



# Daghel (Dark Orcs of Helfallow)

**Author:** *SJ Sanders*

**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** In the eastern kingdom of Zyerk, the Cold Mountain orcs are notorious for their barbarous raiding, plundering tradelines that stretch between the capital city Zyl and that of the far-flung lands of Fountaine to the west. Not even the rail lines are exempt from the occasional attack. It is a risk that any traveler takes, a risk that I was willing to take for the sake of a new life, far from where my reputation as a courtesan and dominatrix was known. But when Daghel drops from the heavens like a spirit of death amid the shrieks and flames of his wyvern, my life changes forever. Captive, lover, mate to monsters beyond reckoning... the Cold Mountain and this powerful, dangerous orc seeks to take everything from me, including my heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 38

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:17 am*

## SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

### DAGHEL

I drink deeply from the cup in my hand, watching those moving around the central fire, the stones around our village and the overhang above protecting us from the worst of the wind and snow. It still manages to get in, but in a gentle drift of flakes that sparkle as they catch the light of the fire. It makes our village look ghostly and ethereal, which is at least pleasing to look upon when every female shies away from my gaze.

Marked by my ghostly coloring as drehl, a child of Vepra, the goddess of death, my clan has kept a respectable distance from me most of my life. Even upon reaching adulthood two years ago, none of the wyverns of Fang Peaks approached me, tracking the scent of my first rut to claim me as their bonded. Doubly cursed, I'm aware that I will never take to the skies like other males of my age group. My mother once sadly told me that, had she possessed the strength, she would have smothered me at birth to save me from the pain of a drehl. There are days where I wish she would have. And there are days that I'm thankful that she had possessed a soft heart despite the fact that it was what ultimately sent her following after my father when he died.

I drag in an icy breath and tilt my head back so that my face lifts to the snow. My eyes slide shut, and I breathe in the sweetness of a winter night. And the mingled scents of those rutting in their nearby lodges. My nostrils flare, but I don't allow my expression to change so that no one else can see evidence of my thoughts and my pain. My slender back arcs as I tip my head back further, greeting the cold breath of

winter, and a shiver rushes over my skin from the bite of cold air. I have not yet put on the mass of a mature male, my pale body remaining lithe and slender, which makes me even more susceptible to the worst that the Fang Peaks has to offer.

If I don't bond with a wyvern and join the gathol, I may likely remain this way. It is a terrible fate. I have no one willing to provide for me and so my body is mostly bare to the elements so that the cold air pierces deeply. At this point, I cannot even say for sure if I want a wyvern bond out of true desire for it, or simply because it is a means of survival for me.

I shrug and take another large gulf of my brew. I drain my cup and hold it out to be refilled by a nervous serving female. I rarely stare at them, knowing that it frightens them, but the drink has warmed my stomach and I am far bolder than usual. The storm is growing in strength; the wind howling around the protective barrier of stone surrounding our village.

The chill in the Cold Mountains is a living thing. It reaches through the night with vicious claws and a monstrous appetite in the depths of the winter. Its dark grip is around the village and running over me tauntingly, whispering of my death. But I am drehl, and I am already an embodiment of death itself. Icy dark fingers drag through my soul, and I can feel something uncoiling in response. It makes me shiver with a deep, knowing dread even as a secret part of me whispers in fascination.

My eyes follow the movement of the shadows as they drift closer with the stutter of the bonfires. Midwinter holds death. Even with all of our revelry, there is no escape from the fact that it is a season of darkness, where the foul magic comes alive and things better left undisturbed stir. And Durethikal, the devouring spirit of winter, has returned from his long slumber to the mountain.

My breath rises in a plume of white mist in front of my pale lips, thickening as the temperature suddenly plunges. The wind shrieks angrily over the stones, but I can see

the sorcerers at work in the four quarters around the center of our village, their hands raised as they call upon the magic of our people and our ancestors to protect us. The darkness groans its protest, and the sound makes the hair on the back of my neck rise.

I slowly rise from the stone bench, watching the dreary skies. A shiver of awareness crawls over me and the wind whips my hair, causing the long bead necklace to snap and rattle as it scrapes over my narrow chest. My chest expands and deflates with every deep breath I take, and my eyes widen with comprehension.

Something is coming.

I take a wary step back, and the rumble of murmurs among my kin fills the air, but I cannot bring myself to look away from that dark sky for even a moment, not even to reassure myself that everything is still well.

There is a flicker of something large moving through that inky darkness, but then it drops with an alarming speed that causes my people to scatter for their weapons. I cannot move. My mouth falls open as the darkness hits the snow, sending white plumes of icy powder into the air. It glitters in the firelight surrounding the blue scales of a familiar shape. The wings of its powerful forearms flex with its respiration, its head snaking on a long neck. The head turns toward me, and golden eyes pin me in place as I see its nostrils flare. Heat churns in my gut in reaction, the rut rising sharply in response, causing me to drop to my knees. A hissed chuckle escapes the wyvern as he turns toward me.

“What is this pleasing scent?” he growls. “From you?” Another dark rumble of laughter echoes from him. “Run, pitiful male. Let me see if you are worth the chase.”

My jaw hardens at the obvious insult, but I push to my feet as I tip my head back to meet his glowing gaze. “I will not run to satisfy your amusement. You can attest from here whether I am worth your bond.”

Locking gazes with the wyvern, I remove my belt and then my surc, the thick length of fabric winding around my waist and legs, and let it fall into the snow at my feet. My balls tighten in response to the cold, but my prick stabs the air from between my thighs, thick and long. The wyvern narrows his eyes at me, but he does not move. I stare back at him, humiliation burning through me, knowing that all the village is watching my rejection. I raise my chin proudly and give a nonchalant shrug.

Very well.

I turn from him, giving the wyvern my back as I bend and snatch my surc off the ground. Gripping the icy cloth tightly in my hands, I calmly walk away, refusing to meet the sympathetic stares of my clan. It was to be expected. Nothing has changed?—

A shriek pierces the air behind me, making the muscles in my back jump and tense, but I do not have time to react. Wings snap with a crack as the wyvern takes to the air. My steps slow and I begin to turn, but a large, powerful body slams into me, dropping me roughly to the ground. Scales slide over my flesh and his claws pierce me, tearing at my flesh as he subdues me, pinning me neatly beneath him. Agony ignites on my face and I bellow as his claws cut a jagged path from brow to jaw before finding purchase on my shoulder. They dig deep and my hot blood flows over me, rapidly cooling in the snow as it pools beneath me.

There would be nothing shameful in panicking at this moment. I have seen it happen many times over the last two years as the wyverns dropped from the mountains to pick off warriors of their choosing. But I'm not afraid. An icy calm rushes through me as I brace my weight on my knees despite my face being pinned to the ground. I can sense his surprise and pleasure as he croons, but the sound is an eerie hiss as much as it is a song. His croon grows louder, and his wings descend in an intimate screen, shielding me from the shocked stares of the clan. I stiffen, preparing myself, when I feel his weight shift over me and his body arch, bringing his hips up behind

my thighs so that the bulbous head of his large cock brushes my ass intimately. I shiver as the hunger of the rut climbs higher in me, scorching my insides at the sensation of his prick prodding and notching in place. His hips flex and rock forward, and I roar as the head presses deep, splitting me for the first time.

Pleasure rises upon the wave of pain, and I pant and moan as his cock sinks in further. Something almost seems to come alive and writhe around his cock, stroking the inside of my ass. Deeper and deeper it presses, and I growl when it finally buries completely within me. Its heat pulses within me and every so slowly he drags it back only to swiftly plunge, filling me entirely with the next stroke. He pumps into me, his movements coming quicker and harder, his claws a vice of misery, mingling pain and pleasure as one. The wyverns croon now has a rumbling note to it as he purrs and sings together, the sound growing deeper with every thrust, driving his cock into my depths. I grunt, my cock an iron bar between my legs. I wish I could move my hand to grip it, but I'm pinned so tightly there is no chance.

His tail moves, sliding around me at the peak of my frustration, and I moan with pleasure as its soft tip curls like a band around my cock, stroking me in time with each thrust until we are growling together. My balls draw up, tightening as his thrusts become more rampant, a pleasing ache gathering at my core as it tightens and then bursts as my seed shoots through me so hard and fast that I'm nearly dizzy with pleasure. I feel as if my essence is draining through me, releasing in waves of intense pleasure, but it doesn't cease. It grows hotter and hotter, boiling inside of me until I am burning. And in truth, I am burning! Wyvern fire spills over, around, and through me with the wyvern's climax, and I continue to find my release as he bellows and pumps ropes of his thick, hot seed into me, the rest splattering on the stone behind me in a large puddle.

The last spurt of seed leaves my cock, and with a groan my body drops the rest of the way to the ground, forcing his cock out one in one slick slide of flesh that sends a shiver through me. I cannot stop the smile curling my lips. At last, I have been

claimed.

Claimed by Drisk.

Anya

Blood drips from my cracked lip as I grin down at the boy lying prone in the snow. My knuckles are bruised and bleeding, but I think nothing of them. All I feel in that moment is triumph. Pain will come later.

“Thought you could touch me without my leave, eh?” I bark, taking a grim satisfaction at the way his body instinctively curls into itself at my tone. “Thought you could treat me like less than a street whore?”

“It was a mistake, Anya,” his companion garbles as he stumbles back from me but not before bending to grab his friend and drag him away with him.

“Oh, it was a mistake, all right.” I sneer at them and then grin brightly. “But where are you going? You two said you wanted to play. Are you no longer interested now that you know that the game has changed?”

“W-we are fine, Anya,” he stutters, his face pale from fear and the icy cold that had descended upon the capital city. “We just want to go home.”

“Home,” I murmur disdainfully.

I have no home left. The city guard came just that morning to take my siblings to the children’s home, ripping them both from my arms. Said it would be better for them than living with a sister who was barely an adult and had no way to provide for them. I tip my head and sniff, dragging a sleeve over my nose. Perhaps they are right. They will have full stomachs and somewhere warm to sleep rather than huddling miserably

beneath our blankets next to whatever sad excuse for a fire I can coax to life in the bitter cold.

And tonight—there is an evil wind tonight that whistles through the dome and sends a shiver through me. I haven't even managed to scrape up enough coins to purchase a lump of coal to get through the longest, darkest night of the year. Yes, my siblings are better off where they are. I blink back my tears as I drag in a ragged breath and glance back down at the pair of boys in front of me. Although I know that they are probably nearing their twentieth birthdays, and are likely to have two years on me, they are still nothing but boys in my mind. Miserable, callow boys who deserve to be whipped. But I suddenly no longer have the desire to be their punisher. I still have a short time before the coal merchant closes up for the night.

“Get out of here,” I growl. “But don't let me catch you two coming anywhere near me again... Wait,” I snap, my eyes narrowing on them as the one starts to drag off the other. “Do you have any coin on you?”

I sigh in disappointment when he nervously shakes his head. Figures. I turn away to pick my way down the narrow alley.

“Looks like it's going to be another cold night then,” I mutter to myself.

“Not necessarily,” a cultured, feminine voice says from my left.

I whirl toward it and squint when a soft winding sound and the sharp click of flint against metal startles me and a bright flame illuminates a woman's cold, blue eyes. She smiles at me and then brings her cigarette to her lips. The flame of her cogniter to the tip of her cigarette, and a curl of smoke rises from the tip as she takes a drag on it. She blows out the smoke and studies me, a thoughtful smile painted on her face.

“What if I told you that you would never be cold again?”

A bark of laughter escapes me, and I cross my arms over my chest. “I would ask what your angle is.”

“No angle. I am merely intrigued and offering an... opportunity.” She glances leisurely around the alley before focusing on me again. “The streets are not a kind place, especially for a girl without protection and support of a family. How long do you think you will last before you take boys like them up on their offer to beg for a couple coppers for the few minutes that they spend rutting over you?”

I shrug but cannot ignore the way my stomach tightens anxiously.

“What is it to you? I can hold my own. Something will come up.”

“I’m sure,” she purrs as she moves away from the wall and steps toward me. “But we all have to eat. And stay warm when the winter gladly feasts and gnaws at our bones. No one can hold out against that misery for long, and I’ve seen many young women just as beautiful as you end up in the opium dens in vain attempts to escape the drudgery of their existence, allowing any dirty cock to take them against the wall for the coins that will pay for their addiction.”

My throat works as I swallow. “What exactly are you offering?”

“Just freedom.” She tips her head as she considers me. “You have something special—an iron will to survive that I would hate to see turned on you to consume you from the inside out. All the while, you allow yourself to die a little more inside with the passage of time.” She takes another drag on her cigarette and gestures at me with it. “You have the makings to survive, however, with just a little help to point you in the right direction.”

“And you think you can help me?” I’m skeptical, to say the least.

Her smile returns and she nods. “Helping you will be easier than helping most. You have the strength to do what needs to be done to secure your own future. All I need to do is bathe you and make you look presentable, and men of means will line up to pay for your time. I will even invest money in getting you properly educated because once that happens, doors will open for you that you have never imagined as gentlemen flock to your side.”

My lip curls as a wave of disgust turns my gut. “Despite all your fancy talk, you mean to make me a whore.”

“I mean to make you a courtesan,” she snaps, and I can tell that I’ve offended her. “A courtesan is no mere street girl selling herself on the corner. You can have your choice of clients and enjoy a life of luxury. The most important step I will teach you—how to attract a benefactor. A smart courtesan can see herself comfortably married to one of her admirers, where you will never have to worry about where your next meal comes from. But more importantly, you will never suffer the cold again.”

I mean to tell her off, to take her fancy courtesan title and fuck straight off to hell, but I pause at those last words. For as long as I can remember, I have been cold when the winter came, after suffering with the heat all summer.

“You are certain I will never be cold?” I whisper.

Her smile widens, and she loops her arm with mine, dragging me to her side. “Never again, my dear girl. Now, tell me, what is your name?”

“Any,” I reply in a bit of a daze.

She tuts softly and shakes her head. “A courtesan needs a name far grander.” She

thinks for a moment as we walk together down the alley, the sound of our footsteps echoing faintly. “How about... Anastasia?”

I whisper the name to myself. It doesn't feel like me. It feels like I'm pulling on a stranger's skin and masquerading as her. And yet it makes me feel a little more comfortable with the situation. As long as I can be Anastasia, I think I can distance myself from all of this. Anastasia is the courtesan entertaining the gentlemen. I give a jerky nod and she squeezes my arm.

“Good girl. Now let me take you home, introduce you to the other girls, and get you fed. A hot meal will do you good, and tomorrow we will begin.”

“And who are you?”

“You may call me Madrina, my little Anastasia.”

True to her word, I ate well and slept even better when cocooned in the warmth of the thick blankets given to me and warmed by the cheerful fire in my little apartment in Madrina's courtesan house. And although I wake up a bundle of nerves, the whirlwind of shopping among the clothiers and perfumeries, followed by a visit to the doctor, flows along in such an orderly manner as Madrina is deferred to that I become more and more comfortable in my intended role. I can be a courtesan. I continue to chant this to myself when my virginity is sold, and tears prick and fall freely from my eyes as a gentleman's cock pierces me and stretches me painfully in the midst of opulence.

I can be a courtesan. I will be a courtesan and never suffer again.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:17 am*

### Chapter

### One

### ANYA

Staring in the mirror, I run a finger over the very fine wrinkle at the corner of my eye. It's finally happening. Despite taking care of my health to the best of my ability and eschewing the "party favors" enjoyed by my clientele, I am finally starting to show my age. True, my auburn curls don't yet have a trace of silver threading through them, but it's only a matter of time and a reminder that my time is limited. It's staring me right in the face—the same face my regular customers are no longer quite so eager to acquire as their companion for the evening. Every month, I seem to lose at least one or two clients. They just seem to drift away—to the sides of other younger ladies of my profession, I'm certain.

"Time to be put out to pasture for a nice rest, old girl," I murmur.

It's better to get out now before the bills of my extravagant lifestyle—one that my gentlemen expect to be greeted with so that they can enjoy indulging in all comforts within my rooms—pile up even more than they have. It is an unfortunate consequence of the profession that prohibits women within the business from getting ahead. The only things of value I have are the jewels, clothing, and fine lace lingerie that I wear for the pleasure of my clientele. All of which is being picked up this afternoon by a goods-peddler who has offered me a tidy little sum.

Truthfully, it's a pitiful amount compared to what I spent, but coin will be needed to

keep myself fed and reasonably comfortable as I travel on the rails. I already dipped into my meager funds to buy several gowns of common streetcloth available at the general clothing stores, sturdy boots, and a plain wool shawl to keep me warm. The only thing I've kept for myself is a ruby pendant on a gold chain that I've slipped within the bodice of my gown where the peddler will not see it, lest he think that he is entitled to this as well for his fee. I have heard of more than one woman of the profession being swindled and was well advised on the matter by a dear friend who retired earlier this same year.

“He will offer a fair enough price for your belongings, all things considered,” Mari said with a pointed look. One that I well understood, knowing that in polite society, courtesan or not, we are harlots, and no “decent” man or woman will do business with us. “He won’t swindle you as much as the other street peddlers. But if there are any treasures you wish to retain, keep them well hidden. His offer is for the lot, and he will demand anything that he believes he paid fairly for.”

It's enough to make me grimace with distaste. I never truly believed it would come to this. In all my daydreams and in every plan that I'd made for the future, it was with the hope that one of my gentlemen would eventually offer for me. Even if it was just to be a mistress comfortably set with all the legal protections allotted in Zyerk. But marriage was always a real possibility for a talented courtesan who found favor with a widow. In fact, I had hung all of my hopes on Giles Kenning, my benefactor, until he died just weeks ago in a tragic accident without leaving me so much as a token sum in his will despite all I did for him over the years. My eyes sting as I blink away the tears that will certainly ruin the powder, kohl, and rouges carefully applied.

I can't make a mess of myself before I conclude my business with Mr. Barkley. One doesn't look weak in front of a scavenger—it makes them brave enough to attempt a strike.

“Do you have any regrets after all these years, Anya?” Mari whispered in a haunting

echo from that last day we enjoyed tea together.

“Of course not.” I laughed, secure still in all the promises Giles made to me in our moments of pillow talk. I shrugged as I tipped the teapot, refilling our cups. “What is there for me to cry over? I was orphaned young but was blessed with a fair enough face to attract the attention of Madrina Solas, who gave me an education I never would have had otherwise.” I sipped my tea thoughtfully. “It is a life that a street girl only prays for... a life floating on the edges of the higher social circles, enjoying the fruits that fall from their golden chalices and the entertainments that they indulge in.”

“There is that,” Mari murmured and sipped from her own cup, a wistful expression on her face. “I’m going to miss that.”

“Then stay,” I insisted, taking her gloved hand in mine, a bright smile on my lips.

She had returned my smile but slowly extricated her hand with a sigh. “To what purpose, Anastasia? I turn thirty-five next month, and you are two years older than me—it’s time you also think of other prospects. As much as I will miss the grand parties and entertainment, you forget that there is something we share with those street girls that we can’t deny.”

“Which is what, exactly?” I asked absently as I glanced over the pastries plated next to the teapot. I reached for a tart, but looked up in surprise when she laid her hand over mine.

“It’s an occupation for the young.”

Those words echo now in the quiet of my bedroom, punctuating the ache of disappointment within my heart that I’ve been carrying around for days now. I have lost faith in love. Now I can only hope for comfort and security.

Lowering my hand to my vanity table, my eyes skate toward the flyer that sits beside my elbow. With a weary sigh, I pick it up. I don't know why I even bother reading it yet again. I have read it at least a dozen times and have already made up my mind. Hell, I even wired the service last week and received a response only yesterday with a ticket aboard one of the steam engines leaving the city tomorrow. Despite the slow response, I'm optimistic. Not so much because I believe that I will find love and adventure with lonely men who live in far-off lands like the ad promises, but because it offers possibilities that weren't there yesterday. I skim the bold print and set it down to pick up the envelope sitting beneath it.

I smile as I run my fingers over the crisp envelope. Inside is a letter from my intended and the ticket that accompanied it. The letter from my intended is brisk at best, just three hastily scrawled lines informing me that he was pleased to welcome me to Ivywood Outpost, and that he will be collecting me personally from Tarnwood Town's station when he comes by wagon with his men to get the monthly supplies for the outpost.

I try not to think of the fact that I am going to be conveniently carted off with flour and sugar as if I am just one of many goods he ordered. It stings my pride, especially since my gentleman clients have often showered me with flowers and jewels in appreciation of my company, besides the small payments of coin to go toward my upkeep. But those days are over. I suppose that I can't get too deeply into my feelings about it given that I was less than truthful about some details regarding my background which is going to be a rude surprise for my soon-to-be husband if he ever discovers the truth.

I'm not twenty-seven, nor am I a mid-merchant's widow looking to escape the painful memories of the city. I can only hope that those good qualities I possess more than make up for the small white lie. How many men in the wild lands of Fountaine can claim that they had an intelligent wife who not only engages them intellectually but also knows her way around the bedroom competently?

Unless the men of Fountaine are as boorish, uncouth, and uneducated as rumor paints them. My smile slips a little at the thought and I shudder. No, I won't think of that. Besides, David Mallory isn't just anyone. He is the governor of the outpost, and while that doesn't mean much in the way of wealth and comforts, it's something.

Although I am thirty-seven, it's not like I am pretending to be a virgin, though in retrospect perhaps I should have made the attempt. It isn't entirely unheard of and I'm not convinced that men can truly tell the difference, anyway. But I had gone for something a little more believable, eager to find a match as far away as possible. The less that my future husband knows of my profession, or the fact that certain gentlemen came to me because they enjoyed the taste of the whip and leather from a petite female with an iron hand, the better. This new future is offering me a chance of family and children—a dream that I had long ago put away. I can do this.

I smile down at the ticket and set the flyer aside, my mind wandering. I am still young enough to bear one or two children; I believe. I would have the family that I sometimes saw in my dreams at night. My husband was always a dark shadow in my daydreams, one that towers over me and ripples with strength and confidence. His features are always obscured, hidden to me, but just being with him makes me feel protected and cherished. It doesn't matter that I can't see him, or my children. Just seeing them in my dreams strikes a longing in my heart. I slowly expel my pent breath and blinked. Yes, I'm making the right decision. My single trunk is packed and lying open so that Mr. Barkley can clearly see that the contents aren't worth bothering about when he arrives.

But tomorrow—tomorrow I will be heading to Ivywood Outpost and David Mallory.

I jump at the sound of a heavy fist banging at my door, startling me from my reverie. There is no need to guess as to who that is. I stand from my dressing table and make my way from my bedroom out into the parlor, where my belongings are packed neatly into several inexpensive trunks. I skirt by them to the door and open it to admit

Tom Barkley.

“Mr. Barkley,” I murmur in greeting and step back to let him in.

Although he barely tops my height by an inch or two, there is a shrewd look to his thin face as he steps inside with the smallest dip of his head in acknowledgment. He takes in the parlor with a sweeping look and hums to himself.

“You are leaving tomorrow, I presume?”

“In the morning, yes,” I agree, as I cast a regretful look over my elegant furnishings.

“Good, good,” he murmurs as he absently hands me a small sack of coins that fills both palms with its weight. “I will take the clothing and jewels today, but I will be by at sunrise to collect the furniture.” He turns to me with a pleased smile. “Show me the rest of the apartment, if you will.”

I nod in response. I expected this. “There isn’t much to show you,” I explain. “Although it is nicely kitted, the apartment is modest, with just a parlor, bedroom, and a small kitchen and washroom.”

He sniffs lightly and follows me through the house, his gaze flitting quickly around each room as if to commit to memory everything they contain. I don’t remark on it or say much of anything else. What is there to say? When he pauses at the sight of my trunk in the bedroom, I stand aside in stoic silence as he quickly sifts through its contents.

“Just a few things I purchased to replace my finer belongings,” I explain when he finally glances up at me.

“Smart,” he replies. “I hate it when women plead and cry to keep a few gowns that

I've paid for so that they have something to wear." He digs into his pocket and pulls out a couple of silver coins and tosses them at me. "A little extra for saving me the time and trouble."

I snatch the coins out of the air, nearly fumbling one, and slip them into the pouch with the others. "Thank you, Mr. Barkley."

Although it's humiliating to be so thankful for the scraps that he offers, I manage to hold my tongue and not cry when he returns to the front door to let in his workers. Neither man says a word to me, or even so much as glances my way, as they quickly begin to pick up my trunks and carry them away. I'm left to watch in stunned silence as every trunk and every neatly stacked jewelry box is carried out of my apartment. I'm relieved, however, when they finally file out with nothing more than a grunted reminder that they will be back tomorrow. That relief is overshadowed by a sense of numbness as I head back to my bedroom and collapse once more into the chair in front of my vanity to stare at my reflection bleakly.

It will all be fine. It has to be. I'm merely saying goodbye to the remnants of my old life before embracing the new. I wish that were more comforting.

Picking up a warm cloth, I wash my face and pat it dry before heading over to my plush mattress made up in its crisp linens and warm blankets. I suspect that my comforts will not be quite so indulgent at the outpost, but I will at least have a husband to keep me warm. Besides, it's not like I've never known a hard life. And that life sharpened me. Born into a poor family in the meanest quarter of the city, I had been as brutal as the dirty streets of my childhood and destined for far worse following the death of my mother, whom my father followed shortly after. That was before Mistress Marina had found me. Beneath the dirt and the sneer, she'd seen potential and had taken me under her wing. She renamed me Anastasia Hightower, and by her efforts I was fashioned into the image of a lady and introduced to my first clients.

Those memories feel ancient now. Childhood memories of bedding down on a thin mattress stuffed with straw and covered with thinner quilts are distant after all these years, as are the memories of snuggling beneath the blankets with my siblings to share warmth. It's the memory of the perpetual cold that plagued me for so much of early life that refuses to leave me. And that is what finally prods me into hurrying to my bed and scooting beneath the plush bedding. A blissful sigh escapes me as the layers of blankets practically swallow me whole. I stretch, savoring the decadent feeling. The outpost won't compare to my current quarters, but at least they will be far better than what I knew in my youth.

Never again will I know such misery as that terrible cold.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:17 am*

Chapter

Two

ANYA

The train station is busy despite the early hour, and men and women alike crowd the platforms, waiting for the trains that will take them to various parts of our large kingdom and even more far-flung places. This is the only place in all of Zylik that one can even see such a unique gathering of people within the city's protective dome. Among them, cogwork servants docilely follow those of the wealthier class to handle their baggage and see to their needs. There are even a few metal dogs programmed for service tasks. Only a handful of platforms stand out because they lack all signs of Zyerk's advanced cogworks, and those are the ones that serve trains heading outside of the kingdom.

None of Zyerk's technology is allowed outside of the kingdom without special license—which cannot be afforded by just anyone.

Although I've never had the luxury of owning more than the most basic cogwork appliances, all of which have now been carried off by Mr. Barkley, I grew up in Zylik and have never been out of the capital city, much less outside of Zyerk. I've never had a moment without the most minimal technological conveniences to be found within the city since entering the life of a courtesan. But even my childhood was filled with the familiar sight of cogworks. To see platforms without a trace of the familiar cogworks sends a shiver of unease through me, despite myself. They appear practically desolate, which doesn't put me at ease.

Is this what I have to look forward to?

It isn't exactly an inspiring sight. Those waiting for the trains there appear to be huddled together miserably. A few seem to talk quietly, but all activity is subdued compared to the bustle of the other platforms. The oppressive atmosphere briefly breaks up as a small group of wealthy ladies and gentlemen hurry toward a train with the porters before disappearing into the sleeper cars at the rear of the train. I give them only the briefest glance of envy. Although the elite ticket-holders are boarding, I know that I'm in for a long wait before the passenger ticket-holders are loaded.

