



First
Comes Orc.
Second
Comes Baby

EMMA ALISYN FAE

FIRST COMES ORC, SECOND COMES BABY

AN ORC MONSTER SURPRISE BABY
ROMANTIC COMEDY

MILLIONORC MATCHMAKER

BOOK 1

EMMA ALISYN FAE

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1

MATCHMAKER

“MATCHMAKER, your three o’clock consultation is here,” a voice came through the intercom.

She turned from the window overlooking a busy New York street and approached her couch.

“Excellent, she’s punctual. Send her in.”

Rather than a desk and chairs, the office where she consulted with clients was meant to balance style and comfort, to set them at ease while offering subtle reassurance they were receiving the highest caliber service.

So her laptop sat open on an antique coffee table and when a client entered, they would sit opposite Matchmaker in a plush loveseat, the arrangement conveying warmth and friendly intimacy.

But her admin, instead of ending the comm, hesitated. These hesitations were usually warnings. Frederick had grown up in a household where speaking directly was considered gauche. It made communication interesting.

“What is it, Frederick?”

He cleared his throat. “She has a puppy with her.”

She rested a hand on her knee. “We don’t allow animals in the office. Is it a service animal?”

“She said it’s an emotional needs pet and she...I’m not quite sure how, but she talked to me into allowing it. I’m sorry.

She's really woo positive."

Good Lord.

Matchmaker tabbed over to the 3:00 PM's file.

Charlotte Alexia Trainor beamed through the photo, sandy brown hair in one of those artfully messy ponytails—or maybe it was just careless and the artful part was a fortunate accident—with cheerful blue eyes and a dimple. On one cheek. The physical bio read Charlotte was 5'8, a classically trained dancer, so Matchmaker wondered that in the picture her posture was slightly slumped.

The sheepishness, combined with the thousand-watt smile and the alluringly graceful physique, bemused Matchmaker. But she didn't think she would have any trouble making Charlotte a solid match. Orc males appreciated spirit, but they also adored a touch of wholesome sweetness.

"I'm allergic to dogs, Frederick," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. I agree pets shouldn't be let in the offices. But she's so cute. Charlotte has her in a purse."

"A purse?"

"Well, like one of those puppy purses. With proper ventilation."

Matchmaker pinched the bridge of her nose. "Send them in."

Considering the consultation fees she charged, on a case-by-case basis she sometimes relaxed certain rules—but not often. Charlotte Trainor had better charm.

In the Orc/Human matchmaking business, every client was a personality, and every personality demanded to be catered to. Well—mostly the Orcs. Humans only had to be themselves, and the males tripped over their feet to please them.

The office door opened, and a woman...bounded in. No, really, it was as if her toes didn't touch the ground. Matchmaker stared.

Charlotte aimed a blinding smile at Matchmaker, holding out a hand to shake after she'd crossed the room in three ground

eating strides. She wore a denim jacket over a wispy summer dress, and strappy flat sandals. Matchmaker noted toned calves and a short, business like manicure. Charlotte's makeup was minimal as well, a refreshing change from the stream of Instagram baddies wearing a full face of Kardashian tutorial.

"Oh my god, it's such an honor to meet you!" Charlotte exclaimed. "I stalk you on every social media profile, and of course I've been following your YouTube serial since it started. Your insights are inspired. I've been saving up for years to pay your fees."

Stalk was an unfortunate choice of word. "Well, I'm glad to meet—"

"Oh, not like you don't deserve every single penny of your exorbitant price," Charlotte interjected. "You absolutely deserve it. Especially with your hit and recidivism rates."

Matchmaker slowly released the Human's hand. "I am a matchmaker, not a hit woman."

Charlotte laughed. "Wouldn't that be a fun movie to watch. Anyway, I've never done this before. What do we do?"

At that point, Matchmaker lowered her gaze to the electric blue puppy purse slung around Charlotte's chest. A small, fluffy white dog with brown eyes stared through a ventilation panel.

It was kind of adorable.

It had also better stay in the purse.

Matchmaker sat and leaned back, crossing her legs.

"Oh, thanks for letting me bring her with me," Charlotte said, intercepting Matchmaker's gaze. "I have an emotional regulation issue, and my therapist prescribed Snowkiss. She goes with me everywhere."

"An emotional regulation issue? Do you mean anger management?"

Charlotte's eyes widened, then she threw herself into the loveseat. "Oh my god, no. I wish it were that easy. No, it's this overdeveloped need to take care of everyone else around me?"

Charlotte gave Matchmaker a quizzical look. “Any time I feel the need to go out of my way—which is all the time—to take care of someone else’s needs before my own, I’m supposed to redirect all of that energy into Snowkiss.”

“I see. You have boundary issues.” Orcs, fortunately enough, were a nurturing species. Charlotte might do very well among them.

“Yup! That’s the term. I’m glad you understand. I feel comfortable placing myself in your hands.”

Matchmaker pressed the comm on her laptop. “Frederick, can you send in a pot of chamomile tea?” The sleepy time blend, were the unspoken words. “For my guest.”

“Right away.”

“Let’s get started, Charlotte. Tell me about yourself. Your goal for love, your wants, and your emotional wounds.”

Charlotte took a deep breath then exhaled, trying to settle some of her excess energy.

Well, to be honest, none of it was exactly excess. It was who she was. Positive, upbeat, outgoing. She’d been driven into therapy because of it, not because those were bad traits, but because they were slightly...

...unbalanced.

Unhinged, her twin liked to say.

Snowkiss yipped.

Charlotte gave Matchmaker, staring at her with steady brown eyes, a strained smile and sank deeper into the cream loveseat. Smiles always made everything better, her mother used to say. Smiles diffused a situation and signaled your willingness to go the extra mile to reach a happy accord.

But then her mother had also spent her entire marriage placating a man who liked to communicate with his fists, so

there was that.

So maybe she was in therapy for more than just her upbeat personality.

But, evidently, Orcs weren't like that. Charlotte had spent as much time studying their culture as she had stalking Matchmaker.

"Okay," Charlotte said. "I've watched every episode of your YouTube serial, and I've been thinking about these questions for weeks."

Lie. She'd been thinking about those questions for months, years. Telling Matchmaker she stalked her on social media was a polite, happy way of reframing a mild obsession.

But no one needed to know all that.

"My goal is simple. I'm looking for true love. Yes, I know you're going to ask me what true love means to me. To me it means compatibility, open communication, and the freedom to be spontaneous."

It had taken months to drill a thesis down to those three simple things.

Because there was so. Much. She. Wanted.

But, focus.

Matchmaker notated her digital notebook. Charlotte recognized the model. She recognized the model because it was on her five-year aspirational wish list for when she actually had money; actually meaning money that wasn't earmarked for rent, utilities, and the bare minimum of food.

Mostly rent.

This was New York.

So eating was optional, though it turned out you couldn't eat the plaster off the walls. She'd been tempted to try once. Or possibly twice.

Of course, if she hadn't paid the \$3000 retainer to join MillionOrc Matchmaking, she could have afforded that model digital notebook. And food.

But whatever, priorities.

“What do you want?” Matchmaker asked in her smooth, lightly accented voice. She peered at Charlotte from behind thin wire framed glasses. “What’s your wish list?”

“They have to be emotionally available, and a great sense of humor. Also, and I know you say to be realistic about physical wish list items, so I’ve decided that realistically, I’d like someone who cares about their health. Health is important to me.”

“Of course. You’re a professional ballet dancer. So nutrition, health, and fitness must be a large part of your life.”

“Oh my god, I’m obsessed. But then you have to be. I’ll need someone who can handle that aspect of my life because we can get a bit laser focused.”

“Can you give me an example of a time where someone didn’t meet this need?”

“Not a specific time.” That Charlotte cared to recall. She suppressed a grimace, absently stroking Snowkiss’s head. It was unzipped just enough that she could poke her head out—and she did. A grimace wasn’t the signal she wanted to send. “But I’ve had exes who insisted that a cupcake would make everything better, or a few days off in the middle of a demanding season. Or they thought I wasn’t caring for my injuries properly and it meant I was unhealthy.”

“You also have a robust social media following.”

“Yes, and my Orc can’t be a jealous type. It’s a part of the job these days. I’m developing my influencer brand and eventually that’ll lead to more opportunities. I know some of them were coming from a place of caring when they questioned the amount of time I spend on the apps, but that wasn’t what I needed. I get balance in everything but...ballet isn’t a sport where there’s a lot of balance.”

“Understood. Which is why respecting boundaries is important to you.”

Charlotte leaned forward. “Exactly! I don’t want them to feel like they can’t express their concerns, but I need them to

respect my lifestyle as well. I don't want to argue about what I need to do to maintain my career, you know? There are so many other things that we could be arguing about."

Like food versus the MillionOrc's membership fees.

"Excellent. You do seem to have put a lot of thought into this. And your emotional wound?"

Charlotte laughed. "Oh my god, this is so romance novel." She knew, since her twin sister was an indie romance author, and she'd been subjected to enough ranting about plotting versus pantsing that Charlotte was tempted to try her hand at a book. Especially since her twin could, you know, afford both shelter and a full fridge. "The emotional wound."

She cleared her throat, also aware from therapy that this was a signal of her nervousness. "Well, my parents didn't have the best marriage growing up so I always played the peacemaker. My mother was a real people pleaser too. That was more... self-defense."

Charlotte gave a weak smile. And moved on quicker than a mugger who'd realized his mark was an off-duty officer.

"Anyway, I learned how to take care of everyone else, to meet their needs. I guess before they could lash out at me, you know? So I tend to burn out. I need someone who won't suck the living life out of me."

"So not another dancer."

Charlotte laughed. "Oh my god, no! Please not another dancer."

"You say 'oh my god' often. Are you religious?"

"Oh my god, no. It's more like a nervous tick."

"I see. Let's move on to logistics."

Matchmaker pushed aside her tablet as the admin, Frederick, entered with a teapot and clear mugs. The matchmaker poured, handing Charlotte a mug and waited until Frederick left.

"Our Orcs are looking for committed partnerships that lead to marriage, and approximately 40% of the Orcs on our roster are

also looking for Humans willing to have a child within the first two years of an established partnership. During your intake, you indicated you were amenable to that timeline.” Matchmaker sipped. “We aren’t a dating service, Charlotte, I want to make that clear. We are a marriage and family service for Orc/Human couples.”

It had been explained to Charlotte that there was a subset of Orcs, both male and female, who were intrigued by and preferred Human partners. There wasn’t any social media infighting between the Orc sexes, so Charlotte was inclined to believe that Orcs specifically seeking out Humans wasn’t necessarily a toxic preference, but just... a preference.

Personally, she thought they were being encouraged to mix cross species because of certain property laws that favored Humans, and growing anti-Orc protest over the decades. After all, many believed they weren’t native to Earth. Their upper classes still held matchmaking balls every ten years, and there were rumors that this year the Orc governor’s son would be attending.

Which was, way, way above Charlotte’s paygrade.

“Charlotte?”

She jerked her mind back into focus. “My career is important, and I think I’d like the first year after the start of a committed relationship to just be for us. But after that, I’ve decided it’s better to do the baby thing while I’m still young and have a lot of energy. It’ll mean taking some time out from my career eventually, but family is a goal that’s as important to me.”

“Excellent.” Matchmaker smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling. “Since we’re all on the same page, I’m going to mark you as active. The tier you selected, you’ll have your first date within a week, Charlotte. How does that sound?”

Charlotte grinned. “It sounds great.”

So why was her stomach churning?

2

“DON’T FUCK THIS UP,” Braht’s mother said through the smartphone, eyes sharp over a hawk-like nose.

Regine’s dark hair was slicked back into an elegant bun of braids, a cream-colored blouse and slacks her morning attire. Next to her at the gazebo breakfast table was Braht’s father, a male with yellow undertones to his green skin and dark eyes, his black hair cut a little longer over the collar of his tunic.

“Regine, we’re supposed to be working on our language,” his father said.

“He’s an adult.”

“Just because he’s an adult, doesn’t mean we need to use harsh language when communicating.”

Regine eyed Samesh askance. “You forget I’ve had ringside seats to the circus you call a kitchen on Friday nights.”

“That’s different.” Samesh, an executive chef, was normally one of the mildest mannered, dare Braht say, gentle males Braht had ever been around.

Until you put him in a kitchen. One didn’t become a Michelin star celebrity chef without picking up a few ruthless traits.

Still, listening to his father swear was like listening to a preacher’s son who’d just discovered profanity.

Awkward, a little embarrassing, but since Samesh signed the paychecks, everyone chorused “Yes, Chef” and pretended like the bite was worse than the bark.

Brahnt emerged from his car, nodding briefly at his driver and walked up to the...he stared at it...quaint brick building in an artsy section of New York.

Interesting choice.

He ignored the cluster of Humans on the sidewalk screaming in bad rhyme. They wanted Orcs to “go home”. But even the elders couldn’t remember if the fables about a Realm Gate the Orcs—Uthilsen in the old language, slowly dying out from disuse—came through in either accidental or deliberate migration, depending on the version of the fable, were true.

One Human tried to step in his path—he snapped his teeth at him. The Human squeaked and scurried back, shouting and holding up a smartphone.

“MillionOrc Matchmaking comes highly recommended,” Brahnt said, continuing past them. “If they don’t match me with a suitable Human in ninety days, I’ll sue for breach of contract and false representation.”

“Maybe that’s not the energy we want to walk into the consultation with,” Samesh said. “This isn’t a corporate takeover. It’s a marriage.”

Regine rolled her eyes. “Same thing. Business deal.”

Samesh and Brahnt shared a look. Father sighed. “Females.”

“I know you’ll get this right, Brahnt,” Mother said. “This is one of the most important decisions of your life, and you have a responsibility to the family to choose wisely.”

“Feelings are important,” Father interjected. “Take time to get to know the girl, decide if you have true compatibility.”

“Good advice,” Mother said. “You can’t pick by looks alone or even personality. We’re looking for an impeccable pedigree, proven discretion with past relationships, good education, and ___”

“Compatible personality, communication skills, mutual interests—”

Mother waved a manicured hand. “Whatever. All of that bullshit too. The most important thing is we fulfil the UFC’s

requirements.”

The interfering United Female’s Council, who having assessed the growing anti-Orc sentiment over the last several decades and the impact it had on schools, businesses and politics, decided mass intermarriage was part of the solution. Families were entered into lotteries, and those whose names were pulled were required to offer a single adult up to the altar. There would be more protest, except the council families were also sacrificing their own.

At least Brahnt didn’t have to attend a ball.

It wasn’t so bad. There had always been some interspecies mating here and there, and those children and families did well enough. Orcs didn’t abandon their own, even if Humans did.

Father eyed Regine. “I’m booking an extra session with the therapist this week. Emotional intelligence is as important as ___”

“How about we go out to dinner tonight and discuss it?” she purred.

Brahnt averted his gaze from the video call as Regine gave Samesh a smoldering look. Often, that worked. Brahnt didn’t really want to witness the details of why it worked.

“I’ll let you two...deal with your issues.”

“Call me when you’re done,” Mother said, “so I can debrief you.”

“Good luck, son,” Father said. “And don’t call today. We’ll be busy.”

Brahnt disconnected, stepped into the lobby of the agency, and approached a woman at the front desk.

“I’m Brahnt Stonefist. I have a 8:00 AM appointment.” He checked his watch. “I’m two minutes early, so I would appreciate being seen on time.”

“My emotional wound?” Brahnt said in his signature slow drawl. The one, that to those who knew him, signaled trouble, usually in the form of a devastatingly polite take down. Minus the polite. “Are you a licensed and experienced psychologist, or a matchmaker?”

Matchmaker smiled, and Brahnt eyed the expression. It wasn't meant to be friendly. He settled down, because one couldn't really escape a lifetime of conditioning and even if Matchmaker was Human...she was still female.

Matchmaker folded her hands across her crossed knee, the casual posture not fooling Brahnt at all. Matchmaker had done this entire room to encourage cosiness. To let one's guard down.

To remind the supplicant of their subordinate position.

“You came to me because I'm the best, Mr. Stonefist. Did you not?”

Brahnt stiffened. He didn't like Matchmaker's tone. “I came to you because I have a timeline to find a suitable wife and produce a child. My people thoroughly vetted your agency, and I was assured you knew what you were doing.”

“We did vetting of our own, Mr. Stonefist. You might be well aware that if we don't believe a client is a good fit for our methodology, we send them on their way with all due well wishes.”

Wasn't “I wish you well” some kind of new epithet? He'd ask his admin. She was always on the internet.

Matchmaker held his gaze. “Your emotional wound, Mr. Stonefist?”

He was going to have words with said admin when he returned to the office. This was ridiculous.

“I insist my wound is none of your business.” He almost gnashed his tusks at the note of meekness in his own voice. Damn it, just...damn it.

Matchmaker picked up her stylus and made a note. “You're defensive.” Brahnt opened his mouth, but Matchmaker

continued. “Let’s circle back to your goal for love.”

Brahnt laughed, then cut the sound off. “Right. Love. Let me redirect. I require a partner who is calm, low-key energy, and polished in public. They’ll have to accompany me to several events each year. They’ll need to minimize their social media presence—no one who is obsessed with all of that crap. It’s a brain drain. They’ll need to be flexible because my life is hectic. Able to travel and meet my emotional and mental and physical needs with minimal arguing.”

He’d never get away with this verbiage in an Orc run agency. The females would laugh him out of the building...right into the waiting arms of their sisters to deliver a well-deserved walloping.

“Charming,” Matchmaker said under her breath.

“Excuse me?”

Matchmaker readjusted her glasses. “Your open and transparent expression of your concept of love is charming. A breath of fresh air.”

Somehow Brahnt didn’t think that was what Matchmaker meant.

“You understand I need to be married and have a child within a year to fulfill the terms of the UFC’s request?” Brahnt said. This was the second time he’d said that, but he wanted to be clear.

Since they were talking about open and transparent communication.

Matchmaker made a noise in her throat. “You mentioned the UFC. Is that legal?”

“I assure you it is. There were many who spent a great deal of money attempting to break the edict—” and the politicians who drew it up “—with no success.”

“I sense some hostility, Mr. Stonefist. You don’t like to be the loser in any scenario, do you?”

“I normally get what I want, yes. When I don’t...well.”

“Let’s move on, shall we? Would you like a cup of chamomile tea? It’s...soothing.” Matchmaker stared at him. “A special blend for my Orcs.”

Brahnt gestured, the motion brusque. “Can you arrange a Human who can fulfill my requirements or not?”

He’d left it a little late, mostly as a form of protest, but his mother’s great-aunt was on the North American council and had nudged her niece, who had in turn sat on Brahnt. Hard.

When his mother brought her foot down, everyone obeyed.

Matchmaker sighed. “What are you offering in return, Mr. Stonefist?”

Brahnt laughed again, incredulous. “Wealth, travel, great sex.” He deepened his voice. “And an excellent health care package, Matchmaker. The female who marries me and carries my child will want for nothing.”

“Understood. You are aware that marriage is not transactional?”

Brahnt lifted an eyebrow, curling his upper lip. “I’m aware you don’t intend that statement to be ironic...Matchmaker. Remind me, what was your retainer fee again?”

“It should not be transactional; let me rephrase. You need to be willing to fall in love, Mr. Stonefist. To be emotionally available and vulnerable. To develop a deep and meaningful connection with another person. Understand that your wife isn’t simply there to serve your needs. It’s a two-way street.”

Brahnt almost rolled his eyes. He’d picked up the habit from his mother, so he’d blame her. But only in his head. “Yes, yes.” He checked his watch. It was a family heirloom inherited from Dada Gurvinder, and Brahnt would not disrespect it by using a device to tell time. “I have five more minutes.”

“Fine.” Matchmaker’s voice was a little tight. “Let’s discuss my requirements for the first date. At MillionOrc Matchmaking agency, we expect our bachelors to pamper prospective partners. None of that coffee date nonsense.”

His aunts would slaughter him. Did Matchmaker think he'd been raised by wolves, or Human males?

“Of course,” he said, voicing absolutely none of his sass.

3

“IT’S A COFFEE DATE,” Charlotte told her twin, walking briskly toward the neighborhood cafe where she was slated to meet her Orc match in an hour. Snowkiss poked her head out of her carrier, watching the crowd.

Charlotte glanced up from the video call in time to avoid running into a woman carrying a battered white sign with “Humans First!” in scrawled red paint. A small crowd congregated in the park, and Charlotte suppressed the urge to ask to see their protest permit.

She tried to walk around the woman. “I just want to get by.”

She liked to arrive at a location early to give herself time—and an opportunity—to calm her nerves.

Well, to bring her energy down a notch in the first place.

Charlotte accepted her energy could be somewhat overwhelming, and sometimes men didn’t respond well to overwhelm.

“Humans First!” the woman screamed in Charlotte’s face. Which was unfortunate, because Pumpkin Spice Season had started early this year and that wasn’t a particularly pleasant scent to smell on anyone’s breath when it had been sitting for awhile.

On second thought...she slowed. “You know, this is an opportunity for communication.”

“I hear the protestors, keep walking,” Caro ordered. “You won’t change anyone’s mind.”

“I know that. But maybe I can talk to them, get them to see that other perspectives are valid even if they don’t agree. And maybe they don’t have a permit.”

“The delulu is strong with this one.”

“Jezebel! Orc spittle!”

“Now wait just one second—” Charlotte stopped trying to push through the protesters.

“Are you wearing the cartoon Orc earrings?” Caro asked. “I told you to stop that. It just makes you a target.”

“I wanted my date to know I’m pro-Orc.”

“Because joining a Human/Orc matchmaking agency hasn’t clued him in?”

Charlotte turned to the Human woman. “I’m really interested in what you have to say. Can you tell me why you want the Orcs to go back to...I’m not certain where it is they’re supposed to go?”

“Back through the Realm Gate,” the woman said, voice a decibel quieter.

“Oh. The Realm Gate.” Charlotte eyed the woman, now understanding she was dealing with someone insane. “So... you believe the Orcs aren’t originally from Earth? I understand why you want them to go home then.”

The woman’s mouth gaped open. She was an average sized Human with short dark hair and what was colloquially called olive skin—yes, yes, Charlotte knew olives were technically green, no need to point out the obvious, and that it made more sense to refer to Orcs as olive skinned, not Humans—

“Well, yeah,” the woman said, recovering. “I have a brochure...just let me—”

“Do you want me to hold your sign?”

“Oh, could you? Just one moment...”

Twenty minutes later Charlotte was escorted through the crowd by the same woman, exchanging Instagram profiles.

“Another one bites the dust,” she whispered to her silent sister.

“You didn’t actually convince her she was wrong,” Caro said.

“No, but I made her start to think that maybe I’m not wrong either.”

“Anyway,” was the dry reply. “Coffee date?” Voice neutral, Caro’s expression said everything her voice didn’t.

Snowkiss yipped in agreement. Charlotte was convinced the Cotonese was a mind reader.

“Okay, yeah, I know you think coffee dates are for cheapos, but I like it,” Charlotte said. “I like to cut through all the mating baloney and...get to know each other, low key. See if there’s a genuine connection, you know?”

“But I really don’t know. Char...it’s cheap. You signed up for *MillionOrc* Matchmakers, and your match is taking you out to coffee? He might as well ask you to bend over and give him a cookie before he even buys you a gallon of milk.”

Charlotte blinked, then laughed. “That’s a new one.”

“I thought you might like it.” Caro smirked. “But...don’t dive into this one full tilt this time, okay? Boundaries. That’s the safe word. Boundaries.”

Charlotte repeated that word under her breath, to remind herself. “Well, I’m here now so I’m going disconnect and grab a seat.” And try to get her enthusiasm under control so she didn’t come off as too eager.

But Brahnt Stonefist’s picture defined hot.

Tall, with thick brown hair and a no-nonsense blue-gray stare, emerald skin with a warm undertone. The hint of a sardonic smile at the corner of his sensual mouth, tusks gleaming and... tippy.

Those tips looked very sharp.

He screamed reformed bad boy, which, unfortunately, was Charlotte’s type. It was also one of the reasons why she had paid *MillionOrc* the retainer fee, because they investigated every Orc. The objective, thorough vetting was a major bonus

for someone prone to falling head over heels in love with a smoldering gaze and planning their nursery for twins ten minutes after the first date.

“Boundaries,” she muttered, clinging to the word. “Boundaries.”

Charlotte fidgeted in her seat, which was involuntary, and swiped through tabs on her smartphone, which wasn't. She was trying to project nonchalant but emotionally available rather than insanely eager and down for whatever if you take me now. So maybe she should have waited until she was feeling less horny to accept a first date. But when was she ever feeling less horny? Somedays she wondered if she was perpetually ovulating.

No, what she needed to learn was how to roll with it, not suppress it. But could anyone blame her? She snuck back to the tab with the Orc's photo.

No...no one sane would blame her. It was why she hadn't shown her twin Brahnt's picture. Caro would have immediately put her foot down. Brahnt was a therapy session in a still photo waiting to happen, no matter what glowing reputation Orcs had for cherishing their wives. In fact—

“Charlotte?”

Charlotte jerked, almost knocked over her mug of herbal tea, and caught it in time. Which, unfortunately, meant she let go of her phone—zoomed into the Orc's headshot.

“I see you are, indeed, Charlotte,” the voice said, a thread of amusement in it.

Charlotte froze, realizing she was somehow halfway out of her seat, and looked up. She tried to save the moment by straightening as if she'd intended on standing the entire time, and defaulted to shoving a hand towards the man, who looked at Charlotte, looked at the hand, and lifted a brow.

“Surely we can do better,” Brahnt Stonefist said, his voice smooth, and still amused.

“Oh...sure.” Charlotte gave a weak smile, mostly because her knees were shaking, and not because she wasn't insanely,

instantly, unreasonably and detrimentally to her health attracted.

Blue-gray eyes that were the death of all Charlotte's good intentions glinted at her.

Glinted.

She'd always wondered, reading Caro's romance novels, how eyes glinted in real life. She now understood.

Brahnt extended an arm, though there wasn't much space between them, and wrapped it around Charlotte's upper back, pulling her into a slow, friendly hug.

Friendly because Brahnt's hold was light, and their hips were at a socially acceptable distance. But the hug lasted three seconds too long because Charlotte was counting.

Five seconds was the socially acceptable minimum unless you wanted to send "ick" signals, eight seconds to demonstrate you'd had a successful first date.

This was an eleven second hug.

Of course she was making all of this up in order to cope, but still.

Charlotte's abdomen clenched. She hadn't had caffeine—god, she didn't need it—but her body began to tremble like she'd downed Pedro Pascal's iced quad espresso with six shots.

And then Snowkiss barked.

The eyes that were glinting, darkened. Brahnt pulled away and looked at Charlotte's feet. "You brought your pet with you."

Uh, red flag number one, and she needed one right now considering her heart rate was accelerating. "You don't like pets?"

Brahnt paused.

Charlotte liked a man who thought before he spoke. So... downgrade the red to an orange flag? That it indicated Brahnt was searching for the answer he thought Charlotte wanted to hear, was not so great. But then, if one put a positive spin on it,

that meant Brahnt cared about what Charlotte thought. So another spin on the side of positive—for caring.

“I don’t mind pets.” Brahnt transferred his gaze back to Charlotte. “But as with all untamed creatures, they require a firm hand when they’re misbehaving.”

Oh *geeze*. Unfair.

When Brahnt’s eyebrows rose, Charlotte realized she’d said that out loud.

After a beat of silence, Brahnt gestured. “Should we sit?”

Can I sit on your lap?

She managed not to say that out loud though.

Brahnt smiled at her anyway, a slow unfurling of lips that showed white, shining teeth. “Do you like what you see?”

Charlotte blinked. It was a forward question from an Orc, but then she realized Brahnt was staring down at the smartphone. Charlotte slapped her hand over the screen, though it was far, far too late.

“I wanted to make sure I recognized you. But, yes. The reality lives up to the fantasy. I mean, to the picture.”

Brahnt lifted his gaze again, tilting his head slightly. “I concur.” After holding Charlotte’s gaze a long moment, he gestured again. “You already have a drink. But have you eaten?”

Charlotte dropped into her chair. “Uh, no. Not since...” she trailed off. She couldn’t say yesterday. She didn’t want to give out the signal she was going on dates for free meals.

Brahnt’s expression flattened. It was subtle; a tightening of lips, a slight narrowing of eyes. “I see. Do you like sandwiches? The ciabatta here is baked fresh on site and they do a side of homemade chips and hummus.”

“Oh, no, you don’t have to—”

“I insist. I wouldn’t be much of an Orc if I let you go hungry, would I?”

Charlotte closed her eyes, then opened them. “Yes sir, I’d like that.” She didn’t realize what she’d said...as usual...until Brahnt gave another wide, hungry, amused smile.

“Excellent. Do you have a preference, or may I order for you?”

Charlotte let the Orc order, though she cleared her throat. “No bread.” She tried not to sound defensive or apologetic.

Brahnt just nodded. “Do you have sensitivities?”

“Only to anything with carbs, except on one of four cheat days a year.”

“Ah, that’s right. You’re a professional dancer, correct?”

“Ballet.”

“I see. They can convert the sandwich to a salad. Is that acceptable?”

Charlotte nodded. And decided to reward the Orc. “Maybe I’ll have a cookie too.”

Brahnt smiled, still perusing the menu. “I think, Charlotte, you can have all the cookies you like, if you eat your salad like a good girl.”

Charlotte’s breath caught for a second, and she forced herself to sit there and not climb into Brahnt’s lap and beg to be the Orc’s good girl.

Boundaries, she reminded herself desperately. *Boundaries*.

4

THE LITTLE HUMAN was setting off every one of Braht's instincts. He sipped a glass of white wine, watching Charlotte dig into the salad, pleased she seemed to be enjoying the food.

He sighed to herself. His reaction to Charlotte was both good, and bad. Good because with his Orc instincts engaged, it would make seducing the Human much more enjoyable. Bad, because, well...it also made it more complicated.

