

MOUNTAIN ORC MATES



DRACOVERSE

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ORC

DADDY

DESTINY DRACO

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DRACOVERSE PRESS

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WELCOME TO THE DRACOVERSE...

The World As We Know It...

The time is now. But ten years ago, the Veil began to fall. And the world began to change.

The Veil was initially constructed by the Witches of Mesopotamia during the early days of humanity. It shielded mundane humans from seeing what they could not understand - a paranormal world of shifters, vampires, witches, and fae.

As humanity began to spread and grow, so too did those who lived on the other side of the Veil.

There were times when the Veil thinned, and someone would think they saw a ghost. Or find evidence of magic. Some humans walked both worlds, but to those in the know, the watchword was always silence.

Until ten years ago, when the Veil finally collapsed and fell, forcing those with paranormal abilities to come out to society.

People have speculated why the Veil finally fell. Was it the increasing number of humans and paranormal beings that came to dwell on the planet? The advent of near instantaneous information and connectivity? Or something more malicious?

Regardless of how it happened, the fact of the matter is that for the last ten years, human beings have had to share a world that they thought they lived in by themselves. They

discovered that there were others who walked among them, known as meta humans, that were very different.

Into this world one hopes that both sides can come together and find common ground.

As of today, that's all it is still.

Hope.

BLAIR

“Let’s just get this over with,” I grumble to myself. Then I look around to make sure no one is around to hear me.

I seem to be in the clear. I’m alone in my childhood bedroom. Just like when I was growing up, no one is paying attention to anything I say.

I poke my head into the hallway just as a toothbrush magically floats out of the bathroom and down the hall to my brother Remus’ room. I walk into the bathroom and grab my own toothbrush. It’s really not that hard to do, even without magic powers.

“Just get it yourself. Why does everything have to involve a trick?” I complain to myself as I pack my toothbrush away in my suitcase. I’m in a house full of show-off witches, and it’s not as fun as it sounds.

“What was that?” I jump at the sound and turn around. My mother is now standing in the doorway. She raises an eyebrow at me.

“Uh, nothing! Just, I’m ready to go.”

“Oh, good!” She smiles at me. “Don’t get me wrong, I love Boston. But it will be nice to get out of the city for a bit! Let me get your bag for you.” My mother waves her hand around, and my suitcase lifts into the air.

I grab the handle before it can get too far away. “I can do this myself, Mom. Don’t worry.”

“Suit yourself.” My mother walks away, and the magic on my suitcase fades. I’m just barely able to keep it from crashing to the ground as the full weight of it returns.

This is why I moved out. I am the youngest child of the Morgan family, directly descended from the ancient Witches of Mesopotamia. My family are all some of the most powerful witches I have ever seen, and they really like people to know it.

Meanwhile, I can’t even do card tricks. I have absolutely no magic powers to speak of, and my family never lets me forget it. They use their powers to step over every minor inconvenience. Dinner too cold? Magic. Can’t find your keys? Magic. It’s exhausting to be around.

Usually, I’d try everything to get out of a family vacation like this. Especially a camping vacation, where we will be forced to be so close together. I got out of a lot of these in college. But my mom basically begged me to come along. As much as they all may annoy me, I still love them. Maybe this won’t be completely awful.

Based on the way the day is starting, however...I’m not convinced.

I carry my suitcase and sleeping bag downstairs, dodging a floating pile of my brother’s laundry along the way. At the bottom of the stairs, my sister Jade is waiting. She smiles up at me and starts to wave her hands in the air.

“No! Jade, I have this. I can carry it on my own.”

“Fine.” Jade rolls her eyes and walks over to an empty cooler. She waves her hand, and it fills with ice. She then uses magic to scoot a chair closer to her so she can sit down.

I’m almost at the front door when it swings open. My father walks in. He notices me carrying my own stuff and frowns.

“Oh, Blair, you don’t need —” He starts to raise a hand, but I don’t let him finish.

“I got this, Dad.”

“Okay, okay, just wanted to help.”

I bring my stuff outside the car and toss everything in the trunk. My family uses magic as quickly and as subconsciously as breathing. It’s like it’s never occurred to them that there is a non-magical way to get things done.

I close the car trunk and catch my reflection in the mirror. My whole life I was the ugly duckling of the family. Everyone else could magically beautify themselves. It wasn’t until I left home that people started noticing me like that.

According to my new, regular, *non-magical* friends, my straight brown hair is pretty. Boys love the freckles on my nose, and everyone is mesmerized by my bright green eyes. Eyes like these go unnoticed around magically beautiful people, but anyone not used to magic would be caught off guard. Maybe they can’t rival what you can accomplish with powers, but nature didn’t exactly leave me wanting, either.

The car trunk opens back up, and I’m shoved aside as a line of luggage and camping supplies magically float out of the house and to the car. I walk back into the house to find my family sitting around, laughing.

“Oh, honey.” My mother laughs. “Remember when we couldn’t do this? Before The Veil fell, we’d have to pack the car ourselves, just to be safe. Make sure no one saw.”

“How annoying. Plus, we got our camping reservation on a discount for helping that park ranger with his bear problem, thanks to our magic,” my father adds. “Couldn’t do that with The Veil still up!”

“God,” Remus says. “I can’t believe you and Mom lived so much of your lives with The Veil. How did you survive it?”

“I couldn’t do it.” Jade laughs. “It sounds so... boring.”

“Oh, it really was!” They all laugh as my mother magically pours herself another drink.

This is a typical conversation with all of them. Just bragging about how easy their lives are and how great things are with The Veil gone. It’s annoying. I’ve heard all of this a million times before.

When The Veil – the magical spell that was maintained by my ancestors for millenia to keep mundanes from seeing all the paranormal that was right in front of their eyes – first fell and the whole world learned about everything supernatural, it was a miracle for them. Most regular humans would walk away thinking my family members were basically superheroes, though it took a lot of convincing that it wasn't just a trick. The internet had built up people's suspicions over many years and the very thing that caused the Veil to fall also reinforced the ideals we had been protecting.

Meanwhile, shifters and other supernatural creatures were attacked in the streets by people who feared learning such things existed and took it upon themselves to get rid of such 'threats.' But that never scared my family. Everyone they came across was so impressed, they saw no reason to hide it anymore.

It was also much easier for me with The Veil up. Before, I didn't have to worry about someone seeing my last name and assuming I was a powerful witch. I could just live my life. The Veil being gone has taken away my anonymity and opened me up to disappointing even more people.

"It's really just convenient, is the thing," my father says. They all nod in agreement.

I involuntarily scoff. They all turn to look at me.

"Oh, Blair," Jade says. "Don't be like that."

"You know magic isn't all that," my mother says with a warm smile. "There are a lot of perils, too. Dangerous spells, regular humans who fear us, bounty hunters hired to —"

"When was the last time any of you were hunted by a *bounty hunter*?" I interject.

My family all look around at each other awkwardly. "Regardless," my mother continues. "It's a constant threat."

"Whatever. I think the car is all packed. Let's head out."

"What a lovely idea!" My mother gives another warm smile as she races past me to the car.

This is going to be a long weekend. We haven't even left yet, and it's already getting to be too much. Why did I even stay here last night? They clearly didn't need my help to pack. I could've even met them at the campsite. That way I'd have my own car and could leave whenever I wanted.

I'm fine, not having magic powers. I am. I'm very proud of what I've been able to accomplish on my own without any magical help. I just wish they weren't so comfortable rubbing their powers in my face all the time.

I hop in the car after my family, and we're off. One whole weekend up in the mountains of Kingston, New Hampshire. Removed from society with no choice but to talk to each other. How perfect.

UZUL

“Let me help you with that.” I rush over to a younger member of my tribe attempting to cut wood. “What you need to do is plant your feet firmly... line up the swing and...”

The young orc swings his ax and perfectly chops a log in half. He looks up at me with a big smile. “Thanks, Chieftain!”

I nod at him and continue on my way. It’s just one of the many jobs I have as the Chieftain of the Broken Maws Tribe. I have to make sure everything is running smoothly each day so we can all thrive.

Today is just another average day for us orcs. I take a deep breath of the chilly mountain air. There is nowhere else I’d rather be, that’s for sure.

My tribe all smile and wave as I pass by them, making my rounds. Some Chieftains in our tribe in the past chose to lead through fear. But my father changed all that, and I’m following his lead.

My father always said it’s better to have the tribe respect and care for you. The way to do that is by respecting and caring for them the same. So, when they need my help, I help. It’s as simple as that. I know they’d all do the same for me.

I pass a group of women mending clothes. “I think these pants would look great on you, Chieftain!” one of them yells. The rest of the women giggle. I don’t know why, but they are always saying stuff like that to me. I simply wave and keep walking.

Another group of orcs is preparing for the night's meal around a smoldering cauldron. They spot me and motion for me to join them. I know just what they want. I have more to do today, but for now I relent.

"How can I help?" Without another word, an older orc shoves a knife in my hand. Before I know it, I'm chopping up vegetables. "All right, all right, but just these carrots. Once that's done, I have to move on."

Later on, after cutting up carrots, beets, and radishes, I pass an elder teaching the young orcs about the history of our tribe. I try to sneak over quietly. I always enjoy listening to these lessons. Unfortunately, I'm spotted quickly.

"Chieftain," the elder croaks out. "Care to join us?"

All the kids turn their heads to me with excitement. "Chieftain! Chieftain!" They run up to me. "Tell us about the time you fought that bear! When you got that scar!" My hand reflexively moves to the scar that slashes over my right eyebrow.

"Again? Didn't I tell you all that yesterday?" I laugh as the children all nod their heads. "Another time, maybe at dinner. Besides, his stories are much cooler than mine." Elder and I nod at each other as the children all hang their heads in disappointment and sit back down.

My round of our encampment takes me next to a vantage point over our fields. I look down at the orcs tending to the crops with pride. The harvest this year is the best it's been in years. After a few harsh winters, it's good to know none of my tribe will be going hungry.

The sound of weapons clashing pulls my attention away. I follow the noise to my next stop, the training fields. The next generation of our tribe's warriors are sparring with perfect form. I dare say some of them may even fight better than me someday.

I return to the central part of the encampment just as a group of orcs returns from a patrol. I make my way over to them as they emerge from the thick wood. Their energy is

joyous, laughing and jumping around. I'm not too worried about anything they may have spotted, based on their exuberant mood.

"Anything to report?" I ask anyway.

"Nothing, Chieftain," says Rogar, the leader of the patrol and an orc I consider to be a good friend.

Nothing to report is an expected state of affairs. We're well isolated up here in the mountains. It's been a long time since anything out of the ordinary has happened. We hardly even have weather we aren't expecting.

"Except..." A huge smile breaks out on Rogar's face. He looks back at the woods as one last orc emerges with a huge moose draped over his shoulders. "It walked right in front of us. I think it wanted to be dinner."

"Amazing! Hurry, get it to the chefs!" The patrol group follows my command and runs back to help carry the moose. We'll be eating well tonight.

If only my father could see this tribe now. I assume he'd be proud of what I've accomplished. How I picked up right where he left off as Chieftain. I couldn't ask to lead a better tribe. The Broken Maws Tribe is thriving.

"Actually, Chieftain?" Rogar says, stepping up next to me as the moose is carried away.

"Yes?"

"Can we talk?"

"Of course! What's on your mind?"

"Can we talk as friends? Not as Chieftain and... not Chieftain?"

I chuckle. I always assume we're talking as friends. It's easy to forget how much weight my title carries. "We may."

"Do you... *I* think it might be time for the tribe to expand."

"Rogar —"

"Just hear me out, Uzul!"

“We’ve been through this, time and time again.” Every few months, Rogar brings this up again. And every few months I turn him down.

“Just think about it. The tribe is so cramped here. We’re only growing larger. If we expand, there is more room for everyone.”

“It’s shocking to me how quickly you’ve forgotten my father’s words.”

“I have not forgotten. But the times have changed.”

“He always warned against expanding. The cities below are far too dangerous.” My father was always adamant about avoiding the human cities. Ultimately, this led to our tribe isolating ourselves from everything. Still, you can’t argue with the results.

When I first became Chieftain, I promised myself to lead in the same way my father did. This includes keeping the tribe to ourselves. We protect our tribe first, above all else.

My father never gave many specifics as to why we need to avoid humans. But I remember the look in his eyes when he first told me about the humans and how they react to our kind. Whatever the original motivation was, my father made this rule to protect us. I won’t be the one to defy it.

“There is a huge difference between expanding our territory and strolling into a city,” Rogar continues. “If we’re smart, if we’re safe about it, I —”

“That’s just the problem, Rogar. There is no safe way to do it. If we expand any more in any direction, we risk being discovered. If that happens, there is no telling what we’ll have to face.”

Rogar hangs his head. I know he knows I’m right. The Broken Maws Tribe has a good thing going here. It’d be foolish to risk it all now.

“Listen, friend,” I say, clasping my hand on his shoulder. “I appreciate you looking out for the tribe. We’re lucky to have you. *I’m* lucky to have you. But we aren’t expanding. I won’t disrespect my father’s wishes like that. That’s final.”

“Okay, Chieftain, I understand. I —”

A rustling noise rings out from the nearby woods. Both Rogar and I turn our heads immediately and silently listen. Rogar reaches for his weapon. I motion for him to calm down.

“No, Rogar, I’ll handle this. Stay here.” It’s been a minute since I’ve had any real excitement. Let’s see what this is. I head towards the sound, ready for anything.

BLAIR

“**B**reathe that in, children,” my mother says with a deep breath. “You won’t be getting air as clean as this in Boston.”

I step out of the car and have to agree with her. You never notice how rough the air is in the city until you get out into nature. The chilly mountain air gives a pleasant shock to my lungs.

Our camp site is in a small, cleared out patch in a dense forest. Apart from us and our car, I can’t see any signs of other people. No other campers, no trash left by the people here before us, nothing.

“How did you manage to book this place again?”

“I did a favor for a park ranger around here.” My father gets out of the car with a proud look. He admires our surroundings. “This is apparently a highly coveted and secretive spot. I can tell why.”

“It’s really great, Dad.” Jade smiles at him.

It really is a nice spot. But maybe we’re too isolated? I was really counting on there being other campers nearby to talk to if my family ever got on my nerves. Which is almost a given.

I guess my face isn’t doing a good job of hiding what I’m thinking, because my mother approaches me with a kind smile. “This weekend will be fun. You’ll enjoy yourself. I just know it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. It’s nice to get out of the city for a little bit. Away from all my responsibilities. Just clear my head.”

“Exactly!” My mother hugs me. “Relaxation, family bonding, what could be better than that?”

I can think of a few things. But for now, I just smile and nod in response. Resisting isn’t going to make this weekend any better.

“So.” Remus snaps his finger, and the car’s trunk swings open. “Are we ready to get set up?”

He snaps his fingers again, and all the supplies in the car start floating out. I begrudgingly wait for my suitcase and sleeping bag to float by and grab them. I then grab my tent from the air.

As my family starts using magic to set up their tents, I find a nice spot, a little away from them, to set up mine. By the time I finish laying out a tarp on the ground, their tents are all perfectly made. But that’s fine.

I take my time pitching my tent, for two reasons. First, the longer I take the better. It means I get to be alone a little longer, making sure there’s less time I’m at risk of being annoyed. My family knows better than to bother me or offer to help.

The second reason is that this is worth making sure it’s done right. If it collapses on me in the middle of the night, I can’t imagine the smug looks Remus and Jade would give me while my mom insists on using magic to fix it. I just can’t have that.

It takes me about an hour, but my tent is finally set up perfectly. I return my attention to my family to find my parents sitting around a fire. Jade and Remus are nowhere to be found. I walk over to join them.

“Oh, finished with your tent already?” My father has a smirk. “I’m kidding, take a seat, join us.”

“Where are Remus and Jade?”

“They are poking around in the woods.”

Just then, my siblings come bounding out of the woods back into our camp site. They're out of breath but excited.

"Anyone fancy a stroll through the woods before dinner?" Remus looks back and forth between all of us. "We found a trail."

"A trail?" Now my mother is just as excited as they are. "To where?"

Jade shrugs. "Let's find out!"

After a bit of protesting, my family manages to drag me along as they walk the trail. I walk a few steps behind them and ultimately end up not hating it. This part of the woods is very pretty.

I zone out on the path and have no idea how long we've been on it or how far we've walked. But I'm snapped back to reality when I accidentally walk into my father. My whole family has stopped near an opening that leads out of the woods into a clearing.

"What's going on?" They all turn and shush me.

"Blair, look," Jade says in a hushed tone.

I crane my neck to look past my family to get a good look. In the clearing ahead seems to be some sort of encampment. Are there people living up here? I can see figures moving around, but I don't have a good view.

"Say, Mara," my father says, turning to my mother. "When was the last time you saw an orc?"

Orc? Did my father just say orc? Orcs don't live around here, right?

"A long time ago, Phineas. A long time ago. How exciting."

"Did you know orcs were living up here?" My brother's voice is quiet, but his tone is excited.

"No idea. I've never heard anyone mention them living up here before." My father sounds just as fascinated.

"How long have they been here?" Jade asks.

“Maybe we should ask,” my mother says with delight, no longer bothering to whisper.

“Ask?” I butt in. “Are we sure that’s a good idea? Maybe we should just leave them alone.”

“Oh, Blair, don’t be nervous. I’m sure they’re nice.”

‘I’m sure they’re nice.’ That’s a bold guess. They are living up here alone, and no one even knows about it. I doubt that’s because they love having uninvited guests strolling up and asking questions.

I get into a better position to take a clearer look at the orcs. Even at a distance, they’re much bigger than I expected. Of course, when you think about an orc, you imagine them being big, but my mental picture doesn’t do their true size justice.

This is an encampment of some of the biggest beings I’ve ever seen. In my life, I’ve known all kinds of supernatural beings. Witches, shifters, vampires, gargoyles, all of them. I thought I couldn’t be surprised by this stuff anymore, but God damn these orcs are huge.

As a family, we silently stand near the edge of the woods, admiring our discovery. I guess I can no longer say this trip is boring. Next to me, I can sense my mother getting anxious.

“Mom? Are you okay?”

“Oh, I just really want to talk to them! I want to learn all about these orcs! It’s fascinating!”

“Mara, keep your voice down, please.”

“Let’s just ask the Chieftain a few quick questions and head on our way.”

“How do you know which one is the —?” My mother interrupts me by simply pointing.

She points at one of the bigger orcs at the edge of the encampment. He has unique and grand markings on his skin that help him stand out next to the plainer orc beside him. Additionally, I don’t know much about orc clothes, but his seem more impressive, with fine leathers neatly lined with fur.

That orc is definitely their leader, or at the very least, is an important figurehead of some kind. I can't make out many finer details from here. But the tusks in his mouth are prominent and imposing. On top of that, I can tell his hair is braided back in a longer chain than anyone else's.

Those all seem like details that point to him being in charge. I'm a bit surprised at my mother's intuitiveness, but I'm realizing she's probably right.

Of course, I suppose we could ask him ourselves. Because it seems my mother is about to get her wish. He's spotted us and is heading straight here.

UZUL

“Now what fresh hell is this?” On the edge of our encampment, a group of humans stand watching us. From where I am, I can spot four, two older and two younger. Others in the tribe have begun to notice them too. My fellow tribesmen look to me for what to do next.

“Everyone, stay calm and hang back. Let me handle this.” I’ll go and confront them alone. Father always said humans tend to get violent when scared. If we all approach, who knows how they will react. My tribes’ eyes are all on me as I approach the humans.

These humans immediately surprise me. As I approach, they do not seem afraid. They don’t even take a step back. They watch me come towards them with what seems like excitement.

“Humans,” I roar at them. “State your intentions here, or leave immediately.”

“Oh wow,” the older woman of the group steps forward. “Hello, it is so nice to meet you. You have to understand, we don’t get many orcs where we’re from.”

There humans really aren’t afraid of us. This is wrong. I don’t understand. I ball my fists and tighten my stance. Humans who aren’t afraid of us might be even more dangerous.

“What are you doing here?” I ask again.

Now, the older man steps forward. “We mean you and your people no harm. I promise. We are just on a family camping trip. We’re actually set up just a little bit that way.” He points behind them.

I don’t change my stance. They could be lying. Why should I trust them? They are still a danger to my tribe.

“You know what,” the older woman says. “Want to join us?”

“Join you?”

“Join us!” The older woman is definitely excited now. “I can sense you don’t trust us and worry about the safety of your tribe. Join us at our camp for the night, then you’d see you have nothing to fear.”

I could join them, they all look very frail, I could easily overpower them if it comes to it. But humans may be smarter than I’ve ever given them credit for. This could be a trap. An elaborate plan to separate me from my tribe.

“How about, I introduce you to myself and my family,” the older woman says. “I’m Mara Morgan, this here is my husband Phineas, that is our oldest child Remus, next to him is our oldest daughter Jade, and behind her-”

Mara gestures to the back of their group and I finally notice her, a fifth member of this family. A beautiful young woman stands shyly, with straight brown hair that falls down to her chest and bright green eyes drawing me in. She’s the smallest of their group, which explains why I missed her at first, but now I can’t seem to look away.

“That’s my youngest daughter, Blair,” Mara continues. I’m snapped out of my trance. I almost forgot what I was doing. My concerns for my tribe return. Mara told me their names but not who they are.

“But who are you,” I say, tired of all of this. “Why are you humans not afraid of us? Who are you?”

The beautiful one, Blair, steps forward. Her family all seem shocked by doing this. “We aren’t normal humans. We are a family of witches-”

“Witches?”

“Yes, witches,” she continues. “We control magic. We know about orcs. Everyone does.”

“Everyone knows about us?” How is that possible? The Broken Maws Tribe’s encampment is supposed to be a secret. I shake my head. “I need to move my tribe now, before—”

“No, not you and your tribe specifically,” Blair says, and I calm down momentarily. “I don’t think anyone knows your tribe is here, we found you by accident. I just mean everyone knows about orcs, witches, everything, after the Veil fell years ago.”

These witches confuse me, what the hell is ‘the Veil?’ And how did it fall? What is the ‘everything’ she mentioned? What else is there? My father never told us much besides not to trust humans.

None of that is important right now. I still don’t know if I can trust them. Although, hearing all of this come from the mouth of Blair makes me want to believe it more, for some reason.

The rest of the Morgan family have all been looking at Blair. She notices all the eyes on her and she seems to sink away from the group, returning to the back. The rest of the family return their eyes to me.

“You all use magic?” I might as well use this opportunity to learn as much about them as I can. I may need to use something against them if this turns bad.

“Well, most of us,” Remus, the younger male, says with a chuckle. Jade laughs with him. Blair looks away with a flash of hurt on her face.

“I can sense you are conflicted-”

“I am not-”

“Perk of having magic, dear.”

I definitely don’t like that. Having my emotions and feelings so easily discovered is not what I want. They are

gathering just as much information about me as I am about them. I thought I'd have the upper hand.

“Again,” Phineas chimes in. “We mean you and your tribe no harm. We were just hoping to share knowledge and experience. I am sure there is a lot we have to learn from you and your people and vice versa.”

I ponder the idea. If they are genuine. I could learn a lot about the world outside. With the tribe wanting to expand, their knowledge could be invaluable.

But at the same time, magic users are opponents I know not to underestimate. If they are hiding something and are leading me into a trap, I'm in huge trouble. I can't abandon my tribe in the face of that.

Then my eyes fall once again on Blair and my decision is made. I look at her and I feel like I can trust them. “Okay, just wait here. Let me tell my tribe where I'm going.”

The humans all nod and I turn away and head back to my tribe. Rogar runs to meet me at the edge of our encampment. He looks concerned.

“Uzul, what is going on? Who are they?”

“Calm Rogar, please. Calm. They are witches, I will be joining them at their camp for the night.”

“But, why? Uzul-”

“They have knowledge of the outside world, something we need. It's just one night. I'll be back.”

“Can we trust them?”

“I believe we can. And, if they prove me wrong, we can kill them.” Rogar gives a hesitant nod as I turn around and head back to the Morgan family.

When I return to them, Mara steps forwards towards me again. “I just realized we never asked you your name. My apologies.”

“I am Uzul, Chieftain of the Broken Maws Tribe.”

“Well, it is very nice to meet you, Uzul, Chieftain of the Broken Maws Tribe. Now, come, follow us.”

Mara leads the family back down the path they arrived on. As they begin to leave, I can feel Blair’s eyes on me. I turn to look at her and she immediately looks away and hurries after her family.

These humans are not what I expected from my father’s stories. Blair even seems to put me at ease in a way I’ve never felt before. Regardless, I need to be ready for anything. Who knows where this visit could lead.

BLAIR

“**I**t’s a good thing we packed extra food,” I whisper to myself.

Our new guest keeps his distance. He lingers on the edge of our camp, watching closely. He must be wary of newcomers showing up around his tribe. I get it, since the Veil fell, it’s been rough for anyone not human.

Though his tribe seems to have done well for themselves. Nobody knows that they’re up here. No one knows enough to even be afraid of them. That’s a dream most have given up on since the Veil fell.

My family and I sit around the campfire enjoying its warmth. My brother uses his magic to stoke the flames, keeping it alive. The family conversation isn’t very lively, I think we’re all not sure what to say with Uzul listening in. Not that I’d be paying attention anyway, I can’t stop looking at the orc.

Never seen one so... handsome before. When you think about an orc, handsome isn’t the first word that often comes to mind. But Uzul is handsome.

My eyes are instantly drawn to his tusks, thick and imposing. Then I notice his piercing yellow eyes, that look like they could see right through me. I also can’t help but admire his massive muscles, I bet he could snap me in half with ease.

All those features come together to make Uzul. In a way I’ve never felt before in my life, I want to get closer to him.

Before today, I never thought I'd ever think of an orc this way, but here we are.

Uzul notices me looking at him and we make eye contact. I quickly look away and can feel my face getting warm. Oh god I'm blushing.

What am I doing? This is an orc that I just met. Plus, I'm on a camping trip with my family. This is hardly the time or the place to be having these thoughts. I need to push any thoughts about how attractive he is out of my mind. Besides, I'm the least interesting member of this family, he doesn't care about me.

Later in the night, he watches me and my family as we pack up the camp for the night. I can feel his eyes on me as I secure the cooler full of food, making sure it's locked tight. Before we left, we assumed bears might smell the food and be an issue in the night, but with an orc around I'm sure most animals steer clear.

It's getting late, my sister and brother have already turned in for the night. Uzul has even stopped watching us and is now looking up at the stars. I continue to poke the smoldering fire as my parents get up.

"Can you make sure the fire is out before you go to sleep?" My father barely gets through the sentence before yawning.

"Yeah," I respond. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," my mother says followed by her own yawn. She looks over at Uzul, still on the edge of our campsite. "Are you sure we can't get you anything? A blanket? A sleeping bag? Some water?"

Uzul turns his head away from the stars. "No, thank you." His head slowly returns to looking up.

My parents retire to their tent and it is just me, Uzul, and the fire. He lays down on the ground and keeps his eyes up at the sky. I look up to, and he's on to something.

The sky looks absolutely beautiful. Thousands of bright dots litter the inky blackness of the night. We don't ever get

views like this in the city. I can't believe my family went to bed without taking it all in.

My eyes move back to looking at Uzul. The moonlight illuminates every one of his bulging muscles. I am once again drawn to him. I want to know more about him, about his people. My family isn't around now, I might as well sit with him. There is no one else around to outshine me with magic.

I get up from my seat and slowly tip-toe over to him. Although, I guess I'm not as stealthy as I thought because his eyes turn to me almost instantly. He watches me silently as I make my way over.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Of course not,” he says.

“Uzul, right?” I sit down in the dirt next to him. “Am I saying that right?”

“Yes, Uzul. Blair? Right? Am I saying that right?”

“Yes, yes you are.” I smile, I also never expected an orc to be this kind and charming. “What's on your mind, Uzul?”

Uzul thinks for a moment. His face is expressionless, he's keeping his thoughts to himself. I guess I asked that question too quickly. We really don't know each other, he must not feel comfortable-

“I haven't been around non-orcs a lot. It's weird. It's different. You and your family are not exactly what I expect from humans” His face is still expressionless, but I'm shocked he gave such an honest answer.

“Well, I'm sure I'm not so different from the other orcs back in your tribe.”

“Oh? How so, Blair?”

“Um...” I can't believe he called me on that. I'm not sure how similar I actually am, that just felt like what you're supposed to say. I just wanted him to think I was smart. “You know, regular humans tend to get scared of us too.”

“Really? Scared of you?” A little surprise manages to sneak through Uzul’s face.

“Well, more the rest of my family. Not so much me, since I don’t have magic. But regular people are often scared of what they don’t understand. Orcs, magic, most don’t even know where to begin with it all.”

“So, your whole family has magic, but you?”

“Yeah, I’m kind of the black sheep of the family in that way. We can trace our family lineage all the way back to the Witches of Mesopotamia. I share blood with some of the greatest magic users in history. But I have nothing. Yet, I still feel so connected to it all. I’m very proud of where I come from and I want to make my ancestors proud. I just have to do it without magic, so I must... work harder... and...”

Uzul’s eyes have not left me that whole time I’ve been talking. I suddenly am very aware of how long I’ve been talking. Not many people let me go on for this long, certainly not my family.

Being the one person without magic in a family of witches does not offer a lot of chances to be the center of attention. However, Uzul is giving it all to me. It’s strange and new, but I like it.

“Keep going,” Uzul says. “What were you saying?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I trailed off there. I’m not used to talking so much. The magical people in my life tend to dominate all the conversations.”

“Don’t worry. I’m enjoying hearing you talk.” He then adds with a small orc grin. “Even if you don’t have magic.”

I turn away and hope he didn’t see me blush. This orc truly isn’t like anyone else I’ve ever met. Human, shifter, or anything else.

