

Zora Black

Monster Mate Comedies, book two



My
Orc
Bosshole

MY ORC BOSSHOLE

ZORA BLACK

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By Zora Black

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CONTENTS

1. Zouk
2. Carnette
3. Zouk
4. Carnette
5. Zouk
6. Carnette
7. Zouk
8. Carnette
9. Zouk
10. Carnette
11. Zouk
12. Carnette
13. Carnette
14. Zouk
15. Carnette
16. Zouk
17. Carnette
18. Zouk
19. Carnette
20. Zouk
21. Carnette
22. Zouk
23. Carnette
24. Zouk
25. Carnette
26. Zouk
27. Carnette
28. Zouk
29. Carnette
30. Zouk

ZOUK

“Traditions and honor have always mattered to Black Iron Production more than profits. The integrity of our metal, the attention to detail, the history in our design. Why, when my grandfather started it nearly eighty years ago, he—”

“Profited from both sides of the war,” I supply helpfully.

“Well.” He clears his throat, making his thick jowls quiver. “I do suppose that some might say—”

Fuck, he’s never going to stop. If this old man says one more word, I’m liable to punch a hole in the wall. Interrupting him is a public service, really.

Though I guess this is my little Vancouver-based weapons depot now. Any damage would eat into my profits in the end. It’s tempting to break the table in two with one slam of my fist, and part of me would love to see just how high I can make him jump in terror. Still, better to save that destruction for something that warrants it.

The day is still young, after all.

“Just sign here.” I take an obviously long glimpse of my watch. Both to signal my impatience and because the watch cost more than a new car, so I like to show it off when I can. Then I smile at him, just to show that although he’s managed to bore me to the limits of my sanity, there are no hard feelings. He might want to buy weapons some day, after all. Best not to burn bridges.

The man shifts back in his seat, and a glimpse in the mirrored window reveals that I'm baring my teeth more than smiling. But he signs the fucking thing, so same difference, really.

"Well." His hands shake a bit as he fits the pen cap back on. "I, ah, always enjoyed working with your former company."

Now I'm definitely smiling, and it's not because I have an unabiding love for the shithole that is Valdor, my former company before I was unceremoniously and unjustly fired. It's because, as the new owner of Black Iron Production, I'm about to single-handedly cut their weapons' acquisitions off completely.

"My lawyers will be in touch with any final details," I say, waving toward the door.

They won't—my lawyers are the best money can buy, and I know for a fact there aren't any final details to finish up. But humans, for some reason I've never understood, prefer being told to fuck off in legalese.

Another flash of my teeth sends the old fool on his way a few billion dollars richer, and with a press of a button my glass window goes from mirrored to clear. I try not to think about the reasons he had the feature in place, and just peer out at my factory. A curl of warm satisfaction settles in my gut.

I've always liked factories, truth be told. They've got that show on TV late at night, with that man's buttery voice droning on while the machines carry on, creating something complicated from a hundred moving parts. And that's how it works below—everything moving at once, like waves of metal, clanking and clanging and building something new.

Of course, in this case, instead of crayons or water bottles, my machines are making axes and other lethal weapons. *And Deiderich isn't going to get his hands on any damned one of them. I'll create an international incident first.*

He's going to beg me to sell to him again by the time I'm done with him. Oh, sure, first he'll bitch and moan. Probably

give me some long, boring lecture about honor. And he'll find other manufacturers, sure.

Eventually.

After I, as his former operations manager, have poached all of his clientele and sold them not only the war hammers and swords they're searching for, but the guns he's always refused to sell. Then, if he's nice, I'll sell him whatever his heart desires at a two hundred percent markup.

"I'm going to destroy him," I tell my happy little factory down below. That's not fair, I shouldn't get all the credit. "*We* are going to destroy him." I'm going to bury his company so deep no one will even remember its name.

It's a shame that a few good workers there will have to go down with the ship, so to speak, but so be it. They saw what he did to me, his most loyal employee, all because I wanted to push his obnoxious side piece out of the office.

Some, like *Carnette*, who had the nerve to glare at me as I was escorted out by security. Of all the people there, I would have thought that she would understand. She's never tolerated fools with her hawk-like eyes and scissor-sharp wit.

Most insultingly, after that glare, she had the audacity to look at me with, with *pity*. How dare she? Leia was everything she wasn't—incapable, foolish, and completely over her head. I'm not sure what made Carnette take to her so much.

At first, I'd thought it was just an act, that she was just pretending to like her because her boss did. But it was completely, unapologetically genuine. Ugh. It's enough to make me want to hurl, and a far cry from when we first met.

I still remember that day. I'd just gotten back from a martini lunch with a client who insisted I take the meeting on his private yacht. One of those things that sounds fantastic until you're two martinis in and realize you get motion sickness.

I'd hurried back to the office about three shades greener than normal, and since I'd left early to meet with another supplier, I hadn't been in the office all day.

“I’ve got a new secretary,” Deiderich told me as soon as I collapsed into the armchair in his office. The room was still spinning. I vowed never to get on a boat again, no matter how attractive the girls in bikinis were onboard.

“And?” Deiderich was on his fourth secretary since starting the company, because that was back when he was fucking competent and didn’t hire airheaded bartenders off the street. “Has he quit yet?”

“She,” Deiderich said, sounding amused. “And no. I told her to write up some projections for next quarter, and she told me she’d already done it the night before.”

Seeing as how the last guy had gotten fired for making a copy of his ass on the company printer, this was a significant step up in personnel quality, but I was cautiously pessimistic.

Then she walked into the office.

No one could ever accuse Carnette of being an airhead. Her sensible heels clacked on the tile, and she took one look at me from behind her black square glasses and it felt like all the light in the room had zoomed in around her, like some sort of heavenly frame.

“Your file keeping is atrocious.”

It might have just been the lingering effects of the martinis. “It’s not,” I said, outraged. “And who the hell are you?”

She reached out her hand towards mine, chin tilted up. She didn’t smile, didn’t try to soften herself at all, and I found myself incredibly reluctantly impressed.

“I’m Carnette, Mr. Deiderich’s personal assistant, and I need to look over last year’s acquisitions in preparation for our audit.”

Deiderich shot me a look. *See what I mean?* his eyebrows said.

“Carnette, this is Zouk. Zouk, Carnette.” Deiderich had looked amused at her audacity, while I was still stunned.

“Secretary Number Five, you mean.” I scowled at her. It was a lot of work to look her in the eyes because she was

unbelievably small. The top of her head barely reached my chest. You think she'd be nicer to someone capable of picking her up with one hand and throwing her out the window.

I had to shut that line of thought down immediately, though, because I couldn't stop my traitorous mind from thinking about all the other things I could do while holding her up with one hand. "I can't wait to meet Number Six. Maybe she'll have better manners."

Carnette didn't even spare me a glance, her full attention was on her boss. "Charmed."

"I understand wanting to organize Zouk's mess," Deiderich said. "Believe me, I'm not against it. But we haven't heard anything from the CRA."

"Yet," she said. "But you donated the maximum allowed to the current mayor's opponent, and you pulled in about a billion dollars of profit last quarter. You're getting audited. Now, where's my desk? I'd like to put my things down before I hunt down your IT admin."

And damned if we weren't audited, and damned if she wasn't, from that day on, the most astute and capable person in the whole office. She rubbed some people the wrong way, but for an orc, it was a pleasant change of pace to have a human around who actually said whatever she was thinking. Having her support Leia over me was a betrayal that hurt worse than Deiderich's, in a way.

At least with Deiderich, I knew he was thinking with his dick. But that's all in the past now. There's no more fielding calls from clients and meeting Deiderich's obscure orders—now I'm in charge, and I'm going to act like it.

I still have to meet with my new employees, set the new tone in this workplace, and then woo all of Valdor's clients. Which shouldn't be hard, since, by my estimates, they'll be running low on weapons to sell in approximately one week. I always told Deiderich that Valdor relied too much on just-in-time inventory management.

I can hear him arguing his points now – JIT gave him more maneuverability and cash-on-hand. Well, he's about to experience my rebuttal first-hand. Enjoy the over-dependence on suppliers and lack of a buffer inventory, asshole.

Because my first order of business is cutting his company off forever.

CARNETTE

“**L**ook, you’ve all seen our sales reports,” Deiderich says from his doorway. He’s recently decided against holding meetings in a separate room – everyone remains in the open office, continuing to tap away at the computers on their desk. Business never stops at Valdor, even for the CEO. “Demand is high, thanks to our marketing team.”

Leia, whose ideas are the reason our marketing team had so much to work with, smiles privately. She has a lot to be proud of, and I appreciate that she keeps it to herself. We could do with a few more humble humans on staff.

If Zouk were still here, where she sits, he’d be halfway through a self-congratulatory speech by now. Hell, we’d be lucky if he didn’t smash his desk in celebration. Our office furniture costs are down ten percent since he left. Still, it’s strange to see someone else at his desk, even someone I like.

“As we look to the future, we need to increase our production and expand our network of suppliers. Best materials, best prices – you know our spiel. It’s essential that we maintain our profit margins without our quality dipping.” He frowns. “This is the point where many companies fail. We will not stumble.”

Of course we won’t – I do more than ensure everyone has their preferred coffee each morning. I’ve already set up a meeting with Gregory Black, the owner of our most essential supplier, Black Iron.

As much as Zouk insisted we diversify our weapons supply, Deiderich knew that leaning into our niche – metal weapons, many copied from antique design – was essential in building up our brand recognition and simplifying our supply chain.

Still, I've personally been concerned that Zouk may have been right about one thing – throwing all of our eggs in one axe-making basket is one hell of a risk, especially considering all the orders we need filled this quarter.

“Yes, Carnette?”

“We've got double the orders for halberds and glaives – is that a trend we anticipate continuing, or just a one-off? I've scheduled a call with Mr. Black just before lunch.”

Deiderich shrugs. He's more of a big picture guy, which is why he's got me to pour over all the details. “Jude?”

Jude has no idea how to do anything except coif his ridiculous man bun, made more ridiculous by the fact that he's supposed to be an orc, not some Vancouver hipster. He yawns, taking a sip of coffee. Then he winces, because I didn't add any sugar this morning.

Fuck you, Jude.

“Leia?” I ask. At least she's competent. My fingers tap swiftly along with her words – the polearms were a special order, but we anticipate the demand to increase anyway, because our demand is increasing across the board. One more point to bring up with Black later today.

The rest of the meeting proceeds smoothly, in no small part thanks to my efforts. It's not that I'm bragging – I just like when things work. I like when I know the answers to questions before they're asked, when I anticipate the company's – and by extension Deiderich's – needs before they arise. Valdor is a Swiss watch, and all of the employees here, or at least most of them, are finely tuned, exquisite gears.

I'm the one who makes sure they all run in concert.

“Want to grab lunch later?” Leia asks. “There's a new Thai place over on Robson. We can go over some marketing plans.”

“Those are probably best to go over with the marketing team,” I say, not unkindly. It’s just that I’m not really the idea person here – I’m more like personnel maintenance. And I’m busy as fuck. And since Zouk left, she should really be focusing on acquisitions, not more sales pitches.

Not that I’d say anything to Diederich about it. Maybe Zouk was a fool, but I know better than to come in between a CEO and his pregnant wife.

Of course, she hadn’t been pregnant when Zouk tried to sabotage her. And she hadn’t been his wife yet. But anyone could see that they loved each other, surely. Even a thick-skulled orc with a persecution complex.

He deserved getting fired. I’d have fired him myself, if I’d been in Deiderich’s shoes. Sabotaging Leia was sabotaging Valdor, and I’d be lying if I said it still doesn’t sting like hell. I thought we mattered to Zouk. All those nights we stayed late at work, reading through sales charts, anticipating orders, wooing clients... I know that Valdor mattered to him at one point.

For a while, I even thought...

“Um, Carnette? You home, girl?”

“Yeah.” I can’t quite bring myself to meet her eyes – I feel a little guilty for wishing that Zouk were here instead. I know that I’d grab a business lunch with him, if only to mock his inability to handle spicy food. “Can’t make lunch, sorry.”

“Just promise me you’ll eat,” she says, a little wrinkle forming between her eyebrows. “You’ve been working hard, picking up the slack since Zouk—”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I haven’t been throwing myself into work any more than usual. I’ve just been enjoying it less.

Look, Zouk was a moron. Brilliant, great with numbers – but a moron all the same. He’d save the company hundreds of thousands of dollars of manufacturing costs by investing in our own iron and copper mines, and then in the next breath

challenge the head of accounting to a battle because he looked at him funny in the breakroom.

The first time I met him, I couldn't stand him, and that assessment stood strong for longer than most jobs I've held. But gradually, the way water wears into a rock to form a cavern, he wore down my irritation until it morphed into tolerance.

I like when things work, and I like when they're predictable, and while Zouk could be predicted to make the worst possible choice whenever it came to his personal life – my skin still crawls when I think back to his acid yellow, slim fit Italian suit and the Italian supermodel with matching hair he carted around during our last weapons expo – he knew the company well.

If I'd asked *him* about the trends of halberd sales, he would have smirked and told me he already called Black for advance orders, and then bragged about the discount he'd scored.

"I think you might," Leia says, but she gives it up and walks back to her desk. "Hit me up before you leave today, I really do want to go over some ideas."

I agree, and then get to work. There's a business lunch for Deiderich to schedule tomorrow – and a hostess to intimidate until she relents and gives him the best table in the restaurant that's supposedly booked for three months out. Financials to file away, orders to place.

A *lot* of orders to place.

Deiderich's office is lush and sleek, with an unimpeded view of downtown Vancouver through its ceiling-to-glass windows. I lean back in my chair as I dial Mr. Black, preparing to transcribe our conversation to review with Deiderich later.

"Carnette," he says, voice warm. "Always a pleasure." It's difficult to hear him, like he's on speaker. And it sounds like there's running water in the background.

"Are you out of the office?"

“Oh, yes.” He sounds like he’s smiling. Honestly, a little vacation could do him good. The last time I called an order over, it sounded like he was about to keel over. “Thought I’d get some fishing done, and just stay out here in my cabin for the rest of the week and live off salmon.”

“Very rustic of you.” My fingers perch over the keyboard, ready to type. “Who should I contact while you’re out of the office?”

“Oh!” He laughs. “I’ll be out of the office permanently. I suppose you could call whoever you want – it’s usually Leslie in charge, but the new guy might have shaken things up. New guys usually do.”

“I beg your pardon?” Out of office permanently? New guy? Warning bells are ringing in my head, making it ache. I like predictability – a new supplier is anything but predictable.

“Oh, I know, I know. I talked up a good storm about handing the place over to Riley, keeping it in the family. But Riley doesn’t know a naginata from his own asshole, pardon my Orcish, and I can’t wait on him for the rest of my life to step up. It was like fate when I got that offer.”

“You sold the company.”

“Oh, now. Riley’s well taken care of, don’t you worry about that. Hell, without the company between us, we’ve been getting along great. He’s actually next to me now, if you’d like to—”

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Black.”

I hang up, not eager to listen to Mr. Black’s tales of family woe or bonding. I didn’t really give a shit back when he ran Black Iron, and now I definitely don’t give a shit. Immediately, I call Black Iron.

It goes to voicemail. I call Black Iron again. It goes to voicemail *again*.

Fists clenched, it takes all of my self control not to slam them against my mahogany desk and scream. Finally, I understand the appeal of destroying office furniture. If I had

the strength, I might strongly consider reducing this gleaming, polished desk into splinters.

Fortunately, I don't need strength. I have brains. And by the time Deiderich's back from lunch, I'm going to have this annoying wrinkle all ironed out. Not only ironed out, I'm going to make it so that Black Iron's sale works in our favor.

I type out an email to our contact at the company, and it goes through, but I'm not going to sit at my desk all day awaiting a reply. I'm going to march over to the factory itself and see what the hell is going on.

ZOUK

“Ah, as you know from your, um, purchases previously, this is our most popular model.” Dean, a portly man with ruddy cheeks who stumbles over his words and shakes whenever he looks up at me, attempts a smile.

I do not return his show of weakness and appeasement. I growl, low and deep in my chest, a signal to all present that their leader is strong and able to lead them, both in battle and in the boardroom.

“Right,” he squeaks. “Well, um. They’re made from the finest materials available—from the iron mines of—” He stutters to a stop as I hold up my hand.

“We will be purchasing our own raw materials from now on,” I interrupt him. “No more outside mines.”

Years ago, my ingenious plan to purchase the mines ourselves and sell the ore to our manufacturing companies brought us our first profitable year. Now, Black Iron will own their own mines, and Valdor can choke on the increased price.

It’s not something the previous owner could have done, of course, because he didn’t have the funds to do so. But I can survive comfortably on my own income until the end of time – I have no qualms about doing whatever I can to make life more expensive for Valdor, even if it takes decades to turn a profit here.

“Oh, uh... Was... was there an email I missed, or...”

“No.” I turn to my secretary, a mousy young man with a nose ring that makes him look like a bull. The nose ring, I like. It speaks of strength and valor. The ink on his arms is of questionable quality, but I am also inclined to approve of it, since orcs are only tattooed after success in battle. Or, these days, success in business. As it stands, these marks are nothing but lies. He has seen no success in life. Moments earlier, I witnessed him losing a battle with the copy machine. “Make it so.”

“Make it...” Confused, he frowns. “Like, you want me to write up a policy? Or form an exploratory committee?”

I resist the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose or throw him out a window. If Carnette were here, she’d whisper mocking congratulations on my self control, as if she didn’t also struggle with the same urges when presented with incompetence.

“Buy a mine.” I hand him my black credit card, and his hand drops beneath its weight. “No, buy five. I don’t want a copper or iron mine available to them.”

“Them?” He looks up at me, jaw gaping like a fool. “Uh... I don’t know who they are, but it kind of sounds like a monopoly—”

“Then bribe whatever officials you need to bribe.”

He stares at me blankly. “Like in Canada, or...”

Carnette, when I presented her with this same task, already had a spreadsheet of available mines, shipping costs, and local laws. Canada, while rich in iron and copper reserves, proved more expensive than bribing officials in Brazil and Russia and shipping the raw product over.

Carnette, in a rare and touching show of morals, had ruled both of those countries out because she couldn’t assure they wouldn’t use child labor. Meanwhile, this sack of numbnuts probably doesn’t even know that the metal used to make these beautiful weapons is dug up from the earth.

“Canada.” I cross my arms over my broad chest, and the silk of my suit glides against them. “We’ll put a patriotic spin

on it.” And triple our prices.

Valdor won’t use companies who use cheaper mines, and thus child labor. They’ll be stuck with me – because I’m going to buy every fucking mine in the country if I need to. But I’m being rude to my weak-kneed, trembling factory guide.

“Please,” I say, sweeping a generous hand towards the factory inspection leader. “Continue.”

“Right. Um. So, we here at Black Iron made a name for ourselves by replicating the crucible steel method. Um, a technique first developed in India around two thousand years ago...”

He rambles on with his history lesson, and I study my new team. The majority are human, and the few orcs hired look more like Jude with his man-bun than Deiderich or I. More and more orcs have been assimilating to human ways of life, weakening our bloodline.

Deiderich, with his half-human child on the way, is probably one of them now. I snort, imagining him declining a physical challenge and calling his lawyers instead. Ha! He probably takes oat milk with his lattes now.

I grab the dagger from the factory inspector and study it. Despite my disinterest in his bland lecture, I am very interested in weapons. With one glance I can tell whether a weapon is competently made. And with one throw...

I launch the dagger into the safety placard that implores us to wear safety helmets, goggles, and closed toed shoes while on the factory floor. I glimpse down at my impeccably made, buttery Italian loafers. Well, I’ve got one out of three.

The dagger, expertly made and crafted, sticks out from the wall. It takes little effort to pull it free of the plaster, although the sign falls to the cement floor with an echoing clank. Not a huge deal, they’ve got these nanny-state, whiny placards posted damn near every three feet.

“Most impressive,” I allow, wiping the plaster off the dagger with my pants leg. There aren’t many things I would

allow to dirty such a fine suit, but this weapon has more than earned the honor.

I grin at my workers. Surely I've impressed them with such a show of cunning and skill – I'd like to see their old boss launch a dagger into a wall from ten feet away.

Instead, they're screaming. I can't even see the portly factory inspector – he must have been the first out of the door. The rest follow suit, leaving me with a pallid secretary and an empty factory. The secretary still holds my credit card.

“Didn't I tell you to order some damned mines?” I snap.

“Y-yes. Sir.” And then he runs, too.

Cowards. I'm working with nothing but a bevy of weak, sniveling cowards. I bring the dagger up with me to my office, and a woman who didn't join in the factory tour below yelps when she sees me holding it. “What? Because I'm an orc with a dagger, you think I'm going to gut you with it?”

“We're in an *elevator*,” she cries.

“There's only one exit! Think, woman! If I were to kill you right now, what weapon do you have? See? I'm blocking the door. You're dead if I want you to be.”

Instead of taking my helpful words in the spirit they're intended, she slams the button for the next floor and runs out with a scream.

“Oh, great.” I stick my head out the elevator door. “I wasn't saying I'm going to kill you! I'm just saying you should always ride elevators with a weapon!”

Gasps and murmurs follow my good advice, and more people begin packing up to leave. This fucking office, I swear. It's like they're immune to good leadership and common sense advice. Exasperated, I ride the elevator the rest of the way to my personal office and check my emails.

Ten from HR in the past ten minutes. I'm no stranger to HR emails, but usually Carnette deals with them for me and interprets them as necessary. Now I scroll past paragraphs of PC legalese, and it makes me want to claw my own eyes out.

According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, weapons may not be discharged into official CCOHS safety informational posters. In fact, they may not be thrown at all when employees are present. An investigational committee —

Boring. Next!

Psychological counselors have been summoned due to employee request —

Yeah, because it's *so* mentally scarring to have a CEO who can defend his workers in combat. If anything, they should be thanking me. What would they do with their old boss, Black, in charge, if a rival company decided to take us over by force?

It's not likely to happen, sure, but I've always stood by a policy of deterrence.

Megan Polk, Head of Finance, tenders her resignation effective today, due to what she terms obscene violence —

“Good.” I slam the laptop shut, stand up to pace, and kick my secretary's desk for good measure. It crunches beneath my foot, and all of his belongings slide to the richly carpeted ground.

It's too bad there's no marble tile. It's more cathartic to hear things crunch and break.

“I ought to fire all of you,” I tell the empty factory down below. “Every single worthless baby.”

I could. It's not like I need the profits – I might as well sell the whole place for scraps and just buy up the mines Valdor needs. I can still cause them trouble, and this weapons company that's terrified of its own weapons is more of a headache than its worth.

Someone knocks at the door.

“Go away.” I'm not in the mood. If they thought my celebratory dagger throw was frightening, wait until they see the wrath of an orc truly pissed the fuck off. I'll be dealing with more than stern emails from HR, I'll be dealing with Legal.

The knock comes again, more insistent. The sound slams against my already throbbing temples, and it doesn't seem inclined to stop any time soon. "Fine! Fuck!" I pull the door open so hard that the door knob comes loose in my grip. "What the hell do you — oh?"

Every whisper of my poor temper flees. Was I thinking about selling this company for scraps? Now I'm contemplating investing my entire fortune into it. Even if I achieve nothing else, I've achieved *this*.

I grin my most savage grin, baring my tusks.

"Is that a resume in your hand, or are you just happy to see me?"

CARNETTE

“Carnette from Valdor.”

“Uh huh,” the young girl at the reception desk mumbles. Her eyes don’t leave her phone screen as she waves haphazardly towards the door. The desk phone is ringing off the hook, but she simply pushes a button to mute the sound. “Door’s open. Go on.”

If I didn’t already feel like something was wrong while coming in, I’d know it was now. She doesn’t even bother to check my credentials or confirm the appointment. In fact, it would appear nothing matters to her beyond an online search of ‘part time office desk job’ glowing on her cellphone.

I have never seen this level of unprofessionalism from anyone at Valdor. I have to hope it’s just this one immature kid in the wrong line of business. But as I make my way through the glass door, she says something that fills me with dread for what’s to come.

“Good luck.”

The door closes behind me, and the sound echoes through the facility like a pin dropping in an empty cavern. The only sound is the air conditioner working hard to keep the vacant space at a reasonable temperature.

“Unbelievable,” I sigh while stepping over a pile of broken glass. I can already tell whoever has taken over production of Black Iron is another orc. Leave it to those big guys to create a mountain of expensive destruction anytime something goes slightly wrong, like the bathroom running out of paper towels.

It's why I hold so much respect for Deiderich. He may hold the exact same toxic machismo as any other orc, but he doesn't need to burn the whole office down to get his way. He can just offer the subtle threat of a fire and everyone falls in line.

Yet, even if this place had been taken over in a hostile manner by an entire army of ancient raging orcs, this is a bit over the top. What few employees I can see are acting like the world is ending. They're shoving office supplies into their pockets and turning over desks.

This is most certainly not the peaceful transfer of power Mr. Black made it sound like. Something has gone awry here. I step down the raised bridge that spans over the production line. The machinery is at a standstill, it's eerily quiet. There's only a couple of people in work clothes down there and they're standing in a group discussing something.

What I would give to have a bug in that place. If they're planning to walk out or start a labor dispute, Deiderich needs to know. Any disruption in our supply lines can have devastating consequences on our next quarter's financials. Just knowing the line has stopped for even an hour is a problem that requires addressing immediately. Something as large as Black Iron crumbling can ruin us.

This meeting is no longer just about introducing myself to the new guy or securing extra product. This is about ensuring we can have any at all.

I continue my approach to the owner's corner office. As I do, I think through any other companies that have had changes in staffing recently. Anyone at all who might have the experience to take over this facility.

I wrack my brain through months of meetings, emails, and financial news reports but nothing is coming up as relevant. A CFO recently left at Zaira Inc, but she was one foot into retirement anyway. No way she would give up tropical paradise to get back into the game on the supply side. Other than that, it's just a revolving door of interns and temps. Who could it be?

Who caused all this mess?

I consider a few less logical answers. Perhaps this is an international purchase? I curse my inability to keep up with that language learning app. Or maybe someone completely outside of the industry woke up and decided they wanted to disrupt it? Maybe a group with more nefarious activities sees this place as a perfect money laundering pit...

I need to be prepared for anything. Behind this door could be someone who will view us as equals, or a new threat to my career. A threat to *Valdor*.

Speaking of threats, a man in a hardhat leaning against the wall looks up from his phone and whistles at me. I tamp down the urge to grab the pepper spray attached to my car keys and give the man an opportunity to be useful.

“Do you know who’s in charge here now?” I ask firmly. For his sake, he’d better.

“Yeah, King Dickhead,” the man laughs. “Guy waltzed in like he owned the place.”

“Doesn’t he?” I ask.

The guy pauses and thinks for a moment, then shrugs his shoulders. “Point is, he started lording his power over everyone before even introducing himself. And no one wanted to bow to His Majesty so he pitched a fit and started breaking shit. Guys downstairs are talking about what to do next, but we ain’t interested in working under such a... what did the janitor say? Hostile work environment.”

Great, I think, definitely an orc. Or a human male trying desperately to be one. Either way, I’m in for a challenge. However, I have one very nice card in my back pocket. If the employees are one insult away from rioting, then he’s going to need as many business allies as possible. Perhaps this little upset can be manipulated to *Valdor*’s benefit.

I have to keep my wits sharp and come back to the office with good news, no matter what. I turn to leave, but the man has the gall to beg for my attention further. “Hey, wait uh, are

you doing anything later tonight?" he asks with the most disgusting look of hunger on his face.

"I am," I state flatly. "Things far above your pay grade." And with that I leave yet another troll of a human trampled under my heel.

I climb a short set of stairs up to the owner's office. The opaque glass feature still has Mr. Black's name plastered across it. Inside I can hear mumbling. It's the perfect last-ditch opportunity for fact finding before I have to face whoever lives in there now.

I press my ear against the door and hear the muffled words, 'fire them all!' and 'scrap the place'. Oh, he's very aware of how dire the situation is for him.

But something tugs at the back of my mind. There's a sense of familiarity in all of this. It's strong enough to start activating my flight response. Every nerve in my body is begging me to get out of here, but certainly I can't do that without knowing why.

And what's worse, running away from the problem would only create worse ones at Valdor. Better to face the devil I don't know, then enrage the one I do.

I straighten myself and adjust my outfit to be a little less work appropriate. Some light biological corporate espionage never hurt before. I take a deep breath and knock on the door. My face is neutral. My breathing is even. My tits look incredible in this blouse. I'm ready.

But supposedly he isn't, as the door remains firmly closed and I'm told very angrily to go away. I let out a huff of frustration and knock again, more forcefully this time. There's the sound of stomping then the door is suddenly pulled open hard enough to break the lock.

After the initial blast of audacity fades, my brain catches up with what my body was trying to warn me. "Zouk."

I blink. How? What? Zouk? Zouk is in charge of Black Iron? Zouk, the orc Deiderich fired from Valdor, is now in charge of one of Valdor's most important suppliers?

