

HER  ORC
GENTLEMAN

BLACK BEAR CLAN

ZOE ASHWOOD

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A MONSTER FANTASY ROMANCE

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*To my husband,
who takes care of me
when I'm unwell.*

A LETTER TO MY READERS

Hi, dear reader!

Welcome back to the Black Bear Clan!

Thank you so much for picking up Ozork and Willow's book. We've all waited so long for their story! I hope you'll find it as lovely as I did when I was writing it.

This is the sixth book in the Black Bear Clan series - and while you *can* read it as a standalone, you might want to start at the beginning by picking up [Her Orc King](#) if you're completely new to the world.

And if you need to check out the content warnings for the series, you can do that [on my author website](#).

Happy reading!

xo, Zoe

CHAPTER
ONE

“The Baron of Meggle wants recompense,” my uncle says.

I stare at my boots, then turn to studying the crack in the ornamental tile on the floor. The Duke of Ultrup’s private drawing room is sumptuously furnished, with hot water piped into the floor to make walking around barefoot pleasant even when it gets cold outside. I’m still in my boots, though, because Uncle hasn’t offered me a seat yet, and besides, I haven’t been barefoot in another person’s presence in years.

That’s not something ladies do.

“Do you know how much he’s demanding?” my uncle continues, his face reddening more by the minute.

His half-smoked cigar sits in an ashtray on the table, spreading noxious gray smoke throughout the room.

“No,” I mumble.

“Three hundred gold marks!” he snaps. “And considering he lost an eye, it’s a wonder he’s not asking for more.”

I try not to fidget in place, but it’s hard. My hands wish to flutter in agitation, so I clasp them tighter together behind my back. Ladies don’t fidget, that’s what my governesses always said.

I chance a look at the duke. “You can take the sum from my dowry,” I say, proud that my voice doesn’t tremble. “And I-I can write a letter of apology to the baron.”

My uncle stares down his nose at me. “You will do that,” he agrees. “But I’m afraid it won’t be enough, Willow.”

The world goes fuzzy at the edges when I consider a terrifying possibility. “He’s not still asking me to marry him, is he?”

Finally, the duke snorts and leans back on the blue velvet-lined settee. “No. He wants nothing to do with you, so I suppose you’ve achieved your goal.” His gaze grows serious, though. “But people are starting to talk, my dear.”

I shuffle my feet, unable to stop myself. “People are always talking. That’s life at court, isn’t it? They’ll forget soon enough when another scandal takes place.”

He rubs his chin, expression thoughtful. “True. But don’t you think it would be prudent to...remove yourself from the public eye for a while, until rumors die down? You’ve already been branded as a handful, and I’m afraid that after this incident, even the Earl of Follett has rescinded his offer of an alliance with you. Apparently, no one wants to lose an eye to your damn cat.” He squints at the wicker carrier basket in which Thistle is hissing discontentedly. “You know, everything would be much easier if we just removed him.”

I snap my head up. “You wouldn’t.”

My cat was the one who scratched the baron’s face. We’d been sitting in my uncle’s drawing room, taking tea, when he’d leaned in close and tried to kiss me in order to compromise me in front of the servants. He might have succeeded, too, if he hadn’t accidentally squashed poor Thistle in his attempt. The cat took exception to having his tail pinched and flew out of my lap, claws outstretched. It turned out that his paws must have been dirty, even though he was an indoor cat, because the baron’s scratches got inflamed, and because he waited too long to visit a healer, he lost his left eye to the infection.

The duke stares at the carrier a while longer, then shakes his head. “I wouldn’t. I know how much he means to you. But, darling, you must take care. The people are restless after a bad harvest and last year’s terrible winter, and we wouldn’t want discontent brewing in the ranks of the nobility. I must be seen as a fair ruler.”

He lifts his eyebrows, and I know what he’s saying. If I wasn’t his niece, his ward, he would have had to punish me severely for what happened with the baron.

“That’s unfair,” I whisper. “He’s the one who tried to take advantage of me. I only defended myself.” Or Thistle did, but I am responsible for his actions—and proud of them, even if I’d never admit that to the duke.

My uncle shuffles a stack of letters laid out on the low table in front of

the settee and doesn't meet my eye. "Yes, well, you know how it is."

Oh, I do. Whenever a man makes a mistake, a woman is blamed. According to the rules of polite society, I was supposed to allow the baron his liberties. I was supposed to be grateful that a man of his wealth and importance even wanted anything to do with me, the daughter of the duke's bastard brother who died years ago, leaving his older brother to take care of me. He'd even told me that I was likely too old to breed, but that he had sons from his first wife, so he only needed my dowry.

I think of my parents and wonder what they would think of this entire farce. They loved each other fiercely, and when they died in a carriage accident, some said it was romantic that they did so together.

As if they did it on purpose.

I push down the well of sadness that still exists deep inside me and straighten my shoulders. If my parents were still alive, I wouldn't be in this situation at all, so thinking about it is useless.

"Ah, here it is," my uncle exclaims, pulling out a thick letter.

The corners are slightly creased, as if it's been handled by many people, and the seal is unfamiliar to me—an animal of some sort. A bear, perhaps?

He unfolds it and scans the contents, then slaps the paper with a contented, "Aha!"

I step closer, trying to read over his shoulder. "What is it?"

"I need an emissary to the orc kingdom," he announces. "An ambassador, if you will."

My world grinds to a stop. "The orc kingdom?"

"Correct." He sets the letter down again and crosses his arms over his belly. The gold buttons of his doublet glint in the lantern light. "I have been corresponding with King Gorvor for months. He has agreed to let an ambassador and some guards spend the winter at his palace in order to strengthen the relationship between our courts. I have been meaning to send someone—I even wrote to the man, I mean, orc. Then that skirmish on the Eastern border took precedence, and now your incident with the baron, and I forgot. But it's high time we put this plan in motion, or else the king will think we've forgotten all about him."

This is the first time I'm hearing about it. And I loathe the fact that the duke is comparing my *incident* with the baron to an unprecedented battle with a fae lord's army that left almost a hundred men dead and another hundred injured.

“But what has that got to do with me?” I burst out. “I’m not an ambassador. I don’t know the orc kingdom, nor have I ever served at your court.”

Not for a lack of trying. I’d begged my uncle for the same tutors that my male cousins worked with, but I’d only ever gotten governesses who tried to mold me into a perfect lady—one who spoke softly, never disagreed with anyone, especially men with power, and held her back and shoulders perfectly straight at all times. So instead, I made friends with the librarians at the duke’s grand library, as well as most booksellers in town.

“You can take notes, can’t you?” he replies. His blue eyes glint as he adds, “You’ve been after me for years to give you more responsibility. Now you can have it. We’ll kill two birds with one stone, eh?”

I *did* want more responsibility. I mostly wanted to be responsible for my own fate, though, not be sent off to some faraway land in the middle of the winter.

“I think this is a great idea,” my uncle continues. “If you perform this task well, we can look at setting you up with a more prominent position once you return. Since you’re so set against marrying, we must find some occupation for you.”

Of course he thinks it’s a great idea. He’s the one who thought of it. I grind my teeth to keep back a caustic reply and force myself to take a calming breath. I never once said I was set against marrying. I only wish to marry a man who would see me as more than a way to line his coffers with gold. A man who would offer me a loving home and a chance to start a family. But my uncle has been deaf to my explanations for years, so I know it’s no use trying to convince him now. Instead, I ask, “What, exactly, is the task?”

The duke sends me a shrewd look. “You’re to uncover a secret for me.”

CHAPTER
TWO

The bell above the door of my favorite bookshop in town jingles happily when I enter, and a sense of comfort washes over me. As the door closes softly behind me, I dust fresh snowflakes from my shoulders and remove my fur-lined gloves, then step between the stacked shelves. Books are *everywhere*. From small pocket-sized editions of the latest adventure stories to big leather-bound tomes containing histories of entire nations, Ellis' shop has them all.

A family with three small children is browsing the shelves in the children's corner. When I was younger, I didn't have many books with pictures, but Ellis is a genius at sourcing the exact items that customers want. If the delighted gasps coming from the two boys are any indication, the selection is perfect once again.

A twinge of sadness twists my insides as the mother picks up her youngest, a curly-haired girl, and takes her over to where a set of wooden blocks is set out for toddlers to entertain themselves while their parents browse. The mother seems to be about my age, and once again, I'm reminded of my loneliness.

At least I'll have the trip to keep me busy in the coming months. I find the shopkeeper crouched behind a very tall stack that looks like it might topple over at any moment and bury them alive.

"Hello," I say softly.

Ellis glances up, dark eyes unfocused for a moment, as if they're still caught in the world of whatever story they've been reading. "Willow, how lovely of you to come by." They stand, stretching out to their full height, and offer me a hand to shake. "I'm afraid your latest order hasn't come in yet. I

would have written to you if it had.”

I grimace. “Actually, that’s exactly why I’m here today—to tell you that I won’t be able to pick up the order when it comes in. I’m leaving town tomorrow and won’t be back until spring, most likely. If I pay you now, would you be able to hold the books for me until I return?”

They set down the tome they’ve been reading and peer at me closely. “Of course, but I didn’t know you were planning a trip.”

My lip trembles slightly, so I bite down on it until the pain chases away the urge to burst into tears. It’s just so hard not to break down. Ellis and their wife, Anna, have been my close friends for years, and I know that they’d both try to help me if I said I needed a way out of my situation. But the last thing I want is to put them on the duke’s blacklist. The trouble that would cause is impossible to predict.

So I take a deep breath and force a smile on my face. “I’ve become an ambassador to the orc lands. It’s a wonderful opportunity.”

They study me for a long moment. “The duke is punishing you for what happened with that bastard, isn’t he?”

At the kindness in their voice, my face crumples. “Yes,” I whisper. “He thinks that sending me away will make the rumors die down more quickly.” I swipe at my eyes angrily and add, “I just don’t know why it has to be the *orc* lands in the middle of winter. I’d be out of the way just as well if he’d sent me to visit the southern cities. At least I wouldn’t freeze to death over there.”

Ellis chuckles and rubs my shoulder in a gesture of support. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

Gods, I wish there was. But I can’t put that responsibility on them.

“No,” I reply. “I’m going to do this and do it well. I’ll be the best damn ambassador this court has ever seen, and when I return in the spring, the duke will have to recognize it.”

Ellis looks a tad skeptical about this but doesn’t contradict me. “All right, then. The orc lands, you say?” They tap a long finger on their lips. “Do you think you could take a package north, actually? The archivist of the Black Bear Clan has put an order in, and I’ve yet to find a caravan going all the way to the orc kingdom at this time of the year.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Of course. They have an archive there? A library?”

Ellis’ eyebrows climb up in response to mine. “A large one, if Marut’s reports are true, and I don’t doubt they are. Does knowing that lessen any of your anxiety?”

They walk to the desk where more books are piled, tied together with string, waiting for their new owners to pick them up. They reach under the desk and bring up a large stack, then another.

“It might.” I grin, eyeing the books on the desk. “Especially since this archivist seems to have an excellent taste in books.”

Ellis laughs. “Well, I suspect half of these are actually for his wife, Violet. She’s quite the voracious reader.” They send me a look from under their lashes. “And she’s a human.”

That’s an interesting bit of news. “My uncle told me that King Gorvor’s new queen, Dawn, is also human. I didn’t know humans and orcs could marry.”

With swift, practiced movements, Ellis wraps the books in waxed paper and packs them securely in a felt-lined crate. “I’ll have these delivered to your rooms at the palace if that’s all right. And I have a book I think you might find interesting,” they say. “Written by a human, so take everything with a grain of salt, but Marut did say it’s not too terrible.”

I follow them into the labyrinth of shelves until we stop by my favorite section of adventure novels and romantic stories. “Oh, it’s *that* kind of book?” I tease.

But when they take a slim volume off the shelf and pass it to me, my cheeks grow warm. *Her Orc Mate*. And if the title wasn’t suggestive enough, the first page after I flip open the cover shows a print of a young woman caught in a passionate embrace with a muscular orc warrior.

Ellis’ full lips press together as they hide a smile. “Are you saying you don’t like *this* kind of book?”

I close it quickly. “Of course not. This is, ah, all for education’s sake.”

Ellis bows their head in agreement, though their eyes crinkle in the corners. “Of course. Shall I wrap it for you?”

I sigh and reach for my purse. “Yes, please. I’ll need something entertaining for the ride.”



My uncle has provided me with one of the best carriages he owns. It’s being pulled by four beautiful tan horses, and its seats are lined with blue velvet to match the duke’s colors. It’s not as fancy as the one he uses to get around

town, but I understand it's his way of saying sorry for sending me off to the north.

If only his guilt extended a little further.

The ten guards assigned to protect me on my journey—and during my stay at the Black Bear Clan palace in the forest of Bellhaven—seem familiar with the road. In fact, Captain Owen Hawke, a tall man with a calm, competent air and a mane of long blond hair, told me these same men delivered that missive from King Gorvor to my uncle. They'd already visited the orc lands, and I want to question them all about what it was like. But because I'm the duke's niece, I am to remain stuffed in the carriage, separated from the guards who are riding on horseback.

At first, I thought I might get to talk to them in the evenings, in a taproom at an inn, perhaps. I would have managed it, too, but my maid, Rosanna, sent along by my uncle, has demanded to have all our meals sent up to our room so I won't be exposed to the loud, crass atmosphere of the inns.

To say that I've been bored on this trip is a severe understatement. If things continue the way they have, I might have to take Thistle as my example and start yowling mournfully every time I'm forced back in the carriage. The cat has made his displeasure known, and after I made a mistake of letting him loose inside the carriage, and he scratched up the pretty velvet seat—and Rosanna's skirts—I've had to keep him confined to his carrier for most of the journey.

Books have been my only solace. I first tried to read the book about orcs that Ellis gave me in the hopes that the racy illustration at the front would match the story inside, but Rosanna exclaimed loudly at my choice of reading material and confiscated the book before I got past the second chapter. I'm not sure whether she burned it, tossed it, or kept it for some illicit reading of her own.

I did learn that orcs rarely marry but rather take mates, which is useful, but the author of the booklet apparently left all the intriguing intimate situations between the newly mated couple for the second part of the story, which I couldn't get to. After that, I broke into the chest of books Ellis packed for the orc archivist and his wife, hoping they won't mind too badly if I read the books first. I took great care to repackage them securely and discovered that I certainly want to make Violet's acquaintance because her taste in books is impeccable.

Several rainy days made the journey miserable for my traveling

companions, and the soldiers spent their time drying off by the fire whenever we stopped for a meal. But today, the sky today is a solid, cloudy gray, so when we step out of the inn where we spent the night, I turn to Captain Hawke, my hands clasped in front of my chest.

“Please, may I ride with you today?” I beg. “I’ll go mad if I have to stay cooped up in the carriage for even a day longer.”

The golden skin around his eyes crinkles as if he’s about to smile, but he remains as serious as ever. “Not yet, my lady. These clouds may not look like much, but this far north, they mean snow is on the way. If it’s a heavy snowfall, we might have to leave the carriage at the last human village and attempt the mountain road on horseback.”

I glance up at the low-hanging clouds. “So what you’re saying is, I should pray for snow, and then I’ll get my wish?”

He shakes his head. “You won’t find it comfortable riding through thigh-high snowdrifts, my lady, or a blizzard.”

“I don’t find it comfortable to sit in a bumpy carriage either,” I grumble as I make my way to where Rosanna is waiting. “But I will persevere. The sooner we arrive at that godsforsaken place, the better.”

The captain offers me a small smile, which I count as a victory, and hands me into the carriage like the perfect gentleman he is. “You might enjoy it there, my lady. It’s a place filled with wonders.”

His voice turns strangely wistful, so I snap my head around to look at him. He’s staring north, toward the orc kingdom, his gaze distant.

“Is it?” I ask softly. “Did you like it there?”

He visibly shakes himself from his thoughts and bows to me. “Yes. The king’s people were very obliging, and they fed us better than any inn on the road.”

There’s something he’s not telling me, but I don’t know him well enough to pry. Still, I make a mental note to observe him and the other soldiers more closely. I need to know what I’m getting into.

Rosanna bustles into the carriage a moment later, interrupting my thoughts with complaints about bedbugs and awful tea, which I listen to with thinning patience. I know my uncle sent her along for my protection, but to think that a woman used to comfortable courtly life could protect me better than ten fully trained soldiers is ludicrous. But my uncle is worried about my virtue, not just my life, it seems, so I’m stuck with the woman for the time being.

As Captain Owen predicted, a light snowfall begins around midday, dusting the land with white. At first, the ground seems to soak up the snowflakes quickly, but the farther north we travel, the thicker the layer of snow. The world turns quiet, and the noise of the carriage wheels on gravel, which bothered me so much before, is muted. I can barely hear the riders surrounding the carriage anymore.

When we stop for the night at a small village just south of the border with the orc kingdom, the captain wrenches the carriage door open, his face grim.

“What is it?” I demand.

He nods at the courtyard, which is covered with at least three inches of snow. “They had some snow yesterday,” he tells me as he offers me a hand to climb from the carriage. “The innkeeper says that the orc lands get at least three times as much because they’re so high up in the mountains. The road will be impassable for the carriage, that much is clear.”

Rosanna, who has been listening to this from inside the carriage, leans out, her face scrunched up with distaste. “So we’re too late? We’ve traveled all this way for nothing?”

Captain Hawke lifts his eyebrows at me but wisely says nothing. It seems that despite his unwillingness to accommodate my wish for riding, I’m the one who will be issuing orders now.

“No,” I say. “It simply means we continue on horseback. Tomorrow morning, before the weather gets any worse. We’ll leave the carriage here, and you and I can ride two of the carriage horses. The other two will carry some of our luggage, but we might have to reconsider what we take with us.”

I’d packed four full travel trunks for this long journey. I’m to remain at the orc palace for the entire winter, after all, so I’ll need multiple gowns, shoes, and cloaks, as well as my toiletries and personal belongings.

The maid huffs angrily and pushes past me as she climbs out of the carriage. The captain frowns after her, but when he glances back at me, I shake my head.

“I’m not surprised she’s unhappy,” I murmur. “She thought she was signing up for a palace job, and instead she’s had to travel all across the country in this weather.”

His exhale creates a long white plume in the frosty air. “She shouldn’t be so rude to you, though. Her job is to serve you, and she’s not doing that very well, is she?”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my worries from showing. “She will

get used to it. Perhaps she'll do better at the orc palace once she's warm and dry."

But the next morning, Rosanna is gone. Without a note, without so much as a farewell. Captain Hawke asks the innkeeper about her disappearance, but the man shrugs and tells us she took the first post coach south, the one that departed before dawn in order to reach Ultrup in a matter of days.

"We should ask around the village to find you a new maid," the captain says, his blond brows furrowed. "And I will write to the duke to inform him of the situation."

I grab his sleeve, tugging him to a stop. "You will do no such thing. I don't know what Rosanna will tell people when she returns to the city, but I have a job to do. I can dress myself well enough, and if she didn't want to be here, I wouldn't want to force her to come." Then I eye him suspiciously. "Do you or any of your men feel the same? I would rather know now than in a week's time when we're all snowed in and stuck in that orc palace."

The captain shakes his head quickly. "No, my lady. We're happy to return."

Again, I sense there's something he's not telling me. I'll have to weasel it out of him at another opportunity, though, because right now, my sole task is to prepare for departure.

An hour later, our small caravan is all packed and ready to go. I hand Thistle's wicker carrier to one of the guards, and he straps it to the back of my saddle, then covers the basket with a blanket. We'd discussed all the possible ways to get my cat to the orc lands and agreed this is our best option, considering I'd refused to leave Thistle at the inn along with our carriage.

Just when I'm about to mount my horse, the innkeeper's wife appears at the door to the inn. She hurries closer and glances behind her furtively, then passes me a thick letter envelope.

"Can you deliver this to the Hill, please?" she whispers.

I glance down at the letter. It's addressed to a Jasmine, no last name. "Of course. Is Jasmine your friend? Is she an orc?"

"She's my daughter," the woman confides. "She ran away from home and got mated to two orcs from the clan, which made my husband very angry. He doesn't like me writing to her, but I can't not write to my own daughter." Her cheeks turn red at this admission of disobedience.

I tuck the letter into my saddlebag and promise, "I'll deliver it myself. She'll be happy to hear from you, I'm sure."

The innkeeper's wife squeezes my hand gratefully, then hustles away without sparing me another glance. The captain, who has watched this entire exchange from atop his big horse, says nothing, only nods at me in approval. One of the other guards helps me climb onto my mare, and soon, we're moving north through a gloomy gray morning.

After a couple of miles, Captain Hawke announces that we've passed the border, though I have no idea how he knows. The forest surrounding us seems just as quiet as before, though perhaps the edges of the road are better maintained, the snow-covered brambles cut back instead of tangling around our horses' hooves. Soon, the path begins winding up the foothills of the mountains I know are hidden somewhere behind the thick cloud cover.

We stop several times throughout the day to rest the horses, but the guards keep up a steady pace. The layer of snow covering the road keeps getting thicker the higher we climb. The forest turns into a winter wonderland, with tall fir trees coated in white. Bellhaven is beautiful, so much so that my heart pangs lightly every time I stop to admire it.

"Will we reach the palace tonight?" I ask during one of our breaks, trying not to wince as I stretch out my stiff, cold legs.

"Yes, but it'll be fully dark by the time that we do," Captain Hawke tells me. "We're making good time, and I'd rather not camp out in the cold if we don't need to."

I rub my back and let out a groan. "That's good to hear. It'll be lovely to sleep in a bed, not a sleeping bag." Straightening, I turn to survey the peaceful scene surrounding us. "It's beautiful here. So remote. I'm surprised we haven't seen any of their people, though. Don't they have any other settlements other than the palace?"

The captain pulls up his hood to counter a chill wind that blows past us. "Their scouts have been following us since the border," he murmurs. "Just because you can't see them, don't assume they're not here."

Surprised, I straighten my shoulders. "Really? Are they watching us right now?"

"They are." He gives me a wry smile that doesn't look particularly worried. "And you'll see why the majority of the clan lives at the fortress. It's..."

He shakes his head, seeming at a loss for words. Without finishing his thought, he motions at me to get back on my horse, and we're off again, our horses laboring up the path.

I check on Thistle several times, feeding him bits of dried fish through the grate in his carrier. He hisses at me, though, and I know I'll have to make it up to him upon our arrival.

The longer we travel, the more tired I am. I'm well used to riding, but this is a taxing journey, and by the time night falls and the guards light lanterns to show our way, I'm barely clinging to my saddle. Still, I told Captain Hawke I could do this, and I'm not going to complain and be a nuisance. It's bad enough that these ten men must be out in the bitter cold weather because of me.

It's becoming clear that I'm woefully unprepared for this task. My feet are freezing inside my riding boots despite the thick wool socks I'd put on this morning, my gloved hands are clenched into claws around the reins, and I can't really feel my face anymore. My cloak, which offered some protection while it was only cold, is now crusted with snow that's been falling steadily for the past hour. My eyelids feel heavy, and I know somewhere deep inside that this is a bad thing, but I can't bring myself to say anything. I'm not only a spoiled courtier, damn it, and I will not complain.

But when a light emerges from between the trees, and a collective sigh goes out of the guards surrounding me, tears of relief sting my eyes.

We have arrived.

CHAPTER
THREE

One by one, tall orc warriors materialize from the night. First, I notice two guards at the door, shrouded in thick cloaks, with a fire crackling merrily in a brazier next to the tall gate. Then I find three more watching us from a rise above the road. I glance behind us, and I think I see more of them in the shadows. They're all silent, and for a moment, their tall, dark forms seem menacing, but none of them challenge us on our approach, so I relax slightly, turning forward again.

I squint at the door, which seems to be built into the hillside itself. When my uncle mentioned the orc king's palace, I'd expected some sort of mountain fortress, a great lump of gray stone. That's what I imagined when I read the book that Ellis gave me.

But this place seems completely different. For one, we haven't climbed high enough in the mountains to pass beyond the tree line. Firs grow around us, their towering forms beautiful. Then there's that great door, reinforced with black iron that glistens wetly in the light of the fire. I can't figure out what's going on until one of the two guards at the door bangs his heavy fist on the door and it swings open, revealing a large underground chamber beyond.

Captain Hawke brings his horse right up to the gate and dismounts in a fluid move that has envy rising in my throat. How is he still this spry after a whole day of riding? I remain atop my horse as he goes to greet the guards. Perhaps no one will notice I'm half frozen in place. If I could just take the mare straight into that entrance hall and wait there for a while, I might thaw out eventually.

But my luck has run out. All around me, the other guards are

dismounting. Another orc has shown up and is leading the first of the horses toward the stables, and still I remain in my saddle, too stiff to move.

I'll die of embarrassment if the first thing I do on my arrival is fall off my horse. If I could just signal to the captain somehow that I need help...

"Hello, there," a deep voice says from right beside me.

I turn to find one of the orc guards peering up at me. He's so tall, his eyes are nearly level with mine, and in the low light, his face is a mask of shadows, cruel scars marring his green skin. The short stubble on his chin hides some, but not all of them. I want to reply to him, but my teeth, which have ceased chattering some hours ago, are clenched too tightly for me to speak.

The orc frowns, then takes a deep inhale, leaning closer to me. I stare at him, unable to speak, which is how I see the swiftly changing emotions flit over his face. The confused frown brightens to shock, then to wordless, open-eyed wonder.

"My lady, do you need help getting from your horse?"

I jerk my head to the side, where Captain Hawke now stands. He reaches up and tries to take the mare's reins from me. At that small movement, the leather brushes against my stiff fingertips, and I cry out in pain.

The captain looks up in alarm, but before he can react, strong hands close around my waist and pluck me from the horse's back.

"Are you all right?" the orc demands.

He's holding me in front of him, with my feet barely skimming the snow. I open my mouth to reply that there's no need for theatrics, but only a low croak comes out. Swallowing convulsively, I merely nod. Perhaps that will be enough for the orc to let me go.

He doesn't seem to believe me. He does set me on the ground very gently, but only so he can brush the backs of his knuckles over my cheek. His hand is very warm, so I lean into the touch instinctively, seeking comfort.

"You're so cold," he growls, frowning at me again.

I gaze up at him. I liked him better when he wasn't frowning.

I don't realize I said the words out loud until the corner of his mouth tips up in a crooked smile. His tusks—for he has two of them, jutting up from his lower lip—gleam in the torchlight.

"I won't frown at you, then," he promises. "But we need to get you inside."

Captain Hawke is saying something, but I can't really focus on him. He's

very far away, and I'm so tired. I squint at the gate, wondering if it might be persuaded to come closer so I won't have to walk so far. My legs are knee-deep in snow, and it seems like such a chore to even consider walking.

Then the massive orc swings me up in his arms. It's an effortless move, one I've never experienced before, not since I was a child anyway. None of my suitors were ever brave enough to attempt something like this, not that I would have let them. I imagine the baron, a ruddy-faced man with a fondness for drink, trying to lift me in his arms, and I burst out giggling.

The orc squeezes me closer to his chest as he strides through the door. "Get Mara," he barks. "Or one of the human women. I'm taking her to the baths."

"Sir," Captain Hawke tries to stop him. "You can't. I mean, please. Let me. I'll see to it that she's warmed up." He comes close enough to peer into my face. "I'm so sorry, my lady. I should have known you were unwell."

My teeth have started chattering again, which might or might not be a good thing. "I'm fine," I manage to squeeze out through the shudders. "Get Thistle, please."

The captain looks like he might object, but the orc doesn't seem inclined to let me go, so he finally relents and moves out of my field of vision. The orc turns toward the long corridor leading from the entrance hall and strides away without so much as a goodbye. From the hurried footsteps following us, I assume at least some of the guards assigned to protect me are trying to keep up with his long strides.

Corridors fly past us, and my brain catches up with what I'm seeing.

"It's an underground fortress," I mutter.

The orc's rumbling voice answers, "Aye, love. Welcome to the Hill."

How nice it is to listen to the vibrations his words produce. I lean my cheek on his chest, lamenting the fact that his tunic is in the way. He smells so nice, of flames and spiced cider and something else I've never scented before, and he's so very warm. Reaching up, I touch the side of his neck, which is very green, just as the rest of his skin.

But I'm still wearing my gloves, which presents another challenge. I'm too clumsy to remove them with my hands, so I bite the tip of the middle finger and tug it off. It flies from my grip, and I'm about to protest—they're good riding gloves, after all—when one of the guards following us calls, "I've got it, my lady."

The orc rounds corner after corner, dipping from one earthen passage to

the next without pausing to check the directions. I'm hopelessly lost already, and I wonder if I'd even find the way out if I wanted to. But the air is getting hotter. It's a gradual change, and I don't understand what's happening until the sound of dripping water and a slight haze in the air connect to what my gentleman orc said earlier.

The baths.

The thought has me squirming in his arms. "Wait," I yelp. "You can't take me to the baths. It's not proper. Unhand me, sir."

The orc merely squeezes me against his chest, rendering me immobile. "We're nearly there. Just wait a moment."

His words prove to be true. One final turn in the corridor, and a wide underground chamber opens up in front of us. If the tunnels we'd been traveling through had clearly been created by orc hands, this space is almost completely natural. A low-hanging mist obscures the view, but the first pools in the ground are visible, water lapping at the smoothed edges.

"Oh my." I stop struggling and stare at the strange scene. It's late, so not many orcs are here, but there are snatches of chatter from the mist, children laughing and jabbering while adults talk. A loud splash is followed by a gasp of surprise, then chiding as the culprit is reprimanded gently.

"You must get in the water," the orc declares. "You need to get warm. You humans are so sensitive to the cold."

At last, he releases me, but he doesn't let me stand. Instead, he places me on a carved stone bench, next to which white bathing sheets are stacked in neat piles.

"Is there a private bathing chamber for women?" I ask tentatively. "I agree, it would feel nice to soak in a bath, but, ah..."

I motion at him, then at the guards who hover awkwardly behind us. They're already removing their hats and scarves, overheating in the humid chamber, and they look as embarrassed as I feel.

The orc glares at them, then positions himself between them and me. "I will hold out a bathing sheet for you if you wish. They will not see your body."

I gape at him. Surely he's joking? But he seems completely serious, his dark gaze solemn. Already, he's reaching for a folded bathing sheet, and he shakes it out, creating a screen for me.

"I can't," I choke out. "I mean...I don't know you. I'm sorry, this just won't work."

His expression falls, and I've never seen a person look this crestfallen. "Ah." He balls up the bathing sheet and offers it to me. "Forgive me. I thought..." He stops himself, shakes his head, and takes a step away from me.

"Ozork?" A female voice echoes from the corridor. "Are you here?"

The orc turns on his heels and faces an orc woman rushing toward us. She's stunning, perhaps a year or two younger than me, wearing a long golden-brown dress that complements the tone of her skin perfectly. Dainty gold hoops adorn her pointed ears. She offers me a tight smile when she notices me, then her gaze falls to the scrunched-up bathing sheet.

"What's going on?" she asks. "Uram came to fetch me but only said you'd taken a woman to the baths."

"I'm so sorry," I say, standing. My head spins at the movement, but I can't stay sitting for even a moment longer. "I'm afraid there's been a bit of a misunderstanding. Your friend here thought I was too chilled and decided to carry me to the baths to warm up. I'm sorry we bothered you."

I manage to say all this with very little shaking, so I'm definitely improving, even if my toes are still completely numb and my fingertips are now on fire, stabbing pain radiating from beneath my nails.

She glances from me to the male she called Ozork. "You carried her all the way?" she asks finally.

He only nods. A look passes between them, and her gaze softens. She reaches out and grips his arm, then turns to me.

"I'm sorry for the confusion," she says. "Welcome to the Hill. I'm Mara, and I'm the steward. It's a good thing Uram came to get me. I'll explain everything to you..." She leaves the end of her sentence hanging, waiting for me to complete it.

"Willow," I introduce myself. "I'm the Duke of Ultrup's niece. And his ambassador. I've come to meet your king."

CHAPTER
FOUR

An awkward silence falls over our small group at my declaration. I glance from Mara to Ozork and find him staring at me intently, mouthing my name. The sight has something warm building up in my chest, but perhaps that's just my lungs thawing out in this hot atmosphere.

My cheeks tingle painfully as heat rushes to my face. "I'm aware we've arrived too late to meet with the king," I hurry to say. "And I'd love a bath. But I have to speak to the captain of my guard. He went to fetch my cat, you see, and I think he might have gotten lost in the tunnels."

Mara's brown eyes widen. "The captain?" she asks, her voice strangled.

Ozork lets out a low chuckle, then rumbles, "Finally."

I beam at them as understanding hits. "Of course, you've met him. And these fine men, I suppose."

Mara swivels on her heels as if she's only now noticed them. "Ah, yes. Certainly. Gentlemen, you must try the baths. Ozork, I'll take Willow to the other end, and after, I'll see her settled in one of the guest rooms. Will you...?"

She stops, and her pointed ears twitch. She turns her head toward the corridor from which we came to the baths. Suddenly, she's by my side and takes my hand, yanking me none too gently toward the thermal pools. "Come, you do look half frozen. I'm so sorry, I know the weather is awful for traveling this time of year."

Her nervous chatter fills the silence between us, but instead of echoing in the chamber like I expected, it gets swallowed quickly by the steam. The family with the children I heard earlier must have been splashing around very close to us, because now that we're moving farther away, I can't hear a thing.

“Here,” Mara declares. “This is far enough from everyone.”

She motions at a stone bench, so I put my bathing sheet on it, then fidget, unsure of what to do. Despite the fog, I’m still very conscious of the fact that the other bathers are close by.

Mara eyes me for a moment, then sighs and undoes the laces on the sides of her gown. “I wasn’t planning on taking a bath, but it never hurts.” She attaches her long braid to the top of her head with several hair pins she pulls from her pocket, then offers some more to me. “And I promise to tell you if anyone gets too close for comfort. I have very good hearing.”

She motions at her ears and smiles. I stare at her for a moment, still debating with myself, but the thought of a hot bath is so inviting. My cheeks flame with embarrassment as I remove my coat, then my boots and dress. This is very unusual, yet Mara certainly doesn’t have any reservations. She slips into the pool, her curvy body disappearing under the surface.

I can barely see anything but the rough shape of her outline, which pushes me to finish undressing. I squeak as my linen underwear hits the damp floor, then nearly stumble into the water, hurrying to hide myself.

The hot water is a shock. I let out a groan—my numb feet react violently to it, stinging pain radiating from my toes, all the way up my legs and into my spine. My fingers seem on fire, and I lift one hand out of the water to observe it, half expecting the tips to be bleeding from the way they hurt.

“Are you all right?” Mara asks softly.

I wash the tears off my face and give her a nod. But my lip trembles, and now that I’ve started crying, I can’t hold back. I cover my face with my hands and sob, big hiccupping breaths sawing out of me.

I’m so far away from home. I’ve never left Ultrup, not for such a long trip, and now I’m stuck at the orc fortress for the winter. I’m surrounded by strangers, and my entire body hurts so much. I think I was perilously close to freezing to death—and I didn’t even know it because the cold had made my thoughts numb and stupid.

