely submissive tone of voice I want to shove my cock in it. My cock, or my tongue. You toy and tease me, and it’s taken every last iota of my self-control not to drag you into the forest and fuck you until you have my young inside your belly. I don’t think it’s possible that I’ll ever not want you. I saw you, and I *knew*.”

I’m frozen, listening to him.

“I watched you threaten a Fae Lord who scares grown Orc warriors. You stared at him with death in your eyes, knowing that he would take you down with him. But you’re smart. You can step back and obey orders, you can hide. You’ll choose survival over bravado if you have a choice, which means I can trust you to stay alive, and some Orc females...sometimes all you can trust is that they’ll rush headlong into a glorious death. I’ve already fallen in love with you.”

I can’t breathe, I can’t even think, but I manage to say, “Then why won’t you take me?”

“We were traveling, for one, and I’d rather not have an audience.” There’s humor in his voice; he lets the crisp Gaithean diction go. “Want Defne to love too. First time we make love, will *be* love. Not only lust. That is what Uther wants. Can fuck any female but want to love wife.”

I nod, shifting to burrow against him, and let my anxiety go. He keeps telling me he wants more, and I’m ready to believe him.

I sit up straight, hearing an approaching child’s voice. “Quick, put that monster back in your pants.”

He chuckles, and as I slide off his lap he obeys, then hands me my shirt which I pull over my head in time for Elif to burst through the front door, shouting for me to come look at the seashell she found.

## ELEVEN

I WALK the path leading from Uther's homestead to the settlement's town square. The first few days of living with him, he took Elif and I on a tour of the countryside, meeting the other major landowners in the settlement, as well as the couples with cabins who work as farmhands, and the long houses where the singles who serve as the settlement's scouts, sentries, and warriors are housed.

It pleased me to see a mix of Orc, Human, and mixed species people. Me'n Elif aren't the only full-blooded Humans, though I'm convinced there's Fae in my mother's line for Elif to be so strong.

As the days pass and Elif begins to blossom under regular meals and safety, there's a new shimmer to her skin that makes me think, uneasily, of the Fae. Uther's watchful of her, and it's more than the proprietariness of an owner or even a stepfather. It's as if he's watching to see what she'll turn into—or if he understands her value and the trouble she can bring down on all of our heads.

Hartland is dead, and the other members of his crew who he brought with him. But the Fae Hartland sold Elif to is still alive, and there's no guarantee that he can't hunt us down.

"Come for the fresh bread," Tersha says as I approach her stall.

She's one of the homesteader's wives, a Human woman with an Orc grandparent so there's a tinge of green under her light

brown skin, and her eyes are black and slightly slanted, her hair in the braids that's typical of the Orcs in this area.

I grin at her. It's getting easier to do that these days since there's more to grin about and no one who sees it as a challenge to wipe the expression off my face.

"You know it," I say. "Love to eat the bread, hate to bake it."

I'd tried, diving into this whole baking thing the second day I'd been in Uther's house. Elif is smarter'n me, she excused herself to go play almost immediately.

I tried. I tried, and I failed, and I learned a good lesson.

Barter for the damn bread.

Laughing at my disgruntled expression after the first miserable attempt, Uther showed me the crop of autumn squashes I could trade to the farmer's wife in exchange for fresh loaves. An arrangement which suits me fine, especially since she throws in a small jar of jam—for Uther's sake, I think. Somehow all the female's know I don't cook.

We make the trade, and I put the bread and jam in the woven basket over my arm and walk further into the town square, intending to check on Elif, who started school the other day.

There've been some behavioral difficulties, mainly because she don't understand the concept of sitting still for several hours at a time, and also that she can't get up and wander out of the schoolhouse at will. I don't mind, except she's still at an age where she can get lost, and besides, until I know the slaver who bought her is dead, I'll never rest easy.

A deep feminine voice calls my name and turn, lifting my hand to shade my eyes.

I recognize Ratha, but not the Orc woman at her side. Ratha's been training me every morning three hours before dawn to use my "knitting needle" as Uther calls it. I'm never going to be a warrior and I'll never have the natural strength of an Orc or Orc-Human hybrid, but that's not the goal.

*"Kill and defend when you must, run if you can,"* Ratha said. *"On scout duty, don't engage. That's the round you'll end*

*up on. You're small and fast and you move well in the forest—be our eyes and ears. The commander won't use you in any capacity where you'll see actual combat."*

I almost laughed when she called me small because even before I'd begun putting on a few pounds of fat, I've been curvy, and tall enough for a Human woman. Hartland had a real hard time picking me up, and he mostly didn't try after the first few humiliations. But I guess next to Ratha, who's over six feet tall and packed with muscle under her curves, I am small.

It's kind of fun to be the delicate one for once, though in the outlands delicate is another word for someone who's going to die young.

I recognize the impatience in the set of her shoulders as she crosses her arms over her chest, beckoning me with a jerk of her chin.

I trot forward instinctively; I'm used to her barking orders at me during training now. As I slow, I give the Orc female next to her a friendly nod, but don't say anything. She doesn't return the friendly nod, though she's not cold.

Still. I sense trouble.

"This is the wench," the unknown female says.

I blink and want to ask her who she's calling a wench, but I keep my mouth shut. I've got a good thing going here, and I don't care if the town mean girl wants to call me names. Besides, Uther already made it clear that he'd kill any man who offended me, but I was on the on my own with the women. Even the women who used to be his soldiers.

"We are Orcs," he'd said, "and among Orcs, females deal with females and males deal with males. There is less bloodshed that way."

"Defne," Ratha says. "The commander's girl. If she doesn't get herself killed on her first round, he'll keep her."

The Orc female looks me up and down, open criticism in her gaze. I guess she's another one of the commander's former soldiers, or maybe a second generation trained by her parents,

because she has the same military bearing as several of the other Orcs in the settlement, and Ratha only calls Uther commander in the presence of other soldiers.

“She’s scrawny. Does she talk? Do you talk, wench? Or are you only good for milking cows and warming the commander’s bed?”

I give her blank face. “I’m good for whatever the commander wants me for.”

She grunts and rolls her eyes at Ratha. “This? This is what he passed over every eligible female in the settlement for? A milkmaid?” Her eyes travel over the blade strapped to my back. “Can you use the blade? You can’t use it, you don’t wear it.”

I brace, because the intonation in her voice shifts by the time she’s done talking, and I recognize someone who’s about to start shit when I hear it.

I skip backwards as she snaps out an arm to either grab me or the blade.

“I don’t want no trouble,” I say. “I was on my way to the schoolhouse to see my daughter, so if you don’t mind—”

“I do mind. I mind that the commander has brought two useless mouths into the settlement to feed. Well, the girl-child has power, so she has some worth. But you?” The female spits out of the side of her mouth. “You’re less useful than a sheep. At least when he’s done fucking a sheep, we can butcher it for meat.”

Oddly enough, I find that funny, though I know better than to laugh. “You can butcher me for meat too, but when the commander tells me he looks forward to eating me, that’s not quite what he has in mind.”

Maybe I say this last bit to needle her; there’s jealousy issues going on here.

And I’m right, because she scowls, her eyes brightening with anger.



“I don’t give a fuck about that,” she says. “I care that you’re wearing an Orc blade like you’re one of us, and you’re not.”

The words don’t offend me, because I don’t care. Well, I do care, but Uther is the head of the table around here and if he says I stay, I stay. But I recognize I need to carve out a place among these women and I don’t know of any settlement where you can put down roots without watering them in blood after.

“What do I got to do to be considered one of you?”

She’s about to lunge towards me again, but she stops. Ratha stands there watching, letting it go down which tells me this is some kind of test. I glance at her, but there’s no expression on her face. She’s not going to interfere. Maybe she figures this is good practice. Maybe she wants to see how I’ll handle myself. Just because she’s training me, and because she’s halfway friendly don’t mean she doesn’t think the same way.

I don’t blame ‘er.

“You fight,” the female says. “Prove you can use that blade. That you’re more than a soft bedwarmer.”

“If any other man but Uther had brought me home, would you be challenging me?”

Her silence, and the considering look tells me all I need to know. I sigh and look for a place to set my basket down. Ratha takes it from me. Of course I wasn’t going to get away with marrying Uther, their beloved commander, without having to field a challenge or two. Even I know enough about Orc culture to understand they don’t let anyone have anything for free.

I was hoping I’d have a few more quiet weeks under my belt though.

“You know I’m barely half trained,” I tell her. “So this isn’t fair.” Maybe she’ll fall for that.

She shrugs. “What does fair have to do with it? We’re not testing your training.” She gives me a toothy grin. “We’re testing your courage, bed warmer.”

Since the town square *is* a square, a packed dirt general meeting area around which they built the various commercial buildings where the community congregates for shopping and socialization, we go in that direction.

“Rules?” I ask. “Is this to the death?”

“No,” Ratha says. “But don’t let that fool you.”

I don’t, because there are plenty of gruesome injuries a person can survive, and I don’t want to experience any of them.

Not bothering to sigh, I unsheathe the blade and wait for the challenger to unsheathe hers.

We fight.

When Ratha trains me, it’s methodical, she’s looking for weaknesses and mistakes she can correct. She’ll stop, demonstrate, and have me practice proper form before we engage again.

This warrior doesn’t bother with any of that; she attacks.

She’s fast, and though I try not to meet any of her blows strength for strength, it’s inevitable I have to go on the defense. She’s strong. I think the women are almost as strong as the men even if they’re leaner. They’re certainly stronger than Humans.

I figure she’s toying with me, because I take several slaps from the flat of her blade, and a couple blows from the hilt—and her fist. I endure the pain, the bruises from Hartland barely healed, and focus on fighting with every last scrap of self-taught viciousness that’s in my soul, calling on the skills Ratha is training me in.

She taunts me for a while, and when that fails to elicit anger, she shuts up. I don’t think she understands that I’m not angry; everybody has to earn their place and my tribe would have done the same thing. Well, we wouldn’t have bothered to issue a formal challenge—someone jumps the newcomer and beats the shit out of them until they walk away, or die.

A moment of dumb luck, I manage to clip her jaw, but after a slight widening of her eyes, she catches herself, and returns

the blow with a cut I hope won't need stitches.

"Switch hands, Defne," Ratha calls out in her crisp instructor's voice.

She's right. Blood is running down my arm and it'll wet the hilt, making it slippery. I switch hands, though I'm clumsier with my left. A weakness she's been trying to correct.

There's sweat burning my eyes from the hot afternoon sun, exertion from the fight after several hours of training this morning, then the walk to the town square. I'm tiring.

I'm hoping she'll be done with me soon.

At least I'm still on my feet, and I haven't cried mercy. Won't, either. Is not like she'll kill me.

But I hear a sudden childlike scream, and it's that split second of recognizing my daughter's voice that does me in.

My gaze automatically seeks her out, and I see Elif running towards me, eyes wide with fear, her dark braids streaming behind her, and my opponent slams her hilt into my jaw.

I guess I wake up not much later, 'cause Elif is hovering over me, tears in her eyes and Ratha is talking to her in a soothing voice.

"There's no need to cry, little one," she says, voice pitched in a low firm tone, her hand on Elif's shoulder. "Your mother was challenged, and no Orc refuses a challenge unless they want to be dishonored."

"I'm not a hellsdamn Orc," I say, and it's painful because my jaw fucking hurts. Is not broken, and I guess I should thank my opponent for that.

I push up onto my elbows then sit all the way up, swearing under my breath because I'm dizzy.

"Well, that was a hoot."

Someone snorts. It's my opponent, but I'm not worried about her. The challenge is over and she's not going to attack me while I'm sitting in the dirt at her feet.

“As weak as an infant,” she says, “but maybe won’t be useless forever.”

I accept that as the grudging semi-acceptance it is.

“I’m Ilotha.”

I want to say, “I don’t care,” but that would undo any gains I’ve made by accepting a public beating in the town square.

“You didn’t do bad,” Ratha says, and reaches down to wrap her hand around my arm and yank me to my feet.

I glance at Ilotha, who’s looking at me with raised eyebrows. I’m about to look away, but something about the expectancy in her expression makes me pause. “What?”

“You’re supposed to invite her for dinner,” Ratha says.

“You’re kidding me. She beat my ass into the ground and I’m supposed to feed her? Bathe her feet too?”

“It’s tradition.”

I want to spit. But I think about it. “Would it make Uther happy?” Even though this is some *shit*, and I got complaints.

