



GENTLING THE BEAST

A COVETED PREY NOVEL

L.V. LANE

Gentling the Beast

Sweet Monsters

Coveted Prey

Book 19

L.V. Lane



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Cover character art by @NguyenKamZ

Editing by Steph Tashkoff

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Part One

Rescued by the Beast

Prologue

Jasmine

I was only thirteen when the Blighten stormed my village. We were a peaceful community in the foothills of a mountain; farming folks and hunters, living off the land and trading for everything else. The nearest town was a day's ride away, and I had only been there once.

The orc hordes, known as the Blighten, had never come to our lands before. We had lived apart from society, only hearing tales of them from bards who, on occasion, passed through.

Orcs, green bastards, Blighten scum: they had many names, but until that day I'd had no cause to use them. As the flames consumed thatched cottages and barns, and as men and women lay slaughtered, I understood the reality of the grim tales that preceded them.

They were monsters—huge, fearsome brutes with green skin and tusks—dressed in leather armor, wielding clubs, axes, and swords to devastating effect.

They didn't need weapons. We were simple farmers, gentle in nature, and defenseless against them.

My young heart was broken by the events that night. The urgent, whispered words my mama bestowed upon me during the midst of the attack—her last words—would forever haunt me. My family was dead, but I, for reasons unknown to me, was selected to survive; thrust to my knees in the middle of the village, a pitiful, sobbing mess, shaken and terrified for what next.

Every member of our now-decimated community had been well known to me. They had been part of my whole life, as was the way in a village. I had liked some more than others, but I wished none such a brutal death as they'd endured at the hands of the Blighten.

Heartsore for what had come to pass, those few of us who survived the massacre then began a journey. We were taken, in

chains, far from our homes and all that we had known. All of us were children between the ages of eight and fifteen. Young enough to be malleable, yet old enough to endure the trek, with the youngest ones being transported in a wagon. We walked for many days through forests until we came upon an outpost surrounded by a sturdy, staked wooden fence topped by crude battlements. We were told that this place—Delwood—was our destination.

The arduous travel had been bad enough, but the arrival was somehow worse because it signified change—it signified a new and terrifying stage of my life.

I didn't want to accept my fate, but I lacked the necessary skills and knowledge to change it.

Duties were allocated, mostly menial. I was given responsibility for the younger ones, having demonstrated the requisite skills during the trip.

Skills? I had no more skills than any other young woman of my village. It was merely desperation to see them quieted that drove me to soothe them, lest they be beaten and tossed from the wagon by our cruel masters.

It mattered not. I gladly embraced a role that might offer small comfort to the children.

I lived at the outpost, caring for the younger ones—the prisoners of orcs—who were brought there for processing before being taken elsewhere. Some went directly to Krug, the orc capital, but most went south to the slave markets of Bleakness. First, it was the children of my own village, but, too soon, they were gone, and new children arrived. There were so many sweet, terrified youngsters I had so little time with, who I loved and comforted before they were moved on.

My heart broke a thousand times over as I watched them come and go. Yet, having the opportunity to show them a measure of kindness in such a hopeless place gave me the strength to endure.

It wasn't the life I'd anticipated as a child growing up in my remote village, but it wasn't all terrible either, and there

were pockets of happiness among the pain of loss, when one of the children would remind me how to laugh. I cherished those moments when I could forget that they would leave me and go elsewhere, that none of us had control over our lives, or death.

I fell into a routine of acceptance.

Children came and went.

Seasons came and went.

Years came and went.

And then, after so long being on my own in the role, a young woman was brought in to support me. She was sweet and kind to the children and, for the first time, I had a friend to share the burden with.

Three weeks later, everything changed again.

Chapter One

Present day...

Jasmine

An orc patrol arrives at the outpost, bringing fresh orders from one General Tulwin. I've never heard of him before, but I'm instructed that I must ready myself to leave the outpost to join his army. After seven days of travel in the front of a supply wagon beside a crusty old beta with an eye twitch, and whose conversation did not stretch beyond the versatility of potatoes, I find myself in a sprawling camp of an army en route to the orc capital of Krug.

The orc patrol who escorted me here, have not divulged any details, and I'm still no wiser about my summons. Now, however, the captain of the patrol tells me that I'm to meet with the general in person. He guides me through the throngs of tents to the largest of all. Outside it, two huge orcs, eyes alert, stand on duty.

Inside, I find the tent is simply furnished, with the main feature an oak table that sits back, directly opposite the entrance. A thick curtain hanging to the right of the tent appears to separate the living space from the bedding area. Two lamps hang from the ceiling. A third rests on the table, casting the largest orc I have ever seen into stark relief. Although I am standing and he is sitting, I am forced to cast my eyes up to look at the orc, which I can only presume is General Tulwin.

His maturity is demonstrated by his salt-and-pepper hair, weathered face, and the battle scars that crisscross his thick arms. His leather armor is well-made and gleams in the lamplight, its quality showing his status as a warrior and a leader.

He sits, eating. It's basic fare—cold meat, cheese and bread—and he chews noisily as he studies me through dark, narrowed eyes. “You have a way with the brats,” he says, still chewing.

I bob my head. “Yes, milord.”

“Good. I have a fairy child. You shall be responsible for her direct care.”

My mouth opens as I seek to protest that I know nothing of fairies. Only, what is there to say? I close my mouth and nod, as I realize that my companion back at the outpost was not brought there to help me, but to replace me. Today, I have learned my new fate. Now, I will have a single child to care for, to love, instead of many. I can only imagine what the pain will be one day, sometime hence, when my cruel masters rip me away again.

My lips tremble, and I feel the sting behind my eyes. I am not treated badly. For the most part, I apply myself to my given duty with acceptance—yet I am always aware that I am not free.

Tulwin tosses a crust of bread back onto his plate and stares down at me. “Do you have a mate?”

“I—no, milord.” I feel my cheeks heat. “I’m not yet of age.”

He grunts and narrows his eyes again, in a way that suggests he knows my words for a lie.

This turn of conversation alarms me. It is common knowledge that orcs are known to rut human lasses, to keep them as concubines, even as mates, or, worse, to use them for their pleasure then offer them no status at all.

I try to stay calm, despite being reminded of that final, fateful conversation with my mama the night she died, but his next words shock me to the core.

“Find a mate, or one will be allocated to you. This is not the outpost. It will be assuredly worse in Krug. Orcs do not concern themselves with the matters of human bondservants. So long as they are fit for duties, that none suffer lasting

damage from an altercation, they are free to bond and settle matters for themselves. The strong rise, the weak sink to the bottom. It is the natural order of things. A weak female such as yourself needs a strong protector. I suggest you find one promptly from among the warrior ranks of bondservants or lower orcs. Prove yourself a skilled companion for the young fairy, and I will ensure your mate remains in service compatible with your duties when we arrive at Krug.”

He nods his head at the orc who brought me from the outpost. “Put her with the others.”

Still reeling, I am escorted from the tent.



There is no time for adjustment when one becomes a bondservant to orcs—and there is no place for wallowing in denial of what has been done or what will happen next. Anger, bitterness, and hopelessness do nothing more than inspire a fundamental lack of peace.

I often dream of my past life, of my father and mother still working the small plot at the back of our land, supplementing our food with fruits and berries in the summer, fish from the river, and whatever small game might be trapped in the forest beyond.

When I wake up from those dreams, it is to the reality of my imprisonment.

Yet the years of capture are proportionately a long time for one so young. I’m no longer innocent in my mind, even if my body yet lingers in that state.

As I’m shown into a sprawling community of bondservants amid rough wagons and cookfires, and look cautiously around me, General Tulwin’s words echo in my mind... along with my mama’s last words.

As I stand there, wondering what my fate will be, wary eyes greet me. I’m the outsider here, a new bondservant thrust into a community far larger than I have experienced before.

My instincts riot, telling me that here there is danger; danger I must endure as we travel to Krug. My whole world has been turned on its head in order for me to become the companion of a fairy child.

An older woman takes pity on me and nods her head toward the ground beside her fire. Half a dozen women and men are gathered, eating food from wooden bowls before this particular wagon.

“She is favored by Tulwin. See that she’s not harmed,” the orc guard grunts.

The Goddess save me from ignorant orcs! Now I’m singled out as special. My time in servitude has shown me such protection, as it is, will be both a blessing and a curse.

The older woman who first took pity on me tears a chunk from the flatbread in her hands and holds it out to me as the orc guard strides away. “Don’t wish the attention of Tulwin on any lass. Best keep your strength up if that fearsome bastard is plowing you.”

I move to her and take the bread, blushing furiously, feeling the eyes of those gathered upon me. “Thank you,” I mumble. “He-he has not touched me. I met him only now. I am to care for a fairy child when we reach Krug.” As I speak, I think of his recommendation that I might look to find a mate from amongst the bondservants, and I cast my eyes over those gathered. “That is as much as I know.”

I turn my attention back to the bread and take a small bite, although I feel sick to my core at the prospect of taking any of these men as a mate. Worse, how would I even go about it? They are all rough looking, with missing teeth and filthy clothing that is little more than rags. It might be that they are all of a kindly disposition, but I cannot imagine any form of intimacies. Despite being in this terrible place and circumstance, I cling to my childhood notions of a young, handsome prince rescuing me from this nightmare, of claiming me as his bride.

I try to focus on the here and now, and eat the bread, overcome with gratitude that a stranger would share what she

has with me, when bondservants are oft hungry.

“I’m Penny,” the kind woman offers.

“Jasmine,” I reply.

Introductions to the other bondservants are made and, before too long, they do not seem as frightening anymore. They are people, like me, who have been taken from other lives and cast into a new one, and who wish to survive.

We are all survivors.

I wonder if they still dream of rescue.

Then I wonder when they stopped.

“You are yet new in the ways of a bondservant,” Penny says.

My head snaps up.

She smiles. “You seem innocent.”

“I lived at the outpost at Delwood, tending the children who came through. They never stayed long, and it was hard to watch them go. I have not been treated cruelly, although I have seen the evidence.” I shudder. “My home and village were in northern Hydornia and isolated. No one in living memory had ever seen an orc. Many believed the bard’s tales to be nothing more than stories, woven to entertain.”

The bread turns to dust, but I eat anyway. To waste it is disrespectful to Penny, who, in giving me food, has less for herself.

“You were one of the lucky ones, to have lived apart from the war so long,” one man offers. He is young, his naked upper body tanned from long exposure to the sun, and he is not quite as old or rough-looking as the other men.

I blush, unused to male attention, even in brief conversation. Maybe he is secretly a prince. Maybe he has infiltrated this camp to set all the prisoners free.

My mama always said I had my head stuck in the clouds.

He is no prince in hiding. He is a bondservant like me.

“I know,” I reply. “That time has passed.”

“That time has passed for all of us,” Penny says.

A quiet conversation follows. They ask me more about the outpost where I lived and tell me a little about the orc master here, Tulwin, and the bondservants under his command. There are low servants, like the people I am amongst—grunt workers responsible for supporting the camp and cooking food for the orc soldiers—and then there are higher human bondservants.

I am coached to stay close to my new companions while we travel to Krug in order to avoid the other, higher status bondservants who are known to wield their power cruelly.

My mind is overwhelmed by their well-intended advice.

As I lay down to rest, I dream of my mother. I miss her laughter: a great booming sound whenever she experienced joy. I often cling to the memory of my parents doing ordinary things, chatting over dinner, discussing the pickling onion crop or the unseasonable amount of rain, of my father patting my mother’s ass and kissing her cheek on returning from a hunt, of him gathering me close for a hug and asking me about my day.

Only there is another memory that intrudes tonight, one I have pushed to the back and tried to ignore.

The memory from the night the orcs came, before they took a sword and opened my mother up.

“Survive for me, Jasmine. That is all I ask of you. There is danger, but you are clever and strong inside. There will come a time when your body turns to that of a woman and when a different danger will present. You have so many dreams, my sweet girl, and I wish you could have hung onto them for longer. Trust your heart and instincts. Find the biggest, most fearsome male and throw yourself at his mercy. There is no shame before the Goddess in doing whatever you must to survive.”

Her words have lingered on the periphery of my mind for so long. With the chaos of the attack, the horror of my parents’

murder, and then the confusion of capture and the blanket of depression that followed, I did not fully grasp their meaning.

Tonight, as I huddle under a rough blanket, feeling the cold ground seep into my bones, I do.

The prospect of finding a man, any man, terrifies me.

But I also want to survive.

Tears well up in my eyes. There were many good young men in my village. Most of them died fighting, trying to protect the women, children, and elders. Any one of those young men might have become my husband. That life is gone, though. It is far behind me; a sweet dream and nothing more.

I need to find a mate, to give him my body, to choose wisely if I can, and hope my instincts are true and he has a good heart. There is no escaping the Blighten. They would hunt me down and flog me as an example.

And there are worse things than being a companion to a fairy child.

As I toss and turn, restless, I grieve for my lost family anew. I also grieve for myself, for my situation, and for the hopelessness of my task.

Chapter Two

Jasmine

We rise early and pack up the camp. The day is spent walking. A procession that trundles through the trees of the great forest, taking us toward Krug. It is the height of summer and warm. The forest is dense and humid. By the time evening falls, I'm exhausted, but I assist in preparing food for distribution.

I follow the instructions given to me without question, although I don't know the ways of food preparation save for memories of when I was younger. I'm a quick study and make myself useful. And so it is that I fall into a mindset that it's not so terrible here, that I do not yet need to worry nor apply myself with urgency toward finding myself a mate.

After the duties are done, I'm more than ready for sleep. Grateful that our wagon is close to the edge of the camp, I move away to do my business in private, keeping my head down as I go. As I round the wagon, movement not far away draws my attention. When I flick my eyes to the side, I gasp and come to an abrupt stop. A short distance away, Penny is on her knees. A human soldier has his pants down so that they hang around his knees. One hand fists Penny's hair, and the other directs his cock toward her mouth. She parts her lips and dutifully sucks on him.

Shocked into silence and docility, I remain frozen. I should turn away, go and do my business via some other route, return to the camp—anything else—yet I do none of those things.

The human guard grunts as he thrusts his cock deep into her throat. She moans and gags. My eyes widen as I wonder if she is in pain, if he forces her to do this, but I cannot rightly tell. Her faint moaning noises set up a prickling under my skin, and a wave of heat washes over me. The guard grunts and stills. Tension invades his body and then leaves it just as swiftly.

Penny's throat works.

I realize that he has just come in her mouth.

I'm still struck, immobilized, when he pulls his cock from between her lips. He pats her cheek affectionately and tucks himself away. As he does so, she rises and quietly wipes off her mouth before holding out her hand.

"Thank you, lass," he says. Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a crust of bread and hands it to her.

She takes it with a nod.

Breaking out of my reverie, I go to step backward, but I'm clumsy about it and stumble.

Both heads turn my way.

"Who is your friend?" the guard says, leering at me.

"She's nobody," Penny says, hastening over to me and drawing me away. "Go on, lass. Go about your business."

I go, dashing for the trees, heart hammering in my chest.

Understanding looms. I feel both older and not old enough. What I don't understand, though, is why I'm shocked. I'm not so ignorant of the world, not after living for these past years among the Blighten.

I linger longer than I perhaps should. Finally, I make my way back to find Penny waiting for me, her sensitive eyes searching mine.

"I have shocked you," she says.

Denial is on my lips, but I nod my head.

"Trent is not so bad." She shrugs. "Some are rougher than others. Some are kind and gift you well. Some even take the time to return the favor, although they are few and far between. I had hoped you would not draw attention. But it is done now, and there's naught we can do about it. You are innocent. It is written upon your face. But that time is over now, too. Do not let them persuade you to take your pussy. That is kept for a mate. Do not let them get away without paying you. Food is expected and accepted. And don't let

them negotiate for nonsense like they might look out for you —they won't. Or convince you that they're doing you a favor —they aren't."

I swallow, taking in all she explains. This is going to happen. I can see pleasing the human soldiers would have benefits beyond the food that they offer, although her plain talking leaves no doubt that such benefit is minimal. This is a transaction, nothing more. My body is no longer mine. It is a tool I might implement and use. There is no brave prince coming to save me. I must, as my mother suggested, survive.

I sleep fitfully. We rise and have a cold breakfast. As we eat, I hear the faint moans from the other side of the wagon. Only it's not Penny this time, but one of the other women. She comes back holding a strip of jerky, and tucks into it with relish. I envy her the strip of jerky. What passed before, however, I do not.

The whole camp seems sullied. A veil has been lifted, and I cannot hide from these adult things.

I told Tulwin I was not yet of age, but the truth is I do not know exactly how old I am anymore. My moon blood started soon after I was taken. Hips and breasts developed, and my body underwent changes in the way that marks a lass as mature.

The seasons were strange in the outpost. There was no thaw of spring and heat of summer, only thick snow and light snow, and not a lot of change between. I had a notion of seasons passing, yet I cannot rightly say how many nor exactly how many years. I know only that, in all the ways that matter, I am a woman, and I have been for a while. Had I lived in my village still, I might have had a babe or two by now, which brings a deep, sorrowful longing to the fore. My reply to Tulwin on the suggestion of a mate was offered without due thought beyond avoidance. I have clung to innocence, but that has now been ripped from me.

A shudder ripples through me as I recall the leering soldier, Trent, who spotted me watching him with Penny. His interest was apparent. As Penny said, I have been noticed now.

Threats and dangers linger everywhere as we gather ourselves to walk. I find myself dreading the passage of time, for, as evening falls, we will prepare the camp again, and the human soldiers will come around.

I can barely get my food down as we gather around the fire. It tastes like sawdust in my throat. I need to *go*. I hate to leave the false safety of others, even for a second, but it reaches that point where I must.

I am quick about it, rushing to the trees and back again, so anxious I do not look where I'm going and near collide with a man.

Trent. My heart thuds a wild tattoo in my chest when he puts his arm out to block my path.

"I've got some nice jerky and a good size crust of bread."

My lips tremble. I cannot look him in the eyes. Trent is big, intimidating, and far more powerful than me. He smells strongly of stale sweat. The thought of taking his cock into my mouth makes me want to vomit. Yet, I fear it will not end well if I attempt to deny him.

His fingers close over my hair, and he tugs, not unkindly, but enough that I must look up. "On your knees, lass." As he applies a little pressure, I drop.

Panic crawls up inside me and takes command. I know I should do this, should loosen his belt, pull his pants down, and take his cock into my mouth. It is the way of surviving, and survive I must.

My mother begged me to do whatever I must, right before she was cut down. I owe it to her to survive, yet in my heart, I can't believe she meant it to be like this.

It is the first time. It will get better, I tell myself.

Only my revulsion is real, and I cannot move forward.

When I try to push him away, he tightens his grip and gives me a little shake.

Then he grunts, as though in great pain.

When I glance up, I find a huge, very pale fist closed around his throat.

Trent's grip on me goes slack. A blow sends him tumbling and blood splatters from his mouth in a great arc.

I cower down on the ground, my hands flying to my mouth as I take in the beast who looms over Trent.

Trent growls and surges to his feet. "Fuck off, Doug. This is nothing to do with you. You don't even touch the women. Lass was willing enough, at least she would have been once I'd broken her in. Doing her a favor. Everyone knows the orc bastards don't give them enough food. If she wants a full belly of a night, she'll learn to suck cock."

The beast curls his lips back and growls.

"Fuck you!" Trent snarls and cuts a glare my way before stalking off.

I would likely empty my bladder at this point had I not just done so. I should have tended to the human. Now, I've drawn the interest of one of the beasts. He doesn't look entirely like an orc, for his skin is too pale. Yet in every other way, every inch of monstrous flesh, he is an orc.

His hand reaches out to me. It is easily twice the size of mine. I stare at it, my breathing fast and shallow, my heart thumping wildly in my chest. Why does he offer me his hand?

I glance up, all the way up, and find myself staring into the coldest blue eyes I've ever seen. They are not orc eyes. They have a brilliance that makes me think of shifters. But his broad face is brutish and is very much orc. His hair is midnight black and sticks out from his head in a shaggy pelt. His beard is short and thick, and his jaw is distended to accommodate two monstrous tusks. He is dressed in plain hide pants that cover his legs and serviceable boots in good repair. His great barrel-chested body and arms are pure white.

He grunts and gestures with his offered hand. I'm too terrified to refuse him, so I put my hand in his, confused when he draws me to my feet.

Cupping my small hand within his two larger ones, he inspects it with narrowed eyes. Goodness! He carefully strokes his thumb over the back of my hand.

I dare to glance up to find him staring at my tiny hand within his, expression utterly enrapt.

Who is this beast that Trent called Doug?

He sighs, it comes out on a rumble that makes me start, then reaches into his pocket, fumbles, and draws out a crust of bread.

I swallow. Gods, he wants... he wants me to do *that* to him.

I shake my head vigorously and try to step back, but he still has my hand, and I don't go far.

He huffs a breath that manages to sound impatient, vexed maybe, and he shakes his head.

Turning my palm over, he presses the crust into it and curls my fingers around it. He holds it toward my lips and motions for me to eat it. Releasing my hand, he repeats the eating gesture.

I could run. He could catch me. He *would* catch me. So I do as he asks, break off a small chunk of bread, and put it in my mouth.

He bares his teeth at me.

The crust turns to dust in my mouth. It's all I can do to swallow it down. When he makes no move to assault me, I relax a small fraction. I'm also strangely mesmerized by this beastly male who is far gentler than Trent.

Wait? Is he smiling? I think he is. Goodness. It is not a becoming smile—it is near enough to strike terror into my young heart. Yet as I take another tentative bite, his fearsome expression never wavers, and I'm convinced he is, in fact, smiling.

I take up another chunk of bread and offer it to him.

He shakes his head and makes a shooping motion toward me before patting his belly.

I wonder why he does not speak. Maybe some orcs speak a different language. “Do you know the common tongue?”

He nods.

I frown. “Are you mute?”

He nods again.

My tension eases a little. Maybe he will soon put me on my knees, and I’m being foolish. I put the lump of bread in my mouth and chew. This strange beastly monster, this pale orc who is not quite an orc, doesn’t produce the same loathing that filled me with Trent. He is not dirty for a start and smells of nothing save a light, clean musk that tickles my nose. I eat another chunk of bread as we stare at one another beside the wagon.

“Doug!”

His head swings around. He looks toward me briefly before he strides away.

Chapter Three

Doug

“**S**omebody needs to break her in—uff!”

I cuff Trent up the side of the head and bare my teeth at the weak human male.

He takes a step back, raising both hands.

Cowardly bastard. I'd happily kill him, save my orc masters don't appreciate killing useful humans, even bastards like Trent.

Bron chuckles as Trent scurries off. I've known Bron since we were whelps, and we often have each other's backs. A lesser orc like me, he doesn't mind that I don't talk—he fills in the gaps and answers for me half the time.

I snatch my tarp from inside the wagon and, with a nod to Bron, stalk off. I do not seek the company of humans, save when my duty is to watch them, yet I'm also not fully an orc and exist in limbo somewhere between the two. I will never be part of the Blighten, even if I believed in their ways, nor will I be accepted by the humans or even desire the fate of a bondservant.

The life that leads out before me is a simple one, lived day to day. My mother was an orc, and my father was an alpha shifter. It was an unusual pairing, for sure. I do not know fully the circumstances leading to it, only that I was born as a result. Were my skin green or gray, I believe my mother would not have rejected me.

However, my skin is white and iridescent in daylight. It doesn't change, even though I'm exposed to the sun. Then there are my eyes, the color of them the same as my birth father's, or so I was told. My coloring sets me apart, for orcs all have brown eyes and green or gray skin. Yet in all other ways and appearances, I could pass for an orc.

It doesn't help that I cannot speak—I'm considered defective in many ways.

There are plenty of thoughts running around in my head, but they cannot form words. It has been this way all my life, and frustrates me at times when I want to express myself and cannot. It also suggests that I'm stupid, which I do not believe I am.

I find a clear spot near the trees where I can set up my tarp. The material is long and wide, and folded in half. Two wooden poles are applied to each end to hold the top flap up. I have a blanket inside, although I don't often feel the cold.

I prefer this, sleeping apart from the others.

I'm a loner. Although, save for when I take to my bed at night, I'm rarely alone. My role is a peacekeeper. I mind the human bondservants and make sure they don't cause trouble among themselves. They are aggressive, quarrelsome little things, snapping and snarling at one another, often using their fists instead of common sense. I know what they get up to. How they rut and encourage the lasses to suck their cocks. How they barter pleasure for scraps of food. I turn a blind eye so long as it does not hurt either that I can see.

But tonight, the lass was not willing, and that bought out my rage. The last time I let it out, I got into trouble and a whipping. I would do it again. My reputation precedes me now, even as the war party and bondservants around me come and go. Tales have been shared of the white orc and his rough justice with humans who step out of line, tales that have been exaggerated over the years. Better the humans are kept in check by rumors of my bestly rage than they use a reluctant lass.

I take to my bedroll and lie on my back, staring at the tarp above me, listening to the sounds of the forest at night.

There are times when I dream of a simpler life: a mate and whelps, a cottage, and to work upon the land. I have only heard of such a life as I have listened in on stories told by human bondservants, but they fill me with a wistfulness for something I cannot have.

I would make a terrible farmer. I am too big, and my fingers are apt to be clumsy at delicate work—I'm a beast whose only skill set involves thumping errant humans.

My thoughts drift back to the sweet little human female, Jasmine. Her cheeks have a rosy golden hue and her eyes are a rich mahogany. She wears the harsh metal collar of a bondservant, yet I can too easily picture her in the simple leather collar that orc masters give to their cherished human pets.

My cock flexes in my hide pants. I do my best to ignore it, which is not easy, for I'm thinking about sneaking her a crust or a bit of jerky... and the ways women barter for extra food.

I will not force myself upon the lass in exchange. Except the little voice in the back of my head says that she was not averse to me, that she softened and relaxed enough to eat, once she realized I was not a threat.

I picture her standing before me, her pretty eyes gazing up at me with burgeoning trust as she nibbled on the crust.

Here in the privacy of my tarp, and away from prying eyes, I can admit that I want her.

Only I don't rut the lasses. I've *never* rutted a lass. How could I when I'm deformed *there*, mutilated from when a surgeon tried to cut my knot from me? Although I have never shifted, not once, my shifter blood manifests in unexpected ways. What they tried to cut from me grew back, bigger, and even more grotesque.

I went to a whore once, determined to rid myself of my virginal state. She laughed when she saw me and said she would have to charge extra for an abomination like that.

I won't make that mistake again.

Yet, in weak moments in the night, I do yearn for affection. I think of women and wonder what it would be to touch them, to pleasure them, to hear the soft moans they sometimes make when the men can be bothered to pet the slick places between their thighs, to get closer to the source of the sweet, human scent of their lust.

I don't normally pay attention to them, beyond keeping them in line, putting aside thoughts of lust for the most part, save those occasions when I take my cock in hand and find some relief.

My cock flexes as I think about petting the hand of the pretty bondservant called Jasmine. I reach my hand down and squeeze it through my pants. It doesn't fucking help. Her unique scent is all up in my nose, sweet and beguiling. She is young and also innocent. If I have any control over it, she will stay that fucking way.

But nothing is permanent for me or the bondservants who do the orcs' bidding. We come and go, we move here or there, we are allocated to this war party or that. The only certainty is that there will come a day soon when she will go one direction and I another. She is young and pretty and might even find herself the cherished pet of an orc of means, while I am nothing but a disfigured white orc bastard, an outcast, who can offer her little.

I still want her. Not to rut her, no. I simply want to hold her, pet her hair, and maybe one day, if I was kind and cared for her well, she might even let me pet the slick place between her legs.

My cock pulses hot and heavy with blood flow, and I push down the thick hide of my pants in order to wrap my hand around it. Before I can counsel myself on the dangers of attachment, I'm stroking myself while thinking about Jasmine. I groan weakly as I fist the engorged flesh and slowly slide my hand up and down. Gods, that feels good. I think about her on her knees as I saw her with Trent. How tiny she looked; how *precious*.

Only I didn't like the way she was terrified of him, so I replace that look with the expression she wore when she was eating her crust like a good girl for me. She would make a fine human pet. I would keep her safe. I would master her in the way that human lasses are meant to be.

In my fantasy I put her back on her knees, and it is now my hand, bigger and rougher, that tugs lightly upon her hair. She

reaches out. I don't even need to ask her. And she undoes the buckle of my belt.

My hand moves quicker. I growl lowly.

Her pretty brown eyes go wide as she sees my monstrous cock... And I come.

Fuck! My hips arch, and cum spews from my cock. I try to smother the flow, but I have no fucking chance and it shoots all over my hands and belly in thick ropey jets.

I collapse spent, taking in great gulps of air, overcome by the force of my reaction.

Snatching up a clump of foliage, I wipe myself up. I have made a fucking mess. Grunting, I drag my pants up and stagger to my feet, knocking one of the pole holding my tarp in my haste.

I pace back and forth in the woods, cursing in my head. What the fuck is wrong with me? This is why I should not think about her thus. What if my cock starts to get hard when I see her again?

I have just fucking come from nothing more than the image of her pretty face gazing upon my cock. She did not even fucking touch it in my imagining, and I was shooting my load.

How the fuck will I get the damn thing under control again?

I do not have the answer. Best all round if I do not go near her again.



Jasmine

“You have drawn the attention of the beast,” Penny says, nodding over my shoulder. “He cannot take his eyes off of you.”

I glance up sharply and peek behind me. Sure enough, there he is, the big white orc standing there with menacing intent, arms folded. He towers over the humans. He is big, even for an orc.

I gulp and turn back to the flatbreads I’m preparing, ready to go on the hot stone. “Trent came to me last night.”

Penny stills her work.

“He offered me a crust of bread and some jerky.”

She raises both eyebrows, and I feel strangely guilty that it was more than she got.

Then her face softens, and her lips tug up. “Happen the bastard short-changed you if it was your first time. Sneaky bastard.”

“I didn’t want to. I should have—I remembered what you said. But when he put me on my knees, I froze, then tried to push him away. Which is when Doug came upon us.”

Her lips tighten a little. “Trent’s not the worst of them, lass, that’s for sure. They prefer persuasion, but they don’t always take no for an answer if persuasion does not work. And some are just rough bastards who enjoy hurting a lass. You’re lucky Doug came upon you if fear had taken to you. None will touch you now.”

“They won’t?” My brows draw together. I glance over my shoulder to find Doug staring back at me with an intense expression. Goodness! He somehow appears more monstrous and beastly when his white skin glistens in the morning sunlight, emphasizing the deep brooding pockets of his face.

“You’ll know because no other men will come around,” Penny says dryly, drawing my attention back to her.

I blush a little. “When I first arrived, I was taken to General Tulwin’s tent. I’m to be a companion for a fairy girl. I told you as much. I didn’t tell you what else he said.”

“And what else did he say?” Penny is all interest.

“That I should find a mate, and if I did, he would honor it when I was taken to Krug... My mother said the same thing to me the night the Blighten came.” Tears pool in my eyes. “She said I should find a big brute and align myself to him for protection. Only I don’t think she realized what it was like here.” I nibble on my lower lip as I hoist over a fresh sack of flour. “I don’t know who to pick. I don’t know *how* to pick. Do you... Do you know anyone as might be a good choice?”

She snorts out a laugh. “Lass, this is a hard life. The ones who are mean enough to protect you are mean in other ways. I’ve seen Luca mooning over you, but he’s young and weak for a beta lad—and happen no amount of hard life is going to fix that. He would be kind to you, but he couldn’t protect you. I will think about it. But I don’t envy you this choice. I agree, it is better to have one than to have many. If you’re free to mate, then you’re lucky indeed.” She chuckles suddenly. “Pity you can’t mate Doug.”

The moment the words leave her mouth, we both still. She chuckles again. “Now there’s a thought.”

“Could I?” I blurt out before I can better think about how it might come across.

Her brows draw together in thought. “I don’t rightly know. I mean, lasses are taken as pets or concubines more often, but occasionally they do become mates.”

“He is definitely an orc, then?” I glance back to him and gulp. Yes, Doug is still staring at me with the same brooding expression.

“I’ve heard he’s a shifter,” she says. “Well, that his father was a wolf shifter. A powerful alpha by all accounts. Doug has never shifted. They call shifters as cannot shift mutes, and they

are shunned by packs. Just as he is shunned by the orcs because he's white and cannot talk."

"How terrible," I say, feeling instant empathy for the big, beastly male. "I wonder what he would look like if he shifted."

"A ferocious beast, I've no doubt," Penny replies. "Happen he would be a wolf, maybe. There are ways around it, I've heard, that powerful shifters can encourage mutes to find their inner beast. There are no shifters here save some occasionally find themselves as bondservants. But they are usually betas. Alpha shifters do not make good bondservants. And all this might be just a fanciful tale as folks are wont to tell. Even so, Doug is only half shifter and might not even have an inner beast to call upon."

I'm only half listening to Penny, for I'm thinking about Doug as a mate. I've had exactly one interaction with him. Yet my heart is fluttering in a strange, hopeful way. How do I know in an instant that he has a good heart? I can't possibly know. Yet I'm sure that he does.

"...and he killed a man once..." Penny is saying.

My head snaps up. "What? Who?"

"Doug," she says. "The man had raped a lass, from what I heard—left her near death. Doug was enraged and killed him with his bare hands. Ripped his body apart. Threw his head in one direction, a leg another, an arm yet another. Hideous by all accounts. The orc masters were furious. They don't care what we do so long as we are fit to graft for them. That's how he got those scars on his back, from the whipping."

I have not seen Doug's back, so I cannot vouch for any whipping scars, but I take Penny at her word. I want to be horrified that he tore a man limb from limb. Only I'm really not, when I know that man raped a woman. After that frightening moment with Trent, I sense my vulnerability in a new light. Maybe Trent would not have pressed the matter even if Doug had not come along. But maybe he would have used heavier means of persuasion, or even forced me if I'd still resisted. Besides all this, Penny has admitted that there are worse men here. I feel great empathy for that woman who had

suffered thus, but also pride in Doug, the fierce white orc who is mute in more ways than one, for meting out swift justice. That he used his own hands to such effect does not horrify me but rather lifts him to heroic heights.

“The bondservants don’t often step out of line, and less so with Doug. They’re mean bastards, some of them, but nothing compared to an orc. He may be white and a shifter’s bastard, but he’s higher than a human, even if he’s lower than an orc.”

Chapter Four

Jasmine

When I take to my bedroll that night, I determine that the strange, compelling, white orc, who is also a shifter, who cannot speak nor shift, who is muted in two ways, is going to be my mate.

There are obstacles in this path: many of them. First and foremost is the fact that he terrifies me and, even so, he's the ugliest being I've ever met. I have yet to work out how I might overcome all of this and be intimate with him, but I will.

He gave me a piece of bread for no reason that I could determine. Although now that I think about it, maybe he was wooing me with a mind to putting me on my knees?

I decide that he is noble whether he was wooing me or not.

He is still very ugly, and I shudder at the thought of kissing him, never mind the more intimate parts of being a mate. If need be, I shall close my eyes and think about something else... like chopping vegetables, while he is doing it.

Yet it was not revulsion I experienced when he gently held my hand within his. I was a little frightened, yes, but it was also strangely comforting every time his thumb passed over the back of my hand.

It was like he was... petting me.

It made me a little fluttery low in my belly.

I toss and turn, restless, trying to conjure up my favorite dream, the one where the handsome prince comes and rescues me. At first, my dream was based around the outpost, but in this most recent iteration of the dream, the prince is joined by a noble army, and they gallantly attack the camp to free all the bondservants. He charges forth on his horse and defeats the orcs. Seeing me cowering beside a wagon where I hide, lest I be slaughtered in the fray, he pulls his horse to a stop and jumps down.

Only, this time when it gets to the part where the prince offers me his hand, it's not a princely hand. It's white, gnarled, and twice the size of mine.

I turn over again, disgruntled that the brutish male now invades my dreams—the well-scripted fantasy where I'm carried off to a castle to wear fancy gowns and have lots of royal babies. I sigh. Look at me, still fantasizing about the prince when practicality dictates I should pursue other routes in the interest of survival. And I do want to survive. I want to do more than that, to find happiness like my mother and father had—their obvious joy in one another and in me, their well-loved child.

They are gone now, existing only in my memory. I survive for them as much as I do for myself; for while I am here, their memory lingers on.

The more I think about Doug, the more obstacles I see. What if he does not even want a mate? What if he is kind to many lasses? Maybe many bondservants willingly go to him, for he is gentle in his ways. They would probably be glad to suck his cock for a crust of bread if he is not rough about it.

And maybe he does not even like human women in that way. Maybe he has an orc lady, given he is big, even for an orc. Maybe he's well-liked.

Only he is lower in status than orcs, Penny said, speaking with authority... although I dare say many people speak with authority on matters of which they know nothing. The baker at the outpost told me all manner of nonsense I later found to be untrue.

Maybe Doug is held in high regard by the orcs.

Or maybe he is not. I sigh again, frustrated by the way my mind goes in circles.

I still think he's my best choice and, further, he would not be cruel to me. So what if he is not a handsome prince? Certainly, I'm no highborn princess. I'm nothing but a bondservant; a captive of orcs. I'm not even pretty. Nobody

has ever told me so, which leaves me to determine that I'm plain.

The longer I ponder upon it, the more I become resolved that I'm meant for the strange white orc.



My tentative plans to take Doug as a mate are thwarted the next morning when we are roused at dawn and ordered to pack up the tents with urgency. There is no time for mischief from the humans. No men come around and seek favors from the women nor offer them a crust. Our pace is usually slow. But today it is a forced march.

We collapse at night, only just finding the energy to pass out meager, cold rations that barely take the edge off my hunger. The next day we rise and do it all over again, pressing on as if the devil himself is on our tail.

When we make camp the following night, I realize that there are fewer bondservants—unease skitters under my skin. I don't want to know what has happened, yet I feel my survival depends upon finding out. My belly is aching from hunger, and I'm a little woozy with exhaustion and from the underlying tension that permeates the camp.

“What happened to them?” I ask Penny. “Did they fall behind? Do they catch up at night?”

She shakes her head. “They do not allow bondservants to fall behind, lest they decide to run away. Human overseers always follow at the back. If any are lagging, they are persuaded to hurry. If they cannot hurry, then they meet their end.”

My eyes well with tears on hearing of this grim fate. I imagine human soldiers, like Trent, taking the thick club he wears at his waist and using it as a tool of destruction upon weak humans whose only failing is not being able to keep up.

“Bondservants live short lives. It's true that they move us around to suit themselves. I don't know where we're going to

be next. I've been part of Tulwin's army for more than a year, and he is on the road as much as he is at the capital of Krug. There are moments between when we can rest. Yet there is no place for weak servants among the Blighen. We are resources to be used." She shrugs. "It is a way of weeding out the weak. If we are not useful anymore, we're dead."

I'm not ignorant of the life of a bondservant from my years at the outpost, and yet there are ever more layers to the experience that are being revealed to me. Perhaps I am a little higher in standing, given I'm to be a companion for a fairy child. But the harsh life of the bondservants who labor for Blighen generals is apparent tonight in all its devastation.

I can see now why Penny does what she does, how the crust of bread she barterers her favors for might be the difference between her surviving this punishing pace or not. It might even be about connection amid such desolate, desperate times.

We seek only to live another day, to watch the sunrise, to feel the rain upon us, the heat of summer, the bite of winter's chill, to watch a butterfly dance across a flower, to see the leaves on the trees above us stirred by a breeze, even to experience a moment of shared humor. These are the simple wonders that we can grasp, when we can forget, albeit briefly, we are bondservants who live only because we have some use.

Rain starts to fall. Across the bondservant camp, weary humans rise, murmuring complaints as the fires spit and falter under the gathering deluge. We dash toward the wagons so that we might seek shelter beneath them.

"Attack!"

The stale flatbread drops from my nerveless fingers, for it is the same call of warning as I heard that last night in my village. My mind floats between denial and misplaced hope that a prince, accompanied by royal guardsmen, has come to liberate us.

"Attack!" A horn sounds. It strikes fear into my heart.

It is no prince who approaches, nor is it even humans who attack, but bears with monstrous fangs and mud-matted coats... abnormally large bears with blue eyes—*shifters*.

Screams rend the air as we scatter.

I weave left and right, dodging charging bears and raging orcs, desperately looking for safety. Finally I seek sanctuary from the melee by huddling beneath a wagon and making myself small.

As the frenzy engulfs the camp around me, as men and orcs fall amid the chaotic roars and shouts, I wonder whether I could escape.

I wonder whether I *should* escape.

Am I a coward to hide, crouched behind a wagon wheel? What hope does a single woman have in such dangerous lands?

But what hope do I have if I stay?

None... and it's this that drives me from the false safety of the wagon into a jagged run for the forest and freedom.



Doug

Reports of bear shifters following us came two days ago. Scouts were sent ahead to the nearest Krug guardpost to call for reinforcements, even as we hastened forward. An attack was always a possibility, albeit bold and unprecedented.

Now it is a reality.

My role is that of peacekeeper for bondservants, but when there is battling to be done, every able-bodied man or orc is called upon. I take up the club that rests at my hip and lose myself in the rush and roar of battle. Bear shifters are fast and vicious, but so too are orcs.

But, at this moment, we are outnumbered, and the outcome is far from certain.

The rain falls steadily, making the ground muddy and treacherous. As I fight against the vicious bears, I feel my inner beast. He has long lurked beneath the surface but does not often make his presence known. I sometimes catch glimpses into his mind. Although he is not restless to escape, he offers intuition at times. Over the last few days, since meeting Jasmine, I have felt him more. He likes her scent and the feminine curves of her body, how she is ripe for breeding, for carrying our child.

He thinks she is our mate.

For the first time in my life, I sense my beast wants out.

As the battle wages, my beast rails with increasing vigor against the orc. He doesn't want to battle. No, he wants to charge for the bondservants' section of the camp and protect our mate: a compulsion so strong, it is all I can do to hold it at bay.

I'm unsettled, moreso than I have ever been. I usually live life a day at a time. I expect little, and get little in return. Yet ever since meeting Jasmine, the tiny little human who let me

pet her hand, emotions have been stirring inside, along with a dream of something more.

I am an ugly white orc—*disfigured* and unfit to be a mate.

Yet none of this quashes my hope. I would dedicate my life to keeping her safe, to ensuring she had an extra crust, even a bit of jerky when available. I would care for her—lay down my life for her.

These aspirations are unattainable, yet they do not go away.

I was away from the bondservants when the attack began, and my battling has taken me further away still. My beast prowls within the confines of my mind, ever more restless and dissatisfied with my handling of this, as he urges me to seek her out.

Only, in the fight to survive, I find I am surrounded on all sides.

I smash my club into the closest bear, sending him crashing to the ground before I bludgeon him to death. The light of life leaves his eyes, but another bear takes his place.

As I lose myself in the fighting, I sense change is coming.

Change is not always bad.

It is not always good, either.

A horn sounds, and I raise my head. A cheer goes up. The bears scatter under the thunderous passage of orcs as reinforcements arrive. The battle tide turns, and the bear bastards flee into the forests—those that survive—while those that have not lay in their human form upon the ground.

The rain has slowed to a heavy drizzle that pelts down upon the ruined tents and bodies. I take a moment to check myself, finding only minor cuts and bruises, which will all heal naturally. Orcs are tough, but my shifter lineage makes me heal faster still. With the arrival of reinforcements from the guardpost, we have safety and respite.

My beast prowls inside me, lifting his snout and sniffing vainly for her. In this we are aligned. We must ensure she is

safe, and my heart quickens as I take off at a jog toward where the bondservants will be found.

As I make my way through the camp, I sense a different battle coming between me and my inner beast. Strangely, he does not feel like a wolf. What he feels like is *me*. This makes no sense, but perhaps that is the same for all shifters. Maybe inner beasts are not tangible as a specific creature.

I am untutored in my heritage and worry about what may happen should he push through. How does any shifter control the other being inside them? These fears ought to be unfounded, for I know his thoughts as well as I know my own. My instincts tell me I need to trust him, just as he has trusted me this far, yet letting go is hard when I fear I may find myself the one who is trapped.

As I reach the bondservants and see the decimation, these internal worries leave me, and stronger, more urgent ones take their place. My beast snarls. We have been negligent. He warned me, and I paid him no heed. Sickness roils in my gut. My eyes pass over broken human bodies and scan the huddled people, searching for her.

I spot Penny, the woman who has befriended Jasmine.

Only Jasmine is not at her side.

My beast growls and thrashes. The bones of my hands pop and ripple beneath the surface of my skin. I stare at them in horror—evidence of my inner monster threatening to break out.

I win, *just*—my eyes scanning the crowds and relieved when I find no witnesses.

I need answers. I need to know *she* is safe.

Penny glances up as I stalk toward her.

Where? I wish I had words enough to ask this simple question, but I can only grunt and point to the empty space beside her. *Where is she?*

“She is not here,” she says quietly, stepping close to me and drawing me apart from the rest of the bondservants. “She

fled. Perhaps frightened. Perhaps trying to avoid the fighting.” Her voice lowers to a whisper. “Or perhaps she just sought an opportunity to run.” Her eyes are wide and fearful as they search mine, yet they hold trust. “Please find her, Doug. I dare not go to look for her, lest I court the wrath of the overseers. A few of the lasses were carried off by the bears, but Jasmine ran of her own free will into the forest. Tomorrow, they will begin searching for signs of runaways, and if they find her thus, it will not end well for her. Do you understand me, Doug?”