“Is there anything you want to know about? Living up here isolated in the mountains, do you have any questions? Is there anything you want to know?”

Uzul thinks for a moment. “I guess, tell me whatever there is for you about magic.”

“Okay,” I say, he really has given me a lot to work with here. “Um, to start, how much do you know about the Veil?”

“What’s that?”

UZUL

“**Y**ou don’t even know about the Veil?” Blair seems very surprised. I guess ‘the Veil’ must be a big deal.

“No, my tribe keeps to ourselves as much as we can. My father always told stories of how humans would react if they saw us. He warned against even expanding too far into the forest, let alone going into a city.”

That’s been my whole life. Making sure the Broken Maws tribe stayed safe and protected. Up until now, that has always meant keeping to ourselves and avoiding humans. But, so far, this human family doesn’t seem so bad, Blair especially.

“Oh wow, where to even begin,” Blair looks up at the stars as she thinks. “So, the Veil was this magical barrier, essentially, that separated the humans from the supernatural. It allowed us to live alongside them without being exposed. If a normal human saw something supernatural, the Veil would magically convince them that it was fake. But then, it was worn down over time, especially with photography and videography capturing everything. The magic couldn’t change that. Eventually, it was too thin to repair and it fell. Suddenly everyone knew about the supernatural world. It was crazy... Am I rambling again? Do you have any questions?”

“No, no please go on.” It’s nice that she checked like that. With orcs, if you don’t understand something, you’re likely to get left behind if you don’t figure it out.

“Well, the Veil fell about ten years ago, when I was fourteen. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was just a

normal day, then boom!”

“Boom?”

“Boom! The Veil was gone and everything was exposed.”

“What happened after? What did humans do?”

“It was chaotic for a while. The regular humans were afraid, many of them are still afraid, but back then they were *terrified*. Mobs begin to form to hunt down anything deemed supernatural. There was fighting in the streets. Neighbors turned against each other.”

Now that sounds like the humans father told me about. Angry and scared creatures that will attack anything they want. Sounds like it was a good thing we were hidden away when this Veil fell.

“Eventually, the fighting died down,” Blair continues. “I don’t exactly remember how that happened. My parents did their best to shield me and my siblings from what was going on outside in the world.”

“Is there still any fighting? I don’t know about witches or any one else, but no orc would ever give up the fight.”

“Oh yeah, a lot, believe me. There are tons of groups on both sides that are constantly fighting. But there are some that chose to fight in different, less violent ways now.”

That doesn’t sit right with me. There must not be a lot of orc tribes out there. From a young age we are taught to never give up, to fight until our last breath. I know if the Broken Maws Tribe was out there when the Veil fell, either we’d have the humans surrendering or we’d all die trying.

“It was actually my ancestors,” Blair says with pride. “Who created the Veil. They did it to help the world. To protect our kind.”

“So, this Veil protected anything supernatural? So, even someone like me would be able to walk among humans?”

“While it was up. Now... Well, they’d see you, but I don’t know how much attention you’d draw. But yeah, witches, all

kinds of shifters, anything supernatural could simply exist without fear.”

This Veil was up for most of my life, all of my father’s. Did he know about it? Has anyone from my tribe? How much have we missed out on to keep ourselves locked away. There is so much I don’t know, luckily, I now have Blair to teach me.

For generations, my kind could’ve been walking among the humans. Experiencing more than our small little area. I’m a decade late to be able to explore the outside world and I didn’t even know it.

Is that even what I want, what I should want for my tribe? I don’t doubt the Broken Maws Tribe could face any enemy we come across but my father must have had his reasons. He was no coward, but what was he trying to keep us away from?

“But,” she adds. “I feel like I should mention it’s not all fighting and danger. Many are able to live normal lives. Some are open about their connection to the supernatural, others not so much but still. People like my family, or shifters, that are not physically different fare much better.”

The whole world is opening up to me so fast. I have so much information to bring back to my tribe. I’m not even sure what to do with it all yet. It’s starting to sound like my tribe would be in danger now.

“So, I’d be in trouble?”

“Um,” Blair shifts uncomfortably. “I think you’d definitely surprise a lot of people. There are not a lot of orcs walking around. But a lot of people have come to terms and have accepted what was revealed when the Veil fell. Yes, there are still a lot of terrible people who might try to hurt you. But in time, if surrounded by the right people, I think you could do well out there.

That is reassuring. I know I’ve only been talking to Blair for a little bit, but I feel inclined to trust her. She seems like she knows what she’s talking about. The tribe is looking to expand, to change our ways. Maybe, despite how difficult it is, it could be possible.

“Besides, I think shifters turn into creatures much scarier than you or any other orc, and they mostly walk around just fine.”

“Shifter,” I question. “You keep saying that, what is it?”

“Oh right, shifter is the term we use for people that can shift between human and supernatural forms. You are always an orc, I’m always a human. But there are some that can change. Like, I have a neighbor who can shift into a wolf form.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, he’s a really nice guy too. Also-,” Blair starts laughing, she can’t control herself. It’s pretty cute. “One of my professors in college was a dragon shifter. He once got so mad that no one did the reading that mid-class he accidentally burned his desk!”

“No way.” Even I can’t help but laugh. I don’t understand many of the words she just said, but her laugh is infectious. I want to hear more of it. “Tell me another funny story. What else is waiting out there?”

“Let me think, oh-,” Blair continues while trying, and failing, to hold in a laugh. “One day, I was out for a walk in the park, and there was this vampire, just casually strolling along with an umbrella for shade. I was like, ‘what is he doing?’ It was the sunniest day ever, and he was just- out there!” She breaks down laughing.

Once again, I can’t help but laugh along. I’m surprised that she seems to be having a good time, that she’s talking so much. When her family was around, she was so quiet. She almost looked miserable. Now, she’s so alive.

She throws her head back in laughter. From my position, laying down, I get a perfect view of her, backlit by the moonlight. I didn’t notice it until now, but she is truly beautiful.

Of course, when I first saw her, I thought she was beautiful, anyone would while looking at her. But right now, it is truly striking me. Her brown hair blows in the gentle night

breeze, the moon illuminates the freckles on her nose, even her bright green eyes shine through the darkness.

I can't imagine any human being as beautiful as her. She must be a stand out among their kind. I'm certainly glad I accepted her family's invitation.

BLAIR

It sure feels good sitting next to Uzul. This attention is nectar I seldom get, but I like it. Uzul's ambiance is the epitome of an earth sign. Slow, steady lumbering Taurus or maybe a third-decan Virgo. He is far too warm and embracing to be a Capricorn.

I reach into my tunic breast pocket and pull out two quartz stones, dragon stone – red jasper – and a lucky penny. This penny's been with me through many Samhain.

“Put out your hand,” I tell Uzul.

“As you wish,” he answers. “Are you going to read my palm now?” He chuckles lightly when he says this last part.

We are sitting close, and our thighs almost touch. Almost touching is torture. His gentle chuckles send waves from his thigh to my thigh.

I put the penny into his giant palm. Our skin touches just briefly. His skin is fire beyond hot, but not the kind of fire that burns.

Uzul's skin is the fire I want to drown in.

“That is a penny,” I tell him. “That is a penny for your thoughts.”

Another soft chuckle from Uzul. “What about my thoughts?” he asks.

“I want to hear them, silly.”

“I know that. I am quiet with a broad spectrum. You need to hint at what interests you about me the most.”

It is so hard for me not to watch Uzul’s arms when he talks without feeling like I am staring. He doesn’t talk with his hands, but the muscles in his arms move anyway. The biceps pull, and the triceps push. There is gentleness and raw power twined together in fluid movement.

“I want to hear you share something about you. Start simple.”

“I was born beneath a great mountain,” Uzul answers. He’s clearly talking to me, but his voice is reporting from back in time. “We lived in the mountains, always. My father was very careful to keep the tribe and those he loved clear from the cities. Always in the mountains.”

“What was your relationship like with your father?” I ask. The gentle evening breeze is taunting me now. The faint scent of alpha male, bay leaf, cinnamon, mint, and pine swirl around me. These are not my scents. These are not my family’s scents either. These haunting aromas are the torture devices of the breeze. These are scents that belong to handsome, gentle, powerful Uzul.

I want to grab his arms. But I won’t. My shyness is still my jailer.

“My father kept me close. Close to his protection, close to his love, and close to the mountains.”

This is one of the many nights Grandmother Moon is both my friend and my betrayer. I keep catching Uzul grabbing glances at me. I have been doing the same. He’s a beautiful specimen, especially in the silvery light. I find it so hard not to wonder how many of my glances he’s caught.

“What does close to your father’s love mean?” I ask. “I mean, you are a bit of an anomaly. Power, strength, and a gentle quietness.”

“I do not know about the gentle part,” Uzul tells me. “I try to be patient. It sort of comes with the territory. My father

helped me learn how to speak when it is necessary, not so much when it's not necessary. “

I wanted to ask him about the violence and volatility orcs have been famous for. Of course, I did not. The silver light of the moon doing sonatas up and down those gorgeous arms was lulling me toward wanting hugs, not answers.

“Oh. I am not void of bellicosity,” Uzul adds. “If I am upset, I channel the rage into protecting my tribe first, sort out any questions after.”

“Another lesson from father?” I ask.

“My entire life as Chieftain stems from lessons from my father.”

“I can see that,” I tell Uzul. I want to ask him something that causes him to look off into the distance again while searching for the answer. This will give me a chance to view his chest, arms, and tree-trunk-strong legs. I need to look. We're practically touching!

“I can see you love being Chieftain,” I continue. “I can see you've been Chieftain for a long time. But you don't look tired. You look like you are forever in the morning of your power, always in the dawning of your day. How do you do that?”

“That is the best question I have heard in a while,” Uzul tells me. Then he gives me what I want before speaking again. His eyes stare away into the purple-blue horizon. There is heat coming from his oak-like body. I take it all in. I feel subtle as a rock troll. Uzul finally answers me while I stare. “How I do it and not burn out is not difficult. Each member of my tribe, when I look at them, I look for something to love. The warriors, the complainers, it doesn't matter. I see love. I look at each one and home in on what there is to love there. There is always plenty to love.”

The evening crickets go quiet. The night birds go quiet. Only my heart is beating noisy drums. My family is asleep behind us. I watch Uzul sense the same stillness and paucity of sound as I do.

This is when Uzul scoots closer until our legs are completely pressed together. Our shoulders touch. Leaning my head against his darling and massive arms would be so easy.

“We should talk quieter now,” he tells me. I am completely surprised at how quiet an orc can be. “Noisy guests are not my favorite. I imagine your family is the same.”

“You’ve been a gem,” I tell him. “You charmed the whole group before you spoke a word. The very sight of you.” I won’t tell him about the part where I got butterflies in my stomach just seeing the slightest inkling of a smile from him. And I won’t tell him he has kind eyes. The shyness-jailer is strong right now.

What I do, however, is kind of look off into space the way he does when he’s thinking of an answer. Through the periphery of my vision, I watch to see if he does what I did, which was steal glances of that statuesque frame while he’s not watching. He sure does steal glances. More than I did. He is not nearly as clandestine either.

I stifle my laugh at knowing I have better voyeur skills, honed from years of being in the periphery, unnoticed in the background.

“You’ve been the best part of this right here,” Uzul says. “You know how to listen. You know how to listen, and you know how to be interested.”

“The same can be said about you,” I tell him. “I would know. I love my family, but I am not well heard with them. I am not only in the background, most days, I become the background for them.”

“I know how it feels to not be heard,” says Uzul. “It feels rotten. I hear you. I am also glad we came up here.”

“I can sense you really mean that,” I tell Uzul. I apply just the slightest lean. My leg into his leg, his arm into my arm. I want so badly for only one moment, if not more, that my being flows into him and he into me.

“I have enjoyed this talk because it has reminded me that my tribe is ready for a change,” says Uzul. He is looking me

up and down again, but this time not stealing the glances. He is obvious. “Maybe I am, too.”

UZUL

I'm not sure what to make of my current situation. This closeness I feel with Blair, this natural harmony I have with this darling human-witch is doing to me what the autumnal equinox does to melons. The melons burst open, and the sweetest nectars pour forth.

"I have enjoyed this talk because it has reminded me that my tribe is ready for a change," I tell Blair. I was drinking in her beauty a moment ago, but now I am gulping. I gulp like a vampire with a mortgage. "Maybe I am, too," I add. She is stirring something in me I can't ignore.

"Isn't that what this evening breeze that carries contemplative silences is all about?" Blair asks me. "This evening and its breezes are marshaling in change?"

"Perhaps," I tell her. The wonderful part is the closeness I feel with this young human-witch of witches. I want to say more. I want to tell her that before the sun had set I could see that her eyes are a certain green beauty I have only seen when the northern lights dance. This rush of emotion is so out of place for me. I have never cared for such romantic matters beyond knowing I need a son at some point to pass my Chieftain mantle to. "What I notice right now is that you and I have more in common than I imagined. Natural harmony, too."

"I am curious to hear what you've seen that makes you say that?" Blair tells me. Blair has her face aimed right at me. The freckles that cross her cheeks and nose are there, buried beneath bands of moonlight. Yet this whole scene is blinding

me and lifting me. I feel more like myself than ever before. This human-witch-blossom is unlocking things. What's been hidden and forgotten for so long is coming to the surface.

"I like how you speak when it is of value and necessary," I carefully tell her. "You are quiet otherwise. I am the same way. I will speak when it is necessary, otherwise I will stay quiet."

"Yes. But you can probably tell that my quietude comes from a few too many years of practice listening when others speak, and then not being heard or getting a chance to speak when it's my turn."

"I also like how even though you blend into the background silently and fluidly, you are fearless and cunning. I can tell you hide your wit and courage but will break it out when needed. I really like that."

"Are you trying to boost my spirit or flirt with me? Which is it?" she asks me.

"It's both," I tell her. "I want to boost you. I am an uplifter. I am Chieftain like my father before me. I lift up my tribe."

"So I am your tribe now?" she jibes back. "You really are flirting."

"Each of us has two tribes. The tribe we are born with is one. The second tribe is the one we meet in the forest, along the rivers, or in the dales." I lean closer when I say this last part. I want to smell her more deeply. The cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh, and white sage are beguiling.

"I like the way you see things," Blair comments.

"You are seducing me into seeing new horizons for my world," I tell her softly and gently. My face is close to her cheek and her hair. I can hear her blood racing through her veins. "Or my world is simply opening to new horizons, horizons that include you."

"Okay. The big mountain orc finally decides he wants to open up, and this is somehow my fault?" she snaps back. I can sense a giggle corralled at the back of her throat.

“Absolutely,” I tell her. “You are cute as a plum blossom.” I move my face forward just enough to press my lips into her cheek. I want to see if she will let me. Will she flinch? Will she make my tusks a thing?

Blair moves ever-so-slightly, turning her face and lips into my kiss. She is warmth, she is fire, she is sweet as an apple, she is a dream. Her lips into mine, and I know things will be right. My lips into hers, and I wish for her all the love in the world.

I close my eyes for this kiss. To relish the closeness. I know her eyes close, too.

Her lips are pouty, soft, and strong. Our kiss becomes a silent, starving prowl from lips to tongue to lips again.

I am Chieftain. I am strong. I need to pull away and be composed. Yet she is pulling me in. I am reminded of the old sea who greets the lovely shore, and when he feigns to leave, she pulls him back, again and again. In my mind I see the leaves of the trees across the mountains and the valleys which blush so brightly on autumn’s hot days and crisp nights. Her tender lips flow through me visages of the mountains who kiss the heavens and the rivers who kiss the seas.

I really do break away. I pull my head back gently and let my eyes open to the spangled heavens.

“I won’t apologize,” Blair tells me. “And neither will you.”

“No, we won’t,” I add. “Because this was perfect. This was a threshold. A place between worlds, a place to cross again.”

“Are you going to head back home now?” she asks. I know she is curious, not accusing.

“I welcome a walk right now to digest this gift of an evening you have given me.” I want to tell her that I already miss her.

I won’t hug her. If I did hug her, I might never let go.

“Give your beautiful family my best blessings and thanks,” I tell her. Behind my words I am imagining seeing her in the

morning light.

“You are not going to be able to not see us tomorrow,” she tells me. “You said it yourself, something about natural harmony. Besides, Remus and Jade so adore you and will be curious for more from you. They will want to learn more about the Broken Maws tribe.”

“I will try not to disappoint them,” I tell her. “Sweet dreams to you.”

I turn to go. The hidden trail back to the Broken Maws tribe calls to my feet and requires little direction from me.

Blair’s smile is what I want to keep smiling at. Her flesh is what I want to keep touching. Her tiny movements, big beauty, first a whisper, now a sonnet, are waking me to bigger horizons.

BLAIR

I'm the first to wake up among my family members. The birds sing and the rays of sunshine peek through the small openings of the tent. The blankets look tempting enough to lay in bed a little longer. On the other hand, going out to look for Uzul sounds a lot better.

After putting on a sweater, I quietly leave the tent to not disturb the others.

"Blair?" I hear Uzul's deep voice from behind.

I almost jump. I can't believe he's already here! I expected to see him in the afternoon.

"Good morning," he says.

"Good morning! Did you sleep well?"

He smiles and nods. "I did, thank you. What about you?"

"I slept well, too."

We sound like an old married couple. I don't want to get ahead of myself since this is the first man that's ever paid attention to me. We also just met not that long ago. I still can't help but find it endearing.

"What would you like to do today?" he asks

For sure, I don't really want to spend the day together with my family. It sounds mean, but I want to spend alone time with Uzul. Having my family around will be overkill.

“Hello, Uzul, good to see you this morning,” my mother’s voice intercepts.

Crap.

“You as well, Mara,” he greets her.

One by one, my family members make an appearance. Already hogging Uzul’s attention. It shouldn’t bother me as much since I’m used to being cast aside. This is different though.

It’s fine. I suppose it’s also beneficial for our family of witches to have friendly relations with the orc tribe.

So, for today, Uzul’s showing us around the forest. Pointing out which plants are deadly, which good to eat, and the ones great for magical concoctions. My parents are especially interested in the last bit.

While we walk through the forest, Uzul keeps looking over his shoulder. I smile at him discreetly. He doesn’t respond the same way, but his gaze lingers for a moment before turning away.

He also shows us around his base. The everyday life of the Broken Maw tribe. Where I get to learn more about Uzul’s upbringing.

They’re very protective of one another. They keep their distance while watching intently. Some with curiosity others with doubt.

The curious ones approach my family, offering bits of their harvest. Things we’ve never seen before. My family instantly went on to ask about the food. They’d never pass up an opportunity to make new magical recipes.

But, they’re now distracted talking with the tribesmen. While they did that, Uzul approaches me.

“What do you think of the tribe?”

I respond. “It’s amazing. There’s so much liveliness here. I’ve read about tribes from different species but nothing can compare to this.”

“In what way if I may ask?”

“I guess how united everyone seems. Despite being quite big and strong, you all are an affectionate group.”

My eyes go wide when I realize what I just said.

“I did NOT mean it that way. I mean that in the best way possible. I think it’s so amazing that the tribe likes to exercise a lot. That dedication is admirable because I can almost run without fainting. I mean there’s even different areas for different exercises. It’s great!”

Uzul gives me a quizzical look. I ranted again. What if I said something stupid and now he’ll think I’m an idiot? God, why can’t I shut up when I’m with him?

He chuckles to my surprise and relief. Then he gently places his hand on my shoulder.

“I’m happy to hear that,” he says.

Afterwards, he heads towards the other “tour” members. I stare at Uzul from afar, watching how he interacts with the rest of them. My mom shows her powers using the new ‘ingredients.’ She grabs what looks like an orcish eggplant. A green light emanates from her hands and the vegetable triples in size.

Uzul gives her a small dagger. She does the same trick to it. The orcs ooh and aah. My eyes remain on Uzul’s fascinated expression.

I can’t hear what he says, but I know he’s asking to show him more. More orcs gather around them. My family gladly demonstrates how amazing their powers are. How it can destroy, create, and embellish.

My heart stings a little, seeing that image. They feel farther away even though I’m standing ten feet from them. When Uzul looks over at me, I offer a smile.

Suddenly, he walks away and up to another orc off to the side. When he whispers something to him, the other orc nods.

Then, he comes up to me.

“Would you like to walk around some more?”

“I’d love to.”

We break away from the small crowd. Now we’re off on our own. I can smile freely now that it’s just me and him.

“Can you tell me more about where you live?” he asks suddenly.

“Well, what would you like to know? The city is very big so there’s a lot of things to do.”

“Anything, really. I’m assuming it’s quite different from our tribe.”

I chuckle. “Yup. It’s an ant colony. People always go, go, go. Someone’s always doing something. Which makes it very noisy. What I really like about it is that we have so many places to eat. I think your tribe would love it.”

We end up sitting on a fallen trunk. Uzul leans against an adjacent tree while listening to me talk. Ever so often, I glance at him to make sure he’s not bored.

He grabs my hand after I finish speaking. He holds it as if it’s a baby bird.

“What about you? Tell me more about yourself.”

I shrug. “Like what?”

“Anything. I really enjoy hearing you talk. It’s quite charming.”

A blush paints my cheeks. I get a rush of confidence. I reach up to him and plant a kiss right on his lips.

He’s taken aback and blinks a few times. He chuckles before returning the kiss equally and eagerly. We break away before getting too far ahead.

I pant between words. “Do you really like when I talk?”

He nods. “Yes. I want to know everything about you. You are very intriguing.”

I pop another kiss. He grabs my face and crashes his lips against mine. I take it further and wrap my arms around his

neck.

When we stop, we don't let go. We just stare at each other with smiles on our faces. His large thumb grazes my cheek. He smirks.

"I'm learning that you are quite bold."

"It's a new habit," I say as I kiss him again.

We spend the rest of the afternoon kissing underneath a tree. I don't want our time to end so fast so I suggest he stay for dinner. Which he accepts.

We return to our campsite where my family already has the dinner ready. The rest of the night continues as smooth as it began. Quickly, it gets really late before I realize.

My family already went to sleep. The fire's still going strong. Uzul and I are unknowingly holding hands. The night feels perfect.

But I don't want to keep him here longer.

"I think you should head back. It's late and you should sleep."

We stand up.

"I don't sleep all that much, but I'll agree on the grounds that you are the one in need of sleep. You are a human after all."

"Will I see you again tomorrow?" I ask, full of hope.

He smiles. "Yes. I'd still like to learn more about you and your home. Given that there are a few "surprises" in between."

He leans down and kisses me. My cheek. My hand. Then finally, my lips.

"Goodnight, Blair," he says before leaving.

UZUL

“Thank you for helping us pack, Uzul. Although you really shouldn’t have troubled yourself with it,” Mara says.

“This is no problem. I am glad to help.”

I load up their bags in the large box Blair has mentioned to be a vehicle. The end of the weekend is here. I’m assisting the Morgans get ready to depart. To my dismay, that also means I won’t see Blair anymore.

The words spoken between us. The sweet kisses we shared. They all feel like they’re just a dream. However, I know it has to end at some point.

Blair folds her clothes into a smaller bag. She looks up as I pass by her. There’s a sadness in her lovely smile.

It hurts to see, but at the same time I’m happy. It means that she’s as upset as I am that our time together has ended. I foolishly had thoughts about bringing her back to the tribe. It’s also selfish of me to do so.

“What will you do now since you know about the Veil?” Remus asks.

I look at him curiously. “I’m not sure I understand.”

Jade speaks up. “Well, you don’t have to hide anymore, you know? Aren’t you interested in growing your tribe? That could be exchanging resources with outsiders.”

“I’ve not thought of it. You must remember we kept to ourselves for a long time. I wouldn’t want to make rash decisions and put my tribe at risk.”

Blair has told me many wonderful and exciting things about her home. I don’t doubt for a second that she exaggerates or is even lying. Despite that, as a Chief, I need to take precautions in everything. Just as I’m still doing with the Morgans.

But I should admit my shields are up unless I’m with Blair. I don’t feel exposed or unsafe by her side. Just by the way she looks at me now, there’s a sense of comfort.

We glance at one another. Her gaze reminds me of a doe. Innocent and adorable. It makes me want to go against my morals as Chief.

“What do you think, Blair?” I ask her.

She’s taken aback. I know she’s still not used to being asked her opinion which is quite silly. I trust her judgment on what could benefit the future of the Broken Maw. Being the quiet one brought forth her skills in paying attention to her surroundings.

She thinks for a moment while looking at her feet. I’m tempted to raise her head. I’m afraid, though, that her parents will see it as disrespectful.

Finally, she responds. “I honestly don’t think you should expose your tribe to the outside world so quickly. Not all of them will have the same reaction to outsiders as you did. There’s a chance that the outsiders will take their doubt as an insult and that could bring a lot of trouble. But if you really, truly, want to expand, you should start slow. Like you can—”

Phineas interrupts her. “Yes, start off slow. Introduce them to topics and objects from the outside. Mara and I’ll be glad to conduct these sessions with your tribe. We could make a lesson of it...”

I ignore the rest of what Blair’s father says. It’s incredibly rude to cut off a person when they speak. I didn’t even get to

hear the last bit of Blair's opinion. I'm inclined to teach Phineas a lesson myself.

Be that as it may, I'd like to avoid any dispute. I'll let it slide this once only. I also don't want to risk Blair's parents forbidding her from seeing me. If I ever get such privilege.

I let Phineas finish talking. Then, I turn my attention back to Blair. My lovely doe plays with her hands.

"Blair? Please, finish what you were saying. I'd still like to hear your opinion."

Her face lights up. She hesitates for a second to continue her words. I nod to encourage her to finish.

"Well, I was going to say that maybe you could be the one to 'expose' yourself to the outside. When you get a good idea of what it's like, then you can slowly show your tribe. You can mention the idea to them first so they won't be as surprised either. I mean I think they had a great start yesterday when you showed us your base..."

Her words trail off. She's thinking she's rambling again. Which is preposterous since I like her idea more than Phineas'. I'm not just saying that for my attraction to her.

Mara approaches me. "Uzul, why don't you come back with us?"

"To your home?"

She nods. "Blair has the right idea. You can start with us and we'll gladly show you anything you'd like to know."

I look at Blair. She stares back expectantly. As do the rest of her family.

There's nothing in me that gives me a bad feeling if I go. It'll also be a great opportunity to see all the great things Blair's told me about. I also can't deny that I feel excited to spend even more time with her.

"Perhaps a short time should do. For my tribe," I say.

The Morgans cheer, with the exception of Blair. She hides her smile but I can see her red cheeks from here. By the Gods

what a beautiful sight. It makes my chest flutter.

“I need to go inform my tribe first and make a few preparations myself.”

“Of course! We won’t leave until you’re ready,” Phineas says.

My legs almost run back to the base. I can’t tell if it’s excitement, fear or duty that I’m feeling. I’ll be actually leaving my home to mesh with human civilization. I should prepare for anything.

Roar is the first to receive me when I arrive.

“That was quick. Did they say anything before they left?”

“They are still here. I came to make an important announcement.”

I walk past him. “What announcement?” he asks.

I sound my horn to alert everyone to gather. The males appear with their weapons in tow. The females with children keep their distance.

“Chief, what’s going on? Have we been attacked by those witches?” one asks.

“I knew we couldn’t trust them! They probably sent out soldiers to kill us!” another yells.

“Silence!” I roar.

The orcs quiet down.

I continue. “I gathered you all here because I have an important announcement.”

They look on, waiting for me to continue.

“After being acquainted with the Morgan family, I decided to follow them to their city.”

A gasp echoes throughout. Murmuring follows after. Rogar grabs my shoulder.

“What are you talking about? You’re going to leave the tribe?”

I move his arm away. “NO, I am not leaving my tribe. I will be gone for a short time in efforts to look for ways to better our quality of life. Resources, information, perhaps even allies. I’ve been informed that the city is an ant colony that offers different varieties of food such as pizza and something called slushies. I will even bring back moving boxes called vehicles that make a lot of noise. The city is very different from what we know. ”

The orcs are in disagreement over how they’re throwing complaints and insulting the Morgans.

“Uzul, are you insane? Did you even think this through?” Rogar says distastefully.

“You told me to expand the tribe.”

“I didn’t mean into the city! We can’t go there! I thought you’d bring the female here!”

My fuse cuts short. I take out my club and slam it on the ground. Everyone quotes down.

“I am Chieftain. What I say goes. Whether you all like it or not!”

Rogar looks away, fuming. “You will be in charge,” I say.

He grunts. “Fine. When do you leave?”

“Today.”

BLAIR

We continue packing our things into the SUV until Uzul's back. I can't actually believe he's coming with us. My heart feels as if it'll leap out of my chest. I can't stop smiling either.

I'm already making up scenes in my head. Where I'll take him in the city. Showing him around. A kiss or two by the Charles River?

I look towards the path to his base. He's been gone for a good minute now. I hope everything's going well with his tribe. Worried, I accidentally let out a sigh.

Jade whips her head toward me.

"What?" I say.

She grins. "Do you miss him already?"

I roll my eyes. "Cut it out. I'm just a little tired. That's all."

"You weren't tired when you'd sneak off with the Chieftain," Remus interjects.

"I didn't sneak off with him. We were just talking and got easily distracted."

"Yeah right. You totally feel for the big beefy guy!" Jade says.

Remus coos at me. "Didn't know that was your ideal type, Blair."

"Shut up you guys. You're so annoying."

Both of them snort. I ignore their teasing as always. I can't say they're completely wrong though. The butterflies in my belly haven't calmed down since meeting Uzul.

Something exciting is finally happening in my life. With a guy. Who indeed is a big and beefy man. That has the softest lips an orc can have.

"Look at her, daydreaming about him already," Jade says, trying to hold back laughter.

I groan internally. As always, my parents don't tell them anything. I throw my bag in the last row of seats. That's where I usually sit.

