

*AN ORC DISGRACED MUST EMBRACE DESTINY FOR THE HUMAN HE LOVES*

# THE ORC WIFE

A MONSTERLY YOURS ROMANCE



S J SANDERS

The Orc Wife  
A Monsterly Yours Romance

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Editor: LY Publishing

Cover Art: S.J. Sanders

## Chapter 1

*Sammi*

I blew on my cup of coffee, frowning as I watched the snow fall outside. The weekend was a bust. I can't believe I let myself get talked into this shit. What should have been a romantic weekend in a secluded cabin in the mountains had turned into anything but. Travis had called and canceled last minute, said there was an emergency, but he hadn't been able to completely block out the female giggling in the background. So I'd told him in no uncertain terms to go fuck himself.

He hadn't even cared. He'd just laughed, and I knew exactly why. He's confident that all he'll have to do is snap his fingers and I'll come crawling back to him. Let's face it: I'm five-foot-two, thirty years old, and even though I have a trim figure, I still have thick thighs and a big ass. My large breasts are the only decent compensation, and they give me that old-world hourglass figure that went out of fashion with the Victorian era.

But I like my boobs. A good set of boobs could make guys do stupid things. Dressing them up with cute lingerie makes me happy. Knowing Travis like I do, I'm pretty sure whatever girl he's with this weekend is also generous of bosom, but probably a decade younger.

Cursing my bad luck, I'd tried to storm out and leave the shithole cabin and go back home. This stupid getaway hadn't even been my idea! Whoever thought a cabin in the snowy woods was romantic needed their head examined. I didn't get more than a mile down the mountain before I had to turn around and battle my way back to the cabin. I must have been crazy to agree to a cabin retreat in January of all months! No one in their right mind went into the wilderness in the middle of winter in Alaska when they couldn't even pitch a tent or ski. The cabin belonged to his buddy, and Travis insisted. I was stupid enough to go along with it.

Despite growing up in Alaska, I'm not skilled with survival... stuff. I grew up in Anchorage, the biggest city in the state. Unlike some kids who learned to ski, snowboard, and other winter sports, I spent mine playing Nintendo, watching cable, reading, and doing a little hiking in the summer. My hobbies never included running around on the ice and snow. I've never even been on a pair of skis or gone fishing in the dead of winter.

Why? Because I absolutely hate the cold more than anything in the world. Ice and snow are *not* romantic.

Travis had insisted it would be cozy and intimate, hidden away where the rest of the world couldn't reach us. It had been enough to convince me, imagining scenic snowy views as we fed each other chocolates by the fire. Instead, I'm sitting on the couch, by myself, cramming chocolates into my mouth. Because of that philandering jackass, I'm stuck for gods know how long in the middle of nowhere. Worse, I'm hidden away where the rest of the world can't reach me! I'm completely stuck in my private hell with two days' worth of provisions.

I am so going to murder Travis when I get back.

I can't even enjoy how pristine the flakes look falling outside the window—the *only* thing about winter I've ever enjoyed. Every snowflake is a horrific reminder that I can potentially starve to death before the road down the mountain is clear enough to drive down. I won't get the opportunity to murder that creep if that happens.

Priorities. Stay alive, murder Travis. In that order.

The second day passes much the same as day one. I spend it nibbling on expensive cheeses and meats and dine on some excellent steak for dinner. I polish off my meal with half a bottle of fancy champagne that Travis likes, the name of which I can't even pronounce, before passing out.

On day three, I'm finishing the last of the food just before the power goes out. It takes me an hour to figure out

how to start a fire in the hearth with my meager supply of wood.

On day four, I have no food and little firewood. I let loose a string of foul words and glare at the flurries as I pull on my heavy coat. I have no choice now. I can survive a few days without food—I have plenty of stored fat deposits to help me out—but I need to find more firewood. Even with the heavy blankets that I'd brought up to the cabin, I won't last long without it.

Muttering every foul word I know, and inventing a few on top of that, I strain until the door slowly pulls open—and reveals a crap ton of snow piled up. I dig my way out through the thick snow, my strawberry blonde curls long since flattened against my head and damp strands in the process of gluing themselves to my skin as they cling to my face while I work.

When I finally manage to scramble up through the snow far enough to give me an unfettered view of my surroundings, I can't help the groan of dismay. The closest trees are some distance away in a small valley in the opposite direction of the road. There will be no miraculous chance of being discovered or even having some reliably packed snow to walk upon. But I need that damn wood.

Huddling deeper into my parka, I stumble through the heavy drifts of snow, my feet sinking, sometimes as deep as my hip. The air is painfully icy every time I draw it into my lungs, intensified by the panting breaths as I feel more and more exhausted. I snarl every time my foot gets caught and bite off a loud screech of anger when my foot twists hard enough to make me stumble and fall face down in the new powder.

Choking miserably, I claw it from my face as quickly as I can. I know enough to know that lowering your body temperature is never a good idea. I need to keep warm as I walk.

I walk for what feels like at least two hours, maybe three. My fingers and toes are beginning to tingle and burn from the cold and I begin to worry that they will soon go numb. Every step feels increasingly labored. After the third time, my knees buckle and I fall. I swear to any of the gods who are listening that I will get a gym membership soon as I get back home. If only they'll be merciful and get me to the trees.

When I finally break the tree-line, I breathe a sigh of relief and thanks. My eager hands grab up every limb that comes within sight. A few take a bit more work as they are partially buried, but the wood rapidly builds up within my arms. Once I determine that I have enough wood to last me a few days, I turn to retrace my path back toward the cabin... and freeze. The falling snow muddled the landscape, and I can no longer tell, except for my most recent tracks, where I'd passed through the snow.

The horror of the situation quickly descends on me. I'm terribly lost. *Fuck!* I turn and stride quickly to what may be the edge of the forest that I'd entered through. I barely take note of the strange shadow on the snow before my foot steps into it.

The snow immediately gives way beneath my feet and down I fall. I have a genuine Alice in Wonderland moment, except instead of falling into a magical world I hit the hard, icy bottom covered with boulders and sharp rocks. I think my head might have struck one of those not so magical rocks because a sharp pain shoots through it, and my vision goes blurry.

I blink, trying to clear away the fog behind my eyes, but despite my best efforts I sink into darkness. How cliché.

\*\*\*

*Orgath*

The snow crunches beneath my feet and I wrinkle my nose at the soft, powdery flakes falling from the skies of the human realm known to us as Ov'Ge. I have been here for several days, burying my caches as I hunt before I return to Ov'Gorg. I am eager to return home; everything feels different in this realm. The air is heavier and oppressive, and it carries the taint of their pollutants that foul their air and water.

I don't care for Ov'Ge, but this region is not as bad as others. The air is crisp and somewhat clean. A few times a year my hunt follows the long-limbed, shaggy omvulo herds that migrate between the two worlds. This is my last hunt for the winter; it will fill my stores and I will be set until the herds pass again into Ov'Gorg in a couple of weeks with the return of spring.

The wild portal between Ov'Ge and Ov'Gorg is unpredictable. Sometimes it lands me in fruitful hunting ranges, and other times barren stretches. I am hoping for the former. At least it never fails to return me home.

Ethiel, my delfass, nudges me with his large snout, his thick fur brushing my neck. Likely looking for food on my person. I lightly shove his face away. We'll be eating soon enough.

"Back off, Ethiel," I grunt.

I hum to myself as I go about the task of checking a few of the traps I'd set the day before. It isn't often that I catch something, but when I do it makes a nice complement to add to the heavy omvulo meat. Omvulo is a staple of the orcish diet, rich in fats and flavors, but a male gets tired of the same thing all the time. I smile when I see that one of my traps has been disturbed. I stomp through the snow over to it, wondering what sort of animal native to this realm I might enjoy feasting on tonight.

I look down and pause. My head tilts in confusion. That is no delicious treat within, although some orcs are not averse



to eating whatever they find. My lip curls with disgust at the thought.

The small human lay on its side, a bit of blood staining the snow around its head. I blow out a breath in disappointment and consider leaving it to the scavengers but reconsider when I see its chest rise and fall. Miraculously, it is still alive. I scowl thoughtfully. I can't leave it now; I doubt that it will be able to get itself out of the hole, and there are no human settlements nearby that I know of.

I must admit it is a cute little critter, small and soft-looking. I can't tell if it is a male or a female. All humans look small and soft to me from what I have seen from illustrations in some of the orcish books about their physiology. Humans are also said to be intelligent. Not like orcs, but serviceable for menial tasks, I would imagine. It might make a fine pet.

With a grunt, I crawl down into the hole. I scoop the tiny body up and toss it over my shoulder, giving me both of my free hands to climb back out again. Once I am out of the pit, I drop the human in the snow and scrutinize it.

It doesn't have facial bristles like a male does. I am pretty sure human males have such things like our males do, if I remember correctly. With a thick finger, I push the head back to an angle where I can see it better. The skin is an odd and unhealthy pale color that I find disturbing. My eyes follow downward along the line of its body and notice the heavy swell of breasts and hips.

Ah, a female.

I rub my jaw. It would be an extra mouth to feed, but she might be a sweet and amusing companion. I cannot see this small, delicate creature plotting to do harm. She looks as harmless as a delfass kitten.

I pinch my lips together and tap a claw on one of my short tusks. My ears move slightly to catch the sounds of the valley, listening for any other humans that may be nearby. If

there are others, I will leave her, but if not, it would be cruel to leave the helpless creature to freeze and starve in the cold.

There is nothing but the sounds from a few resilient winter birds and the creak of branches under the weight of snow. I grunt. Very well then. I grab her arm and hoist her up over my shoulder once more, trudging over to Ethiel. The strange scent of her teases my nostrils; it is pleasant but makes me sneeze. I hope I am not allergic to the female.

I adjust her so her face doesn't hit Uagoral strapped to my back. It would've perhaps been easier if I had left the ax at home. I don't need it for hunting. A moot point to consider though. Truthfully, I feel naked without Uagoral close to hand. I would never leave my hut without it.

Satisfied that my human won't get slapped with the flat side of its head, or suffer any unfortunate slices on her limbs, I swing up onto Ethiel's back. Once seated, I lower her so that she lies supported against my chest. Her body is starting to shiver, and she seems to burrow into my warmth instinctively. It's a good sign. I give Ethiel his command and set out at an easy pace, making my way to the first of my caches.

There, I construct a crude litter from two long poles lashed together with a large hide I brought with me for this purpose. This I tie to the hooks on Ethiel's leather saddle. He turns and flattens his ears briefly. He never does care for dragging litters. I gently pat the side of his massive jaw. It is a slow process loading the omvulo, but they have been cleaned and packed with snow so there is little left to do.

I consider throwing the human down on top of the pile but decide against it. I am not sure I will like having her in my home if she reeks of omvulo carcasses. She doesn't weigh much of anything, so it is no great hardship to continue carrying her over my shoulder while I pull my game behind me.

I settle in, humming a coarse melody under my breath as I make steady work through the day. My human doesn't wake, and I wrap her in the thick fur of my cloak to keep her

warm when I see her skin take on a strange bluish cast. Humans are apparently fragile, delicate things that are vulnerable to a bit of brisk winter air. I snort to myself, realizing that this human may be more trouble to care for than I want. Still, I can't abandon her out here.

When I have finally dug up all my caches, I give the pile a critical eye and huff in approval. That should be more than enough meat for the rest of the winter, even with a human to feed. She is so small. Doubtlessly, she won't eat more than a few morsels at most.

I seat myself again on Ethiel's back and adjust my grip on the female. With a muttered command, we slowly make our way through the rocky pass of the mountains. The travel through the mountains is a rougher ride, but Ethiel's steps are always sure. I check back frequently to make sure we don't lose any of the game. The progress is slow, and daylight is waning when we finally arrive. The subtle shift of light and a stone that vaguely resembles an orc standing sentry is the only marker of the portal.

As usual, cold nothingness seizes me that seems to last endlessly, and then just that quickly I am breathing the clean, cool air of Ov'Gorg. The sun is warm, and I can't help but smile to myself as I make my way back to my cottage.

The gray stone grows closer in the distance, a perimeter of trees to the rear of it. In those woods, a spring feeds fresh water into a river that runs through my territory, and a lake is nestled in a secluded area just paces away from the cottage. I take a deep breath, admiring my home.

I built this with my own hands a decade ago since resolutely leaving the nearby orc village. Secluded but near enough that I can easily get to the village for supplies, or a drink at the tavern. Just thinking of a tall glass of mead makes me lick my thick lips with thirst. Perhaps after I unload, a quick drop-in would do me some good.

I drop the human on a pile of furs near the hearth that has slowly been accumulating until I feel inclined to haul them

all in for trade. I am in no hurry. Sheoul never gives me a good price on the furs, so it behooves me to take a large lump of them in to turn a reasonable profit. The human doesn't look dirty, so I don't worry about her soiling them lying there.

With a grunt, I strip off my heavy belt of knives and set Uagoral on its stand above the hearth. It takes little time for me to remove the heavy leathers I wear for hunting and the heavy-soled calf-boots, leaving me in nothing more than my soft-weave tunic and leather breeches.

After so many days in my gear, it feels good to be free of it. It takes me little time to build a fire to thaw my human out. After warming my hands before the flames, I stand and stretch languidly. I rub my hands over my tired eyes. I look longingly toward my bedroom, but there is work still to be done. I tie on a long leather apron and stomp out of the house to see to the butchering.

## Chapter 2

*Sammi*

I don't want to open my eyes, especially since I'm blessedly warm for the first time in what seems like days. There is a pleasant, meaty smell that permeates the air and my stomach growls noisily. Did someone find me lost in the woods? A deep chuckle rumbles just behind me, and I turn toward the sound and peel my eyes open.

Immediately, I want to shut them again when the dim light of the room jabs into my skull like a hundred shards of glass. Blinking my eyes, I whimper against the pain.

"Ofor miu asak?" the deep voice growls.

With great effort, I focus on the direction of the voice and instantly wish I hadn't. I don't know if I'm hallucinating or not—it's possible with how hard I hit my head—and at this point I don't care. I unleash a scream in the face of the man who leans over me. But he isn't a man, not a *human* man, anyway.

His long, pointed ears seem to flatten against his skull, and he winces as he backs away from me. All seven feet of half-naked male, thick with fog-gray muscle and abs that would put most gym rats to shame. His massive hands lift to cover his ears and he mutters what sounds suspiciously like a curse.

Cat-like yellow eyes narrow at me, set in a broad face with high, defined cheekbones and a broad, flattened nose. His face is the same gray color as the rest of him, but one side is completely covered in swirling tattoos down to his collar and across one pectoral. Gold glints from a large septum ring and a series of hoops and earplugs studding his ears.

His lips pull back, baring teeth almost human-looking except they have a sharper edge to them, and two tusks sprout from a heavy lower jaw roughened with a thick beard into

which he has several braids woven. These braids have bits of metal beaded to the ends, much like the metal decorating the two braids hanging behind his elfish ears.

This guy is no elf, though. What the fuck?

“Efak! Ofor miu magor.”

“I don’t understand,” I whimper, wiggling further back into the corner of the room. That’s when I really notice my surroundings. A warm fire burns in a hearth in a room that resembles all the quaint old-world stone cottages I’ve admired from time to time in random photos. You know, the ones coated with ivy surrounded by gardens.

One thing is for sure: I have *never* seen anything of the like in Alaska.

The man grunts and turns away from me. As he stomps away, I notice that his bare feet are as massive as the rest of him. A series of long, thick black braids fall down his back, swinging behind him with his every movement as he leaves.

“Wait! Where am I?” I shout after him.

Beast-man is scary-looking, but I sure as hell don’t want to be abandoned or kicked out in the middle of nowhere. I needn’t have feared though. He returns moments later with a thick bronze charm on a strap that he thrusts toward me. It’s thick and chunky with some strange swirling script. It’s pretty but doesn’t look particularly comfortable to wear. I imagine the weight of the thing strangling me any time I try to lie down.

“Asar e miu.”

“Uh, no thanks,” I say and push it away.

He growls. “Miu dangor!” he insists, pushing it toward me again.

“No, I don’t want it,” I snap and shove it away a bit harder. My fear is, perhaps foolishly, melting away and this guy is starting to piss me off. It has been said more than once that I don’t have much good sense. This guy could probably

chew me up for breakfast without a guilty conscience, but at this point, I don't much care.

He leans over me, his nostrils flaring, and his eyes narrow with temper. Ooo, I think I am in trouble now. I don't know if he's of a mind to beat my ass—or turn me into dinner—and I decide right then and there that I didn't want to stick around and find out. I'll take my chances outside, thank you.

I try to dart around him, but a huge hand snakes out, moving quicker than I would expect from a guy his size. I squeal and thrash against him when he hauls me up against his chest. He ignores my kicks that land rather ineffectually against his legs. In a last bid for freedom, I lean down and viciously bite his hand. I hear and feel his quick intake of breath, but instead of releasing me, he growls deeply into my ear and loops the heavy pendant around my neck before dropping me.

My ass hits the stone floor *hard*. I yelp and rub my tush, glaring up at the brute. That fucking hurt! He has the nerve to fold his massive arms across his chest, his muscles rippling as he returns my glare like *I* did something wrong.

“Look, asshole, that hurt!” At this point, I'm just going to let him have it.

He snorts at me and rolls his eyes. “You are being unreasonable, female,” he growls. He literally growls at me!

*Wait a minute...* I understand him.

He gives me a disgruntled look and stomps away. He stops for a moment at the hearth to peer at something cooking in a large kettle before heading back to the thick cushion that he'd been apparently sitting on before I woke up. There he picks up some mending and sets to work, frowning at some really uneven stitches. Still, he keeps working at it, and I sit there like an idiot watching the needle move through the leather.

“Don't stare, female. You may begin cleaning or find some work to do,” he grunts.

My jaw drops. I awaken after nearly freezing to death and this oaf only thinks about putting me to work, like... like his servant! I grind my teeth and put my fiercest glare upon him that has made more than one asshole back up. It's completely ineffectual. He glances up and smirks, continuing to working as if I am not even there.

My eyes rake over the room. It's... primitive. There are no light fixtures. Not a single electrical outlet. Primitive is maybe a little too generous. It doesn't look like this place has running water or electricity. I spy a small black rectangular shape and shout out happily, snatching it up. The beastly male just glances up at me, grunts, and shakes his head before resuming his work.

Well, fuck him, because freedom is now within sight.

I press the power button. Dismay floods me. The phone is on four percent and its screen cheerfully displays that it has no signal. Disgusted, I chuck the phone back into the corner.

“Son of a bitch!” I snarl.

He raises an eyebrow in my direction. “Is something amiss, female?”

“I don't know how I am suddenly understanding you, but—”

“The medallion.”

I blink. “What?”

He sighs and thrusts his heavy jaw toward me. “The medallion that you wear. It was made and enchanted so that any who wore it would know the orcish tongue. It won't help you with any other races of beings, unless they choose to speak orcish to you which is fairly common in these parts, but at least you know my words when I speak to you now, and you can speak mine. Take care of it. I traded a week of good hunt for it,” he says.

“It's heavy as fuck,” I grumble.



He glances up and raises a thick eyebrow at me. “Maybe your male is doing it wrong.”

Now I’m confused. “What?”

“Fucking.”

I stare at him. “What are you talking about?”

He sighs again and sets his mending down. His thick arms stretch over his knees and he peers at me. “Did you not say your fucking is heavy? I do not know why you address it. Perhaps you are looking for better fucking. Although if you are complaining about a tiny human male being heavy, I would not recommend an orc,” he laughs, the sound rumbling like thunder from his chest.

The little mental lightbulb clicks on. “No, I said *this*,” I lift the medallion and let it fall back against my chest with a thud, “is heavy as fuck.”

“Again, you are speaking of fucking being heavy.”

“No—” Okay, we are clearly having a translation issue here. “The word fuck is not just an action, but it is also a handy expletive used in many different ways. I have personally found the act of fucking to be more disappointing than not, and nowhere near heavy, but that’s neither here nor there. Anyway,” I rush on, “it’s used for emphasis. So heavy as fuck means really, really heavy. Get it?”

He snorts. “I get that humans are strange.”

“Uh-huh, and what did you say you are again?”

His lips pull back into a smile, baring his tusks, which is a little unnerving. “Orc.”

Huh. Orc. Orc...*Orc?!?*

“Wait, an orc?! As in Tolkien?” I say, immediately backpedaling. From what I recall, those orcs in his work weren’t exactly warm and fuzzy, nor were the ones in the World of Warcraft games that my brothers were obsessed with.

His smile slips into a scowl. “I do not know this Tolkien, but from your reaction I gather he has misspoken about my kind. Fair warning, orcs do not care for insult against us.”

“But... but that’s just fantasy! Fiction.”

He laughs, his shoulders shaking with mirth. His eyes crinkle at me. “You humans have a short memory. Everything of the ancient past between our ancestors is nothing more than legend and lore to you now, eh? Are orcs nothing more than a bedtime story to scare your children?”

It was my turn to snort. “Not even that. Most kids probably don’t know what an orc is.”

He makes a noise in his throat and picks up his mending again. “Interesting. Expected though from a species that is not terribly bright.”

Wait one damn minute. “Don’t you think you have that backward?”

Both of his thick eyebrows arch. “How do you mean?”

“Everyone knows that orcs, and ogres and all the like are just brutes.” I hadn’t watched *Lord of the Rings* a hundred times for nothing. Orcs were portrayed as ugly, violent, and bad-tempered. While this guy isn’t Johnny Sunshine, he doesn’t exactly measure up to the image I would have expected.

He scowls fiercely and I don’t blame him. But hey, he did start it.

The orc throws his mending down and pushes himself up onto his feet. It takes everything in me not to retreat as he stalks toward me. A thick finger is thrust in front of my nose threateningly.

“An orc is *nothing* like an ogre. Pray you don’t meet an ogre, female. You wouldn’t be happy to be made a meal by that lot. Ogres and trolls are best avoided. Orcs are honorable. Elves may look down at us, their cousins, for our appearance,

but in truth we are no less than them. You are becoming a troubling pet,” he growls.

Pet? Oh, hell no!

“I am not a pet!” I snap.

A smirk curls his lips as he stares down at me from his greater height.

“You are not an orc.”

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### *Orgath*

The female talks a lot, but at least she is amusing—when she is not being insulting. Her delicate, pointed chin is thrust out at me stubbornly, and her blue eyes spark at me with temper. She may be human, but I have to admire her fierce spirit. I didn’t think such a trait would be found in a human. It is almost orcish.

I turn away from her, dismissively, and shake out the hemmed leathers. It is not much—a vest and a wrap skirt—but the clothes she wears are torn and bloodied. I throw the leathers at her and gesture.

“Put that on. I will dispose of your ruined garments.”

She looks down at herself, frowns, and then unfolds the clothing I made for her. Her lips part and a look of unmistakable outrage descends. I am not certain what she finds offensive. The clothes I have made for her are perfectly serviceable and are common among orc females when there is no woven cloth available.

“I’m fine in what I have on,” she insists, setting the leather vest and skirt aside.

I grind my teeth. “You cannot continue to wear what you have on. It is stained with blood and needs to be burned before you start attracting predators to my cottage.”

“I don’t want to change clothes,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Very well. If that is how she wants it.

I dart forward and she shrieks when my hand takes a handful of her clothing and rips it from her body. With steely intent, I pull every bit of clothing off her, ignoring her angry shouts. Her small fists beat at me, and I chuckle because they have no more force than a hissing delfass kitten swatting at me. Every bit of material I throw into the fire as she rages.

“There,” I grin down at her, my eyes taking in the supple, pale flesh, and I try to ignore the hardening of my cock beneath my breeches, “you can either wear that or go naked.”

She thrusts her arms over her breasts and glares. Her left arm has an intriguing series of thick red flowers vining down in a tattoo from her shoulder to her forearm. Unlike the clan tattoos, I can see that this is entirely decorative. Most orcs only ink themselves for ceremonial purposes, although some warriors have powerful wards placed on their skin too. For most of our kind, it is otherwise considered wasteful to ink for any other reason. Yet on her, the decorative ink is beautiful.

Her lips suddenly curve into an angry smile. “Naked works for me just fine.”

My mouth drops open. I wasn’t expecting that. Humans are weak of spirit and mind. Shouldn’t she be fainting or speechless with shock? I rub my jaw thoughtfully. Very well, if she thinks she is an orc woman, we will see how long she can keep that up.

“If you insist,” I assent, and her eyes widen. Not what she was expecting, I see. I push down the urge to gloat like a youth. “It is fortunate, because this gives me the perfect opening to examine you. I wasn’t even sure if you would survive the trip over the mountain.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” she says hastily, but I just grin.

“It is not for you to judge. Hold still, female.”

My hands cup her neck and then travel down her shoulders before sweeping forward to touch her fine collarbones. Her skin feels soft and delicate against my hands. I can feel her pulse quicken and if I listen close enough, I can hear the rapid beat of her heart.

“Tell me to stop, and I will,” I murmur, my hands running down to palm a heavy breast in each hand.

Her breath hitches and her nipples jut out into little hard peaks against my skin.

She manages a cocky, challenging grin. “If you can stand it, so can I. Do your worst, orc.”

I chuckle and move so that my fingertips can pluck and toy with her nipples, but my eyes are fastened now on her face, watching a flush run over her skin and her lips part as she pants.

I listen closely for her to change her mind and tell me to stop. I am not a monster. I will stop if she asks, but she does not. Instead, she leans into my touch with an eagerness I find surprising.

She doesn’t flinch when I lean down to stroke my rough tongue against one nipple and then the other. Her skin just barely shudders when my hands trail down the curve of her belly. I reach around her to sweep my hands down her buttocks, to make the skin leap beneath my touch. Her muscle jumps as I lightly smack my hand against the mound of flesh, relishing its give beneath my palm and her surprised squeak. I imagine her bottom flushed red from the work of my hand, but I leave it for now.

At the apex of her thighs, I see a down of hair like orc females have, but hers is softer in texture. It is fragrant with the scent of her musk. The little human is aroused despite the angry glare in her eyes and the sharp words I am certain are just barely leashed on her tongue. I draw my fingers through

the reddish curls, burrowing a thick finger into her soft folds, my thumb toying with the pearl of flesh crowning her weeping slit.

Her breath turns ragged as I play with her, my fingers drawing out every sensation. Her little nub is swollen and hard now, her lips engorged and dripping wet. I add a second finger into her tight channel, and she moans, her eyes sliding shut. I work her body until I see the shudders of her skin and feel the ripple of her muscles against my hand—and then pull my fingers from her body. Her eyes snap open in surprise, desire and anger burning in their depths.

I smile and slowly lick her slick off my fingers.

“Very well, female. Stay as you are.” I rise to my feet and go back to my cushion. The heavy iron bar between my legs makes movement difficult and uncomfortable, but it will pass. She will see who holds the power in this cottage, and it is not a tiny human female. I pull out a book of orcish history and settle in to read, hoping that it would dismiss her presence from my mind.

Sadly, it fails. My cock remains hard and my mind keeps returning to her. She sits beside the fire, her eyes like daggers desiring my blood. My cock leaps. I want this female, but I won't take her unless she begs for it. She is not an orc. Forcing my attention back to my book, I continue to read.

## Chapter 3

*Sammi*

I cannot believe what he just did. This... orc not only stripped me naked but had the nerve to get me worked up to the edge of orgasm and then just *stops* and acts like I'm no longer even in the room.

Oh, I'm not stupid. It's a blatant power play. Everything from his caress to the dirty way he licked his fingers clean, leaving me in want, is all to demonstrate that I am a helpless human subject to his whim. His dismissal of my presence unexpectedly cuts me, though. A clear message that he's not as affected as I am. To be honest, it chaps my ass.

After a while, the orc sets his book down and lumbers over to the pot hanging over the fire. Whatever he's cooking does smell good. He gives it another stir and grunts in approval.

"Human, go fetch some bowls from the cupboard," he says, not even bothering to look at me.

I grit my teeth, seething inwardly at the beast, but stand up and get the bowls anyway. I may sometimes do foolish things, but I'm starving. I'm not about to let him get between me and dinner.

Stopping beside him, I thrust out the bowls a bit less than graciously. He glances down at them and frowns.

"Where are the spoons?"

I swear it is by great effort that my jaw doesn't hit the ground right then and there. That imperious bastard!

"Why didn't you say to bring spoons?" Silence. "Where *are* the spoons?" I grit out.

He frowns at me like I'm being the difficult one and takes the bowls from my hands. "In the drawer inside the cupboard. Go look again."

I stomp back over to the cupboard and fling it open. Sure enough, beneath the shelves holding bowls, cups, and plates is a long drawer. I pull it open and see rows of various-sized knives, odd two-pronged forks, and wedge-shaped spoons. Muttering to myself, I grab two spoons and return to the fire with them.

He arches an eyebrow at my obvious show of temper but wordlessly hands me a bowl as he takes a spoon from me. He says nothing more when he turns away from the fire and returns to his cushion. Absently, he reaches over, grabs another cushion, and chucks it at me. He throws it with just enough force that it lands just inches in front of my feet.

“Sit. Eat. When you are done, I will bring in water for you to clean the dishes,” he says, and he begins to spoon stew into his mouth.

I sit and watch him for several minutes, trying to wrap my mind around the fact that he actually expects me to be some kind of domestic servant in this little cottage. I huff and sink down onto the cushion. At least he isn't making me sit on the floor like a dog. I don't doubt that it didn't cross his mind, though.

I take a bite of stew and almost groan with the flavors that burst over my tongue. Whatever this is, it's delicious, and I eagerly dig into my meal. Out of nowhere, a chunk of bread lands in my bowl with a *thwump*, splashing a bit of the cooling stew over my breasts. I let out a curse and look around for something to clean myself with. The beast chuckles and tosses me a stained rag. I grumble out my thanks and hastily wipe myself clean.

When the last bite is gone, the orc gets up and goes outside. Moments later, the door swings open and he carries in a bucket of water and sets in front of me. He pulls off the now empty pot and sets a clean one over the heat.

“Heat the water and get the soap from the small chest by the hearth. I am going out to chop more firewood. I expect you to be finished by the time I get back.”



Seriously? He just expects me to know how to clean this mess up? He doesn't even have a dishwasher! Or running water. I scratch my head, glaring at the pot.

Well, common sense says that I can't heat all the water in case I get it too hot. I pour most of the water from the bucket in the kettle and sit back to watch it heat. I hunt down a ladle. Once the water seems hot enough, I begin to scoop it into the larger dirty pot that we'd used to cook our dinner. It makes a grayish greasy soup at the bottom of the pot, and I wrinkle my nose at the sight. Barf.

I look dubiously at the cake of soap in my hand. This doesn't look anywhere near as effective as a bottle of Dawn, but it's all I've got. I retrieve the stained scrap of cloth that my "host" threw at me earlier and kneel in front of the dirty pot.

One at a time, I pick up a dirty stone dish and wash them and the spoons, ladling fresh water over them to rinse, and setting them on the hearth to dry. That was the easy part. I flex my shoulders and start working on the pot. I scrub until I can feel a kink forming between my shoulder blades. I want to offer up a prayer in thanks when it finally looks like I've scrubbed all the lingering food from inside it.

Now, where to rinse it?

I certainly can't empty it indoors. I look at the door and shrug. With a groan, I haul the pot out the door and turn to retrieve the bucket and refill it with the remaining water. It takes only a couple of splashes, but I finally rinse all the soap and debris clean from the pot. It made an unfortunate smelly smear in front of the door, but I shrug. If he'd wanted it done better, he would have showed me how he wanted it done, or better yet, done it himself.

I drag the pot back to its spot beside the hearth and stretch out on my belly over the pillow. I can still hear the ax striking wood outside and listen until it finally ceases. Well, at least I finished with plenty of time to spare. I start to hum the Jaws theme as I listen to his heavy steps approaching the door.

Wait for it...

There's a loud crash, the clatter of what must be falling wood, and the orc lets out of torrent of curses. I feel my lips curling up sinisterly. Sweet, sweet, revenge.

I turn over onto my back so that the fire can warm my belly too. My bottom was starting to get a little too toasty. I'm lying there, smirking to myself, when the door flings open. An angry, wet orc stomps through the door heading directly for me. I grin up at where he hovers over me, his nostrils flaring and what must be an angry flush on his cheeks.

"Hello, sweet stuff. What happened? Did you get a little wet?" I ask with feigned innocence.

"Female, you know very well what happened. Why, by all the gods, did you dump the water in front of the door?" he bellows.

I twist a lock of hair and smile up at him. "How was I to know that is the wrong place to dump the water? You didn't give me any instructions and don't own a dishwasher or have indoor plumbing or a sink. You just barked an order at me and expected me to figure it out. So, I improvised," I say, not even bothering to hide my look of glee.

My, my, my, he does look angry though. I think if his hair weren't so tightly bound in braids, bits of it would be standing on end the way he's positively bristling with anger right now.

His yellow eyes narrow at me, his breath coming out in short huffs, warming my skin. Then, just as quickly, he growls and turns away from me, one of his hands tugging at his beard as he stalks through a door leading to what I assume is a bedroom. I lie on my cushion and idly wonder how long it'll take before the orc takes me back home.

A short time later, the orc comes back out, stark naked, an impressive erection briefly in sight before he throws a heavy blanket over me. The blanket is so large and so thick it takes me some effort to fight my way out of it, enough to

where it's no longer covering my head. I look up at my captor and find that he is grinning down at me, his eyes gleaming in the firelight.

"Goodnight, delfass-ki," he says over his shoulder as he returns to his room. I watch behind him, hypnotized by the strong muscles of his asscheeks as they flex. I shake myself out of it.

"My name is Sammi, you great beast," I shout.

He pauses just outside his door, his head turning toward me, and I can see the slightest upward tug at the corner of his mouth.

"I am Orgath."

He disappears through his door, leaving me on the floor with nothing but a cushion and a blanket for my bed in front of the fire. I mutter to myself and wrap the blanket tightly around me, noting the rapid cooling of the room. It's going to be a miserably cold night. What I would give for my apartment and central heating. I'd even settle for a space heater at this point.

Maybe rejecting clothes and parading around naked was a bad idea.

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### *Orgath*

I lie on the thick mattress in my room and take my cock into hand. I can't get the female out of my thoughts. She was supposed to be nothing more than a clever pet to care for and amuse me. Instead, she tortures me. She does not submit to my authority. She displays the luscious curves of her body, so different than the hard planes and rounded curves of an orc female.

I feel almost guilty leaving her on the floor alone in a cold room, but then I remember her glee over the mess she made in front of my door and I ruthlessly quash that feeling. Besides, I am doubtful if she would join me in my bed, and I don't know if I could survive the temptation of having her naked lush body so close to me that I will not allow myself to have.

She is stubborn, but I am a patient male for an orc. I will not give her the pleasure she wants until she begs for it. She will find, however, that if she keeps acting like a brat that I have no problem at all with a little persuasive punishment.

I grin at the idea of having her naked buttocks presented to me, and the rosy way they would bloom with the light strikes of my palm upon them. I begin to stroke myself as I imagine she would cry out and moan and writhe.

Yes, come morning, she will learn the meaning of punishment for the mess she made today, and I will take great pleasure in giving it.

I stroke myself faster, squeezing lightly from root to tip as I envision her soft thighs and the thatch of curls between them. I recall the slickness of her need and the puffy lips of her cunt and how tightly it clung to my fingers. I imagine how that would feel gripping my cock. Will I even fit into that silk sheath? I am not averse to trying.

My seed erupts over my fist, the warmth splashing over my thick knuckles and coating my skin of my hand, spilling more than I ever recall releasing. I don't understand my fascination with the human. Sammi, I remind myself. Her name rolls through my mind as I release my flaccid cock and dig out a rag to clean myself with. If this keeps up, I will have a mountain of rags among the clothes that needed washing.

I stare at the cloth and begin to smile. Let's see how Sammi will enjoy sitting at the side of the river washing clothes. Will she swallow her pride and wear the soft leathers I sewed together for her, or will she squat on the cold rock naked and stubbornly launder in the manner she has done

everything else? I chuckle and fling the rag into a small pile of dirty clothes.

Her refusal to wear the clothes I provided bothers me more than I like. My stitching is not the most elegant, but it is functional and will not unravel on her or split at an inopportune moment. I fully intend to take her to the village and get her properly fitted for a comfortable robe and feminine belts, perhaps even a nice apron to secure over her robe with elvish embroidery.

I have every intention of caring for her needs. All she needs to do is bend her pride just a little and show some damn gratitude. She is not orc; she is not equal to me.

If she would humble herself and know her place, I would shower gifts on my human pet to make her life with me comfortable. She will never want for anything and her belly will always be full of good food. What more is there to want? Sure, sometimes I will have to leave her to her own ends at the cottage while I traded, or if our chieftain demanded that we go to battle. She must accept that she will never pass through the mountains again to Ov'Ge.

I know that is part of why she rebels. She thinks if she is enough trouble that I will carry her back through the portal in the mountains. Even if I bend to her will and take her back through the mountains, I have no way of knowing where she may end up. I find that I am strangely loath to risk her life.

Did she not sleep the entire trip back to my cottage? Has she even accounted for how she would make the return journey to her civilization if I did return her through the mountain portal? No orc who travels the passages in their hunts will chance approaching the humans. It has caused too many problems in our shared history. History that they dismiss as nothing more than tales, and not even common ones. No, I would not break our laws to return her to the human civilization.

Besides, what do they have in Ov'Ge that is better than what we have in Ov'Gorg? Our weather here is better, our air

and water cleaner. I have a great garden that I doubt even the best human gardens can compare to, so fine that in the summer unicorns are known to enjoy it. True, right now it is early spring in the orc realm and a bit bleak, but the spring flowers are already blooming.

Sammi will be content when she learns her place and enjoys the spring sun.

I can hear her shifting around on her pillow in the main room and the rustle of her blanket. There is a tremor behind her breathing, and I begin to worry that she is too cold. I frown in the darkness of my room.

The cold of the cottage doesn't bother me like it does her. I am perfectly comfortable in my bed, although I have to remind myself that she has even less. She will not thank me for bringing her to the warmth of my bed, nor will she be grateful as she should. I should leave her out there to keep herself warm with nothing more than the heat of her temper.

When I hear her shiver, I can't hold back any longer. With an oath, I push off my bed and pad across the room to the door. I am certain to hear about it in the morning from her sharp tongue, but I will not leave her out there shivering and cold any more than I could leave her freezing on the mountains. I pace into the common room to retrieve the little female.

