



ORCFIRE 1

# EMBERS' ORIGIN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

ARIA VALE & ALANA KHAN

# **Embers' Origin**

**A Fated Mate, Forbidden Love Orc  
Romance**



Aria Vale and Alana Khan

Temptation Of The Horizontal LLC

# Copyright

**E** mbers Origin: A Fated Mate, Forbidden Love Orc  
Romance by Aria Vale and Alana Khan

St. Petersburg, FL 33709

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Dear Reader

Sneak Peek: Embers Ignite

Many Thanks

Also by Alana Khan

# Blurb

**T**he arrival of five thousand Others onto the blazing sands of the Mojave Desert could signal the end of life on Earth as we know it.

## Clair

When I agreed to consult with the military on a top-secret project, I never dreamed my job would take me out of the lecture hall and into a world filled with orcs, nagas, and minotaurs.

Ashok, the mysterious orc warrior blessed with the power to unravel languages at a touch, is the key to discovering why they're here and if they plan to harm us.

Though shocking, the liberties he takes with my body aren't too high a price to pay to protect the lives of everyone on Earth. Except how can I pretend this is a sacrifice when I can't wait for his next "download"?

## Ashok

The power of my magic is rivaled only by the intensity of Clair's gentle touch. I'm drawn to her in a way I've never felt before, but my excursions into her mind hint that she might be hiding plans to destroy my people.

Although we may be enemies by day, by night she warms my bed and makes me forget anything but her.

*Prepare to be captivated by this spellbinding tale of forbidden love, high-stakes magic, and the delicate balancing act between desire and destiny.*

*Written by USA TODAY Bestselling author Alana Khan, Embers Origin has sweeping romance, explicit spice, and a happy ever after.*

# Chapter One

## **T**wenty-Five Years Ago Ashok

Every muscle in my body strains as I put all my strength into arm wrestling Groth. I'm not the largest orc in my clan, nor the most muscular, but I'm strong. Still, I'm no match for Groth, who is one of the Flameheart clan's most powerful.

After a few more moments of struggling, the veins on my neck popping, my thighs taut as I give it my all, Groth presses my hand to the stump. Grunts of approval circle the group of males who've been watching us.

"Nice match." Groth gives me a nod. I did well, considering his towering height, broad shoulders, and that his forearm is almost as thick as my calf. "You might yet have another growth spurt."

I doubt that, but I don't argue. It's been a decade since I've grown an inch. I just accept his compliment for what it is, a genuine sign of respect.

Instead of watching Groth's next match, I grab my half-drunk mug of ale and wander to the clearing where an impromptu band has sprung up around a bonfire. I wish I had the talent that minotaur male has as he plays the *khuur'in*. How can he coax such sounds out of a small wooden box?

The musicians had played a lively dancing tune while I arm wrestled, but they're playing something different now. It's dramatic and fills me with power. When the minotaur sings with that special ability some of his species have to make the words resonate from the back of their throats, I stand almost hypnotized.

This is why I love coming to The Gathering. Clans of many different species gather twice a year to trade, revel, and look for mates. I come for that, but as a *kezja*, I have other duties. Because of my special ability, I come to see if there are those here who speak any languages I haven't yet learned. If there are, I seek them out and perform the *linoch* to learn them.

I hold a special place of respect among not only my own clan, but all the clans. In fact, all the species treat me with high regard. I translate, mediate, and help us all live in harmony.

Thunder cracks and a deluge starts out of nowhere. Then lightning strikes. It comes in waves, streaking across the sky brightly, each one following in quick succession. It's as bright as day—brighter. It hurts my eyes.

Families run for cover where they can find it. Children are ushered inside tents while those of us close to the Goddess say a prayer to the heaving sky.

Orcs are closely attuned to nature. A thunderstorm of this magnitude has never snuck up on me before. By the surprised shouts of those around me, none of us saw this coming.

The horses picketed in the trees are screaming in terror. I run to soothe Bataar, my stallion, who is panicking. If this odd weather is scaring me, the poor beast is probably terrified.

The sky is silvery, shimmery bright as I sprint to the trees. People are shrieking. Babies are crying. There's a strange smell in the air that clogs the back of my throat. Something is wrong. Very wrong.

Thunder is rolling. I've heard it like this before, those long, seemingly endless rumbles that seem ominous. But even this is different. It's so loud it's vibrating in my head.

Just before I reach the trees, I glance up. There, in the middle of the noon-bright sky, is a black hole. It's as though a giant sank his knife into the sky and made his mark. I know Bataar needs my soothing touch on his soft muzzle, but I stand transfixed as I gaze into the black eye that pulses in the heavens.

The opening clenches open and shut like a mare in heat and then shimmery threads shoot to the ground. They're random. Some come singly, some come so thickly they're almost braided together.

My balls tighten against my body, one of the many signs of my terror as the hair on my arms stands on end and my legs stay riveted in place. Everything is so astonishing, so bizarre, I'm

hardly surprised when each string, each strand, grips one of the revelers and yanks them heavenward.

I run to Bataar, remove his picket from the ground, and leap upon his back in one smooth move. Needing no reins, no saddle, with the picket still in my hand, I jab my heels into his flanks. He rears and lurches forward, not needing any more direction from me. He wants to run from this place as much as I do.

When I glance behind me, I see the silver threads slicing down, wrapping around males, females, children, young and old, orcs, wolverines, minotaurs, and nagas. The threads don't discriminate.

I feel somewhat safe here under the cover of trees, the canopy of leaves thick above me. Without warning, without even seeing it coming, a thread wraps around me.

Thin as spider's silk, strong as metal, it circles my waist and chest, binding my arms to my sides and lifts me up through the canopy, yanks me above the trees, and into the black hole.

## Chapter Two

**A**shok  
Someone's screaming. I think it's me. Although dozens, maybe hundreds, of my people were snatched into the heavens, I'm alone. If they were with me, I would hear their desperate pleas. So yes. That terrified, plaintive voice I hear is my own.

I try to stay distracted by the noise and my worries about where all the others are in order to avoid paying attention to the pain.

The pain is piercing, agonizing. I would say blinding except I'm already blind—or it's so dark in this place that I can't see a thing. Either way, it adds to my terror as I move through... space?

If I were in the heavens, I would see stars, wouldn't I? Am I dead? Gone to see the dark God? Was I struck by lightning? Is my body lying dead on the ground of the Gathering?



That couldn't be right. If I was dead, I wouldn't hear sounds or still breathe or feel pain, would I?

I saw a dead *brinalak* once. It had lain in the heat of summer for so long its eyes liquified. I think that's what's happening to me. There's so much pressure on my eyes I wonder if their liquid is pouring down my cheeks.

Or maybe it's simply my tears.

I force my tongue out of my mouth to lick the liquid. The screaming ceases, which confirms that the noise I've been hearing is my own.

The thread clamped around me is like a vise, squeezing tighter as each moment passes. I can barely breathe let alone continue to give voice to the terror and the pain.

Mayhap I should have prayed to the Goddess Ani Wei more. I've certainly caused her displeasure if she's decided to punish me thus.

A litany of my transgressions flashes through my mind. Painful as it is to think of them all as they're lined up in my shameful internal ledger of misdeeds, it distracts me from my physical agony.

Some days I've been slow to feed and water Bataar. I could have been more helpful to my father when he was alive. There were times I could have fetched things for my mother if I'd risen from my bed earlier. I can be selfish, sometimes lazy. It's a fault I've had since childhood.

But my biggest flaw is the way I've treated my ability to perform the *linoch*. My gift, as everyone calls it. The ability to learn languages with a simple touch is a boon to my clan, to everyone in the valley, actually.

How many times did I dawdle on my way to a meeting to learn a new dialect from a traveler? I've been lazy. Taken my gift for granted.

Is that why the black hole came for me? Reached out for me? Swallowed me in its giant maw? But how does that explain the others who were ripped from their lives, their families?

Something shifts. I'm not certain if it's the speed or the trajectory with which I'm traveling. I'm not blind because now I see a dim glow, which is getting brighter with each shallow, labored breath I take.

Now the light is dazzling, so radiant it feels like my eyes are being stabbed. Then I'm falling, falling in this brilliant, hot place.

When my eyes focus, it's apparent something is rushing up to greet me. No. That's not it. I'm falling. Falling at a high rate of speed. When I crash onto the brown form beneath me, it's going to—

“Unngh.” I hit with such force a grunt escapes my lips.

Hell. Yes, this explains things, though I never thought it would be so bright. Maybe they got it wrong about how dark it is down here, but they were definitely right when they said it is so hot it's as though you're in a perpetual fire.

I should have been a better person, because after only a few moments of this, I know the true meaning of the saying that hell is hotter than the fire of a thousand suns.

When I was sailing through the darkness, I listened for the cries of others and heard nothing. Now the air is filled with the sounds of heavy bodies hitting the ground. No. It's not the ground. It's sand, which is blowing into my eyes and nostrils and mouth.

I lurch to my feet and use my hand, outspread over my forehead to shelter my gaze from the suns. Sun, I correct myself. The terrifying trip and my surroundings make it clear I haven't died, but I've traveled far from home. That there is only one sun in the sky confirms I'm not on An'Wa anymore.

After so long in the darkness, it's excruciating to open my eyes more than the slightest squint. Using my ears more than my eyes, I stagger toward the closest sound, finding a minotaur babe on the blowing sands. Goddess! How did an infant survive the trip in the darkness and the fall?

It's wriggling and shrieking its displeasure. Thank the gods the thing is swaddled in a small blanket. Although it's covered in a downy, brown coat, without the fabric covering, its delicate skin would have already been burned from lying on the hot sand.

"Mother! Mother!" I call. "There's a minotaur calf here. It's wee and terrified."

That no one claims it isn't too surprising. With all the wailing, it would be impossible to hear me from more than a few feet

away.

I jiggle the babe the way I do my older sister's beautiful daughter Mislik, then trail my little finger into its mouth as I've seen my sister do when Mislik was tiny. Suckling on my sandy finger seems to pacify the babe as I trudge forward, still calling for a minotaur mother.

Now, instead of the random, surprised clamor of the displaced, words come to me in every An'Wa dialect I know. People are calling for their loved ones, begging for help from their gods and goddesses, blubbing in fear and sadness.

I hear a few jubilant whoops from those who find a relative or friend. Their noises are mostly drowned out by the agonized wailing of those who are realizing they are here, on another world—a hellscape—without a single soul they know.

From what I imagine, the nagas must have it the worst. The sands are scalding hot and the heat is probably penetrating through their scales.

If this was An'Wa, the angle of the sun would indicate it is moving toward the horizon. Perhaps we'll get a respite from the heat. But this isn't An'Wa. I don't know if we'll ever get a reprieve.

After a period of shock, then grief, then the search for friends and loved ones, we try to deal with the reality of our situation.

"I don't know where we are or how we got here." The heat is coming off the sand in waves, so it's hard to see who's talking,

but I believe this is said by a big orc off to my right. “We need to organize.”

His deep voice is commanding and his orders are well-thought-out. He instructs three young males, all of whom came through with daggers in their boots, to run to the outcropping of rocks we see in the distance.

“If there are no predators, we’ll move there. Mayhap we’ll find enough shade to shelter the babes and elderly.”

It’s second nature for me to repeat everything he says in all the major language groups. Most species were nomadic for centuries, so there are dozens of dialects, but most orcs know orcish, nagas can understand naganese, and most wolveren speak the common wolveren tongue. We’ll make do as we help each other through this disaster.

I’m not the only person cradling a babe, or keeping one or two rowdy orphans distracted so they don’t break down in tears again.

Pain is in every person’s eyes. Reality is hitting us all. We’re somewhere far from home with little or no family or friends, no water skins, no food, and the relentless never-ending landscape of hot, drifting sands.

There are a few lumps on the ground, already mostly covered in blowing sand. Those are the ones who fell too hard, broke something on impact. I assume I’m not the only one who looks at those bodies with envy.

It appears the rest of us are going to die a much slower, more painful death.

## Chapter Three

**C**lair  
“All right, class. Have a good weekend, but don’t forget your paper due on Monday. I know I gave you some choices, but if any of you planned on doing this last minute, I’d love to see what you have to say about the strategies for language preservation in marginalized communities.”

“Last minute.” Melissa, the short brunette in the front row, scoffs as her classmates hurry out of the lecture hall. “Hell, I’ve been working on my paper for weeks.”

I have to give her a smile and a knowing eyebrow flash of recognition. I was a front-row-get-my-papers-written-early girl when I was in grad school, too.

Three men in military dress uniforms are currently swimming upstream. They’re barging into the classroom as the students are elbowing their way to their first party of the weekend. The men don’t crack a smile as they focus their attention on me and hurry down the aisle toward where I’m standing at the

front of the lecture hall where I teach my Biological Anthropology graduate-level class.

“You gentlemen are in the wrong place. I think they hold the ROTC stuff in...” My voice fades. For the life of me, I have no idea where the ROTC people do their thing. I simply know it’s not here.

“Dr. Clair Thompson?”

My body stutters in that way you see in the movies when there’s a glitch in the space-time continuum. These three mirthless military guys are here for *me*? Did last semester’s fieldwork on the Navajo Reservation break a law? My knees feel rubbery. I’m not proud of my fear, but I’m a rule follower, always have been. I avoid getting in trouble at all costs.

Having three military men stride purposefully toward me can only mean one thing. I’m in big trouble.

“Yes?” My cheeks feel tight. It must be the false smile I’m trying to plaster on my face.

“I’m Lieutenant Graves, sent here on orders of General Adams.”

I control my urge to prod for more information, choosing instead to stay right here in this deer-in-the-headlights pose.

“The army is in urgent need of an anthropologist linguist.”

I can’t say I’m surprised he got my title wrong, but I don’t interrupt to tell him the proper term is linguistic anthropologist.



“We’ve already cleared it with Dr. Perkins, the—”

“The college president. Yes, I know who Dr. Perkins is, but...”

“It’s a matter of national security. Corporal Scruggs here,” he tips his head to the person on his right who I initially thought was a man, but who has a neat bun coiled at the nape of her neck, “has taken the liberty of procuring you some appropriate clothing. We’d like to be wheels up in,” he snaps his arm at an angle to look at his watch, although there’s a perfectly good clock on the wall, “in five.”

I’ve got two doctorates, not to mention additional certificates in advanced study, so I’m not proud that my first question is a stuttered, “N-national security?”

“Don’t worry. We believe we can guarantee your safety.” His eyes swerve up and to the right, an eighty percent indicator of deceit. Not a great way to begin a negotiation, especially when the topic is national security.

“I’ll need more information before I can—”

“We’re burning daylight, doctor. I suggest you join us in the helicopter. The moment you sign the Non-Disclosure Agreements, I’ll give you a full briefing.”

Agreements? Plural?

“If you don’t want to sign-on to the most important project in the history of the world, we’ll return you here. No harm, no foul.”

Bastard. He had to say this is the most important thing to happen in... ever? And he’s got those scrambled eggs and

medals and ribbons all over his uniform? And we're going "wheels up" in five because this is so urgent?

Damn them and their forced urgency. I take a breath and give myself a moment to think. I'm an academic who realized I was built to study and teach when I was still in grade school. While other freshmen were out drinking and partying, I was studying—imagining that every page I read, every paper I submitted, took me closer to Mary Haas, Ada Lovelace, and Marie Curie.

But at the moment, books will not help me. I need to ask myself, what would these female titans of science do in my position?

"Uh, sure." For an educated professor, that was far from eloquent.

He wasn't kidding when he threatened we'd be on our way in five minutes. I barely had time to hit the restroom and text my graduate assistant, Barry, to tell him I'll be gone for a while. Almost as an afterthought, I type, *If I don't contact you by the fifth, call the police.* I regret it as soon as I hit send, so I add, *Ha ha.*

Within five minutes, we arrive at the helicopter, which is sitting on the quad green like an enormous black insect, the door yawning open, already waiting for us, rotor clipping at a moderate pace.

They have to show me how to put the special headphones on. "It gets loud in here. If you don't press the button before you speak, we won't hear you."

Once I'm sitting down with my headset on, yet before I've even had a second to look around or have my jumbled thoughts slow down, he explains.

“This is a matter of utmost urgency...”

## Chapter Four

**C**lair  
Lieutenant Graves beat around the bush enough to entice me to sign the NDAs, then briefed me enough to put me in shock. Because my mind is still spinning, I'm relieved to meet General Adams the moment we set down in the Mojave Desert.

It's not just the oppressive heat and sand in the air that's making my head spin. I hope he'll explain things again so my mind can wrap around not only what has already occurred, but what the army wants from me.

The dimly lit Tactical Operations Center—the TOC in military-speak—is in a hastily erected beige fabric tent. The air is heavy with tension as General Adams strides toward me, his stern face set like stone. I stand up straight, trying to exude confidence as I smooth my hands down the front of the military camo shirt and pants Corporal Scruggs provided.

General Adams is a stern man in his late fifties with brush-cut graying hair and stone-gray eyes. Unlike the men who accompanied me here who were in their military dress clothes, the general is in his camouflage uniform, which is fitting, I guess. From the looks of things when the helicopter set down, they're treating this like a war zone.

"Dr. Thompson, I trust Lieutenant Graves has briefed you on the situation." His voice is gruff and commanding.

"Yes, he mentioned this is a matter of national security." I try to keep my voice steady, but the combination of the way this hardened military man's gaze is drilling into me, plus what Graves told me on the way here has me feeling trembly inside. "I'm afraid I may be missing some details." Which is my nice way of saying I'm still pretty much in shock.

"Let me provide you with some additional information. Radar picked up a strange phenomenon in the Mojave two days ago. It was unlike anything we've ever seen before. We dispatched a squadron of soldiers to investigate, and what they found was... extraordinary."

He walks over to a large digital screen and taps a few buttons, bringing up a satellite image of the gathering in the desert, showing the tents and people scattered amidst the sand dunes.

"We arrived to find five thousand... Others. Nagas, minotaurs, orcs, and a bunch of other creatures that used to exist only in fairytales or a Hollywood makeup person's imagination. We initially treated it as a security threat, came in hot with ten

Apache helos, four tank platoons, and ten squads of infantry, guns drawn.”

He works a joystick on what I assume might be a drone to show me more closeups of the people, and I use that word loosely, in the encampment.

“After assessing the situation, we quickly realized these people appeared lost. It was noted that they are all ages, from infants to the elderly. We provided them with food, water, and tent shelters to ensure their basic needs were met.”

My belly unclenches a bit when I hear the people received a modicum of care. Leaning closer to the screen, I study the faces of the displaced people. Fear, confusion, and exhaustion are etched into their expressions.

“The problem is, Dr. Thompson, we have no idea who these people are, how they got here, or *why* they’re here. The media is being kept in the dark, of course. We can’t risk public panic or interference, not until we have more answers.”

My mind races, trying to comprehend the scale of the situation. “So, you’ve called me in because of my expertise in linguistics?”

The general nods. “Exactly. We need someone who can communicate with these ‘Others,’ as we’re calling them. We believe that understanding their language and culture is crucial to resolving this situation peacefully. That’s where you come in, Dr. Thompson.”

I take a deep breath, absorbing the weight of my new responsibility. It's clear that General Adams is a man of duty and order, but beneath his stern exterior, I detect a genuine concern for the well-being of these displaced people.

"I'll do my best, General. But I have to be honest, I'm not sure what I can do without more information about who these people are or where they come from."

General Adams locks eyes with me, his piercing gray gaze evaluating my sincerity. "Dr. Thompson, we are in the process of gathering as much information as we can. Our experts are analyzing them medically, assessing how they're handling our gravity and air quality. We're hoping that through your linguistic skills, we can bridge the gap between us and these Others."

I nod, fear and excitement bubbling through my veins. This is an opportunity to put my years of study and research into practice, to make a real difference in people's lives. But the weight of the unknown hangs heavy in the air.

"I understand, General. I'll do my best to establish communication and gather as much information as possible."

Adams gives a curt nod, his expression impassive. "Good. You'll have a private tent and any other resources you need to help these people and, hopefully, unravel the mystery surrounding their arrival. Time is of the essence, Dr. Thompson. Lives hang in the balance."

As I straighten my shoulders, a surge of determination courses through me. "I'll do everything I can to help."

He studies me for a moment, his gaze penetrating. “I hope you’re as good as they say you are. We’re counting on you.”

I feel somewhat relieved. Maybe I’ve watched too many conspiracy theory movies where the military are always the bad guys. I think Adams wants to help these people.

“And Dr. Thompson?”

By the tone of his voice, I know what’s coming next is going to be the next curve ball in a day already filled with shocks.

“They look harmless for the most part. They were mostly unarmed, although a few had daggers when we arrived. Don’t worry, they’ve been confiscated.”

He glances at the screen, watching what appears to be a peaceful gathering of people in tents.

“I haven’t spent my entire adult life in the military to be a pushover. We’re not withdrawing the tanks or air support. This could be a first wave. A recon mission. These could be hostiles, Doctor.”

He looks fatigued—and worried. He probably hasn’t slept since those first blips appeared on the radar screen.

“One thing is certain. However they got here was through a technology beyond our ability to comprehend. This could be the first wave of an alien invasion. This could...” he pauses for long moments as he considers his words, “be the end of the world as we know it.”

He rubs the back of his sunburned neck with his palm, then pierces me with his stone-cold stare.



“You’ll have a military escort every minute. You will report everything you learn to me, and you will not trust any of these innocent-acting peasants as far as you can throw them. I don’t want you to forget for a minute that they might kill you as soon as look at you. You may not be military, but you are under my command. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Lieutenant Graves was right. This is the opportunity of a thousand lifetimes. And it just might get me killed.

## Chapter Five

**C**lair

It's dark by the time they escort me to my tent. Although I want to meet the Others immediately, to stroll through their tent city and get my first glimpse of history in the making, my military escort says I can't do that until tomorrow.

I inspect my small tent upon my arrival: beige canvas walls, one cot, one small footlocker, one folding camp chair, and bedding. Behind a curtain reminiscent of how they separate beds in hospital rooms, is a five-gallon bucket with a toilet seat on top. I shudder.

When I signed onto this, I certainly gave no thought to what the bathroom situation would be. I guess the spartan conditions make sense considering this was just an empty piece of the Mojave Desert until two days ago.

Corporal Scruggs shows me how to put gelling powder on my waste—ugh. She tells me I'm lucky because most soldiers

don't get their own toilet and have to use the shared latrine. There is a cold-water shower a short hike away. For this opportunity, I'll make do with what I've got—and be thankful for it.

She also hands me a neat stack of folded underwear, as well as camouflage shirts and pants in a different pattern than what's worn by the military. The generic toiletries she places on my neatly made cot look nothing like what's in my bathroom at home. There's a large tube of sunscreen, which is good. I'm definitely going to need it.

On top of the stack of clothes is the tape recorder and extra cassettes I requested. My cellphone was confiscated before we got on the helicopter because this is a top-secret mission.

Next to the tape recorder are four MREs and four high protein nutrition bars. I picked up the top package and discovered it's a Meal Ready to Eat, hot or cold. Each MRE comes with a flameless heater, but that sounds like too much work, so I opt for a simulated chocolate protein bar and a bottle of water.

Between the sweltering heat and the alarming turn my life has taken, not to mention that an army general told me the world as I know it might be forever changed, I do not sleep well.

I wake at dawn, pull on my sand-colored clothing, finger-comb my short, curly brown hair, and grab another bar and the recorder.

“Good morning, Dr. Thompson.” A young man greets me so aggressively as I step out of the tent flap that I jump. It's barely six a.m. and this man, younger than my grad students,

looks as though he's been up for hours. "I'm Private Rodriguez. I've been assigned to accompany you today. Don't worry," he taps the rifle over his shoulder and nods, "you'll be safe with me."

I smile as my stomach tightens into a knot. Knowing I need an armed guard to walk me through the Others' tent city makes me wonder if signing all those NDAs and coming here was the right choice.

The moment we get close enough to see the Others walking between their tents, I can't control a whole-body shiver of excitement. Isn't this what every anthropologist dreams of when they allow their mind to stretch, to imagine the most amazing thing that might ever happen in their career? To meet an untouched civilization?

I stop in my tracks as I take in the sight.

Rodriguez, his voice low, says, "It's amazing the first time you see it, right?"

The Others have only been here a few days, the military even less time than that. The Others are in a fenced encampment topped with razor wire. They have military-issue tents just like the one assigned to me. The sea of sandy-colored bell tents reaches farther than I can see. There are some larger tent structures, gathering places where they eat and congregate, I assume.

I know nothing about these people, but I can't imagine they're happy to be in a fenced enclosure surrounded by armed guards.

The first sight to catch my eye is a minotaur. Literally a bull with a humanoid face walking upright between tents. I only notice his brown fur in the periphery of my mind because I'm much more focused on his tall horns. Then my gaze drifts to the prodigious cock and heavy balls swinging freely between his legs.

He seems utterly unconcerned with his nudity until he feels my attention. His gaze arrows to mine. His eyes narrow, and he looks me up and down with a leer. We're having a wordless conversation as he gives me a taste of my own medicine.

Placing my palms together in front of my chest, I give him the slightest bow in what I hope is the universal sign of an apology. When I raise my head, he nods his shaggy head at me.

The moment passes, and after we pass a secure checkpoint, Private Rodriguez leads me deeper into the Others' tent city. My heart races with excitement and apprehension. The sound of vibrant chatter fills my ears, an incomprehensible symphony of languages. As I strain to discern accents, dialects, and the unique cadence of their voices, I'm already overwhelmed by the sheer diversity surrounding me.

I drink in the sights that unfold before me. Nagas glide gracefully between tents, their iridescent scales shimmering in the early morning light. Their serpentine bodies move with a fluidity that captivates me, and I can't help but wonder how such a physical form impacts their way of life, their

communication, and even their language. Do they hiss or whisper like the wind through grass?

The minotaurs, hulking and formidable, tower above everyone else. Their horned, bull-like, massive frames, adorned with muscular sinew and thick fur, make them an imposing presence. But it's the intelligence in their eyes that leaves me breathless. Those deep, dark eyes hold the wisdom and ancient knowledge of a civilization far removed from our own. I wonder how they communicate within their own community, how their grunts and bellows convey subtle meanings and deep emotions.

And then there are the orcs, only slightly smaller than the minotaurs. With their raw strength, tribal-type tattoos on green skin, and rugged features with two tusks protruding up from their lower jaw, they command attention with an intensity that is both intimidating and compelling.

Their warrior spirit is palpable, etched into the lines on their faces and the way they carry themselves. The thunderous sound of their language, some of the sounds reminiscent of throaty Gaelic pronunciations, is infused with power and pride. How will I ever navigate the complexities of their linguistic intricacies?

As we move deeper into the tent city, a sense of sadness consumes me when I realize that other than the brazen, sexual look I received from that minotaur, everyone else's eyes have the shell-shocked appearance of people who have been through trauma.

Children, who you would expect to be laughing and playing, are clinging to an adult's hand. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that many of these kids are displaced, because there seem to be no species boundaries. Nagas are parenting minotaurs and vice versa. I wonder how many of these children are now orphans, how many people have lost their life partners.

The weight of responsibility settles heavily on my shoulders. The fate of these displaced people lies, at least in part, in my ability to understand and communicate with them.

I speak into my palm-sized device as I dictate notes to review when I'm back in my tent.

Trying not to be overwhelmed by the sheer diversity, I focus on specific interactions rather than on the tent city as a whole.

It's fairly easy to pick out those who have friends or family bonds, and those who are speaking to people they've just met. It seems there are far more of the latter than the former.

One orc captures my attention. He's not the largest male here. Not by far. Not even the largest orc. Most of the orcs are built big: green-gray skin with slabs on top of slabs of muscles with wide shoulders and tree-trunk thighs.

This male is built like that, but he's the only one who has what almost looks like a signet stamped onto the middle of his forehead. It isn't one of his many tattoos, either. It's an intricately etched plating of some kind.

I watch him walk from group to group and it becomes apparent he is speaking in the languages of the species he's communicating with. He's a linguistic specialist, as I am. My excitement rises as I continue to watch him.

He meets an elderly male of some species I haven't seen in any fairytale. The hunched humanoid male has wrinkled blue skin with spikes rising from his shoulders. The orc is hyper-focused, his eyes narrowed and arrowing in on the older male's mouth.

Finally, he purses his lips and shakes his head. I'm a linguist, trained in macro- and micro-interactions of this type. If I had to guess, the orc was trying to understand the elder's language. He gesticulates, his head movements and lack of eye contact showing great respect. It appears he's asking the elder a question.

I stop pretending I'm not eavesdropping when the elder nods and the orc escorts him into a nearby tent.

"Dr. Thompson? Uh... did we just observe a... sexual proposition?"

"I'd bet you're right in that we just saw a proposition, but not a sexual one."

Rodriguez steps away, but I shake my head and stand rooted where I am despite the lack of shade and the swiftly rising temperature here on the blowing desert sand. There was something about what I just saw that captured my interest.



In all my years of fieldwork, I've learned to trust my instincts. They're not always right, but they've often led me in the right direction.

I watch the people roaming from their smaller tents to the big areas where food is served, but I don't leave my spot until ten minutes later, when the two males emerge from the tent. As they stand just outside the tent flap, the two are engaged in a lively conversation. The elder is using the same gesture I used with the minotaur earlier. It's one of thanks. There's a look of relief on his face as he repeats one word over and over.