My mom comes over to me. "Blair, sweetie, why don't you switch places with your brother and sister today?"

"What?" the three of us ask in unison.

"Well, Uzul's not going to fit in the very back now is he?"

"What does that have to do with me though?"

Mom gives me a knowing look. My face heats up. Embarrassed at the mere possibility that she *knows* something.

"Mom, wouldn't it make sense to put Uzul on top of the car? He's not gonna fit," Jade points out.

"Of course he will. We might be packed like sardines but we'll make it work."

"Remus and I don't fit in the back, though."

"You won't fit in the middle either. Blair is smaller than you both. It's best for them to sit in your seats."

"But—"

Mom exasperates. "Really now, Jade, stop making a fuss. You and your brother will have to deal with it just for a day. We have a guest joining us and I'd like for him to be comfortable."

She turns to me. "Understand, Blair? You sit in the middle row."

I nod slowly. I'm not used to this sort of interaction. Usually my mother tries to get me to compromise with my siblings. This is probably the first time she's asked them to do it.

It freaks me out a little bit, not gonna lie. Somehow, it gives me more reason to believe that she knows something about Uzul and I. *If she did see us kiss, then please, may someone strike me down so I can die instantly*, I think to myself.

Jade's complaining more than Remus about the new seat arrangement. She begrudgingly moves her bag to the back seat. Sheepishly, I move my backpack to the middle row.

Uzul finally comes back. He doesn't have any type of luggage with him. Not even a change of clothes. He did bring, however, a belt stocked with weapons.

Our eyes almost pop out of their sockets. His waist looks like a stove rack from an industrial kitchen. He's ready to go to battle more so to just "mesh" with the city.

"Is there a problem?" he asks.

"Uh, Uzul, I thought you needed to make a few arrangements?" my father asks.

"I did. I needed to arrange my right hand man to look after the tribe."

"Did you bring other clothes?" Remus says.

"I'm assuming you all mean my belt."

We all nod.

"This is just to defend myself."

I think I may have been sheltered as well. What kind of creature's brave enough to go after a man that looks like Uzul? I'm still mentally preparing myself for the moment other humans take a good look at him. I'm 100% sure someone will either scream or call the police.

My mom tries to gently explain. "Uzul, it's fine for you to be ready for trouble. Where we're going, there won't be a need

for so many weapons.”

“How can one be sure about that?”

“How about this? I’ll give you one of my specialty bags to hide all your weapons. You can wear it like a coin pouch. When you need to defend yourself, you’ll just take a weapon out of that bag.”

Uzul thinks about it for a moment. He is clearly intrigued that my mom can do something like that. I used to have one when I was little and take it to school. I’d get in trouble for sneaking an entire sandwich when it was nap time.

“That seems feasible. I accept.”

Everyone breathes out. However, the situation with his clothes will have to wait until we get home. He can be wearing skins out and about. He’ll need to have things tailored to his enormous size.

An Uzul wearing a tight button up shirt with jeans? Exquisite. I’m curious to see his forearms when he rolls up his sleeves.

He turns towards the SUV, taken aback. He crouches down to look inside it. His eyes are wide and his mouth hangs slightly open. I’m confused since he already saw the car.

“Is something wrong?” dad asks.

“I didn’t know this is what it looks like. I thought you rode these like a horse.”

“But you saw the trunk?”

“Yes, the storage compartment for your belongings.”

I smile to myself. His way of taking in new things is adorable. His eyes are bright and analytical. His large hand softly touches the seats.

He rounds the car, staring at every detail of it. He inspects the tires, careful not to move anything. When he gets to the steering wheel, and it moves, he backs away.

He squints his eyes at all the buttons on the dashboard. I am a bit nervous to have him push them so hard that he’d

break them. However, his eyes just wander from button to button.

Overall, he acclimates himself pretty well to the car. Okay step one is done. The hardest part to come: getting Uzul inside of it.

We take off his hazardous belt and leave mom in charge of it. Once he takes a step inside, he tips the car. Dad and Remus stood on the other side to aid him. They pull his hands while us girls push him inside.

Uzul's shoulders bend the door frame getting in. He takes more than half the space of the middle row. With his weight, he makes the SUV a low rider. Dad opens the sun roof in case his head needs more room.

I'm the last to get inside. I'm immediately met with Uzul's muscular arm. My torso presses against him, but I don't mind it at all.

The whole way to the city, I'm squished between the door and him. My mom laughs, commenting that we look like the Flintstones. An orc instead of a Dino.

His eyes are wide, unable to decide what to look at. He stares out the window, admiring how fast we're going. He looks at the radio box, wondering how it's making a 'lovely noise.' He asks about everything he sees.

It's like a baby learning about the world. It brings a wide smile to myself. I'm really happy he's here.

UZUL

“**T**oday is all about you and me in the city,” Blair tells me.

We will not be riding any further in the chariot they call a Ford today. Thank the gods.

Blair at my side, and I am glowing.

“What is this place?” I ask Blair. We are poised to walk at the edge of a large square of grass. Short grass. Grass as green as the Misty Mountains in the spring. The long and wide square of grass is surrounded by cottonwood trees. All the trees look the same.

“What we call a ‘park,’” Blair answers me. “We cut through this park on foot to the marketplace just up ahead. I want you to see the variety of beings from all different cultures walking freely. It’s Samhain every day at the park,” she adds with a giggle.

I can already see the array of creatures walking through the park and in and out of the marketplace area Blair has pointed out. I am excited to see this by walking through it all with a lovely witch.

No creature within sight is noticing me.

No staring at my tusks. Why not?

Blair grabs my hand and leads us swiftly across the grass and into the area she calls the marketplace.

The marketplace is filled with all colors of the rainbow of hair, body sizes, and ages. Some characters have writing on their skin, jewelry through their skin, and just about every shade of skin color.

What story treasures to bring back to my tribe!

“This inclusivity,” I tell Blair while pulling her close. “It is beautiful.”

“The world was starving for a greater sense of inclusivity,” Blair tells me. “And then the Veil fell. It sort of puts two choices in front of everyone. Acceptance and understanding on one side, fear, and ignorance on the other.”

Various small tents with big openings line our path. Everyone is talking and exchanging wares and coins.

Joy abounds.

“Okay, big boy, as you can see this is where we trade goods for goods and goods for coins. This is where we rub shoulders with everyone else.”

“I can see that. A big melting pot,” I add. “There are so many smiles and bright eyes. A large group of rock trolls and a large group of orcs would not mesh so well.” I want to ask her why this large variety of differing creatures are not warring over turf. I won’t ask. I do not wish to sound bellicose. We have passed many couples, many combinations of race and gender, shapes and sizes and age.

“This row of booths to the right are filled with clothes,” Blair tells me, waving her lovely, lithe arm at the array of tents.

There are many items I want to see Blair wear. I want to trade gold for these items. They are beautifully colored and crafted.

“Let’s stop and grab what strikes your eye,” I tell Blair. “I will trade gold for your fancy. Anything you like.”

“You are very sweet,” Blair answers me. “Next trip you can treat me, and I will treat you. This trip I want you to see

this marketplace, how welcoming the world is. We also have a couple other stops.”

Blair squeezes my hand again and pulls me away and towards a large and tall building made of brown-red rock.

“That old brownstone up ahead,” Blair tells me. “My favorite bookstore. I have to show it to you.”

As Blair is telling me this, we pass a tall man dressed in dark garb. He is gaunt and white as February snow. I watch him blow fire out of his mouth and through a colored hoop. Children and parents applaud and toss coins into a large hat at the tall man’s feet.

There are people and children and beings of every size, color, and demeanor who walk close, rub against us, smile at us, bounce into us. Off to our left a crone of a woman juggles balls of light for an audience of several children and three or four angry looking felines.

“I think a break from sensory overload is exactly what is needed right now,” Blair tells me. She then tugs me to the right and into the brown structure she had earlier called a “bookstore.”

We enter the red-brown rock building. Inside it is dead quiet. Many walls and tables and shelves and levels are covered in tomes, like papyrus tomes but not papyrus.

There is a short woman of mixed race standing close to us and reading through a tome. Each time she flips to a new page her hair changes color.

“What are these tomes?” I ask Blair. She pauses pulling me along for a moment, turns to face me with her Venusian green eyes, and takes a deep breath before answering. “This is my favorite spot to get away, Azul. These tomes are books, compilations of information. This is how teachings are passed down or shared.”

“Fascinating. In the orc tradition, we pass traditions from mouth to ear. From a Chieftain’s mouth to a bloodsworn’s ear.”

We leave the bookstore and cross the narrow paths of a less crowded section of the park on the edge of the marketplace. The volume of beings is far less, and Blair is able to share more about chariots like the Ford, lights, technology, and the impact technology has had on society. We stop several times along the way to talk, listen, and soak up the luscious connection we share.

“This next place I want to show you is a café,” Blair tells me. “That’s it right there,” she adds, pointing to a cozy looking cottage-style structure across the street from where we are standing. The food is so good.”

“I am ready to eat a bear,” I tell her. The truth is, I could eat an ogre, even one of the bigger ogres from up north. I want to pick Blair up and hold her. She has been so gracious and kind and genuinely showing me the best that she can come up with.

I want to hold her, caress her, and never let go. I’m not sure what to make of this possessive need that has claimed me.

“We’ll sit outside,” Blair tells me. We pick out a table. A servant arrives and Blair orders many things for us. I keep trying to pay doubloons and gold, and Blair keeps motioning with her hand for me to put my gold away.

“I am overloaded with things to share with the tribe, you know,” I tell Blair. We are eating and watching many creatures walk by, nary a glance they give to us.

“This is the best kind of people watching,” Blair says.

We finish eating and head off in the direction of the setting sun. We traverse a maze of creatures, chariots like the Ford, buildings both short and towering, and many dwellings.

“You are a superb guide,” I tell her. “You have done an exemplary job filling this day with material for me to report to the Broken Maws tribe. I am grateful.”

We reach a bridge that overlooks the city skyline. The sun has set the horizon on fire with orange and red pillars and plumes of color. I want more days like this. Days with Blair at my side.

I find my mind wandering about the night, about staying the whole night through at what Blair calls her “townhouse” on the outskirts of the city.

Blair’s dainty frame is warm and pressed against mine. I lean down and kiss her. Her lips and touch and taste are spring warmth to winter, creeks that sing to rivers, and rivers that mingle with the oceans.

BLAIR

Six.

It's been six days since I first met Uzul. Somehow, I both can't believe it's already been six days and am shocked it's only been that long. It's all been a real whirlwind.

To think I was dreading going camping with my family. I was so close to calling my mother and saying I was too sick to go. The entire drive up I was kicking myself for not doing exactly that.

Imagine all that I would've missed out on if I had. I'd never met Uzul. These past few days would be spent sitting around my townhouse, alone, completely unaware of what I lost.

"Yeah, I made the right choice." I look down at a sleeping Uzul.

I'll never forget the feeling of catching his eyes on me back at the encampment, when he first approached us. He almost didn't notice me at first, I was standing in the back after all. But once he did notice me, I hardly ever saw him *not* looking at me.

The entire walk back to our campsite, I could feel his eyes on me as he followed. At the time, I just assumed he was suspicious of all of us. Now I'm pretty sure it wasn't suspicion that kept his eyes on me.

I love it, to be honest. Having his attention like that has made me feel special. It's what drew me to want to get to

know him better at first.

Now I have his attention all the time. And he has mine. We hang onto each other's every word like we're the only two people in the world.

I can't think of a better way to have spent the last six days.

Five.

Five days since he kissed me. That feeling of our first kiss will stay with me forever. As long as I live, it will be seared into my brain.

That first night, we talked under the stars right past midnight. Maybe he was too tired and couldn't control himself. Whatever his reason was, I'm not complaining.

It all happened so fast. He leaned towards me and suddenly we were kissing. It was like in the movies, or romance novels, when two love interests kiss for the first time and fireworks start going off. I felt those fireworks.

I instantly wanted more of him. I grabbed his head and tried to pull him closer to me, wanting to feel his body on mine. But maybe I was too eager or moved too quickly. As soon as I did, he pulled away and said goodnight.

Back in my tent, I couldn't sleep at first. I just paced back and forth thinking about him. Would it be awkward in the morning? Would he ignore me? Would my family be able to tell that something happened between us?

When I finally laid down in my sleeping bag, I could still feel the touch of his lips. I was praying that it wouldn't be our last kiss. Luckily, my prayer came true.

I bend down to the sleeping Uzul and wake him up with a kiss. His eyes fling open with surprise but soften when they see me. He grabs me and pulls me close for a deeper kiss, just like I had to him five days ago.

"Wake up," I whisper, pulling away from his kiss. "It's almost time," I kiss him again.

Five days' worth of kisses between us. I can't wait to have even more.

Three.

It's been three days since Uzul came back to the city with me. Three days of exploring Boston with him. Three days of teaching him about all that this place has to offer.

Showing him around has taken more energy than I thought I had, but for him I powered through. Seeing his world expand so much has been rewarding. It was truly like he was living in a different world back with his tribe.

One day we'll laugh about how long it took him to understand the concept of paying rent. He honestly made a lot of good points. I just don't see my landlord, a dragon shifter, listening too much.

It has also been an adjustment for him to get used to being around so many people. Yesterday we walked all around the city, in large crowds of people. He took it slightly better than I expected.

"There are too many people," he had muttered to me as we moved through a crowd of business people on their way to work. "How do you feed all of them?"

"We have a lot of farms." Uzul just grunted in response.

It was going rather uneventfully until someone started blaring their horn in traffic. The sound startled Uzul, causing him to grab on to me and pull me close. My heart fluttered knowing his first instinct at danger was to protect me.

I leave the memory as I watch Uzul finally get up and shake off his deep slumber. I pretend to look away, but watch out of the corner of my eye as he gets changed for the day. His body has just as many scars as it does muscles. I hope to one day get to ask about them all.

For now, I settle for holding his hand as we step out of my townhouse into the early morning. It's so early no one is even out and about yet, the street lights are still on, and the sun hasn't risen yet. But that last one is the entire point.

Uzul and I head straight for the park. We get there just in time. Just in time to see sunlight break into the sky over the trees.

This is the culmination of our three days in the city together. A quiet, peaceful moment alone together after three hectic days.

One.

We watch the sunrise together and it's now officially one week. One week since my life was completely changed by this orc.

In a weird way, I never appreciated this city until I could see it through his eyes. Everything is so new to Uzul. Explaining it all to him has helped me appreciate the hidden beauty here.

I remember, in the car driving here from the mountains, his wide-eyed amazement as he saw the city skyline for the first time. Boston isn't typically known for its skyline, but to an orc who lived in the woods his whole life, it was truly something.

"What is that?" He whispered to me, as if he was maybe embarrassed and didn't want the rest of my family to hear the question.

"That is Boston. That's the city where we all live. Those are all buildings. They call them sky-scrapers."

"... And people live in them?"

"Some, yeah."

"What's it like being so close to the heavens?" I had never thought of it like that. It's a rather poetic way to view being high up in a building. Something most haven't given a second thought about since they were kids.

There was also when he insisted we come to this park for the first time. I've lived near here for a while and have come a few times. But with Uzul, I was finally able to appreciate it.

He didn't want to throw around a frisbee or fly a kite. He had no interest in checking out the nearby food trucks or the street performers on the many paths. Uzul just wanted to sit in the grass and enjoy the peace. I haven't slowed down like that in a long time.

Just one week. One simple week. And my life has changed for the better, and I never want to go back.

UZUL

“Another one,” I point up at the sky as a dragon flies by, above the clouds. We’ve been laying in the grass of this park for an hour or so, watching the sky. I can’t believe how much we’ve seen fly over us.

“Yeah,” Blair says, pointing up at the sky too. “And, look, they aren’t alone.” I follow the point of her finger and see two smaller dragons flying just behind.

As she points up at the sky above, Blair’s body leans into mine. Her soft skin presses against me, and I never want it to stop. I truly never thought I’d ever feel this way about anyone, let alone a human.

“Are you ready to get moving?” Blair crawls over my body to poke her head into my view of the sky. “I know a great place for lunch around here.”

Her hair playfully falls in my face while her smile shines brighter than the sun. This is another view that I wouldn’t mind watching all morning. I’ve been in the city with Blair for a few days now. We’ve explored just about all that this place has to offer. But the best part has been getting to spend time with her.

“Just a few more minutes.” Ever since I arrived in the city with Blair, we’ve been constantly exploring. Everyday she has something new to show me and I’m shocked by what I learn. But today we decided to take it slow in the park

Back at the Broken Maws Tribe, my day would be spent taking care of everyone and making sure everything ran

smoothly. But, with Blair, we can simply lay in the grass and watch the clouds and creatures move across the sky. Life here is so different.

I still can't get over how many other creatures like me are wandering around the city. I haven't even seen anyone bat an eye at me the whole time we've been exploring. This is never what I expected.

I can't help but think about my tribe right now. Living in relative squalor up in the mountains compared to what could be waiting for them down here. They would all enjoy living in the city just as much as I have, I just know it.

The technology, the food that we don't have to hunt, the beautiful people. All of it makes living in the city leagues better than up in the mountains. This is a completely different world, a completely different life, but we can all have it so easily.

"I think I should move my tribe down here."

"Really?" Blair looks surprised. "All of them?"

"Eventually, yeah. But I think a few at first. Show them what it's like and then they could help me convince the rest to join us."

"Do you think the others would enjoy it down here? In the city? Unlike you, they won't all have me to show them around." She gives me a lovely smile.

"No, no they will not." I return her smile and lean in for a kiss.

A low grumble breaks the serene silence of the park. I pause before our kiss connects and I look at Blair, whose face is turning a deep shade of red. I've never seen this from her.

"Are you okay? What the hell was-?"

"I'm sorry." She lets out a huge laugh. "That was my stomach. I was just trying to be polite earlier. I'm so hungry."

I laugh along with her. "Oh wow, let's get you some lunch."

About twenty minutes later, Blair and I are setting up a picnic blanket in the park and sitting down with our lunches. She scarfs down her lunch at a speed that would put some orcs I know to shame. I watch her with amazement, everyday she finds a new way to surprise me.

“Oh.” Her face turns that deep shade of red again. “Sorry.” She starts to slow down her eating.

“No, no please keep going,” I say. “It reminds me of home.”

Blair laughs and almost spits her mouthful of food everywhere. I join her in laughing. As much as I care for my tribe, I’ve never laughed this much in my life.

“Here, watch me,” I say, seeing that Blair still looks embarrassed. I look down at my untouched lunch. I scoop it up and shove it all in my mouth with one bite. “Now,” I continue with my mouth still full. “You can still say you eat slower than an orc.” We both laugh.

With both of our lunches gone, we lay down on the picnic blanket. This time we lay cuddled closer together. Blair rests her head on my chest and I wrap my arm around her small frame to hold her close.

Now, instead of the sky, we turn our eyes to the other people in the park. Watching them as they walk past. Blair says it’s called ‘people watching.’ A witch uses magic to perform tricks while looking for tips. A group of dragon shifters toss around a ‘frisbee.’ A normal human drops a sandwich on the ground before picking it up and taking a bite.

“Oh gross,” Blair says with a gagging noise.

“What? The guy with the sandwich?”

“Yeah, so gross.”

I have to make a note to warn the members of my tribe about that. None of us would think twice about eating something that fell on the ground. I don’t know why it’s so taboo to Blair, but best to not let anyone make that mistake around her.

“Oh yeah, very gross,” I lie.

I kiss the top of her head and she scoots herself closer into my body. We are completely wrapped up in each other on this blanket. I couldn't ask for anything better.

Laying here with her has been the absolute highlight of my trip to the city. The more time I spend with her, the less I ever want to leave her side. I could be happy laying here forever, feeling her chest move against my body as she breathes.

Alas, we can't stay here forever. After an hour or two more of laying in the park, it's time to move on. Blair throws away the trash from our lunch as I fold up the blanket.

“So, I have to go to the grocery store. You can tag along if you want, but you've seen this place already. If you want to just hang back at my townhouse, you can.”

“Oh, I don't mind-” My focus shifts away from Blair and our conversation. All my training as a fighter is kicking in. I just can't tell why. I scan the park around us, we're surrounded by people but as far as I can tell, no one is paying us any attention.

“What is it? Uzul? Are you okay?”

“Sorry,” I snap out of it. “I don't know what that was. All my instincts were telling me we were in danger, but I don't see anything.”

“You know what, why don't I take you back to the town house?” Blair's words are full of concern as she rubs my back. “You can rest up while I shop.”

“Okay, yeah that sounds good.”

The two of us start walking out of the park and it happens again. It's like alarms going off in my head. I can feel someone watching us. But when I turn to look, there is no one there. What is happening?

The entire walk home, I can't help but feel that we are in danger but the danger never presents itself. My instincts have never been wrong before. I just wish I could tell what it's warning me about.

BLAIR

“I won’t be gone too long, Uzul. Just try to relax and maybe watch some TV.” I close the door with a sigh of relief.

I was worried I wouldn’t be able to get him back in my townhouse. Or get him to calm down enough for me to leave. Ever since we left the park, Uzul has been on edge. I’ve never seen him like this. He has always been so calm and collected.

But something is wrong. He seemed almost scared, checking over his shoulder every few feet as we walked home. It was such a quick shift from how pleasant the morning was.

Unfortunately, I expected this to happen. I’m just surprised that it took this long. Uzul went from living in an isolated tribe in the woods to the middle of a big city full of new people. Of course, it’d be an adjustment.

Uzul is just feeling a little overwhelmed. He’s been introduced to a lot of new things in the past few days. His whole world has expanded. It’s not only okay for him to react this way, it’s expected.

Yes, I’ve been around to ease him into it all. That must be why it took so long to affect him. But it really was just a matter of time.

It’s easy to believe that Uzul could get so anxious on a day like this. The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, there is a lovely breeze, but it seems the whole city is outside enjoying it all. Someone like him, who has lived the life he has, could easily get overwhelmed by it all.

He just needs some time to decompress. We'll stay in tonight, I can make him a special dinner. Hopefully by the morning he'll feel better. There is still so much I want to show him.

My closest grocery store is not a long walk, so I could take advantage of the nice weather and I won't be leaving Uzul alone for too long. Normally, that's what I'd do. Still, I head towards my car.

I find myself really wanting to get back to him. We've spent so much time together recently. It feels weird to be alone right now. I'm not sure I like it. I want to speed through this trip and get back to him.

Just steps away from my car, a pair of hands reach out from behind and grab me. I'm immediately confronted with a man standing behind me with one hand over my mouth and a knife against my throat. Fuck.

"Now don't make a sound," the man says in a low gruff voice right into my ear. "Or I'll slit your throat from ear to ear. Nod if you understand."

I nod. Luckily, I just got my car washed and am able to get a good look at him in the reflection on the doors. Combat boots, a belt strapped full of knives and other weapons, and a duster jacket. This asshole is a bounty hunter.

The bounty hunter begins shuffling for something. I can hear him unclip something from his belt and a sharp point is pressed against my back. "That's a crossbow, you won't get far if you run. Start walking, and remember, stay quiet."

I do as he says. I spend the majority of the walk mentally kicking myself. I can't believe I let myself get caught, and with Uzul just inside. It's been years since anyone I know has had to deal with one of these assholes.

I've done a pretty good job of shielding Uzul from these types of people since he came to town. We haven't had any trouble. Most have come to terms with the existence of magic and supernatural beings. But every so often some asshole will

pop up and cause trouble, and the bounty hunters are the worst of the worst.

The bounty hunter silently leads me into some nearby woods and we quickly end up outside a rundown shack. “Inside. There is a chair, sit down.”

Once again, I do as I’m told, but I haven’t given up. Growing up without magic, I’ve learned to be resourceful. I can still find a way out of this.

“You don’t have to do this.” My words fall on deaf ears. The bounty hunter doesn’t even react as he ties me to the chair. “I get it, magic can be scary. Once the Veil fell, everything changed so quickly. But-”

“I’m not letting you go, little lady.”

“I promise you, me and my family are not a threat to you-”

The bounty hunter simply scoffs and starts sharpening a knife. He had hardly even looked at me since we got here. He just keeps peeking out the window.

“Look... um... Whatever your name is, if you let me go right now, unharmed, I promise no one will come after you. My family will let it slide and you can return to wherever-”

“Lady, I don’t give a shit about your family! Why do you keep bringing them up? Just stay quiet.”

This guy doesn’t know who my family is? What type of bounty hunter is he? Maybe he just thinks I’m a standard witch. If that’s the case. I can bluff him.

“Untie me and let me leave, or I will be forced to use my magic on you.”

The bounty hunter stares at me for a moment before bursting into a fit of laughter. “If you had magic, you would’ve used it on me already.”

Alright, he’s smarter than he looks. But it was worth the try. The only problem is that I still don’t understand why he kidnapped me. He doesn’t know my family. He knows I don’t have magic. He doesn’t even seem like he plans to kill me. I guess I might as well ask.

“Why did you kidnap me?”

“They all have to go.” He shakes his head and looks out the window again.

“Who? Who has to go?”

“Who? The orcs!” Fuck, he’s after Uzul.

“The orcs?”

“Yeah,” he licks his lips with excitement. “Like your friend. They are a scourge on this earth. And they must be eliminated.”

“You can’t-”

“Oh but I can, little lady. I can and I will. When I’m done, the world will thank me. They will celebrate me and what I did to protect them all. They will all know that Gideon was the one who saved them from the vicious orcs.”

The bounty hunter, or Gideon, is visibly excited by his plan. He starts whistling a happy tune as he returns to sharpening his knife. Fuck.

I can’t believe it. Twenty-four years as the only non-magic member of my family and the reason a bounty hunter finally targets me is because of my relationship to an orc. Gideon doesn’t even care about witches or magic. Most bounty hunters would love a shot to take down powerful witches like my family.

But his eyes are on the orcs. Anxiety spreads through my body as the reason why he took me full sets in. I’m the bait.

I struggle against the ropes tying me to the chair. They don’t even budge as Gideon laughs at me. I need to get out of this now. He’s using me to lure Uzul out into the open out of the city. Gideon is using me to kill him.

The worst part is, he’s right. The moment I’m gone for too long, Uzul will come looking for me. I’m sure Gideon even left an obvious trail right here. Uzul will be walking right into a trap and I can’t do anything to stop it.

UZUL

Blair left quite some time ago. The sun has already set and the moon is almost at its peak. Is ‘grocery shopping’ supposed to take this long?

I have a fairly good idea of what it entails. Blair mentioned that it can be a hassle sometimes; depending on various factors. The people, the costs, and the quality. When I hunt, I just have to worry about the amount and size of the prey.

She didn’t seem like she wanted me to accompany her. I wanted to offer but decided against it. I would make people uncomfortable anyway.

I haven’t left the room since she left. She told me to wait for her and I shall do so. But there’s this urgent feeling in my gut. It tells me to go look out for her.

“How would I even find a grocery?” I say to myself.

I shake off the nagging thoughts. I sit down on a chair to organize my thoughts. This must be an attachment growing. I’m starting to care for her.

She’s able to handle herself. I might become a burden to her more than I already am. I’m afraid to push her away.

It feels a bit selfish at the same time. The Morgans try to hide it, but their treatment towards Blair differs from their other children. From the start, I can see it. I never want her to think that my opinion on her depends if she uses magic or not.

This is all overwhelming for the both of us. It’s a drastic change that’ll affect anyone. My orcs were struggling during

the period we had a drought. Then that time there was a shortage of animals to hunt.

Blair's getting used to my presence here. She needs some space and I'll give it to her. Besides, it's not so bad taking a rest from my duties. I can use this time to take in what I learned so far.

But being by myself doesn't help my itching doubts. Every sound that comes from outside, I think it can be her. Ever since I got that weird feeling while we were in the city, I...

Curses. I just realized why I've been so uneasy. That particular feeling has to do with Blair's extended absence. The two just connect, I know it.

I look out the window. It's getting darker by the minute.

"To hell with this. I need to go find her."

I stand up abruptly and take my wooden club. I know I just said I don't want to be a burden. I would rather be that than have her in potential danger.

I try not to make any noise when leaving the room. The house is deadly silent. Even though it's just us reading, it feels quieter. I can hear the drops of water from the faucets. Not even the insects outside make a shrill.

I stomp around the house until I reach the entrance. When I open the door, the knob breaks off its hinges. That's a problem that can wait. I leave the door semi-open.

I go out into the night and look around my surroundings. I sniff the air in an effort to find her scent. Alas, tracking isn't my forte.

Where do I go? How should I get there? I observed the way Phineas guided the vehicle, but I don't feel confident in trying it myself. I look at what's called the garage.

Wait, Blair's car. Of course! How could I not notice it at first? She's supposed to be using it.

"Blair?" I call out to her.

There's no response.

If her car's here that should mean she is too. I don't see her inside of it. I listen intently for any noise from the garage. Still nothing.

When I start heading towards it to check, I notice some footprints on the pathway. Two sets of them. Most of them are scuffed. It feels like a bad sign.

I follow their path. Some are straight while others deviate into a circle. Then they lead straight again.

"This doesn't seem right," I grunt.

I keep following them carefully. My movements are calm and calculated. Like if I were stalking a roaming animal. I have to be careful to expect a sudden attack.

The path leads me into the woods. The two sets of footprints begin to fade into one. I don't know if it's because of dirt or something else. I bend down to inspect it, something I should've done in the first place.

I pick up pieces of it with my fingers. Before I can analyze anything, I hear noises further in the woods. I don't know whether it was a scream or something falling. I take off running.

I run until I find a peculiar looking house. It's smaller than Blair's and nearly falling apart. It's dark inside the little house. Should I go investigate or should I keep looking around?

My gut tells me to check. With my club in hand, I make my way inside it. I'm in a defensive position checking for enemies. What I find is worse.

