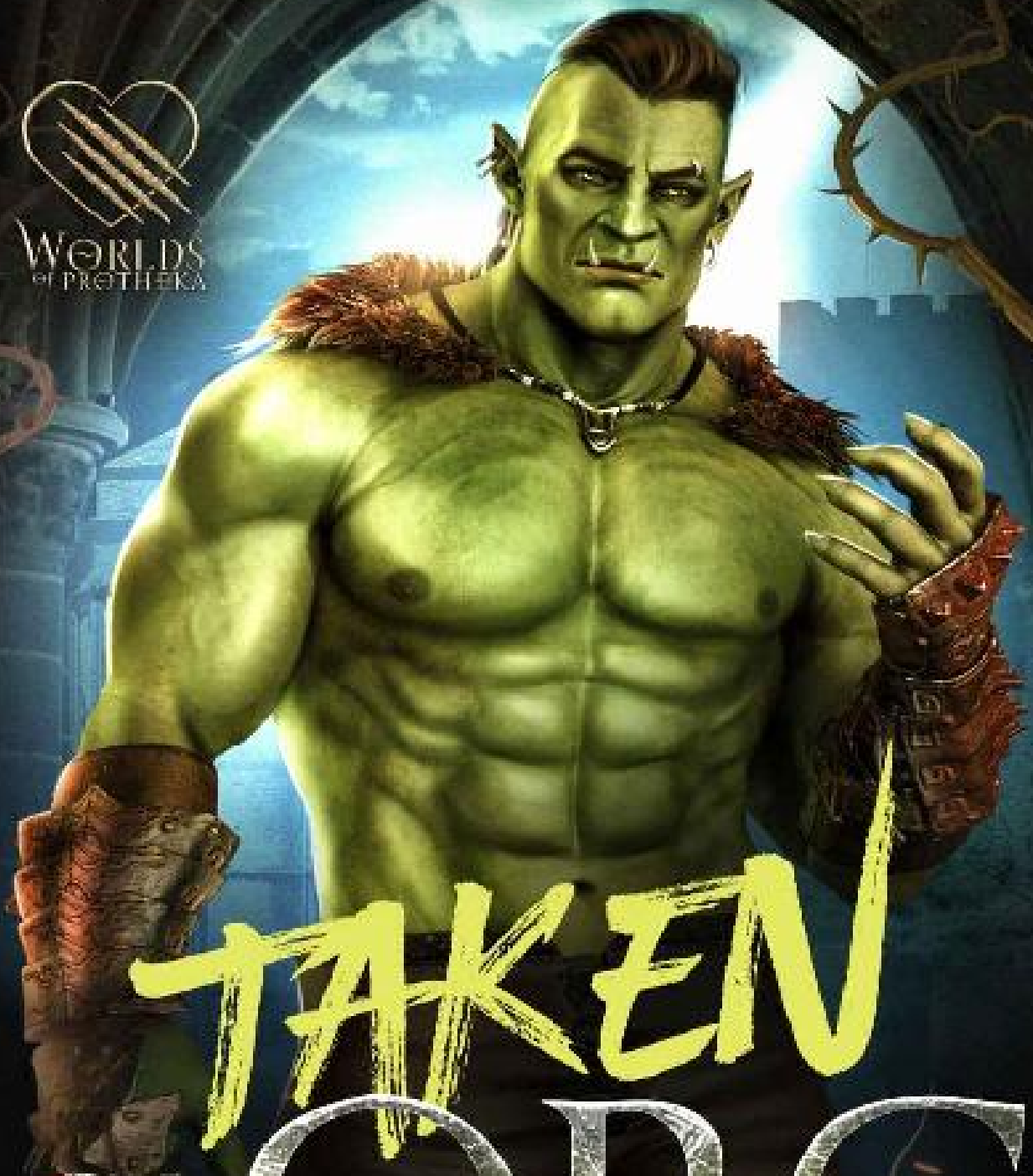




WORLDS  
OF PROTHEKA



BY  
THE

ORC

CRIME LORD

CELESTE KING

# TAKEN BY THE ORC GRIME LORD

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CELESTE KING

PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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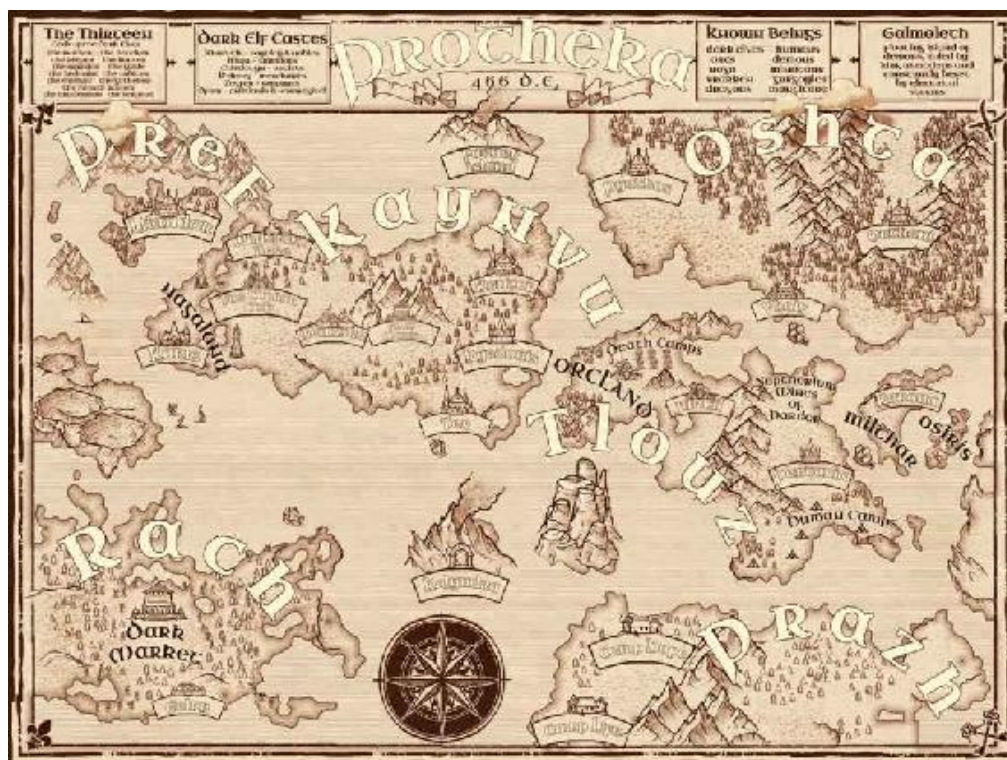
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# THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



## KINLEY

I am woken by the wind.

The wind, rippling and crashing through the sky at a thousand paces per second, comes booming down against the roof of my apartment block before dawn and sends me jolting into consciousness.

I groan as I roll over onto my back, wincing as the wind comes roaring in from the east like a herald for the sun, which I am sure is just an hour or two away.

When I finally get out of bed, swinging my legs over the side of the low, old mattress, I wince when my bare feet make contact with the tiled floor. As I wake up, my daily morning routine becomes a race against the crash and roar of the wind, trying to get ready before I freeze to death.

“This is what you get for living in Tlouz,” I grumble to myself.

I walk around the screen that separates the sleeping area from the bathroom and fight back a yawn.

I could say a lot of bad things about the continent which is my home. I wouldn’t be the first. Tlouz is a wasteland.

*Tlouz is a death trap. Tlouz is a monster. Tlouz is an open coffin, and we’re all already dead.*

The words repeat in my head like a song as I complete my morning ablutions. My bathroom isn’t much of anything. It is a toilet, a rusty, yellow sink, and a large bucket that I only fill

up once a year when I have saved enough money to heat up the amount of water that will fill the bucket.

The bucket rattles across the floor when there is another boom of wind – a boom that could rival the thunder we get during summer storms – and my skin prickles, not from the cold water I’ve just splashed over it but from pure fright.

“Get yourself together, girl.”

By the time I walk back around the screen, the dusky gray of the morning has lightened. Now, my bedroom is almost orange as weak sunlight starts to stretch over the horizon.

*Time is running out*, I think to myself as I pull on my factory coveralls, and for a second there is complete and pure silence. The wind settles.

*Get to work. Now is not a good time to remember how alone you are.*

I pull my boots and gloves on, and then finally pull on an old coat with a high collar that will protect me from Tlouz’s ruthless, unforgiving elements.

The building is waking up when I leave. I might be lonely in the tiny fifth-floor apartment that I call home, but right now all around me, the other humans who work in Tlouz’s various factories are also either preparing to leave for work or coming home after the night shift.

Jurtil is still dark when I hop off the lowest step leading from my apartment block to the street, despite the sun rising somewhere in the desert.

“It’s the damn mountains,” I murmur to myself as I reach into my coat pocket for the small sandwich that I shoved into it before I left. “They always keep the light out.”

Jurtil looks dangerous because it is dangerous. It is also almost always dark and grubby and quite disgusting.

One of its only redeeming qualities is that everyone leaves each other alone. Life might be hard, but at least there aren’t many dark elves enslaving humans around here.

I am walking down my usual route when I see it. When I see *them*. Three orcs standing in a doorway, holding what is clearly an unconscious dark elf woman.

*She probably deserved it*, I think. I nod politely at the orcs before I withdraw into myself and pick up the pace.

That dark elf woman might have deserved it, but I know that I don't, so I walk quickly enough to get out of the vicinity before the orcs can place a target on my back.

The factory that I work in lies at the center of Jurtil, and it is enormous compared to my five-story apartment building, which was once the largest building I had ever seen. It must be twenty or thirty stories high and looms overhead like an avenging god, come down to smite us.

But it is only a building. A building made of dead things where living things like me go inside to produce more dead things.

I let out a raspy chuckle, nearly choking on my bread as I walk into the front office and reach for my timecard.

I am one of the first people to arrive for the morning shift, and I greet some of those who are walking off the production floor, ready to head home.

I swap places with Nina, a woman who is eight months pregnant but cannot afford not to work, and I look thoughtfully at her before I take off my coat, fold it up, and bundle it underneath the table.



THERE IS a word for what and who I have become since starting to work in the factory.

*Apathetic.*

"Apathy." I murmur the word to myself just so that I can feel what it is like in my mouth.

Sarah, the woman standing across from me manning the other part of the machine, looks up at me, her eyebrows raised.

I shrug at her. I wouldn't be the first person to start talking to myself in this place.

We stand for twelve hours a day and get a thirty-minute lunch break. A lot of us have stopped drinking water throughout the day because the bathrooms are too dirty to use, and we'll be penalized if we leave our stations more than once.

There are no open windows or doors, and after the first hour, the cool, crisp morning air has faded. All we're left with for the rest of the day is air as hot and arid as the air out in the fucking desert.

It is noisy and hot on the production floor and the air is somehow thick and wet, but sharp and dry, at the same time.

*Apathy.*

By my sixth hour on the production floor, my breathing has slowed down, and my skin is warm. Sweat has pooled in the small of my back, and my heartbeat would probably be undetectable to a Healer.

My mind is sluggish, and I am moving slightly slower, and my hands and legs are straining for relief.

And yet, I wouldn't change this for the world. I don't care enough to change my life. I don't have the power to change my life even if I could.

And so, I continue to work every day, even though I can feel it killing me. I continue to nod politely at the beings who run Jurtil, and I continue to avoid helping the dark elf women who become their victims.

Maybe I should have helped that woman. Female solidarity and all that. Yet, I couldn't find any pity within myself to extend to her.

*She probably deserved it,* I think viciously to myself as I insert another part into the machine.



IT IS close to eight at night when I leave the factory. Sarah, the woman who heard me talking to myself, walks me out.

Maybe she thinks I'm crazy and wants to protect me. Sarah is older, and though I have never been close to her, I know that she is somewhat of a mother hen to the other girls who work on the production floor.

"You shouldn't be walking alone like this," she chides me. "You do know that Rachel went missing a few weeks ago? We should honestly all walk home together."

"I'll be fine." My voice is mild, devoid of emotion. I don't really have the energy to listen to Sarah preach, so at the first moment, I excuse myself and turn down into a side street that will cut my walk home in half.

It is slightly more dangerous, and Sarah will probably have a stroke just thinking of me trying to walk home, but maybe when I walk into work tomorrow, she'll shut up about my safety in the future.

Sometimes I think Tlouz, and Jurtill by extension, are alive.

Sometimes I can see the sky take a deep breath before a gust of wind explodes across the cosmos. Sometimes I can convince myself that the sun is chasing after the moon like a scorned lover.

And now, as shadows stretch and bloom and shrink around me, I am more sure than I have ever been that Tlouz has no need for the creatures who dwell upon it.

It is alive all on its own.

The shadows begin to laugh raucously.

*Not shadows. Orcs.*

I am not sure if I am afraid. I have been standing for twelve hours, so I'm probably too tired to be afraid. But no one, especially no human woman, wants to walk into a clan of orcs when it is this dark.

My vision is hazy from exhaustion, so I slow my walk and lift my hand to rub my weary eyes.

The orcs haven't spotted me yet, so I remain still, to try and figure out how painful my potential death could be.

There are five of them standing on the steps outside a pub, and they're exchanging sacks of what are probably coins for large wooden boxes. One of them looks up and in my direction, and he stares at me for a second before looking away.

*Okay, they probably won't kill me for this,* I think to myself before I decide to walk further.

I want to get home before midnight because Jurtil becomes more dangerous the later it gets.

I pass the pub as I walk by the group of orcs. Heavy footsteps echo down the alley, so loudly as to rival thunder.

I throw myself against the wall, flattening myself against it, my behavior entirely instinctual before I turn around.

And I see him.

## RURGASH

**M**y base of operations lies at the center of Jurtill in a run-down apartment complex, occupied by myself and the orcs who work for me.

“Winter is coming, and it is coming fast,” I remark, though this fact is belied by the dry autumn heat and the violent winds that threaten to blow the rains away.

But we know winter is coming. We are as sure of this as we are that the sky is blue. Well, as blue as it can get in Jurtill, which has become overrun by factories that pump black smoke into the sky at every opportune and inopportune moment.

Today is inspection day. As the leader of this syndicate, I have to inspect all the goods that we have bought, traded, or stolen to ensure that they’re of good enough quality to use or sell in the future.

But first, before anything, I visit one of the taverns that I acquired a year ago.

A tumbler of zhisk is waiting for me at my usual table, and I sit down on one of the chairs across from Bokk, my right-hand man and the only orc I trust.

“You don’t look very pleased,” I say, my voice low and dark.

Bokk stares moodily down at the plate of orc stew in front of him.

I gesture at the barmaid, a young, voluptuous dark elf woman. Within seconds, I have my own plate of orc stew in



front of me along with a glass of mead.

I finish the zhisk before I start on the food and mead while I wait for Bokk to explain why he looks as though someone has just dragged him face-first through a heap of taura shit.

“You know that dealer who was selling us some good rirzed wine?” Bokk speaks slowly, and I exhale heavily because I know exactly what is coming.

“Yes, I do.” Suddenly I understand why Bokk hasn’t touched his delicious orc stew. The blend of capra meat, fried burgona, and brown sauce might be the most fragrant, decadent thing in the world, but I know if I ate it, it would taste like sawdust.

“Well, it turns out that he has been selling us counterfeit stuff. I don’t know what is in the wine, but I think we’ll have to throw the whole lot away.”

When I look down at the table, my hands have balled into fists, and when I listen closely, I am growling.

The tavern has gone silent, and everyone in it is looking warily in our direction as if waiting for one of us to explode.

But I don’t explode. There’ll be time enough for that later.

“I’ll deal with it,” I tell Bokk and lift my fork and spoon.



JURTEL COMES to life at night. Sometimes in the worst ways. Always in the worst ways.

*This place isn’t fit for life*, I think disparagingly as I look around at the dirt and neglect of the city.

No one cares about Jurtil.

No one cares about Tlouz.

*That is just the way it is.*

The fact that no one cares about this place makes my job a lot easier.

I tighten my grip around the hilt of the club, which is the length and thickness of one of my arms, as I walk down the darkening streets of Tlouz's capital city.

It is mid-autumn in Jurtill, and while there is no sign of winter just yet, the weather has changed almost aggressively.

As I drag the club behind me, the wind picks up, howling and groaning before tearing itself apart and then melding together to form a new current of air that threatens to rip Jurtill apart.

I hold the club, listening to the wind and the conversation taking place in the alley up ahead.

It is when my orcs finally make the purchase from that lying, cheating scum that I decide to make myself known. Rage cracks inside me like a whip, and a low rumbling growl escapes me. It is audible all the way to the other side of the alley.

I lift the club, and the metal tip of it shines in the hazy moonlight. I stride forward.

The orcs have heard me, and I watch as the vendor that they're buying from – the vendor who is cheating the idiots – scrambles to make his escape.

When I bring the club down, it splits the orc's skull into five clean lines. I brought the club down with a howling yell, and the sound of my scream echoes off the buildings around us.

The other orcs have taken off, and I am left alone in the doorway of the tavern, which emptied swiftly, with the dying orc.

The evidence of his dishonesty is on display in front of me. The bottles of counterfeit rirzed wine smashed to the ground. The liquid, more green than blue which should have been our first sign, has spread across the ground.

I think my rage-filled scream must have silenced Jurtill, because, at that moment, I cannot hear anything except the rattling choke of the dying orc's last breaths.

“Let this be a message,” I speak loudly, as I wipe the blood off my face and chest. I know that someone will be listening. “This will be the same fate for anyone who tries to cheat Rurgash.”

I turn then, and that is when I see her.

She is a waif of a thing. She isn't very tall, and her body is small and thin. She is almost... delicate.

Human.

*She's human!*

I am still wiping blood away when I walk over to the shadows that have wrapped themselves around her as if to protect her. Maybe she was frozen with fear, but my sudden movement must shake her out of it because her body jerks and she jumps to her feet.

I see only snatches of her before she runs away.

Long, dark hair. Rich, dark brown hair. Hair the color of wealth. Bright, sharp, slightly frenzied eyes. Eyes that hold a multitude of colors inside them.

A full, slightly pouty mouth, high cheekbones, and skin that could very easily bronze in the warm sunlight.

She moves quickly, as quickly as a startled daette, and I know I should follow her. I know I should kill her because I don't like leaving witnesses to my crimes.

But I don't follow her.

I can't.

I don't know why, but something inside me slows me down and makes me drop the club. I watch as she runs jerkily down the alleyway before turning a corner and disappearing.

*You should go after her. You should find her. Silence her.*

The words repeat in my head as several of my orcs appear from the other side of the alleyway and start the clean-up process.

I stand, wooden and unmoving while they move around me, as images of the human woman's face flash across my line of vision. Jurtill vanishes, and all I am left with are bright eyes and long, dark brown hair.

*Hazel. The color of her eyes is hazel.*

"What do you want us to do with the body, boss?" one of Bokk's cousins asks me.

I am dragged from my hazel-colored daydream, and I have to think for several long minutes before I can form a coherent answer.

I look down at the dead orc reflectively as I think about the kind of message I want his death to send.

*Hazel. The color of her eyes is hazel.*

"Take the body back to his family. And ensure that you slip some of the good, *original* rirzed wine we have in stock to whichever dark elf comes around asking questions."

I walk away from the scene and down the alleyway, in the path of the human woman. The alleyway stretches into a crossroads of sorts, and I stand at the center of it, my body turned in the direction that the human woman fled.

*You need to snap out of it. You need to get yourself together. You cannot lose yourself over a human woman.*

I cannot help but replay the moment that I first saw her in my head. My heart trips and stumbles and then beats into furious, uncontrollable life as I remember the fear on the human woman's face.

*You should have killed her. I cannot believe that you left her alive.*

I know why I left her alive. She was beautiful. One of the most beautiful women I have ever seen.

*Human women are forbidden for a reason,* I think sternly to myself as I turn and start walking back down the alleyway.

The body is gone, and the broken bottles have been cleaned up.

Bokk's younger cousin looks at me with blatant curiosity on his face, and I realize how strange I must look just wandering up and down the alleyway.

"Go home," I say. My voice is rough and hoarse, and he nods before scurrying away.

*Human women are forbidden for a reason*, I tell myself again, and I tighten my grip around the hilt of the club.

The walk back to my base of operations is a long one.

*This place isn't fit for the living*, I think to myself, although my thoughts are distracted.

But it is true. Jurtil has become a city for the lost and for the forgotten. A city for the abandoned and the orphaned.

It isn't for life, for the living, but somehow, everyone on this godsforsaken continent has made living here work.

*Human women are forbidden for a reason*, I try to convince myself endlessly as I walk into the apartment block that I call home.

But I know that no amount of talking myself out of it will help.

The forbidden has revealed herself to me, and I broke all the rules so quickly that I didn't even need to catch my breath.

All I know is that she might be forbidden, but I do need to see her again.

## KINLEY

Halfway up the stairs to my apartment, I realize, with strangled horror, that some of the dead orc's blood landed on me too.

The building is noisy tonight. A baby cries directly above, and a violent domestic dispute filters up from below. I wince at the ear-piercing shriek as the woman is battered below me.

*The orc didn't even have time to scream*, I think shakily. Bile rises in my throat so quickly that I cannot help but retch on the stairs.

*Well, you wouldn't be the first to throw up in this godsforsaken place*, I think to myself as I grab the railing and force myself upstairs.

I don't know how, but I manage to drag myself up to my apartment. When I finally throw myself through the door, I slam all the locks on the door closed.

"Why are you covered in blood?"

Azaria's voice is loud and demanding, and I cannot help but burst into hysterical tears at the sound of her voice.

"Oh dear gods," she says, marching me to the bedroom.

"I'm never wearing those again," I say once I've stripped off my clothes and washed myself in the cold water that comes from the sink.

I am wearing a pair of threadbare old pajamas. Azaria hands me a bowl of soup.

“What happened?” she finally asks me after I have eaten and warmed up.

When I look down at my hands, I realize that they are shaking slightly.

“He killed him,” I whisper. I can feel Azaria’s body stiffening next to mine. “This orc. I was walking home...”

I jump when a violent gust of wind roils across the sky and slams into the roof of our building. For a second, I picture a rift in the sky opening up and monsters crawling out. Every single one of the monsters has an orc’s face.

“He killed him,” I say again. Azaria reaches for my hands, and I lean into her gratefully. “I was walking home after work. And this orc came down the alleyway. And I know I shouldn’t have walked down it, especially because I was alone.”

Azaria sucks in a sharp hiss of breath, and I nod in answer.

“I was alone, and he killed him right in front of me. And he saw me. He *saw me*. But he let me go.”

“He what?” I flinch at the sharp, high pitch of Azaria’s voice. She pulls her hands away from mine, gets up from the bed, and starts to pace around the room.

“He let me go. He saw me. He saw me clearly. And he gave me time to get away.”

“These fucking orcs! They’re ruining this city!” Azaria tosses her light blonde hair behind her.

Her ocean-blue eyes are narrowed and angry.

I cannot help but laugh drily at the righteous anger on Azaria’s face.

“It’s not like this city was ever great to begin with.” I shrug as my mind wanders back to the orc’s face.

He was tall and big, as all orcs are. But his largeness didn’t look uncomfortable or unattractive.

Some orcs can look pretty terrible.

But this one, even in his murderous rage, was almost handsome.

*Not almost. Definitely handsome.* I decide this as my hands stop shaking.

The orc's large mass was perfectly contoured muscle. I don't think he had an ounce of body fat on him. His skin was dark, a shade of green that doesn't exist in Jurtil, or even in Tlouz. His skin was the kind of green that maybe exists in Oshta or even Nagaland.

"His eyes," I find myself murmuring. Azaria turns to me and when I look at her, her eyebrows are raised. Her eyes are still narrowed and angry.

"His eyes were so bright. So yellow. So yellow. And he had tusks."

"So a typical orc then," Azaria says dismissively.

"Yeah." I don't know why, but I find myself trying to defend this nameless orc from Azaria's anger. "But when I looked at him...."

My voice trails off as Azaria looks at me with a confused frown.

"Kinley? What are you talking about? Why do you sound like that?"

I shudder slightly as I remember his eyes and the way they flashed dangerously. I shudder again when I remember the lines of his body.

"I just." My words stumble awkwardly out of my mouth as I try to explain to Azaria what I felt when the orc looked me in the eye. "When I looked at him, there was just this flash. This...charged feeling. This connection that is going to make it impossible for me to forget him."

Azaria snorts derisively and shakes her head again.

"I say this because I love you, but you sound crazy. But I think you're in shock. You witnessed a murder."



“I know I’m in shock.” I don’t mind admitting it to Azaria or myself. “But I don’t think this had anything to do with shock.”

Azaria pulls me to my feet and then pulls me into a hug. I sag into her arms, and we just cling to each other for a long time.

Azaria speaks very sternly when she finally pulls away from me.

“You were very lucky to get away alive. He could have killed you. I don’t know why he didn’t kill you if I’m being quite honest with you.”

I nod obediently at Azaria. Despite the weird way I feel about the murderous orc, she is right. That orc should have killed me.

“Promise me two things,” she says as she prepares to leave. “Please, promise me you’ll never walk home alone from work ever again.”

“I promise,” I say, still obedient.

She exhales heavily. “Secondly, promise me that you won’t go looking for this orc. Just because you think you felt something.”

I nod in agreement, but I do not trust myself to speak, because I am quite sure that I cannot verbally agree with Azaria.

Azaria looks at me with her suspicious blue eyes, and I think she knows that every part of me is screaming to go out looking for that orc.

“Fine. Let me get going,” Azaria says. I hug her again, thanking her for the food and for taking care of me.

I exhale into the silence when Azaria finally leaves my tiny apartment. Then I turn to walk to the window next to my bed. The wind has quieted down, I see when I look outside. Now, instead of cracking the sky open, it is simply pushing leaves around in the street.

I spot Azaria's light head bobbing away from the apartment block, and I follow it with my eye all the way down the street until she walks out of sight.

It is late at night when I finally try to get into bed. But I find myself standing close to my bed, yet unable to get in.

My mind races forwards replaying the death of that orc.

*The murder of the orc*, I think firmly to myself.

I remember every element of that moment. I remember the roar of the orc with the flashing yellow eyes. I remember the way the air smelled and tasted like smoke and smog from the nearby eateries and factories.

I can still feel the harsh ripple of wind against my skin, and I can still hear the growling of the orc. It is low and rumbling and vibrates through the air as if he is in the room with me.

Finally, I start pacing up and down in the tiny bedroom. I clutch my chest and try not to gasp when the shock of meeting the orc's yellow eyes rocks through me again and again. Eventually, I pace long enough that my legs start to become tired, and I collapse into bed.

But my mind is still busy, and I am unable to sleep.

Now, instead of remembering the murder of the orc, all I can think of is the murderer.

All I can think of is the way his rage rippled through his muscles. The way he roared and growled and spat.

*I could smell him*, I think to myself. I could smell the orc. He smelled like sweet musk and mead.

My skin prickles, and I groan as I turn onto my side. I know the scent of him will linger with me for days if not weeks.

The wind has picked up again, and I cannot help but wonder if this morning's insane wind was a harbinger of what was to come this evening.

*You need to be rational about this. You need to think clearly about this.*

I lay on my side and look at the wall. I know that I am right, and I know that Azaria was right.

Orcs are dangerous. At this point, everyone in Jurtil lives by the rules of the orcs and not the rules of the dark elves.

*As if the dark elves' rules made sense to begin with.*

The orcs have kept away from us humans, and we manage to have relatively good lives when we compare our lives to the lives of humans on other continents.

*That's one of the very few good things about living in Tlouz, I think sleepily.*

But just because the orcs have kept us safe from the dark elves doesn't mean they've kept us safe from themselves. We're still subject to their whims and brutal desires. That orc tonight could have killed me and never faced a single consequence. We're disposable to them.

*Why did he let me live?*

As I fall asleep, I realize that it doesn't matter how many times I remind myself that the orcs are dangerous.

It won't matter.

All I want is to see him again.

## RURGASH

**T**he run-down apartment complex doesn't look like much. In fact, it looks completely abandoned.

The windows of every apartment building are boarded up, and a large stone door obscures the front entrance. No one, not even a dark elf, would be able to move the stone.

Only an orc would be able to.

Anyone who walked past would think it was completely empty and possibly condemned. But it doesn't matter, because all around me are hidden orcs who are part of my clan, who guard our territory and keep outsiders away.

I walk through the overgrown bushes and trees that obscure a secret back entrance, which is a crumbling doorway that leads directly to the common areas of the complex.

I have been out all night. After getting rid of the counterfeit wine dealer, I ran a few more errands and then simply walked the city's streets until sunrise.

It is not something I do often, but there are nights when my head is just too full and I know that sleep will be impossible.

And last night was one of those nights.



I WALK until the muscles in my legs start to strain and then, just as the sun is coming up over Tlouz, I decide to walk into a

tavern.

Most of the taverns in Jurtil are now controlled by Udar, despite every effort by the dark elves to remain in control of the city.

The dark elves might technically be in control of the city, and Lord Tursuneth is the official royal in charge of the city, but since Udar's arrival in the city several years ago, their control has been slipping.

The tavern is run by an orc who is closely related to Udar, and he lets me in even though they're about to close.

"Busy night?" I ask him, although I am not really listening to his answer.

"Yes. Although it got quite messy around midnight. One of those dark elf whores came in and overdosed on the orc zhisk. We told her it was too strong for her, but she wouldn't listen."

"Well." I sigh as the tavern owner slides a glass of the zhisk he was referring to over to me. "A dead dark elf is a good dark elf."

Jurtil must be the only city on Protheka where orcs are starting to have the upper hand over the dark elves.

More and more dark elves are falling into poverty in Jurtil, and in Tlouz in general, because there just isn't enough work for them among their own kind.

