

*I Went On an Adventure  
and All I Got Was This  
Barbarian Ore*  
Crack Fantasy Adventure Chapter 1



JENNIFER CODY

**i went on an adventure  
and all i got was this  
barbarian orc**

Crack Fantasy Adventure Chapter One —In which the main characters meet and the main quest begins, but first a side quest in pursuit of tiny zombies.

**Jennifer Cody**

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This book contains sexually explicit material which is suitable only for mature readers.

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## Also by Jennifer Cody

# blurb

## **Berklak:**

Being a half-orc is fun most of the time. Most people think I'm all orc, and that usually slicks things up so I can glide in and out of town without much fuss. Most of the time things go really smoothly for me. Sometimes, young watchmen from small towns with too much time on their hands pick a fight with half-orcs just trying to get some mead, and sometimes that ends up with me taking a kid all the way to the capital to become a bard, and sometimes that means I discover along the way a new questline that I need to follow. Sometimes. Well, this time, at least, and my companion for this quest is the cutest little necromancer I've ever seen (he's the only one I've ever seen, but he's adorable).

Now, where did I leave my barrel of mead again?

## **Lawton:**

Being the most feared human in Fasgard is annoying and inconvenient. It's not like I went out of my way to be born a necromancer, but since my options are death or working for the king, I gladly accept my role as high sorcerer. It doesn't matter that I'm a prince of the realm, at least not to anyone in the palace. When one of my father's concubines loses her temper a little too hard, the things I discover lead me to the most wonderful half-orc I've ever met (I've only met the one, but he's amazing), and my very first real adventure.

I can't believe I'm finally going to leave the palace!

***I Went on an Adventure and All I Got Was This Barbarian Orc* is a five chapter serial fantasy adventure with a light-hearted, fun TTRPG vibe. Expect big magic, lots of cuddles, plenty of steam, and a team of characters that might not get a natural 20 on every roll, but they make up for it with creative solutions to both magical and mundane problems.**

# glossary

**Aelysou-** the gods that rule over what mortals consider good or neutral ideals

**Aelich-** the messengers/servants/warriors of the aelysou

**Aethyr-** the realm of the gods

**Draconian-** a race of reptilian people that are born in fire

**Elher-** a species of felid people

**Maelysou-** the gods that rule over what mortals consider negative or neutral ideals

**Maelich-** the messengers/servants/warriors of the maelysou

**Pescer-** a race of reptilian people that are born in water

**Qilatone elves-** high elves; they claim to be the original elves from which all other elves are descended

**Semer-** a species of canid people

**Thyr-** the mortal realm

**Viltz-** a race of corrupted elves that live in the deep caves

**Xenecar-** the race of people that were born from a maelysou and a legion of humans hundreds of thousands of years ago; they are not considered human anymore



one

# berklak

ORCS ARE NOT KNOWN for their patience, so it's a little worrisome to me that this idiotic barkeep keeps skipping over me to serve the other patrons. I've watched him take the coin of anyone who walks up to the bar where I've been waiting, and no matter how many times I politely knock on the wood top to get his attention, he continues to ignore me.

Now, I'm not one to go looking for a fight—violence finds me just fine without my active pursuit of it—but this feels like violence seeking me out.

I slam my fist on the bar and roar at the fucker behind it. “You can either take my coin and get me a mead barrel or I'll get one for myself and we'll find out how well equipped your town guard is for a rampaging orc!”

The startled barkeep turns red as the rest of the tavern's unruly patrons start booing him. No one wants their afternoon meal disrupted by a barbarian on a rampage. They all still have half a day's work ahead of them, and while most of them would welcome a fight in the evening, during the day it's far too disruptive, and that's why I always start drinking as early in the day as possible.

The barkeep finally gets himself moving again. He turns to me and points to the back. “I'm not lugging a barrel of mead out here for just you. It's twenty five crowns for the barrel and you have to drink it outside. I won't have an unruly, drunken orc in my tavern.”

“Twenty five crowns is theft. I'll give you twenty one because I'm nice, and I'll take it with me right on out of

town.”

At least the man has the courtesy of having orc-sized mead distribution on hand. Ten gallons of mead can sometimes be a problem to come by. Usually I just exchange my empty for a full one wherever I can, but the barrel I’ve been using was destroyed by a troll a few days ago, and it’s taken me this long to find a replacement. I did snoop in the tavern’s stores before coming to the bar since I didn’t want to waste my time.

“Done,” he agrees, holding out his hand.

I drop the gold into his palms, stand up and follow him to a barrel of mead with my name on it. Well, it doesn’t have my name on it yet, but it will. I’m damn possessive after a measure or two of the best or second best thing in life (it depends on the time of day and whether I’m in a fight if mead is the best thing in my life or if it’s my war hammer).

As soon as I step outside, the town’s guards greet me with clubs already drawn. “I’m only *half* orc,” —much to my father’s shame— “and I already told the stupid barkeep that I’d drink outside the town.”

“We’re just here to make sure you get on your way.” The manic grin on the young guard’s face does not assure me that his intentions are at all non-violent.

“Lead the way,” I urge him; putting this guy at my back would be bad for him.

He smirks and shakes his head. “After you, orc.”

I glance at the rest of these stupid fuckers, finding a variety of eager young idiots asking for a wallop and one old man shaking his head like he also can’t believe how stupid this goatfucker is.

“I’m usually a fairly honest *half*-orc, so I’m just going to tell you how this is going to go for you. I’ll walk ahead, and you and your little cronies are going to egg each other on until one of you, probably” —I look for the one with the most to prove, and point him out— “that guy will hit me with his little club. That’s going to irritate me, but it’s not going to hurt me, and when you see that I’m not going to attack the weakest

bootlicker among you, one of the stronger ones is going to take a shot. I'll take his club and throw it farther than most of you can run in a single sprint. That's going to set the whole mob off, except that guy." I point to the wizened guard, who has laughter in his eyes. "At which point I will defend myself with felicity and alacrity because I've been itching for a fight for days and your little mob of town ruffians is the perfect target. When I'm done with you, you're going to spend a month's wages on healing potions or you'll be out of a job for a few months while you recuperate. What I'm saying is, making me walk ahead of you lot is the first decision in a series of decisions that will lead to pain and financial ruin. Do you really want to do this?"

The idiot leader apparently doesn't speak the common tongue, because he just points ahead of him. "On your way, orc."

I exchange a glance with the old man, who shrugs like he thinks these young'uns losing a fight might be good for them, but I think we both know violence doesn't teach shiteheads how to not be shiteheads.

I mirror his shrug and go ahead of them, quickly sweeping a glance across them to categorize who's who. Oh well, that's unfortunate. Looks like the lead idiot's younger brother is the one who'll be pressured into hitting me first. He's probably just blind to what a moron his brother is, and me singling him out isn't going to help with the good decision-making potential. Poor kid.

Sure enough, three buildings down from the tavern, the younger brother hits me behind the knee with his club. Not hard enough to damage it, and he hit it when my weight was on my other foot—at literally the worst time if you're trying to bring an opponent to his knees.

I release a put upon sigh and roll my eyes skyward. It only takes another few seconds for the next hit to come. I'd put money on this guy being the lead shiteater's closest friend. I turn this time and yank the club out of his hand, baring my teeth at him as I rear back and throw it with about half my

strength. He'll probably find it outside of town sometime in the next decade. Waste of a perfectly good club, though.

The fuckers exchange a glance like they're surprised by this even though it's going down exactly as I already described, and they charge together as if an orc, even a half-orc like me, can't take on seven humans with one hand holding a mead barrel on his shoulder.

Spoiler alert: I can.

I don't even have to draw a weapon. The first guy to reach me kindly provides me with a club to replace the one I threw. A few gentle swings later and three of them are unconscious, two are staring in shock at their broken legs, and the little brother is staring up at me and trembling like a leaf in the wind.

I point the club at him, hoping he's got more than cotton between his ears. "I'm taking you to Bards College in Fairview. You're going to get a proper education and become a useful member of society. I won't share my mead, so you're going to have to bring your own."

"Master Orc, sir," the wiser older guard coughs. "I'll need to verify your credentials before I can let you take young Oliver out of Sunny Glade."

I pull out a largish keyring and jangle it a bit at him. "My name is Berklak. I am a member in good standing with the Adventurers Guild, the Barbarian's Club, the Feud of Assassins, the Mercenary Company, and a champion of the Bane's End Crucible seven times," I explain, letting him examine each of the keys on the ring that show my accolades and associations.

He hums his approval and holds up a key that most people wouldn't recognize even if they'd heard of the League of Extraordinary Rage. "What's this then?"

"The key to my home," I answer and let the keyring drop back against my thigh. "I assume I am established well enough to take this hooligan to Fairview?"

The old guard nods sagely and looks at little Oliver. “Go with the orc, boy, and don’t let this town see your face again until your beard has come in.”

Ooof, that’s quite the booting; humans don’t usually get their beards until their forties, and this kid is twenty if he looks a day.

Oliver still hasn’t figured out how his feet work, so I helpfully reach over and pull him up by his shirt. He manages to get his knees steady, and looks at the guard wide-eyed. “Really? You’re just going to let him abduct me?”

The guard points to my keyring. “I didn’t see a key to the Abductor’s Hold on there.” Oooh, maybe I should join that guild next. “He’s escorting you to a better life. Best take him up on it, boy, and do whatever he tells you to do. Not even the most renowned adventurers can boast championing the crucible seven times. Don’t be an idiot like your fool brother. Go with the orc.”

The boy casts a wary glance my way and winces when I smile back at him—orc smiles *are* a bit terrifying—but seems to decide I’m the best offer he’s going to get unless he thinks his worthless brother will do anything other than ruin his life.

“Ok, Master Orc. I’ll, um, just get my travel pack?”

Nervous colts have nothing on this skittish boy.

“I’ll be on the east road.” I pull out one of my coin purses (I keep a specific amount of coin in this one) and hold it out to him. “Take this to the apothecary and tell them that you’re accompanying an orc to Fairview. If they don’t know what that means, do not spend my coin. We’ll get supplies at a *reputable* apothecary.”

The wise old guard snorts as I trudge on toward the eastern road. I’m not watching, but the exchange between him and the boy paints a fun picture in my head.

“You ever been fucked by a man?”

“What?”

“Rosair is going to give you three things when you tell them you’re traveling with an orc. A decanter of oil to make your asshole slick, a plug to stretch it out, and a healing ointment for after you’ve been impaled on an orc cock. Take that coin purse to Rosair and tell them if you’ve never been fucked because they’ll magic you up a potion if you need extra prep.”

“Why would you let him take me if you knew I’d become his plaything?”

The outrage on that sentence is amusing. Most orcs wouldn’t just use him regardless of his wishes. We prefer our partners engaged and enthusiastic, so if he doesn’t want the ride of his life, he’s not going to get it.

The wise old man knows that, but what he says instead is just as fun. “Boy, that orc can teach you more about sex than a thousand whores from Ghallon. The smartest thing you can do right now is let him take you to Fairview, let him teach you everything he can along the way, and then when you’re a famous bard and an infamous lover, you can write an epic to his name that will live on longer than either of you. Don’t be a moron like your brother. Follow that orc and do whatever he wants and you’re going to have a better life than any of us because he’s offering you a leg up, and if you don’t take it, you deserve the life you get.”

I’m sure their conversation continues, but I lose track of it as I get further away. It’s true that orcs are infamous lovers. We’re not particular about our partners, but we do tend to keep the ones we have longer than most other species. We get attached unless there’s an established time limit on the affair. For example: three weeks travel to the capital of Fasgard. Time limits are important to establish if you have no intention of letting an orc keep you.

Of course, having a reputation, even if it’s for being a legendary lover, comes with its drawbacks. Since we tend to get attached to our lovers, we often get bloody possessive of them. Possessive orcs are violent orcs. Violent orcs are feared and not served at taverns that have barrels of mead waiting to be drunk. Not being served mead leads to orc tantrums. Orc

tantrums are bloody and violent, which tends to put people off orcs. It's a self-perpetuating cycle of meadlessness, abuse, and violence dappled with the occasional epic poem written to our dicks.

(It's important to note that all orcs have dicks. We're non-binary in that we don't have womenfolk. We have trees. It's a thing. Don't worry about it. No trees are harmed in the hatching of orc sons.)

Anyway...

Mead. Mead is good. It's life, really. Good mead can be heaven. This mead is tolerable, or it will be when I finally tap the barrel.



two

# lawton

THE JEWEL of the Emerald Sea is the palace of the royals in Fairview, the capital of the kingdom of Fasgard. It sprawls across a huge expanse of land at the top of a mountain that a particularly powerful ancestor of mine, Shavna Fairkin, leveled because she was showing off for the man who eventually became both her husband and her murderer. He loved her to death, but not before they built the main hall of the palace.

Many of my ancestors have had magic more powerful than nearly every other magic user to ever exist; they've been as powerful as demigods without a sniff of divine heritage. It's a particular point of pride in my family that we spawn ridiculously overpowered sorcerers.

Not all of my ancestors have had that much power; the ones who married into the family line have had no magic at all. It's a tradition for my family to progenerate with men and women who lack magic in order to bring balance to future generations. We don't want every person in our family to be as powerful as demigods; we only want a few in each generation, so we marry or consort with the poor, so to speak. Not poor monetarily, though that often goes hand in hand with being poor magically; no, we marry the lowest caste of magic users: the ones who can't cast for themselves.

“Lawton Arcival Fairkin!”

The screech of my name and echo of boot heels rushing toward my lab drive me to duck below my work table and dive

into the tunnel beneath, magically sealing the trap door above me so that no one can follow.

My elder sister hates me with the fires of a thousand suns, and every time she screeches my name like this, she accuses me of something heinous. The last time she came to call, she accused me of killing her dog's litter of newborn puppies.

*Puppies.*

Who kills puppies? Evil people, that's who, and I'm a lot of things, but evil enough to kill a puppy isn't one of them. Evil enough to leave them dead? Well, *I didn't* kill them, why should I fix someone else's bad decision, especially when it would be a favor to a woman who very definitely values her animals more than me, her own brother?

Her entire life is about breeding these dogs. They're superb hunters and make for excellent spies, and they're each worth a thousand crowns because she trains them herself, so she was understandably angry about their loss, but I wouldn't kill puppies! It's ghastly to even think about, and I really don't feel like dealing with her accusations today.

I don't kill. I could. Don't get me wrong, it would be so easy to snuff out her life, but I wouldn't.

*I wouldn't.* Really. I've never actually killed either a person or an animal. Plants, yes. I appreciate their sacrifice, but animals? *No.*

As I scurry down the dark tunnel beneath my workroom to escape her hatred and rage, I send a curl of magic toward the bodies and pieces of bodies in my workroom—*I didn't kill them*—animating them enough to send her fleeing before she does any damage to my work, because that bitch hates me enough to trash my lab in a fit of temper, and I'm not going to let her do that more than once.

Ok, it was twice. I didn't learn my lesson the first time. The problem with having an antagonistic progenitor is that there's bound to be a sibling or two that hates me just because my father does. And the problem with being hopeful is that I keep hoping my father will learn to love me despite my, um,

shortcomings. I really should just quash the optimistic part of my heart that believes that someday I'll prove my value to my father, but that feels like surrender, and I'm nothing if not as stubborn as my father. Someday that man is going to love me, and then my elder sister will either have to relinquish her stranglehold on the position of favored child or fall in line with loving me. You can bet I'm hoping for a long, hard fall from favor.

Well, maybe for like an hour, then I want her to love me too.

I'm a middle child; of course I want love.

I send a curl of wish-magic ahead of me, and the door to my chambers swings up and open. I like this kind of magic because it doesn't require a spell or ritual, but I try not to use it in front of anyone else because if my father knew how powerful my wish-magic is, he might just have me banished out of an abundance of precaution. All the Fairkin ancestors wanted powerful sorcerers, but one necromancer is born and—well, it's not exactly what anyone hoped for.

I climb out of the tunnel, pushing open the false bottom of my wardrobe. After dropping it back into place, I walk into my bedroom and toss my cloak over the back of a chair.

As the least favored prince of Fasgard and the sorcerer of highest regard, my rooms are better than most palace employees, but worse than the rooms given to my siblings. My brothers and sisters were given plenty of space for their families, but since I don't have a spouse, children, and concubines, and because it's illegal for me to impregnate anyone, I've been given a small suite, the same size we would offer to the dignitaries from less powerful nations. At least I have a washroom with water from a hot spring pumped in for the bath. It's a luxurious room, for certain, it's just not the type of luxury typically extended to a prince of Fasgard.

I settle in at the table where my lunch has been waiting for me and dig in, famished now that I've taken a break from my work. No one except me and specific visitors are supposed to be allowed in my lab, so the servants set my lunch up in my

room, but that means if I lose track of time while I work, I find myself eating my lunch at dinner time.

My only saving grace is that no one actually wants me at the king's dinner table. If I don't attend, no one is slighted by my absence; if anything, they're relieved, which is a crying shame because I'm a delight and my stories would be entertaining if anyone gave me the chance to tell them.

Who wouldn't be delighted to hear all about the raskar I found mummified in the pantry and turned into the royal guard's spy?

General Aleron has stopped assassination plots against my father because no one looks twice at a tiny feline pouncing at imaginary moths. He's asked me to provide linked spies for each of the eight knights that provide security for my father because I'm useful and my little zombie raskar are amazing.

Someday my father will appreciate me, I just know it.

Just as I finish stuffing a bite of fried eggplant and dry toast into my mouth, I hear the sound of my sister's heels approaching my chambers and quickly shoot a curl of magic to make sure my door is locked. The only person with a key is my manservant, which means that when my door bursts open, he's betrayed me by opening the door for my sister.

Adama storms in as I rise to my feet, quickly swallowing my bite and shooting my manservant a shocked and betrayed expression.