My hand tightens on my small valise as I head toward the platform. At least I don't have to wait with my trunks. I had the forethought to set aside a small amount of money to pay the porters to load them for me. Still, the wait will not be a comfortable one. I enviously eye women clad in well-fitted trousers as they hurry past—onto their next adventure, I imagine. How nice it is to move freely without the weight of petticoats, skirts, overdress, and all the trappings of a proper woman's attire.

I can privately admit that freely wearing trousers is one part of my old life that I miss before Mistress Madrina took away such things. Proper courtesans desired by the wealthy and nobles did not wear such items. And, unfortunately, the wife of an outpost governor would be expected to keep to proper fashions as well. I bite back a sigh of envy as the simply attired women, one by one, all eventually disappear into the crowd.

I shake my head. It does me no good to stare wistfully after things that I cannot have. The dreams of my youth were hammered out of me through the long life lessons that came with being a courtesan. Some things will never be mine.

Drawing my shawl tightly around me, I quicken my pace, eager to arrive at my designated car and be done with it. At the last moment, however, I'm forced to sidestep in order to avoid being run down by a small group of men rushing past as

they bark urgent instructions at each other. Frowning, I smooth my skirt as I watch them pass and head directly for the engine. How odd. The train won't be leaving for some time yet, so what's their hurry? I shake my head in wonder but then spy a free bench near my car and hurry along the platform to it; the gentlemen forgotten. I'm not going to lose the opportunity to sit and rest my feet. How I wish Mr. Mallory had thought of getting me a ticket for the dirigible rather than the train. I could board and rest by now if so. And in far more sanitary conditions than the dusty, filthy train floors.

The platforms are only slightly cleaner than the trains themselves. Only the opulent private cars are spared from such conditions.

I try not to grimace overtly as I take a seat on the bench. It quickly fills up all around me as more and more people hurry onto the platform with the angry whistle of the train. There is a savory tang perfuming the air coming from somewhere nearby, and my stomach clenches miserably with hunger. With Mr. Barkley showing up so early, there wasn't time to break my fast or to arrange anything to bring with me. My ticket indicates that meals will be provided, but there is no indication of when one might expect it, so I settle my hand firmly against my stomach and try to ignore the pangs.

I sit on the crowded bench for some time, my shoulders wedged uncomfortably between the people sitting on either side of me as a gradually thickening cloud of cigar and cigarette smoke chokes the air. I feel an immeasurable sense of relief when a lean man in a shiny uniform exits the train and gives us all an expectant look.

"All aboard!"

It takes an embarrassing amount of effort to extricate myself from those sitting beside me. They may be in no hurry to get up, but I am. Digging in my heels, I wrench myself from between them and the force of it sends me stumbling forward before I catch myself. I straighten with as much dignity as I can muster and adjust my grip on

my valise before heading into the train with my head held high.

As I feared, the car is already rapidly filling up, and I'm forced to squeeze between people finding their seats as I search for my seat among the pairs of tall benches sitting back to back with each other, creating paired facing seats running down both sides of the car. I scowl as I struggle past a small group of people clustered in the aisle, just barely holding my tongue to keep from cursing when a woman's shrill voice rises over the noise of the car just behind me.

"Wait, I know her! Conductor, I must insist that you remove that woman at once. I will not share a compartment with a... a... whore," she finishes, her words met with an appalled gasp from her companion.

There is no doubt in my mind of whom she speaks. I can feel eyes boring into me, and from the corner of my eye I see a gentleman cast me a nervous glance before quickly looking away. Of course I could not escape my reputation so easily.

My back stiffens, and my chin lifts slightly as I turn to my accuser. I recognize her immediately and my mouth thins as I greet Giles' young niece, Chelsea Kenning, with a cool smile.

"Miss Kenning. I thought perhaps there was some terrible harridan behind me. Imagine my surprise. It's a pleasure to see you again," I say with feigned surprise.

Her face flushes red as the gentleman beside her tries to politely cover the amused twitches of his lips behind a cough. At the far end of the train, I spot the conductor making his way toward us as he slowly pushes his way through the crowd.

"It's nothing of the sort," she returns, her voice shrill with her disdain. "And just what are you doing here? Searching for your next target now that dear Uncle Giles is gone? It's a good thing that I was aware of exactly who and what you are or else the family

wouldn't have known to turn a predator like you away from the door."

"Predator?" I echo in disbelief as I try to ignore the curious looks that are turning our way and the intrigue in the eyes of more than one gentleman on the train with us. Even her companion is looking at me far too speculatively for my comfort. "How presumptuous. And I suppose your uncle was a victim in your eyes and bears no responsibility for his actions?"

"Of course. Many men have been easily led astray by the allure of a woman of your sort. It is only natural that, as his family, I was duty-bound to protect him and his interests."

"His estate, you mean," I observe dryly. "You certainly never voiced your disapproval when he was alive. You did exactly the opposite, displaying nothing short of enthusiasm that he was enjoying my companionship after being a childless widower for so many years. I assume now that it was merely to make sure that you remained favorable and within his will."

Her gasp of outrage is satisfying, but I notice that the conductor is making his way to us even quicker now. Apparently her gentleman companion has noticed, too, because he twitches nervously before leaning down to speak intimately to her.

"Chelsea, perhaps we should find our seat now," he murmurs. "We have a long way to go before we reach Tryg Station."

"Victor, please," she hisses in reply. "How can you possibly expect me to endure traveling while I know that she is breathing the same air as us?"

I lift my eyebrows, but not in response to her behavior. She is pitifully inconsequential. I'm far more curious about the place he mentioned. I've heard of Tryg Station. "Isn't that the private station attached to Dwenell University in the

Kantan region?”

Victor looks at me in surprise, and he gives me a jerky nod. “It is... Have you studied, by chance?”

“Her?” Chelsea’s bark of laughter isn’t flattering, but I ignore her as I shake my head, hating that I’m unable to rub it in her face.

“I have never been out of the capital city, but I did attend Zyl’s Nova Tuela University,” I explain. “There were professors and a few students who had come to us from that prestigious institution.”

His eyebrows rise in polite interest. “An academic. I hardly suspected it. Chelsea won’t even read the morning paper as she claims that it is too dull and taxing for what should be a pleasurable rising.”

“Ah,” I murmur, and press my lips together to contain my smile as the other woman jealously clings to his arm. “Surely that must have changed if you are accompanying her to study at Dwenell,” I reply politely.

He bends a fond look at her and pats her hand. “Actually, we’ve just married. She is the one accompanying me. I graduated with my doctorate just last spring and have received an offer to teach.” His gaze shifts back to me, and his lips curve in a way that sends apprehension up my spine. “You should consider attending and advancing your education even further, given that you’ve already been afforded a very good academic start.”

Chelsea giggles. “Darling, please. She is as destitute as a door mouse. I made sure that she didn’t receive even a penny of Uncle Giles’ estate. And don’t look at me that way,” she suddenly chides when he frowns down at her. “My inheritance is what is funding our new life at Dwenell. Don’t forget that. Which wouldn’t have been

possible if she had inherited even a portion of his estate, as he wished her to. It was my quick thinking that prevented the family from intervening on her behalf. So, really, you have me to thank, my love”

My jaw tightens at her bold declaration. I should have known. She hadn’t turned me away from the door merely for some petty reason or dislike I had been previously unaware of. She had done everything she could to make sure that she inherited it all.

“Of course, dear,” he murmurs as he lifts her hand and drops a kiss on it. His eyes shift to the conductor, and I follow his gaze.

Sometimes discretion is the better part of valor. And the conductor does not appear to be in any mood to deal with Chelsea’s foolishness. I can’t afford to be thrown off this train. Mr. Barkley would want an explanation. I’m not ready to deal with the fallout.

“Chelsea is right,” I reply, drawing a look of surprise from the other woman. “Sharing a car will be uncomfortable for both of us, I suspect. I will go to the next car.” I dip my head respectfully. “Chelsea, Victor... it was a pleasure,” I lie.

She sniffs dismissively as I turn away, but I can hear her whisper even across the distance separating us.

“I’m going to have that bitch thrown off at the next station,” she grumbles.

“Now, darling...”

“Don’t ‘now, darling’ me. That woman is absolute filth, and I refuse to have her anywhere near me. Oh, here’s the conductor now.”

My lips twist in a grimace as I yank the car door open and step through. I’m not the sort to linger or have regrets, but I still feel shaken as I make my way to an empty

seat and allow myself to collapse into it. I am immediately gladdened because there is no one seated across from me to share this small space with me. Pulling out a book, I busily open it to the marked page as the train squeals on its tracks and lunges forward.

Now to enjoy what small measure of peace I can get—and pretend that the domes over the cities are not in place for a very good reason.

I shiver despite myself and turn the page.

Rumor is that the accounts of orcs raiding from the nearby mountains are grossly exaggerated, and most of them may even be fabrications for insurance claims. No doubt there's nothing to be afraid of at all.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:17 am*

Chapter

Three

DAGHEL

I lean forward on the padded leather seat attached to Drisk's harness as the wyvern drops lower through the sky, the jagged Fang Peaks reaching for us. These peaks are just one segment of the larger Cold Mountains that are inhabited by numerous orc clans, but it is the place that I, and others of the Cold Fang Clan, call home.

Drisk's head cranes back toward me, his golden eyes glittering with the glow of our symbiotic union that allows speech between us mid-flight. I much prefer discoursing with him in a far more natural fashion on the ground, especially when I don't have his tendrils invading my body from the sensitive tissue at the base of his neck, but this is effective and Drisk is not a male who floods my mind with too much input all at once.

I shift on his back, feeling the tug of his tendrils rippling through me from where they have burrowed into the anal and penile tissue after slipping into me and forming connections with my internal nervous system. My cock jerks in response, and I growl softly. Perhaps it is time that I capture a female. Many of my brethren have hunted for their mates in the wreckage of our conquests and have found a successful way to satisfy their primal desire to bury their aching cocks in a tight cunt, beyond allowing our wyvern brothers to plow us until we are both brutally spent.

“It's about time. I ache too,” Drisk complains. “It is tiresome to always fight against

your dominance to pin you in place for rutting. We would both benefit from a soft female to distract us .”

I grunt in agreement, and while he cannot hear such a subtle sound at the speed that we are flying, I know he can feel it echoing through me. Symbiotic connection or not, I never could get out of the habit of responding aloud.

“Your cock is not always a joy to take either,” I inform him.

“ You enjoy it well enough or else you would not repeatedly bathe the stone with your seed. And she will enjoy it too. I have a magnificent cock .”

I cannot entirely deny that. It is as he says... I need a distraction. I need a hot little cunt to tug on my cock and milk my seed to tolerate Drisk’s dominance as he pins me from behind for our safety. I also look forward to taking her mouth, getting me ready while I watch the wyvern’s cock stretch and fill her little hole, preparing her for the brutish size of my prick. Despite Drisk’s large size, wyverns’ reproductive organs are proportionately small compared to the rest of them, on average equal to that of an orc. But he is not wrong—it is magnificent, its length bulging and heavily studded with bumps that extend into small tendrils to kiss the insides as they fuck. I know any mate of ours will enjoy it.

And as I’m even larger than most orcs, I look forward to his seed dripping from her hole and making it possible for me to work my cock into her without her screaming in pain and terror like so many of the captives have done. Sadly, wyverns are fussy about fucking and will only mount their bonded brother and a mate—mostly because they are highly fertile and would likely breed indiscriminately if not for mingling their blood with orcs for so many generations. Because of that, they feel the same drive for a mating bond and now require orc genetic material for breeding, which slows down reproduction considerably. That we must prepare our mates for bearing orc and wyvern young is an entirely different challenge since, by the laws of our

matriarchs, we cannot force pregnancy on any female in our keeping.

Which is fine with me. I'm not certain if I ever want offspring of my own. There is too much chance of my sons or daughters inheriting my ghostly coloring and its curse. It is an uncomfortable burden for anyone to bear. But that doesn't mean I cannot take a mate as long as I make sure that she takes a medicinal draught to keep our seed from quickening inside of her.

None of my offspring should know that feeling of the darkness slowly invading them, whispering to them while they stand alone in the snow. I am convinced that Drisk saved me. I don't know how he found me at that moment.

The landscape below blurs and fades as the snowy mountains shift and I am standing in my village, young and powerless against what was crawling through me in my isolation. I shiver in the cold in a way I have not since I was heated by the wyvern's spark deep within me. The darkness of the sky is cut by the snowfall. It turns heavier, the fat flakes whirling chaotically with the force of the bitter air. The shadows thicken with it, growing and condensing like something monstrous at its heart. It was never a wyvern. It was not Drisk that I saw at first. Whatever this is, it haunts me—a wraith of snow and darkness.

Durethikal, the devourer, the son of Vepra whom she bred from the corpse of Ishugor, the divine king of the earth. The hapless son of Vepra was born for destruction, and we dare not say his name, for he was chained and contained within the forbidden depths of the Fang Peaks by the great ancestors of the Cold Mountain clans. To say his name is to court doom. To say his name is to bring his black night eyes open to you. I can't see his eyes, but there is an impression of greater darkness where they might be, and I feel their weight upon me. Tall and powerful, he seems to shift forward, moving far too fast. He did not move this fast before. He?—

“Wake up,” Drisk growls, and my body jerks hard, my mouth gaping open as I drag

in a ragged gasp of air.

I blink down at the white-capped peaks below me and, at a distance, the snow-covered landscape stretches out from below the foothills. It shimmers in the light as the shadows withdraw, and I relax as the sense of deep pressure leaves me, though I can feel an empty hole where it had been. That hole has always been present, and not even Drisk made it go away. Perhaps a mate could finally fill it and bring me some measure of peace. Clenching my jaw, I straighten my shoulders and squint at the distant shadow moving of a steam and cog-train moving swiftly over the snow. We were nearing our prey and yet I had begun to drift unawares? I draw in a steadying breath and glance warily at the gathol, the hunter-warriors mounted on their wyverns flying at either side of us. It seems that no one noticed except Drisk. Good. I did not need anyone from among my clan questioning my sanity and whether I am fit to be a hunter-warrior.

“Thank you,” I mutter as I adjust my grip on the atherium sword clasped tightly in my hand. A bright shimmer arcs over it from the liska crystal in the central point of the sword’s hilt, resting beneath my palm. The magic within the crystal pulses with a comforting familiarity that swiftly stabilizes me. “How long was it this time?”

“Not long. But I sensed its presence. I believe it is stalking us now, though it has retreated. It felt very close to overtaking us, however.”

My gut tightens at Drisk’s observation, but I numbly nod. If it is Durethikal, he is becoming bolder, stalking through the mountains on his ghostly mounts, waiting to descend upon us again. If he is going so far as to pursue us through the mountain shadows in the middle of the day, then there is a reason to worry.

“You should tell them,” Drisk grumbles, but I huff in annoyance as I continue to scan our surroundings to determine the best direction to approach the train.

“What good has that done me?” I reply bitterly. “They did nothing but assure me that he was anchored with dozens of enchanted chains and guarded by innumerable seals. They trust me with nothing but this—the one thing my kind is good for. Destruction and terror.”

Drisk hisses disdainfully, clearly communicating his thoughts about the matter. “You cling unnecessarily to your clan. There are those who appreciate you—clans that dwell deeper in the mountains.”

I grunt in acknowledgement but refrain from responding. This is not a new turn of conversation between us. Although Drisk rarely speaks of the frigid white peaks in the depths of the Cold Mountains or the clans that linger dangerously close to the forbidden tower upon the highest peak, I’m certain he comes from this place. I wrestle with that knowledge since the Cold Fang Clan views those who linger too close to the tower to be corrupted by its power. I know Drisk is not connected to that evil, but I do not wish to contemplate it too closely. It is far easier to focus on the train carrying goods and supplies that will benefit the clan in the depths of the winter. The humans refuse to trade with us and actively cut off access routes, trapping us within the mountains as much as they can, so we will simply take what we desire.

I shift my weight in my seat, giving Drisk a silent command. His wings stretch wide as he cuts to the right, drawing the formation of gathol with us as they follow our lead, keeping high within the thick cover of the clouds.

“Descend at my command,” I growl. “We must time it right and in a spot where they are most vulnerable before they can get to their cannons.”

Damned sorcerer’s cannons can knock the gathols out of the sky far too easily. Fortunately, despite their strength and range, the cannons are too unwieldy to mount just anywhere, or in significant numbers, and they take a considerable amount of time to operate. As long as we have surprise on our side, we have a chance at success. And

with Durethikal on the hunt, we will need what little supplies we can find to fortify ourselves against the darkness that seeks to take us.

The train passes below, its cannons a dark smear behind its engine, mounted on the treasury. I sneer at their absurd priorities. Aside from the occasional desire to ornament oneself, orcs have little use for the inferior bits of metal the humans prize. It is the contents of the supply cars that we desire toward the rear of the train, and just ahead of that—those containing potentially valuable mates.

My mouth dries with excitement as the train winds farther ahead, and a smile stretches across my face.

“Now!” I bellow, and the gathols around me roar in response as we drop with our wyverns in a shrieking descent upon our exposed prey.

I lick my lips, my long tongue sliding along my large tusks contained within my flight mask. I am suddenly eager and very hungry.

Let night descend for the humans. Daghel—the child of death—has come. Any who dare to stand against me shall know no mercy.

### Chapter

### Four

### ANYA

The wintry landscape is beautiful and unlike anything seen within the capital. Although the freshly fallen snow has its charm in Zyl, it is quickly dirtied and disturbed by the human and licensed nonhuman activity within the city. Sadly, as exquisite as the scenery is, it loses its appeal after two days pass on the train. Even the attempts of holiday merriment coming from the front of the car I had been forced to vacate fails to amuse me. Nor do the cups of eggnog heavily spiked with whiskey bring me any pleasure.

I must have nodded off at some point because I awoke from the same nightmare plaguing me—alone and freezing in the cold, an endless, bitter, all-consuming cold. It is a frozen emptiness where my screams echo back to me with mocking laughter. It haunts my nights far too frequently these days. I thought I had put such nightmares behind me long ago. Although I have no relationship with my siblings, they are comfortable enough, and, as for me, I haven't known such cold in years. Still, my hand shakes as I pour a liberal cup of eggnog from the chilled canteen waiting near my seat where the server left it. I lift my cup and stare morosely once more out at the passing landscape.

“What a dreadful Yulen,” I mutter into my cup before taking a gulp.

The elf beside me gives me a sidelong look that I choose to ignore, even if his long,

twitching ears are somewhat adorable. I always did like frolicking in bed with the nonhuman gentlemen who came into the capital and desired some company. And they had a surprising resilience and desire for rougher pleasures.

Sighing, I rub a hand over my eyes. I cannot think of such things. I'm marrying a governor after all.

The male seems to take my gesture as an invitation, however, because he sidles closer to me, his purple eyes brightening with interest under barely a sheen of sympathy. I squint at him sourly as he brushes a hand against my thigh. Although he is not of the nobler elven species with their more exotic appearances, he is not lacking in the least when it comes to beauty. Unfortunately, he takes cues as poorly as most men of my acquaintance do. It seems being around humans hasn't benefited him in the least if he is picking up their bad habits.

Sighing again, I turn away from him to face the window once more, giving him my back with the hope that he will take the hint and go away. His leg shifts away from mine, and I feel a moment of hope before he suddenly moves to the seat directly across from mine, his knees pressing intimately close to me. I look up at him sharply with the unexpected contact, and I give him an annoyed frown.

"I beg your pardon. What do you think you're doing?" I incredulously demand.

His expression turns sly, and his knees shift to rub against my legs in a way that is not the least bit accidental. "Merely attempting to bring some holiday warmth and cheer. You seem cold. Let me warm you."

I blink at him, amused at the line despite my sour mood. It isn't going to get him anywhere—something my body language should have made abundantly clear. That he hasn't picked up on the signs makes me wonder if it's a cultural miscommunication or if he is so young that he has not yet figured out the cues when

it comes to intimate interactions. It is so hard to tell with elves, but given his earnest tone and the sort of bold assurance that comes with youthful cockiness, I'm leaning toward the latter. Just how old is he? I snort mirthfully to myself. I doubt he has seen even fifty years as an adult. Give or take. Practically a child just barely over the cusp into respectable adulthood when it comes to elves.

I take another slow sip from my cup and arch a brow at him. Well, why not? I will play along. If nothing else, it may be an amusing way to pass several minutes while he tries unsuccessfully to woo me out of my undergarments.

"You really think that I need you to help me get warm?" I swirl the contents of my cup with a meaningful look. "I can't imagine what you can accomplish that several good splashes of whiskey can't."

His eyes drop to my cup, but his lips curl as if he has it all figured out, and I bite back my laughter. My, he is young.

He leans in and his lips part in a manner that is quite pretty but not as seductive as he likely imagines. I narrow my eyes in anticipation, curious to see where this goes. A slender lock of deep green hair drifts forward to hang in front of his eyes as he tips his head, his eyes angled in a way that makes them look larger and more inviting. I mentally applaud. I have to hand it to him—he has really thought out his game. He has clearly choreographed every move... and does not understand how to apply them on more experienced prey.

Adorable.

"A beautiful woman shouldn't be alone at Yulen," he murmurs in a low, sultry voice. "Although the ice and snow compliment your beauty and makes you appear as a wintry noble lady of Elhalein, what you truly long for is fire." He brushed a claw along one of the red curls hanging loose to frame my face. "If you accompany me

back to my private sleeper, I can give you the sort of Yulen awakening that you need. I will kindle your sweet fire within the depths of this night and keep you warm.”

My eyebrows rise at his invitation. A private sleeper car? Clearly he is no mere wandering young elf. The old me would have been tempted to indulge him and get him drunk enough that, after a round or two, he might fall into a deep stupor, allowing me to indulge in the comforts of the car and an undisturbed, restful sleep. Alas, it seems that I will have to make myself comfortable for yet another night on my seat.

His smile widens as his eyelids drop to half-mast. He balances his weight on the one hand he has braced against his knee, and he leans in even closer so that I can see the gold flecks in his eyes beneath the fringe of his thick, sooty eyelashes. His lips round, and I stare at him in shock. Surely he wouldn't think to just kiss me in public without my leave? My fingers clench around my cup, preparing to toss the contents into his face, but the scream of metal interrupts me and precedes the violent jerk of the car only by a half a second, flinging the elf forward into my lap. Despite being a woman of the world, I shout with some surprise when his face lands firmly against my bosom, and the force of his body colliding against me provides a soft place to land amidst the ample skirts gathered suddenly between my thighs.

The entire cabin shakes and then jolts sickeningly as half its wheels come up off track. The car tilts, the electric lighting cutting in and out in a frantic flicker before dropping back into place with another hard lurch and a louder shriek of metal upon metal. Finally, we come to a complete stop and silence descends over the car.

My ears are ringing and throb with my pulse as my heart leaps to a gallop within my chest. I shove at the male still sprawled over me, and he blunders awkwardly in his attempt to rise as he mumbles a hasty apology. He jumps, his hand gripping my arm as the wail of an alarm sounds through the car moments before the metal door slides open and a conductor hurries through, a look of alarm stamped on his face. The other

occupants pause in their attempts to right themselves as we all stare at him and meet his frantic, sweeping gaze.

“R-raid!” he shouts. “Orcs have descended from the Cold Mountains!”

The words have barely left his mouth when the metal door squeals violently and splits from what appears to be a giant blade piercing it. The conductor whirls toward, his eyes so wide that the whites show starkly around his irises. The color drains from his face and stumbles back from the door, his entire body shaking like a leaf. His head snaps around and for a moment, he meets my eyes. I pray that he has some sort of plan to get us out of there or that he would at least remove the elf pinning me down so I have a chance at getting to safety, but he makes no move to help any of us.

With a terrified shake of his head, he spins back around and runs down the narrow aisle toward the other end of the car, abandoning us all to our fate. I watch in disbelief as the door slides open and he hurries out without a backward glance. Those already on their feet attempt to follow him, only to have the door slam shut before they can reach it and the emergency locks snap into place.

The sound is deafening, and the silence that descends is so thick that one could hear a pin drop. The wail of the alarm has ceased, presumably because the orcs have made it to the control panel at the engine. The silence is terrible for that reason alone, loudly proclaiming our doom, which is only punctuated by the squeal of metal upon metal when the blade begins to move, cutting through the steel like a blade through a block of cheddar. The door shrieks in protest but it is drowned out by the screams that fill the car, and I push frantically at the elf, who seems to be clinging to me like a cephalopod. Cursing, I jab him hard in the ribs, but the swing lacks momentum with the angle that my arm is pinned against the side of the car. He merely grunts and latches on even harder.

“Get the fuck off,” I growl and attempt to pry his fingers from my arm.

“Please do not let them have me,” he blubbers frantically. “They do depraved things to their captives... but to an elf from among the noble houses...” He swallows with a nauseated grimace and tucks his head against my shoulder. “I cannot go with them! You must save me!”

Metal continues to screech, the sound droning on and getting louder as the blade cuts a path through the door, and I struggle harder, clawing at him ineffectually. Damned elves and their high pain thresholds. What was amusing when they came to me as clients is not so amusing now when I’m trying to get away from one.

“The only thing I must do is try to make it out of here alive,” I hiss in reply. “Do you think I wish to be captured by orcs?”

I swallow back my nausea. As much as I enjoy flirting with the unknown, orcs are violent and brutal. They have often made headlines in the papers over the years. The information comes filtered through various channels to the citizens of Zyerik. But those stories always felt far removed from reality as we safely consumed the news of raids and attacks throughout the kingdom and well beyond our borders with our morning breakfast.

“This doesn’t make sense,” I mutter to myself beneath the din of panic. “Orcs rarely attack trains. Trains are heavily fortified and well armed. It is practically unheard of.”

“Tell that to the male carving out a new door,” the elf lifts his head to hiss at me. “Clearly he did not get the memo.”

I shoot him an annoyed look and resume my attempts to dislodge him. I freeze, however, when the cutting sound stops, and the car grows quiet as everyone turns toward the door with frightened expressions. There is no sign of movement from the other side, and I can practically hear the heartbeat of every person in the car beneath their heavy, panicked breathing. A scream suddenly rises and is taken up by the rest

of the crowd surging further away from the door to bang and claw at the rear doorway as gloved fingers with hemmed slits for the lethal claws slowly slide through the gap into the metal. They curl and wrench, peeling the metal back like a lid from a tin can. The male who emerges is a dark gray color that makes his yellow eyes appear unnervingly bright. His bare chest is covered with scars and several new wounds bleed freely, giving him a horrific appearance as he steps into the car.

The entire car seems to shift with his weight, but that is hardly surprising considering that his head skims the ceiling. His appearance is fierce enough with his large tusks and the numerous weapons strapped to him, but what is truly terrifying is the smile that lights his face when his gaze falls upon the women clustered together at the rear of the car. Chelsea stands among them as she clings to her beau, clearly hoping that her safety will be secured by him, but the man is making no effort to shield her from the orc's perusal.

The male doesn't take more than a handful of steps, however, before he stops and his tips up his head. A heavy scrape echoes from above and every eye turns toward the ceiling with trepidation as the orc smirks knowingly at them. Another louder scrape and then the entire car begins to vibrate as if caught in the jaws of monsters. Bolts pop and drop to the floor as the top of the car is pulled back as the blue face of a wyvern peers down at us from above. My heart nearly stops in my chest as the creature wrenches the metal away with a twist of its powerful neck. Flinging it away, the wyvern's head descends through the hole, its long dark tongue snaking as it brushes along the chairs, drawing more cries from my fellow passengers.