Oh *shit*.

Zouk smiles down at me, hungrier and more lascivious than the pervert in the hallway. I swallow down my confusion and panic and clear my head. I need a plan of action, right now.

“Is that a resume in your hand, or are you just happy to see me?” he says, a wicked grin on his face.

Seriously?

I quickly take stock of what I know: Zouk took over Black Iron, probably through monetary means alone. He immediately made an ignorant ass of himself and expected a hero’s welcome, instead of the invading conqueror he actually is. When he didn’t get the reception which he felt entitled, he chose violence. How incredibly believable. The man has immense power in his hands and is throwing it into the tar pit over his inflated ego.

“Carnette,” Zouk says with a smirk. And I hate to admit it but he doesn’t look half bad. He really went all out for this hostile takeover: new suit, shiny shoes, even a haircut that somehow flatters him for once. And he’s not drenched in the worst pungent cologne known to man.

I’d even venture to say he looks good. I almost shudder at the thought. Someone who betrayed Valdor like he did has no business presenting himself this well. I push those thoughts aside. I can deal with my unfortunate attraction off company time.

“How wonderful to see you. I suppose you’ve heard the good news?” He doesn’t even attempt to mask his gloating. “Black Iron belongs to me now.”

I push my glasses up my nose and nod. “Yes, I inferred.” I wait another moment for Zouk to make the professional move. When he, unsurprisingly, fails to do so, I clear my throat. “May I come in? I have business with the owner of Black Iron.”

Zouk opens the door further and steps aside. “Please,” he says as he holds his arm out to welcome me into a completely

trashed office. The door closes behind me. There isn't even a single place to sit that isn't broken in some way.

He hasn't changed at all.

Unbelievable.

ZOUK

Oh, what a delicious surprise indeed. Carnette is standing in my office doorway practically wrapped and tied with a silk ribbon just for me. I didn't think I'd be able to show my hand to Valdor so quickly! Certainly she'd heard about the change in management and came to investigate herself.

I will give her something quite dire to return to Deiderich with.

I smile down at Carnette who is giving me the same bitchy expression she always did whenever I challenged her almighty boss. Let her be sour. I'm the one with all the control now, and if she knows what's good for her she'll be changing her tune soon enough.

She walks past me into my new office and I can't help but take her in completely. The flush in her cheeks matches the soft pink shade of lipstick she wears whenever she needs to give the illusion of being sweet. It's never fooled me!

Her blouse is tight around her chest, revealing the shape of her bra underneath. And that skirt? It's black and tight and barely covers her ass. My pants are growing tighter around my crotch. I make no move to try and hide it.

She knows exactly what she's doing wearing that here. Was she expecting someone young and inexperienced she could seduce? Did she think the new owner would be someone she could sweet talk into the palm of her hand? I can't help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?” she asks with suspicion.

“Oh, nothing at all. I suppose I am simply appreciating the irony of your timing in being here now. I just finished settling into my new office and was about to begin calling our business partners. I guess I can cross Valdor off the call list, now that you’re here.”

Carnette crosses her arms, heaving those tits further up. “I would ask for a chair that works but frankly, I don’t want to spend more time than necessary here anyway.”

I smile, completely unable to mask my smugness. She will stay as long as I wish. “To business, then? What can I do for you?” I ask. I can think of a dozen things she could currently do, but push those thoughts aside for now.

Carnette is hot for a human, of course, but she’s also smarter than she appears. She’s going to try and play this exchange in Valdor’s favor somehow. I have to keep up with her and foil it. I can’t let her little display dull my senses.

“I am here on behalf of Valdor—”

“Naturally.”

“We wanted to place a new order with Black Iron. It’s going to be different from our normal dealings with this company, so it’s important I speak with the owner in person to ensure the finer details aren’t lost.”

Carnette says the word ‘owner’ with barely disguised disdain. She knows what my being here means and she’s devastated. “How interesting,” I say while casually leaning against my desk. I straighten my suit jacket and wipe a bit of debris from my shoulder. “What exactly would this order entail?”

“An increase in specific metals. I can have a proposal with precise numbers sent over later. We need a much larger supply than normal, thus we would also expect a bulk order discount. Per usual.”

Oh, the gall she shows!

“A discount?” I smirk. It’s simply too easy. “Unfortunately, Black Iron’s business expenses have... changed recently. You understand, the labor market being what it is, and the cost of extraction going up. Why, I’d say we may need to renegotiate all standing contracts with Valdor. We’re practically bleeding money for them as it is.”

Carnette’s brow lowers. Her ability to maintain this level of professionalism is admirable, I can always give her that much.

“And of course, no one can supply Valdor with the high-quality product they need quite like Black Iron can. So I expect Mr. Deiderich to come to the table with his ego in check, and hat in hand. He is indeed at my mercy now, Carnette. I want you to tell him that. I will give him—Valdor—what he needs. But it will not be cheap.”

I study her face for any sign of scheming. Any cards she may hold. I have yet to check in with our legal and accounting departments. For all I know Black Iron has some crazy lifetime contract with Valdor that says they can set their own prices! But her neutrality in body language states otherwise. If there were some legal protection Valdor had in this regard, she would be lording it over me by now.

I have them exactly where I want them.

“I noticed you’ve come into some unfortunate staffing issues,” she finally says. There’s the glint in her eye! She pushes her glasses up her nose and places a hand firmly on her hip. “How can we be sure Black Iron is even capable of fulfilling these orders in a timely manner? We have a very tight production timeline, *as you are well aware*. Hiring and training new staff takes a great deal of time. Not to mention, dealing with union disputes.”

“It will be no issue,” I say flippantly. The staff will return to work as soon as this little meeting is over. “They will come to understand my management style is tough but fair. They simply need to grow a thicker skin.”

“About ten inches,” she replies casually. Is she dropping an innuendo? Carnette flips through her stack of paperwork and

sighs. A small break in her shield showing that classic human vulnerability.

It gives me pause. My beef with Valdor runs deep, and I will do everything in my power to make them pay for their treachery. But Carnette does not necessarily need to be a victim of my revenge. Despite her very strong position in the way Valdor moves, she was only a bystander in the way they wronged me. I can't hold too much ire for her. Even if she did place the same judgment on my actions as the others.

I think back, for a moment, to the old times. When she was kinder and an indispensable part of my team. She meant something to me back then. I don't want to hurt her. Not like this. It isn't her fault her boss let his dick confuse appearances for talent.

Besides, she's good at what she does. If I can find a way to turn her away from Deiderich and over to my side, well, that would certainly be the sweetest revenge of all.

I reach my hand out, nodding towards the paperwork in her hand. She gives me a look of suspicion before slowly handing the order details over. I flip through them initially and raise an eyebrow.

"Halberds?" I ask.

She nods. "A one time purchase, but we expect an overall rising trend in the next few quarters after that sale is complete."

"An influential client, then?" I ask. The name of which is redacted for this copy in my hands.

"And anonymous."

"Of course. One can never be too careful with their information when it comes to war." Whether the battlefield be a bloody border dispute, or a board room meeting.

Carnette's shoulders relax a bit. She seems to be letting her guard down now that the conversation has turned back to business as usual.

“You’ll indeed need a different mixture for this weapon type. It won’t be too distinct from how axes are made, but the change in how it’s used will require differing points of reinforcement. Puncture versus bludgeoning weapons, how intriguing that the market should turn this way.”

I step away from Carnette and take a seat. As I begin to open the ordering software I’ve yet to fully learn, she simply stands in place. “Please,” I say before taking my arm and wiping the clutter of useless supplies to the floor. “Have a seat.”

She raises an eyebrow in confusion. Yes, my dear, I am offering you my desk as a chair. Those heels must make her feet ache, after all. She finally shakes her head and hops onto the edge of my desk. And oh, what a sight she is from here. That round rump is right there in perfect view. How wonderful it would be to have her here every day.

It would be bad for business though, I have to admit.

I open the new order tab and stare at the document in front of me. Carnette leans over, strands of her soft hair fall in front of my face. She points at a tab to the left and sighs.

“This is the form for a new customer. You want to go into the customers module, select ‘Valdor’, and then select ‘new order’. You can also modify our existing orders this way.”

“Can I?” How intriguing.

“Don’t get any hot ideas, the forms are forwarded directly to me for approval before any major changes are legal.”

How disappointing. If only they went to someone with a duller eye for detail. Ah well. “Let’s get this order of yours going,” I say.

Carnette makes a sound of agreement as she walks me through the process of filling out the form. She’s talented, sharp, and witty as always. Not a single blank line or typo gets past her. She even catches a line item with a charge that does not apply to Valdor. I admit that was a mistake on my end, but I don’t reveal that. I still need to keep her on her dainty toes.

“Oh Carnette, what would men like me do without someone like you?” I ask slyly.

She shrugs her shoulders. “Perish, hopefully.”

CARNETTE

And there it is. The arrogant asshole strikes again. Had I known that Black Iron was going to sell, I would have encouraged Deiderich to look at other suppliers. However, signing the contract was a year ago. We couldn't have foreseen Zouk swooping in and screwing us over. Make no mistake, I know my former co-worker's game. This power play is all about getting back at Valdor.

Maybe that's why seeing Zouk in that chair has me so unsettled. How could I miss that he was selling company secrets? How could I be so blind to his double speak?

There was a time I considered Zouk a friend. Hell, for the longest time Deiderich, Zouk, and I were the dream team. We were going to show the world that Valdor was the best in the weapons business. Sure we had a few missteps, but that's what made Leia's hiring so great. We finally had the secret ingredient. We were finally going to show the old timers that we were ready.

Then Zouk had to go and ruin it.

Part of me wishes he had done jail time for his stupidity at Valdor. But good lawyers earn their money. That bothered me for a while too. Had it been so easy to turn on Valdor? To turn on us? I mean Deiderich and I. We built something, didn't that matter?

Zouk feverishly fills out the order form. If I didn't care about a breach of contract accusations ruining our reputation with other suppliers, I would walk out of the office right now.

We're stuck doing business with Black Iron because of the damn contract. Besides, taking our ball and going home would thrill the ambitious orc across from me.

I walk, and by tomorrow every known affiliate we have will be calling me wanting to break other contracts. And why? Because Black Iron, an established industry leader, says we can't be trusted. I can't go to Deiderich with that kind of blow.

I really want to hate Zouk as he tears the carbon copies off the forms. But watching him look at the computer screen and then back to paper copies I remember watching him do similar work back at Valdor.

"Besides the halberds, your standard order will be sufficient, right?" he asks.

The smugness is gone from his voice and I feel like I'm talking to the same orc I worked with way back. However, after his little victory gloat I feel the need to educate him a bit. "Actually, the business has more than tripled since you left. So our standard order will need to be at least double to start with."

It feels good to sink the knife in. Deiderich and I have busted our asses trying to undo Zouk's sabotage. I understand why the money was so tempting. Zouk has always been a creature of comfort.

Hell, the herringbone suit he is wearing costs more than my month's salary. I've always known Zouk was a preening diva. What I can't understand is why he chose to undo all our hard work. Why did he choose to pull the rug out from Deiderich? Alright damn it, why he turned on *me*.

Didn't he know that fixing his shenanigans would be extra work — extra work for *me*?

The Zouk I knew went out of his way to make sure my job went smoothly. He always respected my deadlines. He made sure I had everything I needed for my job. When he started playing Mr. Big Shot, he practically buried me in extra work. What sort of colleague, hell, what sort of *friend* does that?

Zouk seems irritated by my request to up the order. He hides it though with the thin fake smile I remember. He always

gave Leia the same smile when he was giving her backhanded compliments.

“That must be so nice for you,” he replies.

The phoniness pleases me. It means I landed my hit. “Yes, Leia has really turned things around,” I press.

“How is Deiderich’s concubine?” he inquires.

“Quite well, thank you.” That’s all he’s getting from me. I am not mentioning the beautiful wedding ceremony. Or that Leia is positively glowing from her pregnancy. He doesn’t deserve nor does he really care about that information.

I adjust my glasses as an irritated tick. I hate that I do it. It shows Zouk he got to me. I look up and his garnet-red eyes are focused on me. Crap. Here we go.

“You know I think *you* have more to do with such an impressive turnaround,” he suggests.

I laugh. I know he’s trying to mess with me. Of course, I am part of our current success. But if he thinks stroking my ego is going to get him somewhere with me, he’s sorely mistaken. “Flattery will get you nowhere,” I tease.

My old coworker seems to resurrect from the dead before my very eyes. “Of course not, it’s one of the things I admired about you,” he counters.

I hear a bit of flirtation in his voice. What an odd time to think charm is called for in this situation. “Admiration is not something I need or expect from you.”

Zouk balls his fist and rests it against his cheek. We have fallen into an old pattern here. “I don’t think my admirations are any of your business. I simply meant to pay you a compliment,” he says flippantly.

I cross my legs, I may come across as a librarian, but I am well aware of my physical assets. I catch him off guard, the flash of uncertainty is worth my energy. I’m not wrong about the flirtation.

“You always knew how to redirect,” I offer.

“So do you,” Zouk replies.

His tone is laced with innuendo. I feel the heat coming from those three little words. My body responds with an unexpected rush of moisture. Oh no, this arrogant prick isn't going to see me swoon. “Could we get back to business?” I suggest.

Zouk drops his hand from his cheek and motions for me to continue. I stand so my arousal doesn't keep me self-conscious. “I'm concerned about the price. Yes, we need a double order, but you are the kind of orc to let dollar signs cloud your judgment. I have seen your mode of operations first-hand. Plus considering your history with our company—”

“Are you suggesting I am unprofessional?” he interrupts. Even his offended tone sounds fake.

If the shoe fits asshole.

I make sure my body language confirms my thought outwardly. Zouk isn't as hurt as he is pretending. He leans back in his chair and kicks his feet up on the desk. God, some things never change. What makes it worse is, this cool detachment makes him sexy.

There must be something to karma though because just as he fully stretches out, the back of the chair gives way and he is dumped on his ass. A high pitched cheerleader laugh bellows down the corridors of my mind. But that's where it stays—in my mind.

I stand my ground, I don't offer sympathy. I don't go to help him. I fold my arms to signal my impatience. When Zouk finally gets his Gucci loafers back under him, I continue my point.

He salvages whatever pride he has left by straightening his lapels. He looks at the corner of the desk. As if to assess if it will hold his weight. Then he perches himself on the corner.

“You have to admit, you have an axe to grind. Pun intended,” I add.

Zouk rubs his palms on his pants. Then he pushes himself off the desk. He must realize sitting on the desk was a juvenile

move. “Carnette, you know I’m always about the bottom line.”

“I do,” I interject.

He raises his voice a little to establish dominance. Classic orc shit. “Then you know I have never let my personal feelings get in the way of profit before,” he insists.

“You weren’t handcuffed in public before,” I snipe.

He flinches, I got in another hit. He doesn’t recover quite as fast as the first one. “I can promise that my prices will be fair market value,” he mutters.

Your promises mean nothing, buddy.

“I want it in writing,” I demand.

Zouk rolls his broken chair out from behind his desk. He doesn’t look at me. He busies himself with setting his desk back in order. “Fine I’ll have my lawyers get in touch,” he grumbles.

That’s a polite *‘fuck you.’*

“Well, we’ll look forward to hearing from them. In the meantime, we need this order as soon as possible. Can I hear how much you plan to charge this time?” I respond.

I focus on his well-manicured hands. Even if he is an arrogant prick, I do find him attractive. Back during his time at Valdor, I started to think maybe we could move past friends. He certainly gave me the ‘I like you’ vibe, but that trigger was never pulled. Considering how things went down, it is probably for the best. He offers a somewhat reasonable number.

“Five,” I counter.

Zouk’s eyes are angry as he looks up from his busy work. “Seven,” he offers.

“Six,” I assert.

Those well-polished hands flatten on the desktop. He leans forward in a quasi-threatening pose. “Six and a half,” he spits.

I straighten up and grab my purse. “Done,” I answer. I know that number isn’t permanent. He only offered a decent price because he is dealing with me. If Deiderich had been sitting in that chair, the police would have been called and Leia and I would be scrounging for bail money.

No, I’m more than aware of Zouk’s plan. He wants to play the supply chain game with us. Well, I have news for him, I am *not* the one! “It was a pleasure doing business with you. And we look forward to seeing those revised contracts assuring us that you’ll remain impartial,” I conclude.

“Of course,” he mumbles noncommittally.

I don’t offer to shake his hand. I just go to his office door reaching for the knob, but I feel there is one last thing that needs to be said. I turn back to him and peg him with my fiercest stare.

“Zouk, don’t let the fact that I have a pussy fool you.”

I choose the equally unprofessional and unromantic term for the shock value. The response is well worth it. Zouk’s eyes spark with a lustful glint. I adjust my purse as I finish my warning.

“Whatever happened between you and Deiderich is your business. But if you ever consider screwing me over, I will make Deiderich look like a kitten.”

Zouk rumbles with an amused chuckle. “Carnette, your pussy has never fooled me. It smells great,” he volunteers.

I don’t respond. I don’t even blink. And I’m certainly not going to blush and shrink away like a virgin. It’s all a mind game. I wrench open the door and leave the smug son of a bitch staring at my ass as I walk away.

ZOUK

Carnette left an hour ago, but I can't get her out of my mind. And not just the sight of her walking away, although that image was truly delectable. Her ass is amazing. But so is the rest of her.

I'd managed to forget about that after I left Valdor. I tried to forget everything I could about that place, about her and Deiderich and Leia. Once I made up my mind to get my revenge on Valdor, to take that company and Deiderich down, I stopped thinking about Carnette at all. I stopped thinking about any of the individuals that work at Valdor, honestly. It's easier that way.

Seeing Carnette, though, is reminding me of those days right after I was fired. When I felt so lost and furious, lonely and isolated. For some stupid reason, I'd half-expected Carnette to reach out then. I thought that we were friends.

Well, I'd actually thought that maybe we could be more than friends.

But as the days dragged on and I didn't hear anything from Carnette, I decided that she wasn't worth the energy I was putting into thinking about her. That was energy that could be better used on other endeavors. Like ruining Valdor.

I stand up and pace around my office. Why is it so hard to concentrate now? Carnette and I have one meeting – one meeting in which it's clear that she can't stand me – and my focus is shot to shit.

“Fuck!” I growl, unable to get the image of her deep-green eyes staring at me, wide and knowing. I think about those eyes filled with tears when she finds out that I’ve ruined Valdor. That Deiderich and Leia’s cozy little domestic life has been blown up. That Carnette herself will be out of a job.

“Focus, asshole,” I chide myself. Yes, this is my version of a pep talk. “You have one fucking job to do, and that is to take Valdor down in a blaze of glory. Don’t worry about Carnette. She’s sure as shit not worrying about you. Didn’t you see the way she sashayed out of here?”

But that just makes me think about Carnette’s ass again, which is its own form of distraction. Finally I kick my desk in frustration and decide to leave the office. I’ll go out to the floor, walk around, see what is going on out there.

The second I slam my office door, heads swivel in my direction. I stare straight ahead, acting like I don’t notice the stares, but it’s difficult. “You!” I bark at a man in a cubicle. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, um, uh,” he stammers. “I’m – I’m sending an email?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Telling you, Sir! Yes, I’m sending an email. To purchasing.”

“Well, do it,” I snarl and he jumps a little.

“Yes, of course, right away.”

“Good.” I stomp away and stride down the corridor. On the left I see a group of people clustered around a conference room. Is there a meeting that I didn’t know about?” I throw the door open and everyone looks up, mouths agape. “What’s going on in here?” I demand. “This meeting wasn’t on my calendar. Why not? What are you doing?”

“Oh,” one of the women says. “Well, you see, this isn’t an official meeting—”

“Then why are you in a conference room? These are only to be used for company business!” I snap.

“We know, and we’re sorry,” she says. “But we’re planning a surprise baby shower and wanted to talk privately.”

I stare at the woman, then at the other members of the group. They’re all blushing and terrified, and no one will meet my eye. I don’t like this mix of embarrassment and anger that I’m feeling. It makes me think that I’ll lose control, lash out at someone or something. I can’t be seen in the office like that. I can’t have anyone think that I’m out of control.

“Well, then, carry on,” I say stiffly, and slam the door shut behind me.

“I need to get off this floor,” I mutter to myself, deciding to go upstairs and check on the tech department. I take the stairs three-at-a-time to the floor above mine, where the tech division takes up most of the floor. Up here it’s quiet and dim, everyone focused on their screens.

“What are you working on?” I ask the Head of the Department.

“Hi, Zouk,” he says, not quite as nervous as the people downstairs. I’m not up here a lot, and apparently they’re unaware of my reputation down below.

“I recognize that code,” I say, looking over his shoulder. “But there’s an error.”

“No, there’s not,” he says.

“Yeah, right there.” I grab his keyboard and make some adjustments. All of a sudden the electricity on the floor goes out. “What the hell happened?”

The department head sighs. “You shut down the system. What you thought was an error was actually a different line of code.”

“Oh.” In the light slanting through the window shades, I see him staring at me with bemused curiosity. I hand him back his keyboard. “Can you fix it?”

“Sure,” he says, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “I can use my phone’s system to get the power up and running. Should be back in about twenty minutes.”

“Well, good.” I stand up and quickly walk back downstairs, and go straight to my office. I close the door and sit down at my desk.

I look at my own computer – fortunately, the power outage was only confined to the floor above us – and at the long string of emails I need to respond to and documents I need to review. But I can’t focus on any of it.

All I can think about, after all that, is Carnette. Still. Her eyes, her ass, her mouth... even her voice. I thought that I’d forgotten the sound of her voice, but the minute she spoke, I realized that it was as familiar as ever.

The way she carried herself, though, that was new. Or at least new to me. Maybe she’d grown more confident since I left Valdor, or maybe I just never noticed before. Never noticed the graceful way she walked. Never noticed how perfect her posture is, her long neck straight, her back arched just slightly, in a way that pushed out her chest.

Her chest... I feel myself growing hard just thinking about her perfect breasts. I had tried so hard not to stare during our meeting. I knew that wasn’t appropriate, and if she caught me she would be furious. But it had taken all of my willpower, and then some, to keep my eyes on her face, where they should have been all along.

I think about cupping her breasts in my hands, about their weight and smoothness. About running my thumbs over her delicate nipples, how hard they’d feel. I close my eyes and imagine Carnette bent over my desk, my cock grinding against her magnificent ass, her glorious breasts in my hands.

With a groan, I unzip my pants and take hold of myself. This is so unbelievably unprofessional. If anyone walked in right now, I’d be done for. That should make me get control of myself.

But instead, the threat of being caught just excites me more. Because now all I can think about is having my way with Carnette right here, over my desk, in the middle of the workday. Her in a tight skirt and sweater, or that dark blue dress I remember her wearing at Valdor, the way the V neck

accentuated her figure and the material hugged her ass in all the right places.

I can see her, naked except for high heels, her long, brown hair falling down in disarray as I ram into her. I hear her gasps and moans of pleasure as she takes all of me into her warm wetness, as my hands roam over her soft skin and incredible curves.

When was the last time I was this hard? When did thinking about another female excite me so much? I can't remember. My mind is ablaze with thoughts of Carnette, my ears are filled with the sound of her voice. I cum into my hand and lean back in my chair, exhausted and relieved.

But not satiated. Not even close. As I wipe myself off and straighten up, I realize that pleasuring myself to the idea of Carnette has only made me want the actual woman even more. Which is a terrible idea. I know that.

I know that becoming involved with her, even on a purely physical level, could have terrible consequences for my plans for Valdor. That would be a distraction of the worst kind, at the worst possible time.

"She'd also be a distraction of the best kind," I mutter as I try to read an email marked "urgent." Being able to relieve this kind of tension with her; being able to work out the stress and worry clouding my mind with her body against mine – I can't deny that I take deep pleasure in the idea of fucking her and fucking over her company at the same time.

No. I can't do that. I can't blur the boundaries that I've so carefully erected between my work life and everything else. I made that mistake back at Valdor. I thought that Deiderich and I were true friends. I thought that he and I, together with Carnette, were a team.

It's taken me a long time to build my life back up. And now that I have, I can't have anything threatening to mess with my plans for Valdor. Including my own lust.

I stand up and stretch, my fingertips grazing the ceiling. I rake my hands through my hair and sit back down, finally

ready to focus on my work. Finally ready to take down Valdor
– Carnette be damned – once and for all.

CARNETTE

He should have called by now. It's been damn near a week and Zouk hasn't called with an update on our order. I think back to our sparring session a few days ago. I can't believe he thought he could just buy Black Iron. Sure he's got an incredible talent for numbers, but Zouk never struck me as 'boss material.' He makes a great sidekick, an enforcer, but not a leader.

He had been so excited to see me. Granted probably because he wanted to rub my face in his new venture. Not that I believe for a second he gives a damn about our industry.

I knew I couldn't keep my little meeting with Zouk from Deiderich long. Anytime a major buyout like Black Iron happens everyone in our business takes notice. When I approached Deiderich about my negotiation with Zouk, he had similar suspicions to mine. He didn't like the idea of placing such an important order in Zouk's hands. But as I rationally pointed out, we don't have a choice. Breaking Black Iron's contract would do us more harm than good.

Leia agrees with me of course. She is always level-headed especially when Deiderich lets his orc upbringing take control of his better judgment. By the end of the discussion, Deiderich made it clear that I was to take point on the situation. He didn't feel like sitting in lockup any time soon. Especially with Leia expecting.

I agreed Zouk was officially my problem and I would handle it. Now I just had to find a way to *handle* it. He showed

the maturity level of a fifteen-year-old boy the other day. I tried not to sink to his level, but he got me.

His face was wrapped in sheer bliss when I stormed out of his office. I didn't mind him leering at my ass as I walked away. I hope he enjoyed the show. I may have even been offended if he hadn't. I'm not even going to try to unpack that now. I'd be on some therapist's couch all day. I don't have time for that, I have work to do.

I stare at the phone on my desk. All he has to do is call with an update. This order is vital to our current deals. Maybe I should have told him to take his contract and shove it. At least I wouldn't be sitting here wishing for the phone to ring.

You know damn well, it's not the order that has you wishing for that phone to ring.

I physically slam my snack drawer to fight back the thought. Of course, this is about the order. What else would it be about? I shut my brain down with a chocolate-covered sandwich cookie. I can't waste energy arguing with myself about an arrogant, immature, blowhard like Zouk. I'm smarter than that.

The cookie is doing its job. For a few minutes, I can forget about the order. I can forget about the way Zouk's tailored suit tucked in close in all the right places. It was a nice suit. Zouk always knew how to make an impression. For better or for worse.

Before I can chastise myself for salivating over Zouk's effortless demeanor, the phone rings. I snatch the receiver before it finishes the second ring. "Valdor, this is Carnette speaking," I greet.

I brace myself for a crude greeting from Zouk. Instead, a more annoying voice comes across the line. "Carnette! How are you doing sweetheart?" I cringe. I can not stand salespeople that use such informal addresses. 'How are you?' would have been sufficient. There is no reason to force a warm familiarity into our discussion.

I recover from my initial reaction.

“Good afternoon Vivian, how are you?” I ask politely. Or insincerely depending on who you ask. I try to listen to her, but I already know what the call is about.

“I’m doing well, dear.”

Seriously, would she just stop doing that!

“I would be much better if Valdor would at least consider coming over to our firm to help you with your supply needs,” she pouts.

I try to keep my professional politeness intact. “We appreciate your offer, Vivian. But we still have an ongoing contract with Black Iron and we feel we need to honor it,” I explain.

“And that’s very noble of you dear. But I hear Black Iron has been bought out by some nasty ill-tempered orc. Now, I know Deiderich is probably more at home doing business with someone of his own... background.

The bitch needs to tread carefully right now because she’s dancing dangerously too close to the ‘family business.’ Not to mention racist nonsense. “Deiderich welcomes all partners in business. Whether they be human or orc. Valdor thinks business should be inclusive.”

I’m very thankful for my public relations training. She doesn’t know how close I am to telling her to keep her presumptions to herself. Followed by a few devastating f-bombs.

“Which is why we here at Hammer Strike respect Valdor. I just think it would be in your best interest to move your business to a company that is on a little more stable ground. From what I hear Black Iron is on very shaky ground. I would just hate for that kind of turmoil to affect the great thing you guys have going on over there.”

My hand is starting to ache, I’m gripping the receiver that hard. Leia approaches my desk with a concerned look. I force myself to smile as I take a deep breath. I need my next few words to sound cheerful and friendly. We might need Hammer Strike down the line. And Business 101, don’t burn bridges.

“We appreciate your concern, Vivian, really. But we are still going to see our contract with Black Iron through to the end. Out of respect for Mr. Black,” I insist.

“Loyalty is all well and good, but what good is it if your orders can’t be filled? I probably shouldn’t gossip like this but rumor has it—”

“Then please *don’t*,” I cut her off.

Leia shows me her palm to signal me to calm down, she mouths the word “Breath.” I do just that.

