



Alien Orc Warlord's Captive Bride

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Kidnapped in my wedding dress by a savage Orc warlord

One minute I was free, a huntress living on her wits, and the next I was the chosen bride of the corrupt tyrant. His soldiers marched into the village, lined up the young women like cattle, and sealed my fate with a single pointed finger. Only the brutal Orc tribes who roam the wilderness defy him. They're beastly, ferocious warriors who take what they want. And they want me. The horde ambushes on my wedding day, and the Orc Warlord Ragnar himself throws me over his shoulder, carrying me to his mountain home. He is their barbarian king... and I'm his captive. He is over seven feet of jade muscled flesh, more monster than man, ruling his horde by sword and fist. He guards me personally, can't take his eyes off me... but he can't touch me. The Orc tribe plans to ransom me away and he needs me unspoiled. But it doesn't take long until his green eyes burn with the barely-contained mating rage. As the days pass, I'm confronted by the monster's devotion to his people, how fiercely he protects what he loves. There is more to Ragnar than brutal strength... but he'll have to choose between his tribe and me as his mate.

Alien Orc Warlord's Captive Bride is a short, steamy, action-packed captive romance with a satisfying HEA. Take a look inside because you'll get a feel for the writing style!

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1

RAGNAR

The sun's scorching gaze sears my bare chest as I loosen my fist, a silent command to advance from one rocky sanctuary to the next. Our breath is raw and panting. The second my scouts reported that the Lord Ashbourne was amassing troops, I took my two most trusted men and sprinted from our mountain home to intercept them. I needed to see with my own eyes what the bastard was doing.

Ulric and Gorak grimace at the subterfuge, wanting to stand tall as we skulk closer to the village. Crouching, we're the same height as humans, though their weak, pink bodies are far lighter than ours. I clutch the hilt of my blade in my hand. Only I can wield it. It has a blue-black gemstone in it, a gemstone that seems to suck in all the light, glowing when I cut down a foe. When I think of death, the black blade extends, wrapped in lightning that hungers for blood.

"Sneaking and hiding like rats," whispers Ulric.

"Silence." No other in the tribe could speak to him like that and not get a broken jaw. As Chieftain, he defers to me, even when it burns him, and I know that neither of these two would ever take a blade to me to contest my spot. I guided our tribe through the worst horrors we endured, horrors inflicted by the heartless Lord.

Humans have weak eyes and ears, but in the middle of the day, even those fools could spot us if we're careless in the glaring midday sun. I motion to the ground, and there's no grumble of complaint as we crawl over the crest of the hill.

I don't know the name of the village. They leave us alone, and we leave them, despite my hatred for humans. Ashbourne still sends his patrols into the mountains, trying to pick off a young Orc alone, to display their heads on his walls so that we cannot give them a proper funeral pyre. I try to rein in the youngsters, but I remember how headstrong I was as a teenager, and how I was nearly caught by one of his raiding parties. There can be no mistakes now. I let no one else but I and my most trusted men go to find what the bastard is planning.

"Fucking humans. These scum nearly starved us out," snarls Gorak. After cresting the hill, we can see there's no one in sight to hear us, so I forgive him the outburst.

Thatched roofs, packed dirt streets with wooden planks over the mud, now filled with soldiers in black armor. I hate that armor. When hit with spears or blades, the force of the blow is reflected back, shattering the weapon and your hand if you don't release your grip quick enough. I adjusted our tactics. Boulders dropped from above, pits dug and covered in brush, spears thrown from afar. We know our lands, and they are a hellhole for his forces.

That is why instead of fighting us, he slaughtered the herds before they migrated back before the long winter. He chose to starve his own people just to try to kill us, but he does not understand the mind of the Orc. We will be on this land, long after he is gone.

"What the hell is he planning?" Ulric says, keeping his tone low, when I see the Lord Ashbourne himself. Gaunt, tall for a human, he must be near fifty, with a face that looks carved from rock, all hard lines with a cruel gaze. He is standing in the village square, and in front of him are twenty young women.

I focus my eyes, the village and landscape becoming dull as I enhance the scene. Their white dresses billow in the breeze, soft things, some with rips, pulled out at the last minute. Lord Ashbourne looks them up and down, surveying them, deciding.

“The old bastard wants to choose a mate.”

It sickens me. They stand like livestock, rather than people, and he will not win his chosen bride's heart through courage, but through coercion. My blood boils at the thought of him taking one of the women to be his plaything.

No. Not a plaything or a trophy. The old man wants an heir. One of these women will have a belly swollen with a child within the year.

“Poor woman. Even a human doesn't deserve that,” says Ulric.

“They're all the same. All of them. Filled with greed and hate,” growls Gorak. His father refused to eat his share during the last winter. He was sickly and viewed himself as a burden. He didn't make it.

All twenty women are staring straight at the ground, terrified yet glancing up almost hopefully. Being picked as his bride would not be easy, but it might be easier than surviving another winter, with the herds thinned and the great grain wagons demanding their share each year. I've watched those wagons, loaded up with the fruits of the village's labor, setting out to make the day's journey to the castle.

All of them are dressed in their finest clothes, nervous and afraid...

All but one. Unlike them, she's in simple brown clothes, still some dirt on them, clothes more suited for hunting than for being shown off like cattle.

She stares up defiantly. In her early twenties, a striking beauty. Her shoulder-length golden hair frames her tanned face, and she has strong features, unlike the usual softness of humans, her lips red and plump. I can't help imagining how my rough fingers would feel against her softness, and my cock stirs under my loincloth. My heart thuds as something builds up in me, something as primal as the hunt, and

Iwanther. I want this creature as my own. No female of my tribe has caused this reaction in me, this insistent, deep urge to possess her, body and soul, to make her scream my name in ecstasy and surrender to me.

The Lord Ashbourne walks up to a woman, perhaps only nineteen, a wisp of a creature who is staring straight down. She trembles as he grabs her mouth, pulling her lips down to check her teeth. It sickens me. If I had the forces, I'd charge now, but the humans are numerous and well-armed. My own species are few, but strong.

He gives a hard jerk of his head. "Leave," he says, and she scurries off, disappearing into one of the nearby houses with relief.

Then he walks to the woman who stirred my desires.

The Lord's hand rises, and he points to her, his bony finger singling her out from the rest.

A young man runs in, yelling, and is backhanded by a guard. He falls, and another guard slams his foot against his back, pushing him into the dirt, drawing his rifle and pressing the end of it against the back of his neck. The tiniest movement of his finger, and the boy's life will be ended, too soon.

Rifles. Impossible to decipher how they work from a glance, and too valuable to disassemble. A coward's weapon. You need no strength to pull a trigger, and yet, they are supremely useful. We've taken five from raiding parties, and boxes of the ammunition that goes inside of them, and I've trained men in their use.

"My first wedding gift to you, my bride-to-be. This boy is important to you?" The Lord's voice, a voice used to being obeyed, carries.

"He's my brother. Please." The desperation in her voice makes me yearn to cut the

head from the Lord's neck. I hate him deeper than I thought possible.

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“Unhand the brother of my bride-to-be!” He yells out the command, filled with anger, and the soldier quickly removes his boot from the boy’s back, extending his hand. The boy looks up, and doesn’t take it, getting to his feet unsteadily and brushing the dirt from his tunic. The woman looks at him, wanting to go to him, but stays stock-still, like a hunted prey when it knows the chase is over and can run no longer.

He watches her with hawk eyes. His eyes are nearly gray, emotionless even when his voice is filled with rage.

“Thank you, my Lord,” she says, finally.

“Good girl. You will find that I can be quite generous, if you serve your duties well.” I can barely make out his words as he approaches her. The next thing he says is just a mumble to me from so far, but it makes her cheeks flush with embarrassment or anger, I’m not sure which, when she looks down to the ground, defeated.

2

AIRA

I gaze at my reflection in the gleaming glass of the thin rectangular mirror that stretches seamlessly from one end of the carriage to another above the empty seat across from me, taking in the unfamiliar sight that greets me. I see a stranger. No more village girl, no more wild thing breathlessly stalking through the forest at dawn, evading patrols that would have my hand cut off for poaching.

I look like a bird in a cage.

The meticulously applied makeup, my hair in a mass of tall curls, the luxurious wedding dress that they squeezed me into. My features appear ethereal, the pearl and lace on the gown exuding wealth, and I feel like an alien put into it. I didn't want any of my friends to see me, especially not my younger brother, seventeen and headstrong, thinking of himself as the man of the house when our parents died, when it's me who keeps him safe.

He'll have food on the table this winter. That, I know. Grievous Ashbourne wouldn't let the brother of his bride starve.

I want to poke at my blood-red lips, touch at the smokey blackness around my eyes, but any little hair out of place or smudge would only get the three women who primped and preened me for hours in trouble.

The Lord Ashbourne doesn't care about how I can hunt and fish, that I'm clever enough to evade his patrols and feed myself and my brother from the bounty of the forests that he claims as his own. He cares only about the way I look, and what's between my legs.

My cheeks flush red with humiliation as I remember the disgusting examination by the palace's doctor, done just before Ashbourne left the village. The first time a man touched me there, and only to check if I was pure enough to be chosen for marriage. A great honor, everyone's been telling me for the last four days as I waited in agonized stress, because though they meant it, and though many of the other women wished they had been picked for a life of ease and riches, they all have a slight hint of relief that it's me and not them.

My eyes follow the rolling plains and beyond, to the mountains where the Orcs dwell. A shudder rushes through me, a mixture of fear and repulsion. The tales of their brutality and the horrors they inflict on the northern towns have haunted us for as long as I can remember, and it's only the protection of Lord Ashbourne that kept us

untouched. But, as my eyes trace the jagged peaks and the silhouettes of their distant homes, I get a twinge of envy at their wildness.

Behind the towering stone walls of the brutal stone palace that awaits me, I know I will be shielded from the Orcs' marauding raids. The looming presence of the rich man, with all his power and influence, offers protection and security, even if it comes at the cost of my own desires and dreams. A bitter choice to make, but my brother Aldrin forced my hand. I curse him for charging at the guard. Any other time, he would have been killed on the spot.

I look through the window up the long road to his imperious palace. That will be my life now.

As the carriage bounces along the cobbled road, my mind wanders to the stories I've heard about Lord Ashbourne. Some say he's a fierce ruler, others a cruel tyrant. But all agree that he's a man to be feared. A man with a taste for the perverse, a man who takes what he wants, when he wants it.

My stomach churns as I imagine what my wedding night will be like. Will he be gentle? Will he treat me kindly? Or will he take me roughly, without a thought for my pleasure or my pain? I shudder at the thought, feeling sick to my stomach.

After my parents died and left me to fend for me and my brother, I swore never to have a family until I could give them a secure future. I'd never even kissed a boy, and now, I'll be in the hands of the cruel Lord to do as he pleases. My life will be fancy dresses, make-up and singing and dancing for his pleasure, until he puts his child in my belly. That is my only purpose now, and there can be no escape. I'll be known as his bride across the country, and no one would shelter me, not when the price is their head.

“Orcs!” There is a cry from a soldier when three cannonballs of green muscle rush

down the hillside into the pass. The front two have spears, but they just lower their shoulders, barreling through the nearest soldiers while their leader, a huge beast of a man with a blue-black blade that seems alive in his hand, lightning sparking from it, rushes straight for my carriage. I scream and back away as his blade pierces the carriage side like he's shearing through paper, and he grabs my leg, pulling me towards him. I kick, my heel embedding in his chest, and he grunts in pain and pulls me, throwing me over his shoulder, my legs dangled over his back, my head slapping against his powerful chest. He takes off at a run, the two other Orcs in front of him.

"Don't shoot! You could hit her!" yells a soldier, when I hear the crack of a rifle, and a bullet flies past us. I'm jostled up and down as the Orc sprints away with long strides.

My heart beating like a war drum, I try to struggle and fight but the Orc's grip on me is like a vise. He carries me effortlessly, his muscular frame moving with the fluidity of a predator. My mind races with thoughts of escape, of screaming for help, but deep down I know that it's futile.

Once we are over the crest of the hill, there is no one to hear my screams, or to see my struggles. The guards can't keep up with his long-legged gait. I try to break free, to punch at the Orc, but his arm is an iron band pinning me to his chest. My legs dangle, kicking at the air, but his strides are long and I tire quickly. The only thing that gives me hope is that he's not trying to kill me. If he was, he would have done so already. That's something, at least.

He runs at a dead sprint for I don't know how long. It must be ten minutes flat out towards the mountains, when he takes me over a hill. He speaks in the guttural language of the Orcs to his two men, and they slow. Then he sets me down. The three men are panting.

I look up at him. Standing in front of Lord Ashbourne, I felt only contempt. The old

man is wiry and cold. I know he was the one who slaughtered the herds our village relies on to get through the winter, just to starve out the Orcs. He forced us to pay a greater tribute in grain because our village hunters were less successful, and that long winter my stomach gnawed with hunger while I did what I could to feed my little brother.

This Orc is nothing like the old man—except in one way.

He has taken me.

He is a huge beast of a man. He towers over me, over seven feet of bulging muscle and power. He's got a long scar from his abs up to his heart, a white, thick old wound that should have killed him. Any lesser man would have been felled. He stinks, a deep, musky scent like distilled testosterone. His chest heaves as he gasps for air, slowing as he regains composure.

I panic and run.

He's on me in a second. I struggle, but it's like fighting a mountain. His grip tightens around me, and I can feel his hot breath on my neck, making my skin prickle with fear and something else, something dark and insistent at the way he is able to manhandle me with such ease. He lifts me into the air with one arm as I kick wildly, my heart pounding, his groping hand rough against my body.

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He barks out something to his Orc warriors. Their lips draw back, showing their too-sharp teeth, then they run over the hillside, taking positions to guard their leader for whatever is happening next.

“I am Chieftain Ragnar. You belong to me now. You will not try to escape again.” I’m surprised to hear the common tongue come from his lips, accented and growly. His breath is hot on my ear.

He lets go of me, his handprint on my arm, testing to see if I will try to run.

Chieftain Ragnar.

The one man who has defied the lord who starved my village. I’ve heard tales of his raiding parties, of the north villages burnt by his forces, of women taken and turned into property. He stands, vital and huge, a man who rules his warrior tribe through force. He is the opposite of the wiry old Lord, who has others do his bidding.

“I won’t,” I say, my voice shaking.

“I’m going to make sure of that.” He stalks forward, and I try to run, but he grabs me. He lifts me like I’m a toy and sits down on a boulder, putting me over his lap.

I struggle and fight, but he holds me down easily, lifting the back of my wedding dress, exposing my fine lace undergarments. Black lace, chosen by Lord Ashbourne, and now they are the privileged view of the Orc king.

His huge, strong hand rests on my ass.

"You will not be harmed, if you do not try to escape. Your species starved us. I will... how to say it... trade you to the Lord Ashbourne in return for enough for my tribe to survive the winter." I more feel than hear his growly voice, deep and resonant.

"Please. I won't try to escape again," I gasp out, when his hand comes down on my ass.

Hard.

I cry out with surprise and pain, lurching forward, but he holds me easily, and his hand crushes into me again. My ass stings like fire ants biting my tender skin, and I twist, trying to get away.

I cry out again, and he holds me down easily. Slap after slap against my ass, heat flushing to my cheeks in humiliation as he punishes me without mercy. One of his Orc warriors chuckles under his breath as he hears me whimper.

Ragnar is hard and disciplinary, but then his voice catches, growling. His cock surges under me, this huge snake that throbs with lust for me.

The Orc Chieftain wants me. The other two Orc warriors are keeping watch, hand on their spears, looking out for any rescue.

There's none coming. Ragnar's huge, meaty hand rests on my stinging ass, then slowly strokes towards my pussy. A tingle of teasing sensation rushes through my body. My slit feels hot and eager, and I'm overwhelmed with primal lust and hate for the Orc, this combination that overwhelms me. I hate that he is forcing my body to react, hate that he is pretending to be disciplining me when in truth, he aches for my body, just like the cruel Lord who bought me.

He growls, a sound that sends a frisson through my body.

"You bastard, you're just like him," I snarl out, clenching my jaw, and he stops.

He takes in a huge, wracking breath. "You will address me as Chieftain." He raises his hand and brings it down again, hard, making my ass burn and tears come to my eyes. His thick cock is alive with desire, and I know that all he wants is to pin me down against the ground and rip through my innocence, claiming me as his.

The image of the Orc fucking me fills my mind.

He'd be rough and voracious, breeding me hard and without mercy. He'd take my innocence, and leave me a ruined, broken girl, only fit for his bed. The raging, treacherous desire as my body reacts in this primal way makes me fear that I'd moan as he held my delicate body down, my soft curves crushed under his muscular body, my tits bouncing until he finally came up my stretched slit.

My mind races. I thought I'd be taken this night, in the cold bed of an old man. I thought I would be distant and detached as I lost my virginity, and I swore to myself I would not cry. This is different. This is immediate, and I'm forced into the moment.

There's no escaping his dominance. He's too strong, too powerful...

But I bend my mind to my will, to find the words that will stop this, before it is too late.

"He won't take me back if I am not a virgin. Your tribe will starve, Chieftain," I say, my mind racing, and he freezes.

"I am not like that man," he snarls. "I would not take a woman I did not earn. You escaping could destroy my tribe. I had to make certain you would not." He stands,

setting me down.

My cheeks are flushed red with humiliation, not just at being spanked, but how my body reacted to his dominance. I've never felt anything for a man, not like that.

I don't call him a liar. I won't, not when I know what it will earn, but I stare him straight in his green eyes, then let my eyes trail down his muscular body until I am at his tented loincloth. God, but he's huge, and I can see the outline of his inflamed member that aches for me. I look back at him, defiant, and he knows what I am saying without words. That he can pretend, but I know what he wanted.

"I will not try to escape again, Chieftain," I say, my voice so respectful it's mocking, as I plan my way out. I've been to the mountains twice before to hunt for mountain goats when my stomach gnawed so badly that it drove me from the safety of the village, and I dodged both patrols of soldiers and my first Orc as I stalked my prey.

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The Orc didn't see me then, and they won't see me when I escape.

3

RAGNAR

She stares up at me defiantly, calling me a liar with her hot blue eyes. Even with my handprints on her perfect, round ass, her chin juts up, looking down her nose at me.

No Orc of my tribe would dare look at me like that, dare have contempt in their voice. To think that a human, not even half my size, would defy me in this way makes me burn with rage...

And respect.

I knew there was something different about this woman. She ignited something in me when I saw her among the others, and yet, I cannot have her, no matter how I crave her. I should punish her again for her defiance, until those bright eyes water and her cheeks flush red with shame. I can smell her arousal, this hot need wafting from her, and I lick my lips, imagining running my tongue up and down her body, feasting on her need.

"They'll be catching up soon," says Ulric.

"Then we move," I order, and my two most trusted men turn to face me.

Gorak's eyes widen as he sees my cock inflamed with lust. "What the hell is this,

Ragnar?"

"I enjoy punishing a member of their species," I growl back, trying to pretend that my cock surging up is no more than sadism, and not a deep yearning to fill her belly with my son.

"You have lust for one of the worms? Is that why you took her? Did you lie to us of your plan?"

My blade is drawn. Even a hint of defiance can get you killed in the cold mountains, where every day is life or death. "The plan is the plan. If you wish to draw your spear and try to become Chieftain, I'll leave you dead here."

Gorak hates humans more than anything, and the thought of an Orc wanting one in that way sickens him. Then he grunts and lowers his eyes. "Forgive me, Chieftain. I misspoke."

I'll have to watch him. He's hot blooded, a strong warrior who I used to counter-attack human patrols. He lusts for battle, and he's killed more humans than any of us. He's the second strongest of the tribe, the one man who might think he can match me in combat to take the stone throne himself.

I look down at the woman. "What is your name?" I order her.

"Aira."

"It suits you. I know you are..." I search for the word in the common tongue. "Proud." Her cheeks flame up in anger. "But I will carry you. Your legs are short and stubby compared to mine."

It's a statement of fact, but her eyebrows rise. She smooths the pure white wedding

dress. I can see where I ripped it when I grabbed her. It drives me wild to know that I have marked her with my hand, that under her dress is my red print on her ass. The way her slit became slick and needy as I traced it with my finger makes my cock ache.

"Fine. But I'd rather go on your back than be flung over your shoulder like a sack of flour."

The other two men are watching me, their eyes hard, and I ignore her words, grabbing her light body and throwing her over my shoulder. She hisses like a cat, but keeps her nails from my back as I jog up the mountain. The path is narrow, and my scouts confirmed it was clear this morning. We won't run into any patrols. My thick feet find traction in the stony ground as the air chills, and we reach the first frost, when I feel her shivering against me.

4

AIRA

Damn these brutes. Damn them all!

I'm jostled up and down over his shoulder as I'm taken up the mountain. My little village looks like children's toys, and the Lord Ashbourne's palace looks small from up here.

At least he threw me over his back with my legs over his chest, so I can look out and not have my face pressed against his broad, powerful muscles.

There's a war-horn sounded. So Ashbourne has learned of the theft. He'll be coming for me.

But do I want him to?

The thought of life behind those hard grey walls is more terrifying even than being taken by these Orcs. In the mountains, I'll have a chance to escape, without retribution against my brother. Ashbourne would assume me killed by the brutes. I would have to give up everything, but I could make a new life, far from these lands...

Those stone walls would be my cage for eternity.

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The Orcs argued in their language earlier, after the Chieftain spanked me. One of them, with a scar on his neck and cold green eyes, hates me. I never did anything to him, but he hates me, while the other, a big broad fellow, doesn't seem to think much of me at all.