A touch at my shoulder has me looking up. Mara gently pushes me backward, and I stare at her, confused, until my thighs meet a carved stone bench under the water. I collapse onto it, grateful for the support. The orc woman maneuvers me so I’m facing away from her, then pulls out all the pins I’d stuck in my hair. It tumbles down my back, and Mara washes it gently, as a mother would, scooping up water in a pitcher and pouring it over my head. Then she lathers up some honey-scented soap and rubs it into my

scalp, the press of her fingers firm but soothing.

By the time she taps my shoulder again and asks me to dunk my head underwater, I'm feeling much better. I close my eyes and crouch, and the water closes over my head, washing away the suds and my tension.

When I resurface, I find that Mara has retreated to the other side of the pool and is washing herself, giving me space.

"Thank you," I murmur. "I didn't know I needed that."

She gives me a small smile. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I cock my head to the side. "It?"

"Whatever had you sobbing like that," she replies.

Oh.

I chew on my lower lip, unsure of what to say. My uncle sent me here to uncover the secret of the Black Bear Clan, but surely I cannot confide in the first orc who's been kind to me. Well, the second. The memory of the scarred orc has my cheeks heating up again. So instead of answering Mara's question, I ask one of my own.

"The orc who carried me here. Ozork," I begin. "He seemed very concerned with my half-frozen state. Why was that?"

Mara presses her full lips together, as if she's thinking carefully of her words. "Orcs can sometimes react with...with more force than strictly necessary," she says slowly. "Especially when it comes to humans. You see, we're quite a bit sturdier than you. I suppose he saw your bluish lips and pale face and thought you were about to die."

I touch my fingers to my lips. They're tingling now, but perhaps I did look a little worse for wear earlier. "Ah. And is he a guard?" I ask, then remember that maybe I shouldn't show so much interest in that single orc. "I mean, I'm only asking because he seemed older than the others at the door."

Mara's lips now twist up at the corners. "Of course. Ozork is the one who leads most of the trading caravans to the human lands. He's in charge of purchasing provisions for the clan, the items we cannot make or grow on our lands. You might have seen him in Ultrup, actually."

"I'd remember him," I murmur.

Now the orc woman's smile turns positively radiant. "I suppose you would."

I frown at her, wondering about her reply. Then it hits me. "Oh, no, I didn't mean because of his scars!" I flutter my hands nervously, splashing in the water. "I wouldn't—they don't bother me. Not that it matters one way or

another, it's just..."

I shut myself up, cutting off the stream of words and wondering what has come over me. My cheeks flame with heat that has nothing to do with the thermal water.

But Mara doesn't seem to be bothered at all. "Did you know he also plays the fiddle?"

"The fiddle?" I repeat, wondering why she'd think I know anything about an orc I only met half an hour ago.

"Aye." She nods decisively. "You should ask him to play for you sometime."

I grasp the edge of the stone bench. "I couldn't do that. I barely know him."

Mara climbs onto the bench next to me and stands, water sluicing down her tall body. "Well, you have all winter to make his acquaintance. I'm sure you'll find the right moment."

She disappears into the mist, naked as the day she was born, and returns with a bathing sheet of her own. Then she holds mine out for me, and I clamber from the pool, both grateful for her consideration and reluctant because the water felt divine. But the captain and the guards will undoubtedly be waiting for me, and I don't want to keep them standing there. After all, they went through the same ordeal as I did, even if they seemed not to be as affected.

I follow Mara through the chamber, avoiding the pools and holding on to my bundle of travel clothes. My cloak is heavy and soaked, and my gown smells strongly of horses, so I have no wish to put them back on, but I won't be able to walk in the corridors wearing only a bathing sheet.

Mara stops at the bench where Ozork left me and pulls a soft-looking garment from a pile next to the folded bathing sheets. "Here. Poppy thought of these, and they're brilliant. You can wear it to your room and change there, then bring it back the next time you come here."

I shake out the garment and decide that Poppy, whoever she is, is a genius. The dressing robe is knitted from soft wool that feels amazing on my skin. I wrap it around myself, and it allows me to get rid of the damp bathing sheet without exposing my body. I cinch the belt around my waist and decide I might have to commission one of these to wear in the evenings, because it's so comfortable.

"Come on," Mara says when she has put on a similar robe of her own.

“Ozork is waiting.”

I don’t know if I want to meet the orc who carried me here just yet. After all, I accused him of frowning at me and touched his neck, which is hardly appropriate behavior. Yet I can’t very well remain in the baths for the night, so I tug on my boots—without stockings, feeling very rebellious—and follow Mara.

But it’s not just the orc warrior waiting for us when we emerge from the mists. Captain Hawke sits on a beautifully carved wooden bench next to Ozork, and he shoots to his feet the moment he lays eyes on us. “My lady,” he blurts out, then adjusts his collar with the three pips announcing his rank.

His face flushes a very interesting shade of pink, and I think at first that he’s outraged on behalf of my strange attire. But he’s not looking at me at all. He’s staring at Mara, an expression of longing and wonder in his handsome face.

Mara stops so abruptly I nearly walk into her. Her lips part on a silent gasp, and her hand flies up to her hair, which is escaping its braid in the humid atmosphere. Her skin flushes a darker shade of green, and she takes one step forward as if she’s being pulled toward him by a force stronger than her. Then she ducks her head and all but runs past both the captain and Ozork and disappears down the corridor.

I glance at Ozork, worried, and meet his gaze. He seems just as perplexed, his black eyebrows furrowed. It’s a strange moment—it feels almost as if I’m intruding on a private moment, even though I have no idea what’s happening.

Captain Hawke’s slack-jawed expression doesn’t explain anything either. He stares after Mara, looking for all the world like he might dash after her at any moment.

“Captain,” I say.

He jerks his head up, and a flash of guilt passes his face. “My lady.”

This time, the honorific is clipped, and if I hadn’t just witnessed whatever *this* was, I might have found offence with it.

“Do you need to talk to Mara?” I ask calmly instead.

His blue eyes widen. “What? Uh, no. No, I have to escort you to your room. I’ve already dismissed the men for the night.”

I raise my eyebrow at Ozork. “Could you show me the way?”

The orc dips his head immediately, expression serious. “Of course. I will go wherever you wish me to go.”

It's a strange answer, but I turn back to the captain. "See? I'm perfectly safe."

The man looks so torn between duty and his desire to follow Mara, I take pity on him.

"You're dismissed, Captain," I say, drawing myself up to my full height. "That's an order."

His eyes flash, and I think he might object, but a moment later, he lets out a low huff of laughter.

"As you wish, my lady. Thank you."

With that, he hurries after Mara, disappearing down the corridor, and I can only hope he knows where he's going. If he becomes hopelessly lost in the tunnels, I'll be guilty of sending him off. Most of all, I hope Mara won't resent me for meddling in her affairs.

The longer I stand there, staring after the captain, the more I become aware that I'm now alone with Ozork. There are other bathers still around, judging by the low murmur of conversation emerging from the mists, but with no one in sight, I can no longer ignore the orc waiting patiently for me.

"Er," I say, "I'm sorry for troubling you, but I really need you to show me to my room." I motion at the corridor's mouth. "I have no idea where to go."

The orc reaches out for the bundle of my damp clothes, all wrapped up in my cloak. For a moment, I cling on to it, not wanting to let go, but he's only being nice, so I force myself to unclench my fingers. I feel strangely naked without it despite the dressing robe, so I cross my arms over my chest. But Ozork tucks the bundle under one arm and holds out his arm for me.

I could ignore it and just walk beside him, yet he might see that as a slight.

Ozork's craggy face is serious as he gazes down at me. "I'm only offering because you swayed on your feet earlier," he rumbles.

I stare up at him. He's offering me a choice, something the men of my acquaintance have failed to do. He's saying he won't be offended if I refuse him.

I step closer to him. As I wrap my hand around his arm and walk beside him, I tell myself it has nothing to do with wanting to feel his closeness again. Or smelling him—which I absolutely should not be doing, because he'll surely think I'm strange. But when we round a corner, I could swear he leans closer to me and gets a whiff of my scent.

Maybe we're both strange.

The thought is comforting, and I grip his arm tighter, tucking myself against his side. The halls of the Hill aren't as drafty as I would have expected from an underground dwelling, but Ozork is so very warm. I wonder what it must be like to be that large and imposing and decide I cannot possibly ask him that. He would consider it rude, so I bite my tongue and swallow the question.

We enter a long corridor with wooden doors lining both sides. It's well-lit, lanterns dotting the ceiling, each casting a pool of yellow light on the floor.

Ozork stops under one such lantern, in front of a simple, unmarked door. "This is your room, Willow."

A shiver of awareness passes through me. I haven't given him permission to use my given name, but I don't mind that he did. I've been called 'my lady' so often in the recent years, I'd begun to wonder if the people I met even knew what I was called. It's a strangely impersonal way to address a person. With this orc, it should feel wrong to take this step so soon, but I like it.

"Thank you," I tell him. "Are my guards staying close by?"

He motions at the other doors in the hall. "Your captain's room is the one next to yours. The rest have been taken up by your men, though I don't know who sleeps where."

I press my lips together. "They're my uncle's men, not mine." I don't know why I needed to make the distinction, but it feels important. "They're here to make certain nothing happens to me."

Which is why it's so thrilling that I'm now standing alone in the corridor with this orc. I did dismiss the captain myself, but I'd thought I'd be guarded at all times. Now a sense of possibility expands, and I wonder what I could do if given freedom to do things my way, away from my uncle's court. He gave me a task, yes, one upon which my future depends, but for the next months, he has no say over how I spend my days.

Ozork takes a step closer to me and tucks a strand of my damp brown hair behind my ear. The contact is fleeting, not enough to even count as touch, but my eyelids flutter, my heart beating faster.

"You are safe here," he says. "I will always protect you."

I gaze up at him, confusion warring with pure want. What would it be like to have someone like him, someone who would keep me safe not because my uncle paid him to but because he desired it?

“Why?” I breathe.

He gives me a crooked grin and lets his hand drop back to his side. “You’re my mate, Willow. And I’ve been waiting for you for a very long time.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

The first image that flashes through my mind is the etching from the orc book that Ellis gave me. The orc and the young human woman, wrapped in an embrace. I didn't get to any of the details I so wanted to read about, but in the long hours in the carriage, I'd conjured up all sorts of things to fill in the blanks. They all crowd in my head now, and my breath quickens in response. I stare at Ozork, wondering what I'm supposed to say.

In the end, I settle on, "How-how do you know?"

The orc leans in and takes another sniff. "I smelled you, love. I knew immediately. It's how this thing works."

I scrunch up my nose, thinking of where he first saw me. "You must like the scent of damp wool and horses, then."

His low chuckle reverberates in the corridor. "Not particularly, no. But your essence was strong enough to cut through all that." Now he shuffles closer still, until he's towering over me, his chest level with my eyes. "You smell like tart apples and honey, Willow. When we're out on the road, it's my favorite dessert to make. Add a little cinnamon, and it's the best thing I've ever tasted." He ducks his head until his nose brushes lightly over my temple. "I bet you'll taste sweeter still."

I gasp, but not in outrage. Instead, it's as if that same honey he mentioned is spreading through my veins, sweet and sticky and delicious. "You can't say things like that," I whisper, yet I don't step away, nor do I try to push him off me.

We're not touching, and he's not doing anything untoward, but this is the most intimate experience I've ever had. My hands itch with the need to touch his chest, to slide up to finally feel his skin under my fingertips. I yearn for

him to hold me close again, for the strength of his thick arms to envelop me completely.

But Ozork moves away, his dark eyes twinkling. “If I may, I will be here tomorrow morning to escort you to breakfast.”

I let out a shuddering sigh, wondering what just happened. Then I raise my chin and force some calm into my voice. “I’m sure my guards will help me find the right place.”

He lifts one eyebrow in challenge. “Do you want me to come, Willow?”

I bite my lip, knowing what my answer should be. I don’t know him. He’s a strange male I only met tonight, and I should trust my uncle’s men to guide me.

But I cannot lie to him. “Yes.”

“That’s good.” He bows deeply. “Sleep well, Willow. I will see you tomorrow.”

He says my name as if it’s a promise and a compliment rolled into one.

So I try to do the same. “Good night, Ozork.”



I wake up in pitch darkness, confused for a moment. I’d fallen asleep in my cozy bed last night as soon as Ozork departed, and I’d blown out my lantern without thinking how I would find it again in the morning. Moving from my bed to the wall, I make my way all around the room until I touch the iron hinges of my door. I pat around for the latch and crack the door open, letting in a stream of light from the corridor.

I blink in the sudden blaze—and find myself face to face with Ozork, who is standing right on my threshold.

I squeak, pull back immediately, and slam the door shut in his face. Heart thudding madly, I lean my back on the wood, then realize I’m in the same predicament as before. I still can’t see anything, and now the bed and the desk with the lantern are somewhere on the other side of the dark room. But I can’t open the door again because my nightgown is hardly an appropriate attire for meeting strange men. Or orcs.

Still, I don’t have another option because I have no idea where the flint is located either. And the poor male outside is likely confused about my behavior. I push back my curls and finger-comb them, then give them up as a

lost cause. Last night, I'd been too tired to properly dry them, and they've gone completely wild. I crack the door open, this time using it as a shield to hide my body. I only peer through the narrow opening, searching for Ozork.

"Are you all right?" he asks quietly, his mouth turned up in an amused smile.

I press myself closer. "Yes. But I can't see anything in my room. Could you pass me one of those lanterns?"

He strides to the wall and plucks one off its hook. "Do you need help?" he asks, expression hopeful.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You just want an excuse to visit my room, don't you?"

The orc's smile widens, a scar in the corner of his lips stretching at the movement. "I had to try. But it's quite early. Are you going back to bed?"

The thought of trying to sleep while he's standing out here seems too intimate. And besides, now that I'm up, I'm wide awake. Even if I lay in bed and attempted to force myself to fall asleep again, it wouldn't work.

"No, I'm up for the day," I tell him.

Then I lean out the door just enough to peer this way and that down the corridor. None of my guards seem to be up yet, and I wonder if it's because the captain was preoccupied with Mara last night and didn't assign watches. In any case, it's an unexpected moment of freedom, and I intend to make the most of it.

"Does your offer to take me to breakfast still stand?" I ask.

He nods solemnly. "I will always keep my word to you."

My cheeks flush with heat at the promise. I've had many men's attention in the last decade, but I could never be sure whether they were truly impressed by me—or my dowry, or the connection to my uncle. But Ozork is looking at me as if I'm the most fascinating woman he's ever met.

"All right," I say. "I only need a couple of minutes, and I'll be out."

His eyes are the last thing I see before I shut the door and lean on it again. This time, it's to fan my face. I need to compose myself and brush my hair most of all. That thought propels me into motion. I told the orc I'd be ready in a matter of minutes, but I'd forgotten that my maid ran away, and all my bags are still packed.

I drag on the first gown I find, one that has laces at the front so I can tighten them myself. A simple braid is all I can achieve at such short notice, and I quickly splash cold water on my face in the small privy niche attached

to my bedroom. This orc Hill really is a marvel, because I'd expected the walls to be damp and cold, but instead the entire place seems to be heated by the thermal water I'd bathed in the previous day. Finally, I slip on my riding boots because I don't have the time to find another pair and take a deep breath to calm myself.

I'm the Duke of Ultrup's ambassador. The role my uncle gave me is undefined at best and a complete mystery at worst, but the task he assigned to go along with it is not. I don't know what I'm supposed to tell the king when I meet him, but I know what I should be doing—trying to find out how this orc kingdom that sprouted up a little more than a decade ago in these remote mountains has managed to get so prosperous and rich, it's putting the duchy to shame.

I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin. I scratch Thistle's head and give him some fresh water and the dried fish he'd refused yesterday. The covered tray of dirt he uses as his bathroom is stashed in a nook behind the wooden chest that will hold my clothes once I have time to unpack. I'll have to make some more permanent arrangements for him soon, but first, I need to find breakfast of my own. I pull the door open once more, determination pushing me forward. I have a mission to complete, and I won't let my future go to waste. That means I cannot get distracted by Ozork, no matter how intriguing he is, or Mara, who welcomed me with open arms.

There's something strange going on here, and I intend to find out what it is.

CHAPTER

SIX

Ozork offers me his arm again when we make our way down the corridor. I take it because I'm a weak woman and can't resist his warmth this early in the morning. The way his muscles move under the thin linen of his tunic is very distracting, and I almost stumble over my own feet before wrenching my gaze from him and focusing on the path ahead.

He's dressed in form-fitting leather pants, a fresh tunic with an embroidered black bear at the collar, and a leather vest that shows off his powerful shoulders. I recognize the bear emblem from the letter my uncle showed me in his parlor, and I find the small animal in various places we pass—carved on a door that Ozork points out as the library, embroidered in a cloth covering a bench in a cozy alcove, or hammered into wall sconces carrying torches.

I try not to stare at Ozork, though it's difficult. He's imposing in a way that other orcs we meet aren't, and it's not all about the scars on his face—and hands, which I only notice now that he places his palm over mine in the crook of his elbow. He's older than me, a decade at least, maybe more, but he moves with an easy assurance of a warrior still in his prime. His profile is handsome, his nose straight, his eyes a warm shade of brown that seems to brighten every time he looks at me.

He called me his mate last night. In the rush to get ready this morning, I'd forgotten about it, but now that he walks so proudly by my side, I can't help but wonder what that entails. The book I read mentioned the instantaneous nature of the bond and hinted at the passion that followed, but from what Ozork has been saying, the situation, at least to him, seems very permanent.

I'm not sure what to think about that. My interest in him doesn't match

his, at least not yet—and I wonder how he can be so certain that we’re meant to be together. He said he’d scented me, but surely that’s not enough for a relationship. Not to mention the fact that my uncle put very strict rules on what kind of man may have my hand in marriage.

The dowry that’s waiting for me is significant, and not just because of how large the sum of money is. It’s my last connection to my parents, and I wanted to *do* something with it. Buy a property and open a school for girls who want to learn, like I did. Something that would perhaps change another woman’s life in a way that I always wished for myself.

“What has you frowning so?” Ozork asks, keeping his voice low as we pass an elderly couple ambling slowly down the corridor.

I glance up at him, surprised that he noticed. He’d been looking ahead, but maybe he was just giving me the opportunity to stare at him. The thought sends blood rushing to my cheeks, and I duck my head, wishing I’d been more discreet.

“It’s nothing,” I reply. “I’m only wondering what’s for breakfast.”

Ozork takes a long inhale through his nose, then lets out a rumbling hum. “I will not lie to you, Willow. It’s not in my nature to do so. Do you think you could do me the same honor?”

His words land like rocks, and I pull my hand away from him, embarrassed and more than a little angry. “What makes you think you have the right to know what I’m thinking?”

My voice is too harsh for a lady, too raw for the calm moment we’d just shared, yet it’s not every day I get accused of lying by a stranger.

But Ozork merely gazes at me, his expression unchanged. “I only asked you not to lie. You are free to keep your thoughts to yourself, Willow. I would never presume.”

I press my hands to my flaming cheeks. He’s so infuriatingly calm, and here I am, half yelling at him. My uncle would have a fit if he knew I bungled my first opportunity to get to know the clan.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I didn’t mean to shout.”

He shakes his head, and the corners of his eyes crease with something like worry. “It’s all right, I don’t mind. I didn’t think you’d be this upset over it, or I wouldn’t have asked.”

But our easy camaraderie from before is gone, all thanks to me. I lower my hands and clench them in front of me. “I’m sorry I lied,” I tell him as calmly as I can. “I didn’t want to bother you with my thoughts.” I grimace,

because that's a half-truth at best, but it's all I can give him right now.

Ozork's expression falls. It's the same as last night, when he tried to help me undress by shielding me from my guards. He had an expectation of me that I did not fulfill, and somehow, it's heartbreaking to fall short of this male's expectations. I'm well used to it from dealing with powerful men all my life, so I have no idea why it hurts so much this time.

"I'm sorry for pressing you," he murmurs in reply. "Come. The dining hall is this way."

He motions for me to walk beside him, and I can barely make myself. But then he sticks out his elbow for me again. It feels like an offer of peace more than physical support. I close the distance between us and take it, gingerly fitting my fingers in the crook of his arm. My throat is tight, and I blink rapidly to keep myself from showing any more emotion.

I barely manage to compose myself before we stride from a hallway right into a massive underground cavern. It's stunning enough that it chases away my emotions. It's almost empty this early in the morning, but the number of long tables and benches gives me a rough idea of just how large the clan is. I try to imagine the place teeming with orcs—and I realize that I've been underestimating the size of the Hill as well.

"Who made this place?" I whisper. "This cavern must have taken *ages* to excavate." For it is clearly the work of clever architects, a domed chamber supported only by its earthen walls.

Ozork tugs me lightly to the right and leads me to one of the tables, close to the dais on which a pair of beautifully carved wooden thrones stand behind a table decorated with a pretty red tablecloth and boughs of fir.

"We don't know who made it," he says. He guides me to sit, then takes the place next to me. "This is how it was when I found it."

I swivel on the bench to stare at him. "*You* found it?"

A serving boy from the kitchen brings out a tray of breakfast food and a steaming pot of tea. Ozork reaches for the plates stacked at the end of the table, but instead of passing one to me, he fills it with a bit of everything from the platter until it's heaping full. Very carefully, he sets it before me and hums in satisfaction.

"Thank you," I say.

In turn, I fetch two clay cups from my side of the table and pour us both the sweet, fragrant black tea. When I offer a cup to Ozork, he grins at me, clearly delighted.

“What is it?” I ask. “What happened just now?”

Ozork’s knee brushes mine under the table. “It is very important in orc customs to care for one’s mate,” he tells me. “I am honored you offered me the tea.”

Oh gods. It’s only my first morning here, and I’d already participated in some sort of mating ritual by accident. I didn’t read any of that in the book Ellis gave me, so I should likely stop trusting it as some sort of manual to the orc culture. Ellis did tell me I should take it with a grain of salt.

Ozork bites off a chunk of his bread and continues as if the strange moment never happened. “I was scouting in these mountains for King Gorvor. Prince Gorvor, he was called back then.” He nudges me gently and motions at my plate, then adds, “We were still living in the old kingdom then, under King Trak’s rule, but Gorvor was already planning on leaving the clan. He knew we needed a place to live, somewhere far from his father’s influence, but also remote enough so that humans wouldn’t mind if we took over the land.”

I scoop up a forkful of scrambled eggs, which are light and fluffy and perfectly salty. “And this place was just...*here?*”

He dips his chin in a nod and washes down his bite of food with some tea. “Aye, it was empty. The main entrance had collapsed, so I crawled in through a window to one of the outer rooms. Everything was grown over from the outside, but the inside...” His gaze wanders to the ceiling of the great hall. “Can you imagine what it was like to step into this chamber for the first time? Just me, holding up a torch. The light didn’t even reach the ends, and I was lucky I didn’t get hopelessly lost in here. It still took me hours to find my way out again, but by the time I did, I knew I’d found our new home.”

He says it with pride, but not to boast. It’s a strange distinction, but Ozork doesn’t seem like a male who would beat his chest and proclaim all his accomplishments.

I want to learn more about the Hill—and about him—but there’s a commotion at one of the entrances to the cavern. I peer from behind Ozork’s broad back to find Captain Hawke striding into the hall, his full uniform on, his face slightly pink, as if he’d been running. He meets my gaze and reddens some more, then makes his way toward us with a brisk stride. Two of his men trail behind him, looking as if they’d been forcefully dragged from their beds.

“My lady.” The captain stops in front of our table and gives me a short bow. “I didn’t know you’d already left your room. Forgive me, I didn’t order

a guard to stand at your door through the night.”

I reach for three more cups, pour some tea, and push them to the other side of the table. “Won’t you sit with us, gentlemen?”

The captain’s eye twitches, and I think he might be on the verge of exploding, but he masters himself quickly and takes a seat on the bench opposite Ozork and me. With some reluctance, the other two men follow, eyeing my companion suspiciously. The orc is silent by my side, and I rake my mind to come up with a plausible explanation of why I felt comfortable leaving with him even though I’d just met him yesterday.

I do not want to tell the captain or his men about the fact that Ozork seems convinced that I’m his mate. Not yet, anyway, not until I know what’s really going on.

“Two men will be assigned to you at all times,” Captain Hawke says quietly. He’s gripping his teacup so fiercely, it seems in danger of breaking. “If you feel the need to inform your uncle of my slight, you’re well within your rights to do so, but if I could—”

I lift my hand to stop him. “I won’t be writing to anyone. We were all exhausted after our trip last night, and the last thing I wanted was to have one of your poor men standing in that corridor all night when we all needed our beds.”

One of the soldiers nods vehemently. He’s staring at the platter of food Ozork and I haven’t managed to empty yet, so I push it toward him. He gives me a grateful nod and grabs a boiled egg to peel.

The captain and the other soldier seem unconvinced. The soldier in particular is squinting at Ozork with distaste, and I can’t help but wonder why Captain Hawke had brought the man along if he dislikes orcs so much.

The captain himself doesn’t seem bothered by my new companion at all. He takes a long sip of his tea, then focuses his glare back on me. “My lady, you’re the duke’s ambassador. You cannot walk around the Hill on your own, it’s not right.”

I draw my shoulders back a fraction. “I wasn’t alone,” I reply, my voice calm. “Ozork here kindly offered to escort me to breakfast. I didn’t want to wake any of you.”

The captain looks like he might object, but Ozork clears his throat and leans his elbows on the table.

“I will escort Lady Willow wherever she wants,” he says.

The soldier to the captain’s right frowns at him. “But we came here to

protect her.”

Ozork’s expression remains mild, but under the table, his thigh presses against mine again, though I’m not sure I understand why.

“What is it that you think she needs protecting from?” he asks.

I bite the inside of my cheek, grateful that he gave me a slight warning before his question. He’s smart, this orc, because the way the guard and the captain have spoken, admitting that they think the orcs might attack me would be an insult to the king’s hospitality.

The captain, whose face has now turned an interesting shade of white, loosens the collar of his blue cloak. “Er, we only meant to say that it might be seen as improper to be walking around on her own...”

“Human women may not walk on their own?” Ozork asks, his eyes wide. “Lady Willow, it’s a good thing I offered you my arm, then.”

I barely contain my snort of laughter. Mara told me last night that Ozork’s work for the clan consists of traveling to the human lands often, leading trading caravans, so he surely knows all about the rules of propriety in the human lands. But the captain doesn’t know that, and neither does his guard.

The man raises his chin in a defiant sort of way and retorts, “She’s a *lady*. A lady’s virtue is to be protected. Lady Willow is already—”

Captain Hawke lifts his hand to stop whatever the soldier was about to say. With a quick word, he dismisses the man, and his companion, who has managed to put away all the remaining food from the platter in a record amount of time. I want to call after him that the kitchen staff would surely bring him more if he wanted it, but they disappear down a corridor without a glance back.

“My lady,” the captain says stiffly. “I understand what you’re saying. But my men and I have our orders. When we return to Ultrup, the duke will have questions for us, and he won’t be happy if I tell him we just let you run around the Hill unprotected.”

At that, Ozork leans forward, and for the first time, his gaze is hard, the scars on his face pulling tight. “Mara, who you might know, has never had a guard in her life inside the Hill. Our *queen* runs around the Hill unprotected, and she’s just as human as Willow. I don’t know what you’re implying, soldier.”

Now Captain Hawke is breathing hard, his face pink again, and I feel a twinge of guilt. He’s only trying to do his job. But I can *smell* my freedom

now, and I don't want to give it away too easily.

"Gentlemen," I say, voice soft. "There has to be some sort of compromise. A middle ground between having guards trail me everywhere and being completely without protection."

Ozork opens his mouth, and I know he's about to propose that *he* could trail me everywhere. His intention is clear in the stubborn tilt of his lips and the way he leans toward me, his shoulder brushing mine.

I reach out under the table, put my hand on his knee, and press down hard to get him to stop. He jerks, then sends me a heated look that has me fighting a fierce blush. Instead, I focus on the captain.

"I propose a trial of three weeks," I tell him. "I will report to you every morning and evening, and I will take great care not to put myself in dangerous situations. If anything untoward happens, we can discuss it then." I widen my eyes at him, urging him to accept the offer.

It's not only for selfish reasons I want this arrangement either. I don't think I'll be able to uncover the clan's secrets with a pair of guards constantly clattering around in my wake. We all have our roles to play, and though I don't think the duke told Captain Hawke about my assignment, surely he understands that I didn't just come here to chat.

He squints at me. "Two weeks, and you will not leave the Hill without an escort of at least two guards." He rubs his chin thoughtfully. "If this works, I might halve the number of soldiers who will winter here if that's all right with you. No use having men idle and bored through the dark months if we won't need them."

I glance toward the corridor through which the two guards left. "Can we keep the one who ate all the food? He seemed to like it here, compared to the other one."

I still don't know what the angry soldier was going to say about me earlier, but I didn't like him at all.

The captain snorts. "Very well. If all goes well, we'll do just that."

Ozork puts his palm over mine, trapping my hand on his knee. I freeze, not wanting to give away the fact that we're touching so intimately. He motions to a passing orc with his other hand.

"The captain should probably eat his breakfast now." He gives my fingers a squeeze, then adds, "We don't want to be late to meet the king."

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“You should have told me you were taking me to see the king this morning,” I hiss at Ozork.

He announced a moment earlier that we’ve nearly arrived at the royal chambers, and anxiety is gripping me tight. I glance behind me to find Captain Hawke striding several paces from us, his frown fierce. He didn’t know we’d be going here either, and Ozork didn’t really give him a chance to summon any of our other men, so our first meeting with the ruler of the orc lands will be a very private one.

Ozork glances down at me, amusement dancing in his dark eyes. “That’s why you’re here, is it not? To meet the king?”

I elbow him in the ribs, and he gives a soft huff of amusement.

“I would have put on a different dress,” I tell him. “And braided my hair better.”

“You’re beautiful, Willow,” he says. “I promise you, King Gorvor and Queen Dawn will not be put off by your appearance.”

I duck my chin to hide my embarrassment. I’ve been called beautiful by most of my many suitors over the years. It’s become one of those meaningless words that men toss around in the hope the ladies will lose their heads and think they’ve fallen madly in love with them. But from Ozork, it sounds so sincere. He said he’d never lie to me, and now this.

My heart is telling me to trust him, and I don’t like it at all. I’m not nineteen anymore, easily swayed by the first compliment and an earnest smile. I should be immune to his charm—only I’m not certain he’s trying to be charming at all. He says the words as if he’s claiming that the sky is blue, an undisputable, eternal fact.

“Here we are,” he proclaims suddenly, pulling me from my thoughts.

I stare at the heavy oak door, my stomach in knots. With trembling fingers, I brush back a flyaway strand of hair and run my tongue over my teeth, hoping I don't have bits of breakfast stuck in them. Gods, I really should have insisted on a quick break in my room to freshen up. But Ozork lifts his big fist and knocks twice before I can tell him to stop. The door swings open to reveal a cozy parlor, and I have no choice but to enter.

“Welcome,” a deep voice booms.

King Gorvor is standing by the door, a dark iron crown on his head—and a small orc child in his arms. The child yanks on a strand of the king's hair, hard, and lets out a delighted shriek when Ozork comes into view.

“This is my son, Arvel,” the tall, fearsome male explains. He winces when his son's sticky fingers get tangled in his hair, then adds, “and my queen, Dawn.”

A pretty woman a little younger than me jumps up to help him and gently takes Arvel from him. She sets the boy down, and he makes a straight line for Ozork, wobbly on his bare green feet. Ozork takes a step back, forcing the child to walk a bit farther, then scoops him up and bounces him on his hip while the boy gurgles happily.

My heart makes a painful *thump* at the sight, but I force myself to drag my gaze away from the pair and focus instead on the queen. She's shorter than me, with round hips and an ample bosom, wearing a lovely maroon gown that cinches her waist. Her brown hair is piled on top of her head in a messy coil, and her eyes, though beautiful, are slightly shadowed, as is to be expected from a mother of a young child.

What surprises me is that the king is showing similar signs of exhaustion. He's freshly shaven, but when he sits at his desk and motions for me and Captain Hawke to take the two chairs opposite it, he lets out a low groan of relief. Then he motions for his wife to come closer. She gives him a soft smile and perches right on his knee, and he wraps his arm around her waist in a familiar gesture.

I've never envied a married woman before. For all the happiness a marriage is supposed to bring, the women at the duke's court could rarely choose their husbands for love. Most unions between nobles in my uncle's duchy were made for political or financial reasons, and my refusal to do so had branded me as a difficult woman, one too picky for her own good. So I've never wished for what other women had, even though most said that they

enjoyed more freedom after their marriage.

Yet I can't suppress the stab of jealousy when Dawn relaxes into her husband's embrace, and he puts his chin on top of her head and draws her close to his chest. That casual touch seems so comfortable, so loving, and I've never experienced anything like it before.

Beside me, Captain Hawke lets out a huff of breath. I glance at him from the corner of my eye to find him staring at the couple with the same emotion.

A peal of laughter from behind us snaps me from my thoughts. I clear my mind, conscious that both the captain and I have been gawping at the king and queen without so much as introducing ourselves.

"Forgive me," I blurt. "I'm Willow, the Duke of Ultrup's niece. This is Captain Hawke."

"Yes, we've met," the queen says. "It's good to see you again, Captain. I hope you found your room to your liking?"

He gives a respectful nod. "I did, Your Majesty."

"And have you met Mara yet?" she asks.

Her husband pinches her side lightly. If I wasn't staring at them, I would have missed the movement, but she twitches, and a huff of breath escapes her. She squirms in the king's lap, and he stiffens in response, his body going rigid. It takes me a moment to understand why, but then I bite the inside of my cheek, hard, to keep from laughing.

The captain remains oblivious to the new tension in the room. "I've met her," he says, his face turning pink again. "She's—ah—yes. I hope to see her again soon."

I've known him for years, and I've always thought him to be a calm, composed sort of man. Yet he's been on edge since our arrival, and from what just transpired between the king and queen, I'm fairly certain Mara is somehow involved. Then Ozork appears by my side, helping the young prince toddle around by holding his hand. His subtle scent of spiced cider washes over me, and everything clicks into place.

The captain is Mara's mate. Just like Ozork recognized me instantly, Mara must have scented Captain Hawke. It likely happened during his first visit to the clan, because he was already talking strangely about his time here during our trip north.

I assess him critically, trying to imagine what she sees in him. I suppose he is handsome enough. The question that immediately pops in my mind is whether Mara has informed him of what's happened. From how the poor man

is blushing and stammering, I would wager she hasn't.

For some reason, a wave of sadness washes over me at the thought. I wasn't *happy* when Ozork announced that I'm his mate, but not knowing would be worse. To later find out that he kept a secret of that magnitude from me... I bite my lip to keep from saying anything. Whatever Mara is planning, I wouldn't ruin the thing for her, and it seems that the king agrees with me, if him stopping his queen is any indication.

I glance at King Gorvor now and find him studying me with a serious expression. I hold his gaze and straighten my shoulders, conscious of his scrutiny but not willing to back down. After a long moment, the corner of his mouth turns up, his white tusks flashing.

