



ORC GUARDIAN BRIDES BOOK THREE

FATED
TO THE
ORC

SUE MERCURY

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(Orc Guardian Brides, Book Three)



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

The orc warrior says I'm his... *soulmate*?

A long time ago, my father sold my sister to an orc. I haven't heard from her since, but I am determined to find her and bring her home. During my first week on the road north, however, I cross paths with a massively tall Orc Guardian who claims I'm his... *fated mate*.

Magnus the Wolf says I'm coming with him, and he won't take no for an answer.

Hm. Maybe getting kidnapped by a big, muscular orc who wants to marry me isn't the worst thing that could happen. After he brings me back to his clanlands, I can find my sister and we can flee the Orc Realm together. No looking back.

But the first time Magnus kisses me, the whole world fades and I find myself yearning for his touch. I also find myself wondering if maybe, just maybe, escape isn't the answer.

CHAPTER 1



Lorna

THE HOWLING WIND BURST THROUGH EVERY CRACK IN THE derelict cottage. Shutters and loose boards rattled as the tiny structure gave an eerie groan. I glanced upward, worried the roof might collapse and bury me alive. When I lowered my gaze, I spotted several rodents scurrying across the floor. I watched as they disappeared into the shadows.

Home fucking home.

Well, not for much longer.

As I crept down the narrow hallway, shivering from the cold, my boots crunched over broken glass, remnants from my father's most recent drunken rage.

I wouldn't miss this place.

Despite my resolve to leave, a wave of guilt descended when I neared my parents' chamber, and my steps slowed, my feet suddenly heavy.

On her deathbed just two days ago, my mother had begged me to take care of my father after she was gone. Not wanting to break a dying woman's heart, I'd looked into her eyes and agreed, even though I'd had no intention of honoring such a promise. I'd lied to her face. May the Goddess forgive me.

Mama... Oh, how I missed her, and I still couldn't believe she was gone. Her death had come as a complete shock. She'd

taken a fever and faded fast, and the healer I'd summoned hadn't been able to help.

Anguish left my throat burning, my chest tight, and my limbs weighed down, but I forced myself to move past the bedroom and headed for the front door.

No time to dawdle.

I needed to slip away unseen before my father returned from the tavern. Without a doubt, he would try to stop me, and then he would make my life miserable for even thinking about leaving.

I would've left the day Mama died, but I'd wanted to ensure she received a proper burial. We'd buried her yesterday afternoon, and now whenever I blinked, I saw an image of her coffin being lowered into the ground. I suspected the memory would haunt me forever.

The wind ruffled my hair when I stepped onto the porch. Goosebumps prickled my skin, and my breath came in quick white puffs that danced in the moonlight. I heaved my pack higher, fixed my hood in place, and surveyed the street with a cautious eye. It was just after midnight, and the nearest homes were shrouded in darkness, their occupants fast asleep.

I reached into my pocket and fingered the small purse that held my life savings—twenty silver coins and five copper pieces—the sum of which represented years of cleaning houses, tending the neighbors' children, mending and washing clothes, and other odd jobs performed. More than enough to fund my trip north. I could buy a horse and stay at inns during my travels. Good thing, too, as the weather was growing colder by the day. Indeed, winter was coming.

But I couldn't postpone my journey until spring.

I would have left years ago if not for Mama. She'd needed me, and even though I'd longed to leave, I had stayed for her sake. If I'd left, who would've protected her from my father?

Now that she was gone, nothing tied me to this place anymore.

Without warning, the door creaked open behind me, and light spilled across the rotting floorboards of the porch. *Fuck.* My heart lodged in my throat, and I froze in place, too terrified to turn around.

“Hand it over,” came a gruff, familiar voice that made my blood run cold.

Oh, Goddess, help me.

As I turned, my hood fell back and the blistering wind lifted my hair from my shoulders. I sucked in a deep breath, bracing myself for the inevitable confrontation with my father. He stood in the doorway holding a lantern, his features dark and livid. I’d never seen him look so angry. My fear deepened.

“Hand over what?” I asked, feigning innocence. But in truth, I didn’t know what item he was talking about—my coin purse, my pack (which contained food and other supplies I’d swiped from the kitchen), or the long hunting knife I wore at my waist.

He stepped forward and I nearly coughed at the fumes that radiated from him. Whiskey. He smelled as though he’d bathed in the stuff.

Anger churned in my gut.

If he weren’t such a raging drunk, our family wouldn’t have been torn apart in the first place. My sister, Hilda, would still be with us. Maybe Mama would still be alive—maybe she would’ve felt she had something to live for. And I wouldn’t be sneaking away in the middle of the night knowing I would never return.

“The money,” he said with a sneer. “I heard a jingle when you put your hand in your pocket. You steal from me, girl?” His chest puffed up, his nostrils flared, and rage swirled in his eyes.

“It’s my money,” I said in a sharp voice, probably the most defiant tone I’d ever used in his presence. It felt good. Liberating.

“Give it to me!” he roared.

“No,” I snapped. “You can’t have it.” He could pry the coins from my frigid corpse. I kept this thought to myself, not wanting to give him any ideas.

He emitted a sinister laugh and casually set the lantern on the porch. Then he straightened to his full height, towering over me as he closed the space between us in a flash. Before I could turn and run, he grabbed me. Hard. One hand closed on my arm, the other tightened in my hair. Pain jolted through me, and I struggled to escape his punishing grasp.

“What’s with the pack?” He tore at the bag I’d strapped across my back, spilling the contents everywhere. Apples, bread, cheese, cured meat, fire-starting stones, a jug of water—it all went flying. “You think you can take my money and my food and run off?” He dragged me to the living room and threw me onto the floor with so much force all the air was knocked from my lungs.

Tears burned in my eyes, but I refused to cry. I blinked fast and struggled to catch my breath and regain my composure.

I’d spent my whole life cowering before this man and I was fucking done.

I glared at him as I rose to my feet, and it was at this moment that he noticed the knife I wore. His eyes lit with dark suspicion, as well as a covetous gleam.

“Where’d you get that, bitch? Who’d you steal it from?” He exhaled sharply and lunged for the weapon, but I darted away, causing him to trip and crash to the floor. When he tried to stand, he staggered and fell back on his ass, hitting his head on a table in the process. He went momentarily cross-eyed.

Something inside me snapped, an almost reckless bravery taking hold. I withdrew the hunting knife from its fine leather scabbard, allowing it to reflect the moonlight that spilled in through the window.

“If you must know, *Father*,” I said, uttering the last word with disgust, “I bought this with my own money. It’s for protection. I’m leaving and you can’t stop me. I’m going north to rescue Hilda, and then we’re going to find a place far from

this village—far from *you*—where we'll live in peace.” I had it all planned out in my head. We would rent a cottage near the sea, in a remote area where our father would never find us.

Not that I thought he would come looking. He might try to stop me from leaving the village, but I doubted he would bother tracking me across the Human Realm—a chronically unemployed drunkard such as himself would lack the ambition for such a feat. At least that's what I told myself.

He crawled forward and snatched at my ankle, but I retreated to the doorway of the living room. I hadn't heard him come home tonight, but I suspected he'd returned early after running out of money. Perpetually short of coin, the local tavern owners would no longer allow him to run up a tab.

An unexpected stab of pity affected me as I stared down at him. He was panting hard and had stopped trying to climb to his feet. He looked pretty fucking pathetic, but he still looked angry. If I came close, he would certainly try to grab or hit me. Yet I couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

What a wasted life.

He could've made something of himself, if only he'd tried. Instead, he'd squandered my mother's sizable inheritance and then sold my sister, Hilda, to an Orc Guardian when the money finally ran out.

“Mama might have forgiven you for what you did to Hilda,” I said, “but I never will.”

His eyes shone with fury. “I'd just lost my job! We had no money and needed to eat! Hilda was always rebellious and her reputation in this village was shit. She wouldn't have been able to attract a decent husband, a match that would've been advantageous to our family. I had no choice. Even your mother understood that I did what was best for all of us.” He slumped against the wall, no longer attempting to get up. But rage continued to boil in his gaze, and I remained in the doorway, standing well out of reach.

“You lost your job at the mill because you never showed up on time. Because you were always sleeping off a hangover.

And Mama's inheritance that could've saved us? You lost most of it gambling. You're a lowlife who never deserved the love Mama gave you."

Years of pent-up emotion rose to the surface, and I decided to let it all spill out. What did it matter? By the time my father sobered and regained his strength, I would be miles away. He wouldn't be able to hurt me, and now that Mama was gone, I didn't have to worry about him taking his frustrations out on her. I didn't have to walk on eggshells anyfuckingmore.

"I hate you," I spat, "and I hate what you did to Hilda. I hate what you did to Mama. I hate what you did to me. I fucking hate you."

Darkness curled through my being, a force of rage unlike any I'd ever known. My hand tightened on the knife, and there was a moment—a split second—when I considered using it to hurt my father.

Not to kill him, but to maim him.

To hurt him as payment for repeatedly breaking Mama's heart and for selling my sister to a beastly orc.

To hurt him for all the times he'd slapped me or pushed me or screamed in my face that I was worthless.

Fear for myself—for my soul—jolted through me.

I stepped back, stunned that I'd been tempted by the prospect of vengeance, even for an instant, and I endeavored to shake the dark thoughts away.

I drew in a long breath, then returned the knife to its scabbard. I wouldn't stoop to my father's level. I wouldn't act in anger and hurt someone I was supposed to love. Even if he sure as fuck didn't deserve my mercy.

"I'm leaving now, and you'll never see me again. Thank the Goddess of All for that." I turned without saying goodbye, knowing my father would soon pass out in a pool of his own piss and vomit. At least I wouldn't have to clean it up.

I retrieved my supplies from the porch and re-packed my bag. After checking my pocket to confirm the coin purse

hadn't fallen out, I departed Yorkstown under the pale light of the moon and headed north.

It had been three years since I'd seen Hilda. Three years since our father had sold her to a huge Orc Guardian known as Tavish the Reckless, and I shuddered to imagine what terrible events had befallen her during that time. Orcs were savage monsters, cold-hearted and cruel. I prayed she was still alive, prayed with all my heart that I wouldn't find her completely broken.

The brutal wind pierced my cloak and the many layers I wore. My teeth chattered and I feared I might freeze, but I didn't dare pause to seek shelter in the forest. I needed to put as much space between myself and the village as possible before sunrise, just in case my father tried to follow.

My heart sank. If he did come after me, it would be because he wanted my money—not because he cared about my safety or despaired over the idea of never seeing me again. Bastard.

Thankfully, the harsh winds subsided not long after I departed Yorkstown, and when morning came, the rising sun blanketed me in much needed warmth.

Relief filled me.

Not only had I survived the night, but I was truly on my way north to find Hilda. I'd left my village and my father behind. And once I found my sister, we would make a fresh start together.

In the late morning, I reached Springfield, a small but bustling village that was much like Yorkstown, where I purchased a well-tempered horse and a few more supplies for my journey.

Despite my utter fatigue, I didn't pause for rest, and instead pushed on and resumed my travels immediately.

Each time I heard a strange noise in the surrounding forest and considered turning back out of fear, I reminded myself of Hilda and the three years of terror she had undoubtedly endured at the hands of her orc master.

And I kept going.

I kept going and I promised myself I wouldn't stop until I found her.

Until I saved her.

I couldn't save Mama, but maybe I could save my sister.

CHAPTER 2



Magnus

FEMININE SCREAMS PIERCED THE AIR, CAUSING ME TO FREEZE in my steps. A glance up and down the road showed no one, though several sets of footprints marked the mud, as well as one set of hoofprints. I held my breath and listened, trying to discern from which direction the cries were coming.

There. A few hundred feet ahead within the forest.

I withdrew my battle-axe and rushed into the trees. The sweet, enticing scent of a human female soon overwhelmed me, calling up all my protective instincts. A moment later, the unmistakable stench of unbathed human males also reached me, and my grip on the axe tightened.

With a thunderous roar, I burst into a small clearing and came upon a scene that filled me with fury.

A petite, golden-haired female stood holding a knife, turning constantly and swiping the weapon as she tried to hold off the five human males who surrounded her.

She looked familiar, and my heart warmed with affection and longing as I realized just who she was. It was *her*. The human female I'd been searching for. The one I'd dreamed about for years.

My fated mate.

I had finally found her.

When the men's attention turned on me, the young woman took the opportunity to run into the forest. But it was no matter. I would easily manage to track her down once I slayed this group of dishonorable human males.

Rage boiled my blood.

How dare they harass and frighten the woman?

Murderous impulses seized me when I considered what they might've done to the female—*my female*—had I not shown up at this precise moment.

The men took up a fighting stance, one of them standing in the lead, a stout man with a bald head that reflected the light of the sun.

“Ah, would you look at that, fellas?” Bald Man said with a bawdy laugh as he lifted his knife higher. “A Guardian who is on his way back to the Orc Realm, no doubt. What do you say we make sure he never makes it home?”

His companions shouted their agreement, all of them holding knives of varying sizes. The group was filthy, though the quality of their clothing was rich, and they wore gold jewelry and high-quality leather boots. Many had scars on their faces, and their skin was heavily wrinkled though they didn't look very old. They simply appeared as though they'd lived a rough life. Highwaymen, no doubt.

“Good morning, *fellas*,” I said, mimicking Bald Man's strange accent. “I trust you all are well today?” My tone was mocking, and a thrill rushed through me at the prospect of ending these human males.

Bald Man glanced over his shoulder in the direction my mate had run. Then he settled a frustrated look upon me. “You stupid orc,” he said. “You let the girl get away. We were planning to take turns enjoying her. If you'd asked us nicely, we might have even allowed you to have a go at her.”

My resolve to kill the highwaymen strengthened. Not only that, but I would savor the ensuing slaughter and make them suffer. Human females were much sought after and revered by

my people, and the idea of harming one, of violating one, was unfathomable.

I took a deep breath, then released a fierce growl that caused all five males to pale and take a few steps back. They exchanged fearful glances, but Bald Man eventually motioned his comrades to attack. Coward. I'd expected him to come at me first, but apparently he was in the habit of making others do his dirty work.

Two men emerged to stand in front of the others, though their hands noticeably shook as they gripped their knives. They lunged at me in unison, aiming blades at my abdomen. I pushed one man back, causing him to fall on his ass, then sliced my axe across the other's arm, inflicting a deep gash that spurted blood. The coppery scent hit my nostrils and a haze of fury descended upon me.

What happened next was a blur of violence and death.

I picked the highwaymen apart piece by piece. Cutting off fingers, ears, arms, and leaving deep wounds upon their stomachs and backs, severe injuries that gushed blood and brought them to their knees. Their pathetic cries filled the clearing and resounded off the nearby mountains.

I savored the scent of their blood as well as their eventual pleading.

Years ago, during the final days of the Hundred Years' War, when I was but four years old, my people had been attacked by human soldiers. I'd watched my dear mother and my sweet aunt both perish as vile human men slit their throats, helpless to save them.

The echoes of anguish hardened my heart, and I continued tormenting the highwaymen, reveling in their pain and fear, taking it as vengeance I was long owed.

My people might revere human females—and we needed them for mating and breeding purposes—but we held no such reverence for human males. Who knew? Perhaps some of these men used to be soldiers. Several of them were clearly old enough to have fought in the Hundred Years' War. They very

well might have attacked my clan—the Haxxall clan—or perhaps another clan in the Orc Realm.

In any case, they had planned to violate a female, and that was unforgivable. They deserved naught but death.

Bald Man cowered before me, staring up with pleading tear-filled eyes. “Please, don’t kill me.” He drew in a shuddering breath. “Please. If-if you kill me, you’ll be violating the Xornas Treaty,” he said, referencing the tenuous agreement of peace that had been forged by the leaders of the Human, Orc, and Fae Realms upon the Xornas Mountaintop twenty years ago, bringing the Hundred Years’ War to an end.

“Ah, but there’s no one here to witness your deaths,” I said, towering over him, holding my blood-drenched axe at the ready. “Besides, is the punishment for rape not usually death? That is what you intended to do to the human woman, is it not? You planned to violate her?”

“Slavery,” Bald Man said. “In most villages, the sentence for rape is a lifetime of slavery, not death. Let us go. Please. Or just me. Let me go. I promise I won’t tell a soul about this.”

I surveyed the clearing. Dark patches of blood covered the soft grass, and Bald Man’s comrades lay grievously wounded and barely clinging to life. All were missing body parts, which were scattered about in a haphazard manner.

I’d delighted in hacking them to bits.

If only I’d been big and strong enough to have adequately defended my clan during the humans’ fateful attack on our clanlands. While my brother and I had tried our best that day, we’d only managed to kill fifteen humans between us.

Sadly, most of my people’s females, and many children as well, had perished during the attack, as our fiercest warriors had been off fighting the Unseelie at the time.

The dark memories prompted me to continue hacking at Bald Man. His begging wouldn’t sway me. I might’ve spent the last ten years in the Borderlands, where I’d protected the human villages from the beasts that occasionally escaped the Fae Realm, but I hadn’t done so out of any particular affection

for the humans. I'd done it to earn my fortune, as well as the right to one day claim a human female as my bride.

I'd served my time, killed more than my fair share of Fae Realm beasts, and earned more than enough money for one lifetime. I would finish these highwaymen off and track down the golden-haired beauty who'd just fled the clearing.

I knew nothing about her, not even her name, but I recognized her from my dreams.

She was my one true mate, and I wouldn't rest until I captured her and made her mine.

CHAPTER 3



Lorna

FEAR WEAKENED MY LEGS, AND I FOUND MYSELF STUMBLING not long after I fled the clearing. The Orc Guardian's ferocious growls boomed through the forest. I slumped against a tree and felt the wet warmth of tears coating my face. Hastily, I wiped at the moisture with a shaky hand.

I'd been on the road for almost a week and hadn't run into any trouble. Until now.

My heart wouldn't stop racing and I felt cold all over. I scanned the forest for signs of my horse, but the mare was long gone, having been spooked by the damned highwaymen.

When I recalled the threats they'd hurled at me, my shaking increased. They'd uttered vile phrases, promising to take turns fucking me bloody and then slit my throat once they had their fill. I couldn't imagine a worse fate, and I supposed I had the unnamed Orc Guardian to thank for interrupting their plans.

But I needed to regain my strength and get away from here quickly. I didn't trust that the orc wouldn't come looking for me after he finished fighting the human men. And there was also the chance that the highwaymen might overpower him. Orc Guardians were strong and fierce fighters, but perhaps five human men would be enough to take this one down.

I struggled to remain standing and had to continue leaning against the tree. In all my life, I'd never endured such a fright. Even all the times my father had come flying at me in a drunken rage didn't compare to this. Though my father could be violent on occasion, I had never truly feared for my life when he attacked me. But today I had feared for my life, and the prospect of being repeatedly violated left me beyond shaken.

Suddenly, I couldn't take in enough air, and I found myself slumping to the forest floor. I trembled in place, and when I glanced up, I realized I had a clear view of the fight.

The Orc Guardian was slaughtering the highwaymen, wielding his massive battle-axe with skill. It took me a few seconds to comprehend what was happening. The orc was prolonging the fight just for the fun of it. He seemed to enjoy the act of killing. Bloodlust gleamed in his dark eyes, and a note of satisfaction was evident in many of his growls.

He was a beast.

I watched, stunned to my very core, as he sliced one of the highwaymen's arms completely off. It went soaring through the air and landed with a thud. My stomach turned. Oh, Goddess. I'd never witnessed such savagery before. Yet I couldn't look away. I could scarcely move, let alone breathe.

The orc wore nothing but a kilt and tall leather boots. The weapons belt at his waist contained numerous knives, some of them quite long, though he seemed content to use his axe. He was huge and muscular, with dark wavy hair, vibrant green skin, and white tusks that protruded from his lower jaw. I noted that he was even larger and more forbidding than Tavish the Reckless, who until now was the only other Orc Guardian I'd seen up close. A necklace containing bones and teeth hung around his neck, evidence of his status as a great warrior, and I shuddered to imagine the horrid Fae Realm creatures he'd killed to obtain those souvenirs.

As the battle continued, I took a moment to take stock of myself, and slowly, very slowly, my breathing began to calm,

and I no longer felt as though I were on the verge of passing out.

I had a few scratches and bruises, which I'd gotten when the highwaymen had jumped into the road and frightened my horse. I'd struggled to remain on the mare, but she'd bucked and then taken off at a rapid speed, and I'd tumbled to the forest floor. By the time I'd climbed to my feet, I was surrounded by the highwaymen.

Well, at least I hadn't broken anything. If I'd so much as twisted an ankle, that would've severely complicated matters. How would I continue my travels north if I couldn't walk?

Hm. Maybe if I searched the woods, I could find my horse. I brightened at this prospect, but all thoughts of searching for the horse faded as my attention was drawn back to the battle.

The Orc Guardian's tusks gleamed in the sunlight that filtered through the trees. He swung his axe from man to man, spreading the carnage out, taking off body parts with a deranged glee that left me stunned.

I'd heard Orc Guardians were deadly in battle, but I'd never imagined they could inflict such grievous violence with ease. This orc had barely broken a sweat, and none of the highwaymen had managed to inflict the smallest of scratches upon his green skin.

I needed to get the fuck out of here.

After taking a few deep breaths, I rose to my feet, using the tree to keep my balance. My legs still felt weak, but I thought I could manage to walk away. I doubted I would be able to run, but maybe once I ventured farther away, away from the sounds of slaughter, I would gain enough strength to at least break into a jog.

I cast one last glance into the clearing. Three of the men lay motionless. One was trying to crawl away, and the bald man, the leader, rested on his knees before the orc, begging for his life.

Curiosity prevented me from leaving just yet. I wondered if the orc possessed any mercy. The cries from the leader

sounded genuine, though I couldn't make out all his words. But I did hear "please" over and over again, and there was no mistaking the fear in his trembling voice.

A sudden breeze brought the sickening scent of blood to my nose, and I almost heaved into the bushes. I wasn't sorry the highwaymen were being killed. Surely they deserved it. I doubted I was the first woman they'd attacked on the road. But that didn't mean stomaching the bloodshed was easy. The sight of body parts littering the clearing was shocking, as were the events that transpired next.

The orc swung his axe and took the leader's head off in one fell swoop, his animalistic roar so loud that I covered my ears and cringed. I watched, horrorstruck, as the leader's head went rolling across the clearing. Blood. There was so much blood. And one man was still alive and trying to crawl away. I wasn't certain if any of the others were still breathing.

The Orc Guardian quickly ended the man who was crawling, slamming his axe down across his neck. Oh Goddess. More screams. More blood. More death.

I turned and ran, my legs struggling to work as they felt suddenly weakened again. But I couldn't stay here. I shivered to think what the orc might do to me if he caught me.

What if he liked killing all humans, regardless of their sex?

Or what if he didn't yet have a mate and he set his sights on me?

This last thought gave me the strength to sprint faster through the trees. At some point while running, I'd lost my hunting knife. But I didn't dare go back for it. I could buy a new one after I reached the next village.

My pack slammed against my back with every step, and the increasing wind caused my hair to blow across my face, momentarily obscuring my view. I stumbled over a branch and went flying forward. With a cry, I put my hands out and braced myself for the impact.

But I didn't hit the ground.

Instead, I landed in the arms of a huge Orc Guardian.

CHAPTER 4



Magnus

I EMBRACED THE PETITE BEAUTY AND PRESSED MY FACE INTO her golden locks, taking a deep inhale and savoring the sweet scent of her.

Relief and gratitude filled me.

I'd caught her. My beautiful fated mate.

The female I'd been dreaming of my entire life.

Even as a child, I'd had visions of the human woman.

She was meant for me, and likewise, I was meant for her.

The female, however, seemed to disagree.