Despite my heart making a valiant attempt to escape the confines of my chest, I can't seem to scream even if I wanted to. My throat has closed up with horror ever since the orc entered. Now with the wyvern also investigating the contents of the car, I can't imagine how it can possibly get worse. And yet somehow it does because the wyvern's neck flexes and another orc swings down from it, dropping into the car with a heavy thump. His white hair obscures most of his features, but he is such a pale

shade of gray that he almost looks like a wraith as he straightens... and straightens. He is larger than the other orc, to where he has to keep his head bent as his eyes rake over the cart, and his eyes are black as night, but any other differences are hard to tell—much of his face is obscured by a flight mask fastened over his lower face and the fur cloak hanging heavily over his shoulders. He looks to the other orc and nods, bringing a feral smile to the male's face as he charges toward the humans clustered at the other end of the car.

Screams grow louder amid the squelching of spilled blood and the gasps of life bleeding out of those who are stupid enough to resist. The dull sound of bodies hitting the floor fills the cabin, but it is all a background din as my world shifts and focuses on the approaching sound of the pale orc's footsteps. The steps grow slower as he comes near my seat, and the elf trembles but surprises me by jumping to his feet. For a moment, I can breathe freely and feel the briefest hope of being able to survive this when I'm yanked to my feet by that pitiful male and thrust between him and the orc with enough force that I'm practically thrown into the enormous beast of a male.

His arms come up around me in an almost instinctive reaction, his large, gloved hands clasping me firmly enough that I feel the faint prick of his claws through the layers of clothing separating us. I don't dare look up at him. I stare at the wall of muscle in front of my eyes apprehensively as the elf begs for his miserable existence behind me.

"Take my female!" the elf wails. "Having a breeding female of the house is worth more than my miserable life. Spare me and be assured that this blow will be felt and recognized."

A breeding what? My head turns incredulously toward him so fast that I'm certain I will suffer the effects of whiplash for a few days, but I cannot help it. The male gives me a tiny smile, but his eyes go wide, his mouth gaping open in horror as his body snaps toward me in a singular, violent motion. He makes a choking sound, and my

eyes drop to the large blade plunged through his torso. He gurgles on the foaming blood rising to his lips as it mixes with his spittle and then immediately drops when the sword is yanked free with a squelching sound.

The orc doesn't make a sound. I would think him cold and unaffected entirely. I expect him to release me so that he can follow after the other male, but that glimmer of hope dies when he gathers me up into his arms, securing me tightly against his chest, and turns toward his wyvern without hesitation. His long stride eats up the distance quickly, but not quick enough to spare me the anxiety of watching the beast's large eye grow closer and closer. I stare at it in horror, wondering if he's going to feed me to the creature. Its head drops lower into the hole, revealing more of its heavily scaled neck and the long spines jutting from its horned crown down what's visible of the length. It croons at our approach, its eye fastened on me. But it doesn't open its mouth as if expecting to be fed. Instead, it holds perfectly still as the orc steps around its head to place a booted foot on the back of its jaw, his free hand going to one of the spines to hold tight as the wyvern lifts its head and gives him a boost, drawing up through the roof.

The wyvern's neck is not as long as it looks because the orc immediately swings up onto the shoulders that must have previously been pressed close to the hole in the train. I cling to the orc, suddenly afraid of being dropped to my death, but his arms enclose around me tightly the moment he finds his seat, pinning me to his chest as the wyvern drops from the train with another warbling croon. The wings on its forearms snap a few times to clear the snow from them as it turns away from the wreckage. We tip sharply as the wyvern lifts its upper body toward the heavens, but with a powerful thrust of its legs and the beat of its wings, we are airborne, leaving the train and everything familiar far behind.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:17 am*

Chapter

Five

DAGHEL

The female's scent invades me. I understand now what drew Drisk so strongly to the point of ignoring all previous plans and orders once we came within attacking distance. Now that I have her in my arms, I not only understand, but am willing to face the consequences for our actions. Going against orders has a harsh penalty, but it's one that is quickly forgiven when it comes to a mate. Even the way she clings to me makes my instincts go wild with a need to claim and possess that I have never felt before.

And she is a fighter. Although she remains still within my arms, her face hidden against the fur of my cloak, I saw it burn within her eyes when the elf thrust her toward me.

Elves. I fight back a sneer as my mind recaptures that moment. The male had thought to deceive me by claiming she was his own breeder and thus secure further glory to a male who captured her. Little did he know that I care nothing for such things, and his deception and willingness to ignobly sacrifice her did nothing but stir the monster within me. I felt the darkness rise within me, thirsting for his death as it drove a piercing cold straight through me. It was only the warmth of her small body pressed against mine that kept me from doing far worse than merely plunging my blade through his gullet.

And she is mine now.

That knowledge sweeps through me with a heavy sense of contentment, followed by a focused, instinctive protectiveness. The realization hits me hard, and I hold her to me, knowing that a whole future I never dared to imagine is resting within the safety of my arms. A content growl rumbles in my chest, and I feel her hand flatten across the muscle in response as she lifts her head to nervously glance up at me. The corner of my mouth twitches up in reassurance, and I watch in amusement as her slender brows draw together in confusion. It is no wonder she is confused. The smile feels foreign on my lips—I seldom had much to smile about. Grief and pain made endurable by a few meager pleasures that mostly have been the result of Drisk claiming me have marked too much of my life.

I drag the nose bridge of my flight mask against her hair and inhale the sweet perfume of her natural scent. Although there is something floral that she clearly applied to herself at some earlier point, it has faded to reveal a much more pleasant tapestry of flavors. I revel in it.

“At last, a mate of our own,” Drisk croons happily, his head turning back to glance at the female sheltered in my arms. “She is perfect. She is so small and soft. And she smells good. I am certain she tastes good, too. And she is all ours!”

I rumble in agreement, anticipation rising in an exhilarating rush within my chest. I want to caution him not to get too excited too soon, as such abductions often result in a reticent mate who will require much patience with little immediate reward, but the words are stuck in my throat, unwilling to spoil this moment for us. Because regardless of how displeased she is with the situation, Drisk had uttered one absolute certainty: she is ours. Willing or not, she will have little choice but to accept her lot with us. She could always choose to go to another lone male or bonded gathol within the clan, but few will take on what belongs to a drehl once I get her into my rookery.

My lips twist in amusement. For once, my curse will work in my favor.

In the end, she will eventually come to appreciate our tender care and affection, which will leave room for lasting bonds to grow. Not through force, but because, unlike so many other males who take advantage of the vulnerability of their human mates to control or toy with them, I have no such intention. She will receive my respect and loyalty from the first, as is because of her.

“You think too much,” Drisk points out mirthfully. “The scenting always proves true. She will match well with us and meet us pleasure for pleasure.”

“I seek more than pleasure,” I mutter under my breath, and Drisk releases a brassy bellow of what passes for wyvern laughter.

But I am a little reassured by his observation. While many orcs steal mates based on a moment of attraction, a wyvern’s choosing by scent is nearly always infallible. But it only guarantees compatibility—that she will respond to mating overtures. Beyond that it is far more complicated, but I look forward to the challenge of a drehl seeking to steal a female’s heart. I snarl triumphantly behind my mask, shifting forward in the saddle so that I am leaning forward over Drisk’s shoulders as his wings pick up speed as we climb the mountains, nearly grazing the snowcapped rocks in our passing. Higher and higher we climb until suddenly Drisk’s wings snap wide into a glide as we sail over the summit.

Peaks gather and pass beneath us, and after a moment I feel the human shift against me, her head dipping as she stares down at mountaintops jutting up like so many diamonds to catch the light of the sun. Her breath hitches on a little sigh and my gaze drops as I take in the same view, remembering the awe I felt the first time I mounted Drisk during the daylight hours, still aching and raw from being mounted by him the prior night. I had felt the same wonder that she feels now but with it had also been an understanding of the exchange given between wyvern and orc to allow such a

valuable partnership. An exchange that she will also understand when she submits her body to be opened up by his fierce prick.

My cock tightens in my breeches, and I nearly growl with the desperate need to squeeze it beneath my palm to find some relief. I am eager to see her impaled by the merciless rut of a wyvern, mounted by him so that she climbs the heavens in spirit with him in the same way she climbs through the skies on his back. To hear her scream, her cunt creaming in its tight grasp around his cock as he pounds from one climax straight into another.

I know the moment she feels the thick length of my cock against her belly because she stiffens in my arms, wariness creeping into her scent. She doesn't pull away, but she is definitely alert and I can feel her attention trained on me... waiting to see what I will do. I shake my head in an attempt to clear my thoughts from the dark haze of lust filling my head. I want to crush her to me to take advantage of the friction of our bodies shifting against each other with every beat of Drisk's wings. It would be far too easy to impale her on my cock and let her rock on it in rhythm with the wyvern's movement beneath us.

I bow my head and clench my jaw. It does little to help me as it just brings my head closer to her sweet scent, but I can hang onto sanity even if it is by threads until the darkness gradually retreats just as the Fang Peaks rise into the heavens before us. Cold Fang wyverns circling the peaks bellow their greeting at our approach, and Drisk replies in a long shriek in kind, relaying our good fortune. The trumpet of the wyverns is ear piercing, so much so that even I wince. For this reason, I am not surprised when I feel the female jerk hard against me, her startled gasp filling the air between us. Flattening my hand against her back, I strive to share my warmth and the security of my presence through the simple touch. Though I seldom speak to anyone but Drisk, I lower my mouth to her ear.

"Be calm. They are welcoming you," I rumble in a low voice.

She stills at the sound of my voice, her head tipping slightly toward my mouth. Her hair tickles the bridge of my nose above the mask, but she doesn't seem to be aware of this casual contact between us as she focuses entirely on my words.

"They... are welcoming... me?" she returns quietly.

I rumble in agreement, but it seems unnecessary. She wasn't truly asking me a question, anyway. Although there is doubt in her tone, the urgency in her voice is recognizably little more than the need to vocally reassure herself and establish the truth of the matter in her own mind. My utterance merely reminds her that I am here, protecting her. Perhaps it reassures both of us because I feel something tight within me unknot as she remains calmly tucked in a manner that seems almost trustingly within the circle of my arms.

She doesn't speak further, clinging to me silently as the wyverns drop from the peaks to swoop around us in our passing. Her eyes follow their movements, but I cannot tell if it is with interest or with fear... Perhaps a little of both. In either case, she seems to forget some of her fear and my presence almost entirely as she tracks their movement through the sky.

And they do make a spectacular show. The myriad hues of their wings and tails flow together as they dip and weave as they drop gracefully from the peaks. It is truly an awe-inspiring performance—one that I never took the time to truly appreciate before whenever I hurried back to the peaks in the past. Now, however, I regard it with fresh eyes as my female's awe draws me deeper into it. The wyverns spin and break apart at the last minute before colliding in perfectly synchronized moves. But suddenly they burst away in all directions, their wings snapping wildly in the air to carry them far from us. They scatter with shrill shrieks, and the immediate cause is easy to see when my eyes fall upon Ajek, leader of the hunt and the prince's right hand, rising from their midst.

Mounted on his bound wyvern, a black brute of a male, the pair cut through the unbound wyverns mercilessly. I am not surprised. Though he is part of a gathol, Ajek seldom subjects himself to flying with the wyvern and is known to disdain the male. It is to the point that he ignores him altogether and houses him in a lone rookery far from where he resides in the palace. It shocks no one that he possesses little care or consideration for the gathols or the clan's wyverns. He only cares about one thing: domination over those of the gathol. From above his flight mask, his eyes narrow on me, and he signs for me to land immediately. I gnash my teeth in frustration at the order, but I do not dare disobey. Not this time, when I have too much to lose. I expected this—but hoped for at least some time to secure my mate in my rookery first. Let him try heavy handed orders afterward and see how well he fares. It shall not be any better than before. He knows he has him, however. I can see the smug look in his eyes before his wyvern peels away to drop once more into the shelter of the Fang Peaks.

“Follow him,” I grumble to Drisk, and the male makes a disparaging sound in response that I silently agree with.

“What’s going on?” my female asks, but I brush a hand down her back and clamp her firmly against me when she attempts to turn in her seat to follow the other male’s path with her eyes.

“We are descending,” I reply crossly in her odd human speech. “Hold tight.”

Her blue eyes shift to me in shock, but she says nothing in reply, and I’m treated to the beauty of her red curls catching the air as we drop with not even a cry from my brave mate.

Drisk’s wings fold and fan as he maneuvers the twisting labyrinth between the peaks at a high speed, but when we crest above the village, it is a scene of beauty. The sun brings the village to life in an array of jewels, the stone palace and rookeries carved

into the mountainside even grander with the prismatic shimmer of the ice clinging to them as they tower above the common buildings and the comfortable homes of those families consummated without a wyvern's claim and bond. Despite all the ice and snow, it is the cheerful glow of the fires placed strategically throughout the village that awakens the warm spirit of the people as the clan comes to greet the returning gathol.

Not me, however. I am abundantly aware that I am not the only one making an approach and it is for the other males that the members of the clan are emerging. I do not even glance their way when Drisk lands and I drop the short distance from his shoulders to the packed snow and stone with my female clasped tightly in my arms. As expected, Ajek is waiting for me, his arms crossed against his black armor. His gaze drifts to my mate, his brows furrowing heavily before shifting to Drisk. Ajek jerks his head toward the rookeries in annoyance.

"You know that the wyverns are not permitted amid the common areas. Send him to the rookeries to wait for you."

I frown at the order and gently set my female's feet on the ground, though I am a little gladdened that she continues to cling to me as she stares reproachfully at the male glowering at us.

"I will get our female settled first..." I begin, but he cuts me off with a sharp shake of his head.

"She will remain here. The prince is displeased by your actions, and so it will need to be weighed and taken into consideration for what will happen from here."

I bristle as I peer back at him. "I have done nothing that has not been done many times by those of the Cold Fang clan," I snarl.

“But not by a drehl,” he replies, ruthlessly reminding me of the stain upon my existence. “Never has a drehl been permitted to take a mate,” he hisses as he advances upon me. “You are a valuable gathol, for which you are now tolerated, but this was never within the realm of possibilities for you.”

“But it has happened,” I reply, and he gives me a grim nod.

“Do not make this more difficult for you... or for her,” he adds in our native tongue with a gesture toward my mate.

My resolve to fight fades in an instant as a sudden unease fills me. Would they retaliate against her if I fight back? Rage simmers deeply within me as I watch him through narrowed eyes before glancing over at Drisk.

“Wait at our rookery. We will join you.”

The wyvern grumbles with a litany of curses and dark suggestions pouring into my mind, but he complies with a sharp beat of his wings blowing cold gusts around us as he ascends to our rookery within the peaks. Ajek doesn't move, but waits in stony silence. He is certain that he has won because he says nothing more and gestures for me to precede him into the palace.

Jaw clenching, I glance down at my female and brush a hand against her hair, briefly cupping her cheek. “Remain here. I must go, but I will return to you. Do not wander.”

She glances around but nods. “As if I have anywhere I immediately want to go in this place,” she mutters before settling on an outcropping of rock and squinting up at me. “Just don't even think of leaving me here to freeze.”

My lips twitch beneath my mask at her demanding tone, another smile nearly startling out of me twice within the same day. It was unheard of, but my heart feels lighter as I

nod. “Never.”

The single raw word draws her gaze back to me, and an emotion flits across her face too quickly for me to define before she resolutely looks away, leaving me to my duty. I resent that I must answer to the prince for this even more since it means leaving her here, but I can still feel the touch of the smile upon my lips as I step away from her side.

I am grateful, however, for the mask concealing my expression as I turn away to accompany Ajek into the palace.

Chapter

Six

### CHAPTER 6

D aghel

The halls of the palace lack the usual seasonal cheer that has adorned them every year of the queen's rule. A dark silence clings to them as I walk at Ajek's side, the sound of our boots echoing around us. As the palace is built directly into the cliff face with its own rookeries, there is a special kind of resonance similar to the common rookeries but amplified by its vastness.

"This is not meant as an insult to you, Daghel," the male growls. "But our laws and traditions exist for a reason and are not so easily ignored—least of all by you. The prince is concerned."

I show no reaction to his words other than briefly meeting his eyes with a hard stare so that he knows that I have heard him. Ajek is a prick, but he is a prick with limited power. The prince is another matter. My jaw tightens, but I assume a neutral, if grim, expression as I follow Ajek into the throne room.

Fawning females, orc and human alike, surround the throne, hands caressing Prince Vorn and raising slivers of meat and fruit to his lips. His wives. He grunts deeply as the female kneeling between his thighs works his hard prick with her mouth. My lips twist faintly with disgust, but the expression is minute and fleeting so that neither

male catches it. The prince dares far too much. According to our laws, no male or even a bond pair are allowed to have more than one mate, but he has been busy without his mother's strict oversight and now is going as far as to allow his mates to service him on the throne that rightly belongs to his younger sister.

A throne she shall not inherit and rightly ascend to until the present queen dies. Until that time, the prince plays his games with his supporters under the illusion of a dutiful son—and he plays them well—while his mother has lain ill these past few winters with none but the healer and spirit speaker attending to her. Neither female has been seen since the day they were brought into the palace, leaving only apprentices to care for the clan, and no others have been admitted. And yet despite her grave illness, she continues to live... exactly as the prince intends.

He will not allow her to die. I know without a doubt that he forces every breath of life through her and traps the spark of her soul within her withering flesh. It is to this purpose that he has kept our healer and spirit speaker imprisoned with her. That knowledge crawls over my skin, and late at night I catch myself staring up at the queen's quarters, feeling as if a struggling breath rakes across my skin, whispering a silent plea. It is maddening, and it carves like a black blade through my being as the prince luxuriates in his ill-gained power that is not his to have.

I do not share my thoughts freely with the clan, but I have heard hushed grievances among others within the Cold Fang Clan. They speak of sinister dealings within the palace when they think no one is nearby to hear them. Little do they know that a drehl male slips too quietly and too easily among them—and hears everything.

I am a wraith within the clan, and even now, standing before the prince, I feel even more so like one with a dark purpose boiling within me, one that I struggle to contain.

The male's red eyes finally shift to me, and he acknowledges my presence with a deep grunt even as he pumps his hips into his mate's mouth. His thighs tremble and

he growls deep in his throat, his hand clenching the female's head tightly, holding her in place as he deposits his thick load down her throat. It spills from the corners of her small mouth stretched around his length, and she visibly chokes as she attempts to swallow all of it. An obscene sight, and I pity the small human.

It is no wonder our clan is falling, increasingly scorned by our gods and ancestors as so many of the males begin to follow Vorn's lead.

The prince settles back into his throne with a satisfied groan as two more of his mates drop to clean his softening cock with their tongues. He smirks at me as he caresses one dark head and plays with her long braid.

"Exquisite, aren't they?" he rumbles.

My gaze drops dismissively to the females for only a moment before returning to him. Not one compares to my female, but I dare not utter such words while I am at a clear disadvantage within the clan. His eyes narrow on me, but he barks a loud laugh and pushes the females away roughly as he stands, drawing up the ends of his surc and fastening them once more at his waist as he does so.

"But I have heard that you have your own little delicious female. One that you abandoned your mission entirely to seize."

He waits expectantly, and I realize that he wishes me to answer. Surprising. Vorn usually prefers to hear himself talk. He is in a rare mood and that makes me suspicious.

"It was instinct," I reply flatly. "Drisk caught her scent and it could not be denied."

His dark brow rises in response to my words, speculation clear on his face. "A wyvern's choosing, eh?" He hums deeply to himself and exchanges a long look with

Ajek that I pretend to not see. “That does change the complexion of things just a little.”

Suspicion curls deeper within me.

“Perhaps you should just tell him, rather than keep him in suspense, my lord,” Ajek offers with a deep chuckle. “The drehl does not know what to make of such things. It is clear that, if not for Drisk leading the way, the male would not even know what to do with a female, much less go about acquiring one. Who allows a wyvern to choose in this age rather than seize the initiative for himself? I am certain that the wyvern will have to demonstrate how to mount her as well.”

“Clearly,” Vorn rumbles, his gaze focusing on me with open amusement.

I stare straight ahead as I wait for him to get to the point. Beneath the ice around my heart, anger boils and seethes, the darkness stretching forth with skeletal fingers but restrained... for now.

Vorn lets out another bark of deep laughter and turns away from me, his long cloak sweeping in a wide arc around him. “Very well. As things stand, I shall allow you to keep your mate, but on one condition.”

I cock my head, betraying my curiosity despite myself. “What condition?”

Vorn whirls around, a broad grin stretching obscenely across his face. “He speaks!” Chuckling, he stalks back across the room toward me. “The condition is a simple one, drehl. As I require Ajek’s attentions elsewhere, you will swear fealty to me and personally act as my hand.” He stops in front of me, his gaze sweeping thoughtfully over me. “You will be my show of might among the Cold Mountains. You have long been content to live on the fringe of the clan, doing only as much as what is absolutely required of you as a gathol while the entire clan fearfully defers to you.”

I slowly blink at him. Defers? “They are terrified of me. I am a curse upon the clan.”

“Yes!” Vorn agrees, as he lifts his hand to grasp my shoulder. “Exactly. You are a drehl, but more than that, despite your ill reputé, the clan respects your power and looks to it with a certain amount of awe and reverence as if you are Durethikal himself. I want that in my corner.”

A heavy, dark weight gathers at my core at the invocation of the name that few dare to even whisper. Vorn is far too bold.

“You would do well to hope that I am not the son of Vepra,” I growl.

Vorn pauses, his expression darkening slightly as he regards me, but he brushes away my response with a wave of his hand. “Of course not. But you will be a very useful... symbol. And in exchange, I will allow you to keep your mate. Breed more drehl if you like. An army of them. And in turn, I will elevate what it means to be drehl for the future generations to come.”

My eyebrows rise. What he offers is no small thing. I do not trust it, especially not an offhanded comment about breeding an army of drehl. He is making his intentions far too clear, but Drisk and I can play along if it means that our mate will be safe.

“Very well,” I growl, and the darkness roils and grows within as a pleased smile stretches once more across his face.

### Chapter

### Seven

### ANYA

I 'm no fool. Although I'm certain that my captor does not intend any harm to come to me while I'm waiting for him on this rock, I can see the predators beginning to gather and circle. My gaze flicks warily among the small handful of males stalking toward me deliberately. They keep their movements casual as they laugh amongst themselves, but I don't let down my guard.

With their varying hues of gray, they remind me of a pack of wolves milling together in excitement upon catching the scent of blood from weakened prey. Not one of them is as ghostly pale as my captor, however, nor are their eyes as void of light as his dark stare. While he could easily be confused for some sort of vengeful wraith, they very much appear to be flesh and blood males with their eyes bright with interest and their broad chests moving with their excited pants. I can't say for sure which I find more comforting. A few spectators gather on the outskirts to eye me curiously. Among them I spot many females, orc and human both, and they wear mixed expressions of concern and disapproval, the latter aimed toward the males closing in around me.

A tall female pauses in passing, a frown pulling at her mouth as she peers in our direction, her gray coloring bearing a hint of marble blue that sets her apart from many other orcs besides her height. She sizes things up quickly and her brow furrows as she pushes her way forward, brushing a thick braid over her shoulder as she glares at the males.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demands. “You know our laws. She arrived with Daghel. Unless he releases her to the clan, you court death by toying with her.”

Her voice rings with authority, and several of the circling males immediately step back, heads bowing in submission—all except three, and among them a male of a muddy greenish-gray coloring grins at her in challenge.

“The drehl?” The male grunts with laughter, and it is quickly picked up by his companions. “Linahna, you must be joking. Drehls do not have females. You know this as well as we do, or else you would have mated with him long ago. That he dared to take her is a punishable offense. Vorn is dealing with Daghel as we speak, and I would advise you not to interfere. As far as this female goes—she is available to whichever male skewers her on his prick first.”

Is that so? It certainly confirms a few things in my mind. I have no idea what a drehl is, but this Daghel is as distinct as I initially thought—perhaps more so given his apparent untouchable status. But if this male or any other thinks I’m just going to spread my legs and let them mount me... I don’t think so. If any skewering is done, it will only be at my whim. I may be a soiled courtesan, but my right to choose is not something I will ever surrender.

My jaw hardens as I make my move, striking low and quick. My elbow plows into his stomach with all my strength, but I’m not dismayed when it doesn’t do more than make him grunt in surprise. I didn’t believe for even a moment I could incapacitate him, but it is just the right amount of distraction and momentum needed that I’m able to pull the longer dagger from its sheath at his side and make my escape before he can stop me. His claws do manage to snag my coat, and the sound of ripping material is a reminder of just how close he came to seizing me as I dance out of the way.

The male’s snarl fades as he regards me for a long moment, only for him to throw back his head with laughter. “Clever little female. Now give me my blade,” he orders,

his hand stretching out to me in silent command.

“My pleasure,” I reply in a dulcet tone that makes him smirk expectantly.

The fool. He expects a kitten. Let’s see him deal with the claws.

I whip forward, bringing the blade through the air in a quick, brutal strike. It slashes his offered hand in a deep wound that makes him howl with anger and pain. I quickly withdraw again with a cruel grin.

“How did you enjoy that?” I purr. “Would you like me to give you more?” I wave the tip of the blade near his cock concealed beneath the strange wrap-like trousers that the species, males and females alike, wear, though the females have the advantage of extra layers of skirts protecting them. My meaning is clear, however, and Linahna smirks in approval. “I will be happy to remove certain pieces of your anatomy if you even dare approach me with it.”

“It seems you won’t be skewering anyone today, Kael,” a male from the crowd loudly observes, and the orcs surrounding us, except the three with Kael, laugh.

“With how quick she is, I would wager that he won’t be skewering anything ever again if he dares getting close enough to try,” a female barked, initiating another round of laughter.

Linahna’s smile grows in response as she folds her arms over her chest. “Go home, Kael, and let Elehl fuck some of that hostility out of you. You won’t be getting any other kind of rutting today.”

Kael’s face darkens with anger and humiliation. And although I feel no sympathy for him, it does send the smallest tremor of alarm through me. Often public scolding can get bullies to back down, but in groups they are unpredictable.

His gaze flicks among the crowd, but I catch the look he exchanges with one of the orcs that has prowled closer to me. I whirl toward the male, bringing up my dagger, but I'm not fast enough to counter his charge, nor do I see the other male striking out from my left, his sword connecting with my dagger.

The blade spins from my hand with the force of the orc's strike and I stumble back, clutching my numbed arm. Too late, I recall that Kael is behind me. I whip around to face him, but the big male is upon me, his massive fist plowing into my chest. His strike brutally brings me to my knees with a cry and shoves me back against the cart as his fingers bite into my shoulder. I can hear Linahna's protest rising among the shouts of the crowd, but his friends and several other males have drawn into a circle around us, keeping them at bay.

Kael's eyes are merciless slashes of fire, and my cry turns into a scream when he draws another blade and stabs it through my hand, pinning me to the cart as the tip sinks into the wood. I glare up at him as I shout and thrash helplessly against the blade keeping my hand pinned in place. All of my hatred goes ignored, however, as he slowly straightens and grins down at me triumphantly.

"Let's see if you are still hateful once you've had that in you for a few hours." He leers down at me with a cruel twist of his lips. "Unless you are ready for something else in you as well."

