



The Orc's Stolen Shepherdess

Author: *Aurora Winters*

Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I'll do anything to keep my flock, even make a deal with an orc.

Susara

Father thinks being a shepherdess is too dangerous for me. He wants to give away our flock, my flock, and keep me out of the woods for good.

But there are some new folk in the forest. Folk with huge muscles, and sharp teeth and claws that could tear off all my cloth-er... tear right through a tree with one swipe.

The orc warrior, Caivid, has already gotten me out of trouble once and I'm betting if I use my charms right, he'd help me out again.

Caivid

After a lifetime of war and hardship, coming to the Rove Woods has felt like a dream. Especially after I rescue a gorgeous woman and her flock of sheep. But the dream becomes a nightmare when a misunderstanding leads her village to believe I've stolen her.

I must return her before I end up gutted by an angry mob. But letting her go is going to be the most difficult thing I've ever done, and not because of the torches and pitchforks.

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The Orc's Stolen Shepherdess is a spicy and cozy, dual perspective, standalone romance. Its story is the second in the Rove Woods Romance series, but can be read alone. It is adjacent to The Orc Mate's of Faeda series.

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Chapter One

Susara

“It’s fine. Everything is fine.”

The wind caused red oak leaves to rain down onto the moss-covered ground. The scent of crisp autumn foliage and the incoming chill tickled my nose. The soil beneath my feet was soggy and my leather boots were almost covered to the ankle in muck. The evening sunlight peeked in through the canopy, casting the world in a golden hue that was not nearly warm enough to dry out my damp clothes or warm my goosebump-covered arms.

And surrounding me, bleating like their lives were at risk, was my beautiful flock of sheep. Their clean wool was crisp, their dark eyes shined in the dim, and their stomachs grumbled.

Because their favorite grazing patch was now a pond.

“I don’t know how this happened either, Midnight,” I murmured as my most devoted ewe came to bleat at my side. The others milled about, bellowing at the water, at the rocks, at the sky. Obviously cursing the Fades who had made them and taken away their grass.

“We’ll find more.” I gave Midnight’s bushy black head a little pat. The ewe snorted as if she didn’t believe me. “I will! It’s not like the forest has no grass. I’m certain if we walk around, we’ll find more. . . somewhere. . . Snowy, get away from the water!

You'll muddy your bandage."

I rushed toward the injured sheep. With her bright white coat, one would never think she could get into mischief.

My knees were instantly soaked as I kneeled next to Snowy. She bleated in my face and her hot breath warmed my chilly cheeks. I lifted her hind leg and examined the tightly woven bandage around her flank. No bleeding. No signs of puss. She was just as hungry as she'd ever been.

"Get back over there," I mumbled, giving her a gentle push toward the other three sheep who were now congregating as far from the pond as possible. "What's the matter with you all? It's just a little flooding."

Odd flooding, though. We hadn't had rain in half a moon, and this wasn't a particularly low spot.

"So strange." A sinking sensation washed through me as I got to my hands and knees and peered into the water. It shouldn't be very deep. Right?

I was met with the sight of my reflection first. Chubby cheeks, freckles, hair the color of rotting straw. It even looked like straw with how dry it was.

Not that it mattered. It didn't. I was a shepherdess! I spent all my time in the woods. And there had been so many oddities of late, it was a wonder I had time to sleep. If only the sheep would stop having odd mishaps like getting their legs stuck between rocks and slipping on nothing. And now their grazing patch had disappeared under a pool of water.

My father's chiding tone firmed in my mind. "The woods are too dangerous for you. You need to choose a partner."

A partner. I knew which one he meant. My father wanted me to pick Jophel, a greasy, arrogant man who just did not want to take for an answer. I'd rather eat my thumbs than tie myself to him.

But he was also the only man who'd expressed any interest in taking over the flock.

I gritted my teeth with determination, yanked up the sleeve of my wool gown, and reached into the water, feeling around the bottom for the tender, bright green grass that I knew would be there.

My hand sunk and sunk.

All the way up past my elbow.

I snapped my hand out of the water and scrambled back. The sheep bleated and scurried at my sudden movements.

"It's all right, Susara," I said to myself, though my voice was filled with tension, and my eyes were huge on the pond before me. "It's. . . everything is fine."

But it wasn't fine. It wasn't fine at all.

I carefully got to my feet picking up my shepherd's crook as I went. It was taller than I was, and the wood was strong. I clasped it tightly and tucked my thumb into the nook near the top that had been made by the constant rubbing of three generations. My grandfather, my father, now me. Nearly a hundred years as herders for Oakwall Village.

And I'd never heard of or seen anything like this pool of water.

I hesitantly moved to the edge of it again.

“Just stay back,” I said to my sheep. They went back to nibbling reluctantly at the few blackberry vines near the edge of the clearing and I dipped my stick into the water.

It went down. And down. And down.

Until my fingers nearly touched.

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The grass wasn't underwater. The grass was gone.

I pulled out my crook and backed away from the edge as a shiver raced up my spine. I didn't take my eyes away from the threat for a moment.

How had this happened? And why? Why would the Fades steal away my family's largest grass patch? We'd been leading our sheep to it since my grandfather was first shepherd. It had always been here, like a steadfast friend.

And now it was just gone.

With a sharp inhale, I pursed my lips just right and let out a low whistle. The bright sound pierced through the chilly air and carried deep into the surrounding woods. I scanned the tree line, adjusting my pack so I could get some parchment and a pencil. I needed to write to my father and Headman Gerald. They needed to know about this. . this collapse of the ground.

It wasn't natural.

I finished scrawling the note and searched the gold and red trees again.

No bird had come. Why hadn't a bird come?

Here in the Rove Woods, bird messengers were common, but they were enchanted by orc magic, so using them could be difficult for humans. It had taken me years of practice to learn the right whistle to call them. Most of my fellow villagers never learned. It didn't matter to them since they spent most of their lives within the walls

of our village.

But I was out here alone and the ability to send a bird for aid was vital. It was one of the only reasons my father allowed me to continue this work.

I whistled again. And again.

Still, a bird did not come. The woods around me were eerily silent.

“L-let’s move on to another spot for now.” I tried to keep my voice steady and confident, even as my heart began a frantic tempo. I turned to my flock and tapped my crook on the ground. “We can move on to the east. We’re certain to find some lovely patch of something yummysome. . . where. . . where is Midnight?”

I hurried into the flock of sheep, moving around them to search behind trees and bushes. Their bushy white bodies were warm under my fingertips as I counted them. Once, twice.

All here but Midnight.

“Blast it all, Midnight. Why do you keep wandering off?” I clicked my tongue and tapped the sheep gently on their behinds with my crook to get them moving. They bleated in outrage that we were abandoning their favorite spot without so much as a nibble.

“The grass isn’t here, Rosemary,” I said tensely as I tapped the stubborn sheep’s woolly bottom again. “Now, come on. We need to find Midnight before she gets into more trouble.”

She was our best ewe. Our only black one. The sweetest one in the flock.

And also, the most daring. I swear, Midnight wandered into trouble at least once a moon.

I couldn't let that happen today. Not after we'd already lost the grazing ground. Father would be in a right state when he found out. His joints would probably flare up even worse from the stress. He worried about me too much already.

"You need to choose a partner."

I gritted my teeth. I wouldn't have minded a partner, really. All my fondest memories were with my father and mother by my side. There was a little shelter right across the clearing that we'd all built together. My father and I still stayed overnight there during the summer. Or at least we had until his joints. . .

I pushed my worries aside and chose instead to focus on the fond memories of my childhood—before my mother had died, before my father had become unwell. We'd worked as a team out here. A whole lifetime of labor and laughter and love.

But I would have none of that with Jophel. The only one who wanted me. All he wanted was for me to look pretty while I slaved over his stove.

"Midnight!" I called as we walked through the woods. The sheep bleated and followed hesitantly. I clicked my tongue to keep them moving, but their hungry bellies were quite the distraction, and the blackberry vines were rampant in this area. "Midnight. Here, girl!"

No luck. Not even a rustle in the bushes. The wind in the trees was growing stronger, and the light was dimming as the sun set behind them, casting deep, dark shadows. There wasn't time for this.

"Midnight, you come out here this instant." My voice was edged with panic and I

rubbed my thumb against the groove in my crook, wishing that the nervous habit could do more than remind me my predecessors had all done the same. They'd all had setbacks. They'd all had injured sheep and bad grazing days and lost—

A bleat in the distance made me want to collapse with relief. I could recognize Midnight's low, lazy tone anywhere.

“This way.” I clicked my tongue, and the sheep followed at my heel. I focused on my familiar surroundings to ease my worry. I'd walked—and been carried before that—these woods my entire life. Thirty-three years of breathing in the fresh and fragrant air, eating wild berries, drinking clean water from the springs.

The bleating sounded again, and my heart leaped into my throat as I saw a rocky outcropping. “Fades, have mercy. Midnight, why did you go there?” She knew how dangerous it was to climb those rocks.

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The face of them stretched high above my head and I knew on the opposite side was a cliff that fell into a prickly patch. Every sheep tried to get to that delicious-looking patch at least once in their youth. I'd bandaged up more scrapes and scratches from it than I could count.

"Stay here," I said to the flock, though I need not have. There was a tiny patch of clover at the base, which, despite the threat, was the reason we came to this area at all.

I hoisted myself up, following the path I'd climbed a dozen or more times. A fine sheen of sweat cooled my forehead. "Midnight, I'm going to strangle you," I mumbled as I heaved up onto the next boulder. Far below me, I could see the sheep still grazing. A few lazily watched me while munching their clover. At least none of them had wandered off yet.

I got up to a large boulder with a smooth, even top, and a muffled bleat sounded.

From below me.

Confused, I looked down. Eleven sheep. Midnight still wasn't among them.

I let out a whistle. "Midnight! Come!"

Another bleat. It was to my left. Still so muffled. Where was she? All we had around were rocks.

I managed to get up to the next level, and my stomach dropped.

I knew these rocks and boulders like the back of my hand and I knew there should not be a crack in them here. The dark, jagged opening was large enough to fit a grown man inside. The chasm plunged deep, and I wanted to stay as far away from it as possible.

A low bleat sounded from inside and my heart stopped. My fingers scrambled to get my lantern out of my pack. I lit the candle inside with a match and hung it on the end of my crook.

Carefully, I moved to the edge of the crevasse and lowered my lantern to look.

I gasped with horror.

Fades, have mercy. What was I going to do now?

Chapter Two

Caivid

“What do you mean, you want us to just walk in the woods?”

“Do you mean we’re patrolling?”

I stood with my arms crossed and my brow furrowed as my brethren bellowed their complaints. The warrior camp smelled of familiar woodsmoke and roasted meat, most of which was only half done. Many of the fires were still embers and many of my fellow orcs still had sleep in their eyes.

It was too early in the morning for this confusion.

“Why do we need to patrol?” Ogwick asked in his bright, high voice. He’d roused

first and looked like he'd already had a bath. His green skin was damp and his light hair wasslicked back in a tight queue. "I thought these woods were safe."

"They are." Chief Brovdir's voice sounded more like broken rock than words. The puckered white scar at his throat looked even more pronounced in the morning light. "These are orders from Chief Sythcol."

"Why should we have to listen to what that prissy conjurer wants?" Hendr, a burly orc with a death wish, shouted.

"He ischief," Brovdir said with a tone that left no room for argument.

But Hendr liked to argue anyway. "You'reour chief. He's chief of the Rove Wood Clan. We don't have nothing to do with them."

"We arepartof them now," Brovdir said low enough to shake the ground under my feet. "We are members of this clan."

From the corner of my eye, I could see a few of my brethren relax into this truth. After decades as part of the Warlord's elite fighters, after years of constant travel between clans and in battles, we were finally settled. These perfect, blessed woods wereour home now.

My back ached from tension at the thought. I wished I could beat that truth into my skull.

"Report any oddities to Chief Sythcol and me." Chief Brovdir grimaced as he rubbed the scar at his throat.

"But what oddities?" Ogwick's young face went tight. "Do you mean soldiers of the Waking Order?"

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“No. No soldiers. Just look for anomalies.”

“There’s only fifteen of us,” Toj said from the back, surprising me because he was usually quiet. He was a tall, slender male with skin so dark he didn’t have to paint it when on night patrol. “That’s not enough to cover the entire forest.”

“Or even the main proximity of it,” Ogwick added.

“Do it anyway.” Brovdir’s eyes narrowed.

“I thought we were supposed to be making camps for the other orcs who are coming to settle here,” Ogwick said despite Chief Brovdir’s deep scowl. The male’s youth always showed in his inability to shut up. “Aren’t some of them going to be here in less than a moon?”

“If we don’t start soon, they’re going to show up and have to sleep in the mud,” Toj said under his breath.

“We’ll do that later,” Chief Brovdir said.

“And what about finding women?” Hendr’s voice was so loud it nearly echoed off the trees. “Some of us weren’t successful at this morning’s trade!”

“You will all stay away from the humans,” Brovdir said firmly. “You have to wait until the next trade.”

“But why?” Hendr shouted. “We finally have a chance to get a conquest, to have sons,

and you want us to tromp through the muck of these blasted woods instead of trying to win one?"

"Silence," Chief Brovdir said in a grave tone that was as low as the goblin's deepest mine. "You'll have plenty of time to find conquests and have sons later. Now, you will walk and send birds back with reports. Fan out to cover more ground. Go!"

The crowd dispersed, though somewhat begrudgingly, and I walked through the mud back to my tent to gather provisions. We'd been staying on the outskirts of Rove Wood Clan for twenty days, longer than we had stayed anywhere, and the camp was showing its age.

Deep wells of mud marred the middle of the paths and the trek around them was growing just as bad. The logs we'd gathered for seats around our fires were breaking down. The fire pits we'd made weren't large enough to properly cook the elk and boar we'd hunted, and the sticks we'd carved into skewers to roast our fish were splintering.

Usually, we only stayed in a place for a single night unless someone was gravely injured. We marched, fought, and scavenged for food along the way. We were always on guard. Always ready for the next battle. Always choosing which clan to aid next or which Waking Order scheme to thwart.

Now I was here, in these woods, surrounded by peace and tranquility, the likes of which I'd never known. My only job was to walk in the woods and report anything odd. Simple. Easy. Low risk.

And I'd never felt more on edge.

I pushed back the flap of my elk skin tent and kneeled down on my bedding, trying to keep the mud off it. I gathered up my supplies. Dried meat. A water pouch. Some

bandages and healing tinctures and. . .

And I didn't need those things, did I? There weren't any soldiers here trying to slaughter us. The only humans were from a village that had been peaceful with orc kind for centuries.

I exhaled. An attempt to get my tension to leave me. The chatter of my brethren trailed off as they ventured into the forest. The wind in the trees felt stifling, and every crackle from the dying embers made my muscles clench.

The quiet of this place made my skin prickle and my ears strain to hear what might break it. A deep-seated ache hummed in my marrow, like the rumble of thunder after a lightning strike. Like the storm wasn't finished with me yet.

But it was. These peaceful woods were where I was meant to stay.

Stay.

Forever.

I tied up my pack with such force I was surprised the drawstrings didn't tear and pushed back out of the tent into the morning light.

Brovdir remained at the edge of the camp near the woods. I approached him and was glad to see his eyes were light with ease. I knew being named chief by the warlord, his brother, had been the last thing Brovdir wanted. My friend had always preferred to receive orders rather than give them.

"Been given a house," he said as I got closer.

I raised my brows. "A house? You mean one of the tree dwellings in the clan?"

Brovdir nodded.

I hummed under my breath, “I suppose it makes sense. You are chief now, after all.”

“Halfchief,” Brovdir said. “Chief Sythcol is just as important.”

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I nodded. The oddity of having two leaders wasn't lost on me, but if Brovdir didn't mind sharing his power, then who was I to care? "You going to live in it with that baker you like?"

Brovdir's face went instantly flat, and I knew I shouldn't have brought it up. "No."

"Have you. . . seen her at all?" I broached tentatively.

"No," he said. I shouldn't have been surprised. Since he'd made the decision to put aside the woman he fancied to tend to his new duties as chief, Brovdir had refused to speak of her.

But I knew from the way he brooded that he still thought of her. Often.

"You want it, Caivid?"

It took me a moment to realize what he'd asked. "Want what? The house? What would I do with it?"

"Live."

I snorted with laughter. "You know what I mean, Brov. I've never lived in anything but leather. Not sure what walls would do for me that my own skin couldn't do better."

Brovdir gave me a knowing look. The kind that didn't settle well in my bones. He'd been my friend for too long and knew me too well. "Might help you settle."

I clenched my fists. I'd fought hard to be here. Brutal, bloody challenges that had left many maimed. Only fifteen of the fifty warriors in our band had won the right to stay and protect the Rove Woods. The rest followed Warlord Karthoc back out into chaos and carnage. At the time, I'd felt lucky to have earned my place.

And now. . .

"I'll take you there tonight," Brovdir said quietly, and then he turned away and walked back into the clan.

I exhaled sharply as I watched him go. The forest loomed before me. A place where the trees seemed to glow with life, and the air was so fragrant and clean, I could taste the sweetness on my tongue.

I set off into the woods.

The trees above me were golden and red, dappling the light through the foliage. Birds sang, drifting their sweet melody through the air. The scent was intoxicating, moss and pine and rich soil.

I took another deep breath through my nose, filling my lungs, but not for enjoyment. How many times had I been ambushed while traveling in woods? How many times had humans lunged from behind rocks and trunks to slaughter me where I stood?

At least half the scars on my body were from such encounters. The other half were from face-to-face combat. A lifetime of blood and fear.

And now it was just. . . done.

But my body did not seem to think so. Every tweet and rustle and distant sound made me flinch. My claws came out, my body tensed to attack.

I continued on, wandering aimlessly, with little purpose. How would I know an oddity when I saw one? Everything in these woods was an oddity. They were too lush. Too bright. Too fragrant.

Too perfect.

I did not belong here.

As I exhaled, I tasted the air on the back of my throat. My shoulders loosened with the confirmation that there were no humans nearby. I wondered just how long it would take for me to no longer feel the need to check for danger around every blind corner.

Rustling sounded to my left, cracking of twigs and I leaped to attention, claws out, posture braced for attack.

It was birds. A flock of robins had been startled by my presence and had taken flight. I watched with heated cheeks as they disappeared into the ever-darkening sky.

When had it gotten so late? I'd been patrolling much longer than I'd realized. I supposed I should make my way back to camp. Certainly, one of the warriors would have happened upon an elk or maybe some rabbits and they'd be roasting over the fire now. My mouth watered at the thought.

I took one last deep breath, drinking up the scent of the crisp autumn evening. The damp tasted sweet on my tongue. So alluring and stark like rosemary.

I snapped to attention. That was not the forest.

That was a human.

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A humanfemale.

My stomach clenched with dismay. I'd seen the humans of Oakwall Village at the trades twice now. Their tables of goods were as full as their glares. They were peaceful with the orcs of Rove Wood Clan and didn't want to make enemies of us warriors, but that didn't mean we were welcome.

I was about to turn tail back to camp when a yelp of fear pierced the air and all the hair on my body stood right to attention.

“Help!”

Ah, fuck.

I was under no obligation to aid her. None at all. It could be a trap!

It wasn't a trap. I knew that. I'd scented the air already and there were no other humans about. She couldn't have even known a warrior orc would be here.

“Someone! Anyone! Help me, please!”

My throat tightened against my own sense of self-preservation, and I made my way through the underbrush. Tiptoeing closer and closer to that sweet rosemary smell.

Fades, it smelled like comfort made tangible. Like the coziest fire on a warm night. Like the break of dawn after snowfall. I wanted to bask in it. To drink it up and—

Fuck, I'd nearly forgotten what I was doing!

I was quickly reminded when I broke through the trees and found a mound of boulders three times my height.

“Help!”