She screamed and thrashed in my grasp, trying with all her might to escape. I tightened my hold on her, not wishing for her to get away.

Now that I had her in my arms, I despaired over the thought of losing her, even for a moment.

She was mine. *Mine*.

And I would make her understand that I intended her no harm and only wished to take care of her.

"Cease your fighting, little beauty," I said, my lips at her ear.

As she continued to struggle, my cock went rock hard, and I couldn't restrain a growl of desire.

Bedding this small but fierce female would be the greatest pleasure of my life.

"Let me go, you beast!" She raked her nails down my chest, drawing blood, but still, I didn't let her go.

"Relax," I said, striving to keep my voice calm. "I promise I will not hurt you. I swear it on the Mountain God. Please cease your antics, female."

"How about you fuck off and let me go!" She reached for one of the knives at my belt.

I quickly subdued her, turning her around and holding her wrists behind her back.

After a moment's hesitation, I wrapped a rope around her wrists.

I needed her calm and subdued so she might listen to me. With all the noise she was making, she might draw the attention of a bear or a wildcat. Though I would have no trouble fighting off such a predator, I didn't wish for any interruptions.

"Shh, human female," I said. "Shh. *Hush.*" I held her in one arm, snug against my chest, as I stroked a hand through her silken hair.

She whimpered and eventually ceased trying to escape, and I hoped I would soon manage to calm her fears.

"Please," she said. "I-I wasn't with those men. I'm not one of them. You don't have to kill me. Let me go. Let me go and I will pay you handsomely."

"Little beauty," I began, "I have no intention of hurting you in any way. You have nothing to fear from me. Truly."

She drew in a shuddering breath. "I-I watched you kill those men. You enjoyed it."

"Aye, I did enjoy it. They deserved every ounce of suffering that I delivered for what they did to you, and for

what they planned to do.” I continued stroking her hair.

“So, you don’t intend to hurt me too?” She peered at me with wide blue eyes that were filled with fear.

I longed to erase her anxieties. I wanted her to feel safe in my presence, and I regretted that the circumstances of our first meeting were darkened by violence.

But why didn’t she recognize me?

This question left me deeply unsettled. If we were fated mates, surely the Goddess of All would’ve sent her dreams about me. Yet she acted as though I were a stranger—a stranger she feared.

“I already swore to you that I would not hurt you, and I meant it.” I shifted her in my arms so she was fully facing me now. I cupped her face in my hands and caressed her cheeks with my thumbs. Her skin was softer than anything I’d ever touched. She was perfect, and a glance down her body showed she was in possession of wide, shapely hips.

Perfect for birthing our sons and daughters.

I hoped we would have over a dozen offspring together, and happiness filled me as thoughts of our future danced through my head.

She tore her eyes from mine and backed away, but I held onto her face and followed her steps, until she’d trapped herself against a tree. Her bottom lip quivered, and guilt ravaged me.

I hadn’t meant to frighten her, yet I had.

I’d also tied her up.

Fuck. Our first meeting wasn’t going as planned.

“What do you want with me, orc?” she asked, fear evident in her gaze. “If you mean me no harm, why did you run after me and tie me up?” Tears glittered in her eyes and my guilt deepened at the sight. *Double fuck.* The last thing I wanted to do was make my sweet mate break into tears.

“I was traveling on the road when I heard your screams,” I explained. “I came running and found the highwaymen harassing you. They are all dead now and they won’t hurt you again.”

A lone tear cascaded down her cheek, and I caught it with my thumb, slowly wiping it away. Her trembling increased and she swallowed hard.

“I’m not worried about the highwaymen anymore,” she said. “I’m worried about you. Please tell me what your intentions are.”

I placed a finger beneath her chin, forcing her eyes back to mine.

Ah, she looked just as she did in my dreams—flowing golden hair, stark blue eyes, and a light covering of freckles on her nose and cheeks. Her lips were full and pink, and there was a small thin scar on her chin. I’d dreamed of her in full detail, including the scar.

There was no mistaking her identity. She truly was my mate. Though at present, we were naught more than strangers, somehow our fates were entwined.

If only she recognized me too...

I cleared my throat, preparing to answer her question as I held her gaze. “My name is Magnus the Wolf,” I said, “and I have been dreaming about you, little beauty, for as long as I can remember. You are my fated mate. I have been looking for you, and I thank the Mountain God that I have finally found you. My intentions are simple, really—I plan to keep you. I plan to marry you and take you back to the Orc Realm.”

I leaned forward and placed a soft kiss to her forehead, then drew back and gazed upon her, my heart beaming with happiness.

“You are meant to be mine, sweet human.”

CHAPTER 5



Lorna

No, no, no.

Fuck, no.

This couldn't be happening.

Not only had the Orc Guardian captured me, but he also thought I was his... *fated mate*.

Holy Goddess.

I remembered reading something once about ancient orc clans and how thousands of years ago they used to have soulmates, but this wasn't the case any longer.

"Orcs no longer have fated mates," I blurted. "You must be mistaken."

His eyes flickered with warmth. "What do you know about orcs and soulmates?" His voice was deep and warm and filled with interest, and as he leaned closer, his masculine scent caused waves of heat to rise within me.

"I read a book about ancient orc clans once," I replied. I'd read the book not long after Hilda had been sold off to an Orc Guardian, as I'd wanted to learn as much about orc culture as possible. "According to the book, over four thousand years ago, orcs stopped having fated mates, though no one knows quite why. Some have theorized that it was the will of the Goddess of All, or perhaps your Mountain God, while others

have claimed that the Dark Fae King had something to do with it. In any case, there's no such thing as soulmates among your people these days. And even if orcs still had fated mates, perhaps you didn't get a good look at me. I'm not an orc. I'm a full-blooded human."

Surely, he would eventually see reason. Surely, he would soon understand he'd made a mistake.

We couldn't be fated mates.

It wasn't possible.

I held my breath and awaited his response, praying he would decide to let me go.

How in the blazes would I find Hilda if I too was the captive of an orc?

I cursed the highwaymen. If not for them, this orc wouldn't have heard my screams and maybe we would've never met.

I needed to make an escape. I tugged at the bindings on my wrists, but they were tight.

The orc peered down at me, his dark otherworldly eyes filled with warmth, and the level of affection in his gaze caught me off guard.

Though I'd never seen him before, there was a familiarity about him that called to me. His presence tugged at something inside me, something deep in my soul, and I found myself blinking back tears as the emotion became too much.

Goddess, help me.

What was happening?



MAGNUS

LOWERING MY FACE INTO THE CROWN OF HER HEAD, I TOOK another long inhale. My cock hardened further and pressed against her body. A small gasp left her, and I knew she'd finally detected my arousal.

I had to remind myself of the fear she'd just endured at the hands of the highwaymen, and I forced myself to release the petite beauty and take two steps back.

I hoped to claim her as my bride soon, though I would never force her. She would have to come to me of her own free will. However, that didn't mean I would let her go.

No matter what, she was coming with me to the Orc Realm.

She darted a glance from side to side, clearly thinking about taking off through the trees.

"If you run, I will catch you," I said, lifting an eyebrow at her. "Please don't try to escape. Your hands are still tied, and I don't want you to fall and get hurt." I watched and waited, and when she didn't run, I continued. "I am aware that you're a full-blooded human. I knew you would be so. As I've said, I have spent my whole life dreaming about you."

She scoffed. "Did you also dream about tying me up? And *if* I were your soulmate, don't you think I would realize it, too? I have never dreamed about you. Not once. You are a complete stranger to me." She lifted her chin. "Now, as I've said, I am willing to pay you handsomely in exchange for my release. I suggest you untie me and let me go. I'll give you five silver coins for your troubles."

"No." I crossed my arms over my chest. Her offer amused me, and I tried very hard not to surrender to the smile that tugged at my lips.

As if she, or anyone else, could put a price on our love.

Yes, I realized we weren't in love *yet*, but no doubt it would happen soon.

We were soulmates.

How could we not be destined to eventually fall in love?

I already cared for her; I knew that much. My heart swelled with warmth for her, and whenever I met her pretty blue gaze, longing surged in the depths of my being. I'd never wanted anything in my life as fiercely as I wanted this human female.

"Fine," she said after a long pause, during which she glared daggers at me. "*Ten* silver coins. That's a large sum of money and you'd be a fool not to take it. Now, I suggest you untie me, accept the money, and then allow me to be on my way."

This time, I couldn't hide my amusement, and a wide grin broke across my face. "You're my soulmate, little beauty. I wouldn't trade you for all the riches in the known realms. It is *you* I want, *you* that I hunger for."

Her eyes widened and she shook her head. "Please. You must let me go. I need to go. I have to..." Her voice trailed off.

"You have to *what*?" I wondered about her presence here. The nearest human village was a good half-day's walk away. Why was she out here all alone? I'd found her surrounded by the highwaymen, but I got the sense that she'd been traveling alone when they'd come upon her. I didn't think they'd kidnapped her and carried her into the clearing.

"I have somewhere I need to be," she said after a few seconds, a wary look entering her gaze.

"*Where*?" I asked, taking one step closer. The need to touch her again overwhelmed me. My fingers tingled to stroke her hair once more, and my cock throbbed harder, wanting to press upon her body.

I summoned my self-control and resisted the urges, not wishing to frighten her. How long would it take to gain her trust?

"Where?" I asked again, my tone more insistent than before. "Where do you need to be, little beauty?" If her business sounded reasonable, I would be glad to escort her to wherever it was that she needed to be. Then once her affairs were completed, we could travel to the Orc Realm.

She pressed her lips together. “None of your damn business.”

I strived to aim a warm smile at her, though I was much out of practice. When she looked directly at my mouth and shuddered, I started to worry that my sharp teeth were scaring her.

Unable to help myself, I closed the space between us and took her face in my hands.

“Do not worry,” I said in a wry tone. “I won’t bite you.” I grinned widely, but she didn’t return my smile, and I quickly rearranged my expression, closing my mouth and trying to appear respectful. Solemn. Non-threatening. Mayhap she didn’t understand my humor.

“You’re headed to the Orc Realm?” she asked.

I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I detected a brief flicker of hope in her eyes. I found this strange, as she seemed eager to escape my presence, and I could fathom no reason she might wish to travel to my realm.

“Of course,” I replied. “And you, my sweet bride, are coming with me.”

CHAPTER 6



Lorna

HM. MAYBE RUNNING INTO THIS ORC WASN'T THE WORST thing that could happen. We were headed to the same place—the Orc Realm.

I was now without a horse, and though I'd hoped I would find the way to the Orc Realm without any difficulty, I couldn't claim to know exactly where I was going. I'd simply planned to take the road north and occasionally stop in villages and ask for directions.

A new plan formed in my mind as I stared at the fearsome Orc Guardian. He seemed very determined to keep me. And at present, I had no hope of escaping him. Not with my hands tied behind my back, anyway.

Would it be possible to use him as my guide? Then, once we reached the Orc Realm, I could escape and resume my search for Hilda.

“How far is your realm from this location?” I asked, trying to ignore the pangs of warmth that kept afflicting me. His touch elicited goosebumps all over my body, and I couldn't stop the heated tremors that affected my womanly core. His scent drove me wild, nearly past the point of reason. I had the strangest urge to lean into him and take huge inhales of his delicious masculine scent.

Magnus the Wolf peered into the trees as a thoughtful look crossed his handsome features.

Years ago, when I'd met Tavish the Reckless, I'd thought he was a horrid beast. I'd certainly never entertained the idea that an orc could be handsome, and yet Magnus was quite pleasing to the eye.

I couldn't stop staring at him and admiring his impressive physique.

Apparently, my libido was all too eager to forget the carnage I'd witnessed in the clearing.

"Well," he said, "I think we are about a week and a half away from the Orc Realm. That is, if we take the road directly north. But we could travel through the forest or the mountainside, if you prefer to look at the scenery on your way to your new home. And if you decide to tell me where you were headed before the highwaymen came upon you, I would be willing to take you there, as long as I approved of your errand."

I snorted. "*Approve* of my errand? Oh, do you consider yourself my lord and master now? No, thanks." I straightened in his grasp and wished he would release my face, even if my stupid body liked the feel of his large, callused hands upon my cheeks. My life plan did not involve marriage, not to a human male and definitely not to an orc. My plans included finding Hilda and then the two of us living alone in peace. No males allowed.

"An orc male is the head of his household," he replied, "just as a human male is usually the head of his home. Surely you must appreciate that, as your mate, it is my duty to protect you. If I deem your errand isn't safe or necessary, then we will forgo it and instead travel directly to the Orc Realm." He spoke in a strangely affectionate tone, but good intentions or not, his words still riled me.

I stared at him, unsure of what to say. Mayhap I shouldn't admit that I was searching for my sister. Hilda belonged to one of his fellow Orc Guardians. Surely, Magnus the Wolf

wouldn't support my plans to retrieve my sister from the Orc Realm and make a grand escape.

Except...

I didn't *have* to admit that I intended to leave his realm far behind and run back to the Human Realm with my sister.

My heart raced. Perhaps he *could* help me find her. He was already adamant that I come with him—I had no doubt he would carry me north even if I screamed and thrashed the whole way.

Perhaps he could bring me safely to the Orc Realm, help me find Hilda, and then when the opportunity arose, I could fulfill my plans.

Unexpectedly, guilt panged in my chest at the prospect of betraying Magnus.

Weird. Where did that come from?

He was an orc, and we barely knew one another.

All orcs were beasts, weren't they?

He might've saved me from the highwaymen, but he'd clearly just saved me because he wanted me for himself. And my wrists were still tied behind my back. Talk about ungentlemanly behavior. There was also the fact that young women such as myself feared being claimed by Guardians, and whenever one entered Yorkstown, people tended to scatter and run back home.

"Very well," I said, wishing I weren't so entranced by his kind, dark gaze. "I will tell you about my errand. Well, it's more of a quest, really." A dream. A desperate hope. All I've thought about during the last three years. Hilda. My sweet sister. I blinked fast to stall the tears that usually pricked my eyes whenever I thought of her.

"A quest?" He gave me a lopsided grin that somehow made him appear more handsome and appealing.

"Yes. I am searching for my sister. Her name is Hilda and I believe she is living in the Orc Realm. I'm headed north so I

might visit her, though I am not entirely certain of her location in your lands.”

There. That sounded just fine.

I prayed he believed me and didn't suspect I was already thinking of how I might escape him when the time came. I would need to pay very close attention to the layout of his realm. Food and weapons would also be a requirement when I departed with Hilda at my side. Warm clothes and boots. Perhaps some medicine, just in case either of us became ill or injured on the road. After running into those awful highwaymen, I now realized there was no telling what might happen. Best to be prepared for all contingencies.

A pleased look entered Magnus' eyes. “Ah, so your sister is married to an orc?”

“No, not married,” I answered with a shake of my head. “My father *sold* her to an orc who was passing through our village. She's naught but property, and I pray I will find her well.” I tried but failed to keep the bitterness from my voice.

“Property?” Magnus asked with an air of confusion. He narrowed his thick, dark brows. “Orcs do not keep women, human or otherwise, as property. We buy females sometimes, aye, I will admit that, but only so we might claim the women as our mates. If your sister was sold to an orc, it means she is now that orc's wife.” He cocked his head at me. “You stated you'd read a book about ancient orc clans. Surely in this book there was no mention of my people keeping slaves. It's unheard of among my kind. We abhor slavery, and I assure you that we treasure the human females who become our brides.”

“Nothing in the book mentioned slavery,” I admitted, “but you don't understand. The orc—his name was Tavish the Reckless—offered my father a bag of coins for my sister. Then he carried her off screaming, not caring that she didn't want to go with him. He tossed her over his shoulder and just walked out of our village, and I haven't seen or heard from her since. He must be keeping her as property, otherwise she would've written to me. I know she would have.”

He shot me a regretful look and released my face, but only so he might settle his hands upon my shoulders. His touch was as gentle as his eyes, and I felt oddly safe standing here with him in the middle of the forest. Fuck. Clearly there must be something wrong with me. I ought to be terrified of him, and I most definitely shouldn't be thinking of stepping closer and enjoying the warmth of his body. I recalled well the hardness of his massive erection, which he'd pressed against me not long ago, and a spasm of heat pummeled my womanly core.

"Tavish the Reckless was from the Haxxall clan," he said. "That is the name of my clan. But... I am sorry to inform you that he has died. I remember reading about his passing in a letter my father sent me about two years ago. He didn't mention Tavish having a wife in the letter, but if he did have a wife—and he *must* have wed your sister—she has most likely married another orc from my clan by now."

My worry for Hilda deepened, as well as my confusion over orc customs. Was Magnus telling the truth? Did orcs sometimes *buy* human females to keep as their brides?

I knew Orc Guardians liked to marry human women, and such unions were frequently arranged, usually as the result of a debt or favor the woman's father owed the orc.

But I'd always assumed women who were bought with coin were kept as property.

Learning this might not be the case eased some of my worries regarding Hilda, but it also caused new worries to arise because my sister's present circumstances weren't known.

Yes, Magnus claimed she'd probably married another orc from his clan, but he didn't know for certain. What if she hadn't? What if...

"Tavish the Reckless." I tensed as I stared at the Orc Guardian who held me captive. "*How* did he die? A fire? A hunting accident? An illness that was catching? Do you know if others died when he met his end? Please tell me everything you know."

Oh, Goddess, please let Hilda be all right.

Please please please.

The regret in Magnus' gaze intensified. He sighed and gave a brief shake of his head. "I am sorry, little beauty, but I don't know how Tavish died. My father never said. Fatal illnesses are rare among my people, and we possess some of the most skilled healers in all the known realms. I hope that reassures you somewhat that your sister is faring well. If I had to guess, I would say Tavish probably died during a hunting accident. Our warriors sometimes go on hunts deep in the mountains where the beasts are fierce and deadly. Please do not worry about your sister—she is most likely doing well and happily remarried."

I opened my mouth to respond but couldn't form words. Sadness and worry clutched me, and I despaired that it would take over a week to reach the Orc Realm.

I lowered my head and allowed my hair to obscure my face, not wishing for Magnus to see me cry, though I tried very hard not to shed any tears. I'd come this far. I'd escaped Yorkstown and my father and somehow, by sheer luck and a little help from my new orc acquaintance, a band of five highwaymen. Now wasn't the time to break down. I needed to stay strong and continue north. I needed to find out what had happened to Hilda.

Magnus released my shoulders and reached behind me. With a few tugs at the rope, he freed my wrists. His movements were slow and tender, and strangely intimate, and I got the sense that he regretted binding me. Once my hands fell to my sides, he lifted them in his and gently rubbed at my wrists, though they were barely chafed.

"What is your name, human female?" he asked.

I almost laughed. After all his talk about us being soulmates, he didn't know my name. He'd dreamed of me, dreamed about what I looked like, I supposed, yet he'd apparently never heard my name in his dreams.

After a few deep breaths, I met his alluring gaze. Not for the first time, I was struck by how handsome he was.

He let go of my wrists and wiped at tears I hadn't realized had fallen, and I flushed in shame.

For a reason I couldn't fathom, I wanted him to think I was strong.

Well, if I were being honest, I wanted the entire world to think I was strong.

I no longer wanted to be the poor village girl who'd lost her sister to an orc—I'd spent the last three years enduring the pitying looks from others and pretending I didn't overhear hastily exchanged whispers in the street.

Her father sold her sister to an orc.

Her father lost her mother's inheritance gambling.

That black eye is probably from her father.

Her father... her father... her father...

"Your name?" Magnus asked again in an encouraging tone.

"Lorna," I said. "My name is Lorna."

"Lorna," he repeated in a voice filled with warmth. The lines around his eyes crinkled slightly as he offered me a brief smile, one that didn't reveal his teeth. "I promise to help you find your sister, Lorna."

CHAPTER 7



Magnus

I WISHED I KNEW THE RIGHT WORDS THAT WOULD SOOTHE MY mate. She peered at me, worry still gleaming in her blue eyes, looking as though she were lost.

If only I'd thought to ask my father what tragedy had befallen Tavish the Reckless, but his letter had contained other items of importance that had drawn my attention, and I'd never inquired about the particulars surrounding the male's death.

I was stroking Lorna's hair, however, and she was allowing it. She also wasn't making any moves to run away. The scratches she'd left on my chest burned, reminding me of how fiercely she'd wanted to escape me at first. I resolved to keep a close eye on her during our journey north, lest she try to take off through the trees.

"Lorna," I said, "while I was stationed in the Borderlands serving as a Guardian, my father frequently sent letters, and in those letters, he would always inform us of the deaths and births that occurred in our clanlands. If Tavish's wife—your sister—had also died, I am confident that my father would've written about it." I prayed to the Mountain God that I would never be proven a liar. Though I spoke the truth—my father had sent frequent and detailed letters about the goings-on in the Haxxall clan during the ten years I'd served as a Guardian

—I sincerely hoped we wouldn't arrive in my realm only to learn a tragedy had indeed fallen upon Lorna's sister.

"How do I know you're not lying just so I'll agree to come with you?" she asked, appearing stricken.

"I am telling you the truth as I know it, Lorna. I would never lie to you. You are to become my wife, and I mean for there to be honesty between us. Yes, it is possible something happened to Hilda that my father didn't include in a letter, but it's more likely that she is faring well." I ached to gather Lorna close, to wrap my arms around her and hold her to my chest. But I held back when a new glimmer of fright entered her eyes.

"Then why has Hilda never sent me a letter?" she asked. "Three years. I last saw her three years ago. *I know her*. She would've written if she was all right."

"Perhaps the letters got lost," I said, striving for a reassuring tone. "What village are you from?"

"Yorkstown."

"Yorkstown is more than a fortnight's journey from the Orc Realm. When a letter is sent to a human village, it is passed along to a human traveler at some point. Orcs don't personally deliver correspondences to your villages—we only hand deliver letters to our Guardians who are stationed in the Borderlands. It's very possible that any letters Hilda attempted to send got lost, stolen, or even tossed aside along the way."

Hope flickered in her gaze. She exhaled a slow breath, then her expression hardened a bit and she regarded me warily. "You'll really take me to the Orc Realm and help me look for Hilda?"

"Aye," I said. "You're my mate, Lorna, and your place is at my side. We will journey to my realm and find your sister. I give you my word. Now, come. There are still many hours of daylight left. We can cover a fair distance before dusk. But first, please give me your pack. I will carry it for you."



LORNA

AS MAGNUS LED THE WAY BACK TO THE ROAD, I CONTINUALLY scanned the forest for signs of my horse. I'd always liked horses and had even worked briefly in a Yorkstown stable alongside the men.

That was, until my father found out and put a stop to it, claiming that holding such a job, a job traditionally held by men, would sully my reputation. "*People will talk! People will think you're fucking all the stable boys and riders!*" he'd shouted before taking another swig of whiskey. "*You don't want to end up like Hilda, do you?*"

I glanced at Magnus. There was a chance I *would* end up like Hilda. According to Magnus, my sister was probably married to an orc. And Magnus seemed convinced that I was his fated mate, even though the magic that had once bonded souls together in his realm was considered long vanished.

I couldn't help but wonder if the Orc Guardian had truly dreamed about me, or if he was just unhinged.

"You shouldn't have been traveling alone on the road," Magnus said in a chastising tone that took me aback. "It's not safe for a female to venture outside the safety of your human villages. In addition to highwaymen, there are also the beasts that escape the Fae Realm to contend with. And there are predators native to the Human Realm as well that can be dangerous—bears, wildcats, and wolves, for example."

I glared at him and opened my mouth to offer a scathing retort, but the look he'd leveled upon me was tender, despite the light scolding he'd just delivered.

The words, "Fuck off," died in my throat.

His concern shouldn't cause my breath to catch or my face to heat, but I couldn't help the visceral reaction.