"Gesada, gesada," he says.

"Gesada," I speak into my recorder. "Means thank you in the blue man's language."

What the fuck just happened? The two were using hand gestures to communicate when they went into the tent and came out speaking fluently to each other. Something extraordinary happened in there and I want to know what it was.

## Chapter Six

**A**shok The female who's staring at me is different. She's wearing the same type of clothing they gave *us*, but she's one of *them*. She has no weapon—the only one of them I've seen who isn't armed.

It's her eyes, though, that most obviously mark her as not like them. I don't see hatred or fear, which is what the others project. Her eyes glitter with interest.

As she approaches me, the armed male at her side stands taller, on higher alert than he was.

She speaks, her tone pleasant and respectful. We haven't heard much of that since we arrived. The female's speech is slow, though she knows I don't understand a word. As I watch her gestures, I try to understand what she's saying.

She's not telling me something like all the rest of her kind as they bark orders or hand us rations as though they're doing us a favor—which they are, since there's little to hunt in this

wasteland. She's asking me something. But I don't have a clue what she wants.

She's gesturing to my tent. If things were different, a female pointing to my sleeping area would mean she wanted to join me in my furs. That is clearly not what's happening here, though I like the looks of her. She doesn't seem to notice I'm a male. I don't sense the first whiff of sexual interest.

I wonder what would happen if thousands of *them* fell from the sky onto An'Wa? We would confiscate their weapons and isolate them, just as they've done with us. Then we would try to find a way to communicate with them and discover why they were here.

Could that be what this female wants?

Ah, she watched what happened with F'Kesh and me.

"You want to be able to speak with me? Like what just happened with F'Kesh?"

I gesture, though I assume there isn't a chance in all the worlds that she could possibly understand me. Wouldn't it be helpful if she did, though? If she would allow me to perform the *linoch* on her so I could learn her language?

Somehow, I think she guessed what happened with F'Kesh. I point to my *keshmah*, the mark of the *kezja* on my forehead, as though that will further explain things, but it's clear she has no clue what it means.

"Clair. Clair." She points to her chest in the way people do when they tell me their names before I understand their

language.

I test the word in my mouth. The shape is hard to make around my tusks, but she smiles and nods when I eventually get it right. “C-lair. Clair.”

“Ashok.” I point to my chest with my thumb, taking pains to enunciate clearly.

Something changes. Her head tips back slightly as her nostrils widen. Ah, is she catching my scent? Orc-scent can be powerful. It can be arousing to orc females, though I’ve never seen it have any effect on other species.

Her eyes are scanning me, focusing on my chest, then they fly to my shoulders, assess my tattoos, and slide down my body. She’s trying not to linger, but there’s no mistaking the way her gaze pauses for a swift moment at what lurks behind my leather kilt.

When she returns her glance to my face, the faint scent of her arousal circles between us. I try not to smirk; I doubt these people consider it any more respectful than my people do. No matter how long I know this female, though, I’ll always be able to pinpoint the exact moment I went from something to be studied to someone—a person—who captured her interest.

These people have already confiscated our weapons, even though they are powerless against their firesticks. She’s one of them—the enemy. Yet, I regret she wasn’t motioning toward my tent to join me in my furs. Though her skin is pale and she lacks an orc’s crowning glory—tusks—her face is pretty and her figure is curved.

I wouldn't mind performing the *linoch* on her, absorbing her scent as our breath mingles. If given a chance, I would kiss those pink lips. Enemy or not, I would do much more than that.

“Ashok.” Her tone is all business now. Perhaps she caught the flare of interest in my gaze. She says more words, then tips her head goodbye as she strides toward the gate that locks my people in. The armed male scurries to keep up with her as she leaves, full of purpose.

## Chapter Seven

**C**lair

I rush into the Tactical Operations Center, my heart pounding with excitement. General Adams looks up from his desk, wearing his usual stern expression, but there's a flicker of curiosity in his eyes.

“General Adams! I think I've made a breakthrough!” I blurt out, barely able to contain myself.

He raises an eyebrow, clearly taken aback by my sudden burst of enthusiasm. “Go ahead.” I don't need any of my advanced degrees to know he's barely tolerating my intrusion.

Taking a deep breath, I try to compose myself. “I was out in the Others' tent city this morning and I witnessed something incredible. One of the orcs, Ashok, was speaking with another individual from a different species. They communicated using gestures and body language, and then something happened. It was like a switch flipped, and Ashok seemed to understand

everything the blue male said and could speak his language. It was amazing!”

The general leans back in his chair, wearing a skeptical expression. “Are you sure, Dr. Thompson? Communication breakthroughs like this don’t happen overnight.”

I nod eagerly. “I’m positive, General. It was like witnessing a real-time language acquisition, like a download. Ashok seemed to understand what the other individual was saying. I watched them have a short conversation before they parted ways.”

The general rubs his chin, clearly deep in thought. “Dr. Thompson, this is an extraordinary claim.”

“Yes. Extraordinary. I want to try it.”

His head tips back in surprise. “You’re suggesting you undergo the same... transformation?”

“Yes. I want to learn their languages, to communicate with them directly. It will take me months to learn the rudiments of even a couple of the languages I heard in their encampment. If I can quickly bridge the gap between us, we can better understand their needs, their culture, their *intentions*, and work toward a peaceful resolution.”

He gazes at me intently, as if searching for any hints of doubt or hesitation. “Dr. Thompson, this is not without risks. Not only don’t we know if it will work, we don’t know the long-term effects or consequences.”

“I’ve considered that, but you said the safety of Earth hangs in the balance. I want to do this.”

“Maybe someone else? Someone in the military?”

On my way to this meeting from the Others’ enclosure, I thought he might say this, so I’ve prepared an answer.

“We don’t know what this procedure entails. What if during the transfer he acquires more than my language... what if he delves into my mind? Isn’t it best for someone who knows no military secrets to undergo this procedure?”

As the words leave my mouth, I realize they might be true. What if he rummages in my mind? Intrudes into my thoughts? What if—I’m sure I’m blushing—he realizes I find him attractive and already have a little crush on him?

The General is silent. If I could read his mind, I imagine he’s thinking five steps ahead, like in a chess game.

“All right. I’m willing to allow you to do this under strict conditions. You will sign another waiver and provide me with a complete report on your experience, including any potential side effects or adverse reactions.”

“Thank you, General. I promise to give you a thorough report and be extremely cautious throughout the process. I understand the risks involved, but I truly believe this is the key to understanding and communicating with the Others.”

The general nods, his expression grave. “I hope you’re right, Dr. Thompson. We need to find a way to bridge this communication gap as quickly as possible. The fate of both



our worlds may depend on it. I can't help but worry that this is only the first wave, and the next wave won't come dressed in skins clutching only hunting knives in their hands.”

He instructs me to sign the waiver and offers me the use of one of the computers in the Operations tent to keep all my notes, though it will have no access to the Internet. With General Adams' reluctant approval, I mentally prepare myself to undergo the transformation that may forever change the course of history.

## Chapter Eight

**A**shok

I'm not surprised when Clair returns, nor am I surprised to see her face pale and her lips clamped together to hide their trembling. She's fearful, which makes sense.

She obviously didn't grow up knowing about the *linoch*. If these people could perform it, they would be communicating with us already. She has no idea what happened after the tent flap closed behind me and F'Kesh and hasn't a clue about what she's agreeing to.

I don't think less of her because her hands are shaking. The true sign of courage is to feel the fear and do what you need to do despite it.

"You're brave," I tell her when she approaches, nods, and greets me by name. My cock twitches behind the leather strips of my kilt. I like her bravery, the looks of her, and the way she said my name, treating me like a person, not an animal that needed to be caged.

“Come.” I motion to my tent, but when the armed male at her side follows closely, I shake my head.

“No.” To make myself clear, I hold my arm out straight, my palm toward him, and shake my head again, my lips in a tight line.

Clair and the male have a quick argument, their words fast and hard, as though they’re stabbing each other with them.

I feel the slightest pang of guilt. Perhaps it’s actions like this that caused the goddess Ani Wei to pluck me from An’Wa and drop me here. I could allow him in if I wanted. There’s nothing that prohibits an audience. People in my lineage used to perform the *linoch* in crowds all the time.

Clair is scared. The male’s presence might ease her fears. But I want to have her alone in my tent. I want her to relax, if she can, to feel my flesh on hers. For a reason I cannot fathom, I want to bathe in her female arousal scent.

What am I thinking? I have never felt this instant desire with any female of any species, let alone a totally alien female, one whose people are holding mine inside a fence under threat of death. Whatever brought us here must have rattled my brain. I will ponder this later. For now, I will seize the opportunity to learn the language of this female who has captured my interest.

There are many ways to carry out the *linoch*, but I want this to be intimate, sensual. She could refuse, but I can smell her emotions. This female is eager for me to learn her language.

Until she proves otherwise, she's still the enemy. If she's going to get what she wants, then I will get what I want, too.

Clair wins her argument with the male guarding her, because she steps away from him and crosses the threshold with me. When the male sticks his hand out to keep me from closing the flap, Clair scolds him and gets her way again as the flap drops, closing us in. The male's scent is bitter in my nose as he eyes me with distrust.

This place is scorching hot. It's close to midday, and it feels as though my skin could melt off my bones. My discomfort fades away as I focus on Clair and the *linoch*.

The bed is pitiful, an insult with its hard wooden carcass and thin strip of fabric to lie upon. I've been sleeping in a pile of bedding on the floor. I motion Clair there, then sink from standing into a cross-legged posture.

Her fear-scent rises as she swallows hard, twice. Though she's terrified, she sinks to her knees, then sits in a posture mirroring mine. I hide my smile at the thought that this will allow me to scent her with ease throughout the *linoch*.

"Calm your fears," I croon to her in orcish as I give her my most soothing gaze. "I will not hurt you. You'll walk away from here able to speak with me. You'll be safe here with me."

Of course, she understands not a word I spoke, but her lips twitch into a close-lipped smile for the briefest moment and her shoulders relax.

"That's right. You'll be safe. You're in my care."

I scoot closer, until our knees touch, then purr for her. It calms other orcs, especially mates and babes. I'm only a little surprised, though, when her gaze flies to me, then her shoulders relax. I've calmed her, if only a little.

With her more at ease, I close my eyes and pray. Just as I've done since I fell onto the hot sands three days ago, I fervently, humbly apologize for all my previous misdeeds and promise to do better, to be a better person.

My mouth quirks as a part of my mind wonders how I can promise the Goddess to do better in one breath while I'm being deceitful to Clair at the same moment. Perhaps she'd feel more comfortable if the male with the weapon was in here with us, but I've shut him out.

I'm a hypocrite, but that doesn't stop me from what I'm doing, which is thinking impure thoughts about the pale female whose knees are brushing mine.

After my prayers of apology, I ask Ani-Wei to help with the transfer of knowledge. I know the Goddess approves when the *keshmah* on my forehead tingles. It feels as though it's rumbling underneath my skin.

Perhaps I'm worse than just a male who can sometimes be selfish and lazy male, because instead of choosing to do the *linoch* with my fingers on her temples, as I did with elderly F'Kesh, I choose to do this the old-fashioned way. The way males in my line did with females from other tribes they were betrothed to. My selfishness wins as I choose to do this in a more intimate way with this female.

I take a moment to steady my breath, to ground myself in the moment. Reaching between us, I curl my fingers around her nape, then draw our foreheads together.

The initial contact sparks something in my flesh, more than the usual tingle of my *keshmah*. Clair feels it too, at least I think she does. She gasps, gives me a second of resistance, then closes her eyes and rests her head against mine.

Since her eyes are closed, I sneak my tongue between my lips to taste her breath on the air. It's so sweet my lips tip into a small smile.

Closing my eyes, I center myself and begin the *linoch*.

Extending my consciousness, I delve into the depths of her mind, exploring the vast landscape of her thoughts and memories. I navigate through the labyrinth of her intellect, gathering not only her language but a myriad of experiences that have shaped who she is.

I'm profoundly relieved when I find that her intentions are completely without malice. Her curiosity is genuine and guileless.

There is knowledge here I cannot fathom. Some of the pictures baffle me. There are things that are so foreign I can't find an anchor for them, a place to catalog them in my mind. I shelve them with the deadly firesticks, the flying vessels, and the squawk-boxes they wear on their shoulders to speak over long distances. These are things I will never understand.

The richness of Claire's inner world captivates me, an intricate tapestry of flights of fantasy woven together with facts from books.

Deeper, I encounter a well of loneliness. It's an ache that clings to her very being. My heart swells with a newfound appreciation for who this female is, how strong her convictions are. It is this loneliness, this yearning to understand and connect, that drives her to undertake this profound journey with me even though she has no clue what I'll do to her. It's an extraordinary act of faith.

When my father initiated me into this practice, he taught me the power my gift holds. I can read what others want. Knowing their deepest desires makes it easy to cheat and manipulate them.

Teaching me the technique was the easy part of the lessons that went on almost daily for the better part of a year. Teaching me to be ethical took much more time.

I steer clear of her private places, her loves and sadness, and the deepest yearnings of her heart. To access those thoughts without her consent would anger the Goddess. Instead, I pay attention to the energy that grows and intensifies between us. I become more aware of her presence, her essence, of the delicate balance we maintain. The instant spiritual connection we share transcends our physical bodies and twines our minds.

The atmosphere in the tent shifts. A current of sensual tension crackles in the air, a subtle dance of desire clawing at my awareness. Though no physical contact exists beyond my hand

at her nape and the warmth of our foreheads touching, the intimacy between us grows bolder, more obvious.

I embrace the beauty in this mental dance, the realization that the true intimacy lies within the minds entwined in this sacred space. The intensity of the *linoch* heightens my senses, my awareness of her body, her breath, and the growing heat that mirrors my own smoldering desire.

Her breath ghosts across my lips, still sweet, but laden with her potent arousal scent. Inside her mind, I read her thoughts. It's my job to avoid looking at or hearing such things, just as my father taught, but Clair's are blaring at me, chasing me, although she's unaware of how insistent her desires are.

Though at first, she was afraid and skeptical, all that is far behind her. Now her thoughts are dancing with mine, welcoming me inside her.

I even feel tendrils of her mind reaching out to me, but that can't happen in *linoch*. Not in this position. It's a one-way procedure. She gives and I take.

Finally, I feel her fatigue and unlink us. I reluctantly withdraw, allowing our minds to separate, though the resonance of our union still vibrates within me.

My eyes flutter open to find Clair gazing at me, her cheeks flushed, pupils wide, her breath shallow. The undeniable spark of desire lingers in her eyes, mirrored, I'm sure, in my own.

I offer her a knowing smile, recognizing the depth of our unexpected connection, then call out in her language, "Bring



her liquid. The juice of a fruit would be best.”

## Chapter Nine

**C**lair

I don't know how to describe what just happened. A religious experience? Otherworldly? Life-changing? All of the above.

I was attracted to the handsome orc before I settled next to him on this pile of bedding. Now I feel more connected to him than I've felt with any man in my life.

I'm relieved he asked Rodriguez for something to drink. I'm weak and dehydrated. It's only now that I realize Ashok spoke in perfect, only slightly accented English.

He slowly eases me to the blankets, laying my head on his strong thigh. Ashok's fingers glide across my scalp as I melt into his embrace. His touch radiates warmth, sending shivers of pleasure down my spine. A deep connection was forged between us. Now I'm acutely aware of his every movement and breath.

As I lie here, basking in the aftermath of the language transfer, the effect lingers like a surreal dream. I can't help but marvel at how he effortlessly learned my language during our connection. It's as though the barriers that once stood between us have dissolved, and now there's a deep understanding that transcends words. Our connection is so profound it's almost tangible.

Fear darts through me when I wonder what he learned about me when he rummaged in my mind. I don't know how this worked, but whatever happened, I doubt he could have located just the English inside my head and avoided finding out other, more intimate, things about me.

Perhaps he senses my worries, because a beautiful melody fills the tent. The sound of Ashok's bass humming casts a tranquil spell over us, filling me with intense relaxation. The soft, melodic sounds serve as a gentle lullaby, soothing me into a state of absolute serenity. His fingertips, still tinged with the energy of our mental connection, are electric, igniting a fiery desire within me I can't ignore.

Ashok brushes his fingertips down my face, his touch both tender and possessive. My cheeks flush with warmth at the intimacy, the sensation of his rough, calloused fingers leaving trails of heat in their wake. I draw closer to him, craving his touch.

Just as Ashok and I are caught in the intensity of the moment, the tent flap abruptly rustles open, and Rodriguez enters with an armful of bottles of apple juice. His steps falter, and he

freezes in his tracks as his gaze lands on us, still intertwined—Ashok seated, my head on his thigh.

“Dr. Thompson!” Rodriguez stammers, his voice laced with shock. “I... I brought... I mean, are you okay?”

After reluctantly pulling away from Ashok, I untangle myself from his grasp and sit up, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. “I’m fine, Rodriguez. Just recovering from the ... procedure. Thank you for the juice.”

Shit. I was in such a lovely, dreamy state. This is a harsh way to return to reality.

The young private’s eyes dart between Ashok and me. “But... It’s just... You were in his... *lap*.”

Ashok’s voice is calm as he interjects. “She’s recovering from the *linoch*. It is an exhausting procedure.”

Rodriguez’s eyes widen further, disbelief etched across his features. “But *Doctor* it’s... unprofessional.”

I take a deep breath, regaining my composure. “Rodriguez, I appreciate your concern, but the language transfer was a profound connection that builds trust and understanding. I feel safe.”

“And she needs to recover.” Ashok’s tone is firm, protective without being overbearing.

Rodriguez seems torn between his loyalty to the military and his duty to ensure my well-being. “Dr. Thompson, it’s not my place to question, but maybe you should recover in the medical tent. It’s more... appropriate.”

I meet his gaze, determination in my eyes. “No.”

Just the act of sitting up is wearing me out. All I want to do is lie back down and drowse for a moment, and I want to do it with Ashok’s fingers sliding through my hair, just like they were. I lift my hand to Rodriguez for a bottle of juice.

Rodriguez hesitates, clearly grappling with conflicting emotions. Finally, he takes a deep breath and nods, albeit reluctantly. “Alright, but if you need anything, I won’t be more than two steps away from the tent flap.”

I offer him a warm smile. “Thank you, Rodriguez. Your concern is appreciated.”

With that, the young private quietly exits the tent, leaving Ashok and me alone. He’s such a big male, so muscular, that it’s nothing for him to lift me onto his lap. He tucks my head against his sturdy chest as though I belong here.

Although Ashok speaks softly, his deep orc voice rumbles through me. “Rest.”

I take a sip of the juice Rodriguez brought, the cool sweetness dancing on my tongue. Then Ashok purrs, the rumble vibrating through my skin and calming me like a dozen Xanax.

Outside the tent, I hear people speaking in hushed tones. Orcish. The realization hits me like a jolt of electricity—they’re speaking Ashok’s language. In the depths of *linoch*, I felt Ashok probing into my mind, though I have no idea what he learned from me other than English.

I thought I would emerge from the experience with the ability to speak all the languages he knows, but none of the words drifting into the tent sound different from when I walked in. I don't know any of them—even Ashok's native language, orcish.

Ashok catches my puzzled expression, his eyes filled with... affection? He strokes my cheek, his touch grounding me once again.

“That noise you make, what does it mean?” I'm so tired my words slur slightly, but the scientist in me can't resist.

Ashok makes an interesting chuffing sound that could be a chuckle. “Orcs purr for many reasons. Sometimes when we're content, other times to help calm our babes or gentle a troublesome mate.”

My mind is sorting his words as I try to discern if he's calm, if he thinks I'm a babe because he's so much bigger than me, or... if he sees me as a troublesome female. Perhaps he's still reading my mind, because my fuzzy-headed confusion is met with another soft chuckle and then an even louder purr.

“You should sleep. You have questions? Ask them when you wake up.”

The connection between us is so different from when we started only an hour ago. We walked into this tent as strangers, but that status is far behind us now. I don't know what he found in his trip through my mind, but it's as though he understands me.

I don't want to wait to discuss the profound journey we just undertook, but instead of arguing, I drift off with the reassuring vibration of his purr under my ear.

## Chapter Ten

**A**shok How many times have I performed the *linoch*? Dozens? Hundreds? Never was the connection this intense. The moment Clair falls asleep, I shift our positions so we're both lying down cuddled together. This way I can sleep, too. I'm more fatigued than I've ever been after a *linoch*. I could blame this place we're in, that I'm far from home, but it's more than that. It's Clair.

I wake with a start to see Clair's brown eyes gazing at me as though she's memorizing my face. Her expression is sweet, filled with affection. The *linoch* is usually a transaction. It works just as it did with F'Kesh. I acquire the person's language, allowing me to help them communicate what they need, and then they thank me and leave.

But when I look at Clair, eyes heavy with sleep, I let my mind flicker back to our *linoch* and the feeling of our connection. Her short curly hair is mussed with sleep and her eyelashes flutter against her cheek.



She is beautiful, but that's not what takes my breath away. It's her light, the light of Ani Wei that only I can see. It's as if there is a rising sun on her shoulder and its rays halo her head. It's so beautiful it hurts to look away.

I wonder if this is what my father warned me about. He said it might happen this way, but I never thought it would. Is this a soulbond? To my knowledge, a soulbond can only happen between two orcs. This is unprecedented.

Maybe I'm wrong. I've never felt this way with any female. A soulbound happens when there is deep love and abiding commitment between two people. An almost tangible connection between the heart and soul when the bodies come together in the bliss of orgasm.

I've just met this female. She's not an orc. I can't possibly be falling in love with her. Can I? I won't burden Clair with this, though. She's still shocked at what happened between us earlier.

"Does the *linoch* always happen like this?"

She needs reassurance, understanding. She saw what happened with F'Kesh and already knows the answer to her question.

"No. This was... different, special."

"Is that why I can't speak your language?"

"You thought you would receive my language in the *linoch*?"

Of course she did. She had no way of knowing what to expect. I play back in my mind what she observed with F'Kesh and realize that it would have been easy for her to believe the

transfer of language with him went both ways. She expected it to work that way for her.

“The *linoch* goes one way. You give me your language, I receive.”

She leans up on an elbow to get a better angle to look at me, which allows me to see her disappointment. There’s a little furrow between her eyes. I press the pad of my thumb against it, trying to wipe it away.

“It’s just... I want to help you. You and all the people.”

Although I got a glimpse into her very soul during the *linoch*, she now shows me her heart through her words as she tells me how much she desires to learn our ways. To understand not only the orcs, but all the different species of what she calls Others.

“Humans are... fearful of things we don’t understand. When my people, all the people on this planet, find out about you, it could tear the fabric of our society. It could cause panic.”

I understand this. If everyone back on An’Wa knew how the people in this encampment were ripped from the Gathering, pulled through that black hole, and tossed onto the sands of what Clair describes as another planet, they would panic, too.

“I want to be able to talk to your people, understand them, so I can make it easier to inform the other humans that we are not alone in the universe. It’s important for me to tell everyone what’s in your hearts, that you’re kind, that you mean us no harm.”

I say nothing to this, although I wonder what type of people would be so small-minded as to believe they are the only ones in the vastness of the universe.

“And you need our languages to make this happen?”

“Yes. I think it would help.”

I brush my knuckles up and down her cheek as I think. This relationship that’s forming between us is brand new and fragile as a whisper on a breeze. I don’t want to break it, but I need to tell her the truth.

“I’ve already lied to you, Clair.”

Her brow furrows again and the edges of her lips turn down, showing her displeasure.

“I apologize and want you to know the truth before I tell you something new.”

She sits up and crosses her legs, breaking our physical connection. I can’t blame her. I just admitted my lies.

Not wanting to make things worse, I don’t pause before launching into my explanation. I hide nothing as I tell her I could have done the *linoch* with my hand on her temple instead of our foreheads connected.

“It wasn’t a logical decision, Clair. For the first time, I wanted to perform the *linoch* in a more intimate way. Could it be you wanted me there? To know you better?”

She firms her lips into a thin line, a clear message she doesn’t want to answer.

“Why did you do it? Perform the *linoch* differently with me?”

We’re both sitting up, legs crossed, knees brushing just as we were when we completed the transfer of knowledge. Steepling my fingers, I ask myself the same question. There are a hundred ways I could answer her question, including not answering it at all, or gripping her hand and placing it on my hard cock. Instead, I admit, “I wanted to breathe your air.”

Every muscle in her body tightens for a moment, and then she flashes me the first genuine smile I’ve seen grace her face.

“Um, I guess I should tell you my truth, although maybe you know after hunting around in my mind. I liked breathing your air, Ashok.”

I strongly consider spanning the distance between us and kissing her. She’s willing. No, by the look on her face, her gaze no longer running from mine, she’s eager. But I don’t lean forward and kiss her. Instead, I scoot backward.

“There is a way for you to learn my knowledge, but you won’t like it. I almost didn’t tell you because you’ll think I’m tricking you.” She’ll distrust me when I tell her. How could she not?

“Will you be telling me the truth?” She tips her head to the side as she waits for my answer. It’s a fair question. I’ve known her less than a day and already admitted one lie to her.

“Pure truth.”

“Then hit me with it.”

An odd expression, but I understand her meaning.

“No one knows how the *linoch* works, but whether it’s performed the way we did or what I did with F’Kesh, it only goes one way.”

By the look on her face, she knows I’m stalling. At a loss for how to tell her in a manner that won’t make her angry, I blurt, “You can receive the knowledge by drinking of my... essence.”

She tips her head again, clearly having no clue what I’m describing.

“You would have to drink my...” I tried to stay away from the parts of her mind that held her sexual thoughts and memories. I may be an awful person, so awful that the Goddess punished me by sending me here, but looking at her private thoughts was a line even I didn’t cross. I don’t know the word for it, so I point to my groin and watch as my meaning slowly dawns on her.

Her eyes widen, then rivet on the leather flaps of my kilt that hide my manhood. As if to make the point very clear, it bobs so hard it slaps against the leather, the slight sound ricocheting around the tent.

She gasps. Her throat convulses. Now she sits silently, her gaze never leaving the spot where my cock is thumping against my kilt.

Finally, she drags her gaze to mine and says, “Just to be clear, you want me to drink your... semen? Not from a glass, but from... the source?”

I didn't know the word, but by the distasteful way she pronounces it, I believe she understands me, so I nod.

Her nostrils flare, her mouth pinches, her eyes fly back to my leather-covered cock, then again find mine. "This is the truth?"

"To the best of my knowledge. I've never done it before. My father told me about it."

# Chapter Eleven

**C**lair

This is crazy. Surreal. It's been maybe forty-eight hours since those military people marched into my lecture hall and turned my world on its axis. I'm in the Mojave Desert in one-hundred-ten-degree heat with an orc. A freakishly handsome orc with tusks, amber eyes, long, dark braids, pointed ears, otherworldly tattoos, and a pulsing talisman on his forehead.

Not to mention the pulsing cock under his kilt.

But this is real. I've pressed my forehead to his, and he's now talking to me in perfect English.

"Let me ask again. If I..." As I cast about for some euphemism, I decide I owe us both the unvarnished truth. No sense trying to pretty up this pig. Let's call a spade a spade. "I'll be able to speak your language if I suck your cock."

He must realize this isn't the time to play with words, because he adds, "And swallow it," without veering his gaze from mine. "Yes. That's what I'm saying."

I give it about two seconds' thought and know I'll do it. I imagine most people in my position would. To be able to talk to all those people out there? Be the first to speak to creatures heretofore only imagined in fairytales? People from another world? Hell yes.

And that he's unbelievably hot and has been combing his fingers through my hair for hours and purring to calm me down makes it easier.

"I'll have to think about it."

"Of course."

"I'll be back tomorrow morning, one way or the other. If I decide not to... take you up on your offer, will you still translate for me?"

"Of course, Clair."

I believe him. He's a little crafty, but it strikes me he doesn't have a vindictive bone in his body.

I rise from the bedding, my body still humming with the remnants of the *linoch's* energy. Taking a moment to compose myself, I gather my recorder and step out of the tent into the blazing sun of the Mojave Desert.

As I make my way toward the Tactical Operations Center, thoughts swirl in my mind. Ashok's proposition lingers, a tempting path forward to gain knowledge about the Others' languages and culture. This could change the course of what might be the biggest thing that's happened in the history of the world. I haven't admitted it to Ashok, but there's not a chance



in hell I'll turn this opportunity down. The question is, should I tell General Adams?

I pause outside the Operations tent, the sun beating down on me, as I contemplate what will happen if I inform the general. On one hand, he's not only my superior, but he's overseeing this entire operation. He told me the fate of humanity might hang in the balance. It's only right to keep him informed. However, knowing the military's cautious nature, he might try to block the procedure. And I imagine he'll never look at me the same way again.

After I enter the Operations Center, I nod to the General, and slip into an empty chair in the row of computers they told me I could use, the ones that have no Internet access.

I make meticulous notes of my experience while revealing nothing of a personal nature. I'll reflect on those in bed tonight.

"How did it go today, Doctor?" The general is standing over me, looking at my computer screen.

"The transfer went well. Ashok has complete knowledge of English." I give him a proud smile. "I'll be going back daily to learn the customs and culture of the Others. Thanks again for giving me this opportunity."