Now many of them are turning to sex work to get by, and I have known many an orc to get into the sack with a dark elf woman just for the experience.

*I wouldn't recommend it. They're disgusting, dirty things.*



BOKK IS WAITING for me inside the compound.

When we took over the compound, we kept it as is, with each orc taking an apartment and living in it.

The apartment complex is nearly ten stories high, and there are smaller buildings around the apartment building itself, although those do not get used much as the clan is not that large, leaving many of the apartments vacant and perfect for storage.

“Where have you been?” Bokk asks after I have passed through the large pile of factory waste that we used to obscure the compound’s entrances and exits.

“Walking.” I grunt the word, not ready to talk yet.

The compound is silent and empty, and I know that many of my fellow orcs who are not on duty somewhere in Jurtill right now are out getting their jollies, or on their way home and drunk out of their minds.

The silence is good. It allows me to think properly and in a straight line about my experience last night.

*Her eyes were so large. So bright. So perfect. She was so perfect.*

“What?” I realize that I spoke out loud when Bokk looks at me, frowning and questioning what I just said.

The words I say next spill from my mouth unbidden and uncontrollable.

“I saw this woman last night, this human woman. I have never seen a more perfect creature in my life.”

Bokk’s eyes narrow, and he peers at me as if he is examining me.

“Did you get a knock to the head last night? Are you crazy?”

“No!” I take Bokk by the arm and lead him to the courtyard, where we can speak without anyone listening in.

“She didn’t run. When I killed that vendor. Not at first, anyway. She was frozen, and I have never seen anything more beautiful than her, frozen at that moment. Her eyes were hazel, and her hair was so long and dark.”

“Rurgash.” Bokk waves his hands at me wildly to get my attention. “She is a human woman. You cannot fraternize with them. They’re forbidden to us. You would be betraying your clan by following up on this.”

“I know what my duties to the clan are,” I tell him and I start pacing.

I cannot get her face out of my head. She had the creamiest, warmest skin, and thick black lashes rimming her bright eyes.

*She was perfection itself.*

“You should have killed her. You know that is what Udar would have expected,” Bokk tells me sternly.

“I could never have done that,” I say hollowly. And it is the truth.

I could never have laid a hand on her. But Bokk is right. A human woman witnessed the killing.

She could easily expose me, and by extension the rest of the clan, to the dark elves.

*I could never hurt her. She isn’t the kind of woman you hurt. She’s the kind of woman you kill for.*

“You don’t understand,” I tell Bokk. “She’s the kind of woman you kill for.”

“What you don’t understand,” Bokk tells me grimly. “Is that if you don’t end this recklessness, I’ll tell Udar all about this. I might be your right-hand man, but the clan has my loyalty first.”

*You have to agree with him. Just for now. Just make him believe that you agree with him.*

“Fine,” I say only after a long pause. Bokk looks slightly satisfied, but I am not sure that he is completely fooled. “Fine. I’ll forget all about her.”

But I don’t. I can’t.

My obsession with her started the minute I looked into those beautiful, vital eyes. And I know it will never end. I have

to have her.

The rest of the day is dedicated to working on Udar's operations, which are spread out all over Jurtil.

Udar is determined to overthrow the rule of the dark elves in Jurtil in the next ten lunar cycles, and he is working us harder than ever.

Bokk and I leave the compound at dusk and head to the Hedonist's temple, a temple dedicated to one of the dark elves' gods where we do a lot of our business.

Jurtil's skies are gray and orange when we arrive at the Hedonist's temple.

"Look at this." Bokk grunts as he stumbles over a sleeping – or dead – dark elf. "Someone needs to clean up this mess."

There are several dark elves slumped on the ground around the entrance to the Hedonist's temple.

And just inside the entrance to the temple is our contact, who is selling us a new shipment of genuine wine tonight.

"Do you have it?" Bokk demands of the orc, who is slightly shorter than us although he is just as stocky.

We have worked with this orc before, and we know that he will deliver the genuine stuff. We know this because we have broken several of his bones in the past just to make a point.

I look up at the sky, which is a very ugly color, and all I can think of is the human woman.

Her chest was heaving in that moment, just after I brought the club down on that orc's skull for the last time.

Her eyes were wide, and there were tears in them.

I cannot help but frown at the thought that she was scared of me.

*She shouldn't have been scared of me. I never would have hurt her.*

Her hands were shaking, too.



Bokk handles the deal while I stand in silence and analyze every moment from last night.

Now, when I focus very hard, I convince myself that I can remember the sound of her breathing.

She inhaled, small, gasping, fluttering breaths. She curled her shaking hands into fists.

And she waited, cowering in that corner as if she expected me to come marching over to kill her.

*Why wouldn't she think that? You're an orc, and she just witnessed you murdering someone. Of course, she would think you would hurt her.*

*When I find her, I'll reassure her that I'll never hurt her. I'll always protect her.*

At that moment, as the sun sets over Jurtil and Bokk hands over the money for the wine, I vow to myself that I will find my human woman and keep her safe forever.

I don't have a choice.

*I can't live without her. I can't live without seeing those eyes again. I can't live without hearing the sound of her voice, again and again and again.*

Keeping this a secret from Bokk will be difficult, but it won't be impossible.

We head to a local tavern after we finish the wine deal.

This particular tavern is not under Udar's control. Yet.

*Soon. Soon. I'll have her soon.*

The tavern owner doesn't look happy to see us. He knows that we're there to intimidate him.

Tonight I allow Bokk to do all the work.

Because all I can really do is think about that human woman and how much I need her.

## KINLEY

**T**he streets are buzzing with rampant activity, as they usually are in the early afternoon. Azaria and I stick by each other's side as we shift and wiggle through the bustling crowd of vendors and customers. Shouts ring through the air, consisting of enticing deals and violent threats to step out of the way.

"We've made it somehow," chuckles my companion as we reach the center of the market hub. "So, we're here to pick up a few things for the apartment. Remember to barter for a better price with these vendors, Kinley. There's nothing more they want than your money."

"I'll just use my charm and good looks, no need for words," I reply.

Azaria's head reels back in laughter. "Don't stray too far, meet back here in fifteen minutes."

With that, she disappears into the passing crowd. I turn to the nearest stall, a shelf of vases catching my eye. I push past people, who themselves return the gesture. Here in Jurtil, such manners, or the lack thereof, aren't considered rude.

In the rush of the market, there's a common understanding between all those who trade here that one is always going from point A to point B. I approach the stall, where its vendor takes immediate notice of me.

"Ah, good morning to you!" greets the k'sheng. "I have here for you the finest handmade pottery in all of Jurtil."

My eyes come to land on a small red vase in a rustic fashion. The k'sheng notices and picks it up, offering it to me. As I inspect the pottery, he throws his hands together.

“Normally I’d charge a riel for a magnificent piece like that, but for you, I’ll sell it for a ducat.”

I look up at him, reeling him in with a gaze of interest.

“The best I can do is a jeton and two dalers,” I tell the seller, leaning closer. His face contorts with one side of his lips shrinking into his mouth.

“Well, I...” he mutters. “It’s a deal. Just be sure to tell your friends about my shop.”

“Will do,” I reply with a wink.

A few deals later, I’ve acquired quite the haul, carrying a few small pieces in my pack. As I walk around, I’m hit with the sudden realization that I was supposed to have met Azaria a while ago.

I rush back to the hub center, surprised to find she’s not around. *Damn it, where is she?*

Glancing around the endless crowd of people, an ominous sight sticks out amongst the nonstop rush. Standing tall in the distance is the orc I saw not long ago. *Is it him?* I think to myself. *It’s got to be, who else would look at me like that?*

I turn slightly to the right, whistling a merry tune to give off the impression that I didn’t see him. Keeping an eye on him in my peripherals, the orc remains stationary like a statue.

My heart spikes, pumping fast out of fear, but also because this is what I wished for. I remember longing to see the stranger again, and now there he stands not far from where I am. He’s so still that it causes me to question if I’m just hallucinating.

The mysterious man’s eyes fixate on me. Even though he’s just one person, the power of his stare is akin to that of a thousand pairs of eyes beaming down on me.

The immersion breaks when he begins moving my way. I notice passers-by getting out of his way. *What do I do?*

I don't have to think for long as Azaria calls to me. I spin around as she comes rushing over.

"Sorry I'm late," she says. "I got caught up bartering with a grumpy merchant, I –"

"Move!" I whisper with urgency, nudging for us to go back the way she had come. With an alarmed look, she turns and walks with me.

"What's the problem?" she asks me as we move to the next street. I shoot a glance behind me, seeing that the orc is gone for now. Even with him gone, however, I still feel his presence lingering in the air, amplified when a shiver crawls up my spine.

"Wait, is that guy from before still around?" says Azaria, now looking around as well. Her fists clench. I lay my hands on them.

"You're brave, Azaria, but you're no match for a seven-foot orc."

Grunting, she relaxes her fists.

"So he's been here, hmm? You've got to go to the city watch with this, Kinley. A stalker is no joke. What if this guy is a complete and utter psycho?"

*Maybe he is, I think, bouncing between that thought and another. But the way he was looking at me...*

"Well... I feel like I've been seeing him everywhere as of late."

Azaria grabs my hand. "Right, that's it. We're heading straight for the city watch. I'm not going to be able to relax knowing some fucking creep has his eyes on you."

*But maybe I like it... No! What am I thinking? This is dangerous, and I can't live like this. Azaria's right.*

I wrestle with my thoughts as my friend and I venture in the direction of the watch. Each of us keeps a careful eye on our surroundings, given the fact that the city watch is located in perhaps the worst part of town.

Smoke fills these streets, prohibiting our vision to no more than fifty feet in front of us. Dfam hiss at us from their hiding places in alleyways, while others call to us with the offer of the latest drug to riddle the streets.

Still, the worry here is nothing compared to the anxiety regarding my unwelcome stalker. I glance towards rooftops as we pass by each building, wary of catching him looming from above.

Eventually, we reach the city watch headquarters. It's a rundown, one-story building that has certainly seen better days. Its once glossy white surface is reduced to a pale gray with patches of paint peeled off the walls, replaced by mold. Inside, the conditions are much the same, with damp humid air filling the place.

Behind the desk in the foyer are two dark elves, clad in lousy uniforms that couldn't intimidate even the lowliest dfam scumbag. I lay my arms on the reception desk, causing both of them to look up from their magazines of nude dark elf women.

"Yes?" says the one nearest to me, speaking in a tone as if I had disrupted something important. I figure it best to get straight to the point, knowing they likely have short attention spans.

"I need to report a man who's been following me."

Sighing, the elf leans forward, grabbing paper and a quill. He slaps it on the counter, pushing it my way.

"Fill it up and begone," he says.

"Don't you want to hear anything?" I ask, shocked by his reaction.

Again, he peers up at me, rolling his eyes.

"Fine, tell me."

"Well, it's an orc, at least seven feet tall." At this, the elves both look at one another as I continue speaking. "He's got long black hair, yellow eyes, um..."

"Tell them about the murder!" whispers Azaria in my ear.

“I saw him murdering a civilian in an alleyway not long ago, and I think because of that, he’s trying to get rid of me!”

The dark elf leans forward, and for the first time, there is a look on his face other than one of vexation. His brows cross in a manner of concern. His colleague joins us.

“I think I know of this orc you speak of. A word of advice to you, young lady. It may not be the wisest of ideas to report him.”

“What?” I mutter, my heart dropping. “Why?”

“If he is who we think he is, you’d be reporting a high-ranking member of the Mafia.”

“I don’t understand. Isn’t catching mobsters your job?” interjects Azaria.

“Well, yes, but... that man, he’s far too dangerous for us to mess with.”

“So then what the fuck do I do?” I snap. “Let him continue stalking me?”

“Look, you can still report him, but like I said earlier, this man is a lethal weapon and not just for us.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“If you report him now, we won’t be able to keep an eye on you for your safety.”

Azaria grabs my hand, leading me out of the building. “Let’s go,” she urges before turning to the elves. “With such shitty guards, it’s no wonder why this city is in such a bad state!”

We stop outside the building. I lean against the wall, feeling a sudden bout of breathlessness.

“I’m fucked!”

“Get a hold of yourself, Kinley!” urges Azaria. “There are still things we can do for your safety.”

I peer up at her, taking a deep breath to calm myself.

“Those bastards aren’t going to help.” She sighs. “You need to start taking alternate routes home whenever I’m not about to pick you up. Try asking your boss for different shifts each day, too. These stalkers work by studying your daily routine, so the less you’re consistent, the better.”

“I best not take the same way twice in a row, either,” I reply as I get lost in a thought of the orc’s face. I can’t shake off the way he’s been eyeing me up. Never before has such a look brought me to my knees.

“Are you smiling?” asks Azaria.

“Hmm?” I mutter, snapping back to the real world. “No.”

“Come on then, we’d best go home.”



A FEW DAYS have passed since I tried to report the mysterious orc. I wish I could say things have gotten easier, but I’d only be lying to myself. Having to organize a different schedule for each day and take alternating, longer routes home is proving to be strenuous.

Yet, after all my efforts, the stalker is two steps ahead of me.

Even now as I leave my workplace, I spot him watching me from a bar across the street. Each time I’ve seen him over the past few days has served only as a reminder that I’m trapped, that he could strike at any point and I’d be helpless.

But... where there’s fear is also excitement, an inner exhilaration that gets my heart pumping with adrenaline. To know I’m in this man’s sights, to have his full, devoted attention is something I never thought I’d take a liking to, as much as it shames me to admit it.

I almost catch myself smiling at the stranger. When I realize this, I turn away in haste, knowing I shouldn’t be enjoying this. So why am I?

## RURGASH

**T**he human woman has me mesmerized. For many nights now, I have laid awake thinking about her, and even when I manage to sleep, she follows me into my dreams. I've never slept so peacefully as I have with her on my mind. There's only one way my nights could get better, and that's if I was to have her here with me.

"Soon... She will be mine."

I've always gotten what I wanted. Nothing I have desired has ever eluded me, especially with my position in the Mafia. The old saying goes, when there's a will, there's a way.

But this desire of mine is different from anything my heart has yearned for in the past. A human woman... The only obstacle that stands in my way is the clan's rules, but I've never been one for giving up so easily in the face of obstruction.

"I've got to figure something out," I mutter to myself as I enter the training room inside the gang's compound. "No matter what it takes, I'm going to take that girl for myself."

I throw myself into a grueling training routine, doing endless rounds of boxing on punching bags and running laps around the vast space of the training room, made up of several apartments with the walls knocked down. Someone in a position such as mine has to ensure their physical presence is never called under question or threatened.

People in the streets look away as I approach, as do the dark elves who have the audacity to label themselves as law



enforcement despite never lifting a finger to help or protect the community. I plan on keeping things that way, not only for myself but for the rest of my gang, too.

Sweat drips off of me as I unleash blow after blow on the punching bag. If I go any harder, I'll have to replace it. That'd be the third one this month. Behind me, the door swings open, inwards stepping my trusted friend, Bokk.

"You hit like a human pansy." He chuckles.

"Come here and spar with me, then we'll see who the pansy is," I snarl.

"As much as I'd like to, I'm afraid there's some business that needs tending to. Udar requests that you see him in his office. It's urgent, so move your ass on the double."

*I wonder what it could be for, I think to myself as I freshen up. Perhaps a killing? I need something to calm my nerves and help me think clearly. Taking a fool's life is always a good remedy for it.*

Soon, I'm heading all the way to the top floor, where Udar's office is. I knock and enter the room, greeted by the large window overlooking the entirety of Jurttil. With a view like this, I'm sure it serves as a daily reminder to the boss that the city is ours.

He spins around, standing tall as his commanding, penetrative gaze meets mine. He raises a hand, gesturing to the chair across from him on the opposite side of his desk.

"Rurgash, have a seat."

"Thank you, Udar," I say with a subtle bow.

Udar strolls to a large cabinet with a see-through glass front. He removes from it an extravagant bottle of zhisk as well as two glasses. Handing one to me, he then takes a seat.

"Tell me of your satisfaction with your current duties," he says.

"Everything is going well, sir. No complaints on my side. People have been paying up their protection money, no problem. The dealers have been meeting their quota."

“You’re a good man to have on the streets, Rurgash. A man of your talents is surely eager to climb the chain of command, I assume?”

“Yes, boss.”

“You have the look of hunger in your eye, a desire for more. It’s an admirable trait of yours, one that I saw in myself at your age.” Udar sips from his drink. “So you’re likely wondering why I’ve invited you to my office today. I’m offering you the chance to do a favor for me, one that will be remembered.”

“What will you have me do, Udar?”

Smiling, the boss rises from his chair, returning to the window. In its reflection, I see his studious gaze, though I cannot tell if he’s looking at me or at something in the far distance.

“Our family is the most successful to have conducted business in Jurttil... But with success comes doubters, Rurgash. These foes of ours cannot be underestimated, but they can be deterred with a strong message, and I have the perfect one in mind.”

My ears perk, keen on doing anything to strengthen the gang’s grip on this wretched city. Udar’s large fist clenches as he continues speaking.

“The dark elves may run this city on paper, but they’re in need of a harsh reminder that it’s us orcs who have control. Our other enemies in separate gangs need to be told that they cannot fuck with us.”

“Music to my ears, Udar.”

He spins around wearing a devious smile on his face, not one of friendliness but one of maliciousness and cunning.

“Your task will be to kidnap a human woman. Our rival gangs would never have the bravery to commit such a crime in fear of the dark elves. As far as those gray-skinned bastards go themselves, we’ll be showing them we can do whatever we wish. They won’t care for a human, and this in turn will cause Jurttil to continue building their hatred for the elves.”

*A human woman?* I think to myself, a split second before the perfect target comes into my mind. I divert my attention back to the boss.

“That’ll make the general public look to us more, and increase the respect they hold in our presence.”

“Precisely, Rurgash,” chimes Udar with a sense of pride. “I’ll leave the specifics of the job up to you. I trust you’ll get the job done.”

“Yes, boss!” I exclaim, rising from my chair. “Consider it done.”

“Very well, you’re dismissed... Now get out of my sight.”

I turn and march out of the door. As soon as I leave, I run into Bokk. He extends a xaishet to me.

“So, what did the big boss-man want with you?” he asks. I light my xaishet up, taking a puff before answering.

“I’ve been tasked with abducting a human woman. It’ll act as a message to both the dark elves and the rival gangs on the streets.”

“I think I know who you’re going to target.” Bokk chuckles.

“Yes,” I mutter, suddenly hit with a wave of odd reluctance.

“What’s the matter? Can’t handle the scope of the job?”

“No, it’s not that. A simple kidnapping I can do but... This isn’t exactly the type of union I was hoping for with the human woman I’ve had my eye on.”

“It doesn’t have to be her. There’s plenty of others who roam these filthy streets.”

“No,” I snap. “I’m going to take her.” I’m filled now with a newfound sense of determination. “I’ve been waiting for the perfect opportunity to make her mine, and I’ve been presented with the chance. I’d be a fool to pass up a personal assignment from Udar, anyway. The gang comes first above all else.”

“I’m glad you haven’t forgotten your sense of duty,” replies Bokk.

I bite back on voicing the fact that I still don’t wish to kidnap her. I’m having trouble convincing even myself whether this is the right move. But what I said to Bokk is true. The gang is of the utmost importance in my life, even if this human woman in my mind has me completely and utterly enthralled.

“Of course. My loyalty to this family is unbreakable.”

“Look at it this way. Once you abduct this woman, you can have your way with her. She’ll be under your surveillance at all times.”

*She practically already is, I think to myself.*

A few hours later, I find myself back in my quarters, pacing back and forth as I brainstorm a plan for the kidnapping.

*It seems as though she’s been trying to throw me off by finishing work at different times, how cute. By my account, she should be finishing up late at night tomorrow. That will be the opportune moment to strike. This time in twenty-four hours, she’ll be in my arms...*

This mission to me is a dream come true. The human hasn’t once left the inner workings of my mind since the day she saw me brutalizing that vendor. Watching her for days on end is amounting to something glorious.

Although I’d have preferred for us to officially come together in a different capacity, I must still put the gang and its needs first. After all, part of me suspects that the girl must like what I’m doing.

If not, she’d have reported me by now, but even law enforcement won’t stop me from getting to her. No one can. It’s almost fitting of my mien that our first union will be an abduction, and the anticipation of it fills me with excitement.

With me being as determined as I am to finally get her into my possession, there’s no possibility of this going wrong in

any way. I lay down to sleep and smile wide, knowing that tomorrow everything will change.

Pulling off a successful job like this will earn me a promotion within the family, but more importantly, I'll have this woman here with me to witness it all. Then she will realize she wants to be with me.

## KINLEY

**A**nother day at work has come and gone. My hands ache with the familiar stiffness, courtesy of the robotic work that I am subjected to as a human. With a shaky grip, I clock out and submit my paperwork for the day.

Hesitation comes over me as I pack up my stuff. Glancing towards the exit, I contemplate staying. At least I'm safe from prying eyes here. I consider asking my boss for an extra shift, effective immediately. But before I can do anything, I'm yelled at to leave.

Reluctantly, I swing my pack over my shoulders and make my way to the exit. I step out into the humid air of the early evening. The sky is a dark orange with the sun just barely visible as it hovers above the horizon. Soon it will be dark.

I look around, impatiently tapping my foot as I await Azaria's arrival. "She should be here by now," I mutter in frustration. Then a realization hits me. "I told her I wouldn't be finished until midnight! I must have mixed up my days!"

Cursing myself, I run a hand over my head, feeling ever so foolish to have let something so simple fly over me. That's when I notice him across the street, my regular sight after work, the man who's been haunting my very existence. The orc blends in with a bunch more of his kind as he stares at me from the bar opposite me.

Instinctively, I turn the other way and begin walking. Without Azaria, I'm a sitting target just waiting to be caught. I

need to get home before he gets any closer to me. I disappear around a corner, walking down a densely populated street.

I weave and bob between the many people, occasionally shooting glances over my shoulder. In the distance, I see him trying to keep up. Even an orc as big as him can get caught in the mass rush of such a large crowd, which I use to my advantage.

I slip away down a much quieter street when he's not looking. *He didn't watch me come this way. Hopefully, he'll continue down the busy street. This way is quicker home.*

An exhilarating shiver runs down my spine. No doubt I'm in danger, but I love how this silent chase is making me feel so... alive. Still, I try not to let myself get too caught up in the oddly pleasant ways of this whole situation.

After all, I've got to look out for my own safety, even if this is the most exciting thing to have happened to me. *Once I get home, I'll apologize to Azaria and tell her everything.*

A wave of relief comes over me. This street is dead quiet, with not a single person roaming it. I sigh out a long breath, thankful for the –

“Come here!” yells a gruff voice.

My mouth is cupped just as I open it to scream. Suddenly, I'm whisked into an alleyway. My big mistake was unknowingly walking past one, where thugs and hooligans lie in wait for passers-by like a trapdoor yillese.

I reach a hand out, but it's pointless. No one can see me, and even if they did, they wouldn't help me. That's life for humans on Protheke.

I throw a blind kick behind me, connecting with my attacker's leg. They grunt and respond by hauling me into the air and slamming me into the nearest wall. The impact of it snatches the air from my lungs.

Ignoring the sensation of wanting to vomit, I look up at the attacker, revealing before me the orc whom I thought I had shaken off. This is the closest he has ever been to me, and for a moment, I'm stunned by his good looks.

“Let me go!” I demand.

“Shut the fuck up!” snaps the stranger, clenching his fist as a threat. His other hand is wrapped around my throat, squeezing the more I resist. I almost want to tell him to squeeze harder.

Hotter than the way he has me in his grip is the look in his yellow, brooding eyes. From their look alone, I can tell this orc has been wanting to get his hands on me for a long time.

I’m almost turned on by the fact I’ve been caught, my mind bouncing between my deepest, darkest fantasies and rational fear. For all I know, I could be experiencing my final few living moments, so why is it I’m not putting up any more of a fight? For some reason, I find the courage to poke fun at this crazed lunatic.

“So, is this what gets you hot?” I tease.

“Be quiet,” he snarls. “And do as I command you to.” His eyes run me up and down as if undressing me. I’ve seen the same look worn on the faces of other men in this city.

“Yes,” I whisper, my knees becoming weak. At that moment, I wonder if he’s going to spin me around and take me right here, right now. Indeed, he turns me and pins my hands against the wall. “Keep them where I can see them.”

Sex in an alleyway suddenly seems enticing, but my hopes fall short when he pulls my hands back and ties them up, doing the same with my ankles. He stuffs a gag in my mouth to mask my screams and hauls me over his shoulder.

He takes us deeper into the alleyway, the familiarity of the streets disappearing with every step he takes. All the while, I’m scared shitless. Walking through the twists and turns of the maze-like alleys, thugs and small-time criminals step aside as we pass them by.

I’m sure that they could save me if they wanted to. After all, this is just one man who has me. Yet some of them cower in fear of the orc, causing me to question just who the stranger really is.



I wonder if I've just fallen into the hands of a big-time mobster like the watch seemed to think, or if this is some madman that no one messes with because of his size. Either way. I'm about to find out.

Eventually, we emerge from the alley, where the orc then brings me up a long set of steps. I hear the orc fumbling with keys before he pushes open a door. Stepping inside, the air becomes cool and ventilated.

He places me down on a nearby chair. I find myself in the last place I expected to be. All around me is a lavishly wealthy home, filled to the brim with beautiful artwork and paintings. It's as if I've stepped into a royal castle but without the manners expected of such a caste.

*Definitely not the decrepit basement I was expecting.* He barks a command at someone I do not see, then removes the gag from my mouth. Instantly, I start asking questions.

"Who are you?" I ask. The orc raises an eyebrow of intrigue as if considering divulging his identity to me. "My name is Kinley," I tell the man while staring him dead in the eye. My hope is that by doing so, he'll hesitate to go so far as to murder me.

"Call me Rurgash," he growls.

"Rurgash, where am I? Why am I here?"

"This is my home. You're here because I need you to be."

"What am I to be? Some sort of decoration for your extravagant home? You've certainly had your eye on me for long enough."

"So you've seen me then," he mutters.

"Of course I have. One tends to notice someone else when they do everything they can to stand out."

I don't know where I'm finding this bravery from, but a voice inside of me reminds me to cool it and not be so feisty. I look around, almost wanting to compliment Rurgash for having a genuinely beautiful home. I wonder then what his

personal bedroom might look like, part of me still eager to find out firsthand.

“So what are you going to do to me?” I ask enticingly. “I’m sure you’ve had a few scenarios on your mind.”

My thoughts become split, with one part of my head flirting with the idea of Rurgash fucking me, while the other, rational side of me wants to beg to be let go. *Just what is wrong with me?*

“You’ll find out,” grunts Rurgash. He snaps his fingers, summoning two guards to appear from behind the massive orc. They advance on me quicker than the blink of an eye.

Now suspended in the air again, I’m dragged through the house to a little nook. There, Rurgash opens a door hidden behind a silk curtain. My restraints are removed before I’m thrown in there with a rough landing.

“Keep an eye on her at all times, especially whenever I’m gone to report to the boss. Got it?” orders Rurgash as I clamber to my feet.

I rush at him as he comes inside. Pounding at his chest, he stands unfazed, my punches becoming weaker with each hit. My rage turns to sadness as I come to terms with the dire situation I’m in.

“Why?” I wail. “You tricked me, you son of a bitch!”

“Tricked you? How could I have done so? We don’t even know each other,” says Rurgash. He pushes me to the ground. “Behave yourself while I’ve got you here, and you won’t be hurt,” he sneers. With that, he spins around, the steel door shutting behind him.

It shuts with such finality that all strength leaves my knees. I sink against the cold, hard steel, burying my head in my hands.

“Why didn’t I put up a fight? Why didn’t I tell Azaria the right time to meet me? Why...”

Of all the questions I ask myself, one ignites only anger within me. *Why the fuck did I ever entertain the idea of this*

*guy pursuing me? Do I deserve to be here for thinking like that? He's a stalker, and I let my desires get the best of me...*

I recall his words, knowing he was right when he called into question how he could've tricked me. *Maybe I'm the insane one for thinking there was some sort of trust there.*

I look up at my new room. It looks like a regular guest room, with clean sheets and a window to look out of. A small desk and lamp rests in the corner, adding to the appearance of an inviting stay. Beneath it all, a disgusting, wretched vibe oozes out of everything I see.

But this is where I must be. I only wish I wasn't alone.

**RURGASH**

MINE. MINE. MINE.

**K**inley hasn't stopped screaming since I locked her up in my apartment in the compound.

Yesterday, she only stopped screaming when her throat gave out, but this morning I was awoken by the sounds of her stomping around the second bedroom, banging on the door, and screaming her lungs out.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

I consider leaving her to scream herself to sleep or something, but I know I need to feed her, and maybe get her to shut up before the rest of the clan starts complaining.

"I hope she doesn't mind orcish portions," I murmur to myself as I dish up a huge plate of food for both of us.

*And now I'll never find out if she can eat like an orc,* I think to myself, because the minute she opens the door, she takes the plate and dumps it on the floor.

"You fucking beast!" She spits at me. "Do you really think you can bribe me with food? Let me go!"

"You need to calm down," I tell her, and my voice is strangely serene. Her insults don't hurt me.

Instead, the rage on her face and the venom in her voice make her even more attractive than she was before.

*And she was already stunning before,* I think to myself.

"You're just like all orcs!" she shouts at me. "A fucking brutal, vicious beast! You need to let me go!" Her voice rises

several octaves on the last sentence, and she jumps at me, beating my chest with her fists.

I grab both her wrists with one hand quite easily and grab her waist with my other hand.