As I'm jogged up the mountain pass, bouncing against his powerful body, he starts to stride over packed snow and I shiver against him. The three men seem to zig and zag at random, sometimes walking straight through the mountain trails, other times taking detours over rocks and boulders that add time to the trip. When we're on the exposed face of the mountain, the biting wind chills me to the bone.

I clench my jaw, trying not to show any weakness, hating the feeling of being helpless and out of control, but it's impossible. My every movement is controlled by him, and I'm jolted up and down with every footfall.

How many women has this Orc Chieftain taken up to his mountain home? How many has he ravished up there, in the snowy peaks where no one comes to help you?

I am not like that man. I would not take a woman I did not earn.

That is what he said. I don't know if I believe him. His muscled chest is hard against my legs as I'm over his shoulder, and he doesn't seem to feel cold, but I'm freezing. I can't stop my teeth from chattering, and he sets me down.

"Worms. They can't take the cold," laughs the one who hates me, his lips curled back in a sneer. He speaks in the Common tongue - poorly - so that I can understand his insult.

"I'm fine. I don't need anything," I say, keeping my chin up, but my voice quakes as a cold wind blows through the trail, and I can't speak without shivering. He set me down on a rocky patch, icy against my bare feet, and I step from one foot to the other. The impractical heels fell off while he was carrying me, and I relish the memory of driving one of them into his chest.

I hope it hurts.

If the Orc Chieftain cares that I am freezing, he doesn't show it. A cold wind blows, and I hug my arms to myself, my teeth chattering. There's nothing around us but inhospitable wilderness, snow covered trails leading up to the ominous peak.

Ragnar walks off the trail, to a boulder nearly as tall as I am. He puts both hands on it, his fingers thick as tree roots gripping the surface, and heaves forward. Sinews ripple across his forearms like coiled serpents, the veins in his biceps throbbing as a guttural grunt escapes his lips. His legs are flexed, huge as tree trunks, all his might pressing forward and inch by inch, the boulder surrenders, yielding to his power and revealing a concealed cavity beneath.

He reaches in and pulls out a huge fur coat, made for an Orc.

So these Orcs aren't as primitive as I thought. This one is a shrewd leader, with hidden stores on the mountain, probably for Orcs escaping patrols.

I'm eager for the coat, but it's bad news—I'd rather he was an idiot beast than a cunning strategist.

I swallow hard, wondering if he'll make me beg for it, or take something else in return. He knows that I'm only valuable to the Lord Ashbourne as a virgin, and he must know of the humiliating inspections, or he'd have taken me as his already, but there's nothing stopping him from making me earn that coat with my mouth. I

imagine him grabbing me by the hair, forcing my knees into the packed, cold snow and pressing that huge, warm, throbbing thing down my throat, how he'd grunt and groan until he found his release.

Instead, he walks up to me, draping the huge fur over my shoulders. It was a bear, some time ago.

"Thank you," I say, surprised, and I remember what Lord Ashbourne told me, when he spared my brother.

"Good girl. You will find that I can be quite generous, if you serve your duties well."

I pull the coat close around me.

"I need you alive for the trade," barks out Ragnar, his voice hard. The Orc who hates me chuckles. So that's what this is. Nothing more than keeping the Lord Ashbourne's property safe until he can ransom me.

I hate him endlessly. I hate the cold for making me look weak, for my own failure to hide my shivering, for the thick fur around my body that I did not have the strength to refuse.

Ragnar barks out an order, and the two other Orcs rush forward, while he walks behind me. We must be close. Despite the heavy fur covering my body, I can feel his hungry gaze on me. He knows what my ass looks like, and he's seen his handprint on it. My cheeks flush red with humiliation and something else, when I remember that huge, thick cock of his throbbing against my helpless body, the way he was able to pin me down so effortlessly.

He didn't even try. He could have done anything to me. The thought of those thick lips wrapped around my aching nipples, or those fingers parting my thighs and

exposing my private place, or even his hands around my throat, closing, closing, closing... I swallow, my hands trembling, struggling with the shameful desire. Why, why, why! Why do I crave the Orc so badly, and why does my hatred add such an intoxicating edge to my desire?

Each step against the cold ground makes the weak part of me wish he'd pick me up and carry me, and I force it down, embracing the stinging chill against my sure footsteps.

We turn a corner. The other two Orcs are gone. There is a thin passage between the rock face, and Ragnar points, telling me to continue. I do, going sideways through the small passageway, until I get to the end and see the Orc village itself, hidden in a mountain valley.

It is nothing like I expected. I thought this species was nothing more than primitive brutes, and now I know the truth.

The homes are built into the valley side themselves, constructed of bricks of stone that are so well placed together I can barely see the edges. There is a river flowing through the middle of the village, with a stone bridge crossing over it. Children, who would be nearly as tall as me, are playing in the snow as if the cold doesn't affect them, throwing snowballs and wrestling, others making giant snowmen – no, snoworcs. I watch in shock as a teenager in nothing more than a loincloth dives into the stream, cutting through it and jumping out the other side, while two Orc women yell at him, waving fishing rods angrily. The Orc women wear the same loincloth style as the men, but their bodies are painted with intricate designs, each unique. It must take hours. One has a swirling spiral of red, perhaps done with some kind of clay or ink found nearby, over the entirety of her back.

Stone hewn steps go up the mountainside to a huge cavern lit by torches, lined with furs on the walls. From my vantage point, I can see long wooden tables, where Orcs

are drinking from stone tankards. I could hear nothing before going through the mountain pass, but now the sounds of raucous enjoyment hit me like a wall, when it goes silent.

Everyone turns to look at their Orc Chieftain...

And the human he has with him.

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I look for any other humans, and see none. My skin crawls. Where do they keep their stolen brides? Are they locked up, out of the sun, hidden away in the stone houses or below ground? Do the Orcs ever let them out, or do they simply come back after a raid or a hunt, their blood up, to use their possessions like toys?

No!

Think clearly! No more useless thoughts.

The Orcs are all staring, and there's surprise in their eyes. They didn't know of their Chieftain's plan. He went out, and they weren't expecting him to come back with me.

What does it mean?

My kidnapping was a spur-of-the-moment decision.

"You see my people? Now they are healthy and happy. Autumn. I brought them through the last winter alive. And I will bring them through this one." He turns to me and points at the two soldiers watching us, older men with hard eyes. "This is the only entrance to our hidden valley. It's guarded at all times. Escape is futile. I would rather not have to chain you up while you are here."

But I bet you'd like to put me over your lap and punish me again.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Chieftain, but I won't try to escape again," I say, turning my body so only he can see me. I let the fur open ever so slightly, exposing the top of my cleavage as if by accident, and his eyes dart down instantly, then back up.

He wants me.

I need to find a way to use that against him.

The two soldiers are watching me too intently. They are in loincloths, but they also have leather armor over their chests, and wear helmets with horns. One licks his fangs, running his huge red tongue over the ivory.

Ragnar sees where I'm looking, and his thick black brows furrow as he sees the desire in his soldiers' eyes.

Then he turns back to me.

"You are the future of my tribe. I will keep you close to me. You sleep in my cavern tonight, at the back of the great hall."

I shiver, because I've got the feeling the Orc Chieftain doesn't have much use for two beds. Does he sleep on a pile of furs, or on the cold ground itself?

And does he expect me to sleep next to him?

I felt the naked desire when he spanked me. The ravenous hunger, the way his body responded to me. I'll survive the night...but will my innocence?

"Come." He barks out the word like I am a trained dog, and there is nothing I can do but follow. We walk on a stone path cleared of snow, but my feet are getting numb.

Children stop playing, staring at me like I am an animal as I follow him to the hewn stone steps that lead into the great hall. The air is filled with low murmurs as he ushers me inside.

Warmth, glorious warmth from a huge fire, even the stone floor warmed.

The great hall is filled with Orcs, hard men with scars and weapons placed on the tables between plates of meat and tankards. So many eyes, staring at me, most with open hostility, but others with the unmistakable burning of lust. There are some women at the table as well. I didn't notice at first, because the features of Orcs are hyper-masculine, but they have small, hard breasts with four nipples, and their eyes are rounder, but they have weapons all the same. At first, I thought they were men, because they were dressed as warriors, not like the women in the village, no paint adorning them. From them, I get only cold gazes.

Ragnar bellows out, his voice rumbling in the vast hall, and receives a chorus of cheers in return. The sound reverberates with victory.

He turns to me, and I see him smile for the first time. "I have told them that the winter is secured, thanks to you. Tonight, we have a great celebration."

"Follow me." His voice is stern again. His voice rumbles and he stares straight ahead, not at me. Orc women are serving the warriors, bringing food and drink, and they have the ornate paintings on their bodies. It looks like they are made of dried clays, deep, rich colors, and they are strangely beautiful.

Ragnar brings me down a tunnel in the back of the cave. How did these Orcs make the tunnels so smooth? I don't understand. Not even a human could do that. I have endless questions, but I don't speak as he opens a huge wooden door and brings me into his private cave home.

It is nothing like I expected. It's a huge, high-ceilinged room, with a big wooden table, with wooden chairs built for broad Orc bodies, and a bed of furs piled so high you'd get lost in them. At the back, there is an open circular window which has a view from the mountainside to the wild lands below. The wind blows through it, and

despite the furs, I shiver. There is a huge stone tub filled with water by the oval window—but the water must be freezing.

"Your species is very sensitive to cold." He goes to the fire pit, where logs are smouldering, adding huge logs to grow it to a raging fire that makes shadows dance in the cavern.

I pull the furs closer to me. "Chieftain, may I ask a question?"

He uses an iron poker to prod at the fire in the circle of stone. Smoke rises, but it funnels away from the cave and out the window, by some trick of architecture I don't understand.

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"You may."

"I...you said you weren't like Lord Ashbourne. But if you ransom me to him, that's not true. I don't want to be his bride. Can you just...can you let me go?"

His green eyes flash and he grits his teeth in anger. "My tribe would starve. I will treat you as my honored guest while you are here. I can give you no more."

He's trying to protect his people, just as I wanted to protect my little brother.

I cross my arms in frustration. "What a way to treat an honored guest," I say, my tone acid as I remember his huge hand on my bottom.

Ragnar stands up from the fire and towers over me. His eyes bore into me with such intensity I feel like I'm drowning in their green pools.

"An honored guest does not try to escape and put my people at risk."

"You kidnapped me!"

"I took you from one captivity to another." He walks to a finely carved wooden set of drawers, and opens the bottom one, then comes back with a black ring.

It looks strange and alien, somehow unholy, glowing with the same blue-black energy of his weapon. That weapon somehow turns to nothing more than a hilt when it is in the belt of his loincloth.

"What is that?"

"It will let you understand my tongue. Will you put it on, or do I need to put it on for you?"

I grit my teeth and put it on my finger. It's cool to the touch.

"How did you make this?"

"I did not. It is lost in time. We used to have so many things..."

I realize that he's speaking in the guttural tongue of the Orcs, and somehow I understand his words. He points to my finger where the ring sits like a bolt on my hand, tightening as if it has a mind of its own. "What the fuck!" I gasp and pull at it, but I can't budge it.

"Twist it to the left," he says, and looks at me up and down, a strange melancholy in his pure green eyes. I twist it, and the ring unclasps from my finger. Now that I know the secret, I twist it back on. It will be useful for overhearing Orcs and for communicating easier with the Chieftain.

Strange, but it is a technology I doubt even the King himself has.

Ragnar picks up red hot stones from the base of the fire with a shovel and drops them under the bathtub. In time, steam rises from the water and I have to look away as he undresses. His thick cock, with bushy black hair above it, flops into view when he strips off his loincloth, and I find it impossible to avert my eyes.

He stands, completely unashamed in his nudity, a hulking beast of a man. This is the first time I really look at him, and my eyes trace every square inch. Over seven feet tall, and broad, with hard, rough skin over bulging muscles that ripple with even the

smallest movement. Despite his bulk, he has hard ridges of abs and a V taper that leads down to his huge cock, this monstrous thing that hangs down between his legs. I can remember it throbbing under me as he disciplined me, and I know his deep, primal desires, the brutality of his species. On his chest, from his abs to near his heart, there is a long white scar. Something nearly split him in half. A wound that would have killed anyone lesser.

My cheeks flush red as he sees me watching him. "You are embarrassed to see me in my natural state, but you are the one who is nude," he says, pulling himself into the waters and sinking into them with a long sigh of luxury. I didn't expect to see the Orc Chieftain relaxing, but alone in his home, he puts his arms on the sides of the bathtub and leans back.

"What do you mean, I'm nude?" I say, frozen in place. I kept my cool hiding from patrols when I was poaching, not making a sound as Lord Ashbourne's men walked past my hiding spot, and it's crazy that seeing the huge Orc has my cheeks flushed and my mind racing.

"You have no paint. Come." The last word is an order that my body responds to before I can think, moving towards the Orc king as if he controls me. He has a voice suited for orders.

I stand next to him, in a wedding dress chosen by another man, furs wrapped around my body, trying my hardest not to look at his muscled brutality under the waters. I stare out through the oval window into the wilderness below, trying to lie to myself that I am looking at the hard tundra and wild forests while my peripheral vision is caught by his bulging muscles and powerful frame. He's got his eyes closed, so I steal a glance, down his body, then force my eyes up before they rest on that massive python between his legs. "How did you get the scar?"

His eyes flash open. "It matters not."

I swallow hard, my throat parched with a mixture of emotions I can't identify. I should hate this Chieftain. I should hate him for abducting me and stealing me away to be used as his pawn, just as I hate the Lord Ashbourne for coercing me into marriage, and yet...seeing the Chieftain taking a moment of rest, the weight of responsibility melting off him in the waters, I know he is only trying to save his tribe. His eyes follow me like a falcon tracking prey as I move in closer, my fingers brushing against the hard stone of the tub and curling around a bar of black soap.

I had been practicing in the carriage, my thoughts tormented, wondering how I could play the docile bride that Lord Ashbourne wanted. As much as I hate the Orc Chieftain, I lather my hands with the soap and massage his broad shoulders. Tingles flush through my body. He's tense, but under my fingers, his muscles slowly relax.

I'm filled with self-hatred, wanting to scream and curse at him, but I'm desperate for him to let his guard down further. I need him to think I am powerless and meek. He groans in satisfaction as I press my fingers into a knot in his shoulders, then the waters ripple as his huge cock thickens, slowly growing with each beat of his heart.

This time, I can't tear my eyes away.

His cock is thicker than my wrist, and even relaxed, his powerful frame radiates an aura of command that demands obedience. I know his brutal desires. My hands freeze as heat grows between my legs, this tingling need, shameful, hatred mixed with raw, primal lust for the brutal warlord who can command a tribe of Orc warriors. My hands tremble as every nerve in my body reacts to his hunger.

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My mind is racing. How am I going to get out of here?

"Did you get it in battle with Lord Ashbourne's men?"

Despite being completely relaxed, his hand darts up so fast I can barely see the movement, the waters splashing as his fingers wrap around my wrist like iron bands. "You will not press me for details," he says through gritted teeth, standing up from the bathwater and releasing me. Water cascades down his body, dripping between his abs, the Orc Chieftain gleaming as he steps out of the tub. His green eyes are fixed on me with an intensity I cannot bear.

Will this be enough to warrant another punishment? Alone, in his cavern home with none of his soldiers watching, there would be nothing to stop his brutal desires from consuming me.

"The waters are hot enough for you. I will send a woman to prepare you for the banquet."

He strides away, to the mass of furs where he sleeps. In the wall, there are shelves carved directly into the stone, smoother than what any human could have created. Ragnar pulls a loincloth on himself violently, but it can't contain his fully erect manhood, which snakes down his leg. He does not look at me. He stares at the shelves, as if trying to forget I exist, but his nostrils flare.

Is it true that the Orcs can taste a human's emotions?

Can he smell the tortured, shameful way my body is reacting to him? It makes my

cheeks flush red in humiliation as he grabs a black cloak, throwing it over his shoulders.

Finally, he takes a crown. It is black, a stone circle that rests above his ears. He breathes out, his cock softening, and the dying light of the evening bathes his body. He no longer looks like a beast.

He looks like a king.

Then he stalks out of the room, leaving me standing with the soap in my hand.

The door slams behind him, and it is as though I am released from a spell. I hate myself more than ever. I hate myself for the way my body reacted when he put me over his lap and spanked me, the way I served him like a docile pet. My cheeks flush red in shame. Even pretending at being a cowed captive makes me burn inside, because despite acting, there is something inside me that yearns for him primally, a tortured desire I can't control or shake off.

I have to flee the stronghold tonight. When the Orcs let their guard down, drunk off their celebration, I will make my escape. I'll find a way to ply him with grog. One of his soldiers—I don't know the name—but the one who hates me argued with him. Would there be a way to pit them against each other, to try to get them into a drinking contest? If he passes out drunk...I'll have a window. A window to slip out of this place in the darkness of night.

My heart pounds as I imagine him catching me. Stalking me in the night, his huge footsteps getting closer, when his hand wraps around me and pulls me to his body and...

There is a knock at the door.

"Yes?"

"The Chieftain sent me. May I come in?"

It's strange being asked, when I'm a captive. The voice is more feminine and soft than Ragnar's.

An Orc woman walks in wearing a simple loincloth, unashamed that her nearly flat chest is exposed, the four nipples hard buds on her chest. Her body is adorned with blue and green paints in various patterns, including spirals and images of hawks with fierce eyes and outstretched wings. Her dark hair is fashioned into two neatly braided plaits that stretch down to her waist.

She bows her head to me. "I am here to help you prepare for the feast tonight. The Chieftain commanded it."

"Thank you," I manage. I've never had anyone serving me before except this morning when I was primped and preened by a group of women working for Lord Ashbourne, and it makes me feel awkward. I sat like a statue on the chair, not daring to move as they did things with my eyebrows and lips to turn me into another person. "What is your name?"

Her voice is soft as she replies. "I am Silga."

"Silga. I'm Aira. What do you mean, prepare for the feast?"

"Well, a wedding dress isn't exactly the right style for a banquet," she says, and there's a gleam in her green eyes, as I realize she's trying to make light of the stressful situation to relax me. "You must be painted." She has a satchel with her, which she opens. "And we need to get that muck off your face."

I rub at my eyes. Muck. That's exactly how I felt when I was done up like a doll this morning.

I look at the gorgeous patterns that cover her body. "Your paint is beautiful. What does it mean?"

She smiles. Her face is smaller than Ragnar's, her neck less thick, but she's still taller and more muscular than me. "I train hawks that hunt for us," she says, running her hands over the bird above her heart. "I have some skill in plant medicine, but I am no expert," she says, pointing to her thigh, where there is a small sprouting plant done in green. "Would you discard your clothes, that I may bathe you?"

I shake my head. "I can bathe myself."

She hesitates. "I have been told that humans are embarrassed to be in their natural state. Is it true?"

I blush. "Yeah, I guess."

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She looks me up and down, then nods. "It makes sense. Your skin is so soft, it could not protect you from anything. But do not fear. Here, you are under the Chieftain's protection. Nothing can hurt you, and I have been sent to get you ready. Would you allow me to complete my task?"

Unlike the other Orcs, she seems sweet and honest, and I feel no anger in her eyes when she looks at me. The rest of them despise humans.

I remove the heavy fur coverings, folding them neatly and placing them in the carved cubbies near Ragnar's other garments, all finely made loincloths, cloaks and sets of leathery clothes that must be armor. His musky scent still permeates his clothing. I should hate that smell, the stink of him, but the masculine scent of the Orc Chieftain is maddeningly good. It's the power of him. How if he was to keep you safe, no one would dare touch you, or even glance at you.

But he doesn't want to keep me safe.

He wants to trade me for the safety of the people he cares about. His people. I am just an outsider, to be shown off as a trophy of victory at a banquet celebrating his plan.

I struggle with getting the wedding dress off, until Silga comes behind me to help unzip it before removing it from my body. It had taken a team of people just to get me into it.

I breathe out a huge sigh of relief. "Thank goodness," I mutter. "I...I was meant to be wedded to Lord Ashbourne today. I'm glad it's delayed, even if it isn't for long." It's easy to open up around Silga. There was no one I could talk to in the village, and I

felt so alone when I was being carted to my destiny.

Her eyes turn dark. "That man is a devil. Forget him, for now," she says, then leads me to the bathtub. She takes the shovel to scoop fresh stones from the fire, adding them to the basin under the tub. The water is delightful and warm, but I can't help but remember that Ragnar was in these waters just moments ago. Back in the village, a bath is a rare luxury. In the huge tub, I have to crouch so I don't get submerged completely.

She carefully lathers soap over my body, her touch gentle yet precise, and as she washes me clean of all the day's grime and grit, I can feel my muscles relaxing. The warm water is soothing on my skin, and it's like all the tension I was carrying just melts away. She takes care to cleanse every inch of my face, telling me to keep my eyes shut as she removes the makeup that had begun to feel suffocating. It was a mask, painting me up as a doll for Lord Ashbourne's whims, and I am glad to be myself again.

When she has finished washing me, she braids my hair into two plaits, like hers, but much shorter. "Tell me, Aira, who are you?" It sounds like a deeper question than it is.

"What do you mean?"

"You will be painted now. I must know your stories."

She helps me out of the tub and drags two chairs to the fire. Then she takes a massive towel from the carved shelf and dries me off, despite my protests that I can do it myself. I sit down on the cushioned chair and stare into the burning embers of the fire, remembering my life.

The fear when my parents died, seeing my little brother so young and defenseless.