Sweat dampens my brow. I pat the club at my side and nod.

“Find her, Doug, I beg you. Find the sweet lass and bring her back safe.”

Chapter Five

Jasmine

Fear and instincts to survive take command of my body. I run, fleeing the destruction in the camp, my destination unknown. I am mindless in my terror, my feet fast, my body pumped with the potent cocktail of my emotions that drive me ever on. My stumbling path takes me deeper into the forest. Distantly, I'm aware that there are risks in what I do, but my thoughts cannot stretch that far—I need only to be away.

A great crash comes from the trees to my right. I cower against the base of a tree as a giant bear lopes past. He runs on three legs. Within the other huge front paw, a woman hangs limp, unconscious perhaps or made docile by fear.

My heart pounds furiously, and my eyes feel unnaturally wide. They have taken a bondservant or orc mate—they are taking her away.

Too busy watching their passage, I'm not mindful of my own predicament until too late. Another crash erupts behind me and I spin around to see a bear rise up onto his hind legs before me.

His eyes are bright and blue—he is twice the size of a normal bear. A *shifter*.

Lips curled back, he growls, a deep, menacing rumble that I feel throughout my body. I shrink back. He sniffs and stalks closer, then surges forward in a rush and snatches me up.

I scream as he tosses me over his shoulder and runs through the forest on his hind legs.

Each heavy step rattles my skull and shakes me like a ragdoll.

I wanted away, but not like this.

As I bounce around, jolted, and juddered against his thick, meaty shoulder, clinging to consciousness by a thread, a great

roar and flash of white charges us from the side.

Instinctively, I know.

Doug!



Doug

My beast picks up her scent soon after entering the forest. He is attuned to Jasmine, whom he already perceives to be his mate. I want to believe it, too. But first, I must find her.

I pray to the gods, old and new, that I shall discover her safely hidden, suffering naught but a little fright from the event, and without a scratch upon her small, delicate body.

Only, the farther I lope, the greater my apprehension grows. I run, pausing when I must in order to pick up her scent again. Finally, through the trees I catch a glimpse of the bears retreating, lumbering and crashing deeper into the forest.

My body coils with tension, and a feral snarl is ripped from my throat as I see Jasmine hanging limply over a big bear bastard's shoulder, her long, dark locks flowing down. Rage consumes me. His hands are upon her, those beastly bear paws touching what is ours.

The transition sideswipes me—it is as though my entire body explodes before everything pops back into place. The change confronts me in the deepest, most pervasive way. Where I was on two legs, now I am on four. As I look down, I do not see evidence of a wolf, but monstrous beastly paws and forelegs all covered in shaggy white fur. From my jaw, tusks protrude, thicker, longer and more menacing than any orc tusks I have seen.

I do not have time to wonder what I am. It matters only that I am a killer, and someone has dared to touch *our* mate. We are aligned, orc and beast. His thoughts, desires, and wishes are one and the same as mine. Yet he also offers me freedoms, for in this animal form, there is no space for rationale, caution, or consideration.

There are only territorial rights over the woman who is ours.

I open my beastly jaws and roar.

Hearing my challenge, the bear turns, and drops Jasmine to the forest floor. As she falls limp, the last thread of my tenuous control snaps.

Lips curled back in a feral snarl, I charge.

The shifter roars back, his great front paw swiping for me.

It matters not. I'm bigger, stronger, faster, even than a mighty bear shifter. My thick fur-covered hide barely notices the passage of his claw. My giant tusks find skin and sink deep. I toss my head, thick neck muscles straining as my tusks tear through flesh and shatter bones. Blood fills my mouth and smothers my snout before the limp bear body crashes to the ground.

I snort, front feet stamping at the ground before instincts drive me to charge him again. My tusks sink into the side of his heaving body. His piteous death cry is sweet music. I draw back and skewer him again and again until he lies still and ruined, leaking lifeblood over the forest floor.

I snort again, alert to danger. Stamping my front foot, I survey the area for other threats. Bears wait on the periphery, staring at me from the shadows of the trees.

I bellow. It is a great resonating sound that is the cry of a beast ungodly in design that sits outside the realm of nature. I stamp my foot and bellow again, calling all who dare to challenge me.

None do. The bears turn and lope off into the forest.

Hearing a faint moan, my head swings, splatting a curtain of blood from my tusks. Everything inside me softens with dread as I take in Jasmine's unnatural stillness. Did I conjure up the sound? I pad closer to her and gently nudge her with my front paw. Her weak moan rouses a mournful cry from me—*she lives!*

I lick her, my tongue lapping up the side of her throat, tasting salt from tears, a little dirt, and the scent that is purely *her*. As her eyelids begin to flutter, my body explodes upon itself once again, and I reform as an orc. Where giant paws

existed are familiar gnarled white hands. In place of shaggy white fur is thick orc hide.

“Doug? Oh, Doug!” she lifts her hand to me, weakly, and I take it within mine.

I am here, lass. I am here. I lift her into my arms and carry her, running for the Blighten camp, intent only on making her safe.



She falls unconscious once more as I carry her back to the camp. I find my clothing and boots along the way, sodden and covered in mud, and dress swiftly, anxious to get Jasmine to safety. Penny is waiting on the outskirts of the forest, wringing her hands and pacing, and her face softens as she spots me and hastens over.

There is a covered wagon ahead, and I carry Jasmine there. Penny follows, jabbering questions, but they are pointless when I cannot fucking speak to answer her.

As I lay Jasmine down inside, she moans weakly but does not rouse. I run my hands over her, lightly, ever mindful of my greater size, checking for signs of injury. There are no cuts and no obvious lumps or bruises on her head. My beast rises inside, sniffing, but he does not sense any underlying malaise. Her heartbeat is steady, but she is chilled.

“Is she hurt?”

I shake my head and rub my arm in an indication of cold.

“I’ll get a blanket and some water,” Penny says.

I remain crouched over Jasmine, protective, my beast bristling. When Penny returns, I take the blanket, bundle of food, and water from her before motioning her out.

“Okay,” she says, and I see the droop in her shoulders. It is the dead of night, the bears are gone, and we are all exhausted. Her eyes search mine. “Thank you, Doug. Thank you for bringing her back. I will be close by if you need me.”

As she leaves, I draw the flap closed and tie it off, lending some privacy while I tend to my little human. It is dark inside and warmer with the tarp closed against the breeze.

When I turn back, I find Jasmine watching me.

I still.

She does not scream, only blinks up at me before whispering, “Thank you, Doug.”

Her sweet voice is little more than a croak. I take the water, lifting her head to help her as she gulps some down.

“C-cold.”

Her gown is sodden. Her body is chilled. I am hot, and she needs my body heat. I strip off my clothes, mindful of keeping my deformity out of her sight. I do not want to touch her, yet I know that I must. She is weak and could barely lift her head to drink the water. She only stares at me as I lift her dress up. I wish I had words, could tell her all I feel, could explain how I’m only seeking to keep her safe and warm... That I will not touch her beyond what I must do to rid her of this wet dress, even though my beast roars that we should *claim*.

She doesn’t struggle. Maybe she is too weak. I don’t like the thought of that. But I do like the way she snuggles against me, her eyes drifting shut on a contented sigh. I draw the blanket over both of us. With her head against my chest, I feel new emotions swell up inside me, a great outpouring of deep gratitude that she trusts me. I draw her small body closer, offering her my warmth. She settles right down to sleep, and her breathing evens out.

I do not sleep. I gaze upon her in wonder, stroke my finger softly over her smooth cheek, and pet her hair. In all my life, I have never known a peace like this. Even my beast is content now that her skin is pressed against ours.

Chapter Six

Jasmine

The danger is past, yet the terror lingers in my mind. At the same time, I'm so exhausted such that the simple act of breathing leaves me weary. Doug is gentle as he strips my gown from me. It is sodden and smells of the bear, and I am grateful to be rid of it.

I don't have the capacity to fear what Doug might do. He has saved me. I feel I am his now, in the most profound of ways. With my cheek pressed against his chest and a blanket draped over me, I am enveloped in warmth, save for the floor of the wagon, which is wooden and cold. I press closer, seeking more of his warmth.

He grunts at my weak wriggling and, with a huff that makes me think of exasperation, he lifts me, placing my smaller body over his. Here I drape over my living cushion, my legs spread wide around his waist. I am conscious on a distant level that this is a shameful position to be in, with my pussy spread open lewdly and pressed against his thick belly. Only, I'm tired, and he is *so* warm, and I care for naught else.

His arms make a cradle around me. I feel safe. He does nothing inappropriate. With one hand against my waist and the other wrapped around my shoulders, he holds me. After a time, he pets my hair. I feel his fingertips against my cheek.

My body responds to his touch, softening further, sinking against him.

I want him to do more.

He could take me if he wished. In any way he wished. I would give myself up gladly to this worthy mate.

I rub my cheek against his chest in a subtle invitation. We are in a wagon, cocooned together, and shut off from the world and the Blighten camp. As I listen to his heartbeat under my cheek, I drift in and out of sleep. He is a steady presence, a rock to which I cling.

The rain picks up again, muting the sounds from beyond the wagon as it beats steadily against the canvas roof. Time passes, and I grow restless, aware of his scent under my nose and how it invades me.

I do not want to be a bondservant.

I construct a new fantasy, one where it is not a handsome prince but a white orc who comes to my rescue. He takes me far away from here to a little village where we have a cottage and children of our own.

Where this magical village might be that would accept both a white orc and a human, I have no clue. For surely no such place exists outside of my dream.

I fidget again. As I move, the friction rouses my nipples to hardness, and the place between my legs feels needy and a little slick. His hand strays to the upper swell of my ass. His touch captures all my focus as I wonder if he will slide it lower.

My dream fades, and I become aware of my breath and how it takes an effort to keep it even.

His hand lowers, oh so slightly. A deep rumbling noise emanates from his chest, and all the little hairs on my body spring to attention. He squeezes very lightly on my ass, and my pussy clenches in response.

He exhales a heavy breath and squeezes again. His next sound is more of a moan, almost piteous, as though he is in pain. Am I... Am I causing him discomfort sprawled over him like this?

Just as I rouse myself to move, he rolls, caging my body in his arms, ensuring he moves the blanket with me until I am spread out over it on my back.

I freeze, then lift my lashes far enough to peek. My legs have fallen and are spread wide. Through the gloom, I see him staring at the juncture where my thighs meet.

I fight to steady my breath, reminding myself that I wanted this. Yet he is such a monstrous male that fear takes hold as I stare at his huge beastly hands, all white and gnarled. They are

hideous compared to those of a human, yet they saved me, and it is hard to hold onto the fear when he is so gentle with me.

He sniffs loudly, nostrils flared, and my pussy clenches in response.

Goodness, is he scenting me, scenting the slick trickling from my feminine place?

I breathe slow and shallow, trying very hard to be still. I don't want him to stop.

His head lowers, he sniffs and moans again, piteous as though he is suffering still.

Beyond our wagon, it is quiet—save for the rain—as the inhabitants of the camp take whatever rest they can. Here inside, I am spread and at the mercy of a great white orc as he stares at my most intimate place.

My heart is thumping wildly in my chest, and my eyelashes flutter closed as I submit to the moment and whatever he might do.

Then his knuckles brush against me, and it is all I can do to keep still when they slide through my slick folds and catch my clit. A small moan escapes my lips. He stills, and then, purposefully, he brushes his knuckle back over it again.

My chest sags unsteadily, but I keep my eyes closed. I don't want to do anything to spook his exploration. I want him to touch me again—because it feels so good.

“Uff!” My eyes snap open. Two huge hands cupping my ass, he lifts me from the wagon floor like an offering to himself. Shock and fear collide as his mouth lowers toward my pussy, and another cry leaves my lips, this one deep and wanton, as his huge, beastly tongue runs the length of my slit.

My mind stutters and comes to a halt as I come to terms with what he does. He is feasting upon me, groaning low as he lashes at the sensitive place with his tongue. A faint prick along my inner thigh reminds me of his lethal tusks, yet he is careful as he drives me toward delirium with each searing lick. Sensations explode through me. The utter debauchery of his actions is every bit as beastly as the male doing them. I hang,

limp, willing for whatever he might do, a flush of arousal sweeping through me like wildfire. My pussy pulses and throbs, pleasure unfurling with lightning speed. I moan. He doesn't seem to notice now—doesn't deign to stop.

I spread my legs wider, pushing up into his mouth, seeking more.

“Gods, please!” The sensations that overwhelm me are new and unexpected. I feel like I am coiling tighter and tighter. Like I'm headed for a destination, one I do not understand. He clamps an arm around my waist, pinning me to keep me still, then groans again, and doubles down on his torment. His tongue finds the little swollen pleasure nub with unerring accuracy. Each touch sets the tension in my body coiling tighter. My breath traps in my lungs, my body turns rigid, and then I shatter into pieces, moaning as deep blissful contractions ripple through my pussy.

He laps and licks until I become too sensitive and wriggle, and he lowers me to the wagon floor. I lie, panting. He is breathing heavily, too, his great barrel chest working like a bellows. As our eyes meet in the darkness, I feel the world pass between us.

Things have changed, irrevocably so.

I ought to be embarrassed by my enthusiasm, by what I allowed this beastly male to do, without a murmur of protest—but I am not. A small smile finds my lips. Will he rut me now? Will he take his orcish cock and force it into me. I want him to, very much. I bite my lip, and my eyes lower, only I cannot see anything of him through the darkness.

A delayed blush creeps over my cheeks and spreads down my chest. “Will you rut me now? I should not mind if you did.”

He makes a deep rumbly sound, and when I glance up, his eyes have narrowed upon me. He gathers the blanket spread across the floor and covers me. Then he grunts and thrusts it away from my pussy. Head lowering, he sniffs again, getting right up close.

Is he going to... again?

He sniffs again. It tickles, and I giggle before I can plant my palm over my mouth.

He glares up at me before heaving himself up, curling beside me, and putting his head over my lower belly with his nose against my pussy. He wraps one arm underneath my thigh and holds me like that. He sighs, and his head grows heavy.

Goodness! He has gone to sleep. A lazy smile slides across my lips as I stroke my fingers through his hair. He is very heavy on my belly, but I find that I do not mind. How is it possible that I have found someone so worthy in such an unexpected place? That this beast, this monster, this white orc, could give me such pleasure and demand nothing in return?

Perhaps that will come tomorrow. But something tells me that this is simply Doug.

Unconditional.

That is who he is. And this understanding is like a revelation unfolding inside me. Here in this barbaric place of sorrow, within the body of a savage orc, a gentle soul exists.

Chapter Seven

Jasmine

The next morning when I rise, Doug has already gone. It is only now that I learn the full details of the attack. The punishing pace of the last few days was in an effort to meet with reinforcements, after a warning had come of bear shifters tracking us. We had met with those reinforcements just in time.

The mood in the camp is subdued. We do not move out. At midday, the orcs return. With them are five bondservants who fled into the forest during the attack. All the rest of us are gathered. Those who tried to flee are thrust to their hands and knees before General Tulwin, who warns us of the consequence of trying to escape, no matter the circumstances.

He orders their death. Orcs step forward and slit the kneeling bondservants' throats. They fall limp to the ground as their lifeblood spills out.

Shakes take hold of me until I feel like I'm being rocked by a storm. Penny, who stands beside me, grasps my hand. Now, upon reflection, I realize how foolish it was for me to run away. If the bears hadn't captured me, I too would have been rounded up like this, and it would be my blood spilling over the ground.

Except Doug came for me. Doug saved me.

"Ah, lass," Penny says. "You will be okay. They like to make an example, but it is done now." Her hand squeezes over mine, and I take some small comfort in it as we watch the orcs cart the bodies off.



Doug

Tulwin makes an example of the deserters. It is a reminder to all of us, orc and human alike, that we are part of the Blighten; nothing but tools. I see Jasmine only from a distance as the recaptured human bondservants are killed and their bodies carried away. Afterward, the two orcs that fled are dealt with on the other side of the camp. They do not get off so lightly as to have their throats slit, and greater creativity is applied in delivering them to their end. First, they are tossed among the senior orc warriors, where they are beaten to the point of exhaustion before they are strung up and disemboweled. Orcs are hardy. They will swing from the thick tree limb for many hours, watching birds feast on their innards before passing into death.

It is the way of the Blighten, and a warning we all must heed.

Fear is not an emotion I experience often, but I suffer great fear for what Jasmine did. If I hadn't found her, she would have been taken by the bears. If the bears hadn't found her, then she would have suffered the same fate as the other bondservants who fled.

Penny is one of the good ones. She warned me that Jasmine had left. Now my only worry is that someone else saw her leaving.

They could go to Tulwin, seeking to curry favor, or for other reasons of mischief.

I will keep a careful watch. She is mine now, and I protect what is mine.

We don't move out today, and I spend the rest of the day helping clear up the mess left in the wake of the attack. But as daylight wanes, I gather rations and return to the bondservant part of the camp.

My eyes search out the small crowd until I find Jasmine standing, talking to Penny. A flutter kicks off in my belly and, lower, my cock stiffens. Panic assaults me and I instantly soften. I cannot allow her to see that part of me ever. She is sweet and pretty and will not let me tend her pussy again should she realize the magnitude of the monster that I am.

Her head turns at my approach, and her face breaks into a smile that lights the cold, unworthy places inside me with conflicting emotions. I am not good enough, but I am better than the rest of the bastards in this camp, and I vow I will keep her safe.

I have never spoken in my life. For the most part, I do not mind it, save for the odd occasion. With Jasmine, though, I wish I could give her comfort through words, could explain that I will care for her without obligation, and that I will ensure no other male bothers her.

That I expect nothing in return, save being near her and touching her, should she permit.

I hope she permits.

I cannot tell her these things.

But I can show her.

As I hold out my rough hand, she does not hesitate to place her small, delicate hand, along with her trust, within mine.



Jasmine

As Doug holds his hand out to me, I suddenly feel shy. Bondservants watch me accept his silent offer. My heart quickens as my smaller hand is engulfed by his huge, gnarled white one. Eyes follow us as he guides me away, stopping at the same empty food wagon he commandeered last night. I stand and fidget while he undoes the flap and motions me closer, my mind crowded with all the things that happened here last time.

Will he do that again?

Do I want him to?

I do not yet know my place, but I am reassured that he has come for me.

He lifts me up into the wagon, his capable hands leaving an impression on my waist that makes me feel a little tingly. Climbing up beside me, he turns to secure the flap.

Butterflies take flight in my belly as my eyes follow his movements, watching the play of muscles in his broad back.

Then I frown as memories surface from when I fled to the forest. Doug is monstrous, for sure, but he is not as big as a bear. So, how did he overcome it? In my mind, I see blood spraying and a bear falling limp to the forest floor... I shake my head. The memories are all jumbled, and I can't rightly remember what happened until that moment when Doug leaned over me.

I am here, lass. I am here.

Where do those words come from when he cannot speak?

While I have been lost in thought, he has risen and is staring at me through the gloom.

I shudder. There is something wrong with my memories of the forest scenario, only I'm exhausted and cannot work it out.

Doug approaches, stooped low to fit beneath the tarp covering, his nostrils flaring and eyes narrowing as he bends down. I think he is perceptive.

“I’m okay,” I say. “I was just... How did you kill the bear?”

His chest rattles with a low warning growl. I take an unsteady step back.

Then I remember that this is Doug who saved me, and I’m only a little nervous now.

“You’re very fearsome,” I say, “but you have been only gentle and kind to me.”

I take the blanket from him and, aware of his eyes tracking me, spread it out on the wagon floor, where I settle down cross-legged.

He huffs out a breath before he rummages in his sack and hands me a strip of jerky and the end of a loaf of bread. With a grunt, he makes the motion for me to eat.

“I’m not very hungry,” I say as I stare at the food. “Don’t you want it? You have a very big body, and it must need a lot of food.”

He shakes his head.

Maybe he has eaten already. I nibble on the jerky. But all the while, I’m aware of the giant male looming over me. I wonder if he’s going to rut me tonight. I pause my chewing and, staring up at him, swallow the mouthful.

“Have you claimed me?”

He nods once, decisive.

I blush, thinking about our last time in the wagon. Was it only last night? It feels like a lifetime ago, yet it is also intimately close.

“Good,” I say, just as decisive. “I’m glad that you are. I want you to claim me. It makes me very happy.” I am rambling, but it’s like my mind seeks to fill in his silence with nonsense.

I'm also a little nervous about this development because it means he will definitely rut me, for that is how an orc claims his mate. I blush, my cheeks getting so hot there is a danger they might catch fire. "I liked that thing you did. It was very uncivilized. I'm sure goddess-fearing village folk, such as I once was, should not be doing it. But I'm not that lass anymore. Now I'm a bondservant about to be claimed by an orc."

His eyes grow wider with every word I speak.

"A strange white orc," I muse. "You are very beastly, but inside, you have a princely soul."

He raises both brows and grunts.

I smile. "I used to want a prince to rescue me. When I fled the camp during the attack, I had a foolish notion that if only I could get a little distance away, the prince would find me, take me back to his castle, and claim me as his queen. There we would live happily ever after and have lots of royal babies." It sounds utterly ridiculous now and further might have gotten me killed in more ways than one. "Will you tell on me to General Tulwin?"

He shakes his head.

"I think I already knew that, but I wanted there to be no lies between us. It was foolish to run, and even so, I'd already decided that I wanted you to be my mate." I need to stop talking, I cannot meet his eyes anymore after this rambling confession. He is a good listener, which makes me want to giggle, as inappropriate as that is when we are having a very serious conversation-cum-confession. "No, I did not think you would tell on me. Why would you? Now that you have claimed me as yours, I mean."

He grunts again.

"When I close my eyes at night now, I dream about you. Even before you"— my cheeks heat again—"did that uncivilized thing with your tongue." I gesture in the general direction of my pussy.

His eyes lower, and he swallows loudly before he lifts them again and they clash with mine.

“I do not want a prince to rescue me anymore,” I whisper. “I only want you.”

His chest rises with a heavy breath. Then his nostrils flare. The food is snatched from my fingers and dumped on the sack that lies beside the blanket. I’m tipped over onto my back. My skirts are thrust up, and his nose is pressed against me intimately where he heaves ragged breaths.

“Goodness!”

Taking my thighs in his big hands, he draws my legs apart.

I fist his shaggy hair. “Oh. What are you doing? I was assuredly not expecting you to do it again quite this boldly.” This is all progressing very fast!

I hear a distinct tearing sound. He growls. And then his tongue is there lapping and licking. My body, already conditioned to his touch, rises with instant arousal in anticipation of the glorious high only Doug can deliver.

“Unmmm!” My fingers tightened in his hair, hips rocking shamelessly as I try to get closer.

A big heavy arm clamps over my abdomen, weighing me against the blanket and keeping me still. I don’t want to be still, yet his mastering of me is a powerful aphrodisiac and tumbles me straight into a sweet, heady climax that steals the breath from my lungs and leaves me a quivering mess.

I expect him to stop.

He doesn’t stop.

He continues to feast.

My pussy is so sensitive I cannot rightly decide if I like it or not.

“Doug! Please, I need...” I don’t know what I need. A moment to catch my breath, certainly, but also something more.

“I need cock,” I moan wantonly, hardly caring that no decent lass would demand an orc give her his cock.

“Please let me tend you. Please, I need to!”

He growls and tightens his arm over my wriggling before he doubles down on tormenting my pussy with his wicked orc tongue.

I come all over again, clamping my fingers over my mouth to muffle the wild grunts that seek to pour from my lips.

Finally, he lifts his head. I stare at him through the gloom as he licks his lips, and I try to gather my scattered wits. My pussy is throbbing like it wants him to go at me again. The brutish male has broken my poor human body with his debauchery, and now I crave even more.

I thrust my skirts down. He tugs them back up and shakes his head at me.

“I’m to lie here with my legs spread and my skirts rucked up then, am I?” There is a definite note of snark in my voice.

He bares his teeth at me, which alarms me for a moment before I note the strange huffing noise he makes and the way his shoulders shake—Doug is laughing at my discomfort!

“You are a wicked orc.”

He passes me the food again and motions for me to eat.

“This did not work out so well last time.” I say seriously—and I was not even on display then.

After we have eaten, he draws my smaller body next to his, curls his arm around me, and goes to sleep.

As I drift into sleep, I question why he does not want more from me.

I worry that this means that he is not really my mate; that someone might separate us.

Two days later, we arrive at Krug. And for the second time in a matter of weeks, everything changes again.

Part Two

Saving the Beast

Chapter One

Jasmine

The steward—a crusty human freeman—introduces me to the fairy’s elderly guardian, who goes by the name of Bard. The stern beta with gray hair makes a curious companion for Melody, the fairy child.

Melody peeps around Bard’s legs at me... and Doug. She is most assuredly fascinated by Doug. The fairy child I’m to help care for is as pretty as her name, with red-gold hair and strange whirling silver eyes.

“I’ll leave you to your duties,” the gruff steward says, before striding away.

“She is faking shy,” Bard says with a sigh. “And does not like the company of the steward.”

Melody continues to eyeball Doug around Bard’s legs before she suddenly emerges and takes a meandering route over to him. Doug watches her approach with a raised brow.

“Melody,” Bard says, a warning in his voice.

Does he think Doug will hurt the child? I’m about to come to Doug’s defense when Melody closes her small hand around Doug’s large one.

Doug blinks as the tiny fairy begins to stroke his hand as though seeking to gentle the beast.

I bite my lip to hide my smile.

Bard grimaces. “Melody, what did we talk about? Orcs are not for petting.”

“You are so beautiful,” she says, eyes taking on a gleam of deep admiration and ignoring Bard. “Did the Goddess paint you with snowflakes?”

Doug offers a grunt, but I see his lips tug up on the orc’s equivalent of a grin.

And so a new stage of my life begins.



Walking anywhere fast in Krug in summer is simply not to be done. According to Penny, it is frigid here during winter, but the extreme summers offer a brief respite when the blistering winds travel from the deserts that are to the west of Imperium lands, and bathe the city in red dust and waves of heat.

The air is so arid it makes a desert of your mouth and wraps you under a blanket of sluggishness. The red sand blown in from afar leaves a gritty layer over the narrow streets of the capital, where the buildings squeeze close. On the outskirts of the sprawling city, the dwellings devolve into mud huts. Here, in the center, they are also mud but interconnected to form endless irregular passages in variations of color from gray to brown. They have rough walls, flat wooden roofs, small shuttered windows, and their wide cloth awnings reach out from the frontage into the paths to tangle with neighbors in a kaleidoscope of color and fabric.

The inhabitants of Krug are surprisingly diverse. Living among the orcs are many humans and members of other races. One might presume that they would be downbeat, living among the Blighten. But this is not the case. They are vibrant, animated people living in dense communities. Every day they set up stalls outside their homes in these narrow streets, where they communicate with each other and passers-by in an exuberant babble.

In counterpoint to the hawkers' cries come the creak of carts, drawn slowly in the heat, and the general din of many people and orcs who fill these constricted routes—the quicksilver of darting children, the steady pace of the old—orc, human, and everything in between.

As we pass a temple to Emedicus, the god of dreams, a song prayer begins as a single voice that becomes two, and then three. And then many join together, rising to a peak only to return to that single haunting soprano.

One does not think of orcs as pious, yet the many temples suggest they are.

Krug is a surprise, all around.

“Can I have a toffee apple?” Melody asks, in her sweet, high voice.

“We do not have time for toffee apples,” Bard admonishes softly. The tall, gray-haired bondservant is often stern with the child, although none of that deters Melody.

If Krug has been a revelation, then the tiny fairy child—who would do anything for a sweet treat—is a revelation of the highest order. Although she wears no collar at her throat, she is most assuredly a possession of orcs, one who offers a particular form of usefulness to our masters. Yet her indomitable spirit is uncowed by her circumstances, neither those that led to her being a bondservant nor what has followed since.

How I envy her ignorance.

We march for the palace, where Melody will have an audience with the portal master. It is not unusual for us to be out of a day. Melody is gregarious and loves nothing more than to get out among people—she has already befriended several vendors. Her quarters are within the home of a Blighten general who is surprisingly accommodating and we are allowed out so long as we have an escort and return in a timely manner.

At my side is Doug, who is now acknowledged as my mate—even though he has not consummated the matter, which is the only sore point between us.

He is allotted as a guard to Melody, along with a dozen more orcs who surround us as we pass through the busy streets.

Melody peeks back over her shoulder at me, her red-gold curls bouncing and her arresting silver eyes whirling with mischief. Doug grunts, already onto the child. I shake my head slowly at Melody. She wants me to get her a toffee apple from the stall coming up—one she has been to before. The

shopkeeper, utterly charmed by the sweet fairy child, has taken to setting aside one of his choicest toffee apples on the chance that she may come along.

However, our pace is swift, and I dare not step aside even to get her a treat.

“We will get you one on the way back,” Bard says, by way of compromise. “Knowing Derry, he will have saved you one, just in case.”

“Okay,” Melody agrees. “But do not think I shall forget. I have a very good memory.”

“I am aware of this,” Bard says dryly.

There are times when I wonder about his feelings toward the little girl, for they are not related by blood, and he is more often than not very strict with her. Yet there are other moments, like now, when I sense his deep caring.

As we emerge from the narrow streets and into the cobbled market square, the noise rises to a roar as the sellers vie for the attention of customers. One does not readily imagine orcs at a market, standing around haggling, and yet there are as many orcs here as there are humans. Krug is my first time seeing female orcs, while not quite as imposing as their male counterparts, they are not far short of it.

My eyes are drawn toward them as we move along the cobbled roadway that splits the market in half. Is this why Doug does not mate me? Does he think me inferior to the towering orc females; that my smaller, weaker body would break?

I cut a glance over at him, but all I see is him keeping alert to his surroundings and not lingering on any of the females of his own kind, as far as I can tell.

I wish he would rut me.

I wish he would let me touch his cock.

He does not even let me look at it or tend him to pleasure, even though I'm insensible with lust by the time he has done wresting climaxes from me. The male is obsessed with my

pussy, inspecting it, tasting it, and petting it with his thick fingers. He has taken to sleeping with his fingers against me there. Something even pressing a single finger inside me and then insisting that I must sleep like that.

He gets a mutinous set to his jaw if I even suggest I might touch his cock.

He also gets mutinous set to his jaw if I try to move his hand from my pussy so I can sleep. It is assuredly a distraction from rest when he begins to pump his thick finger slowly in the middle of the night. And dare I make a single whimper or sound, I'm tipped onto my back so he can wrest another climax or two from me with his mouth and tongue. After that I am back tucked against him with his finger inside my pussy again, only I am wetter and even more sensitive.

I thought he was sweet when I first met him, the strange white orc who is mute in two ways.

He is not sweet. He is the devil himself, who drives me to the point of distraction with his constant petting of sensitive places.

While I take comfort in his obvious interest in me, I also worry that I'm nothing more than a passing curiosity—not a mate at all, when he will not give me his cock. How will that even work out if we never bond? Will he tire of me? Will another lass tempt him, make him hard, and pleasure him in ways I do not?

As I journey along the road toward the glistening white palace rising up beyond the multicolored stalls, I also journey through my experiences as a bondservant and how one worry is replaced by another.

As we near the palace gate, more immediate worries push to the fore. The palace is the only true brick structure in the city. Although, I have learned that those bricks are made from mud, and the whole structure was rendered in mud before it was painted white, so I now think of it as more of a grand mud hut that got a little out of hand. The thin, slitted windows and the way everything seems to curve are confronting to the eye.

There is no straight line to be found anywhere, but it is imposing nonetheless.

As we approach the palace, where bondservants sweep up the red sand that gathers against the white walls, we turn to the right, circumventing the building and passing through the cobbled courtyard to where the portal master's quarters are found, in the east tower—if one can call it a tower. It is short and squat, and rises only two stories, barely poking up beyond the palace roof.

The guards remain outside as Bard, Melody, Doug, and I take the stairs up. The portal master's room is round and curious in design, with long benches to the left and right, and a desk beneath the small slit window that is directly opposite the door.

The portal master, Jendrick—a great barrel-chested orc with dark, green skin—rises from his chair, brushing crumbs from his gown.

Doug takes up a position at the door while I find a place to sit out of the way. Bard stands attentively a small distance away, watching. I carry a satchel everywhere with me, which holds my sewing supplies. I'm a bondservant. Although I'm a companion to Melody, I'm still expected to keep busy. I don't mind the sewing or any of the chores I'm given. It is no trouble to do a little mending when Melody or Bard have no direct need of me.

It keeps my fingers busy and leaves my mind free. Also, I have found that when a bondservant is occupied in this way, we are invisible to our masters, orc or otherwise. I have learned all manner of interesting gossip while sitting, quietly sewing.

“I have something...” Jendrick fumbles on his desk, pushing aside a great tome and several scrolls before liberating a diamond-shaped stone hanging from a long cord. It looks like a necklace, save the stone is exceptionally big.

I turn to my mending as he passes the stone to Melody. “Do you sense anything, child?”

“Oh!” She suddenly giggles—When I glance up, she is turning it over in her hand. “It makes my fingers tingle.”

“Good, good,” Jendrick says. “And how did you get on with the book I gave you?”

“I finished it,” she says. “It didn’t make a lot of sense.”

“No,” the portal master agrees. “I don’t suppose it does. For some portal masters, the knowledge must be learned. For others, like you, it’s instinctive. But still, even if you do not fully understand what you read, the part of you that makes you special will. Now, I want you to look at this picture for me.” He goes back to his desk and selects a thick book before drawing it to the edge of the table. “Come and look at this for me, Melody.”

She goes to stand beside him—the tiny fairy dwarfed by the giant orc—and shows not a bit of fear.

The circumstances that brought Bard and Melody into the company of orcs are tragic. The dark fae attacked her kingdom and stole her. She was later liberated by orcs.

If one can call it liberation.

“Take your time to view the picture. Do you see this here? How the trees line the path to the right, and the little copse of trees in the distance. Try and think about it in as much detail as you can. The placement of the sun, the dips in the landscape, the river that dissects it, and in the far distance, the mountain range.”

“Where is it?” she asks.

“It doesn’t matter where it is,” he replies. “Only that it is a place far from here.”

I busy myself with my sewing as they discuss the picture.

When I glance up, they have moved away from the desk and are now facing the center of the room.

“Now, Melody. I want you to hold the stone for me. Look to the center of the room where the floorboards are a different color. And while you focus on that point, I want you to think about the place in the picture.”

“Okay,” she agrees in her sweet voice.

I’m paying very little attention to my sewing now, curious about what they do.

Melody is a tool here, like we all are, except she is a particularly precious one.

There’s already been one trip through the portal, which she is capable of guiding. There are many portals in this land, or so I have learned since arriving at Krug. But they are like rudderless ships upon the sea, taking unwary travelers to unknown destinations from which they might never return. Unless they have a keystone—like the one Melody holds in her hands. For Melody, using the keystone is instinctive. The Blighten already have access to many destinations. By using Melody, they hope to gain access to even more.

I could weep for the sadness of it, of new homes and people decimated by the Blighten, of innocent people assimilated into their ranks or killed. This young bright child, with her whirling silver eyes and riot of red-gold hair, with a sweet disposition and a sweet tooth, is being melded toward monstrous aims.

It breaks my heart.

It also reminds me of all that I have lost as well as the ever-hungry war tribe of which I am now a part.

She stands there for long moments. Nothing happens.

“Can you feel anything, child?” Jendrick stands close, leaning in.

She shakes her head. “No.”

“That’s okay.” Jendrick is patient with her. I will give him that. “We’ll try another picture.”

And so it goes on. This is not the first time we have done this. I dare say it will not be the last. I wonder what they’re trying to do when there is no portal in the room.

I go back to my sewing... only to be roused by a thunderous clap. A black hole opens and then snaps shut

again. Melody drops the stone and falls to her knees. Bard is at her side instantly, helping her up.

“I feel dizzy,” she says.

“That is enough for today,” Bard says, daring to offer an opinion to the orc master.

My heart is racing wildly. What did Melody just do? Did she open a portal out of nothing? I don’t fully understand what just transpired, yet I sense the significance of it.

Jendrick stares at Melody. “That is enough for today,” he agrees.

“Can I have a toffee apple now?” Melody asks, oblivious to the dark undertones that have the room in a stranglehold.

“You may certainly have a toffee apple on the way back, my dear child,” Jendrick says. “And tomorrow, you will return.”

“She needs a rest,” Bard says.

“Tomorrow,” Jendrick says firmly, reminding us all that he is an orc and a master, and we are merely bondservants.

Bard bows his head and takes Melody by the hand as I hasten to fold my sewing up neatly and place it back into my bag.

Melody seems untroubled by whatever happened and begins chattering about her toffee apple.

We stop and get her the toffee apple, which is so big she can barely hold it, although she does an admirable job of tucking into her prize as we walk back to our home. She is tired now and asks Doug to carry her, which he does.

As the sweet child nestles in his arms, so tiny and precious against his gruff facade, something softens inside me. He is good with her, and infinitely patient. One does not expect it in an orc, yet nurturing comes naturally to him.

He will make a good father someday, and that brings a great rush of longing to the fore of my emotions.

And as we pass through the crowded streets, surrounded by our silent escort of orcs, I feel the dark undercurrents around us again. I had fooled myself into thinking that there was less danger here, but now I sense it at every turn.

The child is dangerous.

And innocent.

She is also a target for those who want to use her and those who want her dead.

Chapter Two

Jasmine

The general whose home we reside in, along with Melody and Bard, is a huge green-skinned orc by the name of Edwin. He is not an unkind master. He is indulgent with the fairy child and she takes shameless advantage of it. My first impressions of the Blighten was that they were murderers and heathens. But as I submerge myself in their world, I see that they are not all the same. And even though I'm kept as a bondservant, I'm not treated cruelly.

Yet I keep in mind that this time, too, shall pass, as all times do. I cannot forget the execution of those who fled during the bear attack. How they were put on their knees and had their throats slit. Nor can I forget the destruction of my home and village, the death of my parents and neighbors, and how children like me were taken away.

Nor can I dismiss the danger I sense surrounding Melody and the monstrous capabilities in her innocent hands.

Yet, for the sake of my sanity, I must find ways to let these worries go. I am able to do that each night when, after I help Bard to put Melody to bed, Doug and I are given leave to retire.

Our quarters are in the back of the general's sprawling house. We have a tiny room just off a stable block. Beside it are storerooms and then the barracks where the general's private guards sleep. It is a long, narrow room with whitewashed walls, a wooden floor, and a single straw mattress that takes up most of the space. There is a pitcher and basin on a small table where I wash up. The door is rickety and old, and there is not a single window. But as the door closes on us at the end of the day, the sense of intimacy wraps around us.

When you're a bondservant, you do not have your own time, yet these moments, when our duties are done, and we

may rest for the night, are a form of freedom for my mind.

Tonight, a tear trickles down my cheek as Doug rattles the rickety door into the jamb and turns back to me. He instantly stills, then steps forward and raises his hand to sweep my hair back from my face. On the outside, he looks nothing less than a vicious brute, and if I should have met him on the street of Krug without knowing him, I would assume as much. Inside, he is sensitive... So, although he is also wicked with his attention, and will not let me touch him in return... I admit to feeling the beginnings of love.

He brushes the tears from my cheek and searches my eyes.

“It is nothing,” I say.

It is assuredly something if you are crying, his grunt seems to say.

It is funny how he portrays much with no more than a look, grunt, or huff.

“There is no easy way to become a bondservant,” I say, reflectively, trying to let him know where my thoughts have led me. “I was taken from my village as a child. My parents were killed and left dead on the ground in front of our home. The orcs took me and the other children of my village to one of their outposts. There I stayed, for many years, tending to the children who were taken from their homes and families before they were moved on to other places as bondservants to orcs.”

I’m aware of his stillness, of how he listens intently to what I say. “I love these times when we are together like this. When I feel you touch me. When you bring me pleasure. For this brief time, I can pretend that I am free.”

His face softens. He brushes my hair back behind my ear. His hands are enormous, calloused, and easily twice the size of mine, yet he is so gentle with them.

“Can I touch you?” I blurt out.

He takes his hands away and scowls at me.

I dash a tear from my cheeks. “I don’t like that you won’t let me touch you. Do you not like human lasses in that way?”

He scrubs at his brow, looking exasperated.

“I don’t understand,” I say. “Why won’t you let me touch you?”

He looks toward the door like he is about to make a bolt for it. As has happened often of late, and without my conscious permission, my eyes lower to the thick bulge that tents his hide pants: long and girthy, it passes a goodly way down his leg. I am fascinated by it, by how monstrous it is. I have no idea how it might fit within me. It ought to terrify me, but it is part of Doug, and there is nothing about him that terrifies me anymore.

The more time I spend among the Blighen, the more I see that not all orcs are bad. Some, for certain, are wicked and cruel. But many of them are no different to me, caught up in something bigger, beyond their control. We are none of us masters of our own destiny. We are all just dandelion seeds floating in the wind.

“If you don’t mate me, then we are not together properly.” I sound combative, but I won’t take it back. “I want to touch you—to tend you. I want to give you pleasure in the way that you give it to me.”

His head swings back to face me, and his nostrils flare.

I worry that he will not protect me without full intimacy between us, yet that concern is only a small part of what I feel, but more tenderness toward him, if a little exasperated at times. I wish he could talk. I wish he could explain things to me in simple terms, but the reality is that he cannot.

“Could you lie naked next to me? I think that would be a good start. If I could... You know, feel you against me.” Heat floods my cheeks. I am being particularly bold tonight, and he has not yet even touched me. I nibble on my lower lip when he doesn’t answer. His chest is heaving, as though the mere mention of it is a great strain.

He nods, shocking me.

Just the thought of him being next to me, with that big, long, thick snake that fills his pants pressing against my naked

body, has me sparking with interest and arousal. “Okay then,” I squeak, shy and excited all at once that he has relented to this request.

He gives a little tug at the hem of my dress and makes the motion for me to take it off. I’m enthusiastic about stripping and tossing it to the floor.

He grunts, and his lips twitch as he bares his teeth. There was a time when I thought his smile was fearsome, and that he was the ugliest creature on the planet. Time and burgeoning affection have overwritten those initial impressions. He is not handsome, but he is not ugly either. He is compelling, arresting, and fascinating. He is merely different from me. He is also magnificent, powerful, and protective. I need only be in his presence—in the evening, as we are now, when it is time for us to rest—and naked before him, and my body rises: nipples tightening and my pussy growing slick. He has conditioned me to accept his attention, and, oh, what wondrous attention it is. I crave his touch, but I also desire greatly to touch him too.

His eyes are on my breasts. He appears mesmerized as he steps forward and cups the two plump mounds, squeezing them together and pinching my nipples before giving a little tug. Pleasure shoots to my core, making me throb, making me urgent inside.

“You are not naked,” I point out. “You agreed you would undress.”

He huffs, getting that determined look on his face as he continues to taunt my breasts, making them sore and achy, making them flush with arousal.

He releases me abruptly, spins me around, and gives my bottom a tap. He grunts when I peek back at him, then he points at the bed.

I go to the bed and lie down, spreading myself invitingly to him. There was a time when I had shame in showing my body to him; when I didn’t understand intimacy. But now I do. He makes a twirling motion with his finger. *Turn over.* He wants

me to turn over! I huff and glare at him. He plants his hands on his hips.

“Fine, I will turn over,” I say. “But you better be naked when you get in this bed.”

I see the flash of his teeth again, and then I gulp and wriggle over to face the wall because I believe that, finally, he will do it; he will actually take his pants off this time.



Doug

She is a demanding little thing like all humans are, always pushing for things she does not know anything the fuck about.

She wants my cock. Daily bemoans for a chance to touch it, suck it, or tend it.

She would run, fucking screaming, were she to get a look at, and should I harden, she would likely faint from sheer terror.

It is not a human cock that swings between my legs, nor that of an alpha wolf shifter, nor even an orc, but an abomination that sits somewhere between them all, made worse that a misguided surgeon tried to cut my knot from me as a child, thinking it the product of the devil that needed to be purged.

Only my shifter blood does strange things, and it grew back.

He cut it from me again.

It grew yet back again.

Five times I was strapped down, drugged, and mutilated by his blade.

And each time my knot grew back more monstrous than before.

I went back and killed the sick bastard once I had come of age. Cut his tiny green cock off and choked him with it embedded in his throat—it was the highlight of my young life.

Yet my mind does not wish to linger on these terrors of old when there is a human lass in my arms, quivering for the feel of me pressing my crotch against her plump ass. I am besotted with the sweet, beguiling lass and it causes me to make foolish decisions... like taking off my fucking pants. I can admit, though, that it will feel amazing, having her flesh fully against

mine. The last time we were naked together, I had killed a bear for her.

She belongs to us, my beast advises. He is worse than Jasmine for pushing matters that should be left well alone.

And my mind lingers in the belligerent belief that she is indeed ours now, that we own this pretty little human with the tasty cunt that grows juicy for us.



Jasmine

As I lie on my side, facing the wall, I hear a thud as he takes off his boots, followed by rustling. Everything inside me feels electric and alert. Every tiny sound is amplified in my ears. My breathing is unsteady as the rough straw mattress dips, and I keep very still. Then his hand is on my shoulder, gently skimming down my arm to my wrist before sliding all the way back up. He runs calloused fingertips down the arch of my back until he cups my ass, squeezing roughly there, then he trails his fingers past my hips before passing down my thigh and then back up again, all the way to my shoulder. He leans a little closer. I feel his chest press against my back. His hand slides around over my waist and belly and up to cup my breast. He squeezes it in his big hand and nuzzles the side of my throat.