“I knew it would be dangerous,” I finally said, “but I don’t care. I have to find Hilda.” Childhood memories resurfaced, most of them dark. She’d always protected me from our father, shielding me from the worst of his rages. Now it was my turn to protect her. Failure wasn’t an option. I had to find her, whisk her away to safety, and help her heal.

“You must care about your sister very much, if you are willing to put yourself in such grave danger,” he said, placing his hand upon my lower back. His touch sent excited quivers throughout my body that were impossible to ignore.

“She’s all I have left in this world,” I said. “I need to find her and make sure she’s all right.” Visions of the two of us trekking out of the mountainous Orc Realm filled my head. I hoped it would come to pass.

“All you have left?” Magnus paused in the road and turned me to face him. He peered down at me with concern reflecting in his eyes. “You don’t have any other siblings? And am I correct in assuming your parents are both dead?”

“Hilda is my only sibling, and we were very close growing up,” I said. “And as for my parents... well, my mother died of a fever a little over a week ago. My father is alive, but he’s...” My voice trailed off and my face heated with shame. I didn’t want to admit my father was a violent drunk who’d never given a single fuck about me.

“What about your father?” Magnus grasped my upper arms gently and stepped closer, his eyes glimmering with suspicion. “Tell me. Please.”

“My father isn’t a kind man,” I finally replied.

“I see. I’m sorry to hear it.” The orc continued staring into my eyes, and he lifted one hand and started caressing my hair.

His visage shone with understanding, and I breathed a sigh of relief that he wasn’t demanding more details about my father.

“I am very sorry about your mother, Lorna.” His voice resonated with honesty and his expression remained sympathetic.

“Thank you. Um, what about you?” I said, desperate to change the subject. “Tell me about your family.” It wasn’t only that I wanted to change the subject, but I was truly curious about his life in the Orc Realm, the life he’d left behind for ten long years while he served as a Guardian. Besides, the more I learned about his family and the Haxxall clan, the better prepared I would be when the time to escape his realm came. Or so I hoped.

“Well, my father is known as Erik the Giant. And yes, he is truly a giant—the tallest orc our clan has ever known. He stands over nine feet tall. He is the chieftain of our clan.” He paused as his fingers drifted to the back of my neck, lightly brushing my flesh.

Pangs of heat surged between my thighs in response, even though I shouldn’t allow myself to enjoy his touch.

He was an orc.

I shouldn’t relish his nearness, and I certainly shouldn’t be thinking about tracing the lines of his muscles.

My gaze fell to the marks I’d left on his chest, and to my astonishment, I noticed they were almost completely healed. Whoa. I’d read in the book that orcs healed quickly, but until now, I’d had no idea just how fast they could recover from a flesh wound.

“What about siblings?” I asked. “Any brothers or sisters?” My mouth went dry as I considered the gravity of what he’d just told me—his father was the freaking chieftain. Would his family’s importance make escape more difficult? Was his family home kept well-guarded? I also recalled reading that extended orc families lived together in one large home, which meant he probably lived with his father.

“I have one sibling,” he replied. “An older brother. His name is Thorsen the Savage. I also have a cousin—Gregor the Slayer—who is very much like a brother to me. The three of us served as Guardians together.” A smile touched his lips. “We all departed the Borderlands together after our ten years of service came to an end, just over a fortnight ago, but then we went our separate ways so we might find our mates.”

A strange noise drew my attention away from Magnus, and he tensed as he looked to the horizon. I followed his gaze but saw nothing, and I unconsciously stepped deeper into his arms, seeking his protection. Once I realized what I'd done, my face heated, but I quickly told myself I didn't have much of a choice—I'd lost my knife, and until I bought a new weapon (or perhaps borrowed one from Magnus) I would need to depend upon him for protection. Fists and nails would only get me so far.

Finally, I recognized the sound. Horses. Lots of them. The thunderous pounding of hooves in the distance must herald the impending arrival of a massive party of hunters. My stomach dropped. Or an army, or a large group of highwaymen.

Before I could say anything, Magnus swept me up in his arms and bolted off the road, carrying me deep into the forest.

He ran like the wind.

CHAPTER 8



Magnus

ONCE WE TRAVELED MORE THAN A MILE FROM THE ROAD, I stopped and set Lorna down. I glanced over my shoulder, though I detected no signs that the human men had entered the forest.

“Was it a group of hunters?” Lorna asked, peering through the trees. “It sounded like an army. But surely there would be no reason for a large group of soldiers to be on the move, right? The three main realms are at peace right now.”

“During my travels on the road, I’ve seen a mixture of soldiers and hunters, and often they are riding together in large groups. I suspect that was one of the larger groups. They are looking for someone, though I cannot claim to know who. I always move off the road and wait in the forest until they pass. Sometimes they venture into the woods, but they rarely journey far.” A thought struck me. “It is possible they have been searching for the highwaymen who attacked you.”

“Soldiers and hunters wouldn’t try to harm an orc, would they?” she asked. “There’s the Xornas Treaty, and... isn’t it the soldiers and hunters from human villages who usually conduct business dealings with Orc Guardians? Aren’t they the ones who are charged with paying Guardians such as yourself for each escaped Fae Realm beast you kill in the Borderlands?”

“Aye, you’re correct, little beauty. It is the soldiers and hunters who are charged with the task of compensating Guardians. But such men cannot always be trusted, particularly when they travel in large groups. When I last saw them four days ago, I counted fifty-seven men traveling together. I am a strong fighter, and mayhap I could fell fifty-seven human men at once, but you are with me now, and I will not risk your safety. Perhaps it is best that we continue our journey north through the forest, rather than taking the open road.”

She cast a glance around the darkening woods. Dusk wasn’t far off, and the forest was already growing dimmer. Her eyes flickered with fear, and she wrapped her arms around herself as a shiver racked her body.

I went to her and rubbed my hands up and down her arms, trying to help warm her up. I also hoped my nearness might calm whatever fears had caused the worry in her eyes. Didn’t she realize I would protect her with my life?

She was my soulmate.

My one true female.

I wouldn’t let anyone or anything harm her.

“I’m fine, really, you don’t need to do that.” She made to step away, but I grasped her arms and held her close to my body, hoping she would absorb some of my warmth.

The weather was growing cooler, though as an orc I could withstand harsher temperatures than humans. It wasn’t yet cold enough for me to change out of my kilt in favor of trousers and a shirt, though I had the warmer clothing in my pack. I also had an extra cloak, which I would be more than happy to give Lorna.

I started to smile at her, then pressed my lips together, not wanting to scare her with my sharp teeth.

Would she ever get used to my teeth?

Would she ever get used to me?

I removed both packs I carried—hers and mine—and rummaged through mine until I found the item I sought. I withdrew the cloak from my pack and settled it over her shoulders, smoothing the fur down to mold against her petite form. The cloak was oversized on her and reached well below her knees, but it would do a fine job in protecting her from the cold.

“Thank you,” she murmured, a blush turning her cheeks a pleasing shade of pink. “I don’t know how you aren’t freezing right now. You, um, aren’t even wearing a shirt.”

Her eyes danced over my bare chest, and there was no mistaking the heat that ignited in her gaze.

She quickly glanced away, though not before I noticed her blush deepening, her cheeks going from pink to red.

“You may look upon my body whenever you like, little beauty,” I said, and my cock thickened when I detected the scent of her excitement. I’d thought I smelled the slickness gathering between her thighs a few times before, when I was standing very near or touching her, but now I was certain the sweet, pungent aroma that reached my nostrils was indeed her arousal. There could be no mistaking it. I inhaled long breaths, savoring the enticing scent that indicated her body was preparing for our first mating.

“I wasn’t looking at you.” She peered into the trees, refusing to face me, but it was no matter. I reached out and gathered her close, forcing her to turn in my arms.

“Aye, you were, Lorna, but you needn’t be embarrassed that you were caught ogling me,” I said. “We are to become mates soon, and it pleases me that you find me attractive. I, too, find you very appealing. You are the most beautiful female I’ve ever laid eyes upon.”

She scoffed. “You are mistaken. I might’ve glanced at your chest, but only very briefly, and only because I find it strange that you’re running around in nothing but a kilt in this weather.”

“If I’m mistaken, then why are you growing so slick between your thighs right now, my sweet mate?” My nostrils flared as I savored another long inhale. Mountain God, how the scent of her called up my primal urges, making rational thought difficult. I wanted to push her to the forest floor, worship every inch of her body, and thrust into her welcoming cunny until I filled her with my seed. The image this thought provoked left me sweltering with desire, and a low growl rumbled from my throat.

“How do you—” She pressed her lips together and scowled at me. “I am *not* growing slick between my thighs and it’s very ungentlemanly of you to suggest so.” She attempted to escape the embrace, but I tightened my arms around her and enjoyed the feel of her struggling in my grasp.

“I can smell you, little beauty,” I said. “And this isn’t the first time, either. Whenever I touch you, you blush and press your thighs together, and then the sweet aroma of your arousal fills the air.

“But you needn’t feel ashamed by your body’s reaction to me—it means you are ready to take my cock. It means you are ready to mate with me.”

I gathered her closer and pressed a kiss to her forehead, allowing my lips to linger on her soft flesh. The floral scent that clung to her hair mingled with that of her growing excitement.

I pulled back to meet her gaze.

“Are you achy between your thighs right now, Lorna?”

Her eyes widened and she renewed her efforts to escape. Her booted foot struck my shin and she punched at my chest. With a sigh of longing, I released her and watched as she backed up a few steps. I tensed, preparing to give chase should she dart into the trees.

She placed a hand to her heart and shot me an accusing look. “You’re doing something to me. I-I have never in my life felt like this before. One moment, you feel familiar to me, and I keep trying to place how I know you—even though I’ve no

recollection of us ever having met. The next moment, you feel like a complete stranger to me. It comes in flashes and it's driving me crazy. Whatever you're doing—maybe you're using magic, I don't know—I beg you to stop.” Her voice trembled and she appeared increasingly flustered.

Ah, but her words pleased me.

It meant she was starting to feel the soul bond.

“Orcs can't wield magic,” I said. “What you are experiencing, little beauty, is what my people once referred to as The Calling. It is when two souls who are meant to be together finally recognize one another.” I pounded my chest twice. “Not only did I know you on sight when I came upon you in the clearing, but my heart swelled with longing and my soul danced with joy. Even those words are inadequate in describing what I felt for you then and what I feel for you now.”

A thoughtful look overcame her, and hope rose within me that she wasn't immediately rejecting the truth of our compatibility.

Voices in the distance reached me, though Lorna didn't turn her head or appear to notice them. Orcs had heightened senses compared to humans, and I supposed the voices needed to be closer for her to detect them. I lifted my ear, listening carefully, and inhaled deeply of the scents of the forest.

I reached for her hand, and a soft gasp left her as I threaded my fingers through hers.

Her eyes wavered with uncertainty, and I ached to calm every last worry that flitted through her mind.

With my free hand, I reached for her head and set about tucking errant strands of hair behind her ears, allowing my fingers to brush her delicate lobes in the process.

Though tiny in stature, I sensed a strength within her that would rival the bravery of a skilled Guardian.

I also sensed she wasn't used to letting others take care of her, and my heart clenched when I recalled what she'd said about her father—that he wasn't a kind man.

Had he neglected or harmed her?

Rage spiraled through me at the thought.

I promised myself I would tread carefully with her, that I would be patient as we got to know one another better.

In time, she would learn to trust me, and perhaps then she would open her heart to me.

“Come, my mate,” I said with a nod at the trees. “The soldiers are heading this way. We must go deeper into the forest to evade them. Do not worry—I will keep you safe.”

CHAPTER 9



Lorna

I ALLOWED MAGNUS TO GUIDE ME DEEPER INTO THE WOODS. The sun was setting now, a vibrant orange glow on the horizon. Shadows gathered in the trees, but I wasn't frightened. Not really. I trusted—my heart skipped a beat at the realization—that Magnus would keep me safe.

Where would we stop for the night? I doubted we would reach a village anytime soon. Did he mean for us to sleep in the forest? I eyed his pack, wondering if he had a tent. As the sun lowered, the temperature dipped as well, and I fought back a shiver. I hoped we wouldn't be sleeping out in the open.

To my surprise, we reached a clearing that contained large boulders taller than houses. It was nearly hidden by a dense area of vine-covered trees. He led me through the thickness of the trees and between two boulders and into a small, abandoned village that rested at the center of it all. Or maybe not quite a village. There were a few buildings that could possibly pass for houses, but I also spotted dozens of catapults and other weaponry scattered about.

“What is this place?” I asked with a growing sense of wonder, feeling as though I'd just stumbled upon some long-forgotten ancient ruins.

“An old orc military base. It was last used during The Hundred Years' War. We can shelter here for the night. There is a hot spring you might enjoy, and I will build a fire to keep

you warm during the night.” He gave me a heated look that made me wonder if he would insist on us sharing a bed.

Would he try to claim me as his mate tonight?

I flushed all over and couldn’t help the relentless ache that pulsed in my center.

As he peered down at me, his nostrils flared, and a growl rumbled from his throat.

When I remembered that he could detect my arousal, I tried to pull out of his grasp so I might put some space between us. So I might hide my growing excitement.

But he drew me closer and hugged me tightly to his chest.

My pulse raced and I couldn’t resist taking a deep inhale of his masculine scent. But as the hug went on, my throat started to burn and tears pricked at my eyes.

It had been a long fucking time since anyone had hugged me, though I would never admit aloud just how much a simple hug meant to me.

Though I’d loved my mother dearly, she’d become more and more distant over the years. I couldn’t recall the last time she’d given me a hug. And my father? Well, that asshole didn’t have an affectionate bone in his body.

At my mother’s funeral, a couple of the neighbors who’d attended had patted me on the back, but that was the closest I’d come to a comforting touch in ages. It was nice to feel wanted, to have someone care about me—even if this orc was under the delusion that we were soulmates. Even if I couldn’t allow myself to imagine a future with him. Even if I was scheming to leave him and flee the Orc Realm entirely once I found Hilda.

He rubbed his hands up and down my back, and his breaths tickled my ear. Why did his arms feel like the sweetest refuge? Why did I feel so safe with him?

He was a stranger... and an orc.

I would never forget the way Hilda had screamed and struggled as Tavish the Reckless carried her away. And Hilda

wasn't the only one. More than a couple of times, I'd witnessed similar scenes in Yorkstown, when an Orc Guardian would come to claim his promised bride. Most women didn't go willingly, and who could blame them—we'd all grown up hearing stories about the atrocities committed by orcs during the war.

I'd been born two years after the end of The Hundred Years' War, but my parents had been alive during the fighting. They'd shared terrifying accounts of orc attacks on Yorkstown and other human villages, and the stories had haunted my dreams as a child.

But Magnus didn't strike me as cruel. I'd watched him slaughter five human men just this morning, but he'd done so because he believed they'd deserved it. Because they'd tried to hurt me.

Thus far, Magnus had treated me well. During our travels today, he'd frequently offered me food and drink, and he'd also constantly guided me around thorny patches and roots that protruded from the ground.

"I've been wanting to hold you like this, little beauty," he said, tightening his grasp, "ever since I laid eyes on you." Slowly, he withdrew from the embrace, and he peered down at me with affection gleaming in his eyes.

The burning in my throat increased, and I blinked rapidly, because fuck if I didn't feel like crying right now. What in the fires was wrong with me? At this moment, I wanted nothing more than for Magnus to hug me again. Or maybe kiss me.

My lips tingled at the idea of being kissed by the handsome orc.

He was everything I should despise. Everything I should fear.

Logically, I realized it wasn't his fault Hilda had been taken away from me, but one of his people had *bought* her. Apparently, orcs sanctioned the practice of buying wives. And he thought nothing of forcing me to go to the Orc Realm with him. He'd made it clear that he wasn't giving me a choice—

even though I'd agreed to go with him after he'd promised to help me find Hilda.

“How did you get your name? Magnus *the Wolf*?” I found myself asking. The urge to know more about him flooded me, even though the rational part of my mind screamed that I ought to hold him at a distance. I shouldn't try to get to know him. I shouldn't encourage him in any way.

He cupped the side of my face, allowing his thumb to trail over my cheek, and the intimacy of his touch elicited goosebumps all over my body that had nothing to do with the cold breeze.

“When I was eight years old, I joined my first hunting party, and I traveled deep into the mountains with a dozen of my clansmen, my father among them. My uncle, Tormond the Bear, came with us, too—he's my cousin Gregor's father. Anyway, during the final day of the hunt, a large pack of wolves trailed us over the mountain. When one wolf ventured too close for comfort, coming out of the trees and surprising us, the beast managed to separate me from my clansmen. I growled at the creature as I held my axe at the ready, and the growl that issued from my throat sounded just like a wolf's growl. It stunned the wolf and the beast tucked tail and ran away, and my clansmen were stunned as well. And from that day forward, I was known as Magnus the Wolf among my people.”

“I've heard you growl a couple of times,” I said, my blood heating at the memory, “and I'll admit—you do sound rather animalistic.” Whenever he made the primal sound, the vibrations of the noise rippled through me, calling up my desires.

He bent over me, placing his lips at my ear. “You've only heard my orc growl, little beauty. You've never heard my wolf growl. Would you like to hear it?” His voice was deep and rich and rumbling. Heated pulses gathered in my womanly core, and I couldn't seem to catch my breath.

I reared back slightly, just far enough to study his serious expression, his proud masculine beauty, and tension flared

between us when our gazes collided.

I wanted to answer. I wanted to say *yes*.

But my voice caught in my throat, and I could only stare at him as the aching in my core deepened, almost becoming unbearable.

He must have sensed my desire to hear him growl, because he again placed his lips at my ear and started to make the noise.

It began as a low reverberation that didn't sound orc or human. The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and heat continued to pang in my nether region, a steady throbbing that nearly caused me to whimper.

He placed a hand to my lower back and jerked me forward, allowing me to feel the evidence of his arousal. His huge, hard cock pressed against my stomach through the layers of our clothing. He held me in place with his lips at my ear as the volume of his growl increased.

The forest darkened around us as he held me close, and the feral noises issuing from his throat caused me to go boneless in his arms. I leaned into him and touched him of my own free will—running my fingers up and down the muscular expanse of his chest.

I couldn't explain it, but I'd never shared a moment so intimate with another person. His growls filled my head and vibrated through me, and his hot breath at my ear left me deliriously lightheaded.

My breasts ached in the confines of my shirt, my nipples tightening to hard peaks. Waves of heat pummeled my center, and I couldn't restrain a breathless gasp as my desire soared.

Goddess, help me.

How would I resist him?

CHAPTER 10



Magnus

I NUZZLED MY FACE AGAINST LORNA'S NECK AS I DEEPENED the growl, and I was rewarded with a needy whimper. She trembled in my arms as the scent of her arousal grew, and I gyrated my hardness into her stomach once, twice, then a third time. Fuck. If I wasn't careful, I would lose control.

My wolf-like growls excited her. So, I kept growling.

I held her to my body and continued making the primal noises, knowing I sounded like a fearsome, yellow-eyed beast. Her shudders, moans, and whimpers left me in no doubt that she was enjoying the eroticism of the moment.

"I'm naught but a beast," I murmured into her ear. "A beast who wants to carry you inside, throw you upon a bed, and pleasure you until you grow hoarse from screaming. A beast who wants to taste you, to fucking devour you until you cry out in the throes of a thunderous climax. A beast who wants to lay claim to you for all time."

I straightened and met her eyes.

"You're soaking wet between your thighs, Lorna. Don't deny it. I can smell your arousal, and I suspect you're aching for my touch. Do you want me to touch you? Do you want me to quench your desires and assuage the desperate aching in your core?"

Her eyes widened and she swallowed hard. “You mean... you want to touch me... *down there*?” She blushed furiously, even as the intoxicating scent of her slickness increased in the air.

“Yes, little beauty,” I replied. “I want to touch you *down there*. I want to stroke your cunny and suckle upon your clit. I want to feel you coming against my mouth as I feast upon you.” I shifted to cup her face in both hands. “But first... first I want to kiss you.”

I leaned down and captured her lips in a tender kiss that drew a tiny moan from her throat. Longing undulated through me, an echo that pulsed deep in my soul. Finally. Finally, I’d found my mate. The female the gods and goddesses intended to be mine.

Whimpers and more moans left her when I breached her lips and ran my tongue along hers, drinking her in and savoring this first decadent taste of my mate. Passion flared between us, and she moved closer, pressing her body fully against my erect cock. My growls of pleasure mingled with her keening moans and sweet whimpers.

I broke the kiss and swept her into my arms, then headed for the building that contained the hot spring. After a day of travel, I suspected she would appreciate a relaxing soak in the healing waters.

Once we entered the building, a familiar scent reached me, though it was very faint.

My brother, Thorsen, had been here recently.

After I inhaled deeper, I also detected the scent of a... fae female.

He’d come this way, maybe a week ago, with a fae female in his company, rather than a human one. This revelation stunned me, and I looked forward to seeing my brother once I reached the Orc Realm. He likely had an interesting story to tell, if he’d taken a fae female as his mate rather than a human one.

Pushing thoughts of Thorsen and his mate aside, I carried Lorna down the steep stone steps that led to the hot spring. She rested her cheek upon my chest and her fingers kept brushing over my biceps.

Having her touch me of her own free will left me sweltering with need, and my cock thickened further as tingles shot up my inner thighs, my balls clenching with sensation.

Fuck. I needed her. I needed her now.

I suddenly wished I'd carried her directly to a bed, rather than the hot spring.

But we'd already reached the spring, and if we were going to enjoy a soak, we'd have to remove our clothing first.

I set her upon a bench, then removed the two packs I carried.

I reached into my pocket for fire-starting stones as my eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness. I cast a glance around the cavern. Several lanterns rested against the wall, and I immediately set about lighting them. I placed the lanterns a few feet apart, and the cavern flooded with warm, flickering light.

As I straightened, my gaze caught on Lorna's tiny bag, and my heart clenched. She'd run away from home to find her sister. Did the bag contain all her worldly possessions? Had she been forced to leave anything of importance behind?

It saddened me that while she'd been burying her mother, I'd been traveling the main road that connected our realms, searching for her, not realizing just how close she was.

If only I'd known where to find her.

I could've gone to Yorkstown and helped ease her burdens, and I could've protected her from the very start of her journey north.

"The water looks inviting," she said, and though I'd carried her down the steps, she was a bit breathless. She removed the two cloaks she wore, placing them beside her on the bench.

Our eyes met and hunger flared inside me.

“You’ll need to remove more than that if you want to get in the water, little beauty.” I stood and slipped off my boots, not taking my gaze off her.

In the confines of the small cavern, the scent of her arousal was heightened.

I withdrew my axe from my belt and set it aside, and I noticed the weapon had caught her attention. As she stared at it, I removed the knife-laden belt and placed it upon a rocky surface that served as a shelf.

“When you caught me in the forest,” she said, “your axe was already cleaned of blood. After you finished killing those men, you took the time to clean your weapon, yet you still managed to catch me. Stealthily, too, I might add. I never even heard you coming. I knew orcs were strong, but I didn’t know your kind could run so fast.”

Steam from the hot spring whirled around us. I stepped closer and peered down at her, mesmerized by the lightness of her blue eyes. I’d never glimpsed a female whose eyes were that particular shade of blue.

“Guardians must be fast if they wish to survive the Borderlands,” I said, thinking of my fallen comrades.

She glanced at the water before returning her gaze to mine. “I can’t imagine what the last ten years were like for you. I’ve never glimpsed a Fae Realm beast, though I’ve heard stories about the dangerous creatures. I know humans aren’t always kind to orcs, but my people have Guardians to thank for keeping our villages in the Borderlands safe.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Orcs don’t protect the human villages out of the kindness of our hearts. We do it for the coin that will help us purchase much needed supplies for our clanlands. But more importantly, we do it to earn the right to a human bride. It’s a fair arrangement—we keep the human villages safe, and in return, your people give us healthy, fertile young women to keep as wives.