How I grew up fast knowing I would have to provide for him, because no one else in the village could spare any resources. The terror when I first poached in Lord Ashbourne's forests, patiently fishing while listening for any sound of an approaching patrol. Burnes, poor old Burnes, who has to farm with one hand after Lord Ashbourne's men caught him just strolling through the forbidden forests. He didn't even have a hunting bow or fishing rod, and they made an example of him.

And the way I felt when I snuck home two large fish, roasting them over our hearth, the way my little brother's eyes were saucers, how he tore into the first food we'd had in days.

That is who I am.

"I was sixteen when my parents died. They both got the same fever. Aldrin was twelve."

"Your brother?"

"Yeah. My brother. He's seventeen now, and thinks he is a man. But he would have starved if I didn't poach on Ashbourne's land," I say, opening up for the first time. Even with my friends back in the village, I'd always keep my lips sealed tight about how tough life was, and if I had to borrow provisions from them to get through a particularly rough time, I'd pay it back double.

While I speak, Silga mixes pots of dusty sand with water, stirring them.

"Would you put on your cloth?" she asks, pointing next to me. There is a small leather loincloth, and my eyes widen.

"That's what I am wearing?"

"Yes, of course," she replies, not looking up from her paints. I shrug the towel off, hanging it on the back of a chair, and pick up the loincloth skeptically. I wrap it around my waist. It's softer than I expected, well-made material woven...

But there's no top. My breasts are on display, and I don't have the flattish, four-nippled chest of a female Orc. Compared to the wiry, lean strength of a female Orc, I look more like a fertility goddess than one of their kind. It's the exact look I want to avoid, considering that my fate will be a breeding mare for a cruel lord once the Orc sells me off.

"I need something to cover my top," I say, scanning Ragnar's wardrobe cupboards carved into the stone and imagining pulling on a cloak. If I dared take one of his garments without his permission, I can only imagine his response, and I shift uncomfortably.

"You will have paint. Sit."

I steel myself, and sit on the chair. To my chagrin, Silga has placed a pillow on it. Are there still the Orc's handprints on my ass, marking me humiliatingly?

Silga stands behind me with her paints, pushing me forward gently so that she has access to my back. The brush is cool on my back, and I'm curious what she is painting, but before I can ask, she speaks.

"We used to hunt those forests, before we were driven into the mountains. I thought all of your kind had access to them."

"No. Just Lord Ashbourne. Is that why your kind hates us?"

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She pauses in her painting and takes in a sharp breath. Even without seeing her face, I can imagine her brows furrowing, her kind features turning hard. I've said the wrong thing.

"You killed the migrating herds of elk we rely on to get through the winter. I was up here, bringing medicine to Targok, the former Chieftain, and I saw it through the window." Her voice is raw, pained. "Hundreds of them. Burning. The meat wasted. Our Chieftain led the raid of vengeance. They fought on open ground, and many of our strongest warriors died without ever dealing a blow, cut down by your coward rifles."

She takes in a huge breath. "No. I should not say you. Your people, but not you. I do not blame all of your kind for the actions of some."

I get a surge of guilt. I'd thought of all Orcs as marauding savages. Maybe near all of them are, but this woman is better than any human I've met.

Silga clears her throat. "Some Orcs tried to hunt the forests. Four. Only two came back, caught by patrols. You were able to evade them? To hunt?"

"Yes. I learned their movements. Mostly I fished, in a stream that was hard to get to. You had to go over a tree that fell over a raging river, and the guards rarely ever braved it in their patrols. I had a few near misses," I say, remembering bullets whistling past my ear as two soldiers laughed, yelling that they had hit me. When I got home, I had to mend the bullet hole in my tunic, without letting my little brother see, or he'd have insisted that he be the one to go out and hunt. I forbade it. He seemed to step on every branch when we walked in the forest, trip over vines, and

barrel through bushes like a bear.

"Clever, clever," says Silga with admiration as the brushstrokes cover my back. Then she moves to the front. "Head up," she says, as she works her way down my neck, painting with expert strokes, dipping her brush into the pot. I see reds and yellows, like the colors of a sunset, but I resist the urge to look down. She hums happily as she works, a deep, low, rumbling sound as she concentrates.

It takes perhaps half an hour, then she puts her brushes away. "All done. Stand up," she says, and I stand, awkward in my loincloth. "How do you like it? Mirror," she says, and the back wall of the cave...changes.

The grey stone shimmers, then turns into a massive mirror. "How did you do that?" I gasp out, when I see myself, painted from my waist to my neck.

"Old technologies, from the time before. What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," I say, marveling at the intricate designs. I'm like a sunrise, painted reds and yellows that match with my blonde hair that is so different from the look of the Orcs. Standing next to Silga, the contrast is obvious. She towers over me, her body more muscular than that of a human man, all lithe strength and tautness, while I have curves and slopes to my body.

Then I see the fox that runs from my belly button to under my left breast, and I curse myself.

Why?

Why did I tell her of my poaching and subterfuge?

Idiot!

I should have said I baked bread and did make-up, or some other innocuous detail. Now I'm painted up as a thief of the night, and I've brought scrutiny and suspicion to myself.

And what's worse, despite my breasts being painted in deep reds, the pink of my nipples show, so unlike the flat chests of the Orc females. I'm nude, and I'll be on display for the entire tribe, a trophy that will be traded for their future, if they don't take me first.

"You are fortunate," says Silga.

"Why?"

"Ragnar has said you will have the place of honor by his side. Now come, for the festivities are starting."

"Festivities celebrating me being ransomed off for meat," I say, my voice going cold.

"I'm sorry," says Silga. "If I could have my way, you would be let free. Have you hungered, before? The last winter... I never want to go through anything like that again. I'm sorry," she says again, as if it changes anything.

Looking at myself in the huge mirror, the paint covering my body yet my face bare, my eyes intensely staring at myself, I do not feel alien. In the pure white wedding dress, dolled up for a cruel lord, I felt like a stranger. Here, now, somehow I fit in.

"Where did Ragnar get his scar?" I ask.

To my shock, she smiles, showing her two sharp fangs, so much shorter than the males. "The last winter, a great blizzard roared in. We had exhausted our rations. We used to feast on the elk all winter long, roasting their meat and drying it. But we had

nothing.”

"Ragnar went out. Alone, with his blade. No one else dared to go out in the biting wind and snow. Most of our strongest warriors had been slain, but he came back alive from that raid. Four days, he was gone, then he returned, near death, his chest sliced open from one end to another by the tusk of a mammoth. He left a trail of blood that led us to it. He killed it himself, and nearly died for it, and that is how we survived the winter.

"He was out for a week, feverish and weak, our best healers tending to him, but no one thought he would survive. That man is a titan," she says in awe and respect. "He was elected our Chieftain. If anyone can get us through the next winter, it is him."

5

RAGNAR

Isit at the head of huge oak table, filled with Orc warriors and civilians from the village, who are allowed to feast in the great hall on occasions of magnitude. When I became chieftain, we had no supplies, no mead, no food, and there was no banquet for my crowning. Now, our stores are half-filled, but the winters are long. My shamans consulted with the star-charts deep below the ground, and with the night sky.

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This one will be the great winter, when our planet is out of alignment with the sun, plunged into darkness for years.

And Aira will be the key to survival.

Gorak belches to my right, motioning a servant woman for more ale, and downing it. Ulric is to my left, not touching drink, watching the warriors carefully. He always has the pulse of my troops. Now, they are buoyant.

"I say we use the worm as bait. Say we're doing a ransom, draw them into the mountain pass. Then we drop boulders on them from above and take the food for our own, and his castle, too. You know the proud old bastard will want to come to get his prize bitch back."

I bellow out, too loud, "Do not call her that! She is a guest in our village!" Glances are cast my way before the conversation resumes, with one of the warriors producing a wooden flute to play an upbeat melody as the others join in with a drinking song. I take a hearty bite of meat, crunching on the bone and savoring all of it; food is getting harder to come by these days. The soldiers working for Ashbourn have been blocking off our supplies and depleting the game animals in the area. In response, I sent more villagers out to fish at the streams, but even the dried mountain trout can't compare to elk for size and quantity.

Think not of that. Soon, the stores will be bursting with meat.

Eyes go back to the cave behind me, towards my home, and I turn my head.

Aira. She walks in front of Silga, looking like a queen. Her firm, plump breasts are so unlike the taut figures of Orc women, the paints adorning her in bright fiery reds and yellows that match her sunfire hair. Aira keeps her chin up, no longer playing meekly as she was in my cave home, her hands heaven on my sore muscles as she massaged me. All eyes are drawn to her beauty, and I know that though all the Orc warriors hate humans deeply, others will be affected by her fierce beauty as I am. I have to take a deep breath to contain my possessiveness; she is mine alone, existing only for me...

And yet, somehow, I must give her up.

Fully painted, she looks more stunning than ever before—the patterns telling the stories of her life, a clever hunter and fisher who evades the watchful eyes of other hunters, and a protector who guards those weaker than her. She glances to the seat next to me, but I cannot be away from her, not even for a moment. I sit back in my chair, and pat the space between my legs.

Her eyes widen in shock. "Chieftain, I was told I would have the place of honor," she whispers, probably thinking that no one can hear her, not knowing the keen ears of Orcs. Warriors are looking over at me suspiciously. They have never doubted me before, not since I saved the lives of every man, woman and child in our village, not since I modernized our strategies, no longer wasting warriors in full out attacks. They trust me without question in battle...

Rage boils in me with the knowledge that our time together is fleeting, and I cannot look away from her, not for a moment. I raise a brow at her, and she knows that I can grab her and put her between my legs, so without blinking or hesitating, she nestles herself between my legs in front of me, and I wrap my arm around her, pulling her tight against my body. God, but she smells good, the sweet smell of a human woman mixed with the earthy scent of her paints, and I pull her tight against my body, savoring the sensation of her smooth flesh. It's a cruel deception. Soon we'll be apart,

and I am only torturing myself with what I cannot have.

"You go too far, Ragnar," snarls Gorak. "You paint a worm up like an Orc and put her on your throne as if she is your queen?"

"I am chieftain. I do as I wish. Is today the day, Gorak? I count you among my most honored warriors. Is today the day you try to become chieftain?" I let my voice rise in volume, bellowing it out so it echoes in the great hall. The wooden flute stops. Serving women stand stock-still like statues with tankards in their hands.

Gorak glances down to the hilt of my blade. It is nothing more than a hilt with a blue-black gemstone in it, and yet he knows how the obsidian blade appears out of nowhere from my thoughts alone, coated in swirling lightning that can cut through Orc-flesh as if he was human.

"No. I follow you always, Ragnar."

"Good! More mead for my warrior!" I yell out, and a man rushes over to fill his mug. Gorak stares straight forward, not smiling as he drinks deep.

6

AIRA

I shift against the stone seat, the throne of the Orc Chieftain. My feet dangle from it, and he pulls me tight against his body, so that I can feel that huge bulge of his cock pressing against me. It throbs, growing, as he reaches forward to the table and gets a piece of dried fruit, dipping it in honey.

To my shock, in front of all of his warriors, he brings it to my mouth. My cheeks flush red with humiliation and anger as I reluctantly part my lips, letting him press the

succulent fruit past my teeth. The taste is sweet and divine, but the shame is overpowering.

He flaunts me before his troops, a broken captive enslaved to his will, a pretty little bird who eats from his hand. Did he recount how he put me over his lap and slapped my backside until I writhed with pain, nearly crying from his discipline? Did he boast that I bathed him in his home, serving him like a good little pet?

Or did he tell them how my pussy got soaking wet when he had me over his lap?

"How is the fruit, Aira?"

"Delicious," I say after chewing and swallowing, closing my eyes to draw out every last flavor and to help ignore the harsh gazes of other Orcs. Fresh fruit is a luxury. I know that if I travel into the city I can trade a handful of apples for enough porridge to sustain me and my brother for a week, but you wish you had the apples when you're chewing on the mealy slop the next day.

It is good, but I suppress a groan as he grabs a piece of red meat with his bare fingers. I don't dare tell him that I can eat myself, because I don't want to give him any excuse to punish me, especially not in front of this crowd. He brings it to my lips, and I try to bite it, but he pulls it away.

"It's hot. Careful," he says, and I don't know if he's trying to humiliate me more or really doesn't want me to burn my tongue. I blow on it and take a bite. God, but it's rich and delicious.

"That's amazing," I say, my mouth watering for more. I'm being polite like my life depends on it. My life is spared—but my dignity won't be, if he decides to spank me again.

"Mountain goat. The prime cut, the tender meat."

"I'll take the stringy muscles any day," booms out a young Orc, perhaps nineteen or twenty, with his black hair in a mohawk.

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"And I'll eat the balls," says another, to a chorus of laughs. "That's what makes me strong!" He slaps a hand against his bicep. Apparently, it was the wrong thing to say, because the other Orc with the mohawk promptly challenges him to an arm wrestling contest, which ends with a draw and spilt mead on the table.

Ragnar wraps his huge bicep around me, just under my breasts. His hardness pulsates against me, making me want to squirm. I start to shift and immediately regret it as his erection swells beneath me.

Ragnar grunts, reaches down, and rearranges his cock so that it points straight up. It's hidden by my body to the others, so that only I know he has a raging, steel-hard erection that is pressed right against my back. His cock throbs and pre-cum dribbles down my back in a torrent, and I have to fight back a moan of shameful lust.

A flash of fear, a shiver of lust as I consider what he might do to me. Orcs are primal, brutal beasts. Would he take me right there and then, pushing aside food and lifting me onto the wooden table, so that I have to look out at the sets of burning eyes of his Orc warriors as he takes my innocence? Would the brutal beast even be capable of gentleness?

That huge dick of his is pulsing with his heartbeat, and I know he would ruin me for any other man, that nothing could compare to his beastly might, the way he would stretch me open and claim me eternally. I try not to moan as I can think of nothing but that huge, hot, too-hard cock pressed against me.

There's a cacophony, Orcs rising and drawing weapons, as a soldier in Lord Ashbourne's colors is dragged in by two big Orcs with battleaxes slung over their

backs. The tips of the axes glisten with flesh blood. The soldier's hacking breaths are muffled by the canvas sack that covers his head, and he's shaking as he's dragged forward.

Ragnar grunts, and flexes his legs, hard, as if to try and get the blood from his cock and into his thighs. I can hear him grit his teeth as he faces down the prisoner, his cock softening against my back as all his lust is overcome by duty.

Ragnar stands, lifting me like I am a doll and placing me on the empty chair next to his throne. The titan of an Orc looks at the pitiful captive without mercy, his jaw set, looking like a berserker, his thick, engorged cock softening as he reaches to his belt and draws the hilt of his blade. He motions, and the sack is pulled off the captive's head.

"Please," gasps the man, and I remember him.

The soldier who put the end of his rifle on my brother's neck, who laughed as he was about to kill him.

"A scouting party. They fell into one of your pit traps. This is the only one who survived," boasts one of the Orcs who brought back the captive. He clears a space on the table and dumps a huge bag. Rifles spill out, to cheers from the other Orcs. "Eight more rifles for our armies, and rations."

"Gorak. Bring the supplies to the armory," orders Ragnar.

"I'd like to see his head cut off, first," snarls Gorak, a cruel gleam in his eyes. Ragnar never stops watching the captive, his eyes fixed on the pitiful man, and with a grumble, Gorak stands from his chair. He walks, a little shakily from the drink, to the bag of rifles. When he passes by the captive soldier, he leans in and roars, drawing back his lips so his fangs show. The soldier sobs in fear.

"Please. I'll tell you everything."

Gorak hefts the bag and stalks off into the caves behind us. His hatred of humans consumes him, and he rushes to drop off the bounty so that he can hurry back and watch the execution.

"Speak," states Ragnar. There's no fury in his voice. He is cold and authoritarian, taking no pleasure in this.

"We were ten when we set out. We were sent to scout for traps. We found the six at the mountain entrance, and reported them back. We uncovered the one that we fell into, but a rockslide knocked us in. I...oh God, I saw the rest impaled," he whimpers. "Please don't kill me. I'm only doing my job."

"How did you find the traps?"

"Lord Ashbourne was given scanners from the Capital. They..." He clears his throat. He is in his thirties, his face pale, stripped of his armor, wearing only the tunic in Lord Ashbourne's dark colors with the twin eyes on his breast. "The Capital never thought of Orcs as a great threat, not until...not until..." He looks at me like he's seeing me for the first time, his eyes widening in shock as he witnesses my body painted in the fiery reds of the warrior species.

"New technology," spits out Ulric.

"Old technology," says Ragnar. "Too expensive for even a noble like Lord Ashbourne. Where are these scanners?"

The soldier gulps. "The two survivors, they were up ahead, scanning, when the rock slide hit us. They didn't fall into your trap. They managed to bring them back to the castle," he says, wincing as if he wished all ten of them had fallen.

"What does Ashbourne plan?"

The soldier shakes his head. "Please, he doesn't tell me anything."

Ragnar steps closer to him. He towers over the human, who grabs onto the table for support, and draws his blade.

From the hilt, where the blue-black gem rests, a black length of metal extends, lightning wrapping around it. He brings it closer to the terrified soldier's throat. "Speak!" Ragnar's voice booms out, echoing in the great hall, and every other Orc is silent.

"Men from the king's army are fortifying his castle. I think...I think there will be a show of force. Please, Chieftain Ragnar, I've told you all I know. Let me go."

"Yes. I believe you," states Ragnar. Then he pulls his weapon back to behead him.

"No!" I gasp out, not sure why, only that I can't see him kill a helpless man.

I stand, in front of the huge wooden table, and Orcs stare at me in shock that I would dare defy their Chieftain. Ragnar turns, fire in his eyes. "This soldier will be one more in their army if I let him go."

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"The ransom, Chieftain Ragnar. He could be a messenger."

"The message should be his head cut off and displayed," comes a deep voice from behind me. I turn. Gorak is back, stalking into the great hall. "Do not listen to this traitorous human. She is loyal to her own kind."

"Go back to the cave. Now." Ragnar barks out the order to me. I rush towards the back of the cave, down the hallways towards his room, dread pooling in my stomach. I have no idea if my outburst saved the life of a man not worthy of life...

Or if I just delayed it for a second, and brought Ragnar's wrath onto me.

7

AIRA

The door slams behind me, heavy wood that reverberates. One wall of the cave is still turned into a flawless mirror, and when I look at myself, I don't see the tension that's filling my being. The red and orange paints are like fire on my body, and Silga wove the paint expertly, making it accentuate the curves and lines of my body too well.

I'm going to be alone in the cave with the angry Orc warlord, clad in only a loincloth.

It's too intense to dwell on. I pace the smooth stone floor in my bare feet, back and forth. Did he murder that captive soldier? Is that the kind of man Ragnar is?

Ten minutes later, plenty of time to cut a man's head off, and the door opens. Ragnar

stalks in.

I shrink back. He is more imposing than ever, his jaw like an anvil, his stony green face emotionless as an executioner. He strides to me, until he towers over me, his earthy, masculine scent in my nostrils. I stare straight at his broad chest, but his strong fingers cup my chin, forcing my gaze upwards.

Then his fingers slide down my neck, ticklish and sensitive, and I gasp, waiting for them to close around my throat, that he will wring me and punish me brutally for my outburst.

He leans in, and kisses me. His lips are gentle, but I can feel the hunger in his being, and he wraps his fingers around the back of my head, forcing me to meet his kiss as his huge tongue slides into my mouth. Then, as quickly as he kissed me, he pulls away, leaving me shaking and confused, my stomach fluttering, insistent heat between my legs.

My nipples are hard and desperate, uncovered and on display for the beast. His eyes widen as he drinks up my body, looking me up and down, his nostrils flaring.

"I did not kill him." He states the words simply, and I walk to the huge mound of furs, sitting heavily, feeling weak.

He steps closer to me as I sit in the pile of furs, this titan of a beast towering over me possessively. "I saw you," he rasps. "I saw you in your village, picked by that ghoul. Any other woman would have gone with him for the promise of comfort. But you would not go, not until your brother's life was forfeit if you resisted. I saw you, Aira, as if you were painted in stories of courage.

"You drive me mad, Aira. You drive me to insanity. I can smell your nectar. Your body belongs to me, not to him."

My heart races uncontrollably. The tales told about Orcs are all true. They can smell your fear...

And your lust.

I'm more naked than I have ever been, my thoughts and needs on display for the chieftain. My body shudders with an undeniable urge, a primal reaction to his immense energy. He exudes power and my body instinctively responds, an instinct bred deep within my core that knows his strength cannot be denied.

"My men think you have made me soft. That I should not have spared the life of that worm who threatened us." His lips curl back. "I should punish you in front of them. Turn your ass red with my handprints while they watch. You will never contradict me in front of my men. You understand?"

"Yes, Chieftain," I say, imagining the intense humiliation of being stripped and spanked in front of his warriors, publicly shown my place.

"But you were right. He is more valuable alive. We will know by week's end if you can be ransomed, or if it is war for my tribe."

His burning green eyes stroll over painted fox on my body, then rest on my hard nipples that betray my need. "You're a strong-willed woman, Aira. I know you plan to escape tonight. I will give you the choice. I can tie you up, or you can sleep in my arms."

I gulp. I can just imagine it. Ragnar tightening ropes around my arms, then my legs, his breathing growing heavy as he feels how helpless I am. I'd be unable to move an inch while his beastly desires grew.

"I'll sleep in your arms," I say, and he nods. He gets into the furs with me.

"I...I thought I'd be deflowered by that bastard already. That I'd be in his bed, wishing I could get away, the touch of his skin against me making me want to throw up," I say, as he wraps his huge biceps around me. It's safe. Protective. I know I am his captive, that I am just a pawn to be sold, and despite wanting to escape...