The common room is dark and cold. The fire has completely died down and all I can see of Sammi is a lump of quaking blankets and a few curls of her reddish-gold hair. Without hesitating, I pluck her off the pillow and pull her into the warmth of my chest.

She lets out a long sigh, the gust of her breath fanning against my pectoral. My body stirs with another surge of lust, but I firmly ignore it. I return with her to my room and lay her on the thick padding of my bed. She mumbles softly in her sleep, some complaint I'd guess. I can well imagine she is telling off some male, perhaps even me, in the most inner places of her dream world. I stroke a hand down the soft silk

of her hair, enjoying the texture of it as it clings to my hand, and I try to lull her into a deeper, more pleasant sleep.

“Shh, Sammi. Sleep now,” I whisper and settle down next to her, my body curling around hers, sharing my heat. Humans are so thin-blooded and thin-skinned. An orc is filled with heat that allows us to survive even in the harshest of places if needed.

I tuck her head beneath my jaw, her breathing warm on my neck. My cock is raging at me, but I ignore it even though it pulses rigid against her soft belly. My lust is little more than a slight discomfort. Orcs are made to be unconquerable. Not even my desire can lay me low. Nor will this female, despite her best efforts. I chuckle to myself and allow sleep to claim me.

## Chapter 4

*Sammi*

I'm warm, cocooned under a blanket with a warm body pressed beside me. All I can think is thank the gods it was all a dream. I'm home in bed, and Travis isn't hooking up with some strange floozy. He's in bed with me. I never left home, and we're planning our romantic getaway for this weekend. I think I'll suggest something different from his cabin-in-the-mountains idea. That didn't work out so well for my dream self after all.

I snuggle deeper into the blankets and never want to crawl out of bed. After such a horrid dream of being so damn cold, I can't get enough of being warm. I feel a thick bar of flesh press into my ass as I push back into Travis. A *very* thick, long one. I frown. Since when was Travis anywhere near that well-endowed? I mean, I am over the moon for him, but Travis on a good day sports a six-and-a-half-incher, and that feels more like twelve inches easy. A tiny red flag goes off in my brain but I ignore it and attempt to drift back to sleep.

Travis grumbles behind me with a gravelly voice. Is he sick? Poor guy. If he's coming down with something, we're definitely not going up into the mountains. A thick arm locks around me and he grinds his pelvis against my bottom. A warning goes off in my brain.

The hands that grip me are huge and the arms around me thick with muscle. Some part of my brain whispers that there's no way that those arms and hands belong to Travis, but I'm enjoying it too much. The cock grinds into me again, grazing against my slick folds.

"Mmm, Travis right there. Just like that."

"Who the hell is this Travis?" a deep voice growls threateningly just behind my ear.



I shoot from the bed with a horrified shriek. My foot gets caught in the blanket and I immediately go down, crashing into the floor. Thankfully, the bed seems unusually close to the ground, so I don't fall far. I push my hair out of my face and stare at the giant gray orc rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

Fuck. It wasn't a dream after all.

Yellow eyes blink down at me and then gleam with laughter as he takes in my ridiculous state of sprawled all over the place. The bed itself is more of a stuffed mattress on the floor covered with blankets and thick furs. I blush as I realize that at this angle Orgath can see everything from the lips of my pussy to every curve of my body and my bare breasts. I glare and struggle to my feet. I trip over the blanket a couple times, but finally I manage to break free and stand proudly with the fiercest look I can manage.

I know it doesn't impress him. He snorts with amusement and rolls out of bed. He stretches, and I think there's something wrong with my eyesight. I can't look away or even blink. I can feel my eyes bugging out at the sight of his massive cock standing like an iron bar from a thatch of dark hair, bobbing against the taut muscle of his belly. My mouth goes dry instantly. His cat eyes narrow at me.

"Now, who is this Travis that you referred to me as while we were sleeping together?"

My cheeks flame at the memory of how I'd acted when I had still been half-caught in my dreams.

"Don't say it like that. We weren't sleeping together," I squeak. Yeah, that sounds confident.

He smirks. "What would you be calling it then?"

"We were... ah... cuddling. Yes, we were being cuddle-buddies. Perfectly platonic and innocent cuddling."

His eyes narrow further until they are nothing more than slits, and one of his eyebrows quirks up. He is about to call me

on my shit. I just know it. Orgath looks pointedly down at his phallus.

“Seems to me that there was more than cuddling going on,” he growls huskily. “But I am glad you see it that way. I have work to do...and so do you,” he grins wickedly.

“What work?” I ask slowly

He nods to a pile of dirty clothes. No. Oh, hell no. He can't mean what I think he means.

“Laundry day,” he says cheerfully. “Grab a cake of soap, and I will escort you down the to the river so you can get started.”

That. Is. It. “I am not washing an orc's dirty breeches!”

“You will if I say you will.”

“I won't!”

“You will, right this minute,” he growls.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Make. Me.”

\*\*\*

### *Orgath*

Sammi is making all manner of noise as I trudge through the woods to the river. I really don't know what all the fuss is. The female is obviously spoiled. Has the entire human world become so? There is nothing wrong with a bit of hard work, and the sooner she realizes it, the better. Ov'Gorg is not for the faint of heart with its challenges, but it is the best of realms for the strong.

I carry the laundry, washboard, and soap on the basket on one arm; my other arm is bracing Sammi over my shoulder, who is struggling to get down. She will soon discover that it is not so easy to slip from the grip of an orc. This is a pleasant

stroll for me, and I barely feel her struggles as anything more than a minor inconvenience.

The female suddenly freezes, intakes a sharp breath of air, and then screams so loud that my sensitive ears ring.

“What is wrong with you, female?” I growl.

“There’s a horrible beast behind us! Put me down!” she wails.

I look over my shoulder and chuckle. Ethiel is trailing behind us, his ears pricked toward Sammi, the mangled ear twitching curiously. Even his thick-furred tail is arched up behind him with interest as he follows.

“Hush, female. That is just my delfass, Ethiel. He won’t hurt you.”

“I think you’re delusional. He’s staring at me like I’m an afternoon snack.”

I chuckle and swat her bottom. “Ethiel is just curious. Quit squeaking so much before you do make him think you are food.”

“Oh. My. Gods. I hate you so much right now!”

I hum cheerfully to myself as we approach the river. I set the basket on a rock and put my human on her feet next to it.

“There is the river. You have a washboard, soap, and my clothes. Get started.”

She thrusts her chin out stubbornly and folds her arms over her breasts. Her expression practically shouts expletives at me without her needing to say a word. I gnash my teeth in frustration.

“Never mind that I don’t know how to do it, that water has to be freezing. Not a chance in hell,” she hisses.

I glare at her and fantasize about paddling her bottom rosy. Instead, another idea comes to mind. So, she objects to being in the river? Well, I will fix that. Once she is in the water, she cannot object further.

“Perhaps then you would prefer a bath,” I say in a low whisper.

In an instant, I snap my hand out and snatch her up high into my arms. She immediately begins to shriek in an ungodly manner, her fingernails digging harmlessly into my tough hide. I shake my head. Ethiel is pacing back and forth around us, his tail still arched with excitement. I briefly wonder if she is correct and he does consider her a snack, but he isn't making any overtures to take her from me, so I don't think so.

“Don't you dare!” Sammi yells.

I ignore her and approach the side of the river. When I attempt to pull her away from me to hold over the river, she suddenly latches onto me, her arms clinging to my neck. I grunt and try to pull her free without hurting her, but she is a stubborn female.

“Sammi, let go,” I snarl.

“Not on your life,” she says, her voice cracking as she wraps her legs firmly around my hips. My cock goes from half-mast to full interest when her cunt drags up against it with that one move. Her eyes glint at me with a promise of retribution, one that I choose to ignore.

Instead, I am fighting her off me. The harder I try to gently remove her, the tighter she clings. I am only vaguely aware of Ethiel trotting around us with delight.

That is until I take one step in the wrong direction while I struggle with Sammi at the same time that Ethiel weaves toward us. That is all it takes to finally knock me completely off balance. Sammi shrieks and I let out a startled bellow as we both fall forward into the river with a loud splash.

I stand in the shallow thigh-deep river, water sluicing down my body. The braids of my hair lay limp and wet against my skin and cling as assuredly as my soaked clothing. Sammi stands beside me, her arms crossed over her breasts shivering

in the cold water. I give her a disgusted look and begin to make way back to shore when I see my laundry starting to float down the river. At some point, I must've kicked the damn basket over when I was struggling with the human hellion.

Wading through the water, I begin snatching up my clothing, my thoughts as dark as my temper. I berate myself for bringing home such a creature, yet when I look to the side, I am surprised to see Sammi, her long wet hair trailing down her back, beside me gathering up my clothes.

Cursing under my breath, I haul the wet clothes to the bank and gather the soap and washboard. Ethiel is sitting on the bank watching us, his whiskers quivering in what I understand to be amusement. Damn beast. I strip off my breeches and hang them on a tree branch to dry before returning to her. She looks at me with wide eyes as I crook my finger at her.

Sammi approaches, clearly hesitating, and I sigh.

“It is necessary you learn how to do this.”

She doesn't look convinced, and from the set of her jaw, she is determined not to learn.

I firmly turn her in my arms until her back is to me, and I begin the long and arduous task of teaching her how to wash the clothing. She stiffens her arms stubbornly at first, but when I do not relent, she finally cooperates as I hold her hands firmly under mine, showing her the motions to wash clothing on the washboard.

We are at it for hours, washing, rinsing, wringing the clothes, and setting them over branches to dry.

“Very good,” I grunt. “Next time you will be able to do this yourself.”

She throws a wet cloth over a branch and with a groan.

“What if I don't want to learn? Did you ever consider that? I come from a place that has dishwashers, and washing

machines, that has cell reception and wi-fi. It's like I am stuck in the Dark Ages here!" she laments.

I raise an eyebrow at her as she collapses to the ground. "Are you finished?"

She slowly raises her head to glare at me. Good. Let her be angry. I would rather her be angry and learn how to care for herself in spite of me more than anything else. Being soft with her will not force her to learn basic skills anyone needs to know to survive here.

"You can't return, female. As soon as you accept that, the better it will be for you. The mountains are hard and none of my kind will approach human settlements. If I even tried to return you exactly where I found you, if I can even remember the exact location where I found you, you would be left to freeze and starve in the wilderness, vulnerable to predators. Is this what you want for yourself?"

Sammi glares and looks away. I know then that she recognizes that I speak sense, she just doesn't like it. Too bad. It is her reality now and it isn't about to change to suit her. She is among orcs now. Even though she is a human, if she doesn't want to be a pet, she will have to learn to be an orc. No one in the village will treat her gently in consideration of humanity. I treat her far more so than any other of my kind would, in fact.

When the clothes are finally dry, I pull them down, fold them, and set them in the basket. She silently helps me without a word of complaint, still shivering because the weather is too damp and chilly for her to be out here without any other clothes. I frown at this since I do not wish her to get sick, but if I make any demands, I know she will fight me all the way. Never before have I met any being who could come close to being able to out-stubborn an orc. Even our elven cousins would rather give in and try some clever manipulation rather than continue to battle wills with our kind.

Part of me can't help but admire that about her.

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*Sammi*

Orgath is watching me quietly, and he looks concerned. I'm sure he notices the way I'm shivering. I just can't seem to get warm, even though I wasn't terribly cold when we left the house.

Despite the few patches of lingering snow, unlike home, spring is well on its way here. I have worn little in far colder temperatures. It has to be pushing fifty degrees at least. However, now that I'm wet, I wish I had those simple scraps of fur he'd sewn for me so I wouldn't be standing here with my ass hanging out freezing. The air isn't that cold, just a slight springtime chill far warmer than even May in my hometown, but a dunk in the icy river pushed me past my limit. I want to curse the orc, but I really couldn't fault him entirely.

I don't want to learn how to wash laundry, or do any of the cleaning and cooking he is going to expect of me, but I can't completely deny that I need to be able to learn how to get along in this world if what he says is true. The chances of me ever getting home are getting slimmer by the minute. However, that doesn't mean I have to make it easy on him. On either of us, truthfully.

I push a soaked mass of hair out of my face and frown at Orgath.

“Wasn't there some other work you needed to do today?”

He shrugs, unconcerned. “I had intended to weed the garden while you were washing the clothes, but I suppose you can help me with that tomorrow.”

I wrinkle my nose. Gardening... yay. Not. My grandmother and mother both tried to get me interested in

gardening to no avail. I like pretty flowers. A nice houseplant or a bouquet will light up my day, but the idea of being outside in the *dirt*, with the bugs and spiders... No. Absolutely not.

“Yeah... gardening’s not my thing.”

Orgath chuckles, a rough sound that makes my skin tingle. “I suspect you don’t care for much of anything that does not include indulging in your whimsy and comforts.”

I scowl at the back of his head as he gathers our things. He really makes that sound like a bad thing. “Look, I don’t know how things are for your people, but where I’m from, gardening is a hobby that people only do if they want to. We have machines to do things like wash our dishes and our laundry. We have devices that entertain us.”

“And these things make you happy, keep you healthy, and protect you?”

“Of course,” I say loftily and try to ignore the doubtful click he makes in response.

“If that is the case then why did I come across you, lost in the mountains?”

I have no answer for him.

“You never did answer my question either about who this Travis person is that means so much to you.”

I pick at a small tear in my fingernail. “He’s no one now. He was just a mistake, and for just one stupid moment while I was sleeping, I forgot all that he did. But he’s the reason I was in the mountains. He never met me there like we’d planned. He abandoned me with almost no provisions and I got snowed in before I could leave.”

I shake my head and, to my gratitude and surprise, Orgath is silent. His big gray delfass is trailing after us sedately. Now that I’ve had a chance to get used to him, I like Ethiel. Despite the horns on his face, he’s very much like a giant housecat. Except Ethiel seems more intelligent and also happens to be the size of a horse.



When we arrive at the cottage, Orgath commands Ethiel to lie down and keep guard near the gate, but I am appalled. Didn't orcs ever hear of responsible pet ownership?

"You can't mean that," I say in horror.

He looks confused. "Mean what?"

"You can't just leave Ethiel out here in the cold night air."

Now he gives me that familiar sigh that I have started to interpret as his simple exhaustion even dealing with my presence. "Ethiel is not a pet, delfass-ki. He is a delfass, and their kind belong outside. He has always been outdoors. He has known nothing else."

"How inhumane! The poor thing. He's never been indoors at all? That needs to change. The cottage is plenty big enough for him to sleep by the hearth at least at night."

"Female..."

"I am so not budging on this, orc," I growl.

Eventually, I do get my way. Orgath stalks away to his room, muttering about crazy females, and leaves me to figure out how to get Ethiel inside on my own. I try calling to him as I would a kitty, but he just paces in front of the door in confusion. A bit of cream and some dried meat end up doing the trick. It is just enough to lure Ethiel in through the doorframe into the nice bed I made for him.

The large cat curls up, a tattered ear flicking toward me, and he closes his big yellow eyes. I beam down at him, feeling particularly smug over my victory when I hear Orgath shout from the bedroom.

"Are you coming or not, female? You can sleep with Ethiel if you like, but you may be more comfortable in here with me if you can keep your hands to yourself this time."

I flush. That beast of an orc. Well, I'm never one to back down from a challenge.

“I’m coming,” I call out sweetly.

I gently stroke Ethiel’s long soft ears, delighting in the purr that rumbles out from his chest, before I finally go to join Orgath in his bed.

## Chapter 5

### *Orgath*

I wake up to an empty bed. Sammi crawled into bed with me last night, even if she did sleep as far on the edge of the bed as she could get. That didn't make much sense to me since I made sure to wear a loose pair of breeches to bed for both of our sakes, but I left it alone.

At some point during the night, I awoke and found the female curled up against me, her breath fanning my chest. In the dark, I could easily make out the contrast of her pink soft flesh against my gray hide. I had admired it briefly before falling back to sleep. In truth, I'd slept better than I remember sleeping in a long time.

I'd expected to wake up with her soft body still pressed up against me, not alone. I am surprised that I find this a bit irritating. Where is she?

I roll off the bed, pushing the loose strands of my dark hair back with an impatient hand, and stretch. My right hand comes down to absently scratch at an itch, an old scar that still often plagues me despite being healed for years now. It is then that I hear a loud clatter come from the common room, followed by a muffled feminine curse. Curious, I wander out in search of my little human.

The stench of burned egg and bread assaults my nose immediately, as does the plume of black smoke rising from my good iron pan. The female is by the hearth, clad in the leathers I made for her and holding whatever monstrous concoction is currently assaulting my senses and my good pan. I traded one of my best furs to the metalsmith for that! My eyes immediately begin to burn from the acrid fumes.

*“What in the names of the gods and all the ancestors are you doing, female?”* I roar, rushing to her side.

Sammi's eyes widen in surprise, and she immediately drops the hot pan, which has the unforeseen consequence of promptly landing on my foot. Hot pain shoots through my hapless appendage and I reflexively kick the pan away before it can do more damage. Grabbing my foot, I heat up the room with the most profane curses I know. Sammi's eyes are getting wider and wider with every foul word shouted to any god or spirit listening. When they start to film over with a watery sheen is when dread begins to settle in my gut.

No. No. Please not that. Please don't—

"I am *so* sorry!" she wails, and tears begin to rapidly stream down her flushed cheeks. "I didn't mean to. I was just trying to make some breakfast for us. I thought it wouldn't be too difficult. I went and fought the chickens for the few eggs I could find, and I saw the leftover bread and butter in the cupboard. I've seen my mom make this a hundred times. How hard is it to fry bread with a bit of egg cooked in the center of it? I wanted to show you that I'm not completely helpless. It was supposed to be... a... a... surpriiiise," she cries, by increments becoming shriller.

At a loss, I pat her shoulder awkwardly.

"It is not so bad," I shamelessly lie. "Maybe something can be salvaged." Nothing edible remains in the charred mess. "I am sure your mother would be proud of your effort." Maybe?

She cries harder. "You are such a fucking liar! Even my brothers can cook a simple meal over a freaking campfire, and my mother has been a restaurant chef for over twenty years. I can't even boil water without burning the pan," she sobs.

That is... dreadful.

"Many, I am certain, can't cook," I say, trying to cheer her. "Why, there is a good many orcs I have known who wouldn't fare better than you." A blatant, harmless lie. Every orc, male or female, is taught in their youth how to cook, mend, and hunt.

Her sobs show no signs of stopping and now her nose is running as she blubbers, and her eyes are red and puffy. It isn't particularly attractive, but strangely, it makes me want to pull her close rather than push her away.

"I'm not cut out for this life, no matter how hard I try," she cries. "I miss my family. I miss my home. I miss Chinese takeout and Netflix. I miss indoor plumbing and refrigeration. I miss my life. Why didn't you just leave me to dieeee?"

It sounds to me like she misses a lot of comforts and conveniences, but I can sympathize with her missing her family.

"It gets easier," I soothe. "I can't do much for the things that make life easier for humans, but I will teach you how to survive and take care of you—I swear it. Yes, it hurts to miss your family but take comfort from the fact that they live and keep you in their hearts. I have no remaining family. My father and all three of my siblings were killed in battle when my cousin, the current chieftain, took over the clan. I am the only survivor from my unfortunate family, and all to be an outcast."

She blinks up at me then, her small fist brushing away her tears as she sniffs. "You must think I'm awful carrying on this way."

I grunt. "It is natural to miss what you have lost. You learn to move on with your life."

I scrape out the pan and take stock of what supplies are remaining. There is no more bread, and I am out of flour. I will have to go to the village today.

"Are there any eggs left?" I ask gently.

"No, that was all of them," she mutters, cleaning splatters off the floor.

I sigh. If we want to eat, we are going to have to go to the village even sooner.

I grab a spare fur cloak and pull out her boots from where I'd stashed them, handing both to her. Her eyebrows arch in surprise.

“Are we going somewhere?”

I nod sharply. “We need to go get supplies. It is a short trip to the village. We will eat at the tavern and then go to market.”

“Go to market? Like a grocery store?” she asks, her eyes brightening with interest. The last words, like many others she often says when speaking of Ov'Ge, do not translate. All these strange words are beginning to give me a headache.

“I do not know what you are speaking of. A market is a series of stalls from vendors marketing their wares, and farmers come with grains, fruits, livestock, and many other food staples.”

“Oh,” she says and falls silent.

I go into my room, pull on clean breeches and a tunic, and quickly plait my hair. With basic grooming accomplished, I dig out a heavy metal brooch from my trunk that once belonged to my mother. That will serve to secure her cape. The ruby eye in the curved bronze dragon winks at me from the sunlight coming through the open shutters of the window. Curling my fingers around it, I go back into the common room. Sammi has the fur-lined cape and is trying to figure out how to put it on.

I chuckle and pluck it from her fingers. In one deft movement, I turn the cloak the right way and wrap it firmly around her, pinning the two ends in place at one shoulder. She looks down, admiring the dragon brooch, her fingers skimming along the curve of its metal body. My cock stirs at the sight. It is too easy to imagine that it is my cock that her fingers are caressing.

Impatient with these uncontrollable urges, I turn away from her and root through a basket by the door to find a worn hood that will fit well enough on her small head. She needs to

be warm while we travel, but I also don't want to draw too much attention to her. The bright strands of her hair are sure to attract unwanted attention. Orcs haven't seen humans in generations; I don't want to find out the hard way what the consequence of a human in the village will be.

I look at her with a critical eye. Her pale face and neck clear of clan tattoos are certain to draw attention. With the hood and a bit of ochre pigment painted on her, we may get away with her looking half-orcish. I can probably pass her off as my half-orc, half-fae wife. I nod to myself. Yes, given how widely fae vary in size and appearance, that is the best way to go about it.

Sammi watches with interest as I pull out a small brush and then a tiny clay bowl, pouring a bit of water from the jug in the cupboard into it. I gesture to the stool.

“Sit, delfass-ki.”

She slides onto the stool and looks at me curiously. “What does that mean? It doesn't make much sense when I hear it.”

I cock an eyebrow at her and smile. “It is not a common word in our language—that is probably why. It is an orcish pet name, essentially meaning littlest delfass.”

Her lips quirk. “You mean... you're calling me kitten?”

I grin and stir the ochre grounds until they make a thick paint. She nods to my hands.

“What is that stuff for?”

“For your disguise. I don't know how other orcs are going to react to a human in our midst, so I am going to paint you with my clan's marking and have you wear that hood by your feet there and pass you off as my half-orc, half-fae wife. Just try not to speak if you can.”

She lifts a haughty eyebrow, and my grin widens as I witness the return of her spirit.

“Are you telling me to shut up?”

I chuckle. “Some of the things you say are... strange. They would give you away.”

Her blue eyes narrow. “So, what then, I’m your mute wife?”

“That is a brilliant idea,” I say as I focus on the task of painting the clan marks. Her growl warms my heart but thankfully she remains still as to not interrupt my work. I paint on the broad patterns of swirls with a quick, practiced hand. I know the patterns of the clan better than I know the landscape of my own hand.

An hour later, we are comfortably seated on Ethiel and heading toward the village. She’d balked a bit at the idea of riding a delfass, but within minutes seemed quite comfortable. I entertain the idea of maybe getting her a delfass of her own, but then her bottom shifts against my crotch from Ethiel’s rolling gate, and I immediately change my mind. If I have my way any time we need to travel, she will ride double with me, even though I know she will not be patient with such an arrangement long.

My delfass-ki likes her independence too much.

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*Sammi*

Ethiel moves at a thrilling pace over the stretches of grasslands. It’s such an incredible experience that I can’t get enough of it. I almost wish I could lean forward, grasp his shoulders, and urge him to run faster so that we’re like a cloud rolling over the distance.

The rocky land is broken up with high cliffs, and mountains reign in the distance. Everywhere there are tall yellow blades of grass from where the snow has melted away,



but I can see hints of soft green from new growth and pale flowers mixed among.

We have long since left the woodlands that border Orgath's cottage far behind. I should be scared of the prospect of being in a village of orcs, but instead, I find myself strangely excited. I am riding on the back of a giant cat with an orc pretending to be my husband, disguised like some sort of *Lord of the Rings* cosplayer. I never participated in anything like that, but it always sounded fun, and at this moment, I get to live it.

True to his word, it doesn't take us long to get to the village. I look around in fascination at what looks like something that could easily be the movie set of a fantasy or medieval historical drama. The little stone houses are quaint. There are farms nearby, and in the center of the village, businesses thrive.

There are no fewer than a hundred orcs milling about in this village. They are all tattooed with markings identical to the ones Orgath sports, and the majority of them seem to have a piercing fetish too. Earrings and septum piercings are the most common, but there are a good many pierced lips and brows too. I lean forward in fascination when we pass a heavily-pierced metalsmith working his billows.

Ethiel doesn't stop; rather, Orgath directs him to what appears to be a large covered barn. Inside hay is piled in thick layers over the dirt floor, and everywhere delfass are curled up sleeping comfortably, their thick leather saddles and saddle-blankets sitting on benches near the walls.

We dismount, and Orgath pulls Ethiel's tack off his back and sets it on a nearby bench. He rubs down the large cat's sweating flanks and then ruffles the fur with a thick hand. Ethiel leans happily into his touch, a deep purr rattling through his chest. Orgath chuckles and gives him a final pat before taking my hand.

"Come then. Let us find a meal before we begin anything else."

I nod my head, remembering that I am to play the mute now that we're here. A meal sounds more than good to me.

Orgath leads me to the tavern next door. It is noisy but warm. Food is heaped on platters on tables where orcs of various shades of blue, gray and green sit. A few of them glance my way but then swiftly dismiss me as Orgath said they would.

So instead of being the center of attention, I'm the one watching everyone else. Males and females talk loudly, many are laughing among themselves probably over one joke or another, a few are arguing, and there appears to be at least one contest of strength going on at a table in a darkened corner.

"Orgath!" I jump as the voice booms out across the tavern. Several orcs turn our way, raise a hand in greeting, and return to their business. A cobalt-gray orc strides between the tables, wearing a broad grin as he approaches. He claps Orgath on the arm and grips his wrist, and Orgath returns his greeting with gusto.

"Bodi, what are you doing here? I thought you left to court a female of the Morwol clan?"

Bodi's laughter is long and deep. "That was the plan, cousin. After Lorf took over this clan, everything has gone to shit, but the female I had my eye on turned out to be nothing more than a demanding shrew."

Orgath rolls his eyes. "You should have known that. Rawgr spoils all of his children, and none more than his daughters."

Bodi shrugs. "I thought maybe getting under the furs may be worth enduring her demanding tongue, but even that didn't happen. She wants to be properly mated first, and with a male of wealth... apparently I do not have enough of that."

"Did you not leave with three trunks of jewels? I know one had several fine elvish pieces."

"According to her, it was not worth more than a pauper bride, unworthy of the daughter of a chieftain. I decided to cut

my losses then,” he says, taking a big swig out of the mug he is holding.

Suddenly, those brilliant green eyes focus on me and his brows rise. I want to pull the hood further forward but dare not lest that seem suspicious.

“Who is this?” he inquires, his hand reaching out to me.

Orgath swats his friend’s hand away sharply. “This is my wife. Sammi. She is a half-fae orc from the high mountain lands. We met on one of my hunts.”

Bodi peers at me with increased interest. “A wife? Really?” He laughs. “I never thought you would find a female who could tolerate your ugly face.”

I open my mouth to defend Orgath. He can’t help that the side of his face that’s clean of tattoos is covered in scars, but my faux-husband laughs.

“At least my wife did not dismiss me for the small size of my family jewels.”

I blink at the meaningful way he says that and looks pointedly downward at his friend—surely he isn’t making a crass joke about his friend being lacking below the belt? Bodi’s uproarious laughter informs me that it was exactly what Orgath did.

I roll my eyes. *Men.*

“Come, you and your dainty wife must join me for a drink. Her fae-kin must be of a small stature, for I believe I have never seen such a tiny orc before. Let us share a drink and a meal if you like.”

Orgath accepts and steers me after Bodi to a table. I throw a concerned look at him, but Orgath just winks at me. I chew my lip and hope I don’t do something stupid to give us away. Pulling discreetly at a corner of my hood, I sit in the chair that Orgath nudges me toward. Tall mugs of mead are immediately set before us and I enjoy the sweet bite of the

alcohol. I take a long and satisfying sip of it, my throat parched from riding Ethiel.

Bodi grins over at me. “How do you like being Orgath’s wife and living away from the village?”

I freeze but manage a small smile and tap my throat with an apologetic look.

“My apologies, Bodi. I forgot to say that my wife is mute. A childhood accident, I fear.”

“Well, at least you are spared a nagging tongue then—no offense, my lady,” he says cheerfully.

He lets loose another loud laugh, and Orgath, swallowing a large gulp of mead from his own mug, tips his head back and joins him.

Oh ha, ha. I narrow my eyes.

## Chapter 6

### *Sammi*

I grind my teeth together and begin plotting my revenge when a barmaid plunks a fresh tankard of mead in front of Bodi, sloshing a little of it into his lap.

“Hey!” Bodi shouts. He jumps up and starts to beat the liquid off his lap as the ochre orc smirks at him, her amber eyes dancing merrily. Like the other orcs, she is tall, well over six feet, her face bearing the same clan marks. Unlike the numerous small braids that the males wear, she has a long singular thick braid of brown hair that falls to her hip. She also wears a grotesque collar of claws and animal bits around her throat. Bodi glares at her, but Orgath just laughs harder.

“Serves you right, Bodi,” she says sweetly. She smiles at me, but turns to jab Orgath in the chest, bringing his laughter to a halt.

“Why did you not invite me to your bridal feast? Did our mothers not grow up together like sisters, even though they were first cousins. I am your closest living relative. I should have been first to be invited to drink to your happiness.”

Orgath chuckles and rubs his chest with one hand, the other held up in a placating gesture. “Erra, Sammi asked that we not make a fuss. She did not wish for a bridal feast, so we merely settled into our life comfortably in my cottage.”

Erra snorts in obvious disgust. “You should not be in that ramshackle cottage. You were meant to be the next chieftain when your father was ready to step down. Instead, you live like an exile,” she snarls with an outward thrust of her hand.

Orgath frowns down at his mead. “That is the way of it,” he grunts.

The female orc huffs and sits down beside me. I stiffen because she’s so close. I think if I make one wrong move,

she'll see through my disguise. She peers at me thoughtfully, her short claw tapping on the table.

"I have never heard of a female refusing a bridal feast," she states. I shrug and give her a wan smile. Her eyes drift slowly over me. I can feel beads of sweat gathering on my skin under her perusal. Suddenly she smiles again.

"I have heard half-fae inherit a talent for magic. Show me what magic you have," she says, her lips curling into an impish smile.

Oh crap. I look beseechingly at Orgath, who's scowling at her now.

"Leave her be, Erra," he growls.

The female cocks an eyebrow. "What? Surely if she is half-fae as you say, she must have some small gift. She doesn't look anything like an orc from what little I can see, so she must take after her fae side, if that is in fact what she is. So, come on, show me."

I mutinously scowl at her, but her smile just widens.

"For the love of... okay, she is not orc or fae," Orgath hisses. "Sammi is human."

Erra laughs and slams her palm on the table. "I knew it!" she shouts.

Every eye in the tavern immediately turns to her, and Orgath hisses in warning. She immediately sits back down, her expression smug. "I knew it!" she continues. "You have her well disguised, but neither fae nor orc would demand their husband not hold for them a bridal feast. All females look forward to such things." She shakes her head and chuckles. "Only you, Orgath, would be so crazy to steal a bride from the humans."

"I didn't steal her," he growls. "I found her lost and abandoned, near frozen to death in the mountains while hunting. I merely brought her home with me and cared for her. No stealing involved."

Bodi leans forward and looks at me curiously. His focus is so intense it's more than a little uncomfortable. As is the interested rumble coming from him, one that has Orgath scowling fiercely at him.

Erra scoffs. "Semantics, cousin. You know you will not be able to hide the fact that you have a human wife for long. When this gets out, every single orc who hasn't felt the bloodbond is going to be flooding Ov'Ge looking for mates."

Bloodbond? That doesn't sound particularly pleasant.

"Enough, Erra," Orgath says with a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Even if you are not chieftain, you still have a duty to our clan," she insists.

"Erra does have a point," Bodi chimes in. "You know how much some of our kind struggle to find mates. Most of us settle to live without finding our bloodbond. No orc will willingly give up the opportunity to find one if he or she sees that it is possible."

I want to interrupt. Boy, do I ever. Despite the truth being out regarding my species, they are still under the mistaken premise that we're married. What's even odder is that Orgath is not correcting them. Rather, he looks at me in a way that makes me want to squirm from the yellow molten heat in his eyes.

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*Orgath*

I have stopped listening to Erra ten minutes ago, and Bodi about five, although I keep an eye on him. I know he won't harm Sammi, but I don't care for the interest he displays toward her. The amount of possessiveness I feel is surprising.

I hadn't wanted anyone to know she is human for safety reasons, but now I am confronted by the ambiguous truth that motivates me. And it is the reason why I say nothing when they continue to speak of Sammi as my wife. She keeps looking at me with confusion in her eyes, but I won't speak.

It is not just because I don't want to risk possible harm coming to her; it is because I fear another orc may attempt to take her away from me. If I am honest with myself, why else pretend that she is my wife? I could have easily passed the same story without it. No, something within me wants others to give her berth as they would to my wife. I don't want even a suggestion or threat of other males near her.

Erra leans toward me, scowling. "You come among the orcneas race with your human wife. She is now an orcneas wife—or orc wife, since our race seems to prefer that dreadful word," she says, waving her hand dismissively.

Erra's father is a male who keeps our lore and has never liked that, a few generations ago, our kind began shortening our designation to orc, departing from tradition. Not that I can blame my forefathers and mothers.

Who wants to be called a name that refers to one's kind as an eater of corpses or a monster? Men of Ov'Ge gave us that name because we are not as fair in form as the elves. Rather than having the appearance of moonlight and magic, orcs are the color of good earth and hard stone. We are hard and warrish, with severe features.

I sigh heavily. "You know we made an agreement with the fae generations ago to not interfere with Ov'Ge, Erra. Like the other races, we can pass between our world in theirs when we must, but we do not approach them."

"Since when do the fae not change things to suit them? They are good at twisting the wording of a pact to serve their purpose. Technically, you violated that agreement when you saved Sammi," Erra retorts, not unreasonably.



“An even better reason for no one to know,” I growl, my ears flattening against my skull. “Do you wish for us to be at odds with the elves again?”

She snorts and leans back in her chair, her arms folding over her chest.

“If you were chieftain, our clan would not worry about the opinion of elves, nor would the elves be eager to attack,” she says firmly.

I groan and scrub my face. Always this old argument with Erra. I do not wish to challenge Lorf. The last time my family went against him, it did not end well for us. I have thirty-six winters, and I would like to live to see more, especially with Sammi at my side if the gods and ancestors will it.

Erra frowns. “What do you think will happen when Lorf learns of Sammi?”

Even Bodi looks concerned at that. “It won’t go well. Lorf collects females who attract his interest. A human in Ov’Gorg—he will salivate over the idea of possessing her once he gets word.”

“It is not something you can hide forever, Orgath.”

“She’s right,” Sammi whispers, startling me and the other two orcs. I didn’t expect her to break her charade by speaking.

I growl and look around to see if anyone heard her and is now watching. Much to my relief, the other orcs in the tavern seem unbothered by anything occurring at our table. I blow out my breath, the tension in my muscles relaxing with relief.

“See, even she knows what we say is true,” Erra hisses. “You need to challenge Lorf before he comes after you. And he will. It is just a matter of time.”

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*Sammi*

I took a calculated risk by speaking—but a necessary one. I know that there's no way we can pretend forever that I'm anything other than human. All that would need to happen is someone stopping by the cottage to see Orgath at an inopportune time. On top of that, I'm none-too-little worried about this Lorf guy. Therefore, it only seems right to throw my support behind Erra in this.

Sure, it's a bit self-serving, but I'm really terrified of the idea of ending up in some warlord orc chieftain's harem. No thanks. I'm just starting to get used to Orgath; I don't think I want to be thrown in with another orc I don't even know, much less one who has a reputation of killing his rivals. Doesn't sound like a guy with great impulse control. I can imagine all it would take is me losing control of my mouth just once and I would be one dead little human.

I've lived with me all my life and there is one thing I know for certain: I have lousy control of my mouth. That and my temper.

I chew my lip as Orgath and Erra argue back and forth. Bodi is paying attention to them, but he's still staring at me in that unnerving curious way. Thankfully, there's nothing malicious about it, just open appreciation and curiosity. Unfortunately, I'm not really used to that kind of attention either.

I puff out my cheeks and blow out a long breath in irritation when I can't take it anymore. I lean forward, looking Bodi right in the eye and whisper, "What the hell is your problem? Quit staring at me."

Bodi jerks back in surprise and then his whole face crinkles with laughter.

Orgath yanks down on one of Bodi's braids and it effectively silences him in time. I stare innocently at my orc as

he scowls at me. Yep, as far as I'm concerned, he is my orc. The only one in this whole damn place who I feel is actually going to look out for me. The fact that he lights my fire more than a little is beside the point.

Erra snickers beside me. "I like your wife. Has fire in her belly, like an orcneas. Best to keep your eyes to yourself, Bodi, before Orgath helps you with that."

Bodi's grin widens, baring his large tusks, at Orgath's fierce scowl. "Orgath knows that I have no designs on his mate. I was actually just wondering if his Sammi has any sisters or friends who are suffering from the lack of a good strong male."

I can think of several. Unlike some parts of Alaska where men outnumber women, that isn't the case in Anchorage. There are many single ladies bemoaning the lack of a decent man. But are they willing to hop into bed with a massive orc? That may be a bit trickier.

Erra leaves the table for a few minutes and returns with platters of bread and shredded tender meat. My stomach growls in appreciation when the first delicious whiff of the meat hits me. That earns me a grin from all my table companions. Hey, I can't help the fact that I have a healthy appetite. I may not be able to boil water, but I can certainly put away a meal.

No one speaks as we dig into the food. Bread gets ripped apart and chunks of meat are grabbed from the platter. There is no cutlery, no niceties; it's like eating with a bunch of barbarians, and I love it. I don't feel pressured to pick a dainty portion that I cut into even tinier bites in front of the men I date. Nope, I grab the food with my bare hands just as they do, and we are stuffing our gobs as quick as we can shovel it in. Erra seems, in fact, to be consuming twice as much as anyone else at the table.