I'm not lying. I mean it. This is the experience of a lifetime.

There's a gleam in the general's eye when he hears how successful the process went.

“Anything else of note in your report, or do I know the basics?”

I hesitate for a moment, thinking about how Rodriguez reacted to me lying with my head in Ashok’s lap. Now that Ashok speaks English, I don’t want to be excluded from this process. As a woman in the man’s world of academia, I’ve been muscled out of many opportunities. I don’t want that to happen now, with the most important thing in my or any field happening less than a football field away.

“The orc speaks English, Sir, but it is as if he memorized a dictionary. He knows the word for vehicle but not what one is. I’ll need to work with him closely in the coming days. Other than that, it’s only details.”

He nods and steps back to his desk. A few moments later, I head to my tent. Between the relentless heat and the sheer emotional upheaval of the *linoch*, I imagine I’ll sleep well tonight.

## Chapter Twelve

**C**lair  
I wake up the next morning with hard nipples and slick panties. My mind may be fearful of what's going to happen today with Ashok in the privacy of his tent, but my body is completely on board with the sexual intimacy we're going to share.

From almost the first moment I saw him, I was attracted. There was something about him, the way he carried himself, the talisman embedded in his forehead, the intelligence in his eyes, that drew me in.

He's so smart! Delving into my mind was one thing, but our conversation afterward told me he'd assimilated a vast amount of information.

Last Christmas, one of my nieces proudly informed me she's a sapiosexual. Not wanting to admit to a sixteen-year-old that I had no idea what she was talking about, the minute I got a moment alone, I hurried to the bathroom and looked it up on

my phone. “A person who finds intelligence sexually attractive.” I realized immediately that explains me to a T.

Ashok is the whole package: built like a linebacker, smart as a whip, and the tender way he stroked me, providing aftercare when I was too tired to think straight; what else could I ask for?

Instead of feeling sleazy that I need to suck his dick to get what I want, it almost feels as though I’m the predator. He’s been completely open and certainly isn’t forcing me to do this. I believe him when he says this is the only way for the language to go from him to me.

I watched him as he explained it. He seemed genuinely saddened that I’d misunderstood the outcome of the *linoch*. It wasn’t his fault I’d agreed to something only described through the most rudimentary sign language.

“Okay, Clair. Let’s get this show on the road,” I tell myself as I open my tent flap.

Private Rodriguez is waiting for me. I’d hate to have his job description. Watching outside my tent as he stands alone in the hot sun, then watching outside Ashok’s tent as hordes of Others walk by.

What’s going to happen with Ashok and me will be so intimate, I wonder if I can get Rodriguez to step away for a bit. I doubt it.

As I approach Ashok’s tent, a sense of unease washes over me. I’d assumed, or maybe hoped, he’d be waiting for me outside,

but he's nowhere to be seen. When I pull the door flap open, the tent is empty. My heart sinks, and I turn to Private Rodriguez, who stands nearby, his face set in stone.

"Have you seen Ashok?" I try to keep my voice steady despite the nagging worry gnawing at my insides.

Rodriguez looks uncomfortable, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I... I'm sorry, Dr. Thompson." He shakes his head, his eyes on the ground.

As I stand there, the air thick with tension as I try to figure out how to find Ashok, a new figure strides forward from the gate that separates the Others' area from the temporary military garrison.

"Dr. Thompson, I'm Lieutenant Belcher." His voice is clipped and formal. "Today, you will be working under my command as a translator."

My irritation flares as he dismisses my expertise and reduces me to the role of a translator. My skill set is so much more than that. Since I have no knowledge of Other languages, I don't know why my first response is to argue about my qualifications. I guess I just want to put this pompous, chauvinist prick in his place.

"Actually, Lieutenant Belcher," I reply, my voice firm, "I have two doctorates and years of experience in linguistics and cultural studies. I am not a translator."

He looks at me with an air of skepticism, clearly unimpressed. "I understand your qualifications, Dr. Thompson, but for the

purpose of today's interviews, I will be asking the questions and selecting which individuals to speak with. Your role is solely to provide translations." He tips his chin up and looks down his straight nose at me.

Frustration bubbles within me. It's not just his dismissive attitude that sets me on edge; it's the realization that I can't fulfill his demands.

"Actually, Lieutenant, there is something you should know." My steady voice is tinged with concern. "I can't translate any of the Others' languages."

He looks shocked, his eyebrows rising as his rigid demeanor falters for a moment.

Sometimes I can be slow on the uptake, being the last to catch the punchline of a joke or realize where a particular TV show is heading. Now is not one of those times.

The General thinks I know all the Others' languages and has demoted me to a translator. If he believes that, he also believes Ashok is unnecessary. Ashok is missing which means... I'm not sure exactly what it means, but I know it's not good news.

"What do you mean, you can't translate?" Lieutenant Belcher's voice rises as his eyes narrow. "The General informed me you underwent some primitive ceremony and acquired all the language knowledge you would need for us to determine what these monsters are here for."

I take a deep breath, gathering my composure. "I did undergo the *linoch* with Ashok, who is not a monster, nor are any of

these people. Contrary to the General's assumption, the *linoch* didn't transfer the Others' languages to me. It only allowed Ashok to speak and understand English, not the other way around."

Lieutenant Belcher studies me, disbelief etched across his face. "This changes everything. I was told you were our key to effective communication with the Others. We need you to fulfill that role."

My frustration ignites my fury. I don't want to argue about translating when it's something I can't do.

"Lieutenant, I demand to be taken to Ashok immediately. I—" I almost launch into a detailed explanation of why I'm outraged or what I fear they've done to Ashok, but the man doesn't want—or need—to know.

For a moment, Lieutenant Belcher hesitates, caught between the weight of his superior's orders and the undeniable force of my demand. Finally, he nods, evidently realizing I can't translate shit.

My heart pounds as Lieutenant Belcher grudgingly leads the way out of the Others' encampment and toward the heart of the military area. Fear grips me, tightening its hold with every step we take. I don't know why Ashok is in the human part of the encampment, but it couldn't be for a good reason.

As we approach one of the few permanent structures in the hastily erected base, my sense of unease intensifies. The metal structure stands as a stark contrast to the temporary canvas tents that surround it, adding to the foreboding atmosphere.

“What building is this?”

“Interrogation.”

Shit.



# Chapter Thirteen

**C**lair  
Lieutenant Belcher opens the heavy door, and I step into the room, my breath catching in my throat.

Sights, sounds, and smells assault me all at once. The metallic tang of blood lingers in the air, accompanying the putrid stench of fear, urine, and desperation. Ashok, naked and bound to a chair, is soaked in his own sweat. Bruises mar his arms, belly, and back. The blooming emerald and plum colors are evidence of the physical abuse and torment he's endured. I can't even see his face; it's covered by a black fabric bag.

Horror washes over me, incapacitating any coherent thought. Every instinct screams at me to hurry to his side, to save Ashok from this unimaginable cruelty. I can feel the bile rise in my throat, threatening to overwhelm me.

I want to cry, to whimper, to sink into some powerless place I thought I'd left behind in my childhood. Instead, I stand to my

full five feet four inches and growl, “What the fuck is going on here?”

Lieutenant Belcher, expressionless, looks on in silence. It becomes painfully clear to me he knew about this and was hiding the truth about Ashok’s whereabouts until he couldn’t stall me anymore.

I’m a smart woman, but I’m barely holding on to my sanity. You’d think I wouldn’t be able to function, much less play a game of chess. Maybe it was the *linoch*. Perhaps something did come my way in that exchange because it’s clear as day what I need to do to try to fix this.

While the back of my mind wants to cry and rail and shame these men for their inhuman and probably illegal practices, the front of my mind demands, “I need to speak to General Adams.” When that demand is met with mocking chuckles, I repeat with more force. “I need to speak to General Adams *now!*”

“We don’t need to pull the highest-ranking officer on this base from his busy schedule to speak to a bleeding heart like—”

From somewhere deep inside me, I summon the courage to cut him off and bark as though *I’m* the general. “If he’s not here in five minutes, your names will figure prominently in my report.” When they don’t hop to it, I add, “My report about the most important thing to happen in the history of the fucking world and the only alien who can communicate with us has been tortured to within an inch of his life!”

They're quiet for a moment, then Belcher says, "I can contact the general. Let me remind you that in that stack of non-disclosure forms you signed, you agreed to work under the military rule of law. Are you certain you want to pull that man from his very important business?"

"Serious as a fucking heart attack, Belcher." I purposefully curse and leave off his rank. It's a shot across the bow.

I don't know what well of strength I'm drawing from, but I think I'm pulling off this whole I'm-a-strong-woman-who-knows-what-she's-doing-thing pretty well.

Lieutenant Belcher's gaze hardens, his stance defensive. "Do you realize the fate of the entire world might be riding on this? Have you seen how enormous these males are? How ruthless they would be if they had weapons of any magnitude. It is *imperative* we discover their endgame."

"And he's the only fucking person on the planet who can communicate with humans as well as Others. Get. The. General. Now."

Belcher nods to Rodriguez, who hurries out the door.

A surge of bravery courses through me as I launch into the next phase of my plan. I take a step forward, closing the distance between us. My voice, though filled with fear, still carries a strength honed by my conviction.

"These are *people*. This male who you've handcuffed to this chair has thoughts and feelings and a family, just like you.

Does he look like he rode in here on some high-tech spacecraft? If he's such a threat, where are his ray guns?"

I'm going to give these men an earful until the general arrives.

"Even if the general doesn't intervene, can you give this male a break? It's sweltering in here. Take off his hood, give him some water, let him catch his breath."

I didn't think they'd do what I asked, so I'm not surprised when not one of them moves a muscle. Clamping my teeth together, I try not to look at Ashok. His shoulders are wrenched at an odd angle because of the way they have his hands cuffed behind him.

I don't know what is bleeding, but it's so profuse it's leaked from under his black hood. You would think it would be hard to see bruises on green skin, but the deep emerald and eggplant spots are forming on every exposed inch of skin. It would be a tragedy if the best I accomplish here is simply giving him a brief respite from his torture.

The general is only halfway through the metal door when he asks, "What is so important you had to speak to me in the middle of an interrogation, Dr. Thompson?" His voice is laced with irritation.

"I need to speak with you outside." I'm an academic. My best words are carefully thought out and written with care. Extemporizing isn't my strong suit. I've never done anything truly brave in my life, but I rise to my full height, stab the general with my gaze, and stride toward him. "It will only take a minute."

He chuckles and follows me out the door. The sound of that laugh is so derisive, so dismissive, I want to punch him. All I do is take a few strides from the Interrogation Center door, then turn to face him.

“Are those men getting the information they want?”

Although we both know the answer, the general humors me with a shake of his head. “No. If they got what they wanted, they would stop.”

“Do you think torture is going to work?”

“It usually does.”

“You’ve seen the size of that orc. Do you think you can break him?”

“In my experience, size has little to do with it. It’s more about the pain threshold.”

I didn’t expect such an honest—and gruesome—answer.

“Since time is of the essence and he clearly hasn’t cracked, I’d like to offer an alternative.”

He cocks an eyebrow in question, too skeptical to waste words.

“Good cop, bad cop, General Adams. He and I spent all day together yesterday. The *linoch* was an intimate procedure. His thick leather kilt couldn’t hide his interest. What if you and I waltz in there and I continue my do-gooder speech? I’d already worked up a good head of steam, taking the orc’s side

against your men. He already trusts me. My protective speech will seal the deal, don't you think?"

The general has wiped the smirk off his face and is giving me his full attention.

"I propose we go back in there. I chastise you all again, put on a good show, and you relent. Reluctantly remand him to my custody with a stern warning not to harm me and to come clean with the intel we need. Lock him in my tent with me. Put two guards outside instead of one. Give me the list of questions you want answered and I'll use honey instead of vinegar."

I shrug, trying to act as though I couldn't give a shit if he accepts my proposal or not.

Before he answers, he calls the lead interrogator, Lieutenant Escher, out to get an update.

"Same bullshit story, Sir. Black hole, long, painful journey, falling onto the sand. Period. Every time. It's memorized. Clearly rehearsed."

The general rubs his chin for a moment, then looks at me and nods. "Let's go in and put on a good show. By the looks of him, he'll need a trip to the field hospital before we get him to your tent. Be sure to demand that."

His brow furrows, and he looks at me as though he's seeing me for the first time.

"You realize he could snap you in half if he wanted? Just wondering why you're taking such a big risk."

“Three words, general. Nobel Peace Prize. My work with these monsters is going to get me that prize. The reward outweighs the risk.” My stomach rebels the moment I say such a repellant thought.

His lips pooch out thoughtfully as he nods. This is a man who understands ambition. My answer was completely believable to him.

## Chapter Fourteen

**A**shok They've taken me to the healer, fed me, and I've downed many bottles of water. They gave me something to take away the pain, which seems odd, since they're the ones who inflicted it. My mind wasn't working well because of the agony I was in. Now that my pain is gone, my thoughts are still muddy because of the drugs.

"Rodriguez, Ashok can barely stand. Can you help him take a quick shower?"

I've been nude since the torture started, so the man simply helps me into the bathing enclosure and stands nearby as he sprays me down. The pressure from the water hurts wherever it touches and the soap stings, but soon it's over. I continue holding onto the tent pole as he drags a rough cloth over my wet skin. I only release my grip when he pulls me forward to escort me to Clair's private tent.



“You can’t lean on me so hard, man. You’re too big,” Rodriguez scolds. In my fuzzy state, I forget how small these humans are.

Just as I’m about to sag onto the cot in Clair’s tent, she says, “Not the cot. Here, lay him on this pile of blankets. Can you bring us some more?”

“It’s over a hundred degrees out there. You want more blankets, Doc? Sure thing.”

The moment I’m lying in the little nest Clair made me I pray for Ani Wei to take pity on me and help me heal. Then I sink into sleep.

When I wake, the first thing I do is gently press the flesh over my shattered cheekbone. It hurts less than it did. Perhaps the Goddess heard my prayers.

Clair is lying next to me, asleep. I’m not proud that hatred wells up hot and bitter inside me.

Much of my life has been spent being cocky or lazy. I’ve done my work as a *kezja* whenever it was asked of me, but I haven’t been as helpful in my village as I could have been. One thing I’ve never been, though, is a hateful, spiteful, vengeful person.

I am now.

The humans don’t have good hearing. I noticed it shortly after they arrived. That Clair and the general barely stepped away from the torture room’s door just shows how much they underestimated my ability to hear them.

The pain of all the punches and the beating to the soles of my feet was nothing compared to the agony of hearing Clair conspire to lie to me and trick me. Though my thoughts are still hazy, I need to decide how to deal with this.

Luckily, I was too tired to confront her before my nap. Now I have time to strategize.

She's lying next to me in this pile of blankets. We're as close as we were yesterday after the *linoch*, yet everything is different. Yesterday, we'd just shared an emotional intimacy like nothing I've ever felt before. Today, she betrayed me at the deepest level.

How did I not sense her true intentions when I connected with her mind? Has something happened overnight to drastically change her attitude? Perhaps the human mind can hide true feelings. Her words to the general must be her truth.

There are more Others than humans here in this desert. Perhaps if I play Clair's game long enough, I can find the secrets of how to use their weapons. She wants me to be a toothless pet? I can pretend as well as she can.

She'll want me to perform the *linoch* on her so she can understand our language. I'll happily let her suck my prick. If she wants to pretend she cares for me, I'll allow it. I'll even pretend to care for her, if that's what she expects. Two can play at this game of hers.

If there's a way to use her, to trick her, to get the upper hand, I'm ready to do that. Yesterday, I thought I had a soulbond

with her. That couldn't be true. The Goddess might be punishing me, but she would never be so cruel.

The moment Clair's eyes flick open, she searches for me, then smiles. She's a good actress, I must admit.

Pressing her palm to my uninjured cheek so gently it's little more than a feather's graze, she seeks my gaze and asks, "How are you doing?"

"Orcs heal fast. I'll be fine."

"I'm so sorry they hurt you like that. The moment I went to your tent and found you gone, I knew something bad had happened. I know you're the one who went through all of that pain, but it hurt my heart to see what they'd done to you."

I wonder if she's even a linguist. Or an anthropologist. She's an amazing actress. If I hadn't heard her conspire against me with my own ears, I would never in a thousand trips around the sun believe she was capable of such despicable trickery.

# Chapter Fifteen

**C**lair

There was something so heart-wrenching about seeing Ashok handcuffed to that chair in the interrogation room. I can still see it and *smell* it. It just intensifies my tender feelings toward him.

I already had so much affection for the male, but it gutted me to see him so weak, so hurt, so defenseless. At least I had the presence of mind to figure out how to manipulate the system. I don't know where the idea came from for me to act as a double agent, but it worked!

Now the big, handsome orc is in my care, at least for a little while. Maybe together we can figure out how to fix this. Meanwhile, job number one is to help him heal.

“What did they want?” His amber eyes search my face. “I answered the questions every time they asked.”

“I guess they don't believe you.”

“The truth is the truth.” He lances me with his gaze, then asks, “Do *you* believe me, Clair?”

“Tell me what happened.” To be honest, I’ve been dying to know. How did that ragtag bunch of people of all ages, all walks of life, and many different species all land within half a mile of each other in the middle of the Mojave in the blazing summer heat?

He tells me his tale. When he describes An’Wa, his family and friends, his expression is as happy as I’ve ever seen it. Then he describes the Gathering. The picture he paints is so clear it’s as though I’m there.

He lingers on his descriptions of the lush trees, the blue skies, the two suns, and the sweet scents in the air. Perhaps he goes into such detail because it’s so different from what he’s encountered here on Earth.

We’ve known each other for such a short time, I’ve never had the chance to tell him the Mojave is an aberration. The moment I can jump on the Internet, I’ll show him pictures of other, more hospitable places on Earth that might even remind him of his home.

His brow furrows, reflecting his turmoil as he tells me about the thunder, lightning, and the black hole that opened in the sky, blotting out the stars. It’s hard for me to picture the strands that plucked each individual up and brought them through the hole, but as we lie on our sides, I gently pet his shoulder as he narrates. I try to soothe him and give him my

strength as he relives the agonizing passage from An'Wa to Earth.

Dear Lord, they must all hate it here. It's hard to imagine coming from paradise and going through a painful journey to land in this blast furnace of a desert, and then have weapons shoved in your face? And to add insult to injury, the torture he endured. It's amazing he's not huddled in the corner.

"Ashok, I'm so glad you're alive. I wish we knew how to send you back."

"I'd happily go." His tone is mournful.

"Can you sit up? Would you like me to braid your hair?"

His eyes round in his face, his head tipping away from me.

"What? Is it forbidden to touch another's hair?" I ask, then remember the way his fingers slid through my curls yesterday, soothing me after the *linoch*.

"No. Braiding another's hair has meaning on An'Wa, at least with my people."

"I didn't mean to offend you. Just offering to help." I don't admit I'm dying to braid his hair just to have an excuse to keep touching him, providing him comfort.

"It's an intimacy."

Everything changes between us from one heartbeat to the next. The room is suddenly crackling with sexual energy.

"When I went looking for you this morning, I was expecting to... drink your essence for the *linoch*. I doubt this will be

more intimate than that.”

He scoffs.

“May I, Ashok?”

He nods.

We both sit up, I scoot closer, and slowly work each of his masculine braids free of their bindings. As my fingers slide through his hair, a tingle skates up my spine. Although his hair is thick, it’s healthy and shiny, the exact, thick texture I imagined it would be.

I seldom use a brush on my short curls, using my fingers instead, but thanks to Corporal Scruggs, there’s a brush in my footlocker, which I retrieve.

I’ve had few lovers in my life, certainly none with long, lush locks like Ashok. Gently, I pull the brush through his hair, ensuring the bristles gently scrape his scalp in that way I love when my hairdresser works on me. I wonder if it feels as good to him as it feels for me to care for him in this way.

Remembering yesterday, when he hummed for me when I was out of it after the *linoch*, I hum to him, switching from song to song, giving this intimate process some background music as I tenderly touch him.

“Feel good?” My voice is dreamy.

“Mmm.”

I realize he’s still tense.

“Are you waiting for the bad guys to come back? You heard the general. He said you could stay with me, unharmed, while he figures out what to do next.”

He didn't give me a time frame, but I doubt this respite is going to last more than a few days. I don't mention this to Ashok.

“After what happened in that room, I'm finding it hard to trust.” His words come out gruff, harsh.

“Of course, you wouldn't trust them, Ashok, but you can trust me.”

I pull his hair to the side and lean to kiss the nape of his neck. The touch is sensuous, scattering sparks from the point of contact all through my body. How is it this one kiss can inflame me when far more intimate encounters haven't touched me this profoundly?

I want to kiss his lips—to do more than that. I want to suck him, to provide him comfort. Instead, I finish brushing his hair, then grab a hank of hair, divide it into thirds, and braid.

Reusing a piece of hide I just removed, I tie it off, then begin another braid. His muscles are still tight, as though he doesn't want to let his guard down. It's not surprising that the torture changed him. It just bruises my feelings that he seems not to trust me.

As I continue braiding, we barely speak. With each braid I complete, each leather strip I use to tie the end of his braid, his



muscles relax and our connection grows. The attraction sparking between us could light a bonfire in this small tent.

The air around us feels thick with anticipation as I work from behind him. It was so sweet yesterday when he admitted he wanted to breathe my air. I long to do that now. Since I'm behind him, I don't get a whiff of his breath, but I get to drink in his scent. It's warm and, despite the desert conditions and the general issue soap, for some reason he smells like summer rain.

When my fingers finish tying off his last braid, I lean close and say, "After what you've been through, I would understand if you're not in the mood. But Ashok, I would love to kiss you."

## Chapter Sixteen

**A**shok Although before I stepped into the shower my thoughts were slow, my mind has never calculated as fast as it is right now. My first thought is disgust.

How dare this lying, cheating female propose such a thing? Is she a strumpet, selling herself to the highest bidder? Even though it's not my coin she's earning, but the general's, it feels vulgar.

Then my cock springs to life and convinces me to take the opposite course of action. Why allow one of us to lie while the other tells the truth? What is the harm in joining in her game of deception? I'll play along, get my cock wet, feel some comfort. Certainly someone owes me that after the punches to my face and body and those agonizing shocks to my feet.

We're both looking in the same direction, her warm breath brushing across my exposed nape. She can't see the

calculations going on in my mind. If she did, she would run like the prey animal she reminds me of.

I confirm my earlier decision—to take her up on her offer. Not only do I deserve pleasure after all that pain, but perhaps when this is over, she'll feel a sting of distress when she realizes it wasn't her who played me, but the other way around.

I twist at the waist, grab her by hers, and sling her forward so she lands across my folded legs. She weighs so little, I'm surprised it hurts as badly as it does. I guess when the tallest of them smacked my thighs with a stick dozens of times, it did more damage than I realized.

But this beautiful female is in my arms. Her lips may lie, but her scent doesn't. This may be a game on both our parts, but our bodies want each other. She can't make that up and I can't deny it.

If I had real feelings for her, the type of affection I felt until I heard her plotting outside the torture room with the general, I would brush her lips with mine. My actions would be gentle and full of affection.

That was a lifetime ago. Though I don't want to share affection with this woman, I'll let her feel my lust. I press my lips hard against hers. She gasps at the suddenness of it. Since she says nothing else, I take it as a sign to continue. Our tongues play in an erotic dance, locked in a battle for dominance. Mine wins when I nibble on her lower lip and suck it into my mouth.

Her body almost melts into my arms as I take her deeper into the kiss. The heat between us is so intense it seems to warm the room. I can feel it radiating off our skin like the invisible billows from a fire.

The intensity increases until we're panting from the exertion. My fingertips dig into her ass as I press my hips closer to hers, my arousal aching for release. As much as this is about my hurt and anger, it's so much more than revenge. My body has its own agenda and is demanding to be fulfilled.

My lips remain fused with hers until we both come up for air. I feel a sense of accomplishment as I watch her eyes, glazed with pleasure. The corners of my mouth curl upward in a satisfied smirk. Her arms still cling to my neck, and she tightens her grip, a clear message that one kiss is not enough.

I draw back, inch by inch, savoring every moment until finally our bodies are no longer pressed together. With a tenderness that shocks us both, I brush my lips against hers one last time before releasing her completely from my embrace.

Reveling in my power, I wordlessly challenge *her* to be the one to kiss *me* now. I want her to span the distance. She's woven me in her spell almost from the moment we met. Let's see if I have any sway over her.

She stabs me with her gaze, grips my shoulders, then rearranges herself to straddle me, her knees on the blankets bunched at my hips on the floor.

She tosses me a smile, signaling her desire for another kiss. The moment she leans close and presses her lips to mine, I

respond. I'm not gentle as I take over the kiss. She is the betrayer here, after all. My anger rises even as I feel a tingle of pleasure rippling through me from head to toe.

Opening my mouth wide, I devour her, enjoying her sweet taste—uniquely Clair. And her scent, more potent now that her legs are open. It sets my heart racing and kindles a greedy hunger within me.

Though I'm so forceful, her lips briefly resist mine. I don't relent, pushing harder until she finally gives in, her own kiss matching mine in intensity.

My palms slide up and down her body, feeling every curve, every contour of the beautiful creature in my arms. We are surrounded by a swirl of sensation, of taste and smell and touch.

She clutches my shoulders, then skates her fingers down my back, causing a shiver to run down my spine as she explores me. Her hands become desperate and demanding. I meet each of her advances with my own, until we are both lost in the heat of the moment.

We part only when our breathing eventually slows and reality creeps back in. As we look into each other's eyes, I remember who I am, and who this female is. I got caught up in the moment, opened my walls. I can't let that happen again.

Though I'll never show her my vulnerabilities again, I know hers. She promised the general she would perform the *linoch* that will allow her to learn my language. I don't have to

manipulate her to do it; she's already committed. All I have to do is offer.

And I don't have to give her what she wants. Not all of it. Not at full speed. I can dole it out, demanding more and more from her as I bestow tiny dribbles of what she wants. This will give me time to figure out how to get out of here and return me and my people to An'Wa.

## Chapter Seventeen

**C**lair

If I wasn't afraid I would hurt his bruised thighs, I'd be riding his naked cock with all my might. Knowing there isn't an inch of that hard, green body that hasn't been tortured is the only thing keeping my libido in check.

Since those soldiers approached me in my lecture hall a few days ago, I've fallen down the rabbit hole. A week ago, I couldn't have imagined I would be so desperate for a man's cock that I'd be willing to beg. Now I'm not only desperate for cock, I'm desperate for *orc* cock.

When I barged into that torture chamber, all I could pay attention to was the damage those assholes did to his body. Since he sat up in these blankets after his nap, his knees spread wide, all I've been able to pay attention to is that long, fat, pulsing, green cock and the heavy sac below.

"My mouth is watering for you." I'm not super experienced, and when I've been with men before I was always a bit shy.

Never have I said anything like this before, but I choose to let go of the past. I double down.

“Ashok, I want to suck you. I want to give you comfort, pleasure.”

“You want the *linoch*.” His voice is level, but there’s something hidden behind his words.

Does he think that’s my only motivation? He’s been through so much today. Let me ease his mind.

“I want to learn your language, yes, but I want to make you feel good. I want to take your mind off what you’ve been through.”

He lifts one eyebrow, a clear request for me to continue. I grab a deep breath and jump into the deep end of the dirty-talk pool.

“Ashok, I want to lick every bruise on your body. I wish I could make all your pain go away. Do you want my mouth? My pussy? Want me on top or underneath you? Lying down? On all fours? Say the word.”

Although I’ve never said anything like that before, I would have thought he wouldn’t have been able to sit still to the end of my shameless proposition. If I were a betting woman, I would have wagered he would have already pressed me down into this nest of blankets and notched his cock against my hole.

He’s motionless, still as a statue, his gaze flicking from my eyes to my mouth to the V between my legs.



“What if I told you I wasn’t ready to perform the *linoch*? What if I said you had to *earn* it?”

Irritation flies through my body at the same time my already-hard nipples turn to fucking *stone*. As an academic, my first impulse is to assess why electric pulses are zapping through me like a lightning storm. His tone? The command in his voice? The way his amber eyes are glittering with a combination of challenge and yearning?

Whatever it is, I’ll be damned if I say no.

“What do I have to do?” I didn’t know my voice could do that, could sound rough and sexy like a movie ingénue. It disgusts me and turns me on in equal measures.

“That was the right question.” He gives an almost imperceptible nod of approval. How can such a slight movement liquify my insides?

He seems like a different male than the one I spent all day with yesterday. It makes sense. I imagine being beaten for hours would do that to someone. Yesterday, he was firm yet gentle. Today it’s as though his outer shell has disappeared and what’s underneath is hard as steel.

“Take your clothes off.”

After pausing for the briefest second, my fingers fly to my top button. I’m only on the second one when he orders, “Stop!”

I freeze, my gaze arrowing to his face, waiting for his next command.

“Stand.” He tips his chin toward the space a few feet behind me.

I follow his directions. I’m a few feet in front of him now, my fingers still on the second button, waiting.

“Close your eyes. Think about how much you want me. Dive back into your mind, the way you felt a few minutes ago when we were kissing. When you can hardly wait to feel your breasts in my palms, my teeth on your nipples, I want you to remove your clothes slowly. Make me want you more with every graceful movement of your body.”