Life was complicated, hectic, and he wanted a mature, straightforward arrangement to everyone's satisfaction.

Emotions were never mature or straightforward.

The second problem was he suspected Matchmaker had given him the most unsuitable Human on their roster.

Charlotte was...effervescent. Animated. Gentle and excited, and opposite the low key, calm, and simple Human Braht wanted.

And Charlotte's social media profiles were the exact opposite of discrete.

The Human was an influencer, for crying out loud. She'd posted an image from this restaurant moments before Braht had entered, and even mentioned her nervousness over her new first date. If she'd mentioned Braht's name, Braht would have turned around and walked out. But a scroll of the accounts had revealed Charlotte did seem to draw a line—nothing she posted would embarrass him if brought up at a cocktail party. No messy drinking pics, no nudity beyond the

artistic shots of her dancing in barely there leotards. No obnoxious, ranting social commentary.

All thoughts he would keep firmly to herself. What the females didn't know about his thoughts couldn't shank him in the side.

He eyed Charlotte. A professional ballet dancer? One might as well stamp her forehead with a high maintenance mark. Though Brahnt supposed he could always hire people for that—the maintenance, not the marking.

And the dog, the dog. *The dog, Charlotte, is not sleeping in the bed.*

There wouldn't be room.

Brahnt smiled at Charlotte. “How was the salad? Would you like another?”

Charlotte finished the last bite and sat back in her seat with a sheepish smile. “No, I'm almost full. Thank you. The micro greens here are always so fresh.”

“But not too full for your cookie, hopefully.”

The Human blushed. A subtle hint of color, a shine to her sky-blue eyes, but Brahnt saw it.

“You're teasing me,” Charlotte murmured.

“A little. Do you mind?”

Charlotte looked down at the table, drawing her finger through the condensation on her water glass. “I probably should.”

There was a note of wry self-deprecation in her voice Brahnt found intriguing. “Why?”

“I don't usually date—okay, let me not start this out with a lie. I always date reformed bad boys, but the reformed part is usually a little hazy.”

Brent couldn't help herself. He laughed. “I see. That's what you see when you look at me? A reformed bad boy?”

What a Human concept. Orc males were very well-behaved, except during war time. The males who treated females

wrongly were dealt with—usually by the males before the females got ahold of him.

It was kinder that way.

It had also led to a few public relations nightmares because the Humans didn't understand that whatever brutal punishment a male's circle inflicted, it was nothing compared to what the female's circle could bestow. The females were just better at marketing.

Charlotte looked up, her eyes widening. "A one hundred on the bad boy, and a fifty/fifty on the reformed."

Brahnt sat back in his chair, amused, then slid the cookie towards Charlotte. It was the width of the palm of her hand, freshly baked and oozing with gooey chocolate chips.

"Well, looks can be deceiving. I'm the eldest son of my family, so there was never much room for acting out."

Charlotte picked up the cookie, eyed it, and took a bite with the air of a female diving headfirst into a cold lake. Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment, and she moaned deep in her throat.

Brahnt clenched teeth and every muscle in his body as that moan shot straight to his cock. He didn't think Charlotte was doing it on purpose...but then, maybe the Human was the type to flirt in a subtle way.

Very well, Charlotte, we'll play it your way. But I play to win.

"This tastes like fair trade chocolate," Charlotte muttered.

"I didn't know fair trade chocolate had a taste." Of course it did.

Charlotte opened her eyes. "I have a refined palate."

Definitely a subtle flirter. Which, in a way, pleased Brahnt. It demonstrated an instinctive understanding of sophisticated conversational skills. The fact she was a dancer might, in this area, prove an advantage as well. She would be poised while on Brahnt's arm, adjusting her energy to the venue, whether it was a charity gala, an intimate cocktail party, or a business lunch with clients and spouses.

Maybe this wasn't as poor match as he'd initially assumed.

Or maybe his dick was already doing some fast talking.

"So were your parents strict?" Charlotte asked.

"They are exacting. Our family business requires a level of focus and discipline that doesn't allow for extraneous nonsense."

He expected Charlotte to take the opportunity to ask about his business. Who wouldn't? She'd gotten a dossier on Braht the same Braht had gotten a dossier on her. Charlotte knew Braht was a certified millionaire.

But Charlotte didn't ask, instead shifting the conversation away from any talk of money or occupation, again demonstrating a subtle touch of class.

"You had time to pursue your passions, right? Hobbies, sparks of joy?" Charlotte gave him a small, encouraging smile.

It was so endearing, Braht opened up a little.

"There wasn't much time, no. There are pursuits outside of work I enjoy." Mostly pursuits adjacent to business, but tomatoe tomato. "I enjoy building tiny homes by hand." Braht almost winced. He hadn't meant to say that.

Charlotte's eyes lit up. "By hand? The construction and the electrical and everything? There's a YouTube series I love about a couple who dashed off into the wilderness to live off the grid and build their own tiny home over the course of two years."

Braht smiled, relaxing. The Human seemed genuinely interested. "It takes me much longer to build one, but yes. I do everything myself."

"Do you sell them?"

Braht lifted a brow. "No. They're donated to one of the charities my company supports."

"Any chance I can get you to build me a doghouse," Charlotte said with another flash of a teasing smile, a dimple in one cheek.

“There is more than a chance,” Brahnt murmured, taking another long sip of wine. He drained the glass, then beckoned to the server for another.

Not that it would help.

You know what will.

Shut up, he told his dick. I didn't ask you.

Charlotte chuckled, waving a hand as she finished off the cookie. “I’m joking.”

“I’m not.” He held Charlotte’s gaze.

He wouldn’t make a hasty decision, of course not. But 100% of his interest was engaged, and he wasn’t about to let the Human out of this cafe without a second date planned.

For tomorrow.

Fuck it. Who was he deluding.

Preferably the second date would be breakfast in bed.

But maybe he should lead up to that a little more...gently.

Charlotte’s smile faded, and she glanced down at the table again. “I’m glad there seems to be a connection between us. I wouldn’t mind exploring it further.”

Brahnt set his wine glass on the table and stood. “How about now?”

Charlotte glanced up, eyes widening.

“Another one of my hobbies is cooking,” he said. “Let me make you dinner.”

“Uh...I mean, now?”

“In about four hours. We can take a walk first, let the dog stretch its legs. If you still feel the connection at the end of the walk, I’d like to take you to my place.”

Charlotte hesitated. “Just a meal? The MillionOrc rules...”

“Specify no sexual intimacy for three months. I understand the rules.”

Understood, and discarded. With every passing second Braht didn't see any reason to continue looking. He wasn't a window shopper; that wasn't efficient. The entire point of utilizing MillionOrc was because they did the tedious vetting for him.

He was just doing the sensible thing.

Charlotte grinned. "You know what, why not? It's a walk and dinner."

Braht withheld his snort. His Human was cute. Father would adore her. Mother would probably eat her.

5

DURING THE COURSE of the four-hour walk—and it wasn't a straight four hours, but a combination of meandering around the city, taking long sit breaks on benches with scenic views, stopping at another cafe for bubble tea and then swinging by Charlotte's place to drop Snowkiss off with a sitter—they talked.

"I feel naked," Charlotte muttered, rubbing her chest as she emerged from her building and approached Braht where the Orc was waiting on the sidewalk.

"You can bring Snowkiss if you feel more comfortable," Braht said.

So maybe she needed an emotional support puppy, but she didn't have to wear the emotional support puppy on her sleeve during the entire first date. Technically, on her chest, but details.

Charlotte shook her head. "No one has to tell me that's a bad first date idea." She returned Braht's smile with a rueful one of her own. "I'll survive."

Besides, having the puppy was kind of like having a toddler around. Snowkiss needed to be walked and cleaned up after, fed and watered, played with and cuddled...and even that might not be enough to keep the puppy from barking and yipping and getting antsy if she wanted attention.

So Charlotte had left her with a neighbor she exchanged pet-sitting duties with. Of course, her neighbor's cat didn't require

sitting as much as it required utter abasement and a full bowl of premium wet food.

Brahnt, the low-key millionaire, appeared content with their simple outing, mild-mannered and undemanding for someone Charlotte was certain was used to always getting his way.

Low-key because nothing about him screamed wealthy. His clothing was well-made, but there were no labels. He wore a gold watch, but it had the patina of age, so a family heirloom maybe. He casually dropped one or two “neighborhood” restaurants that Charlotte knew for a fact were Michelin starred and had three-month waiting lists.

Because those, too, were on Charlotte’s aspirational “for when you have money list.”

And then they went to Brahnt’s place.

“Oh, wow,” Charlotte said when Brahnt ushered her into the apartment. Apartment was a dingy, plebeian word. But penthouse was so Forbes 100. “This view is fabulous.” She headed straight to one wall that was nothing but windows. “Have you ever turned off all the lights and danced in front of the window naked?”

A chuckle behind her, and soft footsteps.

“No,” Brahnt said, so close at her back that Charlotte felt his breath on her neck. “I’m afraid I’m not a dancer, except at weddings. But make yourself at home. I insist.”

Charlotte turned. “I bet you do. But it’s just dinner tonight, remember?”

The Orc held her gaze. He did that a lot; long, thoughtful stares with a faint challenge behind the introspection. “I remember. You have the right to change your mind.” He lifted a hand, trailing the tip of one taloned finger down Charlotte’s cheek.

He turned away and headed towards the all-white kitchen. “What do you have a taste for?”

“I have a taste for food,” Charlotte said and wandered after him, shoving her hands in her pockets of her circle skirt. “This

kitchen is like HGTV on Real Housewives steroids.”

Pulling ingredients out of the fridge, Brahnt glanced at her and chuckled. “I like it. I’m glad you do too. If you don’t have a preference, I was thinking pad tai with shirataki noodles, and a sorbet for dessert.”

“You had shirataki noodles already in your fridge?” Color her skeptical.

“Please. Of course not. I had them delivered during our walk.”

“The delivery people walk right into your home and put the groceries in the fridge?”

“Of course not. My housekeeper accepted the delivery. I gave her the evening off.”

“Oh, of course. Your housekeeper. What was I thinking.”

She hadn’t thought Brahnt was the trusting type. There’d been a prank video floating on social media a few years back. Humans thought the Orc male’s reaction was hilarious. Charlotte, not so much. When the third prank video surfaced, only the prankee was an Orcess...

Funny how they stopped after that. Probably because the influencer went missing, but no one could prove anything.

Wait, why had she been thinking about...oh. Right. Trust.

The Orc glanced at her, the expression a little quizzical. “Charlotte?”

“Did I drift off again?” Her meek voice usually worked on people.

Brahnt flashed her another one of those slow, amused smiles. It was like a signature. “You did.”

“Sorry. I have an attention span issue. Well, not really. It’s more like there are so many thoughts in my mind fighting for attention and inevitably one has to take over for a few minutes.”

“You probably spend most of your focus pennies in your career.”

She stared at him. “You’re the only one whose every instantly understood that.”

“Hmm.” Brahnt washed his hands and rolled up his sleeves. “I’m very focused in certain aspects of my life as well. What you haven’t learned is how to delegate your thoughts. I can help you with that over the next several months.”

What she hadn’t learned was how to win the lottery. She suspected his idea of delegation was “hand the task off to staff”.

Charlotte slid onto a stool. “It’s an Orc thing, I think.”

“What is?” He grabbed cutting boards and other implements of torture. Charlotte did not cook.

Charlotte did, however, eat.

“Dropping all these hints about long term and permanency.” She tried to make it sound flirty, but the words came out flat.

“Ah. Well, I didn’t go to the matchmaker because I wanted to waste time.” Brahnt began chopping. “When I see what I want, I make it mine.”

And, the temperature in the room skyrocketed another hundred degrees. Charlotte gave him a weak smile. “Can I help you with anything? I don’t want to sit here and profit off all your hard work.”

“No, no, let me take care of you.” If there was a purr in Brahnt’s voice, it probably wasn’t intentional. At all.

Charlotte wished she could believe that.

She’d been seduced before, but not by an expert of this caliber. It was just enough; a brush of heat, of aggression, then Brahnt flitted away again, drawing back and giving Charlotte time to gather herself—before he did it again.

It kept Charlotte unbalanced, and balance was kind of her job.

Still, she steered the conversation back to neutral, first date questions. “When did you learn to cook? Who taught you?”

“I guess the clichéd rich kid thing would be to say my nanny,” Brahnt replied, “but my father was a Michelin starred chef

when he met my mother.”

“Are your parents an Orc/Human pair?”

“No. We’ll be the first in this branch of the family. What about yours?”

Charlotte shook her head. “Nope. There are pairs in my mom’s family tree though, so I’m probably a throwback.”

“That’s common.”

“So, your father taught you to cook. Is he still a working chef?”

“He is, though he took several years off after Mother weaned me to be a stay-at-home dad. My dad is a traditionalist.”

Charlotte cleared her throat. “Do you want children...right away?”

“That decision is the female’s. The female’s circle consults with a new wife regarding family and career planning.”

Vegetables hit a wok—at least that’s what Charlotte thought it was. It was a pan, she knew that much. Skillet? Whatever.

“Shouldn’t that decision be between the husband and wife?”

He shrugged. “It’s the way we do things. It’s better that way. Orc males are naturally aggressive and possessive—we need the checks and balances a group of equally bloodthirsty females armed with battle axes provides.”

“I was born in the right species,” she muttered.

“I assume my wife will want to have some type of career or activity outside of the home. It’s healthier in the long run, I suppose.”

“Well, yeah, so you don’t go stir crazy.”

“Oh, I’d keep my Human plenty busy.” Brahnt’s smile this time was indulgent, but his eyes were sharp. “And you? What are your thoughts?”

She hesitated. “Before I joined MillionOrc I made the decision that if I met the right partner, I could go on hiatus to start a family. For a couple of years while the children were young.”

Maybe that said something about her lack of true ambition, but as much as she loved dance, she'd always wanted a family too. Like a do over.

“With medical clearance, you could dance as far into your pregnancy as you wanted, and after the baby is born we can hire a helper for you.”

All of this casual talk based on the assumption that Charlotte was going to be Brahnt's wife rattled as much as it seduced her.

Boundaries, she reminded herself. *Don't get swept away by the sweet talk. Especially not with the pheromones in the air.*

After all, it took at least three months for a Class B personality disorder to unveil itself.

“Do you plan on being involved in the childcare?” Charlotte asked.

Brahnt dished up two plates, opened a bottle of wine and poured. “As much as I can. I'm aware I'll have to make some adjustments to my schedule, and that's fine. I'm at a point in my career where I feel I'm justified in taking a bit of paternity leave.”

They sampled the food. “This is good,” Charlotte said, wanting to pick up the plate and inhale it. “I'm tempted to sell myself to you just for your cooking.”

“I'm so glad we're on the same page,” Brahnt crooned. “If you think my cooking is this good, imagine how good my...ah. Apologies, I should remember my manners.”

That *voice*. Charlotte was going straight to violated good intentions hell. Straight there, in a handbasket. In her defense, it was the son of the devil sitting across from her, smugly eating homemade pad tai and trying—not really, though—to look harmless.

As if a six foot plus Orc with shoulders that put a Viking's to shame—and don't forget the tusks—could look *harmless*. But somehow, he managed to pull it off.

They had sorbet on the balcony, the early evening lights and noise of New York beneath them. The entire scene took Charlotte's breath. She could imagine herself nesting in this kind of comfort, with a kind but no-nonsense Orc at her side who could wave a magic wand and take care of any need or problem.

It was a long way from her working-class upbringing, with parents who were constantly in conflict.

It was peaceful. Secure. This was what she wanted if she had children.

Maybe that made her a gold digger, but she had a lot to offer in return. Besides, wasn't it her duty to find the best father of her children that she could?

Charlotte stared into her wine glass. But wealth wasn't everything, and money wasn't the only form of security.

And even though the Orc sent out waves of seduction, there was a level of reserve there beyond the natural reticence of getting to know a stranger. Charlotte knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she couldn't marry and have a family with a man who wasn't emotionally available.

She'd spent the evening gently grilling Braht, sifting through the answers to decide how willing and open this man was to actual love, and emotional commitment. Braht had the responsibility part down pat, Charlotte had no doubts on that end.

The sex part? Also a triple check.

Charm? Yep.

Charlotte sighed. Maybe she was being, as usual, too hasty. Most people needed time to open up and reveal their deepest selves. Just because Charlotte was willing to splatter herself all over the sidewalk on a first date didn't mean everyone else would too. That was healthy, right?

"What's on your mind?" Braht asked.

It had been several minutes of companionable silence, and for once Charlotte hadn't felt the need to fill it. She'd felt like she

was enough, like she didn't have to exert herself to please the person she was with. Another check mark in Brahnt's favor.

Maybe that was why Charlotte was hoping, already, that this would work.

Because instinctively, it seemed as if Brahnt accepted her as is.

But Charlotte wasn't sure.

"I'm thinking about my tendency to jump off balconies without a parachute," Charlotte said, because there was no point in not being herself now. And her "self" was brutally honest.

"Do you think I have bad intentions?" Brahnt asked.

"No. That's what bothers me. I should be more cautious."

"I can wait until you're sure of me. I don't want to, but I can." He met Charlotte's gaze across the small round table, the expression in his eyes focused, his posture still as if he was holding herself in check. For now. "May I ask you for one thing, though? You can say no."

Charlotte's heart began to beat in her throat. "You can ask."

"A kiss. I've been thinking about it all night."

Charlotte forced herself to breathe evenly, thrumming her fingers on the small table. A kiss. Just a kiss? She almost laughed.

It wasn't just a kiss with Brahnt. But...she stood and walked the three steps around the table to Brahnt, who looked up, wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her down into his lap.

Brahnt tangled his free hand in the back of Charlotte's hair, holding her but didn't otherwise move. He waited. As if to say, *Your move.*

Or as if to say, *We'll do this at your pace.*

Clever Orc. Giving the Human an illusion of choice.

Charlotte knew it was an illusion, because the minute she'd stepped foot in this penthouse and the door had shut behind

her with a final click, she'd known she was lost.

That she was Braht's.

She'd begun mentally rearranging his furniture, damnit.

Angling her head, Charlotte brought her mouth until her lips were hovering right over his...then closed that last millimeter and kissed him.

It was soft at first. Charlotte tasted his bottom lip, darting out her tongue. He sat still, his hold tightening, letting her control the pace, the depth.

Suddenly, the Orc took over.

Charlotte thought it would be rough, demanding, but even though it was filled with heat and control, it was still soft. Exploratory.

As if Braht was discovering something new, something precious.

His arms tightened. The hand at the back of her head tugged her neck back, and his tongue delved inside her mouth, commanding.

Taking what he wanted.

Charlotte clung to him, moaning, her breath hitching as her stomach clenched and her clit began a steady drum beat. She wanted to straddle the Orc and peel off his clothing and start licking every inch of skin she could get her tongue on.

"Me first," Braht murmured.

"I was talking out loud again."

His lips curved. "It's charming. It also tells me what you're really thinking."

"You can't tell?"

Braht tightened the fingers in Charlotte's hair into a fist. "I can tell you want me, Charlotte. But do you want me to do something about it?"

6

IT OCCURRED to Charlotte what the subtle something she hadn't been able to put her finger on all evening was, the reason she felt comfortable with Brahnt.

Orcs were supposedly all growls and dominance, taking charge and steamrolling full tilt ahead to get what they wanted. Brahnt leashed himself. There were rules they had to follow with their own females, but those same rules didn't completely apply to Human women, though it was strongly encouraged. But Human women had no female's circles to back them up.

He was still dominant, still seething with aggression under the surface, but he was completely, exquisitely controlled.

It reminded Charlotte of the control and strength required to make ballet look effortless. The awareness you had to have of your partner during pair work.

So she felt she could trust Brahnt now, to respect her boundaries, to take time with her needs. To not completely overwhelm Charlotte's senses until she couldn't do anything except let the Orc have his way...and crawl back to her apartment in the morning, feeling both satiated and broken.

Charlotte wanted the satiation. She didn't want the brokenness.

"Yes," she whispered. "I want you to fuck me."

Brahnt's hold on her tightened and he exploded out of the chair, Charlotte instinctively wrapping her legs around his waist, the Orc proving his strength because he didn't grunt under her not insignificant weight.

She might look delicate, but her above average height frame was packed with muscle.

Charlotte nuzzled Brahnt's neck as the Orc strode down a hallway, opened a door to what she assumed was a bedroom, and walked in, dumping her on the bed.

She shivered as Brahnt stripped out of his clothing, his scorching gaze trained on her face, movements economical.

The reveal proved Charlotte's guess Brahnt was naturally more a golden-green; his skin gleamed a few shades lighter everywhere, stretched like satin over a well-toned but not overbearingly meathead body. He was broader than Charlotte, his arms thick, and there was a charming handhold of fat at his waist though his abdomen remained toned.

"Like what you see?" Brahnt purred.

He wrapped a hand around his engorged cock and pumped himself, once, twice, then leaned a knee on the bed and leaned over Charlotte. "How do you want it? For me to fuck you fast and ruthless, or do you want to be cherished?"

As he spoke, he lowered his head and sank teeth, gently, into the side of Charlotte's neck. Then suckled—not gently.

Charlotte gasped, grabbing Brahnt's shoulders. "I can't think right now, so Orc's choice."

He chuckled. "Dangerous words. What's your safe word?"

"Boundaries."

Brahnt paused, pulled back, an eyebrow raised. "Seriously?"

Charlotte nodded.

"Alright...boundaries." He paused, seemed to think better of what he was going to say, and said instead, "Are you concerned about something in particular?"

Charlotte hesitated. For sex talk, this was almost too intimate. Too much like Brahnt cared about her as a person instead of just a fuck toy, and that was the last thing Charlotte needed if she was going to keep her emotional guard up.

“Just love bombing, I guess,” Charlotte said. “Of going too deep too fast.”

“Oh, I intend to go deep, and fast.” He brushed his lips across hers. “But I don’t intend on breaking your heart.”

Said heart raced as Brahnt stared at her with hunger in his eyes, before trailing kisses down her body. Charlotte shuddered beneath him as Brahnt pulled a nipple into his mouth. She almost mewled in disappointment except when he moved, it was to slide down her body toward the juncture of her thighs.

“May I?” the Orc murmured.

Charlotte nodded, swallowing, wondering when was the last time a man had gone down on her first, as Brahnt unzipped the waistband of her skirt and tugged it down, along with panties—then pushed her thighs open.

Charlotte’s entire body tensed, her spine arching as Brahnt licked up and down her slit. Lightning arched through her clit as he drew it into his mouth.

“Like this, baby?” he murmured, adjusting his strokes and pressure as she directed him. Not really with words, but more with mewls of approval or protest.

“Oh...Brahnt, god...it feels good.” When was the last time she’d said those words to a man?

But then he wasn’t, was he? A man. He was an Orc.

Brahnt moved faster, a growl in the back of his throat and with a cry, Charlotte came, shuddering, Brahnt finally lifting his head and pinning her with a look that had her going completely still.

“My turn,” Brahnt said, voice dark, heavy with lust.

“Come here—”

The Orc flipped her onto her stomach, a hand on the back of her neck, pressing her into the bed. Charlotte didn’t move, responding instinctively to the silent demand for submission.

“Stay,” he whispered in her ear, then rose.

Charlotte didn't dare lift her head, her forehead against the sheets as she heard the sound of a drawer opening, closing.

The bed dipped under Brahnt's weight as he straddled Charlotte's thighs, began to massage her buttocks.

"Hands and knees, be a good Human," Brahnt murmured, and Charlotte obeyed, tensing with anticipation when strong hands parted her cheeks, a now lubed finger slipping the first few centimeters into her pussy.

"The first time with an Orc can be painful," he said. "Relax and take it. You can cry if you want, but I won't stop unless you use your safe word."

"Will you be mad if I do?" she asked, breathless.

"No, baby. I don't want to hurt you."

His fingers slid further into her sheathe, in and out, finding an angle that had her writhing and pushing her buttock against his groin because she wanted more.

"I'm going to fuck you now, Charlotte. Are you ready?"

Charlotte moaned, the sensations overwhelming her, and she nodded into the sheets.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. God. Just fuck me."

Brahnt pulled out his fingers, and a dick pressed against Charlotte's opening, beginning a slow, inexorable breach. Brahnt pushed inside and Charlotte cried out, forcing her body to relax though she wanted to seize up from the pleasure. Both the physical, and the pleasure of knowing she was being claimed by her Orc.

"Relax," Brahnt ground out, "let me have you. I'm going to fuck you so good. You're mine, and you'll know it."

Brahnt pushed his cock all the way inside, withdrew, pushed back in. "More? Faster? Tell me how you want me to fuck you."

It was a demand, and to make that clear, Brahnt grabbed the back of her neck, his fingers pressing down hard.

“Please,” Charlotte moaned, “fuck me hard. I need you.”

She whined, begged, until Brahnt gave her what she wanted, until he let go and pounded inside her. Charlotte arched into each stroke, her fingers digging into the sheets.

“Mine,” Brahnt rasped. “I’m going to fuck my baby into you, and you’re going to be mine. You’ll nest in my bed, and every night when I come home, you’ll be waiting, presenting this tight little pussy for me to fuck.”

“Yes, yes, god,” she gasped.

Brahnt jerked her head back, his strokes relentless. “Tell me you’re mine. That’ll you’ll take my seed and make my heir.”

“Yes, yes, I’m yours. Give me your cock, give me your baby. God!”

Charlotte convulsed with pleasure and a moment later Brahnt shouted, hot come filling her pussy. He ground inside as if he wanted to make sure he deposited every last drop.

“Fuck, this pussy is so good,” Brahnt swore. “I’m never letting this go.” He slid out. “I’m never going to get enough.”

Charlotte smirked—all the guys said that—though she wanted nothing more than to collapse on the bed and sleep for a year, but Brahnt had other ideas. He slid an arm under her waist and hauled her up, carrying her into the bathroom.

The bathroom was luxurious, of course, done in whites and creams with veins of gold. A large clawfoot tub sat under a window, and there was a separate shower that didn’t bother with anything as plebeian as glass doors. The size it was, it didn’t need it.

This was not a bathroom designed for privacy.

Brahnt kissed her shoulder, trailing fingertips down her back before slapping her ass once, hard.

She leaned against the sink as Brahnt turned on the shower then beckoned, his eyes still hot and glittering.

“I’m not as young as I used to be,” Brahnt said, “but give me a minute.”

Charlotte blinked at him, staring.

Brahnt smiled. “You didn’t think I would be done with you so soon, did you?”

“I don’t know if I can take much more.”

“Oh, you can. You will.” Brahnt approached and stopped, sliding his arm around Charlotte to cup her ass and pull her against him. “Unless you want to use your safe word?”

“I never lose a game of chicken.”

“Hmm. Maybe you’ll lose to me.”

Charlotte stepped under the warm spray of the shower, leaning her hands against the wall and lowering her head, closing her eyes. Oh my god, there was almost nothing better than a warm shower on abused muscles.

He moved behind her, his hands on her hips, sliding up to cup her breasts. Brahnt kissed the side of Charlotte’s neck, then one hand slipped back down between her thighs. He flicked her clit, erection pressed in the crease of her ass.

“I said I wasn’t done with you yet,” Brahnt said, and she obligingly arched her back, rising just a little on her toes as Brahnt positioned the head of his cock at her entrance...then slid in, sheathing himself.

She moaned, Brahnt’s hot breath on her neck as the Orc fucked and stroked her, bracing his free hand against the wall next to hers, his other digging into her hip.

Charlotte met each thrust, needing more of the pleasure, more of the burning fullness. Teeth sank into the side of her neck and Brahnt held on, hips plunging faster and faster.

Their cries echoed in the bathroom, mingling with the harsh breathing and the fall of water against the tile and Charlotte came, hard, her body tightening and pulsing around his cock.

Brahnt hooked two fingers inside her mouth, almost gripping her by the jaw in a dominant, possessive gesture.

She licked his fingers as the Orc growled, then once again flooded Charlotte’s pussy with a rivulet of cream.

Charlotte sank against the shower wall, trembling, braced on her forearms to keep her knees from collapsing.

“Not done with you yet,” Braht growled.

Oh. My. God.

7

SHE HADN'T SLEPT MUCH, and not just because Brahnt had the stamina of an over-caffeinated bull. Charlotte had always thought her own focus was well developed—except when it came to multi-tasking, of course—but Brahnt took it to a whole 'nother level.

He fucked like every orgasm was a winning lottery ticket and he lived in a trailer park. Like if he didn't eat the last bite of Ramen, someone else would snatch it and run chortling into the dark night.

But clearly, from the thread count of these sheets, Brahnt and poverty had never run in the same social circles.

“Good morning,” the Orc murmured, settling on the edge of the bed. He held a cup of coffee in his hand. “I wasn't certain if you drink tea or coffee.”

“I don't discriminate,” Charlotte said, sitting up with a vague wish for more pillows, maybe an extra blanket. “I'm equal opportunity caffeine.”

Brahnt smiled a little, handing her the cup, and Charlotte wrapped her hands around it, inhaling.

Strong, black, enough to wake up a girl who'd been fucked so good all night long she'd gotten about fifteen minutes of sleep.

She took a sip, then cleared her throat.

Brahnt watched. “I can bring you sugar and cream if you like.”

“I think I’ve had enough cream.” The words shot out of her mouth, and she winced.

Brahnt only laughed. “I did go a little hard on you last night, didn’t I?” He trailed a finger down her arm, and Charlotte shuddered.

She needed a few minutes alone, so she smiled at Brahnt and slipped out of the bed, setting the coffee on the bedside table, then headed to the bathroom where she shut the door behind her and leaned against the sink.

Fuck.

Okay, deep breath.

She’d had the best sex of her life, and Brahnt was bringing her coffee in bed with the scents of breakfast cooking in the kitchen. Looking at her with Orc eyes.