Then, tentatively, he presses his lower body against mine.

I moan, pushing my breast into his hand and my ass against his crotch. His cock is long and thick but not yet hard. His mouth finds the juncture of my shoulder and throat. I feel the faint scrape of his tusks against my skin, but he is always gentle and careful whenever he touches me. He is monstrous, and his big, gnarled hands could kill me in an instant, yet my trust in him is absolute. I feel small and cherished as he cups my breast from behind, squeezing it roughly, then pulling the nipple and twisting to create a little bite.

Arousal gathers. I am always wet for him, always eager for his touch in these moments of intimacy that belong to only us.

His hand slides down over my belly, and he cups me intimately. I open my thighs, giving him better access, and a thick finger presses between my folds, making me gasp as he catches my clit, swollen and tingling. The sweet, achy sensations kick off deep in my pussy. The throbbing, pulsing need for something more. He presses lower, slipping inside me slowly, first with a single finger, and then two. Gods, even one

feels so big. It is always a strain to take him there at first. My hips move restlessly as I seek more, and he obliges me by slowly pumping in and out.

My legs spread wider still. I am drenched for him, and it makes filthy, wet, sticky noises. He growls lowly, a rumble that vibrates through his chest where it is pressed against my back, and I feel the faintest press of his cock against my ass.

I wish he were hard.

I wish I knew what to do to please him.

“Oh, please!” I rock my ass against him. All my inner muscles are squeezing and clamping over his finger as I think about his cock. I want him to put me on my hands and knees, or on my back, or to enter me like this while we lie on our sides. He could take me any way he chose to. I would gladly accept him into me. “Please, Doug! Please!”

His fingers move faster, squelching as he fucks me with them. He bites against my throat—gently. A warning to be still and good. He wants me to come for him. He always wants me to come. Doug is never satisfied until I’m limp and weak as a newborn kitten from the pleasure he has bestowed upon me. But tonight, I want more. Tonight I want to touch too.

“Oh please, please, please!” My hips rock furiously. My whole body is tense. Sweat bathes the surface of my skin. I shudder, feeling my breath stutter. And then the glorious contractions begin deep in my pussy, squeezing lovingly over his fingers as his palm grinds against my clit. The climax is glorious and satisfying. It is a starter for so much more.

He pulls his finger from me and lifts it to his lips. I pant, aroused by the sounds of his noisy lapping as he cleans himself up. As I glance back at him, his hand lowers to my hip.

“Please, may I kiss you?”

His eyes search mine. Long moments pass as we stare at one another through the gloom. Then he nods once and, drawing back a little, gives me space to wriggle over in the small bed.

I keep my eyes locked with his as I reach to cup his cheek. Beneath my hand, he trembles faintly. He is naked for me and at my request, and I'm determined that I shall do nothing to make him regret this concession. I kiss his lips, his jawline, and the strong column of his throat. He submits to me, his hand resting lightly upon my hip, squeezing now and then but doing nothing more.

"Is this okay, Doug? When I kiss you like this?"

His nod is curt, and his blue eyes are very dark and intense.

I try not to think about my end game, his cock, but I'm aware of it now at all times. My kisses lower to his collarbone and shoulders, following the path of my fingers as I pet and knead all the glorious thick muscles of his body. I glide over meaty pectorals before returning to his jaw. I caress him lovingly everywhere.

When I lift my head, I find his eyes are closed, his lips parted a little. Palm against his throat, I gently press him onto his back, and he allows me. His eyes open to clash with mine. I feel his throat work.

"You are magnificent, Doug," I say. I want to swallow my tongue and the fool words that pour out. How is it that only now that I recognize his beauty?

My hand lowers to where his heart beats, feeling him thudding beneath my fingers. I lean down to kiss him there. When I lift my eyes to meet his again, they have darkened further. "You are beautiful in here," I say. "But you are also beautiful here." I run my hand over his brawny shoulder.

I am gentling him, I realize, as I sweep my hand down his arm much like he did with me. Although I'm curious, I keep my focus away from his cock, kissing and touching him, venturing as far as the thick ridges of his upper stomach, then lower to his belly.

Tension locks his body up tight, and his breath turns ragged. I kiss all the way back up to his mouth again and,

cupping his broad face between my smaller hands, kiss his lips again until he gentles for me.

He is a monster, and an orc, but he is also my Doug and nobler than any prince. I want to please him, to touch him, to touch him *there*. My kisses lower again, over those firm abdominal muscles, until I'm presented with... Goodness! I blink as I take in the sight of his great cock. It is long and easily as thick as my arm, even in repose as it rests down against his thigh. Only his cock's size is of limited consideration next to the knot that I have heard shifters and alphas have.

I swallow thickly, aware that he is unnaturally still, but unable to tear my gaze away.

His knot is nothing like I expected. Not the smooth twin glands that will swell when aroused but, instead, a great mutilated mass of lumps and ridges that double his girth near the base. Is this why he does not grow hard?

Aware of the tension racking his body, I press a kiss against his belly. Gently, I trace my finger over a long white ridge that dissects the knot. *Scars*. These are not natural marks. He has been cut here... many times.

My eyes flash up to meet his, and my lips tremble as I see the desolation there.

My chest swells with empathy, and tears pool in the back of my eyes. He has been hurt. Someone has done terrible things to his most intimate place.

Deliberately, and even though I'm horrified on his behalf, I lower my lips and kiss, just a gentle press against that lumpy, puckered skin to show him that I love him even here.

He growls, striking fear in my heart. I fear, not that he might hurt me, but that he will push me away; perhaps never trust me again.

My fears prove unfounded when his eyes flash and he rears up to tip me onto my back and spread my legs. Head lowering, he laps upon me with noisy enthusiasm, grunting and growling.

My arousal soars, and a climax crashes through me. I pant and gasp, hips rocking against his wicked tongue. My fingers spear his hair, pulling him closer to me, because no sooner does the climax roll through me than I am rising again. His enthusiasm is infectious. I wonder if his thick cock is getting hard now. Whether he will let me touch him there again.

I come once more, barely having come down in between.

He does not stop; in fact he seems intent upon gobbling me up.

Over-sensitive, I plead with him for a moment. He only growls a warning and continues to eat me out. I court madness as he lavishes me with his tongue. There is no respite, only climax after climax. And all the while, I'm thinking about him *there*, how truly monstrous he is, the mutilated mass of glands, and what they might feel like if he were hard... were he to force all of him inside me.

As those thoughts swirl around in my mind, my next climax is the hardest and longest of my life. My body arches off the bed, and a cry is torn from my lips.

Finally, he rises from between my legs and collapses beside me on the bed. With his back to the door, he tucks me between him and the wall, insinuates his hand between my twitching thighs, and heaves a shuddering breath.

Only... he is still not hard. Maybe he has been broken there. Maybe he will never grow hard. And how my heart breaks for him and what was done. But he enjoyed my kisses and my touch, and that gives me hope. There are many ways of showing love and affection that do not involve the place where he is scarred. As I drift into sleep, I determine that I shall dedicate every future evening to discovering what pleases Doug.

Chapter Three

Jasmine

The next morning Melody and Bard are called to speak to Edwin, the general whose home we are all quartered in.

He is wealthy, his residence spacious, and he has many bondservants and orcs employed to do his bidding. I suspect this morning's summons relates to what Melody did yesterday and the strange dark space that opened up in the center of Jendrick's room, which I believe might be a kind of portal.

As usual, I accompany them to Edwin's stately office with dark wood paneling and a leaded window, currently open, which offers views across the city.

Sitting at a broad desk, the huge, intimidating orc puts aside a scroll as we enter.

Edwin wears fine leather armor, and his long dark hair is tied back with a simple strip of leather. He listens with interest to Bard's report on Melody's wellbeing, nodding and occasionally pausing the discussion so he can consult a scroll.

"Jendrick has requested to work with Melody daily," the big orc general rumbles. "He is constantly in the ear of our warlord to this end."

"The lessons are taxing," Bard says. "The child needs some rest between."

"I don't mind," Melody chirps. "So long as I get a toffee apple afterward."

Edwin frowns and looks to Bard in askance. "What is this toffee apple?"

"An apple" —Bard clears his throat— "which has been dipped in toffee."

Edwin raises one bushy brow. "That sounds appalling. She will rot all her teeth and give herself a stomachache. No wonder fairies are so small."

“It is in their nature, my lord,” Bard offers. “Fairies are made from magic and are renowned for having a sweet tooth. I’ve known many of advanced years, and not one had problems with their teeth, nor did they suffer digestive issues as a result.”

Edwin grunts and goes back to the scroll, reading farther down before finally rolling it up. He selects an empty scroll and takes up his pen to scribble something down.

As he writes, and despite Bard’s hissed instructions that she returns to his side, Melody draws ever closer to Edwin via a strangely meandering route, all the while throwing impish smiles our way. It is a constant wonder to me that the child can remain such a playful brat in the presence of orcs.

I hold my breath as she puts her small hands on his desk and attempts to peer up at what he does.

Edwin’s head swings around to fix his dark glare upon the tiny sprite, their faces inches apart.

“Melody, the general is very busy,” Bard says. “Come away before you get into trouble.”

Edwin is still staring at the fairy. The child standing at his side twists a lock of her long golden hair around her finger while staring back at him.

“You are a pretty color,” Melody announces. “I wish I were green. Then I could pretend to be a forest sprite and make friends with deer.”

Both of Edwin’s bushy eyebrows crawl up into his hairline. “You think my color is pretty?” He glances across at Bard, who shrugs helplessly and appears equally confused by this development.

“I also like your hair.” Her eyes take on a deeply admiring gleam. “May I plait it?”

“No,” Edwin and Bard say, in unison.

“Fine then.” Her eyes narrow. “But you are missing out.”

I bite back a smirk—the child is utterly shameless.

Edwin huffs out a breath and leans back in his chair. “She may have lessons with Jendrick every other day. If she appears troubled or unwell in any way, you are to speak to me about it.”

We leave the general’s office, Melody skipping down the corridor and babbling about sweet orc generals. We will be staying home today, so I go and collect my recent mending to return to the seamstress where I can collect more.

I did not sleep well last night. After Doug had wrested many climaxes from me, I had much to think on.

How I wanted to be fully intimate with him. But I also worry about Melody, the danger she represents, and the decimation that sweet child could unleash upon the many portal worlds. Her skills are likely what saved her when the dark fae destroyed her home and snatched her away. Those same skills also likely saved her when the orcs attacked the dark fae.

Her young life has played out in a never-ending cycle of abuse. She would have been better off dead, a dark voice at the back of my mind tells me. Yet who could ever wish such a sweet child dead? If she does wrong under the direction of the Blighten, that is not on her but on the shoulders of the creatures themselves, for they are ever hungry for more, like a disease spreading, their filth into every corner of this world and beyond to other worlds via the portal.

I could weep for the tragedy of it, that I, too, am part of this, that, like every other bondservant, I have become a facilitator in their dark quest.

Only, what choice do I have? Life is precious. I cherish all the moments in between the darkness, when I can forget the part I have played in the destruction of other homes, families, and worlds. I cling to life, like all of us do, praying for something better.

My heart is sore as I head down the narrow passage that leads from the stables to the kitchens and beyond, where there are more servants’ quarters including the room where the seamstress is usually found at this early hour.

And it is here that I bump into Trent.

Penny has gone with General Tulwin. I miss her kind presence and advice. Most of the bondservants I traveled with stayed with Tulwin, save a few who were given over to Edwin's service. Unfortunately, one of them is Trent.

I wish Penny had come with me.

I wish Trent had not. On the few occasions I've seen him, he leers at me, and I recall what Penny said about him currying favors from the Blighten the night the bears attacked. How he was among those who helped the orcs track the humans who fled. And how he has now risen above other bondservants by showing his loyalty in this way.

He has gone from an opportunistic bully, seeking favors from the lasses for a crust of bread, to a cretinous traitor.

I might have been one of those he managed to prey upon, had Doug not been there for me.

"What do you want, Trent?" I ask. He is a muscular, intimidating male. Although he is nothing compared to Doug, he is considerably more powerful than me. I remind myself of Doug's protection. Trent would be foolish to do anything to raise Doug's ire. Yet there is something in his expression that unsettles me deeply.

"It's not me who wants anything," he says, "but you."

I frown.

His leering slides to a smirk as he leans in close. "I saw you that night."

My eyes lift to clash with his. I want to step away from him, but something tells me showing fear to Trent would be a bad idea. My heart is racing. I feel it pulsing against my throat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"So, you have forgotten the night the bears attacked and when you ran into the forest? No one was chasing you, lass. I thought for sure we'd find you with the other runaways in the forest. But you were already back. It was Doug, wasn't it?" His grin widens. "I'll keep you a little secret.... for a price."

My palms turn sweaty, although I'm cold inside. "No one would believe you," I whisper. "Not after so long."

"No? Well, that's a risk you could take." His chuckle is dark and nasty. "Who do you think they will believe? It's not like Doug can speak to defend you. The mute bastard can't speak at all."

My stomach roils. I fear I may empty it over the passage floor.

"Doug should have turned a runaway over to the orc masters, not put you in his bed." His eyes lower to my breasts and then rise up to meet mine. "I'm held in high regard now. I might even gain my freedom."

I swallow hard, feeling the noose tightening around my throat. There is already a metal collar there. Trent, I notice, no longer wears a collar, in evidence of his high status—and I know he is not bluffing. What would I do for freedom? It is a hard question to ask. I know I would not sell out my fellow bondservants. I could not. And yet Trent has gone down that path. He's willing to go further, and use me and Doug in his quest for freedom.

"This would be the right time to ask," he says, expression playful, for he holds a winning hand, one I do not know how to counter.

"Ask what?" My scattered mind sinks toward outright panic. I shake my head, trying to rouse myself.

He smirks. "The price for me to keep your secret."

My lips tremble as I acknowledge that I'm standing on the precipice of a very slippery slope. "What is the price?"

"You," he says—the noose tightens. "In any way I want."

A passing orc guard sees us and barks orders to Trent.

Trent sneers at me before he strides away. "Be seeing to you later, lass," he calls over his shoulder.

I sag against the wall. I have been given a respite, but he will be back. Somehow, I continue on to the seamstress and

exchange my mending. But my mind is whirling with all that Trent has just said and what might happen next.

I could tell Doug, but then what? We will never be safe from Trent unless he were gone. I swallow. Dead. Would Doug do that? Kill a man? If he thought the threat serious, he might. He has killed before.

How do I even feel about that? Horrified, for certain, and yet that look in Trent's eyes tells me he well enjoyed wielding his power and will not let this go.

I don't want to be responsible for a man's death.

But I also don't want Trent's hands upon me.

Doug killed a man who raped a woman, and she was not even his mate. My heart tells me he will not stand by.

Only I can't be sure what would happen to him. Would Doug be punished? Whipped?

Would he be sent away?

And what if Trent has told someone else? What if others are part of his game, waiting to step in should Trent fall?

The possibilities are endless, and harrowing. Every one of them fills me with dread.

I don't know what to do. I should talk to Doug, but I'm also afraid. Common sense tells me Trent will hold this over me forever and a day. He wants me. He will use me. And, even if I accede to his demands, one day, if it suits him, he is like enough to betray me anyway.

And what of me and Doug? What of those moments of happiness that I find in his arms? I cannot bear the thought of another touching me; not when I have my white orc who is a prince in both ways and deeds.

It is now, when I am on the precipice of this looming disaster, that I acknowledge that I love Doug: that I would do anything to save him from a whipping; that the thought of him being taken away or, worse, hung for protecting me, is more than I can bear.

Chapter Four

Doug

All my life, people have had a misconception that I'm stupid because I cannot talk. For much of my childhood, I suffered abuse because of my differences in not talking, in being white, in being the bastard of an alpha shifter. It is survival of the fittest among the Blighten, but especially for an orc abandoned by his mother. The surgeon, a cruel and wicked orc, was given too much power and leeway to subject children to torture under the guise of purging them of imaginary ailments. The sick bastard thought I would talk and turn a natural orc color if only he could cut my knot from me.

I enjoyed feeding him his own cock and watching his eyes bulge as he choked on it. I consider it a blessing to the many abandoned whelps he still had access to at the time.

Despite being white and a half-shifter bastard, I've every reason to believe I could have risen through the ranks of the Blighten were I not mute. It is the way of the world. I'm not bitter about it. I'm a simple male with simple needs. That they have allowed me to claim Jasmine as my bond mate has been the source of my greatest joy.

Yet, through Jasmine, I see the Blighten and their ways through increasingly jaundiced eyes. When she speaks, as she does on occasion, of her past life, it is of somewhere wondrous and free from the monstrous control.

Where once I existed to do my master's bidding without question, now I wonder whether there is a better way to live.

Humans are tricky and quarrelsome, but they are tenacious and loving. As I would know now I'm intimately acquainted with one who is obsessed with my cock, and who I'm already making concessions for because my greatest joy is to make her happy.

She has seen my scars, and she did not run screaming—she even kissed me there.

But it is not Jasmine or her mischief regarding my cock that occupies my mind as I enter the barracks, where we are called for a meeting to discuss the day's orders. It is on the slimy bastard Trent, who has grown increasingly full of his own importance and who is rumored to be given his freedom soon.

“How did a useless bastard like you get a mate like—uff!”

We are standing toward the back of the crowded room, and I subtly backhand Trent, slamming him into the nearby wall, amused when his eyes cross from the blow.

Bron, standing beside me, rumbles his laughter and nods his head approvingly at me.

“Dumb fucker. You don't scare me,” Trent snarls, puffing up his small chest like he might intimidate me with words or actions. “You're going to regret that.”

I doubt it. The look I share with Bron suggests he doubts it too.

The orc master in charge of our duties calls for silence and gives us our orders.



My duties take me away from Jasmine today. Melody is having a rest day and does not venture out for either a toffee apple or Jendrick's portal workshop. Jasmine, Bard, and Melody remain within the general's home while I am put to use grafting.

All fucking day I move piles of bricks from one place to another, for an extension to the residence. My only consolation is that I'm not the only orc who suffers this thankless duty.

It is hot and muggy, and I drip with sweat. Darkness has fallen by the time we are given leave to wash up. I return to our quarters, anxious, having not seen Jasmine all day. The

moment I enter the small room allocated to us, I'm hit by a tiny, fierce bundle who throws her arms around my waist. With a growl of approval, I tear her dress off, toss her on the rough mattress, and spread her thighs so I can feast upon her slick cunt.

I'm obsessed with her and the needy place between her legs. I cannot get enough. Her fingers are in my hair, gripping tightly as she mumbles my name over and over. Focusing on Jasmine and what she needs, I'm determined to get her off as fast as possible. I am addicted to the sounds she makes, the tightening in her body, the way her fingers try to tear my hair from my scalp, and the softening that happens afterward.

She comes quickly, as is inevitable under my onslaught, riding my face and tugging sharply upon my hair.

Only, I'm not satisfied with once. I'm never satisfied with just once. If by some miracle I lived into old age, I shall feast on this slick little cunt until my dying day. She moans and thrashes, always sensitive after the first time. But I have discovered that if I pin her still and persevere, she quickly comes again.

And she does.

She's impatient tonight, mumbling about kissing me... about kissing me *there*.

I'm going for a third time when her tugging upon my hair reaches a level of insistence. I raise my head groggily to stare across at my mate.

Mate.

Our mate.

I know we can never consummate things in a full way, because of my broken state. But in all ways that matter, in my heart, and for my beastly side too, she is our mate. My beast roars his approval. He does not agree with my determination that she cannot take us fully. He believes we should try.

I shake my head, rousing myself lest my thoughts stray toward rutting, to find her small hands petting my shoulders, trying to pull me up.

“Doug, please come lay beside me.”

I think about going back to her pussy again. My eyes drop toward it, and my mouth waters.

“Doug.” Her small hand cups my cheek, tipping my face toward her. I get a little lost in her eyes, how flushed her cheeks are, and the way her lips look, swollen and red. Her dark hair is long and luxurious when, of a night, she lets it down from its neat plait.

I can come back and feast again, later, I tell myself as I heave my bulk up to lie beside her.

She sits up and pushes me onto my back, then, quicker than I can follow, she slips one slim thigh over me and rolls above me on her hands and knees. Her plump tits hang low, and her thighs spread wide around my thick waist.

I think she’s trying to kill me. I cannot look at her face anymore, I’m too busy looking at *her*. My hands are on her tits, squeezing them together before I pinch her little berry nipples. I tug on them lightly, and her mouth pops open with a needy moan. I drag her down, my arm around her waist, to pin her wet pussy against my stomach, and fill my mouth with one juicy tit. I suckle one side and then the other until she’s gasping and squirming and mumbling all sorts of nonsense about wanting to tend to me.

Keeping one arm wrapped around her, my fingers seek and find the drenched little treasure, sliding back and forth over her pussy from behind. Usually I prefer to spread her out, but I like this too, her small weight on top of me, the opportunity to feast on her tits as I pet her slick pussy.



Jasmine

Doug is driving me toward delirium with his attention tonight. I realize that I'm emotionally charged after my run-in with Trent. I told myself that I would talk to Doug about it, but then the moment came and I could not. I just want one more night, one precious interlude, before things are sullied, and fears and pressures arrive at our door.

I need to lose myself in Doug. But, also, I need to touch him and pleasure him because I know that once I tell him, everything will change.

My enthusiasm has carried me away, and now Doug is caught up in it too. There is a wildness to him tonight, a desperation, that crawls under my skin and finds the echo inside me. I have not seen him all day, which is unusual. How ridiculous to miss him when we have known each other for such a short time. My love for him is settled in my mind as I consider all I might lose.

I do not have to tell him the little voice in my head whispers. I could manage this.

But how?

Just thinking about being with Trent in order to protect Doug is terrifying, but so is the alternative.

My mind is caught up in these thoughts, but I cannot linger there for long when Doug torments my body with more pleasure. I lay sprawled out atop him, my legs spread wide around the thick girth of his body. He sucks on my breasts, making them sore and achy, lighting a torch of desire that rips through me. His finger pumps slowly into me from behind, keeping my body primed with lust.

Only I need more from him than just to be pleased. I need this to be equal.

I close my teeth over his tufted ear and nip, first lightly and then firmly. His lips pop off my breast with a grunt, and he stares up at me through the gloom.

“It is my turn,” I say boldly. “It is my turn to play, and I will not accept no for an answer.” I have never been this forthright with him, but I’m a very determined woman tonight and shall have my dues.

He swallows, huffs out a breath, as he stares at me like he is thinking over my request.

“You let me kiss you there before.”

He shakes his head firmly.

“Well, can you be naked again?” My face heats with my forwardness. “Can I kiss and touch your body? If I do not go *there*.”

I want to touch him there, but I sense my beast needs to be gentled in stages. I’m patient, despite wanting so much from him, but I also understand that he has been hurt badly in more ways than I can know. Perhaps he shall never be whole, never feel aroused by my touch or actions. Yet there are many ways and forms of pleasure—simple light touches elsewhere, and his trust in me thus far is a form of bonding too.

I don’t realize I’m holding my breath until he nods once.

“Thank you, Doug, thank you for trusting me.”

Then he rises, strips from his pants, and slips back beside me. I press my lips to his, trying to convey all he means to me with that kiss.

My lips trail down the strong column of his throat, over skin that’s thick and coarse compared to a human, across his shoulders and chest, then down his body until I reach the firm ridges of his stomach. Then I head back up toward his throat. I am so intent on kissing and petting him, feeling him beneath fingers and lips, that I forget how we are pressed together, that his cock is touching me, until I feel it flex against my belly.

I freeze, my heart thudding wildly, wondering if I imagined it.

It flexes again, unmistakable this time.

Doug roars and, thrusting me aside, charges out of the room.

I stare after him, the door now slammed between us, shaken and a little scared. What does this mean? Why did I have to push this? Did he like what I did? Oh God, what if I hurt him?

I rise up off the mattress and pace a little. It's a tiny space, and I can take no more than two steps. I don't know what to do. Should I go after him and apologize?

I'm torn with indecision when the door flies open again, and Doug is standing there, a huge, monstrous male, all power and quivering muscle. My eyes shoot down of their own accord. His cock is as it always is: enormous and mangled near the root... the room is dark save for the little light that spills in from behind him, but I believe he is bigger there, and my mouth opens with a gasp.

My eyes snap up. He waggles his finger at me. *No.*

I gulp. "I'm sorry... Did I?" I can hardly get the words out. "Did I hurt you?"

He shakes his head once—a very firm shake.

Oh, Goddess, he *liked* it. He liked what I did! "But then why—oh!"

I get no more opportunity to speak, for he takes my arm and walks me backward into our tiny room, and shuts the door firmly behind him. Then I'm flung onto my back, and my legs are parted before he feasts yet again. I'm already sensitive there, yet his wildness unleashes something inside me.

Hope and anticipation.

I didn't hurt him. Maybe he's putting on a brave face, or... No, I saw it in his eyes. He liked what I did, but maybe it frightened or shocked him, or a little bit of both.

I come, gasping and squealing and riding his face with pleasure. He surges up and collapses beside me, pulling my smaller body against his, and tucks his hand between my legs,

working a single thick finger deep inside my pussy in a very determined way. I dare not even murmur a protest, sensing I have already pushed boundaries. I'm so fiercely aroused, not only because of what he is doing to me but also because of the wondrous surge of hope I feel for us.

I should tell him about Trent, but I hate to let that man spoil what has happened here. The matter is not yet urgent. I'll make sure that I do not go anywhere alone or give Trent the opportunity to corner me again. If he intended to tell the masters, he would have already done so. No, he wants to hold this over me to force my compliance. And, either way, we are all bondservants and might be sent elsewhere at any moment, so I might never see Trent again. How much time I have is unknown, but I do have some.

Precious time that I want to spend with Doug.

Chapter Five

Doug

I'm not a male with a high sexual appetite. I hate that part of me—the sight of the hideous scarring. I hate those occasions when I take my deformed cock in hand and the guilt I suffer afterward like I am unworthy of pleasure.

I crush the memory of her kissing me there lest my cock harden again, which would be a disaster given we are marching through the streets of Krug on the way to the palace.

Ahead of me are Melody and Bard. The fairy child is already talking about toffee apples like it is a given that she shall be indulged. There is a tightness around Bard's eyes—he worries about his charge. Beside me is Jasmine, who is quiet and keeps sending shy glances my way that are a test of control.

I should be focusing on any threats from the crowded streets, but I am distracted by thoughts of this evening and when I touch the slick place between her legs again.

Only there is something niggling me, a strange pressure at the back of my skull that tells me something is amiss. Maybe life has taught me that happiness is not for me, that whatever I experience now will soon be ripped away. Life is harsh, and I am nothing but an ugly, scared orc who is unworthy of a mate.

I force myself to concentrate on the matter at hand as we traverse the streets of Krung, arriving promptly at the gates to the palace. This time it is not Jendrick's office and workshop that we go to, but the large portal room housed deep beneath the palace. It's said that in ancient times this site was nothing but a desert. The discovery of the portal brought the first settlers here. The settlement became a town, and the town became a city, eventually rising to become the mighty capital of the Blighten.

When I first visited, I was a young lad, new to service, and the city had overwhelmed me with its vastness. It is still a vast

place, a sprawling conglomeration of peoples and orcs. I am low among our kind. My present status is elevated because I have been granted the right to mate and protect Jasmine, a companion to the fairy child. We have both risen up past our previous ranks, although she is still a bondservant, and I am still a lesser orc. Our only duty is to follow the fairy in whatever she might do.

It does not take a scholar to work out that dangerous matters that are afoot. The fairy, a strange, funny little thing who's obsessed with toffee apples and does not even have wings, possesses power beyond my understanding. A power that has drawn the attention of Rignor, the Blighten's warlord. He seeks to use Melody. To what end? I can only guess it involves the portal and the assimilation of new lands.

The child is all innocence as she skips along the streets, pointing out the various shops to Bard and asking him about things. She's but a pawn in greater games. The Blighten are hungry, living to conquer, moving ever onward in one direction or the other.

Only, their expansion in this world has met with resistance. Where they previously pressed to the southwest into Imperium lands, I've heard progress is all but halted, and, worse for them, previously conquered ground is being lost. Then there are ventures into Hydornia, to our southeast, which have met with fierce resistance after the border settlements received reinforcements. So the Blighten have moved in other directions, further east over the mountains into the lands held by shifters and the barbarian clans, although the route is treacherous and the pickings slim as they search for bondservants.

In the face of this resistance, they turn their gaze with increasing interest to the worlds beyond the portal, which they have dipped into over the eons since they acquired a portal key.

Scholars like Jendrick, with the help of this key, are able to control the portal's destinations. Without the key, traveling through a portal is to travel a rudderless ship and, worse, have no way back home. They can pick destinations at will. This is

nothing new. They have been doing this for many years, although on a smaller scale. But recently, with the pushbacks in our world and the limited number of bondservants to be gathered, they have increasingly taken to portal lands.

I have traveled through a portal before, stepping into the oily blackness that rips your soul from your body and reinstates it as you emerge on the other side. My portal journeys took me from the seaport at Bleakness to Krug and back again.

I have never left this world for another, and I do not wish to do so.

As we enter the portal room, Jendrick has already called the portal, and it gleams and sparks with life. As always, I stand beside the entrance, and Jasmine goes to sit against one wall, where she takes out her mending and begins to work.

Melody immediately slips from Bard's side and skips over to the ungodly thing.

"Melody, come away." Bard's voice is sharp with stress.

Jendrick turns and sees how close Melody is, her small hand dipping into the glittering surface.

"Melody!"

She pulls her hand back.

Jendrick clasps the large stone in his hand and chants under his breath—the portal winks out, and we all heave a sigh of relief. Goodness knows where it was pointing to and where the child might have gone had she slipped through.

"We do not play with portals, child," Jendrick admonishes softly. "We have spoken about this before. You do not know what is on the other side. We only pass through it in a controlled manner and with an escort."

"Will we go through the portal today?" she asks. She does not walk anywhere in a straight line and takes a meandering path from the portal over to the station, where Jendrick is looking over the runes. "What does this one do?" She points at

the large round one with a jagged symbol that looks like lightning.

“It doesn’t do anything on its own,” Jendrick says. “We must select a sequence.”

“I don’t need to press the sequence,” she says.

Jendrick smiles indulgently. “I know, child. That’s because you’re special. But you will be meeting the Goddess early if you pass through the portal without assistance. And that would make Bard very unhappy, not to mention making our warlord furious. I would likely lose my head.” He says all this dryly while Melody plays with a long lock of red-gold hair and fidgets from foot to foot.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I won’t pass through the portal. It’s just so pretty.”

Her words hold wistfulness and innocence.

“Good girl.” Jendrick nods approvingly. “But for the sake of my heart, and for the sake of Bard, and Jasmine, who you love well, I suggest we do not go near the portal but hold Bard’s hand when it is working like that.”

“Okay,” she agrees.

She’s an agreeable child and even-tempered, although mischievous on occasion, and her sweet, beguiling nature could soften the hardest of hearts. She makes me think about children, of having whelps of my own with Jasmine.

Bard stands attentively nearby, watching as Melody and Jendrick converse. The scholar goes over what he wishes to do today, which allows my mind freedom to think about my mate... To think about some distant future when her belly might grow ripe with child... To wonder about this imaginary child we have created and that we might one day meet.

My beast informs me that we need to stick our cock in her before that can happen. I growl at him to keep his insights to himself. I know how breeding is done. I’ve seen it enough. I’m not ignorant of the mechanisms involved.

Only Jasmine is so tiny there, and I've yet to work out how I might work even the tip of my cock inside. My beast tells me that I'm an idiot and that if a baby the size of a watermelon can come out, she can sure assuredly take my cock.

Maybe something magical happens when a woman births a watermelon-sized baby? Maybe the Goddess is involved? I'm not familiar with childbirth or how the screaming newborns come out of such a small, tight passage, which, in Jasmine's case, I can barely fit my fingers in.

Maybe the Goddess could similarly help with her taking my cock?

I feel my cock stiffen, which is inappropriate and terrifying enough that my reaction makes it immediately softens again. Sweat breaks out across my brow as I glance across at Jasmine, concerned she might have noticed. She is busy working and has her eyes on her sewing, but then, as if she feels my eyes upon her, her head lifts and she bestows on me a shy, beautiful smile.

I never found humans attractive before Jasmine. They were strange, annoying little creatures, always bickering and shouting at one another, getting emotional about everything. They caused me no end of trouble, for I was responsible for managing them.

Jasmine is not like other humans. She has a calm presence and is natural in her ways with Melody, has infinite patience with her, and finds joy in caring for her, fetching the child's favorite treats from the cook, and letting her plait her hair.

She would make a fine mother.

No, I'm not going to think about that lest my cock stiffen again.

Lost in these thoughts, I'm ill-prepared when the door opens, and the warlord himself enters, accompanied by his guards.



Jasmine

After Melody gave us all a fright by walking over to the portal, I find a place to sit out of the way and work on my mending. With Melody occupied by the work she does with Jendrick, these events are often boring, and I prefer to sit and do the sewing.

If they have need of me, I will be called upon, which is usually to collect food and drinks from the kitchens. I don't mind either way and prefer to keep my fingers busy, allowing my mind to float elsewhere.

Today, I alternate between thinking about Doug's arousal before he stormed out of our room and worrying about Trent. I'm distracted when the big double entry doors open, and an imposing orc sweeps in.

All the tiny hairs across my skin rise to attention. He is important. I think I know instantly that he is the warlord even before Jendrick bows graciously and says, "My liege."

I freeze, not sure what the protocol of a bondservant is—wondering whether I should scramble to my feet and bow as Doug does or keep very still and hope no one notices me.

I elect to shift subtly to my knees and, with my head bowed, keep very still as I peer under my lashes at the Blighten warlord. His name is Rignor, and what I'm surprised by is the paleness of his skin. It's gray but with an unusual mottling of white that almost seems to glow. His hair is long, dark, and luxurious, while the battle garb he wears is fine, as one might expect of a kingly orc. Many orcs favor clubs or shorter war axes, but Rignor wears a sword complete with a gem-topped pommel.

He is also monstrous. Perhaps the largest orc I've ever seen, save for Doug.

I try not to stare as his guards span out into the room like there might be a threat here. One of them sneers at me as he

notices me kneeling but soon turns away and dismisses me.

“So this is the child,” Rignor says in a deep, resonating voice that carries in the stone portal room.

“Yes, my liege.” If Jendrick bowed any deeper, he would likely topple over. The warlord makes an upward motion with his hands, impatient.

Melody, in true impish style, has already begun a circuitous path toward the warlord, who eyes her approach.

“Are you the warlord?” she asks.

“I am,” he replies.

“Do you have any toffee apples?”

He raises both bushy brows and looks toward Jendrick in question.

Jendrick bows near in two again. “The child is partial to the treats found in the market, my liege.”

“Treat? What manner of absurdity is a toffee apple?”

Jendrick shrugs helplessly and turns toward Bard.

Bard clears his throat. “My liege, if I may explain. It is an apple that has been dipped in toffee.”

“Sounds thoroughly disgusting,” the warlord says, still tracking Melody’s approach as she closes the final gap.

She smiles sweetly up at him and dares to close her fingers around his great and meaty hand. “You should try them,” she says. “Eating toffee apples makes people happy.” I bite my lip to hide my smile. The child disarms everyone. “You have beautiful hair. May I plait it?”

“Melody—” Jendrick begins, a definite warning in his tone.

The warlord surprises all of us by emitting a deep guffaw. “She is fine.” He waves a dismissive hand at Jendrick and smiles down at her. “I believe you have been helping Jendrick with his important portal work?”

“We are finding new worlds,” she announces happily.

“The child is natural in ways of portal lore,” Jendrick explains. “Symbols that have eluded our understanding are instinctive to Melody. Three new worlds have already been identified.”

“Good.” The warlord nods his head approvingly before he turns, and his eyes come to rest on a nearby guard. “See that the cook prepares these toffee apples... and whatever else she wishes.”

“Honey cake,” Melody pipes up. “Only no one knows how to make it here. Not like my Mama used to make. I think I could find portal worlds faster if only I had some.”

The warlord chuckles and nods his head at the guard, who looks deeply affronted by this request. “And honey cake, whatever that might be. Tell the cook this is a priority.” He lowers his indulgent smile upon Melody. “I dare not let my mate near you, for fear she will make you into a pet.” His eyes shift to rest upon Doug, whom I note is standing attentively still. “You have a fine companion guarding you. A white orc, no less. Doug, it has been some time. Were my sister not a bitch, you might have had a better life. Yet here you are. Know that she loved your father deeply. That he used her to gain information on me was a sore point. One that she took out upon you. Still, such is the way of things. You still bear my blood, and that counts for something.” He turns back to Melody while my jaw hangs slack. “Now, my dear child, why don’t you give me a demonstration, hmm?”

Melody, excited by the prospect of toffee apples and honey cake, is only too eager.

I barely notice what follows. The real world fades under the pounding of my heart. Do I understand the warlord’s words clearly? As I send a surreptitious glance Doug’s way, I’m convinced that I do.

Doug, my white orc, my mate, is nephew to the Blighten warlord.



It's late and already dark by the time our duties are over. The whole time I can concentrate on nothing save the revelation that Doug is a nephew to the Blighten warlord. Rignor even acknowledged that his sister mated to a shifter, and this was why Doug was cast out of favor. Further, the warlord appeared to have disapproved of this decision... I believe he might even care for Doug.

I'm confused about much of it. The orc who leads the Blighten is a monster responsible for the death of my family and the destruction of the village, yet he did not seem like a monster when I met him today.

He seemed much like any high-ranking leader, a little full of self-importance but still regal.

He was not unkind to Melody, and while I understand he is spoiling her with treats so she will facilitate his domination plans, he could have gone about it in ways so much worse.

As the rickety door shuts on us, Doug is on me, stripping my dress with barely suppressed urgency and tossing me onto the mattress. My legs are prized open, and he gets that gleam in his eyes that tells me I am in for a rough ride. I press my hand to the center of his chest, stilling him before he can go down. "We need to talk."

I wince as the words leave my mouth.

He raises both brows.

I blush with mortification at my poorly worded phrase. Not so long ago, my state of nakedness with an orc between my thighs would have made me blush, now, it is the accidental insult falling from my lips that brings heat to my cheeks.

He bares his teeth at me in the Doug equivalent of a smile.

"Well, I should like to ask some questions, and you can nod yes or no."

He rocks back on his heels, still eyeing my pussy hopefully, before he sighs.

I try to close my legs.

He wedges himself between them, then slides his hand the length of my thigh toward my pussy with deliberate slowness as if defying me to complain.

“I—oh—are you really the warlord’s nephew?”

He nods, fingers continuing on a path for my pussy.

I gulp and try to remember what the urgent questions were as he reaches his destination. I’m too slow. He begins to play, dipping into the wetness that always gathers for him and spreading it up and over my clit. I suck in a sharp breath. “Did your mother abandon you... send you away?”

He nods again, his eyes on my breasts as he leans forward.

“The warlord, ah, seems to like you... maybe. Oh!” He closes his lips over my stiff nipple and sucks as he eases a single finger into me.

I fist his hair, my pussy squeezing over his finger, and wish it was something more. I wonder what this all means about his uncle—the warlord—and his mother; whether there are other people here who hate him because of what his father did. Only, it is hard to hold onto any thoughts when he is pumping his finger slowly in time with the pull of his mouth sucking against my sensitive nipple.

I believe that it means nothing, for nothing will change in our status.

I am still a bondservant.

He is still a low orc who was abandoned by his mother.

Melody is still a pawn being used to discover worlds for the Blighten to rain terror upon.

But here, in this darkened room, we remain ensconced from the rest of the world. And here my fierce white orc is forever gentle with me.

Chapter Six

Doug

I come to dread the days when we do not need to go to the palace, and even though when I'm there, I'm bored to the point of distraction as I stand around and watch Melody and Jendrick. But I prefer anything over laboring for the new extension to General Edwin's home, where I lug mud bricks from the courtyard to the construction site at the back of the property. Stack upon the stack of mud bricks must be ferried, due to the constricted nature of the path which prevents a cart or wheelbarrow from getting through.

Orcs are sturdy and strong by nature. We turn our hands to whatever the fuck we need to do. Yet there is something soul-destroying about moving mud bricks from one pile to another. Worse, it is summer, and the sun is high in the sky, beating down upon us in relentless, blistering waves.

My skin, as is the way with all orcs, is resistant to the rays of the sun, and I do not take on the golden hue that some pale-skinned humans do, nor do I burn. My white skin does, however, seem to glow with annoying brilliance.

"Could you not put a fucking shirt on or something so you don't have to blind us!" Trent, a typically quarrelsome human, snips at me as he carries a paltry few planks of wood past.

I curl my lip at him. It is too fucking hot to wear a shirt. He is not wearing a shirt, and he is barely carrying enough to break a sweat on any other day.

"Fuck off, Trent," Bron says. He is my orc companion on this joyless day and responds where I cannot. "When you can carry as much as Doug, you can comment on the color of his skin."

Trent, whose skin is already a deep shade of pink that reminds me of the lobsters they pull out of the sea at Bleakness, sneers at Bron. "I'm to be made a free man soon."

Bron cuffs Trent up the side of the head, which I appreciate, given my hands are full of mud fucking bricks. “But you’ll still be a stinking human, won’t you? Small, weak, always thinking with your small cock.”

“Trent!” the site overseer barks when the snippy human looks like he might club Bron with the wood in his hands.

He scurries off to do the overseer’s bidding, which is a shame because Bron is not well known for his patience around humans and might have thumped the mouthy fucker again.

“He’s always full of himself,” Bron mutters. He has already been liberated of his stack of bricks by one of the builders and now helps to unload me, taking the mud bricks from my arms and forming a pile at the foot of the wall where they are already being snatched up and laid with wet mud and grit mortar.

“More bricks, or logs?” he asks the builder as he gets near to the bottom, and I can put the last few down for myself.

“Bricks,” the builder says. He is a young orc who is mostly doing this drudgery, like us, for the senior builders.

Bron sighs. We return through the long, convoluted passage that leads out to the courtyard, where a fresh cartload of bricks is being delivered. Here, another pair of young orcs load up our arms.

“How many bricks does the extension fucking need?” Bron mutters.

I grunt.

“Too fucking many,” Bron continues, filling in words for me, before changing the topic. “I don’t know why they would give that creepy bastard freedom.” More mud bricks are loaded onto our waiting arms. “He’s always eyeing that pretty little bondservant you have.”

My eyes narrow.

Bron nods his head at me. “I caught him the other day in the passage, talking to her about something. She didn’t look happy, if you know what I mean.”

I growl. What the fuck was he talking to her about?

“I don’t know what they were talking about,” he says, for it is an obvious question. “But he was looking at her tits. I told him to get back to fucking work and cuffed him a couple of times.”

If I thought I might not crush the small orc loading me, I would drop the bricks and charge down the passage so that I could beat that fucker, Trent, to a bloody pulp. I do not often befriend orcs, but Bron is one of the good ones, and I appreciate him having my back.

“Sneaky little bastard has got himself a harem going. I’ve heard one of the maids got pregnant by him. He took her to that herb woman who can get rid of unwanted babes.”

My grunt is one of disgust.

We are still being loaded with bricks, and it is starting to become a strain, but I don’t interrupt the lad loading me because I’m too busy listening to what Bron has to say.

I shrug my shoulder in question—*How the fuck do you get rid of a babe?*

“I don’t know how they do it,” he says. “I heard they can use herbs, and if that doesn’t work, they poke something inside until it comes out.”

I shudder.

He grimaces. “It sounds disgusting to me too, but they’d be fucking in trouble if the servant master found out she’s with babe. You don’t touch their pussies unless you’ve been given mate rights, which he hasn’t.”

My nostrils flare with rage. I’m loaded up and grunt at the lad to stop before I drop the fucking lot.

We make our way back along the narrow passageway to the building site.

“Get a whipping for that,” Bron continues, “and the lass, too, whether it was her choice or not. Trent was always pushing his favors on lasses for a small crust of bread when we were with Tulwin, but he’s gotten worse ever since, you

know. I understand why they make an example of bondservants as flee lest they all give it a go, but bondservants don't often sell out on their own like Trent did. Edwin doesn't like him."

I come to a stop at the building site, and the young orc begins to unload us again.

I lift my chin in askance, wanting more.

Bron shrugs. "He's a good master, Edwin. I was in his service last year until I went with Tulwin to the borders. He doesn't take any mischief with the bondservants. He certainly doesn't expect them to be lifting fucking skirts, although he turns a blind eye to the cock sucking." He drops the last of his mud bricks on the floor and dusts off his hands. Somehow, I have more, and the lad is still going. "As I say, Edwin's not a bad sort. Had a man whipped for taking a lassie's pussy against her will. I think he'd be pissed if he heard about Trent taking the lass to the herb woman if he found out. But, you know, such stories don't always go that far up the chain. I'd forgotten about him talking to your mate. You might want to take him aside. Give him a bit of a thumping. You know, remind him of his place."

I grunt. Bron grins.

Oh, I'm definitely going to be taking Trent aside and giving him a fucking thumping. Maybe I'll even strangle him a bit.

Only I don't know what Jasmine was talking to him about. What if she secretly wants him? What if she finds me ugly and repulsive and wants a human man?

We go and get more mud bricks.

I tell myself that Jasmine cares for me. She has told me and shown me enough times.

But she is also disappointed that I have not rutted her yet.