I become very aware then of how her body is pressed against mine.

She seems to become aware of this at the same time because her face goes red and her eyes go bright with shock.

“Let me go,” she speaks through gritted teeth and starts to wriggle away from me. But I hold her still, and somehow, her legs become wrapped around my waist.

I examine her closely as she continues to struggle, even though every single one of her movements just forces her body closer to mine.

*She is beautiful.* The errant thought slips across my mind as quickly as the fluttering of a papilion in the summer.

But then the thought is gone, and all that is left in its place are Kinley’s hazel eyes that are flecked with gold very close to her irises.

I let go of her so suddenly that she nearly falls to the ground. She staggers backward, and she glares at me with narrowed eyes as she rights herself.

“I’ll dish you up another plate,” I say pleasantly. I leave quickly after I hand her the food, which she doesn’t throw to the ground this time.



KINLEY’S SCREAMS have started to get to the rest of the clan.

“Can’t you shut her up?” one of the orcs asks me as I walk into the compound with Bokk. Most of the orcs are gathered in the courtyard and almost all of them have very annoyed expressions on their faces.

I head up to the apartment, and when I get there, Kinley hurls a pillow from her bed at me.

I catch it one-handed, but this doesn't deter her, and she keeps throwing anything she can get her hands on at me.

I walk towards her, wading through the pile of projectiles that have fallen to the floor. This time when I grab her wrists, I force her to her knees, and I keep her there.

She goes quiet, and a strange light flickers in her eyes, like flames reflected. I swallow as my throat goes dry.

*She looks perfect on her knees.*

For a second, I wish she would stay like that. Sweet and quiet and submissive. I wish she would just do what I want when I want.

But the apartment feels strange when she is quiet.

And I have grown to like her fiery attitude in the short time she has been inhabiting my apartment with me.

"Let me go." She starts to struggle against my hands as if she read my mind.

I let her go, and again, she falls backward. This time she lands hard on her ass, but I don't feel any sympathy for her.

*She should have stayed on her knees.*

I have to walk away when an image floats across my line of vision. An image of Kinley on her knees, and my cock out, in her mouth.

I swallow a groan as I prepare a plate of food for her.

When I turn back to hand it to her, Kinley is curled up on the bed with her back to me.

I place the food quietly on the desk and shut the door.

*You need to get these ideas out of your mind. She's human.*

Udar has always been strict about our clan's connections with the humans. He doesn't want us to have any connections with them, although he won't stop us from selling our products to them.

We know that some orcs use humans as sex toys. Some orcs even eat humans.

But Udar has always maintained that humans are beneath us. They aren't even fit for eating, according to him.

And if he ever found out about my sudden, strange desires, he'd have me exiled from the clan, or worse.

*You just need to forget about her. You need to find a female orc to get rid of these feelings with.*



I RETURN HOME at midnight on the third day after I captured Kinley and brought her to my apartment.

She has been alone all day, and I don't know what chaos she has caused in the time I have been away.

I left her bedroom door unlocked today, so when I nod at the guards outside the door and walk into the apartment, I expect it to be a mess. I wouldn't blame her for destroying it out of spite, but when I walk in, the apartment is quiet and dark.

I light a fire and start to prepare the food for the evening.

Kinley's bedroom door is closed, and when I finally open it, she is asleep on the bed.

I look at her still sleeping form wonderingly.

*I could have my way with her right now, and she'd be powerless to stop me. And I don't think she'd resist. I don't think she'd want to resist.*

I think back to the strange light I saw in her eyes yesterday as I close her door.

I think she wants me as much as I want her. Even though neither of us should want this.





WHEN I RETURN AGAIN, now four days after capturing Kinley, she is awake. And she is ready for a fight.

*Gods, she is beautiful, I think almost breathlessly.*

“You need to let me go.” She looks me up and down, and the flames are back in her eyes.

“You need to fucking let me go!” she screams, her voice shrill and high-pitched. I wince and step back, but she launches herself at me.

*Gods, she is beautiful.*

I don’t have time to grab her by the wrists, and she ends up landing a few punches before I take her by the throat and slam her up against the nearest wall. She continues struggling, as usual, and I press my body against hers for a long moment before I let her go.

She sinks to the floor, gasping and clutching her throat as I walk out of the room.

This time, I lock her in the room and go to my own bedroom, slamming the door shut.

I can still feel every part of her body against mine. I hold onto the wall with one hand while I rub my hardening cock through my pants.

This time, the vision of her sucking my cock won’t go away no matter what I do.

Before I know it, I am unzipping my pants. My cock is hard, and a vein pulses on the underside of the shaft.

I grip the base and stroke it slowly before I spit on my hand, imagining that it is her spit, imagining that she has her mouth around it.

I look down at myself as I stroke my tightening, hardening cock.

Kinley is tiny compared to my size.

*You would wreck her.*

I grip the base of my cock, imagining her body underneath mine, imagining myself thrusting into her wet, soft pussy.

I cup my balls with my other hand as I stroke my cock slowly, luxuriating in the feeling of it.

Precum spurts from the tip as I imagine taking Kinley from behind. The imagination is so vivid, so real, that I can almost feel her pussy tightening around me.

I stroke myself faster and faster as lights flicker on outside although my bedroom is in darkness.

The lights cast strange shadows on the walls and illuminate things that aren't there.

I groan out loud, and part of me hopes she can hear me. Part of me hopes that she knows exactly what I am doing.

*Maybe she's doing it, too.*

My balls tighten at the thought of Kinley on her back, her hips in the air as she fucks herself with her hand and thinks of me.

Now I growl, and it reverberates throughout my entire body as I get closer and closer to my peak.

All I can think of, all I can see, all I can smell, is Kinley.

My mouth waters at the thought of her, and when cum spurts from my cock, I am not in control of the sounds I make.

*All I want, I think to myself, is Kinley.*

*All I want is to make her mine.*

**KINLEY**

FOURTEEN.

*I* *t has been fourteen days since the murder.*

“I’m going to lose my fucking mind,” I mutter to myself as I hop up off the bed and start pacing the length of the bedroom that I have been locked in.

It isn’t really just a bedroom, though. Outside my little sleeping quarters, it has a small, fully stocked kitchen, a full bathroom, and a living room. The door to my quarters has been unlocked for the past couple of days, seemingly to allow me to move at my will as long as I don’t go past the locked, guarded door on the other side of the kitchen.

I guess I should feel lucky that I have been locked up somewhere as nice as this, except the windows are locked – we’re six stories up, but maybe they think I’ll jump.

*You should feel lucky,* I think to myself. I have enough to eat, and I don’t have to work at a job that has been slowly killing me.

But I don’t feel lucky.

I haven’t seen Rurgash for days, and it is driving me insane. And it is also making me irrationally angry.

Now, as I pace up and down the length of the room, from the kitchen back to the bedroom, all I can think of is him.

Hot, stinging tears prickle up in the corners of my eyes as I think of the last time I saw him.

My body aches for him, crying out to be close to him. I gasp, doubling over when something painful twists in my chest.

And then I scream.

There are guards outside. Rurgash made it clear that there is no way I am getting out of here.

So when I scream shrill and loud, I hear them move and murmur outside the door.

“I want to see him!” I scream at them. I scream until my voice is hoarse, and then I take a deep breath and start to scream again. “Why can’t I see him?”

My anger twists and flails inside me as if it is a living thing, trapped in a cage and trying to get away.

“I want to see him!” I scream again and then march to the locked door and start to bang on it. “Let me see him!”

*How dare he take me away from his life, lock me away in here, and then ignore me! Who does he fucking think he is?*

I turn around and grab one of the mugs on a table close by, and I hurl it at the wall.

The door finally opens several hours after I started throwing things.

It isn’t Rurgash. It is just a guard, and I start sobbing angrily upon seeing him.

“I want to see Rurgash.”

It has been fourteen days since I decided to leave Sarah and take a walk down a dark alleyway. It has been fourteen days since I witnessed a murder. It has been fourteen days since I first met Rurgash’s flashing yellow eyes.

My life has changed completely, and I am not sure how it’ll ever be the same again.

*Ten.*

*It has been ten days since Rurgash captured me and locked me up in this godsforsaken place.*

The guards try to calm me down. I fall asleep at some point, and when I wake up, my eyes are burning and my mouth and throat are dry.

“Where is Rurgash?” It is the first thing out of my mouth after I have had some water. I refuse to eat. I won’t eat until I see him.

“I won’t eat until I see him!” I scream through the door. “I won’t eat! I’ll starve myself to death if he doesn’t come to see me!”

My anger ratchets up several levels, and I start to throw myself against the bedroom door.

After a few seconds, the door is thrown open, and the two guards walk in.

They immediately restrain me, and I expect them to hurt me, to knock me out at least, but they are surprisingly gentle.

Instead, they beg me to calm down, and one of them even brings me food.

“You’re not allowed to hurt me, are you?” The truth dawns on me, and a grim smile spreads across my face.

There is a look of reluctance on both their faces. They stay with me for several minutes until they think that I am calm.

I start to throw things the minute they lock me in the room and step outside again.

This time, I start in the kitchen. I start to break every single one of the glasses in the kitchen.

“I’m not going to stop until I see Rurgash!” I scream and hurl three plates at the ceiling.

It has been ten days since I was captured by Rurgash. It has been ten days since I first felt his hands on my body.

It has been ten days since I felt myself become addicted to him, the way Jurtill’s whores sell themselves for the finest zhisk.

And I have come to realize that I don’t know myself any longer. Or maybe I never did.

*Seven.*

*It has been seven days since I started breaking.*

I am asleep when Rurgash explodes through the bedroom door in a whirl of blood and alcohol.

He shakes me violently out of my sleep and roars into my face.

“What the fuck do you want? Why are you causing all this trouble?” he yells at me as I look up at him.

I am stunned into silence.

Rurgash is breathing heavily, and his hands are balled into fists as I examine him. His face is bruised and swollen, and there are ugly, bloody wounds on his arms and across his chest. His clothes are torn so badly that he is practically bare.

I swallow my anger at the thought that he has walked down the street with his body on display like that for every other woman to see.

“What happened to you?” My voice is surprisingly soft, and he blinks at me in shock.

Then he snorts and gestures at himself. “You know what I am.” His voice is rough. He runs a hand over his head. “I am a murderer. And sometimes the people I kill don’t go quietly. And you interrupted me.” He starts shouting again.

“You interrupted me! You’ve caused so much trouble that I had to leave in the middle of a job!”

My body is warm, I realize vaguely, as he shouts at me. My skin is warm, and my thighs are trembling, and the softest part between my legs pulses every time that his voice rises.

I exhale a deep, shuddering breath, and I feel my nipples tighten and sweat start to trickle down the back of my neck.

I crane my head to look up at him, and I see that he has closed the space between us. We’re so close that I can feel the warmth of his breath on my face.

His hands are braced on the wall on either side of my head, and he is glaring down at me.

It has been seven days since I started breaking. It has been seven days since I started letting Rurgash into parts of me that I didn't think existed.

*Three.*

*It had been three days since I had seen Rurgash. Then he exploded through the bedroom door.*

"Let me help you clean up," I tell him quietly.

I don't know where the words come from, but they stop Rurgash in his tracks.

"What?" The disbelief in his voice is obvious.

"Let me help you clean up." I push past him and get up from the bed. I keep my hand on his strong arm and lead him to the bathroom. I don't know why, but I feel the need to protect him. I feel the need to keep him safe.

And for some reason, that includes cleaning his wounds.

"Okay then," Rurgash says woodenly when we reach the bathroom. He pulls off his shirt and drops his pants.

I turn away from him, swallowing as warmth flares through my body at an uncontrollable speed.

*Keep it together, my girl,* I think to myself as I turn back to him. His body is perfect. Hard and strong. It looks as though it was carved out of rock by an artist.

I knew he was handsome, and I knew I was attracted to him, but I didn't realize how attracted I was to him until now.

I start to clean his wounds, and he leans against the wall before sliding to the floor. I lean down and carefully clean each wound properly before moving on to the next one.

I leave the bathroom to find some fabric that I can turn into a bandage, and when I return to the bathroom, I see that he has fallen asleep.

I am frozen in shock as I realize that the orc who captured me has left himself vulnerable in my presence. He even sent the guards away from the door.



*You could always try to escape*, I think to myself. But I know right away that that idea won't work.

There is nowhere I could go in Jurtil where Rurgash and his orcs couldn't find me.

I sit down on the floor next to him and lean against his hard, strong arms. His breathing is even and measured, and he is clearly deeply asleep.

I cannot help but touch him, because I always want to touch him, and I marvel at the pure strength that flows through him even when he is asleep.

In all my years living in Jurtil, I have never felt safe before. Until now. Now, I finally feel safe because I know that Rurgash won't let anything happen to me. And he won't let anyone near me, either.

Before today, I hadn't seen Rurgash for three days. And I never want to go a day without seeing him again.



# RURGASH

**S**omehow, Kinley's scent weaves its way into my dreams because I smell her before I wake up.

I am dazed when I wake up. My eyes open, and the scent that followed me into my dreams wafts in the air around me.

*She's so soft,* is my first thought when I realize that, somehow, Kinley has fallen asleep in my arms.

She stirs then and wakes up, and I watch as her delicate eyelids flutter open.

I swallow when her breasts press against my chest as she moves away from me, and my already hard cock tightens.

"You're impossible to sleep next to." Her voice is deep, dark, and filled with sleep, and she pulls away from me even more.

*I can't let that happen,* I think almost frantically to myself. I don't know what I am doing, but I slide a hand around her waist and pull her back towards me.

*What am I doing? What the fuck am I doing?*

I look up and see the sunlight filtering through a crack in the curtains in the bedroom. We're in the bathroom on the floor, and I am not quite sure how we got here.

Kinley looks up at me. I've never realized how thick and long her eyelashes are. I've never realized how pouty her lips are.

I've never realized how sweet the curves of her face are.

I've always known she was beautiful. Her beauty practically screamed at me from the minute I saw her in the alleyway, but I didn't know it like this.

*I didn't know her beauty could rival that of the sunlight. I didn't know she could look as beautiful as the Harvest Goddess.*

Her hair falls over her almost bare shoulders. She is wearing a strappy undershirt and a pair of underwear and that is all.

I notice the gauze bandages on my body then, and I realize what exactly she did.

"Thank you." The words fall awkwardly from my mouth. Kinley's eyes brighten and widen with surprise.

"Thank you for taking care of me. I don't know how to properly thank you."

"I know how you can thank me," she says immediately, almost breathlessly.

Kinley moves so quickly that I don't even see it coming. Within seconds, she is grasping my forearms and swinging her legs over mine.

*What the fuck is she doing?* I think to myself frenziedly. Because there is no way she can't feel the way my cock is hard in my pants. In fact, she is practically grinding herself against it.

Kinley throws her head back as she rocks her hips back and forth and lets out gasping, breathy moans that make me groan.

I place my hands on her hips and force her to slow down as I consider what I am going to be doing next.

*We don't do this. We don't do this. She's a human. She's forbidden. She's human. She's forbidden.*

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

I know what the consequences of my actions will be. I know what will happen if Udar, Bokk, or the rest of the clan

finds out.

I might be ostracized. I might be exiled. I might be killed.

She is human, and she is forbidden. But she has been mine from the minute I saw her.

And I have to have her.

I stand up, my hands still on her hips, and I carry her to the bedroom.

“Are you going to thank me?” Kinley’s voice is soft, small, and adorable, and I can feel the precum dripping from the tip of my shaft.

“Shut up and get to your knees,” I grunt as I stand in front of her. Kinley doesn’t argue or speak. She doesn’t even hesitate.

I pull my pants – which were torn up last night – off and my hard shaft springs free.

Kinley wraps both her hands around my cock and sticks her tongue out as a droplet of precum lands on her tongue.

Then she leans forward and licks up the underside of the shaft before closing her mouth as much as she can around my cock.

My head falls back as she sucks on my cock and cups my balls, but then she pulls away.

“No.” The word escapes me unbidden, and I take her by the wrists and haul her up onto her feet.

I lead her over to the bed, with one of my hands wrapped around my shaft. “Get on your back.”

She complies, almost submissively, and I kneel in front of her.

When I part her legs, her panties are soaked and her thighs are slick with arousal. Ripping her panties off is easy.

I run a finger up her slit, and she shudders as I find her clit and stroke it lightly.

“Oh, gods,” she moans, her voice low and thick.

She arches her back, lifting her hips off the bed and parting her thighs. This gives me perfect access to her perfect pussy.

Kinley's musk is heady and sweet, and she gasps as I lick up her slit. She writhes away from me, and I clutch onto her hips again and force her to remain still.

Her body flexes and tightens when I slip a finger inside her, and then another, and curl my fingers upwards inside her.

"Yes. Please. Rurgash. Yes!" Her voice rises to a slight scream, and I lick her clit as I thrust my fingers inside her.

I pull away as I feel her reach her climax, and she collapses to the bed, gasping and clutching at the sheets.

"You're mine." I realize, as I speak, that I am no longer in control of my words. "Kinley." My voice is a growl. "You're mine. You belong to me now. Do you hear me?"

I push her thighs apart as she stares up at me. Her chest rises and falls quickly. I reach down and rip her undershirt off, revealing perfect breasts and tight, hard nipples.

"Please. Please." Her voice is a whisper. "I want – need – you inside me." Her voice twists into a whine, and she tries to sit up and reach for me.

I push her down and thrust into her at once, reveling in the feel of her tight pussy stretching around me.

She falls back and arches her back. I take her by the hips and drag her towards me, and she wraps her legs around my waist.

I thrust into her slowly at first because all I want to feel is her soft, wet, heat around me.

But then she smiles lazily at me as if she is still in control of the situation. As if she knows exactly what she does to me.

As if she knows that she can dominate me with the smallest touch.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

I know then that I need to show her who's in charge. I reach down and close a hand around her throat while I keep a

hand on her hip.

Her eyes widen as I fuck her harder and harder. She tightens around me then, her pussy spasming as she reaches her peak. I remove my hand from her throat, allowing her to cry out.

At that moment, I don't care who hears us. I don't care if the rest of the clan bursts in and sees us fucking.

I grip her hips again with both hands, and I lift her butt and pull her closer to me, to the edge of the bed so that I am buried more deeply inside her.

Kinley's scent swirls all around me as I fuck her, a heady combination of musk and nimond beans, and it makes me dizzy as I groan.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

The words that I speak next come from me so automatically that it is like I have been waiting to say them since the minute I saw her.

"You're mine. Mine. No one else will ever touch you like this. I'll fucking kill anyone who touches you without my permission."

Her body shudders as another smaller orgasm explodes from her core as I place a finger on her clit.

"Please." Her voice drips with wanton lust, and she reaches for me, clutching my forearms. "Please." Her words become a high-pitched whine as I bottom out inside her.

I can feel myself getting close to my peak, and I know Kinley feels it, too. She feels it in the way my muscles have tensed and flexed.

She feels it in the way I fuck her without a care. And I know I must be hurting her slightly in the way she gasps and flinches every time I slam into her, but I also know that I cannot slow down and that she wouldn't want me to, either.

It is Kinley, throwing her head back as her beautiful chest heaves and her body shimmers with sweat, that pushes me over the edge.

Just looking at her is enough to send the climax exploding through me, and I spill inside her as waves of warmth and cold wash over me.

“Oh, gods.” I groan as Kinley tightens around me again, milking me and pulling me deeper into her wet warmth.

Our lips meet, and I realize that I have never properly kissed her. At that moment, I regret that our lips have never touched.

Her mouth is soft, and she tastes salty. I pull out of her slowly, still kissing her. She groans into my mouth, and we both look down to see my cum spilling out of her in a flood.

I can’t stop kissing her, I can’t stop touching her, and my hand goes around her throat again as our foreheads touch.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

“You’re mine,” I say again, and there is a warning in my voice.

And this time Kinley replies.

“Yes.”





# KINLEY

**I**t takes me a long time to realize that I am dreaming and not awake. In my dream, it is summer and Jurtill is warm, and the sun is burning bright, heavy, and dry.

The air is so dry that it is uncomfortable to inhale or exhale, and my chest feels heavy. My vision is hazy and watery.

In this dream, I see a dark, tall, hulking shape walking away from me in the distance. In this dream, something in me twists painfully, and I cry out.

“Where are you going?”

The shape stops and turns.

It is Rurgash, and when he turns to look down at me, his yellow eyes glinting with slight frenzy, desire shoots through me hot and fast and so, so dark that it scares me.

At that moment, Rurgash both scares and excites me, and my body thrills and trembles beneath his gaze.

My breath catches in my throat. Droplets of sweat form at my temples, and I take a step towards him.

But then I see it in his right hand. A knife, a knife dripping with blood.

I am alone when I wake up.

I felt it when Rurgash left me several hours ago, but I was so exhausted that I remained shrouded in sleep until now.

I wake up slowly and blearily, and my body hurts when I roll onto my back.

The dream still lingers although most of it has faded from my memory. The only things that remain rooted in my line of vision are Rurgash's glinting yellow eyes and the knife dripping with blood.

My lower stomach and thighs are particularly painful, and I cannot help but let out small groans as my muscles pulse and throb as I lay there.

The room is dark, and when rain starts battering the building from all sides, I realize that Jurtil is experiencing one of her signature autumn storms.

I shiver slightly and then I reach for the blankets that were shoved aside during the night and pull them over me before I burrow down against the mattress. For a second, I wish Rurgash had stayed. I am not afraid of Jurtil's violent storms, but I am not the biggest fan of them, either.

Jurtil's storms are legendary, and I remember one storm about five years ago that was so ferocious that it pulled ancient Tiphe trees from the ground by the roots and destroyed entire buildings that had been constructed before even the orcs came to Tlouz.

"I hope this storm doesn't get that bad," I murmur to myself and close my eyes as the building around me trembles underneath the force of the wind.

As I lay there, remaining in the dark with my eyes closed, memories of last night come rushing to the surface of my mind.

Memories of Rurgash's hand around my throat, while my hands were all over him, grabbing onto him for dear life. Memories of his hand gripping my hair while he was inside me. Memories of my body shuddering uncontrollably while I clutched him, clinging onto him, never wanting to let go.

My cheeks grow warm, and I lift my hands to cover my face even though I am alone under the blankets.

I know how I am supposed to feel after sex. I am supposed to feel happy, satisfied, and satiated.

And I definitely feel satisfied and satiated.

But I also do not feel happy.

Instead, all I feel is shame. For having been with an orc. For having encouraged him, urged him on, for having enjoyed it.

“You didn’t just have sex with an orc. You had sex with an orc who has murdered a countless number of people, potentially innocent people. Never mind all of that! You had sex with an orc who kidnapped you and who is keeping you captive!”

I let out a loud, rasping gasp as the shame wells up inside me. The shame and confusion I feel take up space in my chest, forcing me to gasp for air as more and more memories of last night flood my mind.

I cannot believe what I have become in the short time that I have been locked up in this place!

I cannot believe that I gave in to an orc! I cannot believe that I let him do the things that he did to me!

I am unable to stay still any longer. I throw the covers off and get up out of bed, too wired to do much except pace up and down the room.

The storm has grown in magnitude, and I walk hurriedly over to the window and drag open the heavy drapes to stare out at Jurtil.

I am not sure where in Jurtil I am. All I know is that I have a view of the entire city from the room I am locked up in.

Now, as I stare out at the city, I see that it is under siege from the storm.

Rain and hail fall thick and fast, and wind rips through the streets, dragging hidden dirt into the open and pulling apart the sparse desert bushes and shrubs that dot the city.

The city turns into a blur under the assault of the rain and hail, and soon the only things I can see are the tops of the only two temples in Jurtil.

The spires of the two temples stand out in the foggy rain and hail like two pinpricks, or like two stars shining brightly in the darkness.

The temple furthest away from me is the dark elves' temple dedicated to the Hearthkeeper. It is in the northernmost part of the city, and I have only been there once before.

All the wealthy dark elves live around the temple dedicated to the Hearthkeeper, including the only noble family that deigns to make a home of Jurtil.

The other temple is smaller and closer. In fact, it would probably take me only five minutes to walk there.

It is a dark elf temple dedicated to the Hedonist. But not many dark elves worship there. In fact, I haven't seen a dark elf close to this part of the city in years.

The truth is that orcs like Rurgash and his clan have taken over in this part of the city and have started up sex clubs and taverns so close to the temple that dark elves don't dare come close by.

The only dark elves who do come to this part of the city are those who have become enslaved to the drugs and alcohol sold by the orcs.

*Maybe if the dark elves actually did their job, I wouldn't be in this position now,* I think to myself as I cross my arms over my chest and watch the storm.

The problem is that with Rurgash, I feel this kind of dark excitement that I have never felt before in my life.

I have felt this excitement around him since I first saw him come thundering down that alleyway, swinging that club.

Even now, my skin prickles with anticipation as I remember him killing that orc.

*You're sick! This is disgusting!*

“Is that why I like the sex so much?” I whisper to myself as I start to pace up and down the length of the room again. “Because deep down I am just like him?”

I walk over to the bed and flop down on it as a sob rises in my throat. Hot tears leak from the corners of my eyes, and I press my fingertips to my eyes to stop the flood of tears that threaten to drown me.

The wind, rain, and hail have grown louder, drowning out my sobs, and I am grateful for it because I really don’t want my guards bursting in while I am crying.

Visions of the dream come back to me, mingling with my memories of last night. Visions of one of Rurgash’s hands around my throat while he holds a bloody knife in his other hand.

*He must have killed someone. He killed someone in your dream, and you’re still willing to do this?*

I close my eyes, shuddering as I remember the way Rurgash dominated me completely and utterly and all the while, he still holds that bloody knife in his right hand.

*Am I as bad as Rurgash? Have I been this bad all along? And now it is all coming out because I have spent time with him?*

Every bad, selfish, or hateful thought I have ever had seems to come floating to the surface of my mind as I think about who I have become around Rurgash.

Because the truth is, as disgusted as I am with myself, all I can think of is what I want Rurgash to do to me the next time he walks through that door.

*He is a murderer! You shouldn’t be thinking this way!*

But maybe the truth is that I am just as dark and twisted as Rurgash. And maybe that is why I feel so comfortable, so good, around him.

*Maybe you’re finally seeing the truth of who you are. You might not like it, but you probably can’t change it. This is who you are.*

My chest rattles as I sob more violently at the thought that I am just like Rurgash. Tears splash onto my arms and into my lap, and I resolve to avoid Rurgash from here on out.

*I can't sleep with him again,* I think to myself.

Because I am not sure what I'll be capable of the more time I spend with him.

And I don't want to know who I'll become with him.





# RURGASH

I leave Kinley's bed just after midnight and meet up with Bokk at a tavern close to the Hedonist's temple.

The temple is close to the clan's compound, and the walk is short and brisk.

When I left, Kinley was asleep. And it was almost too difficult to leave her. Kinley is beautiful when she sleeps.

Her warm skin is smooth and unmarred by emotion, and her rich dark hair is spread out like a crown around her. Her long, dark eyelashes flutter slightly as her eyes move behind her smooth eyelids. She fell asleep naked, and I could see the shape of her body underneath the thin cover as I stood over her.

"What took you so long?" Bokk grunts when I walk into the tavern. He was standing in the doorway waiting for me, and now we walk towards the bar where the tavern's manager waits for us.

This tavern is one of many businesses in Jurtil that is under Udar's control, and tonight is collection night.

Usually, one of the younger, less experienced orcs is charged with collecting the weekly earnings from each of Udar's businesses because we very rarely have occasions to use brute force.

But this particular tavern manager has been shortchanging us. Tonight, Udar needed a show of force, so he sent Bokk and I.

I look around the tavern, which is still quite full even at this late hour, and a feeling of deep satisfaction washes over me at the sight of several dark elves slumped over tables, high or drunk off whatever new substance Udar is selling in his taverns.

The dark elves have spent their entire lives trying to subjugate the orcs. They spent decades slaughtering my people, trying to control us, and destroying our way of living.

The dark elves might still have control in Jurtill, but as our operations and trade strengthen in the city, the orcs grow more and more powerful, and the dark elves lose more and more of themselves to us.

As I wait for Bokk to count the weekly collections, my thoughts return to my night with Kinley.

My mouth goes dry and my palms tingle as I yearn to touch Kinley again. I can still smell her clean, sharp scent, and I can still taste her heady musk on my tongue.

Bokk finally finishes and places the tavern's weekly earnings in a secure bag around his waist. He grabs a bottle of zhisk and two tumblers, and we find a table at the back of the tavern.

I don't miss the way the tavern manager and the barmaids mutter angrily to one another, but I ignore them. They know better than to speak out against Udar out loud because they know what their fate would be if they did.

*I wonder what Kinley is doing now. Maybe she has woken up and is thinking of me. Maybe her body is warm and flush with desire, with pure unadulterated need. Maybe she is touching herself, thinking of me. The way I want to now.*

"Where were you?" Bokk interrupts my thoughts loudly, his voice demanding as he splashes several measures of zhisk into my glass.

"What do you mean?" I ask him distractedly as I lift the glass to my lips. The bronze liquid is smooth and cool, and it burns slightly as I swallow it.

“You weren’t in your room when I called for you.” Bokk looks at me with raised eyebrows.

My face grows warm as I think about Kinley, and my hand tightens around the glass.

I know that I can tell Bokk anything. He is deeply loyal to me, and he is a good friend. But on the other hand, Bokk is also deeply loyal to the clan and to Udar.

“It is Kinley,” I say after swallowing the premium zhisk. “The human woman,” I add when Bokk looks confused.

“I had her last night. She was magnificent. And I made her mine.”

Bokk’s eyebrows have raised so far that they are in danger of disappearing into his hairline.