The voice was right there now—near the top. I climbed up onto the nearest rock so I could look over the edge.

My heart dropped right down into the pit of my stomach.

I could see the feet of a human woman sticking out of a massive black crevasse. Her toes were curled around a crack in the rocks. One wrong move and she would plummet.

Without forethought, I bolted up to the ledge she was on.

“Is someone there? Please help!” she cried, obviously having heard my scrambling as I climbed. The delicious scent of her was overwhelming, and I rushed to her side. There was no time to lose here.

Reaching down, I gripped the woman around her waist and yanked her.

Her yelp of alarm cut off as I swung her into my arms and backed away from the crevasse toward a safe location to put her down.

Fades, have mercy. She felt good. I'd never held a woman before, and I hadn't realized how soft they were. Or how warm. Or how fucking incredible they smelled.

Suddenly, I understood why some orcs wanted to take a woman as a mate, to have her

for alifetime, instead of just taking one as a conquest.

Her hand tightened against my chest and her face went pale with shock. Fades, blast me back to the depths. They were so blue. Like the coolest, calmest depths of a lake. Perfect waves lapped at my soul and made my whole body lax.

And then she inhaled sharply like she was about to start screaming.

Blast it all. For one blissful moment, I'd forgotten that I was a monster in her eyes. Compared to the slender, regal conjurer orcs of Rove Wood Clan, I looked like a scarred-up beast.

"Y-you're a—you're one of those new orcs!"

Ah fuck. I set her down quickly and backed away. She was saved. Time to leave.

A hot grip circled around my wrist, and I froze with shock.

"Wait!" she cried, golden hair frizzy from her tumble with death, cheeks a bright, perfect pink. She looked like a vision from one of my best daydreams.

"I need your arms."

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More like my nightmares. “You what?”

“I need your arms!” she said forcefully again, giving my arm a jerk as if they might come free of my body if she tugged hard enough. “Now hurry up. There isn’t time!”

Chapter Three

Susara

Fades help me! IknewI was being a complete idiot. I knew that. And yet my stupid words were coming out all panicked. I’d almost died just now.Died!

But this orc had saved me. Thiswarriororc. The kind that my whole town was saying would plunder me and force me to carry his son if I let him get too close.

Instead, the huge, sharp-tusked male was looking at me like I’d just asked to rip his arms off and roast them for breakfast.

“Not to eat!” I said quickly and his eyes widened all the more. “Don’t worry, I need them to still be attached to your body. I don’t want to eat them. I don’t eat people—er, or orcs.”

“I’ve saved you.” He wiggled in my grip, but not enough to make me let go. He could have pulled away if he wanted. His muscles were huge. His bicep looked like it was as big around as my whole head. “You asked for help, and I gave it. I’m going now.”

“Oh, please, please, I just need a little more help! My Midnight needs saving too!” I

tightened my hold on his hand. His skin was so soft. I wouldn't have expected that, judging from how many scars he had. I couldn't feel any callouses at all.

"Your what?" His brow furrowed, and honestly, he would have looked adorable had I not been so panicked about my sheep. "It's sunset, woman."

"No, that's not what I meant. My sheep. My sheep is named Midnight. Her foot is caught and she's hanging. She's going to fall if you don't come." I tried to tug him over, but I may as well have been tugging one of the boulders.

"There's a sheep down there?" He looked like the perfect combination of aghast and disbelief. As if on cue, Midnight let out a bleat that echoed up from the dark void and pierced right through my heart.

"I'm sorry, Midnight! We'll get you out. I promise," I shouted, hoping the rocks her foot was stuck between would hold. The orc was looking at me like I'd grown two heads. "I know I should have mentioned her being stuck first. I'm just all scrambled up."

I still had his hand in mine, and I gave him another quick pull. This time, he took a hesitant step forward before stopping again.

"Why are you out here, alone, with a sheep?"

Of all the questions! "I'm a shepherdess! Look, here's my crook!" I picked the stick up off the ground where I'd left it and the orc's brow knitted up. "I swear this is actually my crook and not a random stick I just picked up off the ground to convince you."

"You are a shepherdess of a single sheep?"

Oh, for the love of— “My sheep are right there! Grazing all over that clover.”

His brows rose as he looked down and spied my happily munching flock.

“You can try to tell me you didn’t see them, but don’t you dare pretend like you didn’t smell them. I know how good orc’s sense of smell is.”

“Maybe I would have smelled them if your delicious scent wasn’t covering everything up.”

With that, his mouth shut so tight around his sharp teeth I wondered if he’d cut himself, and his cheeks turned such a dark shade of green, I could have sworn they were trying to rival the ever-blackening sky.

So, he liked how I smelled? I could work with that! “Look here, if you save my sheep, I will give you the best hug you’ve ever had in your life.”

“You’ll. . . give mewhat?” His voice had gone high with shock.

“Then you’ll smell like me! Why is that so odd? You just said you liked how I smelled.”

He exhaled sharply. “You could just give me your clothes; they smell like you.”

I supposed he was right. “It’s a little cold to be going around without my overdress, but for Midnight, I’ll do it.”

“No, that’s not—I didn’t mean to saythat.”

“I’ll let you say anything you want without judgment if you justsave Midnight.” I pulled at him again, and finally,finally, he followed me over to the edge of

thecrevasse.

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He stayed a good distance back as he peered into the darkness, only to sag with relief. “Well, fuck, there really is a sheep in there.”

“You thought I was lying?” I couldn’t decide if I was more insulted or amused.

He shrugged and kneeled to get a better look. “Been lured by more ridiculous things than this.”

“Lured by. . . you thought I was setting a trap? Honestly? Who would use rescuing as a trap?”

He raised a brow at me and then continued to examine the predicament my sheep was in.

“Do you need light?” I picked up my lantern and matches. I relit the flame with shaking fingers. “How is she? Is she slipping? Fades, please tell me you can reach—”

“She’s fine. She’s not going anywhere.” His voice was low and calm.

“Really? She’s really all right?”

“Her foot is stuck tight between the rocks. I think she’s eating.” He moved to get down on his stomach. “I’m going to try to reach her.”

“Hold on, Midnight,” I called. “This niceorc is going to save you.”

He shot me another odd look and then reached down into the darkness. A loud crack

sounded, and I yipped with fear.

“Be calm.” His voice was a low rumble that somehow managed to soothe away my panic. “I just broke the rock holding her. She’s fine. I have her in a firm grip.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” I held my breath, wrung my hands, and prayed to the Fades who’d made me that in a moment, he would pull her up, and everything would be right with the world again.

“Fuck! Let go!”

“What?” I hurried over to his side and looked down into the darkness, but the crevasse was so slender and his body took up all the visible space. “What’s going on? Do you have her?”

“I have her. She just won’t let go!”

“Won’t let go?”

“She’s eating something. Some sort of root or . . . Fades, blast it all, stop kicking me.”

“Midnight, you naughty thing!” It would be just like her to be so ruled by her stomach that she would die for the last bite. “Let go of that food this instant!”

“She’s not budging,” he called up.

“Pat her butt,” I suggested.

“What?”

Had he not heard me? “I said pat her butt!”

“I am not going to touch its butt. That’s disgusting.”

The abject horror in his tone made me burst into laughter instantly.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“Yes!” My sides hurt from trying to keep my laughter at bay. “I don’t mean her butt hole, you clod! I meant pat her flank! On the fluffy part! That’s how I get them moving in the woods.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he grumbled, voice echoing in the darkness. I could imagine his knitted brow and my chuckles broke free again. “Stop laughing at me! It’s not helping.”

“Did you need help?” I wiped my eyes. “I could hold your legs or something. Or maybe you want me to pat your butt?”

“You stay away from my butt,” he snapped. “Patting her isn’t work—oh! It worked.”

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I scrambled back to give him room as he pushed his way back up out of the crevasse with Midnight held tightly in his arms. I wanted to collapse from relief.

“Oh, Midnight!” I gushed as the orc put her down. She looked a bit disgruntled and was still chewing. “Thank goodness you’re all right. You naughty, naughty thing! I can’t believe you nearly died for a blackberry vine!”

She paid me almost no mind and simply ambled off, climbing back down the rocks to where the rest of the flock was still grazing on clover. My relief was so palpable I couldn’t stay mad at her.

And then I turned to face her savior, and my stomach dropped right back down to my feet.

Fades, I’d been in such a panic I hadn’t really looked at him. He was absolutely nothing like the serene and slender orcs of Rove Wood Clan. This male was covered in hulking muscle, with enough scars to make one think his profession was wrestling saber cats. His legs looked thick enough to choke an elk. He wore no shirt and the rippling, perfect set of muscles that lined all the way down his stomach was incredible. They tapered off just above his tight leather pants, which were snug around his—

My cheeks went deadly hot, and I snapped my gaze right back up to his face. He crooked a brow at me, and suddenly, the memory of his horrified voice after I’d told him to touch Midnight’s butt blasted right into my mind and. . . and. . .

I burst with laughter all over again. “I cannot believe you thought I wanted you to pat

her buttole!” My eyes were streaming as I held my stomach. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t laugh, I just—Fades, I’m just so glad all this is over. Thank yousomuch for your help.”

Fades, I was laughing right in the face of a huge, battle-scarred warrior! What was he going to—

Deep, rumbling chuckles met my ears, and I looked up to find he was also laughing.

The mirth transformed his face almost completely. Laugh lines appeared around his eyes and mouth. His cheeks had colored to a bright green. Even his jawline looked softer.

“I cannot believeyoutried to use a stick to prove you were a shepherdess.” His voice was tinged with jollity, and it made my stomach flip.

“I-Itismy crook though!” I lifted it up to his view again. “Look, this is where I hang my lantern and it’s all worn down where I hold it. What do you think I pat my sheep’s butts with?”

“Are you telling me you made me touch your sheep’s butt with my bare hand, but you touch it with a stick as long as you are tall?”

His smile widened, and any thought that he might be seriously offended was thrown right out. Fades, he was a sight. One could get used to looking at such a smile.

This whole situation was familiar. Not the sheep almost dying part, but the laughter. It had been almost two seasons since my father’s joints had flared up so badly, he couldn’t join me anymore.

I’d missed having company.

The orc's smile softened. His deep green eyes looked so warm and inviting.

My cheeks went hot, and my heart began to hammer. "W-we should get down before any more insanity unfolds."

Chapter Four

Caivid

I watched her movements closely as she climbed down the slippery rocks. I shouldn't have been worried. She was more adept at it than I was.

Her smile was bright as she got to the bottom, and it flooded me with warmth. Much like our shared humor had. When was the last time I'd laughed like that? I couldn't recall.

"Midnight, let me look at you," she demanded the moment our feet were on solid ground. The sheep bleated at her with annoyance as she looked at the leg the animal had been hanging from. "It's a little scraped and swollen, but you aren't limping."

The relief in her tone was almost palpable, and I leaned against one of the boulders to watch. The Fades must have been inspired when they'd rendered her. With her golden hair shimmering in the setting daylight and her blue eyes sparkling with relief. She was curvy and full in ways that made my fingers twitch with want to touch, and the sound of her laughter still echoed delightfully in my ears.

But she was also a stranger. A human woman from a village that wasn't too keen on my presence here in these woods.

I should just leave. My purpose here was done.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"You're such a naughty thing." She threw her arms around the sheep's neck. The animal bleated with irritation and struggled out of her grip. It trotted over to munch on clover with the rest of the flock. They were fine-looking animals. Round in the belly with shiny, clean coats. The one I'd saved was certainly the roundest. I watched her shove another ewe out of the way to get to some particularly nice-looking leaves.

"Here, a reward for all your help."

My gaze snapped back to the woman as she walked over to my side. Was she teasing? She didn't look like she was teasing.

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She went to a pack sitting at the base of the rocks and dug around inside. The scent of fruit, honey, and dried meat drifted toward me, blotting out her delicious rosemary. I closed my eyes and took a deep inhale, filling my lungs to the brim as I tried to memorize the smell of her beyond the pungent aromas coming from her bag.

“Here!” My eyes snapped open, and I found her right in front of me, holding out a cloth-wrapped bundle the size of my palm. “You can have this. It isn’t much, but it’s all I’ve got now. Once the sheep are sheared, I could give you some wool as well. Do you like wool? Most of the orcs in Rove Wood Clan do. They have it spun and knitted into. . . shirts.”

I raised my brows as she trailed off with her eyes stuck on my chest.

“You warrior types don’t wear shirts, though, do you?” she asked.

Oh, that’s why she was staring. “Not typically. It’s a waste of resources.”

“Your resources are so slim you can’t afford shirts?” She blinked her blue eyes at me. Her golden hair framed her rounded cheeks. Her arms were thick with muscle, and she’d already recovered her breath despite the exertion of climbing down the rocks.

She was strong and hale, and suddenly, my mind was quickening with thoughts of how I could wear her out. . .

Ah, fuck, what was wrong with me?

“Go ahead and try the oat bar.” She pointed to the cloth in my hand. “I’m sure you’ll like it.”

I reluctantly looked away from her and unwrapped the packaging, only for my nose to curl up in disgust. The sickly-sweet smell of dried fruit and honey curled up around my nostrils and my tongue shriveled with dismay.

“My name is Susara, by the way. I’m Shepherd Tomind’s daughter. What is your name?”

“Caivid,” I responded curtly, warring with myself over taking a bite of the flat oat pancake in my palm. It was harder than rock and stickier than Hendr’s socks.

“Caivid,” she repeated, drawing my full attention. “Caivid, the warrior orc.”

Fades, have mercy. I could get used to that. The sound of my name on her lips felt as warm in my chest as the light from the Fades themselves.

“Try it. Tell me what you think.” She waved to the bar.

There was no way out of it. I lifted the disgusting thing to my lips and took the smallest bite my teeth could muster.

My tongue shriveled up and my throat closed as it rebelled against swallowing. The taste was even worse than the dry, sticky texture. The sugar flattened my tastebuds until they burned. It took everything I had to keep my expression blank.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry.” The food was taken back out of my hand, and I blinked down at the woman as her brows furrowed with contrition. “You hate it, don’t you? Please feel free to spit it out if you do.”

She didn't have to tell me twice. I leaned over and spat the food on the ground as far from her feet as I could. Once the taste was gone, I couldn't help but marvel that she could read my expression so easily.

"I'm truly sorry." Her remorse burned me. The last thing I wanted was for her to be upset. "Was it the oats? The honey?"

"Too sweet." I smacked my lips, trying to get the taste out.

"Here, I have some water." She passed me a leather pouch, and I downed a few grateful gulps. "What else could I give you. . . do you like dried mutton? I have a little of that in here. Or I could meet with you at the next trade and bring you some mutton stew?"

She would see me again? I would not pass up that offer. "Yes. I'll take the stew."

She clapped her hands and beamed. "Wonderful. Still, I wish I had something for you now. The trade isn't for another half-moon. I promise it will be worth the wait. I'll make you the best mutton stew you've ever had."

"That should be easy for you." My body felt light and full at the same time. "I've never had mutton stew before."

"Really?" Her brows rose adorably.

I shook my head. "Sheep are only owned by humans." Not even the Rove Wood orcs owned sheep.

"I suppose that's true." She tapped her chin. "I wonder why that is?"

"Likely because humans do not share their resources."

Her brow furrowed with irritation, and it shadowed her eyes. The dark blue was enchanting. “Well, the humans of Oakwalldoshare. Do you want to own a sheep? Several of my ewes are pregnant and we could strike a deal. You could be the first orc to ever own one.”

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The oddity of that offer struck me so hard I couldn't help but chuckle. The idea of one of these small creatures following me around, getting into constant trouble. My brethren would mock me mercilessly.

"No, woman," I said once I'd caught my breath. "I would far prefer the stew. I fear your sheep may be too mischievous for me to handle."

My response made her grin, and Fades, wake me, she was breathtaking when she smiled. "All right then, but if you change your mind, you know where to find me."

My humor dimmed. I did know where to find her. She was behind tall walls within a community that did not welcome my company. The trade wasn't for another fourteen days. Anything could happen in that time.

She looked off toward the setting sun. "I should get going home. My father is going to wring me out for being so late."

I looked around, only then realizing how dark it had grown. "Do you want me to walk you back?"

"Oh, you don't need to." She opened up the glass door of her lantern and turned a little knob that made the flame glow brighter. Her golden hair glowed orange and her eyes sparkled in the firelight. "I've spent many nights out herein the woods before and I know every path, even in the dark. I'll be fine."

My stomach knotted. "What about predators?"

“The sheep have good instincts.” She closed her lantern with a light click. “They’ll warn me if a predator is about.”

That didn’t answer what she would do when one attacked. “Let me walk you.”

Her brow furrowed adorably. “You’ve done so much for me already, Caivid. And I really will be fine.”

“I insist.” My tone was firmer than I’d meant it to be, but all she did was tip her head and blink. “Let me walk you, Susara. For my own peace of mind.”

Her cheeks went a brighter pink at that, and her gaze skittered away. She cleared her throat. “Well, I suppose if you insist.”

I exhaled my relief. “Thank you.”

She chuckled and the sound was like music. It made my blood dance in my veins. “I should be thanking you, Caivid. After all this, I’m going to owe you more than just stew.”

She tapped her crook on the ground and the sheep stopped their grazing to gather around her feet. “Come on. Let’s go home for oats.”

Several of the sheep bleated as if excited.

She navigated the path to Oakwall Village so easily despite the darkness. I knew humans couldn’t see in the dark, but the way she moved made me wonder.

“You’re really out here alone with your sheep every day?”

She shot me an amused look. “Yes, I am. I wasn’t always alone though. My father

used to be with me, but his joints have been causing him trouble. And before that, my mother was with us too.”

“What happened to her?”

“She passed from illness ten years ago.” There was a hollowness to her voice. An ache that made my throat tight. “There are some things even your healing tinctures can’t cure.”

That I knew all too well. I’d lost many brethren over the years. “I understand that pain.”

Warmth covered my hand, and I blinked down in shock to find her hand on mine.

Was she offering comfort? I met her gaze and her eyes softened as she looked at me, as she read me, and I exhaled slowly, taking all the tension with it. Her thumb smoothed over my knuckles and my knees threatened to buckle under the soothing weight of her touch.

My hand was covered in scars from a lifetime of using my fist to bash, bruise, and break anyone and anything that threatened me. Pain was more familiar to me than any other sensation.

I’d never known tenderness like this before.

Something pushed hard into my leg and our hands broke apart.

The black sheep I’d saved, Midnight, was shoving me aside so she could nuzzle at my pack.

“Midnight, you naughty thing. That’s no way to show your appreciation.” Susara

tapped the sheep's bum with her crook, but the ewe only bleated with annoyance.
“I'm sorry, Caivid, I don't know what's come over her.”

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She went up on her back legs and pushed her nose into the front pocket. She yanked out the sack of dried vegetables and herbs and trotted off faster than I could blink.

“Midnight!” Susara was so aghast that I had to hold back from laughing. “You naughty thing. Give that back!”

“It’s fine,” I assured, clearing my throat to hide my mirth. “I can get more. Rove Wood Clan has opened their storeroom to us.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t want it with sheep slobber all over it anyway.” She sighed and we began to walk again. “I’d offer to get you a new one but produce is orc territory in winter. I have some dried apples at home though, if you’d like.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m fine.”

“Oh right, you don’t like sweets.” She tapped her chin in thought. “Maybe some bread, then? I get on well with Trinia, the town baker, and I bet I could get you some.”

“The stew is enough.” I was feeling like I was taking advantage of her kindness.

An odd look crossed her features. One that I, surprisingly, read as easily as I could read animal tracks in mud. “Don’t you be plotting anything, woman.”

Her brows rose and her voice was a little too high when she said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It was a bag of dried carrots,” I insisted. “I wasn’t going to eat them anyway.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to offer? What if it’s something you need?”

“I have all my needs met by Rove Wood Clan.” And yet I couldn’t help but mumble, “Though, I supposed hearing your offer wouldn’t hurt anything.”