I'd rather his arms around me than Lord Ashbourne.

"He does not deserve you."

"I know," I say, and he pulls me closer to his muscled chest.

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Our breathing is in sync, his huge bulge resting against my ass, and there is no way I can sleep. I can feel his manhood growing and surging. It rubs against my slit from behind, and I'm soaking wet, and I can't stop myself from moaning. There's only a tiny bit of cloth between me and him. It's humiliating, but the sound is not what betrays my lust. He can smell it emanating from me, the primal need to be taken by the Orc warlord.

His breath grows heavier, and he runs his hands over my body, taking my hard nipples in my hands and gently stroking, making me writhe, grinding my slit against his manhood. My loincloth unwraps as we grind together, and I don't reach down to pull it up, as the teasing pleasure of his massive cock pressing against my pussy lips drives me insane. His cockhead is so fucking hard, too big to be contained by his loincloth, and it slips under the cloth, pressing against my naked pussy. Then he pinches my nipples. Hard. He has a brutal side to his desires, squeezing too hard, then grabbing my entire breasts with his massive hands and hurting me.

I moan out in pain and pleasure. It's too intense, too perfect, this mix of protectiveness and ownership, and I want to feel him let go, to lose control to the darkest of his desires and pin me down and take me as his own. My body aches for it as my mind screams in self-loathing for what I need.

"I'm worthless if you ruin me," I gasp out, terrified, aching for him, knowing that if he fucks me, I'll never be the same again. It won't just be that I would be ruined to any other man.

If he tied me up and fucked me for his own pleasure, it would be one thing.

To have my own need displayed, my shameful lust for my captor exposed, will make me hate myself forever.

"Your worth is not what lies between your legs," growls Ragnar, his fingers slipping down, brushing against my bellybutton, closer and closer to my needy slit. His cock is straight out between my legs from behind, so that I can feel the hard, steel rod against the folds of my pussy lips. He grunts and removes my loincloth completely, throwing it aside.

"Your tribe, Ragnar. Don't damn them," I gasp, spitting out any reason to delay this another second, so that I will not be destroyed. He grinds his cock back, and the head spits out pre-cum, as if it is designed to prepare me for his too-big manhood.

His finger finds my clit, and circles. No man has touched me in this way. He is hungry, his tongue lapping at my neck, his lips gently kissing my earlobe as I feel his breath hot and needy.

"The smell of your need is my drug," he growls in my ear, and I whimper out, grinding up and down his huge, rock-hard shaft as his fingers quicken their circling, faster and faster, my body moving uncontrollably. He's put me in heat. His sweat reeks of power, lust, masculinity, this overpowering blend of testosterone and war that makes my head swirl.

With a growl, he can resist no more. He grabs me, pressing me onto my back, and opens my legs. His hands are rough and calloused, warrior's hands used to hefting a sword, not delicate human flesh. I can see the gleam of my pussy, my need betrayed, and I want him more than I've wanted anything. I stare up at the brutal titan. His chest is sculpted and cut, the scar running from his abs to his heart only makes him look more fierce. He places hands so huge they could crush my skull with a squeeze on my thighs, opening me up for him. His cock is so hard it looks like it could explode with a single touch, the veins running down the sides of his green rod pulsing with each

beat of his heart.

"I am not like Lord Ashbourne," snarls Ragnar, fighting against his lust, fighting against every instinct in his body that tells him to ram his massive Orc cock into me and split me open. "I can smell your need, Aira. I can taste how badly you need this. Say it!"

I can't lie to myself any longer. His face is rugged, jaw clenched with lust, hard lips pulled back to show the sharpness of his bright white teeth, his nostrils flared as he drinks in the scent of my lust. I'm burning for him, my pussy tingling. His stink intensified, pheromones filling my nostrils, overwhelming me with his brutality and agonizing hunger for my body.

He roars his command out, and I tremble, his hands squeezing tighter around my thighs, so hard it hurts, showing my desperate pussy to the alpha. "I need it," I gasp, aching to feel that massive cock inside of me.

His lips curl back in a smile of victory, then he lowers his head, his black, tangled mass of hair slick and sweaty as he extends his tongue and laps at my pussy. It is like he is starving.

"Ragnar," I gasp, as his fierce green eyes stare up at me and he feasts. He runs his tongue up and down my virgin pussy, tasting the nectar of my desire, and my eyes roll back in ecstasy as I grind my slit against his tongue, my hips bucking uncontrollably. There is a fever of a desire taking over me. He drinks in the juices of my need.

I try to find something to grab hold of, anything, something to center me as I lose my mind, gripping the furs tight, but then I need to touch him. I grip his tangled mass of sweaty black hair, grasping tight, as he spreads me open, his tongue sliding deeper into me. Then he pulls his head back and forms his huge tongue into a point, centred

on my clit.

The juices of my pussy and his hot saliva mix together, sliding down my slit and over my ass as I pull my hips up to meet his tongue. His breathing is deep, rough, and I feel my orgasm welling up.

A scream erupts from me as I cum on his tongue, and he doesn't stop, lapping furiously, faster and faster, forcing every ounce of pleasure out of me. He presses me down into the soft fur of the beds as he laps against my too-sensitive clit, until his tongue slows.

He kisses my clit, gentle, tender, then kisses his way up my stomach, each nipple, then my neck as I pant. Our bodies are sweaty, but the paints do not run as he moves me so that he is behind me again. He pulls me tight against his body. His cock is still rock-hard, between my legs like I am sitting on a log, and he runs his fingers over me lovingly.

I sink into his might. He's fierce. Brutal.

But he is not like Lord Ashbourne.

And when I am sent off and ransomed, I know what I will be thinking of when that bastard takes my virginity.

8

RAGNAR

The morning light spills in through the huge oval window, over Aira in my arms. She undid her braids before bed, her golden hair spilling out and framing her face. My arms are around her. She is soft, her skin warm, her body athletic yet curvy and fertile

in a way that drives me wild. She is asleep, peaceful, and I resist the urge to run my fingers over her cheek, not wanting to wake her. Her chest rises and falls as the birds sing their dawn chorus. I gently extract myself from her.

I look down at her and feel the gulf of emptiness. I never want to see my bed empty again, and yet, soon, she will be gone.

She is at peace now, but I've only brought her torment. Aira is strong, but I saved her from the cruel Lord only for a moment, because today I must send the soldier out to give a message to Ashbourne. My tribe is but one of the Orc groups in different mountains, and we have an uneasy relationship with humans. I have heard tale of wars farther north, where the more brutal tribes, who kidnap and pillage, are stamped down by attacks, but I always led my men to be defensive, hunting and protecting our lands instead of making raids.

I don a fresh loincloth and pull on a cloak. Will Aira be cold, when I am gone? I lean down to pull more furs over her body, but I have to pause to admire her. The red inks swirl on her body, accenting her curves, drawing my attention to her perfect, sensitive nipples. I love the way she moans when I play with them, how she reacts to my hands over her body. There's this new fullness in my balls. I did not sate myself in her last night, though every sense in my body urged me to take her innocence, to bind her to me for eternity.

I could sense her resistance. That alone stopped me. That despite her body burning for me, taking her last night would have put a chasm between us that could never be breached.

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Last night was an ecstasy stolen. I can still remember her taste on my tongue, and I have to suppress a growl as my cock surges up again, demanding to be inside of her. I stalk out of my home, closing the door softly behind me.

I take a hallway, then perfectly carved stairs down deeper into the cave system that was bored out so many millennia ago, when my species had great technologies, lost in the eons. The stone floor is smooth and polished. Torches lining the walls give off a low light, illuminating my path downwards, deeper into the cave systems. It would take me centuries with my blade to bore a rough room into the mountainside, but somehow, my species was able to create this fortress, beautiful yet secure.

Where did we come from?

It matters not. All that matters is that we endure.

Guards bow their heads in respect as I go into the cells. The soldier is sitting with his head in his hands on a wooden bench, his food untouched. His tunic is sweat-soaked. The eyes that are the insignia of his master look pitiful, crumpled and worn.

Last night I thought I would have to kill him. I would have swung, taking his head off, not in anger, but in the cold, merciless sense of duty, that a threat to my people must be ended. Aira gave me another choice. A smarter choice. Her mind is quick, even under pressure, and I wish I could have her by my side, helping me strategize and negotiate with the humans so that we could avoid this war.

"You will go to Lord Ashbourne's castle today. You will have an escort of guards."

"Please, not that one who wants to kill me," he begs, and I grit my teeth. Gorak was always loyal to me, but his hatred for humanity is causing him to act rashly.

"Not him. You will relay my demands exactly. We will return his bride-to-be, untouched and unharmed, in return for twenty head of cattle, four hundred caloric rations, and a ton of smoked fish."

"Okay. I've got it."

I lick my fangs as I think. "What do you predict his reaction to be?"

"I...I just follow orders and..."

"Answer me."

He gulps. "I think he would do anything to get his property back, but a war would be more costly than a negotiation. He doesn't like waste. The king only sent a dozen troops...but he sent guns, ammo, and these...these black birds, I don't know their function."

"Black birds? What is this magic you speak of?"

"I don't know what else to call them. They are the size of a man, these black triangular things. But I saw one flying above, as if under the control of the king's men."

More bad news. We already have to fight skirmishes and guerrilla battles, and if those things can report back our movements, it would be worth a hundred scouts. Did the king have his scientists create these new weapons—or were they from long ago, hidden away and valuable? If so, he won't risk them easily.

I'll start training a counter-defense force today. Orcs with rifles, posted at high vantage points, the best shooters. They will practice on the hunting hawks and eagles that circle the mountains. Proud birds, and such a waste to be killed, but it is the only way. Their flesh is stringy and chewy, but we will not waste their bodies.

"You will be the one to return with his answer, within three days. If any other soldier or scout comes, I will consider the offer ended, and she will be my property. Tell your Lord that we have trained with your rifles. We are not the Orcs he used to battle against. For every one of us he kills, he'll lose ten. Make him believe it."

"He'll believe it. Thank you, Chieftain Ragnar, for sparing me."

"Thank the bride-to-be." I grunt, about to leave, but I can't help myself. "How will he treat her?"

He swallows. "Well."

"Don't lie to me."

He takes in a big, shaking breath, his eyes darting to the left. "Okay. I...he sometimes has servant girls brought up to his bed...he gets me to stand guard and..." He plants his eyes downward. "They come back shaking, and they don't make eye contact. That man has a darkness to him. But a wife is unlike a serving girl. He'll view her like a prized trophy. I think, I really believe, she'll be well-treated."

"She is the one who spared your life. Remember that, when she is in the castle," I say, and open the bars to his cell. Then I bark the order to the guards to get a group of three trusted Orcs to escort him out of our mountains.

Then I walk down, deeper, past our armory, to our cellars. It is a high-ceilinged room, and the sweet smell of smoked fish, bathed in honey to preserve it, greets me. Half

filled. Three falls ago, there would be carcasses of elk hanging, their meat drying, to keep us strong through the winter.

I think of Aira, cold and scared in the cruel Lord's bed, and I grit my teeth. We have always hunted, but I have watched how humans tend to their herds. With twenty head of cattle, we can breed more. We can drink of their milk, while the caloric, high-density rations and the ton of fish supplement us enough to last the winter without slaughtering any of our new herd.

I will secure the future of my tribe...

But I will lose my own.

I grip the hilt of my blade as I realize the horrible truth.

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I want Lord Ashbourne to refuse. I want to claim Aira as my own, for eternity. I will sate myself between her legs while she screams my name in ecstasy, and I will make her belly swell up with my son. He will have my brutality and her intellect. He will be the king not just of these mountains, but of the entire planet, leading together the tribes in a true war against the human species, to take our rightful places as masters of this planet.

Guilt fills me. Shame, as I focus on the memories of Orcs starving, cold and shivering, most of our soldiers killed in the open fields. I can remember Silga coughing dryly, conserving her movements as she made a soup of herbs and bones, bones we boiled a dozen times before, to get any last nutrients from them. Gorak's father, who succumbed, refusing all rations so that the younger Orcs could survive.

How I went deep, deep into the caves to try and find something left behind from the time before that could save us, and finding the hilt of a blade with an orb inlaid. I got chills when I saw that thing. I stared deep into it, and it seemed to speak to my being, longing to be brought out of the recesses of the cavern systems and brought into battle.

I wrapped my fist around it, and it extended into a blade that could cut through stone.

I took it and went into the blizzard, not expecting to come back. I can still remember the fiery pain as the mammoth tusks split me open in a blow I knew would be my end, as I slammed the blade through its thick skull and into its brain, hoping that somehow, my people would find my grave and the food I died for.

But I did not die. For an hour I bled, holding my furs against my wound to stop the

blood flow, and no one came.

I crawled back. Hours in the biting wind, I crawled, and I left a blood trail leading right to the feast.

I remember the gnawing hunger, the pall of terror in my helpless tribe, and I cannot damn them to another long winter without food.

I will provide, even if it means sacrificing the only woman who gave me hope for something greater.

9

AIRA

I rouse from my sleeping stupor, disoriented because...because I am not in my village home, or even the huge featherbed that Lord Ashbourne must have. A cold, fresh wind blows through the huge oval window, and my situation hits me like a slap.

I am alone, in his chambers, nestled in the furs that smell of his musk. The wind is the first chills of winter, harsh and vital, and this one will be long. I know it in my bones.

I shiver, and it's not from the wind, as I remember the night before. The warlord's tongue lavishing me, forcing out the most intense orgasm of my life, so that the cavern swirled around me. I pull on my loincloth, and hesitate at the cupboards. It's icy cold, and I want to drape myself in furs, but everything here is made in the size of Ragnar. I find a coat made of a bear, and don it, disappearing in it. The smell of him permeates it, and it makes me feel safe. It drags on the floor as I walk to the window, looking out at the wild lands to the north. There is a long stretch of tundra, a forest with towering trees, and dark mountains, black against the white of snow, a harsh, unforgiving land which I know is filled with more Orcs. Before the tundra, there are

three lakes fed by rivers, and I can see the fish jumping, glimmering in the dawn light. To the northeast, I can catch a glimpse of the tall walls of the capital city, blurry in their distance.

I start as the door opens. It is Ragnar, clad in a fur, but without his crown.

"That fur suits you," he says, looking me up and down. Then he looks away, clearing his throat, and I know the night before was a mistake for him.

"I...I was cold, so I just took one at random."

"Take whatever you need. You have free rein of this village while I am gone. You are under my protection, and none will touch you." His voice is distant, too formal.

I shiver. "That other man. I don't know his name. But he...he hates me."

"Gorak. His father died of starvation after your people massacred the herds. He's lost many friends to Ashbourne's patrols." He licks his fangs, thinking. "Silga!" he booms out, and I hear her pattering steps. "Guide Aira today. Show her around the village, if she likes." The second Silga is in the room, he relaxes a little, as if the presence of another is enough to stop him from doing anything he will regret.

"It would be my pleasure."

Ragnar leaves, and I feel more at ease with Silga in the room. She's at least one friendly face in this mountain stronghold filled with the alien race.

Until she looks over at the rumpled furs on the ground, and I realize there's no other bed made up. My cheeks flush red.

"He seems to like you," says Silga, biting her lip in a smile.

"It doesn't matter. Whatever he feels for me, it won't get in the way of his duty."

Silga nods. "Sorry, I didn't mean to joke, I just..."

"No, it's okay. It's a weird situation."

She smiles. "I guess I'm one of your captors, then. So you should hate me."

I shrug. "But I don't. And my people killed your herds and nearly starved you to death. So you should hate me, right?" It's a touchy subject, but I dare the joke.

"And I don't hate you either. In fact, I'd quite like you to stick around more. Would you like to see how we live?"

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"I don't know. I...it's just weird, with everyone hating humans so much."

"Well. Most of the soldiers are out. Ragnar has tripled guards and sent out patrols. He's also been getting volunteers for..." She trails off, and I realize she was about to spill strategic information.

Information that will be in the hands of their enemies, as soon as I am

"So who's left?"

"Mostly civilians, and a few soldiers. And the children, of course. To them, you're like a strange animal. They are fascinated. When I walked up to the great hall this morning, there were a dozen of them, hiding in the bushes, trying to catch a glimpse of you."

"Oh dear," I say, because I just want to disappear.

"Come on. It'll be okay. I know you won't be here long but..." She swallows. "Look. You're going to be Lord Ashbourne's bride. He is a powerful man, but you'll have direct access to him. If you learn about us, it could take years, but you can plant the seeds in his mind. We are not a threat to him. We just want to live out here, alone, at peace with the land."

"Okay. I'll do my best," I say, anxiety spiking. Lord Ashbourne will view me as no more than a trophy, a breeding sow to bear his heirs, but even if it's false hope, I need to do everything I can to advocate for her species.

"Then come on, let me show you the village. Here. I've got shoes for you," she says, handing me a pair of leather boots that are a size too big. I try not to look too closely at them, fearing I'll see bloodstains from the previous owner.

10

RAGNAR

I pull my furs around me as I stand on the peak in heavy boots. Even our species is affected by the cold and biting wind, and though the air is clear, a gust kicks up a gale of snow, scouring my face. I brought twelve of my men, younger, with good reflexes and keen eyes, up to the peak with rifles in hand. We are followed by another three big soldiers lugging boxes of ammunition.

I've tested the weapons. They can be fired thirty times before they must be exchanged for more ammunition, and these twelve have been working nonstop to replace the bullets quickly, learning the mechanism of the cowardly weapon to be able to keep a high rate of fire.

It's clear and harsh up here near the peak, and I can look down to Aira's village, along with the other six small farming villages that surround Lord Ashbourne's cold grey castle. Smoke rises from chimneys, and little shapes walk around in the villages. Wagons, drawn not by horses but by the infernal engines of Ashbourne's technology, surrounded by soldiers, bring supplies to his castle to get through the winter. Behind those walls, people will be safe.

In the villages, their stomachs will gnaw.

I scan down the mountainside, looking for any hint of movement of the men escorting the messenger back. I catch a glimpse of a shadow, but as I focus, it is only a hardy mountain goat.

I reach down, under the snows, and grab a slab of ice, grunting as I lift it and throw it over the side of the peak as high as I can. "Fire!" I yell, without letting my men prepare.

Some curse, but one, only nineteen, with sharp eyes and a hard face, has already raised his weapon. The crack of the rifle sounds and the chunk of ice explodes into a flurry. He lowers his weapon, chews, and spits out black liquid of the tobacco grass. His fangs are stained yellowish, his eyes cold and green as he waits.

"Good. Lord Ashbourne has a new weapon. Black metal birds of prey that will report our movements back to his people." The Orc soldiers growl. I picked ones who were open-minded, who did not dogmatically follow the old ways of combat with axes and spears, but who could embrace the new methods of combat that would help us survive. Younger, often ones with wiry, light physiques who did not excel in close combat and want to learn a new way to fight for the tribe.

"The twelve of you will train today. You must be able to bear the cold for long hours. There will be two shifts of six, on these peaks," I say, pointing one by one at the vantage points that will protect our mountain home. "Shifts will be around the clock. Half day each. You have one job. To be able to shoot down the scouting birds before they can bring back information. Understood?"

"Understood," says the one who shot down the chunk of ice.

"Good. You three. Lay out targets."

I watch for a good half hour, ignoring the frost. When one of the soldiers complains that he feels like an old woman, sitting down as if he is sewing furs, I take the rifle from his hands and fire, showing him that even the warlord of the tribe is not above the new technology.

They go through hundreds of rounds, and slowly, their aim improves, and none complains about the biting cold.

We will adapt. We will survive in these lands that are our birthright, no matter what the humans try to put against us.

11

AIRA

The great hall is silent, the long wooden table empty and cleaned. The table bears the stains of hundreds of meals, greasy residue of animal fats from the meaty diet of the Orcs, but the stone floor is polished clean, without a scratch. I follow Silga, looking closely at her back, seeing more hawks among the swirling blue and green patterns of her paints as she brings me to the entrance of the great cave and we look down at the village.

The village is bustling with activity. The long river that runs through the village is thick with jumping fish. Two Orc women are wading into the waters with nets, clucking and yelling at each other as fish jump past, and an older man with a long spear is driving his weapon into the waters to catch the ones they miss, pulling out fish and putting them into a huge bucket. The two women have matching pink and purple paints adorning their bodies, fish and berry designs that cover their hard green flesh. Along the walls of the valley where the Orc village is nestled, homes are built into the stone itself, some as high as four stories. From one, three Orc teenagers are peering out, and when they see me glancing, they duck under the stone and out of sight.

The clang of metal is coming from a stone house, where black smoke is funneled up a long wooden pipe, dissipating in the cold breeze above. "We work the blacksmith only on windy days, so the smoke doesn't betray us," says Silga, seeing where I'm

looking.

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She leads me down the steps, and bushes rustle near the bottom. As I come closer, there's a yell, and four Orc children, in loincloths, sprint away in fear.

"I feel like a monster out of a fairy tale."

"They're shy. Don't worry."

The entire village is well protected by the two valley walls that rise up on either side. There's only one entrance, at the far side, through the tight pass which is guarded by two Orcs holding spears, and a third, sitting on a boulder with a rifle on his lap. Some Orcs are kneeling in a little garden, tilling the soil, others tanning hides.

It is nothing like what I would have expected. From the stories, the Orcs would have human slaves toiling for them, nude women tied up to sate their beastly desires.

The clang of hammers stops, and from the blacksmithy, a big, low building, I see an older Orc appear at the window. He watches me carefully, then extends his hand to beckon me.