"You little weasel!" she screeches, throwing the corpse of a small animal at me.

I catch the dead thing, glancing down to discover it's one of the miniature golden paradise chickens that lay magical eggs for the king. Shock explodes through my body, and I gasp at seeing this beautiful creature destroyed.

"How did this happen? Who did this to Felicity?" I demand, angry and loud.

This beautiful animal might only be a signal of my father's wealth, but it was the last gift *my* mother gave him, and more valuable to me because it was a legacy of her life. She passed

into the aethyr ten years ago, the day after seeing me promoted to high sorcerer. She had been sick for many years, and though I could have magically helped her, my father waited too long to give me the only job in the kingdom that would allow me to use my necromancy to save her. Even with my status as high sorcerer, I couldn't bring her back to life—that aspect of my necromancy is illegal no matter my rank.

My magic swirls around us, and my sister, who has never experienced the full force of my power, stumbles back, shocked by my reaction. I don't usually lose my temper anywhere near actual living people. I'm level-headed and, if nothing else, demure with my family because I really don't want to weather their collective wrath, but this is an outrage!

Adama gawps at me, but the sudden force of my power, the demigod level of raw magic, silences her.

Cradling the precious bird in my arms, I frown at her. Yes, my siblings hate me, but I hope that doesn't mean that they would kill one of the last legacies of my mother just to accuse me of a crime. Still, better check.

I let the raw magic choking the air in the room curl around my sister. My father might banish me for doing this, but maybe he'll forgive me too. It could go either way. "Tell me who killed Felicity!" I demand, forcing Adama to obey my will.

She cries out as the spell binds her to me. "I don't know! I thought *you* were killing our animals!"

Disappointment weighs on my shoulders, but I brush it off because, yes, my sister thinks I'm a chicken murderer, but on the plus side, she isn't a chicken murderer, so I don't have to decide whether I value the chicken more than her. Honestly, I'm not sure who I would pick if I had to choose.

"Go tell father I will find out who is responsible," I instruct her and set the binding spell to dissipate as soon as she informs our father I'm investigating the animal's death. If I could trust her to just do as I ask, I wouldn't bind her with a spell, but she hasn't proven trustworthy, has she? No, she hasn't.

She turns and runs, clacking in her boots at a clip. I narrow my glare at my manservant and hold out my hand.

“What did she bribe you with?” I ask as he places the key to my rooms on my upturned palm with a grimace.

“She said she would bring me into her harem,” he confesses.

I roll my eyes at that and check his magic. He’s a level one, barely, but still more than a zero. “You don’t qualify for the harem of any of the royal family because we only bring in level zero magic users.” I shove the key in my pocket and shake my head at him. “Go see Hildred for a new assignment, unless you would prefer to leave the palace employment.” Hildred is the castle’s steward. She likes me.

I push him and his shocked face out of my room and shut the door, locking it again.

The poor bird in my arms looks like someone wrung her neck, so I straighten it out and set her on my table, drawing a small amount of magic into a spell. Around her I draw an array of symbols infused with my magic, singing a low song of remembrance and life as I do. The last dot of the array dries in blood-infused ink as the last line of my spell-song quivers on my voice. The magic salutes me, the caster, and infuses the bird, bringing it back to life and returning the poor creature’s soul from the aethyr.

It hops up onto its feet and immediately drops three golden eggs in quick succession. The first one cracks and the yolk runs out, liquid gold. The second bounces, and I catch it before it can roll off the table. The third one falls soft and delicate, cushioned by the mess of the first. I take the soft egg and place it on the window sill where it will get the full attention of the summer sun, then I pick up the remaining golden egg and the shell of the broken one along with Felicity, intent on returning her to the lawns where she makes her nest.

It won’t take me but a minute to figure out who killed this poor bird, because I might be a necromancer with magic more heavily controlled than the taxes and tariffs of our kingdom,

but that means both life and death inhabit my magical demesne. All life. Including the witnesses to chicken murder.



three

# berklak

I EXAMINE the bloody scene on the road, noting that the rips and tears that clearly killed the team of four horses belong to a creature with curved claws. In fact, the creature has three curved foreclaws and a shorter hind claw, or maybe I should call them talons. What stumps me are the spotted black and white feathers. Three of them scattered in the blood appear as grisly evidence that this was a harpy attack.

The problem is that harpies don't usually come this far east. They're denizens of an island continent three weeks by boat to the west of Fasgard, and they're not especially violent toward horses. Yes, they're a warrior race, but they're not mercenaries for hire. They'll war with invaders and fiercely defend their borders, and when the rest of the world is at peace, they will war among themselves, but they don't just come to other people's kingdoms and kill horses.

"What killed them? And where are the people who were driving the cart?" Oliver asks, staying well away from the bloody mud.

"Circle the scene, look off the road for the people. Hopefully they ran off and found their way to the closest town, but just in case, look for their bodies. If they were killed with the horses, there's going to be a lot of blood." I wave at the bloody mud as an example.

Oliver grimaces but does as he's told.

That old guard who told him to do whatever I tell him to do did me a huge favor with this boy. He's good at following instructions and doesn't verbally complain either. He might

not want to go looking for bodies, but he'll do a good job of it, and that will give me the chance to study the scene again.

Harpies.

It's just so strange. Why would harpies come to Fasgard? This kingdom boasts plenty of wealth and resources, but it's a relatively peaceful place to live. King Valerian prefers to keep his borders safe rather than expanding his reach; the only exception is the soldiers stationed in Gwafellaw to the south, the land that fell to the wilds a thousand years ago. His soldiers are there to make sure the frost giants and snow trolls that live in that frozen land stay well away from the border. There are rumors of ice dragons, but no one has seen a dragon, ice or otherwise, in an age, so I'm skeptical about those rumors.

Unless King Valerian has decided to make war with the Isle of Flight without warning his citizens, there's no reason for harpies to even be in Fasgard, much less attacking our merchant wagons. I'm going to have to report this to the royal watch—the king will want to know of harpy attacks on his citizens.

I should probably see if I can hire a tracker to find the attackers too. This is going to delay our arrival in Fairview, unless the royal watch can spare the men to investigate this. Maybe the next guild I should train at should be the Druid's Grotto; they produce the best trackers among the guilds; not even the Hunting Party can boast a better tracker than the druids. It's because the hunters only track animals for specific purposes: food or glory, whereas druids will hunt down anything and anyone they need to find for any reason at all.

Oliver reappears looking grim, but not like he found any other bodies. "Unless you want me to go out further, there aren't any corpses in the immediate area."

"I had a druid track me from Jergall all the way to the Xiana Mountains because I overpaid him for a staff. He tracked me for seven hundred miles to return three gold to me," I say as I examine the scene this time to see if there's a

broken claw or something I can take to the guard as proof in addition to the feathers.

Oliver makes a confused sound—ok, yes, I guess my statement comes out of nowhere for him, but it’s relevant, trust me. “That’s—why didn’t he just keep it? He probably spent a hundred times that on the journey.”

I roll my eyes at his ignorance as I grab up a feather, giving up on finding a broken claw too. “You realize it’s possible to journey seven hundred miles and not spend a single coin if you already have your travel gear. I spent my coin fifty years ago and I’ve been careful to keep my travel gear in good condition replacing items only when it’s necessary. I could leave here and the next time I need to spend coin would be to get me another barrel of mead. If I gave up mead, I could probably go until I needed a new whetstone in about three years.”

Oliver’s eyes grow wide and his nostrils flare as his imagination goes wild at the thought of a feral orc wandering the wilderness.

I snort and grab the front of his shirt, pulling him away from the murder scene. “I’m not going to give up mead and regular bathing, boy. Let’s go find a member of the royal watch to report this to.”

I release Oliver’s shirt when he grasps my wrist and snipes, “You already stink; it would be unbearable if you stopped bathing altogether just to save some coin.”

I gasp, placing my hand over my heart where the spearhead of his words were aimed. “I can’t believe you think I stink. I bathed *yesterday*.”

“Dirt baths do not count as bathing,” he snorts.

“Clearly you’ve never spent time at an elher spa,” I chide, smiling at the memory of the felid shifter spa I once visited for a month. “Elhers swear by dirt baths, and before you start snarking about that, I stayed at an elher spa once and dirt baths were part of the daily beauty routine they put me on, and let

me tell you, I've never had softer skin than when I was in their care. I was practically glowing when I left there."

Oliver gives me a flat look. "There's a difference between the dirt baths of the elhers, which exfoliate your skin, and rubbing dirt all over yourself at the end of a long day of travel. Did you forget the water baths and hot springs that elhers always build their spas on?"

I reach over and muss his grubby hair, proud of him for remembering that fact about the elher spas that the felid people brought from their homeland to Fasgard. "I didn't. We'll get a room at an inn tonight so we can bathe properly."

The normal stress that keeps Oliver tense relaxes slightly at the promise of hot water and a bed. "Finally," he grumbles, but he's pleased.

He might not have known that he wanted to travel with me, and he might have some reservations about enrolling at Bards College, but he's slowly realizing that I really am giving him something that most people don't get: a solid chance to improve his future.

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At dusk we finally reach a small city with a solid royal watch presence at the gates. I send Oliver running ahead to tell the watchmen I'll need to speak to the watch sergeant, and by the time I reach the gates, the sergeant is there with Oliver.

He's a draconian with fiery orange scales and sparkling green eyes. His tail twitches at the tip when he sees that I'm orcish, but he manages to keep his prejudices to himself, offering me his hand. "You're Berklak; I'm Sergeant Helvan of the Gladfield watch. Your young companion here tells me that you came across some horses that were killed."

"Aye, we did. Thank you for seeing me, Sergeant. About four hours down the road was a team of four horses that looked like they had been attacked by harpies."

Helvan's eyes widen in shock. "Harpies? You're sure?"

I show him the feather. "I was considering hiring a druid to find the attackers, but I've had hours to consider this, and the only other thing that has feathers like this and claws capable of eviscerating a horse is something we want in Fasgard less than we want harpies. Of our two options, I would prefer going to war with the Isle of Flight."

Smoke seeps out of Sergeant Helvan's nostril slits and his tail thrashes behind him, belying his agitation. "You're not suggesting that our choices are harpies or speckled giant eagles."

"I'm not," I reply grimly. "I'm saying it's either harpies or we have an established lich lord with an aerial guard at our doorstep."

Helvan forcibly restrains his tail, but the smoke continues to seep from him. "Let's hope it's harpies. I'll send a runner ahead of you to Fairview and a contingent back down the road. We have a druid we work with when we have need of a tracker." His eyes catch on my key ring and he squints at it in surprise. "Is that a key to the League of Extraordinary Rage?"

I brush my hand over the key in question. “It is.”

His gaze finds mine again. “You’re half-orc, then?”

“I know it’s hard to tell, but yes,” I confirm.

“When you get to Fairview, seek out Captain Finch. She’ll want a word with you. If the druid finds the source of the attack, I’ll send them along to her as well, so she’ll have news if you’re interested.”

A grin splits my face. “Of course I am, Sergeant.” I jingle all the keys on my keyring. “I live to bleed and be bled; whether there’s a swarm of harpies or a lich lord, I’m here to lend my warhammer to the cause.”

His eyes stray to the maelysson warhammer strapped to my back. Most people don’t notice the details, but clearly this man isn’t like most people, because he bares his teeth in appreciation. “Someday you’ll have to tell me how you acquired a warhammer made from the steel of the gods.”

“I’ll let you buy the mead and tell you all about the lower maelich I got my baby from,” I promise, offering him my hand again.

The lower maelich had been a powerful sorcerer that had necromanced himself immortality from Ovphin, maelysou of hunting. He had a little run-in with my rage and I got a pretty warhammer out of the deal. It has jewels of death embedded in it. Anyone who’s ever carried a weapon really ought to look into jewels of death for it; they’re very convenient against higher level evils.

He takes my arm and clasps it in a warrior’s grip. “Until next time, Berklak.”

“Until then,” I agree.

Pulling Oliver along as Sergeant Helvan starts barking orders to deal with the attack down the road, I lead him straight to the city center, looking for an inn that would be friendly to an orc and his companion.

“Do you really think it could be a—”

I cut Oliver's question off with a hand over his mouth. "Do not speak of such things within the hearing of the common folk, boy. We don't know what it is, and until there is a plan in action and a confirmation of what happened, we keep the speculation to ourselves," I whisper in his ear. "Panic is the enemy of the people, and words like 'lich lord' and 'harpies' will cause general panic. Do not speak of what we've found to anyone but me and never in the hearing of others."

"Yes, sir," he mumbles behind my hand.

"Good boy," I tell him, straightening again. "Now, let's get food, drink, and a bath. Then I'll show you how the elher at the spa collected their fees."

He casts me a sideways glance and the scent of his arousal reaches my nose. "So they really do make you pay them with coin and cum?" he whispers, flushing the cutest pink.

I shoot him a lascivious grin. "They really do."



four

# lawton

THE CHICKEN KILLER turns out to be one of the concubines in my father's harem. Swahla got a wild hair up her butt after the last time my father passed her over and decided to kill one of my mother's chickens. My father, the stoic man that he is, doesn't express more than vague disappointment in me via his deliberate use of avoiding looking at me. I guess I won't be punished for subverting Adama's will for a few minutes the other day, so that's a relief. Maybe this is the first step in the journey toward acceptance and love.

Don't disabuse me of my flights of fancy. A prince is allowed to dream.

Swahla kneels before him, just a half step behind me where I stand as witness to her crime; she was arrested several days ago, but this is the first time we could get an appointment with my father. She sobs quietly, pleading with tears for clemency from her lover, the king. I know exactly how she feels, though I haven't cried in my father's presence since my mother's death, and before that I suspect it was as a toddler. He's not exactly the nurturing type, so I save my tears for the bottom of my cups.

Unfortunately for Swahla and myself, my father is as merciless as he is ruthless in his rule. He isn't cruel, but he does expect every person, including himself and his children, to obey the law. And as far as I know, he's never struck a law down, hence I've been made the court sorcerer rather than executed for the crime of being born.

Lovely, isn't it? He might not love me, but at least he won't murder me for an accident of birth.

“By law, killing an animal owned by another is a crime punishable by a month in jail and a fine of the value of the animal. According to the court auditor, the chicken is worth one thousand seven hundred gold. You will be remitted into the custody of Kyn, taken to jail, and fined for the cost of the chicken. However, our miniature golden paradise chickens are invaluable to us as they were a gift from our child's mother before Elkay guided her soul back to Aethyr. Thence, you are hereby put out from our household. We will have no one so cruel taking up space in our home. Your belongings will be sold to pay the fine for your crime, and any leftover coin will be given to you upon your release from jail. Guards, take this woman to Kyn.”

Two castle guards drag Swahla away, shrieking and crying. I understand her upset, but she should have known her king better than she did and stopped herself from exacting revenge. Even I know he's not going to forgive a crime that would get our poorest citizens jailed. If anything, he holds us to a higher standard than he holds everyone else.

Which makes me wonder why I'm not being punished for the spell I cast on Adama. Did she tell father I bespelled her? Did she fail to mention it? If it was anyone other than Adama, I might suspect some affection and loyalty, but she would definitely use my spellcasting as a reason to turn me in to my father, so there's got to be some other explanation for why I'm not currently as banished from my father's household as Swahla. Or rather, executed for being a necromancer in Fasgard.

Without looking at me, my father beckons me close enough for a private conversation. Unlike most of the people who know I'm a necromancer, my father has never shied away from proximity. He just hates my magic and me because of it, but we're working on the latter.

“My king?” I murmur, bowing my head respectfully.

He keeps his voice as quiet as mine. “Swahla was the gentlest, most self-effacing woman we’ve ever met. She got along with everyone in our harem until a month ago. Something happened from one night to the next, and suddenly she hated everyone. We’ve been made aware that she has threatened her sister concubines and started to collect toxiferous herbs and seedlings. Our sweet Swahla went from the favored sister to the least liked in a few days. We want you to find out why. People do not suddenly change for no reason; we both know this. Find out what happened to her.”

“I will do my best to find answers for you, my king.”

And now I feel even more sympathy for the poor woman. Obviously she is responsible for her own actions, but if something happened to her that caused her to act out like she did, I can only imagine what it might have been. Actually, I don’t want to imagine what it might have been, because that might hinder my investigation.

“You will, or your usefulness to the crown won’t be enough to save you from the consequences of your spell-casting, sorcerer. Do not let us hear of you bespelling our citizens, courtiers, and royals again.”

“Yes, my king,” I whisper, holding back a sigh because he’s granting me clemency. It would be a shame to have to break my winning streak by having to kill a bunch of loyal guards escaping my father’s wrath.

My father dismisses me with a grunt and a wave, and I leave as one of the many courtiers takes up his attention.

On my way to my lab, Hildred, the steward of the palace, joins me. “Your highness, I must insist that you choose a new manservant or a maidservant. You have to hire someone; I don’t have anyone to spare now that we’re beginning the preparations for your sister’s birthday celebration in earnest.”

“I’m going to be far too busy to look at potential hires. The king just now asked me to investigate something important.” I shoot her a sideways glance to see her reaction. Her draconian features don’t tell me much, but the narrowing of her nictitating membrane tells me she’s not pleased.

It's against the law to put hands on a member of the royal family, but what use is a law that someone will ignore because they know I would never turn them in for pulling me to a stop right in the middle of the corridor?

Hildred forces me to face her, looking up into her pretty golden brown, loving and aggravated eyes. "Lawton, my sweet boy, I will hang you by your little toes if you don't make the time to hire someone from the list I gave you or submit someone to my office as a candidate so I can investigate them for approval. I understand the king's matter is urgent, but if I bring this up to him, he's going to agree with me, because he wouldn't want any of my extra effort to go into this." She sneers even though we both know she's right. She has never made the effort to hide how she feels about the way my family treats me.