She grinned in a way that made my heart stutter in my chest. Like she’d cracked through a thick stone to reveal something warm and soft that had been hidden away inside me. I couldn’t look away from her.

“Do you still want a hug?”

My heart felt like it was about to stop in my chest.

Her smile widened. “I’m going to take that look to mean yes. You’ll have to lean down a bit though, or I’ll be hugging your stomach.”

Ah, fuck, she was serious. My throat felt tight as I leaned down.

She didn’t hesitate for even a moment and stepped forward into my arms. Her head tucked right next to mine and her arms came around my neck. She smelled like bliss. Better than bliss. Like perfect warmth and comfort made real. My body relaxed, every muscle going limp. It was a wonder I stayed standing.

In response, she tightened her hold. Her breasts pressed into my chest, warm and soft. All thoughts of comfort were drowned out in an instant as my blood heated. I sucked in a breath to stop the basal urges suddenly swarming me with need.

The embrace came to an end far too quickly. As she stepped back, it felt like the first winter’s frost had settled in my bones.

“W-well.” Her voice sounded jittery, and her cheeks had gone back to that delightful bright color. “I, er, I suppose we should part ways here.”

I blinked in shock and looked around, only to realize we were very close to her village. I could see the wall of oak trees through the foliage.

“But I’ll see you at the next trade,” she said with a nod. “I’ll bring the stew.”

“Yes.” My voice sounded thick and my whole body quailed against the idea of her leaving. She couldn’t leave.

And yet she did. She gave a light wave and clicked her tongue. Her sheep bleated and followed as she made her way toward the village gates. They were closed, but a quick call from her had them opening up a crack.

I moved closer, watching until she and her flock had disappeared safely behind the walls—into a place where I could not go.

The painful truth of it crashed down around me. I’d have to wait fifteen days before I could see her again.

Every moment would be agony.

Chapter Five

Susara

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Oh,I was inhugetrouble.

Or maybe it was that my trouble washuge.

My heart hammered as I hurried up the darkened streets to my home. The looming wall of oaks that surrounded our town and gave our village its name felt both comforting and suffocating. The branches twined together tightly to make an impenetrable barrier that no predators could break through. The foliage had turned red and yellow and was quite beautiful against the dark evening sky.

I wondered if Caivid was still right outside those walls or if he'd already made it back to Rove Wood Clan.

He wasn't at all like what I'd been told about the warrior orcs. My fellow villagers would haveme believe they were angry, dangerous beasts, dead set on taking the vulnerable women of Oakwall as conquests and siring sons on us, whether we agreed or not.

Instead, he'd come to my rescue so fast I hadn't even thought to be afraid of him. The memory of his arms around me, so strong and warm, made my muscles relax. It had felt so incredible to be wrapped up, like nothing could ever hurt me again. . .

The way he'd exhaled on my neck had lit up my body like an inferno. My stomach still felt all fluttery, and my steps quickened as my mind raced.

Maybe. . . being a conquest wouldn't be so bad?

I smacked the thought away before even considering it. Women in my village played conquest to an orc in exchange for boons, and I had everything I needed already. Besides, I wouldn't be able to continue my duties as a shepherdess while heavily pregnant.

And I would not give up the duty to someone else. I would never allow myself to be trapped within the walls of my overcrowded village. The woods were where my heart and soul belonged and I'd rather the Fades strike me down than give it up.

"Susara! I cannot believe you were out so late."

The heaviness of exhaustion pitted in my stomach as I morosely watched Waston flounce over to me. Her graying hair was done up just so, and her shirt looked freshly mended.

"A girl like you ought to be settled down in her husband's home." Waston clicked her tongue. "Not out in the woods every day."

I barely withheld a sigh of frustration. Oakwall Village was a peaceful place, set in its traditional ways. Fighting against them was often a headache.

Before she asked anything, I said, "Is that a new blouse? It's lovely."

"Oh, well, thank you, dear. But no, it's the same one as always. I'm not fond of the hem work Nalina did to fix it up this time. It looks crooked to you, doesn't it? I hope she doesn't do as shoddy a job on the things I left with her today."

"It looks perfect to me, Waston." I wondered just how tired poor Nalina must be from repairing the same shirt over and over again. I noted to pay her a visit once I was done checking in with my father.

“Well, it’s not like you have a fashionable eye.” She looked down her narrow nose at my mud-covered gown and I rolled my eyes so hard it nearly sparked a headache. “What happened to you? Don’t tell me those orc brutes got you? Did you see them today? I’ve been told they’ve started patrolling the woods!”

“No, Waston,” I said dryly, feeling absolutely no remorse about lying. “Just like yesterday and the day before that, and for the last half-moon, none of the warrior orcs have bothered me.”

“Well, you tell me if they do, and I’ll report it right to Headman Gerald. Honestly, those menaces have some nerve attending our trades already. If they start terrorizing our walking trails, I’ll stop at nothing to get them banished from our beautiful forest.”

My brow pinched as I tried to remember the last time Waston had taken a stroll outside the village walls.

“I bet you they’re going to start sniffing around here. Our walls are high, but not so high they cannot climb them. I guarantee it’s only a matter of time before one of our poor girls is stolen away.”

I jolted with shock and glanced about, making sure this heinous rumor hadn’t been heard by anyone. “Waston, how can you say something so horrible? Where is this lunacy even coming from?”

“Lunacy? How dare you!” Her eyes flashed with anger, and in that moment, I realized she was serious, and my skin went cold. “Those all-male brutes are drooling for our women! Especially since so many of us have finally seen reason and stopped attending the trades. Mark my words, they are going to become desperate and start snatching.”

“No orc of Rove Wood has ever forced a woman to bear their child. Ever,” I said

firmly. “And speaking this way is only going to cause strife between our communities.”

“As it should! We should be causing strife after they forced us to accept these awful warriors at our trades.”

“We allow them to come because they bring us food.” I thought back to the elk meat the warrior orcs had provided at their first trade. A whole bull to every family. Many were still raving about it. “Waston, have you forgotten that we depend on the orcs for survival as much as they depend on us? They may need us to bear their sons, but they also grow our produce and supply most of the meat in return.”

“We can survive without them just fine.” She sniffed. “We’ve got mutton and beef and all the fish we could ever want from the streams.”

“Our village is almost a thousand strong.” She really had gone raving mad. “Our flocks and herds could never sustain everyone long term.”

“We’ll get more.” There was something in her eyes, some odd gleam of triumph that made my chest tighten.

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“How?” I searched her face to find the truth. “How do you plan to do that when our village has been isolated from everyone outside the Rove Woods for centuries? It’s not like we can go to the next town to get more sheep. There literally aren’t any more in the Rove Woods.”

Waston crossed her arms and pursed her lips and wouldn’t meet my eyes as she said quietly. “Perhaps it’s time for us to stop being isolated.”

I was momentarily speechless. My mind could hardly fathom it. We were safe here. At peace. And we had been for hundreds of years. Outside these woods, the world was at brutal, bloody war.

And she wanted to let that in?

“Does Headman Gerald know what you’re planning?”

For the first time, I saw a flash of alarm cross her features and wanted to collapse with relief. “It has nothing to do with him and you need not go blabbing your mouth to him either.”

I would blab the moment I saw him. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but I suggest you stop before our peace in these woods is broken.”

“Our peace is already broken, Susara,” Waston said with a sniff as she turned away. “And all will see that by the time I’m done.”

My stomach twisted with worry, but there was nothing I could do about the woman’s

ominous words now. I hurried to put the sheep in their paddock out the back of our house. The oak wall loomed above me, almost oppressively, as I got the flock bedded down for the night.

But as oppressive as it was, it was still better than being outside these woods. In a land of constant strife and bloody war, I was certain everyone would agree that being friendly with our orc neighbors and occasionally carrying sons for them was far better than that.

Right?

I wrung my hands with worry but could waste no more time dwelling on it.

“Father, I’m home.” I tried to sound casual as I entered the small cabin house that I’d lived in all my life. Inside, there was a crackling fire, sturdy walls, warm-looking cushioned furniture. ..

And my father, whose cheeks were red with fury.

“Where have you been?” His bushy gray brow was set so tight his eyes were almost hidden as he struggled to get out of his rocking chair. My father had always been strong, but in the last few years, his yellow hair had all gone white, the wrinkles on his brow had become more pronounced, and age had stolen his ability to move well.

“Oh, don’t get up.” I stopped untying my boots and hurried to his side. He let me help him back into the chair, which told me how much pain he was in. “Where is that orc medicine we traded for?”

“I already took it,” he muttered, making my chest squeeze with dismay. If magical healing tonics weren’t working, then— “Don’t look at me like that—I’m fine.”

My throat tightened as I tried to swallow down my worry.

“And this isn’t about me,” he insisted. “I’ve been worried sick about you. The moon is high! Why were you gone so long? What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” I lied, going to the pot on our small cast-iron stove where soup was bubbling. I grabbed two dishes from the shelves above. “I’m perfectly fine. We just got caughtup, is all.”

“Caught up with what?”

I tried again to change the subject. “Waston caught me outside. Has she told you about all her ludicrous ideas? About leaving the Rove Woods and trying to drive a wedge in the peace between us and the orcs of Rove Wood Clan?”

My father let out a long, frustrated sigh. “Yes. She has. She’s been getting into the minds of many folks.”

“Not you, I hope!” I exclaimed as I ladled the soup into our bowls.

“Of course not. But many others. With those warrior types coming here to stay, folks have been afraid. But I know Waston isn’t what kept you, so spit it out. Where have you been?”

I made the quick decision not to tell him about Midnight and the warrior orc. “The main grazing patch was flooded, so we had to go to the eastern one.”

“Did you say flooded? But it’s never flooded before. And the winter rains haven’t even started yet.”

“I know.” I carried the bowl to him. The sweet smell of barley and carrots was

comforting. “It’s odd. I’ll go to Headman Gerald tomorrow morning and let him know.”

As I passed the bowl into my father’s hands there was a sharp knock at the door, and it swung open before either my father or I could respond.

I felt nauseous as Jophel, the butcher’s youngest son, walked inside like he owned our home. He was a short man with long, greasy hair and a quick temper. I’d known him all my life. Gone to school with him. I tried to avoid him as best I could. He knew my answer would always, and forever, be no.

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So, what was he doing in my house?

His dark eyes shot to me, scrutinizing my body in a way that made me shiver.
“Susara, you finally came home.”

“What are you doing here?” My voice was level and clipped.

“I left my coat.” He went to the chair across from my father and picked his black cloak up off the back. “I see you’re still wearing yours. Don’t tell me you just arrived.”

“That’s none of your concern.” I balled my fists.

His jaw ticked and his muscles were tight. “What kind of woman isn’t home to cook dinner for her ailing father?”

My stomach churned with guilt. “The kind who has a flock to tend to.”

His smug expression made my blood run cold. “Not for too much longer.”

“What did you say?”

“He hasn’t told you?” Jophel looked from me to my father.

“Jophel, you should go,” my father said.

“Told me what?” I demanded.

“Don’t interrupt your father,” Jophel scolded as if he wasn’t two years my junior.

“You’ve got your coat. Now get out of my house.”

Jophel narrowed his eyes at me and crossed his arms. “Your father has been far too lax with you. A girl like you should know her limits by now.”

“Jophel! Go. Now.” My father’s voice was a near shout, and I couldn’t seem to find my voice at all through my shock.

Jophel narrowed his eyes but begrudgingly went. The door slammed shut behind him, and I was left with nothing but icy dread.

“Father. What was that? Why was his coat here?”

My father let out a long exhale. “Please sit down, Susara.”

“No,” I said firmly. “I won’t. Just tell me what is going on.”

He looked down at the bowl in his lap and then straightened, looking me in the eyes. “The woods are too dangerous for you.”

My stomach dropped down to my feet. “It’s not that dangerous, Father. The biggest threat I’ve come across so far is a little flooding. I’m fine.”

“You need more protection than I can provide. I’ve decided to let Jophel take over the flock.”

I couldn’t even breathe.

“He promised to let you go into the woods with him.”

“You’re giving him the flock?”

“He said he’d do it for only half the wool and mutton.”

“Half the wool and mutton!” I cried. “Father, no!”

“This is for the best, Susara.” Father’s voice was hard and firm.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “It was you who always said that I would take over the flock. You said you’d never let them be taken from me.”

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“That was before.” His mouth was a flat line and his eyes were devoid of all warmth. “That was before the warriors came to these woods.”

“Don’t tell me you truly believe the warriors are as dangerous and vile as the gossips say!” It was on the tip of my tongue to bring up Caivid. To tell Father about how kind he’d been, how generous.

“It isn’t just the gossip. Some of my own friends have agreed they are dangerous. They’ve talked to some of them, seen how angry they can get, and how they fight so brutally with each other.”

“Not all of them are like that. Some of them are nice—”

“It doesn’t matter if some are nice,” my father contested. “Chief Sythcol has confirmed that more may be settling in the Rove Woods by the end of the winter. These woods will be filled with them.”

“So, you chose Jophel?” I nearly spat.

“He’s a good man,” my father said before quietly adding, “And. . . he’s still unmarried.”

“You cannot be serious!”

Father wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“You know how I feel about him!” I shouted loud enough to wake the Fades. “All

Jophel ever talks about is having a wife to do his cooking and cleaning and raise his children for him. Why do you think he hasn't found a wife by now?"

"That was a long time ago. When you were still children. He's changed, Susara. The years have humbled him."

"What about his actions just now made you think he's changed?"

"You must give him a chance. He's the only man I found that said he'd let you continue to go into the woods with the flock." I could see the desperation in my father's face and it made my stomach churn. He'd really tried. He'd tried to find me a husband.

And the only one he found was Jophel.

"I cannot marry him, Father," I said firmly. "I will not. He's lying about letting me go with the flock and you know it. He'll chain me to the stove the first chance he gets!"

"Better chained to the stove than dead!"

My breath caught in my throat and my father's eyes widened as he realized what he'd said. He raked a hand over his face. "I can't lose you, Susara. I already lost your mother. I can't bear to lose you too."

"I won't marry him. I won't. And you can't force me. Headman Gerald would never allow it."

The silence was so oppressive, my lungs burned.

Finally, he murmured. "I won't force you to marry him, Susara, but he is taking over the flock. Tomorrow morning is his first day."

My throat felt choked, and my eyes prickled, and my vision blurred.

I saw his throat work in a gulp. “I’m sorry, Susara. This is the only way to keep you safe. If you can think of an alternative by morning, I’ll consider it.”

Before I could break down and make a fool of myself, I turned on my heel and stormed down the hall to my bedroom. The small space had been my place of protection and reprieve. Now it felt like a cage.

I paced over to the bed in the corner, picked up my wool-stuffed pillow, and threw it hard. It bounced off the wall almost lazily, lacking the violence of my anger.

He was giving the flock, my flock, to Jophel. Jophel!

How could he steal my life away so easily? How could he just burn my future to the ground? The pain was so sharp I could hardly breathe.

I looked out the window into the darkening woods. Just a few moments ago, I was out there with my flock, walking the paths I’d always known. Laboring and laughing. . .

With Caivid.

With Caivid, the warrior orc.

The exact threat that my father was so afraid of.

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My eyes widened as an idea popped into my head. A silly, stupid, perfect idea. I wrung my hands and paced the room, trying to talk myself out of it. Trying to convince myself it would never work.

But the eager face of that warrior orc kept popping up in my brain. The warmth of his embrace still lingered.

Caivid.

I knocked over my lamp as I yanked out a warmer dress and didn't bother to pick it up. I popped a button on my damp gown as I changed and left it in a rumpled heap on the ground. My muddy boots left tracks on my floor as I went to my desk and scribbled down a frantic note with jerky, shaking hands.

I didn't need to bring anything else.

I climbed over my bed, uncaring that my muddy shoes left huge footprints on my bedsheets. I would wash them tomorrow. After I made sure I would have a tomorrow.

I threw open the window. The cool night breeze fluttered over my face. The air was crisp and cleansing.

I sucked in a breath, hesitating only for a moment. This was a dumb idea. Foolhardy and risky and. . . and. . .

And worth it.

I whistled into the night and was relieved when a little robin swooped out of the nearest tree and landed on my windowsill. The bird looked the same as any other—tiny black eyes, red breast, tapping feet. They were a marvel of these woods, enchanted by the magic of the conjurer orcs to carry our messages to anyone we asked.

I swallowed hard. “Can you take this to Caivid? The warrior orc?”

The bird cocked its head at me, and for a moment, my chest tightened with dismay. What if the magic did not extend to the warriors?

And then he stuck out his tiny leg for me to tie the message.

I exhaled with relief and the moment I’d gotten the parchment secured, he flew out into the night.

Now it was my turn to join him.

If my father thought the woods were too dangerous for me, then I would get myself a protector.

A protector that was the source of my father’s fear.

With that determination, I climbed over my windowsill and leaped out into the night.

Chapter Six

Caivid

“This. . . is it?”

I looked around the worn-out, almost dilapidated dwelling that Chief Brovdir had guided me into. When he'd mentioned that the conjurer orcs had offered him a house to stay in, I hadn't expected it to be the nicest dwelling they had available, but this was just insulting.

"Might be better off as firewood," Toj said as he walked the perimeter. He stopped near the fireplace, which looked more like a burned-out pit.

"I wonder if they actually tried that," Ogwick said brightly, betraying his youth. He went to look at the countertops lining the far wall. They were half rotten. Even the floor underfoot looked like it might give way.

Which was impossible, because like with every other orc home in Rove Wood, this dwelling had been carved directly into a massive tree. An oak so ancient I could feel the life of it thrumming in my bones. It was a wonder that it could survive such a huge chunk of its trunk being carved out. I looked toward the ceiling and could see the tree's rings, marking each year of its life. There were probably more than I could count.

"I think with enough work, it would be a fine house." Ogwick toed at one of the open cabinet doors and the top hinge snapped off.

I chuckled at Ogwick's shock as he scrambled to right it.

"Don't bother," Chief Brovdir said from the doorway and Ogwick gave up the fruitless task only to have it break off completely. A puff of dust wafted up as it smacked to the floor.

I looked away from my younger brethren and scanned the wall. "Is that the bathroom?" I pointed to a door that was shut tight.

“Don’t, ” Chief Brovdir warned darkly. “Needs fixing.”

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I grimaced at the thought, and Ogwick moved in close anyway. His wide nose wrinkled up fiercely and he jerked back as if smacked. “Fuck, it smells worse than Hendr’s socks.”

I couldn’t help grinning at the comparison. “Maybe we should give it to him since he’s not around to say no.” I looked to Brovdir, whose shoulders were shaking as he silently laughed.

“I’d like to see his face when you showed him,” Toj said in his low, quiet voice. If he hadn’t been standing next to the window, where light from the street lanterns was filtering in, he’d have blended into the shadows completely.

Ogwick gave a wry grin. “I think he’d rather spit on it or use it as target practice than waste his time trying to fix it.”

Toj shrugged. “I think he’d be motivated.”

Chief Brovdir narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Toj. “Meaning?”

Toj averted his gaze. Clearly, he knew something more than he was letting on, and usually, he’d have told instantly. We five had been friends for many summers and weathered many storms. But with Brovdir as chief now, I knew the dynamic had shifted.

“Out with it,” Brovdir demanded roughly. He rubbed the scar at his throat and his brow pinched with pain.

Toj muttered, “We’ve all seen the way he looks at that seamstress at the trades. . .”

Right. I’d almost forgotten Hendr’s obsession. “Nalina was her name, right?”

Ogvick’s brows rose high. “Is that why he ran off into the woods at the camp? Is he going to see her?”

“Better not be.” Brovdir’s voice was as low and fiery as a goblin forge. “You need to stay away from Oakwall.”