I narrow my eyes at him as my mouth snaps shut with an audible click of my teeth. I am a mistress of pain. He will not conquer me with it. Holding my pain locked inside of me, my lips curl and I lift my head to meet his stare with a cold smile. His smile fades slightly and he leans down, lowering his head to mine as he drags a claw along my cheek.

"You will be a delicious fuck with all of that hate and rage," he rumbles. "I can see it burning in those beautiful blue eyes. I would take great pleasure in skewering my

prick in that tight little human cunt so that it can squeeze my shaft as you battle me. How does that sound, human?”

I grin up at him, baring my teeth in a silent threat that means nothing to the orcs surrounding me. No matter. My smile widens, and I’m aware of a stream of blood trailing down to my chin from where I bit my tongue at the sharp bite of the blade. His face drifts closer, a look of intrigue and lust on his face. I bide my time, waiting until his mouth is a breath away from mine, before I let the bloody spittle gathering in my mouth fly into his face. He jerks back with a snarl and straightens, a mass of seething muscles in front of me as he lifts a booted foot and presses it hard against the dagger slicing through my hand.

I grit my teeth against the shriek bubbling up, escaping in a sharp whine of sound as tears well up from my eyes and streak through the dirt on my face. Despite this, I glare up at the male defiantly, his laughter filling my ears. His companions are laughing too, and it is a cruel, ugly sound that mixes with the dissonance of angry shouts surrounding us. The laughter, and truthfully all sound, comes to an immediate halt as all eyes turn to some point behind the orc, driving the blade deeper into my hide. Only he is laughing. His lips peel back from his teeth, revealing the full length of his fangs and tusks, unaware of whatever threat has silenced the other males and made them withdraw from their loose circle. As Kael’s monstrous bulk fills most of my vision, I can’t even see what is causing the other orcs to retreat, though my skin prickles with awareness.

Nor do I see the blow when it comes. One minute Kael is sneering down at me, and in the next there is a spray of blood that hits my face and the male drops, his foot slipping from the blade as he hits the ground with a loud thud. I blink, my vision tinged with red from the droplets of blood clinging to my eyelashes as the wraith—Daghel—stalks toward me and stops just a few feet away, turning his head as he stares angrily at the gathered orcs.

“He is not dead—not yet,” he hisses in a sound of pure fury. “What I want to know is who gave any of you permission to touch this female? She is my capture, my female, mine !”

The nearest of Kael’s companions stumbles back, their heads dipping submissively.

“Apologies, Daghel,” one among them grunts as he looks worriedly among his companions. “We meant no disrespect. Kael sought to claim her, believing that she was unclaimed since you—” His voice falters, and he shrinks into himself further. “We were merely watching. We were curious if he could get the fierce one to submit.”

“Get him out of here before he bleeds to death,” Daghel rumbles as he steps over the prone body lying in front of him and crosses the remaining distance between us.

I stiffen at his approach, everything within me preparing to defend myself, but he does not touch me immediately. Instead, his cold black eyes fall to the knife buried in my hand. They narrow with such rage that it catches me off guard enough that I’m not prepared when he strikes, yanking the blade free from my hand. My blood flies, flecking the snowy skin of his arms and chest as it splatters on him and the stone beneath me. I hope it’s a bitch to clean off the masonry as I howl with pain and clasp my injured, bloody hand to my chest. He bends, reaching for me, but I strike out with my uninjured hand and feet in a desperate attempt to frustrate him and the other orcs into giving up and leaving me alone.

He doesn’t give up, however. He evades my kicks but takes each blow from my hand and arm without flinching as he gathers me against his blood-streaked chest and hauls me off the ground. I growl pitifully at him as I glare up at him, looking for any opening that I can take advantage of to hurt him for subjecting me to this, until the hand bracing my back drifts upward to grip the back of my neck. His grip is firm and merciless with a brutality I would be a fool to ignore, and yet I can’t help but be

aware of the way my back rests against his forearm, keeping me securely and comfortably supported.

“Be still, female,” he orders in a gentle voice that makes my snarl slip from my face in surprise. “Good,” he rumbles, and I’m startled at the sound of a purr vibrating through him even as a strange warmth washes through me at his praise.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Let me go,” I snap, and a faint look of amusement briefly lightens the hard features of his face above his mask.

“You would prefer to become a meal for one of the clan? If you refuse to rut or fail to breed, it is a likely outcome.”

“A meal?” I gape in shock, my outrage momentarily forgotten as his pace picks up, carrying me across the courtyard. “You eat people?” I hiss vehemently. “It’s wrong!”

He shrugs. “Humans and orcs are not the same species. Your taboo is meaningless to us. It is just more meat for the Cold Fang Clan when it comes to an unclaimed and unmated human.”

Fuck or be eaten. Not great choices, but above all, I’m a survivor. And this high in the mountains, I know that I’m not getting down on my own, especially when it would be ridiculously easy for a wyvern to pluck me off the mountainside.

“Fine. But I’m not eating anyone. Don’t even think of feeding a human to me.” I growl the words at him, but he ignores me and turns toward an intimidating male standing just a short distance away.

Linahna gives this male a hard look before glancing back at us worriedly as she

departs with the crowd. I hate to see a potential ally in this mess leave, and the other male makes me nervous as he stalks toward Daghel, the surrounding air charged with menace.

“Are you finished here?” he growls, casting an impatient look at me. “Vorn has instructed me to show you to your new rookery attached to the palace. You may summon your wyvern once you have settled there. All the same rules apply, however,” he adds gruffly, and Daghel dips his head very slightly as he turns to follow him.

My captor says nothing more but stares flatly ahead as he carries me through a stone doorway, and we are suddenly plunged into a torchlit darkness. Despite the low light, I can make out the orc stalking ahead of us, and the smooth rhythm of Daghel’s steps doesn’t break for even a moment as he follows the male down the corridor. A distant sound of laughter trickles up the passage, growing louder and louder until we enter directly into a court with a massive enthroned orc surrounded by female orcs and human women.

I stare at them, aghast at the women fawning over the enormous male. Do they dine on human flesh with the orcs? Are they even aware of what they feed upon? It makes me nauseated as the women pluck little bits of meat offered to them from his fingertips with soft little moans of gratitude.

“Prince Vorn,” Daghel rumbles, startling close to my ear. The heat of his breath stirs something deep within me that makes me tremble in spite of myself. “Stay away from him when you are not with me. He does eat humans when not fucking them.”

“Do you?” I shoot back as I attempt to ignore the ice seeping into my belly, warring with the strange heat that my proximity to him seems to stir within me.

A deep, dark chuckle rumbles from his broad chest, and I feel it echo through me,

triggering tiny tremors that I fight to ignore. “On occasion. But human flesh is unsatisfying. Too fatty.”

My brows knit together, and I feel a familiar sting to my pride, but I can’t put a finger on exactly if I should be offended or not. I thought we were speaking of literally eating human flesh, but now I’m not so sure. I feel a strange desire to defend my desirability, but I clamp my teeth together hard before any words have the chance to spill out.

I am not getting trapped in whatever game this male is playing.

### Chapter

### Eight

### DAGHEL

Although I maintain my icy reserve as I follow Ajek down the long halls of the palace, fury smolders beneath the surface with every drop of blood from my female's hand. I am livid. With Kael for daring to harm her. With Ajek for insisting that he escort us to our new rookery rather than visiting the healer's apprentice to see about her wound. With myself for leaving her behind when I should not have let her out of my sight. And yet she didn't complain. She tore a bandage from her own clothes shortly after entering the palace and wrapped it tightly around her hand, staunching the flow of blood to the best of her ability, but that hasn't stopped her from falling unconscious from blood loss or the slow, steady drip splattering on the palace floors.

"Can you not do something to keep her from bleeding all over the floors?" Ajek growls as he peers back at me over his shoulder.

"Certainly," I reply. "That would be going to the healer." I raise an eyebrow at him, and his lips curl in a sneer.

"Fucking drehl," he mutters as he resumes facing forward. "I do not understand what Vorn thinks he can accomplish with you. You will bring misfortune to the entire clan. Either by simply being the curse that you are, or because of your failure to abide by any authority but your own. We all know that the clan cannot depend on a drehl."

“Interesting that you say that when life teaches a drehl one fact quite well: that we are without clan in any way that it truly matters,” I point out as my gaze drifts along the carvings and tapestries of the inner corridor. “All we have is the fear that we strike in others and the begrudging respect it garners us. And I have done that very well. That is what Vorn wants. But,” I drawl so softly that his head turns back to me with a frown, “if my female dies, I can guarantee that whatever he is planning dies with her.”

“Are you daring to threaten your prince?” Ajek demands as he rounds on me.

I meet his gaze without flinching and narrow my eyes as I come to a stop in the middle of the corridor. “I am simply informing you that everything hinges on her welfare. That is the cost of having a pet drehl to command,” I growl. “I will dance to Vorn’s tune for no other reason than for her. Vorn knows this and is counting on it. The most basic truth of the situation is that my loyalty belongs to her, and to her alone. And Vorn is smart enough to capitalize on it. So, if you do not wish to run afoul of the prince with your games, I suggest that you cease worrying about the floors and bring a healer for her.”

Ajek clenches his jaw so hard that the muscle bulges and stands out, as do the veins in his neck. But the male is as smart as I anticipated, and he gives me a sharp nod before resuming his path down the corridor while adjusting his pace to a quicker clip. I stalk after him, my flesh nearly shivering with the effect of the strange energy in the air stirring around me. A pulse that he clearly does not feel or has learned to ignore over the years despite its slow growth around our peaks.

“We are nearly to the stairwell to your rookery,” he mutters. “I doubt she will die of a hand injury. If you kept it clean and changed the rags, it would eventually heal on its own, but I will send one of the apprentices up to you to mend her hand. Since you insist. You may want to rethink it, however. She is dangerous with functioning hands. She not only managed to get Kael’s dagger from him, but drew first blood. She might

do worse to you in close quarters.”

I shake my head at the thought, but my cock tightens with anticipation. Such exquisite pain and agony from her hand can only be looked forward to with considerable pleasure. If that is the coin with which I must pay to claim my mate and bind her completely to me and Drisk, then I am pleased to do so.

“I wish nothing more than for my mate to be whole,” I reply in a low voice, only to be met by a derisive snort from the male in front of me.

“I never would have taken a drehl for a sentimental fool,” Ajek observes with a dry chuckle. “It’s your hide. If you wish to take risks, maybe she will save me the headache and just kill you quickly.”

My mouth tightens beneath my flight mask in consideration. “Perhaps.”

Ajek’s chuckle floats through the corridor, echoing with his heavy footsteps. “Obedient to your mate already, are you? I never thought a drehl, of all people, would suffer the same disease as much of our clan.” He pats a hand in the air with his amusement. “Do not worry, you will see. Prince Vorn will show you a different future for our clan.”

I peer at the back of his head, cocking my head. This is enlightening, but I am not surprised. “Will he?” I murmur as we arrive at a dark staircase.

Ajek stops and turns toward me as he leans back against the wall. “Naturally. Males are stronger and more powerful. It is our right to have power over the females who depend on our protection. All other orcs across Helfallow know this. Even pitiful, weak humans understand it. It is our Cold Mountain clans who are ignorant of the natural order of things. The time of our dominion is now.” He waves me toward the stairs. “This is you.”

I incline my head and proceed toward the stairs, refusing to comment on his speech. It is something I have heard before among some males within the clan. Males like Kael, whom I wouldn't trust with the welfare of a female. They will never understand the reason females have led our clans throughout the ages.

I pause on the steps and glance over my shoulder. "The healer?"

The male grunts and nods. "I will send one immediately. We will get your delicate little female fixed up for you so that you can enjoy her trying to murder you in your sleep. Here... your key."

He snorts mirthfully and tosses an iron key at me as he pushes away from the wall to head back in the direction from which we came. I shift my mate's weight to snatch the key from the air with one hand. Holding the cool metal in my hand, I watch him for only a moment before following the stairs the rest of the way to the dark door at the top.

My expression hardens as I regard the entrance to the rookery and slip the key into the lock. The heavy door groans as I push it open, and it occurs to me that I've been put in a long-abandoned rookery just off the palace. My lips twist grimly as I pocket the key in the small pouch on my belt. The rookery is cold without any fire to warm it. The entire rookery has the feeling of something long dormant and layers of dust on all the furnishings. I'm not the least bit surprised that, when I enter the bedchamber, there is a similarly thick layer of dust on the furs stacked on the bed and a pile of cold ash in the small, neglected hearth near the bed. It is barely habitable. I growl to myself as I dump the furs from the bed onto the floor, kicking up a cloud of dust. The heavily stuffed mattress beneath appears clean and at least relatively dust free, so I lower my female onto it and gently brush back her hair from her face. She is so small and fragile beneath my claws. I can not believe that she is so fierce.

I am captivated by her. And I have been ever since Drisk tore through the top of the

train and showed me the first glimpse of what he knew by scent. My mate. Our mate. I can feel it deep in my bones now that I've had a moment to get a good look at her and draw her scent deeply into me. I understand why our ancestors valued the wyvern's choosing so highly. Although an orc's nose is keen, and among the Cold Mountain orcs it is even sharper because of our breeding, a wyvern can scent for miles.

I should summon Drisk. He could manage well enough on his own in gathering the furs from our bed and returning with them so that we can keep our female comfortably warm until I can clean out the hearths and fires can be lit. Reaching up with one hand, I unfasten the flight mask and toss it on the bed. Opening my mind to Drisk, I softly whistle the precise notes of our call. Although the connection, once made, is more difficult to access without the assistance of the strands, I'm grateful that it is one benefit that developed over the years. I am also aware of the fact that it is a condition that no other gathol enjoys. His hum of response returns immediately, rolling through me with his affirmation.

"We have been assigned a new rookery within the palace cliff face. Bring the bedding and whatever you can manage," I instruct him as my gaze drifts disdainfully over the chamber. "It needs a lot of work."

"No welcoming fires? Imagine that," he scoffs wryly, and I cannot help but grimace in agreement. "Is that what the spoiled princeling wanted—to give us a new rookery where he can keep us under this thumb, to use us?" There is a note of sly speculation in the wyvern's mental voice that brings a reluctant smile to lips.

"Not exactly," I reply. "It has... conditions. One of many that comes with being permitted to have a mate."

"He thinks to permit us to mate?" The wyvern's amusement sharpens lethally with a distinct edge of bloodlust that seems to be unparalleled among wyverns to my

knowledge. “Who here assumes to control our mating? You should slaughter him and let his blood run over the stones as a warning to any orc who seeks to set their boot upon you.”

“That would do remarkable things for our mate’s acceptance,” I reply dryly. “I do not wish her to be alienated from the clan as we are. The clan may hold some odd sort of respect toward us as Vorn says—and wants to capitalize on—but that does not mean that they will be welcoming to her. Especially if we start slaughtering its prominent members.”

Drisk grunts in reluctant acknowledgment. As much as he despises the Cold Fang Clan and insists that being a drehl is not only a special mark, but that the clan is somehow beneath me, I know that he will not do anything that will harm our female.

“What do we need?” he replies sourly.

“There’s not much of anything,” I grumble. “We will need most things transferred to our new rookery to make it livable. But our first priority is for our female. She is cold and injured?—”

“Injured?” Drisk falls deadly silent at the other end of our bond.

“Nothing the healer can’t fix,” I quickly assure him. “Our mate has proved to the clan that she possesses teeth. This will elevate her within the clan’s esteem. And I have dealt with the offender in a way that will make him rethink coming anywhere near her.”

“You should have dealt with him in a more permanent fashion,” Drisk observes with a mental snap of his teeth.

“I wanted to,” I admit, and the darkness rolls in my gut in sinister agreement.

“But you did not wish to make things more difficult for her,” the male echoes with a sigh. I get the mental sense of his movements as he broadcasts them to me through our bond, but I am distracted by a sharp knock at the door.

“The healer is here,” I inform him. “Let me know when you have arrived at the eastern gateway of the palace rookeries. I will identify our rookery when you get here.”

“The eastern rookeries are nearly falling down.” I hear the resigned dismay in his voice, and I understand the fury he is holding back in that one simple statement.

One of these days, Drisk will attempt to burn the entire Cold Fang territory to the ground, and I do not know if I will have the strength against my seething darkness to stop him.

Reluctant to leave my female’s side, I slide off the bed and head toward the door as another knock, this one somewhat harder, echoes through the rookery. I walk through the main chamber, the echo of my passage within the nearly empty space emphasizing its decrepit state. A fist strikes the door again and barely sounds once before I wrench the door open and peer down at the female staring up at me with wide brown eyes with a large steaming washbasin in her hands.

My brow rises in response. A human? That is unexpected. I didn’t know that Ahandra had a human among her apprentices. As I stare down at her, I gradually become aware that she is shrinking uncertainly into herself.

“I-I’m Gwen. T-there is a h-human in n-need of healing?” she whispers.

Although I’m not blocking the entrance, I realize that I may be standing just close enough to make the female uncomfortable. Stepping back, I wave her through with a grunt. She scurries through with a nervous glance cast in my direction, and I close the

door behind her.

“This way,” I rumble and turn abruptly to head through the rookery.

I hear the rush of footsteps follow behind me, but I don't look back. She seems uneasy with my focus on her, so I keep my gaze trained straight ahead until we arrive at the bedchamber. I enter wordlessly and take a seat on a large chair at the other end of the room, facing the bed. My gaze falls upon my female, and from my peripheral vision, I see the apprentice hurry through the room. Her tiny gasp of dismay echoes through the bedchamber, but I avoid looking directly at her, though the water in the large bowl she is carrying sloshes loudly in a way that makes my ear twitch. At least the little healer seems to be properly caring for my mate as she carefully unwinds the rudimentary bandage and bathes the wound.

Settling back in the chair, I cross my arms over my chest and wait for Drisk's signal. Given her gentle care, I am certain I can trust her with my female when I must go down the tunnel chamber that provides a direct access point for the wyvern into the rookery.

### Chapter

### Nine

### ANYA

My head feels like it's stuffed with cotton as I sluggishly awaken, so much so that the last thing I want to do is wake up, especially since I've never been quite so toasty warm in my life. It is so luxurious that I could almost ignore anything except that my hand hurts like a bitch. There isn't the pull of stitches as I've had back-alley butchers piece me back together in my youth. Rather, it is just the deep echo of pain that follows after a legitimate healer has done their work. I haven't had the occasion to experience it often—as it is an expense that I've been careful to avoid—but I recognize it and I flex my hand experimentally as I push myself up to a seated position and peer around the enormous, if empty, bedroom.

Enormous is really an inadequate word, I decide within seconds of perusing my surroundings.

The bed isn't even what I would properly consider a bed, but a heavily padded platform that stretches from one side of the room to the other. It is so large that it could probably comfortably fit a family of fifteen and several additional people if they wanted to lie in the excess space at the foot of the bed. The room boasts plenty of unrealized sitting space and an impressive hearth besides the bed filling half of it.

Its shocking size aside, there are also the barebones of luxury apparent despite the emptiness of the room. The very dusty but very richly upholstered chair in one corner

speaks of it even if there is nothing else in the room except me and the excessively large mound of furs taking up most of the bed. It all strikes me as so unimaginable—like something directly from the pages of a fairy tale—that I cannot even begin to guess where the hell I am.

Common sense says to stay put until someone arrives to give me answers, but the suspicious, paranoid side of me is louder and meaner and demands that I hunt down my abductor and corner him until he returns me home. Except... what home?

The thought gives me pause. By now, any casualties and missing people from the train attack will have likely spread far and wide by telegram. If David hasn't received word of it already, then he undoubtedly will soon. If he is anything like most men—and the odds certainly weigh against me—he won't be the least bit inclined to take on what everyone will see as an orc's castoff. I almost want to laugh at the miserable fact that the bad reputation I worked so hard to outrun will simply be replaced by another of equally damnable disrepute.

Well... fuck. I drum my fingers on the bed in frustration. It is an impossible situation, one I can't outmaneuver with the usual tricks. Which means trying something entirely unexpected and new. I draw in a deep breath and slowly exhale as I allow the shift in momentum settle within me, and a new plan surfaces within my mind, bringing a smile to my face.

No problem. Change of plans then. Hunt down one pale orc who thought he would steal himself a woman, and make sure he follows through with properly taking care of me now that he's got me. Because one thing is for certain: I'm not going to take my chances out there in the world now that I have nothing. Even my paltry pocket money was left behind in the train within my damned valise—not that it would have gotten me very far if I had to start over somewhere.

In short, the orc is stuck with me, and he needs to know exactly what sort of

standards I expect. Poor male. I suppose I should feel sorry for him—except I don't possess even an ounce of sympathy for the scoundrel. At least he came close to making mincemeat out of the nasty male... what's his name... Kael. That at least is encouraging, though he may not feel so protective when he realizes what all goes into my general upkeep to maintain my basic comforts. Comforts that I also demanded when submitting my application to the agency as a mail-order bride.

I'm certainly not going to be any easier on this Daghel.

Snickering quietly to myself, I crawl to the edge of the bed and drop off its side. I glance back at it as I straighten and peer at it in wonder. Aside from being quite large, it is also exceedingly tall. I won't be getting back into it without help.

I wonder whose bed it is, anyway. I purse my lips thoughtfully, considering the matter as I stride across the room. I can't imagine any scenario where one would need that much space to sleep comfortably. At least the room is pleasantly warm, even if the stone floors are far too chilly beneath my feet. I will have to request some basic slippers if I'm going to be living in this icy village. I don't relish the thought of my feet becoming frozen lumps.

I'm nearly at the door when it swings open, and a woman walks in with a tray and nearly collides with me. Though she wears a scarf folded and pinned neatly over her straw-colored hair, there is an air of purpose to her that comes to a crashing halt the moment she catches sight of me and stumbles. The tray tips, its contents sliding rapidly to one end in a prelude to the coming disaster. I rush forward and catch the falling end of the tray, stabilizing it even as she lets out a squeal of dismay. Her breath catches, her eyes rounding in horror as she releases the side I'm supporting to slap her hand over her mouth. I stare at her curiously but gently pry the tray from her hands before any other incidents can occur and carry it over to the small table by the chair that—unlike much of the room—at least appears to have been recently wiped down.

“Relax,” I call back to her and curiously study the contents of the tray. Looks like some sort of medicinal balm in a small pot and a bowl of bone broth. Huh. She must be the one taking care of me. “Nothing spilled. You don’t have to worry about being scolded or having a mess to clean up.”

“T-that’s not what I-I’m w-worried about,” she rambles nervously.

“Hmm?” I frown in confusion and turn toward her as I straighten. “What has you so jumpy then?”

A loud sound like the exhalation of an enormous monster blows through the room, stirring the tiny hairs on the back of my neck, and I freeze as the young woman’s hand comes up to point at the bed.

“T-t-that,” she stammers.

Dread coils deep within my belly as I slowly turn toward the bed I just vacated. The furs bulge upward in a mound that comes close to touching the ceiling before they drop away from sapphire scales, the sight of which makes my mouth go dry with terror. No wonder I was so toasty warm. Hell, no wonder the room itself is far warmer than the fire alone could account for! I was snuggled up with a damned wyvern!

A blood-curdling scream rends the air and I’m not entirely proud of the fact that it came from me. I don’t particularly care at this moment either, however, as my entire focus has narrowed down to putting as much distance between me and that monster as possible. I backpedal so abruptly that I don’t notice that the girl had hurried to me until we collide and drop like a pair of stones. Unfortunately, my view from the floor gives me an even more terrible view as the wyvern’s neck snakes and its massive jaw opens wide in a yawn that reveals a tapered red tongue and numerous dagger-like teeth amid a small puff of smoke and lick of flames that makes me feel positively

faint to look at.

Amber eyes open as his neck curls, drawing his head around to look directly at me. Even though I feel no pride in it, I welcome the darkness that descends over me as I feel the urge to faint right there on the floor. My last cognizant thought is less than inspiring—at least I don't have far to fall seconds before my head hits the damnable stone floor.

### Chapter

### Ten

### DRISK

I blink at my special human, torn between conflicting emotions as concern wars with a foreign sensation of what I can only imagine is mirth. I have felt it a few times throughout the endless passing of ages of my existence, but it has been too infrequent and shadowed by much misery that I barely recognize it. Keeping my wings pinned tightly along my arms and sides, I rise from the bed and prowl to the floor, my gaze focused on my female as the healer wiggles out from beneath her prone form and flies out the door. Disdain fills me that this Gwen found it so easy to abandon my human, but I cannot fault her too much given that she merely left her in my care.

After all, my female will never be in danger while she is in my care. In fact, there is no safer place than beneath my wing. If any male had dared to do as Kael had done, I would have eaten him on the spot before Daghel had a chance to return. Now that I think on it, I probably should eat the healer too for just abandoning my mate on the floor, but I do not wish to leave her side to chase the silly female through the palace.

A lick of flame springs from my mouth and snuffs out in the air as I stare at the door with disgust. The healer's fear still sours the air, and I can taste its essence as she flees down the hall.

My pointed ears perk at the distant sound of heavy footfall, and Daghel's welcome scent fills my nose. I dislike the palace. There are too many scents mixed together,

many of which do not belong lurking so close to our rookery. They are intrusive and unwelcome, and yet still these orcs persist. The disrespect makes my lips pull back from my teeth. In the depths of the Cold Mountains, it would not have been tolerated. It would never have happened before.

I grumble quietly to myself as I fold my arms and legs beneath me, taking care not to pinch a wing as I settle around my mate, warming her and chasing the chill from the cold stone floor. I would keep an eternal ember burning within the stones, but with the condition of the palace, there is a good chance that the fire would rush through the stonework, setting everything within ablaze. Not a great loss but Daghel would disapprove. His opinion is the only one that matters, for he is the only reason for my purpose here. His birth awakened me, and I searched the mountains for years until I finally caught his scent and felt the familiar tightening in my loins that roared with lust and adoration through me.

Surprisingly, it is the same feeling that I felt when I caught her scent.

I did not anticipate this little female, however, though I welcomed the idea of Daghel choosing a mate. Although I saw generations of orcs mate and give rise to new ones, I never seriously considered what it would mean to have a mate of my own until I scented Daghel's loneliness. It puzzled me at first—why would he be lonely when he had me here? But I watched the interactions of orcs with their mates, and while there were a few males I barely restrained myself from eviscerating, I slowly came to understand exactly what he needed. Her scent, however, was unanticipated. It nearly broke me as a wild need to cage her and lock her to me as I breed her consumed me.

I blink down at her with amusement, curling my tail protectively around her. Judging by her reaction, I do not think she will welcome a mating lock just yet.

The door groans, and Daghel fills the doorway. His dark gaze moves to the rumpled bed before shifting to fall upon us as his pale arms cross over his chest.

“Gwen fetched me.”

I grumble at his observation and curl myself more comfortably around our female. “Gwen is a silly girl. It is only by the grace of the gods that she has more gift with the healing arts than she has common sense.”

His brow cocks in response, but his mouth flattens as he shakes his head grimly and strides across the room, closing the distance between us to crouch by our female. He runs a clawed hand gently over her cheek and sighs with relief.

“She merely fainted,” he rumbles before lifting his gaze to me once more. “What happened?”

My tail twitches, disconcerted. “I did not expect her to be so frightened,” I admit. How could I when all of my experiences on the mountain have showed close, loving relationships between gathol pair bonds and their mates? “I returned from my hunt and noted that, despite the fire, she was shivering. She is uncomfortable in the cold, so I sought to remedy it in the quickest and most efficient way. She did not react well.”