When we finish, she leans back and pats her belly and smiles at me. "Have to keep up my strength. I am hard at work growing a warrior."

Orgath's eyebrows rise and he smiles. "You and your mate are expecting?"

She nods smugly. "All that fucking since we mated last year did its job."

I snicker into my mead, swallowing down the rest of the contents to wash down my meal. Part of me wonders briefly what it would be like to be "busy" growing a little orc for Orgath. I freeze at the thought. Where did that come from? I look up and find him watching him with a strange light in his eyes.

The moment is broken when he shakes his head. "Come, Sammi. The daylight won't last long, and we need to get to the market and return home before we lose the light."

With a nod, I stand and brush the lingering crumbs from my hands.

Orgath says a final farewell to his friends before we head back out into the sunshine in the direction of the noises and smells coming from the market.

An orc farmer's market. Imagine.

## Chapter 7

### *Sammi*

The market is a cacophony of sounds and smells, some of them incredibly unpleasant. Seriously, some of these boys need to learn the meaning of soap!

I try not to wrinkle my nose as we pass by an ash-gray male wearing a stained apron. His hair hangs in stringy dark locks around his face and from the grease and heavy stink surrounding him I'm certain he hasn't bathed in weeks. That isn't even taking into account the careless smear of gore on him from the butchering he's hard at work doing in that very moment. I hold my breath as we pass, grateful that Orgath isn't stopping there for any provisions. I'm just glad to see I am not the only one giving him a wide berth; several orcs seem to be intentionally circling wide away from the butcher.

There are, however, many interesting things. Strange spices and teas are traded back and forth. I see a few elves hocking what look like enchanted wares. The elves are so pretty that I can't help but stare. It's like running into a male supermodel on the street—you can't help but stop and appreciate.

The elves are nearly colorless with their alabaster flesh and long white hair. They are fine-boned, yet they are not as dainty as I would have assumed an elf to be. They are almost as broad as the orcs looking over their goods, yet unlike the massive sturdy frame of the locals, they carry the muscle in a graceful, almost feline way. Even their eyes seem to have a gemstone quality to them.

I almost stop breathing in fascination when an emerald set of eyes catches sight of me, and the male issues an inviting smile. That smile edges with a feral, predatory gleam and I suddenly understand why humans treated fae-folk with so much caution in our legends. Orgath growls deep in his chest, seeming to take exception either to my appreciation or the

elf's open observation. The other male doesn't seem to take it personally. With an impish grin, he turns his attention back to his customers.

"Fucking elves," I hear him mutter under his breath and I pinch my lips together to keep from laughing.

"That is a lot of hostility toward the pretty boys," I whisper just loud enough for him to hear me.

I don't think he hears me, but then I see his lips twitch and know he did. For a minute, it feels good that I managed to lighten his mood just a little. He doesn't say anything but stays on course through the labyrinth of the market, and it's all I can do to stay by his side. I sure as hell don't want to get separated from Orgath in here and wind up lost.

I watch Orgath, a small smile playing on my lips at the way he moves with an aura of authority through the market. He doesn't appear to notice that orcs yield and make way for him when he approaches, or that the tradesmen leap to attention to entice him with their goods. I hold back a chuckle when a particularly brave dwarf practically steps in front of him to shove a tray of enchanted gems beneath his nose. Orgath scowls fiercely, enough to make any human piss themselves, but does nothing more than politely shake his head and continue on his way.

To my surprise, the first stop is a clothier. There are all kinds of jewelry and accessories too, but the wealth of cloth clothing after wearing animal hides is a nice surprise. Orgath leads me over to some long tunics and digs through them. He immediately pulls out a blue one, shakes it out, and scrutinizes it before handing it to me.

Is he buying me clothes? I'm touched. I don't think I've ever had a guy willingly take me clothes shopping before. A broad bluish orc with heavy bosom and a thick torso hovers nearby, an eager smile on her face. Like Erra, she has small, understated tusks, but unlike the other female, she has a thick and matronly figure. Like all of the orcs, she has the familiar clan tattoos trailing down her face and neck, but her septum

ring is ornate, set with lovely stones. Ah, the merchant, I decide.

I hold the tunic up against me and grin. It's clearly made for an orc. What would probably be a modest fitted tunic on an orc will probably fit me like a knee-length dress. Orgath promptly hands me five others in different colors and I hold my precious treasures close to my breast, giddy with the thought of getting out of the sweaty leather and into something more comfortable. The proprietress is looking happier with each selection too.

Orgath grunts and finally turns his attention on our hovering shadow. "We also need spare boots and slippers for my wife, and any other items that may be essential. She lost most of her belongings recently."

The female makes a small noise of sympathy, but I can see her eyes gleam as she calculates just what all she thinks I will need. I feel my lips quirking and am grateful for the deep shadows of my hood as she scrutinizes me with a quick full-body glance.

"Your wife is quite small. Half-orc, I assume?" She makes a small noise when he grunts in agreement. "I think perhaps something in my children's footwear will fit her."

"My thanks, Gidra," Orgath says, completely unconcerned with the veritable free rein he has given her. My eyebrows arch. I can imagine that this is going to get expensive for him—and fast. Orgath must have some hidden font of wealth I did not notice in his humble cottage.

True to his instruction, Gidra begins to pile up a mountain of goods, more than I would have ever thought necessary. Among them I see leather supportive bands which I assume is supposed to be something like a bra. Thank the gods, because my girls miss having some sort of support. She adds loose drawstring breeches to the pile, also from the children's goods, soft slippers and boots, and a blood-red fur-lined cloak, not that I see anything wrong with the gray spare

that Orgath gave me. I open my mouth to object but Orgath just gives me a stern look, so I shut it just as quick.

“That too,” he says nodding to a set of jewelry. Gold earrings lay with an ornate septum ring and a thick gold cuff set with icy-blue stones. I shake my head, because that’s really way too much and I don’t have the appropriate piercing anyway, but he ignores me as he pulls out a heavy pouch and hands over several gold coins and a few silver pieces. Real honest-to-gods gold coins. Like pirate’s booty gold coins.

“Thirty-three gold pieces and five silver,” the merchant says without even looking up from her task as she packages all of my new belongings.

Orgath fishes out the necessary coins, returning the rest to his pouch before setting the coins on her table. Lightning quick, she pockets the money without even breaking stride. I am duly impressed at that level of mercantile skill.

As we wait for her to finish, two children dart out from behind a curtained area. A pale-gray girl, probably no older than seven, chases after a slightly older greenish-gray boy. He has what appears to be a rag doll in his hands that they’re squabbling about. Seems some things are universal when it comes to children.

Unlike adult orcs, they don’t appear to have any tusks, but the juvenile teeth, which I get a clear view of as the girl starts to wail, are longer and more pointed than the teeth of human children. I guess they don’t get tusks until they get their adult teeth. With or without tusks, they’re adorable.

Gidra sighs impatiently and snatches the doll from the troublemaker, handing it back to the little girl who’s still sniffing as she hugs her cloth doll close to her.

“Fensi, I swear if you don’t leave Bouka alone, I will send you out to hunt with your father next time,” she hisses. “Both of you, back inside,” she says as she shoos them back beyond the curtain. Given the clatter that follows, I’m assuming they live behind the shop.



I almost miss it when Orgath picks up the bundle and bids Gidra good day. Hurriedly, I give a small nod to convey my thanks and follow after him. When I emerge from the shop, I see that Orgath had turned to wait for me to catch up before we head off again into the market.

The rest of our time in the market passes in a flash. Orgath goes to a few stalls to get what looks like salt, flour, and other dry staples before we return to collect Ethiel. For his part, the giant feline didn't seem to have missed us at all. He'd found a comfortable spot under a sunbeam and obviously spent the day napping.

"Come, Ethiel," Orgath says as he grabs the padded saddle and blanket. The feline flicks a lazy ear at Orgath but doesn't otherwise move. He scowls and tries again. "Ethiel." The delfass yawns, showing off a mouthful of sharp knife-like teeth, but begrudgingly gets to his feet and walks over, his tail twitching lazily.

"Stubborn beast," Orgath mutters as he straps the saddle and packages onto Ethiel, but I don't miss the fond smile he gives him as he briefly rubs behind an ear. Ethiel rumbles a pleased purr just before Orgath launches into the saddle and yanks me into his lap once more. My nerves leap to life once again, and I try to ignore the curious warmth I feel coiling inside me.

Is it weird that I'm responding sexually to an orc? He doesn't even look anything near human. Since I'm so different from female orcs too, I'm probably just as strange to him. Despite the conversation in the tavern, I doubt an orc male would ever really desire a small human.

There's no way he feels this strange attraction I do.

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*Orgath*

The ride home is almost as torturous as the trip to the market, but now it is fueled with a strange, unbidden instinct to seize her and make her my own. That still rages through my blood in such a discomfoting impulse despite how much I try to ignore it, and it seems to be progressively worsening. Yet now having seen her wander among my clansfolk, there is a new compulsion that is just as unfamiliar. A strange warmth that is settling around my heart. Not that there aren't plenty who would say I have no heart, an image I don't mind cultivating.

As we arrive back at the cottage, for the first time I look at it critically and wonder how Sammi sees it, especially after seeing the common dwellings in the village. I built this cottage, stone by stone, with my own hands, but now I wonder if it is comfortable enough to keep a female in. My mother would not recognize the sort of abode I am choosing to live in—not after the fine craftsmanship of the chieftain's lodge.

Would Sammi prefer to find a place within the village? I do not know why I care for the wants of my human pet; it is foolishness. It is probably the same reason why I impulsively bought the marital jewels for her. In truth, I know that, despite my intentions, she is not a pet to me. For all her temper and her stubborn, mischievous nature, I enjoy this female and want to keep her with me as something more than a pet.

Do I dare admit—even to myself—that I want her as my wife? I have only known her a few days, but this connection between us is not something either of us will be able to ignore for long. I can already scent the arousal coming from her skin. I know she is not unaffected.

I also know that compared to the fair elven folk in the village, and even among many of the orcs, that as scarred as I am, I am not one who would appeal to a soft female. I am large and as hard as stone, in more ways than one. How a small female can look at me and not be fearful or intimidated, I do not know. However, this does not reduce my desire for her

even a little. Desire that kindled the first time she cursed at me, with her eyes flashing and her jaw thrust out in stubborn defiance.

Once Ethiel is cared for and turned loose, we go inside. Sammi says nothing but silently helps me unpack our bundles from the market. She is contemplative but doesn't speak her thoughts to me. I clean out a trunk in which she can store her belongings and receive a sweet smile in exchange for it. The jewels I set aside in a small box until the day that I may need it, if it ever comes.

It was presumptive to buy them before I even know if she will accept being bonded as wife to an orc. Still, they are a symbol of something... of hope, I suppose.

The waning light forces me to light the lamps as well as the hearth fire, and I close the shutters on the windows because I can smell rain on the air. Damp air doesn't bother me, but I don't want her becoming sick.

I settle back into the fur and cushion in the common room and pick up a book just as I hear the crash of thunder. I don't read more than a few sentences before I glance up at Sammi, taking her in. She sits staring at the fire, tracing invisible patterns with her finger on the stone floor. I hold in a frustrated snarl. She can't help being bored. There isn't much to do in the evening. Most orcs would pass their evenings under the furs with their mates, and I am uncertain if she would appreciate such an advance, even to alleviate her boredom. My cock, though, is very much interested in that idea.

She casts a longing look however, not at my cock, but at my book, and I know then that I am not the only one frustrated. I have many books, a room full of them since I have loved the written word since my youth. At one time, I'd considered being a lore-keeper like Erra's father before my world fell apart. Yet Sammi cannot make use of a single volume. Her talisman allows her to know my language but only the spoken word. She can't read even a bit of it. Would

she even want to learn? It is not like she had a choice in being stranded in Ov’Gorg.

Well, there is no way of knowing without asking.

“Sammi, would you...” I clear my throat awkwardly, “would you like for me to teach you to read?”

As if I spoke the words of some enchantment, her face immediately lights up.

“Really? You’ll teach me? Right now?”

I bare my tusks in a broad smile. “Yes, it will be a good way to pass our evenings. Come, join me over here and I will see if I have any books buried somewhere for children for you to begin with.”

It turns out that I do, in fact, have a whole box of books from my familial home that is full of children’s books, many of them orcish tales that will help her learn a bit of the customs and culture into which she must now blend. We pass the rest of the evening by the fire, shoulder to shoulder, going over the words. She is a quick learner, my Sammi.

## Chapter 8

*Sammi*

The days pass with a sort of oddly comfortable routine. Since we'd established that I can't cook, Orgath has been doing most of the cooking. Still, I'm always nearby, because he's determined to teach me. Even though I tell him I'm a lost cause, he's good at selectively ignoring my objections.

Since we're both hard-headed individuals, we often butt heads over the stupidest thing. Our days consist of household chores, which, so far, I pretty much hate all of them because I suck so badly at doing everything. It doesn't deter him from making me learn, however, which is the root of many of our "discussions."

This morning, he seems determined that I learn how to milk a goat. Ha... yeah... no. Grabbing ahold of some sensitive bits aside, this creature looks like the malevolent spawn of some denizen of hell. I mean, it *is* a goat, but the way it's looking at me makes me leery.

"I'm not reaching my hands under there. That goat hates me."

"Don't be ridiculous. She doesn't hate you. She is just a goat."

"There's no just about it—I am not putting myself within biting distance of that thing. Look at the way she's looking at me! Like she wants to take a huge bite out of my—"

"Enough!" he growls. "Put your hands down here... *now*."

I give the goat a dirty look and stick my hands down beside his. I can't believe I'm doing this. *Yuck*. I never had any dreams of being a farmer. Apparently, it wasn't high on Orgath's list either, because he didn't have a goat until two days ago when he went to trade and came home with one.

Even as I bitch to myself about how gross it feels to have my hand on a goat's tit, I shiver a little when Orgath's giant hands enclose mine. I've been having some pretty intensely naughty dreams starring my orc, and it just makes me all the more aware of him every time he comes close to me. Down, girl! His hands put pressure on mine as he tells me exactly the way to compress the teat to draw milk from it. I'm both appalled and fascinated as piss-warm milk jets out into the bucket.

It can't be that easy. I narrow my eyes suspiciously at the goat, but she has turned her head away from me and is innocently munching on a bit of hard straw. As if I'm going to fall for that. Still, it doesn't seem like she's going to kick over the bucket, so I continue to express the milk even after Orgath withdraws his hands with an approving rumble. I have to admit that sound makes learning to do chores at least a little worthwhile.

"See, you have it. Well done," he praises.

"Yeah, I suppose," I agree reluctantly. Still, I make a silent promise to myself to keep a close eye on the demon goat if this is going to be a regular chore for me around here.

Soon enough, the pail is full, and Orgath explains the process of making cheese as we haul the milk back inside. Between me and the stone floor, it sounds revolting, especially without refrigeration. Not that humans haven't been eating cheese for centuries before refrigeration was devised, but the thought still makes my stomach wobble like a squirrel drunk on moonshine.

But the cheese-making lesson gets put on hold due to the surprising fact that we have company. Orgath is *not* happy about the company either. He pulls me to the far side of the room, putting as much distance between me and the stranger as possible, before placing himself mid-room between us. The stranger chuckles darkly, but Orgath doesn't so much as twitch in response. His back is rigid with tension, so I decide to keep silent for a change.

The dude is tall—as tall as Orgath, which is saying something, because most orcs seem slightly undersized next to him. This guy also has a mass of golden-brown muscle covered in a lattice of scars, none of which reach any higher than his shoulder. The part of me that has a death wish boldly observes that a few scars might actually improve the disaster he calls a face.

“Orgath,” he drawls, though his creepy yellow-green eyes never leave me.

“Lorf, this is a surprise,” Orgath says, his frown heavily creasing his brow. “What brings you to my cottage?”

Lorf, huh? So this is the asshole who killed Orgath’s family and took over? What a swell guy. With the way he curls his lip in disgust as he looks around our home, he looks like one in a million—the one you want to slap and give back. Our home may not be much, but it’s ours and I love every bit of it, from the broken stone by the doorway to the uneven flooring in the bedroom and the slightly leaning hearth in the common room. He isn’t allowed to look at our home like it’s beneath him to even be there. He’s more than welcome to leave.

Those words are on the tip of my tongue, but some sense of self-preservation picked that moment to intervene. Or maybe it’s one of the familial gods or blessed ancestors deigning to save my ass once more.

The chieftain offers a thin smile, his eyes narrowed in a predatory manner. Orgath doesn’t so much as flinch a muscle. If it weren’t for the slight concern I can detect in his posture, I would have taken him to almost look bored.

“I heard gossip around the village that you have taken a wife and I just had to come and meet your little female. A new clan-member is always of interest, wouldn’t you say? Word travels that she is a mixed-breed, but she certainly doesn’t appear to bear even the slightest hint of orc. So, what, then, is your wife, Orgath?”

“She is as I say,” is all Orgath replies, his expression unyielding.

Lorf purses his lips. “I don’t see any signs of mating on her, and it is common knowledge that you did not have a wedding feast, yet you are passing her off as your wife.” His nostrils expand as he inhales deeply, which I find terribly offensive that this moment. “She doesn’t smell of you either. What secrets are you keeping?”

“I do believe that is a human, chieftain,” says an oily voice from the corner nearest the door where he’d gone unnoticed up until now. A guy, smaller than your average orc, leans there against the wall, his eyes gleaming like those of a cat in the dark. He smirks at me and I immediately dislike him. His hide looks softer than any orc I have seen, even among females, and is unmarred with scars. Even his hair is carefully oiled into lank braids. I sure as hell hope he doesn’t touch me. It will take forever to get out the grease stains if he does.

The chieftain tilts his head and looks at me with crafty interest.

“A human, hmm. I don’t believe our folk have seen a human in generations. How did you end up with a human, Orgath?”

I can see that Orgath is subtly grinding his teeth but manages still to hold onto his temper.

“I found her alone in the mountains, Ov’Ge-side. I rescued her and brought her home with me.”

The chieftain seems momentarily distracted as he plays with a large medallion hanging around his neck, but it is a ruse. “Surely you do not think that you are worthy enough of an orc to keep for yourself such a rarity?”

Orgath shows the first sign of hostility. His long ears snap close against his skull and he growls threateningly, enough so that the chieftain’s escort pops up, warily fastening his eyes on him. “It matters not what any orc thinks. I saved her. She chooses to be safe in my keeping. It matters naught to



anyone else. Anyone who attempts to forcibly remove her from my house against her will shall face not only my anger, but the anger of the orc females.”

Lorf scowls but retreats. “Perhaps. But things, as you know, change.” He then leans forward and say something low enough that I cannot hear it from my place at the other side of the room. Whatever it is, it is enough to make Orgath’s cloud over with anger. Lorf gives me a final lingering look and chuckles before moving out the door, followed by his lap-dog of an orc.

I look over at Orgath. “What was that he said?”

Orgath clenches his jaw and shakes his head. “It is nothing to be concerned about,” he grits out. He inhales deeply and blows out a long breath. “Come, let us prepare our evening meal, Sammi.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, but I do not believe him. Not for one second. That Lorf guy had a look of glee on his face before he left, and Orgath looks like he wants to kill something or someone. Whatever Lorf said, it couldn’t have been good.

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### *Orgath*

That disgraced so-called chieftain of our clan dared to challenge me in my own home. I cannot get over the insult. My home may be humble, but it is mine. And it is Sammi’s home too now. To even suggest that he could get away with stealing my female out from under me and violate the sanctity of our home infuriates me. That he knows loopholes to get around the orc females is beyond galling. His last words linger in my brain.

“She is not your wife. How far do you think your protection will extend? Do you think that the females will not be soothed by this fact? It will take so little effort in the end to seize her at the opportune moment. Think on that, Exiled One.”

I gnash my teeth but try to keep my worry to myself. Sammi is staring after me in concern but I do not wish to worry her. Nor is it worth breaking a tusk over. If Lorf comes for her, I will have to be prepared. I think to the bits of claws, bones and gems I have begun over the last couple nights to string together. One thing may solve itself soon, if Sammi accepts the gift.

For once, Sammi doesn't argue. She follows me to the cupboards where I pulled out the dried meat from my hunt and she digs through bags of tubers to find vegetables for our stew. There is a loaf of bread with fresh butter. The butter is from the village, but the bread is Sammi's accomplishment.

I smile to myself as I look upon the bread and remember her face flushed with pleasure this morning when she pulled it, unburnt, from the oven. Her first successful loaf. She celebrated for an hour, and I could not help but laugh.

I will not lose my female. It had been a long time since I've had a reason to laugh before she came into my life. She brings me joy and holds my heart like none other. She looks at me and sees more than an intimidating pile of muscle or large tusks that appeal to females of my kind for their greater size bespeaking of virility and power. Sammi doesn't notice these things. She looks beyond the surface, which is perhaps a good thing since she is accustomed to human men.

We prepare our stew and we play a game of bone dice as it cooks because she enjoys it. She has an unerring luck for games of chance. It is fortunate that we are not wagering else she would likely soon own all my wealth, not that I won't lay it all at her feet anyway. As she wins another throw, her hands shoot up in the air in victory.

“Won again, orc. Maybe we should make this a bit more interesting.”

I frown in confusion and some of my feeling must be apparent on my face because she chuckles in delight.

“Maybe we can make a friendly wager on the next toss?” she says, her grin mischievous.

I raise an eyebrow at her. “I have plenty to wager with, but I seem to recall that I pulled you out of the snow without anything more on you than the clothes on your back.”

She sticks her delightful small pink tongue out at me.

“Perhaps,” I say after a moment, “you can wager something only you possess.”

Now she raises a slender eyebrow but her lips twitch with humor. “And what did you have in mind?”

I make pretense of thinking of it. “A kiss?”

She looks surprised for a moment and I almost retract the request before a grin appears on her face. “Are you sure that I won’t just throw the game so I can give you such a reward?”

I find myself smiling, pleased with her flirtatious manner, and my eyes become hooded with interest. “I would find that quite acceptable if you do, delfass-ki,” I murmur huskily.

She licks her lips and leans forward, her round breasts pushing against her tunic, making my cock stiffen from its regular half-hardened state in her presence.

“Your roll,” she whispers through those perfect plump lips.

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*Sammi*

My pulse pounds. Holy hell, is this really going to happen? Orgath's heavy-lidded yellow eyes perk up with desire as he looks at me as if he could leisurely consume every part of me, and gods help me, I want to be consumed.

Who cares if he's not human? I've never felt the same attraction to any human man as I do toward Orgath.

His large fist closes around the dice and my pulse leaps with interest as I imagine that large long-fingered hand gripping me. A surge of lust has my panties dampening from the wet heat that shoots through my core. I can barely keep my attention on the dice as they roll on the floor between us. I blink at them and hastily add them in my head. He rolled twenty-seven.

"Your roll," he rumbles and hands me the smooth bone pieces.

I give the dice a vigorous shake and for once pray that I lose. My hands release them and they clatter on the floor, spinning and falling edge over edge. He begins to laugh, and I understand quickly the source of his humor. Each die displays a single dot. I rolled a perfect six points and nothing more.

I flush and lean forward, uncertain how to go about this, but he takes control, much to my eternal thanks. Thank the gods for take-charge orcs. He draws me flush against his chest and I can feel his massive erection pushing against my belly when his surprisingly soft lips descend to capture mine.

Who knew that a male who is hard and tough everywhere would have the softest, plumpest lips I'd ever kissed? The tusks didn't even get in the way, rather they were nothing more than a gentle pressure as we explored each other's mouths.

His thick fingers begin to rub over my ass, gripping and squeezing the flesh, sometimes sharp enough to make me jerk, my cunt rubbing against his cock through the fabric of our

clothes. We both groan at the contact and our kiss deepens with more fervor.

Suddenly, he releases my mouth and his lips trail a plundering course down my neck, intersecting long licks and caressing kisses and playful stinging nips that make me squirm and wiggle against him. He hasn't touched me in any kind of sexual ways since he examined my nudity that first day, and my body has remembered those touches well—and missed them. Now every nerve is straining eager for his touch, and I find myself over-sensitive and shivering under his every caress.

He stops in his amorous pursuit just long enough to pull my tunic over my head and toss it into the corner of the room, followed by the leather band that binds my breasts. His mouth greedily attacks my breasts the moment they are exposed to the air. His mouth sucks deeply on one nipple while his fingers ruthlessly and firmly pluck at my other nipple. Every tug on my breasts shoots down to my pussy, and my body is crying out to be fulfilled. It screams for something more. Something thick and hard to be pushed inside of my weeping cunt.

“Orgath, I can't wait. This is killing me. Please, give me your cock.”

His head lifts and his eyes are like fire as he stares down at me, the passion held within threatening to burn me. I want to burn in him. His large hand grips my thigh and he suddenly lifts my rear high into the air, the other hand striking the flesh of my ass with sharp cracks that dance on the edge between pleasure and pain. My pussy gushes and I cry out, startled.

“You do not give me orders, female. I will give it to you only when I am ready to do so.”

In the next breath he is between my legs, his mouth attacking my nether lips with such shocking enthusiasm that I nearly come up off the floor. I've never had a lover eat pussy with such enthusiasm. His tongue pushes into my folds, alternately stroking and pushing inside my channel, pausing

only so that his lips can greedily suck on my clit and the labia with relentless tugs.

Every now and then, a curved tusk brushes my inner thigh, or the sensitive tissue of my pussy, and it pushes me up just that higher. I am spiraling out of control in a haze of need. When I finally go over the edge, it's a freefall from such heights that all I can do is let go and scream out my pleasure.

It is in the midst of the scream, with my cunt clenching frustratingly on empty air, that Orgath frees his thick member and pushes it within me just enough to give me something to clench onto, and my body quivers anew with another orgasm. With a few thrusts, he is lodged deep within me and I can feel him everywhere. In my body, in my heart—hell, I feel him in my very soul. He stills, gasping for air, his eyes wide with surprise, but then he begins to move inside my tight sheath, gently at first but then riding at a stronger tempo. His fingers dig into my hips and he lifts me just enough to change the angle so he can thrust deeper into me.

I am panting and whimpering but his grunts are loud around me. He grunts with each thrust and growls deep with pleasure in a continuous rumble. The thick veins of his cock massage the walls of my pussy so deliciously and he fills me up so much that I don't think we will ever be able to come apart.

I try to grip him harder to me to encourage him, but he snatches both of my hands in one of his large fists and holds them above my head. But ultimately, he gives me exactly what I want—what I crave. He pounds into me savagely, his cock thickening. I feel a flutter deep within me, and then another building up to crescendo, my cunt spasming around him viciously. I tilt my head back and scream once more as a powerful orgasm completely undoes me. I can barely hear his deep roar and feel the hot spurts of his cum within me.

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## *Orgath*

My seed spurts out of me and doesn't stop for many minutes. It fills her channel and begins to seep between us long before my cock ceases to spew its fluids. She doesn't shirk from my roar, but her lusty scream serves as an answer to it, our souls merging.

The bloodbond is a fragile bond. Our essences are merging, only waiting to be strengthened as we continue to come together. I will need to finish the gift as is proper and present it to her soon.

Her body becomes boneless beneath me and I sweep her against my chest as I roll on to the floor beside her. A pang of guilt assaults me for not making certain that we were not at least over the comfortable cushion and furs. I never wanted our first time to be on cold stone, but she doesn't object. Instead, she stretches and nestles into me, her reddish-blond curls hanging in tangles around her head. She drifts off to sleep almost instantly, and I gently pick her up and carry her to our room where I lay her on the thick mattress and furs.

Silently, as not to wake her, I gather the small basket I had hidden within a trunk and retreat to the common room and sit before the fire. I carefully untangle the thin gold wire and lay my supplies out before me: gleaming polished claws, gemstones, and beautifully fine bones from my greatest trophies of the hunt. With the fire warming me, I sit there for hours assembling the gift.

Now I have no doubt she will accept me.

## Chapter 9

*Sammi*

I slowly stretch, feeling languid pleasure at the pull of muscle. Four leisurely days of making love since Lorf showed his face and my body is feeling it. It's a comforting ache of pleasure, the kind that only a well-sexed body can know. In fact, I wouldn't mind at this moment rolling over and doing it again except a heavy arm is stretched across my abdomen, the gray skin a patchwork of scars running its length. This arm speaks to me of all that he's survived. Battles won and lost.

It's not the arm of a man who leads a life of leisure.

I gently trail a finger over the longest of the scars as Orgath snores in my ear, the dense muscles of his chest pressing into my back. But that's nowhere near as distracting as the thick length resting against the crease of my ass. I make a small noise in the back of my throat and shift my hips subtly, enjoying the feel of his flesh against mine.

The band of his arm suddenly tightens around me and he growls low, his pelvis pushing up behind me aggressively. That's something I can appreciate in Orgath that I'd never found in the men of my previous relationships—his hunger and dominance. It appeals to me on a primal level, the part of me who likes a rough fuck. He gives that and then some while still managing to be considerate and thoughtful outside of our furs, which is rare.

A soft tongue drags slowly up my neck and I shiver despite the heat of his breath on my skin. His large palm also begins to wander, unhurried in its path to caress my breast before heading south to the flesh of my belly. His hand dips between my thighs in a long, teasing caress as he captures my mouth with his, plundering my lips as his fingers toy with my pussy with such brutal efficiency that it brings me to a sharp orgasm.



Satisfied with himself, he pulls his hand back and flashes his tusks in a wide grin. The hand that just moments ago was busy bringing me pleasure slaps my ass with a muffled crack, sending my pelvis arching forward as he chuckles.

“Good rising, my heart,” he says, tossing his braids over his shoulder as he throws his feet off the side of the bed. Ooo, we’re doing love names now. Noted. I watch in rapt fascination as he stands, his half-mast erection swollen against his thigh and the mass of his muscles rippling with a long stretch. He catches me ogling and winks before coming over to haul me out of our bed.

I return his smile playfully, making no effort to hide my eager perusal of his body. I squeak when he pulls me up against his chest, my feet hitting the ground. I’m treated to another long kiss before he gives me the opportunity to breathe again.

“Good morning,” I reply, my voice still husky with sleep. I yawn and rub at an eye, my body still coming to terms with the concept of waking up without its regular dose of caffeine. If there were any way for me to go back home for even a single day—hell, I’ll take an hour in a pinch—the first thing I’d do is completely clean out the coffee aisle of the first major grocery store I see to bring back and store in our little cellar. I don’t understand how my grumpy orc is such a morning person—well, as much of a morning person as he can be, since his disposition isn’t any *worse* in the morning.

Orgath chuckles. “Still struggling, I see. I can make you some tea if you like?”

I wrinkle my nose. The strange herbal blend of leaves that the orcs seem to relish takes some getting used to. It’s nearly as bitter as coffee with an odd tang that nothing I’ve found as of yet fixes. Although, unlike herbal blends from home, the orc tea does kick like a mule after your second cup.

“Yeah, tea sounds good. I just wish you had something even a little like coffee. How is it that your entire realm has tea

but does not have something as life-giving as coffee?” I moan.

Orgath raises an eyebrow and shakes his head in amusement. He doesn't understand my love affair with coffee, but he's never tasted its dark elixir either. One cup and I know my orc would be hooked.

“Isn't there any way at all you can smuggle me over the border for, like, an hour for supplies? I know you said it's something that can't be done, but one hour in a grocery store for a few necessities and I'd be set for the year, I swear.”

A sound between a tsk and a growl comes from him, but his eyes crinkle with laughter. “Female, do you not think if it were so easy that I would not have returned you home as you asked when you threatened me with bodily harm and attempted to maim me every time I turned around?”

Really, a couple of accidents and he turns it into an assault charge. Hmph. Still, I can't help but enjoy his playful mood.

Orgath leans forward and gives me a gentle nip on the neck before he turns and heads out of the room. I find myself staring after him with what must be the dopiest smile on my face. With a slight bounce in my step, I follow after him into the main room where he's setting a kettle over a freshly stoked fire. Humming some eerie tune under his breath as he works, he shakes out a handful of leaves into the teapot that he has on the floor by the hearth. He then goes about his business, first opening the shutters and gathering together a pair of cups and searching the cupboard for our simple morning meal.

When our morning meal is prepared, I sit on the thick cushions and furs with him in front of our hearth, enjoying the sun streaming through the windows. The air is brisk but here's a secret about orcs: they're basically like living space heaters. Cuddled up next to him on our little “loveseat” keeps me more than plenty warm enough.

I take a long swig of tea. “What's on the agenda for today?”

Orgath looks thoughtful. “The garden needs weeding so that we can begin planting in a few days. There are also some minor repairs to the cottage that I need to make now that the worst of the bad weather is over.”

That’s why, several hours later, I find myself in the garden, dirt crusted under my nails and gawking like a virgin at the sight of a shirtless Orgath, glistening with sweat as he perches on the roof replacing a few shingles with some of the clay ones that he has stashed in the cellar. He strikes me as something of a rough woodland god with the way the warm spring sunshine is playing over his muscles.

I squint against the sun when a sudden movement in the fields east of our cottage draws my attention. Riders on white long-legged horse-like creatures are coming toward our cottage. I wave my arms up at Orgath.

“Orgath!” I shout. “Riders to the east.”

He lifts his head and looks over at the quickly approaching party, a scowl on his face as he clambers down from the roof to plant himself protectively in front of our home. His massive arms cross intimidatingly against his chest as he awaits them. Not exactly the most welcoming of postures but not one that the riders seem to pay particular attention to, given that they haven’t slowed their approach. It really must be the week for visitors.

They are almost upon us when my eyes widen. It’s a small band of elves, no more than seven, riding together toward the woods bordering our territory. They have bows slung across their backs and the leader raises his hand in greeting to Orgath. He doesn’t return the gesture but does politely incline his head toward them, which is honestly a generous show of respect for him.

Several of the elves eye me curiously.

The elf at the fore of the group, wearing a gold circlet on his brow, narrows his eyes on me for only a moment before turning his full attention to Orgath. Just as well. I don’t like

being the object of scrutiny by these beings who look at me like a butterfly on a display board. Something rare and curious, but nothing more.

“Orgath, greetings.”

“Irhindral,” Orgath acknowledges.

“I have come due to some disturbing news. As you know, your clan is our neighbor and we have been at peace for a great many years, but word has come to us that Lorf is rousing the orcs of your clan and some of your neighbors to join his cause. He seeks to bend us to his will to give him access to the human realm.

“In our passing through your territory, we have seen and heard firsthand the disruption among your clan. Many speak ill of Lorf and his vanity, yet many more agree with him on this point when it comes to the humans. Lorf refuses to meet with us. He is caught up in lording over his perceived domain and merely sends an envoy to tell us that he refuses to budge, despite our aims to resolve the situation without violence. We hoped that you, of all the orcs who hold the place of highest respect, will be more receptive but now we see that his claim bears some truth—that you have a human female in your possession. I find this turn of events disturbing news to bring to my father.”

Orgath’s frown deepens and I can make out the tension tightening his muscles. He’s wary now of these elves, and that just fuels my own caution. I drop further behind my orc’s guarded stance but continue to pay careful attention to the exchange.

“I will tell you as I told Lorf. I rescued this female from certain death in the mountains. I broke no laws, nor did I trespass near any human settlement. She lives only because I found her and returned home with her. And as I told him, I will not suffer anyone to take her from me or my house.”

“True, you have broken no laws in place, but Orgath, certainly you must see how this action has fueled dissent

among your kind. They see you with something that they want which the laws of the fae safeguard.”

Orgath snorts. “You safeguard it, but also take it upon yourselves to break it when you see fit. I am not so ignorant to not know how many humans you have in your hidden courts, or how many mixed-blood offspring your kind have bred to enrich the strength and health of your own bloodlines. Yet you hold your rules over the heads of all the others of the many realms and seek only for us to submit to them. While I find fault with Lorf’s intentions, for no good can come of his selfish desires, I do not fault those of my kind who yearn to seek human mates in search of the bloodbond.”

Irhindral bares his alarmingly sharp teeth in irritation, but he has nothing on Orgath for brawn or fierce fangs. Orgath, uncowed, merely grins, showing his own sharp teeth and baring his great tusks, which make the other elves murmur nervously among themselves.

“Is that your final word then on this matter, Orgath? Our line favors you as the more reasonable and rightful chieftain for your clan. We’d hoped for a more logical response from one such as you.”

The orc shrugs without concern. “I am sorry that I must disappoint you, Irhindral.”

“Yes, clearly,” the elf says coolly, his pale eyes narrowed on my guy.

I take personal exception to that. No one threatens my guy except me. I step out from behind the massive shadow of Orgath and plant my hands on my hips as I square off with the elves. Orgath tries to snatch me up behind him again but I maneuver out of the way. A few weeks living with him has had its benefits. I can now predict most of his moves from what few strong emotions he emotes. The look he cut me screamed “snag a Sammi” to me.

“Look here, you overbearing, toothy, sparkly ass motherfuckers, I am not going anywhere, and I do not

appreciate you coming here like this is some huge imposition. Orgath and I are happy, and we aren't hurting anyone. I am certainly not leaving him to make you guys happy, and I don't care how much Lorf whines to the other orcs about it. You want the orcs happy? Then open up communication with Ov'Ge so you can get them off your back."

"Human, I do not think you appreciate with whom you speak." The male glares down at me from his mount, his eyes narrowing further, dangerously.

"Don't know, don't give a fuck either," I declare.

"You would allow this female to speak to me this way?" Irhindral snaps with outrage.

Orgath curls his lip. "What makes you presume I have any control over anything she does?"

"Do *not* make an enemy of Sehriel court, Orgath!"

The orc shrugs, a menacing grin still in place. My guy looks fearsome as fuck. For a second, I wonder just when I decided he's my guy... oh well, it doesn't matter now. He's mine. If I could lick him and claim ownership, I would—not that it isn't a splendid idea anyway.

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### *Orgath*

I want to throttle my female for putting herself in harm's way, yet I want to fall down to my knees before her and demonstrate for her just how high my admiration and pride in her runs. Irhindral, the pompous little prince, is scowling at my female in a manner I do not like, but I know him well enough to know he won't try anything, especially not without his father's express orders.