We all fell into a glum silence. There wasn’t one of us warriors who didn’t hope for a conquest. Preserving our species was a goal that had been beaten into us from an early age. Finding a human woman who was willing to lie with us was hard enough, but also convincing her to carry our babe to term? That was another thing entirely.

Oakwall had brought us all hope until we realized that the stark differences between us—brutal, battle broken warriors—and the serene slender conjurers was so noticeable to the humans.

At least most of them. Susara’s bright eyes flashed in my vision. Her lovely smile. Her high laughter made my whole body feel light.

She hadn’t seemed to care what I looked like.

Or perhaps she was just being kind.

I glanced out the foggy window at the golden trees and the stars in the twinkling night sky and wondered for perhaps the millionth time why the Fades had not created female orcs. Why had they forced us to rely on human women to keep our species alive?

“I need to go to the hall,” Brovdir said, breaking off our brooding. “Need to check in with Sythcol.”

“I’ll come with you. I want to visit with some of the conjurers.” Ogwick’s voice was bright with excitement, and he suddenly looked younger than twenty years. I wondered if I’d ever looked that jovial, even in my youth.

“They’ll welcome you this time?” Toj raised his dark brows suspiciously.

Ogwick scowled, though I could see a flicker of uncertainty cross his features. I knew he was eager to make friends his age, but the Rove Wood orcs hadn’t exactly been warm toward him. “They have to get used to us eventually.”

“Perhaps eat with me,” Toj suggested. “I’m joining Iytier and Govek.”

“Maybe,” Ogwick grumbled before turning to me. “You comingtoo, Caivid?”

For a moment I almost agreed, but then my chest tightened at the memory of what was found within the walls of the hall. Massive tables with enough seating for the whole clan. Orcs chatting and laughing. Mated males seated next to their women with the sons careening around them.

There was music, and light, and laughter. Every one of them was relaxed. At peace.

At home.

And that only made my chest ache with longing more. Why couldn’t I just settledown? The other warriors had joined them so easily, and I still felt like the ground beneath my feet would fall out at any moment.

“Maybe later.” My voice sounded hollow, even to my ears. Ogwick shrugged and Toj

followed him out. Only Brovdir, with his eyes mirrors of understanding, paused to give me a nod. We'd spoken on this before. How our lives felt as if they'd been turned inside out. With his new position in leadership, he was as unsteady on his feet as I was.

But I envied him, for with every passing day, his new task grew easier. I could see him settling into the new routines. I tried so hard to follow suit, but no matter what I did, my mind refused to relent.

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As the door closed behind them, I went to touch the wall, the trunk. I was here. In the Rove Woods, inside a huge tree that had sat here for a thousand years and would stand for a thousand more. Rooted to the same spot. Never questioning where it was meant to go.

I tried to imagine roots of my own digging down deep into the ground below my feet and the ache in my chest eased a little.

A knock at the door jolted me back out of my trance. Icy shock tingled up my spine, and my muscles clenched. My brethren wouldn't bother to knock, which meant it must be a conjurer orc.

The knock sounded again, sharp and distinct. I blinked with realization before going to the door and yanking it open. The bird that had been rapping its beak on the doorframe swooped into the room. A messenger bird. But who would send me a note so late in the eve?

The bird did a quick lap around the perimeter of the room and then perched on my shoulder with its tiny leg stuck out so I could retrieve the message.

The scent of rosemary wafted from the parchment, and my heart thundered to a halt as I read.

Caivid, please meet me at the northern entrance to the Clan. I'll be there as soon as I am able. ~Susara

The bird flew off, and I barely noticed as a million questions raced through my mind

so fast I could hardly catch them.

But one thing stood out.

She was going to walk all the way here, on her own, in the dark.

My heart was in my throat as I raced out of the house. The paths were mostly vacant at this time of night, though the orcs I saw gave me an odd look as I sprinted to the northern entry. It took far too long to get there.

Fuck, she hadn't arrived yet! I didn't smell her scent in the air. I continued along the route that led to the trade pavilion. I arrived there in half the time it would normally take and found it completely empty. She hadn't reached this point yet.

I'd never been on the human side of the path, the one that led directly to Oakwall, but with Susara's safety in mind, I did not hesitate.

The night felt oppressive and dangerous, even though I could see as clearly in the dark as I could in the day. Every shadow, every rustle of the wind in the trees, every hoot or scamper of nighttime wildlife made my hair stand up on end. Panic settled hard and fast in the back of my throat, making me want to lash out. To bare my teeth. To strike with my claws at every threat.

But there were no threats! I was not at war here. I wasn't.

My body did not relent its tension, despite my logic.

And then I rushed around a bend and there she was.

Her face was illuminated by her lantern. Her crook thudded rhythmically as she walked. Her sky-blue eyes sparkled in the dim.

She blinked up, eyes wide, as she saw me sprinting toward her.

And then she smiled.

And it felt like dawn had just crested in my soul.

“Oh, Caivid! I didn’t mean for you to come all this way. I’m sorry. It took me longer than I expected to sneak past the guards.”

My heart burst into my throat even as my panic began to ebb. Susara wore a thick woolen gown that fit her well and protected her from the chill of the night. Her hair was tousled, her cheeks were pink, and her expression was open and warm.

I was so glad to see her safe, I nearly went to my knees.

“You got my bird then,” she said as she stopped in front of me and her smile faded slightly. “Caivid, are you all right?”

“Yes,” I managed, trying to tamp down my blasted instincts. I could smell no other humans in the air. No predators. We were alone. She was fine, and so was I.

“Caivid.” Her voice was soothing, and then she picked up my hand. I blinked down at her in shock as she rubbed my knuckles. My claws were still slightly extended.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. I would have put in more details, but the messenger birds can only carry a small paper.”

Fades, her fingertips felt so tender as they stroked me. I managed to tuck my claws away.

She smiled. “I know it’s a little crazy for me to ask to talk to you so late. I wouldn’t

have done this if I wasn't. . . if I didn't need. . .”

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Her voice sounded choked and there was an odd shimmer to her eyes that made my chest squeeze. “Why don’t we get off the path so we can talk?”

Her brow screwed up. “Off the . . . path?”

Ah fuck, my instinct to hide, to stay off main paths, especially ones made by humans, blared in me again. It was hard to focus, to remember that there was nowarhere. Just a woman.

A woman I needed to keep safe.

I needed to get her off the path.

Warmth covered my cheek, and I blinked down into her eyes.

Fades, she was cupping my face in her hand. She was so small she had to stretch nearly all the way up to reach me. “All right, Caivid. Let’s find somewhere you feel safe.”

Was I making my tension so obvious? I clenched my teeth and gestured for her to lead the way. She released my hand and cheek, and it felt like the whole world went icy cold.

Her steps were quick and sure as she stepped off the well-worn path and into the dark forest. She glanced back at me a few times, her eyes alight with curiosity. But her movements were smooth and there was no tension in her shoulders.

“Is this far enough?” she asked, stopping in a small clearing with a soft, mossy patch beneath our feet. It was completely obscured from the path, and I could scent no threats nearby. Just a few squirrels and a hungry owl who hooted in the distance.

“This is fine,” I said with a nod.

Her gaze softened as she looked up at me. Her smile made my whole body go hot.

She touched the middle of my chest with her warm fingertips, and it felt like I was melting.

“Thank you, Caivid. I promise I won’t take up too much of your time.”

I’d like to give her every moment of time I had left.

ChapterSeven

Susara

“I’m so sorry for calling you out here so late.”

Fades, the way he was looking down at me made me squirm. I’d forgotten that orc’s eyes glowed in the dark and it felt like his stare was piercing right down to my soul. It was hard for me to remember why I was here at all.

“I . . . I’m glad the bird made it to you just fine. I was worried it wouldn’t since you’re new to the woods. I’ll try to make this quick for you.”

“I don’t mind, Susara.”

Fades, the way he rumbled my name, so soft and sweet and low, made my whole

body feel jittery. He watched me carefully, arms crossed on his broad chest, bushy brows furrowed slightly. He looked like he was trying to puzzle me out, and honestly, I couldn't blame him for trying. My decision to meet with him had been foolish.

But I had no other choice. "Caivid, I'm here to ask for a . . . a trade."

His brows shot up. "A trade? You walked here, alone, after dark, to trade with me."

I wrung my hands. "Yes. I did. It couldn't wait. Believe me, I wouldn't have come if everything wasn't already turning to disaster. I had to make this deal with you before morning."

"Go ahead," he said smoothly. "I'm listening."

I wanted to collapse from relief even as the intensity of his gaze made me squirm. His jaw was so perfectly square, and his eyes were so soft and his hair looked like it could do with being stroked away from his forehead.

Fades, why did he have to be so . . . so . . .

I jerked my gaze away from him and they landed on a boulder covered in leaves and moss. It would make a good place for him to sit down.

I walked over to it. "You know I'm a shepherdess."

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“Yes.” His voice was warm with mirth as he said, “You’ve got the stick to prove it.”

I grinned helplessly and leaned the stick against the boulder so I could brush the leaves away. “I do indeed. It’s the same crook that my family has used for over a hundred years. Three generations have held it, and I was brought up to think that the job would be mine too.”

With the leaves and moss gone, that only left a damp surface. I took up the sleeve of my wool gown and used it to clean up the mud. “I was raised in the woods, you know? My mother and father would go out together. They carried me until I could walk. I’ve used a sheep as a prop for my head at night more times than I’ve used a pillow.”

Fades, this rock just wouldn’t come clean. No matter how hard I scrubbed, the grime would not relent. “I’ve always known exactly where I was going, what I was meant to do. I’ve felt it in my soul since I took my first breath. I’ve known no other life and wanted nothing else.”

What if I couldn’t change my father’s mind?

What if he forced me to give up the flock anyway?

I scrubbed so hard it hurt.

Warmth covered my fist, and I glanced up to find Caivid looming over me, so tall and huge it hurt my neck to look up at him. One would have thought I’d scramble away.

Instead, I wanted to get closer.

His opposite hand held something. Dried autumn leaves. Fades, where had he found dry leaves in all this damp?

He swiftly covered the damp rock with the soft foliage, solving my problem so swiftly it made my eyes go wide.

Then he caught me about the waist and plopped me right down on top of it.

I gasped, tall enough now that I didn't have to crane my neck to look at him. "I . . . I meant for you to sit here."

His brows rose as he blinked in shock. And then his expression softened with such tenderness that my throat constricted again. "You're scared, Susara. Tell me what you are so afraid of that you would risk your life walking here alone, in the dark."

"I would hardly call walking the path from Oakwall to Rove Wood Clan arisk." My voice sounded choked despite my best attempt to hide it.

He reached up slowly and brushed a thumb along my cheeks. The touch was so warm and gentle it made me want to melt into him. To collapse into his chest and let him wrap me up in his arms. To close my eyes and breathe him in and forget every trouble I ever had.

His hand moved away, and I saw that his thumb was wet from my tears.

The words tumbled out of me in a rush. "My father always promised he wouldnevertake the flock from me. But he's gone back on his promise, Caivid. He's giving the flock to Jophel. That stupid asshole of a man who's been skulking around our sheep since his brother inherited the butcher shop from their father. He's been

pestering my father about the dangers of the woods and now he's taking the sheep. Mysheep! The ones I've led all my life, that I've been leading on my own for two seasons and now he just wants to—"

Warmth went tight around my body so quickly I was awash with shock. Caivid's arms formed a tight hold as my head was tucked against his shoulder. The spicy, musky scent of him clouded my mind and soothed the prickling of my eyes. The last of my tears dripped onto his skin and dried on my cheeks as he held me.

I didn't want him to let me go.

"What do you need, Susara?" He rumbled against the top of my head. "What can I do?"

What could he do? Such an easy question and yet the comfort I found in the soft tone made me want to weep all over again.

"I . . . I need a protector." I swallowed thickly. "My father has made this deal with Jophel because he's scared. Scared of the dangers I might face in the woods alone. Scared of. . . of. . ."

I puffed out a breath and leaned back so I could look into Caivid's face. His eyes were still gentle, and his expression was open. I took one of his hands in mine and rubbed at his knuckles, counting as my thumb bumped over them. The rhythmic motion helped soothe the ache in my chest.

Strange. . . this action felt like something I'd done a million times before.

And like I'd do it a million times in the future.

"He's scared of the warriors. Many of the villagers are. You're the first big change

that has come to our home in centuries. But changes aren't new forever. Once he gets to know you, once we all do, it will be fine. I can feel it."

Caivid tipped his head and narrowed his eyes. "So, you want me to. . . protect you?"

"Yes." I took a deep breath and looked into the warm shock of his bright green eyes.

My reservations fell away and determination took its place.

“Yes, Caivid, I want you to be my protector, and in return, I’ll take care of you.”

Chapter Eight

Caivid

I blinked as the words slowly banged around in my thick skull.

She’d. . . take care of me? What did that mean?

“Look, I know this is a strange offer.” Her hand was still caressing mine, fingers stroking over my knuckles. Knuckles that had bashed and bruised and been broken more times than I could count.

I had to stifle a shiver.

“I’m sure you expected me to play conquest for you. That’s the standard trade for an ask this big.” Her caress sped up. “And I’m not. . . completely opposed to it.”

My thoughts seemed to freeze and melt all at the same time.

“But I can’t do it right now. My father is already buying into all the heinous gossip about you warriors kidnapping women against their will and forcing us to carry your sons. If I tell him you’re my protector because I agreed to be your conquest, he’d never accept it. He’ll think that I’m being coerced.”

And he would be right about that. She was going to lose her flock. She was desperate.

I'd be a monster if I played on that desperation.

"But what I can promise you is care." She nodded eagerly. "I'll feed you every meal. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks too. Nothing sweet since you don't like it. I swear my cooking is better than what you tried this afternoon. I make the best mutton stew you could ever dream of. So hearty with meat and thick with cream, you'll never feel hungry again."

Fades, my mouth was watering just thinking about it.

"And clothing. Wool is wonderful and warm. I'll have it spun and knitted into a sweater for you. And shirts. I'm friends with Nalina. She's the seamstress that one of your fellow warriors has been obsessed with, er. . . I mean, has been intrigued by."

I snorted. "You don't need to make excuses for Hendr. We all know he's been watching her."

She fidgeted. "Well. . . anyway. Nalina is very talented. She could make you amazing things and I'd pay. You need only ask, and I'll give you anything you want."

"You. . . can afford that?" I glanced down at her well-worn overcoat and seasoned boots.

"I can." Fades, her confidence was a vision. With her golden hair flared around her face and her blue eyes lit fierce, she looked as bold and beautiful as the sun in spring. "Anything you ask for would be nothing compared to the cost of losing my flock to Jophel."

"And your father will agree to this, sunshine?"

Her brows rose at the pet name, but she didn't reject it. "He'll have to. Or he'll lose

me. I'm not going to sit back and let him give our sheep away to a man who doesn't even care about them. I bet your weight in gold Jophel is only agreeing to lead the flock so he can get to me."

My chest went hot, and fury burned behind my eyes. "Get to you?"

She sucked in a hard breath. "Jophel has always wanted me to be his wife, and I've always turned him down."

I gritted my teeth against the sudden burning impulse to run to Oakwall Village and challenge this male.

My hand was pulled forward. Right into Susara's slap. Fades, she was so warm, and her hands were so soft and her rosemary sunshine smell was like nothing I'd ever dreamed. My throat felt choked as she stroked over my knuckles again, bumping the tip of her finger along each ridge.

It felt so blasted good my muscles relaxed.

"All you need to do is follow me around while I lead the sheep." Her fingers continued to caress my hand, and it was drawing me to distraction. "It won't be difficult, I promise. It doesn't even have to be every day. I'll make sure you get days off when you need them."

Literally, all she was asking was for me to follow her around and protect her in the woods. To stay by her side, breathe in her rosemary scent, and soak up her sunny smile.

Fades light, I'd do it for free. "I'll do it."

She sucked in a sharp breath and her eyes went as bright as the sky at dawn.

“Really? You really will, Caivid?”

I gulped hard and nodded.

The joy and relief I saw on her face made my whole body hum with pleasure.

And then she threw herself into my arms.

The hug was so tight around my neck. Her body pressed into my bare chest. It felt like I’d been wrapped up in perfect warmth. Engulfed by a shield of light so wonderful that every part of me relaxed. Every speck of my soul was lit and soothed at the same time. I melted into her embrace, soaking up her radiance.

It felt like I’d been drowning in deep, churning depths and she’d pulled me back into the sun.

She broke off the hug and my skin tingled. Her hands gripped my shoulders. “Meet me outside the village gates tomorrow morning. At first light. I’ll bring my father, and we’ll prove to him, and everyone, that the warrior orcs are honorable.”

Her words humbled me back to reality. This wasn’t just about my desire to be at her side, was it? It was bigger than that. This was about proving to her family, and her village, that I and my brethren were not the uncontrollable monsters her villagers believed us to be.

Fades, I owed her far more than just protection.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Caivid.” She released me and picked up her crook. “First thing. Right outside the gates of Oakwall.”

I stood, stunned at what had just transpired. She turned toward me and smiled.

I nodded. “Yes. I will be there.”

I felt that vow at the very base of my being.

I would protect her for as long as I still had breath in my lungs.

Without another word, she walked back into the dark forest. Into the night. Disappearing as if she’d never been here at all.

The woods went icy cold and my head pounded like a storm was brewing right behind my eyes. When she’d been with me, everything had felt warm and bright and now. . .

Fuck, what was I doing?

I barreled to my feet and ran after her.

Chapter Nine

Susara

I’d done it! I’d actually really done it!

My steps felt a little jerky and unstable as I made my way back to the road. My heart hammered and my palms were sweaty despite the chill.

But my mind was light with relief. Now, I just needed to get my heart to stop beating so hard.

It was done. Finished. I'd made the deal and Caivid had agreed and that was that. He would be my protector, and I would give him everything he wanted, and we would spend every waking moment together out in the woods.

Every moment.

I paused in my stride and pressed my hands to my heated cheeks. Fades, I was being silly. This was a business transaction. A way for me to keep my flock. It had nothing to do with how his smiles made my heart race, or how his voice made my stomach quiver, or how him calling me sunshine made my whole body thrum with bliss so strong it made me tremble.

The way he'd held me, so tender and warm, with the musky smell of him filling me up. . . I hadn't wanted him to let go.

"Susara!"

I jerked around just as Caivid burst out of the woods behind me. He stepped into the lantern's glow. His hair was tousled, and his cheeks were colored dark green. He swallowed hard, his throat flexing with the effort, and I followed the line down to his rippling abs.

Fades, he looked incredible.

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“Did you forget something?” My throat felt a little too constricted for my own good.

He opened his mouth and the color in his cheeks brightened. He stood there, mouth open, unable to find the right words.

I couldn’t help teasing. “Caivid, you have a nice tongue, but it’s not good for much unless you’re using it to speak.”

His mouth snapped shut and I could see something flash in his eyes, some dark thought he hesitated to share.

To my disappointment, he kept it to himself but rewarded me with a burst of bright laughter. “Fades, woman, you’re always catching me off guard.” His laughter was so cheerful it completely transformed his face. He looked younger and softer. One could almost forget he’d spent most of his life in battle.

I smiled at him helplessly. “Well, you’re going to have to get used to me. We’ll be around each other a lot with you as my protector.”

His expression softened and he let out a huff. “I think getting used to the sheep will be a more difficult task.”

My stomach flipped right over. “I promise that today’s event isn’t how things usually go. The worst you’ll have to deal with is listening to them shout at me about the quality of their grazing lands.”

“Do they shout at you often?” He gestured to the path and began to walk toward

Oakwall.

Was he walking me back? A nervous giddiness made my voice a little high. “Y-yes, quite often. They are ruled by their stomachs, so any disruption to their food will get them riled, but they also bleat for weather changes and if they’re nervous.”

“Do they warn if there is a predator near?” He kept a steady, slow pace that was easy for me to follow. His green eyes glowed in the darkness and the gentle light of my lantern illuminated his face. His jaw was chiseled, his gaze was soft, and his hair fell over his forehead. I had to resist pushing it back.