“You know that is forbidden.” Bokk’s voice is dark and dangerously quiet. “You know that bonds between orcs and humans go against every rule that our people have created for ourselves. We made these rules for a reason.”

“Kinley is mine.” The words come out in a growl that surprises Bokk. It surprises me, too. “And I don’t care about an old rule that I had nothing to do with making.”

The words become true as I speak them. In one night, Kinley became mine. I laid claim to her, and in her passion, she accepted me.

And in a way, I became hers. Because now all I can think of is possessing her again. All I can think of is owning her. All I can think of is controlling her.

In one night, we became so thoroughly entangled in one another that I cannot see a way back. I cannot see a way out of this. I cannot think of a way to extricate myself from her.

She is mine, and I am hers. And I cannot wait to have her again.

“Shirking the old ways won’t get you far in Udar’s favor. You know the punishment will be more severe than you can handle.”

One of the dark elves at the table close by stands up and then slumps to the ground. Her body jerks, and she starts to retch.

The tavern manager and barmaids run over and grab the dark elf woman by her arms before dragging her to the back of the tavern.

I turn to Bokk. “I do not care about Udar’s punishments. I want Kinley to be by my side always. I want her to be my mate. And I’ll destroy anyone who gets between us.”

Bokk shrugs and swallows the smooth liquid in his glass. He pours himself another measure of zhisk, almost emptying the bottle, and then pushes the rest of the zhisk in the bottle over to me.

“I won’t be the one to tell him. But you need to be careful. By all rights, you should renounce her and your desire for her. Orcs and humans don’t mix for very good reasons.”

I finish the last dregs of zhisk in the bottle, before Bokk and I stand up and leave the tavern.

As we pass the bar, I look through an open door towards the backroom of the tavern.

There, the dark elf woman lies still, with one of the barmaids kneeling next to her. The barmaid reaches down and closes the dark elf woman’s eyes before a blanket is thrown over her.

The sky is inky black when we step outside. It is the kind of darkness that hangs heavy and suffocating just before dawn arrives.

All I want to do now is return to Kinley. I want to return to bed with her. I want to make love to her again.

*No, a voice in my head amends. I want to fuck her. I want to fuck her into submission and break her. I want to make sure that once her body is done shaking, that when she looks into my eyes, she is fully and completely mine.*

But I also know that Udar has more jobs for Bokk and me. There are four more taverns and several clubs on our route,

and collection night isn't over yet.

*She'll keep. Besides, the longer you keep her waiting for you, the more passionate she'll be when you return.*

The streets of Jurtil are surprisingly crowded for this late at night, and as we turn the corner to one of Udar's new clubs, I see that his latest business venture is a success.

It is technically a club where patrons can watch dancers. But there are back rooms where patrons can go with dancers and do whatever they desire.

A line has formed outside one of these clubs, and the music blares, loud and booming.

The air, when I lift my face to it, feels wet, and I know that rain is coming in the next few hours.

Tonight, the club's attractions do not capture my attention as they usually would. Tonight, the human and dark elf woman who dance and gyrate suggestively on the stage, all of them wearing very little, do not look appealing.

Instead, all I can think of is how I am going to make Kinley my mate. Mating with Kinley is simply a formality.

She already belongs to me. But I want to claim her in public so that every other male around us knows that she is mine.

*Udar will exile you for that.* The errant thought is annoying, but I know it is true.

But my resolve does not weaken at the thought that Udar might disapprove. Now that I have found Kinley, Udar's opinion of me is meaningless.

The next three clubs that we visit are just as full as the first one. All of the taverns are also almost completely filled up.

Bokk's bag has grown heavy by the time the sun has risen. We head back to the clan's compound to deposit the entirety of the night's collections as a stiff wind speeds up through the air and fat, cold droplets of rain start to fall.

By the time we reach the clan's compound, I know that I have chosen Kinley as my mate.

And there is simply nothing that will make me let her go.

I stop on the top step that leads into the back of the apartment block. I turn and look out over Jurttil.

And I do not see Jurttil. All I see is Kinley.

And I know then that I will burn the city down before I let go of Kinley. And if that means burning Udar and my clan with it?

Then so be it.



# RURGASH

The storm comes roaring across the sky just as Bokk and I make it up the stairs and into the clan's compound. The air is cold, sharp, and fresh, made crisper by the balls of ice that have now begun falling from the sky.

"Odd," Bokk says. I turn to him, though I am still lost in my own thoughts.

"What is odd?"

"It is only autumn. And we're in the middle of the desert. We shouldn't be having this kind of weather."

When I think about it, I realize that Bokk is correct. Tlouz is a dry continent, and while we do get some rain throughout the year, it is never heavy and always just enough to water the ground. We do have several lakes and rivers that come down through the mountains, so we do not go without water.

"This kind of weather should not be happening," Bokk grumbles as we walk through the lower floor of the apartment block towards the courtyard.

We hear it then, the excited cries and raucous laughter coming from the courtyard. The sound was drowned out by the wind and rain at first, but now as we come up onto the courtyard, we hear them.

Two orcs are lounging in seats underneath an awning, clutching jugs of ale, and they wave us over. "Rurgash! Bokk! How did collection night go? We had to bash some heads in to get all Udar's earnings last night!"



This comes from Brignal, an orc I have never particularly liked, who is smiling widely. He offers me some ale, but I shake my head. I look over at Bokk, who is looking at Brignal with undisguised disdain on his face.

All I want to do is report to Udar now so that I can get back to Kinley.

But then Bokk asks the question that I probably should have.

“What is all the commotion about?” he asks Brignal and jerks his head in the direction of the courtyard as another loud cheer goes up.

*We’re supposed to try to stay hidden. We’re never going to remain hidden from the dark elves at this point.*

I am sure that the dark elves wouldn’t mind knowing where the entire clan’s compound is. They’d probably drop a magic bomb on us or something and take us all out at once.

“Haven’t you heard? They’ve captured another human girl. She was snooping around here.”

A crack of thunder twists in the sky, accompanied by bright, silvery lightning that looks eerie against the yellow morning sky.

The rain starts to fall more heavily, and as if to make a point, dark clouds slither across the sky, swallowing up the yellow sky and shrouding Jurtill in darkness.

*We really shouldn’t be having this kind of weather. They captured a human girl?*

“They captured a human girl?” My voice is sharp as I jerk the question towards Brignal, who looks at me with widened, surprised eyes.

“Yes. They did. And here’s the orc himself who did it.”

Lornac, another orc I am not particularly fond of, comes walking towards us from the courtyard with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Rurgash! Just the orc I was looking for! Walk with me! I have something to show you.”

The inside of the apartment building is gloomy. We haven't fixed it up for a while, and now, rain trickles through cracks in the roof.

Most of the windows are boarded up, but there are several dangerous cracks in the few glass panes that remain.

“You captured a human girl?” I ask Lornac impatiently as we walk behind him.

He looks back at me with a broad smile on his face, though his smile falters as he looks at me.

“Yes. She was nosing around here. We had to take her before she left with any information that could hurt us.”

There is a crowd of orcs gathered in the courtyard, and Lornac turns to me. The broad, ugly smile is back on his face.

Two of his front teeth are missing. He looks so pleased with himself that I am tempted to knock the rest of his teeth out.

“What was the name of the human girl you captured?”

“What does it matter?” I ask him, my voice rough.

A sudden, piercing scream shrills through the air from the middle of the courtyard, and the orcs who are standing facing the center of the courtyard in a circle burst into a round of boisterous cheers.

“Oh!” Light dawns across Lornac's eyes. “Kinley! I remember now. We need to torture her with this new girl because that's why the new girl came here! She was looking for Kinley, and she won't shut up about her! Let me show you.”

And with that, he grabs my arm and drags me through the crowd of orcs.

Another crack of thunder bursts across the sky, and then rain starts to pour into the courtyard within seconds of the

thunder. It's as if the sound of the thunder shattered open the clouds.

And there she is. She is a slip of a thing. She must be close to Kinley's age. Her hair is lighter than Kinley's, and her eyes are blue. She is tied to a chair in the middle of the courtyard, and she is struggling against her bonds.

I'd tell her that it was futile, but I think she already knows.

And yet she keeps struggling. Her eyes grow wider when she sees me. She opens her mouth and is about to speak when she is drenched in a torrent of rain.

She screams again when Lornac grips her hair and the back of the chair to lift her out of the rain.

"Shut up, you little bitch!" Lornac shouts at her as she screams and kicks her feet. "I'm making sure you don't drown in this fucking rain."

"This weather is unnatural," Bokk says next to me, but I cannot focus on the weather right now.

No one should be asking me about Kinley. For a second, a wave of uncontrollable rage washes over me. I look at the bright-haired girl with narrowed eyes as I try to breathe through my anger.

*She's ruined everything! Why did she have to come here?*

Lornac places the girl just out of the way of the rain, but she is still right in the middle of everyone. All the orcs peer and leer at her, treating her like a circus freak.

"I think it would be fun if we tortured them together," Lornac says with a triumphant smile on his face.

"Maybe you should focus on work," I find myself snapping at him.

*No one should be asking about Kinley.*

"Instead of fucking around like this. All you're doing by keeping her." I jerk my head towards the bright-haired girl. "Is inviting trouble. At least Udar asked me to capture Kinley. Now get back to work!"

I roar the last sentence, and every orc in the courtyard falls silent.

I walk away from them swiftly and make it up the stairs to the apartment that I call home.

*No one should be asking about Kinley.*

I don't want anyone to ask about Kinley. I don't want anyone to know what I am doing with her until I am ready.

I thought that we would just use her, and then everyone would forget about her.

Again, a streak of anger ripples through me, mostly directed at the bright-haired girl but also at Lornac's plain stupidity.

I think about the fact that Kinley shouldn't even be in my apartment but should be locked up in the rooms that we turned into dungeons that are located beneath the ground floor.

*Udar didn't give you any specific instructions. He told you to kidnap her. He didn't say anything else. So he can't really punish you for keeping her in your apartment, can he?*

I try to sort out my thoughts as I walk slowly up another flight of stairs. My rage at Lornac and the girl he captured hasn't gone away. But I am mostly enraged that he has exposed Kinley to danger from the other orcs.

I sit down on the fourth-floor landing, and I realize that my hands are balled into fists.

*When did that happen?*

If Udar realizes that I have grown attached to Kinley, he'll order me to get rid of her, or worse, kill her.

And the best-case scenario for me is that he'll exile me from the clan.

The worst-case scenario is that someone like Lornac will get to kill me.

"Not in this lifetime," I find myself murmuring, and then I get slowly to my feet. "No one is touching me or Kinley. No one!"

Because Kinley is *mine*. And I'll rip apart anyone who tries to take her from me. I'll fight to the death to keep her by my side, to keep her as my mate.

The realization that I would kill the people I consider to be family for Kinley's sake is grim. But I do not have any other choice, and I do not see any other way. Kinley is going to be my mate, and as her mate, I have to protect her. It is as simple as that.

Udar might not like it, but every orc understands the concept of what a mate is. And if it means that I have to rip my chieftain's head off to keep Kinley safe from danger, then that is what I'll have to do.

"I think," I say to myself as I get to the floor that is just below mine. "That it is time to sharpen your old knives."



# KINLEY

**I** *wonder if we're the only people living on this floor.*

I have been awake for several hours now, and all I have done is watch the storm ripple and twist across Jurtill's sky. "This is unnatural," I whisper to myself.

The truth is, Jurtill doesn't get storms like this. We're in Tlouz, the driest of Protheka's continents. And while we do get seasonal rains, it is never like this.

I turn away from the window listlessly and walk over to the little kitchen where I make myself a cup of kaffo.

This morning, after Rurgash left, was quite an intense one, and I still don't feel very well. All I can think of is the monster I am becoming in Rurgash's presence.

I nearly drop the pot of boiling water when the door to the apartment bursts open. When I turn, my heart jumps up into my throat as I see Rurgash looming in the doorway.

"You're awake," he says gruffly. Despite my feelings in the aftermath of the night I spent with Rurgash, I assumed that he would be happier than me.

But instead of looking pleased to see me, Rurgash looks like someone has given him very bad news.

I don't say anything. All I do is walk up to him slowly with my arms crossed over my chest.

Rurgash doesn't wait for me to speak as he walks into the apartment and shuts the door. He bolts the door and then in

one swift, fluid movement, he lifts a side table and wedges it underneath the handle of the door.

“Another human has been captured,” he says in answer to my raised eyebrows. “And I need to increase security.”

This time, when my heart jumps into my throat, it stays there, making it difficult for me to breathe, to even think.

*Why did they capture another human? What could they possibly want with another one? Or are they just capturing humans for the fun of it?*

*They’re orcs, what did you expect?*

“Who is it?” It’s the first question out of my mouth as I picture the human, probably a woman, who has been captured.

All I can see in my mind’s eye is a frightened, small woman, cowering underneath the assaults of the orcs.

“You don’t need to worry about this. All you need to do is stay here and stay out of sight.”

My level of annoyance skyrockets the minute Rurgash speaks. I curl my hands, which look minuscule compared to his, into fists as anger surges through me. My body grows warm, and I clench my jaw.

“Who is it?” I ask him, and then I start to repeat the words again and again. “Who is it?”

Rurgash shakes his head and walks past me to the kitchen, where he lights the fire again and reheats the water.

“You don’t need to worry about any of this.”

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think that Rurgash was trying to sound soothing. But I don’t have time to decipher his babbling.

*I need to know who it is and why they captured her!*

I stamp my foot down in frustration as I crane my head to look up at Rurgash, who is looking serenely down at me. “Tell me who it is!” I say through clenched teeth. “Tell me who it is!”



I repeat the words again and again, and I only start to scream when I realize that Rurgash isn't going to budge.

Maybe he is afraid that my screams will attract attention because he grabs both my wrists with one hand and clamps his other hand down over my mouth.

There is a sudden urgency in Rurgash's bright yellow eyes that I have never seen before.

I don't remain still just because he has gotten hold of me.

*Make this as difficult for him as possible. Make it a pain for him to keep you here. That's the only way he's going to let you go.*

I struggle against his hands, biting down on the inside of his palm and kicking at his legs with my feet.

Eventually, he sighs almost exhaustedly and lets me go. I stumble backward as he runs a hand over his head.

"It is a human woman. And she knows you. She can't stop talking about you. None of the orcs can get her to shut up."

My mouth is dry, and my heart is beating fast. Too fast. Painfully fast.

"What does she look like?" I ask him as a more solid picture of the captive forms in my head.

The picture comes into view in my mind's eye as Rurgash describes her.

*A small, petite blonde woman with blue eyes and fair, creamy skin.*

*Azaria.*

"Azaria." I croak her name out and stagger backward to the nearest chair because if I don't sit down, I know I'll pass out or piss myself.

Rurgash looks at me, and this time his eyebrows are raised.

"Please." My voice is painfully hoarse. The storm hasn't let up outside. It has gotten more violent, in fact. "You have to help her!"

I don't know why I haven't felt real, true fear yet, being locked up in the compound of a clan of vicious orcs.

Maybe because I knew I was under Rurgash's protection. Maybe because I was more attracted to Rurgash than I cared to admit.

But now I feel real fear and can see real danger, knowing that Azaria has been captured by Rurgash's clan.

I know that not all the orcs in his clan will be as good as he is. Not all of them will be as merciful as he has been.

"You have to help her!" I curl my hands into fists again as my voice dissolves into rasping sobs, and Rurgash looks at me, his eyebrows still raised.

His face is grim. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks at me with his head cocked to the side.

"Please." He still hasn't said anything. I get up off the chair and fall to my knees.

*I can't let her get hurt. She probably got captured trying to find me! I have to save her! I can't let her get hurt because of me!*

"Please, Rurgash." I bow before him in supplication before I crawl to his feet and wrap my arms around his wide legs.

"Please. That's my friend. Her name is Azaria. She is only in this mess because of me. You have to save her."

Rurgash steps away from me, and I fall to the floor.

When I look up at him, he shrugs.

"I don't have to do anything. You're the only one under my protection. This is just business for our clan. She came snooping around, and she got captured. We can't let random human women, who might run to the dark elves at any minute, just hang around here."

"You don't understand," I am babbling, I think to myself distractedly. All I can see now is the storm and Azaria's blazing blue eyes in the center of it. "You don't understand.

She won't go to the dark elves. She isn't a threat. All you have to do is let her go. Please,"

When I look down, I realize that my hands are clasped together as if I am praying. "Please, just do something to save her."

Rurgash walks back to the little kitchen where the pot of water has boiled.

"She shouldn't have come around here, Kinley." His voice is calm, measured, almost reasonable. "She made her bed, now she has to lie in it. Whatever happens to her, it won't be anything personal. Like I said, it's just business."

I remain on the floor, my hands clasped together to stop myself from tearing my hair out.

Rurgash pours hot water into a mug and takes a sip from the mug, frowning slightly.

*He isn't going to do anything. He isn't going to help you. You thought he cared about you? He doesn't give a damn about you.*

This time when I cry, I cry softly. I unclasp my hands and wipe away the tears that roll slowly down my cheeks.

I get up from the floor and continue crying as I walk over to the bed. My shoulders shake so violently for a second that I can barely move.

Soon, I start to cry more loudly, and pure despair is obvious in every sound I make.

It is only when I have gotten under the covers of the bed and I have buried my face in my pillow, still crying, that Rurgash comes over to the bed.

"Sit up," he says roughly. I obey almost mindlessly, still sobbing, as he places two fingers underneath my chin and tilts it up.

"Look at me," he orders me and roughly wipes my tears away.

“I’ll handle it. I’ll make sure your friend is okay,” he says, and his voice is rough and slightly doubtful.

But there is determination in his eyes despite the doubt in his voice. And when he looks at me, I know that he is breaking every rule for me.

*Saving Azaria is going to cost him a lot. And he doesn’t even know if it will be worth anything.*

I also know, as he still looks at me, stroking my cheek with his thumb, that Rurgash hasn’t lost any of his raw, vicious power because he is breaking the rules for me.

Instead, he is using his power like a whip, to do what I want. Because he doesn’t want me to be unhappy.

*He’s willing to kill for you. He’d kill for you if it made you smile. And he would enjoy it.*



# RURGASH

I might have reassured Kinley that I am going to help save her friend, but she is still afraid.

*I don't think she was this afraid when I captured her, I think wonderingly to myself as I watch her fall asleep in my arms.*

She didn't stop crying even after I told her multiple times that I would help her friend Azaria, and she refused to eat or drink anything.

Instead, all she did was sob quietly into my chest until she exhausted herself.

And now, her body jerks every now and then as she falls asleep, and tears still roll down her cheeks as she lays in my arms.

I suppose I can understand how she feels. I wouldn't cry over Bokk, but if he were captured, I would want to help him.

*The bonds between orcs in a clan are not the same as the bonds between human friends or families. Not even dark elves can love the way humans love.*

*Humans are capable of loving one another, and everyone else around them in ways that are nearly impossible for orcs or even dark elves.*

I'll never be able to love like a human. But I know that I would do literally anything and everything for Kinley.

I'd kill for her. And I'd enjoy it.

“Bokk,” I whisper to myself, glancing down at Kinley to ensure that she is properly asleep before I move. “I need Bokk.”

The storm is still rolling on when I carefully adjust Kinley’s small body in the bed, making sure that she will be comfortable and warm.

But the clouds have receded slightly, and the sky has brightened to some extent.

Lightning still flashes and cracks across the sky every few seconds, followed by the ringing boom of thunder.

*This weather isn’t natural*, I think to myself, remembering what Bokk told me. *Maybe it is time to give an offering to the Lunar Goddess*, I think as I walk out of the apartment and lock the door behind me.

I cannot help but wonder if the weather is some kind of herald or harbinger of something worse to come.

Bokk’s apartment is on the floor below mine, and he opens the door almost immediately after I knock on it.

“I need your help.” My voice is low, and his face tightens when he hears my tone of voice.

*He knows that it is about Kinley and the captured girl, Azaria.*

Bokk turns, letting me into his apartment, which is slightly smaller than mine but still large enough to accommodate him.

I know that Bokk leads quite a solitary life and doesn’t mix with the female orcs the way some of the other orcs in our clan have done.

*The way you used to.*

“The human girl that Lornac captured.” I do not miss the way Bokk’s eyes brighten with immeasurable curiosity and some emotion I cannot identify as soon as I mention Azaria. “She is the friend of Kinley. My mate.”

“Oh?” Bokk gestures at me to continue.

“Her name is Azaria.” His eyes lighten even more, and I watch as he mouths her name. “And Kinley needs me to keep her safe. I need to get her away from Lornac and the rest of the clan before they actually torture her.”

“And how do you propose to do that?” Bokk asks me. His voice is grim, and it is because we both know how difficult this is going to be.

“I need you to hide her. You can do it more easily than I can because everyone has their attention on me because of Kinley.”

Bokk is silent for a long while. When I look out of his window, which faces the desert that leads away from Jurtil, I see that the storm hasn’t touched the Tlouzian desert at all.

*This weather is certainly strange. For this storm to ravage Jurtil but not touch the rest of Tlouz at all? It is definitely a sign that something is coming.*

“I don’t think this is going to end well,” Bokk says after a while.

“Of course, it won’t,” I wholeheartedly agree with him. “It won’t end well at all. *If* they find out.”

“I don’t like crossing the clan,” Bokk grumbles, but I can tell he has already decided to help me.

I don’t know what his reasons will be for helping me. I have a feeling that his reasons for helping me have nothing to do with me. But I don’t care.

I just need him to say it.

“Fine.”

I let out a dark sigh of relief when Bokk finally agrees.

“I’ll help you. Can you say her name again?” he asks me. I am not sure whether I should be worried about the curious light in his eyes or not.

“Her name is Azaria. Azaria.” I repeat it the way I heard Kinley say it.



“Azaria.” Bokk says her name slowly, and there is an expression on his face that looks familiar to me, although I cannot place where I saw the expression.

“Fine. I’ll hide her tonight, when everyone is on patrol or out or asleep.”

I nod my thanks, and then I head out to do my rounds.



KINLEY IS awake when I return home close to eleven in the evening. She looks as though she has just woken up. Her hair is messy, and her eyes are hazy.

“Don’t worry,” I tell her, keeping my voice even and measured. “I’ve taken care of Azaria. She won’t be in any further danger.”

Instead of looking overjoyed, which is what I imagined, Kinley looks even more concerned and starts to pester me with questions.

“How will you do it? And how will you manage without alerting the other orcs?”

She doesn’t seem any less worried when I tell her that Bokk will be the one to free Azaria.

*She doesn’t know Bokk well enough to trust him yet. She won’t stop worrying until she sees that Azaria is completely unharmed and free.*

“Listen.” I grab her wrists and pull her towards me. She looks up at me, and there is reluctance in her eyes. “Listen to me.” My words are a sharp command.

“Calm down. Bokk will get her out of there. I trust him with my life.”

She nods, still reluctantly, and then pulls away from me.

I go over to the kitchen to prepare something to eat, because I am quite sure that Kinley hasn’t eaten anything in days.

The world outside is quiet, and there is no sign that a treacherous storm raged across the sky only hours earlier.

Kinley paces up and down the length of the room as I prepare two plates of aged taura cheese, bread, and warm dripir meat.

She picks at her food distractedly, glancing at the door every now and then while I eat my meal and finish it off with some fine zhisk that I appropriated from a tavern on my rounds earlier this evening.

We don't go to bed right away, and after eating some of her food, Kinley resumes pacing.

I know why she's worried.

I cannot deny that I am concerned.

Bokk is taking a huge risk for both of us.

This could end him. Udar is the kind of chieftain who loves making an example of orcs who cross him or the clan, and he loves doling out severe punishment.

*I have a feeling that Bokk is willing to risk it,* I think to myself as I grab Kinley by the waist as she paces past me.

I force her onto my lap. Eventually, her body just goes still, and she lays her head against my chest.

Her reluctance is obvious, and I cannot help but wonder what has changed. Last night, she was all over me. Maybe it was simply the news of Azaria's capture that changed her, but she seems a lot more distant than she was last night.

There is a knock on the apartment door around one in the morning. Kinley, who was asleep in my lap, jerks awake and scrambles to her feet.

I get up, too, and in three long strides, I get to the door and open it.

It is Bokk, standing on the other side of the door. He nods once, and I know that he did what I asked him to do.

Then he walks away.

“What is it?” Kinley is behind me, craning her head to look over my shoulder. “Who was it?”

“It was Bokk.” I keep my voice low as I close the door and lock it before I wedge a small table beneath the handle.

“He got Azaria out. He’s hiding. She’s safe now.”

The look of relief on Kinley’s face mirrors what I feel, but as she turns away from me and heads to bed, my relief disappears, changes.

It twists and shifts, becoming concern at the fact that I have just deceived my clan in the greatest way possible.

*You’ve broken all the rules for Kinley. There is no going back now. You might actually have to kill your way out of here in the end.*

But then I look at Kinley, who is already asleep, and I know that it is all worth it.

I’ll do everything in my power to protect her and Azaria. Their lives are in my hands now, and I won’t let them get hurt.

I don’t join Kinley in bed but sit down next to the window in the kitchen.

There, I look out at Jurtill, at the flickering lights that make up the city.

Udar could find out about my and Bokk’s deception at any minute. I need to stay ready.

*You might need to burn the world down for Kinley sooner than you thought. You better keep your matches ready.*



# KINLEY

**T***hat cannot be good*, I think to myself at the piercing sound of shattering glass that comes from below the apartment I have been locked in for two weeks now.

I am alone in the apartment. Rurgash left me early this morning without a word, like he has done for the previous three days, and I know that something is wrong.

He won't tell me much, but the little he has told me has been revealing.

It has been three days since Azaria was captured, and it has been three days since Bokk, Rurgash's friend, helped to hide her.

The little information that Rurgash has given me is that the orcs in his clan have grown rowdy and reckless since Azaria 'went missing.'

More and more fights are breaking out amongst the clan, as the different orcs accuse one another of stealing Azaria away.

*"Some of them have proposed that we search the clan compound."*

Rurgash told me about the proposed search of the eight-story building, and I know it would take some time for them to reach our floor, but he still doesn't feel safe.

I know that he is mostly worried about my safety. But I know that he has to be concerned about his own place within the clan.

“We’re leaving.”

Those are the first words out of Rurgash’s mouth as he thunders into the apartment.

“What?” I ask him, whirling around as he slams all the locks shut on the inside of the door. “What do you mean?”

I wasn’t expecting Rurgash back this early, and the troubled look on his face tells me that his concerns about Azaria and I were valid.

“What do you mean?” I ask again when he doesn’t answer me.

Instead, he walks swiftly over to the window in the kitchen and peers out onto the street.

Just then, the sounds of yelling and cheering resound all throughout the building.

“We’re leaving. Tonight. I’m moving you to a safe house. One that no one else in the clan, except Bokk, knows about. It isn’t safe for you here any longer.”

He speaks abruptly, his voice harsh, and all I can do is nod in response.

“It’s for your own safety,” he says brusquely. “Don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be.”

There is a clear warning in his voice and what he is saying is obvious.

*Don’t make a fuss and don’t throw a tantrum.*

And once again, I am reminded of Rurgash’s sheer strength. He could snap my entire body in half as easily as if I were a twig.

*He could hurt you terribly, despite everything he has done for you.*

I resolve then to never forget how powerful Rurgash really is. Because I know it will be deadly for me if I don’t.

Rurgash doesn’t wait for me to respond but grabs a cloth bag from a wardrobe and goes to the kitchen cabinets.

He empties out the kitchen cabinets and hands the bag for me to hold.

“Wait here,” he tells me. “And lock the door when I leave.”

I do as he tells me after he leaves, and when I am alone, I find that I cannot focus on anything so I start pacing.

Rurgash returns when it is dark and throws a jacket at me, which I pull on quickly. It is way too big for me, but it will keep me warm, which is good enough.

We leave quickly and quietly, avoiding every one of the orcs who stand guard within and outside the compound.

We leave through the back of the compound, and my clothes, particularly the new jacket, get caught on an iron fence that we walk through to get to the road.

“I just hope they didn’t see us. Bokk distracted the guards at the back gate so that we could slip through. I hope that was enough.”

Jurtil’s streets are dark and smoggy, and Rurgash keeps a hand on my back while we walk.

We walk for what feels like an hour but is probably only a few minutes. When we come to a stop, the sky has grown so dark that I cannot even see Rurgash’s dark green skin.

Bokk is waiting for us outside a small abandoned house that is located behind what is clearly a sex club.

*Where in the name of the Hearthkeeper are we?* I think to myself as Bokk and Rugash usher me into the house.

The house is tiny. In fact, it is even smaller than Rurgash’s apartment in the orc compound.

A lump grows in my throat, and a cold sense of dread washes over me.

*It’s still bigger than the apartment you were living in,* I think to myself. I look down at the heavy bag of food in my hand. *And you’ll have a lot more to eat here than you ever did at your apartment.*

“I hate this,” I find myself mumbling, and Rurgash looks over at me with a stern expression on his handsome face.

*I’m still just a prisoner. That is how I feel. Is this what the humans in the death camps feel like when they are moved around by the dark elves?*

But I know that I should not think like that. This small one-roomed house is the furthest thing from a death camp in Tlouz, and I also know that Rurgash is only moving me because he is trying to keep me safe.

Rurgash takes the bag of food from my hands while Bokk ensures that the house is warm enough.

I look at Rurgash reflectively as he unpacks the bag of food into the small cabinets in the makeshift kitchen.

*All he wants is to take care of me. No one has ever done that before.*

The realization that Rurgash is risking his life and position in his clan for me hits hard. I don’t think anyone, except Azaria, has ever taken care of me before. And Azaria certainly hasn’t taken care of me the way Rurgash has.