"Blair!"

She's tied up and alone. Her mouth's covered with a thin cloth. By the looks of it, she's the one that made the noise earlier. I think she tried to chew her way out of the bind.

I untie the rope and rip the cloth away from her face. Her cheeks are stained with ears. Her eyes are bloodshot. The clothes on her are quite dirty, as if she were dragged.

"What happened to you? How did you get like this?" I ask.

She takes deep breaths, trying to calm down. They quickly turn faster and less stable. She's leaning into a panic attack. I've seen one too many back home.

I gently place my hand over her back. "Calm down, Blair. I'm here, take a few deep breaths so you can tell me what happened."

She does as I suggest. Soon after, the panting subsides. Then, suddenly, she grabs at my arms.

"We have to get out of here!" she whispers.

"What's wrong? Please, tell me."

I try to remain calm but her wide eyes and terrified expression set me off. I'm ready to defend her with my whole body. I need to know first what and who attacked her.

"We have to go before the bounty hunter comes back!"

She pulls my hand but I stop her. "A bounty hunter?"

"I'm fine! But if we don't get out of here, he'll come and hurt you!"

She stumbles on the floor. Her legs give out underneath her. I quickly go to help her up. When I hold on to her wrist, I see the cuts on her wrists.

They're from the rope that said bounty hunter used. She not only has dirt on her clothes, but dried blood. Nothing too alarming, but equally infuriating.

Anger rises in me.

"How long have you been like this?"

She looks at me incredulously. "Uzul, that doesn't matter. We have to go, please!"

I shake my head. "No, you're injured. You can get worse if we run out of here."

"I'm fine, truly. But we really, really, have to leave."

"He would already be here if he were near. If something does happen, I'll protect you. Let me help you go back to your house," I say.

She hesitates to take my hand. In the end, she places her hand on it. Then she leans on to me. Carefully, and slowly, we leave the place.

BLAIR

“I’m fine, I promise. He didn’t hurt me.” Uzul leads me through my front door. Ever since he found me in that shack, he’s been relentlessly asking if I’m okay.

“I just want to give you a look over,” Uzul says with concern in his voice.

“Fine.” We might as well get this over with. I stand in the center of my living room and hold my arms out, ready for inspection.

Uzul reaches out and gently grabs my left arm first. The tips of his giant orc fingers lightly run the length of my forearm as his eyes look closely. His other hand slowly slides my shirt sleeve up as he moves to my upper arm.

His light touch sends a tingling sensation throughout my body. The gentleness from this behemoth of an orc is driving me wild from a single touch. He moves to my right arm, and inspects it with the same tender method. He lets go of my arm and I’m already craving more of his touch.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” His voice is soft as he makes sure to look me in the eye. “He didn’t hurt you at all?”

“No, I’m fine. I promise.”

“Okay.” Uzul turns around. “Should we start-?”

“But.” I slowly pull my shirt off over my head. “Maybe you should keep checking, just in case.”

Uzul turns back around just as I start to unbutton my pants and let them fall to the ground. I notice the ever so slight flash of a smile on his typically expressionless face. He looks me up and down, standing in just my bra and panties before him.

“Yes, better make sure.”

He crouches down and starts with my legs. Uzul lightly wraps his hand around my left calf and slowly runs it all the way up my thigh. He leans forwards and starts kissing his way up my leg too, starting just above the knee. The cool touch of his tusks against my skin sends a glorious shiver up my spine.

Uzul starts to stand, kissing his way up to my stomach. His fingertips explore my back, tantalizingly running just across my skin. I quickly take off my bra and by the time he kisses up to my chest, my tits are free.

He very carefully takes one in his mouth, it fits perfectly between his tusks. His tongue teases my nipple as it hardens. Uzul starts massaging my other tit with one hand while the other begins to slip under my panties. I can't stand this build up any more, my pussy is soaking wet. I need him now.

“Uzul,” I say breathlessly. “Maybe I should check you, too.”

He wastes no time ripping off his shirt while I start working on getting his pants off. I can already see his massive erection showing through his pants, but it in no way prepares me for what I see when I finally get them off.

Uzul's pants drop to the floor and his cock springs out, already almost fully erect. All I can think to do is marvel at it at first and wonder how I'll manage to fit it in me. I try my best to wrap my hands around this cock that's as thick as a tree trunk.

I start stroking him. Uzul makes a deep grunt as my tongue runs the length of his cock from the bottom of the shaft to the tip. Teasing his tip with my tongue and I slowly start to wrap my mouth around him.

“I can't wait any longer,” Uzul roars. He lifts me up and with one hand rips my panties off. He throws me over his

shoulder and carries me to my bedroom, spanking my ass as he walks.

I giggle and laugh with delight as he tosses me on the bed. I spread my legs, ready for him. Uzul kneels down next to the bed and once again starts kissing his way up my leg. With each kiss, a new tingle of pleasure spreads through my body.

He kisses his way up to my pussy and doesn't hesitate. Uzul's tongue teases my clit while he slips two fingers in and out, practically filling me up. He sticks to this tag-team approach and it works. In just a few moments from this, my whole-body tenses up. Waves of pleasure explode across my body.

"I'm cumming," I yell. I squeeze my legs around Uzul's head and pinch my own nipples. Uzul stands up to his full height and watches me squirm on the bed, trying to catch my breath. His face is full of pride. Somehow, I manage to say more. "I want you in me, now."

Uzul grabs my legs and pulls me toward him, so my pussy is closer to the edge of the bed. He holds his cocks against me, refusing to put it in. He just rubs it along my lower lips. I need it now.

"Beg for it. I want to hear you beg."

"Please," I cry out. "Please give it to me. Please."

Uzul obliges and guides himself into me. I don't know how, but my body opens up to accept his ginormous cock. It's a tight squeeze, but it feels so good. Standing at an almost half crouch next to the bed, he begins to thrust into me.

"Fuck, you're so tight." He reaches forward and wraps one of his massive hands around a tit. He squeezes as he thrusts.

He's perfect. Every thrust hit all my pleasure sensors. The sensation is almost overwhelming. I don't know how long we've been going and I barely notice as Uzul grabs me to switch positions.

Uzul moves me onto my knees facing away from him and enters from behind. It's even better. His cock reaches new depths in me that I never even imagined. He moves a hand

around my body and starts playing with my clit as he returns to thrusting, slowly at first.

“Harder,” I beg. I need more of him. The soft tenderness was good before. But now. “I want to know what it’s like to fuck an orc. HARDER.”

“You got it.” I can hear the grin in his voice. Uzul lets loose. He ruthlessly starts pounding into me. I fall from my knees to my chest as he positions himself over me and keeps pounding away.

My bed frame shakes with every powerful thrust. Thank God, modern furniture has improved to accommodate creatures of Uzul’s size fucking. We can keep going without worrying about it breaking beneath us. Which is great because I *need* to keep going.

“More,” I moan. I really hope none of my neighbors are home, they might think there is an earthquake. I also hope they aren’t home because I start getting loud, I can’t help it. “What else, how else would an orc fuck me?”

Uzul thinks for a moment, not slowing down his thrusts at all. He leans forward so his mouth is right next to my ear. “I’d mark my territory. Claim you as mine.”

His voice in my ear, as his cock stretches me out, sets me off. I’m so close to cumming again. I scream so Uzul knows he is doing a good job. He holds my body still as he keeps pounding away.

“Yes, oh god, yes! Spank me!” I’m on the edge of my second orgasm of the night. I need that something extra to send me over the edge. I feel a hard slap on my ass and it does the trick. I cum, hard. My whole-body spasms with pleasure. “FUCK!”

Uzul stops pounding and pulls out of me. I revel in my orgasm, screaming into my mattress. Eventually, I find my composure and flip over on my back. His still erect cock glistens with my juices.

“Mark me,” I whisper. Uzul grins and motions for me to come closer. I crawl across the bed to where he stands. “Claim

me as yours.”

I crawl off the bed and get on my knees. Uzul strokes his cock furiously next to my face. My hands reach up and grip his balls.

“You’re mine,” he moans.

“I’m yours. Now mark me Uzul.” I fondle his balls in my hands, squeezing and tugging on them.

He grabs the back of my head and holds it still. His cock, just a breath from my face, twitches as he strokes it harder. In my hands, his balls tighten. He’s about to cum.

I’m right, Uzul let’s out a roar that shakes the room almost as much as his fucking. His cock explodes into my face, covering me in his seed. I sit there and take it happily as huge spurts escape him and land on me.

“You’re mine.” He says once he’s done. He leans down and kisses me on the top of the head.

I’m his.

BLAIR

“This is better,” Uzul mutters with an exhale.

“No kidding,” I answer back. We are at my family’s house. I can sense Uzul’s whole body relax. I can hear the tension release with his words as he speaks them. The affection earlier had been otherworldly, no doubt, but I keep replaying the scene where Gideon told me that all orcs must be eliminated.

Hence, we made a beeline to my family’s home.

Gideon would find us if we were to stay at my townhouse. I know he must’ve just missed us. I also know for certain Uzul would love to get his hands on Gideon, and this scares me.

My brother Remus is waiting for us on the porch as we arrive. Remus is holding his best broom with a free hand. He must’ve been doing something important before we arrived.

“Good to see both of you,” Remus tells us. “You look beautiful together.” Remus is not teasing me like before when he says this. He is sincere.

“Protection spells over the property have been cast?” I ask. I hug Remus after I ask this. His arms are strong and warm.

“Oh. You know it!” Remus answers.

“Good to see you, young man,” Uzul tells Remus. I watch them hug.

“Phineas and Mara want us to gather in the family room,” Remus tells us. “You can share more about why you rushed

home and how we might help. We're in this together."

"Older Brother, you are so organized. I love it," I tell Remus.

Uzul and I enter the house and go straight to the family room. My mother Mara and my father Phineas are sitting in the loveseat. The table in the center of the family room is loaded with coffee, tea, and crumpets. There is meat for Uzul.

"Protective spells have been cast over this house," my father reassures us. "We want to hear what this is about and how we can help."

Before Uzul and I can sit, Jade swiftly floats into the room and grabs Uzul in a wide-reaching hug. "You are a mountain of handsome goodness," Jade tells Uzul.

Uzul and I sit in the loveseat opposite my father and mother. I wonder if my family can see me glow each time I am close to Uzul. I wonder if they know all the roses in the valleys bloom each time Uzul touches me.

Jade takes one of the chairs at the table and hovers near the crumpets.

Remus enters the room, smiles a wide smile at me and Uzul. "They look like they've been married fifty years, don't they?" Remus asks the room, nodding his chin toward Uzul and me.

Jade laughs.

I know Remus is teasing, but way down inside I believe the bells in every chapel were ringing the night that Uzul first kissed me.

Remus sits. My father and mother, brother and sister are watching us intently. My beautiful family is clearly ready to listen and support. Tears are coming to the surface for me. I am so proud of my family. They torture me to no end, but they are fiercely loyal. Uzul sits tall next to me. I know we look like a couple. I feel like a couple. I know Uzul also feels this way, even though he is certainly ruminating on all the things he can do to Gideon that are similar to what coffee grinders do to coffee beans.

The room gets quiet, and all eyes are on Uzul and me.

“Please tell us what this is about and how we can help?” my father asks us.

“We had a bit of a rough day,” I tell the room. “There is a bounty hunter named Gideon. He is looking for the orcs. At least that is what he told me. He was not kind.” I don’t go into deep detail. I do not want to terrify my family.

“Looking for orcs for less than noble reasons,” Remus remarks.

“Gideon targeted me to get to Uzul,” I answer. “I am not harmed,” I add to reassure the room. “I am glad we are here. Grateful you are listening. I know you love me and want to help.”

“Uzul, are you familiar with this character Gideon?” my father asks.

“I am not. As the Broken Maws Tribe, we keep to ourselves.”

“Interesting,” Remus adds. “You are the Chieftain, Uzul. Psychically I pick up what Blair said. Gideon targeted Blair to get to you.”

“Now that the Veil has fallen, ensuring that all beings have equal opportunity for personal sovereignty is more important than ever,” my mother Mara tells the room. She sits up stiff as a board when she says this.

“I am with you on this, Mara,” my father Phineas chimes in. “We need to promote and support equal opportunity for everybody whenever possible. I am not sure of anything regarding the Gideon character. I agree that until we know more, it’s best to assume he is after Uzul and targeted you, Blair, to get to Uzul.” My father pauses to take a breath and direct a serious stare at both me and Uzul. I can see rage, turmoil, and fear tearing through my father’s heart and mind at the idea of a bounty hunter targeting his daughter to harm a diplomat like Uzul. “It is imperative that you two stay here tonight. We will figure out who this Gideon guy is.”

“I know we will,” I say to the room. “I feel loved and safe.” I do feel loved and safe with my family. Loved and safe with Uzul at my side. But in the back of my mind there is a voice reminding me that Uzul will soon go back to his tribe.

Will I fall to pieces?

“I also insist that you stay here tonight,” my mother Mara adds. “We have a room for each of you. And we will enhance the already in place protective spells.”

My family’s love for me and their spell-craft abilities are tight. What scares me is a full night’s sleep in a room away from Uzul. It has been a few days since I have had to brave such a desert without that handsome loving orc. Will I be in his dreams the way he is in all of mine?

There is one other thing that bothers me. Uzul will be returning to the mountains and the Broken Maws Tribe. This will be sooner rather than later now that Gideon is a problem.

We finish our family discussion about how it’s best to stay the night here until we figure out who this bounty hunter Gideon guy is. We also agree that a full night’s rest will be the best medicine. “Thank you for this,” I tell my family. “I am grateful. Uzul and I will help straighten this sitting room back to normal, and then retire.”

The family stands, we hug, issue “So mote it be” prayers for the successful conclusion of our plan, and then adjourn to our respective rooms.

Uzul might as well be a million miles away. This one night I hate the night. The morning light when I can see Uzul again cannot come too soon. Perhaps not to be, not to exist, is how it feels to be without his presence.

Of all the things I have done these last few days, doing things with Uzul is what I want to keep on doing. Of all the things I have touched, his flesh is what I want to be touching. This is very unfair. And what will come of me when he returns to his beloved Broken Maws Tribe? I know he must. I am already coming undone. I am a rose of fire that never blooms.

UZUL

We walk along the path I found the footprints on. The Morgans believe that the bounty hunter still lurks nearby. The only problem is, I followed a pathway and left it when I heard the noises.

“Do you remember what the shack looked like at least?” Mara asks.

I nod. “Yes. It’s small and a little rundown. If we see it, I’d recognize it.”

The woods look vastly different between day and night. I don’t know which direction I took off to. Still, I did run a couple more meters into the trees after hearing Blair.

The footprints wore off a bit with my own. When I walk, I tend to drag my feet, leaving thick streaks. I never felt so useless as I do now.

Blair puts a hand over my arm. I look down at her, seeing her give me an encouraging smile. Such a beautiful slight renders me weak to any negative thoughts. I return the kind gesture, forgetting for a moment the presence of her family.

Phineas clears his throat. “I suppose it’ll be faster if we use magic to find it?”

“That’s a fine idea,” Mara replies. She turns to Blair. “Give me your hand, sweetie.”

“Why?” Blair asks, hiding her hand.

“One method of tracking is using DNA. You scratched your legs right? If there’s even a bit of it left in the shack then we can track it by pricking your finger.”

Even Remus appears confused. “I don’t remember learning that.”

Mara laughs. “Of course not. This trick was only for your dad and I. How do you think we knew when you were up to no good?”

“Wait, is that why you guys would sometimes show up to my parties?” Jade asks.

“Obviously.”

Blair stands on her tiptoes and whispers to me. “Parties are a type of celebration.”

I nod in understanding.

“Mom, Dad! Why would you do that? Do you know how embarrassing that was?” Jade whines.

Phineas shrugs. “Better for you to be safe than not. Remus was worse than you. We almost got in a war with the dragon clan because of him.”

Jade, Blair, and I look at Remus with a mix of shock, confusion, and curiosity. The parents still look like the incident bothers them. The person in question shows no signs of remorse.

“What? They started it. How was I supposed to know they have anger issues?” he says.

I’ll have to agree with him on that. Orcs are known to have a short fuse. Dragons are an entire different story.

Jade scoffs. “Because they’re *dragons*? What did they even start? And why didn’t Blair and I know?”

The siblings start to bicker. Blair sighs in defeat. I share her same emotions because this is getting out of hand. We keep getting off track of what’s important.

Going back to how Mara planned to track down the shack, I don’t like it. It feels a bit too ominous to use on Blair.

I say loudly. “Is there another method that doesn’t require blood?”

“Hm, I suppose we can use hair instead of blood.”

“Why wasn’t that the first option?” Blair mutters to herself.

Instead of pricking her finger, Mara pulls a strand of hair. She extends it up in the air, towards the sun. Then, she lights it on fire.

It keeps burning, giving a small flame. Mara lets it go and the strand of hair floats away. The trajectory in how it moves follows a distinct path. We follow behind it.

The hair floats around like a falling feather. We don’t move our eyes away from it. Finally, it takes us to the shack. Exactly how I remember it.

“Is this it?” Jade asks.

Blair and I both answer. “Yes.”

We walk closer to it, then I start to notice that it’s the same as how we left it. It doesn’t look like anyone’s been here since Blair and I. “Gideon” isn’t around either.

The chair’s in the same position. The door is ajar. Even the rope he used on Blair is in the same position on the floor. Everything’s untouched.

“What now then?” Jade asks.

Remus follows. “We track him down, don’t we?”

“It won’t work. We need to use it directly from the source. It will be a bad ‘signal’ and could give us detours,” Phineas explains.

I turn to Mara. “I don’t suppose you have *another* hidden tracking trick?”

She ponders for a moment. “There is, but it’s more complicated. We can track his footprints but to find a clear path we need a special potion. One that we don’t have.”

“Wait, then how did you track us down then?”

“We secretly pulled a hair before you left for a party or with your friends.”

Now I’m beginning to get annoyed. I’ll admit Blair’s siblings have impeccable magic skills. Their attitude needs some work.

“How should we go about this then?” Remus asks.

“Well, we have to at least assume that he’ll definitely be back. He wouldn’t kidnap Blair without good reason and just up and leave.”

“Right, so we can also assume he won’t attack in the same way. If we try to chase after him, it’ll just be a waste of time. We need a plan that can be flexible in case anything drastic changes,” Phineas says.

Remus suggests. “Then we should just trap him. I have a feeling he’s as slippery as a worm.”

We all nod in agreement. I turn towards my lovely Blair, realizing I haven’t asked her opinion on the matter yet. Hers is the most important. She’s the victim.

“Blair, can you go over everything that the bounty hunter told you? We need as much information as we can get.”

She looks out into space suddenly. It worries me that I accidentally triggered her memory of that night. I breathe out in relief once she looks up at me.

“He said that he was going to kill you. Then after he does that, he’ll kill the entire orc tribe. I also remember him saying about being revered as a hero for eliminating the orcs.”

I should be greatly upset by such bold words. It’s the opposite of it. I feel a spark of excitement. Anger fuels it no doubt, but I look even more forward to meeting ‘Gideon.’

Mara approaches me. “Uzul, I know this will sound inconsiderate of me. Given that Gideon’s interest lies in you, do you think you can serve as bait?”

I nod without hesitation. “I don’t mind at all. In fact, I was even going to suggest it.”

Phineas claps his hands together. “Great, we’ll use Uzul to lure him in—”

“Are you serious?” Blair blurts out.

She walks up to me. “You’re completely fine being used as bait for that jerk?”

“Do you have another idea, Blair?” Remus scoffs.

“Did you not hear me *again*? He wants to *kill* Uzul. We’d be sending him to die!”

Her words pull at my heartstrings. It brings me bliss knowing how much she cares for me. This isn’t about me, though. It’s about her protection.

I know she feels frustrated that her words aren’t being taken seriously again. Thus, I take her small hand in mine. She hesitates to look up at me. I lean down.

“Blair, I am honored you worry about me, but I want to do this. This is the only way to ensure your safety. Please, trust me when I say, I will be fine.”

She bites her lips, but relents in the end.

I look at her parents. “How shall I lure him in?”

I want to protect Blair. There’s no doubt in my mind I can take on the bounty hunter. My orc’s beastly instincts want to destroy the man that thought he could touch Blair.

BLAIR

My parents go over the plan with Uzul and my siblings. I already assume the part where I just watch. What can I do without magic? Cheer them on?

Maybe not that, per se, but I would like to be there. I know I told Uzul I was fine with the plan to use him as bait. It doesn't mean I'm not bothered by it still. I can feel two things at once.

It makes me happy he's doing it in my interest. He shouldn't though. We were the ones who brought him out here, almost defenseless. I can't help but feel guilty that I can't do a lot for him.

It's even more frustrating that I can't even make suggestions for the plan. It boils down to the same thing. No magic? No opinion.

"The easiest way to lure Gideon is for you to be by yourself, obviously. We can't use the part of the forest where he attacked Blair, so we need another location," Mom says.

"It's best if we still use the forest as a trap, Mara. We can disguise ourselves better and I don't think Uzul'll be attacked in a very busy city."

They all nod in agreement with Dad. I try to scoff on the down low. It's not like me to be bratty towards my parents. But everything is annoying me right now, even their voices.

Remus butts in. "Then let's keep it simple: we use another entrance to the forest and lead Gideon to the shack. We can

still have a back up plan just in case, like dad said.”

“Fine,” mom says. She turns to Uzul. “You will have to call attention to yourself while in the city. Since an orc being out and about isn’t odd, you should act a little like your stereotypes.”

Uzul tilts his head. “Stereotype? I’m not sure you’ve explained that word before.”

I answer from the couch. “It’s basically generalizing a specific group with specific traits. Like for orc stereotypes, they are violent, mean, and loud. Something like that. For dragons, it’s the same but they can also be arrogant.”

I correct myself quickly before Uzul thinks I think of him.

“But that doesn’t mean they’re true. It’s more like the thinking of if one is like that then all of them are. Do you get me? Like when your tribe thought we were bad people because of what you guys went through before. But then you realize we’re not like that—”

Jade rolls her eyes. “I think he gets it Blair.”

Uzul holds his chin in pensive mode. It doesn’t look like he’s mad with the traits I branded him with. The Broken Maw are nowhere near those stereotypes. Especially Uzul.

“I see. So it’s comparable to what a myth is.”

I breathe out in relief. “Yes, exactly.”

He smiles proudly to himself. There’s something utterly adorable when he does it. His eyes close and his tusks seem to lift with his smile.

The moment ends when he gets back to the plan. He’s going to act as loud and ferocious as he can. That way, Gideon gets a quick word about an out of control orc. Since he wants to be heroic, he’ll look for Uzul.

As for the orc himself, he’s not going to take his club with him, even for defense. It’ll give Gideon more chances to attack him. If he thinks he’s vulnerable.

My family will be around the area. Close enough to jump into action. Far enough to throw off Gideon.

“Then I can be present,” I announce.

Mom sighs. “Honey, we’ve been over this. It’ll be difficult for you to keep up with us.”

I don’t respond.

“Great. Then Uzul can make a scene as much as you can but not enough to scare the citizens. We’ll disguise ourselves. Once you sense something off-putting, you make your way out of the city. You let yourself get caught. Pretend to be injured until you both are at the shack.”

Uzul nods without any questions. The plan sounds smooth and like nothing can happen. There are infinite possibilities of the plan going wrong. In the end, Uzul will be the victim.

No, no, no. I don’t like this. My family seems to just brush off those possibilities like they’re nothing. They of all people should know the law of probability. Isn’t it one important factor of using magic?

The rest of the conversation goes through deaf ears. They start preparing to leave. I stand up quickly from the couch, interrupting their meeting.

“Stop, let’s stop here,” I say.

My parents look at me with annoyance.

“What do you mean? Stop the plan?” my dad asks.

“Yes. Well, no. I mean to stop the plan where Uzul’s the bait. It’s more dangerous for him. It’s better if I’m the bait, since I don’t have magic powers.”

Mom holds her finger against her temple.

“Blair, we *also* talked about this. Uzul agreed to it without any problem. You went into detail about Gideon’s only interest being the orcs.”

“I know. I know. But what if this time he intends to kill him? *Just* like I told you guys. If he gets me, then he can’t kill me because he needs me to get to Uzul.”

“Did you stop and think that he can absolutely kill you to lure him out? Do you think Uzul won’t go after him himself because you’re dead?” Dad says.

“But, Dad—”

He raises his hand. “Enough. We already made a plan that works for all of us. You can’t be near and you can’t be the bait. End of conversation.”

That was my father’s cue for everyone to head out. My siblings disperse to gather their things while my parents head outside. I’m left there with a ball in my throat and balled up fists.

I feel hot tears coming but I hold them back. I already made myself a fool trying to stand up to my parents. I don’t want Uzul to think of me as a brat that doesn’t get her way.

My anger dissipates when I feel a gentle palm on my cheek. I look up at Uzul, blinking away the frustrated tears. He wipes one away with his thumb.

He looks at me sympathetically. “Stay here at your parents house. I want you here, safe, when I return.”

I nuzzle against his touch. “What if you don’t?”

He grins. “I faced worse and survived.”

Once out of my parents’ sight, Uzul leans down and gives me a sweet kiss. It lasts for only a few seconds before he breaks away. He grazes my bottom lip.

“I’m sorry. I won’t be able to go if I kiss you any longer.”

I laugh forcefully. “Please be careful, Uzul. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I know. Don’t worry.”

With that, he leaves as well. I watch them from a window as they depart in the car. My smile completely falls when they leave the driveway.

My heart drops to my stomach. At the same time, I feel it beating hard in my throat. It feels like I want to throw up. It’s only been less than a minute and I already want him to return.

I pace around the living room, glancing out the window. What if it's the last time I see him? This can't be our goodbye. It just can't be.

He'll never know what I feel for him.

"But how do I feel?" I say out loud.

I like having him around. I don't want him to leave. The sex was incredible. But that's not the only reason.

He's kind, gentle, smart, and a great leader. Anyone would be lucky to have him around.

I stop pacing. "I think...I'm falling in love."

UZUL

“Are you all ready?” Blair’s family all nod. Why wouldn’t they be ready? It’s a good plan. Gideon won’t know what hit him.

Gideon. I can’t wait to get my hands on this guy. Teach him and anyone else what happens if they lay a hand on my Blair.

“Don’t worry,” Mara says. “We’ll be watching the whole time.”

“Then let’s get moving.” On my word, the Morgan family disperse, heading in separate directions. With their powers, they will be able to covertly watch me from a distance. I could do this on my own, but it’s nice to know I have some magic on my side.

With that, I start walking. I retrace my steps with Blair the other day and head back to the park. It’s another beautiful day, and it seems everyone in the city is out and about. Perfect.

With this level of cover from other people, Gideon is much more likely to be hiding among them. Drawing him out will be so much easier. But so far, nothing. My instincts and senses are quiet.

I make it to the park and begin to stroll around. The area is just as lively as it was when Blair and I were here the other day. Humans and supernatural creatures all living peacefully together. Meanwhile, somewhere among them, Gideon, stalks me, ready to mess it all up.

I take a lap around the park, but Gideon still doesn't make himself known. So, I go deeper into the city. Who knows where this asshole might be waiting for me?

It feels weird to be walking in the city without Blair. I'm glad she listened to me and is safe at her parents' house, but I can't help but wish she was here with me enjoying the nice day. She introduced me to this city and everything great about it. I feel wrong exploring without her as my guide.

About an hour into my stroll through the city, the alarms go off in my head. All my senses and instincts are telling me I'm in danger. Just like the other day. Gideon must have eyes on me.

I don't look around for him, I can't risk him catching on. Instead, I give a subtle signal to Blair's family, a quick tug on my braided hair. Time for stage two.

I take a turn and move in as straight of a line as possible back towards Blair's townhouse, where he first grabbed her. The whole way there, the alarms are still blaring in my head. It's comforting to know he isn't very smart. A bounty hunter worth their salt likely would be a lot more wary. But I can feel Gideon right on my tail.

Once I get back to Blair's townhouse, I move down the path leading to Gideon's shack. I can almost hear how giddy he's getting. He thinks it's his lucky day.

When we get deep into the woods, it's time to make my move. I can still sense him following me, but he is about to learn why you never mess with an orc in the woods. This is my home turf, no one can beat me here.

I quickly duck off the path into a thick patch of brambles. Disappearing from view effortlessly. Years of hunting have taught me how to blend into the trees. Instantly, the alarms in my head grow quiet. Gideon has lost sight of me, but I finally see him.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck." Gideon races down the path past me. "Where did he-?"

After he passes, I slowly step back onto the path. He's so distracted, he doesn't even see me coming. This fool really thought he could take me out?

I make my way behind Gideon and tower over him. He notices my shadow half a second too late. He spins around to face me.

"Oh shit!" Gideon fumbles for the crossbow on his belt. I punch him in the face and he slams into the ground. Honestly, I hoped for more of a fight.

"Fuck, did you kill him?" Phineas Morgan materializes from the thick woods. One by one his Mara, Remus, and Jade do the same, all looking at Gideon's unmoving body.

"No." I look down at the body, it's hard to tell if he's breathing. "I don't think so."

"He's alive." Mara kneels down next to Gideon and waves her magic hands over him. "We should move him quickly, before he wakes up."

I nod and effortlessly lift Gideon up. I throw him over my shoulder and continue down the path. Only one place I know is nearby.

At Gideon's shack, Remus magically ties Gideon to the same chair he tied Blair to. Meanwhile, Jade hits him with a puff of magic that wakes him up. A dazed Gideon looks around the room.

"What the fuck-?" He finally notices me and starts struggling against the magic binding him down.

"Yeah, it's me." I crouch down to get eye level with him. "Now tell us what we want to know."

"I'm not talking to some fucking orc."