“With all due respect,” I say, meaning none at all, “times are changing. Sammi and I have a *bond*,” I stress. “It is time that the fae make allowances and reconsider the treaties in light of this. No orc will wish outright war with the elves, but nor will we willingly be held under what we feel is an unjust yoke, regardless of Lorf’s involvement.”

I pause and say as an afterthought, “Beware of Lorf. He is motivated only by his own greed and sense of self-importance. Take the concerns of the orcs seriously is my advice but keep an eye on him in particular. Do not trust him to honor any kind of agreement or do anything that isn’t advantageous to him.”

Irhindral sits back on his mount and eyes me thoughtfully. He may be a vain little prick, but he is not stupid. I know he will take my words of caution seriously and relay them to his father. At long last, he nods and signals to his company. Their mounts turn gracefully to the side and begin their long-legged gallop back to Sehriel. Irhindral inclines his head before whipping his own mount around and following after them.

Sammi slinks over quietly beside me, her eyes wide as she watches them depart. I glance down at her, the reddish-blond curls ruffling in the breeze.

“That was very foolish, my heart.”

She looks up at me and winks. “It isn’t the first time I’ve done something foolish, but I can’t say I regret it.” She pinches her lips and looks over the considerable work still ahead of her in the garden. “Well, the entertainment is over. Guess we should get back to work.”

I grunt and inhale the distinct smell of spring rain on the air. Yes, work needs to be done before the rains move in and we are not able to do much of anything for several weeks. Sammi will appreciate a warm, dry cottage in that time more than anything else.





## Chapter 10

*Sammi*

It takes little time for Orgath to finish patching the roof, but it's evening by the time we finish with the garden. It probably would have been later if Orgath hadn't joined in to help me. His strong fingers and short claws are much more adept at turning up the earth whereas I struggle to yank up every weed I come across.

At long last, we look over the fresh tilled earth of the garden, perennials carefully worked around and standing as the only spots of green.

My shoulders ache and burn, as does my lower back, and I'm not even going to talk about the aches in my knees. Orgath stretches his arms over his head with a groan, likely working his own kinks out from being hunched over for hours. He finishes with a roll of his shoulders and turns an appreciative eye over the garden as his arm snakes around me, pulling me close to his side.

"I will trade for some manure from a herder I know so we can fertilize the beds and then we will be all set to plant."

Animal crap. Swell. I hope he doesn't plan on having me participate in that little job.

I push a damp lock of hair out of my face as I struggle to catch my breath. Damn, I'm out of shape. Too many years doing little exertion beyond reading and drinking lattes. If nothing else, my time with Orgath is giving me a workout in more ways than one.

"You know, if I told any of the D&D freaks, like my brother, that orcs actually do things like garden, farm, herd, cook, and sew, it would totally destroy your badass reputation."

Orgath gives me the side-eye, his lips quirking. "I assume badass is a compliment?"

“Yep. It’s the highest level of impressive.”

He chuckles. “What is it they expect that orcs do?”

I snort. “Come on—look at you. You’re huge, with massive, sexy muscles, which you’ll get no complaint from me about,” I add, fascinated with the way his expression becomes more of a pleased smirk. “As far as anyone is concerned, you should be out there fighting like champs, kicking enemy ass day-in and day-out. In fact, so much so that you’re often painted in something of a brutally ugly light.”

With a disgusted snort, Orgath rolls his eyes. “Sammi, orcs are naturally superior warriors, we are hardly pretty like the fairer races, and we do spend much time warring on campaigns of one sort or another as guards and protectors, but it is absurd if anyone thinks that is all that we do. Orcs enjoy peaceful life in our clan more than anything. Give an orc good earth and he will be content all of his days.”

I whistle low. “You’re going to make fanboys cry if you say things like that anywhere near them.”

Orgath laughs, the lovely deep sound rumbling from his chest. “You say the strangest things, female.”

I brush my hands off and grin at him. “So, what now? Flogging enemies? Torturing small critters? Terrorizing the neighbors?”

“We are going to check the traps,” he states.

“Right. Torturing small critters it is, then.”

Orgath huffs in amusement as he headed over to the cellar to grab a small thickly woven bag.

“Stay inside while I am gone and keep the door bolted. I shouldn’t be gone long. Unless you want to go with me?”

I consider my options. Go look for furry animal bodies or stay home by myself?

“Hard pass. I’d rather stay right here, thanks. If you can help me draw in some water before you leave, I’ll pull out the

tub and soak for a bit while you're gone.”

He smiles indulgently and tucks the bag into the waistband of his pants before going off to hunt out the water buckets.

In no time, I'm alone in the cottage with six buckets of water by the hearth, which I'm carefully pouring into the giant pot over the fire. All is silent except for the crackle of the fire and my off-key voice belting out the words to “Bad Reputation.” A song I've been singing repeatedly for the last twenty minutes because for some strange reason I have it stuck in my head.

Once the water is heated to a comfortable temperature, I empty the contents into the large orc-sized tub and climb in with a sigh of satisfaction. I scrub my skin and hair briskly and then lean back to sink into the hot water. This large tub is absolutely divine.

At home, it always seems like I have to bend myself into a pretzel to partially submerge in my bathtub, and it never entirely covered the generous mounds of my breasts, which were always doomed to be cold unless I rolled over and allowed my ass to cool instead. Bath time always ends up being an awkward shuffle from one side to the other without accidentally emptying a quarter of the water from the tub. Something entirely unnecessary in this oversized tub. I suspect even Orgath could fully submerge in this thing.

My jaw cracks with a yawn as the door thumps open. Heavy footsteps pace over. I open my eyes to look up at the large orc glaring down at me, his nostrils flaring.

“Didn't I tell you to bolt the door?”

I splash water at him, ignoring the irritated gleam in his eyes. “Well, yes, you did. And I would have, except I forgot to do it before getting into the tub—and that's terribly inconvenient. The living room would've been soaked.” I finish by flashing him my most charming smile.

“I don’t care if it takes flooding the floor—you will never leave the door unbolted again. It is not safe. Do a stunt like that again and not only will I redden your hide, but I will make sure you pass the rest of the month checking traps with me.”

I shudder. That’s enough to convince me.

“All right, I am sorry. You’re right. I should have thought of that. So, did you get anything?” I asked, determined to change the subject away from my inability to listen to simple instructions. I stand up, his eyes riveted to the water sluicing off my body as I step out of the rapidly cooling water and begin to dry myself with a thick cloth.

Breaking his attention away from the pass of the towel down my body, he grunts in affirmation, ever my conversationalist, and plods over to the fire with the bag. He pulls out something fluffy, about the size of a large rabbit. My eyes widen in horror as he sets to work stripping off the soft fur.

“Wait, we’re eating that adorable fluffy thing?!”

He pauses in his work and his brow furrows in confusion.

“Yes, of course. It is a vorki. There is not much meat, but it should be filling enough for us tonight. Why wouldn’t we eat it?”

“Why? Because it’s so precious and furry... and you killed it for dinner. I can’t eat that!” I say, my voice rising in horror.

Orgath must have been gifted with the patience of a saint because he just sighs at me and goes back to work.

“You will eat it,” is all he says.

Not likely.

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## *Orgath*

Females are strange creatures. Even among orcs, they get sentimental about the most particular things. I am preparing a meal of fresh meat rather than the dried and smoked stores of the beasts I hunted Ov'Ge, and yet she is acting like I killed and am presenting her pet for her to eat.

“Vorki are not pets,” I inform her sternly. I will not have her refusing nutrition just because she has a soft heart for the beasts.

I make quick work of skinning the vorki and set the hide aside to be cured. It will make a good pair of gloves for Sammi when winter returns. With a practiced hand, I rub butter and herbs over the flesh and spit the meat over the fire. I look at the meager offerings for our evening meal and for the first time I consider getting a wood stove for Sammi. It is not an indulgence I ever felt necessary for my own comfort, but she may enjoy the greater variance in dishes that a stove could be used to cook. Erra can teach her how to make a meat pie perhaps; her meat pies are renown through the clan. It is quite probable that her skill is what encouraged Orgul to consider mating with her.

Besides, if we ever have young, she may find having a stove to be helpful. I shake my head and scold myself for thinking of such things so soon. Although even among orcs such things can happen unplanned between a brief pairing, orcs as a general rule do not breed quickly. It is unlikely that my seed would've taken root in her. Yet my heart warms at the idea of Sammi's body swelling with our young, and the images of a half-orc babe rolling around on a fur in front of the fire.

I huff at myself. I am turning sentimental too.

Ethiel pushes his way in and stretches out by the fire, his ear turned toward the sizzling food. Sammi leans into him, rubbing at his neck and jaw, making the large beast purr. For a

moment I feel jealous of the delfass. I mutter that I am stepping out for a moment and lift the tub of water easily. I carry it outside and empty it far from the cottage, where it won't make things overly muddy, before storing it in its accustomed place in the small barn where I've spent the last few days constructing a low table for this night.

The table is low, at a comfortable height for us to sit around it on cushions and furs. I take a moment to look it over with pride. It may very well be the finest thing I've made with my own hands. I'd spent hours last night alone, rubbing the wood with a rough sanding stone. There is not a scratch or rough spot that I can see anywhere along the surface. With a pleased grin, I lift the table up and set it on my shoulder to carry it back to the cottage.

Sammi's eyebrows raise when I come through the door, but her face lights up with a smile when she sees the table. She gently pushes Ethiel's head to the side so that she can climb to her feet and hover at my side as I carefully set the table in the center of the room.

“Orgath, this is just beautiful! Did you make it?”

“I did. It is a gift for you.”

“Really? You made it for me?” Her smile brightens momentarily before her face crumbles. “You're spending time out there doing this for me and I act like a shrew when you try to do something as simple as feed me. I must be the worst house guest in history.”

I chuckle. “You are not a house guest. This is your home too. In any case, I do not mind if you complain. If you were not always speaking your mind, I would think something is wrong with you or that you were sick.”

Sammi laughs, a loud and beautiful rolling sound. That is something I adore of this little human. She never attempts to restrain her laughter. She just lets it flow out of her naturally with her heart attached to it.

Taking her hand, I sit her facing the fire in our hearth.

“Stay, I will be back,” I tell her and go back to our bedroom. Everything is ours now as far as I am concerned. Our home, our room, our bed. Sammi is mine as much as I am assuredly hers. I would do anything for her.

My heart thuds in my chest as I remove the small carved box that has been passed down through my family just for this occasion. I pray and ask my father to be with me and give me strength, as he must have done the night when he gave it to my mother.

Thinking of her, my hand goes up to caress the gold pendant hanging from the hoop at my ear, my only true last memento of my mother. I pause so that I might pray to her spirit that she helps Sammi be receptive to this night. Opening the box, I set the gift on the bed of fur inside and close it once more with a final entreaty to my ancestors collectively to bestow their kindness and blessings upon us.

I return to the room with the small box and Sammi is watching me curiously. I set the box on the far end of the table away from her and remove the roasted vorki from the spit to set it on the platter. This I set on the table, along with cups of mead and thick bread, and sit down beside her.

Very carefully, I tear meat from the bones and extend the portion to her lips for the first part of the ritual. She watches me curiously, a brow arching, before parting her lips to take the food from my fingers. Her lips and tongue caress my fingertips erotically and I try not to moan from the sensation of it.

I then take up a cup of mead and raise it to her lips in the second gesture. As if we are playing a game, she smiles and leans forward to sip from it without hesitation. She may think we are playing a game, but if we are, then I am playing for the ultimate prize.

Now that she has drank from my hand, I set the cup in front of her and reach finally for the box. By offering food and drink, I have solidified my commitment to provide for her and any of our young, to cherish the bloodbond that is growing

between us day by day, but now this is the offering of my heart for her to accept or reject.

I take her small hand in mine and turn the palm over to set the box in her grasp and curl her fingers around it. She looks at it with interest and places it on the table in front of her. Her fingers lift the lid and stares down inside. Something inscrutable crosses her face but then she smiles, removing the necklace gleaming with red and green gemstones and the best claws and bones from my hunts.

A perfect collar for the most perfect mate.

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*Sammi*

Orgath has been acting strange all week, being secretive and disappearing for odd hours, and now that I see it coming together, I'm blown away by how sweet he is. It makes me feel terrible for the way I acted while he took the effort to make a nice meal for us. Not to mention that the vorki does actually taste pretty good if I can forget how cute it looked. First the table and now this gift.

At first, I'm not sure what to think of the gift. It's almost gruesome with what appears to be bones, teeth, and claws chained together with beautiful gemstones. But then I remember seeing Erra wearing something similar but nowhere near as fine in my estimation and I'm immediately touched, certain that Orgath made this for me with his own hands as well.

I beam up at him and clasp it around my neck, marveling at the gentle weight. It's not uncomfortable at all, and if I'm not mistaken, it looks like he went through pains to make sure the sharp edges were all blunted and smoothed. It *is* kind of barbaric, but still a perfect gift. I don't think I've ever had a



man go through so much effort to do something so sweet for me. I swear right there that I will never take it off.

“Orgath, it’s beautiful. Thank you!” I say as I lean in to kiss him.

Orgath’s lips part under mine and he eagerly plunders my mouth. Any shyness or hesitation he’d been exhibiting during our meal disappears like a morning fog melting under a midday sun. His arms solidly draw me against him until I am straddling his lap, our mouths meeting repeatedly with swiftly building passion.

His large fingers grip my hips hard, the claws lightly scraping my skin and suddenly he’s yanking my red tunic up and over my head with one hand as his other hand slides between us to pull open the lacings on his breeches. He seems almost feverish in his intensity. His mouth captures the soft skin of my neck in a small stinging bite before he groans low against my throat.

“Sammi, please, you must do this. Take me inside you and welcome my body within yours.”

I pause, uncertain. Orgath has never surrendered control like that to me before. It just seems so... strange. I’m still deciding how I want to go about this when his fingers dip to toy with the flesh between my legs, and his thick tongue swirls around my nipple, first my right then the left. I choke on a breath, gripping his cock hard in my hand. It is like stone encased in flesh as I guide his thick member to my slit.

I sink slowly upon him, both of us groaning in pleasure at the pressure of his cock stretching my pussy. Rocking my hips gently, I become used to his size, and it doesn’t take long before his fingers tighten to an almost bruising intensity as he lifts and drops me on his cock. It’s just shy of brutal—but oh, how I love it.

I sink my teeth into his shoulder, eliciting a deep growl, and suddenly I’m dropped back onto the table, laid out before my orc. His mouth attacks my breasts again with long licks

and deep sucking pulls as his cock rams into me. My flesh shudders with each violent thrust that my pussy swallows with relish. I can barely breathe I'm panting so hard. The micro-orgasms that began to tease me when I was riding him are now full-strength ripples sending me over the edge repeatedly. I can do nothing more than cry out Orgath's name as my pleasure claims me in its unceasing grip.

When I feel Orgath swell inside of me, I tighten like a fist around him, shooting off like a falling star when he roars loudly and his hot seed explodes within me. His hips slam against me as he pumps into me, and I writhe beneath him, my mind reduced to nothing more than instinctual responses.

All I know is that I need. I *want*.

I feel him all the way inside of me, and something deep within me responds, gathers and reaches forth and tethers to him. With the last thread of my awareness I hear his triumphant bellow and the whisper of his voice. "It is the bloodbond."

## Chapter 11

### *Orgath*

I wake with my wife in my arms and there is no better feeling than the caress of her spirit at the other end of our bloodbond as she slumbers deeply. I smile contently and draw her small body close to my chest. Our passion last night had been unquenchable. Despite her falling into exhaustion after our first bonded mating, we woke three other times over the course of the night to join our bodies and hearts, solidifying our bond deeper into our beings.

Gently, I wrap my massive hand against her small pink one and smile at how tiny it appears. She looks so sweet and delicate in her slumber, concealing well her sharp tongue and fierce spirit that I so adore. I bring her hand up and brush my lips against the back before laying it against her belly. It stays there for only a minute before she flips over to face me and her arms lands heavily, striking my jaw. I snort in surprise and watch her nose wrinkle into a small scowl before smoothing out again without waking.

There is nothing I want more than to linger in bed with her until she awakes, but there are things to do before we travel to the village for another supply run in the near future. Seeing how word has traveled among the clan and to the nearest neighboring elves, Sammi will be going without a disguise and I am nervous about this. I haven't told her yet, and I do not know if she will welcome it or be afraid.

Worse, without the clan tattoos, I am uncertain how many of my people will respect her as one of us. I may be risking everything if I take her unmarked into the village where Lorf has sewn his venom. I am tempted to just continue to keep her well-guarded within our little cottage, but Sammi and Irhindral are both correct. I can't keep her hidden here forever. Not only will I not be able to protect her when I need to travel, but eventually she will begin to suffer from the lack

of companionship from other females, even if she doesn't feel the bite of it now. I cannot do that to my wife. She needs to be able to move freely as any other wife in the clan.

These are the concerns that have me waking at this early hour. I decided last night that today I would go to retrieve the inker. This way, instead of accompanying me in a poor disguise, I will prepare for her to arrive in the village with the full dignity of her station as my wife. I cannot give her the tattoos myself, so I will need to bring the inker to my cottage. I rouse my mate, and she mumbles incoherent words in her sleep as she blinks up at me.

“Is something wrong, Orgath?” she whispers.

“Everything is fine my heart. I need to leave our home for a short time, so I need you to wake and bolt the door behind me.”

She yawns and snuggles into my chest, but she scrubs at an eye attempting to further rouse herself. “Where are you heading so early?”

“To fetch the inker from the village. We need her to give you the tattoos of the clan. It will declare to everyone that you are one of us and worthy of our protection. Ultimately, it is for your safety and would do much for my peace of mind when we must be among other orcs.”

“Hmm, sounds painful,” she mumbles, “but that's fine. A tattoo is nothing in the grand scheme of things.”

I chuckle and press a kiss to her forehead, earning a sleepy giggle. “That's the spirit, my delfass-ki.”

I slip out of bed and pull on my breeches and tunic while she stumbles out from beneath the furs and wraps a thick blanket around her shoulders. Her curls stand at odd angles away from her face, presenting me with a charming image. I gently try to smooth the wildest of curls and she gives me a sleepy smile in response.

“Once you bolt the door, go back to bed, my love,” I whisper as I press my lips along her jaw. She shivers in

reaction and I know it would be easy to tumble back into bed and enjoy the sweet arms of my wife once more. Regretfully, I pull away and she follows me out to the common room, cursing briefly when she misjudges her step and strikes the side of her foot against the edge of the wall. I wince but she doesn't complain, so I say nothing.

I lean forward and kiss her once more at the door, and she wakens enough to respond with her normal range of enthusiasm, sparking the fire of desire between us. I ruthlessly ignore the pull on the bloodbond that demands that I join with her and settle instead for hugging her close before gently setting her aside. Ethiel makes a noise of complaint as I bark a command to him but stretches by the banked fire and slinks out the door ahead of me.

It takes me little time to pull the tack from the barn and saddle Ethiel, and within minutes he is bounding through the grass heading toward the village. I am thankful that the inker lives at the edge of the village. She is an elder female who was, like her mother and the other females of her line, trained in the traditions and rituals of ceremonial inking. I recall that she has her granddaughter living with her now as her apprentice as I pull up to the humble dwelling and see a girl no more than fourteen years of age throw open the door with obvious curiosity.

The inker steps briskly behind her grandchild, spry still despite her age as orcs tend to be, and her face wrinkles with a wide smile.

“Orgath,” she croaks, “I was wondering when I'd be seeing you come to my home.” She shakes a chiding finger at me. “With a wife now I hear, it is about time you seek me out for her clan tattoos.”

I embrace my aunt in a tight hug, her hand playfully swatting me as she chuckles. “Let go of my aged bones, you great beast. We have work to do.”

With a laugh, I release her so that she may go gather her supplies.

“Your mother would be doing this herself if she were still among the living,” my aunt says as she begins to thump through various boxes as she packed her small satchel. “I know she was looking forward to this day, even though you were still a young male when she joined the ancestors. So now the privilege falls to me,” she says, packing a small metal box containing all of her needles.

“I must tell you. She is more than my wife. She is my bloodbonded.”

She pauses and raises her eyebrows at me. “You don’t say. Well, that *is* something special then. Do you have the mating jewels for her yet?”

“Yes, Aunt, but it doesn’t appear she has the necessary piercing.”

“Good, good,” she mutters. “I can do the piercing part myself. Some of the males have been going to that young fool who has set up shop in the village. Doesn’t have a lick of sense about how to do a proper piercing. Best if I do it.”

I indulge her rant with humor. Morthi is a young male from another clan who learned the arts against the wishes of his female relations, since it goes against tradition to train males in such things. My aunt prefers the old ways best and is very vocal about it; still, even she cannot fault that the young male eases the burden off her for some of the more outlandish work that males of the clan like to have done, giving her the freedom to focus on ceremonial work that is the core of our inking traditions.

“The very idea that the work should be decorative... *puh!*” she rants in disgust.

Ah, here we go.

“At least you don’t have to constantly turn clan members from your door now,” I say in a misplaced attempt to cajole her into a better temperament. I should have known better. My aunt likes to argue for the sake of it.

She thrusts a jar of ink she made from her own custom blend under my nose. “Don’t make excuses for that lot.” Her face then softens into a smile. “Never you mind now. We have your wife to see to. Let that foolishness carry on as they like. I have work to do.”

I solemnly and silently nod, thankful that she ended her tirade quicker than is her usual wont.

“Ferlia, you stay here child and keep an eye on that batch of ink. Do not let it set out too long under the sun, you hear?”

“Yes, Grandmother,” the girl says deferentially, but I do not miss the pass of affection between them.

“Very good. Well come on then, Orgath. The sun doesn’t wait for anyone.”

I chuckle and hoist my aunt onto Ethiel’s back. She gains her seating promptly and clutches her satchel tightly to her lap to keep it from jarring too much during the ride as I vault behind her. She gives Ethiel a fond pat on his head and he spins around, eager to return to Sammi.

Eager to be spoiled more is my guess.

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*Sammi*

I look at the elderly female that Orgath introduced as his aunt Emel, and she seems intent on frowning as she returns my scrutiny.

“Hmph, so this is the human the whole clan is talking about. You are a mite smaller than I’d imagined,” she says, squinting as she looks me over. I try not to be insulted by her tone since Orgath at that moment lets out a huff of amusement.

“Not every species can be a mountain of muscle,” I say offhandedly and try not to shrink back when her yellow eyes narrow at me. She may be wrinkled and old, but she moves quickly and, judging from her grip on my jaw as she studies my face, she isn’t feeble in the least. I’m starting to wonder if she is going to kill me and have Orgath toss my offending carcass off the property when she bursts out laughing.

“Oh, I like this one,” she says, wiping a tear of mirth from her eye. “No coddling female, this one. A fine female,” she rasps, baring a pair of small chipped tusks with her grin. She slaps her leg and opens the lid of the bag she carried in with her.

“Well then. There are a few things that need to be done.” She squints at me again. “Not squeamish, are you, girl?”

“I... hope not?” I say, at a loss.

She chortles. “Well now, that is an interesting answer. See here, girl, you need the clan tattoos, but you also need a piercing,” she points to her septum ring, “that way you can wear the proper jewelry of an orc female.”

I nod to convey my understanding. The septum piercing is a new one for me—Orgath hadn’t mentioned it—but I’m not opposed. In for a penny, in for a pound as the saying goes. It’s not like I’m going back to my nine-to-five in the foreseeable future. Even if that became an option, it really isn’t one for me. I don’t want to leave Orgath anymore.

“Which would you like done first?” she asks, knocking me out of my reverie.

“Uhm, maybe the septum piercing? It’ll be over with faster and then we can get on to the lengthier process. I’m not sure if I want to face a piercing after hours of tattoo work.”

“Fair enough,” she says, her eyes twinkling with mirth, and produces a long thick needle. “Orgath, get the jewels please.”

Orgath nods and heads toward our bedroom, returning with a familiar box that contains the gold jewelry set with ice-



blue stones that I recall he purchased at the market. He sets the box on the table around which we sit at Emel's elbow. She grunts her thanks and begins to swab my nose with the sort of professional care that I would expect of a human tattooist. The alcohol stings briefly, clearly different than what we use, and she holds my nose still with the pressure from one hand. I yelp when the needle punctures through the thick flesh but manage to keep from making any further sound than breathing out a hiss of air between my teeth.

She douses the septum ring in alcohol and hooks it through the hole she made as she withdraws the needle. I feel a pinch as she closes the ring and she leans back to observe her handiwork. I wiggle my nose a bit, adjusting to the unfamiliar weight. Emel's face wrinkles into an approving smile.

"Now lie back on the cushions with your head facing toward me," she instructs and sets out small jars on the table at her side.

My nose stings like a bitch, but I do as she asks without complaint. Orgath settles beside me, a small smile curving his lips around his tusks. I focus on his eyes and let out a breath.

"This is going to hurt, isn't it?"

"Yes," he says with perfect honesty.

I narrow my eyes at him briefly. "You could have lied just a little."

He shrugs, his cat-like eyes softening. "I would not lie to you, even to make things more comfortable."

A strong finger thumps me on my forehead. I wince and glare up at the merciless appendage. Emel smirks down at me.

"Look, girl, hold still now," she chides and roughly swathes the entire side of my face and neck with more of that burning liquid with the sort of efficiency that would do a nurse proud.

She takes out a wooden instrument and inserts a needle. I smell a sharp spice as she leans over me again and sets the

needle against my temple. I hear a soft singsong chant and light clap, and then I feel the sharp prick as the needle begins to jab me repeatedly, following the repeating clapping noise. It stings brutally but doesn't start really hurting until she gets down to my cheekbone.

I want to swear and cuss but suck my lower lip under my teeth and dig my fingernails into Orgath's arm, which is in convenient reach. He grunts but doesn't try to move away, as if he's trying to shoulder some of the burden of the process.

When the "tattoo gun" moves slowly down to my jaw, I barely keep myself from screaming. Orgath's eyes fill with concern, and he signals to his aunt to stop. Immediately, I can feel the skin tightening rebelliously.

"Do you need to stop for a moment to rest?"

The temptation almost makes me agree, but then I consider the way my skin is tightening and burning, and the idea of letting it sit longer and then resuming makes me want to cry.

No, better to just get on with it.

"No," I croak. "It'll just hurt more if we stop and start again. Please continue, Emel."

The female gives me a broad grin, her eyes shining with pride and, without hesitation, resumes her task as she quietly sings her strange chants under her breath. Orgath still looks worried but I try to squeeze his hand reassuringly despite the way my fingers want to dig in as the pain mounts up again.

I don't know how long I lay there, panting in agony, as she works. I'm dimly aware of the needle moving down my neck, but only when it stops, and feeling rushes into all the brutalized places she'd touched with her needle, that I can finally breathe a sigh of relief. It comes out sounding more like a painful whimper, and Orgath bathes the side of my face with a cool cloth with more of that stinging alcohol. I want to

curse him until he flings the cloth away and drags me into his arms, murmuring words of affection into my ear.

Okay, it's kind of hard staying mad at the big oaf, even if that stuff stung like acid on the fresh tattoos.

Emel's eyes sparkle at me despite the fact that she appears to be sternly looking me over, and she begins packing up her equipment again.

"There, now you look orc," she says, and then arches a whitened eyebrow. "Well, as much as a human can, anyway," she amends with a mischievous look. She smacks Orgath on the shoulder as she pushes herself to her feet. "Well, best return me. I have things to do and can't while away my day here. Who knows what that granddaughter of mine did to my ink in my absence?" she says sourly in pretense over her obvious fondness for her grandchild.

Orgath chuckles and kisses the top of my head.

"Get some rest until I return, delfass-ki," he mutters into my hair.

Yeah, that sounds good. Right now, I don't even want to move my face... not even a little.

## Chapter 12

*Sammi*

Another week and a half passes and Orgath finally agrees to go to town. I've been pointing out for days that our provisions are getting dangerously low again, but he's resisted any talk of departure with an ironclad will that is pretty darn impressive on a large orc. I know that it's mostly out of pity for my poor skin that heals so much slower than his own. Orgath doesn't want me to be uncomfortable any more than I absolutely must, even if that fights against his impulse to feed me.

In all honesty, I'm not complaining. I'm not sure I wanted to risk possible infection traipsing around the village while my tattoos were fresh and still healing. I even got out of garden duty for most of the week. Now they have a nice, healthy light scab over them, and there's no reason to delay any longer.

Orgath frowns at me with uncertainty as he adjusts the saddle on Ethiel. "I do not like taking you to the village without your clan tattoos healed."

"Pfft, they aren't even bothering me. Stop worrying."

He grips my arm in his hand so quickly that it startles me.

"It is my place to worry about you. If you became sick or hurt, it would destroy me."

My heart melts a little. Truthfully, I've been feeling a bit queasy the last few days, but it always eases off eventually so it's nothing that will interfere with a quick trip to the village. I reach up and pat him on the cheek. "Well, that's not going to happen. Besides, I have it on good authority from my ex that I'm difficult to argue with, so you might as well give in now and save yourself the trouble."

His arms slowly wrap around me, drawing me up against his big, warm chest. “Is that so?” his chest rumbles beneath my ear. His hands skate down my arms, making me shiver. “Should I yield to you, *delfass-ki*? What pleasure would you have me do?”

I pull back and grin at him. “Oh, you *are* good—but nice try. We’re going.”

Orgath huffs a laugh and gives me a brusque kiss. “Very well, since you insist, up you go,” he says as he tosses me up into the saddle.

I cling to Ethiel’s scruff as Orgath seats himself behind me, a broad hand shifting my hips close to his to secure me in place in front of him. At his command, Ethiel leaps forward through the grasses and rushes over the plains, startling various birds into flight as we pass.

In the distance, I see a flash of white near the woodlands and squint my eyes. Oh, my gods, it can’t be! Excitedly, I squeeze Orgath’s arm to catch his attention.

“Orgath! Is that a *unicorn*?” I squeal. I can’t help it—I love unicorns. I have ever since I was eight years old and became fixated on the movies *The Last Unicorn* and *Legend*. We’re talking big time unicorn-crazy here.

Orgath looks over in the direction I am gleefully pointing and grunts. “Yeah, that would be a unicorn. Uncommon to see a white one—humans hunted most of their kind out. He must be an old one. This time of the year, he is likely out looking for his ‘mare.’ You stay far away from the beast.”

I turn halfway around in the saddle to look at him in shock. “He’s a unicorn,” I say as if that settles the matter. “I don’t think he would hurt me.”

“No, he won’t harm you, that is true. But he may try to enchant you. Unicorns are desperate creatures when they get looking for mares.”

“Uh, Orgath... human here, remember.”

He chuckles humorlessly. “Unicorns are born all male, my heart. They look for females among other races. These they often entrap within their groves and seduce. Only after they mate, when the female turns into a unicorn mare and is bonded to him for life, does he venture from his hidden grove with her..”

Contemplative, I lean back against Orgath and watch the unicorn rear up before disappearing once more from sight. “Huh. Well, that puts the unicorn tapestries in a completely different light.”

“What are those, then?” he mutters.

“The unicorn tapestries are very old and depict scenes of unicorns, some of which involve the hunting of unicorns by putting young women out as bait.”

“Ah, yes. I think I recall humans hunting unicorns in such a manner. Fool creatures. Too easily drawn out into the open and vulnerable because of any pretty face. They will not think twice of trying to take a lone female. This is one reason I wish you would stay far away from them.”

I frown. “But, Orgath, I thought unicorns could only be captured by virgins. We both know I’m not one.”

He laughs loudly. “Is that what you humans think? Unicorns have no such preference. In fact, a good many lusty females have been stolen away by unicorns because they thought they were meeting for a tryst with a fair-faced male. A unicorn can look near to an elf when he takes a two-legged form.”

“Oh,” I say and shiver. Suddenly, unicorns aren’t looking quite so sweet and innocent. I jab him with my elbow. “You’re destroying my childhood fantasies here, you know.”

Orgath doesn’t even wince but chuckles low in my ear. Of course, he wouldn’t even feel that. We ride in companionable silence the rest of the way until we see the stonework rising in the distance. Orgath is muttering behind

me, too low for me to discern. However, I can literally feel the tension radiating from him.

Something about this visit wears heavily on him, and I suspect it has to do with me. I'm not so foolish that I don't see how parading around as a full human, even with the clan tattoos, is risky. These orcs haven't seen a human in generations and now there's suddenly one thrown into their midst. This whole situation is unpredictable. Seeing how Orgath is the very definition of controlling, his inability to control the situation is freaking him out a bit.

Word of our approach must spread quickly as I note orcs drift out of their home and places of business, their bright eyes fastened upon us and curious. To my relief I see a familiar face. Bodi rushes forward on his own delfass, cutting through the crowd to pull up at our side. He glances at me and grins widely.

“Greetings, Orgath! I see you brought your little human out of hiding. Lorf has been whispering that you are hiding her at your cottage to keep her tied to your side. A bold move to bring her completely out in the open.”

“Lorf will spew poison to anyone he can get to listen. His words have even carried as far as to the ears of the nearest court of elves. I will not stand for such rumors going around about Sammi. We are not going to stay hiding with some unfounded sense of guilt in our cottage, nor will I allow him to goad me into action. We are here for supplies and nothing more.”

Bodi looks at him in disbelief and shakes his head.

“Orgath, you are going to have to take control of the situation sooner or later. Inaction will do nothing but cause divisions within the clan. Already he is rousing supporters to his cause, and he enflames them against you and against the elves.”

Orgath frowns. “How many?”

Bodi sighs and does some mental calculations. “A few from this village, but more from the far-flung villages of our territory. Orcs who don’t well remember your family or remember the sight of your face like we do.”

I try not to shiver in dread, but none of this sounds good. If the clan splits, that can only mean one thing.

“You are inviting war, Orgath,” Bodi says quietly.

Orgath sighs. “I swore an oath when I survived the ruin brought about by Lorf that I would not raise my hand against him again—not when so many of my clan did nothing to aid my family. I also swore never to raise my hand for the benefit of the clan again.”

Bodi glances away, his jaw clenched. “Your clan failed you, but if you do not step in and take your place and lead, to protect us from Lorf, you will help strike down our clan, even if not by your own hand. Many of our people will not tolerate being led about by him much longer. War will come whether you will it or not.”

Orgath grunts again but doesn’t deign to say anything further. I can see it frustrates Bodi, but anyone who knows Orgath can’t expect anything else. He’s not one to waste his words once he makes up his mind. Privately, I agree with Bodi, but I don’t feel inclined to say so where everyone can hear. In the end, I am with Orgath, one way or the other, and I won’t have anyone saying otherwise.

As with our previous visit, Orgath settles Ethiel in the stable and we stop for a light midday meal at the tavern before we visit the market. Unlike last time, the tavern goes silent when we enter, and I can feel dozens of eyes on me as every orc in the room turns their attention on us. More specifically, on me. A few males stand up and step forward in a challenging manner but halt at Orgath’s bass growl. He encloses me in his arms and glares at all the orcs in the room.

“Not one of you will approach her if you value your hide. I know Lorf has been spreading rumors, and I will tell



you now that they are not true. The only truth which he speaks is that my wife is human.” I freeze. Wait a minute, we’re still going with the wife gimmick? I thought we weren’t doing disguises. “But she is mine out of her choice, not because I stole her from the humans. She is not a captive—she is my bloodbonded mate.”

A whisper of awe goes up through the crowd and speculative looks turn wide-eyed. I frown. Something doesn’t feel right about this. It feels too—real.

Behind the bar, Erra leans forward and quirks her eyebrows at my expression. My stomach lurches with nausea, fueled by stress and the smell of mead and hot food permeating the air of the tavern. A cold sweat pops over my skin and the room feels like it’s suddenly spinning.

With a choked cry, I push out of Orgath’s arms, unable to listen as he calls my name. I rush out the door that we just entered and puke on the ground, my stomach heaving wretchedly. A familiar heavy hand rests on my back.

“Sammi, are you ill?”

I swipe the back of my hand over my mouth and shrug his hand off. Ever so slowly I turn and face my “husband.” Fury and a sense of betrayal roil in my belly as I glare at him.

It’s not that I hate the idea of being his wife. In truth, I would have been over the moon—if he’d only asked. I hate to admit it, but I feel cheated out of knowingly pledging myself to the man I want to spend the rest of my life with.

Orgath *is* that guy, but I wasn’t given the opportunity. He married me in secrecy without my knowledge, without even recognition of the event. Didn’t Erra joke about a wedding feast when we played at it last time we were here, and yet he marries me and doesn’t even offer that one despite that being the custom? I want to rage at him helplessly. Just behind him, Erra is watching on with concern.

“I’m fine,” I mutter. “I think I need to leave.”

“Of course. Let us grab just a few things and—”

“No,” I interrupt, “not with you.” Orgath bristles but I ignore him and look over to Erra. “Erra, may I stay with you for a short time if it would not be too much of an inconvenience? I don’t know what’s going on and I need time alone.”

Her lips pinch together as she frowns at Orgath, but she gives me a supportive smile and nod. “Yes, of course. I have a feeling that there is much you have been kept in the dark about,” she says, glaring daggers at my husband. My mind tumbles that knowledge around—I like the sound of it, but I’m hurting and confused and don’t want to think of him that way at this moment.

“Now wait one minute,” Orgath growls. “There is something wrong with her—she is ill. I am not allowing anyone to take her out of my protection, especially when she is unwell.”

Erra straightens to her full height and throws her shoulders back stubbornly. “Don’t try to lord over me, Orgath! We grew up together, and our fathers were brothers who held each other well in esteem, so much so that he was terribly wounded in his effort to save your father from Lorf’s jealousy. You will not see to the welfare of this clan, nor did you adequately see to the needs of your mate. You need to face your responsibilities on both counts.

“I will see to her welfare and my family will protect her for as long as she desires to stay with us. As for her illness, I will have the healer meet me at my home and I will send word to you of the results.” For a moment, her face softens. “Get what you need and go home, Orgath. You will do no good lingering when she is feeling this angry and hurt. You have kept her ignorant of our customs.”

Orgath looks at me with pleading eyes, stretching out his hand, but I turn my face away. I try not to think of the audience watching us, judging him in all likelihood. My heart clenches painfully as a wall descends between us, and he

assumes a mask of apathy. He gives me a short nod and turns away.

Erra's arms come around me as we watch him leave. The orcs part before him, allowing him to pass. Not one makes a sound. Not one looks my way. Slowly, the crowd disperses, leaving us alone in front of the tavern.