"So, Lady Willow," he says. "You've come to examine how our clan works, aye?"

I sit forward, my hands clasped in my lap. "That's right. My uncle has asked for a report on how you manage your lands, but I think he'd be particularly interested in your Hill. I don't believe he realizes how amazing it is." I motion at the room behind us. "Before I arrived, I had no idea the entire thing was constructed underground. If I could see how it's run..."

I stop myself from blabbing anything more. I don't want to overwhelm the king with requests.

"Certainly," he says. "That's what the duke and I agreed to."

The queen sends him a sideways glance. I don't understand her reaction. Is she worried I will poke around and get in their way?

"It would make sense for you to have someone to show you around, would it not?" The king rubs his chin thoughtfully. "I would ask Mara to do it, but she has far too much work, especially now that Arvel has started walking and we need to mind him all the time."

Dawn lets out a tired sigh. "Some days, I think he just skipped the walking step and went straight to running. We're so lucky we have Mara to hold down the fort."

Beside me, Captain Hawke is hanging on the edge of his seat, as if news about Mara is the most riveting thing he's ever heard. Poor man. I hope Mara takes pity on him soon and explains to him what's going on.

I'm about to suggest that any orc who has lived here for a good amount of time would work when the king motions at Ozork, who is now holding the prince over his head and walking around the room while the boy shrieks in delight.

“Ozork could help you,” King Gorvor suggests. “He knows the Hill better than anyone. He’s the one who discovered it.”

I stiffen, aware that Ozork has stopped and is listening intently.

“Yes, he told me that,” I manage to force out. “How lucky that he found a place as perfect as this one.”

The king now focuses on Ozork, his eyebrows drawing into a frown. “I hope this won’t be too much of an imposition, my friend. I know you’ve been hoping for a quiet winter after the last trip to Ultrup.”

Ozork clears his throat, then gives the king a short bow. “Of course. It would be an honor.”

I don’t dare look at him. He clearly hasn’t told the king that he has found his mate—me. I have no idea what the usual practice is for telling others, but I’m strangely grateful that he hasn’t announced anything yet. I think other clan members would congratulate him, congratulate *us*, and I’m nowhere near ready for that.

But I’m fairly certain Mara figured it out last night, possibly because of Ozork’s overreaction to my chilled state. Would she tell others? Considering she hasn’t even told her own mate about their bond forming, I doubt it.

“Captain Hawke,” the king says now, seemingly oblivious to the fraught moment between us, “what do you need from us?”

The captain straightens his shoulders, and to his credit, he no longer looks distracted. “Lady Willow and I had a conversation this morning and agreed that she may not need to be constantly under guard at the Hill. So I might end up sending some of my guards home before the snow gets too deep for travel.”

King Gorvor hums. “If they want to remain here, they could be included in the guard rotations. That would give you all another insight of how we’re organized.”

I lift my eyebrows, surprised at the suggestion. It’s more than I thought he would offer. This would mean that the men would be let into the inner workings of the Hill, which is exactly what I need to figure out what’s really going on in this kingdom.

The captain either agrees with me or senses the approving thoughts I’m sending his way because he says, “Thank you, that’s very generous. I will mention it to them and see if anyone agrees.”

With that, our interview with the royal couple is concluded. I stand and curtsy, the captain bows, and Ozork tries to set Arvel on the floor. But the

orcling lets out a growl of disapproval and catches Ozork's long braid in his tiny fist.

"No!"

The word is loud, clear, and completely unexpected.

Dawn stares at her son, tears in her eyes. "Darling!"

She rushes from the king's lap and coos at the boy, but he clearly doesn't want to let go of his friend.

"This is his first time saying no," she says, grinning widely. "It shouldn't be such a big affair, but I'm very proud of you, Arvel. But you have to let go now. We're visiting the daycare today."

Ozork grins. "Want us to take him? The school is a good place to start for our tour of the Hill."

Dawn chews on her lower lip and glances back at King Gorvor, who shrugs. Then she turns back to us, her eyes welling with fresh tears. "Oh, would you? I'll pick him up in an hour or so. The teacher said it might be good if someone else brought him in the mornings because I always end up crying, and he senses my fear." She swipes her hands under her eyes and sniffles. "Gods, I don't know why that's so hard."

The king stands from his chair and comes to stand behind his wife. He wraps his strong arms around her and pulls her closer to his chest. "He'll be all right with Ozork and Willow," he rumbles in his low voice. "And you'll see him again very soon. In the meantime, I'll do my best to distract you, shall I?"

She lets out a small gasp and tries to smack his chest, but he's holding her tightly.

Ozork huffs out a laugh and heads for the door. "Come on," he says to me and the captain. "Time to leave."

My cheeks flame with heat as we step out into the corridor. The captain closes the thick door behind us, looking similarly flustered. I didn't know orcs were so *open* about intimacy, though I probably should have expected it after seeing the very public baths.

Captain Hawke drags his palm over his face. "This place..." He shakes his head and doesn't finish the thought.

I completely understand his confusion. I'd expected things to be different, but not in this way.

Ozork is watching us with amusement twinkling in his dark gaze. "Aye, it's something. You'll get used to it the longer you stay here."

At his words, some of my embarrassment dissipates. I might not get a chance to get used to it—I'm only here for the winter, after all. And so is the captain. When the spring thaw comes, we'll leave and return to our lives in Ultrup, such as they might be.

The thought lands in my chest like a stone, lodging somewhere beside my heart. I will have to leave and I'll likely never see Ozork again because this is his home and mine is at my uncle's palace. Ozork's expression sobers, and he looks as if he might say something, but the orcling in his arms makes a restless sound, and the moment is gone.

The captain excuses himself to go speak to his men, and my heart pangs for him, because he might never know what Mara feels for him. He's clearly enchanted with her, but duty will call him away from her sooner or later.

Ozork and I make our way through the corridors. I should be taking note of every crossroads and asking questions about where we're going, but the mood between us is subdued, only interrupted by the low chatter that Ozork keeps up for the prince's sake.

A hum of sound is the first thing I note as we enter a wide, well-lit corridor. A peal of laughter is followed by someone singing off-key, and a round of mismatched applause. The doors in the corridor are all ajar and decorated with branches of holly and fir, similar to the ones in the great hall.

Ozork motions at the first door. "We have three classes, and this is the one for the older children. When they turn thirteen, they get to try out different professions to see what they'd like to do as grown-ups."

I look up at him, surprised. "That's a good way of doing things. In the human world, parents usually choose that for the children."

He raises his eyebrows. "What did your parents choose for you?"

The memory of my parents is too hazy to know what they would have chosen. "They passed away before they could," I say softly. "But I was born a lady anyway, which means I didn't get a profession, only hobbies to help me pass the time until my eventual wedding." I didn't mean for the words to sound so bitter, but I suppose I do resent the way my uncle refused to let me learn what sons of noblemen were expected to study from an early age.

Ozork stops and moves Arvel from one arm to the other. "I'm sorry, Willow. I didn't mean to pry."

I shake my head, trying to banish the sour mood. "It was a long time ago. And I managed to occupy myself just fine. And I finally got this job, didn't I?"

He eyes me a moment longer, then asks, “But no husband?”

His voice is deceptively light, but his gaze tells a different story. I stare at him, then realize that we hadn’t actually talked about this—about whether I’m married or not.

“No husband,” I blurt out. “I wouldn’t... I mean, I would have told you immediately if I did...”

He lets out a long exhale. “Gods, you scared me, woman.” He brushes back his hair with his big palm, then motions for me to continue down the hallway. “We’d better get this one to school, or Dawn will never let us take him again.”

His love for the prince shines through in everything he does, and it’s affecting me in the most curious ways. “You’re good with him,” I say to cover my emotions.

Ozork grins. “Aye, I helped my sister with her four boys when they were little.”

I peer through the second door and find a group of children seated on cushions in front of a teacher who’s holding up a drawing tablet with some letters scribbled on it. This class must be the middle one, and it’s comprised mostly of orc children, apart from a small human girl with curly blonde hair. She follows the teacher avidly, sounding out the words with the other kids.

“You have a sister?” I glance back at Ozork. “Is she your only family, or are your parents still alive?”

His expression turns somber. “I don’t actually know. They remained behind when I left the old clan with Gorvor and the rest. Orsha also came with us. She’s two years my senior, and her mate fell out of favor with King Trak, so it was a matter of survival for them. She walked all the way here even though she was pregnant with her second child at the time.”

I try to imagine a massive caravan of orcs leaving their old home and crossing the human lands to try their luck and build a new life in this remote part of the world. “It’s amazing, what you’ve achieved here. The Hill is a very special place.”

“Aye, that it is,” Ozork agrees. “And here we are.”

We find ourselves in front of another door, and even from this side, the commotion happening inside is loud to my ears. Ozork winces when a particularly high-pitched shriek pierces the air, and he carefully pushes the door open.

Inside, chaos reigns. Three teachers, two older women and one young

male, are each holding two tiny orcs a piece while the rest, perhaps another five or six children, are crawling or toddling around them. Most are crying, though there's a small girl sitting by a low table, methodically ripping apart a piece of paper, her expression serene.

"Close the door before someone escapes," yelps one of the women. "And can you grab Lorna, please, she's the one who's trying to bash her brother's head with that mallet."

I race toward the girl, pluck the wooden toy from her hand, and scoop her into my arms so she can't hit her brother anymore. Then I crouch and pick up the boy as well because he's crying, big tears rolling down his round green cheeks.

"Hey, now," I coo to him. "It's all right, she won't hit you anymore."

They both blink at me, and the boy stops crying immediately, though I suspect it's more from confusion than my soothing words. His dark-brown eyes go wide, and he pulls his hand from his mouth where he'd been chewing on it. Instead, he pats my cheek with it, smearing drool all over my face.

I laugh and try to wipe my cheek on my shoulder, but it doesn't work at all. The boy's sister, who looks to be about a year older than him, tugs on my ear, and I realize they're fascinated by the pale color of my skin and my rounded ears, so different from their own.

"Don't touch the lady's ear, Lorna," the male teacher chides. "She's not an orc, so we have to be gentle with her."

Some of the crying has quieted since our arrival, likely because we distracted the children. The teachers put their charges down and set to wiping away tears and snot.

"That's correct," I say, sitting on a low bench and settling the toddlers on my knees. They're heavier than I expected, and holding two wriggling orclings at the same time is taxing the muscles in my arms. "Though you may touch my ear if you'd like. My name is Willow, and I'm human."

Lorna purses her lips and repeats, "Hoo-man."

I grin. "Exactly. Your queen, Dawn, is also human. That's her son right there. His name is Arvel."

I point toward where Ozork is still standing with his back to the door, Arvel in his arms. But it's not the prince who catches my attention. It's Ozork's expression and the way he's focused on me. He stares at the three of us with such naked longing, it takes my breath away. His lips are slightly parted, and he's completely still, as if the scene triggered a memory or a

deep-seated desire in him.

It hits me all at once, the reason why he's so stricken. If I'm his mate, and he's waited for me for such a long time, he must have wanted a family. But surely, if he really wished to have children, he could have had them by now.

Aware that there are little ones and their teachers present, I set the two siblings onto the carpet and let them go, watching to see if they'll start fighting again. But their animosity seems forgotten for the moment, so I stand and walk over to Ozork.

He has pulled back his emotions, it seems, because he smiles at Arvel and hands him over to one of the teachers. "His mother will get him in a short while," he tells her.

"Thank you for bringing him." The teacher grins at us, and when the boy wriggles in her arms, she sets him on the carpet and nudges him toward his playmates.

It's only then that it hits me—Arvel goes to school with all the other children in the clan. He's barely old enough to walk, his wobbly feet carrying him over to where a crate of wooden blocks waits, and he'll have to share them with ten other children. His mother and father rule the clan, but their son isn't isolated or offered private tutors, nor guarded by a whole regiment of soldiers as he would be in the human lands.

It's no wonder Ozork reacted so strongly to the idea that I needed to be protected inside this Hill. If the future king of the clan can stay in school without guards at the door, it would be ludicrous for me to walk around with an escort.

I'll have to talk to Captain Hawke about it. Our two-week trial period is much too long. Nothing will happen to me here, and I'm perfectly safe, especially with Ozork around.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

We leave the children to their games and crafts, and Ozork takes me on a tour of the kitchens, where we grab an early lunch by sampling the dishes the cooks are preparing. We meet Jasmine, whose mother gave me a letter for her, and we do a quick detour to my room to bring it to her. I make note of the number of cooks and the organization of their storage, because feeding a clan that consists of hundreds of orcs is a monumental task.

I used to think my uncle's palace is large because we have several dozen servants who run the place, but in truth, it only seems crowded because of the courtiers who arrive every day from their own homes and hang around, either working for the duke or simply vying for his favor. He entertains often, which means the kitchens are busy, but they prepare lavish dinners with several dainty courses, not hearty breakfasts and filling lunches intended to feed a mass of hungry orcs.

My mind overflows with all the gathered information by the time Ozork escorts me back to my room. I find Thistle sleeping in his basket, which opens at the top to transform into a cat bed. He's curled up like a little snail, and I coo over him, apologizing for taking so long to return.

I'll have to show him the kitchens and the pantry. I'm certain the kitchen maids will welcome a cat in a place such as this—surely even orcs have mice that sometimes crawl into the big bags of flour and oats sitting on the shelves.

"I'll leave the door open for you if I'm gone," I promise the cat and scratch his side when he stretches lazily.

Ozork remains at the threshold, leaning against the doorjamb. "Your captain will not be happy about that."

I leave the cat alone and turn to the privy niche to refill his clay water

bowl. "You should give him a chance, you know," I say over my shoulder. "He's a good man."

He nods, and I realize he already knows it. I doubt he or any of the other warriors in the clan would let Captain Hawke near Mara if they thought otherwise.

Still, Ozork doesn't enter the room, so I finally motion him inside.

"Do you want to wait here for dinner?" I ask, a sudden shyness creeping over me. Then I add, "I mean, you don't have to, if you have somewhere else to be."

He gives me a crooked grin. "Do you really think I'll refuse a chance to spend more time with you?"

I huff as he steps into the room and shut the door behind him. It's unthinkable, the fact that I'm alone with a male in a private room. If this happened at my uncle's palace and we were found out, we'd be forced to marry whether we liked each other or not. It's what more than one suitor tried to do in order to secure my hand in marriage, which is why the duke had given me a maid as a chaperone and guards to call upon if I needed them.

Yet now, I'm the one trapping us here. The room, which I considered perfectly adequate last night, seems so small with Ozork inside. He's so close, towering over me, and his scent spreads around us, so delicious, it's all I can do to keep myself from sniffing at him loudly. I wonder if it will remain in the room after he leaves, soaked into my clothes and bed linens. If I'll smell him when I go to sleep at night.

His nostrils flare on a deep inhale, and he lets out a groan. "What are you thinking about?"

I bite my lip, trying to get my emotions under control. "I cannot tell you. I won't lie, like you asked, but please, don't make me tell you."

He lifts his hand and lightly brushes the backs of his knuckles over my cheek. "I can guess a part of it, love. I wish you would trust me with your desire."

It's the same gesture he made last night, but the hot spark between us is stronger than before. Perhaps I was too cold and tired yesterday to register it, or maybe it's growing in potency because I spent the whole day in Ozork's company.

In either case, it's dangerous, especially because it's so very appealing. Ozork's skin is warm, and I want to lean against his broad chest and...take a moment. I've been running for so long, trying to make a place for myself at

my uncle's court, then escaping the baron, who was only the latest idiot who wanted to trap me into a loveless marriage. The exile from court—because that's what this entire voyage is, in truth—has left me with so little energy that I wish I could rest a while, and Ozork seems like such a solid presence. An oak tree in the middle of a storm, unmovable and steady.

The smile that my words drew from him fades slowly, replaced by concern. "What is it, love?"

I swallow thickly and shake my head. "Nothing. Just thinking about silly things that aren't meant to be."

He shuffles a step closer, so our feet are nearly touching, but he doesn't do anything more. From how the vein in his neck throbs, I know he's as affected by my presence as I am by his, yet he doesn't press the clear advantage he has over me. If he pounced on me now, I would have no way of defending myself. I almost race to the door to throw it wide, because I'm not certain I want to give him so much power over me, but I can't make my feet move.

I'm basking in his attention, soaking up the heat that's pouring from his large body, and when I sway, overcome by the strength of my craving, the fabric of my skirts brushes the front of his leather pants.

Ozork lets out a rough breath. "Willow."

I look up, even though I shouldn't. I shouldn't meet his gaze, because it might ruin me, yet I can't keep myself from doing just that. His throat bobs, and the hunger in his dark eyes is shockingly clear. This orc wants me. He said he has waited for me.

"Will you let me hold you?" he rasps. "Just for a moment?"

I nod before I can stop myself. It's a quick jerk of my head, and I don't want him to mistake it for a nervous twitch, so I blurt, "Yes," to confirm it.

Ozork moves slowly, as if he's not entirely convinced I'm really here, allowing him to do this. He cups my face with one palm and brushes the pad of his thumb over my cheek. I close my eyes at the tender touch, not wanting to show him what I'm feeling right now. He hooks an arm around my shoulders and gently tugs me closer, until my body is flush with his. He hugs me, and I instinctively put my hands on his waist, then slide them around to the small of his back.

My next exhale is ragged, my breath catching in my throat. It's been so long since I experienced a true embrace. I have friends and acquaintances at court who I greeted with fleeting hugs, our cheeks touching lightly. I'd

receive a pat on my shoulder from my uncle sometimes, which is his way of showing affection and approval. But I've been starved of *this*.

"Gods," Ozork murmurs.

His arms tighten around me, and I find myself pressed to his vest, the fine wool smooth against my forehead. I inhale deeply, wishing I could bathe in his scent and rub my cheek on his tunic. At his back, I dig my fingers into the fabric and cling on tight.

Then I realize I'm groping at this orc like a madwoman, even though I only met him yesterday. Panicking, I push myself away from his chest. "Oh gods, I'm so sorry." I put my hands to my flaming cheeks. "I didn't mean to grab you like that."

He gently catches my hand and halts my movements. "Willow. You needn't apologize for this. You've been through a lot, and it's only normal." His thumb brushes over the sensitive skin on the inside of my wrist. "Did the hug help with whatever is bothering you?"

My grip on his fingers stiffens for a moment. My first impulse is to deflect his question and deny him the real answer, but what good would that do? I tell myself I need Ozork to show me the clan's secrets, so I have to open up to him. The truth, ugly and embarrassing, is that I would do anything to be touched like that again. The way my body craves it... It's a need that throbs in my chest, a greedy thing that wants to hook its claws into this kind orc and hold on to him for as long as it can.

He is too good for me. I'm here to deceive and snoop, to use whatever means necessary to find out what's keeping this clan so prosperous while the rest of the world is falling behind. And for what? So that my uncle will give me a morsel of his attention, so that I'll gain some freedom I desperately want?

Ozork is still staring at me, but with every moment that passes, the hope for my answer dwindles from his gaze. He can tell I'm shutting him out again, and I can't bear it.

"It was a nice hug," I croak. "It's—it's been years since I experienced one such as this. I don't remember..." I shake my head, my throat tightening.

The orc warrior shuffles closer again. He releases my hand and cups my shoulders, then stares down at me for a long while. At last, he says, "You can have one whenever you want."

I frown, confused. "Have what?"

"A hug," he says, the corner of his lips turning up in that endearing,

crooked smile. “You only have to ask.”

“Oh.” I bite the inside of my cheek, telling myself to be strong. I’m going to resist the offer, because it’s much too dangerous. If I’m not careful, I could...

“Do you want one now, Willow?”

Ozork’s rumbling voice washes over me, sending goose bumps down my arms. He’s still standing so close, his hands on my shoulders, which is more contact than I’ve had with a man in years.

My chin dips down in a nod before I can stop myself. It’s my body betraying me, but my mind doesn’t protest either. A small part of me is screaming that this is a mistake, but it’s quickly smothered by the wave of intense comfort that comes from Ozork pulling me closer again.

This time, I’m better prepared than before. Our first hug took me by surprise, especially the emotions following that first contact, but now I wrap my arms around his waist more quickly and lean my cheek on his chest. Then I drag in a deep inhale of his delicious scent and simply...hold on.

It’s better than I imagined. I thought Ozork was like a solid tree that I could anchor myself to, but he’s not immovable. His hands come to rest on my lower back and just below my nape, warming me through the fabric of my dress. He rumbles out a deep sigh, and the vibration of it rattles me.

“Say something,” I whisper, cheek pressed to his tunic.

Ozork’s huff sends a shiver of delight through me. He *likes* this.

“What’s your cat’s name?” he asks.

“Thistle,” I say. “He’s six years old. His mother was my mother’s cat.”

I don’t know why I told him that. I never explain Thistle to people, letting them think I’m just strangely attached to the ginger ball of fur. It’s only one of the pieces of my armor designed to repel unworthy suitors.

“He seems content here,” Ozork muses. “He’ll have lots of mice to catch in the pantries, and the cooks will feed him well.”

I smile against his tunic. “I hope so. He’s very important to me.”

“Because you lost your mother’s cat?” Ozork asks.

It’s dangerous, how easily he can read me so soon after meeting me. But since he guessed the truth, it feels silly to deny it.

“My mother loved that cat. I thought she was too old to have kittens, so when she had that very last litter, I kept Thistle because he shared her coloring.”

I would have kept all four kittens, but my uncle forbade it because having

a whole herd of cats wasn't appropriate for a lady of my standing. The fact that I was always covered in fur from petting Thistle was a constant source of annoyance to both my uncle and my maid.

Ozork is silent for a while, then says, "Do you think he'll become lonely? Perhaps we could get him a companion."

My heart squeezes at his offer. I would gladly adopt another cat, but I won't be staying here past the spring, and I wouldn't be able to take the second animal back to Ultrup with me.

"He'll be all right," I say. "Cats are solitary creatures."

I push away from Ozork gently, and he lets me go, his hands sliding down to my waist where he gives me a squeeze, as if he can't help himself. Then he steps back, and the addictive feel of his body disappears with him.

He clears his throat. "It'll be time for dinner soon."

I glance at the door, thinking about all the orcs who will be gathering in the great hall. I'll have to talk to them and try to charm them as best I can to draw out tidbits of information that could prove useful to my uncle.

And I find that I can't do it. I'm too raw from learning just how much I crave Ozork's touch, too open and vulnerable after he gave me exactly what I needed.

"I'm not really hungry," I say. "I think I'll just have an early night and get some sleep."

Ozork hides his disappointment well, and only a flash of his brown eyes tells me what he's really feeling. I realize he's hiding the truth from me, just as I am from him, and I hate the emotions triggered by it. I'm *hurt*, and it's completely ridiculous, because he owes me nothing—I don't have any claim to the thoughts in his head, no more than he has the right to mine.

"Shall I return tomorrow morning?" he asks, his voice subdued. "I thought we could explore the outer layer of the Hill."

"That would be lovely." I need him to show me around, but it feels so dirty to be using him like this. "Thank you."

He bows slightly. "Wear something warm," he suggests. "Those outer chambers are cooler than these. Good night, Willow."

He leaves, and I try to stifle a gasp of hurt that follows the sound of the door closing. I press my hands to my cheeks and blow out a ragged breath.

This is bad. I shouldn't be feeling all these *emotions* around Ozork. He may have declared I'm his mate, but that doesn't mean I have to accept him. How many men have claimed that they wanted me, only to show their true

colors once I got to know them?

But the truth is, I don't think Ozork wants me for my dowry. I don't think he rightly knew I was the duke's niece before he plucked me from my horse, carried me into the Hill, and started shouting at people. All this talk of mates and fate has filled me with hope that he might be the first one interested in *me*, just as I am. But I'd thought that before, and things have always turned sour in the end.

I latch the door behind him and lean my back on the cool wood. There is no earthly reason for me to feel disappointed that he's gone. I'll see him tomorrow, and we'll have to spend the day together, just as the king ordered. If it was up to me, I might have requested a different guide to show me the Hill, but I don't want to offend King Gorvor, who clearly thinks Ozork is the best for the task.

I push myself from the door and straighten my shoulders. Tomorrow, I'll worry about Ozork. And tonight, I have work to do.

CHAPTER
NINE

I spent last night writing down everything I learned during the day. My task is to find out what makes this clan—and kingdom—so successful, and I won't know what it is until I have a complete picture of how it functions. So I sat at my tiny desk in my room, hunched over a stack of nice paper that I bought at Ellis' shop, and wrote until my hand cramped from holding the quill and my eyes stung from the low lantern light.

Then I knocked on the captain's door to report that nothing strange had happened and explained that having guards follow me around would be considered a slight. He agreed, having apparently spent the day wandering around the Hill and looking for possible dangers. He hadn't found any and confirmed that all the women, both orcs and a handful of humans, walked around on their own, so my guards would only stand out and cause offence. Once I explained what I learned about Prince Arvel, he told me he would be sending half of the men home the following week.

Now I'm dressed and ready for another day with Ozork. I braided my hair neatly and pinned it up, and if I took special care with putting on a dab of rouge on my lips and cheeks so I don't look so pale, it's because I want to put my best foot forward while meeting new orcs. It has nothing to do with Ozork at all.

When a knock on my door announces his arrival, I force myself to take two deep breaths instead of rushing to open it immediately.

"I can't have him thinking I've been waiting for him for half an hour," I whisper to a sleeping Thistle. "That would go straight to his head."

But when I open the door, Ozork is grinning at me, his tusks flashing in the lantern light.

“What is it?” I ask.

He leans on the wood, studying me with amusement. “Did you know orc hearing is much better than yours?”

I stare at him for a moment before it hits me. “Oh gods!”

I try to close the door in his face, burning with mortification, but he only laughs and braces his hand on it to stop me.

“No need to feel embarrassed, love,” he rumbles. “I like knowing how eager you are to see me.”

Forced to abandon my effort, I smack him lightly on the chest. “You should have told me that earlier.”

He smirks at me. “Ah, but then you wouldn’t have shown your true colors.”

My true color right now must be red—all over my face and neck.

I step into the corridor and leave the door ajar for Thistle, who is still fast asleep in his basket despite my hurrying and banging around the room.

“This means nothing,” I murmur to Ozork as I fall into step with him.

He merely offers me his arm in silence, but from his profile, I know he’s smiling. The insufferable orc. My cheeks are still hot—as is my chest. But I shuffle closer to him because his scent is particularly appealing this morning. A glance at his long, braided hair tells me he’s fresh from a bath, and the glow from my chest moves farther down into my belly as I imagine him soaking in one of those misty pools.

“What are you thinking about?” he mutters as we enter the great hall.

I let him lead me to the same table as yesterday morning, though there are already several clan members sitting on the benches on both sides. Then I lower my voice and answer, “The baths.”

It’s the truth—if not the full story. Ozork stumbles slightly, and I hide a grin by taking two cups from a tray and pouring tea for the both of us. If I have to imagine him taking a bath, it’s only fair that he does the same.

I glance down the table, wondering if he’s going to introduce me to our neighbors, but he’s busy filling our plates with scrambled eggs, pickled beets, and slices of pungent white cheese.

An orc about my age, who’s just finishing his breakfast, grins at me and gives me a friendly wave. “Hello, I’m Neekar. Welcome to the clan.”

A low rumble from Ozork interrupts me before I can introduce myself. It’s a sound of dismay, more than aggression. I glance up at him and find him staring at the younger orc. He looks as if he might pounce at Neekar at any

moment, so I reach under the table and squeeze his knee. It worked once, so I'm hoping it will work again. Ozork's growl turns into a choked-off moan. His face flushes a deeper shade of green that contrasts starkly with the faint silvery sheen of his scars.

My body sings with awareness over what I caused. It takes me a moment too long to master my will and try to pull my hand away—Ozork slaps his big palm over mine and keeps it trapped right there on his knee. His grip is firm, his expression unreadable.

I wrench my gaze away from him, aware of how rude I'm being toward the other orc. But the younger male doesn't seem to mind. He's leaning forward, his chin resting on his hand, and watching us in amusement.

"I'm Willow," I squeak. "Pleased to meet you."

Neekar's smile grows. "I'd offer to shake your hand, my lady, but I worry Ozork might bite off my fingers if I so much as reach toward you."

"Neekar..." Ozork's voice is a rumbling warning, though there's a hint of fond exasperation in it.

The younger orc pushes away from the table and picks up his now-empty plate. "Aye, I know. I'll leave you two to it. But, Ozork, I'm coming along on your first spring trip to Ultrup." He lifts his chin proudly. "I want a mate of my own." With that proclamation, he's gone, disappearing into the mass of orcs arriving and departing from the hall.

"Ozork," I hiss. "You cannot growl at people who are only trying to be polite."

He drags his other hand over his face. "I know. I will apologize to Neekar later. It's just..." He trails off and glances at me, then at his plate.

I move to face him. "What is it?"

He sighs and lowers his voice. "Well, Neekar is much more handsome than me."

"He's not," I blurt, too surprised to hold back the words.

Ozork scoffs quietly and takes a bite of his cheese, though his fingers twitch over mine. He keeps his gaze on his food and doesn't try to convince me again—but it's still clear what he's thinking.

I look up and down the long table to check whether anyone is listening in on our conversation. Apart from Neekar, who has already left, most orcs are content to mind their own business, with only an occasional glance thrown our way. I am the newcomer after all, so that's expected, but no one approaches us.

“Ozork.” I keep my voice low since I’m now aware of how sensitive orc hearing is. “I’m not attracted to Neekar. He’s good-looking, but I don’t find him handsome like I—” I bite off the rest of my sentence before I confess something I’m not ready to say out loud. “What I’m trying to say is that you don’t have to be jealous.”

He squeezes my hand and shuffles an inch closer to me on the bench so our thighs are now touching from hip to knee, our shoulders pressed together. Allowing myself a moment of indulgence, I lean into his side, and Ozork lets out a satisfied hum.

But now that we’ve tackled the subject, I can’t help but ask, “You don’t have to answer if you’d rather not talk about it—but how did you get them? Your scars?”

I want to lift my hand and trace the one that runs from his cheek to his temple and has taken off a chunk of his pointed ear. It must have been a horrific injury.

“In wars,” he says simply, still focusing on his food.

I wait, willing for him to open up to me some more.

Ozork must sense the weight of my stare because he sighs and finally glances at me. “It was in the old kingdom. King Trak was always waging some war or other, trying to grab more land or riches from the neighboring countries.”

His voice is rough, as if the memory is difficult to delve into, so I flip my hand, the one he’s holding on to, and interlace my fingers with his, gripping tight.

Ozork gives me a small smile and continues, “I was a young warrior, and my parents weren’t of noble blood. They weren’t part of the king’s court, so they couldn’t pull strings to get me a better position in the army. I was always on the front line in the battle, and these are my souvenirs.”

He motions at his face, then falls silent, stewing in his thoughts again.

“Is that why you left?” I ask softly. “Because you didn’t want that anymore?”

He grimaces. “At one of the last battles I fought for the old king, I was almost left behind for dead. The general didn’t allow the other soldiers to bury the fallen or take the badly wounded because the army needed to retreat. They’d misjudged the strength of the fae force and stretched us out too thin.”

I stare at him, horrified. “How did you survive?”

Ozork nudges me gently with his elbow, then points at a couple sitting

together at one of the other tables. The woman is human, small and rounded, with a cloud of curly golden hair, and the male is a big warrior about Ozork's age, or perhaps a little younger. He's watching her talk with quiet amusement, and I know immediately that they must be mates from how in tune they seem with each other, even from afar.

"That's Steagor and his mate, Poppy," Ozork confirms my thoughts. "He and Gorvor defied direct orders and carried me back from the front line. I'd be dead if it wasn't for them. So when Gorvor decided to leave, I volunteered to go scouting for our new home. He gave me the chance to stop fighting, to stop killing, and I will be forever in his debt."

His voice gets lower with every word. I sense the current of emotion running through him, and I don't say anything, only hold on to him to show him support. And I think of my uncle and the kind of ruler he is to his people. Do his generals leave his soldiers behind to die? The unexpected attack he'd mentioned right before my departure to the orc lands had left a hundred men dead. Did he know them or their families?

I don't have to think too hard of the answers. They're plain as day—and they don't paint a very nice picture of my relative. Nor of me, because I've never thought of this issue until now. Of how young men sign up for the army because their families cannot help them to a better position and are sent to the front lines in some unimportant cause, dying so their kings and dukes can claim more gold.

I've lived my life protected from these truths, not only because my uncle purposefully kept me out of the court politics and matters of state, but because it was more comfortable to do so. I had my books and my daily tasks, and even though I complained often of not having options, I have always lived in peace. I've had a roof over my head and a soft bed to rest in at night, more clothes than I could ever need, and servants to assist me.

And now that I've got a task that seemed so significant when my uncle assigned it to me, I am to spy and snoop on the good people of this Hill so the duke can get an advantage over them.

Shame flames in my belly, bitter and strong. I want to squirm away from Ozork and hide from his knowing gaze, but if I leave now, he might think I'm bothered by his story. So I swallow the bile rising in my throat and force a sip of tea down my throat.

"I'm glad you managed to get away," I whisper. "King Gorvor sounds like a good ruler."

Ozork nods, some of the darkness gone from his gaze. “That he is.” He rubs his thumb over my knuckles, then asks, “Are you angry at the Fates that they provided you with a mate like me?”

I bite my lip, because I’m not certain I believe in these Fates as deeply as he does. But he trusts them, and for now, that will have to be enough for me.

“No,” I tell him honestly. “They’re proof of your will to survive. We all have our scars, Ozork. Yours are just visible on the skin, but they don’t make you any less.”

His brown eyes spark with curiosity. “What scars do you carry under your skin, love?”

Now I squirm next to him. “Compared to yours, they are all unimportant,” I hedge.

He nudges me with his knee. “I would still like to know if you’d be willing to tell me.”

I scoop up some scrambled egg with my fork and chew slowly to give myself time to answer. After hearing his story, mine truly seems so shallow. But Ozork is patiently waiting for my answer, and I can’t deny him this now that he has opened up to me.

“I told you my parents passed away,” I start, wondering how to make this as succinct as possible. “My father was the duke’s younger brother, and he married a woman his parents didn’t agree with. But he loved my mother and he didn’t care. When I was born, my grandfather, who was duke at the time, wouldn’t even see me.”

Ozork frowns. “His own granddaughter? That’s shameful.”

I smile, because I agree with the sentiment. “That’s how things were at the court in Ultrup. But then my grandfather died, and my uncle inherited his seat. He had two sons by then, so he didn’t feel threatened by my father or me, and they slowly repaired the bond their father broke between them. So after my parents died in a carriage accident, he took me in.”

“How old were you?” Ozork asks. He’s listening to me intently, his attention unwavering.

“I was six,” I tell him. “It was a hard time for me. I was to be raised with the duke’s children, but he and his wife had two more boys, so I had no female cousins for company. I was lonely a lot, passed on from one governess to another.”

At this, Ozork’s eyebrows furrow. “Do human children not get raised together?”