“Well, in most cases that is how it happens. *Our* situation is different. Several times over the years, hunters offered me their daughters as payment for slaying the fae beasts, but I declined every offer of a bride. Because I knew one day I would find *you*, the female who is meant to be mine.”

CHAPTER 11



Lorna

THE LIGHT OF THE LANTERNS BATHED MAGNUS' BODY IN golden hues, and I couldn't stop gawking at him. He was gorgeous.

He'd removed his boots and his weapons belt. All that remained was his kilt.

I swallowed hard.

Did he expect me to get naked with him and jump into the hot spring?

I flushed as my fingers went to the buttons on my shirt. Well, my outermost shirt. I was wearing another long-sleeved shirt and a tank top underneath this one. I'd always gotten cold easily and had dressed accordingly, knowing it would be early winter by the time I reached the Orc Realm, knowing there might even be snow on the ground.

I almost laughed aloud. I'd planned my escape from Yorkstown carefully—or so I'd thought—only to get captured by an Orc Guardian during my sixth day on the road.

Not just captured—but saved.

I tried to ignore the little voice in my head that reminded me Magnus had in fact saved me. If he hadn't shown up when the highwaymen had me surrounded, I shuddered to think what might've happened.

I would most likely be dead.

Gratitude welled in my heart. Had I thanked Magnus for saving me? I couldn't quite remember. But I *was* grateful for his help, even though it now meant I was sorta kinda his captive.

Never mind the fact that I'd agreed to go with him.

My head spun. This was getting confusing.

One moment I wanted to run and escape the Orc Guardian, and the next moment I wanted to fall into his arms and allow him to kiss me.

That kiss outside...

I couldn't stop thinking about it. Even now, my lips tingled, and a strange weightless sensation gripped me.

I eyed the water, longing to feel the warmth of it easing my aching muscles. But getting naked with Magnus was a bad idea. I'd practically become a trollop as he'd kissed me.

If we took off our clothes and he happened to kiss me again, well... that kiss could lead to a lot more.

Sex with Magnus was out of the question.

We couldn't do it.

In orc culture, sex equated marriage. His people didn't have ceremonies that joined a man and woman together as husband and wife. Instead, they considered themselves permanently hitched once they had sex.

Mating, they often called it.

Despite the heat of the cavern, I found myself fighting back a shiver. Such a primal word—mating.

Speaking of primal... those growls.

My cunny quaked when I recalled Magnus' rumbling, wolf-like growls, and his commanding manner while he held me close and his huge cock throbbed against my stomach.

"You will remove your clothing, little beauty," he said, "and then I will help you into the water."

My fingers froze on the top button of my shirt. Lost in thoughts of Magnus and how we most definitely weren't going to have sex, I hadn't even managed to undo one button. I shot him a pleading look.

"Why don't you go first?" I suggested. "I'll turn my back and give you some privacy, and then I can take a turn."

Would he turn his back while I bathed?

Hm. Judging from the scowl that had taken over his features, I didn't think he liked my idea.

"We are fated mates, Lorna," he said in a firm tone that sent quivers through my body. "There is no need for modesty. We will soon consummate our union and see one another unclothed."

My mouth went dry.

"When?" I asked. "When do you plan for us to mate?"

His dark eyes gleamed with longing, and he stepped forward and knelt before me. He brushed my hands away from the buttons and started removing my shirt. I let him.

"I will mate with you tonight," he finally replied, "*if* you will have me. I am eager to claim you, little beauty, though I realize you might not be ready. I won't force you—if that is what you are wondering." He tugged off my outermost shirt, then set about working the buttons of the next one.

He was saying all the right things.

Goddess help me, but I wanted to explore the delicious tension that kept sparking between us. I wanted to kiss him and surrender to the desires that heated my blood.

"I'm not ready yet," I forced out. "I-I probably won't be ready for a while." Could I hold him off until we reached the Orc Realm? Until I found Hilda and we made our escape?

Pangs of sensation seized my core as he brushed my hair behind my ears. His gaze brimmed with understanding, though his muscles tensed, and I suspected he had to force himself to be patient with me.

It would take a week and a half to reach his clanlands.

Could *I* resist him until then?

I felt as though I might explode. Or scream. Or reach between my thighs and stroke myself to a release.

A few hours ago, the idea of being claimed by an orc would've disgusted me. But now? Now I wanted to reach under his kilt and grasp the hardness that tented the fabric.

"Little beauty," he said in a playful tone as he inhaled deeply, "I daresay you're entertaining naughty thoughts. You're thinking about sharing my bed and letting me pound into that tight, aching cunny of yours." A mischievous glint entered his eyes.

Damn him. He knew what he was doing.

Tempting me.

He finished unbuttoning my second shirt and pulled it off me, leaving me in the thin tank top that left little to the imagination.

I wasn't wearing a bra or underwear. Only the wealthy could afford such luxuries—the people whose houses I used to clean. Which meant my hardened nipples were practically poking holes through the fabric.

His attention dipped to my chest, and I had the sudden urge to arch my back and invite him to grope my breasts.

However, I didn't move a muscle.

I froze in place, even holding my breath, as I waited to see what he would do—or say—next.

"I feel like I'm unwrapping a gift," he said in a deep, husky tone. His eyes moved to mine. "If I promise not to ravish you just yet, Lorna, will you agree to get in the hot spring with me? There are a few deep spots in the water, and I don't want to risk you falling in."

I nodded wordlessly, not trusting my voice.

My heart leapt.

Holy Goddess.

I'd just agreed to get naked with the big Orc Guardian.

CHAPTER 12



Magnus

AS I HELPED LORNA UNDRESS, ANTICIPATION RIPPLED THROUGH me. The lantern light cascaded over her flesh as I finished pulling the tank top off her lithe form. More blood rushed to my cock, and I was glad to be wearing a kilt rather than constricting trousers.

Lorna's face reddened and she shyly cupped her breasts, though not before I got a good look at them. I would see the luscious, pink-tipped mounds in my dreams tonight.

I removed her boots and socks, then beckoned her to stand up so I might help her out of her pants. To my surprise, she was wearing two pairs of trousers. But when I examined the garments, I realized why—both were thin and threadbare. She'd needed two pairs of trousers just to stay warm.

Once we reached a village that contained a decent marketplace, I would buy her a sturdier outfit made of fine weatherproof fabrics, one that wouldn't require layering.

I took a deep breath and rose to my full height, allowing my gaze to wander over the little beauty's delicate curves. She was breathtakingly gorgeous, and when she shook her hair out, her golden waves covered her breasts. She let her hands fall to her sides as she peered up at me, and I caught a glimpse of a hardened nipple peeking out from between the curtain of her hair.

“You are exquisite, Lorna.” I cupped her face. “Truly, in all my life, I have never beheld a female as beautiful as you.”

A grin tugged at her lips. “You’re just saying that because you want to get in my pants.”

I chuckled, and the sensation felt strange in my chest. Now that I thought about it, I couldn’t recall the last time I’d laughed. I released her face, then stepped back and reached to unfasten my kilt. “Even if I knew for certain that we would never mate, I would still think you are beautiful.”

Her eyes flashed with pleasure. “Well, I suppose I ought to thank you for the sweet compliment.”

“You are quite welcome.” Holding her gaze, I loosened the front of my kilt and let the garment drift to the floor.

Her eyes immediately went to my crotch area, and a deep blush suffused her cheeks. Her breath caught on a gasp, and she slowly licked her lips. I followed her gaze and noticed a drop of pearly essence gleamed on the tip of my erect shaft.

She fidgeted with her hands, and for a second, I thought she meant to reach out and grasp me.

“Into the hot spring we go,” I said, moving to her side and guiding her toward the steaming water. “Stick to the bench that’s built into the side of the spring. If you venture too far from it, you might find the water is above your head.”

“Thanks for the warning,” she said. “I never learned how to swim.”

I helped her into the water and got her settled on the bench, and she leaned back with a contented sigh.

“Oh, this is wonderful.” She sank deeper, until the water rested at her neck, and her long golden locks floated in the water.

In the lantern light, I could see her breasts bobbing just beneath the surface, the fleshy mounds no longer hidden by her thick tresses.

I suppressed a growl.



LORNA

WELL, HERE I WAS.

Naked in the hot spring with Magnus.

I kept sneaking peeks of him, trying to peer into the water and catch another glimpse of his huge manhood.

And it really was huge.

I had absolutely no idea how that thing could fit inside me. Nope. Even if I agreed to bone him, I didn't think it would be physically possible. Not without killing me.

Goddess, the water felt nice. I could stay here forever.

In our rundown cottage in Yorkstown, the best I could hope for was a quick sponge bath. We used to have a copper tub, but my father sold it a long time ago, and it had been years since I'd been fully submerged in water.

I closed my eyes and tried to let my mind drift.

But the urge to peek at Magnus again was overwhelming.

I couldn't help it, and I soon found myself ogling him like he was a fine cut of meat on display in a village market.

My heart skipped a beat when he moved closer, allowing his thigh to graze mine.

He draped an arm over my shoulders.

"I am pleased you agreed to join me in the spring," he said, his lips far too close to mine.

If he leaned down just a few inches...

"I could do this every day," I said. "Enjoy a soak in the hot spring, that is. I don't mean get naked together." *Liar.*

He grinned, revealing his sharp white teeth. At first, they'd frightened me, but now I thought they suited his rugged,

beastly appearance.

After a few seconds, an alarmed look filled his visage, and he pressed his lips together and glanced away.

It took me a while to understand what had just happened.

He thought I didn't like his teeth. Either that, or he was self-conscious about them. I tended to think it was the first reason. He was a big, proud orc, and I didn't think there was much that could embarrass him. Except possibly the rejection or disapproval of his mate.

Wanting to reassure him, I reached for his hand in the water... only to curl my fingers around something that sure as the stars wasn't a hand.

Kill me now.

My eyes widened and I gasped.

He turned his head and aimed a surprised look at me that quickly became heated.

And I was still holding his cock.

Why hadn't I let go yet?

"I am so sorry," I said, wrenching my hand from his manhood. "I meant to grab your hand. Not your cock." My face grew warm. Had I ever said the word *cock* aloud before? I didn't think I had.

Understanding dawned in his gaze, and he grasped one of my hands underneath the water, threading his fingers through mine and squeezing tight. His eyes darkened. "You just got to touch me, little beauty. May I touch you?"

I quivered in place as I imagined *where* he wanted to touch me.

My cunny throbbed and I wondered if he could still detect my arousal while I was submerged in the water.

Not that it would take a genius to discern my level of excitement.

I kept trembling and flushing, and my breath kept catching in my throat.

“Yes,” I finally answered. “You may touch me.”

CHAPTER 13



Lorna

MAGNUS' EYES DARKENED FURTHER, AND HE RELEASED MY hand. My knees fell apart and I found myself arching my center upward, inviting his touch *down there*.

Please please please.

Would he opt to caress my breasts instead of my cunny?

I nearly whimpered at the thought.

But to my great relief, his hand dipped between my thighs, and he applied a featherlight touch to my nether folds. *Oh my Goddess. Yes.*

“This would feel better, little beauty,” he said, meeting my eyes, “if I set you on the ledge beside the spring. The water removes most of your cunny’s moisture. If I’m going to stroke your clit and help make the ache go away, we’ll have better friction outside the spring.”

I shuddered and moaned at the feel of his fingers dancing along the seam of my intimate folds. He pressed one digit inside and my head spun with the sensation. Sparks and pulses and white-hot fire ignited.

“All right,” I said on a gasp. “Please. Please.”

His hands closed around my hips as he lifted me from the spring. Once I was seated on the ledge beside him, he pushed my legs open wide.

Compared to the water, the air of the cavern felt cool, but Magnus' touch quickly warmed me up.

I was frantic for more.

He crouched in the water before me and reached for my cunny. He began slowly, caressing my outer folds, before he slipped his thumb inside to rub my throbbing clit.

I tensed and gasped, and my head fell back, my eyes slamming shut.

The pleasure.

It quaked through me in thrumming waves.

No stranger to touching myself, I'd brought myself to orgasm plenty of times before. But having Magnus' hands on me was a whole new level of bliss.

He gathered moisture from my core and spread it over my nubbin, applying the perfect amount of pressure. *Oh, my stars.* I alternated gasps and moans, and my hips lurched as I grinded my center into his probing hand.

"Do you like this, little beauty?" His warm breath puffed against my inner thighs, and his tusks occasionally brushed along my flesh.

I propped myself up higher and opened my eyes, a wave of shame rushing over me. He had an up close and personal view of my cunny. I'd never undressed in front of a man before. What if he didn't find me pleasing?

"I asked you a question, Lorna. Do you like this?" He increased the pressure of his touch and swirled his thumb faster over my clit.

My legs felt increasingly weak, and if I wouldn't have been sitting down, I'm certain my knees would've buckled.

"Yes!" I gasped out. "You know I do."

"Shall I keep going, or would you like me to stop?" He paused in his ministrations.

Desperate longing, and a good amount of frustration, stole through me. I gazed into his otherworldly eyes as my legs

wobbled.

“Keep going,” I rasped. “Please.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “If I’m to adequately pleasure you, sweet mate, I would like to replace my fingers with my tongue.”

It took me a while for the meaning of his words to register. I stared at him dumbly for far too long, and then my eyes went wide and I started shaking my head.

But then I stopped shaking my head.

He stared at me with passion-filled eyes, then lowered his head between my thighs, allowing his breath to dance over my lady parts.

Without meaning to, I reached out and grabbed his head, threading my fingers through his dark, shoulder-length hair.

I wanted this.

I wanted him.

Even though I shouldn’t.

He allowed his breath to continue hitting my core, and I quivered in place and found myself guiding his head to my throbbing center. Or trying to. He didn’t budge, though he did raise one eyebrow at me in question.

“Well, little beauty? Is this what you want? Do you want to feel my tongue upon your cunny?” He fixed an intense gaze on me, clearly not intending to continue until I’d offered a definitive answer.

“Yes,” I replied in a trembling voice. “Yes, please, do it.” I’d lost count of how many times I’d said *please* during the last few minutes. A tad embarrassing. But I wasn’t exactly in the position to be prideful right now.

I peered down at Magnus, silently beseeching him to resume the whirlwind of pleasure he’d started. I ached unbearably for his touch, for his fingers or his...

Oh my.

He suddenly leaned in and ran his tongue up and down my nether lips.

Slowly. Sensually.

His tusks fell on either side of my cunny, pushing against my flesh and somehow heightening the pleasure.

A rush of heat engulfed my entire body, and my fingers and toes curled under the force of the sensation.

After licking up and down several times, he gently swiped his tongue over my engorged clit, and I tightened my hold in his hair as a cry escaped my throat.

Two thick fingers nudged at my entrance, and I shuddered as he started pumping in and out of my channel, though he kept the thrusts shallow. Large as his fingers were, I struggled to accept the intrusion, though I couldn't claim it caused any pain.

The mild discomfort soon faded as he swirled his tongue faster over my nubbin, and I found myself shamelessly bucking in tune with his plunges into my center.

A quiver beat through me at the prospect of his cock filling and stretching me.

Maybe it wouldn't kill me.

Maybe I wanted to try.

"You're so fucking tight, Lorna," he said, pulling back to meet my eyes. "Have you ever laid with a man before?" His eyes held no judgment. Just simple curiosity. Damn him, but my heart quickened.

"I've never so much as kissed a man," I admitted. I was always too scared my father would find out, and I'd feared he would sell *me* to an orc if I displeased him too much. I kept this tidbit to myself, not wanting to spoil the mood.

Magnus' steady, shallow thrusts into my cunny brought me back to the present, and my breath hitched when his head dipped between my thighs again. He gave a deep, wolf-like growl that vibrated directly upon my core, and he lapped at my clit as though his life depended upon making me come.

It didn't take long.

As he increased the pressure of his tongue upon my nubbin, a wave of ecstasy washed over me, drenched me, and I shattered completely. I gripped his hair and moaned through the pulsing climax, and it went *on and on*, until I thought I very well might pass out.

When the release finally ended, I panted breathlessly on the smooth stone ledge of the hot spring, gasping for air as my heart raced. My limbs felt weakened, and I doubted I would be able to stand anytime soon.

I gave a startled cry when Magnus scooped me up in his arms. I blinked up at him, my senses still not fully returned. This whole experience felt dreamlike.

Maybe I *was* dreaming.

Surely I hadn't begged an orc to feast upon my cunny.

Reality returned in small fragments, though I tried very hard not to think. I rested in Magnus' arms as he sank into the water still holding me, and I sighed with pleasure at the feel of the warmth enveloping me once again.

His huge, erect cock poked at my bottom, reminding me that he'd gratified me, but I hadn't returned the favor.

Accidentally grasping his cock for five seconds didn't really count.

As he placed a kiss to my forehead, an affectionate growl resounded from his chest.

I melted.

CHAPTER 14



Magnus

THE FIRST BEDROOM WE REACHED SMELLED LIKE MY BROTHER, and it was also filled with unusually large vines. I paused in the doorway, a lantern dangling from one hand as I held Lorna in my arms. Her face was buried against my chest, and she didn't glimpse the strange condition of the room.

I carried her down the hall to another room, one that didn't smell like my brother or a fae or anyone else. The mattress was bare, but it was no matter. I could retrieve my bedroll from my pack and spread the furs upon it.

Lorna's breath tickled my chest as I brought her into the room, and my spirits bounded with joy. She was warming to me and quickly. I shot another glance at the bed.

Would she welcome our first mating tonight?

Or would she persist in claiming she needed more time?

She'd already allowed me to kiss her and taste her between her thighs, and I'd brought her to a quaking orgasm with my mouth.

Desire flared, an intense flush sweeping through me, and my cock hardened at the memory.

I set Lorna on a chair near the bed and placed the lantern atop a table. I turned and removed our packs from my back, then started a fire in the hearth. The flames grew quickly and soon the warmth filled the room. Next, I retrieved the roll of

furs from my belongings and set about spreading it over the bed. It was actually two large furs joined together, creating a sizable pocket we could crawl inside and stay warm.

Knowing Lorna's aversion to the cold, I was glad I could provide her with a cozy place to sleep. Even if we had to spend the night in a tent in the middle of the forest during our travels, my furs would keep her warm no matter how frigid the night winds. My furs and my arms.

Once the furs were spread out to my liking, I placed a rolled-up blanket at the head of the bed, which we could use as a pillow. I normally didn't bother with a pillow, but I wanted my bride to sleep in comfort.

I turned to face her. Not for the first time, I was struck by her immense beauty. The sweet female from my dreams.

During my time in the Borderlands, I'd had visions of her every night. Every. Single. Night. To finally have her in my possession... well, it felt like the true beginning of my life.

She was wearing one pair of trousers and an undershirt, having stuffed her boots and the rest of her clothing into her pack before we departed the cavern.

Her tight nipples were visible through the thin material of her shirt, and a primal hunger took hold of me when I imagined stripping off her clothes and taking those ripe peaks into my mouth.

She met my eyes, and an uncertain look came over her. She fidgeted in the chair. Then she shot up, grabbed her pack, and headed for the door. "Well, goodnight, Magnus!" she said in a high-pitched, breathless tone. "I'll find a room nearby to sleep in. See you in the morning. Sweet dreams!"

I moved to quickly block her path. "What do you think you're doing, human female?"

"Going to find my own room," she said, trying to walk past me.

I continued to block her way.

“You’re not going anywhere, little beauty,” I replied in a firm tone. “Until we reach the Orc Realm, I don’t want you out of my sight. Consider that an order, if you must. Furthermore, you are my mate, and your place is at my side during the night hours. Where *I* sleep, *you* sleep. It will be this way until the end of our days.”

Her face grew pink. “Technically, I’m not your mate yet. We haven’t consummated our union. I told you I need some more time. Despite what happened in the cavern—which was very, very nice, by the way—I’m still not ready to mate with you yet.”

“We can sleep next to one another without mating,” I said. “This is non-negotiable, Lorna. I will not allow you out of my sight. Especially here. This orc base isn’t known to the humans, but it’s always possible the hunters and soldiers might stumble upon it by happenstance. It’s also possible another Guardian might appear. I will not risk another male trying to claim you. I intend to keep you safe.”

“But—”

“Non-negotiable,” I repeated, folding my arms over my chest.

She huffed out a quick breath and spun on her heel. “Fine. All right. I guess we’re having a sleepover. The key word being *sleep*.” She dropped her pack next to mine and eyed the bed.

“You’ll be more comfortable if you remove your clothing. Trust me. The furs are incredibly warm and soft.” I slipped off my boots, removed my weapons belt, and reached for the fastenings of my kilt.

She immediately shielded her eyes with her hands. “What are you doing? You can’t sleep naked. We shouldn’t...” Her voice trailed off, and I noticed she was breathing hard, and the scent of her arousal was returning.

Ah, I loved that she couldn’t hide her excitement from me. I would always know when that sweet cunny of hers ached for my touch.

I removed my kilt and set it aside. Then I strode toward the bed, completely naked. Lorna's sensibilities confused me. Hadn't we just seen one another naked in the hot spring? I couldn't fathom how this was any different.

I climbed between the furs and cleared my throat.

She spread her fingers, peeking one eye at me. Then her hands dropped to her sides, and she glanced down at herself. I suspected she was inspecting the dust from the road that covered her trousers.

"I have a nightgown in my belongings," she said, giving me a wary glance. "Please close your eyes so I can change."

"Ten minutes ago, I had my head buried between your thighs, Lorna, as I suckled upon your clit and you orgasmed right on my mouth."

I enjoyed the deep blush that stained her cheeks.

She blew out a deep breath and went to her pack. She rummaged around until she pulled out a white, threadbare nightdress that I knew would leave little to the imagination. Not that I needed to imagine. I'd already seen her naked, and I'd committed every detail to memory.

When she held up her nightdress and aimed a menacing look my way, I made a great show of closing my eyes tight, scrunching my face up in the process. My heart sang when I heard a faint giggle across the room, followed by the whisper of fabric.

Only when I felt her weight next to me on the bed did I open my eyes. She slipped between the furs, and I immediately drew her close, wrapping an arm around her as I pulled her snug against my body. She emitted a tiny squeak of alarm but didn't protest further.

"You're very warm," she said. "Like a hearth. I'm glad orcs aren't cold-blooded like the fae are."

I met her eyes in the dim light. "Fae beings aren't cold-blooded, not even the dark fae. That's just a myth."

“Did you meet any fae beings while you were stationed in the Borderlands?” Her face lit with interest, and she shifted closer to me, her legs tangling with mine underneath the furs.

“Aye, dozens of them.”

“But they aren’t supposed to leave the Fae Realm,” she said. “Did you cross the portal and visit their realm? Or did some of them break the Xornas Treaty and visit the Human Realm?”

“Though the fae aren’t supposed to leave their realm, they do so more frequently than you might think,” I replied. “Most of the Unseelie I came across in the Borderlands were looking for escaped slaves.”

“You mean human slaves?” A shadow crossed her face.

“Aye, human slaves. But also, Seelie slaves. The dark fae keep their conquered light counterparts as slaves too, though from what I understand, there are more human slaves in the Fae Realm than Seelie slaves. There aren’t many light fae beings left.” I brushed a hand through her hair, relishing the feel of her silky locks.

I thought of the magic I’d detected in the first bedroom we’d come upon. I’d never met a light fae being—a Seelie—before. But the scent in the room, though definitely fae in nature, hadn’t quite smelled like the dark fae I’d met in the Borderlands. Had Thorsen claimed a *Seelie* female as his mate?

“Something wrong?” Lorna asked. “You look perplexed.”