“The commander? What does his happiness have to do with it. This is females’ business.”

I sigh and take my bag of bread and jam, examining it to make sure everything’s intact. I glance at Elif. “It’s fine, sweetbun. You know Ratha and Mommy have been training in the morning to fight. So if anyone ever attacks us, we can kill them first.”

Elif nods slowly. “This was training?”

“No. This was a challenge.” I won’t lie to her.

She thinks about it. “And we’re all friends now?”

“I guess I have to feed her first.” I don’t bother keeping the sour note out of my voice. I glance at Ilotha. “I’m making rabbit stew. It’s not very good.”

Ilotha rubs her hands together. “I like rabbit stew. It’s hard to ruin.”

Yeah, she don’t know me very well. She’ll learn.

I'm learning, but cooking isn't an art in the outland. Mostly 'cause there ain't much to cook.

Somehow I think I've made a new friend, and I didn't want one.

But by the time dinner is over—and Uther comes into the kitchen, takes one look at us sitting around the table, and backs out, muttering something about going to Hathur's place for dinner—I kind of think it might be nice to have a female friend. Even if she can kick my ass if I piss her off.

## TWELVE

ELIF SKIPS ahead down the path, pausing only when I call out for her to wait for us.

Uther squeezes my hand. “Will be fine.”

In my mind, I know it’s safe, we’re safe. This Orc territory, and the forest on either side of the main road leading in and out of the town square is bristling with sentries and warriors. It’s well defended, and the relay system set up to warn of impending trouble is sophisticated.

Uther is at my side. But still, I can’t help but worry. It’ll take time to let my guard down, but I’m not even sure if that’s what I want. The minute you relax, fully relax, is the minute something eats you.

Besides, once Ratha declares me fit for duty, I’ll be joining the sentries on rotation several evenings a week. I refuse to put down my Orc blade, and there are consequences to that decision.

“Tell me again what tonight is for?” I ask Uther.

What I want him to say is I don’t have to talk to people. I don’t mind being around people—well, on the outskirts of people—and I don’t mind watching him enjoy himself as Elif mingles with friends, but I’m not the chatty type. Hard, when you see everyone as a potential enemy.

He chuckles, squeezing my hand again. “Meat and cake, good fun, meet more of community.”

“But do I have to talk to people?”

There are downsides of being the concubine of Uther Bachdracht.

Everyone's had a reason to drop by the house. The Orcs are as fussy about hospitality as the Fae, so dropping by the house means feeding them, offering them tea.

Sitting and talking with them, or at the very least because I make Uther do most of the talking, pretending like their babbling interests me and I'm not counting the minutes until they leave and I can have my house to myself again.

When Ratha and Kaithen drop by, I suspect they linger to torture me. But they're mostly family now, so I don't mind being rude. When I am, they laugh. Which is probably why I consider them almost family.

Almost, because there's a bit of reserve that's keeping them from fully warming up to me.

I get it, I do. But as long as they ain't trying to talk Uther into getting rid of me, I don't mind. Time takes care of most things.

"People will talk with you," he says. "No need to smile or ingratiate yourself. Defne is mine. But..." he hesitates and clears his throat.

"But?"

"May want to make friends with other females." He clears his throat again. Then adds hastily as if he doesn't want to get in trouble for telling me the wrong thing, "Is female business, not mine. But still."

I sigh. This isn't the first time he's hinted that I want to get in good with the local women. He says nothing about the men, but it's important to him that the women like me. I'm not quite sure why, but I take it as a positive sign that he *does* want to keep me around long term, otherwise he wouldn't care.

"I'll try," I say. "I've been practicing smiles in the mirror."

It's pretty hard after a lifetime of frowning, scowling, neutral expressions, forbidding expressions, resting "I'll slit your throat," and all of that.

He releases my hand, sliding his fingers up to grip the back of my neck in what I've learned is a sign of affection. Anyone else, it'd be considered a threat to choke me, but not Uther. Or maybe it's an Orc thing.

"Uther happy Defne try," he purrs in that warm voice which promises all manner of evening shenanigans. Which is the problem—the lack of evening shenanigans. "Defne try, Uther reward."

"But you're not going to reward Defne are you?" I slam my mouth shut, not having wanted to express my ire.

The Orc isn't a virgin, I know that. We kiss, he fucks me every which way each evening. Tongue, fingers, random objects. He loves when I bring him to release in my mouth.

But no cock in pussy.

I asked him if he was worried about pregnancy and he'd said no, his hand on my belly.

"Then why won't you fuck me?" I'd asked.

"Not right time."

"What are you waiting for? Do I need to get permission from your father?" That was sarcasm on my part but he took it seriously, answering me.

"Not father, no."

But I couldn't get him to say anything more. He's waiting for something, but I'm not sure what. I had been thinking that it was "love" he was waiting on. He'd said as much, after all, that he wanted more than a nightly roll in the hay with his concubine. That he wanted mental and emotional connection, something deeper.

And I'm frustrated because I'm giving him everything I can. It feels like our relationship is deepening on a daily basis, and sex can only help that, so what is he holding out for?

I kick a rock in the middle of the road, cursing under my breath. "I don't have to dance, do I?"



I feel him glance down at me, but he's not stupid. He keeps his yap shut, for once. He usually talks enough I can get away with sipping tea and sitting quietly and no one notices, but when I want him to talk, he goes all close-mouthed. Contrary beast.

“Uther?”

“No, not if don't want.” He sounds a mix of resigned and irritated. “Don't know why so unsocial.”

“You can always command me.”

He snorts. “Uther likes living.”

Soon we're in the town square. I exhale, erasing the aggravation from my expression because these people worship this man, and the last thing I need is for them to think I'm giving him a hard time or not making him happy. Or that I'm ungrateful for what he's given us.

Because I'm not ungrateful. I want him to accept what I'm offering, which is everything. I don't have any more reservations. Maybe he's waiting for me to say I love you. But, hellsdamn, I'm not that kind of woman. He's gonna have to catch me in a weak, alcohol infused moment.

“Get a few beers in me,” I tell him, “and maybe I'll dance. Grudgingly. Though you owe me for the milking beast.”

I'm going to try again after the bonfire tonight. I'll sit him down and see if that's what he's waiting on. Those stupid words. Some people need words. I have to respect that. It's a small sacrifice, all things considered.

I grit my teeth.

As usual when Uther shows up in town, people surround him. Some with greetings, others with complaints and concerns. Mostly men, though, because the women don't tend to come to him with anything except complaints about the men. In fact, the women go to Ratha as if she's Uther's counterpart.

My eyes widen as something occurs to me. If we get married, will they expect me to take over that role?

Oh, hells no. I'll have a long talk with Ratha if Uther and I get to that point. No way do I want to be the town mayoress.

"Defne!" And speak of the demoness. I turn towards Ratha's voice as she strides towards me. "Come, leave Uther to deal with male's business."

Uther swats me on my backside and gives me a gentle push towards Ratha.

"You said I wouldn't have to socialize," I hiss at him.

His only response is a deep chuckle, but cognizant of the halfhearted promise I made to try and make friends, I stomp towards Ratha.

She kind of grunts at me, curving her mouth in a smile. It's amused and malicious, which means she understands my annoyance.

"There are things the males won't discuss with Uther while you're present," she says. "It would be unseemly. The males know their place for the most part."

She half pushes, half drags me towards a group of women standing at the giant bonfire with drinks in their hands and babies on their hips. A couple of rolled joints are passed around, and they make room for me, their general manner affable though there is still that reserve. I'm happy to accept a beer and a joint, and I listen to the gossip but don't participate.

Slowly relaxing, I realize I can get used to this. This is my happy place. Listening, getting drunk, being allowed to be *silently* social. I have two beers to relax me enough to actually talk.

"How do you like the settlement so far?" someone asks.

Takes me a minute to realize they're talking to me. Had to happen eventually, which is unfortunate. I glance at the woman, a Human, half Orc, probably around my age.

I shrug. "Like it. Whatsh not to like?" Oh, hells. This beer is pretty strong.

"Think you may stick around?"

Are they kidding me? “Have you sheen Uther?” Have you seen Uther’s homestead? But I’m trying to hide the mercenary side of my personality, at least in civilized company.

Some of the women chuckle, though not everyone. A sip of my beer, practicing my pleasant smile.

“Not all of the males have to go outside the settlement to find a mate, but he’s one of those,” another woman says. An Orc, with deep green skin and two thick braids falling to her waist. Ratha usually wears a vest and either pants or shorts cut off at the knee, but this woman is in a long dress.

“One of what?” I ask. “Oh right, a shavior complex.” I shrug. That’s not my fault, and I’m not going to apologize for taking advantage of it. He’s grown.

“He should have a mate, not a concubine.”

I shrug again. “I’m willing. Ish up to him, I can’t make him do anything he don’t want.” Truer words were never spoken. “Besides, whash wrong with a clonk...concubine?”

And this is why I don’t like to talk to people, because people always want to get involved in messy conversations, and my philosophy is to avoid the mess and mind your own business.

“It’s not fitting for his position. The commander is an example to the younger males of proper behavior, and it’s difficult to get them to stop running all over the territory peeing on trees and starting fights when the commander himself isn’t settled down with a mate and young.”

“I’ve never seen Uther pee on a tree, but I take your point. What would you like me to do about it? Again, I can’t make his decisions for him. We have a contract. If there’s a woman here he wants to mate, I won’t stand in the way.”

That is a hellsdamn lie, but I won’t stand in the way in an obvious fashion, a way that will start a fight. I’ll undermine the bitch from the sidelines. Stick her with the pointy end when she don’t see it coming.

I practice my pleasant smile again, though I don’t know how effective it is. Next to me, Ratha snorts.

“This is not a problem for now,” she says, shutting down the conversation. “Tonight is for relaxation. We’ll deal with female’s issues another night.”

I don’t know how this is a women’s issue, when I have no control over my life here, but I’m not one to argue unless it’s needful.

The informal gender segregated circles break up, and the community begins to mingle.

Someone brings out drums, a reed like instrument, and a fiddle. Music starts, dancing. Meat’s roasting over a separate pit, and there are tables laden with goods from each household. I’d dropped four squash pies off earlier when checking on Elif, and I glance at the table to eye their state, satisfied when I see they’re gone after the first hour.

I make sure Elif eats, then release her to the wild, watching in satisfaction as she’s absorbed by a gaggle of children her age. Cheeks shining, her belly bloated with good food. Her hair is growing out and lost the brittle edge, and she can play longer and harder these days.

Let one of these women try to take this from me. I’ll show them pretty quick how outland women roll.

“Defne,” a male voice says.

I glance over when an Orc male steps up to me. I have a hard time judging their ages, but he’s an adult. Tall, muscled as they all are, handsome in an Orcish way with skin almost too blue for true green, and black hair in a rakish shoulder length cut, his braids thin and slightly longer.

After a minute I recognize him as one of the single homesteaders. His farm is smaller, but he’s younger than Uther.

“Hathur.”

He grins. “Dance with me?”

I’m about to refuse, because dancing is too close to public humiliation for my tastes, and talking will be required, but

when I look over through the crowd to find Uther to see if I can use him as an excuse to say no, I see him.

I see this bastard accepting an offer to dance from an Orc female, allowing her to lead him to the impromptu dance floor where he joins the milling circle.

My eyes narrow.

*Really.*

Not that I'm jealous or anything, but it rankles. He didn't bother to ask me to dance, so I turn back to Hathur and smile, accepting his hand.

"Defne fine dancer," he says after we've been at it for several minutes. What a liar. He talks like an ori-gen, but that could be on purpose to look older, and therefore, stronger. "Defne stay in settlement? Would be shame to lose. Only outland female."

I've noticed that. The Humans in this settlement are mostly blonde, slender Northerners, and I'm a brown-skinned, dark-haired Southerner. "I like it here. I'll probably stay."

"How Defne like Uther?" He deepens his voice, looking at me underneath his lashes as he pulls me a little closer, looping his arms loosely around my back. "Don't like Uther, maybe like another male."

Oh.

He's flirting.

I'm not certain why, because though I'm not a hag, I'm not the best-looking woman here. Must be the novelty of a new face, especially if he's a fuckboy. Or maybe the novelty of swiping Uther's concubine out from underneath him.

"Maybe," I say, spying the commander with yet another female.

Our gazes meet for a second, and he falters, but then he's swept back into the crowd.