I shrug. “Not if they’re of noble blood.” Then I wave quickly, not wanting to explain how jealous I’d been of my cousins. “Once I grew up and was old enough to get married, my uncle announced the size of my dowry to his entire court,” I go on. “You see, when my father died, the estate that was his to use reverted back to the duchy, and I couldn’t directly inherit it. However, my uncle, who was likely grieving his brother at the time, wrote up a document saying that my dowry would be worth as much as that entire estate—in gold.”

Ozork lifts his eyebrows. “That’s a lot of gold.”

“It is,” I agree. “And I know my uncle thought he was making me seem like a special jewel that all men would then crave, but all his declaration did was make me a prize. Especially for fortune hunters who wanted my money to get rich or get out of debt.”

His gaze is full of compassion as he says, “I’m sorry.”

I shrug, the old hurt less sharp now that I’m so far removed from it. Maybe my uncle inadvertently did me a favor by sending me away from the noise of it all.

“Another thing I didn’t anticipate,” I add, “was how it would affect my female friendships. At court, connections are everything, and suddenly I was cut off from them all. I was far from being the most beautiful or kind or interesting woman in the room, yet I suddenly had all the suitors panting over me.” I grimace, then correct myself, “Well, apart from the truly wealthy ones. They didn’t need to fawn over me because they already had more than enough money. But it was enough to ruin any chance I had at keeping the few friends I’d managed to make.”

He’s silent for a long while, then says softly, “No one here has to know.”

I stare at him, surprised. “What?”

“About your dowry,” he explains. “You needn’t tell them if you don’t want to. And besides, you won’t have any other suitors here either.”

He growls the last words, that touch of jealousy creeping back into his voice.

I can’t hold back a laugh. “That’s a good point. And it’s so ridiculous, this entire affair, because I don’t even have the money. It won’t be released until I marry a nobleman.” The allowance my uncle gives me covers all my needs, but it’s definitely not the vast lump of money promised to me.

A thought hits me then. Ozork isn’t a nobleman. My mind grinds to a stop, and I sit very still for a moment, my smile frozen. If I married him...I

wouldn't get even a copper from my uncle.

When did I start considering that a possibility? And why is my first impulse to say that I don't care about the gold?

I gently withdraw my hand from Ozork's grasp, and he lets go this time. He's silent, and perhaps he's thinking the same—that we're impossible, a fluke of fate that would never work. But I ache at the realization, more than I thought I would. To have a future with a kind male who doesn't seem to care about my heritage dangled in front of me, only to have it ripped away.

Ozork and I aren't meant to be.

CHAPTER TEN

Ozork takes me to see the stables and the outer rooms of the Hill where the orcs keep a vast chicken coop and some animals for milk and meat. He explains that the king employs a number of hunters who bring back both small and large game, depending on the season, keeping the clan's larders filled. It's just more proof of how complex the workings of the clan are, and when we return, I spend another hour writing down all the things I learned today.

From what I see, the clan is just supremely well-organized. Every orc puts in the work, regardless of their age, gender, or status. The king and his queen work just as hard as the cooks in the kitchen, the hunters, or the cleaners. It's a concentrated effort that reaps rewards in the form of prosperity and peace.

I write all that down but decide to talk to Mara, if she'll be able to find the time to meet with me. The thought of her reminds me of Captain Hawke, though, so I leave my room and knock on the door next to mine.

The captain opens the door after a long moment and stands on the threshold, blinking at me. "My lady," he says finally, his voice raspy.

I stare at him. "I've come to report to you. But I see I interrupted your rest. I'm sorry. Please, come by my room later when you're better."

"No, it's fine." He straightens his shoulders. "Do you want to come in?"

I step inside his sparsely decorated room and take a chair by his desk. The captain leaves the door ajar, as propriety demands, and collapses on the edge of his bed.

"Are you all right?" I ask. "Forgive me, but you look a bit pale."

That's an understatement. His skin has a grayish cast to it, as if he hasn't

been sleeping, and his eyes are red. His usually neat blond hair is messy, thrown back in a haphazard bun.

“It’s been harder to adjust to the life here than I’d hoped,” he says cryptically, leaning his elbows on his knees. “Though you seem to be doing well?”

He formulates the last words as a question, and I tell him about my exploration trips around the Hill with Ozork.

“The entire structure is amazing,” I gush. “I feel like I’m an ant sometimes, hurrying through all these underground tunnels.”

He lets out a croaking laugh. “True. I haven’t found the center, though. It’s frustrating to be walking in circles and never getting through.”

I cock my head to the side. “What are you talking about?”

“You haven’t noticed?” He stands, walks over to the desk next to me, and picks up a piece of paper and a quill. He dips it hastily into the inkpot, sending black droplets flying, and sketches out a rough circle. “Here is the main gate,” he says, drawing as he speaks, “the entrance hall, and the hallway that leads toward the great hall. Over here are the baths...”

I point to the right of the main gate. “This part is the stables, as well as the forge. We saw them today.” I squint at the map and tap the area near the great hall. “This leads to the kitchens, then to the larders. And I’m fairly certain the school is somehow a level above?”

He draws what I tell him, and slowly, a picture emerges. It’s not exact, nor to scale, but now that I’m looking at it on paper, the Hill seems to be organized in a circular shape, the various levels connected with rising or falling tunnels rather than stairs. That’s what makes it so hard to orient oneself inside it—the corridors go every which way, but what the captain said is true. There is a blank area in the center of the Hill that I haven’t been to yet.

Whether that’s an oversight on Ozork’s part or a purposeful avoidance is the question. I will have to ask him about it, though perhaps I should simply give him a couple more days to see if he’ll show me what is there on his own.

“That’s a good observation,” I tell the captain. “Thank you for this. May I take it?”

He merely nods, back to his morose mood.

“Captain Hawke,” I begin, wanting to ask again what is wrong with him.

“Owen,” he interrupts. “We’ll be living here for months, cooped up together. It’s only fair you should call me by my given name. Especially

since it seems like I'm no longer required to act as the captain of your guard."

The bitterness in his words surprises me. "All right, that's it. Will you explain what's going on?" I demand.

He lets out a long breath. "I hardly know myself."

I chew on the inside of my cheek, wondering if I should say anything or not. Finally, the man's ashen face and subdued air convince me to speak. "Is this about Mara?"

The captain—Owen—jerks his head up in surprise. When he sees my knowing expression, he groans and drops his face in his hands.

"Surely it's not that bad?" I ask. "What did you do?"

His hoarse laugh is no more than a rasp. "Nothing. That's the issue, isn't it? I have my duties. We'll leave in the spring, so nothing can come of this." He glances up, gaze stark with despair. "She is needed here. This is her home, and I could never... She could never leave. I wouldn't dream of asking her to."

My heart breaks at the raw pain in his confession. This is more words than he's ever said to me, and they're all about a woman he clearly wants.

"You could stay," I suggest. "After the rest of us leave, I mean."

Owen shakes his head. "And abandon my duty? I couldn't do that. If I deserted, how could I be worthy of her?"

I didn't think of that. But I can see how a decision like that might ruin his self-esteem. He's been a soldier for the better part of his life, and duty has become a part of his being.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He looks up at me. "What for?"

"I'm the reason you're here," I explain. "You wouldn't have to..."

But he stops me by holding up his hand. "This isn't your fault, my lady." He gives me a small smile. "You didn't want to come here. Before the duke decided to ship you off to the most remote place he could imagine, another ambassador was supposed to take your place. I would have been sent along to protect them just the same."

A flush works its way up my neck and into my cheeks. "You know about that?"

Owen sighs. "Soldiers gossip. I heard about what happened with the baron, and I'm sorry you got sent here. He's the one who should have been exiled."

My lungs expand on a breath. It seems to be the first full one I've taken

since that day when my uncle explained to me that my actions—and my cat’s attack—would see me punished like this.

“Thank you for saying that,” I choke out. “It means a lot.”

He nods. “I’ll help you in any way I can. It’s the least I can do.”

I don’t know how he could, but knowing I have an ally, perhaps a friend, who knows what happened to me and doesn’t judge me, is a relief.

“And I will do the same,” I promise as I collect the hastily drawn map of the Hill and stand. “Don’t give up hope yet, all right?”

His parting smile is more of a grimace. “I didn’t peg you for a romantic,” he mutters. “But all right. We’ll see how it goes.”

I stop at the door. “Ozork and I might go riding tomorrow, if the weather holds. Do you think you could have two men accompany us? It doesn’t have to be you if you’d rather not...”

I trail off, suddenly awkward. We talked as friends just now, and it’s hard to switch to giving him orders again.

“I’ll see to it,” he promises.

My stomach rumbles, reminding me it’s almost time for dinner. “Do you want to walk to the great hall with me?”

“Thank you for the offer,” he says, serious again, “but I think I’ll stay here.”

With that, he closes the door behind me, and I’m left standing alone in the earthen corridor. For a moment, I think about knocking on the captain’s door again and ordering him to accompany me—not for my sake but because it’s not good that he’s isolating himself like this.

But the man clearly wants his privacy, and we haven’t been friends long enough for me to pry and push him any more than I already have. So I return to my room briefly to add the map of the Hill to my notes and pick up a pretty wool shawl to wrap around my shoulders. Then I rebraid my hair and brush my teeth quickly, and while I’m at it, wash my face and dab on a bit of cream I purchased at an apothecary in the city. It smells like beeswax and roses, one of my favorite scents.

Then I pause, because that’s not true anymore. Ozork’s scent of spiced cider and flames has replaced it in the short time since I’ve known him. I think of how he smelled early this morning, and a shiver of awareness runs through me.

I’ll see him at dinner tonight. And for our outing tomorrow. And again the next day, and the next. I’ll spend every day with him for several months

because he has been ordered by his king to show me the Hill.

A sudden sense of foreboding washes over me. I don't know if I'll be able to resist him. He's everything that's good and kind in the world, gives excellent hugs, and stares at me as if I'm his personal sun. In just two days, he has managed to chip away the bulk of my defenses with his honest compliments and the complete assurance that we're meant to be together.

But like Owen, I'll be leaving come spring. And though Ozork travels to Ultrup often, his home is here, like Mara's. Given what I've seen of the place, I cannot imagine anyone would want to leave and make their home in the human lands.

I should tell Ozork that nothing can ever come of this bond between us. It would be dishonorable of me to lead him on. As we've only known each other for such a short time, it should be easy to do. He'll be disappointed, but we barely know each other. Surely he can go and find another, more suitable mate, one who isn't dependent on a duke who wants to control everyone's lives.

Perhaps I should just leave. I could write up a credible report for my uncle, give him all the information I've collected so far, and tell him there is no big secret to be uncovered. The clan is simply well-managed and prosperous because everyone cooperates and chips in with their work. But the thought of leaving so soon, of cutting short the time I'll get to spend with— with the kind people here, is too painful to contemplate.

Gods, what a mess. I put my hands to my cheeks and blow out a long breath. It's impossible. My uncle would send me right back if I returned now. I've been gone for only two weeks, which likely isn't enough for my scandal to have died down completely. And by now, the duke must have put out the word that I'm his ambassador to the orc kingdom, which means that I'd be defying his direct orders and rejecting my duty if I showed up in Ultrup four months too soon.

To calm myself, I crouch to where Thistle is resting. He has no worries, no concerns beyond where his next meal is coming from. I brush my fingertip over the soft orange fur between his ears, smiling when his pale-yellow whiskers twitch in annoyance. He's self-sufficient and aloof, which is how I should be from now on.

Be like a cat.

Shaking my head to get rid of the silly thought, I refill his water bowl. Then, unable to ignore my rumbling stomach anymore, I depart for dinner

and leave the door ajar for Thistle.

I've walked from my room to the great hall several times with Ozork, but it's different now that I'm not being guided there. I noticed the small wooden signposts at the major corridor junctures, and I'm beyond grateful to whoever put them up. There's one that points toward the library, and I promise myself I'll explore it soon. Maybe I should just avoid Ozork as much as I can to save him from being hurt when I leave. I could borrow some books from the library, the history of the clan, perhaps and sequester myself in my room.

There are more corridors leading this way and that, unmarked for the most part. Ozork never mentioned any of them, so they likely lead to storage areas or private rooms of the other orc members. But now that the captain has pointed out how the Hill is organized, I can't help but wonder about its center.

I try to peer into the tunnels that I think lead in the right direction, but they aren't as well-lit as the main one, and besides, I don't want to get hopelessly lost on my own while everyone else is at dinner. Instead, I promise myself that I'll explore the issue someday soon, preferably with the help of someone who knows this place better than I do. I know Ozork would help me, but perhaps it's best that I don't involve him in my plans more than necessary.

The sound of hundreds of voices and the scent of food announce that I'm nearing the great hall. I round the last corner and stop, staring at the gathered mass of orcs. At my other meals, Ozork and I were always early, so I've never seen the space this full. All the tables are taken, some benches completely full, and the noise of the crowd is immense. Orcs talk loudly over platters of food, passing plates, cups, and cutlery and laughing with their families.

For a moment, I'm lost, the odd one out standing on the edge, looking at a cozy but unfamiliar scene in front of me. At my uncle's dinner parties, I always knew where to sit, who to talk to, which fork to use for which course. Now, I could sit anywhere, but there are too many options, and in the sea of faces, I can't make out anyone I know.

I should have paid more attention to meeting the orcs of the clan. But Ozork has occupied all my thoughts, and I'd only met Mara and Jasmine, the king and queen, and Neekar. They're nowhere to be seen, and I can't very well march up to the high table and demand to be seated next to the royal couple.

My chest feels tight suddenly, and I retreat a step. If I wasn't so hungry, I'd return to my room and just wait until breakfast, where I could go early and get something to eat before everyone else crowded in.

Or maybe I could come back later, after dinner, and see if there's any more food to be had in the kitchens. The orcs there have been so nice, feeding my cat. Surely they would give me a bite to eat if I asked them.

Then it hits me, a realization so powerful, it steals my breath away.

This was a mistake. Coming here, this entire mission my uncle has sent me on, is a mistake. This clan doesn't deserve me snooping around and reporting my findings back to a man who would only use them to make himself rich.

That's when Ozork appears in front of me. One moment, I'm retreating into the corridor, and the next, he's standing right there, hand outstretched toward me.

"Hello, love," he murmurs. "Where are you going?"

I swallow down the words I want to blurt out. I cannot beg him for help. He would give it to me, unconditionally, and that's exactly the reason why I shouldn't. I can't use him like that.

"I don't..." I stop myself, unable to lie to him anymore. I don't know what sorcery this is, but the excuse I was about to give him won't slide off my tongue.

He steps closer. "Do you need me to walk you to your room?"

He glances over his shoulder, to where I now see his friends, Steagor and Poppy, at one of the tables closest to us. I must have been panicking to miss them, especially with Poppy's golden hair so different from the orcs' more numerous black. But perhaps she'd been hidden behind Ozork's bulk because there is room for two people opposite Steagor and Poppy on the bench.

They're both staring our way with unabashed interest, and my heart shrivels at the thought of having to sit there and engage in pleasant conversation with Ozork's best friend and his mate, who seem so very happy together. If Ozork told them about us, they will likely expect that we'll be just as gloriously joyful to have found each other.

But I also can't embarrass Ozork by refusing to sit with them. I wish he would have told me in advance that he was going to introduce me to his friends, but perhaps he didn't know they'd be sitting together like this. He's still watching me, eyebrows pinched together, and I know he'd escort me back to my room if I asked him to.

“It’s fine,” I say finally. “Just feeling a little under the weather. And I’m hungry.”

I put my hand in his and offer him a smile. Those were all truths I said, but I still feel guilty for not telling him the whole story.

Ozork stares at me for a moment longer, his fingers wrapping around mine. “Are you certain, Willow? You don’t seem...yourself.”

Damn him for being so perceptive. I’ve been able to hide the truth of my emotions from my uncle and any governess for years, but this orc takes one look at me and knows.

I give his fingers a squeeze. “I think I just need a good, hot meal. Then we can talk after dinner?”

He doesn’t seem entirely satisfied but nods at my offer. “Very well.” He leads me back to his table and says, “Steagor, Poppy, this is Willow. She is the niece of the Duke of Ultrup.” He glances down at me. “And these are Steagor, son of Torg, and his mate, Poppy.”

Poppy, who is several years younger than me, stands to shake my hand over the table. “I’d hug you, but it’s so crowded it would take me ages to round the table.” She motions at the mass of orcs all around us.

As she shifts closer, her belly comes into view, rounded and large.

“Pleased to meet you,” I say, pressing her fingers. “And congratulations!”

She beams at me, blue eyes shining. “Thank you. It’s our first.”

Steagor watches her like a hawk until she sits on the bench, then stands to bow over my hand. “Welcome to the clan, Willow.”

His words take my breath away. It’s such a simple greeting, and he likely doesn’t mean it like I understand it. But my mind can’t help but run with the idea. *Welcome to the clan*. What would it feel like to really be welcome here? To belong?

Ozork nudges me gently, his hand at my lower back. “Where would you like to sit?”

I snap out of my daze and take the right, where an empty plate waits for me. Ozork sits next to me, so close our thighs are touching again, and fills my plate with more food than I could possibly eat in one meal. I stare at it for a moment, wondering if my stomach has suddenly shrunk itself—despite how delicious the food smells, I can’t bring myself to take a bite.

“What brings you to the Hill, Willow?” Poppy asks.

I snap my head up to focus on her. Have I been ignoring everyone instead of starting a polite conversation? My governesses would smack my fingers

with a cane for behaving so poorly in company.

Straightening my shoulders, I grasp the mug of pale ale that Ozork poured for me and take a fortifying sip. Then I grimace, because ale has never been a favorite drink of mine. Still, the drink unclenches my throat enough so I'm able to answer.

"I'm the duke's ambassador," I tell her. "He arranged with your king that an envoy from the Duchy of Ultrup would come and stay here for the winter to learn more about how your clan runs."

Steagor nods thoughtfully. "That's a good idea. It would be nice if we had more human visitors. Then the people down south wouldn't still hide their children when they see us pass by."

I cringe, but I can't deny his words. The only stories I'd heard about orcs in my childhood were terrible, painting them as horrid creatures who kidnapped maidens from their beds.

"My visit so far has been wonderful," I offer.

Poppy plucks a piece of bread from her roll and mops up a bit of gravy. "Have you been to the baths yet? They're the best place in the entire Hill."

"I have. And I have to agree, they're a marvel."

The conversation flows more easily from there, and I learn that Poppy and Steagor didn't have a smooth start to their relationship. In fact, Steagor tried to marry Poppy off to a human groom because he'd been appointed as her guardian by her late father.

"But all turned out well in the end." Poppy smiles up at her mate and rubs her belly.

Steagor leans close and kisses her temple, the gesture easy and familiar. "Aye. We should get going now. You need to rest."

Poppy juts her chin out, a stubborn expression crossing her face. "I don't need rest. I need to finish Dawn's gown."

He scowls at her, but the tilt of her lips tells me this conversation is far from over. I hide a smile—I don't want to seem rude. But I like seeing how they interact. Steagor could easily pick her up and carry her to bed where he could insist she remains for the foreseeable future, but he considers her wishes instead.

The jealousy I experienced when I witnessed King Gorvor and his queen's embrace isn't as pronounced this time, but I do wish my life could be as simple as Poppy's. She knows where she belongs, and it's right here, in the Hill, by Steagor.

I glance at Ozork to find him studying me, his gaze soft. Is he imagining us in a couple of years, bickering like this? Or me with a baby on the way?

The visceral longing that hits me has me looking down at my plate. Poppy and Steagor will soon become parents—yet another thing that’s out of reach for me. I must tell Ozork to find another mate because he clearly wants this.

Poppy stands, and Steagor follows suit, tall and broad, towering over her.

“It was so nice to meet you,” she says, smiling warmly. “And I’m so glad the duke is taking steps to improve things in Ultrup. If he’s willing to listen to how orcs run their lands, I hope the situation will change soon.”

I smile back on instinct, though confusion lances through me. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I only thought...” Her hand flutters to her throat in a nervous gesture, and she looks up at Steagor as if asking for his advice.

He shrugs, a silent communication passing between them.

Poppy shakes her head, her expression more serious than before. “It’s no matter. I only wanted to say it’s lovely to see that you’re here as the duke’s ambassador, and that he’s keen on learning from the clan.”

It’s clearly not the whole truth, but I don’t know Poppy well enough to press her for more answers. Our goodbyes are strained, and when the couple leaves, Ozork and I remain in silence at the table, awkwardness spreading between us.

Finally, I can bear it no longer. I turn in my seat to face him and whisper, “What did she mean by that?”

Ozork grimaces, then glances at my plate. “You should finish your dinner first, then we’ll talk.”

I set down my cutlery, no longer hungry. “Tell me, please. It’s something bad, isn’t it?”

He heaves a sigh, then stands and offers me his hand. “Come, we should take a walk.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

We leave the bustle of the great hall behind, strolling down the busy hallways. My hand is tucked in the crook of Ozork's elbow, and I follow him without minding where we're going—I'm lost in thought, picturing all the horrible things that Poppy could have meant.

I know poverty has been an issue, especially in the countryside, and that there were several street gangs in Ultrup that shouldn't have been allowed to run unchecked as they have. But what has that got to do with the orc kingdom?

When we stop in front of an unmarked wooden door, I snap out of my thoughts. "Where are we?"

Ozork's cheeks turn a darker shade of green, and he scratches the back of his neck. "I thought I'd show you my rooms. They're closer to the great hall than yours, and I didn't want to have this conversation in the hallway."

I gape as he hands me a heavy iron key. "Oh."

"You can keep that one," he says. "I have another."

My stupid heart stutters at his words. He's trusting me, giving me a key to his home.

I shouldn't take it. But then I glance up at Ozork's face, and the hope in his eyes shines so brightly, I can't snuff it out. I'm weak, too desperate for whatever morsel of his attention, to tell him right now that this is wrong, that we will never be like Steagor and Poppy.

The pressure of his expectations nearly suffocates me. I'm not the perfect mate he's been waiting for all these years. I'm not her, and I don't know how to say it so he'll believe me.

But he's already pulling out the second key and fitting it in the lock, and

when he swings open the door, I tell myself I need to solve the mystery of Poppy's strange remark. So I follow him inside and allow him to shut the door, pitching us into total darkness.

I stand still, disoriented, and wait until a strike of flint against stone produces a flame that starts quickly, filling the room with a soft yellow glow. It's a sitting area, a parlor of sorts, with a writing desk and a pair of armchairs.

There's a tapestry similar to the one in my room that I assume hides the privy niche, but three more arched doorways lead to other rooms. Through one, I see the outline of a large bed, while the other two spaces are mostly empty, apart from a beautifully carved wooden chest on one side on top of which a fiddle case sits. It reminds me of what Mara told me that first night at the baths, that Ozork is a musician.

I'd like to ask him to play for me, but whatever he has to tell me is more important right now. He sets the lantern on a low table between the armchairs and motions at me to sit in one of them. Only when I'm comfortable in mine does he take the other, facing me.

"There is no easy way to say this," he begins, "but in this Hill, your uncle doesn't have the best reputation."

I sit up straight. "Oh? But everyone has been so nice to us." I think of the kind welcome I received from Mara and even from the king and queen.

Ozork leans back. "That's because Gorvor gave the order to treat you all as honored guests." Then he smiles slightly. "And because you are nothing like him."

I can't exactly tell whether that's a compliment or not. But the thought that the king had to order his people to behave nicely is a blow. How would they have treated us if he didn't?

"But why?" I ask. "What happened?"

"What do you know about the slave trade in the kingdom of Styria?" he demands in return.

I blink. "Well, it's been outlawed for several decades," I say slowly. "Since before my grandfather became the duke. It's an abhorrent, antiquated practice. Why do you ask?"

He taps his fingers on the armrest, then says, "Our queen, Dawn, was sold to slavers in Ultrup before she came to the Hill."

The room is very quiet as I gape at him. My first impulse is to accuse him that his claim is impossible. But Ozork wouldn't say something so

outrageous if he didn't think it was true. Finally, I choke out, "In Ultrup?"

He nods. "I was there the day we rescued her. King Gorvor has been working with your uncle to stop the trade entirely, but sometimes, it's necessary to pay the slavers to release the people so we can rescue them before they disappear." He clenches his teeth, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "We don't have the authority to detain the criminals in human lands, nor kill them for trading with people. In our lands, it's an offence punishable by death."

My hands tremble, so I clench them tight in my lap. "And my uncle? Why doesn't he stop them?"

Ozork lets out a long sigh. "I'm not sure, Willow. He claims they move around too much to catch them. That the ones selling people at auction are only hired lackeys, and the real culprits are hiding behind layers and layers of protection. Then there are the brothels and organizations who keep purchasing the poor souls who have been kidnapped from their homes and dragged halfway across the land. It's not an easy task, uprooting an entire criminal underworld that's been active for the better part of a century." He grimaces. "He has said that appointing so many soldiers to the task of searching for these bastards would show to his subjects that he doesn't have the situation in hand, which would in turn destabilize the duchy and his power in it, making it even easier for criminals to operate."

"Those are all excuses," I say harshly. Then I swallow and add, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to speak to you this way. It's not you I'm angry at."

He studies me for a long moment, then asks, "You really didn't know about this?"

"No," I admit. "I had no idea."

Shame courses through me, hot and burning. My uncle has allowed this to happen—to *keep* happening—and instead of dealing with it, he has sent me here to spy for him? Some of the shame turns to anger. I'd tried, so many times, to get more involved at court. I'd asked for access and was refused time and time again. I should have tried harder, I know that now, but I'm furious at my uncle for denying me, for depriving me of a chance to contribute to change.

"I'm so sorry," I say. "I'll apologize to Poppy for being so dense. And to Dawn, if you think it's wise."

Ozork shakes his head lightly. "The queen wouldn't hold this against you. Nor would Poppy for that matter." He leans forward now, pinning me with

his dark gaze. “I just wanted you to know the truth so you may make your own choices from here on out.”

He gave me what my uncle never did—information. And options. And for that, he will forever have my gratitude. The tension inside me builds the more I think about this. I came here, expecting to find a slightly backward society of mountain-dwelling folk, because that’s how orcs are talked about in Ultrup. My uncle hinted that they would be easy to hoodwink, a bunch of country bumpkins who have somehow consistently managed to make him look bad out of sheer luck.

The truth couldn’t be more different. In Ultrup, the powdered, perfumed courtiers spread gossip and stab each other in the back, flatter the duke outrageously to gain favor, and nothing ever changes. They do nothing to use their wealth for good, to fight the poverty spreading through the land—or to stop criminals from selling people at auction, apparently.

And I’d benefited from that. I’d eaten at my uncle’s table, worn silk gowns purchased with his money, and enjoyed the comfort of his palace for all my life. My head spins with all the ways I’d unknowingly participated in injuring those who needed my help the most.

“Willow, are you all right?” Ozork leans forward, his eyebrows pinching in a worried frown. “You’ve gone all pale, love.”

“You have to pick another mate,” I choke out. “I can’t be yours. I’d ruin you.”

He sits up, clearly taken aback. “What?”

I force myself to meet his gaze. I want to rage and cry, but I’m numb, my teeth chattering as if I was out in the cold. My fingers are icy, but I only clench them harder, desperate to keep myself in check.

“I cannot be with you,” I force myself to say. “You deserve someone better. Someone who will love you like you deserve and make you proud, not the niece of a power-hungry duke who allows *slavers* to operate in his lands. Someone to have a family with.”

I motion at the empty doorways leading to empty rooms. This apartment is fit for a family, and the fact that Ozork chose it tells me that he’s been planning on having one, likely for years. By focusing on me, he has only delayed the realization of that dream.

Ozork stares at me through all this, a muscle working in his jaw. When I clamp my mouth shut, he simply says, “I can’t.”

“What?” I frown at him. “I’m not joking, Ozork. How do you think your

friends would feel if they realized who you're mated to? Your *queen* was enslaved. In my uncle's city."

He scrubs both palms over his face, mussing up his hair in the process. I want to reach over and tuck it back behind his pointed ears, but I can't touch him. If I do, I'll crumble. In fact, I should leave, but my body is locked in the armchair, rigid from the shudders that are gripping me. I don't know what's happening to me, but I need it to stop, or I won't be able to escape.

But Ozork drops his hands to his knees and pins me with a steady look. "I cannot choose another mate. That's not how this works. The Fates are never wrong, and you're the only one for me."

"No," I breathe. "No, I'll leave, and you'll forget about me, and then you'll meet a nice orc lady and have many adorable children with her, I know it."

My heart thuds faster and faster, fluttering madly in my chest.

"Willow. Listen to me," he insists. "This is how it is. You're mine, and I'm yours, and the only way I'm ever going to have children is with you. That's how it is for our people."

"But I'm *rejecting* you," I whisper. "I'm setting you free so you're not..."

Ozork only shakes his head. "There will be no one else for me."

My words trail off as my throat closes up. I try to take a deep breath to calm myself, but it's impossible, the airway clenched too tight. I try again and only manage to suck in a shallow gasp. My hand flies to my throat, and I claw at my collar, though it's not cinched around my neck.

"Willow?"

Ozork's voice sounds far away, and black spots dance around my vision.

Then strong arms grasp me by the waist, and I'm hauled into my orc's lap.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

“Willow, breathe for me.”

Ozork’s low murmur floats in my mind, but I can’t reply. I’m *trying* to breathe, but the air won’t pass through my throat. No matter what I do, I can’t cut past the buzzing fear, the realization that I haven’t only destroyed my own life but Ozork’s as well. This kind orc will be ruined because of his connection to me.

I push against him, fighting to get off his lap, to get away from him before I taint him with my darkness. He deserves better. He...

“Stop, Willow,” he demands.

His arms wrap around me like steel clamps, and he squeezes me close to his chest. I fight him harder, because he doesn’t know what he’s doing. He thinks he wants me because of some stupid twist of fate, and I have to make this right.

But I can’t breathe, can’t speak.

“Listen to me, love,” he croons, his voice low and calm. “You have to stop fighting me. Come now, let me hold you. Lean on me, Willow.”

My thoughts are still panicked, but some deep-seated part of my mind responds to his order. Whether it’s the cursed mate bond or the way he’s squeezing me against him, keeping me safe, I don’t know, but I manage to gain enough control over myself to stop trying to crawl away from him.

“That’s it,” he encourages me. “Now lean your head on me. Close your eyes.”

I still can’t breathe right, but if he’s hugging me... I scrunch up my eyes, willing myself not to cry. I’m not the victim here. It’s not my place to cry about this.

“Can you take a deep breath for me?” he asks quietly.

I shake my head, and my breath wheezes past my lips in another shallow exhale.

Ozork palms the back of my head and presses me more firmly to his chest. “Do you want me to get our healer, Taris?”

Another shake of my head. I’m glad I can communicate with him even if I can’t speak. The thought of other people seeing me like this is horrifying. I should be embarrassed in front of Ozork, but he’s not looking at me. His chin rests on top of my head, and he’s started to hum softly, a lilting melody with simple tones and no words.

I wonder if he’d play that one for me if I asked him to.

But I won’t, because I’ll pack my bags and leave right after this. I’ll go to Captain Hawke and demand that we depart before the mountains are trapped under a four-foot layer of snow and ice.

My hands are still shaking, but my teeth are clenched hard enough that they’re not chattering anymore. I’m not sure if that’s good or bad, but the next breath I take comes a little easier, a deeper inhale than the one before. Ozork’s warmth slowly leaches into me, and my muscles unwind a tiny bit, the pressure in my head no longer so brutal.

I don’t know how long we sit there, with Ozork humming at me, the same melody over and over again, soothing in its repetitiveness. The orc doesn’t move his arms, but he smooths his thumb up and down my shoulder, a small movement I focus on. After the violent surge of emotions I just experienced, my senses feel raw, as if someone dragged them out in the open and beat them bloody with a mace.

Ozork’s humming stops a long while after my breaths no longer wheeze in and out of my lungs. My heart is no longer racing, and the cold sweat that had broken out all over my body has started to dry. I feel gross and tired, my muscles aching.

The thought of walking through the corridors of the Hill to my room in this state has me burrowing my face deeper in Ozork’s chest.

“I’m sorry,” I croak.

Ozork’s exhale ruffles the hair on my temple. “What for?”

I think for a moment, then say, “For everything.” I don’t want to list out all the things I’ve done wrong, but he deserves a full apology, especially after sitting with me through this episode. “I’m sorry for not being the mate you wished for. For not knowing what the duke has been up to. And for whatever

this was just now.”

I still can't make myself tell him about the mission my uncle sent me on. It's too deceitful. I took it before I knew anything about the orcs, and I was only looking out for myself. Now, I'm determined that I simply won't report on anything substantial when I return to Ultrup. I'll give the duke a vague, boring account of what happened here, the meals I ate, the people I met, and if he'll think I'm an insipid wretch who cannot think beyond food and clothes, I won't be bothered. But I will not do anything to jeopardize the clan that not only seems to be a wonderful society, but has accepted me without rancor even though my uncle has made so many mistakes.

Ozork listens to me without interrupting, then sits silent for a long time. “I don't accept your apologies.”

I stiffen in his arms. “Oh.” I squirm to get away from him. “Um, I'll just go, then...”

But he doesn't let me go. Instead, he pulls back just enough so he can meet my gaze. “Willow. I don't accept because you cannot apologize for any of those.” His eyes are kind, his lips pulled up in that endearing smile. “You *are* the mate I wished for. And you've been kept in the dark all your life. You didn't do anything wrong, and now that you know, you can decide what to do about it.”

He pauses and brushes back my hair, his palm coming to rest against my cheek. “And *this* was nothing to apologize for either. You were overwhelmed. I'm sorry I didn't explain sooner about how matings work in the orc world. Yes, I want children. I've always wanted a family. Gorvor gave me leave to pick any set of rooms I wanted, and I chose these so that I could one day live here with my mate and our young. I've waited a long time for you, Willow, and every single day has been worth it.”

I gaze up at him, caught in the glow of his affection. My heart thuds painfully, though this time, it's not from panic and fear but because I want what he's saying so badly. I want *him*.

Without thinking, I tip my chin up and straighten my back, and it lifts me just enough so that I can press a quick kiss to Ozork's lips. They're warm and firm, like the rest of him. This late in the day, his stubble has a coarse texture to it, but I only get a fleeting feel of it before I'm retreating again, staring wide-eyed at him.

Ozork stares right back. Then he grins, a smile half delighted, half wicked, and moves his palm from my cheek to my nape to bring me closer to

him. He presses his lips to mine in a firm, confident kiss. His tusks nudge at my cheeks in a new, but not entirely unpleasant contact. I purse my lips in reply, thinking to kiss him back. Digging my fingers in the front of his tunic, I hang on to him, thrilled that we're doing this.

Ozork lets out a huff of breath. "Relax, love." His thumb comes to caress the side of my jaw, then he taps lightly on my chin. "Open up for me."

Open up...?

I've been kissed before, and no one has ever said anything about opening my mouth. Perhaps this is an orc way of kissing? When Ozork brings his lips closer again, he doesn't merely hold them to mine but licks my lower lip slowly, like he's savoring me. I gasp, and he takes advantage by pressing his thumb more firmly on my chin to guide me where he wants me.

Then he slides his tongue between my lips.

I squirm in his lap, unsure of what to do. But he's patient with me, alternating quick, soft kisses with more carnal licks, until I decide to try what he's doing and touch my tongue to his.