He just looked so. . .

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to answer his question. “Yes, they’d warn me, but any odd noise will get them going. More times than not, they’re in a tizzy over a squirrel.”

He chuckled and I couldn’t help but grin.

“It’s even worse during lambing season. When they have their babies at their side, they get paranoid about everything. A leaf will fall, and they’ll go to pieces.”

“Sounds difficult. How often do you breed them?”

“Only once a year. We don’t keep rams in our flock because it’s so small, and they tend to pick on the girls when they’re together for more than just breeding. There are three other shepherds in town, two with larger flocks, and we trade any male lambs to them. We’re in it for wool rather than meat and only keep enough mutton to last us through the year. Since it’s just my father and me, we can only handle so many. It’s a lot of work to shear and process the wool, but the ewes we’ve got have the best coats in town.”

Fades, I was rambling, wasn't I? I glanced up to find Caivid still watching fixedly. He was probably waiting for me to stop. I blushed deeply. "Sorry, I must be boring you with all this."

"No. You aren't."

He sounded so sincere. It had been so long since I'd had someone to talk about the herd with. "My father and I used to talk sheep all day long. From dawn until dusk and sometimes late into the night too. I suppose the obsession is passed down through our blood. You'll have to tell me if I'm talking about them too much. Or talking too much in general."

His eyes went wide and then he stopped in his stride, turned to face me head on. My heart thundered right up into my throat.

"Susara, I don't think I will ever tire of hearing your voice," he said with such vibrant sincerity that I could feel it all the way from the bottom of my heels to the top of my head. "It doesn't matter what you speak on, I will still want to hear it."

"You say that now," I said, even as the intensity of his gaze made me squirm and I was forced to look away. "But just wait, after a few seasons of following me around while I jabber about nothing but sheep, protecting me might become a real chore for you."

I felt warmth under my chin and my eyes went wide as Caivid brought my face up to meet his gaze again. His green eyes were so vibrant that I felt them hooking deep inside me, pulling me toward him.

Tethering me to him.

"I don't think it will, sunshine. But go ahead and try. I will enjoy every moment of

you trying to prove me wrong.”

Chapter Ten

Caivid

Susara’s cheeks had gone so bright they looked like flames in the light of her lantern, but the smile pulling at her lips told me she’d liked what I had to say. She was so beautiful when she smiled like that it made my whole body warm up.

I would do everything in my power to keep that smile on her face.

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“What do you use to sheer them?” I asked as we continued along the path. The scent of Oakwall was growing near and our time together was coming to an end. My mind quailed at the thought.

“Clippers.” She looked up at my quizzical expression and said, “Like scissors?”

She may as well have been making up words at this point.

“Warrior orcs don’t have scissors?” she asked, reading my expression so easily it was a marvel. “I know the conjurers use them for cutting things all the time.”

I held up my hands and my claws shot out from beneath my nails with a quietshlink. It was only after they had extended, long and sharp, that I realized what I’d done and rapidly tucked them back away. “Sorry.”

She tipped her head in a casual way. “I’m not frightened of your claws, Caivid. Though they are much bigger than conjurer orcs. Can I see them again?”

I swallowed and extended them once more, making sure to keep them far from her. The last thing I ever wanted was for her to feel afraid of me.

I shouldn’t have worried about it because she picked up my hand and brought my fingers into the lantern light so she could look at the deadly weapons more closely. I couldn’t count the number of times I’d used them to slash down a soldier of the Order.

“Having these is the whole reason I hired you on as my protector.” She stroked over

my knuckles again and the tender touch made me feel like I was melting right down into the ground. “And they could be useful for other things too. I bet you could even help shear the sheep with them, if they’re sharp enough.”

“They are as sharp as I file them to be.” I exhaled slowly, afraid that if I even twitched she would let go of my hand. “Would you show me how to shear the sheep?”

Her eyes brightened up again. “Of course. I’d be happy to have another set of hands. Or claws, rather.”

I grinned, feeling full in the knowledge that I could be even more useful to her.

“You don’t have to though,” she insisted, releasing me. “Protection is all I need from you, Caivid.”

“I don’t mind. I’d like to fill my time with something,” I said before glancing up into the tree canopy. The wind was whistling through the leaves and they rained down onto the path like gold and red snow. “I don’t have much else to do, now that my days at war are over.”

“It must be difficult.”

I blinked and looked down at the bright, beautiful woman at my side. With her sunshine and warmth, she seemed to fit right into the world around us. And here I was next to her, scar-covered and so comfortable with violence that I showed her my claws without a second thought.

Did I even have a right to stay near her?

“I just mean. . . it must be hard to go from constant fighting to endless peace,” she

said, shocking me to my core. “Even though it was a hard life, it was still the only one you knew. I think it’s normal to feel unsettled.”

“I . . . yes. . . that’s. . . true.” Fades, how was it that time and time again, this woman was able to read me?

“You think they’re perfect, don’t you?” She gestured to the forest surrounding us. “The Rove Woods, I mean. I used to think the exact same thing.”

I blinked rapidly. She did?

She took a deep breath. “This forest is absolute magic. Pristine and grand.” She chuckled and shook her head. “Isn’t it just so annoying?”

I let out a puff of laughter. “What?”

“It makes me feel so flawed by comparison.” She explained. “I used to always wonder, how can my imperfect self fit into this perfect place?”

Fades. . . “Yes. Exactly.”

She looked up at me with knowing eyes, and all my tension evaporated. “I used to try to be the perfect shepherdess. I would work myself to the bone trying to get every little thing right and I’d get so upset when I inevitably made a mistake. But not anymore.”

Not anymore? “What helped?”

Her expression softened, and then she picked up my hand again. Still walking. Still guiding me through this beautiful autumn forest, as she said. “My father’s brutal honesty. He sat me down and dashed my dreams. He told me I would never be the

perfect shepherdess I wanted to be. I was going to fail. I would lose sheep, sleep, pride, and even my dreams would fade away.”

“That’s harsh.” Fades, what kind of man was her father?

But she smiled up at me in a way that made me lose my breath. “He went on to say that new dreams would replace them. Every day, I would get better. Every morning, I would be a stronger version of myself. Every spring would bring new lambs and new growth. New excitement, joy, and heartache, too. He told me I needed to stop trying to be perfect and see the good in what I already had.”

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I tightened my grip on her hand and licked my lips. “But what if. . . what if the good comes, but you still feel horrors lurking around every bend? What if there’s constantly a storm on the horizon, waiting to swallow you whole?”

Her brows furrowed, and I fully expected her to tell me it would be fine. That I was here in these blissful woods now and no storms would ever reach this place.

And instead, she murmured, “There’s always going to be a storm, Caivid.”

An exhale escaped me, draining my lungs and emptying the tension from my body.

“It’s foolish to think that things will be wonderful forever.” She continued to stroke my hand. “But I can tell you one thing for certain: storms aren’t something to be feared. They are hard, sometimes brutal, but they always pass, and we’re stronger for every one that we survive. The changes they bring are more often than not for the better.”

She looked into my eyes and it felt like the blue of them was coloring my soul. I couldn’t look away from her. “I wish I could believe that. Every deep change I’ve experienced in my life has been brutal and stark. I’ve never experienced a ‘wonderful’ storm before.”

Warmth cupped my neck. A gentle touch that pulled me lower. Into Susara’s arms.

Fades her hug felt like perfection. I didn’t want to let her go.

“I’m sorry your life has been so hard, Caivid. But I promise, I’ll try to bring light into

it.”

I felt myself sag against her as every bit of tension I had evaporated away. The perfect woods around us absorbed it and left me quaking. “You already have, Susara. Everything you do is light and all I want to do is bask in you.”

She pulled back slightly so she could look into my eyes and search my face.

She must have seen something there because a smile touched her lips and she murmured, “Will you let me show you what a wonderful storm feels like?”

What did she mean? It didn’t matter. I nodded helplessly.

And then she leaned in and kissed me, right on the lips. Her perfect mouth covered mine and her rosemary scent made me dazed, and my world flooded with a raging wave so strong I knew I’d never fear the storms again.

Chapter Eleven

Susara

Fades, he tastedso good.

I slanted my mouth over his a little more firmly and licked at the seam of his mouth. He sucked in a shocked breath.

Was I going too fast? I hadn’t meant to startle him. He’d just seemed so lost and out of place.

I wanted to give him a place.

Beside me.

His lips parted, and I drowned in the taste of him. Warm and spicy. His tongue touched mine almost tentatively. Funny, I would never have thought such a huge, powerful male would be hesitant about kissing, and it made me melt for him. His tusks pressed into my cheeks, caged around me as if holding me captive.

He bent lower to get better access and brought his arms around my hips. His grip was tight as he hoisted me up into his arms.

I let out a little yip of laughter at the shock of being picked up so easily. “Fades, you’re strong.”

“Want to be put down?” he asked, even as his grip tightened around me. One hand at my back, the other under my knees.

I cupped his cheeks and pulled him in again. “Don’t you dare.”

He chuckled, and I swallowed up the sound. I could feel his laughter like radiant heat pooling in my stomach, thrumming between my legs. I clenched my thighs together and resisted the urge to squirm as his tongue stroked against my own.

“Fades.” I cursed against his lips. “Where did you learn to kiss?”

“I’m following you,” he managed, breathing hard.

I grinned. I couldn’t help it. “I guess that’s your life now, isn’t it? You’ll follow me everywhere, every day.”

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“I can think of nothing more I’d rather do,” he whispered. My whole body went lax and my heart felt so full it threatened to burst.

I leaned to kiss him again when he tensed slightly. “What was that?”

“What was what?” I glanced around the darkened woods but could see nothing. My lantern had fallen to the ground and the flame within was flickering like it was about to go out.

I was plunged into darkness, held captive by a predator, and I’d never felt so safe in my life.

“That!” Caivid said sharply. His hands became bands around me, and his pupils dilated. The glow of his eyes illuminated the tension on his face. “There are voices. Humans.”

I tipped my head to listen but couldn’t make out anything. “I don’t hear them.” Orcs had much better hearing than humans. “How close are we to Oakwall? Could you be hearing the village?”

“No. We aren’t that close.” He took a rapid step backward. Toward the dark woods. “I hear them. . . a whole group is coming up the path.”

There was panic in his glowing eyes. His body had gone tense. I could feel the prickle of his claws against my back.

“You can hear them? What are they saying?”

He didn't respond, only continued to stand tense and worried. "Something about hunting. About finding. . ." He froze, eyes widening.

"Finding what, Caivid?" Goosebumps were breaking out on my arms as I watched his mind work.

"We should get off the path," he said firmly. "Hide in the woods until the threat has passed."

"Until the threat has. . . Caivid, they're probably out hunting for an elk one of the night watch saw."

"They're getting close." Caivid's whole body was tense. His fangs were bared like he was about to fight anyone who came around the bend.

Alarm tightened in my throat and I reached up to cup his face in my hands. His eyes shot to mine for only a moment before returning to the path ahead. "Caivid, they're just humans from Oakwall. They don't mean any harm." Even as I said it, I knew it was stupid. He'd lived a lifetime of being hunted by humans.

And the people of Oakwallwerewary of the warriors.

My mind worked rapidly through my options. I could part ways with Caivid here and walk back on my own. Though it would be a bit dangerous. It was so dark now, and I'd have to make sure the hunters knew who I was long before they caught a glimpse of me, or they might think I was the animal they were hunting. It would be just my luck to be shot with an arrow.

"Fuck, we need to get off the path now." Caivid backed up a few steps. His eyes were far more frantic as he scanned the path ahead, and it made my heart jump into my throat.

“Why? What did you hear? Or see?”

His hands tightened around me, only to release again. Like he was about to set me down and bolt.

“Don’t you dare leave me here, Caivid.” I clung to his shirt. “My lantern is out. I can’t find my way back in the dark. You’re my protector.”

“I am.” His voice was a low rumble and his body was shaking against mine. “I would not leave you here, woman. You decide. Do we leave or stay?”

“Leave or stay?”

His eyes darted to the path again. Then I heard what he did. Low voices. Sharp, rumbling tones.

Growing closer.

I sucked in a hard breath, suddenly acutely aware of our position. Of me, a young woman, out in the woods late at night with Caivid, a huge warrior orc, clutching me in his arms, claws out, teeth bared.

They’d come around the bend and see us any moment now. And they would likely not wait for an explanation.

And he was on the precipice of giving in to his darker instincts.

“I know a quiet place we can go.” I stroked the hair back from his temple and he went completely still. “Somewhere you can calm down.”

He swallowed so hard that I could hear it.

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Then, without a word, he turned and carried me into the black woods.

Chapter Twelve

Caivid

Blast my instincts back to the Fades who'd made them.

My heart was hammering, and my claws curled, and my muscles constricted, ready for a bloody, brutal fight.

The words of those humans rang in my ears. "We'll catch him! Hunt him down! Gut him!"

"Caivid, are you all right?"

Susara's voice broke through the fog. "I just. . . need a moment."

She went quiet, but she was still stroking my hair, still caressing my hand clutched around her knees. Her calm assurance soaked into me and my rapid heart began to calm.

"I know a place we could go for a bit," she said after I'd taken a few deep breaths. "A little shelter my father and I built for summer camping."

"Shelter." My muscles released a little of their tension, but I kept a firm pace as we walked through the dense woods. The rumble of human voices was distant now. Far

behind and getting farther.

“It’s near some grazing land, close to where Midnight got stuck. Or. . . it used to be grazing land. It got flooded somehow. But the shelter is fine. It has a cover and some wool blankets inside. Some dried meat and fruit too. Extra provisions stashed away for emergencies.” Her voice was light with laughter. “We can relax there for a little while, while you get your teeth put away.”

She was teasing me? Now? Her humor could be light while my claws were out, and my teeth were bared and my body was tense to do battle?

“Caivid,” she soothed. “It’s going to be all right. The shelter isn’t very far. . . I think. I can describe the land markers to you as we go.”

Fuck, it was so dark out here. She couldn’t see like I could. She likely would not be able to find her way back alone. Did she realize the position she was in?

“You. . . really want to linger longer?” My voice was raspy. “With me?”

Her expression somehow softened more, and a smile played on her lips. She stroked my hair back, fingertip grazing the edge of my ear all the way to the point at the top.

“Yes, Caivid.” Her voice was warm and full in a way that made my chest hum with delight. “I want to linger with you.”

And just like that, my whole world shifted so forcefully I could feel it realigning in my mind. The brutal beast inside me was changed. My claws went back into my hands. My muscles relaxed.

I was no longer a warrior. I was now a protector.

Her protector.

“Caivid?” she whispered softly, and I leaned down to her, took her lips with mine.

She tasted exquisite. Like the finest mead and the heartiest meal. I wanted to satiate my hunger on her and nothing else for the rest of my life.

Her tongue delved into my mouth, and I followed her lead, drinking her up and following her down. Hot need burned in my chest and was made worse by her squirming in my arms like she was trying to get closer.

Her rosemary luster had become spicy, and every time I stroked her tongue with mine, the cloud of it grew thicker.

Fuck, I was going to lose my mind.

I broke off the kiss, panting and trembling and wanting her so badly I could hardly think.

“We. . . we need to get to the shelter.” She squirmed again.

She wanted me. There was no denying that. I could smell the desire all over her.

“Caivid?”

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“Yes,” I agreed, picking up the pace. She went quiet, but the scent of her arousal remained, and I could feel her heart beating hard in her chest.

She wanted me.

Me!

And I was going to have her.

Chapter Thirteen

Susara

Caivid made it to the shelter so quickly it was like he’d traveled there a million times already.

I couldn’t see the grazing land that was now a pond in the darkness, and I was glad for it. The shelter itself was just a bunch of sticks and downed logs piled on top of a few boulders, with a narrow opening at the front. From most sides, it would look like nothing more than a bramble bush, but inside, it was large enough for my father and me to sleep side by side.

My eyes had more or less adjusted to the darkness by the time Caivid set me down in front of the shelter, but the interior was so dark I couldn’t help feeling nervous. Usually, I would check each part of it with my crook to make sure no animals had bedded down before trying to enter.

Then it occurred to me. “We left my crook behind.”

Caivid was a dark, looming shadow next to me with only the glowing of his eyes to see by, and after that last kiss, I was having a hard time meeting them. Fades, he’d queued me up so strong and swift I still felt damp between my legs. My longing for him was thick in the back of my throat and my stomach quivered with want to yank him into the shelter and. . . and. . .

My cheeks were so hot they may as well be on fire.

“Would you like me to go back for it?” Caivid’s voice was a husky rumble. Wool and wails! Eventhatwas making me squirm. “Will the humans find it?”

My breath caught. “Oh. Perhaps they will. . .” They’d know immediately it was mine, too. “Maybe I should send a message to my father and the headman. If those villagers go back and report me missing, he’ll be so worried.”

Caivid nodded and whistled low into the night. I waited for the flapping of bird wings to sound. But there was nothing.

He whistled again, this time more sharply, and it was then that I remembered. “I tried this before. For somereason, the birds wouldn’t come here. It’s odd for them to ignore our calls, isn’t it? My father and I have sent messages to the headman from this shelter in the past.”

Caivid’s brow furrowed in confusion. “This. . . is an oddity I should report to Sythcol.”

Disappointment made me go cold. “I suppose we should go back then.”

Caivid was silent for a long moment before finally murmuring, “Do you want to go

back?”

I absolutely didn't want to go back. Not even in the slightest. What I wanted was for Caivid to kiss me again, to pull him into the shelter and forget anyone else in the world even existed.

A rumble sounded from deep in Caivid's chest. A warm, rich sound that made me gasp. "All right then, sunshine. How about we linger for just a few moments? Just long enough to . . . sate you."

To satiate me? "Are we really doing this?" My voice came out so breathless I could barely hear it. "We both know it's not a good idea for me to play conquest for you right now."

Caivid's eyes went soft in a way that made me melt. "Begetting you with child is the very last thing I have on my mind right now, sunshine."

It was? Disappointment hollowed out my chest. "Then what did all those kisses mean?"

I could hear the smile in his tone as he said, "I'm not going to get you pregnant, Susara, but that doesn't mean I don't have plans for you. Should you consent, of course."

Oh Fades, yes, I was consenting! "What exactly is your plan?" My voice was far too eager, but I couldn't help it.

He hummed under his breath. "You told me that my tongue was only good for speaking."

I blinked as he leaned down close to me. All the way until I could feel his hot breath

curling around my ear.

He whispered, “Let me prove to you it’s good for more than that.”

A full-body shiver coursed all the way through me and my pussy throbbed.

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Fades, how was it that just hearing him whisper could make my body melt like this?

“You can still say no, sunshine,” he said, and my toes curled. “I can still take you back to your crook. To your father. To your high walls, where you’ll be safe from all predators. Even me.”

My breath hitched at the sharp hint of worry that darkened his tone. I reached around his neck, gathering his cropped hair in my hands as I held him. Our noses were almost touching as I murmured, “I’m not going anywhere, Caivid. You’re the one who’s supposed to keep me safe now.”

His exhale was laced with pure relief, and then he chuckled. The warm sound tipped me on my axis and lit a fire in me until I burned.

“Then I will, sunshine, and I’ll protect and please you so that you’ll never want for any other protector for as long as you live.”

My breath caught in my throat. That should be too much, shouldn’t it? I’d just met him earlier that day. He was basically a stranger.

But as I took his hand in mine and rubbed my finger over his knuckles, I looked into his glowing green eyes, and I couldn’t help but think that this was where I was meant to be. Right here. With him.

I turned and crawled into the shelter, pulling him along behind me. The inside was so dark I couldn’t see a thing, but I trusted Caivid would tell me if he saw a threat. I found the blankets near the back and laid them out on the packed dirt floor. The

warmth they provided was decent, but it was nothing compared to the heat Caivid brought with him as he crawled inside.