"We're contracted for a year and a day," I say, not bothering to hide my malice. "After that, who knows?" I give my best

placid smile, trying to pronounce my syllables like someone who can handle their beer.

I shouldn't encourage him, I shouldn't. But the man who claims he wants something deep and meaningful with me is dancing with other women, not me, and there's the small issue of why I can't get him to put out even though from the state of his cock whenever we so much as brush arms, he clearly wants to.

A part of me wonders if maybe, maybe, he doesn't want me all that much. I don't know much about Orc men. Constant physical arousal might be normal.

He's dancing with other women. He's knows I'm watching him.

It's a slap in the face.

Maybe something about me is causing him to hold back, to wait and see. It's reasonable, I suppose. But I don't have to like it.

And I don't have to like that when I glance at him he's dancing with yet another partner.

Another male cuts in and claims me, and then another. I do nothing to discourage it. Goose, meet fecking gander.

They get progressively bolder, hands wandering along hips, pulling me closer as we dance. The flirting is becoming more overt as I respond with either a neutral smile or teasing.

I catch Uther's gaze occasionally, but he don't do *nothing*.

Every time he does nothing, my anger ticks up a notch.

When my original partner, Hathur, claims me again and asks if I'd like to take a walk, I loop my arm through his and smile cheerily.

Uther is watching, I feel that bastard's eyes on me. Why hasn't he asked me to dance yet? Any of the males would have given way. He's not jealous, at all. The last thing I'll do is make a scene, or act like I have rights I don't. He's the master, I'm the servant. So I'll let him dance.

I grab another beer and down it. Why not. Has bits of dried apple floating in it, tastes pretty good.

Hathur looks awfully pretty.

Hathur leads me away from the bonfire and around a building where there's a bit of privacy and pushes me against a wall. Not rough or mean, but interested.

He caresses my chin. "Defne like me? If like, can show more."

Hathur waits, and I have a quick, nasty conversation with myself over the common sense of the situation. Do I want to make Uther jealous?

Yes.

Do I want to piss Uther off to the point where he'll get rid of me?

Absolutely not.

I want to teach him a lesson about ignoring me, especially when the women of the community will make a note of his behavior. Since women of all species are the same everywhere, my social credit is going to dive. They'll know I'm not important.

"It's not a good idea," I say, a slow build of misery in my gut. A war between jealousy, disappointment, and growing bewilderment. A stew of emotions that as I look up at Hathur, will only lead to no good.

Uther started it.

Wonder what he'll say if I finish it.

## THIRTEEN

“WHY NOT?” Hathur asks.

I press my hands against his chest and push. He retreats, though not much. “I don’t want to make Uther angry.”

Lie, lie, LIE.

I begin laughing. Cut myself off. Maybe I shouldn’t have had that last beer.

He frowns. Not a mean expression, but confusion. “Why Uther be angry? Has not staked claim on Defne, and Defne has not accepted Uther.”

I stare at him. “I’m his concubine. We have a contract. I came from the Sorting, remember?” Or maybe he doesn’t know that.

Hathur shrugs. “Contract for concubine is not exclusive. Can fulfill contract and still have interest in other male.” He caresses a finger down my cheek. “Until Uther stake claim, and Defne accept, Uther have no right to anger if Defne like another male on own time.”

I didn’t know that, and no one explained that social custom to me.

It hits me what he said. “Uther has to sshhh. . take a claim if he’s serious about me?”

Has he been playing me? No, I don’t think I’ve misunderstood his intentions. Maybe...maybe I don’t need saving no more, so he’s lost interest. He kept saying he wouldn’t abandon me’n Elif, so maybe he’s keeping me out of duty.



Hathur hums agreement.

“And he hasn’t done that...whatevers required to dooo that.” The stew in me begins to bubble over. I don’t know if I should feel sick or enraged. This is our *life* Uther is playing with.

Hathur shakes his head, then gives me a lazy half smile. “Is why Uther say nothing when Defne dance or touch another male. He has no right.”

Uther hadn’t told me this. I’ve misjudged the situation. A chill begins at the base of my spine, killing any ember of heat, and for the first time I’m really, really worried. If Uther means to keep me around long term, means to marry me, he would have staked the claim outside of the contract. There are social customs he’s not fulfilling, and his clan’s customs are important to him.

“Defne? What’s wrong?” Hathur sounds generally concerned.

I don’t know what to do now. I don’t know what to think. But Elif and I need to survive, and if Uther plans on cutting me loose after the contract ends, I’ve got to start building bridges now.

Though I’m in no mood for it because something stronger than disappointment, more sour than hurt, is twisting through me, I look up at Hathur and force myself to smile.

“Nothing’s wrong.”

I step into him, reaching up my arms to twine around his neck.

“I won’t do more than kisses,” I warn, because I’m still going to tread a careful line.

That’s common sense anyway; keep him simmering on the back burner so when it’s time to give me to a new owner, he’s ready to boil over.

Hathur kisses me, and it’s pleasant enough. He’s handsome, and I’m a normal woman. Hathur is getting into it, his hands on my waist, curving up my rib cage to rest beneath my breasts. I don’t want him thinking he’ll get more tonight—I

must have come on too strong, been too easy with Uther. It backfired.

This time I'm going to play...uh. Hells. Whatsit called. Hard to get. That.

I drop my arms and begin to pull away, when suddenly Hathur is ripped away from me.

I recognize the broad form, the many beaded braids, the unique pattern of scars on his arms and shoulders.

But I don't recognize the naked threat on his face, the rage in his growl as Uther engages Hathur.

Hathur pulls his lips up over his teeth, and the men go at it.

Hellsdamn. I stagger back, lean on a wall. I know better than to get in the middle of a fight between raging bulls, and I don't wanna shout for help 'cause I don't wanna bring any attention to this particular fight...or the reason for it. I don't know how these people feel about a woman playing both sides of the field.

The Orcs are circling each other, growling and spitting in their language.

I'm crouching to make myself small. Hathur isn't a bad fighter, he meets Uther blow for blow, but Uther is...vicious. Vicious in a way that strikes a deep chord of true fear in me, enough that I ignore the gathering crowd. People watch the fight, a range of expressions on their faces.

I force myself to stand. Cowering against a building is not the look I want to go for, and as I do rise, the fight ends.

Hathur is on the ground, his throat between Uther's talons. Both men are bleeding, but where Hathur is angry and threatening, Uther is nearly berserk. He growls something else, and Hathur slowly raises his hands, spitting a reply.

Uther rises and turns his head towards me.

Ssshhit.

I don't move, not even when he stalks in my direction. Out of the corner of my eye I see Hathur flip to his feet, and shake

himself, glance towards us, then saunter towards the crowd as Uther blacks out my vision of everyone else.

He slams a hand on one side of my head, leaning into me, and sniffs.

Lowering his head, he growls in my ear, “Defne is mine, even when drunk. Will kill any male who touches.”

“I’m not—I ain’t—” Can’t even finish the sentence.

Uther slips a talon under my chin and tilts my head back so I meet his gaze. He steps back enough for me to see his eyes are a deep, angry black, glittering with hard internal fire. The snarl is still on his lips, and it occurs to me how much damage those tusks can do. How much damage he can do.

But his finger under my chin is gentle, even though he’s crowding me, the body language is aggressive, dominant, but not threatening.

I curl my upper lip, unimpressed. “It were only a kiss. I wasn’t going to do anything else.”

His talons scrape down the wall and I cringe, because the sound is awful.

“Stop that,” I snap. “If you didn’t want me to kissh, *kiss*, another man, shouldn’t have danshed with other gurlsh!” Classic technique. Deflect the blame onto him.

I slap my hands on his chest, ball up a fist and throw a punch. He catches my fist, cradling it.

“Defne jealous?” It’s a dark, thoughtful sound. The sound of a predator who’s discovered a weakness, and plans on wringing it for every last drop.

“I’m not jealous. You’re the master, I’m the servant. You can do what you want.” I sound sulky even to my ears, barely coherent, and that pisses me off more. I shove at his chest. “I’m not yours. You didn’t sshtake a claim, and you don’t toush me other than kisses.” I sneer up at him to hide that beneath the anger is hurt—he doesn’t deserve my hurt if this is how he’s gonna behave. “If you don’t want me, that’s all you have to say. I’ll do my work and leave you alone.”

“Did stake claim, staked claim now in front of all men of community,” Uther rumbles. Some of the seething darkness leaves his voice, replaced with his usual mild cheer, and he lowers his head to snuffle at my hair. “Defne try to make Uther jealous, force his hand. Defne should not drink Orc mead. Will get into trouble. Force Uther to discipline his female.”

Oh, no he doesn't. I shove at his chest again, but he don't move.

“Males know Defne is off limits now, will kill them if they make offer. Defne understand? You may take any lover you choose, that is your right, but I will tear him limb from limb and roast the meat for our evening's supper.” The last few sentences are smooth, cold, dangerous. “Make you watch me eat it.”

“But what took you so long? You didn't even tell me you had to stake a claim. Or whatever you Orcs call it.”

He slides a hand around the back of my neck, pulling me against him. “Was trying be nice,” he complains.

“And look where that got you. So what lesson did you learn about being nish?” I poke his chest.

“I learn Defne spit on nice male. And cannot have more than one beer.”

I lower my gaze, staring at his shoulders. “Why did you dansh with all of those women and not me?”

He makes an exasperated noise deep in his throat. “Defne already says she don't like dance. Trying to be nice.”

“You don't try to be nice by not asking me to dance!” I bat at his face, and he catches my hands again, bringing them to his lips to kiss the knuckles. “You try to be ni—*nice* by not asking me to dance and not asking anyone else to dance!”

His lips brush the side of my neck and he makes a deep, satisfied noise. “Defne jealous. Territorial. Defne not mark her territory though.”

It's a taunt, and a challenge.

“You’re the one who’s holding out.”

He’s silent for a long moment. “Not holding out for no reason. Must court in proper steps. Uther want no other female. But we do this properly, or not at all.”

I swallow, because now there’s a warning in his voice, and his hand on my neck tightens. “So we do this your way, or you get rid of me?”

“Hmm. Not get rid. But is important. To me. New world, new life, need maintain old customs. Shows respect for my wife, or others think she has no value. Lose face with female’s circle.”

Sighing, I give up, collapsing against his chest.

His hand tightens more, and he yanks my head back as his other arms slides behind my back to brace me. His eyes are twin coals of ire.

“Would Defne have done more if Uther not intervened? Kiss, lick, suck...fuck?”

“Now who’s jealous,” I taunt.

“Not too late to rend Hathur limb from limb and roast for supper.”

“You leave that poor boy alone.”

Uther barks a laugh. “Hathur not a boy. Hathur know what he do. Taunt me. Men say Uther shy, not claim his female. Maybe not handle her right, she want other male.”

“Uhhh...okay.”

“Not follow ways of male’s circle. Trying to be nice. Males say I not claim, Defne free to chose another.”

“Don’t know why they’d even want me.”

Uther’s expression is odd, but he doesn’t take the bait. I sulk a bit more ‘cause I hand fed ‘im the perfect opportunity to flatter my ego, but he lowers his head and kisses me.

He lifts me, pulling my legs around his waist, deepening the kiss.

His tongue is in my mouth, and I taste the same beer I've been overdrinking. He pulls away to run his lips down my throat to his favorite spot where he begins suckling at my neck. It's been a few days since he's done that, long enough for the bruise to begin to fade. The last time he did, he almost gave in and fucked me, which is why I think he's left my neck alone.

As I tilt my head to give him access, I realize that's been part of my growing ire. I love when he gnaws at my neck, but he's been denying me.

His hands are underneath my dress, on my thighs, fingers caressing up and down my slit. He touches me with a purpose, as if he's proving he's the only one who has the right.

When his fingers sink inside me, I cry out, and for a split second I wonder if we have an audience, but I doubt it. And if we do...well, it's not like they can see much of anything except for my legs wrapped around his waist.

He slams his fingers in and out of me, his thumb on my clit as he kisses up and down my throat, my lips, in my ear, bringing me to a quick, brutal climax.

"No other male do this for you," he snarls. "No other male make you come on fingers alone. Is Defne not satisfied? Do Uther not make her scream every night? Why test me?"

"You tested me first."

He spanks me, a quick hard slap on my thigh, and I jerk, squeaking. He slides his finger back inside. "Remember Uther warning."

I shudder in his arms, going limp, still grinding against him because as usual, it's not enough. I want to feel more than his fingers.