And she could be lying either way.

I am a big, scarred brute, ugly even for an orc, with my pale skin and mutilated cock. I will never be worthy of her.

My mind saws one way then the other.

There is one unavoidable fact—that she has not told me about this.

She is keeping it a secret, and it's not as if I can ask her why.



Jasmine

It is bath time for Melody, and she is in a mischievous mood. I would say it was from eating too many sweets, but the child rarely eats anything else. Bard assures me that fairies eat for pleasure and take sustenance in magical ways from the universe around them.

I have my doubts.

The bath is full to the brim of warm water, and the other servants are dismissed. Bath time is always private for Melody, and since meeting her, I have come to understand why. Bard is sitting before the window where he is reading a book, but he pays no attention to Melody, who is dancing around the room tossing shoes, stockings, and clothing all over the place.

I stifle my laughter as her shift lodges over the light fitting, which is thankfully unlit.

Finally comes the thick cloth wrap that binds around her chest. As it drops away, her wings pop into existence, and golden dust flies everywhere.

“Yippee!”

She bounds onto one side of the bed, performs a perfect pirouette, and jumps off on the other side. Her body doesn't have human form anymore but is a magical shimmering apparition that loosely resembles a young child.

And those wings. They are golden and so delicate as to be transparent in many places—they never fail to bring a catch to my chest.

“Melody,” Bard says with a warning in his voice. He hasn't lifted his head from his book, but given there is gold dust flying everywhere and even landing on the open pages of his book—which he reaches to brush off with a sigh—it is

hard to miss what is going on. “What did we talk about last week?”

She huffs dramatically but dutifully lifts her hands, and all the scattered dust is sucked into her body. As she climbs into the bath, her body is once more that of a little girl.

I help her with her bath and plait her hair, ready for bed. Yet, all the while, I’m thinking about how there are now two secrets I must keep.

She tucks down in bed, and Bard begins his nightly tale. He is not merely *Bard* but also a former bard, I have discovered. But as she drifts into sleep, and Bard turns down her lamp before closing the door, it is my other secret that calls to me.

I offer a good night to Bard and make my way to the quarters I share with Doug.

He is there, waiting for me. One look at him, and I know something is wrong.

There is a strange set to his jaw that makes me pause. His body is damp, and his hair is wet, like he has just cleaned up.

“Have you been moving bricks all day?” I say, hesitant, as I try to compose myself and settle the strange fluttering in my belly.

He nods, stepping closer to me, radiating menace.

“I... oh.” I take an awkward step back, bump into the bed, and sit down in a rush. It puts me in a low position. I glance up, a long way up, past strong legs encased in hide pants, past a thick bulge where my eyes want to linger, over slabs of abdominal and chest muscles until I meet his eyes.

I gulp. “Is there, ah, something troubling you, Doug?”

He huffs out a breath. He does not nod yes, but he also does not shake his head no.

I swallow nervously, wondering if this is about his cock. He has not let me touch it since that one time when I kissed him there. Last night, when we were together, he did not take

his pants off and he got that mutinous set to his jaw when I suggested that he might.

“Do you want to be naked again?” I blurt out.

He raises both brows.

My eyes lower as though compelled by otherworldly forces to that fascinating thick ridge bulging his pants—the strange ever-present knot where his gland has been mutilated. Goodness, my throat is dust dry. I desperately want to touch him there, to kiss him and please him as he has pleased me. “Please let me... let me kiss you while you are... while you are without your clothes.”

My words are disjointed because I’m thinking about kissing him *there*. Only, on reflection, I think my mumbled request might have been confusing.

Something troubles him. I know it, but it’s not like he can say. I was going to talk to him about Trent, but now I’m here with him, I’m distracted. I haven’t seen Trent again. He’s been busy. Perhaps I won’t see him again ever. Perhaps he was only toying with me because he’s a more powerful bondservant, and he likes to abuse his power in that way.

I’m lying to myself. But when I’m here in this room with Doug, it’s like the rest of the world doesn’t exist.

Only, tonight, there is an edgy darkness to Doug, and I’m ashamed to say it’s making my pussy very wet. I rarely think about him being a male orc, huge even among their kind, nor how powerful he is. While he is always gentle with me, he is still a huge, brutish orc who could snap my neck with ease.

I know he won’t. It’s not in his nature. And even though something is troubling him, I trust him. *Implicitly*. And yet the little frisson of danger enveloping us sets a delectable curl to the arousal rushing through me.

It is no use.

Still sitting, I wriggle out of my dress and toss it to the floor.

There, I’m naked.

His eyes widen, and the deep rumble that emanates from his chest tells me I have achieved my aim and distracted him thus.

“You may touch me only when you are naked,” I say boldly. “And not until.”

I know that I’m pushing him, always pushing. Perhaps I’m a wicked woman. Perhaps I should be more gentle with him, more patient. But I don’t feel patient tonight. I feel the direct opposite: a little wild and untamed. It’s like the emotional state he’s radiating has crawled under my skin.

His nostrils flare and, goodness, if I ever had any doubts that he is the one for me, that fear is shattered under his heated look.

Then he steps back, kicks off his boots and, without apparent shame, shoves his pants down.

My throat works as my eyes meet his thick, monstrous cock that hangs halfway down his legs. His balls hang heavy and potent. I can scarcely draw enough breath as I glance up and his arresting blue eyes pierce me with a look.

Reaching out my hand, tentative, I touch his thigh, feeling him trembling underneath my fingertips.

Perhaps it is I who tremble.

I believe we both do a little bit.

I swallow as his spicy musk invades my nose, making me a little woozy.

My hand slides up over his thick muscles, over his belly, and down again in the center of his body. Holding my breath, I gently brush my thumb against the base of his cock. Tension locks his body, and his cock flexes under my thumb.

I’m so surprised, I start. My eyes flash to meet his, finding him staring down at me, jaw locked.

He does not indicate I should stop. So slowly, I lean forward and press a kiss against his thigh.

Perspiration dampens my skin as I continue to kiss him, edging closer, and all the while, I stroke my thumb over his knot, thrilled when his cock flexes again.

Goodness, he is growing bigger. I'm so hyper-fixated on what I do that I'm near starved of oxygen, for I scarcely breathe, and what little air finds its way to my lungs is saturated with the scent of him. I want to kiss him there, to take him into my mouth, to please him as he has pleased me. A groan escapes my lips as my kisses draw closer, and then carefully, oh so carefully, I close my fingers around the root and press my lips to the side of the thick shaft.

He is hard and flexing against my hand. My pussy is absolutely drenched and pulsing as little spasms shoot through me. I hear the sharpness of his labored breathing, his fists clenched at his side. There is no mistaking the tremble in his legs now as I gently kiss all the way to the tip. His thick cock flexes violently in my hand. I lick my lips, brace myself, and level the head with my mouth to press a gentle kiss.

“Oh!”

He jerks away, his chest heaving like a bellow as he angles away from me. His cock stands to attention, bouncing as he paces and weeping pre-cum begins to drip.

The air is so thick and hot that I fear I might spontaneously combust.

“Please,” I say, “I will go slowly. I will be gentle. I will I'll do anything you wish, but please...”

Rising, I round him and press my palm to his belly. My face softens as I take in his pained look. I remind myself that he said it did not hurt him last time, and that whatever troubles him is of the mind and not physical, not that it makes this any easier. He has been hurt there before. The scars tell me as much. Perhaps he has never known pleasure in this way.

Suddenly I am certain he has not.

“Please,” I whisper.

He doesn't shake his head, *no*, doesn't take my hand off, or step away.

Taking all of this as a cue, I sink to my knees. Grasping his thick grith with two hands, determined, I lean forward until I can take the head and a small amount of the length into my mouth... and suck.

He growls.

“Hummm...” I groan and hollow my cheeks, jaw straining as I try to open and take more.

And then he comes...

“Umnnn!”

My lips pop off. My mouth is full of cum. I swallow instinctively as heavy splats hit my face and chest.

I’m trying to work out what I should do when he roars and slams out of the tiny room.

The door rattles in the jamb. I blink and stare after him, still on my knees, shaking and covered in cum. I glance down at myself. Goodness, I’m smothered. My throat works. The scent of his seed fills my nose, and gods, it tastes so good. I use my finger to wipe it from my chin before stuffing it into my mouth with a groan.

Is it supposed to happen that quickly? No, I do not think it is. Next time, I will try to be better prepared so that I don’t waste so much.

Eyeballing the door, I scoop some more from my chest and lick it from my fingers, wondering if I should go after him... if I should clean up... how long before he will let me do this again.

I am sucking more cum from my fingertips when he returns, pushing the door shut behind him, chest working. His nostrils flare as he takes in what I do.

A blush creeps over my face. “It felt natural to taste it,” I say, defensively.

He grunts, and his cock, which had softened, flexes.

“Oh, can we do it again?”

“Huf!” I am snatched up from my knees and dropped onto my back on the bed.

He wiggles his finger at me.

“Okay... maybe later, then?” I ask hopefully.

His answer is to drag my ass to the edge, spread my thighs, and bury his face between them.

I fist his hair and rock my hips as he eats me out enthusiastically, not even caring that I am sticky with cum.

He liked it. There are no doubts in my mind.

I pleased him for the first time.

I come within seconds, gasping, gripping his hair, and holding him close to me.

I sense the tide is turning. He let me take him into his mouth. It is the first step of many. I cannot wait to take the next one.

Chapter Seven

Jasmine

The next morning Doug is called away early, tasked with ferrying building supplies to the new extension. This time, sacks of grit must be moved from the courtyard to the building site at the back of the property.

Melody has no portal lessons, but I rise, too, given the child is usually up and about early, and head over to the kitchens to collect her breakfast.

However, all is not well in the kitchen. The normal stoic head cook is in the pantry with two kitchen maids. Pippa is sat upon a low stool, with her hand pressed to her belly, moaning softly, while the other maid holds her hand.

“Drink this.” The head cook passes a cup to Pippa. “It will help with the bleeding, Goddess willing. And will ease the pain enough for you to do your duties.”

Turning, the head cook sees me. “Jasmine, go and see if you can find some clean rags and hide this at the bottom of the trash. The laundry lasses do nothing but gossip. If they catch us washing this out, there is sure to be a fuss. Best not to tempt their wagging tongues.”

She passes me a cloth, sodden with blood, before turning back to Pippa, whose hand trembles as she drinks from the cup.

Uncertainty crawls under my skin. Some gut instinct tells me this is more than monthlies. The dripping rag in my hand is assuredly not a natural amount of blood loss. That I have been asked to hide it rather than wash it out in the laundry builds a deeper sense of unease. I do as asked, gathering a few rags from the kitchen store, although these are not the best kind of linens for such needs.

When I return, Pippa is white-faced and handing the cup back. The young maid at her side pats her hand while the head cook is stern-faced as she takes the rags from me.

“Do not let the bastard corner you again, Pippa. He is no good, and full of self-importance.”

“He said he was going to be freed soon and would marry me... and then, when I told him I was with child, he said... he would take me to get rid of it, and if that didn't work, he would take me out the back and... oh!” Pippa suddenly groans and presses her hand to her belly. “I'm near faint with the pain. How am I to do my work?”

“The drink will work soon and ease the pain some. Lord Edwin is with the warlord today, and the steward is in a foul mood on account of the extension work falling behind. You don't want to draw his attention today lest you get yourself a whipping to go with your other woes. Trent is a nasty piece of work and, further, a fool if he thinks he will be freed anytime soon. Not unless he has something up his sleeve that might curry further favors.” She sighs heavily. “I can't believe he took you to that hag to get rid of the babe. The old crone loses more girls than she helps.”

As the young kitchen maid falls to sobbing, the blood drains from my face. Trent did this: rutted her, lied to her, and when she got with child, then took her to someone to get rid of it, then threatened to... No, I cannot think about that. Even so, everyone knows bondservants are not permitted to have children unless they are given permission to wed or mate.

Trent, who was not the worst of them, according to Penny, has been elevated after he betrayed those who fled the bear attack.

Trent, who has already cornered me... telling me what he wants from me to keep my secret.

As I look at the young girl, I see myself and the fate that might have been mine had Doug not come along. I tell myself I would not have fallen for his lies, after Penny's coaching, but the truth is, we live desperate lives and can all fall prey to the hope of being something more than we are. My experience with Trent also tells me he is not above coercion or even forcing the matter should a lass turn him down.

Trent still wants you, the little voice cautions. He has grown ruthless as his power grows. He holds my secret for now, but he will use me at some point, for sure.

This little scene plays out like a wake-up call. I need to speak to Doug about it tonight.

“I can help with her duties,” I say. “Melody is at home today. Bard is a good man. If I explain, he will cover for me, and I can help here.”

The head cook’s face softens. “Thank you, Jasmine. That would be greatly appreciated. Edwin is expecting guests tonight, for General Tulwin is back in Krug, and they have business to discuss, by all accounts. There is much to do. But with your help, we can find some light work for Pippa that will keep her off her feet.”

“Oh, thank you,” Pippa says, her eyes brimming with tears as she looks from the head cook to me.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I say and hasten to collect Melody’s breakfast tray.

I take the tray up and help Melody to wash and dress. After, as she is tucking into her breakfast, I explain the situation to Bard, about Pippa, and about Tulwin coming to visit this eve and how the kitchens are short-staffed. He is understanding, but I see the worry there. Perhaps it is about Pippa, for such troubles are never isolated to one bondservant and spill over into consequences for us all.

But then perhaps his worry is about Tulwin.

“When I arrived with General Tulwin, he made it sound as though he was responsible for Melody.”

Bard nods. “A celebrated war hero with many conquests and successful battles, he is still hungry for more glory. Plain-talking, as orcs often are, he made no secret of his interest in Melody and her skills as she matured.”

“She is still so young,” I say, my heart breaking a little for the innocent pawn in these games.

“She is,” he agrees, eyes shifting to Melody, who is tucking into her breakfast at the table before the window. “You had better go. I will keep Melody occupied. We will talk more later.”

“I’ll be back with her lunch,” I say.

I know I can trust Bard. For a fleeting moment, I consider telling him about Trent accosting me, confessing about how I fled the camp during an attack, and how he seeks to blackmail me into compliance. Yet something holds me back. Bard is worried for Melody, and my foolish mistakes are my own.



After working to assist the cook in the morning, I return to Melody with lunch, but the kitchen is still busy, and I go straight back to help.

With Tulwin’s imminent arrival, fresh rumors spread amongst the bondservants as we all question how this meeting tonight might impact us. By the time the general arrives and dinner is served, the light has faded, and I’m exhausted from my duties. It is some consolation that Pippa is looking better and her unnatural bleeding has slowed.

One of the other servants catches me as I am making my way up the stairs to Melody’s room. He presents me with a toffee apple which he tells me he collected, at Edwin’s bequest, from the little stall just south of the market.

It puts a smile on my tired face that only grows as I slip into her quarters and gift the treat to Melody.

“Yippee!” The child is a constant source of wonder. Her happiness is like a little rainbow peeking out between the clouds of life.

So, even as I want to wallow in pity, I decide that life is not all bad, even for a bondservant. There is a camaraderie in what we are, as in the way the kitchen staff rallied to hide what happened to Pippa. We take care of our own as best as we can within the constraints of our situation.

My heart softens toward the kitchen maid, who is guilty only of being young and gullible. If it were not for Doug, my own foolishness could have cost me my life.

But my trouble is not yet over. Once I have done getting Melody ready for bed, I will need to confess all to my mate and pray that his solution will not see him whipped... that he might have a solution to this cloud over me that does not see me punished as a deserter.

As Melody settles to sleep, she begs Bard to sing to her.

He does. A rich baritone that stirs the hairs on the back of my neck as he weaves a melody in a language unknown to me. The song soothes the tiny child. With her hands under her cheek, her eyes drift shut. Her wings are bound and hidden, but there is no mistaking her little pointed ears, the slight upturn to her nose, and the delicate features that are all fairy.

She will be a beauty when she matures.

As the final notes of Bard's song fall upon the sleeping child, I feel my worries surface again.

I linger, and as Bard shuts the door to her bedroom and joins me, I see the fresh lines upon his face.

"Do you think they will move us on?" I ask, sensing change is coming for me once again. A part of me craves change, for it might liberate me from Trent's shadow. But it might escalate matters too, and there is no way of knowing which way fate will fall.

"The only certainty is that we shall move on at some point," he says. Taking a seat at the small table before the window, shuttered against the night, he indicates the opposite chair.

I take a seat.

"I believe it inevitable. They will seek to use her powers. Tulwin has made his interest plain. At the very least, he will want news on her progress. Edwin met with the warlord earlier. I heard the steward already begins plans for Edwin, who will be leaving within a matter of days. It seems reasonable to assume that our time here is coming to an end.

When Edwin goes, all the servants go with him, save a skeleton crew who remain.” His smile is humorless. “I dare say they’ll be carrying on with the building work, but I expect we shall be leaving, one way or another. Whether we shall go with Edwin or Tulwin remains to be seen.”

“It never stops, does it?” I say quietly.

His eyes hold mine. “We are bondservants. We may never forget what we are.” His eyes shift to my throat.

The collar serves as the ultimate reminder that I’m a bondservant. To wear one is to facilitate our management should a situation occur, and they need to chain us up. A reminder that I am owned.

“I swore to Melody’s parents that I would protect her, yet I do not know how to protect her from this. I lurch from one day to the next, feeling like I am failing her over again. I can only do my best to shield her from what transpires. She does not have one bit of artifice. She’s sweet in nature. It will devastate her young mind when she realizes the part she plays in the Blighten war, the consequence of her portal games, and the lives that are being irrevocably changed because of what she does.”

I swallow and feel that familiar sting at the back of my eyes. All that he says is true, yet there is no way out of this. Sorrow wraps around us, an invisible cloak that nevertheless carries a great weight. She is still a young child, but she is of an age where she is transitioning from one stage into another. In my time caring for children, I have seen how they grow. How they begin fearless, but then, at some point around five, they understand danger, death, and what mortality means. Melody is on the cusp of such understanding. She’s not yet six years old. Soon, the tragedy of her life and the dreadful consequences of what she does will dawn upon her.

“She won’t want to do it,” I say. A heavy, cold lump settles in my lower belly, and I feel a little sick.

He nods slowly. “Fairies mature differently to human children. There is some time yet left. But, yes, even fairies do mature and, when she does, the knowledge will break her

young heart.” His hand trembles as he rubs his forehead. “I wish I knew what to do for the best. How to coach her. How to protect her. The burden is so very heavy.”

I reach across the table and grasp his hand. It is old and gnarled, yet also warm when he squeezes mine back. We share a look. “Do you believe in the Goddess?”

He nods. “I do, yet her ways are mysterious to me. When viewed from my perspective, you and Melody have both barely begun life. I am old and, were I the one with portal skills, I would view my death as a kindness and relief.” His voice breaks. “I fear for Melody. She is so very innocent, and I fear the day when that will change.”

My heart is aching, for we are all very much trapped.

“You have a good heart, Jasmine,” he says. “But we must remember we are bondservants, and we can only take each day at a time.” He squeezes my hand once more before slowly releasing it. “You were right to remind me to have faith in the Goddess. We are her humble servants and must trust that she has higher plans. She blessed you with a good mate.” His smile is fleeting. “Best you get back to him, for it is late. Knowing Doug, he is sure to worry.”

A genuine smile lights my face. This is my favorite part of the day, when Doug and I can be alone, when we can close the little rickety door of our room and put the rest of life aside.

Then my smile fades as I recall that tonight, I need to talk to him.

“I will see you tomorrow,” I say.



I leave their quarters, half expecting Doug to be standing outside as he sometimes does if I am late. Only, he is not there. Maybe he is washing up in the cold showers or getting some food after laboring all day. My belly takes a slow tumble as I think about how he came to the room last evening, a little

damp from having just washed up. I wonder if he will let me kiss him there again.

I can be very persuasive when I need to be, and I believe that, if I insist, he will.

Only that is for another night, for tonight we have matters to be resolved.

As I hasten down the stairs and turn left into the corridor that leads out to the stables and the barracks, where our small room is nestled beside the main house, a man steps out of the shadows and places himself in my path.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise as fear curls in my belly. It is dark here, and I see little more than an outline, yet instinctively I know who it is. My footsteps falter and then come to a stop as I weigh up my options, whether I should run back to Bard... whether that would even help.

My heart gallops in my chest. I believe running would be a bad idea and likely to escalate matters. Besides, Trent is close enough that he would likely catch me.

Trent takes a step forward and into a square of weak light spilling from an open window. I see the calculation on his face. "Have you been avoiding me, Jasmine?"

I swallow and shake my head. "It is late, Trent. I have had a busy day, and I have duties early on the morrow."

His lips tug up. "Yes, I heard you all rallied to help Pippa. Not that the sniveling cunt deserves it."

I blanch at his callous words.

He steps closer—I take a step back. "And we all have duties early on the morrow... Did you forget about our little chat?"

"No, I did not." I take another step, but he is faster, and he boxes me against the archway and the wall. Raising a hand, he slowly brushes my hair back from my cheek.

My stomach churns. I think about Pippa and what she was forced to endure because of this foul man who rutted her even though they weren't mated.

“Now you’ve got a mate, no one will question if you’re with child. I’d say you’ve been well broken in by Doug, only the orc bastard has been mutilated, I heard. Did you know what the surgeons did to him when he was a youngling? How they tried to cut off his knot?” He smirks. “He hasn’t rutted you, has he? The bastard is broken and can’t get it up. But that’s okay. I know that I can, and I have a mind to breed me a whelp in your belly. No one will know it’s not Doug’s, will they, Jasmine? You won’t tell them.” He chuckles. “And it’s not like Doug can tell them. If the baby looks human, no one’s going to care either way. And after that whelp is born, you’ll be fertile again and ready for another. It will be our little secret.”

His words horrify me.

They also galvanize me into action. Shoving him away, I catch him off guard and slip away.

He curses, and his footfalls follow. At the other end of the long corridor is the door to the courtyard. If only I can get through, I have a chance.

His fingers snag my hair, tearing a cry from my lips as he pulls a chunk of strands out. He grabs my elbow and spins me around, then his palm connects with my cheek and sends me stumbling. The blow rattles my head, and I taste blood.

Clamping one hand over my mouth, he drags me away, down the corridor, and out the back. I have never been this way before, but I recognize the narrow passage that leads to the extension.

I kick and thrash, nails raking his wrists, panicking as I recognize my fate, that he is taking me away from where anyone might hear.

A cloud passes over, blocking the weak moonlight and plunging us into darkness. All I see are shapes and outlines of walls as he half carries, half drags me over a mound of sand before pushing me down.

Then he is on me, his greater weight crushing me into the gritty ground, his hands grasping my clothing. The sound of

my bodice tearing strikes further terror into my heart.

This is happening.

As his fist closes around my throat, taking my breath, I try to kick out again and swing my small fists.

“Stupid bitch.” Spittle flies from his lips as he stares down at me, face contorted with rage. “I’d have made your first time good. But, make no mistake, I’m breeding you. If my seed doesn’t catch this time, I’ll be coming for you again.” He leans in close and licks up the side of my face. “Tell Doug. I dare you, and I’ll tell them how he protected you after you fled.”

My vision has turned to sparkling dots. I’m on the verge of blacking out. My heart is thudding so wildly I feel as though it might beat out of my chest. Then his hands are down between us, pulling up my dress and the realization brings me a fresh burst of energy. My muscles quiver with the strain as I try to blink away the darkness swamping my mind.

My terrible vulnerability hits me harder than a blow. I do not court death, but nor do I fear it, for I shall join my parents at the Goddess’ side. No, what I fear is the terrible things that can happen in between.

Chapter Eight

Doug

News came today that Edwin, after visiting with the warlord, will be leaving. The nature of his mission, or what is requested of him, is unknown to me, for I am only a lowly orc. But the consequences mean that we are to labor all fucking day, barely taking a break, before we go to it once again. We will be leaving; that is as much as I know. They want us to shift as many sacks of grit and mud bricks as possible over the next few days so that the building work may continue after we are gone.

The sun is fucking hot, and I sweat like the beast I am. Even Trent, who is usually a mouthy fucker, is beaten down by the work. We carry on, right through to dusk, until finally, when the light gives out, and torches cannot help, we are given leave to clean up for the night.

It is late. I am filthy, and every muscle in my body twitches.

“I’m too tired even to eat,” Bron moans next to me as we strip out of our clothing to stand beneath the water spout to rinse the dirt and sweat away. The water comes from deep underground and is blissfully cold. I want to linger, but I am also impatient to return to our quarters and see my mate.

Only, when I open the door, Jasmine is not there.

I sniff, searching for some lingering scent of her to see whether she has been nearby.

Nothing.

The hairs prickle at the back of my neck. I stalk out of our tiny room, eyes going to the small window, shuttered against the night, where Melody and Bard reside. There is no light on.

Fear and worry crash over me. My beast prowls beneath my skin, lifting his snout and sniffing.

Where the fuck is she?

I take off at a jog for the door leading into the main building and the long passage that she usually emerges from when she has finished her duties for the day. She is on her way to me, she must be. I curse myself for not coming for her sooner.

As I enter the sturdy wooden door, scents hit me.

Her scent. Her blood. *His* scent.

My head swings toward the other end of the corridor, and a terrible premonition dawns.

A roar—an ungodly combination of orc and beast, erupts from my chest. I charge the corridor, my tired body flooded with a potent cocktail of emotions that tear all sense of lethargy away, and I slam through the door to the courtyard, nearly taking it from its hinges.

My beast thrashes for dominance as we pick up more scents, and I pound down the narrow passage that leads to the building site, following their scents while I attempt to crush down the mounting dread and sense of failure.

I stumble over a mound of sand and pitch into a darkened room that has three walls and no roof.

Trent. He has her by the throat, pinned to the floor. My nostrils flare. I see the glisten of blood on her lips, the way she thrashes under him. Her skirt is already lifted, and his hand fumbles between them as he seeks to shuck from his pants.

His head whips around, jaw going slack just as my vision shimmers. I feel like every bone in my body explodes and then reforms with a *pop*. The angles are all wrong. My head is lower, and yet I fill the space. I see tusks: white, long, horrifying, and white shaggy fur.

I snort out a breath and scrape one big, clawed paw against the stony ground. Lips curled back, I issue my challenge in the form of a roar—and charge.

Legs pumping, Trent scrambles back, falling over himself before, loose pants held in one hand, he takes off at a run.

I leap over Jasmine, bowling over a stack of mud bricks and sending them tumbling as I chase down my quarry. Trent stumbles again.

I am on him.

With a sideswipe of my head, my left tusk pierces his back, lifting the weak human who dared to touch our mate clean off his feet.

He screams, his body thrashing. The struggles only impaled him deeper upon my tusk.

I shake my head, flinging him off, smashing his body against the stone wall. I charge him, skewer him with a tusk and toss him over again, smashing his body from one side to the other, raging and roaring.

I must eliminate the threat.

He is dead long before the wildness in me calms. I snort. The body is unrecognizable, the walls and floors smeared with his blood. I stamp my feet and snort again before my head swings back to where Jasmine is.

She kneels on the floor, her chin bloody, with one hand grasping the bodice of her torn dress.

My nostrils flare, and I stamp again, head swinging back to the fallen male who hurt her. Lifting my snout to the sky, another savage roar erupts from my throat.

I shudder a deep breath, her scent reaching for me, pulling me back from the brink of madness, and I take a tentative step toward Jasmine.

The world explodes around me as every bone in my body disassembles and reforms again with an agonizing *pop*. I collapse to my knees in time to see Jasmine faint dead away.

Distantly, I hear the clamor, the cries, and approaching footfall and see the glow of torches getting ever brighter.

Through the open wall behind Jasmine, orc guards storm in.



Jasmine

They take Doug away... in chains.

He goes meekly, and somehow that is worse. I cannot stop shaking. When I open my mouth to speak, stammered gibberish comes out.

I am taken back to the residence, where lights blaze, and bondservants bustle about. Guards are everywhere. In front of the cold hearth of the hall, the steward and the orc guard captain engage in a heated discussion that is lost to me under the broader noise of conversation. The head cook is at my side—Pippa and a few bondservants that I know also gather around. Then Bard is striding over, face full of concern, as I'm handed a cup with water to drink.

I'm shaking so hard that I spill most of it.

“D—Doug.” I stammer.

Bard shakes his head. “He has been taken to the barracks under guard.

Anxiety crawls over me. I need to go to him. I need to see him. Why did they put him in chains? I cannot bear it if they whip him.

My mind is full of chaotic scenes.

Blood everywhere.

Trent's broken body.

A huge white beast.

Then the great door bursts open, and Edwin strides in. With his long dark hair loose and flowing over his shoulders, he is every inch an imposing and barbaric orc general.

The riot of chatter tapers off.

“What is this about?” Edwin demands.

“A bondservant is dead, my lord,” the steward says. “Doug killed him. Another bondservant was involved.” He stabs a finger at me, his tone ripe with censure. “Likely the lass was pitching them against one another. They will both need to be punished.”

“Doug was defending his mate,” a nearby orc guard rumbles. I have sometimes seen him with Doug, and I remember now that his name is Bron. “I caught Trent cornering the lass a week ago.”

“We need to take a firm line, my lord,” the steward persists.

“Enough!” Silence descends in the wake of Edwin’s roar. “Do not counsel me on how to run my household, lest yourself beside them on the whipping post.”

The blood drains from my face and, for the second time this evening, I faint dead away.



I rouse to the sensation of a cool cloth against my forehead and plush comfort beneath me.

“She is waking, my lord.”

I slowly blink my eyes open, and Bard’s worried face comes into view.

His smile is brief. “You gave us quite a fright then, Jasmine.” I try to sit up but he stops me. “Take your time. Let me help you.”

My lip throbs from where Trent hit me, and my dress is torn and filthy. My throat aches where his fingers gripped—there will be a bruise there, come the morrow. Thankfully, a cloak has been placed around me, offering a much-needed element of modesty. I stare around the rooms, realizing I’m lying on a couch in Edwin’s study. The orc lord paces before the fire, pausing now and then to swipe his big hand through his long hair. Somehow he seems less civilized tonight, like

I'm seeing him once more as an orc as I remember how Doug killed a man so quickly and easily.

He has killed for me before, only that time it was a bear, and there were no consequences.

Not immediately, anyway, although the repercussions of Trent having seen me flee have followed me all the way to here and now.

The two events jumble up in my mind.

No one is rushing to mention Doug's beast. My glimpse was fleeting before he changed back to an orc.

No one saw. My instincts tell me that it is for the best.

In my heart, I know his beast also saved me from the bear, although that memory is far less fresh and tangible.

My eyes shift to Bard before returning to Edwin. I'm at his mercy, and so is Doug.

On the other side of the room, Edwin brings his pacing to a stop and turns his gaze to me. He picks up an ornate carver chair, places it down before the couch, and sits.

I don't know where to look. My heart is racing. The last thing I remember was him saying that both Doug and I would be whipped.

"Fear not, Jasmine," Edwin says gruffly. "You're not about to be whipped. I was vexed with my steward who, while a highly capable manager, is wont to forget his place. My head cook, Bard, Bron, and half my damn household have already pushed my temper by rushing to tell me how no fault lies with you. Even though not one of them has a clue what went on, save Bron saw Trent corner you last week. Besides which, the warlord would roast my balls over a hot fire should I be the cause of anything that might distract Melody from her portal work."

"Melody?" I turn to Bard.

"Is blessed with an ability to sleep through anything. A maid is sitting in the room, and another shall come and fetch me should she wake."

I relax a fraction.

“Doug is refusing to cooperate,” Edwin says, returning my focus to the matter at hand. “Not so much as a nod or shake when questioned. Can you tell us what happened?”

I meet Edwin’s dark gaze, knowing I dare not look away when I am about to lie by omission. Trent is gone now, and I’m ashamed to admit the only thing I feel about the death of a fellow human is relief. “He wanted to lay with me. I said no. That I was with Doug and mated to him.” A blush stains my cheeks. “I like Doug very much and have no desire to be with anyone else nor to pitch men and orcs against one another. Tonight, I was returning to my quarters when Trent cornered me again. It was dark, and Doug would usually be waiting for me. He was not tonight.”

Edward’s eyes shift over my shoulder, and I turn to look, finding the captain of the guard standing beside the door.

“Doug, along with several of the guards who had no duties today, were tasked with working on the extension, ferrying supplies to the site. They worked until late. Trent left earlier on an errand for the steward.”

My heart breaks a little knowing this might have been avoided, only had I known and waited a little longer with Bard. I should have spoken to Doug sooner. I shall forever suffer guilt that I did not.

“How did you come to be at the building site?” Edwin asks, frowning now.

“T-trent dragged me there when I t-ried to run.” I cannot get any more out. I must swallow several times to keep the bile from rising in my throat. “Doug must have come looking for me.”

Edwin nods. “Doug has stepped over a line, and this is not the first time,” he says, ominously. “He will need to be made an example of. But he is tough. He will endure it, and he will recover. This is the way of the Blighten, even though he was defending his mate. It was not his right to take a life. Had you come to me, I would have dealt with Trent. Doug is not the

lord here and has no right of execution over someone that does not belong to him.”

I swallow thickly, my throat working. Edwin reminds me with those words that I am not free but owned. I believe he would have punished Trent, for I have heard other bondservants mention that he suffers no mischief. Only I could never have gone to him about Trent, nor anybody, because if I had, Trent would have betrayed me out of spite.

My eyes pool with tears. I have been so foolish. “I’m sorry that Doug will need to be whipped because of me... I should like to accept the punishment.”

“What nonsense!” Bard says.

Edwin lifts an impatient hand. “You’ll do no such thing. This is not the first time Doug has felt the taste of the whip. I dare say it won’t be the last. He is an orc and will suffer no lasting damage. And even so, I would have more trouble on my hands than I need should I have you whipped. Do you think Doug would stand by and allow that? No, the bastard would go on a rampage.”

I nod in understanding. “What will happen now?”

“Now, you will get some rest. Doug will remain under guard, and tomorrow, when I am clear-headed, I will decide.”

Dismissed, I leave with Bard. I insist that I am fine, and then I go to the narrow room I share with Doug. It may only have a rough mattress and few other necessities, but it is where I can let all the sorrow out. I cling to the scratchy blanket that holds his lingering scent and wish that Doug was here. I’m broken by what my actions have caused, even though I understand that Trent is a wicked man and the fault must lie with him.

Tomorrow, when Edwin makes his decision, I know I shall be broken all over again.

Chapter Nine

Jasmine

I sleep fitfully, missing Doug the whole time. In some ways, a great weight has been lifted, the axe that has hung over my head ever since Trent cornered me and told me what he saw.

I know that I shall get through this; that, as Edwin says, Doug is tough. Only there is still a great deal of pain to endure between now and then. And there is my concern as to whether or not Doug will forgive me. Perhaps he does not want a mate who brings such trouble to his door. Perhaps when he finds out I have kept this secret from him and did not trust him, my mate, he will see me in a less favorable light.

I do not pray to the Goddess often, but today I do, beseeching her to give me a chance to prove to Doug that I'm worthy, and a chance to redeem myself.

We have only just begun. I haven't even told him that I love him, and now all of that might have been broken by my actions.

I rise and dress as always, finding a strange sobriety as I step outside. Orcs are already up and about moving bricks, but there is no talking and none of the good-humored complaints that usually accompany this duty.

A few eyes turn my way, reminding me that orcs and humans alike love to gossip. I have drawn attention in ways I have always sought to avoid. They will all be talking about me, the bondservant, and Doug, who awaits his fate after killing on my behalf.

I collect Melody's breakfast tray, the other servants greeting me and checking on how I am.

"You have a nasty bruise on your cheek," the head cook says, clicking her tongue. "Did you sleep at all?"

“Only a little.” I summon a cautious smile, seeing Pippa approach. My memories of last night are hazy, and I wonder if she hates me now that Trent is dead, or whether like me, she is relieved.

“I wish someone had been there for me,” she says quietly. “I thought myself in love with Trent, but what I was really in love with was a hope and dream and he turned out to be a monster.” Tears pool in her eyes. “I know he would not have stopped. I’m only sorry that it was you he preyed on next.”

I hug her, and she hugs me back.

As we break apart, I scrub away the fresh tears that spill down my cheeks.

I collect Melody’s tray and take it up to her room. Here, I find her dancing around using her stockings like streamers, and it puts a smile on my face. I share a look with Bard, who offers me a small smile.

“Melody, put your stocking and boots on, or Jasmine will be forced to take your breakfast tray back,” Bard chides. “I can see your favorite pancakes and berries... although I am sure the pigs will enjoy them if you do not want them.”

“PANCAKES!”

I have never seen her put her stockings on so quickly, although I need to help her with her laces when she is too excited to sit still, and I fear she is about to trip.

As she tucks into her breakfast, Bard joins me at the window, where I gaze down in the hope of seeing Doug helping the other orcs with the bricks. He hates that work, but it would still make my heart soar to see such normality.

“Edwin has been called away to speak with Tulwin. There are rumors of a fresh push from the Imperium as they take back lands they lost to the Blighten a decade ago.”

“Is that where he will be going?”

Bard shrugs. “Possibly. There is also trouble brewing to the east, and I have heard talk that Tulwin will be going there.

The Blighten are being hit from many directions in this world. Melody's portal lessons have been placed on hold."

A strange hope flutters in my belly. Are we about to be liberated?

But then I question if I want to be saved when I'm mated to an orc. For if I were to be saved, then Doug would be the prisoner, rounded up with all the other orcs... He might even die in the battle.

"We are a long way from the front lines," Bard says as though he can read all that I feel from the expression on my face.

The lines have gotten blurred. Not all orcs are bad, just as not all humans are good. And all of us are caught up in something not of our choosing.

I am about to ask more when a great clamor comes from below. We look down to see orc soldiers dressed in royal livery surge into the courtyard.

"What is happening?"

"I don't know," he says slowly, brows drawing together as we watch the unfamiliar soldiers swarm the area.

A sense of unease creeps under my skin, growing stronger as I watch the strange, urgent scene play out.

Something is wrong. Very wrong. At first, I feel the pricklings of worry for Melody, and then realization dawns.

"I must go down there!"

"Jasmine!"

Bard's call follows me, but I don't pay him any heed for I am already skittering along the narrow passage, down the stairs, and into the lower passage that leads to the courtyard.

As I round the corner, the door to the courtyard swings open, and I collide with an orc. His hands shoot out to stop me.

Chest heaving, I look up. It is Bron, the one who is a friend of Doug's—the same orc who spoke up on my part last night

to Edwin. He is dark for an orc, a shade of grey that is not far short of black. His eyes unexpectedly hold a sensitivity that I do not readily associate with orcs.

I swallow.

“There is trouble,” Bron says.

My breath saws unsteadily. “What kind of trouble?”

“She has taken Doug while Edwin is away.”

I frown, my eyes darting toward the double gates that lead into the streets. “She?”

“His mother.”

I feel the blood drain from my face. “What does she want with him?” As the words leave my lips, I already know that whatever it is, it cannot be good.

Bron shrugs, glancing over his shoulder through the open door like he’s worried someone might see us talking. “I don’t know how she found out. She’s a nasty bitch,” he says with heat, bringing a catch to my breath. “The warlord is also away. From what I’ve heard, he was the one who saved Doug when the bitch tried to drown him at birth.”

My ears begin to buzz. “What do you think she might do with him?” I whisper.

Bron shrugs. “You can be sure she’ll order double whatever Edwin intended. She was broken when his father betrayed her and has been hell-bent on breaking Doug ever since. She is an accomplished warrior, but she never took another mate and she has dedicated her life to the war. It’s common knowledge that she and the warlord do not get along, on account of him stepping in with Doug. He tolerates her because she is a fearsome general and shares his enthusiasm for death.”

“Did you see Doug before he left? Do you know if he was well?” I want to ask so much more, but the matters of my heart are of little consequence anymore.

“He was under guard all night. Refusing to eat, from what I heard.”

My lips tremble, and tears sting the back of my eyes.

“You care for him,” Bron says, nodding at me. “You looked wary when Trent cornered you. But I wondered if I’d read it wrong. I’ve known Doug since we were younglings, both of us with no parents, albeit in different ways. It was his mother who ordered the surgeon to cut the wolf part from him, and I worry what she will do to him now that she has her hands on him again.”

Bile rises in my throat.

“Bron! Get back to moving the fucking bricks!”

His head swings around to acknowledge the order before he turns back to me. “I will keep you updated as best I can.” And then he strides away.

I return to Bard and tell him what I have learned. Somehow, I get through the day, although I hold myself together by will alone, sick with anxiety as I wait for news, all the while, terrified for Doug, for what might be happening to him.

As the light fades, Edwin returns. Soon after, with dread churning in my stomach, I am taken by an orc guard to his office.

The room is much as I remember it, save there is a defeated air to the orc general who sits at his desk and beckons me over.

Once I approach him, he delivers the news bluntly.

“The warlord’s sister has taken Doug. He is to be hung tomorrow. I’m sorry, Jasmine. I pleaded his case, that he was a good worker, that he was defending a mate.” He runs his fingers over his face. “Short of storming the prison where she has taken him, the matter is closed.”

My mind whites out, and a strange, wounded whimper escapes my throat.

I see the flush darkening his cheeks. He is sorry for me, yet also reminds me of my lowly place and that I have no route to redress what has happened.

Neither does Doug.

He is going to hang tomorrow.

He is going to hang because of me.

I feel fragile, parchment-thin, as though I might shatter.

I fall to my knees and beg, babbling, prostrating myself before the general who is my own source of hope.

“Ah, Jasmine.” He crouches beside me, coaxing me to lift my head. “You are young, Jasmine. These circumstances are extreme. I’m sorry for what has come to bear, but what you ask is impossible.”

Tears stream down my cheeks. “May I go to him?”

He shakes his head.

“Please.” I know I’m pushing my luck, but I don’t care. “Let me see him, I beg you. Let me be with him this last night.” I sob. “Please. Let me see him one last time.”

He sighs heavily. “I will see what I can do.”



In my short life, I have spent too much time thinking about death. The death of my parents and friends, the death of other bondservants, and my own death. But it seems the Goddess has not done with me and death.

I can do nothing about those deaths past.

Nor can I do anything about Doug.

I have known him but a short time, yet he has left an impression upon me that will stay with me forever. One that I know time will not diminish.

I love him.

With all my heart.

I cannot believe that he has come into my life only to be snatched away to the Goddess’ side. But then I remember that

he doesn't even believe in her. He is an orc, and they favor the old gods. I will not even get to meet him in the afterlife.

I think knowing we will not find each other again in the afterlife cuts the deepest of all.

Fresh tears spill down my cheeks. When I sniffle, the burly orc guard who walks at my side cuts me a glance. "This way," he says gruffly.

Doug is sitting on a simple cot in the sparse cell, a single high barred window letting in a little moonlight. His arms are braced across his knees and his head is down. At the sound of the key rattling in the lock, his head snaps up. The barred metal door swings open, and I step inside.

Doug rises, his face crossing over so many emotions it is hard to make any out. He growls at the guard and makes a shooing motion at me.

He is too late. The door swings shut with a creak, and the key rattles in the lock again. "The lass wants to be with you," the guard says. "Lord Edwin has given permission. I'll be back before morning."

Now that I'm here, I lose all confidence. I stand facing Doug, the huge white orc who has claimed my heart.

The guard's footsteps fade away.

I don't move. There is a gap between us far greater than the single pace it would take me to reach him.

A strange sound erupts from his chest, startling me. It is a pitiful sound, like that of a wounded animal. Then he sinks to his knees, gathering me close.

All the tears I have sobbed are nothing compared to the river that escapes me now. I bend and close my arms around him, burying my face in the crook of his neck. As the sobs wrack my body, Doug, my brave white orc, is my steady rock. "Oh, Doug, what have you done?"

He cries out again and holds me tighter. I hate that I shall never know him fully. It is the saddest thing ever that we will

never share full intimacy... that I will not become his mate... that I never got to bear him a child.

He lifts me up and takes me over to the small cot, where he sits with his back to the wall and tucks me upon his lap.

I rest my cheek against his chest. I don't even fight the tears that fall. "I am so sorry for bringing this trouble to you. I hate Trent. I hate that he was mean-spirited. He is gone now. Punished. He will be with the Goddess, and she does not take kindly to men who force their attention upon women. But you, my brave Doug, you have saved me. I wish you believed in the Goddess, for she would think kindly upon you, I am sure."

He lets out a deep sigh and strokes my hair. I have a headache from all my crying, and his touch is soothing. I want to soak up this moment where I can hear the steady beat of his heart beneath my cheek so that it might sustain me through the cold days to come. How am I to live without my white orc?

"You are the noblest orc ever," I say. "Edwin spoke for you, but your mother is cruel and powerful." My voice softens. "He told me there was naught else that he could do."

Doug's fingers never stop stroking my hair. If he feels any bitterness for what has come to pass, he reveals none of it in his actions.

Life is cruel and unfair. I do not want to watch him die. I still don't quite understand what happened when he saved me from Trent—I caught only the briefest flash of white fur and huge tusks. It was Doug's beast. I know that. Only he is not a wolf shifter. It's something else—a part of him that roused to protective anger on my part.

"I am sorry," I say, "that I did not talk to you about Trent earlier. He saw me run into the forest the night the bears attacked. He wanted me to lay with him. I refused. He threatened to tell... not that it matters when he forced... Goddess, I'm so sorry." A sob breaks from my chest. "I shall be sorry for the rest of my life, for I must spend it without you all because of my stupidity and foolishness."