Charlotte knew Orc Eyes. The eyes that said, “*Got you, you’re mine.*” That unwavering, intense, slightly tender gaze of an Orc wanting to start preparing a nest for his Human. And...it was so unexpected. She’d hoped for a fabulous date, to make a strong connection—but she hadn’t been planning on getting married and having babies *this* year. She knew the whole MillionOrc spiel, but she hadn’t quite believed it.

She believed it now.

Cause Marriage & Babies was the first song on the Orc Eyes soundtrack.

Those were the words Brahnt had been whispering in her ear all night long, and the thing was, Charlotte didn’t think that was just sex talk. Brahnt didn’t strike her as the kind of man who sang that tune unless he meant it. Not when he had his wealth and family name on the line.

And...*oh my god.* They hadn’t used condoms. At all. Charlotte could blame the suffocating Orc/Human cocktail of bonding hormones, but she also couldn’t. It wasn’t like she’d been drunk, or slightly out of her right mind. She’d been sober. And consenting. Which meant—

Caro was gonna kill her dead, have one of her fictional hot necromancers raise her, then kill her again, if Charlotte had gotten herself knocked up without a marriage contract first.

What were the chances Brahnt hadn't realized what they'd done?

She cut off a beginning trill of laughter. No...cackling. Definitely a slightly manic cackle.

As panic was beginning to grow extra feet and put on happy dance shoes, there was a light knock on the door.

"Breakfast is ready in five," Brahnt said, but otherwise didn't try to enter.

Charlotte appreciated the discretion. He could have barged into the bathroom to ask her what was wrong, or in general do the guy thing of sniffing out a problem and fixing it even if no one wanted it fixed. Or demanding the little distance Charlotte was trying to put between them be eradicated.

Obliterated.

Oh fucking god, Brahnt was in the kitchen making breakfast. The second meal he'd made with his own hands for Charlotte.

It was a classic bonding ritual.

Charlotte groaned, kicked her butt into gear and washed up. When she emerged from the bathroom, clean clothing lay across the now made bed. She picked it up; leggings and plain T-shirt not only in her size, but expensive.

Charlotte knew. She checked the tag. It was the kind of expensive clothing which to the untrained eye looked like every day wear—no gauche desperate new money loud labels.

But it was not every day wear. It was also not consignment.

Charlotte put it on, panic clogging her throat.

She wasn't ready for this. She had to play it cool if she wanted to get out of here without a ring on her finger—or a tracker.

Charlotte walked down the hallway and entered the kitchen, giving Brahnt what she hoped was an easy smile.

The Orc glanced at her, lips curving, and beckoned. Charlotte went to him without thinking. Like a good little Human.

Damnit damnit damnit.

Brahnt slid an arm around her waist and pulled her close for a side hug, then kissed her on her cheek before nudging her towards the stool at the center island.

“Go sit, I’ll make you a plate.”

“Do you usually sleep in late on Sunday instead of working?” Charlotte asked, teasing. “I thought you millionaires were all high achiever types.”

“10 AM isn’t too indulgent,” Brahnt said, sliding scrambled eggs and sliced avocado onto plates. “Perks of being the boss. No male will chastise me for taking a day off. Do you have rehearsals?”

“Sunday is my rest day, so my schedule is a little more flexible. This is good.”

“Yes, I’d noticed you have a healthy appetite.”

Charlotte didn’t choke. She was almost kinda used to Brahnt by now, which was saying something—she wasn’t sure about which of them, though—considering they’d only known each other for less than twenty-four hours.

So...score for instalust?

“I don’t want to intrude on your day,” Charlotte said, pushing aside her plate when she was finished. “Thank you for breakfast. And for dinner. I don’t think I’ve eaten that well in forever.”

Brahnt, who hadn’t eaten much but mostly watched Charlotte mow through her plate, set aside his coffee. “Don’t eat and run. Spend the day with me.”

It was barely a request. Charlotte tensed, though she kept the smile on her face. It wasn’t like Brahnt didn’t deserve the smile, but spending two days in a row together was the kind of thing she *used* to do. The new, balanced with boundaries, but completely not sabotaging herself Charlotte understood that to be safe she needed to take relationships slower.

“I would love to, but I have commitments today I can’t cancel,” Charlotte said with a tinge of regret. “If I’d known how the date would go, I would have cleared my entire week.”

There. A touch of blatant neediness to scare the rich boy off.

Neediness, meet unblinking Orc. “How much time do you need? I’ll pick you up after. I’m willing to clear my schedule if you’re willing to clear yours.”

Charlotte hesitated, then slid off her stool. “I started rehearsals for a new ballet. I’m sorry, but...”

Brahnt nodded, walking around the island and pausing in front of Charlotte. “I understand. It’s selfish of me to want you all to myself at the drop of a hat, though I’m not certain I care. When can I see you next?”

“I’m not sure.” Charlotte slipped around Brahnt, and she kept the movement loose, playful. She was a professional dancer, after all. She knew how to lie with her body. “How about I call you?”

Fingers gripped her wrist, halting her. Slowly, Charlotte turned around and met Brahnt’s steady gaze.

“How about you tell me how you really feel?” the Orc said. “You’re giving me a skilled brush off.”

The tone of voice wasn’t accusatory. It was more implacable than anything else. As if Brahnt expected this kind of behavior and was prepared to overlook it.

“All right,” Charlotte said. “You’re right. I owe it to you to be honest. And, honestly, I’m a little overwhelmed right now.”

Brahnt’s fingers on her wrist tightened, then slowly relaxed. “I’m sorry I’ve made you uneasy. We have a strong, natural connection. I don’t see any reason not to pursue it. What are your concerns? Clearly, you have some.”

Had Charlotte thought she wanted direct, open and transparent communication? Now that she was getting it, she wasn’t quite sure what to do with herself.

“It’s not you, Brahnt, it’s me.”

Brahnt's eyes darkened a touch. He stepped forward. "It definitely is you."

The Orc was playing with words again.

"How can you know that after one day and night?" Charlotte asked, not bothering to misunderstand. She was kinda too old for that now.

Brahnt tilted his head. "How can you not? But I don't think the problem is that you don't know. The problem is that you do, and now you're running scared." Brahnt leaned down a little and inhaled. "I can smell it."

Now that was ridiculous. "We aren't werewolves. You can't smell my fear."

"Can too. Smells like burnt cinnamon."

Charlotte laughed. "You're being ridiculous."

Brahnt stepped into her in one smooth move, sliding his arm around Charlotte and pulling her against his chest. "Am I? You laughed. You're smiling again. Tell me how slow you want me to go. But tell me that you're mine."

Charlotte's smile vanished. She put her hands on Brahnt's chest, not to push him away, more because she didn't know what to do with herself right now; her head was spinning.

"You said a lot last night. The kind of a lot that's hot when we're fucking, but in the bright light of morning—"

"I didn't say anything I didn't mean."

The words were flung between them like a challenge.

"Should I repeat what I told you?" Brahnt asked softly, arm tightening. "I said I wanted you to be mine. I said I wanted you to have my baby. I said I wanted you to make your first nest in my bedroom. It's the bright, cold light of morning, Charlotte. I'm sober, and my cock is in my pants, not in your tight little pussy. So what is your excuse now?"

"Listen, I'm not going to beg you to give me space—"

"There's nothing wrong with begging." Now Brahnt's nose nuzzled the side of Charlotte's neck. "I liked it when you

begged me. Give me more, Brahnt. Don't stop. Ohmygod, Brahnt, fuck me harder. And aren't I a good Orc? I obeyed."

Light mockery in Brahnt's voice, but also the warmth of affection. Charlotte bristled anyway.

"Relax," the Orc murmured, "I still respect you. But no one but me will ever hear you whine like that again."

Charlotte...didn't know what to say. She kept trying to gather herself and every time she started, Brahnt gently obliterated her wall. Picked up Charlotte's brick made of wet sand and stomped it against the ground then brushed the dirt off his hands with a quizzical look.

There was a word she was supposed to remember. Shit. What was it?

"More?" Brahnt said. "Harder? Can I stay the weekend?"

"The last one was five words," Charlotte said flatly. "I'm talking out loud again, aren't I?"

"It's endearing." Brahnt paused, sighed and stepped back, releasing her. "The word? Boundaries." He wrinkled his nose, but at least he had the grace not to roll his eyes.

"Yeah...that's the one." Charlotte gave a weak smile.

Brahnt leaned his hip against the island, crossing his arms over his chest, and gave Charlotte his signature steady stare.

"Tell me what you want," the Orc said in a crisp, no-nonsense voice. "I'm giving you the reins for now. Tell me how you want this to go."

Charlotte ran her hand through her hair, realized it was trembling and hid it behind her back.

"Let's spend a day or two apart and let our nostrils clear," Charlotte said. "I'll call you."

Brahnt lifted a brow, gaze flat. "When will you call me? Let's nail down a day and time frame."

"So you can put me in your appointment book?"

"I like to be organized."

“I’m not something you can organize, Braht.”

“Is it too much to ask?”

Charlotte wasn’t fooled by the conversational tone. “No. But I think a little reflection will help us both decide that if this strong beginning is something real, and not only fabulous chemistry.”

“Your age is showing, Charlotte. I think I have about, what, fifty years on you? Chemistry like this isn’t common.”

“Okay maybe not, old man, but good chemistry doesn’t make a solid foundation.”

“It helps.” Braht loosened his arms and held up a hand. “Fine. You’ll call me. In two days’ time.”

“Let’s not put a time frame on it. I’ll call you when I feel clear.”

“That’s not acceptable to me, Charlotte.”

“I feel like you’re violating a clear boundary I’m trying to erect right now.”

Braht straightened, pushed away from the island and walked back to his coffee as if he needed the furniture between them.

“Well, we can’t have that, can we? Fine. I’ll wait.” He picked up his abandoned mug, sipped, then set it back down again and flipped his gaze towards Charlotte. “It’s not like you won’t come back to me. It’s not like I don’t know where you live.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. “We’re going to discuss this sinister Dom vibe you’re giving off. Baby, it’s cute after like the first three months, but we haven’t even had a second date yet. Right now, it’s just creepy.”

Braht laughed. “Noted. Tone down the Orc Dom vibe... except in bed.”

Charlotte closed her eyes, took a deep breath and let it out. When she opened them again, Braht was gripping the edge of the counter.

Okay, it stroked every part of Charlotte’s ego to think that he wanted her to stay so badly he had to physically hold back, but

new healthy Charlotte was trying to look at these things through a more rational lens.

“If you’re going to go,” Braht said softly, “you should go now.”

Charlotte hesitated, feeling awkward. Should she give him a hug, a kiss on the cheek? Something?

Braht narrowed his eyes. “You should go *now*.”

Charlotte turned on her heels, strode into the living room where she recalled dumping her messenger bag and snatched it up, then left.

8

MATCHMAKER

THIS WAS POSSIBLY Matchmaker's favorite part of the process.

The first glimmer of vindication.

If anyone had been in the room with her, they might have described Matchmaker's smile as one shot smug, two shots benign malice. The combination, most days, depended on who she was speaking to and how grueling their intake process had been.

She connected the call to Braht Stonefist, steeping her fingers underneath her chin.

"Speaking," Braht said, his voice deep and crisp.

Matchmaker rolled her eyes. The Orc couldn't help himself; he went into every situation trying to control it right away, even if the situation was only a phone call. She'd locked horns with his type before.

"Mr. Stonefist, this is Matchmaker. How are you doing today?"

"Well."

Matchmaker suppressed her snort. Fine. Moving on from the small talk, since obviously pleasantries were above Braht Stonefist's paygrade.

"Tell me about your date with Charlotte. How did it go?"

The stretched silence put Matchmaker on edge.

“It went well,” Brahnt Stonefist said with the air of a man who had considered—and discarded—a half dozen responses. “I commend you for your unusual choice. On the surface, it appears as if Charlotte is completely ill-suited to my needs. But I decided to give your experience the benefit of the doubt.”

What a fun example of an underhanded compliment wrapped around a backhanded insult. “I’m gratified. Tell me more. Where did you take Charlotte?”

Another silence.

“Mr. Stonefist?”

“A tour of the city ending with dinner in an exclusive restaurant prepared by a private chef.”

Bullshit.

Matchmaker didn’t know why millionaires always tried to finesse her. Like she hadn’t heard every variation of that lie before.

“So you took a walk through a park and made her dinner at home?”

“Did you already speak to Charlotte?”

Bullseye on the bullshit. “No, I always call the Orcs first.”

They didn’t lie as skillfully as Humans. Probably because they were well-trained by their women not to.

“The evening was satisfactory,” Brahnt said.

“Will you be seeing each other again?”

“I intend on seeing Charlotte again.”

The careful verbiage set off another well-worn red flag. She picked up her stylus and notated her tablet. “Oh? Did you set a date?”

“I have business I need to—”

“Of course, I won’t be but another moment. Did you set a second date?”

Matchmaker was getting a little tired of the silences.

“Charlotte requested I allow her to contact me.”

Really.

Matchmaker narrowed her eyes. “Did you break any of my rules?”

She kept her voice pleasant through willpower. Pleasant, slightly amused, a dose of sympathetic.

Jump on my hook, you disobedient fuckfist.

“The rule I believe you’re referring to is the one that references no intercourse during the first three months of courtship?”

If Brahnt Stonefist thought that icy tone of voice was going to work on Matchmaker, then he really was used to dealing with spineless idiots.

“That would be the one, Mr. Stonefist. Do you recall the consequences for breaking that rule?”

“I am committed to a monogamous relationship with Charlotte.”

Of course he was. “I’m thrilled to hear that. Is Charlotte on the same page?” She almost heard the thrumming of fingernails against a desk on the other end of the line.

“Charlotte is Human. She needs time to process the strength of our connection.”

In other words, this bastard seduced the Human, overwhelming her, and now the poor girl had fled in self-defense just so she could get a whiff of non-pheromone scented air.

Matchmaker grimaced.

She was going to have to do some quick damage control. There was a good reason for the no sex for three months rule, damn these Orcs.

For one, she was not running an escort service.

For two, she had to maintain a reputation as the agency being a safe space for Humans, who were often emotionally

vulnerable and bonded far too quickly to Orc males, without understanding what that meant. Orc males considered regular, monogamous sex tantamount to an engagement.

“I see. Well, I’m gratified you were pleased with your experience.”

“Yes, you came highly recommended and I will pass along that recommendation. You can remove Charlotte from your roster.”

Matchmaker chuckled. “Not so fast, Mr. Stonefist. I’ll speak with Charlotte and if she concurs, I will close out her file. And yours. Have a good day.”

The chuckle faded as she pursed her lips into a grim line, dialing Charlotte Trainor. She wanted to hear what the girl had to say for herself. Maybe she should reconsider Fredricks’s suggestion to outfit the Orcs with chastity belts.

“Hello?”

The forced cheer in Charlotte’s voice was about what Matchmaker had expected. She removed her spectacles and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Ms. Trainor! How is your day going? This is Matchmaker.”

“Oh! I know who this is. My day is going great so far. And yours? How are you doing?”

It was almost as if someone—not Brahnt Stonefist—had at least a rudimentary grasp of basic social emotional intelligence.

She lied. “My day is satisfactory so far. So tell me all about it! How did it go?”

Matchmaker wasn’t quite Human, but she’d spent so much time around Humans, both in her family and in her business, she’d learned to mirror enough of their energy to put them at ease.

Charlotte answered. “The day went really well. I don’t think I’ve ever been on a better date.”

Truth.

“Mr. Stonefist said she prepared you dinner at home. How intimate.”

She injected warmth in her voice, rather than the irritation at having *that* rule broken too. The Orcs weren't supposed to engage in bonding rituals during the first three months! There was a good reason for that, damnit!

Charlotte's voice brightened. “He did. He's a talented chef.” She laughed. “I burn boiled eggs, so I guess we're a perfect match in that sense. He cooks, I eat.”

Matchmaker matched the chuckle. “Please tell me Mr. Stonefist was a gentleman? You know I'm strict with my Orcs. I tolerate no misbehavior.” She kept her voice light, warm. “We are firm on our rules that require our Orcs treat the Humans with the utmost care and respect. You deserve it, after all.”

“Oh, I appreciate that, and Brahnt was an absolute gentleman.” Charlotte cleared her throat. “Very, um, gentle.”

And now the unicorn poop was about to come out. Orc males and their bullshit, Human women and their unicorn poop.

“Tell me more about it. If I may be so bold as to inquire, did the date end on a first kiss? We highly encourage that, you know. It's good to explore a healthy physical connection right away...as long as it doesn't go too far.”

Matchmaker pulled back the thread of a growl that entered her voice. Yes, she was protective of her Humans.

“Oh...no. Not far at all. Yeah, everything went great.”

“And will you be seeing him on a second date?” It was a good thing the Human couldn't see Matchmaker's gritted teeth. She hated when they lied. It insulted her intelligence.

Silence on the other end of the line.

Matchmaker waited.

Charlotte cleared her throat. “Oh my god, well, the funny thing is, I wanted to treat Brahnt this time, so I'll be making the arrangements. I'm going to contact him.”

“Charlotte. You would tell me if Mr. Stonefist made you uncomfortable in any way, wouldn’t you? We rely on our girls to give us honest feedback about our Orcs. We don’t allow predators in our agency.”

“Oh no, Brahnt’s not like that.” Charlotte sounded genuinely shocked. “He’s a bit, um, forward. And assertive. And, well, he doesn’t waste time, does he?”

Matchmaker was going to strangle that Orc.

“When do you plan on contacting Mr. Stonefist to arrange your second date?”

Charlotte tried not to squirm in her kitchen chair, Snowkiss curled in her arms, as Matchmaker’s calm tone unraveled. Caro was glaring at her, slumped in a chair on the opposite side of the table, the lid of her laptop half closed.

“Well, I was planning on arranging something for the end of the week,” Charlotte said. “Work is hectic right now, you know. We just began rehearsals for a new ballet.”

Snowkiss yipped. Charlotte loosened her vice like grip.

“Of course, you and Mr. Stonefist share similar work ethics. But don’t forget to take time out for your personal lives.”

“No, of course not. I mean, of course I agree.”

There was a beat of silence on the other end of the line and Charlotte wondered if Matchmaker saw through her.

Her unreasonable attraction.

Her sense of overwhelm.

Her panic that, “*Oh what the hell have I done?*” was colliding with “*Shit, what the hell am I doing?*” But the reasons she’d given Brahnt for leaving abruptly yesterday morning were still true. Charlotte didn’t trust herself. She needed time to make sure this was a good decision.

“Is there anything else you’d like to share? Remember, our aim is to make MillionOrc Matchmakers a safe space and to be known as the agency which successfully pairs the most Orc/Human couples in healthy committed relationships.”

“No, that’s everything. I’ll stay in touch.”

“So will I.”

Why did that sound like a threat?

“Tell me again what the real problem is?” her twin asked once Charlotte disconnected the interrogation.

Charlotte hemmed and hawed.

Why had Brahnt had to mention marriage and babies and all of that right away?

She really needed to protect herself this time.

Boundaries.

“It was just all going too fast.”

This was the sign of growth, wasn’t it? That she wasn’t jumping headfirst into a lake of hot mess, heavy on the hot?

Caro took some time to think, nodding slowly. “I mean, I’m glad you’ve developed an internal braking system. Finally. But I don’t think you were meant to do a complete three sixty. If he treated you well, he’s offering monogamy, and you like him, why are you running away? He hasn’t even had a chance to love bomb you yet. He can’t future fake when the whole premise of the agency is for them to marry.”

It didn’t feel like progress. So far Brahnt had ticked all the right boxes, said all the right things. He hadn’t been too aggressive—in fact, oddly enough, it had felt like Brahnt had been holding back all evening.

Two years ago, before Charlotte had begun therapy, she would have been all over him like orange on chicken. Now she couldn’t wait to get out the door, and she recognized there was no legitimate reason why.

She was self-sabotaging.

The perfect guy wanted a commitment, and Charlotte couldn't handle it.

Snowkiss seemed to agree, because she stretched, standing up to place her paws on Charlotte's shoulders, and licked her cheek, then settled back down after turning a half circle in her lap. She was an adorable little lapdog, but nonetheless, Charlotte wiped the puppy kiss off with the back of her hand.

She knew exactly where Snowkiss's tongue had been just an hour ago.

Which kind of made her a hypocrite, because she'd accepted kisses from Brahnt after knowing where *his* tongue had been.

But Charlotte wasn't trying to think about that right now.

"I'm not going to do the clichéd thing and push away the perfect guy for me," Charlotte said. "But I am going to take time to think and make sure this is the right situation to get into. I wasn't expecting to go on a first date and come home with a proposal to move in."

Or, shit, a baby, but she wasn't about to tell Caro about the whole "*Oopsies, look Ma, no condom*" thing. Or that she'd finally gotten so sick of the side effects from her hormonal birth control that she'd just stopped taking it—she'd been celibate for two years. Why torture her body when she was celibate?

She really, really, hadn't meant to sleep with Brahnt last night.

Caro snatched up her headphones and put them on, lifting the lid of her laptop. "Fine. I've got a deadline and I don't need to be dealing with your dating drama." She gave Charlotte one last, withering look. "I've written this plot line too many times, and mostly the characters fuck it up until I intervene. Don't make me intervene."

"Gee, sis, you're so loving. I'm overwhelmed with your concern."

Caro was already dictating.

9

...SiX WeEkS LaTeR

“DAMN IT, CHARLOTTE,” Caro said, staring at the positive pregnancy test. “How could you let this happen?”

Charlotte rested her elbows on her knees, trying to not panic and feel like shit, especially when she’d spent the last several days either on the toilet or above it—prompting her to take a pregnancy test, cause the timing of her symptoms made the flu seem laughcryably unlikely.

“You know I got off the shot years ago. It affects my weight.”

She couldn’t take any type of birth control that affected her weight, which wasn’t even the worst side effect, and she’d cycled though all of them. Weight problems, skin problems, mood problems—none of them were issue free, and she always used condoms.

Always.

Until she hadn’t.

“You didn’t use fucking condoms?” her twin exclaimed. “What were you thinking? He’s an Orc! As soon as you tell him, he’s going to go berserk. They always do. Moody, possessive bastards.”

Charlotte swallowed. “I don’t have to tell him yet. Caro, how am I going to afford a kid? Diapers, gear...I won’t able to work at some point, unless they let me do some kind of admin. How am I going to pay rent? I guess I can get Medicaid.”

Charlotte gave her twin a weak smile—or tried. “Maybe we should try living together again.”

Which usually ended with them at each other’s throats. They’d never shared space well. Caro needed vast quantities of quality alone time and Charlotte was the opposite.

Add a kid in the mix?

Charlotte would have to hide anything weaponizable. And the Benadryl.

Caro put the pregnancy test down on the sink and stared at Charlotte. “Let me get this shit straight. You got knocked up during a one-night stand with a millionaire Orc whose sole purpose in signing up to the same matchmaking agency as you is to find a Human for a committed, monogamous relationship that leads to marriage, and you’re worried about money? Stop me if I’m getting anything wrong. I’m not, though.”

Charlotte grimaced.

“Why wouldn’t you tell him? You said you liked him. That you hit it off.”

Charlotte had said that. She’d also said something noncommittal about why she hadn’t seen Brahnt again. Because it seemed stupid to have commitment phobe issues after plunking down \$3000—to find a commitment.

Her therapist was going to have a field day with her this week. A stadium sized field day.

“I’m pissed about the timing because it’s too early, but Orcs don’t abandon their young,” Caro continued. “There’s no reason for you to be afraid of his reaction, or to consider being a single parent.”

“I just, I need someone who’s emotionally available,” she began, knowing how weak her voice sounded.

“You knew him for one whole day, Charlotte. How can you say he’s not emotionally available? You didn’t give him a chance. You ran away.”

“I wasn’t sure. It was overwhelming and I needed time away to make sure it wasn’t the pheromones clouding my judgment.

That the whole marriage and kids thing wasn't lovebombing."

"Then agree to a long engagement. You don't have to get married now, you can wait one to two years."

"You know how I am, my track record with bad relationships."

"I know. And I would back you up on your squirrely shit 1000%, except the agency has an impeccable reputation for vetting all their clients. Criminal check, psychological check, past relationship check, health check, everything."

"There's no saying that some type of user or abuser can't slip through the cracks."

"Is that the sense you got from him?" Her twin's stare was hard.

"...no."

"The issue is you this time. You know if I got even a whiff of a red flag, I would be the first one to sit on you and bellow no in your ear. Girl. This is all your issues. You have to call him and tell him. You don't want to be a single mom. Don't do that to your kid."

Charlotte nodded, shoulders hunching. "Is he going to think I did this on purpose to trap him?"

"Are you reading too many secret baby enemies-to-lovers romance novels? Doesn't he *want* to be trapped? You said he was talking long term and babies right away. Then he slept with you with no condom. Maybe *he* was trying to trap *you*."

"Why hasn't he gotten in contact with me! It's been six weeks."

"Gee, I wonder. Because you told him to give you space and that you would contact him, and Orc males are raised to obey women. You told him that if he violated your boundary, that would be it. Game over. He's doing what you asked him to do like a good little bitch. If he'd asked me, I could have told him that shit never works the way you think it does."

Charlotte muttered something under her breath but didn't bother to repeat it louder.

Caro straightened off the sink. “Tell him. Because all of this angst you’re going through over a surprise pregnancy?” She gestured. “Unnecessary. Not when the father is waiting and willing to stand by you. The miscommunication trope drives me fucking insane, man,” she added as she stormed out. “Too stupid to live shit.”

Sighing, Charlotte pushed up off the bathtub ledge and grabbed her smartphone, pulling up the last text she’d sent to Braht.

She hesitated, then;

Hi. It’s Charlotte, from MillionOrc Agency. We talked six weeks ago?

“Talked” sounded so goddamn insecure—but better than hooked up. She couldn’t admit that in a text, it could get her kicked out of the agency if Braht was feeling vindictive. Also she didn’t want to ASSume Braht remembered her.

If youd like, can we talk? If you don’t want to, I get it. Charlotte.

She hit send and grimacing, set it back down on the sink then braced herself on her hands, staring at her face.

“Oh my god. A baby.”

Straightening, she decided to bury herself in Netflix versus brooding, and grabbed her phone just as it began ringing.

Startled, she almost dropped it, her fingers clenching out of reflex. She hit accept call and cleared her throat. “Oh, hey. It’s Charlotte. Is this Braht?”

Idiot. Caller ID said Possible Bad Decision #349.

“You wanted to talk, Charlotte.”

She closed her eyes, almost shuddering. That cool, smooth voice with a hint of reserve, a hint of dominant amusement... and a hint, a strong hint, of disapproval.

“Yes. I mean, if you’re not busy. If you want to. Look, I shouldn’t have texted you—”

“I’m on my way. Don’t leave your apartment.”

Brahnt disconnected the call.

Charlotte stared at the screen. “Okay then.”

Wait.

“How the hell does he know my unit?”

The man either had a helicopter or a magic wand, because despite New York’s traffic, he reached Charlotte’s place only twenty minutes after he disconnected the call.

They stared at each other.

“Can I come in?” Brahnt asked, lifting an eyebrow.

Charlotte scrambled back from the door, running a hand through her hair. “Oh yes, sorry. Um, come in. Do you want something to drink? I’ve got water...and water. And lots of positive thoughts for the future.” She managed a smile and got out of the way.

Brahnt stopped in the middle of the living room, not bothering to look around, and stared at her. “I don’t want anything to drink. Why did you call me?” His nostrils flared, and he inhaled. “Charlotte.”

Charlotte took a step back, then halted and twisted her hands behind her back. “So. I said I needed some time to think about things.”

Brahnt stared at her, mouth thin.

Charlotte looked away, unable to meet his gaze. “The thing is, I know this is going to sound opportunistic. But I promise I didn’t plan it, at all. I...I’m in shock. My sister had to talk me into calling you.”

“Your sister had to talk you into contacting me? You didn’t want to talk?”

Oh crap, that was the wrong thing to say. Charlotte scrambled to get her foot out of her mouth.

“I—yes, I wanted to talk to you. So many times, I’ve wanted to reach out. I just...it’s me, not you.”

“Really.”

She exhaled. “Look, I told you on our date that I have a bad track record with men. I don’t trust my judgment anymore. I’m in therapy to deal with my issues, and I know I’m making strides, but I haven’t dated in a long time, and I hadn’t tested myself out, you know? So I wasn’t sure if what I felt was real, or a product of my issues.”

She chanced a glance at Brahnt again. The Orc’s head was tilted as he listened, expression neutral.

“So I guess, ironically enough, I am a bit of a commitment phobe.”

“And now?” Brahnt asked.

“I’m pregnant.”

She hadn’t meant to blurt it out like that.

Charlotte cleared her throat. “Surprise pregnancy trope, hell yes! It’s my sister’s favorite. She’s made a shit ton of money off of it. I mean, you’re not a billionaire, but I guess I’m willing to lower my standards.”

She cringed. That’d sounded a lot funnier in her head. Which was why some things should stay in her head, and not actually trip and fall out of her mouth. Like she’d somehow tripped and fallen onto a condomless cock and gotten knocked up.

“Pregnant.”

Charlotte didn’t know how to read the complete lack of emotion in the word, the utter absence of expression on Brahnt’s face.

She was tempted to rush in and fill the silence, but she held herself back, giving the Orc time to process.

“Six weeks, obviously,” Brahnt said next. He pinned Charlotte with a look. “You’re certain it’s my baby?”

Charlotte didn’t bristle. She’d expected the question. It was a reasonable question. She nodded. “I’m certain. Though, of course I don’t mind submitting to a paternity test.”

Brahnt waved a hand. “Well, this is unexpected.” Now he did move, crossing the few feet of distance between them. When he spoke, his voice was gentle. “You do know I’m not going to allow my Human and baby to live separately from me, right?”

Charlotte opened her mouth, closed it. “I mean, I don’t think we have to make any hasty decisions. Pregnancy is nine months. That’s a lot of time to spend getting to know each other better.”