On instinct, I raise my hand to strike him but stop myself. I can't torture him in front of Blair's parents. As much as I'd like to for touching her, I don't think they'd like seeing it. I return to just asking questions.

"Who are you working with?" Mara chimes in, stepping towards Gideon. But he responds with just a smug grin.

“Who do you work for?” I roar as I get in Gideon’s face. To his credit, he doesn’t flinch and stays silent. “Did you really think you could touch *her* and survive?”

“Uzul,” Phineas places a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t think he’s going to give us any information.”

“Certainly not to a fucking orc. All you bastards are going to-!”

I look at Remus, he waves his hand and a bit of magic wraps around Gideon’s head as a gag. “True. He’s just some dumb lone wolf that thought he was bigger than he is.”

Gideon glares at me. That seems to have struck a chord. Good, if he won’t tell us anything, I’m glad I can hurt him in more ways than physical.

I look back at the Morgan family. They’re good people. They’ve proven that much so far. But they are too good to be a part of what I have to do next.

“I think you should all go home. Get back to Blair, let her know the plan worked.”

“But,” Jade says. “What about him?” She points at Gideon.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of him. He won’t hurt Blair... or anyone ever again.” Next to me Gideon must realize what I’m saying. He starts struggling against his restraints and screaming into his gag.

From everyone else in the shack, there is a silent nod of understanding. Back in my tribe, we would never be so shy about this, but I understand things are different here. They know it has to happen, he either won’t leave us alone or will just find someone else to hurt, but they’d just prefer not to say it out loud.

All four of them quietly exit the shack while Gideon screams as loudly as he can into his gag. I listen as their footsteps get further away, not taking my eyes off Gideon. Once they get far enough away, Remus’ magic fades and Gideon’s restraints and gag dissipate into thin air.

“Please,” Gideon begs. I’m surprised he hasn’t tried to run.
“Have mercy, please.”

“You went after Blair. You surviving this long *is* mercy.”

I grab his head and twist. Gideon’s neck snaps like a twig. Part of me wanted to hurt him more but I just want this all to be over. I just want to get back to Blair.

I exit the shack and begin the long walk back. Hopefully, one day soon, this will all be an annoying memory. Hopefully, Gideon is the only evil we will face.

BLAIR

The obsidian scrying mirror on the piano is scaring me. The mirror is showing me images of my family returning without Uzul. Frustrated, I grab a towel and clean the windowsills around the front entrance of my family's home and wait, distracting myself with work.

Seeing my family in real time does not take long.

Coming up the front path in lead is Jade, then Dad. Behind him is Mom. Remus is ever-alert and in the rear. My tears are already rushing me. I can't swallow.

Where's Uzul? Certainly, the pesky scrying mirror is wrong.

I want to move and greet them at the door.

I can't. I am frozen.

I can see Jade looking up at the house while climbing the drive. She smiles and shakes her head as soon as she sees me watching her through the window.

What does that mean, smiling and shaking her head?

The front door bursts open. Jade enters. I rush forward and hug her. She is still shaking her head from side to side like she is saying no.

"Where's Uzul?" I ask. I feel like my words and my entire being spill out like a bag of marbles spilled onto a hard floor, everything is going in every direction.

“No way did Gideon have a chance,” Jade tells me. “That poor fool was hoodwinked, bagged and questioned.”

“Where’s Uzul?” I ask again. Doesn’t my sister see that the snakes are going to come out of the basket if she doesn’t tell me where Uzul is?

“Uzul did the toughest part,” Jade tells me. My heart is hammering the loudest of drums in my ears. “Lead Gideon into the woods, was able to lose Gideon in the woods, and then looped around and captured Gideon.”

“Where’s Uzul?” I scream it this time. All four of them are inside now. Everybody pauses in mid-motion to stare at the screamer.

“He’s coming,” Dad chirps matter-of-factly.

“Uzul’s coming?” I answer in barely a whisper.

“Of course, babe,” Jade tells me. “He’s not far behind.”

“I’m sure he is already enroute,” Dad confirms.

“Uzul stayed back to take care of a couple things,” Remus adds.

“What kind of things?” I ask.

“Bad things,” Remus answers. “Let Jade tell you. She’ll say it better.”

“We questioned Gideon,” Jade says on cue. “He answered nothing. We took turns asking. Uzul could not get past Gideon not answering why he targeted you. None of us could. Uzul did not accept Gideon not explaining why you were targeted or offering any assurances that you would not be targeted again.”

“So, what happened?” I ask Jade. I know what happened. Uzul went to great lengths to protect me. Didn’t think twice about taking a life to protect me.

“You know why Uzul stayed back,” Jade answers. “Uzul was not going to accept blurred lines regarding Gideon coming after you. So Uzul took care of that. I know Dad is right. Uzul will be back here shortly.”

Jade finishes and I move to the nearest comfy chair to sit and swallow what I just learned. My emotional switchboards are flooding with love and remorse. Remorse that Uzul had to do such a task to protect me. The love I feel is because I know Uzul does not think twice about giving all for those he loves, and now I am the receiver of such inexhaustible devotion.

A humongous, bittersweet weight is pushing me into myself.

I return from my reverie to hear Jade in the kitchen. Remus is outside working with his broom. My parents, I am guessing, are in their bedroom decompressing.

My task now is to endure the wait for Uzul to return. I trust what my father has said. Uzul is not far behind.

Two hours or ten minutes of waiting is an eternity right now.

That's how longing is. Longing is never a friend.

I stand from my comfy seat and go upstairs to pace. I need to be away from the pesky scrying mirror and obsessing over watching the front driveway and path.

The hallway upstairs that runs between rooms is Massachusetts mastery. Long and dark and quiet. If you are not trained right, you will see spirits in the day or night. I simply want to pace, take my mind off the front drive, diffuse some of the tension of waiting. The process of continually scanning the front drive for Uzul's approach is tough. Pacing the dark hall of my family's home is not so anxiety inducing.

I do not eavesdrop. Not my style. We were not raised like that. Yet when I pass my parents' bedroom door, I can hear them.

"I do not recognize the coven," my mother is clearly telling my father. "I sensed spell-craft. Tracking Gideon, both early in the chase, and later, I sensed the presence of those who practice witchcraft."

"Darling, I did too," my father answers. His voice is taut when he says this. "A few times. Just like you, I could not detect a coven that I recognize. Their ambiance was poignant

and harsh. These are witches who regularly practice and perform their craft outside the lines.”

“I sensed them in the city, in the woods, at the shack, and when we left the shack,” my mother adds. “I haven’t sensed them since we’ve been home.”

“Remus is outside now working with his broom, recasting protective spells, no doubt,” Dad says more to himself than Mom.

“Do you think Remus picked up on these others and their presence?” my mother asks.

“I am not so sure,” says Dad. “I have my suspicions. What’s scaring me is that I can’t pick up a coven that I recognize, nothing that resonates as familiar with other covens.”

I can’t help myself. I press my ear to the door tighter and quiet my pulse. This is serious. My parents are alluding to rogue witches or a group that might be malevolent. Uzul is still out there.

“Rogue witches?” Mom asks softly.

“That is exactly what I am getting to.”

“Uzul is not back yet. Should we be worried?” Her words make me feel like I should be.

“I am not sure,” my father answers. “I can’t pick up on his energy right now.”

I am frozen. This is horrible. I want Uzul. When I hug him next, I will never let go.

“Rogue witches can be complicated,” Mom adds. “Gideon targeted Blair to get to Uzul, so he said. Perhaps Gideon was a tool of Rogue witches to get to rival covens? Uzul is clearly very dear to Blair, and Blair is very dear to us.”

Fear and confusion were swamping me. Gideon clearly said he was wanting to eliminate the orcs. Orcs plural, not singular.

“Let’s focus on what we know,” my father chimes in. “Gideon was a problem. Gideon is gone. You and I both picked up on the presence of witches. Not a coven we recognize. It must be rogue witches. The rogue witches are clearly behind Gideon’s presence, and this is something we agree on. Whether the rogue witches are after orcs, Uzul, or other covens is hard to say. We can discuss this more when Uzul returns.”

Mom doesn’t answer or comment, and the silence turns heavy.

“You are wanting to know what this means for us, Uzul, Blair, and other covens. I do not have an answer yet. Protecting what’s close to me is my priority.”

I am terrified.

I back away from the door and pace my way to the windows where I can watch the front drive and pace some more. I watch for Uzul. This is holy torture. I can’t help it. He is for me the way moonbeams kiss every sea.

UZUL

“I’m back.” I open the front door to Blair’s parents house and step in. I have no idea what to expect as I enter. I just killed Gideon, I had to, but there is no telling how they’ll all feel about it, especially Blair.

However, that does not seem to be an issue. As soon as I step inside, a figure starts racing towards me. Blair leaps into the air and I catch her. I can’t even say hello, as she starts kissing me.

It feels so good to be holding her again. I could stay like this forever, her body against mine, our lips together. I can’t believe I lived so long without someone like her in my life.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” she says quickly before returning her mouth to our kiss.

“Don’t worry,” I say just as quickly, also wanting to return to the kiss. “I took care of it. I took care of all our problems. Everything will be fine now.”

I protected her today, and I always will protect her. The desire to do so is so strong within me, I can feel it control my every action. I’ve never felt like this before.

Before, as Chieftain to my tribe, I’ve felt a strong desire to protect them and keep them all safe. Of course, I have. But with Blair, the instinct feels even more primal. It’s almost a need not a want or desire.

Feeling this way for someone is scary. I never thought someone could out rank my feeling of duty towards my tribe.

But as I kiss Blair and hold her close, I think it might be true.

“Do you want to go back to your place?” With Gideon gone, it’s safe to go back. I’m very grateful for Blair’s family and all their help but I want to get her alone.

I can’t stop thinking about our night together. I need to have her again. Feeling her heartbeat against my chest, the taste of her lips, the smell of her hair, it’s all driving me mad.

“Oh.” That’s the only answer to my question as she stops kissing me. I put her down.

“Is everything okay?”

Suddenly, Blair is refusing to look me in the eye. Her entire body language changes as she turns away from me. Something is wrong.

“Blair? What is it?”

“I... We need to talk to my parents.” She grabs my hand and leads me out of the front entrance of the house.

We find her parents and siblings in the kitchen. All of them are bushing and it dawns on me that they could probably hear us kissing. Humans definitely seem shyer about that stuff than orcs.

“Uzul,” Mara finally says after a moment of awkward silence. “Glad you made it back so soon.”

“Mom, Dad,” Blair starts in a serious tone. “I overheard you two talking when you first got back.”

Mara and Phineas look back and forth between each other and their daughter. The energy of the room instantly turns tense. What happened? What did I miss?

“Blair,” Phineas says. “I’m not sure what you thought you-”

“When tracking Gideon, did you, or did you not, sense traces of other witches?”

“We did,” Mara says. Phineas looks at her, shocked by her honesty.

“But,” Phineas adds. “We really don’t know much. It could mean anything.”

“We know exactly what it means, Phineas.”

“What are you two talking about,” I ask. I’m tired of them talking around the point. They are both clearly scared and whatever Blair overheard scared her too. I look directly at Mara. “What does it mean?”

“Well, for starters, they weren’t from any coven we know. We believe it might be a rogue coven.”

“So, that means they’re dangerous? Right?” Jade asks.

Her parents both nod.

“Rogue witch covens are bad news, to put it lightly. Then you add them working with a bounty hunter that specifically targeted you, Uzul, and... Well, I think it’s clear.”

Blair gasps. Her father and siblings all look at me with pity. I’m getting so angry, why are they looking at me like that? Why can’t anyone just give me a straight answer?

“It’s not clear! What does that mean? Just tell me!”

“Uzul,” Blair reaches out and holds my hand gently. “It’s bad. Your tribe has been pretty isolated. So, it makes sense you wouldn’t know this. But, even before the Veil fell, orcs and witches never got along. Our history books are full of conflicts across time between certain covens and tribes. Most have moved past it but some still hold old grudges.”

“We have reason to believe,” Mara says. “This rogue coven is one of those covens, still holding on to the old ways and with it, the old enemies.”

Oh god, I thought all of this would end with a dead Gideon. It only seems to be getting worse. Now there is some rogue coven thrown in to complicate everything further.

“Wait,” Blair says as a look of realization washes over her. “When Gideon took me, he kept talking about ‘orcs’, how all ‘orcs’ must die. Not ‘orc.’”

“He did the same thing when we had him in the shack.” I think I’ve come to the same realization as Blair. “His plans were much larger than just killing me. He must have also had his sights on my tribe. And if he did-”

“Then this rogue coven must as well.” Blair looks up at me with concern.

My head is racing. I’ve been so distracted down here in the city with Blair. I forgot about all the threats lurking in the shadow. To think I wanted to bring my tribe down here to join me, I’d be walking them right into danger.

“I need to get back to my tribe!” I immediately head to the door. There is no time to waste.

“Uzul!” Blair grabs my arm and tries to hold me back but I easily keep moving. “Mom! Dad!”

I open the front door but a blast of magic slams it shut before I can get out. I try to open it again, as Blair continues to pointlessly tug on my arm. The door is held shut with magic. I look back and Blair’s family have followed us from the kitchen.

“STOP!” I roar, but no one backs down, Blair doesn’t even flinch. “My tribe could be in danger! Just because Gideon failed his part doesn’t mean these witches will just go away! I need to warn them!”

“Okay,” Blair says. “You make it back to your tribe. You warn them. What happens next? What do you do next, Uzul?”

“We move, we hide.”

“And if this rogue coven has already found them? Or find them before you can get far enough away? What do you do next?”

“We fight.”

“How, Uzul? Think! Your tribe doesn’t even know about the feud with witches, do you really think you know how to defeat them? You can’t just run up there without a plan.”

She’s right. If I go to my tribe now, it’ll change nothing. I need to be smarter about this. That’s what they need from their

Chieftain.

“You also,” she continues. “Certainly can’t run up there without these four, powerful witches, by your side, ready to help.”

“You’ll help protect my tribe?” I look at the Morgan family and they all nod in agreement. I take my hand off the door knob.

“So,” Blair slowly pulls me away from the door, this time I comply. “Let’s come up with a plan.”

BLAIR

Almost instantly, Uzul and my parents start forming a plan. It then doesn't take very long for me to notice what else they're doing. None of them are even looking at me.

"You've got to be kidding me." No one even hears me. They're too busy brainstorming ideas, all of which include me staying behind.

I've experienced this my whole life. Maybe I was foolish to think that something would change after these past few days. I have no magic, I'm not as strong as an orc, so why would I be included in the plan?

But I'm putting my foot down today. Things will change. I know I can be just as useful as anyone else in this family. There is no way I'll be sitting at home while Uzul's whole tribe is in danger.

"So, I think the five of us should drive up there and-" My dad starts to say.

"Six," I chime in. "The six of us. There are six of us, not five."

While before all of them were too caught up in making a plan to look at me, now they are all actively looking away. Even Uzul is refusing to make eye contact with me. None of them want to include me.

"I'm not staying behind," I continue. "Not again. I'm just as much a part of this as anyone else here. I want to help. I

want to help end it.”

“You can’t be serious,” Remus says with a scoff. I glare at him. “You’ll just get in the way.”

“Remus!” My mom snaps, she then calmly looks at me. “Blair, we understand why you want to help. Why you want to be there. But... Your brother is right.”

“Mom-” I start to protest.

“Blair,” she continues. “You don’t have any powers like we do. This rogue coven will not hesitate to kill you. You have no way to protect yourself out there.”

“And,” Jade cuts in. “If we have to protect you it’ll just get us killed too.”

“You won’t have to protect me. I can take care of myself. I promise.”

“We know, Blair.” My dad looks at me with more pity than I’ve ever seen from him. “We know you can take care of yourself. But that is no reason to run headfirst to your death.”

“I’m not going to run straight into the middle of the battlefield. I’m not stupid, dad. But I can still go with you and help. I’m sure there is something I can do.”

My dad shakes his head. “There is just nothing that you can do in the fight that will be worth risking you getting hurt or worse.”

I look to Uzul for support, but he isn’t looking at me. His eyes have been glued to a map of the mountains since I joined the conversation. Then he turns to face all of us.

“She’s coming with us.” He says with certainty, as if it isn’t even a question.

“What?” My mom is shocked, along with the rest of my family. “But, Uzul, you do know what she’ll be walking into. She can’t defend herself like we can.”

“I know. But I believe in her. Her intelligence and resourcefulness can be just as useful as your magic or my

strength. We can't afford to not have her around for this fight. This isn't a discussion, she's coming."

My family all reluctantly nod in agreement. I look at Uzul as he returns his focus to the map. It's been a long time since I've had someone support me like he just did. Once all of this is over, I'll need to properly thank him.

"Besides," Uzul says. "We'll all be heading straight to our deaths if we don't come up with a plan that'll actually work."

"Well, time to include me in the conversation. What do you have so far?"

"Uzul, and any orcs we can muster once we get up there, will lead a physical attack while myself, your father, and your siblings will stay at a distance using our magic."

"But that won't work? Right?" I ask. "You guys can't constantly blast magic. Certainly not for an entire large-scale battle. Plus, this coven is probably prepared to fight orcs."

"That's right," my father confessed. "We can't and they likely are. That's why we need a better plan, but none of us have one."

"I do." Everyone looks at me, even Uzul looks up from the map to look at me. "The one advantage we have is that we know the rogue coven's weakness, it's the same as yours. They can't constantly be blasting magic."

"That's true." Pride seems to show through Uzul's typically expressionless face. "What are you thinking?"

"We alternate between physical and magical attacks. In the moments when the rogue coven can't use magic, we send in the orcs. Then pull them out and counter the enemy's magic attacks with our own. This way, they never get a chance to truly rest while both kinds of our fighters do."

Everyone nods along to my plan. See, I knew that if they just would give me a chance, I could prove my usefulness. It's nice to see Uzul didn't doubt it for long.

"That would work," Remus sounds almost a little excited at the plan.

“Brains instead of just brawn is always a good way to go.” My mother looks at me and smiles.

“It would increase the chances of breaking through their defenses,” my father says.

“Especially, if we get your tribe in on the plan, Uzul.” I look at him. “Do you think they’ll go for it?”

“Oh, definitely,” Uzul says with a nod and a hint of a smirk. “Anything for an excuse to crack some skulls.”

With that, the plan is settled. We all spread out through the house to collect supplies for the upcoming fight. We have to hurry, who knows what the rogue coven is up to right now.

I quickly move to my parents’ weapon closet. A closet in their home that is filled with shelves full of knives, crossbows, and any other physical weapon they might need.

Growing up, my parents put a lot of emphasis into training us to fight, even without magic. There are a lot of people out there that might want to hurt us and we need to be able to defend ourselves regardless of the situation.

Since I never had magic, this was all the training I ever got. So, I took it very seriously and practiced my skills almost every day. Now, all of that hard work will hopefully pay off.

As I pick up a knife and inspect it, I can feel eyes on me. I turn to see Uzul watching me from down the hall, a box full of medical supplies in his hands. A bit of concern shows on his face.

I put the knife back and head down the hall. This has to be just as hard for him as it is for me. I don’t want to see him get hurt, but he has so much riding on my plan. The life of his whole tribe, his family, hangs in the balance.

“Hey.” I playfully nudge him. “It’ll all be okay. I promise.”

“I know,” he says in a low voice. “I just think-”

“Don’t you dare try to suggest I stay behind.”

“Never.” He laughs.

“We can do this, Uzul. We can, and will, do this together.
That coven won’t know what hit them.”

UZUL

“**E**veryone in the car now!” Phineas sticks his head out of the driver’s side window to yell as we pack the last of the supplies in the trunk.

Remus and Jade climb into the back first followed by Blair. The last time I rode in this ‘SUV’, as they call it, it was a pretty tight fit. I certainly haven’t gotten any smaller since then. But there is no time to waste, my tribe needs me. I quickly squeeze in and we’re off.

It’s a long drive back up the mountains. I have far too much time to think. Too much time to imagine what might be happening to my tribe right now. All because I thought it would be a good idea to leave.

What’s worse is that we all sit in the car in silence. No one is saying a word. They aren’t even playing their human music. I have nothing to distract myself with. All I have is my thoughts.

I can’t shake this bad feeling. This feeling that we’ll be too late. Like when I was sensing Gideon following me, alarms are going off in my head. Every one of my instincts and senses are telling me the tribe is in danger right now. This all may be too little too late.

Why did I leave? I should’ve known something like this would happen. If my father was still Chieftain, he’d never have made such a stupid mistake. He tried to warn us all, protect us all from the outside world. But I didn’t listen.

He never would've left our people behind for so long. He never would've let himself get so distracted. My father was the Chieftain that the Broken Maws Tribe deserves.

I, however, have never been half the Chieftain he was. Now, my mistakes and short-sightedness will destroy everything my father and other ancestors worked so hard to build. Maybe I should've never been made Chieftain.

If only there was a way to contact my tribe and warn them. While I'm stuck in this car, useless, my whole tribe could be getting slaughtered. If that's the case, I will not rest until I hunt down this rogue coven and avenge my tribe.

A small hand reaches out and grabs mine. I look down and see Blair looking up at me. The sight of her kind face silences the alarms for a moment. I hold her hand back.

"Don't do that," she says.

"Do what?"

"I can see it on your face, I've gotten pretty good at reading you. You're beating yourself up, aren't you?"

"I never should've-"

"Stop, Uzul. Don't do that to yourself. You never could've known that any of this would happen."

"Still, my father warned me about the world outside our tribe. I didn't listen and now the whole tribe is in danger."

"Uzul," she squeezes my hand tighter. "Whatever we find when we get up the mountain, whatever we end up facing, we can face it together. You won't have to do it alone."

I nod. She's right after all. I have her, and her family by my side. We will be able to handle whatever we find on the mountain.

I'm glad Blair is here. Without her, my mind would've spiraled for the entire drive up. Even in my relatively short time knowing her, she has proven herself to be very smart. She always knows just what to say at just the right moment. She is able to calm me down, and help me focus, like no one else I've ever known.

However, at the same time, I don't know why I argued that she should come with us. She has no powers. We're bringing her right into a fight she has no business being in. Blair could easily wind up getting hurt or worse.

Blair is smart and resilient. But that won't stop some rogue witch from going for the kill in the heat of battle. I know this is what she wanted, she couldn't just sit back and do nothing. It's just that now I'm just as worried about her as I am about my tribe.

But I also know that even if we left her behind, that wouldn't stop her. She'd just hop in her car and follow us up the mountain. This is far and away the best option. I'd much rather have her by my side, where I can protect her myself, than somewhere I can't see her.

I will do whatever it takes to protect her. Blair means far too much to me to let anything happen to her. She's shown me so much, taught me things I'd never learn otherwise. Blair is the exact opposite of the humans my father warned about, she's special. I'd do anything for her.

With the reassurance from Blair, the rest of the drive goes by fast. Phineas parks at the campsite the Morgan family originally came to not so long ago. I quickly squeeze out of the car as the humans follow - it's time to continue on foot.

I take a moment to breathe in the mountain air. I didn't realize until now how much I've missed it. Even in the park or in the woods by Gideons shack, the air was never this good. It's hard to believe I'm still thinking of giving this up to move my tribe down to the city.

As Blair's and her family start unpacking the supplies from the car, the alarms in my head start going off again. Something is wrong, but I can't figure out what. Until it dawns on me, it's quiet.

I can't even hear birds chirping. Or wind blowing through the trees. Everything is far too calm for what I know is going on.

“We need to go now,” I declare. “I need to get to my tribe now!”

“Go,” Blair says. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“The path is-” Mara starts to speak but I already start running. I know how to get back to my people, and there is no time to lose.

I speed through the woods as fast as I can. I know this place like the back of my hand. It takes almost no time at all before I’m out of the woods and into a clearing.

Relief washes over me as I spot my tribe. They are not only still alive, but everything is seemingly business as usual. Still, the rogue coven may be on their way, we need to get everyone to safety.

My tribe spots me come out of the woods and rush over to me. In an instant, I’m surrounded by orcs, asking me all kinds of questions about the city and humans. However, I don’t hear any of it, the alarms in my head are still too loud.

Rogar approaches me and slaps a hand on my shoulder. “Good to have you back Chieftain. You’ve been missed.”

“Rogar!” I grab him and hold him close. I need to make sure he hears this over everyone’s commotion. “The tribe is in danger. We need to get everyone out of here as soon as-”

“You brought them back?” I follow Rogar’s eye line behind me to where Blair and her family are stepping out of the woods.

“Listen to me now!” With that, all the commotion from my tribe around me quiets down. “We need to get the tribe to safety before it’s too late.” The tribe bursts into more questions.

“UZUL!” Blair’s shout cuts through everything else. I look at her and see she is pointing at something in the distance. On the far side of my tribe’s land, a mass of rogue witches and their minions approach us. They move slowly but menacingly.

It’s too late to run and hide. Now is the time for the Broken Maws Tribe to fight.

BLAIR

“**W**arriors, go to Uzul, everyone else, you know where to safely hide until the battle is won.” I try to yell over the commotion, but I doubt anyone hears me. Luckily, it seems the Broken Maw Tribe has planned for days like this. Everyone seems to know exactly what their role is and plays it perfectly.

In just a few moments, only the fighters are left on our side of this soon to be battlefield. While the warrior orcs all flock around Uzul. I stand back, out of their way. Better to let Uzul do his thing as Chieftain than get in the way.

My family hangs back, ready to fight from a distance, behind the orcs at this end of the battlefield. They all look so serious. I’ve never seen my family like this. Though I appreciate how willing they are to help Uzul and his tribe, I don’t think many would blame them if they stayed out of the fight.

I watch the rogue coven approach at a distance. They creep towards us slowly. These rogue witches seem to be enjoying the dramatics of it all. Soon, they will come to regret that. All they’re doing is giving us more time to prepare.

“Blair!” I turn and see Uzul waving me over to the center of all the orcs. I shake my head ‘no.’ I know I wanted to be here, but I don’t know if I should be in the middle of all that. But Uzul keeps waving me over. “Get over here, Blair!”

I relent and hustle over to them. What could Uzul possibly need from me right now? All the orc warriors watch me

closely as I run over. I thought after my time with Uzul, I'd be better at reading orc facial expressions. But I can't tell what they're thinking.

"Really, Uzul? What are you doing? She-" One of the orcs starts talking but Uzul waves his concern off.

"Trust me, Rogar. Just trust me, she is a good one."

"What? Uzul, what is it?" I look at Uzul and try to ignore what I just overheard from that orc, who I suppose is named Rogar.

"Tell them the plan."

"I- What?"

"It's your plan. I think they should all hear it from you, Blair."

"But, don't you think it should be you?"

"They will listen to you."

I look at all the orcs that now surround me, again I can't read their faces. I have no idea if Uzul is right. Will they listen to me or even respect the plan I came up with? But I look at Uzul and *can* read his face. He looks confident and it gives me the confidence I need to order these orcs around.

"Okay, the first thing you all need to understand is that those witches—" I point at my family. "Are on your side. Do not hurt them. Any other witches today are fair game to hurt. Understood?"

I wait for the orcs to make some kind of indication that they understand. I look at all of them and they simply look back at me. This is not reassuring. I look at Uzul.

"It's understood. Keep going."

"Alright, so witches are not able to constantly be using magic. There will be intervals where they have to rest for a moment. That is when all of you orcs should attack. My family back there will use their magic to fight these rogue witches first, then you attack until they get their magic back, then you pull away and wait to strike again."

I again pause to try to see if they are all following along, but get nothing so I just continue. “This way, we can keep them on the defensive constantly. So, they will tire out, their numbers will dwindle, and we will get the upper hand. Do you all understand?”

The orcs all look at me. Then they look at Uzul before looking back at me. Oh god, this was a mistake, wasn't it? Uzul should've just given them their orders himself. Not me.

Of course, the orcs wouldn't listen to me. No matter what their Chieftain says, they would never take orders from a human. This was just a waste of time.

Then, something surprising happens. All the orcs nod and murmur a chorus of “understood”, “on it”, and “let's do this.” They disperse and get into formation, ready for battle.

Uzul looks at me and nods. “I told you they'd listen.” He takes his spot among his tribemates.

After spending so long with him in the city, it's strange to see this side of him. Yes, I never forgot that he is an orc and a warrior. But he truly seems in his element here. After all, there is a reason that he's their Chieftain in the first place. Uzul is a strong and fearless warrior.

I watch from behind as the orcs stare down the approaching coven. My family takes their places beside me, behind the warriors, and ready their spells. This is all suddenly getting very real. I pull out the knife I took from my parents' house and hope no one can see how much I'm shaking.

Uzul stands ahead of all the other warriors. He raises his weapon in the air, the others do the same. He then leads all the orcs in a war chant. The loud rumbling roar from the orcs shakes the ground. I've never been happier that they are on our side.

Unfortunately, the rogue witches don't seem phased. But their slow creep towards us comes to an end. Standing tall, the rogue coven stops, forming a line opposite of the orcs. A single witch steps forward in front of them all, mirroring Uzul with the orcs.

“That must be the matron of the rogue coven.” My mom says, quietly. The matron is the leader of a coven and the strongest member. She’s the one we’ll have to be the most afraid of.

But the orcs aren’t afraid, they continue their war chant. Even in the face of danger. I wish I could say I’m as brave as they are.

“ORCS!” The matron says, using magic to amplify her voice even louder than the chant. “Your last day on this earth is today. You do not belong on this world. You are a scourge to these lands. That’s why you were driven to the mountains all those years ago... to die. But you couldn’t even do that on your own.”

The matron breaks out into an evil cackle. All the other rogue witches join her in a chorus of evil laughter. The orcs roar even louder to drown it out.

“Oh my,” the matron says, still laughing. “You’re all looking for a fight huh?” She looks back at her coven. “Okay, if these orcs want to come out and play, that’s fine...”