I hold it together until he's at last completely out of sight before I collapse against Erra's chest, my body reeling with shock.

"Come then," she murmurs. "I have already sent a serving boy to fetch the healer. Let's get you home where you can rest. This has all been a horrible blow for you."

Mercifully, her home is nearby. It is simple but comfortable, maybe more so than our cottage for it was obviously built by someone with the skill to seamlessly join the stones together. Our cottage, in comparison, is small and drafty, but I cannot help but miss it at this moment. An elderly male sits among a pile of cushions and furs near the fire, and he looks up with a smile as we enter.

"Erra, I did not expect you home so early," he rasps.

She goes forward and kisses him lightly on his forehead. "I left early. Sammi, this is my father, Bistee. This is Orgath's wife, Sammi. It seems that Orgath kept her in the dark about our mating customs and it was a bit of a surprise for her, so I brought her home for a bit of a stay. She isn't feeling well so I am going to get her some cushions and furs to make her comfortable while we wait for the healer."

Erra gives me an encouraging smile and leaves me to the scrutiny of the grizzled white-haired orc. I attempt a smile and his brow draws downward. Dropping the attempt to be friendly, I return his stare. Clearly, he and I were not going to be on the friendliest of terms. He grunts and reopens a heavy tome that is on his lap. I peer curiously at it.

After all these weeks, my ability to read orcish has improved greatly. To my fascination, I notice that the engraved

script on the hard leather cover reads *The Lore and Sacred History of the Orcneas*. My fingers positively itch to get ahold of it. I can well imagine what fascinating bits of information it holds. He notices my attention and his eyebrows slowly rise.

“You can read this, can you?”

I laugh. “Probably not terribly well. This amulet gives me the ability to know the language but it’s useless for reading. Orgath has been teaching me all these weeks how to read. From what I can see, it must be a fascinating book.”

He looks startled but then a pleased look creases the corners of his mouth. I do believe he is smiling. “Would you like to read some of it? My eyes aren’t what they once were, and I confess it does sometimes strain them more than a little to read the script. It takes me twice as long to read a page anymore,” he huffs with dry amusement.

I resist the impulse to rip the tome eagerly out of his hands. “I would love to! Thank you.”

He grins at me indulgently, gesturing for me to join him at his side as he flips to a passage. I lean forward and begin to read it aloud as he taps a finger on his thigh, nodding to himself as I go over passages that he finds relevant.

I’m briefly distracted when Erra sets some cushions and furs beside me. I look up but she winks and nods her head to indicate that I should continue on. Her father scowls at her for the interruption and I immediately resume my pace. We sit that way for what has to be a good hour before we end the passage, and he slowly closes the book with an air of satisfaction.

He beams down at me. “Human or orc, you are a fine wife for our Orgath,” he says slowly. He inclines his head, “If you will excuse me, I need to get up and stretch these old joints. Old wounds are acting up,” he chuckles and hauls himself to his feet with a painful groan.

As I watch him hobble away, Erra returns to my side with kind-faced female of a vaguely golden hue that seems

peculiar compared to what I've seen so far. She kneels down in front of me and gently takes my head between her hands, shifting it from side to side, peering into my eyes.

"I am Vorla. Not feeling well, I hear," she says. Her voice is soft with a very slight lisp.

"Just nauseated at bad moments," I clarify.

She chuckles. "So I hear. The boy who fetched me spent a good many minutes complaining about he will be left to clean up that mess."

Guilt settles in at once. No one wants to deal with cleaning up another person's vomit.

She looks at me thoughtfully. "How long have you been living with Orgath?"

I shrug. "I haven't exactly been keeping a calendar. A few weeks, I guess."

She purses her lips with amusement. "Lots of sex?"

"Gods, yes. Weeks of uninterrupted, glorious sex."

Vorla begins to chuckle. "I am glad to hear that you and Orgath enjoy such a healthy appetite for each other."

"He mentioned something about a bloodbond a few times. I assume he means we share a sort of closeness."

She pauses and stares at me. "Well, in a manner of speaking, I suppose you can call it that. A bloodbond is very rare and most treasured among orcs. As you see, we fall in love and marry, but a bloodbond is unique. It is an irresistible calling between souls to join together. And once sex is instigated it becomes undeniable. It demands union."

A strange sort of comprehension dawns on me.

"As for your illness, I believe I can tell you the reason for that as well."

"Oh, my gods, is this bond killing me?"

She laughs loudly. “Oh no, never that. You will never be healthier than you are when you have a bloodbond. It links your souls together. Tell me, when did you last have your monthly courses?”

“Monthly courses? Oh, my period. Well, that’s easy to answer. I think the last time I had it was a few days before I went to join that rat-fink of an ex-boyfriend in the mountains...” I trail off, my eyes widening.

That was weeks ago. My period should have shown her scarlet face long ago by now. “Oh, my gods.”

“You are carrying Orgath’s heir, it seems,” the healer confirms with a smug look. “Likely a month along I would say, with eleven more to go!”

Eleven...

“Wait one damn minute—are you telling me that orcs carry for a year?”

“Oh no, we actually carry for about fourteen months, but I am estimating a little less for you given that you are a human. How long is the human gestation?”

“Nine months,” I squeak.

“That sounds about right then,” she says with a sage nod.

I hear nothing more, because at that moment, I pass the fuck out.

## Chapter 13

### *Orgath*

I glare sourly into my mead. The other orcs are wisely giving me a wide berth, cognizant of my foul temper. Finally, the male I have been waiting for enters the tavern. I raise my hand, and he inclines his head in my direction as he catches sight of me. Bodi slides into the chair at the opposite side of the table and gives a sympathetic look.

“Orgath, you look tired. Haven’t you gone home at all?”

I snort derisively. He doesn’t have a mate. He has no idea how impossible it is to just leave your mate. “She may not wish to see me, but I cannot leave her without my protection.”

“She has Erra’s family to provide protection—”

I don’t even try to temper the growl that rises from my chest. “I am no kind of male if I just leave her care to another.”

He puts both hands up, yielding.

“How is she?” I ask. This is, after all, why I asked him to meet me here.

“I spoke with Erra this morning. Sammi is well... in fact she has sent me to impart some news to you,” he says, hesitation in his voice as he shifts with excitement.

“Well?” I snap, impatient.

“Sammi is carrying your young,” Bodi bursts out, grinning from ear to ear. The trickle of conversation around us instantly dies.

Everything stills within me. My mate, my wife... is carrying my child. She carries my son or daughter and *she is not here*.

Frustration boils, but then I am distracted by hands striking my shoulders as voices of my clan happily congratulate me. One male, a fair bit into his mead, begins to

heartily sing a traditional song of our clan and others spiritedly join in. For a moment, I am stunned at the reception of the news by the clan. Every one of them is beaming with happiness. Another orc shouts out my family name in praise to the clan ancestors, and this is taken up all through the tavern.

I look over at Bodi, who leans forward and grins. “They celebrate the return of our chieftain’s line. Our *true* chieftain.”

As voices continue to shout, something settles within an empty void that my family’s death left within me. I will have to face Lorf, if not for myself and my clan, then for the sake of my child. I push away from the table.

Bodi’s eyebrows climb as he stumbles onto his feet after me. “Where are you going, Orgath?”

“To get my wife,” I growl. “Then I will plan what I need to do to see about Lorf.”

“About fucking time!” he shouts after me.

As I walk to Erra’s home, I wonder how much difficulty my cousin is going to present me with when I arrive. I am confident that I will be able to soothe Sammi’s temper, but I would prefer avoiding an outraged orc female if I can. I am not feeling very confident when she opens the door with a fierce scowl, but to my relief, she waves me in.

She crosses her arms over her chest and gives me a long look as I enter and close the door behind me. “I take it that Bodi delivered my message. That was faster than I expected.”

“I have been waiting at the tavern for my wife to be willing to receive me. I won’t leave the village without her.”

Her face softens a bit. “I suppose I shouldn’t have expected any less of you.”

“No, you shouldn’t. Now that I know she carries my young, I am determined that she hear me and return home with me today.”

She laughs and shakes her head at me. “Come on now. You know it is not going to be that easy.”



I feel my temper rising. “And why not? I am to protect my wife and child, and none should dare to deny me that. I am orc—I don’t abandon what is mine.”

“And I am not suggesting that you do. What I am saying is that it will probably take more than your presence and demands for Sammi to return with you.”

“We will see about that. Sammi is reasonable. Produce her and I will speak to her.”

Erra chuckles and turns on her heel. “Very well, cousin.”

An eternity feels as if it has passed when Erra brings Sammi into the room. I can easily hear her telling Sammi to call if she needs anything before throwing a smug grin at me as she departs. I step toward my wife and immediately her chin rises in defiance. I curse that look, because I know it is going to be harder than I boasted to Erra.

I frown down at her and say the stupidest thing that comes to mind. “Come home.”

I mentally wince as her face darkens.

“That is what you came to say to me? To order me to come home?” she says slowly.

I nod because it is, at essence, what I have come here for—even if not carried out quite as elegantly as I wish.

“Uh-huh, I see. Well, in that case, no thanks,” she says and turns to leave. In a bid of desperation, I grasp her arms and turn her toward me, lifting her off her feet until we are eye level with each other.

“You are my wife,” I growl. “You carry my child. Whether you like it or not, you both belong in my care and no other.”

“You are fucking delusional,” she finally snarls in a show of temper. “I’m not going just because you say I am. Unless you can come here and show some humility for what you’ve done and apologize properly, my ass isn’t going anywhere. I am not your wife unless I agree that I am. *You*

*never asked!* You just snuck around and bonded me to you—mated with me—without my consent.”

“I shouldn’t have to ask!” I bellow angrily. “You fulfilled the ritual. I did everything proper according to custom. I demonstrated my love and care for you. You accepted me, now it is done. You are my wife, and nothing is changing that. You will come home with me now where you belong.”

“Fuck you! How about that?”

I step forward, growling deeply, but Sammi doesn’t budge. She thrusts her chest forward and sets her jaw mulishly.

“You are a stubborn, vexing female. Fine, maybe leaving you with Erra for a few days will improve your mood... it is certain to improve your cooking at least,” I say, unable to resist digging in with that particular barb.

Her jaw drops. “No. You. Didn’t.”

I smirk and step out as if I haven’t a care in the world. The slam of the door is the only thing that calls me on my bluff.

“You beast!” I hear her shout through the door. Surprisingly, that stings more than I care to admit.

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*Sammi*

I stare in disbelief at the door. All he had to do was come in and apologize. Admit that he was wrong in how he carried out his plans—but no, of course he can’t do that! My heart lurches with pain thinking on the sweetness of what had assuredly been our mating ritual.

If only he'd asked, it would've made the whole thing a beautiful cherished memory that we could tell our children. Instead, I'm the fool who was tricked into mating, ignorant of everything I accepted.

It's humiliating, and he can't even see that.

"That went well," Erra says, humor lacing her words. I turn to look at her and manage a weak smile. She takes in my expression, sighs and shakes her head. "Are you really that bad at cooking?"

"Yeah, pretty hopeless," I admit. "Though I finally learned how to make bread without burning it."

"Well, that is a start," she laughs. "We might as well be productive while you visit then. Come help me prepare the evening meal. If nothing else, by the time you are ready to leave here, you will know how to feed yourself and your little one."

"What, you aren't going to encourage me to learn how to cook to feed Orgath?"

She snorts. "Gods, no. If he continues being stupid, he can just continue cooking for himself. My own mate has had to make more than one of his own meals when he let himself be ruled by the wrong head," she says confidentially with a wicked grin.

I relax and follow her to where she has a small wood stove set up in a partitioned-off corner of her home that serves as a mini-kitchen. I take a moment to admire it. It has crude burners on top and a large door that opens for an oven. Something like this could make life much easier at the cottage.

"I wish Orgath had one of these things," I say in awe.

Erra snorts. "Why am I not surprised that he doesn't? Males. If it can be charred over a fire or baked in a clay dish in the coals, it suits them just fine. Never mind that not one of them turns away a meat pie or a pastry. Speaking of which, I think that is exactly what you will learn to make tonight. Males willingly surrender much for a good meat pie."

I follow and watch her pull some butchered meat from the cellar. This she cooks quickly and set aside to pull down flour, salt, butter, and sugar for the pastry. In no time the dough is ready and she makes quick work rolling it out. I watch her set the rolled-out dough into the bottom of a rounded pan and promptly fill the crust with the meat, spices, bits of dried vegetables, and some sort of sliced tuber that I believe is a local variety of potato. This she tops with the other half of the rolled-out dough and puts in the oven. Looks easy enough.

With a grin, she announces, “Simple, yes?”

I hesitate. “It doesn’t look terribly difficult, but that doesn’t mean I won’t mess it up.”

Erra snorts. “Just remember the proportions and you will be fine. It is not an exact science. Set it in the oven over banked coals for about thirty minutes. Just be sure to keep an eye on it so it doesn’t overcook,” she says with a wink.

“I’m not sure if I can make anything like this without a stove,” I say awkwardly.

She puts her hands on her hips and looks thoughtfully at her stove. “Yes, you are going to have to get Orgath to part with some of his fortune to get a stove for the cottage.”

I blink. “Fortune?”

Erra laughs. “Of course. Orgath is very wealthy despite living in a cottage that is just shy of falling down around him. Lorf was able to take over the leadership of the clan, but he could not steal the wealth of Orgath or that of my father. Providing an oven for you is the least he can do.”

I mentally file that away under with the other things that Orgath never told me and resolve to enjoy the rest of the evening in Erra’s company without dwelling on any unpleasantness.

The evening meal proves to be delicious. Bistee hobbles out to join us and I eat with relish until I can barely move. Erra puts what’s left on a plate for her husband in the cupboard.

When Bistee retires to his room, we pass time throwing dice until late after dark. Erra stops only once, to light a lamp near the window, and we resume our game until the moment Orgul returns home. He greets his wife with a tired smile and fond embrace. I find myself looking away, the awkward third wheel.

“Sammi, you did not have the opportunity to meet my mate. This is Orgul, whom I have spoken so much of.”

“I guarantee she has a talent for exaggeration,” Orgul teases, his dark eyes sparkling with mirth. “Doubtlessly at least half is not true... unless it is referring to my male parts, in which case it is all true and probably not enough said.”

I laugh. I can't help but like this guy. For all that he is massive, ash gray, has tusks that rival Orgath's in size, and has the darkest eyes I have ever seen on an orc, he's personable. More so than most orcs.

“I have to say, compared to other orcs you are a bit...”

“Less hostile?” he fills in with a wide grin. “Pleasant company? Possess a sense of humor? Capable of smiling and knows the meaning of a joke?”

I giggle. “I guess all of the above.”

Erra laughs. “Orgul owns the tavern where we met. He comes from a very distant orc clan and was traveling to find the perfect place to set up business when he arrived at our village. We had no such thing as a tavern before he came. Traditionally, our families tend to brew our own meads. Many weren't receptive to a business that brewed and sold mead and beer, but they warmed up to the idea pretty quickly. It even took a while for me to get used to his extreme mannerisms when we first met.”

“She threw the mug of mead I offered her right in my face when I told her she had remarkably impressive assets that I wouldn't mind partnering with in a joint venture,” he says with a cheeky grin. “This clan is such a stoic lot, and so in love with tradition that my younger brother, who recently

moved here, still has to fend off older members of the community who object to male inkers.”

I raise my brows in fascination. “Really? With humans, it’s usually the opposite problem. Human males dominate many industries, including inking and piercing, although women have been pushing strong into it.”

“It is because it is spiritual and ceremonial in nature, and such things are often left in the keeping of our females by tradition,” Erra supplies.

“We males are allowed to claim the debauched things,” Orgul says with a playful leer at his wife, who responds by driving an elbow into his abs. He lets out a painful *oof* and grins down at her as he rubs the abused muscles.

“Speaking of the terrible state of males,” he says nonchalantly, “I haven’t been able to get rid of Orgath. Your mate is determined to lurk around my tavern until you come to your senses and go home. His suffering is providing me with some entertainment over the day, so don’t rush on my account,” he laughs. “I provided him with a place to sleep in one of the spare rooms above the tavern that we keep for travelers.”

“You aren’t charging him, are you?” Erra demands, her eyes narrowing.

“Of course I am,” he chortles gleefully and rubs his hands together.

I snicker but can’t help feeling the pinch of pity I feel for my mate as something deep within me yearns to feel him close by again.

## Chapter 14

### *Sammi*

I don't see Orgath for several days. After the first day he began leaving small things for me: a shawl so I won't catch a chill in the cool evenings, and my favorite sweet treat made from a dough boiled in honey. This morning, I wake to a large flowering bush set outside my window, roots and all.

I shake my head in exasperation. He's really making it hard to stay angry with him, but I made up my mind not to totally cave until he properly apologizes.

I don't see Orgul entering the room until he stops mid-stride and stares at the bush, blinking in stunned surprise. Erra is beside him and I imagine that they are on their way to open the tavern. Erra had mentioned something the night before about helping him out this morning. Her jaw drops, but his shoulders shake with laughter. Erra frowns beside him.

"Orgul, why is there an uprooted bush sitting outside the window? Did you have something to do with this?" she asks, her brow furrowing.

"No, no. I think that there is a slight miscommunication. Orgath asked for a bit of advice on appealing to his mate and I suggested flowers. I didn't think he would think to pull up an entire bush, however," he says, breaking into full-on laughter.

I flush, knowing that Orgath is enlisting help from the males of his clan. I learned recently from Erra that the females refuse to help, believing it up to him to resolve the problems that are of his own making. That's apparently not stopping the males. Erra gives her mate a disgusted look and she thumps his chest with irritation.

"That won't magically fix anything, and you know it. He needs to swallow his pride and apologize," she snaps.

Bistee eases onto a cushion, looks at the bush, and snorts. "Erra speaks true, but anyone with eyes can see that

boy really loves you, girl. Stop torturing him and you both, and accept him already,” he states in his typical blunt way.

Erra gives me a look of exasperated commiseration before turning her attention to Bistee. “I am going with Orgul to the tavern for a couple of hours to help do some cleaning, I trust you will be all right with Sammi here while I am gone.”

He waves her aside with a gnarled hand. “Go then, already. Sammi and I will be fine. I believe she was going to help me read some correspondence sent from the lore-keepers of other clans. I will likely have her bored to sleep long before you return.”

Erra smiles appreciatively, and frowns again at the bush. “What would you like me to do with these?”

I look at the bush. It really *is* a sweet gesture. I can’t bear to throw them out. “Maybe we can replant the bush in the garden here?”

She smiles and nods. “Very well. I will just plant this really quick before we leave. I am not sure what else you can really do with them.”

As I imagine trying to shove an uprooted bush into a vase, I can’t stifle my laugh. “Yeah, that might be the best idea.”

She shakes her head once more and hauls up the bush, taking it with her.

True to his word, as the door swings shut after them, Bistee pulls out a thick stack of folded papers from the pocket of the loose robe he wears. I unfold one and squint at the small writing.

Great. I get to read orcish written by scholars or doctors of some type by the way the language is scribbled out. Still, most of it seems recognizable enough. I settle in and begin reading. Bistee leans back and listens, nodding in agreement with a shared observation or scowling when I come to a passage he disagrees with. More than once he interrupts me to essentially tell me that the writer is full of shit.



Time passes remarkably fast, and I set aside several read letters as I stand up to prepare a small afternoon meal for us when I hear a sharp, loud strike against the door. Bistee pushes himself to his feet and I spin around to face the door just as it flies in off its hinges.

“Take cover,” Bistee growls to me and throws himself forward with a long knife he pulled out from gods know where. I hesitate, torn between following direction and a strong drive to help the near-crippled elderly orc. At the last minute, I attempt to run, but a hand tangles in my hair, and I am drawn brutally face-to-face with Lorf’s slimy henchman. Another male’s voice laughs tauntingly as he thrusts Bistee aside.

“Bistee, you old fool of an orc. Isn’t it enough that I left your body broken last time you thought to stand between me and what I desire? Don’t risk your life over one small human.”

Cold fear seeps through me.

Lorf. He’s daring to do the one thing that no one thought he would: kidnapping me.

I struggle against the orc holding me. Striking out with my hands and feet gets no response, so I turn my head toward the hand gripping my hair and bite down hard on the meaty part of the palm. My captor roars, and I hear Bistee shout out as a hand strikes me hard enough that the world falls away into nothingness.

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### *Orgath*

I walk through the market looking for the perfect gift. Something to tell my wife—my bloodbonded mate—how much she truly means to me. It rankles me to have to apologize for something that is natural for orcs, but I must

acknowledge that it is a different custom from her own and perhaps I would feel similarly if the situation were reversed.

If she needs to hear the words, then I will give them to her.

“My lord, I hear good tidings on the young one you are expecting,” an unfamiliar merchant calls out. I do not recognize the species—some sort of troll I believe. They have a reputation for being conniving traders but talented in acquiring the best of things. Though his lavender hair is swept into a series of complicated braids in a courtly fae fashion, his deep forest-green flesh is packed with lean muscle and though he stands hand-lengths shorter than me, he has undeniable presence. Purple eyes watch me with sharp interest.

I am reluctant to acknowledge him, but his grin is broad and friendly, so I pause and nod my thanks with every intention of carrying on until he pulls out a bundle.

“I have something perfect for your babe,” he calls. “A gift to honor your clan.”

I am immediately suspicious but approach with caution. “What is it then?”

He unwraps the bundle and inside is a small collection of the softest tunics for my babe, a thickly woven blanket, a rattle made of silver that chimes beautifully when shaken, and delicate coverings for the feet. “From where did these come, and why give it to me?” I ask slowly.

He offers a good-natured shrug. “The Troll King of the Middling Way sends it with his regards. He has received word that you have found a bloodbonded mate among the humans and already she quickens with your young. Naturally, such news is treated with great excitement in the kingdom. There is rumor that the elves are considering opening the borders to the human realm, and we know that your mountain pass is the nearest to us in that eventuality. All know the orcs guard it, so he is eager to have friendship with you so that trolls may, at that time, pass without consequence to and from the portal.

When he heard that I was coming to trade with your village, he insisted I bring it along to present to you.” He pauses. “But maybe it is not to you I should be giving it if the rumors I hear this morning are true.”

I frown, confused. “What are you meaning?”

He scratches a claw along his neck absently. “I heard that the chieftain has been organizing a raid to secure your female, and even now may have her. Perhaps it is he that I need to speak to.”

I growl and thrust the clothes back at him. “My wife is secure. Lorf has no way to get to her. His power is limited here and may not be suffered for much longer.”

The troll raises his brows with amusement. “Is that so? And if he secures your wife and babe?”

Even though I want to insist on the truth of the matter, a cold dread begins to settle around me. I don’t want to think that my cousin could do something so foul as to kidnap a mated female, much less one carrying young. But then, there is much that I never would have expected of my cousin in the days of our youth. His ambition has rotted him and destroyed him from the inside out. I run a hand over my braids and narrow my eyes on him.

“Perhaps I will attend to my kin and see to her well-being myself—just to be certain.”

He nods respectfully, his eyes still gleaming with something beyond my grasp to understand at this moment. “A most ideal plan,” he murmurs, a thin smile stretching over his black lips and deadly sharp teeth.

Although I am uncertain if it is wise to trust rumors delivered by a stranger, much less by a troll who may have interest in manipulating matters for the benefit of his king, I quicken my pace as I head back to the tavern.

I am halfway there when I feel a seizing along the bloodbond that tastes of pain and terror before even that falls silent in a way I haven’t experienced since before I’d initiated

the bond with Sammi all those weeks ago. She has been a constant presence within me and the absence of that terrifies me.

Launching into a full run, I barely draw up short enough to not throw the door off the hinges when I barrel through it. My ears tilt forward as I search for Orgul or Erra, either will do.

“Orgath, is something amiss?” Erra says as she rushes to my side from behind the long counter. Orgul stands just beyond it, puzzled.

“Is Sammi here with you?” I ask, praying for some odd chance that maybe she’d accompanied Erra.

“No, she is at home with father, why do you ask—wait, Orgath where are you going?”

I don’t reply; I run straight out of the tavern. All of my focus is on getting to my mate. I have nothing else of myself to spare, not even so much as to pause and speak. I hear a disturbance behind me followed by something that sounds a lot like foul cursing, and I know that Erra is close behind me.

Good. I do not know what I may encounter when I arrive at her dwelling.

Briefly, I entertain the idea that maybe it is a false alarm, but that is until I catch sight of Erra’s home. The door is broken in and I catch the stench of blood and fear mingling with the unmistakable scent of Lorf. My lips pull back from my teeth, baring my tusks savagely as I leap through the doorway, ready to attack.

I skid through on some broken pottery and search in a panic for any sight of my mate. The abode is empty, except the crumpled form of Bistee on the floor. I hear Erra slide in behind me and her anguished cry. I crouch down by my uncle and lay my fingers against his neck, praying to the gods for a sign of life. I let out a breath in relief when I feel the weak pulse.

“Erra, he lives,” I whisper as I draw away from him. Leaving Bistee to his daughter’s care, I rush through the house and throw open the doors, calling for my mate.

A hand grips my arm firmly and I throw myself around ready to fight off whoever dares to restrain me in my search for my mate. Orgul flinches but is unmoving. His eyes are full of sympathy. “She is not here, Orgath.”

He is only saying what I already know, but having it verbally affirmed throws me into a rage. I roar and thrust my hands against the wall, cracking several stones from the violence of my fury. I wish to pull the whole building down but just barely retain hold on my sanity.

My enemy has my mate and is doing gods know what to her. Does he violate her? Is she unharmed? The unknown destroys me even as I desperately search within for that small glimmer of the bloodbond between us.

“I will kill him! Lorf will not escape from this fate he weaves,” I snarl, my muscles tightening with my anger. I wish for nothing more than to meet my cousin in battle and sever his head from his body with my own hands.

Erra comes up beside me, her face taut. “We will be with you, Orgath. We will summon those of the clan who are loyal to you and we will attack the chieftain’s keep. The females will not let this go, it violates all our traditions and values. It disgraces our ancestors. I will take my father to the healer and call upon all whom I know that will stand with us.”

“I will as well,” Bodi speaks from the door. I look over, startled, unaware that he’d followed behind. His face is a mask of anger, lips pulled back from his tusks as he meets my eyes and nods. “I will track down all those I know who are loyal to you, who are willing to take up arms against Lorf.”

I nod gratefully and brush past him as I leave the house. Every beat of my heart starts the agony anew. All I have before me now is regrets.

Things I should have done.

Things I should have said.

I only pray it is not too late to rectify the bond between me and my wife.

## Chapter 15

*Sammi*

The metal cuffs bite into the skin of my wrists. Not iron but still metal and unyielding no matter how much I pull on the chain anchoring me to the wall. I worry about Bistee. I hope that his family discovers him still alive. I have no way of knowing, but I pray to the gods for his sake... and for mine.

I may be alive now, but I'm not confident how much longer I'll be able to stay that way, especially with how much trouble I have keeping my mouth shut. I have a feeling that Lorf won't find my sass as humorous as Orgath did.

My heart pinches at the thought of my mate. *Orgath, I miss you.*

Lorf's creature, Mogol, grins at me as he paces back and forth in front of me. I'd woken up on the cold floor, without any kindness or relief shown before I was shackled to the wall. Lorf enters the room, completely ignoring his flunky, and strides over brusquely. Mercilessly, he grabs my face, tilting it this way and that for his inspection. He pries my jaws open to peer at my teeth and tongue.

"You look healthy enough," he says and proceeds to grip my hips and pull on them. He then runs his hands over my ass and along my upper thighs before roughly palming my breasts. Finally, he grunts and grins. There's no mistaking what he has in mind from the bulge pushing at the front of his breeches. I curl my lip at him.

"You are fortunate, human. None of my females have supplied me with young, and yet here you have fallen into my lap, a fertile female already breeding an orc babe. I will destroy Orgath and raise his child as my own, and you will do for me what you have done for him. He will breed my progeny, enough to fill my keep, and for it, you will be my favored from all of the harem.

I groan from the discomfort of the cuffs and narrow my eyes on him, my lips twisting into a cruel smile. “I would sooner sleep with the foulest ogre in the deepest, dankest pit than submit to your loathsome touch.”

Lorf’s pupils constrict and his fingers pinch my jaw painfully seconds before his mouth descends upon mine. The taste of him is as foul as the stench. I bear it just enough to sink my teeth into the flesh of his tongue when he dares to push it into my mouth. He hisses in pain and snaps his head back, giving me the perfect opportunity to spit in his face.

With a snarl, he wipes the spittle away with the back of his hand seconds before he backhands me, knocking my head back into the stone wall behind me. Stars shoot behind my eyelids, my lip stings, and I can taste blood in my mouth. I think I bit the tip of my tongue and am likely sporting a split lip now. The warm trickle of blood down my chin confirms it.

Still, I manage to grin, infuriating him further. He slaps me a few more times to get his point across but eventually stalks away with his henchman trailing behind him like a lapdog.

I sigh and lean my head back, my temples pounding with a headache. I try to ignore how swollen and painful my face, arms, and breasts are where I was struck and savagely pinched repeatedly. I’m grateful, though, that the attack was limited to my upper body.

As of this moment my child is not in any danger, but then again, why would it be when Lorf made himself clear that he wants our baby? I close my eyes, tears gathering at my lashes.

I can’t hide from the fact that I regret not patching things up with Orgath. We have both been too stubborn in this, neither one of us willing to bend for the other. I could have been safe at home with Orgath right now, nagging him to get a wood stove instead of cooling my jets in what amounts to a mini-dungeon. Exhausted, I allow sleep to overcome me and hope that when I wake it will just be a bad dream.



When I wake hours later, still in the cell, I'm disappointed. Well, so much for that little bit of failed self-deception. I'm about to sink into another round of self-loathing when I hear a sharp cough from a nearby cell. Though it pains me to move my neck, I look over to the source of the noise. A beautiful man is crouched, not inside the neighboring cell, but outside of mine. He is colorless like the elves, but not an elf.

I am not sure what exactly the stranger is, but he wears a wide grin, sporting several sharp teeth. His hair flows in a wild moon-colored mane down his back and his velvety purple eyes sparkle at me. From within his mane, a pair of pointy horse-like ears shift at the sides of his head independently, listening for any noises, but that is nothing compared to the pearly five-inch horn sprouting from his brow. His grin widens at my scrutiny and he creeps forward, bringing my attention to the fact that he's butt-naked, a large thick cock curved up against his belly between his thighs. I blush and promptly jerk my gaze back up to his face.

"Are you trapped here, female?" he whispers. His voice it is almost like a bell, and that immediately sends up every red flag in my brain.

I clear my throat, feeling the painful, dry rasp. "Why do you ask? Were you sent here to help me?"

His eyes dance with humor. "Cautious one, aren't you? I have not been sent to your aid, but I will be happy to remove you from your bonds and carry you far from here."

I narrow my eyes. His wording is a bit too precise yet revealing nothing at the same time. It seems more than a little shady. "What are you?" I ask bluntly.

He shrugs his muscular shoulders and pushes back the fall of his white hair to show off a firm pectoral. "I am a bit of magic, you might say. Not elf, nor man, I am not what I seem."

“Uh-huh. Sorry, but if you’re going to rhyme at me and try to talk around my questions, then it’s best if you just leave.”

The sudden laughter that greets my words is resonant and rings out in the air well after he’s done. “Very clever. Very well, female, I won’t play at words with you. I am a unicorn. I have seen you before, from the distance when you passed my glade, but when I saw the orcs bring you here, I had to investigate.” He looks around at the walls and at the chains without concern. “It seems your mate did poorly in protecting you, so I offer myself in his stead. I can carry you away from here and you can live for thousands of years at my side. We can pass freely through the portals, you and I, now that the fae kings have ordered the bridging. You can see your family if you wish. See anywhere in the world and all the realms you desire.”

I stare at him. I can see how this offer could be so tempting—for another woman. I shake my head and give him a gentle smile. “I appreciate the offer, but I can’t go with you. Orgath is coming for me. I know it. And my heart will *always* be his.”

The unicorn man frowns, his brow knitting in confusion. “I do not understand. You will risk everything for an orc? How can an orc compare to a unicorn?”

Sympathy tugs at my heart for the forlorn look on his face. He doesn’t understand. For all the years he has walked the earth, he doesn’t understand love.

“Unicorns are, without a doubt, amazing, and you’re probably the most beautiful guy I have ever seen, hands-down, but I’m completely in love with my mate. I love Orgath, and that is more than anything else for me. I can’t run away with you, no matter how beautiful you are.”

His eyes widen with sadness and he withdraws slowly from the bars of my cell. “I don’t know this love. I want to know it,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper. His breath came out as a sigh of chimes. “Very well. I will leave you

then. I will do this one thing for you as I depart: I will lure the orcs of this keep into slumber until your mate can gather his force. They will sleep for a full day. Pray that your mate is ready to attack at the dawn,” he murmurs just as his form blurs and shifts before me.

Where once a beautiful man crouched, an ivory unicorn with a massive horn paws the ground. He jerks his head at me, and I know it is in farewell. I hear his voice whisper around me like a dainty glass bell.

*“Be well, human.”*

The unicorn rears up, his tail flagging as he whirls and runs up the steps with a clatter of hooves. Surprisingly, no shouts raise above from anyone who may see him. I sink against the wall and smile, comforted with knowledge that the unicorn is keeping his oath. Silence descends over the entire keep. I hear not a step above me, or the muttering of guards talking between each other.

As hours pass without seeing another face, I allow myself to rest, confident that all of the keep will be slumbering with me.

\*\*\*

*Orgath*

I climb the hill parallel to the one upon which my ancestral keep sits, and the village stretches out before me between the two hills. I feel the wind tug at my braids as my hand grips Uagoral, the weight of the ax a familiar comfort.

At my side, Erra squints into the setting sun, a massive spear balanced carefully at her side, as is Orgul, a long, heavy

sword clenched between two hands, the tip pointed for the moment at the ground. Bodi holds a pair of short swords, a wild grin on his face. Battle-mad, my father would have said were he still alive.

I pause in surprise when I see a flash of white fly out from the steps of the keep. A unicorn dances briefly, tossing his head as if to salute our force before he gallops away into the distance, returning to the woods I suspect. Erra inhales deeply.

“A good omen, do you think?” Erra whispers.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “It seems as if he acknowledges us, and certainly that must be something good to our purpose, in some way or another.”

I turn my head to watch the orcs coming up from the village, heavily armed. Not as many males as I’d hoped are joining us. That is disappointing. It means that many of the clan males are rallying under Lorf for what he promises to give them: access to human females.

Yet the response from the orc females is satisfying. They arrive in their armor with axes, spears, and blades of all kinds. Many carry large nets. Even the clothier Gidra has net and spear in her capable hands. She spies me and grins widely, baring her tusks in a savage grimace. She comes up to my side and nods at the few males.

“Don’t be disheartened. You will not have to fight against a great number of the males of your clan. Most are refusing to choose sides and are waiting to see the result. My own husband agrees with them and I have told him that if I come back from this battle, I will set him from the house for three months until he makes reparation to me for his dishonor to our family. I have spoken among the females and this is a familiar case.”

I nod my thanks to her, feeling a little better.

My eyes turn back to the keep as a young male rushes up from its direction, his breath coming out in pants from the

exertion of his quick journey. “News from the keep, chieftain,” he says, giving me all formalities my clan feels due. “A strange mist has descended upon the keep when the unicorn fled. I investigated and saw nothing but slumbering orcs everywhere. Our clan and those from outlying clans, fallen over where they stood, caught in a deep sleep.”

I clasp him on the shoulder and my heart quickens. My mate may just yet be spared if all the keep sleeps. I look to Erra with a vicious grin. “The keep slumbers—summon the warriors to us. We attack at first light before the rise of dawn. May we subdue more than what we must reap.”

She bares her tusks in response and grabs her horn, blowing the rallying call over the hill, summoning our warriors. A shout goes up from the valley in response. I face once more my ancestral home, and the wind suddenly, shifts bringing the scent of flowers and life. A shift in the wind, a good sign of things to come.

*Stay safe, Sammi. I am coming.*

## Chapter 16

### *Orgath*

I sit at the fire, waiting for the first light of the sky. Few of our numbers slept, and those who did slept the restless sleep of one before they wake to meet battle. Erra sits on a rock to one side with her mate, and Bodi sits on the ground sharpening one of his swords. My warriors are gathered around us, seated on the ground or whatever outcropping of stone or log that they can fashion into some manner of rough seat.

“How long do you imagine that the unicorn-sleep will last?” Bodi grumbles from his place.

“Not much longer, I’d imagine,” I reply, rubbing at my beard. Most enchantments last just for a short period.”

“A day, I would wager,” the voice of a newcomer says as he drops down beside Bodi. “Most similar enchantments done by trolls in my kingdom, and even by elves, usually don’t last much longer past sunrise of the next day.” The troll grins over at me, aimlessly tossing a knife in one hand. A longbow lays stretched over his knees. Unlike the first time I saw him, he is dressed in simple leathers and his lavender hair is pulled up high into a warrior’s knot at the top of his head. He doesn’t even twitch at the blade that Bodi holds at his throat. My cousin is not one who cares to be surprised.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?” Bodi growls.

The troll pushes the blade away with a finger and his grin widens. “I am Cavek, the envoy and third son in line of the Troll King. Pleased to make your blade-happy acquaintance.”

I sigh. *Perfect*. The troll is not only an envoy but one of the royal sons of the king. I can already imagine the monumental debt that the trolls will consider accrued for the assistance of his son to our efforts.

“This isn’t your fight,” I tell him, diplomatically attempting to avoid owing the troll king any favors.

Cavek shrugs, his lips twisting into a dark grin. “I was bored and have nothing planned for today. I figure throwing in with your fight will be more entertaining than hanging around the village,” he comments as if he is doing nothing more strenuous than going for a pleasant stroll. “Don’t worry, chieftain. Consider this completely on me.”

I grunt in acknowledgment.

“If the spell ends around sunrise as our troll ally says, we should strike at the very first light before dawn,” Erra cuts in. She restlessly taps the end of her spear against her boot as she thinks. I nod in agreement. That would be the best time.

“What of those orcs who have allied themselves with Lorf?” Orgul asks quietly.