No, no, no. I’ve never done anything like this. For the most part, sex has been with other academics. We scratched an itch after a few glasses of wine at faculty events. I’ve never played the seductress before.

When I sneak a look at him through my lowered lashes, his eyes are glinting. Is it anger, desire, affection? I can’t read him.

Instead of fighting this attraction, which is impossible, I lean into the moment and follow his directions.

After closing my eyes, I slide a fingertip across my kiss-puffed lips, slipping back into the electric connection of the kiss we just shared. When my lids fly open a moment later, I’m no longer Professor Thompson. I’m Ashok’s woman.

Just that thought sparks a firestorm of desire through me. I hold his gaze in mine as I swing my hips and unbutton my shirt, then let it drift to the floor. The plain, white military-

issue bra is the next garment to flutter south. Then I skim my pants and panties down and stare at him. My expression is a dare, though what I'm daring him to do is beyond me.

"That's good, Clair. Just the way I imagined it."

A lightning strike sizzles through my body at his compliment, amping my desire even more.

For the life of me, I don't know why I ask, my tone almost goading. "What else do I have to do to earn the *linoch*?"

"I misspoke, Clair. I don't want you to earn the *linoch*. That should be freely given. It would displease the Goddess for me to charge for it. I'll let you have the *linoch* with me sitting on that chair as I feed my liquid to you. Just ask for it and you will receive it."

Oh? I can't believe it, and don't understand why, but I'm disappointed that he doesn't want my mouth on him.

"If you want to suck my cock, though, you'll have to earn the right for that. Just say the word. Tell me which you want. To learn orcish as a passionless transaction or to suck my green flesh."

When I picture him doling out his sperm to me in a soulless exchange of goods and services as opposed to the sensual act of sucking him, the answer is easy.

"I want to suck your cock, Ashok." It's all I can do to control my urge to add, "Please."

## Chapter Eighteen

**A**shok I keep my expression locked tight, wanting to hide my surprise. With my own ears, I heard her conversation with the general. She wants to keep me pacified until I divulge the secret they think I'm keeping. She was also clear she wants to participate in the *linoch* to speak with Others, undoubtedly she wants to interrogate them, too.

So her clear preference to willingly join me in an intimate act shocks me.

It proves nothing, though. I still don't trust her. I know her dirty secret. Still, the scent she's pumping out is so thick with arousal I imagine every Other in the fenced area can smell her from here. She wants me, and there's no reason to turn her down. After the way she's using me, I won't feel bad about anything I ask of her.

"Sink to your knees."

The pretty professor is willing, sinking to the rumpled bedding the moment the command is out of my mouth. The execution, though, doesn't please me.

“Stand up, Clair, and try again. Do it in a seductive manner, never veering your gaze from mine.”

She exhales in a little huff as her pupils dilate. She likes it when I give her orders. Good, because the evening is going to be filled with them.

She stands, spears me with her gaze, swallows, and makes a better attempt. If I hadn't heard her treacherous plot with the general, I would praise her for her improved effort. But I *did* hear that deceitful conversation—I'll never be able to forget it.

“Try again, Clair. Pretend you want to arouse me with every movement you perform from this moment forward.”

She rises, plants a small smile on her face as she looks at me. I almost hear her conversation with herself as she decides to comply with my wishes. This time, her arms rise from her sides, her fingers in a pleasing display as she eases to the floor in a graceful move.

If I didn't feel so hurt by her, my lips would be filled with praises. I catch her gaze on my cock, which has not kept as silent as my mouth. It's twitching its approval—he's more of a traitor than she is.

“Approach me on all fours.”

Her nostrils flare, indicating her reluctance. Maybe reluctance is too mild a word. She doesn't want to do this. I'm a bastard.

As evil as she is. I'm not the type of male who enjoys harming anyone, especially a female.

It's only when her arousal scent gusts at me and her eyes flare with desire that I decode her message. Her mind does not like my orders. Her body, on the other hand, *loves* them.

As much as I didn't set out to please her tonight, I believe we'll both be pleased by the time we go to sleep.

She makes a little peep. I don't know whether she was about to protest, or that was just a hint of displeasure that escaped her without her own permission. All it takes is a stern glance from me and she eases her hands to the floor and crawls toward me.

"Ah!" I say. It's a word of warning. Not even a word, just a sound. I'm proud of her when she understands my meaning and instead of crawling to me as a mere means to get from there to here, she uses movements designed to arouse.

The conflict on her face is obvious. She might be scolding herself for how much she enjoys this play. It doesn't matter what's going on in her mind. She's holding my gaze and crawling to me like an eager female on her way to suck her male's cock.

When she gets close to me, I rise, grab the straight-backed chair from the corner, then sit it down in the place I just vacated. The chair has a fabric seat and a wooden frame. I spread my knees as wide as the chair allows.

"Describe what you see."

She grabs a breath and is about to start when I interrupt, holding up one finger.

“Describe it in the way a lover would, the way a female who can’t wait to get her mouth on what she sees would describe her male’s most private spaces.”

Her pupils flare. She’s bursting with desire. I can see it on her face and smell it circling in the air around us.

Her voice comes out slowly, carefully, like she’s afraid of getting the words wrong or saying something that will offend me. But the more she talks, the more assured she becomes as a faint blush crawls up her neck and spreads to her cheeks.

“Your cock is huge,” she says, awe in her voice. “Long and thick, even wider at the base. It curves slightly to the right and is pulsing... in desire?”

Though that last statement is more a question than a statement, she doesn’t wait for my response. She takes a deep breath, her breasts rising, nipples tight, inviting me to touch them. I’m tempted.

“Your shaft is a deep emerald green, darker than the rest of you except for your big green-black cockhead. The veins that run along it are thick. I can barely control my urge to trace them with the tip of my tongue.”

The air around us thickens with arousal and I can’t help but smile in admiration of this woman. She has truly embraced her task to arouse me through her appreciative words. It’s not just

words though—I can feel her desire radiating off of her in tight waves.

“That drop of cum on your slit is teasing me. Threatening to drop onto the blankets instead of into my mouth.”

She’s pouting as though she’s jealous of the fabric. I should punish her for that—or kiss that pout off her puffy lips.

Leaning forward, I flick one hardened bud and then the other. The tiniest cry escapes her mouth as she thrusts her chest forward, her pretty mounds on display. That noise wasn’t a protest, it was the primitive sound a female makes when their higher mind is far away and their body is desperate for their male to take them in any way he wishes.

I’m enjoying watching as I evict the professor from the tent and call forth the wanton lass ready to not only spread her legs for me, but beg me to fuck her.

My cock twitches at that thought. We’ll get there, but I’m going to take my time. Reaching out, I extend my open palm to her and she takes it without pause.

I place her hand on my cock, wrapping my fingers around hers so I can guide her. Her body jumps slightly at the unexpected sensation and she slowly moves her fingers along its length, gently exploring.

The human takes direction well, but although I told her to look me in my eyes, she can’t keep her gaze from dipping to my cock from time to time. What male wouldn’t like to know his



female can't keep her eyes off the proof of his manhood? Even though she's not my female, I let it puff my chest with pride.

Look at the way she's gazing at me, her eyes dewy, her lips trembling as she simply waits for my next command.

I continue to guide her motions as I tighten my grip over her hand, causing her to clutch me more firmly. I'm almost mesmerized by the way our hands interact as if we've been here before.

My breath comes in shorter bursts as her fingers make their way up and down my shaft, each touch sending waves of pleasure through my body. I slow her movements when I realize how close I'm getting to the edge.

Her fingers tremble in my hand but, instead of withdrawing her touch, she leans into it—a subtle submission that only adds to the intensity of the moment.

Finally, I can't take it anymore. I pull away, close my eyes, and calm myself. When I open my lids, she's kneeling, her naked bottom sitting on her heels, her pink lips parted, and her eyes looking at me as though I'm her king and she's my servant.

Why am I continuing this farce? Why don't I demand to go back to my tent in the crowded area where they've herded all the Others? Why am I delighting in bringing this beautiful, brilliant female to her knees?

I replay her conversation in my head. “Three words, General. Nobel Peace Prize. My work with these monsters is going to

get me that prize. The reward outweighs the risk.”

All I have to do is think the word “monster,” and it gives me the desire to toy with this woman all night long.

# Chapter Nineteen

**C**lair

I left Professor Thompson in the dust what feels like years ago. It doesn't feel as though I know who she is anymore. I'm a harem girl ordered around by a sheik. I'm a slave girl at the feet of her king.

No. I'm none of these. I'm Clair, obediently following every single one of Ashok's orders and willing, no *desperate*, to do whatever he tells me to do next.

He stares down at me, his amber gaze burning into my soul. His eyebrows are furrowed and his mouth is set in a hard line. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was angry, but since that's not possible, this must be how that gorgeous orc face looks in the heat of passion.

I can feel the heat radiating off his body and I take comfort in it. It's a barometer of his passion.

He reaches out and grabs my chin, ensuring my gaze is glued to him. He holds it there for a few beats before letting go.

There's a quiet intensity coming from him that has me on edge.

He envelops my hand in his and brings it back to his hard length, guiding my movements as he did before. His hold tightens when I pick up the pace, a reminder that he is in charge.

There's a vague thought in the back of my mind that I should have a say here. Instead of acting on that mutinous thought, I push it away and embrace his dominance. He's using my hand to masturbate himself, and some perverse part of me, deep inside, feels lucky I'm allowed to do it.

My breath hitches as I feel the power of our connection growing with each passing second. His eyes darken and smolder as we both get lost in the intensity of this moment. It feels like time stands still for us while we continue our journey.

He leans down, slides his other hand around the back of my neck, and guides me closer to him, my mouth just inches from his. I can feel the tension bubbling between us as I part my lips ever so slightly, preparing to do what he wants. His grip around my neck tightens and he lets out a deep growl that sends shivers down my spine.

"Suck me." He uses a soft, low voice that sounds like a command yet is somehow still gentle. My stomach flips with nerves and excitement as I allow him to push my head into his lap and then open my mouth to take him inside me.

He exhales deeply, a sigh of pleasure, and his grip loosens slightly. Then he seems to remember his role as my king and growls, “Eyes.”

My glance flies to his and I don't have to try to fill it with adoration. I'm sure my affection for him, my gratitude for letting me put my lips on him, is shining in my gaze.

For long minutes, when it wasn't covered by my hand, I've glimpsed one pulsing vein running the length of his cock. Instead of sliding him inside my mouth, I fight his firm hold on my nape and dive toward his thick base, right where the vein emerges from his hair.

I trace the tip of my tongue along the curving vein, feeling a sense of accomplishment at bucking his order. After I succeed in laving that thick, pulsing vein from its origin to its terminus, I comply as he eases my mouth to his tip.

He releases me, scoots forward to widen his thighs, and allows me to explore him on my own. I trail my tongue up and down his length, slowly at first, before increasing the tempo. Exploring every inch of him with my mouth, I pay special attention to the sensitive head by swirling over it with a soft caress.

His fingertips wind more tightly in my hair, gently guiding me. The warmth radiating from his touch arouses me, coaxing me to move faster as he groans eagerly.

My gaze is fixed on him, drinking in every last bit of pleasure as I bob up and down. With one hand erotically gripping his base and one hand on his beefy ass, I fall more deeply into my

task. His hips are pulsing, their tempo increasing as he gets closer to spilling into me.

My arousal is growing too, as I feel his bliss intensify. I can't contain my moans any longer, only adding to the rapturous soundscape swirling around us. He grabs the back of my head as if to steady himself and thrusts his hips a few times before releasing a guttural roar.

His hot liquid sprays into my throat, giving me the barest taste of his salty-sweet, potent cum. I drink him down, keeping him lodged as far as I can take him, enjoying the connection as he softens inside my warm mouth.

When he sighs and leans back in the chair, I lick him clean, moving my whole head like a lazy cat cleaning its paw. I don't just clean his shaft, circling the tip of my tongue on the underside of his corona, but bend low to lick his balls.

He seems so in touch with his primitive side, I was surprised at how few sounds he made as I worked him through his orgasm. Something happens when I lick his balls, though. He gasps in shocked pleasure. I can't help but smile that I managed to pull an appreciative noise from him.

I collapse onto his lap, exhausted from our acts of pleasure but not wanting to break our contact.

It's only now that I can truly appreciate what has happened between us. He has conquered me in a way I could never have imagined, and I can't help but feel an odd mix of emotions: guilt, pleasure, fear, and admiration all occupying the same space.

He looks at me with confusion, as though he's discovering something new about himself too.

“That was... good.”

Emotions catch in my throat as my eyes sting with tears. He's from another culture, another world. I shouldn't have expected this to mean any more than an exchange of bodily fluids, but I can't help the way I feel. I expected something more than those three words.

## Chapter Twenty

**A**shok  
My bliss lasts five, maybe ten heartbeats, then evaporates. It doesn't matter how many times I replay Clair's conversation with the general, how many times I hear the tone and disgust when she used the word "monster" to describe me, I'm still the worst person in the room.

Until today, my sins consisted of being lazy and selfish. I've never been a *kristab* before. I am now.

How can I be intimate with a female and not want to embrace her, lie in the blankets with her, tell her how good she made me feel? She loved giving in to my dominance, something orc females seldom do. No matter how many times they relinquish their power to their male, they want to fight back.

Clair was built to submit and deserves to be praised. Did I really just say that was good? I didn't even say *she* was good. I am a *kristab*.



This situation is so wrong in so many ways. If things were different, I wouldn't be here. If things were different, at least I could demand to go back to my tent in the Others' area.

But I'm here with her, this female who attracts me like no other. I just spilled down her throat and I'm hardening again by her mere presence slumped on my lap, hugging me as though she's lucky to be sitting at my feet.

I either need to bellow and demand to be released—which won't work anyway—or I need to do right by her even though she's a betrayer.

Speaking of betrayers, my cock is hard again, and my fingers are sliding through her silky curls as if they're the softest things I've ever touched.

"Come." I reach under her arms and lift her onto my lap. This isn't right, though. The chair is hard and barely big enough for both ass cheeks.

The moment she settles into my lap, I ease us both to the pile of blankets. She snuggles next to me like she would crawl underneath my skin if she knew how.

Tucking her close, I arrange her just how I want her. I'm not ready to fuck her, but I want to keep us both on edge, so I lie on my back with her on her side, her bent leg slung across my groin. I feel her wet, open heat riding my thigh.

"You were very good just now." My fingers are still carding through her short, brown locks. "Eager. Talented."

She lifts her head and holds my gaze as though it's just this moment she remembers she's supposed to keep her eyes on me at all times. I grant her a smile and feel her body relax against me.

She was waiting for this, desperate for this. I'll give her a double dose.

"Yes," I croon to her. "Such a good female who likes to please. You pleased me, Clair."

I'll hate her later, when she's not in my arms. Right now, I'll give her what she wants. I'm a male of my word. She wants the *linoch*.

"Do you think you earned the *linoch*?"

Her eyes fly wide. "I... I'm not the one to say."

Do all human women give over their power this easily? She seemed stunned that I would ask her to make a decision, preferring to let me set the rules. I purr for her and immediately see the effect it has on her body as she leans closer to me, her muscles loosening in pleasure.

"Yes, Clair. You did everything I asked. Beautifully." I don't have to heap so many praises on her. I'm not sure why I do.

Perhaps it's that my tone has softened. She must feel emboldened because she cups my cheek and says, "You must be tired, Ashok. You went through so much today. Why don't you sleep now? You need to recover."

What game is this? The *linoch* is her end game. Why would she delay it? Why not ask for it now?

She kisses my shoulder, my pec, my nipple, and stretches to reach my cheek. “The *linoch* can wait. Do you want me to wake you when they bring food? Or let you sleep?”

I’ve been so furious at her I hadn’t realized how tired I was, but I can barely keep my eyes open.

“Let me sleep, pet.”

Did I just call her pet? I shouldn’t feel affection for her, shouldn’t have let that slip.

# Chapter Twenty-One

**C**lair  
Ashok slept all night and almost until noon. When I pulled back the covers this morning to tend to him, his bruises were barely visible. I don't know about the rest of the Others, but Ashok heals ten times faster than a human.

The military should be studying *that*, not figuring out how to squeeze information out of people who have nothing to tell them.

They're so fucking paranoid. Isn't it obvious these people have never seen advanced weaponry before? All they would have to do is stroll through the Others' encampment to see these aren't aliens who are used to electricity and modern conveniences. They're primitive, as though they just stepped out of the 1800s. Ashok's story about how they got here has got to be true.

I need to have him perform the *linoch* on me and acquire the ability to translate. Maybe if I tell the general that a hundred

people told me the same story as Ashok's, he'll believe they came through the Rift just as they say they did. Then the general can quit torturing them.

I slept fitfully even though having Ashok's big body next to me was almost as good as a sleeping pill. It was comforting.

I just kept replaying what happened between us when I was sucking his dick. I've never been that turned on in my life.

For a while, I fought the urge to follow his orders. Part of me bridled at it—I'm a powerful woman in my own right. It's the reason I'm here working on this top-secret project.

It was only when I simply let go, pushed all my thoughts out of my head, and went on purely physical instinct that I realized I loved the power exchange. Loved not being in charge. My clit quivered, my channel clutched at empty air, my cream coated my thighs as I worshipped that male's cock.

If he were awake right now, I'd do it again right this minute.

When my gaze takes a lingering journey from his six-pack up his green tattooed body and lands on his face, I see he's awake. Staring at me.

"I... uh, was seeing how you're healing."

His lips tip into a smirk. "I see what you were doing, Clair."

He reaches to tuck a coil of my short hair behind my ear, but it falls forward again, framing my face.

"You want the *linoch*. You've earned it."

He rises without even a grimace of discomfort and urinates in the bucket, not bothering to close the little curtain. From what I've seen, the Others have different cultural norms for nudity and privacy.

When he's done, he heads to our blanket pile.

"You want to perform it now?" My voice is high, tinged with apprehension.

"Yes. I'm a male of my word. I've already made you wait the better part of a day."

"First, you're going to have lunch, Ashok. You're healing. You need to eat."

His brows bunch together as though I just said something surprising. He stares at me with his expressive amber eyes for a long moment.

Finally, he nods and joins me at our little table. I smile and lift the cover of what Rodriguez brought from the mess tent earlier.

"Here you go." I shrug. "The best we can offer. Maybe soon we can discover something on Earth that tastes like what you enjoyed on An'Wa."

We're in the middle of the Mohave. I shouldn't be surprised that everything looks, smells, and tastes like it came from a can. Although the biscuits are amazing.

Ashok doesn't complain. He eats like a starving male. I guess he is. When he's inhaled everything on his plate, his gaze flicks to what's left on my plate.

“Have at it, big guy.”

He doesn't pause a moment before switching plates and wolfing down all my leftovers. I'll have to ask Rodriguez to bring a double helping for him tonight.

As soon as he swallows his last bite and wipes his mouth with his palm, he says, “You were very generous with me last night.”

That was such an abrupt change of subject. The way his voice dipped on the word “generous” makes my belly do a swirly, swoopy dip.

“I can't be as generous with you. I need to dole things out slowly, because I don't know how your human brain will tolerate the intrusion.”

That makes perfect sense.

Soon, we're sitting cross-legged opposite each other on the now-neatened pile of blankets, our knees touching. Positioning us so our foreheads touch, he closes his eyes and doesn't move for long minutes.

Perhaps one day I'll know him well enough to ask exactly how he does this. That's almost funny. I could map the course and texture of the veins on his penis. I could describe the taste of his cum, but I'm afraid to ask about his inner life.

Come to think of it, it's really not that odd. We barely know each other and there's no reason on Earth—literally—for him to trust me. The military thinks the Others are our enemy. The Others *know* we're their enemy.

Soon, I feel the not-quite vibrations of his energy, coming at me in waves from the *keshmah* on his forehead. Time becomes quirky. I don't know if it's seconds, minutes, or hours passing as the energy builds, circling, enveloping, whirling around us as if binding us in an invisible web.

Then I feel Ashok, at the threshold of my mind. It's similar to when a visitor comes to my house and knocks, then waits for me to open the door. I don't know how it is that I signal him. Maybe it's just my welcoming thoughts, but I feel him enter me.

It's like tendrils of smoke at first. It doesn't hurt. In fact, it's completely painless, and yet terror whips through me. Something is happening in a way I've never experienced before.

When we did the *linoch* the other day, I was giving him something. It was gentle and respectful. This feels different. The male is pushing something inside me. Perhaps it's a normal response to want to push him out.

Though he didn't say a word last time, he speaks, barely a whisper. "Calm. Safe. It's a delicate process, but I can only do this with the Goddess's blessing. She would take my gift away if I misuse it. Don't fear. I won't hurt you."

I try to let down my barriers, and can feel him slipping deeper inside me. There's a rush of... something coming at me. Trying to keep my mind open, I reach out to hold onto his shoulders as though they're a lifeline.



I don't know Lamaze, but I naturally fall into a cadenced breathing of short, sharp breaths as I wait for this to be over. I shouldn't be terrified, but I am.

Gently, gently, he presses my shoulders down. It's only now I remember I need to drink his sperm. I keep my eyes shut tight, only knowing to open my mouth when his cockhead brushes my lips.

Focusing on this makes what's happening in my head feel less intrusive. What's going on in my mouth is nothing like last night, when he was in complete control. He isn't moving his hips at all, he's simply letting me suckle the head of his cock.

I taste his semen, which seems richer, sweeter than it was last night as it trickles onto my tongue. There's something gentle about this process, especially since Ashok's purring, crooning to me, sliding his fingers through my hair, rubbing one hand up and down the channel of my spine as I suck him.

I dip the tip of my tongue into his slit, seeking out more liquid, as it eases out of him. When he finally comes, it's not with the force I felt last night. Even this act is gentle as his hips barely thrust into me on his pulsing bursts.

All my attention focuses on my mind as the smokey tendrils of knowledge that were trickling in now swirl, coalesce, and burst, like one explosive firework. For a moment I think it hurts, then it feels as though it's always been there. I'll experiment in a minute and talk to him in orcish—if I can—but I'm certain I can speak his language now.

“It’s all right. You’re fine. You’re safe.” His gentle fingers ease my head onto his lap, then continue to stroke me until I doze off.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

**A**shok I lay her down and curl around her, as if my body can shield her from how my mind just ravaged hers. I tried to be gentle, to give her less than I thought she could handle. Obviously, I overwhelmed her.

I was so tempted to stop the flow from me to her so I could delve back into her mind and find the treachery that was hidden from me when I received her language. I couldn't do it. I don't know what it would have done to Clair to stop and I can't risk displeasing the Goddess any more than I already have.

I stroke the soft skin of her cheek, my fingers gliding gently over her face as I purr to calm her. She stirs in her sleep, a soft sigh escaping her parted lips. Her hair is like liquid silk between my fingers as I slide them through its tangled strands. I can't help but marvel at the way she feels in my arms, so delicate and yet so generous with her trust.

Her scent—sweet, hot, and tired—wafts up to me. It's a soothing aroma, calming my racing thoughts and anchoring me to this moment. I hold her close, inhaling deeply, and let the comforting scent fill my senses.

I can feel the rise and fall of her chest as I notice the way her lashes flutter against her cheeks as she dreams. It's a beautiful sight, one that fills me with a strange mix of tenderness and confusion. How can a woman who conspires against me be so open and giving?

Her skin is warm against mine, a soft contrast to the roughness of my own green flesh. I trace patterns along her arm, reveling in how smooth it is beneath my fingertips. It's a reminder of her vulnerability, of the fact that despite her betrayal, she is still a precious thing who needs protecting.

My mind returns to the conversation I overheard her having with the general, her words still ringing in my ears. She was willing to do anything to find out the truth about the Others, even if it meant using me. The pain of it cuts deep, but the bond I feel with her is stronger.

Something is wrong with me. Broken. No matter how much she betrays me, how much she deceives me, I don't want to hurt her. I want to protect her. It's something more than physical attraction, something deeper that pierces to the core of my being.

A heaviness settles in my chest as I grapple with the warring emotions. How can I make sense of my budding affection for

her despite feeling betrayed? The only thing that explains it is that my heart wants a soulbond. Perhaps it's the prophecy.

In order for the bond to be complete, we have to be united in heart, soul, and body. Perhaps, with time and patience, I can help her see the error of her ways, show her there is another path, one that will unite us and won't harm my people.

I tighten my hold on her, vowing silently to safeguard her, even from herself. If I am to honor my Goddess and my family, I must treat Clair with care and respect.

Her eyes flutter, then open. Her useless little nails claw at me as she pulls me impossibly closer.

"That was..." She thinks for a long time, but never does come up with words to finish her thought. "Talk to me in orcish."

Although I've never performed a *linoch* to teach my language to another, I'm certain it worked. I choose my words carefully. "*Almael shemach, Clair, azh mae antreyel vas.*"

She's sitting on my lap, her head cradled against my chest with my arms surrounding her. Her face, inches from mine, inspects me as her mouth pops open in shock. Without a doubt, I know she's not surprised by the fact she can speak my language. She's shocked at my words.

"I'm precious? You'll treat me like glass?"

Our gazes lock. She understands that everything between us is different now.

She sags against me and places her palm on my pec. I don't know what I expected, but I didn't anticipate her hot tears

sliding off her cheeks and onto my green flesh. It makes my gut clench, though I'm not sure whether that's from the sweetness of her actions or from my fear of all the ways she can hurt me now that I've hinted at the depth of my emotions.

It's as though I'm playing a game I'm guaranteed to lose.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

**C**lair  
The *linoch* changed something in him. Everything is different, from the way he looks at me to the tenderness of his touch. It's fragile, though. I can feel it. So I don't mention it. I'll just let him see my affection in everything I say and do.

I use orcish to ask if he feels well enough to go to the Others' encampment. The words are hard to pronounce with all of their ch and zh sounds. The way he gently corrects my pronunciation is so soothing it calms me. He's been so harsh since we've been in my tent together that his tender behavior is a relief.

"Yes. Let's go to the tent city so you can interview orcs, I'll act as interpreter for other species. You'll get the same answer I already gave you."

His choice of words puzzles me. "I've always believed you, Ashok. This is the only way to prove it to General Adams."

I can't quite interpret the look he gives me, but we're soon striding through air so hot it shimmers off the shifting sands.

Stepping into the Others' fenced encampment is like entering a realm of fantastical beings. Nagas slither gracefully in the sand, their reptilian scales glimmering under the scorching sun. Wolven men, with their lean bodies, sleek fur, and sharp, intelligent eyes, roam the camp in packs, their presence both captivating and slightly scary.

It's not hard to imagine that the Egyptian God Anubis walks among these tents. Those they call wolven could be descended from him. Minotaurs tower above it all, their muscular forms covered in intricate adornments that speak of their rich traditions. More intimidating beings stick to the shadows as if they are aware of the soldier's wary gaze.

The camp is a bustling hive of activity, filled with tents and covered areas where the inhabitants congregate and eat their meals. The air is thick with the scent of desert heat mingled with the aroma of cooking food and the sound of laughter and conversation. The burning sand that whips against my skin when the wind kicks up stings my cheeks.

I'm grateful for the ugly boots the military provided. The sandals I wore to work the day I arrived here would have made it impossible to leave my tent.

Ashok walks beside me, his presence steady and reassuring. His hand brushes against mine, a simple connection that sends shivers down my spine. I've always been fascinated by



different cultures, but this... this is like entering a world I've only dreamed of.

As we weave through the crowd, I can't help but be captivated by the individuality among the Others. Some still wear the clothes they arrived in, reminiscent of the wilderness garb from the 1800s, made of skins and beads. Others have adopted military-issued clothing. Their faces, though the species are so diverse, all seem to reflect similar emotions: fear, distrust, anger, and a deep grief and sadness.

My newfound ability to speak Orcish makes me feel like a kid in a candy store. I approach a group of orcs engaged in an animated discussion, eager to join in. They exchange curious glances as I address them in their native tongue, but their surprise quickly turns to warmth as they realize I'm genuinely interested in their stories.

The Others are more than willing to share, their words filling the air with tales of their homes, their struggles, and their families back on An'Wa.

I don't catch every word. I feel I've been plucked out of a high school Spanish class and dropped into Madrid. But I understand enough to have a half-decent conversation.

A few had musical instruments in their hands, or tucked into their belts when they were carried here through the Rift. Even in these harsh conditions, little groups congregate to play music and sing, the melodies seeming to harmonize with the desert breeze.

I watch as a minotaur plays a long flute that reminds me of a Mongolian *tsuur*, his fingers moving with innate grace. The haunting notes weave a spell around me as I imagine life in An'Wa, the way Ashok described it.

He stands beside me, his gaze fixed on the minotaur as he listens intently, a gentle smile playing at his lips. It's in these moments that I see a different side of him, a softer and more vulnerable side that he's hidden since his terrible trip to the torture chamber.

The scent of freshly baked bread drifts through the air, drawing me toward a covered area where meals are being prepared. The sight of Others cooking together, sharing stories, soothing fussy infants, and hearing the infectious laughter of children, fills me with a sense of community that transcends our differences.

Maybe I can find a way to turn everything around, to convince the general to quit assuming these people have done something wrong so he can come up with a plan to help them stay on Earth with safety and dignity.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

**A**shok The air in the food tent is thick with voices and the scent of food. I sit at a long communal table. The clinking of utensils against plates, and the sounds of laughter and conversation fill my ears.