I briefly explained what I’d discovered in the first bedroom, as well as my suspicion that my brother had claimed a light fae female.

Her eyes grew wide. “Whoa. I’ve never met a fae before, but if I’m going to meet one, I’d much prefer to meet a Seelie rather than an Unseelie. The dark fae sound downright evil. But why would your brother claim a fae as his mate, instead of a human? And can fae and orcs produce children?” Innocent curiosity tinged her voice.

I shrugged one shoulder. “My brother wanted to visit the sea before he returned to the Orc Realm, and he planned to buy a human bride from one of the seaside villages. I cannot say what prompted him to take a Seelie as his mate, but I am certain he must’ve had a good reason. And yes, fae and orcs can produce children. I’ve never glimpsed a fae-orc hybrid with my own eyes, but I’ve heard of them living in other clans within my realm.”

She closed her eyes and emitted a soft, sleepy sigh, then fell quiet for so long I started to think she’d fallen asleep. But then she opened her eyes and regarded me with a dreamy expression. “Right now, I’m having one of those flashes where you feel familiar to me. Like I’ve met you before. Perhaps we knew one another in a past life.”

Her eyes fluttered shut one last time, and she finally drifted to sleep.

CHAPTER 15



Lorna

WAS IT POSSIBLE TO PERISH FROM SEXUAL FRUSTRATION?

Four days had passed since Magnus had saved/captured me. I kept trying (but failing miserably) to hold him at a distance. I also kept trying to dissuade him from believing I was his fated mate.

But then he would pull me close and kiss my forehead and I would melt. Or he would place his lips at my ear and growl like a wolf. Sometimes he would hold my hand and gaze into my eyes with such profound affection that I would be overcome with emotion.

He'd even insisted on buying me a brand-new and very expensive outfit in the first village we came to, clothing that was easier to move in than the threadbare layers of my previous attire. An outfit that was also warm and waterproof.

Before I'd left Yorkstown, I'd splurged on a knife and high-quality boots, but I'd hesitated to buy myself new clothing. I'd wanted to ensure I would have enough coin for a horse and room and board during my journey north. With a little leftover to fund my escape from the Orc Realm with Hilda.

When Magnus purchased the outfit, I'd caught a glimpse of his fat coin purse, and I nearly laughed as I recalled my offer to give him five (and eventually ten) silver pieces in

exchange for my freedom. My life savings, which I'd worked very hard for, was the tiniest drop in the bucket to him.

The new outfit had cost seventy-two silver pieces (a staggering amount), as the rare material was imported from a distant island realm. A place where sirens supposedly lived.

Yet he hadn't mocked me when I'd made the offer.

I glanced at the big Orc Guardian as we made our way through the trees. Today, he'd donned a pair of trousers and a shirt, claiming he smelled snow.

As if summoned by my thoughts alone, a white snowflake swirled down from the sky and landed on my nose. Light flurries began to fall, and Magnus eyed me speculatively before pulling a hat from his pack. He stepped in front of me, forcing me to halt in my steps, then he shoved the hat on my head. He playfully flicked my nose, right where the snowflake had fallen—apparently nothing escaped his notice.

My heart warmed. He wasn't just mindlessly dragging me north to his realm without a care for my comfort. He consistently went out of his way to make sure I was warm. Not to mention, fed and hydrated. He also kept suggesting we take breaks every few miles. I doubted he needed a break. Again, he had my comfort in mind.

Who would've thought an orc could be so sweet and attentive?

The flashes of familiarity came more frequently. It was just past midday and already I'd had three of them. My belief that we weren't soulmates kept weakening. Sometimes I wondered if perhaps there was truth to his claims.

"Thank you, Magnus," I said, touching the warm hat. My heart beat faster when I realized the hat wasn't oversized. It fit me perfectly. He must've bought it in the village when I hadn't been looking.

"You are quite welcome, little beauty." His eyes shone with affection, and he reached out and carefully tucked my hair behind my ears, his thick fingers swiping underneath the

hat as he tended to me as though I were a child who needed help dressing.

“Tonight, we’ll stay in Sconnis. It’s a small village, but they have several inns to choose from. I’m certain we’ll find one with a vacant room that suits us.”

I nodded my appreciation. We’d slept in a tent last night, and though I’d been perfectly warm nestled in his furs and his arms, I hadn’t liked the constant flapping sound of the wind hitting the tent. Also, we’d heard wolves howling in the distance, and the noise had unnerved me. I much preferred Magnus’ carnal wolf-like snarls over the eerie howls of actual wolves.

“I never thanked you,” I blurted.

He shot me a confused look. “You already thanked me for the hat, Lorna. A few seconds ago.”

“No, I mean, I never thanked you for saving me. From the highwaymen.” I swallowed hard. “So... *thank you*. Truly. You risked your life for me, and you didn’t even know me. You probably saved my life that day.” It felt like eons ago that I’d watched him slaughter the highwaymen. Yet it was just four days ago.

I became lost in Magnus’ dark gaze as the flurries landed atop his head and shoulders. But not long after landing on him, the flakes would melt, as though a fire were burning inside him. I envied his crazy orc body heat, but I appreciated that he had a tendency to stand close to me, or even hold me, whenever he saw me shiver.

He stroked a hand over my hat-covered head. “You are very welcome, my mate. I am glad I came upon you when I did. The thought of any harm coming to you...” His voice trailed off and he gulped hard as his eyes filled with emotion.

I didn’t know if I could hold him off for another week.

His patience was a testament to his character. I knew he wanted me. I knew he went to sleep with a raging hard cock every night as he lay beside me.

My face heated when I remembered the feel of his tongue *down there*. On my cunny. On my clit. And he'd enjoyed it. He'd selflessly given me pleasure, and he hadn't complained when I failed to return the favor.

"What are you thinking about right now?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Just wondering how much snow we're going to get." Guilt slammed into me, and the force of it took my breath away. This wasn't the first time either. Seemed like every time I told him a lie—even a little white lie—I experienced a painful wave of remorse.

The idea of running off once I found Hilda...

That caused an actual stabbing pain in the middle of my chest. It also filled me with grief, a heaviness that weighed my entire body down.

For a moment, I thought Magnus would kiss me. But he soon turned and pressed a hand to my lower back, guiding me through the forest. I tried to ignore the disappointment that abruptly clutched me.

We traveled through the snowy forest, and occasionally I caught glimpses of the road through the snow-covered trees. Magnus believed it best to stay off the road just in case the army of soldiers and hunters ventured this far north. But we still followed the road to help shorten our journey. I appreciated this, as I was in a hurry to reach the Orc Realm.

In a hurry to find Hilda.

I kept praying I would find her alive and well, but the issue of her letters—or lack thereof—still bothered me.

Three long years... Three years and I hadn't received a single missive from her in all that time.

I marched faster through the snow.

CHAPTER 16



Magnus

“BLOOD AND BODY PARTS EVERYWHERE!” A WIDE-EYED OLDER man shouted at his companion on the street. Judging by his volume, I thought the man was either drunk or perhaps hard of hearing.

“You don’t say. What do you think killed the highwaymen like that? Some kind of bear? A wildcat, mayhap?” said his companion.

I felt Lorna tense beside me as we entered the inn. I tensed, too.

But as we stood in the entryway and waited for the proprietor to offer us assistance, the conversation filtered in through a crack in the door.

“Well, it could be a Fae Realm beast, I suppose. One that made it past the Guardians in the Borderlands,” said the first man, practically shouting.

“My son is a soldier. He’s due for a visit soon. He might know something more about this when he arrives,” replied the second man. “Are the soldiers still out looking for what did this? I realize they were highwaymen, and they probably would’ve hanged, but no man deserves to die that way. Chopped to pieces.” He made a noise of disgust.

“I think it’s poetic, in a way,” said the first man. “That band of highwaymen has been terrorizing these parts for a few

weeks now. About time someone took them out. And if it was a Fae Realm beast—I'm fine with that. I just hope the soldiers catch the creature and kill it before an innocent person gets hurt.”

I was starting to think coming to this village was a mistake. I cursed my own foolishness. I ought to have planned for every eventuality, including the chance that the slaughtered highwaymen would be discovered by someone.

I should've taken the time to bury the bastards and cover the blood-soaked grasses with dirt and underbrush.

Lorna shot me a worried look, but I gave her a comforting smile and lightly patted her back, hoping to calm her distress. Surely there was nothing to worry about. We would reach the Orc Realm in a week, and until then we would stick to the forest to evade the soldiers.

Tonight would have to be our last stay in a village. If news of the highwaymen's slaughter was traveling this fast, it would be best if we avoided civilization going forward. I had half a mind to return to the forest and erect a tent, but I knew Lorna didn't like sleeping in the woods. I would allow her to enjoy one more night in the comfort of an inn before we started sticking to the tent.

Finally, the proprietor bustled into the entryway and welcomed us to the inn. He led us to his finest room and promised a meal would soon be brought up.

Once we were alone, Lorna turned to face me. “Why don't we buy some horses so we might reach the Orc Realm faster? We should hurry, don't you think?” She frowned at me, her eyes raking over my body. “Never mind. That was a stupid suggestion. I guess you can't ride horses, can you? You're pretty much horse-sized yourself.”

I grinned at her observation, then stepped closer and pulled her into a tight embrace. I kissed the top of her head before drawing back to peer into her deep blue eyes. “Aye, I am much too large to ride a horse. Horses are also skittish around orcs. Otherwise, I would've bought one just for you—to help ease

your journey north—in the very first village we came across while traveling together.”

“Should we be worried?” she asked. “Are *you* worried?”

“I’m not overly concerned about the soldiers,” I said, “however, given that the soldiers are scouring the countryside in search of the creature who tore the highwaymen apart, I think it would be best if we slept in the tent from now on. We’ll avoid villages starting tomorrow.”

She nodded. “That sounds smart.” The worry in her eyes deepened. “If the soldiers and hunters were to come across us—if they were to see *you*—do you think they would suspect you’re the *creature* they’re looking for?”

“I believe they would question me,” I admitted. “They would likely ask to inspect my weapons, too. The men we heard talking downstairs speculated that a Fae Realm beast tore the highwaymen apart, but the commander who examined the scene will probably realize a weapon was used, rather than teeth and claws.”

I was glad Thorsen had a head start on me and hoped he’d already reached our clanlands. An orc such as myself would be the most likely suspect. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing Gregor was probably already in the Orc Realm as well—he’d been betrothed to a human female from Fairview, a village close to the Borderlands, so he hadn’t needed to spend any time searching for a female. In all likelihood, he’d retrieved his bride and traveled directly to our clanlands.

“Please do not worry, little beauty.” I removed her hat and ran my fingers through her hair. “I will keep you safe.”

“It’s not me I’m fretting about. It’s you. I...” Her voice faded and a blush overcame her. “Well, to be truthful, the thought of any harm coming to you fills me with sadness.”

Joy resounded in my heart. I removed the cloak she wore, set it aside, then took her more deeply in my arms.

Bonding.

We were starting to bond.

More and more, she was able to feel The Calling. She'd admitted as much, when she'd told me that I often felt familiar to her. It was the process of her soul finally recognizing mine.

“You needn't worry for me, Lorna. I'm a skilled warrior, and I'm hard to kill.”

Her gaze fell to the necklace I wore, which contained teeth and small bones from some of the Fae Realm beasts I'd slaughtered during my time as a Guardian. I kept other such souvenirs in my pack, but these were my favorites, representing the fiercest, most challenging creatures I'd taken out.

Before she could respond, a knock sounded at the door. Our evening meal had arrived. I accepted the large tray from a wide-eyed servant girl, passed her a generous tip, and closed the door and locked it.

“Let us eat,” I said, “and then I will call for a tub to be brought up and filled with hot water. If this is to be our last night in a village, I want you to enjoy it.”

My cock thickened at the prospect of helping her bathe, and I soon tucked into my meal with gusto.

CHAPTER 17



Lorna

SLEEP PROVED DIFFICULT. I TOSSED AND TURNED IN THE comfortable bed, wishing I could nod off as easily as Magnus. I studied him in the dim light of the room. We'd left one lantern burning low, and the warm beams kissed his face, accentuating his high cheekbones and formidable tusks.

My face grew warm as I continued to admire him.

He truly was breathtaking. The epitome of masculine beauty. Tusks and all. But it was his heart I admired the most. His character. His utter sweetness toward me.

I couldn't fathom leaving him in a week or so.

But what would I do if I found Hilda and she was unhappy?

I would have no choice. I would have to save her. We would have to run away.

Tears pricked at my eyes, and I blinked them back.

Fuck. This was getting complicated.

I turned over and tried to sleep, but then my mind drifted to our first night together. At the abandoned orc military base. I still couldn't believe I'd sat on the ledge of the spring and spread my legs for him, allowing him to savor my cunny and suckle upon my clit. A quiver seized me at the memory of his thick fingers pumping into my slick core.

Suddenly I was sweltering in the furs he'd placed upon the bed. I kicked my legs out and threw the furs off me, desperate for the cooler air of the room.

"Little beauty, if you move one more time," came a sleepy voice, "I will tie you securely to the bed and keep you that way for the remainder of the night. I might even smack your bottom a few times."

His threat prompted a spasm of heat in my center, and as the ache deepened, I felt moisture gathering between my thighs.

"Sorry," I murmured, my voice coming out more breathless than I'd anticipated. I flushed. Sooner or later, he would detect the scent of my arousal with that infuriatingly sensitive orc nose of his.

He sat up in bed and regarded me with a heated expression. His nostrils flared and he breathed deep as he leaned closer to me. When his eyes darkened in the lantern light and he gave a low growl, my heart raced faster and the little pulses in my core became an urgent throb.

"Lift up your nightdress and spread your thighs," he said.

"Why-why?" There wasn't enough air in the room. I couldn't seem to catch my breath.

He placed a finger beneath my chin, forcing me to look him directly in the eye. "Because I want to inspect how wet you are, Lorna, and then I want to stroke you until you climax repeatedly. Apparently, if either of us is to get any sleep tonight, I must tire you out."

"I'm plenty tired already." A pain pierced my chest, and I placed a hand over my heart and grimaced. This wasn't the first time I'd experienced physical pain when I lied to him. I didn't like it. I needed to be able to lie. What if I had to escape his realm with Hilda? I would have to lie and pretend all was well—that was, until the hour I stole away.

"Are you all right?" He cupped the side of my face and peered at me with concern.

“Yes, I am fine. I think I just ate too much for dinner—and those potatoes were spicy. I’m fine now.” Another pain lanced through my chest, but I managed to keep a straight face and pretend all was well. I wished there was someone other than Magnus I could talk to about orc soul bonds. Because I had a lot of questions—like why in the fires did I experience pain when I lied to my mate?

Wait—what?

He wasn’t my mate. Not yet.

We hadn’t consummated our union.

“I am glad you are well,” he said after a moment. “Now, lift up your nightdress, Lorna.”

My legs trembled as I obeyed, reaching down to lift up the sheer fabric. I couldn’t think of a good reason to keep refusing him, and the truth was I wanted to feel his touch. It had been days since our sensual escapades at the military base.

“Spread wider, human.”

Flutters rose in my stomach as I did as he asked. Once my legs were parted to his liking, he shifted closer and ran his thumb down the slit of my nether lips, the caress light and teasing.

A jolt of pleasure rocked me, and my body gave a quick, involuntary jerk, my center surging against his probing fingers.

He situated himself between my spread legs and dragged his tusks along my inner thighs. His thumb brushed over my clit, then he reached for me with his other hand and splayed my folds, exposing my most private parts to his gaze. I flushed, but I didn’t try to stop him.

I wanted this.

He’d slept naked, as was his habit, and I glanced down his body, admiring his huge muscular form. My gaze snagged on his erect cock, and I found myself yearning to stroke it and perhaps even take him in my mouth. Would he allow me to pleasure him?

Before I could build the courage to ask, he massaged the slickness from my inner core overtop my clit, and my hips gave another fast jerk.

Then he set himself to his task, concentrating on my exposed privates as he rubbed a digit over my pulsating nubbin.

It didn't take long until I shattered and cried out in the throes of a quaking release. Ecstasy washed through me in heady waves.

When the last quaking pulse faded, I grew still upon the bed as I fought to catch my breath.

I expected him to stop stroking, but he kept going.

The sensations became too much, and I tried to scoot away, but he grasped my thigh and held me in place.

His eyes flicked to mine. "I meant what I said, little beauty. I mean to tire you out. Lay back and enjoy this."

What happened next did exhaust me.

He held me down and wrenched climax after climax from me. I lost count of the releases as he alternated between using his finger and his tongue. When he used his tongue, he growled like a wolf and the vibrations left me frantic with need. My knees shook and I clutched at the covers, my head tossing from side to side.

It was too much.

But I'd long lost the ability to speak. I couldn't even beg him to stop, though in truth, I couldn't claim I really wanted him to. All I could do was moan and whimper and cry out. Some of the noises I made sounded strange to my own ears.

Magnus paused and peered up at me, his lips twisting with a slight, wry smile. "One more," he announced. "One more and then I will let you rest, my sweet mate."

He set to work.

CHAPTER 18



Magnus

MISSING. GONE.

Panic seized me, and I jumped out of bed and looked around the room.

Where in the fires was Lorna?

Fury and worry rippled through me as I quickly dressed and fixed my weapons belt at my waist. Why would Lorna leave the room?

A dark thought struck me.

Had she run away?

I spun to face the wall where I'd left our packs. Hers was still there. Relief edged away this particular fear. But she was still gone. She'd left the room and she hadn't woken me.

We'd stayed at several inns throughout the last week, and this was the first time she'd strayed from my side.

I rushed downstairs and surveyed the bar area where several human men sat with mugs of ale. Lorna wasn't here. I grabbed the first servant I came across—a middle-aged human male—by the front of his shirt. I put my face in his and pushed him against a wall. Several patrons gasped, but I paid them no mind.

“The golden-haired human female who arrived with me last night—where is she?” I roared the question and

immediately the scent of urine reached my nose. He'd pissed himself in fear.

"I-I saw her leave the inn about an hour ago," the man replied in a trembling voice. He pointed at the door. "I'm sorry, sir, but I didn't see which way she went. Perhaps the marketplace? It opens early."

I released the servant and barged outside into the frigid morning. A thick layer of snow covered the houses and roads, though it had ceased falling overnight and morning had brought a cloudless blue sky. Several sets of footsteps led away from the inn in various directions.

Fucking fires.

Trudging through the snow, I marched in the direction of the marketplace, my mood growing fouler by the moment. I continually scanned the streets for signs of Lorna. I also inhaled deeply every few seconds, trying to catch her scent in the air.

Just as the outdoor marketplace came into sight, I finally detected her familiar floral scent. I broke into a run and barreled into the bazaar. Most humans gave me a wide berth, scampering in the opposite direction the moment they saw me.

When I spotted a blonde human standing in front of a stall, I hurried toward her. It was Lorna. I could smell her.

Relief warred with anger.

I still couldn't believe she'd slipped out of our room while I'd been sleeping. She hadn't run away, but I still felt the deep cut of betrayal. During our first day on the road together, I'd ordered her to stay at my side at all times. Unless she was relieving herself in the bushes while I stood close by with my back turned, she wasn't permitted to venture away from me.

I paused behind her and listened as she spoke with the owner of the stall. Her head was bent as she eyed several knives displayed on the table. Long hunting knives. The kind used to slay beasts by hand and then butcher them.

She removed one knife from the table, held it up for inspection, then tested to see if it would fit in the leather

scabbard at her waist. She nodded at the merchant and passed him a few coins from her purse.

I folded my arms and glared at the back of her head, waiting for her to turn around.

After the merchant shoved the coins into a money bag, he looked up and locked eyes with me. He went pale and backed away from the table, though he didn't run off like the other humans who'd spotted me.

The idiot probably thought I meant to buy weapons.

As if I would lower myself to purchasing weapons forged in the Human Realm.

Lorna spun around with a smile and jumped in place when she saw me. Her smile instantly faded. She gulped hard and cast a cautious glance around the marketplace, probably noticing that the crowd had thinned considerably after my arrival.

I strode up to her and had to restrain myself from grabbing her. My temper flared. I wanted to grab her and shake her and demand to know what she'd been thinking.

A knife?

She'd sneaked away in the early morning to buy a poorly made knife? I wore a dozen knives in varying sizes at my waist. I would've gladly given her one if only she'd asked.

"You left my side, Lorna," I said in a biting tone. "Did I not specifically forbid you from leaving my side while we were still in the Human Realm?"

Before she could answer, I snatched her by the arm and started marching her back to the inn.

"Let go of me," she said in a loud whisper, trying to escape my grasp.

I didn't release her.

"Holy Fires, Magnus, I just went to the bazaar. You don't have to get your knickers in a knot."

“I do not wear knickers or any other type of undergarments for that matter.” I increased my pace, forcing her to break into a jog. I wanted to get her back to the inn so I might interrogate her in private. Though the humans of this village were doing a fine job of avoiding me, some of them peeked out windows or peered at us from around the corners of buildings.

“Yes, I know you don’t wear knickers,” she said. “It’s an expression. Look, please slow down. I meant to return before you awoke.”

I didn’t slow my pace.

When we reached the inn, the bar area was empty and not a servant could be seen anywhere. Even the proprietor was absent. I supposed I couldn’t blame them.

I urged Lorna up the steps and into our room. After closing the door, I locked it and stared at her, my fury rising, as I waited for her to offer up an explanation. Or an apology. Or a promise to never risk her safety again.

But she turned and showed me her back. “I’m not speaking to you until you calm down. I can practically see the steam coming out of your ears. Might I suggest some deep breaths?”

CHAPTER 19



Lorna

SUGGESTING MAGNUS CALM DOWN AND TAKE SOME DEEP breaths?

Not my smartest idea.

His deep growls resounded off the walls. Then I felt his hands on me. He spun me to face him. But his touch was surprisingly gentle given the livid gleam in his eyes.

I could feel the waves of fury rolling off him.

“What were you thinking, Lorna?” To his credit, he actually paused and took a deep breath. “Someone could’ve robbed you or accosted you. Perhaps a criminal might’ve even tried holding you for ransom. You are wearing a finely made outfit, one that cost more than most human villagers see in ten years’ time. Anyone who glanced at you would’ve immediately suspected you are wealthy.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “I-I hadn’t thought of that.” Truly, I hadn’t. But what he’d just said made sense. I could recall a handful of cases in Yorkstown where the wealthier residents had been robbed on the street. The idea of being kidnapped and held for ransom made my veins fill with ice.

Still grasping my upper arms, Magnus closed his eyes and inhaled another deep breath. A long moment passed. When he

opened his eyes, his fury was gone. Instead of angry, he now appeared concerned.

The longer he stared at me, the warmer his gaze turned.

Emotion clogged my throat, and I struggled to swallow past the sudden, intense burning. Regret welled in my heart. I didn't like causing Magnus worry.

How will he feel when I finally escape him?

How will he react when I slip away in the darkness and leave the Orc Realm behind?

Guilt pressed on my chest, making each breath difficult.

"I lost someone I loved once. My mother," he said. "It hurt. It was devastating. But you—you are my soulmate, Lorna. I cannot fathom losing you. The sun would never shine again, and my world would forever be shrouded in darkness."

His confession had me blinking back tears.

I'd assumed something had happened to his mother, as he hadn't mentioned her when I'd inquired about his family, but I'd been too nervous to ask for details. Perhaps she'd died in the war.

"I'm so sorry about your mother, Magnus." I placed a gentle hand upon his chest. I sighed. "I'm also sorry I went off on my own this morning. The village seemed safe enough to me when we arrived yesterday, and I didn't think there could be any danger. But what you said about my attire makes sense. Again, I am sorry."

His expression gentled further, and he cupped my face in a tender hold. The burning in my throat increased. Remorse churned in my gut. I felt awful.