“Charlotte.” The voice was still gentle, but steel crept into it. “You can keep this apartment if that makes you feel secure. But I’m not allowing my pregnant Human to live alone. When you accepted my seed into your body without a condom, you were accepting the possible consequences. A baby. Living with me.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. “Whoa. Having unprotected sex, or a baby, doesn’t mean we’re in a committed relationship, that I’m yours.” Shit, who was she kidding here? She was talking to an Orc.

To an Orc, that’s exactly what it meant, if she wanted it to.

This time Brahnt lifted both eyebrows. It was so cliché, but so sexy. “Excuse me if I’m incorrect, but didn’t we meet through the MillionOrc Matchmakers agency?”

Charlotte started to talk, but Brahnt placed a finger on her lips. “No, just nod yes or no.”

Glaring, Charlotte nodded.

“Good. Isn’t the entire premise of that agency that Orcs and Humans are seeking to pair? To build a family together?”

Had he and Caro been talking behind her back? Charlotte nodded again.

“Finally; you matched with me, aware of that premise. That my goal was to marry and have a child as soon as possible.”

Charlotte didn’t bother nodding. She crossed her arms and increased the wattage of her glare.

“Then you let me fuck you, Charlotte. Without a condom. All night long.”

The breath wheezed out of Charlotte's chest.

Brahnt smiled, mocking and...yup...slow. "Now you're pregnant with my child. Charlotte, don't tell me you didn't accept the inevitable conclusion from the very beginning."

The Orc watched her for another long moment, then lowered his finger. "Good. Now. Go pack."

After entering her bedroom, Charlotte connected a Bluetooth to her smartphone and called Caro—while she packed.

"Brahnt is here," she hissed. "He's making me move in with him."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Making you? Do you want to move in with him?"

Shit. Charlotte knew *that* tone of voice. She hurried to do damage control. "I mean, I don't *not* want to move in with him. I didn't expect—"

Her twin's tone eased from borderline psychotic into sardonic. "You didn't expect the Orc baby daddy to...go Orc? After you told him you were pregnant? I mean, come on. I've written this scene at least fifteen times. Even you have the beats memorized."

"You don't have to make me sound too stupid to live." She sat on the edge of her bed.

"You're not an idiot. But maybe the hormones are messing with your brain cells a little."

"Dude. You're so goddamn rude sometimes."

"I believe in tough love. I've got three thousand words left to dictate before I can have pizza and sushi. Text me when you're settled in. Bye, babe."

"It's like you don't even care," she muttered at her smartphone. "Also, didn't we already talk about food rewards?"

"Is everything okay?" Brahnt said, appearing in the doorway.

Charlotte shot up, and immediately regretted it as all the blood rushed to her head and she staggered a step, flailing to grip

something.

A second later, she was gripping a handful of shirt that covered a muscular chest, and Brahnt's arm was around her, holding her steady.

"Wait it out," the Orc murmured. "I've got you."

After another several seconds, Charlotte blinked, and straightened. "Sorry. The nausea and dizziness are a doozy."

Brahnt's arm tightened, then he released Charlotte. "And you think I'm going to leave you living alone here? You could trip and hit your head on something."

"Considering there's not a lot of furniture in my place, if I tripped I'd be hitting my head on air."

Brahnt's gaze hardened.

Charlotte sighed. "Let me just get my bag."

10

BRAHNT LOOKED AROUND. “Did you pack everything?”

“No, I’ve got it. There’s not much I need.”

“So you’re low maintenance?”

He said it with such bland irony Charlotte laughed. “I am the opposite of low maintenance. But I’ll let you find out the hard way.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” Brahnt took the duffel bag from Charlotte. “Can I carry this for you? I don’t want to violate your boundaries.”

Charlotte ignored the sarcasm. Don’t feed the hot troll. Orc. Whatever.

“That’s fine.” She took a deep breath, let it out and lifted her chin in the Orc’s direction. Then lowered it, as soon as she realized what she’d done. “There’s something else we need to discuss.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

Brahnt’s jaw tensed. “Go on.”

“Snowkiss.”

“Oh.” He relaxed, then shrugged. “I have no objections to a dog in the house, if there’s no other way to avoid it. But not in the bed, that’s my firm rule. You’ll have to interview a pet sitter, because taking care of a dog is beyond the scope of duties for my housekeeper.”

“Does she not like dogs? If she does like pets, it makes more sense to offer her a bump in pay or something.” Charlotte

dragged the second duffel bag out of her tiny closet and began stuffing it with Snowkiss's things. "Snowkiss!"

The dog yipped, toenails clicking on the laminate floors as she darted from the small living room into Charlotte's bedroom.

Charlotte crouched. "We're going to go stay with Brahnt for a few days—"

Brahnt snorted.

"—because he's having an Orc meltdown and we have to be understanding. We're deciding to choose our battles."

"Wise," the Orc murmured. "Though I hesitate to kill your garden of delusions with the weedkiller Reality."

Charlotte stood, ignored Brahnt, and stuffed Snowkiss into her carry bag and slung it over her chest.

"I hope you're not allergic," she said in the tone of a woman who hoped the exact opposite.

"Oh, no worries," Brahnt said. "I like having cute little pouty creatures around. Especially after we've established who's dominant, and who's not."

"You'd never get away saying something like that to an Orc female."

His eyes widened. He cleared his throat. She watched in interest as he made himself not beg her to keep his behavior to herself. She patted his shoulder and left the room, letting him trail behind her.

Charlotte locked up, and they made a short trip out of the building to Brahnt's car, double parked on the street. But she supposed the Orc wasn't worried about tickets. To him, a ticket would be a parking fee.

Brahnt opened the door of his little black sports car, and Charlotte slid into the front seat. "This isn't what you would dub family friendly."

"You can select something else. I'll have my admin research the latest vehicle safety reports and compile a list of options." Brahnt put the duffel bags in the trunk, then got in the driver

side. “There’s a car seat for Snowkiss in the back. I guessed her size, but I’m certain it’s correct.”

Twisting, Charlotte eyed the small dog car seat already set up in the back. It wasn’t like the Orc had an Amazon fairy in his pocket and had ordered one while they were in Charlotte’s apartment. Which meant Brahnt had been planning this all along.

It was diabolical.

Fuming, because it meant Brahnt had been sure of her this entire time, Charlotte fastened Snowkiss into the car seat, then turned back around and settled into her own, pushing Brahnt’s hands away when the Orc tried to fasten the seat belt for her.

“I’m not a child,” Charlotte snapped. “I can buckle my own seat belt.”

“Maybe I like riling you up.” Brahnt’s fingers trailed along Charlotte’s thigh, but the Orc settled back into his own seat and started the car. “Have you been to your first doctor appointment?”

Charlotte crossed her arms over her chest, staring out the window as the car pulled out of the parking lot.

“Of course not,” Charlotte said. “Don’t worry, you won’t miss it. We’ll go together.” Brahnt thought she was dumb. It was clearly a trick question.

“I’m glad you’re thinking in a “we” mindset, but I’m also a little concerned you’re six weeks pregnant and you haven’t been to a doctor yet.”

Charlotte sneered—but she was faced away from Brahnt anyway. “You’re not supposed to go any earlier, Brahnt. It’s a waste of everyone’s time. All they’ll do is give you a stick to pee on and pat you on the head and send you home with generic vitamins the size of sewer rats.” Her cousin, a dad of five, who’d she called after talking to Caro, had said so.

“It sounds like you’ve done some research,” Brahnt said. “Good. You’re taking this seriously.”

Charlotte swiveled to stare at her. “How else would you take a pregnancy, Braht?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He smiled pleasantly. “There’s all kinds of reactions you could have to this sort of news. Denial. Self-destructive behavior. Failing to tell the father of your child.”

“None of which I’ve done. In fact, as soon as Caro and I knew, I called you.” Not first, but eventually.

“Remind me to send Caro a gift basket—or maybe tickets to that writers’ conference in Vegas you two were on social media talking about since calling me was her idea.”

Charlotte said nothing. Mostly because she was trying to figure out how long ago that social media discussion had been and where else Braht had been stalking her.

“That’s what I thought.”

They didn’t talk much the rest of the trip, and Charlotte grudgingly admitted it was a companionable silence...and that said, she was being immature.

She could blame some of it on the pregnancy, but some of it was her being an ass.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Charlotte said. “I’m being difficult, and you don’t deserve it. I mean, you fucked me without a condom. More than once. But you don’t deserve it.”

Braht glanced at her as he turned into the parking lot of his high-rise. “You’re fine. This is an emotionally charged situation, and we’re both off balance right now.” He pulled the car into its slot and turned it off. “But you have to be aware, Charlotte, I’ll only tolerate so much sass before I discipline you.”

Oh my god. There was that voice again, that look. Orc Eyes, but another variation. This was the “*please misbehave so I can fuck you hard*” variation.

Charlotte was so tempted.

She ran her tongue along her teeth.

So tempted.

But then, that would give away how much she was craving to be fucked, hard, and she didn't want Brahnt to have that power over her yet. They were still in the negotiation phase, and if Charlotte didn't set up strong boundaries now, the Orc would run right over her in the course of their relationship.

She wasn't trying to go out like that.

"You're so quiet," Brahnt purred. "Are you tired? Hungry? How can I take care of you?"

In response, Charlotte unbuckled her seat belt, got out of the car, and proceeded to retrieve Snowkiss while Brahnt grabbed the duffel bags.

The Orc gave her an amused look then pressed his hand on the small of Charlotte's back, ushering her towards the elevator.

Once they were inside the penthouse apartment, Brahnt gestured. "Your bedroom is this way."

"We're not sharing?" She trailed behind Brahnt.

"I would like to, but I won't force the issue. Even if you're sleeping in my bed, you're an adult. You need your own space."

The last of Charlotte's ire vanished. How could she stay unreasonably mad for the sake of using anger as a barrier when Brahnt was still, curse him, doing and saying all of the right things?

"Thank you. I appreciate the consideration."

Brahnt lowered the duffel bags onto the floor and turned towards her as Charlotte entered the bedroom.

"I don't appreciate the distance," Brahnt said. "Let me make my position clear."

Charlotte held her breath and couldn't escape the intensity of Brahnt's gaze.

"I want you in my bed. I don't like the idea of sleeping apart. I won't press the issue for now, because we're still in the getting to know you phase and I don't want to scare you away. But I will be pressing the issue, Charlotte. Fair warning."

Charlotte nodded.

Brahnt walked past her. “Meet me in the kitchen in about ten minutes. We have a conference call. It won’t take long.”

Charlotte unpacked Snowkiss’s things and spent a few minutes deciding how to set her up—dog bed in the living room, or in the bedroom with Charlotte?—then left and went to the kitchen.

Brahnt was talking to someone and looked up as Charlotte entered, gesturing her forward.

“And here she is now.”

Charlotte recognized the face on the laptop and blinked. “Matchmaker. How are you?” She glanced at Brahnt.

“I’m doing well, Charlotte.” Matchmaker smiled. “I’m told you and Brahnt have wonderful news. Spill the tea.”

Brahnt said nothing.

Charlotte cleared her throat. “Well, we’ve moved in together. After a discussion, we came to the decision—”

“Charlotte is pregnant,” Brahnt said. “You can take her off your roster. And obliterate all of her data.”

Charlotte rounded on him, glaring. “Do you have to be so abrupt? It’s like you have no soft skills.”

“You were beginning a verbal tap dance. Matchmaker is a busy female. But please excuse me, continue with your soft skills.”

“I’m sorry, Matchmaker. He’s like this. I’ve decided to find it endearing rather than strangle-inducing.”

Matchmaker chuckled. “I’m pleased for you both. I’ll remove you from our rosters and close out your active files. We do have an alumni’s club for our successfully matched couples. My admin will be in touch with the details.”

Charlotte’s expression brightened. “That would be great. Brahnt, we can socialize with the other matches who’ve gone through the same process.”

Brahnt grimaced.

Charlotte ignored him, turning back to Matchmaker. “Do any of them have children yet?”

“Oh, quite a few have young families. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to develop a connection with couples at a similar life stage. Anyway, Brahnt is looking impatient to have you all to himself. I’ll let you two go.”

Charlotte turned to Brahnt when the call disconnected. “Did you want to look at forehead stamps before we pick an obstetrician? That way you don’t have to walk around bellowing ‘she’s mine’ at everyone.”

Brahnt looked intrigued. “That sounds like an admirable solution. Or I could put a ring on it. I like that Human custom.”

Charlotte gave up. She returned to her bedroom to finish unpacking.

“I’m not sure if taking a limo to the first doctor’s appointment is necessary,” Charlotte said, her voice trailing off when Brahnt gave her the Signature Look.

“Nothing but the best for you,” was the cool reply.

“You’re showing off.

“Maybe. Maybe I’m trying to ram home into your thick skull the benefits of being mine.”

“Look, I’m pretty clear on that,” Charlotte said, unnecessarily adjusting her ponytail. “It’s not like the whole penthouse thing just flew over my head. I told you it was a me not a you thing. Are you ever going to let me live that down?”

Brahnt lowered his lashes over his eyes.

“Somehow I didn’t think so. You know, it’s detrimental to my emotional health for you to hold a grudge for the next nine months.”

“Who said it was only going to be nine?”

Charlotte glared. “See what that attitude gets you in bed.”

Brahnt snorted. “Please. That’s not even a challenge.”

“*Brahnt.*”

“I’m sure I’ll get it out of my system soon enough. The fact I gave you six weeks of space, and not only did you not contact me once, not a text or a call to let me know you at least were thinking of me—”

“Oh my god, I’ll give you the name to my therapist. We can’t start a co-dependent dynamic. If I’d known you were an anxious attachment style—”

“—but your twin had to talk you into telling me you were carrying my child. She told me you were worried about *money* before she knocked some sense into your head.”

Charlotte’s mouth dropped open. “Caro told you that?”

“You act like I’m the poor communicator,” was Brahnt’s drawl. “Of course, she told me—she’s pragmatic, and protective. She looks nothing like you, by the way. There lies the death of my identical twin fantasies.”

“I will cut you.”

“With what, your killer jete? Charlotte, please. Be your authentic self. It’s fine. I’ll be the ruthless one, you’ll be the... nurturing one.”

“God, now I know you’ve been talking to Caro. She gifted you her latest bundle of Firsts in Series, didn’t she? And you’ve been reading them. Look, that stuff is not real life.”

“Hmm. We’ve arrived.”

Charlotte tried to look nonchalant about the gift basket of swag she clutched to her chest. Brahnt had offered to carry it, ever the gentleman of course, but Charlotte was a former trailer park kid.

She didn't want to let go of the fancy free stuff.

Once Brahnt buckled her in—Charlotte far too distracted pulling the treats out of the gift basket to protest—she began spreading the items out on her lap.

Premium liquid vitamins—the kind that required refrigeration, thank you very much.

A signed hardcover from a prominent expert in Human/Orc pregnancies, along with a QR code for the audiobook version.

Samples of protein and micronutrient infused chocolates and energy bars. A selection of decaffeinated tea.

So, it was a little heavy on the food rewards, but she supposed she'd give the office a pass.

There was even an engraved photo where they would put the first ultrasound picture. Plus, various gift cards and accouterments.

“Where did you find this obstetrician again?” Charlotte asked, sitting back in her seat and tearing open one of the chocolates.

She had to test them out early, after all, to see if it was a brand she preferred.

“They're the office my parents utilized. I wouldn't trust anyone else with my Human.”

“Why all the bribes? Not that I'm complaining.”

“They aren't bribes. If it weren't uncouth, I'd show you the bill.”

Charlotte eyed him sideways, still munching. “If I'm going to accept the ring you keep saying you're going to put on it, we're going to have to sit down and discuss budget eventually.”

Brahnt started laughing.

Charlotte frowned. “What's so funny?”

“You're cute. That word, budget.”

“Yeah, Brahnt, even filthy rich people can have budget discussions. Like there's no reason to fling money around

because you have it to spend.”

“Why not? It’s cooperative economics.”

“Come again?”

“If you’re rich, part of your duty to society is to spend your money. Spread it around. I only like to hoard my females.”

“Wow. That is an interesting way of looking at things.” She stuffed everything but the food treats back into the basket. “So, when do I meet your parents? Oh my god, you didn’t tell them about me, did you?” She laughed. “They are going to have a fit. The upstart struggling dancer and their shiny darling boy? They’ll demand a paternity test. Or try to pay me off. I honestly can’t wait.”

When he didn’t say anything—but Charlotte was learning Brahnt’s silences said a ton—Charlotte shifted to face him.

She took one look at his face and started laughing all over again. “I was messing around, but I’m right, aren’t I?”

Brahnt sighed. “There will be questions. And concerns. My mother probably had someone else in mind.”

Charlotte’s laughter morphed into howling. “Concerns? God, I love how you talk sometimes. Okay okay, so how do we play this? Do you like your parents?”

“Of course I like my parents.”

“So no trolling. Too bad. That could have kept me busy for awhile.”

“Exactly how would you troll my parents?”

“By being every one of their worst nightmares brought to life.” Charlotte grinned. “But since you like them, I guess I have to be on good behavior. Maybe we should do the smart thing and wait until the paternity test comes back to do the meet and greet.”

“We didn’t order a paternity test,” was the testy response. “Nor do I plan on doing so.”

Charlotte smirked. “You never know. I might have had another stud stashed in my closet somewhere. Did you do your due

diligence? I mean, did you?"

"Charlotte. You're straying dangerously close to language for which you will be disciplined."

Charlotte unwrapped another chocolate and popped it in her mouth. Adored how Braht talked. When Braht wasn't trying to rearrange her life, Charlotte could listen to him talk for hours. Private school education must be fabulous.

"You know you don't scare me, right?" she said.

"I've been on my best behavior."

"The female's circle would cut you."

Silence.

OUT OF SHEER perversity and a lifetime of being told if he wanted to be successful don't open his phone in the morning—fine, perhaps not a lifetime, but more years than he cared to count, which really was only the few decades since cell phones had been invented but who was counting...wait, no, just since Humans began writing about productivity...and usually from peons whose net worth didn't come close to his own—Brahnt woke, made a mental note that Charlotte was already up since he heard her in conversation with Snowkiss, damn morning people, and reached for his phone.

He sneered at it as he opened the Instagram app and began to mindlessly scroll.

Damned if he let some guru who couldn't live to be more than a measly century tell him his personal and business success depended on not checking social media for the first twenty minutes of the day. Please. If Humans were so weak minded, which they mostly were—

Brahnt stopped. Stared.

Moved the phone out of his line of vision to look at where his feet even now poked out of the bedding—a peculiar quirk of his, he just didn't like to have his feet covered while he was sleeping—then looked at the square image innocently sitting in his feed.

He wasn't insane.

Those were his feet.

“Charlotte!” he roared. He didn’t even have to check the account that had posted the picture.

That damn influencer account.

It belonged to an up and coming classical dancer, an attractive young woman named Charlotte Trainor.

He shoved the covers off him right as Charlotte’s footsteps came running down the hallway, the pitter patter of dog nails following her.

The bedroom door flung open just as Brahnt surged to his feet, all but frothing with indignant rage.

She skidded to a stop, eyes wide and long ashy hair mussed, as Snowkiss ran in a circle around her, yipping.

“What’s wrong!” Charlotte exclaimed. “Is there a bug? Do you want me to kill a bug?”

Brahnt stared at her.

“Kill a bug?” He shoved his smartphone in Charlotte’s face. “What is this?” He could barely speak coherently. “What is this?”

Charlotte looked at the picture, her eyes brightening, then at Brahnt’s face, her eyes dimming, and began to hem and haw.

“Well, um, it’s...”

“My feet!” Brahnt roared.

“And sexy, masculine feet they are.”

He hated social media. He loathed that privacy wrecking disaster with a passion. And his feet were sitting on the account of a woman with twenty thousand followers. He hadn’t been tagged or otherwise identified...but it was the principle of the matter.

He would give Charlotte one opportunity to explain before he blistered the Human’s behind with his hand. Then somehow convince her not to tell on him.

“Charlotte, why are my feet on your Instagram account?” And when the hell had she even taken the picture?

“Oh, well, I’m doing a grid this week comparing regular feet to dancer’s feet. And, I mean, you have great feet. Strong toes, well-shaped nails.” Charlotte gave him an unsure smile. “I didn’t tag you or anything. I know how psychotic you are—I mean, I know one of your boundaries is not posting your face on social media.”

Brahnt tossed his phone onto the bed and took a step towards her.

Charlotte skipped a step back, eyes widening. “Do you want the phone number to my therapist? She’s good with teaching emotional regulation skills.”

“Your backside is going to be red by the time I’m done with you.”

“I’m pregnant!”

“Yes. You are.” Snowkiss yipped, paused, and began to growl. Brahnt gave the bit of dandelion fluff a brief sneer, then caught himself—he wasn’t going to get in a pissing contest with a Cotonese.

Brahnt took another step forward and Charlotte, damn her, danced another step backwards, darted to the side, quick and light on her toes, then behind.

Brahnt halted and turned to face her. “Don’t make me chase you. Or rather...do. Please. Do.”

Charlotte cocked her head. “So is this role-playing, and you’re pretending to go all beast mode on me to let off some morning wood? Or is this for real?”

“Oh, it’s definitely for real, Charlotte Trainor.” Another step forward.

“I don’t think I want to participate.”

“I don’t think you have much of a choice. My *feet* are on your *Instagram* feed.”

Charlotte’s lips turned down. “That whole dubcon thing would be hot, except you said you’re angry angry. So why don’t we go have some breakfast—”

“You don’t cook.” A sudden concern for the state of the cage-free duck eggs from a Pennsylvania farm diverted some of his ire. Please someone tell him Charlotte hadn’t touched the duck eggs.

“And for a very good reason,” Charlotte said. “But I thought this morning I would make the effort. Just like you’re going to make the effort to use big boy words to express your concern rather than defaulting to being an Orc Neanderthal and expressing your anger through physical violence.”

“Just a little physical violence,” Brahnt purred, though it was closer to an Orc’s version of a wheedle. It was only Snowkiss present to witness, and he’d already established his dominance. Not that she’d paid that any mind. “Just enough to blister your backside.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “No.” Then she dashed out of the room.

Brahnt followed. “Did you roll your eyes at me?”

“You bet I did, Mr. Grey,” the Human yelled over her shoulder. “We’re having pancakes and turkey bacon and I had a yearning for strawberry and jalapeño salsa.”

Thank the Allmother. Odd combo, but fine.

“Oh, and those weird rich boy eggs you had in here.”

Damn.

Charlotte decided the prudent thing was to let the Orc have some quality quiet time to cool down before Brahnt convinced himself to make good on the threat to blister her backside.

Especially since Charlotte was kind of into it, but only if it was play. That dubcon stuff was fine when reading a book, but she’d seen her dad strike her mom and vice versa and in real life that type of dysfunction wasn’t sexy at all.

But if Brahnt was under control, and wanted to let off a little steam with some spanking and would honor a safe word,

Charlotte was down. So down.

She mentally patted herself on the back because the old Charlotte would have been like, hell yes daddy spank me now what safe word?

But this was the new, emotionally healthy and pregnant Charlotte. And couldn't kids hear in utero these days?

So she spent the day at her twins' place, silent on pain of death because Caro was on this new 10,000 words a day kick and would strangle her if Charlotte interrupted her streak, which was on an entire three days so far.

Charlotte rolled her eyes where Caro couldn't see it. Authors were insane. Charlotte was glad she was only a dancer, much more balanced. You just did your eight hours of training five days a week, your one day of strength training, your one day off, kept abreast of the competition while doing the round of auditions, maintained your influencer accounts, monitored your diet and nutrition on a daily basis, and called it a day.

Much more balanced.

"Fuck yeah, day four," Caro exclaimed, yanking her headphones off and tossing them, with apparent venom, onto the table. She was gentler with her laptop and microphone. "Fitty K book in a week coming up."

Charlotte perked up. "You know what, that's an awesome achievement. Four days straight. You deserve a reward."

Caro snorted, pushing out of her chair, and headed towards the kitchen. "Don't try to finesse me. What do you want?"

"Get me out of this apartment."

Caro popped open the tab of a beer. Charlotte shuddered at the carbs. "Don't you have a man for that? Why are you at my place bugging me?"

Charlotte avoided her keen gaze. "There was a minor blow up this morning."

"What did you do?"

"Why the hell does it have to be something I did?"

“Because I know you, and you are hell to live with. You bitch about boundaries, but you eat other people’s food, wear other people’s clothes, rearrange other people’s furniture—”

“I’ve only ever lived with you.”

“I am the other people. I feel really sorry for your Orc. You’re going to drive him insane. And he’s got a mini you coming on top of it?” Caro shook her head and took a long swig of beer. “You couldn’t pay me enough.”

Charlotte frowned. “Your support is overwhelming.”

“I support you. If he does anything stupid, I’ll be over there and I’ll kick his ass. But again, why are you hanging out at my place?”

“I may have posted a picture of his feet on Instagram. But I didn’t tag him,” Charlotte exclaimed, interrupting Caro’s sharp inhale. “Anyway, I’m letting him cool off. He mentioned something about blistering my backside.”

“Yeah, but you like that shit.”

“That was the old me.”

“Riiight. Just get the doc to clear it.”

“Can we go out or not? I already texted Felicia and Hamlet. Ham’s got a new plus one this week.”

Caro sighed, set down the beer and wandered to her bedroom. “I guess. I’ve been trying to talk myself into leaving the apartment.”

“It’ll be good for your word count.”

Caro’s sour expression brightened.

“You’re what!” Felicia exclaimed, spitting out wine.

White, and dry, because Felicia didn’t drink anything else. She stared at Charlotte with wide dark eyes, a Black-Chinese

American woman Charlotte met through a dance colleague in college.

“You’re not married! What have I told you?” She leaned forward and jammed her pointer finger on Charlotte’s forehead. “No wedding, no womb.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re living together, and we’ll get engaged soon.”

“I see no ring.”

“I mean, I think I’m on his medical insurance.” Charlotte frowned. “Unless he paid the bill in cash. He took me to our first doctor’s appointment, and it weren’t the county clinic, let me leave it at that.”

Felicia leaned back in her seat, sipping her wine. “Fancy?”

“Gift baskets with chocolate and signed hard backs and...” she gestured “...stuff. So much stuff. Nothing generic.”

“I looked it up,” Caro said, because of course she did. She was the one who always researched everything. “You have to know someone to get in at that office. By someone, I mean either the president or a mob boss or a Kpop idol.”

Charlotte laughed. “No way.”

“Are you questioning my research skills?”

Charlotte stopped laughing. No, no she wasn’t. “I wonder how rich he is?”

“Okay, gold digger. Didn’t you meet him through MillionOrc Matchmaking?” Hamlet asked, stirring his drink.

His date was in the bathroom, and that whole dynamic didn’t seem to be going well. Charlotte figured the date was in the bathroom because he was waiting for the opportunity to sneak out.

It wasn’t like Charlotte hadn’t done it before. A lot.

She wondered what would happen if she tried that on Brahnt, but...she didn’t have to wonder. Those days of giving Charlotte space were laughcryably over.

“Yeah. And I think the fee would have covered my first doctor visit.” Charlotte grimaced. She wasn’t going to think about the state of her bank account. She was going to think positive.

“And you’re already knocked up and living together?” Hamlet raised a reddish-blond brow. “Maybe I should try it.” He cast his gaze in the direction of the bathroom where his missing date was. “I need some help. Do they do same-sex pairings?”

“The vetting is thorough,” Charlotte said, trying to be diplomatic, “but I think they do.”

She suspected the only reason she got on to the roster was because she was an up-and-coming influencer and classically trained dancer. There was a certain amount of elitism involved in whose applications were selected. Charlotte had gone to several mixers as part of the process, and the people there would all be considered tens. Either in their career fields, or physically, but usually both.

Hamlet wasn’t dumb. “You don’t think I’ll get in.”

“I didn’t say that. But it’s competitive. Like trying to get into the Ivy League college from hell. If you’re sure about wanting to get in, then we can talk. They do regular mixers, and I can ask some questions and see what would help your application stand out.”

“So spill,” Felicia said. “Usually you’d be giving us your guy’s life bio by now. Why so close mouthed?”

Charlotte pursed her lips. “He comes from old money, and he’s publicity shy. Like no social media or anything. He had a fit when I posted a picture of his feet on Instagram today.”

Felicia and Hamlet sat down their drinks and snatched up their phones.

Charlotte sighed. Caro laughed.

“You didn’t tag him or anything,” Felicia said, sounding disappointed. “Nice feet though. I can’t tell you how many guys I’ve dated who think pedicures are just for girls.”

Charlotte shuddered. “He doesn’t have that problem. I don’t know if I’m supposed to announce anything yet. Let me text

him and see what he says.”

are you still mad at me for posting that picture

What do you think? Fine, I've calmed down some. But we're going to discuss this further.

Its not like I put it on my OnlyFans

What the fuck is only fans?

Charlotte cringed and left the message on read.

Three minutes later her phone rang.

“Answer it,” Caro said. “It’ll go worse for you if you don’t.”

Knowing she was about to get an earful, Charlotte connected the call. “Brahnt, yes?”

“You have an OnlyFans?” Brahnt growled. “And it’s still active?”

“I thought you didn’t know what OnlyFans was.”

“I have the fucking internet, Charlotte. I’m making an account now, and by the Allmother, depending on what I see there...”

Charlotte, thinking herself rather brave, stayed on the line as Brahnt went silent. There were several keystrokes, then long moments of silence while the Orc probably was looking at Charlotte’s account.

That lasted for sixty seconds. She couldn’t take it anymore.

“It’s not so bad, is it?”

“Come home, Charlotte.”

Brahnt disconnected.

Shit.

Charlotte pursed her lips, then texted:

Anyway, I was texting you to find out what you want me to not tell my people about us. My friends are asking who the baby daddy is. Am I still your hot, dirty little secret? Because I don’t mind, but I need to know what to tell people

Tell them you're engaged and your husband will break the neck of anyone who touches you

right, a bit much. But not your name or anything?