Clair sits beside me, her eyes brimming with wonder as she observes the noisy chaos of people who make up this makeshift community. As plates of steaming food are passed around, I can't help but marvel at how far my people have come from the terror of our arrival just a few short days ago.

It hasn't escaped my notice that some of my comrades, especially a few groups of wolverines, orcs, and minotaurs, seldom take their eyes off of Clair and me. Their interest isn't of a sexual nature. I can smell their suspicion.

I imagine they wonder if they can trust her, and by association, if they can trust me. If I wasn't with Clair right now, I would be with them, planning, plotting, trying to figure a way out of

this place and back to An'Wa. I'll join them in a day or two if I need to, if the general doesn't do the right thing.

I listen to the conversations around me, various languages and dialects intertwining like a symphony. Amidst the chatter, an orc approaches holding a *khuur'in*, a stringed instrument with a long neck. I've seen him at Gatherings back on An'Wa. Though I don't remember his face, his instrument is quite distinctive.

It's intricately carved with depictions of old orc legends—an artistry that speaks to generations past. My gaze focuses on the picture on the front of the box. The image shows an orc standing next to a pale woman whose ears are rounded instead of pointed. She lacks tusks like ours.

According to legend, the two were struck by thunderous love upon meeting each other. He was a *kezja*, a male like me who possessed the ability to give and receive languages. As the story goes, he met a woman who brokered peace between warring kingdoms and saved many lives. It was accomplished by her capacity to speak both languages—made possible by the *kezja*—and her ability to make both sides see reason.

A spark ignites within my chest as the pieces click into place. The realization hits me like a falling tree—this myth describes what's happening between Clair and me. Is it possible our paths were destined to intersect? That together we can fulfill this prophecy?

When I turn my attention to Clair, her eyes meet mine briefly before she lowers her gaze shyly, unaware of the thoughts

racing through my mind. It dawns on me why I can't stay mad at her for long—an invisible thread has woven us together, binding our souls in ways that are deeper, larger than what she promised the general.

This connection between us is bigger than both of us. My mind keeps rejecting what now seems like a fact—we have the potential for a soulbond. My father told me a soulbond is rare. The depth of love and the mutual desire for commitment is a gift from the Goddess herself. It has to be nurtured and accepted by both the male and the female, then consummated in the act of love. It can be denied and it can be broken, but the pain of that is devastating. It also means the potential is in Clair, I have to make her see it.

With renewed conviction, I reach out and take Clair's hand in mine. As she looks up at me with those wide eyes, it becomes clear that this path we walk is not one we were meant to travel alone.

An orc female I've never met slides into the seat next to Clair, engaging her in conversation so she can practice her orcish. She was sent by the group of orcs, wolverns, and minotaurs who've been having a very serious discussion at the edge of the dining tent.

They catch my eye and silently invite me to join them. With a nod to Clair before I leave her side, I make my way toward them.

Their eyes intently follow my movements until I reach them. A lean wolvern, the oldest of the group, his muzzle silver with

age, meets my gaze head-on. His golden eyes pierce mine as he begins, “Whose side are you on? The humans or ours?”

I’m taken aback by the challenge in his voice but understand the weight of his question. Without missing a beat, I respond firmly yet calmly, “I stand on the side of truth and peace.”

The tension lingers between us as we lock eyes, but soon it softens into something more approachable. They want answers just as much as I do—to ensure our survival against the threat of total annihilation with weapons we’ve never imagined in our wildest dreams.

“The human female’s scent is all over you.”

I pull my lips back and bare my tusks. “We didn’t have to leave our good manners back on An’Wa.”

The wolveren lowers his muzzle slightly. “Apologies. I only meant to find out where her loyalties lie.”

When I explain our plan for Clair to interview many of the Others to prove we’re telling the truth about the Rift, it brings nods of understanding. If we can convince the general that every single one of us shares the same story about finding ourselves here unexpectedly, we might have a chance to gain his trust and protection.

An orc male in his early twenties, Brokka, steps forward. He possesses the rugged features of a hero in the making—strong and tattooed, with an intensity burning in his amber eyes.

“We need to return to An’Wa. My mate, my *soulbound*, is there.”

There's an anguished, desperate look in his eyes. I can't imagine how gut-wrenching it would feel to leave a soulbound mate on the other side of the Rift.

"These people have tools and weapons none of us have even imagined." A muscle leaps angrily in his jaw. "If this general doesn't decide to use his flying machines to get us back to An'Wa, we'll have to take a different course of action—one that isn't so peaceful."

The weight of his words hangs heavily in the air as we all acknowledge the possibility of armed conflict. While our desire is for peace, it's clear there might come a time when we have to resort to our warlike history to ensure our survival.

"The general is a warrior. He thinks he is protecting his people. Just as we would if the situation were reversed. Let us not test his good nature. But if it comes down to fighting... then know that I will stand beside you."

A genuine smile spreads across Brokka's face—a glimmer of hope amidst his grief. It's clear there's respect between us—acknowledgment that despite our differences or fears about each other's motivations, we are united under one banner—the preservation of our people.

"You've seen their weapons, though?" I had to say it, to remind them what we're up against. "Our daggers and the few swords that came through the Rift with us are no match against their guns. And they've confiscated most of what we had."

We're all silent for long moments. I imagine they're all picturing the same thing I am. Shortly after we arrived, the

humans' horseless vehicles rolled in, along with the flying machines we at first thought were locusts. As the locusts became bigger and louder and more terrifying, humans from the ground vehicles started calling to us through noisemaking machines.

Most of us, though we couldn't understand a word, stood still with our hands up, instinctively knowing it was useless to fight back. We outnumbered them, but the majority of us are females, children, and elderly. Besides, more of the enemy were still pouring in.

Altiss, an elderly naga who might have simply been confused, kept sliding through the sands, away from the humans. When more sharp directives were shouted and ignored, one of them shot fire out of a metal tube I now know is called a gun... and Altiss was no more. He dropped instantly and the hot sand absorbed his blood.

We all stood in shocked disbelief at the power of their weapons.

"If it comes down to it, we'll have to rush them," Brokka says. "They have weapons on their side, but there isn't one of us who couldn't kill three of them with our bare hands. We'll spread out and run in a zigzag pattern to make it difficult for them to hit us. Once they discharge their weapons, we'll have them at our mercy." The other warriors nod their agreement to this plan.

"From what I've seen, Brokka, you're probably right."



I'm not sure getting their guns will be as easy as the big orc thinks.

“Clair isn't a warrior. When I accessed her memories to obtain her language there was nothing there to show me their battle tactics or the details of their weapons.”

A fierce look comes over their faces. “We will pray to the Goddess that She will give us the strength and opportunity to protect our people.” The elder wolveren growls and the rest, again, nod in agreement.

After returning to Clair's side, I wrap my arm around her, proud of how easily she fits in with the group that probably filled her with fear only a few days ago.

The wind kicks up outside the tent, reminding me that the winds of change are coming. Never in my life have I been this unsettled. Something tells me the worst is yet to come.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

**C**lair

I realize if I stay in this shower much longer, it's going to run out of water. We're in a desert for god's sake. It has to be trucked in. They brought in gas-powered generators and have heated the water. It's the first warm shower I've had since I arrived. I should have already turned it off. It's just that I'm worried and I needed this time alone.

Something changed between Ashok and me yesterday. Understandably. He was so cold after they tortured him. His eyes glittered with rage. His jaw was set, his shoulders stiff. Then, after the first time he used the *linoch* to give me the orc language, he softened, giving me smiles and gentle touches.

Last night, he showed me around the encampment and I tested my skills in orcish. When we arrived back at my tent, he performed another *linoch*, downloading wovlen into my brain easier than loading something onto a thumb drive. It's an even growlier language than orcish, but it's thrilling to learn so much in such a brief time.

My cheeks heat at the memory. The *linoch* last night was just as intense, just as intimate. And I'm ashamed to even think it, but part of me is glad that Ashok hadn't done this with anyone before now.

Today was grueling. Between the heat, about three dozen Other interviews, and the deep emotions swirling inside me about my growing affection for Ashok, I'm dead on my feet. Which is one of the reasons I've lingered so long in this shower. I need to get my head on straight before I meet with the general.

It's not just a meeting. It's the *big* meeting. I feel like every life in the encampment is resting in my hands.

As if to add to the level of difficulty, Ashok has been getting more irritable and restless with every passing minute. Our budding relationship is so tenuous. Even though he's been inside my mind and I've sucked his cock several times in service to learn these Other languages, we seem to have more secrets and misunderstandings than we started with.

As an academic I should hate that old adage 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus'. But not only is Ashok a male, he's also an An'Wa-rian- an An'Wa-ite... he's from a different world. We might be speaking English but are we speaking a different language?

When another woman in the community shower loudly mentions the scarcity of water, I turn the water off, towel dry, and get dressed. When I return to my tent to grab some notes I made, I find Ashok sitting on one of the two tiny chairs at the

small dining table. He looks as though he just received bad news.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen while I was in the shower?”

He shakes his head, avoiding eye contact. When I press again, he says, “Your meeting with the general will determine the fate of all the Others. I’m worried.”

Worried? He looks as though he’s already lost the fight. I step closer and ease between his knees. This way, with him sitting and me standing, our heads are almost the same height.

“I’m worried, too, Ashok, but if what I tell the general doesn’t convince him, we’ll just have to rethink, come up with another strategy, and try something else.”

Placing his hands on my waist, he presses me a step back, then examines my face as though it’s the first time he’s taken a good look at me. I have no idea what he’s searching for.

Cupping his cheek in my hand, I give him the smallest smile and say, “Something’s eating at you, Ashok. Tell me what it is. We have a saying here on Earth. Two heads are better than one.”

“I overheard your conversation,” he confesses, his voice laced with pain. “I heard what you said to General Adams.”

For a moment, I can’t fathom what he’s talking about. Because of the look of betrayal on his face, I mentally scroll through every interaction I’ve had with the general and come to the

conclusion that the only thing he could be talking about is the moment outside his torture chamber.

My heart sinks, a rush of realization flooding through me along with a profound sense of regret as I try to recall exactly what I said. At first, all I can remember is that I got Ashok out of those handcuffs in that hellhole and into my tent. I bargained to get him food and enough time to heal.

Groaning, I step back, and sink into a chair when I remember the rest of the conversation. I called him a monster and spouted off about being willing to do anything for a Peace Prize.

“Shit.”

“Yes. Shit. I heard the entire conversation.”

I suppress my urge to ask how he managed to hear through the metal door. Instead, I focus on the fact that he did hear it.

“So all this time you thought I’d betrayed you.” My breath eases out of me in a shaky huff.

He spears me with the most sobering gaze and corrects, pain etched across his face, “All this time I *knew* you betrayed me.”

I want to fly into his arms, to kiss him, to make this better and erase the last few days. That’s bullshit. I remind myself that five thousand people’s lives hang in the balance.

As he continues, recounting verbatim the words the general and I exchanged, I can see the hurt etched across his face. It’s clear how my words struck him, how my apparent condoning of using him as a pawn has wounded him deeply. The word

“monster” reverberates within me—each syllable causing an agonizing ache in my chest.

Before despair can suck me into a desolate pit, I find my voice. “Ashok, please listen.” My words tremble but carry an urgency borne out of genuine desperation. “I never believed any of it—I *never* saw you as expendable or monstrous. It was all part of a ploy to get them to stop torturing you in order to buy time—to gather stories from the Others so the general would stop being paranoid and realize you’re victims, not invaders.”

His gaze meets mine, skepticism and pain intertwined, but there’s a flicker of hope as his eyes narrow and he tries to read me. I continue without hesitating this time—every word spoken carries the weight of my sincerity.

“Everyone I’ve spoken with tells the same story about how they came through the Rift. It aligns precisely with what you’ve repeated. And if we can present these stories, I think General Adams will believe it.”

The angry look on his face evaporates the moment he believes my words.

His voice is filled with an ache as he responds, “I believed you betrayed us—betrayed me.” The pain echoes through his words.

“I never meant to hurt you. How was I to know you could hear through a metal door? Some part of you must have known it was a lie, though. The way I look at you? The way I welcomed

you inside my mouth? You allowed that despite your belief that I was betraying you?”

“At first, I wanted to punish you by using you, since you betrayed me. Then the feelings from you felt so real, but your words kept echoing in my head. I felt like a fool every time I was gentle and giving to you, Clair, but I couldn’t stop.”

I can’t stay where I am for another second. Spanning the distance between us, I hug him so tightly if he wasn’t an orc, I would bruise him.

“I am so sorry,” I whisper, my heart breaking at the thought of how deeply my words affected him. “Trust me, I never doubted you or your people. All I wanted was to convince the general to stop the pain they were inflicting on your and give me a chance to gather enough evidence to prove the truth—the truth about the Rift and your arrival here. I gambled that if I led him to believe I was motivated by ambition, he would believe me.”

“It was a heavy burden to carry these last few days, Clair.” He swipes one of my ringlets behind my ear and the stubborn thing springs forward again. I get a flash out of somewhere of my hair being more gray than brown and him still doing it, fighting a battle he’ll never win. It’s the most comforting thought I’ve had since those soldiers walked into my lecture hall.

“I’m going to march over to the Operations Center and do my best to convince that man to do the right thing and move on from this paranoid worry that you’re here to do harm. We’ll

move to phase two, finding the Others a place to live while you wait for the scientists to figure out how to get you home.”

I force myself to keep my optimistic smile on my face at that thought. I’m falling for this amazing big, green orc and don’t want to imagine him going back to where he came from—away from me.

“After I meet with the general, I’m going to come back here and use my words—and my body—to convince you just how much I want you to be happy.”

With that, I brush my palm over the enormous cock stuffed into his pants. Considering how much this male likes to be in charge, it was a risky move. He might scold me for such a bold action.

He lets it slide, though. Instead, our gazes collide and whisper our affection.

I’m feeling optimistic as I head for the door, but what I hear as he calls after me makes my stomach feel as though I just swallowed a vat of concrete.

“If I’m gone when you return, know one thing, Clair. I didn’t leave willingly.”

Shit. We’re both so powerless, and he’s so very vulnerable.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

**C**lair

I'm so nervous my hands shake as I make my way to the Operations Center to meet with the general. After I give my report, if he still thinks the Others are a threat, I don't know how to convince him otherwise.

I have an inherent mistrust of the military. Maybe I've just seen one too many doomsday movies where the military messes everything up because they're paranoid. Perhaps it's because I've had my own research mansplained to me by a guy who thinks he knows more than me because of his possession of a penis. I can't shake my fear that the general isn't going to trust what I tell him.

As I approach the Operations Center, my heart beats faster and my mouth suddenly goes dry. I enter the general's office to find him behind his desk, an air of authority surrounding him as he looks up from his papers. I take a steadying breath before starting our conversation.

“General Adams, I’m happy to inform you I’ve completed thirty-three individual interviews with orcs, minotaurs, wolverines, naga, and others. Males, females, and children old enough to communicate have given me their accounts of their arrival on Earth.”

He steepled his hands in front of him and gives me his full attention. “Tell me everything you’ve learned.”

After a report, a sense of relief washes over me as he expresses satisfaction in knowing there won’t be another wave of well-armed aliens descending upon us. But this relief is only temporary. It’s swiftly replaced by growing concern when I push further, seeking answers regarding our next steps.

“What are your plans now? What can we do to ensure these individuals have a place to live beyond this desert? Is anyone doing studies on where to re-home these people?”

The general’s smile fades as his gaze avoids mine.

“Well...” He trails off hesitantly. “As you know, even as a general, I take my orders from a higher authority. I’ll inform the President and Congress of your findings. They will take it from here.”

Part of my anthropology training focused on body language. I could swear he’s hiding something.

“As long as I have your attention, can I just suggest we get them out of the Mojave as soon as possible? There’s the sweltering heat, the never-ending dust storms. And I understand winter here is bitter cold.”

“Yes, Dr. Thompson. We’ll take that into consideration.”

Okay, now my shit detector is on high alert. That was definitely a patronizing tone.

“Are other countries going to help with this burden? If so, can I suggest all the Others stay together? Perhaps the United Nations could help with costs, but splitting these people into smaller groups would just—”

“I appreciate your concern, Doctor, but let’s leave those decisions to people with different areas of expertise.”

He’s dismissing me. What an asshole.

Unwilling to settle for mere empty promises or vague responses any longer, I press forward even amidst the palpable tension hanging between us. “General Adams, we can’t delay anymore. We have a moral obligation to find suitable living spaces for the Others. There are hundreds of orphaned infants and children, pregnant females and elderly who, without proper homes, remain vulnerable and displaced.”

His guarded expression suddenly grows less amicable as he leans back in his chair, arms crossed with stubborn determination.

“This is a complex matter.” That was a verbal pat on the head if ever I’ve heard one. “There are logistical challenges and numerous considerations to address before any plans can be set into motion.”

My patience evaporates. “You brought me here because of my expertise. Don’t you want my opinions?”

“I’ll expect your white paper in my inbox by ten a.m. But these decisions will take time,” he counters brusquely. “We need thorough assessments of available resources, consultations with relevant institutions, and careful consideration from all stakeholders.”

With that load of bullshit, I think our conversation is officially over.

“Thanks for your concern, doctor. I know you’ve got your eyes on the Prize, the Nobel Prize.” He chuckles at his clever *bon mot*. “But we won’t need your services after Friday. We appreciate your service.”

His words hit me like a physical blow. I’ll need to leave in four days!

“But I’m the only person who speaks their language!”

“You said that orc you’ve sheltered in your tent speaks English. That’s all we’ll need.”

I don’t try to hide my shock and outrage. “One person to translate for five thousand people. How could that possibly be adequate?”

“We have military personnel who can take it from here. Thank you for your service.”

“I-I should stay. At least to train other humans—”

He cuts me off with an impatient wave of his hand and nods to one of the privates who’s been standing by, a clear sign to escort me out of the Operations Center.

Something's wrong. Not just a little wrong. Red alerts and klaxons are going off in the back of my head. My stomach feels heavy as a ball of lead. I've never been this worried in my life.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

**A**shok Although I told Clair I believed her when she said she never intended to betray me or the rest of the Others, I had time to think after she left for her meeting with the general. Little nagging doubts came up in my mind, causing me to question her again.

When she enters our tent and hurtles into my arms, clinging to me as though I'm the only thing that gives her any peace, all those worries fly out of my mind. The picture on the front of the stringed *khuur'in* instrument fills my thoughts. Clair and I were meant to be together. I want her as my soulbound. All the other details can be worked out.

She's grabbing big gulps of air, her eyes wide and unseeing. When she finally pulls far enough away to look me in the eye, there's a desperation I've never seen on anyone's face before.

I ease us to our nest of blankets, nestle her across my lap, her hip at my belly, so we can look at each other. Eagerly, I listen

to every word she tells me about her meeting with the general.

“Why wouldn’t he want the only human in the world who can speak Other languages to remain in the area, Ashok? It doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know.” The only thing I can think of is that they plan to abandon us in this place with no water, few animals to hunt, and no weapons. My people have never had to endure this degree of heat, and Clair told me it gets so cold in the winter that water freezes and stays ice for many moons. Except there is no water. We would all die in a season, perhaps less. That’s heartless.

“Humans would do such things?” I can’t fathom the cruelty.

“Some other day I can tell you the merest fraction of what humans have done to other humans over thousands of years, Ashok. We can be barbaric.”

“When those males were beating me, they called me a brute.”

“We can be stupid as well as barbaric, but not all of us are that way, Ashok.”

I press kisses to the top of her head, my chest filling with warmth and affection. Then I purr, hoping it will calm us both.

Tonight, there’s nothing we can do to protect my people. Tomorrow I’ll meet with Brokka and any others who want to fight. We’ll come up with a plan.

“Ashok? The general said he would read a paper I’m going to prepare. I don’t even know if he’ll glance at it, but it gives me a reason to return to the Operations Center. I’ll go in a few

hours when there are fewer people around. In the meantime, I want to make love with you.”

Sometimes this female is so shy around me. My head tips back in surprise at her bold proposal.

“Not interested?” Her eyes are wide in surprise.

“You think I don’t want to slide my thick black tongue inside you, Clair? Don’t want my hands to memorize every hill and valley of your body? Don’t want to thrust into your wet heat and give you so much pleasure you fall asleep, exhausted in my arms? Perhaps you’ve been struck with *mrecken* fever.” He scoffs, trying to lighten things.

“Ashok, you have a hidden talent. Talking dirty. I hope by the time I leave our tent, I discover a few other hidden talents.”

I grip her hand and press it to my cock, which is already thickening at the idea we’ll be sharing pleasure soon.

“Are you mocking me, Clair? Calling this hidden. I thought my body’s response to you has been obvious from the start.”

We’ve been together every waking and sleeping moment for days, but I’ve never seen quite this expression on her face. Sometimes when we perform the *linoch* so she can acquire a new language, it feels almost like a chore, something that must be done and then checked off a list, not sensual at all. The naughty smile playing on her lips looks like nothing we share tonight will feel like a forced assignment.

“I doubt you’ve forgotten that orcs have to be in charge, Clair. I hope you’re not hungry or tired, because starting right now,



the only thing you'll be allowed to think about is how to either please me or take your pleasure.”

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

**C**lair Although I'm terrified about what happened in the Operations Center a few minutes ago, there's absolutely nothing I can do about that right now. Consciously forcing that to the back of my mind, I decide to stay in this moment with Ashok.

He wants to give and receive pleasure? I can't argue with that. He's going to be in charge? Well, isn't that convenient, because I recently discovered I like it that way.

"You know what to do, Clair. Keep your eyes on mine and take off those awful clothes."

There's something about the way his voice dropped an octave that gets me instantly in the mood.

Slowly, I begin to undress, feeling my skin flush as his eyes travel up and down my body. He's drinking in my nudity as if it were the sweetest nectar. His rapt attention adds fuel to the fire of my raging libido.

Following the instructions he gave me days ago, I make certain to keep our gazes locked, to point my fingers as though I'm a prima ballerina, and to make every movement graceful to add to the eroticism.

“Open your legs.”

When I quickly comply, he rewards me with a loud, unbridled sniff, a sexy, tusk-filled smile, and a purr.

The purr makes my nipples hard and a trickle of liquid slides from between my lips.

“You smell good, Clair. Soon, all your luscious cream is going to coat my lips and tongue and, if I'm lucky, it will be dripping down my chin.”

Holy shit. How can something so brazen be so sexy it makes me weak in the knees?

“I'm feeling lazy.” He lies back in the blankets, cups his palms on the back of his head, and allows himself an appreciative lingering look.

Look at him. Nude from the waist up, exposing sexy, green skin, slabs of muscle, and swirling tattoos. His handsome face is raptly focused on me as his tusks glint in the low light.

“I'll watch you play with your breasts. Pretend your hands are mine.”

We've been intimate for days. Always with *me* pleasuring *him*. How can he just lie there, waiting to touch me? When the answer strikes me, it makes my belly tighten. I'm not sure I feel fear or desire when I realize this male is going to draw this

out. With self-control like he's displaying, he could edge me for hours.

I think I'm going to love this.

My fingers fly to my nipples. I comply without hesitation, desperate to please him.

My nipples have never been this sensitive as I pinch, then roll them, my gaze glued on my huge green orc.

"That's right, Clair. Feel your need rising?" He pauses to ensure I pay attention to the vortex of arousal spiraling between my legs.

His captivated gaze makes my nipples even tighter. I start a slow rhythm of pinching and rolling them back and forth, watching how his eyes turn an even deeper shade of amber.

"Good girl, Clair," Ashok murmurs, his voice laced with desire. "Tease yourself a little more. Let me see, let me *smell*, how you *ache* for me."

Wetness gathers between my thighs. I yearn to be touched, but I hold back, following his directions, wanting to please him, wanting to show him I can follow his instructions without hesitation. As I continue to play with my breasts, his voice fills the room, sending shivers down my spine.

His words and heated looks fuel my desire like gasoline on a fire. I can't help but moan softly as my fingers pinch harder, feeling the tension build within me. I'm unable to take my gaze off him, the way he watches me with hunger and pride.

His gaze ignites a fire within me I didn't know existed until now.

“Do you like it when I watch you, Clair?” His voice is low and velvety, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me.

“Yes.” The sound is soft, barely escaping my lips. I dredge up the courage to brazenly glance at his cock twitching under his pants. “I like what watching me does to you.”

“Tell me what you're feeling.”

He knows I'm not used to this, to being so open. I love how he forces me out of my comfort zone.

“It's torture and ecstasy, Ashok, all rolled into one delicious sensation.”

He grins, his tusked smile sending my pulse racing. “Good. Show me, Clair. Show me how wet you are.”

With his words, I can no longer hide the evidence of my arousal. My pussy is soaked, the desire pooling between my legs. I release one of my breasts and slowly slide my hand down my stomach, teasingly diving through my trimmed mound until I reach the wet heat between my thighs.

As my fingers glide through my slick folds, I let out a whimper, unable to hold back any longer. Each touch is electric, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body. I watch Ashok as I touch myself, his eyes never leaving mine. The intensity in his gaze matches the intensity building within me.

“You’re so beautiful, Clair,” Ashok praises, his voice a velvet purr.

I display my glistening fingers to him, then reach up and paint my nipples with my honey, making them even more sensitive in the warm air. His response thrills me, “Look how your body responds to your touch. You’re made for pleasure. Keep touching yourself, but remember, don’t come until I tell you to.”

His words send me spiraling even further into the abyss of lust. I groan, my body trembling with need as I continue to stroke my throbbing clit. I’m close, so close, but I fight against my impending orgasm, wanting to obey his command.

“Please, Ashok,” I plead, my voice barely a whisper. “Please let me come.”

He smirks, his gaze never wavering. “Not yet. Not until I say so. Keep making yourself hotter, wetter for me.”

His words push me further, ignite the fire within me. I arch my back, my hips rocking against my hand in an instinctual rhythm. I want to show him how much I want him, how much I crave his touch.

The sight of my own pleasure reflected in his eyes intensifies the eroticism. My breath quickens, and need coils within me.

The sweet torture continues, my fingers working feverishly, my moans growing louder, the pleasure threatening to consume me. The tension continues to build, the pressure in my core close to reaching its breaking point.

And finally, as if he knows exactly when I can't take any more, Ashok's voice fills the room again.

“Come for me, Clair. Come for your orc lover.”

With his command, the dam breaks. Pleasure rips through my body, waves crashing over me, as I let out a cry of ecstasy, my moans filling the small tent. My walls clench, desperate to feel filled, though I'm so empty. My body convulses in the throes of my orgasm, as I struggle to remain standing. And through it all, Ashok watches, his eyes filled with adoration, a look of appreciation on his handsome face.

As I come down from my high, my body still trembling, I lock eyes with him, a smile playing on my lips. Looking at him, at the desire still burning in his eyes, my heart bursts with affection. I'm falling for this dominant orc warrior who has shown me a world of pleasure I never knew existed.

Ashok's gaze is still fixed on me. His eyes devoured every second of my release. His presence alone intensified my bliss, making it deeper, more explosive than anything I've ever experienced before. I can feel his hunger, his need for me, radiating from him.

His voice breaks through my haze of lust, bringing me back to reality. “Good girl, Clair,” he murmurs, his voice heavy with desire. “You were made to be worshipped. To be pleased.”

He sits tall in the blankets. Sitting, standing still, or walking, this male moves with the grace of a predator. The sight of him half-clothed, his muscular form dominating my field of vision, sends a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

Reaching out, he grips my hips and pulls me to the rumpled blankets. Slipping out of his dominant character for a brief moment, he nuzzles my neck, inhales deeply, then praises, “You’re magnificent. Now I’m going to unleash a pleasure upon you that you’ve only dreamed about.”

Though I have no idea what will come next, my body shivers in anticipation. And just like that, he takes control. His roughened palms explore my body. Every touch igniting sparks of lust, every caress spiraling me deeper into ecstasy.

His mouth claims mine in a searing kiss, his lips tasting of desire and dominance. I surrender to him completely, my body eager to please and be pleased. Our bodies move in sync, a tangle of limbs and heat.

I’m lost in a whirlwind of sensation, every touch, every kiss, magnifying the already overwhelming pleasure. I can’t help but moan into his mouth as his hands roam my body, igniting every nerve-ending with a surge of desire.

“Open your eyes, Clair,” he whispers against my lips. “I want you to watch as I pleasure you, as I bring you to the edge, as my touch pushes you over.”

I do as he commands, my eyes fluttering open to meet his intense gaze. There’s a hunger, a raw need in his eyes that doubles my lust. Without breaking eye contact, he slowly trails his lips down my neck, leaving a trail of liquid fire in his wake.

I gasp as his lips find one of my breasts, his black tongue flicking across my hardened nipple. I bite my hand to stop



from crying out because, though I've seen his tongue a few times, playing at the corner of his mouth or hiding between his teeth, this is so erotic it's hard to bear.

He captures my gaze and grins as he extends it fully and circles it slowly around my entire breast. His mouth is hot and wet, his tusks drag roughly across my tender flesh. The sensation sends electric pulses straight to my core. I arch my back, craving more of his touch, more of his mouth on my body.

"Tell me what you want, Clair," he growls against my skin, his voice laced with arousal.

"I want... I need you," I manage to whisper, my voice heavy with desire.