She doesn't approve, in case that wasn't clear, and it's because she loved my mother. Not platonically. They were lovers on the side. I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to know that, but since I do, it's a secret that she and I have from the rest of the world. It would have been fine for my mother to have a lover besides my father as long as they were in the harem, but Hildred is a level three hearth witch and doesn't qualify to join the harem, so her love for my late mother is a secret we will both take to the grave.

"When you're right, you're right," I agree. "I will make some time to find a qualified candidate as soon as possible. Let me do the preliminary investigative work for this request from the king today, and tomorrow I will take some time to suss out the right manservant for me."

She narrows her eyes at me suspiciously. "I better have an update on your progress by dinner tomorrow or I will take desperate measures, boy. Just because you're a prince doesn't mean you can cross me."

I lean up and kiss this wonderful woman's scaly cheek. "I would never dare cross the most important person in the palace."

She scoffs and her draconian tail swishes behind her, belying her pleasure at my affection. “Go on then, prince. Go start your investigation.”

I grin at her and take my leave, twirling in my robes and rushing off to get to work.

My lab door opens as I approach and closes once I cross the threshold. It’s an easy spell I put on the door so I never have to juggle the items I carry in and out and the door latch. It doesn’t lock my lab or keep anyone out, but I am the only person besides General Aleron and Hildred with a key to the lab. My manservant will get one when I hire another one, but until then, only the three of us have keys, which is why I’m only mildly surprised to find the general waiting for me on the stool I placed in a safety ward. It’s the place all my visitors are meant to sit while in my lab because it protects them from anything I might do in here, though only Aleron has ever used it. I’ve never been visited by anyone except Adama, who ignores her own safety no matter how many times I tell her standing anywhere but inside that ward is unwise.

“Hello, dear!” I greet him with a bright smile. “What are you doing in my lab?”

No sooner do the words leave my mouth than Kynl, the elther in charge of the palace’s jail, steps out from behind the general. He’s styled his mane in five rows of braids tied off with leather strips and heavy with gold, silver, and copper beads. His long beard is tied into a single queue and held together with more beading.

He waves his furry, clawed digits at me. “Hello, Prince Lawton,” he greets me nervously.

I glance between these two men, curious how they beat me here, especially when Kynl is supposed to be seeing to Swahla. “Hello, Kynl. Did the guards not deliver Swahla to you?”

His shy nervousness morphs into immediate confusion. “Of course they did. She is settled in her cell and has already had her first meal.”

I raise my brows, surprised. “That was fast. I only just left the king’s presence.”

General Aleron frowns. “What are you talking about? It’s already mid-afternoon.”

It’s my turn to frown. I flick my glance at the wind-up clock from Jassun, a country across the sea to the north where they have developed many brilliant uses for gears, including the priceless time-keeping device the ambassador gifted me last spring.

I stare at it trying to figure out where three hours have gone since I was in the throne room. It certainly didn’t take me that long to get here, not even if I include the conversation with Hildred.

I hold up a hand to my visitors. “Stay in the circle,” I instruct them.

Once they agree to stay in the safety circle, I grab a black charcoal stick and let my instinct guide me as I draw an array around me. It’s meant to scan me for spellwork or the remains of spellwork, and as I chant the words I make up to focus the spell, it comes to life, scanning me. As I finish the last dot of the array, the spell...

Well, it kind of explodes with magic. I don’t know how else to describe it. It’s not dangerous to anyone, though it might chafe a serious magic-user like Aleron because it’s so different from any magic he normally uses. The magic explodes outward, encompasses the whole room, and then falls back in on the array and then into me.

The magic tickles as it enters me, then turns uncomfortably hot. It’s not burning me, it’s just hot enough to make me sweat, which means I’ve been cursed, which is unusual. I don’t know of many people strong enough to curse me and make it stick without my being aware of the magic as it happens.

My father probably could. He’s not as powerful as me, but he is powerful. Aleron maybe, but he wouldn’t curse me and then trap himself in the curse, because that’s what’s happening

right now. I'm in a slow-time curse, and it affects every person and thing I interact with.

Hildred won't be happy about that.

Well, at least it's a fairly straight forward curse. According to the analysis of it written in my shorthand (it's the only written language my spells know), the curse was placed on me by a level five magic user, which stuns me. It would take a level seven like Aleron to slip behind my defenses; a level five should not have gotten a curse on me—

Oh wait.

“That *bitch*,” I complain.

I manifest a bound scythe and send it swiping through the magic my fucking sister put on my robes! My robes!

She set the curse to activate when I donned them, which of course I did for going to court; I'm the high sorcerer of the country; I'm required to wear my dress robes to court. The parameters of the curse are pretty clever in that it deactivates in the presence of royal blood except for me. Stupid that she would put the kingdom in so much danger by delaying Aleron from his duties, but she probably wasn't thinking too far ahead.

“Well, I disabled the slow-time spell. I very much suggest you two go check on your charges, because the moment I walked in, you were subject to the slow time curse as well, and I have no idea how much time has passed since I walked in the room.”

Kyln and Aleron exchange an uneasy look.

Aleron huffs his annoyance. “Please tell me this was a prank and not a legitimate attack on a prince of the realm.”

“It was a legitimate attack on the prince of the realm, but the culprit is going to tell you it was a prank. Saimey set the curse on purpose.” Saimey is one of my younger sisters. I have three brothers and five sisters, and I am sitting solidly in the middle of them. Saimey is our youngest sibling, barely twenty five years old. She likes pranking the rest of us, but I get the



brunt of it because I never tell our father about her activity, so she gets away with it.

Aleron grumbles under his breath, jerking his head to Kyn who follows him out of the room. I assume they'll be back if there isn't an emergency, and then we can talk about what they came to visit me about.

In the meantime, I pull out the journal I use for all the royal requests made of my office and start writing by describing the job my father gave me. I write out all the details I can remember from this morning, then add to it as an aside the curse Saimey put on my clothes. I detail how I removed the curse, then move on again to planning out my next steps, the first of which is to interview Swahla herself.

No wait, the first step is to collect all her things before they're taken to market.

In fact, since I've been delayed by a curse—I glance at the clock, frustrated to discover that it's late afternoon now—I need to run to intercept the guards.

I sprint through the palace to my father's family wing, where I lived until I became an adult. I slam into the family room, grabbing the attention of my father's concubinus, Jareh. "Did anyone collect Swahla's things already?"

Tears roll down his cheeks and he nods. "It was Hildred. She was in a pique," he snuffles, trying to wipe away his grief at losing Swahla; all of my father's harem are very close and have always tended to love each other; I imagine he's not the only one of the harem suffering her loss.

I reach out to comfort him, but he jerks away and I drop my hand. "Right. Ok. Thank you. I'm sorry for your loss."

He stifles a miserable sob and nods. "Thank you, your highness."

Turning because he doesn't want me to witness his grief, I leave the family room and wait until the door is firmly shut before sprinting to Hildred's office.

I find her in a tiff with trails of smoke seeping out of her nostrils as she glares at stacks of paper on her desk. As soon as

I enter her office, the door behind me slams shut with excessive force. “What did you do?” she demands in a puff of smoke.

“It was Saimey,” I defend myself. “I need Swahla’s personal items. I have to scan each item for intrusive magic before it’s sold.”

Her nictitating membranes narrow and another puff of smoke clouds the air around her. “I’ve already ordered it delivered to your lab, but you weren’t in it so the servants delivered it to your storeroom.”

I bounce over to her and kiss her scaly cheek. “Thank you, Hildred. Expect a delivery of Firebrew brandy.”

That offering soothes her irritation and she pats my cheek. “Good boy.”

I giggle at that and leave, power-walking to my storeroom to pull all Swahla’s things out for a thorough scan.

five

# berklak

WELL. This is worrisome.

I cut a glance to Oliver who looks like he might puke.

The stench of death *is* strong, and Oliver, for all his snark and bluster, is a bit delicate. Eventually he'll make a fine bard, but he might be the kind of bard that finds his place in the world and never explores further.

“Is it harpies again?” he asks, swallowing his gorge.

“Ah, no,” I admit. I'm still pretty sure the last scene was harpies, as odd as that is, but this is definitely not harpies. “You can tell by the smell, but please don't breathe deeply right now. This was an attack by the viltz.”

Finding that the corrupted dark elves that usually stay in the deepest caverns have surfaced to destroy a farm makes me think that a pattern is emerging in Fasgard, and that sounds like a mission for a team of adventurers. I really hope the druid Sergeant Helvan hired is already in Fairview when we arrive, because I really want to be in the party of adventurers contracted to investigate and resolve the problem.

Oliver shakes like a leaf as he stares at the pile of burned corpses in the middle of a ravaged field of crops. “The viltz stay underground,” he insists.

I pull him by the shirt to my side and lay a protective arm over his shoulders as I look over the scene. What truly concerns me is the three arrows in a triangle on the only unburnt post in sight. This wasn't a raiding party or a group of viltz hunters; this was an advance scouting party. “Exactly.

The dark elves stay in their caverns and tunnels and only ever battle with the dwarves for territory, so the question is: what is bringing them to the surface? Why are harpies and dark elves appearing in Fasgard? What is drawing them here, and is it the same thing or different things? Is it just a coincidence or a pattern? Focus on what we can do something about, because it's tragic that all these people are dead, but they're in aethyr and we're still in thyr. We have to deal with the here and now and let the gods deal with the there and then."

Oliver nods and focuses on the questions instead of the corpses, which is the best thing he can do right now. "Maybe they need food or supplies? The harpies are from an island, right, so maybe they had a bad harvest or something? The viltz—they took the animals, so maybe they had a plague or something that killed their livestock?"

He's right about the animals. It's easy to see that the viltz took them because the pens are empty and there's a clear trail of retreat with animal droppings in it.

"I think we'll let the druid know there's another attack to investigate. We'll be in Fairview tomorrow evening and can tell the watch there about this farm. It probably feeds Fairview if not the palace itself."

Oliver's expression sours. "You're going to enroll me at Bards College when we get there, so I won't be told the results of the investigation."

I laugh at his petulance. "You're an incredibly young human. You have nearly three hundred years of life ahead of you; this one little problem is the least of the adventures you'll miss out on."

His jaw drops and he makes an offended noise. "I'm going to be the most famous bard to ever sing for an adventuring team. I'm a level four radiant sorcerer, I'll have you know."

I snort at that and shake my head, turning to continue our trek along the dusty road. "If that's the result you were given, your testing guide was a hack and a charlatan. If you're a level three I'll carry you the rest of the way to Fairview. And unless

you have a contract with one of the aelysou, you're not a radiant anything."

Oliver looks taken aback as he follows me. "No. My teacher told me that radiant just meant that my magic comes from the gods."

"Your teacher must've gotten his education under a rock. Radiant sorcerers have contracts with the aelysou. Dark sorcerers have contracts with the maelysou. You're just a sorcerer if you have sorcery magic without a contract. There are many different schools of learning for sorcerers that you can pursue without a contract. You can be a healer, a technomancer, or an artisan—" I think about the current high sorcerer of Fasgard. In most places necromancy isn't illegal, but Fasgard is an exception. "A necromancer. But those pursuits depend on the strength of your magic and the way you train. How have you been training your magic?"

Oliver's response doesn't surprise me at all. "I'm good at potion making, so I've been doing that with him."

A pulse of irritation forces me to open the tap on my mead barrel, which is already dangerously low since I bought a new one in Gladfield, and gulp several times. Mead makes me feel better when I'm on the verge of getting angry. When I feel like I can continue this conversation without destroying a tree or two, I turn the tap off and wipe my mouth, licking the dampness off the back of my hand—waste not want not, right?

"Let me guess, the town alchemist was your magic teacher."

Oliver shrugs. "He's the only one who knew much about magic except the old blind witch, and no one would ever want her to teach anyone anything. She's mean and cranky, and she cursed the sunflower fields one year and no one will buy our sunflower seeds now."

Based on how good his magical education has been so far, I seriously doubt the witch cursed anyone's fields. She would have to be a dark witch to curse anyone, and most witches are as in tune with nature as the druids are, and it would be anathema for them to become a dark witch. I can think of three

dark witches to exist in all of the written and oral history of the clans of orcs, and we're really good at record keeping—trees have long memories and rarely forget anything.

(It's one of those orc things, don't worry about it.)

Our records are even better than the Qilatone elves of High Emintis.

“I think it would be good for your magical development if you just forget everything anyone has ever told you about magic before today. I'll give you a basic run down so you're not completely stupid when we get to Bards College, but if you have magic of any significance, they'll teach you how to use it as a bard.”

For a while, Oliver remains quiet, probably contemplating how ignorant he is because of other people's ignorance. Sunny Glade used to be a thriving market town, and it was probably because of the sunflower fields, but when the fields failed, the town lost its connection to the other parts of Fasgard, and now they're just a bunch of ignorant idiots pissing off orcs and teaching their magical children wrong information.

“I really was a pretty good potion maker,” he mutters.

“Then you're probably a witch and not a sorcerer at all,” I shrug. “Witches can be bards too.”

“Shouldn't I go to potion-making school or something if that's my specialty?” he demands.

I shrug. “You could if you want to, but barding is more fun, and you can still learn how to make potions. You could learn what Bards College can teach you, use the money you make from your epic stories, poetry, and singing to go to the College of Witchcraft, and learn to be a proper witch, if you really are one. I'm not qualified to assess your magic, so you're going to have to wait until the college assesses you before you decide what to do. I'm sponsoring you for Bards College. If you want a different education, you'll have to figure out a way to pay for it yourself.”

“Anyone can go to any of the colleges for free, even I know that,” he snorts, rolling his eyes.

“It’s free to get an education, yes, but you still have to pay for food, housing, clothes, and supplies. I’m sponsoring your education at Bards College because I own one of the dorms. I have seven kids currently in residence. I pay for their room and board and each of them gets a stipend from the college at the beginning of each month as long as they’re attending their classes. I don’t even demand they pass their classes; they just have to attend. You’ll be the thirty-eighth kid I’m putting through their schooling. I’ll pay for you to attend Bards College for up to ten years, and then you’ll have to have enough of an education to support yourself. Maybe in a decade I’ll buy a dorm at the College of Witchcraft, and then you can get an education there too, but for the next ten years, it’s Bards College or nothing.”

“Are you rich?” he questions skeptically.

I roll my eyes and shake my head. “Do you see my keychain? I’ve been looting dungeons, rousting evil sorcerers, returning lost children, and exploring the wilds for treasure since before you were a twinkle in your father’s eye. My skill set is lucrative, to understate things. I choose to use my excess on the future of Fasgard, because there is no way I could ever spend the amount of coin I’ve collected on things for myself and be happy. Happiness isn’t owning a sprawling estate for me. It’s bleeding trolls for gold I won’t spend the half of. As long as I have enough for mead, food, and sex, I’m content. The rest I will happily send to the college for my kids.”

Oliver falls silent for another minute before uttering a begrudging, “You’re not bad for an orc.”

“*Half-orc.*”



six

# lawton

FRUSTRATION IS DISCOVERING foreign magic in every article of clothing, every trinket, every piece of jewelry Swahla owned, but not being able to pinpoint its source. Frustration is discovering that the foreign magic is saturating every corner of the palace, every tile, every tapestry, every goblet—and not being able to figure out where it's coming from or how it infected everything with no one noticing. *Frustration* is realizing I've somehow let someone's dark foreign magic into the kingdom and didn't notice its destructive influence.

I can't even conceptualize how this much dark magic spread over the kingdom as evenly as it has. It's like we've been blanketed in a fog of dark magic without realizing it's happening. I should have noticed, at the very least. I'm the high sorcerer of Fasgard! It's literally my job to protect the kingdom from this kind of thing. Swahla suddenly becoming violent isn't a surprise; what is a surprise is that there aren't more incidents like Swahla's.

Maybe I should ask Aleron if there has been an uptick in violent crime. Actually, I should probably just go straight to the watchmen of the city. The palace is kind of a bubble of disconnect from the everyday lives of the citizens of Fasgard. It would be better to get unfiltered information.

I snap my fingers, directing all my helping hands to put themselves away in the stasis bowl I store them in when they're not in use, then I pull the magic out of the body parts helping me with my investigation. I head back to my chambers using my secret tunnel. Hildred and I haven't yet agreed upon a new man or maid servant. All the candidates she proposed

failed to pass the initial interview test: don't flinch when the necromancer speaks.

I don't want a personal servant who's afraid of me, and she thinks that anyone who's willing to apply for the position has proven they're able to overcome their own fear. I shouldn't be judged by my magic, and I'm not going to let my own servants do that to me before I even hire them. I'm trying to fight for a lessening of fear against me, and I'm not going to hire someone who isn't going to help me reach that goal.

In my chamber, I change into my bar clothes. They're my common clothes; Hildred acquired them for me when I explained that sometimes I need to blend in with the common folk. Blending includes having a coin purse of mostly coppers with some silvers and only a few gold. Everything from my clothes to my boots and the wear on my purse is designed to blend in with the rest of the citizenry in Fairview. There are of course signs that I'm nobility no matter how I dress, but the drunks at a tavern shouldn't immediately notice that I keep my hair clean and my skin soft.

After I dress, I walk to Aleron's office. He refuses to let me go anywhere unaccompanied, and I respect his position, so I don't leave the palace without him or someone assigned to me. Besides, I need him to go with me to the city gates to interview the watchmen, otherwise they're too intimidated or not intimidated enough to speak to me. There's never a happy medium.

Aleron and Kyn are in a meeting when I arrive, but instead of making me wait, Aleron beckons me into his office. "We're just finishing lunch," he explains, waving at a shared platter of cold cuts between them.

Kyn eyes me—we haven't had much interaction since he became the head jailer, though I do keep an eye on the elher. "Hello, your highness."