Erra frowns at her mate as if he is making no sense, but I understand his reasoning behind the question. This too is something I’ve been thinking of all night. Erra snorts. “From what I understand, most of those who have allied themselves with Lorf are out-dwellers, not from our clan. Very few of our people are with him. Even still, those few we can’t allow to live,” she says firmly, meeting the eye of all those gathered. “They have shown that their allegiance is not with the clan and are a potential threat, not only to us but also for those humans that they share Lorf’s greed for acquiring.”

A murmur of agreement runs through the clan warriors.

“And our honor?” growls another.

“How does it tarnish our honor when they have none to begin with? I say there is nothing dishonorable in attacking the enemy when they are vulnerable and spare as many of our own when they would create even more devastation if they are allowed to continue on,” she counters angrily, slamming the end of her spear into the ground with emphasis.

“As much as it pains me to lose any member of our clan, Erra speaks the truth. We cannot risk traitors to linger among

us who may harm us or try to imprison human females. If anyone has issue with this and cannot raise their hand against one who may be their kin, retreat now with my blessing. I will not think less of you for it.”

I feel a surge of pride when not one orc even shifts in reluctance. This time, my clan is standing with me. Though their faces are drawn, their expressions bear clear understanding of the solemn duty they face and what must be done. Only the troll grins, his eyes sparkling with a sense of eager anticipation.

A short time later, just before dawn, my small force of armed warriors moves toward my ancestral home. Bodi and Erra take up each flank beside me. I don't give much attention to the orcs in the village, watching silently from in front of their homes. I do take note, however, of those males who, with an obvious change of heart, stride out in armor to join us in our passing.

The small fortress lies silent before us as we approach. At the gate, I can see the guards slumped in slumber. I gesture to the warriors at my left, and they slip forward to slit the throats of the guards lest they waken and alert the rest of the keep.

The grounds of the courtyard are littered with bodies that have fallen under the influence of unicorn-sleep wherever they stood. We make quick work of them. Their deaths weigh on me, and I wish I could be lenient and spare the lives of those lying helpless at our feet. However, I will not risk sparing even one.

The spell does not begin to break until after we pry open the heavy doors. It is as we are entering that voices begin shouting in groggy alarm to each other. They are too late, and even now they are realizing it.

Erra, already heavily painted with blood, leaps forward, her braids flowing behind her as she thrusts her spear with the full weight of her body into a thick-bodied orc who rushes at that moment around the corner. Her war-scream



echoes through the entryway. Orgul is at her side, covering her back, his sword cutting into another male who attempts to strike her while her attention is diverted.

Running to the fore, I bury my ax into any who dares to place themselves before me. Bodi is at my side, gore running down his chest. He sports a few minor cuts, but most of the blood he wears is not his own. He doesn't seem to notice it as he drives into one male after the other, his grin savage. He is an unstoppable force, and we have been a fighting-pair for as long as I can remember. I know he will protect my back with his last breath of battle-frenzy. I trust him with Sammi's life, and to help me to liberate her more than any other.

A savage roar rends the air and the troll leaps forward to strike a blow with his bow, catching an unseen enemy unaware. His victim stumbles with shock, but Cavek makes use of his stun to slip a dagger up into the soft tissue beneath the orc's jaw. The orc gurgles and falls, forgotten already at Cavek's feet as the troll lets loose several arrows.

"Lorf!" I bellow, catching sight of the long robes worn by our so-called chieftain as he disappears around a corner. I bare my tusks and growl to myself.

Of course he runs!

Lorf never chooses the honorable path. He destroyed my kin with an act of deception, presenting himself as a guest at my family's harvest festival. And now he has taken my wife. His dishonor will be his end.

Bodi slams into a large male protecting Lorf's retreat and shouts out, "Orgath, go! He heads to the lower-level cells."

I dive into a narrow hall that leads down to the cells. My breath breaks from my body in a sharp snarl when I am almost beheaded by a guard. He stares at me with panicked wide eyes when his blade clangs uselessly against stone, my hand locking around his wrist. The cries of the dying fill the

air, and I allow the terror of his demise to sink in with a fierce growl. When realization dawns, I draw up my other hand and strike with such strength that his head severs from his neck and rolls down the stairs proceeding my descent.

“Lorf! Face me!” I roar in the darkness below.

\*\*\*

*Sammi*

I hear Orgath’s bellow from the stairs above and my heart leaps in my chest. *My mate is here!* My inner party is greatly subdued when Lorf rushes into the room, another toady of a smaller, unfamiliar species at his side. The smaller male’s head whipping from side to side with terror.

“Lord Lorf, we must hide you!” he cries, wringing his hands helplessly.

I snort from the confines of my cell, drawing their attention to me. I bare my teeth at them, knowing full well that my face is still painted with my own blood. I giggle at the look of fear they wear so plainly.

“Orgath is coming, and you’re about to be very sorry,” I sing out, gloating. “You’re scared. You should be. Both of you. My mate will not show you any pity,” I say, leaning back against my chains and laugh. They are looking at their doom, and at this moment I am its messenger.

The henchman strikes the bars to the door of my cell. “Shut up! You know nothing,” he hisses.

“Tick tock, boys,” I grin, “Tick tock.”

They stare at me in confusion but behind that, I can see that they get a sense of my meaning. Shit is winding down for them. I laugh.

\*\*\*

## *Orgath*

As if passing through a thick wall of fog, suddenly everything becomes clear and the bloodbond sings to life once more. I realize then that the cells have been enchanted in some manner to completely contain those who they hold. But now that I am here, I can feel Sammi long before I hear the voice of my wife and her mad laughter.

I grin because I know she is no comfort to those who seek to escape my wrath. Below, I hear her voice as she mocks them and prophesizes their end. My wife speaks the truth; I will descend on them with vengeance, blood, and fury.

When I round the last steps and catch sight of my mate through the bars of her cell door, at the way she grins through a mouth coated with dried blood, fury rips through me. It is a torrential fire burning through my blood and I cannot suppress even a fraction of the rage I roar.

I hear Sammi giggle as Lorf scurries back, shoving the smaller orc at me. I catch the male easily, grinning down at him as I raise him up to meet my eye. He twists in a last attempt to free himself, but I don't permit Uagoral to drink his death. Instead, I tighten my grip and with a savage twist I end his life, breaking his neck before I discard him, forgotten, on the floor.

I look over and meet the wild-eyed gaze of Lorf. His panic has grown and I am cognizant of the source. My clan had descended the stairs behind me. Even if he had a hope to get past me, he will never escape them alive.

"This ends, Lorf," I growl. That is all that needs to be said. No other words will satisfy the vengeance burning inside

of me. For my family, for my wife. The shades of my ancestors scream for his blood from the shadows.

Fear flickers in his yellow gaze yet his face hardens with resolve. With a battle-cry, he draws up a sword and rushes toward me. I bare my tusks in a bloodied grin, and I meet him within two steps, my ax swinging with enough force to knock his sword from his grip. He stumbles and I follow through a turn, swinging Uagoral once more, burying her blade deep into his head with a crack and a sick sucking sound as I pull her free.

Lorf's body falls to my feet and my clan bellows around me, clanging their weapons as I stand over his corpse.

I look over to Sammi's cell, dreading that I may see horror in her eyes at the sight of me covered in the blood and innards of my enemies. My breath draws short when I see not disgust or fear, but happiness shining from her eyes as she strains against her cuffs. I barely notice Bodi's gore-encrusted hand shoving a set of keys in my face that he removed from the smaller orc, but I take them with an incline of my head to him in thanks.

It takes scant minutes to unlock the door and remove her cuffs. As the last cuff falls, she smiles at me, my heart lightening with that look of love I am so caught up in the moment that I do not see the swing of her arm until her fist connects with my face. I snarl and grip my nose.

"What the hell, female?"

"*That's* for not apologizing. If you had just said you were sorry for not being upfront with me so I could have enjoyed the most special moment of our lives, I could have been home long before Lorf got this stupid idea into his head," she hisses at me just before her trembling hand snakes down to grip my tunic.

She grips it tight in her fist and pulls us together in a brutal mash of mouths, her lips covering mine and her tongue plunging into my mouth, heedless of the blood on us.

Nothing. Sexier.

“And that?” I growl.

Her features melt into the sweetest smile. “That one is to say that after all this shit that’s happened, you’re forgiven—and I love you.”

I chuckle and yank her forward into my arms, taking possession of her mouth in front of all my clan, swinging her up into my arms to the delight of my kin.

\*\*\*

*Sammi*

We fall to the floor of the cell, the orcs shouting their encouragement and cries of their own pleasures. Many of the females are falling upon males, perhaps their mates or lovers. It’s a total frenzy with the heat of battle concluded. One female I see between two males, all three of them with fever-bright eyes.

Blood is absolutely everywhere, and on everyone, but if anything, it drives passions higher. No one seems to be paying attention to each other, caught as they are in their own desires. Despite at first feeling squeamish about the idea of what’s quickly becoming an orgy, the fact that not one looks my way is some comfort.

“Look only at me, mate,” Orgath growls above me.

“Kind of hard to not notice the orgy,” I pant.

“Everyone feels the need burning to be satisfied, the blood lust,” he grunts. “But here, in this moment, there is only us.”

Through the bloodbond, I can feel Orgath’s wild need to conquer and dominate, and it feeds my own desires. Nothing

cruel or ruthless, but a powerful celebration of life and death. It's intoxicating. Our mouths hungrily take each other, his tusks pushing against my jaw, streaking my skin with blood. I don't even notice the cut on my lip. I grip his cock through his breeches and Orgath growls, his hips thrusting brusquely against my hand.

He bares his tusks with a snarl and rips down his breeches, allowing his massive member to spill into my hands. It's thicker than ever, swollen from battle lust. My breasts jiggle when he grips the collar of my shirt and rips it down the middle. My nipples tighten as they hit the cold air. Orgath is focused entirely on me, his eyes aflame, and I know in that moment I am his entire world.

My pussy drenches with the lust thrumming through our bond and the endorphins rushing from a finished battle. And it's a good thing too. In his frenzy of desire, he thrusts deep within me, his hands anchoring me to the floor as his hips pound into me. His heavy balls are slapping my ass with each deep thrust. It is a fury as his hips pummel against my own, my clit dragging against the rough flesh of his groin. I orgasm with a shattering scream and jerk up against him as his teeth grip my shoulder for the last several thrusts until he comes with a violent roar, his cock springing free mid-thrust to spray the rest of his cum over my belly.

His arms grip me to him fiercely as I come down from the heights of my passion, and all too soon he scoops me up into the protection of his arms and carries me away. His shaft still pressed against me, unyielding even after that rough coming-together. I drape my arm around him as he throws me over Ethiel's flanks so we can finally go home.

## Chapter 17

*Sammi*

It'll probably take another hour and two changes of water for me to finally feel clean. Much to my amusement, Orgath elects to forego the use of the tub in favor of washing in the river.

"I am so foul with gore it will be far easier for me to scrub this filth there," he says as he brushes his nose affectionately against my cheek. I send him off with a laugh and gentle shove while I scrub myself rosy with a rough cloth.

It actually ends up only taking about forty-five minutes, but I do in fact change the water once after the worst of the grime turns loose from my body. It probably would take less time, but mid-bath all the horror of being Lorf's captive and the stress of the battle catches up to me. I spend twenty of those minutes crying until all of the shock and horror of it is rung out of me.

I am thankful that Orgath is far enough away down at the river that he doesn't come rushing in to see what's wrong. I don't want our first night at home to be all about Orgath having to comfort a weepy wife. I want it to be all about the celebrating and catching up.

It's not until I'm dry and dressed in a clean tunic that I look up and see my very naked mate standing just inside the door with a look of intense longing on his face. My eyes drink in the sight of bare gray muscle and a thick cock rapidly rising from between the heavy muscles of his thighs. He growls with lust, and I know that all of this is for me.

"Are you okay, wife?" he asks, a bit of concern lingering around his eyes. I guess I should have known that something would ripple down to him through the bond.

"I am now," I murmur, my body tingling at the sight of him. He looks me over slowly, taking note of my tightening

nipples and the arousal likely coming off my body in waves and nods to himself as if coming to a decision.

His muscles ripple as he begins to stalk toward me.

“You left me, female,” he growls lowly. “You took my heart and all that I am and left me to once again face life alone.”

I tilt my chin stubbornly. “And you withheld important information that I deserved to know before we mated.”

He halts his forward motion and his expression turns solemn. “Never with the idea to hurt you, delfass-ki. Never that. I felt a deep compulsion I could not resist to make the offer to you and did not appreciate how little you knew of orc mating traditions. I regret that you were hurt and disappointed because of this, but I do not regret making you mine that night,” he proclaims with a sudden wide grin.

I laugh. “Fair enough on that score.”

“I am, however, very unhappy that you did not seek out my protection as soon as you discovered that you were carrying my child. For that, I am thinking that you need to be slightly corrected.”

My eyebrows shoot up and I set my hands stubbornly on my hips. “Just what kind of punishment?”

He chuckles and takes a bit of rope from a drawer in the common room, winding it around his hand. His eyes narrow like a cat preparing to pounce.

I hold up a hand. “Now just wait one damn minute—”

He darts forward with a nimble grace and seizes my hand, a small slip knot sliding around one wrist and binding it to the other behind me, forcing my breasts to jut forward. I growl irritably at him, unable to ignore the surge of lust as he draws the rope down and circles it around me, knotting it at several strategic places where it rubs erotically against my skin. I peel my lips back from my teeth in a threatening grimace to egg him on.



Gods, how I have missed his strength.

He bares his tusks back at me, his eyes shining with humor and desire in equal portions. His cock is now gloriously thick and heavy against his belly. It brushes against my abs when he draws me against him, his fingers playing along my bound breasts. The grin that curves around his tusks is wicked and makes wet heat pool in between my legs, my thighs coating with my slick.

The bit of rope between my legs slides erotically as he tugs on my bindings to pull me even closer. I gasp at the sensation and wiggle against my bonds, my body brushing against Orgath's massive member. He growls and slides a thick finger down parallel with the rope, pulling it back just enough to pinch and rub at my clit counter to the light brushes of the rope along my tender flesh. My breath goes jagged straight away.

Hyper-focused on the movement of his finger and the feel of the rope against my flesh, I yelp in surprise when suddenly he turns me around, laying me out over his lap. His hand gently massages the globes of my ass.

"I've never known fear like I did when you were taken by Lorf," he mutters. "I'd just learned of our child growing safely beneath your heart and then just that quickly you and our child were gone, facing threat from him. I was terrified of losing you and our babe," he growls and his hand whips down, landing sharply on my asscheek.

His strike is no gentle or playful swat. It stings like a son of a bitch. I shriek and attempt to move my ass away from him, but he has me immobile within my bonds.

He leans down and licks the edge of my ear. "If you want to stop, tell me."

It's right there, on the tip of my tongue, but I can't manage to form the words. Something within me rebels against the idea of stopping this thing between us. Instead, my body waits at attention for his next move.

When his hand falls on my ass again, I cry out, but it triggers beneath the pain a dark spur of pleasure between my legs. The tension increases by increments with every blow from his hand, the rope shifts between my legs pushing my pleasure onward, and I raise my hips as he rains his slaps alternatively over both cheeks and the tops of my thighs. It is only when my bottom begins to burn and my throat grows raspy from my cries that Orgath's hand stills against my bottom, his fingers lovingly stroking the hot flesh.

Two thick fingers carefully slip into the folds of my flesh, stroking deeply, his short claws tapping within me as the fingers of his opposite hand roll and squeeze the nipples of my breasts. His hand skates over my belly and he sighs into my hair.

"I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you," he says in a hoarse whisper.

I whimper at the pleasure he is stirring, but my heart breaks a little at the vulnerability I hear in his voice, so at odds with the fierceness he projects to the world.

"If anything happens to you, it will be the end of me," he continues, his thumb pressing against my clit. "I wouldn't want to go on without you."

"I won't leave you," I cry out, my hips moving in time instinctively to his touch.

"Never again. I will never let you go."

"Yes," I cry, both in response to his declaration and at the sudden roll of my orgasm. He growls at the feel of my cunt clenching down on his fingers. He thrusts his fingers in and out, pushing me brutally through my orgasm before finally pulling them free.

With a tight grip on my bonds, he sits me up, facing away from him, my back and arms supported against his chest. He pulls aside the cord between my legs and my cunt is dripping so much that his cock easily pushes its way deep within my pussy.

He fills me up tightly at this angle, enough so that there's a slight burn, but oh gods I am hot and eager for him. So much so that my pussy is sucking like a vise on him as he begins to rock me on his cock.

Beneath my thighs, his hips jerk with his rapid rhythm, and only his tight grip keeps me seated firmly upon him. My cunt weeps and I pant raggedly for breath, the large veins of his member rubbing in all new ways as he shuttles in and out of me, pitching me toward a feverish height.

When his hard length pulsates and swells I'm pushed over that edge into a blistering climax, shouting out my pleasure. He follows me over shortly afterward by his roar of completion, his hot seed spewing deep within me with every jerk of its head.

My thighs quiver from exertion as I slump forward against his arms, and I feel his lips burrow against my neck. I'm physically exhausted and emotionally drained—and my ass stings now, too. We don't move for what feels like a long time as he holds me tenderly in his arms. I'm aware of him breathing me in and the gentle kisses he trails over the flesh of my neck.

Still, his whispered praise and words of love make my heart beat with happiness.

With infinite tenderness, he unties the bonds and carefully massages my limbs before his arms wrap around me and carry me into our bedroom. He lays me there on our bed, his hand stroking down my belly, his brow puckered with worry.

“I did not think—I hope we did not hurt our babe with all that.”

My eyes shift over to him in surprise and I begin to laugh. Once I get myself under control, I playfully twist one of his coarse braids and grin up at him. “My love, this baby has been on Mister Toad's Wild Ride for over a month now. What

we just did? That's nothing," I snicker and peck a kiss on his nose.

He grins down at me, his yellow eyes crinkling with mirth. "I have no idea what you are talking about, mate."

"All children do just fine on a bit of bumping and rolling," I say mischievously, my hand snaking down between us. "Come to think of it, I'm thinking it's about time for another ride." He groans as I grip his cock, his hips pushing forward eagerly.

"Sounds good to me," he grunts, pulling me close to him. "I have lost time to make up and will be happy to do so until you are boneless, replete, and satisfied."

"Mmm, I *will* hold you to that," I purr against his lips as he slides between my thighs.

Some time later we lay together, dozing languidly in each other's arms. I am officially exhausted, as promised, and Orgath is just shy of falling asleep. He rests his cheek against my belly, whispering in low tones to our baby growing inside of me. I know it's too early for the baby to be able to hear him, but I find the gesture sweet and so don't discourage it. Orgath is so pleased to be a father that it brings tears to my eyes. It's so easy to imagine him as a large, strong doting father to our children.

Pressing a kiss to my belly and tickling me with the gold metal of his septum ring, he pulls back and slides back up beside me so that he can comfortably pull me back against his chest. I have no complaints that my orc is a big-time cuddler. It's one of his more redeeming qualities as far as I'm concerned.

He threads his fingers through mine, kisses the back of my hand, and meets my eyes.

"Sammi, there is something we need to discuss. As much as this cottage is home, now that Lorf is gone, there will be pressure very soon for us to take up residence in my familial home. It is not as private as our little cottage here, but

I can promise that we will come here as often as we can to be alone with our family.”

I lean back and sigh. “Yeah, I figured that would happen when you took out Lorf. Are you disappointed that you’ll have to take up the duties of chieftain? You never showed any interest before.”

He shakes his head. “In truth, I would prefer living my life peacefully with you here for the rest of our days.” With a deep sigh, he continues, “However, I do have a responsibility to my clan, and to my ancestors—as well as to our children, who will inherit all that we have and all that we do.”

I nod thoughtfully. “It’s settled then. We’ll move into the keep and I will do my level best not to burn it down.”

Orgath chuckles and kisses my hair. “Fear not, love. The keep is fully staffed from the villages. You won’t have to worry about burning anything until we return to our cottage.”

I grin impishly. “Oh, ye of little faith.”

My mate chuckles and nips at me as I cuddle down into his embrace, drifting off into a happy sleep.

## Chapter 18

### *Orgath*

I wake with the alarming sensation of immobility. My eyes pop open and I growl as I struggle against the bonds lashing my arms down against my body. Lengths of rope bind my arms and legs.

Initially, I'm afraid that someone has set upon us during the night and my anger builds with the need to get to my mate. But as the bonds are not well tied, it will take little effort for me to break through them. I begin to flex my muscle when I hear a feminine chuckle and look over near the door where Sammi leans with a big smile on her face.

By some effort I manage to restrain my laughter at her laudable—yet poorly done—attempt to subdue me. I make a mental note to show her how to correctly tie a large male to properly restrain him. You never know when that will be necessary, after I extract a promise from her to never attempt to tie me again.

Instead, I growl fiercely at her. I am eager to play and see where this game of hers takes us. “Female, release me. Immediately.”

Sammi takes her time walking over to me but rather than release me, she crouches over my legs and smirks. “Good morning, sweetie. Is there a problem?”

“Yes, there is a problem. Why have I woken to find myself tied down?”

“Ah, that. Well, since you were so eager to tie me up last night, I thought I should return the favor. After all, you were in fact very naughty for what you did.”

I look at her with interest. I can get into this game. “Oh, have I now?” I purr.

She arches her back and plays with her nipples as she licks her full lips and eyes my stiffening cock. With a small shiver, she slides forward and climbs up my legs like a delfass in heat. I can't tear my eyes off her when her face descends, and I can feel the warm puff of her breath on my flesh. When her small pink tongue darts out to lap at the head of my member, I growl low in my chest as lust shoots through me. It takes every bit of my self-control not to snap my feeble bonds right then and there.

Her tongue plays along my length, long licks alternating with teasing flicks. I can feel sweat dripping down my muscles as I restrain myself against the fervor her coy little tongue inspires. Then her soft mouth closes around me to draw a third of my length into her mouth and I can't help snarling, my claws digging into the muscle of my leg. I can feel that familiar tightness in my pelvis and for a moment I worry that I won't be able to resist spending my release down into her throat.

Not that I object to that I idea, but I am eager to bury myself within her cunt.

I lift my hips as much as I can as she drags her tongue along the length of my cock one final time before sliding up, her legs straddling me at either side. I pant when I feel her heat settle over me as she lowers herself and I pierce her folds, burying deep within her. I clench my fists as she rocks herself on me, her hands gripping the ropes as she rides me. I arch up beneath her, attempting to hurry her pace, but she grins down at me and continues with the slow and provocative roll of her hips.

The need to shove myself into her hard and fast quickly corrodes my resolve to allow her to have her fun. My balls tingle with need and the muscles of my back tense similarly. Yet when her channel clenches around me, rippling along my length as she reaches her first peak, I am unable to hold back any longer.

With a growl, I flex the muscles of my arms and legs, breaking loose of the rope. Her eyes widen for just a moment with surprise before I flip her beneath me. She squeaks and then begins to moan as I ravish her body. I grunt with each thrust, burrowing as deep as I can with every hard thrust. She lifts her hips and sinks her teeth into my chest, making my cock jump within her. I pound into her eagerly, her nails scratching at my back and sides, her whimpers turning into screams.

When her body clenches around me hard, I feel the rip of lightning through my back and balls as cum shoots out of me, leaving me shuddering over her, still thrusting weakly as the last of it jettisons out of my body.

I roll to my side, dragging her up against me, and we lie there for a long while panting.

After a time, she looks up at me and grins. “Just how long were you able to break free?”

“Within minutes after waking.”

She scowls. “I could have sworn I tied you up good enough. Gods know I used enough rope.”

I press a kiss at the top of her head. “Rope isn’t going to do you much good if you don’t know how to tie a knot correctly.”

“Well, damn.”

I chuckle. “Do not concern yourself. When we get settled, I will teach you how to properly restrain an enemy.” I lift her chin and give her my most serious glower as I say, “So long as you promise to never use it on me.”

“Of course not, dear,” she says sweetly.

“Swear to it.”

She huffs. “I promise.”

It only takes two days to relocate our personal possessions from the cottage to my ancestral home, and only



because we always find a reason to interrupt our work with lustier pursuits. We aren't in any hurry, but it does take a visit from Erra to motivate us to finish packing our things into the small wagon I'd brought from the village.

"I thought maybe you had died of some grievous wound out here," Erra says, her lips quirking despite the scowl she is leveling us with. "Imagine my surprise to find you two on each other like a pair of vorkis in rut."

I snort at her and place the last trunk of my wealth into the wagon. The berol ox, one of a few bovines native to our realm—and really the only ones we have available since no one has raided Ov'Ge for cattle in ages—with his four horns and long shaggy fur, is already hitched to the wagon, happily chewing on a clump of grass he pulled up. Ethiel flicks his tail impatiently from where he is crouched, saddled and ready to go.

Sammi sets her hands on her hips looking aghast at the load. "I can't believe we had all of this in the cottage. Where in the world was it all at?"

I wink at her and bare my tusks in a playful grin. "Most of these trunks are the wealth of our family, and orcs are ingenious at hiding things we don't want anyone else to find."

She shakes her head in disbelief, her eyes wide. "I guess so."

\*\*\*

*Sammi*

It's a little odd going from a humble cottage to something that looks like a miniature castle with a small staff of villagers, but everyone's been so welcoming, and that's helped me warm up to the situation. My biggest fear was

arriving and being hated on sight by everyone and treated like an outsider every time I set foot out of our room.

Not that our room isn't almost as big as the cottage, but still, that tension was something I wanted to avoid. It's only a small staff which, makes the whole thing far less intimidating.

The housekeeper and cook are the only females employed, with younger males—their sons it seems—at hand to do supervised cleaning a couple times a week. The other males stationed there make up a small guard. I came into this dreading a staff the size of what powered a medieval castle but was delighted to find that most of our needs we'll be able to take care of on our own.

Our bedroom is large with its own hearth. A small fire crackles within it, casting the room in a soft glow and making the space comfortably warm. The shutters are open on the window, letting in the light which falls over the bed, but I note a number of oil lamps set about to provide light on darker days and when the sun goes down.

The housekeeper grins as I look on in shameless slack-jawed wonder at the room. She's not particularly tall for an orc—I believe she said she's half-dwarven—and her hair is more coppery than dark while her skin tone is a light shade of gold.

“I hope everything is to your liking. If there is anything amiss, just let someone know. I had the boys change out the mattress yesterday, and there is clean bedding for you as well. I can arrange to have a bath brought in after the evening meal if you like.”

Orgath nods with a low grunt, busy storing what looks like no fewer than twenty different blades in a large wooden display case. His giant war-ax hangs just to the left of it, the sharp edge catching the light of the sun. When it looks like he isn't going to say anything, I jump in.

“That sounds great, thank you,” I say, giving Orgath a meaningful look which he pointedly ignores. No teaching an old dog a new trick in this case, it seems.

The housekeeper, not in the least put off by my silent mate, winks at me and pulls the door shut behind her as she leaves. I flop on the bed, playing with the collar around my neck as I watch him diligently work. All of our personal trunks were unloaded and put away, and those that held Orgath's inheritance and personal wealth were moved to the treasury.

For the first time since waking up to Orgath's company and in a foreign realm, I'm at a loss of what to do with my time.

I lean back and notice deep grooves in the headboard above my head. With a finger I poke at them and notice that they are, in fact, carved holes just big enough to slide a rope or chain through. That certainly provides for some interesting opportunities. Speaking of...

“Hey, Orgath?”

“Hm?”

“Why haven't you ever done the whole bondage bit with me before?”

His hand immediately stops moving, and he looks over at me with his eyebrows raised. “What do you mean?” he growls.

I really hope I don't end up insulting him.

“That thing with the rope. Not that I'm objecting—it's hot as hell. It's just that, when humans think of orcs, we usually think of a bit more kink. Sex dungeons, stockades... that sort of thing.”

Orgath sits back on his haunches and starts to chuckle.

“Here I thought I am being considerate, and my mate is complaining because I have not broken out all the orcish toys and games.”

“You have sex toys?” I say, my curiosity now fully engaged.

He snorts and laughs harder as he pushes up to his feet. Within minutes, he has me caged on the bed, running his cheek against mine, his tusk brushing my jaw.

“Many orcs enjoy more aggressive sex play,” he admits. “Often it is used only between mated pairs to minimize some of the risks, although in times past it was used with some select war captives.” He looks at me contemplatively. “You are very small. Honestly, I worry about hurting you if I took you into the Twilight Room.”

“You have a whole room in this place for sex play? Hot damn!” I say, already wet at the idea. I am assuming that is what he means by a twilight room. I am going to completely ignore the bullshit about my size.

He huffs out a breath and gives me an amused look.

I waggle my eyebrows at him flirtatiously when what can only be a massive orc fist bangs at our door.

“Enter.” Orgath growls, his irritation at being interrupted showing.

“Chieftain, there are elves in the great room demanding to meet with you,” the guard says deferentially, but his scowl communicates just how little he enjoys being ordered around by elves.

“Those elves sure are quick,” I observe, a moue of distaste pulling at my mouth.

Orgath sighs and runs his hand over his face. “I suppose it had to happen sooner or later. I am sure that they have had a close eye on everything that has been going on with our clan. Very well. I will be done briefly.”

“Yes, chieftain,” he inclines his head and walks away, the floors echoing from the thudding impact of his heavy booted feet.

I clap my hands together. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

“No, mate,” he shoots me down. “You will stay here in our rooms while I deal with the elves.”

“The hell I will!” I glare at my mate, not feeling quite as warm and fuzzy at this moment with my bossy spouse.

“Sammi—”

“Not a chance in hell. I’m coming whether you like it or not. I don’t care if I have to climb out the window and come through the front door.”

He shoots me an amused look. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

“Damn skippy,” I snap.

“All right, come on then. But you are to stay clear of them. I don’t trust elves, nor do any of my clan.”

“You got it, sweet cheeks,” I say beaming up at him.

I have to jog to keep up with his ground-eating pace, but there’s no way he is leaving me behind.

A small envoy of elves is waiting at one end of the great room near the entrance with a faintly bored expression on their faces. More than one has his nose wrinkled in distaste that just makes me instantly dislike them on a personal level. The great room is really an oversized common room with a giant hearth, but it differs quite a bit from those in most homes by the pair of large stone chairs on a dais flush against the wall. The stairs we take from our room empty out just to the side of them.

Orgath firmly grips my hand in his and pulls me up beside him as we go and take our places. Once seated, he leans forward on his throne, one arm draped across his knee, and narrows his eyes at our visitors.

“You lot don’t waste any time,” he observes testily.

The taller among the elves moves forward. He wears a bejeweled crown; I am guessing this must be the elf king, deigning to bring himself from his lauded court. I barely resist

rolling my eyes at all the overdressed finery on him. At one time, I might have been dazzled, but living among the orcs I've become accustomed to their simpler lives. At his side is a younger elf I recall from the cottage—uh, Irhindral, I believe. He seems to be sulking as the king grins with a wide, sly smile and extends his hands outward in a gesture of some kind of overdone royal greeting.

“Chieftain Orgath, it is a pleasure to see you on your ancestral seat. News came of Lorf’s defeat and I hastened to greet and congratulate you. As you know, our court has long had a peaceful relationship with your clan. Your people secure the mountain portal and keep guard, and that is worth its weight in gold. And I wished to see with my own eyes your human mate. Ah, she is a lovely creature indeed,” he murmurs, ignoring Orgath’s obvious bristling at his perusal.

His strange teal eyes move over to me with an almost slimy regard that makes me want to shudder. I restrain myself and manage a polite smile, not unaware of the way the orc guard, catching the mood of their chieftain, shifts in agitation around us.

“Sammi is a treasured mate,” Orgath agrees at length, his eyes narrowing with caution. “She and our unborn child are a blessing to me.” If I’m not mistaken, the king’s eyes brighten with interest and it makes my skin crawl. “I appreciate the show of support, King Ovorhandol. You mention the duties of our clan, which we unerringly carried out even under the rule of Lorf, but it makes me wonder if there is anything else that brings you among our clan? A visit from the Elf King of Sehriel is certainly an unheard-of thing—even in a case of shift of power. I do not recall seeing you or any of your court when Lorf put his stranglehold upon our clan.”

*Oh snap!* I want to crow with delight.

The subtle tightening of the king’s jaw is minute and momentary, but I catch sight of it before it disappears beneath his coolly controlled mask.

“There *is* something I hoped to address,” he finally says. Orgath raises an eyebrow but waits patiently for him to continue. Ovorhandol grits his teeth but smoothly continues, “The fae kings and elven courts have come together and have decided to open all the portals to the human realm. The portal outside of your village will open up for the first time in generations to allow easy trade and travel.”

“That is fortuitous news,” Orgath says slowly, his eyes shifting to me for a moment. I can tell that, like me, he’s waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The elf king’s grin widens. “Indeed. However, the Sehriel court is concerned that there may be too much sudden interest by other species in your portals. We do not wish to cause alarm and panic among the humans. We have come to ask that you restrict travel through your territory.”

I can’t seem to keep my mouth shut a second longer. They don’t wish to cause alarm and panic? My left foot. This whole thing stinks.

“That would include elves too, yes?” I can’t resist asking, my lips twisting into a polite smile.

His eyes narrow in irritation at me. “Well, no, my lady. Elves are not like others you might encounter in these realms. There is no reason to restrict our movements.”

My eyebrows wing up. “So, you are saying that you want unfettered access to the humans and human realm without competition?”

Ovorhandol’s smile briefly morphs into a snarl before vanishing once more behind a serene look. “Don’t concern yourself with such things. This conversation is best handled between experienced males and beings and not... common mates,” he finishes with faux-kindness.

“Excuse me, your most high and haughtiness, this *does* concern me. I’m human and you’re speaking of my world and my people as if we’re a commodity for elves, and you’re trying to get my mate to block others from mingling with us. I

do have a voice in this, and I do find this whole thing to be disgustingly fucked up,” I state firmly.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Orgath sit back on his throne, his arms crossing over his massive chest and a smug grin on his face. Of course, he is delighted that I am turning my sharp tongue on someone else. I almost want to laugh if I not for the fact I’m busy putting these stuck-up dicks in their place.

“Human, learn your place,” he snarled, pacing forward not more than an inch or two, but enough to make every orc in the room suddenly bristle with weapons pointed in his direction. Orgath too is no longer seated but rather is standing with his feet parted in an aggressive stance, a long knife pulled from his belt.

“You will treat my wife with respect,” he snarls. Short, sweet and to the point. I do so love my mate.

“Furthermore,” Orgath continues as he slowly strides toward the elves, “my wife is correct in her insights. We do not trust you to not utilize the agreement of the courts of your own selfish greed. Orcs will be no part of such insanity. Instead, we will defend any who wish access to our portals, and do so without mercy to any who may seek to stop them. Now you and your court can remove yourselves from my presence immediately.”

At that, I gleefully throw both arms up like a referee. “*BOOM*, baby!”



## Chapter 19

### *Orgath*

The elves don't look happy. I don't really care either. What I do care about is that they dare to threaten *my* mate. For a moment, I regret leaving Uagoral up in the room, but perhaps it is a good thing. I am too angry to think rationally, and I recognize that fact. If I attack the king of Sehriel, I will be provoking war with the elves. That is not necessarily a *bad* thing, but I am not of mind to do that just yet. That doesn't mean I can't scare them a little.

My attention is so focused on the Sehrielians that it is only from their disgusted expressions that I take note of the presence of another in the room. I turn my head in the direction of their scrutiny and notice that Cavek leans against the entrance, tossing an apple in the air as he grins at my disgruntled guests. After a few deft tosses, he catches the apple mid-air and brings it to his mouth with a loud crunch.

"Don't mind me," he says around a mouthful of fruit, his eyes gleaming in the low light of the room.

"A troll," hisses Irhindral. He turns to me with an affronted look. "You would permit a troll in your territory?"

I shrug, unconcerned. "Why not? Unlike those from the elven court, Cavek has been a pleasant guest and makes himself useful."

"Trolls are foul brutes," the elf insists. "They take nothing seriously and are loathsome in their habit and manner. Nothing more than cutthroats, brigands, and beasts."

"More so than an orc?"

"Absolutely," he says. "At least the strength and honor of an orc makes up for your many other flaws you possess by nature's cruel design."

My laughter grows like a thunderous rumble, though I can sense Sammi fuming at the other end of our bloodbond.

She can't quite appreciate the humor of the situation like we can. All she hears is the insult. I bestow an affectionate smile on my mate, and she relaxes and responds in kind, before turning a fierce scowl once more on the elf king and his small collection of courtiers.

"I'll thank you to leave now, on your own power if you like—if not, I am certain my guards will be happy to escort you out."

Laughter spread to the guard now, tusks flashing in malicious humor. The elves, cognizant of just how outnumbered they are, draw back, obviously bristling from the insult. I grin and return to my throne, pulling my wife into my lap as I do so, demonstrating in the clearest way I know just how unconcerned I am with any threat from them.

Ovorhandol, ever the courtly king, swallows back his anger and gives a brisk nod of displeasure. My grin merely widens in response. I know that the elves do not wish to risk war with orcs.

The last war my clan fought against Sehriel was a long and bloody affair. They may disdain us for our crude appearance and simple ways, but the elves learned well that orcs are nothing to trifle with. They also depend on us to keep Ov'Gorg safe from any encroaching force from Ov'Ge, and they will need that even more now that the council of the fae kings opened the roads fully between our worlds.

The Sehrielians spin about with a flourish of their cloaks and proceed with their usual pomp toward the door. They collectively tense with agitation when Cavek chuckles and barely makes room for them to pass. I don't want to encourage the bad habits of the troll, but I can't help the faint quirk of my lips.

Sammi leans against my chest. "I can't believe it."

A flash of panic sparks in my thoughts. Will Sammi leave Ov'Gorg now that she has the opportunity to safely go home? Will she leave me?

I press my nose against the top of her head, inhaling her sweet scent. “Do you wish to go home, Sammi?”

She stills, but then looks up at me, her face lit up with a smile. “*This* is my home, Orgath—with you.” She pauses and bites her lip. “I would like to go see my family, though. Everyone must be so worried about me.”

I let out a breath, not realizing until that moment that I’d been holding it. I grin down at her. Such a small and reasonable request. I can fulfill this one little thing for her.

“Certainly, we must go to see your family,” I agree, but then hesitate. “I should warn you that I won’t let you go by yourself. I and at least four of my trusted guard will go with you. I won’t risk the safety of you or our child.”