He smirks, satisfaction glinting in his eyes. "And you shall have me. But first, I want to taste you."

His words send a thrill through me, anticipation electrifying the air. He trails kisses down my stomach, his breath teasing my sensitive skin. I can feel his hunger, his excitement as he approaches his ultimate destination.

"Come when you want. I'll be too busy to give you the command."

With that, he gives me a sexy smirk, then his long, black tongue is on me. It's like nothing I've ever experienced before. The sensation is mind-blowing. Each flick and swirl sends shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

Maybe I should change my field of research. I want to spend years studying how his tongue works. It moves and knots inside me, ripples as it works my clit, and then caresses my g-spot. It's almost too much—sensory overload. When he hums, making his tongue vibrate, I almost shatter. Gripping the blankets beneath me, my body writhes against him as he skillfully works his magic.

I'm lost in the rhythm of his tongue, the heat and wetness swirling together in a frenzy of desire. I can't help the moans escaping my lips or the way my body arches and bucks against his mouth, his tusks brushing roughly against my skin. He knows exactly how to push me to the edge, how to tease and torment until I'm on the precipice of release.

With a primal growl, he doubles his efforts, his tongue delving deeper, his lips sucking and devouring me. My orgasm hits me like a tidal wave, crashing over my body in a powerful surge of pleasure. I cry out, my whole being consumed by the intensity of the moment.

My hands are clenched in his braids, the soles of my feet are lodged on the backs of his thighs. We're as wrapped together and connected as two people can be.

As the waves subside and I come back down from my climax, he kisses his way back up my body, his eyes filled with adoration and only a hint of masculine triumph. He kisses my lips gently, his touch a stark contrast to the dominance he just lorded over me.

“You are mine, Clair,” he whispers, his voice filled with possession. “And I will spend eternity giving you pleasure.”

I can only nod, my mind and body still buzzing from the explosive ecstasy he just bestowed upon me. As he moves to lie beside me, his warmth seeping into my skin, I can't help but feel a sense of contentment wash over me. This dominant orc, this powerful and commanding force of nature, has awakened desires within me I never knew existed. And now, I'm falling deeper into a connection that defies all logic and expectation.

As I lie here, catching my breath, the room is filled with the sound of our heavy breathing and the lingering scent of our passion. I turn to look at Ashok, my heart pounding, overwhelmed by the emotions swirling within me.

He pulls me into his embrace, our bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces. I bury my face in his chest, inhaling the scent of sweat and musk, trusting him completely. His hand strokes my hair, his touch comforting.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

**A**shok How do you know you've been missing something when you never knew it existed? Well, I know it now. What I've been missing my entire adult life is the female in my arms. Clair. How could she be more perfect? Brilliant, compassionate, and the only human I've met who wants to champion my people. That she wants to obey me? That she's the perfect match to my dominant nature? There couldn't be anyone on my world or hers who would be a better partner.

Lying here, smoothing her hair, kissing the top of her head, listening as her heartbeat slows, I thank the Goddess for bringing me my other half, even though it took a cataclysm to make it happen.

"I know you like to be in charge," she lifts onto an elbow to look at me, a sly smile on her face, "but could I mention that you forgot one thing? You forgot to put this..." She grips me at the root, calling attention to how full to bursting I am. "Inside me."

I've always been dominant in bed. It's the way of orcs. Orc males dominate, orc females fight until they're bested. I've never let my guard down. Until now.

Why force the pretty human to my will when she bends to it so beautifully with barely any effort on my part?

"If I wasn't ready to spill in my kilt, I would punish you and make you wait, little human. But I know a good idea when I hear one."

It seems like years that I've waited to slide into her willing channel, though it's only been days. In that time, though, I've wondered how my thick cock could possibly fit inside her. I've planned for this, though.

"I'm in a lazy mood, little Clair. Ride me."

She gives me an appreciative smile. When she softly bites her lower lip, I doubt she knows it makes me want to bite her, too.

She rises, then slings her leg to straddle my hips. Her hands rest on my chest for support as she gradually lowers herself, inch by delicious inch. I can hardly contain the groan that escapes me as she rides her drenched slit along the heavy length resting against my belly.

"This job might be harder than it looked." She winks at me. I've been worried for days about how the logistics would work, but she looks fearless, her face wearing a naughty smile as she drags her slick lips up and down my prick.

"Hard? Yes. Job? This shouldn't feel like work." Gripping her hips, I move her like a child's doll, using her slickness to make

us both even more primed than we already are. I love the way her eyes droop closed when I pull her ass toward my feet, then fly open when I bump my cockhead against her pleasure button with every pass.

“No more stalling,” she says, then leans to kiss me before taking me in hand and placing me at her entrance.

We both moan in unison as she forces me inside her. Although only my crown is squeezed into her wet warmth, bliss spears through me with just this small invasion.

Between her determination and my firm hands on her hips, we work my cock into her welcoming channel.

“*Meloch, Clair. Meloch sh’kesh, misorth.*” I croon her praises, though I don’t know how I manage to make sense even in my mother tongue.

“Yes, Ashok. Bliss.” She interrupts herself to arch her back and press down, gaining more depth. “Sheer ecstasy, feeling you inside me.”

Then all talk ceases and we work together again until we can’t lodge me any deeper. She trembles, but I think it has nothing to do with the physical sensations. Emotionally, she’s as overwhelmed as I am.

There is no doubt in my mind that all the Gods conspired, moving heaven above to get us together.

Clair begins to move, her hips rocking back and forth, her body undulating with a rhythm that is both intoxicating and primal. The room is filled with the sounds of our bodies

sliding against each other, the soft slaps and wetness only adding to the symphony of pleasure.

I watch her intently, my gaze tracing the curves of her body, memorizing every intimate detail. Her skin gleams with a fine layer of sweat, her kiss-swollen lips puffy and inviting. I long to taste her again, to feel the slickness of her tongue against mine as we lose ourselves in each other.

“Gods, Clair,” I gasp, reaching to cup her breasts in my large palms. “You feel incredible. So tight and wet for me.”

Her only response is a whimper of pleasure, her hands gripping my shoulders as she quickens her movements. I can feel the coil of desire building inside me, the familiar warmth spreading through my body, but I want to savor this moment, to hold on to it for as long as possible.

I bring one hand between us, the pad of my thumb finding her swollen clit. Her breath hitches at my touch, her eyes meeting mine in a raw, unfiltered connection. I press gently, circling the sensitive nub, and her moans grow louder, mingling with my own.

With every thrust, every stroke of my fingers, I can feel her pleasure building, her body tightening around me. I lean up to capture her lips with mine, kissing her deeply, passionately, as our bodies move in perfect harmony.

Suddenly, her walls flutter around me, her eyes closing tightly as she rides the wave of her climax. The sight of her unraveling is enough to push me over the edge. With a primal

roar, I spill inside her, our bodies shaking with the intensity of our release.

There is no doubt in my mind or heart that if I had told Clair about the soulbond and she consented, we would be bound right now. This is not the time nor the place that I want this to happen. I'm not certain a human could feel the bond. Plus the future is so uncertain right now that I don't want either one of us to have to deal with the pain if we become separated.

We collapse against each other, sweaty and breathless, the sound of our combined heartbeats and ragged breathing fills the tent. My *keshmah* rewards us by vibrating when I lean my forehead against hers. Our bodies tangle together as we bask in the afterglow.

“You are my everything, Clair,” I whisper into her ear, my voice filled with emotion. “I never thought I could feel like this, but you've changed me, rearranged me from the inside out.”

She looks at me, her eyes filled with affection and a hint of mischief. “I think we've only just begun, Ashok. There's so much more to explore together.”

As I gaze into her eyes, open and filled with devotion, I keep my blissful expression pasted on my face, hiding my true feelings. From what Clair told me about her meeting with the general, I hope we have time to explore together. From what she said, I wonder if we're going to be torn apart.



## Chapter Thirty

**C**lair

To say that was the best sex of my life is like comparing a flickering candle to the blazing sun. Yes, the mechanics of it were amazing, wonderful. But it was the depth of our connection that made it something I'll never forget.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I open my eyes, our bodies are plastered together in a sweaty pile. It's only now, fully sated as well as fully awake, that reality smacks me in the face.

The general is up to something, and I think it's terrible, unthinkable. I don't give a rat's ass about the white paper I promised to write for him. I doubt he'll even read it. It's probably busywork to keep me from investigating the elephant in the room.

With five thousand Others and only one person who can translate, they need me more than they need the general himself. *If* they are planning to communicate with the Others.

Perhaps things fell into place when I was napping in Ashok's arms, because everything seems clearer to me than it did when I left the Operations Center a few hours ago. The only reason he wants me gone is if he's planning to do something terrible to these people.

I get washed and dressed in record time and leave Ashok sleeping as I hurry to the Operations Center to see if I can gather some intel on what the military is planning.

Intel? Since when do I talk like that? Since about the same time I met five thousand nagas, minotaurs, orcs, and Others.

Although the big tent is filled with computers and is a hub of activity during the day, there are only two people here now. I take my place at the computer they designated for my use. It has no Internet access, just a word-processing program for me to write my notes.

My workstation is up against the back wall, facing the room, so I have a good view of what's going on. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to notice that the two soldiers aren't paying attention to their screens at all. By the way they can't take their eyes off each other, I imagine I interrupted an intimate moment when I arrived.

As they pretend to get back to work, I pretend to focus on the document I just opened. These two soldiers' interest in each other is the luckiest thing that's happened to me in a while. They mumble loudly that they're going outside for a smoke break. The moment they leave, I hurry to their workstations to see if they left their computers unlocked.

It's my lucky day. The woman's screensaver hasn't engaged yet. Instead of finding a search engine to look for clues about what's going on, my mouth pops wide at what's on the screen.

What at first appeared to be a boring receipt of provisions coming from nearby Fort Irwin isn't boring at all. I don't see mention of food, clothing, household goods, or toys for the children who arrived, most without their parents.

Only one word jumps off the screen.

Sarin.

Sarin gas. Chemical warfare. As Hitler might have called it, The Final Solution.

My body leaps into fight-or-flight mode, my stomach tightens in a spasm of panic.

Somehow, I manage to ignore my body so I can figure out how to deal with destruction on an inconceivable level. The military is planning to kill every Other—male, female, and child—soon. Otherwise, they would need a translator.

“Dear God.” I place a shaky hand over my mouth, trying to think what to do, who to contact, how to stop this.

“Step away from the computer,” the woman commands, her voice laced with authority. I was so engrossed that I didn't hear them return. My heart pounds and my chin trembles as the two soldiers stride closer, their expressions shifting instantly from besotted to alert when they see me at the woman's workstation.

Gripping the edge of the desk, my knuckles turn white, as I feel the weight of the impending danger hang in the air like a storm cloud. The man speaks into his shoulder comm, calling for backup. I know I'm in deep trouble, caught red-handed with my discovery.

I slowly comply, standing up from the desk, facing them with as much composure as I can muster.

"What is this about?" I feign innocence, but my mind races, calculating my next move.

The woman crosses her arms and regards me suspiciously. "What were you looking at on the screen? You're a civilian. Not authorized to touch that."

I take a deep breath, hoping to steady my racing thoughts. "I'm... missing my family. My mom's been sick. I just wanted to get into my email and tell her—"

"That's not your email. That's about a munitions arrival."

Munitions? Is that what they call a deadly gas?

"That's classified information. You have no business snooping around."

My heart sinks, realizing not only am I fucked, but the lives of five thousand innocent beings hang in the balance.

Before I can respond, the sound of heavy boots signals the arrival of more soldiers. My heart races faster, my mind frantically searching for an escape route.

General Adams enters the room, his presence commanding attention. He's followed by eight soldiers, guns drawn. The general's stone-gray eyes lock onto mine, cold and steely.

"Dr. Thompson," he sneers, his voice dripping with disdain. "I didn't think you would cause any trouble. But that was before you started *consorting* with the enemy."

I straighten my spine, refusing to cower beneath his intimidating gaze. Two of his words are deeply troubling: *consorting* and *enemy*. From day one he's seen these people as the enemy rather than an unfortunate group of terrified, disoriented people who want to be here even less than we want them here.

"General Adams, I... saw the word 'sarin'. Certainly, you're not planning on... It's inhumane, unjust. I imagine it violates a dozen international laws."

A cruel smile quirks his lips as he takes a step closer. "Oh, my dear Clair, this decision goes higher than my rank. Now I need to figure out what to do with you. I should have never invited a civilian here."

He rubs his palm across his mouth as he thinks. "You will remain on this base, and when the Others perish, you'll join them in oblivion. Civilization can't afford to die out because of bleeding hearts like you."

"Die out? They have no more technical savvy than Old West trappers and miners. They pose no threat." I stifle a groan when I realize what a pathetic argument that was.

“Obviously you haven’t thought this through. They might be carrying deadly viruses, they might have other, hidden abilities we can’t even assess. It’s best to simply... make this problem go away.”

Every fiber of my being screams defiance, but I bite my lip, refusing to give him the satisfaction of what he would consider a hysterical reaction. My mind races to find a way out, a glimmer of hope in this dire situation.

With a sudden surge of confidence, I meet his gaze head-on and reveal my trump card. “You should know, General, that before they put me on the helicopter to come here, I managed to send a text to my assistant. Barry knows enough to worry if I meet an untimely accident. He’ll contact the media.”

Barry’s a huge conspiracy buff and has connections with other conspiracy buffs. I doubt he believes in orcs or minotaurs, but he’s a believer in Sasquatch. He’ll get the word out to the right people.

General Adams’ face contorts with anger, his eyes narrowing into dangerous slits. “You think a journalist can stop me? We have ways of silencing people like that. The reach of the United States military is vast, Dr. Thompson, and we are within our rights to censor any communications that may impact national security.”

His threats wash over me, but I refuse to let fear dictate my actions. “If anything happens to me or my loved ones, a text will be automatically sent to every major news outlet. You

might be able to silence one journalist, but not *all* of them. Your secrets will be laid bare for the world to see.”

A tense silence hangs in the air as General Adams considers his options. His facade of control cracks slightly, hinting at the fear gnawing at his core.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Clair,” he seethes, his voice laced with venom. “I’ll let you live. But mark my words, if you dare ruin this exercise or disclose anything after we release you, I will ensure your life, your family, and your career are destroyed. I know your mother is ill, and your special needs niece just might lose funding for that expensive school she goes to.”

One thing is certain, a man who would use sarin gas on five thousand people wouldn’t hesitate to kill my mom—or me, for that matter

“And I have one other thing to incentivize you. That ugly orc.”

I’m not surprised he’s using Ashok against me. The only surprising thing is that he waited so long to threaten me with it.

“Okay, General. I’ll keep quiet.”

“Dr. Thompson, Clair...” the smile that creeps over his weathered face is more dangerous than any I have seen before. It’s cold and humorless and makes my blood run cold. “Do you think I got where I am today by leaving things to chance? I hope I’ve ‘inspired’ you to make the correct choice.”

Even as he says the words, I feel two thick hands grab my arms as I'm dragged out of the tent.



# Chapter Thirty-One

**A**shok  
It's the middle of the night, but after a short nap, I wake with a start.

I've been keeping my worries at bay, but the sense of urgency returns. Clair understands humans far better than me, and she's scared. That tells me there's something to worry about.

Suddenly, the moment shatters as harsh voices pierce through the tranquility. "Get the fuck out here. Now, Asshole!" I freeze, my heart pounding, my hands balling into fists. This can't be good. It must be about Clair. If the situation weren't serious, they wouldn't be barging in like this.

"Out!" they command, then enter the tent without my permission. Soon, eight guns are aimed at me, and fear clenches my gut.

"Hands up," a tall, gangly man orders. He was one of my torturers. I comply, trying not to show my reluctance. I don't want to provoke them.

Another voice demands, “Hands behind your back! Now!”

“Where’s Clair?”

“We’re asking the questions, asshole. Next time you talk without permission, the butt of my gun will smash your ugly tusks off your face,” the soldier sneers.

My tusks! An orc’s pride. They mock me. But I know better than to retaliate, not with eight guns pointed at me.

Can I fight? I have superior strength, hearing, and sight to these humans, but they have guns. I’ve seen what those weapons can do.

“If you want to see your little fuck buddy again, you’ll put your hands behind your back and come with us.” Heat flies through my body at the way they disrespect Clair. She’s more than a hole to fuck. She’s a brilliant scholar, a kind, loving female, but more importantly, she is my soulbound. My everything. But I can’t challenge them, not with her life on the line. I do as they say. My wrists are bound behind me in no time.

My sense of urgency, fear, and doom grow stronger. I’m now at their mercy, not knowing what’s happening with Clair or what their intentions are.

As they lead me outside, the night air does little to ease the fear tightening its grip around my heart. My mind races. Though I wonder what horrors they have in store for me this time, I’m far more concerned about Clair. She must be in their custody, too, or she wouldn’t let this happen to me.

We approach the grim metal building where they tortured me before. Dread washes over me. I have a hunch this time will be more painful than the last, only this time I doubt Clair will be able to interrupt it.

Instead of strapping me to the chair they used before, they throw me into a small, barred metal cage just big enough for me to hunch over or sit on the floor.

“Get in,” one of the soldiers barks as he shoves me forward. I glance back, searching for any sign of Clair or a way to escape, but they’re too quick, slamming the cage shut behind me.

Inside the cramped enclosure, I feel like a trapped animal. The space is so small I can barely stretch my limbs.

The sound of footsteps drifts in from outside, along with muffled voices, and the clanging of metal. Each sound heightens my sense of doom. My pulse races and the walls of the cage seem to close in around me.

With a sinking feeling, I realize that my hope of protecting Clair and the Others is dwindling. The soldiers have me now, and there’s little I can do to change that. I struggle to calm my breathing, attempting to steady myself for whatever comes next. There must be a way out of this, a way to stop their evil plans, but my mind is reeling with fear for the female I’ve grown so close to.

Hours pass, or maybe just minutes; time seems to blur, making it hard to think. I pray to the Goddess for Clair’s safety, but I

can't shake the feeling that she's paying the price for trying to protect us—protect me.

As I stand hunched, my heart sinking with dread, I can't help but feel a glimmer of hope that Clair might be safe somewhere else. But optimism is shattered when they drag her in, her hands bound and her eyes wide with fear. My heart feels as though it's been ripped from my chest.

“Clair!” I cry out, my voice choked with emotion. The soldiers shove her forward, and she stumbles, falling to her knees. Her cry of pain as she hits the floor echoes through the room, accompanied by the sound of my ragged breathing.

Her eyes lock onto mine, and I can see the pain and terror reflected in them. It's unbearable to witness. I wish I could shield her from this nightmare. The smell of sweat and fear fills the room, mingling with the faint metallic tang of blood that lingers from my last trip here.

“Leave her alone!” My voice is soft. I know they won't respond to orders from an Other. Perhaps they'll hear my pleas. “She has nothing to do with this.”

A cruel smile spreads across one soldier's face as he retorts, “Oh, she's got everything to do with it, Otherfucker.”

The general steps forward. “Your girlfriend has it in her head that she's going to tell the world about the Others. She needs an incentive to keep her fucking mouth shut. *You're* the incentive.”

He nods to the man who called me Otherfucker who takes it as a signal to poke a two-pronged metal stick through the cage. When it hits my arm, hot pain sears through my whole body, making me writhe in agony.

Panting as I drop to my knees, I see Clair's face, a mask of shock and pain. Her wild, curly hair frames her tear-stained face, and all the blood has drained from her lips. She claws at the soldiers holding her, her boots slipping as she tries to reach me.

"Again," the general orders.

As Clair yells for them to stop, the soldier presses the stick to my neck, causing me to black out. I awaken to Clair's tortured voice, as she screams, "Stop it! General, tell me what you want."

"That's just what I wanted to hear," he says as he yanks her out the door.

Still weak as a babe, I heave myself to my knees, grip the bars of the cage, and call, "Clair! Clair! I love you!" I never told her. She needs to hear it.

The general had his grip on her arm. She would come back if she could. I know it.

I keep yelling for her until my screaming tears my throat. Since I'm unable to even say her name anymore, my noises turn into feral growls until the man with the shock stick points it at my throat and the world turns black.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

**C**lair  
My mind and body are swirling with so many emotions: pain and love and terror and hatred. My ears are ringing and my chest feels hollow. For a moment, all of that fades to the background and I feel nothing. I breathe a sigh of relief. It's easier this way.

Then I force myself out of the no-man's-land of blissful oblivion and return to reality to figure out how to fix this.

The general yanks me into the room next door to where they're holding Ashok. It's maybe eight-foot square with nothing in it but a metal chair.

"Tell me you'll stop hurting him. I'll do whatever you say."

Although Ashok's agonized screams are still echoing in my ears, the night is quiet. They've either stopped torturing him, or he's lying unconscious in that fucking cell.

"You're going to translate for us. When the time comes, after most of the enlisted soldiers have left in a convoy, you're

going to help us herd these animals into the big tent we've erected at the southeast corner of their fenced enclosure. We'll need them calm so we can do what needs to be done."

As he talks about killing thousands of people in cold blood, he shows absolutely no remorse.

"We don't have adequate infrastructure. This would be easier if we had brick and mortar, but we must make do. We want as many personnel out of the area as possible. By the time it's done, it will just be those who administer the gas."

"Wearing biohazard suits, I assume? Don't you think the Others will wonder what you're doing?" But why stop there? Why not get them to dig their own graves as well?"

I pay for that bit of sarcasm. He may be a desk jockey now but the general is a soldier to his core. Before I can react, he grips my chin and cheeks with one hand and squeezes until I'm sure I'll carry the bruises for a week.

"You, my dear, will calmly explain this will be a delousing procedure." He gives me a feral smile. My jaw screams in pain, but all I can think of is what the nazis did in the showers of Auschwitz.

Ashok becomes almost animalistic in the room next door—snarling, howling, threatening the general for hurting me until I hear the sound of one long, continuous shock and then the dull thud of his heavy body hitting the floor.

"Do what we say, and your boyfriend will be among the lucky ones who die quickly. If you don't? He'll be beaten and cattle-

prodded to within an inch of his life non-stop until the time comes. Then, instead of killing him painlessly, we'll leave him to die in the desert with no food, water, or even a knife to take his own life when he's dying of thirst. You're going to cooperate willingly if you want to spare him from a world of pain. Your call."

As if on cue, Ashok's wordless grunts of pain float to my ears from inside the torture chamber on the other side of the wall.

I don't ask about my fate. There's no way the bastard is going to let me live, although I'm sure he'll lie and tell me I'll go free as soon as every Other is dead. I refuse to press him. As a bright woman, I know what's going to happen.

Whether I help or not, we'll all be dead in a few days. Unless I can think of a way out of this. As long as I'm alive and allowed to roam the property, there's hope, however small.

"I agree to your terms, as long as you let me live and allow me to see Ashok whenever I want." I'll let the bastard think I'm stupid enough to believe him. Maybe he'll let down his guard.

"You watch too much TV, Dr. Thompson. You don't get to call the shots. But I'll let you live and allow you to see him for ten minutes once a day."

He looks as though he can't wait to get back to his desk to plan the cold-blooded murder of five thousand Others—and me.

"In the meantime, I want you documenting everything you learned about these people."



“I assumed the Others’ presence on Earth needs to be a secret.”

“You’re correct. I’m afraid there will be no Nobel Prize for you. But scientists and the military will be studying this for years to come. The bodies will be shipped to Area 51 for security and for study. Every piece of evidence will be scrutinized. You will do your patriotic duty and provide all the information you can gather. It will be documented and cataloged for further analysis.”

Of course. Show no mercy to the people, but use the information to get better at waging war. It makes perfect sense—if you’re a psychopath.

“In that case, I’d like to continue going into the enclosure until... the time comes.”

He chuckles. “You academics kill me. The world could be collapsing and you’d want to study it. The more detail you can provide in the report, the better. Be warned, Dr. Thompson, if those monsters show even a hint of rebellion, your lover will suffer.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

**C**lair  
Awakening from a restless sleep, thoughts of Ashok and the fate of the Others consume me. There are tears on my pillow. I'm not sure if I'm imagining it, but I could swear I hear Ashok's grunts of pain drifting to my ears even though the torture chamber is nowhere near my tent.

The feeling of being powerless makes me want to scream and throw things. But I can't let my hopelessness consume me. Maybe I can think my way out of this.

Rodriguez is guarding my tent as usual. His gaze flies from mine. I imagine every soldier in the garrison has been told I'm no longer a willing participant in this genocide. He greets me civilly, though.

With the soldier as my shadow and with determination fueling my every step, I make my way toward the fenced enclosure.

Pretending to gather information about the Others is my ruse as I engage them in conversation all while keeping an eye out

for Brokka or one of the others who were quietly talking about a revolt.

After an hour in the sweltering heat, my gaze finally falls upon Brokka. Ashok pointed him out to me the other night. He's younger than I realized, not even as old as most of my grad students.

There's something about him, though. He has a commanding presence; his eyes shine with defiance and strength. Poor guy. Ashok said the male was pulled from his mate's arms when he was dragged into the Rift.

I approach him quietly amidst the buzz of activity and take a seat opposite him, immediately saying, "Don't react to anything I say. Smile and nod. Keep your eyes on me."

Only because I've spent so much time with Ashok do I notice his pointed ears twitching slightly. Other than that, he schools his features perfectly as I explain the general's plan. I'm heavily guarded, but with my knowledge of the orc language, as long as we keep our tone light, we can plot together.

In light and airy tones so as not to raise suspicion, I liken sarin gas to a cloud of falling arrows so he can understand how deadly it is. To my guards it sounds like I am discussing the weather.

"We need a plan." The male is young, but he perfectly understood what I said and is managing to hide what has to be hatred behind his placid smile. He grabbed his friend's *khuur'in* and is pretending to tell me about its history,

occasionally pointing to the picture or plucking the strings as we conduct our business.

In hushed voices, ideas flow between us.

With careful steps, we lay the groundwork for our rebellion.

“How will we know when to do this?” Brokka asks when we’ve tied down all the steps.

We’ve tried to keep our voices light and our faces happy as we pretend to discuss music and Others’ instruments, but it’s hard to keep the tension out of our voices.

Even if our plan goes as intended, there will be casualties when the action occurs. By the look on his serious, tattooed face, the orc is well aware both he and I will probably be dead within a day or two.

“I think the best bet—”

“Dr. Thompson? Don’t you think you should gather information from some of the other five thousand in the encampment?” This is Private Rodriguez’s not-so-subtle cue that I need to move on.

“Certainly,” I say in English, flashing the soldier a smile. “I’ll just finish up the interview with one more question.”

In orcish I finish my sentence, “It should happen when the first convoy leaves. If you see more than one truck leaving, that would be the time to make a distraction. I know I’m putting you in danger, but if I can make my way to civilization, we might gather enough support to keep most of you alive.”

The rest of the day crawls by. If circumstances were different, I would be enthralled listening to the Others' stories, learning the minutiae of living life in An'Wa. I'm still not sure whether it's another planet or another... plane of existence.

But circumstances are not different. All of us will be dead in a matter of days if I can't save us all.

When I'm escorted back to the human side of the encampment, I ask to see Ashok. At least the general didn't renege on his promise. Rodriguez seems reluctant, but escorts me to the torture building, I can hear Ashok's grunts of pain before we open the door.

What happened to the hale and hearty orc I met when I arrived? He had been fearful of his circumstances and distrustful of me, but he'd been so full of life. Even under the strain of being yanked away from An'Wa, his face bore the remnants of the happy life he'd led.

None of that is apparent now. He's on his knees in the corner of his cell, so consumed with vomiting from pain, he doesn't see or hear or smell me arrive.

His already-agonized face crumples when he sees me. Is the poor male ashamed for me to see him like this? Perhaps that was what this display was for, to make me see him as little more than an animal in a cage filled with his effluvia. Nothing could be further from the truth. This male is a hero for enduring this—all because of me.

I consider yelling at the men who are doing this, but it would accomplish nothing other than squandering the precious

moments I have with the male I love.

I grab two bottles of water in each hand. They were on the table, only a few feet away from him. I'm certain it was to taunt him.

Kneeling next to his cage, I pass a bottle to him, then pour two of the bottles onto the floor in an effort to wash the piss and shit and vomit out of the enclosure. Because the poor male is still handcuffed, I crack the top of the water bottle and lean in to help him drink.

“Watch yourself!” One of the soldiers warns as Ashok guzzles the contents.

I control my urge to snap back a remark at the man. Does he think they've tormented Ashok enough that he's rabid? That he'll harm me, the only human on this planet who has treated him with compassion and dignity ?

When I cup the back of his head and help him drink the fourth bottle and he's hydrated enough to talk, I simply smile at him.

Dear God, how did this happen? How are we in such a terrible predicament? Yes, that's an important question. But even more important, I wonder how I've fallen so deeply in love in a matter of days.

As he gulps down his last bottle of water, I babble in orcish. “I love you, Ashok. I'm trying to find a way to fix this. For all of us.”

“You should leave. You don't want to see me like this. Go. Forget me. Have a good life, Clair. Do what they want and

save your own skin.”

When I reach through the bars to hold his hand, one of the soldiers shouts, “No more touching.”

After snatching my hand back, I say, “I’m not going to forget you, Ashok. If I live through this, these last few days with you will remain the best days of my life. And if you live through them with me, we’ll be able to reminisce about how lucky we were to find each other.”