*What wouldn’t Rurgash do for you? He would go to war for you. He would kill for you. He would destroy for you and build for you.*

Rurgash turns to me then and comes over to take me into his arms.

“I will protect you.” His voice and eyes are solemn. “I will protect you from anything and everything. Even from my own kind. Even if I have to rip their heads off to do it.”

He lifts his hand to lightly grip my throat, and my skin prickles underneath his touch. He strokes the side of my neck with his thumb and tightens his other fingers around the back of my neck.

I lean into the pressure of his hand, staring up into his eyes.

*There is no going back from this. There is no more pretending that you haven’t slept with an orc. That you haven’t*



*fucked an orc. There is no more pretending that you haven't placed your life, and Azaria's life, in his hands.*

The thought that I should maybe try to trust Rurgash does cross my mind.

It might be painful to trust Rurgash, but it might be the kind of pain I can take.

*It might be the kind of pain that I have become addicted to around Rurgash.*

Rurgash only moves when Bokk clears his throat, and the two orcs speak before Bokk leaves.

"So what now? You can't stay here forever," I tell Rurgash. He goes over to the counter and starts preparing some food.

*You need to start doing that. He can't do all the work,* I think to myself, and I force myself to move over to help Rurgash.

"I just need to keep you safe until I figure out what we're going to do. I can't hide you forever. Udar knows you exist. He's going to want to know where you are eventually. Hopefully, I can buy myself some time to figure this out."

We eat slowly and in silence. A fire crackles in a small metal can in the middle of the room.

I take the plates to the counter when we're both finished eating, while Rurgash goes to wash up.

"Are you going to leave now?" I ask him when he has returned from the even tinier bathroom.

He looks at me for a long while.

"No," he says finally. "I'll stay."

Rurgash is lifting me into his arms before I know it, and he carries me over to the bed.

Soon, I am lying in his arms in the darkness, with the fire in the metal can providing the only light in the room.

“Thank you.” The words slip from me before I know what I am saying. But I don’t regret it. “Thank you for taking care of me,” I tell him.

“You are mine now.” He tightens his hand on my arm as if to drive the point home. “And I take care of what is mine.”

I cannot help but feel slightly anxious as I nestle closer to Rurgash. This is uncharted territory for me, and I do not know how to approach it.

*Are you ready to trust him? Even if it could be painful?*

I close my eyes, inhale his scent, and try to fall into unconsciousness.

But I realize then that I have never felt more awake, as I lay there curled up with Rurgash’s arms around me.

His breathing is deep and heavy, but I do not know if he is asleep. All I can hear is the crackle of the fire and the thud of my own heartbeat.

*Will I ever fall asleep?*



# KINLEY

I don't know if he is asleep.

His body is still, and his breathing is deep and heavy.

"Are you asleep?" I ask him after I have been silent in the darkness, curled up against him for several minutes.

I do not expect him to reply at first. But then he does, his voice drowsy and softer than I have ever heard it before.

"No. Why aren't you asleep?" he asks me, and I sit up, moving my body closer to him.

I don't answer him right away. My thoughts right then are tumultuous and unsteady. I feel unsteady.

I inhale as deeply as I can.

*Everything should feel wrong. Instead, everything feels perfectly fine. As though this is where I am meant to be.*

*I shouldn't be here, falling asleep next to an orc. I shouldn't be here, falling for an orc.*

At this moment, in the dark with the fire flickering close by, I know that I will never be able to go back to my old life.

*I'm too far gone.*

I was lost the minute I saw Rurgash murdering that orc. I was lost the minute I looked into his eyes, eyes so much like fire.

But now, after what he has done for me, after what he has done for Azaria, I have tipped too far over the edge to ever go

back.

*How did I get here?*

“Are you okay?” Rurgash’s rumbling voice, which I would have found terrifying under any other circumstance, is comforting in the dark. I lean against him, taking his hand in mine.

“I’m... fine.” My words are slow, and I realize that I sound as drowsy as he does. I feel him sitting up in the dark. “I have a lot on my mind.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” His voice is tentative. He almost sounds reluctant.

“No.” My voice is breathless. “I want you to take my mind off it. I just... I don’t want to think.”

*He knows exactly what I am asking him,* I think to myself as Rurgash’s warm hands go to my arms.

My body is warm from laying next to him, and a new wave of warmth washes over me as our lips meet in the darkness.

The kiss is almost sweet. But sweet is not what I want.

*Sweet is not what I want.*

I move first, pulling my face away from his and kissing and nipping my way down his neck.

I feel his chest tighten as I swirl my tongue around one of his nipples and then the other before I take some of his flesh in my mouth and bite down hard.

Rurgash’s hand goes to my hair. He wraps the length of it around his fist and tugs hard on it, jerking my head back up to his face.

I cry out from the sudden pain, but my cry is lost as our mouths crash together.

This time, the kiss isn’t sweet. Instead, it is almost frenzied, and we bite each other hard several times as Rurgash uses his other hand to rip off my clothes.

I tremble when his hand goes between my thighs, parting them and slipping a finger up and down my pussy.

*Gods.*

I moan into his mouth as he sucks on my lower lip and drags the pleasure from me.

*Yes!*

“Yes,” I hiss when he finally touches my clit, though he touches it maddeningly lightly. “Yes.” I whimper again and again, bucking and rocking my hips against his hand as my pussy, already hot and wet, grows even wetter.

Rurgash still has a grip on my hair, and he controls every movement I make with my hair entwined around his fist.

Now he yanks my head down to his crotch, where his cock is hard, the head of it flared out and bulbous.

I open my mouth willingly as he forces my head down on it. I lick up the underside of his shaft, tonguing the vein that throbs there before I swirl my tongue around the tip. Then I lower my entire mouth onto his length.

The room is silent but for Rurgash’s occasional groans, and the crackling of the fire in the can.

He pulls me off him by my hair when I feel his body tense underneath my hands and mouth.

Then, in a movement so fast and fluid that I didn’t see it coming, Rurgash flips me over onto my stomach.

“Arch your back.” He still has a hold on my hair as he grunts instructions. “Come closer to the edge of the bed.”

Small whimpers and whines escape me when Rurgash lines his cock up with my opening, and I push back against him, impaling myself on his cock.

He lets out a gruff laugh. His one hand goes to my hip as I move backward and forwards.

“You’re so desperate for it,” he almost croons. “You’re so needy for it, it’s almost pathetic.”

“Yes.” I hiss again as he slams into me then, suddenly, painfully, gloriously.

He does it again and again, thrusting into me roughly, still controlling my movements with my hair and his hand on my hip.

The pressure of him inside me, filling me up, stretching me out, sends my eyes rolling backward in my head while my mouth hangs open.

It is Rurgash’s words, more than what he is actually doing to me, that send me crashing over the edge of my first climax.

“You’re mine. You hear me? You’re mine. You belong to me now.”

*I’m yours.*

“I’m yours!” I find myself sobbing the words out loud as he angles his hips upwards and rubs against my most sensitive spot.

“Oh, gods!” I squeal the words as the climax explodes throughout my body. My pussy pulsates, spasming around his dick, and Rurgash grunts as he flips me over onto my back, not pulling out as he does so.

He drags my body closer to the edge of the bed, letting go of my hair and reaching down to close a hand around my throat.

He presses a finger into my skin on either side of my throat as he keeps my legs wide apart with his other hand.

“Fuck!” I whine, my voice trailing off into a moan. I wrap my legs around Rurgash’s waist and start to rock and buck my hips back against him every time he thrusts into me.

He laughs again, throwing his head back, and I look up at him frantically as I reach my peak again.

Rurgash seems to sense this and tightens his chokehold around my throat, cutting off my oxygen supply.

I struggle against him, coughing and spluttering, and then he lets go so suddenly that it sends me soaring.

“Oh, gods, yes!” I scream before Rurgash pushes my legs into the air again and fucks into me with a ruthlessness that I have never experienced before.

Twin spikes of pain and pleasure ripple, twist, and skitter across my body as Rurgash pushes my legs further and further apart, holding onto my feet.

Droplets of his sweat drop onto my body, and I arch my back, twisting away from him when the hurt becomes too much. Rurgash sees this and lets me go, letting my legs fall to the bed and slowing down. Warmth and pleasure wash over me slowly.

This time when he thrusts into me, he moves slowly, steadily. I reach for him because that is all I want. To be close to him.

He grabs my hands, and our fingers interlock. He stares down at me, and any last doubts I may have had that this is where I’m meant to be dissolve into nothingness.

The room is quiet again. Even the fire has died down enough to be quiet.

Rurgash’s movements become shorter, faster, and more frantic. His eyes widen and his mouth goes slack.

He pulls out when he comes, spilling all over my stomach, groaning and grunting as he strokes himself until he goes flaccid.

The room is dark. The fire has gone out completely.

Rurgash collapses on the bed next to me and then turns on his side to pull me close to him.

He kisses me. A demanding, dominating kiss.

*I’m yours. I’m yours. I’m yours.*

“You’re mine,” he murmurs at me.

I nod against his lips, hungry for more of him.

“Say it. I want to hear you say it.”

“I’m yours.”



*I've been yours since the minute I saw you. I don't know what did it. It is inexplicable. But I'm yours.*

*There is no going back now.*

"I'm yours," I say again, nodding so that he knows that I mean it. "I'm yours."

"You're mine."

I don't know when we fall asleep. But we do. We fall asleep in a hot, sweaty mess.

The room is quiet. The only sounds that we can hear are the distant sounds of Jurtill filtering into the compound's safe room.

But I am used to those sounds. And I have grown used to sleeping next to Rurgash.

So, that night, I sleep the best that I have slept in years.

Even my dreams are peaceful.

I dream of the future, where Rurgash is properly mine, and I am properly his – though I do not know how this could possibly happen.

I dream of a future where we have become one completely.

When I wake up, it is still dark.

And Rurgash is still by my side. And I know that I will never leave his side again.

*This is where I'm meant to be.*



# RURGASH

**K**inley sleeps fitfully, and it takes me a long time to calm her down.

*I don't think she's going to get a good night's sleep if she keeps tossing and turning like this,* I think to myself as I rub her back as soothingly as I can, while she murmurs in her sleep.

I have discovered that Kinley is a real enigma, every time she reveals more and more of herself to me.

*She is a darker soul than she realizes,* I think to myself as she finally stops moving. Her breathing deepens and steadies, and I exhale heavily with relief.

*That's the only reason we work. She might not realize it, but that's why she was attracted to me in the first place. Because she is as dark as I am.*

The safe room is much quieter than my apartment, even though we are still on the compound's property.

*You won't be able to stay here every night,* I think as my thoughts falter and stumble as sleep grabs at me.

*Kinley will have to spend some nights alone.*

The thought of Kinley being here by herself is not a pleasant one, and when I fall asleep, I am still frowning.



I DO NOT KNOW what wakes me.

Maybe it is the sensation of Kinley, jerking awake, away from me. Maybe it is her screams.

I don't know. It doesn't really matter.

One minute, I am deeply asleep, though still conscious of Kinley's warm, soft body pressed against mine.

In the next minute, I am thrown into consciousness, with no warning, with no second to breathe or think.

All I know is that we are being attacked. And I have to protect what is mine.

I jerk upwards and then leap out of bed, still holding onto the club, to see Kinley staring out of the window of the apartment.

The building seems to scream then. A roaring, bellowing cry comes from the very walls of the building as if the dilapidated structure is in actual pain.

But I know that the scream, that bellowing roar, is just the enraged cries of the orcs in my clan.

We are all being attacked, and I need to join them.

*I need to help them.*

I turn to Kinley then.

"You need to hide," I tell her, and the urgency in my voice is sharp and biting. She flinches away from it as if I had said something bad.

I try to soften the tone of my voice.

"Please. Listen to me. You need to hide. I need to go out there, and I need to go fight. You need to hide until I come back."

She swallows, and her hazel eyes have never been wider or more frightened.

A banging crash comes from outside, and then an arc of flames springs up right in front of the window.

"Oh, gods," Kinley breathes.

We fell asleep in the safe room, which is still connected to the clan's compound. Now I am about five minutes away from the main section of the compound, where the battle is happening.

"You can stay here," I tell Kinley. No one except Bokk and I know that this place exists. "You'll be safe here."

Then I go over to the window to examine what is happening. *They're lighting the fucking place on fire*, I think, horrified as I see that a group of dark elves have descended on the compound.

They are a group of rogue dark elves who do not follow the rules of their people.

But dark elves very rarely do. They're a vicious, brutal species, and now this particular group is laying siege to my home.

"Who are they?" Kinley lets out a frightened, strangled whisper.

"They're dark elves who have been trying to take over our operations for years now. They hate the fact that some of their own people are addicted to the product that Udar sells. They want this territory, and they also want to get revenge."

We have been having skirmishes with this group of dark elves for years now. Rigalis, the leader, has had me in his sights for months.

I know they have a bounty out on both myself and Bokk since our last encounter six months ago.

*You need to come out of this alive*, I think fiercely to myself. *Remember, you have Kinley and Azaria to take care of.*

Another crashing bang sounds on this side of the compound, and when I look out the window, I can see that they've set alight some of our barrels of old alcohol that we had stored outside.

*As if the first fire wasn't enough. I'm going to need more weapons than just the club.*

Once I leave here, I'll have to make a detour to my apartment, if Bokk hasn't gotten my weapons out already.

Kinley is still clinging to me. The temptation to stay with her and completely ignore the fight is overwhelming, and I take several deep breaths.

*Things were a lot less complicated before you killed that orc in front of Kinley,* I think ruefully to myself as I open my eyes and look at her.

"Now listen to me." I take her by the arm and shake her slightly, until I know she is listening to me. "You need to hide. Now. Listen to me!"

The tone of my voice seems to shake Kinley out of her frightened reverie, because she swallows and nods shakily.

"I don't want you to go." She grabs my wrists as I turn to leave.

Turning to Kinley is easy. It is the easiest thing in the world. Letting it all fall away – the bloodbath happening outside, and the responsibilities I have as a member of this clan – would be so easy.

*She makes it so easy.*

I always want to be with Kinley. And if I left now to go join the fight, I would be leaving her completely unprotected.

"I don't want to go, either," I tell her. I place a hand on her neck, and she leans into it.

"But." I tighten my grip around the base of her neck slightly. She inhales sharply, quickly, and an expression of almost excited fear enters her eyes. "But you need to listen to me. I need to go fight, and you need to hide."

The tone of my voice and my hand around her neck seem to be enough to convince her to listen to me.

*That's all she needed. A little proper persuasion.*

"What if they come to find me? What if they hurt me?" Kinley only speaks again when I have set one foot out of the door.

My blood goes cold in my body at the plain fear in her voice.

I turn to her and grab her towards me. I cup her face, tilting her chin up so that she is looking me in the eye.

“No one will hurt you. You will stay locked up and hidden here. And if they even try to get close to you, I’ll rip them apart and burn their remains before they can even lay a finger on you.”

“Rurgash.” Kinley sags against me. She is crying now. Her body shakes violently. “Please. I love you, and I don’t want you to leave me. I’m afraid. I’m really afraid.”

“When this is over.” There is a promise in my voice. “When this is over, we’ll be together.”

Kinley’s face is wet when I kiss it. Our lips meet, and I groan and grab her by the hips, pulling her closer to me.

“Please don’t leave me.” Her sobs are ragged and heart-wrenching when I finally pull away.

*I don’t want to leave her. This isn’t right. I shouldn’t be leaving her.*

I grip the handle of the club tighter and shove Kinley away from me. Her sobs become cries of terror as I lock her into the room.

Bokk is waiting for me close to the safe room.

We are half a mile away from the action, and he has a contingent of orcs gathering behind him.

He hands me a giant mace – my other weapon of choice – and I take it with my free hand.

Kinley’s cries have died away, and I am glad to see that none of the orcs are looking particularly curious as to why I am here instead of coming out of my apartment.

“Rigalis and his elves have attacked. We’re defending in place, but we need to counter the attack as soon as possible. Udar’s orders.” Bokk barks the words at me, and I nod in response.

I take a moment to scan the group of faces in front of me as I formulate a plan. Then I split the group of about twenty orcs into four groups, with each group defending a corner of the compound. There are another twenty orcs in the center of the compound, who will defend from there.

“You ready for this, brother?” Bokk smiles wildly at me, swinging a giant axe.

We have been going into battle together for so long that we no longer need to talk to one another.

“Always, brother,” I reply, and then with a roar, I send the first group of orcs into battle against the dark elves.

Their footsteps are thunderous as they pound against the ground. And I am quite sure that, at this moment, the entirety of Tlouz can hear this battle. In fact, Jurtil seems more quiet than ever, and this weird silence magnifies every sound we make.

I look over at Bokk as we prepare to send out the next group of orcs. I nod at him. The message between us is clear.

*We’re getting out of this alive.*





# RURGASH

“**Y**ou three will go here.” I point to the rough map that Bokk has drawn on the dusty ground. “You three will go there.”

The orcs that I split into four groups have already left to defend each corner of the compound. Now I have split another group of nine orcs into three groups, and I am sending them to defend different sections of the compound.

“Don’t just defend,” I clarify. “Kill. We don’t want any dark elf leaving here alive. Now that they know we’re here, we cannot let them leave with that knowledge.”

The orcs around me nod obediently. I am glad that we haven’t lost any orcs yet, but several of them are quite badly wounded.

*We’ll have to draw back at some point, defend in place, and then tend to the injuries before we attack again.* That thought, along with a thousand others, rolls through my mind as I stare down at the map of the compound.

All we really need to do is stop the dark elves from getting to the first floor of the apartment complex. Once they hit the stairs, we lose them, so we need to stop that from happening.

*If they got to the first or second floor, they could hide there for months, and we’d never know.*

I repeat this instruction to the orcs, and I assign each orc in the third group to a stairwell. Then I watch as Bokk goes out to one of the corners of the compound with one group of orcs.

I look at the group of five orcs behind me. Swinging my mace, I let out a roaring bellow, and we plunge into battle.

Udar's compound – the abandoned apartment complex – is quite large, and while the dark elves may have started out with an advantage, they won't end with one. *They lost their advantage the minute they came into the building*, I think to myself with grim delight as I come barreling out of the darkness.

*He didn't even see me coming*, I think as I behead the dark elf that I find sneaking around the winding corridors of the ground floor of the complex.

The apartment complex that makes up our compound is tall, narrow, and compact. And at this moment, as I remain hidden in the darkness, I must admit that Udar is a bit of a genius.

He insisted when we claimed the condemned building and moved in on breaking up the floors and digging holes beneath the now-broken cement. He insisted on stretching barbed wire across some corridors, and I now listen with satisfaction to the pained cries of the dark elves as they get entangled in the wires.

*Rigalis never could have seen this coming*, I think as I rush out of my hiding place into a group of four dark elves who do not even have time to inhale, let alone prepare to attack.

Killing them is easy and satisfying.

I think part of it is because each and every dark elf poses a threat to Kinley's safety and well-being.

*And I'll never forgive Rigalis for attacking at this very moment. When Kinley is scared and alone. Before I could move her to somewhere safer. Before we could even really be together.*

The thought that I might have little to no time with Kinley because of Rigalis' attack is infuriating, and I decide then that it is time to face the dark elf and stop attacking from the darkness.

“Rigalis!” I bellow his name as I step out of the darkness of one of the hallways.

Rigalis is tall, muscular, and lean. His skin is a glittering dark gray, and he keeps his long silver hair braided away from his face. His face is completely scarred, and he has tattoos all over his bare upper body. All he wears is a pair of brown cotton trousers and a pair of leather boots.

“You crossed the wrong clan, Rigalis!” I shout at him and lift the club and mace into the air. “You know we’re going to destroy you!” I’ve done my research on Rigalis because I have been anticipating this battle for months now.

And I know the truth about him.

Unlike the rest of the dark elves who have blindly followed him into battle, Rigalis is of noble birth. I know that he is the direct nephew of Lord Tursuneth, who supposedly rules Jurtill. And this is a fact that I am quite sure he hasn’t told his followers, who are all of k’sheng or zagfer birth.

Rigalis lifts a bored eyebrow as he looks at me, and then jumps down off the box he was standing on.

“I’ve been looking forward to this!” he shouts. A wide grin crosses his face, revealing a set of perfect, sharpened teeth.

I don’t miss the way he twists his voice and words, to sound less noble and more common. *He may have fooled his followers, but he hasn’t fooled me.*

“And I.” I incline my head graciously and let my hands drop to my side. “Will look forward to killing you.”

“We’ll see about that.” Rigalis smiles again.

He lifts an arm, and instead of attacking me himself, he orders a bunch of his followers to descend on me.

Killing them is easy. It is almost pleasant. There are seven of them, and I drop the club because I am quite sure that I will only need the mace for this.

*They’re all a threat to Kinley. Remember that.*

I roar with rage as they rush towards me because all I can see is Kinley's face.

The first dark elf has no chance. I think he expected to spar with me before actually fighting. But what I do instead is rip through his middle with the mace, which is so sharp that it drags his intestines out as it moves through his stomach. He shudders and blood spurts. I am drenched in it before he falls.

Rigalis's face goes ashen.

"I want you, Rigalis," I snarl at him. Two of the dark elves that he sent after me try to escape, but I grab them and smash their heads together before I twist their necks.

"I want you!" I shout as I squeeze the life out of another dark elf. "Aren't you going to fight me yourself?"

*You fucking coward! You put my mate's life at risk, and you won't even fight me yourself!*

But Rigalis just takes another step back and sends another contingent of dark elves my way.

This time, several orcs intervene – clearly they do not want me to enjoy all the kills.

I take a step back and pick up my club, and then I lift the club to the skies and send up a prayer to the War God.

*We really should have prayed before we went into battle, but here we are,* I say to myself as I pray for strength.

And the War God delivers right away, as a jolt of energy bursts through me.

All I think about, as I fight through the crowd of dark elves, is Kinley. All I think about is the life I am going to lead with her.

I don't know exactly what that life with Kinley will look like. We have so many hurdles that we will have to overcome before we can really *live*. But I know that she will be by my side for eternity. And I won't let anyone, or anything come between me and my future with her.

*Whatever that future may be. Whatever it looks like. Nothing will ruin it. I will destroy anything that threatens it.*

Another thing that I know about Rigalis is that he doesn't want any of his dark elf followers to discover who he really is. Many of the lower classes of dark elves have become disillusioned by the noble class.

The k'sheng dark elves work hard to elevate themselves in life but are always looked down upon by the noble class. And the zagfers work themselves to the bone for the noble class, but they get paid very little and are never treated with respect.

*We should burn down the lot of them,* I think to myself as I grab a dark elf by his throat.

"You're really testing my patience," I grunt at the dark elf who is fighting against me. I lift him into the air as he kicks and scratches at me.

"Just die already." I exhale as I reach into his open, screaming mouth and pull his tongue out.

The action of pulling his tongue out of his mouth rips his entire throat apart, and this, in turn, causes his face to collapse into a bloody mess.

"Thank you," I say pleasantly.

Then I turn to Rigalis. "Aren't you going to tell them, Rigalis?" I shout at him.

"Aren't you going to tell them who you really are? Son of the brother of Lord Tursuneth?"

The look on his face tells me that if his gray skin could go white, it would at this moment.

Rigalis snarls then jumps towards me. He pulls the sword from his sheath as the battle around us rages on. But I do notice that several of his followers have stopped and are looking at Rigalis with confused betrayal on their faces.

Rigalis advances towards me, and more evidence of his royal upbringing is obvious in the way he walks and in the way he carries a sword. It is clear that he is a classically trained fighter like all male dark elves of noble birth are.

But instead of Rigalis, all I see is Kinley.

So when Rigalis leaps towards me, and I kill him swiftly and almost painlessly, I also pray to the War God that Kinley knows how much I love her.

And when I offer Rigalis's bloody, broken body up to the skies, it is not an offering to the War God.

No.

His body is an offering to Kinley.





# KINLEY

**T**he safe room has never looked smaller or darker than now, while the world is burning down around me.

*This fear isn't natural,* I think frantically to myself.

I have been pacing frenziedly around the small room since Rurgash left me. I don't think I'll stand still or even sit down until he returns.

"And what if he doesn't return?" I pose the question to the room as if there is another person here, capable of answering me.

*Maybe there is someone here with me. A spirit or something. Everyone knows that Tlouz is full of ghosts, from all the people that have died in the desert.*

I laugh out loud at my fractured, feverish thoughts, and then I continue pacing before I dissolve into madness.

"You need to get used to the idea that he might not return. He is strong and powerful. But so are the dark elves. They have magic and weapons that the orcs do not have. You need to prepare for the fact that he might not return."

Talking out loud to myself is comforting, even as the volume of the angry screams and pained shrieks increases from outside. I turn to the window, remaining just out of sight like Rurgash showed me, and I watch the carnage as it unfolds.

We are still on the compound's property. We're just in a different building, about five minutes away from the apartment block.

This means that I have an excellent view of everything that is going on outside right now.

And everything is on fire.

There are several bodies on the ground – all of them are dark elves. The dead dark elves are evidence of the orcs' brutality. The bodies are practically ripped apart or were beaten so badly that they look like a shapeless, misshapen mess.

I know that I should be disturbed by the bloodshed and by the pure callousness with which the orcs killed the dark elves, but instead, I am strangely excited by it. *Their deaths – no matter how gruesome – are evidence that we're winning*, I tell myself.

I move away from the window as an orc stumbles past the window. I notice a dark elf in his hands and stop.

I watch as the dark elf spits and struggles and curses and prays, as the orc, who I do not know, slashes open the dark elf's body and rips his entrails out. The dark elf dies slowly and painfully. Again, I know I should feel terror or disgust or any emotion that isn't pure delight at the violence I have just witnessed, but I don't.

I start pacing again after the dark elf has died. There is nothing happening to captivate my attention any longer.

For some reason, I wish I could see Rurgash killing.

"Is that what he's doing right now? Killing the dark elves? Ripping them apart? Bludgeoning them to death?" I try to picture it, and all I can see is Rurgash, swinging that club and killing that orc on the first night that I saw him.

And again, excited shivers thrill down my spine.

But as time goes on, the fighting stretches on and the fires continue to burn. And my worry returns.

Worry that Rurgash won't return to me safely. Worry that I have lost the love of my life.

A sudden burst of hysterical mirth washes over me, and I throw my head back and laugh, standing still in the center of

the dark room. “When did he become the love of your life?” I ask myself, nearly sobbing with laughter as I review my thoughts.

But the truth is, I think I have been falling in love with Rurgash from the minute our eyes met.

I turn back to the window and watch the fires blaze almost merrily. More dark elf bodies have fallen, and I am glad to see that there haven’t been any orc casualties yet.

When I turn away from the window, I can still see the light of the fire from the corner of my eyes. The fire transforms, mutating into two yellow eyes. Those eyes belong to Rurgash, and within seconds, I am surrounded and enveloped by his warm, strong embrace.

*This is just a vision. This isn’t real.*

But nothing has ever felt more real. Maybe it is because I miss Rurgash more than anything in this world, but now I can practically smell him.

He pulls away from me and looks down at me. Those yellow eyes flash and shimmer, and for a second, those eyes are simply flames flickering again. And then it is Rurgash again, and he is guiding me through our shared memories of the time we have spent together thus far.

I clutch onto his hand as he shows me the memory of my kidnapping. I cling to his arm, moaning slightly when he shows me the memory of our first time together. I hold onto him as I watch myself fall in love with Rurgash again and again.

And then, when I open my eyes, I am alone again in the room, and the battle still rages on outside.

“You really fell in love with your kidnapper, didn’t you?” I laugh tiredly to myself. I jump when there is a shrill scream from outside.

“You really fell in love with a brutal, vicious, violent orc, who has dragged you into the most danger of your life.”

*And I wouldn't have it any other way.* I may not have trusted Rurgash at first, but now I trust him with my life.

I have never really prayed before, but now, I fall to my knees and say a prayer to the War God, whom I have learned about from Rurgash. *Please. Please bring him back to me.*

I remain on my knees in supplication for a long time, before I go back to the window to check on the battle.

The dark elves aren't giving up, and I think they have summoned more help because there are about twenty or thirty new dark elves streaming through the usually hidden entrance to the compound.

There is a loud, bellowing roar, and a flood of orcs come from all directions of the compound, heading directly for the dark elves. *Will they really win? Will the orcs really win? Against all those dark elves?*

"You shouldn't worry. He'll come home to you safely. He is strong and fast and a great warrior. He was built for this."

I start to pace again. "This floor will have to be replaced after I get out of here." I laugh hysterically again, and I laugh until I can't breathe, and that is when I shake myself because I know I need to get a hold of myself.

"Focus on the good. Focus on him coming back. Don't focus on anything else."

And that is what I do.

I focus on the future with Rurgash. A future where I am at his side for eternity, bonded to him, melded with him, tied to him in every possible way.

I focus on the future, where we have vowed ourselves to one another. I focus on the future where Rurgash knows that my heart belongs to him, unequivocally.

In this future that I am creating, willing to live in my mind, all the orcs in Rurgash's clan know about us. I am no longer in any danger from them in this vision. And in fact, they celebrate that I am at Rurgash's side.

And in this vision, I love the clan as much as I love Rurgash. In this vision, I love them no matter how violent or brutal they are. Because I think I am more like them than I thought I was.

“He’ll come back to me. And everything will be perfect. The fact that I’m human won’t matter. The fact that he is an orc won’t matter. There won’t be divisions between us because of who we are. The only thing that will matter is that our souls are meant to be together.”