No.

are u ashamed of me

No. But my parents don't know yet and we need to tell them first. Plus you need to be introduced to the female's circle.

Why? I mean why haven't you told them yet

Because they're going to be weird about it, Charlotte, you're not ready for them and I've already got my hands full dealing with you this week. Come home. If you're not home in an hour...

No, seriously, the OnlyFans isn't that bad is it? I mean bad being a poor choice of words because there's nothing wrong with OnlyFans. But I mean ...

Charlotte gave up.

Caro was looking over Charlotte's shoulder, reading the messages.

"I told you he wasn't gonna like that shit," Caro said.

"It's very tasteful artistic nudes."

"And nude dancing."

"Also tasteful."

"There's that twerking video."

"Oh my god, that was so insane! But yeah...Orc Daddy might not like sharing his little Human's tight ass with the adoring public." Charlotte smirked.

Caro gagged. "I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear you call him Daddy. I don't need those images in my head."

"Not if you're not paying my subscription fee, you don't."

“You two have always been so weird,” Felicia muttered.

12

CHARLOTTE, mindful of the...*request*...to be home in an hour, decided obedience was the better side of valor this one time.

The whole leaving Braht alone to stew in his juices thing could backfire. But really, they'd been in each other's pockets for a couple of days now and needed to spend time apart in order to maintain a healthy relationship.

She ordered a ride share, leaving Caro and friends in the bar, and on the ride home posted the pictures she'd taken to her social media feeds along with a few fun captions.

An impromptu low key night on the town with family and friends. And soon I'll have both sad and happy surprise news for everyone!

She'd have to tell her followers she was taking a hiatus from dance in a few months, but she knew they'd be ecstatic when they learned why. Well, there would always be trolls, but she'd either ignore them or selectively engage depending on her mood and which lucky darling got to experience the evil side of positivity.

The concierge greeted Charlotte by name when she entered the building, and pushed the elevator button for her. She couldn't decide if that was cool or another mind-boggling example of why common folk needed to rise up and eat the rich. Except the ones who spread the wealth.

And maybe Orcs.

“You don’t have to push the elevator button for me,” Charlotte told him. “Though it’s appreciated. I hope you’re getting paid enough to deal with these people.”

Charlotte got a bland smile in return. She supposed she was now part of these people.

“Brahnt?” she called out when she entered the penthouse. It was dark, if one ignored the evening lights streaming in through the entire wall that was actually a window—

—and the Orc sitting on the couch, leg crossed at the knee, one arm sprawled on the couch back as the other held a smartphone, the harsh light in his face.

Charlotte blinked, recognizing the music from one of her OnlyFans videos, and her wild laughter as she signed off.

“Oh...you’re still going through my content.” There was at least two years’ worth to comb through. “So...”

Brahnt set the phone aside and looked up, crossing his fingers over his knee. “Come here.”

Oookaaay. Charlotte gave him a bright, unsure smile. “Since you’ve had some time to look through it, you see that my OnlyFans is consistent with my overall social media brand. Adults only, of course, because the content is a little racier, but overall I feel—”

“Charlotte. Come here.”

The command was mild enough, but she wasn’t fooled. At all.

“I went through extensive vetting at the agency, you know. If anyone had thought my content was unbecoming, I never would have made it onto the roster.

“You’re stalling.”

She was. She absolutely was. Maybe Snowkiss would do her a solid and wake up from wherever she was napping and run interference.

“Right, okay. So maybe we should set up some parameters for how the rest of the evening is going to go. No shouting—growling is okay, because it’s hot when you growl and you

can't help yourself—no name calling though cursing is fine. Spanking *only* if it's foreplay.”

Brahnt watched her, eyebrow slightly raised, his entire posture relaxed, patient.

Charlotte still wasn't fooled. “Can we agree to behave like adults?”

“Let's talk about that, Charlotte. Let's talk about agreements. For example, how when you agreed to be mine, you agreed to thorough and transparent disclosure.”

It was more or less pointless to point out that she had never actually verbally agreed to be Brahnt's. She'd more or less just gone along with the flow.

Charlotte frowned. “I had no idea you didn't know about my OnlyFans.”

Brahnt's expression darkened a touch. “You're prevaricating. Do you think I would have allowed you to maintain a social media account dancing and posing erotically for the pleasure of anyone but me?”

She wanted to argue with the word “allow” because she was pretty certain he wouldn't talk like that if she was an Orcess.

“It's tasteful eroticism. More artistic than anything else. Though I'd like to reiterate that we are straying close to sex work shaming, and I don't agree with that.”

Brahnt's eyes plunged into the abyss. “Sex work.”

“OnlyFans is the closest I've ever gotten to that,” Charlotte added hastily. “No worries. We are completely exclusive.”

“By we, you mean you, I, and...” he glanced at the smartphone “how many subscribers do have?”

“Enough to pay the rent, by the gods of New York.”

“Wonderful. I'm glad to hear that. That you maintain this side gig in order to pay rent. Which you no longer need to pay, so you'll indulge me and close your account.”

“Brahnt.”

“Non negotiable, Charlotte.”

They stared at each other. Well, Charlotte contemplated how to talk herself out of this...or, to be honest, fuck her way out of this, while Brahnt looked like he was trying to decide how hard he could spank before it was obviously no longer foreplay.

She really did need to find out who the matriarch of his clan's female's circle was. And put the number on speed dial.

Charlotte cleared her throat. “Do you want to skip to the angry make-up sex since that's where this seems to be headed?”

“I want to establish that my wife isn't going to be stripping on social media for tips and likes.”

Charlotte turned on her heels and strode toward the door.

Brahnt caught her in five seconds flat, slamming his hand on the door as Charlotte grabbed the knob.

“I don't think so. You don't get to walk out on me because you don't like direct speech. Or the consequences of your own actions.”

“I had a life before you, Brahnt. You don't get to imply I'm a sloppy attention seeker instead of a businesswoman!”

Brahnt put hands on Charlotte's shoulders and leaned in enough to pin her against the door.

“You did have a life. I accept that life. But you're with me now and I—” he nipped Charlotte's ear “—don't share.”

“You're asking me to take a massive leap of faith. I'm going to have to give up my career in a few months, which will impact my social media hustle, and now you want me to give up my side gig too? I'm going to be dependent on you!”

“In what universe is that not right and proper? You're pregnant with my child. I'm not poor. Why should you work instead of focusing on the baby...and my cock?”

Charlotte let out a breath through gritted teeth. She refused to be drawn by his deliberate provocation. “Maybe because I

enjoy my work? It's fulfilling, it gives me purpose outside of family. Family can't be everything. *You* can't be everything."

Though...tempting. She'd entertained sex slave fantasies before, and it occurred to her that Brahnt was the personality type to try that out with.

"Why not?" Brahnt's voice was cool in her ear.

"Do you want a whiny, clingy Human who's dodging your heels every minute of the day while you're trying to work or rest or do whatever? Is that what you want? Because you're letting the bonding hormones do most of your thinking for you right now."

Brahnt ground his groin against her ass. "No, I'm pretty certain it's my cock doing the thinking for me right now."

Charlotte snorted. The Orc was so outrageous it was hard to stay angry with him.

Focus, damn it. Establish boundaries.

"You're going to have to accept that I want a life outside of the home. And right now—"

"Do you think I can't make a few phone calls and have your account shut down?"

Charlotte froze. "Exactly what is it your company does again?"

Brahnt chuckled. "We've been legal for two full generations now."

"Wait what?"

"No, Charlotte, I don't have to threaten anyone. But my family knows people. If we don't know people, then our people know people."

Charlotte rolled her eyes, gasping when Brahnt's teeth sank into the side of her neck, his hardness still grinding slowly against her. "You mean the filthy rich boys' network."

"Exactly that. The network I can wield for your benefit, or to your detriment. You choose."

Obviously, therapy wasn't doing its job, because she should be a lot angrier about this. But it wasn't like she had begun her OnlyFans account out of a need for artistic expression. It was purely a cash grab, and something of a raunchier outlet to tide her over during her celibate streak.

“Just take my money, Charlotte,” Brahnt said, “as sweetly as you take my cock. It's not that difficult.” Brahnt cupped her buttock, squeezing. “Take it like a good Human. You know I'm going to win this argument, so you might as well submit now and enjoy what I'm trying to give you.”

It was the thread of frustration in Brahnt's voice that had Charlotte relenting. Frustration that wasn't simply from a need to control, but a thwarted need to give.

Charlotte sighed, resting her forehead against the door and arched her back, finally reciprocating.

“Once we get married, then we'll sit down and talk about a household budget. I'm willing to use you for your money up to a certain point—but I'm going to have a life, and that life is going to include social media in some shape or form. Also a job.” She felt Brahnt's grimace.

“Everything is open to negotiation,” the Orc muttered. “Clearly I haven't been fucking you right.”

And clearly Brahnt had decided to remedy that lack right now.

Brahnt slid a hand around the front of her waist, unsnapping the button of her jeans and pulling down the zipper with a metallic click, then dug his fingers in the waistband and pulled them down.

Charlotte obliged by toeing off her shoes and kicking them aside, giving her pants the same treatment as Brahnt slid fingers between her thighs, stroking her clit, his teeth gnawing into her shoulder as his free hand roved up her stomach and cupped her breast.

“Do you want me?” Brahnt whispered, voice hot and guttural. “Do you want me to fuck this tight little pussy? Right here, right now?”

Charlotte's only response was a gasp and moan as the fingers caressing her clit slid down and slipped inside her sheath as he whispered filthy words in her ear.

"You pretend to be such a defiant, independent Human, but you know all of that is posturing," Brahnt said. "It's your way of begging for my cock. For me to take you hard and fast. For me to show you who owns you. That's what you want, isn't it, Charlotte? You want me to own you."

"Two year's...therapy...down...drain..." Charlotte gasped.

"If you didn't want me to own you, you wouldn't have let me fuck you without a condom," Brahnt said, his mouth roving up and down her neck, tusks gently scraping her skin as he paused to bite or suckle. To leave bruises. Marks that would tell anyone who saw them that she was claimed.

"I know I overwhelmed you at first, so I let you run." Brahnt slid his fingers in deeper, and Charlotte moaned. "That's right, moan for me, baby. I give you a long leash, don't I? But this OnlyFans is a hard no for me." Brahnt withdrew his fingers and she listened as pants unbuckled, unzipped, and then the head of her Orc's cock nudged against her entrance. "I won't tolerate it."

Brahnt slid in and Charlotte cried out, pushing her ass against his groin, wanting the Orc to go in deep, hard. Brahnt gripped her around the hips, then let go.

He pounded Charlotte into the door, growling, his own gasps of pleasure harsh in her ear.

Then he dug his fingers in her hair, yanking her head back. "Tell me you're mine. Tell me I'm enough for you. You don't need all this other bullshit."

"I'm yours," Charlotte gasped. "Oh, fuck. Harder, Brahnt. Fuck, yes."

He tightened his fingers in her hair as he pistoned his hips in and out of her. "And?"

"You're...all I need. Fuck—yes, god, damn you."

She came in a rush and a moment later Brahnt followed, shouting, filling Charlotte's pussy with hot milky seed.

"You'll remember what you said once we're in our right minds again," Brahnt rasped, withdrawing.

He slid an arm around Charlotte's waist, half dragged her to the living room couch, and flung her down.

Charlotte's smartphone lit up around 2 AM. She squinted, rolled over, and grabbed it.

Noticed your OnlyFans is down. Orc tapped dat ass didn't he

Fuck you very much Caro

Yeah, no. Incest ain't my kink Imfao

13

“FUCK, Charlotte, I could drive a dump truck through your shit timing!” Arthur stormed back to his barre.

Charlotte grimaced, rubbing her face. “I’m sorry. I’m off my game today.”

Four months pregnant and her symptoms kept getting worse instead of subsiding like that book assured her.

The ballet mistress took her aside. “It’s not only today, Charlotte. You’ve been off all week. What’s going on? We’re trying to not have an injury this soon in rehearsals.”

It was a nice way to warn her to stop fucking up or else.

She leaned against the wall, stretching, then sighed and slid down into a sitting position. “I’m pregnant.”

The mistress’s eyes widened. “Congrats.” She pursed her lips. “Charlotte.”

“I know.”

The company didn’t allow pregnant dancers, not past a certain stage of gestation. With medical clearance technically an individual could dance or engage in whatever activity they had prior to pregnancy, but this wasn’t a hobby. She could cost someone their career if a moment of dizziness had her messing up a lift. Like it almost had a minute ago.

Mistress put a hand on her shoulder. “Was it an accident?”

“One night stand gone gloriously wrong.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s fine. The father and I are together. It’s a good relationship. He’s standing by me. But no, we didn’t intend to get pregnant right away.” At least Charlotte hadn’t. Brahnt was still suspect. “I mean, rehearsals just started.”

“How far along are you?”

“Four months.” Spent in sheer misery. Some pregnant people breezed through the first trimester. Charlotte wasn’t one of those people.

Mistress let out a breath. “You know the company policy.”

“I know.” She leaned her head against the wall, closing her eyes. Her stomach clenched, and not just with nausea. “I mean, I wanted to start a family and I accepted I’d have to go on a hiatus, but I hadn’t meant to do it right away.” *Damn you, Brahnt.* But she’d probably been unrealistic.

“Well, no help for it now if you’re going to keep it,” Mistress said. “It’s not forever, just for a few months. You have a solid career ahead of you once this is behind you.”

Charlotte opened her eyes and gave Mistress a look. “It’s a kid. It will never be behind me.”

Mistress shrugged. “You know what I mean. Besides, I never had any.” She gave Charlotte a brief smile. “Do the paperwork. If you’re sick and dizzy and all of that, I can’t have you doing partner work.”

Charlotte nodded, frowning, and after a moment pushed up on her feet and stepped forward.

Another bout of dizziness, and this time it lasted more than two seconds. She hadn’t slept much last night—not Brahnt’s fault for once—and she hadn’t eaten much this morning, which normally wouldn’t be a problem, but the hormones were messing with everything.

Her stomach clenched again, and she took another step forward to prove she was fine, then blacked out.

It wasn't like she was out for long. Two of the other dancers were crouching next to her when she opened her eyes, the back of her head sore. "Oh my god, Brahnt is going to kill me."

The other morning the Orc had given Charlotte his Signature Even Stare and pointedly inquired how she was holding up under the strain of an early pregnancy plagued with vicious morning, afternoon, and evening sickness.

"Can you still dance right now?" he'd asked.

Defensive, Charlotte had hunched her shoulders, refusing to meet his gaze. "Of course I can. I have medical clearance."

"You do. But it doesn't take into account the amount of nausea and vertigo you're having. That's unexpected. What if you fall and hurt yourself? I won't be very happy, Charlotte."

"God, you're going to make a brilliant father. You nag like my dad already."

At that Brahnt set aside his coffee mug and stood, crossing the distance to where she slumped in her chair.

He looked down at her. "I don't mind if you call me Daddy when I'm fucking you, but I am not, in fact, your father. Any more comments like that though..." Brahnt sighed. "I understand you're reluctant to give up work. I'll leave you to make a sensible decision."

Well, the silver lining in this cloud was that Brahnt didn't know she fainted, and what Brahnt didn't know, Charlotte couldn't get disciplined for. Though that would be fun when she was feeling better.

That delusion scurried out the door the moment Charlotte got home.

She stopped, staring at the Orc who was sitting on the black couch, legs crossed, sipping a glass of wine as he thumbed a tablet.

It was, by now, a familiar posture.

The “you done fucked up” posture.

How could a creature so brutally sized look so civilized?

Especially when it was a dirty lie.

“You’re home early,” Charlotte said, justifiably suspicious.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know?”

So they were cutting straight to the chase.

“Know what, Mr. Grey?”

Charlotte dropped her duffel bag on the floor and wandered to the loveseat, flinging herself down. Which was a mistake. When her stomach was settled again, she focused on Brahnt, who watched her, hands laced over his knee.

“You fainted today. In the middle of rehearsal. In the middle of a lift.”

Charlotte sighed, closing her eyes, and settled her head on the back of the couch.

“And I guess you’re going to go all Orc on my ass now. I didn’t mean to faint, Brahnt. Can you cut me some slack?”

She would not open her eyes. She would not open her eyes.

Charlotte opened her eyes.

Brahnt stared at her, gaze laced heavily with disapproval. “I thought we had an agreement. If the nausea and vertigo affected your ability to dance safely, then you would sit the rest of the season out.”

Charlotte shoved, carefully, to her feet. “I know what we agreed. And I’ll abide by it. It’s not that easy to walk away from something I’ve spent my entire life doing. I don’t know what else to do with my time.” That was also somewhat of a dirty lie.

Brahnt rose as well, and drew Charlotte into his arms. “I understand. I appreciate and respect your focus. But this is a health issue, and if you don’t abide by our agreement in a timely manner, I’ll have to insist.”

Charlotte drew back a little, glaring. “What, you’ll get me fired?”

“That would be a little over the top. But I can make a few phone calls.” Brahnt caressed Charlotte’s bottom lip with his thumb. “Isn’t there something dance adjacent you can do? Teach? Or volunteer? Why don’t you write, like your sister?”

“God no. She’s insane. You’ve never been through a new release week with her. She doesn’t sleep, she doesn’t eat anything but chocolate, she chugs alcohol by the *liter* and rants as the reviews come in. I’ve had to talk her out of hunting down some of her readers. I hid her laptop and smartphone once for two hours—for her own good—and she threatened me at knife point. We didn’t talk for six weeks after that.”

Brahnt pursed his lips, looking a little skeptical.

Charlotte sighed, leaning her forehead on Brahnt’s shoulder. “I’ll figure it out. Give me another week. They say this type of sickness goes away eventually.”

But it didn’t go away, it only got worse, and the second time Charlotte fainted, this time clinging to the railing of a set of stairs in the wide hallway, she woke up in an ambulance.

She was lucky it was only three stairs she’d fallen down, but company policy dictated an ambulance be called and that Charlotte not be allowed to move—an insurance and liability issue.

Oh my *gaaaahd*. She was glad Brahnt wasn’t listed as next of kin yet. Caro would be more calm. Scathingly insulting—but calm.

Once Charlotte arrived in the ER, she was examined. Of course nothing serious was wrong beyond a few bruises, but they insisted on putting her in a room, gowning her up, and doing an IV. As soon as she’d said the word “pregnant” it was like everyone lost their minds. She wasn’t having a miscarriage. She’d fainted a bit, damnit.

It happened.

But then Brahnt showed up.

Brahnt showed up furious, taking in Charlotte's appearance in one look and began to quietly froth at the mouth.

"Look, I'm sorry your work got interrupted," she began, already sitting up in the hospital bed.

Brahnt cut her off. "You think I give a damn about work? They called me to tell me you had been taken away in an ambulance. Then started bleating all that bullshit about next of kin. Do you have any idea who I had to threaten to get a status update *because we aren't married yet?*"

Charlotte rolled her eyes. "The ambulance is an insurance thing, and the next of kin thing...I don't know what to say."

Brahnt leaned on the edge of the bed, staring at her with hot, fuming eyes. "What you can say is, 'This is the day I want to get married, Brahnt.'"

"I could say that. But I'm not yet. Look, I'm fine."

"Fine is when you fainted again? We don't understand that word the same way, Charlotte."

Charlotte grimaced. She might as well sit back and prepare herself for the rant, because there was absolutely no way they were going to go on with their lives until Brahnt got it out of his system.

"...communication and trust... Responsible thing... Not taking my concerns seriously."

She listened with half an ear because she pretty much knew the gist of the lecture, and also because she'd already decided Brahnt was right.

"Are you done?" she asked the Orc once he paused to draw in another healthy breath.

At least their kid would have a good set of lungs.

Brahnt turned on his heels and stalked towards Charlotte. "Am I done?" He asked the question too softly.

Charlotte eyed him, unimpressed. The Orc melodrama was fun except when she was tired. "You're right."

Brahnt opened his mouth, then snapped it shut and narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“You’re right. I can’t keep doing this. I’m having worse than normal nausea and vertigo. I accept that. I’m going to have to sit the rest of the season out.”

Brahnt blinked, suspicion leaking out of his pores as he deflated. “You’ve decided to be reasonable. That saves me some trouble.”

She bet. Like bribing the board of directors, or maybe staging a hostile takeover of the company so he had the right to boss her around.

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to stay home in bed all day working on my pregnancy weight gain.”

Brahnt paused, tilting his head. “What’s wrong with that?” He bared his teeth in a...smile. “I like meat.”

She ran her hand over her face. One battle at a time.

Just one. At a time.

Charlotte didn’t spend the rest of the week in bed, but she might as well have. Bed, the couch, sprawled on the floor, even sitting on the kitchen table one time because she was so bored out of her mind.

She’d had some type of job since she was a kid, first at Dairy Queen, then the car wash, then the Community Center where she’d taken her first ballet classes.

And it had all gone downhill from there.

Caro came over a couple of times to keep her company, but well, Caro would deviate from her writing routine only through divine intervention. Which meant Caro sat at the kitchen table with her headphones on listening to focus music as she dictated her latest story.

Which was fun listening to, but Charlotte had heard them all before.

“I’m as bad as you are,” Charlotte told her twin—who didn’t look up. “I have no life outside of my career. I need to find

something to do.”

Or someone.

“I wonder if Braht is busy this time of day?”

14

THE ANSWER TO THAT, of course, was a big fat yes. Because it took a lot to irritate Charlotte, she chose to be amused that it took fifteen minutes and six different reroutes before she got through to Braht.

“What’s wrong, Charlotte?” the Orc said, a thread of irritation in his calm voice. “Why are you calling my business line and not my cell? You would have gotten through on my personal line faster.”

“Could be worse. I could have DMed you on Insta.”

On her back, staring at the ceiling, listening to Caro’s theatrical voice in the background—her twin dictated like she was reading an audiobook or a play—Charlotte shrugged.

“Get your dog, Charlotte,” Caro yelled from the kitchen, “I’m trying to work and she’s bugging me.”

“Snowkiss,” Charlotte called, then put the phone back to her mouth. “I’m bored. If you’re making me give up work, you have to suffer the consequences along with me.”

There was a beat of silence. “I guess there are more questionable ways you could amuse yourself, as you’ve proved, but really. Don’t you have anything else to do? A hobby? Friends available this time of day?”

Charlotte put the cell on speaker and began thumbing through her contacts. Snowkiss ran across the open room and put her paws on Charlotte’s chest before she settled on her back, asking for a tummy rub.

“One or two,” Charlotte said, absently complying with the dog’s demands. The one or two were mostly exes, okay, they were both exes, but what Brahnt didn’t know didn’t have to piss him off. Though why should it? The exes were just friends now.

“Why don’t you invite that one or two to lunch at the restaurant in my building? I’ll join you if I can get a few minutes away from my desk.”

“We’re not pretending I’m your dirty little secret today?”

Brahnt sighed. “You are not a secret.” His voice lowered. “You *are* a dirty Human, but no one but me knows that.”

Charlotte said nothing. Everyone had delulu moments. One just had to ride it out.

Brahnt snorted. “I have to go. Do what I tell you to do, and when I get home we’ll discuss how to keep you occupied and out of trouble for the next several months now that you’re off work.”

Charlotte disconnected, texted both her exes to see if one would bite, and considered her life choices.

She supposed she could start looking up Lamaze classes, and researching local childcare and preschools, but there was plenty of time for that. Well, since her twin was busy, maybe one of the exes could give her some perspective; their opinions on what would suit Charlotte as far as the hobby might be interesting.

And right on cue, Michael texted back.

Haven’t heard from you in a while. I won’t pretend I’m not free, so just tell me when and where.

Charlotte grinned, texted the name of the restaurant and the address, and rose to dress.

Snowkiss followed her to the bedroom. She settled on stylish but not trying hard. Dark wash jeans with a corset waist belt over a white blouse. Comfy, but slightly steampunk. She wasn’t showing much yet, and probably wouldn’t for several

more weeks since this was her first pregnancy and her abs could give Jungkook a run for his money.

Charlotte put Snowkiss in her carrier, slung the dog around her chest and left the bedroom. She waved at Caro, who jerked a chin but didn't move from her seat at the kitchen table, and then Charlotte was out the door.

Michael gave her a one-armed hug when Charlotte met him at the outdoor restaurant in Brahnt's office building, eyeing the small dog. There had been some trouble at the door when Charlotte showed up, but she'd pulled rank.

Otherwise known as the "I'm Brahnt Stonefist's girlfriend" card.

She had no shame.

"Long time no see," Michael said, a dark-skinned African-American man with close-cut hair and warm amber-brown eyes. "So what's new? Besides the dog."

Snowkiss yipped. Charlotte slid into a chair and they talked between placing orders. Charlotte kept her order light since her appetite was throttled this time of day. She'd nibble on something to placate Brahnt when she asked.

"I'm on a dance hiatus," Charlotte admitted as Snowkiss squirmed in her carrier.

Michael blinked, and almost choked. "You? You're kidding me. What prompted that? You're too young for a midlife crisis."

Charlotte grinned, rather sheepish. "I got knocked up. In fact, the baby daddy might meet us here today."

She unslung Snowkiss from her chest and sat her under the table. Snowkiss yipped a few more times, but Charlotte wasn't about to let her out. She brought a treat out of the side pocket, thinking about diaper bags and double strollers.

Michael sat back in his chair, eyes widening. Then he laughed. "I can't believe it. You're obsessive about nothing interfering with your career." But he paused, leaning an elbow on the

table. “Though you did always talk about wanting to start a family. Was it an accident?”

“We kind of have to define the word accident.” Charlotte wrinkled her nose and took a sip of her lemon water. “I have a feeling the baby daddy knew what he was doing. I was just caught up in the pheromones.”

“Pheromones? Oh fuck, an Orc?”

“Dude.”

Michael shook his head. “I don’t know if I should congratulate you or smack you upside the head. I hope he’s worth it.”

“I share your sentiment,” a cool voice said.

Charlotte turned her head, then shot out of her chair and slid an arm around Brahnt’s waist, kissing him on the cheek.

At the last second Brahnt turned his head, claiming her lips, and because she opened her eyes a few seconds before the kiss ended, she saw Brahnt staring at Michael.

Orcs.

It seemed to amuse Michael, who stood and offered Brahnt a hand once the Orc let Charlotte go. “Congratulations. I’m Michael. Charlotte and I haven’t dated for years now, we’re just friends.”

Branch stiffened. “Dated?”

Charlotte widened her eyes. “You said I should text a friend who might be available.”

Brahnt, being well-bred if one ignored the whole only two generations of legal wealth thing, said nothing further. It was the kind of nothing that assured Charlotte—in case she was doubtful—there would be plenty to say later, in private.

Brahnt took a seat and engaged Michael in casual, deceptively friendly conversation which didn’t fool Charlotte for one second. The server brought Brahnt a drink and a salad without him having to order. Because of course. But he also brought Snowkiss a dish of water and another of what looked like a grilled patty and brown rice, all chopped up and mixed.

“Enjoy, Mr. Stonefist,” the Orc male murmured, straightening, his gaze caressing the side of Brahnt’s face a touch less casually than Charlotte liked.

Charlotte glared at the server, then gestured abruptly. “Can I have a refill, please?”

She didn’t actually want a refill. The pregnancy hormones had her bladder doing weird things, which meant every sixteen ounces of water, she seemingly had to piss out sixty-four ounces. She was a little tired of the constant peeing. No, it was an excuse to gain the server’s attention, and give him a look. Charlotte was Human, of course, but that didn’t mean she would roll over and play dead while another man seduced her lover. Right in front of her face.

Snowkiss barked, a bit of bass in her voice. “Good girl,” Charlotte muttered.

But Michael’s brows rose. “Mr. Stonefist? Not...?”

Brahnt gave Michael a pleasant smile. “Yes. This is my building. And, of course, lunch is on me.”

Michael began to protest.

Brahnt waved a hand. “It’s nothing. Consider it my gratitude for entertaining my fiancé this afternoon. She has a great deal of energy, and I can’t quite keep up.”

That was a lie if ever she heard one.

Michael slanted Charlotte a mischievous gaze. “No problem. Any time you need help keeping her entertained, I’m your man.”

Charlotte gave him a “really?” look. She’d texted Michael because they were both firmly in each other’s friend zones, but her ex wasn’t above teasing. Brahnt had started it after all.

Lunch ended and Charlotte would have meandered away to find something else to do...she hadn’t managed to ask Michael about the whole finding a life outside of being a kept Human issue...but Brahnt snagged Charlotte by the upper arm—somehow making it look solicitous rather than possessive—

and marched her into the building, up the elevator and into his high-rise office.

So fast Charlotte didn't have time to gape at her surroundings, except to note that everyone was slickly dressed, and discreet. Gazes flickered towards Brahnt and Charlotte, but none lingered.

"When you said you were bored," Brahnt said, closing the office door behind them, "and I suggested you invite a friend to lunch, I didn't think you would be so bold, Charlotte."

Charlotte shook her arm away from Brahnt's hard grip, twisted her hands behind her back, and casually began to explore the office.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, so we're going to play these games today? You weren't lying when you said you were high maintenance."

Charlotte turned and faced him with a grin. "I told you so." The grin turned wry. "But no, Michael is just a friend. There was never much chemistry between us."

"And you found that out by fucking him."

Charlotte rolled her eyes. "Let's not pretend either of us are debutantes, Brahnt."

"No? The difference is, I haven't flaunted my ex in your face." A pause. "I can."

Charlotte snorted. "If you had an ex you wanted to flaunt, you would already be married. And she would be working on your third kid."

Brahnt curled his upper lip, tusks gleaming. "You think you know me."

"I'm getting to know you." She took a risk and wandered closer, propping her hip against the desk. "The jealousy is cute, but don't go overboard with it. Jealousy is boring. I'd never cheat on you."

Brahnt took a deep breath, exhaled—then did it three more times. "Right. Since you're so bored, why don't I take you out

tonight? We haven't had a proper date in awhile."

"We go out all the time."