When I'd turned to find him scowling at me in the marketplace, I'd been furious that he could be upset with me just for running a quick errand by myself. I'd been ready to shout and call him a 'controlling ass,' among other choice phrases.

"I am sorry, too." He kissed my forehead and stroked a hand through my locks.

“You’re sorry? Whatever for?” I was genuinely confused. I was the one who’d fucked up.

His eyes brimmed with emotion. “For my anger,” he said. “I hope I didn’t scare you. I’ve been told I have a temper.”

A temper? I’d sensed his anger, but he hadn’t frightened me. Well, maybe for a split second. But then I’d remembered who he was, remembered that I was starting to trust him. Remembered that he’d promised to keep me safe. And I knew, deep in my gut, that he wouldn’t hurt me.

He hadn’t run at me with his fist raised.

He hadn’t shoved me to the ground and kicked me.

I tried to push away the memories of my father’s rages. Magnus wasn’t anything like that lowlife drunkard.

“I wasn’t scared of you, Magnus,” I said, running my hand up and down his chest. “Not truly. I knew you wouldn’t hurt me. And you didn’t.”

“I grabbed you. I dragged you back to the inn.” His gaze raked up and down my body, as if he were making sure I wasn’t injured.

“Well, you were a bit of a beast, and you definitely pissed me off when you did that,” I said, a smile tugging at my lips. “But, like I said—you didn’t hurt me. No hard feelings, really.”

I didn’t like conflict. Not at fucking all. My whole life, I’d tried to avoid it at all costs. Conflict used to mean being on the wrong side of my father. It meant being slapped and called cruel names.

But it wasn’t like that with Magnus.

Relief slammed into me, and my heart lifted as the handsome orc returned my smile, revealing the sharp white teeth that I still thought suited him so well.

We’d had a disagreement, but we’d talked about our differing viewpoints, apologized to one another, and now all was right between us again.

Was this how normal people behaved?

I'd grown up with a shitty excuse for a father, though my mother had been doting when I was very young—before she'd become withdrawn and distant in her later years. She'd bowed to my father out of fear and went along with his decisions, but she'd usually treated me with kindness. Indifference at the worst.

But I used to pretend my parents had the loving sort of relationship that many of my friends' parents had enjoyed. I used to imagine they settled their differences with hugs and kisses and calm discussions.

I'd daydreamed a lot as a child.

Oftentimes, it was my only escape.

And I'd always promised myself that *if* I one day got married, my husband and I would share an affectionate relationship.

A safe relationship.

I peered into Magnus' dark eyes. Hope was a bright warm beam that surged within me, illuminating the last vestiges of darkness, quelling most of my doubts and worries.

“Let us eat breakfast, and then we can depart the village.” He cleared his throat and shot a hesitant look at the door. “I will go down and request a meal be brought up.” He turned and mumbled something under his breath about tipping one of the male servants, but he was already headed to the door, so I didn't ask questions.

Once I was alone, I checked my bag to make sure I hadn't forgotten to pack anything. I also spent some time replaying the interaction with Magnus in my head.

Not for the first time, I found myself hoping that I could make a home in the Orc Realm. With Magnus.

Maybe running away wasn't the answer.

But if Hilda wasn't happy—assuming I found her there—I didn't know what I would do. I couldn't imagine letting my sister suffer, but I also couldn't fathom parting from Magnus.

CHAPTER 20



Magnus

“DID YOUR MOTHER DIE DURING THE WAR?”

Lorna’s question caught me unprepared. My steps momentarily slowed as I glanced her way. We’d finally reached the northern forests, where there was little underbrush and the trees were massive, many of them wider than houses. After a few hours of travel, we’d even reached an area where the snow hadn’t fallen yesterday.

“Aye,” I finally answered, my heart heavy with the memory of that fateful day. “It happened during the war. Our clanlands were attacked by human soldiers while most of our warriors were away fighting the Unseelie. I watched her die. A human man slit her throat.”

She grasped my hand and squeezed it. “That’s terrible. I’m so sorry. How old were you?”

“I was four, and Thorsen was six. We fought as best we could, but being as small and young as we were, we didn’t manage to kill very many soldiers.”

Her head swiveled my way. “You fought human soldiers when you were four years old? And you killed some of them?” Her expression was a blend of horror and reluctant admiration.

“Aye. My mother encouraged us to fight—there really was no choice—and she tried to defend our clanlands as well.

Thorsen and I fought together and managed to slay fifteen human soldiers.”

“Oh, Magnus.” Tears glimmered in her eyes. “I cannot imagine the fright you must’ve felt.”

“I wasn’t scared at first. It was when I saw the unusually tall human man preparing to kill my mother that I finally experienced true terror. My brother and I were on the roof of our house—where our mother had instructed us to go—and we were throwing rocks and knives at the human soldiers below.” I lifted my eyebrows at her. “We weren’t running around in the heat of the battle with axes and swords at the ages of four and six, if that is what you were thinking.

“Anyway, our mother was too far away for us to provide assistance, though we tried desperately. She was fighting side by side with my aunt. They perished together.”

Thorsen and I had found them holding hands after the battle, the ground soaked heavily with their blood. My mother’s eyes were still open, and I’d brushed a hand down her face to close them. My aunt’s eyes were already closed, and despite the blood and the gash across her throat, her expression was peaceful.

“How many members of your clan died that day?” A tear cascaded down Lorna’s cheek, and she hastily wiped it away.

“Hundreds.” I felt a punch in my gut. “Hundreds of women and children. The human soldiers knew the majority of our warriors were off fighting the dark fae, and they attacked the weakest among us.”

“Sometimes I find the cruelty of men shocking,” she said in a faraway tone. “How tragic. How wrong. And I can’t believe I didn’t know about this. In Yorkstown, I was taught that orcs and Unseelie were the sole aggressors in The Hundred Years’ War. I was taught that humans only fought when we had to defend our villages.” She gave my hand another squeeze. “But I believe you, Magnus, and my heart breaks for what your people endured, and for what *you* endured.”

Her compassion touched me. And I thanked the Mountain God that she trusted I'd spoken the truth. Many human brides of Orc Guardians had a difficult time believing their own people had committed such atrocities during the war.

A comfortable silence fell between us, though I sensed Lorna was as deep in thought as I was. I also sensed she had her own childhood demons to contend with.

We continued through the forest, holding hands as we walked amidst the ancient trees.



LORNA

MAGNUS HAD ENDURED A GREATER PAIN THAN I COULD fathom.

I'd watched my mother die too, but the circumstances were vastly different. They barely compared.

Thank the Goddess of All for the Xornas Treaty and the end of the bloody war.

When we paused to rest at midday, Magnus kept eyeing the knife at my belt. Nerves erupted in my stomach because I feared maybe he was about to scold me again. I'd thought our argument was over and we'd reconciled. Maybe I was wrong.

"Let me see that," he said with a nod at my waist. "Please."

He spoke in a calm tone, and cautious relief spread through me. I passed him the knife and watched as he inspected the weapon. He frowned, then hurled it at a tree, where it lodged between the bark.

He jumped to his feet and walked over to the tree, peering close at the knife stuck in the tree. Then he yanked it out and tossed it from hand to hand, as though judging the balance of the weapon.

Finally, he frowned and threw the knife to the ground.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Aye. The knife you purchased is of poor quality. The merchant who sold it to you ought to be ashamed of himself.” He withdrew a similar sized knife from his own weapons belt. “Here. You may have this one. It’s made of Nossxian steel. Nothing is stronger.”

I accepted the knife and turned it over in my hands, mesmerized by the decorative markings and the sturdiness of the weapon. It definitely had a better balance than the one I’d bought.

“Thank you, Magnus. It’s beautiful. But are you certain? It looks very expensive.” I tilted the knife, allowing it to catch the sunlight that filtered through the canopy.

“Aye, I am certain.” He moved closer and placed his hands upon my shoulders, giving me a serious look. “If you’d wanted a weapon to replace the one you lost, you should’ve asked me, little beauty. I would’ve gladly provided you with one.”

I tested the knife in my scabbard. It was a perfect fit, and the carved handle matched the extravagance of my new outfit.

A sense of power flowed through me. I liked being armed, even if I hoped I would never have cause to use the knife.

“It suits you,” Magnus said, running his gaze up and down my body. “You look proud and fierce wearing it, Lorna, and so very beautiful.”

I smiled and stroked the knife’s handle. Then I met his eyes. “I worried if I asked you for a knife, that you would say no. I worried you might tell me that it’s your job to protect me and I wouldn’t have any need for a weapon.”

“It is my duty to protect you, little beauty, but if you wish to carry a weapon, I will not deny you. I want you to feel safe at all times.” He paused and drew a slow breath, his eyes flickering with an emotion I couldn’t quite read. “Do you know how to use it correctly?”

“Yes, of course. I stab the villain in the heart, or maybe the stomach. Or slice the asshole’s throat.” The pointy end goes into the flesh. How difficult could it be? I realized heavier weapons like battleaxes, swords, and hatchets probably required a little more skill to wield, but a knife seemed simple enough.

He lifted one eyebrow at me, and he appeared to be fighting back a grin. “Stab me,” he said, backing up and opening his arms, offering his uncovered chest as a target.

“What?”

“Stab me. Come at me. Do your worst.”

I scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t want to hurt you.”

This time, the smile broke across his face. His sharp white teeth gleamed in the sun, and his tusks lifted slightly. Despite his pointed teeth and large tusks, he looked rather harmless when he smiled. I thought he was adorable.

“Trust me,” he said. “Now come at me. I am a big, scary villain.” He lifted his arms higher and made a menacing face. He growled and wiggled his fingers, slowly walking toward me.

I laughed. But I also decided to humor him. I withdrew the knife from its scabbard and held it at the ready.

He growled again and scrunched up his nose, causing me to laugh once more. But I bolted forward and aimed for his stomach, hoping he knew what he was doing. I figured he would jump back in the nick of time to avoid injury. I’d seen him fight. He was fast on his feet.

Ah, but he took me by surprise. He grabbed my wrist, twisting my arm (though not painfully), and circled around me in one quick movement, holding me captive in his arms. He was solid and so very warm, and I found myself relaxing in his hold and inhaling deeply of his masculine scent.

His breath danced along my earlobe, sending a shiver rushing down my spine. “Now you’re at my mercy, little beauty. I’ve caught you, and you’re mine to do with as I

please.” He nibbled at my neck, dragging his pointed teeth along my flesh.

My breath hitched and heat spasmed between my thighs.

But I didn’t want him to think I was weak. Or a bad fighter.

Even though it was pretty obvious I could use some lessons in how to properly wield a knife.

So, I leaned into his touch with a soft sigh, only to stomp down on his foot and elbow him in the gut at the same time, using my full strength. I wrenched my wrist from his hold and tightened my grip on the knife as I spun on him, holding my weapon at the ready. Prepared to stab at him again if he came any closer.

He hunched over slightly, rubbing at his stomach as he fought to regain his breath. Shock filled me. Had I truly knocked the air out of a big Orc Guardian?

“Not bad, Lorna,” he said, straightening to his full height. “Not bad. But, you still haven’t managed to stab me. Come at me again.” He lifted his hands and made more funny faces at me as he growled.

We sparred for the next two hours. He kept catching and subduing me, but then he gave me pointers on how to improve. He showed me how to properly hold a knife, and the best fighting stances to take, depending on the height of my foe. He also showed me the best places on the body to stab, explaining which type of wounds would be most fatal.

Apparently, there was a lot more to knife play than I’d realized.

Toward the end of our sparring session, I managed to get a few good stabs and swipes in, and it was only his quickness on his feet that saved him from injury.

“Human males aren’t as fast as orcs,” he assured me later as we resumed our journey through the forest. “Orcs won’t bother you. It’s the humans you must worry about. Drunk soldiers, disreputable hunters, and highwaymen of course. Then there are the wild animals to contend with. I will also

teach you the best methods of defending yourself against wolves, bears, and wildcats, among other predators. We can practice your fighting skills daily if you would like. I am more than happy to teach you, little beauty.” His eyes gleamed with a sudden wickedness. “I enjoyed fighting with you.”

“I’d like that, Magnus. Very much.”

I couldn’t wait for our next sparring session.

CHAPTER 21



Magnus

I FROWNED AT THE TRACKS ON THE ROAD. A SMALL ARMY HAD passed through recently. The road was practically torn up with hoofprints, and the grasses surrounding the road were stomped down too. I glanced back at the forest, where Lorna lingered at the tree line. Now that the Orc Realm rested but two days away, I'd hoped we might finish our travels using the road north, instead of trudging through the woods.

It disturbed me that the soldiers and hunters had come this far north. Even more disturbing—these tracks pointed north. They were headed in the same direction as me and Lorna. They could very well have reached the portal to the Orc Realm by now, though I doubted they would be so foolish as to enter orc clanlands. The borders of my realm were patrolled regularly. Male humans who trespassed were killed on sight.

I jogged back to Lorna and guided her deep into the forest. She didn't ask why. Her grim expression revealed she'd seen the state of the road, and the torn-up countryside too. She might not be as skilled a tracker as I was, but she had to know an army had passed through recently.

“Why would they go to so much trouble trying to find the person, or creature, responsible for killing the highwaymen?” she asked a while later.

“You heard the same gossip I heard in the last village we stopped at,” I replied. “The residents of every village along the

road that leads north are likely anxious. Regular villagers are probably spooked that there is an unknown, evil monster on the loose. Whoever manages to catch the creature responsible for killing the highwaymen will be considered a hero. I also wouldn't be surprised if a reward has been announced."

"I'm glad we'll reach the Orc Realm soon." She shot me a worried glance. "You don't think the soldiers would dare cross the portal, do you?"

"Human males rarely trespass in my realm these days. It's possible, though not likely. But if they do, I'm confident they'll be caught quickly by my people and killed. We do not tolerate trespassers."

"So, are the borders of your realm constantly guarded? Is it difficult for people to come and go without being seen?"

The wording of her question bothered me. She'd spoken in a perfectly innocent tone, but it seemed like she was fishing for information. My guard went up. Was she thinking about escaping me?

I repressed a growl and tried to keep my expression calm.

"Aye," I said. "Warriors patrol the borders of the Orc Realm. The clans that live near the borders are responsible for this task, though clans that live deeper inside my realm often send young orc warriors to help when they come of age. It's often a precursor for our younger warriors before they go off and become Guardians."

"Oh. I see." She brushed a strand of hair behind her ears and peered into the trees with exaggerated interest.

I grabbed her arm and spun her to face me.

"We're soulmates, Lorna. You will not leave me. Even if you try, I will hunt you down and bring you back. We belong together. You might not realize it yet, you might not feel the full force of our soul bond yet, but one day you will. I have never been more certain about anything in my entire life."

"I'm not thinking of running away," she said. "That's not why I asked that question." A second later, she winced and pressed a hand over her heart.

“Lorna? What is wrong?” Alarm rose within me. “This isn’t the first time I’ve seen you grimace and put a hand upon your heart. Perhaps we ought to get you to a healer soon.”

She shook her head. “It’s not a healer I need. I’m fine.” She breathed deep a few times and regarded me with a speculative look. “Let me ask you something, Magnus. Have you ever lied to me?”

“No, never.”

“Not even a little white lie?” she asked.

“No, I would never lie to you,” I said adamantly. “Why do you ask?”

She sighed, looked to the sky, then met my gaze. “Because whenever I tell you even the smallest untruth, I experience a weird physical pain in my chest.”

Her confession shocked me, and I tried to recall all the times she’d winced in pain and put a hand on her heart. It troubled me that she’d lied to me a few times, but right now she was telling the truth. She was opening up to me.

A thought struck me. What *would* happen if I lied to Lorna?

Well, no time like the present to test it out.

I regretted what I was about to say, but I needed to know if the strange affliction my mate was experiencing would also extend to me. I was starting to suspect it might have something to do with our soul bond.

“Lorna,” I said in a firm tone as I held her gaze, “I don’t really want you. I’ve been lying to you this whole time about us being soulmates. The truth is that I intend to sell you to one of my comrades once we reach the Orc Realm.”

Pain jolted through me before I could inhale my next breath. I released Lorna and backed up a few steps, coughing in surprise as I pressed two hands to my chest. It felt like I was being ripped apart from the inside.

A couple of seconds later, the agony subsided.

The little human peered at me in disbelief, her lips parted slightly and her eyes wide. “Oh, wonderful. We can’t lie to one another. This is just great. Just great.” She huffed, turned around, and kicked at the grass.

I stared at her in confusion, wondering how the ability to lie to one another could be a good thing. “Lorna? I don’t understand why this upsets you.”

She spun on me. “Because it’s just another complication! And now you know I *have* thought about escaping you. What happens when we get to the Orc Realm and I find my sister? What happens if I find her and she’s not happy? What if she’s in a bad marriage, perhaps a union that was forced? I feel like my whole plan is blowing up in my face. Especially my plan not to fall for you.”

“Lorna, have you been planning to run away from me all this time?” I asked, my heart sinking. “Has that been your plan all along? To escape the Orc Realm with your sister? To leave me?”

She paled and tears glittered in her eyes. “It was my plan at first,” she said. “But now... now I don’t know what to do. The thought of leaving you guts me. But I can’t let my sister suffer. If she’s miserable in your realm, I have to help her. She’s my sister and I love her.

“You-you don’t know what my childhood was like. I never really talk about it. But my father is a cruel man, a violent drunk. Hilda always tried to protect me from him. She would hide me in a closet or under a bed, or send me outside, and then she would come get me once my father had passed out and it was safe again.

“Too many times to count, she took a beating on my behalf. Too many times when she came to get me, she was covered in bruises. I owe her this. I have to help her.

“But now I can’t lie to you without you realizing it. If I’m going to escape you one day soon, the ability to lie to your face would’ve come in handy.” A tear rolled down her cheek and she sniffed loudly.

I rushed forward and gathered her in my arms. She buried her face in my chest and shuddered as a sob racked her body. My heart broke to hear about the darkness of her childhood.

I held her until she stopped crying, and then I dried her tears.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you as a child, little beauty,” I said gently as I smoothed a hand through her hair. “And I’ve half a mind to travel to Yorkstown and pay your father a visit.”

I wanted to kill the bastard.

Not only that, but I wanted to make him suffer.

“I appreciate you wanting to seek vengeance on my behalf, Magnus, but he’s not worth the effort,” she said. “Besides, he’ll probably die soon anyway. Either he’ll drink himself to death or he’ll wind up owing the wrong person money that he can’t pay back. The type of men who loan money to desperate people aren’t very merciful when the borrower can’t pay their debt. It’s likely he’ll end up in a ditch with his throat slit.”

“Very well,” I replied, still stroking her hair. “I won’t go after him. I will stay with you, and I will protect you. No one will ever hurt you the way he hurt you and your sister again. I give you my word.”

But I stopped short of promising to help her sister. If Hilda wasn’t happy in the Orc Realm, wasn’t happy with her second husband (I was still certain she must’ve married again), I couldn’t help her escape.

Orcs didn’t interfere in other orc’s marriages.

And my people mated for life.

If she was being mistreated, yes, I would try to intervene in such a case, but it wasn’t likely that she was being abused. We orcs tended to treasure our females. It was rare to see an unhappy couple among my people, even rarer for an orc male to raise a hand to his wife.

“I am glad you are falling for me, Lorna.” I pulled back to peer into her blue eyes. “I have already fallen for you, and I

cannot fathom ever letting you go. We are meant to spend the rest of our lives together. It is the will of the gods and goddesses. Perhaps soul bonds between orcs and humans will start to become more common. Perhaps the magic of soul bonds that faded in our lands long ago is making a resurgence. We might be the first of many orc-human couples to enjoy such a close bond.”

It hit me then—the reason Lorna hadn’t fully surrendered to the passion that flared between us. We’d kissed and touched one another, and she’d allowed me to bring her to pleasure with my fingers and my mouth, but we hadn’t gone beyond that.

We hadn’t consummated our union.

I hadn’t surged into her depths and filled her with my seed.

She hadn’t wanted to mate with me until she was certain she wouldn’t be escaping the Orc Realm with her sister.

“I tried to deny it,” she said. “I tried to tell myself I wasn’t feeling the soul bond, that surely there must be another explanation for the flashes of familiarity I feel in your presence, as well as the pain I experience when I lie to you. But I’ve been lying to myself, I suppose.” Fresh tears gleamed in her eyes, but she blinked them back.

I opened my mouth, preparing to respond, when I heard a multitude of hoof beats in the distance, along with the braying of hounds.

Fuck.

Riders were headed this way.

CHAPTER 22



Lorna

MAGNUS CARRIED ME THROUGH THE FOREST, RUNNING FASTER than I'd believed possible. We'd been in the middle of a conversation, and suddenly he'd swept me into his arms and taken off.

A sense of urgency surrounded him.

He must've heard something, though I knew not what. I hadn't heard anything myself. Nothing but the breeze ruffling the trees.

We reached a river and Magnus plunged into it. The current was fast, and the rushing water reached his hips. He lifted me higher so I wouldn't get wet and hurried to the other side.

He ran and he ran, and I clung to him with my arms laced around his neck. His strength and endurance were impressive. Not only was he carrying me, but he also wore two packs.

An hour passed. Maybe two. I wasn't certain. But he ran for a long fucking time without stopping for a rest.

Then I heard something. Dogs barking and men shouting.

Oh, my Goddess. Worry clutched me. If the soldiers and hunters were using dogs to track us, that couldn't be good.

What would we do if they surrounded us?

Would the soldiers believe Magnus was responsible for killing the highwaymen? Would they try to capture him? Or would they try to slay him on the spot?

Grief blanketed me at the prospect of losing him.

I'd just confessed my feelings for him—in a way.

I'd admitted that I was falling for him. That the idea of leaving him gutted me.

How long could he keep running like this?

“Magnus,” I said. “I can run when you start to get tired. Just let me know. I swear I'll run as fast as I can.”

I felt the rumble of his voice, but his response was lost in the wind.

The sounds of barking dogs and men grew louder, and it wasn't long before I heard the stampeding of horses.

I racked my mind for a way out of this that didn't involve lots of bloodshed.

The dogs had obviously caught our scent, and unless a miracle occurred, the soldiers would soon close in on us. Magnus was a fast runner, but the horses used by soldiers and hunters were bred for their speed.

And hunting dogs?

Well, I supposed they were just as quick as the horses, if not faster.

There was a very good chance we were fucked.

Maybe when they caught us, I could demand to speak to the commander of the group and explain what had happened in the clearing. I could tell them about the highwaymen attacking me and how Magnus had valiantly come to my defense.

But would the soldiers and hunters listen?

If there was a reward for the creature who'd torn the highwaymen apart, maybe they wouldn't care why Magnus had killed those men. They might only care about the money and the prospect of being viewed as a hero.

A swell of noise circled us, and Magnus came to a stop. I peered out from his arms and my stomach dropped. Three dogs stood in front us, barking and snarling. But even worse—about a dozen men on horseback had us surrounded. They held various weapons at the ready—swords, axes, bows, knives.

The bows made me especially nervous, as five of the men possessed bows. If they decided to start shooting at us, it would be nearly impossible to avoid getting hit.

Slowly, Magnus set me on my feet, though he placed an arm around me, holding me close.

“State your business,” Magnus said in a deep, booming voice. He hadn’t pulled his axe from his weapons belt, but I knew he could grab it in a moment.

A burly man with a large, crooked nose urged his horse closer. It looked as though his nose had been broken at least five times. He was also old enough to have fought in The Hundred Years’ War. A career soldier, then.

“I am Commander Garvis,” the man said, glaring at Magnus. “What is your name?”

“I am Magnus the Wolf, son of Erik the Giant. I hail from the Haxxall Clan in the Varrulian Mountains.”