I realize that I have stopped pacing, and I start again. As I do, my vision of my future with Rurgash grows. *When did I give myself to him so completely? I haven’t even told him the entirety of how I feel about him! And I have already given myself to him, mind, body, heart, and soul.*

“It doesn’t matter,” I say out loud. I think some of the fires outside have been put out because the safe room is darker. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t need to tell him. He already knows.”

I continue pacing and praying as the time goes on. It is only when pale light starts creeping across the inky black sky that I see that dawn has come.

*And hopefully, only good things will come with the dawn. Like an end to this skirmish.*

By the time the sun has risen completely, I have prayed to every one of the gods and goddesses that the orcs worship. And all I have prayed for is Rurgash’s safe return.

Because I know now that my place is by his side. Until my last breath. I will stay with Rurgash until the end of the world and beyond it.



# RURGASH

Rigalis's death changes nothing.

Instead of slowing down his followers, or even inspiring them to turn around and flee, the dark elves continue streaming into the compound.

They're fast and deadly, and while we have brute strength, I am not sure how much longer we can handle their assault.

I pull back, getting away from the battle, and find Bokk, who is tending to a gravely wounded orc.

"Lorcan." I look down at the massive orc who is lying prone on the ground at Bokk's feet. "What happened to him?"

"Dark elf magic." Bokk's face is bloody and his nose has turned purple. "They cursed him. Tore him open from the inside."

I watch as dark blood spills from Lorcan's mouth slowly and steadily. It is clear that he is dying. And there is nothing we can do about it. I have never particularly liked Lorcan, but I have never hated him enough to wish this kind of death on him.

"How are we doing?" I ask Bokk, now that I am quite sure that nothing can be done to save Lorcan.

"We are..." Bokk's voice trails off. But then he shakes himself and continues talking. "Udar is getting help from another clan we're allied with. And these bastards are getting tired. We just need to keep pushing until they break. We keep killing, we keep maiming until they give up."

“I thought that killing their leader would be the turning point for them,” I murmur and glance back to where the battle rages.

I lean down and grab Lorcan’s battle axe. *No point in letting a good weapon go to waste.*

“They need a win to feel good about themselves.” Bokk grunts, and then nods at me.

The sun rose a few hours ago, but Jurtil is silent aside from this battle. It is as if everyone in the city heard the battle and decided it would be safer inside today.

*Well.* I think to myself as I swing Lorcan’s axe over my shoulder and jog into battle. *They aren’t wrong. There is no telling whether or not this will spill out into the streets. There was a riot the last time there was a battle between the orcs and the dark elves.*

There seem to be fewer orcs and dark elves on the grounds of the compound when I jump into the fight again. *Where have they disappeared to?* I think this idly to myself as I behead a dark elf and kick his head through the air as if aiming for a goalpost.

A dark elf attacks me then, jumping at me with a feral grin on his face. He has a long silver ponytail and silver eyes. He wields a broadsword, wears black leather, and is clearly an experienced fighter.

*A miou dark elf. Or another trained nobleman.* He fights savagely and with a certain grace that I cannot help but admire.

*You still have to kill him though.*

I am shocked when the dark elf starts speaking mid-fight. “You won’t stop us just because you took Rigalis from us!” he hisses. I notice that his teeth are sharp the way Rigalis’s were.

*Were they related?*

“I’m not trying to stop you. I’m trying to wipe you from existence. There’s a very big difference,” I reply as I swing the



axe around his knees. The dark elf howls with angry pain, and when I look down, I see that I've cut his legs in half.

I don't think he knows what is happening at first. His eyes go wide with surprise, and he looks down.

Blood has already started pooling on the ground around him, and bile rises in my throat at the sight of the tendons, fat, and severed muscles hanging from his thighs.

He dies quickly, which is a mercy that no dark elf deserves. I swallow the bile and prepare to swing the bloody axe again when I hear my name being called. The sun is high in the sky, and more dark elves have streamed into the compound.

"They've found the humans! They've found your safe room! The dark elves want to kill the humans!"

My heart goes cold in my body. I almost drop the battle axe onto the now-dead silver-eyed dark elf with the sharpened teeth.

*Kinley.*

Twin emotions of rage and fear twist and spiral through me, unrelenting and uncontrollable as I run toward the safe room where I had Kinley hidden.

Sudden anger at Udar spikes through me. This was his stupid plan to start with. He should have known that the dark elves would target the humans we captured as revenge.

*He should have known that they would figure out his plan! He should have known that they would try to destroy the humans for this.*

The dark elves have shown no mercy towards the orcs who raced to protect the safe rooms. *They ran to protect the safe rooms without even knowing that Kinley was in there.*

The bodies of several dead, beheaded orcs litter the ground as I run toward the safe rooms. Their bodies are almost completely destroyed, not unlike the way I killed the dark elves.

My stomach turns and my skin prickles. I swallow down shallow gasps of air as I run. I roar with rage as I round a corner and watch three dark elves blasting their magic at Bokk and Uric, who is related to Udar.

The dark elves look up, and I know that they're about to direct their magic at me, but I give them no time.

Instead, I barrel into them with force and swing the axe. There is a popping, tearing sound as I cut through the midsection of one of the dark elves.

The other two dark elves slip away, escaping in the direction of the safe rooms, which are just two minutes away.

I turn to Bokk who is helping Uric, who is sobbing with pain.

"They took his eyes out. He has gone completely blind," Bokk says softly.

"They're going to find her, and they're going to kill her," I tell Bokk. I have no time to care about Uric's vision.

"Go," Bokk says briefly and nods at me in understanding.

Again, I remember the strange light in his eyes whenever I would say Azaria's name, and I think that Bokk understands how I feel about Kinley better than he'd like to admit.

The orcs who I find lying dead on my path towards the safe rooms haven't just been killed. They've been butchered.

It is clear that our enemies have relished in this kill. I feel sick as I slow down, examining the bodies just as a strangled scream is cut short. The heavy thud I hear next is a sign that another orc has fallen.

I lift a large mace from the ground next to a dead orc, who was practically drawn and quartered. *Kinley. They're not going to hold the elves off for much longer. You need to go save her.*

Warmth and energy flow through my body when I think of Kinley. *Thinking of her is better than praying to the War God.*

The dark elves stop when they see me coming. I stand still for a moment and watch as two more orcs fall.

*They want Kinley. That's really why they came here. To get her. To attack her. To kill her.*

*They want to take her away from you. Are you going to let them?*

The dark elves watch me, as if trying to figure out what I am about to do next.

The safe room that Kinley is in is just a foot away from one of the dark elves. He'd just have to turn the handle, and he'd have her.

A smile stretches across my face. *We're not going to let that happen, are we?*

I remember what I once told Bokk about Kinley. *"She's the kind of woman you kill for."*

The roar I let out then is deafening. It is filled with twisted rage and delight. Rage that they dare threaten my mate and delight that I get to kill them for it. I move swiftly, swinging the axe and throwing the mace.

I get one of the dark elves in the face with the mace. The heavy weapon drags him through the air and then pins him to the wall.

I grab another weapon off the floor, barely conscious of what I am doing, not really seeing the dark elves. All I really see, all I have been seeing for a long time now, is Kinley's face.

Her face is emblazoned across my line of vision. Her eyes, bright and kaleidoscopic, are etched into my brain so closely and carefully that I remember the location of each individual fleck of gold in her eyes.

All I see is Kinley. And that is fine. Because I can kill just fine with her face thrown across my sky.

The dark elves throw everything they can at me, including their magic. Maybe it is the pure rage coursing through my body, but I do not feel a thing.

*This is for Kinley. Bokk, she's the kind of woman you kill for.*

*I would never hurt her. I need to find her again, to make sure she knows I would never hurt her.*

*I never want to let her go. I want her to be my mate.*

*I want her to be by my side for eternity.*

*I want to be bound to her.*

I am bathed in blood when I finally see that I have killed each and every one of the dark elves who dared to attack the safe rooms.

I am shivering, and my skin is prickling. When I lick my lips, I realize that I can taste blood, though I do not know if the blood belongs to me or not.

*Does it really matter?*



# KINLEY

I glance at a stopwatch resting on the nearby dresser, walking over to check the time. It has been quite some time since Rurgash left, each passing minute only filling the pit of anxiety in my stomach.

“I only hope my love is okay,” I mutter to myself.

At that moment, images of him pop into my mind, though they are far from pleasant. I picture him being surrounded and overwhelmed by those dark elf bastards, vividly imagining his blood spraying the ground around him as they cut him down in a brutal fashion.

I shove those thoughts away. As hopeless as it may seem, I try to think of what our life together will be like when all of this is said and done, where Rurgash and I can exist in peace and safety, free from the chains of this gang life.

It seems stupid and almost pointless, that nagging voice in the back of my head spilling out words of doubt and concern. *There's still a long road ahead to go, you fool! Do you really think this orc can completely go against the criminal lifestyle he was created for?*

“No,” I retort at my own thoughts. “I know that he’ll make it back to me. He just has to, that’s the way things are meant to be.”

There’s no other means of existence I’m willing to settle for. I know for a fact that if my life doesn’t have Rurgash in it then it’s not one I want. There’s no way I can go back to the

way things used to be, not back to my old job and boring life. No, the one I'm forging in my mind is meant for me.

A wave of relief washes over me, my pep-talk somewhat working. I know if that Rurgash fights like he fucks, in a dominating and violent fashion, then he'll make it out of his dilemma alive. I know firsthand what he's capable of, and for a moment, I feel an ounce of sympathy for whoever he catches in his path of bloodshed.

"What was that?" I blurt when the sound of crashing comes from outside the safe house. I rush to the window, but there's not much I can see from here. Only the rear yard of the sex club, separated from the safehouse by a thin measly fence.

A muffled outburst comes from the club's interior. I realize there's something going on in there, igniting a shiver to run up my spine. The sound of glass breaking echoes from one of the open windows at the back of the club.

I peer at the window, becoming temporarily blinded when a bright flash fills up its frame. A loud boom shatters more glass, this time breaking the window itself.

My vision returns just in time to see the back door swinging open, a dark elf emerging from it. I watch as he investigates his immediate surroundings, searching behind every corner and peering inside every nook and cranny of the yard.

"What could he be looking for?" I ask.

That's when a horrifying realization hits me like a brick in the face. Just then, another dark elf comes out of the club, his words confirming my theory.

"So much for that club being Rurgash's safe house."

"Don't give up," hisses the first elf. "It could be another building in this area."

The second elf points towards my location, causing me to pull away from the window I'd been peering out of.

"Let's search that building there. Let's rally up the others first."

*Fuck! How did they find out about this place?* It feels as though someone is twisting my insides as I become riddled with a sickening sensation. Still, I know there's no time to think of how they find the safehouse. If I'm to have any chance of surviving, I have to act now before it's too late.

I glance behind me at the large closet, my first instinct being to search for a hiding place, but I don't move. *Is there even any point in hiding? They'll find me anyway...*

As if my brain knows I'm going to die, I think of the one thing I love more than anything, Rurgash. Wondering what he would do in this situation, the answer comes in the blink of an eye.

*He would stand and fight to the death, not cower underneath the enemy's blade... And so I'll hold my ground and take these bastards head on.*

Rurgash may not be present with me, and for a moment, I'm sad that he's not going to be able to protect me. I'm fully aware that if I fight, the chances of me losing are far higher than the impossibility of victory, but I'm going to make Rurgash proud by taking this last stand.

With the dark elves still convening outside the sex club, I snap into action, searching the safehouse for anything I can use as a weapon. I find a blunt old knife and hammer in the makeshift kitchen. Resting beside the front door is a broom and a weighted ball, the latter being difficult for me to lift.

I bring everything into the room, getting to work on creating a spear using the broom. I remove the brush and use the knife to carve the broom's tip until it's sharp enough to pierce the skin.

"Okay, let's move!" shouts an elf from outside.

I have probably two minutes before they find me in this room. Looking at the ball, I figure it's heavy enough to do some major damage. I somehow manage to rest it on the top of the door to my quarters, opening the door ever so slightly so that it sits undisturbed. Whoever comes in first is going to have one impressive headache.



The front door swings open. I hide in the shadows at the back of my room, the makeshift spear poised in my hands. From outside the room, I hear doors being opened, things being smashed, and furniture being turned upside down.

As they draw nearer to my room, my palms grow sweaty. I grip the spear, taking a deep breath, reassured only by the image of Rurgash's face. I pray that by some miracle, I'll see him again. If I don't, I'm ready to die. A glimpse of his love was better than anything else I'd ever experienced.

"There's one last room here!" shouts a muffled voice.

"Here we go," I whisper.

A dark elf bursts through the door and is immediately taken down by the weighted ball from above. He falls to the ground, his skull crushed. From behind him, another elf rushes to his side, horrified by the death of his friend.

"It's a trap!" he blurts out.

He casts a spell of bright light, illuminating the dimly lit room. He spots me but is too late, for I'm already sprinting full force. My spear penetrates his torso, causing blood to spurt out from his mouth as he writhes in pain.

The warmth of the crimson liquid splashes across my face, its sensation igniting a thirst for more. I twist the spear inside of the elf, causing him to holler a bloodcurdling scream that shakes the walls of the entire safe house. His eyes roll back in his head, and he falls to the ground.

From the other rooms, there comes the sound of many footsteps. I grab the hammer and knife, ready to kill on sight.

"By the gods, Jalfre and Geldor are dead!" cries an elf, stepping inside the room. He doesn't see me yet as the light spell died alongside its conjurer. "What kind of monster did this?"

"Me," I snarl, a second before lunging out of the darkness.

My speed is like an arrow from a bow hurtling forward as I advance on the nearest elf. I may not have the stature of an

orc, but by the gods, my fighting spirit is bigger than any of these scumbags.

Swinging wildly, I hurl a hammer across the face of the elf, rolling away immediately after. As I regain my footing, I see the elf keeled over on all fours. From his mouth pours a stream of blood, coupled with missing teeth.

Another attacker bursts in behind him. I duck and roll beneath his legs, driving my blade into the back of his knee. It's blunt, but I give it all I've got, stabbing with strength I never knew I had within me. The elf screams and falls but doesn't die, instead clutching his knee.

I smile, letting my guard down for a moment. The elf whose face I just smashed grabs me from behind, causing me to drop my hammer. I reel my head forward then hurl it back with all I've got, hitting his nose. It cracks and breaks, the sound of which is music to my ears.

"Get your hands off of me!" I roar, my voice reaching a monstrous pitch.

I break free of his grip and roll forward, kicking the other elf in the face as I do so. Spinning around, I get back to my feet. Three more elves burst in, the sight of which causes my heart to drop.

I kick one away, but they have the numbers advantage, overwhelming me with their strength. Falling to the ground, they unleash a barrage of kicks and punches. I grab the hammer and swing at one of their legs, injuring one of my attackers. One of the others kicks the hammer away and restrains me.

"I'll kill you!" I bark.

"Shut the fuck up!" shouts an approaching elf, his balled fist delivering a silencing blow. He turns to the others. "Get yourselves together. How could you let a human get the advantage on you?"

I'm shoved down to my knees as a sword is drawn. The wielder presses the icy tip of the blade against my neck.

“Put up quite the fight, didn’t you?” He chuckles. “Any last words?”

I smile and then spit blood in his face.

“Bitch!”

He raises his sword high. Closing my eyes, I accept what’s coming, thinking how lucky I am to have gotten to know Rurgash even if it was only for a short time.

“Not so fast,” snarls a familiar voice.

Everyone turns around as I open my eyes, shocked by what I see. Standing there in the doorway is my saving grace, my hero Rurgash. In his hands are a sledgehammer and a decapitated elf’s head.

“Let’s dance, you gray-skinned son of a bitch.”



# RURGASH

I run without taking even a second of rest. Kinley's life is on the line. I'll never forgive myself if tomorrow comes without her to share it with. The mist clouding the streets makes it feel like I'll never reach her in time.

Each passing minute only increases the dread fueling my body, driving me forward to what could possibly be the worst moment in my life. If she's dead, what would this have been for?

I finally come upon the sex club. From the outside, I notice it's been trashed. The thought of them searching the wrong place provides me a glimmer of hope, but it shatters when I hear screams from behind the building, where my safe house is and where Kinley may be lying dead already.

Gripping the sledgehammer tight, I run for the safe house. A lone dark elf stands in the front entrance, where the door is half off its hinges. His back is turned to me.

I grab him, his throat crunching under my grip as life leaves him. I must be using more strength than I'm aware of, for the man's body suddenly separates from his head.

I look ahead, alarmed at the sight of an elf's corpse. A spear has been driven through him.

*I don't have any spears...*

The door to Kinley's room is open. Pressing myself against the wall, I hear the hissing of an elf as he catches his breath.

"Any last words?"

“Kinley... you’re still alive!” I whisper, pressing myself against the wall. I inch closer to the room just as I hear someone spitting. “Bitch!” yells the same dark elf.

I step into the doorway, greeted by what looks like a painting. Another dark elf’s corpse lies on the floor, his head reduced to nothing under the weight of a heavy iron ball.

Blood puddles the ground. Two dark elves stand tall, one with a sword raised high. Another two remain crouched on the floor, both heavily injured. One of them holds the last person I expect to be alive in this scenario, Kinley.

The whole thing looks like a last stand. It becomes apparent to me that Kinley didn’t want to go down without a fight. Even now, she closes her eyes, her face entirely at peace, seemingly in acceptance of death like an honorable warrior.

But that’s not about to happen.

“Not so fast,” I interject, my voice low and brooding as if carried by the air.

Everyone whips around to look at me, but my eyes are only on one person. Kinley’s jaw drops when she sees me before smiling. She still looks beautiful despite being bruised, beaten, and bloody. I’m sure not all of the blood is her own by the state of the room.

The dark elves look at the head of their comrade in my hand, fear flashing in the glints of their eyes.

“Let’s dance, you gray-skinned son of a bitch,” I snarl at the one about to take Kinley’s life.

He rushes forward, but I grab him by the head. The others gasp and take a step back as I suspend the would-be executioner in the air. I crush his skull in my hands, his arms falling to the side.

The only other able-bodied elf lunges at me. Catching him mid-air, I slam him to the ground, quickly lifting my foot up before stomping on his head. The satisfying crunch of his bones rings through the air.

Kinley headbutts the elf holding her, then spins and jumps on him. I watch proudly as she sinks her teeth into his neck, blood spraying the walls as she rips out his throat like a wild animal.

Only one of the slimy bastards remains. He is unable to stand, thanks to the knife embedded in his leg. He shrivels in fear as I advance on him. I bring a heavy boot down on his leg, its snap bouncing between the walls of the room.

Behind me, I hear the sweet laughter of Kinley. Reeling back the sledgehammer, I bring it down on the elf, ending his life.

“Are you okay?” I ask Kinley, coming to her side.

“Just a scratch.” She chuckles as I help her back to her feet.

“You’re one tough human, I’ll give you that. How on Protheka did you take some down?”

“Well,” sighs Kinley. “Truth be told, I did what I thought you would have done.”

“I’m proud of you,” I marvel, planting a kiss on her bloodied lips, the taste of which turns me on.

Just then, there comes a bumbling of footsteps from the main street. I rush to the window, watching as reinforcements make their way to this location in greater numbers.

“Shit, more are coming,” I say. “Can you still fight?”

I turn to see Kinley is already armed, having equipped one of the swords from our fallen foes. Smiling, I join her side, readying my sledgehammer. I give Kinley some of my throwing knives, trusting she won’t hurt herself with them. I correct her fighting stance as the footsteps draw nearer.

“It’s time for me to get a firsthand experience of what you’re capable of,” I remark. “There’s a bounty on my head, and you’re going to help me clear it.”

“A bounty?” gasps Kinley.

“No time to explain. The cavalry has arrived.”

A unit of dark elves pour into the safe house, reeling back in horror as they come upon the glorious sight of my lover and I standing over their fallen brethren. The fear is obvious in all of their faces, a surefire sign that we have a psychological advantage over them.

Kinley and I rush forward, meeting them dead on. She makes use of her small stature and speed, dodging hits and plunging her newfound blade through an attacker's heart.

I send an elf flying out the window with a swing of my sledgehammer. Grabbing another elf, I use him as a shield to take the many hits coming my way. When the elf is dead, I throw him forward, knocking down most of our assailants.

Glancing over at Kinley, she throws up her hand in victorious fashion. In her grip is the heart of a dark elf. The sight causes our attackers to shriek in horror and disbelief, but it sends a rush of blood throughout my body, turning me on more than anything she has done this far.

She takes a bite out of the heart and spits it on the ground before lunging, the elves too frozen in fear to move. I join her, unleashing wild blows to the assailants who dared to attack my safe house. Little did they know, they'd signed their own death warrants by doing so.

All the while, I keep spectating Kinley where I can. Her movements lack the grace of a trained fighter, but by the gods does she make up for it in ferocity, so much so that I've never seen an orc fight like her. She fights like someone who has everything to lose.

I'm in the middle of gouging out an elf's eyes when I hear her call out to me.

"In front of you!"

I look up just in time to take aim and hurl a throwing knife at an advancing enemy. The blade embeds itself into his throat. Returning my attention to the now-eyeless enemy below me, I stick a blade in his stomach, gutting him and laughing maniacally as his insides spill out over the floor.



Only three more are left. I grab the nearest scumbag, lifting him in the air before slicing his throat. His warm blood trickles down my arm before I toss him aside. Kinley has the remaining two cornered, both of them cowering in fear of her.

I watch as she throws a knife at one's groin, bringing him to his knees. The other tries to sidestep her, but with a swing of her sword, his head rolls by me. The last elf somehow finds the strength to run, but I'm quick to catch the sneaky bastard.

I slam him to the ground, then grip his head with both hands, lifting it up and banging it repeatedly against the floor. I stand to my feet.

Kinley and I are both breathless after the fight, but against all odds, we stand tall over the gray-skinned sons of bitches. She is covered in blood from head to toe, to the point where I almost do not recognize her. We smile as we join one another in a bloody embrace.

"Impressive," booms a familiar voice behind us.

With lightning speed, I throw up my hammer as I spin around to face Udar. He stands there in the doorway, leaning against it in a spectating fashion. He steps closer, his arms crossed.

I pull Kinley behind me as Udar comes to a stop. He casts a wary glance around the room, seemingly marveling at the bloodshed before his gaze settles on us. I'm more tense than ever as I stare down the boss of the crime syndicate.

Fighting him would mean there's no going back, but I've made it clear to myself and to Kinley that I'm willing to throw this life away just to be with her.

"How did you know about this place?" I ask. "Have you come here to fight?"

Udar tilts his head as if I've asked something difficult. "Step aside, Rurgash. It's the girl who I wish to talk to. Kinley is her name, right?"

Snarling, I ready myself for a final showdown, but Kinley's soft hand lays itself on my wrists, prompting me to lower my weapon.

“I’ve got this, Rurgash,” she says reassuringly. She steps closer to Udar, standing square to face him.

“Kinley, we may not have met, but I’m sure you know who I am,” he says, his deep voice shaking the room. “I am Udar, leader of the Orc Mafia and the boss of your lover.”

“How dare you show your face here? You’ve made my life a nightmare.”

“You’ve got guts.” He chuckles. “As strong as your fighting spirit is, I’ve come with a proposition.”

“Out with it!” I blurt.

“We could do with fighters like you on my side, Kinley,” he says, much to our surprise. I can’t believe the words coming out of his mouth. “I want for you to stay with the clan, not as a prisoner but as an equal. What do you say?”



# KINLEY

**F**or a moment, I don't believe what I'm being offered.

"You want me to be a part of the syndicate?" I say, not even trying to hide my confusion. "Like, a full member? A syndicate warrior?"

"That's what I said," the orc answers. "Are you interested?"

"You're sure you don't mean that you want to kill me? Or kill my family? Something more like that?"

Rurgash smirks. "This guy says what he means and means what he says. If he wanted you dead, you'd be dead. He wants you in the syndicate."

I glance around at the dead bodies lying on the floor. On some of them, I can make out the wounds I gave them.

"And I'd actually get paid for taking out more of these fuckers?"

The syndicate leader laughs. "It sounds like that's a yes, then."

"Of course, it's a yes," I say, looking at Rurgash. "Yes, I want to be in the syndicate. And I'll show you! I'll do a great job, too!"

"I bet you will," the leader tells me. "But take your time to rest first. You've already done a remarkable job." He starts towards the door.

Rurgash stops him. “Wait a second. We can’t let an attack like this go without a response, can we? We are striking back, right?”

“Oh, of course, we are,” the man says, pausing at the door. “But we can handle what little fighters they have left on our own. You kids have other things you need to talk about.”

“We do?” Rurgash repeats, surprised.

But it’s too late. The man is already out the door.

I nearly jump into Rurgash, tightly wrapping my arms around him. “I’ll say we have some things to discuss!”

“Well, you’re not going to get much discussion if you crush me,” he grits out.

“Oh, don’t flatter me. You really are an ass!”

He chuckles. “Oh, I’m the ass here? I’m not the one who slammed the door right in the middle of a conversation.”

“As if doors are such a big obstacle for you,” I return, gesturing at the splintered remains of what was once this room’s door.

When I take one of my arms off him, he takes it as an opportunity to immediately wrap both of his arms around me and lift me off the ground.

“I love you, too,” I say, grunting slightly from the sheer force of his hug.

He gives me a quick kiss on the lips. “So you’ve just had a big day. How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “How should I be feeling? Is being a member of the syndicate everything it’s made out to be?”

“Everything and more,” he says. “A lot of people would do anything to get the offer you just got.”

My eyes go over the blood and bodies strewn around the floor. “I feel like I already did just about everything.”

He sighs. “The syndicate will ask a lot of you. Fighting is a part of it, but only a part of it. Sometimes you’ll have to do things that are a lot harder than that.”

“Things like kidnapping me?”

He looks me in the eyes. I know what he’s thinking. That the syndicate could have asked for far worse than just kidnapping me. And that even he doesn’t know what he would have done if they had.

“It’s a good thing that the only thing the syndicate asked me was to kidnap you,” he says finally. “Hurting you is the one thing that could have made me turn against them. And I do mean the only thing.”

He does, too. I’ve fought by his side now, and I know I haven’t seen anything like the violence and capacity for bloodshed that he has. Maybe someday I will, now that I’m in the syndicate, but not now. Now, all I know is that it’s more than I can imagine.

It excites me to be held by someone who’s seen so much. I’m fascinated by his savageness and curious how exactly he honed it.

“Can I ask you something?” I say.

“What is it?” He can obviously tell that it’s a serious question. Or maybe it isn’t, but it is something that fascinates me.

“When you killed these elves and rescued me, was that for me, or was it for the syndicate?”

“For you,” he answers. There’s absolutely no hesitation in his voice.

“That’s going to be something you’ll learn to do yourself, working for the syndicate,” he asks. “You do whatever they say, but for some things, you have to find your own reason to do it. You’re killing who the syndicate says, but you’re doing it because they deserve it, or to show that you’re capable of it. There’s always some other reason. This fight was for you.”

“You’re not used to doing things like this for other people at all, are you?”

“No,” he admits. “This is the first time I’ve ever killed someone for someone other than me.”

His hand squeezes my ass, and I laugh.

“Well, who do you think I was fighting for? When we were fighting together there?”

He seems almost surprised by the question. “I assumed you were just fighting for your own survival.”

I shake my head. “Maybe it started out that way. But I couldn’t have fought like this just for me.”

“You mean?”

“Who else?”

We kiss again, and this time, he presses my head to his lips. There’s still blood on his hand, and I can feel it in my hair and on my skin. I’m feeling so hot right now. I’m almost surprised that he can still hold me with my body burning the way it is.

“Maybe that’s why he decided to make you a warrior in the syndicate,” he muses, his eyes gazing on my face. “Maybe he could tell that you were fighting for someone else.”

“And he’d want that?” I reply, puzzled. “I thought you said that you always fought for yourself.”

“And it was always the biggest obstacle in the way of me getting ahead in the syndicate,” he admits. “I was vicious and strong enough to make it anyway. But someone who only fights for themselves is dangerous. Unpredictable. The syndicate only took me in because they decided it would be worse for someone else to have me.”

“But now you’re...”

“Yeah.” He smiles. “Now I’m finally learning the one thing I couldn’t.”

“Well, then I’ll keep doing it for you,” I tell him. “I’ll prove myself to the syndicate because you fell in love with

me.”

“I sure did.” His face clouds for a moment. “Just remember to be careful, too. Having a good reason to fight will always help you, but it won’t always be enough.”

The seriousness of his face startles me. Have I been taking violence too lightly? After all, it’s easy to be thrilled by it when he’s the one doing most of it.

But I was almost killed a few minutes ago, too. If he had arrived just a few seconds later, I would have been. I may not understand violence or the syndicate the way he does, but I’m not a little baby, either. I know the dangers of this business and the thrills.

“Well, how about we leave all that behind and go home?”

The light returns to his face. “I can’t think of anything in the whole world that I’d love to do more.”

I pull away from him a little and plant my feet back on the floor. “Just one thing. You are absolutely not locking me up behind anything. I swear, I will break it down if you try.”

He laughs. “What, lock away a fellow member of the syndicate? What do you think I am, a traitor?”

“Oh, don’t play innocent with me.”

“I’m not playing innocent.” His grin becomes devious. “Innocent would be if I told you that I definitely wouldn’t consider tying you up, either.”

I smile back. “Well, that I don’t mind as much. The problem with doors is that they’re just tragically unsexy.”

“You know, you’ve got a point. A floor or a wall you can at least make sexy. A ceiling, maybe not so much, but it at least knows not to get in your way. But a door is really the worst of all worlds. Even the fact that it has a knob doesn’t help.”

“Well, there’ll be nothing getting in your way soon,” I tease. “As soon as you get me home, that is.”



He sweeps me up into his arms. “Well, you certainly make a good case.”