“There’s a door made of moss there on the side.” My voice was shaky. “Keeps the heat in.”

“Good,” he murmured. “The last thing I want is for you to get cold.”

I doubted anything could make me chilled at this point. My pussy pulsed with heat.

He placed the door over the opening and all the light from the moon and stars was cut off completely. I could only see the glowing of his eyes now. He crawled toward me.

I reached out and stroked down his bare chest, outlining each of his abs.

He sucked in a breath. I could feel him trembling under my fingertips, and I didn’t think it had anything to do with the chilly ground. My mind reeled thinking about such a powerful male bending to my touch.

I leaned in to kiss him, and instead, he flopped down next to me. I only had time to blink with surprise before he gripped my hips and pulled me on top of him. My legs straddled his torso and my hands rested on his bare chest.

“The ground is too cold for you,” he murmured in the darkness and my heart skipped a beat.

Wool and wails! I could feel every trembling breath he took between my legs. My pussy clenched. I wanted to get closer to him, needed to get closer.

And my dress was getting in the way of that.

“I’m going to take this off.” I adjusted so I could start unbuttoning my dress.

His eyes went huge and his breath came out shaky.

Fades, he had a right to be shocked. I’d never been so wanton in my entire life. I’d had a few men in the past, but mostly because they pursued and I was curious. They’d always taken the lead.

I got the front of my thick, woolen gown open. The air was chilly on my overheated skin. My underdress was a thin cotton that did nothing to hide my body. The way Caivid’s eyes fixed on me with such longing made me squirm.

He hissed and gripped my hips tight to stop me. I could feel the swell of his cock, already hard, against my ass.

How big was he? Should I worry about it?

“Fuck, Susara.” His fingers stroked the curve of my hips. “You’re so gorgeous you make it hard to breathe.”

I chuckled. “You sure that isn’t because I’m sitting on your stomach.” I shifted my hips, purposefully moving back to rub his cock.

He let out a groan and his hold on my hips became so tight it was almost painful. “Careful, woman.”

My brows pinched. “I thought that was where we were going?”

He exhaled slowly as if trying to get his bearings.

“I’m going to use my tongue on you, Susara.” He growled low and shifted me further

up his body. I let out a yip as he had me straddle his chest, far away from his jutting cock. “We aren’t going to do anything withme.”

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Disappointment brewed hot behind my eyes. “Why? I’m not worried about you getting me pregnant on accident. I know orcs have to rut a woman twice in the same night to get her pregnant. Can’t we just stop after your first spill?”

“No.” I heard him swallow in the dark. “I can’t stop, Susara.”

I blinked my eyes wide. “You. . . can’t?”

“No. Never have been able to. After the first time I cum, the need to release my second spill is instant. I lose my mind with the need to finish the rut.”

“Oh!” Fades help me. The image of him out of his mind with lust for me, bucking and squirming and begging me for release, had my pussy clenching so hard it was almost painful.

He sucked in a long breath and his pupils dilated. “Susara, please. We can’t both be out of our minds.”

“Yes, we can. I’ll just make sure your first spill lands on the ground.” A wicked idea formed in my mind and I grinned. “Or maybe I should suck you off and swallow the chance.”

“What?” His fingers curled around my face and forced me to meet his eyes again. “What did you say?”

Fades, he looked half gone already. “Why so shocked? You said you wanted to use your tongue, so I may as well return the favor.”

“I don’t think you realize what you’re asking for.” Fades his voice was vibrant, alive. It pooled liquid heat in me so thick I could hardly swallow down my longing.

“I know exactly what I’m asking for, Caivid. I may not have had an orc before, but I’m not an innocent.” I trailed my finger down his cheek to the sharp point of his tusk. “And the women who have played conquest before like to talk.”

He let out a growl so low it vibrated from the soles of my feet all the way up to the top of my head. “My inability to control myself isn’t the only concern, Susara. I’m larger than most human males by twofold. My cock may not even fit inside you.”

Oh fuck. That should have worried me, but it didn’t. Instead, it made me ache with wanting to try.

“How much?”

His brows pinched in confusion. “How much what?”

“How much do I need to stretch to make you fit?” His grip on my hips loosened so I could move down his body. I stopped when I was straddling his knees. My eyes had adjusted to the dim light enough that I could make out the bulge at his groin. “Can I see?”

His breath halted, and for a moment, I wondered if he’d frozen stiff.

But then he gulped and nodded and began undoing the tie at his pants with fumbling, quivering fingers.

“Let me,” I said, brushing his hands away so I could undo the leather knots myself.

“Fuck, woman.” He groaned right into my ear and I could have sworn my blood was

catching fire. “Sobrave.”

“Not brave,” I said, looking back up into his eyes. “Desperate.”

His breath hitched.

I finally got his pants open. His cock fell out in an instant.

Wool and wails. It was so much bigger than I’d have guessed. Longer than my hand from wrist to fingertip. The head was dark green, and by far, the thickest part, and thick veins spiraled down the shaft. They pulsed with the beat of his heart.

I wondered if I would be able to feel them pulsing inside me.

He froze when I reached out and stroked him. It was soft and hot and I gripped the thickest part of the head, testing the size. I couldn’t quite fit my fingers around it. . .

“F-fuck,” he said through gritted teeth. “Susara, I. . .”

I stroked his cock again, and he stopped me instantly, his grip firm around my wrist.

“I-I’m sorry.” I looked up at the fire in his eyes and couldn’t decide if I should be terrified or excited.

He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed the center of my palm. His tusks dug gently into it, and I sucked in a hard breath as desperate need struck me. Hot, tingling, and pulsing.

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He opened his mouth and dragged his wicked tongue along my wrist. “Where would you like me to use my tongue first, sunshine?”

Fades, I couldn’t find my words.

“Hurry, or I’ll just do whatever is in my mind. I’ll try every devious, sordid thing that my brethren have spoken about. I’ll use my tongue, my teeth, my fingers, and I’ll wring you out until you beg for mercy.”

Oh,fuck,now I didn’t want to answer him!

His eyes held mine, searching and hopeful. When I still didn’t speak, he groaned. “Susara, you are supposed tostop me.”

“Never. I never will.”

“Fuck.” His fingers trailed up my arms, and I squirmed under the tickling touch. The tips of his claw scraped gently forward, along my collarbone, down to my breasts.

“You’re so beautiful.” His voice vibrated my chest, and I helplessly shivered while he teased my nipple beneath the thin cotton cloth with the pad of his thumb. “I need to get this off you. Let me.”

Without a second thought, I reached down and yanked the underdress up.

“Good girl.” His low voice pooled warmth in my stomach, lighting me up. His hands went to my bare hips and the feel of his hot skin against mine made my breath halt in

my throat. I froze in place with the dress still pooled around my chest. A whole-body shiver raged through me as he toyed at the waistband of my panties with the tip of his claw. “Now these too.”

“Just cut them.” My voice was a mere squeak of desperation, and he rumbled with laughter I could feel between my legs. My pussy tightened with want and I groaned helplessly.

“Fades, you are perfect, aren’t you?” He hooked his claw around the thin cloth and sliced it clean through. Then he met my eyes again and my heart jumped into my throat at the warmth and longing I saw there.

I still had my underdress gathered up around my chest and yanked it off so hard it may have ripped. And I didn’t care.

“Fuck.”

I looked down to find reverence flooding his face as he looked at my now nakedbody.

“You are perfection made real.” His hands were trembling against my sides. One went high, the other low, and the anticipation of his touch at my most intimate places made me pant.

The tip of his claw swirled around one of my nipples and I groaned as shivering pleasure danced through me. My back bowed, and I ground my pussy harder into his body.

“You’re so beautiful.” He groaned, and I helplessly shivered while he teased my nipple with the pad of his thumb. His other hand found my pussy, and he pushed a finger between my folds. His hand was so hot, and the digit twitched over my clit. Pleasure made me buck into him. He sucked in a sharp breath. “Fuck, Susara, you’re

so wet. I can smell the need on you. This isn't enough, is it?"

"No." I ground my pussy into his hand, wanting him deeper, needing to be filled. "I want more."

His eyes snapped to mine, and he whispered, "I'm not going to stop until I've wrung you out."

"Ooh, yes." His finger was so close to my entrance and yet he wouldn't delve into me. "Yes, Caivid. Please."

"No need to beg me, sunshine." His hands gripped tight around my waist and lifted me like I weighed no more than a sack of grain. My world tipped and my mind spun as he brought me up.

And sat me down with my legs straddling his neck.

"C-Caivid!" Wool and wails. This position was—I couldn't let him just—he could see everything.

And he looked. Fades, all my reservations fell away as his eyes softened with reverence. He sucked another long breath and his hands clenched around my ass.

"I want to taste you, Susara."

I was shivering and I couldn't find words, but he must have seen my approval in my face because his expression slacked and he pulled me forward the rest of the way.

His mouth was so hot against my sensitive skin it made all my muscles go weak. His tusks dug into me, pulling my pussy apart to make room for his . . . his . . . fuck.

His tongue rolled over me without preamble, starting from the entrance, which was clenching with need all the way up to my pulsing, desperate clit. He curled his tongue around it and shooting waves of pleasure crashed over me, so strongly I saw stars.

“C-Caivid.” My voice didn’t sound like my own, and he groaned loudly in response. I could feel that groanlike a vice of bliss in my stomach. It made me buck against him without thought.

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His tongue swirled around my clit again and my skin went shivery and hot at the same time. The pleasure was so great I felt weightless.

There was pressure against my entrance. Wet and slick and skewering deep. His tongue curled upward inside me. My rational mind winked out as I ground into him, wanting him deeper, harder. I needed more.

Instead, he retreated with another chuckle that sounded far more like a moan of bliss. “Fuck, Susara, you taste so good!” His finger thrust into me. Filling me. “So tight.”

I was, but it felt so good I bucked into him, taking his finger deeper. “I need more.”

He licked all the way back up to my clit, flattening his tongue over it as he curled his finger inside me. I thrust into him in frantic, mindless jerks. “That’s my good girl. You’re taking me so well.”

“More,” I begged as my body coiled.

He thrust another finger into me and probed with a third. I whimpered at the burning sensation even as my hips danced against him, trying to help him along.

“Relax.” He groaned against my pussy, and my channel clenched around his fingers. It felt so good. “Fuck, Susara, relax for me.”

I couldn’t, my body was too desperate. The pleasure was too much. My muscles were taut with the need for release.

He moaned, breath hot, teeth sharp against me. And then his lips formed a circle around my clit and hesucked.

My bodyignited. Pleasure roared, shivering down every limb as ecstasy burst in me. The shock of my sudden orgasm made me go slack just enough that Caivid's probing finger slipped inside me, the three digits curled up and stroked that hidden place that made my mind seize up.

The ecstasy drew out longer and harder than I'd ever felt before. My mind felt splintered as he continued to suck and lick and,Fades help me, my head went dizzy.

He pulled back slightly. "Breathe," he demanded, and I sucked air into my desperate lungs. "Breathe, that's it.Good girl."

Fuck, why did he have to say it like that? Every time he praised me, it felt like my bones were being etched with his voice.

I collapsed on top of him in a heap of gasps and shivers. His fingers slipped from me, and he pulled medown until my head was resting on his shoulder, in the crook of his neck. I could do nothing but tremble.

He showered my face with kisses. My forehead, my cheek. . . I went completely boneless, weightless. Fades, how could this powerful, ruthless orc be capable of wrecking my body with such pleasure and then relaxing me into a dreamlike state all within a few moments? I lost my breath all over again as my heart squeezed in my chest.

Caivid chuckled, bringing his hand up to gently scratch my scalp with his claws. Goosebumps broke out on my whole body. "Breathe,Susara. You keep forgetting."

"Your fault," I managed between gulps of air. "All your fault."

He hummed with pleasure and kissed me again. This time, his lips found my mouth. His tongue dueled with mine. I sat up to get better access.

My leg brushed his cock, and he broke off the kiss with a low hiss. I looked down and found his shaft was throbbing with need. My body felt sated and weightless from the groundbreaking release, but I could think of one thing that might queue me back up.

“It’s your turn,” I said, and with that, I began to kiss down his body.

Chapter Fourteen

Caivid

My every muscle was still buzzing from the mind-altering pleasure of having her collapse with ecstasy on top of me and then she began to caress her lips along my chest, down each one of my abs.

Her kisses felt like a brand. It burned me right through to the center of myself. I caged the sensation inside me, hoping I would never forget.

Her eyes lifted to mine and her sweet, deadly grin made my world turn on end.

And then her fingers wrapped around my cock.

“You’re so big, Caivid,” she said softly. “So hard. Let’s release a little of that tension.”

Oh, Fades help me. She dipped her head down low. Her lips parted.

And she took the tip of my aching cock into her mouth.

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The pleasure was searing. Waves of mind-melting paradise crashed over me with every swirl of her tongue.

I'd never imagined anything could be this good, and I never wanted to let it go. Never wanted to let her go.

Susara.

She was mine.

Her hands came down to stroke my shaft at the same time, and all my thoughts were gone. I could only feel as her fingers stroked and squeezed and the tension in my gut grew tighter. The need grew stronger. The ecstasy mounted.

"Susara! I'm—"

"Come for me, Caivid." Her voice was so low and sweet it changed something in my brain.

I fell instantly over the edge, hurtled into a blinding orgasm. Pleasure rippled down every limb and my mind melted with ecstasy as she continued to suck and lick and—

Fuck! She raked her tongue over the head and my eyes crossed at the sensation. They cleared just long enough to see her swallow.

Her tongue dipped down for another long lap.

And I came again. My mind fractured and my body wrung itself completely dry against her willing, perfect mouth. I felt her gasp with surprise, chuckle with shock. I could feel everything against my shaft as she continued to torture me with long, smooth laps.

The ecstasy began to fall away, and I reached down to grip her hair. To stop her. To stop myself. I had nothing left to give, and she'd already drunk so much of me.

Fades, she was a beautiful sight, her lips sopping, her chin dripping, and her eyes dancing with bliss. Like she'd just been given life-altering pleasure and not the other way around.

"You do come quick the second time, don't you?" Her voice was as smooth as butter, like a balm soothing my burning need.

I couldn't find my voice to apologize.

But then she crawled up my body and nestled in the crook of my arm. The feel of her against me was so right, like pieces falling into place, like my body had been made to cradle hers.

Just her.

Susara.

My sunshine.

"Next time," she murmured against my chest, "let's see if you can hold out long enough to get inside me."

Ah fuck.

Next time.

I could hardly wait.

Her beautiful blue eyes searched my face, and I felt like I was drowning in them. “Have I left you speechless?”

I nodded. She absolutely had.

She quirked a half smile and then started to get up. Maybe to get her dress or adjust the door, which had fallen askew. Maybe to leave and go back to her home behind those high walls.

I couldn't let her.

My breath caught as I held her against my chest. “Wait.” Fades, my voice didn't even sound like my own. “Just. . . wait a moment.”

“All right.” She nestled back down against my chest. Her hair tickled my cheek and her fingers came up to splay against my pecs. They stroked one of my scars so gently it felt like a dream.

Except that it couldn't be, because I'd never known such tenderness could ever exist, not even in my fantasies. Even in my wildest delusions, I could not have fathomed someone as radiant and warm as she was.

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I never wanted to leave her side again.

But. . . did she feel the same?

“What are you thinking?” She took my hand in hers and ran her fingers over my knuckles. The action felt so familiar and comforting to me now. “You look very serious.”

The concern in her tone helped me find my voice. “Am I. . . still your protector?” I inhaled as much courage as I could muster. “Your protector . . . and nothing more?”

She blinked wide as her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink. “Are you asking me to play conquest for you? Because I will, Caivid, I just really need to wait until at least spring—”

“No.” I cut her off swiftly. “No, I don’t want your womb, or your wool, or your mutton. I. . .” Ah, Fades, blast it all. There was no use beating around it.

I looked into her sky-blue eyes and said, “I want you, Susara.”

Her breath hitched, but she didn’t look away. Didn’t even blink.

“I just want you. Only you.” My throat was dry, but I continued. “Basking in your rosemary scent, in your bright sunshine, that’s all I want.”

Her breath continued to hold at the back of her throat.

I swallowed so hard it was nearly painful. “I plan to give you myself as well. Not just my protection but every part of me. I’ll completely devote myself to you, if you let me.”

Her jaw slacked and her eyes widened, and her cheeks went the prettiest pink I’d ever seen. “Caivid, I . . . I don’t know what to say.”

Fuck, had I gone too fast for her? “You don’t have to say anything. This is my vow to you, Susara. This is simply my assurance that no matter what comes, even if everything is lost and you have no boons left to offer, I will still remain at your side. Being with you is the only reward I require.”

Her blue eyes were so wide I could see myself in them. I held my breath.

And finally, finally, she exhaled out her tension. Her body relaxed and her expression melted into happiness so bright it almost hurt to look at her. But I couldn’t look away.

“Well. . .” she murmured so warmly it felt like spring, “who could say no to that?”

I exhaled my own tension.

“I still intend to feed you though, Caivid. And clothe you. And share my fires with you. And teach you the ways of the sheep when you want it.” She stroked my hair out of my face and her touch was so gentle it made my muscles go limp. “You deserve that. Not just for protecting me.” She fingered a scar on my temple that was half hidden by my hair. “After all you’ve been through in your life, you deserve to have a little tenderness, and I plan to give it to you.”

My breath left me in a rush as my body warmed. My mind calmed and my muscles loosened, and I pulled her down into my arms, tucking her into my chest, desperate to taste her lips and seal her offer with a kiss.

She met me readily, deepening the kiss without hesitation. I felt like I was drowning in her. Losing myself in her bright, warm sky.

When we broke apart, she remained in my arms, cuddled against my chest, with her forehead tucked into my neck. Her scent was all around me and her warmth soaked into my marrow.

For the first time in my life, there were no storms.

Chapter Fifteen

Susara

I could feel a change in Caivid as soon as I cuddled in closer to him. He melted into me, relaxed completely, pressed his nose to the top of my head, and sucked in such a deep breath it felt like he was trying to breathe in my soul.

What was even stranger was that I wanted him to. And not just because of the mind-blowing, life-altering orgasm he'd just given me or for the protection he'd promised me.

I knew we shouldn't linger here, knew I should get back to Oakwall. Back to my father. Back to worrying about my flock and wondering what tomorrow would bring.

But those troubles seemed far away as I lay here in Caivid's arms. I was able to breathe. To think clearly. His strength and calm relaxed me.

I was asleep before I realized I was even falling.

It was the best sleep I could remember. Deeper than any other I'd had, and when I awoke, I felt so refreshed I could hardly believe my eyes when I looked around the

shelter, dimly lit by the rising sun. The scent of frost was in the air, but my cloak was placed on my back and. . .

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And Caivid was warm under me. I'd slept directly on his chest.

"Good morning," he said, far too casually for someone who'd had a person crushing him all night.

"I'm so sorry." I sat up away from him. The chill prickled my skin, and only then did I realize I was still naked.

Caivid groaned softly, his eyes fixed on my body, and my breath hitched.

Fades, I should have been embarrassed, but the way his eyes lit and melted at the sight of me made my heart skip right over itself. He looked like something out of my wildest dreams. His green skin was beautiful in the predawn light. His abs were shadowed, accentuating each one. The memory of his hips rolling under me, of the pleasure he'd worked from my body. . .

Fades, it was making me squirm.

His hands trailed down my sides and my skin broke out in goosebumps. "You smell so Fades-blasted good, sunshine. You want me again, don't you?"

"Yes." I saw no reason to lie to him. "Yes, I do."

He hummed under his breath and then he cupped the back of my head, brought me down to him. His tongue delved inside to duel with mine, stoking a fire in me that quickly became a raging inferno. I wanted more. Needed more.