The corner of his mouth hitches faintly and I stare curiously at his expression, but he is no longer looking at me. Instead, he is peering down at our female thoughtfully.

“She is strong. She will adjust, perhaps even better than many other humans brought here. It was simply too much too soon,” he says and gives me a pointed look. “I did tell you to rest in the common room until she woke.”

I huff in a quiet grumble. I did not like being out there when my delicious female was hidden away from me in here. “I waited for an entire rotation of the sun,” I mutter.

Truly, my self-restraint should be praised. Wyverns rarely have patience for such

social conventions, though I've noticed that those born through the clans with some of the orc bloodlines within their veins have a milder appearance and temperament. As an ancient, my own bloodlines show in sharp contrast when compared to theirs. Although I'm only slightly larger, making it possible for me to comfortably fit into the rookeries, I know that their features are far blunter and broader, giving them a "pleasant" appearance. Now that I think on it, the females and many of the males often shy away from me, and I have heard comments more than once about my "monstrous" look.

Is this what she saw when she looked at me?

My chest tightens uncomfortably, my stomach souring as if I had eaten something rotten. Daghel's gaze shifts back to me, sensing a hint of my distress through our bond. His brows rise in surprise as he regards me.

"You are worried."

It is not a question, but then it need not be one when he knows my feelings through our joining. Still, I gnash my teeth in annoyance, hating the sudden weakness flooding through me.

"She is afraid of me," I grumble, echoing my concern.

Daghel snorts and shakes his head. "They are all afraid when they first arrive."

"But I am not like the other wyverns."

He lifts his head and regards me quietly for a long moment. "No, you are not. But she may like that better."

I am not sure if I believe that, but I settle beside her and lower my head to the floor so

that I can watch over her until she awakens. I rarely mind the fear of orcs and humans. Usually, I savor it. But not from her.

I just do not know how to win her affection when I have never attempted to win the love of anyone. I never cared to. I never cared for anyone except Daghel, and he accepted me and grew to love me quickly because he had been bred toward that expectation. But this female presents a new challenge that I am uncertain if I will be successful in overcoming.

Chapter

Eleven

ANYA

Warmth envelops me. Even the stone floor feels delightfully warm, which sends little pings of warning through my mind, but I can't quite seem to connect the dots. My brow furrows and my hand twitches, sending a sharp aching sensation through it and up my arm. Oh, yes... the healer mended it. A vision fills my mind of a woman still in the first blush of youth with jaw-length blonde hair and brown eyes, a look of surprise on her face.

But why am I on the floor?

Heat coils around me as something scaled brushes against my arm. The muscles in that limb tighten in immediate response, and my breath catches even as I struggle to fight for a state of calm.

Oh. Right. The wyvern. Is it... lying beside me? That doesn't sound like the behavior of a monster preparing to snack on a human, or even one that intends me harm in any fashion when it could easily just let me freeze on the floor. In fact, now that I'm able to slowly untangle the events in my mind, I would dare say that if it had planned on killing me, it would have likely eaten me long before I woke up the first time. Instead, it cuddled with me in bed, much like it seems to be doing now that I'm on the floor. Cuddling isn't threatening... right? I've even known a few aggressive cuddlers and they are about as dangerous as a pillow. Only threatening if they happen to

accidentally smother you.

Blowing out a slow breath, I crack one eye open to peer at the creature lying beside me. Its head is roughly twice the size of an orc's head, which puts it in large proportions, but not quite as terrifying as something that could swallow even an adult orc in one bite. As if sensing my stare, the eye nearest to me opens, its slit pupil expanding slightly in a sea of amber. It doesn't move, but returns my regard quietly.

"You... you aren't going to eat me, right?" I whisper.

"Would you like me to?" it queries in a musically sonorous voice. "I could make it very good for you. Such pleasure would be a little death as it claims you. It would please me to offer this."

That... is an unexpected offer. Heat rushes into my cheeks as the dragon's blatant innuendo makes my belly tighten with interest. It seems wrong. I have done some perverted acts over the years to please my gentlemen clients, but I never quite stepped over the line of familiar humanoid features. I know that many of the more monstrous species satisfy themselves with the street girls willing to accept their coin, but I never dallied with more than the occasional elf who lived within the capital or visited on business. A wyvern though... That sounds even beyond what a street girl would accept invading her cunt. It was too other, too bestial, and yet I cannot deny that its whispered promise does things to me, even if my mind wishes to reject it.

"Cease your flirting, Drisk," Daghel chuckles, and the deep sound makes my head whip around to the chair where the big male is reclined with ease.

Despite his relaxed posture, I get the sense that laughing and smiling are not familiar to him. His laughter sounds raspy with little use, and his smile is merely a hint traced upon the corners of his lips.

“Do not be concerned. Drisk will not harm you. In fact, despite appearances, you are safer with him than any other on these peaks,” he rumbles. “He is quite incapable of harming you.”

He is? I peer at the wyvern as I let this new information sink in, and without a certain comfort base with the monster curled so gently around me.

“Does that include you?” I ask in challenge and am met with another rusty chuckle.

“Yes,” Daghel muses after a long minute. “Unlike Drisk, I can hurt you. You have my oath, however, that I will not. Of all people, you are the one I value the most.”

I scoff a little at his words as I struggle awkwardly to my feet, taking care not to step on Drisk. “Forgive me if a little hard to believe. You don’t even know me. Hell, you don’t even know my name. You just stole me.”

That faint hint of a smile returns as he seems to see straight through me with his dark, impenetrable gaze. “It does not matter. I know enough. I know that Drisk’s scenting led him true directly to you, and that wyvern’s choosing never fails. I know that you are strong and brave. And that you are far bolder and more spirited than you permit others to see—or are willing to see in yourself.”

“And how do you figure that?” I demand.

Daghel taps the side of his nose with a claw, his smile curling further, giving his features a predatory cast. “With you this close, I can smell you.”

I gape at him, embarrassed and horrified at his insight. He can smell me? Suddenly, I feel very exposed. I’ve always been able to control the perceptions others have had of me to at least some degree to hide my vulnerabilities, but there is no hiding anything from him or the wyvern if they can smell my reactions so acutely. I stumble back,

ignoring Drisk's querying whistle of concern. I can't handle this. I am supposed to have some control here, but I have none— none!

Daghel's smile disappears, his expression becoming wintry once again as he uncoils from the chair and slowly to his full height. "What are you doing, female?"

"Stop," I snap, my voice whipping out in a broken lash that startles him enough that he stops in place. His dark eyes, however, search my face as if trying to pry out every secret. "You don't know me," I bite out in emphasis.

He inclines his head slowly in acquiesce. "Then tell me. I wish... we wish to know you."

A bitter laugh falls from my lips as a shiver of fear overtakes me. I feel like he is humoring me, no matter how serious he appears. And how would I know any differently? I can't scent his reactions. Not only do I not have the upper hand, but it turns out that I'm also at a serious disadvantage. Drisk lifts his head from the floor, his amber gaze following me as I scramble away from them.

"This... this isn't going to work," I mumble, and I can feel the weight of their gazes as they narrow upon me. "It may be fine with the other women your people have dragged to the mountains, but I... I can't do this."

"You cannot give us your name?" Daghel's query sounds almost offhand, but his focus is intent on me as if trying to solve a puzzle.

How do I make them understand? Monsters I can deal with, but this is different and somehow even more terrible.

"Start with your name," he rumbles. "It is a small thing, and we can go from there."

“Anastasia,” I say automatically, but then let out a miserable laugh. “No. No, it’s not. Anastasia is a guise... a game I play with clients. Anastasia is nothing but a mask that I put on that reflects back to men every single fantasy.”

“Then who are you,” Drisk hisses, and the sinews of his wings strew slightly, all the long anterior fingers and flexible wing spines. “This that you speak of does not define you. Speak your truth to us so that we may see you.”

“Anya,” I whisper. “I’m just Anya. A girl who is... nothing.”

“False!” The word cuts through the air, startling me as the wyvern rises on his powerful legs to peer down at me. “You are mine.”

“And mine,” Daghel growls.

I stare down at my bare feet. The floor is growing chilly again. I can feel it seeping up through my soles to meet the cold gathering in my chest. “I’ve done... things to survive.”

A chillingly fast clicking sound fills the room, and my eyes fly to Drisk. Is that... wyvern laughter? By the gods, it’s disturbing.

“Survival is all that is important,” Drisk observes, his wings snapping to his sides against as his arms fold casually in front of him as he regards me with what I swear is an air of amusement. “So, why do you fear? I can smell its perfume. Fear is an enticing delicacy but not from you... never from you,” he purrs earnestly.

“I... fear that if I cannot hide some parts of myself, that no one could want me,” I admit as my mind goes back to my hasty efforts to acquire my match with David Mallory. “I have always given men everything they wanted because it was always just my body... always just... flesh. My thoughts and feelings were always my own.

But this... If you two can smell what I'm feeling or somehow gain insight into my thoughts that way..."

"You feel that it invades your privacy," Daghel finishes, his head inclining thoughtfully. "It makes you feel vulnerable."

"Yes," I whisper. "And more than that... I'm far from innocent. More so than most women who have joined your clan."

I jump at the sound of Drisk's clicking laughter as the wyvern ignores the sharp look Daghel casts his way. I shrink slightly at the sound, but then gasp in surprise when his neck snakes toward me and his muzzle practically knocks me off my feet as he gently headbutts me.

"Absurd human morality," he chastises. "Orcs do not care about such things, and wyvern care even less. A cunt is a free cunt at a female's discretion to use, just as males enjoy their pricks. We are only territorial upon finding our mates."

That is a remarkably revolutionary sentiment. And... I believe him. Despite his strange, inhuman coldness, there is a raw honesty there that makes me want to weep with gratitude. No condemnation. He couldn't care less and was making that abundantly clear. A tear leaks from my eye to run down my cheek and is immediately followed by another.

"Are you so burdened with shame?"

I shake my head. Of course not. I have always been the mistress of my destiny and have never felt shame for even a moment for what I've had to do to guarantee that my needs are seen to.

"Then what?" Daghel prods.

And here we come to the crux of the issue that I loathe to admit.

“I do not wish for you to regret taking me. I wanted to keep control of the situation and feel secure in demanding that you keep me because I thought you would and could never know me any more than I wished you to.”

“That will never happen,” he growls, and he strides across the floor to me to cup my cheek with his dangerously clawed hand. “You are ours, Anya, and that is all that will ever matter. From here we carve our future together.”

Drisk hums his agreement, and something gradually loosens within my chest, a tension I carried for ages without even realizing it. I’m still uncertain what the future holds, but I sense a burden of release that leaves me feeling more like myself than I have in ages as the guise I carefully cultivated for so long slowly unravels. A spark of excitement comes to life inside of me as I savor the feeling of Daghel’s palm on my cheek. Only then do I notice the warm curl of Drisk’s tail around my leg as each male comforts me in his own way.

The corner of Daghel’s mouth suddenly tips, pulling his lips tight around his tusk as I get a glimpse of his sharp fangs. “Welcome, Anya.”

### Chapter

### Twelve

### DAGHEL

It takes all my strength of will to remain still behind the throne as Vorn holds court. While the prince permitted me two days to get my mate settled, it was hardly enough time. She is slowly unwinding, especially after the first night spent sleeping comfortably between us. Trust will be hard won, as I am certain that she bears many scars that she does not speak of, but her laughter is coming a little more easily and she is starting to open up more, though she has not ventured out of the palace yet. Nevertheless, when Gwen brought the dark blue gown made by one of the village seamstresses, Anya did not hesitate to dress herself to accompany me to the throne room despite Drisk's grumbled protests.

I glance at her, a warmth filling my chest, chasing away the ice that has accumulated over a lifetime. Anya is a true picture of beauty as she stands proudly, her face impressively impassive as her gaze moves along the gathered males and their mates. She reveals nothing of her inner thoughts, and even her scent has a mellow warmth to it, betraying nothing as well. Her gaze shifts and slides to meet mine, and I can see the faint downward pull of her mouth in silent commentary of the meeting. I grunt quietly in agreement, keeping the volume low and just for her ears.

Vorn is in fine form making a complete ass of himself as the males flaunt their mates and brag of their exploits without the slightest regard for the flinches of discomfort or anger on their faces. And this is the state that the Cold Fang Clan has come to—a

disgrace.

“Perhaps you can enlighten us, Daghel,” Vorn booms, drawing my cool regard directly to him. As I have not been paying any attention to their ridiculous conversation, I merely arch an eyebrow in silent inquiry, drawing a chuckle from the male and all others gathered within the room. “Since you and Drisk have had your female skewered upon your pricks these last couple of days, perhaps you can enlighten us as to when you think you might expect a pup from her?” Vorn leers at Anya as he turns in his throne, his weight leaning against its arm. “Or whether we might expect the pup to be an orc or wyvern. They say that the odds favor whoever breeds her more soundly and repeatedly.”

“I certainly didn’t think we would be spared from hearing her screams while you and that foul-tempered creature mounted her,” Ajek remarks with a smirk before draining the contents of his cup, rousing the laughter of the surrounding males.

Kael snickers into his cup and directs a particularly nasty smile toward my female, making my fists clench. “Daghel probably gagged her with his prick down her throat to keep the bitch silent.”

“I, for one, would enjoy listening to her squeal while pierced on their cocks.” Mattik, a heavily tattooed male who just recently returned from scouting, comments and squeezes meaningfully between his legs.

I contemplate the best way to remove the member when another round of laughter fills the room, and my mouth sets into a frown. Mattik. A shame that something larger failed to eat him while he was scouting. Perhaps I should let Drisk satisfy his appetite... just once. I am seriously entertaining the idea when my mate’s cool voice cuts through my gathering anger, dampening it as she replies to their collective impertinence.

“The joke is on you then,” she replies. “As it happens, I find pain to be the most profound aphrodisiac, so you would have had to listen closely to hear the moans. And seeing how you clearly can’t even pay enough attention to your own mates’ pleasure, I’m not the least bit shocked that you missed it.”

The laughter falls silent as the males turn reproachful looks at my mate before turning suspicious glowers toward the females kneeling at their feet with their heads bowed. Anya is not the least bit bothered by their overt hostility but smirks at them as her arms cross in front of her chest, the blue fabric of her gown flattering every delicate curve of her body. The sight of her makes my mouth water despite the fact that she’s wearing more now than she has over the last few days. Given the state of her bloodied and torn dress, Anya has been wearing little more than a long woolen chemise within our rookery. And yet this female is pure temptation, no matter how she is attired.

Vorn’s laughter breaks the strained silence, and he slaps the throne’s arm a little too jovially and with a little too much force so that the rings on his hand strike the stone clamorously, echoing through the chamber. I glance suspiciously at him from the corner of my eye but quickly look away before anyone notices. I know that he will find a way to make me compensate him for this embarrassment. My lips twitch faintly. Let him try.

“Daghel’s mate is clearly something very special,” he chuckles, and his eyes rove over my mate, his long tongue sliding over his tusks. “It is funny that I do not scent you or your wyvern on her, but some humans take a bit more time to mark. And the healer does report that she asks for bathing water to be melted from the snow every day. I would discourage it if I were you if you do not want another male attempting to mount her.”

“I imagine that another male would prefer to keep his prick attached to his body,” I reply coldly, and this time, the prince’s smile definitely slips as his eyes glitter

angrily at me.

“Naturally,” he rumbles and turns away from me to address the males seated on their large lounging benches in front of him. “And we shall end our meeting on that note. Return home in peace.” He rises from his throne and steps down from it. He does not make any move to depart, however, but glances at me over his shoulder as I gather Anya to my side and prepare to leave. “A moment, if you will, Daghel.”

A desire to rip his guts through his stomach and gnaw upon his tender internal organs claws deeply through my belly. I have no excuse to offer Anya for this feeling as Vorn is very much another orc, and yet my instinctive impulses that see him as nothing more than a fattened hog to slaughter are something I feel no shame for.

My female is truly mating herself to a monster, but I cannot pity her, nor can I let her go. She will be a monster’s mate in every way and will watch on as I feast on those who subdue us and the vulnerable within the clan.

Turning toward him, I incline my head in acknowledgment and wait for him to speak. He peers at him as he shoos away his females. They leave in a flurry of whispers and giggles as he picks up a rag and wipes the grease from his meal off his claws. All the while, his eyes move over me speculatively.

“I hope that I did not bring you into my innermost council just to endure your threats, Daghel. Is this the behavior I should expect from you?”

“It was not a personal threat. I was merely responding to an insinuation of what someone might do against my mate. I did not consider it inappropriate or a reflection of you,” I reply.

Vorn eyes me for a moment longer, his hand dropping to brush idly over his sword hanging from the throne, but then he chuckles as he casts his rag aside. “Quite so. I,

of course, would never permit such a thing to happen within the palace. The advice was meant more broadly. I do think your warning, however, will be an effective discouragement.”

I incline my head again as if accepting what praise he offers, despite biting back my sneer. He watches me and then nods as he turns away.

“That is all for now, Daghel. Do try to make your female scream. And consider my words about prohibiting baths. It will discourage talk among your brethren.”

They are not my brethren. They are mangled, rotting filth beneath my boots, but I give Vorn a small bow as the male exits with all the expected pomp. It is only when he is gone that my hand goes to Anya’s elbow to guide her toward our rookery.

“He is absolutely disgusting,” Anya mutters, her nose wrinkling as she walks at an unhurried pace at my side.

I grunt in agreement, but a feeling of pride awakens further within me, and I give her a sly smile. My female is not only astute and possessing considerable dignity, but she has great control of herself, expertly fooling those around her. Much of that is because of her insistence on practice with us these last few days so that she would not be an open book to the rest of the clan, but it speaks volumes of the sort of female that will be at my side in the years to come. And I, for one, cannot wait to see her bloom fully into her full power.

Still, an uncertainty weighs heavily on me that I must speak upon. “Your disgust... is it weighed the most heavily against the thought of being mounted and bred?”

Her eyebrows go up but then immediately beetle as she considers my question. “In a way. Though it was more because he thought that he had some special privilege to speak on and jest about something so private. It is what you expect to see in the Pits

of Zyl.” I give her a confused look, and she smiles apologetically. “The Pits are the lowest levels of the city where the foulest thieves and murderers gather.”

I mull over her words as we ascend to our rookery in silence. There is not much that I am willing to speak of in the corridors. Vorn is unworthy—a blight and stain upon the Fang Peaks that needed to be dealt with—but he is not without his supporters. And in the long halls of the palace, it is far too easy to be overheard.

“Vorn does not speak with the authority or dignity of the Cold Fang throne,” I assure her once we are secure behind the impenetrable weight of our rookery door. If nothing else, the individual rookeries are well protected against attempts at spying. “I consider him less than even the males of your Pit, because his ambitions are fed and bought by nothing more than promises that fuel the hands of his followers. He undertakes nothing himself and accomplishes nothing other than being a festering pestilence within this clan and upon the throne.”

Anya stares at me through my heavily growled outburst, her lips pursing in a silent whistle of appreciation that sends a tiny hum of pleasure deep within me. “Tell me how you really feel,” she teases, and I huff at the joke.

“More than that, he is not a gathol, and the matters of the gathols are nothing more than a joke to him and his followers. Something which Ajek encourages so that he is not held to the laws regarding gathol bonds.”

“I don’t follow,” she murmurs, her brow furrowing once more.

I brush a claw gently across the crease between her eyebrows until they relax and I smile faintly down at her. “In the old traditions, the gathols are the warriors and hunters because we are unconstrained by the mountain passes because of our bonds with our wyverns. The gathols are a necessity for the clan, and so there have long been many laws that protect both the orcs and wyverns within a gathol

bond—something which Ajek refuses to take part in. And because of Vorn, he is permitted to. Vorn and his ilk have cast much of this aside, making us merely a part of an attack team designed to carry other males down to raid. Males he considers more worthy to capture mates and wealth,” I add.

Anya’s brows fly up in sudden comprehension. “The male on the train!”

I nod grimly. “Verkol is another male pledged to him but not of his inner circle, so you did not see him tonight. It is guaranteed that those in attendance will share news with their underlings, including him.”

“So the gathol—the orc and wyvern, ah, teams—you are being pushed aside.”

“And pushing our females out of their positions of honor since they have always flown with us since time immemorial,” I add. “Only a gathol’s mate can be trusted to fly with the wyvern if the orc of the pair must fight separately.”

A frown of confusion mars her lips. “But I don’t understand... How did anything about the gathols and their females even enter the conversation?”

“Because he spoke of Drisk breeding you,” I remind her. “He may have spoken of it in jest, as did the others, but it is careless and cruel when they know that being taken by a wyvern is always shocking to the humans when they join with gathols. It is something that Drisk and I have not yet mentioned because our priority was to help you become comfortable with us. The tactless way Vorn and his males handled it was not what I wanted.”

“Are you telling me that he was serious? They were serious?” She glances at me with amused disbelief. “You expect me to take a wyvern’s cock?” A soft snort of laughter escapes her when I again incline my head in affirmation, bringing a smile to my lips. “You first... and I get to watch.”

I take her hand in mine and gently brush my tusks and lips over the back of it—the highest sign of affection from Cold Mountain orcs—and smile down at her. “I consider it an honor to initiate you into the pleasures.”

Chapter

Thirteen

ANYA

I initiate me into the pleasures? Holy hells! I stare down at him in horror as a tongue of heat unfurls rapidly within my belly without my leave. And is he going to do this by allowing Drisk to mount him? It defies all beliefs.

“Are you certain? Drisk is a wyvern, and he’s... not small,” I murmur doubtfully but Drisk’s clicking laughter interrupts any response from him as the wyvern enters the main room.

“You did not enlighten her about a wyvern and orc’s bond before mentioning the swallowing of girthy pricks?” Drisk asks Daghel with a sort of savage glee that makes my toes curl with the anticipation of what’s coming.

Hopefully me, repeatedly.

“I have been mounted by Drisk since he claimed and bonded me,” Daghel assures me as he removes his fur cloak and tunic, tossing them casually on one of the lounges.

My mouth goes dry as I realize that all of this is completely in earnest. He is really going to do it... and let me watch. He holds my gaze as he kicks off his boots so that his bare clawed feet touch the floor and unbuckles his belt before flinging that aside as well. My pulse speeds up, and I’m sure it must be matching the rattling purr of the

wyvern as Drisk's amber eyes fasten on the orc. A hint of a smile plays at the corner of Daghel's mouth, as if he understands exactly how much it's affecting us, and I realize belatedly that I haven't been even attempting to control my reaction as I watch him strip. I know he is being barraged by the perfume of my arousal that is only growing stronger as he proceeds to loosen the fabric gathered and tied at his waist. When at last it falls free, the material flows around his legs like a black woolen skirt that shifts around his ankles with every casual movement of his body.

His fingers skim over the ties of the waistband enticingly, but he doesn't go any further. Instead, he nods toward the hall leading to our bedchamber, his dark eyes no longer icy as they blaze with the fire of his arousal. I lick my lips, suddenly nervous and very, very curious about logistics.

"No offense, but how does this work? I'm assuming, by looking at Drisk, that wyverns have internal genitalia. How do you manage cleanliness or even?"

"Show her," Daghel interrupts, his eyes narrowing on me with desire.

The wyvern hums in agreement and sits back on his hind legs, drawing his arms to his sides so that I have an unobstructed view of his genital sheath. His cock slides out, the blue tip pushing from the sheath as inch by inch of his slippery cock is exposed. And it is impressive. Bearing numerous bumps and one large ridge that runs down the length to a raised pebbly spot at his cock's tips, it's far longer and thicker than anything I've taken. It's also mercifully smaller than I expected, considering the sheer size of his frame. While he is no more than twice Daghel's size, and more accurately quite a bit short on that, I had assumed that his cock would be more in proportion to it.

"Do you see the slick on his prick?" Daghel asks, and I quickly nod my head in confirmation. "That is not only lubrication but also a potent antiseptic, to the point where healers covet it as a cleansing fluid for wounds."

I balk at that bit of news. “Are you telling me that I had wyvern cock juice spread over my wound?”

His lips twist in amusement as Drisk lets out another hair-raising cackle. “Straight from Drisk, as it happens.”

“Merciful gods,” I mutter. “That certainly comes close to the top of my weird shit list. So I’m assuming that whenever his phallus draws back into his sheath that it is thoroughly cleansed?”

Daghel nods and turns to Drisk, his big hand covering the wyvern’s sheath as he slowly strokes down toward the base, where he points to what appears to be a large gland in the back.

“This is not his testicles,” he informs me as he glances up to meet my gaze with obvious humor. “It is a special gland that stores the waste that occurs whenever his sheath retracts and triggers a cleansing with his excessive fluids. The waste fluid is collected here to be ejected at a later time when Drisk leaves the rookery.”

“My prick is cleaner than any orc’s on this mountain,” Drisk rejoins with a rapid click of laughter. “And my fires sustain the biochemical balance within my bodily fluids to keep it perfectly regulated.”

“That... is good to know,” I admit with a little laugh of my own.

“Come then,” Daghel growls, and the mood shifts, a serious intensity falling that makes my laughter vanish as my gaze snaps back to him.

He blends with the shadows and slips down the hall, becoming entirely invisible to me except for the burning blackness of his eyes that I can somehow still pinpoint. My heart gallops within my chest with nervous excitement as I take my first step down

the hall, following after him. Drisk grunts and I glance back over my shoulder at him as he drops on to his hands to prowl into the hall behind me. His amber eyes glow brighter in the dim lighting in the hall, and I swallow nervously as my head snaps forward to where Daghel is waiting for me at the door to our bedchamber. My steps instinctively slow with uncertainty, but there is a tiny electric thrill that races up from a hidden place within me, responding to the fact that I'm very much caught in a narrow place between two big hungry males.

Their hunger is like a sucking void, tugging my senses, triggering a slow buildup of heat from within my core. Daghel waits, eyeing me like a cat watching a struggling sparrow or toying with a blind mouse. I shiver as I come up to his side and tip my head back to peer up at him. His lips twist in a faint smile and I catch a hint of his fangs as I slip past, drawn irrepressibly into the room.

The room is so dark that I can barely see where I'm going, and I must rely on memory as I step carefully so that I don't accidentally stumble into the table and chair. My pulse pounds in my ears, filling the void with its quickening beat. A thrum rolls through me, echoing deep within me, and Drisk croons to it as he fills the doorway for a moment before slipping inside with a rhythmic hiss and the scrape of his claws against the stone floor. He prowls directly for me, but then he angles away and brushes his head against me like a big cat as he passes and heads for the bed. His pinned wings flare slightly, shadows expanding quickly in the dark and just as quickly contracting, as he climbs onto the bed before circling and waiting expectantly, his eyes like two bright gems glowing back at me.

My skin prickles as footsteps echo within the room, and I turn to face Daghel as he stalks forward, the fabric around his legs whispering with his every movement. He stops just a few feet away from me, and I see the shadowy outline of his head turn toward Drisk.

"The fire, Drisk. She cannot see anything otherwise."

“Ahh,” Drisk hums with another clicking laugh, and a bright ribbon of crimson fire streaks through the air before exploding over the logs in the hearth with an eruption of dancing flames.

I squint as the room brightens abruptly. Several candelabras between the bed and the hearth also sprang to life with the stream of fire, and they cast ghostly shadows over Daghel’s paleness, making him look even less corporeal.