I wave his formality away. "Please call me Lawton. I have a distinct lack of people in my life who use my name as it is."

"Please do not call him Lawton in any room with more than the three of us and Hildred in it," Aleron corrects, and I

acquiesce with a dip of my chin.

“I understand,” Kynl replies slowly, but I’m not sure if he’ll use my given name or not based on the uncertainty in his tone.

Aleron ignores it, turning his attention to me. “Are we going into town?” he asks, eyeing my outfit.

“I love that I don’t have to waste words with you,” I enthuse. “I need to speak with the watchmen, as many on different shifts as possible, and then we need to go collect the town gossip from any of the less savory taverns and also from the Taproom.”

Aleron sighs. “Pray tell why?”

“I’m looking for evidence of an increase in violent crimes. Not just ‘it feels like everyone’s fighting these days’ but actual violent crimes. Swahla might not have been in control of her actions, but I won’t know unless I can ascertain whether there’s a kingdom-wide problem, a problem with the palace, or a problem with her.”

Kynl smacks the desk and points to Aleron. “What did I tell you? Something made her do it. She would never have done anything like that unless she was forced to.”

Aleron holds both hands up in surrender. “I never said you were wrong; I said you needed proof. But it seems as if our high sorcerer is on the job.”

“What makes you think she acted under duress?” I ask Kynl, focusing on his expertise—he knows prisoners—it’s his job to know them—and he is as kind a jailer as we have ever had in Fairview. I’ve heard about his kindness.

Listen, people talk when I’m around even if they don’t talk to me. I’d make an excellent spy if I wasn’t such a good high sorcerer.

Anyway.

Prisoners under Kynl do not go hungry unless they choose not to eat, and he eats what the prisoners eat to make sure no one poisons the food and the cooks are using quality

ingredients. It's dangerous but effective for his goals. I keep a very close eye on him so that if something does happen to him, I can intervene. I have spies too, you know. Dead spiders are as much in my domain as mummified raskar, and no one notices the spiders crawling along the ceilings.

“Swahla is the sweetest, kindest, most humble woman I've ever met besides my own sister. She is a light in the darkness, and if no one takes her in when her time is served, I'm giving her my extra room and I'll adopt her into my household. She confessed that she killed the chicken because she was angry, but she can't tell me why she was so angry. She gets upset at herself because she knows she shouldn't have done that, and not even she can figure out *why* she got so angry all of a sudden.” As he speaks, his claws stand up in evidence of his frustration and his ears flatten against the top of his head.

I reach out and pat his forearm, ignoring the way his muscle twitches at my touch, even though it's kind of hurtful that I've given him permission to use my name and he's still jumpy about me. “I will do what I can to help her. I think if we can prove to my father that she was not responsible for her actions he will bring her back into his household.”

His ears sort of quiver in approval as I take my hand back. “I'll help, if you need my help.”

“I need your help,” Aleron immediately announces. “We're going drinking, and one of us needs to get drunk while the other two gather the information.”

Kyln smiles, showing all his sharp felid teeth. “Are you inviting me to get drunk on the government's coin?”

“He absolutely is,” I agree, jingling my coin purse.

Aleron grins and pulls his own coin purse from his desk. His has exactly the same amount of money as mine since it's part of his costume as well. “I am. I don't want to carry you home, but if you need a shoulder to lean on at the end of the night, I won't complain.”

“I'd never drink enough to be sloppy anyway,” Kyln assures him.

Aleron's cheeks pinken as he clears his throat and stands. "Let me just get changed and we can head out. Kyn, we'll meet you at the gate."

Kyn stands as well, gathering the platter. "Give me an hour to check in and make sure my guards are behaving. I've had to switch the guard out and make the majority of my team women. I just can't trust the men not to harass the ex-concubine of the king himself." He shakes his head, ears flat again, radiating anger. "We need a way to filter out the fuckers that don't respect the inmates."

As soon as he says that, my brain jumps to work and my mouth promises things that I know I shouldn't. "I'll see if I can come up with a potion or spell."

Kyn shoots me a surprised look. "Thank you."

"Right. Ok. See you in an hour," I tell them both and then make a quick escape, embarrassed for no reason at all. I probably can come up with a way to figure out if a guard is going to be disrespectful to the inmates without using magic, but now I've promised a magical solution, and I'd feel like a failure if I didn't follow through with something magnificent.

Sometimes the best sorcerer in the land is an awkward idiot. I can admit that.

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The west gate of Fairview boasts the busiest guards, the most traffic, and the best measure of the heart of Fasgard. The lieutenant on duty, Falren, meets us in the tax office with a jug of watered down ale and some fresh bread. He's a sweaty, middle aged human with salt and pepper hair and plenty of smile lines around his eyes. He offers Aleron his hand, and shakes Kyn's as well, then bows to me, stepping out of arm's reach.

Rude.

Well...

I mean, technically he's not allowed to touch me, so there's that, but still. We all know he didn't want to shake my hand because of my magic, not because of my title.

"Let me pour us a drink while you tell me what the watchmen can do for you, your highness."

At least he's respectful. "I wonder if you might relay some of the details about the violent crimes happening in the kingdom to me. I'm interested in the perpetrators and their motivations and if there was anything significant about their victims."

It's hard to ask the right questions without leading people to the answers I'm looking for. I don't want him to pick up a pattern that doesn't exist because they are trying to fit their stories into the context of my questions, but I can't let the questions remain too vague either because then the story-teller might not remember an important detail.

"Och," he grumbles, handing out cups filled with the drink and cutting the bread into equal pieces.

My piece seems to be *more* equal than the others, but I don't know how to comment on that without sounding like an idiot royal, so I just accept it.

“There’s been a rash of infuriated women in the city. Men coming home to their wives waving knives in their faces. We’ve had two men nearly castrated and four men poisoned. Fortunately we haven’t had any deaths beyond a few beloved pets, but it’s been strange,” Falren explains, drinking his ale down to the bottom when he’s done and ignoring his bread.

“Just women?” Aleron asks curiously. “What were the men doing to anger them so much?”

“Not just women, only married women. The men all reported coming home drunk, and a few of them admitted to coming home after drinking at one of the brothels.” He gives us a significant look like we’re supposed to draw some conclusion from that.

Kyln makes an understanding noise, and I don’t pretend that I’m not a spoiled royal, but I’m not drawing the connection between brothels and angry wives. Aleron takes pity on my sheltered self by asking, “The women were jealous that their husbands were spending coin on sex? Were they not humans?”

Falren shrugs with his entire upper body, waving his hand. “All of them have been human. Strange, isn’t it?”

“Are the men neglecting their wives? Are they withholding coin for them to visit the brothels as well? Why would they be jealous?” I ask, surprised that humans, of all people, would get upset by the use of prostitutes. Some species are zealously monogamous, like the elhers and the semers, the felid and canid shifters who can smell the scent of someone else on their mates and hate it. But humans are notoriously adventurous in their sexual habits and rarely ever form monogamous bonds unless they bond with an elher or a semer.

Falren sits back, tearing his bread into pieces without actually eating it. “That’s the thing, we have signed contracts between all of the spouses that state they agree that each person gets a certain allowance for discretionary visits to luxury establishments that include spas and brothels. The wives signed the contracts. You know, these days those places require extra documentation before they take in clients. They



require either a signature affirming that the person entering their establishments is unbonded, or if the person is bonded, they require both spouses to sign a permission agreement. The king's—long may he live—ruling on the fault of businesses in the corruption of the people has gotten the luxury businesses wary of missteps. Even the bars and taverns have started cutting people off if they don't have a mostly sober friend to get them home. That's why it's so bizarre that these women lost their tempers with their husbands. Some of them have stayed angry, but most of them are horrified by their own actions. We haven't had many of the men wanting their wives in jail. The only ones that went to court were the two that stayed furious. The poor husbands have been hoping their wives would calm, but I just got word that one of the poor bastards is filing a suit for dissolution. He's a mess, but he doesn't want her to be miserable with him.”

I usually keep abreast of changes in the law, but I have no idea what Falren is talking about. “What was the king's ruling?”

Aleron clears his throat. “About seven months ago your father ruled in favor of the parents of a young man—barely twenty—who drank himself to death in the Tankard Tavern. He was celebrating with his friends and the owner kept refilling his glass with vodka. The kid died, poisoned by his own drink. It came out that the tavern had had three alcohol related deaths in the last year, and besides that, the owner had taken coin from people who he knew were neglecting to feed themselves in favor of drinking, and they ended up starving in the streets. They wouldn't even seek out food from the charities because all they wanted was more drink. The king ruled that the owner was responsible for killing the young man and the others who'd died because his greed for coin blinded him to the plight of his fellow citizens. The king said that businesses that allow greed to rule their practices to the corruption of their clients should be held liable for their callousness. As of right now, most of the luxury businesses are trying to do right by the king's ruling even though it's not a law on the books.”

I don't disagree with my father on this. No one should allow greed to make them callous to the plight of their fellow citizens.

“Captain! Orc at the gates with news from the road to Gladfield!”

The announcement interrupts our meeting, but both Falren and Aleron shift their attention to the watchman who bursts into the office, panting from his run.

“Half-orc!” a deep, booming voice calls after him.

The watchman pales and turns as the half-orc in question ducks into the room behind him.

The half orc's vibrant green skin is covered in a fine layer of road dust. He carries a mead barrel under one arm and a youth under the other. His black hair hangs in a queue starting at the base of his neck and hanging down his back over a huge-ass warhammer that would make me question my life decisions if I ended up standing opposite him in battle. The impressive part is that it's a maelysson weapon, enchanted and far more deadly than anything I've ever seen.

All those interesting physical features of this orc pale and fall by the wayside as soon as he lifts his eyes to take us in. The brightest sapphire blue I've ever seen peers out from his right eye, and the grassiest green emerald orb sweeps over us from the left.

“Fuck the gods, you're gorgeous!” I exclaim, jumping up to examine him more closely.

His smile brings the room to life, and my magic reaches for him, wanting desperately to connect to him.

I rein it in and pull it back, because no matter how full of life a person is, it's not legal to attach to them without a contract in place, and it's completely illegal for me to do it even if my magic wants to. Anchors only exist for people with legal magic, which is a crying shame since I would rock an anchor bond if I was allowed to have one.

The orc sets his companion on his feet and sweeps his hand toward me, looking at the boy. “What did I tell you?”

People think I'm handsome."

The boy lifts one side of his nose in a sneer. "There's no accounting for some people's taste, I guess."

I raise my hand to stay the reactions from the men who know who I am. It's not this boy's fault he was insolent to a prince of the kingdom, though he shouldn't unleash that attitude on anyone, really.

Kyln steps up beside me. "Boy, you are talking to Prince Lawton Fairkin; mind your tone in the presence of your betters."

Aleron steps up beside him and glares at the kid. "And this is the warden of the Fairview prison. I'm General Aleron. You look ragged, so we'll forgive your insolence. Get yourself a cup and sit silently in the corner."

Aleron dismisses the boy and turns his attention to the orc. "Introduce yourself and relay the news. I've met with Darian, the druid charged with investigating the attack on the road to Gladfield. He brought me the left wings of four harpies. I assume you are the half-orc he spoke of when he reported."

"I am. My name is Berklak." He holds up a keyring with an impressive resume on it, including the Adventurers Guild, the Barbarian's Club, the Feud of Assassin's, the Mercenary Company, and the League of Extraordinary Rage. Not that anyone but Aleron and I would know what that last one is, and I only know because it was the first thing that I learned about when I was trialing my little raskar spy project.

"Pleasure, Berklak. What news?" Ferlan asks, offering the orc a cup that he waves away.

"Viltz destroyed a farm along the road about a day and a half walk to the east on the road that forks down to Gladfield. They burned the people and stole the animals. There was evidence it wasn't a hunting or raiding party. It looked like an advance scouting party. I spent some time in a dwarven mine. When the viltz planned to make war, they sent ahead the scouting party to start the war. They aren't sacrifices, General Aleron; they come in, wreak havoc, and escape, and the next

time you see a viltz, you're in the middle of a godsdamn war and you better hope your weapon's sharp enough to send them limping home or to completely destroy them."

"Or light enough to swing very quickly," I note, indicating his warhammer.

He reaches back and pats his weapon with a wide grin. "Indeed, your highness."

Aleron snaps at the watchman who ran to announce the orc. "Run to the palace as fast as you can. Find Knight Heather in the knight's office and tell her these exact words, 'The cover cracked.' Do not stop for anything or it's your life."

The watchman snaps into motion with a barely there bow and runs like his life depends on it.

Aleron closes the door behind Berklak and invites everyone to sit. "Now that that's taken care of, Master Orc, do you have a vision for what the king should do about the viltz?"

Berklak squats on the floor rather than taking up a chair, reminding me of his slightly larger kinsmen who prefer squatting to actual sitting—it keeps them battle ready, according to their own philosophers. "If you're wondering if this is a job for an adventuring party or the military, I think sending an adventuring party out first would be a wise option, especially if you hire me. I want the druid—you said his name was Darian?"

"It is," Aleron confirms.

"I've worked with him once. He's an excellent tracker, couldn't ask for a better one. I also want the necromancer," he says, looking straight at me. "If a prince of Fasgard would stoop so low."

Oh, this is *brilliant*.

"Don't smile like that!" Aleron barks, but it's too late. He can't order me to stay home; the best he can do is assign me a bodyguard to make sure I come back.

"General Aleron. Berklak, our most esteemed expert on the wilds of Fasgard, thinks my skill set would be useful in

keeping the dark elves in their underground lair. I couldn't agree more." If I sound like I'm happier than a pig in mud, it's because I'm delighted by this turn of events.

The half-orc grins at me with as much glee as I have bubbling inside me. "I didn't realize you're more trouble than you're worth, your highness. I reckon we'll get on like a house on fire."

"Oh, I like you," I decide, full of unbridled joy.

Finally, someone who isn't going to make me work to get them to understand my magic isn't dangerous; I am.

seven

# berklak

THE GIDDY NECROMANCER prince is a pretty little thing, but do the rules of traveling with orcs apply to him or not? That's the most important question, but sadly the last one I'm likely to get answered, because the general of Fasgard is focused on security and solutions.

“You're going to have to take at least three guards with you, and if one of them isn't a paladin, I'll forbid it. You haven't even hired a servant yet and Hildred was threatening to withhold your lemon ice if you dallied any longer. Do you really think the king is going to let you leave the palace on an adventure? You're the high sorcerer of Fasgard—”

“Exactly, Aleron. Currently we're facing what is turning into a dismaying pattern. The viltz coming to the surface to attack a farm and steal animals. Harpies coming from the Isle of Flight to Fasgard to kill merchants on the road and their horses. Residents of Fairview attacking their spouses, including the king's own concubine. There is something attacking the population of this kingdom, and it is my job, my responsibility as the high sorcerer of Fasgard, to figure out what the fuck is happening. I'm taking the orc because he's pretty and he has an exciting weapon.”

I correct him with a grunt. “Half-orc.”

“Which half?” He winks at me before turning back to the general without waiting for a reply. “I'm taking the druid because the *half*-orc wants him and I trust Berklak. If you want me to take a company of soldiers, I'm happy to do it, but I require them to be members or former members of the

Adventurers Guild or the Mercenary's Company. I prefer the adventurers." The prince holds up a single finger and twists to face me. "Your keyring needs to be verified first, but Hildred can do that rather quickly. She's the steward of the palace. I want to hire you as my personal servant. Hildred can explain your duties fully, but my needs are simple: I need someone to protect me and my rooms from my siblings, someone who won't betray me to them, and a person willing to fetch things as I need them. Food is usually what I need, but sometimes I require other more interesting items."

I run my hand over my smooth cheeks, contemplating this job offer. "I have two questions."

"Ask," he encourages me.

"Are we still going on an adventure to stop whatever evil is causing mayhem in the kingdom? And do I get a key to the Servant's Union?"

His smile would light up the deepest, darkest dungeon in Fasgard. "I'm sure Hildred will certainly entertain your application to the Servant's Union, and yes, we are going adventuring."

"Perfect. I'm in," I agree without a moment's hesitation.

What? Adding important skills to my CV is life goals. It's not like the Servant's Union is hard to get into, but you do have to have a job in a serving capacity to join, and I've never had one of those. Besides, if I have a small amount of regular pay, I can redirect that to my sponsorship of the student bards, and it will mean I don't have to make as many trips here to deposit funding, which was the point of coming to the capital this time.

"I need to escort this boy to Bards College, and that will take the rest of the day and likely all night, but if you take my keyring and name to your steward, I can come collect it in the morning," I explain, unhooking my keyring from my belt.

I don't often part from my ring, but the usual qualms I have when I lay it in another's hands don't shake me this time.



My instincts tell me the prince of Fasgard is worthy of my trust.

Lawton takes the keyring with the appropriate amount of respect and care, immediately tying it to his belt more securely than his purse. “I will make sure it is ready for you. May I ask why Bards College?”

I shoot him a lascivious grin. “I sponsor some students there, including this little wayward crumb. The dean, Tavian Talltalker, will want to wine and dine me, and let’s not be coy, he will want a good hard fuck, too. It’s one of the many perks of being a patron of the arts.”

Oliver squawks at me. “Are you fucking joking right now? You sponsor students just to get your rocks off with the dean? How am I supposed to learn from him knowing he’s one of your regulars?”

Aleron takes this one without breaking stride. “Figure out which of the dean’s songs are inspired by your patron’s dick and learn how it’s done from a master of song and storytelling.” He shakes his head and gives me a pointed look. “Are you sure he’s worth sponsoring?”

Oliver makes an offended noise, but thankfully he’s smart enough to not question the man who can have him imprisoned for disrespecting the king and court.

“He’s smarter than he looks,” I assure them, snapping at the boy and standing. “Come along, Oliver. Time for your new life to start.” I bow to the prince and give my respect to the general and jailer. “Until tomorrow.”