He cupped his hands under my ass and hoisted me up, but I resisted him. I had a plan for this, but I needed his permission first. “Wait. Before I lose my head. . . I want to try to get you inside me this time. Will you let me?”

His eyes went huge. “That’s. . . risky.”

“I know.” I took a deep breath. “I know it is, but I’m willing to take the risk to have all of you.”

He sucked in a hard breath and then raked a hand over his face. “Fuck, Susara. You make me crazy.”

I squirmed as he spread my legs wider.

“I need to ready you.” He cupped my ass and brought me up around his face again. I shivered at the intimate positioning. Fuck, it was even more intense now that there was enough light to see by.

The shivers turned into a groan as Caivid delved in, swirling his tongue around my clit.

Pleasure burst behind my eyes and my pussy clenched as if trying to find something to fill it. He didn’t make me wait long. Caivid pushed a finger into me, curled it upward into that spot that made my skin go shivery and hot. His lips formed a tight circle around my clit as he sucked, flicking it with his tongue. My hips bounced and my nipples beaded, and the pleasure was so much I couldn’t think straight.

“Come for me,” he groaned. “Lose yourself to pleasure, sunshine.”

His words brought me back to reality and it dawned on me he was trying to get me distracted. Trying to make me lose myself so I’d forget all about my plan.

I used my slight irritation to help hold back the ecstasy. “Fill me more, Caivid.”

He groaned and, blast it all, the hum of it felt so good against my pussy and the feel of his second finger stretching me open made my skin go all hot and shivery. I was right on the edge of an orgasm and it took every drop of concentration I had not to come right then and there.

But I wasn't ready. Caivid's shaft was huge. “I need more, Caivid. Another finger.”

He sucked in a sharp breath and the cold air helped to cool my blood as he worked a third finger into me. I was so wet and wanton there was barely a pinch. I bounced my hips on his hand, readying myself. It felt so good I could see stars behind my eyes.

“That's it.” His fingers thrust hard under me. “You're so perfect, Susara. You're so hot and wet. Come for me. Now.”

Fades I wanted to. I wanted it more than almost anything.

But not more than having him.

I reached down and pushed his hand away. He released me with a pop and his eyes went wide with surprise. I shuddered as my pussy clenched at the loss.

But it would be worth it.

“Now,” I crawled down his body. “It's your turn.”

Chapter Sixteen

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Caivid

My eyes flew wide as she lined her pussy up with my cock. “Susara, careful.”

“Just trust me, Caivid,” she said, continuing to move back until my cock was in front of her. My brow furrowed in confusion.

And then she shifted until my shaft was nestled firmly between the slick lips of her pussy.

All my breath was gone in an instant and my hips bucked helplessly. The head of my cock slid through her damp folds and hit her soft stomach right below her belly button.

She groaned softly. “That’s it.” Her hand cupped around the other side of my shaft, and she bucked her hipsto thrust against my cock again. Her eyes fluttered as the head grazed along her clit, grinding into her.

Oh,fuck.“Susara.”I groaned helplessly as she continued to work my cock against her clit. Her pussy was so hot, and her body trembled all around me. “Good girl. Buck those sweet hips. Come for me, woman.” I felt choked from the bliss of watching her.

Her eyes fluttered closed, her hand gripped tighter, and her body tensed up again. Rippling and bucking and using me for her pleasure.

I couldn’t take it.

I shot my hand down to hold the head of my cock as I hurtled into an orgasm. I kept the head as far away from her channel as I could, even as my body roared and bucked and demanded I thrust deep into her to feel her hot, tight pussy engulfing me.

The need for another spill gnawed at me and I squirmed beneath her, aching and desperate for a scrap of control.

She pushed my hand away from my cock and replaced it with the towel. The feel of the rough cloth against my sensitive shaft was maddening, but then it was gone.

And then she poised the head of my cock at her entrance.

She pressed down hard.

Everything around me went deliciously vibrant as her tight channel enclosed around the head of my cock. The grip was so tight I couldn't catch my breath, so wet and slick she took me almost effortlessly.

Fuck, fuck. I'd never felt anything like it. Hot and so fucking tight. I could feel her channel pulsing around me with every frantic beat of her heart.

My need to spill burned in the back of my throat like hot magma and I couldn't catch my breath. But I'd allow myself to combust before I came first.

"Oh fuck." She groaned, and it sounded like music. She touched the middle of my chest and I barely felt it beyond the pleasure roaring through me. I gripped her hips tight and squirmed in desperate, pleading circles.

My cock was only halfway in. I needed more.

"Ooh." Her groan was literal perfection. "Oh, fuck, Caivid. That feels good. Just like

that.”

Her praise made me daft, made my blood sing. I pressed down on her hips more firmly, shifting my own back and forth as her body slowly gave.

It wasn't fast enough. My release was right there! Right on the edge. I couldn't hold it.

I brought my thumbs forward to splay against her little pulsing clit and stroked it, massaging and swirling, and her pussy began to flutter around me as she let out a deep, guttural cry.

Fuck! She was coming on me and I could feel every mind-bending pulse.

I plunged into an orgasm so powerful I could feel it altering me to the core. The ecstasy was unreal, and I roared so loud it threatened to bring down the tree.

Susara collapsed on top of me as my bliss held me firm in its vice grip. The feel of her perfect body pressed into my chest, hot and damp and squirming from the aftershocks of her own orgasm. . . fuck, I was lost.

“A-are you all right?” I managed on a gasp. “Susara. Are you. . .?”

She leaned up slightly with pinched brows and the softest eyes I'd ever seen. I felt bathed in the adoration and affection she conveyed in her gaze.

Fades, I'd never felt like this before. So warm and bright. Like every pain and hurt in the world couldn't touch me. Like nothing else mattered but her.

She leaned down to kiss me. A slow, lazy kiss that was so sweet it made my eyes prickle and my limbs go boneless. When she broke it, she rested her cheek right next to mine, and I was fully surrounded by her.

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Nothing had ever felt so good. I never wanted it to end.

Susara stirred slightly and murmured, “That was amazing.”

“Yes.” I nuzzled her cheek and neck. “You’re perfect.”

She laughed. “If I am, then so are you.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in her sweet rosemary scent. Basked in her warmth. This was where I wanted to be for the rest of my life. Right here.

With her.

“Goodness, I’m lying on top of you again.”

She said that like it was a bad thing.

“I should get up or at least move to the side.”

I tightened my hold on her. “Don’t you dare.”

She looked up at me with a face that mirrored contrition. “I’m sure you didn’t sleep well with my weight preventing you from taking a deep breath—”

“Susara.”

She blinked at me with those perfect, bright eyes, and it felt like she was chasing

away every cloud that marred the sky. “Y-yes?”

“I want to sleep like this, with you, for the remainder of my days.”

Chapter Seventeen

Susara

My breath caught in my throat and my cheeks went hot, and all of a sudden, my body was ignited again, even as his cock was still inside me. I squirmed against him.

He hissed and pulled me up further. His cock popped free from me, and I lamented at the loss. “Careful, woman or I’ll take you again.”

His voice was so warm and rich. I wanted him to rumble words into my ear until I’d turned to jelly. “I wouldn’t mind that.”

He groaned low in his throat. “You are insatiable, woman.”

“Yes, I am.” I stroked my fingers down his chest. “You don’t like it?”

“Oh, I like it,” he said low and sweet. “I just need a little time to refill. But the sun has only begun to rise. We have the whole day ahead.”

Sunrise?

I looked up, remembering where we were and what we were doing. The shelter was illuminated dimly by sunlight.

I gasped and sprang up away from him. The chilly morning air made my panic worse. “Oh no! Caivid, it’s morning. My father is going to be worried sick! We have to go

back. Right now.”

His eyes widened as if he'd only just realized. “Fuck, yes. Let me help you.”

I was so glad he didn't argue or make parting from him harder. He was dressed almost instantly, with only a pair of leather slacks. Then he turned to help me.

The feel of his hands on my body as they helped smooth down my underdress in the small space eased away the sharp edge of my panic. The way he brushed back my hair and how his fingertips lingered on my neck allowed me to take a deep breath.

I felt like I was melting into a hot pool of contentment, even as my heart wasthundering with the thrill.

I get to spend every day out here guiding my sheep with him.

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He pulled my thick wool overdress over my head with a furrowed brow and arranged the creases as I shoved my arms through the sleeves. His look of concentration was adorable like he wanted to get it just right, and my heart swelled.

He met my gaze and any worry he held in his eyes dimmed as he looked at me. It was a wonder that such a powerful and dangerous male could look so soft. So open.

So loving.

Fades, I hoped. . . my eyes fell to his lips.

He rumbled a pleased moan and cupped the back of my neck with his huge, warm hand. He pulled me down for a kiss that curled my toes and made me melt. His lips were so soft but relentless.

And then he froze, jerked back.

My stomach flipped in shock. “What is it?”

“I heard Brovdir.”

“The warrior chief?” I asked as he hurriedly guided me out of the shelter. “Where is he?”

“Far off.” Caivid tipped his head and closed his eyes to concentrate. I stood still and quiet, trying not to breathe too loud.

“Fuck,” he said sharply. “Something’s. . . happened. He’s looking for us. Why didn’t he send a bird. . .?” Realization struck across his features.

I touched my fingers to my lips. “Oh no. The birds can’t reach us here, can they?” I glanced at the sky. It was still early dawn. “If my father woke early and found me gone, he’ll be worried sick. I need to get home.”

“I’ll take you,” he said, only to flinch and then glance in the direction of where his chief was calling. “Fuck. He’s brutally mad.”

Alarm burned in my chest. “Will he hurt you?”

He exhaled sharply and looked away. “Not if I go to him now and try to placate.”

“Then. . .” My chest felt heavy. “Then I guess this is where we part ways.”

Before I could say another word, Caivid had stepped close. He loomed over me and the warmth of him soaked through my gown. “I will not allow you to walk back alone.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Caivid, I walk alone in these woods all the time.”

“Not anymore,” he said so fiercely I could hear the crackle of fire in his tone. “I’m your protector now. I won’t allow you to be unguarded again.”

My cheeks heated at how delighted his words made me. “But I don’t want you to get in any more trouble than you already are. I guess we only have one choice. I’m coming with you.”

His brows shot up.

“I can send a message to my father as soon as we’re in an area where birds can be called. And then you can walk me back to Oakwall after you’ve checked in with your chief.” I tapped my chin. “Or I suppose someone else could do it if your chief disapproves. What if. . . Caivid, do you need to ask him before you become my protector?”

“No.” His voice was sharp. “If he tries to deny me, I’ll challenge him.”

“Challenge?”

“Fight.”

I huffed out a nervous laugh. “Don’t do that.”

His eyes softened slightly, and he leaned in close again, looming over me in a way that made me feel shielded from everything around us. Not even the chill in the wind could touch me.

“I would do anything to keep you with me, sunshine. Never doubt my devotion to you.”

Oh, Fades, my heart felt like it was going to burst from beating so hard.

He grinned as if he knew exactly what he’d done, and his eyes dipped to my mouth. My lips parted in preparation for his kiss.

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But then he jerked away, and his eyes snapped back in the direction his chief was calling. “We have to go.”

“Carry me?” I reached up to him. “It will be faster, I think.”

He hummed with delight and lifted me into his arms. Fades, it felt good to be carried by him. To submit to his embrace. To give in and let him take care of me.

The morning light was beautiful as the sun crested over the distant hills. It bathed the red and gold trees in bright light, making them glow. I breathed deep, this moment felt like magic. Carried by Caivid. Content. Safe. I snuggled in closer to him as we made it to the path. I should call a bird now.

Maybe just a few more moments.

Caivid let out a happy little huff as I relaxed against him. He started walking toward Rove Wood Clan. After a few moments, his brow furrowed. “Chief Brovdir is with some of your villagers.”

“Some?” I asked as his expression went tense with concern.

“We should hurry.” He picked up the pace.

The breeze stung my cheeks. We rounded a bend and—

And a fullmobof villagers was waiting.

Caivid halted so fast the world was a blur for a moment, and then we all stared at each other in shock.

Wool and wails! They had pitchforks and scythes and knives. Their faces were contorted with shock and rage.

“There she is!” someone cried.

“He’s got her!”

“Gut him.”

They bolted toward us with such speed and fury it made panic rise in my throat. Caivid backed up a few rapid steps, ready to bolt.

“Stop!” I finally found my voice. “Stop! What are you doing?”

But they didn’t stop! If anything, they started moving faster.

Thundering footsteps sounded and Caivid set me down so fast the world around me spun. I could hardly get my bearings.

A crack sounded so sharp I scrambled away, feet sliding on the muddy ground. My arms were caught in a tight embrace, and the familiar smell of mutton stew followed.

My father was holding me.

“Susara, my daughter, thank Fades!” he cried.

What was going on? I looked back toward Caivid and saw Chief Brovdir, with his massive body and his deadly-looking scars, hauling Caivid up off the ground and

holding his arms tight around his back.

Caivid's face was colored up dark and his right eye looked swollen.

Chief Brovdir had slugged him in the face.

“Don't hurt him!” Panic squeezed my throat. The mob was all hollering and raging so loud I could hardly hear my own voice. “Caivid didn't do anything wrong!”

“Susara, what are you saying?” My father gripped me tight. His terrified eyes pleaded with me and my heart squeezed.

What had happened while I was gone? “Father, why are you here? You shouldn't have come all this way in the cold! Your joints are going to swell again.”

“You're all right? You aren't hurt?” he asked, running his slender hands over me.

Before I could respond, someone bellowed over the chaos.

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“Calm down!Calm down!” The familiar voice of my headman made me want to collapse with relief, even as I saw how tense his usually jovial face had gone. “Susara, thank Fades, you’re all right.”

Father squeezed my arm again, and I took his hand. “I’m just fine, Father. Truly. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

He looked like he was about to collapse. He was so pale and shaky. There was a boulder nearby, and I took his arm. “Here, let me help you sit down.”

“Find Chief Sythcol and his conjurers! Tell them she’s found.” Chief Brovdir’s voice was ragged and sharp as he ordered two warrior orcs I hadn’t even noticed. There were a few conjurers as well, standing back from the crowd. “Fuck, Caivid, we’ve been looking half the night. Where did you go that Chief Sythcol’s magiccould not reach?”

“We were just in the woods,” Caivid said as the orcs ran off to do Chief Brovdir’s bidding. “Near Susara’s pasture that was flooded out recently.”

Chief Brovdir’s eyes widened. “Did you say aflood? Was it growing larger?”

Before either of us could respond to that odd question, one of the villagers cried. “You stole her!”

“We demand justice!”

“Silence!” Headman Gerald’s voice echoed off the trees. “Susara issafe!She’s well.

It's over! You must yield!"

But his words only made the group angrier.

"We will never yield." Waston stepped forward, her dark eyes peering at me as she spoke with such vigor that it felt like ice had formed in my veins. "Not until this male is gutted for what he did! Every warrior here should be punished for his horrible crimes!"

Chapter Eighteen

Caivid

"Be calm," Brovdir hissed into my ear. "Fighting will only make this worse."

I took deep breaths and tried to follow his orders. My cheek stung from where he'd hit me, but I could tell he hadn't put even half of his force into it. The punch had only been for show.

The group of villagers was fifteen strong. Their weapons were drawn, if you could call pitchforks and grain cutters weapons, and their eyes glared daggers right through my chest. They whispered threats behind their hands so loudly I knew they must have meant for me to hear them.

But Susara was fine. She was helping her father to a log. A few of the calmer humans had gone over to check on her. To help her. Only three. And after she reassured them, they returned to the group. Went back to their anger.

The mob wasn't after her.

They wanted me.

“Waston, be calm.” The village headman’s tone was laced with exhaustion. At least he was being reasonable. He was a tall but plump man with a kind expression that was not mirrored in the faces of the other humans.

“Why should she be calm?” one of the men raged. His black hair was greasy and his dark eyes lingered on Susara far longer than I thought necessary. My fists balled. “One of our women was stolen from her bed.”

“Stolen from my bed?” Susara’s incredulous tone was obvious even as she helped her father to settle on a nearby boulder. “What are you talking about, Jophel?”

Jophel.

The male who wanted her.

I gritted my teeth, and my claws threatened to unsheathe.

“You see!” Jophel shouted. “She is so distraught by what she’s gone through she doesn’t even recall what happened to her!”

“That’s right!” the elder woman called Waston said. Her voice was so high and shrill one could hear it echoing in the trees. “Her mind is so clouded by fear that she cannot think straight!”

“I’m thinking just fine,” Susara said. “And I have no idea what any of you are talking about. Jophel, give me back my crook.”

“Why did you let go of it in the first place?” Jophel’s voice was low and his grip tightened on the crook. His beady eyes narrowed on her before they flashed to me. “What could have caused you such terror as to leave it behind?”

“I didn’t leave it behind in terror, Jophel.” She put her hands on her hips but seemed unwilling to go anywhere near him, which was good because I was close to beating this vile male to a bloody, useless pulp.

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“Then why did you?” He approached her, using the crook like a walking stick. He clearly did not intend to give it back. Susara held her ground. I tensed, readying to break from Brovdir’s grip the moment he threatened her.

“Caivid,stop,” Brovdir hissed into my ear.

Susara’s face went red as she remembered the true reason she’d left her crook, and she began to stammer. “Well,that’s. . . there wasn’t really. I mean. . . it doesn’t matterwhy?”

You could almost taste the confusion as murmurs rolled through the group.

“It doesn’tmatter? We’ve been hunting for you half the night!” Jophel raged. “Since your poor father discovered your roomransacked.”

“Ransacked?” She looked from him back to her father, who grabbed her hand as he trembled on the boulder. His movements looked painfully stiff. “My room wasn’t ransacked.”

“It was,” her father said thinly as Susara blinked in shock. “When I saw it. . . you have no idea how I feared for you, Susara. You’re really well? Truly?”

“Yes, Father, I’mjust fine.” She patted his hand again. “This is all a misunderstanding.”

“You don’t need to lie for this male, Susara. You are safe now!” Waston held open her arms as if she expected Susara to run into them for comfort.

“I was safe before. That’s the whole reason I went to Caivid. To make a deal with him for protection.” She looked back to her father as she explained. “You thought I wasn’t safe in the woods alone. Well, I’m not going to be alone anymore. Caivid has agreed to be my protector.”

“You what?” Chief Brovdir growled next to my ear and, Fades blast me, I guess I should have gotten his permission before vowing such a thing.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Jophel raged, getting far too close to her again. “The flock is mine!”

“It isn’t yours, Jophel.” She puffed up her chest. “And it never will be. I can’t believe you thought I would just let you have it without a fight.”

“And your fight is to get that horrible monster to protect you? How can you trust it? It’s no human.”

I almost chuckled at how familiar his words were, but the humor died in my throat as both Susara and Headman Gerald gasped with horror. Even some of the humans in the crowd were gaping at the greasy man like he’d just told them he laughed at crying babies.

“How dare you, Jophel!” Headman Gerald said. “You know better than to speak such horrible things about our allies at Rove Wood Clan.”

“These warrior brutes are not our allies!” Jophel snapped.

“He’s right,” Waston said over the rumbling of the crowd. “All they want is to sire sons off our women, and apparently, they are willing to use force to do it!”

“I told you I went to Caivid on my own!”

“Child, you’ve been through a horror. You don’t know what happened to you!”

“Enough!” Headman Gereld bellowed so loud I could feel the ground shaking beneath my feet. It was a wonder that a human male could have such volume. “These warriors are the allies of the conjurer orcs, and therefore, we will be open to them. Or do you want to ruin the peace between our communities? Do you want us to starve this winter? Because that is where your distrust and cruelty will lead.”

To my surprise, most of the humans in the crowd bowed their heads and conceded to their headman’s judgment.

“Susara.” Headman Gerald turned back to my woman, who was holding her head high. “So, this was all a misunderstanding? You sought out this orc for aid?”