Maybe it’s my words, or perhaps he catches my scent over the other foul smells in the room. I hope my smell of hope and love is even more potent than my words.

“Aye. I love you, Clair. Remember that.”

## Chapter Thirty-Four

**C**lair

I sit in the darkness, my heart pounding in fear. Time crawls as I wait for a hint as to the time of the convoy's departure. Every sound, every movement, sets my nerves on edge, making it hard to focus.

My senses are heightened as I strain to catch even the slightest whisper of information as the soldiers talk. In this moment, I'm filled with a singular purpose—to save Ashok, myself, and the Others from impending doom.

My stomach is tight with fear as I carefully plan each step. Sneaking into one of those damned trucks will be no easy task. It could potentially ruin everything if I'm caught. And what will happen if I do make it safely onto a truck? My plan after that is even more murky.

But time is running out. If my moment for escape comes, I have to take it. Goosebumps prick at my skin as cold sweat trickles down my back, but eventually I fall asleep.



There are a few things that you learn quickly when you live in a tent. You know the moment the sun begins to rise because it filters through the beige tent walls, and you can pretty much hear everything going on around you.

The sound of boots on the ground, motors coming to life, and duffles being thrown into transports is unmistakable.

Although on my arrival I was equipped with cammies that differentiate me as a civilian, the clothes I first received from Corporal Scruggs were standard army issue. Thankfully, no one thought to remove them from my tent. I put those on, pull a hat over my forehead and leave my tent with only the clothes on my back.

The tightness in my chest never eases. It pounds in tandem with each hurried footfall. There are ten trucks idling, their exhaust fumes filling the air. Soldiers throw their gear into the rear truck, then board one of the other trucks.

I ease to a stop in the shadows between two tents. There are at least a hundred feet from here to the last truck.

Can I do it? Can I make a run for the last truck when the convoy takes off? Even if I can catch up with it, how can an academic like me who seldom goes to the gym find the strength to heave myself onto the back gate, then dive into the opening and hide among everyone's personal gear?

I guess it doesn't matter how unlikely my success will be. It's the only choice I have.

After what feels like an eternity, I catch glimpses of soldiers completing their final checks and settling into their seats. The lead vehicles begin to roll.

This is it. The moment that will determine our fate. The vehicle ahead of the last truck pulls ahead and my stomach tightens. I need Brokka to do his part, yet I hear nothing from the Other part of the encampment.

Finally! A commotion sounds from the Others' enclosure. Yelling, the sound of fighting, and oh dear God—gunfire. But it captures the attention of all the soldiers on the ground who were gathered to watch the convoy roll out. When they move en masse toward the gates into the fenced enclosure, it gives me the time I need to make a break for it.

I run to the last truck as it jerks into gear, jump higher than I thought possible, and after kicking my legs and pulling myself up with all my strength, I get my midriff onto the edge of the metal gate. With a final lurch, I dive into the murky interior of the truck, then lie panting on a pile of camo duffles.

I got myself into the truck. How am I going to complete the next steps of my plan?

The canvas-topped truck's rear tailgate is up, but the opening allows in enough light to see and air to breathe. Still, with the heat way above a hundred degrees and very little breeze, it's suffocating in here. The gas fumes mix with the tension in the air, making it hard to catch my breath.

Lying motionless among the camo duffles, my senses are on high alert until I realize I'll be safe until we stop. I pray we

make a pit stop somewhere before we arrive at Fort Irwin, which is where I assume we're bound. Once we're on the army base, I can't imagine I'll be able to sneak off undetected.

I think about pawing through one of the duffle bags to don civilian clothing. But if I do that now and the convoy stops for some reason before a rest stop I won't be able to pass myself off as military personnel.

The rumble of the convoy gradually intensifies as the trucks lumber over corrugated dirt roads. I cling to the hope that my desperate gamble will pay off and I'll find a way to contact someone with the power to stop the military's plans to kill every male, female, and child who had the misfortune to land on the desert sand.

Pictures of Ashok fly through my mind. I can't stop them, but I can control them to some extent. Instead of visualizing him as I last saw him in that horrible cage, I picture him as he looked when I was sucking his cock, his eyes shuttered in bliss. Or the way he tried to tuck my springy curls behind my ears, only to have the unruly things jump out of his grip.

I always thought instalove was something for romance novels, but I'll never doubt the reality again. I couldn't love him more if I'd known the gentle giant for decades.

After we make several jolting turns, the feel of a smooth highway under our wheels and the occasional sound of civilian vehicles tells me we've reached civilization. I imagine the soldiers are as tired of juddering along rutted roads as I am. The truck slows. Are we making a pit stop? The moment the

wheels stop rolling, we're all going to jump off these trucks and I'll be busted.

My fingers working with lightning speed, I paw through duffles until I find one with women's clothing. I pull out the first shirt and pants I can find and wiggle into them. A baby blue T-shirt and jean shorts are more than I could have hoped for. When I find a pair of shower shoes that are about my size, I take it as a stroke of luck.

I put my cammies back on to protect my skin from road rash, lurch to the rear opening, throw the shoes out, and follow them before I have time to realize that no matter how slow we're going, this could kill me.

Air punches out of my lungs as I hit the ground and roll to the ditch. Ouch, ouch, ouch. As I get up, I realize nothing is broken but everything feels bruised. They make this look easier on TV, that's for sure. My stolen shower shoes seem like they're a half-mile away, but that's probably a good thing. By the time I crawl in the ditch to where they dropped onto the dirt road, I'm far from where the convoy trucks are stopping for gas.

Shit, my hip is killing me. I think it took the brunt of my fall. I strip off the cammies, dust myself off, fluff my hair, and wonder if I can make it to the gas station unnoticed. Maybe I can hide behind the gas station until the convoy moves on.

I stay crouched in the ditch as I consider my next steps. There's nothing I can see in either direction but this old gas

station perched by the side of the road. It's run down and was probably built in the 70s.

An 18-wheeler is coming down the highway with the brakes squealing. He's slowing down, signal on, obviously stopping for gas. This may be my only way out of this desolate place.

I hunch low, following the ditch, until I arrive at the gas station.

The trucker, his weathered face and worn denim jacket hinting at how many days he's been on the road without a shower, has jumped to the ground and his hand is on the pump as he refills his truck's tank. He could be a rapist or murderer, but since he could be my ticket out of here—my *only* ticket out of here. I approach him, making sure to keep the gas pump between me and the soldiers, despite my feeling of impending doom.

“Excuse me,” I stammer, my voice shaky with nerves. “Could you please help me? I'm in a bit of a bind.”

The trucker glances up, his eyes widening in surprise at the sight of a civilian among the dozens of soldiers descending on the small station convenience store. Despite my fears, there's kindness in his eyes as he drawls, “I might be able to help. What can I do you for?”

“I... I need to make a call. Can I borrow your phone?”

His scruffy beard twitches in thought before he says, “Sure.”

It took him a moment too long to answer me. My paranoid mind wonders what nefarious plan he has in mind, but right now, he's the only game in town.

With his phone in hand, I tuck myself between the cab and the trailer, trying to stay out of sight as I google the *New York Times*.

Luck is a fickle thing. I'm lucky to have made it onto the truck and gotten clothes that fit, and not killed myself jumping out of a moving vehicle. My luck is holding that I haven't been discovered—yet. But it shouldn't surprise me when I can't get cell service. We're out in the middle of nowhere. My shoulders sag in despair.

“Got service?” The trucker snuck up on me and is no more than a few feet away. I stutter out, “No,” as I try to decipher his words—is this a code for a blow job?

“Lucky for you I'm hauling a trailer full of expensive tech equipment. Engles Shipping equipped me with a satellite phone for this run.” He gives me a long once-over. “Looks like you need it.”

It's do-or-die time. Die being the operative word. He's either going to lure me into the truck to kill me, or I'm going to get through to the *New York Times*.

“Uh, great. Thanks.”

I hop in his cab, swallow hard, and he hands me a sat-phone. Though I've seen dozens of them carried by army personnel in the last few days, the trucker has to show me how to use it. Within a minute I'm bullying my way through the main operator to get to someone on the news desk.

Although the trucker doesn't have the best hygiene—I guess it's hard to find a place to shower on the road—his cab is remarkably clean. The trucker gets the hint that this is a personal call and takes a walk as I wait to be put through.

Worry consumes me as I explain the urgency of my situation to Bob Trask, the man who was kind enough to answer my call. I explain the arrival of the Others, the imminent threat, and the impending sarin gas attack. As the words tumble from my mouth, I hear how absurd, crazy, and downright unbelievable they are.

“Please, don't hang up, Mr Trask, I know this sounds crazy, but five thousand lives are hanging in the balance. I need you to believe me.” He doesn't say anything, but he hasn't hung up... yet, so I push on.

“Check my credentials. I'm Dr. Clair Thompson of Providence College. I'm the real deal. When you come to get my statement, you'll see I'm the same woman whose picture is on the College's website, listed as a Full Professor. Although I'm a little the worse for wear and will most probably be dead if you don't get on the first plane to...”

I pause and lean out the window to where the trucker is returning the hose to the pump. “Where are you headed?”

“Las Vegas.”

“Can you drive me there?”

He shrugs, “Sure.”

Speaking into the phone again, I say, “Can you meet me in Vegas at the...” I think of the first place I can think of “Bally’s? And can you book me a room? I have no cash.”

When we’re done confirming details, Mr. Trask says, “Be warned, Dr. Thompson, if that is even your name, if this is a hoax, you’ll regret it.”

“You’ll have every right to charge me with something if I’m lying. But since I’m not lying, what’s actually going to happen is you’re going to get a Pulitzer for the biggest scoop of the millennia.”

I rub my hip as I say, “I’m hitching a ride on an eighteen-wheeler. If... I don’t make it to Bally’s, if something happens to me...” I pause as I put my heels on the edge of the seat and tuck myself into a ball. “Come anyway. The rest stop I’m at is called Ray’s Motor Oil and Gas. Follow the road south into the desert for two hours until...” I don’t say the words “mass grave,” my mind simply can’t go there. Instead, I say, “You see hundreds of army tents.”

When I hand the phone back to the trucker who introduces himself as Jerry, he says, “Let’s go. We’re burnin’ daylight.” Although he notices when I slump in my seat as we pass the army trucks, he doesn’t say a word.



## Chapter Thirty-Five

**C**lair After the first awkward minutes in the truck with Jerry, he turned out to be a fun conversationalist. I could tell he heard more of my conversation with Bob Trask than he let on and was dying to ask questions, but he respected my boundaries, which was a lucky break.

Jerry was generous with his snacks on the drive and even more generous when he handed me some money when he dropped me near the hotel.

“Truckin’ money ain’t what it used to be. I wish I could give you more. Good luck, little lady.”

I thanked him profusely and used some of it to buy a crappy ten-dollar t-shirt with a picture of Hoover Dam on it at the Walgreens only a few steps from the hotel front door. Holed up in my room, I rationed the box of Little Debbie brownies Jerry gave me until Mr. Trask called my room at 7:30 am.

When he stepped into my room a little while later, he instantly reminded me of a starving coyote I once saw on a nature program. He was whip thin, with more gray hair than dirty blond. His hazel eyes were narrow, and he squinted down at me with a cold, assessing look. He looked hungry. I'm not sure if it was for the truth or the story which would send his career into the stratosphere.

I guess you don't get a job on the news desk of the New York Times without having great instincts. Trask didn't just fly to Vegas on the first flight out of New York, he managed to research not only me, but troop movements in the Mojave.

He learned enough to make him decide to pay a private investigator to use a drone to capture video footage. We sit at the little table in my room as he opens his laptop and checks. Sure enough, since last he checked, the video popped into his inbox.

We watch it together. Though I didn't expect to see him, I wasn't disappointed not to catch a glimpse of Ashok.

What to me is now old hat has Mr. Trask exclaiming "Holy shit," "Oh dear God," and "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," about fifty times in the span of the ten-minute video.

"Sorry if I doubted you, Dr. Thompson, but you are the real deal."

"The *Others* are the real deal, and they're possibly all going to be dead by sundown if we don't do something."

For nearing retirement age, Trask knows how to get a move on. He marshals untold resources back at the New York office, has a colleague grab and enhance screenshots and upscale them to remove the grainy texture, and begins writing his story a moment after he gives me permission to order room service on his dime.

By 9:30 am, he's written the article, gotten his supervisor's blessing, and pushed the button to make his blog go live to the public with copies sent directly to every major paper around the world. Short of sending up smoke signals, this story will be on every newsfeed and the topic of every watercooler conversation by lunchtime.

“We just changed history, Clair. This thing will be viral in less than ten minutes. At that point, the publisher of the paper will call the President, Speaker of the House, and the Majority Leader of the Senate. I think the use of sarin gas will no longer be on the table.”

I've been through hell and back since the moment I heard about this project, so it's funny that this is the first time I've cried since those soldiers walked into my lecture hall.

As soon as the tears start to flow, they change from silent tracks of liquid to full-on ugly crying. I'd been tied in knots over the fate of the Others, but it's Ashok I care about. I'm still worried about him. He wasn't just wandering in the enclosure with his comrades, he's been crammed into a fucking cage being shocked with a cattle prod—and worse.

“I’ve got no crystal ball, Doctor, but I’ve been around for a while. Here’s what I predict.”

Even though I’m still sniffing, I give him my full attention.

“The sarin gas may be off the table, but the fight isn’t over. If you think these Others...” His gaze darts to his computer screen where there’s a stunning picture of a minotaur, well over seven feet not counting his horns, standing naked in the sunshine. “If you think these Others are going to be welcomed into society, you might want to think again. Almost every immigrant group to come to the melting pot of America has faced discrimination: the Irish, Italians, Jews, Muslims. You’re an educated woman, I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”

He still can’t wrap his head around what his eyes are seeing as he focuses on his screen and scrolls in slow motion.

“If I were a betting man, I’d wager a significant amount of money that these people have a long, hard fight ahead of them in terms of human rights and humane treatment.”

His gaze drifts to me over his slim, rectangular cheater glasses. The compassionate look in his eyes tells me he knows more about why I’m crying than I let on.

“Do you have resources, Bob? People who might be able to help champion the Others’ rights?”

“Absolutely. You don’t get to where I am as a reporter without knowing just about everyone with clout in America.”

## Chapter Thirty-Six

**A**shok

It's odd to think that not more than two handfuls of days ago I was at the Gathering on An'Wa, arm wrestling, drinking ale, and wondering what female might like to warm my bed.

Today, I'm spitting up blood from too many punches to my stomach, and lying in a pool of my own urine and vomit because I'm in so much pain I can't move.

"Hey, Otherfucker! Thirsty?" Escher, the lead tormentor, sneers at me. He takes a long swig of his bottled water, then throws the half-full bottle into the overflowing trash bin.

I'm too tired to dredge up anger. They'll give me food or water when they feel like it. Perhaps never. It doesn't matter. I've heard them talking. We'll all be dead in a day, maybe less.

Clair didn't visit yesterday. Maybe she escaped. More likely, though, they didn't allow her through the door. My heart squeezes when I consider the possibility that they've already

killed her. I'm smart enough to know that if they're killing all the Others to obliterate any awareness of our existence, they'll have to kill her, too.

My thoughts drift to the Goddess, though I gave up thinking she'll show me any pity. There are children, babies, some pregnant females and many elderly in the encampment, though. Although she might not care to save me, you would think she would try to save the innocents.

My torturers haven't hit or shocked me in a while. I imagine the next round of torture is coming. They don't bother asking questions anymore. Surely they realize I know nothing. It's just entertainment to them now.

Private Rodriguez comes in.

"Holy shit! It smells like crap in here."

"Don't blame us. Blame the Otherfucker."

"I have two words for you. Geneva Convention."

He motions for me to turn around and uses his knife to unbind the slim white band that binds my wrists. As I rub where they've gouged into my skin, he grabs two bottles of water and hands them through the bars.

"Assholes! Have you gone off the reservation in a matter of days? These are fucking war crimes!" It's good to know not all these people are cruel. Perhaps he's too far down the chain of command to know that we'll all be dead in a matter of hours.

He can't let me out of my cage, but he uses a bucket of water to sluice the waste into the main room where he mops it up, all

the while cussing out the other soldiers.

He hands me some rectangles that smell like fruit and what they use to clean the latrine, then cautions me to eat slowly. “If you eat too fast, it might come right back up.”

I can smell his anger. For the first time in days, a human’s anger isn’t directed at me.

Another soldier enters. I may not know what his rank is, but by the way they defer to him, it’s higher than everyone else in the room.

“Change of orders,” he informs everyone the moment he steps into the room. His head rocks back when he says, “It smells like shit in here.” Then he continues. “An enforcement arm of the United Nations will be here in a few hours to investigate alleged violations of the Geneva Convention. Has this male aggressed on anyone, human or Other?”

“No, Sir.”

“Then I want him cleaned up, given clothing, and escorted back to the main encampment. I want this room cleaned with soap, then bleach until it smells like air instead of... what it smells like now.”

“You. Have you been treated well?”

Is he talking to me? He sees me lying here with bruises all over my body. He obviously wants me to say they’ve treated me like a king. In order to get out of this cell, I’ll happily lie.

“Yes, Sir. I’ve had an enjoyable stay.”

Rodriguez grunts disapprovingly as he shakes his head.

Soon I'm clean, medicated, fed, dressed, and am back in the Other enclosure. Brokka sees me and the moment the gate closes behind me. Before I have time to ask why there are bandages on both sides of his shoulder, he tells me he thinks Clair escaped.

“Do you know what the words United Nations or Geneva Convention mean?” I ask.

“No, but at least you're alive, brother.”



## Chapter Thirty-Seven

**C**lair  
I've been clinging to that old saying, "It's better to ask forgiveness than permission." I've simply acted as though I belong back in the Mojave. Mr. Trask was happy to bring me with him, since I'm the only one who can translate. It gives him a ticket to the biggest scoop of the century.

My heart pounds as we wait in Bob's rental car while the sentry calls a supervisor to double-check that we can gain entry into the compound. Between Bob's *New York Times* Press pass and demanding calls from a couple of senators who Bob says owe him favors, they finally wave us through.

We're stopped at a second checkpoint when a small army of soldiers stops us. Trask's name works like a magic spell and we're waved through.

When we arrive at the interior gate of the Others' encampment, I frantically scan my surroundings until finally catching sight of him—Ashok. He's bruised and battered, but

when our eyes meet, there is no mistaking his relief—and love.

I rush toward him, practically stepping on a little naga who is enjoying basking in the sun despite the drama going on around her. Nothing else matters in this moment except being by Ashok's side and assuring myself he's okay.

Before I get close enough to jump into his arms, he reaches out, scoops me up, and hugs me to him so tightly I can barely contain a little squawk of discomfort. It doesn't matter because we're together again. The agony of separation evaporates.

I'm so full of emotion, my hand trembles as I touch his face so gently it's as though I'm afraid he might shatter beneath my fingertips.

"My love," I whisper hoarsely.

He leans into my touch, closing his eyes for a brief moment before opening them again to gaze deeply into mine. In those gleaming pools of emotion, I see everything—the pain endured during our time apart, matched only by the strength and determination radiating from within him.

"I worried they'd hurt you," he confesses brokenly. His voice is hoarse from screaming and filled with raw vulnerability. I want to kiss him, ease him, magically erase his pain.

"I imagine there are a whole lot of people who might want to hurt me when they find out I was instrumental in keeping all the Others alive," I reply softly, a trace of bitterness seeping into my words.

We stay locked in each other's embrace for long moments as the encampment swirls with activity. More soldiers are pouring into the Others' area, possibly in anticipation of the onslaught of reporters who are going to descend like locusts.

Eventually breaking free from our lingering hug, Ashok takes hold of my hand and brings it to his lips, placing a tender kiss on each knuckle. I forgot how beautiful he is, how pretty his green skin shimmers in the sunlight, how appealing his ivory tusks are, especially when they're further exposed by his happy smile.

"I love you," he murmurs against my skin as his warm breath raises goosebumps along my arm. "When you didn't visit, I thought I'd lost you forever."

"Sorry. It won't be easy to get rid of me." I attempt to lighten the mood. "We've fought too hard to let anything tear us apart now."

Brokka approaches us. While most of the Others look optimistic as word filters to them that the whole world will be watching and ensuring they don't meet an untimely end, Brokka looks stern and serious.

"Tell me, Clair. Does this mean we're safe?"

I'd pegged him as a smart male from the start. He's too smart to lie to. "At this point, I can assure you the Others are not going to accidentally die in a mass accident. From here out, though, I have a feeling we're going to have to fight every step of the way. We need to discuss next steps."

A group gathers around as ideas flow freely—a chorus of voices filled with determination yet tinged with sadness over what they've left behind in An'Wa.

Bob Trask is part of the discussion. I promised him Ashok and I would interpret exclusively for the *Times* in exchange for his help with brainstorming and connecting us with necessary resources. I was right about him being hungry. His eyes seem to study everything. His hand blurs as he jots down notes in shorthand.

“You're going to want full citizenship,” Trask says. “And a place where all Others can live together without fear of persecution until the scientists figure out a way to get you home.”

Nods ripple through the crowd, and one by one, the Others add their desires. There are representatives of every Other species, and Ashok interprets when I can't. They all agree they want a safe place to live—together—and a way to start their lives anew if the scientists can't figure out a way to transport them back to An'Wa.

“Is there a place here where we can hunt? Where there is shade? Where there are cool days? Where our nostrils and eyes aren't filled with sand?” This is a naga elder, weary after only these few days of relentless desert heat.

We talk and deliberate well past midnight, then Ashok and I adjourn to his tent. This is where he performed his first *linoch* on me what seems like weeks ago. I would have thought he

would make love to me, to cement our bond after the time apart.

Perhaps it's because we're both dead tired, or the aftereffects of his torture, or maybe it's that the sex doesn't seem as urgent right now as to just lie in each other's arms. For whatever reason, we go to sleep snuggled together whispering I-love-you until we doze off.

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

**S**ix Months Later...  
Clair

“I almost forgot what it’s like to have adequate air conditioning,” I say to no one in particular amidst the hubbub of packing my things.

I’ve only been back to my apartment a few times in the six months since the world changed. The day the Others existence went public, the *New York Times* headline blared, “This is the Day You Will Tell Your Grandchildren About.” The byline was by Robert Trask, of course.

The NYT broke it to the world that we are not alone in the universe. I can’t say I was surprised by the response. It seemed everyone immediately jumped into one of two camps: those who welcomed the Others, and those who wanted them gone.

There were many reasons spouted by the exclusionary group, the Purists. From the lack of mention of Others in the bible, to

the fact that there aren't enough resources on Earth for humans, to the fact that bloodlines should remain pure.

Those voting for inclusion all seemed to have one reason: the Others are here and we need to help them assimilate.

I also wasn't surprised to find that those for and against in our government were split almost fifty/fifty. Luckily, though many voters may not have wanted the Others here, actually killing them was too radical for all but the most radical hardliners.

For the past six months, I have worked tirelessly to get the Others citizenship, stipends, and education to help them fully assimilate into society. Sadly, I wasn't able to accomplish much of that.

Other countries had all sorts of suggestions about what to do, but very little funds were forthcoming and no one stepped forward to invite them to stay in their territory.

So the Others are here in the United States. Funding was meager, so one of the worst ghettos in the Los Angeles area was emptied. Somehow, money was located to help the human inhabitants move into better housing.

With that blighted area now vacated, a tall barbed-wire fence was erected around the ten square city blocks, and the Others were bussed in. Add some donated furniture and home goods, a sprinkling of government handouts, and some hand-me-down books for the schools, and voila, the Others' Integration Zone was born.

No Others are allowed to live anywhere else, thus, I'm packing my apartment with the help of some grad students as I get ready to move to the Zone.

Ashok and I have been assigned a two-bedroom apartment so I can have an in-home office. Miss Crenshaw, who is in charge of housing, was only too happy to inform me how lucky I am to be allowed to stay within the fenced Zone and have a two-, rather than one-bedroom apartment.

The cramped unit should have been bulldozed a couple of decades ago, but I refuse to feel sorry for myself. Which is why I'm not proud of feeling like crying right now.

"Wow, Dr. Thompson. You are so lucky." Barry was one of my best students. Is he joking? Trying to keep the mood light?

"Really?" I try to feel him out to see what his game is.

"Really! The Others' arrival is the biggest thing to happen to planet Earth in all of recorded history. You're an anthropologist! You get to live with them! You already speak all of their languages. Every single textbook about them for the next decade will reference information obtained from you. You're at the epicenter of the most important thing in history, Dr. Thompson. Yeah, you're lucky."

"You're right, Barry. What was I thinking? There's nothing in my new apartment that a new coat of paint and my furniture can't improve. Ashok and I are going to make a wonderful home together."



“And promise me, Dr. Thompson.” This is Melissa. She’s preparing to defend her dissertation next month. “The moment they allow another human to live there, tell me you’ll beg, borrow, or steal to get me inside those gates. I want two things.”

She smirks, and I think I know what’s coming. “I want to study them, make them my career for the rest of my life.”

“And...?”

“And if I can find an orc half as hunky as yours, I’ll be a happy woman.” She gives a salacious wink.

“I don’t know, Melissa. You might want to set your cap for one of those minotaurs. They don’t care much for modesty, and from what I’ve seen, the words well-endowed don’t begin to cover it.”

After we all have a good laugh, I return to the sorting and packing process, all while focusing on my blessings.

My mind wanders to the fable of the light-skinned female with rounded ears who, along with an orc, saves their people. I’ve never quite been able to wrap my head around how prescient that was.

Just as we’ll probably never find An’Wa, and the Others will never return there, I guess I’ll never truly understand that myth. One thing I know deep in my bones, though, is that Ashok and I were destined to be together—and tonight we are going to be soulbound.

The Zone is a pit, but there are a lot of wonderful aspects to my life. My school has given me a two-year sabbatical to focus on research. When I come back to teaching, they tell me this new thing called distance learning will be in place.

They're thrilled to have me continue working for them and gave me a sizable raise. Anyone wanting to study the Others will fight for the chance to be in my classes. It will be a huge income stream for the college.

Since I'll be downsizing, I give all my helpers a memento of my collection of books and knickknacks, then pack everything else for my trip to my new life in the Integration Zone. I'll keep it to myself that I call it the Segregation Zone in my head.

“We'll stay in touch. As soon as the time is right, I'll try to get you grants to study the Others. There are plenty of species to go around.”

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

**C**lair

The moment I eased into the yellow taxi at the airport, the driver talked non-stop about the Others. Although he's clearly an immigrant himself, he was not thrilled to have the Others here. I didn't argue; I understand. When there's scarcity, those scrabbling for crumbs at the bottom of the barrel don't want to have to share.

The Others weren't allowed out of the desert compound for the last six months. The authorities said it would "cause panic."

I've worked tirelessly lobbying for better conditions and have made several trips to the Zone as human officials readied it for Other inhabitants. When I returned to the encampment, I tried to put a bright spin on things. It's not hard to do. Even these dilapidated buildings are better than the constant heat and blowing sands of the Mojave.

This time when I pull up to the front gate, it's different, though. Before, I was on recon missions. Today, this is my

home. I doubt the Others will be welcomed into society for a couple of years, so I'll be living inside the Zone for a while.

An eight-foot-tall chain-link fence surrounds the ten-square-city-block area. Last time I was here, it didn't have what is now its crowning glory—razor wire on top. My stomach plunges when I realize this is exactly what I've seen in prison movies.

The taxi stops at the front gate and the driver helps me with my bag. I'm not sure if he's being gentlemanly, or just can't wait to get me out of his car. There are six armed guards on either side of the sliding electric gate.

Half of me resents their presence, while the other half worries that there should be more of them. The Purists are organizing outside the gates now that most of the Others have been bussed here from the desert.

I worry for everyone's safety. The words "out of the frying pan and into the fire" couldn't be truer.

Word travels among the Others. Someone must have told Ashok I've arrived because he's hurrying to me, a huge smile on his handsome face. He's wearing the leather kilt and boots he wore when he came through the Rift.

It does my heart good to see him in something other than the government-issue clothes the Others were forced to wear in the desert. This may be a shithole, but at least most of the relentless government rules have been lifted.

I set my bag down in the middle of the empty street and he lifts me up, twirling me in circles until I'm dizzy and laughing. As long as we're together, I guess it really doesn't matter where we live.

Others aren't allowed out of the Zone, and have zero money, so there isn't a car inside the fence. We stroll down the middle of the street, passing tenements and weed-filled lots on the way to our apartment.

"Clair, I missed you. I've been busy helping everyone navigate the system and find their apartments. A few human volunteers came to help each family set up their furniture, and learn how to use the cook-machines."

"We'll work it out. Pretty soon this will feel like—" I stop myself. For most of these people, Earth will never feel like home. "It will get better. You'll see."

We walk to our two-story apartment house.

"You still want to do this? It can wait." He looks so sweet, so unsure.

"We had six months living in that shitty tent in the desert, Ashok. How many times did we talk about what type of relationship we wanted to have when we moved into our own place?" My gaze drifts to his kilt, already tented in expectation of what's to come.

"But is it what you want now? We could start another day."