I curse at him, a string of long filthy words with some Orcish mixed in. "I want more."

Uther laughs, a deep full-throated sound. "Defne not patient. Will give all, but at right time."

"What are you waiting for?"

He hesitates, but shakes his head, compressing his lips. “Not for me to say.”

“Is it something you can control?”

“No. Female’s business.”

“What? What the hells do—”

I stop talking only because now I recognize the closed, stubborn expression on his face. He’s not going to say anything else. I don’t want to push him, because due to some weird quirk in their culture I wasn’t even aware of, I’ve gotten away with cheating on him. ‘Course, he started it.

Uther gives me a final kiss before letting my legs slide down, feet touching the ground. He holds me up until I feel steady, then slides an arm around my waist as I straighten my dress.

As we walk back towards the bonfire, he whispers in my ear, “Be good girl and tonight will fuck you to sleep with tongue deep in pussy.”

As I’m trying to catch my breath, his fingers press into my waist and he pulls me tighter against him.

He meanders through the crowd with me trapped to his side, his hand roving up and down, sometimes on my waist, sometimes cupping the curve of my breast and kneading the flesh in full view of every adult in the community, sometimes doing the same with my bottom.

Uther doesn’t look at me once as he does this, instead meeting the gazes of every male who turns to watch as he passes. As if he’s daring them to say I’m not his. To fight for, to fuck.

He drags me to the community table where he sits on one of the benches, yanks me down onto his thigh with one arm wrapped around me, and grabs a plate and begins piling it with food.

I’m thinking we’ve come to the feeding part of this ritual because he begins putting bits of food at my lips.

I can’t say I’m thrilled by the blatant domination in his gestures, the demand in his gaze as I glare at him, because I’m

pretty sure I'm losing points with the women. Ratha and Ilotha aren't damsels, no one else here is.

"I don't see any of the other men dragging their women around by the hair and feeding them like toddlers," I snap.

His eyes heat. "Defne mine. Defne eat from my hand, or not at all."

There's no warmth in his voice, no humor, nothing but an aggressive masculine demand.

"The other girls are going to make fun of me," I complain.

"Other females see you are mine. Be jealous. Unless you want another to take your place?"

This beast knows how to get to me. I open my mouth and let him slip the bit of meat inside.

To be a bitch, I wriggle on his lap, grinding my bottom against his groin to make sure he suffers.

"Defne behavior backfire soon," he croons, feeding me another bite of food.

He lifts a cup to my lips, and I tilt my head back. Water. When I've drunk to his satisfaction he sets it aside, and he claims my mouth, his tongue invading me in a leisurely, blatantly sexual kiss. It's not sweet, or family friendly. He's kissing me like we're alone together.

His hand is on my breast in full view of everyone, and I don't do anything, I don't pull away, because when he kisses me like this, touches me like this, it's all I can do not to crawl out of my own skin into his.

I moan, boneless in his arms, the sounds of the community fading to the background because it's just us.

When he pulls away, it takes me a second to come back to myself, not that I'm sober yet. He feeds me a slice of bread. There's a smug grin on his lips, and he holds up another bite of food.

When I'm full, I turn my head away. He nips at my ear, chuckling. "Defne blush. Hmm...maybe rend limb from limb



not right punishment. Maybe next time Defne touch another male, will fuck Defne on community table so males see how she moans. She how she belong to Uther.”

Hellsdamn him.

Ratha saves me. “Let her off your lap, Uther,” she growls, stomping up. “You’ve made your point and you’ll make the other males think this kind of behavior is acceptable with non-wives.”

Uther lets me slide off his lap, watching as I straighten my clothing, gathering my dignity. Ratha throws her arms around my shoulders and leads me away.

“The males will posture and mark their territory and paw all over you for the benefit of the other males,” she says. “Let them get away with it for a few minutes, but don’t indulge them. Always remind them who’s in command.”

“But he’s Uther Bachdracht.”

She grunts. “So? He’s still a male. And he’s not your husband yet.”

## FOURTEEN

“UTHER,” I call out, marching towards the man in the barn playing with his toys. He calls them tools, and says he’s making Elif a bed frame.

She sleeps in the loft on a thick nest of palettes and blankets, and we both told him that it’s a luxury. But he insists, and if he wants to spend his free time playing with wood, even though he’s no woodworker, who am I to tell him no? At least he’s not out drinking or chasing skirts.

Though from what I’ve gathered the more I talk to the other women in the community, like Ratha said, infidelity among Orcs is rare, because the women put an end to it.

Mostly by chopping the man’s balls off, and if he protests in a threatening way, his head.

“There hasn’t been a castration in oh, thirty years,” Ratha had said, lounging in her wife’s arms as we watched Elif play in the sand. She and Ilotha are mated, one of the reasons she’d let her challenge me.

Evidently once I survived a challenge from Ilotha, it headed off the others.

Ilotha nodded. “Last one was two settlements over. Old Lieutenant Orhvac’s youngest daughter. We told her not to marry that no good bounder, but you know how she is for a pretty face.”

“I like pretty faces,” Elif had declared, listening to us.

We’d explained to her, at length, why she was wrong.

“Where’s Elif?” I ask Uther, tugging the collar of my shirt over my mouth because there’s sawdust in the air.

He pauses and squints at me. “Beach.”

“I looked there, and I don’t see her. I don’t hear her either.”

Uther frowns and stands, and now I’m worried because she’s not where *he* expected her to be.

I turn and dash towards the beach, barely keeping from tumbling headfirst. There’s no need to panic, maybe she’s hiding in one of the outcroppings of rocks. We’d told her to stay away from the rocks because we needed to keep her in our line of sight, but she’s getting older, which means she’s getting rebellious.

And for the first time in her life, she feels safe, so she doesn’t understand why we have to follow the same rules even here.

I’m going to beat this child when I find her. I ain’t got the nerves for this.

“Split up,” Uther orders, on my heels.

I head towards the eastern outcropping of rocks and he veers off towards the west.

It’s not until I’m scrambling over sharp, wet rocks that I hear my daughter’s light voice raised in laughter. My anxiety plummets, replaced by aggravation.

I’m going to beat her little bottom until it’s red. As Ratha and Ilotha teach me daily, pain is the best teacher. Living this soft life is making my daughter disobedient. I ought to take her and drop her off in the middle of the forest to teach her a lesson.

And then I hear a deep, masculine murmur and my anger at my daughter is replaced by fear, and rage.

It’s not an Orc voice. It’s too lyrical, the syllables of the language smooth and rounded.

Fae.

Fecking Fae. I draw my sword and when I burst into sight, I catch a glimpse of silky black hair, and pale skin with a

shimmer. The male slips back into the water, an iridescent green tail flipping for a second before he disappears.

Elif turns to me, her eyes wide.

“You know you’re in trouble,” I growl. “Come here.”

She hunches her shoulders, and that’s when I notice the necklace around her neck.

I stomp towards her and reach out to grab it, but she slaps my hand away. “No, Mommy! It’s mine.”

There’s an almost savage note in her voice and I stop, startled by the flash of blue light in her eyes.

I’m not scared of my own daughter, but I’m not stupid. “Give me the necklace, Elif.”

She pokes out her bottom lip. “It’s mine. Athan gave it to me.”

Athan.

*Athan.*

“Was that Athan who swam away?” I calm my voice, because I’m not going to get anything out of her if she thinks I’m angry, or if she thinks I’ll take away her necklace. “He’s a Mer Fae.”

She nods, and grins. “He’s teaching me to swim better. And to breathe underwater. And all kinds of stuff.” Elif pauses, and maybe she sees something in my expression, because she hunches her shoulders again. “I’m a magic water girl, Mommy.”

“A water elemental.”

I give her my back, because if I don’t, I’m going to strangle ‘er, and it ain’t even her fault. It’s Athanmir’s fault. “When you play with Athanmir, does he touch you?”

“No, Mommy.”

I let out a breath, then beckon her to come with me. I’ve talked to her about touching, and the ways people will try to touch you that will hurt, but I think I’m gonna have to sit her down and go into a little more detail.

She's only six.

That sheepfecker.

As soon as we walk around the outcropping, Uther is there. He must have searched his side of the rocks, then doubled back. His gaze shifts to the necklace around Elif's neck, and now that I'm calmer, I pause and look at it more closely too.

It's a silver chain, with a blue stone set in a silver filigree pendant. No, not a stone, but something shiny and iridescent, like a seashell but fancier. There's writing engraved on the pendant, and when I stare into the shiny blue stone, I think I see pictures.

"Don't look into it," Uther says.

I jerk my gaze up and look at him. "You know what it is."

He nods, his expression set, and he glances once at the ocean. "Athanmir?"

I have a new focus for my anger. "You knew he was seeing her?"

If Uther knew, and didn't tell me...I'm wondering if there are other justified reasons for castrating men around here.

But he shakes his head. "No. But not surprised."

"I'm a magic water girl, Uther," Elif says. "Athan is teaching me."

He gives her an inscrutable look, then glances at me, more wary. As he should be. He's not surprised, but he didn't bother to warn me.

"How about we all go home for lunch, and Mommy sits you two down and we have a nice long talk."

"Mommy is mad," Elif whispers to Uther.

"Uther will make it all better. Uther know how get around Mommy temper."

We'll see about that.

"He won't hurt her," Uther says later, after lunch, sitting on our bed.

I start to slam my hair brush down on the dresser but stop. It's the nicest hair brush I've ever owned, and I don't want to break it. A smooth wooden handle inlaid with shell, and what I assume are bore bristles. I've spent hours brushing, and when I'm done on some nights Uther will run his fingers through my hair or bury his nose in the strands and inhale my scent.

I turn towards him. "Have you lost your feckin' mind. He's a Fae Lord. He thinks she belongs to him."

"It's a betrothal necklace."

I stare at him, trying to come up with something to say, but I'm speechless.

Is that...is that supposed to make it better? "A betrothal necklace."

"Knew Athanmir, served missions together," Uther says. "Never knew him to harm female or child. Arrogant bastard, and as murderous as Fae come. But not dishonorable."

"He's a Fae Lord. And he gave a 6-year-old a betrothal necklace. How is that not wrong to you? She's six!"

"Meant to protect her. Other Fae will recognize his mark and leave her be. If touch, he will hunt down and exterminate." He pauses, eyeing me as if he's not certain he should say what is about to come out of his mouth. Seeing the expression in his eyes, I'm pretty certain he shouldn't say it, but he says it anyway. "May be good thing."

"Good thing? A *good thing*?"

I want to wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze. Did I make a mistake?

"He teach her now, become friend. When she's grown, husband will be best friend. Better than stranger. Better than cold mating. Maybe he learn to love her, will make him gentle."

"I can't believe you're justifying this."

His expression hardens, and he stands. "If Athanmir touch daughter in any way harmful or dishonorable, Uther kill

him. Slowly. Athanmir knows. Surrender girl to my protection, knows no harm will come to her with me.”

“I’m sure you think the words coming out of your mouth are reasonable.”

Uther sighs and approaches me. Probably only because there aren’t any knives within reaching distance.

“We aren’t Human, Defne. Oath, if Athanmir hurt Elif, I kill him, then slit my own throat. Promise you.” He’s rubbing his hands up and down my arms.

“That won’t be a comfort, Uther. She’ll have already endured harm.”

“It’s meant to demonstrate that I trust Athanmir with Elif. I wouldn’t allow it if I did not trust him.”

I close my eyes.

“Defne, Elif is water elemental. She must learn. Mer Lord is best to teach her. Strong in that magic. She will have rank, wealth, influence. Good life.”

“Among the Fae? Do you have any idea how they treat their Human servants and concubines?”

“Elif will be wife. Not servant or concubine. Too powerful for low status.”

And that makes it right? But I recognize I’m not going to win this argument. The only way to win it will be to take Elif, and flee.

“Uther, if I left you, what would you do?”

I open my eyes and look up at him. I almost jerk away, because the look on his face for the first time frightens me. Hard, cold, ruthless.

“I would hunt you down, Defne, and I would bring you back.”

“But you haven’t taken me yet. You said I’m only yours once you take me to bed.”

A long cold silence in which the Orc commander still rubbing his hands up and down my arms considers me. “Will hunt you

down. Bring you back. Not safe out there for mother-girl and girl-child,” he adds, as if trying to soften the words.

I lean my forehead against his chest. “I want to trust you.”

“I know.”