Of course, a wraith would invite me to witness his submission to the shadowy wyvern. Drisk’s dusky blue scales make him look like a living shadow—all except for his slickened cock, which has a strange luminescence. It jerks with a strange pulsing movement that is visible within the raised ridge running down the length of its shaft. A drop of fluid pearls at its tip but doesn’t drop to the furs on our bed. It merely trembles with the vibration of his croon as it grows louder within the chamber.

Daghel turns his head toward me and holds my gaze as his hand goes once more to his waistband. This time he doesn’t hesitate but unties the strings and the fabric slides down his muscular legs to pool at his feet. He braces his feet far apart, so that nothing is hidden, allowing me a long moment to look my fill. My eyes fall to his sex and a startled sound escapes me.

“Your cock...”

“Is like Drisk’s,” he finishes in an amused voice as his hand goes to the hard length and gives it a slow stroke. “Yes. It is. It is because the orcs of the Cold Mountains have blended our genetics so much with the wyverns over the ages that those who are bound as gathols not only need each other to reproduce, as the seed from both males is required, but this is also a characteristic we share. There are very few males in the mountains who do not have it due.”

My brows knit together in confusion and I open my mouth to voice my question, but Daghel's raspy chuckle fills the room, interrupting me.

"Questions can be answered later," he rumbles. "All you need know at this moment that no progeny will come without your permission... Wyverns have excellent control of when and where they will breed. Tonight is all about you, and I believe you wished to begin with a demonstration."

I nod, since my tongue is suddenly glued to the roof of my mouth as he whispers tantalizingly to me. It seems almost lurid. When has any male ever performed for me? I have heard of paid professionals in Zyl's red district, but I had never set foot inside such a place. Despite our profession, courtesans must work even harder to keep our reputation intact, and places like the red district were always strictly forbidden by Madrina.

The small gesture seems to be enough for Daghel, however, because he inclines his head and ambles toward the bed. Drisk kneads the furs expectantly, his croon reaching a deeper pitch as Daghel vaults on to the bed. His bare body barely brushes the furs when Drisk moves lightning fast to scoop him up with one clawed hand to drag him down toward his hindquarters.

"Not so fast that she cannot see," Daghel growls, and I watch as Drisk's chest expands with a deep breath and the wyvern calms himself enough to slowly and carefully position the orc in front of his engorged and weeping tip.

Heat flows through me and my belly clenches, sending a pulse straight down to my cunt. Drisk's slickened sex slides back and forth along Daghel's muscular ass, thoroughly lubricating him with his dripping essence with every pass until notching the tip and pressing slowly inward. My angle does not allow me to see the way Daghel's ass is stretching around his hot girth, but I can well imagine as I've had more than one man on his hands and knees in front of me while I've worked an

artificial phallus in and out of his clenching, puckered ass. Daghel is making the same whining sound, but it is a low treble that echoes through the bedchamber as Drisk fills him.

A small pant escapes me, and I take a step forward, drawing Drisk's bright eyes to me.

"Approach and see," he invites, and I do not hesitate to close the distance between us.

I strangle on a moan as I find a spot that gives me a perfect view of Drisk's thick, inhuman cock stretching the tight, clasping ring of Daghel's hole. It grips and sucks upon the cock furiously as Drisk's pelvis rocks back before slowly driving forward again, plunging to the hilt. I watch for several minutes in fascination, desire kindling and burning low within me as I imagine my cunt likewise stretched around him as I moan with the fullness and burn of it. But I'm also imagining Daghel helpless to my control, his cock engorged and leaking as it is now with every thrust from Drisk, but in my imagination I am the one to play with him. I pant as Drisk's pace picks up and the wet slapping sounds fill the air. Licking my lips, I move away just enough to climb onto the bed just in front of Daghel to give me the most exquisite view of his desire.

The sight of his engorged cock hangs between his thighs, jerking and leaking, is a fine thing—even a little shocking giving that its girth and length more than rivals the wyvern's which would normally give me pause if I were thinking clearly—but I love the view of Daghel's face the most, his lips twisting in a grimace of pleasure and pain as I kneel in front of him. His dark eyes are hazy and drugged with pleasure as he peers up at me. Smiling down at him, I run one hand down the side of his face, tracing the strained muscles and the perfection of its structure with my fingertips.

"How pretty you are," I murmur. "No squealing. No begging. Just raw sensation. You are so glorious riding it as Drisk pierces you with his huge prick."

Heat flashes within the depths of his eyes, burning away much of the haze as his lips tilt into a grin.

“Do you like it so?” he rasps and then grunts as his body jerks and rocks with a sudden hard thrust from Drisk.

“So very much,” I assure him.

His grin widens and then suddenly he grips my arm and yanks me forward as he draws up onto his knees. Drisk makes a thrumming sound as he immediately adjusts his angle in response until Daghel is upright and I’m resting flush against his broad chest. I can practically feel Drisk’s vibration and every thrust rocking through him as he holds me close, accustoming me to the wyvern’s natural rhythm and the heat pouring off him.

Daghel’s dark growl fills my ears, and I gasp as I’m bent backward over his arm. Despite being rutted by the wyvern, he takes complete control as his hot tongue strokes a path down to my breasts. His tusks press in as his mouth encloses over my breast, drawing my nipples and half the breast itself into its wet heat. The pull there sends a hot trail down to my belly as he sucks on it and bathes my nipple with the whorl of his hot tongue with every tug. I shiver in reaction and then jerk with an explosion of pleasure-pain as his claws score my buttocks. He shakes against me as he curls my legs slowly one by one over his hips, his mouth and claws creating a tapestry of ecstasy over me. I’m certain that his teeth are piercing and scraping the sensitive flesh of my breasts as well, but the sensations mingle in a vortex as he transfers his attention from one breast to the other and back again until my cunt is a mess of dripping heat to welcome his cock as it glides along my folds.

Drisk’s hum grows louder, vibrating through us, entwining us together as Daghel’s bumpy tip with its odd hard little knob presses forward and begins to split me exquisitely upon it. His claws bite deeper as he sinks into me, drawing hot trickles of

blood to run like delicate ribbons over my skin. I shake in ecstasy and sigh when his cock is fully sheathed, pressing tightly against my womb. He shudders within me, and I feel the first tiny spurt bathing my insides before he begins to shuttle in and out of me as if operated by the fingers of the cleverest of weavers. Tighter and tighter he spins and knots the threads of my pleasure as he begins to fuck me in earnest, his cock driving into me over and over until it finally surges forward and holds in place, spewing his release in a hot flood bursting within me.

My back arches and I cry out at the sensation, his cum a couple degrees hotter than that of men, so that I feel every stream of it hitting the mouth of my womb. His mouth covers mine, swallowing my scream as he continues to rock his release within me as Drisk grunts deeply and shakes with his own climax over Daghel. We vibrate together in bliss, and I feel the dark web of Drisk's wing close around me.

"Give me a minute," I pant, "and I will take Drisk."

Daghel chuckles as Drisk's click of laughter fills the chamber.

"And when you are well prepared and are ready to take both of us together, we will finally be one," the wyvern promises in a dark whisper that sends an entirely different sort of shiver through me with the strange weight of meaning left unsaid and obscured within his words.

### Chapter

### Fourteen

### DAGHEL

Excitement hums through me as I adjust my position on the bed and slide out from beneath Drisk. Anya has not yet moved from where she has collapsed on the bed, and the sight of her sprawled there floods my chest with adoration. So beautiful. Leaning forward, I palm the side of her head, my thumb lovingly stroking the soft skin of her cheek. Her eyes slowly open, revealing glorious blue depths that rival the purity of the winter skies. My breath is stolen for a moment and my chest expands as I slowly and intently inhale, drawing in our mingled scents as they fill my nose. And it is the most satisfying scent in the world.

A soft growl of pleasure breaks from me, and I shiver with such exquisite need as renewed hunger once more stirs to life within my belly, demanding satisfaction. I brush the corner of her mouth with my thumb and then drag it over the fullness of her bottom lip until her small tongue suddenly darts out, tracing a line from the sensitive spot at the bottom of the claw to the first knuckle in a hot sweep. My eyes drift shut, enjoying the exquisite sensation, my thumb resting in place there on her lips. Her little tongue strokes back up to twirl at that sensitive spot between the thumb tip and the claw base, but then her mouth opens and unexpectedly closes around my thumb, claws and all, dragging it into her mouth.

Opening my eyes, I pant as I stare down at her, drowning in the sly desire brimming in her eyes. She knows exactly what she is doing to me, and the movement of her

hand draws my gaze down the length of her bare body to rest where the fingers of her left hand are playing in the mess of seed dripping from her sex. My cock flexes as it begins to swell once more, but I cannot look away from the teasing dip and slide of her fingers. I am completely captivated by their quick, dexterous movements as my pearly seed, the evidence of my claiming, squelches in and out of her with every dip of her fingers into the feminine slit I so recently plowed and enjoyed having stretched tightly around my shaft.

My skin shivers with a small tremor, and my eyes slide shut in ecstasy as I feel the smooth warmth of her right hand curl around my prick. I bask in its warmth and growl when her thumb strokes over the small knot on its head, lighting up every nerve within me. Her hand squeezes slightly and she strokes in one smooth motion to the root. Groaning, I thrust up against the downward motion of her hand, dizzy with the dual pull of her hand and mouth upon my cock and thumb simultaneously. I rock against her hand as she pumps me, soft growls stuttering forth as my precum dribbles down my shaft and soaks her hand. Every bit of my attention has dropped southward as my cock begins to engorge, and I only give a passing notice to the coolness that bathes my thumb when her lips release my claw.

My eyes flutter open, however, when I feel her hot breath upon my cock. “Anya, what are you?—”

A deep groan rips from my chest as my back arches in response to the hot suction of her mouth enclosing around the head of my prick and slipping lower as she sucks more of my length between her exquisite lips. Pleasure shoots through my shaft and deep through my testicles to mingle with the fading ache from where Drisk’s cock filled me. Anya makes a pleased sound around my cock, her eyes closing as she works her mouth over me. Although her mouth is enclosed around me, it doesn’t stop her tongue from flicking and teasing the skin that is stretched tautly now that I am fully erect and engorged with the need raging like a black current within my blood. I pump between her lips, thrusting with such urgency that her hand provides a much-

needed buffer to keep me from choking her on my length as her throat tightens around the head of my cock with every pass.

Gathering her red hair in my hands, I stare down at her bobbing head, an intense wave of adoration shaking me as her wet pink lips stretch around my pale gray cock so prettily. It is the unadulterated pleasure on her face, however, that steals my heart completely. Her touch is not a product of a female simply suffering through the act in order to achieve her own ends. I would recognize it if it were because that had too often been the case in my youth when a female permitted me to mount her. It was always with a desire for some jewel or treasure, or even for the right to claim that they tamed a drehl cock between their legs. But not my Anya. I can smell her rising lust with every breath, speaking the truth of her desire. My sack tightens, and I groan deep within my throat at the tight clasp of her lips upon me and the playful, teasing strokes of her tongue, nearly choking on a growl when that clever little member prods at my prick's slit to gather the first bloom of cum spilling from it.

Even with her mouth so sweetly upon me, I am fully aware of Drisk's gaze fastened upon us. He watches with glowing eyes, a soft rumble of desire vibrating within his chest as he begins to croon again. He is still engorged, his cock an angry, deep hue of its normal blue color. Although he had climaxed in a sense, I had not allowed him to fill me with his hot wyvern seed. I want to spare every drop of it so that I might see it brim and overflow our female's cunt as it strangles on his length. My gaze focuses now on him, watching with fascination as his muzzle drops between her open thighs, his long tongue driving into her with a hungry growl. Her cry of shocked pleasure vibrates exquisitely around my cock as he seeks to lap up every bit of our mingled essences leaking from her.

I instinctively begin to time my thrusts with his tongue, my breath panting viciously from me as I watch the wyvern devour her, reveling in our flavors. Although his tongue often caressed my cock and thighs to savor the taste of my spend as he chased every drop, watching him split her little slit with his tongue makes my cock jerk with

its first release as I pump a hot stream into my little mate's mouth.

She moans exquisitely as she swallows me down, and it not only fuels my lust higher but captures the wyvern's interest so that Drisk's head rises from between her thighs, his tongue stroking leisurely along his sharp teeth. His eyes glitter down at her, their dark pupils swallowing the amber of his irises. I know that look well, and my hold tightens on her head, pinning her to me as Drisk slowly gathers himself behind her, his winged arms falling heavily at either side of us. I feel her shiver of awareness pass through me, but a smile touches my lips when she immediately shifts her weight onto her knees, allowing me to drop to my knees and recline as I effortlessly draw her down with me. Anya lies over my legs, her plush breasts and the hardened peaks of her nipples rubbing against the inside of my thighs, and tips her ass upward for Drisk as her mouth milks my prick for every stream of cum she can tease to the surface.

The wyvern's rumbling croon grows deeper and louder, and I watch as his straining sex twitches as it lowers to brush over her blushing cunt. My breath catches, pressure tightening at the base of my cock as I watch his prick press forward, plowing slowly through her folds, stretching her slit ever more tightly around his girth as it sucks him into her welcoming heat.

A vicious growl rises to my lips and my claws tangle in her hair as my lust climbs and I begin thrusting harder and faster, chasing my mounting pleasure as my cock leaps and plunges into her mouth, muffling her ecstatic cries of pleasure as Drisk's every ridge, bulge, and node sinks into her cunt's hot clutch.

Drisk

Our female is delicious. Her flavor coats my tongue, mingling with Daghel's familiar savory taste with a burst of musky sweetness that makes my scales quiver with pleasure as my cock sinks deeper and deeper into her. A growl of pleasure rises up my throat at the constriction of her silky heat, and I press deeper still, spearing her

and splitting her open on my length as my cock slowly plows her depths. The walls of her channel ripple around me exquisitely and I hiss, an electric pop of fire teasing the back of my fangs. I snap them shut, snuffing the flame before it can start as a fire burns brighter and hotter within me with every pulse of my engorged phallus that is now buried completely within her.

I can feel her sex instinctively squeezing around me as she trembles on the edge of bliss, but I remain still, savoring the jolts of pleasure that each one sends to my testicles tucked safely at the rear of my sheath. They tighten and spasm in response, drawing forth more of my seed and gathering it deep within me. My growl echoes from my chest in a rolling sound of thunder, my claws digging into the furs as I watch the expression of bliss pass across Daghel's face as our mate takes him and draws out his seed with her perfect little mouth. Watching is almost too much to bear as I feel the threads of my control begin to unravel.

I am painfully full with seed, but it is an exquisite pain that I savor as I rock my hips, slowly pulling my cock from her sucking heat before driving deep again into her clutch with a thrust that I feel down to the quick of my being, setting my fire spinning out of control. It floods through me like a terrible venom, burning from the inside out as I lock my pelvis against her soft ass, my pace quickening with my rising urgency as I instinctively fall into a rut. Flames engulf my mind as my seed boils up in a hot sea rising from within my depths. Daghel's growls of pleasure grow louder as she moans and squeals, her sounds choked and vibrating over his cock plugged deep within her mouth, but even so they are the most beautiful of sounds as they penetrate the haze of my lust to feed into it until my hips are flexing in a wild tempo as an instinct to breed rises to the fore.

I drive my cock through her folds, the swollen ridges pulsing as she squeezes violently around them, the drenching flow of her juices easing my path as she climaxes repeatedly. The perfume of her cunt clouds my mind in its exquisite scent, ecstasy flooding me as her cunt sucks my cock harder and deeper even as her muscles

bear down so tightly that she threatens to push me out of her clasping heat with every kiss of my prick against her mouth of her womb. The stiff knob at the tip of my cock throbs and lengthens, being pulled thinner as it presses more firmly with every brush against that most hidden place. A grunt rises from me, and my hips cease thrusting and begin to quiver ecstatically—my rut shifts into a rapid pulse, barely withdrawing before plunging deep again with the cresting of my climax.

From a distance, I can hear Daghel's strangled growl of completion as he rocks upward, his hips kicking up to drive his cock deeper into her mouth as she drinks him down. It is the primal curl of his lips in his moment of ecstasy, revealing the length of tusks and fangs, that sends me over as my cock's needle hooks into her womb, tugging back with just the right amount of exquisite pleasure that dives like a white-hot ribbon of living flame straight into the center of me. My hips stiffen and my cock throbs and jerks within her as stream after stream of hot seed is sprayed into her womb. Her little body quickly overflows with the gift, dripping my spent cum everywhere, but still, I fill her as instinct drives me on.

This is forbidden. I know it is, and Daghel will be furious when he discovers what I have done. I was supposed to only spend seedless cum in my release. I wasn't supposed to breed her. It is a calculated move on my part as much as it is the play of instinct to claim and breed my wyva thoroughly. A wyvern's love and adoration know no bounds, and this is also truthfully just another piece to play in what is to come.

A song of love echoes from my chest as I enclose my mates within my wings, my cock throbbing with every pulse as I continue to fill my mate and draw our mingling scents deep within me. I know no allegiance to any but them and our progeny that will come. And it will conquer these mountains.

Yes, they will soon come to see the power of a wyvern's love for themselves.

Chapter

Fifteen

DRISK

I lie with my mates, my long ear snapping and flicking at the subtle sounds carrying in the night. Daghel and Anya are oblivious to them all, but I won't disturb their slumber. I keep watch and keep guard. As ancient as I am, I do not require as much rest; I merely enjoy curling up with them more than anything. Besides, there will be time enough to inform them of the disturbance later, as a being of utter darkness taps with a whisper of sound before seeping through the cracks of the shuttered window. My eyes follow its passage curiously as it slowly begins to gather and condense.

This is the closest the darkness has ever been. Its touch has always been something gathering and wailing in the distance as it rushes like a descending storm, threatening to crush everything. But this time it is different, and to be a curious reaction. It glides quietly through the room, touching every surface as if exploring it as it pulses and grows, practically filling an entire corner of the bedchambers all at once. Excitement trembles within my wings, and I lift my head so that I can continue to effortlessly follow its movements.

Is it quickening in response to Anya's presence? That is a delicious little morsel of information. Perhaps the reckoning will soon come. And if Anya is to be the catalyst of things to come, it just reaffirms that my scenting was correct in every way. Not only is she perfect for us, but she will bring forth the long night upon the Cold Mountains. I am certain now that time has been slowly winding down to this moment.

I knew that it would soon come. I have known this ever since I scented Daghel and clasped him beneath my wings. Good. I waited patiently enough.

My tongue snakes out, tasting the air, and the darkness pauses, turning its head toward me slowly. I get the sense of it meeting my eyes, and a tingling sensation rushes beneath my scales like tiny fissures of raking through me and crackling with lightning as the darkness suddenly flows forward and regathers beside the bed.

A dark hand stretches, reaching across the bed to slip like a shadow falling over Anya's slender calf. My breath catches in wonder. It is responding to her. I watch with fascination as it slides farther up her leg in a slow caress. Will she recoil in rejection of its terrible energy, as I have seen so many other females do from my distant vantage point whenever the darkness passes through the village below me?

But no. She does not. Instead, a sigh falls from her lips as she opens herself up to it and invites it as her legs fall open.

The fur shifts and the shadowy hand cups her sex for a moment before delving inside in a writhing motion that makes her moan as her back arches with pleasure from the bed. At her side, Daghel stirs, a faint furrow appearing between his brows as his expression grows strained in his sleep. His breath explodes from him in a long sigh as the darkness continues to plunge into Anya, and her hips writhe with excited little moans until her legs tremble as she climaxes with a hiss of sound that makes my cock ache.

"Enough," I growl.

The shadow stills, and I get a sense of its regard turning toward me and an invisible brow arching imperiously.

"Enough," I reiterate as my arm extends so that my wing fans over her. "You have

seen enough and have made your point.”

Displeasure rises sharply, making the air crackle within the room with sudden violence. But I am no stranger to this battle of wills. It cocks its head, and then an electric crackle of hollow laughter fills the room.

“Very well,” it hisses, the icy chill of its voice drifting from everywhere all at once as the darkness withdraws from her. “But I will never be far. I am never far. Eventually, I will possess everything I have come for.”

I watch the heavy coil of shadows as the darkness departs, whisking back out into the night—where it belongs, beneath the watchful eye of Vepra. For now, anyway.

Grunting quietly, I lie back down and carefully gather Daghel and Anya close to me. They both appear so relaxed, and a peaceful expression has returned to Daghel’s face. Something softens within me. This is my family—I cannot forget that. And because of that, it is my responsibility to protect and care for them. Brushing my muzzle across the tops of their heads, I breathe in their delicious scents and let them settle within me. I will keep my mates close. They will sleep undisturbed under my wing.

Chapter

Sixteen

ANYA

The icy chill of the morning crawls through the rookery and it's utterly miserable. I don't bother to hide the fact that I hate it, even if Daghel watches on with amusement as I practically wedge myself completely under Drisk's wing in order to bathe in the natural heat the male possesses.

"Have I told you how wonderful you are, Drisk? My personal furnace," I moan, tucking my toes into the toasty warm webbing of his wing as the wyvern shakes with his clicking laughter.

"Strange female to cling so to a wyvern," he growls in mock threat, but he turns his big body, gently cushioning my head and upper body against his powerful chest.

"What's wrong with cuddling with a wyvern?" I muse with a small yawn. "Your scales are soft and wonderfully warm. Besides, Daghel is not much of a cuddler when he's got so much to do."

I spare a teasing look toward the orc seated in the chair, and he smirks back at me as he lifts his mug and sips at some sort of thick, cinnamon-y brew that is too strong for my human tongue.

"You would not be so cold if you dressed properly and drank your fill of spice," he

points out, tapping a claw against his cup in emphasis.

“Spice would be a name for it,” I reply with a faint shudder. “I like to keep my tongue intact, thanks... and I would imagine that you should as well, considering that you seem to enjoy what I can do with it.”

A dangerous grin spreads across his face as he regards me. My stomach flutters with excitement, but he makes no move to rise from his chair. Instead, he strokes his jaw, his claws catching the firelight as he watches me, his eyes glittering dark pools. Staring into his eyes is like staring into an abyss, and it makes me tremble with desire whenever he looks at me that way.

“As for the clothes,” I say, wrenching my gaze away from his to focus on teasing the inside of Drisk’s wing with my toes, “all the layers are simply too confining. I prefer being comfortable, and sadly orc fashion isn’t any more comfortable for females than it is in Zyerk.”

Here I am, living in a damned mountain where everyone expects females to wear layered dresses of all things over their surcs while the males get to walk around in nothing more than surcs and tunics. I have nothing against dressing up when I want to look devastatingly impressive, but I have newly discovered that I value comfort more than the lessons hammered into me over the years. Madrina would be turning in her grave if she knew.

Daghel’s brows rise, but his head turns toward the window as a brassy bellow from a young wyvern pierces the air. Drisk’s ears snap forward and a rattling growl rises in his throat until Daghel lifts his hand as rises from the chair, heading for the window.

“Impetuous males! They dare too much in directly approaching the rookery without invitation.”

“Calm yourself. It was merely a summons for my rounds,” he mutters and then turns to pull his fur cloak around his shoulders.

“No one should be ‘summoning’ you either,” Drisk mutters darkly. “ You are a gathol, not a servant.”

“You will receive no argument from me, but this is on Vorn’s orders. I will play his game for now. It will at least give me an opportunity to work against him, especially if he attempts to make a move against Linahna.”

“Linahna?” That catches my attention. Didn’t Kael insinuate that there was some sort of relationship between them? Clearly it never was allowed to flourish for whatever reason and doesn’t threaten me, but I’m admittedly curious. Dropping my feet from Drisk’s wing, I turn and sit up to peer at him expectantly. “Why would he move against Linahna?”

Daghel pauses in the midst of fastening his cloak to look over at me gravely. “Linahna is the princess and heir. The female leads and the male defends. This is the way it has always been in the Cold Mountains. But the current queen has not been seen in years, and Vorn has made it clear that he intends on blocking Linahna’s ascension to the throne, preferring to keep it for himself.”

“I see,” I murmur. “That certainly tracks with his particularly loathsome pretense at authority. It practically reeks.” I glance at him from beneath my lashes, watching as he resumes fastening his cape. “I should have guessed it was something like that when Kael remarked that it was impossible for Linahna to mate you.”

He freezes at my words, and his dark eyes rise to focus on me. “He suggested that Linahna and I would have mated?”

My stomach drops at his curt words. Had I misjudged the situation? Had he wished to

mate with her and had not known of her interest? Daghel is not a male to let small things like Vorn stop him from mating. He proved that by capturing me, hadn't he?

Eyes narrowing me, he strides forward, his hand curling firmly around my arm. "He spoke this in front of you?"

I frown down at his hand and step back, pulling my arm free from his grasp. "As a matter of fact, he did."

His brows pull into a dark glower as his eyes follow my retreat, his breath hissing from between his teeth. "He should not have said such in front of you."

"Why?" I demand. "Is it something that I should not have known?"

"He should not because it is a disrespect to you," Daghel quickly replies, his voice dropping in temperature with his mounting fury. "You are my mate. You are Drisk's mate. It is clear that we have chosen you and will want no other. He sought to embarrass you so that you would believe you were not the first chosen."

"I told you that you should have let me eat him," Drisk rumbles, and Daghel inclines his head in agreement.

"If he should attempt to err again where our mate is concerned, cleanse the Fang Peaks of him." His cloak flutters around him as he spins toward the door. "In the meantime, we have our 'duties.'"

I scamper from the bed and hurry toward the wardrobe that had been just recently set up for me in the far corner of the room. "Wait! I would like to come."

Daghel pauses, an expression of intrigue entering his eyes as they follow me. "Dress warmly then. The air is bitterly cold today, and it will feel even colder as we fly."

“Warm... got it,” I reply as I yank open the wardrobe cabinets and inspect its contents.

“Wear your thick boots,” he adds as if in afterthought. “And dress for comfort and ease of movement. After the aerial inspections, Drisk will drop us just outside the lower village. From there, we will need to do rounds on foot. I trust you know how to protect yourself with a blade,” he says.

“Not at all,” I reply as I pull out a woolen gown and bodice to go over my chemise and glance back at him curiously. I altogether forget what I’m doing because he goes to another cabinet and pulls out a belt with a sheathed dagger hanging from it. “What is that for? Won’t we have Drisk there? I don’t think there is better protection,” I add with a chuckle.

He does not laugh, nor does he return my smile. Even Drisk growls quietly as he climbs from the bed.

“Wyverns are not allowed within the villages beyond our access to the rookeries,” Drisk hisses.

“What? But... that’s absurd. You have an entire culture built around the wyverns and the bonding of gathols. Why wouldn’t a wyvern be allowed in the village?”

Now that they mention it, however, I seem to recall the one particularly brutish orc saying something similar when I first arrived. He had forced Daghel into making Drisk leave before taking him away from me.

“It was not always like this,” Daghel explains, his gaze thoughtfully focusing on Drisk. “Once there were more gathol because being a gathol was something prized among all males, and they were the most desirable of mates. Our villages and palaces were built to accommodate the movement of wyverns everywhere.”

“What happened?”

“Durethikal, the wintry one, fell,” Drisk rumbles . “And when he fell, the clans began to war and the power of the gathol became so feared that the rulers of the clans pinioned them in an attempt to control it.”

Well... that explains it. It's utter bullshit, but I have seen enough to know that fear is a great motivator. Still, it is a sad and bitter testimony that likely planted the seeds of what is happening now to the Cold Fang Clan.

“What will you do?” I ask.

I must have betrayed some hint of distress with my question because Drisk immediately begins to croon in response. His reaction is so instinctive that I know the moment it catches him off guard, and the sound stutters briefly as his amber eyes blink in surprise before resuming at full throttle.