Now it was Brahnt's turn to roll his eyes. "We go places together, yes. We fuck almost every night you're not puking your guts out. But I haven't wined and dined you for some time." Brahnt closed the distance between them and brushed his thumb along Charlotte's bottom lip. "I haven't shown you everything I can offer."

Charlotte lifted a brow, then grinned. "Oh yeah? Well, impress me then."

Brahnt lowered his head a little and pressed a kiss on Charlotte's lips. "Go home. I'll send you an assistant with a selection of evening fashion. Make sure you get plenty of rest. I have plans for how we're going to end our night."

Charlotte's hands went clammy.

She hightailed it out of there and got her ass home.

Whoever Brahnt had on speed dial was efficient, because Charlotte only managed a forty-minute nap—Caro, who'd taken to working at Charlotte's place because of the "setting inspiration" was now in editing mode, having apparently not moved her ass from her seat even five minutes—before the concierge buzzed up to request admittance for a stylist.

Charlotte let them up and when they entered, the woman snagged even Caro's attention.

"I'm glad I already got my words done," Caro remarked, coming to stand by Charlotte and crossing her arms over her chest. "Or else this shit would have been distracting. What is this?"

Charlotte ran her tongue along her teeth, watching as the woman gestured in an assistant with an entire rack of clothing. Another assistant entered, carrying bags and boxes.

"This is Brahnt's idea of keeping me occupied until he takes me out tonight," Charlotte said.

"Ah, the Cinderella scene," Caro said. "It's about time. You know, I should take notes. Actually...let me just put the cam

on.”

Charlotte wanted to ask what the Cinderella scene was but could deduce from context.

They spent an exhausting two hours putting together an extended wardrobe for Charlotte, who went along for the ride. She probably should have done the self-effacing and noble thing and protested—but she didn’t.

If Brahnt wanted to spend money, who was she to keep telling him no? Virtue was exhausting.

She spent Brahnt’s money.

Gleefully.

In fact, she impressed the stylist with her knowledge of discrete, highly exclusive designer labels. The kind the general public had never heard of because only the uber rich old money could afford them.

There was so much more she could be doing with \$2500 than spending it on a T-shirt.

She could fund a small business.

She could donate the money to an animal shelter.

But, damnit...Charlotte sighed. “I’m such a sellout.”

“Nah,” Caro said, sitting on the couch and in a staring match with Snowkiss, who kept trying to win Caro over to her side though Caro wasn’t having any of it. “Think of it as an emergency fund. If you ever have to high tail it out of the relationship, you can consign or Ebay these pieces for some quick cash.”

True.

Or maybe she would wear them a couple of times to revel in the borrowed wealth then do the right thing and resell them and donate the money to an appropriate charitable organization.

Then have a long, hard discussion with Brahnt about the appropriate budget for clothing. No, she didn’t expect a

millionaire to dress her in Target brands, but these prices were excessive.

But she'd keep a few outfits just for meeting the parents and so on.

After the stylist chose her attire for the evening, Caro left, and Charlotte collapsed in the bedroom for a nap, Snowkiss curling at her side.

15

BRAHNT PRESSED his hand on the small of Charlotte's back as he escorted her out of the car and into the Art Museum. Charlotte recognized several Human faces among the Orcs in the small crowd from prior mixers.

"This is a matched couple's mixer," Charlotte said, relaxing.

She'd been nervous on the drive, tugging at the hem of her cocktail dress. Not that she couldn't handle herself at a more formal affair, but her dreams of grandeur had mostly been confined to her head and her sister's novels until this point.

So maybe she had a bit of an imposter syndrome going on despite a growing social media following, and her own self-assurance in her utter attractiveness. Still. She and Caro were working class kids, and no amount of hard work, studying, and internet haunting the heels of the rich and infamous could disguise that.

"It is," Brahnt said. "You mentioned you wanted to attend a couples' mixer."

She'd said "a few" which he'd just reduced to "a" in one sentence. Charlotte understood escorting her here was a grudging indulgence. Brahnt didn't do social mixers. It wasn't that he was introverted or antisocial, he was just highly aware of the value of his time and saw no need to waste it on social occasions that weren't thinly disguised business meetings—a mix of his actual words and Charlotte's interpretation into everyday speak.

Charlotte wondered how Brahnt was going to manage to subvert play dates into business opportunities, but one problem at a time.

“This is great,” Charlotte said. “I recognize a few of the Humans who’ve been paired. I’ll introduce you.”

Channeling a bit of his Orcish assertiveness, Charlotte took him firmly around the upper arm and dragged him along. Charlotte was stronger than she looked, but Brahnt still outweighed her so it wasn’t like dragging along a five-foot nine ballerina.

Brahnt’s steps were grudging, every last one.

“Addison!” Charlotte squealed. “I haven’t seen you since the last mixer we were at? How’s everything going?”

Charlotte began a flurry of introductions, aided by the other Humans, of course, while the Orcs eyed each other, not even trying to tone down the “touch her and die” snarls disguised as smiles. Orcs didn’t play well with others outside their clans.

At her side, Brahnt stiffened. Charlotte glanced at him, then followed his gaze to one of the males.

“Brahnt!” the Orc was saying. “I hadn’t heard you’d been matched. Congrats congrats.”

“Thomath,” Brahnt said coolly, curling his upper lip—slightly. Not even for open hostility. “It was recent. I’m pleased with Matchmaker’s services.”

Thomath chuckled. “Right right, if the Stonerator is pleased, then that’s a rousing endorsement. Let’s celebrate!”

“Stonerator,” Charlotte echoed, mostly silent though her lips formed the word.

She glanced at Brahnt—uh oh—glanced at Thomath, glanced at Thomath’s Human who met Charlotte’s gaze with a slight wince and leaned into her Orc, whispering in his ear.

Charlotte did her part, and also began doing preemptive damage control. “You know each other?” she murmured in Brahnt’s ear.

“Yes. Childhood...acquaintance.”

“He’s a character. Small world.”

“Too small.”

“No fights,” Charlotte hissed, pitching her voice even lower.

“So how is everything going?” Thomath asked Brahnt. “Still in the honeymoon phase? Is there going to be an actual honeymoon?” Thomath eyed Charlotte speculatively.

Brahnt shifted, sliding an arm around her back and pulling her closer.

“We’re pregnant,” Brahnt said, “so we’re a bit distracted. Charlotte will decide the particulars as far as dates go when she has the chance.” He gave Thomath’s Human a fleeting but pointed look. “Any news on your front?”

“I don’t move as fast as you do, Stonefist!” Thomath said. “How’s your mother taking the news?”

“She’s ecstatic, of course,” Brahnt lied.

“I see another friend!” Charlotte chirped and excused them both, dragging Brahnt along—which was more difficult this time because, evidently, Brahnt wanted to stay and lock horns with Thomath.

“Is this a dick measuring contest between you two or something?” Charlotte asked.

“No. I knocked mine up first.”

“Are you sure you’re not twelve?”

Brahnt stopped and whispered in her ear, “If you have doubts, I can do my best to lay them to rest tonight.”

Now Charlotte wanted to abandon date night and go home. She felt her eyes glaze over and mentally slapped herself. She pulled away.

“We’re going to finish this date. We’re supposed to do something tonight besides play in bed, remember?”

Brahnt shoved his hands in the pockets of his slacks and sighed. “I don’t know why.”

Charlotte poked him in the shoulder. “You can at least try to pretend you’re having fun.”

“I would rather be fucking you, but fine.”

Conscious that her nausea could rear its ugly head without warning, Charlotte tamped down on her usual energy once they found a plush couch to settle on, which was part of a seating arrangement the party planner must have had brought into the venue.

They were soon joined by other couples, and servers came around with hors d’oeuvres and beverages, including nonalcoholic beverages.

Surprisingly, Brahnt turned on the charm, engaging other Orcs and Humans in conversation, including a couple who already had two young. The Orc males discussed pregnancy, postpartum and newborn tips as Charlotte cuddled against Brahnt’s side, exchanged numbers with the Human, and nibbled on the blander selections of hors d’oeuvres while chatting.

After an hour or so, he murmured in Charlotte’s ear, “Are you ready to leave? I had planned for us to have dinner elsewhere. A menu more suited to your current health challenges.”

Charlotte nodded, and they excused themselves to leave the mixer. The restaurant Brahnt escorted Charlotte to was a celebrity chef joint the Orc co-owned with his dad.

“I’ve arranged for Chef Samson to give us a private cooking class,” Brahnt said. “You’ve been trying to figure out what your interests are outside of dance and social media. We’ll try cooking tonight and see if that inspires you. And I’ll order *chicken* eggs for you to practice with.”

Charlotte squeezed Brahnt’s hand, excited even though she knew she wouldn’t be able to dive into the eating part of the date because of her nausea.

“It sounds like fun,” she said, and meant it.

“Plus,” Brahnt continued with a straight face, “a stay-at-home wife should at least know how to boil water. And not overcook expensive eggs.”

“Since when do you care what anything costs? Your shoelaces are an average fast food worker’s weekly salary.”

“It’s the principle. I don’t like waste.”

“My eggs weren’t that bad.”

“I thought you wanted open and honest communication in your relationship?”

Charlotte pinched him in the side, discreetly.

Proving Brahnt was both organized and thoughtful, the cooking class Chef Samson gave them featured a simple menu packed with stomach friendly nutrients for a pregnant Human. With an eye towards convenience and ease of prep, the chef matter-of-factly discussed substitutions for some of the items which would cut down on prep time.

“There’s nothing wrong with using frozen or pre-prepped produce from your local grocery store,” the chef said. “We don’t have to grow the food ourselves in soil we prayed over in order for it to taste good and be nutritious.”

The menu also included a selection of mocktails Charlotte could replicate at home. By the end of the two hours, Charlotte’s energy was pleasantly lagging but for once she felt full without the accompaniment of nausea. Sensitive to her dipping energy, Brahnt cut the evening short with a murmured thanks to the chef and ushered Charlotte outside.

In the limo, flowers and chocolate covered strawberries were waiting. Strawberries flaked with gold leaf. Charlotte suspected some self-interest involved in the selection of gifts because though Brahnt didn’t have a sweet tooth, he loved fresh fruit.

“We really do need to eat the rich,” Charlotte murmured, snuggling against Brahnt as she popped a gold leaf and chocolate strawberry into her mouth. “Though I won’t lie. I could get used to this.”

Brahnt kissed the top of Charlotte’s head. “That is my nefarious scheme. When are you going to let me put a ring on it?”

Charlotte said nothing. Her stubborn, though non-hostile silence lasted until they got back to the penthouse.

“I wanted to have my way with you tonight,” Brahnt said, stripping off his tuxedo jacket. “But you’re tired.”

“I mean, I could just lay there. You could lick my pussy. Neither of those activities require actual energy or movement on my part.”

Brahnt gave her a look. “How about I run us a bath, and if you’re not unconscious by the end of it, I’ll accede to your request.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Brahnt stopped, eyes darkening, and gave Charlotte a long, long look. Then he turned and strode down the hallway to his bedroom.

Charlotte smirked, and sauntered after him.

Brahnt, of course, damn him, was right. By the time their bath was over, though Charlotte was horny as hell, she was too tired to even lay in bed and let Brahnt do all the work. Brahnt hauled her out of the tub, toweled her off and bundled her into a fluffy black robe. The lights shut off and they slid into bed.

That was when Charlotte realized she wasn’t in her own bedroom, but in Brahnt’s.

Slick Orc.

“Move into the bedroom with me,” Brahnt murmured, his arm slung across Charlotte as he held her close. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“It’s not ridiculous. The day we met we got pregnant, then we moved in together six weeks later. We haven’t had an actual courtship.”

Charlotte had an urge to poke out her bottom lip, but that would be juvenile, so she suppressed it.

Brahnt propped himself up on his elbow, and she felt the Orc’s stare. “You’re holding out on me because you feel like we

skipped steps in the process?” The incredulity in Brahnt’s voice irritated her.

“Yes! What are we going to tell our children? We don’t have a story.”

Charlotte knew she was whining, and yes, probably being ridiculous, but still. There was no second date or third date story. No tale of how they’d slowly fallen in love. Caro kept telling her there were steps. Drilling those steps into her head had been part of Charlotte’s therapy, so she could mentally check off when she was being love bombed or neglected—she’d *worked* to raise her standards as far as how she expected to be treated.

“We do have a story,” Brahnt said. “We’re living our story. It might not be neat and orderly like one of Caro’s books—”

“Are you really reading her stuff?”

Brahnt made a noncommittal noise. “Our courtship might not be neat and orderly, but it’s still a courtship. I’m getting tired of going to sleep alone and waking up alone. What more do you want?”

The question wasn’t delivered with anger or accusation, so Charlotte sighed. Brahnt was genuinely asking Charlotte to tell him what she needed.

Charlotte shifted, facing the Orc. “Fine.”

Brahnt grinned, then immediately wiped the expression off his face. “You’re going to move into the bedroom with me?”

Charlotte indulged herself and finally poked out her bottom lip. She felt she’d earned it.

The Orc raised an eyebrow. “Now who’s twelve?” He paused. “Why change your mind now?”

“Because I don’t want to overcorrect just because I’ve been hurt before, and I don’t want to not recognize the effort you’re putting in.”

Brahnt’s eyes softened. “As long as you don’t ignore pain points, you’ll be okay. If you feel like something is wrong,

come to me and we'll talk. I'm not perfect, and I may hurt you, but not on purpose."

Charlotte leaned her head forward enough to capture his sensual mouth in a kiss. She ended up on her back a moment later, though Brahnt lifted his head and sighed.

"Now that's settled, we can move on to the next hurdle."

"You have an internal checklist or something? What's the next hurdle? Finding maternity pants that don't look like they were hand sewn by a Mormon soccer mom? I mean, have you seen the options at Target? Baby, wouldn't be caught dead."

"Meeting my parents."

"Oh...well, how bad can it be, all joking aside. I'm sure it will be great."

16

“ARE you sure we aren’t supposed to bring a casserole or something?” Charlotte said, redoing her ponytail. “We can pick one up from Whole Foods on the way. I asked my sister, and she said good housekeeping, whatever that is, said—”

“No, Charlotte,” Braht cut in. “If you bring a casserole, my mother will start drinking.”

“Is she really that elitist, or are you exaggerating?”

“You’ll see,” was the grim reply. “And you’ll understand why I delayed this as long as possible.”

“Great, this is going to be fun. I like new experiences. Caro wanted me to wear a spy cam.”

They exited the car, Braht waiting for Charlotte to unbuckle Snowkiss. Charlotte opted to carry the dog rather than confine her to a carrier since Braht had said they’d be socializing outside and Snowkiss could run around.

“Try not to crap on their lawn, okay?” she murmured at her baby, who licked her chin and yipped—it was a non-committal yip. “Are you sure it’s fine we brought Snowkiss?”

“Start out as you mean to go on,” Braht said. “Besides, it’ll annoy Mother, and that’s always a bonus.” He paused. “Please don’t tell her I said so.”

“Do you two have unresolved issues?”

“Of course not. We get along great. I adore my mother. She is a fine female.”

Riiight.

They walked toward the house, though house was an inexact term. Charlotte kind of mentally blocked out the grandeur of the estate and grounds and pulled on her high positivity. Desperately.

“Sir, it’s good to see you,” a gentleman Orc said, opening the door for them. He gave Snowkiss an askance look, then smoothed his expression. “Ma’am. A pleasure.”

Charlotte stared at the gentleman, and belatedly realized the gentleman was, in fact, a butler.

“Your butler is better dressed than I am,” she hissed in Brahnt’s ear, tightening her hold on Snowkiss.

Brahnt snorted. “No, he’s not. What you’re wearing is three times his monthly salary.”

Charlotte looked down at her summer dress. Again, deceptively simple, and she’d prided herself before on her knowledge of the obscure brands of the quietly, insanely, insular rich. But Brahnt had taught her a thing or two.

“It doesn’t look like I’m better dressed,” Charlotte said.

“Only poor people try to look wealthy.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, because she was well aware by now that Brahnt’s definition of poor and Charlotte’s definition of poor were separated by the gaping chasm of several tax brackets and at least three generations of accumulated wealth.

To Brahnt, Bill Gates was middle class.

Okay, fine, maybe Charlotte was exaggerating...but she didn’t think so. Not by much.

“They’re going to hate me,” Charlotte muttered.

“Probably,” Brahnt agreed. “Mother will. Father will like you because I do. Don’t worry about it. You don’t need their approval.”

“You’re so offhand when you say things like that. I wish I had your confidence.”

“You do,” was the reply as they stepped out of the house. “Put Snowkiss down. I already informed the staff she would be present. They’ll keep an eye on her.”

Charlotte hesitated, then obeyed. Snowkiss, predictably, immediately took off chasing...something...and barking.

They walked across the lawn to an honest to god gazebo, Charlotte looking over her shoulder to keep an eye on her dog. Two Orcs, a male and a female, sat around a small round table, sipping beverages—the female paused mid sip, staring daggers at the dog.

The female was tall, elegantly casual in a blouse and wide legged trousers with black braids in a chignon and bare feet, toenails painted a matte lavender that went nicely with her blue-green skin tone. She lounged in her chair with the kind of “don’t give a fuck because I rule the world and you don’t” aura that made Charlotte want to turn around and walk back to the car.

She turned and looked at Charlotte, who began to pat herself down to make sure her skin wasn’t being peeled from her bones to reveal her totally inadequate insides. The stare Brahnt’s mother leveled at a mere Human flipped the capitalization on those words—to Mere, and Human. And added an underlying threat. Charlotte sometimes wished she didn’t have her twin’s imagination, and verbose internal dialogue.

So the Mere Human pasted on her brightest smile and reminded herself that these people might be richer, but she was way more talented.

The male’s skin was a deeper green with yellow undertones, and he wore his shoulder length black hair in a tousled cut, his facial features broad rather than aquiline like the female’s. Discreetly, Charlotte glanced up at Brahnt. He mostly looked like his mother, but there were strong echoes of his father’s features as well.

The parents rose, the dad coming around to hug Brahnt. “You look well, son. And this must be your Charlotte.”

Charlotte started to hold out her hand, but he brushed it aside and drew Charlotte into a hug. “Welcome, daughter. I’m Samesh.”

“It’s good to meet you finally,” Charlotte said. “We would have come sooner but Brahnt keeps me tied to the bed.” She winced. Oh my god she needed to work on the words that came out of her mouth when she was nervous.

Samesh only laughed. “I remember the early days bonding with my wife.” Samesh released Charlotte and turned to the female. “Regine.” The word was sharp, and firm.

The female rose, sauntered forward, shook Brahnt’s hand, then gave Charlotte a once over.

She turned back to her son. “Well, at least you saw to her attire. I was afraid she’d come looking like she’d been vomited on by Gucci. Or...what’s that one chain store...” Regine rubbed her chin, eyes narrowing. “All the working people shop there. I saw it on a commercial. Sammie, help me.”

“Target?” Charlotte said in a meek voice. “Or Wal-Mart maybe. There’s also—”

“No, the second one’s it.” Regine snapped her fingers. “So many to cater to the masses. Of course I should have asked you first. At least wearing Target would have been honest. I can’t abide pretenders.”

“Mother,” Brahnt said.

“Alicia should be bringing out lunch soon,” Regine said, ignoring Brahnt. “Sit, let’s talk.”

“Absolutely!” Charlotte increased the wattage of her smile. “I can’t wait.”

“So, you’re going all in, Brahnt,” Regine said as they settled into chairs. “Marriage...dog—that *is* a dog, not an albino rat?—the whole shebang.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened as she glanced at Brahnt. “You told them we were engaged?”

“He didn’t have to tell me,” was Regine’s condescending reply. “He wouldn’t have brought you to meet us if you

weren't."

Charlotte settled back in her chair, mimicking Regine's pose, and crossed her leg over her knee. "We aren't engaged."

Regine's eyebrows rose. "Oh? Are you holding up for a more advantageous prenup?"

"Prenup?"

Regine looked at Braht. "Please tell me you've drawn up a pre-nuptial agreement." She reached for the smartphone lying in the center of the table. "I'll have our lawyers—"

"I'll handle it, Mother," Braht cut in.

"I think an objective third party—"

"Mother."

"Well, what do we know about this Human?" Her expression smoothed. "And she hasn't been introduced to the female's circle yet."

Charlotte thought it was interesting that Regine abandoned civility two minutes into the conversation and started talking about Charlotte as if the *Human* wasn't even present. Oh well, that meant Charlotte didn't have to do any of the actual talking. She was kind of okay with that.

A blonde thirty-something Human woman in livery brought out a tray of drinks and set them down. Charlotte picked hers up and sipped. Strawberry lemonade.

"I asked the staff to make something a girl like you would normally drink," Regine said. "I wanted you to feel at home. What is it called again, Alicia?"

"Kool-Aid, ma'am," she said without missing a beat.

Charlotte wasn't offended; she was hugely amused. "It's good!" She grinned at Regine. "One of my favorites."

It also wasn't Kool-Aid. For one thing, it lacked the punch of white sugar sweetness. For another thing, it was all the wrong color. So either Regine was pulling her tail, or Alicia was humoring her employer knowing she wouldn't be able to tell the difference. If this wasn't homemade lemonade with actual

strawberries crushed in and strained for color, Charlotte would eat her leotard.

Or Snowkiss's lunch.

Snowkiss, right on cue, yipped and ran towards them.

"Why again is there an animal in the house, Braht?" Regine said.

Samesh exclaimed. "She's so cute. Come here, good boy."

"She's a girl," Charlotte said.

"And the prettiest little princess you are," Samesh said, settling the dog into his lap.

"Really, Sammie?" Regine said. "Next you're going to ask me to buy you a hamster. Or a goldfish."

"Neither is necessary if you're looking for something small and cute to hold," Braht said in an inflectionless tone, "since you'll soon be grandparents."

All hell broke loose.

Charlotte sipped her lemonade and let Samesh clutch her dog.

"She's an emotional support puppy," she murmured to Samesh. "She's used to being squeezed."

Regine did not, in fact, have a heart attack—Charlotte watched with compounding interest—but she did summon Alicia to bring her strong drink, though Samesh disapproved. A bottle, though Regine managed to pour it into glasses rather than drain it right from the source.

"You get the puffy white rat," Regine snarled, "I get bourbon. We each cope with devastating disappointment in our own ways."

Charlotte did sympathize with Regine's apoplexy though. After all, Charlotte was basically every cliché of a poor kid from a broken home, with the requisite trauma. Her intentions

were mostly pure—with a liberal dash of healthy money grubbing. After all, could you really *really* have a long term, healthy, successful relationship if Maslow’s Hierarchy wasn’t taken care of? Charlotte didn’t consider it gold digging, she considered it strategic mate selection.

But, in the end, though she didn’t mind spending Brahnt’s money in reasonable amounts, it wasn’t like she wanted to take anything she hadn’t earned. So she put Regine out of her misery.

“I’ll sign a prenup,” Charlotte said. “I don’t mind. If it will make everyone feel more secure about the marriage. As long as financial provisions are made for any children we have.”

“We don’t need a prenup,” Brahnt snapped.

“Shut up,” Regine said, lifting a hand—the one not holding the bourbon. She pinned Charlotte with a look, ignoring the aghast look her husband was directing at her. “My lawyer can draw papers up by tomorrow. You’ll sign?”

Charlotte nodded. “But it needs to be reasonable. In case we divorce—”

“You’re funny,” Brahnt said. “Legal only *two* generations, Charlotte.”

“—and if at the time of divorce I’ve been a stay-at-home parent for years, it might be difficult for me to find gainful employment right away.” Charlotte felt her expression settle into stubborn lines. “I plan on having my own thing that brings in income during the marriage, and I plan on going back to work once the baby is old enough. But I’m entitled to protect myself and to recognize the value of labor done in the marital home.”

“It’s reasonable, Reggie,” Samesh said. “She’s giving us our first grandchild and providing Brahnt with stability so he can stop messing with those females from the Orc/Human bdsm club—please, son, you thought we didn’t know about that? It’s not as if we can’t afford to make the standard financial provisions. They’re getting respectably married, not shacking up.”

“I have no intention of depriving any female what is rightfully due her,” Regine said. “I simply want some assurances. She doesn’t come from any of the Human families that understand how things are done among Orcs.”

“Things?” Charlotte echoed.

“There is no divorce,” Brahnt said.

“But...but what if you fall out of love? Or the husband is abusive.”

“*Abusive?*” Regine gave Samesh a look as if to say “I told you so”. “There is no such thing. We would never allow a husband to abuse his wife. Or vice versa. As for the other—don’t fall out of love. Grow up instead.”

“I’ll need to call Aunt Ati. She does all the wedding planning in the family.” Samesh gave Charlotte a sweet, easy smile. “You don’t mind a traditional Punjabi celebration do you, Charlotte? It’s where my clan originally hails from.”

Charlotte knew what the correct response was, and gave it. “I would adore a traditional celebration. Can I choose my—”

“Aunt Ati won’t let you.”

“Oh.”

Regine coughed something that sounded suspiciously like gold digger. Brahnt growled.

“There’s nothing wrong with being a gold digger,” Charlotte said haughtily. “It’s just good business. The times when we think stay-at-home partners shouldn’t be compensated financially are over.”

Brahnt laughed, then sat back in his chair and sipped on bourbon with the air of an Orc who was satisfied he didn’t need to come to his Human’s rescue after all—and would now enjoy watching the rest of the show.

On the drive home, Charlotte couldn't help herself. "I think Regine liked me."

Brahnt didn't even look at her. "Don't start."

"Samesh can't have our dog."

“BRAHNT?” Charlotte whispered into the smartphone.

He stared at her through the screen, expression flat except for a raised brow. She didn't take it personal. Work Braht endured her frequent interruptions with grace, but less enthusiasm.

Home Braht smothered her with attention, sometimes to the point where a nap was her only escape. She hoped that would wear off soon. But he'd probably realized after the first few weeks her workday interruptions were mostly due to boredom, not any real emergency.

Her mind needed something different to occupy itself every ten minutes. She still danced, but keeping up the rigorous training schedule didn't make up for being kicked out of the company—excuse her, placed on leave. Running the new business helped, and spending time with Caro, but she could only bug Caro so much before her twin went rabid.

Which was only fun until Caro actually got her teeth in Charlotte's arm.

“There's an Orcess here, and I think she wants to kidnap me.”

She'd woken to pounding on the front door, wondering who it was since the concierge usually buzzed when there was a visitor. Charlotte opened the door to reveal an Orc female of average height—over six feet—with minty green skin that suggested a mixed species heritage, and gray eyes. Despite her height and broad shoulders, she was slim for an Orc female, long dark hair draped to her waist. Her nose reminded

Charlotte of a hawk...whatever that meant, she'd read it in books...and gave the impression the female was about to swoop down and carry Charlotte off. That, and the slightly amused twist of her lips as she stood patiently listening to Charlotte talk.

The thing was, Charlotte knew no Orcess would enter another female's home without permission—and Charlotte wasn't inviting anything that could smash her without blinking into her house without some *assurances*.

"Turn the phone around," Brahnt said, sounding a little too unconcerned for Charlotte's liking.

The Orcess still didn't enter the living room, standing just outside the threshold with her arms crossed over her chest.

Charlotte obeyed.

"Oh," Brahnt said.

"Tell your female I won't hurt her, cousin," the Orcess said, "but she's been summoned. You should have warned her."

"Summoned?" Charlotte asked, stepping back. Cousin? No wonder the female reminded Charlotte of Regine.

"Charlotte. Go with Milgrida."

She turned the phone back to face her. "I don't want to. She looks scary. I'm pregnant."

"This is female's circle business. I can't interfere." The words, and his face, were resolute.

Charlotte turned her gaze back to the Orcess and cleared her throat. "Were you sent by Regine by any chance? To eliminate me? I left instructions on all my devices and in several secret lockboxes scattered throughout the state in the case of my likely early demise."

Milgrida rolled her eyes. "You'll have to develop a spine if you're going to wed into our clan, Human," she snapped. "Now, come on. We're already late. Fucking traffic."

"Promise they aren't going to kill me," Charlotte said to Brahnt.

“They won’t kill you.”

“Why do you sound dubious?”

“They might bruise you...a little. Just remind them you’re pregnant. Say it loudly, more than once. If you have any doubts, drop to your knees and curl into a ball.”

“Seriously?”

“Survive, my love. I have faith in you. I just can’t help you.”

He cut the connection.

“What a jerk.”

“He is a good son. He knows his place,” the Orcess said, and flapped a hand. “Go put things on your feet. I’ll wait.”

Charlotte trotted back to the bedroom and found her ballet flats. She contemplated her appearance in the bathroom mirror as she brushed her teeth, ran a comb through her hair and sniffed her armpits. Oh, well. If they’d wanted her to look and smell decent, they would have given her some warning. She debated taking Snowkiss, but there was no reason to disturb the Cotonese, and she was fine with the housekeeper.

“Alright,” she said, leaving the bedroom. “I’m ready for my doom.”

Brahnt’s cousin wasn’t chatty, and she drove like a blind grandma, leaning forward over the wheel and squinting at traffic as she cursed. Charlotte was torn between holding on for dear life or requesting the female pull over and let her drive.

“It’s a good thing I don’t have a job anymore,” Charlotte said loudly, watching the passing scenery become more and more rural. More loudly than necessary. “Since I’ve been kidnapped, and driven god knows where—”

“Oh, be quiet,” Milgrida snapped. “I didn’t blindfold you, and you have your tracker on.”

“Wait, tracker? What do you mean, tracker?”

Milgrida snorted.

Charlotte digested that information. “Brahnt knows exactly where I am, then.”

“And what do you think he’s gonna do about it?”

Charlotte opened her mouth, closed it.

“Exactly. The males stay in their place. They know what’s good for them.” She cast Charlotte a critical sidelong glance as she pulled off the two lane highway and down a forest path. “You’ll learn too.”

“That doesn’t sound ominous or anything.”

Milgrida cackled. “This is going to be fun.”