He lifts me into his arms, even though the bed is only a few steps away, and lowers me onto my back, leaning over me, his black braids falling into my face. The beads at the tips smack against my cheekbones, but it’s gentle. He brushes my loose hair out of my face, takes a handful of it and lifts the locks to his nose, inhaling.

“Defne mine, Elif mine,” he murmurs. “Would not risk this for Athanmir. Would slit Athanmir’s throat first.”

He begins to kiss me, one of his leisurely, drugging kisses. He can kiss me for an hour without letting up, content to feast on nothing but my lips, his hands drifting up and down my body, pausing to squeeze here, pinch there, caress and grab as if there’s nothing more pleasurable in the world than touching my skin.

But he hasn’t put his cock in my pussy, he hasn’t emptied his seed into me in a way that will make a baby. He’s still waiting.

And maybe he’s waiting because he knows I don’t fully trust him. Not yet. I want to. I want to trust him, and this life we’re building. Keep telling myself I do, and for a few days I believe it, and then something like this happens. It’s going to take time. I can’t control my heart, though I give it a good talking to each day.

I twine my arms around his neck. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing,” he says, pulling away from my mouth. He drifts to the side of my neck and I tilt my head, letting him suckle at my skin. “Nothing wrong with Defne.”

“I feel...I feel like all of this could go away. I’m waiting for the ax to fall.”

“I know.” He says it like he does know, in that kind, gentle voice he uses when I’m at my most emotional. He’s patient



with me, though sometimes I wish he wouldn't be.

Sometimes I wish he would take. But he won't. It's not his nature. Oh, he's a commander, and he can give orders and expect obedience. He can dish out punishment.

But soldiers sign up voluntarily, they're not conscripted on the Orc planets. And even though I went to the Sorting of my own free will, no one is stupid. The people who go to the Sorting, who offer themselves up on platters, are desperate. They have nothing left to lose. So it doesn't count. It don't count if you ain't got nothing left to lose. That's not really choice.

Orcs don't respect anything more than they respect blood freely given.

Uther starts kissing me again, unties the belt of my robe, pushing the cloth aside until I'm naked beneath him.

He does this to me every night, this cruel torture. First, gnawing at my neck like he wants to break through the skin, drink down the blood like a night walker, taking nourishment from the essence of my life. He leaves bruises on my neck and looks at them in the morning with a harsh satisfaction in his eyes. I don't bother covering them up, and when Elif asks I tell her the truth.

"Uther kisses Mommy on her neck," I say. "It's okay. It don't hurt."

When he releases my neck, content that he's renewed the mark of his ownership on me, he slides down my body like he is now, and takes a beaded nipple in his mouth.

I moan, like I do now, and breathlessly ask for him to bite me. I like the feel of his teeth on my breast, the cruelty of it, the sensuality of it. I like how he makes it hurt just enough, but always knows when to ease back and replace it with tenderness.

He licks, suckles, and bites his way down my body, pausing on the belly that's grown a bit softer, a bit rounder. I watch him, satisfied, liking my rounder belly. It was concave weeks ago, from starvation and too much walking, and death on our heels.

My thighs are filling out too, and he bites that inner fleshy part as well.

Squeezes as if he's checking that there's enough fat over the muscle.

His hands slide underneath the meat and he does the same to my bottom, his thick fingers massaging again to the point of pain, then easing back.

I whine, deep in my throat, because his breath is between my thighs, tickling my thick curls.

He rolls his eyes up at me, the gleam in them mocking.

"Use big girl words," he says. "Tell Uther what want."

"Your mouth, I want your mouth. And your tongue," I add.

Because his tongue, his lips, hellsdamn. I've never felt anything like it.

He takes my clit in his mouth, suckling as leisurely as he did at my breast, and I'm mewling, bucking my hips as he feasts, his hair tickling my skin, his hands on my knees keeping me spread wide.

"Uther," I moan his name over and over again. "Master."

He jerks a little, like he does whenever I call him master. He likes it.

He likes when I come in a gush, which is why his tongue enters me now, thick and slick inside my pussy, eating me into an orgasm that has my entire body shuddering, my back arching.

I cry his name out and go limp.

Uther scrapes his tusks along the inside of my thigh, licks his tongue along the scratches where tiny beads of blood well. It's his reward. Because he doesn't take any other.

I want to take him in my mouth, but he refuses. Lately, he always refuses.

I wonder if it's some rite of passage, or maybe he's trying to develop an immunity to me. I don't know. He doesn't let me

whine though, because when he's done bringing me to release, he lies down and cradles me in his arms, my back against his chest, his hands roving over my skin some more. Though when he does it now it's meant to comfort, not arouse. He buries his face in my hair.

I rub my bottom against his erection and he growls, nips my ear and then my shoulder, a little harder than I like.

"Behave," he admonishes.

"I don't know why you're doing this," I complain.

Uther grunts. "Character building."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

He chuckles. "When Defne marry Uther, wedding night will be better than any fantasy. Uther will have much come to release."

I don't know what to say to that, any of it. The Defne marrying Uther part, as if I'm the one who has to do the asking and the dragging to the altar.

Since I don't know what to say, I whine a little more, until he slides his fingers inside me and leaves them there, the fullness an odd sort of sensual comfort.

I fall asleep, and if I have nightmares, I don't remember them in the morning.

## FIFTEEN

I'M MASHING up squash to make pie filling—my family isn't sick of it yet and it's about the only thing I make well—when I see Elif's lunch basket still sitting on the table.

I huff under my breath, cover the half-mashed squash in the bowl, and snatch up the basket, heading out the door to catch up with her.

She'll be halfway to school by now, so I'm not going to rush. She does this at least twice a week, forgets her lunch, and if she weren't already so damn scrawny, I'd teach her a lesson and let 'er go hungry, though I suspect one of the children or adults would share.

Also, if I didn't suspect she does it on purpose, so she sees me during the day. We're both dealing with the past in our own ways.

Well, I don't mind the midmorning walk. The mornings are warmer now the closer we get to mid-spring. Has it been almost five weeks since the Sorting? It's been about that. I don't too much keep track of days because there doesn't seem to be much point. We live by seasons here, not by days. Maybe when Uther and I start having baby-making sex, I'll keep track of days, cause then there'll be a reason.

I'm a quarter of the way down the path when I see Elif's book bag on the side of the road. I pick it up, glancing into the forest, figuring she paused to pee. I wait, holding her bag with my foot tapping impatiently, when I hear a scream.

Dropping the bag, I plunge into the forest, screaming her name.

A flock of birds bursts from the trees above, calling out sharp trilling tunes, but I'm only thinking about my daughter, and her scream.

There's a slap of moisture in the air and as I sprint past, blade drawn, the trees next to me wither, releasing moisture.

I race after the trail of water, screaming her name and listening as she calls for me.

The scream cuts off just as a twang through the air warns me to duck and roll.

I glance up; an arrow vibrates in the tree right above my head. I begin running, staying low and weaving, trying to make myself a difficult target. There's an archer somewhere.

I know what's happening, because only one scenario makes sense. The slaver finally tracked us down.

Five-ish weeks of peace before the ax fell. I should have known.

I unsheathe my blade and attack the first person I see.

There's water in the air, slapping Elif's assailant, diving down his throat to drown him though he's standing in the middle of a forest. She's restrained from behind, kicking and screaming as she's being dragged through the forest.

Another arrow flies, and this one embeds itself in my shoulder as the Human thug I'm attacking whirls and meets my blade.

I scream, but I don't feel even half the shock of the blow.

The raider grins at me, waving his hand and glancing over my shoulder, as if he's telling the archer to leave me to him.

"It's the mother," he calls. "She's worth something alive."

Good, I think viciously. Good. If they're reluctant to kill me because I may be useful, then they won't fight the same way.

And I fight.

My only real advantage is that I'm trying to kill him, but he's trying to subdue me.

Elif is farther and farther away as her assailant retreats with her in the forest.

I scream again, as loud and long as I can, hoping that that there's someone, anyone. I know where the scouts are posted, and evidently so do these Fae, because they'd slipped between the rounds.

"Come quietly, girl," a Fae watching the fight says, "and we won't hurt you. We can use you to breed another like your daughter, and you'll be comfortable. After you're pregnant, you won't have to take any more men to your bed."

These are the people Uther wants to give my daughter to. I'm mad at them, mad at him, mad at myself.

Why the hells did I send my daughter to school alone? Stupid. Thought we were safe. Relaxed. Should have known better. I do know better, but I'm seduced by the idea of a normal life.

A roar thunders through the air, and the Fae's eyes widen. He lifts his arms, and a shower of circular blades meets his magic and he flinches back. The Human too, and the split second he looks over my shoulders I stab towards him. He blocks it just in time, but he's distracted now. I keep distracting him, in time for Uther to come barreling through the forest like a battering ram. That's my job; stay alive, wait for Uther.

I've trained for this. I disengage and drop, throwing myself out of the way so Uther has a clear line of attack.

I scabble backwards, taking care in case the archer hasn't been put down yet.

But no arrows fly, and minutes later another Orc, and then a second and a third are running past Uther, following after Elif.

I push to my feet, my shoulder shrieking, and run after them.

"Keep one alive," Uther roars.

For torture? I approve.

When I catch up with them, Elif is in an Orc scout's arms, and there are two Humans dead on the ground.

The scout puts Elif down when he sees me running towards them. I wrap my good arm around her, pulling her close, my blade still in my right hand, though pain radiates down from my shoulder all the way to my nail beds. I'm dreading when they remove the arrow. But I'm alive, and I have my daughter, so it's not a big deal. That's what I tell myself.

"Other Human get away, Dreada follow," a scout tells Uther when he appears.

Uther ignores him, striding towards me, vicious the only word I think of to describe the look on his face. His lips tighten as he sees the arrow sticking out of my shoulder, but he glances down at Elif and clucks reassuringly, patting the top of her head.

He looks at me. "Mother-girl injured. Come."

"We'll take care of it when we get Elif home."

Uther straightens to his full height, and I sit. Not even the commander's lover gets a pass to disobey him in a combat situation.

All they do is tear strips off the bottom of my dress and apply a pressure bandage around the wound to staunch bleeding and stabilize the arrow. They'll extract it, but until we get home where there are supplies to take care of potential infection and to sew up the wound right away, they'll leave the arrow be.

I grit my teeth and walk home with them, one of the scouts carrying Elif, another the unconscious Fae Uther says they're giving to Athanmir. Uther glances at me from time to time but doesn't offer similar transportation. I understand why. There's an Orc blade in my hand, and he already warned me that if I was going to carry a blade, I'd be treated like a warrior, and not a fat, pampered housewife. I'm good with that.

I yowl, screeching as they treat my wound. The settlement midwife is also the settlement bodyhealer, and she's female, which means she has no mercy.

"Stop that," Ratha snaps. "Is barely flesh wound."

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re ruthless, Ratha?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. Ilotha is here as well, dealing with Elif. I keep my ear cocked, which is why I hear a murmur of male voices, the front door open and closing. I stand, shaking the midwife off and walk through the house, and out the front door where I stop.

“You!” I exclaim, and lurch forward, about to put my hands around Athanmir’s neck and wring.

Uther catches me around the waist, lifting me off the ground and steps back. “Defne.”

“You pointy eared, sparkly skinned, child stealing, shifty sheepfecker,” I swear, throwing in a few of the Orc words I know and even a few words in the Fae tongue. I forget what they call it, and I don’t feckin’ care.

Athanmir stares at me, impassive.

“Where is your tail, you slimy fish? Shapeshifting, sneaky—”

Uther slaps a hand over my mouth. “You’ll start a blood feud, female,” he says in my ear.

Athanmir lifts a hand, flicking his fingers. “No matter. She’s in some distress, and she’s young and ill-trained...you will see to that, Uther. I expect Elif to be much better behaved. But she is the mother of my future betrothed, so I will take no offense.”

I ram my heels into Uther’s shins, pushing with all my might to try to get this monster to release me, but it’s no more difficult for him to handle me than it is for me to handle a squirming toddler. A little irritating, but not difficult.

“Why are you here?” I demand.

“I sensed the child’s distress.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “How close are you?”

He lifts dark brows. “Proximity is not an issue. We have methods of quick travel.”

“Through the water? What the feck is in the water?”



The Lord shifts slightly to speak to Uther. “I will take him, and I will send word if there’s any further threat.”

It’s then I realize the Fae slaver who attacked Elif is unconscious at Athanmir’s feet.

I still. “What’s going on?”