“There’s no way you can carry me all the way home like this.”

He shrugs. “Well, maybe it will look a little bit weird out in the streets. But I bet I can carry you like this longer than you think I will.”

With that, he sets off, carefully squeezing through the door to make sure nothing bumps me. He then heads to the main door and somehow manages to get it open using his foot and a little bit of patience.

“Wait, you’re not actually going to carry me outside, are you?”

“I told you I’d do it longer than you’d think I would.”

“But...”

I don’t want to remind him of the fact that he’s an orc and I’m a human, but it’s the first thing that anyone on the street will see. And most of them won’t ask any more questions than that.

“Those are the kinds of rules for people who aren’t part of the syndicate,” he says. “And if anyone wants to get angry about it, they can get angry with me.”

He steps out onto the street, carrying me in his arms. Gazes turn and, sighing, he finally sets me back on my feet. Still, he doesn’t look abashed or frightened at all. He holds himself just as confidently as he always does.

“Well, we’ll walk for now,” he says. “But I just want you to know how I feel about that whole thing.”

And I do. I know exactly how he feels.



# KINLEY

“Pledge your loyalty to me,” orders Udar, looking down his nose like a king on his throne.

“I pledge my undying loyalty to you, Udar,” I reply, speaking in a firm and confident tone.

“And to your new clan.”

“I promise to remain loyal to my clan even in the face of danger. There is nothing that will deter me from my commitment.”

“Do you understand what is expected of you?” asks my new leader.

“Yes, to do the syndicate’s bidding and see to it that our influence continues to spread over every street and district in Jurttil.”

“Precisely.” Udar beams like a proud parent. “Now then, onto specifics. I’m going to have you assigned to Rurgash. The two of you seem pretty familiar with one another already.”

I can feel Rurgash’s pleased gaze from behind me.

“He will oversee your training and get you well-equipped, not just in weaponry but in all aspects of our clan. You fight ferociously, Kinley, but by honing your skills, you’ll be able to take on whole units of elves by yourself.”

“What about the city?” I ask. “I want to be out there on the streets with Rurgash.”

“You have my blessing to be there by his side. Just follow his every command as you learn the ways of the syndicate.”

I smile, knowing full well just how good Rurgash is at commanding me, especially in bed.

“The elves,” I say. “Are they still a problem? Because I have no issue finding them and giving them what they deserve.”

Udar chuckles and looks at Rurgash, exchanging a nod of approval before returning his attention to me.

“As far as our intel reports, Rigalis’ men are no longer a cause for concern. Of course, should you ever come across any of his group, you know what to do. There’s no boundaries to what you do to our enemies, just make sure you have fun.”

“Oh, I will,” I reply, already thinking of what torture methods I can incorporate. “Thank you, Udar.”

“Go now to commence your official combat training. Your skills will make you a valuable asset to the clan.”

I bow and turn around, joining my lover as we leave Udar’s office. We make our way to the training section of the compound.

“You handled yourself well in front of the leader,” remarks Rurgash. “No human that’s ever faced him did so without cowering in fear. That is, until you came along.”

“I fear no man,” I snarl.

“Here we are,” says Rurgash, opening the door to the training room.

I follow him into a smaller, conjoining room where the armory is stored. I marvel at the vast selection of weapons available, from swords to daggers and axes to war hammers.

“Today, I’m going to teach you about basic sword combat. You fought well the other night, but attacking by itself isn’t going to win you fights. Defense will be the game-changer in your case.”

After selecting an appropriate sword, we head back to the main room, taking our places on training mats. There, Rurgash teaches me how to handle a weapon, going over the importance of footwork and how to catch and absorb a blow when on the defense.

Naturally, I play rough, as does Rurgash. Soon, both of our faces are bruised. Blood pours from my nose, with every breath stinging my ribs.

“You’re no orc, so overpowering someone by strength is out of the question,” he comments. “But being a human does provide you with some major advantages. For one, you’ll move far quicker than any foes larger than you. Given that we face no trouble from humans, that means you’re faster than all of our enemies out there.”

He strokes his chin in deep thought.

“But you’ll still be training in power and strength. We leave no room for weaknesses here.”

“Fine by me.”

Rurgash sheaths his sword and comes closer, closing the distance between us. He runs his hands over my body.

“We’ll need to make arrangements for a tailored, padded armor set for you, too, just in case another battle lies ahead in our future.”

“I suppose you’ll be overseeing the fitting personally?” I tease, tapping my fingers on his chest.

“Yes,” he snarls, the look of a predator igniting in his eyes. “In fact, I want to get a firsthand look at your measurements right now.”

He takes me right there in the middle of the training room. Neither of us gives a damn if someone else walks in, especially me. I’m done caring what others think about me.

A few minutes later, I’m getting dressed when Rurgash makes a suggestion for a celebration.

“Let’s go for a drink. It’s about time that we commemorate your ascension into the syndicate.”

Soon, we find ourselves entering a busy tavern in Jurtil's city center. The place reeks of Jurtil's filthy residents, but my nose has grown accustomed to the stench. Rurgash places his hand on my lower back as we make our way through the bustling crowd of patrons.

The bar counter is chock full of customers, all of whom hold out wads of cash to get ahold of their next poison. Ever the opportunity seekers, my lover and I start shoving people out of our way.

"Hey!" shouts a dfam.

"Watch the cloak!" yells a k'sheng.

I make it to the bar first, pounding my fist on the counter for the bartender's attention. He comes over just as Rurgash joins my side. As expected, he has no issue with us pushing ahead of the line.

"Four of your finest ales," I bark, slamming the money down on the counter. "Keep the change."

"Yes, uh, right away!" replies the worker, rushing off to get our order together.

"You know how to get what you want," Rurgash says and chuckles.

"How do you think I got you?" I reply, stroking his cheek.

"Hey!" interjects a dfam. "You don't just get to skip the line."

"Yeah!" adds his friend. "Back of the line, you bitch!"

As if by instinct, I grab the nearest glass and smash it on the counter. Using the jagged pieces, I slice it across the fool's throat.

As blood sprays everywhere, Rurgash grabs the other dfam, then plucks out his eyeball. He tosses it into the nearest cocktail glass.

We turn around to see the bartender frozen in fear, his hands holding four pints of ale.

"About time," sneers Rurgash, taking the drinks.

Others get out of our way as we stroll to the nearest table. It feels damn good to be able to do what we want.

“These people here know me,” says Rurgash. “Now that they’ve seen you, don’t expect any of them to give you trouble.”

His power and aura draw me to him like magic. I reach for his hand. It completely envelopes mine with its grip. With my other hand, I raise my pint, clinking it with his.

When I put my drink back down on the table, a nervous k’sheng approaches us. I snap my head toward him, causing him to startle.

“What do you want?” I growl.

“Sorry to bother you! You may not recognize me but you bought some pottery from my stall not long ago!”

“Ah!” I gasp, recalling the man with whom I had bartered. “Yes, I know you now.”

“Well, I just wanted to say you no longer need to pay full price at my stall! Whenever you visit, just name your price. I’ll be happy to sell my goods to you.”

Smiling, I accept his offer and dismiss him.

“You know you could have countered his offer,” says Rurgash. “Why pay a discounted price when you know he’d give it to you for free? Better yet, make him pay you protection money.”

“Rurgash.” I chuckle. “The man needs to make his living, I’m not going to be a monster and strip his income away from him. Anyway, after drinks, let’s go find some dfam elves to flay.”

A few hours later, I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, reeling over rampant thoughts running wild in my head as I stroke my chin. I take no notice of the blood stains on me, courtesy of a murder I committed on the way home.

“Are you alright?” asks Rurgash, entering the room.

“Hmm?” I murmur, snapping back to reality.

“Kinley... you’re not having second thoughts about joining the clan, are you?”

“Of course not. Don’t ever make an assumption like that again,” I snarl, annoyed. Sighing, I pinch my nose. “Apologies, I just... It’s Azaria. I haven’t seen her since before I got taken by you. I know Bokk tried to get her out of danger, but...”

Rurgash takes a seat beside me, his brows crossed in concern.

“You haven’t mentioned a word about her since she was initially captured,” I mutter, my eyes welling with tears. “Do you know what’s happened to her? Where she is now?”

“I’m afraid not,” he sighs.

“Fuck...”

Rurgash squeezes my hand, prompting me to turn to him.

“Fear not,” he booms in a reassuring tone. “I know how important Azaria is to you, my dear Kinley. I vow to find out what happened to her.”

“Thank you,” I sigh, a surge of hope calming me. “I know that things can never go back to the way they used to be when it was just her and I... But I just need to know that she’s safe.”

“I understand. I suppose I should have enquired for more details from Bokk, but sometimes in this line of work, the less you know, the better. Hopefully, he can still find a way to connect with her and put your mind at ease. I’ll ask.”

“I know you will,” I say with a smile, placing my hand on his inner thigh. “You always find a way. I’m not feeling so great, maybe you can help with making me feel good?”

“I have just the thing for that,” Rurgash tells me huskily.





# RURGASH

I wake up early the following morning. Half the night was spent with Kinley as the two of us took each other over and over, each round progressively wilder than the previous one. Despite this, I find myself refreshed and full of energy.

Not a single worry is on my mind as I rise from bed. Before long, I'm settled into my morning workout, sweat pooling as I practice my combat skills.

But when I take a short water break, I recall Kinley's words of concern from last night. After cleaning up, I head back to my quarters, opening the door slowly so as to not wake my sleeping lover.

I gaze upon her sleeping face, remembering the promise I made to her about uncovering Azaria's fate. Being a man of my word, I write a quick letter for Kinley to read upon her waking before setting out in search of her friend.

"Bokk may know something. I better go see him at the compound."

Soon, I am strolling into the gang's headquarters, casting wary glances around as I seek out my good and trusted friend. Oddly, I find no sign of him. *Maybe he is out on a job.*

I approach the nearest enforcer.

"Hey, you! Have you seen Bokk? I'm looking for him."

"Oh, that guy? No, he's not here. Truth be told, none of the guys see him around that much anymore. The only time he's

here is when he's dropping off payments to the boss."

"Really?" I question. "Interesting..."

The revelation only adds to my suspicion that Bokk knows a thing or two more than he's saying about Azaria's sudden disappearance. It's out of character for him not to be here during the daytime, though it's fully possible he is out on an assignment.

*I ought to check his house and see if he's there.*

The journey from the compound to Bokk's residence is a short walk. Ever the loyal member of the syndicate, Bokk set up his place to live in close proximity should they ever need him in an emergency.

I can't seem to be able to shake off the strange air surrounding this situation. As I approach his place, I fish for the key to his door. He had given it to me a long time ago back when we first became friends. Part of me suspects he has had the lock changed.

I slip it into the lock, and surprisingly it works. As I enter his home, I hear his familiar grunting carry through the air. *Well, at least I know he's here.*

Following the noise, I come upon Bokk practicing his hand-to-hand combat skills on the corpse of a dark elf. I recognize him as one of Rigalis' men.

"Bokk," I call out, prompting my fellow orc to stop. "We need to talk."

He lowers his clenched fists, letting them unfold as he slowly looks over his shoulder. A look of predatory thirst glimmers in his eye, the sight of which reminds me that my friend is a dangerous and formidable orc. I'm glad we fight on the same side, for he would make a worthy adversary.

"I don't like being interrupted, not even by you," he snarls. "What do you want? Out with it!"

"There is a pressing matter that needs resolving. I figured that you might know something about it."

Bokk tenses up for a brief moment. His eyes widen ever so subtly before he quickly reaches for a towel, perhaps in an effort to maintain the appearance of his coolness.

“What might that be?” he asks.

“Azaria,” I state, my tone firm and commanding. “You had her freed... Where is she?”

“Azaria? The human? She... she...”

The one thing that riles me up quicker than even the presence of dark elves is taura shit. I never tolerate it from anyone, and my good friend here will be no exception.

“Do not give me any taura shit about her being killed during the battle with the elves. You must know that I’m asking for Kinley. They mean the world to each other, and I will not be leaving until I get a satisfactory answer from you.”

Bokk grunts, clenching his fists once again as he hesitates with an answer.

“No lies,” I remind him.

“Okay!” he snaps. “Azaria is in hiding. I reported her death to Udar because I didn’t want him to know she was still alive. You have seen how he handles matters that he considers ‘loose ends.’”

“Where is she?”

“I cannot tell you that.”

“Bokk,” I growl. “Tell me, for Kinley.”

“I cannot risk it! Shouldn’t it be enough for Kinley to know that her friend is alive and well?”

“You son of a bitch...”

“It is for her safety, Rurgash! I assure you that she is fine, I would not even think about harming her.” He comes closer, but stops just short of squaring up to me. “I trust you with my life, but I cannot afford to risk that of Azaria’s. Don’t you dare utter a word of this to anyone else!”

“I’m going to have to tell Kinley. You know that.”

He sighs in frustration, turning and moving away from me.

“Do not worry, Bokk,” I say reassuringly. “When you knew of my intentions with Kinley, you didn’t tell a soul. I’ll keep your secret as you have kept mine.”

“Fine. Now get out of here and let me train.”

As I’m about to depart, I glance at him one final time in the doorway. He punches the enemy corpse with rage, far more impactful than when I had initially arrived.

It feels as though I’m spectating a different Bokk, for this man is far from the orc I had fought alongside for many years. The clan is the closest thing he holds to his heart... Or so I thought.

He himself has discovered many traitors within our syndicate. Before, his response would be to deal out appropriate punishment as Udar deems fit. But now he is the one lying to the clan, which is classified as treason as far as Udar thinks.

I had done it myself, yet Bokk kept my secret safe. In the end, I got away with it when Udar found out, but I have a feeling that he may not forgive the same thing twice, even for a man as loyal as Bokk.

In fact, the violation of his ‘loyalty’ would likely garner him a brutal punishment. I do not want such a fate to come down on my best friend of many years.

I finally leave Bokk’s residence. After all, I came here for Kinley’s sake, not on behalf of the clan. I understand his position better than anyone, and it’s clear to see he would rather do anything else than reveal more about Azaria. My respect for him only grows.

I return to my home to find Kinley up and about. She has assembled breakfast for both of us. Only now do I notice how hungry I am when my stomach growls at the sight of food on the table.

She greets me with a kiss before I take my seat. I notice a look of anxiety in her eyes, her brows crossed in concern.

“Kinley, I know what’s on your mind,” I tell her. “And I have the answers you are looking for. That is why I went out before you woke up.”

Her eyes light up. She moves her chair closer to mine and takes my hands.

“So you found out what happened to Azaria? Tell me!”

I push a plate of food toward her. “Eat as I explain, you need your strength.”

Almost reluctantly, she begins eating. All the while, she keeps her eyes on me as if I’ll disappear.

“About Azaria... She is alive and well.”

“By the gods,” sighs Kinley with relief, sinking back in her chair. “Where is she?”

“She is safe, hidden in exile though I do not know where.”

My lover tilts her head in confusion. “So how do you know this?”

“Bokk,” I say with a smile. “Only he knows because he’s the one who took her.”

“But how can you be sure that he still knows she’s okay, then?”

“I have only one answer I can give to that. My suspicion is that he’s developing feelings for Azaria, the same way I did with you. It remains to be seen what happens with them, but rest assured Azaria is okay.”

“I’m guessing he won’t reveal any more than that?”

“I’m afraid not, but right now you and I have the responsibility to keep this all under wraps for the sake of their safety.”

“I understand... You trusted him, now it’s time for him to trust you.”

“Precisely,” I reply, glad that Kinley isn’t pressing for more clarification.

“Well, the important thing is that she’s okay. That’s all that matters to me even if she’s far away. I wonder if I’ll ever see her again.”

“If I’m being honest with you Kinley, I would not bet on it. You’re a full-blown member of the syndicate now. Our leader believes she’s as good as dead. We have to keep him thinking that way.”

“Alright,” she responds with a faint nod.

I can see the news has troubled her somewhat, but I know it’s nothing she won’t be able to recover from. Kinley must learn how to let go of all the traces of her old life, and in this case, it includes her very best friend. Still, a part of me aches for her. I cannot imagine losing Bokk.





# RURGASH

**T**he mating ceremony will be held at midnight.

Bokk helps me prepare. “Udar told me to give this to you.” He hands me a silver box, and I open it to find an ornate and beautiful dagger nestled carefully into the velvet insides of the box.

“What is this?”

“It is a gift. For your mating ceremony. I think he approves of Kinley.” There is a wry smile on Bokk’s face.

Udar is not the kind of orc to show any signs of affection. I wouldn’t expect him to give me this kind of gift. But the fact that he is blessing a union between an orc and a human is important, and I know I should not take it for granted.

*It isn’t as if his disapproval would have stopped you from mating with her. You knew she was your mate from the minute you saw her.*

I know that there is nothing in this world that could have stopped me from properly making Kinley mine. But having Udar’s approval will make things a lot easier for both of us in the future.

“Hang it on your belt. He’ll want to see you wearing it to the ceremony.”

It is just after eleven in the evening, and we have less than an hour left to prepare.

Tonight I am wearing a pair of taura leather boots and a pair of trousers. My chest is bare, but I am wearing a flowing black cape that fastens around my chin with a gold clasp.

I hang the knife on my belt and grab my club, which has been polished and looks shiny and new.

“Come,” I tell Bokk as it gets closer to midnight. “Let us go. I cannot wait any longer.”

The entire clan will be attending our mating ceremony, but I know that, unlike Udar, not all my fellow orcs approve of my eternal union with a human.

*Not that it matters what they think. If they even look at Kinley with disrespect, I have no problem ripping their eyes out.* I think this calmly to myself as I walk out into the courtyard of the compound.

Besides, the entire clan has learned what I am willing to do to anyone who threatens Kinley. They saw the evidence of my love and devotion to her in the remains of the dark elves who tried to get to her in the safe rooms.

They might not like it, but they aren’t willing to risk their lives to protest against my mating with a human.

An altar has been erected in the center of the courtyard, and there are a variety of offerings to the War God. And standing behind the altar is Ezric, the shaman who will be performing the mating ceremony.

*I hope Kinley loves what we’ve done to the altar,* I think anxiously to myself as I examine the altar that Bokk and I worked on until the early hours of this morning.

Using Udar’s contacts, I had Paradise Blossoms imported from Osiris. Now, the brilliant yellow and orange flowers line the altar. The center of the altar is dedicated to the offerings to the War God. There are piles of intricately designed breads and buns on the edge of the altar. And inside the ring of bread are stacks and stacks of small nimond bean cakes.

Later on, we will slaughter three dripirs and two thistles, and some of the meat will also be an offering to the War God.

“It is nearly midnight. I hope she won’t be late,” Bokk grumbles. He glances around, and I know he is looking for Azaria as he always seems to be these days, though she won’t be attending the ceremony.

*It just becomes a reflex after a while. Looking for the person who is always on your mind. That is, if my suspicions about Bokk and Azaria are correct.*

“You know what women are like.”

“Don’t worry.” My heart has never felt more serene. I look around as the members of the clan filter into the courtyard.

The moon hangs full, bright, and heavy in the sky. The sky is dark, as it always is.

Things in the city have been different since our battle with the dark elves. We barely see anyone on this side of the city now. Everyone, even in the dark elves’ military, seems to be avoiding us.

The only thing that hasn’t changed is the factories. They still chug on, pumping out smoke and other pollutants every day. And the humans still continue on, working themselves half to death every day.

*I don’t know how Kinley did it, working in a place like that. Barely seeing the sun. Well, what little sun there is to see in Jurttil.*

“Rurgash.” I turn when Bokk tugs on my arm. “She’s here.”

Everyone turns to see Kinley walking into the courtyard on her own. She wears a dark green dress, which looks shocking against her eyes and hair. She also wears a necklace that I gave her – a necklace of hidium and bone.

Ezric, who is swaying on his feet, clears his throat and opens the ancient book in front of him.

“I’ll ask the two mates to take each other’s hands,” he says in a growling, raspy voice, which is more for show than anything else.

Kinley smiles and eagerly takes my hands in hers.

Bokk moves over to us while Ezric rattles a string of batlaz bones. Bokk takes a ball of twine and then wraps it around our joined hands, as Ezric chants in orcish.

*These offerings better be sufficient,* I think slightly anxiously to myself as we stand in silence and wait for the War God to voice any objections he might have.

*I guess now we'll learn if the War God approves of an orc mating with a human,* I think to myself, and I know everyone in the courtyard is thinking the same thing.

I look into Kinley's eyes for reassurance more than for any other reason. Looking at the sweet smile on her face calms me down immeasurably.

Ezric clears his throat when we have all stood silently for ten minutes.

"I suppose that we have the War God's blessing," he says, and I glare at him when he almost sounds disappointed.

"Now, blessings for the couple!" Ezric cries, looking hastily away from me, and I hear Bokk snicker behind me.

I am quite certain that Ezric knows that I will put him through a meat grinder if he acts even a little unhappy today. Shaman or not.

An older female orc, one of few who belong to the clan, comes over to create a circle of salt around us, while other orcs place a crown of Paradise blossoms on Kinley's head.

My hands have grown slightly numb from being bound tightly in twine, though I am still holding onto Kinley's hands.

Gifts from the clan are placed on and around the altar, and soon the courtyard is filled with the sounds of talking and laughter as my fellow orcs relax and start to accept my union with Kinley.

The twine is unwrapped from around our hands a little later when the ceremony has finished, and I grab Kinley by the waist.

"You have never looked more beautiful," I whisper to her and take her face in my hands.

“And you have never looked more handsome,” she replies with a soft smile.

“I love you,” I tell her, and my voice is hard and firm. I need her to know that I am telling the truth. “I love you, and I will always protect you. I will always honor you. I will always take care of you.”

Kinley reaches up and caresses my face with her small hand.

“And I will do the same,” she promises me.

Our lips meet almost automatically as if the movement is purely reflexive, and to my surprise, each and every one of the orcs in the courtyard cheers us on.

We kiss as the moon rises higher and higher in the sky. We kiss to the sound of raucous applause.

We kiss until we’re both gasping for air, and we only let go of one another because we’ll both fall over if we don’t.

Kinley and I hold hands all evening, and I am glad to see the clan is treating Kinley with a new kind of respect. I know that, despite their feelings, the orcs in this clan won’t challenge Kinley’s authority or right to be here now that we have completed the mating ceremony.

They have accepted her place among them, and they have accepted her place by my side. And orcs are nothing if not loyal.

The rest of the night is dedicated to roasting the dripir and thistles and then eating them, and we pair the meat with fruit and bread from the altar.

Afterward, we finish off with the nimond bean cake, and I lean down to lick the sweet, sugary powder off Kinley’s cheek.

She laughs and moves her face, and our lips meet again.

*This is it, for the rest of your lives. You get to do this for the rest of your lives.*

The thought thrills me and calms me in equal measure.

“I don’t know how I got this lucky,” I whisper to Kinley slightly later, when the sun is rising and most of the clan has passed out in a drunken stupor.

“You killed someone. That’s how you got this lucky,” she says with a cheeky smile on her face.

I shrug and kiss the back of her hand.

“I was just doing my job. And I have never been more grateful for this job. Because it led me to you.”



# KINLEY

**T**oday is the day I've been anticipating for a long time. I have exceeded all expectations during my many months of training, but on this day, I will be tested to my truest abilities. Udar has given me the blessing to finally join Rurgash for assignments in Jurtill.

Apart from collecting money from street dealers, word has been given to the syndicate that there is a new dark elf in town, looking to claim the southern district of Jurtill for his own doings. That's not about to happen, not on my watch.

I will prove myself to the clan that I am worthy of being here. Udar will see it, as will Rurgash, but most importantly, I'll be proving to myself that this is the way of life destined for me.

I'm in the training room at the syndicate compound, sharpening my weapons as Rurgash enters. Turning around, I see him approaching with a smile. He pulls me close, greeting me with a kiss.

He then takes my dagger from me, running its sharp, serrated blade along the outline of my breasts.

"All of what you have learned will be put into action today. Are you ready, my love?" he asks.

"I'm more than ready."

"If you pull everything off today then your power and influence within the syndicate shall grow."

"Failing isn't part of the plan."



He smiles proudly and hands my dagger back. I sheathe it as he gestures for us to leave.

“Time to get out of here, let’s go.”

Soon, we are out on the filthy streets of Jurtill. My first task is to collect money from a dealer in the district.

“This guy has been late with our cut for the third time now. Udar said to collect the money and to teach this son of a bitch a lesson. How you do it is up to you, I’ll be watching from nearby.”

Rurgash points out the dealer from across the street. I go ahead as my lover takes position, leaning against a wall. With a defiant march, I make my way to the orc.

A customer finishes dealing with him just as I call out to the dealer, who goes by the name of Brek.

“You there! You’re late on Udar’s payment, cough it up now!”

Brek returns a look of bewilderment at me, perhaps because he’s just been accosted by a human.

“What the... A human woman, working for Udar? I’ve seen it all now.”

“Well? Where’s the money? I know you have it, I just saw you conduct a deal.”

“Here’s the thing,” sneers Brek, turning up his nose against me. “Many times I’ve been warned to pay up, but nothing ever comes of your gang’s threats. So you know what? Deliver a message to Udar on my behalf, and tell him that our partnership has reached its end.”

“Do you think it’s that simple?” I scoff. “Udar is the one in this business relationship that wears the pants and calls the shots, got it?”

“No.” He laughs. “I don’t.”

“Silly bastard.” I unsheathe my knife, tossing it high into the air. It spins and lands in the grasp of my hand. “Pay up or face the consequences.”

Brek squares up to me. He dwarfs me, but he knows little of what I'm capable of. I know Rurgash is ready to back me up at a moment's notice, but I'm handling this one on my own.

"And what exactly are you planning on –"

No more than a whimper emerges from his mouth as I plunge the blade into his manhood. I twist it slowly as I speak.

"There's still a chance of you being able to use this if you cough up what you owe Udar, right now!"

"I'll... I'll pay!" he groans.

I retract my dagger, watching as he shakily extends his money to me. "Pleasure doing business with you," I sneer. "Don't make me have to come back here again."

My heart beats with excitement as I return to Rurgash. I inspect my knife, coated with the blood of Brek. Running it along my tongue, I feel the thirst for more bloodshed growing within me.

"Well executed," chimes Rurgash, beaming a proud smile down on me.

"Let's go," I reply, sheathing my knife.

We make our way towards the southern district where my next job awaits. People passing by on the street marvel at me, even getting out of my way as I walk. As well they should, I'm no longer a person who turns the other cheek at disrespect.

"Tell me more about this elf bastard," I say.

"His name is Renzir. As you already know, he's been trying to stake a claim over the southern part of the city. However, our intel suggests that he has only a few men working underneath him, far less than what one needs for a takeover. Nevertheless, Udar wants him dealt with for good."

"Nothing I can't handle," I reply with confidence.

"I admire your determination, Kinley but I warn you not to get cocky. The last thing I need is to be bringing your corpse back to Udar."

“I’ll take the lead on this one. You hang back just like last time.”

“Alright.” Rurgash chuckles.

Following the intel, we make various twists and turns through secluded alleyways until we come to a discreet building. According to Rurgash, it used to be a factory but is now a front for Renzir’s gang.

Busting through the front door, the vast building is empty, but we hear muffled conversation coming from the offices. Rurgash lingers behind me as I come upon a door, pressing my ear to it.

“They’re here.”

I take a step back and kick the door off of its hinges. I quickly step in, greeted by the sight of alarmed elves, mostly dfam and who I presume to be Renzir, surrounded by a group of prostitutes. He sits on a high chair, perhaps feeling like he’s on his throne.

“Renzir!” I call out, smiling for a moment as if greeting an old friend. “Did you think you could swoop into this part of town and take it for yourself?” My smile drops, eyes locked on my target.

Renzir pushes a prostitute off his lap and rises to his feet, almost knocking over the table in front of him.

“What is the meaning of this? Just who are you?”

“My name is of no relevance to you, but my boss is. Udar is ordering for you to cease all operations and to return to the bottom of the food chain where you and your measly men belong.”

“How dare you speak to me like that?” he hisses through his teeth. “Someone dispose of her and make it quick!”

The nearest dfam throws a punch at me but I catch his wrist. With one twist, I break his arm, causing him to scream in agony. I brandish my blade and slice from his wrist to his shoulders before shoving him to the ground. Within seconds, he’s gasping for air all while bleeding to death.

The other dfam and prostitutes quickly run away as I turn my attention back to Renzir. The elf cowers in his seat as I flip the table out of my path.

“Need any more convincing?” I growl.

“I... I...”

“Hmm, it seems like you don’t know how to speak. Perhaps you won’t be needing that tongue of yours.”

Renzir’s screams and gurgles echo through the entire factory as I carve out his tongue. I display it like a trophy upon rejoining Rurgash.

“I don’t suppose he’ll be giving the syndicate any more problems then?” he asks.

I laugh, tossing Renzir’s tongue aside. As soon as we leave the factory, we come face to face with the same group of dfam working for Renzir.

“There’s only two of them and eight of us, we can take them!” one shouts.

Rurgash and I exchange a glance of hunger before we unleash ourselves on the elves. I slice the throat of one and gouge out the eyes of another at lightning speed. I hurl two throwing knives into the knees of one running at me. He falls to the ground, his head smashing violently as he hits it.

Only one more dares to attack me, running with a knife in his hand. I jump over him, gripping his neck mid-air. I twist it with all my strength, and he falls before I land behind him.

I turn to see the other four have already been dealt with by Rurgash. Before leaving, we cut off all of their heads, planting them on pikes for all of Jurtil to see.

I stand tall by my man as we return to the syndicate compound. Udar awaits us just beyond the entrance, having anticipated our arrival.

“The jobs were a success, and she did them all without my intervention,” reports Rurgash.