As if on cue, the rogue witches all stop laughing. Chaotic magical energy begins swirling around the matron’s hands. She raises her hands up and unleashes the magic straight into the sky, in a huge plume of power. Like a geyser of unstoppable magic.

I’ve never seen someone with magic like that before. I look back and forth between my mom and dad, and I don’t think they have either. All the color has drained from their faces as they look up at the matron’s magic still infecting the sky.

The matron lowers her hands and takes another confident step towards the orcs. “They can play.”

UZUL

The matron steps forward, arms waving, eyes rolling crazy in her head. Witches and minions are lined up beside her.

Orcs to my left. Orcs to my right. Rogar standing tall, immovable.

To my rear and through the periphery of my vision I see Blair, Remus, Phineas, Mara, Jade, and our allied witches.

The rogue crowd is ever growing, a psychotic mob forming. "Orcs are not meant for this world!" I can hardly make out the words she's shouting, a smile on her face that has me on edge. "And I am destined to make them regret the day they crossed Aisling, the strongest matron on this continent!"

Then she throws into the air a pillar of fire like nothing I have seen before.

"Rubber teeth," I yell to Rogar. I yell this loudly and calmly as possible through the side of my mouth.

"The louder the bark, the softer the bite," Rogar yells to our entire line of orcs. I can tell that Blair and Phineas and their line of witches hear it, too. A salty taste of cordite and sulfur and dust carries into my lungs.

I know that beings on both sides will fall in a moment. Sword and fist, magic and fire, beings are about to fall.

"It takes a lot of energy to put on a fire-display like that," I say loudly, aiming my voice at Blair and Phineas and their brave line of witches. I am not worried about my orcs. Orcs

know that show-offs often hide their weakness behind their demonstrations. “Get her to do that again,” I add.

I want Aisling to burn off as much energy as possible before our first blow.

“Don’t be a fool,” Phineas hisses. “She’s throwing the next river of fire right at you!”

I need something. Something with which to boost and lead. Boost the orcs and witch allies.

The plan is that Blair and Phineas and their valiant line of witches will fire first. When they pause to recharge, my mighty orcs rage forward. Then our witch allies blast again, and so forth. We need this kicked off with a boost.

“Earth and stone,” I roar.

“Earth and stone,” Rogar and the Broken Maws orcs repeat.

“Earth and stone, fire and bone!” I roar.

“Earth and stone, fire and bone!” Rogar and the Broken Maws orcs repeat. This time many witch allies, Blair and Phineas and Remus chime in.

“Earth and stone, fire and bone!” I roar again, stomping my feet with each syllable.

The Broken Maws orcs, and the witch allies all repeat, stomping their feet with each syllable. The ground shakes. I can feel static electricity in the air. It feels like the universe has paused after a heavy and full inhale, which means an exhale that is really something is about to follow. I know my orcs and allies need one more boost.

“Earth and stone, fire and bone,” I yell again, louder this time and stomping. The ground shakes. The trees shake. I am shaking. “Swords and hammers sending enemies home!”

The orcs and our witch allies do not hesitate to repeat in beautiful unison. “Earth and stone, fire and bone. Swords and hammers sending enemies home!”

I can feel the waves of tremors from the stomps and the chants up into my jawbone. I know Blair and our witch allies will strike first, as planned, then Broken Maws orcs will hammer down while the allied witches recharge.

Hearing Blair's voice chanting reminds me of how Gideon tried to harm her in his service to Aisling. I can feel rage flow up through the soil and stone and into my bones. In the distance I watch a large flock of starlings abandon their cottonwood roost.

The pending clash is one mother-of-an-exhale away.

Aisling starts waving her hands in a slight circle as she did right before the first pillar of fire.

Will Aisling send the pillar of magic and fire into the air or into me?

This is when screams that could be the screeches of a thousand banshees sail past my ears and into the matron Aisling's line of witches, followed by a hot wind. The hot wind carries sheets of electricity, bolts, and beams of green, red, and ice-blue light blasting out of the hands and arms, wands and brooms of Blair and our witch allies.

I can see the matron Aisling and her line of witches flinch. Some stumble and some are unphased.

One or two enemy witches drop.

I can see the enemy screaming in pain and surprise and venomous rage, but I cannot hear it.

"Stand ready!" I yell in Rogar's direction.

"Stand ready!" Rogar screams at our line of orcs.

A second whoosh of heat and electricity roars past my ears. In the periphery of my vision, I can see streams and streams of color and fire and bolts of electricity flowing out from Blair and Phineas and the witch allies.

The matron Aisling, her line of witches, their minions, wobble slightly. Some fall and stand back-up.

I watch with awe at the power and coordination of our allied witch friends. Aisling's witches and their minions boggle my mind with their durability.

Any second now the stream of magic from the allied witches will begin to wane. This will be our turn, just as Blair instructed. Witches will pause to recharge, orcs hammer forward.

The stream begins to wane.

"Swords and hammers," I scream and lunge forward. I can hear Rogar answer this, and I can see Rogar and our entire line of orcs lunge forward in unison with me.

"Sending enemies home," the Broken Maws orcs bellow while lunging.

I want Aisling to experience my version of blunt-force trauma before anyone else. What stops me are two or three minions who appear in front of me and then vanish in puffs of smoke when I swing. To my right and left I can hear orcs connecting with witches and other orcs whiffing at phantoms as I have. There are several flashes of light and banshee-like screams. I can feel burns and stabs of electricity hitting my arms and legs.

To my right and left I can hear orcs wincing with pain and growling with rage. I see some fall. Some orcs stand back and up and some don't.

The torrent of fire and magic from our allied witches completely ceases. They are recharging and will strike again. Orc rage and violence fills that pause just as planned.

What terrorizes me is that I can't get to Aisling. I rush forward and minions or witches appear. I bat at them with iron and steel, and they either vanish, turn to smoke, or barely take a glancing blow. This deathly maelstrom reminds me of a wretched game that Blair tried to show me. The game was called Whack-A-Mole.

To my rear I can hear and feel our allied witches move forward. They are recharged and ready to hurl another barrage.

Someone next to Rogar falls with a scream. Something my father once told me rises quickly to the surface at the sound of falling orcs. “A great Chieftain knows when each orc falls, because the Chieftain is that orc!”

I swing and miss, swing and miss. Then I swing and connect. Not a minion this time. A witch of Blair’s size and shape. Or maybe this is a trick to get me worried about Blair? I will not let myself be distracted.

The air is thick and dark with the smell of copper and dust and sulfur.

Two more witches appear in front of me. Young and lithe and sinister.

“Earth and stone,” I roar.

I cannot see Rogar or most of my orcs. They are fighting to live.

I use the intense love I feel for Blair and the Broken Maws Tribe to fuel my advance.

BLAIR

The sound of clashing steel, orc roars, and beast snarls echo all around me. No amount of sparring practice could have possibly prepared me for this chaos.

The orcs around me slash forward with their axes, swords, and hammers, weapons whistling as they pierce through the air. They throw their whole bodies into the attacks, letting loose with spinning kicks, skull crushing uppercuts, and goring their sharpened tusks into the summoned creatures who dare to get too close.

“Charge!” shouts an orc leader to my right as a second wave of orc warriors slams into the horde of summoned. Orcish cries of war are soon drowned about by the gurgles and screams of creatures dying.

But, where one summoned creature is felled, another steps up to take its place.

Meanwhile, the puppeteers stand back from the fray, spurring their minions on and raining fire, lightning, and other magical attacks down on the defenseless orcs.

“Come now, is that best you can do?” a screeching voice calls out. “I thought orcs were supposed to be fearsome warriors. But look at you, cowering in fear.”

Searching for the source of the taunting voice, I find Aisling laughing maniacally as she waves a hand, peppering a small group of orcs with what appears to be innocent rain. Except the air fills with the acrid scent of burnt flesh, the droplets hissing as they find their mark. The small group of

orcs let out angry growls as they hastily retreat, arms covered in bleeding blisters, singed hair dripping off their burnt scalps.

My blood turns to fire. I want nothing more than to wipe that smug smile off Aisling's cruel face. I lift my sword and prepare to charge her, but a seven foot tall creature intercepts me.

Calling on my years of training, I reach deep inside, envisioning a fireball forming in my opened fist. But all I find is the emptiness that has greeted me a million times before.

"Aaargh!" I scream. If there was ever a time where I truly needed magic, it was now. The rogues are slaughtering the orcs.

I whip my steel blade forward, leaving a deep gash in the hairy hide of the summoned beast standing before me. It roars at me and retreats a few paces. Blood now drips from its left shoulder and one arm swings limply at its side.

The creature roars as it charges me once more, swiping a clawed fist at my face. But I deftly step aside, leaving the creature to stumble and fall.

Scratching at the grass and dirt, the creature slowly clambers its way back to its feet, preparing to charge me once more.

That's the problem with summoned, I think, staring at its rage filled eyes. Being bound to the witch that summoned them, they must keep charging the enemy until they win or die.

The creature I am battling lumbers forward, but a slice to the right thigh sends it tumbling to the ground once more.

Shaking my head, I take a moment to gaze around. The orcs are fighting ferociously, but there are too many summoned. I watch in horror as orc after orc is cut down, weariness and pain reflected in the eyes of those that remain.

Dammit, this was my plan. Beat back the enemy with the orcs and then unleash surprise magical attacks. But all I've succeeded in so far is helping lead Uzul's people to slaughter.

My lip trembles as I think of Uzul's kind, caring, face. The fierce orc leader that I care so deeply for placed his trust in me. And I'm letting him down.

"No!" I shout. "I will not let this happen." I take a deep breath and shake my head.

I'm on this battlefield to use my brain, not my brawn. And it's about damn time I make myself useful.

Scouring through the recesses of my knowledge, I search for the answer while continuing to dodge attacks from the persistent creature intent on tearing me limb from limb.

What we need is to break the link between witch and summoned. Without the bond, the witches will no longer be able control the creatures they summoned.

The easiest way to defeat a summoning spell is to kill the witch, but we can't currently reach them, so that's out.

Option two is a counter spell, but this is difficult and attempting it would reveal our witches.

The third and final option is to manually sever the link.

With this in mind, I begin carefully circling the creature in front me. I repeatedly bait it into attacks so that I study it further.

After the eighth failed attack, I find it, the binding point. A small, half-circle rune hidden in the forearm of its fur. It is glowing light blue.

I shake my head in disbelief. Aisling must have been in a hurry to create such a weak binding in such a vulnerable place. Or perhaps she had simply underestimated us.

Angling my short sword blade, I quickly slice through the creature's forearm, just above the binding point. The creature howls in pain, clapping its forearm to its chest. The rage fades from its eyes.

The creature swivels its head left and right, looking around in confusion. It crouches low and I ready myself for another attack, but the creature bolts instead, fleeing into the tree line on my right.

Triumphant, I look for my next victim.

After a few seconds calculation, I sprint forward, severing the wrist off a gnarled creature, before spinning away and slicing off the arm of a second tentacled creature. Giving my wrist a quick flick, I stab my dagger into the forearm of a third hairless creature.

Pausing to admire my work, I see that the first creature I attacked lays on the ground howling, and the third creature I stabbed is currently attacking the tentacled one. None of the three show any interest in battling the orcs.

“Focus your attacks on their left forearms.” I call out to the orcs around me confidently.

I hear several grumbles of confusion, and no one moves to carry out my orders.

Then I hear Rogar growl beside me, and I watch as he launches at a spiny creature, quickly cleaving off its left arm at the elbow. The creature immediately flees, screaming.

The other orcs who have stopped to watch Rogar, hesitate for only a moment before charging forward to launch their own attacks. With a yell of my own, I join their charge.

I move through the ranks and continue to shout “Their left arms, hack off their left arms.” until my voice is hoarse.

The word spreads quickly, and soon the hordes of summoned are significantly thinned, as most of the now unbound creatures flee or battle one another.

It's time I think, as I whistle sharp and clear. A few moments later I hear the crack of thunder and the searing heat of a fireball fly past as my family charges into the fray. They quickly blow through the weakened line of summoned and begin directly attacking the dozen or so rogue witches.

The rogues, now faced with battling the orcs as well as my family, begin to falter. A young male rouge is knocked unconscious, blood trickling from an open gash across his forehead. The orcs let out a cheer at the sight.

“Glory to the Broken Maws tribe!” I hear Uzul call out. Invigorated, I pump my fist in the air and charge once more into the fray.

“Filthy traitors!” I hear Aisling screech.

I look up to find her Aisling’s eyes focused intently on me. “Why do you betray your own kind and help the orcs?” she screams at me. “These filthy brutes are a blight on our world.”

I just shake my head and raise my sword, planting my feet in a wide ready stance.

Aisling stops her rant and stares at me curiously. “What is wrong little witch? Are you all out of magic?” I brace myself, teeth gritted as the blast of air she flings out slams into me.

The sound of her screeching laughter rings through the battlefield. “You don’t have a drop of magic in you, do you.” Aisling states, breaking into a fit of maniac giggles.

She waves her hand once more and a cold icy wall slams into me. *Shit, a freezing spell* I think to myself. I can feel a leg muscle twitching as I struggle to move, but it’s like I’ve been turned into a statue.

“You know, after I kill you, I think I’ll summon you back to the battlefield. Let you battle your friends.” She spits out the last word in disgust. She begins to saunter closer.

I watch as the orcs around her begin to rain down attacks, but they simply bounce off an invisible shield, Aisling paying them no attention.

“Say goodbye, little human.” Aisling calls out joyously. Even frozen, I can feel the electrical charge build in the air as she gathers power for her attack.

My heart sinks. Frozen as I am, there is nothing I can do. I will die here today.

UZUL

Blunt-force trauma is what I have for Aisling. Getting at her is difficult.

And painful.

“I keep lunging at phantoms,” a young warrior breathlessly tells me as we both stumble forward. “Witches and minions appear in front of me. I swing, I smash, I rage, and these cowards disappear in puffs of smoke.”

“We got this,” I growl.

Bites of electricity, burns of acid and flames tag me for my effort.

I know Aisling is close. “Come get it, you skinny old thing!” I call out.

“Spread out, spread out,” an orc warrior yells.

“Stay in line,” another orc barks between breaths.

Aisling and her fetid crew are using confusion and mimicry to great effect. A couple times I have seen members of Aisling’s swarm form into orc shapes. Mimicry of our voices has also been used. Birds use mimicry, why not the wretched?

“Our turn,” Remus tells me from the right. He is huffing for air and banged up. “Let this wave roll, power in as soon as it fades,” Remus adds.

Lucky me. Right as Remus updates me, my thundering rage finds a home in the crumpling forehead of one of

Aisling's witches.

I glance backwards and see Jade, Phineas, and a sturdy but staggered line of allied witches. Their wands, hands, and brooms are bellowing torrents of fiery death.

To the left and right I watch my scattered and staggered line of orcs ready to pour on more violence as soon as the allied witches' torrent wanes.

Blair ferrets up and down the line of allied witches as they blast. She is fantastic, she is the jewel of the heavens.

"Remember the orange fire of the moon," I yell at Blair. I want her to remember that first kiss. We sat beneath the orange fire of a setting sun and the silver celebration of Grandmother Moon rising. Even the nightingales up in the trees sang of the lilies in all the valleys blooming just for us.

"Watch for fakes and feints," Remus tells me. He is still just behind me. The hellfire streaming white from his wand begins to soften.

Time for more orc wrath.

I lunge forward. The next witch that catches my swing falls like a bag of corn husks. I hear her scream. I want more. Sparks of fire and electricity are slamming into me from all angles. They all sting and hurt.

"Earth and stone, fire and bone," I yell again. I hear voices behind me and to my sides chime in. Some loud, some scared, and some subdued with pain. "Swords and hammers sending enemies home!"

There is one witch in particular who catches my eye. She is one who stood beside Aisling in the beginning. She has green robes. Fancy robes. I had sensed earlier she was Aisling's favorite. I watch this foul tall thing stumble forward from a hit of white fire sent from Remus, Phineas, or one of the other allied witches.

I grab her skinny neck. I can hear her pain. I squeeze and thrash her into the ground. I can hear gasps of shock on both sides.

Oh glory! I am Achilles smashing the Trojan champion Hector for all to see.

Finally, some success.

Orcs to my left and right, what is left of our punctured line, lunge forward. We have to be in unison to swarm Aisling's hideous brood while our allied witch friends recharge.

I am still howling with victory after breaking that tall green witch like a bag of driftwood that has baked in the sun all summer long. I want Aisling to step out of the fray and face me. She has ducked me enough.

"Earth and stone, fire and bone," the line of orcs yell. "Swords and hammers sending enemies home!"

An orc appears before me. It looks like Rogar. I know it's not Rogar. A minion. I swing and feel my rage find purpose.

A tall figure dark as obsidian glides forward from the blood and the dust and the fear. I know who it is.

Aisling.

"Stop her!" Remus and Phineas scream. They are not yelling at me.

Phineas and Remus are yelling in the direction of the witches closest to Blair.

Aisling is going after Blair!

I don't have to think. I move. I am fast. I am the wind. I am hummingbird quick.

The success I want more than anything is to reach that space between Aisling and Blair.

An orc falls before me, and I leap right over him.

Two minions materialize in front of me, and I run right through them.

What horrid ball of fire and electricity forms between Aisling's hands I have not seen anywhere except from Aisling's foul self. I watch this ball form and launch forward.

I am moving like the wind. I turn to my side to make my Aisling facing side wide. My chest is to shield Blair.

Unto my chest said ball of fire lands.

As young orcs we would have sparring matches. Plenty of times I have been rattled hard. The few times I was really knocked out never hurt. What would happen is I would get hit, then the next thing I knew I would be looking up at the rafters, and my father would be laughing. Or I would be on my back and looking up at the trees, if said pugilism match had been outside.

This is exactly what happens after the robust ball of fire that Aisling surely summoned from the fiery entrails of hell hammers into my chest.

I am on my back. I can see the trees above through the dust and smoke. I cannot hear anything. Not a sound, but I can feel screaming. I feel the scream of someone who is watching the best friend they have ever had fall, fall the way things fall when they won't be getting up again.

I know the scream.

The scream is Blair's scream. Blair is screaming for me. I will get up again, is what I want to tell her. Do not cry or scream for me!

My legs do not move. My back is still pinned to the ground.

"Do you dream of me the way I dream of you?" I scream back. I know nothing comes out of my mouth. I want Blair to know that I dream of her every night. I dreamt of her before I knew her. Does she know this? I loved her before I knew her, I want to tell her. My mouth moves, no sound comes out. My hearing is still gone.

Orcs clamoring against witches and minions is still happening on all sides of me. Balls of fire and electricity sail back and forth above me. A silent chaos.

The strangest thing. I can see my body is still on its back. Blair is close and screaming. Orcs and witches are fighting, stumbling, and falling over me and all around me.

I am not in my body. I am over here. Not there. I feel great.
Yet I am heartbroken.

If I am over here, and my body is over there, how do I tell Blair that I love her? How do I tell her that she mirrors back to me the inexhaustible love that flows through all creatures great and small? She kissed me that first night, and I thought the moon rose in her eyes. And I knew the joy we shared would fill the endless starry skies. This is unfair. I need to tell her all of this.

I am here. Not there.

BLAIR

The whole world stops for a moment. I can hear everyone's breathing stop, just as my own. My body doesn't respond to what I'm witnessing right now. It just can't or it doesn't want to.

The orcs are behind me, closing in on the inflicted area. They stop right where I stand. There's a series of gasps.

"Uzul?" I croak out his name, terrified that he won't hear.

But of course, he doesn't. It's just even more of my foolishness to believe that my words will wake him up. My stupidity is the cause of this.

My heart is in my throat. Should I cry? Curse out at Aisling? Towards my parents for having a useless child like myself?

He lies there. The wound is fresh and bloody. Blood comes out his mouth. The image is too bold and clear.

It takes for me to react to the sound of his tribe crying out for their Chief. I run towards his fallen body. There's a small flicker of hope that he's just resting from the blow. As soon as I stand above him, I fall on my knees.

It's more gruesome than how it looks from afar. There's blood everywhere. The magic that Aisling used still courses through his large body.

My hands don't know what to do. They hover over his torso, trying to find something to do. For a second I truly

believe that a miracle would happen. That somehow, I will get a burst of energy and power.

The tears finally start falling. I don't know what to do. Why am I so stupid? Why can't I even make a protective seal for myself?

I nudge his body. "Uzul, please wake up. I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to protect me."

No response. My body falls limp on him. His body still feels warm, but that's probably from the leftover magic's heat. The glowing slowly subsides, along with his color.

I caress his handsome, lifeless face. His vibrant green skin slowly turns gray. I can't believe this is the last image I'll see of him.

Memories of these past weeks flood in my head. From the first time we met, until now. There's not a moment in time when I felt so happy. Just by being next to him.

"I didn't even tell you how I feel," I whisper.

I wipe away the blood from the corner of his mouth. Every limb of my body shakes, full of regret. I should've told him I loved him the moment I realized it. Now, I 'll never be able to tell him.

"Chief?" a member calls out.

I don't have the courage to turn towards the orcs. The ones that depend on Uzul for guidance. There's no way I can face them with the excuse that I'm too weak.

What will happen to them now?

My mom comes running next to me. I don't realize until she puts her hands on my shoulders. She pulls me away from Uzul's body.

"Dear, you're getting covered in blood," she says.

I don't care. I shove my mother away. From afar, I can hear my siblings gasp. My parents can scold me all they want later.

"Blair Morgan," mother scolds.

“No, I’m not leaving him here,” I say without looking up.

She grabs my arm. “Listen to me. We are not finished here. The rogues will regain their forces after the magic’s shock waves off.”

“We need to get him to a safe place. They’ll kill him if he’s out in the open!”

My siblings come running towards us.

“There’s no time for that. I’m picking up that bitch’s energy. They’re preparing for another attack. They’re moving fast,” Jade explains.

“Let me at least hide him somewhere—”

Remus shakes me. “There’s no time, Blair! It’s awful what just happened but mom’s right. We’re not done yet.”

Their shouting doesn’t get through to me. I’m just pissed off now. At everyone and everything. All I want is to disappear next to Uzul.

I turn away from my family and lock eyes with the remaining tribe members. They stare at me with a mix of fear and sadness. They expect something from me. I can feel it.

“What do we do now?” I hear one of them whisper.

I want to protect them all. It’s the very least that I can do now that Uzul’s gone. They’re just trying to live.

I turn to my family. “Make a wall of magic you guys can hold while we recuperate. It’ll at least keep Uzul’s body away from harm.”

They glance at one another, hesitating at my demand. Regardless, they lift their arms up to make a shield big enough for our side. The orcs are startled at first, but look at me once the wall completes.

I step closer to them. It’s an odd feeling to do. I don’t know whether I should apologize or give them encouragement.

“Everyone, I…” I start.

I look at each of them, finding the right words to say. I'm scared that I'll say something stupid or inconsiderate. At this point, I shouldn't care anymore.

I clear my throat. "I know I'm not the only one that's affected by what just happened. I know it's also something so sudden. There are no words that I can use to describe what I feel and what you all feel. I am so deeply sorry for your loss of your beloved Chief. Just know that the whole time he's been away from you all, he always, always, thought of the tribe."

One of them speaks out. "Then why did he leave?"

"Because he wanted to bring everything that he learned back here. He wants what's best for all of you. You are his family. Believe me when I say he had absolutely no intention to leave here forever. I never would have encouraged him to do such a thing, because I know how much this tribe means to him. I think if he had asked me to, I would follow him here instead. His happiness is my happiness. Just like your well-being is his."

They all listen to me intently. The fear in their eyes lessen, replaced with gratitude towards Uzul. I'm glad my words are able to reach them, even if it's just a little.

My family's wall starts to falter. They can't hold on much longer. I need more time with the tribe.

"Because you all are so important to him, you must all have to survive this. I know the rogues seem like a difficult enemy to beat, but don't let that discourage you. This is your land. Your home. One that you all and Uzul worked so hard to protect. Now you must fight for it."

They all roar while lifting up their weapons. They start chanting in their native language. Though I don't understand them, I know they're ready to keep going. I'm feeling the effects of it.

"Don't let those rogues take this land. Do it for you! Do it for Uzul!" I shout, lifting up my fists.

"MAKE THEM PAY FOR WHAT THEY'VE DONE!"

The orcs belt out a war cry. This is no time to grieve. We have plenty of time to do that after. In order to do so, we have to kill Aisling and her wretched army.

I wipe away the tears from my face. The last ones I'll let fall until this is over. I'll fight even if it costs me my life.

BLAIR

We need to come up with a plan. The after shock from Aisling's blow nearly clears out. I gather the surviving orcs and my siblings to start with tactics.

The only problem is that I'm blanking out. My previous plans backfired terribly. Uzul's fallen body is proof of that. What if I make another mistake?

Just as my thoughts begin to wander, I feel a large hand on my shoulder. It's Rogar. I completely forgot about him.

"Where were you?" is all I can ask him.

"We had more casualties than I thought. I was out searching if anyone else was alive."

"But, Uzul—"

He raises his hand. "I will have time to grieve my Chief. As his right hand, it's my duty to put the tribe first."

I look down. "I'm so sorry, Rogar. I—"

He chuckles. "Come on now, where's the attitude you were giving me earlier? We have work to do."

I firmly nod. Chills run up my spine. I can feel the rogues creeping up on us.

I take a stick from the side to draw our battleground. I draw broomsticks to symbolize Aisling and her minions and little hammers for our side. We all stare at the drawing.

"Okay, then what's next?" Remus asks incredulously.

“Well, we’re here. They’re over there,” I say while pointing with the stick.

Jade snaps at me. “Blair! Do I have to keep telling you we don’t have that much time?”

“I’m trying! I don’t want to fuck up again!”

“If you’re just standing there then you will!”

I think back on my strategies. I told the orcs all the time to concentrate on the minions to make an opening on Aisling and the witches. It can’t be that simple.

It’s a given that Aisling’s the source of the power. We need to get rid of her to take them all down. She’s two steps ahead of us and probably already knows what we’re doing right now.

“Jade, you know how to cast an invisibility spell, right?”

She nods.

“For half of the orcs?”

She hesitates for a moment, then nods again. I turn to my brother.

“Remus, do you think that you can make clones out of the orcs that Jade will make invisible?”

“Not exactly clones...”

“Then what?”

“Well, that spell will require time and work to replicate each and every one. When we clone, it goes down to every little detail. The best option we have is to use puppets with a conjuring spell.”

“Where will we get puppets?”

Without saying anything, Remus looks towards the fallen orcs. Then he glances at Uzul’s body. Rogar, me, and the rest of the orcs look at him horrified.

“That is out of the question!” Rogar bellows.

“Think about the advantage we have. Aisling has half her numbers. If we use puppets, that doubles our chances.”

“I don’t want to use Uzul’s body as a shield again.”

My parents join the group. They still have their arms raised, holding up the wall. They take a look at the scribbles we made on the floor.

“This won’t be enough. She already knows about those spells,” dad comments.

I rack up my brain .

“What about the illusion spells? Have you guys used that recently?”

They all shake their heads. Finally it’s all getting in place. From what I remember, illusion spells are a tree that includes different types of illusions.

“Instead of puppets, we’ll use the mirror illusion spells on the orcs to confuse them into thinking we doubled in numbers. We still need invisible orcs to attack from behind but with this it’ll buy us more time. Mom, dad, you guys will need to use a group of orcs to disguise them as some of Aisling’s minions. Change the group of orcs every now and then to attack at more angles. After we see her side weaken, I’ll use myself as a distraction to “attack” Aisling. When I have her attention, one of you needs to create an illusionary object. Make her think that I can use magic so she can get close to me. Then, mom, dad, use the transfer magic on Rogar and I so he can deliver the final blow.”

“Blair, I’m weaker than Uzul, and she took him down. How could I?”

I turn to mom. “Please place a destruction rune on Rogar’s club.”

My parents gasp. “That includes alchemy. We need a blood sacrifice,” dad explains.

Without thinking twice I slice my palm on Rogar’s weapon, letting the blood fall. After yelling, my mom draws the destruction rune on the club. It glows bright red as the blood seeps into it.

“It’s not enough,” mom says. “It needs a bloodletting ritual for it to work. This will last about ten minutes at most.”

The wall collapses. I yell at everyone to do what I instructed them. Without asking more questions, Jade casts the invisibility spell on half our army.

Remus casts the mirror illusion. The orcs prepare themselves to charge ahead. My parents took off with a group of orcs to sneak them inside the enemy army. Rogar and I stay with the rest of the orcs.

“Earth and stone,” he says.

“Stone and Uzul,” I reply.

The enemies appear in the blink of an eye. I can’t find Aisling as I hide behind Rogar while he takes down minions with his other weapon. I use fallen daggers to defend myself. I need to get out of this mess to find Aisling.

The disguised orcs make their way into the numbers. They take down witches and minions from behind and as fast as they can. The real ones stare in confusion but before they can realize what’s happening, my parents disguise some invisible orcs as rogues.

Once the rogues figure out the disguise trick, Jade removes her cast and lets the orcs show themselves. Using the element of surprise, the orcs run through the enemy like bulldozers. Suddenly, we’re hit by one of Aisling’s powerful blows.

She takes down our numbers immensely. Jade didn’t have time to create another spell. She herself begins to use illusion spells.

She disguises herself as an orc and slays them one by one. She sends my siblings flying with a wave of her hand. They fall almost ten feet down to the ground. In the chaos she’s creating, she looks as happy as a child.

“AISLING!” I scream across the battlefield.

She turns around before she attacks again. Thankfully, one of my family members is on time to create the illusionary

magic. My fists glow white, to show the “purest” form of magic: cleansing a soul. Aisling cackles at the sight.