"Who is that?"

"Old Mr. Tork. He's fascinated with humans."

"What does he want from me?"

Silga smiles. "I'd imagine he'd like to pick your brain."

I follow her on the path to the blacksmithy. The wooden door opens. Mr. Tork is short for an Orc, perhaps six foot five, and he's missing his left hand, which ends in a nub. His right arm is twice the size of his left, huge muscles bulging, and he puts a long hammer on the wall with his other tools.

He glances down to the black ring on my finger, then up to me. "Welcome, Aira. How do you do, Silga?"

"I'm good."

I don't speak, too nervous. "The name's Tork. Tusk Tork." He extends his right hand to me. I take it, and he barely squeezes, too gentle, as if he thinks my hand will shatter under the slightest touch. "I need your help."

His workshop is a forge, an anvil with a long, beaten piece of metal, and next to it are twenty metal tubes. "You're trying to make rifles," I say, blinking.

"Smart. Very smart. So you will be of use to me. We've taken more ammunition than we could use from the war parties, but we don't have enough weapons to shoot them. I've been trying to recreate your technology."

"It cost you," says Silga, sadly.

"I was born with two hands. I can spare one of them," grins Tusk. I feel no animosity from him, only a deep curiosity. "I've been able to make a weapon that can fire the bullets, but the accuracy is terrible. I'm missing something."

"She wouldn't know anything about rifles. She worked in a farming village," says Silga, trying to brace him for disappointment.

"Well. That's not completely true," I say. "When I was sixteen, some of Lord

Ashbourne's troops were on a patrol in our village. One of them took a liking to me, and thought he'd impress me by showing off his gun. I'd hoped to steal it, but he never gave me a chance." I walk to the anvil, where the long half piece of metal that will form half the barrel of a gun is lying. "See here? On the inside? It needs to have...like, spirals. That's how the bullets fire farther, with more accuracy."

"Spirals. Of course! The Chieftain never let me open up one of the rifles to see their secrets. He said they were too valuable."

"It's called rifling. It makes the bullet sort of...spin. I don't know the physics, but it'll shoot longer."

"Rifling. And do you know how to make the spirals?"

"I don't, sorry. But I bet Silga could. She's got incredible hands, and a keen eye for details."

To my shock, the Orc woman blushes, her green cheeks flushing as she looks down, unused to the praise. "I don't know about that," she says.

"If the Chieftain lends you a rifle, you could...well, you could maybe coat the inside of the front of the barrel with some of your clay, or soot. Then put a piece of cloth or...paper inside, maybe you can get a replica of the pattern?"

"That might work," says Silga, tapping her right fang with her finger. "We could also melt wax, coat the inside of a rifle, and try to gently pull it out."

There's a pounding at the door, then it's kicked opened. "What the hell are you doing? Giving our secrets to our enemies?"

It's an Orc I haven't met before, a young one, not yet twenty. He's ugly, with uneven,

slanted teeth, a wispy beard that cannot hide his weak jaw. His left eye is gone, with a brutal scar, and his other is pure hate. The Orc's one eye is wide and bloodshot, like the whole world is taunting him.

Tusk moves quick for an old man. The hammer is already in his hand, his body between me and the angry Orc. "You forget your place, boy. She's a guest under the Chieftain's protection. You raise your weapon to her, you raise it to him."

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"And that means you have to spill our secrets, worm-lover? These weapons are cowardly."

"You only say that because you can't aim with one eye!" bursts out Silga, stepping in closer to me to keep me safe. It's the wrong thing to say. His one good eye darts to her, then back to me, and he snarls.

"They'll keep us alive." Tusk's voice is too calm, steady and slow, trying to defuse the situation. "I'd rather our tribe be live cowards than dead in the plains, like our old Chieftain would have wanted. We are more than mindless warriors, and there's no glory in a futile death."

The younger Orc grabs his mace from his belt, bringing it up, his lips drawn back to show his fangs. He stinks of sour sweat and gristle, and as he speaks, a fetid scent fills the room. Rotten meat mixed with strong alcohol. The Orc never went to sleep after the festivities. He's been drinking through the night. "You'll kill us all, feeding information to her."

"I'm sorry. I'll leave. I didn't want to cause any trouble," I say quickly, trying to calm him, but my voice only enrages him.

"Shut up, worm," snarls the Orc. He steps forward, swinging his mace. Tusk steps back, the blow whistling in front of him, and brings his hammer down hard on the young Orc's shoulder. There's a crunch of bone, and the weapon falls from his hand. The over-confident Orc collapses in a whimpering heap, and Silga rushes forward, grabbing a clean cloth and pressing it to his arm. He moans out in fear. Each gasping breath, spit and mucus drips down his mouth. "We need to get him to a healer," Silga

says, her voice shaking. His arm is ruined, the bone turned to dust, and it hangs limply by his side.

Drawn to the commotion, other Orcs are running in, women hissing in anger, older men growling. "He raised his weapon against a woman under the Chieftain's protection," booms out Tusk, no longer looking old or weak. "Bring him to the healer. His fate will be in the hands of the Chieftain."

The wounded Orc is dragged away, leaving a trail of sickly, orange-brown blood that clings to the ground, staining it. I try to slow my breath, but I'm panting. I walk forward in a trance, out of the blacksmithy, and despite him trying to hurt me, I hope the young Orc will be okay. He must have been poisoned with hatred for humans from a young age, incapable of seeing us as anything but demons bent on eradicating his species.

When I think of men like Lord Ashbourne, he's right. As long as men like him hold power, the Orc species will never be safe.

The young Orc is whimpering as he is dragged into a long stone building that must be their hospital.

Most of the Orcs are staring at me and the trail of blood. Do they blame me for what happened? Some of their gazes go to the entrance of the village, and I follow their sight.

Ragnar. He stops at the top of the steps, standing tall as a giant, with a huge mountain goat over his shoulders. He drops it, the limp body falling as he races down the steps towards me. His long, muscular legs like tree trunks eat up the ground as he sprints towards me. Orcs gather around us while women rush their children inside their homes, not wanting them to see his vengeance. That young Orc went against his decrees, and the hammer slamming his bones to dust is only the start of his

nightmare.

Ragnar is clad in a heavy fur coat, his green, stony skin slick with sweat, snow melt in his rough, tangled black hair. The waterfall of unruly curls goes down his neck, a bear's mane that frames his anvil of a jaw. He towers like a titan, but there is a hint of vulnerability on his powerful face, out of place. The green skin of his shoulders and chest is visible beneath the fur coat, impregnable jade skin that could stop a sword blow, but there's pain in his eyes.

"By the laws of my honor, I failed you. I told you that you were under my protection, and one of my own raised a weapon against you. I cannot hold you. You are free to leave," he says, his voice hard. Gasps come from the crowd. Just last night, they were celebrating that I would be the key to their survival, and now their Chieftain is letting me go.

That, I did not expect from the Chieftain, and neither did anyone else watching. They are shocked, but nod in understanding. This species has a code of honor I did not understand or expect. Orcs are shifting uncomfortably, waiting for my answer, and one rubs his belly as if remembering the long hunger of the last winter.

"The fate of the young one is yours to decide. Shall I take his head from his neck?"

I shake my head. "No. It'll just make your people hate humans more. He's been poisoned by..." I don't say his soldiers like Gorak, because I don't want to cause more trouble, not when I am free.

Ragnar turns to the hospital. An Orc woman in a white apron is looking at him, arms crossed. "Tend to his wounds, but give him no medicine to soothe his pain. Let him learn from what he has done." The woman nods and goes back into the hospital.

I look up at the mountain pass that will lead back to my home.

No.

Not to my home.

I'll be lead straight to Lord Ashbourne's castle, trapped behind the stone walls. The valley on either side of me looms up protectively, but in Ashbourne's castle, I'd feel like the walls were a cage.

I look at the small, poorly made gardens, the plants placed haphazardly, the stream where Orcs fish inefficiently. They do not have the tools to survive this winter. They are hunters, and my people destroyed their way of life. The only way they can live through the long winter is by trading my life for their tribe.

"I will stay. Trade me, that your tribe can survive this winter."

The collection of Orcs look at me, stunned. Then one woman, old, with long grey braids, gets to her knees. "Thank you," she says, and I have to look away, because I can't handle the praise.

Ragnar strides to me and wraps his huge arms around my body, pulling me tight against his broad chest. "We do not deserve you," he says, but there's pain in his voice.

I clear my throat, uncomfortable. I'd love to sink into his arms, to feel protected and cherished...

But it's all going to disappear. I pull away from Ragnar. "Well, Lord Ashbourne's only getting married once. You'll need new tactics to survive the next winter."

He nods. "We will...we will trade you for rations and cattle. I plan to start a herd that will provide for us for decades to come."

I cock my head. "Herds are good. A start. But one blight or disease, and you could lose it all."

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"What do you suggest?"

"I saw from your windows many streams and lakes. I saw some of your women fishing with nets. Could they make larger nets?"

Ragnar turns towards the stream, where the two women, painted in swirling purples and pinks, have paused in their fishing. They must have extremely keen hearing, because they nod. "We could. It would take us some weeks."

I look over at the Orcs gathered. It's a clean split. Half are looking at me with gratitude...

But the rest, mostly men, can't hide the hostility that makes their eyes gleam.

"You can use those, to increase your fishing production."

"We need meat. Red meat, not fish!" yells out an Orc with an axe at his belt.

"We need food, to survive." Ragnar's voice has a warning in it, and the Orc who yelled looks down, but he regains his confidence.

"The lakes are covered in ice through the winter. You think she can magic up enough to last us?"

"Ice fishing. You can bore holes through the ice and fish them even in the winters," I say, quickly. "It's not easy. But it can be done."

The Orc with the axe licks his fangs. Then he nods. "My apologies. I spoke out of turn. Your kind has caused us such harm that..." He grunts, embarrassed.

It's hard, but I smile at him. "I was told stories about Orcs to scare me when I was a kid. That you take humans as slaves, bring back captives, kill for pleasure. I'm sure you've been told the same."

"The tribes to the north are like that," growls Ragnar.

"And the bastards in Lord Ashbourne's castle are worse. There's bad in any species."

"And good," says Ragnar. "Prepare the goat for tonight. We will return."

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To scout the rivers and lakes. I believe that you are the key to my tribe surviving, Aira."

12

RAGNAR

Just watching her walking is intoxicating. Clad in three layers of clothes, my warmest furs, her body shrouded, it does nothing to stop my imagination from running wild. I know her body nude and displayed, and as she walks, I can imagine the roll of her hips, the perfection of her ass. She looks back, her fur hood framing her golden hair and bright, gleaming blue eyes. "Can you keep up?" she teases.

I grin. It's strange having someone speak to me like this. No one disputed my rise to Chieftain after I nearly died for my tribe, but in the year that followed, two different men challenged me for primacy. Each time, I dispatched them, and the way people

speak to me is with a fearful respect, knowing that I am the only one who can lead the tribe to survival, mixing brutality with cunning. But Aira... Aira has a lightness to her.

"My legs are twice as long as yours. It's not a fair fight."

Aira walks in front of me, her footsteps silent as she strides through the rugged trail with steps more certain than a mountain goat. Silga did well with her paints. She is lithe and intelligent.

We walk another ten minutes or so, me trudging through the snows, her somehow finding patches that support her weight, shifting slightly, her feet finding certain ground on rocks where even my keen eyes cannot see hard ground. The sky is clear, the sun warm in the last heat of autumn. There will be a final melt of snow that makes the stream that runs through my village swell, and then the lands will be shrouded in snow.

I brought her out here to learn her knowledge. To benefit from her sharp mind...but my cock is surging up between my legs, this primal ache for the one woman I cannot have. It tortures me. She stands on a boulder, looking out at the lands below, and I pull myself up on it, surveying my domain. All of this, I own, by the sword in my belt, by the endless fight for survival. I can see the trails through the mountain boulders, noting each place where there is a pitfall trap, a hidden Orc waiting with bow and arrow, some few with rifles to cut down patrols. There have been none since I sent the messenger.

A good sign—but one that is bittersweet. I almost wish they would bring us to war, so that I could have Aira as my queen.

She looks up at me, and I can smell her feminine scent. She is delicate yet powerful. I cannot have her. Not in the way I want. If I returned her without her innocence, I can only imagine what the Lord Ashbourne would do to her. He'd punish her, and there

would be nothing I could do to stop it.

My heart quickens as I imagine taking her, right here and now, sealing our fates together forever. I suppress a growl, and step closer to her, reaching up to touch her cheek. She leans into my touch, hesitant and eager at the same time. I am standing on the rock slightly lower than her, so that we are at eye level, and I can see my brutality reflected in her eyes.

I press my lips against her. I can't stop myself. I need her, more than I need life itself. She responds with a hunger that matches my own, then pulls back.

"The day I took you. You begged me to let you free," I say. "What changed?"

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"Silga. I thought you Orcs were all brutes. She...she doesn't deserve to starve. And if there's one like her, there's more." She smiles. "I saw some little Orc boys hiding in the bush, trying to get a glimpse of me. When I came close, they scattered and ran. If you let me go, there's no happy ending for me. Lord Ashbourne would hunt the lands for me, or if he heard I had escaped, he'd hold my brother hostage until I came back to him." She swallows, her perfect, pale neck bobbing, and I run my fingers down her cheek, loving the sensation of her perfect smooth skin.

"If my fate is to be his toy...I won't have my captivity be for nothing. He'll never let me leave those walls. But in the winters, I'll look out, and I'll know your people are safe."

I ache to kiss her again. I ache to run my tongue down her body, to taste her again. Her scent is conflicted. There's a tendril of desperate need, but she is withdrawn from me.

She clears her throat.

"I want you, Aira."

"I know. But the messenger will be back soon. And if you don't return me untouched, it'll be war. Your people have had enough suffering."

I pull away from her, snarling. My cock is a hard rod of fiery need. My thoughts are filled with images of her slit, glistening with desire, every instinct in me telling me to take her now, our bodies warming each other in the snows, merging together. I want to fuck her until I fill her with my seed.

Her wide, blue eyes hold my gaze. They're filled with an aching need, a sorrow that I cannot fix. "Let me taste you again," I growl, but it is not a command. It is a desperate plea, and I run my tongue over my lips, aching to taste her nectar once more, to have her in the only way I can.

She gets a gleam in her eyes, teasing. "You really think you can keep up to me, you big bear?"

My brows furrow. "Of course. I know these lands."

"I've evaded patrols all my life. You're strong. You're fast. But I can hear you coming a mile away. I'll make you a deal, Mr. Chieftain."

If any other person talked to me in this way, I'd have them punished for insolence. From her, I crave it, crave the easy way she speaks to me, as if I am not a brute beast, but a man her equal.

"What is the deal?"

"Close your eyes and count to a hundred. I'll give you until the sun passes the peak to catch me. If you can't...then you will not touch me again, not until I am gone."

"And if I catch you?"

Her eyes are hot. Glinting and filled with aching need, and her scent swirls with her arousal. "Then I'll pleasure you, the way you did to me last night." She runs her tongue over her lips, and I growl as my cock throbs painfully hard, as I imagine those lips wrapped around my manhood.

"This is a dangerous game."

"That's the only kind I play," she says, and takes my finger, slowing bringing it up to her lips.

"My word is iron, Aira. If you escape me, I swear to you, I will not touch you," I say, as her tongue slides around my finger, and I cannot think of anything but the way her tongue will feel on my cock, massaging my aching manhood until I find my release.

13

AIRA

I bring his huge, calloused finger up to my lips and slide my mouth over it. I massage his finger with my tongue, rolling my tongue around his meaty digit. I'm tormented with lust, this aching need for the man I cannot have, but I can't stop myself.

I pull his finger from my lips. His eyes are wide with lust, his nostrils flaring, and I know he can taste the scent of my need, but I no longer feel ashamed.

I want him to taste it. We cannot have each other. I can see Lord Ashbourne's castle from this vantage point, and I hate it.

The only thing I will have, when I'm a stupid little pretty bird, good for nothing but looking beautiful, clad in fine silks and jewelry, are the memories I will cling to. Ashbourne won't care a whit for a single word that comes from my mouth. It's so unlike Ragnar, who listens to every word as if they are precious.

"Count to one hundred," I say, and he closes his eyes.

"One," I hear, and I know I should escape...

But I cannot resist. I reach into his furs, down his loincloth, and feel the heavy weight

of his massive cock. He gasps in surprise, and his eyes open. "Two," he says.

"You opened your eyes. No cheating. Start again," I say, as I rub his cock slowly. The head of his dick spurts out pre-cum, smooth liquid that coats my hand, and I slide my hand all the way up his huge shaft, teasing him with my touch. I can't even wrap my hand around his manhood, and I imagine that heavy thing throbbing in my mouth, the way he'd growl and groan as he sates himself.

He closes his eyes again. "One," he growls, his voice heavy and ragged, filled with desire, as I pull my hand away and run.

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My mind clears as I sprint, muscle memory from the dozens of near misses when I was hunted by Lord Ashbourne's patrols. If they caught me, they would have taken my hand from my wrist.

This game is far more intense. If I can escape...he swore he won't touch me. I'll end this torment that we both feel, the aching needs in our bodies that cannot be sated.

But if he catches me...

He won't be gentle. I could feel his brutal, aching need. That huge thing of his will claim my mouth as his property.

"Five!" he yells, from back on the ridge, loud so I can hear him. He'll count to the full one hundred, and not cheat by quickening the count.

I sprint over the snowbanks, my gait certain, finding hard patches of ice and rocks to get away. I don't look back. There will be a trail, but a faint one, and he's faster than me. I'll have to outwit him to escape.

I sprint at full speed, turn a corner, and think. I bite my lip as I make my plan. I reach down, pulling off my loincloth. I was soaking wet when I slid his finger in my mouth. His senses are keen, and I will use them against him. I scrape the loincloth against a rock, then throw it as far as I can over the edge of the mountain and into the forests. Then I double back, taking a vantage point higher in the mountains and looking down, my heart pounding in anticipation.

Ragnar turns the corner. He's walking slowly, methodically. Fuck, but he's huge, over

seven feet of powerful Orc muscle. He looks like he was carved from jade, by a sculptor who wanted to capture the pinnacle of masculine, beastly power. His fur coat is opened, his chest slick with sweat, his tangled mass of hair framing his hyper-masculine face. His green eyes glow as he pauses, looking left and right for any sign of me.

His cock is fully erect, this huge, beastly thing pointing straight forward, unable to be contained by his loincloth, and it drips like a faucet, huge, pearly globs of his alien pre-cum falling to the snow, and I remember some of the barmaids giggling about Orcs and how they wouldn't mind being a captive for a night. That huge thing is curved upwards, the artery running along the bottom of it so filled with throbbing need, the entire thing swollen and brutal, aching to sate itself past my lips.

He leans down on the snow, sniffing, and stands. From my hiding point, I can see him clearly, my heart pounding as I make myself invisible in against the rocks. The sun is setting. If I can evade capture just another half hour, it will touch the peaks, and he will keep his end of the bargain. Ragnar's nostrils flare, trying to find my scent. I'm being stalked by the Orc, and if he finds me, he'll claim me as his.

If I elude him, I will not have to endure the torture of his aching need once more. I will not have to taste his lips, firm against mine, his tongue invading my mouth as though he owns it, his rough, calloused hands so harsh against my body...

Ragnar jolts up to his full height, inhaling my aroma where I rubbed my clothes against the rocks. He gazes over the edge of the mountain, his eyes squinted, blocking the sun with his hand as he looks down the sheer face. Fear is written on his face.

He thinks I fell over the edge.

"Aira!" He booms out my name, so loud that small birds flutter from the hardy bushes that struggle to grow in the snows. "Aira!"

I stand to tell him I'm okay, when he charges over the ridge side. He moves with fluid grace, downwards, jumping from rock to rock, searching for me, navigating the sheer mountainside like he was born to it.

Then he disappears, out of sight down the mountainside, and I am alone in the chill silence that blankets the land like the heavy snow.

The sun lingers an inch above the mountaintop, marking the imminent end of the game. My heart pounds, sickened with regret, because he will hold his end of the bargain. I will be returned to Ashbourne's castle, untouched, unharmed, never to kiss the Orc warlord again. I position my foot behind a rock the size of my head, and press forward to kick it over the edge and land below, to make enough sound that Ragnar rushes back and finds me before it's too late.

There's a growl from behind me. Low. Deep. I turn, shocked, and it's him.

My monster, my captor, the only man who's ever made me moan and whimper in need. His green eyes are dark and piercing, gleaming in their anger. His tangled black hair is wet with sweat, sticking to his broad neck. His fur coat is opened, showing off his jade green skin and his thick cords of muscles, scraped by the rockside, his skin rough in places from rushing down the mountain to find me. Ragnar's cock is brutally hard, painfully so, curved upwards and dripping his seed into the snow. At full arousal, the stony green head turns dark with blood. He's an angry bull of a man, and he's going to unleash his pent-up rage on me.

"I thought you were dead," he snarls.

"I only play dangerous games," I say back, and sprint away. His heavy footsteps slam against the ground behind me and I feel his hand gripping me, pressing me against the stone, my huge fur coat like a blanket underneath me.

He holds me down against the stone with one hand, the other pointing to the mountain peak. The sun is a hair above it, then descends. He's caught me. The stalking beast has found his prey.