“Slaver attacked Elif, female marked by Lord.” Uther’s chuckle is chilling. “What Lord Athanmir will do to him will be far more fitting than any cruelty we can devise, Defne. Will serve as a warning to his people.”

I begin to struggle again. “That’ll only paint a target on Elif’s back!”

“She is already targeted.” Athanmir’s pitiless voice. “Did you think the child’s father was subtle in his inquiries when he sought a buyer for her? Her potential worth is known, Lady Defne—my interest in her has only confirmed speculation.”

I feel all the blood drain from my face, along with the fight. Uther sets me on my feet. But he doesn’t release me from his restraining arms. He ain’t that stupid.

“Then it’s your fault. If you hadn’t tried to nab her, then no one would think she was worth nothing!”

He spreads his hands. “Now my vengeance will also be known.”

“We can’t protect her,” I say.

“You underestimate your master,” Athanmir says. “And me.”

It’s clear from the tone of his voice which he don’t like the most. But he gentles his tone.

“By the time I am done with this unworthy one, all will know the penalty for touching what is mine. My people watch, Lady Defne. There will be no further attacks.”

I’m staring at him, staring at him hard. “And the price for this is my daughter.”

His gaze flicks away from me and to Uther, as if he’s asking the Orc holding me “how much have you told her?”

“Oath, Defne,” Uther rumbles. “Will be Elif’s choice.”

“Of course,” Athanmir says, too smooth, inclining his head.

He glances down at the unconscious Fae, and the body rises in the air.

I inhale. “You’re not only a water elemental.”

Athanmir smiles, and I flinch. “Your daughter will be well protected when she is my wife.”

He turns, and the male I’m suddenly certain will face a hideous execution, floats after him.

Uther ushers me into the house, bundles me into bed then returns and sits, his big hand cupping a hot bowl of soup.

“Eat,” he demands.

“My stomach is queasy.”

“That’s why only broth. Eat. Must replenish blood. Need fluids, protein and fat.”

I open my mouth and let him spoon feed me the broth. It has slivers of meat in it, and I’m pretty sure they melted butter in it as well for some fat. It’s hot, and savory, and I finish the entire bowl and a slice of toasted bread. They don’t do too bad in my stomach.

“I need to go see Elif,” I say again.

“She’s asleep. She’s fine.”

“I’m her mother. I should be the one who rocked her to sleep.”

“Defne cannot be everywhere, everytime,” he says. “This what female circle for. To help. Elif is fine. Ratha and Ilotha raised young of their own.”

I sigh, releasing some of my guilt, because he’s right. It used to be like that, didn’t it? Mother, sisters, aunts and cousins, friends. Everybody chipped in to help with the children. It’s been me and her for so long that sometimes I forget.

I let go of my guilt, and let Uther settle at my back, careful not to jostle my shoulder too much. A little bit is inevitable, and I

grit my teeth and don't make a sound, 'cause I don't want to distress him.

"Are we safe here?" I ask after a time.

I want to let the ocean waves, moonlight shining through the open window lull me asleep, but my mind is racing even though I'm in pain, and exhausted.

"We'll find out what failed today," Uther promises, "and will make safe. Will post warning."

Something in his tone of voice tells me about the warning he has in mind, and the next day Ratha, Ilotha, and I stare at heads on pikes lining the settlement's main road.

My hands creep up to my hips as I purse my lips. "I don't think it's quite gruesome enough."

Ratha grunts. "Is all this easy living off the land. The males go soft."

"Should have skinned them," Ilotha says thoughtfully.

"Skinned," I say, staring at the heads, "then impaled. I'll talk to Uther. Next time the female circle will handle the punishments."

## SIXTEEN

I SIT on a tree branch overlooking the one main road that leads to the settlement, alert but bored. This is only the second rotation I've worked on my own, and I'm debating the merits of boredom versus being allowed to keep my Orc knife.

On one hand, scout duty is about as fun as a bar brawl—less.

On another hand, I don't want to give up my blade in exchange for a Human variation, and in this clan anyone who wields an Orc blade has joined the military. The military under the command of Uther Bachdracht.

Ratha pronounced me fit three weeks ago, assigned me a partner, and since then the reserve of the female community members has softened. There's still a thin barrier present. I'm not quite sure what it is, but I figure time will tell. Besides, even if I don't make bosom buddies, Elif will. I have Uther; that'll have to be enough.

But I'm not quite one of them yet, and I don't know what I have to do to prove myself. So I keep my mouth shut, don't complain about the tedium of sentry duty, and show up for my shift two evenings a week, do my job—though job implies pay, which I'm not getting—and leave when I'm relieved of duty.

Except for one comment when I first began, assuring me I'm doing well, Uther has said nothing. Evidently, this is women's business. Uther deals with the male sentries and warriors, Ratha with the females.

Inhaling, I snap into full alertness because the scent on the wind is that of burning things, and that's not a scent that should be present at this time. The community gathers in the town square for giant bonfires, but never in the hours before dawn. This smoke smells different.

I haven't mastered the leaping from tree-to-tree thing the Orcs can do without somehow breaking the branches, their agility a source of amazement, so I clamber down from the tree and begin to jog towards the scent, my nose a guide. I might not be as agile, but my strength and endurance have increased over the last several weeks of training and good food, and I've always been able to walk through the forest silently. It's the skill that convinced Ratha I'd be useful.

I blink, a haze growing as I approach the source of the scent and my alarm increases. Someone has built a fire, and I can almost see the flickering glow in the distance between the trees now. If it was authorized, Ratha would have told me. Someone is in our territory who doesn't belong, and they're up to no good.

I issue a trill of birdsong to alert the other sentries on duty that there's potential trouble. I'm the first one to have sent up an alarm, which is odd and increases my worry. I don't have the best nose out of all of us.

The crack of a branch alerts me a split second before shadowed images emerge from the forest, surrounding me in a loose circle.

I don't go for my blade because I recognize them, and I'm not sure they're a threat.

Ratha, Ilotha, several of the other women, Orc, Human, and mixed species surround me. All looking at me with stern expressions and glittering eyes.

I wait as Ratha approaches on silent feet. She's wearing nothing but a leather loincloth, her chest, arms, shoulders and face painted in a swirl of symbols highlighting her scars. Her hair is braided back in rows and woven with leather and beads, and there's a naked blade in her hand.

A glance at the others tells me they're all dressed the same. Bare chested, painted and scarred, hair braided and beaded.

I'm pretty sure they're not here to kill me in some type of ritual, but they're here for a reason.

Ratha pauses in front of me and lifts her blade, the point touching the hollow of my throat but not breaking skin. I don't move.

"The female's circle has deemed you worthy," she says. "You may take your place among us if that's your desire."

I relax, though internally I grimace. I doubt anything about the next few hours is going to be pleasant, but like childbirth, you have to go through it if you want to come out on the other side. Ain't no way I'm going to refuse the offer.

No one's bothered to tell me I have to be hazed into the clan, and I guess that's what that remaining barrier of reserve is all about.

"It's my desire," I say. "What do I need to do?"

She smiles, a toothy grin; I've relaxed too soon.

Ratha doesn't answer my question, just turns on her heel and darts away. The other women grab my upper arms, dragging me along at a fast lope until we reach a circle that's been cleared, a roaring fire in the middle.

I blink, my eyes tearing at the astringent smoke. Someone threw herbs into it, and I'm dizzy now, inhaling and coughing. No one else is coughing, so they must be used to this.

While I'm hoping for euphoria to overtake me, the exact opposite happens. The herbed smoke heightens my senses but settles me deep into the present at the same time. My skin is hyper sensitive.

No, this isn't gonna be pleasant.

Ratha turns, putting her back to the fire as we all come to a stop.

"To accept a place as an adult in our community, you accept that the blood of one is the blood of all." Her voice takes on

the cadence of ceremony. “That the death of one is the death of all. That the protection of one is the protection of all. We claim you as a sister, and you accept us in return, from the youngest babe in a belly to the oldest crone. Betrayal is met with execution, cowardice with shunning.”

She pauses for a minute, but I don't respond, and she nods approvingly.

“You can remain among us but not be one of us. You will be fed, sheltered, protected.”

“Like a child.”

Ratha smiles again, hard, glittering. “A child, a servant. You will live well, because your master will accept nothing less.”

This is an extension of the whole “put down the Orc blade if you don't want to use it to defend” thing. I'm being given a choice to remain fat and happy and protected in the house... and forever on the outskirts of their society. Or I can take a place among them and one day have to offer up my life.

The smart thing to do is wait, go through an entire raiding season to see what I'm getting myself into. I might not have to fight now, but I will eventually. But I've spent my entire life fighting in some way or another, and all I've ever fought for is my own survival, and then Elif's.

And I ain't no leech. The thought of being a kept woman appeals, but if these women have the courage to pay the price of living a good life, so do I. If it weren't for Elif, I might pick the easier road.

But I have a feeling that if I do pick the easy road, I'll be condemning my daughter to the outskirts of society too, at least until she's of age to make her own choice.

I step towards Ratha. “I don't trust anything that's free, or easy. I'm willing to give as much as I'm willing to take. I'll enter the women's circle.”

“Good girl,” she says.

They strip me down, and I don't even have a loincloth to cover me below the waist.

I'm pushed to my knees as Ratha begins a low, droning chant in a language I recognize as the Orcs' original tongue but don't understand. One of the Human women translates under her breath as everyone else withdraws a blade.

In the next several minutes I understand where everyone got their scars. One by one each woman carves the sigil of her name into my skin. I don't make a sound, hellsdamn, I went through childbirth, but it hurts, and I don't bother to wipe away the tears streaming down my face. Breathe through it, and the smoke doesn't help because it forces me to feel every last slice of a blade.

Someone brings out a jar of unguent and slathers it on my skin. I grunt, holding back my shriek, and figure the cream will ensure the symbols scar.

One by one they kneel. Ratha hands me a small blade and gestures, and I understand what they want. She's been teaching me to write my name in Orcish, which is how I recognize the name sigils, and now I know that I'm meant to scar them as they've scarred me.

One by one every female submits, and when I'm done, we're all bleeding into Gaithea.

The blood doesn't go to waste.

Ratha takes a wooden bowl, and we each drain some of our blood into the bowl. It's passed around the circle and everyone takes a sip, me last.

Oh, what the hells. Orcs don't carry diseases, and if the Humans do, I guess it's too late to worry about that.

I sip, scrunching my nose at the taste, and Ratha snorts.

"One of us," she says in a husky rumble, and the others echo her. "One of us."

I'm given a loincloth, and they put me back on my knees and braid my hair. Someone brings out a small tool they use to insert the first of the clan beads into two of the braids.

I stand, trying to hide how difficult that is considering I've just been carved open. I've got a threshold for pain, but this is



ridiculous. “So, is there a party now? At least tell me there’s beer.”

Several of the women laugh, and Ratha grins. Her smile fades, and she pins me with a serious stare.

“You’re an adult female, and one of the responsibilities of an adult female is to take a mate.”

I blink at her. “Not everyone here is mated.”

“Not every female here has been claimed. If a male stakes a claim, you accept him or reject him, but no clan female can live in the house of a clan male unless he is hers. It’s beneath your dignity.”

I stare at her. I wish she would have told me this beforehand. “I can’t control whether or not Uther wants to marry me.”

“You can. I already said, the male stakes the claim, and the female accepts or rejects. You can work for him, but you can’t live with him in his home as his concubine now that you are of the clan.”

I’m trying to wrap my head around the rules. I knew Uther was waiting on something, but I wasn’t sure what, and I didn’t want to rock the boat. He doesn’t act like a male who has plans on going anywhere else, so I’ve been content to be a concubine.

But they’re saying that as a fully inducted clan member, that’s against the rules.

“What do I have to do?”

There are several more chuckles around the fire, and I tense, because they’re a mixture of amusement, malice, and glee.

“Let me tell you,” Ratha says, rubbing her hands.

Oh, hells.

## SEVENTEEN

UTHER'S dark eyes snap open.

This is a risk, and I stop a tremble that begins at my shoulder and tries to work its way down to the hand that grips the blade I'm holding at his throat.

I really, really hope this beast trusts me.

His gaze holds mine for a long second, dark, death peeking through the thick lashes.

"You come with me," I say, painstakingly pronouncing the words Ratha gave me.

When he doesn't move, I press the blade a little deeper against his throat, not quite drawing blood, but threatening.

Uther lifts his hands, slowly, the tension in his body a coil I know can unsnap and fling me across the room in a second.