“Do not be concerned, wyva,” Drisk purrs. “You will be safe, and I will be watching from a distance. What use do I have for being stared at by frightened humans and drinking spice?”

“There will be many humans?” I ask, and Drisk inclines his head in a graceful bob on his long neck that other species couldn't possibly help but envy.

“Always,” he hisses as he creeps closer to me. “The lower villages are not like the upper village where you were brought. They are very large and sprawling to cover segments of the Fang Peaks. In the lowermost villages, most of the clan's humans dwell there with their mates. There are several villages, each of which has fallen to the command of generals loyal to Vorn.”

“That's just perfect,” I mutter dryly, and am treated to another one of his creepy

laughs.

“We will be going to Glas Village,” Daghel interjects. “It is the farthest of the lower villages. So, again, dress warmly. And be quick if you truly wish to come.”

With a nod, I throw myself into getting ready until I am wearing an under dress over my chemise, a surc tied under it, and a woolen skirt and bodice over that, as well as my fur cloak. My hair is plaited, which seems the best option considering that we will be flying. Overall, I feel very warm, with every bit of clothing bound as tightly as my hair. And it is something I quickly am grateful for because the moment Drisk leaps from the rookery’s access point, the cold air immediately whips around me, stealing my breath completely as we sail over the glittering white landscape.

### Chapter

### Seventeen

### ANYA

Despite the cold air's best attempt to steal my breath and freeze me, I gasp in delight as the world opens up below me in ways I could never have imagined as the orc palace drops far away in the distance. The Fang Peaks are far more glorious from this vantage point as we soar between them with the sun shining down on their stark white fanglike peaks piercing the sky. In truth, they are aptly named, and it gives me a little shiver as I stare at them. It feels like we are flying into the jaws of some sort of primordial monster. I'm not afraid, however. Daghel's arm is a steel band encircling me, keeping me pinned tightly to him, and Drisk's flight is as smooth as can be expected of a species known as kings of the skies.

"Not afraid, are you?" Daghel observes, and his deep chuckle warms my ear when I give a quick shake of my head.

"It is marvelous!" I shout, and Drisk responds with a staccato series of chirps that echo all around us.

"Ready yourself then," he rasps as he tightens his grip a little more.

I angle my head in an attempt to glance back at him in confusion, but then I feel it—a hot tendril sliding against my inner thigh beneath my skirts. The muscles in my legs tighten in reaction, and the tendril coils for a second before working its way higher.

“Wha... what is that?” I demand, but heat drops deep into my belly as it climbs higher in a sinuous glide.

“Be calm,” he murmurs, his voice dropping to a soothing rumble. “Drisk is just seeking to connect.”

“Drisk?”

The word barely parts from my lips when the tendril slips upward with a shocking speed and into my underthings. I make a choking sound of shock when I feel it slide over my folds to probe my clit, but then it drops and dives into my cunt so quickly that I suddenly can’t breathe at the sensation of it swelling rapidly inside my channel. The entire world fragments and explodes before my eyes. It happens so fast that I don’t have time to be afraid before all the tiny pieces fall back into place and re-knit themselves, but this time with a vividness far beyond my normal vision.

Drisk. I can feel him there with me in my head—a mind so unlike anything human that he feels cold and dangerous, with a terrible and vicious hunger that demands to be satisfied. I blink slowly as I mentally scramble to make sense of my impressions without leaping to conclusions. He is hungry? I nearly laugh at the thought. Of course he is! I am famished myself, as it has been several hours since our morning meal. Drisk’s awareness suddenly turns toward me as if one of his amber eyes is rolling back to peer at me, and his coldness rapidly melts away to be replaced with a warmth of affection that brings a smile to my lips.

“Did I frighten you?” His voice fills my mind, curling against my thoughts like a cat lovingly rubbing against one’s legs.

My first impulse is to deny it so that I don’t appear weak, but I quash that impulse and reconsider. Who am I trying to impress? This is Drisk. Not only does he think the same way as humans, but he is already in my mind now. In this moment he’s

intimately a part of me, touching my thoughts and feelings.

“A little,” I admit. “I wasn’t expecting it.” But Daghel had. He knew. My brows rise as the implication hits me. “Are you... connected... with Daghel this way, too?”

Drisk’s cackling clicks of amusement echo, bouncing off the mountains. “Of course. The strands that rise from certain parts of my body are an ancient gift to wyverns to allow us to communicate with those we allow to mount us. They only work one way, however. They must penetrate the soft interior tissue of our rider to connect to the nervous system.”

“That’s...” mildly horrifying “...efficient,” I reply mildly, drawing another laugh from him.

“You are amusing, wyva. Amusing, bold, and delicious,” he observes with a hum of pleasure. “So very delicious.”

I bite back a smile of pleasure. Of course, he would be obsessed with his appetites. It seems quite appropriate for a creature such as a wyvern, especially when I can feel his hunger simmering still beneath his affection. I don’t bother replying—he is so firmly within my mind that I know he can feel my reaction just as I can feel his pleased hum echoing quietly as an undercurrent running through my mind.

“You could have warned me,” I say, and Daghel’s quiet chuckle fills my ears over Drisk’s cackle.

I feel the gentle circling motion of his thumb rubbing against my belly, and I lean back against his warmth, enjoying the more physical connection between us. He may not be capable of delving into my mind in how Drisk is, but he is a solid, strong presence with all the potential of brutality harnessed and controlled by his will—a powerful being who bows to no one except me. Even Drisk, for all his ferocity,

submits to Daghel's will, elevating me in a way that I am only starting to understand.

"You will see," Drisk rasps, affirming the fact that he is indeed a shadow, watching my thoughts as we fly together. There is a certain smugness in his thoughts that I find curious, though.

"What do you mean?" I ask him, but he does not respond, other than to cackle in obvious satisfaction.

He is obviously intent on keeping his secrets, so I just direct a mental eye roll at him and focus on enjoying my surroundings. It is certainly picturesque. There are heavy shadows that rest amid the jagged peaks, but the ice and snow sparkle like a frost of cut gems. Cozy villages rise up from various plateaus and within the mountain valleys. Smoke rises invitingly from the numerous lit hearths, but we pass by them as we continue to make our way lower through the fang peaks until a village of prominent size tucked within a large valley comes into view. Drisk chirps as he descends in a slow circle, and I immediately know that this is our destination and I lean forward in my seat with excitement, my eyes taking in the bright seasonal décor that is rapidly becoming visible.

As expected, Drisk doesn't land within the village but drops into the snow just a short distance from its outer edge. I gasp a little at the sensation of his tendril tugging free from my channel, and behind me Daghel quivers in response to Drisk's separation. Does he feel the same emptiness as Drisk disappears completely from my mind? Does Drisk feel it? There are no answers to my silent question, just Drisk's sonorous bellow announcing our presence as we drop to the ground from the large saddle pad attached to his harness, drowning out the crunch of snow beneath our feet. Daghel leads me away until we are clear of the wyvern's wings before turning to Drisk with a cautious look.

"Hunt, but do not go far," he says quietly.

Drisk drops his head briefly in agreement before arching up to the sky and rising with a blast of his large wings. My eyes follow him for a long moment, and I glance uncertainly toward the big male at my side. He wraps an arm around me, squeezing me reassuringly.

“Do not worry. There are many ledges that overlook the village on which Drisk can rest while he waits. He will be fine, and he does not feel the cold like we do. Now come, let us get this over with,” he murmurs as his arm drops back to his side in easy reach of his weapon.

I immediately miss his warmth, but I say nothing as I follow him into the village, my eyes continuously moving to take in everything from the fat icicles hanging from the eaves and signs to the thick garlands of evergreens and bright red berries bound with red ribbons. The pungently warm scent of spice is also heavy on the air, along with the scents of spiced baked goods. My stomach rumbles as I peer curiously at the shops to identify which one is the bakery.

“Everything is so festive. I didn’t expect that. It’s so different from the village around the palace,” I observe.

Daghel grunts in agreement. “Vorn abolished the traditions in the high village when he came into power to rule on his mother’s behalf. It is an ancient tradition from the time of Durethikal when people celebrated their bounties with the hope that the merriment would please the god-king so that he would pass peacefully over the villages, perhaps even join them in merriment before leaving them to their comforts. It is a time of feasting.”

“I see,” I murmur. “It is not unlike our Yulen.”

“It is exactly the same. Yulen is elvish tongue for the holiday that orcs called Gehl, the winter feast. Durethikal brought winter storms throughout Helfallow, though most

races like to forget he ever existed even if they bribed the Cold Mountain orc clans into turning away from him. Why would they admit it when the plot was all an attempt to wrest control over the season?"

I shake my head in disbelief, but somehow that most certainly tracks. It leaves one glaring question, however. "Why would Vorn abolish a feast day that is obviously very central to your culture?"

His lips twist grimly, and he glances down at me. "To forget."

"I don't understand."

He chuckles softly. "This is because the origins of your Yulen have long been forgotten by your people. All the merriment and feasting do have a purpose beyond pleasing Durethikal, but it is also an invitation of a bride to join him and soften his darkness so that prosperity continues among the peoples and the clans." He nods to a building around which many females, both orc and human, are gathered. "In every village, the tradition always has an unmated male as the feast king to represent Durethikal, and a female is selected to be the bride of the feast. To be chosen for either role is considered a high honor, but the most important is the feast bride, the queen of winter."

"And Vorn cannot stand anything that takes away from the illusion of his power and is a reminder of where true authority lies—with the queens," I conclude dryly.

He chuckles in agreement and steps around me to snake his free arm around my waist. I cuddle against his side, a smile curling my lips, but straighten when I see a number of women filing down the street, uniformly clad in yellowish gowns trimmed with crimson. Several among them studiously stare at the ground as they walk, obscuring their appearance beneath their long hair and shawls, but one familiar face among the women catches my eye. Chelsea? She's here?

From the corner of my eye, I catch the movement of Daghel's head as his gaze follows the direction of my attention.

"Ah," he murmurs.

"Ah? What does that mean? Why are all those women together like that?"

"It is... complicated," he replies in a cool voice and begins to stride forward again. I stubbornly grab his upper arm, bringing his attention directly back to me. He studies my face for a moment and sighs. "They are comfort maidens, females who refuse to take a mate or, for whatever reason, are rejected for mating. The village chief is responsible for their care and sees to it that the entire village provides food, clothing, and anything that they may need with the understanding that they are there to provide comfort to the unmated who turn to them. All human captives who are not immediately claimed are taken to them where they might be chosen. That female there," he says, nodding toward Chelsea, "I have heard of from rumor among some males in the palace. Three different males tried to claim her, and each time she fought to where they returned her to the company of the maidens once more. It seems now she wears the official regalia of the comfort maidens."

"What? You are saying that women are forcibly turned into prostitutes?" I demand. I was a courtesan, but I chose my life and chose the exchange of coin for my service to provide for my comforts. But this... This seems so wrong. "What happened to just eating them?"

"I may have exaggerated," he shamelessly admits. "We prefer not to eat the females as we revere those of our own clans so highly and would rather keep them for our mates. And they are not forced to be comfort maidens. They are all initially offered training in many different pursuits where they might claim a place in the village if they do not wish to mate yet. They either choose to remain among the maidens because it demands little of them or refuse to become a part of the clan in any

meaningful way. However, a comfort maiden can surrender her position for training or to mate. It is not a permanent service.”

“I...see.” I’m not sure how comfortable I feel about it, but that does change the complexion on the matter a little. “Can’t you just return them home?”

“To what?” A shadow passes through his eyes and he stares down at me imperiously. “Most have little to begin with and nothing following the raids. Many are found wandering the mountains, close to death when they lose their homes. Others would face complete ruin and rejection from their families as we have been told. Is it kindlier to return them to their death or suffering?”

“But you don’t give them the choice,” I argue.

“No, we do not,” he agrees, his arm falling away as he continues to stride down the street, his gaze fastened on a spot farther down the road as he leaves me to follow him.

My conscience is not entirely settled with the matter, but I give them one last look before hurrying after him. At least they all look warm and well fed. That is more than many were guaranteed should they have fallen into the service within the cities. It is better than starving and freezing. I am certain that they are aware of the fact, however, and that feeling settles within me as one of the women toward the middle suddenly lifts her head to smile and shyly wave at me. I return the gesture. I may not be at peace with this, but there is much in life that I’m not at peace with. That doesn’t stop me from recognizing that it’s necessary to give them the option of returning to one of the human kingdoms if they prefer to take their chances there. I just need to convince Daghel to support my cause in this.

There always needs to be a choice.

### Chapter

### Eighteen

### DAGHEL

Frustration pierces my stomach with sharp, bitter talons as something terrible stirs and stretches within me. It sinks its claws into my bowels, ripping and tearing even as it draws a haze of confusion through my mind. Need—violent, hungry need—consumes me, eating through me, devouring me as it reaches for her, wanting to devour her. I want to shove my cock into her, pinning her against the wall, pounding into her grasping cunt to the festive toasts of merriment from the villagers. I want, and all I know is that terrible want. It gnaws at me, frustrated that she is more interested in the females passing in the distance, demanding that I make her forget them by filling her and reminding her that it is I who am at her side.

It is such a terrible force that I recoil in horror and spin away from her. Her small sound of surprise destroys me, but I force myself to walk away, quickening my pace to force further distance between us as I attempt to break the coiling darkness choking me. It rose abruptly out of nowhere to viciously attack me, shrieking and clawing at my mind as I met Anya's accusative stare. While I can pretend that my conscience is not pricked by my mate's valid concerns, it is the deadly hiss and its venom aiming directly at my mate that shakes me so profoundly.

I drag in breath after breath of icy air in a vain attempt to clear my mind as the darkness roars angrily through me at my defiance. My pulse thuds with a vicious tempo in my ears, black blood filling my vision as I struggle for control. Whatever

this thing is that is haunting our clan, it will not win. I recognize it, for it has been as a raven as it has hunted among us, its dark wings carrying it at will to feast upon the fallen and the broken—those carrying its stain and mark already through their own putrescence and violence.

I have little doubt that it is attracted to Vorn's filth, but it seems that not even the merriment of the lower village can drive it away completely. As far as I have seen and understand, creatures of the shadows are as ghosts dwelling in the dark places between worlds, feasting on the festering rot that they find. It explains why they linger around the upper village, but I cannot fathom their purpose here. Vorn is not here, nor are any of his followers. There is nothing here that would draw such a dark entity, unless it is Anya who attracts it.

And it does want Anya. I cannot fathom why, but I feel its violent hunger as it reaches for her again despite the physical distance between us, wanting to steal every bit of her essence for itself. And that shakes me to the core. It is easier to imagine that it was Drisk's hunger that drew them like a lure. Guilt stirs within me, rising beneath the confusion raking through my mind. If there is even the smallest chance that this is the case, then its presence is entirely my fault. I am responsible. I had not made certain that either the wyvern or our female were fed before we left. It seemed like such a small matter when the mountains offer much in the way of hunting opportunities for Drisk and the village itself is filled with a multitude of shops, each one boasting delicacies I could feed to our mate until she had eaten her fill.

Yes. That must be it. It has nothing directly to do with Anya. How could it be when it is Drisk's hunger that is sharp and cruel enough to demolish half the village? In hindsight, it was something I should have seen to before we ever left the rookery. Guilt claws deeper into my innards. Perhaps if I had, the darkness within the shadows would never have followed us into the village. Nor would they have latched onto me when Anya encountered the comfort maidens. And now it will probably be a cause of torment for the people here as it feasts and feeds, shredding their joys to glut itself on

their sorrow. I growl in frustration and forcefully shake my head as the darkness releases its grip in a whisper.

The relief I feel is instantaneous, and I once again breathe deeply of the cold air, allowing it to clear my mind. Drisk must be the cause. I will have to tell him of my suspicions and see to it that he leaves the rookery to feed more frequently so that it will not afflict us.

No matter, it will not feed on me now that I have regained control. Not when I have something far more important that requires me to be whole and sane, unafflicted by the darkness's madness—namely caring for my wyva. Which, at this moment, means feeding her. The tension within me eases with the banishment of the shadows and I attentively turn my entire focus to the task. I will not see Anya go hungry for even a moment longer. Especially not after seeing her face light up upon entering the village. It was abundantly clear that she scented something in the air which had intrigued her. That was before the darkness, the madness, and the comfort maidens—Vepra fling all of it to the abyss! That is not how I wished our time together in the village to proceed when I wanted nothing more than to sate her immediate hunger while kindling another for later. And now that my mind is clear, I believe I have the source of the smell.

I turn toward a building just ahead boasting a large window warmed by the golden cast of firelight contained within. A faint smile touches my lips. It looks like exactly the sort of place my temperature-sensitive female would enjoy. Though it is only a short distance away, I do not blindly hurry toward it. My gaze sweeps repeatedly over the street as I make my approach, my pace a brisk but steady clip, as I keep an attentive eye on my surroundings—especially my mate hurrying to catch up with me.

Now that I'm no longer in the grip of the darkness, I allow my steps to slow to a stop as I wait for her to rejoin me. I had not wished to abandon her. Not even in the grip of the darkness did I wish to do so. I can only hope that she thinks nothing of it and does

not question it. I do not wish her to know about the violent need that had consumed me almost to the point of insanity.

As I wait, my ears pricking at the sound of her footsteps as her pace picks up with the realization that I am waiting, my nostrils flare at the aroma of spices, rich, creamy goat's butter, and the warm musky scent of bread from the shop in front of me. My eyes drop to the display in the window. A bakery—is this what intrigued her so?

I do not understand the appeal when roasted meat dripping with juices would have inspired my hunger far more than the sweets contained within these doors. Yet, this was the only shop within scenting distance of a human's weak nose. It had to be it.

“Daghel, thank goodness. I didn't think I would ever catch up,” she pants as she comes to a stop at my side and doubles over, struggling to catch her breath. “Just so you know, running in these layers is not a great joy.”

I glance down at her sympathetically, an apology on my lips, when suddenly her nose wrinkles and her eyes widen with delight as a smile stretches across her face. She comes close to shoving me entirely out of the way as she pushes ahead to the shop.

“A bakery! I thought that was what I smelled.” Her laughter falls excitedly from her lips, and despite being set off balance, another smile creeps onto my face at the concentrated glow of her pleasure that she turns on me. “Do we have time to go in?”

“Of course,” I reply. “You are hungry, are you not? I must see to my female being satisfied in all ways.”

A red flush creeps into the pinkness already staining her cheeks from the cold air, but I am so charmed by it that something flutters and awakens within me when she stands on her toes to brush a kiss against my cheek.

“I will be sure to return the favor,” she whispers before lowering once more to the flats of her feet.

I move to drag her back into my arms and inquire more about this favor, but she laughingly dances out of my reach before hurrying into the bakery. Amused, I follow her into the shop docilely as I turn her loose upon the proprietors. I do not need to take the lead in this matter. I am content to remain her shadow as she gleefully descends upon them, catching the male behind the counter off guard by her enthusiasm as she proceeds to order enough to feed a half-dozen families. I smirk, imagining the way Drisk will grumble when he sees all that we will be returning with.

Arms crossing indulgently over my chest, I lean against a support beam and watch with amusement as the baker fills a large basket with sweet bread after sweet bread and a selection of pastries with every new thing my female discovers. Although the male is initially wary because of my presence, and his eyes frequently shift to me as if wondering what a drehl is doing in the lower village, he gets into the spirit quickly and relaxes under the spell of my mate’s idle chatter. She has a talent for this, I realize. In contrast to my surliness, she is like a warm, inviting hearth, drawing those to her like so many moths to a flame. Of course, such a fire is also death to the moths, but they do not seem to realize it, and in truth, Anya is content enough that she is unlikely to harm her admirer as he dances around her.

I might harm him, but that is another matter and entirely dependent on just how far he dares to go. I patiently drum my claws on my biceps as I wait, and that seems enough of a reminder for the male not to become too smitten.

“The drehl is your mate, is he?” he inquires—almost too politely—but my mate’s sweet laughter brushes away whatever offense I felt rising in response to it.

“Oh yes. Daghel and Drisk... they are both mine,” she replies cheerfully and with a pride that warms the cockles of my withered, blackened heart.

“Daghel... an appropriate name, I would say, and a gathol at that, from what you say. That male certainly looks like the embodiment of death,” he grumbles as he glances over at me again, and I meet his eyes with a hard smile.

The male shivers in response and bends his head to focus on his task while my mate continues to talk about everything under the sun with a feigned exuberance that I know is partially for show in order to take advantage of local gossips. She is not only charismatic but cunning, my lovely little wyva.

Settling back against the beam once more, I leave Anya to her game as my gaze drifts toward the activity on the street. There are a surprising number of human females mixed among the females of my people. Since when had our raids returned with so many? Granted, it has been six years since I have been this far down the mountains when not raiding, but it catches me by surprise. My eyes narrow as I peer at them, and a coldness draws around me as I feel the wispy smoke of darkness invading me once more. To my relief, it does not attempt to consume my will and possess me like it did before. Instead, it is merely a light touch from a distance. But it is enough that its presence triggers a violent response within me.

I catch sight of the wraithlike shadowy form of the darkness moving among the dimly lit edges of the festivities. Vaporous black tendrils rise and twist from a vague form of a tall, powerful male whose head turns to watch the activity of orcs and humans on the street. Its movements are predatory, almost imperceptible, amidst its perfect stillness. A feeling of death whispers from it, and I feel as if a vise is squeezing around my heart as I struggle to draw a breath. It straightens then and turns its head toward me. I can feel the penetrating blackness of its stare as I get the impression of a broad smile stretching over its face as it stares back at me. Silently bidding me to let it in. The instinct to accept is nearly overpowering, but I grit my teeth and battle against it, refusing to succumb.

The sound of nearby laughter jolts through me and my head instinctively turns toward

it, my senses zealously narrowing in on the source as my hand goes to my side, reaching for my weapon. I catch myself just in time and draw my hand away as my gaze falls on a bulky male entering with his rosy-cheeked mate. The female laughs in response to something he murmurs into her ear, but her laughter dies as the couple's gaze turns toward me. The male immediately bristles as if sensing a threat from me—but I am accustomed to this reaction. I do nothing more than lift an eyebrow when his arm tightens around her and he hurries her further into the shop, putting a fair amount of distance between them and me.

Absurd. As if I am more of a threat than that thing out there... and they cannot even seem to see it. My lip curling, I whirl back around, but the darkness is gone, leaving not even a trace that its presence was once there. Strange. It had been hunting and yet no alarm went up. No screams of terror as it possessed the innocent to feed. Perhaps the merriment had been effective on the darkness as it was said to be on the spirit of Durethikal. It is a puzzle but one I relinquish when Anya's hand settles on my forearm, drawing my gaze down to her smiling face. Possessiveness rises within me at that smile, and a need to stamp my claim and bellow it out in defiance. It shall never take her from me.

“Hey, are you ready?”

I incline my head in agreement and offer my arm as she hugs her basket to her. “Did you get what you hungered for?”

“Almost,” she teases, and my cock tightens with interest in my surc.

“I have an idea of something that can completely satisfy you,” I purr as we step back out onto the street.

She glances over at me with an intrigued smile, and without hesitation, I take the lead, relying on memories from a great many years past as I draw her down the road,

herding her into a hidden little alcove off the street. Her eyes dance with warmth as I take her basket and set it on an iced-over edge of a fountain, but not before reaching within it and removing a sticky, sweet roll that smells of cinnamon and sugar. The icing smears on my fingers, and her tongue trails over them, licking up the sweetness. I press the roll to her lips, and she opens with a moan as I fill her mouth with it.

“Satisfy your hunger, wyva, and I will take care of the other,” I growl, delving beneath her skirts for the delectable heat blossoming between her legs.

She bites into it and shivers as I lean into her, backing her forcibly against the stone wall as her lust curls around me and teases my senses. I hold her there with one hand, enjoying the sounds of her pleasure as she slowly eats the roll, as the other delves into a gap in my surc’s fabric to grasp my cock. A quiver of pleasure runs through me, and I cannot resist stroking it a few times as my hunger roars forth, this time wholly me and untainted.

Pulling my cock free with one hand, I turn her to face the wall, dragging her round bottom to me. I cannot see its fine shape concealed as it is beneath the fabric, but when my hands delve beneath her skirts to her warm, silky skin, I grasp it firmly in my palms, spreading the globes wide as my cock nestles against the wet scrap of material covering her slit. Pushing it aside with an impatient hand, I guide my length into her and rock forward, hissing with pleasure at the sound of her choked squeal around her mouth full of sweets as I plunder her drenching cunt that opens so hungrily for me.

I take her against the wall, my hips swiveling in a rapid tempo, her pleased moans rising amid the slurping sounds of her sex on my cock and her lips dragging the bits of sugar and spice from her fingers. It is a maddeningly erotic sound that only makes me drive into her harder, following the gnawing path of our hunger until her cunt seizes tightly around me, triggering an electric spark rushing through me, milking the hot streams of cum from my balls as we shout our completion together.

A soft growl parts from my lips as my cock twitches in her tight clutch, delivering another thick stream. I lean forward, my body covering hers, and I press a kiss to her sweaty brow. Darkness stalking us or not, she is ours and may the gods pity anyone who tries to separate us.

### Chapter

### Nineteen

### DRISK

I peer down at the village from the ledge, my senses trained on the activity below. Although my gut is filled heavily with my kill, my gaze is sharp on those moving carelessly beneath me, unknowing that their every deceitful action is being observed. The only bright spot is spying upon my mates coupling, their lusty scents and cries rising to me, where I greedily savor them.

I hope the silly male does something romantic to woo our mate. Rutting is all well and good—and she is cunning enough to realize the advantage of accepting our mating and adoration, she even enjoys it—but to bond completely, it is her guarded heart that we need to win. Unfortunately, wooing is not a skill possessed by many drehl. It is only because of a clawful of lustful females allowing him to rut upon them that the male even knows how to sufficiently use his prick. Anya is unique—a long-awaited perfect match—and so it is vexing that I cannot oversee matters to make sure that he does not mess this up. A visit to the lower village in all its festive garlands is an ideal place for wooing.

The only thing that is souring the atmosphere is the lingering taste of the darkness's touch on the village, subtly dimming its brightness. It has been here in my absence. I can sense the fading impression of its presence even as I can taste its trace upon the air, and that makes me more anxious. It is moving too fast, speeding up the game between each of the carefully placed pieces. I snort to myself. It never did have any

patience when it came to what it wanted. Its hunger drives it, and when it comes to Anya, that hunger is great and growing stronger by the day if it is descending to the lower village. I can only hope it did not interfere too much and upset the progress of things before departing. If it makes a move for Anya in Daghel's presence, his mind may not be in the proper place for wooing. On the other claw, the instinct to defiantly rut and claim is clearly well developed in the orc.

Hmm . I tap a claw on the rocky ledge on which I am perched.

I may need to find a way to salvage the situation. I croon quietly to myself and slowly spread my anterior fingers to give my wings on my arms a little stretch as I cast my gaze over my surroundings. What to do?

I certainly cannot go into the village. The uproar that would cause would not pass unnoticed.

My gaze drifts along a road leading into the village, and I pause as I spot a pair of orcs heading along the route. They must have a farm outside the village to make the trip with so little belongings. And though their cheeks are ruddy from the exertion of their journey and the cold air, they do not seem uncomfortable. But what is more interesting is their playful demeanor as the male breaks into a chase, startling the female into running so that the brightly colored ribbons in her hair become looser with every passing minute as her tresses work free from their bindings.