She stalks towards me. She maneuvers her hands to form the largest “fireball” I’ve seen so far. I shake on my feet, waiting for her to get closer.

“You really thought that cheap illusion trick would work on me?” she taunts.

“I wanted to surprise you, actually. I can use magic,” I retort.

“How stupidly pathetic. It’ll be boring to kill you now.”

Behind her, the fight gets bloodier. From the corner of my eye, I can see my family creating a spell. I don’t know what since I didn’t plan this ahead. We got weak but we’re not losing.

Aisling stands a meter from me. She lifts her hand up. I look behind her. My mom looks in my direction, pointing a finger at us.

I close my eyes. Aisling’s not in front of me anymore. Mom moved me at the starting point. Rogar took my place as planned.

Aisling looks around for me, confused and pissed off. She loses the magic ball in her hand. Rogar extends his large arms back. With every strength an orc has, he strikes her right on her chest.

“FOR UZUL!”

UZUL

“O w...” It’s not the most original thing I’ve ever said. But fuck me does it fit. Or, did I even say? Or did I just think it? I can’t focus enough to tell.

My entire body is on fire with pain. Every single one of my muscles and joints have this terrible ache. I can’t move. I can’t do anything other than lay here and suffer.

I must be dead. That is the only explanation. The last thing I remember is taking that blast of magic for Blair, saving her life. She was about to be killed and I changed that. If that’s how my story ends, I’m satisfied. I must be dead then.

But is death supposed to hurt this much? I fell in battle. We orcs were taught that if we died fighting, we would join our warrior ancestors in an afterlife. An afterlife full of celebration for battles fought and won. We’d be honored for fighting to the very end.

The only problem is that this doesn’t seem like the stories. I see no ancestors or celebrations, only darkness. I also still feel the pain of what killed me. Is this what death is? Or... Am I not dead... Yet?

Maybe I can still fight. If I’m not dead yet, I could fight against this pain and get back on my feet. I try to move, I try to even open my eyes, but nothing. I’m still surrounded by darkness, feeling excruciating pain.

I try to focus on anything but the pain. Maybe I can see something beyond this darkness? Maybe I can feel the grass beneath me. Maybe I can-? I can hear!

The sounds of the battle ring out around me. It's chaotic and loud. But it means that I'm actually alive, which is good. Very good.

I hear screams. The blasts of magic. The thunder of charging feet. The clash of weapons. I can't tell who's winning, but I know I need to get back to my feet to help. But how? I can't even move.

Then, through the chaos, I can hear her. Blair. In my current state, I can't make out any of the words, but I'd recognize that voice anywhere. The most incredible sound in the world. Then it hits me, this means she's still on the battlefield.

A rage starts coursing through me. She doesn't have me there to protect her. She could be in danger. I need to get back on my feet now! I'll destroy anyone who dares to hurt my Blair!

Suddenly, my body starts listening to me again. My rage is helping me, giving me the strength to keep going. Slowly, and still very painfully, my arms and legs start to move on my command. Then, the pain starts to fade ever so slightly. I'm getting better. I'll be back on my feet, and back in the fight, in no time.

My eyes finally fling open and I'm greeted by a beautiful and clear blue sky. I'm taken back to that day in the park with Blair, what feels like an eternity ago. It all seemed so simple back then. I never imagined it would all lead here. But I have no time to reminisce. I need to get up!

The pain is still slowly fading, is this all my rage? No, something else is helping me. A figure pokes their head into my blurred vision. Blair? I'm, again, back in the park, with Blair's beautiful smile looking down at me.

But it's not really Blair, I can hear her voice coming from somewhere else on the battlefield. Who else could this be? My vision clears a little and I see Jade looking down at me.

Jade has one hand pointed over somewhere behind me, magic flowing violently from it. I wouldn't want to be

whatever rogue witch is on the receiving end of that. Her other hand is pointed at me. This time, the magic is flowing very gently towards me. She's healing me.

That's why I can finally move. Why my pain is fading. It's not my rage coursing through my body, but her magic. Giving me the strength to get better.

I finally have the strength to move my head and look directly at her. She notices that I'm awake and gives me a wink.

"Thank... you..." I try to say more but find I'm still too weak.

"Don't say anything," Jade responds. "You'll need all your strength. Just rest."

I haven't interacted with Jade much before. Honestly, just about all my focus has been on Blair since I met their family. From what I have seen, she and Remus seem to spend a lot of time teasing and taunting Blair, which hasn't sat right with me.

Yet, here she is, helping me. Their whole family is here. Helping my family.

It warms me on the inside seeing this. They could've easily not come up the mountain. They could've run at the first sign of danger. But they have not only stood their ground but have been fighting as hard as any orc.

Of course, they are fighting with us. It's Blair's family, I refuse to believe that she could've been raised by anything less. A woman as strong and selfless as her definitely comes from similar stock.

The Morgan family will forever be friends of the Broken Maws Tribe. No matter how today ends, I'll be sure to never forget that.

I can still hear the unmistakable sound of battle around us. But I can't move enough to look around and see if we're winning. I need to know if Blair, and my tribe mates, are okay.

"Are... we... winning?" I barely manage to say that much. As much as Jade's magic is helping, I still feel a sharp pain

with every movement.

“Please, Uzul, let me heal you.” A few days ago, Blair taught me a human game called poker, I’ll have to remind myself to never play with Jade. She is stone faced, giving me no clues to what’s happening, beyond simply being happy that I’m not dead.

I think I’ll have to come to terms with the fact that I likely won’t be getting back in this fight. Jade’s magic has kept me from dying, but it isn’t getting me back on my feet very quickly. But I’ll live, and that’s good.

Blair’s voice still manages to cut through the chaos of the battle. Unfortunately, it’s too far away to truly make out what she’s saying. But she is talking, which means she’s alive, and at least somewhat well. Jade also doesn’t seem concerned or scared, so maybe Blair is kicking a lot of ass.

Jade’s healing magic continues to course through me. I feel like I might be able to sit up, and look around if I tried. I have to try.

I need to see Blair. I know I can hear her but I also need to see her. I need to see with my own eyes that she’s okay.

With great effort, I swing myself forward and manage to sit up. Such a simple movement brings excruciating pain and leaves me out of breath. I guess Jade decided not to fight me on this, because she helps steady my body, so I stay upright.

“Fine, Uzul. Sit up, but please, I need you to stay still.”

“Blair?” Again, that’s all I have the strength to say. Jade’s eyes shoot off to the side at the mention of her name. I start to follow her eye line when, for the first time since I got knocked down, I hear Blair’s voice clearly.

“NOW!”

BLAIR

When Remus and I were in our pre-teen years we once decided to drop a watermelon off the roof of our home so we could see it splat and hear the sound of the melon being obliterated. It was a fascinating sound. Watching and listening to Rogar deliver a blow to the center of Aisling's chest was the exact sound the melon made when it hit the hot pavement many summers ago.

My mother charges forward. Allied witches who were upholding the mirroring spell charge forward.

“All hands get on her!” my father screams as he runs forward.

Fireballs of all colors and sizes, sailing in from different angles, smash into Aisling's body. Those witches who are not firing their best at Aisling, Rogues, and minions, too, watch in surprise and horror.

I still have knives with me. I rush forward to bury my blades as many times as I can get away with Aisling's battered husk of a body. Remus grabs and holds me close.

“Hold up there,” Remus tells me. “Get ready for the counterattack!”

I know what he means. Now that Aisling is getting pummeled and has all the focus, her witches and minions are freed to counterattack with less hindrance. I keep trancing out on Aisling's body twitching and shaking with each blast of magic and fire from the allied witches.

“Get them!” my father yells. “Don’t let them regroup.”

Two orc warriors rush in and begin battering Aisling’s body until there is nothing left. In a blast of heat and fire, she rips apart, taking the warriors with her and some of her own people too.

The sight of her death only seems to give the rogues and their minions a surge of energy, though.

Not needing the obvious to be stated, all other orcs and allied witches face outward and prepare for the counterattack.

The minions are rushing in first, half-hearted and almost directionless.

Orc hammers and fists convert the thrumming wave into confetti, mash them down into the earth and stone.

“Without her they have nothing,” Remus shouts. “They are like bees without a hive or queen.”

To my left is a group of witches. Jade. Orcs. And my fallen beloved.

“Blair?” someone calls from this group circled around Jade. I won’t look. I am not going over there. I’m not ready. I know who is over there, and I don’t need to see him fallen.

Instead, I watch the rogue witches retreat themselves into the trees, duck for cover behind anything, or run blindly into the angry swings of orc hammers and swords and fists. The rogues and minions have no tiller with which to steer their ship with Aisling mashed into the dust and the blood and soil.

“Form a solid perimeter,” I tell the allied witches. “Face outward. Just in case they’re not done.”

“Blair!” is shouted again from the group of witches and orcs circled around Jade and my fallen beloved.

“Form a perimeter in line with the allied witches,” Rogar barks at his orcs.

I watch with relief and huge sadness as a ragged and bloody circle of orcs and allied witches encloses our position.

What rogues have not fled are crawling or taking a knee with hands raised in the gesture of asking for quarters.

“Blair!” is shouted a third time from the same group circled around Jade and he-whose-body-I-am-not-ready-to-see-yet. Don’t they know I can’t go over there?

What puts fissures in my stubbornness is what I see through the inverted v-shape of an orc’s muscled green legs.

Uzul.

That beautiful being of green muscle and tusks that I have come to love is sitting up. Jade is helping him.

“Is it you?” I ask, not allowing myself to fall for the witches’ mimicry again. I do not recall crossing the distance between where I stood at the perimeter next to my father and the small circle around Jade and Uzul.

Total blackout.

Everything sans getting next to him is blank.

“It is, my love.” Uzul’s voice is deep and soothing.

At the sound of his voice I fly into him, my arms wrapping around his tree-trunk frame.

“I am just not myself when you’re away,” I tell him. I realize this sounds silly. Moments ago, I had been heartbroken and sure Uzul was deep into the afterlife.

“I’m never going anywhere, Blair,” Uzul tells me and the group surrounding him.

My face is pressed into his shoulder. All of his shoulder is wet. I pull my face back expecting blood. Blood and dust and muck and tears.

With shaking hands Uzul grabs and holds my cheeks and pulls my face close to his.

“I see you in every dream,” he tells me. “I see you every time I shut my eyes. I feel like I loved you even before I knew you.”

“I hate to interrupt!” my father interjects. “But the rogues are returning. Not to fight. Some want a quarter to start over. Some want to collect the wounded and deceased.”

“What about the minions?” I ask.

“They have faded out,” Remus murmurs. “Bees without a hive or queen.”

I look questioningly and raise my eyebrows at Rogar.

“I have no desire for witches, except for allied witches,” Rogar tells me. “If they want a quarter, go ahead and grant it. You can work with them. My orcs and myself will not harm them or stop them from collecting their deceased and their wounded.”

“Go tell them if they want a quarter, they can stay and help us clean up,” I tell Phineas. “If they want their dead, tell them to hurry and get gone before I change my mind.”

Rogar barks laughter and issues similar commands to his orcs.

I turn to Uzul. More tears are rushing to the surface. I am so grateful. I do not know where to begin.

“Thank you, big handsome,” I tell him.

“Don’t thank me. Thank Jade.”

“Wherever you went was not here,” I stutter back. “You came back.”

“I’ll always come back. Now, help me stand,” he tells me. So many arms both green and witchy reach to hoist his robust frame to his feet.

I stare up at Uzul, and the rest of the world fades away. “I don’t want to be in a world without you. I...I don’t want to be anywhere without you. I’m just so glad you’re okay. I was afraid that you wouldn’t survive it.”

“Nothing will keep me from you.” He cups the back of my head.

Jade’s voice cuts through our moment. “I think he really means that. Not even death,” Jade adds.

I stop talking, focusing on our balance so we can stand without falling over. I am falling apart. I can barely put a sentence together. I do not hear any more clashing between orcs and witches. The crowd surrounding us is getting bigger.

“You need to say something,” Remus tells me.

“Remus is right!” my father chortles. “One or both of you need to address this moment.”

The last of the rogues, those who have not fled, are grouped to the right. It is clear they want to gather and mourn their dead. The allied witches and orcs hold a close perimeter.

All eyes are on Uzul and me.

“You tell them,” Uzul whispers. “I am still having trouble breathing.”

I don't have anything to say on hand, still overjoyed to have my big-green-handsome back. I decide then to just tell them how I feel, which usually goes over like a lead balloon.

“That Great Breath that flows through me, flows through you, too,” I yell out with my best effort to be loud but not scream. “I am another version of you, and you are another version of me. We all got hurt today, and we all lost today. We owe it to the ones we love, the ones we lost, and especially to each other, to spend the days we do have left a little better than we spent today. I think you know exactly what I mean. That's all.”

“Nobody will ever accuse you of bloviating,” Remus snickers.

UZUL

“**W**OAH!” Blair takes a nervous step backwards into me as the bonfire roars even higher. I hold her close. Something that, not too long ago, I was worried I’d never get to do again.

Her beautiful face is illuminated by the flames as she looks up and smiles at me. My face starts to feel warm at the sight, and not just because of the roaring fire. I’ve literally been in battle with this woman and she still makes me feel nervous.

“Don’t worry,” I say as I hold her tight, feeling every curve of her body against mine. “I won’t let you fall in.”

“So, tell me again, what is this tradition?” Blair looks around at all the orcs around the giant bonfire, in the midst of celebration.

“Well, in the Broken Maws Tribe, after every victory, we build one of these bonfires to mark the occasion. The bigger the victory, the bigger the fire.” I look at the flames as they seem to reach as high as the trees. “The idea is that, if the victory is great enough, the fire will be so large that our ancestors, and anyone who fell in the battle, can see it burning in the afterlife, and know to be proud.”

“I bet they’re very proud,” Blair says as she leans into me. “Have you told your tribe yet? About...”

I know what she is referring to. My whispered promise on the battlefield as she helped me to a place to rest and be healed properly. At first, she told me to wait, to give it time before I claimed such things, but I know in my heart where I belong.

It's next to her.

"No, not yet." I look around at my tribe. Today has been a great victory for us. But it has also made something else abundantly clear, we can't keep to ourselves anymore. If we do, it could mean the end of us. "But now is as good of a time as any."

I step up onto a large rock near the campfire. My tribe's celebrations immediately fall silent. They know this means a speech is coming. They look at me with eager anticipation. But now I worry they won't like what I have to say.

"Broken Maws Tribe! Today, we won!" My tribe breaks out in cheers. "But victory would not be ours without the Morgan family." They now cheer for Blair and her family.

I look down at Blair. She blushes as all the orcs cheer for her. Phineas raises his drink, Mara smiles widely, Remus shows off some magic, and Jade does a polite wave. They deserve all the praise they are getting, and more.

"If it was not for them, the Broken Maws Tribe would be no more. And that is a problem. For so long, we have kept ourselves isolated, thinking it will keep us safe. However, ultimately, it was our relationships with the outside world that truly saved us. It's time for a change."

My tribe begins to murmur to themselves.

"What does that mean?"

"Change what?"

"What is he saying?"

Rogar steps forward. "Chieftain, what are you saying?"

"It's time for the Broken Maws Tribe to leave the mountains and enter the world out there. Enter society."

My tribe's murmurs grow to full blown yells. "The outside world just tried to kill us!" "You have to be joking!" "His father would never-"

"Please, listen to him!" Blair tries to yell but is quickly drowned out. I grab her by the shoulders and heave her up on

the rock with me. “Everyone! Listen to me!”

The tribe grows quiet. Listening to her with the same anticipation they usually give me. She really earned their respect today.

“Uzul is right! Keeping yourself isolated is actually opening you up to more danger! The world outside this mountain isn’t like it used to be. There are communities of supernatural beings living together peacefully. Witches, shifters, and hopefully soon orcs, all looking out for each other, keeping their friends and neighbors safe.”

“But,” Rogar says. “We were just attacked by witches. How can we live alongside them, knowing some might attack?”

“That coven does not represent all witches. They were rogue, caught up in the old ways, and they paid for it today.”

“Believe me, Rogar.” I place a hand on Blair’s shoulder. “Not all witches are like that. Most are perfectly fine people.”

“What about the rest of the world? What about humans?” Rogar looks around at the rest of the tribe. They all nod in agreement with them. “Are we really supposed to believe they’ll accept us among them? We’ve heard stories of the old days, stories *your* father used to tell Uzul.”

“Some people might look at you funny, but in the past few years there have been great strides to get normal humans to accept the supernatural living alongside them.” Blair looks up at me. “Right, Uzul?”

“In the time I spent down in the city with Blair, I was never made to feel out of place. It was like I had always lived there and no one gave me a second thought. It can be like that for all of us!”

My tribe starts murmuring again. Maybe this was a bad call. They’ve all lived their whole lives up here in the mountains. It’s silly to think they’d want to leave to live in the unknown.

“Ahem,” Mara steps forward towards the tribe. “If I may, in our time with Uzul and since meeting and fighting

alongside all of you. We've come to have a great level of respect for orcs, and the Broken Maws Tribe."

"Yes," Phineas continues. "A lot of respect."

"We also hold a lot of sway in the supernatural community. Should you all decide to join us in the city, we will be with you every step of the way, to help you integrate and adjust. We will do everything in our power to help all of you live full and successful lives."

"Uzul," Rogar looks back up at Uzul. "Is this truly what you think is best?"

"Yes, Rogar. It is. We can no longer survive this way. The time of the Broken Maws Tribe's isolation is over."

"Okay." Rogar nods. "What should we bring?"

The next few hours are spent packing up everything from our tribe. Generations of the Broken maws Tribe gone so quickly. But it's for much better reasons than what the rogue coven was trying to do.

Orcs and the Morgan family work together, almost as well as they did on the battlefield, to remove all trace that we were ever here. Rogar and Remus lead team to take down tents, Phineas shows others on a map how to get down the mountain and to the city, Mara does magic to impress and distract the children while the adult work, and Jade uses her magic to do some last-minute healing on my tribe mates before we head off.

Blair and I watch it all from a distance. We just stand in silence, her leaning against me. It's hard to believe it's actually happening. This new chapter in the Broken Maws Tribe will be scary at first, but it's for the best.

It's going to be a lot of work, but right now I'm just grateful to be spending this time alone with Blair. We don't even need to say anything, simply listening to her breath is enough for me.

From our vantage point, we can see the finishing touches being completed. It's almost time to go. It's too bad,

everything is about to get so busy, I don't know when we'll be alone again.

Blair steps away from me towards her family and my tribe. She looks back with a smile. "Ready to go?"

UZUL

“Mara, I can’t thank you enough for all your help,” I say.

She waves me off. “It’s the least we can do to repay you all.”

I look at the giant mess of their home. “Yes but, don’t you think we could’ve done this at the campsite?”

“Then how would we teach your tribe properly?”

She has a point there. However, I didn’t have the foresight to know that other orcs would be clumsier than me. A few windows have broken along with the furniture. That’s only because they still don’t know how to measure their strength.

I have to say that it’s quite a sight to see. Orcs being excited to learn about the modern. The first thing they want to learn is about the “pocket box” each Morgan has. They take them out and light up the cell phones.

The phones make a ringing sound, to what Blair describes as the phone starting or ‘waking up.’ There’s a chorus of ooh’s and aah’s. Blair giggles and places her phone on an orc’s large hand.

Orcs huddle around her to get a better look. She holds down his fingers so he wouldn’t crush it by accident and guides him with one finger. She allows him to touch the screen and navigate through its properties. Just as she did with me.

Blair looks up at my right hand man.

“Rogar, wanna try?” she asks him.

“Sure.”

As she did with the other member, Blair takes Rogar’s hand gently to place the phone on it. The latter clumsily presses too hard on the screen and it cracks. The orcs gasp and turn to Blair. Rogar turns a bright shade of red.

“Blair, I didn’t mean—”

She raises her hand. “It’s okay, you guys are learning. My family can fix this with no problem.”

They all breathe out in relief. I wanted to laugh in Rogar’s face but I’m sure that’s the jealousy speaking. Instead, I offer him an encouraging pat on the back. Although a little too hard.

“It still works. See? You just cracked the screen. Try to graze it with the pad of your fingers,” Blair explains.

“What do you use this for?” an orc from the crowd asks.

“It was made to communicate better. Instead of relying on a messenger or a letter, this was invented. It’s much faster and you can call for help in emergencies.”

Blair presses a series of numbers. Mara’s phone rings and she picks up with a “Hello?”

The orcs ooh again. Unable to comprehend how the phones are connected in such a manner. It still confuses me but Blair said that even she can’t fully explain it.

Across the living room, Jade shows them the computer. Their attention is much more hyper fixated on the large rectangle than the cellphone. For this, Jade only allows the younger orcs to try it out.

“You have to do it gently. These are much more expensive than the cellphones,” Jade says.

“How expensive?” the child asks.

“Twice as much. So be careful!”

“What can we do with it?”

“So many things! It has the same functions as the cell phone. You can listen to music. Write whatever you like. Watch movies. Search up thousands of resources for information...”

“What’s the difference then?”

“It’s bigger!”

Outside, Remus and Phineas show how the cars work. Their reactions are the same as mine was. The orcs eagerly tried to beat the other for the driver’s seat.

Phineas snaps his fingers to make them float right back out.

“Now, you all have to remember to mind your strength. Just because it looks big doesn’t mean it can hold you all,” Phineas explains.

“Then how did the Chief travel all the way here?”

“Well, it was quite difficult to be honest. They may need to start producing cars that are fit for you orcs. It’ll be more expensive I imagine.”

The orcs’ shoulders slump.

“But that’s why we’ll teach you how to earn your own money,” he finishes explaining.

The answer was enough to satisfy the orcs. I’m sure the integration will be hard for them. It’s a good sign that they catch on pretty quick. It makes me proud as Chieftain.

I approach Mara. “They’re learning quickly, albeit clumsily.”

She chuckles. “I can see that. I was thinking of separating them in smaller groups, how they’re doing right now. Each group will be led by a member who has shown aptitude for learning and adapting quickly. What do you think?”

“I think they have already done that.”

“How about taking them into the city?”

After the orcs overhear our conversation, there's no talking them out of it. The Morgans take each group to a different part of the city. The park, a library, a restaurant, and such. Blair takes her group to the local market.

I follow closely for safety purposes. Rogar takes the lead for the group. Blair hands each orc a basket.

"Usually we use carts to carry our food, but to avoid accidents, we'll use these baskets. Go along the aisles to pick two items of food you want."

They all rush ahead of her, as if they're on a hunt. The cashier looks on with surprise and worry.

Rogar comes back with his items. "I chose these."

Blair looks over them. "Great, these are called spaghetti noodles. This is a ham. Do you know how much you'll pay for these?"

Rogar tilts his head. "Pay? But I found them first."

"Yes, but here we have to exchange money to have it. For example, if Aghed wanted your hunt, he'd have to exchange something of equal value."

Blair takes out cash from her pocket. The rest of the group returns with their own items. Some I recognize as cleaning tools, others are just eating utensils, and others are just boxes of food.

"Instead of exchanging food for food, we give them dollar bills. They go from one dollar to a hundred. You have to be careful not to spend everything all at once or else you won't be able to get food."

They all nod in understanding. While Blair explains more of "bartering" a fellow shopper passes by with their cart. An orc reaches in and takes out what I remember being bananas. The woman looks on with disgust.

Quickly, Blair intervenes. "I'm so sorry."

She places the item back in her cart. The woman says nothing else and leaves quickly. Blair sighs and turns toward the group.

“That’s one thing you have to remember. You can’t just grab things that aren’t yours because you like them. Here we respect people’s property. You have to make sure if something, anything, doesn’t have an owner first. It can get you in trouble.”

Blair shoos them off again with instruction to check the price and mind other people’s presence. It’s finally just the two of us on this chaotic day.

“How do you think they’re doing?” I ask her.

She laughs. “Better than I thought. I’m glad there aren’t any fights. I’m glad they’re as curious as you were.”

“I have you to thank for that.”

She looks up. “What for?”

“You were the one that made me interested in all of this. It just started with your shy expression and willingness to teach me everything.”

“But it’s thanks to your willingness to be open minded. We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you.”

I chuckle and caress her cheek. “Then I guess we both came really far, haven’t we?”

She takes my hand and nuzzles it. “We sure did. I can say now that I’m happy I’ve met you, Uzul.”

“Me too.”

I lean in for a kiss. However, it’s greatly interrupted by a series of crashes followed by yelling. Blair goes off running to fix whatever happened.

It was, of course, a destroyed display and carts, which Blair is able to help negotiate her way out of, and I watch with a smile on my face, pleased to see that now she is the strong leader she was always meant to be.

BLAIR

“**W**hat to do now?” I pace back and forth in my apartment. Every waking moment since we returned to the city has been spent helping out Uzul’s tribe adjust to their new life here. This is the first bit of down time I’ve had in a while. I have no idea what to do with myself.

“What to do... what to do...” I continue to pace back and forth. It feels weird to be doing nothing. I should be doing *something*. Right?

After everything I’ve been through, how can I just sit down and watch TV or read a book. There has to be something else for me to do. Another task to be done.

Uzul is out there right now on an outing with his tribe, teaching them something. I was so exhausted I didn’t even hear what he said. Maybe that’s why he suggested I hang back, and not go on this outing? Could he tell I was tired? I hope he wasn’t disappointed.

Should I have insisted on tagging along anyway? Uzul himself is still pretty new to all this, I should be there to help. But God, this has been such a long few days. It’s been so non-stop since Gideon showed up. Maybe I do need the rest.

As I pace, I catch my reflection in a mirror on my wall and it almost makes me jump. My hair is a mess, there are bags under my eyes, and my skin looks pale. “Yeah, let’s get you to bed.”

First, I hop into the shower. Again, with everything going on, I haven't had time to enjoy a nice shower in a while. I let the hot water wash over me and try to clear my head. Instead, my mind keeps going to Uzul, and how I wish he was here with me now.

I think about what he might say. How he might touch me. It's been too long since we were alone together. I miss the days when he first came to the city.

Once I'm out of the shower, I change into my pajamas and climb into bed. I let my blankets swallow me whole, wrapping me up in a warm cocoon. But the sleep doesn't come.

Instead, my head is swimming with everything I haven't gotten to say to Uzul. We haven't had the chance to talk about us. What we are to each other and what we will be moving forward.

I sit up straight in my bed as it dawns on me. Recently, Uzul has been staying with members of his tribe to help with the adjustment. Is that permanent? I guess I'd been assuming he'd still be staying with me. We haven't had the chance to talk about it.

I hope he'll still be staying with me. It's what I want, is it what he wants? Of course, I'd understand if he chooses to stay with his tribe. But selfishly, I want him all to myself.

The door to my place opens. "Blair, I'm home." I leap out of bed. In my haste, my legs get tangled in my blanket and crash to the floor. But I don't care. I need to see him. He just called this place 'home.'

I slide into my living room where Uzul stands, waiting for me. He looks just as exhausted as I did earlier.

"I think the Broken Maws Tribe is really getting the hang of this new life. Today, Rogar-" Uzul pauses as he sees me. "What's wrong?"

"You're here."

"Yeah?" In a new sight to me, embarrassment washes over his face. "Oh sorry. I just assumed I could still- You know what, I'll stay with-"

“No, no. It’s good. I’m glad.”

Uzul smiles at me. Now is our chance. We should actually talk to each other. We need to discuss our relationship.

But what if he doesn’t feel the same way as me? What if I was just a fun distraction for a while and now, he’s ready to move on to a new lover. Surely there is some orc from his tribe that he’s had his eye on before meeting me.

What am I thinking? If that was the case, he’d be with them. He came back here. He came back to me. He just called my place ‘home.’ He said he was ‘home.’ That must mean something.

I just have to be brave. It’s time to say it. I need to put it all on the table. Get it off my chest. Hopefully, he feels the same way.

“So, other than that, I think the tribe is all set.” Oh shit, I have not heard anything Uzul just said. I was too in my own head. Hopefully, he didn’t notice. “Blair? Are you okay? It looks like you spaced out there, did something happen?”

“I fell in love with someone!” I don’t know why I’m yelling. I don’t need to be yelling. I just can’t help it. I need to get it all out.

“Oh...” Uzul looks away from me. I can see a flash of hurt on his face. My heart stops. Fuck. Why did I phrase it like that? It was too vague!

“WITH YOU! With you! I’m in love with you, Uzul! I love you! I love you! I love you!” His head whips back around to look at me with a smile.

“Blair,” he takes a step closer to me. “I have been in love with you since I first laid eyes on you. I’m just sorry it’s taken me this long to say something. That first night together, talking under the stars... I’ve never felt a connection with someone like that in my whole life.”

My face starts to heat up. I can’t believe I’m blushing. Twenty-four years old, and Uzul is making me blush like I’m a kid again. I take a step towards him too.

“Uzul, I’ve felt the exact same way. I-I didn’t say anything because I was worried you’d want to return to your tribe soon. I didn’t want to get hurt.”

Uzul grabs my arm and pulls me close. “I’ll never hurt you, Blair. I promise you that.” He bends down so we’re face to face, his hot breath licking my skin.

I get on my tiptoes to meet him the rest of the way for a kiss. We’ve kissed before, but this is the best one yet. Our tongues intertwine perfectly like matching puzzle pieces.

Our hands glide over each other’s body. My fingers trace the outline of everyone of his bulging muscles. Uzul grabs a firm handful of my ass. I can’t help but giggle in response.

This is what I’ve been missing. We can’t keep our hands off each other. I need him now, and I can feel that he needs me too. It’s never been clearer, we’re meant for each other.

As we kiss, I slowly start unbuttoning his shirt. My fingers run up and down his firm abs, Uzul shudders against the cool touch of my fingertips. Meanwhile, his massive hands hold me closer than ever.

I pull away from the kiss and whisper in his ear, “I was about to go to bed, care to join me?”