“For *who*?”

“Probably not you. But *I’m* going to enjoy myself, mostly because my aunt has been frothing at the mouth for days now. I owe you for giving her someone else to focus her affection on.”

“I sense latent hostility under your gleeful tone of voice.”

“Just wait until you’re under the thumb of the circle,” was the dark reply. “We must uphold honor of clan, Mil’a.” She deepened her voice to a raspy, feminine growl and added the trace of an accent Charlotte sometimes heard Orcs speak with. “No Orcess in six generations has become *actress*, Mil’a’. ‘You must set good example for new Human, Mil’a’.”

Charlotte made a soothing noise in her throat and refrained from rubbing her hands together. If she survived the hazing, she’d work on Milgrida. Charlotte needed allies.

“I was a social media influencer before I gave it all up for love,” Charlotte said in her most mournful voice. “That’s definitely like acting because you have to make people believe the shit you post is real. And I had an OnlyFans.” Milgrida glanced at her, open longing in her expression. “Brahnt pitched a minor hissy fit...you know, people keep telling me

your culture is matriarchal. Brahnt doesn't act like it's matriarchal."

"You let him get away with shit, that's why. Don't worry, once you've proven yourself he won't be able to pull that anymore. The circle will bite him. He's living it up while he can."

She fell into brooding silence, which was fine with Charlotte, who understood the value of not laying it on too thick.

As they drove, Charlotte realized this was a private drive and not a road leading to her doom. After several minutes, the trees thinned, the road widened and a large house could be seen through the forest. Not a mansion, but like someone rich's getaway.

"Get out," Milgrida said, parking and shutting the car off. It wasn't the only car, which made Charlotte feel something. Certainly outnumbered. But maybe this was like a pre-baby shower.

"Will there be cupcakes?" she asked to test the water, clinging to the door handle as Milgrida undid Charlotte's seat belt.

The Orcess snorted and left the car, slamming the door, and stomped around to Charlotte's side. She yanked open the passenger door—Charlotte had to let go to protect the integrity of her finger bones, *oh my gaaawd* Orc females were strong—but there was still a small tussle as Milgrida wrestled her out of the seat.

"Have some dignity, Human," Milgrida puffed. "This is happening."

"You haven't told me what this is! I'd rather survive, and every instinct is firing off right now."

"Great, you're not stupid. Don't make me—"

Charlotte gave up. She wasn't going to win a fight, and had a feeling Milgrida was going easy on her anyway.

"Let's go," the Orcess said, and turned to stride into the forest.

"Wonderful," Charlotte said, and slowly followed.

“In the old days,” said Orcess #1—no one had bothered with introductions. “We took the Humans who wanted to join us into the woods and carved our names into their backs.”

She was the eldest looking present, with lines at the corners of her eyes and thick grey hair in a curly mane around her head and shoulders. Like all the Orc females present, her arms were bared by a tank top, and toned. But her biceps also sported scarring.

Charlotte wanted to cringe, but she only blinked—slowly, her most vapid expression fixed to her face, and fished her phone out of her pocket. She figured if she looked pathetic, it would be beneath any of them to actually harm her. It was Braht’s fault, really. He’d been filling her head with stories about the female’s circle, and she was now properly terrified.

So Im in the middle of a forest in the middle of nowhere and there are like twenty orc chiks and none of them look friendly

I can’t talk to you about this, Charlotte.

Your mother is dressed like Linda Hamilton. It’s definitely a look

Female’s circle business, Charlotte.

Am I going to survive this

I love you

“Someone take her phone away,” Regine said to the air.

Milgrida held out a hand. Charlotte spent time looking for the phone, a feat since it was right there in her palm, but Milgrida waited.

“And now?” Charlotte asked, handing the phone over, also wondering if hazing was legal. She could have sworn it wasn’t, but then who was going to take these Orcs to court?

Technically they were sovereign on any Orc owned land, even smack in the middle of a Human city, one of the main reasons behind the constant protests.

“An Act of Courage,” another female said.

“An Act of Courage?” Charlotte echoed. “Is that a thing or did you all just make it up for me?”

“You’re already pregnant,” Regine said, casting a critical eye over Charlotte, “we took that into account and modified the task. We decided a broken leg or arm won’t hurt the baby but you could still break your back or pelvis. Or your neck.” She smirked, an expression Charlotte didn’t like on Regine’s face one bit.

“Thanks for the consideration, I guess.”

“If you have to pee,” another female called out, “just crouch in one of the bushes. None of us mind. We’ve all been pregnant. Well, not Milgrida.”

“Daylight’s wasting,” Orcess #1 said. “Let’s begin the trial.”

18

AS THEY WAITED, Charlotte dabbed sweat from her cleavage and forehead, gratefully accepting a glass of iced lemonade and sipping delicately.

“Lavender,” she murmured, noting that no one else had a beverage. She paused, then handed it back.

“Bring forth the table,” Regine said in her rich, ominous voice.

Charlotte watched as the stage was set. Someone brought out a folding banquet table and white tablecloth. Milgrida helped drape it over, then stepped back as everyone turned expectantly towards the eldest Orcess emerging out of the forest where she’d disappeared moments before. She paced up the path, a laden tray balanced steadily between her hands.

“Cupcakes,” Charlotte squealed. She turned to Milgrida. “You said there wouldn’t be cupcakes!”

The elder Orcess stopped in front of the table and slowly lowered the silver tray.

Nine fist sized cupcakes, sans wrapper, of vanilla and chocolate and strawberry, topped with mounds of colorful, fluffy frosting returned Charlotte’s stare. Or she imagined they did, anyway. She swiped the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand just to make sure she wasn’t drooling.

“This is a test of courage,” the Orcess said in a kind, but gravelly voice.

Charlotte gave the table a perplexed look, but predictably it said nothing. “Well, you already said that and I think I

understand now. But I don't think one cheat day will hurt me that much. I can be brave."

The elder gave Charlotte a long, amused stare that was a touch too grim for her own liking.

"There are nine cupcakes on the tray," Regine said. "Three of these cupcakes are not like the others."

"They're almond flour? Oh. That *is* a trial."

Regine's laughter was hollow, and almost echoed in the forest. Which was a neat trick considering they *were* in a forest and not a cave, and there was no breeze to help her voice travel.

"No. Three of these cupcakes are infused with deadly poison," Brahnt's mother said. "As it is certain death to come against a strong clan. The remaining cupcakes are weak—poisonless. They must be destroyed utterly."

Charlotte made a face. "Well, poison's going to make it a bit difficult to eat any of them."

Her future mother-in-law smiled; a slow, satisfied, upward curve of her lips that was not at all a snarl or a silent death wish.

"If you have the courage to take the risk, and you don't die, then you will join us," Regine said. "Note that this is also a test of obedience. Every individual must fall into place for the good of the clan. To uphold the collective's honor."

Charlotte laughed. "Okay, okay. I guess this is a good time to reveal one of my more annoying personality traits. I'm not at all susceptible to social pressure." She lifted a hand and did a princess wave. "Since I don't wanna die and everything, tootles. I'm out."

Charlotte turned on her heels and got two steps before Milgrida intercepted. "If you have courage," Milgrida said solemnly, "then you'll earn not only your place among us, but the approval of your future mother-in-law."

"Yeah, but the thing is, I don't really want it all that badly."

"Do you love my son?"

Charlotte turned. “Do I love him enough to risk certain death? Come on. What kind of question is that? Do I *look* like a ride or die girl? I’m a ballerina, for gods’ sake.”

“It’s not certain death, girl,” the eldest Orcess said with a slight grimace.

“I just don’t see how this is going to work out well for me. It’s like boy math and boy math always screws over the girl.”

Everyone was silent as everyone contemplated the truth of that statement. No one argued.

Charlotte sighed. “How about I call Brahnt and get his take? Can I have my phone back?”

“This is female’s circle business,” the eldest said slowly. “But under the circumstances, perhaps some lenience is called for.”

Regine shrugged, and Milgrida fished Charlotte’s phone out and handed it to her.

He answered on the first ring. “Charlotte! You’re alive! Uh, I mean, how are you?”

She glared at his face. “Well, that greeting tells me everything I need to know. Did you really think you were sending me to my demise?”

Brahnt cringed, then smoothed his expression into a stoic mask. “I trust in your strength and courage, mother of my child.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Look. The female’s circle is hazing me, right?”

“That’s an unfortunate choice of—”

“They want me to eat poisoned cupcakes as a test of courage—wait, no, in this odd scenario poison cupcakes are good? They want me to eat the not-poison cupcakes. I guess courage is the word we’re using instead of ‘premeditated murder’ these days. The odds are like...oh my god, it’s boy math. There are nine cupcakes, six are not-poison. Enemies. You calculate the odds.”

He visibly relaxed. “Cupcakes?” Then he began laughing. “They’ll never get you to eat cupcakes.”

She scowled. “I love cupcakes.”

“Charlotte. You wanted me to fund a social media campaign to ban them from all the local supermarkets. Even though you’ve started posting pictures from the local bakeries.”

“I’m thinking about making a thirst trap account, but for baked goods. Anyway, I was thinking about the children, not my desperation to end my pregnancy induced sugar addiction.”

“They should have hidden it in a bowl of pho. You would have slurped it down like you were sucking—” he stopped.

“True. But they believe what they see on my Insta. Anyway, if I do this, I earn your mother’s approval.”

Brahnt went silent for a long moment.

“Oh my god! You’re thinking about it.”

“I’m weighing our options.”

“Except I’m the one who has to eat the poison carbs!”

He was rubbing his chin. “That is a conundrum. Is there a time limit on this approval?”

“I can’t believe you’re willing to risk this.”

Brahnt sighed. “No, no, of course I’m not. It’s completely not worth the risk. Not at all.”

He fell silent as Charlotte glanced up at the sound of approaching footsteps. Regine stopped in front of her, crossing her arms over her chest.

“If the girl leaves the trial before it is properly concluded, she will be shunned from our clan,” Regine said.

“Can we make an alternate arrangement? Someone mentioned something about carving names into one’s back.” Not that Charlotte was particularly thrilled at that idea, but she’d gotten a tattoo when she was younger so it couldn’t be that much worse. Certainly couldn’t be worse than death.

“You’re going too far, mother,” Brahnt snapped, “even for you. I know you’ve decided for some inexplicable reason that Charlotte isn’t the wife you would’ve chosen for me, but that doesn’t give you a right to murder her.”

“If I wanted to murder her, I would reach out and snap her neck,” was the pleasant reply. “No, son, this is a test. And it’s female’s circle business. We allowed her to call you for your counsel to indulge her Human weakness, but time is up.”

“Mother, if you force her to do this, we will be at war. I’ll go to the male’s circle, and they’ll back me.”

Charlotte blinked. The slightly helpless, almost whiny son of an overbearing mother tone was completely gone from his voice. Now he sounded cold, deadly almost.

She pressed her thighs together. No one noticed. Well, Milgrida gave her a sidelong look and sniffed the air, but no one else noticed.

Regine snatched the phone from Charlotte and turned it so she could look at her son. “You would break the clan for this Human girl?”

“I’ll break the clan, I’ll burn down the city.” His voice deepened. “Then I’ll come for your throat. I love you, and you are my mother and worthy of my respect, but she is mother of my child. I will defend her above all others.”

“If you come against me, I’ll treat you like an enemy,” Regine snarled.

It clicked for Charlotte that no one thought the two, mother and son, were joking. She glanced around at all the faces and met several battlefield stares.

Brahnt adored his mother, he talked about her all the time—he thought hiding it behind his attitude fooled people. Charlotte also understood the importance of family and community to Orcs, especially the importance to males to honor and respect the females in what was still a strongly matriarchal culture.

Her shoulders slumped. “I’ll do it.”

Regine’s gaze snapped to her.

“Give her the phone,” Brahnt growled.

Charlotte took the phone, ignoring the faint satisfaction in Regine’s now hooded gaze and gave her baby daddy a bright smile.

“All this fuss over a little poison! I thought about it, and Eldest said it’s not certain certain death. I was just nervous.”

He drew his lips back over his teeth. “Charlotte, I want you to turn around and leave. They won’t stop you.”

“No. This has to be done.”

“Forget everything you just heard. It’s not your—”

“Love you! See you soon!” She disconnected the call and shut off the phone for good measure.

“Next time,” Regine said, “make the decision. You don’t need his counsel; keep your own.”

Charlotte frowned, sliding the phone into her pocket. “That’s not how healthy relationships work.”

“It is among Orcs. Now.” She gestured to the cupcake table. “Strawberry or chocolate frosted?” Regine bared her teeth. “Make your choice.”

Charlotte marched back toward the table—it was only three feet, so the drama of the whole scene was cut short.

Regine walked around the table until she was facing Charlotte and slapped her hands down, rattling the tray. She leaned forward, eyes bright.

“Who is the enemy?”

Charlotte drew herself up. “Refined white sugar! I mean, outsiders. The weak not-poisoned ones.”

“How do we treat our enemies?”

“Consume them utterly!” she roared.

“Make your choice. Devour your enemy. Take your place.”

19

CHARLOTTE FOCUSED, ignoring feminine roars and chants as she walked around the table, examining cupcakes from all angles.

“This is a test of courage,” she said slowly, “but also of strategy. But also of obedience. Six of these do not belong, and therefore must be cast out.”

She crouched, examining the cupcakes from all sides. “No one has been stupid enough to wage frontal assault on an Orc clan in centuries. No...enemies would come disguised as allies. On the surface, all of these cupcakes *appear* alike.”

Charlotte rose, then bent and sniffed each one. “Interesting. This one has no scent. It’s strawberry frosted like two of the others.”

She gave each strawberry frosted cupcake the sniff test and set aside two. She lifted the third, which had a strong fragrance of ripe summer berries.

“This is the true cupcake, the one that is death to outsiders, for it has retained its essence. Therefore, the other two are the enemy.”

Without hesitation, she picked up the poisonless strawberry duo and devoured them.

Silence in the clearing, but all Charlotte experienced was a spike in her glucose.

“Victory,” the eldest intoned.

“Victory!” the Orcesses screamed.

Someone handed her the half-drained glass of lavender lemonade. She sipped, letting the tang clear her tastebuds of sweetness.

It stood to reason that if the strategy was to differentiate the poisoned cupcake from its to non-poison counterparts, that that same strategy would apply to the trio of chocolate cupcakes and the trio of vanilla cupcakes.

Charlotte turned her attention to the chocolate and lifted one. “Death by chocolate—but not today.”

They all smelled as they should, but she didn’t expect each test within the test to be the same.

She set it down, then lined the other two next to it and stared down. Crouched again, turning her head from side to side to not miss a single detail. And as she did so, it occurred to her that the swirl of the fluffy frosting on two of the cupcakes went in the left direction—and the swirl on one chocolate cupcake went right.

The difference was subtle, especially since the cupcakes were monochromatic and otherwise unadorned. She stared for a few more moments just to be sure, but yes, the swirls on one definitely went in another direction. She couldn’t imagine that this was an oversight, not in a test of life and death, of courage.

She set aside the right swirl cupcake, and savagely ate the remaining two, wiping frosting from her mouth with her sleeve.

The Orcesses screamed, their wild shrieks blasting primal fury into the afternoon sky.

Charlotte took another sip of lavender lemonade. Deliberately—was there any other way—she set the glass down. It sat lonely and alone, only a quarter full, a forsaken herald on a field of battle.

Never give up. Never give in.

She turned her attention to the vanilla trio.

Deceptively innocent, insidiously elegant.

After twenty minutes of examination, could find *nothing* that set any of the cupcakes apart from the others. Sugar laced bile rose in her throat.

“It’s too late to turn back now,” she said to herself. “I accepted the call. The only path is forward.”

Regine came to Charlotte’s side. “There is always a choice. *This* choice must be made without coercion. If you wish to turn back now, none of us will stop you. In this, my son was right.”

“But he’ll start a war.”

Regine said nothing.

Charlotte rested her hand on her belly. “For you,” she whispered. And knowing that her chance of death was one in three—that damn boy math—she chose a cupcake at random. Closed her eyes, raised it to her lips and—

The cupcake was knocked from her hand. Charlotte’s eyelids flew open...they didn’t actually fly, but they did open. “What!?”

“The smallest bite would have killed you,” Regine said, sounding unbothered.

“I...wasn’t that the point?”

“It is also,” Eldest Orcess said, “a test of commitment, and trust. You could have turned back; you did not. Regine could have chosen to let you eat the cupcake; she did not.”

Blood rushed to Charlotte’s head. “Hey, hey,” she heard Milgrida exclaim. “No fainting! I wouldn’t have let you eat it either.”

It took moments for the dizziness to clear. It was one thing to *think* she might die, it was another to have it confirmed that yes, she woulda been a goner, her and baby. Except Regine was in a good mood or something. Or didn’t want to piss off her son.

“I think...” Charlotte said faintly, “I think I need a steak.”

When she threw up on Regine's shoes, her mother-in-law didn't do anything but snarl.

"Congratulations, Regine," an Orcess said, clasping Charlotte's mother-in-law on the shoulder. "She's not pathetic. You did good."

Charlotte didn't think Regine had anything to do with it, but she also knew better than to open her mouth, or to move at all. She continued to lie on her back, staring up at the sky. Someone would notice she wasn't moving soon, and hopefully pick her up and carry her into the house. Maybe feed her meat. Milgrida had mentioned a fire pit and barbecue, and officially inducting her into the clan so she could marry Brahnt, and Charlotte was down for it.

As long as she didn't have to sit up.

A shadow blocked out the sun. Charlotte opened her eyes. "We're going to have to discuss the marriage proposal," Milgrida said.

"Oh, Brahnt hasn't—" Charlotte stopped. "Wait a minute. Isn't it flipped in your culture? The girls do the proposing?"

Regine joined Milgrida in staring down at Charlotte. Then the Eldest Orcess, then the others until they surrounded her in an enclosed circle.

"Yes," Regine said, "but our traditional betrothal practice has been banned for centuries. So you have to do it in secret, and you can tell no one."

"That sounds...ominous."

Regine smiled. "You will give my son a proper proposal, or I will break you over my knee."

Charlotte blinked. "Yes, ma'am."

She sat on the couch, one leg crossed over the other.

Brahnt burst into the house. “Charlotte! Why didn’t you tell me as soon as you were home?”

“Good evening,” she said pleasantly. “How was your day? You tell me how your day was, and I’ll tell you all about my day.”

He took a half step back, then halted. “My day was...good.”

Their gazes dueled.

“Are you going to come inside the house?” she asked.

Brahnt’s gaze retreated and tried to hide in the hallway. “I’m weighing my options.”

She bared her teeth. A particular facial expression she’d learned that very day. Charlotte patted the couch next to her. “Why don’t you come sit next to me. I’ll go first.”

“Ah...”

“Get in here now,” she barked, satisfied when he jerked forward, slamming the door behind him and darted forward two steps before he halted, eyes narrowing.

“Clearly, you’ve spent the day with the female’s circle. I didn’t think they’d rub off on you so soon.”

“Let’s discuss the female’s circle.”

He struggled not to wince. “Have you had dinner, my darling? I made sinigang and left it in the fridge for you.”

“I was too fatigued to eat. My appetite is completely gone. You might as well sit, Brahnt.”

The Orc slunk forward, paused, then drew himself up to his full height, gaze narrowed on hers, and took the last two steps forward at a deliberate pace.

She was tempted to snap her teeth at him, except it would just look pathetic, all things considered.

“I’m not going to bite,” she said, as he lowered himself with appropriate wariness onto the couch.

“If you’ve spent a day with the female’s circle, you are,” was his muttered, dark reply.

“You didn’t warn me.”

Brahnt rubbed his chin. “No. I thought it would be better for your mental health to go in blind. How did it go?”

“I’m still pregnant.”

He winced. “My mother didn’t call me.”

“Is that a good or a bad sign?”

“Either/or. But she would have called me if you’d died or been seriously injured, so...”

“And you let me go anyway?” she exclaimed.

“It’s female’s circle business. I can’t interfere.”

“Why, you circle whipped—”

He snarled at her.

“Did you just gnash at me? Did you just gnash at me!” She smacked him on the nose. “I’m telling your mother! And the circle, because I *passed their stupid poison cupcake test.*”

He paled.

But she was just warming up. “You should be scared. Did you know back in the old days—”

“*What did they tell you about the Old Days?*”

“*In the beginning of the days of the Orcs of Uthilsen, our gods and goddesses still walked among us—*”

He relaxed. “Oh. The fables. Those are just stories.” He cleared his throat. “Did they mention anything about knives?”

She ignored the part about knives. Let him wonder. “You know us Humans believe you Orcs aren’t originally from Earth.”

Brahnt sneered. “Faetales.”

Charlotte perked up. “Do you believe in the Fae? Are they real?”

His expression blanked. “So, about your induction into the female’s circle—no, do *not* tell me what happened, that’s forbidden—but did everything go...well. Is my mother...”

“Day drinking?” She glanced out the giant windows. “Well, night drinking now. I don’t think so? The ladies congratulated her on snagging a decent enough Human for her son.”

Brahnt sagged into the back of the couch. “Thank the Allmother.”

Charlotte sniffed. “Why don’t you go take a shower and relax? I’ll go warm up the soup. Did you leave the heads on the prawns?”

“Of course I did, darling. The head is where all the flavor is.”

She rose, patting him on the shoulder. “Go shower.”

Charlotte busied herself taking the soup out of the fridge and putting it on the stove to warm up. She set up bowls, spoons, and glasses of an appropriate wine, then turned and padded down the hallway to enter the bedroom.

He was humming, a low, sonorous song with a guttural edge to the word and an accompanying beat—his heels marking time on the floor. Charlotte knew the Orcs still spoke their own language despite the mass migration from across the ocean centuries ago, but it was rare to hear it.

She listened for a moment, then went to bed and picked up the blade she’d slid under a pillow.

Brahnt didn’t glance up when she entered the bathroom. It was one of those showers with no curtain or sliding glass wall, so she untied her robe and let it drop to the floor and walked quietly behind him, sliding one arm around his waist, letting the dual showerheads rain down on her. He paused singing long enough to hum his pleasure at her presence, and that was when she slid the knife blade against his throat.

Brahnt stilled.

“*You’re mine,*” she said carefully in the words Regine and Milgrida had drummed into her. “*I will have no other. I claim you as my husband and will defend my mate with blood, mine and my sisters’.*”

The Orc tensed. She lifted the blade a hair, enough to let him turn and when he did, he stared down at her for a split second,

then went down on one knee, head bowed. She pressed the blade against the vein of his neck.

“Will you yield, or will you fight?”

“I yield,” he said softly, and when he looked up, his eyes were bright. Brahnt rested a hand on her stomach, fingers spread wide. *“I yield to my wife.”*

She slowly lowered the knife. “I know the shower isn’t very romantic, but they said I had to take you by surprise or it didn’t count.”

Brahnt stood, sliding his arms around her and pulling her close. She buried her head against his chest.

“It was perfect,” he murmured.

“I’ll arrange the public, socially acceptable one soon.”

His arms tightened.

Later that night she half woke from a satisfying dream that involved Charlotte and her new sisters waging war on an army of cupcakes wielding battle axes. The muted light of a smartphone drew her gaze to where Brahnt stood on the bedroom balcony, back to her.

“Was there blood?” she heard Regine ask.

“A little,” Brahnt said, voice very soft.

“And did she speak the traditional words?”

“She did.”

“Good girl.” Regine paused. “Are you happy?”

“I didn’t think I’d be.”

“I’m glad for you, son. She’s a little frothy, but the circle will whip her into shape.”

“She’s perfect the way she is.”

“Of course of course.”

Charlotte smiled and turned on her side, closing her eyes.

20

CHARLOTTE TOOK A DEEP BREATH, braced herself, and shoved one leg out of the car. Brahnt hovered, holding out an arm and assisted her to her feet.

It. Took. Forever. To. Stand up these days.

“I don’t like being pregnant anymore,” Charlotte said as Brahnt fetched Snowkiss from the backseat. At eight months along, it was a normal refrain in their home.

She couldn’t breathe, because her lungs were squashed. She had to pee even on days she refused to drink anything so she could have a few hours without waddling to the toilet. Her ankles were swollen and that was not an attractive look. Even for a woman who was used to feet that looked like a train wreck.

Heartburn, indigestion.

She couldn’t walk faster than a strolling sloth, and forget about going up more than a half flight of stairs at one time.

She used to pride herself on how in shape she was.

And then she’d gotten knocked up.

Charlotte didn’t think her back would ever return to normal.

“You don’t have to stay long,” Brahnt said, matching her pace as they walked into the mansion. “Two to three hours to do your social duty, and then you can lie down and nap. My parents want to show you off. The Singhs’ son joined MillionOrc the same time as I did, and he’s not engaged yet. My father is gloating a little. Endure it with grace.”

Charlotte tried. Her best. Caro and their circle of friends were present at the baby shower, and Charlotte actually liked Samesh's relatives—they were, gasp, normal people, though of course normal was on a scale of “comfortably well off” to “trust fund baby with a Netflix reality show.” In fact, Charlotte had overheard a conversation where Brahnt vehemently vetoed the request cameras be present to capture footage.

Which kind of irritated Charlotte, because she could use that kind of exposure. Maybe snag her own spin off because who wouldn't want to see her face on television? But in the end—at least in this matter—Brahnt's rabid desire for privacy was more important to Charlotte than fleeting streaming service fame.

Though it was a close call and had taken some serious soul searching.

“So when is there going to be a public wedding?” Ati, one of Samesh's aunts, demanded.

She was shorter for an Orcess, her tusks dainty, her graying dark hair twined in fat braids around her head, and a colorful sari in blues and greens almost blending with her skin.

“I don't know about this whole newfangled thing the young people do where they have babies before they get married. I don't know about it. We didn't do things like that in my day. If a girl got pregnant, she had a blade at the father's throat *before* she started showing.”

“It's proof of concept,” Charlotte said. “Brahnt had to make sure I was fertile first. You know, so he could reliably carry on the dynasty.”

Brahnt gave Charlotte a flat, unamused look.

“But don't worry,” Charlotte assured her. “As soon as I'm back in shape after the baby's born, we'll throw a wedding. The whole nine yards.”

“It will be traditional, of course,” Ati said, her tone ominous. “We have to uphold the honor of our clan.”

Charlotte nodded earnestly. “Of course. I'll look to you to guide me, Aunt Ati.”

Ati patted her cheek. “Such a respectful girl. I approve, Brahnt. We were so afraid you would marry a stripper, or one of those baristas. What did you say you do again, Charlotte?”

“I’m a professional classically trained dancer,” Charlotte said. “Ballet.”

Ati exclaimed, pressing a hand to her ample bosom. “Ballet. So refined. Not everyone can be a doctor. After you have the baby, you come to me, and I’ll teach you Bhangra and help you plan the sangeet.”

“Don’t do it,” Milgrida muttered. “Don’t do it.”

“Sounds like fun,” Charlotte said, and meant it. “Oh here, let me friend you on Instagram. I have a maternity skin care shop now with my own branded merchandise, but if you DM me I can send you a discount code.”

“How much?”

“Twenty percent is the friends and family.”

“Surely you can do better for an auntie. I’ll put in a word with your local female’s circle.”

Charlotte considered. “Okay, thirty, but don’t share the code with anyone else. I only want people I like to have it.”

“Why don’t I have the code?” Caro interjected.

“I haven’t forgotten that knife incident.”

Caro’s expression darkened. “When I find out who one-starred my new release before it was even live...”

Inevitably, Charlotte had to pee. She had to talk Brahnt out of escorting her to the restroom. “I can go potty all by myself. I swear I haven’t forgotten how my urethra functions. That’s not the hole the baby comes out of, by the way.”

Brahnt scowled. “Go, you little smartass. Take your phone with you. If you need help call me immediately. I’ll instruct the staff to keep an eye on you.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, left the outdoor party and entered the house.

When she left Brahnt's old en suite after taking way too long to do a number two because, no, that wasn't working right either these days, Regine intercepted her in the hallway.

"Charlotte. I'd like to speak with you."

Charlotte stopped, looked around for Orcs in black suits and shades with discreet guns, saw none, and shrugged. Regine led her into an office, then gestured for Charlotte to take a seat.

After she was settled, Charlotte gave her a look of inquiry.

"I'm sure you're wondering what I wanted to talk to you about," Regine said.

"Not really."

Regine paused, then continued, "You and I both know the score. We're females of the world."

"Go on." What she really wanted to know was; where Regine was getting her dialogue?

"I'm going to make you an offer."

"Oh my god, let me guess. One I can't refuse, right?"

Regine reached into her desk and withdrew what looked suspiciously like a checkbook. Charlotte hadn't seen one since she was a kid, and wasn't certain at first, but yep, definitely a checkbook.

"The deal is contingent. I'm prepared to make you a comfortable girl if you will leave my son and never show your face around here again."

Charlotte stared at Regine, feeling her eyebrow inch up her forehead. "What about your grandchild?"

"I'll consider that problem at a later date." Regine gave her a shark's smile. "You're going to be a busy woman, Charlotte. An internationally renown dancer, an entrepreneur...you may not have time for a child in your life."

"I mean, my future husband's parents are rich. He can hire help."

Regine was talented at ignoring logic when it suited her. “Orclings are stressful. They...how do you kids say it...crimp your style.”

This was so cringe. Charlotte didn’t believe in getting mad at people, even when they were insulting. What was the point? You either accepted people as they were, or you didn’t be around them. She was certain Regine had other redeeming qualities. Samesh fucked her, one assumed, so she must. But then...they had been married for thirty years, so maybe not.

“What’s the offer?” Charlotte asked.

Regine scrawled something on the check, then handed it to Charlotte. “If you leave my son by the end of the week, you can cash this. Free and clear.”

“You’re offering me \$50,000 to leave the father of my child?” Charlotte said in disgust and tore up the check. She let the pieces flutter to the floor. “Please, you could easily quadruple that.”

Regine paused, narrowed her eyes, then scrawled out a second check.