“Vivian, thank you for calling. We will certainly keep Hammer Strike in mind for any future dealings. Have a nice day.” I hang up the phone before she can wind up a rebuttal. I rub my palm to work out the tension. I try to give Leia a friendly smile. “How’s your day?” I ask.

Leia rubs her growing belly. I leap up to get her an office chair. She throws me a grateful look as she settles down into it. “I just came to see if you are okay?” she inquires.

I take my chair again. “Yeah I’m good,” I hedge.

Leia shifts uncomfortably. I hope the chair isn’t too small. I would hate for her to fall out of it. She finds a new position though and I’m drawn back into the conversation.

“It’s just I know what Zouk did, didn’t just affect Deid. It affected you too,” she explains.

I take a deep breath. I’m not mad, I just am tired of thinking, hearing, or even seeing Zouk’s name right now. “Look, this whole situation shouldn’t be about Zouk or what happened. It should be about honoring a contract,” I affirm.

Leia nods. “I agree. But it’s okay if you have issues with this,” she assures me.

Leia seems to have a gift for reading a mood. I am glad Deiderich was able to find a balance with her. I’m sure running a company with someone you are sleeping with and the mother of your child is tricky.

I lift my palms in a defensive move. I lean back in my chair to exaggerate it. “I’m fine really. I just need to go over to

Black Iron and make sure we're on track," I explain.

Leia glances at the phone. I look at it with her. "Is Black Iron not answering their calls?"

I can hear the disbelief in her voice. I shake my head. "Nope, not even an automated message," I answer.

I don't tell her how many times I've tried. It might get back to Deiderich and then we'll have a reality shitshow on our hands. If I give any clue that Zouk isn't handling this one-hundred percent professionally, then Deiderich may not be as restrained as I am. Valdor doesn't need that kind of thing.

I stand up to go get my car for the drive over to Black Iron. "Look Leia, I'd appreciate it—"

She stops me with a quiet finger. "Like Deiderich said, as far as he's concerned Zouk is your problem until we can get out of this," she reminds me.

I smile. That is exactly what he said. Zouk is my problem. I don't think they realize just how much of a *problem* he is for me. I pat Leia on the shoulder as I leave to go down to the parking garage to get my car. She smiles but doesn't get up. It's fine she can sit there all day if she wants.

I think about what I'm going to say when I get to Black Iron. *Hey, I was just in the neighborhood and I thought I'd check on the order.* Or considering our last conversation, *Hey, dickhead! Where's our order?*

I'm pretty sure which one will get through to him faster. But I don't want to be constantly sparring with Zouk. I just want him to get a grip and keep his end of the deal. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar, they say. But flies aren't overconfident orcs with chips on their shoulders.

Mr. Black seemed so happy when I called him. He must have seen something in Zouk to feel comfortable enough to hand the company over to him. Maybe I don't see Zouk's leadership skills, but maybe they're there. I just haven't seen him in the right setting yet.

I cross Black Iron's nearly empty parking lot. That's strange, it's the middle of the day, this place should be full. I

also take note that the doorman is missing too. Huh?

I enter the marble foyer. My heels click on the tiles. It isn't till I reach the office area that I see the 'gossip' Vivian mentioned in her call. No wonder she called us.

ZOUK

Yesterday I gave a speech to the company. I called everyone out to the factory floor and delivered a rousing, inspirational talk about how important it was to steamroll our competitors, work harder than ever, and bring in every project not just under budget but on time. “Now let’s get out there, you weak-kneed worms!” I’d yelled at the end.

“Let’s go kick some ass! Let’s take these motherfuckers down and dance on their carcasses!” I’d bellowed, not needing the microphone. I’d been grinning and sweaty, and even raised my arms above my heads like an idiot. But that’s how excited I was! That’s how amped up I was, and how enthusiastic I wanted all of my employees to be.

I was greeted with silence. Seriously, three minutes of dead quiet. So I went back to my office and closed the door, figuring that I should give my employees some time to come to terms with how incredibly excited they were now going to be about coming to work.

Instead, the director of Human Resources had stormed in without even knocking. She’d ranted and raved. “I was getting texted resignations before your speech was even over!” she’d told me. “You can’t use the mother-f word! You can’t tell employees that we want to dance on carcasses!”

“Yes you can!” I’d yelled back. “That was how my dad sent me off to school each morning, did you know that? And it worked!”

But she'd just shaken her head in disgust. "Zouk, why did you tell everyone that they'd be expected to work longer hours? People want to leave before nine at night. They want to see their families, have dinner with their kids. They need work-life balance."

"Longer hours are a good thing," I'd argued back. "That means we're so busy that they have job security!"

In the end, the HR director had thrown her hands in the air and quit. She's not the only one. Half of the staff — that hadn't quit after my initial meeting — left between yesterday afternoon and this morning. Those that are left shot me nervous looks when I came in this morning, and I wouldn't be surprised if more of them quit today.

I jump at the sound of a knock on my door. It feels as loud as thunder, echoing through the quiet hallways and empty cubicles. I don't have the patience to open the door; I don't want to listen to the HR director yelling at me again, or to hear another resignation speech.

"Zouk? Are you in there?"

At the sound of Carnette's voice, I jump up and stride to the door. "You're the last person I expected to see today," I admit, looking down at her.

"What's going on with our order?" she asks, pushing past me. I close the door and sit back down at my desk. At least all my new furniture came in on time so my office looks put together.

"Good morning to you, too," I say mockingly. "Nice to see you, hope you slept well."

"Oh please, you don't care about small talk," she says, sitting down and crossing her legs.

"Yes, but you do. I thought you'd appreciate the effort."

"What I would appreciate is knowing the status of our order," Carnette says. "And maybe also an explanation for all the empty desks out there." Her voice drops. "Though I have a feeling after my last visit..."

“There have been some, ah, developments in the factory.”

“And will these developments slow down our order?” she asks.

“It might be a little bit delayed,” I shoot back. Even if I had a full staff, it would be delayed. Carnette is going to have to mine the metals and build the axes herself if she wants them on time. “Why?”

“We’re going through some staffing changes,” I say shortly.

“Then fix them,” Carnette snaps. “It’s not too late for us to terminate our contract and find someone else to work with. Don’t make me regret this.”

But it is, and we both know it. She’s stuck in this contract, and even if they wanted to fight their way out of it, they couldn’t find someone else to fill this order now.

“You don’t get to make demands around here,” I snap back. “You signed a contract, and I am who you are stuck with. You will get it on *my* production schedule.”

“What production schedule? Your company doesn’t look like it’s even running this morning, Zouk. Not with all of those empty offices. What did you do, fire half the company?”

I keep my face impassive, determined not to let her see how close she is to the truth. Or how much this entire conversation hurts. I came here to destroy Valdor, and while initially I didn’t mind the weak being weeded out, it’s gone a bit farther than I was prepared for. It’s been a long time since I’ve failed at anything. Since Valdor, in fact. The idea of failing again ... I can’t even think about that.

“You are in a contract,” Carnette says, her voice icy.

“Which I’m fulfilling,” I remind her coolly. “But I don’t work around *your* deadlines.”

“Order deadlines are part of your fulfillment,” she replies. “But if you are holding up your end of the contract, then you won’t have any excuse for not bringing our order in on time.”

“I wasn’t going to give you an excuse,” I shoot back. “I said ‘developments.’ That’s all. Developments that I will handle. That I’m *already* handling, as a matter of fact.”

“Good! Then why the look?” she asks.

“What look?” I scoff.

“Please, you forget that I knew you way back when,” Carnette says. “I know how to read you, Zouk. I always have. You’re pissed off.”

“Right, I forgot how wise and all-knowing you are,” I say, and her face burns at my mocking tone. “Heaven forbid I ever underestimate the great Carnette!”

“What you shouldn’t do is underestimate just how trashed your company’s reputation will be if you screw this up for Valdor.”

“I don’t ever underestimate anything. Or anyone,” I say.

Carnette’s lip curls up in a smirk. “Oh, I would have hoped that you learned your lesson about that,” she says.

“Your concern for me is touching,” I reply, taking great pleasure in watching her smirk fade. “But I’ll be okay. And so will your order.”

“See, you keep saying that,” Carnette says. “But the look in your eyes makes me think that you are completely screwed.”

I shake my head. “Don’t you have better ways to spend your time than trying to insult me? I guess things at Valdor must be pretty slow if you can hang out here.”

“Hey, don’t worry about anything at Valdor. We’re doing fine. Great, even. Better than you could have ever imagined.”

I grin at her, enjoying how flustered she seems. “The lady doth protest too much.”

“The lady doth not protest at all,” Carnette replies. “It figures that you’d be this defensive, though. I don’t know why I ever thought you might have changed.”

“You come in here, insulting my company, and then get on my case for being defensive? Carnette, please! What the hell did you expect?”

“I wasn’t insulting your company, Zouk. I was pointing out that it looks a lot emptier than the last time I was here, that’s all. Excuse me for making conversation!”

“No, conversation is what I was trying to make when you blazed in here. ‘Hello, good morning, nice to see you.’ Remember? *That’s* conversation. What you’re doing is just being a pain in the ass.”

“Nice!” she laughs. “You talk to all of your customers that way?”

“No, just the ones I know personally.”

Carnette gives me a long look. “Let’s get something straight, okay? You may have known me back in the day. But you don’t know me anymore. And you didn’t even know me all that well back then.”

“Oh yeah? I think I knew you pretty well,” I challenge her. Carnette’s face flushes.

“You knew a different version of me. A younger, more naïve version.”

“Well, you knew a different version of me, too.” She looks surprised and I smile. “What, only you can change? How narrow-minded of you.”

“I’m not narrow-minded! Just observant. And from what I can tell, you haven’t changed at all. Still the same old hard-charging, out-for-himself Zouk as you were back then.”

“And you’re still so busy trying to prove that you’re a badass, that you can’t even be a real person,” I shoot back.

“I don’t have anything to prove. I’m exactly where I want to be at Valdor. You’re the one out here, scrapping and flailing to make a name for himself.”

“‘Scrapping and flailing,’ really? Then why’d you bring your business to me?”

Carnette's eyes flash. "We didn't have a choice, remember? *You* bought Black Iron and we already had the contract. Trust me, if it was up to me, we would have cut and run. But Deiderich believes in standing by his word."

"Oh yeah, Deiderich is such an admirable orc," I say sarcastically.

"He's always been good to me," Carnette says stubbornly. "And he treats Leia like a queen."

"Why in the world would how he treats his mate be any reflection on who he is as an employer?"

"Because you can tell a lot about someone by how they treat those around them," Carnette says. "Something you might know if you actually had anyone around you!"

She turns on her heel and walks to the door. Then Carnette turns around and looks at me. And I mean *really* looks at me, eyeing me up and down. I remember my fantasy of her from the other day, how it played out in this very spot. Despite knowing better, I feel myself grow hard.

I clear my throat and shove my hands in my pockets, subtly adjusting the fabric so she can't see what's going on. But it doesn't matter – her eyes stay glued to mine, as if she's trying to read my thoughts.

If you don't want my help," Carnette finally says. "Then you can burn to the ground."

I swallow in surprise. Her help? What? And before I can think it through, I step forward. "Wait!" I say as she begins to open the door.

CARNETTE

I hesitate, my hand still on the doorknob. I could just walk out of here and go back to work. No one would blame me, certainly not Deiderich. In fact, he'd probably love to hear about these empty offices. No matter how much he's trying to cover it with bluster, I can tell that things at Black Iron are dire.

And Zouk's been such a jackass! Why not just say that things are rough right now? Why pontificate and puff himself up and spout all this nonsense? It's exasperating and exhausting. I should just leave. Let him clean up whatever this mess is, a mess that he almost definitely created himself.

But I can't. Some dusty part of my brain that's a slave to nostalgia won't let me leave Zouk like this. Instead, I slowly turn around. "Yes?" I say.

"I'll accept your help," Zouk tells me gruffly. "But you have to defer to me."

"Ha!" I laugh. "That's a good one. Are you a complete idiot or just trying to be funny?"

He crosses his arms and glares at me, which makes me laugh harder. "You don't get to tell the person offering you help that they have to defer to you!" I say, my laughter subsiding in the spotlight of his glare.

"I'm not budging on this."

"Okay, so say I do it. What's in this for me? Why should I not only defer to you but also not just let all of this," I say,

waving my hand in the air to encompass the entire factory. “Crumble to the ground?”

Instead of answering, Zouk takes a step closer to me. I tilt my head back, looking up at him. It’s funny, but I forgot just how tall he is. And how broad. Was he this jacked when he worked at Valdor? I don’t think so. I remember him as this tall, skinny orc in bad suits. Not this muscled, powerful boss standing in front of me.

I feel a thrum of desire pulse through me, deep at my core. It’s been too long since I’ve been with anyone. That must be why I’m responding to Zouk this way. It’s just because he’s a warm body, I tell myself. It doesn’t mean anything about him as ... *him*.

“What’s in it for you,” Zouk says, his voice low and calm. “Is that without me, Valdor will go down.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You need this order. Your company has relied on Black Iron for too long to walk away now. And if you do, you’ll be the person responsible for torpedoing the deal.”

“Deiderich will understand if I don’t want to work with you.”

“Maybe. But will he understand if Valdor loses Black Iron entirely? Will he be so accepting of your reasons then?”

I swallow, unnerved by being so close to him. “I’m willing to take that chance,” I say, trying to sound more secure than I feel.

“I don’t think so. And I think that you know this will be good for you, too. So play nice, Carnette. I won’t tolerate your behavior for much longer. Smart mouths are only good for one thing,” he adds, stepping away and walking back to his desk.

What an asshole! Right now I want to use my ‘smart mouth’ to tear him a new one. Let him know what they’re really good for. But he’s right that if Valdor loses Black Iron, I’m screwed. The company is screwed.

I could kick myself for not realizing that earlier. I was too busy reveling in Zouk's discomfort and fuck-up that I didn't stop to think about what happens to Valdor if Black Iron can't deliver. And what will happen is simple: we'll be fucked.

I'll be out of a job, even if the company survives. Zouk knows that. He worked at Valdor for too long to not be aware of just how close our companies are entwined.

"Please, have a seat," Zouk says, holding out his hand to the chair I recently vacated. I sit down and wordlessly watch him gather up sheafs of documents.

"What is all this?" I ask as he sweeps the papers into a black leather folder.

"This is everything you'll need to help me sort out Black Iron," he says, handing it to me. "Resignation letters, order forms, purchasing agreements, contracts, emails. Anything that has to do with running the company is in there."

I pull out a handful of pages and start flipping through them. "These are all resignation letters," I say in surprise.

"I know," Zouk says with a wry smile. "Apparently I rub some people the wrong way."

My disloyal body starts getting turned on again when he smiles, and now I flush at his choice of words. Rattled, I look back at the letters. "Zouk, you must have lost at least half of the staff."

"At least," he agrees. "I tried to give an inspiring, let's-band-together speech yesterday. That brought a flood of new resignations with it. Including from our director of Human Resources."

"And your head of Information Technology," I say, looking at the top letter. "And Director of Communications. Two-thirds of your purchasing department looks to have walked, too. What the hell happened here?" I ask.

"Carnette, if I knew that, I would be able to solve the problem myself," he says impatiently. "Just read the letters and tell me what you think." He turns to his computer, frowning at something on the screen.

I begin to read. Certain words and phrases jump out at me, over and over, from different letters: *arrogant*, *abrasive*, *scary*, *know-it-all*. “Maybe if Zouk had a life outside the office, he’d know that we can’t work eighteen hours a day,” one former employee noted. “He thinks he knows more than everyone,” another says. “Totally terrifying,” is another person’s assessment. “Which would be fine if he valued my work, but he doesn’t. Life’s too short to work for this jackass.”

I can’t help but smile at that line. Taken together, though, the problems at Black Iron are clear – and they run deep. Zouk’s not just an arrogant and abrasive manager. He also seems entirely unable to see his employees as individuals, with families and children and desires that extend beyond the four walls of the factory. I wince at one letter, in which the employee describes how Zouk called her incessantly during her child’s second birthday party, which was on a Sunday, with questions about an order.

Another employee’s story about trying to have dinner with his ninety-year-old mother almost brings me to tears. He had just finished making her favorite meal when Zouk called and demanded that he come back to the office. “The problem he had wasn’t even time-sensitive,” the employee wrote. “I got the feeling that he was doing this just because, as the boss, he could.”

“I’m going to take a walk,” I murmur. Zouk just nods brusquely.

I wander through the hallways of the factory. I make a cup of coffee in the breakroom and pace the factory floor. All the while, I’m listening to what the remaining employees are saying and talking about. What I hear just fills me with more despair.

“Okay,” I say when I return to Zouk’s office. “We need to talk.”

“Have you diagnosed the problem?” he asks, not glancing up from his computer.

“Yes. It’s you.”

At my words, Zouk looks up. “What do you mean?” he asks, furrowing his brow.

“You’re a tyrant,” I say bluntly. “You scared away a lot of talented women and men because you didn’t value their contributions, their private time, their intelligence, or their dedication.”

Zouk opens his mouth to protest, but I hold up my hand. “I’m not done, Zouk. In fact, I’m just getting started. The employees that you still have – who are either incredibly brave, incredibly desperate, or some combination of both – they don’t want to be here. Morale isn’t just low, it’s nonexistent. No one wants to work hard or take responsibility because they don’t think it’s going to matter. Which means productivity is also basically non-existent.”

“Wow,” Zouk says, looking ill.

“Nope, still not done,” I say, shaking my head. “You also fucked up big-time when you decided to personally manage the supply chain logistics, instead of delegating to employees that actually were familiar with the logistics.” I hold up the purchasing orders and invoices. “These tell a bleak tale.

“You didn’t have a system in place,” I continue. “So it shouldn’t have been a surprise that you messed up or forgot about a crap ton of orders. But apparently this is a surprise to you, because even after you missed the first one, you didn’t turn it over to what looked like a very capable team.”

“They didn’t work hard enough,” he protests.

“And you didn’t know what you were doing! Key materials are on backorder now, and I don’t see any evidence that you have a plan for what to do until they arrive. And there are at least a dozen parts that you should have stocked in surplus, but instead are running short on. I’m going to take an educated guess that at least five of those are on backorder now, too.”

“Bottom line,” Zouk says flatly. “What do you make of all this?”

“What I make of all this, is that you don’t know what the hell you’re doing. You’re egotistical and intolerant, and it’s amazing that Black Iron has any employees left. You need to give everyone that stuck around a raise, effective immediately. Stop calling them on the weekends and after six p.m. at night. Try and prove to them that this company is worth saving.”

He looks at me, his jaw set and eyes hard. And I remember that I was supposed to defer to him, not rant about his deficiencies. Legion though those may be.

“I’m sorry you don’t like what’s coming out of my ‘smart mouth,’” I say, and he has the grace to look ashamed. “But you asked for my opinion, and now you have it. I don’t care about you, Zouk, but I care about Valdor. So I’m going to do everything I can to make your company a success. Not for your sake, but for my own.”

ZOUK

Carnette is an incredible distraction. It's been almost impossible for me to get anything done with her in my office yesterday and today. How the hell was I supposed to be throwing a wrench in her plans, but now she's fixing Black Iron?

This isn't what I intended, not at all. I could kick myself for accepting her offer of help. I genuinely thought that she'd see what bad shape the factory is in and head for the hills. I didn't expect her to dive in headfirst, and be so eager at the idea of turning Black Iron around.

Her initiative is almost making me second-guess my own strategy. I can see what a great company Black Iron used to be, and that it could be again. The idea of making a real go of it here is starting to sound appealing. I've never turned away from a challenge before, and I'm sure as hell not going to start now.

But how can I take revenge on Valdor like this? How can I bring down Deiderich's company with Carnette standing alongside me? And I mean that literally. Right now she's standing beside me in front of the same podium where I gave my infamous speech two days ago. Only this time Carnette's the one doing the talking.

Well, more like moderating. She had the idea to host a staff meeting. There was no way I could tell her no without tipping my hand, so I told her to go ahead. I expected it to be a disaster. Actually, I didn't even expect anyone to show up.

Why would they, when they were as demoralized as Carnette made it sound?

Apparently, to complain. Because that's what the past two hours have been. An ocean of complaints, all washing over me. "We just don't feel very heard," a man is saying now. "I think I speak for all of us when I say that Zouk just, um, he's not very receptive."

"I am!" I finally burst out, unable to hold my tongue any longer. "I'm receptive to good work! Come to me with ideas about vanquishing our enemies, and I'm all ears!"

"We're not vanquishing anyone," Carnette scolds me.

"Then what's the point?" I ask.

"The point," she says, turning back to the staff. "Is to do good work that makes people feel valued and helps Black Iron's customers. Right?"

I watch in amazement as her words are greeted with applause. What the hell? Why is this touchy-feely crap so popular?

"I'd like to talk about the restrooms," one woman says. "They need to be cleaned more often. What happened to the cleaning staff?"

"They left," Carnette says diplomatically.

"Well, we need them!" the woman complains.

"I'll get them back," I promise her. "All I need to do is rip off the head of one of the crew. Two at most. That'll scare them into ensuring that the restrooms are so clean you could eat off of them!"

"I don't want that," the woman says, aghast. "Don't kill anyone! And who would want to eat in a bathroom? That's disgusting."

"Those are both very valid points," Carnette says soothingly. "I think that the cleaning staff would be open to returning. I've had some initial conversations with the head of the crew and she said that they could come back if the manager was a bit less, um, overbearing."

“I’m not overbearing,” I growl. Carnette glares at me. “Come on! You say you want a clean workplace, but I’m not allowed to use force to get that? Make up your mind!”

“What you are supposed to do—” Carnette hisses, grabbing my arm so I have to lean down closer to her. “Is listen and learn something. And don’t alienate anyone any further. Do you want Black Iron to still exist after the end of the week?”

“Yes,” I hiss back.

“Then shut up!”

As Carnette turns back to the microphone and someone else begins to talk, I let my mind wander. To my surprise, when I said ‘yes,’ it wasn’t just because I need the company to remain viable for a while longer to thoroughly fuck with Valdor.

As soon as I agreed, I felt a bolt of excitement shoot through me. That’s something that I haven’t felt in a long time. I hadn’t realized how boring and predictable my life had become before I bought Black Iron; I hadn’t appreciated just how much of a rut I was in.

Turning around a factory after more than half the staff has left wouldn’t have jumped out at me as a good cure for boredom. Hell, I would have said that if that many people had left, the company was doomed to fail and should be put out of its misery. I would have insisted that my skill and intelligence was destined for something better.

Maybe part of me feels badly about the state the company is in, because I helped get us here. Not that I’d ever admit that to anyone, especially Carnette. I’d never hear the end of it.

Especially since she’s already made positive changes around here. Not this stupid meeting, but more practical changes. She told me right before the meeting started that she’d negotiated with some alternate suppliers, and we’ll have all the parts we’ll need by the end of the week. Which was a pleasant surprise.

But her words yesterday... they got under my skin. It’s been a long time since anyone talked to me so bluntly and

openly, especially when they're criticizing me. That might have been the most honest conversation I've had in years.

Which is kind of sad, now that I'm thinking about it. Even though I don't often wish that I had a companion, a mate, I can see now that keeping to myself to the extent that I have maybe wasn't the healthiest choice.

I still don't get what's so important about being around for a child's entire birthday party. Why not just show up at the end, with a gift? That's more than my parents ever did for me, and I turned out great.

But after spending all afternoon listening to Black Iron's employees talk about how difficult it's been for them to spend time with their families... Okay, I can admit it to myself. Some of their stories were kind of sweet. I didn't feel bad about asking them to work late or come in on weekends; there was work to be done, even if none of them want to admit it.

Still, now I understand a bit better about what they were giving up for this company. And the fact that they still came in when I asked, even when they didn't want to, makes me respect my employees a little more.

I look down at Carnette, who's nodding as yet another employee complains about me. Does everyone hate me? I mean, I guess so, or we wouldn't still be having this meeting. Which, to be honest, feels less like a meeting and more like a venting session.

Carnette seems genuinely engaged in the conversation. Before this afternoon I would have said that she would have loved any chance to bash me. And that still could be what's motivating her. I'm sure that she wants to agree with a lot of what's been said.

But I think again about our conversation in my office yesterday. She wasn't just blunt and honest with me. She was passionate. I never saw that kind of passion from her at Valdor. Was that because I just didn't notice, or was it because the idea of saving Black Iron appeals to her, too?

For the first time in years – actually, maybe for the first time ever – I wonder how happy Carnette is at Valdor. She’s still Deiderich’s secretary. I know that that job comes with a fair amount of responsibility, but I can also imagine that Carnette’s pretty much mastered the role by now. Maybe she wants another challenge, too.

For just a second I let myself imagine how sweet it would be to poach Deiderich’s right-hand woman. He would lose his shit!

But that means that Carnette would be working at Black Iron, and I don’t want that, either. Having her help me turn the factory around is one thing – one, time-limited, thing. And I’m only doing it because this will get me to my goal.

“Zouk, what do you think?” Carnette asks, turning to me.

I clear my throat, unsure what she’s asking. “What do I think of what?” I ask.

“Do you think that you can be the boss that they want?” she asks, indicating the employees. “Can you commit to letting them leave at reasonable times, and do their jobs without your micromanaging?”

“And can you stop talking about beheading people?” one guy shouts out. “It’s really unsettling.”

“Yes,” Carnette nods. “Can you keep all of your conversations and interactions appropriate to the workplace, and not make your employees feel uncomfortable?”

I want to say that that will be difficult, since apparently everything makes them feel uncomfortable. But I get the feeling that that’s not what Carnette means. So instead, I just nod. “I can promise that I will do my best,” I say.

She looks slightly annoyed. “And that you’ll learn quickly how to do better?” she nudges.

“Yes,” I sigh. “And effective immediately, no employee has to come in earlier than eight in the morning or leave later than six at night. Although I would appreciate those that choose to come in early and stay late, since that’s what I do.”

Carnette clears her throat. “But that’s voluntary,” she says, glaring at me. I reluctantly nod.

A woman raises her hand, and Carnette nods at her. “Are you going to be staying?” she asks Carnette. “Because you seem like you’d be fun to work with.”

Carnette blushes. “Thank you. I’ll be here to help get Black Iron back on track,” she says. “Thank you all for coming, and sharing this afternoon. I think that you’ll find a very different, and more enjoyable, workplace going forward.”

Carnette follows me to my office. “I think that went well,” she says as we walk down the hall.

“I think it was a boring waste of time,” I reply, opening the door.

“Agree to disagree,” Carnette says.

I turn around in the doorway. “Do you always have to have the last word?”

“Yes,” she says simply, pushing past me and going into the office.

CARNETTE

This has been the most frustrating week of my life. It's not bad enough that I had to come here in the first place to check on our order. An order that I'm now convinced will come in late, if it comes in at all.

But then I let myself be suckered into helping Zouk out. And after spending all of yesterday afternoon and evening digging through that mass of papers he gave me, and all of this morning trying to drag Black Iron into some kind of presentable shape, I had to oversee that employee meeting. Which was where Zouk was supposed to begin making amends for his behavior and acting like a proper boss.

Instead, he almost blows up the meeting entirely. I can't believe that he's actually that clueless, to have said all those asinine things about ripping off heads and the rest of that bullshit he was spouting.

I don't remember him being like this at Valdor. I mean, I know that was a while ago, and of course people – and orcs – can change. But still, this feels like next-level cluelessness. Unless... could he be doing all this shit on purpose? Is he trying to tank his own company?

I think about the speech he gave to all of the employees a few days ago. I might not have been here for that, but I've heard and read enough from the employees to know just how out-of-control Zouk sounded. No one would think that he was the owner of the company from the way he acted at that meeting, that's for sure.

Could that have been on purpose? Did Zouk deliberately lay the Bad Orc persona on super-thick to force people to quit?

But that's ridiculous, I think as we walk back to his office after the meeting. He just bought Black Iron, after all. Why buy a company just to ruin it? I know that Zouk has a ton of money now and money can make anyone do stupid things. Still, does he have that kind of money, so much that he can just waste a bundle by taking ownership of a company and then basically burning it down?

I wince, hoping that he doesn't decide to literally torch the factory. "Are you okay?" Zouk asks.

"Sure, I'm fine," I say. "Just shaking off that meeting."

"I know! What a bunch of whiners."

"That's not what I meant," I say coldly. "I actually think that you have a great group of employees here, and you're lucky to have them. What I needed to shake off was your clear arrogance and contempt."

I sit down in the chair across from him and place my hands on the desk between us. "You need to stop trying to scare your employees," I say.

"They're my employees," Zouk argues. He stands up and moves out from behind the desk. I watch as he paces around the large office. "I can handle them how I want."

"What the hell is wrong with you!" I yell, jumping up. "God, for a second there I thought they were actually getting through to you."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that there was a moment during the meeting when you didn't look like you wanted to rip everyone's heads off." Great, now I'm talking about decapitation, too. "When you seemed to consider that you don't have a bunch of robots working for you, but individuals that like to be treated with respect and autonomy."