He holds me closer and rocks me in his arms. He ought to hate me for costing him his life. But I know that he doesn't.

"You could make your beast," I whisper. "Tomorrow, as they are leading you away. You could run away." I lift my head from his chest to look at him. "Why do you never make your beast? Does he only come out when he's angry?"

Doug nods.

"Is that what happened with the bear shifter?"

He nods again.

"I should like to meet him." My heart breaks just a little more, knowing I shall not. "Maybe if you get angry enough tomorrow..."

He cups my cheek in his huge hands and kisses my forehead. And I realize what he is telling me.

The beast only comes for me. The beast only comes when I'm in danger.

My mind is sore and frantic. I ache everywhere—my whole body throbs in pain from the sorrow that consumes me.

"I love you, Doug. I shall hold your memory inside me, beside those that I have of my parents, for the rest of my life."

He kisses me again, and then he tucks my head back down against his chest and holds me.

There are no words left to say, only endless desolation that wraps around us.

I don't want the night to end. But all things end, and I feel the passing of time as one moment leads into another. I cherish every breath, every beat of his heart under my cheek. I cherish the touch of his hand in my hair and the feel of his body underneath me.

But eventually, as the light beyond the grilled window begins to lighten, the guard comes around.

It is time for me to go.

“I love you. When I was younger, I always wanted a prince to save me. And then, here, and so unexpectedly, I have found exactly that. But you are an orc prince who has been rejected, who has suffered terrible injustice, who must now pay the price for being noble and protecting me. I will never forget you. Know that, just like my parents, you are never gone while you live inside my heart.”

I cling to him, shameless in my sorrow. He has to pry me off and hand me bodily to the guard. The guard nods and takes me by the arm. I thought I had emptied myself of tears last night, but I sob piteously as I'm led away.

The next time I see Doug, he will be on a gallows with a noose around his neck.

Chapter Ten

Jasmine

There is no market in Krug today. In the place of colorful stalls, a gallows has been built—a raised platform with wooden steps and a cross-arm from which hangs a sturdy rope.

Crowds gather to watch the white orc, who is a nephew to the warlord—and who is mute in two ways—hang.

My eyes are so swollen from my tears that I can barely see. Bard coached me not to come. Only how could I do anything else?

I am not the one who is on the gallows, but I must be a different kind of brave. I know the image will haunt me for the rest of my life, but I want Doug to see me here for him even though I cannot save him in the way he saved me.

The sun is already blistering hot, and the crowd is raucous, full of a strange, off-kilter merriment that seems misplaced in light of what's about to happen.

Sellers call out, advertising their wares as they push carts laden with food and drinks through the throng. Bard walks at my side. I feel his worried eyes upon me as we press through the people, aided by our orc escort, at the front of which is Bron, the dark-skinned orc.

With every step, I'm breaking into pieces that no passage of time will mend. Yet I force myself forward, desperate for the chance to see Doug once more.

Finally, there is no more crowd in front of us. Bron moves to the side, and I find myself standing before a rope barrier. The rope is attached to stakes that form a circle separating the people from the gallows where the hanging will take place.

The wooden gallows are so much larger than they seemed from a distance, and so much more frightening.

Someone grumbles that we have cut in. Bron bares his teeth and the human spectator quiets.

Orcs wearing the imperial uniform patrol inside the circle, hands on the clubs at their waists should any spectators get out of hand. From the left, a phalanx of orc guards march into the open space. My breath catches as, for a moment, I see Doug between them. Taller than his guards, he cuts an imposing figure; his white skin glistening in the sun. I reach out to hold onto the rope barrier as I strain for my next glimpse of him, and a reckless compulsion grips me.

A thick arm clamps around my waist before I realize my intentions. I thrash against it. Consequence be damned, I need to hold Doug one more time.

“Behave, foolish human,” Bron growls. “Do you want his last memory to be of you being beaten down by the guards? For that is what they shall do, without hesitation, if you try to go to him.”

My eyes shift to the orcs surrounding Doug. I see the way they assess the crowd, clubs at the ready in their hands. And it is not only them. The orcs who patrol the barrier watch with similar menace in their eyes, searching for any opportunity to deal with trouble.

The fight goes out of me, and fresh tears well in my eyes.

Bron releases me.

The grim reality sets in: when the sun sets tonight, Doug will be gone.



Doug

My mother is a bitch. I understood this from a very young age. It wasn't even that she rejected me. That seems of little consequence now. It was the many acts of cruelty she meted out over my life, leading right up to now. That happiness was mine so briefly is the bitterest blow of all.

The orcs escorting me come to a stop before the steps to the gallows. A faint tremble manifests in my hands, tied securely at my back, as I see the fate that looms before me.

I will not shame myself as I face my end, nor will I give my mother an opportunity to call me weak. Resplendent in her finest battle armor, she stalks to stand in front of me, accompanied by the old executioner orc, who will fit the noose around my throat.

She sneers at me. "Finally, I will rid myself of the abomination that bastard's seed grew inside me." With a nod to the judicial, she steps back, and he steps forward.

The crowd falls silent as he begins to read from a rolled parchment; his voice, practiced at such events, carries over the nearby spectators. The rest of them who are gathered here don't care whether they hear or not, so long as they can see. The words will go through iterations as they gossip and it's most likely that, by the time the stories reach the corners of Krug, I will no longer be an orc who killed the bastard who tried to touch his mate but some kind of monster who slaughtered children in their sleep.

The words wash over me. My mind is elsewhere, thinking about gentle, feminine hands. I cling to that memory lest my thoughts go to how orcs are sturdy and can hang for half a day or more before being delivered to death and the great pain I will suffer as I slowly fade.

I promised myself I wouldn't look, yet my eyes have a will of their own and search the crowd.

I don't want her to be here, to see me like this, yet the moment I see her, I am lost in her pretty eyes, fucking hating all the sorrow I see there.

She came.

She said she loves me—loves us.

My knees nearly give. I stumble a half step forward before I catch myself. The guards around me are wary, with their clubs at the ready. Not that I can fucking do much, unarmed, bound, and surrounded by so many. They settle their stance when I make no further move, and I drink my fill of my mate. In the bright sunlight, she is a vision of dark beauty. There is no heaven waiting for orcs when we die, yet while Jasmine was in my arms, I found that elusive place to which humans aspire to ascend.

My inner beast rails.

They have bound my wrists to facilitate the hanging, lest I hold tight to the rope when the trapdoor drops, and interfere with the deed. Yet as I stand here, in my last moment, I become aware that my other side is no more ready for death than I am, that if these bindings were not in place, he would smash through the guards, snatch Jasmine up, and run. The orc side of me understands the dangers in such an undertaking, that Jasmine could be hurt or, worse, killed, and that we are in the middle of a huge city with nowhere to hide.

Regardless, my beast still thrashes beneath the surface, great tusks swinging from side to side in my mind before lifting his snout to offer a deep, mournful bay.

Trent. I should have killed the bastard before, only done so discreetly. I'd known he was a threat, and that he had his eye on Jasmine. Bron had warned me as much.

I wish she had trusted me.

I take comfort that he is gone, and I have eliminated the threat.

I pray that one day, she will find her way from here. Perhaps the handsome human prince she dreamed of will come and rescue her.

A growl bubbles up in my throat. The nearby guard eyeballs me and hefts his club in a warning.

Bron is at her side, shielding her from the crowd. Likewise, some of the other orcs I've worked alongside since I joined Edwin's home stand attentively near. They are my brothers, and I'm grateful they are there. Yet the thought of any other, man or orc, touching her brings my rage to the surface, albeit that it's irrational when I can no longer protect her and that I want her to be loved and safe.

Selfishly, I wallow in the delusion that she was meant for me and only me; that no one else could care for her as well as I do.

There are fresh tears on her face, and I hate that my actions have put them there.

The official finishes his speech.

I'm escorted up the steps.

My feet are suddenly heavy, reluctant. I hold myself together, but only just.

I wish she wasn't here.

I wish she wasn't going to see this.

I wish a thousand things that shall now never be mine.

Look away, I silently plead.

She does not, and I feel the world grow cold as the noose is placed around my neck. It is made from a thick, sturdy, coarse rope that will bear my weight. My ankles are bound together before they check my wrists again to make sure that they are also secure.

More words are spoken, but I cannot hear them over the ringing in my ears.

Then, the platform beneath my feet falls. The crowd gasps as I drop. A moment of brief weightlessness before the rope snaps around my neck. A dreadful gurgling sound escapes my lips. The strain is monstrous, and it has only just begun. The crowd turns into a kaleidoscope of colors as I spin upon the

rope. Instinctively, I tug against the bindings on my wrists and thrash.

A great clamor penetrates the ringing in my ears—the sick crowd cheering, perhaps?

I spin wildly, even as I coach myself to submit to my fate.

The clamor rises.

Something sounds off, although I cannot work out what it is. Perhaps it is just the effect of the blood pounding in my ears.

Cold sweat bathes my body as I thrash.

Shouts penetrate the fog: a wild jumble of sound that I cannot make sense of, as dots sparkle before my eyes.

My breathing is harsh and strained. My strong body is not ready to accept death. Nor is my mind.

I convince myself that if I could only cease my thrashing, I might catch a glimpse of her again.

But I no longer have command over myself and continue to fight.

The clamor grows louder, wilder, and I wonder if something is wrong with me—if I am dying quicker than an orc usually might; if my shifter blood makes me weaker—for something is assuredly amiss.

Then the rope jerks. I drop a small distance and then the rope yanks on my neck again. The pain is so great it renders me temporarily blind.

The rope jerks again, and this time, I drop and drop. My knees buckle as I hit solid ground. I collapse to my side, my head ringing as it connects against the gritty earth with a *crack*.

My vision is restored briefly as colors move in and out of my view. The discordant clamor manifests into the scuffle, thuds, and clangs of close fighting.

“You’re a tough bastard, and you’re not going to die,” a voice tells me. The noose loosens, and I blink the world back

into view.

The warlord?

Edwin?

And then a small, dark-haired angel flings herself at me, sobbing.

Jasmine.

My mate.

Part Three

Mating the Beast

Chapter One

Doug

We are gathered in the warlord's audience chambers. Rignor, my uncle, is pacing. Edwin stands with his hands neatly clasped behind his back before a giant mural depicting a battle between a griffin pride and the Blighten. Rumor has it that, in reality, the battle ended in a stalemate, not the great victory spoken of officially.

I do not have the full details of what transpired leading to my liberation. But from what I can infer, the warlord returned early via the portal, learned what was happening in the market square of his great city and was enraged.

I do not delude myself that he feels any affection for me. I believe much of his rage centers around the liberties my mother took in holding a spectacle of this magnitude behind his back.

Either way, I am grateful.

I am not dead.

Our warlord has acknowledged me as his nephew.

My mother has been exiled on pain of death should she set foot in Krug again.

It is a lot to take in.

My neck aches. I'm confident I could not get any words out past the swelling even were I not mute. Jasmine stands beside me, her small hands clinging to mine. I will not let her step aside for a moment and I growl when a physician, my uncle's order, tries to examine my throat. My head is still attached to my shoulders, and that is good enough for me. I have seen enough hanged orcs to know what happens; how their immense weight eventually makes their head part ways from their body. I shudder at the memory. I determine that nothing feels unduly pained, and I will heal.

“I believe he was not there long enough for undue damage,” the physician says.

The warlord waves him away.

“This business with Tulwin is important,” Rignor says to me as the door clicks shut on the physician. “Your mate will stay with the fairy child, for now. Nothing can interfere with that. But after, when this work is done, I will see that your mate is freed.”

I bow my head stiffly, which is fucking painful. Jasmine’s hand tightens over mine, but I dare not spare a glance toward her pretty face while my emotions roil as they do. My beast is still not happy, despite our liberation, and is still in favor of taking Jasmine and running.

Beyond the high, arched stone window, it rains in a steady deluge.

Krug’s brief but intense summer is over.

Soon, the rain will turn to sleet and then to snow.

I just want to be dismissed already so I can take Jasmine away from here and ease the stress etched into her sweet face.

“Tulwin is due to leave at the end of the week,” Edwin says. “I will be leaving shortly after. The child is familiar with Tulwin and has traveled with him before. She is also fond of Jasmine. I believe it would have been catastrophic for her well-being had Jasmine been taken from her circle or, worse, been grieving for her lost mate. To facilitate her transition to freedom, I venture to advise we seek a new companion for the child.”

I gently squeeze Jasmine’s hand lest she offer an opinion. She remains silent at my side.

“I will think on it,” the warlord says. His eyes shift to me briefly. Where I have been told mine are shifter blue, his are a dark mud brown. “Dismissed.”

Those words come as a relief.



Jasmine

We leave with Edwin and are accompanied by an escort back to his residence.

It has been a long day. One that will leave a legacy upon my heart. Doug insists that he carries me. He gets a familiar mutinous set to his jaw when I tell him I have two capable legs. So I relent, and as my hands rest gently against his chest, I'm again sorrowful for the terrible bruising I see around his throat.

With the arrival of the rain, the stifling heat is gone, and the temperature plummets. Swathed in a thick cloak that the warlord ordered one of his servants to fetch for me, and tucked in Doug's arms, I am cocooned from the world and protected from the heavy rain that pounds the streets of Krug.

Although my body is well cared for, my heart is sore and aching. My mind is a jumble of thoughts and impressions. I don't think I shall ever forget the moment he dropped, nor the desperate hope that rose in me when the warlord stormed the gallows with his many orc guards. As someone had cut Doug down, I prayed to the Goddess that he was not yet gone.

My breath hitches at the memory. Doug rumbles a distressed sound, and I force my thoughts to still.

It will take time. I understand this. But, for now, all I need is the feel of his warm, sturdy body beneath my cheek as he carries me effortlessly through the streets.

When we arrive at Edwin's home, many bondservants and orc guards are gathered, eager for news.

I'm lowered to my feet as a concerned Bard greets me, relief evident on his face. And there is Pippa and the head cook, and Bron, who protected me when Doug could not.

We are not allowed long before Edwin dismisses everyone. "There will be no more duties today," he says. "Eat and take

rest. At the end of the week, we shall be leaving, and new orders will be given.”

As the door shuts on our little rickety quarters, a tiny space that barely holds a mattress, I recognize that I am numb with delayed shock as I stand, unable to do anything for myself. Doug sits on the side of the bed, draws me close, and strips me of my rough, homespun dress. After ushering me under the blankets, he strips himself.

He does so without me asking, and the realization finds a chink in the numb, so that a little warm place begins to bloom. He settles with me on the bed, gathering me close in his arms as he lies on his back.

“Will it hurt you if I lie beside you like this?”

He shakes his head stiffly, his throat working as he swallows. The sight of the bruising makes my stomach churn. Although the physician did not examine him long, he assured the warlord that the short time Doug was hanging would leave no lasting effect.

I press my cheek against his chest and hold him as tightly as I can.

Outside, the rain batters the shutters and door, a steady thrum that gives an indication that the season is changing. Not only the season but our lives.

A promise of freedom offers me time with Doug where we might learn about one another in all the ways I have hoped.

My mind quiets, and my ears are filled with the strong beat of his heart.

Here in this orc city, so far from my former home, I find unexpected peace with my brave white orc.

Chapter Two

Jasmine

The early change of the season brings the building work to a close. There is no more brick moving for Doug. Instead, all haste is made to complete the preparations to leave, before the rain shifts to snow.

Melody is excited and dances around her room as Bard and I pack up her small number of possessions. The light stockings and summer dresses are discarded. In their place is more practical clothing to protect her from the weather as we travel. Serviceable brown pants, a linen shirt and a tunic, along with a new fur-trimmed blue cloak. The rather drab clothing emphasizes the brightness of her red-gold hair.

“I am an intrepid explorer,” she announces while modeling her new cloak.

I share a smile with Bard.

“The child is indomitable,” he says, throwing a look heavenward. “After yesterday, her mischief and merriment are just what we all need.”

“What happened yesterday?” Melody asks. “Where did you all go? I was bored. Pippa’s hair is short and does not make good plaits.” She commandeers Bard’s walking stick from the nook beside the door and proceeds to vanquish an imaginary foe with it. It is far too large for her small arms. I wince as she narrowly misses a lamp.

“We had a meeting with the warlord,” Bard says, diplomatically, while nimbly extricating the long cane from Melody before anything can break. “He explained about us leaving for this trip with General Tulwin.”

“General Tulwin is not a pretty green color like Edwin. Can’t we stay here?”

I choke down a laugh.

“Well, you cannot be an intrepid explorer if you stay,” Bard points out.

She mulls this over. “Okay then! Is it time for lunch?”

“I will pop and get something from the kitchen,” I say to Bard.

“Yippee!” Melody cries.

Bard is right. It is nice to have something normal, to have a reason to smile again. I have much to be grateful for. There is something about Melody’s presence that lifts the spirits of us all.

But as I exit the room, an air of melancholy seeks to envelop me. I’m not ready to be moving on again. Although, I already love Melody and couldn’t bear to be parted from her, even for freedom, I realize.

I take the stairs down to a passage that leads in two directions, one out to the courtyard where Trent came upon me and the other to the kitchens. Pausing at the bottom of the stairs, I stare at the place, so innocuous now, where he cornered me. It set in motion life-changing events that somehow, miraculously, played out for the better.

I turn away from the memory, instead heading toward the kitchen, but as I pass the open doorway that leads out to the stables and barracks, I come to a stop, spellbound, as I catch the sight of a towering white orc.

Like he senses me, Doug’s head swings my way. It is raining, and he is soaked, his dark hair sticking up like a shaggy pelt from his skull. My heart softens as I note the terrible bruising that turns his neck shades of purple and blue. Despite the cold, he wears only his usual hide pants and boots. Water sluices down over his big body.

Gods, he is magnificent in all his barbaric glory. My body stirs simply because all that he is... is mine.

His nostrils flare. He grunts and gestures to the orc beside him then turns to stalk my way.

A squeak escapes me as I realize I'm his destination, and, momentarily panicked, I turn away, then back, in a full circle to find myself facing him again. He is closer now, almost upon me, and two big wet hands grasp my arms to still me.

I glance up at him, a long way up, and my breath catches as I see that determined glint in his eye.

Heat pools in my belly. "We can't." I look around, scandalized. "It is the middle of the day. I'm supposed to be getting Melody's lunch..." I trail off, realizing I'm rambling and further that he is looking even more imposing and determined now.

He grunts and tosses me over his shoulder before splashing out into the wet at a jog.

"Doug! What are you doing?!"

Rain pelts me, saturating me in the short space between the buildings.

A giggle escapes me.

He grunts again and sets me down on my feet in one of the outbuildings.

"Doug, I have duties," I say, turning to poke a finger in his belly as I scold him.

His lips tug up. The wicked orc is grinning.

"You have recovered very quickly," I say pointedly, pushing wet hair from my face.

He nods, stalking me again, making me step backward deeper into the building, which I belatedly realize is a storage barn full of hay for the horses. The back of my legs connect with a thick bale of hay, and I sit abruptly.

"Doug," I hiss. But I'm also laughing.

He crouches down before me, unseating me as he lifts my thighs and rocks me onto my back. A low appreciative growl rumbles in his chest as he lowers his nose to my already weeping pussy and sniffs through my wet skirts.

My breathing turns choppy as he tugs my dress up. A heartbeat later, there is a distinct *snap*, and the remnants of my panties are tossed aside.

Beyond the open barn door, I can hear the clamor of men and orcs busy readying supplies, muted under the thunder of the rain. There is no preamble. Doug wishes to do this, and, therefore, he is doing this. With a low growl of acute need, he buries his head between my spread thighs and licks.

My fingers find his wet hair and grip. I spread wider and rock my hips for more. “Oh yes,” I say. “Yes, yes, yes!” The feeling of his tongue licking me, the faint scrape of his tusks against my inner thighs, all of it has me panting with need. Pleasure shoots through me. I nearly lost this—I nearly lost him. But I didn’t. And he is here, touching me.

“Please say you will let me touch you afterward. Please! I cannot abide it if you will not.”

He grunts and sets about tormenting me into a state of delirium with his wicked tongue as he lavishes his attention on my clit. My body locks as a climax tears through me, and sweet clenching sensations bring a flood to my pussy. He doesn’t stop, and I become too sensitive. When I wriggle, he merely pins me still. He tries to thrust his tongue deep into my pussy as if to gather all my juices from the source. I cannot bear it, and yet I never want him to stop. The rain drums outside, muting the clangs and shouts of men and orcs and providing cover for my moans as he easily wrests more pleasure from me.

He is mine, this orc—my mate. I am claiming him and keeping him. No threat nor danger shall ever drive us apart again.

As is inevitable, I come once more. Except, this time, once I rouse myself from the climax, I’m determined to have my turn. Gripping his coarse hair, I tug with all my small strength.

His head lifts, and he pins me with a glare, his black tongue swiping over his lips, savoring my taste. When he looks like he means to go back to his endeavors, I grip harder and tug again. “It is my turn,” I say. “It is my turn to touch.”

He shakes his head.

I nod, rising. He allows me to push him away from me, with my hand against his chest. “This is how it shall be from now on. You are not allowed to touch me unless I can also touch you.”

His jaw locks, and his nostrils flare, but I am very determined about my dues.

My eyes lower over the thick slabs of muscle, past his tight abdominals to where his cock strains his hide pants. I shove my skirt down to take away any temptation on that front. “It is my turn,” I repeat.

I stand and he stands too, eyes wary. Then I swap our places and urge him with a gentle hand. He sits back heavily on the bale of hay with a grunt that shifts to a low growl as I kneel between his spread thighs.

My important duties elude me. I shall get back to them... once I have had a taste.

The memories of how he tasted surface as I work his buckle, fingers made clumsy by my haste, and then his pants are down far enough for his thick, engorged flesh to spring free.

An appreciative murmur escapes me as I close my small fingers around his girth and pump. He groans, fingers biting onto the bale of hay at his side, and his body locked with tension. His scent hits me as I stroke him. Sticky pre-cum soon leaks from the tip and covers my hands. I hold his eyes. Unnatural for an orc, so blue and bright but turning darker as I lean forward. Then, directing the tip, I enclose the head in my mouth.

Mindful of last time, I brace for an explosion. When nothing happens, I glance up. Goodness, he is a picture of tension, body trembling wildly and barely in control. The taste of his copious pre-cum fills my mouth. Gods, how does orc seed taste so good? I cannot hold back and so I swirl my tongue around the head, only wanting to taste more. Then,

although I am new to this, it seems the most natural thing to work my small hands along his length as I bob my head.

“Mmmm.” I hum around his cock, better prepared this time, managing to get a third of him into my mouth before I feel the telling flex.

His hot cum explodes against the back of my throat. I lock my lips around his cock and swallow as quickly as I can. He makes a sound somewhere between pain and pleasure and tries to rise. My palm slaps against his belly, and he lets me hold and *gentle* him.

The excess cum leaks around my lips as I feel his belly tremble under my hand. His growls of pleasure and the way his hips jerk are only part of the reward when he tastes so impossibly good. More and more cum pulses into my mouth, dripping around my lips, coating my fingers, and pooling around his groin.

His fingers spear my hair, and he tugs. Not roughly, but enough to dislodge me from my prize.

His cock continues to jerk and shoot cum over his belly as we heave gusty breaths.

“There is a lot,” I say unnecessarily.

He grunts. I snatch my eyes from his bobbing cock, and our gazes clash.

My lips tug up when his cock is finally done dancing against his belly—he emits a shaky sigh. “I think we need to practice this.” When he doesn’t shake his head, no, I take it as a concession. “I don’t know if it is because you’re an orc or a shifter or because I love you, but it tastes good, and I want to do it again.”

I blush as the words leave my lips.

He grunts, lifts me from my knees to my feet, and helps me to straighten out my skirts. Rising, he uses a clump of straw to wipe his belly off.

I giggle. “I guess the rain will wash it away.”

He spins me around and plants his big palm against my ass in a playful spank.

I peep back at him, grinning. Then I remember I'm supposed to be getting lunch for Melody, and with a last lingering look at my mate, I head out into the rain.

I collect Melody's lunch tray and take it up to her quarters. It is here I learn the latest news from Bard.

We are leaving tomorrow, with Tulwin, for the port city of Bleakness. I shudder, for I have heard about the city where humans and orcs live... where they hold the slave markets.

It is also the place where many of the children were sent after they had passed through the outpost at Delwood.

Chapter Three

Jasmine

A part of me is not ready to leave the next morning, and a part of me cannot wait to be rid of this place and the memories that linger in that corridor I have to take every day.

We wrap up warm, the rain already turning to sleet. The sweltering heat of only a week ago is no more than a memory.

Melody is lifted up onto a wagon laden with supplies. Although she does not mind walking, it is a reasonable distance to the docks and wharf where sailing ships are waiting for us. She is very excited about both the wagon ride and the ship, and whoops with delight.

Our escort of orc guards are used to her antics and pay her no mind. They are dressed for war today, carrying long pikes, clubs, axes, sometimes swords, and they wear heavy leather armor with cloaks against the rain. I have been given similarly warm clothes, a basic dress, sturdy boots, and the cloak Rignor gifted me the day Doug was freed.

We make a procession through the streets, which lack their usual bustle. Any of Krug's residents who choose to go out in this weather hasten between their squat dwellings and the markets. The sky is overcast and filled with yet more rain, and by the time we reach the docks, the weather has taken on an icy chill, although at least the rain has slowed almost to a stop. The buildings here—the same squat mud creations—are of broader construction than the city and given over to warehousing of supplies.

I have never been on a ship before nor sailed upon the sea—I have never even seen the sea, although the path we use to approach offers me no view. The two ships, though, are a wonder to me as we come out onto the wharf. Tall-masted, built from glistening dark wood, they roll gently in the swell, and are so huge and sturdy that I question how they float.

Around them are several smaller vessels, the farthest of which is being unloaded. Bondservants form a steady stream carrying hessian sacks from the boat through an open archway into a nearby building.

I send a furtive glance to my left, where Doug walks, decked out in leather armor and a thick cloak, very much an orc ready for war. His eyes shift to meet mine, and I find reassurance in that look.

“Have you been on a ship before?”

He nods once.

Okay then. I can do this. People sail ships all the time, and they rarely sink. *Rarely*... I cling to that word, for sometimes they clearly do.

The cart bearing Melody comes to a rumbling stop on the wooden planks of the wharf before the first ship.

“Yippee!”

Her excitement brings a smile to my lips. If Melody can do this, so can I.

Bellowed orders come from ahead. Gangplanks are laid down, and the ship’s grizzly human captain, with a weathered face, bristly beard, and long gray hair whipped in the breeze, hastens us to board.

“Hold my hand, Melody,” Bard says, using his stern voice as though sensing the fairy child is about to get up to mischief.

“Can I climb the mast?” she asks.

“No,” Bard says. “Fairies are forbidden from climbing masts.”

“Why?”

He sighs heavily. I bite my lip to hide my smile as Melody turns and gives me an impish grin. “Can Doug climb the mast?”

“No,” Bard says. “Orcs are too heavy to climb masts. That is for small human boys.”

“I could be a small human boy,” she persists. “If I cut my hair short, no one would know.”

“They would see your pointed ears and know instantly that you were a fairy up to mischief, and you would be in very serious trouble indeed.”

“What would they do to me?” she demands to know, aghast. “Would they feed me to the sharks? I think I would like to meet a shark or a dolphin. Do you think we shall see any dolphins?”

I don’t hear the rest of what they say as they walk onto the gangplank. My stomach is full of fluttery nerves as I follow and see the dark, murky water lapping at the side of the ship.

It is a small relief to reach the deck, although I do not like the movement one bit.

“Are you a pirate?” Melody demands of the gruff captain, who does have a bit of a pirate look to him with his faded red jacket and cutlass at his hip.

“Aye, wee lass, I am,” the captain says, offering a conspiring wink to Bard. “Ye best nah be gettin’ ideas about climbin’ me mast lest I feed ye t’ the sharks.”

Eyes wide, Melody backs up into Bard, who places a hand on her shoulder.

“I like your jacket very much,” she announces, after gazing at the captain consideringly. She slips away from Bard to take a wandering route toward the commander of the ship.

“Melody, come away from the pir—captain,” Bard admonishes. “He is a very busy man.”

Melody ignores him. She comes to a stop beside the captain and closes her small hand over his while bestowing him a sweet smile. “Do they make such jackets in fairy size? I should very much like to become a pirate, too.”

The captain throws his head back and roars with laughter.

Orc generals, warlords, and captains-cum-pirates: none of them can resist a fairy’s charms.

Around us, more orcs are embarking, disappearing down a narrow set of steps into the underbelly of the ship. The second ship is likewise loading up.

“Peter!” The captain calls out to a young human lad, who hastens over. “Show our guests to their quarters.”

Peter is a brown-skinned lad only a few years older than Melody. He is dressed in shorn-off pants, a billowing shirt with a worn leather jerkin over it. From beneath a riot of corkscrew hair, he bestows a broad smile on us.

Melody abandons the pirate/captain and gives the lad a deeply admiring look, as if sensing a kindred spirit and the possibility of mischief ahead.

Doug emits a deep huffing sound. When I turn, I find my orc mate laughing.

“It will be a miracle if we can keep her from the mast,” Bard says tiredly, as we follow Peter through a round wooden door. Melody skips along at the lad’s side, demanding to know if he has ever seen a shark and how often he climbs the mast.

Our allocated room is at the end of the corridor and is small and cramped, with a tiny portal window through which I can see only the wooden slats of the wharf. I will share the tiny bunk room with Melody and Bard, with a nook outside for Doug.

“Yippee!” Melody announces, nimbly clambering up onto the top bunk.

“Why don’t we stow our things and watch the ship set sail,” Bard suggests.

“I’ll show ye where ye can stand so as nah t’ get in the crew’s way,” Peter says.

We are shown back onto the deck, where the gangplanks are being stowed and sailors hasten to their duties, while we are taken to the prow where we can stand out of the way.

I get my first look at the open sea.

My breath catches.

Melody whoops.

“It is so vast,” I say, unnerved by the rippling gray body of water that stretches out into the distance to where it meets the billowing clouds.

Around us we hear bellowed orders, the creak of the ship and rigging, and a great rattling sound that Bard informs us is the anchor being raised. The ship rolls in the water, and a great flapping noise comes from behind. I turn to see the first of the three great sails unfurl. It whips in the wind, and I feel the pull as we are taken out to sea. Behind, the wharf diminishes, growing smaller and smaller. I move over to the side so I can watch the land fade into the distance, my belly full of butterflies.

It is terrifying.

It is also exhilarating to see the great city of Krug sprawling out against the coastline, in a way that few people do.

More sails are raised, and the crew members are kept busy until we are soon powering along with the coastline on our portside, as Bard calls it.

The rain holds off, although the dark clouds suggest more is to come. The air is cold and sharp, yet I want to remain on the deck lest I miss a single thing.

I soon learn that being above deck is better than being below, because even though it is cold outside, at least my stomach does not roil. Melody barely notices, too excited by it all.

One day turns into two, and two into three. Doug turns the greenest shade of white orc and is miserable the whole trip.

On the morning of the fourth day, our destination comes into view.

Bleakness is a cheerless-looking port city built entirely from stone in variations of black and dark grey. Plumes of smoke rise from the jumble of dark slate roofs, dusted with snow.

Snow. How that reminds me of the outpost where I first began my time as a prisoner of the orcs.

Even Melody, who is usually excited by everything, watches the city loom closer with quiet, pensive regard.

I remember what I learned while at the outpost at Delwood: that this is where they bring the prisoners.

I wonder about the children from my village and whether any still linger in servitude here. The warlord promised me freedom, but that has not yet come to pass. And, even so, the thought of freedom leaves an unpleasant aftertaste while so many are not afforded it.

Melody is not the only quiet one.

Once more, change is coming for us all.



Doug

I have been to Bleakness twice before. It is a thoroughly disagreeable place. The only good thing about it is the opportunity to stand on solid ground. I do not like the fucking sea.

As the crew ready the ship and we sail into the port, I sense the melancholy encompassing our small party. The elusive freedom my uncle promised Jasmine feels a long way off. I'm no fool. It could be many years before he relinquishes Jasmine from her bonds, and much can happen in between.

Overhead, seagulls swoop and *squawk*, their cries carried on the breeze, merging with the cries of men. Carts rumble over the surface of the rickety wharf which is made uneven by weather and wear. The sharp, salty air carries the chaotic scents of tar, spices, and refuse. Sea vessels of every kind, from fishing boats to merchant ships, line the wharf. As our ship comes to its rest against the wharf and the sails are tied off, I'm aware of the immediate future, in the presence of so many orcs, myself included, who are dressed for war.

Orcs do not dress for war unless they are going to war.

I am trapped by the hope of the promised freedom for Jasmine, even as I recognize the great danger we will face before that can come to pass.

There is only one reason our path brings us via Bleakness, and that is to top up the battle ranks from the slave markets. They will pick the strongest. If there are not enough strong slaves, they will take whoever is there. All of them will be forced to fight. If any attempt to desert before the battle, they will be made an example of in ways that will instill upon the rest that to die serving us in battle is the better choice to make.

Whatever the fairy's part in this, it will scar her innocent soul.

And Jasmine, too. For all that she has been a bondservant for many years, she has been sheltered from much of what this means.

I have followed orders all my life and thought little about the consequences. In this world, we are at war with humans and shifters alike, while, beyond the portal, we battle sentient beings of every kind.

The weight upon my shoulders feels heavy, yet I'm grateful to live and bear it and for this opportunity to protect those I care about, in whatever ways I can.

Except, as I have recently been made aware, I am not infallible.



Jasmine

Bleakness is only the second city I have ever visited, and I'm struck by the wonder that humans created this. The obvious skills that have been applied to the more advanced brickwork make me feel sadly nostalgic, as though pining for something I didn't know I'd lost. I heard one of the sailors mentioning how this was once a prosperous human settlement known as Port Ardin, and then the Blighten came and took it over. It sits on the edge of their empire. The Blighten have enough control over it, but they pay it little mind now the inhabitants are well integrated with their society.

I wonder what it was like before, whether this drab facade is a symptom of its assimilation into the Blighten world or whether it was ever this way. My mind conjures up a more cheery setting with bright flags flapping in the breeze on the tallest roofs and a blue sky in place of these billowing dark clouds.

The pirate-cum-captain joins us on the deck as the gangplanks go down. "Ye are t' be the first off," he says. "General Tulwin be waitin' fer ye on the wharf." He reaches down to ruffle Melody's hair.

They made friends during the trip. He offered her an honorary red scarf and bestowed on her the title of 'pirate apprentice'. She wears the scarf with pride tucked inside the collar of her tunic.

Melody gives the pirate-captain an impish smile. "I want to be a pirate," she announces, turning to Bard. "Can't we stay on the ship?"

"No, Melody," Bard says. "We have very important matters to attend to. Our pirating days are over for now."

Doug and Bron take their positions, ready to escort us off.

Melody twists around to wave at Peter, who has likewise become a friend.

Then we're marching down the gangplanks to once more stand on solid ground. I feel strangely still at sea as my feet connect with the wooden wharf.

"It will pass," Bard says as if reading my mind, or perhaps it's clear that I'm a little unsteady on my feet.

We are escorted over to General Tulwin, who waits beside the entrance of a wide warehouse door that stands wide open. It is dark inside. A ramp slopes downward, although I can't see much beyond the illumination of a few torches.

"Do you remember your portal lessons, Melody?" General Tulwin asks.

She nods.

"Good," he says. "Come."

We follow him down the stone slope and into a great vaulted underground chamber where stone pillars rise to support the ceiling. He walks all the way to the far end, where he comes to a stop beside the farthest two pillars. Once there, he draws a velvet pouch from his pocket and takes out a portal keystone, which he presents to Melody.

"Place it around your neck, child."

She does as he asks, tucking it under a coat.

"Do you remember the marker Mohr Fall? Can you call it, child?"

She nods, closes her fingers around the keystone now nestled against her throat, and begins to chant.

The hairs rise on the back of my neck. The words have a resonance to them that brings a sense of quickening to the air.

A *pop* accompanies a portal opening between the two stone columns. It sparks and warbles like a black, oily sea.

Only now do I realize what this means.

I am to go through a portal for the first time in my life. Not only me, but Doug, Melody, Bard, and likely two full ships of orcs and our commanding general.

But Melody is not yet six years old. What happens if she gets it wrong?

I'm assaulted by such nerves that it is all I can do to try not to flee. Doug, perhaps sensing I'm a flight risk, places his big hand on the back of my neck, resting it over the harsh iron collar they fitted when we left Krug.

His touch calms me.

And the reality is that I am still a bondservant. I will be going through the portal whether I wish it or not.

The sounds of booted feet come from the left, and I turn to see rows of orcs marching down the slope. Two by two, they pass into the portal without apparent fear or concern. I watch the strange sparking surface welcome them into its embrace and I wonder what awaits us on the other side.

Somewhere new.

Somewhere I have never been before.

A home to innocent people we will soon war with.

As more orcs pass, Tulwin moves, and as if on a silent cue, we follow him, merging into the line, Bron and Doug forming their position of guard around us.

My heart thumps out an erratic tattoo in my chest as we draw closer to it. Ahead of me, Melody suddenly peers over her shoulder, not at me, but at the side of the room where the shadows linger between the tall columns.

I follow her line of sight... is that movement?

There is no time to look any further or try to make sense of what I think I've seen, for I'm at the portal. I balk. Doug closes his hand solidly over the back of my neck, propelling us both forward. His other hand reaches forward to clamp onto Bard's shoulder. Without the chance to protest, I'm thrust into the slick black surface.

The only sensation I have of anything is the feel of Doug's hand circling my neck. I scream into the nothingness, utterly terrified that he might let go.

Just as I convince myself we are lost forever in the void, I'm spat out the other side into a forest glen. The heat hits me like a blow. I stagger. Doug is there, keeping me up and moving, for my legs have turned to jelly, and I almost pitch to my knees.

"Mama!"

At Melody's joyful squeal, my head whips around. We are still moving forward. Behind, the other side of the portal that we've just emerged from sparks as bondservants and orcs continue to pass through. We must move forward to give them space.

"Mama!"

Something is happening. Something wrong. Something terrible. The orderly line of orcs disintegrates into chaos as weapons are drawn and the sounds of engagement ring out.

"MAMA!"

A wooden slatted wagon lumbers through the portal, which seems to expand to encompass it before resuming its normal size again.

Blood.

It sprays in an arc across the forest floor, shocking me into docility.

Doug shoves me away from the disturbance then surges into the fray.

An orc goes down.

So does a warrior bondservant.

"MAMA!"

Melody's cry rouses me, and I hurry to her side, drawing her small body against mine as the ring of clashing swords rents the air.

Another orc goes down.

Growls, savage and full of rage, set me trembling with fear.

A fairy woman with beautiful red-gold hair a shade darker than Melody's has a blade pressed against her throat.

"Halt or I will slit the fairy's throat!" the orc holding her barks.

Melody trembles in my arms.

A human alpha—a warrior—stands in the middle of a circle, bloody sword in hand. Around him are the fallen bodies of human bondservants and orcs. One... three... no, five. My racing heart steadies a little as I see Doug standing to one side, and he appears to be whole.

A dozen more orcs form a circle, weapons trained on the alpha who stands, chest heaving and armor sliced through in numerous places, his face bruised and a little bloody. His eyes locked with the fairy held at knifepoint before he growls and tosses the sword to the floor.

"Don't hurt Mama!"

A shudder ripples through Melody's young body as the mass converges on the alpha. I pull Melody's face into me, shielding her eyes with my hand as they beat him to the ground.

I don't know what just happened or what any of it means. I convince myself the fairy cannot be Melody's mother, but there is the possibility that she might be.

Bard's face is a mask of consternation as he turns to me and shakes his head once.

The fairy and her warrior are tossed into the slatted wagon, and then we are all moving again, marching into the forest and the unknown.

Chapter Four

Jasmine

We march, greater now in number than were in the two ships of orcs which left Krug, for many bondservants of varying ranks joined us at Bleakness wearing the same harsh iron collar that I do. There are also bondservants of higher ranking, whose attitude and demeanor remind me of Trent. I recognize their type for what they are: the worst form of scum who would betray their fellow humans to curry favor with the orcs.

There are times when I think I'm coming to understand the Blighten, but today is not one of them. They are more than a race of orcs. Although the orcs hold much of the power, there are layers inside this society in which humans can thrive.

I hate that I play a part in their obsession with conquest and I fear for the unwitting role forced upon Melody, who has retreated into quietness as she is carried in Doug's arms.

Yet, there is good among the Blighten in the form of orcs like Doug and bondservants like Penny... who I had not seen since I arrived at Krug but I am reunited with her today. It is a small positive and one I cling to.

"I thought I saw you when that business was going on with the fairy and her mate," she says, having dropped back from the cart she was following to speak to me, and gives me a quick hug. "How have you been? I heard about what happened with Doug at Krug and how he was nearly hung. Is it true he killed Trent?"

I nod and tell her about what happened.

Her lips form a line. "It is the same everywhere. There are two among the human bondservants with me that've been promised freedom, and they are nothing but thugs and bullies, eager to impress upon the orc masters that they are well integrated with the Blighten cause. Rig is a thick-necked bald bastard who is always quick to use his fist or club. Dolan, his

companion, is missing a couple of teeth courtesy of the fairy's alpha mate. Both will be out for blood and to remind us of our place after that alpha got the better of them."

"Back to your place in the line, human," an orc calls out.

Penny sends me a brief smile before she hastens ahead to join her part of the massed group.

It is good to see her again, even if her words remind me that there is danger here and that I must never grow complacent.

We march throughout the day. As dusk falls, the long column is brought to a stop, and tents are pitched.

Bron and Doug make short work of the tent for Melody, which is erected close to the center of the camp. As they are completing the task, I meet General Tulwin for the second time when he arrives with an escort of battle orcs to speak with Melody and Bard.

"No harm shall come to the fairy," Tulwin assures the child. "And tomorrow morning, she may visit with you."

Melody has been subdued all day but visibly lifts at this news.

She does not speak nor venture to approach the stern orc and take his hand. Having never seen her with Tulwin, I cannot say if she dislikes him in general or has been damaged by what happened earlier. Either way, her pensive regard in one usually so vibrant makes me want to weep.

Tulwin turns to Bard and nods once before leaving again.

Bron and Doug finish the tent before heading off to help with others. I go and collect a tray of food for Melody. She doesn't eat anything, not even the berries, which are always her favorite in lieu of a toffee apple. I barely recognize this child who is more often full of joy.

As she climbs into her bedroll to sleep, Bard motions me to join him outside the tent.

"She will settle," he says. "The other fairy is not her mother. Her mother is assuredly dead. I think she suffers shock

seeing another fairy for the first time since... her mother and father fell.”

I swallow thickly. “Will she be all right?”

He shrugs and lifts his brows. “The child is indomitable. I believe if, as Tulwin indicated, she might be able to spend time with this fairy—whoever she is—it will go a long way toward comforting her.”

“Do you know what they wanted? Why they came? Why they followed us? Are they her people?”

“No, I don’t believe they are Melody’s people. There is something different about the other fairy. I have heard of a fairy kingdom called Sanctum, through the portal and in a parallel world where fairy omegas command warriors in quests, which would fit. Still, there are many fairy worlds.” His face softens. “You should try and get rest, Jasmine. Make no mistake, this is a war party, and we are going to war. Tomorrow we will travel again. And it is likely to be a long, arduous day.”

Bard is so often serious, yet it is understandable when he bears the weight of looking after Melody. I have often wondered about how she came to be here, and now I know it was through tragic circumstances that left her parents dead.

I collect the supper tray to take back to the servants’ part of the camp. Then, as I return, making my way between the tents, a man steps into my path. He is bald with a thick club hanging from his belt. I recognize him from the fight. This is the one Penny called Rig. I’m sick of lecherous men and want to roll my eyes that this nonsense comes for me. If he offers me a crust of bread, I swear I will demand Doug shove it up his ass.

In some ways, I feel like I have matured and learned lessons. In others, I think myself naive for thinking things would change for the better.

But that is not the case. We are part of a war tribe, as Bard has pointed out. An orc army set on a path toward assimilation of others. The people with us now are a mixture of good and

bad ones. Penny is one of the good ones. But while Trent may be gone, other human bondservants, like this Rig, step in with the same mindset, eager to bully their fellow humans for a sucked cock, or to impress their orc masters.

I am not much older and certainly no wiser nor better equipped to deal with the scourge of humanity, although this time, at least, I remember that I have a fearsome orc mate. “What do you want?”

He chuckles, but it has a nasty edge, and he steps closer. “Playing coy, lass? You know the score.”

My nostrils flare. “I’m a mated woman,” I hiss, assessing where we are and how far away Doug might be. He was setting up a tent two down from Bard’s last I saw, which is a distance away. I could scream, but it is debatable whether anyone might come to my aid. I tilt my chin, determined to set this presumptuous male right. “My mate killed the last man who tried to put his hands on me.”

“Doug? That dumb white bastard doesn’t frighten me.”

“He should.” Doug might be mute, but he isn’t stupid, unlike this stinking human who dares to block my path. Only I’m shaking now, considering screaming or running or both, when a dark shape comes behind him, and a meaty fist cuffs Rig up the side of his head.

Bron.

The human swings around to face his assailant before staggering a step back when he sees the huge orc.

I bite back a smirk. *Not so brave now, are you?*

“That is Doug’s mate, human, and he killed the last man who touched her.”