Prince Lawton grips my forearm, looking up at me with a delighted smirk. “Be sure to stock up on the orc’s travel pack before you come to the palace. I expect we won’t have much time to stop by an apothecary before heading off.”

Oh. Well, that answers that question, doesn’t it? *Lovely*. “On my honor, your highness.”

His excitement shines in his eyes, perking up my cock—there’s nothing like an enthusiastic lover, is there? And the anticipation of a new lover is as sweet as honey, is it not?

Oliver and I exit the office, returning to the heat and oppression of the city streets and urban living. The smell of working bodies, cooking foods, animals, flame, and magic all coalesce into a smell orcs like to call “the scent of happiness and despair.” Happy because of the bounty of fuckable bottoms in one small space; despair because of the loss of the joy of the pursuit. Orcs tend to enjoy the adventure as much as the reward.

“So you weren’t exaggerating. People really expect to be fucked into oblivion when travelling with you,” Oliver grumbles from beside me.

I chuckle, clapping his shoulder. “I benefit from the reputation my people’s ancestor’s cultivated. Blood-thirsty warriors and amazing lovers. If you’ve been lacking in satisfaction, you will have plenty of potential bedmates at Bards College. Bards are notoriously promiscuous.”

“You know I haven’t been dissatisfied,” he mumbles, turning the shade of beet juice. “I’m just saying.”

He’s a little jealous, which makes part of me want to latch on, but I’ve given myself a time limit on him, and his time is up. It’s for the best; I can’t very well enjoy the little necromancer if I’m attached to the boy, and no one wants to go on an adventure with a grumpy orc.

Outside of Bards College, I stop by a street vendor and buy them out of their inventory, paying to have it delivered to my dorm. My kids will know when the food arrives that I’ll be paying them a visit, and it gives them the opportunity to clean up the house if they’ve been neglecting their chores.

After I settle up with the vendor, I take Oliver straight to the admissions office. The lovely little dwarf in charge of the office scratches her beard as we enter and lights up when she recognizes me. “Berklak, my friend! Who are you bringing to us this time?”

I bump her outstretched fist with mine. “Luaet Rubyfeet, this is Oliver Sunlider.”

Oliver scoffs, spinning on me. “That’s not my name. It’s Oliver Bubkney.”

I arch a brow at him and turn to find the same look on Luaet’s face. She shakes her head at him when he follows my gaze. “Oliver. Do you really want every song and poem attributed to O Bubkney? It sounds like Oh, bum knee. It’s literarily lame. O Sunglider is suave, refined, full of adventure and mystery, and most importantly, worthy of having songs sung by fans. I’ll put you down as Bubkney, but I won’t be responsible for the trashing of your reputation before you even start lessons because you chose the wrong name.”

Oliver turns a ridiculous shade of red as Luaet points out the obvious and finally grits his teeth, making the smart choice without arguing. “Sunglider it is, then.”

I clap him on the back. “I spent days coming up with that name for you. It took me most of a barrel of mead to finally decide on it.” Drunk thinking is the best kind, and I’m pretty proud of myself for this one.

Oliver scrubs his face, clearly frustrated. “Great, I’ve been named by a drunk half-orc.”

Luaet laughs, deep and bellowing. “All of his kids were named by a drunk half-orc, and not a single one of them regrets it. You’ll soon discover that coming into the college with Berklak’s patronage gives you an advantage over many of your peers and a certain amount of initial popularity. If you don’t fuck this up, you could pass through this college and onto a lucrative gig among the nobles or even at the palace itself. We’ve had many bards marry into the harems of the royals, and most recently two of Berklak’s kids were brought into Princess Adama’s harem upon her fortieth birthday. Your prospects for life have significantly improved with Berklak’s patronage, and you shouldn’t snub your nose at that.”

Oliver isn’t refined yet; he’s just a kid from a failing farm town, but he sketches a little bow to Luaet. “I know, sir. I promise I’m not ungrateful.”

“Ma’am,” I correct him, though no one’s offended by his mistake; dwarves have a hard time telling each other’s

biological sex apart; they're certainly not offended when surface dwellers mistake them.

“Ma’am,” he corrects quickly.

Luaet’s eyes twinkle with delight, and she happily pulls out the paperwork for admission and the special form for students under a patronage like mine. They actually had to create the form for my students, and fortunately they now use it for the students of other patrons. I’m rather proud that I had a hand in making a positive change in the processes of the schools in Fasgard, and since that thought makes me happy, I give myself a congratulatory drink from my mead barrel.

It’s delicious, as it should be.

eight

# lawton

DANCING INTO HILDRED'S office with a huge smile on my face causes the draconian to stare suspiciously. She studies me, searching for whatever has me in a good mood, but I'm not going to keep her in suspense. "I've hired a manservant!" I announce, producing the keyring for her inspection. "He's a half-orc named Berklak, and here are his qualifications, and he requests a sponsorship into the Servant's Union to add to his keyring, please and thank you."

Hildred takes the keyring, eyes narrowed as she looks at each key closely to verify their authenticity. "Interesting. Why would someone with this kind of provenance want to be your manservant? Do you even know what this key is?" she asks, holding up the key for the League of Extraordinary Rage.

I nod with a huge smile splitting my face, but I say nothing because one of the rules of the league is that you don't talk about it.

She harrumphs and places the keys on her desk. "I will verify his CV before I accept this hire. I also need to interview him. Send him to me at midday tomorrow. I will speak with him and return his keys then."

"Thank you!" I say, dancing over to her and kissing her cheek.

She huffs at me and pushes me away, but I can tell she's pleased. She loves me. "Get out of here. I have work to finish before I can return home."

“Yes, Mistress Hildred! Until tomorrow! Ooh, send him to my lab when you’re done with him,” I request as I make my exit with a little twirl of happiness.

She hollers something at me, but I’m too far away to understand her. At least, that’s what I’m going to claim if she asks.

My next stop takes me to my father’s secretary. I don’t *want* to see my father, and I would prefer to never see his secretary, but if I disappear from the palace on an adventure without at least giving him a note, I might not be brave enough to return. Plus, we’re working on the whole healthy communication thing, remember? It would be irresponsible for me not to give him a heads up.

Reginald adopted his current name when he was put forward as a candidate for his current occupation. Before his name was Fergus, and I guess he didn’t think it was dignified enough for the King’s Secretary. When I enter his office with just a brief knock (the door is open, so I’m not intruding), he looks up and flinches back, scowling at me.

“What is it now, High Sorcerer? The king is quite too busy to see you,” he sneers with exactly zero respect. If Aleron was here, he’d have a completely different tone, but since he knows I have no power at all except over the magic of the kingdom and the magical needs of the palace, he knows that he can get away with being rude to me—the consequences of necromancy being illegal in Fasgard for everyone except the high sorcerer.

It’s aggravating, but I’m too happy with my new orc to let him get to me today. “I have dire news for the king in regards to the safety of the kingdom. Squeeze me into my father’s schedule tomorrow so that I can discuss this with him. Not in the throne room; this is not news for the likes of the nobles. It is for the ears of the king alone until he decides what to do with the information.” The less Reginald knows the better. If I have to pull rank, that’s what I’ll do, because this really cannot wait for Reginald to find time for me next week.

Reginald narrows his already beady eyes at me. “I might have space for a true emergency during the king’s breakfast. What is this dire news?”

I pull myself up to my full height (which isn’t significant, but he’s sitting, so...). “As I said, this is for the king’s ears alone until he decides what to do with it. If I wanted to talk to him during a meal, I would go to dinner tonight and sit in my place at his right hand. As we know, putting the king off his dinner has never had positive consequences, so should you have a more appropriate time for me to see my king, I will take that; otherwise, I will ensure he knows you couldn’t find a time for me other than when he’s eating.”

The man sneers at me. “I doubt the king would blame me for your failings, *necromancer*.” He spits the word like a curse.

I actually agree, but I don’t let him see my doubt. “I’ll take the breakfast appointment as long as it’s private.”

“Oh, it’s too bad. While we were talking, the appointment was filled,” he replies with a terrible grin.

I might actually hate this man. I don’t hate anyone, but he’s standing between me and my father. It doesn’t matter that my father probably agrees with him. I refuse to believe my relationship with the man is broken beyond repair. He didn’t banish me for bespelling Adama, and that counts for something, dammit.

“As high sorcerer of the kingdom, I require time to see my king right the fuck now. If you stand in my way, I will make you regret every choice that led you to this moment. Do you want to get in my way now, Reginald?” As I speak I let the darkness of a death cowl rise up behind me and form into the shadow of the visage of death.

Reginald spooks, of course, but he’s loyal and would rather die than lose his job (which is honestly the only reason he’s worth keeping as the king’s secretary; anyone could do his job, but no one would do it with as much loyalty). He stands on shaky legs, walking to the door to my father’s office, keeping



his eyes on me. He knocks and my father's voice calls for him to enter.

He disappears behind the door, but there's no way I'm going to let him relay the message without me, so I waltz in as well, dispersing the death visage. I bow low as soon as I enter, cutting Reginald off.

"Sorcerer?" the king acknowledges me.

"Your majesty. I have dire news that requires your attention." Nope I'm not tattling on Reginald. "I would not otherwise interrupt your day, but this is emergent."

"Leave us, Reginald," the king orders, and the secretary makes a quick exit. I remain in my bow until the king beckons me to him. "Sit, Lawton."

I school the surprise out of my face at the use of my actual name and rise to sit in one of the comfortable armchairs in front of his desk.

"Tell me your emergent news," he orders me, looking at me for the first time in my memory.

Almost forty years of life and this is the first time I can remember my father's eyes on me. My heart beats a rapid staccato in my chest and sweat forms on my brow. Nervousness makes me stumble over the start of my words under the pressure of the weight of his gaze.

"My k-king." I swallow hard and sketch another bow to cover up my faux pas before actually sitting. I take a breath and look slightly south of his chin. "I've discovered a pattern of violent anger among married women within the walls of Fairview. It may be connected to a blanket of dark magic that I have discovered has descended on the palace and all of Fairview. I cannot pinpoint a source, and I suspect the dark magic covers more of Fasgard than just the palace and city. I would like to investigate some of the more disturbing rumors that are coming in from outside the city.

"There's been a report of a viltz attack on the road to Gladfield and another of an attack by harpies on the road between Sunny Glade and Gladfield. I've spoken with General

Aleron, and he's agreed to send me with a small contingent of soldiers. I've hired a half-orc with an extraordinary reputation and a druid that he knows. The half-orc's name is Berklak, and he brought the report of the viltz attack. I haven't yet met the druid, but he brought the news of the harpy attack. I plan to hire a few more adventurers to join me. Berklak believes we should fill out a full adventuring party and that will be enough for now. We will return with news of the attacks, and hopefully I will find the source of the dark magic infecting Fasgard."

Ok, I managed to get all my sentences strung together in a coherent order even under the gaze of the king.

"Berklak," he mutters, staring at me. "I've heard that name—no. I've read that name. He's the barbarian that broke the ranks of the wight army that invaded from the southern border fifty years ago. I approve if you are taking the Berklak I've heard of. I will meet him first. Bring him to dinner. I will have a word with him at my table."

I bow in my seat. "Yes, my king. I will bring him. Thank you, your majesty."

He tenses just before another knock comes to the door. "You may leave, sorcerer," he tells me, then louder, "Come."

I rise and swiftly make my way out, passing the mayor of Port Westcliff, the major port on the western coast of Fasgard. He sidesteps me quickly, sketching a quick bow as he backs away. I acknowledge him with a quick greeting and shut the door on my way out.

Fuck. That was stressful, and now I have to interrupt Berklak's visit with the dean of Bards College.

I ignore Reginald on the way out and head straight back to Hildred's office. I don't need to interrupt her again, but she always has runners. I stop and wave at a girl with a sturdy look about her. "Girl, I need you to run a message to Bards College for the dean's guest," I instruct her as I grab a scrap of paper from a desk and a charcoal pencil, writing out the king's request and signing it with my name. I fold the paper and use the palace stamp to seal it before handing it to the girl. "Be

quick, and get this to Dean Tavian Talltalker at Bards College. Do you know the way?"

"Yes, your highness," she chirps, taking the paper from me with a smile. The runners have seen me with their mistress too often to fear me, and I appreciate that more than I can adequately say. Most children fear me because their parents do, but not the ones that work for Hildred.

"Good girl. After you deliver the message, you can get yourself a treat from one of the bakers," I tell her, handing her a few coppers.

She shines as she pockets both the money and the message. "Thank you, your highness!" she shouts, running off as fast as she can.

Dammit. Now would be a good time to have a manservant to help me dress for dinner. I knock on Hildred's office door, poking my head in again.

"Mistress Hildred, I apologize for interrupting you once again," I say sheepishly, giving her my biggest feel-sorry-for-me eyes.

Hildred snorts, setting aside the charcoal pencil in her hand and leveling me with a stern glare. "Prince Lawton, what can I do for you now?"

I step into her domain, folding my hands in front of me, assuming a meek posture. "I'm required to attend dinner tonight, and I was wondering if I might borrow a servant to help me dress. Or, if you've established any of his keys, I would love permission to use Berklak to help me. The king has requested his presence at dinner tonight before he will approve of my leaving the palace with him."

Hildred's expression softens in sympathy. Well, as much sympathy as a draconian steward can muster for her favorite prince. She knows the difficulties my father and I have and understands the uncharacteristic request to have me at the king's table. "I wonder if the half-orc would even know how to dress a prince for dinner with the king," she hums to herself, mostly. "It is surely easier to undress a noble than dress them,

and who knows if he has experience with formal evening wear.”

“I can instruct him, and this won’t be part of his regular duties, as you know.” I try not to think about *why* dressing me for dinner wouldn’t be a regular occurrence, because that way lies heartbreak. “Have you ever had the king look at you, Hildred?” I ask, wiping at the remnants of sweat on my brow.

She gives me a very draconian look, narrowing her nictitating member as she does. “As steward of the palace, I often report directly to the king about the wellbeing of his household, and yes, I bear the royal gaze when I do. Why?”

I lower my voice so that no one else can hear, checking for servants, runners, and spies just in case. “I haven’t, Hildred. Not until today. He never even looked at me as a child, Hildred. Yet, today, he looked at me in the royal office while I was reporting to him. I didn’t realize how terrible it can be to fall under the king’s scrutiny.”

Hildred, the woman that took the place of my mother when she passed, who loves me more than anyone else in the palace or in all of thyr, slowly blinks. It’s the draconian equivalent of the sigh humans release when they settle in with their loved ones, full of satisfaction and warmth. It’s her way of telling me she’s pleased, full of a happiness that can only spring from a loving familial bond, and I hadn’t even thought of it that way.

Without words, the woman completely rearranges the encounter in my head. My father looked at me. He called me by name. He didn’t shy away or ignore me or present me with the usual mask of formal indifference. He *looked* at me.

“Oh. Well. That’s different, then, isn’t it?” I say, feeling just a bit dazed and maybe a teeny tiny amount of glee. I wonder what changed between every other encounter with my father and this one.

Hildred only gives me a few seconds with this new feeling before she’s back to business, telling me with a crisp tone of dismissal, “I will send an attendant to your chambers an hour before dinner. If the half-orc can’t help you get dressed, it is

unlikely that I will sponsor him to the Servant's Union until he learns how."

I blink, clearing the daze and sweep a teasing bow to the mistress of the palace. "Thank you, Steward Hildred." With that, I take myself out of her office, because even I know that keeping the Steward of the Jewel of the Emerald Sea from her tasks is a good way to find oneself lost in the labyrinth under the palace.

nine

# berklak

I'VE NEVER BEEN to the Jewel of the Emerald Sea, but it lives up to its name. The facade looks like a pearl shining in the summer sun under the shallow waters of a tide pool. Its gates stand open with a contingent of observant watchmen scrutinizing those coming and going while a pair of watchmen checks the passes and invitations of every person that passes through the stone archway.

The wagon ahead of me carries sacks of flours and vegetables headed for the kitchen, as well as a small child sleeping in one of the sacks. The watchmen check all the bags, including the one the child is in, but they don't seem to find anything out of the ordinary with that, and I'm not about to tell them how to do their job, so I quietly wait my turn.

Eventually the wagon passes through, and then the watchmen, both of them, beckon me forward. "Name, pass, and reason for your visit," the one holding the ledger instructs.

"Berklak," I reply, handing the note Prince Lawton sent me over to the other watchman. "I've been invited to attend dinner with the king."

I'm not too humble to admit that I find myself puffing out my chest a bit at that. The king himself asked for me to sit with him at his table. I've never even met a royal, and today I get to meet the monarch of Fasgard. It's an honor, and I'm not going to diminish my accomplishment. I am, in point of fact, outstanding. Clearly. The king noticed me, and I bet he doesn't give much mind to most barbarian adventurers.

“Seal and signature authentic,” the watchman with my invitation reports, handing it back to me.

The other scribbles in his ledger, and when he finishes, shoots me a tight smile. “You will have to check your weapon in and submit to a search. Anything you’re carrying may be required to remain here for you to reclaim on your way out of the palace, including potions, weapons, foreign food and drink, and other items at the discretion of the king’s guard. Please go over there to check in your items.”

This is why I had an enchantment placed on my warhammer. It’s of maelysson origin, created by the maelysou Geinole, the god of soul smithing. His dark powers imbued my weapon with the ability to trap the life energy of my foes into the weapon, making it more powerful with every enemy it kills. I’ve had it for twenty years; it’s a one hit wonder for most of the beings that fall under its swing. As a result, it’s worth my weight in gold, and since it was forged with the strength of a dark god and the souls of the damned, it’s light as a feather and easily stolen. So, I added an enchanted pommel to it that makes it impossible to lift by anyone without the blood of the trees running through their veins.