“Well, that should make Sunday dinner with Mom interesting,” she says with a laugh. She leans forward and presses a brief kiss against my lips, pulling back before I have the opportunity to respond and deepen it. I grin to myself, because I know that is mostly due to her shyness about certain displays of passion with an audience.

“Sounds good to me, babe,” she declares. “When do we leave?”

I mentally do some calculations. “I think I can have the guard prepared in a day. I know Bodi will like to go, and likely Erra if I know my cousins.”

“I shall go as well, with your permission. It would be good for me to gain some direct insights of the humans to return home with,” Cavek offers cheerfully.

I narrow my eyes at him, but it is not an unreasonable request.

“Very well,” I growl. “But do not be mistaken, I will be keeping my eye on you. Be aware that you will be following all orders that I give while we are there.”

He inclines his head in acknowledgment with an almost unsettling grin. I do not know if I trust the troll, but as

long as he agrees to follow my direction, I cannot fault his presence among us.

Sammi snorts with disbelief but doesn't say anything. From the way her eyes are narrowed on him, I suspect she will also be watching him closely.

“Wait, how are you guys going to communicate with everyone?”

“I have that covered,” Cavek says, pulling out an amulet from a bag at his hip. “Courtesy of my father's court, plenty of enchanted translation talismans. You will be able to speak and understand the spoken language of whatever humans you encounter.”

Sammi's eyes go wide and she claps her hands together. “You just might be useful yet!”

I incline my head in thanks, but my patience is dwindling. I want my wife in the privacy of our own room, as of now. Eager to distract my wife from any preoccupation with other males, I sweep her up in my arms.

“Come, wife, we may as well prepare for our visit with your family. Two days should be enough, yes?”

“A week,” she says, smirking up at me from against my chest. I grunt in distaste. I don't know if I care to be among humans for *that* long.

“Four days,” I counter-offer. Surely, she will not require any longer than that.

“Orgath,” she says, a note of warning in her voice. She then sighs and wrinkles her nose at me. “Five days, and not a day less.”

“Sammi—”

“Five... days...”

“Very well. Five days. We leave at sundown on the fifth day.”

“Not before the evening meal.”

“Fine, but not a moment later.”

“I can live with that,” she says so primly that I bark out a laugh.

\*\*\*

*Sammi*

The portal—this being my first time ever seeing one—did not look quite like I expected. I’m not exactly sure *what* I expected, to be honest. At some point in their history, the clan had erected a stone arch. The few times I noticed it, I thought it was something that marked the passage of time like some authorities suspect of Stonehenge marking the summer solstice. Standing in front of it now, I find out that it’s actually the portal around which the village had been constructed.

The entire center of the arch fills with a shimmering purple mist.

I lean back from my position on Ethiel and whisper to Orgath, “How do we know where this thing is going to spit us out?”

“We tell it before we enter. The wild portal in the mountains is far less predictable where it sends us, though it always returns us unerringly home, for which we must be thankful, but these fae portals are precise.”

“Well... that’s handy.” That thoroughly explains why Orgath was unable to guarantee returning me safely home before. Anyone who goes through the mountain portal would literally have no idea which mountain range they ended up exiting into. That’s a lot of mountains to risk being stranded in.

“So will this dump us in downtown Anchorage or outside the city?”

“I have no way to guess,” Orgath calmly replies.

Gods, please let it be outside the city. People are going to have a cow if a small company of orcs and one troll appear on Fifth Avenue. I chew my lip uncomfortably.

“Maybe we should leave the delfass cats here in Ov’Gorg,” I say.

Orgath shakes his head adamantly. “No, that would leave us in a vulnerable position.”

“Orgath, it’s going to freak out any human in a fifty-foot radius to see four giant cats.”

“Mate, it is a good thing that I have ceased trying to figure some of these idioms of yours out long ago, else I fear it would make me go crazy before our first child is born. Still, I think I may get your meaning in this case, but let me ask you: will it do more harm than four orcs and a troll already will?”

I consider that. He really has a good point. I sigh.

“Right, terrifying humans it is then. Let’s get the terror train moving,” I say with a laugh. I hope my younger brother doesn’t come out swinging that silly barbarian sword he bought. I don’t even think the edges are sharp... then again, it may give the orcs a good laugh. Bonding moment?

I am grateful when the portal opens up inside the Chugiak Park just within city limits. I know this area. I grew up in this part of town and can make out the trails, and it takes less than twenty minutes for us to make our way to my old neighborhood.

Probably the most uncomfortable twenty minutes of my life.

No one screamed, thank the gods, but there were plenty of wide-eyed stares when we exited the thick line of trees. I suspect that the fae have already made themselves widely known to the world and so now everyone is more or less in a stunned state of shock.

Bodi sits near us on his delfass, his fingers inching around the pommel of his sword. He catches the dirty look I

direct at him and pulls his hand back to a safer distance from the hilt. We *so* do not need anyone overreacting. Especially since I'm fairly certain that it won't take much to stir every human in the city into a massive panic, even if it were an innocent gesture.

"For such a small species, they certainly are brave staring at us so intently," Erra murmured from my other side. She's not making any move toward her weapons, but I notice the tight clutch of her fingers on the scruff of her delfass.

I know part of her anxiety is due to leaving behind Orgul. Neither is comfortable being apart when they are accustomed to covering each other's backs in battle, but Erra had insisted that her mate stay behind and look after their home and business. She wouldn't even hear any suggestion that she remain behind.

"Erra, it is not too late to return home," I say in a whisper so that no one else will overhear. I don't wish to hurt her pride. "No one will think less of you if you wish to remain with your mate and keep an eye on the village."

She looks side-long at me and snorts with a rueful grin. "Oh, you won't get rid of me that easily. I am not concerned for Orgath here—he can handle his own. But I won't allow any chance of one of these humans getting the idea to try and harm you since you are the most vulnerable one in our company."

Orgath's arms tighten around me, and I can feel his anxiety through our bloodbond giving truth to her words. I am his most vulnerable point for anyone to attack. I know without needing to ask that he'd surrender anything—do anything—to keep me safe if it came to that. I sink back into the warmth of his body, allowing my cloak to conceal more of me, and his own cloak to partially obscure me hidden against his body.

When our company arrived before my parent's house, true to my worst prediction, my youngest brother, all whip-wire lean muscle of youth, comes barreling out of the house, his broadsword replica raised above his head with a battle-cry

that would almost do an orc proud. Every member of our group immediately pulls their weapons, preparing to strike back defensively. In alarm, I throw back my hood and shout at my idiot younger sibling.

“Jake, put down the godsdamned sword before you get yourself killed. I swear, if you don’t end up cutting yourself with that dull ass sword, and these guys don’t kill you, I will murder you myself!”

My brother slides to a wide-eyed stop, staring at me like he’s seeing a ghost.

“Sammi, is that really you?”

“Of course it’s me, you big dummy!”

He drops his sword at his feet and comes rushing up. I squeeze my fingers on Orgath’s wrist and he begrudgingly sheathes his ax, signaling the others to do so as well. My brother hesitates a bit as he stares at Ethiel, who looses a light growl, but manages to scurry around at a safe distance to my side.

“Sammi, we thought you were dead! Travis told us he went to meet you at the cabin you rented, but you disappeared, leaving behind all your food and possessions.”

My jaw drops. “That lying little *worm*! He left me up there by myself so he could play with some girl he met, and I got snowed in with only two days’ worth of supplies. If Orgath hadn’t found me and saved me, I would’ve died from exposure and starvation.”

Jake shifts from foot to foot. “That’s not what he’s been telling the family, Sammi. Mom’s had him over every Sunday for dinner and more or less adopted him as if he were family ‘cause of all this.” He scrubs his hand against the back of his neck and almost seems to grin. “Boy, Mom is going to lose it.”

His eyes zero in on Orgath’s possessive hold around my abdomen and he clears his throat. “Ah, are you going to introduce me to your... friend?” I catch a subtle gleam of eagerness in his eyes. Of course, my brother who’s obsessed



with World of Warcraft and D&D is going to be enthralled with the orcs.

“I am no friend,” Orgath growls, offended. “I am her mate, bloodbonded.”

My brother frowns slightly, looking from Orgath to me, likely trying to figure out what he means. I pray that he doesn’t do anything stupid.

“I should probably challenge you for her honor,” he says, thrusting his chest out.

Yep, and there it is.

I don’t even have to look. I can feel everyone staring at him. Hell, I’d be staring at him too, but growing up with him has made this sort of shit cease to surprise me.

“Jake,” I groan, covering my face with one hand in embarrassment.

Orgath chuckles deeply, and I can feel his chest resonate with laughter behind my back. He pats Uagoral at his side and gives my brother an amused look.

“That is very brave to want to protect your sister, but she is my wife now and mine to protect. Are you sure you wish to fight it out with me, boy?”

“Jake,” I hiss, “stop this lunacy right now. You know damn well you aren’t going to be able to take out my husband. Orgath can murder you quicker than it would take me to dismount. Don’t make me come down there.”

He blinks at me and grins reluctantly. “Sorry, sis. Yeah, thanks anyway... uh, Orgath, but on second thought, I don’t have a death wish.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” I mutter.

Orgath laughs again and hugs me against him. I lovingly pat his arm in silent thanks for not dismembering my baby brother.

Jake begins to chortle. “I can’t wait to see what Mom thinks of this!”

On second thought, murdering him doesn’t sound like such a bad idea...

## Chapter 20

### *Sammi*

My brother doesn't waste any time running back up the steps, shouting at the top of his lungs, "*Mom, Sammi is home!*"

I wince because this is not exactly how I envisioned my reunion with my family. In under three minutes, my mother comes flying out the door in a blind rush. I suspect she doesn't even see the company I've brought home with me.

"Samantha Vera Alexander, *where have you been?!*" she yells and then comes to a screeching halt when she finally sees exactly what's standing on her front lawn. Her jaw drops open, her mouth only twitching as she attempts to find her words again.

"Momma, this is my husband, Orgath, and his guard."

"Oh my..." she finally croaks before falling to the ground.

Well, shit.

My dad just stares at us wide-eyed as he silently rouses my mother. She groans, a hand going to her head as she blinks her eyes over at me.

"Hi, Momma," I say, wiggling my fingers at her. "Surprise."

With Dad's help, she manages to sit up. She watches me warily. "Samantha, I don't understand. What have you done to yourself? Travis said you disappeared on him and here you return home with monsters, and... good gods, what have you done to your face?"

Everyone around me tenses. *Monsters...* So not starting things on the right foot.

"Momma, this is my family. They are orcs, not monsters. And this," I repeat, hooking my thumb, "is my

husband, Orgath.”

“Husband? What about Travis? How can you do that to him after he grieved for you all these weeks?”

“Do what to him, exactly? Momma, he left me up there so he can hook up with a hot piece of ass. Jake told me what lies Travis has been filling your head with, and he’s completely full of shit! Convenient for him to not come and look for four days.”

“So you went and married an... erm... orc?”

I jut my chin out stubbornly. “I sure did and would do it again in a heartbeat. Orgath here is far more honorable, kinder, and a better lover than Travis ever was.”

Orgath makes a noise behind me that is caught somewhere between a jealous growl and a snort of laughter. His large hand squeezes my hip and I feel him nuzzle my neck. My mother watches, still looking a bit pale, but my dad manages a shaky smile.

“It’s okay, Lucy,” he murmurs to my mom. “It is nice to meet you... ah... Orgath. Welcome to the family,” he says.

My whole family jumps back when Orgath bares his tusks in a pleased smile. “It is a pleasure to meet Sammi’s human family at last. These behind me, with the exception of the troll, are my clan-kin.”

“Troll...” Momma says weakly, her hand clutched firmly at her breast. Dad adjusts his glasses and takes a nervous look at the lot of them but keeps his smile politely plastered on his face. Can always count on Dad to play the peacekeeper.

Cavek, for his part, grins at Momma and sweeps an elegant bow her way. “It is a pleasure to meet you, dear lady. Certainly, human women are fairer far more than even elves to see such beauty in mother and daughter alike.”

Momma blushes and lets out a small giggle, allowing Dad to relax significantly, though I did catch him frowning for

a split second at the flirtatious troll.

“Oh, oh! Yes, welcome to you too. Please, why don’t you come inside?” He helps Momma stand and braces her weight slightly as they walk together back into the house. Orgath dismounts and pulls me from Ethiel’s back, ordering our delfass to go lie in the shade. Ethiel flicks his tail and wanders over to Momma’s prized lilac bush, curling under it. The other delfass follow him as the orcs dismount, and I silently hope that the large felines don’t damage the bush, else I will never hear the end of it.

All of my companions from Ov’Gorg look around with wide eyes as they enter my parents’ house. I’m sure it looks quite alien to them, with the electric lights, thick carpeting, and state of the art electronics. Bodi leans over to peer at the television with an old rerun of *Star Trek: Next Generation* playing on it. His eyes narrow on Commander Worf speculatively.

“What is this strange magic box, and these strange beings the likes of which I have never seen?” he growled, looking at the back of the screen, trying to determine the source of the image. “Though this male seems to be strong and certain as any orc. I approve.”

“It’s a television. Be careful not to damage it. It’s not magic but uses technology to play recorded images on a screen for us to watch. That’s not real—it’s an actor wearing makeup. He’s playing the part of a fictional species called Klingon.”

“Ah, I understand this concept. We have many plays during the festivals,” he says with a slow nod of his head. “A clever use of your technology to bring it into your home to enjoy at any time.”

Orgath snorts as the orcs crowd around the set. Cavek, meanwhile, proceeds to poke at the upholstered loveseat before delicately lowering himself onto it. With a surprised sound, he shifts and leans back comfortably. My mate watches him for a moment before turning his attention back to me. I clear my throat, drawing ten sets of eyes from the television.

“Guys, all weapons need to be stowed in the shoe crates by the door. I don’t think Momma will appreciate you walking around here armed to the teeth.”

As one, they all grimace but move to do as I ask.

I eye Orgath. “You too, my love.”

For a moment he looks like he is about to argue, but then stalks off with an irritated grunt to store all his knives and his prized battleax in one of several crates. I blow out a breath and turn a bright smile on my mother.

“So I couldn’t help but notice that people aren’t exactly running for the hills screaming at seeing orcs. What gives?”

Jake laughs from a stool beside the breakfast bar. “Oh, you missed out on the epic stuff that went down! About two weeks ago, all TV sets went haywire and suddenly we’re all watching this show—a projection spell they said—that addresses all of humanity. They told us that they’re joining our realms back together as nature intended.

“They also said that any hostilities will be met with ‘unequivocal force.’ Seeing all your orcs just probably made that much more real. I’ll bet my entire week of wages that your guys will show up on the news tonight. As it stands right now, no one’s going to lift a finger against anyone coming through the portals. Even the president has come on asking all humans to stand down and treat our neighbors respectfully.”

“That jackass? He’d be the last one I would have suspected to say that.”

“Yep.”

An uneasy feeling settled into the pit of my stomach. It seems like the fae court wasted no time communicating with Ov’Ge, and we only found out well after the fact. Worse, it’s probably only a matter of time before someone tries something completely hairbrained.

But for the time being, my guy will be safe here, and that was my biggest concern. No one’s going anywhere

without me or one of my family members close by, though. A lone orc or troll may be too tempting of a target.

“Well, as long as no one goes anywhere by themselves and doesn’t tempt anyone to try something stupid, I think we will be okay. We’ll just take reasonable precautions. Orc-human buddy teams, maybe.” I say this last part mostly for Orgath’s benefit.

Orgath settles his weight against the counter and frowns. “We will remain on our guard. As long as humans are reasonable, we won’t have to defend ourselves. But we will not hesitate to do so if they attack us.”

Momma blanches and I rush to change the subject.

“Well now that it’s settled—what’s for dinner?”

“Trust you to show up in time for Sunday dinner,” Jake chortles.

Momma purses her lips and looks at her unexpected house guests critically. “David,” she says to Dad, “you’re going to have to go to the store and get four more boxes of noodles and five cans of tomato sauce, I think. I am going to break out every pan I have and see if we can feed this horde.”

“Mom, you’re picking up the lingo!” Jake praises, and she rolls her eyes at him.

Momma really can be a good sport when she chooses to be. Right up until the point she levels Orgath with a suspicious glare and begins to grill him.

“So, Orgath, tell me about what you do—”

I turn pleading eyes to my father.

I could kiss Dad when he clears his throat and says, “Orgath, perhaps you might like to come to the grocery store with me.”

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## *Orgath*

I am trying to ignore the small, furry creature that is bouncing around yapping at me. The noise reminds me of a high-pitched mimicry of the elvish hounds, but its size makes it unlikely that they are at all related. Despite its ridiculous size, it seems to think itself some kind of fierce beast.

Erra stares at it and mutters, “Do you think they raise those beasts for eating?”

I grimace. I certainly hope not. It doesn’t look appetizing, but you never know with humans.

I am distracted from my speculation over the tiny snapping monstrosity when Sammi’s mother asks me a question. I frown. What does she mean, what do I do? I don’t understand what exactly she wants to know. I breathe, I fight, I eat...

My mate turns and is making a soft pleading expression to her sire, who immediately offers me the opportunity to retreat. Grateful, I take it.

“Yes, I would like to see this... grocery store?”

Sammi leans in and says in a low voice, “It’s the human equivalent of a market.”

“Ah. Yes, your market. I wouldn’t mind seeing a human market.”

My mate’s mother, Lucy, picks up the foul little beast and makes soft noises at it, which makes the animal’s long skinny tongue start to swipe out at her face. I curl my lip in distaste. I certainly hope that Sammi doesn’t intend to bring any such creature into our home.

The market is of the like I have never seen. Erra elected to come with us and let the males surround the television thing and watch a sporting event called football,



according to Sammi's older brother who'd recently arrived before we departed. She lingered at my side looking upon all the variance of produce with awe.

“And you can get any of this at any time of the year, from all of your world?” she asks again, uncertain if the male is mocking her ignorance.

David nods as he focuses on a crudely scrawled list in his hand. “Yes, it can vary sometimes throughout the year, but most things we can get imported from somewhere.”

“Such a marvel! Perhaps we will do well trading with the humans,” she spoke just loud enough for me to hear. I nod thoughtfully. Certainly, our people would enjoy such wide variety unlike anything we'd seen before. The human world has come far in such trades through Ov'Ge.

It seems like an entire market—like that of our village—is squeezed into one large building rather than enjoying the sales of numerous vendors. I am not sure how I like this. It doesn't seem to give much opportunity for their community to share in the wealth.

I look at hundreds of loaves of bread set out in the bakery as we pass and also find myself bothered at this sight. How can the people of this large village possibly eat all that bread before it wastes? David grabs a long narrow loaf from a bin, and for the first time I can appreciate the frustration that my Sammi must have felt. The talismans provided by Cavek allow us to understand and speak the standard language of any human we come into contact with, but they do nothing for any ability to read said language.

I sigh and patiently follow behind David as he continues to throw items into the strange metal cart that he pushes. I do not recognize any of these things. I come to a standstill, however, when he pulls up in front of a section of clear wrapped meat. He pulls out several packages of ground meat, but I am distracted by the numerous packages sitting out on a shelf that blows cold air over them.

“What is this?”

“Uh, the meat section,” he says with confusion.

“Why is all of this meat just sitting here? Where is your butcher? I would have words with him for such wastefulness.”

He lets out a short, nervous laugh. “We don’t have a butcher. All of this meat is shipped to us from a large production facility where they butcher the animals.”

My mouth drops open in surprise. “How many animals are slaughtered for this display?”

He shrugs uncomfortably. “Maybe hundreds.”

I pinch my lips together and exchange a look with Erra, who is frowning with disapproval.

“Such waste is not done among orcs,” she says stiffly. “Our butcher takes orders the day before from our villagers and then allots how many beasts he needs to fill the orders. We would never kill so many of our animals.” She looks around slowly. “I like many of these conveniences you have, but it seems to me that Orgath is correct. Humans tend toward excessive wastefulness. A pity.”

David flushes a little but proceeds to go into a lengthy discourse on modern meat curing and freezing methods. It is surprisingly informative. As he concludes, he rubs at the back of his neck and asks, “Do orcs have any problem with beer?”

Erra’s somber expression cracks with a broad smile. “Now that is a passion that any orc will be pleased to share.”

He relaxes and with a little grin gestures for us to follow him as he pays for the foodstuffs. Afterward, he leads us into another adjacent building where they sold all manner of bottles and strange metal cans chilled. He grabs a large box of these cans.

“This is how we package most of our beer.”

I stare at it. It seems a mighty small portion. I could probably drink the entire contents of one of these metal vessels in one mighty swallow. Erra points to a tall reddish bottle.

“What is that.”

David raises his eyebrows and peers at the bottle she is indicating. “Uh, looks like pink champagne.”

“What is that?”

“Champagne is sort of like wine with fizzy bubbles. I believe this kind is supposed to be sweet.”

“Intriguing. I will acquire this,” she digs into her coin pouch and withdraws a silver coin. “Is this enough in exchange?”

David flushes and looks at the young male tending behind the counter who is staring with rapt fascination at Erra, specifically looking downward toward her chest. I growl threateningly; after all she is my cousin, and her mate is not there to voice his displeasure. The male’s eyes jerk over to me and he pales. Erra huffs in exasperation.

“Erm, no problem, Erra. I’ll cover it,” David says weakly and adds the bottle to our collection along with a bottle of something he calls Johnny Walker Red Label, a whiskey, whatever that is. Erra gifts him her most gracious smile, but he seems to take a few steps back out of discomfort.

Humans are odd creatures. I am glad I am so fortunate in my mate.

## Chapter 21

### *Orgath*

Sammi is in the kitchen helping her mother, and although they seem to be arguing good-naturedly, there are unfamiliar smells wafting from their strange stove. Erra is in there as well, mostly because she is fascinated with their cooking appliances.

I retreat to the living room, because with an orc and two humans, there is just not enough room left for anyone else in that small space. The males are no longer watching the football event. Jake has put in a movie called *The Lord of the Rings*, and the orcs are collectively jeering at the human concept of orcs.

Naturally, the elves are presented as beautiful creatures, and unlike real elves these seem to possess little guile and lack a predatory nature. Yet orcs are twisted creatures made by magic, and at heart are evil beasts. The whole thing makes me sneer in disgust.

Jake, noticing the mounting discontent, quickly switches out the movie for one he calls *World of Warcraft*. These orcs are more palatable, although not by much. Still, it gave us some sort of redeeming qualities. All the same, the bias against orcs as savage brutes is not lost upon any of us. The only good thing is that humans at least have some idea of our superior strength and capability in battle.

At some point I notice that Cavek is no longer with us. I look in the few rooms I would suspect him to be holed up in before approaching the kitchen.

“Delfass-ki, have you seen Cavek?”

Sammi looks up from a pot which she is stirring something red with a long spoon and frowns. “I don’t know. Momma, have you seen Cavek?” she calls across the kitchen.

Lucy turns around holding a pot with many holes through which water is straining. She purses her lips. “Which one is Cavek?”

“Troll: green skin, purple hair and eyes, sharp scary teeth,” my mate clarifies.

“Oh yes, I believe he went out to the garage with Jake. Something about looking at Jake’s little studio he’s set up in there. Jake runs a blog and has been working on some project or another since those fae made contact.”

I grunt in appreciation and make it to the door, my hand closing around the knob when I hear a loud commotion that sends me rushing in, with Uagoral at the ready. I can hear my brethren just behind me, grabbing their weapons as we all dart outside, a good dozen weapons drawn and ready for battle, and a great many knives strapped on for backup.

I don’t immediately see the source of the noise, but I do hear an amused snarl and a high-pitched human shriek.

“Hold him!” Jake shouts excitedly. “Wait, let me get a better angle for this. This is awesome.”

I round the corner of the small forebuilding—what I assume is what the humans call a garage—and am greeted with the sight of the tall troll holding a human upside down by his leg. I wrinkle my nose at the stench of urine, and a wet stain has spread over the male’s crotch. The male has a fair amount of lean muscle on him, but he is not particularly impressive, especially not shrieking and squealing as he is.

“Travis! What the hell are you doing here?” Sammi yells from behind me.

I narrow my eyes, my nostrils flaring as a red tide of anger sweeps over me. So this pitiful male is Travis? I curl my lip into a sneer as I look him over. He doesn’t even compare to the strength and discipline of an orc. An orc would never piss themselves in encountering a hostile opponent.

“Sammi? Thank the gods you’re alive! I’ve been so worried,” he says, a wide smile curving his mouth as twin

indentions appear on his cheeks. I immediately growl possessively. This male thinks it is permissible to smile and speak to my mate as if nothing had happened?

“Don’t give me that, asshole,” she snaps, pushing her way in front of me. I bristle. I do not like my wife between me and anything that is even remotely threatening—even something as pitiful as this Travis.

“You ditched me for some bimbo. You didn’t even have the nerve to make sure I got home okay. You can go fuck yourself.”

“Now Sammi—”

“And you had the *nerve* to lie to my family! I was up there for four days and you never came once in all that time.”

He flushes... or maybe that is all the blood running to his head. It is difficult to ascertain. I very gently push my mate behind me and stomp up to him. Travis’ eyes widen so much that I think they might fall out of his head. Slowly, I lean down until my face is level with his, my nose wrinkling as I try not to breathe in his stench.

“This is the sort of male you found suitable?” I ask my wife, snorting at him in disgust. “He is a tiny and pitiful male, without even enough honor to see to your safety. Weak,” I sneer in the male’s face. “All the better that you have an orc chieftain for a mate, seeing what a sad excuse for a male you had before.”

Sammi chuckles and I bare my tusks in a chilling grin at this Travis. I set a thick finger between his eyes and shove lightly, making him swing slightly in Cavek’s grip. The troll laughs in delight. I hear a small gasp and note from the corner of my eye that Lucy, her fist pulled up to her mouth as she watches on wide-eyed, has joined us, accompanied by her mate.

“This is how it is, human. You will apologize to my wife and her mother, Lucy. Then, you will leave here. You will not return—you will not speak to my mate or her family. If I

catch you near my mate again, I will personally break every major bone in your body. Do you understand?"

"Y... yes," he stammers.

"Good. Now, apologize."

"I... I am s... sorry. I should have checked the next day, after I canceled our plans. And I shouldn't have lied to everyone about what happened. I... I was scared when you disappeared that everyone would find out and blame me."

Such cowardice! I am surprised, however, when Lucy pushes past me, hauls back her fist, and punches the human right in the face. He yelps, a small amount of blood spurting from his broken nose. Bruises are already beginning to welt up from when Cavek subdued him. I want to hurt him too, but as chieftain I have to show some small measure of restraint when presented with a weaker and immobilized enemy.

With dignity, she steps back and straightens her apron, tucking back a loose lock of hair before giving everyone a gracious smile.

"Well, if we're done with this piece of garbage, I do believe dinner is ready. Who wants to eat?"

The happy clamor of orcs ensues as they file back into the house.

"Behave—no killing," Sammi says as she gives me a lingering look before following to help her mother.

An idea strikes me as I watch Cavek. I can't kill the coward, but I can do something else to demonstrate to this male how little I think of him.

I unlace my breeches. "Cavek, hold him still, and step slightly off to the side."

The troll laughs and shifts his position.

"What are you going to do?" the human whimpers.  
"Please, don't violate me!"

I say nothing and merely grimace with disgust. As if I would do something like that to this wretch. I reach down and pull out my cock, the human's eyes widening in horror—and proceed to piss all over him.

Fifteen minutes later I am seated to the right of my wife, grimacing once more, but this time in disgust at the mass of worms and blood sauce on my plate. Glancing at my clan-kin, I notice similar expressions on their faces. Erra holds one worm up pinched between her thumb and forefinger, looking at it with unabashed horror.

I clear my throat. I do not wish to offend Lucy.

“This meal is very... interesting. I think I speak for my clan in conveying our gratitude for inviting us to dine with you,” I say as more than one orc raises their eyebrow in disbelief. I grit my teeth and continue, “but I did not realize that humans eat things such as worms, especially with as much complaining as Sammi did over many foods I offered her.”

Sammi begins to snort at my side, joined quickly by choked laughter from her brothers. Lucy stares, a forkful of worms paused halfway to her mouth. Sammi recovers quick enough to jab me in the ribs with her sharp elbow.

“Guys,” she chuckles, “we are not feeding you worms. It is spaghetti. These are noodles made from special dough formed into long strands that we boil in water. And the sauce is made from tomatoes, not blood.”

Erra hesitantly sniffs at the noodle thing. “It does smell appetizing, even if it looks absolutely disgusting.” We hold our collective breath as she slowly places it on her tongue and begins to chew. Her face immediately brightens. Grabbing her fork from beside the plate, she begins to shovel spaghetti into her mouth, moaning in appreciation.

Sammi looks at me, her eyes sparkling with humor. “Come on, eat.”

I sigh miserably and scoop up a couple of noodles onto my utensil and quickly put them into my mouth before I can



change my mind. The savory spices burst on my tongue, and the noodle is soft and flavored well with the sauce. It is surprisingly good. Cavek stuffs a quarter of a loaf of bread toasted with garlic and butter into his mouth, his surprisingly long tongue snaking out afterward to capture the flavor from around his mouth.

Lucy beams at everyone eating with gusto at her table. She daintily resumes eating. Before long, every bit of food is consumed, and Bodi is arguing with Luke over the last balls of meat in the pot. I rub my belly, loosing a contented sigh.

Jake is staring wide-eyed down at a small device in his hand and lets out a choked laugh. Very slowly he turns this thing where we can see, and I see my likeness and that of Cavek just as it shows me pissing all over the human. Bodi and his younger brother Ferli laugh uproariously. Sammi's eyes widen as she stares at the repeating captured image. Very slowly she puts her fingers to her temple and begins to slowly massage the spot.

“Please tell me you didn't whip out your dick in front of the gods and everyone and *piss* on my ex.”

I shrug unapologetically. Sammi tries to look fierce, but I can feel her tight restraint on her laughter. She settles for rolling her eyes.

“Great. Thanks to our crazy neighbor and YouTube, the whole world gets a look at your cock,” she laments.

“The whole world then sees how fortunate you are in your mating and will be quite envious of you,” I say. Sammi huffs and gives me a bawdy wink.

Cavek snickers.

Jake blows out a breath of disappointment. “I knew someone would start putting up videos of you guys. Everyone is beating me to the punch on this. You have to let me document your visit for my blog!”

I exchange a look with my clan-kin and mate, whose lips quirk with barely contained amusement. I look down at

the human's hopeful expression and nod my head in agreement.

## Chapter 22

### *Orgath*

Late into the evening, after a few rounds of beer, Erra breaks open her bottle of the pink champagne drink. The rest of us continue making steady progress through the small metal vessels of beer as she takes a sip of the bubbly substance that looks alarmingly like some sort of sorcerer's brew. Sammi is stretched across my lap, dozing in and out.

Erra smacks her lips appreciatively.

"Well?" Bodi asks.

A wide grin splits Erra's customary scowl. "It is grand!" she exclaims with enthusiasm and proceeds to take a long pull from the bottle.

Bodi and Ferli both scowl in unison. "You aren't going to share?" Bodi asks irritably.

Erra lowers the now half-empty bottle and looks forlornly at it. "There is not but a few good swallows in this bottle, and you want me to share?"

"It would be right to share among your kin; besides it is not right for you to be with young and drinking," Ferli grouses.

She narrows her eyes at them. "Don't be an ass. You know as well as I that I can safely drink far more. The meager contents of this bottle are considered below moderate for orcs in general. I may be persuaded to share; however, if I agree, it must be small swallows so that there is plenty left for me."

The brothers grunt in agreement, and she hands the bottle over in resignation. True to their word, both take a small swallow and return it to her. They smack their lips appreciatively.

"Erra, perhaps Orgul should keep this at the tavern. It is not a good beer or mead, but it is pleasant. I think the

females will especially enjoy it, and males will appreciate something to enjoy with female company,” Ferli suggests, winking at Bodi, who chuckles. Likely the pair is imagining what females they may be able to woo to their beds with the sweet, bubbly offering.

Though it hasn’t been reduced by much, Erra frowns at the liquid level in the bottle as if calculating just how much they left her. After a moment, she grunts and tips the bottle back. She swallows, polishes that bottle off and makes quick work of downing the second she bought, smiling with heavy-lidded appreciation at the rosy bottle.

“I think I will take a few bottles back for Orgul to try, and then we will see if it is something we want to purchase. But I approve,” she says with a giggle.

We stare in shock. I don’t think any of us have ever heard Erra giggle. Sneer with disdain, yes. Chortle with evil glee, absolutely. But giggle? At my side, Jake nudges me and shows me his small device on which he has captured Erra’s expression of champagne-induced bliss. Bodi and Ferli look at it and stifle their chuckles.

“I would be happy to print this out for you,” Jake whispers.

“What is that?” Bodi asks quietly.

“Erm, how to explain. I can make a copy of this image that you can carry with you. If you want, that is.”

My clan-kin’s eyes light up with glee.

\*\*\*

*Sammi*

I yawn and stretch out on the queen-sized bed. I haven’t been in this bed since before I moved out into my own

apartment, but since my apartment isn't an option because my family thought I was dead, it's nice to have space still in my childhood room. I groan and snuggle into the pillow, one eye watching my mate as he glares, disgruntled, at the bed. I lick my lips at the sexy stretch of bare skin as he shucks his pants and there are just inches upon inches of bare orc.

"Are you coming to bed?" I purr, running a finger down my breasts onto my belly that has not yet begun to swell with our child.

Orgath grunts, his hand running along the length of his cock as he casts a dubious look at the bed.

"I would if I were not so concerned about the entire thing collapsing beneath my weight. This bed is so small. It can't possibly support my weight, or my length for that matter," he snorts in disgust.

He paces in obvious contemplation of how best to get into bed when the door flings open and Momma walks in, oblivious, until she is not.

"Samantha, I brought you some towels and fresh linens if you like... *and oh!*"

She draws to complete stop, staring wide-eyed at my very large, very erect, husband. Her mouth drops open and her face turns red. After a good eyeful, she brings the sheets up in front of her face in embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry. I should have thought..." she trails off awkwardly.

Orgath, noticing her reaction, looks at me with confusion and I pat his hip reassuringly, working hard to keep my lips from twitching.

"Momma, it's fine," I chuckle, giving up any pretense of trying to be sober and sympathetic to her plight. I can't help it. It *is* pretty damn funny. She mutters something muffled by the linens, but I suspect she's either cursing or praying. Orgath grins and winks at me before gingerly sliding onto the bed and covering himself.

“Okay, it’s safe to look,” I tell her.

She practically throws the linens on the chair across from the bed and scowls at me. “Really, Samantha, it’s not funny.”

“Come on, it’s a little funny,” I say, squeezing my thumb and index finger an inch apart. She huffs and shakes her head at me as she strides from the room, leaving us to our privacy.

I curl against Orgath’s broad chest, noting the stiff way he’s lying beside me. I lift myself up onto my elbows and frown down at him.

“Are you okay?”

“I am fine, love. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“Well, I am not so certain of this bed.”

I look down his length and frown as I notice that not only does he take up over half the bed, which doesn’t bother me at all since I’m usually splayed over him most of the night anyway, but his legs dangle well off the end of the bed. I chew my lip thoughtfully.

“Hmm, yes, I can see what you mean.” I ponder our situation and then snap my fingers when it comes to me. “I have an idea.”

I crawl off my husband and begin to root through the room for every spare pillow and blanket I can find stored in my closet. It’s fortunate that my mother more or less made my room a spare storage area for bedding. There aren’t a lot of pickings left since mom had raided it earlier for bedding for the rest of our group, but it’s enough. Within minutes I have a pile of bedding and pillows thrown over the floor.

“Voila! Our temporary sleeping pad.”

Orgath grins down at my improvisation and slides off the ominously creaking bed to join me on our pallet. I snuggle

against him and smirk.

“Not too bad, huh,” I announce with pride. “Reminds me of our time in our little cottage.”

He wrinkles his nose as he looks up at the posters of rock stars that litter the ceiling of my room, many of them in various stages of undress. In my defense, this room has not been redecorated since I was seventeen and many of those guys were inspiration material for some of my naughtiest fantasies in my youth. Apparently, this fact is not lost on my husband.

“Not quite like the cottage,” he mutters with a dirty look.

I chuckle and pluck one of his dark nipples making him groan. “Don’t worry, sweetie. None of these guys can even hold a candle to you. You are absolute perfection and I wouldn’t trade your sexy, wonderful self for any one, or all, of them.”

“Hmm.” Orgath’s yellow eyes gleam in the dark room as he draws me under him. I wrap both my arms and legs around my mate and arch into him as he grinds his pelvis against mine, my eyes rolling back into my head as I feel his hard length rub my sensitive folds.

“Perhaps a reminder of just what kind of lovers orcs are?” I murmur, darting my tongue out to lick his pectoral. He growls deeply in response and peels my arms off him as he sits up. He leans forward just enough to stretch my arms above my head until my hands touch the leg of the bed.

“Hold that, right there. And don’t let go,” he rasps. My pussy floods with eager heat as I wrap my fingers around the wood.

“Oooo. Are we going all hot and dominant now?”

His mouth seizes mine before I can say anything further, his tongue plundering deep. This is effective not only in shutting me up but also in making me forget anything that is occupying my brain space. I’m pretty certain that if I were asked right now, I wouldn’t be able to even provide my name.

His large, heavy hands stroke down the length of my body, paying particular attention to lovingly skim over my belly. His lips follow after his hands, tugging at my nipples in longer sucks, his tongue playing with the distended peaks. He stops every so often to bite on the soft swells of flesh and then laps over the spot with his tongue before drawing my breast deep within his mouth once more.

I am panting by the time he gets down to my navel, my hips arching with urgency, begging him to hurry things along. But he pauses for a moment and places the sweetest, most reverent kiss over my womb, making tears spring in my eyes. He then turns to drag his tongue down the remainder of my belly and through the curls at the apex of my thighs. When his tongue touches my clit, I nearly shoot up off the floor.

His tusks dig lightly into the flesh at either side of my pussy as he begins to methodically lap at the liquid flowing from my body. One tusk drags against my labia as he shifts his position to thrust his thick tongue deep within my channel, slurping loudly from the source. I love it when he does this; it's the most erotic thing. Panting and bucking my hips against him, my pussy clenches with need.