Rig’s eyes bug in a way that makes me want to giggle.

“I thought the bitch was lying.”

“She wasn’t,” Bron says, folding his arms. “Now fuck off.”

Rig mutters a curse and stalks away.

The suppressed giggle escapes my lips, but it turns into a sob. My shaking shifts to a violent tremble that makes my teeth chatter, as I'm reminded of my vulnerability and how men are made foolish by the cocks that swing between their legs.

Bron closes in on me and fists my upper arms when I sway. "There, tiny human. The bastard is gone. I will tell Doug, and he will put a thumping on the prick lest he get confused again."

"I-I-I..." I cannot get the words out past the violent chattering of my teeth. "If D-d-doug had come up-p-pon us, he might have killed him a-a-and go-t-t-en into t-trouble again."

His big brows knit together. "Ah—you're looking pale, tiny one."

My legs give out, and he hoists me into his arms before striding off through the camp.

"I can walk," I protest. His scent is pleasant in some ways and clean, compared to Rig, yet it is not Doug's scent, and it makes me uncomfortable to be close.

Bron ignores my wriggling and continues on, a stubborn set to his jaw that is reminiscent of Doug at his mule-headed worst. Do all orcs have a stubborn streak?

Only as we emerge from the camp, and I see Doug rise from where he is putting up a low tarp tent—which I realize is for us—do I recognize the error of Bron carrying me.

"Put me down," I say, my tone sharp.

To his credit, Bron is swift to comply, and even though my legs are not quite stable, he slowly backs away.

Doug stalks toward us, chest heaving.

"He was only—uff!" I am snatched up and tossed over Doug's broad shoulder. He growls low and menacing at his friend. "Oh! This is not Bron's fault, Doug." He swats my ass—I thrash—he swats it again.

I huff out a breath and try to peer back.

Bron stands a few paces away, hands up. “Doug, this is not what you think.”

It would seem humans are not the only males made foolish by the thing swinging between their legs.



Doug

Common sense tells me I should hear Bron out. We have been brothers since we were whelps and have always had each other's back. But seeing his hands upon Jasmine clouds my mind to everything but rage and lust.

Territorial. That is how I feel. She is mine.

Ours, my beast corrects. He paws inside my head, snarling and wanting out.

“One of the humans had cornered her,” Bron is saying. I believe he has said it more than once, but I am slow to take it up. My nostrils flare.

He lowers his hands, perhaps sensing I've regained my self-control. “Name is Rig. A bald bastard who enjoys using his club.” He nods at me. “Take some time to calm and comfort your mate. Put a thumping on him tomorrow when you're clear-headed and won't kill the prick. We are far from Krug and the protection of the warlord. You look fit to bust my skull, and all I did was bring your mate back. The human bastard will not live to see the morning if you go at him like this.”

Bron always did have a rambling mouth, as though my silence makes him fill in the gaps. But he is well-meaning, and I'm grateful that he protected her when I could not. I will need to make an example of Rig so that word gets around not to touch what is mine. That will not be a problem. I am skilled at keeping querulous humans in line.

“Doug?”

My head twists to look at Jasmine, still over my shoulder, and she peers back up at me.

I hear Bron chuckle and the sound of his footsteps as he walks away.

But I pay him no mind—all my rage shifts with lightning speed toward lust as her aroused smell hits me.

Does she like it when I master her?

My cock thickens and lengthens, spitting an enthusiastic blob of pre-cum behind my pants. The tiny hairs on my body rise as I remember that stormy day when I took her to the barn and licked all the juices from her sweet cunt.

I think she does.

With a growl, I turn and stalk for the low tarp that makes a tent of sorts. It is not cold here, and the camp is well-guarded. Not that anyone would threaten me.

My hands shake as I consider her being at risk again. I have been fucking negligent and will not do that anymore. If events at Krug serve any purpose, it is to cement that I am hers and she is mine.

I strip her of her clothing, ripping it a little in my haste, half mindless with my need to taste her.

“Doug?”

Her demand comes out a little whiney as she is tossed onto her back amid the thick fur that lines my little tent. I lick my lips, taking in the image of her spread out for me, legs wide, wet pussy on display, and plump tits heaving in the most enticing way.

She likes it when we master her, my beast assures me, prancing under my skin, preening for our mate even though she cannot fucking see.

“Do you want to put it in me?”

I freeze.

“Doug, please. I am so wet and ready for you.”

Gods, she is a fucking test. My eyes lower to her pussy. I am obsessed with it, the feel of it under my fingers, the taste. I imagine how good it would be to sink my cock inside her, to feel her silken walls wrap around me. Sinking into a daze, I

lower my hand to her most intimate place and carefully push a finger inside her hot, wet cunt.

She moans and clenches over me.

“Yes, please, yes.” She rocks her hips, seeking more.

My cock is hard and thumping for release—my beast growls his encouragement. My other hand is at my waist, loosening the tie as I kick off my boots and shove the pants down, all the while finger fucking her needy place. Just the scent of her has me half out of my mind. I thrust a second finger in, eyes darting between what I do and her face, searching for any signs that she wants me to stop.

My nostrils flare when I see that she does not want me to stop; in fact she is humping up for more.

My cock aches. My balls are heavy and swollen—the mutilated gland near the base is throbbing.

I should not do this. I should wait. Eat her out and make her come, and then hold her in my arms like I usually do. I am nothing but a mutt, neither an orc nor a shifter. I am an abomination that should have been drowned at birth.

“Goddess, please, Doug!”

Her cry cuts through the dark void, filled with my mother’s harsh words, into which I was sinking.

Somehow, and against all probability, she wants me and only me. This tiny, sweet, caring human woman is begging for me to take her, to *mate* her.

My fingers are gone, and my wet cock head nestles against her entrance. It is only now that I see how big I am compared to my fingers, how obscene I look against her tiny entrance that is tight around two fingers. I’m trembling with the strain of holding back, of resisting the hot, wet place that I want to make mine.

I have never rutted any female, neither woman nor orc. I have rutted no one. I am frozen in confused terror that I might do this wrong. Yet, at the same time, I find that I am also

sinking into her, feeling her tight place sucking on the tip of my cock and encouraging me to give her more.

I press deeper, my eyes flashing to her face just in time to see her wince.

With a roar, I try to pull away, but she clamps her small legs around me, and all I do is lift her from the fur. I try to peel the brat off—she clings tighter.



Jasmine

He thinks he is hurting me. “I am fine, Doug. It was just a surprise.” Gods, he is hard work with his fear of breaking me. I admit to being a little nervous, but we shall never get past this. I must show no reaction as he cleaves his flesh into me, which will surely be a test for me when he is huge there. He has been preparing me for many weeks, rousing me to pleasure, using his fingers and tongue, making my body sing. Perhaps there is more that might be done, yet I do not want to wait—I did not want to wait this long.

We hang at an impasse. My legs are locked on his waist, as we stare at one another with his thick cock head wedged inside me, promising an enticing fullness and pleasure.

I stoke my hands over his big, brawny shoulders, feeling the tremble in him. Perhaps there is no amount of preparation that can be enough when a woman mates with an orc. The knowledge that they do gives me the courage to go on. I pet his shoulders. “Please don’t stop.”

With a growl of anguish, he relaxes and sinks deeper. My sharp gasp is involuntary. The strain is monstrous, yet what I feel is more discomfort than pain. He tries to pull out. I clamp my thighs tighter. My pussy squeezed over the arresting fullness, and a deep moan feels like it is ejected from my belly.

He groans again in answer, trembling violently, trying to peel my legs and arms off, but I double down, and he is mindful of hurting me, even in this.

“You are a stubborn orc,” I hiss at him, my legs trembling now, too, with the strain of keeping him in.

I hate seeing his indecision and how I have pushed him past what he is comfortable with, but his cock is still hard, and he wants this as much as I do. Goddess, the nerves in the entrance to my pussy pulse and flutter around his thick girth. “I think I’m going to come.”



Doug

She wants this. The tiny wriggling human is determined, and I am but a weak orc half-breed who is helpless to pull out. She moans as my hips begin to rock, filling her in shallow thrusts that have me seeing stars. I'm going to come.

I'm going to come, and I haven't yet gotten more than half of it in!

Then she tips her head back and emits the filthiest moan before her pussy clamps down on me.

She is coming all over my cock!

My hips snap forward.

Gods! My cock has sunk all the way into her slippery cunt until it meets resistance where the knot butts up against her entrance. Truth be told, there is not a bit of fucking space anywhere inside her. I have bottomed out even as her walls caress me as she comes.

It feels too good. I never dared to imagine what it might be like. Her mouth was a fucking test: but this clenching heat? I cannot hope to abstain. My spine tingles and my heavy balls rise as her rippling cunt compels me to follow her over. My hips jerk erratically as I pump her with seed, losing all command of my wits.

She moans and writhes underneath me, her pretty face contorted with rapture.

"Why did I not do this before?"

"You are so stubborn," she mumbles.

I know I am stubborn. Truth be told, I believe my stubbornness is the only reason I am still alive. My balls keep reaching for more. My cock, painfully hard, demands that I thrust into her softness to better open her up.

She thrashes—I believe she is still coming. I pin the wriggling human and begin to thrust again. My eyes are glued to the place where we connect, where I pierce her flesh and split her in two with my brutal orcish cock.

“What a filthy gripping little cunt. Look how you cling to me with every thrust.”

“Oh gods!” She mutters, her head thrashing from side to side.

My chest swells with pride even as my dick spews more cum. I am doing this to her. I am pleasuring my mate. *“Your filthy human cunt will be well ruined by the time I’m done stretching you out with my fat cock.”*

“Please, please, please!”

“That’s it. Beg mate. Beg me to give you more. You were made to take this, to take me. Always demanding my cock. Trying to touch it, kiss it. Well, have you gotten what you wanted now, little human? Now I’m opening you. Forcing your flesh to yield. Ruining this tight little pussy to make it perfect for me.”

“Oh, oh, oh!”

“You don’t even know what you beg for. I have come once, but it has barely taken the edge off it. The second batch of my seed will drown your pussy.”

“More!”

I pick up my pace, mesmerized by the wet slapping sounds. *“Can you hear that, mate? Assuredly that is not all down to me. My filthy, needy little human is all wet and open for a good deep rutting. Letting the brutal beast ravish you and demanding more. Look how you grip and suck me in. Do you want some more of my seed? Do you want me to fill you all up?”*

“Oh please, Doug. More!”

I give her more, pounding into her softness. Different noises pour from her lips, deep and guttural, at first, then little whimpers even as she spasms around my thrusting length. *“I*

love your filthy pussy. I've been obsessed with it since I first tasted you here, but now, look at you taking me, all of me, making your little hurt noises every time I bottom out, even as you beg me for more."

"Oh! Please don't stop. I'm coming!"

I pound her cunt. I don't know how she takes it. Her mouth is open in a silent scream, and her face is contorted and looks barely human.

"More, more, more," she chants.

"Gods, how do you take this? Where does it all fucking fit?"

Her head thrashes wildly, and her nails score my flesh. My heated gaze roams over her body. Her tits jiggle and sway with every thrust. I palm one and pinch the nipple and she arches up into my touch.

"Do you like that little human? Like it when I play with your tits?"

"Oh yes, that feels so good!"

I am fucking close. I pinch her engorged nipple and cruelly twist it with my fingers in time with my more leisurely thrusts.

"You are perfect like this, my little writhing human, with your pussy stuffed full of fat cock. I'm going to seed you. Work you up to taking my knot so I can breed you."

She groans. Braced above her, I grind deeper still.

"Rest assured, before I'm done with you, you will be taking all of me."

"I'm going to come, I'm going to—" She comes yet again, her pussy spasming violently around me.

I thrust deep and still—it feels like the top of my head blows off even as my cock flexes and shoots hot jets of cum into her gripping cunt.

I rock against her, my knot maddened by the need to get in, although I have no idea where it might fucking go. I pump

more cum into her as she thrashes and mumbles all kinds of nonsense.

“You will take it, little mate. Take every drop of my beastly cum until you are all full up.” Lowering my head, I nip against her throat, breathing in her scent. *“Does that feel good?”*

“Mmm, so good,” she mumbles.

I lean up to have a better view of the place where we join, watching her stomach ripple as she milks me of my seed. The sight is deeply compelling, and I shoot a particularly heavy jet of cum that fills her up. She moans. There is so fucking much, I can feel it leaking back out around my cock and dripping down my balls.

Her hands go to her belly. “Oh, what are you doing?”

I pluck her small hands away and pin them above her head. Gods, her belly is swollen. It was not like that before. My hips rock against her, balls tighten and rise over and over as weaker jets of cum are ejected and I stare at her belly. *“Fuck! I’m really filling you all up.”*

“Oh, Doug, I can’t. This is just assuredly not a normal amount,” she wails, pulling against my hold.

I feel my jaw set and my nostrils flare as she seeks to deny my seed. My balls reach again, and I growl low with pleasure as another hot batch of cum bathes the entrance to her womb. *“Try to stop gripping, filthy little human. I can’t possibly stop coming while you keep milking me like this.”*

“Oh, I’m coming again!” And she does, squeezing my cock so hard that it is little wonder I am forced to come yet again, ejecting a final heady jet of cum, followed by a full body shiver.

She falls to panting.

I find the presence of mind to pull out of her clenching heat. A flood gushes out. I stare at it in wonder.

“Oh, Doug, what have you done to me? My tummy’s too full.”

I grunt, push her wrists firmly against the furs above her head and fix her with a stern glare that warns her not to interfere. Then I spread her legs wide and, using my fingers and thumb, gently pull her puffy pussy lips apart. Frothy cum spills out, dripping to the furs. She is swollen, pink, and all beaten up by my cock. This knowledge ought to soften my dick—it does not. Holding her open, I push first one, then two fingers into a dripping cunt. Cum splatters out as I slowly pump.

“Oh!”

I'm rapt as she thrusts her hips up and begins to milk my fingers. It is a weak contraction. *“You are well used here, yet your naughty pussy is greedy for more. See how you keep gripping my fingers, encouraging me to fill you all up again. Do you need more cock, mate? Do you want me to force my knot in here so it holds all my cum inside you where it needs to be?”*

My cum begins to splatter out as I pick up my thrusts, torn between watching her dripping cunt and the ripples over her distended belly.

“Oh please, make it come out! There is too much!”

I growl with displeasure that she claims this is too much. My cock is still dripping seed, which should be inside her. But I also do not like that she appears to be in discomfort. It seems only natural to place one palm on her belly and press firmly as my fingers thrust in and out of her ruined cunt. Then I begin to pump her belly. *“There. This will relieve the pressure some. Next time, you need to hold it for longer to better get used to it.”*

She wails and thrashes about as I pump my fingers vigorously, and the cum gushes out. Then her neck suddenly arches and she offers up a filthy little groan as her cunt crushes my fingers and she ejects a heavy gush that saturates the furs.

I slow my pumping. She flings an arm across her eyes and pants.

Her belly has gone down, although my lips thin seeing all this waste. *“I will never breed you unless I can get my knot in and hold this inside properly, but we will build up to that.”*

She moans, her stomach ripples, and yet more cum spills out. I blink a few times, my cock rising to full hardness and ready to go again. I’m not even touching her, and she has just fucking come.

Fighting down the urge to prize her slim thighs further apart and plow her softness, for my mate has already taken a lot, I collapse to her side and drag her tiny body against mine. *“I love you.”*

She presses a sleepy kiss to my chest and mumbles, “I love you too.”

My whole body stiffens, except my cock. My cock goes soft.

She stiffens, too, and slowly lifts her head to peep up at me.

My mind scrambles over the conversation we just had. *Conversation*—We just had a fucking conversation.

Sweat breaks out across the surface of my skin. *“You can hear me?”*

“Um—yes!” It comes out on a squeak.

“Fuck!” I surge up in a rush, stubbing my toe on a tree root in my haste to get away from her. My toe hurts like a bastard, but I pay it no mind. I am too busy pacing and gripping my hair.

“Doug?”

I continue pacing, surprised I have not ripped the hair from my scalp when I consider the violence with which I grip it. She’s staring at me expectantly. I’m coming apart in the privacy of my mind... which is not fucking private anymore. *“How long?”*

“Just tonight”

Is she smiling? *“How long tonight?”*

“It—ah—started when you first put your—um—cock inside me and started talking about my filthy gripping—”

“*Enough!*” The way she hesitated over the words tells me she is blushing, although it is too dark to see. Self-loathing fills me. I should not have said those things. She can hear me! “*Gods, I have defiled you with my coarse words!*”

“Well, I liked them,” she announces primly. “They made me get even wetter, especially the bit about—”

I growl.

She bites her lip, but I can see the brat is fighting another smile. My cock is sticking up like a flagpole and leaking pre-cum like a tap.

I bring my pacing to a stop and stare at her in wonder. She can hear me. How amazing is that?

A sweet smile breaks across her face. “Doug, please come and cuddle me. I very much need you to hold me right now.”

I go to her. How could I not? I can deny her nothing. I would kill for her. I have, twice. And I would do it again. A jealous rage had gripped me earlier because Bron aided her, not me. Bron had been the one to carry her back. Bron, who could talk to her... “*Did you hear any of that?*”

“What?” She peers up at me.

“*It is only when I project then.*” Or whatever I am doing.

“I like it,” she says. “I like that I can hear your voice. It is deep and rumbly.” She rests her head against my chest as though shy. “You have a very naughty mouth... I never realized.”

I huff a laugh. And then I roll her over, so my back is to the opening of the tarp, and any potential danger, and put her back to my chest. Once I have her placed to my satisfaction, I slide my hand down and insinuate my fingers between her tightly sealed thighs.

“Oh, what? Why? Why do you need to do this?”

A little moan escapes her lips I force two fingers into her gaping cunt.

“I like this. It is mine. Sometimes, when I move my fingers in the night, your pussy squeezes over them. It is very pleasant. I like to keep you wet and primed. It pleases me. It pleases me to see you come. It pleases me to feel the wetness there afterward. It also pleases me immensely that you are full up with my cum.” I cannot get the pride from my voice.

“A little too full.”

“I believe you will get used to it.”

“I believe I will never get used to it,” she says dryly. “But I shall spend the rest of my life joyfully trying.”

Chapter Five

Jasmine

The pretty fairy, who Melody calls Mama, goes by the name of Winter. She is kind to the child, if a little cool in disposition, and answers her many questions about the kingdom from which she comes. Her fine clothes have gone. She has been given a rough homespun dress and fitted with an iron collar. The blisters on her throat speak of her race, for fairies are made weak by iron. A strip of blanket has been wound around it to try and protect her, but the way she almost reaches for it, then stops, indicates the great pain it causes her.

Life settles into a pattern. We travel most days but occasionally make camp and do not move. Winter's mate, Jacob, is tasked with training the human bondservants and shifters, which takes place all day if we remain in camp, or of an evening if we have traveled.

Rig has not come near me since Doug had words with him, and I'm grateful for that.

I ought to feel more settled, but I do not.

There is an undercurrent to the camp that sets me on edge.

Doug has not ruttled me again. I made the mistake of telling him I was not sore the following night, and then, the moment he tried to put his finger inside me, I winced. He roared and stormed out of our little tent, pacing for a good long while before he calmed down. When he returned to the tent, he put me on my back and told me in no-nonsense terms how he would only accept pleasuring me with his mouth.

I love his voice, deep and growly. He is very blunt, and his words make me blush.

Much of what he does makes me blush.

I blush now just thinking about him and busy myself with my sewing as Melody and Winter sit talking about Sanctum, the fairy kingdom from whence Winter comes.

I wish Doug were a little less fearful of hurting me. I'm not made of glass and I can take more than he presumes. It has been nearly a week, and I'm a little obsessed about taking his cock inside me again. But, no, he is full of stubborn determination that *he* will know when I'm ready. If only I could get him past the putting-it-in part, matters would all fall into place. For such a gentle orc, he has a very dominant side when it comes to rutting and I am amazed with how obsessed he was with filling me with his seed and keeping it all inside.

My blush deepens as I wonder if that is an orc thing, a shifter thing, or just a Doug thing.

On the opposite side of the tent, Winter is encouraging Melody to take a nap. Today, is a day where we have not had to move on, and the child is full of energy and back to her old self. "She is a good lass," I say into the quietness that follows, going back to my sewing, "and has taken to you swiftly, mistress."

"She is." Winter smiles then reaches toward her collar before she remembers and stops herself.

I feel all that she suffers like an echo inside me.

The collar reminds us of our status, that I am still bondservant, and that the freedom promised by the warlord is far away.

"I am no one's mistress anymore," Winter says quietly, but with such bitterness that I lift my head from my needlework.

"What of your warrior? Is it not the way of your people that you are his mistress?"

"It is our way, but Jacob and I are not bound to one another in the deeper way of a life bond."

"You are not?" I frown. "But your omega scent is muted. I thought for certain he was your mate." I have no knowledge of this personally, but Bard spoke about it with confidence a few days ago. And besides, whenever I see her beside her warrior, the pull between them is palpable.

She shakes her head, her brows pinching together. A myriad of emotions pass across her face. They unsettle me in

the way many things have done since we joined Tulwin on this quest.

“I need a moment,” she says, and I stare after her as she pushes the opening flap aside and flees the tent.

I rise, dropping my sewing to the floor. As my eyes go to the sleeping child, I am torn. That look upon Winter’s face is one I know well. It is the mirror of all I felt the night I fled during the bear attack. It is a look of imminent recklessness. If she runs, she will be punished, as will her warrior, too, perhaps.

I go after her, relieved to find Bron on duty outside. “Do not let Melody leave,” I say. “Which way did Winter go?”

He points to his left, where rows of tents disappear into the distance under the shelter of the forest.

I take off at a run.

But she is gone, and my frantic search comes to a stop as I turn full circle in the midst of tents in an area unfamiliar to me.

“Where are you off to, my pretty little omega?” a rough voice says.

Omega? There cannot be more than one omega in this camp.

I take off again, slowing as I near, peering around the side of a tent, heart thumping in my chest.

Dolan has her. The toothless bastard who is Rig’s friend. The one Penny warned me about. He has a hand clamped over Winter’s mouth as he drags her into a tent and from my sight.

I look around, feeling frantic. Should I go back to Bron? I do not want to give the bastard that long alone.

My eyes alight on a sturdy tree branch that has fallen beside the tent.

I snatch it up and creep toward the front of the tent.

“Quiet, little one, and I will not hurt you,” he says, his words muffled by the tent wall.

I shake with outrage fills me. The dreadful memory of that night Trent took me batters at my mind. I blink furiously, my palm turning sweaty around the branch as I carefully peer through the crack in the tent.

He has his back to me with Winter pinned to the floor beneath him. She kicks and flails as he fumbles with his belt.

She cries out.

He slaps her.

I charge. The tree limb is far too large for my small strength, I nevertheless put everything into it. It swings in a perfect arc, driven by the potency of my rage, and connects with the side of his head. *Crack!*

“Uf!”

The blow carries him with it, and he topples to the side.

I stare down, chest heaving, wondering if he is out or if I need to bash the bastard again.

When he doesn't move, I toss the branch to the floor and rush to Winter's side. A deep guttural sob bursts from her chest as she strains to break free. Dolan has trapped her legs with his heavy weight, and we both wrestle to push him aside.

“Come, mistress,” I say. “We cannot linger here.”

“Melody?”

“Is safe. But you cannot go to her like this. Come.”

I take her hand and lead her back through the camp. Finding an empty tent, I take her inside and sit her down. I pour her a cup of water, but she is shaking so badly that she spills more than she drinks. I pour more water into a basin and wring out a cloth, which I press to her cut lip. The side of her face is already coloring and will soon bruise.

Her warrior, Jacob, will beat Dolan bloody when he finds out. “There will be retaliation,” I say bleakly as I wring and reapply the cloth. “Your alpha will not stand for this.”

“He is not my alpha,” she says bitterly.

“You are a woman and a bondservant,” I say, face tightening. “If he is not your man, then you should make him so. If you don’t, other bondservants will offer him what you do not, and then he will protect them and not you.”

My words are harsh. They are delivered with far less finesse than my mother did to me.

Yet Winter is not a young fairy. Bard said she was many hundreds of years old and surely not ignorant of the world. There is no time for gentleness when we live in such bleak times. I have seen how she looks at Jacob and how he looks at her. Now is not the time to be fey with feelings when there is so much at risk.

“If you do not give him the favor of your body, you cannot expect him to fight for you.” I am speaking with a hardness I do not recognize as I wring and reapply the cloth. “This is about survival. My mama told me the day they took me to find the biggest, baddest male and throw myself at his mercy. I am still alive because that is what I did. The masters don’t much care for the bickering between bondservants. What is the rape of a bondservant? It is nothing to them. They do not trouble themselves with our infighting so long as no bondservant dies. Without a clear message from your alpha, Dolan will assuredly try again. But next time, he will be meaner and crueler.”

She stares up at me a beautiful broken fairy with an ugly collar around her delicate throat and a bruise on her cheek.

“We do none of the things we do because we want to,” I continue. “We do them so that we might live to draw breath another day. I have come to love the orc whose protection I bartered for with my body. When I was younger, I dreamed of marrying a prince. Instead, I am mated to a giant and a monster, yet he is now the prince of my heart. A man might feel honor bound to protect a woman who is not his for many reasons, but a man protects *his* woman with his heart and his soul, and that is a very different thing.”



Doug

The humans are plotting. I have watched their kind for long enough, and I know all the signs. Usually, I would take the ringleaders aside and give them a thumping to let them know I'm on to them.

This time, I let it play out.

I ask myself why.

My answer is called Jasmine, and I accept that she is changing me.

The orcs think they control the alpha, Jacob, by threatening his mate, Winter.

They do not control him. He is a former slave of Bleakness who was freed, and besides all that this means, his skills are beyond exceptional.

My determination is realized when he finds the means to stand near me as the captives eat their midday meal. The Blighten would not usually care about feeding the expendable bondservants they will soon use in battle, but it is a means to an end for when they come and sit with their women, they have the opportunity to see their loved ones and remember the consequences of what they fight for.

"I hear you are a nephew of the warlord," Jacob says, casually.

I grunt.

"And that you are mated to a pretty bondservant."

I grunt again.

"I assume you don't like seeing that iron collar around her throat."

My nostrils flare, and I glare at the cocky bastard.

He raises a placating hand.

The warlord promised Jasmine freedom, but there are many issues with that future and much that can go wrong before we reach that point, if we ever do.

“I want to talk to you plainly, but I understand that in doing so, I’m taking a risk.”

When I don’t even offer a grunt, he side-eyes me.

Turning away, he sighs heavily. “I am highly trained—a terrible weapon capable of killing many. One day soon, I will be forced to take up arms and fight a race who were once my neighbor. I will do it because there is a binding between my fairy mistress and me, and it compels me to protect her, whatever the cost. Tulwin said he would give her over to his soldiers for pleasure if I do not fight for him, telling me how she is an omega and how she would likely endure their harsh treatment for many years to come.”

My belly clenches, and a cold sensation settles in my chest.

“I don’t know why I trust you,” he admits. “But I see the way you watch me and know you suspect something is amiss. I’m hoping you are going to give me something here, so I don’t need to take you fucking out and upset that pretty bondservant my fairy mistress already likes.”

I snort out a laugh. The bastard is *very* fucking cocky.

His lips tug up as he continues to stare out at the clearing where the shifters and other bondservants take food and water. “I know, I might be coming across as cocky. I prefer to think of it as confident. Also, you have not reached for that sturdy-looking club at your hip yet, so I’m thinking we are in the tentative stage of an agreement.”

We are not in fucking agreement; I am merely humoring him.

“Do you make words in your mind?”

I scowl at him. *What sort of fucking question is that?*

“No need to get all grouchy. It is a pertinent fucking question. Not everyone thinks words. Some people speak

everything out loud. I had a warrior friend once who never shut the fuck up. I told him to think about shit before he opened his mouth, and he was very fucking confused, which is when I learned that not everyone thinks words inside their head.”

I think words. I think lots of words. It is the *only* place my words exist, except for my mate... I arrive at the abrupt conclusion that Bron does not think in words, for he also never shuts up.

I make a ‘continue’ gesture with my hand.

“So, assuming you do think words” —he is grinning now — “then shifters can communicate with their mind within their pack. Alphas, which you seriously must be, given you’re a big bastard, can communicate with other alphas outside their pack.”

I consider what I do with Jasmine... how we communicate. Is that part of me being a shifter? It feels likely that it is. Frowning, I glance at him and wonder where he is going with this, for there are only beta shifters here.

“I know these lands; I grew up here. Farther south and east are barbarian clans and other small villages like the one I once called home, certainly nothing of interest to a highly decorated general and his war tribe. But there are also shifter packs closer to the mountains, many of them... The wolf shifters are forming alliances with the fairy and human kingdoms. Some are already in place. They are formidable adversaries for the Blighten. There is only one reason why Tulwin would be here with so many orcs, why he is training beta wolves and bondservants as disposable fighters and threatening their fucking loved ones to this aim. He is going to attack the shifters to teach them a lesson, cow them, and deter them from an alliance. Only we can change that. If you are shifted, you will be able to speak to the shifters the orcs wish us to attack. You can warn them.”

My heart rate elevates. He is seeking to escape. To use the battle coming against the shifters toward this aim. I play catch-

up with what the alpha is saying as he sends me a casual glance. “You can shift, can’t you?”

I shrug, only now realizing that in engaging him this far, my loyalty has already shifted. Cold sweeps down my spine. *What am I doing here?*

“Have you ever shifted?” he presses.

I swallow thickly and nod.

“But you cannot shift at will?”

I shake my head.

He frowns. “Okay, that’s something I can ask the beta shifters about. Maybe they can coach you.” He gives me an up-down look. “You must be a very big fucking wolf.”

I blink slowly.

He raised both brows. “Are you a wolf?”

I shake my head.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Then what the fuck are you?”

An abomination. An ungodly beast. A monster.

I believe he reads all of this in my expression, but he surprises me when he chuckles. “Good. A badass orcle beast is just what we need. Pity we don’t have another ten. I will keep you posted.”

He strides away like we are in fucking agreement, and, despite my reservations, I’m thinking that we are.

I believe he will get a surprise when he sees my beast.

I believe everyone will, but most especially the sweet bondservant who is my mate.

She will not fear that side of us, my beast encourages me.

Everyone else assuredly will.

As I watch the alpha join the team of humans he is tasked with training to fight, I see them in a new light.

The humans are plotting. Now, I am plotting with them. I could pull back and strangle the alpha whelp who is too

fucking self-assured for his own good. Only I have already seen him fight, and I do not believe he is boasting. He has a plan, one that is afflicted with many flaws yet backed up by his indomitable will.

Some men were not meant to be enslaved. Jacob is one such man. I only hope his quest for freedom does not get us all fucking killed.



When evening comes, and I return to collect Jasmine, I know instantly something is wrong.

“There was trouble today,” she says, the moment we are alone.

“*What trouble?*” My eyes search her for damage. Not satisfied, I have her in my tent and on my fur, determined to take a closer inspection.

Her hand in the center of my chest stills me. “Not me, Doug. The fairy, Winter.”

I rock back on my heels, feeling the cold sweep of dread. “*Tell me.*”

“Dolan tried to rut her in a tent.”

My nostrils flare.

“I stopped him. Hit him with a branch and got Winter away... But he had hurt her, hit her, and frightened her very badly.”

“*Her alpha will retaliate.*”

She nods.

Fuck!

“Doug?” At the sound of Bron’s voice, we both turn. I rise and face him.

“Jacob has killed Dolan. He has been taken to General Tulwin. I thought you should know.”

I nod.

As Bron strides away, fresh worries rise to clamor with the rest.

Jasmine joins me, slipping her hand into mine. “Will they... will they kill him? They cannot kill him. Please say they will not?”

“I do not know. He is valuable to Tulwin. As is his fairy mistress... He was also planning to escape. To use the coming battle to this end.”

She gasps, and her small hand flies to her lips. “You are part of this?”

I nod slowly and swallow. *“We spoke today. I made no commitment to aid him.”*

“But you listened.”

I nod.

Her lips tremble. “And now?”

“Now I do not know what the fuck will happen. If he is dead, that will be the end of his plans. But if he lives... we are close to our destination, close to the shifter lands and those that Tulwin seeks to cow. One way or another, change is coming for us, Jasmine. What would you have us do?”

She leans against me and places her small hand on my chest. “I trust you, Doug. I trust your judgment in this. You listened to him when you could have taken him to Tulwin. I already know where your heart lies. We have both been broken down and remade by events. Freedom is but a fantasy your warlord uncle conjures to keep us complicit in his plans. No one here is free, not even Tulwin. They are all parts to be used. Your actions with me and with others tell me that you are noble of mind and deed. Your values do not align with the Blighten—I believe they never have. You are as much a shifter as you are an orc, although they are not your people any more than they are mine. I would live in the middle of a forest in a mud hut if that is the only place where we can be without judgment. We come from different beginnings and different

races, but we only make sense when we are together. I would go anywhere so long as it was with you.”

Her words and the honesty behind them move me in ways I did not know were possible for an ugly, scarred orc half-breed.

“Jacob’s fate is in Tulwin’s hands. If he lives, then I will follow him. You must be ready and alert. Do not underestimate the magnitude of what we seek to do. Many will fall. If it begins, I will find you. Never doubt that.”

Chapter Six

Doug

Jacob is given a warning and reprieve.

I am coached by two beta shifters, who I take into the forest during the early evening under the pretext of gathering wood. An alpha shifter could compel my beast to the surface, I am told. They can only offer instructions.

On the third day, I finally summon my beast.

The shifters cower back in horror before I can command my orc side to return.

They are stricken of face and wide-eyed.

“What is the name of the Goddess was that?”

I shrug, feeling a little smug about the awe in his voice. I cannot mind-talk with them, so that is the best I can do.



“Tomorrow,” Jacob says as he casually joins me on the edge of the clearing beneath the trees later that day.

I nod, feeling a rush that the moment is finally here.

Tonight, I will leave Jasmine with Bron for protection and seek out the wolf shifters who live in this region.



Jasmine clings to me when I tell her I must go. We are close to shifter lands, and I will need to run hard and fast if I’m to make it to their territory and back again before morning breaks.

To get there, I must yield power to my beast for the night. I’m nervous about it but also exhilarated, even though this is

dangerous and there are risks.

It is strange to have another half to yourself that is part of you and yet distinct. I worry that we are not well integrated, and this is a dangerous time to test this new skill. My beast grumbles under the surface of my skin that my worries are foolish.

“Bron will stay on guard while I am away,” I say to Jasmine.

“Does he, ah, know?” her words are tentative as she glances between me and Bron.

“Jacob spoke to him. The alpha is determined, courageous, and perhaps foolhardy, but he also has a good sense of people and orcs. Bron has had my back many times. I trust him. He understands and is prepared for the risks.”

Bron, who pretends to stare at the trees to give us some privacy, suddenly swings his head to face me, making a mockery of his pretense.

“Are you talking?” He looks between us.

Jasmine bites her lip to hide her smile and glances up at me.

“You can tell him.”

“Since we are, ah, mated” —it is dusk and the light poor, but I can still see her pretty blush— “We can speak to one another with our minds. Perhaps part of Doug being a shifter.”

Bron’s eyebrows rise. “What does he sound like then?”

Jasmine chuckles. “Like a big grumbly orc.”

Bron huffs a laugh.

“It is time,” I say.

Jasmine nods. “Will you? Will you change into a beast here?”

“I will move further away from the camp, just in case I am seen.”

Her eyes search mine. She's curious about that side of me. I'm not quite ready for her to see him, even though she has been in his presence twice. Will she fear that side of me?

My beast rumbles that she will like him, might even favor him.

"Does he want to meet me too?" she asks, tentative as if he would not love her equal to me.

"*My beast loves you.*" I don't point out that he is a presumptuous bastard with delusions that she will favor him.

A beautiful smile breaks out across her lips. "You have both saved me twice. I already know I shall love that side of you, too."

Emotions stir inside me, strong and compelling. I love this woman with all my heart. I will make this work tonight. I'll convince the fucking wolves that we can be allies. I will make them fucking understand. It is not only my life and Jasmine's but those of many others who are relying on *us*. The beta shifters are former hunters who will be nothing but expendable soldiers and die swiftly against a well-honed pack of alphas and betas who are warriors at the core. Jacob has driven trained warring skills into them, but there is only so much that can be done in the short time they have had. If they die, their human mates and children will be left alone as bondservants to orcs.

I press my forehead to hers. How swiftly and surely my perspective has changed. Once, humans were nothing but a nuisance that I would thump occasionally to keep in line. Now, I am part of a plan to save them.

With a nod to Bron, I take off at a steady jog until the lights of the camp disappear. Here, I strip and stow my clothes at the base of a tree. My beast assures me he will find them on our return.

As I stand under the shroud of darkness, a little moonlight dapples through the trees. I relax, roll up my shoulders, and picture the world as though I'm looking through the eyes of my beast.

The shift is instantaneous. The world feels like it explodes before my eyes.

The angles are all different. I'm bigger, yet a little lower in the line of sight. Two great curved tusks thrust from my jaw. Lower, I see the paws tipped by lethal claws and the shaggy white fur.

Lifting my snout, I sniff, then take off at a run.

I wonder what my beastly face looks like. A strange tusked wolf, maybe? Although I do not feel like a wolf, but a larger, sturdy beast—broad-pawed with thick legs and a substantial body. And heavy. I have battled a bear shifter and won.

However, bears are lone fighters, unlike wolves, who attack as a pack, communicating through their minds and working seamlessly. I remind myself that I am seeking to warn the wolf pack, not fight with them, but I cannot know what reception I might get and must be prepared.

As I run, I hear the sound of creatures in the undergrowth. They are swift to dart out of my way, recognizing me as a monster, deadly to all who stand in my way.

I relish in the feel of the soft, loamy earth under my paws. Finally, my beast is free and alert in ways even an orc is not. I run on, a steady gait that leads further east and south. At a stream, I pick up scents—instinctively, I know that it is the scent of wolves.

I stop, feeling the prickling awareness at the back of my neck.

Wolfshifters.

We are close.

Chapter Seven

Jacob

Doug is missing.

I don't know what the fuck is going on, but it is too late to back out now. We are close to the shifters' lands; retreat is not an option. I will hold my promise to him to get his mate to safety, along with Winter, and the fairy child, even if it costs me my life. Bron should be with them, at least, as the orc on duty to guard them. It is fucking hard to trust any of the green bastards—Bron and Doug are the only ones among them that I do.

However, when I reach the clearing, the bondservant men are all present... but not the wooden swords.

I frown. Where the fuck are the wooden swords? I see my fellow bondservants shuffling, eyes shifty. I shoot them a fucking glare. Whatever the fuck happens or doesn't happen, we will need to adapt. They are all twitchy. If they keep that up, even that hapless bald bastard, Rig, will realize that something is up.

I should be taking Rig by the throat by now. We should be implementing our plan, but it will be a whole lot harder without even a wooden sword.

“Where the fuck are the practice swords?” Rig snarls at the nearest orc.

The orc's nostrils flare as he swings his head our way.

“Do not yap at me, human,” he rumbles, black eyes narrowing on the bondservant.

“I will get the fucking swords,” I say.

“You will not get the fucking swords,” Rig says, stabbing a finger at the orc. “What happened to Reggie?”

The orc smirks. “The hunting was poor last evening.”

Rig blanches. I have no love for Reggie, who was ever ready with his club, but even I feel a little queasy.

“I expect it to be poor again tonight,” the orc continues, broad face splitting into a grin.

I brace myself as the orc lifts his ax and slams it straight into the top of the Rig’s head. It cracks like a ripe melon, and blood splatters out.

“Now!” I yell, snatching up Rig’s sword as he slips to the forest floor.

The orc’s ax is wedged, and he cannot quickly get it out. Rounding him, I hamstring him while he still fights to free his ax.

The bondservants react too slowly. Orcs surge forward. One man is sent flying as a club swipes him from his feet. It is like they have forgotten every word I have said.

“NOW!”

As I run toward them at full tilt, the shifters finally shift. Without swords, their power and teeth are the only credible means of attack.

It is fucking messy and chaotic, but they take the first orc down, even as another wades into the mass of defenseless men, smashing two more off their feet. I meet the next orc’s blow, feeling it reverberate the length of my arm. “Get the club!” I holler.

I trade blows with the orc. He is a heavysset bastard and easily twice my weight. A shifter leaps from the side, closing jaws clumsily around his throat.

It is enough. My sword slices, finding the orc’s belly. He crashes to the ground, fingers fumbling for where his body is split, to no avail.

An orc makes a run from the clearing, and three shifters tackle him to the ground.

The fight is ugly and deadly on both sides. Blood flows, and men and orcs fall.

But we fight for our lives and for the lives of those we love, and that is the most powerful motivation.

The Goddess is with us today, and as I stand over the body of a fallen orc, chest heaving, I look around and find most of the men are still miraculously here, and so are all seven shifters.

Orc weapons are gathered. Some men are wounded and hastily tie off or staunch blood as best they can.

I nod. "It's time."

Chapter Eight

Jasmine

I have not seen Doug all night, and I am near faint with worry. Bron comes for me early, looking for word. I shake my head. “He is not here, Bron. He did not return last night.”

He doesn’t say anything, but his lips tighten. Finally, he nods. “We need to go about our business as usual. If anybody asks, say he’s dealing with a few troublesome humans, and he will be along shortly.”

“But what if he isn’t,” I ask.

“Jasmine, you know this is happening, whether Doug is here or not. We are out of options. We are almost upon shifter lands. The battle is coming for us, whether we will it or not. He would not want you to die. He would want you to get to safety. Jacob made him a promise, and the alpha will stand by his word.”

I wring my hands. “Should I pack up the tent?”

“Leave it,” Bron says. “One way or another, you will not be using it again.”

We leave together for Melody’s tent, but we don’t need to get very far into the camp to sense something is amiss.

“Fuck!” Bron mutters gruffly, his eyes shifting to the northern side of the camp. “It’s kicked off already. Stay alert.”

He leaves me at the tent, and I slip inside. Winter is standing close to Bard, tension in both their stances.

“Something is happening in the north of the camp,” I say, before turning to Melody. “Your guards have gone.”

“We’re going on a trip,” Melody chirps.

My stomach churns with all the concern I feel for this sweet fairy lass, for all the trouble that has already come into her life, and for the new troubles that are about to begin again.

I do not want to frighten her, but as I share a look with Bard, he knows and hears beyond the words I do not say.

“Get your cloak, Melody,” Bard says.

“Yippee!”

“What—”

“Help her with her cloak, Jasmine.” He interrupts me. I want to tell him about Doug, yet I do not quite dare voice my concerns and hasten to do his bidding.

“Your mate is behind this?” Bard asks.

I lift my head, thinking at first he is talking to me, but he is looking at Winter.

She nods, and I see the lines of stress on her face, a state of mind that I share. I retrieve Melody’s cloak. She chatters excitedly, oblivious to the heavy undertones.

I am startled when Bard crouches before Melody. It is only now that I consider his age and how ill-equipped he is for such times. I feel the softening inside even before he speaks.

“Winter is going to take you away from here, Melody. You will need to be a good girl for her and keep very quiet.”

Beyond the walls of the tent, I hear shouts and cries. It reminds me of the day the orcs attacked my village and the day my life was irrevocably changed.

“Are you coming?” Melody asks Bard, her young voice quavering as her eyes dart toward the tent flap, beyond which comes the discordant sounds.

My heart breaks for this young child, even as it breaks for myself.

He shakes his head. “You must move swiftly, and I would only slow you down.”

“Will I see you later? After the adventure?”

When he shakes his head again, Melody’s face crumbles.

“You must be a brave girl for me, Melody, like you were the day the dark fae came, and your mother and father

entrusted me to take you to safety. You trusted me then, and you must trust me now. Winter will take you to Sanctum, and you will see all the wonders you have talked to her about. I pray that you will see them. I pray that I shall never see you again, for it will mean that you are there and safe.”

She throws herself into his arms, sobbing.

He holds her just as tightly.

My eyes pool with tears, yet the sounds of battle rise from the far side of the camp.

Oh, Doug, where are you?

“Your bard is old now, precious child. One day, I hope you will forgive me for some of the truths I have hidden from you. You are still too young to understand. When you are older, I pray that you will come to do so. But for now, you must be brave and go with Winter. She will take you to where you will be safe.”

I have so often wondered about the relationship between the two. He is ever stern and firm with her, and yet, seeing him here and now, I could never doubt his deep love and affection for this small child whose parents entrusted her to his care.

That heavy burden is passing from Bard to Winter. What shall happen to Bard, I do not know. My heart tells me he will likely meet his end.

Perhaps we all shall.

Perhaps Doug, who has shown his true heart and nature through his deeds, has already fallen.

Perhaps the Goddess has welcomed him, even if he never believed in her.

And perhaps I shall join him at her side today.

But before that, my priority is Melody, who is so young and has so much to live for still, and for her, I will fight... I will do whatever I can to keep her safe.

Bard rises, and Melody slips her hand into Winter’s.

“Jasmine!”

My head turns toward the tent flap, and my heart pounds with relief—my Doug is here.

“Your mate?” Bard asks me.

“He is outside,” I say, pride shining in my voice, feeling instantly calmer now he is here. “Seeing no orc guards there, he would do naught else.”

“Go with Winter,” Bard says to me. “The orcs will kill the other bondservants if any escape. Fleeing is your only hope.”

It is what I had already planned.