“Yes,” Susara said. “He’s agreed to protect me in exchange for mutton and wool.”

Her father blinked in shock and looked from me to her. I gave him a nod of assurance and his eyes went even wider.

“For mutton and wool?” Jophel spat. “You can’t be serious. These warriors only want one thing and it’s not sheep.”

“That’s right,” Waston said with a firm nod. “The moment he has you alone, he’s going to defile you!”

Susara opened her mouth to deny the woman, only to have her cheeks go bright as she realized I’d basically done just that.

I went cold. Fuck, was I as horrible a beast as they said I was?

Before I could question my own morals further, Susara caught my gaze and smiled. I

exhaled out my tension and breathed her rosemary scent deep into my lungs.

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I may have defiled her, but she'd wanted every moment of it. She'd been even more eager than I was.

Waston let out a gasp and Jophel cursed loudly, and even Susara's father looked pale.

Fuck. Had the glance we'd shared been so potent?

"You heinous monster. You've ruined her, haven't you?" Waston screamed. "You've defiled her! Don't you deny it."

Apparently, it had.

Susara looked smug until her father gripped her arm and pulled her to his side. "Susara, is that true?"

She sputtered, unable to get out a solid word.

To my surprise, Jophel spoke out for her. "Don't speak such heinous lies about the woman I plan to, er, a woman of our village! Of course, she's never. . . never. . ."

I watched as the realization crossed the man's face as he looked at Susara's disheveled hair and clothes. At her bright cheeks and her swollen lips.

"You have!" he raged, storming toward her. "You stupid wench. What have you done?"

Her father instantly yanked her back behind him and got to his feet, even as his face

was contorted with pain. Jophel looked as if he was about to attack them both.

I instantly saw red. My claws shot out, fists balled. The world narrowed to a pinprick, and only the vile, disgusting man who'd insulted my woman remained.

“Stop!”

“Grab him!”

“Fuck, Caivid, calm down!”

My arms were yanked back by Brovdir's strong grip, and I fought against him, blind to everything but protecting Susara.

Then the headman came out of nowhere, gripped the back of Jophel's shirt, and yanked him back so hard his ass bounced against the ground as he hit it.

“Jophel, restrain yourself!” The headman's roar silenced the entire crowd. Jophel remained on the ground, too stunned to speak.

But there was one person who wasn't too stunned.

“Oh, you see!” Waston cried. “You all see what kind of horrible monster he is! He was going to attack poor Jophel!”

“Jophel was about to attack me!”

Waston rounded on me next. “You've ruined her! You've taken advantage of her dire situation and used her! No man or beast will ever want to touch her now!”

If anything, her words calmed me, and I stopped struggling against Brovdir's hold.

Did she think I wanted my woman to be touched by another male?

My woman. The words sat crisp and sweet in the center of my chest.

“Waston, calm down now,” Headman Gerald demanded, still holding Jophel’s arms behind his back.

Jophel’s eyes gleamed in fury. Unable to break free of his headman, he lashed out with words. “I’m not surprised. Susara has always been a loose girl. She’d have her head turned by a slug if it wore the right clothes.”

“How dare you?” her father raged. Susara had just gotten him sat back down and now he was fighting her to get back up.

“J-Jophel has every right to be upset!” Waston cried. “She was meant to be his wife, and this beast has defiled her.”

“What?” Susara’s sharp shriek of shock rang in my ears.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed,” Waston said quickly. “We all know you’ve been taken advantage of!” She looked at the crowd. “We’re all on your side!”

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“Justice for Susara!”

“We demand retribution!”

“He should be put to death for defiling her.”

The cries of the villagers sobered me in an instant.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, shut up!”

The rage-laced scream sent a sudden chill down my spine, like a deep dark cloud had passed over the sun.

Susara stepped forward with her eyes blazing, her arms crossed, and her father looking wide-eyed with shock as she shook her hand out of his grip.

“You lot are going to listen to me and end this stupidity now, or Fades help me, you will live to regret it.”

Chapter Nineteen

Susara

The sunny day was far too pretty to deal with all this nonsense.

I stood to face the madness of my villagers, and my hand was gripped tight. Father refused to let me go. “Susara, please. Stay out of this. Let Headman Gerald handle it.”

He was scared. I could see that written all over his face. He was scared and in pain and thought he was about to lose the only person he had left.

“Father, I can’t stay out of this,” I said firmly. “You know I can’t. I’m directly in the center of it.”

My father’s face went stricken, brows pinched, mouth tight, eyes misty.

And then. . . he released me.

“Thank you.” I exhaled a sigh of relief and turned to face the crowd. Into the faces of the nearly fifteen villagers, most of whom were men armed with pitchforks and scythes. Another chunk was the town gossip and Waston’s closest friends. The ones who loved to stir up the most trouble and who everyone knew exaggerated the truth to spin a better tale.

After all the lies they’d told in the past, how had they convinced so many to believe them now?

“Absolutely nothing of this has been done against my will,” I announced to them, raising my voice as a rumble of disbelief rolled through them. “And, of course, I wasn’t taken from my room! Why would you think it had? I’ve been out at night with my sheep a thousand times before. You all know this.”

Roerra, a round, old woman who owned a very profitable candle shop and spent most of her free time with Waston, stepped forward. “If you were not taken by force, how do you explain the state of your room?”

“What exactly do you mean by the state of my room?” I looked around them in confusion, then back at my father, who was pale.

Jovi, one of the town whittlers, spoke up from the back of the group. “Your father said there was overturned furniture.”

Overtured? “Do you mean the lamp that I knocked over? I did that by accident.”

“Then explain your dress,” Waston cried. “The one that was torn to shreds on your floor.”

“Torn to shreds?” I shook my head. “I popped a few buttons out of my dress in my haste to change. I was angry that Father was giving the flock to Jophel. I took it out on the dress. That’s all.”

There was a rumble of disquiet through the crowd, but not every tone was laced with disbelief.

“What about the boot print, then?” Glennd, one of the burly woodsmen, cried. “That massive, disgusting print that took up half of your bed?”

Oh, that stung. “That footprint is mine.”

“There’s no way! It was far too huge and ghastly!”

Wool and wails. “My. . . feet aren’t that big, are they?”

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“Your feet are perfect.”

Caivid’s low voice caught all my attention. He was still held firmly by his chief, though I doubted he needed to be. He wasn’t struggling.

I looked back at my father, who was sitting tightly on the rock. I sighed heavily. “All this time, I’ve never doubted your trust in me, Father. You still hold faith in me, don’t you?”

My father’s eyes widened a moment and then he swallowed hard. “I just. . . can’t lose you too, Susara.”

I reached out and took his bony hand in mine. They were chilled, and I swung off my cloak to give to him, settling it around his shoulders. “And you won’t. I know what I’m doing. Please trust me.”

He searched my face for a long moment, and I held my breath.

And then, finally, he gave my hand a tight squeeze and whispered. “I do trust you.”

All my tension left me in a rush, and I pulled him into a tight hug. Fades, when had he gotten so small? So weak.

When had our roles switched? He was no longer my caretaker. I was his.

And I knew what I needed to do.

I let him go and went to Caivid's side. "You can let him go, Chief Brovdir. I've got it."

The quiet male raised his brows at me but did not hesitate to release Caivid.

"You get away from him," Jophel raged, trying to break free from Headman Gerald's grip so he could get back to his feet. Caivid tensed, but I gripped his hand tight, rubbed my fingers over his knuckles.

"Calm down," I ordered him.

And he did. He relaxed into my touch and his expression went soft.

My heart swelled for him.

"Blast it all, Jophel!" Headman Gerald gripped the obnoxious man by the collar, but Jophel still fought, using the crook to try to leverage himself up. My crook. "Stop being a fool!"

"She's the fool!" Jophel spat. "Thinking she can lead that flock on her own! A tiny, useless woman like that has no right to—"

Rage burst behind my eyes. I stepped forward and slapped him across the mouth so hard the crack of it echoed in the woods.

"That"—I snatched my crook out of his grubby hands and slammed it down between his legs, right in front of his groin—"is the reason that no woman would ever take you for a husband."

Jophel was shaking and pale as he looked down at how close my crook had come to smashing his manhood. The silence of the group was almost tangible. Even Waston

was stunned.

I took advantage of the moment and said loud and firm so all could hear.

“All this has been a misunderstanding, and it, truthfully, doesn’t involve any of you. My father was worried for my safety, so I found someone who was willing to protect me.” I went back to Caivid’s side and touched his arm. “Beyond that, there’s nothing more any of you needs to know.”

Jovi spoke up again. “You. . . really would rather be alone in the woods than be married?”

I could hear the confusion in his tone, could see it mirrored in many other faces. Oakwall Village was a peaceful place, set in its traditional ways, and fighting against them was often a headache.

But it was worth it. Because change was the only way we could grow.

“I would.” I turned to my father as I spoke. “I’ve loved my life. Out in the woods as a family, guiding the flock, making memories. That’s where I feel the most at home. The most at peace. I know it’s strange for a woman to want to walk the woods all day, but I do. It should not be stolen from me because it’s not how things are traditionally done, and it certainly shouldn’t be out of fear.”

My father searched my face for a long moment, his eyes soft, posture loose, heart open.

And he nodded. “Yes, I agree. As long as you have protection, I will not force you to give up the flock.”

I wanted to collapse from relief, and instead, I rushed to my father and threw my arms

around him. “Oh, thank you, thank you!”

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He gave me a tight squeeze.

And then he let me go.

“You cannot be serious!” Jophel said, though his voice wavered. “You’re going to let your daughter be alone in the woods with this beast?”

“Restrain yourself!” Headman Gerald bellowed into his ear. “I’ve already decided you’ll be mucking the pigs for the rest of winter, Jophel. I suggest you shut your mouth or you’ll be scrubbing them out all year. Good luck finding a wife while you’re stinking of shit.”

Jophel went pale and shut his mouth tight.

“Why should Jophel restrain himself?” Waston cried. “This is ridiculous!”

Caivid growled under his breath and I went to his side and took his hand. He exhaled out his tension in an instant.

“This male stole her right out of her bed and manipulated her into lying for him,” Waston continued. “You have no proof that he didn’t!”

“And you have no proof that he did!” I snapped.

“We do!”

I blinked as Jovi pushed his way to the front. It was then I noticed he had a huge,

bulging bag slung over his shoulder. “I brought the print!”

“You brought the what?” What on Faeda was going on?

“I told you not to!” Waston snapped.

“But why not?” he asked as he carefully removed the gray wool fabric that had been neatly folded inside his bag. “I don’t understand. This is our proof!”

“Because I told you to! That’s why!” Waston shrieked.

“Is that. . .” I blinked rapidly as he got the bulky item out. “Is that my blanket?”

“It sure is!” Jovi began to unfold my wool blanket onto the muddy ground. “It has the footprint he left! This is the proof he was in your room.”

I almost cackled with glee.

“Put that away!” Waston cried. “We don’t need to go this far!”

“Why not?” I asked. “Because you know it will prove him innocent?”

She sputtered. “It couldn’t possibly! That footprint was too huge to be anyone’s but an orc’s!”

I looked her dead in the eyes, and she paled. “Let’s get to it then.”

Waston sputtered with indignation, but there was nothing more she could do. My blanket was laid out and the print of my boot was right there, a deep brown stain right in the middle.

“Come over, warrior!” Jovi was grinning as he pointed to the print. “Let’s put an end to this farce. I’m ready for breakfast.”

I laughed, so relieved that at least one of the villagers was seeing reason.

Caivid came over without hesitation and placed his foot next to the print. Many came over for a closer look.

The difference in size was tremendous. His foot was nearly twice the size of mine.

“Susara?” Jovi waved me over.

Ah, blast it all. I really didn’t have a choice, did I?

I walked over and put my boot down right on top of the print.

Perfect match.

“Well, what do you know?”

“Guess her feet are that big.”

“Fades. . . didn’t realize a woman’s foot could be so huge.”

My cheeks burned, but then warmth caged around my shoulders and Caivid dipped low to my ear. “Next time we’re alone, I promise to show you how perfect I think your feet are.”

Now my whole body was burning.

“This isn’t over!” Waston shrieked, “Mark my words. I will prove that these warriors shouldn’t be allowed to stay here.”

And then she stormed off down the path, glowering at the orc chief and Caivid as she went. I was alarmed to see that more than half the villagers followed after her.

But then those who remained also began to walk back toward Oakwall. They gave both Caivid and I sheepish smiles as they passed with their pitchforks lowered. A few murmured apologies. Most bowed their heads as if embarrassed.

It was over.

I wanted to collapse with relief.

“Caivid,” Chief Brovdir said. Caivid tensed, but all the male said was, “report to Chief Sythcol about the flood before the end of the day.”

Confusion made my brows go up as Caivid asked, “Is there something going on with the floods?”

The chief glanced in Headman Gerald’s direction, who was busy wrestling Jophel to his feet and lowered his voice. “Not sure yet. No need for panic. Just. . . be sure to report.”

“I will,” Caivid promised.

“I’m taking him back,” Headman Gerald called as he pushed Jophel toward a horse-drawn cart I hadn’t even noticed. He shoved him into the back, on top of a load of musty hay, and Jophel didn’t say a word, just ducked his head.

Headman Gerald faced us again and bowed slightly. “I apologize, Chief Brovdir, warrior Caivid, for all the trouble. I promise to work twice as hard not to let something like this happen again.”

“We are at peace,” Brovdir assured, and I exhaled a sigh of relief.

“Shepherd Tomind,” Headman Gerald called to my father. “Would you like a ride back in my cart?”

My father nodded and struggled to his feet. I hurried to his side.

But Caivid got there first. He took Father’s arm gently and guided him to the headman’s cart. My father followed willingly, though his eyes were as large as the moon.

“Shepherd Tomind,” Caivid said carefully after my father had gotten settled on the bench next to the headman. I gathered up my blanket and brought it over to him. Caivid took it from me and helped arrange it in my father’s lap. “I promise you I will never do any harm to your daughter. My intention will always be to protect her and keep her hale. You have my solemn vow.”

I held my breath as my father looked from him to me.

Finally, he said. “I trust my daughter, and she trusts you. That is good enough for me.”

Caivid beamed, and so did I.

“You can walk her back,” my father said to Caivid, shocking us both. He took off my cloak and handed it back to me. Then he turned his sharp eyes to Jophel. “I have business regarding this man. I’m not sure mucking pigs is enough for trying to soil mydaughter’s name.”

“Agreed,” Headman Gerald said, and Jophel hunched his shoulders.

“But I expect you to join us for breakfast, Caivid,” my father said sternly. “I have quite a few more questions left for you regarding your. . . arrangementwith my daughter. You best be ready to answer them.”

Caivid swallowed hard and nodded.

With that, Headman Gerald clicked his tongue to spur the horse into motion. Brovdir called a goodbye as well, already nearly around the bend back to Rove Wood Clan.

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And just like that, it was over. I wanted to collapse from relief.

Warmth enclosed my hand, and I looked up to find Caivid holding it tight in his own. He smiled down at me in a way that made my heart squeeze. “Let’s walk back together.”

Chapter Twenty

Caivid

As the carriage with her father disappeared behind a bend in the path, I finally took a deep breath.

And then Susara squeezed my hand in hers and I lost it again.

“That was. . .” She exhaled long and heavy with a shake of her head.

“Pure madness,” I finished, and a smile lit her face.

“Exactly. Fades, I knew people were being less than welcoming toward you warriors, but I had no idea they would believe you’d actually stolen me from my bed,” she said as we began to walk along the path. I felt like I was floating. The sunshine was brighter, and the air held less chill.

“I would like to say that this is the last time something like this will happen.” Her voice was tense, and she gave my hand another squeeze. “But you saw the way Waston looked, right? She looked. . .”

“I know,” I said softly. “I think she must have something planned.”

“But what?” Susara shook her head. “What could she possibly gain from stirring up tension between our communities?”

“I know not, but I suspect the truth will reveal itself soon enough. Regardless of what comes, Susara, I vow to protect you through it. You and your father both.”

She looked up at me with sparkling blue eyes and gave me a smile that had me melting for her all over again. “And I will take care of you. Just like I promised.” Her brow knitted, and she reached up to touch my cheek. “Does it hurt where he hit you?”

I snorted with amusement and leaned into her touch. “If I say yes, will you mend me?”

She smiled mischievously. “Lean down here and let me take a look.”

I did so without hesitation, and she pressed her cool lips to my hot skin. The touch was so wonderfully tender it made my eyes shutter.

She trailed kisses all the way to my mouth, and I captured her lips with mine. She tasted so good and her rosemary scent engulfed me. I parted my lips to deepen the kiss.

And then something pushed right into my back.

Susara gasped as I broke off the kiss and whirled around.

Only to find asheepbehind me. A black one.

Midnight.

Suddenly, two hands of sheep burst out of the woods and rushed toward us. They circled around Susara, bleating loudly.

“Wool and wails, you broke out of your pens again! You really couldn’t wait just a little longer for your grain?” Susara looked a perfect mix between shocked and amused as she rapped her crook on the ground. “And you’re filthy! What in all Faeda have you been getting up to?”

“They don’t look too bad off.” I patted Midnight’s black head, and she stopped next to me. I scratched under her chin and found her beard was orange. “Is this. . . carrot juice?”

Susara’s eyes grew huge, and she checked the other sheep. “It is! Where have you sheep been getting carrots? Do you think someone has been feeding them? Or are they getting into one of the orc’s gardens?” She sighed. “I can’t imagine he fed my sheep a bundle of carrots willingly. They probably stole them. I’ll have to give him a few sacks of wool to make up for it.”

I snorted with amusement. “I suppose I’ll have my hands full guarding this mischievous flock.”

Susara stood back up and came to my side and I gulped at the glint I saw in her eye. She touched the middle of my chest with her soft, warm hand. “I’ll show you real mischief tonight.”

I used my thumb to push up her chin and leaned down over her in that odd way that made her breath catch, her heart hammer, and the scent of her arousal bloom. “I’ll be there.”

I kissed her with all the passion I could muster and she melted against me, so boneless that I had to hold her up.

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When she slanted her mouth to deepen the kiss, I forced myself to pull back. Fades, resisting her was getting more and more difficult by the moment, but it had to be done. “We need to get back before your father sends another mob after us.”

She laughed and took my hand as we began to walk. “It’s been a day, hasn’t it? We’ll have breakfast with Father and then take the ewes to the east pastures. They’re nice and open, so it’s easy to keep them all in view. We’ll be able to rest in the sun and gather energy for tonight.”

My blood heated at the thought.

As we walked, Susara continued to tell me of all the problems her herd often caused. She outlined the daily routines and explained how to care for the sheep. The longer I listened, the more content I grew. I could already imagine the long days spent herding together.

I couldn’t wait.

The walls of her village were in sight, and she mused. “I suppose the sheep wouldn’t be so eager to get out if their pen wasn’t so cramped. But there’s nowhere for it to be expanded out. We can’t even keep more than twelve at a time because of how little space we have to keep them in.”

I raised my brows. “Do you. . . want me to build them a pen outside the walls?”

She looked up at me with her huge, beautiful eyes. “What?”

“Wouldn’t be hard,” I said. “I could build a proper shelter for us next to it, where we could rest overnight to keep watch. On the nights your father doesn’t need you home, of course.”

Her lips parted as she looked up at me. “You’d. . . really do that for me? For the flock.”

“There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you, sunshine.” I stroked her golden hair away from her face. “You are my priority now. I plan to protect you for the rest of our days.”

Her eyes went wistful and huge in a way that melted my heart. “That sounds good to me.”

Fades, was it possible to feel more joy than this? I couldn’t imagine it. I leaned down and kissed her hard, drinking her up. She melted into me, fitting so well it was like fate. For the first time in my life, I felt like I truly belonged.

I’d never thought the storm would be finished with me.

But it was. I’d found my sunshine, and these woods were where I would stay.

Stay.

Forever.

With her.

The End