"You win," I gasp out, and he pulls my furs open. The wind bites at me, making my nipples pebble up, and I have nothing covering my pussy. My heart is pounding. I can't see anything but Ragnar, the entire world replaced by the Orc. His face is like the mountains he calls home, hard lines and brutal power. Ragnar's body reeks of musk and sweat, a pheromone-laced smell of pure testosterone from hunting me down. One huge hand wraps around my throat, encircling it fully, while his other slides over my body, as if he wants to touch every inch of me at once, his calloused fingers grazing my skin and finding my nipple. He pinches, hard, making me grind my hips upwards as he puts his huge thigh between my legs, pressing it roughly against my pussy as he mounts me. He's on top of me, pressing his weight down, and despite the fingers wrapping around my throat, my tongue licks out and he growls as I run it over his broad chest, licking the sweat off his skin.

I want to taste his cock. I want to run my tongue over the thick, dark green head, to hear him growl in pleasure, but he won't let me, not yet. He kisses me, his tongue swirling hungrily in my mouth, our lips meeting. His skin is hot, an inferno that warms me despite the howling wind, and I run my hand over his sweaty muscled chest, tracing the scar he earned saving the lives of every man, woman and child in his village. I run my hand down his body, gripping his cock. Holy fuck, but he's hard, fully engorged with blood, and I can feel the web of veins fully filled down the length of his too-huge jade member. He growls, breaking off the kiss, and our breath forms panting clouds of white in the icy air.

Ragnar grunts and moves himself up the rock, pulling his thigh from between my sopping wet pussy, and stands. I am lying back against the boulder, my head against the rock, and he stands with his tree trunk legs on either side of my head and crouches so that his massive Orc dick presses down against my face. He is standing behind me,

but his dick is so big it blocks the sun, and his huge, grapefruit-size balls rest on my nostrils. The stink of his pheromones emanates from his aching balls, and I can smell his musk, his need to breed me, and it drives me wild, my hips bucking as I lick at his huge balls. I know he's getting his scent all over me, that any Orc or human that smelled me would get a noseful of his stink, as if he is marking his territory, marking me as his possession. He pulls back, resting the engorged head of his cock against my lips, and I open as he enters me. His dick spurts the pearly pre-cum of his species, salty, hot, and making me crave more, and he groans as he slides his dick forward into my mouth as my tongue swirls to please him. His huge, rough hands grip my breasts, taking them and squeezing. I reach up, grabbing the rock-hard muscles of his thighs. I can feel every vein of his cock as he slides it down my throat, his dick pumping the alien pre-cum letting him slide that too huge member into me without resistance. My head swirls as I cannot breathe, my entire world the Orc, when he leans forward. I can feel his sweaty, tangled hair against my stomach as he presses his mouth against my needy slit and laps.

He loses control. His hips drive forward and back, pumping into my throat as if he is fucking my pussy, his tongue swirling like mad as he feasts on my nectar. My entire reality is Ragnar, his smell, his growls of pleasure, his raging need to unleash, his cock so hard it must be driving him mad. His tongue laps furiously, as if he is trying to suck the juices from my body, intoxicated by my arousal. I reach up, gripping his taut, pumping ass cheeks, built for thrusting, as his huge, sweaty balls rub against my face as he thrusts into me.

He pulls back and I gasp for breath, a long strand of saliva and alien Orc seed dripping from my mouth to his cockhead, but he does not stop lapping at my pussy. "Ragnar, fuck, don't stop, don't stop," I beg, as my hips buck, and he grabs my thighs, wrapping those huge, calloused hands around my tender flesh and opening me wide as his tongue finds my clit. I am on the verge of orgasm as he forces every inch of his huge dick into my throat, his alien pre-cum soothing me so that there is no pain, only the sensation of being full as my throat bulges with his cock, his balls resting on my

nostrils and making my head swirl as I orgasm.

I feel him tense, and I know he is going to find his release. I open my lips as far as I can, trying to lavish him with my tongue as he thrusts so deep into my throat and unleashes with a beastly roar. His cock shoot jets of pearly cum into my stomach, and I am unable to do anything but take every drop as it fills my mouth. His alien cum soothes me, making me crave more, wanting every drop as my muffled screams of pleasure come out only as gasps as I orgasm on his tongue, my world swirling as I forget everything but this moment. He pulls his stiff cock out of my mouth, still spewing cum, filling my mouth with his seed, and I swallow every drop, craving more, obsessed with the feeling of sating the alpha.

But he is not sated.

He growls and lies on the rock next to me, wrapping me up in his massive biceps. The musculature of his body, his flawless, smooth jade skin, the rugged handsomeness of his masculine features. He is a god of war, a protector, and I want him to be mine, I want him to be mine so desperately that tears come to my eyes as I imagine the cold bed of Lord Ashbourne.

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"Don't think of him," rasps Ragnar. "Here, there is only us," he whispers in my ear, and my body curls into his. His chest is a fortress, arms like stone pillars, and his eyes glow green only for me. His cock is still half hard, huge and thick between his legs, and I wrap my fingers on it, liking the sensation of having that monster in my hands.

"Tell me to go to war. Tell me to make you my queen." His voice is tortured.

"I can't tell you that, Ragnar. Your tribe needs you," I say, and the tears drip down my cheeks, frozen by the wind, as he pulls me closer to him and wraps me up in his being and the furs that smell of him.

I don't want this moment to ever end. I can see it, so clearly. By his side in the great hall. The gardens of the Orc village growing, neatly arranged crops, rivers filled with nets, their storehouses full of fish and food, happy Orc children throwing snowballs at each other and building fortresses of ice. I rest my head against the warlord's steadily beating heart, and he runs his hands over my body so tenderly, bringing his index finger to my cheek and gently brushing the tears off before they can freeze.

The long, loud sound of a horn from far away destroys the dream. Ragnar is alert instantly. He listens intently. One long sound, then three short, then another long.

"The messenger has returned."

He waits, and the horn sounds an intricate tune. "And? What else?" I ask.

"They will make a deal with us."

"Is this our last day together?" I ask, and pull away from him, wrapping myself in furs as if it can be armor around my heart.

He doesn't answer, but his hot green eyes tell me everything I need to know.

14

RAGNAR

Isprinted back to the village. Aira wanted to run with me, but despite her stealth and quickness, her legs are simply too short. She did not protest as I put her on my shoulders, carrying her back to the village, but it drove me insane, her naked slit against the back of my head, filling my nostrils with the scent of the woman I ache to make my mate.

I set her down in front of the mountain pass at the entrance to my tribe's village, and we walk past the guards. In the middle of the town square, the messenger soldier is standing. Two Orcs guard him, one with the sack that covers his eyes so he could not betray our mountain village's position.

My eyes widen. Five huge oxen, grazing slowly on the rough grass that grows in patches in our stone valley.

Ulric waves to me, a grin on his face. "The messenger has returned! With five head of cattle, as a token gift of good faith!"

Even Gorak is nodding in approval. He stands next to one of the oxen, running his hand over its matted fur back. "I never thought we'd be herders or farmers, like the worms. But you did well, Ragnar," he says, as I approach.

The messenger is still terrified, glancing at the Orcs that surround them, his eyes on

the weapons at their belts.

"Chieftain Ragnar," he says, as I approach, my woman at my side. "May I speak?"

"Speak."

"I told Lord Ashbourne everything. That you have rifles, that the traps we found were only the beginning. But that you are a fair man, a man willing to negotiate. I've brought five head of strong oxen as a token of good faith. The other fifteen are waiting. All healthy. No tricks."

"The oxen were laden with smoked fish and rations. I inspected them myself. Our stores are filling," says Gorak. The messenger hears the Orcish language, and his face goes white, because no matter what Gorak says, he always sounds angry. He's not sure if we're accepting the offer, or if we'll take the five head of oxen and his as well.

"Lord Ashbourne has shown he can make a deal. I will survey the lands, and if I see no hint of a trap, then we will finish this," I say, choosing my words carefully. Even dealing with a treacherous worm like Lord Ashbourne, I do want to promise anything I cannot.

"I am instructed to bring her back tonight. Your men guided me up the mountain, and they can guide me back. He's got twenty guards waiting at the bottom of the mountains. I told them not to come a foot into your territories...but he expects her back, soon."

"I must ensure this deal is not a ruse," I say, and the messenger licks his lips in worry. Aira looks up at me, but I cannot decipher her thoughts.

Gorak's eyes are a venomous green, his black brows furrowing as he watches me with open suspicion. His nostrils flare. He can smell my stink on her, the musk of my balls

on her face, marking her as my property. "They've got those stalking birds, Ragnar. I'll follow you into war if that's what this is. But tell it to me plain."

"There will be no war. I will make certain this deal is no worm subterfuge, to let our guard down. Then she will be returned." The messenger looks from me to Gorak, hearing the tension, and he smooths his freshly washed tunic.

I stare down the messenger. "You will be brought back, unharmed, tonight."

"When...when can I say his bride will be returned?" His voice quakes, barely able to dare question an Orc warlord. His eyes dart to the hilt at my belt, and I know he's remembering when I had that blade activated and at his throat.

"Wait at the mountain bottom. Ulric. Take two men and bring him down."

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I do not show the worry that is gnawing at my being. I'm risking everything for another night with her, another day, but they are the most precious of my life.

“When it’s safe,” I answer the messenger obtusely, not knowing how I can let her go.

How long will Lord Ashbourne wait before he declares war?

A day? A week? How many precious moments can I dare enjoy with Aira, before my world turns grey, every moment dust?

15

AIRA

I spent the night in his arms. I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to be awake for every moment, as we held each other, clinging on like we were holding onto a tree branch dangling over a raging river. From the distance, I could hear the dull clanging of metal on rock, rhythmic, and I focused on it and his heartbeat as sleep slowly took me, my eyes unable to stay open, heavily lidded. It was the dead of night, stars twinkling through the oval window when I finally fell into sleep, and I awoke with the dawn in his arms. He fed me a breakfast of smoked fish and berries, and I said nothing, because I knew that the only thing I could say was to ask him when I would be sent back to a new kind of captivity at the hands of Lord Ashbourne.

We went out in the morning, while Orcs watched us with too much interest, pretending not to look but glancing out the sides of their eyes as Ragnar took me out into the mountains again. This time, it's not for any game of stalking. We can't torture

ourselves anymore. He took me out to help him find the rivers and streams that will be laden with fish to help him through the winters.

"There." He looks where I am pointing, to a long river that teems with the glistening greys of fish. "In the winter, they will be down in that lake. You can string up nets to get a huge bounty, and during the long cold months, you can use that sword of yours to cut holes in the ice and fish." My voice feels distant, like it's someone else speaking.

He follows my eyes, than leans down to kiss me, but I step back, putting my hand up. "Ragnar. Stop."

He shakes his head, his black mane swaying. "I told the messenger to delay, because I could not bear the idea that it was over."

"I know."

His eyes darken with desire. "Then let me..."

"No. Ragnar, no. I want you to. I want to be with you. But I can't...I can't bear to feel you, to know what I cannot have. We can't keep doing this. I'll be down there," I say, pointing down to the tall stone walls of Lord Ashbourne's castle. "And you'll be up here. And every day I'll be thinking of you. Wishing for you. It's going to drive me crazy, but I've got to accept it. Don't make this worse."

Ragnar's face softens. He reaches up, and I don't have the heart to stop him as he runs his calloused, warrior's fingers over my cheek, staring at me with such intensity I know he is etching this moment in his mind. I look up at his stony, mountainous Orc face, and I focus on every detail, the hard line of his jaw, every tendril of black hair, the gleaming, vital aliveness of his eyes. He is carved out of jade, his eyes emeralds, burning with a fire of life that I crave and know will burn me up if I let him touch me

much longer.

I step back, torn. "Ragnar. Please."

"Very well." He swallows hard, then looks out at the castle below. At the bottom of the mountain, there are tents and wagons set up. They look like toys from this height, the party of the messenger, waiting for me to be brought back to them.

"I can't let you go." His voice is deep and certain. My heart quickens.

"Ragnar, don't do this."

"You told Tusk the secret of rifling. He's produced three guns already, working through the night. He's going to teach others to make them. Whatever Lord Ashbourne sends, we can hold them off."

My heart quickens. "Don't fill me with false hope, Ragnar. I can't live with being the reason for a war." I think of the little Orc children running from the bush, giggling and shrieking in fear. Of Silga, humming happily as she paints.

"We have five head of oxen."

"They're all male."

"We can trade with a village."

"Any village that trades with you would be burnt to the ground by Lord Ashbourne's men."

"Then we'll capture some. I know. It's wrong, but it's necessary. And with your knowledge of fishing and farming, together, we can build an impregnable

stronghold."

"Ragnar. You know Lord Ashbourne. He killed herds. He starved his own people to hurt you. If you do this...it's going to be a winter of bloodshed. People are going to die. Lots of people."

"If I let you go into that castle, there will a worse war. Every day, I will stand here, and I will look down, and I will know you are in the grasp of a man who does not deserve you." He snarls, his face painted with anger, his jaw clenched as his eyes burn furiously. "I'll take men down there, and I'll kill everyone who gets in my way."

"No you won't, Ragnar. That would be a suicide mission. And you care for your tribe. You wouldn't damn them to a death against those hard stone walls."

He deflates. The huge behemoth of a man's shoulders slump.

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Then he gets on one knee in front of me in the stone, drawing a sharp dagger from a pocket in his furs. He cuts his left hand, a long line, his brackish, reddish brown blood staining the stone. It is metallic like copper.

"Be my Queen, Aira. Be my queen, and let us face the storm together. Without you, I am nothing."

Tears pool in my eyes. I look down at him, and I gulp dryly. "Can you really fight them off? Don't lie to me, Ragnar. Will your tribe be safe?"

"They will. We will survive, with your knowledge. My men will follow me without question. They are eager for war, and our mountain home is fortified and protected. We could hold off a thousand men with only a dozen Orc, trained with rifles and surrounded by traps."

My eyes widen. I imagine it, so clearly it's like it is real. By his side in the great hall, a crown on my head.

"You wouldn't lie to me. Right? We'll be safe, truly safe. This isn't some mad dream, Ragnar? Tell me this isn't insanity."

"I want to put a son inside you, Aira. I want to fill you with my seed. You're everything. I would not bring a child into this world unless I knew I could protect him. I would not wed you, unless I knew I could keep you safe."

Tears stream down my cheeks. They are tears of tortured happiness, the possibility of a future with the one man who made me want more, the tears of fear for the war that

our union will damn us to.

My hand shakes as I slowly bring it forward. "I won't cut you," Ragnar says.

"Is that the ritual of your people? When a man and woman are wed?"

He nods. "It is."

"If I'm going to become part of your tribe I must do it," I say.

He takes his blade and gently cuts my hand. The pain as the knife opens my flesh is sharp and biting, but I do not wince, cherishing it. It is us, this union that has been so tortured, this sharp pain that centers me, and I put my hand into his, feeling the blood mixing together. He stands and runs his hand through my hair, and kisses me, deep and tender, when the war horns blare out.

Rifle shots boom out, and he turns, his brows furrowed in tension, as three black shapes shoot through the sky like massive falcons.

They are like black triangular birds, huge and metallic, soundlessly screaming towards the village of the Orcs. One of them is hit by rifle fire and careens downwards, smashing against the rock, but the other two fly straight over the valley home of the Orc, and the bottoms of them open.

Fire streams down, a magma inferno, and I scream in horror as Ragnar sprints towards his mountain home, leaving me in the snow alone.

A red drop of my blood stains the virgin snow, and another follows it.

AIRA

I'm frozen in fear on the mountain, looking down at the castle.

The huge gates open and Lord Ashbourne's army, hidden in wait for the surprise attacks, streams out. They look like toy soldiers, but they are deadly, flanked by men on horseback with long spears, spears pointed upwards and displaying the black banners with the twin red eyes of Lord Ashbourne's insignia. Behind them, there is a shock troop of men with long rifles slung over their backs that look like toothpicks from this height, wearing the royal purple of the king, twenty elite warriors worth a dozen of Ashbourne's men each.

They move forward like a river that cannot be stopped.

The oxen were nothing more than a ruse, to get Ragnar's guard down. Or perhaps the messenger said that I was painted and by Ragnar's side, and Lord Ashbourne knew the Orc Warlord would never let me go.

I curse myself, curse Lord Ashbourne, and run, as fast as I can, back to the mountain pass that leads to the village. There are no guards. I squeeze through the tight entrance and stand, looking down at the carnage. There are swaths of fires burning, the bridge crossing the river a smoldering wreck, but the stone houses are protected, and from them, Orc children look out in fear. "Dragon!" yells one child in a high-pitched voice, repeating it over and over. He's pulled from the window, brought deeper into the stone home to safety.

The woman Orc doctor in the white vest is yelling, directing wounded Orc into the hospital, and Ragnar is in the field, directing a bucket line from the river, putting out the fires. The one-armed Tusk has a rifle in his hands, staring up with cold eyes, two other Orcs with fresh made weapons in their hands staring up for any sign of the killing birds. Two of the oxen have collapsed, but the other three have been led to the

far right of the village, protected by the valley cliff face that looms over them. The stink of chemicals, burnt wood and grass, the burning flesh of oxen and Orc assaults my nostrils.

I recognize Gorak, his body smoldering, his eyes closed. He has his axe in his hand, useless against the enemies above, pulling himself up heavily, when I look up at the twin black shadows of the killing birds. Their bottoms open, and more fire streams down. Ragnar yells, grabbing an Orc teenager and pulling him into the safety of a building, yelling for everyone to shelter. Tusk fires up, and I can hear his curses as he misses, then one of the other Orcs tackles him into the safety of his blacksmithy just as fire scorches down where he was just standing a moment before.

No—he didn't miss!

The newly created weapons were rifled, and they struck true. One of the huge black birds careens downwards. It slams against the side of the valley, smoking as it lands in front of me. I step back into the shadows, staring at the mess of metal and oil of the massive thing. I've never seen anything like it before, some rare technology that only the King himself possesses.

Lord Ashbourne will wipe us off the face of the earth. He's got technology from the King himself, who usually ignored the Orcs, but cannot take the affront of them making a mockery of one of his lords.

I can almost feel the cold hate in Lord Ashbourne's heart. He would burn women, children, every last Orc to get his revenge. Ragnar is brave, but he can't stand up to this.

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I turn, my eyes wet, and run from the Orc village. I race down the mountainside, then stop, panting. Ragnar said it's filled with traps and pitfalls. Any false step, and I could fall into a hole with spikes, and my death would be meaningless.

I need to get down to the army, to give myself up to Lord Ashbourne. If he gets back his bride, maybe then, I can end this. Lord Ashbourne is only brave because he has the King's backing. I look up—the third, surviving black bird is flying back towards Ashbourne's palace.

Did it drop all of its payload?

Or was the loss of two of them too much for the King to withstand?

He keeps a tenuous grasp on this land only through his superior technology, forbidden to commoners. The Lords get rifles and powerful armor for their troops, but the King himself has works of intellect that seem like magic to us. Losing two of the deadly scouting birds could be unacceptable to him.

If I turn myself in, and say that Chieftain Ragnar sent me as a peace offering, would it be enough to end this?

I don't know.

But I have to try.

"Where do you think you're going?" The words are filled with hate, and I turn.

Behind me is Gorak. He's over seven feet tall, and his face is burned, his chest covered in fresh white marks, but he stands tall and powerful.

"You brought this on us, worm. You corrupted our Chieftain," he snarls, his face a rictus of agony. He clutches his war axe in a white-knuckled grip. "You deserve to die."

"Gorak. Listen to me. Bring me down to Lord Ashbourne. Show me the way through the traps. I'll tell Ashbourne that Ragnar gave me up to him. That he knows he can't stand against the armies." My voice is wracked with emotion, knowing I am damning myself to the worst captivity I can imagine, knowing it is the only way to save the tribe.

"It won't stop him. Nothing can stop him now."

"You don't need to stop him. You just need to show that your species is broken. Subdued. And the King will not risk his technologies, not when he's made his point. Ashbourne can't stand alone. He only dares a full out assault with the King's backing... but the King is loath to lose his ancient technologies. To lose two of those black birds against Orcs is unacceptable to him."

I don't know if I believe my own words. Once an Orc has defied a human Lord working for the King, maybe the only way for this to end is in blood.

But maybe, just maybe, I can end this myself.

Gorak's eyes, filled with hate, narrow.

"Why should I trust you, worm?"

"Because I love him. I don't want you all to die." I raise my hand, showing him the

fresh cut, my blood mixed with Ragnar's. "I am Ragnar's wife. And I will be given up to Ashbourne, the ultimate sign that Ragnar is broken."

"Damn you. Damn you!" he says, but he puts his axe back into his belt. "I should throw you off this mountainside. Ragnar was strong, until you filled his fool head with fantasies."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but you can end this all. You can save your tribe, when he couldn't."

His lips curl back in a grin. "You're right. I can save them. Me, alone. Ragnar no longer deserves to be the Chieftain."

He steps forward, and I can smell the stink of chemical on him, the burning of flesh, and he wraps his powerful hand around my arm, throwing me over his shoulder, grunting as I grate against his tender flesh.

"So little you weigh. So meaningless, to have brought this death to my people."

He carries me roughly down the mountainside, stepping carefully in places to avoid triggering traps, bouncing me as he rushes me down the face of the mountain, until we are above the tundra, huge boulders looming over us, nearly at the bottom of the peaks I wish I could call home.

A few miles away, the pennants of Ashbourne's army flutter in the wind. "Sing, little bird. Sing and make sure they know Ragnar is broken."

"I will," I say, my voice choked.

I look back up at the mountains. No matter what Lord Ashbourne does to me, no matter how he punishes me or takes out his anger on me, I'll know that the tribe is

safe. That Ragnar is up there, alive, eating meat, setting up the nets, providing for his people.