The men exchanged uneasy glances, making me wonder about the reputation of Magnus’ clan. Or perhaps the soldiers knew Erik the Giant was a chieftain.

More men rode out of the trees and surrounded us. I stopped counting at forty. My spirits plummeted. How in the fires would we get out of this? I fingered the hilt of my knife.

“My men and I have been searching the road and the forest for over a week now looking for the individual responsible for killing five highwaymen,” Commander Garvis said. “I examined the scene myself and believe they were slaughtered by an orc. The men were cut to pieces in a brutal manner, and there were sets of large orc-sized footprints in the blood-soaked ground. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about this, would you, Magnus the Wolf?”

Magnus was silent for so long I thought he had no intention of answering. But when he spoke, his voice brimmed with confidence. His reply, however, made me want to smack him. “Aye, I know something about it.”

I clenched my jaw. Would it have killed him to lie? Yes, the men might not believe him if he claimed innocence, but couldn't the stubborn, proud orc have at least tried?

The commander smirked and he made an elaborate gesture with his hand. “I invite you to expand your answer, Magnus. We haven't got all day. We are hunting a murderous orc and it's very important that we catch the male and end his rampage through the countryside.”

“The highwaymen attacked my mate and planned to violate her. So, I killed them.” Magnus cleared his throat and looked from soldier to soldier. “You and your men have been traveling the road for about a fortnight now, clearly in search of someone. You didn't start out by looking for a murderous orc, as you so put it. You were after the highwaymen first. And then you found them slaughtered and the rumors of that scene started to spread amongst the villages, and naturally, people got worried that a beast of some kind was on the loose. I understand that. However, you ought to be happy that justice was served.”

“But you are mistaken—justice wasn't served. Those men ought to have been put on trial. Most likely, they would've been sentenced to a lifetime of slavery. Slave auctions boost our village coffers.”

“If it's money you're after,” Magnus said, “then I will offer you all I have, which is a substantial amount. But in return, I demand safe passage for myself and my mate all the way to the Orc Realm.”

The commander appeared to consider Magnus' offer for a long minute, but then he eventually shook his head. “I'm afraid this is out of my hands now. Villagers are a superstitious lot. Many believe a depraved creature is roaming the countryside. I need to get your head on a spike and parade it around from village to village in order to calm the masses. I'm

afraid it's as simple as that." He spoke in a casual tone, as if he were discussing the weather and not a man's life.

Not just any man. But Magnus'. The male I loved.

Despite the fear churning through me, my heart gave a quick flutter.

It was true.

I loved him.

But would I get a chance to tell him?

CHAPTER 23



Magnus

THE ODDS WEREN'T GOOD. OVER SIXTY MOUNTED MEN HAD US surrounded. Most of them were career soldiers. About fifteen were hunters.

And they wanted my head on a spike.

Protectiveness for Lorna swelled in my heart. Beyond all, I needed to keep her safe. I doubted these men would leave her unharmed even if I surrendered to them peacefully.

More than once, I'd heard phrases like "the orc's whore" whispered around us. To them, she wasn't quite human anymore, and therefore didn't deserve to be treated with respect.

"I demand a trial by combat," I announced, staring at the leader. "As a commander, you have the authority to hold a trial here and now. We needn't go through the formality of a trial conducted by Elders in one of your villages."

Commander Garvis snorted. "A trial by combat? How would that be fair? One on one, you would slay even the strongest fighter amongst us with ease. One Orc Guardian against a human soldier is madness."

"I agree," I said, "which is why I was going to suggest five to one. Or even six to one. Pick your best soldiers and I'll be glad to fight them."

“Eleven,” the commander said. “I will agree to a trial by combat if you fight me *and* ten of my strongest men.” A dark grin spread over his face. “And when we kill you, you won’t be the first orc from the Haxxall clan that we’ve killed. You must’ve been a young child when we descended upon your clanlands years ago. I bet you hid under a bed like a coward. Tell me, *orc*, did your mother survive that day? We killed too many female orcs to count. Children, too. The only good orc is a dead one, as far as I’m concerned.”

Rage burned through me, and it was a struggle not to react to the commander’s taunts. I looked at the soldiers. Most of them were middle-aged. Old enough to have fought in the war.

Lorna gasped beside me, and she clasped the hand I had draped over her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I accept your offer.” I stared at the commander, still trying to keep my expression devoid of all emotion. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d upset me.

I would enjoy his screams.

I would savor the scent of his blood.

“Very well,” Commander Garvis said. “Trial by combat!”

A cheer went up amongst the soldiers and hunters.

“Magnus, you must promise me something,” Lorna whispered.

I met her gaze. “What is it?”

“Promise you’ll stop once you kill all eleven men. You mustn’t keep going. I know you want to kill all of them—at least you want to kill the oldest among them—and you have every reason to do so, but you must stop at eleven. They’ll let us go after that.”

“All the older men in this group deserve death,” I said in a harsh whisper. But I knew she was right. I had a good chance of killing eleven human men in a trial by combat, but I had little chance of slaying over sixty men. Especially when many of them possessed bows. Sooner or later, one of the archers would send an arrow through my heart.

“I know they deserve it, Magnus. But the Goddess of All will judge them. They’ll pay for what they’ve done when they are denied entrance to the Hereafter and sent to burn in the fires instead.”

“You are right,” I said in a grudging tone. A deep sigh escaped me. “Very well. I will stop at eleven.”

The cheers finally died down, and the commander dismounted his horse. He walked among his men, occasionally pointing at one of them. Those he pointed at also dismounted their horses.

And so, he assembled his ten strongest soldiers, and the men lined up to face me. Only one of them looked too young to have fought in the war. Too bad. He would die anyway. I couldn’t leave any of them breathing.

This was a battle I intended to win.



LORNA

ALL THE SOLDIERS WHO WEREN’T FIGHTING FORMED A CIRCLE around Magnus and the eleven men. I moved outside the circle and perched myself on a branch, wanting to get a good view. Magnus had ordered me to run, promising he would catch up with me later, but I’d looked him in the eyes and refused. We could argue about it later.

Besides, if Magnus lost (I prayed that wouldn’t happen), the soldiers would be able to track me down easily. They had dogs. Running wouldn’t help. I appreciated that he wanted to keep me safe, however, and my heart warmed as I watched the man I loved draw his axe from his weapons belt.

I studied the eleven soldiers. One of them was unusually tall for a human—he was almost as tall as Magnus. Worry panged in my chest. The others looked fierce enough, though they were of average height and build.

Would the soldiers prove a challenge to Magnus?

He'd slayed the highwaymen with ease, but they were only armed with knives.

My pulse quickened with nerves. Magnus and Commander Garvis were speaking, but I couldn't make out their words over the murmur of the crowd. But then I saw the commander motion at one of them who wore a bow and quiver, and the man removed those items from his person and accepted a sword that was passed to him from another soldier.

Well, at least none of the eleven would be able to shoot arrows at Magnus. That wouldn't have been fair.

Not that there was anything fair about this.

Magnus shouldn't have to fight these men during a trial by combat. He'd had good cause to kill the highwaymen. He wasn't guilty of some terrible crime. He didn't deserve death. This was all wrong.

I closed my eyes briefly and sent up prayers to the Goddess.

Please let Magnus win.

Please don't let Magnus get injured.

Please please please.

A breeze caressed my face, and when I opened my eyes, I spotted a small blue bird fluttering down from the sky to perch on the branch beside me.

Well. This seemed like a good omen.

If a crow had landed next to me, I would've been more worried.

After a moment, the bird took flight and disappeared in the trees. But I latched onto the possibility that the Goddess was in fact watching. Maybe she would infuse Magnus with strength and weaken the eleven.

I prayed it would be so.

"Let the trial by combat begin!" the commander shouted.

I braced myself on the branch and kept an eye on Magnus.
May he send them all to the fires.

CHAPTER 24



Magnus

A HAZE OF BLOODLUST GRIPPED ME. THE EDGES OF MY VISION blurred, and I saw nothing beyond the eleven soldiers in the clearing. I memorized their faces, the faces of those who'd slaughtered my people.

The crowd roared with enthusiasm.

As I looked over the eleven, I saw a familiar face. One I would never forget. A face that was etched into my memory when I was but four years old.

The human man who'd killed my mother.

He was the tallest fighter in the group.

"Let the trial by combat begin!"

I wasn't certain who'd just shouted. The commander? I couldn't tear my gaze from the tall man. I despaired that this fight would have to be quick. If only I had the time to make the tall man suffer. I could happily spend days slowly killing him.

Two soldiers holding swords came running at me, and I cut them down with ease, spilling their guts to the ground.

The crowd fell momentarily silent, and the nine remaining fighters exchanged worried looks. When the crowd started up again, half of them cried out encouragements to their fellow

soldiers, while the other half screamed taunts and obscenities at me.

A soldier holding a long knife in each hand approached me from the front, while two others armed with swords moved to either side of me. My axe clashed with the swords as I made several defensive maneuvers. I knocked the knives from the first soldier's hands, kicked him backward, then brought my axe down across his chest. He flailed for a few seconds as blood spurted before he grew still.

I wasted no time in killing the other two.

Five down. Six to go. The commander and the tall man among them.

As I turned to face the next three who were coming at me, I caught sight of Lorna sitting on a low branch of a tree.

I growled.

I'd ordered her to leave this place, ordered her to run, promising I would find her later. I'd wanted her to run just in case the worst happened. I couldn't bear the thought of the soldiers turning their wrath on her if I perished during combat.

Yet she'd refused.

She'd insisted on staying to watch, claiming she wished to support me. "My place is at your side. You said so yourself. You can't really expect me to leave." Then she'd kissed me, wished me luck, and disappeared into the crowd.

If I lived through this (and I fully intended to win), she would not escape the good scolding she had coming her way.

I killed the three soldiers who were approaching me, then yanked a knife from my weapons belt and hurled it at one of the remaining men, stabbing him directly in the heart.

Only the commander and the tall man remained.

I would save the tall man for last. I wouldn't be able to spend much time torturing him, but I planned to take a few pieces off him before landing a fatal blow.

Commander Garvis advanced on me first. His sword clanged against my axe. He was a skilled fighter for a human, I would give him that, but he wasn't much better than a novice orc warrior.

When it became apparent that he needed help, the tall man joined him, and I faced off with the two murderous soldiers. Dark echoes of the fateful attack on the Haxxall clan lived in my memories, and I called those memories forth, resurrecting the past as I fought the very men who'd taken out many of my brethren.

As I fought, I felt as though my fallen clan members were at my side. Watching me. Guiding me. Praying for me. Lending me strength.

I even felt my mother's presence, as well as my aunt's.

The commander stumbled, and I brought my axe down atop his head, splitting his skull.

"You are dead!" the tall man cried. "Dead! And it will be a pleasure to be the one to end you."

I didn't bother with a reply.

But I did bother to slice off his left hand.

He paused mid-attack and screamed. Blood flowed from his injury. I kicked his hand toward him in a mocking manner as outraged shouts filled the clearing. The soldiers watching weren't happy about this turn of events. But fuck them.

The tall man staggered toward me, gasping as he lifted his sword. He lunged at me, but I darted away from his sword, then left a gash on his thigh with the axe. He hissed in pain and cursed me to the fires.

My ears rang with the roars of the crowd. I spared a glance in Lorna's direction... but she wasn't there. The branch was empty.

Cold panic rushed me, and I spun around looking for her, searching both the crowd of soldiers and the other nearby trees.

But she wasn't anywhere.

Had she decided to obey my orders and leave?

That didn't seem likely.

She'd been adamant about staying.

I faced the tall man as he bolted at me with his sword again. His form was poor. I could easily take him out right now. So, I did. I slammed the axe across this throat with a primal roar that resounded through the forest. He fell to the ground next to the lifeless body of his foolish commander. I watched as he twitched, his wide eyes filled with the fearful realization of impending death. A pool of blood gathered beneath him, and it took him all of five seconds to stop moving.

The spectators fell silent. I held my axe at the ready as I spun in a slow circle, waiting to see if any of them would come at me. I would kill the whole lot of them if I had to. But I hoped it wouldn't come to that. A few minutes ago, I would've loved nothing more.

But I still didn't spy Lorna among the crowd, and I was filled with a frantic urgency to locate her, to ensure she was all right. Maybe the fighting had been too much for her—maybe she'd needed to get away from the slaughter.

The soldiers began departing the clearing, and no one lifted a hand against me. Most males respected the result of a trial by combat. To lift a hand against me would be considered a grave insult to the Goddess of All and the wisdom of her judgment.

I rushed to the tree where I'd last seen Lorna.

Her scent led south through the forest—in the opposite direction of the Orc Realm. Once I followed her scent out of the clearing, away from the soldiers who'd lingered to recover the bodies of their fallen comrades, I picked up two sets of footprints.

Then I heard screams. Screams that didn't belong to Lorna.

Still holding my bloodied axe, I followed the footprints and the scent of my beloved mate, running as fast as my legs would carry me.

CHAPTER 25



Lorna

I YANKED THE KNIFE FROM THE HUNTER'S UNMOVING BODY, then stood over him watching for any signs of life. His chest failed to rise or fall.

He was dead.

I stared at the knife in my hand, stunned by what I'd done. Not that I regretted my actions. The man had stolen me away in the middle of Magnus' battle.

As he'd dragged me off, he'd informed me that I was his ticket to an early retirement should the eleven soldiers fail to kill Magnus. Knowing Magnus was likely traveling with a great fortune—the fortune he'd earned killing Fae Realm beasts in the Borderlands—the man had wanted to hold me for ransom.

He'd smelled like my father. Like whiskey.

My stomach rolled at the memory, and I backed away from his body. The sounds he'd made when I'd stabbed him in the stomach replayed in my mind—panicked screams riddled with pain.

Thank the Goddess for Magnus' sparring lessons. And for the finely made knife forged with Nossxian steel.

I knelt to clean the knife in the grass, then rose to my feet and placed it back in its scabbard. Rapid footsteps made me

tense, and I spun in the direction of the noise, my hand going to the hilt of the long knife.

But relief filled me when Magnus emerged from the trees, running toward me at full speed, his blood covered axe held high.

He slowed to a stop and dropped his axe on the ground. Concern sparked in his gaze when he glanced from me to the fallen man and back again. He looked me up and down before grasping my upper arms gently and peering into my eyes.

“Did he hurt you, little beauty?”

“No. I’m fine. What about you? Are you injured?” Sprays of blood soaked his shirt and trousers, but I didn’t think it belonged to him. Not with the way he’d bolted out of the trees. He hadn’t been moving like an injured male.

“I am fine,” he said. “The Goddess of All has spoken—in her eyes, I am innocent—and I didn’t so much as receive a scratch during the trial by combat.”

I released the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. “That is good news. I-I am so happy you won.” I placed a hand on his chest, directly over his heart, not caring that I was touching his blood-soaked shirt. I needed to feel the steady beating of his heart beneath my palm, needed to reassure myself that he was truly unharmed.

“That hunter,” Magnus said with a nod at the body. “What did he want with you? Are you certain he didn’t hurt you?”

I explained how the drunken hunter had pulled me from the branch and forced me to leave the fight, holding a knife to my back to enforce my compliance. I spoke of how the man planned to ransom me, and how I’d spun out of his grasp when he’d stumbled, then stabbed him in the stomach twice.

“He was so drunk that he never noticed the weapon at my waist,” I said with a glance at the body.

Magnus looked at me with pride. “Sounds as though the fool mistook you for a helpless female. But you are anything but helpless, Lorna. You are fierce and strong, and you did well today.” He leaned in and brushed his lips upon my

forehead, and the tender kiss helped calm the last of my anxieties.

I'd killed a man. But it had been in self-defense. I wouldn't burn in the fires when my time in this world came to an end. And Magnus had won his trial by combat. Tragedy could've struck today, but it hadn't. My mate and I were both all right.

My mate...

We hadn't consummated our union yet, but I was starting to think of Magnus as my mate.

My heart fluttered, and I sank deeper into his arms.

"Do you want a souvenir from your kill?" Magnus asked, and his question took me aback.

I withdrew from his arms and stared at him in shock. But then my gaze fell to the necklace he wore, which contained bones and teeth from some of the Fae Realm beasts he'd ended. Taking trophies from their kills was a proud orc tradition.

The thought of taking teeth or a small bone from the dead man made my stomach turn.

And yet...

I found myself kneeling next to the body and using my knife to extract several teeth. I cleaned them off and tucked them into my pocket.

When I rose to my feet and faced Magnus, he was staring at me with a look of admiration. "You are a warrior now," he said. "And once we reach my realm, I will make you a necklace so you might display your souvenirs for all to witness your strength and bravery."

A tooth necklace. He'd just promised to make me a tooth necklace.

Was it strange or messed up that I planned to wear it with pride?

Most of my life had been spent cowering before a drunk, violent man. Now I would wear the teeth of a similar such man

around my neck, a man I'd killed. Orcs and fae had pointed teeth, as did most forest predators, or so I thought. Anyone who saw me now would know what I'd done—they would realize I'd once killed a human man.

“Before we resume our journey north,” Magnus said, “I would like to return to the clearing.”

He guided me back to the site of the battle, holding my hand as we walked through the forest. When we arrived in the clearing, I saw no sign of the soldiers and hunters.

But I did see a lone hand resting in the clearing, and Magnus retrieved it from the ground and tucked it into a pouch that hung from his weapons belt.

“Now I have a trophy from the man who killed my mother.” He turned to face me, his expression serious. “No souvenir has ever meant more to me, despite how easy the man was to kill. I will clean the flesh from the bones and wear them until the end of my days.”

His confession surprised me, and I regarded him with a questioning look. He went on to explain how he'd recognized the tallest man of the eleven as the same human who'd slit his mother's throat many years ago.

I didn't know what to say, so I approached Magnus and placed a comforting hand on his arm. *You're not alone*, I wanted to say. But my throat was burning too fiercely because all I could think about was four-year-old Magnus watching his mother die in a violent manner.

“Let us go home now,” he said. “To the Orc Realm. To my family, and yours.”

CHAPTER 26



Magnus

WE JOGGED BACK TO THE MAIN ROAD AND HEADED NORTH. Lorna didn't complain about our fast pace, but if we hurried and traveled for a few hours after darkness fell, we could reach the trading outpost that rested on the border of the Orc and Human Realms.

The soldiers and hunters were no longer a concern. I doubted they would risk the Goddess' wrath by bothering us. But we rushed nonetheless, both of us eager to leave this realm behind. Eager for a new beginning.

When the lights of the outpost came into view, bright flickers in the darkness, we slowed our pace to a fast walk, knowing we would soon have a roof over our heads and a hot meal in our stomachs.

Most orcs stopped at this particular outpost on their way to and from the Borderlands. I'd stopped here ten years ago and recalled the inn and the bustling marketplace.

Not only would we find sustenance and shelter here, we would rise early tomorrow morning to purchase supplies for my clan before we headed for the portal of my realm.

Our journey was almost at an end.

Thank the Mountain God for that.

We reached the village a short while later and secured a large room at the inn. We bathed and then enjoyed a

scrumptious meal, and my heart pounded with excitement as I anticipated the night to come.

It was late, and we were both exhausted, but I sensed a change in Lorna. Would she finally accept me as her mate? Would she allow me to claim her?

Every time I looked at her, all I could think about was thrusting my cock between her thighs and filling her with my seed.

“Lorna,” I said, coming up behind her as she looked for a hairbrush in her pack. I placed my hands upon her shoulders and put my mouth to her ear, and she shivered as the scent of her arousal filled the air. “Lorna, I wish to claim you tonight. I wish for us to consummate our union.”

She turned in my arms and peered up at me. Hunger filled her eyes, and she exhaled a shaky breath. Her cheeks pinkened slightly, and I marveled that she could be shy or embarrassed around me after all the intimacies we’d shared.

“I-I would like that too, Magnus.” Her blush deepened. “But, as you know, I’m a virgin. And I’m a human. And you’re a big orc with a big orc cock and I can’t help but worry that it will be difficult. That it will hurt terribly.”

I smoothed a hand through her hair. “I promise to be gentle, little beauty.” My cock hardened in my trousers—I’d put on a clean pair after our bath, but I was wearing nothing else—and I leaned in to smell her hair. “I will take my time stroking you until you’re sopping wet and aching to be filled up, and then and only then will I thrust my *big orc cock* into your tight little human cunny.”



LORNA

I COULD SCARCELY BREATHE AS MAGNUS PULLED MY nightgown over my head and tossed it aside. He stood before

me in his trousers, and I admired the way the firelight danced over his sculpted chest.

Incessant throbs tugged at my core, and I felt the wetness growing between my thighs. My nipples tightened to the point of painfulness, and I almost reached up to caress them.

Magnus' hands went to the fastening of his trousers, and my mouth went dry as I watched him undress.

His massive, erect cock sprang free in the next moment.

And all I could think about was taking him in my mouth.

He'd pleased me with his mouth and his hands a few times, but I'd never returned the favor. I inhaled deeply, took two steps toward him, then sank to my knees.

Oh my.

Up close, his cock was rather intimidating.

But I didn't back away.

I stayed in place and peered up at him, my heart skipping a beat at the feral growl that rumbled from him.

Tentatively, I reached out and grasped his hugeness in my hand. His cock was hot to the touch and my core spasmed as I imagined him pounding it into me.

He threaded his fingers through my hair and guided my head forward. "What a good little human you are, Lorna, getting on your knees to suck your husband's big orc cock. Be careful, I don't want you choking on it." He tightened his grip in my hair, and his sudden roughness (as well as his crass words) sent a thrill through me.

Holding the base in one hand, I took the head of his manhood into my mouth, tasting the saltiness of his essence that rested on the tip. I whimpered around his cock as pleasure jolted through my center, and I slowly took him deeper into my mouth, keeping my lips sealed tightly around his girth.

He growled and started guiding me, urging my head forward and back over his length. His cock jerked in my mouth, and I inhaled through my nose, breathing deep of his

musky, masculine scent. My cunny kept spasming, and heat persisted in gathering in my core.

I released the base of his cock and cupped his scrotum, stunned by how solid and heavy it felt in my hand. He groaned and moved my head faster over his shaft, and I tried not to gag when the wide tip struck the back of my throat.

“You’re doing a wonderful job, little beauty.” He loosened his grip in my hair, then started caressing my locks.

Still sucking him, I peered up at him from under my lashes. He stared at me with a look of profound longing that warmed me inside and out. His length jerked in my mouth again and he released another low growl that resounded throughout the room. As I bobbed forward and back on his hugeness, I allowed my tongue to drag up and down the length of him, my lips still sealed tight.

He hissed, as though in pain, and a few harshly uttered words in an unfamiliar language fell from his lips.

Orc curses?

Without warning, he yanked me upward, then scooped me up in his arms. I fought to catch my breath as my heart pounded and the pulses between my thighs came faster.

He placed me on the bed and settled his large body atop mine, though he was careful not to put his full weight on me. He placed a finger beneath my chin, forcing my gaze to his.

“When I come in you this first time, Lorna,” he said, “I want it to be in your cunny. I want to drench your womb with my seed.” He reached between my thighs and stroked my wetness, and I arched my center against his probing fingers with a hoarse cry. “Open more for me, little beauty. Spread your thighs wide apart for your husband.”

CHAPTER 27



Magnus

AS I RUBBED LORNA'S MOISTURE ATOP HER CLIT, CIRCLING the nubbin with precise strokes, I leaned down to kiss her. She whimpered into my mouth and her body practically convulsed as I inflicted pleasure upon her, kissing her hard while increasing the pressure of the swirls upon her clit.

I withdrew from the kiss, but only so I could drag my teeth and tusks down the slope of her neck. She shuddered and moaned and her eyes fluttered shut. She grasped at the covers as a frantic look came over her, and I knew she was close to coming.