I haven’t seen a single orc besides myself in Fairview so far, so I’m going to hedge my bets that my weapon will still be here when I return after supper.

I lumber over to the watchtower where the check-in watchman pointed me and give the woman who comes out a friendly greeting. “Hello. I’ve been told to check my weapons and other items,” I say, placing my mead barrel on the ground next to me so I can retrieve my warhammer from the harness it’s hanging from on my back. As I unbuckle the harness, the guard disappears into the tower momentarily and returns with a hand truck. That might work for moving my warha—

“What are you doing?” I demand as she tips my mead barrel onto the hand truck.

“You can’t take this into the palace without a key to the Sodality of Brewers and Vintners,” she explains, looking up at me expectantly.



Even for a human she's short, but the arms on her look like she's probably got some dwarf in her, so I'm not surprised at the ease with which she moves my mead.

Even if I had my keyring, I'm not a member of the Sodality, so I grimace at her. "I just bought that barrel. If I come back and find it tapped, I will rage," I warn her.

She snorts at that. "If you come back to a tapped barrel, *I'll* rage, because none of these fuckers should be drinking from a tap on the job. Put your weapon on top and empty any pockets, satchels, or other inventory storage you may have on your person, so I can inspect it."

Reluctantly I do as I'm told, eyeing her suspiciously every time she takes something from me and places it on top of my barrel. When she puts my tap and hammer on it, I nearly lose my temper, but she eyes me, grabs the tap, and puts it in her own pocket. "I'll keep this a bit more secure just in case."

Grumbling, I accept that, then just to make sure no one cheats me, I scratch my mark into the mead barrel. It looks like a raging orc, angry face and all, and will definitely make anyone think twice about fucking with my mead. She arches a brow at that, but I can tell she feels suitably warned, and when she finally finishes with me, I walk away from the most important thing in my life and my warhammer. I may cry if the kitchen doesn't serve mead with supper. I don't care how fancy a dinner is, it won't be any good without it.

As I walk the path toward the entrance to the palace I was instructed to go through, a tiny human child with adorably elfin ears runs up to me, stopping so close she has to crane her neck to look up to me. "Master Berklak?"

"That's me," I agree, crouching to get closer to her level, although I'm still taller than her.

"Steward Hildred said to take you straight to the high sorcerer's chambers. Will you come with me?"

Maybe I'm getting a head start on tomorrow's companion since mine for the evening was canceled at the king's behest.

Perfect. I'll be a lot less grumpy about my mead with my cock in a warm slick hole. "Thank you, little one. Lead the way."

The girl leads me through the palace along an interesting route that hits several of the major community rooms and passes by the same staircase twice—I'm pretty sure, but I haven't had nearly enough mead to be sure. Eventually, she stops at a plain door with no guards beside it and steps aside. "Here is where he is, Master Orc," she says sweetly, looking up at me expectantly.

I hand the girl a copper from my coin purse and pat her head. "Well done, little one, but next time, I think just take your guest up that stair and the one at the end of the hall that leads to the grand staircase, ok?"

She giggles and shrugs. "I thought you'd like a tour."

She squeals as she runs off.

Before I knock, a servant approaches, looking nervous and a bit sweaty under his frippery—yes, he's wearing servant's garb, but it's the kind that separates him as a servant to a noble. He stares at the door I'm about to knock on, and then looks at me. "Excuse me, Master Orc, are you here to attend Prince Lawton?"

The euphemisms that nobles use are always so circumspect. "If I wasn't, would that be your job?" I ask curiously.

He nods, wiping his hands on his waistcoat. "Yes, sir."

I pat his shoulder to comfort him since he's clearly not looking forward to attending the prince. This servant probably realizes like me that Prince Lawton isn't going to want to fuck him, and it's hard to face rejection. "Don't worry, I'll take care of the prince. You can leave this with me."

He blows out a relieved breath. "Oh, thank you, Master Orc. Thank you."

He turns to go and I watch him get to the staircase at the end of the corridor before knocking on the door, calling out, "It's Berklak!"

A moment passes, then the door cracks open and the pretty little prince looks up at me from where he hides behind the door, smiling with relieved purple eyes under curly wet blond locks falling across his forehead. “Oh good, you made it,” he sighs, stepping aside to reveal he’s wearing nothing but a towel around his waist.

“You’re very pretty,” I compliment him, ducking through the door and perking up despite being meadless. “Do you have oil?” I ask, looking around and immediately spotting a vanity with multiple bottles on it.

I head straight for it as Lawton answers. “Oh yes, right over there. Thank you. I always forget the oils.”

I glance over my shoulder at him, surprised. “What do you use instead?”

He gives me an adorably helpless little laugh. “Nothing. I’ve never needed help before.” He grunts and does a little shimmy as he hangs his towel over a drying rack exposing all the pretty pale skin for my viewing pleasure. “Well, not since the tailor came through with my wardrobe when the king promoted me to high sorcerer. He was very thorough and helped me both times I saw him after our initial appointment, but that was ten years ago.”

“Ten years?” I gape at him, shocked. Who can go that long without sex? I can’t go more than a few days if I have company. On my own, I drink more and fuck less, but if I have a companion, two days max. I hope he’s prepared for my needs. My face probably reflects my concern, because he approaches with a reassuring smile.

His words are not assuring. “Don’t worry. This won’t be a regular part of your duties, I promise. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I’ve been doing so since I was a teenager.”

I place both hands on his delicate shoulder, looking down at him. “No, your highness, this isn’t a duty. This is a pleasure. I will take care of you every day. We orcs would never neglect an adventuring companion like that. It just isn’t done. Now, tell me, how long until dinner?”

The prince's expression softens and at the same time fills with happiness. "Thank you, Berklak. We only have about an hour, and I swear it takes half that time to get into my damn evening wear."

"Ah, ok, then we'll make this quick and take our time later," I decide, releasing him to grab a bottle of oil. I sniff through the four choices he has, picking the one that smells of gardenia and clove. That will be pleasant. I turn, unstopping the bottle and pouring a bit into my hand. Lawton holds both arms out from his body, and I smile at his stance, spread out for me and willing to let me do anything. He's adorable.

I take a knee, set the bottle on the floor, and decide the man is going to dinner so he should feel like he at least smells lovely. Besides, I enjoy touching my lovers a great deal. I start at his shoulders, massaging the oil into his skin, sliding down his arms and making sure to address the tension in all his muscles. For such a small man, he carries a lot of tension in every muscle. I wonder if that's a symptom of his station or just his personality. The burden of being the high sorcerer of Fasgard is surely much.

I pour a bit more oil and turn him to massage his back, pressing out the tension there too. The poor man must not take very good care of himself; he almost turns into cooked noodles at this small kindness.

"You really ought to make a habit of visiting a spa. There's a lovely elther owned spa just across from Bards College. The owners are members of the Companions Compendium, the Sodality of Brewers and Vintners, and the Society of Devisers. They take good care of their clients. Every time I go, I leave feeling refreshed and at least ten years younger. They have excellent mead, which they pour liberally."

Lawton laughs softly as I start at his feet with more oil, working my way up to the pretty little globes of his ass. "I'm not sure they would allow me inside, and even if they did, I have standards. No one is allowed to touch me that flinches at my magic."

I nip his ass, causing him to startle, because it's there and it's lovely, and because he needs to get out of his head. "Your highness," I chastise softly. "Elhers have no fear of necromancy. Those from the jungles and plains of Prassa fear neither life nor death. Hideki and Hiroshi would welcome you."

"Ah, hmm. I wonder if that's true for all elhers. The warden of the jail is elher and he fears me. Ng?" he grunts as I massage the oil between his cheeks and over his tight little bud.

We don't have time for me to open him up, but massaging this muscle too will help for our after dinner romp. I press against his little bud without trying to penetrate, simply massaging the oil into the skin before turning him and starting with the front of his legs and working my way up.

"Berklak?" he asks.

With me on my knees he's about three inches taller than me, which is why I got down. Our cocks will line up nicely this way. "Your highness," I respond curiously as I finally put my hands on his lovely cock, which chubbed up during my sensual massage. "Do you like kissing?"

His eyes widen, "Are we—do we have time for—Berklak!" he exclaims when I pinch the head of his cock and pull the foreskin back at the same time.

"Just a little aperitif," I promise, lifting enough to press my mouth to his.

He surrenders to the kiss like a man who hasn't had someone to fuck for ten years. His little moans of pleasure start the timber tremble in my chest, which vibrates us both. Oh, it's been a while since I liked a companion enough to tremble for them. That's nice—definitely worth storing my mead at the guard tower for.

If we had more time, I would spend much, much longer kissing him. He avoids nicking himself on my lower tusks and naturally adapts to the wetter, sloppier kiss of an orc lover. The suction humans use is nice, but my tusks prevent that. Instead I

taste every corner of his mouth, licking him like I plan to lick his cock. He dances with me until I pull back, loosening my leather skirt and pulling my cock out of my trousers. Mine is twice the length of his, but that lines us up perfectly.

With another small amount of oil, I slick up our cocks, and grab them together, thrusting into my fist against his pretty little prick. He grabs my arms and opens his mouth again for me, giving me another steamy kiss as I pleasure us far more quickly than I truly want to. I'll take my time after dinner to properly care for him. He won't find me lacking as a lover, not in this moment or at any point during our adventure together.

Lawton moans, and it goes straight to my balls, prepping me for the orgasm we're barreling toward. He twitches in my hand and grows harder, and my body prepares for his release. Electric sparks run through me, and then my new lover gasps and freezes. The world stops, time ceases for a breath, and then his cock spurts over mine, igniting the sparks and sending me barreling into the aethyr for pulse after pulse of our orgasm.

Orcs bond so well with their lovers because we share their pleasure on an ethereal level. Connecting with this beautiful man as only orcs can and sharing this singular moment of pleasure with him cinches my decision; he's worth being meadless for.

As the final dribbles of cum bring us back from ecstasy, we share panting breaths and the scent of sex, clove, and gardenia. I hum my happiness with our first dance and kiss him again, just a tiny lick across the seam of his mouth before I bring our combined seed up to my mouth and lick my hand clean.

He huffs and smiles. "I think I believe the rumors about orc lovers more now than I did before."

I chuckle as I stand, putting myself and the bottle of oil away. "We are notoriously good at orgasms, but just wait until we have time for me to take you apart first. Then you'll truly understand the songs sung to our cocks and cumstains."

ten

# lawton

“I’VE HEARD THEM, but I think most people believe, like me, that they are a bit exaggerated,” I laugh, following Berklak’s movements with my eyes.

He’s lovely, and that orgasm was—well, I’ve never had anyone touch my dick besides myself. It’s illegal for me to have sex with anyone I can impregnate, and I didn’t lie about not allowing people who flinch at my magic to touch me. This half-orc is the only person I’ve ever met who meets both qualifications. I’m going to have *so much* sex with him.

He gives me an earnest expression as he turns back from putting the bottle of perfumed oil away again. “No, sir. Every word of those songs is likely true. I know the ones sung to my prowess as a lover are true. I’ve sponsored bards at the college for thirty years; there are many, many songs sung to my cock. I’ve never found a single one to be exaggerated.”

A shiver of anticipation snakes up my spine and my cock tries to rally for another round even though we barely have time to get me dressed. Thankfully, he knows how to help a man with that.

“I look forward to finding my own song,” I giggle and point to my clothes laid out on my bed. “I can get the small clothes on and the trousers, but everything else is tailored to fit so closely I can barely move.”

Berklak frowns at the clothes. “How do you get them on?” he asks, with no small amount of confusion and a bit of derision.



I laugh until I realize he's serious. "You're here to help me, correct? It's the manservant's job to help me dress, but like I said, this won't be a regular part of your duties. My adventuring clothes are much more practical for everyday wear."

Berklak's eyes slowly blink close then he chuckles deeply and that purr that rumbled through his chest while he jerked us off returns, significantly more amused this time. "Oh. I thought you hadn't had sex in ten years. I was assuring you that I wouldn't neglect your sexual needs."

I process that with a laugh, reframing that whole conversation from his perspective. Oh goddess, that's funny. "Oh no. No. I've never had sex. We are going to spend as much time as possible engaged in coitus." I laugh again and grab the small clothes from the stack on my bed, pulling them on. "So much coitus," I assure myself, eagerly.

"How old—wait. I haven't heard about your age of ascension celebration. Are you" —he leans in and whispers worriedly— "*legal?*"

I sigh, tying the small clothes on. "I am almost forty. I didn't get a celebration on my thirty-third birthday because it is very illegal for me to sire children, marry, or have a harem. My sexual activity is as heavily regulated as the spices that come from Crouwisal."

"It's a good thing that orcs can't get pregnant and don't have marriage in our relationships," he decides, coming up beside me and picking up the shirt as I grab the trousers.

"Seeding trees is probably the better way to go. At least that way you don't have any accidental pregnancies," I comment, tightening the laces enough to keep the trousers on my hips.

When I finish, Berklak holds the shirt up for me and I drop my arms into the sleeves so he can pull it up to my shoulders. The fit restricts my movement, but it's fashionable; well, it was ten years ago. Who knows what the fashionistas are producing these days. I'm unwilling to pay for more formal evening wear that I have little use for.

“My father certainly thinks so. There’s a reason orcs try not to bed females,” he grunts with far more agreement than I would expect.

“You’re a half-orc, so your father got a bit adventurous?” I ask curiously, since he brought it up.

“Much to my father’s shame, he became besotted by a Qilatone elf from High Emintis. He thought my mother was a male. As he tells it, the Qilatone don’t make it easy to tell, and my mother seduced him with her strength and vitality. She refused his advances many times, but eventually he seduced her back, and by the time he realized he was hopelessly in love with a female it was too late to back out. They’re still very much in love, but my father can’t show his face among our clan without becoming the butt of all the jokes. He only attends the annual winter wars just to maintain his status as the Champion of the Brawl. It’s his only saving grace. I’d be too ashamed to show my face if he ever lost his status.”

I listen while he buttons the shirt and tucks it into my trousers. “You’re ashamed of your father for falling in love with a female?” That seems rather harsh since he was born from that union.

He snorts as I tie up my laces, and he grabs the cravat and the vest, deciding which to help me with first. “No, of course not. I love my mother; she is certainly worthy of any orc’s love.” He picks the cravat and ties it rather quickly as he continues. “No, I’m ashamed of my father for taking the comments without defending his love. He never rages when others tease him. It’s shameful. He’s basically a tamed orc. If he couldn’t defend his championship, I would tell the world my father has finally passed from the thyr to hide my family’s shame, and then I would enter the annual brawl and win that fucker from the orc that defeated my father. I would not have my tribe further shamed by my father’s lack.”

He helps me into the vest and buttons it over the cravat, adjusting the way it lies and the collar of my shirt. He steps back, looking at his handiwork. “Where’s the pin to secure it?”

I'm honestly impressed, though clearly I've underestimated my companion. "I believe it may be in my jewelry box," I reply, nodding to the oak box with silver inlay on my vanity.

Berklak steps over to it, and I send a tendril of magic out to pop the box open. It won't open any other way. He doesn't even blink at the display of my magic, looking through the jewelry and picking out several items. He returns to me, setting the pile of jewelry on the bed, and pinning my cravat to my shirt to secure it for the evening. Once he's done, he picks up my waistcoat and helps me into that, pulling the ruffles of my sleeves through and then buttoning me into the damn thing.

Once I'm fully dressed, he decorates me with the jewelry he chose—three rings on each hand, a cuff for each ear, and a ring in my nose. He puts a pin on my breast and adds a long golden chain to hang on my neck. He backs up and takes me in, nodding to himself before pulling my silk stockings off the bed along with the garters to hold them up.

"Dammit." I can't believe I forgot to put my stockings on first.

"They were hidden under the stack," he points out before crouching. "Don't worry, we'll just push your pants up."

He lifts my cuff past my calf and I lift my foot when he holds out the stocking. Once he pulls it over my calf, he belts it in place with the garter and lowers my pant leg again.

"Forgive me, Berklak, but how do you know how to dress a man like this? I barely know how."

"I have bedded nobles before. Undressing a man and keeping his cock hard is a challenge when they're wearing so many layers. I've practiced my technique, and it's paying off now," he replies, glancing up with a lascivious smile.

"I will have to brag to Hildred about your skill when I see her tomorrow. She claimed you couldn't enter the Servant's Union as a manservant if you didn't know how to dress a man for dinner."

Berklak laughs. “Now I am truly grateful for adventurous nobles.”

I laugh with him as he pulls my other pant leg down, finished with my stockings. He pulls my high heeled boots toward him and helps me into them, lacing them to my feet so they don't slip off.

“I might need you to escort me to dinner in these shoes,” I complain, feeling very unsteady on the three inch heels.

He grins as he stands back up and holds out his arm to me. “I would be thrilled to have you on my arm. Imagine me, Berklak the half-orc barbarian, entering the hall with a prince on my arm. I would tell everyone about that. I would brag about that for the rest of my life.”

“Be prepared to brag,” I warn him, taking his arm and leaning on his strength to keep me from rolling my ankles. Whoever decided that heels were fashionable should be jailed for at least a month, but maybe not under Kyn, who's too kind to torture the prisoners.

Berklak smiles smugly and escorts me out of my room, holding me steady as he walks past my guard (who moves away from me—definitely would not trust him with my life), and to the stair that will lead to the main hall.

Berklak gives the man a withering look. “And where were you when I arrived?” he asks levelly.

The guard backs up another step. “Apologies. I had to see to the barbarians at the gate.”

Berklak snorts and shakes his head. “You get a replacement when you need a break.”

The guard sketches a bow to me. “Yes, of course, I apologize.”

I'm not usually mean, but having guards on my door is only for show anyway, so I don't bother even acknowledging an apology that won't change the guard's behavior. “Take me to dinner, Berklak,” I tell my companion, turning away from the useless guard.