Charlotte took it. “Is there a way to make this a recurring donation? Because in some states 200K a year isn’t even middle class, I’m just saying. I’ve become highly accustomed to living in obscene wealth.”

When she saw Regine’s cheeks start to go dark, Charlotte relented. She didn’t want to explain to Brahnt his mother had a heart attack because Charlotte was goading her. “Fine. 200k now, 200k after I pull a runner and the kid is born.”

“Brahnt can’t know where you go, or he’ll come after you.”

“Yeah, whatever. Are you allowed to do this now that I’m in the clan?”

Regine snorted. “Do we have a deal?”

Charlotte shrugged. Technically, a shrug could simply indicate her understanding of the offer. But she figured Regine would believe what Regine wanted to believe.

The Orcess sat back in her chair, folding her fingers over her knee with a satisfied look. "I knew you were a smart brownie."

"Oh, I'm smart alright." Charlotte grinned. "It was nice doing business with you." She tucked the check into her pocket, stood and waddled out of the office because, of course, she couldn't manage a jaunty saunter.

God, she couldn't wait till this kid was out. It was terrible being so graceless, like normal people. How did they live with themselves clodding around on their hooves all day long?

Thankfully, Charlotte didn't have to go looking for Brahnt. The Orc was already searching the house for her. As soon as he spotted Charlotte, he charged forward.

"Where have you been? My mother is missing too."

And clearly, that meant something to Brahnt.

Charlotte waved a hand. "We had a nice little chat in her office. Come on, let's go somewhere private to talk."

Brahnt gave her a suspicious look but put his hand on Charlotte's back and gently nudged her halfway down the hall, opening the door to reveal a library.

Charlotte took two steps in, stopped, and turned in a slow circle, looking up and down at the floor to ceiling shelves. "If I had time to read more, this would be a real Belle moment."

Brahnt shut the door and leaned on it, crossing his arms over his chest. "What did my mother say to you?"

Charlotte laughed, fished the check out of her pocket and unfolded it, waving it in front of Brahnt's nose. "Look what I did! I totally conned your mom out of \$200,000." She chortled.

Brahnt looked at her, unimpressed. "Explain."

"Oh, Regine was trying to buy me off. The whole if you leave my son and never darken our doorstep again, you can have this fast cash now." Charlotte rolled her eyes. "It's like she thinks I'm stupid. \$200,000 is what you spend on duck eggs in a month. She would have to go up to at least two million to tempt me to leave you."

Brahnt took the check, looked at it, grimaced, and handed it back. Then he ran a hand over his face. “I knew she was going to do this. What did you tell her?”

“Are you serious? The first offer was 50K, I told her to quadruple it. I took the deal, man. Just...go along with it until the check clears.”

“Charlotte.”

“Come on. You didn’t expect me to turn down that much cash, did you?”

“You’re going to give the check back.”

“I say we cash it. We could use a fifth luxury vehicle, right? You never know when the other five might break down in the snow and leave us stranded.”

Brahnt gave her a withering look.

“What? It’s not like she can’t afford it, and it would teach her a lesson. I don’t know why she thought I wouldn’t tattle?” Charlotte gave Brahnt a quizzical look. “Caro writes these plot lines all the time. I already know not to run away sobbing, or hold my silence in aggrieved martyrdom, or...nah. Cash the check and have a date on Mom’s dime.”

Brahnt grabbed Charlotte’s hand and ushered her out of the library, out of the house and back to the outdoor party. “We’re going to nip this shit in the bud right now.”

“Oh, a dramatic confrontation?” she squealed. “I’m down. Wait, let me go get Caro. This never happens in real life, she’ll feel it’s vindication her werewolf billionaire smut is actually reflective of reality or something. Though it’s really not.”

Brahnt’s parents glanced at them as they approached. Milgrida and Caro hovered nearby, in conversation. Regine must have recognized the expression on her son’s face because her posture shifted slightly. Samesh, knowing his wife, glanced between everyone then thinned his lips.

“What did she do?” Samesh asked when Brahnt was in ear shot.

Brahnt gave Regine a long look. “She tried to buy Charlotte off.”

Regine sneered at Charlotte, unabashed. “Snitches got stitches in my day.”

“Except you’ve been legal money for two generations now,” Charlotte said. “Though I have legit doubts. I tried to convince Brahnt to cash the check, but he said no.” Charlotte shrugged. “I did my part. I tried to cooperate.”

“You didn’t, Reggie,” Samesh said, turning to Regine. “Couldn’t you restrain yourself this once?”

Regine sipped her drink. “It had to be done. Consider it her final test.”

“You could act like you’re normal for once. *Once*, Reggie. You tried to buy off our son’s pregnant fiancé at the baby shower? And you constantly bitch how low class the Carlsons are.”

Regine sniffed. “Because they are. Do you know their daughter actually wore a—”

“No one wants to hear it,” Milgrida said loudly.

“It screamed insecure new money. Why don’t you just stamp “Daddy won the lottery twenty years ago and made some good investments” on your forehead? Please. They’re fooling no one.”

Charlotte gave Brahnt a look.

Brahnt avoided Charlotte’s gaze. “Mom, don’t do this again. If you do, the baby’s first wardrobe will be Louis Vuitton. With visible insignia.”

Regine paled.

“*Plus* the stroller, and we’ll push that bad bitch all around Central Park and post pictures on Instagram too. And tag your friends.”

Milgrida sat in the grass and began laughing.

“I don’t get it,” Caro said.

Charlotte turned on Braht. “Oh my god, can we? My engagement stats would go through the roof.”

“Mom?” Braht demanded.

Charlotte turned to Regine. “Hey, can you do me a solid and refuse? I could use those pics. Tell you what, we can work something out about this whole leaving Braht thing. Maybe —”

“Don’t make me spank you when we get home,” Braht said.

Samesh coughed. “Son. We’re in company. Don’t be uncouth.”

“I wouldn’t mind details,” Caro said.

Milgrida lifted a hand. “Seconding.”

“She’s visibly pregnant, Father. No one thinks she got that way because of a wand.”

“Not a magic wand, anyway,” Charlotte coughed, and young female voices giggled. Oops. Charlotte smiled sheepishly at Ati. “Sorry. Girls present.”

“Nevertheless, we don’t discuss these things in public,” Samesh said.

Regine rolled her eyes, giving them all a sneer, the sneer Charlotte often saw on Braht’s face, though more subtle. She supposed age really didn’t mellow a person, just made you double down on your issues.

“I have the number of a good therapist,” Charlotte said.

Samesh turned to her. “Oh? I’ve been meaning to ask for recommendations. I believe Reggie’s narc tendencies have bamboozled the person we’re currently using. We need someone who hasn’t fallen prey.”

“What?” Regine said. “I just broke our current one in.”

“My point exactly.”

21

CHARLOTTE SIGHED as she shifted onto her side, the enormous swell of her pregnant belly making even the smallest movements a chore. Though the support band helped relieve some of the pressure, she still gritted her teeth as she slid a hand under the bump.

“Seriously?” she huffed.

Lying down was marginally better than sitting up, but at forty-one weeks pregnant, nothing was particularly comfortable.

On top of the general third trimester discomforts, she’d been having little cramps all morning that even extra-strength Tylenol couldn’t kick. Caro caught her trying to sneak the pills and confiscated them, bitching about pregnancy and meds, whatever.

Aunt Ati and cousin Milgrida were present to help out.

“Staff!” Ati exclaimed several weeks ago when Brahnt had been ready to hire help to stay with Charlotte during the day. “No, no, the female’s circle will handle it. Besides, I’ll call Milgrida. She’s getting to the age where she needs to think of settling down, and this will be good experience for her.” She paused. “The male’s circle will be doing Brahnt’s training, don’t you worry.”

So despite Charlotte having nested in the bedroom, complete with an ever-refreshed tray of fragrant dishes Ati and Milgrida were preparing, she didn’t feel alone because there were three people a shout away waiting to wait on her hand and foot.

Well, Caro, not so much, but her twin was being her *version* of nice.

“This is for the birds,” Charlotte muttered after another, stronger cramp, and pushed herself into a sitting position, grunting, then stood.

Maybe a bit of walking would shake it off.

She made it halfway down the hall before it occurred to her slow ass what increasing cramping could indicate.

“But my water hasn’t broken yet!” she exclaimed to the empty room. “Where’s the bloody mucus plug? Aren’t there supposed to be signs or something?”

Was this—could she be in labor? She shook her head in disbelief. Of all the dramatic, over-the-top scenarios she had imagined for the birth of her first child, going into labor with no fanfare felt strangely anticlimactic.

She waddled into the kitchen where Ati took one look at her and ushered her into a chair.

“Sit down before you swoon!” she exclaimed.

“The midwife said walking helps labor progress,” Charlotte said. “I, uh, think I might have been in labor all morning.”

Ati’s eyes went wide. “What?! Why didn’t you say anything?”

Charlotte shrugged helplessly. “I’ve been having cramps on and off all morning, and they’re getting worse. And now I just have a feeling...” she trailed off.

A feeling, a strong feeling, that this was it. She couldn’t pinpoint why, and of course when she texted Brahnt, he would grill her for specifics. But she didn’t have specifics.

She had a *feeling*.

Milgrida glanced between them. “Should we call Brahnt?”

Charlotte and Ati exchanged a knowing look. “Better not yet,” Ati said. “If you’re in labor, you’ll want peace and quiet as long as possible, and the males—especially the first time fathers—can be a bit frantic. In the old days we’d send them

out to the forest to dance around the fire and slash their chests—the bloodloss always helped calm them down.”

“As bloodloss will do,” Charlotte muttered, then groaned, unsure if she was more excited or terrified. Either way, impending fatherhood was about to get very real, very quickly!

So though Braht sent two more perfunctory wellness check texts during the day—and there was something Charlotte couldn’t pinpoint about those perfunctory texts that made her feel secure in her Orc’s affection, maybe because their tone was so “old married people,” Charlotte didn’t tell him she was in labor.

And then it occurred to Charlotte that New York traffic was terrible.

You should start making your way home now, I’m having contractions

What? When did it start?

This morning

YOU’RE IN LABOR? You didn’t tell me?

The midwife said first births usually take a while there was no reason to have you rush home, but considering traffic

I’m on my way.

Charlotte put the smartphone down and took a bite of the dish Ati had put in front of her face. She didn’t know what it was, but it was sweet and carby, and it was good.

“Braht is on his way home,” she said around a mouthful.

Caro wandered into the kitchen and Ati ushered her to the table too, then set a plate in front of her.

“Milgrida has just about everything packed up for the birthing center,” Auntie said. “Enough food for all of us and some treats for the staff too.”

Ati had already informed them weeks ago that despite the elegant, nutritious menu offered by the plush birthing center Charlotte and Braht had chosen, they would be eating no food but hers.

Charlotte was okay with that. She could get fancy rabbit food any other time; she'd rather eat Auntie's cooking any day of the week, especially since home-cooked meals had been the stuff of fantasy growing up.

Braht was home ninety minutes later, walking in on the tail end of a video call Charlotte had placed to the midwife when the cramps suddenly skipped over some line of demarcation into full-blown, mild contractions.

And, oh my god, was she feeling it. She'd managed to con herself into thinking she could handle this so far, but now she was having doubts.

This shit hurt.

This shit hurt like a bitch. And she'd suffered plenty of injuries in her dance career.

"...still early but if you'd feel more comfortable coming to the center now, there's nothing wrong with that," the midwife was saying. "The contractions are still far enough apart that I think you have several hours to go."

"We're on our way," Braht said, taking over in his usual terse fashion.

The midwife smiled and nodded, and the call disconnected.

"How close together are the contractions?" Braht snapped, running a hand through his hair. Then he crouched.

Charlotte recoiled, slapping a hand on his shoulder. "Don't pick me up! Have you lost your mind?"

He stared at her. "You're in labor."

"I can still walk, Braht! Whatever you do, don't try to pick me up."

"I've been working out. I've had to, considering the weight you've put on."

Charlotte stared. “You do realize there are so many ways I could misinterpret that statement.”

Brahnt stared back, expression blank. “You have put on weight. Around nine pounds of baby, plus all the extra blood and water and...stuff. Plus the additional fat reserves.”

Caro, still eating, snorted. “Bruh. Should have stopped before ‘fat reserves.’”

“I’m not saying you’re not attractive, Charlotte,” Brahnt said, finally seeming to realize his mistake. “You’re preparing for breast-feeding, so of course you’re retaining...” he stopped before saying *those two words* again.

“I can stand up on my own,” Charlotte snapped, and began the process. She didn’t need to worry about anything. She’d get back into dancing shape as soon as her postpartum period was over.

Absolutely nothing to worry about.

“Maybe I should lay off the roti.”

“What?” Ati said, as if Charlotte had suggested sacrificing her firstborn to Prada.

Brahnt rolled his eyes, slid an arm under Charlotte’s shoulders and helped her rise, then turned to his cousin.

“Milgrida, go get Charlotte’s bag,” Brahnt said. “Caro, pack up Snowkiss. We’ll drop her off at the sitter. Aunt At—”

“Don’t boss me, boy,” she warned. “I’ve been to more birthings than you have fingers and toes. You get your female into the car, and Milgrida and I will follow after we pack up all the food.”

Caro pushed away from the table. “I guess I’m with you two. I’ll get the dandelion puff.”

Milgrida reappeared with the bag, which Auntie gave one final inspection as Caro strapped a yipping Snowkiss to her chest.

“You’ll have a little brother or sister soon,” Charlotte told her. “I’m sorry you can’t come with us.”

“Bag, door, car,” Braht was muttering as he strode out the door, having snatched the bag. “Bag, door, car. Damnit, I know there was more than that.”

Caro and Charlotte following at a more sedate pace. Braht reappeared in the hallway just as they made it through the threshold.

Charlotte gave Braht a withering look. “Forget something?”

“Why don’t you take the bag and the dog to the car and get it started,” Caro said. “I’ll help Charlotte.”

“Please,” Charlotte said, gritting her teeth as another contraction started. “Go get the car.”

The last thing she needed was a hysterical Orc running around her in a circle doing his best imitation of a frantic Snowkiss.

“He’ll settle down soon,” Auntie said after Braht disappeared down the hallway, bag on his shoulder and dog on *his* chest for once.

“And if he doesn’t,” Milgrida muttered, “she’ll have something special for that.”

“Breathe,” Caro murmured. “Do that breath work shit we were listening to on YouTube. You got this, twin.” She cleared her throat. “You want me to call Dad?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Caro squeezed her shoulder. She understood.

Charlotte couldn’t think about their mother right now either, so set that issue aside to deal with later. A new baby wasn’t going to fix years of estrangement.

Once they were in the car, Ati called her brother and put him on video.

“Stay hydrated,” Samesh said, “and mobile as long as you can. The center has pools. Are you doing a pool? Don’t worry about poop, it’s natural. We’ll be there soon, but don’t worry, I won’t let Reggie come in the room until she’s meditated.”

Sitting next to Samesh, but slightly out of the camera, Regine grunted. “Be snappy about it, girl. I want to meet my

grandchild before we go on vacation.”

“Vacation?” Auntie exclaimed. “Sam, this isn’t the time for vacation!”

“Of course not, we’re going to reschedule. Regine, we will discuss this later,” he cut off his wife’s protest.

“Fine, fine,” was the grudging response. “We’ll be by soon.”

“I’ll keep her on a leash,” Samesh promised.

22

CHARLOTTE LEANED her forehead on the soft edge of the birthing pool, trying to absorb the feeling of weightlessness and translate it into painlessness.

That wasn't going so well.

"I think I want the drugs," she moaned. "Oh my god, this shit is for the birds."

"You're doing well," Brahnt murmured, slowly rubbing circles on the small of Charlotte's back.

Brahnt had stripped down to swim shorts and alternated between getting in the pool and getting out of the pool, according to Charlotte's wishes. After arriving at the birthing center, he'd seemed to get ahold of himself and become the unflappable rock she needed while attempting to recall why the hell she'd wanted to go through natural childbirth in the first place.

Oh, yeah. That evening around the bonfire listening to the Orcesses talk about their birthing war stories.

"Someone slap me," she muttered.

"No negative energy," the doula chanted in her low, soft voice. Everything was low and soft, except for the contractions.

The lights were dim, fat scented candles dotted the room for ambiance, and the playlist Charlotte and Brahnt had meticulously selected over the last several weeks droned on.

"Give me drugs, or give me a C-section," Charlotte panted.

“You’re doing so well,” Brahnt said. “You wanted me to remind you—”

“Fuck what I said to remind me about!”

“You can have the drugs if you want,” Caro said from the corner, “but I don’t think you’ll be happy if you go with a C-section. You wanna give it another five minutes?”

This was Brahnt and Caro’s tag team response every time Charlotte asked to abandon the pool. Praise and reassurance from Brahnt with Caro in the role of slightly bad cop, telling Charlotte no, suck it up.

In the back of the part of her mind that could still think despite the pain—Brahnt slid a straw in Charlotte’s mouth, and she sucked down another gulp of mango lassi—she knew they were right.

“Just one more,” she said after the contraction eased. “I can do one more.”

On and on the cycle went until it was at the point where Charlotte thought she was going to rip somebody’s eyes out from the pain, but then the urge to push hit her like a Mack truck.

“Let’s ease into it,” the midwife said. “Let your body do most of the work.”

Yeah, this was one of the things of all the things she and Brahnt had decided on back when they’d been so naive about this whole process. The whole letting the body expel the baby naturally thing.

It was a good thing. It sounded *great* in theory.

Charlotte wanted this little motherfu—

“Language,” Caro said.

—this baby out.

As the urge to push seized her, a strange ruthless focus took hold of her senses as well. She abandoned Brahnt’s voice, the midwife’s instructions, and everything narrowed down to that

ring of fire, and her body straining, working, to expel a new life.

“We have the head,” the midwife said, her voice distant.

Charlotte knew not to panic, the baby wouldn't drown.

After the next contraction, “And the shoulders. And baby is here...”

She felt a whoosh and a tug, heard a splash of water as a child emerged, clasped by the midwife. Charlotte lifted her head and turned, straightening instinctively to reach for the baby. Braht was there, grinning as the midwife put the slippery, now squalling infant against Charlotte's chest.

Oh my god it was big.

Charlotte clasped the baby to her, carefully shifting—and it seemed like the baby bump wasn't going to magically disappear—to lean back against the pool, Braht cradling them both from behind. If anyone had asked her to describe her feelings, she wouldn't have had the words. Tears pricked her eyes.

She felt as if the world had stopped, reset itself, and reemerged on a completely different axis.

She was now a mom.

“Oh shit.” Charlotte stared down at the crying baby. “Maybe we should put it back. I don't think it likes it here.”

Caro snorted. “Would you put Snowkiss back?”

“No...”

The baby with a head of black hair, and minty pale skin. She gently pulled down the bottom lip—

“They don't have teeth at this age, genius,” Caro said. “I guess I'm going to move in for a few weeks to make sure you get plenty of sleep.”

Everyone was busy doing things, and Charlotte also learned that contractions didn't stop once the baby was out. But Braht and Charlotte knelt there holding the new child, not talking because no one had room for words. Except for Caro.

“Boy or girl?” Brahnt finally murmured.

“Oh, I forgot! It’s a girl!” the midwife chirped.

Eventually, they urged Charlotte out of the pool. The doula wrapped a postpartum girdle around her middle after she toweled off, then enveloped her in a Snowkiss white robe. Brahnt was cradling the baby while the midwife and doula dealt with Charlotte, and Caro had left the room to announce to the rest of the family that the baby was born.

Charlotte was tucked into bed, the baby curled on her bare skin and Brahnt in the bed at their side, also bare-chested for when it was his turn, when the door opened.

Caro poked her head in, grimaced and made an exaggerated eye roll. Charlotte smiled, beckoning. She was exhausted, but sleep was the furthest thing from her mind.

But not food. She was hungry. Famished.

“Aunt Ati,” she began as Brahnt’s aunt ushered into the room right after Regine and Sammie, clucking her tongue.

“You don’t even have to say it,” she said. “More birthings than you have fingers and toes. Give me a few minutes, and we’ll get everyone fed.”

Regine strode to Charlotte’s bedside and stared down at the baby.

“I think it’s cute,” Regine said, “but I can’t see its face, so I don’t know. Do something.” She made a circling gesture with her finger, and Charlotte shifted the baby so she was more face up.

“Mother,” Brahnt said.

“What?” Regine said. Then after a long moment, “I can see the resemblance. I think we’re all clear, son.”

Samesh muttered something under his breath. “She’s beautiful, children,” he said and bent to place a kiss on Charlotte’s forehead. “I want to hold her, but I remember these early hours, and we won’t intrude long.” He said this with a warning look at Regine, who sniffed then held out a hand to Charlotte.

Charlotte stared at it, extricated one of her arms and shook Regine's hand.

"Good job, girl. She looks good." She released Charlotte and turned to Braht. "We need to think up a name. Nothing new aged, none of that celebrity crap. Something traditional."

Charlotte kept her expression neutral. Don't feed the troll. Don't feed the— "We were thinking of Karen."

Regine paled.

Eventually, the crowd cleared out except for Caro, who would be that evening's designated gopher so Charlotte could focus on baby and Braht could focus on Charlotte. Which meant they needed someone to fetch and carry and run interference. Charlotte eyed her sister, hunched over in the corner of the room, sitting on a chair and staring at the floor.

"You can get out your laptop now," Charlotte said. "I know you're going through withdrawal."

Caro jerked her head up. "You don't mind? I'll do some editing. Maybe admin. Light, nothing deep focus."

"You went, what? Twelve hours without a device other than your smartphone? You deserve a reward."

"Oh, thank fucking god," Caro exclaimed and retrieved her laptop. "Braht, if you need anything, just holler. I'm your girl."

Braht gave Caro a look, then murmured in Charlotte's ear, "I'm starting to see what you mean. I admire focus like any normal person, but I don't think that's focus. I think that's addiction."

"Nah, that's just being an indie author. They're insane. She just started a new pen name and thinks she can magically dictate her way into like two years worth of backlist."

The baby woke from one of her brief naps and began nuzzling Charlotte's chest.

Braht called the doula, who entered moments later and watched as Charlotte, for only the second time that day, latched the baby onto an engorged nipple. Doula murmured

tips and encouragement here and there, but honestly, it was as if Baby knew exactly what to do.

“Have you decided which of the names?” Brahnt asked once the doula retreated, leaving them alone in the darkened suite.

They’d compiled a list of female names from both their families plus the names of famous ballerinas, and Brahnt had said he would leave the final decision up to Charlotte. Charlotte suspected Brahnt did that just to annoy Regine. But in the interest of family peace, Charlotte decided to stick to something classic that would look good on a resume or on a stage.

“Anna Surina,” Charlotte said.

“Classic,” Brahnt said, approval in his voice. He grimaced. “Mother will like it.”

“Unfortunately.”

Brahnt shrugged. He didn’t seem to recognize the dryness in Charlotte’s tone. “Nothing’s perfect. We’ll put her in pink Gucci for her newborn photos. That will piss Mother off.”

“You’re such a good son.”



To help keep Charlotte from going stir crazy, Brahnt and Caro—under Charlotte’s supervision—set up little nests all over the penthouse, one of them on the balcony where Charlotte currently lounged in a hammock, Anna Surina napping on her bare chest.

Two days after she’d been born, her life consisted of Brahnt fussing over Charlotte eating and drinking enough, Caro texting to see if Charlotte wanted her to drag Brahnt out of the house for a couple of hours, Ati popping by regularly with and without Milgrida to eyeball the state of the fridge and continue her polite standoff with Brahnt’s housekeeper, and Samesh getting in plenty of video calls so he could coo over the baby. Charlotte and Brahnt distributed a request for no visitors other

than Ati for the first week so parents and baby could bond, but after seven days, the family would descend.

Charlotte was soaking up the peace and quiet now, though admittedly she enjoyed the chaos of larger groups of people and missed it.

Still, she was tired, her body achy, breastfeeding wasn't as easy as people made it look in videos, and whenever she undid her postpartum corset, she cringed.

"All in good time," she told the sleeping Anna. "We're supposed to be gentle with ourselves right now."

Though really, that was all noise. She was still an elite athlete. She would give it exactly six weeks, and then she was going hard and getting her body back. Even if she had to sneak her workouts when Brahnt wasn't hanging around. Brahnt, forget him anyway, said he liked the extra cushion.

"Do you need anything? I can take her for a few hours if you want to nap solo."

Charlotte glanced up at the Orc, who stepped out onto the balcony, his expression soft as he gazed at the sleeping baby. "She's fine."

Brahnt glared a little. "It's my turn, Charlotte."

"But I don't want to wake her up."

Brahnt took a deep breath, let it out, and fixed a smile on his face. "Whatever you want. I have some more of that electrolyte lemonade you like."

He disappeared inside and returned moments later, Charlotte's water bottle refilled, with the appropriate amount of ice.

She could get used to this.

Brahnt pulled up a cushioned deck chair and a small side table, lugging his laptop with the air of a man who planned on settling in for quite some time. Charlotte eyed him.

"Lunch is heating up in the oven," Brahnt said without looking at her.

Charlotte grinned. “That’s great, but not what I was going to say.”

Brahnt glanced at her, eyebrow lifted. “Oh?”

“I got you a push present.”

Brahnt stared. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but weren’t you the one doing the pushing?”

“Gentle expelling, or whatever they call it. And yes. But are you going to say no to a present? I think you’ll like it.”

Brahnt pursed his lips. “What I think is that you’re up to something.”

“Come on, don’t be a chicken. You’ll like it, I promise. Open up your smartphone.”

“Oh, hell no. Now I know I won’t like it.”

Charlotte scoffed. “You’re so negative.”

“I’m realistic. And I know you.” But the Orc, with an air of resignation, picked up his smartphone. “What am I looking for?”

“Go to my Instagram page.”

“By the Allmother, Charlotte...”

Brahnt was silent for a moment, eyes narrowing, all expression fading from his face.

Charlotte waited.

3, 2, 1—

“I think I want to strangle you.” Brahnt set the smartphone down and turned to Charlotte. “This is so you.” The Orc began to laugh.

Charlotte shushed. “Not so loud. You’ll wake her up.”

Brahnt muted his laughter immediately, then leaned forward and claimed Charlotte’s mouth in a kiss, sliding a hand around the back of her neck.

It was too early for any of those kinds of shenanigans, but Charlotte couldn’t help but feel the spark of desire anyway.

Soon, she told herself. *Let's get everything back into fighting shape.* Though she suspected Brahnt had no intentions of waiting that long.

Finally, the Orc pulled away just enough to lean his forehead against Charlotte's. "I love you, you know that?" he murmured.

Charlotte smirked. "I know. And it is so me, isn't it? I just couldn't do the whole knife to the throat thing. But a public announcement without asking you first is still pretty ruthless."

She'd posted a branded square quote graphic moments before, announcing the upcoming wedding of Charlotte Trainor and Brahnt Stonefist. May 5th.

Brahnt took a deep breath, exhaled. "Why almost a year from now?"

"I need time to get back into shape."

"Charlotte," he said with a growl.

"Besides, Ati says we need to give Sammie's family enough time for everyone to arrange to fly over. And then the baby will be old enough to get through all of the ceremonies with a bottle and a nanny..."

After a moment, Brahnt nodded. "I don't want to wait that long, but it makes sense."

"Besides, it's not as if we're not living together with a kid."

Brahnt straightened, stood and looked down at Charlotte. "In that case, I have a present for you too."

Charlotte waited, rubbing the baby's back until Brahnt reappeared. He held a manila envelope and a small, eggshell blue box.

Charlotte suspected what was in the box but had no idea what was in the envelope.

Brahnt dropped the folder and shoved the deck chair away, then got on one knee, opening the jewelry box. "You've honored my culture and I want to honor yours. Human males propose. Will you marry me?"

Brahnt, her Orc, a man of few words.

Charlotte held out her hand, fingers trembling slightly, her gaze glued to the platinum, diamond-studded band. Simple, elegant, obviously expensive but understated. He slid it on her ring finger and Charlotte held her hand up, the gemstones sparkling in the sunlight.

Charlotte beamed. “I have to take a picture and post it now. Here, take the baby.”

“Now you want me to take the baby.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She posted the pic with an appropriate caption, then glanced at the discarded manila folder. “What’s in there?”

“You can read,” Brahnt drawled. “It’s the second part of your present. Open it. I’m going to go check on lunch.” He took the baby with him.

Charlotte opened the envelope, drew out a stack of papers and stared at the first page, puzzled.

It looked like lawyer stuff.

“Do I have to read this?” she called out. “Give me the Cliff Notes.”

Brahnt reappeared, cradling the baby with one arm while he carried a tray of hot snacks with the other, and set it down.

“You’re going to have to learn how to read legal documents. Mother almost fleeced you with that prenup. If I hadn’t insisted you read through it with me, you would have signed away our firstborn.”

“Yeah, your Mom’s a shark. She almost got me with that one.” And, in classic Regine style, had brushed it off when Charlotte complained. Sammie swore his wife had a softer side.

Charlotte couldn’t see it.

Brahnt sighed, settling back down into the deck chair he’d retrieved. “It’s a lease to a commercial building.”

Charlotte stared at him. “You mean...”

“The prenatal and postpartum dance studio with attached boutique you’ve been pestering me about for the last several months? I reviewed your business plan. It’s a little...airy...but the best way to learn business is through crushing failure.”

“You sound just like your Mom.” But Charlotte wasn’t angry; she was ecstatic. So happy that she couldn’t talk, a rarity for her. “I didn’t think you took my business plan seriously.”

“I take everything about you seriously,” was the soft reply. “I told you, whatever it takes to make you happy.” A wolfish gleam entered Braht’s gaze, and Charlotte didn’t have to be told the rest of that statement.

A happy Human was a horny Human.

“Thank you, Braht. I don’t know what else to say other than thank you, and I love you too. This means everything.”

Braht leaned forward and kissed her. “Anna means everything. *You* mean everything.”

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