As we emerge from the tent, my eyes find Doug. I search his face and body for signs of injury, relieved when I find none.

“I am well,” he says. *“Our allies are waiting.”*

“We are going with them,” I say. “It is time.”

He nods, and before my eyes, the towering, brutal orc I know and love shifts into a great tusked beast with snow-white fur. He is not a wolf. He is the product of nightmares, with his savage jaws, the lower set bearing two immense tusks. His blue eyes, *Doug’s* eyes, are wilder than usual.

Besides all this, he is huge. My head barely reaches half his height. His paws are the size of my head, and each toe is tipped by claws like daggers.

He snorts when I lay a gentle hand upon his foreleg.

I have only caught half glimpses before. Today I see him.

“You are beautiful,” I say in wonder “I have dreamed of seeing your beast form one day. May the Goddess guide your fury.”

His great snout lifting to the sky, he issues a savage roar.

Chapter Nine

Jasmine

The camp disintegrates into bedlam. Word of our plans must have spread. Some bondservants take up arms and side with the orcs. Others join with us.

We run, fleeing from the camp into the forest.

We are pursued.

Camped as we were in the lower foothills of a mountain, the ground soon becomes steep, and we must scramble up the incline. Winter carries Melody, while her warrior, Jacob, runs alongside them. Doug, the shifters who colluded with Jacob, and any other bondservants who seek to flee run with us.

I see Bron off to our right battling with another orc, and I wonder if they were once friends or whether they even know each other at all.

The lines become blurred, both in the battle and in determining who is friend and foe. The noise fills my ears: the clash of weapons, the screams, the shouts, the sound of my own blood rushing in my ears as I scramble and pitch and try to keep moving.

I want to ask Doug what happened while he was away. Only I see no evidence of any shifters beyond the few who have been working with Jacob, nor other allies. It feels very much like we are too few, and there are too many in pursuit. I have neither training nor skills at battling, but I have a will to survive, one that tells me to run as fast and as hard as I can, to keep going even though my muscles and lungs burn with the strain.

There are so many fleeing, yet the orcs who follow are faster and stronger.

I see people fall, and it breaks me inside. Is Penny among those who run? I do not have time to wonder long when all my efforts must go into surviving and taking another step,

scrambling a little further up the incline and keeping alert to danger.

Doug's paws drum on the ground as he charges back and forth, dispensing with any who get too close. His white coat is smothered in blood. He is fearsome, he is brutal, and yet it is not long before I sense his growing exhaustion, the slowing of his footfall, not only him but in Bron as orcs and human bondservants who fight for the Blighten swarm us.

As is inevitable, an enemy gets through. As Doug fights an orc, a human bondservant is on me. A scream tears from my lips as I am knocked to the ground, his club raised and coming for me. Another club whistles through the air, knocking the man clean off his feet.

Bron.

The man who sought to assault me now lies broken on the forest floor.

"Winter and Jacob?"

"They were heading east, last I saw. We need to keep running, lass," Bron calls.

Beyond him, I see a dozen orcs charge up the slope. I run, glancing back in time to see Doug rush them. They scatter as he side-swipes one, skewering the orc on his mighty tusk.

They won't be deterred for long.

"You need to move faster," Bron says, and as Doug pounds back toward us again, Bron sweeps me up and lifts me onto Doug's back.

"Take her, Doug. I will hold them off and follow."

Doug snorts, and his front paws claw at the forest floor before he takes off at a run.

The wind whips my hair as he bounds up the slope, weaving between the trees as the cries of pursuit follow in our wake.

"They are coming!"

“Who?” My words are lost amid the melee, and I don’t get a chance to ask again, for dark shapes emerge from the trees ahead.

Wolf shifters.

Doug skitters to a stop, standing protectively before Bron, snorting heavy breaths.

“They know Bron is with me.”

He must be communicating with them, for they charge past, hurtling down the slope.

I look back over my shoulder to see the two sides clash.

Vicious snarls permeate the air as they swarm the orcs.

“They saw Winter and her warrior passing through a portal. The fairy child was with them, they say. We are to keep moving. Tell Bron.”

I relay the message, seeing the wariness in Bron, but he nods and we continue at a slower pace. As we move from the battle, I see other escapees: weary former bondservants, the beta shifters.

By unspoken consensus, we come to a stop, forming a rag-tag cluster where they collapse to the floor. Among them, women and even children, some crying, some stony-faced.

Doug bends his knee, and I slip from his shoulder to the ground. My chin is bloody where I fell, my hands and knees scraped, but miraculously, I am whole.

“Jasmine!”

I turn at the call, seeing Penny climbing up the slope, Bard at her side.

I throw my arms around them both, babbling away about Winter and Melody escaping.

“I’m so glad,” Penny says.

“But, Bard, why are you not using your stick?”

He smiles and twirls it in one hand. “It was always more than a walking stick, and I was never as weak as I pretended,”

he says, with a wink.

His eyes shift behind me to focus on something over my shoulder and a sudden hush comes over the group.

I turn to find a huge black wolf approaching, a gray and russet wolf flanking him.

He nudges forward until he stands beside Doug, and they stare at one another for many moments before the wolf suddenly shifts.

The air shimmers, and where the wolf stood, is a huge, dark-haired man.

“I am Ashe,” he says, his eyes settling over those gathered. “The leader of this party and the representative of the Oberon Pack, whose lands you are now on.”

I swallow and step up beside Doug. “We seek sanctuary... if such a thing is possible.”

“It is,” Ashe says. He is naked. I find the energy to blush, though he does not seem to mind his state of undress. “Many among you have scattered, but we shall endeavor to round up all that we can and bring you all to our den. The orcs have retreated for now. Once you are safe, we shall return to punish them again, but for now, we will guide you to our pack home. The little ones and those injured may ride on our backs. Our den is large, and there are unused chambers that will serve you while you recover. We should arrive by nightfall.” His lips tug up in a humorless smile. “I would say you would be welcome, but I am not the pack leader, and I cannot speak on Travis’s behalf. But we do not kill women, children, or innocent men. At the very least, it will be a place where you can recuperate and decide what to do next.”

“We are grateful,” I say.

He bows his head. “Come.”

He shifts back into a wolf, and yet more wolves arrive. Children and injured are lifted up as everyone prepares to leave.

I'm about to climb up onto Doug again when Bron approaches.

"I have no place here," he says, wary eyes passing over the group.

Doug snorts and steps up to his friend, nudging him carefully with his snout.

"Your destiny is not my destiny, Doug. I am no shifter. I am a bastard orc."

"Where will you go?" I ask. "Will you... will you go back?"

He shakes his head. "I do not know where I shall go. I might find myself a place at Bleakness, where orcs live among humans, and the Blighten does not have such a stranglehold. Maybe it is time I did more than pass through life. Maybe I can do good, and find ways to support the freedom of other bondservants. My future lies down a different path. I wish both of you well."

He rests a hand on Doug's shoulder.

Doug snorts.

I throw my arms around him and hug him.

"You will be forever in my heart, Bron. May your travels be kind to you. May you live to help liberate many bondservants."

"I think this is where our journeys will end too," Bard says.

"Well, I don't rightly think I'll settle with shifters," Penny agrees. "Happen it's time I found a place for myself, too. But who knows where that might be."

I feel the pull upon my heartstrings that we have escaped, and now we are about to separate again.

"We will travel together," Bron says. "Until you both find your own paths."

I hug them both, and there are tears in my eyes.

“Here,” Bron says, “let me help you up.”

He lifts me onto Doug’s back just as another pair of shifters approach, nudging us onward to follow the many others who are making their way up the slopes.

As Doug trots up the slope to catch up with the rest of our party, all bound for the Oberon pack, I twist to give a last wave and commit to memory the party of three who have become my friends.

Finally, this is where our stories will divide.

We walk throughout the day, a sense of relief at our escape tinged with uncertainty about our future.

As night falls, we arrive at the den of the Oberon pack, and I discover all that Ashe hinted at, about our lackluster welcome, is true.

Part Four

Loving the Beast

Chapter One

Jasmine

It is dark by the time we arrive, after skirting a lake and taking a pathway that rises steeply out of the forest and leads us to an entry to the den—a deep chasm in a sheer cliff face.

Doug lifts his nose and sniffs. He has been in beast form all day and did not even shift to say goodbye to Bron. Perhaps he is stuck in this form. I cannot know, nor can I presume, given he has been quiet.

Ashe, the big black wolf shifter, nudges to the front, accompanied by the two wolves who were at his side when he first met with us.

We pass through the entrance into a great cavern, with tiered recesses and passages leading off in many directions. Pack members lounge in wolf and human form around a central fire pit. Beyond the fire is a raised dais where an imposing man with long dark hair and a scowl upon his face sits on a pelt-covered stone slab which has all the appearances of a barbaric throne.

Two naked women sit at his feet.

This is their leader, Travis. And it appears that Travis is more than a little angry.

We come to a stop in the center, spreading out into the space. A child starts crying—her mother tries to calm her as low murmurs rise.

“Silence!” Travis rises, tossing a pelt aside and striding naked over to the black wolf.

Ashe shifts, as do the russet and gray wolves beside him.

Travis’ lips twist in a sneer as he glares at the young man with tussled brown hair who stands where the gray wolf formerly did. “You were part of this, son?”

“It needed to be done,” says the young man, the pack leader’s son, I assume.

Ashe folds his arms. “They are here, now. I said we had space. I said they would not meet a welcome, but that you would not turn them away, either.”

Travis grunts, noncommittally, his eyes skimming over us. “What the fuck is that?” He stabs a finger in Doug’s direction.

Ashe glances back. “A shifter of a kind. He does have another form, but he is a little shy.”

“Shy?” Travis raises both brows, and I feel my temper rising.

“Now is not the time to speak, lass,” Doug cautions.

It is the first time he has spoken to me since the battle. I step closer to him and put my hand against his shoulder, stroking his beautiful fur. “Why don’t you shift?” I whisper.

“My beast will not relinquish hold until the danger is past.”

I glance around, feeling the hostile glares as the pack members rise from where they have been lounging and edge closer for a better look. I don’t think it really sunk in when Ashe said we would receive a frosty welcome. A part of me wants to leave, but I’m also exhausted. We have injured and children amongst us, and they need rest—we all do.

“They will need to earn their keep,” Travis says.

“I’m sure they will,” Ashe says, dryly. “Once they have recovered.”

“There are beta shifters among them.” Travis curls his lip as though thoroughly disgusted. “*Weak*, beta shifters.”

“Aye, they are former prisoners of orcs.”

“I expressly told you not to confront them.”

“Well, it’s for the best we did,” Ashe says boldly. “Given there was an entire fucking army of orcs. We’ll need to go back tomorrow and encourage them to move on.”

Travis huffs. “Fine. Take them to the lower chambers. They can have rations for a day, and then they’re expected to earn their keep.”

Ashe inclines his head. “Our magnanimous leader has spoken.”

“Don’t push your fucking luck, pup,” Travis snarls.

Tension invades the cavern, and deathly stillness settles over those present.

Ashe bears his throat in a show of submission.

Travis nods and stalks back to his throne.

Ashe relaxes his stance and turns to us. “Come. I will show you where you can rest.”

Chapter Two

One year later...

Doug

“**H**e is long gone,” Tavion says, lifting his snout to sniff.

“*Caught a glimpse of Doug and shit himself,*” Casper, Tavion’s second, says, and I hear his wolf’s amusement through the bond.

I have various duties within the pack, mostly patrolling the pathways closest to the den. But I remain in contact with the wolves out hunting and patrolling and can be called on if there is any sign of a threat. Tonight, it was a bear shifter harrying Jim and his hunting party.

“*Good hunting, I see,*” Tavion adds.

“*Aye,*” Jim, a lesser shifter and former Blighten bondservant, agrees, a tone of pride in his voice. “*We have been following your advice, and it has paid off. We are heading back now.*”

“*Well, I reckon even Travis cannot hold onto his sour expression when he sees that fine feast in the making,*” Tavion says—Travis might be his father, but he never acknowledges him as such and always refers to him by his given name. “*We’ll escort you back. Doug?*”

“*I will finish up my patrol and return shortly.*”

We part ways as Tavion and his patrol escort the hunting party to the den.

Jasmine and I have made a place for ourselves in the pack, albeit at a lowly level. I have always been a low-ranked orc, so that does not matter so much to me.

There are tensions here. Many of them. Mostly pertaining to the leader, Travis, who is constantly scheming in one way or another. Furthermore, he is lazy and leaves much of the pack's protection up to Ashe.

Travis talks the talk, but, as the saying goes, he does not walk the walk.

It has not yet come to an outright challenge between the two of them, but I sense, at some point, it will. The matters of leadership are not important to me, I tell myself. Although I'm certain things would be better should Ashe assume the role of leader. He does not suffer the same prejudices that the older alpha does and judges people on their merits, not where they come from.

I'm a white, mute orc who shifts into a monster. I know that I'm never going to fit in here—or anywhere, for that matter. Although my beast is fast and has a certain grace when in battle—as the bear shifter who ventured close to Jim and the hunters found out—I'm not the same as a wolf. I do not have their agility or speed. I am big and brutish—an ungodly beast version of an orc.

I have ever been an outsider. I will always be one and I accept my place. Yet when I see the companionship that grows between Jasmine and the human women here, I wish things were different. I want to fit in for her. To some extent, I do, at least with the lesser shifters and with Tavion, the pack alpha's son. I see much of Ashe's ways reflected in him and, although the two are not related, it's clear that Ashe has been influential in his growing up.

They had a different pack leader a few years ago, I have learned. But he left and mated an omega, making a home on the other side of the Lumen sea in Imperium lands.

Some pack members still hope that he will return, maybe bring his mate with him.

I have heard Tavion speaking about it, and he at least does not hold onto such distant hopes.

So the pack is strange and conflicted. And yet, I'm also happy to have a purpose here that does not involve the destruction of innocent lives and the assimilation of races toward that end. I'm not a natural hunter, more a battle beast, and I take pride in my role as protector.

As I finish my loop, the sun has risen, and warmth penetrates the thick forest canopy. I take in a deep breath and catch a familiar scent. My beastly nostrils flare, and my gait takes on a distinct prance. I'm a fucking orc, we do not prance, yet that is definitely what my beast is doing. I pick up my pace to an eager trot. Then, as I reach the next rise in the undulating forest path, I see my mate.

My bellow is all playful exuberance—my beast is very high-spirited when it comes to Jasmine. It is as though he turns into a giant fucking pup.

An alarmed squeal escapes her as we draw near—my prance has shifted into a full-tilt charge—and the basket in her hand goes flying as she takes an unsteady step back. “Don't!”

I try to pull back, but my beast is so overcome with joy that I do not have a fucking chance. He adores our mate to the point of worship and knows no form of restraint.

He bowls her onto her back and licks up the side of her throat.

She bats at his snout. “Ugh, Doug! What are you doing?”

I lick her again. She tastes delicious. I think about licking her *there*. My nose is under her dress, which is not easy when I have massive fucking tusks, but I am determined. I snort, taking in her sweet, slick scent. She slams her hands down, but not before my beastly tongue snatches a taste.

“Doug!” she says, scandalized.

I chuff my displeasure at being denied and seek to nudge her hands away.

The sharp slap to my snout rouses me from my beastly stupor, and I rock back, planting my ass against the ground.

She scrambles up, and then she stands there, scolding me, pointing at her basket, and telling me how the herbs are all scattered across the ground. At the same time, she also smells a little hot and needy, so she is not entirely cross, I decide, smirking to myself.

I love her. I love her scolding. I love the little treasure between her legs. I love her breasts and her ass, which are definitely fuller now that she has plentiful food, much to my satisfaction.

But most of all, I love her, her sweet ways and gentle nature, how she adapts, how she is a survivor.

Jasmine is the most amazing person I have ever met. My beast and I are very much aligned in our worshipping of her.

I settle my front legs down and rest my head on them so I can watch her. She has turned to her scattered herbs, and is rummaging around in the grass collecting them up again. I believe she has forgotten that I am here. Her berating continues but after a few minutes, she turns and stills.

“Doug, are you listening to me?” She plants her small fists at her hips.

We can mind-speak now, and I could answer, but sometimes I choose not to.

Sometimes, I like the little huff that she makes when she is vexed with me. She looks particularly cute and adorable when she reveals her feisty side such that I cannot resist the temptation to put her in this state.

Her eyes narrow in a way that tells me my mate is very angry with me.

Then she surprises me by chuckling, falling to her knees before me, and throwing her small arms around my beastly head.

She strokes my brow.

I shudder.

The feel of a small hand in my fur is absolutely divine.

“You are so beautiful.”

I chuff out a breath. I’m quite certain that I am the most fearful, ugliest beast in the world in whatever form I take. It is ever a wonder to me that Jasmine loves me at all. It is a greater wonder that she speaks with such reverence when she says as much.

“Do you want to ride me back to the cavern?” I ask, trying to keep my eagerness in check. I like her to ride me. I like the feel of her wet little pussy against my fur. It doesn’t matter what form I take, I’m still a filthy beast—obsessed with rutting the hot, tight place that, while part of my mate, assuredly belongs to me.

Her choice of clothes is modest compared to shifters, perhaps a legacy of her former upbringing when she was a village lass. A hide dress that reaches her knees, but she never wears any undergarments, which is my only stipulation, for I need her often, and I’m too impatient to wait.

I’m glad to say the feeling is mutual and that she is as enthusiastic for me as I am for her.

“I cannot fucking wait to get back to the den,” I say, weakly. *“I need you now, mate.”*



Jasmine

He needs me. I love that he needs me, how he starved me of the connection I craved when we first met, and how joyfully I embrace it now. I can never get enough of Doug or his thick orcish cock.

My answer is to kneel up, kick off my shoes, and tear my dress over my head. It lands several feet away with a *whoosh*.

The air crackles, and where a white-furred beast once lay, a white orc now towers over me, his cock already hard and glistening in the most arresting way.

I reach for him. He only moans weakly as I stretch my lips wide to stuff the fat head between them and lap up all the sticky goodness.

“Mmmmm!” I hum around him.

“*Gods, Jasmine!*” His rough fingers spear my hair, shaking a little. He is still uncomfortable with me tending to him like this. It is his own fault for shifting in a way that offered me the opportunity for my sneak attack. His resolve to peel me off weakens as I dutifully suck.

I want to make him come. I’m obsessed with his seed, but I’m also feeling strangely wild. Perhaps it’s being here in the forest, the sun already warming me. I don’t know, and I don’t care.

I feel free.

My lips pop off his cock.

He groans pitifully.

I giggle, scramble up, and take off at a run.

“*What the fuck are you doing, brat? You cannot leave me in this condition. I will frighten the children if I go back like this!*”

“You can have me only if you can catch me,” I call back.

He is an orc, but he is also a beastly predator, and I know he cannot help but chase me down.

He does. Heavy footfalls follow me, urging me to run faster.

I squeal as his arm snakes around my waist before he swings me off my feet.

“Uff!” All the air leaves my lungs as I’m tossed over his broad shoulder.

“What were you thinking of, running off like that!” He brings his palm down against my naked ass as he stalks back to where my basket and dress lay on the forest floor. *“You could have broken your neck, and, further, you have no fucking shoes on.”*

I only giggle and wriggle about, my pussy growing hot and needy as I anticipate him filling me.

He rewards me with another spank and drops me before him on the ground. He comes down over me, caging me against the floor, and my legs part to accommodate him without shame. I bite my lower lip and glance down to where his cock bobs, pointing straight at me.

He plants his big hand over my belly to pin me down. I wriggle, moaning when I can’t escape, and his lips tug up in an unmistakable grin. Then, with a growl of defeat, he lines up with my slick entrance and thrusts deep.

We both groan as he bottoms out. Goddess, the stretch is divine, setting all the little nerves quivering and fluttering even as I clamp down over his arresting girth. His knot is a challenge I have yet to overcome, but sometimes I feel it nudging, seeking entrance, and it makes me tremble with need.

“I need you in the beastly way,” he rumbles.

He pulls out, flips me onto my belly, and drags my ass up before plowing into me again.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Even as I’m saying yes, I’m straining to get away.

He growls and tightens his hold on my waist, and then he stills. *“Am I hurting you?”*

“Oh no, Doug. I would speak plainly if you did.” I peer back at him over my shoulder. I hate that I heard confusion in his voice, and I’m sorry that I put it there.

“Do you understand games?”

He doesn’t move, but his cock flexes inside me.

“You can feel how wet I am and how much I want you.” I test him again, tentatively pulling against his hold.

When his grip tightens, I groan, and my pussy squeezes over his cock.

His orcish lips tug up. *“You want to play.”*

“Yes, Doug, I very much want to play. Sometimes, it feels nice when you are a little rough. It doesn’t mean I want you to stop.”

Holding me perfectly still, he slides out oh so slowly and then slams back in.

“Yes! Make me take you. I want you to. I want you to give me all your cock. I can take it; you know I can. But I also want to struggle and for you to subdue me.” I claw at the forest floor, putting everything into my attempts at escape. He lets me go a little way, only to slam deeply again.

“You smell fertile,” his voice rumbles in my mind, somehow more intimate in this way. *“I think it’s time for you to take my knot.”* He thrusts shallowly, taking full control over my pleasure and driving me absolutely wild. *“I think it’s time for me to breed this hot little cunt that you are always begging me to fill with my filthy orc cock.”*

The little nerves along the length of my channel, flutter and spark with every passage of his thick cock. He picks up the pace, but still not giving me quite enough.

“I think I will need to take you often. I think you will be dripping seed. I think you will be dropping to your knees the moment I return from my patrol, getting my cock nice and hard so I can fill you how you need. You are already naughty about

it. I anticipate a lot of whining about how it's too much for your poor human pussy to take. How you are all sore inside from my constant rutting, even as you beg me to fill you all up again. You will feel empty without me, and won't be satisfied until I'm inside you, won't be able to sleep unless my cock is nestled deeply, and if my cock is not inside you, then you will need my fingers there, filling the terrible emptiness. Sometimes, I shall give you what you want. Only it will never satisfy you, not until you take my knot."

He is rutting me with all his savagery, and I'm a helpless vessel for his lust. His knot pounds against my pussy entrance, even as his cock head pounds against the entrance to my womb.

Strange grunting noises pour from my lips.

It hurts.

It hurts so good.

"That's it, little mate. You're taking this so well. Is this what you wanted, hmmm? Listen to those filthy wet noises your well-used cunt makes. You are opening so well. Submit to me. Submit and let me all the way inside."

I feel something snap deep inside, and a scream is torn from my lips. It feels like his cock is lodged in my belly. My pussy snaps around him, and I scream again as fierce, darkly erotic contractions milk the seed from his cock.

My mind fractures—he has knotted me. He is all the way inside me, with his thighs flush to my ass.

Oh, so full.

I feel mastered. It is the most glorious feeling to be his, to be ruined by his thick orcish cock, to be filled with his seed. I have tasted so much fear and death, but here, there is no judgment. Here, I am Doug's, and he is mine.

I want to be a mother, to have a child to love and nurture, to grow that life inside me and watch it bloom.

I want to be *bred*.

His cock keeps flexing, shooting more and more cum inside me until my belly aches with the strain.

I dare to whine.

“Quit whining, mate. You can hold it for a little longer. You are well-knotted, and you will need to bear it either way.”

I hear the dark approval in his voice. He has held this part of him in check, letting it out so rarely, and I love this side of him, the dominant orc-shifter. The part that loves me fiercely and forces me to submit.

He is so gentle in other ways, but this, I crave.

“Oh! What?”

I feel this thick fingertip pushing against the puckered entrance of my ass.

“Hush, I am just testing. The wolf shifters are obsessed with taking their mates’ dark place. If the screeching of their mates is any indication, they like it well, too.”

I am sensitive there. His gentle petting around it, followed by shallow finger fucks makes everything clench up inside.

“I shall never get my cock in, but petting you here has merits. I like very much the way it forces your pussy to flutter around me even though you are well spent...”

“Oh, I’m going to—”

I come again, squeezing so tightly over his monstrous cock and knot I fear I’m about to black out from the twisty pleasure.

I don’t, but I do eject his knot and his cock, and a flood of cum splashes out.

“Ummnnn!” I collapse face down against the forest floor, panting, not even caring about the prickly undergrowth.

“Bad pet,” he admonishes. He rolls me onto my back, spreads my thigh, and then uses his finger and thumb to spread my pussy lips too.

I’m too weak to bat him off. Worse, my pussy is still clenching rhythmically in little mini climaxes, and to my

mortification, my hips begin to roll as if seeking to entice him to rut me again.

He slides a finger inside me.

“Gods, you are all weak and thoroughly ruined, yet humping up for more cock. I will need to rut you again as soon as we get home, lest you tighten up again.”

He slips my dress on and carries me home. The pack mostly sleeps during the day, and he takes me straight to our quarters, a room carved from the stone deep inside the den. Here, he lowers me to the fur-covered pallet and fills me again.

He ruts me slowly, rapt by the vision of his thick cock splitting my flesh and is seemingly in no hurry to reach his end game, although he coaxes me to culmination many times.

True to his words, I am all sore by the time he fills me with his seed for the second time.

I whine about the knot and make a fuss but then he rolls onto his back and, still knotted, tucks my head against his chest and commands me, *“Rest.”*

With my legs spread wide around his thick waist and my pussy stretched wide around his knot, I drift into contented sleep.

Chapter Three

Jasmine

Two weeks after the forest knotting incident, I sense the familiar awareness of imminent change. While it's too soon to know for sure, I have missed my monthly for the first time in my adult life, and every day without a sign of blood cements the notion in my mind.

I am pregnant. A child grows in my womb. A little piece of Doug and me that we might one day meet.

I have yet to tell anyone beyond Doug, who is now torn between holding my pussy and holding my belly while we sleep.

For now, it is our secret, one I'm not yet ready to share.

There is always something to be done within the pack, and my days are busy and full. Doug has been out patrolling but is due back soon. It's late and, while the higher pack members get to relax in the central cavern, I sit with the lower shifters on the edges, far from the warmth of the fire.

We are all still at work, which takes me back to the night Ashe met us as we fled Tulwin's camp, and he told us not to expect a welcome. A year on, I am fully acquainted with the reality of those words as we find ourselves living in relative peace within a flawed and fractured pack.

It is not the happily ever after I had hoped for, and we are outsiders here, not only Doug and I but the lesser shifters and the few humans who came with us.

But we are also free, and I take that as a blessing.

I don't mind my duties, nor the current sewing I'm working on. It is no hardship to craft a beautiful quilt for the pack leader's mate. What I mind is her coming to inspect it with a sneer of distaste. She has her two favorites with her tonight, younger shifter bitches whom she is grooming in her stead and who copy her disdain like perfect little replicas.

“I don’t like this color,” Ava announces in her imperious tone. “Remove this section and start over again, but in shades of blue.”

Her two companions smirk.

I bite my tongue lest I say something I will regret. The section with lilac-colored squares makes up more than half the quilt, and now I must unpick it and start again.

To add insult to injury, they were originally blue, and she told me to swap them out for lilac!

I tell myself it doesn’t matter how I spend my time, except I’m no longer a bondservant, and it does. One of the lesser pack women is expecting a baby imminently, and I was hoping to make a smaller version of the quilt ready for the arrival. I might be able to reuse the lilac squares, but unpicking them will not be easy, given they form the shape of a crescent moon and the feature in the quilt.

When I merely nod, reach for my sewing pick, and begin removing stitches, Ava moves on to complain about something else.

Deba sits to my right, a kindly older woman who lost her shifter mate several years ago. Her twin sons are part of Tavion’s patrol, which ought to offer her some status. In the Oberon Pack, it does not. Not that she seems to mind. She appears to prefer to keep to the company of the other humans and lesser shifters.

“Ava is particularly ill-tempered tonight,” Deba observes. “I ought to feel more sorry for her, given her mate’s many affairs, but it’s no excuse.”

My eyes go to the throne where Travis sits, surveying his domain. I thought the orcs to be barbarous, but wolves are barbaric in their own way. Two female shifters are at Travis’s feet—his current favorites who Ava is sure to punish the moment they fall from her mate’s grace.

“I don’t know how I would feel if my mate kept rutting other women,” I say, trying to summon charity toward Ava.

“I would cut off his balls,” Deba says, startling a chuckle from me. She has such a kindly disposition that it always shocks me when she speaks plainly and with fire. “My mate was dedicated to me in the way Doug is dedicated to you. Pack leader or not, it is a slow death to remain with a mate out of obligation or because you are enamored with status.”

I cannot disagree with her. Despite the strange circumstances that led to Doug and I bonding, I cherish the love that continues to grow between us. “It won’t be long before your sons take mates,” I say, smiling.

She rolls her eyes, going back to the mending she is working on. “They are young and full of adventure still. They care nothing of their aging mama having grand-pups to spoil.”

The woman sitting on Deba’s other side chuckles. “Deba, you are not so old yet!”

Our conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Tavion and his patrol. I do not speak to him often, but both Deba and Doug speak highly of him. Deba’s sons are half-breed shifters, Deba being human, yet Tavion includes them in his patrol, showing he does not disdain lesser pack members as his father might.

I have often wondered how Tavion came to have such admirable qualities when his mother and father are weak-minded and bigoted.

Travis hails his son from the throne.

Tavion’s patrol peels off, save for Casper, who stays at Tavion’s side. Judson and Jay, Deba’s sons, come to join us, snatching up a couple of furs and tossing them around their waists, which is a pertinent decision given both lads are blessed with being impressively endowed and are sinfully handsome in human form. Every young lass sitting in the vicinity swings their heads our way, hoping to catch the eyes of the young shifters. I’ve seen a few lasses actually swoon if they don’t cover their assets up.

“There has been an attack at Andell,” Jay says, wiping my amusement away.

Andell is a large village with strong ties to the pack on account of it being situated closest to our border. I've had no cause to travel that far, but shifters patrol regularly. In exchange for protection, the village often trades goods and services that shifters have no skills for, including fine pelts and grain to supplement our food in the winter. It's true the village is under the jurisdiction of a king to whom they also pay tithes, but his stronghold is far away, and his protection does not stretch this far.

"When?" Deba asks, setting her sewing aside as her two lads sit down. "What happened?"

"Earlier today," Jay says. It is only now that I see how tired the young shifters look. "Bear shifters attacked two hunters from the village, while they were in the forests."

My heart plays giddy-up with worry for Doug, having not seen him all day. He is strong and capable, but he also patrols alone, more often than not. There have been increased patrols of late due to several run-ins with a neighboring pack of bear shifters. This is the first time they have attacked villagers, though.

"Goodness!" Deba says. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Yeah, one hunter was badly injured. Thought we were going to lose him. Fern, ah," —he flushes— "Fern saved him."

"The young healer?" Deba asks.

Both shifters turn pink-cheeked and shifty-looking.

"She..." Jay clears his throat and lowers his voice, mindful of the many lasses leaning to catch what he says, "lay with him to heal him."

I blink a few times. I had heard many healers' ways were unorthodox, but never quite in *this* way.

"The wound was mortal," Judson adds. "And after they," he makes a circular motion with one hand and grimaces as though in pain, "he didn't have a scratch on him. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I'd never have believed it."

“You watched?” Deba says, raising both brows.

I also raise my brows.

“We had to make sure no one interrupted,” Jay says, his ears near crimson. “The bitchy lord’s daughter was screeching for the lass to be whipped, and all Fern was doing was healing a man. I swear it felt like the Goddess herself was there. It was a miracle for sure.”

I bite my lip, torn between outrage and the amusement that the pack watched this ‘miracle’ unfold.

“Fern,” Deba says. “That wouldn’t be the same lass your whole patrol is sweet on, then?”

“There is only one Fern in the village,” Judson blurts, sitting a little straighter at the mere mention of her name.

Jay thumps him on the shoulder. “Would you shut the fuck up!”

“Jay! You are not too old to get your mouth washed with soap root!”

“Sorry, Ma,” he mutters, still cutting a glare at his twin.

Jim, the unofficial leader among us lesser pack members, joins us. “Did I hear them mention bear shifters?” He thumbs in the direction of where Travis, Tavion, and now Ashe are talking in the center of the cavern.

Judson nods and brings Jim up to date on the attack.

“The bear shifters sent a human envoy here today,” Jim says.

“What did they want?” Jay asks.

“My mate was sent to take food to them, and she overheard them talking. The bears want peace. Said they wouldn’t trouble us nor poach game from our lands.”

Judson makes a scoffing noise. “That ought to be good news. Except Travis rarely does anything without there being a catch.”

“Travis is no leader,” Jim agrees. “He is merely the shifter who presumes to take the role.”

No one ventures to come to Travis’ defense. We all feel the consequences of his ways. His supporters follow his lead, treating us as though we are beneath them and giving us the worst of the jobs, although every one of us pulls our weight.

“I wish Ashe would kick his ass,” Jay mutters with heat.

“I have lived through a leadership challenge,” Jim says. “And they are rarely simple, nor do they resolve problems in an instant, no matter how the outcome falls... I have a bad feeling Travis intends to rescind our protection of Andell.”

“But they have just been attacked by bear shifters?” I stammer. “The bears will move in unchecked. Why would we do such a thing?”

Jim shrugs. “Why does Travis do anything? A centuries-old agreement means nothing to him. I have visited the village many times in the last year. They are good people, for the most part, and have honored their side of the agreement by providing supplementary food and wares to the pack. Travis is always looking for an easy option. Ashe said the bear shifters’ envoy was a weasel. Told Travis straight that the bears were playing us, seeking the village and power of their resources only to come for us later down the line.” He shakes his head sadly.

“Do not fucking question me,” Travis suddenly snarls, his voice carrying all the way to the edges of the cavern where we sit. “Do you lead me into a fool’s war so that you might snatch power from me?”

He goes nose to nose with Ashe, and I hold my breath.

“If I wanted you out, I would challenge you,” Ashe replies, his voice lower yet still carrying.

My stomach coils. I should not want Ashe to challenge Travis when bloodshed would likely follow—I’m certain one of them would not survive. I’m also certain Jim speaks true, and any such challenge would be fraught with risks. Yet, do I

really want to bring my child up in this pack where these behaviors take place?

I do not.

But something is definitely holding Ashe back. I've only heard second-hand tales of his fighting prowess, but I believe he is a stronger male, which only makes me more confused. Perhaps, as Jim mentioned, there are complexities to a challenge, and that is why Ashe holds back.

The two men are talking again, but I can no longer catch what they are saying.

"The bears are not the only ones Travis seeks to form alliances with," Jim says. "He considers Andell, as a small village, beneath him. There have been other meetings, other human envoys arriving in secret, although I don't know from where or why. You should let Tavion know."

Jay nods. "I will."

Our focus remains on the increasingly tense conversation between Travis and Ashe.

Travis is all about status, never judging a person on their skills or character, thinking only of whether they can shift, and admiring schemers over hard workers. A wise leader sees the strengths of all his people and how they offer values beyond their physical prowess. Everything I hear about him only confirms to me that he is not the right leader and that the pack is weaker because he is in charge.

Travis suddenly lunges, taking Ashe by the throat and reminding all of us that he is a formidable alpha.

Ashe turns his head, baring his throat submissively to the pack leader.

Travis thrusts Ashe away and takes a step back.

More harsh, low words are spoken before Travis dismisses both Ashe and Tavion.

As the two shifters stride off and Travis returns to his throne, the cavern explodes with conversations.

“We need to go,” Judson and Jay say in unison, reminding me that they are twins.

Seeing Doug slip into the back of the cavern, I also make my exit, returning with him to the little cave nook that belongs to us, where I tell him what I have learned.

“Who do you think the new alliance is with?” I ask. “Jim mentioned the bear shifters but also other secret discussions.”

Doug draws me next to him on the pallet bed, tucking my head against his chest. *“I do not know. Perhaps Travis pretends alliances are being made to bolster his importance.”*

“I don’t like it,” I say. If I thought the pack was fractured when I first arrived, that was nothing compared to what goes on now. I am grateful to Travis. He gave us a home when we had none. But, whatever is brewing, I know that should Travis prevail and Ashe fall, our time here will be up.

“Do you want to leave? Say the word, and we shall go.”

Perhaps had I lived always among the Blighten, I might see this pack in a more favorable light. Only, I can still remember the village where I grew up, how peaceful it was, how all the villagers pulled together when a storm damaged a neighbor’s roof, the celebration and sturdy cottage that was built for the young couple who came of age and committed to one another in marriage, and the shared grief when a young hunter died of the wet lung.

I was only a child myself, yet I saw so many examples of how decent people should act.

It was not always perfect, and there were certainly occasional altercation between families that might cause our village leader to step in. But I crave that simpler life, a smaller community that might never be ours if we remain a part of the life of this pack.

There is safety in numbers. The Blighten will not come here, at least not in the near future. Ashe punished them a year ago when they dared to come with war in mind. I do not want to live with the threat of the Blighten again, nor risk my child growing up under an orc warlord’s tyrannical rule. But nor do

I like the increasing malevolence that permeates every level of the pack. Yet how could a simple village life ever be for us?

“But where?” I feel myself choke up. “You’re an orc and a shifter, and I’m a human. Where could we ever go?”

His sudden stillness pricks at my misery, and I lift my head to look down at him. I feel tears sting the back of my eyes as I see how he does not meet my eyes.

“You’ll be better off without me,” he says.

I shake my head, “No, Doug, no. Never believe that, never. They were foolish words spoken hastily.”

“You spoke the truth.”

I feel sick as a sense of coldness grows between us. “Please say you will never leave me, Doug. Please, I cannot be without you. Our babe cannot be without you. I love you.”

“I will not leave you,” he says fiercely, drawing me down again and wrapping me up in his arms. But I sense his reserve, how he is now thinking himself unworthy in the way he used to when we first met.

I have broken down his walls over time. But now, with a few careless words, I have erected them again. “I’m just scared for the future,” I say. “A part of me wants to flee, but a part of me is also afraid to flee. I don’t know why Ashe doesn’t challenge Travis. I wish he would, and I feel wicked to seek the death of a man.”

“We cannot know his reasons,” Doug agrees. *“But Ashe is his own man. Perhaps he will never challenge Travis. And perhaps, if he does, he will fall, for a battle is won as much in the mind as it is in the physical world.”*

Only it is a different battle taking place in the mind of the white orc I love, and I have unwittingly armed the other side with my careless words.

As we hold each other, I lie awake. I don’t know how to fix this, only that I must.

Chapter Four

Jasmine

The next day, I wake up early, my eyes puffy, only to find that Doug has already left. There is no warm place beside me, which tells me he has been gone for a while. I rise, turn up the lamp, and pad over to the stone shelf where an old, chipped pitcher and basin rest. Here, I wash my hands and face and then slip on my simple dress.

If I could take those words back, I would. I don't know how to bridge this gap. The trouble is my words were the brutal truth. It is difficult for us to make our way outside of Blighten lands when I am mated to an orc, but that does not mean I wish to give him up. He saved me. He is my Doug.

My hand settles on my belly, which as yet shows no hint of the babe inside. I wonder what our little one will look like, thinking that it would be easier for them if they looked human, and how sad that is when I consider all the abuse Doug suffered because he never fitted in with the Blighten, the cruelty as a direct consequence of his own mother's orders. There is no way to fix the past, but I can do better for our child, and I know I shall love them unconditionally and however they might look.

I wish there was a place where we could go and just be ourselves, where we would be accepted.

We are not the only ones who suffer prejudice. Even the lesser shifters and the humans do not fare well in this pack. At least they have other options, although leaving is not easy when you have neither coin nor food. We are all trapped here, in one way or another. I am perhaps more fortunate to have a strong mate to protect me and our babe.

Doug and I will get through this so long as we have each other.

But I have a strong sense that a tumultuous time lies before us.

As I turn toward the door, I notice that the sack Doug uses to hold his few possessions has fallen from the hook. I crouch down and pick it up. As I do, a thin strip of leather falls out.

My hand stills before I slowly pick it up, noticing the intricate markings carved into the leather, a pattern that is not quite complete all the way around.

I have seen such items before. They are collars. Not the hideous iron collars given to bondservants, but the kind that orcs give to their cherished mates or pets.

Doug is making this for me.

My body softens with tenderness, and I sink to my knees and cry.

I do not cry often, but it is like the breaking of a dam as all my fears collide into a potent cocktail of misery.

Doug is making this for *me*, taking what little time he can between his duties.

But will he still give it to me now?

I cry twice as hard.

Some of what ails me is to do with being with child. While I have no prior experience myself, plenty have mentioned how they can find themselves weeping for no reason at all.

I should put the beautiful collar aside and wait for the day when he remembers he loves me, forgives me, and asks me to wear it for him.

Only, I can't take my eyes off of it, and it seems my fingers have a mind of their own as they trace over the pattern, while I imagine him sitting there quietly, perhaps working on it in the morning before he goes on his patrol.

I should wait, I know I should, but I can't help myself from lifting it to my throat and pressing it against my skin just to see how the leather feels.

Nice, like Doug is touching me.

Before I can second guess myself, I have slipped it all the way around my neck and tied a knot.

I tell myself I'm only doing it so I'm better prepared when he finally gives it to me, but at the same time, I know I'm not.

"Jasmine?"

"Oh!" My hand flies to my throat as I scramble to my feet. I'm sure guilt must be written all over me as I turn to face Doug. His eyes go from my tear-stained face to his bag, which lies upon the floor with half the contents spilled out.

"The bag had fallen off the hook," I offer unnecessarily, hand still clamped around my throat. It looks very much like I was snooping. "I thought you had gone on patrol."

In response, he gestures with his hand and I see he is holding a wooden bowl full of berries. The sight makes me want to wail all over again.

His inner voice is a little gruff as he says, *"Deba mentioned that they are beneficial for a woman carrying a child."*

He draws his hand back slowly and a little awkwardly.

My breath catches. He loves me. He has already forgiven me. I am not worthy of such a mate even as he thinks he is the one who is not worthy of me. Forgetting all about the collar around my throat, I cover the small distance at a run and throw my arms around him.

"Uff!" The bowl drops to the floor with a clatter as his arms come around me.

"I thought you were angry with me. That you might leave me, thinking it best for me."

He tips up my chin so that he can look into my eyes, and uses his thumb to brush the tears from my cheeks. *"How could I ever be angry with you? I know your words were said without thinking, without any intent to hurt me. But they are also the truth. I think that is what hurt me most. As for leaving you, I could not, ever, even if you begged me to."*

My eyes search his.

"You are mine, Jasmine. You carry my whelp in your belly. It is too late now. Too late for you to ever leave. I'm not

worthy of you. I never was. But I will spend my life seeking to be as close to that as I may, and by whatever means.”

I didn't think it was possible for me to love him more, But, today, I find there is always room for love to expand. I don't even care that he's possessive of me. I want him to be. I want him never to give me up.

“But what is this?” His fingertips trail down my cheek until they catch at the collar.

I swallow.

He gives a little tug, and his brutal mouth lifts up in the Doug equivalent of a smirk.

“Jasmine?”

“I-I found it in the bag. I didn't mean... I shouldn't have ___”

“It is not finished.” His nostrils flare, and he runs a fingertip along it, his eyes turning hooded. *“But I like seeing it on you.”*

The temperature in the room goes from cool to burning hot in an instant. My throat is suddenly dust dry, and I'm ravenous for my mate. “Please, Doug. Make me forget all these troubles. Remind me that I am your mate. Show me how I belong to you. Show me how you claim me again.”

I'm picked up and taken over to our fur-lined bed, where he lowers me onto my back and thrusts up my skirt. His growl is one of deep satisfaction as he buries his head between my spread thighs.

The feel of his tongue, the sound of his noisy lapping, and his grunts and growls of satisfaction all conspire to drive me wild. I fist his thick hair and push him where I need.

He emits a deep rumble and lavishes my clit with his tongue.

I'm so close, climbing, almost there—And then he lifts his head and pins me with a look.

“Oh, what? Why? Why did you stop?”

His answer is to thrust his pants down only far enough to free his cock. He drags the tip the length of my pussy until he snags at my entrance and thrusts deeply.

I arch up off the bed as nerves the length of my channel spark around his thick cock.

With a growl that is savage to the core, he pounds into me, his eyes locked on the collar at my throat. *“You are mine, mate. Mine forever. Mine until your Goddess takes us both to her side, for she’s my Goddess too, now. Until that time, I shall worship you, my love, my world, the mother of my unborn child, my filthy, needy little mate.”*

His knot blooms swiftly. The climax I was denied tears through me as he locks me on his brutal, disfigured knot that is the source of so much ecstasy. I writhe and thrash under him, my body turning molten with the pleasure.

He closes his big, rough hand around both my throat and the collar, and holds me in place.

“You have been very naughty,” he says. *“There is going to be a lot.”*

I feel him pulsing, pulsing, more and more, filling me, my belly swelling in an unnatural way.

“You will bear it, mate. You will bear it because you are mine.”

And I do, willingly, gladly. I would bear anything for him.



Basking in the heady glow of reconnecting after our misunderstanding, we go together to the central chamber of the den, only to find the whole pack is on edge. Tavion has just returned from patrolling the village of Andell and brings with him trouble in the form of a village lass.

Travis prowls back and forth across the space in front of the dais, his normal scowl etched even deeper into his features as he seethes. Not even his favorites dare to go near. Not only

did his son patrol against his wishes, Deba tells me in a low voice, but he also claimed a human as his mate. Fern, the sweet healer Jay and Judson mentioned, has been claimed by their patrol leader.