Sensations explode inside me, starting right there at the contact between us and dipping low in my belly. Ozork groans, and his fingers tighten in my hair. I *like* hearing that sound. It feels immensely powerful to be the one to draw it out of him, so I lick him again, more confidently this time, and tug on his tunic to bring him closer to me.

But he's massive, a big boulder of an orc, so I do the next best thing. I slip my palms around his neck and pull myself up, maneuvering until I'm straddling his hips. He helps me move, never breaking the kiss, and takes my waist with his other hand, his hot palm on my lower back, hugging me to his chest.

He tastes *divine*. The scent of him is nothing compared to the rich flavor that coats my tongue, and I feel like I'm bathing in his essence. I go up to my knees so our faces are level, or nearly so, and dig my fingers into his long hair. The texture is a marvel, silky and smooth, and I want to wind it around my hands like rope and hold on to him forever.

Ozork kisses me deeply, hungrily, and I can't imagine what this must be like for him. I didn't know what I've been missing all this time—but he'd wanted a mate for most of his life. And now he has me here, he's kissing me like he never means to let me go.

"Willow," he groans when I suck on his lower lip like he'd done to me just moments earlier.

It seems to elicit the same delicious response in him as it did in me, because he shivers and tightens his arms. I lean into his touch and instinctively roll my hips, searching for something I need, something elusive and unfamiliar.

I brush against the very insistent proof of his desire for me. I stiffen, mouth falling open, and Ozork stills as well, his fingers clenching on my waist.

“Um.”

I fight the urge to look down for as long as I can. I stare at his face, noting how flushed his skin is, how quick his breaths. But at last, curiosity gets the better of me, and I drop my gaze between us, to where a thick ridge strains behind the leather of his pants.

It's *large*. My mind supplies that observation—and stops. I knew Ozork was bigger than a human man. But I've never seen a naked human either, because I was raised a lady, with no access to common baths or changing rooms. I'd always been chaperoned, and if I managed to sneak away for a quick kiss when I was younger, those situations certainly never led to anything like *this*.

“Oh my.”

I release Ozork's hair and sit back, perching on his thick thighs. Now that reason is returning, I know I should move away, because this is as far from proper behavior as I could possibly get. But I'm fascinated by his reaction to me—and by the way my body is responding to the knowledge. That glow of desire I felt earlier blooms into something liquid and hot, and my nipples tighten under my dress.

“Do you like seeing what you do to me?” Ozork asks.

His voice is gravelly, and he doesn't release me. Instead, his thumb is making slow circles on my hip, the motion similar to how he comforted me earlier, only this time, it's dangerously close to my core and sparks feelings of an entirely different nature.

“Yes,” I admit. “It's... I didn't imagine it'd be this big.”

Ozork lets out a hoarse bark of a laugh. “No, I don't suppose you did.”

I glance up at him to find him smirking at me, his expression just a touch smug. I mock scowl at him, and he laughs again, his face lighting up.

“Don't look so worried, love.” He presses a kiss to my lips. “I can scent how wet you are for me. You'll take me beautifully, you'll see.”

“Oh!” I push myself away from him in shock, but he doesn't let me go.

“Ozork! You can’t say things like that to me.”

He gentles his grip on me, rubbing his palms up and down my back, my sides, so close to where my body wants him but not close enough.

“Hmm,” he murmurs. “Haven’t you come here to learn of orc ways? This is how we treat our mates, Willow. I’ll worship you however you need me, but you’ll have to let me.”

He gently tips my head to the side and trails light, barely there kisses down my neck, to the point where it meets my shoulder. His stubble and tusks scrape over my tender skin, and I can’t hold back a gasp of delight.

“Will you let me? Not tonight. You need to think this through, don’t you?” He brings a finger up to my neckline and traces it slowly, over my collarbones and back up to my shoulder, again and again in a sinuous, hypnotic movement. “Will you lie in your bed tonight and think of me, love? I’ll do the same if you promise to make yourself feel good for me.”

I realize I’d closed my eyes at some point, overcome by the sensations he’s drawing from my body. I snap them open now and ask, “What?”

Ozork’s next kiss to my neck involves his teeth. He closes them gently over my pulse point, not enough to hurt, but to claim ownership of that spot, a primal, barbaric thing that has me melting in his arms. I want to do the same—I want to bite him and claim him as mine, and I have no idea where the impulse is coming from. If it’s the mate bond, I need to learn more about it so I know...

“Once you’re alone,” he says, interrupting my thoughts, “remember how it felt to be in my arms.” His palm slides down my back to my bottom, and he tightens his grip on me, squeezing ever so slightly. “Remember what your body is telling you. Then explore that, Willow. Will you do that for me?”

He lifts his head, his brown eyes blazing with heat, and I can’t help but nod.

“Will you do the same?” I ask, voice breathy and too revealing. “In here? In your bed?”

Ozork’s nod is a solemn promise. “Aye. Knowing you’re thinking of me as you pleasure yourself will make it hard for me to restrain myself.”

He loosens his hold on me, and my first impulse is to squirm closer to him, to grasp his shoulders and make him kiss me again. But he looks like he’s in pain, his jaw clenched, his frown in place.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, getting to my feet.

I’m a little wobbly, either from the terror that gripped me earlier or from

Ozork's kisses, it's hard to tell. But he notices and stands, his hands steadying me.

He gazes down at me, serious. "I wish you didn't have to leave. I want you in my bed, because you're my mate and you belong there."

I make the mistake of glancing toward his bed. It's very inviting, carved from massive wood and piled high with pillows. "Ozork..." I swallow and wrench my gaze away from it. "My guards would raise an alarm if I didn't return to my room tonight."

His lips tip up in a small smile. "Aye, I know. I hope you will consider moving in here someday soon."

I think of the heavy iron key in my pocket. Of having to return to Ultrup in the spring. Of what my guards—and the world at large—would think if I simply decided to spend my nights here from now on.

In the end, I only nod. That's all I can give him, and he understands. He leads me back to my room through corridors that are much emptier now that dinnertime is long past.

But in front of my room, he kisses me again, and it's a different sort of kiss—a claiming, a promise of what only he can offer me. Then he grins at my shocked expression and strides off, humming softly.

If I thought Ozork would back down without a fight and let me retreat, I was wrong.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

“Did you do what I asked you last night?”

Ozork’s voice is barely loud enough that I can hear him past the crunching of the horses’ feet in the snow.

“Did you keep your promise, Willow?”

I gasp and throw him a dirty glare. “Quiet! You can’t talk about those kinds of things out in the open.”

We’ve been out riding through the snowy forest for the past two hours, and I’m strung tight, half from having to guide my horse over treacherous terrain, half from being so close to Ozork without being able to touch him. This mate bond thing is torture, and I don’t like it one bit, especially not when we have an audience composed of four of my guards and Captain Hawke, flanking us on all sides.

He lets out a low chuckle that sends a shiver through my body. “No one will know what we’re talking about. So...did you?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I almost wish I could tell Ozork no, because he is so damn smug about this. Probably because he can scent exactly what I did. It’s unfair that he has senses that sharp.

“Did you?” I counter. “You made me a promise, too.”

Ozork nudges his horse with his knees and brings the big beast closer to my mare. My animal shifts nervously, her dainty feet sinking into a snowdrift.

“I did,” he murmurs, his voice intimate. “I made myself come thinking of you, Willow. When I had you in my lap yesterday, I could barely think past the need I have to sink inside your body.”

My breath shudders out of me. “Gods, Ozork. You...”

I should tell him that he's overstepping, that he shouldn't be saying these things to me. I've had men whisper lewd words in my ear, but somehow, this is completely different because I *want* it. I want to know exactly what he did.

"Tell me more," I demand, my face turned away from him so he doesn't see how flushed I am, how nervous.

His knee brushes mine, he's so close. This is bordering on dangerous. If my mare got spooked... But he reaches out and pats her neck with a gloved hand, and she settles immediately. He knows his way around a horse, as evidenced by how magnificent his animal is, well cared-for, his coat gleaming.

I focus on these small things instead of Ozork's face because I'm afraid that I'll do something stupid if I see how he's staring at me. We're already in danger of giving ourselves away, and I don't want to offer the guards more fodder for gossip.

"You want to know how I stroked my cock, Willow?" Ozork continues. "Or what I thought about as I did it?"

My eyelids flutter as I fight not to glance at him. I lose the battle a moment later and meet his heated gaze. "Both," I whisper.

His breath steams in the cold air between us. "*Fuck.*" He grips his horse's reins tighter. "Tell me first if you kept your promise. Give me that, at least."

I trace his features with my gaze, the harsh line of his jaw, his tusks, his full lips, the silvery-green scars. My body thrums with the need to climb from my saddle into his and let him carry me away, propriety be damned.

"I did," I confess. "And I thought of you."

His growl is low and just for me. "Did you make yourself come, love? Was it good?"

"Yes." I answer immediately this time. "But you weren't there."

It comes out as a whine, almost, a complaint. Because I'd needed him there, not just to provide instruction but to give me *more*.

"I'm sorry." He brushes a hand over my thigh, and despite the layers of riding skirts and thick stockings I'd put on underneath, I imagine I feel the warmth of his palm. "I wanted so badly to be there for you."

I draw back, putting some distance between us because this is mad. We can't be doing this in the middle of a frozen forest. "What do we do now?" I ask instead of demanding a detailed report from what he did last night. I'm afraid that I might decide to tackle him off his horse if he so much as mentions his cock again.

Ozork lets me retreat, shuttering his expression. We're close to the Hill now, and I'm glad we're returning. This outing was necessary so I'll be able to write about the lay of the land in my report to my uncle—without mentioning any strategic specifics, of course—but I'll be glad to be out of the bitter cold. From the looks of my guards, I think they'll be happy as well. Captain Hawke seems to be the only one who doesn't notice the cold, staring thoughtfully into the distance. But it's likely thoughts of Mara keeping him occupied.

My orc mate is silent for a long time, and I start to think he might not have an answer to my question after all. Perhaps it's unfair of me to expect it, but he's so much older and more experienced than me, and surely he's done this before.

The thought instantly sours my mood. *Of course* he's done this before. How else would he know all of this? And he has to be older than forty years, so surely he wasn't celibate his entire life. Jealousy is unbecoming for a lady, and I try to shove it down, I do, but it claws at me, scraping my insides raw.

Then Ozork offers me his crooked smile. "Now we find ways to spend more time together," he says. "I have some ideas, but most of them involve having you in my bed, so you should talk to your captain, perhaps. I don't want him to launch a full-scale search party for you when he finds your room empty in the morning."

I think of Ozork's large bed. "I'll consider it," I whisper back.

A cottage comes into view, a surprising sight since Ozork told me the nearest village is several hours away. It's a merry little place with a green door and shutters. A plume of smoke curls from the chimney, announcing that someone is indeed living there.

"That's Korr and Ivy's home," Ozork tells me. "We built it earlier this year. He doesn't like to stay inside the Hill, but they wanted to remain close because Korr's brother and his mate live here."

I don't think I've met Korr or Ivy, but whoever they are, their home is very cozy and beautiful. I grew up in a palace, with more rooms than I knew what to do with, so living in a place so tiny would be an adjustment, but I can't deny that it looks like the perfect nest to cuddle up in the winter.

We dismount in front of the main gate, which is guarded by four orcs warming their hands by the glowing braziers. They're all wrapped up in furs and thick boots, but I recognize Neekar, who waves at me. As he comes closer to take my horse's reins, he sniffs the air, and his gaze darts between

Ozork and me before he grins, his handsome face lighting up.

To my surprise, he doesn't say anything, only wraps Ozork in a one-armed hug and thumps him on the back. I think he whispers something in his ear, but I'm too far away to hear it with my human senses. Ozork hugs him back, his expression kind.

As the younger orc leads away our horses, followed by Captain Hawke and the four guards, Ozork and I step inside the entrance hall. I stomp my boots on the floor and shake the snow off my shoulders, then remove the hood of my cloak and shake that, too, not wanting to trail the melting snow deeper into the corridors.

Ozork does the same beside me, removing his riding gloves and tucking them behind his belt. "Do you want to head to lunch? We're a bit early, but at least we'll beat the rush. I think they're making stew today, which is good because you should get warm."

I remove my own gloves, pinching them off finger by finger. Ozork's gaze narrows on what I'm doing, and he takes a step closer, as if me disrobing even this small part of my body is irresistible to him.

"Actually," I say quietly, "I thought I might visit the baths."

Ozork's throat bobs as he swallows. "The baths?" he asks, still looking at my hands.

I pull the glove off more slowly than is necessary, reveling in this surprising moment of power over him. He worked my body so easily last night, knowing exactly where to touch me so I melted for him, so it feels good to take some of that control back.

"Yes," I tell him. "I enjoyed the water so much the first time I visited."

He drags his gaze from my hands to my face. "Would you like company?"

I should say no. Or ask someone else to take me, like Mara or perhaps Poppy. But Ozork is right here, his unique scent mixed with the cool bite of snow in the air, and I cannot resist him.

"Yes."

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Ozork doesn't offer me his arm on the walk to the baths. He carried me in his arms the last time I took this exact route, so the difference is even more pronounced in my mind. But I'm glad there's a foot of space between us, because I don't think we would make it as far as the large chamber with the thermal springs if I put my hands on him.

The air between us seems charged, the crackle of energy similar to that moment just before a summer storm. The atmosphere grows thicker once we round the last corner and enter the large chamber with the low ceiling. Mists obscure most of the space like last time, and the murmur of conversation and splash of water lets me know we're not alone here.

I have a moment of panic as I remove my coat and jacket to hang them on a hook. I sit on the bench to unlace my boots so they won't get soaked by the pool. Then Ozork passes me a stack of bathing sheets and wordlessly offers me his hand, and I take it without hesitation. His eyes flare with heat before he turns and guides me into the fog.

We meander between pools of various sizes, lanterns glowing here and there. I thought there were several good spots, but Ozork seems to know where he's going, and I'm content to follow. Coming here was my idea, but I have no problem with him taking over.

Finally, we stop by a pool that's nestled against the far wall of the bathing chamber. Water trickles into it from a source that's lost somewhere in the fog and flows away from it on the other side.

"No one comes here," Ozork says. "Not when there are so many other pools empty."

Ah.

“That’s-that’s good,” I reply.

Then I realize that time has come for me to remove my clothes. I can’t very well slip into the water still wearing my riding dress. I’d look ridiculous, not to mention that I’d likely ruin the dress.

“You can bathe in your underwear,” Ozork says suddenly. “If that makes you more comfortable.”

I glance up and find myself staring at a naked green chest. Ozork has already removed his vest and tunic, and the effect is startling. I knew he was large. There’s no way I could miss the fact. He towers a head over me and carried me without so much as breathing hard. I’d even felt the muscles of his chest shift under my hands while I’d straddled his lap yesterday.

But to see him now... My throat feels suddenly dry, and my thoughts grind to a stop. His chest is thick, a patch of coarse black hair covering his muscles, except where the twin disks of his dark-green nipples are. The hair continues down in an ever-narrower line to where it disappears behind the waistband of his leather pants...which he is now unlacing.

I let out a yelp and turn my back on him, hands flying to my cheeks. “Gods, Ozork, you can’t just...”

I don’t even know what I want to say. He can’t what? Strip down before a bath? I don’t expect him to ruin his well-made pants any more than I want to ruin my dress.

His low chuckle caresses my skin. “Wait a moment, then, Willow. I’ll get in the pool, and then you can do the same.”

I untie the laces at my waist with trembling fingers. “Will you close your eyes?”

A slide of leather is followed by a small splash. Ozork lets out a low groan that hits me right in the belly.

Then he says, “No.”

I whirl around. “What do you mean, no?”

He motions at me. “I told you to keep your underwear on if you’d like. But I won’t look away. I want to see you, Willow. If you want this, you will have to let me see you.”

But why? I bite back my pitiful question. From what I’ve heard, married couples often do the deed in the dark, under the covers, where no one can see much. Yet Ozork expects me to put myself on display?

Huffing, I reach under my gown and draw down my long stockings, first one and then the other. Then I remove my linen drawers, untying them and

kicking them off my legs while Ozork watches with an amused smile playing on his lips.

“You are such an orc,” I mutter darkly to myself as I wrestle with my slightly damp riding gown and pull it over my head.

Ozork’s chuckle raises my hackles even further, and I drop the gown on the floor beside his clothes and stomp to the edge of the pool. When he gazes up at me, however, I realize what he’d done. I’m too irritated with him to really care that I’m standing next to him in my underwear.

“Are you coming in?” He arches one dark eyebrow.

I roll my eyes at him but crouch by the water, then carefully lower myself. Like in the pool I used with Mara the first night here, this one has a bench carved from rock, so I don’t immediately submerge myself.

I gasp, the hot water warming my skin in an instant. I sink to my neck. “Gods, this feels so good.”

Ozork watches me from the other side of the pool. “You’re so beautiful, Willow.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, then admit, “I think you’re very handsome, too.”

To my surprise, the orc ducks his chin and scratches the back of his neck.

“What is it?” I ask, floating closer. “Is this about Neekar again?”

He scowls at me. “Don’t mention other males to me.” His voice is a growl, his expression fierce. Then he groans and scrubs his face with his palms. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

Something is clearly bothering him, so I scoot along the bench until we’re nearly touching. I’m only too aware of the fact that he’s completely naked beside me, but I’m counting on him being a gentleman.

“What’s wrong?” I press.

He lets out a long sigh. “The mating bond is screaming at me to take you,” he admits. “And if you mention another male’s name while we’re naked in the pool...”

“We’re not naked,” I retort quickly.

Ozork’s incredulous expression has me flushing. All right, he *is* naked and I might as well be, for how much protection my chemise offers.

“I’m sorry,” I say, voice soothing. “I promise not to talk about anyone else. But I still don’t understand what happened just now.”

He motions at his face. “I’m almost two decades older than you, Willow. Don’t do me the dishonor of pretending you’re not aware of how different we

are.”

I reach over and trace the scar that cuts across his mouth, his cheek, and continues to the remaining half of his ear. He shudders under my touch. I only played with his hair and clenched his shirt last night, and I didn’t get the opportunity to explore the rest of him. Now, he closes his eyes and lets me, his skin prickling with goose bumps when I touch the lobe of his ruined ear.

“We’re different,” I whisper. “But I told you, I don’t mind your scars.” I stop and cock my head to the side, then correct myself, “Well, they make me want to search out all the bastards who caused them, including the old king who forced you into war. But I don’t think you’re any less handsome because of them.”

He leans into my touch, then covers my palm with his. “Willow.” His voice is hoarse, as if his throat is too tight to speak.

Feeling very bold, I follow the line of one brutal scar from his chin to his shoulder, where the gnarled scar tissue testifies to how horrible the injury must have been. Had he twisted away from the blow, saving his neck in the process? I want to ask the story behind every single one of these because I want to know him, but perhaps that’s not the right way to go. Ozork is more than his scars—and certainly more than the warrior who was pushed into battle where he had to kill to save his life and those of his friends.

So instead, I reach underwater and find his left hand, pulling it to the surface to study his palm. The back bears several scars, but the inside is clear of injuries. Only his fingertips have small calluses, and I lean down to kiss each of them.

Ozork lets out a shuddering breath. “They’re from playing.”

I lift my gaze to his. “Playing?”

He swallows and moves slightly so his thigh brushes mine. “Aye. From the strings. I play...”

“The fiddle,” I say quickly. “That’s right. I saw the case in your room, and Mara said—”

Ozork grins. “You talked to Mara about me?”

I nudge him lightly with my elbow. “Only that first night. I think she guessed right away what you felt and was trying to show you off in the best light possible.” I pause, thinking, then add, “Not that you needed it. You behaved perfectly from the first moment we met.”

He studies me for a long moment. “What if I’m tired of behaving perfectly? Of being proper and keeping my hands away from you?”

I freeze, my senses, which were lulled into slumber by the hot water, springing back to life. “What do you want to do?”

Ozork moves his hand in mine to interlace our fingers. With his other, he cups my face and tips my head back, staring at my lips. “I want to touch you, Willow. I want to make you feel good. Will you let me?”

A glow spreads through me that has nothing to do with the bath. “Can I touch *you*? It-it would be easier for me...”

“You can touch me anywhere you want,” he says immediately. “But I scent your need, love, and if I don’t do something about it soon, it’ll drive me to madness.”

I flush harder, knowing he scents that liquid pressure in my core. Can he hear the rapid thud of my heart as well? My gaze slips to his neck where a vein throbs, strong and fast. It’s comforting to know that I’m not the only one affected. But what I really want to know is...

I squint into the water between us, trying to get a glimpse of his cock, but the bathing chamber is dark, and the light of the lantern nearby reflects on the ever-moving surface of the pool.

“I’m hard for you,” Ozork murmurs. “You may touch me there as well if you’d like.”

My gaze flies up to his face. He’s grinning at me, all his earlier reticence gone. Slowly, he unwinds his fingers from mine, then reaches for me. His hands close around my waist, and he easily moves me to his lap, my knees spread on either side of his in an imitation of the way we sat together last night.

Only now, my chemise slips up my naked thighs and hot water brushes over my most intimate parts. This time, Ozork’s skin is right there, firm and smooth—apart from where his hair grows. The sensitive skin of my inner thighs touches his legs, and I shiver at the sensation. He’s so *present*, so overwhelmingly hot and large.

Ozork tightens his hands on my waist for a moment, then slowly brings them to my hips and lower, down my thighs. Just when I think he’s about to reach for the bunched-up hem of my chemise, he reverses direction and swipes his palms up again, until his knuckles brush the undersides of my breasts.

My breath catches in my throat. “Oh,” I gasp.

“Mm...” He leans in, burying his face in my neck. “You smell fucking edible, Willow.”

A scratchy kiss pressed to a sensitive spot just under my ear has me trembling in his arms. “Ozork!”

“Patience,” he orders. “I’ve waited so long for you. I don’t want to fuck it up by hurrying.”

Again, he slides his hands down my body, only this time, he ends with his palms on my ass, squeezing lightly. I can’t help my reaction. I rock my hips forward on instinct, following his movement. My belly brushes against the hardness sticking up between us, and Ozork freezes, his grip tightening slightly.

Then he groans and brings me closer to him. His palms slip under my flimsy garment, and he touches my skin for the first time. I didn’t know my ass was this sensitive—or that Ozork’s firm grip would feel this good as he lifts me over his length. We haven’t discussed how far we’d take this, and I have a moment of terrified delight at the thought that he might impale me on that hard cock right away, but he only shifts me on his lap.

He kisses me deeply, and I part my lips for him immediately. I may be inexperienced, but I learn fast, and I want to do well for Ozork. I want to show him how much I want him, so I scoot even closer and lean my chest against his, then wrap my arms around his neck. He sucks on my tongue in a wicked gesture that has me gasping into his mouth. I’m so distracted I don’t notice that he has moved his right hand between us.

The first brush of his fingers over my most intimate part has me yelping loudly. Ozork swallows the sound and kisses me again, and this time, I’m better prepared for what’s to follow. I did touch myself last night to thoughts of him, just as I’d told him, but those sensations were nothing compared to *this*. He slides a fingertip around my wetness, then slowly pushes it through my lower lips and *inside me*.

My eyes fly open, and I stare at him in shock, my hands clenched on his shoulders. “Ozork?”

“Aye, love, I’m here.” He nuzzles my cheek, the gesture soothing. He doesn’t move his hand, neither to push deeper nor remove it. “Did you play with yourself like this, or did you only touch your pearl?”

My cheeks are flaming hot as I whisper, “J-just the pearl.”

He presses a kiss to my lips. “Good. That’s wonderful, Willow. But if I’m ever to take your pussy with my cock, I need to prepare you for it. Will you let me?”

I squirm lightly on top of him, which sends an entirely new rush of

sensations through me. That finger feels *amazing*, even if it's strange. "Yes," I breathe. Then I slowly reach into the water between us. "But I'll touch you, so we both— *Oh*."

My palm closes around Ozork's rigid cock. My fingertips barely touch he's so thick. I tentatively slide my hand higher to see where it ends and find a slightly broader cockhead at the top, rounded and smooth. The length of him throbs in my grip. I glance up at Ozork to gauge his reaction. His eyes are closed, his jaw clenched tight as if he's in pain.

"Is this all right?" I ask softly.

He gives me a jerky nod. "Aye. Better than all right." He leans his forehead against mine, and our noses touch. "You have no idea how good you feel."

His finger twitches inside me, and I bite back another gasp. "Actually, I think I know."

Ozork lets out a rough exhale. "Now run your palm down."

His command is gravelly, and I cannot resist it. Reaching lower, I run my fingers all over the veined, pulsing cock until I end up at...

"Ozork," I choke out. "What is that?"

The orc chooses that moment to slide his long finger deeper inside me. He crooks it forward and finds a spot that has me shooting up in his lap—but then I immediately try to sink down again to repeat the sensation.

"And what was that?" I grip his shoulder with my other hand for leverage and try to squirm around, chasing that elusive feeling. "Gods, what are you doing to me?"

He grasps my ass in his other palm and brings me down over his lap. I try to move, but he secures me in place, handling me easily.

"That's my knot," he says. "When you come, it'll slip inside your body and lock there so my seed won't escape."

I run my palm lower, fingering the fist-sized bulge. "B-but how?" I stutter. "It's too big."

Ozork levels an amused look at me. "Do you trust me, Willow?"

I give him a rather jerky nod. "I do."

"Then let go of my cock for the moment," he orders. "And grab my shoulders instead. I don't want you to worry about me while I make you come for the first time."

"But—" I object, then stop at his stern glare.

Gods, he can be strict when he wants something. The strange thing is that

I don't mind. I don't know how this will work at all, and I need guidance. I'd heard enough about how men and women come together to know where parts are supposed to go, but no one ever mentioned that fingers could feel this spectacular—or that orcs are different than humans.

Obeying Ozork isn't difficult when he rewards me with a deep, carnal kiss. He draws his finger out of me, then pumps it back in, all while holding my hips firmly in place. I want to rush his rhythm to feel more, but he keeps it steady, building the pleasure inside me.

Then he adds another finger on the next stroke, and I whimper, feeling the slight bite of pain until my body adjusts. His movements become easy again. He hooks his fingers expertly forward.

"That's—" I gasp as he hits that magical spot inside my pussy again. "Will you break my maidenhood like this?"

Ozork brushes a kiss over my lips, so tender. "I didn't have to. Not every woman is the same, and yours wasn't there anymore. It's not always a big affair like some men think."

"Ah." I try to squirm to take those fingers deeper, but he won't let me. "That's good. But why are you doing this, then?"

He chuckles. "You touched my cock, love. It's thicker than my two fingers."

I can't help but laugh. "All right, fair point. But I need..."

I don't know what I need. Last night, I stroked my pearl lightly until I shivered in delight, and I did feel that when Ozork brushed his fingers over me earlier. But now, a different kind of sensation is building inside me, a glow that sparks every time he finds that strange spot.

Ozork replies by adding another finger into my pussy on his next push. "You can take them. Just breathe for me, then let it build."

I don't know what he's talking about until I do as he says, inhaling and exhaling into the small space between our bodies. My inner muscles relax, and the slide becomes easier again, though it's a deeper kind of pressure this time.

"You're doing so well," he encourages me. "You'll look so fucking gorgeous stretched on my cock, Willow. My body was made to give you pleasure, and I finally get to show you."

I close my eyes as if that could protect me from feeling all of *this*, the closeness, the inexorable push and retreat of Ozork's fingers, the pulsing need that's building inside me. My pearl throbs in time with my racing heart,

and I want him to touch it so badly, but when I let go of Ozork's shoulder to do it myself, he stops moving and shakes his head.

"Not yet," he rasps. "Let it build."

So I do, helpless to stop the sensations. "Ozork," I whimper. I should be afraid that someone will hear us, but the mists dampen all sound, and we might as well be completely alone in the cavernous space. I feel like I'm floating, about to be swept away, but Ozork's touch grounds me so firmly, I know I'm safe.

"Please!"

I'm not above begging. I dig my fingernails into the muscles of his shoulders, and Ozork lets out a hiss, but he doesn't stop me.

"Just a little more," he pushes me. "Take them, Willow."

I'm trembling, my body teetering on the precipice, but I force myself to take another deep breath, to relax in his arms. His three fingers slide all the way in, my pussy finally accepting them. I scrabble for grip and tangle my fingers in Ozork's long hair. I'm so full—and somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice is screaming that Ozork's cock is thicker even than that, not to mention his knot.

Then he presses his thumb firmly onto my pearl and claims my lips at the same time. He swallows the moan I cannot hold back. The first waves of pleasure threaten to swallow me whole. I try to get away, but Ozork won't let me, keeping me pinned in place. He wrings my climax from me with clever strokes of his thumb and fingers, teasing me from the inside and out.

I squeeze my eyes shut and clench my teeth to keep from crying out as the pressure inside me breaks. If what I did last night was a gentle swell, this is a thunderstorm of sensation, an all-consuming, wild thing. I curl around Ozork's hand, my fists clutching his hair and shoulders, and pant as he slowly withdraws his fingers from me.

He wraps me in his strong arms and holds me close, nuzzling my cheek. I float down from my bliss, but I don't want to let go of him yet. He's no longer keeping me pinned to his lap, but rather caresses me, his palms wandering up and down my back, my legs, as if he's trying to reassure me that I'm still here—or maybe he's reassuring himself.

I lean my cheek on his scarred shoulder and let out a shuddering sigh. "Ozork."

He brushes a kiss to my forehead. "Are you all right?"

My laugh is only a huff of breath. "Very much so. I've never..." I shake

my head, my damp hair moving against his skin. “This was incredible. I didn’t know it could be like this.”

And we didn’t even...

I peer into the water. His knot is right there, next to my inner thigh, so I shift, enjoying the heavy weight of him. He’s still so hard, but he doesn’t pressure me into anything, doesn’t demand that I should return the favor.

He also doesn’t stop me when I reach for him.

Ozork remains perfectly still. I close my fingers around his shaft, and the only thing he does is release me. He puts his hands by his sides, and from how the muscles in his arms bunch up, I suspect he’s gripping the edge of the underwater bench.

“Stop me if something feels strange,” I tell him. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Ozork’s voice is a hoarse rasp as he demands, “Harder.”

I put one hand on Ozork’s barrel chest for leverage and grasp his cock more firmly. “Like this?”

He gives me a jerky nod. “Aye. Now stroke it.”

Oh. I run my palm all the way down to his knot and give him a tentative squeeze. His hips buck up before he hisses in a breath and manages to settle again. Then I stroke up, right to the smooth head.

The thud of Ozork’s heart beneath my palm and the speed of his breaths guide me in my exploration. I release his shaft to trail down toward his balls, and he lets out a low growl, so I grin and quickly reach for him again. He seems to like having his knot squeezed, and his cockhead is more sensitive than the rest of the shaft.

“Don’t play with me, Willow,” he groans when I slide my fingers up again. “Please.”

I look up at him, worry lancing through me. “Am I doing it wrong?” I release him and go to move away. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know...”

He grips my wrist immediately and puts his other hand on my waist so I can’t slide off his legs. “Don’t go. I didn’t mean—it’s all right. Keep doing what you’re doing.”

I shake off his fingers from my hand. “No, Ozork. You knew exactly how to touch me to bring me to my climax. Now show me how I do the same for you.” Anger courses through my veins at the thought of him keeping something like that from me. “I want to learn, but how am I supposed to *know* if you don’t tell me?”

Ozork stares at me, then lets out a low, disbelieving chuckle. “Forgive me, love. I’m a fool. This would be the happiest day of my life even if you never touched my cock, but I understand what you want from me.”

He takes my hand again and tugs it toward his cock. I instinctively wrap my fingers around his length again, but this time, he puts his palm over mine and shows me how hard he wants me to hold him.

I look up, shocked. “That doesn’t hurt?”

His smile turns wicked. “No, Willow. Imagine how tight your pussy is. That’s what I like. When you ride me, you’ll grip me so hard I’ll see stars. We’ll have to work together to get you to take my knot, and it’ll be the tightest fit.”

These words should be instructions on how I’m supposed to please *him*, but I squirm over his thighs, my need building up again.

Ozork palms the back of my neck and tips my head back, then kisses me deeply. I whimper into his mouth and sink my teeth into his lower lip, drawing a satisfied groan from him. Underwater, I stroke him like he’s showing me, with my fingers clenched around his shaft.

“Fuck, your scent.” He drags his nose over my neck and inhales, then sucks the lobe of my ear between his lips. “I’m going to lick you all over, Willow. If your scent is this potent, I can’t even imagine what you’ll taste like.”

My mind flashes with all sorts of wicked images that can’t possibly be true. Ozork’s dark eyes flash, and then he repositions my right knee, putting it between his spread legs. Suddenly, I’m perched on top of one thick thigh. The brush of his skin over the slickness between my legs draws a whimper from me.

“Do you want to come again?” he asks. “I’ll wait for you. But you have to be good for me and ride my leg, Willow.”

Gods, if anyone else said that to me, I’d slap them immediately, but Ozork’s coaxing voice is impossible to resist. He mutters encouragements to me, telling me how close he is to coming, how fantastic I feel against him, and all the while, his hands roam over my body. He trusts me now to keep stroking him with enough pressure, and instead, he cups my breasts with both hands, his thumbs finding the stiff peaks of my nipples through the thin fabric of my chemise. It’s almost completely sheer now that it’s wet, and my modesty is long gone—I would pull the thing off if I could do it without losing contact with Ozork. I squirm, trying to lift it up my belly and over my

head, but give up because the hem is stuck somewhere, and I'm too impatient to do it.

Suddenly, Ozork grasps the neckline of the garment with both hands and rips it off me, then frees my arms with two efficient tugs of his fingers. I squeak, then laugh as he tosses the wet rag out of the pool, where it lands on the stone with a wet smack.

"I'm sorry," he rasps. "I need to see you, Willow."

I meet his gaze, smiling. Earlier, I could only stare when his naked chest first came into view, and now he looks his fill, tracing my full breasts with his thumbs. Then he surprises me by taking my hips and rocking me over his leg as if he knows exactly where I need him.

"Come for me," he commands. "I want to make you feel good again before I give you my cum."

He's so solid underneath me, his muscles all bunched, his large body prepared for his own release. The knowledge that he's right there with me is incredible. I scrunch up my eyes and try to fight the sensation creeping over me, because I want him to fall first this time, but he tilts my hips forward ever so slightly, and it's over—my second climax is a deep, throbbing sensation, beautiful beyond words but terrible because my pussy clenches around emptiness, and Ozork's cock is *right there*.

I tense up from the pleasure, my hand twitching around Ozork's cock, and he gasps, tipping his head back.

"Aye, like that, Willow," he groans. "Just like that."

Encouraged, I slam my hand down, over his knot, and squeeze. Ozork's loud gasp of pleasure is cut abruptly short, and I look up to find him smashing his own hand over his mouth to keep the sounds of his pleasure in.

I like it—it feels like I should be the only one hearing him like this. *I* made this happen, and his pleasure belongs to me now.