"The respect is their paycheck!" Zouk snarls. "And autonomy has to be earned. How can I give them autonomy

when I don't trust them to do their damn jobs?"

"It's not like you've been doing so much better!" I cry. "The purchase orders? The supply chain logistics that you completely botched? Why the hell do you think you know better than everyone else?"

"Because most of the time, I do," he says, approaching me with an angry expression on his face. Unnerved, I back up until my ass hits the edge of his desk. "How do you think I made it this far? Why do you think I became such a success after Valdor?"

"Because you're an emotionless jackass that works nonstop and doesn't care about anyone," I shoot back.

"You are supposed to defer to me!" Zouk cries. "How about you show me some respect?"

"Why? You're not giving me a paycheck," I snap. "And to me respect, like autonomy, has to be earned. You haven't done anything to make you worthy of respect in my book."

"I listened to you about that insipid meeting," he snarls, coming closer. "I said what you wanted me to say at the end. Wasn't I a good enough puppet for you?"

"You're no one's puppet." I try to laugh to hide my emotions as he approaches me. I'm not scared of Zouk. I'm angry and frustrated, but that's not what I want to conceal.

The embarrassing truth is, part of me is turned on. Granted, that's the purely physical part of me, but as he leans over me, breathing heavily, I can't deny that I'm wetter than I've been in a long time.

I look up into his eyes, which are dark and stormy. I wonder if there are emotions he's actually wrestling with, too. Or if I was right that he's devoid of any emotion – or at least any recognizable emotion, because I don't think arrogance and avarice are actually emotions.

Zouk interrupts my train of thoughts by leaning even closer to me. His breath is minty and warm, and so close to my face. I lift my chin, determined not to look away.

“In orc culture, women are obedient,” Zouk says. His voice is lower, almost raspy.

“Well, good for them,” I reply. “But I’m not an orc.”

“That’s clear,” he says with a short laugh. “Orc women sit on their knees, with their heads bowed when the male above them is talking. They listen to the males.”

“Then I hope the males are saying something more interesting than what comes out of your mouth,” I say, automatically dropping my gaze to his lips. Damn it!

“If you want an orc woman so badly, maybe you should get one over here,” I say, dragging my eyes back to his. “I’m sure you could find a meek little female orc that would like nothing more than to get down on her knees for you.”

“You’re right, I could,” he says.

“Then why don’t you? Why’d you ask me for help? I don’t think you want some obedient orc woman,” I say boldly. “I think you’ve had that and you found it too boring, too predictable.”

His lips curve into a smile. “You’re assuming an awful lot about me, Carnette.”

“You forget how long I’ve known you for.”

“I’d like to see you on your knees,” Zouk says and my eyes widen in astonishment.

“There’s no way I’m going to get on my knees and listen to anything you say.”

“Oh no,” he chuckles. “I want you on your knees for a very different reason.”

“You really are a bastard,” I hiss. He’s put one arm on either side of me, pinning me against the desk. “The only way I’d ever get on my knees for you – wait, no. There’s no way I ever would.”

“No way?” he asks, putting his leg between mine. He leans forward and I can feel him, hard and long, against my leg.

“None.” I shake my head to prove my conviction. But it’s getting more difficult to stay mad at Zouk. Not with him so close to me. Not feeling him against me. Not with me getting so turned on that I can barely think.

“That’s a shame,” he says, still smiling. “Because I think that would make a very pretty picture.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“You’ve called me worse.”

“And you deserved every word, and more.”

He leans even closer. “Don’t you get tired of being so mad at me?”

“Tired? Not a bit. I find it invigorating, actually. Someone needs to put you in your place. I would have thought that after what happened at Valdor, with Deiderich, you’d be humbled. You’ve fooled me.”

“I don’t get humbled,” he says. But I can see a flicker of pain in his dark eyes, a hint of uncertainty. And I know that I’ve hit his weak spot. His ouster from Valdor, the end of his friendship with Deiderich – it does still hurt him.

This knowledge should make me feel triumphant. But instead, I’m surprised that the first thing I feel is pity for Zouk. I wonder how exhausting it must be, pretending to never be bothered by anything.

“I don’t believe you,” I tell him now. “If that were true you wouldn’t have asked me for help. You wouldn’t have lasted two minutes at that meeting, never mind two hours. You’re saying one thing but your actions are proving you wrong.”

“I think the same could be said about you,” Zouk says, pressing his leg harder against me. I let out an involuntary moan.

I look at Zouk, expecting him to make fun of me, to point out his dominance. But instead he’s gazing at me like he’s never seen me before. I blink at the tenderness I see in his eyes, at the yearning I find there.

“This is wrong,” I say. “We shouldn’t be doing this. I don’t even like you.”

“I don’t even like you,” he replies, his voice as low as mine.

“Then we should stop right now,” I say weakly.

Instead Zouk kisses me. I’m too surprised to react at first, but then I kiss him back. It feels like a fire is racing through me, reaching out from my core and igniting every nerve ending, every inch of skin. Only our lips are touching but my entire body is jolted with desire.

“What was that for?” I ask when he pulls away.”

“That?” He grins. “I just thought that it was about time someone shut you up.”

CARNETTE

I pull back and slap Zouk on the cheek. He looks shocked, but then his eyes narrow angrily, making heat lick up between my thighs. “What did you do that for?” he asks darkly.

“It seemed like the only appropriate response for you being such an unrelenting jackass,” I say, wishing that my voice didn’t sound so shaky.

That kiss – oh my lord, that kiss! It was incredible. And if he’d just kept his own mouth shut, we’d be repeating it right now.

“Don’t ever try that with me again,” he growls, pushing hard into me. “Or you’ll regret it.”

“Don’t talk to me that way,” I bite back.

I should leave. After all, I have a ton of work to do. I should tell him no and get out of this office, this building, right away. But even as my brain is telling me to go, my body is begging me to stay.

And for the first time in – well, maybe ever, I decide to listen to my body. “Maybe it’s time someone shut you up.”

He cocks his head, so close to me now that I can feel the heat of his breath coasting along my skin. I tilt my chin up, practically begging him to kiss me, but as the smile spreads across his face, I know he won’t.

“Maybe you’re right,” Zouk says, slowly sinking to his knees. I’m about to ask what he’s doing when he pulls my skirt

down roughly, and I gasp at his touch. I don't dare protest as he nudges my legs apart.

Then he slides two fingers inside me, his thumb tracing circles around my clit. I throw my head back, ecstasy shooting through me like fireworks in the sky. I can barely handle how good I feel as his fingers explore every inch of me, inside and out.

Then he slides his hand off of me. Before I can really even register what's happening, his head is between my legs, his tongue pushing deep into me. I lie all the way down, splayed across his desk as he continues eating me out. I bring my legs up and wrap them around his shoulders, pulling him closer.

“Oh god,” I moan. “Oh, yes! Yes!”

My orgasm leaves me spent and panting, sweat dampening my hair. Zouk begins kissing my stomach, unbuttoning my shirt as he slowly moves up to my breasts.

When he takes one nipple in his mouth, I let out a deep, guttural groan of satisfaction. I've never made this noise before. But I've also never felt this turned-on before. Zouk turns his attention to my other breast, still working slowly and thoroughly. I'm already wet again, ready for more. So I decide to take over.

I rear up and kiss him, catching him off-guard. “My turn,” I tell Zouk, placing my hands on his shoulders and pushing him towards the desk.

He grins and lies down. I unbutton his shirt, push his tie to one side. His chest is muscled and taut, with the perfect amount of hair: not a pelt, but not sparse. I run my fingers through his chest hair and he moans in pleasure.

I close my eyes, enjoying the sense of power I feel as I straddle him. After unzipping his pants, I run my fingers over his large, rock-hard cock. I lower my mouth to his boxers and nip my teeth along the waistband.

“Oh my god, Carnette,” he moans. “You are fucking amazing.”

“I know,” I say, then pull his boxers off with my teeth. I kiss my way along his shaft, enjoying how it strains against my touch.

“I need to have you,” Zouk growls. He wraps his hands around my waist and guides me on top of him.

With a gasp I lower myself onto his powerful cock, slowly inching down until I’ve taken every bit of him. I lean forward slightly, resting my hands on his chest to steady myself. Zouk’s hands slide down from my waist to my ass. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted to do this?” he asks as he thrusts into me.

His words surprise me, but instead of bringing me out of the moment, they make me want him even more. I had no idea that Zouk had ever fantasized about me, had ever thought about having sex with me.

Knowing that he has, though, is another incredible turn-on. I close my eyes and give myself over to the sensation of him filling me up, claiming my body just as I’m claiming his.

“Hold on,” Zouk finally gasps. He puts his hands on my waist again and stands up, still holding me inside him. I moan as he swings us around so now I’m lying on the desk. The wood is smooth and cool against my skin, a wonderful contrast to the heat rushing through me.

Zouk pushes into me and I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him as close as I can. He’s barely moving, more like rocking against me, which is just what I want. “You feel so good,” I whisper into his ear.

“And you are...” he pauses to catch his breath. “Beyond words.”

I smile and so does he, and it’s been so long since I’ve seen a genuine smile from Zouk that I almost cry. I didn’t realize that I missed that side of him, the side that was decent and funny and caring.

He kisses me and while it’s less passionate than our earlier kisses, this one feels more tender. Almost romantic, actually.

It's slow and soft, and I don't want it to end. I don't think he does, either, because we keep kissing until I'm almost dizzy.

"I can't wait any longer," he moans as we pull apart.

"Don't!" I encourage him, arching my hips up. He groans and plunges deeper into me, and my back is basically suctioned to the desk by now and there's a pile of papers under my left shoulder and a pen in my hair but I don't mind. All I can focus on is Zouk moving inside of me, how good he feels, how he's hitting all the right spots, over and over and over.

"Oh! Carnette!" he cries as he cums.

"Yes!" I yell, closing my eyes and letting the sensations of my second orgasm, which is even better than the first, crash over me. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Zouk shudders against me and collapses into my arms. "Oh my god," he whispers. "That was incredible."

"It was," I murmur, wrapping my arms around his torso, cradling him against me.

Our breathing gradually slows down, and I swear we're breathing at the same time, our hearts beating together. I cringe at that mushy thought. What's happening to me? Am I actually starting to have real feelings – something deeper than just lust – for Zouk?

No, that can't be happening! He's a jerk. An arrogant, entitled ass. He treats people like trash. His idea of a polite conversation is one where he only talks about ripping heads off once.

And he screwed over Deiderich, and Valdor. How could I ever, even for a minute, let myself forget that? I know what he's capable of; I know that better than almost anyone. And yet here I am, basically sleeping with the enemy.

I let go of Zouk and he rolls over onto the desk. He turns his head and looks at me, still smiling. "This has been a very unexpected surprise," he says.

I sit up, shaking my head. "No, no, no!"

"What's wrong?"

I jump off the desk and look around for my clothes. “We’re not doing this again. Got it?”

“Why not?” he asks as I yank my skirt on.

“Because it was a mistake!”

“You didn’t seem to think that ten minutes ago,” he points out. “Or five minutes ago, for that matter.”

“That’s because my mind was on other things,” I mutter, buttoning up my shirt.

“Very delightful things,” he says, lazily putting his shirt back on.

“That will never happen again,” I say, tucking my shirt in and straightening my skirt. “This was a one-time moment of insanity.”

“Felt more like two times to me,” he grins, smoothing his tie.

“Shut up!” I snap, stepping into my shoes. “We are never speaking of this again. Much less doing it again. And we don’t tell anyone about it. Understood?”

“Hey, I never talk about my conquests,” Zouk says, looking hurt. “I’m not one to kiss and tell.”

“I appreciate your discretion. It surprises me, but I appreciate it.” I look at Zouk as he stands up and puts his pants back on. “But you have to promise me.”

“Okay, I promise,” he says. “This never happened, we never kissed, I don’t know what you taste like, and you don’t have three paper clips stuck to the back of your head.”

“Dammit, Zouk!” I cry in frustration, feeling my face turn red. I yank my hands through my hair and remove the paper clips, then wind my hair up in a tidy bun. “What you just said about how I taste? That’s not exactly never talking about it again!”

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” he says, holding up his hands in surrender. “Okay, I promise for real now. Nothing happened between us or will ever happen again.”

“Thanks,” I mutter. Getting him to agree felt like pulling teeth, so I’m not in the mood to be more gracious or appreciative. I run my hands over my clothes again. And then, satisfied that I look completely normal and no one will be able to tell what I just did, I walk to the door.

“Where are you going?” Zouk asks from the desk. He’s straightening up papers, returning order to what we messed up.

“I have work to do,” I say shortly, and close the door firmly behind me.

ZOUK

I let myself into my apartment and drop down onto the couch. I don't know how I got any work done after Carnette left my office. But somehow I managed to stay busy, both because I have a stack of purchase orders to redo, at Carnette's insistence, and because that way I didn't have to think about what we'd done.

Now, though, I don't have any distractions. I close my eyes and think about Carnette. About how good it felt to be with her. About her incredible taste and scent, her smooth, strong legs wrapped around me, her delicate hands on my back. About how she arched her hips at the end and I almost lost my mind.

It was good for her, too. I know it was. Which makes her disappearing act all the more mystifying. I thought she was going to make me swear a blood oath to never tell anyone! How could she think that? How could she imagine that this was just another conquest?

"Because of your reputation, moron," I mutter. It's not that I have a rep as a player – I don't. At least I don't think so. But I do have a reputation as an asshole. So it makes sense, I realize, that she would assume that I'd look at her as yet one more notch on my belt.

Is she right? Do I just think of her as another notch, something else that I can brag about having done? I wince at the thought, but the truth is that I never thought about Carnette

in a relationship-type way. Mainly because, for a long time, it hurt to think about anyone associated with Valdor at all.

But it's been surprisingly enjoyable to have her back in my life. Not initially, of course; at first I thought she was a royal pain in the ass. Then she began standing up to me, pushing back and giving me unvarnished opinions, and somehow seeing her has become the highlight of my day.

I hear a noise from my kitchen and jump up. "Who's there?" I roar, charging towards the open kitchen door.

"Whoa, bro, calm down!" My brother Goran is leaning against the counter, drinking a glass of water.

"Don't tell me to calm down," I growl. "What the hell are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"I still have that extra key you gave me when you moved in," he says. "I thought I'd stop by and see if you wanted to get a drink."

"You couldn't bother calling first? Or waiting outside?" I ask.

Goran shrugs. "I was in the neighborhood, and I was thirsty. Want some?" he asks, holding out his glass.

"I don't need to be invited to have a damn glass of water in my own fucking kitchen," I seethe.

"Whoa, someone had a rough day," Goran says. "Come on, Zouk. One drink. You look like you could use it."

I sigh. The idea of a drink or two is appealing, and it's been a while since Goran and I have hung out. "Sure, fine. Let's go."

We end up at a bar a few blocks away. It's old-school, which appeals to me: dim lighting, dark wood, dart boards hanging on the wall. "Four shots of Jack," Goran says to the bartender. I look at him and raise an eyebrow.

"This is your idea of a drink?" I ask.

"Hey, if you don't want yours, I can handle them," he says, grinning as the bartender slides the glasses over.

“I’ll take them,” I say, and down both of my shots at the same time. Goran laughs and does the same.

The whiskey burns pleasantly and I hold up four fingers at the bartender, who nods. “Trying to show me up?” Goran asks, looking at the new glasses.

“I don’t need to try,” I quip, and I think I see the bartender smirk. I quickly down both of my shots and nod at the dart boards. “Ten bucks says I can whip your ass.”

“Ten? That’s pocket change,” Goran sniffs, slamming down his fourth shot. “Fifty, and you have to get the center.”

“Please, give me a real challenge,” I scoff, walking over to the board and yanking out the darts.

“Fine, best two out of three gets two hundred,” Goran says, tossing his first dart. It lands in the third-innermost ring and he grins.

“Done,” I say, lining up my shot. It hits dead in the center.

After I beat Goran in three straight games, he orders us each scotch. “Neat, three fingers,” he instructs the bartender.

“Let’s make the next round more of a challenge,” I suggest. “This was so easy, it’s boring.”

“Okay, what do you want?” he asks, pulling out the cash he owes me. I wave his hand away.

“How many darts do you think you can destroy?” I ask with a wicked grin.

Goran laughs as the bartender’s face pales. “All of them.”

I hold out my hand. “Whoever takes down the most the fastest wins. And then I’ll take your money.”

“In your dreams.” Goran throws a dart so fiercely that, when it hits the board, it explodes. “Looks like it’s one to zero.”

“Not for long!” My dart not only shatters, but it takes out a dart on the board next to it. Goran high-fives me.

“Um, guys,” the bartender says weakly.

“What!” Goran snarls, slamming his already-finished glass down on the bar.

The bartender swallows and grows even paler. “Nothing. Would you like a refill?”

“Yeah. And give my brother one, too,” he says.

An hour later, we’ve demolished all of the darts in the place. The bartender looks like he wants to stop serving us, but Goran won’t let him. I’ve won five hundred off my brother and should be feeling great, but those damn thoughts about Carnette are creeping back in.

“What’s wrong, Zouk?” Goran asks, handing me yet another drink.

“Nothing,” I say gruffly.

“Hah!” Goran chortles. “Come on, dude, I know that look on your face. It’s either business trouble or woman trouble. And you’re rich as fuck, so I’m guessing it’s the latter.”

I open my mouth, planning to tell him about Black Iron. But instead, I say, “Yeah, it’s a woman.”

“I knew it!” he says. “Is she hot?”

“Dangerously,” I admit. “Her ass could stop traffic.”

“Nice,” he whistles. “So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is I’ve been fucking pining after her,” I say. “It’s ridiculous.”

“Then tell her!” Goran says. “What’s the problem?”

“Well, she could flat-out reject me,” I say. *She already did*, I think but don’t add. I wasn’t lying when I told Carnette earlier that I don’t kiss and tell. That’s never been my style – in large part because Goran would never stop asking for details, and I don’t want to put up with that.

“So she rejects you. Big deal,” shrugs my brother. Goran’s never had a long-term relationship. Hell, he’s never really had a relationship at all. My brother’s more into one-night stands, claiming that there are too many available women out there to ever see the same one more than once.

“Did you miss the part where I said I’ve been pining after her? Her rejecting me actually would feel like a big deal,” I insist. “It’s like I’ve been wanting her for so long that I can’t act naturally around her.”

“Man, this chick has really got you wound up,” Goran observes.

“This is what I’m trying to say!”

“Then go after her! Come on!” Goran says, jabbing me so hard in the ribs that I almost fall off my bar stool. “What are you, some kind of coward?”

“Fuck, no,” I say, shaking my head.

“Then tell her how you fucking feel!” Goran bangs his fist on the bar for emphasis. The wood cracks beneath his hand and the bartender looks like he’s going to pass out.

“Okay!” I roar, pounding my own hands on the bar. The wood splinters but I don’t care. “Fuck it, I will!”

Yes! This is what I have to do. I need to just tell Carnette how I feel. What’s the worst that could happen? She already rejected me today, after all. There’s nothing else she could say that would wound me as deeply. So why not?

And maybe if I stop trying to push her away at Black Iron, and stop seeing her as the enemy just because of her association with Deiderich, she’ll change her mind.

“Go for it!” Goran howls, interrupting my train of thought. “Find that woman, tell her how you feel, and tap that hot ass! Hey!” he yells to the bartender. “Six more shots!”

“To you!” Goran cries, handing me a full shot glass. We toast and gulp the whiskey down. “To her!” he yells, and we clink the second pair of glasses. “And to me, for talking sense into your stubborn ass!” he roars, downing the third shot without waiting for me.

Then Goran reaches into his wallet and pulls out a thick stack of bills. He thrusts them at the bartender. “Here, this should be enough for the drinks and darts and counter,” he says, starting to slur his words. He throws a heavy arm around

my shoulder and pulls me close. "I'm glad we did this, Zouk," Goran says. "You're a good brother."

"You too," I say, feeling my own tongue growing thick in my mouth. "How much did we drink, man? I lost count."

"You had less than me!" he crows. "I can still drink you under the table."

"Aw, whatever," I grin stupidly. "I'm going to get that woman, and you're still going to be alone."

Why did it take me so long to realize that Carnette is the only woman clever enough to match me? The only one that has ever pushed back and challenged me so much? The only person I've ever met who can not only soften my rough edges but make me want to stay softer?

"I'm going to see her tomorrow," I slur. "And I'll tell her everything!"

CARNETTE

I breathe a sigh of relief when I slip into my desk chair the next morning. I couldn't sleep so I came into work early, and the office is blessedly quiet. As I wait for my computer to wake up, I run down the list of what I need to get done today.

Grabbing a pen, I cross off "Black Iron." I don't want to go back to the factory anytime soon. Maybe not ever. I think about yesterday in Zouk's office, the surprise on his face when I left. I don't know what to say to him or how to act around him.

Fortunately, Deiderich won't mind if I don't go over there. He hasn't said anything about the amount of time I've been spending at Black Iron recently, but he's also not the kind of boss to micromanage his employees. He's the complete opposite of Zouk in that way.

In fact, the only thing Deiderich has said about Zouk's factory is that he hopes the order will come in on time. But now that the staff is up and running and I've sorted out the supply chain issues, Zouk should be able to handle his own business today.

I sigh and lean back in my chair, twirling the pen around between my fingers. Zouk's face flashes through my mind again, but now it's not how he looked when I walked away. Instead, it's how soft and sincere his eyes looked when he kissed me. How gentle he was.

I shake my head. “Stop it!” I command myself. “This is *Zouk*, okay? The macho, insensitive, grumpy, overbearing orc. Sure, he might have looked all innocent and whatever when he kissed you, but you know who he really is.”

Do I, though? Because my words sound a little hollow, even to my ears. The truth is, I don’t know how to feel about *Zouk* now.

I don’t regret sleeping with him. Not at all. And I don’t regret leaving his office as abruptly as I did. I don’t know any other way that our encounter could have ended.

He’s just as much of an arrogant jerk as I remember him being at *Valdor*. But spending so much time with him has also reminded me that we did become friends, in a way, when we worked together before. It was almost impossible not to; he and *Deiderich* were so close, it was rare to see one without the other nearby.

After *Zouk* left, I told myself that it was just that proximity that caused us to be friends. That I would have had to get along with anyone that was so close to my boss. But to be honest, I think that I just told myself that I wouldn’t miss *Zouk* so much. So I wouldn’t feel so betrayed by what he did – not to me, but to *Valdor* and *Deiderich*.

I know that *Zouk* can be kind and thoughtful. I saw evidence of that at *Valdor*. And even though *Zouk* was being pretty awful to the staff at *Black Iron* at first, his willingness to make changes has impressed me. Sure, sometimes it’s a grudging willingness. But just the fact that he’s implementing my suggestions means that he knows I’m right.

It’s also evidence that he’s changed since we worked together before. I can’t imagine the *Zouk* I knew at *Valdor* ever letting someone else tell him what to do. Is it possible that he’s learned from his past mistakes? Could he really be becoming humbler, and more collaborative?

If so, that will definitely make him easier to work with. And it would mean that *Valdor* can continue to use *Black Iron* as our supplier. Which is a huge relief, because it would be

hard to start building this kind of relationship all over again from scratch.

“But do I want to build a new relationship with Zouk?” I ask out loud.

I feel like I have two choices right now. I could ignore what happened yesterday, just like I told Zouk to. I could act like nothing happened, and once this order is done, ask Deiderich to hand off communications with Black Iron to someone else. That wouldn't be a strange request; indeed, this kind of interaction really isn't in my job description. So it would be easy to cut Zouk out of my life the same way he cut me out of his before.

I'm reluctant to commit to that plan, though. Part of it is because the sex really was that good. I can't remember the last time any guy, human or orc, gave me two orgasms. Much less gave me two orgasms that were so good, I'm pretty sure I blacked out at some point.

But the other part of it is because I've enjoyed spending time with Zouk, and I'm curious to know if this ... whatever it is ... could become something more defined. After all, I know all about Zouk's unattractive qualities. And if I know all that, and can still see something good in him, maybe that means something. Maybe I should follow my curiosity and see where it leads.

Also, much as I hate to admit it, I kind of like how domineering he was when we had sex. I enjoyed him taking control, the way he instinctively seemed to know what to do to make my body respond the way it did.

The door to the outer office swings open, and I sit up straight, hands over my keyboard. Deiderich enters and smiles at me. “Good morning, Carnette!” he says. “You're in early.”

“Just wanted to get a jump on the day,” I say. “How's your morning going?”

“So far so good,” Deiderich says. “Leia says hi, by the way. You should come over for dinner sometime soon. Maybe next weekend?”

“I’d love to,” I reply. “I think I’m free on Saturday. Let me know what to bring!”

“I will,” he says. “Hey, I have another question for you.” He pauses at the door that leads to his office, suddenly looking uncomfortable.

I stare back, my mind racing. Does he know what happened between me and Zouk? Oh my god, did someone see us? I know that we were being kind of loud, but the building was so deserted and no one was at the desks closest to Zouk’s office. Were they? I try to remember if I saw anyone sitting in that area when I left, hoping that my panic doesn’t show on my face.

“It’s about Black Iron,” Deiderich continues, and I swear my heart skips a beat. Shit! He knows!

“Um, what about Black Iron?” I ask, my throat dry.

“We haven’t received any shipments yet,” Deiderich says, frowning. “I thought that they were getting their act together over there. Do you think it’s worth risking it to break our contract and go somewhere else?”

“No!” I exclaim with too much enthusiasm. Deiderich raises his eyebrows at me in surprise. I swallow and will my heart to stop racing. “I mean, no, I don’t think it’s worth that. Are you sure we haven’t gotten anything?”

“I had the team check three times,” Deiderich confirms. “You’ve been over there a fair amount, Carnette. And I appreciate all the care you’re giving this matter, and that you’re doing it while also staying on top of your work here.”

I nod, trying not to blush at all of the double entendres Deiderich has no idea he’s making. “Well, it’s a big deal,” I say, then envision Zouk smirking at my words. Dammit! “What do you need me to do?” I ask, determined to stay focused.

“I’d like you to go back over there today,” my boss says. “I know that it’s an inconvenience for you to keep running back and forth. Hopefully today will be the last time. But we can’t afford to miss our deadlines, and that could happen if we don’t

start getting shipments from Black Iron by the end of this week.”

“Don’t worry about it, Deiderich,” I say. “My schedule’s pretty light today, actually. So it’s not a problem for me to check in and see what’s going on.”

“Thanks, Carnette,” he says. “You’re the best.” With that, he finally goes into his office, and I can fully relax.

I’m so relieved to be done with that conversational minefield that it takes a few seconds for me to realize what I’ve just agreed to. Less than twenty-four hours ago I was telling Zouk that sex with him never happened. Less than an hour ago I’d resolved to avoid him until I could be sure that I could actually act as though he hadn’t gone down on me or given me multiple orgasms.

And yet now I have to go to Black Iron and face Zouk, so much earlier than I’d anticipated. Not just that, but I’ll undoubtedly need to stay for a while and help out Zouk and his team if they have any chance of making the deadline for Valdor. Deiderich wasn’t exaggerating about how tight our timetable is.

I think of the empty offices at Black Iron, of the employees that until way too recently wanted to walk away from the factory. Forget helping out the team. Unless yesterday’s meeting cast some magical spell and turned everyone into super-productive machines, I’m going to have to spend all of today and probably a good chunk of the night at the factory to ensure that we get our shipments on time.

The idea is intimidating and exhausting, but also kind of exciting. I’ve been waiting for this kind of challenge, I realize. I can really help accomplish something, and that feels good.

And if that means seeing Zouk again, so soon? Well, that’s kind of exciting, too. I can test out if what I thought I saw in him yesterday was real. And if it is, well, maybe I’ll rethink my stance on pretending that we never had sex. The thought of that is exciting and anxiety-producing all at once.

All of a sudden, I can’t wait to get to the factory.

ZOUK

I slump over my desk, rubbing my head. Why did I let Goran bait me into having those last five shots last night? I haven't been this hungover in a long time.

I groan, remembering the night. All that whiskey ... all that scotch ... all that splintered wood, and so many pulverized darts. And so much talk about women. About me being straight with who Goran is calling my mystery woman.

That thought brings a smile to my lips, and I straighten up. Yes! Today is the day that I'm going to tell Carnette how I feel about her. The thought excites me enough to take the edge off of my headache.

I reach for my phone. I should call her and invite her to the office. Or maybe I should ask if she wants to meet me after work? Not at a bar, though. The idea of being anywhere near alcohol makes me feel slightly ill. Maybe a café. That would be nice – and it would be much less likely to be construed as a date, too.

But before I can press a single button, Carnette throws open the door to my office. She looks at me and frowns. “You look like shit.”

“I had a late night,” I grimace. “My brother is a bad influence.”

“Goran, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, impressed with her memory. “He wanted to go out, and—”

“I’m not interested in hearing about your nocturnal exploits,” she cuts me off. “I came here to find out about our shipments.”