I lean close. "*Smell* me, Ashok. I've been dreaming about the day we'd have brick walls instead of fabric. Dreaming of how

we decided we wanted to live our lives behind closed doors. Dreaming of what's coming in about five minutes.”

I hand him my suitcase and say, “See you in two minutes. Just like we talked about.”

He gives me one more are-you-certain look, then jogs to our place.

I've been waiting for this since the first time he told me his fantasy, because the moment he described it, it became my fantasy, too.

# Chapter Forty

**C**lair

I stand outside our battered wooden door, breathing deeply to settle my nerves. We discussed this and decided this is how we wanted to start our newly-mated lives. It's not exactly the orc way, and certainly isn't the human way. It's going to be *our* way.

When he told me I was his soulbound and what that meant to him, there wasn't a shred of doubt in my mind that I wanted that with him. Tonight we are going to find out if an orc and a human can be connected with a soulbond: heart, soul and soon, again, in body. I can hardly wait.

Outside our walls, I'm Dr. Clair Thompson, the world's foremost expert on Others' culture and language. I'm a full professor and in-demand to speak at international conferences. I was always well-respected, but after what the *UK Sun* called the Mythical Menagerie Arrival, my schedule is booked solid for years to come.

Despite my fame in the real world, inside our walls, I'm Ashok's woman. Although I aspired all my life for the accolades and scholarly respect, what I realize I want more than that is what's behind this door. Right here.

I open the door and step onto the rug just inside the doorway. Next to it, just as we'd discussed, is the small table from my living room that I knew would fit perfectly right here.

Without leaving the three-by-five-foot rug, I slowly remove my clothes, folding them neatly and placing them on the nearby table. When I'm naked, I stand, waiting for instructions from my orc mate.

He must have been waiting in the bedroom, giving me space, making sure this is really how I wanted to start our new life together.

A ten-person tent in the desert encampment was no place to let our sexual fantasies loose. Our sex was quick and furtive. There was no privacy. This is what we've both been waiting for.

“Open your legs.”

His deep, bass voice whips through me like a lightning storm. I haven't heard this tone of voice since we were in my private tent six months ago. Without hesitation, I open my stance.

He doesn't move, doesn't speak, just eats me up with that intense amber gaze of his. The longer he looks, the more turned on I get. The more turned on I get, the more his nostrils flare and his eyes glitter with desire.



“You’re sure? This is the last question I’ll ask for a long time.”

We may not have been able to have uninhibited sex in the encampment, but we sure talked about it enough. We’ve shared a thousand detailed, whispered fantasies over the last months.

“I’m sure.”

“Drop to your knees and come to me.”

I’m glad he wants me on my knees, because just that forceful command makes my legs too rubbery to stand. This is what I’ve dreamed about for months. Letting go of all my cares and doing what my big orc commands.

“You did that so well.”

I don’t know what I like better, the commands or the praise.

I walk on my knees to him, liking the small bite of pain when I leave the little rug and hit the wood floor.

“It’s only because you’re such a good female that I’m going to let you suck my prick.” His voice is deadly serious.

As his words flow over me, a shiver of anticipation ripples down my spine. I can feel the heat pooling between my thighs, evidence of my desire for him. I want nothing more than to taste him, to feel his body tremble beneath my touch.

My heart pounds as I crawl toward him, my knees grazing the rough wooden floor. The sensation sends a thrill through me, igniting a fire deep within. I can’t help but feel a delicious naughtiness that makes my pulse quicken.

Reaching his feet, I see the way his eyes smolder with need. His fists ball as he fights for control. He wants to possess me completely, to revel in the power he holds over my body. And I'm more than willing to give myself to him, to surrender to his dominance.

I look up at him. He's over a head taller than me when we're both standing. In this position, he towers over me. I love that it accentuates our power differential even more.

Desperate to touch him, I simply keep my gaze on him as I wait for him to give me permission. First, he pets my head, the simple touch of appreciation sends shivers through me.

Without warning, he lifts me to standing, places my feet apart and cups my sex in his huge palm. "This is mine."

His eyes, no longer amber but carnelian, are piercing mine, challenging me to deny it.

"I'm yours."

He doesn't move. He's waiting for more.

*"Amnoch baleen mayore, my love. Krenash ja f'ren."* I belong to you, my love. Forever and always. This is the consent, the verbal commitment he needs. What I've been holding back until this moment so we can create the soulbond here, in our new home.

His handsome face beams in happiness, his long tusks gleaming in the fading light streaming in from our windows.

"You may begin."

I'll remember this moment forever. This is what I've been waiting for these last six months. I release in a shaky sigh as I reach under his leather kilt, place my hands on his thighs, and feel the hard muscles beneath my touch. Carefully, I trace small circles along his skin with my thumbs, teasing him, building the anticipation between us. His breath hitches as his grip tightens in my curls. I may be on my knees, but I have a certain amount of power.

His fingers tangle more tightly in my hair with a possessive grip. The slight pain sends a surge of arousal straight through me, intensifying the already magnetic pull between us.

He's choosing to keep his kilt on. There's something furtive and delicious about dipping my head beneath the leather to catch his masculine musk.

First, I press little kisses to his muscular thighs, then I nip and lick my way north, tracing a slow path upward, relishing the taste of his salty skin. I feel him stiffen beneath me, and a surge of satisfaction courses through my veins.

My tongue trails from his inner thigh all the way up to his heavy balls. It's so dark under here, his emerald green sac appears almost black. His shaft twitches in anticipation as I cup and rub his testicles, rolling them in my palm.

Bringing my lips to one of them, I suck as much as I can manage into my mouth as a deep groan rumbles from him, followed by a string of orcish expletives that makes me smile.

The taste of his skin on my tongue is mesmerizing, salty and faintly musky. His manhood rests heavily against my cheek as

he rocks his hips slightly with every suckle and lick. My hands cup both balls now, pressing them firmly against my lips and tongue.

He unbuckles his kilt, lets it slap to the floor, then weaves his fingers through my hair. His grip tightens as I continue my exploration, tasting every inch of him. A pleased oath leaves his mouth as his hips thrust.

He's not the only one losing control. I can feel myself getting hotter and wetter with every passing second.

Finally, I bring my lips to his cock. After giving the plump head an affectionate kiss, I swirl my tongue, exploring every ridge and vein in an almost reverent manner, savoring the taste of him. He's moved his almost-bruising grip to my shoulders as he murmurs in orcish and rocks against me with primal need.

My hands slide up to his waist and grip tightly as I take in as much of him as I can handle, which is barely more than his huge head. I grip both hands around his shaft to provide better coverage, desperate to give him release, to feel his hot cum surge down my throat.

His guttural groans are like music to my ears, sending shivers of need through my body. I can feel the fire deep within me, licking at my insides, spreading a warmth that threatens to consume us both.

I continue, lost in the rhythm we've created, the dance of power and submission that binds us together. With every flick of my tongue, every caress of my lips, his control crumbles. I

revel in the power I hold over him, in the way I can push him to the brink of madness with my touch alone.

As the tension builds within him, I look up, locking eyes with him. His gaze, filled with raw need, fuels the fire inside me. I want to bring him pleasure, to be the one to push him over the edge.

I intensify the pressure of my suction as I increase the speed of my movements, sending him into a frenzy as he thrusts harder and faster into me.

He grabs onto my hair again, tugging painfully. With one final, desperate moan, he lets go, his body convulsing as he growls his pleasure. My mouth floods with his salty release before I swallow it, drinking him in, savoring the taste of his satisfaction.

“Clair! So good.” His knees have sagged, but despite the intensity of his orgasm, he’s still standing. “Lick me clean like a good girl.”

He doesn’t need to tell me twice. Still on my knees, I lean in and lick the length of his shaft, tasting every last drop before giving it one final, gentle kiss. His hands stroke softly through my hair as I do so, a show of appreciation for the pleasure I gave him.

I draw back, looking up into his eyes as he looks down at me with admiration and gratitude written all over his face. Our connection is strong. He reaches out a hand to help me up off the floor, then draws me into an embrace, kissing my forehead and murmuring in his language.

# Chapter Forty-One

**A**shok I loved that, loved the play, ordering her around in the way of male orcs since the Goddess created male and female. I dreamed of it in our tent when it was hot as blazing suns and when it was cold enough to freeze water into ice.

We'll play this game again whenever I want. My mate likes it, too.

“Enough of play, Clair. As much as I love you at my feet, I want you as my equal right now. I'm going to have you in our bed.”

Lifting her in my arms, her legs circle my waist as though we were made to fit together like this. I guess we were. After placing her on the bedspread, I run my hands up and down her body. Although I just declared that we're equals, in my mind I need to claim every inch of her skin as mine. I not only take ownership of it, I vow to protect it to the best of my ability.

As I join her on the bed, she shivers in delight as her hands caress my face, tracing circles around the ridges of the *keshmah* on my forehead, then sliding over my facial tattoos.

I gently move her hands, making it easier to reach her lips. I kiss her hungrily, invading her mouth with my tongue, tracing my tusks along her cheeks.

We've been separated for days. I need to reclaim her, filling her with my saliva and seed. I nibble at her earlobe and push away the wild curls cascading around us like an aphrodisiac fog; they seem alive with a will of their own.

Cupping her cheeks while my lips move down her slender neck, my tongue randomly feathers her skin, tantalizing her. She whimpers and writhes in delight as I make my way down the curves of her body, pausing to take in the scent and texture of every part of her.

My hand snakes to the small of her back, drawing her close enough for me to bend at the waist and slip my tongue between her legs. She gasps with pleasure as I find her nub of pure need. Swirling, licking, tasting her deeply, my eyes close in deepest concentration as I memorize everything about this moment. Clair clings to me, her blunt nails digging into my shoulders. She's seemingly oblivious to reality apart from this moment, which is ours alone.

Taking my time, I wait until she's trembling on the brink before plunging into her depths again and again with the thick black tongue she tells me she loves. Her muscles ripple around

it as I tease and tempt until she shatters into liquid joy beneath me and then surrenders completely into deep satisfaction.

I know she's no longer in her submissive space when she urges "more" in that breathy whisper she only uses when she's entranced. Granting her wish, I nip and lick the tender spots that always pull a moan from her lips.

Once she's had her first taste of bliss, it's easy to bring her over the edge again. Her moans are almost feral howls as her legs shake, tightening against my ears, then fall open onto the bed. This is her unspoken request for more.

After bringing her to the heights of ecstasy twice more, I flip her onto her stomach, then lift her waist so she's on all fours.

She looks over her shoulder at me with mischief in her eyes and a sultry smile on her lips. Covering her from behind, I gently nip the back of her neck before placing myself at her entrance.

I love that this is our first act in our new house. Whatever we share here, this is the foundation: our connection, our love. The act that will bind our souls together forever.

Between my saliva and her honey, she's drenched, dripping wet for me, so I slide into her in one hard drive, all the way to the hilt.

I feel her walls clench around me, her tightness embracing my length with a delicious heat. Clair gasps, her body arching against mine, as we both surrender to our sexual connection.



The sensation of being inside her, of becoming one, is overwhelming, igniting a wildfire of desire within me.

My hands grip her hips firmly, using them as leverage as I move, setting a rhythm that matches the rapid beat of our hearts. Each thrust is met with a moan, a mingling of pleasure and desperation that fills the room. The air is thick with the scent of our passion, a heady combination of sweat and arousal that only fuels our lust.

I can taste the saltiness of her skin as my lips glide along her back, leaving a trail of fervent kisses in their wake. I'm intoxicated by it all. The sounds she makes, the way she grips the sheets, it all intensifies my desire for her.

With each thrust, I slide deeper into passion. The slickness of her inner walls caresses me, urging me deeper.

Clair's body trembles under my touch, her every gasp and whimper driving me further toward the precipice of bliss. I can feel her surrender to the pleasure I give her. It fuels my own release. She's bucking back against me, urging me to keep moving, to keep pushing us both toward the edge.

And then, with a final urgent thrust, we topple over into euphoria. The world around us fades as the red haze of our bond envelops us, leaving only the raw intensity of our love. Our bodies surge together, convulsing in waves of pleasure as we ride out the tempest of our passion.

As our bodies reach mutual completion, we become one: body, heart, and soul. We are soulbound. Just as my father described. I never thought I would experience it. I had to travel into a

black hole, through the Rift, and to another world to find Clair, the perfect female for me.

As we collapse, breathless, onto the bed, I hold her close, cherishing the feel of her sweat-slicked body against mine, my cock, half-hard, still lodged inside her, maintaining contact. Our bodies are entwined, our connection unbreakable. In this moment, our new home becomes a sacred sanctuary, a testament to the love we share, to the soulbond that can't be broken.

She gazes at me with love and awe shining in her eyes. "I feel it, my love. I can't see the red but I can feel the bond. We're soulbound."

"Aye, my beloved. *Krenash ja f'ren*. Forever and always."

# Epilogue

**C**lair  
“Hey, my love, are you ready?” Ashok looks sexy in the new leather kilt he made. When he lets loose and really smiles—which he does more often lately—those ivory tusks are devastatingly handsome.

I can’t help but beam back at him. “I’m absolutely ready for the grand opening of the Adult Learning Center. It’s my new pride and joy.”

He dips his head to my ear, his hot breath gusting across my cheek giving me the shivers as he husks, “I thought *I* was your pride and joy.”

“Save it for later, big guy.” I playfully bump my shoulder against his sturdy frame. “Much attention will be lavished on my *other* pride and joy later.”

Our gazes collide, heat sparking.

“Not now. We’ve got to hit the bricks.”

“Why are we hitting inanimate objects?” he asks with a wink.

We’re both linguists, although in completely different ways. Ashok gets a kick out of our idioms, so I sprinkle them liberally in our conversations.

“Maybe bricks should be hit more often. I can’t be the only naughty one who gets punished.” Before I can bump him again with my shoulder, he gives me a gentle swat on the ass. Hmm. Maybe that will be fun to explore when we return home after the grand opening.

I’ve learned a lot these last few months since I moved into the Zone. The Others are more resilient than I could have imagined. They’ve banded together, regardless of species, to adapt to our world.

They’ve helped each other learn how to live in brick-and-mortar homes instead of their nomadic lifestyles, how to use electric appliances, and a myriad of other things. Their determination knows no bounds.

Our schools are already open. Elementary, middle, and high schools are staffed and filled with castoff human teachers from other districts. Our children are enrolled and learning English as a second language, along with other subjects.

It’s a good thing the Others are trying to be self-sufficient, because other than education, government assistance has been hit and miss. From providing food or monetary assistance to fixing overgrown lots and crumbling infrastructure, help has been slow to arrive.

The government may not be swift in follow-through, but they wasted no time in legislation. When Others work outside the Zone—which isn't allowed yet—they can be paid thirty percent of minimum wage. Steam still comes out of my ears when I think that some people don't want the Others here at all, but won't bat an eye at paying them slave wages.

The powers that be also mandated that one year from now speaking any language other than English in public will be prohibited. Don't even get me started on how angry this makes me.

The thing is, most Others actually want to assimilate. I'm so proud of them. They realize they're here and will probably never go back to An'Wa. Our scientists haven't been able to figure out where An'Wa is, much less how to get there.

So the Others are trying to make the best of it. They've created community gardens, organized cleaning crews, and are planning recreation programs. I'm so impressed with their resilience.

As we make our way to the abandoned factory we've converted to our Adult Education Center, we join dozens of Others on their way to the party. I'm flush with cash from paid interviews, and put my own money into decorations and lots of food. The interior is well-lit, newly painted, and the elders of many species told me it looks welcoming.

On our way, I see Brokka. I feel a bond with him because without his efforts, I don't think I would have made it into the

back of that truck undetected. He not only saved my ass, he quite possibly saved every Other on the planet.

The gunshots I heard when I was making my great escape? He took a bullet through the shoulder. Of course, the huge orc just shrugged when he told me about it, as though it was no big deal.

He doesn't show the depths of his pain often, but that male might never be the same. Now that I know what true love is, I can't imagine being ripped from Ashok as Brokka was from his mate—his soulbound.

With my mate's hand firmly in mine, I enter the Ed Center, get everyone's attention, and welcome them in every single Other language—thanks to Ashok. After a brief speech, I offer everyone refreshments, and then begin signing people up for classes.

No one mentions the government mandate to learn English. Instead, there is an atmosphere of excitement and hope.

We've all made sacrifices. I imagine there's not one of us who wouldn't rather be living in a different place, but here we are. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, we can all take what we've been given and make the best of it.

After talking to hundreds of people, I yank Ashok's hand. He dips his ear to my mouth so I can whisper, "Let's go home so I can lavish some loving attention to a certain part of your anatomy that is your pride and my joy."

“You’ll get no quarrel from me, love, as long as you follow my directions to the letter.”

“How can I argue with that? It’s my favorite thing to do.”

## Dear Reader

I hope you enjoyed this origin story to the OrcFire series. Can't get enough of Ashok and Clair? I wrote an amazing, heartwarming, surprising BONUS EPILOGUE. Click here and it will be delivered to your inbox posthaste.

All the next books in the OrcFire series are set in the present day and will feature one sexy orc firefighter who finds his true love here on Earth in the Integration Zone.

Brokka, who you just met, is the hero in Book Two, Embers Ignite. The poor guy had to wait a quarter of a century, but trust me, he gets the happy ever after he so richly deserves. Keep reading for a sneak peek of Brokka's book.

Do you want some freebies? I've got you covered.

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Alana Khan

# Sneak Peek: Embers Ignite

## **C**hapter One Marissa

I'm two hours into my twelve-hour shift in the ICU and I've yet to check on the patient in 412. The computer screen blurs as I pretend to re-read his chart, but I'm just stalling.

Margaret told me in report that he's an orc. I tried not to look shocked, but I've never actually been in the same room with an Other.

The Others arrived twenty-five years ago. About five thousand of them appeared in the Mojave Desert one day. I was too young to remember much of it, but from what I've read, the country went on red alert, thinking it was an alien invasion.

What we were invaded by was a ragtag bunch of people we'd only heard about in fairy tales: nagas, minotaurs, sasquatch, orcs, and other creatures that a fevered mind could dream up. They were as surprised and unprepared to be here as we were to receive them.

World leaders decided that since they dropped into America, they were our problem. Our politicians picked the shittiest ghetto on the outskirts of Los Angeles, found the current inhabitants new places to live, put a barbed wire fence around the compound, and euphemistically dubbed it The Integration Zone.

Twenty-five years later, there's been very little integration—until recently. The Others were kept in their area, given food stamps and Goodwill furnishings, and allowed to leave within strict curfew hours if they had a job to do.

Shortly after they arrived, a law was passed to allow Others to work for thirty-five percent of minimum wage. Where the lawmakers came up with that number is beyond me. The Others were relegated to janitorial, dangerous, or menial jobs that had very little public interface.

That was the way things carried on until two years ago when Mayor Tillman returned to her job with a new lease on life after a near-fatal heart attack. Since then, she's been pushing for Affirmative Action for the Others.

They've created fire and police forces inside their fence, staffed by their own kind. Little by little, they're trickling into society as the curfew has been lifted and they're allowed into the mainstream.

There's a small hospital, staffed by humans, that has been inside the Zone since its inception, which makes it surprising that there's an orc in 412.

“He’s the fire chief,” Margaret had said with a shoulder shrug. “I think they’re using him as some kind of poster child to normalize more integration. I fucking hate it. They shouldn’t be here at all if you ask me.”

The ICU is busy at shift change and I seldom share more than a perfunctory conversation with her when one of us gives report to the other, so I’m surprised she felt comfortable enough to let me know how she felt. Most people who hate the Others—and there are many—are more subtle about it.

“Really?” I had asked. I’ll admit, it was a stupid response.

“When I told you he was an orc, you looked like you’d just sucked a lemon. I assumed you might be a...”

She let the last word dangle, but it was obvious the word she avoided was “Purist.” There has always been a group of people who actively hate the Others, but ever since Mayor Tillman started her new initiatives, they’ve become more vocal. And militant. They created the PPP, the People’s Purity Party.

I fluffed off the conversation, happy to see her go when report was over. As I dawdle, avoiding going into room 412, I have to ask myself if I’m like her.

Am I a purist? A hater? No. I don’t hate anyone. I’m just uncomfortable. I guess there’s no time like the present to meet my first Other.

Squaring my shoulders, I take a sip of my almost-cold coffee and proceed to his room to check his bandages. He was burned

on the job. The Others had been called in to help with a four-alarm fire that was outside the Zone.

Tend to him the way you'd tend to anyone else. Perhaps better. He's a hero.

At the doorway, I flick the switch that turns on the dim light above his bed. I'll just ease into this, right?

Dear God. Are they all this big? He dwarfs the bed. He's so tall, his feet stick off the end of the bed. His shoulders are wide, and his green skin is emerald in the low light. There's a tattoo on his forehead, and do I see some swirling designs peeking out of the top of his gown?

Bandages cover his eyes, drawing even more attention to those large, upthrust tusks that glimmer as though they're in a spotlight. His ears are pointed, just like in the storybooks I used to read, and large earrings catch the light as they dangle from each earlobe.

Thick braids cover his head. They still carry flecks of soot from his last fire. The faint smell of burned hair and skin becomes more pungent as I inch closer.

He's heavily medicated. When I saw how high his Morphine drip was set, my jaw dropped. I guess a male of his size needed an unheard-of amount of painkillers.

His wide chest rises and falls beneath the thin blanket that barely conceals his strength. Instead of feeling more comfortable now that I've observed him from my safe spot

near the door, I'm becoming more terrified. With his obvious strength, he could reach out and choke me with one hand.

"Which he will not do," I whisper to myself.

"Z'Rasha?"

His gruff voice is weak as he lifts his head. Did he hear me? Did I wake him? Tending to him is going to be harder if he's awake.

"Z'Rasha."

There's something about the passion he imbues into those two syllables that captures my attention.

"Is it you?" He strains to lift his head so his ear is a few inches closer to me, as though he can discern that I'm here even though his eyes are bandaged. His body relaxes back into the pillows as he gives a contented sigh. "It feels like years since I've seen you, Love."

Ohh. Z'Rasha is his love. Although I consider backing out of the room until he goes back to sleep, I remain rooted to the floor.

"I've missed you, Love. I dream of you during the night and think of you during the day. Have you missed me?"

Perhaps he's in a hallucinogenic fog and hears her answer because a small smile curls his lips around those terrifying tusks.

"I was thinking about that night at the Amarantine Sea. Remember?" His mouth is dry, turning his low, husky voice

into a growl. “Your breasts were so beautiful in the light of our two moons. It was our first time.”

I should leave. Give this male some privacy, but I can't force my feet to move. There's something about the depth of this male's feelings that draws me in, fascinates me.

“Oh, Love. You fought it. Fought your attraction like a good orc female should. You scratched me good. I can still feel how hard you kneed me in the balls.”

Instead of anger on his face, he's grinning like a lovestruck fool.

“I tamed you, though. Didn't I, Love? Gods, when we were together I woke up every morning thinking of what I could do to make my mate happy and went to sleep every night, wondering if I'd done enough.”

I'm thirty years old and have had my share of boyfriends. At no time in any of those relationships—not for even a day—did any of them care half as much for me as this male does for his Z'Rasha. What would it be like to be loved like that?

“Al drigagh malach, Z'Rasha. Ah mae, tun la, abrecht.”

He continues speaking orcish words that are mesmerizing, magical. They're weaving a spell over me. Perhaps no one will ever speak to me with this much love, but if I act quickly I can listen again and again. I slip my phone from my pocket and record the words, now spoken in a harsh whisper, that spill from his lips.

Recording him seems worse than the eavesdropping I did just now. This is premeditated. His pronouncements of love are not meant for my ears.

A heated debate ping-pongs in my head—decorum versus desire. The stubborn part of me who wants to hear a male's deep voice professing his love—even though it's not directed at me—wins. I record every last word until he falls back into a deep, drug-induced stupor.

It's only when he's heavily asleep that I approach his bed and tend to him. Starting with his eyes, I remove the gauze, use a soft, warm cloth to gently wipe away the crust and old ointment.

I assess the burns to make a note in his chart, apply new medicated ointment to the skin, add drops to his eyes to keep them hydrated, and reapply the bandage without even a peep from him.

Thankfully, the chart says the burns around his eyes didn't damage his vision. The doctor may even order these bandages removed tomorrow. He's healing remarkably fast considering the severity of his wounds.

I slip the thin, white blanket to his waist and can't resist my urge to pause before going to work. I've never seen a body like this. Even with the bandages that cover almost half his chest, you can tell his physique is a work of art.

His chest is hairless, which makes his abs stand out in stark relief even in the low light. His swirling tattoos look like they belong right where they are on his upper chest, shoulders, and



arms. I feel the spark of attraction, the pull to trace the ridges and divots on the uninjured half of his chest.

They covered this for about a minute in nursing school. “You may experience attraction to a patient as you go about your duties. Acknowledge it, move on, and never act on it.”

I’ve never had to struggle with this before, but here I am, encountering it for the first time. I acknowledge it, but am wondering how to manage the “move on” part of the advice.

Because of my urge to violate his boundaries, I go out of my way to keep my ministrations strictly business as I remove his bandages, reapply the ointments, and cover him back up.

I’ll be off for the next four days. Maybe on my next shift, they won’t assign him to me.

Buy Embers Ignite Here!

# Many Thanks

**G**ill V., Michelle M., Anne-Marie S., Vedece B.

## **Also by Alana Khan**

### **Galaxy Gladiators Alien Abduction Romance Series**

This 19-book series can be read as standalones, although it's fun to read them in order because the books are full of that rich, delicious found-family trope where people with nothing in common form connections that are stronger than blood. You'll grow to love this ragtag bunch of escaped slaves and the human women they rescue. Or do the women rescue them? Full of action, romance, and spice.

### **Galaxy Pirates Alien Abduction Romance Series**

As the name implies, these alien Robin Hoods are scoundrels and rascals. Opportunists all, they've never met a human damsel in distress who wasn't worth saving. Full of action, romance, daring capers, and spice. P.S. The bad guys always lose their money and our pirates walk away all the richer.

### **Galaxy Sanctuary Alien Abduction Romance Series**

There's one thing about flying across the galaxy righting wrongs (the Gladiator series) or stealing from people who

deserve it (the Pirates series)—you can't have kids on a fighting ship. Some worthy freed gladiators end up on planet Fairea and find themselves on a safe parcel of acreage, yet in desperate need of funds. Between jostling for control of the operation and the lengths they must go to stay safe and keep the lights on, there is plenty of action, romance, and steam.

### **Galaxy Warriors Alien Abduction Romance Series**

What was I thinking writing 19 books in the Galaxy Gladiators series? Call it temporary insanity. This series is similar to Gladiators, but lets new readers jump in without knowing any backstory. Action, adventure, my trademark spice, and romance.

### **Galaxy Games Hostile Planet Alien Romance Series**

All the heart-pounding passion and gut-clenching action I could cram onto the page. This series will grab you by the throat from the first page and never let you go. More action and hotter than previous series. And love. Did I forget to mention love?

### **Rescued by the Monsters Reverse Harem Romance series**

In a future dystopian Earth, males have been spliced with animal DNA. Human women have been reduced to chattel and when they say no, even once, they're banished Down Below to where the "monsters" live. This series will soon have you wondering just who the monsters are as the human women each bond with three adoring human/animal hybrids.

## **Arixxia Fields: A Steamy Small-Town Alien Romance Series**

Are you ready to party? I imagine so, after reading all the drama in all my previous series. Each of these books is short, sexy, romantic, and FUN. Each revolves around a holiday. Check them out.

## **Hybrid Hearts Series**

Bred to be soldiers, these rescued genetically engineered males are all given a new lease on life. How does the United States military plan to do that? They create an isolated town with cute shops and train the males in new jobs. How about a sexy lion-man baker for starters?

## **Galaxy Artificial Series**

Packed with passion and spice, USA TODAY Bestselling author Alana Khan brings robots to life in this science fiction romance series. Oh yeah, she manages to give the metallic buckets of bolts smokin' hot humanoid bodies, too.

## **Orcfire Series (written with Aria Vale)**

Twenty-five years ago, thousands of Others (orcs, nagas, minotaurs, and other species only known in fairytales) fell onto the burning sands of the Mojave Desert with no way to go home. They were rounded up by the U.S. Military and placed in a fenced enclosure on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The OrcFire series features one hot, green, tusked orc as the hero of each book as they battle fires and so much more to find

their happily ever after. The OrcFire series will be hot, hot, hot in all ways.

### **Cosmic Kissed (Earthbound Alien Romance Series)**

This fun duet manages to make reptilians sexy (trust me). Two alien brothers are abducted to Earth. Each gets his own book and manages to get the girl in this upside-down take on alien abduction.

### **Monster on Board (written with USA TODAY Bestselling author Ava Ross)**

What happens when two USA TODAY Bestselling sci-fi romance authors get together to have some fun? We write these entertaining, short, and sexy books set in space. They're all standalones, so take your pick of an orc, an ogre, a merman, or a hunky blue-winged alien. Or take them all!

### **Treasured by the Zinn Alien Abduction Romance Series**

The US government gave the Zinns permission to take human women as wives. Let's just say the unsuspecting women, who know nothing of this unsavory deal, are none too happy—until they fall in love.

### **Billionaire Doms of Blackstone (written as Deja Blue)**

Alana's only contemporaries. The heroes are all doms, the women are only happy to serve.

### **Boxed Sets**

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