I watch as the thick white cum shoots from the tip of his cockhead underwater, then floats away in the gentle current of the pool. Jet after jet of it, so I keep stroking Ozork, wringing every last bit of pleasure from him.

"Enough," he growls at last.

I release him immediately and look up, surprised at his tone. But it's just that Ozork's voice is hoarse—he's still leaning back, his head resting on the lip of the pool, his eyes closed. He didn't snap at me—on the contrary, it seems as if he's too wrung out to do anything at all.

I try not to think about what happens next. I have no knowledge of what

human men do after they're satisfied, so I have no way of knowing what to do. I wait a long moment to see if he'll act, but he seems content to lie back, his big chest heaving with every breath. Just when I decide to move away from Ozork, climb out of the pool and escape the baths altogether, his hand finds my waist again.

"That was better than I ever imagined," he murmurs.

He kisses me with such tenderness and passion, my heart stutters. It scares me so much, how deeply I feel for him, but Ozork won't let me retreat into my thoughts. Now that he seems to have caught his breath, he caresses me languidly, petting me all over. His expression is one of wonder, and I believe him when he says this is his dream fulfilled. He is an honorable male, and he'd never lie to me.

So I push down the fear and the thoughts of tomorrow and simply enjoy his company. We'll figure out how to be together, I know it. It might take us some time, but we'll get there in the end.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Ozork walks me back to my room and kisses me so well, I nearly break down and drag him through the door. But I resist because it's too soon, and besides, I still haven't informed Captain Hawke of what's going on between Ozork and me. I don't even know how to tackle the subject—if I explain the concept of mates to him, and he hasn't yet talked to Mara about it, he'll likely guess what's going on between them.

First, though, Ozork and I must discuss what will happen between us. I will have to return to Ultrup, but the thought fills me with dread every time. More and more, I find myself wondering what it would be like to remain here, at the Hill, where everyone knows their place and everyone works together to help the clan. At my uncle's court, I'd witnessed so much intrigue and backstabbing, I'd grown wary of other people's intentions. I'm sure that the orcs have their disputes as well, but there's no trying to one-up each other in front of their king, which is incredibly refreshing.

The next morning, Ozork isn't there to escort me to the great hall. I try not to be hurt after what we did at the baths. He'd been so adamant that he wanted to remain close to me, and now that I'd allowed him to touch me, he disappears. But when I arrive at the crowded hall for breakfast, Poppy waves at me to join them at their table. Steagor is there as well, watching her intently as if he expects her to go into labor at any moment. She basks in his attention, leaning into his side. He puts his arm around her shoulders.

"Good morning," she trills. "Ozork asked us to keep you company today."

I raise my eyebrows. "He did?"

"He has some urgent business to attend to with the king," Steagor

rumbles. “Otherwise he would be here with you.”

I flush, hating that this calm orc knows exactly what’s bothering me. I got along just fine on my own for years, and now I’m pining after Ozork? I’ll have to shake off this ridiculous feeling that he’d left me behind.

“Thank you,” I say, “but I don’t want to be a bother. You have better things to do than—”

“Nonsense.” Poppy waves imperiously to brush away my objection. “Steagor has been telling me I need to cut back on my working hours and let the assistants I’ve trained take over my workshop, so this will be good practice. But it’s hard, you know?”

I study her curiously. “Your workshop?”

I remember her saying something about finishing the queen’s gown, but I didn’t pay it much attention, to my shame. I’d been so consumed with Ozork.

Poppy’s smile is a little shy but mostly proud when she says, “I’m a seamstress. Steagor helped me start my workshop, and now we employ several women from the clan. Some live at the Hill, but others are stationed in one of the nearby villages.”

That’s how I find myself adopted by Poppy, who is the sweetest new acquaintance I could hope for. She’s younger than me and adores her orc mate. They take me to visit the workshop together, and then I accompany Poppy to the baths while Steagor goes to the fighting ring to practice with the other warriors.

The memory of being at the baths has me blushing furiously, but I hope Poppy will chalk it up to the heat of the water. She claims baths help her with her back pain and spends our time there mostly floating around one of the larger pools, completely naked and not even slightly worried about it.

“You really will get used to it,” she promises me as she lathers up a bar of honey-scented soap. “I used to think that wearing stays was absolutely necessary, and now I can’t stand the things.” She glances down at her rounded belly. “Well, I can’t wear them at all now, but you know what I mean.”

I’m not sure I do, but I understand the sentiment. She has found a place for herself here and a male who loves her more than life itself. She’s about to have a baby, a family. From what she told me throughout our time together, I’m certain she didn’t grow up in the orc lands, either, but arrived here recently—and now she fits in so well.

I need to talk to Ozork. Wherever he is, I need to find him and ask him if

his vision of our future includes me moving here to be with him. The idea of being so bold as to ask him about this is terrifying, but I can't stand the uncertainty anymore.

"If you'd like to share what's worrying you," Poppy says suddenly, "I could try to help."

I glance up to find her floating nearby on her back, her large belly poking out of the water.

She maneuvers so she can see me and adds, "You're probably wondering whether this mate bond really is forever. If it's as strong as the orcs claim." She levels a serious look at me. "It's everything they say and more. The longer you're together, the better you open yourself to him, the more you'll feel it. You only have to allow it."

I appreciate the sentiment but... "That's not really what I was thinking about."

"Oh." Poppy blinks at me. "I'm sorry, then I read you all wrong."

"No," I say quickly, not wanting her to feel bad, "that's absolutely a part of it. But how did you decide to move here to be with Steagor?"

Poppy shrugs. "I didn't have anywhere else to go. My father passed away, and my stepmother wanted to keep me on as an unpaid servant."

Now it's my turn to stare at her. "I'm sorry."

She motions at the space around us. "I'm not. Everything that happened to me brought me here, so I don't regret a thing. But I will say that I wished I had somewhere to turn to in the human lands. So did most of the women here. The laws in the Duchy of Ultrup—and the entire kingdom—aren't exactly kind to women."

I grimace. "I know. I couldn't inherit my father's properties, so my uncle promised the value of them in gold as my dowry." It's only then that I realize how ridiculous I sound, complaining about it. "Forgive me, that's incredibly unfeeling of me. I always had a roof over my head and more comforts than I knew what to do with. Having to marry a nobleman to access my dowry is hardly as bad as being enslaved."

Poppy's lips twist in a wry smile. "Ah, so Ozork explained about what happened to Dawn?"

I sink all the way to my chin, wishing the hot water would swallow me whole. "Yes. And I'm so embarrassed over the entire thing. I truly thought those awful practices were in the past."

"I wish that were true." She sighs and replaces the soap in its ceramic

dish at the edge of the pool. “But perhaps we can make the world a better place. Maybe our daughters won’t have to suffer the same fate we did, whether that’s being sold like cattle or having to run all the way across the kingdom or marrying some awful lord.”

I nod but remain silent. Her words were meant in a general way, I’m sure. Growing up as part of the Black Bear Clan, her children will have options that she didn’t have growing up. But what she said sparked an idea in me, one too big to blurt out loud. I’ll have to think it through and see if it’s even possible before I confide in anyone, even though my first impulse is to tell Ozork.

Steagor is waiting for us when we return from the pool, and it’s almost painful to watch their reunion—they were separated for a short time, but the deep sigh Poppy lets out tells me how much she missed him. Steagor wraps himself around her and closes his eyes, inhaling her scent.

It only makes me even more conscious that Ozork hasn’t come to me yet today. I say goodbye to the happy couple and slink away to my room to cuddle Thistle and lick my wounds in peace. Instead, I sit at my desk and try to write down everything I know about my dowry. If my plan is to work, I will need to leverage it somehow, but I don’t know how to gain access to it without marrying some lord from my uncle’s duchy.

The thought of one of my old suitors touching me sends revulsion through my body. I want Ozork, but being with him means giving up on the money. And without the money...

A knock sounds on the door, so I set away my quill and notes and shuffle to the door. I push back my still-damp hair and unlock the latch, and there he is, dressed in a new pair of dark-brown leather pants, a fresh white tunic embroidered with green at the collar, and a lovely brocade vest that matches the embroidery. A white silk handkerchief is tucked in the pocket of his vest. He has braided back his thick black hair and put gold hoops in the plait.

I’ve never seen him look this polished before. My breath catches in my throat, and when I greet him, my voice is higher than usual. “Ozork,” I squeak.

“Hello, love.” He steps close to me and kisses me gently, right there in the corridor. “I’ve missed you.”

I kiss him back, then remember that I’m cross with him and pull back. Not wanting to discuss our relationship where anyone might hear us, I grab him by the hand and tug him inside—luckily, Ozork moves willingly,

because I'd have no hope of moving him if he decided to refuse me. The moment the door slams shut behind us, I whirl away from him.

"You smell agitated," he remarks and crosses his arms over his chest. "Is something wrong?"

I mimic his pose, but I leave enough space between us so I won't be tempted to touch him. And suddenly, I don't know what to say. Ozork was only gone for the morning. He didn't actually *go* anywhere, as far as Steagor and Poppy told me, and he's here now, waiting patiently for me to speak.

But I *missed* him, damn it, and I couldn't even find him without admitting to the others that I was desperate for him. He didn't leave me a way to contact him or tell me what he was up to.

"You sent Poppy and Steagor to babysit me," I blurt out, my voice coming out more petulant than I'd hoped. "I don't appreciate being passed around like an unruly toddler."

Ozork's eyes flash with humor for a moment, but luckily for him, he manages to stamp it down quickly. "I'm sorry. If I knew you wouldn't enjoy their company, I wouldn't have asked them. I just didn't want you to be all alone at breakfast, and Poppy's workshop is an important part of the Hill you hadn't seen yet."

I want to stomp in frustration. Everything he says is so damn reasonable! "I did enjoy their company," I retort. "But you..."

I clamp my mouth shut, not wanting to give Ozork more than I already have.

Still, he takes a step closer to me and reaches for my hand. I retreat a step, and he advances again.

"Stop following me," I snap, my hands fluttering at my sides.

Ozork remains in his place but quirks one eyebrow at me. It's the scarred one, and I want to trace the line of it with my fingertips. Instead, I clench my fingers into fists and grit my teeth.

"Will you tell me what's wrong?" he asks. "Whatever it is, I want to make it right."

I huff, not wanting to admit what's really bothering me. But Ozork is *right there*, looking all wonderful, so I finally grumble, "You said—you said I could have a hug." I scuff the toe of my boot on the floor. "You said I could have one whenever I wanted."

Ozork slowly closes the distance between us. He doesn't say anything, only wraps his arms around me and squeezes me to his chest. I resist for a

moment longer, then bring my arms around his waist and hold on tight, my eyes scrunched up as I lean my cheek on his tunic.

“I missed you, too,” I whisper.

My orc lets out a low, rumbling chuckle. “And you hate that, don’t you?”

I barely resist kicking him in the shin. He knows me so well. “I hate that I don’t know what’s going to happen,” I admit instead. I loosen my grip on him enough so I can bend back and look him in the eyes. “What we did last night... Where do we go from here? I keep trying to find solutions, but all I know is what I want. I feel like I’m missing half of the puzzle.”

He cups my face with his big palm. “I thought I made my intentions toward you very clear. But since you have doubts, let me say it once and for all. I want you to live with me here, Willow. At the Hill, away from your uncle and those other men who wished to force you into a fate you didn’t want.” He leans down and presses his forehead to mine. “I want us to have a family together. I want to give you as many children as you’d like and raise them with you.”

My throat has grown steadily tighter from his first word onward, so I only manage to croak, “Yes, all right,” when he stops. Then I swallow and force myself to say the words that I’ve been dreading to speak out loud. “But I can’t let you tie yourself to me without knowing everything.”

I step away from his arms but keep a hold on his hand. I guide him to my bed, where we sit facing each other, and I gather my thoughts because I don’t want to leave anything out.

“We’d have to get married,” I begin, speaking past the lump in my throat. “Because I wouldn’t put it past my uncle to try and manipulate the truth and insisting our bond isn’t valid because it isn’t a regular marriage.”

Ozork nods gravely. “It would be my honor to marry you, Willow.”

My heart skips a beat at his easy acceptance, but there’s more he doesn’t know.

“But that will mean I won’t get my dowry,” I say. “My uncle made it very clear that I had to marry a nobleman. I’d bring...” I stop, wondering how to say that, then decide on the truth. “I’d bring nothing to our marriage but the things I have here. Maybe he’d let me empty out my rooms at his palace, but that’s all. No money, no land.”

I’m embarrassed to admit it, because it’s the most backward thing, this arrangement my uncle has put together for me. I’ve no idea what he’d been thinking at the time, but I grew up listening to how generous his offer was.

The amount of money tied into the deal is large, yes, but the terms of it are ridiculous.

Ozork studies me for a long moment. “We don’t need your money, Willow.” He squeezes my fingers, then interlaces them with his. “If you would be content living at the Hill with me, I will make certain you’ll never need anything. The king has always paid me well for my service, and living here, I don’t need to spend much. We have more than enough.”

I sniffle, then nod. “All right. I would work, too. I don’t know if any of my skills are valuable to you here, but I’ll learn. I can learn.”

Ozork’s craggy smile is a thing of beauty. “I know, love. We’ll make it work, don’t you worry.” He moves on the bed so he’s looming over me, then bends down to capture my lips with his. “I love you, Willow, and I promise to give you everything.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Our kiss is a promise, and it feels as if we're completing the bond between us. My heart aches, but in the very best way, accompanied by a wild, falling sensation in my belly. If this is his love, I want more of it, I want *everything*.

Needing to be closer to Ozork, I scramble onto my knees and plaster myself to his chest. He catches me by the waist, and his hands roam my body with that easy confidence, fanning the flames inside me. My breasts press against his chest, aching with the need to be touched. Ozork sucks my tongue into his mouth, and I moan his name.

My fingers tremble when I unbutton his lovely vest, then push it over his broad shoulders and toss it to the end of the bed. He lets me pull up his tunic and helps me by raising his arms over his head. I slide my hands over his naked chest, marveling at the firm, warm skin. Then I lean closer and brush a kiss on the gnarled scar on his shoulder.

"Willow," he breathes.

His face is so serious. He undresses me slowly, his hands gentle as he lays me out on the bed and climbs over me. My breath hitches in my throat at how deep our next kiss is, and I know it's him promising he'll be good to me. He stares at my naked body with awe, tracing one large palm down my belly and between my legs.

"You're mine," he says, his voice a low growl. He cups my pussy possessively and opens my thighs wider so he can fit himself between them. "I need to make sure you're ready." He nibbles his way down my throat, his tusks scraping at my skin.

I nod because my voice seems to have disappeared, but it returns the moment he closes his lips around my nipple for the first time.

“Ozork!” I cry out, shocked at the strength of the sensation, but he doesn’t stop and teases me mercilessly until I’m a panting mess underneath him.

He keeps his hand between my thighs, brushing me lightly, and I know how wet I’m getting. I try to close my knees, embarrassed, but Ozork only lifts his head and gives me a stern look.

“I need you wet,” he tells me. “Wet and soft, Willow. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“All right,” I breathe. “But I want you naked. I haven’t seen all of you yet.”

He pauses for a moment, then lets go of me and stands, straightening to his full height by the bed. I roll on my side and prop my head up, grinning at him. Ozork’s throat bobs, and he seems unaccountably nervous for the first time, and I don’t understand why, until he undoes the laces on his leather pants and pushes them down his legs in one swift move. Then he faces me again, and the teasing words I wanted to say to lighten his mood die in my throat.

His cock is *large*. It was one thing to touch it underwater and feel its weight, but now that it bobs up in front of me, I don’t know how I ever thought he’d fit inside me. I *barely* took three of his fingers, but I’m certain the shaft of his cock is thicker than that, and the knot at the bottom...

Gods, *the knot*.

“Do you trust me?” he rumbles, bringing one knee to the bed again.

I snap my gaze from his groin to his face. “Yes!” I blurt immediately. “You know I do, but *Ozork...*”

His name is a whine, a plea for him to understand. I’m human, and clearly orcs aren’t meant to sleep with us, because our anatomy cannot possibly fit right.

He puts his hand on my knee and caresses me slowly. “I won’t let you get hurt,” he promises. “We’ll go as gently as you need to. But I need you to listen to me when I say that we were made for each other. The Fates are never wrong, love, which means you were born to take my knot, and I was made to bring you pleasure.”

I give him a jerky nod, because he seems so certain. Then I remember Poppy and Steagor. She’s smaller than me, and Steagor must be about Ozork’s size, and they seem so happy together. Given that she’s pregnant, they must have done this at least once—but judging by their ever-constant

need for each other, I think they managed to find a way to do it much more often.

My mind is still rebelling, screaming warnings at me, but my body responds to his every touch. When he traces both palms up to the insides of my thighs and cups my ass, I let my knees fall wide. Ozork kisses my left breast, then my right, and I think he'll start teasing my nipples again, but instead, he lowers himself down my bed and fits his broad shoulders between my legs.

The first lick of his hot tongue sends my hips arching off the bed.

“Oh!” I squirm, my hands flying to Ozork’s head. “Y-you—what? Ozork! I thought you were going to...”

My words dissolve into a moan, and I flop back on the bed, already anticipating this new wonder of a touch. Ozork licks up my pussy slowly, then swirls his tongue around my pearl. The pressure is so different to what he did with his fingers yesterday, lighter but more insistent at the same time. Then he dips his tongue between my lower lips and laps up all my wetness.

“You thought I was going to fuck you with my fingers?” he murmurs. “I’ll do that, Willow. But I needed to taste you. Gods, your pussy is the sweetest thing I’ve ever had in my mouth.”

On his next lick, he slowly pushes one finger inside me like he promised. He slides it through my clenching inner muscles and finds the same spot as yesterday. My body melts into the pillows because it remembers the pleasure that came from him teasing me like that. Soon, he adds another finger and pumps in and out, keeping the same rhythm with his tongue.

My pleasure builds more quickly than last night, and I’m almost sorry to feel my climax cresting already because this feels so good. I wrap Ozork’s braid around my hand and tug at it to get his attention. He lifts his head, and my breath stutters—his eyes look wild, his mouth parted, and when he licks his lips, he groans, as if he’s drunk on my taste.

“I want to do that, too,” I say.

He blinks at me, two of his fingers still inside me. “Do what?”

I squirm under him. “Lick *you*.”

Ozork shudders at my words and presses his forehead to the inside of my thigh. “You don’t know what you’re asking for, Willow. I’m barely holding back...”

I give his braid another tug. “I want this to feel as good for you as it does for me.”

He kisses my pearl, the contact light enough that it doesn't push me higher, but still sending shivers of pleasure through my limbs. "I wanted to go slow for you. But if you keep saying things like that, I won't be able to."

I'm playing with things I don't understand, I'm well aware of that. But it's not fair that I'm almost at the cusp of my climax and Ozork is still so very composed.

"Show me," I demand. "I want to know."

Ozork moves so fast, I let out a squeak as he grabs me by the waist and maneuvers me around the bed. Then I giggle, because he clearly wanted this but was holding back on my account. It takes me a moment to understand what he intends for us to do, but when I study our new positions, my pearl throbs with anticipation.

Ozork is lying on his back and has put me on top of him, only I'm turned the other way, with my knees on either side of his head and his cock right in front of me. Then he drags me back a couple of inches and fastens his mouth directly on my pearl, sucking hard.

I scream, then remember that anyone passing by in the corridor might hear, so I muffle the sound with my hand. I glare at Ozork over my shoulder, but he doesn't stop. He's too focused on my pussy to care about anything else, and if I don't hurry, he'll finish me off before I can even start returning the favor. Already, I'm fighting the rush of sensation, and my legs tremble with the effort of holding back.

Reaching for Ozork's cock, I realize I can barely close my lips around the head. It's hot and slick in my mouth, leaking drops of salty-sweet cum onto my tongue, but I can't pull it deeper. Because Ozork is so much larger than me, we're not evenly matched, and when I try to squirm forward, he tightens his hold on my hips.

"Forget it," he growls. "I'm not letting you go."

He slowly fits two fingers back in my pussy. I can't close my legs, can't get away from the constant pressure of his tongue on my pearl. I'm shaking all over now, but I still grip Ozork's shaft with one hand while I brace the other on the bed. I'm determined to make this good for him, but he's making it impossible...

Ozork closes his mouth around my pearl and sucks, then pushes his fingers deep into my pussy and twists them down. My world explodes into a riot of color. I cry out and squeeze his cock, and for a moment, I think Ozork will let go, because his hips buck up into my grip. I tremble on top of him and

rock my hips back for more of his fingers. He draws out every drop of my pleasure, then pulls his fingers from me and licks them clean.

He leaves my pussy dripping, though, and flips me easily again so I'm lying by his side. Then he rears over me and spreads my legs while I'm still panting and breathless from my climax.

"I'll give you my cum, Willow, but not in your mouth. Not tonight." He notches the broad head of his cock to my pussy and slicks himself up with my wetness. He looks half mad, his harsh frown so fierce. "I need to come inside you. I need your pussy to take my knot."

In answer, I hike my knees higher to make room for him. My heart thunders, and I feel the answering heartbeat all over my body, in my hands, my legs, my pearl. I've never felt so alive, so cherished, and I don't know how to put this into words. At last, I whisper, "I trust you."

Ozork's frown lessens, and he lowers himself over me and kisses my lips. He tastes a little different this time, and I gasp when I realize I'm tasting myself. He dips his tongue into my mouth and tangles it with mine, and at the same time, he nudges his hips forward.

I scrunch up my face. I'd already established that his cockhead was larger than his fingers, but until now, I wasn't certain of the difference. It's clear that I might not be able to do this after all.

"Ozork..." My voice comes out as a reedy whine, and I squirm, trying to get him inside me. "I'm not— What if it's not right?"

He kisses me again, then puts his forehead against mine in a gesture I've come to know so well. "You can do it. Just relax, love. Let me in."

I breathe through my nose and gradually get myself to relax. When the head slips inside, I close my eyes again as a slight pinch of pain cuts through my pleasure. Ozork lowers himself to one elbow and brings his other hand to my nipple, playing with it while he kisses me languidly. He's taking his time with me, never pressuring me, and I slowly take another inch, though it has me squeaking in shock.

The stretch is incredible. Every time Ozork rocks his hips back, he glides out, then gently nudges back again. His cockhead soon hits that wonderful spot inside me, and now every push sends shimmers of pleasure through me. I could easily continue like that, but when I peer between us, I realize he's not even halfway inside me.

"Gods, you're so large," I gasp.

He grins, though his forehead is dotted with sweat. "You'll grow to like

it.”

Now most of his shaft slides through my pussy, and it feels... “I already like it,” I admit. “Now tell me what to *do*, Ozork!”

My orc lets out a low chuckle. “You’re so impatient,” he says, pinching my nipple harder. “What if I wanted you to just lie back and enjoy this?”

With that, he releases my nipple and instead takes both of my hands and pins them to the bed over my head. The stretch brings his chest closer to mine, and every time he shifts above me, his chest hair brushes over my tender nipples. I try to get free to tug him even closer, but he’s holding me fast, taking control of the situation.

My traitorous body responds to this by growing even wetter. On the next stroke, Ozork reaches all the way inside, and we both groan when his knot hits my pussy.

“Willow.”

His voice is a rasp so deep, I feel the vibration of it in his body. Now, he moves faster, sliding into me easily. His body straining over mine is the most delicious thing I’ve ever seen, and my eyelids flutter with the force of the sensations he’s drawing from me. I need to touch him, but I also know he needs this, needs the control, so I don’t try to tug my hands away from him. Instead, I wrap my legs around his waist, hook my ankles behind his ass, and on the next stroke, I squeeze him closer.

Ozork roars as he sinks so deep inside me. The changed angle between us sends stars shooting through me, and when he leans down to kiss me, the dam inside me breaks. My pleasure floods my veins, and I throw my head back, my voice stolen by the perfect moment of bliss.

“Oh, fuck,” Ozork groans. He releases my hands and grabs my ass instead, lifting my hips off the bed. He fucks me through my climax. “Gods, you’re squeezing me so tight. I can’t... Willow, love, I need you to take my knot now.”

My body feels as if it’s floating a foot above the bed. Ozork nudges his knot against my pussy, and my happy mind doesn’t even throw up any objections. I only want *more*—more of Ozork’s wonderful cock, more of his desperate words.

The pressure increases, and just when I think we won’t work after all, his knot slips inside. It’s a swell that lodges in my pussy. My breath explodes out of me in a shocked gasp as this pushes his cockhead all the way to the end of me, and Ozork comes, snarling. His knot *twitches* inside me, forced up

against the oversensitive walls of my pussy, and the new, wonderful sensation tips me over into another climax, an almost painfully strong one, so I barely register the hot splash of his cum inside me.

He rocks his hips into me, and though we can't really move now that we're joined, the slightest shift sends more pleasure radiating from my pussy.

"Stop," I whimper. "I can't take another."

Ozork stills above me, elbows braced on both sides of my head. His weight settles on top of me—not all of it, because he'd crush me, but it's wonderful. I felt like I was floating away earlier, but now I'm just grounded, joined with him in the most primal way.

"Are you all right?" he asks quietly.

He's so close I can feel his words rumbling in his chest. We're both sticky with sweat, but I don't want to move away at all. Instead, I wrap my hands around his shoulders and clench my thighs around his waist, holding on, and lift my lips to his in a quick kiss.

He smiles at me, his nose touching mine. "I'm going to take that as a yes."

I'm too wrung out for words. To my horror, a tear leaks from the corner of my left eye, closely followed by the right, and soon, I'm crying, tears trickling over my temples and into my hair.

"Ah, love." Ozork swipes the moisture away. "Will you talk to me?"

In answer, I just clutch him tighter, needing to feel the solid weight of him.

"All right, take a moment," he murmurs. "But if you need me to move, tell me."

I nod, my forehead bumping his shoulder, and try not to feel ridiculous as he brushes soft, gentle kisses over my cheeks, my eyelids, and my temples. All the while, I'm aware of the insistent pressure of his knot inside me. I breathe in through my nose and let a shuddering breath out of my mouth, and my tears dry up slowly as Ozork kisses them away.

"I didn't know it would be like this," I admit. My voice is hushed because I'm afraid to break this magic spell between us.

Ozork nudges his nose against mine, then kisses me slowly, tracing my lips with the tip of his tongue. "The knot? I've never thought it would feel this wonderful either."

That has me blinking up at him. "You've never...?" I don't want to ask about the other women he's been with, though I know there must have been

some over the years.

But he shakes his head. “Only mates fit together like this. Today is the first time for me, too.”

The sense of pride and relief that washes through me shouldn't be this powerful, but I flush with the emotions anyway. “I like that,” I admit. “But I meant...the entire thing. It was wonderful.”

“Mm.” Ozork kisses me again, more insistently this time. “I'm very happy to hear that. I've wanted to fuck you from the moment I first scented you, but I thought we'd have to wait longer.” He shifts between my legs. “Let me know when you're ready to go again.”

I dig my fingernails into his shoulders. “Again?” I ask, breathless, but I already feel the stirring of another climax building up in my core. I know the sensation now, the gathering of heat. And if I thought a moment earlier that I couldn't possibly take any more, my body is telling me otherwise.

Ozork's gaze traces every feature of my face, and I know he can tell that my heartbeat is racing, that my breaths are coming faster.

“You can give me one more, can't you?” He rocks his hips just a fraction. “You feel so good, Willow. Taking my knot and my cum.”

We're too tightly joined for any real movement, but just the minute twitches of his hard cock and knot inside me are enough to push me higher and higher. So when Ozork hooks his arms around me and flips us both so I end up on top of him, I let out a moan of delight, then brace my hands on his broad chest and circle my hips, searching for the best angle between us.

My orc mate brings his hands up to my sensitive nipples and pinches both at once, and I cry out, not caring anymore that someone might hear. I'm his now, and I want the world to know it. I bite my lip and spread my knees wider, really grinding down over Ozork's cock, and he comes, bellowing his release, his head arching back, his powerful body working under mine.

The kick of his knot as he pumps his cum inside me tips me into another climax, so potent that I collapse on top of Ozork's chest, wrung out and boneless. He clasps me close to him, his hands on the globes of my ass, and ruts inside me until he stops shaking. I listen to the slowing rhythm of his heart and know with absolute certainty that it beats for me. Whether that's the mate bond or just wishful thinking, I have no idea, but I've never been more determined to make something work.

We rest for a long time, and Ozork covers us with blankets so we don't get chilled. I doze on Ozork's chest, his knot still full inside me, while he

caresses me, his hands gentle on my skin. I've never slept with another person in my life, but I know that I want him next to me every single night from now on.

Ozork seems to be thinking the same because he asks, "Will you come to my rooms?"

"I'll talk to the captain first," I answer. "But we'll have to move Thistle. He'll be so confused if we don't bring his bed. It's how he knows where to return every night."

He chuckles underneath me, his chest shaking. "Aye, I think we'll find a place for him."

His knot dislodges, and I wince at the rush of cum that flows from my pussy. But Ozork kisses me and tells me to wait, then walks to the privy niche and returns with a damp washcloth. He has me lie on my back and spreads my legs, studying the mess.

"I've been keeping something from you," he says softly, his gaze on my pussy.

I lift my eyebrows even though he's not looking at me. "Oh?"

He drops the washcloth on the bed between my legs and traces a blunt finger through the cum at my lower lips. "Aye. There's a tea," he rumbles. "You can get it from our healer, Taris, and it'll let you decide when you want children. I can take you to her if you wish."

I bite my lip, my eyelids fluttering as he scoops up some of the cum and slowly pushes his finger inside me. My aching inner muscles twitch around the new intrusion, and Ozork growls low in his throat, his expression unreadable.

"I thought this was a choice we had to make together," I manage to say. "Whether we'll have children or not, I mean."

Ozork looks up at me, though he keeps his finger inside me. "There is no choice for me, Willow. I want to have a family, but I'll wait for as long as you need. You will never need to worry about me not wanting children. If you say the word, I'll fuck you every night until you're round with our child, then again and again until you have as many as you wish."

My pussy clenches at his words, drawing his finger deeper inside me.

"Oh," Ozork growls. "You like that, do you?"

I let out a whimper, unable to stop the roll of my hips. "Yes. I want that. I've wanted that for *years*, but no one..." I gasp as he pulls out, then thrusts back in. "No one ever made me feel safe enough, Ozork."

He leans over me and kisses me deeply, then presses his thumb on top of my oversensitive pearl. My climax hits differently this time, wrenched from the depths of my soul after that confession, and I cry Ozork's name, helpless in his arms.

Afterward, he cleans me slowly, running the cool washcloth over my inner thighs, my pussy, and all the way down to my ass because I'm dripping with his pleasure and mine.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me." He helps me sit up. "I thought the Fates had forgotten about me, but they were just waiting to bring us together." He pulls me in his arms so my naked body is pressed to his. "Thank you."

I glance up at him, incredulous. He's given me so much pleasure today that I can barely stand, and he's thanking *me*? "For what?"

His lips twitch up in a lopsided smile. "For accepting me as I am. My greatest fear was that my mate would take one look at me and run away, screaming."

I wrap my arms around his waist and squeeze with all my might. "She would never."

Ozork lets out a low chuckle, then pats my naked bottom. "All right, love, you'd better get dressed now. We're dining with the king."

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

“Next time you come by with an invitation to a dinner with the royal couple,” I complain as I root through my clothing chest for the other stocking, “lead with that, please. In case you didn’t know, ladies need more time to get ready for important events.”

Ozork sits on the bed and buttons up his vest, already dapper and ready for a fancy meal. “I would have, but someone demanded a hug, and after I had my mate in my arms, I couldn’t be responsible for my own actions.”

I send him a dirty glare but when I meet his heated gaze, I don’t have the heart to say anything more. It’s true, I did tackle him, and I cannot lie—I’m more than happy with how things turned out. I locate the other stocking and straighten, heading toward the privy niche to clean up.

“Willow,” Ozork calls just before I let the tapestry that hides the doorway swing shut after me.

I turn back to him, eyebrows raised. “Yes?”

“Would you...” He stops and tugs at the neckline of his tunic, then tries again, “Would you consider not washing yourself?”

“What?” I glance down my naked body. My sweat has dried, but I know it was there, and I couldn’t go to the king and queen without washing. “Why?”

Ozork stands and walks over to me. He tucks a strand of my messy hair behind my ear, then leans in and take a sniff of me. “Because you smell like me. Like *us*. And it would mean a lot to me if you’d keep that scent on you.” He gives me a rueful smile. “It’ll get better after a while, the need to mark you with my scent all over. But now that our bond is still so fresh, I like you smelling of us.”

I sniff my arm, wondering what it must be like to have a nose that sensitive. “Won’t the other orcs smell what we, er, what we did? Or is this a normal thing?”

Ozork nods gravely. “They will know and they will be happy for us. I was happy for Gorvor and Dawn, and Poppy and Steagor. They deserved every happiness.”

My smile trembles when I gaze up at him. “You deserve to be happy, too.”



I don’t wash away Ozork’s scent beyond wiping the sticky residue of him from between my legs, because there *are* limits I’m not willing to compromise on. He helps me tie the laces of my best gown, and we almost get distracted again when he peppers kisses down my exposed neck. Then I sit on a chair and allow him to braid my hair for me—a chore I never expected my husband to do. But Ozork’s hair is longer and more beautiful than mine, and his large fingers are surprisingly deft at braiding.

“I will get you ornaments for your hair,” he announces as he ties the end of the braid and hands me pins so I can roll it into a coil on top of my head. “Gold will look good with your dark hair.”

I glance at his braid. “That would be lovely, but we needn’t spend so much money on me.”

I’m all too aware that I’ll have to cut back on the luxuries I’ve been used to. Ozork seems to be well-off, that’s true, but the Hill isn’t a palace of the kind that noblemen in the human lands build for themselves. Orcs aren’t rich in the sense of having mounds of gold, but rather spend their hard-earned coin on comfort and safety.

“I think I will like buying you gifts,” Ozork muses, unaware of my thoughts. “You saw Torren’s work at the forge. We’ll have to ask him for a pair of rings for our wedding.”

Our wedding.

I’ll really have to talk to the captain tonight. Perhaps he’ll be willing to stand with me as my witness. That way, my uncle won’t be able to deny that our union really did take place, and that it’s solid in the eyes of the law.

I stand and pat down a small wrinkle in my gown. “How do I look?”

Ozork's gaze is warm as it sweeps from the top of my head to my feet and back. "Beautiful, as always. But you were even more beautiful before you put on all this unnecessary clothing." He sighs, walks to the door, and holds it open for me. "But alas, I don't think you'd be happy going to dinner without it."

I smack his chest lightly with the back of my hand and stride past him into the corridor. "You cannot say outrageous things like that," I tell him sternly. "Especially if we're heading to a very important meeting."

He takes my hand and tucks it into the crook of his elbow. "How about unimportant meetings?" he teases. "Is clothing mandatory for those?"

Someone clears their throat behind us, and I whirl around to find Captain Hawke standing in the corridor mere feet away from us. He must have come from his room next to mine, and we were both too focused on each other to notice him. Though judging by the knowing smirk on Ozork's face, he knew full well that the captain was there.