“What?” I ask, taken aback by her cool tone.

“Deiderich sent me over,” Carnette says smoothly. “He wants to know why we haven’t received a single shipment yet. If Black Iron can’t keep up its end of the contract, they’ll be fucking with Valdor’s business. You more than anyone should know what a bad idea that is, Zouk.”

“I do,” I say, growing irritated. Wasn’t that my whole plan anyway? When did it switch?

I look at her, hoping to catch her eye, but Carnette is staring at a spot just over my shoulder. “And you, more than anyone, know the kind of hole that Black Iron is trying to dig itself out of.”

“You said that you could meet our timeline,” she protests, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Look, will you please sit down?” I ask, gesturing at the chair I’d come to think of as hers.

“I’d prefer to stand, thank you.”

“Fine. Valdor’s order is our number one priority. We’re working as hard as we can on it.”

“That doesn’t mean a lot when you’re down half your staff,” she says impatiently.

“You think I don’t know that?” I ask, my own voice rising. “What, you came down here just to tell me a bunch of shit I’m already well aware of? I’m glad to know that Deiderich considers your time so useless that he can waste you on stupid errands.”

“My time is incredibly valuable,” she shoots back. “And my reputation is on the line here, Zouk. Deiderich doesn’t know how badly you’ve fucked up here. I’ve gone out on a limb for you at Valdor. Don’t repay me by making me look like an idiot.”

“I didn’t ask you to go out on a limb!” I roar, standing up. “I didn’t ask you to do one damn thing for me, Carnette!”

“You’ve asked me to do plenty!” she yells. “Help you dig yourself out of your hole, explain to your staff that you’re not actually a gigantic jackass, and, how can I forget, make sure to ‘defer’ to you in every matter,” she concludes, her voice positively dripping with contempt.

“Oh, you sure as hell haven’t done that last one!” I say, pacing around my desk. “You constantly question me, you always have to push back, and you’re never satisfied that I actually know what I’m doing!”

“Because I haven’t seen any evidence of that!”

“You haven’t given me a chance!”

“I don’t have time to give you a chance,” Carnette says through gritted teeth. “My ass is on the line.”

“Then maybe you should get your ass back over to Valdor and come clean to Deiderich!”

Just then, the phone rings. I punch the speaker button and bark, “Yes!”

“Zouk?” The voice on the other end of the line stops me in my tracks. I look at Carnette, who’s finally looking back at me. Her eyes are wide, her mouth slightly ajar in shock.

“Vivian,” I reply. “This is unexpected.”

“But not unpleasant, I hope,” she says, almost purring her words. Her pleasure puts me on alert. What’s going on?

“You know I can never get enough of you,” I tell her. Carnette rolls her eyes. “How have you been?”

“Fabulous as always, darling! And how about you? How’s it going with that cute little factory of yours?”

“Black Iron is doing great, Vivian. Thanks for asking.”

She laughs, a low, throaty sound. “Oh Zouk, that’s not what I hear.”

“What do you hear?” I ask, making sure to keep my tone even. I don’t like Vivian, but I also don’t need to alienate her.

“I hear that you’re falling behind on your deals. *And* that you’re losing clients.”

I force myself to laugh. “You’re getting bad information, Vivian.”

“I don’t think so,” she says, her voice taking on a harder edge. “I know for a fact that you’re losing clients, because I just signed one of Black Iron’s longest-term customers this morning.”

“Who? Valdor?” I ask, glaring at Carnette. But she shakes her head.

“Not Valdor, although I really should take Deiderich out to lunch sometime soon. Thanks for reminding me, darling. No, this is another one of your clients. One that was more than eager to tell me all about the drama at Black Iron. Losing half your workforce. That has to hurt,” she says, her voice full of glee.

“We’re doing just fine here,” I say. “But your company must be in trouble if you need to start poaching from us.”

“I didn’t poach anyone. I don’t have to,” she says. “They came to me.”

I bite my lip, trying to keep from yelling at her. I know that she’d love nothing more than to know that she got a rise out of me. I can’t lose both my temper and one of my clients to the same woman.

“Well, thanks for letting me know,” I say shortly. “I’m sure you’re very busy, so I’ll let you go.” I end the call before she can say anything else, and sit back down.

Carnette sits down in her chair, too. “Vivian?” she asks.

“She’s a complete vulture,” I say, trying to calm myself down.

“Really,” she replies, like she doesn’t already know this.

“Yeah. That woman ... there’s nothing I wouldn’t put past her,” I say with a sigh. “She’s always trying to find a company’s weak point and then exploit the hell out of it.”

“Well, that’s one business tactic.”

“It’s a waste of time here,” I hasten to add. “I don’t have any weak points. Black Iron’s ramping back up and it’s going to be even better than before. And she’s been trying to get under my skin for years,” I add, shaking my head. “It’s a complete waste of time!”

“I can tell,” Carnette says dryly. “Clearly there are no weak points here. Except that you’re on the brink of missing your deadlines for Valdor. And if that happens, it sounds like it won’t take long for Vivian to swoop in and grab our account.”

I sigh. “Okay, I admit you’re right. But I’m only admitting that to you,” I say quickly. “What we’re talking about and what Vivian says, none of that leaves this room.”

“Hey, why would I tell anyone you’re in trouble?” she asks.

“I’m not in trouble!” Carnette just stares at me. “Fine, fine. I’m a little bit in trouble. Look, I think that we can get the Valdor shipment ready in time. It’ll just mean working around the clock. And since you recently talked me into not making my employees stay here all day and all night, that really means *me* working around the clock.”

“I’m not going to apologize for that.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“But I am sympathetic to Black Iron,” Carnette continues. “And not just because I need you to hit this deadline for my own sake. But because I like this company.”

“Thank you,” I say, genuinely touched by her admission.

“So we’ll have to work harder,” she says. “To make sure that no one can undermine Black Iron. Or you,” she adds.

I stare at her in dumbfounded surprise. *We*? Does this mean that she wants to help me? Even if she doesn’t – even if she just meant “we” as in the company – I’m still touched by

her words. This is the first time in a long, long while that I've felt like someone has my back.

I know that I've screwed up a lot in the past. I've burned more than my fair share of bridges, some of which hurt more than others. I think about Deiderich. That's the one that hurts the worst.

But I also know that I've been trying to do the right thing for a while, even if I don't always go about it in the best way. But it can get so damn discouraging when everyone refuses to see beneath the surface, or keeps judging me for who I used to be and can't see who I am now.

Right now, though, I feel seen. I feel like Carnette really understands me – not just who I am, but who I want to be. I swallow back the emotion that's welling up in me, unsure what even to call it. Relief? Hope? Gratitude? Maybe all of those mixed together. Maybe something even bigger.

I can't think about that right now, though. Not with Carnette staring at me, her words hanging in the air between us. I clear my throat and look straight at her. "I appreciate the vote of confidence. But I have to ask. What did you mean by *we*?"

She smiles. "I'm going to help you, Zouk."

CARNETTE

The last two weeks have been a blur. Between helping Zouk and my job at Black Iron, I've barely slept or seen the inside of my home. I feel like I'm living in either one office or the other.

But it's a good blur, oddly enough. Maybe it's the lack of sleep or the overload of caffeine – I don't even want to know how many cups of coffee I'm drinking each day – but I feel energized and excited in a way that I haven't in a very long time.

I'm discovering that I love the hectic pace and relentless rush of working to meet a deadline. The uncertainty and stress of untangling supply chain issues and coordinating projects felt overwhelming at first, but I'm actually really good at it.

There's a rush that comes over me when I fix a problem, a high that lingers for hours. And that really only happens at Black Iron. That's where I feel most excited and useful, where I can tell that I'm really accomplishing something tangible.

Zouk and I have been working well together, too. Although he's been so weird sometimes! There are days when he's annoyingly sweet. He'll pull a chair out for me at the conference table, bring me coffee without being asked, order in dinner for me when I have to stay late.

And then there are the other days, when he's completely overbearing and awful. He'll stomp around with a dark look on his face, his brow so creased with worry that I think the lines are carved in cement. Those are the days that I work in

an empty office as far from him as possible, and try to ignore him completely.

Today, though, Zouk seems neither particularly attentive or annoying. We're both in his office, going over the final list of approvals needed to complete the order for Valdor.

"You're sure that we'll get the last batch of supplies by noon today?" Zouk asks, frowning at the papers.

"I talked to their team lead last night," I reply, crossing off that item. "She all but swore a blood oath, that's how certain she was that we'll get what we need by noon. She actually thinks that we'll get them in earlier."

Zouk looks at the clock, and I do, too. It's just after nine a.m. "We have plenty of time," I assure him, and he grunts. "And the team here, they're ready to accept the shipment?"

"We've done everything short of running drills," I reassure him. "Everything's on track, Zouk. I really think that Valdor will have the order on time."

"Earlier would have been better," he grumbles. "If it's on time, it might as well be late."

"You're not making any sense," I say. "On time is on time, full stop. It's what Valdor expects and what Black Iron promised. And, given the shitshow that this place was a few weeks ago, it's also a miracle."

"I know," he sighs, running his hands through his hair. "I just need this to—"

"Go well," I interrupt him. "I know. That's been your mantra twenty-four-seven, Zouk. I wouldn't be surprised if you're muttering that in your sleep."

"I probably am, when I do sleep," he admits with a small smile.

"Yeah. The first thing I want to do after this order is delivered is sleep for about twenty hours." I stretch my arms over my head, trying to work out some of the tension in my shoulders and neck.

"You're good at this," Zouk says unexpectedly.

“What?” I ask, dropping my arms.

“Managing this project, getting the team to come together. You’ve really saved my ass here, Carnette. I appreciate it. Here,” he adds, handing me an envelope.

I slide it open and pull out a check. When I look at the amount it’s for, I stare at Zouk. “What’s all this for?”

“You’ve basically been a consultant on this project, so I thought I should pay you accordingly,” he says.

“This is a lot of money.”

“You’ve more than earned it.”

“Thank you,” I say, and he nods. “I have really liked this more than I thought I was going to. It’s made me – no, never mind.” I shake my head. “I’m just rambling.”

“Ramble on,” he says. “All we have left to do is wait on this shipment.”

“It’s just, I like working at Valdor. It’s been a good company for me, and Deiderich is great to work for.” I glance at Zouk, wondering if he’ll object. But he just nods, urging me to keep talking.

“But maybe it’s time for me to move on,” I say slowly. This is the first time I’ve given voice to the thoughts that have been swirling around my head for the last two weeks. “Maybe I’ve gotten complacent at Valdor, and thought that I couldn’t do more. That I couldn’t do a job like this.”

“Which you clearly can,” Zouk says. “You haven’t just kept our order for Valdor on track, Carnette. But you’ve helped keep up Black Iron’s reputation. And I think you’ve even helped save mine, too. Thank you,” he adds, not meeting my eyes.

I smile. “How difficult was it for you to say that?” I ask, a teasing note creeping into my voice.

Zouk grins. “I’d rather have my toenails pulled off with pliers. Please don’t make me say it again.”

His phone rings, and he answers it. “Yes?”

Zouk's smile fades. "Oh, I see."

Now he's frowning. "Really. She said that? Okay. Thank you for telling me."

He slams the phone down so loudly that I wince. "That was an acquaintance at another company."

"What's wrong?"

"I've just been informed that Vivian stole another client from Black Iron." His hands curling into fists, he mutters, "I thought things were turning around. And now this!"

I seethe in silence, feeling the betrayal almost as deeply as Zouk. How dare she keep poaching Black Iron's clients? What makes her think her company is better than this factory? I know in my bones that Black Iron is a great company that can do amazing work.

This action feels personal. And that makes me realize just how much I care about Black Iron and its success. It's not about keeping my job at Valdor anymore, not about making sure Deiderich doesn't doubt my judgment.

No. It's about protecting this company, which I've worked so hard to save over the last two weeks. I look down, surprised to see that I'm clenching my hands into fists, too. "She's not going to get another client," I vow. Zouk looks over, surprise washing over his face.

"You sound almost as pissed off as I do," he comments.

"I am! What gives her the right to steal Black Iron's clients?"

"My rocky start, I'm guessing," he admits. "Let's face it, I was on my way to running this place into the ground."

"Yeah, but you're not anymore. Look at what you've done with Valdor. No one can doubt this factory's skill and quality after that."

"Look what *you've* done for Black Iron," he replies. "You've saved us, Carnette. I just hope it's not too late. I wouldn't want all of your hard work to be in vain."

“It’s not,” I tell him. “Don’t worry about that.”

Zouk smiles. “You’re quite a force to be reckoned with, Carnette.”

I savor his words as he returns to his desk and begins answering emails. They echo through my mind all day, which turns out to be both exhausting and exhilarating.

The supplies we’ve been waiting on arrive thirty minutes early. Zouk is so happy that he actually high-fives the team lead, accidentally knocking the man over with his exuberant hand-slap. The rest of the team reacts with shocked silence, until the team lead hops back up, laughing. Then everyone else breaks out into loud laughter, and it feels as much like a stress relief as a reaction to seeing Zouk actually excited about something.

After that, the day passes quickly. Valdor’s order is enormous, but once Zouk, the team, and I get everything in place, we’re able to start churning the materials out quickly. Everyone looks thrilled that Black Iron is finally producing something; even employees whose jobs usually keep them far from the factory floor find excuses to come down and watch, grinning as they do so.

It’s incredibly rewarding to see everything coming together. *I helped bring this about*, I catch myself thinking at random moments. *I really am a goddamn force!*

By seven that evening, it’s clear that the Valdor order will be done on time. A cheer breaks out from the surprisingly large number of employees that are still in the building, far past when they’d usually go home.

“Good job,” Zouk says to me, grinning from ear-to-ear.

“You, too,” I say, and hold up my hand.

“You’re not afraid I’ll knock you over?” he asks and I mock-gasp.

“Oh wow, did you just make a joke at your own expense?”

“I guess I did,” he says, still smiling. “Don’t expect that to happen too often, though.”

“You’re leaving me hanging here,” I remind him, and he gently touches his palm to mine. A shiver runs through me, and I have to look away.

“Carnette,” Zouk says, lowering his voice. “I have a question for you.”

“What is it?” I ask, also keeping my voice low.

“Would you go out with me?”

“What, like on a date?”

“Exactly like that,” he says.

I look at him. Does he – wait, he’s nervous! I can tell by the way Zouk is clasping his hands and shifting his weight from one leg to the other. This day is just full of unexpected developments.

I smile, knowing that I’m about to give him an unexpected development of his own. Two weeks ago I would never have dreamed of going on a date with Zouk, but now I’m curious to see what going out with him would be like.

“Yes,” I say, smiling as his eyes widen in surprise. “I’d love to go out with you.”

ZOUK

“**B**ehold!” I exclaim, gesturing towards the sign on the restaurant’s front door.

Carnette is speechless, as she should be. I took great pains to ensure we would have a private table and the best possible service here. Any normal man of high society would spend weeks on a waiting list. And someone below them? Impossible. But I secured this night of perfection for the two of us in mere hours, such is the weight my name carries in this city.

Carnette stares wide eyed at the logo above the door. “Poodles?” she asks.

I laugh at her ridiculous joke. It isn’t until I compose myself that I notice she’s genuinely confused. “It’s pronounced Pud Lays,” I explain. The embarrassment that floods her cheeks makes the misunderstanding completely worth it. “It’s the name of the executive chef who owns it. An elven man well known for combining cuisine from different cultures and creating something wholly new.”

Were I dining solo, of course, I would never lower myself to such small plate ego driven culinary abominations. I would eat a hearty steak, perhaps two, with a fine whiskey. Perhaps a side of root vegetables with a rich sauce, were I feeling healthy that night.

But wooing a mate means making sacrifices. And a mate such as Carnette deserves only the grandest gestures possible. An orc man is only as good as the woman he wins. And if I

can't win her over with glorious acts of barbarism in war, then I will do so with every connection and all the money at my disposal.

I offer Carnette my arm and she takes it. She still appears nervous. Perhaps she is simply not so used to the finer things in life? Ha! Deiderich is a fool for mistreating such a fine female specimen. I walk her into the lobby and we are quickly greeted by a hostess who takes our coats and sees us to our table. We walk through the dining room, past the poor pathetic souls who dine in the open, and towards our table set squarely in the back corner.

A privacy curtain made of strings covered in glittering jewels separates us from the riff-raff outside. There's enough space between each string to see the jealous pedants staring at us. I lavish in their feelings of inadequacy.

Carnette fiddles with the silverware set out in front of her for a moment, then looks up at me while biting her lip. "This is... a lot," she says.

"Indeed! Are you not impressed with the bounty I offer?"

Carnette appears to choose her words carefully. She adjusts her dress, letting her breasts jiggle as she does and ancestors help me. Were it not for the sommelier already on her way, I would simply ravage her right here behind this glittering curtain.

"Are they going to bring us menus?" she asks.

Again, her ignorance makes me chuckle. "Of course not, we're receiving the ten course *prix fixe* experience. You don't have to worry your pretty little head one bit about anything else tonight."

My reassurance doesn't seem to land well. Carnette looks a little offended. How ridiculous! Is it not every woman's dream to be fully taken care of by her mate?

"*Ten* courses?" she asks in shock.

Leave it to a woman to fret over her waistline. "You need not worry about gaining weight. The portions are quite small."

Again, my reassurance falls flat as her confusion turns to a look of anger. As she opens her mouth to speak, though, the sommelier separates the curtain and presents us with a bottle of sparkling water from some tropical island in the southern hemisphere. She makes sure to explain the bottling process, the heritage of the natives who cultivate the spring, and the gentle notes of summer air and freshness we can expect to taste.

“So, it’s water?” Carnette asks flatly. The sommelier forces a smile across her face before stepping away. Carnette rolls her eyes. “I’ve seen a lot of pretentious shit in my time, but this must take the cake,” she sighs.

“I don’t understand,” I say, working hard to maintain my temper. “How can you not be impressed by sparkling spring water that tastes of summer? It came thirty thousand miles!”

Carnette puts her hands up and shakes her head. “I’m sorry. It’s just this isn’t what I expected tonight, is all.”

“What *did* you expect?” I ask. Surely she has not exclusively dated men who treat her to a dumpster behind a children’s hamburger joint.

“You just,” she waves her hands around and laughs. “You don’t strike me as the kind of guy who’s into this ego stroking ostentatious... I wasn’t expecting this level of fine dining is all.”

“Of course you weren’t! Because you’ve never dated a male as high status as me.”

Still, she looks reluctant to simply enjoy the experience. She’ll come around.

Our waiter arrives with the first course. Tiny fish surround a mound of purple rice with a thick yellow sauce spread decoratively around the plate. He explains to us the significance of the presentation, how it is a recreation of the chef’s childhood in an elven village far from here.

This is perfect. Women adore small things and bright colors. As the waiter leaves with a bow, I look smugly at

Carnette. She stares at the dish for a moment, then pokes it with her fork.

“Eat,” I command.

She looks up at me with disdain. “I’m not really into fish.”

I take a large scoop of the dish with a huff and shove it into my mouth. The taste is abysmal. There is nothing satisfying nor pleasurable about the experience. Is that not the entire point of art, after all? Food that is art is meant to create strong feelings, such that the diner may easily recall the experience for the rest of their life. It is succeeding on that front.

Carnette eats a small amount of the rice and shrugs her shoulders. “It’s fine. Hopefully the next course will be something less... ambitious.”

It’s not. It is fifteen different types of vegetables rolled into a slice of dough and steamed. The combination of which is abysmal. Carnette looks more miserable than ever. Even when the sommelier brings the first glass of wine, she can barely bring it in herself to taste it.

“I guess I’m just not cut out for fashionable places,” she says in defeat. “I’m sorry I’m ruining this for you. I’m more of a ‘stay at home, cook something fun, and listen to music on the radio’ kind of person. Or, you know, go somewhere like Hot House for a steak and beer.”

I blink. I must have misheard her just now. There is no possible way we could have simply enjoyed a juicy steak dinner and had a better time. No. The thought of it is too demoralizing.

The waiter returns and eyes Carnette with derision while taking her full plate. I will have to correct this behavior, physically, if he does it again. He presents us with bowls of thick, creamy broth. Green tentacles line the rim.

Carnette’s face turns a matching shade as she takes it in. “I... I need to go to the bathroom.” She stands without a word and opens the curtain before quickly walking away.

I shake my head. How could I have messed up this badly? Does she not want a mate who can provide for her? Who can

give her all the finest things life has to offer? I thought for sure she would come around but so far this is an unmitigated disaster.

I decide to try the stew. It's the first delicious thing so far tonight. It doesn't do much as art, but at least my tongue is satisfied. I let my mind drift for a moment, considering how else I may use my tongue to satisfy Carnette. Perhaps that will turn this evening right around.

Finally, Carnette walks back to the table looking a little less green. She steps through the crowd of diners and pauses for a moment. A man sitting at a table of drunken businessmen reaches out and slaps her on the ass.

Rage consumes me. The sheer audacity of this pathetic little man to disrespect my mate drives me over the edge in an instant.

"Hey you stupid asshole," Carnette says. She spins around and gets in the offender's face. "Didn't your parents ever teach you—"

I step between them. She doesn't need to defend herself, not when I'm here. I grab the man by his necktie and drag him out of his chair. "Do you understand how deeply you've fucked up?" I growl.

"Listen man, I'm sorry alright?" he says. Sweat is beading on his forehead. The wimp knows I can snap his neck with one brutal movement.

"Sorry does not undo the disregard you have shown us both."

His friends stand up, as if they think they can fight back. One of them pulls out his phone. An employee in a nice suit is reluctantly marching towards us.

But it's Carnette who makes the first move. "Put him down right now!" she screams as she attempts—and fails—to shove me.

"Gentlemen, please—" the employee says, trying to break up the tension. But I only hear Carnette.

“Put him down *right now*,” she demands.

Again, she confuses me. I let the man fall back onto his chair. Carnette grabs her coat from the hostess area and stomps out of the restaurant.

“We’re gonna sue you!” a blond man in glasses shouts. “You can’t just assault someone like that.”

“You would do well to teach your friend that same lesson,” I growl before following Carnette outside. I’m barely two steps out the door before she rounds on me, face red with anger.

“That was so reckless! What the hell were you thinking! Were you thinking at all?”

“I—”

“No, I was handling that. Okay? I can handle myself!” Carnette turns around, takes a few steps towards the street, and sighs. “Zouk, this isn’t going to work unless you trust me.”

I blink in confusion. “How have I shown you anything less?”

Carnette sighs. “I know you want to protect me, but I can handle myself. Alright? I know how to put people in their place without raising a single fist. And if you care, you’ll let me. That?” She points at the door. “What you did in there wasn’t helpful. It was putting both of us at risk. You want to show your devotion to me?”

I solemnly nod.

“Then let me take care of myself.”

I still don’t understand. I agree anyway. What else can I possibly do to keep her?

CARNETTE

As I walk into Black Iron today, I have to marvel at just how much better the factory is compared to the disaster I stumbled into so long ago. The floors are clean, windows repaired, even the furniture is all in one functional piece.

The same can be said about my relationship with Zouk. To say it started off shaky would be an understatement. The man has an ego bigger than any orc I've ever met before. And it keeps him from seeing the forest for the trees.

It also keeps him from believing me when I tell him his choice in date venues is a bit much. He keeps insisting on showing off his wealth and social power by taking me to snooty and expensive restaurants, clubs, and lounges. He just doesn't seem to understand that he's already won me over, for the most part.

Just last weekend, he insisted on having a luxury car taxi us all the way across the city to a popup bar that was only open that one night. And the scene he made when the bouncer refused to let him cut the line? If there is a word stronger than embarrassment, I was really feeling it that night. And once we did make it in, he ordered only the most expensive bottles of wine and liquor that all tasted like rubbing alcohol with artificial candy flavoring.

For some reason he just can't accept that I want simplicity. Intimacy. After a long day of running two companies—and if everyone were honest that's exactly what I'm doing—all I

want is something home cooked and simple, a ten-dollar bottle of red wine, and to cuddle up next to someone on the couch and watch some bad television. Or maybe even a bad movie, if I'm feeling spicy.

No, every date has to be an explosion of big wealth and terrible taste. But I'm learning to tolerate it. Hell, sometimes I even end up having a little fun. There is something funny about rubbing elbows with the hottest B-list celebrities. One time the dining room even had a burger on the menu! It was a pretentious mix of four different meats and enough big-ticket toppings to make it a fifty dollar burger, but still.

And I admit, he's been taking some of what I ask to heart. He understands I need to operate for myself. I take care of myself, I always have. I don't need a man to fight my battles for me. I just need him to listen when I vent about it later.

He's starting to understand that. He's rough around the edges, but in his heart, he cares. He cares about me. He just has an unfortunate way of showing it.

We'll both need to meet in the middle. And for now, that's okay.

I finish my walk, looking happily down at the busy workers tending to the machinery below. Everything is running smoothly again. From the most recent batch of employee comment cards, morale is up as well. Not pre-Zouk levels, but we're getting there.

I knock on Zouk's office door, and he answers it immediately. He probably heard me coming and could barely contain himself.

"Please, come in," he says professionally. He isn't fooling anyone. "You'll be pleased to know the new operation workflow you suggested is showing positive results in the pilot."

"That is good news," I reply as he closes the door. I sit in a very comfortable and intact chair and lean back. I expect some complaining from him, maybe a little horny leering, but instead he goes back to his desk and sits down.

“How is Valdor faring?” he asks.

I hesitate a moment. There’s not a single speck of disdain or gloating in his voice. It’s a genuine, normal question. Am I dreaming? “Uh, fine,” I reply. “Our projections were on point. The halberds are growing in market demand. I think some kid on social media with a lot of followers was showing one off and now they’re a trend.”

Zouk barks a laugh. “I’ll never understand this younger generation, but as long as they’re buying what we’re selling, who am I to complain?”

I *am* dreaming. Not a single vindictive word has come from his mouth, and I’ve already been here for three minutes. He types on his keyboard for a moment then turns his attention back to me. “And how are you? I assume you’ve been busy with this order wrapping up.”

“Yeah,” I sigh, blowing my bangs up out of my face. “It feels good wrapping up such a large project. But, just like a hydra, you finish one and two new ones land on your desk. It really never ends.”

“Are they overworking you?” Zouk asks. He sounds genuinely worried. My knee jerk reaction is to tell him to butt out, we talked about handling my own problems, but he doesn’t sound like he’s looking for a fight with Deiderich. For once.

“Maybe. It’s hard to tell what counts as too much when work is ninety percent of my life.” I laugh, but Zouk looks at me with concern. “I like it that way. Work is fulfilling for me, you know? But...”

I grip my fingers around the hem of my skirt. There’s more, of course. Maybe we’re at that point now? Maybe I can tell him how I really feel? I glance back up at Zouk. He’s simply waiting for me to continue.

His newfound patience makes me smile. “I’m getting really sick of my role. It’s like, I have all of these ideas and skills, and none of it matters when everything is said and done! All of my hard work gets credited to the guy at the top,

and I'm sitting here with a salary and benefits package that a newly graduated business major would scoff at. And don't even get me started with Vivian."

Zouk smiles. "Please, go ahead and start with Vivian."

"She's just so relentless! She's trying so hard to grip her claws into Black Iron, and she thinks she's so smart and manipulative when everything she does is blatantly obvious. She really thinks she can pull one over on me, me! All because I'm just an assistant."

I slump back into the chair and wait for Zouk to finally butt in. To tell me I need to stand up for myself, to launch a counter offensive against Vivian, to swear vengeance against all who've wronged me.

But he doesn't.

"Maybe you've outgrown your current position," he says gently. "You have the talent and skill for something higher on the ladder. Anyone who can't see that is a fool."

My cheeks get hot. I know I work hard. I don't need anyone else to validate that for me. But it's still nice to hear someone else say it outright.

"The problem is I'm too useful where I am. I'm too good at being an assistant! If I'm promoted, some poor wide eyed college grad will have to fill it, and whoever that unlucky person is will be put through a pretty terrible wringer. And Deiderich knows it."

Zouk chuckles and cracks his knuckles. "Valdor can't afford to promote you, but then again they can't afford not to."

"It's like I'm stuck in this backwards position of being *too good* at my job somehow." The irony is not lost on me. I made damn sure to give my best every day, and now my impeccable performance is the exact thing dragging me down. It's frustrating just thinking about it. I can almost feel my hands shaking.

"Would you like my advice?" Zouk asks.

If he keeps acting like this I might just pinch myself to prove I'm awake! I nod regardless.

“Valdor is a mighty forge built on a shaky foundation. There is only one single brick keeping the entire place from crumbling to dust. That brick is you,” he says, pointing his big green finger towards me. “If you let them, they'll keep you right there forever, so long as you continue holding them up.”

“Are you suggesting I need to pull that brick out?” I ask, folding my arms. The thought is ludicrous. Let Valdor crumble? Maybe Zouk does still harbor a grudge against Deiderich.