“Everyone take note!” booms Udar to all the gang members surrounding us. “Kinley has been under Rurgash’s tutelage but perhaps she is the one who should be teaching all of you! I commend you for your efforts Kinley, I expect to see more of these results.”

Later that evening, Rurgash and I celebrate with a drink at the tavern. Our pints clink together before we down our ales.

“I fully expected a good performance from you, but you still managed to blow me away,” laughs Rurgash. “I never doubted you for one second, I want you to know that.”

“I had the best guide,” I tell him, my hands resting on his cock underneath the table.

I’ll never forget today. I proved to myself that this lifestyle is the one for me. All fears and doubts that once plagued my mind have all been left behind, and I will never look back.

The power that this way of life grants me is intoxicating... And I will never be able to get enough of it.



**RURGASH**

SHE'S MAGNIFICENT.

**K**inley stares at the thief with cold contempt.  
*She's magnificent.*

Kinley has taken to wearing a golden circlet that I gifted her a few weeks ago. Now, her dark, rich brown hair is braided away from her face and falls to her waist. She wears a form-fitting long black dress which is lined with golden thread. Her chin is high, and her eyes are narrowed, and she looks absolutely regal.

The thief is a zagfer dark elf, who was caught stealing in one of the taverns under Udar's control.

I almost feel sorry for what the zagfer has coming.

Almost.

She is thin, and she is clearly very young. I actually think I have seen her around several times, with another dark elf who is addicted to zhisk and is a frequent gambler at the underground gambling stations we have installed beneath some of the taverns.

I examine the zagfer more closely. She is not an addict. She looks relatively healthy despite her low body weight, and she is also very clean.

*She must have stolen to make up for the gambling losses.  
And all that money spent on zhisk.*

I still cannot bring myself to feel any pity for the dark elf. She knew what the consequences were for stealing from Udar.



The zagfer cowers in front of Kinley as my mate takes a step towards her.

We're in an alleyway outside the tavern where the zagfer was caught stealing. Bokk is the only other person with us.

I nod at him, and he nods back at me and disappears into the darkness.

I think of Azaria, and I know that Bokk has other priorities tonight.

"What is your name?" Kinley's question surprises me. And I know it surprises the zagfer, too.

I see the light flicker in the zagfer's eyes. *She is hoping for mercy. She hopes that Kinley's question means that she will be merciful.*

But the expression on Kinley's face, the lines of which have been thrown into harsh relief by the cold moonlight, is anything but merciful.

Somewhere in the distance, there is the shouting and reveling of people enjoying their nights out.

The zagfer answers Kinley timidly, flinching slightly when Kinley takes another step towards her.

"My name is Lira." I watch as the zagfer starts to swallow convulsively.

"You shouldn't have stolen from us, Lira." Kinley's voice is still cold.

"I'm so sorry." The dark elf bursts into pathetic tears and falls to her knees.

I look around, ensuring that there aren't any dark elves around as Kinley metes out the first blow.

The noise in the tavern next to us goes silent as the zagfer cries out. But then everyone in the tavern bursts into laughter and song.

The tavern is mostly filled with orcs, and any dark elves that are in there are probably too drunk or high to notice that one of their own is being kicked half to death.

Kinley kicks and punches the dark elf mercilessly. Soon, the zagfer has no strength to cry out but lies blubbering on the cobblestoned ground.

When I look at her more closely, I see that her nose is broken. Both her collarbones have also been crushed, and her right arm is hanging at an awkward angle.

But despite this, Kinley doesn't let up.

"Your. Kind. Should. Know. Not. To. Fuck. With. Us." Kinley punctuates each word with a kick before she grabs the zagfer by the hair and yanks her to her feet.

The pain must be too much for the dark elf then because she lets out an ear-piercingly shrill shriek and bursts into tears again.

Kinley takes her by the throat and swings her around, slamming her into the brick wall.

The zagfer hits her head against the wall, and her eyes flutter close as she slides to the ground.

I step closer to look her over as Kinley steps away, breathing hard.

The dark elf isn't dead, but she won't be conscious for a long while.

I go over to the back door of the tavern and knock on it politely.

The tavern manager opens it a second later and peers around it with a nonchalant expression on his face.

"We need you to clean up here. Can't leave her laying in the street like this."

The tavern's manager nods, and within seconds, two large orcs are carrying the zagfer's body away.

They'll dump her in the north of the city, close to the Hearthkeeper's temple, where it is more likely that she'll get help.

I turn to Kinley then. She is bloody – though it is not her blood – and her knuckles are bruised.

There is a bright look on her face, and her eyes sparkle with pleasure as I take three long strides towards her.

I have never been more attracted to her than at this moment.

“I like it when you’re covered in blood,” I whisper to her as our lips meet in a desperate crash.

She clings to me, gyrating her hips against mine, and she moans loudly, not caring who could possibly hear us.

I don’t care if anyone hears or sees us, either.

Our clothes come off fast, and I am already hard when I slip a finger between Kinley’s thighs, which are wet. Her pussy is swollen, and her clit is hard with anticipation. She rocks against my hand as I press her up against the wall.

The tavern goes silent when she moans out loud, and several passersby stop and point at us.

But I continue fingering her clit, and then I slip two fingers inside her.

“Yes!” Her voice is a whine, and it has never been sexier. I kiss my way down her neck, tasting blood and sweat and the particular heady flavors of spice and musk that is all Kinley.

She comes quickly on my hand, shuddering and trembling. When I pull my hand away, my fingers are coated in her arousal.

Kinley reaches for me then and wraps her hand around my girth before dropping to her knees.

When I turn, I see two orcs, a male and a female, watching us. The male orc has his hand down the female orc’s trousers, but his eyes are focused on Kinley.

“Let’s give them a show.” I grunt and lift her to her feet by her hair.

“Okay,” she says breathlessly, and her eyes are hazy with pleasure. I turn her around, and she braces herself against the wall as I press into her.

She stretches slowly around me as I thrust into her, and then I pull out before I slam back in.

Kinley cries out each time I enter her and whimpers each time I pull out.

When I look over at the two orcs, I see that the orcs are entangled with one another. Their clothes have been hastily pushed to the side.

Unlike us, they are in the street, so anyone would be able to see them.

“I want everyone to see me fucking you like the slut that you are,” I tell Kinley as I reach to her face and grab her chin.

“I want them to see you and know that you’re my slut.”

“I’m your slut!” she cries out so loud that the tavern goes quiet again.

The back door to the tavern opens, and the orcs closest to it watch us as we fuck uncontrollably in the alleyway.

Kinley spasms around me, tightening, flexing, pulsating, as a climax ripples through her pussy.

She collapses away from me, but I grab her by the hips and turn her around.

I walk to the other wall, so that everyone in the tavern has a better view of us, relishing the feeling of having an audience.

I lift her up against the wall, and Kinley places her legs over my shoulders, arching her back and pushing herself towards me.

I taste myself on her when I bury my face between her legs.

I lick up her slit, tonguing her clit before burying my tongue inside her.

She bucks her hips, and I tighten my arms around her waist, forcing her to stay still. I swallow a flood of her cum as she climaxes in my mouth, and then I lower her so that her legs are around my waist and I am pressing inside her again.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” She screams when I thrust into her and slam her back against the wall.

I know my own orgasm is close, and my thrusts are hard and short. Kinley clings onto me, still covered in blood and sweat, her body quivering beneath mine.

The alleyway is quiet, so when the other orc couple reaches their own peak, their cries are loud and satisfying.

I am covered in sweat and all I can focus on is how Kinley feels around me. Soft, wet, and warm.

I am not in control when I spill inside her, as she wraps her arms around my neck and slows me down, rocking against me.

“You’re mine,” she whispers in my ear, and the warmth of the orgasm ripples throughout my body like a fast-spreading fire.

“And you’re my slut. Did you like giving all these people a show?” I hear the tavern door closing behind us. But it doesn’t matter. Everyone saw us.

“I loved it so much,” Kinley tells me as I still hold onto her. “I want to do it again and again. I want you to fuck me in front of the entire clan.”

“It’s a deal,” I tell her as a smile spreads across my face.



# BOKK

I place the sack of money down on Udar's desk, taking a few steps back as he opens it up to inspect it.

"That's this week's earnings from our street dealers. No need to count it all, I did that myself. No one tried to pull a fast one."

"Right then," says Udar, putting the money away. He shifts in his chair, his eyes locked on me. "The syndicate was hit hard during Rigalis' attempted siege but we're slowly pulling ourselves back together."

"Do you need me to handle anything more?" I ask, eager to get out of here.

"What's the rush?"

"I just have things I need to get done."

"Hmm, alright then, dismissed," says Udar. I turn to leave, but he calls out to me just when I'm about to disappear. "Whatever happened to Azaria, the other human that we kidnapped?"

I glance over my shoulder at the cold gaze of Udar. I don't like the look on his face, an expression that teases he knows the truth. The tension in the room multiplies tenfold as I think of an answer.

"I told you already, Udar," I say after what feels like minutes. "She was killed during the bloodshed, caught in the crossfire at the compound."

“I never saw a body, though,” says Udar.

“I cleaned it all up. What you saw was merely a fraction of the mess,” I reply, my heart pumping rapidly. My hand hovers over my knife as it rests in its sheath.

“Very well,” replies the boss. “Get out of my sight then.”

*That was close... too close*, I think to myself, overcome with a mixture of relief and concern as I leave his office. I walk past the enforcers and other lowly members of the syndicate. Somehow I feel I can't trust anyone here at all.

The only orc I can trust to an extent is Rurgash, but even then he can't know my deepest secret, the sin that I've committed against our gang. Besides, he and his girl are far too invested in their killings to give a damn.

I have no more duties until the day after tomorrow. I already know what I'm going to do in my free time, thinking of the one girl I have become infatuated with. I will go to her and bring her something to eat.

An hour passes by the time I find myself deep in the treelines of the forest. I position myself high amidst the branches, watching over a lone draek as it grazes on the forest floor.

I make no trace of a sound as I pull back the arrow in my bow. Unleashing it, the arrowhead whisks through the air, plunging deep into the skull of the animal. It falls to the ground with a thud.

Jumping down, I remove the rope wrapped around my shoulder and encase the draek before hauling it over my shoulder. Once set, I venture deeper into the forest in pursuit of my hideout where Azaria currently resides.

There is a voice in my head, one that has always been present since the first day I started working for Udar. It's the same voice that has kept me loyal all these years and strayed me away from anything that would put my position with the syndicate in jeopardy. Even now, it speaks to me of the pending danger.



*You know it's far from the wisest thing to be doing this, to go so far out of your way to protect a human who is afraid of you.*

I ignore it, remembering Rurgash had refused to listen to reason and went behind the clan's back. In the end, not only did he get away with it, but his girl had been recruited to join our ranks. What was going to stop Azaria from doing the same in the future? Nothing by my account, but even then, a life for us both within the syndicate seems unlikely at this point.

I cut through the branches and bushes in my path as I make my way to the hideout, all the while thinking of what the future holds. The truth is that my life has taken such an unexpected turn, but I'm not about to complain as Azaria is the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on.

*She doesn't feel the same about you,* says that voice again. It's true, she isn't exactly open with me. While she knows I'm no threat, she puts up a shield of sorts and is determined not to let me get closer to her.

"I'll break down her walls," I say aloud. "I will make her see that she belongs to me, and no one else but me."

I come to a hidden passage, concealed by two inconspicuous boulders. It leads me into a small valley, where the sky is covered by the leaves and branches of towering trees.

After another short distance, I come upon a quaint one-story cottage. The front door opens as I approach it. Through the small gap, a tuft of blonde hair falls into view.

"Oh, it's you," remarks Azaria. "What are you doing here?"

"I've brought you something to eat," I tell her.

"There's plenty of food here," she replies.

"Yes, but nothing as fresh as this. When was the last time you had a tender cut of meat?"

Her stomach growls. The door fully opens, allowing her full self to come into view. For a moment, I'm mesmerized but

she retreats deeper into the cottage. I cast a glance over my shoulder, wary of any prying eyes.

Once I verify the coast is clear, I step into the hideout. From the fresh aroma on her body, I can tell she has just washed herself. Her sweet scent lingers in the air, prompting an overwhelming wave of desire in me.

I admire her as she takes a seat near the burning fireplace. She says nothing, but she doesn't need to. Her presence alone coupled with the snapping and crackling of the fire puts me at ease.

Seeing her safe reminds me that I am responsible for this, that it is me acting as her protector whether she likes it or not. I hope soon she comes to realize this.

Bringing the draek to the kitchen, I slam it down on the counter. It almost feels like I am living here with Azaria and that I'm about to prepare our dinner before settling in for the evening.

*You know she doesn't want you here, right?*

I acknowledge that as a possibility, but it's not like there's anything that Azaria can do to stop me from coming to visit. After all, the property belongs to me. Better yet, she knows there's nowhere safe for her to reside other than this place. I'm glad she has nowhere to run to.

Her newfound presence in my life has given me something new to relish, a purpose to live for other than serving the clan. For that, I'm eternally grateful.

"I'm making bahru," I tell her.

"Okay."

Her cold, one-word answers are something I've quickly grown accustomed to. I understand that it'll take time to get through to her. After all, good things come to those who wait, but when the opportunity arises, I'm going to make sure the waiting is worth it.

I butcher the draek, occasionally trying to start a conversation with Azaria but to no avail. I do not push her

beyond her comfort zone. She is the one thing in my life that brings me calmness like I've never experienced.

I glance down at my hands, now bloody from dismembering my prey. These hands have killed, and they will kill again to protect Azaria should the need arise.

Soon, I finish cooking and am in the middle of dishing up a bowl for Azaria as I once again gaze at her.

"One day, you'll know that you are mine, I'll make sure of it," I whisper in a low voice.

"Did you say something?" she asks, spinning around in her chair. In her eyes is a look of concern.

"Dinner is ready," I tell her, making my approach with her portion.

We sit in silence as we feast. My eating is loud and messy compared to hers. She eats at a gentler pace, keeping her mouth closed while she chews.

"Thank you," she says after eating. "It was tasty."

"You're very welcome."

She rises and walks to the window, looking out into the night sky. The rays of the moonlight cast in through the glass, reflecting on her alluring figure and facial features.

An urge rises within me to take her right here, right now, but I make no such move, knowing it'll be best done when she wants me back the same way. I find myself daydreaming of our bodies caressing each other without a care in the world.

*I know you'll want me one day, that my fate lies with you, Azaria.*

The dynamic in Jurtil is changing, with the defeat of the dark elves and the blessing given to the union of Rurgash and Kinley. I realize I may not be so lucky to receive such blessings given the fact I've lied to Udar's face about Azaria's supposed death.

But it fails to shake my inner strength. If it comes to it, I have the strength within me to abandon the syndicate and

leave this life behind. That way, I can live my days in peace and prosperity with Azaria.

If I can't have that then I will die trying. I lean back in my chair, keeping my eyes on the human woman as she marvels at the nature outside the hideout.

*I'll get us away from all this if that's what it takes to be with you.*

THE END.

To read more about Kinley and Rurgash sign up for my newsletter here: [Celeste King Newsletter](#)

# **PREVIEW OF DARK ELF'S SECRET BABY**

The Worlds of Protheke is a vast and growing world. Check out one of the books, Dark Elf's Secret Baby

Dark Elf's Secret Baby

By Celeste King

Available on Amazon [here!](#)

## LAYLA

I drop my pickaxe at the mouth of the mine as I step into the open air, the metal tip clanking against the countless pickaxes beneath it as it falls. The setting sun glances off of the snow capped tips of the mountain range around us, stars beginning to wink into existence in the sky.

After a few steps forward, I reach the small stand where one of the dark elf overseers sits, taking inventory of the product we bring back to the surface from the mines. I shrug off my bag and hand it to him, watching as he rummages through it and pulls a chunk of kirialite out, his eyes glimmering as he beholds the raw stone.

The dark elf gives me a curt nod before sliding a handful of tickets to me. They never give us real money, of course, as it could be used to formulate some type of escape, but these tickets are as good as currency within the camp.

I grab the tickets off the table and return his nod, turning away and letting a small sigh slip through my lips as I start on my way home. Camp Horizon isn't a bad place to be as a human, and if I'm being honest with myself, I rather enjoy the predictability of my routine.

Wake at dawn, to the mines just after sunrise, work until sunset, and on the way home at twilight. The same location, same activity, and same schedule, every day but holidays.

The dark elves aren't as bad here as they are on the other continents, either. Sure, there are some who are too quick with

their whip and take too much of an interest in the human women, but the vast majority are rather apathetic.

My steps fall rhythmically as I walk down the path from the mines toward the village square, the footsteps of the other miners around me creating a strange, drum-like beat, accented by catches of quiet conversation. It isn't long before the squat little cabins of the village square begin to peek into view from behind the massive tree trunks of the surrounding forest.

People mill about in the loose gravel streets, moving from vendor to vendor after their work day and collecting various supplies and food for the coming week. A handful of dark elf guards lean against the walls of scattered stalls and cabins, watching with thinly veiled boredom as the humans move about. The camp is almost peaceful- at least, as peaceful as any dark elf run settlement can be.

The camp is separated into different quarters, which also helps to keep the peace. The dark elves largely stay in their quarter, situated to the west of the main village square, and the humans stay in their eastern residential quarter. The mines lie to the north, and the road into Camp Horizon sits to the south, along with the warehouse where all of what we mine is stored and cataloged.

I sigh, wiping my soot-covered hands across my face. No, Camp Horizon isn't the worst place to be, but the work is hard. And I know, deep down in my bones, that I want something more.

A stray, chilly breeze sweeps up the path from the village, carrying with it the decadent scent of fresh nimond bean rolls. The baker in town, Marshall, always seems to be making something with the spices he trades for with the dark elves.

I half-believe he's managed to stay out of the mines almost solely because of the confections he creates in his little kitchen. I follow my nose to his small shop, the cabin radiating heat from the ovens within and enveloping me in its sweet, yeasty scent as I cross the threshold.

"I already know why you're here," Marshall calls teasingly over his shoulder, not even needing to turn around to know it's

me. This is another bit of my routine, although my trips to Marshall's bakery are far less frequent than I'd like, only happening on a weekly basis.

"Then it's a wonder you aren't more prepared," I rib back, leaning on the counter with a small smile. Marshall clucks at me as he turns around, producing a small box tied with twine and giving me a lopsided grin.

"How could I ever forget my favorite customer?" He teases as he hands me the box. I roll my eyes but give him a warm smile as I accept it, the heat radiating from the bottom of the box soothing my aching hands.

Marshall and I chat about our days as I tuck into the nimond bean roll right there in the shop, Marshall recounting an order from one of the dark elves while I stuff my face between laughs.

This gentle camaraderie is another reason I can't imagine leaving Camp Horizon- there are so few places where humans are allowed to simply be, to form relationships with one another without being punished or watched constantly.

Wiping the crumbs from my face, I reach into my pocket to produce a ticket, but Marshall is already shaking his head at me.

"No, no," he says, backing up a step. "You've repaid me with conversation, that's all I need. Save that ticket for your family."

Ah, shit. My family.

I throw an alarmed look outside the bakery to find that the sky has darkened past twilight and let out a string of curses under my breath, earning a laugh from Marshall.

"At this point, they should expect you to be late," he jokes as I hurry toward the door. I fling him a crude gesture as I rush outside, the sound of his laughter following me out into the cold night.

I pull my sweater tighter around me as I begin to trudge up the path. I'd move faster if I weren't already thinking about the



way Amara's eyes will inevitably skate over me, sizing me up and always somehow finding me lacking.

My cousin is perfect, in every way. The golden daughter, strong and smart and capable, and while I know Leandra and Jethro love me just as much as they love Amara, I can't help but still feel like an intruder sometimes.

My parents brought us to Camp Horizon right after I turned ten. At the time, they told me it was because they wanted to be closer to my father's brother, saying that it was so rare for humans to have extended family and that we should be more grateful, and find ways to spend more time with them.

Now that I'm older, I understand the real reason they fought so hard for us to get here.

The continents are a dangerous place for humans, especially human women, and even more so for the pretty ones. I've never thought of myself as particularly pretty, but I know now that what I think holds little bearing on the way things actually happen.

My parents got us out of Orthani as fast as they could, bringing us here to work the mines and escape the more cruel treatment that runs rampant in the continental cities. For the first few years, everything was perfect.

My aunt and uncle and cousin took us in, and we lived together as a family. The cabin we shared was always warm and full of laughter and conversation, even when Amara pulled my hair or took my favorite doll. I was allowed to work at the tailor's shop until I was 12, mending clothes until I was big enough and strong enough to work in the mines.

It was only a few days before my thirteenth birthday, when I was supposed to start in the mines, that the collapse happened.

To this day, I don't know what really happened. It could've been something as simple as the wrong stone being taken out, or perhaps the planet shifted deep down and the tunnel in the mountains closed because of it. I don't know. All I know is that my parents kissed me goodbye that morning before

heading into the mines, and then a few hours later, the earth swallowed them up.

The dark elves didn't even bother trying to unearth the bodies.

I shiver, only partly from the cold, as the eastern edge of the village comes into view. The path winds through the last of the shops and up a small hill, and on the other side, is my home. And the only family I have left.

Despite the fact that it's late, and knowing that my family is more than likely already worried about me, my footsteps slow to a halt. I do nothing but stare at the crest of the hill, the last stragglers of the villagers pushing past me on their way home.

It's not that I don't want to go home, at least not necessarily. My head just feels too full of thoughts to bear Amara's judgemental gaze or Leandra's lecturing on finding a husband, however well-intentioned.

Whenever Leandra mentions finding a nice, human man to settle down with, I never seem to be able to find the heart to tell her what I really think. The only thing Amara and I seem to agree on these days is our lack of interest in marrying off any time soon.

I understand why Leandra pushes the subject, of course. She wants her family to stay close, wants to be able to play a hand in mine and her daughter's life for years to come, and I can't bring myself to dash her dreams.

While I know I want more for myself than what I have right now, regardless of whether or not Camp Horizon is one of the best places to be as a human, I'm just not interested in any of the human men here.

I'm not ignorant to the sneaky glances some of them give me, both at work and in the village, but I just don't find any of these men... appealing.

Movement sounds from behind me, far enough away that I almost don't turn toward it, until the husky voice of a dark elf calls my name.

“Layla!”

Oh, shit.

## KERYM

Layla whirls toward me, her dark curls bobbing with the sudden jerk of motion. I can't help the smirk that rises to my lips as I see the panicked look on her face before she realizes it's me, a laugh nearly breaking free when her features relax slightly and she rolls her eyes.

Layla steps toward me hurriedly, her eyes darting around for witnesses as she hisses "That's not funny, you scared me!"

The laugh that had been building in my throat shakes free as I look down at her and give her a wink.

"You like it," I murmur softly, earning another eye-roll, although she's unable to hide the small smile playing across her full lips. My fingers itch with the desire to brush across them, to feel her soft, tanned skin beneath my hands. I've waited long enough for her.

The rest of the village is quiet, but that's no reason to be sloppy. Before she can react, I grab the crook of her elbow and pull her into the alley behind us, pinning her to the wall with my body weight as I drop a searing kiss to her lips.

Surprise renders her unresponsive for a moment, her human senses struggling to catch up to my elven speed. As soon as her mind catches up with her body, however, her lips part beneath mine, returning my kiss with every bit of hunger and passion.

I can't get enough of her.

Layla's tongue darts from between her lips, brushing against the seam of my mouth in equal parts question and demand. I groan, opening my mouth against hers and letting our tongues tangle together.

I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of her.

Ever since I first spotted Layla last year, I haven't been able to control myself. Dark elves take human slaves and play things all the time on the larger continents, especially in the bigger cities, but Layla is so much more than that to me.

When I first arrived at Camp Horizon, I was an eager, untried, bright-eyed soldier, intent on making his way through the ranks. Miou soldiers never stay in Camp Horizon too long, finding the camp boring and lacking any real way to move through the ranks.

Soldiers pass through here in rotations, using the camp as a stepping stone to bigger and better positions once they gain enough experience to warrant transfers to more exciting, opportunistic locations.

But the second I found Layla, I knew I wasn't going anywhere. It took nearly no time at all for me to be head over heels for the woman. I don't care that she's human, and I don't care what beliefs or opinions others of my kind hold- she's everything to me.

My ambitions within the ranks of the miou, my dreams of becoming a Lieutenant and proving my worth to my family, all feel childish as my lips move over Layla's. Nothing, no victory or rank or recognition, could compare to the way she makes me feel.

Layla breaks our kiss first, the both of us breathing heavily as we stare at each other. Her warm brown eyes twinkle in the stray spears of moonlight. It's all too easy to forget my responsibilities when I'm with her, to cast aside all of the things I know I want. In this moment, right now, I only want her.

"How was work?" I breathe, falling into our usual, playful routine. Layla loves her routines, and I love that about her. I

especially love throwing a wrench into it every now and again, especially if it means that I get more time with her.

Layla grins and gives me a playfully casual, one-shouldered shrug.

“It was work,” she responds. “How about you, how was work?” I mimic her reaction, loving the way her smile grows wider.

“It was work,” I reply. Neither of us acknowledges what we know is coming. Transfer season is on the horizon, and Layla is all too aware of the ambitions I hold so closely to my heart. They’re certainly not unusual ones, especially for guards who choose to be stationed here for at least a brief time, but my case is made all the more unusual by my family.

Phonipe and Kunardah Torsys, power couple of the decade. My father is well known for his position among the miou ranks, being an influential player in Vhoig among the nobility. My mother was his chosen prize, the beautiful and talented daughter of another strict, traditional miou family.

My older brother, their first son, is everything they’ve ever wanted him to be. The perfect soldier in shining golden armor, with his perfect mate and perfect life. He was stationed in Camp Horizon for a time as well, before leading armies and earning prestige through his victories.

My parents have always wanted me to be the same, to uphold our honorable family name. They waste no opportunity to tell me as much, to push me harder and farther, pointing out all of my numerous flaws and missed opportunities for success.

In some ways, I guess I can’t really blame them. Salnath created an expectation that I don’t know if I’ll ever live up to, and given the social expectations of my dear family, it’s no wonder that they expect only the best from me.

Too bad I’m little more than a disappointment.

With transfer season coming up, my father has sent countless karasus with messages on where I should be

transferring, what I should be doing, and the like. Just like every year since my first at Camp Horizon.

And just like every year before, I have no intention of following his orders. I won't leave Layla, I don't know that I could even if I wanted to. I'll simply have to find a way to become a lieutenant in Camp Horizon, even if it means usurping the current camp lieutenant so I can take his position.

There's only ever one lieutenant here at a time, intended to lead us and run this camp and our sister camp on Zerva, hence why no other miou have lingered here for too long. That's no problem to me, however.

Our current lieutenant is a drunk, and I have no issue with gunning for his job, no matter how long he's been in his seat. Especially if it means I can stay close to Layla without my family breathing down my neck.

Another problem with transfer season, and another problem Layla and I never speak about, is that there will be new guards entering the fray. Guards that are eager to make a name for themselves, who will keep a closer eye on things. Those who might notice the two of us sneaking off together and cause trouble.

It wouldn't be the first time a dark elf has been caught with a human, of course. It's generally accepted as part of the perks for this job by some of the more uncouth miou, but my family would take less kindly to finding out about any sort of dalliance of mine, especially with a human woman.

I can only imagine the position it would put Layla in.

I realize too late that Layla and I have just been standing in silence in the quickly dimming light. There's a certain sadness in her gaze, something distant that I can't quite put my finger on. I can't help but wonder if she's thinking of the coming transfer season, too.

"Stay the night with me," I breathe as I hold her gaze. Layla's face shutters instantly, her eyes dropping mine as they dart toward the mouth of the alleyway.

“I’m already late, my aunt and uncle are going to worry. They might even send Amara out after me,” She says, avoiding answering my question directly. She can’t bring herself to truly say no- she wants to come with me, we both know it.

“You know Amara won’t find us,” I retort, dropping my face into the warm crook of her neck and drawing my nose lightly across the sensitive skin. Layla shivers beneath my touch, her head dropping back slightly in welcome.

“We could get caught,” Layla argues, although her voice is feeble and lacking any real conviction. I graze my teeth lightly over the peak of her exposed collarbone, a purely male swell of pride blooming in my chest at the strangled noise that slips from her lips at the contact.

My obsession with Layla and the looming, ominous feeling of transfer season aren’t the only reasons I’m so intent on making room to have her to myself, although they certainly play a part. No, there’s another reason everything feels more urgent now, every stolen second feels weightier.

Layla’s 24- marrying age. Most human women tend to get married even earlier these days, their lifespans shorter and more pressing on Protheka than they ever were on their home planet. I see the way the men in the village eye her as if she’s some prize to be won, as if she could ever be anyone’s but mine.

The idea of another man with Layla, of her marrying or his hands skating across her curves, fills me with rage. I drown the feeling, unwilling to let my darker nature ruin a perfectly good moment as I withdraw from Layla’s neck and find her eyes.

“We’ve never been caught before,” I say with a grin, my voice rough with my overwhelming desire for her. Layla’s cheeks flush scarlet as her eyes dip to my lips, only making my smile grow wider. She wants me nearly as bad as I want her, a fact that will never cease to make smug satisfaction ripple through me.

“But my family-”



“I’ll send word,” I interrupt her, my hold on myself growing weaker with every passing second her little body is pressed to mine. “I’ll tell them you’ve picked up an extra shift. You’ll be safe with me, I promise.”

“I know,” Layla whispers. It’s all the permission I need as I twine my fingers between hers and tug her down the alleyway, leading us toward the dark elf quarter.

To be continued. To read more click [here](#)!