I pinch his arm stealthily, and he chuckles under his breath. The evil orc. I'll have to be more vigilant in the future. But for now, I decide that I might as well take the opportunity presented before us. I give Ozork's arm a light squeeze, then draw my hand from his grip.

"Captain Hawke," I say. "Will you walk with us to the king's chambers?"

Ozork puts his hand on my lower back. "The captain can join us, Willow. It would be good if he did, actually. And if you have an escort, I need to hurry up and speak with the king about something, so I'll meet you there." Without a shred of embarrassment, he leans down and kisses me full on the lips, then smiles at me and strides off with a brisk pace, leaving me standing in the corridor.

I press my fingers to my lips, which tingle from his kiss. That damn orc! I will absolutely need to plot my revenge for this.

But when I turn back to Captain Hawke, he's grinning at me. I expected him to be shocked or outraged—I did just get kissed in public by an orc who is not my husband. But the captain merely steps closer to me and offers me his arm, sticking it out like a proper gentleman so I don't have to come too close to him.

"Ozork seems like a nice male," he remarks after a couple of steps.

I send him a sideways glare. "He is. He's wonderful, except when he disappears like this." Then I shake my head and add, "I'm not really cross with him. I've been wanting a moment to speak to you."

“I can imagine,” he says, a wry smile on his lips. “Do you want me to send the men home? I assume you’ll be staying here for longer than planned.”

I think about it for a moment, testing the words in my head. Then I say, “I want to live here, but I’ll have to return to Ultrup in the spring for a short while. If I don’t, my uncle might launch a rescue mission, and I don’t want the orcs to get in trouble for it.”

The corridor winds through the Hill, other tunnels branching out to the left and right. The captain is silent for several steps, then asks, “Do you want me to stay? Or should I go as well?”

I draw to a stop and nudge him until he looks at me. “Do you want to stay?”

He grits his jaw so hard, a muscle pops in his cheek. “I will go where duty demands.”

“Owen!” I snap, anger rising in me. “Do you want to stay?”

His blue eyes widen at my tone, but he finally jerks his chin down in a nod. “Yes.” He swallows, then adds, “Please, don’t make me leave. I’m at your service, my lady, but if you’ll allow it, I’ll stay behind as your guard.”

I let out a huff of breath. “Well, thank the gods. I thought I was going to have to shake you for you to admit it.”

I tug him along the corridor, and as we fall into step again, I think the captain’s gait is lighter already with the knowledge that he’ll get to remain here.

“And stop calling me ‘my lady,’” I add, grinning. “I’m marrying Ozork soon, and as far as I know, no one at the Hill goes by that title, apart from the queen.”

He lets out a long breath. “All right, I promise I’ll try. Hard to break a habit of a lifetime.” Then he pauses and says, “Thank you, Willow.”

We walk in companionable silence for a while, and I think we’re getting quite close to the king’s chambers when Owen stops so suddenly, he jerks me to a stop. I whirl toward him, surprised, and find him staring at me with a frown.

“How did you know?” he blurts.

“What?” I’ve never heard him use that tone before, all impatient.

Owen pushes a hand through his blond hair. “How did you know Ozork was the one for you?” he demands. “Forgive me for saying so, but he’s hardly the handsomest orc in the Hill. Yet you somehow just *fit*. I look at

you, and you make sense, even though he's a head taller than you, more than a decade older, and from a different fucking *species*. So how did you decide he was..."

"The one?" I ask gently. I step closer to him and pat his arm. "Have you talked to Mara yet?"

He shakes his head, eyes darkening with something like shame. I have no idea what has happened between them, and it's not my place to ask. But there's something I do need to know before I push Owen one way or another.

"Do you mind that she's an orc?" I ask.

"No, of course not," he snaps.

But I press harder on his arm to get him to stop talking. "Will you mind that your *children* will be orcs, Owen? Because that's how things go when humans and orcs have babies together. They come out green, with pointed ears and tusks."

I think of Arvel, Dawn's son, and her love for him. I remember the orclings I held at the nursery school, and my heart flips with the anticipation of having my own. If Owen cannot get past that, I don't want him to hurt Mara by giving her false hope.

"Gods, if you asked me six months ago whether I saw myself as a father," he rasps, "I would have laughed in your face. I was going to become a general one day, and I didn't have any time for things like a wife or a family. But then I visited this Hill on your uncle's orders, and Mara dropped a full tray of food at my feet, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about her." He shakes his head and adds, "I wouldn't care. I wouldn't, as long as I was with her."

My eyes sting with tears at his confession. "All right, then," I say, my voice hoarse. "Then talk to her, for gods' sake. And don't worry about duty and having to return to Ultrup. You have a duty to yourself, too, and as long as you're here as my guard, you're not breaking any rules." I swipe my fingers under my eyes and start forward again. "Now, we have to hurry, or we'll be late for the king's dinner."

He stumbles over his feet in an uncharacteristic show of nerves. "We're having dinner with the king? Do you think Mara will be there?"

I grin and tug his arm to get him to move faster. "I don't know, but we'll find out when we get there. Now come on. I skipped lunch and I'm *hungry*."

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

King Gorvor and Queen Dawn have set up an intimate dinner party in their rooms, with a long table and chairs for almost twenty people. It reminds me more of my uncle's private parties than anything else, but the atmosphere is completely different. Here, the kitchen staff brought dishes to the table and left us to serve ourselves instead of hovering behind us like at the duke's palace, whisking away plates as soon as they were cleared. The king himself carves the boar roast, and the queen passes him plates to put on juicy slices of meat.

It feels like a family celebration, and I love it. Poppy and Steagor are there, as are a one-eyed warrior named Vark and his human mate, Hazel. Ozork introduces me to his older sister, Orsha, who has come to the party with her quiet orc mate who seems out of place because he keeps scribbling something in a small journal he keeps in the breast pocket of his vest. After I observe him in bemusement for a while, Ozork whispers at me that he's a poet, and a good one at that.

Mara sits on the opposite end of the table, and the captain, who got seated next to me, keeps sending her longing glances which she's ignoring completely—but she peers at him whenever she's certain he's turned the other way.

I have high hopes for them, if they both get out of their own way and talk.

After the plates are put away, Mara brings a tray of pastries to the table, delicate little things soaked in honey and filled with ground nut paste. I swipe one from the tray and bite down on it, humming happily at the taste.

Beside me, Ozork clears his throat and nudges me with his knee. I glance up at him to find him staring at my mouth, and from how his gaze darkens, I

know exactly what he's thinking. Instead of setting down the second half of the pastry, however, I put it in my mouth and lick my fingers one by one.

His hand disappears under the table, and he grips my knee, then squeezes in warning. I hide my grin behind my napkin as I dab at my lips. I'm only paying him back for his rude departure earlier.

He leans close and whispers in my ear, "I can still scent myself on you. Thank you."

I'm about to comment how unfair it is that I can't smell myself on him, for he must be equally covered with my scent, when the king stands and lifts a hand so we all fall silent. He looks from one guest to another until he settles on Ozork and me.

"I have an announcement to make," he booms. "A very good friend came to ask me a favor the other day. He's never once asked for anything, though he's been at my side all these years, the most loyal companion an orc could wish for."

I glance at Ozork to find him smiling lightly, his gaze on his empty pastry plate. Under the table, I reach for his hand, the one still resting on my knee, and he squeezes my fingers in answer.

"I invited you here tonight," King Gorvor continues, "to celebrate a very special occasion and witness a small ceremony."

My heart skips a beat, then thunders wildly. Did he...? I stare at my orc mate to figure out whether what I'm thinking is true. Did he organize a wedding for us without my knowledge? For what other ceremony could the king be on about? Yet this is nothing like any wedding I've ever been to.

I focus on the king again. He steps away from the table, puts on his iron crown, and reaches for a sheaf of papers on his desk. He carries that and his golden seal back to where Dawn has removed his plate and made space for whatever he means to do.

"Ozork, son of Bram, will you come closer?"

My mate gives my hand another quick squeeze, then stands and approaches the king. They clasp hands, and King Gorvor claps him on the shoulder, then releases him and says, "Kneel."

Ozork drops to one knee without hesitation, so he must have expected this. I stand, unable to see exactly what's going on past the other orcs' bulky forms.

"I haven't done this since before we left the old kingdom," the king murmurs to his queen.

She gives him a brilliant smile, and he turns back to Ozork, then places his hand on my future husband's head.

"With this, I name you Lord Ozork, Duke of the Black Bear Clan." Then he offers him his hand and pulls him to his feet. "You've always been part of my court, friend, and giving you your due makes me very happy."

Together, they lean over the papers and scribble signatures here and there, and the king adds two thick blobs of crimson wax and presses his seal into the contracts. He hands one to Ozork, who grins widely, his gaze on me, and the room explodes in noise, clapping and calls echoing off the earthen walls.

Only I stand still, staring at him, my eyes filling with tears. He strides over to me, sets the document giving him noble status on the table, and takes my face in both hands.

"What did you do?" I whisper.

His scarred lips twitch up in one corner. "I became a duke. Now you'll get your inheritance when we get married." He leans down and gives me a soft kiss, right there in front of everyone. "I would never take your future away from you."

I clutch his arms, still unable to believe it. "No one has ever done anything like this for me."

"You deserve it, love."

He brushes his thumb over my cheek, then draws me into a tight hug. All too soon, he's pulled away from me by others who want to congratulate him on his newly acquired title, so I step back and study the gathered crowd. They're Ozork's closest friends, his family, the ones he invited to this important event. Then there's the captain, the only one of my guards who I really know—and the person I want to have by my side when I marry Ozork.

Everyone we need is here.

I wait for Orsha to release her brother, then step up to him and tug on his hand until he leans down to me.

"Could we get married?" I whisper.

He rears back, his brown eyes wide. "Of course, but I thought you'd want to wait..." He motions toward Poppy, who's sitting in Steagor's lap now, feeding him bits of pastry. "Poppy is taking some time off work, so she won't be able to make your gown."

I clench my fingers around his hand. "I meant now. Today." I glance sideways at the king. "I don't need a big wedding, Ozork. I just want you, and I don't want to wait. I would have married you when you were just

Ozork, not a lord, and that didn't change with you doing this wonderful thing for me."

He smiles then, a beautiful, joyful grin that has me laughing in return.

"All right, then," he says. "Let's ask Gorvor."



The guests at Ozork's party are only too happy to keep celebrating once they realize what we're planning. Mara plucks several boughs of holly from the centerpiece on the table and ties them expertly into a bouquet of dark green and bright red. Steagor and Vark get into a growling argument about who will stand up as Ozork's witness, until Orsha breaks up the bickering and says that since neither of them have ever bested her in the fighting ring, she will be the one to stand beside her brother on this important day.

I turn to Captain Hawke, intending to ask him to be my witness, and he nods before I even get the question out, saying, "It would be my honor."

His smile matches mine as we take our places beside Ozork and Orsha. The king, who had put his crown away, replaces it on his head, then straightens his shoulders and faces us.

"I haven't had much practice with this, either," he admits with a wry smile. "We don't often get marriages after our clanspeople find their mates."

"Marut got married to Violet," Ozork objects. "I was his witness."

"Well, I only meant to say that my words may be a little rusty," King Gorvor says. "So you'll have to forgive me."

He leads us through a short ceremony in which Ozork and I exchange vows of fidelity and respect, of love and devotion—though I notice any mentions of obedience are curiously absent. We both repeat them, and when the king prompts Ozork to kiss me, I realize that this is it. I wrap my arms around Ozork's neck and cling to him as he lifts me off the floor and kisses me deeply. I have a husband now, an orc who loves me more than life itself. My heart threatens to burst with happiness, so I laugh and cry at the same time, kissing him back with all I have.

We listen to several toasts from our friends, which increase in exuberance and volume the more mead is consumed. The orcs water down the strong liquor for the humans, but I still feel its effects grip me. My cheeks are warm, my heartbeat fluttering each time Ozork casts a heated glance at me.

Then someone has the brilliant idea to fetch Ozork's fiddle, and he plays for us, happy tunes that prompt several of the couples to sway and dance in the small space beside the king's table.

When Ozork pauses between songs, King Gorvor sits beside my husband and puts his arm around his shoulders. "It's good to see you happy, my friend," he says softly. "We've come a long way, haven't we?"

Ozork looks up and finds me watching them. His smile is intimate, meant just for me. "Aye, so we have."

Then it's time to leave, and anticipation flutters inside me. Ozork packs up his fiddle, takes the case in one hand, and offers the other to me. He leads me into the darkened corridor beyond, and I realize how late it must be by now. The lanterns have been turned down for the night, so I have to lean on Ozork to guide me through the gloom.

We make our way through the Hill, encountering only two orcs who are hurrying off to bed after a long day. I yawn as the excitement catches up with me, and Ozork chuckles, tucking me into his side.

"It's our wedding night," I whisper, even though there's no one around. "Do we need to consummate our marriage?"

Ozork shakes his head, his long braid falling over one shoulder. "We did that ahead of time, remember? You'll be too sore tonight to repeat that. Tomorrow, I'll find Taris and get you a healing balm that will help you, and with time, you won't need it anymore."

I whine in protest, but he only kisses me and says he doesn't want to hurt me. And I understand—we did something incredible today, but my body needs time to learn to accept his fully.

"All right," I mutter. "But we're spending all day in bed tomorrow."

"You'll find no argument from me," he replies.

We pass a smaller tunnel that branches off to our right, toward the center of the Hill. Compared to the rest of the way we've walked, it's brightly lit, the glow coming from a number of lanterns hanging on the walls.

"Where does that lead to?" I ask. Then I yawn again, covering my mouth with my hand. "I don't think I've been this way before."

Ozork pauses for a fraction of a second. "Nothing. Only a storage space." Then he pulls me closer to his side and presses a kiss to my temple. "Come on, love, let's get you to bed."

We decide that Ozork will spend the night in my room, because it's closer, and we'd have to move Thistle if I decided to go to his.

“Tomorrow, we will pack all your things and carry them over,” Ozork declares.

I nod sleepily as I pull back the covers and scoot over to the far side of the bed. “All right. Where will Thistle sleep?”

Ozork mutters something that sounds suspiciously like, “Anywhere, as long as it’s not my bed,” but when I peer up at him, he only says, “We’ll figure it out tomorrow.”

He washes as well, turns down the lantern so it only emits the softest glow for my sake, and lies in bed with me. Then he opens his arms for me, and I roll into the space he created, groaning as his warmth leaches into me.

“I love you, Willow,” he murmurs. “I didn’t think I’d end up married tonight, but it couldn’t have been more perfect.”

“Mm,” I agree. “I love you, too.”

Ozork falls asleep beside me, his breaths deepening, his heartbeat slowing down. From how tired I was earlier, I expected to sink into a dreamless sleep soon after, but something pokes at me, a niggling thought that’s trying to force its way through the fog of tipsiness and fatigue.

I scrunch my eyes closed in an effort to convince myself to sleep, and it hits me.

The corridor. The one narrow tunnel that was so brightly lit in the middle of the night. Ozork had said that it led to a storage space, but why would a pantry or a linen closet need so much light? Very slowly, I extricate myself from Ozork’s arms and gaze down at him, my heart breaking wide open.

My husband, who promised to always tell me the truth, had lied to me.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

It starts with a silly idea. I leave the bed because I don't want to wake Ozork with my tossing and turning, and I sit in my armchair in the half darkness, trying to think things through. I could wait until morning and demand an answer from him. That would be the most sensible solution—if I could trust him to tell me the truth. But I've already asked him about the corridor, and he'd lied to my face.

The thought stings more than it should. I *love* him, and to think that he doesn't trust me is beyond painful. I want to stomp my feet and yell at him for hurting me, but at the same time, I'm afraid of what he'll do. What if he decides that I'm not worth the hassle? What if this entire thing was a ploy by King Gorvor to wed someone from the clan to the Duke of Ultrup's niece? Now that Ozork is a lord, marriage to me means he'll gain access to my entire dowry, which is a *lot* of money. It was what every other suitor wanted, after all.

Bile rises in my throat, and I have to swallow thickly to force it down. I retreat to the privy niche to splash more water on my face and rinse out my mouth, but all that does is leave my teeth chattering from the cold. So I quietly put on Ozork's tunic over my chemise, then layer on the bathing robe I'd brought from one of my trips to the baths and never returned.

And then I realize I'm already dressed—and I should just visit the corridor myself and figure out what the fuss is all about. I pick up my walking boots and tiptoe out of the room, cringing when the hinges creak softly. Thistle lifts his soft head from the pillow in his basket and looks at me, green eyes gleaming in the lantern light.

"I'll be right back," I mouth to the cat, which is ridiculous—but I'm

really speaking to Ozork, promising him to return, even though he doesn't know it.

My husband must be tired from the festivities as well, and perhaps the mead didn't only affect me, because he doesn't stir as I slip outside. I walk barefoot for a while, afraid to make a noise, then pause to put on my boots. Wishing I didn't have to do this, I set off through the corridors, pausing at every twist and turn to check whether anyone is coming my way. Only once do I hear footsteps ahead of me, so I hide in a niche in the wall and wait for them to die down. Then I continue on, hoping I remember the correct way from my room to the king's chambers, because the corridor was right...

There.

The bright-yellow light spills from the mouth of the tunnel onto the floor of the main corridor. I tiptoe closer, all my senses on alert. I grimace as I remember that the orcs' senses are much sharper than mine, so whoever is in there might hear me much quicker than I would hear them. But they're not anticipating my arrival, which is my only advantage.

My mind whirls with all the various possibilities of what might be hiding in here. If it's something dangerous or bad, I'll have to get Captain Hawke and inform him of it. Pausing, I scrunch my eyes shut at my stupidity. I should have woken Owen to help me tonight. He could stand watch while I explored. Then I remember that he'd also had some mead at dinner and he's likely sleeping it off like the rest of the wedding party.

My heart twists painfully again at the thought of our lovely ceremony. I'd been so *happy*. Until that moment, I hadn't allowed myself to admit how much I wanted to be married, how much I wanted a husband who'd love me unconditionally. I was so certain I'd found that with Ozork, but now...

I come to a bend in the corridor, but a murmur of voices stops me before I peer around it. Godsdamnit, there are guards posted to protect whatever is hidden here. What if it's not a thing but a person? Are they keeping someone captive?

I crawl back toward the main corridor, then toe my boots off. I'm afraid of them scuffing on the floor, and I know I'll be much quieter barefoot. Then I attempt to get closer for the second time. I hold my breath as I creep forward, keeping close to the wall but taking care that my robe doesn't brush against it.

At the bend, I close my eyes for a moment, praying to the gods that whoever is guarding the passage is sufficiently distracted and tired from the

late hour. Then I slowly lean forward, willing the guards not to pay attention.

First, the edge of a thick iron fence comes into view. It's set directly into the wall of the tunnel, reaching from top to bottom. The spaces between the iron bars are barely enough for a fist to pass through, and I can't see what's beyond it at all. Then I notice hinges at the top—there's a door cut into the grate, one that must be operated by the pulley system on the wall.

And there's the first guard's chair. He's turned slightly away from me, his brown tunic stretching over his broad shoulders. A weapons belt bristling with knives is fastened around his waist, and his hair hangs loose down his back. I don't recognize him, at least not from this vantage point, but I know his companion, even from his profile. Neekar is focused on the game of cards set up on a low table between them, his eyebrows pinched in concentration. A small pile of copper coins rests beside his hand.

I allow myself only a moment to study the bars and the pulleys, then slowly pull back. But as I start to straighten myself to hide behind the wall again, my braid swings over my shoulder in a long arc, dangling freely.

Neekar's gaze snaps to me, no doubt alerted by the sudden movement of my hair. His hand flies to his waist, where a short sword is sheathed, and his eyes flare wide, and then I see nothing more because I'm running, my instinct pushing me forward. I ignore my boots—there's no time, no time—and instead dash toward my room where Ozork is.

I need to get to Ozork before—

A strong hand wraps itself around my arm and wrenches me to an abrupt stop. I cry out, more from shock than pain, and whirl around to face Neekar.

“Willow?” he asks, bemused. “What are you doing here?”

I pant, panic rising in my chest, and shake my head. He's not even breathing hard from running after me. Why did I think I had a chance...?

“Who is it?” The other orc guard appears behind us, then glances back toward the corridor. “One of the humans? What is she doing here?”

Neekar stares down at me, something like disappointment making his handsome features harsher than usual. “Uram, would you get someone to guard the grate? Then fetch Ozork, please. We'll wait for you in the king's chambers.”



The walk to King Gorvor's rooms is silent. After Uram took off at a run, Neekar asked me whether I would try to run or if he could trust me to walk on my own, and I'd promised him to stay meekly beside him. Not that he believes me. He's been casting suspicious glances at me the entire way, but I didn't try to run. I wouldn't get far, considering how fast he is, and there are guards at the main gate who would undoubtedly stop me if I tried to leave. Besides, there is nowhere for me to run in the middle of a winter night.

So I step beside him as calmly as I can, even though my feet are freezing and my teeth are chattering again—from fear this time, not cold. Whatever is hidden in that corridor must be of great importance to trigger such a reaction. And by snooping around, I might have stumbled upon a secret that will cost me everything.

At the door to the king's chambers, Neekar lets out a long sigh. "He won't be happy about this."

I only nod, because my throat is too tight for words, but I imagine he's right. Still, I don't try to stop the guard from knocking softly on the wide wooden door, nor do I run away when the door swings open to reveal a very grumpy, shirtless monarch of the Black Bear Clan.

"What is it?" he says, squinting in the lantern light. "Godsdamnit, Neekar, this better be important. Arvel is growing his molars, and I only just fell asleep..."

Then his gaze falls on me, and he shuts his mouth with a click. He takes in my strange attire, my mussed hair, and bare feet, then looks back at Neekar and raises his dark eyebrows in a clear question.

"She wandered into the corridor where Uram and I were stationed tonight," Neekar says. "I thought it best to bring her to you for a little...talk."

"Fuck." The king retreats into his room. "Let me grab a shirt. Wait here, and don't make a sound. If you think I'm unhappy with being woken up right now, you do not want to know what Dawn would do to you."

My legs tremble as we wait in silence, and I badly want to lean on the wall, but I don't dare move. Most of all, I want to ask where Ozork is, but now that the first flash of panic has receded, I realize how badly I've messed up. He will *know*. By now, Uram will have found him, and he'll know that I left our bed on our wedding night to snoop around the Hill. Because the truth *will* come out. Neekar might have told the king that I'd wandered into the corridor, but he saw me peering around the corner, not bumping into walls like I would have if I'd been sleepwalking.

Another thought crystallizes, shocking me with its intensity. The moment Neekar spotted me, I ran—but not away from him. Instead, I ran toward Ozork, because my panicked mind imagined him as safety. Even though I knew he'd lied to me, I instinctively knew he'd protect me.

The king appears, wearing his shirt and boots this time, carefully closes the door, and motions for us to follow. I fall into step with Neekar again, even though I can barely put one foot in front of the other. I clasp my elbows in an effort to stop the shaking. I have no idea where they're taking me, and Ozork isn't here. Neither is the captain, who would undoubtedly take my side in all of this.

We end up in a small sitting room that must be for the king's personal use as there's a wooden horse on the floor beside an armchair and a cardigan hanging forgotten from the back of a settee.

The king motions for me to take a seat, then lowers himself into the armchair with a groan and pinches the bridge of his nose between two fingers. He motions at Neekar to approach him, and they speak in hushed tones before the younger orc moves back to stand guard at the door.

"Let's wait for everyone to arrive before we start," King Gorvor says.

He stares at me, his gaze shrewd. This male has built up an entire, very prosperous realm in a decade. He's known to be fair to his subjects but metes out swift justice to his enemies. For so long, I thought I'd fall into the latter bucket, and if things hadn't changed with Ozork, I would be afraid for my life right now.

As it stands, I know I've done nothing wrong. I may have come here with an ulterior motive, but my thoughts and feelings couldn't be more different than they were when I first arrived. I only hope I'll be able to prove that to the king—and to Ozork.

"Do you want Ozork present for this talk?" the king asks after a long silence.

He's been studying me, or perhaps just gathering his thoughts since we woke him up so rudely.

I think about his question. Ozork lied to me, but he's inextricably linked to my time here, and he deserves to know the truth—and so do I. I want to know what has prompted him to lie to me after he'd promised to always be honest, so I nod to the king.

A knock on the door soon interrupts us, and King Gorvor calls for the newcomers to enter. And there he is. Ozork steps into the room, closely

followed by Uram. The king thanks the guard and asks him to return to his post, which I'm grateful for. I don't want too many witnesses to this conversation.

Ozork stares at me, eyes wild, then crouches next to the settee. His hands tremble as he palms my face and brings my forehead down to his. "What's going on, Willow? I woke up to Uram banging on your door and realized you weren't there."

I grasp his wrist, though I don't allow myself to kiss him. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"For what?" Ozork demands. He glances over his shoulder at the king. "Gorvor, what's this all about?"

The door bursts open without a knock, and Captain Hawke barges into the room, his blond hair disheveled. "My lady!" He takes in the situation and stops abruptly, likely realizing I'm not in immediate danger. "I came as soon as I heard. I didn't have the time to rouse the other soldiers..."

"That's all right," I tell him quickly. "We won't need them."

I'm not entirely sure that's true, but I don't want to cause a fight. Especially not since we're clearly outnumbered—Mara follows the captain into the room, her dressing robe thrown hastily over a nightgown, her long black hair undone.

The king shifts in his chair and asks, "Willow, is there anything you want to say before we begin?"

I glance from him to Ozork and back. My thoughts race with all the possibilities, but there is only one way to prove that I had nothing bad in mind on my nighttime wander.

"Could I get the notes from my room, please?" I ask. "I would like to show them to you."

King Gorvor studies me for a moment, then asks, "Would you allow Neekar to fetch them?"

Ozork lets out a low growl at that. "Why wouldn't she be allowed to do it herself?"

I clench my hand around his. "It's all right. Neekar will be faster." I turn to the younger orc. "The papers are all on my desk. Just bring the lot, please."

He looks at the king, who gives him a nod of agreement, then says, "I'll have to watch out for your cat. He has been hissing at me every time I pass him in the corridor."

I straighten at that. "Please, don't hurt him. He only doesn't like strange

men.”

I try not to think of how lovely Thistle has been toward Ozork from the start. Clearly, he knows how much my husband means to me.

“I would never,” Neekar says solemnly. “But his claws are very sharp.”

This conversation is too strange, given that I was caught trespassing in some sort of secret corridor, but I whisper, “You can use some dried fish to lure him into his carrier. And don’t forget that he needs to go to the bathroom and have some water.”

Perhaps I shouldn’t be giving him instructions on how to get past my furry guardian, but I don’t want anything to happen to Thistle. Neekar nods and leaves, and a tense silence falls over the room as we all stare at each other, waiting for *someone* to begin.

But the monarch of the Black Bear Clan seems content to wait for his warrior’s return. I gave Neekar clear instructions—and he returns soon after, carrying what looks like the entirety of the papers and books from my room. I didn’t know I’d amassed that many, but he sets them on a table next to the king.

“Willow, would you mind explaining what you were doing in that corridor in the middle of the night?” King Gorvor asks, sifting through the pages. “Neekar said you were sneaking around, peering around the corner.”

So he *did* rat me out earlier. I huff at the thought, but I suppose he couldn’t keep this crucial information from his king.

But Ozork speaks before I can. “You went there? Why?”

His question sparks anger inside me. I focus on him instead of the king and lift my chin. “Because you lied to me.”

Ozork blinks, then understanding dawns in his eyes. A moment later, it’s followed by shame, and he lowers his head over my hand, squeezing my fingers.

“Forgive me,” he murmurs. “So I did.”

My throat closes up, and I put my hand on Ozork’s nape, sifting my fingers through his silky hair. It’s entirely unfair. I can’t even hold a grudge toward him when he’s being all contrite like this.

“For gods’ sake,” the king explodes. He waves around a stack of papers he’d just pulled from the pile. “I will not have a spy in my clan. So, Willow, I would ask you to start talking. I want to know what’s going on.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

He's holding the notes I wrote, everything I'd observed in the Hill since the day I arrived, and he doesn't seem pleased about it.

"I know this looks bad," I begin, "but I want you to know that I would never willingly endanger anyone in your kingdom."

The king shuffles through the papers. "There are notes here on guard rotations. Storage capacities of our larders. The number of children in our school." His gaze is dark and dangerous as he pulls out the crudely drawn map of the Hill. "There is even a map with all the strategic spaces clearly marked."

"I drew that," the captain interrupts. He steps forward and points at the paper. "That's mine."

I think he's trying to protect me, but I can't let him take the fall for this. There's been enough lying, and I don't want to continue the vicious cycle of secrets.

"Yes, you drew it *for me*," I say, emphasizing the words. "My lord, the notes were going to be part of my report to the Duke of Ultrup. He sent me here to learn as much about your kingdom—but mostly to uncover the secrets to your success. I've written down every possible weakness one could exploit to gain advantage over your clan."

"Willow," Ozork gasps. His dark eyes are wide with shock—and hurt.

The knowledge that he's in pain because of me cuts deeply, and when he goes to pull his hand from mine, I dig my fingernails into his palm, desperate to hold on. If he would only wait a little longer so I can explain...

I breathe a little more easily when he relaxes his grip, no longer trying to shift away.

“I talked to Captain Hawke,” I continue, “and he mentioned that all the spaces in the Hill seemed to be constructed in circles around *something*.” I motion at the sketch of the map that the king is studying. “There’s an empty space right in the middle. And that corridor...it seemed to be leading toward it. So when Ozork and I passed it returning from your chambers tonight, I asked him what it was.”

Ozork runs a palm over his face. “And I told you it was nothing.”

“Only a storage space, you said,” I confirm. “And I couldn’t get it out of my head. Why would a storage space be the most brightly lit space in the Hill in the middle of the night?” I shrug, then add, “So I went to investigate.”

The king scans the papers, one after another, and his skin turns ashen at whatever he’s reading in my notes. Then he lifts his head and frowns at me. “You said these were going to be a part of your report to the duke.”

I nod, hoping he has come to the right conclusion. “That’s right.”

“But...you changed your mind?” he asks.

I remove my hand from Ozork’s grip and stand slowly. “If you’ll allow me...?” I ask, reaching for the stack of papers.

The king hands them to me, and I rifle through them until I find several pages I’d written out in a clean hand, without the scribbles in the margins and abbreviations no one but me could hope to understand.

“This is the beginning of my current report for the duke,” I say and hand the stack to the king, then take my seat again because I’m still not certain my legs would hold me upright.

His eyes dart this way and that as he scans what I’ve written. At the end of the first page, he hums thoughtfully, then hands the paper to Mara. “Here, read this.”

She dives right in while he continues down to the second page. They exchange the pieces of paper until they finish reading what I’ve written so far. The king’s expression is inscrutable, but a small smile tugs at the corner of Mara’s lips. She glances at me, her eyes sparkling, then goes to stand next to the captain, as if she cannot bear to be far from him for long, even though they’re not touching.

“May I read those as well?” Ozork asks.

I bite my lip and look at the king, who nods and hands his friend all the pages of the half-finished report. Ozork tilts the papers toward the lantern and reads. By the end of the first page, his eyebrows pinch together in confusion. He places the paper face down on the settee next to me and reads the second.

By the third, frustration radiates off him in waves, and he scans the rest of the report quickly, eyes skipping over the lines.

“But this...” he starts. He raises his head and glances from me to the king and back. “It’s completely useless!”

“Yes,” I agree simply.

He shuffles the papers again, frowning at the paragraphs. “You didn’t mention any details at all.”

I raise one eyebrow and point at a description of Poppy’s workshop. “On the contrary, I listed all the details right here. Imported silks from the south are very much in demand in Ultrup, so it’s a small coup that Poppy has managed to get so many bolts in such beautiful colors.”

“There aren’t any *relevant* details,” Ozork growls and shoves the papers back at the king.

“No, I suppose not,” I reply. “But how would I know what relevant details would be? I’ve never been given tutors to explain battle strategy to me.”

Somewhere behind me, Captain Hawke covers a snort of laughter with a cough.

The king shoots him an annoyed look, then asks, “Is the rest of your report going to be similarly...entertaining?”

I clench my hands in my lap to keep them from fluttering. “I expect so. I haven’t reported on the number of your chickens yet, or the dishes you serve at your dinner parties. I’m also looking forward to describing the decorations for the solstice celebration.”

“We’ll have to make them very beautiful, then,” Mara quips, “if you’ll write about them to the Duke of Ultrup.”

The king taps his knuckles on the notes clutched in his hands. “Do you mind if I keep these, Willow? You raised some excellent questions about the safety of the Hill I’ll have to think through.”

“Of course,” I say, “but there’s more I haven’t had time to write down yet.”

The king frowns at me. “More than this?” He waves the papers again. “You’re wrong about our children being unguarded, just so you know. All our teachers go through battle training with Orsha, so they themselves act as guards.”

I smile despite myself. “Ah, that explains a lot. But I meant your water supply. All your drinking water comes from a single source, yes? It would be

awfully easy to tamper with.”

The king’s skin turns ashen again. “I’ll add that to the list. If you notice anything else while you’re exploring the Hill, let me know.” With that, he stands and heads for the door. “Ozork, I believe Willow would enjoy a stroll to that cursed corridor. And I will enjoy some sleep—if Arvel hasn’t woken up in the meantime.”

At the door, he turns back. “I would ask you for a promise,” he says, facing me. “I think you will understand it once you see what Ozork will show you, but I need your promise that you will never speak of this to anyone outside our clan.”

I nod immediately. “Of course, my lord. You have my word.”

“The future of our kingdom depends on it,” he says. Then he hands Ozork a big iron key he unclips from his belt, and my husband promises him that he will bring it back first thing in the morning.

The king is about to leave when Mara stops him with a hand to his arm.

“I would like to show Owen the same,” she says.

King Gorvor eyes her for a long moment, then asks, “Will you vouch for him?”

“Aye,” she says without hesitation.

“All right. Is that all, or does anyone else have an emergency?” He stares at us, expression stern, and when no one speaks, he blows out a long breath. “Thank the gods. Good night, everyone.”

Mara takes the captain by his wrist and tugs him through the door. “We’ll wait for you outside and go together,” she says, then shuts the door behind her.

I don’t know if I’m grateful to her for giving Ozork and me a moment of privacy or if I’d prefer to have this conversation later.

Ozork sits next to me. “Willow.” He takes my hand, flips it so my palm is facing up, and presses both thumbs into the soft flesh.

The touch is so comforting, as if he knows how tightly my hands were clenched all through this meeting. He gently massages one hand, then takes the other and repeats the same, all without speaking. Only when my shoulders relax and I drag in my first full breath does he stop.

“I’m sorry I didn’t wake you,” I whisper. Now that he has calmed me with his hands, I can speak the words without crying. “You lied to me, and I didn’t know what to do about it.”

He shakes his head, his head bowed over my hands. “Will you ever

forgive me? I didn't want to lie, but this is a secret that concerns the entire clan. I would have spoken to the king about it soon, because you're my wife. You're my mate, and you're a part of this clan, so you deserve to know. But it wasn't my secret to share."

I bite my lip. "All right. But can we make another agreement? If there's something you cannot tell me, just say so. I won't pry. There will be things that come up that you won't be able to tell me, I know that. I just felt so horrible after I realized you deliberately gave me a wrong answer."