I pulled my hand from her crotch.

Her eyes shot open. "What. Are. You. Doing?" She exhaled a trembling breath. "Please, Magnus. *Please.*"

"Please *what?*"

"Please keep touching me. I-I was so close and..." Her voice trailed off and she blushed profusely.

"Hm. I believe I like it when you beg, my sweet mate." I wagged my eyebrows at her, then resumed teasing her.

I'd promised to get her good and ready for my cock, promised I would be gentle. The wetter she became, and the more swollen the tender pinkness between her thighs grew, the easier it would be for her to accept my size.

Once she settled somewhat, I returned to stroking her clit and spreading her moisture across it. But whenever I sensed her orgasm was impending, I immediately withheld my touch.

Her moans became desperate, and my cock thickened whenever she gave me one of her pleading wide-eyed looks.

She was so beautiful. So perfect.

Her hardened nipples beckoned to me, and I leaned down to alternate suckling them, first the right one, then the left one, and so on. Sometimes I gave the tight peaks a gentle bite, and her hips thrust up especially hard against my probing hand when I did so.

Her sweet but pungent feminine scent called to me. I inhaled deeply of the intoxicating aroma and considered burying my head between her thighs.

But I thought she was now adequately prepared to accept my cock. Her cunny felt swollen and slick enough, and though I liked to believe I possessed more self-control than most males, the truth was I couldn't wait until I'd driven my manhood into her depths.

I drew her legs up slightly, opening her wider and exposing the gleaming pinkness of her core. I settled my cock at her entrance and dragged it up and down through her moisture, coating my manhood in her slick essence. She shuddered and made more desperate noises in her throat, and her eyes glazed over with desire.

Raw need clutched me, and a fierce sense of possessiveness for Lorna echoed through my soul.

I waited until she met my eyes, then I grasped her hips and began a slow thrust into her cunny.

“Oh!” She gasped and clutched the furs harder, but she didn't appear to be in any pain, so I pushed an inch farther.

She was tight. So fucking tight. But we had to mate. I had to claim her and make her mine. Moving slow was torture, and I had to call up patience I didn't know I had.

Finally, I was submerged half-way inside her.

She continued gasping, and occasionally whimpering or moaning, but she also kept watching me. Her gaze darted between my face and to where our bodies were joined.

I withdrew from her center partially before pushing straight back in, going another inch deeper with this plunge. My blood heated and I sweltered under the force of my need for this sweet little human I would treasure until the end of time.

“Are you in any pain?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, no pain. I just feel very, very full. In a good way. If that makes sense. Please don’t stop.”

With our bodies still joined, I released one of her hips and reached for her clit. Her eyes grew wide as she watched me stroking her nubbin. As I caressed her aching parts, I started thrusting into her center, taking it slow but driving a bit deeper with each drive.

Suddenly, I felt her insides contracting around my cock, and she cried out and writhed beneath me on the bed as she came hard. It took all my strength and concentration not to spill myself inside her in this moment. When the last wave of pleasure receded, she peered at me in wonder.

“Magnus. *Magnus*. Oh, my Goddess. That was...”

She didn’t complete her sentence, and I resumed claiming her, clutching her hips as I commenced a faster pace with deeper plunges.

Eventually, I couldn’t hold back any longer.

But I wanted her to come with me. I wanted to spill myself inside her while her insides clamped down around my cock and she cried out in the throes of pulsing release.

I swirled my thumb over her clit and quickened my drives, wanting to complete the act of our mating. Once I came inside her, she would be considered my wife. My heart warmed and my soul danced at the thought.

Her whimpering cries filled the room, along with the sound of flesh slapping against flesh. I wasn’t exactly

pounding her, but I was pushing into her steadily, and my balls smacked into her with each quick thrust.

Just as the first spurt of my seed shot into her, she began contracting around my pulsating cock. I came hard and shot torrents of my essence into her, growling as the pleasure went on and on.

Dark spots danced in my vision, but I kept driving into her, not willing to stop until I'd emptied myself inside her. I wanted to mark her as mine, and I wanted my scent on her. I wanted her to feel my seed gliding down her thighs when she awoke in the morning.

She grew still beneath me, panting hard, and I gave one final thrust before I slowly withdrew from her center.

I sat next to her and lifted her into my lap, wanting nothing more than to cradle her in my arms. I kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her lips, and the top of her head.

“Magnus, I need to tell you something,” she whispered, pulling back to meet my gaze.

My pulse thundered in my ears. I still hadn't caught my breath. “What is it?” I asked in a gentle tone.

“I love you,” she said. “I know it's fast, and I tried to hold you at a distance during our travels together, but I can't fight it any longer. I love you with my whole heart, and I believe you now—I think we were fated to mate. Fated to mate and spend our lives together.”

I had to take a moment to swallow past the sudden, intense burning in my throat. Her confession and her sweet words overwhelmed me with emotion. “I love you, too, little beauty. My sweet fated mate.”

I hugged her tighter and kissed her again.

CHAPTER 28



Lorna

WE REACHED THE HAXXALL CLAN IN THE LATE AFTERNOON. Magnus stood on a cliff overlooking the settlement and blew into a horn, and the noise resounded off the snow-covered mountains. I knew from reading the book about orc culture that it was customary for a Guardian to announce his return to his clanlands by blowing into a horn.

I peered down into the settlement as hundreds of people spilled outside. Most ran out from directly below us—those who lived in the massive cave system—but a few dozen orcs and humans emerged from the houses that stood in a large clearing.

I heard Magnus shouting down at the crowd, but I didn't pay much attention to his words because I was too busy looking for a blonde head. I heard my name being shouted though, and his name too.

Hilda. Where was she?

But there were too many people, and Magnus was soon guiding me toward our supply-laden wagon. We'd stocked up on supplies at the outpost this morning before departing for his realm.

He dragged the wagon toward the path that led down into the settlement, beckoning me to walk with him. I wanted to rush ahead and start screaming my sister's name, but I forced

myself to remain at Magnus' side, wanting to make a good impression.

I tried to convince myself that after three years, it shouldn't be difficult to wait another few minutes.

Fortunately, Magnus quickened his pace to a jog, and I gladly matched his speed. He shot me a comforting look.

"I know you are anxious, little beauty. We will find her. Soon. I promise." He offered me a pointy-toothed smile that warmed my heart despite my impatience.

I smiled back at him before returning my attention below. Just as we reached the bottom, a familiar face emerged from the crowd.

My heart nearly stopped.

I paused mid-step and stared in disbelief.

Hilda rushed up to me, wearing a confused but joyful look. She held a hybrid baby in her arms that had light green skin and golden hair.

Tears blurred my vision, and I blinked rapidly as I closed the remaining distance between us. After all these years, we'd finally been reunited.

"Lorna?" She grinned wide and laughed, then promptly burst into tears. "I can't believe it's you!"

A tall male orc appeared at her side, and she handed the man her baby. Then she threw her arms out and we hugged and cried and laughed for what felt like hours.

I heard Magnus' voice and realized he must be speaking to the man holding Hilda's baby.

"How are you here?" Hilda asked, grabbing my hand and moving us to the edge of the crowd. "How is this possible?"

"It's a long story," I said, my heart sinking somewhat. Because the story started with our mother's death. She had no idea Mama had passed away, and I regretted that I'd come here bearing bad news.

But to my shock, a knowing look entered her eyes and she said, “Mama died. Didn’t she? And after she died, you were free to leave Yorkstown because you no longer had to watch over her and protect her.”

I squeezed her hand. “Yes, Mama died recently. I’m so sorry to bring you such sad news. I wish it were different. I wish she was still alive and could’ve come with me.”

“What happened?” she asked.

“A quick illness took her. Started with a high fever and she faded fast. I called for a healer, but nothing worked. I stayed in Yorkstown long enough to see her buried, then I left. Our father is still alive, in case you are curious. And yes, he’s still an asshole.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Hilda said. “I wrote so many letters, but I never got any replies from you or Mama. I always suspected our father was throwing them away.”

Before I could respond, Magnus and the orc who held Hilda’s baby approached us. The crowd swelled around us as people cheered and shouted words of welcome.

Hilda smiled at the man holding her baby and placed her hand upon his arm. “Lorna, I would like you to meet my mate, Finn the Brave. And this is our daughter, Olivia.”

I didn’t miss the affectionate glance Hilda shared with Finn, and relief and happiness spread through me. Thank the Goddess. Just as Magnus had speculated, my sister had indeed married again within the Haxxall clan.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Finn,” I said. “And you too, Olivia.” I giggled when the baby scrunched her nose up and made a cute gurgling noise.

Finn gave me a deep nod in greeting. “And I am glad to meet you, Lorna. I have heard a lot about you, and it pleases me that you have decided to join our clan.”

Hilda hugged me again. “I could scarcely believe it when you and Magnus appeared on the cliff and he announced your arrival and introduced you as his new bride. I am so happy for

you, Lorna.” She grinned. “I’m happy for me too, for now I have my annoying little sister back in my life.”

I made a face at her. “Lies! I was never annoying.”

I looked up when a shadow fell over us, and my eyes widened at the sight of an impossibly tall orc that could be none other than Erik the Giant. And beside him stood two couples, and an older orc who resembled Erik the Giant (though not in height) stood close as well. I glanced at Magnus as he rushed to greet the newcomers.

Introductions were made. So many introductions.

First, I met Magnus’ father, who welcomed me with a warm hug. Then I met Magnus’ brother, Thorsen the Savage, and his mate Freya. I was instantly struck by Freya’s beauty, and when I noticed her pointed ears, it suddenly clicked in my mind. She wasn’t human. She was a Seelie, just as Magnus had suspected she might be, based on what he’d discovered at the abandoned orc base. I found myself eager to become better acquainted with her, but before we could do more than say hello, the introductions continued.

I also met Gregor the Slayer (who was Magnus’ cousin) and his mate, a human woman by the name of Catrin.

“And, last but certainly not least, this is my uncle, Tormond the Bear,” Magnus said.

Like his older brother, Tormond also gathered me in a quick hug and whispered encouraging words of welcome into my ear. “I know this must be overwhelming for you, Lorna, but our people are always joyous when a Guardian returns with a bride. Please know that you are welcome here and you are part of our family now. Magnus is my nephew, which means you are now my niece.”

His words touched me, and I found myself blinking back more tears. “Thank you, Tormond. That is very kind of you.”

Erik the Giant lifted his hand in the air and moved to the center of the crowd. “Tonight, we will celebrate the return of my son and his new mate!” he shouted, and the crowd cheered louder.

Hilda wrapped an arm around me, hugging me from the side. She grinned at me through her tears, which hadn't abated in the least. But they were happy tears. I didn't think I'd ever seen her cry tears of joy, and Goddess how my heart lifted at the sight.

She kissed my cheek. "Welcome to your new home, sister. I can't wait to show you around."

CHAPTER 29



Magnus

HOME. I WAS FINALLY HOME.

I glanced at Lorna, who was fast asleep, and crawled into bed with her. I drew her close, hugging her from behind. A soft sigh left her, and she snuggled deeper under the furs.

I'd wanted to join her earlier in the night, but I'd needed to speak with the men of my family first. My father and brother especially, as I'd wanted to inform them that the human male who'd killed my mother was dead. It was a somber conversation, but I hoped it would bring them peace to know the tall man was gone from this life and likely burning in the fires.

Lorna turned in my arms and her eyes fluttered open. She covered a yawn and blinked sleepily at me, and a dreamy smile soon spread across her face.

"Is the celebration still going on?" she asked.

"I think it's finally over," I said, kissing her forehead. "I haven't heard music or laughter outside for a while now."

We'd stayed at the party until late in the night, but when Lorna had become tired, I'd taken her home and tucked her into bed.

"Your sister appears to be happy with her mate," I said, hoping to reassure her, just in case she harbored any doubts. "And I've known Finn the Brave for many years. He is an

honorable male who holds a high status among my people—he is one of our most skilled hunters.”

“Hilda told me that she’s in love with him,” Lorna said, covering another yawn. She placed a hand upon my chest, her fingers lightly stroking. “She says she cared about Tavish, too, and that she was devastated when he died in a landslide while out hunting about two years ago, but I’m glad she was able to find happiness again. This almost feels like a dream, doesn’t it? Hilda’s in love with Finn, and they have a beautiful daughter together, and I am in love with you. And the people of your clan are more welcoming than I’d expected. I had a great deal of fun tonight getting to know everyone, especially your family members. Your uncle was especially sweet to me.”

I tangled my legs with hers underneath the furs, then leaned in to kiss her, cupping her face in my hands. It was a soft, sensual kiss that drew a whimper from her throat and a growl from mine.

The scent of her need filled the air, and my cock hardened in response.

I helped her out from under the furs and situated her on her hands and knees.

Then I mounted her from behind, holding her hips as I thrust into her slowly, taking my time as I claimed her. Her golden hair cascaded over her shoulders, and her back arched as she pushed back against me, urging me to plunge deeper.

“Please, Magnus. *Please*. You can go faster.”

“If this is a dream, little beauty,” I said, placing my lips at her ear, “I pray I never wake up.”



Thanks for reading *Fated to the Orc*! I hope you enjoyed Magnus + Lorna’s story.

Want to read Gregor + Catrin’s story?

Promised to the Orc (Orc Guardian Brides, Book One) is
[available here](#)

Want to read Thorsen + Freya's story?

Rescued by the Orc (Orc Guardian Brides, Book Two) is
[available here](#)



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ALSO IN THE ORC GUARDIAN BRIDES
SERIES

PROMISED TO THE ORC

(Orc Guardian Brides, Book One)

I've been promised to an Orc Guardian.

He's coming for me soon and I will have no choice—I'll have to leave the realm of humans and marry the huge, fearsome beast known as Gregor the Slayer.

Orc Guardians are said to be cruel and unfeeling. I struggle to accept my lot in life, and I won't lie—I'm tempted to run and hide. But deep down, I know I wouldn't get far, and the last thing I wish to do is bring down an orc's vengeance upon my village... or upon myself.

I soon learn that while Gregor has a fierce, vengeful side, when it comes to me, he can be gentle and... sweet. He's also intensely protective and possessive of me.

But we come from different realms, and his world is so very different from my own.

Will I survive marriage to a big, growly orc?

[BUY NOW](#)



RESCUED BY THE ORC

(Orc Guardian Brides, Book Two)

A big Orc Guardian just bought me.

I've spent my whole life in hiding, exiled from my people, most of whom are dead.

I tell myself loneliness is a strength, even though deep down I long for companionship.

The first time I leave my hiding place, I'm captured by hunters and taken to a seaside village, where I'm put on the auction block, my pointed ears on full display before a crowd of stunned humans... and one gigantic (and incredibly handsome) orc who is determined to cast the winning bid.

I think Thorsen the Savage bought me to keep as a plaything, and I'm fully prepared to use my light fae magic against him. But when he removes the iron bands from my wrists, helps heal me, and promises to take me far from the enemies who would hunt me down, I decide to make a deal with him.

I'll become his wife if he hides me away in the Orc Realm.

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ALSO BY SUE MERCURY

ALIEN WARRIOR'S TREASURE

(Vaxxlian Matchmakers #1)

He aches to claim her.

When Molly is rescued by a sexy Vaxxlian named Gavvin, she expects the muscle-bound warrior to carry her off and claim her as his bride—whether she's willing or not. Instead, he heals her wounds and promises not to hurt her, and his gentle but protective demeanor wins her over. But when he eventually turns cold and pushes her away, she's left confused and heartbroken. Determined to make a life for herself on planet New Vaxx, she visits Vaxxlian Matchmakers—only to receive shocking news about the identity of her soul mate.

Gavvin is an outcast among his people, and he has no plans to take a bride. But his self-control is tested when he comes across Molly, a human woman in distress. She's the sweetest, most beautiful female he's ever met, and her enticing scent calls up long-buried primal needs. Pushing her away is the hardest thing he's ever done, but it's for the best. How could any female find happiness mated to an outcast like him? But when Molly's life is threatened, he'll risk everything to save the sweet human who's stolen his heart.

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Royal Alien Mate (Savage Martians, Book One)

He's determined to conquer her heart...

Desperate to save her parents from debtors' prison, Esmay signs up as an alien mail order bride. She'll travel to Mars to become a savage alien's mate, and in exchange for her sacrifice, all her family's debt will be forgiven. She prays she'll find some semblance of happiness on Mars and hopes her future husband treats her with kindness. But she's stunned to discover the muscle-bound blue alien she's been matched with is Prince Vaath, a fearsome warrior who once led a deadly battle against Earth. How can she willingly give herself to an alien who killed so many of her people?

Prince Vaath is aware many of his followers are hesitant to mate with humans, but after losing most of their females, it's necessary that they claim as many human females as possible in order to procreate and strengthen their numbers. He's shocked by the possessiveness he feels when he first looks upon golden-haired Esmay, and long-buried instincts soon rise to the surface as he claims his new princess time and time again. He knows she's afraid of him and believes him to be a savage, but he can't get enough of the little human who incites his desires, and he is determined to one day win her heart. But dark forces are gathering, and it will take all his power to keep Esmay safe from harm.

[BUY NOW](#)



Rozar: Vaxxlian Alien Mail Order Brides #1

The otherworldly stranger is the biggest, fiercest looking alien warrior she's ever seen...and she's already agreed to become his mate.

Nadia knows if she stays on Earth, her mob boss ex-husband's goons will eventually find her. When the opportunity to become a Vaxxlian Mail Order Bride arises, she can't sign up fast enough. She's soon matched with a huge, fierce-looking alien warrior named Rozar who wants to mate with her upon their very first meeting. Whoa there. Slow down. She's desperate to escape Earth, but she also wants to be sure Rozar is a kind, decent alien before she commits to spending her life with him. She rushed into her first marriage and look what that got her—a one-way ticket into the Witness Protection Program. But the clock is ticking. The ship that brought Rozar to Earth departs in two weeks. Should she take a chance on the handsome otherworldly stranger whose kisses make her melt? Or should she rush back to her hideaway and hope for the best?

One glance at the little human called Nadia and Rozar knows she's the female meant to become his. Her bottomless blue eyes mesmerize him and her sweet demeanor calls up his protective side. He wants nothing more than to claim her and bring her back to New Vaxx. But the dark-haired beauty is reluctant to mate with him, despite his promises to always keep her safe and provide for her and their future offspring. Before he can convince her of his devotion, the little human disappears without a trace. Word of her dangerous past reaches him and he's more determined than ever to protect her, even if vanquishing her enemies means she no longer has a need to leave Earth. But he's just as determined to claim her as his, and Rozar will do whatever it takes to convince Nadia she's meant to be his female for all time.

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Vaxxlian Mates: The Complete Series

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Desperate to escape war-torn Earth, young women are lining up in droves to submit applications to Mail Order Human. If chosen, they must journey to faraway planets to meet their new alien mates. Of course, when you combine space travel, nervous mail order brides, panty-melting **alpha male aliens**, and the occasional villain... something is bound to go wrong.

Cultures collide and passion burns hot as a supernova in this collection of five sci-fi alien romances penned by *USA Today* Bestselling Author Sue Lyndon writing as Sue Mercury.

Featuring:

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Alien's Princess Bride
Alien's Reluctant Bride
Alien's Orphan Bride
Alien's Beloved Bride

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SUE MERCURY WRITING AS SUE LYNDON

Note: Sue Lyndon is Sue Mercury's kinkier, naughtier alter ego whose books contain elements of bdsm and tend to be darker.

SURRENDER

(Kall Alien Warriors, Book One)

The spoils of war are being divided...

As Fiona struggles to survive in the aftermath of a brutal war, she worries her sick mother won't make it long without the medication she so desperately needs. When turncoats offer a way to keep her mother safe, she can't refuse—even though it means marrying Merokk, a fearsome Kall warrior, and posing as the First Daughter, Betsy Carson. The turncoats assure her the marriage will be in name only—but she soon learns Merokk not only intends to consummate their union, but he expects her to share his bed nightly. Furthermore, she will be subject to his rules and firm discipline.

He's been given a human female...

Kall warrior Merokk has mixed feelings about retiring from battle and marrying a human woman, but it's his duty to his people and he can't refuse. One look at Betsy and he's filled with the powerful urge to conquer the beauty who's been given to him as the spoils of war. He enjoys taming the headstrong human female and, as the months pass, discovers his feelings for his little wife run deep. But when he learns of her deceit after the real Betsy Carson surfaces, Merokk's new world comes crashing down. Can he learn to forgive Fiona, or will he spend the rest of their lives punishing her for a crime she never wanted to commit?

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ZYLONN'S HUMAN BRIDE

(Tarrkuan Masters, Book One)

The stern alien expects her absolute obedience.

Nova doesn't want to leave home, but she doesn't have a choice. Earth has agreed to provide the Tarrkuans with a steady supply of fertile human females—and she's found herself among them. When her intended, Zylonn, catches her speaking out against the trade agreement only minutes before their wedding ceremony, the no-nonsense alien scolds her and promises her a strapping. His stern words both surprise her and leave her quivering with anticipation. Will the handsome blue alien really punish her on their wedding night? And does he really expect her to call him *Master*?

Zylonn has been waiting for his human bride his entire life. One glance at Nova and he knows the reluctant female is meant to be his. She's the loveliest creature he's ever seen, and he can't stop stroking her beautiful golden hair or staring into her expressive blue eyes. He's shocked by her rebellious behavior, but he's determined to tame her, claim her, and make her his in every possible way.

A passion that knows no bounds soon flourishes between Zylonn and his precious little human. Once is never enough. He's driven to claim her again and again, and her sweet surrender calms the darkest parts of him. But when an old enemy threatens their union, he's forced to reveal a secret side of himself no one has ever seen. Can Zylonn protect the little human who holds his heart?

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HER ALIEN BEAST

The little human has awakened my mating instincts.

I don't think I can be gentle.

My blood heats to feverish levels whenever I look upon the pretty human female called Amira. I burn with the need to claim her, body and soul, to sink my teeth into her and mark her as mine forever.

But we come from different worlds and she was promised to another long ago, a male she is desperate to escape. I've promised to keep her safe and help her avoid the forced marriage, but can I protect her from myself? My blood keeps getting hotter, the urge to hold her down and claim her as my mate becoming stronger by the day.

Eventually, I'll give in to the dark passions coursing through my veins. The Kaxxloran mating urge is coming upon me. It's only a matter of time until I lose all control...

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KENAN'S MATE

(Kleaxian Warriors, Book One)

I've been taken by a fierce alien warrior, and my life is no longer my own.

My name is Laylah. On my eighteenth birthday, the Kleaxians attacked and killed all the human males aboard the Stargazer. The females were kept as mates or slaves. I was taken as a mate. Lucky me.

The huge alien who claimed me is called Prince Kenan. He says he'll never let me go—that we are bonded for life. When I defy him, he punishes me in the most humiliating ways imaginable. But sometimes he's tender and loving. I try to be good so he doesn't hurt me.

I don't know what scares me more—that I'll never escape Prince Kenan...or that I'm starting to fall for my captor

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DARK EMBRACE: THE COMPLETE SERIES

Dominant husbands, reluctant brides, and scorching hot passion...

The year is 2689, and as mankind emerges from a great societal collapse, arranged marriages and marriages of convenience have become the norm. Not only that, but wives are expected to obey their husbands in all things, or suffer firm, shameful consequences. In this deliciously naughty collection, strict but loving husbands take their blushing brides masterfully in hand, teaching them what it means to be owned, body and soul...

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ABOUT SUE MERCURY

Sue Mercury loves to write sci-fi, fantasy, and paranormal romance. Big sexy aliens, growly orcs, and other smoking hot otherworldly heroes make her heart go pitter patter. She lives in Maryland with her husband, children, and super adorable furbabies. She also writes romance of the much kinkier variety under the name Sue Lyndon.

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