After the trio of black birds spewed their fire over his village, I know he won't risk more death of those he is sworn to protect to come after me.

At least, that is what I hope...

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Because I can't be the reason all those Orcs die.

"Gorak. Tell Ragnar I don't want him to come to me. That he was a mistake. I don't love him. I don't want him. We're not meant to be together."

Gorak's lips curl back, showing white fangs. "There is only one way to become Chieftain, little worm. If Ragnar has breath in his body, he will come to you, even if it damns us all. There are many warriors who do not approve of his foolish lust for you, worm. He does not survive the night." He takes pleasure in telling me that he'll kill Ragnar, pleasure in destroying the one hope I have.

"No!"

"Oh yes," he says, and gives me a kick with his strong, booted foot. I stumble down the mountainside, falling, my body rolling until I rest in the tundra in front of a huge boulder.

Two men on horseback with long lances gallop towards me, circling me, hard eyes staring down. I look up at the mountain, and see the back of Gorak, his green flesh red and mottled where he was burned, as he sprints back up the mountain.

"Who the fuck are you?" snarls one of the soldiers.

"Aira. I am promised to Lord Ashbourne," I say, as the rest of the troops approach. The army is over three hundred strong, all wearing the colors of Ashbourne, the blackness with the twin red eyes staring out from their hearts. All those eyes seem to be staring at me without pity.

There is a carriage, drawn by no horses, powered by the infernal technology that only those blessed by the King have access to. The door opens, and Lord Ashbourne descends, stiff in black armor, flanked by two guards. My leg is sore from the fall, and I stay on the ground as he stands over me.

"Lord Ashbourne. Please, you've got what you wanted. The Orc Chieftain gives me up, as a peace offering."

His cold gaze stares over the paints on my body. I try to pull my fur coat over myself, but he reaches down with the butt of a rifle, opening it, so that my naked, painted body is displayed. "You've turned savage, bitch. You're worthless to me. Today is the day I rid myself of the Orcs."

Panic fills me.

I look at the men with the King's insignia. They are clad in purple, gleaming armor, their heads covered by helmets. I can see only their eyes through polished glass in their helmets, and they have long, thin rifles and blades at their belts that gleam with black energy.

"The Chieftain won't fight anymore. He's backed down, and he's given me back to you, to show his submission. Please. They will never go against the King again." I plead to them, the true power.

"Ignore her. We press on," states Ashbourne, his voice cold, his gaze upwards.

The King's men look at each other, then one speaks in a low voice into his wrist. He has some sort of watch, but it is black and gleaming. A communication device? Do they have a way to speak with the Capital from this distance?

The leader of the King's men, who has a crown insignia on his breastplate, steps

closer to the Lord Ashbourne. "The King accepts. We will not waste any more resources on this problem."

"No! I was promised!"

The leader's eyes narrow. "You told us the Orcs were primitive savages, an easy rebellion to crush. We've lost two of our drones based on your bad intel. Do you understand that each one is worth more than your head? You'll be paying for this mistake for a long time, Lord Ashbourne."

I've never seen anyone dare to speak to the Lord like this. His face is a rictus of anger and humiliation, and his eyes turn to me, cold and hard.

"Kill the savage," he snarls to one of his guards. The man looks down at me, hesitating, not wanting to execute a woman. With a hard swallow, his grip tightens around his sword as his face turns pale.

"No," says the leader of the King's men. "You went to the village and took her as your bride, by the laws of our King. She will be married to you by the end of the week."

It's the first punishment to Lord Ashbourne, the first punishment for costing the King dearly in the attack. Ashbourne turns, fuming, and stalks into his carriage, leaving me on the ground alone.

This is to be my fate.

To be the hated bride of a man who I caused humiliation to, while the one I love is cut down by traitors in his own home.

AIRA

Ishiver in Lord Ashbourne's bed. There's a bruise on my leg, a deep purple that mixes with the red and orange paints, making the fox face on my thigh ugly, like the corpse of an animal caught in a trap and forgotten. He pulled the ring from my finger roughly, twisting it hard, pocketing it in his black robes.

He is in the bathroom, and I can see him in front of the sink, washing his face with ice-cold water. He changed from his armor, into black robes. His posture is rigid, standing tall and thin, his short cropped grey hair on his skeletal skull.

His room is neat and spartan, as cold and impersonal as the Lord himself. I'm on his bed, but I dare not even wrap the covers around me. He stripped me of my fur robe, and I didn't fight back as he took it and threw it into the fire. The brackish stink of smoke fills the room, and his nostrils twitch in distaste, as if the smell is coming from me. There is no warmth in this place despite the fire, no laughter, no vitality. It is a hollow shell of a room, just like Lord Ashbourne himself.

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He did not ride with me back to his castle. I was thrown over the back of a horse, chafing with every bounce, brought into this castle like a sack of flour and into his bed.

"Do you understand what you are? The King is humiliating me." His lips curl back in a snarl. He doesn't look at me, staring at his own reflection, his hand closing into a fist.

"I didn't mean for this to happen. The Orcs took me."

"Orcs. This is not over. Oh, this is not over." He turns to me, his face drawn tight. "You think I don't know what those paints mean? The cut on your hand? You're one of them now."

I swallow, hard. His cold, dead eyes get a glint of cruelty as he continues. "They'll be blighted out from this world. Every last one of them. And your village, too."

"What...what do you mean?"

He smiles then. It's more terrifying than a frown. "Those poor, starving Orcs. So hungry, they'll attack your little town."

"They would never."

"Oh, but they will. They'll sack the whole town and leave it burning, because we burnt their village home. The King does not want to waste his resources on a petty squabble, no, but when he sees what they are capable of, he'll have no choice."

I sit up in the bed. I hate being naked in front of him, hate the way his eyes scroll over my body, not in lust, but in hatred. "That village is under your protection. If it burns...he'll find a new Lord who can protect it."

He stalks to me, and my ears ring from the slap. I can't even raise my hand to stop him. I keep them planted at my sides, terrified. "You think you can tell me strategy? You learned so much, from fucking savages?"

"I'll do anything. You can have me, any way you want, please...they're innocent."

Lord Ashbourne sneers. It makes his thin, skeletal face even more cruel. "You have nothing to bargain with, Aira. You will serve me any way I wish." He grabs my nipple, tight and hard, pulling me to him. "Your womb is polluted. The only pleasure you little Orc whore will get is from your ass. By the King's laws, if you do not bear me a son within the year, I can choose another and be rid of you. I'll fuck every other hole."

Then he pulls away, like I am on fire.

"Wash those paints off you. Scour them off, and if there is one bit left, I'll have two men hold you down and scrub you with kitchen bristle even if I have to take your flesh off to get rid of those savage marks. I will return in an hour. Do not displease me, mybride-to-be." He puts scorn into the word "bride," and his eyes flash with deeper hatred.

"Clean yourself. Get the stink of Orc off you," he spits out. I pull myself from the bed, and he grabs the blanket I was on, stuffing it into the fire where it billows into smoke, filling the room with the acrid scent that reminds me of the burned Orc village. Then he leaves, his robe swishing, slamming the door behind him. The blanket smolders in the huge fireplace, igniting, and I rush to the window, opening it wide to get air before I pass out. It would be just like him for his bride-to-be to die in

a horrible accident.

I am in his tower, the citadel that rises from the bleak stone of his castle. Moss grows on the side, and men are training below, dull iron blades clanging against wooden shields. The walls rise up all around me, and soldiers patrol, but as evening falls, I see one yawning in boredom. No one has ever dared attack Lord Ashbourne's fortress—but the guard next to the yawning one gives him a hard slap on the shoulder to rouse him, aiming his rifle out towards the mountains. I breathe in the cold air greedily, wishing I was running through the peaks with Ragnar, wishing he was by my side.

Ten more guards clamber up the stairs to the walls, and I can hear their low grumbles. The guards already there do not leave, instead leaning against the walls in tiredness and looking out towards the mountains.

Double shifts. Lord Ashbourne is a cautious man. Even after the blow he dealt to the Orcs, he fears a counter-attack. If only he knew the truth. That right now, the only man who could threaten him is being hunted by those he trusted.

Those mountains mock me. Hard, cold peaks that remind me of his broad, strong face. I see him everywhere. Has Ragnar been killed already, ambushed by his closest men? Would Ulric be cut down as well, defending him?

Gorak must have been plotting in the shadows behind him. I saw how they argued, that first day when he took me. He can't accept a human queen to his Chieftain. He thinks of Ragnar as weak because he has a heart.

The thin blanket has burned up and is now a smoldering, smoking mess, smoke churning up through the chimney and stinking up the room.

So this will be how I will be taken. In a cold bed, the air soured by smoke, by the man

I hate more than anything. I can remember his horrible words when he picked me. That if I was obedient, I would be rewarded.

For my village, for everyone I knew, I'll have to be the submissive little bride he demands. It might not be enough, but even a hint of defiance will only bring more terrors to them. He'll calm down soon. The sting of shame is making him act rashly, making him plot things that will be his own undoing. I'll close my eyes and imagine Ragnar, trying to blot out the cruel Lord as he takes me. He'll be rough, that I know, but I'm stronger than I've ever been before.

I can imagine the feeling of kitchen pads, made to scour heavy, greasy frying pans scraping up and down my body, and I rush into the bathroom. The bathroom is made in the same dull granite of his castle. There is a clawfoot tub, a smooth mirror, and a square shower. I'd heard of showers, but never seen one in real life, and I walk into it, turning both nozzles. A stream of icy water shoots down, and I gasp, but keep my head up. A little chill is nothing compared to what is coming.

I have to kill him.

The thought comes from somewhere deep inside me, the certainty of it making a chill rush up and down my body as the waters heat.

It's the only way.

He cannot take the humiliation of having a bride who was the property of the Orc. He's a cunning, careful man, but he's been driven too far, and he'll burn up my village and kill everyone I know to get his revenge, blaming it on the Orcs and forcing the King to respond with strength. Maybe the King will strip him of his post for failing to protect the village—but it will be too late for my little brother. Being Ashbourne's obedient little pet might stay his hand...

But the only way to be certain my village will be safe is to end him. I gulp, because I know what will happen after.

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On the sink is a stone bowl of thick cream, and a long straight razor. Water streams down from the roof, and I grab soap, scrubbing desperately at my body until my skin turns pink, the paints slowly fading.

I'll slit his throat, but then his guards will find me, blood on my hands, and I'll be flayed alive. That is the fate of any peasant who revolts against their Lord. It would be quicker to use the blade against my own wrists. I remember the cut that Ragnar made on my hand, the sweetness of that pain. I'll think of that, when I end it all.

Tears fill my eyes. I don't know if the man I loved is alive or dead, and life is so empty. Alive, all I have to look forward to is a lifetime of captivity.

I can't make that life have meaning. But my death can.

I scrub every last inch of paint from my body and look at myself in the mirror. My golden hair framing my face, my eyes hard and staring at myself, not knowing if I have the strength to do what must be done, when I look at every inch of my body and see those red and orange paints in my mind's eye, each line that was carefully drawn on by Silga. A clever protector. That is what she drew on me, but I've put myself in a trap there's no getting out of.

I take the razor blade and slip it under the pillow, leaning back in the bed, the cold wind blowing through the windows and making my flesh goosebump. The blanket has turned to dust, the air clearing.

An hour has passed, darkness falls, and the door opens.

It's not Lord Ashbourne. It's two big, burly guards in his black colors. I try to get up from the bed, but they've grabbed me, their hands rough on my arms as they clamp iron handcuffs around me, tying both arms to the bedframes so that I am helpless. Next, they clasp my ankles without speaking, so that my legs are spread. I feel no shame in my nudity, fiery rage filling me as I kick, but it's no use. The guards leave without speaking, and Ashbourne walks in, closing the door softly behind him.

He looks me up and down, his gaze settling on my breasts, down to my slit, and back up to my eyes. I snarl at him, and he walks into the bathroom.

"Just as I thought. You are a savage," he says. "Now where did you hide it? Orcs are stupid brutes. Under the bed, perhaps?" He kneels down, running his hands again the wooden floor. He rises up. "Perhaps under the pillow?" He reaches under and comes back with the long, sharp razor.

"What were you planning to do with this?"

"Fuck you," I say, and he brings the razor blade to my throat. Panic fills me. All my bravery is lost as pure terror fills my being, reducing me to a trapped animal, a fox caught in an iron trap.

"What was your plan then? To slit my throat? To cut it open? Oh, it wouldn't take much. Just a little...flick of the wrist," he says, touching the blade against my neck. I freeze, not moving an inch, as he slides it against my skin, cutting me ever so slightly. He disrobes with one hand, and to my horror, his thin cock is fully hard, engorged at the feeling of power he gets from having the blade at my throat.

"Not so brave now, are we? Where's that filthy tongue of yours?" he snarls and presses his fingers into my mouth. I want to bite down, but I can't anger him, not any more, and my cheeks flush red with pain and fear as he takes my tongue and pulls it out. "Should I cut this filthy tongue of yours out?"

He lets go of my tongue, dropping the razor blade next to me. "Perhaps you will be more fun than I expected. I'm going to train you, Aira. I'm going to train you until the only thing you care about is my pleasure. I'm going to break you down, day by day, until you accept your place." He positions himself in front of me, ready to thrust, a cold, hard look in his eyes, when I see movement to the right.

Hands. Hands on the windowsill. Big, green hands, then Ragnar's unmistakable face, staring through the window. He pulls himself into the room silently. For a second, I think I am imagining it, when I smell his deep, masculine musk. There is soot on his body, sweat and burn marks on his arm, and the giant of an Orc steps in silently, his feet bare. He fills the entire window, muscles rippling on his bare chest, and I have never seen such hatred and cold focus in his eyes.

Lord Ashbourne turns his head, his brows furrowing, and Ragnar is on him. His hand is on his mouth, pulling him away from me, his other hand on his throat as he lifts him into the air.

Ashbourne gasps, panic in his eyes, as Ragnar slowly crushes his throat, his grip tightening. He looks at me, pleading in his eyes, blinking erratically, trying to say something, but only a muffled gasp comes out.

"Let him speak," I gasp out, my voice weak.

Ragnar's eyes are filled with fury. His grip clenches, then releases. "You scream, you're dead," he says, putting Ashbourne down. Ashbourne's legs buckle, and he nearly falls, but Ragnar holds him up.

"Wait, wait. We can make a deal," he pleads.

"There's no deal to be made."

"You got over the walls. I don't know how, but there was no..." Lord Ashbourne clears his throat. He's terrified, but his mind is working quickly. "No alarm. You think you can get back over with her on your back? Even if you kill me, you'll be seen."

"I'll take that risk."

"Wait. Wait. Just. Wait. You don't need to do this. My safe. I've got money. Lots of money. Gold, jewels, you can trade for enough food to keep your tribe fed for decades."

"If I can't get out of here with her on my back, I won't be able to get out with money. Tell me something useful, Ashbourne, or I'll kill you."

"I'll call my guards off. I will. You can leave, with her, and anything you want."

My breath has slowed. I was hyperventilating, my head swimming. "He's lying. Ragnar, the second we're out the window, he'll sound the alarm."

"Not if he's dead." Ragnar snarls out the word, and Lord Ashbourne's pale, skeletal face turns ghostly white.

"Where's the key to those locks?" Ragnar asks.

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"In the robe. On the bed."

Ragnar pushes Ashbourne to the ground. "You move an inch, I'll take your head off."

He rushes to the robe, opening it. He finds the black ring that lets me understand the Orcs, as well as their iron key. He uses the key to unlock the clasps around my wrists and legs, sliding the ring back on my finger gently. I rub where the hard iron scraped me, and I want Ragnar to hold me, to hug me, but we're not safe. Not yet.

We're trapped in the top of the citadel. Ragnar evaded the patrols and scaled the walls, but he won't be able to do it with me on his back. He's damned us both by coming here.

Ragnar turns to me. "He's right. The only thing I cared about was getting to you. I don't have a way out." His voice is low, rumbling, his lips drawing back to show his sharp teeth.

I take the razor blade in my hand. "I do."

"Using that on me will only get you both killed," says Lord Ashbourne. He's sitting, but the panic is gone from him. He looks weak, and old, but his head is up. His throat is red from Ragnar's fingers, but he knows we have no way of getting out of the fortress alive.

"Cover his mouth," I say. Ragnar moves like a bolt, his huge frame liquid as he wraps his hand around Lord Ashbourne's mouth. Ashbourne tries to scream, but nothing comes out but a gurgle. "He's not going to like what I'm about to say."

I stand, holding the razor blade in my steady hand. "I'm going to carve your name into his chest."

"What will it do?" asks Ragnar.

I grit my teeth. "The only thing Ashbourne fears is looking weak. The King will not allow a Lord marked by an Orc to rule. He'll lose his position. His power. Oh, he can yell and alert his guards when we leave. But before we die, we'll tell them to look at his chest. Maybe he'll hide it for some time, but people talk. Sooner or later, the King will learn that he's not fit to rule."

Lord Ashbourne is trying to shake his head, his eyes panicked, but Ragnar holds him tight, easily.

"I'll do it. You're not a brute, Aira. Let me do this," he says, and draws his blade. From that hilt, the blue-black lightning blade extends, a dull hum as the gem in the hilt seems to drink in the dying light of the burning fire.

Ragnar carves his name in Lord Ashbourne's chest in huge letters, the blade cauterizing the wound instantly, until from his nipple to his belly button, he has the word clearly visible, the skin red and burnt. He can't shriek with Ragnar's hand on his mouth, and he sweats, passing out.

Ragnar waits, patient, until Ashbourne blinks awake to the horror of his life.

"If you go to war with us, if you even send one more patrol, I'll send a messenger to the King himself and tell him you've got my name on you. He'll know you are too weak to be a Lord in his command."

Lord Ashbourne's eyes go cold with hate, but he knows he is broken. "Damn you. Damn you and your little whore," he says, weakly, and Ragnar closes his hand into a

fist, ready to slam it into his face.

"No. He's broken. He won't go against us, you know it, Ragnar."

"Now open the safe."

Ashbourne stands, unsteady. He walks to a painting of a man on horseback and pulls the painting open, showing a steel safe. His hand shakes as he puts in the combination, and it opens.

The glow of the fire illuminates the mound of gold and jewels.

"Bag," says Ragnar.

"In the bottom drawer," says Ashbourne weakly, rubbing his hand on his bare skin, wincing as he touches the letter R that is huge on his chest. I open the bottom drawer and take out a large sack, which Ragnar fills with bounty.

"Call your men to a meeting. All of them. Every last guard. I was nearly seen coming in, and I won't be seen going out. You'd be able to kill us, Ashbourne, by raising the alarm—but before we die, I'll let everyone know that you bear my name on your body."

Lord Ashbourne shivers. Then his eyes get wet, his lips quivering in fear. "I'll call them," he says, and I know he won't betray us, not when it would make him look so weak and foolish he could never be allowed to reign.

"Put on your robe, Ashbourne," I say, my voice cold. The old man is broken, like a corpse that doesn't know it's dead yet, all the color lost in his skin. He pulls on the robe with shaky fingers, closing it, hiding the shameful letters on his chest. "The village tribute. It will be halved. As long as you rule, it will be halved," I say. "And if

it's not, we'll send a messenger to the King.”

“Okay.” One word, subdued, all the fight gone from him.

Then he opens the door, and walks out, closing it behind him. He walks like an old man.

I watch from the window, waiting, the tension growing in my chest, dread pooling as I imagine him sacrificing everything just to take us down, but then a guard runs up the stairs of the outer walls, barking out orders.

Just like that, every guard follows him down the steps and into the castle. They look confused, but they shrug, not caring that much, just following orders.

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Ragnar lugs the sack over one shoulder, and crouches. I mount his back, my legs wrapped around his broad torso, as he pulls me out of the window. His hands find holds in the rough-hewn stone, bringing me down to the courtyard. It's empty, and he quickly stalks up the stairs, keeping low, and over the walls. With a grunt, he lowers himself, handhold by handhold, until we are on solid ground.

In the darkness of night, we escape. It all feels like a dream. Only when we are a mile from the castle does it hit me. The adrenaline dumps in my system, and I sob, clutching my arms around his powerful neck, feeling the certainty of my Orc savior.

"You're safe now, Aira. Forever."

"Gorak. He's planning to kill you and become Chieftain."

Ragnar sets me down. Softly. "I know. I ran into him coming down the mountain to get you when I heard you had left. He drew on me. We'll give him a proper funeral pyre. He was a warrior, to the end."

"He said there are others. Who won't accept you with a human."

Ragnar looks down at me, his green eyes certain. "Every one of the tribe will have the choice. Kiss the ring and accept you as my Queen, or be banished from my lands."

18

AIRA

"I feel so useless, up here alone." All I want is to be with Ragnar.

"Everything is being taken care of. The wounded are being tended to, the defenses bolstered. Ragnar can handle it," says Silga, as her brushes stroke over my back. I felt naked without the paint of the Orcs. I'm happy to be back with her, and I'm glad she survived. Only four Orcs couldn't be saved, three men and a woman who were manning the bucket line despite the hellfire, trading their lives to quench the flame. There was a funeral pyre for them earlier this day, I am told, but I was not allowed to watch.

The bride of a Chieftain must be in his cave until the feast to celebrate their union. Only Silga has kept me sane.

"You're going to look so beautiful," says Silga. "He won't be able to take his eyes off you."

"I just wish he was with me now."

"He will be. Soon. And he won't be able to take his hands off you, that I know. But you are one of us now. And that means following our rituals."

"I know. I know. What are they going to expect me to do?"