Hope is stupid.

But he slides out of the bed.

As he begins to push to his feet I press the blade against his throat, forcing him to sit still.

"Don't try no funny stuff," I say in Gaithean. I'm going off script, but I don't know much Orcish. Only what Ratha taught me in a hurry.

His eyes on mine, he rises. I keep the point of the blade at his throat, and gesture curtly for him to precede me.

This is ridiculous.

So ridiculous.

I'm 5'10 and he's 6'5, there's no way in the hells I can kidnap an Orc commander unless he's coming willingly.

But he leaves the bedroom in a saunter, and if he had pockets, his hands would be in them, but Uther don't sleep with clothes on.

I've shifted so the blade is now at his side and I'm walking at his back, bumping him along every time he slows.

I think I hear a chuckle, so I pinch him in the side. Hard.

"No noise!" I snap.

He begins to whistle a jaunty tune.

This beast. He thinks this is funny. So I let my blade draw blood, and he stops whistling, glaring at me over his shoulder.

"Not so funny now, is it?"

He opens his mouth, but I snarl at him. "No talking!"

We're out of the house now, and the other women are arrayed in the front yard. Elif is awake, painted and hair braided, and she's now wearing a loincloth and a band around her thin chest because only clan members get the privilege of prancing around in the cold pre-dawn with their breasts and ass hanging out.

I guess whatever makes these people happy makes me happy. They're mine now.

They make short work of tying his hands together behind his back, and Uther doesn't resist.

In fact, this bastard is grinning. When he catches me glaring at him, he wipes that expression off his face.

A couple of the other women chuckle.

I lower my blade. "I can't believe the way of marrying an Orc male is to kidnap him at knife point. What if he was actually unwilling?"

"Well, then," one of the women says cheerfully, "you would be dead. So it's a good thing to always make sure your groom

is willing before you kidnap him.”

These people.

We return to the ceremony circle in the forest, the same circle and the same bonfire. When I inhale, the herbs are different, not only that but the sun is beginning to peek over the sky. Weddings here are held right before dawn, so the new day can rise along with the new marriage.

As we approach the circle, men burst out of the forest, battle cries roaring from their throats.

I shove Uther to his knees, and stand in front of him with my blade, guarding my territory.

Elif guards his other side, a small dagger in her fist. She growls, and behind me I feel Uther’s shoulders shaking.

I aim a kick in his general vicinity.

He bites my bottom, and I yelp, which ain’t dignified at all. But I guess considering he’s on his knees, tied up and naked, I can’t complain.

The women put on a good show, battling the men for the right to claim Uther as the newest mated male of the community. He’s adult, but he’s never been mated so according to their customs he’d still be considered a boy in the old ways. If the men win the fight, then they get to reclaim him for eternal bachelorhood, I guess. Which no one really wants, so I get that this is just an excuse for a friendly melee, and injuries are forgiven.

Because of course it’s not a good fight without injuries.

No one thinks of Uther as a boy, and I was told that hundreds of years ago that particular custom fell into disuse as the males started marrying and mating later in life, and as the Orcs as a civilization approached space travel and began interacting more with other cultures.

But the symbolism is present.

There are a few injuries, and a new line of fire licks down my bicep, blood dripping down into the ground. I glare at Kathien, who grins at me and skips out of the way. Ilotha warned me

that the males wouldn't let me get away with marrying Uther without shedding some blood, but I expected that. The clan is all about bloodshed.

"Are you having fun, dear?" Uther asks, taunting me. "Defne bleeding."

"Uther's brothers bleed," I growl. "Any who try take my mate bleed on my sword."

His chuckle turns into an outright howl of laughter. I wonder what I actually said.

"Keep guffawing," I say, abandoning Orcish, "and see who'll be milking the cow in the morning."

He shuts up, then says, "Defne cruel female to tease vulnerable Orc."

Finally the males are satisfied and retreat into a wide circle, lowering their bloody blades. I'm not the only one who's been injured, but the fierce battle expressions have faded, replaced with grins and ribald teasing.

"Give him to the females," Kaithen yodels. "May the Great Mother have mercy on Uther."

Of course there's no solemnity, no sense of ceremony for a wedding. In fact, what we get is suggestions. I want to slap my hands over Elif's ears, but I think most of it goes over her head. She's having a grand old time too, on Uther's either side as I haul him to his feet and march him towards Ratha, who will be the officiant. Weddings are women's business, though I was told the men have a ceremony for the birth of children. Something to do with equating births with manhood and conquering the female. I hope they don't eat the placenta while they dance around the fire in the forest naked, but Ratha looks sideways when I joke about that, so I think I accidentally hit on the truth of the matter.

One of the women comes forward and drapes a cloak around his shoulders. It's a rich reddish-purple, and I'm told that means it's been dyed in the blood of his enemies. But probably beet root.

A matching cloak is thrown around my shoulders, and I sniff at it surreptitiously.

The cloak do smell kind of funny. Not like beet root at all.

Ratha clears her throat. “Defne Yildiz, a female of the clan, this male has staked the claim on your life and body. Do you accept?”

“I accept the claim.”

“Uther Bachdracht. You have staked your claim, and this female has accepted. Give this female your vows.”

He turns to me and goes down on one knee. “This male vows to honor this female with his blood and his body. To protect our home and young with his life, to provide her with food and shelter when she is ill or big with child. To give her and only her pleasure, reserving my body for her use only. I vow to rend limb from limb any male who threatens to take her from my hearth, and to deliver her any female who trespasses on her territory. These vows I do make by blood, and let my deeds prove them true.”

Not surprising me, he takes the point of a knife Ratha hands him and with his left hand painstakingly—ha! Another one—carves the sigil for my name in his upper bicep.

I’m a little impressed, because he’s doing it with his left hand, and backwards, but when he’s done it’s perfect.

Someone brings out the unguent, and then it’s my turn.

“Uther Bachdracht, I offer you my blood and my body, to defend our home and bear our children. I vow to give nothing to any other that belongs to you, and to defend your rights over me to the death.”

“The milking beast,” he whispers, rather fiercely.

“Really? You want me to make a vow about who’s going to do the milking?”

He crosses his arms stubbornly. “Uther want no misunderstandings.”

Hells spare me...I roll my eyes. “I vow to milk the milking beast, sparing this poor delicate baby from that awful responsibility.”

I take the same knife, and having practiced Uther’s sigil, carve it into my upper arm. I ain’t gonna lie, I’ve spent the last several hours talking myself into this. I’m no stranger to injury, but self-mutilation takes a particular kind of crazy. I think that’s the reason for the different herbs that are smoking in the fire. Instead of grounding me, these ones do give a kind of high.

“Defne and Uther come,” Ratha says as he rises and clasps my hand, “she is your wife, and you are her husband. Let the clan witness.”

War cries rise from throats, masculine and feminine, and I even hear Elif’s wild shrieks. She joins the stomping and the impromptu dancing around the fire, but the next thing I know, Uther is lifting me up into his arms and striding away from everyone, deeper into the forest until the fire is just a subtle glow.

“They not leave ‘till we return,” he murmurs. “Must return with blood and seed.”

“Blood and—oh. Well, that’s plenty barbaric.”

He grins at me. It’s a lazy, sly grin, and when he stops and lowers me onto the forest floor, I don’t protest. I’m wondering where the blood is going to come from, since I ain’t no virgin. Though I suppose there’s plenty of it, what with all the cutting that went on today.

“Barbaric?” He shrugs his massive shoulders, his gaze trailing over my body. I’m wearing nothing but the loincloth still, and my nipples have already hardened from the cold; me’n everybody else, so I shook off the embarrassment already. “Maybe. Proof Defne is mine.” He settles a hand over my belly. “Maybe make baby. Plenty of good Orc seed pent up. Would be good sign of strong union.”

“I don’t know, Uther. You’re a talker, not a doer.”

His grin turns malicious, which tells me he's about to answer my challenge, and I shiver, twining my arms around his neck as he settles over me, the braids draping down to tangle in my face.

"Mouthy female still talk shit," he says. "And tonight will learn truth of Orc cock. First take pussy, then take ass."

I feel my eyes widen, because the whole ass thing...I'm not sure about that.

Hands are on my breasts, his mouth follows. He pulls one nipple past his teeth, suckling, biting down carefully so his tusks don't pierce my skin. He massages the other, switches, giving both nipples attention until they're hard and puckered, and my clit is throbbing.

"I don't need all this, Uther," I say, breathless, reaching for him, running my hands down his chest. "Just fuck me."

He grabs my wrists and pins them over my head, nipping my ear. "Behave."

"No."

"Will punish Defne."

"But will you? I don't know, Uther. You've been acting like a blushing virgin for weeks."

"A challenge."

When he moves down my body and puts his mouth between my legs, I'm more than ready. In the distance is laughter and the beat of the drums, the cadence of conversation and roars of friendly—or maybe not—fighting.

I spare a few seconds to worry about Elif, but Ratha had promised that once the ceremony was complete, the other children would be allowed to participate in the general celebration. The only reason they'd allowed Elif was because she was my daughter, and in binding myself to Uther, I was binding her as well. So it was fitting she be present, since the decision was being made for her too.

A sharp slap on my thigh. I yelp. "Defne not paying attention to Uther."



“I was just—”

Another sharp slap. I shut my mouth. Then I open it again. “Well maybe if you would get down to business and stop all this teasing.”

“Like to tease Defne. Like listening to Defne beg.”

“One of these days I’m going to turn that around on you.” I’m still disgruntled that he’s been able to hold out this long, that he’s been able to resist me.

Or maybe I should have been denying him the entire time, the way he’s been denying me. Taking him in my mouth certainly took the edge off; I’m such an enabler.

“But not today,” he says, and his mouth is on my clit suckling, licking, feasting on me in that leisurely way he does except this time there’s a difference.

His hands on my body are frenzied, rougher, as if he knows he’s at the end of the finish line and soon, soon he’ll have his reward.

Grinding myself against his mouth, I cry out when his tongue buries deep.

He strokes in and out, strong and short, and when I’m trembling, about to tumble over the precipice, he withdraws.

I snarl at him.

But he straightens, straddling me, and the cock that was pressed against my leg juts forward, thicker than my forearm, and slick at the head. Holding my gaze, he fists himself, once, twice, and it swells even more.

I swallow, because I know how that cock feels in my mouth, so big that my jaws ache.

And he’s about to shove it in my pussy; from the look on his face, he don’t plan on being gentle.

These people are all about pain, about blood as proof of loyalty.

More pre-come leaks out into his palm which he rubs along his heavy length, at the same time sliding a thick finger inside my

tight entrance, testing my readiness.

“Defne hot, wet, tight. Want Uther fuck now? Use big girl words.”

I’m ready enough. I grit my teeth. “I already used big girl words.”

Uther must agree because he makes a deep, rumbling noise of satisfaction, pumping his finger in and out of me, rubbing up and down my slit, as if I need any more preparation.

“Not sure. Defne may think ‘cause held blade to Uther’s throat, that Uther is tamed.”

I draw my knees up and wrap my arms under my thighs, pulling them wide apart. “Take me.”

His eyes flare, and finally he settles between the juncture of my open legs, his gaze on mine a slow torture because I know this beast is drawing this out on purpose. Like he said, he likes to hear me beg.

He’s pressing the head of his cock to my entrance, nudging inside, and I bite my bottom lip because as wet and willing as I am, he’s still an Orc.

I gasp as he presses in another inch, no mercy on his face though there’s tenderness lurking in the back of his eyes.

“Wife,” he murmurs, sliding in another agonizingly slow inch.

I let go of my thighs and wrap my arms around his neck, because he’s stretching me, and my pussy is burning.

He pulls back out, wedges back in a little more; again, and again, with each gentle thrust making his way deeper, pausing to let me adjust to him.

“Pain?” he asks.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

Uther chuckles in my ear. “Defne not fine. Brave, but not fine. Told Defne Orc cock too big.”

Finally, he’s inside, but instead of thrusting right away he grinds deep, bracing himself on one arm and rubbing my clit

with his fingers.

It does feel like I'm going to be split in two, but as the pleasure from the clitoral manipulation increases, my body relaxes more.

My hips began bucking, instinctively wanting movement and that's when he withdraws, pushes back in.

Again.

Again.

I come first, my clit throbbing, but that's not enough for him. He growls in my ear, speeding up the pace.

"Will fuck Defne 'till can't walk. Fuck her 'till tears and juice bathe Uther's cock."