“The foundation must be fixed, but no one will so long as that one brick keeps holding the entire weight of it all. Valdor needs its foundation shaken in order to come back stronger. Deiderich must be capable of fending for himself, or it's only a matter of time before there is nothing left to fix.”

I hate to admit it, but Zouk has a point. He pulls his hands into his lap and looks past me into the distance. There's a strange tension in the air for a moment before he begins to speak again. “I took the brick for granted,” he states solemnly.

My eyes fly open in shock. What?

“I always assumed you would be there to hold everything in place. Even now, with Black Iron, I couldn't have turned this around were it not for your dedication to the cause. Valdor and Black Iron both owe their success to you. I never apologized for how I hurt you, back then... I'm sorry.”

I barely keep my jaw from dropping open. Where is this sentimentality coming from?

Zouk grunts and resumes his normal posture again. “I will strive to ensure you are never hurt by my actions again.”

A soft smile spreads across my face. That must be the soppiest speech an orc has ever given in the history of time.

“I appreciate it,” I reply. He nods silently, and we begin reviewing the final pieces of the order.

ZOUK

And with a final press of the enter key, the order is complete. Valdor has what they need, Black Iron has their payment, and my staff are congratulating themselves on their hard work. In fact, I've decided to give them the rest of the day off. It's just three hours or so, but it's something to show their loyalty will be rewarded.

The order is finished. And thus, so is Carnette's business with me. I haven't seen her in two days. I know Deiderich is keeping her busy. Wrapping up a project this large always meant massive overtime. Unpaid, of course. She may even be sleeping under her desk right now. It wouldn't be the first time.

I miss her though. It's a difficult adjustment to feel this attached to another person. I always knew one day I would choose a mate, and my dedication to her would put to shame our moon's dedication to the earth. I didn't expect it to be so complicated, though. That I could feel so strongly about someone who is so different from myself.

But I have. And all I want is to be with her right now.

My phone rings. I expect it to be Valdor's administrative department thanking me for the last of the paperwork. "Black Iron," I say gruffly into the receiver.

"Hey, Zouky."

It's Vivian. My mood quickly turns sour at the very sound of her voice. "What do you want?" I ask, knowing full well what it is.

“I just wanted to share the good news! While you were working like a loyal pet dog for Deiderich, pumping out his orders for a discount, I was picking up your slack. I’ve poached two of your clients who were sick of being on the back burner while you chased after Valdor’s good favor.”

“I’m sure you did,” I grunt. And I’m unconcerned. Vivian’s company poaches clients with the dazzling promise of lower costs, but delivers a quality to match. Valdor learned that the hard way long ago. After enough shattering blades and imperfections in the steel, they’ll dump her pathetic excuse for a supplier and come crawling back to me.

“I wonder why you tried so hard to please the man who threw you in the trash the moment he could? Could it be—?”

I hang up the phone. If Vivian wants to use my affections for Carnette against me somehow, she can do so without wasting my damn time.

I stand from my chair, stretch, and make my way down to the production floor. The workers are already weary when they see me. One of them even goes quite pale. It’s a sign of respect and deference that I appreciate.

“Men!” I bellow, my voice echoing around the machinery. A foreman shuts it all down to allow my speech to continue unimpeded. “Today, we have accomplished something many doubted we could. Our order with Valdor has completed ahead of schedule! With your hard work, and my expert leadership, we have done the impossible! You all should bask in this glory with pride!”

I walk among them like a warrior chief surveying the spoils of a battle hard fought and won. My men look exhausted and brow beaten. They will come back next week even stronger and more capable for it.

“You have fought well. Therefore, I am giving you the rest of today off.” A sea of disbelief breaks out around me. I clear my voice to bring their attention back to me, where it belongs. “On Monday you will return rested and ready to work twice as hard as before. We will crush our opposition and bring glory to the name Black Iron! Do you hear me?”

There's a smattering of applause, a few men nod, and one man puts his arms in the air and screams an expletive. He has a warrior's spirit! "That is what I want to hear! Now, go." I leave as well, even as the foreman pesters me with petty concerns. He can figure those out on his own. For now, I have a different type of business to attend to.

That of the family.

My brother Goran is another proud member of my clan. He is not nearly as accomplished or motivated by economic gains as I am. But he's moderately successful in his own career. Anything less would bring shame to our name.

It is his turn to choose the venue, and I meet him at the tacky sports bar with great reluctance. I would stick out were I to go in my usual fashionable suit, so I have to settle for a simple button down and slacks.

He greets me at the bar, already halfway through a pint of ale. "Greetings, Zouk!" he calls, raising his glass to me. There is another one already waiting for me at his side.

"And to you as well, Goran," I reply as I take my seat. I take the frosty mug and down it in one gulp.

"Well," Goran chuckles. "It would appear someone had a hard day."

"On the contrary. An important order finished production today. Ahead of schedule, even."

"Then we have cause to celebrate! Bar wench, another round for my brother and I!" The elf girl behind the bar looks at my brother with offense but does what she's told. Goran chugs the next one just as well, but peers at me over the rim of his glass.

"What?" I ask gruffly. I don't appreciate being stared at by anyone.

"Something *is* wrong, though."

I simply grunt in response.

"Come now, brother. I know you better than anyone. Something is bothering you, and it'll ruin the mood even

worse than you already are. So get it out!”

I shake my head, but relent. Goran can be quite stubborn about such things and I don't wish to hear his nagging all night. “I have fallen for a woman who works for Valdor.”

Goran raises an eyebrow before breaking out into loud, boisterous laughter. I leave him to his foolishness and walk towards the empty billiards table. A good game of orc pool is exactly what I need to ease my mind.

“So you have found a suitable mate? What's the issue? Does her father demand too high a price for her?” Goran asks.

It would take too long to remind Goran that humans don't practice such marital traditions, so I correct his assumption instead. “Now that my business with them has ended, she has no further need for me.” I select a proper cue from the rack and line up the balls in the middle of the table. Goran selects one as well.

“What a load of dragon shit,” Goran says. “Is that truly what has you so upset? And here I had such respect for you.”

I position my cue like a battle axe, lift it above my head, and slam it onto the table. The balls scatter across the table in terror of my might. Two of them land in a pocket. “Don't belittle my struggle,” I say, warning him.

“I'm not. I'm simply confused as to how you could give up so easily!” Goran slams his cue on the table. The balls spin around, but none fall into a pocket. “Damn.”

“Who said I've given up?” Three points for me.

“You did! Look at you, moping around a bar with your brother about how she has no reason to see you. Well, give her a reason! One she can't refuse! If she is truly the mate for you, then you must make her believe it.”

I seethe as Goran scores one point. But I finish my beer and think his words over. Then I have another, and another. I win two games of orc pool, and we draw on the third. We manage to only snap four cues in the process, despite the inane screeching of the elven bar wench.

And as I bask in the glory of my superior orc pool skills, something hits me.

Goran is right. I have to prove to Carnette that I am worthy of being her mate! That our relationship is worth extending beyond work. I cannot just win the battles of business and blood. I have to win the battle for her heart.

I pay my share of the tab and leave. I have to get to Carnette, now. I have to be with her. See her smile, hear her laugh. I want to touch her soft skin and smell her flowery perfume. I need her.

I arrive at her home and pray to the ancestors she's there. I adjust my clothing, ensure my hair isn't out of place, and knock on her door. After a tense moment, she answers. Carnette is wide eyed and flustered, wearing a bathrobe over a pair of sweatpants and a tank top.

"Zouk! What the hell? Is something wrong?" she asks with a hint of annoyance.

"Yes, very wrong. You are not on a date with me right now."

She blinks, then cracks a smile. "What! Wait, you just show up at my door unannounced and expect to take me out? Now?"

"Yes," I reply.

Carnette raises her arms and lets them fall against her side. "Zouk... you couldn't have even called first?"

"Listen, I'll take you anywhere you want. We can go anywhere, do anything. Whatever it is you crave this moment, I will fulfill it for you. I only ask that you let me."

Her cheeks turn bright pink. Carnette folds her arms and bites her lip. "Anywhere?" she asks. I nod. She smiles a wicked grin. "Alright. Let's go."

CARNETTE

Before Zouk showed up, I'd been having a quiet evening at home. It was a necessary tonic to what had proved to be a surprisingly emotional day.

When I went to the office this morning, I hadn't planned on telling Deiderich that I was going to leave Valdor. Sure, I'd been turning the idea over in my head for a while. Once I knew how happy being at Black Iron made me, it was difficult to imagine staying at Valdor for much longer.

But I hadn't decided that yes, today was the day that I'm giving my notice. I thought I'd mull over the idea a little bit more to make sure that working at Black Iron, and with Zouk, was what I really wanted to do.

Then I sat down at my desk and looked around the office, and thought *nope, I'm done*. It was a gut instinct, a feeling deep inside that told me that moving on was the right thing to do. That's when I knew that I couldn't put off the conversation with Deiderich any longer. So I'd stood right back up and knocked on his closed door.

"Come in!" he'd called. When I'd entered, Deiderich had looked up from his papers and smiled.

"Good morning, Carnette. Have a seat," he'd said. "You know, I was just looking over the timeline for the upcoming brand launch. I have to say, Black Iron has really turned things around. The shipments are coming in on time, and everything is looking good for the launch party. You're planning it, right?"

“I am,” I’d confirmed. “It should be a great party.”

“Well, everything you do is great,” Deiderich had smiled. “So, what’s up?”

“I’ve loved working at Valdor,” I’d begun, not sure how to tell him what I needed to say. “And you are the best boss I’ve ever had. So I’m not quite sure how to tell you this.”

“Carnette, it’s okay,” Deiderich had said, his eyes kind. “I understand that it’s time for you to move on.”

“How did you know that’s what I was going to say?” I’d asked, astounded.

He’d chuckled. “I’ve been doing this for a long time. I know when an employee has decided that they need to go somewhere else, to follow a new dream.”

“That’s exactly right,” I’d told him, so relieved that he understood. “But please believe me that my decision to leave has nothing to do with you, or Valdor. I’ve just realized that I need a new challenge, and that you deserve to have someone in my role that really wants it. And I deserve to have a job that pushes me more.”

“You do. Is there another role at Valdor that would do that for you?”

I’d shaken my head, touched that he’d asked. “Thank you, but I think – no, I *know* – that I want to see what it’s like at another company. The job at Valdor is practically the only job I’ve ever had, you know? It’s time for me to see how I can handle working somewhere completely new.”

“That’s a lot of changes,” he’d said. “How do you feel?”

“Nervous,” I’d confessed. “A little scared. But mainly excited.”

“Have you told Leia?”

“Not yet. Would it – I mean, I don’t want to put you in an awkward position, but I think it would be best if she heard that I’m leaving from me.”

“Of course,” he had agreed. “I respect that. I won’t breathe a word of our conversation to anyone.”

“Thank you.”

“But I will give you a glowing recommendation,” he’d added, and I had smiled.

“Thank you. I hope that my leaving Valdor doesn’t jeopardize our friendship,” I’d added.

“Don’t worry, Carnette. Our friendship is safe, and I think that wherever you go next will be lucky to have you.”

After that, we’d talked a little bit more about how much longer I’d stay at Valdor and what I was thinking of doing next. I didn’t tell him that I wanted to work at Black Iron with Zouk; even after his reassurances about our friendship, I thought that that information might have been too much for him.

Especially since I don’t even know if Zouk will want me to work at Black Iron. Given all that, I just talked in generalities about how I really loved working in a project management role, and Deiderich suggested some other companies that I should look at. He even offered to make a few calls for me if I wanted, which is awesome.

So if I ask Zouk right now to bring me on at Black Iron and he says no, I still have good options waiting for me. But I really hope he says yes.

Zouk is still standing in front of me, his eyes bright with anticipation. I’m pretty sure that I could ask him for anything right now, and he’d say yes.

But I want him to give me this job because he knows I’d be good at it, not because he wants to date me. I think about how he insisted on paying me for my consulting work. That’s a good sign that he values me as a professional, right? He didn’t have to do that, especially since I was officially working for Valdor when I was helping get Black Iron into shape.

“So what’s the one condition?” Zouk asks, a hint of nervousness in his voice. “Or are you just going to leave me hanging all night?”

“The condition,” I say. “Is that you hire me at Black Iron as a manager.”

“Really,” he says. “That’s it?”

“That’s it,” I nod.

“But you have a job at Valdor.”

“Actually, I talked to Deiderich this morning. I told him that I was leaving Valdor to pursue a job that I feel passionate about.”

“Did you tell him it was at Black Iron?”

“No, because I didn’t know if Black Iron would want me.”

“If I say no, will you go back to Valdor?”

I shake my head. “I’m leaving Valdor regardless of if you hire me. But Black Iron is my first choice of where to go next.”

“Why Black Iron?” he asks.

“I like it,” I say simply. “I like the employees, and I like what the factory stands for. I like that a job there will pay me more and not keep me in an office all day. I also like the challenge of taking someplace that’s considered an underdog and making it into a winner.”

“An underdog?” Zouk asks defensively, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Come on, Zouk,” I say. “I’ve been in the trenches with you. I know what shape the factory was in when you took over, and I saw what happened after so many employees left. Like it or not, Black Iron’s reputation isn’t what it once was. But I know that it can be even better than it was before.”

“You’re very confident,” he says.

“I would have thought that appealed to you.”

“Oh, I didn’t say that I didn’t like it. Even though you are bad-mouthing my company, which is an interesting technique to use in a job interview.”

“I didn’t realize this was an interview,” I reply. “And I’m not gratuitously bad-mouthing Black Iron. I’m merely pointing out why I want to work there, and that I know that with my skills and knowledge, the company will be a force to be reckoned with.”

“Your skills and knowledge combined with my leadership,” he says.

“Now who’s being confident?”

“I have to be,” Zouk grins. “I’m the boss. Are you sure you can handle working under me?”

I flush, remembering what happened in his office the other week. “I don’t think I’ll be under you for very long,” I tell him.

“I will be your boss.”

“Officially, yes. But I’m envisioning more of a partnership, Zouk. You have a specific skill set, I don’t deny that. But I’m much better with handling employees and talking with suppliers and contractors. You need a manager whose strengths complement yours, and that’s where I come in.”

“So you want to have the title of manager but be viewed as more of a partner,” he nods.

“I do,” I say, wondering if I’m pushing my luck here. I know how ballsy this is – I don’t have the years of experience that most project managers do. I’m banking on the work he’s seen me do at Black Iron to get me the job.

As he thinks about what I’ve proposed, another thought occurs to me. What happens if he hires me, we start dating, and then we break up? That thought should make me totally nervous. It should be enough for me to say that there’s no way I’m tying my professional future to my personal life.

But strangely enough, I’m not panicking at that possibility. Instead, I’m filled with the certainty that Zouk and I will start dating, and our relationship will last.

I don’t know how I know that. I don’t want to question my feelings too deeply. Instead I relax into my intuition and wait

for him to speak.

Zouk nods slowly. “Okay.” He holds out his hand.

I look at him. “Okay, what?”

“Okay, you are officially Black Iron’s lead manager,” Zouk says. “We’ll consider this a handshake deal for now, at least until you officially sign your contract.”

“I can live with that,” I grin, shaking his hand. “I look forward to getting started.”

“So,” Zouk says, still holding my hand in his. “Do you think you can work alongside me?”

I pull him inside and close the door. “Maybe I do,” I say, grinning.

Zouk smiles, too. “Maybe?”

“Yeah, maybe.” I step closer to him and put my hands on his chest. “And about that condition...”

“Right,” he says, staring into my eyes. “I believe that I’ve done what you asked me to do. So will you go on a date with me?”

“Yes,” I say, putting my arms around his neck.

Zouk lowers his head closer to mine. “Really?”

“Really,” I nod, kissing him.

ZOUK

I eagerly kiss Carnette back. “Hi,” I grin when we finally break apart.

“Hi,” she says, smiling up at me.

“You’re in a good mood,” I observe, keeping my hands clasped around her waist.

“I’m excited!” Carnette says.

“I should have offered you a job at Black Iron weeks ago,” I joke.

“I probably wouldn’t have accepted,” she says and I wince. “Sorry! But it’s true. I needed to figure out for myself that this was what I wanted to do, and not feel like I was being pressured by anyone.”

“I hope you don’t feel that way now,” I say, concerned.

“No, not at all. This was my decision all the way, and it’s one that I feel great about.” She reaches up and pulls my face to hers, and kisses me again. “I feel really great,” Carnette whispers against my mouth.

“Mmm. You’re making me feel pretty great, too,” I murmur back and she giggles.

“Oh yeah? Prove it.” I grab her hand and press her against the bulge in my pants. “Oh, hello,” Carnette grins.

“Enough proof for you?” I ask.

“More than enough.” I kiss her again, guiding her over to the couch. We collapse onto the soft cushions and I pull her on top of me.

“So how should we celebrate?” Carnette asks.

I run my hands under her top and deftly unclasp her bra. “I have a few ideas.”

“I’m sure you do,” she says, then gasps as I cup her breasts. “Oh, this is a good one.”

I don’t answer, just close my eyes as I rub my fingers over her nipples, feeling them grow hard at my touch. I think back to how I once fantasized about this. About holding Carnette’s breasts in my hands, feeling their voluptuous weight, handling them as delicately as ripe peaches.

And here I am doing just that, with Carnette murmuring ecstatically as I continue to explore her body. I thought that my fantasy had been pretty good, but I’m quickly learning that it was nothing compared to really being with Carnette.

This feels different than our encounter in my office, too. That was the culmination of stress and misunderstanding and frustration; that was a purely physical release. And it was good. It was amazing, actually. But this – being here, in her home, knowing that Carnette is going to be a part of Black Iron – this feels so much better. More intimate; more deliberate. More meaningful.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Carnette murmurs, interrupting my thoughts.

“Why?” I gasp, not wanting to let go of her.

“My bed is so much more comfortable,” she says, moving away from me. “I promise, you won’t regret it.”

“I better not,” I mock-grumble. I stand awkwardly, and she giggles as she sees how much trouble I’m having walking while so turned on.

“I think I’ve finally found your weakness,” Carnette teases as we hurry up the stairs.

“Yeah, you,” I say, following her into her bedroom.

As promised, her bed is large and pristine, and covered in a thick comforter that we sink onto. I start to undress but she stops me.

“Let me,” she says, straddling me again. She slowly unbuckles my belt, then pulls off her top and removes her bra all the way. I gasp as she bends over me, her pale skin luminous in the dim light coming through the shades, and unbuttons my shirt.

“Not yet,” Carnette says as I instinctively begin to untuck my shirt. She unzips her skirt and scoots to the edge of the bed, then stands up and lets it fall off. Clad in just black lace panties she kneels at my feet and tugs off first one shoe, and then the other. Then she climbs back up and slowly lowers my pants, grinning wickedly as she sees my cock straining against the fabric of my boxer shorts.

“You’re killing me,” I moan happily as she lowers herself over me, rubbing up and down. Even through two layers of fabric I can feel how wet she is, and I groan.

Carnette pushes my shirt open and kisses her way around my chest. She flicks her tongue over my left nipple, then bites it, so lightly and quickly that a zip of lust shoots through me. “Carnette,” I gasp. “You’re amazing.”

“I know,” she grins, then repeats her trick on the right side. I grab her waist and clasp my hands tightly around her. “Ooh, that feels good,” she whispers and I slide my thumbs down and into her underwear.

“Good,” I breathe. Her eyes begin to close in pleasure, and she leans back as I continue to work. I sit up and lower her all the way to the bed, then shrug off my shirt and pull her underwear down over her smooth legs.

I lower my head and breathe her in deeply. Then I work my tongue around her clit. She groans and tugs at my hair, the pressure spurring me on. I explore her depths as she shivers and jolts and cries my name, her excitement building as I lick and taste her.

“Zouk!” Carnette yelps. “Oh my god, yes!”

I raise my head and lick my lips. She's gazing at me with a satisfied smile on her face, her cheeks stained deep red. "You're dangerous," Carnette grins. "I might have to make you my personal sex slave."

"I'd gladly accept that job," I say, kissing her.

"Maybe that can be your second career," she says, pulling down my boxers. "The night shift, say."

"Just the night?" I ask as she slides on top of me.

"Day, night, sunset ... take your pick," Carnette says, enveloping me in her warmth and wetness.

"All of them," I gasp with desire. "All of them with you, all the time."

I grasp her ass as she grinds down on me, enjoying the feel of her firm, soft skin against mine. She moans in pleasure as I squeeze and caress, and I close my eyes and give myself over to the incredible sensations surrounding me on all sides, dazzling me into just feeling and not thinking.

Carnette leans down against me and I clasp her to my chest, still moving inside of her. I breathe in her scent, a heady aroma of flowers and sunshine and *her*, that indefinable quality that lets me know she's nearby even before I can see her, that makes me smile in anticipation of hearing her voice, of seeing her beautiful green eyes.

I'm on top now, taking care not to press down too hard, balancing my weight on my arms as she moans and writhes underneath me. We move together, her legs tangled in mine, our breathing increasing in tandem.

"Carnette," I gasp. "Oh my god, I can't wait any longer!"

"Zouk!" she cries, nails pressing against my skin. "Neither can I! Yes, yes!"

"Yes!" I roar as I cum, fireworks and lightning bolts bursting against my closed eyelids as my skin tingles with pleasure and my breath leaves my body. I groan and collapse next to Carnette, my throat dry, my ears ringing.

When I finally open my eyes I see Carnette lying next to me. The comforter is lying in a heap at the end of the bed and the sheets are tangled around our limbs. Her eyes are closed, her face flushed, her lips curved into a smile.

“That was amazing,” I whisper, tracing my finger along her cheek and over her mouth.

She kisses my finger and opens her eyes. “I think you might have blown my eardrums out there,” Carnette says.

“Oh shit, I’m so sorry!”

“Just kidding,” she grins. “But hey! I got you to apologize again!”

I playfully tickle her until she squeals, “Okay, stop it! I’ll never ask you to apologize for anything else in my life, just stop!”

“You can ask me to apologize again,” I say, pulling her close to me. “That doesn’t mean I will, but you can ask.”

“I feel so honored,” Carnette giggles.

“Hey, you should. I don’t say that to just anyone. You’re special,” I smile. “Actually, you’re incredible. Why didn’t I realize that sooner?”

“Um, because you were too busy being a stereotypical macho orc and never bothered to think about others?” she teases, but I wince at the truth in her words.

“You’re right,” I nod. “I was a complete ass, and a fool. Thank you for making me see that.”

“Thank you for seeing something in me, too,” she says, her face serious. “I don’t know if I ever would have found the confidence to leave Valdor, to reach for something more, if it wasn’t for you.”

“That means a lot,” I say. “That actually might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“I mean it,” she whispers. “This is the last thing I expected would happen when I saw that you were the new head of

Black Iron. I expected to hate you even more than I already did.”

“Because of what I did to Deiderich,” I say, and she nods. “But that had nothing to do with you, Carnette.”

“It felt like it did,” she explains. “Because he’s my friend, and Valdor was my life then. It felt very personal.”

“I can see that,” I nod. “But please believe that I wasn’t trying to hurt you. And honestly, I regret how I handled things back then, with Deiderich.”

“Do you think you two will ever be friends again?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “I’d like that, but I don’t think he would.”

“You should talk to him,” Carnette suggests. “He might have changed, too.”

“Maybe,” I say, pulling her close to me. “But right now I want to concentrate on keeping Black Iron on the right path. And making sure that you feel at home there.”

“I appreciate that,” she says. “I think I will, though. It helps that I’ve already spent so much time at the company. And that you totally don’t intimidate me anymore,” she smiles.

“Well, I’d hope not,” I laugh. “Hopefully you’ll help me become less intimidating to the rest of the staff.”

“I’m up to that task,” she says.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I say, pressing my lips to hers for a long, delicious kiss.

CARNETTE

The next morning I'm in an interminable meeting with Deiderich, Leia, and various department heads at Valdor. I'm doing my best to stay focused, but my mind keeps wandering back to thoughts of last night.

Zouk ended up sleeping over, which neither of us had planned on. We were just lying in bed, talking, and the next thing I knew, it was morning and the alarm was blaring. I smile to myself, remembering how tousled and rumpled Zouk looked when he woke up.

"Where are we at on catering?" Deiderich says, looking at me.

"What?" I ask, blinking and looking around the table. Everyone's staring back at me.

"I said, where are we on the catering?" my boss repeats. "For the party?"

"Oh, right!" I exclaim, looking down at my notes. "Sorry, I zoned out there for a second."

"Carnette, we've been planning this brand party for months," the Head of Public Relations says snippily. I wonder if now would be a good time to announce my plans to leave Valdor.

No, that would be petty. Instead I give her my sweetest smile. "I know, and it's going to be amazing," I tell her, then look around the table. "Catering is locked in, and I've signed

off on the menu. All of the alcohol will be top-shelf, with two special custom cocktails created just for the brand.”

“Good,” Deiderich nods, but I’m not done.

“The D.J. I’ve booked comes highly recommended from several different high-end event planners, and early feedback I’ve gotten from the employees that know he’ll be spinning is incredibly positive. They’re talking about the party both in the building and online, which is great for our brand presence.”

“That’s wonderful,” the Head of P. R. says, looking slightly mollified.

“And we’re good to go in terms of equipment, decorations, table rentals, and goodie bags,” I finish. “In fact, I think the only outstanding items are a final head count, Deiderich. I need to know how many VIPs you’re inviting.”

“I can get you that list by the end of the day,” he says, looking impressed. “Great work, Carnette. You’re truly an asset to the company.”

“Thank you,” I say, touched by his compliment. He winks at me and then moves on to the next item on the agenda.

When the meeting finally wraps up, I stay behind to straighten up. Leia lingers, too, as everyone else clears out. “You don’t have to do that,” I laugh as she starts recapping pens. “I can handle this.”

“I know,” she says. “But I wanted an excuse to talk to you.”

“You don’t need an excuse for that!” I say, taking the pens out of her hand.

“You’ve been so busy lately, I feel like your schedule is more booked than Deiderich’s is,” she says, sitting back down. I sit next to her.

“Yeah, between my work here and everything at Black Iron, I do kind of feel like I’ve been pulling double duty,” I say. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too. And I think I’m missing out on some major developments in your life,” Leia smiles. “You

seem different. Happier, and more confident. Which I'm thrilled to see, of course. So what gives?"

"It's Zouk," I confess.

"Zouk?" she repeats in surprise.

"I know!" I laugh. "I'm as shocked as you are."

"How is Zouk responsible for you being happier – oh my god, Carnette! Are you seeing him?" she asks.

I just nod, unable to keep a big, stupid grin off my face.

"But I thought we hated him!" Leia says.

"I know!" I say again. "We did! Or at least, I did, until I started spending more time at Black Iron, working on this project. He's changed, Leia. He's not the same slimy asshole we thought he was."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, because that means that maybe he and Deiderich will be friends again one day," Leia says pensively. "Deiderich misses him. Not that he'd ever admit that," she says with a roll of her eyes.

"Don't get me wrong, at first I wanted to tell Zouk to take his company and shove it," I said. "Although he was tanking Black Iron pretty well on his own. He gave this one speech to the employees that was supposed to be motivational and it backfired big-time."

"Let me guess, he talked about ripping people's heads off."

"Yes!"

"Orcs are so predictable sometimes!"

"Half the staff left after that meeting. I'm not even exaggerating."

"Whoa. How in the world were they able to get the order for us done on time?"

"Zouk asked me for help," I say, and Leia's eyes grow wide.

"He actually did that? Wow."

“Yeah, I thought he was joking at first. But I knew that if Black Iron couldn’t fill the order, Valdor would be screwed, so I agreed to help him out. That’s why I’ve been going back and forth so much.”

“That makes sense,” Leia nods.

“The more time I spent with Zouk, the more I realized that I actually kind of liked him,” I say. “Yeah, he can be an arrogant jackass sometimes. But he’s also really determined and driven, which I admire. Especially after he figured out that taking my advice wasn’t the end of the world, and could help him make Black Iron into a success.”

“Well, he’s never been stupid,” Leia says. “I’m not surprised that he knew you had good ideas. I am surprised that he didn’t try to claim them as his own, and actually told you he was listening.”

“Like I said, he’s changed,” I say. “Helping get things back on track at Black Iron was good for me, too, personally. I realized how good I am at that kind of project, and how much I liked the challenge of the work. You know that I’ve loved working at Valdor,” I begin, and she shakes her head.

“Um, I don’t like your use of the past tense here. What’s going on?”

“Being at Black Iron made me see that it’s time for me to make a career change,” I say.

“Carnette, are you leaving Valdor?” When I nod, she grabs my hands. “No! We hardly see each other as it is, when we’re in the same building!”

“I know, Leia. I’m going to miss you too. But I’ve already talked to Deiderich, and he understands.”

“I mean, I understand,” she says quickly. “I do, and I want you to be happy. I’m just being selfish, because I don’t want to see even less of you.”

“That’s not selfish!” I reassure her. “I don’t want that, either. But this is making me happy, Leia. I’m excited to try something new, and I like how I feel about myself. Does that make sense?”