Chapter Five

Jasmine

I spend a little time with the young village lass every day, for Tavion has asked me to tend to her. I can see why Judson and Jay were so sweet on the healer. Fern is pretty and kind-natured. She has also suffered terribly at the hands of a cruel mistress and daughter to Andell's lord. All these things combined have roused not only the patrol's ardor but also their protective instincts.

She has been beaten badly and still bears the cuts and bruises of her wicked treatment. It breaks my heart to see her so, but I'm grateful that Tavion trusts me to do what I can for his mate.

Mate.

Tavion is very clear about what the lass is.

The lass is not similarly aligned and blushes furiously every time I use the word in conversation.

Further confusing her, no doubt, is the over-attentiveness of all the members of Tavion's patrol. As I tend to her in their fur-covered bed, helping her to sip a little water, I'm aware of the patrol members hovering in the periphery. The animal skin that covers the entrance to the chamber is constantly being pushed aside for one or the other of them to stare in at her, in a way that is nothing short of intense.

They all want to claim her.

All six of them... because the lass is a latent omega, and that is the way things are done.

And it is not only Tavion and his patrol who see her as theirs, but also two humans who have turned up from the village—an alpha and a beta!

I have enough on my hands with one orc, so I can't imagine how the sweet woman will fare with eight lusty mates clamoring for her attention. The poor lass is overwhelmed on

every count. Worse, Tavion is all surly possessive wolf, and matters are progressing post-haste.

Unwrapping her injured hand so I can check on her formerly broken fingers, I try to push aside the ruckus going on beyond the bedding chamber.

Her mates are arguing, again.

They argue all the time.

But at least they are not fighting today.

I go back to her fingers. The bruising and swelling have gone down a lot, and she tentatively bends her fingers. Her smile breaks out as she gives them a scratch.

“Much better,” I say, just as a meaty thud comes from beyond the entry.

Fern starts and looks toward me in alarm.

I smile, seeking to put her at ease. “Don’t mind them. Just alphas being alphas.”

Since Fern arrived, I’ve learned more about alphas, regardless of whether they be shifters or humans, than I really care to know. I can’t imagine how Doug would take to sharing me with another male, remembering how possessive he got that night when Bron carried me back after Rig had cornered me. So I have some idea of how difficult this is, but still...

A blush stains Fern’s cheeks, and she fidgets in the bed.

I’ve also learned something about omegas and how they respond to displays of aggression and dominance from their mates.

I throw a look over my shoulder toward the open passage leading to their day chamber. The hide covering that separates the two rooms has now been torn off—probably part of the altercation. “Do I need to bring my mate here to box your ears?” I call.

I’m not normally this bold before high-standing pack members, but I’m close to reaching my limit with their

nonsense. The lass has yet to go into heat, and their claim is not cemented until this is done. Tensions are high all round.

The sound of retreating footsteps offers some relief. “They are getting worse,” I say. Turning back to test Fern’s fingers gently. “Any soreness?”

“No, just itchy,” she says.

I swear her cheeks are so red there’s a danger they might catch fire. “Are you well?” I ask, holding her eyes.

She shakes her head, swallows, and blinks rapidly against the glisten of tears. “I’m confused.”

My heart swells with sympathy for her.

I reassure her as best as I can but there is only so much that words can do. As I leave their chambers, however, I’m reminded why Fern’s mates are the least of her concerns.

Since Tavion brought Fern into the Oberon den, he has clashed verbally with his father several times. Travis wants his son to mate with a strong shifter bitch and Tavion is angered that his father will not recognize that Fern is Tavion’s mate. I’ve heard rumors Travis is ready to exile Tavion from the pack over this. Even Fern’s status as an omega, a designation that is usually revered, has not cooled Travis’ anger at having his plans thwarted.

And now, as I step out into the central corridor to start making my way toward the lower part of the den and our quarters, I see one of Travis’ enforcers speaking to another shifter. Their voices are low and their demeanor is circumspect.

I’m not one for gossip. However, as a former bondservant, I know the importance of keeping my ear to the ground and listening to what is going on. Now that I’m with child, I have an even greater sense of vulnerability, which brings with it a deep-seated need to ensure that all around me is safe. It is not only about my life but the life I will one day bring into this world.

There is something about their manner of speech, their shifty eyes, that have all my senses clamoring that this requires

my attention. Shifters are naturally bold. They speak plainly and with no mind to who might hear them, particularly not a lowly member of the pack such as myself.

Something is happening here. Acting on instinct, I slip into one of the side passages, where I pretend to inspect the contents of my bag.

“... with Travis now... big bastards ... stinks of ...”

By the sounds of it, those in the delegation that Travis is meeting with are unknown to the enforcer or, at the very least, are from outside the pack. Perhaps this is to do with the mysterious secret alliance that Jim mentioned.

The two shifters pass, heading the way I just came.

I emerge from the shadows, and follow the passage they emerged from. It is one which leads to Travis’ audience chamber.

What I do is foolhardy, but every sense in my body is on alert.

Danger is coming. I can feel it.

“Doug?”

Nothing. He cannot hear me in this way. For once, I wish he could.



Doug

My mate is troubled, and that means I am troubled, too. A part of me wants to leave, but I also see the risks. She is with child now. I would do fucking anything to keep her and the babe safe, but I am merely an orc who happens to be able to shift. I don't claim to have the intelligence to strategize for the complex situation that is unfolding.

In plain terms, I do not know what the fuck to do for the best.

"Doug! I need you!"

Hearing Ashe's hail, I pivot and center myself on the call, sensing the urgency of his request—the alpha and his patrol are under attack.

I charge, tearing through the narrow forest path that is better suited to wolf or deer, snapping branches and flattening saplings in my haste. I see them as I crest the hill, battling with a dozen humans who have set up a rough camp by the river.

As I apprise myself of the situation, I see that the opponents are not only humans. Their number includes two orcs.

I bellow my challenge and race down the slope. The Oberon wolves scatter out of my way, aware of my battle skills and the deadly might of my tusks. The orc, though, sees me too late, his club swinging as though in slow motion as I stampede through the broken tent and skewer the bastard.

My attack provides an opening. The shifters regroup and take down the second orc.

I toss the orc from my tusk and trample him as I charge a fleeing man.

More men scatter, running into the forest, but the wolves are faster, chasing them down.

I snort and bellow again, letting my aggression ease its hold on me, seeing only dead on the forest floor as our wolves return to the camp.

It's only then, as my vision settles, that I notice the harsh metal collars upon the broken human remains. This, more than the presence of two orcs, forces me to acknowledge what this is.

"Blighthen," I say, dread leeching me of strength.

"Aye," Ashe agrees. *"Two of you return to the pack. Ask Tavion to meet me outside the den. The rest search the area, looking for evidence of any more of the Blighthen bastards. Doug, stay with me and keep watch while I search the camp."*

As the shifters leave to do his bidding, he shifts to human and, crouching, inspects the nearest body on the ground.

"Do you think Travis is behind this?"

Ashe lifts his head. "That would be bold, even for Travis. While I am sure that bastard is undoubtedly scheming to have me taken out, I don't believe he would engage the Blighthen to this end."

I have supported Ashe on many occasions since I first joined the pack. It was Ashe who I spoke to the night before we fled the Blighthen. He gave me his word that night that he would aid me, even though Travis had indicated conflict should be avoided unless the Blighthen stepped on pack lands. At the time, I questioned that he went against his leader, even though I was grateful that he did. Now, a year on, I see Ashe in an ever-evolving light. He is no insubordinate acting without due care, but a man and shifter with purpose and standing.

"You are the leader the pack deserves."

He huffs out a breath and, tossing aside the satchel he was rummaging through, rises to face me.

"You wonder why I don't challenge him," he says. "You are not alone in this." His eyes shift toward the river before returning to me. "A leadership challenge is never clear-cut. Many will die. That will likely involve innocent pack members who find themselves caught up in the fray. The

bloodlust that follows can be barbaric if unchecked by the leader. If it were only about my life, it would be easier. Make no mistake, if I fuck up, it is not only I who will forfeit my life, but many lesser shifters and their mates will suffer atrocities beyond imagining. I would know,” he adds bitterly. “It happened in my former pack.”

“This is why you wait.”

He nods. “I do not underestimate Travis. In a straight fight, I could take him. But it would never be a straight fight unless I catch him unawares. Even then, he likely has contingency plans. Someone waiting to attack me, even though it’s forbidden, and that shifter would be dishonored by the act. They only need to distract or wound me enough to give Travis the edge. Don’t think they would do as much out of love for him. No, Travis is ever a schemer and will have leverage over many toward this end. That this is not the way of shifters means nothing to him, for he is a man enamored with the power of leading a pack.”

He looks down at the fallen man before shifting his focus to one of the prone orcs.

“Seeing Blighthen scum on our lands? That is a bigger worry and must be my priority. If I challenge Travis now, I will weaken our pack and put us all at fucking risk.”

I feel the honesty of his words. He is a good man and alpha. I would follow him willingly; in a way I have never wanted to follow anyone before. It dawns upon me that I have never had someone who I might look up to until now. Both Ashe and Tavion are worthy leaders, in ways that have nothing to do with age but come from the sort of maturity that is soul deep.

“You have my allegiance. In whatever ways this plays out, and whenever and however you might need it,” I say.

“I hope I never need to call upon you, Doug. But make no mistake, if I need to, I will.”

“Doug!”

My head lifts, and my nose turns toward the north.

“What is it?” Ashe demands, instantly alert.

“Jasmine?”

“Doug!”

She does not answer, only calls for me again. Do I imagine it?

“Something has happened. My mate needs me.”

“Ashe!” one of his patrol hails. *“We have more Blighten bastards!”*

“Go,” Ashe says to me. “I will return as soon as I can.”

He shifts to a sleek wolf and bounds off in support of his patrol.

“Doug!!!”

“Jasmine, I am coming!”

I charge into the forest, bound for the pack and my mate.

Chapter Six

Jasmine

“**J**asmine, I am coming!”

Somehow, I make it outside the den, taking the old passage that leads around the back, used only by the lesser shifters and humans. I am reeling from what I’ve just heard, which has left me gasping for breath and near faint with terror.

Orcs, inside the pack den.

Orcs, talking with Tavis.

Orcs, the ones that are in the secret alliance that Jim warned us about.

But he did not know it was with orcs, and now it’s all too late.

The spring weather is warm and pleasant outside as I stagger for the cover of the trees and empty my stomach over the forest floor.

Orcs, taking Fern away.

Orcs, taking Tavion, Casper, and Fern’s two human mates.

I heave until there is nothing left, and then I heave some more. Then, finally, the terror dissipates enough for me to recover my wits.

I am so lost in my misery that I do not notice Jim and the other hunters until they are upon me.



Jim is stony-faced as I tell him all that just happened. Since we arrived at the Oberon pack, the lesser shifters and their human mates have been our friends and allies. I trust Jim, along with

his fellow hunters and their mates, the same way that I trust Deba.

“It is pure luck that some of Tavion’s patrol left the pack earlier today,” Jim says, his hand shaking at his side. “Tavion sent four of them to inspect the Sparrowpit village.”

“The old abandoned mine site? Why would he send them there?”

“It’s true that no one has lived there for years,” Jim says, with a nod. “But it offers good hunting in the summer, and we have been in the area many times. The village itself is overgrown, and several cottages have collapsed. A landslide obliterated the main route, making it untenable as a home for the former mine workers. Shifters can still get through, but it’s not a place as might ordinarily appeal to a shifter.”

“Tavion was thinking of taking Fern there before her heat,” I say, as understanding blooms.

Jim nods. “I was curious when Tavion first asked me about it but thought no more of it until we crossed paths with members of his patrol earlier today.” He wipes a hand down his face. “Goddess weep, this is a living nightmare. That poor lass is an omega. I have seen the high orc ladies keeping them as pets, or worse. There is assuredly worse. We need to stop Judson, Jay, and the others, before they return. If they enter the den, Travis will either kill them or have them enslaved, too.”

“How did he spirit Fern and Tavion away without the rest of the pack noticing?” I ask thickly. “Do you think many others know?” Suddenly, the whole den feels dangerous, as I wonder who can be trusted.

“Ah, I have it,” another shifter, Dirk, speaks up. “They will be taking them through the tunnels.”

“Gods, you are right,” Jim says. “Which means we have a chance. How far away is Doug?”

“Close,” I say. “What do you plan to do, and how can we help?”

“Listen carefully,” Jim says. “We need to act fast.”



Doug arrives, bringing news that Ashe and his shifters were attacked by a Blighten patrol. A decoy perhaps, or part of this alliance Travis has formed that were sent with the intent to take Ashe out of commission.

Our plan is confirmed. Some of the lesser shifters return to the den to ensure mates and loved ones are safe. Jim, Dirk, and two others make haste to track the orcs who took Fern.

Doug and I head for Sparrowpit village in the hopes of catching the four remaining members of Tavion's patrol before they can return.

Several miles out from the den, we crest the rise and see them, heading toward us at full tilt. As they spot us, they come to a skittering halt, paws raking up dirt.

"Set me down, Doug." I gently pet the scuff of his neck, aware of the wildness coursing through my mate as my anxiety triggers his protective instincts.

The shifters stretch out, popping into human form, their confused eyes darting from Doug to me and back again.

Dawson, who is the highest among those present, steps closer. "What's happened?"

"Taken," I say, the word feeling like it must be punched from my lungs. "By the Blighten."

"What? Who?" Perhaps worrying for me, Dawson dares to try and put his hand on my shoulder. Before I can ward him away, Doug growls.

"I will not harm your mate," he says, taking an uneasy step back.

"Fern," I say.

He frowns. "The fuck?!"

"A gift to the Blighten." I want to weep all over again. "Travis has aligned himself with orcs."

Dawson shakes his head as he tries to make sense of my disjointed comments. “I don’t understand.”

“I stayed alive as a slave because I made it my business to keep my ear to the ground. I knew something was happening within the pack but didn’t realize what. Then this morning, Doug and Ashe came upon Blighden orcs inside pack territory.”

I wring my hands as fresh tears spill down my cheeks. Doug nudges me with his snout. “*Steady, love.*”

“Why the fuck would Travis be speaking with the Blighden?” River, another patrol member, asks.

“Humans have betrayed their own people since the beginning of the wars,” I say bitterly, seeing the horror play out on their young faces. “Many gained positions of power within the Blighden because they sold out their own. Shifters have long been a thorn in the Blighden’s side, for none of the packs would entertain an alliance based on such betrayal. When I saw the orcs, I followed and overheard their conversation. Travis came across a book with details of an ancient pathway that once connected Hydornia to the lands that are now occupied by orcs. He is gifting the Blighden the book. In exchange, the Blighden will rid pack lands of the bear shifters.”

“How did they take her?” Dawson asks, his shoulders straightening as shock gives way to purpose.

“Tavion and Casper were taken to Travis’ personal quarters, where orcs lay in wait. Then two pack enforcers came and took Adam and Emric away...and Fern. The orcs are obsessed with omegas and often keep them as cherished pets.”

“Fuck! If we return to the pack, they will take us as well.” Dawson’s voice cracks a little with frustration. “How the fuck do we save them?”

I share a look with Doug.

“*Jim is waiting,*” he informs me.

“We think we have a way,” I say. “We have never forgotten that you were with Ashe and helped when we escaped the

Blighten. Let us repay you.”

“Show us how,” Dawson replies.



I climb back onto Doug’s back, and he guides the shifters through the hidden pathways until we arrive at a tiny fissure in the rock. Here he stops, allowing me to climb down.

“Ashe needs me,” Doug says. “And, besides, I cannot hope to fit. As you traverse between the rocks, the way will soon turn into a man-made passage, which leads into a cave. Jim and the lesser shifters are waiting there. Do not return to the pack until I can check whether it is safe. I will return for you soon.”

I pet the white fur of my beastly mate. “Take care, my love.”

He nudges me with his snout before turning and taking off at a trot.

I lead the shifters between the natural rock formations that, as Doug informed me, soon show the marks of human tools and lead to a cave where Jim and the lesser shifters wait.

Tavion’s remaining pack members shift to their human form, and Dawson once more steps to the front. “Do you know where they took her?”

“Aye,” Jim says. “She is being taken back to their lands through the tunnels. They mentioned a port city by the name of Bleakness.”

“I remember that port,” I say. It feels like a lifetime ago now when we arrived there by ship, and I think of Melody and how she aspired to become a pirate-captain. She is safe now, or she should be, as long as she was able to pass through the portal to the lands Winter hails from. It has been some time since I thought about the little girl, about Bard, Penny, and Bron, all of whom left for their own adventures. “Long ago, it went by the name of Port Ardin. There is frequent shipping there and also a trade route to the orc city of Krug.”

“That is a long fucking way through the mountain,” Dawson says.

“Aye,” Jim replies.

“What about the rest of our pack? Adam and Emric?” River asks. “Do you know where they are?”

“They were taken into the tunnels, too, although they left earlier than the party with the omega, maybe by half a day. They will have many hours’ head start.”

“Can we catch them in the tunnels?” Dawson asks. “Can we follow them?”

“Follow, yes,” Jim says, lips tugging up in the first smile that has crossed his face since I broke the news of Travis’ betrayal. “I’m not much of a fighter, but my sense of smell is excellent. I can track them.”

“As to whether we can catch them,” Dirk says, “That is not as certain. It is a long way—weeks, from what we heard. If we were to travel light and in wolf form, though, then we might be able to do it. The caves have water from the underground rivers running throughout and there is natural lighting from the pools and rocks sufficient for most shifters to see.”

“You will help us?”

“Aye,” Dirk says. “We will, for a price.”

“I have nothing to give,” Dawson says, confusion evident in his tone. “What price would you ask?”

“Freedom,” Dirk says.

“You are free to go anytime.” Dawson frowns, searching the faces of those of us who are gathered there.

“A person who stays somewhere because they have no place to go is not free,” I say, sorrow coloring my voice. “Those of us who are barely tolerated by Travis and his coterie know to keep our eyes open. Thus we know where you went today, and why.”

“Sparrowpit village?”

“Sparrowpit village,” I agree. “Or wherever you decide to go with your mate. Whatever happens, you will no longer be able to stay in the pack. If we help you, our place is similarly forfeit. We will go with you. We trust Tavion, for he was one of those who helped us escape the Blighten.”

“Our people have skills,” Dirk adds. “Having lived among humans all our lives, we can hunt, farm, and even work wood.”

“I am no leader,” Dawson says. “I cannot speak on behalf of mine.”

“You are right. Tavion is not here,” I point out. “But the four of you are, and you know his ways.”

The four young shifters turn to each other. Silence falls over the small cave, and I sense Tavion’s patrol members are communicating in their minds.

When they turn as one to face us, I hold my breath, waiting, hoping that I have judged them aright. I have a sense of their answer, even before Dawson nods his head.

“I will persuade Tavion to accept you into our pack,” Dawson says, his young voice ringing with the gravity of the pact we make. “Although, knowing Tavion, it will not be a hard task. Humans and shifters alike, and all that are yours, children, and their children to come, will be welcome. I swear on my honor that I will persuade him to do so.”

“Then we shall help you gladly,” Jim says. “Although I can freely admit now that we would have helped you, either way, for I wish no one, man nor woman, to be taken by orcs.”

Chapter Seven

Jasmine

Doug returns to collect me, and I throw my arms around his beastly head, sobbing with relief.

He does not shift to his orc form but instead bays pitifully in response to my emotions. There is danger still, so much of it, and I know his beast will not yield to him while it remains.

“Ashe is coming. He has battled no less than six Blighten patrols. He will challenge Travis. I have pledged my support.”

“Oh, Doug.” I hug him, sobbing harder.

“I should not have done so,” he says. “I should have spoken to you first. I should take you away where it is safe.”

“I am safest with you,” I say, wiping the tears from my cheeks and straightening my shoulders as I feel my resilience return. “Wherever that may be. They took her, Doug. Not only Fern but her mates, too. Travis betrayed his own son. Ashe and Tavion helped us when we had no one. How could I live with myself if I stepped away from them? How could I abandon them now in their moment of greatest need? I love you. You have been mine from that very first day when you chased Trent away and offered me a crust of bread. Some things are worth fighting for. Some people, too. My mama would have been so proud if she could have met you, just as I am proud to be your mate. We will go to the pack together. And whatever happens, we shall face it together, too.”



Doug

My mate is a wonder, so brave and fierce, even as she is tiny and weak compared to me. Jasmine has an inner strength, one that has carried her through the great adversities in her life. Her courage is what makes her face fears great enough to bring lesser mortals to their knees.

All my life, I have followed a cause that was not mine. This last year among the shifters has shown me that a different, better life is possible. And while there may be bastards like Travis in this society, there are more who are his opposite. Men like Ashe and Tavion, men I follow not because I must, but because I choose to do so.

I feel powerful in a way I have never done before.

I will keep my mate and our babe safe.

I will also do right by the promise I made to Ashe.

"We are here." Ashe's voice claps like thunder through the mental connection.

As I slip into the back of the great cavern, tension already crackles in the air. I search the crowd and see Deba standing on the edges, wringing her hands, her face ashen.

Jasmine climbs down.

"Stay with Deba," I say. *"The lesser shifters will know how to get you out, should trouble prevail."*

I remain in beast form, vigilant, even as I trot forward in a way that is bold for me. I have always been treated as less than the others. Today, I do not cower from anyone nor hide in the shadows but take my place proudly next to the members of Ashe's patrol.

Ashe is in human form, and I immediately see the weariness that manifests in the sallowness to the skin that

happens after shifting too many times in succession without taking the necessary nourishment and rest.

A hush falls over the cavern.

Travis lounges on his ludicrous throne. There are no wolf bitches at his feet, but his two enforcers stand attentively close, forewarned, I presume, that his betrayal did not yield Ashe's death as they had hoped.

I am blessed in some ways and cursed in others. I cannot speak, but I have found that, with certain alphas, I can mind-speak regardless of which form they might take. It is a skill unique to shifters bound together in a pack or patrol, and also to me, even though I am neither part of Ashe's pack nor patrol.

Although, perhaps I am.

Perhaps he has always had my allegiance, and today, I merely chose to tell him formally.

I feel my chest rise further.

Travis will need to pay.

"He had Fern, Tavion and his second Casper, and the two human members of her mating pack delivered to orcs," I say to Ashe. "The other half of Tavion's patrol was scouting Sparrowpit village, and we warded them off before they met the same fate. They are now tracking Fern and the others through the tunnels, where the orcs took them, bound for Bleakness. Travis has sold out his own son."

I thought my mother to be heinous, but at least she was honest in her hatred of me. Travis is a special kind of parental monster.

Ashe's chest heaves, and his fists clench at his side. "What have you done, Travis?"

Travis thrusts his pelt aside and rises, stepping down from the dais, right up to Ashe. "So you've heard." He glances at me before returning his focus to Ashe. "Aligned yourself with the white bastard beast now, have you? What a fine collection of misfits you gather."

Ashe rolls out his neck, not in the manner of submission, but in the manner of a man preparing to fight. “How many Blighten were on our lands? I cleared up six patrols worth of the bastards that I know of.”

Murmurs rise as the pack members turn to another in question.

“That’s right,” Ashe turns, addressing the pack. “Did they know you’ve aligned yourself with the Blighten?” More murmurs rise. “Your pack leader sold out Tavion, along with his mate, and the rest of his patrol.”

“Do not preach to me, boy,” Travis snarls back. A hush falls over the chamber as their alpha sneers. “He is no son of mine.”

“No?” Ashe says. “And his mother just let this happen?”

“The bitch is long gone,” Travis sneers. “She left a week ago. Had you been around, you might have noticed.”

“Around? I work for this pack. I patrol and keep us safe while you negotiate with green bastards. It was me who saved the pack a year ago while you sat on your ass.”

“And *you* brought one of theirs in here,” Travis said, stabbing a finger in my direction. “You only conspire with their kind when it suits you and not for the good of the pack.”

“Doug may be half-orc, but his shifter blood is true and higher than yours, that is for sure.”

Travis smiles without humor, spreading his arms out wide. “And what will you do about it, Ashe? Talk to me? Disrespect me? Your yapping means nothing. You never challenged me before, and you’re not wolf enough to challenge me now.”

I feel the electricity in the air and see the widening in Travis’ eyes as he realizes he has finally pushed Ashe too far. Ashe leaps, the air crackles around him as he shifts seamlessly to wolf, mid-bound.

Tavis leaps to meet him. The two men clash as wolves, in an explosion of fur, fangs, and snarls of rage.

One of Travis's enforcers leaps from the shadows to my right.

I am alert and always suspected this would be no fair fight if it came down to it. I am on him, the cowardly bastard, and my tusk skewers his body. He whines as I toss him, mortally wounded, into the crowd.

Those too close to the battle shrink back, as though fearful that they may also be seen as trying to interfere and meet the same fate.

In the middle of the cavern, the two wolves fight in a wild ball of fur, raking claws and savage teeth. They crash into the cold ashes of the fire pit as pack members scatter out of the way. Then another wolf dares to leap for them, from the other side of the open area. One of Ashe's pack takes him down and his other patrol members join in, tearing the wolf who dared to interfere to pieces.

I remain alert. This is not over yet. I always knew Travis would not yield his power in an honorable way. This battle is far from decided, and Ashe is weakened after his many fights with the Blighten. I want to charge in and dispense justice of my own. The bloodlust is upon me. I can taste it in the air. A righteous fury that says Travis does not deserve to live, that my mate, my unborn babe, that the lives of countless others are at risk while he lives.

Yet this is not my fight. This was never my fight.

Travis rakes his claws at his opponent, opening a savage wound along Ashe's side. Stones skitter as each wolf seeks to find purchase and dominance amid their wild tumbling. The younger shifter gets a lock around Travis' jaw. Travis kicks, his back paws raking Ash's belly, administering terrible wounds. Ashe doubles down his efforts, body shaking with the strain as he rolls and pins the alpha to the cavern floor... and then shakes his head with great intensity.

A terrible whine echoes through the cavern, followed by a loud, wet pop. Blood sprays in an extensive arc across those nearby as Ashe rips Travis's throat clean out.

He drops to the floor, panting heavily as he stands over the body of his fallen pack leader. Lifting his head, he howls.

The call is taken up around the chamber. I lift my snout and issue a mighty bellow of my own.

The sounds of a scuffle ensue as Travis's supporters make a break for it. Ashe is on them, as is his patrol, and the sound of snarling and death fills the air as those who had pledged to the wrong leader meet their end.

Chapter Eight

Doug

It is a long night as we deal with the fallout from Travis' demise. All the pack members are rounded up from wherever they have been hiding and each of them steps forward, one by one, to pledge their allegiance to Ashe.

Those who cannot or do not do so are allowed to leave. They gather their things, then are escorted out of pack territory with enough supplies for a week.

There is a risk in this approach, for there is always the possibility that those who are exiled will foment rebellion in some other way. Although it is less likely with the demise of their leader, and when other shifters who might have provided a focus for dissent—those who were too tightly aligned with Travis—have already been dealt with and their bodies removed. It is a difficult time, painful, and filled with tears. All told, a quarter of the pack are dead or must leave.

The next day, Ashe and several shifters go to the tunnels, seeking signs of where Fern and her mate went.

They find none.

Not only has Fern and Tavion's pack gone, but so have some of the lesser shifters who sought to help them.

"The tunnels are deep and complex," Ashe says, as he holds an audience with the loved ones of those involved, along with myself, Jasmine, and the few other humans within the pack who are all keen to learn the outcome of the many searches.

We gather in the great chamber, which is quiet at this hour of the morning. Where Travis once slouched arrogantly on the rough stone throne, now Ashe sits, his energy intent on those around him.

"We found no signs of them nor the way they went. They did not fall, at least. This gives me hope that they are still

tracking them through the mountains, even now. To follow after them without guidance is foolhardy,” Ashe continues. “You tell me that Jim is a tracker, and that he can follow the orcs, so we must pray that he does, that the Goddess will guide him, and that they can reunite again. The journey to Bleakness, even below ground, is long. The orcs had a head start and can travel swiftly. It will be many weeks, or even longer, before we know anything.”

“We had braced for this news. Prayed for better and feared for worse, but there is still hope, and we will hold onto that,” Deba says, her face lined with worry, for her sons are part of Tavion’s patrol and are now in the tunnels, or at least so we hope. She draws herself up and continues. “And now we come to you with a proposal.”

Ashe nods. He confessed to me a few days after his challenge that he never wanted to be a leader, but he has stepped up to the role and moved swiftly where any dissent appears. Under his guidance, the pack is navigating the difficult path from being fractured to becoming whole. He has already tightened the bond with the village of Andell, met with an emissary of the bear shifters, and given a stark warning should they venture onto our lands or those belonging to the village.

There have been no more bear sightings. I believe his strong leadership and firm message have already persuaded the bears that ours is not a pack to be trifled with.

It will take time, but I already see the signs he will make the pack great again.

And so, it is perhaps strange that we choose now to leave.

I feel Jasmine’s hand squeeze lightly over the top of mine, and I glance down at her to share a look. We have discussed this in detail, both the two of us together and with those who we have been living amongst in the lower part of the den. We are committed.

“The pack is no longer our home,” Deba says. “You are a good man, Ashe, and the leader we might have hoped for, but

all of us here, the former lesser shifters and the humans who suffered most under Travis, long for a different life.”

Ashe frowns. “You are asking to leave?”

“In a way,” she says, smiling now. “More, we ask permission to make a home above ground within pack lands.”

He raises both brows. “Sparrowpit?”

She nods. “We would like to make it our home. The mine no longer has any worth and, besides, none of us are miners, but the land is good and the hunting plentiful. The village, while abandoned and in need of much repair, can be rebuilt. None of us are afraid of work. We miss having homes made of wood and working the land. We come from many different places, but we are all villagers at heart, or wish to be so now. We could offer food and services in the way Andell does. We believe we could prosper there, with your permission.”

Ashe rubs his jaw as he thinks this through, his eyes skimming over all of us before landing on Jasmine and then me. “You wish to go with them?”

“I do. It is Jasmine’s dream to have her own little cottage where we might bring up our babe. I am no farmer, but I am a strong fighter, and I can offer protection and patrol wherever I might be needed.”

Ashe nods. “Tavion inspected the site with a mind to making it his home. Perhaps one day, when he returns, he will join you there.”

“We can go?” Jasmine asks, her voice full of eagerness as her small hand clutches at mine.

A smile breaks out across Ashe’s face. “Of course you can go, although I do expect a tithe, and you will need some fucking help clearing the route after the landslide, as I assuredly don’t want to be scrambling over rocks every time I want to visit...”

The rest of what he says is lost under a cheer.

Deba, who has known him since he was a pup, is so bold as to throw her arms around him and kiss him soundly on the

cheek.

Chapter Nine

Jasmine

It is with an air of hopeful anticipation that we transition to Sparrowpit village.

It takes several weeks for a crew of shifters from the Oberon pack, working with Doug, to clear the rocks from the main route between the den and Sparrowpit. Once that is done, we find we have the help of some skilled workers from Andell, and we begin the long task of making it into a home.

Cottages are repaired, and plots are turned over—we even manage to get a few crops in. Trees are cut back where they have encroached on farmland, and some of the more mature trees are felled to facilitate repairs.

All the while, we hope and worry, in equal measure, for the missing members of our community.

And then, on a warm, early summer's day, many weeks later, we are surprised by the return of Jim, Dirk, and the two other shifters who left in search of Fern and her mates.

However, Fern and Tavion, and their other mates are not with them.

The return of these Oberon shifters brings happy tears and a few sad ones, too.

“We rescued Fern and were at least able to reunite her with Dawson, River, Judson and Jay. But Tavion, Casper, and her human mates were being held in the cells of Bleakness. Fern and the others made known to us their wish that we return, knowing we have our own responsibilities to our mates, just as they have to theirs. It was hard, to be sure, leaving them to their path. But I also sensed the Goddess in Fern and in what she said to us that day. She is no ordinary healer, and is greatly blessed by the Goddess' power. I have no doubt they yet endure and shall one day return.”

In the days that follow, there is a lightness to my step. My belly shows the evidence of the growing life, much to Doug's delight, and I feel grateful for all that I have.

Our home is simple and wooden, but it is all ours. A large kitchen with a broad oak table with a long bench on either side. They are all a little wonky, but it adds to the charm. An oil lantern hangs from a hook for use in the evening, and I have a few hand-me-down pots and pans and bowls, one presently full of my first crop of runner beans. We do not go hungry, for many of the lesser shifters are skilled hunters, and whatever we have is shared by all.

There are two further rooms and a decent sized plot at the back that I have planted with vegetables from seeds donated by Andell.

When I uncovered an old jasmine vine on the wall that encloses the garden out the back, I knew this was destined to be our forever home.

I feel so blessed.

How quickly we have found a community here, and how often I glance out my little cottage window at the village green, seeing neighbors busy with the many jobs that need to be done. And how content I am.

There was a time, long ago, when I prayed for such a life. It seemed impossible back then. I had recently left the outpost at Delwood and joined General Tulwin, and still dreamed of a handsome prince who would rescue me.

Then my orc prince, Doug, came along and gave me a reality to replace those dreams.

In all our times and our travels, both the good ones and the bad, I held on to a hope that I might find a place and a little village somewhere where we would be accepted and where I wouldn't fear for the babe in my belly, however they might turn out.

As I glance up from the sink where I am washing the beans before I top and tail them, I hear a familiar bellow.

I smile, seeing the playful version of Doug through the open shutters. He is in beast form. Two young children are riding on his back, and another skips along at his side, whooping. To them, he's not a monster. He is a hero who protects the village.

He comes to a stop at the edge of the village green. The smaller boy, who was running at his side, jumps up to throw his arms around Doug's tusk to use it to swing from.

I chuckle as Doug makes his playful baying sound and obligingly sways his head to aid the game. The infectious sounds of the children's giggles fills the air.

He is fearsome and a killer. He is a beast, but he is so gentle with the children, and they adore him just as I do.

And so it is that I find myself a free woman, living with the unexpected bounty of love, in a distinct corner of Hydornia, within the lands of a shifter pack.

Home.

My hand moves to rest on my belly. There is still some months ahead. I cannot wait to meet them, and I know that they shall not find any prejudice here. We are people who have come from many places, some near and some far, but all of us have known conflict and sorrow and seek only to live and thrive in peace.

The repairs have begun on a cottage big enough to take Fern and her eight mates. In our hearts, we believe they will one day return, and Tavion, who is naturally a leader, will take on that role here.

Perhaps it is presumptuous for us to anticipate that happy outcome, but no one is willing to imagine it any other way.

My neighbor, Sally, emerges from her house opposite. Wiping her hands off on her apron, she scolds her young lad, the boy who is presently swinging from Doug's tusk.

The lad drops off, shifts to a wolf pup, and darts off to his mother's side. The other two clamber down from Doug's back and likewise shift to pups before scampering off to their own games.

Sally smiles as she waves to Doug before ushering her pup inside.

Doug turns his head my way. His strange beastly head is covered in white shaggy fur. He's better suited to winter with such a thick, luxurious coat, I muse, thinking about how it feels under my fingers.

My belly rumbles. I've been strangely unsettled of late and fussy with my food. I feel a familiar pull deep in my pussy, and heat gathers there quickly as I stare at my mate.

I see his nostrils flare and a flash in his eyes of the sentience that is Doug behind his beast's form. With a distinct prance to his gait, he trots up to the front door, shifting seamlessly as he pushes it open and stalks inside.



Doug

No sooner do I enter the cottage than Jasmine's eyes drop to my crotch. She has always been obsessed with me there, truth be told, a feeling that is very much mutual given I am similarly obsessed with the slick treasure between her thighs.

Before I get lost in her pretty eyes, I notice a half-eaten apple on the side. I frown. "*Why are you not eating?*"

"It is not food that I crave," she blurts, blushing a shade of cherry red.

My whelp is growing in her belly. We have done all manner of depraved things together. And on a regular basis. I find I cannot settle to sleep unless I have at least rutted her or eaten her juicy cunt. She can be forthright and bold with her demands. She can also be strangely shy. And I love all aspects of her.

"*What do you mean it is not food you crave? You're with child. You need to eat afore we get to rutting.*" I stalk towards her, thinking about putting her on my lap and making her eat some food.

"I need cock."

I come to a stop. We have already established as much, but her statement still throws me for a loop. I raise both brows.

Her eyes bob down. My cock jerks with hopeful anticipation.

"I need to tend you there," she continues.

"*Fuck!*" Even after all this time, I am still reserved about her touching me or, worse, kissing me there. Yet I also see the strange tension in her body and the brightness in her eyes.

I swallow thickly. I had heard that orcs needed to feed their human mates in that way. Living here as I do, there are times when I can almost forget that side of me. But, fuck, I did not

expect that I might need to do this, that she would need me in this way... and likely on a regular basis.

“I can’t help it,” she says. “I just... I think I might recover my appetite afterward.”

Thank fuck the door is solid, lest one of the many village brats come barging in, for my sweet mate drops to her knees, wraps a small hand around my cock, and directs the weeping tip to her mouth.

I huff out a strangled breath as she closes her hot little mouth over the head and pumps her fingers erratically.

Gods, I am not going to last.

She hums contentedly as she sucks, closing her eyes as she does, and I am fucking lost in the expression on her pretty face.

I draw her hair back from her hot cheeks, trying desperately not to fucking come because I like this, too, the image of my mate on her knees taking what she needs, her cheeks hollowing as she sucks then laves me with her naughty tongue.

Don’t think about that... don’t... Too late. I come like an explosion. My legs shake violently, and my hand shoots out to grasp the sturdy kitchen table, which creaks under my grip. I shudder. My balls are so tight I feel like they’re trying to become one with the rest of me.

Hot cum pulses and spews, and she swallows and gulps hungrily, working her hand along my length for more.

I give it to her. I can’t stop fucking coming. I don’t even know where it all comes from.

“*Gods, lass, I need to sit next time you do this.*” I tug on her hair gently but firmly until her lips pop off her prize.

She pouts and defiantly squeezes me, all the way from root to tip.

I shudder again, half from pleasure and half from oversensitivity. “*Brat,*” I say without heat.

But her face has taken on a dreamy look, and there is a healthy glow to her cheeks.

I lift Jasmine from the floor and stride for our bed. My cock has not fucking gone down, so there is that to deal with. Although I dare say it might take me a little while before I unload again, but that is her own fucking fault for rousing my beast.

She only giggles when I liberate her of the little hide dress she wears, and spread her out on our bed for my pleasure. Squeezing her plump tits together, I gorge myself, sucking and nipping until she grows impatient and tugs on my hair, and then I lower myself to between her spread thighs and feast there.

She comes quickly, all over my waiting tongue, but I am not yet done. I rise above her, gazing down upon what is mine. As her dark eyes meet mine, I brush my knuckles along the side of her face.

How did I ever get so lucky as to be gifted with such a mate?

I don't know, and I don't care, for I'm never giving her up. As all the dark possessiveness of my beast side fills me, I fit the head of my cock against her tight cunt and press. With a hand under her ass for leverage, I sink into her welcoming heat.

We both groan as I bottom out with my knot nestling at her entrance. It still takes a little build-up before she can accept it. I rut her slowly, letting her get used to the stretch, feeling her squeeze lovingly around me as we stare into each other's eyes.

If I live to be a hundred, I should never tire of her.

My hand shifts to her belly, and I rest my palm over the swell where the babe grows, before moving on to her tits, squeezing one and then the other. They are already a little fuller. Soon, they will be bigger still. The vision of her feeding our babe there, of the child suckling nourishment from her, is deeply compelling.

She is mine. Mine to protect. Mine to cherish. Mine to love.

Mine to knot.

“Are you ready for my knot, mate? Are you ready to take all of me? Can you endure it like a good girl? Can you let me open you all up?”

“Please, Doug. Please. I need it. Please!”

My growl is one of approval. I begin to pick up the pace, letting the mutilated swelling near the base of my cock slide past her slick entrance and get all the way in. *“That’s my good little pet,”* I say, my eyes shifting to the leather collar, now finished and which nestles at her throat. *“You are mine. And you will remember it well when you must take my knot.”*

“Always, Doug, forever, as you are mine.”

My knot begins to swell. It is always raised after what was done, but it grows bigger still when I am rutting my mate.

“Oh, oh, oh!” Her eyes glisten with heat as she wraps her legs around my waist and encourages me to give her more, squeezing over me with every thrust, her hot, tight walls encouraging me to give her my seed.

I pound into her, using her body well and in the way that my mate needs. I am ravenous for her, a filthy rutting beast.

“Please! I need to feel you come inside me.”

I am hers to command, but I want her to come, too. My thumb finds the slippery nub of her clit, and I pet it mercilessly, watching her face contort and her neck arch before those sweet, filthy sounds of climax tear from her lips and the magic walls of her pussy clamp around me and compel a heady gush of my seed.

I pump my hips. I have drained my balls down her willing throat, but my body finds yet more as my knot swells and locks us together. With my lips pressed against her throat, I fill my mate all up until she makes her cute little whining sounds.

I roll onto my back with her nestled above me, her thighs spread around me, and the comforting cushion of her belly

squished against mine. I bask in the moment. Our babe has grown almost too big for her to do this—soon, we will need to find different ways to snuggle.

She lifts her head and gazes lovingly at me.

“How did an ugly orc get this lucky?”

Her lips tug up, and she stokes a fingertip down my cheek. “It is me who is lucky.” And then she snuggles down with her head to my chest. “Best you rest, my mate. I will need to tend you that way again in the morning.”

I groan weakly, already trying to work out how the fuck I will get through this pregnancy with my sanity... if she needs to... suck me, and... Gods. My cock flexes inside her, very much up for this arduous task.

“Do not think to deny me, mate,” she mumbles against my chest.

“As if I ever could. It is far too late for me and my cock: you have long since gentled the beast.”

Epilogue I

Jasmine

Several months later, as autumn settles deeply over the land, we welcome our beautiful baby girl, Lillian, into the world. Named after my mother, she is rosy-cheeked with my dark eyes and hair, and entirely human in every way that I can determine.

Doug is besotted with her.

I can admit I am a proud mama and that I'm besotted with her, too.

Doug finds it hard to leave either of us, but after a few weeks he returns to his duties patrolling, though not for as many hours each day. One afternoon, I am outside in the front garden, making the most of the sun while it still has some warmth to it. Lillian is napping in her basket on the lawn, and I am chatting to my neighbor when I hear a distant howl.

After a brief pause, there is a response, much closer, then another, followed by more and more as the shifters of our village take up the call. Gradually people and wolves appear in the street and move to gather on the village green.

"It is Tavion!" someone calls out to me. "With Fern and all of his pack. They have returned!"

A great cheer goes up. There are more than a few who succumb to happy tears. I wave when I see Deba and she comes running over to give me a hug, her wide smile showing her relief that her sons, and all of the ones we have been worried about for so long, are safe and will soon be back with us.

Epilogue II

Jasmine

At nine months old, Lillian is pretty, plump... and crawling everywhere. If I thought Doug was besotted with her the day she was born it is nothing to the bond that grows between them now.

She is unashamedly daddy's little girl. Then there are her ear-splitting squeals of excitement whenever he is in beast form that never fail to bring a smile to my lips even as they make me wince.

I always knew he would make a good father.

Good feels inadequate when applied to Doug. He is amazing, patient, and tireless, and embraces every task with willing and joy.

He is also determined, and fiercely protective

With Doug, we are always safe.

I'm standing beside the table, about to prepare lunch, when he enters the door. His arms are laden with wood, and his eyes swing from me to Lillian, who is on her belly on a thick woolen rug, crawling with determination toward the sturdy oak bench where she usually heaves herself up.

He grins. "*She is getting stronger,*" he says, with no small amount of pride.

He stacks the wood beside the hearth, dusts himself down, and strides over to pluck our daughter from the floor.

She throws her hands around his neck, babbling baby noises as she yanks on a handful of his hair.

He rumbles a purr and bears his teeth—he still has a fearsome smile.

"*Just like your mama,*" he says, with a wink at me. "*She is always pulling on my hair, too.*"

And how could I forget about his wicked side that is still as obsessed with petting my intimate places as it ever was.

I blush, which is ridiculous given I'm a mated woman with a babe who has reached the crawling stage.

"I want another one," he says, gently stroking one rough, knarled knuckle over our daughter's soft cheek. *"Maybe two or three."*

He turns to look at me, and I see all the heat there

I suck in a sharp breath, taking in the image of this fearsome male holding our daughter so gently in his arms. A sweet achy throb kicks off low in my belly. I have been more amorous of late, initiating intimacy more often than not, much to Doug's delight.

Does he know that I'm ready, that I have been thinking about and longing for him to knot me again?

To breed me.

His nostrils flare.

He steps closer, handing our daughter to me, while I try to steady my breathing. Pressing a kiss to the top of her dark head, he reaches to brush the hair over my shoulder, calloused fingertips skimming along the leather collar I never take off.

"I think I will need to take you often if I'm to get you with child. Morning and night, and again while our sweet daughter is taking her afternoon nap. And when I'm not inside you, you will be thinking about it, anticipating the next time I will fill you all up. Your poor human pussy will be stuffed full of my beastly cock and cum, and all sore inside from my constant rutting, even as you beg me to do it again. You will feel empty without me and satisfied only when my cock is nestled deeply, and my seed is locked where it needs to be as you writhe on my knot."

I blink up at him, arousal flaring as I crave and anticipate all he just said.

Then the wicked orc shifter smirks at me and strides for the door. Here he stops and glances back at me. *"I best speak to*

Tavion about adjusting my patrol. He will understand when I tell him I have a mate with a mind to being bred.”

About the Author

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