He continues on in that vein, alternating between threats and praises. "Good girl, Defne. Take Uther's big cock like a good girl. Scream. Let males hear how well Uther please wife."

His thrusts are nearly brutal now. "Dreamed of this. Defne squirming on cock, screaming, crying, begging. Knowing who is her master. Knowing who make her belly fat with new baby."

He pulls out all the way, seizes my hips and flips me around, pulling my ass up into the air. For a second I'm worried about dirt getting into my cuts, but hopefully the unguent is creating a barrier.

I stop wondering about that when he parts my thighs, and slams into me. "Uther!"

"Commander," he snarls. "Master. Defne *mine*."

I scream, clawing at the ground because from this angle it's deeper, tighter. I can't move, especially with his hands on my hips, holding me.

"Defne whine, complain, fuck me, fuck me, Uther. But now fucking, Defne can't take." He chuckles, the sound dark. He slaps my bottom. "Too late. Will take all Uther give. No quarter."

If I didn't love this man, if I didn't trust him, I would be more scared than I've ever been in my life.

He sounds like a marauding beast, and there's no restraint in the thrusts of his hips. His hand tangles in my hair and he yanks my head back, his balls slapping against my ass. I feel him moving inside me, filling me, and as I cry out again, my body convulsing, he shouts.

Yeah, there's no way in the hells he's putting this monster cock in my ass.

His come fills me, and I've never known such heat before.

But he's not done. He'd warned me, after all, that he had weeks of pent up come to deal with.

Uther picks me up and turns me around so we're chest to chest, and with his come leaking out of my thighs, gushing, he lifts me, draping my thighs across his, and drops me onto his cock.

I scream again as he thrusts his hips up in me, one arm banded around my waist, his other hand massaging my breast as he gnaws his teeth at my throat.

This isn't making love, this isn't even something as gentle as claiming.

This is pure, bestial fucking.

He'd warned me.

I don't know how long we spend there, but the sun is well into the sky by the time he seems to have his fill.

"Defne well," he murmurs in my ear, cradling me in his arms, his hand splayed across my belly.

"You have the nerve to ask me that, you beast," I wheeze. "You fucked my brains out."

"Complain if don't fuck, complain if do," he mutters. "Just like wife. Males warned Uther. Can't please wife, just say yes, and sorry, and you're right."

He pinches my thigh, and I yelp.

“Defne may be boss outside bed, but in bed, will call Uther master.”

“You *beast*.”

Uther laughs and stands, still cradling me in his arms. “Must return to circle, so they see are truly husband and wife, mated pair.”

“Put me down then.”

No way in hells am I letting him carry me back to the others. I’ll never live it down. I’m pretty sure they all know he fucked my brains out, but I don’t have to make it obvious.

“I think I’m going to sleep this off for a week.”

“At least two,” he boasts.

Men.

## EIGHTEEN

### **UTHER**

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?”

I pause and look up, eyeing the female who juts her swollen belly at me like an accusation, her dark eyes narrowed with malice.

There is only one correct reply to this inquiry.

I set aside my tools and rise. “How may Uther serve Defne?”

I watch her filter through several responses, but come to the conclusion that she can’t, with justice, make a legitimate complaint about my reply.

So she deflects, pushing out her bottom lip and allowing it to tremble, her eyes filling with water.

“I can’t sleep,” she says.

“Forgive me,” I say, because that’s also my fault. She takes her afternoon nap at the same time daily, and without it, her mood makes me question my reason for living.

I spend most of my days reminding myself this will pass. Orcish females are also notoriously waspish while pregnant. It is one of the reasons why a child is considered a male’s rite of passage.

Because the male did not throw himself out of an airlock. Cliffside, on this planet.

I settle a hand over her swollen middle, waiting to see if the child will reward me with a roll or a kick.

Defne grits her teeth, whistling, which turns into a low moan as she closes her eyes.

I frown at her. “What’s wrong? In pain.”

“I think it’s time to send Elif for the midwife.”

I stare at her. Almost at a loss for words, because suddenly it occurs to me that the reason for her foul mood, furtive glances, and odd pacing all day is because...

“Defne labor now?”

It’s my first child. I’ve never had a pregnant wife, so I don’t know what labor looks like.

She nods. “Second babies come faster. He already dropped.”

Instinctively I look down, and she snorts.

“Not that kind of drop. They don’t just slide out. I mean, he’s settled down in my pelvis, and he’s ready to come out.”

My mind stutters for a moment. I told myself for the eleven months of her pregnancy that when the time came, I would be cool, calm; an impenetrable rock.

I panic.

But just for a moment, before I get a hold of myself. I am an officer, I will not break under the pressure of childbirth.

I walk out of the barn, and roar. “Elif!”

“Do you have to be so loud?”

I turn back to her at once and slide my arm around her shoulders so she can lean her weight on me.

“Defne should have said in labor.”

“You would’ve been breathing down my neck all day, and I’m already miserable enough.”

There’s nothing I can say to that, because she’s right. Instead, having ascertained her foul temper this morning, I fled to the barn to work on my latest project in peace, trusting in my hearing and Elif as a go between to alert me if anything was wrong.

Obviously, my intelligence is lacking.

It's difficult to speak in the Gaithean language right now, and she gives me a look when I forget and give her my next instruction in my own tongue.

I grimace and repeat it. "Come, Defne, go to bed and make ready."

Defne widens her eyes at me. "Don't be a moron! I'm not giving birth on my back. I'm fine walking."

She leads me back into the house, muttering.

Elif appears; I give instructions for her to fetch the midwife, and then I attend my wife.

She sets me to boiling water and putting out cloths. I suspect this is a busy work task, and not necessary to the actual birth, but I obey her nonetheless because the consequences of flouting her orders do not bear repeating.

The thought of her being given command of a ship has oft left me in cold sweat.

I help her settle gingerly onto a stool, which is supposed to be better? When she commands me, I crouch in front of her and rub her back and her shoulders and her neck. It's the most she's let me touch her for two weeks now, and when I ask if her breasts require similar attention, she sneers.

My intentions are pure. Perhaps they ache, as full and lush and round with milk as they've become. As soon as she lets me touch her again, I am going to—

I blink. "Why Defne hit?"

"Focus," she snaps. "Eyes up here."

She moans through the pains, and I can tell they're coming faster and harder because there's less time between her grim silences.

"Did I lie and say this weren't too bad," she pants. "Oh, did I lie. This is for the hells. Never again."

I keep my mouth shut, and do not inform her how unlikely never again is, considering how lusty she is.



Ratha's wife comes to take charge of Elif, and the midwife gives me curt instructions that if I disobey will mean I will be forever shunned from a birthing room.

Mostly I am required to continue to massage my wife, fetch whatever I'm told to fetch, and otherwise keep my mouth shut unless I am asked a direct question.

They prefer four to five word responses, at most.

This is why a sensible male does not interfere in female's circle business.

Ratha and Ilotha coach Defne through the labor as the midwife focuses on whatever it is that has her attention, Elif crouching in front of her mother to watch. I suspect Defne hopes it will persuade Elif against ever choosing to mate.

"Do you see the head crowning?" the midwife asks Elif, who nods. "And now we will ask Mother to stop pushing. See how the perineum is stretching? We do not want it to tear. We massage it a little, and slow down the pushes and wait for the tissue to adjust."

I watch the females' faces and understand that though this birthing is going as well as it can be, they are concerned. Humans can birth Orcs, but Orc babies are bigger, and when I questioned the midwife earlier, she admitted that Humans often tear. Not a life-threatening injury, necessarily, but painful for the mother and recovery can be unpleasant.

Perhaps I am selfish to want more than one. Perhaps I should allow this to be enough.

The child is born. Defne screams one final time, then slumps over, sobbing.

"Stop that," Ratha snaps. "Now you are just being indulgent."

I open my mouth, and my lieutenant gives me a look. I shut my mouth. I am a wise male.

Defne takes a deep breath and lets it out. "That hurt like a son of a bitch." She grimaces. "Hells, I hate this part too. They never tell you that the contractions don't stop when the baby's born."

The midwife puts my son in my arms after the cord has been given time to rest, and then been cut. When the placenta is delivered, they wrap that up and hand it to me too, and I rise, taking a deep breath and forcing myself to blink back my own tears.

There will be time enough for weeping later but for now, I must introduce my son to the male's circle.

"Don't take all night," my wife calls after me. "He needs to nurse, and he'll probably poop soon."

I'd warned her what would happen if the child was a boy, of the customs of our people, and she accepted it, barely.

"They'll be fine," I hear Ratha say. "Besides, start out as mean to proceed. Teach males that they must care for the young too, is not only female's work. Strange ideas since coming to Gaithea."

I grin as I leave the house. Some males leave raising of the young to the females, but helping to raise Elif has been a challenge, and a source of comedy.

I like it.

My son is fat, and strong, crying with hearty lungs and kicking. He is indignant at being separated from his mother, of course. He's probably hungry.

"We must handle the male's business first, my son," I tell him. "Then you may have the breast."

And when he is done, then the breast is mine. I hope. Though I am told it will be several more weeks before my wife will forget the birth enough to allow me to touch her.

I stop at Hathur's homestead, and he sends one of his young farmhands to run the message that gathers the males. He accompanies me into the forest, an arm around my shoulders as he peers down at my son.

"Just think," he says, "if Uther had fucked up, this son would be mine."

I sneer at him. "Only in Hathur's dreams."

He laughs. "Fine boy. Defne well?"

"Strong female. Is well." I blink away more tears, and the arm on my shoulder tightens.

"Good," he says. "Good."

The males gather and we light the fire to welcome my son into the clan. He is the first Bachdracht to be born since my cousin, and the first of my direct line since my mother's sister had Kathien.

Kathien arrives, dashing towards me. I snarl at him before he careens into me and the babe.

"Oh! Cousin, he's beautiful. He doesn't look like you at all."

I ignore his ridiculousness. The baby is a pleasing light green with that aged ivory undertone newborn half-Orcs often have. He will darken with time, his skin settling into something closer to my own. His eyes are black, his hair thick.

And he has not stopped crying.

He sounds very angry, which means he is his mother's son. Defne has a temper. She tried to conceal it the first few months of our marriage, but now she doesn't bother, especially once Ratha and Ilotha and the other females began training her on how to properly handle an Orc male.

I almost regret allowing that.

After the brief ceremony welcoming a new life into the clan, I cradle the baby to my chest, making soothing noises that don't placate him at all. We're home soon enough, and the house is so quiet that for a moment I'm afraid something has gone wrong.

Ratha pokes her head out of the bedroom and smiles at me, beckoning.

"She's napping," my lieutenant says quietly. "But we can wake her up to nurse the baby."

The baby turns his head at the sound of Ratha's voice, and begins crying. Defne's eyes pop open immediately and she starts to sit up in the bed, wincing.

“I feel like my pelvis is detached,” she mutters.

“She tore a bit,” Ratha says. “It could have been worse, but peeing for the next few days is going to be torture. A little indulgence is fine, but don’t let her lay in bed all day. She’ll heal faster if she gets in a good daily walk.”

“Where’s Elif?” I ask.

“Asleep. Ilotha took her.”

I nod, kneeling next to my wife’s bedside and handing her the baby. “Our son, Throthven.”

“I thought we agreed on Timothy.” She keeps a straight face for three seconds and then laughs.

Defne settles Throthven on her breast, fussing a little over the latch. “You don’t really forget how to do it,” she says, gazing down at the nursing baby’s face. “He’s so fat. What was he eating?”

“What Defne eating?” Ratha asks. “Oh, wait. Everything. Don’t worry. We’ll take care of that.”

Defne makes a face. “Nursing mothers are supposed to be plump.”

“If enjoy lugging extra sixty pounds on scout duty, fine.”

“Look, Ratha, it’s mostly muscle.”

My lieutenant says nothing. I too, say nothing, because I’ve learned in the last several months that my wife does not appreciate commentary regarding her physical form, no matter how much I am expressing my appreciation. I’m allowed to call her beautiful, and that’s it.

“Thank you,” I say when Ratha slips out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind her quietly. “For our son. You did well.”

“I must have, if you’re speaking proper.”

“Uther always speak proper.”

Defne nurses for a while longer, then looks up at me, her eyes bright with water. “Uther, do you love me?”

She asks me this sometimes, though she already knows the answer. But I don't mind telling her again, as often as she needs to hear it.

“I love you now, and for always.”

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