“Totally,” she nods. “Wow, you’re leaving Valdor *and* you’re seeing Zouk? That’s wild.”

“You want to know the craziest part?”

“Always.”

“I know things with Zouk are new, but Leia, I think I’m falling in love with him.”

“Girl!” Leia squeals, bouncing up and down in her chair. “That is crazy!”

“It is, but it feels so right.”

“Have you guys already slept together?” she asks. I nod, grinning again. “Oh shit, was it good?”

“The best I’ve ever had.”

“Woo-hoo!” Leia yells, fist-pumping.

“Leia!” I giggle. “Someone will hear you!”

“So? This is major! Carnette’s getting it, and it is *gooood!*” she hoots.

“Oh my god, shut up,” I say, laughing.

“Fine, I’ll stop teasing you. I’m just happy that you’re happy.”

“Even if it’s with Zouk?”

“Look, I trust you,” Leia says. “If you say he’s changed, then I believe you. You’re a grown woman, and you should be able to date or sleep with or fall in love with anyone you want. But if he stops treating you right, I’ll beat his ass.”

“I’d like to see that,” I say, imagining little Leia going up against all seven feet and three inches of Zouk.

“Oh, you know I would.”

“Thanks, Leia. You’re a great friend.”

“You deserve the best,” she says. “Hey, I just had an idea! You should bring Zouk to the party.”

“What?”

“You heard me! Bring your boyfriend,” she grins.

“You don’t think that would be weird?”

“Maybe a little, but so what?” she shrugs. “Carnette, you can’t change Zouk’s past. There might be times where things he’s done before are going to crop up, and you can either avoid them or face them head-on.”

“Valdor is a big one of those,” I reply.

“Right. So bring him to the party. Let everyone see that he’s changed, and they can move on, too. And don’t you want to bring your boyfriend to a big, fancy party?”

I blush at the idea of calling Zouk my boyfriend. But Leia’s idea makes sense. As much as both Deiderich and now Leia have said they’re fine with me seeing Zouk, I know that it would be good for all four of us to be able to get along. I don’t expect Zouk and Deiderich to ever have the kind of friendship they did before. But I also don’t like knowing that Zouk doesn’t get along with my best friend’s mate.

Maybe the party will be a chance for all of us to start over. Or, at the very least, it will be a way for Zouk and Deiderich to see each other again and not have it be super-intense. I know Deiderich will be so busy that evening, he’ll hardly have time for a one-on-one conversation with Leia, much less any of the guests.

“Okay,” I nod. “I’ll ask him.”

“Good,” Leia says. “Oh, come here!” She throws her arms around me. “I’m so happy for you,” she says again.

“Thank you,” I say, hugging her back. “You’re the greatest.”

We pull apart, smiling at each other. Then we hear a shout in the hall.

“I can totally lift twelve desks at once!” Deiderich is yelling at someone. “Watch!”

“Oh lord,” Leia mutters, standing up and rushing to the door. “Excuse me while I go attempt to keep orcs in line!” I

laugh as she runs out of the room, and finish gathering up my belongings.

ZOUK

I pace nervously outside of Valdor. A couple of times I almost step inside the building, but I can't make myself go in. It's bad enough when I see old coworkers going in or out. Each time I reflexively duck my head, but I'm an orc, and I'm over seven feet tall. Blending in has never been my specialty.

I wish that Carnette would come out already. I check my watch; it's after five. She should be done with work by now. Granted, she doesn't know I'm waiting for her outside. "This is what you get for trying to surprise her," I mutter to myself, pivoting around to face the street as another former colleague leaves for the day. This is ridiculous.

I turn back around and look at the building. I remember when I used to love coming here every day, when I thought that working with my best friend was all I could ever want in the world.

Maybe I should just go inside and to Deiderich's office. After all, he knows that Carnette's leaving Valdor for Black Iron; my name has surely been mentioned a time or two in the course of those conversations.

If Deiderich was really pissed off by her decision, he would have fired Carnette immediately. That he hasn't makes me think that maybe Carnette is right, and I should try talking with Deiderich.

I used to be so close with Deiderich that I could anticipate his every mood. Sometimes I think I knew what he was going

to do or say even before he did. He was just as much of a brother to me as Goran is; often, Deiderich was even more loyal, more reliable, than Goran.

I miss that. Not that I'd ever admit as much to Deiderich, or to anyone. Okay, maybe Carnette. *Maybe*. And only if she asked – I'd never volunteer that information.

Looking up at the building, it's hard not to be impressed at what Deiderich has accomplished. Valdor is thriving, and a lot of the credit for that goes to him and his leadership. I can see now how much of that leadership style I absorbed when I worked at Valdor, and have been using without realizing it at Black Iron.

I wonder what Deiderich would do if I showed up at his office door right now. If he'd be angry and immediately demand that security throw me out; or if he'd smile and greet me like nothing had ever happened between us. Or if he'd be too shocked that I actually set foot back in Valdor to take any action.

I don't know what kind of reaction I'd like. If he pretended that nothing happened, that would keep me off-balance, which would probably be his intention. But if he wanted to hash over everything ... Just the thought of that conversation makes me tug nervously at my tie.

Why am I still wearing this damn thing, anyway? I rip it off and shove it in my bag. Then I check my watch again, wondering if there was any way that Carnette slipped out and I didn't see her. But I can't imagine that happening.

And then, finally, Carnette steps outside. "Zouk!" she cries, a smile spreading over her face. "This is a nice surprise!"

I walk over to her, taking in her flattering, light-gray dress, which hugs all over her curves, and her soft, sky-blue coat. "I'm glad to hear that," I say, returning her smile. "You look lovely."

"Thank you. What brings you here?"

"I was waiting for you," I admit.

“Did we have plans that I forgot about? Do you need me to take care of something at Black Iron?”

“No,” I say, reaching for her hand. “But would you like to go back to my place?”

“I’d like that,” she says, taking my hand in hers. “I really would.”

“Great,” I say, feeling a startling amount of tension leave my shoulders. I didn’t realize just how nervous I was about showing up like this until now. “I’m not that far, if you don’t mind walking.”

“Not at all.”

“How was your day?” I ask as we set off down the sidewalk, still holding hands.

“Busy,” she says. “Valdor’s planning a huge party for our new brand launch. I was in party-planner mode all day.”

“Sounds like fun,” I say.

“It kind of is, but I also know that if anything goes wrong, I’m the one that’ll be held responsible. Which is pretty stressful.”

“Carnette, I can’t imagine anything you plan ever being less than perfect.”

“Thanks,” she says, squeezing my hand. “I appreciate the vote of confidence. Black Iron deserves some of the accolades for this party even happening, by the way.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask.

“Definitely. The project that the factory was doing for us, that’s what we’re launching. So if Black Iron had missed the deadline, we’d have had to cancel the party. Which would have meant losing a ton of money on nonrefundable deposits.”

“Then I’m even more relieved than I was before that we got the order done on time.”

“Me, too,” she says. We turn the corner and she adds, “I’d like you to come with me.”

“What do you mean? Where?”

“To the brand party,” Carnette says. I stop walking and she stops, too.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I say softly.

“Why not?”

“Come on, Carnette. Mending fences with Deiderich sometime in the future is one thing. Showing up at his company party is something else entirely.”

“I know. But I think that this could be a good first step. Leia agrees,” she says.

“You told Leia about us?”

“I did,” Carnette nods. “She was surprised at first, but happy for me. For both of us.”

“I’m glad, but I’m still not sure that I should come to the party.”

“Deiderich is going to be incredibly busy that night. All you need to do is show up, be polite, and not be a stupid, macho orc at him.”

“Oh, is that all?” I joke and she smiles.

“If you agree to come, I guarantee that Leia will be extracting the same promise from Deiderich.”

I sigh. “This is important to you, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Carnette nods. “I want you there, Zouk.”

“I’ll think about it,” I tell her. “That’s all I can promise right now.”

“Thank you,” she says. “I appreciate you taking me seriously.”

I kiss her. “Let’s get going. I’m starving.”

We spend the rest of the walk arguing good-naturedly about what kind of takeout to get. I place an order at Carnette’s favorite restaurant as soon as we get to my place, and soon we’re sitting on my leather couch, containers, plates, and

glasses on the coffee table in front of us, watching a movie that Leia recommended to Carnette.

“Oh dude,” I yell at the screen. “That’s not how you punch someone!”

“It’s just a movie,” Carnette says.

“But his technique is all wrong!” I argue.

“He’s a human, not an orc!”

“Right, which is the first thing wrong with this movie,” I mock-grumble. Carnette hits me with a throw pillow.

“Movies are supposed to be about escapism,” she complains. “Be quiet and escape with me.”

“Fine,” I agree. But three scenes later, I can’t help but let out a snort of disgust at another fight scene.

“Zouk,” Carnette says. “Come on!”

“Please. No human can knock out another one with just one punch. Especially with such a weak right hook.”

“Maybe you should change careers yourself,” she suggests. “Become a stunt coordinator or something.”

“Hey, I’d do a more realistic job than this,” I grin.

Carnette smiles back and twirls a noodle around her fork. “Humor me, please, and watch the damn movie.”

I lean over and kiss her. “You’re lucky that you’re so damn cute. Makes you easy to humor.”

“And you’re lucky that I’m enjoying the food too much to want to leave.”

“Not the company?” I ask, putting a hand over my heart. “Ouch! You wound me, woman!”

“Hey, learn how to keep your mouth shut and you might be better company,” she grins.

“I’ll be quiet. Scout’s honor.”

Now it’s her turn to snort in disbelief. “You were never a Scout.”

“Sure, I did one year in the Orc Scouting program, when I was eight years old.”

“Why only one?”

I shrug. “Turns out even other orcs have limits for how much they want to hear a kid talk about decapitation.”

She laughs and I smile, putting my arm around her. We watch the rest of the movie in companionable silence, even though I have to bite my tongue at several points to keep from critiquing more unbelievable scenes.

But Carnette seems distracted, too. I laugh out loud at a few funny scenes, but she barely manages more than a smile. When I glance over at her at other times, she seems to be looking off into the distance, not at the screen.

She’s so lovely. I can’t really believe that she’s here, in my home. That if all goes well tonight, she’ll be in my bed. I imagine her spending the night, how nice it would be to do it deliberately. Instead of rushing around like I had to at Carnette’s house the other morning, we’d plan to wake up together. I smile, thinking of her sleeping in my arms.

I shut off the movie as soon as it’s over, eager to turn all of my attention to Carnette. I kiss her and she responds, but then breaks it off and moves away from me. “Is everything all right?” I ask.

Carnette takes a deep breath. “Zouk, I need to tell you something.”

CARNETTE

I need to tell Zouk the truth. I need to tell him that I want every night to be just like tonight. I want to see him after work, and I want to walk home with him. I want to sit on this couch watching a movie and laughing at each other, laughing with each other. I want this feeling every night for the rest of my life – this feeling that I’ve finally come home.

He’s looking at me so intently, and I can tell that he’s nervous. I smile, hoping to break the tension a little. “So,” I start, then pause, not sure how to begin.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” Zouk says. He begins to reach for my hands but then hesitates. “Is this okay?” he asks, finally taking my hands in his.

I can’t believe he asked. I can’t believe that he stopped to consider how I was feeling, and then asked me without making an assumption. I knew that Zouk had changed, but with that one little gesture, that one question, I finally believe it deep in my bones.

“Yes, it’s okay,” I say, grasping his hands in mine. “Zouk, what I need to tell you isn’t easy for me to say. But I can’t keep it from you anymore, either. That’s not fair to either of us.”

“Okay,” he says softly.

I take a deep breath. “I’ve never said this to anyone before. I mean, I’ve said it to my parents, of course. But you pretty much have to, right? And they have to say it back and so even though it means something, of course it does, it’s different

when you say this to someone not related to you by blood. Or marriage, too, I guess, although maybe that's a little different, too, somehow? I don't know, I haven't really thought about that before."

"Um, Carnette?" Zouk asks, looking confused.

"I'm sorry! I'm rambling," I say. "Sorry, I do that when I get nervous. I mean, I used to, I thought I outgrew it, but apparently not." I try to laugh and he smiles, but it looks pained.

"I love you," I blurt out.

Zouk stares at me, his eyes wide. I can't read his face, don't know what his expression means.

"Oh fuck, I just ruined everything, didn't I?" I cry, pulling my hands out of his. "I said I love you and you're sitting there thinking, 'Whoa, this girl is crazy, we've hardly been dating for any time and this is all too soon and too fast,' right?"

He still just sits there, looking stunned. I jump off the couch and start gathering up the takeout containers and dirty silverware. "So I'm just going to clean up and leave, okay?" I continue, my voice sounding too loud. "I'll go, and I'll see you tomorrow, and we'll pretend that none of this ever happened. How's that?"

Then another thought hits me and I sit down on the edge of the coffee table, still holding the containers and forks. "Unless you don't want to keep working together? Which I understand. I mean, wow, how awkward would it be to keep working with someone that says 'I love you so soon. God, no wonder you don't want to keep working with me.'"

I pause and look at Zouk, but he still looks gobsmacked. "So, it's okay. Consider this my official notice, and sorry for the clusterfuck that working at Black Iron turned into. Deiderich said that he had a lot of contacts in the industry – of course he does, he's Deiderich – so I'll just call him tomorrow and set up some interviews, and I'll be out of your hair by the end of the day tomorrow."

I jump up and race into the kitchen, where I busy myself putting silverware in the dishwasher and containers in the trash. Even with all the noise I'm making, I can tell that Zouk hasn't moved from his spot on the couch.

I slam the trash can lid closed, wishing that it made a louder noise. I feel agitated and restless and nervous, all at the same time, and I don't like it. I wish he would just say something. Anything! Even if he just told me to get out, at least then I'd know how he felt.

Because, let's be real, this is too freaking weird! I know that my words caught him off guard. I'm sympathetic to that – really, I am. But I don't think that this kind of reaction is typical. I mean, I don't know for sure, since as I so inelegantly told Zouk, I've never said I love you to a partner before. But still, this seems a bit over the top.

I march back into the room and sit down on the edge of the table again, so I can look straight at Zouk. “Are you not going to say anything?” I demand. “Are you just going to turn into a freaking statue? I thought you were this big, tough orc,” I go on. “But here you are, stunned into a coma because a woman said that she loves you?”

Zouk looks at me, and my heart skips a beat. His eyes are full of the most pure and deep love I've ever seen, the kind I thought only existed in movies and books. He takes my hands in his.

“I'm not reacting like this because a woman says she loves me,” he says, his voice hoarse. “I'm reacting like this because *you* said you love me.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, even though I think I already know.

“I never imagined that you would ever fall in love with me,” Zouk says. “I never imagined that I would be worthy of your love. I thought that the most I could hope for was that you'd grow to like and respect me. I thought the most I could hope for was your friendship. I gave up on hoping for your love a long time ago.”

“How long?” I whisper.

“I’ve been in love with you since we worked together at Valdor,” Zouk says softly. “For years and years, you’ve been the woman that I’ve compared all other women to. You’ve been this unattainable goddess to me.”

“I had no idea,” I say, my voice choking with tears.

“After what I did to Deiderich, I figured that I’d completely ruined any chance of you ever loving me. When you came back into my life, it felt like a miracle. When you agreed to help out at Black Iron, I was sure there must have been a catch. And when you asked if you could work with me?” Zouk shakes his head. “I didn’t think that my life could get any more complete.”

“So what are you saying?” I whisper.

“I’m saying that I am totally, completely, to a ridiculous degree, in love with you too, Carnette,” Zouk says. “I have been for a long time, and I will be for the rest of my life.”

“Oh, Zouk,” I murmur, tears running down my face. “When you reacted like you did, I was certain it was because you were trying to figure out the best way to say that you *didn’t* love me.”

“No!” he cries, caressing my face. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I knew that I was acting strangely and you were upset, but honestly, I didn’t know what to say or do. I was afraid to even open my mouth, sure that if I said anything you’d change your mind.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve waited for you for so long,” he says. “The idea of having everything I want – I mean, I’ve imagined that, of course. I thought I’d know what it would feel like. But then it actually happened, and ...”

“Did it feel like you imagined?” I ask as he trails off.

“No,” Zouk says, shaking his head.

“No?” I repeat, surprised.

“It felt so much better,” he says, a smile breaking out across his face. “It felt so fucking wonderful that it paralyzed me. I’ve never felt so happy, so complete before. Thank you, Carnette. Thank you for loving me.”

“You don’t have to thank me!”

“But I do,” he protests. “You don’t know what your love means to me.”

“I think I do,” I say, thinking about how happy I’ve felt since Zouk’s been back in my life. “I think your love means the same thing to me.”

“I love you,” Zouk says, gazing at me. “And I am so, so in love with you.”

“I love you,” I repeat, squeezing his hands. “And I am totally in love with you, too.”

He pulls me onto his lap and holds me close. I wrap my arms around Zouk’s shoulders and lean against him, enjoying the sound of his heart beating under my ear. “I can’t believe this!” I exclaim, grinning. “You just let me ramble on like that!”

“I was in shock!” he protests, also grinning. “But you’re awfully cute when you ramble. Even in my dazed state, I was thinking, *wow, Carnette really needs to ramble more often, because it’s adorable.*”

“Be careful what you wish for,” I tease. “Maybe I’ll break into a stream-of-consciousness rant at the next shareholder meeting. We’ll see how fast they run for the hills then.”

“I doubt it,” Zouk says. “Even in your rambling, you make excellent points and are incredibly passionate.”

“Thanks, I think,” I say, and he laughs.

I raise my head and look at Zouk. “I love you,” I say again, just to hear the words out loud.

“I love you, too,” he says, and I grin at how good the words sound in his mouth, too. And then I kiss him.

ZOUK

I know that Carnette wants me to attend the brand party with her. I'd like to go, too. Not to see Deiderich or anyone else I used to work with at Valdor – although the idea of that isn't as unappealing as it once was. But because I know how important it is to Carnette, and I don't want to let her down.

But I can't see a way to attend without talking to Deiderich first. So before I even go to Black Iron, I decide to stop by Valdor and see if he's free.

I approach the entrance to the building with less trepidation than the other day, when I was waiting to surprise Carnette. That doesn't mean I'm not still looking around, half expecting security guards to come flying across the lobby when I give my name to the receptionist. But she just nods pleasantly and buzzes me through.

Carnette doesn't know that I'm doing this. I didn't want to mention it and get her hopes up, if the end result isn't what I want. If this fails, I'll either make up an excuse for why I can't go to the party, or go and avoid Deiderich as much as possible.

From what Carnette told me, she's going to be at the event space all day today, overseeing the setup and troubleshooting any last-minute issues. Still, even though that's what I expect, I'm relieved to see her empty desk in the office right near Deiderich's.

His office door is open, but I still knock on instead of just going in. He looks up and sees me. "Zouk," Deiderich smiles.

“Hi,” I say, taken aback. His smile looks genuine, and he seems happy to see me. This is not the reception I was expecting.

“How have you been?” Deiderich asks, getting up and crossing the room. He envelops me in a hug. Stunned, I pat him on the back. “Come on in, have a seat.”

I do, and he drops into the chair next to mine. I look at him and laugh. “I have to say, this is not – did you know I was coming, or something?”

“No, but I’m not surprised to see you,” he says. “I’ve actually been thinking about reaching out. So I’m glad you took the first step. Literally,” he adds with a grin.

“Well, I guess I am, too,” I say, still a little confused. “Why aren’t you surprised? I feel like I’m missing a step or twelve here.”

Deiderich chuckles. “Carnette and Leia are still close, man.”

I nod as the pieces slide into place. “You know that Carnette and I are seeing each other.”

“I do. And once Leia told me that, I knew it was just a matter of time before you understood why I acted the way I did with Leia.”

“I guess that now I do, actually,” I say slowly. “I didn’t really think of things from that perspective before, but now that you mention it, it makes a lot of sense.”

“I’m glad to hear that. And that you understand now.”

“I do. But for whatever it’s worth, Deiderich, I really do regret what I did. I know it was a shitty thing to do, and I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” he says. “It means a lot for me to hear you say that.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t say it sooner.”

“It’s okay,” Deiderich replies. “To be honest, I needed to get some time and distance from what happened, myself. If

you'd tried to apologize earlier I probably wouldn't have been ready to hear it."

"Yeah, I get that. I've been thinking kind of the same thing about me and Carnette, you know? That if I'd made a play for her back when we were both at Valdor, I probably would have fucked it up somehow."

"Oh, you definitely would have," he says, nodding.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I say and he grins.

"You know I always have your back. And that means being honest with you."

"True."

"But seriously, I've moved on from it. That's the past, and it happened and we've both learned from it. Business here is good, and from what I hear about how well you're doing at Black Iron, you've moved on, too."

"Yes and no," I say. "I mean, yes, I'm glad that Black Iron is a success. But I miss our friendship, man. You—" I shrug, not sure how to say this without sounding like a sentimental mess. "You're like a brother to me, you know," I mutter.

"Yeah, same to you," he says, his voice just as rushed and awkward.

We look at each other, and then we both laugh. I shake my head. "How can Carnette and Leia be so good at talking about feelings and shit?" I muse.

Deiderich shakes his head, too. "I don't know, but more power to them for knowing how to do all that."

"About Carnette," I say, feeling the need to explain myself on all fronts. "I didn't try to steal her away from Valdor."

"I know," he nods. "I also know that I was taking her for granted here. The truth is, she was just so good at her job that I didn't want to see her leave. It's selfish, I know. I'm glad that she decided on her own to see what else she could do."

"Me, too," I say. "She's really dynamite at the management side of the business. I don't know how I ever

thought I could run Black Iron by myself.”

“You’re a stubborn and egotistical jackass, that’s how,” Deiderich says fondly.

“Hey, takes one to know one.”

“Damn right,” he grins, and we fist-bump. “How are things going with Carnette, anyway?”

“She wants me to come with her tonight,” I say. “To the brand party.”

“You should! It’s going to be a great time. Thanks in no small part to her ideas.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it. But otherwise, it’s actually really great,” I say, grinning. “I can’t believe I got a woman like that, you know?”

“Hey, don’t tell Leia, but I wonder the same thing myself all the time. I’m glad you’re both happy, Zouk. I really am. I wish you guys all the best.”

“Thanks,” I say, smiling. “That means a lot.”

“And hey, don’t be a stranger!” Deiderich says. “Seriously, we should get drinks or something soon. I mean, I know Carnette and Leia are going to start making all kinds of double-date plans, but aside from that.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Leia says, walking into the office. “Carnette and I have much better things to do with our free time than hang out with you guys.”

“Ouch,” Deiderich says, clutching his heart. “You wound me, darling.”

“You’ll live,” she says dryly. “Zouk, I heard you were in the building.”

“Good news travels fast, hunh?” I ask.

“Hey, you know you’re welcome back here anytime.”

“I know that now,” I say.

“Zouk’s going to be at the party tonight,” Deiderich tells Leia.

“Good! Carnette’s dress is dark green, so your bow tie and pocket square should either also be dark green or a complementary color. Maybe silver?” she says, frowning. “Or blue, that would be nice.”

“How formal is this thing?” I ask.

“Black tie,” Deiderich and Leia say at the same time. He says it with a scowl, and she says it with a grin. I laugh.

“I’ll dust off my tuxedo, then. But I’m afraid that my only bowtie is black,” I tell Leia. “And what’s a pocket square?”

“You guys are hopeless,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I’ll tell Carnette to keep her expectations to a minimum.”

“Oh, harsh!” I grimace.

“Wait, unless you’re surprising her by showing up tonight? Oh, that would be so romantic!” Leia says. “You should do that!”

“No,” I shake my head. “She has enough on her mind with the party. I want her to know that she can depend on me to be there when she needs me.”

“Okay, *that’s* freaking romantic,” Leia says. She looks at Deiderich. “Why don’t you ever say things like that about me?”

“I do all the time, just when you’re not around,” he says.

“You’re such a bad liar,” she grins.

“True, but I do sing your praises.” Deiderich pulls her onto his lap and kisses her.

I stand up. “I think this is my cue to leave.”

Leia jumps up, too, and surprises me with a huge hug. “I’m really glad you’ll be there tonight, Zouk. And that you and Carnette are together. This is the happiest I’ve seen her in a long time. Maybe ever!”

“She makes me really happy, too,” I say, hugging Leia back. “I’m glad that she has you both.”

“Hey, you have us, too,” Deiderich says.

“Whether you want us or not,” Leia adds.

I’m still smiling as I leave the building. This has gone so much better than I expected. I didn’t realize how much I’d really missed my friendship with Deiderich until I was in his office, joking with him and Leia. Knowing that we can have these friendships again feels like a giant weight has been lifted off of my shoulders.

I just have one thing left to do before I go to Black Iron for a few meetings, then home to get ready for the party. I look around the sidewalk, suddenly afraid that Carnette will be rushing back to the office to pick up something for the space.

But I don’t see her coming towards me, which is a relief. Because I wasn’t completely honest with Leia. There is one surprise that I have planned for Carnette tonight. I wasn’t entirely sure if I was going to do it before I talked to Deiderich. But now I know for sure that I am.

So that means that I have one more place to stop before I can really get going with my day. I look around one more time, to make sure I don’t see anyone I know. Satisfied that I’m alone, I shove my hands in my pockets and quickly walk down the block, excited and just a little nervous about how Carnette will react.

CARNETTE

I enter the ballroom and stop. “Oh my gosh!” I gasp, looking around.

The party looks even better than I imagined. The food stations are laden with sumptuous-looking fruits and pastries, glistening seafood and perfectly seared meat. Small bars are set up at every corner of the room, and I see that each location has an impressive array of liquor and neatly-spaced rows of glasses waiting to be filled.

The DJ is playing an upbeat tune at a volume that manages to be low enough to allow for conversation and loud enough that I see people tapping their feet to the beat, even when they’re standing still. The lighting is particularly dramatic, a mix of purple hues – lilac, lavender, plum, and grape – dancing against the walls and highlighting the dance floor.

Tall arrangements of vibrant gladiolus and irises festoon each table, and more climb along the walls and decorate the food stations. Each bar is draped with the same flowers, and I smile as I see couples taking pictures of themselves with the flowers as backdrops.

I glance up at Zouk, beaming. “I’m not trying to brag about myself, but this looks so freaking good!” I exclaim.

“You should be bragging about yourself,” he says. “This is spectacular, Carnette. Are you sure you don’t want to go into full-time event planning?”

“Very,” I nod as we enter the room. “Getting Black Iron into shape was a piece of cake compared to putting this

together!”

“So what are you going to do with your free week?” Zouk asks as we make our way to one of the bars.

Tomorrow’s my last day at Valdor. In exactly eight days, I’ll begin working at Black Iron. “Sleep,” I say without hesitation. “That’s pretty much all I can think about right now. And maybe I’ll adopt a puppy.”

“Really?” he asks, handing me a glass of champagne.

“Yeah. I’ve always wanted a dog.”

“I don’t know, puppies are a lot of work,” he says. “I don’t think they can be left alone that much.”

“Then I guess you’ll just have to make Black Iron a dog-friendly workplace,” I say, and he laughs.

“I think that can be arranged.” He tilts his glass towards mine. “To you, Carnette. The most amazing woman I know.”

“And to you,” I say, clinking my glass against his. “To Zouk, the best orc I’ve ever met.”

He chuckles again, but his eyes are bright with pleasure. We sip the champagne, which fizzes nicely on my tongue. “Would you like to dance?” Zouk asks. The DJ has put on a slower song, and the dance floor is filling up.

“I’d love to.”

We set our glasses down on a nearby table, and I put my hand in his. He leads me to the dance floor and twirls me around. The skirt of my long, strapless emerald-green gown flares out as I spin, and when Zouk pulls me back to him, he caresses my bare shoulders.

“Have I told you how stunning you look?” he murmurs, wrapping his arms around my waist.

“Not for at least ten minutes,” I say with a mock-pout.

“Well, you do,” he says.

I smile and brush a speck of lint off his bowtie. “And you should always wear a tuxedo,” I tell him. “You look very

dashing.”

Zouk smiles, and spins me around again. We dance until my feet ache, although that might be because I’m wearing silver stilettos with a three-inch heel. Not very practical, but they looked so good in the shop window, I couldn’t resist.

Zouk escorts me to a table, and brings us both plates piled high with food, as well as more glasses of champagne. We chat with so many people, from both Black Iron and Valdor.

Initially Zouk did receive a few curious glances from some Valdor employees. But as the evening goes on, those glances fade, and everyone seems genuinely happy to see him again. I’ve never seen Zouk so animated around other people, and it makes me feel good to know that he’s enjoying himself, too.

“Carnette, this is such a great party,” Leia says to me after Zouk and I return from another spin on the dance floor.

“Thanks! I love your dress,” I say, admiring her bright red sheath. “And those shoes! Wow,” I add, looking at her gold heels. “You look dangerous.”

“I try,” she grins. “You look incredible, too.”