Effortlessly, Uzul sweeps me off my feet. I hold the back of his head and pull him back in for another kiss. He carries me to my, or our, bedroom and I never want him to put me down.

UZUL

I can't stop pacing back and forth. Everything's coming up so fast that I'm overwhelmed. At the same time I can't believe the day's already here. I'm about to propose to the love of my life.

I want everything to be perfect. It needs to be perfect. Blair deserves all the precious treasures in the world. It took me such a long time to choose the perfect ring.

She needs something simple yet intricately beautiful. Not too flashy but also brilliant enough for the whole world to see. The tribe members assure me that what I decided on is perfect.

"Chief, you'll make a ditch if you keep pacing around like that," Rogar interrupts my thoughts.

"How'd you know I was here?"

Rogar approaches me from the driveway.

"I can hear your stomps all the way inside. Why are you hiding over here? Blair's not home," he says.

I currently hide, or was, by the woods' entrance.

"I'm trying to calm myself."

He chuckles. "I think the whole of Boston knows you're nervous."

I sigh. "Yes, I know. I just want everything to be perfect. It's my first time doing this, Rogar."

“Yes, and as a human custom. Tell me again why you’re not going to propose to her the way we do it?”

“As much as Blair has accepted our way of life, I don’t think she’d appreciate a hunting prize as a proposal.”

He shrugs. “You’d be surprised. Did you ever think you’d be proposing to a woman like her?”

Of course not. Never in my entire years of living on this earth did I think that. To be honest, I never even thought of having a bride. The tribe’s been my first and only priority.

Despite my plans changing immensely, there’s nothing else in this world that makes me happy. I count myself lucky every waking moment. To have the privilege to be loved by her.

I then look at Rogar. “What are you doing here? I thought you had your own abode in the city?”

“I do. But as your right hand man, I go where you go.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You should expect for that to change a bit once Blair and I wed. It won’t be appropriate to have you around our matrimonial home.”

He laughs. “Obviously. I don’t think Blair would want that either. Just be sure that I’d still perform my duties as a friend. Until I myself marry as well.”

“I appreciate it, Rogar. Though, that is if I can successfully propose to her. I have all these plans and ideas. I don’t know where to begin. What should I do?”

“What do you have so far?”

“Well, I first thought that I should take her where we first met and where our base was. I wanted to gather a group of orcs to chant the courting call. Then, I would signal for them to launch fire arrows over the sky. I even thought it’d be nice to make a bonfire after to celebrate the engagement.”

“My second plan was to gather her family and other witches so they can make fireworks spell out ‘Will you marry me?’ I was also going to ask her parents if it’s possible for us to float up into the clouds so she can see the fireworks better.

That's where I'm stuck between the two. What is more romantic and fitting for her?"

He looks back at me with wide eyes. He breathes out exasperatedly. Then, he puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Chief, Uzul, I'm sorry but none of those should be your pick."

"Why?"

"You don't have to go to the extremes my friend. Blair will love it even if you propose in her home right now. All you need is to speak from your heart. That's enough for her."

His words relax me a little. I'm scared that she will think that I don't care for her as much with a simple proposal. But, I have to remember everything we went through together. I mean, she even led a battle in my honor.

I spoke with her family earlier. They seemed thrilled about the proposal. If Blair had any doubt about our relationship her family would say something.

"She told me she loves me," I say to myself, as a mantra.

She loves me. She loves me. I love her.

I can do this. I'm ready for this. I want her for life.

"I'm ready," I tell Rogar.

Later in the evening, I take Blair to a serene lakeside spot in the state of New Hampshire. She keeps asking why we're all the way over here. I don't say a peep even though she begs in the cutest way possible.

"Not even for a kiss? On the nose? On the cheek? What about a butterfly kiss?" she pouts.

"Nope," I regretfully say.

To not give off any hints of my plans, I told her to dress rather warmly and comfortably. She looks beautiful in anything anyway. If she gets cold, I can hold her close.

"I've never been here before. It looks so beautiful at night," she says.

The stars and moon reflect like a mirror on the lake. I may not be able to do the fireworks but at least she can be this close to the sky. She touches the edge of the lake, causing ripples.

My chest tightens. My vision blurs with affection. Everything about her causes me to fall deeper in love. The only drug I'd ever get addicted to.

I take her hand from the cold water. Slowly, I stand her up and guide her a bit further from the water. She smiles up at me, a little puzzled at what I'm doing.

“Uzul?”

“Let me look at you for a moment,” I say.

“Why?”

“Because you are the most radiant being in existence. It'll be a shame not to appreciate it by such a lovely lake.”

She blushes at my words. Another dazzling sight. If angels or gods would appear before me, they'd hide away in shame next to Blair. My lovely doe is made up from the stars themselves.

I lift her hand to kiss it. Then, I lean down to kiss her entire face. Relishing her skin with each touch.

“Blair, I fell in love with you at first sight. I didn't realize it until I thought I lost you. I couldn't bear the thought of not being with you. You are a part of me that I can't, won't, live without. Because of you, I learned so many wonderful things outside the tribe. It came with the honor of knowing you as well. We've been through a number of obstacles, and vanquished them. There's no doubt in my mind that we can go up against anything together. As long as I have your love, my life will be eternal. I will spend that eternity loving you and treasuring you in every way you can imagine.”

I go down on my knee. “Will you marry me?”

By the time I finish, Blair cries. Before I can put the ring on her finger, she jumps into my arms. I catch her and I'm attacked by a thousand kisses.

“Yes! Yes! I will marry you!”

I spin her a few times, laughing with joy. Once I set her down, I put the ring on her finger. She holds it up against the moonlight. Her face is bright with glee.

I kiss her back tenfold. When I stop for a moment to breathe, we stare into each other's eyes. There aren't words needed to feel the love between us. We press our foreheads together, holding each other close as if we'd disappear.

"I'm forever yours," I whisper.

"And I yours," she says with a kiss.

UZUL

“Hurry up, hurry up!” Blair anxiously stands next to me as I fumble with my key. The drive home was agonizing, we could hardly keep our hands to ourselves. Now this stupid door is all that’s stopping us from tearing off each other’s clothes.

The front door finally swings open. There is half a second’s pause before Blair starts pushing me inside. I playfully plant my feet firmly down while smirking down at Blair.

“Come on, Uzul! Let’s get inside! I want to fuck my fiancé!” Fiancé. That’s the first time I’ve heard it out loud. I’m her fiancé and she’s mine.

“As you wish.” I relent and let her push me inside, slamming the door behind us. I turn and face her. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She reaches up and pulls my head down for a kiss. Her soft lips against mine are driving me crazy.

I can’t wait any longer, I need to have her now. I pull away from the kiss and look down at her. She looks back at me with a huge grin. I can’t believe how lucky I am to be with her.

I grab Blair’s shirt by the hem and pull it off over her head. Her hair falls down in a playful mess. I brush the hair out of her face as I lean in for another kiss. Meanwhile, she takes off her bra.

She kisses me back, pressing her naked chest into me as she does. I quickly rip off my own shirt and hold her close.

Blair whimpers as I kiss my way down her neck to her chest.

Placing two hands on Blair's waist, I lift her up so her chest is level with my face while standing straight up. Our height difference makes this a little awkward, but for her, I'll make anything work.

Blair wraps her arms and legs around me to help support herself. I take one of her tits in my mouth and feel her nipple harden against my tongue.

"Yes, Uzul, don't stop." Blair runs her fingers through my hair. "Take me to the bedroom now. I need you."

Following both commands, I continue to play with her nipple with my tongue as I carry Blair to the bedroom. Her soft moans echo in my ears.

My own erection presses against my pants as I walk. I can't wait to get these fucking things off. It's only getting harder as Blair's moans get louder.

Once in the bedroom, I toss Blair on to her bed. Her breasts mesmerize me as they bounce with her. She really is perfect.

I quickly tear off my pants, letting my cock fly free. At the sight, Blair licks her lips. She slinks off the bed and wastes no time taking me in her mouth.

I'm in heaven. I close my eyes and feel the euphoria of Blair's tongue running along the underside of my cock.

"I love you." I feel like a broken record. But it's true. I love her and I never want her to forget it.

With my cock still in her mouth, Blair gives a muffled response. I can't help but laugh. Blair spits out my cock to laugh with me.

Still laughing, Blair looks up at me. "I need you in me now." I lift her up by her under arms and toss her back on to the bed.

I slowly saunter over as Blair slides her pants and underwear off. She rotates from laying on her back to being on her hands and knees. Blair shakes her ass, inviting me in.

Holding my cock at the base, I rub the tip around her outer lips. From Blair's mouth comes a noise that I can only describe as purring. She looks back at me, wide-eyed, with a silent plea to give it to her.

My cock slides into her pussy. "You're so fucking wet. I love it." I grab Blair at the waist and start thrusting. I start slowly at first, but I know how Blair likes it. I just want to hear her beg me.

"Harder, Uzul." Blair looks back at me again. Her face and voice are full of desperation.

Never one to disappoint Blair, I start thrusting harder and faster. She's so small, I'm always surprised how well she takes me cock. But she takes it *very* well.

Blair grabs one of my hands on her waist and guides it to her clit. I take her command and start rubbing it gently, never slowly down my thrusts. Her breathing picks up its pace, she's loving it.

"You like that?"

"Yes," she moans. "I love it. Yes, yes, yes..." Her voice trails off as I pick up the pace on both my thrusts and rubbing her clit. Her words morph into unintelligible moans. But one phrase bleeds through it all. "I'm cumming."

I take my free hand and move it from her waist to her chest. While still thrusting and rubbing, I hoist her up, so her back is against my chest. My head moves down to Blair's, I don't want to miss a single sound she makes.

Blair softly bites onto my ear lobe with a groan. I thrust into her pussy, rub her clit, and pinch her nipple at the same time. Her body shudders against mine. She moans directly into my ear, it sounds better than anything I've ever heard.

She lets go of my ear and I feel her body go limp. I pull out of Blair and let her fall back down to the bed. Looking down at Blair, still ass up, trying to catch her breath, I admire my work.

"I... I fucking love you..." She manages to say.

“I fucking love you too.”

Blair flips herself on to her back. My cock twitches as I watch her tits jiggle from the movement. We are far from done here. She uses a single finger to beckon me onto the bed with her.

“On your back, *fiancé*.” She says as I crawl onto the bed with her. Her emphasis on ‘fiancé’ is almost too much for me. I give Blair a quick kiss before lying down on my back. “Lay back, and enjoy.”

Blair gets up and slowly lowers herself onto my cock. She starts grinding on me. Her tight body looks incredible, moving around on me. Everyone of her curves is on full display.

I reach up with both hands and grab a handful of her tits. Her hands travel up and down my toned chest as she rides. We’re so connected, feeling each other’s bodies.

My cock grows even harder. I’m close. It’s ready to explode, but not yet. I still have a job to do.

One of my hands travels down from her breast to her clit. I start rubbing it again, how I know she likes it, as she rides. Blair begins to moan again.

“Oh my god,” she says. I pinch her nipples. Blair rides me harder. She digs her nails in my chest. “I’m cumming again.”

I can’t help but grin as I watch her chest get flushed. She stops riding as she quivers on my cock. I take my hands off her nipple and clit and move them to her waist, holding her down on me.

“I’m cumming, I’m cumming, I’m cumming.” She looks down at me. “How have you not cum yet?”

“What can I say? I’m a gentleman.” We both laugh, but I am ready to cum.

I swiftly swing Blair around, so she is now on her back and I’m on top, in missionary position. I thrust in and out of her slowly. I don’t break eye contact the entire time. She has the loveliest eyes.

“I love you,” I say again.

“I love you, too.” She smiles and softly moans with every thrust. The sound is making the buildup in my cock even worse. “Now, cum for me, Uzul.”

I can't hold it in any more. My balls tighten and I explode into her pussy. We moan together as more and more of my seed shoots into her.

I collapse onto the bed beside Blair. She quickly slides herself against me. Her warm skin is like heaven against mine.

I wrap my arm around her and we silently cuddle for a moment. The only sound in the room being our breathing.

“So,” Blair says with a devious grin. “Are you ready for round two?”

I laugh and give her a kiss on the top of her head. I love my fiancé.

BLAIR

Our wedding takes place at the previous Broken Maw base. My “wedding party” set up camp somewhere in the trees to help me get ready. My mom helps with final arrangements until the male orcs arrive with Uzul. Jade and some female orc fuss about my appearance.

I need more flowers in my hair. The Veil isn’t perfectly symmetrical on my head. My boobs aren’t perky enough.

Jade dusts me off. “Just a few more final touches.”

“Is all of this really necessary? I look fine.”

She and the orcs scoff. “Can you just wait a bit longer? It’s not like you get married every day.”

With Uzul, I would. I’d never tire of repeating my vows to him. I’d even wear a wedding dress every day. Well, maybe not the one I’m wearing now since it’s quite heavy. I never knew orcish wedding dresses included so much detail.

The dress has actual white roses sewn into it. The reason why my Veil wouldn’t sit still was because precious stones are attached to it. Besides that, it drapes down my lower back, being held by myna Bobby pins. The finishing touch is a small jeweled headpiece made out of oak.

I just pray it won’t fall in the middle of the ceremony.

“How much time is left?” I eagerly ask.

“We have about four more min—”

Just like that, the horns finally blow. Without missing a beat, I go to take a peek through our 'hiding spot.' The guests look towards the entrance of the base, and my eyes follow them. The leaves rustle and the ground vibrates.

Uzul's the first to appear. He bangs his chest to the beat of the drums. Rogar follows behind with a small unit of orcs, doing the same gesture. They all bellow a chant I'm not familiar with. Different from the battle one of course.

The guests part down the middle like the Red Sea. Uzul's the only one that walks through the middle, while his tribesmen separate into the sides. They continue the chant until Uzul stops at the altar. It's almost time for me to come out.

Jade pulls my arms and fusses even more around my face and hair. She licks the tip of her finger to remove a very small speck of dust. After, the female orcs shoo me off to where Uzul came in. They extend the train to lay perfectly flat on the ground.

I start walking when I hear my cue; the flutes. I take a few deep breaths before my feet move on their own. The reality of the event finally settles in, and all I can do is smile until my cheeks hurt.

Uzul and I lock eyes. He looks so handsome and fierce with his new body tattoos. They accentuate his muscles and bright yellow eyes. The markings of a married man.

My family stands up front next to Rogar and Uzul's closest members. It's bittersweet that his parents can't be here on this blessed day. At least they can be at peace that their son will surely be loved and appreciated.

Finally, I join my beloved at the altar. There's a large scepter of fire before us. An orc, to what I can assume is the shaman, greets us with a bow.

Uzul takes both of my hands. I step closer towards him and look up at his towering height. The only expression on his face is tenderness and devotion.

"You may exchange your vows to commence the ceremony," the shaman instructs.

I go first. “Uzul, there are no words to describe the love that I feel for you. Only know that it gets bigger each time I look at you. Never in my wildest dreams have I thought to meet someone like you and be blessed enough to marry them. Yet, here I am. You always say that I changed your life but really, you changed mine. I got to learn about my world through your eyes while also looking into yours. Before you, I was reclusive and self-conscious. Now, I can take on anything, as long as I have you by my side. You are my strength and my pride. I swear to you my dedication, respect, and love. You will never go a day without any of them, as long as I live.”

Then, Uzul continues. “Blair, I lived for a long time, yet, I’ve never felt so alive until I laid my eyes on you. That was the first time I actually felt my heartbeat. I will never stop saying how lucky I am to be marrying you. It’s an honor to be with such an intelligent, loving, and beautiful person like you. For you, I would fight death itself. For you, I would sacrifice myself a thousand times just for you to breathe a second longer. For you, I give my whole life, my heart, and my soul. Your pain, sorrow, and anger, shall be mine as well. You, too, shall never go a day without my dedication, respect, and love.”

The shaman throws sage in the fire, making it bigger and brighter. Uzul gestures for Rogar to bring him a sacred cloth. From what I learned, the orcs’ goddess of marriage and fertility sewed this cloth out of her own tears.

He binds our hands together with the sacred cloth. Then, the shaman pricks the tips of our fingers, to let them fall on it. Uzul raises our hands over the fire, where the cloth shines brightly as it absorbs our droplets.

“With this cloth, we are bound together for eternity, even in death. Even in reincarnation. I will always find you in our next life,” he says.

Before we get to kiss, my family incorporates a witch custom to the ceremony. With the cloth in hand, they create a protective circle around us. With a powder made of peonies, they spread it around us. My mom lights up a white feather that burns between me and Uzul; blessing our unions with love and prosperity.

The drums and guests go crazy once Uzul and I share our kiss. As soon as our moment ends, the reception begins. It's a joyous celebration that will last the whole night.

A bonfire is made. Everyone dances like no one watches. It's the first time I'm able to see orcs and witches mingling and exchanging cultures peacefully. After the battle with Aisling, it left me wondering if we'd get to this point.

Seeing a witch trying to snag Rogar pieces it all together. Uzul and I share a giggle after pointing it out. Who knows, maybe we'll come back here in a couple of years for Rogar?

There's not a silent moment with each group Uzul and I mingle with. The orcs excitedly show the witches their weapons, asking if they can do any cool tricks. The witches, without any qualms, show off. They exchange stories of how they creatively use certain tricks as the orcs listen intently.

As I listen to the story, Uzul tugs my hand.

"The sun is setting now," he says.

I smile. "Ready for our first dance?"

"I'm more excited than ready."

He signals the drummers to stop for the flutists to take their spot. The guests gather around us, full of excitement and happiness. On the count of three, the music flows like a serene river.

Uzul holds me by the waist as I rest my head against his large chest. I can feel his heart beat go fast, much like mine. My feet are light as Uzul gracefully takes the lead.

"I love you, my wife."

"I love you more, my dear husband."

Underneath the stars, surrounded by our loved ones, we dance as we look forward to our future.

UZUL

I am sitting on my favorite log on the eastern side of Misty Mountain, New Hampshire. Orc country. The sun is an orange, glorious madness rising. The tribe village is off to my left and nestled beneath the trees. The road below me is filled with a troop of thirty orcs and Rogar. I am watching them from my favorite stump. Blair is standing beside me.

“Do you ever think about her?” Blair asks.

“Only if I have to,” I answer. I know who Blair is referring to.

Aisling.

Approximately one year ago the crazy witch had been dispatched from this world about twenty feet from where I sit.

I turn my attention back to the troop of orcs gathering on the road below us.

“They look happy,” I say. I say this to Blair, and to the universe all around us. I say it for the mountains, too.

“Thanks to you,” Blair inserts.

“Thanks to the human resource people at the Department of Forestry,” I tell her. “Nobody is better equipped for caring for the mountains and the trees than orcs. The first orc to walk these hills was born from the Misty Mountain, earth and stone. She appeared the way rainbows appear, between the heavy rain and the sun.”

“You are so correct,” Blair adds. “There are no forest rangers as efficient and better fitting for the role than orcs.”

I stand. Blair and I walk down to the orc village deep in the trees where they have jobs to protect this land. It’s their perfect part of society. The air is thick with smoke, coffee, and bacon.

Blair and I reach the back section of the orc village where we see a second grouping of orcs gathering. The young, huge, and unusually strong orcs.

The warrior class. This group is dressed in all black suits, dark shades, and they are loading into trucks and SUVs with tinted windows.

“They’re looking tight today, babe,” Blair tells me.

“Hell yes,” I answer. “They need to be. The number of stadium-tour concerts this summer is crazy. Nobody does concert and special event security better than orcs. Watch, this’ll be our busiest platform.”

“I am so proud of you, my big handsome.”

Blair is always proud of me, surely more than I deserve. I have won the Lotto securing her as a wife.

I am proud of the Broken Maws Tribe. They integrated. They are thriving. They are fearless. They show that fearlessness is not being without fear. Fearlessness is transforming the fear-lead into gold.

“We should go soon,” I tell Blair.

“We can go whenever you’re ready,” Blair answers me. “I packed the Ford last night.”

“You are so organized,” I tell her.

“We are a great fit,” she adds.

I stay silent for a moment and watch the warrior class gather and organize and finish loading vehicles.

“We’re going to have to tell them when we visit today,” Blair says with a slight giggle. “My family can detect secrets a mile away.”

Blair's family can detect secrets from millions of miles away, from dimensions away, too.

"I know. Let's drop the news towards the end of the visit," I suggest. "They've probably already figured it out."

I follow Blair to the Ford, and we leave. I drive these days. Blair is patient but misses no opportunity to tell me I drive like an old man. I am still deciphering what she means by that.

The drive to Blair's family's house has lots of bends and valleys that I have come to enjoy. For that reason, it feels over too soon.

We pull into the Morgan driveway. Mara, Phineas, Remus, and beloved Jade are sitting in deck chairs on the front porch.

I am excited to drop our big news. These people are so beautiful. I love being a part of their family. I love them all so much it sometimes scares me.

Blair and I sit. Remus fills our hands with our respective drink choices. Without being too suspicious, Blair insists she get spring water.

"All is well on the mountain?" Phineas asks.

"The integration has been better than we expected," Blair answers.

"I can honestly say the tribe has never been happier," I add. "Home is more home than ever now that we have integrated. I kid you not, the Broken Maws have not been more self-actualized than they are today."

"Interesting!" Jade chimes in. "You look different, sis," Jade tells Blair. Jade has a mischievous smile on her face when she says this.

Blair, of course, looks like she swallowed a canary.

"Really?" I ask. I am bursting here and hope my poker-face is holding up. "What kind of different?"

"Happy," Jade answers. "A pure happy."

"Blair is always happy," I tell the group. I know I sound guilty as hell when I say this.

“Now that you mention it,” Remus inserts. “You do look like a different happy, Blair. Yesterday I pulled a Tarot card just to get a read on you two. Sheesh, I pulled the Queen of Pentacles, and the Star card. You two have any good news you want to share?”

I can see Mara stiffen at what Remus says, like any word now and Mara will jump from her seat and start dancing.

They know. Of course, they know. They have crystal balls and scrying mirrors and Tarot cards. There are no secrets.

“Your divination skills are spot on,” I tell Remus. “We have a new arrival on the way.”

“I knew it!” Mara belts out, standing and prancing out a quick jig. “She’ll be a daddy’s girl, wanna bet?”

“Mother, please,” Blair pleads. “Let us have our gender reveal when we get our twelfth-week checkup, like every other normal orc-witch couple does.”

Remus laughs at this last comment.

“We are going to throw a shower,” Phineas adds. “A shower open to tribes and covens. Come one, come all! You watch how big this shower is going to be.”

Tears are streaming right now. This is not something I normally let others see.

I do not care.

I love change, and I love these people.

The tears are rolling because I could not ask for a better life. There is not one thing I can think of that could be added to make my life better than it is right now. I love this Universe that I am in. This Universe clearly loves me right back and is on my side. I could not ask for a better life.

“A daddy’s girl,” I mumble to the group.

I am over my threshold, overjoyed. So be it. I wonder if she will grow her hair long and have pigtails or braids. My daddy’s girl. I love the look of pigtails or braids on females. I have Blair to thank for this.

“You are the light in me and you that never dies,” I tell Blair.

Blair doesn't answer. She looks at me and smiles. I wonder if she is as thrilled as I am – though I doubt anyone can be as excited as me.

A daddy's girl. Wow.

“She'll be the first female Chieftain,” I tell the group. I say it proudly. “I will show her how to be merciless with her enemies!”

“Excuse me?” Blair asks.

Her family just laughs, and I am filled with a joy I didn't know I could have.

The End

To read more on the series or to find a slice of life about Blair and Uzul join the newsletter here: <https://www.subscribepage.com/dracoverse>

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Dracoverse is wide and ever growing. Every book and series is interconnected with each other.

Names of groups, packs, organizations, and situations transfer from one book to another to create an immersive experience that anyone can join in and read as a standalone, and enjoy even more when they read a few books.

To learn more about the Dracoverse, I invite you to click thedracoverse.com/dracoveropedia.

Here you will find notes about everything from Gideon's Torch to Draconis Fire and The Veil.

Enjoy!

Destiny Draco

PREVIEW

Every book in the Dracoverse is a standalone, but they are all connected in the same universe. Each takes place in the here and now time period where metahumans and mundane humans live and work in the same vicinity.

To read a preview of another work, look no further. I've included a preview of [Fire Dragon Daddy](#) for your enjoyment.

HAILEY

“**N**o, goddamn it!” Hailey snapped into her comm. “I know it’s not my place, but she didn’t wanna go, and my gut said not to send her in!”

“Trent, I’m warning you! This could result in an official write-up for dereliction of duty!” her captain warned.

Hailey thought for a moment, but her instincts told her to keep going. “I’m sorry, Captain.

But my conscience won’t allow anyone else but me to go in and negotiate with these assholes.”

Crime. It had always been a fact of life but year after year, in city after city, crime had been getting worse and worse. Ever since the Veil had fallen though, the crime seemed to get almost...organized. It was all Hailey Trent could do as a hostage negotiator to keep up with the number of times her services were needed.

“Trent! Fuck!” was the last thing she heard as she rounded the alley.

Stepping through the doorway from the hall, Hailey peered around the corner to see that no one was standing guard. She continued nimbly down the corridor into the main room with her gun extended, at the ready. She was an expert sniper for the NYPD SWAT, and she knew what she was up against. Even before she rounded the corner to face the ragtag band of looters, she heard them catcalling.

“Hey!” she shouted, entering the room. “Why don’tcha let these people go, and then we can chat about your so-called demands?”

“Looky here!” yelled the one called Rocko. “I’ll definitely talk to you, anytime.”

“Aw, c’mon, Shorty. Let the others go. We’ll keep this here prego one,” pleaded a robber named Louie. “We don’t need any more than that, plus, we got us this here hottie cop,” Louie looked to his left and wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Shorty gave a nod of his head, signaling his approval to let them go. The only one who remained was the pregnant woman, and she was crying softly.

Hailey stepped aside as the other hostages marched out the front of the building frantically. “Alright, let’s get this over with. Are you gonna play nice, or do I have to get rough?” she asked sarcastically, twirling her gun, and pointing it straight at Rocko.

Without warning, the crying abruptly stopped and turned to light laughter before becoming hysterically louder. The woman who was supposedly pregnant removed her ‘bump’ to reveal a sleek, young woman who was undeniably a member of the gang.

“I’ll play rough,” she jeered, revealing her own weapon. “Wanna have fun, boys?” she asked maniacally, before she shot out the lens of the last camera, thus severing all communication between them and the police outside.

The ‘boys’ began to come toward her, “Sure, we wanna have *a lot* of fun. Especially with this hottie,” Rocko razed.

Shorty joined in the raucous conversation as he snarled through his teeth, “Yeah, and then we’ll kill ya, dead. After we get the helicopter then we will have our fun.”

Hailey felt the tension as it welled up inside her, instinctively corralling Louie from her right. She used him as a body shield and pointed her gun at the others.

“Stay back!” she commanded. “I’ll use this and that’ll be a lot of fun for me!” she chuckled.

They all laughed as Louie pleaded for them to kill her. Her colleagues rushed the front door then and bombarded the plunderers as a shootout commenced. Hailey discharged a few rounds as she slowly retreated, thinking she was going to be safe. But then, *BLAM!*

It all faded to gray.

SLOAN

“Another one bites the dust,” Sloan murmured through his fingers as his right hand largely covered his mouth. The sterile morgue had periwinkle drywall that somehow made the fluorescent lighting worse. Cold storage containers for the stiffies lined the far wall.

In addition to Sloan and the corpse was Hutton, the dragon coroner; a man who appeared to be in his forties but was no doubt far older. His bald head was offset by his bushy, rust-colored beard and green eyes that burned with intensity.

Sloan’s eyes also held that fire. Like most dragon shifters, his emerald eyes had flecks of yellow and red. Dark blonde hair was combed back and cut short on the sides, which gave the illusion of slimness in a man whose frame topped the charts at six foot five. He bore the look of a man in his mid-thirties, but in truth, he was approaching ten times that.

“This is the second dragon in as many months,” Hutton’s tone was laced with anger. “We thought the first was a one-off, but this man died in a similar fashion. No way that’s a coincidence.”

The black leather duster creaked when Sloan moved closer to inspect the cause of death. An open hole gaped in the man’s chest. The wound was so large, the man’s innards were easily illuminated by the garish light above.

“A claw,” Sloan’s hand took on a claw-like shape, demonstrating the method no doubt used by the murderer.

“I think we have a serial murderer on the loose,” Hutton was all business, intent on bypassing any small talk.

“I need to take some pictures for the team,” Sloan produced a cell phone and snapped a few shots of the deceased.

“Oh, yes, the fabled team of enforcers, the Vulcan Group. How big is the crew now?”

“Five; counting myself, Katarina, George, Cole, and you remember Brawn.”

Hutton chuckled, “No one forgets Brawn.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Sloan threw his arms out in disbelief.

“Not at all. No one forgets Sloan Drake, or who your father is,” Hutton added that last bit to let Sloan know what he thought of nepotism.

“I’ll thank you to watch your mouth. Things like that could be easily misunderstood. I’ve got a job to do, same as you,” Sloan accentuated his point with a finger aimed at Hutton.

“And you have your work cut out for you. This smacks of organized crime.”

“How do you figure?”

“Just my gut. That wound was inflicted by a metahuman; which means the motive is almost certainly money or power. Two things organized crime can’t get enough of.”

“Thank you for the investigative insight, but maybe you should stick to your job and let me do mine. What I know is, you don’t create a narrative before you have evidence, because then, the only evidence you’ll be looking for supports that narrative. It has to happen the other way around.”

Sloan took a finger and inserted it into the gaping wound, noting how much larger the orifice was compared to his finger. He let out a short whistle, “That was a big sucker either way. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

TO BE CONTINUED. Read more [here!](#)