Ozork lifts his head, hope and relief warring in his expression. "You don't hate me for it?"

My lips quirk up in a small smile. "I could never hate you. I love you too much for that."

He lets out a shuddering exhale, then kisses me, his firm lips capturing mine. "I agree to your proposal. And I love you, too."

I clutch the front of his vest, which I now realize he has put on without his tunic—because I borrowed that from him for my exploration. I giggle and run my palms up his bare arms. "I like this look a lot."

Ozork grabs my hips and draws me closer for another deep kiss. "And I like smelling myself on you." At last, he pulls back and stands. "Come on, we shouldn't keep the others waiting."

I take his offered hand and wobble to my feet. "Where are we going, exactly?"

Ozork's eyes light up. "To the Heart of the Hill."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Mara and the captain walk in front of us, not touching but leaning their heads close together. I watch them for a while, then glance up at Ozork, who has me tucked into his side, his arm wrapped around my shoulders. I incline my head toward the couple and shrug. In answer, he merely smiles and shakes his head, and I understand.

They'll find their own happiness when the time is right.

So even though I'd love to interfere, to possibly lock them together in a room and force them to just *talk* until they figure something out, I keep my mouth shut and pretend I don't notice how Mara sniffs the captain delicately while they turn the corner.

"What is the Heart of the Hill?" I ask. "You're all being so very secretive about it."

Ozork's scar pulls at his skin as he smiles. "Patience, love. Everything will be clear soon."

He's right—Mara and Owen have already turned into the lit-up corridor. We arrive at the thick iron grate, and four guards are there, waiting for us.

"You've increased the security?" I ask.

But Ozork shakes his head. "No, that's how many orcs are needed to open the gate." He nods at Uram, who in turn directs the other three guards to the system. "Overnight, no one is supposed to go in or out, so we only keep two guards here."

Ozork inserts the king's key into a massive iron lock that clicks loudly. The four orcs strain and pull, and the iron portcullis slowly lifts from the floor of the tunnel. Soon, the opening is tall enough for us to slip through, and Ozork ushers us to the other side—first Mara and me, then Owen, until

he's the last to pass under the iron bars. The orcs lower the gate carefully, and Ozork thanks them, then takes a lantern from the wall.

Mara follows his example and nudges Owen's boot with the tip of her slipper. "You should take one. It'll be dark at this time of night."

Curiosity rising inside me, I pick up a small lantern as well. I don't want to be the only one without a light. Then we set out down the corridor, into the darkness. Our lanterns cast flickering shadows on the walls of the tunnel, which, I notice now, is rock rather than earth. We've reached the very bedrock of this massive mountain, and a shiver passes through me at the realization of just how deep underground we are.

Then the corridor ends, opening into a vast black chamber beyond. We all raise our lanterns instinctively, but the light doesn't reach the ceiling. From how our footsteps echo, the cavern must be enormous, and there's a drip of water somewhere nearby, each *plink* of the waterdrops magnified by echoes.

"It's a natural cavern," Ozork murmurs. "Similar to the one with the baths."

Mara walks forward, keeping her lantern low now to see where she's going. "We didn't discover it until we'd already moved into the Hill. I remember the first time I saw it. I didn't believe it was real."

My husband lets out a chuckle. "That's right. I forgot you were the leader of the little gang that found it. How old were you at the time?"

Mara turns on her heels and glares at him. "Seventeen, and it wasn't a gang. We were just trying to escape Orsha and her exhausting training sessions."

The captain stumbles, then curses softly. "What is that? Why would someone leave this lying around..." His voice trails off, and then he breathes out a low, "*Oh.*"

"What is it?" I ask, hurrying closer as fast as I dare in the low light.

Then I notice the glimmer on the floor. At first, I think it's a trench someone dug, several feet wide and filled with water, and I don't understand what has Owen staring so intently.

But it's not just the lantern's glow that's turning the world around us yellow. The thing inside the trench isn't fluid at all but solid, and it shines yellow. No, not yellow—gold.

"Is that...?" I shuffle closer and peer into the trench. It's not as deep as I thought from a distance. I crouch beside it and reach inside, my fingers brushing against cool metal.

“How deep does it go?” Owen asks. His voice is raspy, as if he’s having trouble speaking. “How high?”

Because he’s walking forward, following the golden vein, and I see now that it continues up the far wall of the cavern, splitting it nearly in two. When he lifts his lantern as high as he can reach, its glow illuminates a forest of stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

“Deep enough,” Ozork replies. “We won’t run out anytime soon.”

I stand and face him, my mind whirring. “This is how you...” I press my hand to my forehead. “This is how the clan has managed to achieve everything. You’re minting your own gold marks?”

He nods, a little warily. “Aye, we are. But we were prosperous before we discovered it.”

I twist in place, taking in the enormity of this information. If it came to light, if my uncle or the King of Styria discovered it...

“How have you kept it secret all this time?” I whisper. “People would kill for this.”

“We know,” Mara says. “Which is why we only tell those we trust with our lives.”

Owen stares at her. “And you decided to tell me?”

She whirls away, but not before I see the smile tugging up her full lips.

I turn to Ozork. “Thank you for bringing me here. And I understand now why you couldn’t show me until now.”

He kisses me lightly on the lips. “I wanted to. But we all had to be certain that this information wouldn’t spread to the human lands.”

Something niggles at me, a fear that crystallizes when I find the captain with my gaze again. “Oh.” I walk to him and tap his shoulder until he faces me. “What if the duke orders you to tell him everything you saw here?”

Owen grits his teeth so hard, a muscle jumps in his cheek. And I understand—he’s deeply honored that Mara decided to include him in her circle of trusted friends, but he is also bound by duty. It’s exactly what we discussed days ago, when I’d suggested he could simply remain here.

“You could order me not to,” he finally blurts out.

I cock my head to the side. “What?”

He passes his fingers through his messy blond hair. “In Ultrup, the duke assigned me to you, correct?” At my nod, he goes on, “So if you are now my superior, an order from you would work.”

His reasoning is sound, but he’s missing something.

“You’re forgetting that the duke is *my* superior,” I counter. “The chain of command is clear.”

But Owen grins, his gaze a little wicked. “Not anymore. You married Ozork last night, did you not? And by marriage, you’re now part of the Black Bear Clan. Which means that if I serve you, I am, too.”

Mara laughs, her voice echoing around the cavern. “That’s some convoluted logic, Captain.”

I have to agree with her, but if this helps him keep his sense of duty intact and protects the clan’s secret at the same time... “Captain Hawke, I hereby forbid you from ever speaking about the Heart of the Hill or any other clan secrets to anyone outside the clan, and especially the Duke of Ultrup,” I recite.

He bows deeply. “Thank you, my lady.”

I groan and nudge him with my elbow. “We’ll have a difficult time explaining to my uncle that we’re now determined to remain here. And that we’ve both developed a case of silliness and can only report on how good the spiced cakes were.”

Owen nods gravely. “We’ll send most of the soldiers home tomorrow before they discover anything and we have to swear them to secrecy. You’ll have to write a very convincing letter for your uncle, or else the duke will send an army here to try and save you from the evil orcs.”

I shudder at the thought. “I’ll see what I can do.”

As we leave the gold mine, Ozork tugs me close again and kisses the top of my head. “You’re taking this awfully well.”

I squint up at him. “I think I’m still in shock. I thought I was marrying a poor orc soldier, and now you’re a lord with access to a massive gold mine. My world has been turned upside down.” Then I yawn, barely covering my mouth with my hand. “And I haven’t had any sleep tonight.”

We leave our lanterns at the iron gate, where the four guards raise the portcullis for us. Ozork locks the gate behind us, and it’s only when he pockets the heavy key that I understand just how much Gorvor trusts him to lend it to him. I’m so proud of him, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life building our family.

Mara announces she’s going off to bed. Owen offers to walk her to her room, and for a moment, I think she’ll refuse him. But her cheeks flush a delicate green, and they amble off together, shoulder to shoulder, though still not touching.

I yawn again, then yelp as Ozork swings me up in his arms. “What are you doing?” I demand.

“Taking you to my room,” he declares. “I need you by my side tonight, and you need rest.”

I squirm, then blurt, “But Thistle...”

“Neekar has him,” Ozork replies. “He won’t let anything happen to him.”

I want to object, but I trust Ozork, and if he trusts the younger orc, I’m going to as well. So I relax in his arms and bury my face in his chest, inhaling his scent. “Ozork?”

“Hmm?” He kisses my temple and continues down the corridor at a steady pace, as if he loves carrying me like this.

“Is it tomorrow yet?” I ask coyly. “You said we couldn’t consummate our marriage because I was too sore, but surely, it’s tomorrow now.”

He lets out a chuckle that reverberates through my body, but he does step faster. “Aye, it’s tomorrow, love.” His palm finds its way under the hem of my nightgown, and he gives my thigh a firm squeeze. “We’ll have all the tomorrows we want.”

I grin up at him. “That’s wonderful.”

EPILOGUE

Five months later.

The duke's palace, Ulstrup.

I thank the maid who knocked on our door early this morning to inform us that the duke will receive us after breakfast. She took one glance at my mussed-up hair and offered to braid it for me, and though I've gotten used to doing it myself or allowing Ozork to braid it for me, I accepted her help. She leaves, and I admire the style she crafted for me, a severe twist that pins up most of my long curls but leaves several strands free at the front to soften the overall effect.

Ozork, who has been lying in bed all this time, watching us, now stretches like a big cat and lets out a groan. "Your bed is too small for an orc, love. Can we move to an inn tonight? They have larger beds there."

I get up from my seat in front of the vanity table. "Of course it's too small. This is my childhood bedroom. I wasn't supposed to entertain gentlemen here."

His dark eyes flash at my teasing. "Gentlemen, eh? We'd better not meet any of your former suitors today, or I will have words with them."

I flush at his possessive look. I've told him enough about my previous life that he knows how difficult it is for me to be here, to face my uncle with the full knowledge that he might still decide to go back on his word and refuse to give me my dowry because of who I chose as my husband. But Ozork is here with me, and he's making sure that I'm in a good mood, so I step over to him

and press a kiss to his scarred lips.

“We won’t be meeting any courtiers today if luck is on our side,” I tell him. “But if we do, they’ll hopefully be too scared of you and Neekar to say anything bad out loud. Please remember that the king wouldn’t want you to start a war over today’s meeting.”

We’d arrived in Ultrup late last night, and most of our trading caravan members chose to remain at an inn where the orcs usually stay. Ozork and I decided to head straight to the duke’s residence, though, and when Neekar and Owen offered their help as our guards, my husband readily agreed. He doesn’t trust the duke at all, and I can’t blame him. I’m not at all certain how today will go, so having more than one large orc warrior by my side will offer me some peace of mind.

I open my wardrobe door and inhale the scent of the lavender sachets that the maids have placed in there to keep the moths away. For a moment, I study the hanging gowns, then pick a dark-golden dress that will complement both my hazel eyes and Ozork’s skin. As I shimmy into it, I mentally tally up all the items I’ll have to pack from my chambers and have them delivered to the inn, from where we’ll load them onto our wagons and drive them north to the Hill. I won’t need as many dresses, but I’m sure Poppy will gladly take them from me and tailor them to fit the other human women or even sell them through her workshop.

Ozork is washing at the basin, cursing over the lack of running water at the residence. I’ve gotten very spoiled at the Hill as well, with the access to the wonderful baths at all hours without having to boil the water or lug around a heavy copper tub. When he dries his hands and face on a towel, I motion him closer.

“Will you do up my laces?” I ask him, then give him a back. “And not too tightly.”

He steps up behind me and brushes a cool kiss to the exposed back of my neck. “Aye, I know, love.”

Since I found out I was pregnant with our first child, I’ve asked Poppy to let out several of my day dresses. I’m not really showing yet, but my waist has started to thicken slightly, and this dress hasn’t been altered. I haven’t decided whether I want to tell my uncle about the pregnancy or not. It’s still quite early, and we’ve only told our closest friends about it so far—and my uncle definitely doesn’t count among those.

By talking to my friends at the Hill, to Owen, Mara, and Poppy, and

especially to Ozork, I've come to realize just how unfair my dowry arrangement has been. How awful it was of my uncle to refuse me the right to learn when all I wanted was to study, to work when I wanted to help out. So today's visit is a formality, a way to bring my supposed mission to an end—and a possible start of something new. I'd left Ultrup almost six months ago in what I thought was disgrace, but my trip has turned out to be the most wonderful experience of my life instead of a punishment.

Ozork slowly tightens my laces, checking in with me to make sure I'm not being pinched anywhere. With each tug, he presses kisses to my shoulders, my neck, my cheeks, until I'm squirming in front of him, my need rising. If I thought he was insatiable with me right after our wedding, it's nothing compared to how he's been since I told him I was pregnant.

"Ozork, we can't," I whisper. "You'll mess up my gown and hair, and then we'll be late."

He hums deep in his throat, but he doesn't let me go. Instead, he traces his fingers over my shoulder to my neckline, where he teases the valley between my breasts. "What if I promise you your hair will stay intact? And that I won't wrinkle your dress?"

I bite my lip, trying and failing to keep my gasp to myself. "How?"

He kisses my neck one last time, his morning stubble scraping over my skin and sending goose bumps all over my body. "Kneel on the edge of the bed."

I obey him immediately. I arrange my gown so I'm not crushing it with my knees. He stops behind me and lifts the hem from the back. I already know what he intends to do.

"You have to be quiet." He reaches underneath me to untie my linen underwear. He drags it down to my knees, where it stays, preventing me from spreading my knees any farther. "If you cry out, that maid might come running and find me knot-deep in your pussy."

I grab a pillow and drag it closer. If it comes to it, I'll muffle my screams in it. Gods know that Ozork has perfected his skill of making me senseless in the last couple of months. "I'm ready," I whisper. Already, my pearl pulses with anticipation, and I know he'll find me wet when he touches my pussy.

But my husband is a gentleman, and he never allows me to rush things. He caresses the globes of my ass, teasing the sensitive spot where they meet my thighs. By the time he dips one long finger inside my pussy, I'm so wet, he slides in easily.

“Ozork,” I whisper. “We don’t have the time...”

“We always have time for this,” he retorts. “Your pleasure comes first, love. Meetings can wait.”

The thought of leaving my uncle, the most powerful man in the duchy, waiting so I can climax, is so wicked, I gasp then remember the pillow and tuck my face into it. Ozork slides a second finger inside me, and only pulls all the way out once my thighs are trembling and I’m rocking my hips back, desperate for his touch.

Then he unlaces the front of his leather pants and fits his cockhead to my pussy. Slowly, so slowly, he pushes inside, and we both groan. He slips to the end of me, his knot bumping against my pussy lips. Taking him has become easier, but the fit is still tight, and my inner muscles clench around his girth.

“Fuck, Willow,” he growls. “If you could see yourself now...”

We’re both still mostly dressed, but I’m always naked with him, unable to hide my feelings.

“Ozork!” I brace my hands on the bed, get ready for his first push, and demand, “Fast, please. I need it fast.”

His big hands land on my hips, and he withdraws almost completely, then fucks me with deep, measured thrusts that drag the shaft of his cock over my inner walls. Since I’ve become pregnant, I’ve been even more sensitive. Ozork’s knot brushes my exposed pearl, the pressure just enough to build up my need.

“Do you want my knot today, love?” he rasps, leaning over me to brace one hand on the bed beside mine.

The changed angle sends sparks dancing behind my eyelids, and I know I’m so close. I should say no, because we don’t have the time, but with Ozork covering me so completely, all I smell is his spicy scent, all I feel is his cock, hitting every pleasure spot in my body, and I gasp, “Yes!”

He reaches underneath me and finds my pearl with two fingers. He rolls the pads over it, and the pressure is almost too much, almost too good. I whimper into my pillow. My arms collapse, but Ozork is there, holding me up with his other hand. He pulls me close and flicks my pearl at the same time, and I come hard.

My pleasure steals my voice. I shudder silently in his arms, my pussy clenching around his thick length. Ozork guides my hips back, readying me for him, and when my inner muscles relax, he nudges his knot forward. Then he’s coming, growling into my neck, his hot breath on my skin the only

warning before he bites down on my shoulder, just hard enough to pinch. The fleeting pain is a delicious counterpoint to the pleasure coursing through me as I climax once more from the pulsing of Ozork's knot.

We slow down, our hearts thudding in time, and simply breathe for a while. Ozork caresses my back through my gown, then gently brushes his fingers over the spot where he bit me.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs. "But I think it would be good if you found a shawl to cover this. Just for the morning."

I giggle, then laugh. "Oh gods. I shouldn't have believed you when you said I wouldn't be a mess after this."

Ozork chuckles with me. "Well, your hair has survived mostly intact, at least."

We remain very still for a long while to get his knot to release, and when he slips from me, we both hurry to clean up. I brush down my gown and use several hairpins to fix the curls that escaped the maid's elegant updo. Then I find a shawl that matches my dress well enough and pin it in place with a golden brooch that belonged to my mother.

I like that I'm carrying a piece that I inherited from her to a meeting that will determine my future. Or rather, a meeting where I will inform my uncle of the future I have envisioned for myself. Whatever his decisions today, they will have little influence over how I live my life with Ozork.

I take the flat box in which I stored the faux report I'd spent several weeks preparing. It's not just inane chatter, either, but contains just enough true information that my uncle will see it's legitimate yet won't be able to use any of it to hurt the orcs. Along with it, we brought the document that King Gorvor signed to grant Ozork a lord's title and our marriage contract, because I know my uncle will insist on seeing them.

To my horror, Neekar and Owen are waiting for us in the hallway when we finally emerge from our room. Owen lifts one eyebrow, a smirk curling his lips, and Neekar chokes on the apple he's munching on.

"You should be grateful humans can't smell you," he mutters and coughs again. "Or else they'd come after Ozork with pitchforks and torches."

I grimace and fan myself, hoping my cheeks will lose some of the feverish flush. "They still might do so if this goes badly."

But Ozork takes my hand and squeezes my fingers, his touch reassuring. "They will not. You've done nothing wrong, and if the duke has something to say about it, he can deal with all of us."

His quiet confidence gives me hope. Together, we march toward the duke's private drawing room. I'm glad we caught him here, because the alternative would have been to present ourselves at his court in Ultrup's city center. I have no wish to discuss my personal matters in front of all the gossipy nobles.

At the double door, two guards greet us with indifferent nods. I expected them to at least acknowledge Owen, but the captain is wearing a plain brown cloak instead of the duke's colors, so maybe that's why they're ignoring him.

I knock and wait for my uncle's reply before entering. The space has always seemed so large to me, refurbished several years ago to follow the most recent fashion. I've been treated to many lectures over the years, standing right here, while my uncle sat on his blue velvet-covered sofa and waved at me with his cigar. It was right here that he informed me that I would have to travel to the orc lands.

But now that Ozork, Neekar, and Owen are standing here with me, the room seems much smaller. Neekar stares openly, then strides over to the mantelpiece where a basket of pears has been set, likely for decorative purposes. He tosses the core of his apple into the flames, takes a pear, and sits in one of the armchairs.

My uncle stares at him for a long moment. I don't think anyone has ever sat in his presence before he invited them to, and it's clear he considers it a sign of disrespect. Knowing Neekar, that's exactly what this is—but the question is what my uncle will do about it. The guards outside would rush in at his call and try to arrest Neekar, but I doubt they'd succeed without summoning reinforcements. The orcs had to leave their weapons at the door of the mansion, but I would bet both of them are still more lethal than fully armed humans.

The tension builds, and Ozork moves closer to me, as if he's already anticipating trouble. If I don't do something, there's no knowing how this will end.

But my uncle surprises me by standing and walking toward me. "Willow. Welcome home." He stops in front of me, takes my shoulders in a light grip, and presses his cheek to mine in what passes for an embrace at court. "You look well, my dear."

"Thank you." I unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth and grab Ozork's hand. "This is Lord Ozork, son of Bram, and Neekar, son of Takmor, from the Black Bear Clan." I motion at Owen, who has remained standing

closer to the door as if to guard our backs, holding the box I entrusted to him. “And you remember Captain Hawke?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” my uncle says. “Sit, please. You can pour the tea, Willow. I didn’t know four of you would come, but if the captain could fetch more cups from the sideboard over there, that would be lovely. Thank you.”

Ozork carries two chairs closer to my uncle’s sofa for us. Owen brings the cups to the small table, then takes a tentative seat in the other armchair, clearly uncomfortable. I take the teapot with trembling hands and pour for us. If a little tea splashes over the rims, no one comments on it. When my uncle reaches forward and adds a dollop of cream to each of the teacups, I don’t complain either.

My husband, who detests milky tea, accepts the dainty porcelain cup in his large hands and takes a careful sip. “Thank you, sir,” he rumbles.

“Well, my dear,” my uncle begins, leaning back, “it certainly seems as if your role as my ambassador at the Black Bear Clan has been successful.”

Neekar, seated opposite me, catches my gaze and grins widely. A hot flush creeps up my neck, and I refrain from trying to kick Ozork’s young friend.

“It was,” I agree. “In fact, I’m very happy to inform you that I married Lord Ozork. And I prepared a full report on my time at the Black Bear Hill, like you requested. I hope you’ll find it—”

“You did what?” my uncle interrupts my rambling.

I grip Ozork’s hand again. He interlaces our fingers and gives me a gentle squeeze, and his strength flows right into me.

“Ozork and I are married,” I repeat. “We have been for more than four months.” I release Ozork and reach for the box that Owen has been holding for me. “All the documents are here, you see. Legalized by King Gorvor and witnessed by Captain Hawke.”

My uncle’s face turns red as he quickly reads the marriage contract, then glances at the other papers and shoves the box’s lid back on. “Willow, I would speak to you alone. Now.”

I grit my teeth and remain in my seat. “I see no need for that. Whatever you have to say to me, you can say it in front of my husband and our friends.”

This doesn’t sit well with the duke at all. “Very well,” he says, voice rising slightly. “I’m afraid that by willfully disregarding my wishes, you’ve gambled away your dowry. The rules were always very simple, my dear, and I cannot—”

“Actually, you’re right,” I interrupt him. My chest hurts from the pressure building inside it, and it’s all I can do to keep my voice from trembling. “The rules *were* simple. I read the contract about my dowry, Uncle. You don’t know how many times I studied it, hoping I’d be able to get out of it somehow.”

He stares at me, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“You wrote it yourself,” I explain. “It says I have to marry a nobleman. You didn’t specify that he must be from our duchy or even human.”

“Impossible,” he splutters. “That was never the intention.”

“Explain it to us, then.” Ozork, who has been almost completely silent up to now, leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees. “What *was* the intention of the contract? To sell your niece to one of your friends? To trap her in a loveless marriage to some bastard who managed to capture her using the backward rules of your society?”

His voice seems mild, but I’m certain even my uncle, who doesn’t know him like I do, hears the undercurrent of tightly leashed violence in it. Ozork might be the gentlest male I’ve ever met, but his scars testify to the fact that he has fought—and would fight again for those he loves.

“No, of course not,” my uncle says. “Willow, but this... You’ll never be accepted at court.”

I give him my most brilliant smile. “That’s all right. We have no intention of presenting ourselves there. We’ll be returning to King Gorvor’s lands as soon as our business in the city is concluded.”

I glance at Owen, who is gripping his armrests so hard his knuckles turn white, and add, “I only have one favor to ask. Captain Hawke has decided that he would prefer to serve as my personal guard. His work has been invaluable over the past several months, which you will read about in the report. King Gorvor has offered to take on his pay, so you needn’t worry about that.”

I say all this very quickly, just like I’ve practiced in my head on our long trip from the Hill. I’ve had months to prepare for this confrontation, but that doesn’t make it any easier to wait for my uncle’s decision.

He sits back, his mouth working. Then he seems to get himself under control. “Very well. If that’s what you want... I will write to my treasurer to release your funds to you.” He shakes his head, disappointment rolling off him in waves. “And assign the captain to your protection permanently if he wants to ruin his promising career.”

And to my surprise, I don't care. I think he is convinced I'm doing this as some sort of rebellion against him, but that couldn't be farther from the truth.

"Thank you," I say, genuinely pleased. "But we've come to propose a different deal to you if you're prepared to cooperate with us." I glance at Ozork. "My husband has been appointed by King Gorvor as his ambassador."

It's the idea I've had when I thought of what I wanted to do with my dowry. Until my husband told me how dire things were in my uncle's duchy, I had only a vague notion of what would happen, but now, we've put together a solid plan.

Ozork gives me a slight smile, then turns to the duke. "Our king has been trying to help you get rid of the criminal rings that still promote the trade of people for years. But you haven't managed to achieve it."

The duke pales, his fingers clenching into fists at his sides. "It's a dangerous endeavor, and an expensive one. It's all good for the orc king to say these things from his fortress in the mountains, but the real work needs to be done here."

"Exactly, sir," Ozork says, the picture of respect. "Which is why we've come up with a plan."

I open the box of documents and pull another stack of papers from the very bottom. "This is a contract between King Gorvor, me, and you, Uncle," I tell him. "I will give up most of my inheritance, and the king will match the donated sum if you do the same."

Ozork points at where the king and I have already signed our names. "This will allow you to hire a full force of soldiers and investigators dedicated to this exact cause. And because you're the authority in Ultrup, you will reap the benefits once the work is successful."

King Gorvor and I would only be silent partners, allowing the duke to take the glory. I don't care about it, as long as progress is made, and the king cannot be seen to influence the duke in any significant way, so this is better than us visibly working together.

My uncle stares at him, then glances over at me. "That's... Willow. You put all this together?"

"With the help of important people of the Black Bear Clan," I say, thinking of Queen Dawn, who has been instrumental in bringing this idea to fruition.

He sits back and rubs his forehead. "And if I refuse? This is a monumental amount of work. It won't be easy..."

“It’s not *supposed* to be easy,” I snap. “They’re selling *people*, Uncle. It’s been outlawed for decades. And it’s still happening right under your nose. Do you really wish that to be your legacy?”

I don’t say that we’re prepared to inform the entirety of the city if he decides that he won’t cooperate. I’ve had it with him. He’s willing to scheme and plot to bring down a successful king who’s always been a good neighbor to him but won’t do the same to root out evil in his own city? If he makes the wrong decision, I will burn this palace to the ground if I need to.

But my uncle only shakes his head and orders Captain Hawke to bring him his quill and inkpot. “You are too much like your father, you know. He wouldn’t listen to reason either, and look where that got him.”

The job is unpleasant, but I don’t care, because he signs his name above mine and King Gorvor’s and adds a glob of wax, then presses his signet ring into it.

“Don’t expect me to receive you if you ever realize how good you had it here,” he adds testily. “I will do this because those vultures at court would tear me apart if they heard I’d refused. But make no mistake, you will come to regret this.”

He means me, but he also glances at Owen, as if he’s expecting him to change his mind right there. The captain merely smiles, no doubt thinking about a certain orc lady waiting for him at the Hill.

“I won’t,” I say as I roll up the signed contract. “And I wouldn’t stay here anyway. Ozork and I will be buying a house in Ultrup. The king’s ambassador will be visiting often to check on the progress of our new endeavor.”

We will still spend most of our time at the Hill, but the house will serve as a base for any orc from our clan who will be traveling to the city in the future.

Neekar suddenly stands and bows to the duke. “Thank you for the tea, sir. And the pear.”

I choke back the sudden laughter that threatens to bubble up my throat. “Thank you for cooperating, Uncle. I hope that in time, you will learn to see that I made the right decision.”

He harrumphs but doesn’t object.

“Good day, sir,” Ozork says. “You might not want to hear this, but I promise you that I will look after your niece. She will never want for anything, and if you decide that you would like to see her in the future, we

will receive you if you visit us at our new house here in Ultrup.”

I cover my mouth with my hand, touched to my soul. I’d hoped this meeting would go differently, but even though my uncle showed himself to be just as rigid as he’s always been, I don’t have to rely on him anymore.

I have found a husband who will stand by my side no matter what life throws at us.

We leave the drawing room, and one of the guards closes the door after us. Silence stretches between us as we walk back up to our rooms. There, I stop in the hallway, brace my hand on the wall, and breathe deeply.

“Are you all right, love?” Ozork asks.

I nod. “I am. But I remembered the baby doesn’t like milky tea.”

Owen, who has been with me throughout the rocky start of this pregnancy, rushes to his room and returns with his washbasin. “Just in case.”

“Thank you,” I reply. Then I straighten and look from him to Neekar, then to Ozork. “*Thank you*. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Ozork rubs my back in slow circles. “You were magnificent. There was no doubt in my mind that you’d succeed.”

I shake my head, giggling. “I was certain that he was going to call the guards when Neekar started eating that pear.”

“I was hoping he would,” the younger orc admits. “This winter has been awfully dull. We need a little excitement.”

Ozork takes my hand and pulls me back toward my room. I wave at Owen and Neekar and call that we should be ready to leave within the hour, before my uncle decides we have overstayed our welcome.

Then my husband kicks shut the door behind us, crowds me up against it, and kisses me deeply. I return each lick and kiss with passion, clinging to his shoulders. When he finally lifts his head, regret pangs through me because we really don’t have the time to repeat what we did earlier.

But he kisses my forehead and says, “Our future will hold plenty of excitement.”

I press my hand over my still-flat stomach. “I know.”

“And as much as I dislike the duke,” he adds, “I have to be grateful to him for sending you all the way to the Hill.”

I grin at him. “I like to imagine that we would have found each other no matter what. He only expedited our meeting.”

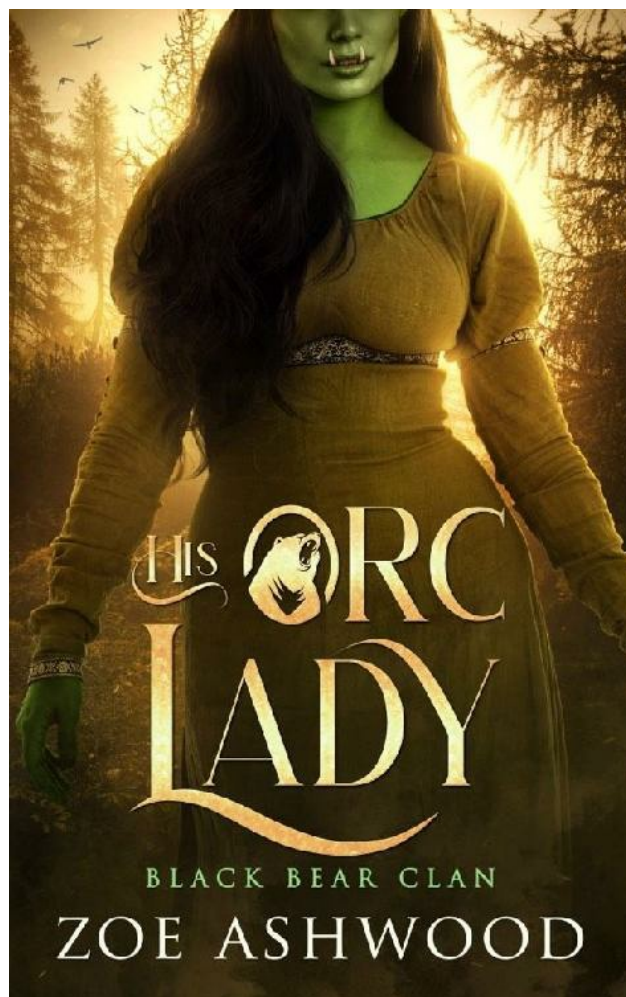
Ozork’s crooked smile is brilliant as he says, “I love you, Willow.”

I tuck my hand in his and pull him toward the wardrobe where our

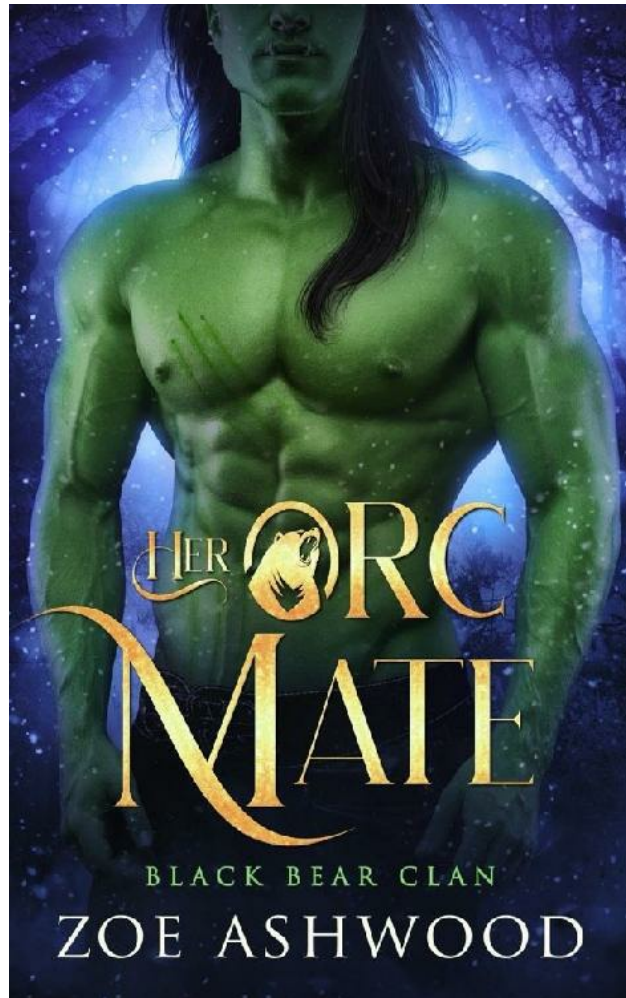
suitcases wait for us, ready to be filled with my belongings. “And I love you.”

The End.

Coming soon to a Kindle near you: [*His Orc Lady*](#)! Which will be Mara and Owen’s story, of course.



If you haven't read *Her Orc Mate*, my FREE prequel novella, yet, you can get it now at [this link](#) (or type <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/9mynd9uqw4> into your browser)! You can also email me at zoe@zoeashwood.com if you can't access it otherwise.



I put a handy list of all my books on the next page, but if you'd like to get **more short stories from the Black Bear Clan** - and get a chance to vote on which one I write next, come check out [my Patreon!](#)

Thank you so much for reading my books - and for asking me about when

Ozork's book is coming. I've wanted to write his HEA since the beginning, and I'm so glad I got to do so. And to the reader who suggested that I name Willow's cat Thistle - thank you! It's the perfect name for him, for sure.

Thanks for being here!

xo, Zoe

PS. Yes, Neekar will get his book, too. <3

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoe Ashwood writes cinnamon roll heroes, no matter how loud they growl.

While she's always been a reader, Zoe's writing used to be limited to diary scribbles and bad (really *bad*) teenage poetry. Then she participated in NaNoWriMo 2015 and never looked back.

She's happily married to her best friend and has two boys who are as stubborn as they're cute and a very fluffy dog.

She's always super happy to hear from fellow bookworms, so don't hesitate to get in touch! Her [newsletter](#) is an especially great way to stay up-to-date with all the latest news (and get a free book). Or you can catch up with her in her [Facebook group](#)!