“As you wish, your highness,” he replies, escorting me toward the stairs.

As we walk, I give him a verbal tour, explaining the artwork, tapestries, and even some of the hidden gems. There’s a little painting on the wall in one of the corners that lives at about knee height for an adult that was painted by my own father when he was just a toddler. He hung the piece up in that corner, and my grandmother, the monarch before he ascended, added it to the art registry. It’s illegal to take it down now, which I think is adorable.

Once we reach the main hall where my family eats dinner with the visitors of the palace, the herald startles when he sees me and takes a step back before catching his faux pas. I’m never going to enjoy that, but the orc escorting me scoffs at the poor man and walks past him, bellowing loud enough to silence the hall. “Prince Lawton escorted by Berklak the Barbarian Orc.”

Then he gives the herald a mean look and proceeds to make his way to the head of the King’s table where two seats have been reserved for me and my new companion.

The king scowls at the herald who very much failed to do his job properly because of his fear of my magic. Honestly, if he knew half the things I was actually capable of, he’d have run all the way to the Sakai Citadel on the border to Smos Esten, and then he would have kept running into our neighboring nation’s wildlands.

I’m much more dangerous than he gives me credit for, but I genuinely wish people would give me the benefit of the doubt first.

“It’s the eyes. People see glowing purple eyes and they just react,” I murmur to my companion.

“I reacted. I chubbed up like a kid who just learned what his dick is for,” he teases, then we quiet, greeting my father with low bows.

“Rise,” my father says, looking at the way I’m holding Berklak for a long moment before indicating the seats next to

him on the right. The one directly next to him is mine, since until my eldest sister inherits the throne, I outrank her, and the one next to me is for Berklak since he's my guest at the king's command. My presence has shifted my entire family down the table. Across from me, my eldest sister, Haughney, sits, and next to her, my brother Exander, next to him is Adama, and beside Berklak is Saimey, which means that the rest of my siblings aren't having dinner with us tonight. I'm a little surprised that Exander is here; he truly hates me; loathes the very air I breathe.

Berklak helps me into my chair before he sits in his, and as soon as we're seated, servants appear with plates for us and pitchers of wine to fill our cups. Berklak glances at the king as the servant fills his goblet, then he takes the pitcher from the servant. "I'll just keep this here," he tells the girl, emptying his goblet into his mouth and handing it to the girl. He sets the pitcher where his cup was and gives the table a smile. "Orcs are notoriously thirsty; I'm just saving the poor girl a hundred trips to refill my cup."

"Your majesty, why is there an orc at your table?" Adama asks, barely tempering her tone as she glares daggers at me. If she had trained her magical ability as I have, I might be concerned about actual daggers appearing in the air to stab me.

The king sips his wine and addresses Berklak. "You are the half-orc who defeated the wight army during the invasion at Hosten's Tower?"

Berklak's smile brightens the room and his green cheeks grow darker as he flushes with pleasure. "I am, your majesty. You weren't yet the king then, but I didn't know you'd heard of my heroism that day."

"I oversaw the fortifications at the tower and King's Crossing. I read the report that was submitted by the soldiers stationed there when you arrived. Tell Us, Berklak, why does someone of your renown want to accompany a necromancer in the execution of his duties as high sorcerer? Our high sorcerer will have a contingent of soldiers at hand; we want to know what you add to his quest and what you gain from it."

Berklak turns in his seat, placing an arm across the back of mine as he answers the king, clearly telling my father and everyone at the table that he's very comfortable with proximity to me. "Your majesty, I add to every quest I join, whether I know how I will or not. In this case, we may have to venture into the depths of Chilghen. I've defeated an army of viltz before, your majesty. Just last year I heard from a dwarven smith that helped me that the dark elves have a saying about me: 'if you're going to face a barbarian orc, you're going to need a bigger army.' I'm going to make sure whoever Prince Lawton faces needs a bigger army. And no offense intended to the soldiers, but so far every person in this palace has stepped back from the high sorcerer, and I don't think I trust them to come to his defense if he's attacked. The royal herald himself couldn't muster the courage to announce the prince; why would I entrust his safety to anyone but the one person I know won't shirk from him? That's me, your majesty, in case that wasn't clear."

The king doesn't bat an eye at Berklak's casual way of laying claim to me with his arm, nor the direct way he speaks about the failings of the palace staff and probably how the soldiers will treat me. He's not wrong. I would be surprised if Aleron manages to put together a whole contingent of people willing to travel with me. Undoubtedly more than a few of them will keep their distance. I appreciate what Aleron expects from his soldiers, but there's a reason I can manifest acid baths and plunge a room into the deepest darkness. I don't trust the king's guard to protect me.

"We have been told that you plan to hire more than our guard to accompany our sorcerer. Tell us about the companions you would entrust our high sorcerer's secrets with."

Berklak grunts and nods. "I know a druid by the name of Darian Silverleaf; he once tracked me for seven hundred miles to return three gold that I overpaid him. I don't know about you, but a man with that kind of diligence in his work is one I would have at my side. I've also talked to a xenecar bard named Armus Song who Dean Talltalker recommended to me. Armus Song has experience with Chilghen. According to my

friend, he's from Dramnarark—a xenecar adopted by dwarves, if you can believe it. He's confident he can navigate the caves if we do end up traveling into the below."

"He could be lying about his background," Adama points out. "Why would you trust the word of a xenecar?"

The prejudices my sister has against strangers because of their parentage leaves me agog. "How does being xenecar affect the value of his word, dear sister?" I ask without trying to hide how disgusting I think her prejudices are.

She sneers at me. "The xenecar are born from the spawn of the maelysou. Everyone knows you don't trust the children of evil gods."

"Oh for fuck's sake, Adama. One time, a hundred thousand years ago, a maelysou bred with a thousand humans and now all of their descendants are evil. That's ignorance. There's nothing more evil about the xenecar than there is about humans, and they are just as worthy of your regard as any other person, not that I expect you to give much regard to anything that isn't one of your dogs."

"My dogs are far more worthy of trust than—"

"Enough," the king interrupts firmly but without raising his voice.

Adama and I both snap our mouths shut. Exander snorts into his cup and Haughney turns a narrow-eyed glare at him. "Of course the kingdom of Fagard doesn't hold any prejudice against a person because of the circumstances of their birth, including their species," she confirms firmly.

My father returns his attention to Berklak. "While Princess Adama's thoughts do come from a place of ignorance, her doubt is valid. If you don't know Armus Song beyond the introduction you received from Dean Talltalker, why would you entrust him in the company of our high sorcerer?"

Is it me, or does this sound like my father might be concerned for my safety outside the palace walls?

Berklak hums softly, nodding at the king. "I was doubtful when he showed me his keyring. He had keys to Adventurer's



Guild, the Keyroom, and the Companion's Compendium, which are all perfectly good keys to have. Adventuring is done with joy when one has a skilled companion, and it's done with more ease if your companion can get into locked rooms, so those were keys that I can appreciate, but I didn't need a companion since I had already negotiated that for this adventure, and I can get into locked rooms with my warhammer no problem. It was the key to Kitchen that I saw hiding behind his key to the Compendium that cinched it for me, your majesty. If you've ever been on an adventure, you know how hard it is to come by good food. I'd have hired him for that key alone even if he was a hobgoblin from the pits of Karewu. Plus, he tipped the runner that came for me with your invitation and gave her a honey roll. Anyone who feeds the kids like that is worth having around."

King Valerian hums softly as he stares at Berklak. His tone remains firm without betraying any emotion, but...but somehow I think my father is concerned about me when he tells my new manservant/adventuring companion, "We will entrust our high sorcerer into your protection, Berklak, Champion of Hosten's Tower, as long as our Steward approves of your employment."

Berklak raises his pitcher of wine to the king. "Thank you, your majesty. I'm confident your steward will find my keyring impressive."

The king indulges Berklak with a lift of his goblet, and everyone scrambles to join as the two drink to their new agreement.

I would not have expected my father to care about who accompanies me, but today is a day full of wonder and progress in my relationship with him. I'm thrilled, and if that means I do a little undignified wiggle in my seat as I start eating, so be it. Who can possibly contain their excitement when they learn their father might actually care about them?

eleven

# berklak

DINNER LASTS FOR HOURS, which is good because orcs are hungry even when we're not, so at least the king knows how to feed an orc. The first pitcher of wine was weak, but King Valerian gave a servant a look and suddenly my pitcher was refilled with a fine mead that made the meal all the better. For the most part everyone ignored Prince Lawton, although Princess Adama often glared daggers at him and Princess Saimey tried on multiple occasions to tamper with his food or drink. I foiled her plans every time since I was sitting between the two, but I think the prince would have intervened if I hadn't. He wasn't unaware of her actions.

When the nobles at the table start drooping, the king sets his fork down and wipes his face.

I've never been to a king's meal before, but that is apparently the cue for everyone to stop eating, and since I'm good at following cues, I also stop eating. Once he bids us all good night and tells us we're welcome to continue to enjoy his hospitality, he leaves the room with his knights.

As soon as the door closes on his retreat, I turn to the little prince, resting my arm over the back of his chair. "I don't suppose you know if I'm meant to sleep here tonight or if I should return to my house?" It'll take me an hour to get to the right part of the city, and then I'm more likely to spend some coin at a tavern than go straight home. I keep a cot at the dorm where my kids are just in case I need a place to sleep when I'm in Fairview. I don't think I've ever used it—Tavian has always offered his hospitality when I've come for a visit.

“You’ll have to be back for your interview at midday tomorrow; you might save yourself some travel and stay with me unless you have other errands to run in the morning,” Prince Lawton answers with a giddy little grin.

Even with tiredness around his pretty purple eyes, he exudes joy and enthusiasm, and it makes me glad I chose him to adventure with. He’s good company, even if no one else sees that. Well, the king might, but he’s a little too circumspect to know for sure. It’s good that he wanted to verify his son’s acquaintances, but he never even looked at Prince Lawton all through dinner, and he had nothing to say to the prince besides that one firm command right at the beginning of the meal.

“Whoring yourself out already,” the other prince says, deep in his cups.

That brings silence to the table faster than King Valerian’s quiet chastisement of his children earlier.

I take a breath to respond, but Lawton beats me to it. “Brother, you are a prince of Fasgard with a wife and harem. If you want an orc lover, it would be nothing to put up an ad for one. Ask Hildred if you truly want one for yourself, but do not think for a moment that I’m going to allow you to insult me or my orc over sex.” He looks to the king’s guard and snaps his fingers, pointing at his brother. “Take Prince Exander to his room, and if he resists, put him in the drunk tank until he sobers up.”

As the highest ranking person in the room, his orders are obeyed quickly. Prince Exander stands and wobbles out of the dining room on his own power without another word.

“It’s a shame he doesn’t know how to enjoy his buzz,” I sigh, feeling sorry for him. “Hangovers aren’t worth it if you don’t have fun the night before.”

Prince Lawton and Princess Saimey both giggle. Princess Haughney hides her smile behind her cup.

“Are you staying or not?” Prince Lawton asks, getting us back on track.

“I do have some errands to run. I have to resupply and let the others know where to meet the party, but I don’t mind leaving early and returning at midday if you don’t mind some company tonight.”

“That’s disgusting,” Princess Adama announces as she springs from her seat. “I’m sure my father will be pleased to learn the barbarian intends to fuck the *necromancer*.” She spits that word like it’s filth.

Before I can say anything, Prince Lawton puts a staying hand on my thigh, very near my perky cock. Mead makes me horny, and I’ve had at least four pitchers already.

The aura around the high sorcerer of Fasgard grows heavy, and the glow of his purple eyes brightens. “I can’t presume to know the mind of the king, so please, let me know what he thinks when you tell him. I’m very curious if *our* father cares enough about me to have an opinion about that beyond the obvious that I cannot impregnate this half orc.”

Princess Adama glares at him like he’s done something wrong and turns on her heels, stalking off with two hounds following her. I didn’t even realize there were dogs under the table. “You mean to tell me I could have fed the dogs my beans?” I demand, slamming my fist on the table. Turning to the prince, I grouse, “I’m not a fan of beans, and it would have been quite satisfying to give them the gas instead of me.”

Princess Adama hears me and shoots her dagger glare at me before disappearing altogether.

Princess Saimey stands with a wicked grin on her face. “Do come to supper more, High Sorcerer; I’ve never been so entertained,” she snickers and then slinks away.

I look down the table at the nobles who’re slowly leaving as well, then turn back to Prince Lawton. “Allow me to accompany you back to your room, your highness.”

He smiles up at me and gives me his hand. Helpfully, I keep him steady as he rises. As I walk him out of the main hall, I realize that he must’ve had more to drink than I thought. He’s unstable, but not in the same way he was when I escorted

him in. He rolls his ankle twice on the way to the door, so when we reach the corridor, I scoop him up. “I think you might be a little inebriated, your highness.”

“I know,” he whispers, sounding completely sober. “I always water down my alcohol, because when I get drunk, I tend to use my magic irresponsibly. It scares people, so I usually stay away from the good stuff, but my servant didn’t give me a single opportunity to tell her to water mine down.”

He suddenly stiffens in my arms and starts slapping my chest. “Berklak, go down stairs, not up. I just had an idea!”

I’m not proud. Well, I am proud, but only about certain things. Taking a drunk necromancer to the basement isn’t one of them. In fact, it sounds like a good time. “Sounds fun, where’s the staircase?”

He snaps his fingers and a barely there trail of light appears in front of us. “Follow the light, Berklak, it will take us to our destination!”

I make sure the wiggly prince is secure in my arms and follow the Quest Trail through the corridor, to a door that leads to a stairwell, and down two flights of steps to the bottom of the stair. On the other side of the door, another corridor expands outward to the left and right in what looks like an unending line. This must be the infamous Labyrinth of the Jewel.

As soon as the door shuts behind us, Prince Lawton wriggles to get back on his feet. I set him down and he immediately rolls off his heels. “Help me out of these shoes! They’re trying to kill me!” he pleads, clinging to me.

I hold him steady as I take a knee and help him to sit on my leg. Once he’s secure, I help him out of the high heels. He grabs them out of my grip, and they immediately disappear. With a grin he pushes to his feet, immediately swaying, but at least he’s not in danger of busting his head open with a fall.

“Perfect, Berklak. Time to go hunting. We need spies!”

“I have no weapons, and I don’t know where to get spies, but I’m all in. Tell me what to do, Prince Lawton.”

His smile brightens until his pretty eyes radiate his happiness. “Please call me Lawton. We’re friends now, and I don’t want you to have to use my title all the time.”

He’s adorable. I don’t know why anyone wouldn’t want to be around this guy. “Lawton. What can I do?”

He does a happy little wiggle and walks straight into the wall in front of us. I reach out to stop him from giving himself a broken nose, but he passes through it with no problem, and I see that it’s just an illusion covering the entrance to the labyrinth.

I follow him through it to a place much more visibly confusing with high stone walls and statuary blocking out confusing pathways.

“Ok Berklak, we’re on a quest to find raskar, but they have to be dead already. I prefer them freshly dead, but I’ll make do with whatever we find. We need a lot. If I’m leaving the palace, I need spies to keep an eye on the place. There are people here I care about, you know. Not Adama or any of my siblings, obviously, but others. Ok, maybe Saimey; she’s also a child of my mother, so I’ll admit I might like her more than the rest of my siblings. Anyway, I love Hildred—you’re going to meet her tomorrow for your interview.” As he speaks, he still sounds completely sober, but he toddles along unsteadily, walking in zig zags and leaning on the walls to help him stay upright.

“How do your dead raskar report back to you?” I ask as I walk behind him, ready to catch him if he misses the wall.

“Oh! Good point! I really need actual spies for that, don’t I? I should get Aleron to send me spies! Or at least the knights he trusts to spy for him. Did you know that I linked a mummified raskar to the general and that’s why he knows so much about what’s happening in the palace all the time? I’m amazing, and no one appreciates me. Ok, that’s not fair. Aleron appreciates me, but he’s also scared of my magic sometimes. And Hildred loves me, but she’s like a mother to me, and I don’t think that counts.”

He stops moving so suddenly that I collide with the back of him. I grab him around his chest and he sighs happily, cuddling me. "I'm really glad you arrived at the watchtower while I was there."

He perks up and pushes away, tottering deeper into the labyrinth. "Let's go, Berklak! We've raskar to find and zombify!"

I know, I know. I should say more, but I like that I don't have to in order to get to know the man. He's very good at carrying the conversation, and I think I've figured out how the alcohol affects his speech, because he isn't slurring, so it's something else, right? Perhaps jumping from topic to topic with no need for input from me? Yeah, that's what I'm going with too.

I should add to the conversation, though, especially when it's about zombies. "Zombie felids, huh?"

"Raskar make excellent spies! No one polices the population of feral felines, and we welcome them into our spaces because they keep the rodent population down. They're so small that most people just overlook them altogether. A raskar can literally follow a person all day, and they'll only note the tiny cat in the back of their head. No one stops to think that maybe this kitty following them could possibly be a spy. Of course they don't. We've never had kitty spies before, have we? No, we *have not*, because *I* wasn't the high sorcerer before."

He stops, squeals with joy, and runs around a statue, falling to his knees and picking up a clearly dead and rotting raskar with gray fur. Its naked tail looks like some of its compatriots may have nibbled on it. The stiff corpse looks like a large rat, but raskars just disguise themselves like their prey. They are in fact tiny felines with retractable curved claws and the sharp teeth that felids usually have. In fact, elhers often have limited telepathic connections with their tiny brethren.

"I wonder if their ability to form bonds with elher makes them good for your spying magic. You said you bonded one to General Aleron?"



Lawton looks up at me with wide eyed awe. “You’re a genius. That is exactly the bond I played with when I linked Aleron and Sofi.”

I crouch next to him and pat his shoulder. “I think you’re the genius. I’m just following the clues.”