“Thanks,” I say. “Although I don’t think I’m going to be able to walk for, like, a month.”

“Me too,” Leia says and we laugh. “Oh no,” Leia adds, wrinkling her nose. “I was wondering how long it would take for this to happen.”

I turn around to see what she’s looking at, and roll my eyes. Deiderich, Zouk, and a few other orcs from both Valdor and Black Iron have taken over one of the bars. They’re each holding bottles, and having what looks to be some kind of competition to see who can spit liquid through his teeth the farthest.

“Oh, you have to be kidding me!” I say, turning back to Leia. “Do you think they care how much money they’re literally spitting against the wall?”

“No,” she says. “Welcome to life with an orc, Carnette. Deiderich gets up to this kind of foolishness at least once a

week. But he knows better than to try it at any parties we host at home, which I consider a major victory.”

“I’m going to need all of your tips,” I say. “Seriously, do you have a manual or something you could give me?”

Leia laughs. “I should write one! I’d be a millionaire in my own right.”

“Yes, you would.”

“So things with Zouk are going well?” she asks.

I glance over my shoulder to check on him. They seem to have moved on to feats of strength, because Zouk is balancing the entire bar structure on one hand, to hoots and applause. “They really are, present boorishness excluded. This could be it, Leia. I think he’s the one.”

“Oh my gosh!” she beams. “That’s so exciting, Carnette! I’m so happy for you both.”

“Thanks,” I grin. “I don’t want to jinx anything, and I know that working together is going to be a major adjustment for us both. But I’m really happy.”

“You’ll be fine,” she says. “If Deiderich and I can work together and have a relationship, anyone can. And I have to say, seeing you and Zouk together tonight – you guys look so right together, like you just make sense as a couple. Honestly, I don’t know why I didn’t see it years ago, when he was at Valdor.”

“Because he was totally different then,” I say. “And so was I. If we’d hooked up back then, that’s all it would have been. Just sex. But this is different, and so much better.”

Leia throws her arms around me, and I hug her tight. “Just promise that I’ll be your maid of honor,” she says.

I laugh. “I think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself. But sure.”

She smiles, and then the music fades. We turn towards the DJ booth and see Deiderich standing there, microphone in hand, looking both stern and a little nervous. He’s staring at a sheet of paper clutched in his hand.

“Sorry to interrupt the fun,” he begins. “But I just wanted to say a few words.”

“Stay on script, stay on script,” Leia mutters next to me, and I smile.

“I hope you’re all enjoying your night,” he says. “Let’s have a round of applause for Carnette and her team, who worked so hard on putting this all together!”

I smile as everyone claps and cheers, Zouk’s voice the loudest of them all.

“And thank you to Black Iron as well, for your partnership. I know how hard you worked and how big a hand your company had in bringing our brand to launch on time, and Valdor is truly grateful for your efforts.”

We all cheer this time, and I catch Zouk’s eye. “I swear he’s blushing,” I murmur to Leia, who giggles.

“Um,” Deiderich stumbles, squinting at the paper. I feel Leia tense beside me.

“He has one paragraph left,” she whispers to me. “Honestly, if he decides now is the time to try and make a joke, I’m going to stab him with my shoe.”

“I appreciate everyone’s hard work,” Deiderich says. “It is because of the people in this room that Valdor is such a powerhouse, and I look forward to many more successful years together and memorable events such as this one. Thank you!”

We all clap again, and Leia sags against me in relief. “I hate it when he has to give speeches,” she says. “I feel like I age three years for each paragraph.”

“He did great,” I reassure her. “Sounded almost totally natural!”

“It’s a low bar, but he cleared it,” she nods. “Hey, I didn’t know Zouk was giving a speech.”

I look over and, sure enough, Zouk now has the microphone. “Oh god,” I say, feeling faint. “What’s he doing?”

“Hi, everyone,” Zouk says. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to make some big speech. I just wanted to thank Deiderich, and everyone at Valdor, for being such great partners to Black Iron during this process. We – I – don’t take that for granted.”

I relax. He just wanted to say thank you. That’s great. Actually, that’s amazing.

“One other thing,” Zouk adds. “I had a question for Carnette. Carnette, could you come over here?”

Leia grabs my arm and pulls me through the crowd. Everyone’s turning to look at us as we pass, murmuring about what might be happening. Finally, I’m standing in front of Zouk.

“Carnette, I love you,” he says, and bends down on one knee.

“Zouk!” I gasp.

“Will you do me the tremendous honor of marrying me?” he asks, pulling a ring box out of his pocket.

I gasp again as he pulls out a glittering diamond ring. “Yes!” I cry, and he slides it on. “Oh my god, Zouk!”

“She said yes!” he yells, and everyone cheers as he spins me around. “You’ve just made me the happiest orc in the world,” he murmurs into my ear.

I laugh and kiss him to a new round of applause. “And I’m the happiest woman in the world, thanks to you.”

ZOUK

“**S**hit! Someone’s knocking on the door,” Carnette gasps. “Where’s my bra?”

I quickly zip up my pants. “Just a minute!” I yell in the direction of my closed – and, thankfully, locked – office door. “It’s under the chair,” I tell Carnette, rolling my desk chair off of her bra. “Sorry, it’s a little crushed.”

She shakes her head. “It’s my own fault for having sex in your office,” Carnette laughs, stepping back into her heels. “Your buttons are misaligned,” she adds, putting her bra on.

“Dammit!” I quickly fix my shirt buttons and pull my tie on as she pulls her sweater on and straightens her skirt.

“Any paper clips in my hair?” Carnette asks and I laugh.

“Not this time.” I pick up the folders that we pushed aside before making love and pile them on a corner of my desk, then give the room a once-over. “Okay, I think we’re all presentable.”

“Great,” Carnette says, sitting down in her chair. She has her own office at Black Iron, a corner suite that’s almost as large as mine. But we meet in my office frequently to go over projects and schedules together.

She crosses her legs and nods at me. “Okay, I’m ready,” she says. “You look presentable, too.”

I try to wipe the grin off of my face as I stride over to the door and unlock it. Lena, our new secretary, is standing patiently on the other side.

“Hello Zouk,” she says, and nods to Carnette. “I just wanted to remind you both of your next meeting. It starts in three minutes. The other party is already here. I seated her in the conference room.”

“Thank you,” Carnette says. “We’ll both be there on time.”

“Very good,” Lena nods.

“Thank you,” I say politely, and both women smile.

“I’ll be at my desk if you need anything,” Lena says, and goes back down the hall. I lean on the edge of the desk, near Carnette.

“How long do you think she was out there?” Carnette asks. “Do you think she heard anything?”

I shake my head. “No. But if you want to feel extra secure, I’ll have more insulation added to the walls next week. Extra soundproofing is never a bad idea.”

“Especially not in this room,” Carnette grins. I reach for her but she swats my hand away. “Not now! We have a meeting to get to.”

She stands up and walks to the door. I let out a low whistle and she shoots me a look. “What, I can’t admire my fiancée?” I tease, catching up to her.

“Let’s be professional for at least an hour, okay?” Carnette says.

“I’ll try, but it’s going to be hard.”

“That’s just the way I like it,” Carnette murmurs, pulling open the door to the conference room.

Vivian stands up as we enter. Carnette approaches her first, and shakes her hand. “Hello, Vivian,” she says coolly. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

“I just got here,” Vivian says, offering a flinty smile. “I hear congratulations are in order,” she adds as she shakes my hand.

“Thank you,” I say, and gesture to the chairs. “Shall we get started?”

“Of course,” Vivian says, and we all sit down. “I have to admit, Zouk, I was surprised when you asked for this meeting.”

“Actually, I was the one that asked for it,” Carnette says, crossing her legs.

“Oh?” Vivian asks, raising her eyebrows. “A bold move for someone that just started working here.”

“I just started at Black Iron in an official capacity,” Carnette corrects her. “But I’ve been working for the company as a consultant for long enough to know how things work around here, and what Black Iron is capable of.”

“Besides losing clients, you mean?” Vivian asks, with a glint in her eye.

Carnette returns her thin smile with one of her own. “You poached Black Iron’s two lowest-performing and most difficult to please clients,” she says calmly. “I’d hardly call that a huge loss for us, especially with the success of our recent work with Valdor.”

“Really,” Vivian spits out.

Carnette nods. “In the days since our launch party with Valdor, Black Iron has picked up four new accounts. Which brings me to why I called this meeting today.”

She glances at me, and I nod. I’m enjoying watching Carnette take control of this meeting. It’s actually a huge turn-on, and I make a mental note to ask Carnette later if she’d like to try some boss-subordinate roleplay. I clear my throat and try to stay focused.

“Do tell,” Vivian smirks. “I’m dying of anticipation.”

“We’re buying you out,” Carnette says bluntly.

Vivian’s face pales and her eyes widen in shock. “What are you talking about?”

“Black Iron is buying you out,” Carnette says, enunciating each word.

“You can’t afford to do that,” Vivian says, but she still looks rattled.

“Actually, we can,” Carnette tells her. She opens her folder and slides a document across the table to Vivian. “Copies of this are currently being hand-delivered to your company’s attorneys. But I talked to each and every Black Iron shareholder. We worked out a deal that gives Black Iron not just enough capital to buy you out, but enough shareholder support that you can’t fight us.”

“Unanimous support,” I chime in, knowing that Carnette won’t take credit for that unless I bring it up. “Carnette brought them all on board. Everyone wanted this buyout to happen. You’re done, Vivian.”

“This was your idea?” Vivian asks Carnette.

Carnette nods, and Vivian snorts. “Who knew the secretary had such good business sense?” she sneers at me.

I open my mouth to defend Carnette, but before I can, Carnette stands up and leans over the table, so her face is within spitting distance of Vivian’s.

“Never underestimate the secretaries,” Carnette says quietly. “You do that at your peril.”

“That’s what you think,” Vivian snarls.

“You’re wrong, Vivian. That’s what I *know*. I’m that good at my job,” Carnette says. “And you should begin thinking about where you’re going to find your next one.”

Vivian stands up. “You can expect to hear from my lawyers,” she says curtly. “And you better believe that they’ll be going over this with a fine-toothed comb,” she says, crumpling the document in her fist. “If you forgot to cross one ‘t’ or dot one ‘i,’ I’m taking action against Black Iron.”

“Search all you want,” Carnette says as she stands up, too. “You won’t find any errors, or any avenue for recourse. This is a done deal, Vivian.”

She holds out her hand, but Vivian just sniffs and shakes her head. She looks at me and for a second I wonder if she’s

going to say something, but then Vivian looks away and shakes her head again. She slams the door open so forcefully that it bangs against the wall and strides off, her heels echoing down the hallway.

“Well,” Carnette says, sitting down in the chair next to mine. “That went well.”

I chuckle. “The look on her face when she realized it was your idea! Man, I wish I’d been able to take a picture.”

“Do you think she’ll really go quietly?” Carnette asks.

“I don’t think she’ll have a choice,” I say. “I read over those contracts with you and Black Iron’s attorney, Carnette. There are no loopholes, and no way she can claw back into our lives. It’s over.”

“Good,” Carnette sighs. “I guess we should get back to work, then.”

“Well, there seems to be a problem with doing that,” I tell her.

“What?”

“Watching you,” I murmur, leaning over and kissing her. “It’s gotten me so turned on that I absolutely can’t walk the halls like this.” I take her hand and gently place it on my cock, which is rock-hard and straining against my pants.

“So much for being professional for an entire hour,” Carnette says. Then she looks at me, her eyes dancing with delight. “Although this does seem to be quite a problem you have there, Zouk. What are you going to do about it?”

“This,” I say, pushing back my chair and lifting her onto the table. Then I kneel down and kiss her ankle.

“Someone could walk in,” Carnette gasps as I continue to kiss my way up her leg.

“We have the room booked for the rest of the hour,” I whisper against her underwear. I kiss a trail over to her other leg and start to work my way down her thigh.

“Are you sure about this?” she pants.

“You just had your first official Black Iron success,” I remind her. “Consider this your reward.”

“You better not reward all of your employees like this,” Carnette says.

“Only the most special one, who also happens to be my beautiful, whip-smart fiancée,” I say.

“We are so going to get busted by HR,” she moans happily as I nudge my head under her skirt.

“The doors are frosted glass,” I whisper against her.

“That doesn’t mean people can’t see through them,” she says, and then gasps as I pull her underwear aside. “Oh!”

I plunge my tongue inside her, and she moans in pleasure. Her legs tighten against me, and her fingers weave through my hair as I quickly but thoroughly explore every part of her. I’m enjoying her delight as much as she enjoys my attention.

“Zouk,” Carnette gasps, tightening her legs around me as she cums. I linger on her, savoring her taste, and then pull myself back up next to her.

“Did you like your reward?” I ask her softly.

She gazes at me with love in her eyes. “Like you wouldn’t believe,” Carnette smiles.

CARNETTE

“How do I look?” I ask Leia. “Tell me the truth.”
“You look divine,” she says.

“Really?” I ask, turning nervously towards the mirror.

“Really,” she says firmly, handing me my bouquet.
“Carnette, you’re ready.”

I stare at myself in the full-length mirror. My wedding dress is strapless and long, with a full skirt and intricate beadwork along the waist and neckline. My hair is pulled back and arranged in a complicated twist, the veil attached with an antique silver comb that is my favorite piece of jewelry.

I take a deep breath and smile at Leia in the mirror. “You look incredible, too,” I tell her.

“Thank you for letting me buy my own maid of honor dress,” she says, smoothing out the fabric of her chic lavender gown. “If you’d made me wear a dress with a butt bow, our friendship would have been over.”

I laugh and inhale the fragrance of my bouquet. The red roses are the same color as my lipstick, and the white roses echo the creamy color of my dress. “Okay. I’m ready to do this.”

“Good!” she grins, and loops her arm through mine. We carefully descend the stairs of the historic mansion where mine and Zouk’s wedding is being held.

My parents are waiting at the bottom of the stairs. “Sweetheart, you look stunning,” my mother says, tears springing to her eyes.

“We’re so happy for you,” my father says, taking my hand and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

The four of us walk to the back of the house, where French doors open onto a magnificent sweeping lawn. All of the guests are sitting in elegant, upholstered folding chairs, and I see Zouk, Goran, and Deiderich standing under the canopy of flowers at the end of the flower-strewn aisle.

Leia opens the doors, and the string quartet sitting to the side of the canopy pick up their instruments and begin to play. I watch my friend walk down the aisle, smiling as I see the adoration beaming from Deiderich’s face as she approaches.

This might be my wedding day, but it’s clear that Deiderich only has eyes for Leia. Which is just as it should be, I think as my parents and I approach the doors.

“Are you ready, honey?” my dad asks, looping one of his arms through mine.

“Yes,” I nod, looping my other arm through my mother’s. “Let’s go!”

They both laugh, and we step through the doors. As we walk down the aisle, it’s all I can do to not pick up the pace. Zouk and I have been engaged for six months, which all of our friends and families have told us is hardly any time at all.

But it feels to me as though I’ve been waiting to marry him for years. Ever since we first met at Valdor, in fact. So, despite all of the hours we’ve both been putting in at Black Iron and all of the time that planning the wedding has taken up, it still feels like the days have passed at an agonizingly slow pace.

Now that we’re here, though, I can’t stop grinning as I walk down the aisle. Zouk is grinning back at me, his smile just as wide. And I can tell that he’s counting down the steps I have left to take, and the seconds that have yet to elapse, until we’re officially married.

When we finally reach the canopy, Zouk gives my mother a cordial kiss and carefully shakes my father's hand. Then he takes my hands in his. "You look so gorgeous," he tells me softly as we turn to face the officiant.

"And you seriously should never wear anything except a tuxedo," I whisper appreciatively.

The ceremony is short and sweet. At the end, when the officiant says that we can kiss, Zouk actually picks me up, kisses me, and then swings me around. Everyone laughs and cheers.

"I can't believe you did that!" I giggle as he sets me down and we run up the aisle together.

"I just can't keep my hands off of you," he says as we burst through the French doors. "Think we have time to slip away for a quick, private celebration?"

I slap him on the arm, still laughing. "Not a chance, husband. Deiderich and Leia are right behind us."

"Then we'll just have to save some energy for later, wife," he says, bending me over in a deep kiss.

The cocktail hour passes in a blur of excited hugs and animated chatter. We've invited the entire staff of both Valdor and Black Iron, along with our friends and family. I love seeing my human family getting to know Zouk's orc relatives, hearing connections being made and commonalities being discovered.

After dinner, the party moves back out to the lawn. The chairs and canopy have been whisked away, and all of the flowers from the aisle are now strewn about the grass, adding color and beauty to the serene landscape.

"I have a surprise for everyone," I call out, tapping a knife against my champagne glass. "Actually, my maid of honor, Leia, and I have a surprise."

"What's going on?" Zouk asks, looking a little apprehensive.

“Don’t worry,” I whisper to him as Leia steps up beside me. “You’re going to love this.”

“To fully celebrate the marriage between a human and an orc, we thought it would be a good idea to include some orc games,” Leia says. “Carnette and I thought we’d have some traditional orc games that everyone could play!”

Zouk, Deiderich, Goran, and some of the other orcs roar in delight, and even the humans look excited. “So, behind us, we have an axe-throwing arena, darts – where the object is to destroy the other players’ darts, not score points on the board,” Leia explains. “And, my personal favorite, a furniture-lifting competition. Have fun!”

“You are incredible,” Zouk says as our guests head to different game stations. “I can’t believe you and Leia put all this together!”

“We wanted the night to be super-special,” I say as Leia and Deiderich come over to us, his arm over her shoulders. “I think we pulled that off,” I add, to Leia.

“I’ll say,” Deiderich grins. “You have a spectacular woman there, Zouk.”

“So do you,” I remind Deiderich.

“Oh, I know,” he says, kissing Leia’s cheek. “And if I ever begin to forget, she makes sure to remind me.”

“Damn straight,” Leia says, then grabs my hand. “Come on, let’s see how many step stools we can lift!”

We run over to the furniture-lifting area, where I’m delighted to see my mother and Zouk’s favorite aunt facing off against each other. We cheer and laugh as they battle to a draw, and then Leia and I compete against each other. After that, I move around the stations, watching my cousins throw axes and my father pulverize three of Goran’s darts in a row.

“This is the best wedding ever!” my mother tells me happily. “If you and Zouk decide to renew your vows every year, we’d be glad to attend.”

“Maybe we’ll just do a huge anniversary party,” I suggest as she hugs me. “I’m so glad you and dad are having a good time.”

“And we’re both so happy that you’ve found Zouk,” my mother says, her face growing serious. “I’ve never seen this side of you, Carnette.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I always knew you were special and deserved the world,” she says, squeezing my hands. “But I was never sure that you believed that, until you met Zouk. Now I look at you, and everything that you’ve already accomplished at Black Iron, and I know that there’s no limit to what you can do.”

“Oh, Mom,” I say, touched. I sniffle and try to smile. “If I cry, I’m going to ruin my makeup!”

“No tears,” my mother says, and I laugh. “Now, I’m going to go see if I can out-throw your new mother-in-law on the axe course.”

“My money’s on you,” I say and she grins.

I watch her go, then turn to look at the scene around me. There’s so much love and friendship, laughter and joy all around that I feel tears pressing against my eyes, and I blink hard.

“How are you doing?” Zouk asks, coming up behind me.

I turn and lean my head against his chest. “I’m so happy. I want this night to last forever.”

“I know what you mean,” he says, hugging me to him.

I close my eyes for a brief second, savoring the moment. Then I smile. “Would it totally ruin everything if I told you that I just had a work brainstorm?”

“Yes,” he mock-grumbles, shaking his head. “It’s our wedding day!”

“I know,” I nod. “But I just figured out a way to maximize our profit on the Zalzman order, and also finish the project two days early.”

“This is why you’re so brilliant at your job,” Zouk says fondly. “And why you’ll probably end up the CEO of Black Iron before either of us know it.”

“Hey, why stop there?” I tease. “I think we should be thinking expansion, franchising, maybe going international.”

“Stop!” he laughs. “Oh my god, I think I’ve created a monster!”

“Nah,” I grin. “The monster was inside me the whole time. You just gave it an excuse to come out.”

“You’re something else, Carnette,” Zouk says, shaking his head with pleasure. “I can’t believe that I get to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“I feel pretty damn lucky, too,” I tell him.

“What do you say we slip away?” Zouk asks, gazing around at the crowd. “I don’t think anyone will miss us.”

“You think we can just leave?” I ask uncertainly. “But it’s our reception!”

“And we’ll see everyone for brunch tomorrow,” he reminds me. “So the rest of the night belongs to us.”

“You make a good point,” I smile, and he grabs my hand. “Where are we going?”

“This is my surprise,” Zouk grins. He leads me back through the mansion and onto the circular entrance drive, where a limousine is waiting. “Get in,” Zouk says, opening the door.

“What do you have planned?” I ask as he closes the door and the driver pulls away.

“Just a night for us in the best suite at the best hotel in the city,” Zouk says. “Think Jacuzzi tub, huge bed, total privacy ...” his voice trails off as he kisses my neck.

“Oh,” I sigh, throwing my head back and smiling. “That sounds like the perfect way to end the day.”

ZOUK

I swing open the door to our hotel suite, and Carnette gasps.

“Zouk, this is beautiful!” she says, twirling around the foyer. “I can’t believe you arranged this!”

“Wait,” I call as she’s about to open the bedroom door. I run over and sweep her up in my arms. “You have to let me carry you across at least one threshold tonight.”

“You’re only supposed to do that at your house,” she says, giggling as I maneuver my arm under her voluminous skirt, trying to find the doorknob.

“Man, you could hide an army under here! Ah, got it,” I say, swinging open the door. The bed is covered in red and white rose petals, and they flutter around us as I gently lay her down. I kiss her tenderly. “Hi, wife.”

“Hi, husband.” Carnette kisses me again, then sits up. “I am dying to get out of this dress.”

“Well, that’s convenient, because I am dying to get you out of it,” I say, reaching for the row of cloth-covered buttons that run down her back.

After I undo the last button, she steps out of the dress and stands before me in a strapless lace bra and matching lace underwear. “Wait there,” she says, and darts into the bathroom.

I undo my tie and take off my shoes. Then I hear water running. “What are you doing?” I call through the door.

Carnette opens the door just enough so I can see that she's now fully nude. "You only get to find out if you take off all your clothes," she says mischievously.

"Challenge accepted!" I grin and she giggles, then closes the door.

When I open it again, she's sitting in the rapidly-filling Jacuzzi tub, under mounds of fragrant bubbles. There are lit candles ringing the edge of the tub, and she's turned the lights down low.

"Do you know why I love you?" I ask as I slide into the warm water and pull her onto my lap. "It's because you always have the best ideas."

"I'm glad you like this," she says, kissing my neck.

"Mmm. I like that, too," I say, leaning back as she straddles me.

She kisses me full on the lips then, and I eagerly respond. She wiggles her hips and grinds against me.

"Ever had sex with a married man before?" I whisper into her ear.

The shiver that runs through Carnette's body delights me almost as much as it does her. "No, and I can't wait to try it."

"Then you shall." I gently lower her onto me, and she moans with pleasure.

The water is still pouring into the tub, and the steam and bubbles are rising all around us. I breathe in the scent of Carnette's hair, run my hands over her slick skin. She moves against me, falling into a circular rhythm with her hips that takes my breath away.

I plunge deeper into her, actually lifting her out of the water with each thrust. "Oh god, Zouk, yes!" Carnette screams. "Harder!"

She reaches down and grabs my hand, then puts it directly where I'm entering her. She rubs my hand against her and I thought I couldn't get any harder, but this is so hot I think I'm

going to explode. I find her clit and rub it gently, finger it like it's a pearl.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Carnette cries, tossing her head from side to side. Water sprays over my face from her wet strands and I close my eyes and give myself over to the most powerful orgasm I've ever had.

“Wow,” Carnette says, sliding into the water. “So that's married sex.”

“Yeah,” I gasp, trying to catch my breath. “We should have gotten married a long time ago.”

“Seriously,” she laughs, then turns off the water. Carnette cups a handful of bubbles and blows them at me. I grin as they stick to my hair and eyebrows, then duck down under the water and grab her ankles.

I hear her muffled shriek as I pull her down into this ridiculously huge tub. Her eyes are open and we smile at each other under the water, bubbles dissolving all around us.

We break the surface at the same time and she throws her arms around me. “Can we just live here forever?”

“Sure, once we finish all those Black Iron franchises you've been dreaming up,” I say, tenderly stroking her hair. “Then we'll make this suite our permanent residence.”

“Sounds good to me,” she says, breaking away and drifting over to the other side of the tub. “I can't think of anything that would make this night more perfect.”

“I can,” I say, kissing her. Then I go under the water again and use my tongue to pry her open. I can hear her surprised gasp, muffled under the water, as I lick and nibble in all the ways I know she loves best.

When I come back up, she has a content smile on her face. “How in the world can you hold your breath for so long?” Carnette asks, kissing me again.

“Orc power,” I shrug. “We are champion breath-holders.”

“How did I never know that about you?”

“Well, Black Iron doesn’t have a Jacuzzi,” I point out.

“Okay, scratch moving in here. *That* has to be our first order of business,” she says. “We’re redoing your office to install a Jacuzzi in the corner.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Carnette wraps her arms around my shoulders and runs her fingers through my soaking-wet hair. “Do you know what I want to do right now?”

“What?”

“Well,” she says, tilting her head and shooting me a coy glance. “I want to return the favor, but I’m afraid us humans lack your super-special abilities.”

I leap out of the tub and grab two thick towels from the counter. “I guess we’ll just have to return to dry land, then.”

“I suppose so.” She takes the towel and wraps it around herself, then leads me back to the bedroom. “Sit,” she commands, dropping her towel and lowering herself, naked and damp, onto the carpeted floor.

“I like it when you take charge,” I murmur as she runs her hands up my legs and down my shaft. My cock springs to attention and she gives me a wicked smile.

“That’s good, because I like it, too.” Carnette lowers her head and licks her way from the tip of my cock to the base, as I moan and squirm with pleasure. Then she takes me in her mouth, and I almost cum at once.

“Oh my god,” I gasp. “You are incredible.” I reach down and scoop her wet hair back so I can see her lovely face as she moves over me, her dark-green eyes focused on mine, her hands working in concert with her mouth.

“Carnette,” I moan. “Oh my god, Carnette!”

She moves her mouth from my cock to my stomach, and swirls her tongue around in a way that electrifies every nerve ending on my body. “Glad you like it,” she murmurs, her lips barely touching my skin.

“You have no idea,” I groan. “Oh my god, you’re killing me. I need to be inside you.”

“I thought I was in charge,” she says, that same wicked grin flashing across her face. “I say when you get to be inside me.”

“I submit,” I gasp, laying all the way down on the bed. “Do what you will.”

“Music to my ears.”

Carnette lingers over every inch of my chest, kissing and licking until I think I’m going to pass out with anticipation. Then she nibbles my earlobes and I groan. “Please, I’m begging you,” I cry.

“Almost ready,” Carnette says. She takes my hand and presses it against her. She’s so warm, so wet. “I want you to be aching for me.”

“Oh, I am,” I gasp. “Believe me, I have never wanted anyone so much in my life.”

“Good,” she purrs, lowering herself down onto me. She slides up and down my shaft, pressing her hands against my chest for balance. “You feel incredible,” Carnette moans.

“So do you.” I run my hands all over her body, wanting to feel every part of her at once, inside and out. I close my eyes and we move together. She gradually lowers herself onto me until our torsos are pressed together, and then we’re rolling over the massive bed.

“Yes, yes, yes!” I yell.

“Zouk! Oh, Zouk!” she cries, and I swear we cum at the exact same time.

Afterwards, we lay on the bed, completely spent. “That was ... I have no words,” Carnette says, spooning herself close to me.

I wrap my arms around her. “Still feel bad about leaving the reception early?”

She laughs. “Absolutely not.”

“Think anyone noticed?”

“They probably did, but I don’t care. This has been so magical, Zouk.”

“You deserve all the magic in the world,” I murmur into her hair.

“So do you,” she says, rolling over to face me. “You believe that, don’t you?”

“Carnette, I have you,” I tell her. “That’s all the magic I ever need for the rest of my life. Anything else is just the icing on the cake.”

“I feel the same way,” she says, tilting her forehead so it’s touching mine. I caress her face, run my thumb over her lips.

“I still can’t believe that I get to wake up every morning looking at you,” I murmur, the events of the day – and especially the last hour – beginning to catch up to me.

Carnette chuckles, but I can tell that she’s growing sleepy, too. “I’m not always going to have this much makeup on when we go to sleep.”

“I don’t care if you never wear makeup again,” I say. “You will always be the most gorgeous woman I know, and I will always love you.”

“I will always love you, too,” she says, her eyes closing.

I watch her for a few minutes, as her breath evens out and she falls into a deep sleep. Then I kiss her lips again, pull her close to me, and fall into a blissful sleep.

The End

To read more about Carnette and Zouk join my newsletter at:
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