*I need more!*

He draws his short claws lightly against my inner thigh, a sharp contrast to his tongue between my legs. The slight bite of pain makes my pussy suddenly spasm as I rock toward him with pleasure and my body twists and shakes with completion. I spasm again from the vibrations as he chuckles against my clit before sucking it leisurely into his mouth.

“Orgath, enough fucking playing,” I groan, reaching toward him.

“It is enough when I say it is enough. Don't move your hands from the leg.”

I tightly resume gripping the leg of the bed frame as I moan and twitch while he continues to suck on my clit, alternating with rolling it with his tongue before sucking down



sharply again. I tremble with another spike of pleasure, and then again. Sweat drips off my body, and my nerves feel fried as I lay limp beneath him.

Suddenly, my mate pulls back, rocking onto his heels, his brutal hands yanking my pelvis up off the floor. What weight that isn't lifted by the strong muscle of his arms is now supported by my shoulders and upper back as he holds my lower body up against him. I barely have time to inhale before he thrusts deep into me. I shriek and wiggle against him, my vaginal walls convulsing around him as he plows expertly into me.

His hips thump in a wild tempo against my inner thighs, and his heavy balls swing into a slapping rhythm against my ass as he rides me. I have no hope in keeping up, so I just support my back with my elbows and allow him to manipulate the angle of my hips high into the air as he surges within me. His gruff groans and my whimpering moans fill the room at an increasing rate.

I feel his cock swelling as he burrows himself deep and grinds against me, maintaining his depth and stimulating all of my nether-regions, sending me over into a screaming orgasm just as he roars, his seed erupting inside of me as his fingers clench hard on my hips. His whole body shakes around me. I let out another scream, no less wild than the first, as his release triggers another orgasm.

We lie there panting in the aftermath, his arms tight around me when the door bursts open. My older brother, Luke stands in his underwear, his hair disheveled and eyes wide, as he holds his prized autographed hockey stick like a club.

“What the hell was all that noise? I thought you were killing her,” he snaps at my husband.

I can't stop the belly laugh from rolling out of me. I gasp and choke for breath because I'm laughing so hard. Luke turns red and Orgath levels him with his fiercest, most unhappy scowl. Unfortunately for Luke, my husband really dislikes interruption during our trysts. If looks could kill, Luke

would be worm-fodder right now. Morbidly, that just sends me off into another round of giggles. Finally, I roll over and drape myself over Orgath, gasping for breath as I regain control over myself.

“Luke, go the fuck away,” I giggle helplessly. My brother mutters something that I wager is distinctly unflattering about me under his breath and stalks out, slamming the door behind him.

Orgath huffs his amusement into my hair, now that my pest of a brother is no longer hovering over our naked bodies. The afterglow is dead now, but I still happily snuggle into my mate as his good humor is slowly restored.

We both start to laugh as we hear Jake loudly whisper asking if he saw anything of particular interest in regard to orc mating habits. That pervert.

When we both finally recover from our laughter, Orgath gets a thoughtful look on his face.

“Mate, why are your brothers always trying to threaten my life with some flimsy weapon or another? Do they wish me to correct them?”

I snicker into his arm, relishing in the feel of the thick, rough skin there against my own.

“Don’t mind them. Both my brothers live at home and I think it has made them both a bit unhinged. Cost of living up here is difficult to get a place on your own. It unfortunately leaves them with way too much time on their hands and overactive imaginations.”

“A month in our village would be far more productive for them.”

“Don’t say that too loudly. I think Jake would take it as an invitation and start packing his things to ‘document’ orc lifestyles and culture.”

He thinks of it and nods. “I think that would be a highly beneficial thing, if he can control his wayward impulses

and not threaten anyone else with swords as he did upon our meeting. Not all orcs will be so forgiving.”

I sit up slightly and peer at him. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” he says firmly. “It would be good for orcs to share our culture with humans, and good to give your brother something constructive to do. Who knows—he may like life in the village. There are many young females in the clan that are about his age.”

“Oh, good gods, well I’m not so sure about the females part, but yes, I can well imagine that my brother will be very, very happy to be there indeed.” I am not entirely sure how to tell him that my brother doesn’t swing that way. Although, by the way Ferli and Jake have been sitting so close together whispering and looking at each other, I can’t imagine it would be a huge shock. “We’d probably never get rid of him.” I giggle and land a kiss on his jaw. “You’re so good to my family, sweetie.”

“Of course.”

## Chapter 23

*Sammi*

I wake to a shrill voice calling my name at some ungodly hour of the morning. I peel my eyes open and look at the clock. Oh. Not so early after all. It's well past ten.

"Auntie Sammi!" the tiny voice shrills, and I recognize it immediately.

I scramble off Orgath, making him grunt when my knee accidentally connects with his stomach in my haste. He yawns and yanks on his breeches, and I scurry into a clean tunic. Once I know he's decently covered, I throw open the door and scoop up the mini tornado rushing my way.

"What do I have here? Is this my Boukie? Really? It can't be Boukie," I say as the six-year-old nods vigorously, an impish smile on her face. She isn't really my niece but my best friend's daughter. Although her name is really Rebecca—Becky for short—somehow Boukie just stuck ever since she was a mischievous toddler. And where there is Boukie, there's my buddy Kate, close behind. Of course, my family would have made sure to let her know that I am home.

Kate doesn't hesitate to sweep me into an enthusiastic bear hug, her dark braid slapping me in the face, but I don't mind. Over her shoulder, I see Cavek lurking, his long, thin pointed ears turned toward her with interest, his nostrils flaring. I give him a dirty look over her shoulder which he completely ignores. I'm going to have to sic Orgath on him if he bothers Kate.

She finally pulls back, swiping tears from her eyes.

"I can't believe that bastard lied to all of us. I am so pissed right now I'd like to hand him his a—" her eyes flick down to Boukie, listening with wide-eyed interest. "—Argh!" she growls in frustration. "Booty. I would like to hand him his

booty,” she amends, and the six-year-old starts giggling. Booty is always funny to a six-year-old.

Boukie tugs on my hand eagerly. “Nana Lucy made pancakes. Hurry before the other big ones eat it all. Have you seen them?” Her eyes grow huge with wonder. “They are the most giganticus peoples I have ever in my whole life saw!”

I ruffle her feathering brown hair and giggle. “Yes, I have,” I confide. “They are orcs. My husband is an orc. His name is Orgath.”

She peers over my shoulder, her mouth rounding as she stares upward. “Is that him?!” she squeals.

Orgath crouches down and holds his palm out to her.

“Hello, tiny human.”

She immediately releases me and grabs ahold of his hand with both of hers. “Hello, Ogre. I am Boukie.”

“Orgath,” he corrects firmly. Yeah, don’t call an orc and ogre, apparently.

“Ogre-ass?”

“No, Or-gath.”

“Orgath, okay. Hi, Orgath. I am Boukie. My name is really Becky. Well, for really reals it is Rebecca, but Becky is supposed to be my nickname, but no one calls me that—just Boukie,” she finished with a pleased smile.

I peer at my husband to see how much of that he caught. Apparently enough, because he has an infatuated grin on his face.

“It is very nice to meet you, Boukie,” he says solemnly.

She looks at him critically. “You are very pretty. Not as pretty as the big green man with the purple hair, but you are still pretty.” She turns her attention to Cavek.

“Can I braid your hair after breakfast?” she asks him innocently. Cavek blinks down at her and begins to slowly

grin, baring all his sharp teeth, his expression softening in obvious signs of his heart turning to goo confronted with the cuteness of Boukie in her full adorable glory. He nods his head, and she jumps up and down clapping her hands.

“All right, let’s go eat. My belly is starving to deaths! Hurry!” she says and runs at full speed toward the dining room.

Cavek slides up behind Kate, breathing her in deeply. Instead of being completely wiggled out, Kate winks at him. I shouldn’t be surprised, really. Kate has always been more than a little adventurous. In fact, if memory serves, she often finds sexual appeal where I would have to squint really hard to see it. Boukie’s sperm donor was a heavily tattooed and pierced biker that Kate had a fling with until he got thrown into prison from setting his toe outside the law one time too many. After that, she doesn’t consider any man good enough for her little Boukie to actually consider keeping.

“If you want to eat, you better hurry,” Momma calls out from the kitchen. Orgath grabs my arm from behind and steers me in that direction.

“I’m not letting those two out of my sight. It looks like a disaster in the making between them,” I hiss lowly to Orgath. His lips twitch, but he shakes his head.

“Sammi, if they decide to mate, you are not going to be able to stop it, so cease worrying and fussing over it. You need to feed our babe.”

Naturally, everyone looks up when we enter the dining room. The entire room is instantly charged with a kind of “knowing.” There are no secrets whatsoever in this family, not with these thin walls. What I didn’t expect were the wolf whistles from my brothers, and the smirks on the faces of the orcs. Even Cavek is leering playfully at us as he takes a seat beside Katie, with Boukie in a stool between them happily shoving a pancake into her mouth.

Orgath growls about the virtues of good solid stone walls beside me as we take our seats at the table. Momma sets a plate in front of both of us overflowing with pancakes, eggs, bacon, and sausages. I don't think she's ever given me so much food at one time.

“To help you rebuild that energy, dear,” she says with a playful wink, and I just want to die right there.

To my mortification, Orgath just nods at my side, putting away food with gusto. “She is right, wife. You need to eat more. The babe is going to require far more than the paltry amounts you eat.”

My mother nearly drops her spatula on the table as she shovels another pancake onto Bodi's plate. He's no longer paying us any mind now that he's focused on his rapidly refilling plate. Momma loves to feed people. Each and every one of these guys have wormed their way into her heart just by appreciating her cooking. Even Erra, with her enthusiastic questing for recipes, has drawn more than one smile out of her. Now the full weight of her attention is firmly on me, and I don't know if her expression is one of horror or just shock.

“You are pregnant?” she says slowly.

I nod my head, trying to steel myself against whatever might shoot out of her mouth.

“You are pregnant with my grandchild and you didn't tell me?” Her lower lip begins to quiver.

“Honestly, I just didn't think of it. A lot happened yesterday.” Frankly, I wasn't sure how she would handle the idea of a half-orc grandchild—not that I'm going to even breathe a word of that to her.

She sucks her lip in, blinks her eyes a few times and then switches gears like a pro. “Well that is such exciting news, Samantha! I understand you're just here for a few days, but we will have to do some baby shopping before you go.” She looks at Orgath critically. “I imagine we will have to get bigger baby clothes. Somehow I don't think newborn sizes

will fit a half-orc baby. You will certainly need bottles, cloth diapers since I imagine disposables will be difficult there, but they do make the cutest Velcro diapers now—oh yes, and binkies and booties—”

Orgath looks completely enthralled as my mother rattles on and I settle back into my chair, relaxing. Momma is now completely in her element. Watching Momma plot and plan is kinda like watching a natural disaster progress. You can see it coming but just can't look away. Even Erra is leaning forward with interest. I seize gleefully on the opportunity to present momma with another project. I certainly don't want to be the sole subject of her full focus.

“You know—Erra is pregnant too. I'm sure it'll be great for us to go shopping together,” I say with a smirk as the female shoots me a startled look. Oh yes, be afraid. Be very afraid. Shopping with my mother is like going about with a woman on a mission.

“It's no wonder Sammi is pregnant already, the way they were going at it last night. If that's the norm, I bet she was knocked up within days,” Luke notes dryly, bringing attention right back to the topic I didn't want to revisit. I glare death threats at my older brother, who smirks at me, forking a large bite of eggs into his mouth.

Sensing my discomfort, Orgath frowns at my brother, making him choke when he attempted to breathe and swallow at the same time in response to that fierce glower.

“Orcs do not reproduce quickly or easily. Every babe is welcome and cherished. If we did indeed breed our young within our first days together, all the better. We may well be blessed with many children. Or at least I pray that we are,” he says softly as he takes up my hand.

I want to childishly stick my tongue out at Luke but restrain myself. I am, after all, about to be someone's mother. I should at least behave with the tiniest bit of decorum.



“Well, I’m sure you’ll get your wish if my sister continues to jump you like a howler monkey,” my brother dares to reply, an evil gleam in his eye.

My mouth drops open. That ass! I grab a handful of the egg off my plate and unerringly throw it right into his face, the soft yolk breaking and running down his nose and cheeks.

“Well, now you have egg on your face, you baboon’s ass,” I crow.

Luke glowers and Momma’s eyes widen.

“Luke, don’t you dare retaliate,” she says. A little too late. A gravy-soaked sausage flies across the table, completely misses me, and smacks Bodi, seated at my other side, across the face. He throws down his fork and growls, and I wonder for a second if my brother pissed himself. I almost think I would if I were the focus of that growl.

Luke clears his throat nervously. “I think I best excuse myself. I need to change my underwear now.”

Bodi’s brows jerk up and then he begins to snort, his shoulder shaking before letting loose loud bellows of laughter. The atmosphere lightens quickly as first Orgath, then Ferli and Erra join in the laughter. Before long, even my family is chuckling. Luke hobbles away from the table, muttering to himself. Cavek is the only one who doesn’t seem to notice, all his attention focused on Kate with a sort of single-minded intensity.

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*Orgath*

Our second day in Ov’Ge is remarkably enjoyable. Despite the rough start, the afternoon passes without incident. David brings home more beer and introduces us to the favored

past time of American humans called barbeque. It doesn't seem like anything special to me. Many orcs cook over an open fire, but humans do make a certain ritual over it.

David brings out this big metal device he says is his grill and lays out steaks with other meats he calls hamburgers and hotdogs out on the metal rack over hot coals. The sun does feel pleasant, and the females are in the kitchen making the appropriate foodstuffs for the ritual: fruit salad that is not a salad but a dessert Sammi says, baked beans with chunks of seasoned fat, and potato salad, which is also not a salad but is not a dessert either.

Human barbeque rituals are confusing. So is the secret sauce that David keeps talking of as he brushes it over the meat.

Nearby, Bouki squeals as Cavek chases her through the grass. I am not sure what I think of the situation between that male and Sammi's friend Kate. I was reared to believe that mating was the business of no one outside of those involved, so I am hesitant to say anything to Cavek, despite Sammi's misgivings.

The female doesn't object to his overtures and the child seems to enjoy his attention. Cavek also seems to take pleasure in the presence of the small human, even to the point of allowing her to braid his hair and tie clumsy bows with the multicolored ribbon that Lucy found for her.

Cavek clearly would make a good and patient sire for the little one, seeing how, according to Sammi, she has none raising her. As Kate has no mate, it seems reasonable that Cavek should be allowed to pursue mating with her if they are both in agreement. I nod to myself, my mind settled on the matter.

At my feet the tiny beast is growling again, attempting to bite at the thick leather of my boots. It seems to have a valued position in this house, but I have yet to determine what this is. I cannot see any particular use of the monstrosity, other than possessing a foul disposition. It wears a tiny pink band

around its neck and is carried nearly everywhere. I curl my lip, bearing my large teeth and tusks, and growl back at it. The animal yips and ducks away. Lucy lures it back out of hiding with a small piece of the meat they call a hotdog.

Ferli whispers at my side. “They call that tiny beast a dog, and the meat they call hotdog. Do you think it is from the same creature? Maybe Erra is right and it is an animal raised for butchering. It seems wasteful—that creature doesn’t look like it would make more than one or two of those hotdog things.”

Sammi, overhearing from her place sprawled across me, snickers. “No, hot dogs are not made from dog. Dogs are pets. I don’t know why we call hotdogs what we do, but they’re made from various meats packed together.”

Bodi snorts. “Seems unfortunate. At least if it were livestock it would have some purpose other than be carried around and pampered.”

My mate starts to giggle harder. “Haven’t you ever had a pet? A *real* pet?”

Ferli snorts a mocking sound. I give him a stern look and he quickly swallows it back and smiles ruefully. “We have our delfass. They are good animals and serve us well, many of them are our companions but we do not treat them as children.”

Now Sammi makes a derisive noise. “Well, I got news for you. I’m going to bring home a kitten before we return. Not a delfass kitten—a normal furry cuddly kitten that needs to do nothing more than hunt mice and cuddle. Someone needs to bring the concept of domesticated pets to Ov’Gorg.”

I grimace, dreading bringing home a useless creature that will demand to be fed, but I recognize that look on her face. There will be no winning with her mind set on the matter. I am marginally relieved that at least she is not insisting on a yapping chihuahua beast like her mother has.



## Chapter 24

*Sammi*

While Boukie plays with Cavek, Kate finally corners me in the kitchen sometime later. She watches as I slice the potatoes for the potato salad with a quirk of her brow.

“Since when did you know how to cook?”

“Since I was stranded in a J.R.R. Tolkien novel for weeks on end,” I joke.

“Well, it doesn’t look like the experience was a complete loss. You learned how to cook, got a huge beast of a man,” her eyes turn appreciatively toward Orgath and I feel a sudden possessive flash of anger. Kate takes in my murderous expression and laughs. “Oh, don’t look that way. I’m not angling for your man. Anyone can see he’s head over heels for you. And obviously you return the sentiment, I mean look at those wonderful matching tats you guys have. But do tell—how are they, you know, in the downstairs department? Are we talking boys-department or menswear?” Kate waggles her eyebrows suggestively.

“More like Big and Tall,” I deadpan.

“Nooo,” she draws, her eyes widening and sparkling with interest. “Oh my. As tempted as I may be to try one of those orcs of yours on for size, I think I’m more interested in the big green one.”

“The troll, you mean.”

“Yes him. Boukie seems quite taken with him, and after she’s done playing with him, I can teach him a few new games. He does look like a good candidate for a fun roll in the blankets. I don’t suppose you can tell me what he’s packing?”

I choke. “Ah, no. Sorry. Somehow, I don’t think Orgath would be thrilled if I went around trying to get a gander at everyone’s equipment, and I can’t say I’ve ever been tempted

to get a peek of what a troll's dangly bits even look like. Not even mentioning that the only cock around here I want to make close observation of is the one that my mate comes equipped with.”

“Hmm, maybe I'll steal him away for an evening before you head back and satisfy my curiosity.”

“Um, yeah. Okay. Just be careful, Kate. These guys aren't human.”

She laughs. “No need to tell me. I'm not looking to be a troll's bride. I just want to have a little fun with something big and deadly between my legs.”

I laugh. “You are such a slut.”

Kate grins and takes a long sip of her beer. “We both know I am as pure as the driven snow.”

“Yeah, driven on by a dozen different cars,” I counter teasingly, drawing out a long laugh from my best friend.

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The next day, Momma drags me and Erra out shopping. She also somehow conscripts Cavek into service to be our official bag carrier as she hauls us from one shop to another in the mall. Erra is bewildered at the rush of activity but has no trouble getting into the spirit of shopping. Even Cavek seems to be surprisingly enjoying himself, when I'm not dodging questions from the left field about Kate. His interest in her can't be more obvious. Still, he makes a cheerful companion and is happy to be burdened with anything we hand him.

He also proves to draw women in like a magnetic body. It's almost impressive to see how gaggles of women suddenly stop what they are doing to flirt openly with him. Enough so, that I notice more than one guy eye him angrily when their girlfriend or the woman they're with starts to stare and flirt outrageously.

What is more surprising is how many men are glaring at *me*. Apparently, thanks to social media, and a huge part to my brother's efforts, I have been publicly dubbed "The Orc Wife," and have become a very recognizable person. Probably in part due to the huge, distinct tattoos scrolling over one side of my face and neck.

I'm not entirely sure why this put me on anyone's shit list. Since no one is actively bothering us, we continue shopping, although admittedly at a brisker pace than before. Any enjoyment I'd been feeling is now gone and I just want to get it over and done with.

It takes most of the day to finish up our shopping, and I for one am glad to have the end in sight. We're on the main floor making our way to the entrance, juggling our bags, when I feel a wet glob hit my face. Lifting I hand, I grimace and wipe it off and look at the milky smear on my fingers. Immediately I wipe my hand off on the leg of my pants with a shudder of disgust.

Someone spit on me!

I look up and see right away the raging crowd of men staring down at us with various expressions that all scream hostile.

I immediately know which one is the loogie champ, because the shit-eating bastard is wearing a huge cocky grin. When my eyes meet his, he begins to laugh, which spurs on others in the crowd to shout out slurs.

"Orc's whore! You and your monsters need to go back to wherever you came from."

"You are not welcome here, beasts!"

"Whore!"

On it continues, drawing Erra's gaze upward, frowning fiercely at the crowd above us. The taunting suddenly shifts, and we are pelted with food they throw over the railing at us. Cavek snarls, but Momma ushers us out of the building before my mouth can get us into a whole lot of hot water.

It's a smart decision. There's no point in waiting around to see how brave one of those assholes may suddenly get and try something violent. I take a moist towelette from momma and start to sponge off the bits of food. Erra and Cavek do so as well, though Cavek does pause to lick at a bit of sauce from what looks like some sesame chicken long enough to declare it delicious.

It's not until the mountain of bags litter Momma's living room floor I am wondering just how we are going to cart all the stuff home. At Erra's insistence, we even stopped by the liquor store so she could grab three more bottles of pink champagne. Orgath slows to a halt as he enters the room and looks at the accumulated hill of shopping shame.

"It looks like your expedition was fruitful," he observes drily.

I chew my lip. "A little too much. I swear it didn't look like this much when we were in the mall. I don't know how this happened."

Cavek throws himself down in the chair with a snort.

"I was used like a beast of burden. I could have told you exactly how much you had acquired if you'd asked."

I wave a hand at him. "Oh hush, you."

"Well," Orgath says at length, "we could probably tie things into loads of larger bundles dispersed among all the delfass. That should get most of these things home fine."

He picks up a bag full of clothes and nods at the pliable give to it, before setting it back down among the others. "We can work with it," he assures me.

Orgath sits on the couch and draws me into his lap, holding me like the last few hours we've been apart were a lifetime. I don't mind; I enjoy being encompassed by his embrace, and truth be told I've missed him today. We're rarely apart long if we can help it. It seems this bloodbond mating business has made me surprisingly needy.



I used to sneer at women who can't stand being apart from their men for even a day, and here it's been less than six hours and I cling to him so thoroughly that he will probably have to peel me off just to breathe. Thankfully, Orgath doesn't seem to mind. He nuzzles my hair and wraps his thick arms around me.

We sit like that, Orgath holding me and Cavek dozing in Dad's recliner, when Jake trots into the room. He slows, his eyes widening as he looks at our haul, but then seems to shake himself free of his surprise and makes his way over to us, stepping around bags as he moves through the living room. He stands in front of us, nervously shifting from foot to foot. I can feel Orgath begin to get impatient, and even I'm about to open my mouth and tell him to get on with it.

"I think we may have a tiny problem," he says finally.

I frown. "A problem? Like how big of a problem? An 'oops I misplaced the remote and am missing my favorite show' problem, or a 'I accidentally burned down the garage' problem?"

"You are never going to let me live that down," he grouses. "It's more of a 'people are actively speaking out against you as a race traitor' problem."

I just stare at him in shock. "Excuse me?"

He nods miserably. It sucks being the messenger bearing bad news.

"People are commenting on my YouTube videos I've been putting up documenting your visit, and it is not good."

He swings around his phone and scrolls through several of them. Some of the comments were good. But those are overwhelmed by ones demanding that the "monsters" go back to where they came from and stay away from good, godly, human communities.

Several of these comments attack me directly as betraying and selling out the human race. Some of the comments call for my death and directly threaten the orcs. I sit

back slowly, after reading several of them aloud to Orgath, stunned. Cavek, who I thought to be asleep, is alert, his mouth drawn down as he scowls.

“Well,” I say slowly, “that explains the mall.”

“What happened?” Orgath growls, suddenly incised that something happened that he wasn’t present for.

“Just a tiny incident, not really worth mentioning,” I say hastily.

Cavek snorts, belying my words. “Foolish humans risking their skins saying foolish insults. If they weren’t standing so high above us, I would have rent their arms from their bodies when they began throwing food at us. They were gathering their courage for violence—it was clear to see. If dear Lucy hadn’t insisted we leave, I would have relished seeing such a thing and teaching them some manners for daring to call your mate a whore.”

“They threw food at you? They called you a whore?” Orgath asks with a deadly quiet. The violence in the air is of such strength I’m glad he was not there to witness the event. Suddenly he growls angrily, setting me off his lap and rising to his feet. He begins to pace restlessly.

“We cannot remain here if there is even a chance that they may attack. I won’t risk you, our child, or our clan. We will return and I will speak to the clan.” He sighs and runs his hand along the side of his face. “It may be more prudent if orcs stay to the wilderness lands and our own realm as much as possible—for now.”

I frown. “What about my family? I can’t cut them out of our lives. It’s bad enough that we’re going to have to cut this visit short.”

He acknowledges my concern with an inclination of his head. “No, we won’t cut ties. We will allow trusted humans entrance into our world to visit, but I won’t risk my clan-kin beyond that. A single orc can do much damage to humans, but

it is fruitless to engage in an endless battle with your people for no purpose.”

I’m not particularly thrilled with the idea of being exiled from my home, but I can’t argue against his reasoning. I sigh. I have to face the fact that I have responsibilities now as both a soon-to-be mother and the wife of the chieftain. This can’t be all about my wants.

“Maybe things will simmer down in time and we can try again,” I say dully. Knowing my species as I do, I don’t feel particularly hopeful that it’ll happen in my lifetime, but I can always hope.

Orgath gently strokes my cheek with the back of his hand. “I regret that you cannot enjoy your time with your family as we planned,” he says, sorrow heavy in his voice.

I dredge up a weak smile. “It’s okay, my love. Tomorrow then?”

He nods. “We will leave before daybreak to attract as little notice as possible. No one has attacked us yet, but I do not trust hostilities not to suddenly mount and catch us unaware.”

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I have to hand it to my family: being made aware of the necessity for our imminent departure, suddenly my last night at home transforms from something sad to a going away party. My mother cooks several roasts loaded with vegetables in every slow cooker she can dig up in the garage, and Dad makes another run for beer and the fixings for margaritas. Even Kate and Boukie come to wish us well.

As soon as she comes in the door, Kate thrusts something small and soft into my hands, and I look down in surprise to see a ginger tiger-striped kitten, blinking its sleepy green eyes up at me. She gives me a teary grin.

“I know you said you wanted to bring a kitten back with you, and since you have to leave early and all and might not be back, I just want to make sure you got that kitty.” She draws in a deep breath, trying not to sniffle. “You find a way to get letters to me, okay? You have to now—you’ve got to keep me informed how this little guy is doing.”

I wrap my arms around her and hug her tight.

“You better believe I will, some way or another.”

Luke coughs from behind us. “Look, if it helps, I can meet you once a month—let’s say on the full moon since you like that esoteric shit,” he says with a lopsided grin. “We can meet at that spot we used to run wild in as kids, you remember? You can give me a list of things you need and some of those coins and I’ll get it. And I can take letters back and forth, no problem.”

I’m surprised at the offer; Luke is not one to volunteer for anything, really. I rush over and wrap my free arm around his waist. “That would be wonderful! Thank you.”

He flushes and pats my arm with an awkward grin. “Just don’t forget those coins,” he says gruffly, but I swear I catch a glimmer of moisture in his eyes before he rapidly blinks it away. The kitten mews between us and we both laugh as we pull apart. I bring its soft little head up against my jaw, where I gently rub my cheek against its fur.

“Jake can probably help too. There was something we wanted to tell him. Where the hell is he?” I look around for my errant younger brother with an impatient scowl.

Luke laughs and gestures to the back yard.

“I believe he’s out there trying to get Ferli to show him some fighting moves or something,” he chuckles with a sort of gleeful anticipation lighting his eyes.

Apparently, Jake does want to get creamed by an orc at least once before we leave. I roll my eyes and head out the door. Boukie is fast asleep against Orgath’s chest so I pretend that I don’t notice Kate slipping off with Cavek.

Although I'm suspicious of the troll's intentions, in truth she's a grown woman and if she wants a wild fuck with him, I can't say I blame her without sounding like a complete hypocrite. In any case, trolls, like elves, seem to naturally possess magic so who knows—he might be able to pursue something with her under the radar if they both are in agreement.

Sure enough, when I arrive into the yard, Ferli has Jake lifted above his head.

“Are you sure about this, human?” he says as he looks up at my brother with concern. Jake nods his head eagerly.

“Absolutely! Now throw me—uh, in the direction of the mattress though.”

With a slight shrug Ferli tosses Jake with all his strength, and I wince as Jake's body collides loudly with the mattress. I can hear the painful expulsion of the breath from his body, followed by a low moan.

“Jake, you are such an idiot,” I scold. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he gasps, slowly pushing to his knees. “I'm fine. Just had the breath knocked out of me.” He winces as he puts a hand to his ribs. “And bruised the hell out of myself, I think.”

Ferli chuckles and sits cross-legged on the lawn across from him.

“Care for another round?” he asks cheerfully. Jake waves him away.

“Nah, man. I'm good,” he wheezes, making the orc laugh and slap him on the back in a friendly manner that nearly has him stumbling to the ground again.

“You're lucky you didn't break something,” I say in exasperation. “Did Orgath tell you our decision?”

Ah, that gets his attention. He scrambles up, eagerly looking from me, to Orgath, and back again. “What decision?”

“Well, if you can manage to not do stupid stunts or anything suicidal, and *try* not to aggravate everyone by questioning them to death, we’d like to offer for you to accompany us to the orc village where you can continue to make your documentaries on orcs.”

His eyes widen. “Seriously?”

I nod and Orgath bares his tusks in a wide grin, prompting my brother to shout and swing his fists in the air in celebration unaware of the orcs watching him with amusement. He draws to a sudden halt as a sudden fervor sets upon him, his palm smacking his forehead.

“I need to hit the electronics store. I’m going to need enough backup batteries for a month at least. I’ll have to come home to recharge and do uploads, but I can’t run out of power while I’m there,” he says as he rushes into the house, no doubt in search of his car keys and wallet.

I sit in the chair beside Orgath. “Luke says he’ll meet with us every full moon for trade and to collect any letters I write home, so I won’t lose touch with anyone.”

He frees one arm from beneath Boukie and wraps it around me. “That is good,” he says quietly as he lays his cheek against my head. I listen to the steady beat of his heart and find comfort in it.

The tranquility of the moment is immediately upset when Luke sets off some fireworks, which have the orcs backpeddling with shouts of surprise. Orgath’s eyes widen as they shoot up above our home, sparkling a myriad of colors above us.

“Luke always has to do everything big,” I chuckle.

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*Orgath*

I look at my mate and feel a sense of contentment. She is smiling at the colorful display above her, the lights dousing her skin in beautiful hues as they flame in the sky. Although visiting Ov'Ge didn't turn out quite the way we'd hoped, I am still glad that I could give this to her. It is also comforting to know that, even despite what we must do to protect our family and clan, she will still be able to retain ties to her family and kin here. I owe Luke a debt.

I take a deep breath, enjoying the warm earthy smells of the garden, the sweet scent of my mate beside me, and the fresh scent of the little human, Boukie, a gentle weight on my chest.

Despite how hostile so many of the adult humans are, the little ones like her give me hope. They haven't learned hate and may mean a better future between our worlds. My own child, growing safely within my mate is part of that new future. One that I am eager to meet. I envision many days such as this with my own babe asleep against me, and it brings such a strong emotion up that my heart beats a heavy tempo in anticipation.

I curve my arm tighter around my mate and am surprised when a tiny furred creature lifts its head from my mate's arms and mews at me, baring little needle-like teeth. Looking so much like a miniature delfass, I can't help being charmed by the thing.

In truth, I have never told my mate, but I have a weakness for delfass kittens. I rescued Ethiel as an older kitten from the fighting pits some of the less scrupulous members of my clan indulged in under Lorf's rule. I have been tempted once too often to bring home others if it weren't for common sense intervening that caring for many large delfass cats would be difficult to care for by myself, due to the proper feeding and exercise required as they mature.

This tiny creature, though... I can see the appeal. Perhaps this whole pet thing won't be so bad.

I stretch my hand toward it, earning a hiss and a swift strike of its claws. I chuckle. Yes, it is very much like Ethiel. After a long moment, the kitten allows me to place my palm against his tiny body and stroke its fur. Sammi turns her head and catches me in the act. No matter how much I disparaged her idea of a pet, now I am caught and can't complain further. Her lips curve upward, and she presses a soft kiss against the back of my hand as it brushes near her lips. The kitten begins to rattle a low purr in response to my slow strokes along its fur as we sit and enjoy our final hours in Ov'Ge.



## Chapter 25

### *Sammi*

Daybreak came quickly. Momma was up early so that when we all rise there's coffee, which my orcs have developed a fond taste for, especially Orgath, who can drink an entire pot by himself, and a dozen and a half hot cinnamon rolls, a side of eggs, and crisped bacon. Momma is blinking back tears as everyone devours breakfast with appreciation.

After breakfast is done, the sun is rapidly lighting the sky the way it does in late spring in Alaska. The orcs shuffle and bind together packages we're taking back with us. Erra carefully packs her bottles of pink champagne in between rolls of baby clothes, and Orgath finds a way to tie down the large bag of coffee beans Dad gifted him. I think my mate almost had a tear in his eye when he received it the previous evening.

At long last everything is secure, and my parents hug me close with promises to visit as soon as the baby comes.

"Just send a note to Luke and we'll be ready to visit the next month," Momma says, her lip trembling despite her smile.

Jake sits double with Ferli and, given the way that the male's arm is draped around my brother, I rather suspect that there is something going on there. My brother isn't exactly out of the closet because some of his gamer friends are real douches, but it's sweet to think that there is maybe a romance building there with Bodi's younger brother. I suspect Bodi knows as well given the affectionate way he treats Jake.

In that bittersweet moment, I can feel our company eager to get going. Even the delfass war-cats, who were slow to rouse after days of napping in the garden and eating some pretty decent cuts of meat, are feeling restless now that they are saddled and weighed down with their burdens. Cavek is the only one who seems reluctant. He sits on his borrowed

delfass, watching as if looking for someone. Suddenly he brightens and I see Kate and Boukie pull up.

Kate runs up, out of breath. “Shit, sorry we’re late. I almost thought we were going to miss you. We can’t let you go without saying goodbye,” she says as she gives me a hug and then holds Boukie up for a sticky hug and kiss. As sad as I am to say goodbye, I feel a strange ache in my heart when I watch them approach Cavek.

Boukie cries as she clings to the male, and he seems reluctant to let her go. Kate sets a hand on his arm and whispers something low and he nods, his lips curving into a smile. She grins shyly, a strange expression for her. Another romance blossoming perhaps. Orgath looks on too and snorts.

“He should just take her and be done with it,” he says.

I elbow him sharply in the stomach which he doesn’t even acknowledge. “He’s courting her properly. Don’t be such an ass.”

He chuckles and kisses the top of my head.

“I thought you objected to them mating.”

I shrug. “I can’t exactly stop them.”

He hums in agreement and gives Ethiel his command to depart. I look over Orgath’s arm one last time until the house disappears from my sight as the cats pick their way along the still-dark roads, my kitten Oliver tucked in a small sling across my breasts, purring away in his sleep.

Soon enough we leave the roads to enter the park trails. The delfass stride through the tall grasses and thick brush, their tails high as they head into the Chugiak State Park. I can feel the shift of energy and see the glint of the portal as we approach it.

The first time, I left my world involuntarily when there was nothing but pain, ice, and snow; now I leave it in the growth of late spring with pale new leaves slowly unfolding

under the sun. I squint at the flash of the portal's light, looking forward to the rest of my life as The Orc Wife.

## Epilogue

*Orgath*

*A year and half later*

Our daughter lies on the rug in front of the hearth of our private chambers, her pale gray belly warming in the yellow glow from the crackling fire. Winter is settling in quickly and I am relieved that she came long before the snows. Instead of a midwinter baby if my mate had been an orc herself, my daughter was born earlier with the last flush of summer, weeks before the busy autumn harvest began.

She looks very much like an orc—her size, the texture and color of her flesh, the shape of her face, and her long, pointed ears. The only tributes to human parentage are the shock of curly reddish-blond hair currently held in place with a tiny bow and the same brilliant blue eyes of her mother. All of the clan is enchanted with her, and neighboring clans have already been busy offering marital alliances with ours for when our daughter comes of age. Sammi naturally had a fit at the idea, and I have to agree with her.

Our daughter will be allowed what every other orc enjoys the privilege of: the opportunity to find her own bloodbond.

Sammi sits across my lap, engrossed in a letter from her mother.

“Jake and Ferli are doing well with the interspecies conferences they are holding in Ov’Ge. Apparently, they found ten other couples to travel the country with them. There have been plenty of demonstrations but no incidents.”

“Glad to hear they are entertained causing trouble there, rather than terrorizing our village.”

Sammi laughs merrily, a sound I will never tire of.

“Please, they weren’t *that* bad. Just a bit excitable, and a very cute couple. It was sweet seeing them together enjoying the village and surrounding area. Plus, it was Jake’s documentaries that really started the conversation going in Ov’Ge about our interrelationships as species.”

I grunt and tickle our daughter’s rounded belly. She opens her mouth wide in a gummy smile; the only protrusions from her jaw are the tiny spurs of juvenile tusks. I grin down at her and mash a bit of fruit between my fingers and slip it over her tongue while my mate is distracted.

“She is never going to nap on time if you keep feeding her sweet fruits,” Sammi comments without even looking up from the letter.

I laugh and pluck the piece of paper from her hands, drawing her up close to me as I growl and attack her neck with lustful kisses. Our daughter squeals from the pelt on the floor as Sammi giggles and struggles to get away.

“You great brute,” she laughs.

“You like it when I am a brute,” I say, licking the length of her neck and making her shiver and moan.

“Mmm. Yes, I certainly do. Maybe after Feronia goes to sleep we can pay a small visit to the Twilight Room and you can show me just how much of a brute you can be,” she purrs, making my cock surge with interest.

I moan and draw her closer to me. My body hungers in anticipation for tonight. Over the months, I have come to appreciate the fact that my wife can hold her own against orcish desires. In fact, she has turned my own games against me more than once. For all of her delicate human ways, my female certainly does have a taste for the Twilight Room.

## Author's Note

I hope you enjoyed Sammi and Orgath's story! If there is nothing I love as much as a good alien romance, it is a good monster romance, but I wanted this series to be quite distinct from my other writing. I wanted to play more with it. Next up is Kate, Boukie and Cavek in the Troll Bride!

S.J. Sanders