He holds up the little raskar. “Do you mind if I animate her and send her up to my lab?”

“Why would I mind?” I ask.

The urge to pull him into a tight hug hits me with the formation of tears in his pretty glowing eyes. “Because no one likes it when I animate the dead.”

“I’m about to embark on an adventure with you. I would be pretty disappointed in my choice of companions if you turned out to be shy about using your magic. You’re a necromancer. I might be able to defeat entire armies because I’ve been honing my skills for eighty years, but I can’t kill a guy and then bring him back to life just to kill him again. Sometimes I wish I could.”

It’s true. Eighty years of life has taught me that some people deserve to die twice, but I’ve never been able to give that kind of justice before. Unless you count the wights, ghouls, and occasional zombies that I’ve had to put down, but I don’t because I didn’t cause the first death in most of those cases, and if I did I wasn’t the one that reanimated them.

Lawton sucks in a breath and wipes his tears away before they can grace his cheeks. He smiles again and pats my arm. “If you ever want me to bring someone back to life so you can kill them again, I will. I won’t even ask why.”

I press my mouth to the back of his hand. “Thank you, my friend.”

Lawton sighs happily and gathers his magic, casting a spell over the tiny corpse that reanimates it. He sets it on the ground, and the tiny little cat scurries off. Lawton claps his hands and stands. “Alright let’s see how many more we can find. I think ten should be enough, but if we find more, I’ll take them. It can’t hurt to put a few of my little spies on

specific people.” He leans in close, wobbling unsteadily, and grabs the panels of my leather vest. “It’s completely treasonous to say this, but I’m going to put one on my father to make sure he’s safe. I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to him while I’m away; we’re finally making some progress in our relationship. He *looked* at me today! Do you know how long it’s been since he cast his gaze on me? I can’t even remember the last time.”

That’s fucked up. What kind of father doesn’t look at his kid? I guess Lawton is a fully grown adult now, but damn. Forty years of living with the king, and he can’t remember ever seeing his father look at him? That’s just sad. I wonder why the king would shun him like that?

“I was very nervous. I thought I was going to puke when he looked at me. I ran away, but still. Progress! Someday my father is going to love me! And if I have to spy on him to make sure he stays alive long enough for that to happen, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

This couldn’t possibly go wrong.

“Maybe we don’t tell anyone what you’re doing with the raskar,” I suggest, because I don’t want to be executed for treason.

Lawton giggles as he swings around a wall and out of sight for a moment. “I think I better not get caught, because my father isn’t known for mercy. He cast his concubine out when she murdered one of his miniature golden paradise chickens, even though I don’t think it was her fault at all. I think she was under the influence of evil magic, and the chicken was an unfortunate victim. I’m hoping I can convince the king to take her back, but I have to come back with proof that she was not in control of her actions first.”

“Is she safe until you bring him back proof?” I ask, following him further into the depths of the labyrinth.

“She’s in jail for now, and if I don’t return by the end of her thirty days, the jailer will provide her a safe place in his own home. Ooh, I think I’ll give Kyn a purse for her

expenses. That will help ease the burden if we don't return before her release."

I spot two dead raskar that he floated past and call for him. "Lawton, I've found two more."

He spins and returns to me, falling to his knees again over the little bodies. "Oh, aren't you just the prettiest little things," he coos softly, pushing his magic into them to animate them. They jump from his hands, two little black and white twins, and scurry away.

"Is the labyrinth dangerous?" I ask as I watch them disappear. "Is there always this many dead animals down here?"

Lawton frowns sadly. "Unfortunately, they get in and get lost and starve to death. It's the same with the actual rodents too."

"Oh, that's too bad," I sigh, straightening out of my crouch.

He stands with me, beaming at me and holding up his arms to me. "Do orc companions get kisses for no reason at all?"

I pick him up, grinning at the little man. "Orc companions get whatever they want," I promise and kiss him. For no reason at all.

twelve

# lawton

MY BRAIN BUZZES STRANGELY as I realize I'm waking up. I don't remember falling asleep, but if the headache behind my eyes and the churning in my stomach tell me anything, it's that I drank way too much last night. I hope I didn't make a fool out of myself at dinner. I should never drink more than a cup of my father's wine, otherwise I make very poor decisions with my magic.

The buzzing in my head feels like a very poor decision was made. Possibly nine very poor decisions.

Fuck a dead god. What did I do? And where did I get so many raskar?

"Please tell me I didn't kill the poor creatures," I whisper to myself, cracking an eye open. Immediately my gaze falls on a sheet of paper on my pillow. I pick up and read the sloppy handwriting:

Lawton—

Gone to the city. Don't forget to transfer the raskar to the knights. I had a lot of fun last night with you. See you at the gate after midday.

—Berklak

That's possibly not as bad as I thought it would be. With a quick spell, I get rid of the hangover and get ready to leave. As soon as I'm dressed, I poke my head out of my door, where the guard on duty immediately backs away.

"Fetch me a runner," I order him.

“Ah, sir, I’m not allowed to leave—”

“You’re useless as a guard because you’re more afraid of me than you are worried about my safety. Go get me a runner. Now.” I’m usually more patient with the palace guard and staff, but the buzzing in my head demands attention, and I don’t have the wherewithal to deal with dodgy guards.

He looks like he’s about to protest again, so I just let my eyes glow really bright for a second.

He runs off posthaste.

I might apologize to Berklak later for this since he went to all the trouble of telling the guard not to leave his post.

As soon as he’s gone, I return to my room and start packing a travel bag. Most of my things in here will go into my travel chest, but the few things I want to carry with me go into the bag. I don’t trust any of my valuables not to be pilfered once I’m gone, so I lock them away in the vault I’ve hidden in the tunnel that connects my rooms to my lab.

As I’m returning from my wardrobe, a knock on the door tells me the runner is here, so I swing my door open, pleased to see the boy on the other side. “Guido. Come in here. I have a message for General Aleron,” I tell the boy, and he follows me to my desk where I hand him a little bag of sweets I made up for him and a note sealed with my stamp. “Get this to the general as fast as you can, and if you tell him your little sister is a bit ill today, he’ll give you a nice treat.”

“I don’t have a little sister,” he replies softly, big brown eyes frowning with confusion.

I giggle and shrug. “He doesn’t know that, does he?”

His confusion turns to glee and he smiles at me. “Thanks, Prince Lawton. I’ll tell him.”

I pat his head. “Good boy.”

I shouldn’t encourage the deception, but these kids come from the orphanage; every little bit helps when they have nothing but what they’re given. I consider giving him a life skill as important as the ability to lie a social responsibility.

Maybe someday he'll grow up and join one of the lucrative guilds in Wayfarer's Rest, and if that happens, the ability to form a decent lie will serve him well. Especially if he gets caught doing something less than legal.

My father follows the traditions of our ancestors and allows the Abductor's Hold and the Thieves Keyroom to exist as guilds, but everyone knows if you get caught, there is no mercy for you. Even carrying the keys to those guilds can be dangerous.

Hopefully Guido doesn't turn to a life of crime, but if he does, I want him to be charismatic enough to lie his way out of too much trouble.

After I finish packing my bag, I use the tunnel to get to my lab, leaving the guard on duty without informing him that I'll be leaving the palace this afternoon. He's more than welcome to find out after he's passed his shift standing at my door.

Pettiness? What pettiness? I don't think anyone would ever accuse me of holding grudges or exacting revenge. They'd have to get to know me enough to figure that out.

Ok, the buzzing really is making me grumpy.

I lift the trap door that leads to my lab with a little bit of magical help and climb up into the space, immediately smelling the scent of mummified raskar. Yep, I know the smell all too well. The nine new zombie raskar lined up on my work table don't surprise me in the least. They all buzz eagerly as soon as they see me, though they remain still as statues, because apparently I didn't quite finish giving them natural life while I was working last night. Fuck a goddess. This is what I mean by bad magical decisions. It's going to take me all morning to get them all looking and smelling alive, and I have to bond them to Aleron's knights. I'm going to be exhausted before we even ride out of the city this afternoon.

Well, at least the general won't be able to complain about not having his army of raskar spies. Oh, but wait.

I look at the line of raskar. "What am I going to do with the extra?" I ask myself, because Aleron only has eight knights he

wants bonded to raskar spies of their own.

He wouldn't want anyone to have that extra, but I guess if it's mine that would be ok.

That thought reminds me of something...

What—

Oh fuck.

I told Berklak I was going to spy on the king. Oh fuck no. That would get me executed. Even talking about it is a death sentence. I hope no one else heard that...

Well, if they had I would be in chains right now.

We are not talking about that ever again. Nope. Aleron can decide how the raskar will be used by his knights, and I will leave the spying to him. It wouldn't hurt to have one of these as a companion though.

I just can't let Aleron know that I've kept one back for myself.

“Ok, friends! Let's finish this. Who's first?”

One of the little buggers buzzes more insistently than the others, and it's one of the white kitties with a black spot on his ears. He's adorable and will make the perfect spy. Drunk Lawton did a good job picking kitties, and now that I can see them, I know they were dead before I found them. They all have a bit of decay.

“Come on little kitty, up on the array,” I tell the loudest buzzer, and it moves to the array, laying in the center of it so I can get to work.

I pull my magic in close and start drawing, using my magic to give the little feline a more natural life without bringing it back to mortality. I spend some time cleaning it up and giving it the illusion of a healthy body, then set it aside and start on the next one. Midway through the fourth raskar, Aleron's voice overlays mine as I chant the spell to give the zombie natural feline behaviors. I point to the safety circle without interrupting my chant.



It's a delicate spell to make these creatures functional without a constant draw on my magic. Most undead creatures only remain that way as long as they are connected to the necromancer that raised them. I'm powerful enough to cut off parts of my magic and infuse them into the creatures. It's a bit risky, because I'm essentially sharing my soul essence with them, but I haven't noticed any significant long term effects. I seem to regrow the bits of soul I give up. It takes a few weeks, but the only thing that it does is make me lethargic until I get a good night's sleep.

Once I finish with the raskar, I remove it from the array and turn to Aleron. "Hello, my dear! As you can see, I decided not to leave you without your bonded knights. I hope you were sincere in that desire, because I worked very hard all night, and these raskar are already bonded to me. I'm ready to transfer them to your knights, but I need them just one or two at a time, and I need to finish by midday if at all possible. I want to sit in with Hildred on Berklak's interview."

"I was quite sincere," he assures me, looking over the table. "I see nine raskar, but I only have eight knights."

I bat my eyes at him, smiling innocently. "I thought it would be helpful to have one of my own to take with me. They can get into tight spaces and might be a useful little animal companion during my investigation."

Aleron gives me a deadpan look. "You accidentally made one too many, didn't you?"

I sigh and let my shoulders droop. "Maybe a little bit accidentally on purpose. I was very drunk."

Aleron laughs. "Alright, Law. I'll let you keep one for your quest, but when you return to the palace, we'll have to talk about protocols for it. I can't have you using it as I plan to use the rest of them."

"I know," I promise, dancing a little in my travel clothes. "I swear I'll follow all your rules."

Aleron gives me an affectionate smile. "I know you will. You're the easiest royal to keep safe, and I appreciate that

more than I can possibly express.” His expression turns sour. “I asked for volunteers to accompany you first. The paladin that volunteered is” —he pauses and grimaces at me— “he’s interesting. His name is Inghram Sepferaline.”

He stops right there because he doesn’t need to keep talking. “Oh,” I hum, a little impressed. “A child of Sepfera volunteered? A maelysou’s child? And he’s a paladin? What god is he in contract with?” Because there’s no way that Aleron would accept the child of an evil god into my personal guard if he was in a contract with his own progenitor.

“Benilon,” Aleron replies.

The god of redemption. Huh. “That makes sense, I suppose. I don’t expect it would be easy for a person of Sepfera’s line to find an aelysou willing to contract with them.” The good gods probably wouldn’t look beyond the man’s ancestry. Having the blood of a maelysou running through you would disqualify you to serve as a paladin for nearly all the aelysou. Benilon is the only one I can think of who might make an exception.

Not that I know the names of every god he could have possibly approached, but I do know all the names of the twenty gods with temples in Sakai Citadel, the city that stands as a fortress at the pass between Fasgard and Smos Esten.

“I’ve never known the man to do anything intentionally evil, but he sometimes finds redemption a challenge. If you don’t want him, I’ll assign a different paladin to you.”

“No, absolutely not. Inghram will be perfect. I would rather have a paladin struggling with his contract who wants to go with me than one who doesn’t want to be near me.” And that’s the godsdamned truth. I’d rather have someone who might accidentally kill me than one who’d do it on purpose.

Aleron gives me a knowing look. “I will let him know to meet you at the gate after the midday meal. Now, as for the others going with you; I only had two others volunteer. I think they both volunteered on a mutual dare. They’re rambunctious best friends. One is a private in the king’s army and the other is a watchman. They heard about your adventure when I put

out the call for volunteers, and they came to see me together. I don't think either of them have left the city since arriving, though they aren't from Fairview, so I hope that will do instead of being members of the Adventurer's Guild. They both only finished their training last month. I have a list of others I've assigned, but I've given the volunteers the closer assignments. Those two will be your close guard. The rest of them will make up the outer defense."

"I'm impressed you got two volunteers," I congratulate him. "How many am I taking?"

"Altogether six, plus the paladin and the druid and bard that Berklak recruited. I think you'll be as safe as I can possibly make you away from the palace."

"You remember that I'm not helpless, right?" I laugh.

He dips his chin respectfully. "I remember, Law, but I'd rather not take chances. I know you have to leave, but I want you to return. No matter what anyone else in this palace thinks, you would be missed if you didn't."

Aww. He's so sweet. Wrong, but sweet. "Thank you for your diligence. Please have them dress in plain traveling clothes. I do not want to draw attention to the fact that the high sorcerer of Fasgard is moving through the land unless I absolutely must."

"I had planned on it. As usual we're of the same mind."

I smile at that, grateful that my life isn't completely devoid of friends. "Thank you. Now get out of here so I can finish these up, and send me your knights. I might go nuts before lunch if I don't offload these guys soon."

Aleron chuckles and nods. "Sure. See you after lunch. I'll be there at the gate to see you off."

"Thank you!" I appreciate my friend, and I'm glad he values me and my opinions enough to arrange my security as much to my taste as possible. Hopefully the two volunteers won't be too terrified of the consequences of their actions.

After he leaves, I finish with the other five raskar, interrupting my work three times to offload the bonds to six

knights that come to me in pairs. As I finish the final raskar, the last two knights show up. I let them have their choice of the felines, then put them into arrays on the floor that I use to transfer the bonds from myself to them. After instructing them on the limitations and uses of their new bonds, they leave, and I give myself a moment to collapse onto the cot at the back of my lab.

I'm exhausted, but it's the good kind. I've worked hard, set up for success the royal guard, and even given myself a little companion too. "This is going to be fun," I whisper to the little raskar resting on my chest as I pet her.

She's the gray one with some tail damage. I can't see the illusion of life that veils her from the eyes of everyone else. Her skull peaks out from beneath desiccated skin that's drawn back, and she's missing one eye while the other one has turned a pretty shade of red from burst blood vessels. She's a little wrecked, but my magic will hold her together indefinitely unless someone manages to dispel the magic, and they would have to be at least as powerful as I am to do that. Unless her body is completely destroyed, disintegrated, burned to ash, or something equally heinous, she will continue to exist even after I die and our bond is destroyed.

What can I say? I take pride in my work, and there's no way I would do a half ass job on my animal companion. Well, if I'm honest, I don't think I've done a half-ass job on my traveling companion either.

And with that thought, I hop back up, horny, happy, and ready to get this quest under way. All I need to do is pack up my lab, ward it against everyone in the palace, and meet Berklak at the gate.

Adventure, danger, and sex, here I come.

# author's note

Hello Reader!

Thank you for reading *I Went on an Adventure and All I Got Was This Barbarian Orc* Chapter One. That's a mouthful, isn't it. Well, I fell in love with that title, so here we are. My poor PA is making the covers, and she had to fit all that on the cover! Feel sorry for her.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter of the adventure. You can look forward to four more installments. I was a busy little author this summer and finished a bunch of books. You can find the full list of all my works below, but I want to draw everyone's attention to the Fated Mate charity anthology I am pleased to be a part of. You can pick it up using this universal link: [mybook.to/FatedMatesJC](http://mybook.to/FatedMatesJC) or just search for it on Amazon.

All the royalties from that anthology will go directly to the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund. As a queer author, I think it's important to support the people in the LGBTQ+ community that are making a difference for this community. I wish we lived in a world where homophobia and transphobia didn't exist, but we do, so we make choices that hopefully lessen the impact of those awful things. If you want to help us make an impact, please consider reading in KU and buying the anthology.

For the love of MM,

Jennifer Cody

# about the author

Jennifer Cody writes gay romance of a variety of sub-genres, though her favorite is paranormal romance/urban fantasy. She uses her husband's vast knowledge of all things man and mechanical to help her write, but takes literary license with her characters because they're romantic heroes, thereby making him shake his head in disbelief almost as often as she causes his incredulous laughter.

With three kids at home, the only time she has for boredom is 5 a.m. when everyone else is still asleep, and coffee usually keeps that at bay. When she reads, she usually binges an author's entire backlist for a few days but has a few one-click favorites she stalks. Her go-to sub-genres are gay PNR (Paranormal Romance) and UF (Urban Fantasy), but she has a soft spot for certain contemporary MM tropes (falling in love with the Manny, and small-town/rural stories).

Join Jennifer's Facebook group, [Jennifer Cody's Cocky Cuties](#), for all kinds of fun shenanigans, live writes, schedule updates and more!

Sign up for my newsletter on my [website](#) to get more news and occasional serial shorts.

I'm now on Patreon! If you want early access to all my books as I write them join me on [Patreon](#).



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