"You'll be perfect. It's nothing compared to what you've been through. First, the tribe will pledge their loyalty to his chosen Queen. Those who wronged you will apologize, and you will choose whether to spare them or end them."

I think to the young Orc who raised his mace to me. "How do I accept?"

Silga finishes painting my back, moving to my front, kneeling down by her paints while I sit on a chair made for an Orc. My feet dangle.

"Just nod."

"Can you teach me to say I forgive him?"

Silga purses her lips, dipping her brush into silver paint. "A Queen does not forgive, but she accepts an apology. Take off the ring, a moment," she says. I twist the ring off, and she says a short phrase in Orcish, the words alien without the translating device. It takes me three times to get it right.

"Put. Ring. On," she says, slowly, struggling with the words in Common, and I put the ring back on.

"We can teach each other," I say.

"I'd like that."

I look down at the silver paint. There are many pots, most with reds and oranges like before. "You're changing the paint?"

"Oh yes. We have to incorporate yesterday." I told her the whole story earlier today, the words spilling out of me, translated by the ring. She listened intently, then hugged me tight against her flat chest.

"I don't want to remember yesterday anymore."

She shrugs. "The events of the past are part of us, whether we like it or not. You will have a necklace of blades. You're a warrior, now," she says, gently stroking the silver paint on my neck.

"You said first, before. That the first part was accepting the loyalty of the warriors. Is there a second part?"

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"Don't worry about that. Ragnar will do the rest," she says, a sly smile on her face.

"What does that mean?"

"The final part of the ceremony. The cut on your hand binds you together as King and Queen. But you are not yet his Mate. Every warrior will watch the honored union."

My eyes widen in shock. Silga cocks her head. "It is nothing to be ashamed of. It is something of beauty."

"Please tell me you're joking."

"Of course not. Why?"

"I've just...I was picturing it here," I say, motioning to the furs. I'd pictured it, a hundred times over, wishing for Ragnar's strength, his possessive, powerful arms around me as I forgot everything.

"If you wish, I can tell Ragnar that you cannot. You're a human. People will understand."

"Are you going to be there?"

"Of course. Ragnar is a being of pure power, and you are beautiful. Witnessing the two of you will be art. Or do you wish me to avert my eyes?" Her brows furrow, trying to bridge the gap of customs.

I take in a huge breath. "No. If I am to be worthy of the allegiance of warriors, I must abide by your customs. I will do it."

Silga's proud grin tells me I made the right choice, even as the shudder runs up and down my spine.

Being with Ragnar alone is already too intense to handle. The way his tongue devours me, his huge, powerful hands gripping my body and groping me, the scent of the beastly man overwhelming my senses...

He's going to claim me as his, forever, while the hot, hungry eyes of the Orcs watch.

19

RAGNAR

Isit on my throne, Aira to my right, in a newly made throne sized for a human, built of pine in Tusk's workshop. Her paints are reds and golds, done by Silga, and there is a new marking around her neck, a necklace of silver painted blades. My fox has a bite to her. She has a striking regality to her, her shoulders back, head high. Aira is my Queen, and I am her King.

The two oxen slain in the attack are roasting over the fire, the smell of meat and fat filling the great hall. They were washed clean of the chemical fire that took their lives, and we will not waste their bodies.

I think back to the year before, the winter when the gnawing hunger filled our bellies, strong Orcs turned to skin and bone from the starvation. Never again. My tribe will feast, a feast that will never stop, and I will swell our numbers. Children's laughter will fill the village, as new families grow in the prosperity.

Four Orc cooks were tending to the roasting oxen, but they have left.

This ceremony is for the warriors only. To pledge allegiance and then to witness our bond together, the King and Queen united forever.

I look over at Aira, taking in her beauty, and all I can imagine is her belly swelling up with my child, her breasts full and laden with milk. It is the only thing I crave. The fires in the hall are built high, flames dancing over the heavy wooden table and igniting her paints, making her glow. Every inch of her body is perfection. If it was not for her sharp mind, I would be dead in Ashbourne's castle, a man on a suicide mission whose only thought was to save my mate.

It is a night for celebration, and mourning, for the four Orcs who died in the attack, and even for Gorak, who died by my hand. He was a traitor, but in his life, he fought well for me, and I gave him the funeral pyre. His bones will be laid to rest in the caves deep below by his father.

The only sound is the spit of fat dripping from the oxen into the fire, the crackle of wood. Extending from our thrones to the entrance of the great hall are my men and women, their axes and swords on their backs.

Forty of the Orc warriors of my tribe are standing in a long line in front of me. I clear my throat, and they begin.

One by one, they walk up to Aira and kneel. She extends the black ring, and they kiss it gently. They will accept our rule. On the table in front of me is the bounty I took from Ashbourne, gold gleaming in the light of the fire. Coins of gold and silver, emeralds and sapphires, a pile fit for a dragon that will secure the future of my tribe for eternity.

The final Orc in the line is the young one who raised his weapon to Aira. If it was not

for her mercy, I would have taken his head from his neck. His arm is in a sling. He kneels quickly, kissing the ring, and looks up. "I'm sorry," he says.

"I accept," answers Aira in Orcish. There there are smiles on the faces of my warriors, and I swell with pride. She learned her first words of our language.

When the procession is over, I address my troops.

"We will trade with the Southern villages. We will have a herd of our own, that we do not depend on the seasonal movements of animals. Tusk. Come forward."

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Tusk steps forward, his head bowed. He's one of two civilians allowed in the great hall, along with Silga, who has a place of honor as my Queen's chosen servant. Tusk has aged a decade in a night, but the cunning old Orc has fire in his eyes. "Your rifles cut down two of the King's birds, which repelled the attack. You are granted your pick," I say, motioning to the pile of gold and gems.

"One of these, and I'll be able to buy tools to expand my warehouse," says Tusk, picking a small ruby from the pile. It is a modest gem compared to the others.

"You may have your pick of any. I owe you a great debt."

He grins. "This is enough for me. Thank you, Chieftain Ragnar and Queen Aira."

He steps away, walking towards the entrance to the cave. "Stay. Feast. You earned it."

"I've got work to do. I'll have another two rifles made while you lot drink yourselves to a stupor. That pine throne of yours set me behind schedule," he says, with a wink to Aira. She smiles, graciously, nodding her head at her subject.

"Ulric. You are now captain of the patrols. You alone will be in charge of sending out scouting parties, to gather information. You've proved yourself in battle, and to be loyal. Take your pick of anything you wish."

"I don't need gold or gems, Ragnar. Just a blade." He grins at me. "Do you wish me to start my patrols now, or can I feast?" He took Gorak's death hard. The three of us had grown up together, wrestling and fighting as kids, and he could not believe that he

had betrayed me. Despite his sorrow, he's keeping his head up.

"Barton is keeping watch tonight." Barton is the sharp-eyed Orc who shot down the first metal bird before it got to our villages. He's got ten men with him, good soldiers who I trust with my life. They will pledge their fealty on the morrow...

If I can tear myself away from Aira for a moment.

"Then I'll take my pick of reward. Mead, and lots of it!" He yells it out, and my Orc warriors grin.

"Then let us feast!" I boom out, to cheers of my men and women warriors.

I take a bite, but the juicy meat is tasteless in my mouth as I look over at Aira. She sits, straight-backed, her full breasts exposed shamelessly, and she looks up at me, smiling. I want her. Desperately. The firelight licks at her, the paints gleaming, and I drink up every inch of her curves, my eyes resting on those perfect, exposed nipples, running down the taut, pale skin of her belly. My heartbeat quickens. I pray to the Gods of this land that tonight is the night I put my sire in her belly, that my seed grows inside of her. She's brought life to the valley. Where we faced the icy cold of winter without hope, she has filled us with a future.

Civilians are waiting at the bottom of the stairs in the square below the great hall, families, some still wounded, in bandages and with plant medicine balm on their cuts, but they must wait, because there is one final thing to be done before they can share of the meat.

A King and his Queen must be united, as the rituals of our tribe decree, in front of every warrior who pledges his blade.

I can't wait a second longer. I stand from my seat, and take my Queen's hand.

AIRA

On the outside, I am ice, portraying myself as a worthy Queen.

On the inside, I'm as terrified as the first time I went out poaching. Silga told me that this part of the ritual is a union. To act natural and let my body guide me, that inside me, I know what to do already.

But as Ragnar stands, towering over me, the Orc warriors stop eating. They put down their food and drink, staring at me. My nipples harden instantly, heat growing between my legs, hot and tingly. I've been picturing it all day. Ragnar taking my virginity in front of his tribe, claiming me forever. A low moan escapes my lips. I don't try to stop it. I let myself feel my need for Ragnar without shame.

There is no malevolence or distrust like the first time they saw me. Instead, I see something new. Hope. Some brute warriors, covered in scars, are smiling as Ragnar wraps his huge hand around mine, gently stroking his fingers against my skin.

Him standing is all the signal needed. Two Orcs bring a huge pile of furs, moving the thrones and placing them down against the floor. I swallow, nervous, and try to act the queen, but I don't know what to do. My body is petrified, not out of shame, but out of fear I will do something wrong. Will the Orcs see something in our union that negates me as their Queen?

Ragnar stands in front of me, turning to face me, blocking me from the view of the Orcs with his massive body. He runs his finger up my cheek, down my freshly braided hair, then traces the line of silver painted blades over my collarbone. His touch centers me, as I stare up into his pure green eyes.

The Orc is a behemoth of a man. Pure power incarnate, his skin hard and rugged compared to my softness. He is carved from jade, his black, wild hair down to his shoulders framing that powerful jaw and his face like a mountain. His protectiveness and possessiveness radiates over me. I run my hand over his long, white scar, earned protecting his tribe, and I know he would die for me in a heartbeat. His green eyes stare into my soul, filled with love, lust, and aching need, wanting me more than I thought any man possibly could. His calloused fingers are so gentle as he traces my collarbone, as if I am a piece of art, yet he knows my strength.

"You are my Queen, Aira. Tonight, you will be my mate."

He leans in, and his lips brush against mine, soft, gentle, calming me yet igniting passion through my body. His smell intensifies as his lust grows, the heady stink of man, and he wraps his huge hand around my lower back, pulling me into his kiss as his tongue invades my mouth. My hands are shaking as I press them against the wall of muscle that is his chest, feeling his heartbeat pounding like a drum. His Orc cock surges up, pressing against the loincloth, and I bring my hands down, undoing his clothes, his member rearing up to full height.

The feverish flush of lust fills me, this primal desire for him to claim me. It is his sheer size, his protectiveness, how he would do anything for me that makes my nipples pebble, sensitive and begging for his touch.

Ragnar kisses me hard as he rips my loincloth from me like it is made of paper, exposing me fully, and he grabs my ass with both hands, lifting me up and pulling me against him. I can't even wrap my legs around him. His biceps are huge under the crook of my leg, his hands on my back, my arms wrapped around his huge, thick neck, and I stare into his beautiful green eyes as he positions his cockhead against my soaking wet slit.

Ragnar growls, low and deep, his eyes wild and furious as he fights against his brutal

mating rage, every instinct in him telling him to impale me with his massive cock that is thicker than my wrist, to ruin me forever and bind me to him, his muscles tensing as he grips me tight, grinding his cockhead against my slit. His dick throbs, spitting alien pre-cum against me, soothing me, making my pussy tingle as I breathe in his scent. He's sweating, rivers dripping down his forehead, and it is not from the heat, but from the brutal, aching need welling up in his being. The smell of my Orc intensifies, testosterone and distilled masculinity that fills my nostrils and makes my head swirl.

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I stare down. I never thought I'd see anything like this, his huge, green cock throbbing at full strength, the head a deep, dark purplish green, filled with blood. Sweat drips down between the ridges of his chiseled abs. He is a monster of a man, and his dick throbs again, wetting my already soaking pussy with his pearly pre-cum, and he cannot resist any longer.

Ragnar thrusts forward, his hips powering his cock forward, and I stare straight into his green eyes that blaze like twin suns, biting my lip as he stretches open my inner pussy lips, his cock harder than steel, this throbbing, almost vibrating monster of a thing that forces its way past my resistance. There is a sharp, quick pain as he rips through my innocence, taking my virginity and linking me to him forever, but his cock throbs again, spitting more pre-cum into me, and it soothes me instantly, as if it is made to allow his massive Orcish cock to claim my too-tight human hole.

Ragnar kisses me, our tongues dancing together, but he's unable to stop himself, to slow himself down or let me adjust to his size. His cock keeps impaling me, deeper and deeper, filling me as he claims ownership of me in front of his loyal warriors. My chest heaves as he advances into me, an inch, two, my eyes rolling back in the intense pleasure as the Orc warlord takes me.

They start to chant. It is low at first, this deep, rumbling hum, felt more than heard, and as Ragnar pulls back out, it lowers in volume. When he thrusts, the Orcs roar out in triumph. I melt under the alpha as he pulls back and thrusts again, gripping tight around his neck as his huge hands squeeze my ass painfully hard, so that I know he will leave handprints, each thrust deeper than the last.

This is nothing like his tongue on me. There, I felt some semblance of control, but as

he stretches me open, invading me and linking me to him, I am reduced to nothing but lust and love, a bitch in heat for the alpha as he growls, running his tongue along my neck as he enters me fully, until his huge, grapefruit-sized balls are pressed against my asshole. The chorus of the Orc warriors is growing, the low hum deepening, thrumming as he pulls back out and slams his dick into me. I scream out in pleasure, my eyes rolling back, as my orgasm builds and builds. Each hard thrust of his war hammer of a cock makes his huge, full balls slap against my tight asshole, his cock so thick that there is a flash of sensual, aching pain as he stretches me open anew, the pain only making me hotter, sweat dripping down my body as he squeezes me against his powerful chest. I'm on the edge of ecstasy in his arms, staring into those green orbs that see only me, and his cock stiffens even harder.

His smell fills my nostrils, his bright green eyes fill my sight, and the humming chant of the Orcs mixes with his growls of pleasure and need, all of my senses filled by Ragnar, the world disappearing until only we exist. His sweat drips onto my body, and I will stink of him, primal, wild and viral, marking me as his territory. His body is on fire, hot against me, and I buck like a wild horse being tamed, grinding myself against him though I can barely move an inch in his powerful hands.

Ragnar roars, and every one of his Orc warriors joins the battle scream of triumph, echoing out into the night like wild beasts as I cum on his cock, my pussy clenching, as if my body is milking the alpha, and my release sends him over the edge. He seeds me, jets of cum that I feel unleashing deep inside me, an endless stream of his alien cum. He grabs my ass cheeks, hard, and presses me against him, his huge balls twitching as they unload every drop of his seed so deep inside me.

He slides his arms up, wrapping them around me, holding me tight to him as I rest my head on his shoulder, his cock still twitching, slowly softening inside me, but so thick and huge that his seed cannot drip from my stretched slit. He holds me up easily with one hand under my ass, the other running through my hair, over my cheek, and he kisses me again, deep and long, savoring the moment as the Orcs cheer.

My legs are shaking, trembling nonstop from my orgasm as the afterglow of my release fills me with a golden warmth. "I don't..." I try to tell him I don't think I can walk, but my words fail me.

He senses it, and strides with me still in his arms, his cock still inside me, walking me away from the great hall, where the sounds of feasting and celebration intensify, yet as we walk away, they reduce to a low roar. He opens the door to his home and leads me inside, until we are alone.

We collapse together in his bed of furs, spent and sweaty, still connected. His eyes are heavy-lidded with pleasure, and he pulls me close, wrapping me up in his strong arms.

He runs his fingers through my hair and stares into my eyes. "Did it hurt, my love?"

I shake my head. "No. It didn't. I don't know why. I should be hurting right now, you're so big," I say, and smile. "There's something in your seed that soothes me."

He grins, showing his sharp teeth. "Good. Because I want to be inside you forever, my love," he says, and his cock starts to stiffen inside me again. My eyes widen in shock.

"So soon?" I gasp. "I thought men needed a break."

"You ignite me, Aira. All I can think about is seeding you. From the first time I saw you, watching you in your village, I knew you belong to me." He groans, low and deep, in ecstasy and aching need, as his dick swells up inside me. I'm filled with his seed, and he slowly grinds his body against mine, pressing it deeper and deeper inside of me as writhe together, our hands exploring each other's bodies, breathing in each other's scent, and tears of joy fill my eyes.

"I love you, my mate," he says, and I kiss him hard, deep, before breaking it off.

"I love you, Ragnar," I say, and his dick swells up to its full length, stretching me deliciously. The stars twinkle through the oval window, and I know that we're not going to leave this bed of his for a week.

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AIRA

"A good strike!" booms out Ragnar, as Star hits his leg with a wooden sword. She's only four, but she's already shown an aptitude for fighting, and a clever mind when it comes to getting extra honey-drenched strawberries and meat. She's got sharp little teeth in her mouth, but Silga made me a poultice that I rubbed over my breasts, a thick, harmless substance that soothed my skin when I breastfed. Star giggles, her little face wrinkled with glee, her tongue stuck out as she backs away, holding the wooden sword tight. She has light brown hair the color of wheat before harvest, and I never knew I could love anyone so much.

I groan, shifting my bulk. I'm like a whale with his second born, and the seers of his tribe told me that this one will be a boy, but I know, deep inside, he'll be a man who creates and grows, rather than a warrior. My belly is firm like a ripe melon. I was terrified of the first pregnancy, knowing how big a half-Orc baby could be, but I had her in the midwife's home, as the other women of the village chanted around me, bolstering my strength.

The changes of the Orc pregnancy are intense and unexpected. My breasts have swollen up three times their size, and my nipples toughened, laden with milk for the strong babe. I can just picture my son. He'll have the jet-black hair of Ragnar, and his toes will curl up when I touch his feet, his little green fingers will wrap around mine.

"I got you!" yells Star, and jumps forward with her blade, but Ragnar picks her up, twirling her in the air as she explodes into giggles. Silga smiles next to me, her own belly swollen up, and her four hard nipples have extended slightly, her flat chest swelling up as her breasts grow for her pregnancy. She gave up falcon training, focusing on plant medicine, and her paints are a chorus of vines and flowers that wrap around her entire body, beautifully detailed.

"Ulric is going out into the mountains today to get us winter berries," she says with a smile. "Oh, how I've been craving winter berries," she says.

Poor Ulric. Silga and him were wedded last fall, and he's been doting on her every need, just like Ragnar for me, but despite how much she protests, he insists on making trips out to the glaciers where he has to dig through ten feet of ice and snow just to get a handful of the deliciously sweet berries that are hidden below. The spring sun is heavy above, and those berries ripened all last summer, their sweetness stored in their skin during the freezing winter. It was not a brutal winter, with a gnawing belly, but a full one, meat roasting and weekly feasts, Orc children throwing snowballs at each other while the patrols stalked the mountain, ever watchful, each outfitted with a new rifle and a sword or axe, but no enemies ever surfaced. Ragnar told me that the King has given up trying to fight us, focusing his efforts on the brutal, raiding tribes to the north, the Orc warlords who live in the harshest climates through the strength of their swords alone, casting away all technology or thought of farming to live their violent lives.

"He spoils you," I say.

"Of course. Just like Ragnar spoils you. It's only right," she says, with a huge smile. Her green cheeks are ruddy, her long black hair in two perfect braids. My own hair has grown in the four years, but my braids will never rival hers.

I run my finger over my collarbone. I no longer have the silver paint of blades. There

are fox designs, smaller now, and instead, the imagery is of a rising sun. Some of the Orc call me Queen Aira, but some call me Dawn. It's a nickname I don't mind, though the flattery sometimes makes me blush—they told me that their tribe was in cold and darkness, and that I brought out the new dawn. The sun's light glows on the valley, warming the new growth of spring, grass sprouting up and mountain flowers filling the fields.

I look out at the village. There are rows of gardens, filled with grapes that create a fine wine that we trade with one of the far southern villages. Twenty oxen are grazing placidly, and there are newborns, guarded jealously by their mothers. The bridge has been restored, and there are new homes growing up, built from strong pine wood. There's baby fever in the Orc village, couples pairing up as if by instinct when the stores are filled and the crops abundant.

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I look over at Star, who Ragnar puts on his shoulders. She loves to be up high. She's not as tall as other Orcs her age, but she's ferocious, keeping up in play and outrunning them in sprints. She has my eyes, and her jade skin is a lighter shade than that of Ragnar's deep green.

Ragnar walks to me, a huge grin on his face. He smiles a lot, these last years. There hasn't been an attack since he rescued me. Though Lord Ashbourne still rules, I've visited the villages. My little brother found a girlfriend, and learned the art of metalworking, sometimes taking trips up to our mountain village to share tips and trade knowledge with Tusk.

The villages are prospering. Ashbourne reduced his tribute by half, and yet, no longer oppressed by his brutal rule, their crops have grown threefold, and the Lord ironically benefited as well. I saw Lord Ashbourne from afar once. Though I wanted to hate him, I could not. He simply looks old and weak, growing a long beard. I know why.

He can't go near a razorblade again.

Ragnar gets on his knees in front of me, leaning his head forward and pressing it against my swollen belly as Star stares forward with awe in her blue-green eyes. "Is my brother coming soon?"

"Soon, my sweet. Soon. You're going to have a baby brother, and you're going to take care of him and protect him, aren't you?"

I love seeing the pride in my daughter's face as her face gets serious, her brows drawing down hilariously. "Yes! I'll keep him safe."

Ragnar sets her down next to us, and she runs off towards the other Orc children, screaming and yelling for the second fastest to race her. Ragnar stays there, his head against my chest, and I run my hands over his broad, strong face, through his black hair, and I'm filled with so much happiness I feel like I could burst.

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