I cock my head as my gaze focuses in on a ribbon hanging half-untied. Dyed a dark blue with a shine of silver within the patterns of its stitching and tiny tassels made of strung sapphires at their ends, I immediately covet it. It would look glorious in our mate's hair! And as carelessly as the female has tied it, it is only fair to assume that she intends to part with it. So why not relieve her of her burden?

I shift my weight from right to left, wiggling slightly as I align my muscles and draw

closer to the edge in preparation for my leap. I spring forward from my haunches, my arms stretching out from my sides as my long anterior fingers spread so that the webbing of my wings catches the air. I snap my wings powerfully, driving me forward, before opening them wide to glide overhead. The orcs do not notice me at first, but as I drop lower and my shadow becomes a visible stain upon the snow, they are alerted to my presence for several full seconds before I begin to dive.

I drop through the air, watching with great amusement as the male jumps in alarm and yanks his female against him. Although she is nearly as tall as he is and fairly broad with muscle, I must admit that I am impressed with how quickly and effortlessly he lifts her off her feet. Gesturing rudely at me, he tosses his mate over his shoulder and charges for cover with several creative curses clearly aimed at me.

“Crazy bastard of a wyvern!” he bellows at last, finishing his stream of insults before ducking beneath the protective outcropping of rocks.

It is not much protection against a determined wild wyvern, but I pass overhead with a cackle of laughter and snap my wings before angling them to turn in a wide arc and circle back around. It is not lost upon me that the sound rises more effortlessly from me now, and with it a true sense of delight seems to unfurl and bloom within me, growing more brightly ever since Anya came into our lives.

We cannot afford to risk losing her. I refuse to.

Dropping low, I skim over the snow, my eyes scanning over the blankets of crystalline particles of ice until a shimmer of color catches my eye. I fold my wings in response, drawn to the ribbon’s pure beauty. I angle my body, my wings snapping rapidly, and land amid a violent spray of snow. It gets everywhere, coating my scales, crusting my eye ridges and lodging into my nostrils. At least I had the foresight to land at a safe distance away so as to not overly disturb the ribbon and lose it in the powder spraying around my legs.

My head jerks and I cough momentarily to clear the snow from my face and mouth. I squint and blink rapidly but hiss in excitement as my gaze falls immediately upon the ribbon still lying coiled on the snow where it dropped. Picking my way toward it, I scoop the ribbon up within the claws of one hand and smirk as I peer down at my prize with delight. It is quite costly, or at least I am judging it, so given the matching garments the female was wearing. Anya does not own anything of such high quality, but that is of little matter.

It is a fair prize and my chest swells with happiness as I kick up from the snow and take to the air once more.

I cannot wait to give it to her.

Chapter

Twenty

ANYA

I am still coming down from the bit of excitement with Daghel, my cheeks so scorching hot despite the cold that I fan them as we return to the street. Of course, I can't help but enviously notice that he looks as cool and composed as ever, as if nothing had happened; his eyes scanning the street restlessly. He appears to deem everything to be as expected because he merely grunts and the small amount of the tension that he's carrying eases as he draws me beneath his arms once again.

Although my previous gentlemen usually escorted me with my hand just delicately perched on their arms in the most minimal and polite amount of contact when out in public, and the younger Anya would have disdained being pinned so helplessly to someone's side, I must admit that this is quite nice. It's cozy, in fact, and my heart softens as I allow myself to lean into him and am immediately cocooned within Daghel's heat. I'm not sure if it is just my imagination, but it gives our surroundings a warm glow. My earlier dismay when faced by the harsh reality of the village is slowly melting away as my eyes fall upon the holiday splendor lining every door and orc children squeal with laughter and run in small playful packs amid the building, several of them with pockets bulging with what appear to be sweets.

“You have confectioneries?”

Daghel grunts in agreement, his mouth twitching slightly with his amusement. “The

confectioner brought it to the mountains. She is unmated still despite the efforts of many of our warriors, gathols, and the village hunters and protectors both, but she has refused them all since arriving here some years ago. Many doubted that she would be such a successful addition to the village, but her sweet creations have become something that all upon our mountains have grown to enjoy so her freedom goes unchallenged.”

“Even you,” I tease, as over the last few days with him, I haven’t seen the male eat anything remotely sweet.

He grimaces slightly with disgust despite his best attempt to hold it back, and I burst out laughing, drawing a bit more of a smile from him.

“It is too sweet for me. Human indulgence in sweet things seems to be beyond my enjoyment,” he admits.

I smile at his confession as I continue to look around and blink in surprise when I see a pair of human children stumble from a house with a shout of laughter as a brutish male follows them outside. His barrel-like torso and thick muscles gives him an intimidating appearance that would make me wonder as to the children’s safety if not for the fond smile on his lips and the swaying of a ridiculous garland of evergreen and berries around his neck as he stomps after them, only to be followed by a tiny blonde woman in a festively red skirt and fur-trimmed coat laughing as she follows after them.

“Hagthor, do try not to get them so riled up,” she calls as she shuts the door and hurries to catch up with the big male, who stops with a broad grin to wait for her.

“I did not think that there would be human children in the villages,” I murmur after passing the adorable little family.

“There are quite a few. Many of the females who arrive in our villages have been abandoned by males or widowed young. No male worth his salt would separate her from her pups. Indeed, most are pleased to have a mate and younglings to care for and bring some happiness to his home.”

“That is truly a wonder,” I admit, my heart clenching a little with emotion that I don’t entirely want to acknowledge.

From the start, I have viewed the concept of mating with an orc through a lens of practicality. Orcs have always been portrayed in Zyerk media as beasts incapable of feelings of deep love and tenderness, providing only staunch protection and provision as one could expect of a beast. A male like that was painted as one that any sensible woman would flee.

How strange to suddenly find myself in a position where I must admit that the way humans have painted the orcs is very contrary to reality—though Vorn and his rule within the upper village is certainly trying to live up to the stereotypes.

“This is not the way it is among your people.”

It is a statement, not a question, and I am sure that he has witnessed enough during his raids to see truthfully how little many men value women—like Chelsea—but I’m shaking my head and answering as if it were one. I don’t want to think too hard about that woman lest it stir some sympathy for her, whereas I would rather have none.

“There are always exceptions, but it is often harder for an older female, especially one with children, to find a man who genuinely loves and wants to build a life with her. We make easy targets for those who would prey on us to fulfill their own needs or to gain something that they desire.”

His head cocks in puzzlement as he peers down at me. It has started snowing again,

and the small flakes cling to his white hair and the tops of his frosted lashes. “We?”

I chuckle despite myself. He is so incredibly clueless about just how poorly he has chosen. It is not only flattering, but endearingly sweet.

“As much as I hate to tell on myself, outside of what I have told you about my past, there are many reasons men would not consider me a good mate. Besides being paid for my skills at bringing pleasure and pain to my clients, I am no longer a young girl.”

He squints at me curiously. “You are no elderly female.”

I laugh at that because he’s not wrong, but also with pleasure at just how easily he overlooks the additional details about my past profession—but I suppose that I shouldn’t be surprised when comfort maidens not only exist but aren’t considered a pariah. I wonder if there even exists such rigid idealization of young women as there is in Zyerk.

“I am not elderly,” I agree around my laughter. “But, having seen thirty-seven years, I am considered being outside the ideal for men who wish to have a wife young enough that they might enjoy a great many years of her fertility.”

His shoulders shake in a sudden spasm, and I reach for him, suddenly concerned. Did I shock him that much with my age? Oh, gods, what if he wishes to return me and I end up one of those comfort maidens? No, no, no—and then I blink when a deep rumble shakes him that grows into a thunderous booming sound as his mouth parts with genuine laughter. I am so shocked that I stare at him, my mouth agape as he wipes tears of mirth from his eyes.

“You... you... Why the fuck are you laughing?” I demand, but despite myself, my lips twitch and a giggle escapes me. “It’s not funny.”

His other arm wraps around me to drag me against him, his entire body quaking with his deep laughter. “Ah, my wyva, you do bring such joys into my heart.” He draws a deep breath as he regains his control and grins down at me. “That is considered a lusty age for females among orcs. A female is not treated as a beloved elder until her hair is completely white and her face is as wrinkled as a winter apple.”

“An apple, huh?” I say with a roll of my eyes, but I hug him back as I breathe in his spicy scent.

“Now come, my lusty one,” he teases as he draws me back beneath his arm as we proceed once more down the street. “There is still much to do before the sun begins to set. And much that you may enjoy seeing, I suspect.”

I smile happily as I take another hot pastry from the bespelled basket that the baker gifted me and reminded me to bring with me to be refilled when I return. The nice little enchantment woven into it keeps them piping hot and fresh so that I nearly moan as I bite into a danish and its warm, sweet filling coats my tongue. It is the perfect accompaniment for a stroll through the village, and although Daghel frequently stops to check on something or speak quietly with some orcs we come across, it is the sort of holiday wonderland that I wistfully dreamed of in my youth while huddled beneath thin blankets to stave off the chill.

And while there don't appear to be any Yulen trees brightly decorated for the holidays, there are numerous straw figures that can be spied through windows of orc males and females adorned with bright ribbons, many of which also wear more of the evergreen and berries fashioned into garlands and crowns. There is even a far larger couple in the village square at its heart that, with the snow and ice covering them, pronounced crowns and garlands of evergreen, and the fur cloaks wrapped around them, gives them an even more regal ethereal appearance. I suspect that these represent Durethikal and his awaited bride. Certainly, the female of the couple stands out with a colorful apron of fabric bound around her and numerous necklaces

adorning her neck made of nuts and wooden toggles.

They stand on a tall platform at the northernmost point of the square. The remaining perimeter is marked with several tall wooden pillars, each heavily decorated with motifs of winter. I recognize different types of greenery and berries, and various nuts that are readily harvested to be eaten throughout the season. The square itself hums with activity as large firepits roar and sizzle with spitted meat turned over them, while nearby tables are laden with all matter of food and drink as the orcs and humans laugh, eat, drink, and socialize. There is even a small circle of orcs wielding unfamiliar and familiar instruments playing strange but exciting songs that have groups stomping and spinning to their music.

Daghel leads me to join them, and though I turn down dancing to the unfamiliar steps when he offers with a faint tip of his head, I enjoy the energetic pulse and merriment and happiness that surround me. There are no beggars or street children being chased away as would be done in Zyl so that their presence does not bring down the festivities. There are none who seem impoverished at all. Some have more finery than others, but everyone is warm and happy as the whole village partakes in the celebration. It is far too easy to drink every cup of mulled wine and spiced ale that Daghel hands to me and eat far heartier than I would have ever dared to indulge in previously out of fear for my waistline.

“You are going to make me fat,” I tease as I accept a bowl that appears to be filled with a sort of spiced custard and frozen cream.

“There is no harm in a plump female,” he replies as his warm gaze settles on me. “Any size that you are is perfect in my eyes, though I dare say Drisk would be very enamored with such plumpness.”

A pleased blush warms my cheeks, and I take a bite, moaning softly at the taste. This must be a traditional orc dessert. It is not overly sweet but has a delicious aroma and

flavor that I find incredibly satisfying, far beyond the traditional desserts enjoyed at Yulen in Zyerk.

“A most happy Gehl to us all,” a female bellows as she raises her tankard, her gray cheeks well flushed with a violet hue from all her merry making.

“Happy Gehl! Blessed be we on this first night,” the village replies, and I shout it out as well at Daghel’s side as we all raise our cups in cheer.

I glance up at Daghel as I sip from my cup. His gaze is fixed on me with a look of such affection that I swallow wrong and immediately sputter and lower my cup to cough violently. Gods, how embarrassing! His hand, however, is warm on my back as he gently rubs in a soothing circular pattern that relaxes the tension that had quickly gathered within me in response to choking. My coughs quickly ease, and I smile up at him gratefully when a young girl with deep dimples at either side of her maturing tusks arrives at our side with a delighted smile.

“A gift for your mate, drehl?” she asks, and she lifts a string of blue stones that rival any sapphire I’ve ever seen. Those in Zyl were far smaller and fetched high prices. “I made these by my own hands and know on sight those whom they are meant for.”

The emphasis on the word sight is strange, but I must admire her entrepreneur’s spirit. What’s more, despite her eye for business, although she is likely no younger than sixteen, her voice is sweet and light with such innocence that it nearly breaks my jaded heart. And even more so when her eyes light up with delight when Daghel smiles and inspects her offering before digging out a gold coin and handing it to her.

Her clawed fingers curl around the coin happily, and she nods in thanks before taking off once more into the crowd with her basket of wares.

“This necklace is worth hundreds of gold coins in Zyl—it’s really too much for

someone like me,” I protest when Daghel turns to me to slip the rope of gemstones around my neck, his hands warm against my skin as he fastens the little latch at my nape.

It is a weak protest, however. I was always fond of the eternal beauty of jewels, but as much as past lovers tossed inferior specimens at me over the years only for me to be eventually parted with them, nothing truly felt like a gift for my pleasure. Not like this. This is not merely being adorned. Every bit of Daghel’s body language is that of a male sweetly cherishing his female. Of giving me something because he saw that I desired it even if I never would have asked for it, for no other reason than to make me happy.

Daghel’s eyes glow with such pleasure as his claws brush my throat as he adjusts the gemstones against my neck. “In my eyes, only you are worthy of them,” he murmurs in a deep rasp that slides over my senses, making me shiver. “And apparently, that female agrees. Those who speak to the stones within the clans have a knowing of where they belong. You are worth every treasure, Anya, even if just taking into account what happiness that you have brought into the life of your gathol.”

My eyes prickle with tears, but I quickly blink them away as I clutch a hand over my chest in an attempt to collect myself against the sentimentality puddling within me. Is this truly what it is to be cherished? Daghel is no gentle male and rarely speaks in gentle words, but in this moment, I feel as if I were a queen among women for no other reason than being showered with what feels very much like what I imagine love to feel like.

“Thank you,” I manage around a lump of emotion. “This is?—”

A shrill sound of frustration interrupts me, but when I glance over at its source, my eyebrows rise in surprise. Chelsea, no longer clad in simple yellow and crimson as it has been replaced with a warm burgundy dress and coat, is just a short distance away,

her beautiful face pinched with displeasure as she squares off with the male at her side. Although she is tucked lovingly beneath his arm, I can see the war brewing on her face of a spoiled child, and I bite back a sigh. I have witnessed far too many such outbursts from this girl over the years in nearly every social setting I've come across her.

"Why can't you make that girl come back and buy a necklace for me?" she demands. "There was one in that basket with a ruby the size of my thumb. I want it."

"It does not work that way," he rumbles far more patiently than I would have imagined coming from such a brawny male possessing a face that's a mess of scars. His appearance suggests the rough appearance of a fighter, and yet his expression and tone are gentle as he strokes a hand along her arm to soothe her. "It is a special knowing. She cannot give them to those to whom they do not belong."

"Are you saying I'm unworthy?" she shrieks, and I wince at the obnoxiously piercing tone.

"Of course not," the male replies, his tone as mellow and patient as ever.

Truly, I applaud him because I already want to slap her.

"Seems that another male is trying their luck in mating your friend," Daghel observes dryly.

"Oh, she's not my friend," I reply as I turn from her and sip on my warm drink. "Truthfully, she has done her best to make my life miserable on more occasions than one."

"Is that so?" Daghel's eyes narrow as he peers over at her, but I nudge him gently with my elbow, bringing his attention back down to me where it belongs.

“Let’s not allow her to spoil things,” I suggest in a low voice as I lean into him and rest my head against his chest. The top of my head barely reaches the lower edge of his pectorals, but it counts. The contact is what is most important, and a happy sigh escapes me when his big arm wraps around my back. “This has really been a wonderful day.”

“It has,” he agrees, a hint of surprise coloring his voice.

I smile, happy to just wallow in the moment. Unfortunately, Chelsea once again proves her distinct talent at ruining everything when her voice rises sharply with anger.

“Then why is that whore wearing one of those necklaces if they are so precious?”

I feel Daghel’s muscles tense as my back goes rigid. There is no need to guess whom she means as the heads of orcs and humans alike turn toward me with curiosity. Tension coils deeply within Daghel as his arm drops away. It is like hugging a spring that is coiled up and preparing to be released. And Chelsea definitely does not want him to be released upon her. I wrap my arms around his waist tightly, disregarding the fact that I’m spilling my drink all over the place.

“Don’t kill her just yet,” I whisper in a quiet plea.

“Enough!” The male’s brutal growl drowns out my words, and I look over curiously when I hear Chelsea respond with a squeak of surprise. Although his scarred face is stern with displeasure, he holds her gently by the back of the neck as he frowns down at her. “Enough,” he repeats in a calmer voice. “It seems that this is not a good day to enjoy Gehl. If you can learn to curb your tongue and speak respectfully about your sisters, we can try again tomorrow.”

“Sister?” she barks in outrage. “How dare you compare me to—” She squeals again

as he lifts her up into his arms.

Holding her firmly against his chest, he turns toward us with a respectful dip of his head before heading out with a very angry and loudly cursing Chelsea in his arms. I watch them go, a niggle of concern working its way through me despite the absolute delight I feel at how efficiently he dealt with her cruelty.

“Is she going to be okay?” I whisper.

Daghel watches them leave, a small smile playing on his lips before his eyes drop to me, their depths filled with warm reassurances. “Of course. Although a male is to help his mate become accustomed to the traditions of the Fang Peaks, this small public correction is to spare her from being corrected far more unkindly by another female in the future. He does not appear to be willing to give up on her easily, so he will not return her. He will merely take her home and comfort the sting of his rebuke and shower her with adoration.”

“Ah, that seems a little more than what she deserves,” I grumble, but it is halfhearted.

As much as Chelsea has been a thorn in my side, I do not wish her any true harm or unhappiness. Unwilling to waste another moment of thought on the wretched girl, I wrap my arms around Daghel and hug him tight as the merriment resumes all around us. Despite the unpleasantness, this is turning out to be a most enjoyable Yulen—or Gehl—after all.

### Chapter

### Twenty-One

### DAGHEL

We stay within the village until the sun begins to sink and the temperatures begin to drop with a distinct icy chill that makes my wyva shiver despite our proximity to the fire. Those with children have already withdrawn from the fires to the warmth of their homes, but I'm certain it will not be much longer before the others follow them. We could have left long ago, but after the unpleasantness with that Chelsea female—one that she was fortunate to escape unscathed—I wanted Anya to enjoy every bit of the festivities. But the snow is coming down heavily now and the winds are starting to kick up, threatening a blizzard to fall upon the peaks tonight.

Tucking her beneath my arm, I wrap the edge of my cloak firmly around her as an extra barrier against the dangerous cold of the mountains. I can hear the disturbing click of her teeth. It is far too cold for her. She is not a Cold Mountain orc with ice and fire in her veins. There is no way to proceed with her, not in good conscience.

“Perhaps we should stay here,” I rumble as I squint up at the darkening skies. I may have misjudged the weather—a storm is definitely moving in. “It is too cold to take you back tonight, not with a blizzard coming. There is a tavern where we can get lodgings and?—”

“A blizzard?” Her head shoots up to meet my gaze before whipping back to the street. “No, we can't possibly stay here. Drisk is out there waiting for us. I know that you

say he can stay warm, but I won't have him out in that overnight, much less in the cold for days if it is as bad as you say."

"Anya," I growl in warning, but she shoots me a hard look, her jaw hard and her blue eyes as cold as ice in her determination. I will not admit that privately it warms my heart that she is so insistent on looking out for Drisk's comfort as well—it is something that every gathol dreams of from their mate—but I refuse to overlook her safety. "Drisk will be fine. Wyverns are accustomed to the storms and bitter temperatures of the Cold Mountains. You felt how well he warmed the floors of our bedchamber. He can find a cave and be comfortable enough."

"No. He is mine too, and I'm not leaving him out there alone." Her eyes narrow on me. "Do not think to force me to comply with this, Daghel, or you will regret it. I will not allow my ability to make choices for myself to be taken from me by anyone."

I stare at her in frustration, a low growl rumbling deep within my chest.

"Fine," I snarl as I bend down and scoop her up into my arms, drawing her completely against my warmth. I tug my cloak firmly around us and hold it together with the fingers of one hand as I proceed down the road at a quicker pace. We draw a few looks from those orcs remaining on the streets because of her bright red curls just visible above my cloak, but I don't spare them even a cursory glance as I storm down the street.

She makes a happy little sound as I carry her so that I cannot be too frustrated with her. Truthfully, my heart warms with pleasure as I adjust my hold on her, cradling her lovingly against my chest as I make my way swiftly to the outer edge of the village. By the time we leave the village, however, I am feeling a greater edge of concern knifing through me. Within such a short distance, the wind has already picked up, whipping my hair around even as the cold bites harder and far more brutally as it stings us with flying snow. In the midst of this, Drisk drops from his ledge like a

phantom, his glowing amber eyes the only truly identifiable thing about him as he rushes toward us, the snow crunching loudly beneath his weight.

“What do you think you are doing coming out here?” Drisk demands, and I meet his gaze with a frustrated glower.

“She refused to leave your scaly hide outside,” I bite out despite my desire to laugh at the ridiculousness of this entire argument and the urge to hug my female tightly for her big heart.

The wyvern’s ridged brows lower, making his features appear more drawn and deadly. “I can look after myself well enough, female. You should return to the village and stay warm. I will keep watch until the storm moves in, but will have no trouble finding shelter.”

“I said no,” Anya replies, her voice as icy as the summits of White Peak that rise at the heart of the Cold Mountains, a peak which never thaws even in the warmest of seasons. “It is bad enough that the villages do not accommodate wyverns, but I will not leave any of my family to fend for themselves out in the cold. Never .”

That gives me pause, melting some of my frustration. Anya never does anything without reason, even if it is a reason that I do not fully understand.

“Anya,” I murmur, but she turns a beseeching gaze on me that tears at my heart.

“Please. Don’t ask it of me. You do not know what it was like to be cold and suffering, left in a freezing room alone with nothing but a few shabby blankets and a miserable little fire built over the coals you are forced to ration so that you don’t freeze to death. Seeing my siblings getting sick and weak and yet being forced to stumble out into the streets day after day to make enough to coins to buy food with, never knowing if they would survive. The aching cold—it gives me nightmares still.

Please,” she whispers, her gaze turning to Drisk, “I cannot leave you out here.”

The wyvern’s eyes widen with surprise but then brighten with an unmistakable glow of love kindling within him. His gaze softens as the amber warms and brightens to a deep honey, though he huffs and irritably expels a tiny flame from his mouth.

“Very well,” he growls, “but the flight will be colder than the seventh infernal ring of killing ice and snow. It will not be a kind one.”

Anya nods quickly in agreement, her blue eyes bright with such relief that, even if I had the resolve to rally another battle of wills against her, I could never deny her.

“I will hold you beneath my cloak so that your head is well covered,” I grumble. “It should cut some of the cold, but try not to wiggle around too much when Drisk makes the connection.”

“Use this,” Drisk suggests unhappily as he hands me a length of blue and silver ribbon with delicate sapphire tassels. “Bind her hand securely around you once you have mounted. She will need it.”

Sighing heavily, I turn to Drisk and wait as the wyvern carefully lowers himself into the snow. Shifting Anya’s weight into one arm, I grasp the leather wrapped metal loops at the fore of the saddle and swing up onto the wyvern’s shoulders. Drisk grunts under our combined weight, but he does not make a sound of complaint. He merely waits patiently as I knot one end of the ribbon around Anya’s right wrist, leaving a long tail. Drawing the excess length around my waist, I fashion another knot around her other wrist so that her arms are tightly around me before double-knotting the remaining ends against my stomach.

“Done,” I tell him as I lift my flight mask in place. Wrapping my arm snugly around her, I follow with wrapping my cloak tightly around us with my free hand.

With another grunt of acknowledgment, Drisk rises from the snow and slowly turns as he stands on his hind legs. Craning his head back toward the skies, his arms lift and his wings spread wide to snap down as he powerfully leaps into the air. The violently quick beats of his wings as he rises into the air booms through the atmosphere, interrupted by his shriek as he fills his lungs, stoking his inner fires to help him ascend faster even as his scales warm rapidly beneath us. The pulse of his strand encircling and sliding deep within my cock makes me moan quietly in response to the seductive heat that is such a startling contrast to the coolness of his mind as it joins mine. From beneath my cloak, I hear Anya's answering moan to the connection, and I tighten my hold around her, my eyes rolling back briefly at the dual sensations of Drisk's penetration and Anya's softness rubbing enticingly against me.

Through my bond with Drisk, however, I can feel the billow of his lungs working powerfully as he fights against the storm pulling at us and the tension of his chest muscles with every pump of his great wings. As he warned, however, there is no gentle glide awaiting us as we reach altitude to compensate for the harshness of lifting off from the mountain. It is just the opposite. Without the protection of the peak, the wind strikes us mercilessly, driving with a strength that has sent many lesser, younger wyverns lost amongst the mountains. Anya's frightened gasps as she clings to me fill my ears, making my heart pound faster in a raging crescendo as the winds howl viciously around us.

The wind tugs so ferociously that it feels as if it is threatening to steal her away. I clasp her tighter to me, my teeth bared beneath my flight mask as we fight against it. The snow is a twisting cone of violence blasting toward us with a cold, merciless malevolence. And within it I can feel the darkness sliding through the night, darting between the frigid gusts of snow as it barrels toward us. I know the moment that it catches up to us. I feel the sinuous slide of it against my senses. I can even taste the sharp, unidentifiable sting of it on the air, a bitter coldness that rivals even the iciest wind and the merciless sheets of snow.

It wraps around us, sliding over me with a wicked seductiveness that makes my cock painfully tight. Anya feels it too. She writhes against me with a needy moan, and I clamp down on her instinctively, not only holding her against my aching cock, but also to prevent her from knocking the cloak loose. Still the tendrils of the darkness slide against us erotically, tightening its hold on us and on Drisk as if demanding to feast on our pleasure. I fight against the urge to take my mate, despite the pull of the darkness on my cock working in counterpoint to the grasp of Drisk's strand. It is drawing my seed up heavily within my sack, making my cock thicker and its ridges more swollen with the need it enflames. The darkness teases me, whispering temptations in to my mind to let it in as my mate quivers against me mindlessly, her little pants becoming more desperate.

"Please," she rasps, her voice quivering from the brutal effects of the cold and the feverish desire that the darkness stokes to life.

I hesitate, uncertain despite the eager flex of my cock, until Drisk's biting voice blasts through my mind in chastisement.

"Do it," he growls in a command that he never dares with me. "Your indecision is maddening. Skewer her upon your prick and comfort yourself with the fact that as the two of you are slaking your pleasure that it will be an additional point pinning her in place and extra warmth for our female."

I groan a growl that rips from deep within me as I surrender and clamp my legs hard around his torso, then reach into my surc and pull my swollen cock free. It is already slippery with pre-cum and every ridge and pearl of flesh painfully hard. I let go of it with an impatient sound and tug Anya's skirt just enough out of how I'm able to reach between her legs and drag a clawed digital gently through her sopping, messy heat. She is literally dripping, her heat scorching me despite the coldness of her skin. She bumps against my finger and whines in protest.

“Daghel, fuck me already,” she hisses and sighs with a low moan when I grip my cock and push her undergarments and the hidden opening of her surc out of the way, feeding it against the welcoming slit of her cunt. “Perfect. Just like that. I feel so warm right now—make me blaze.”

I growl deep in my chest, and I am not entirely sure if it is with lust or protest. The darkness plucks at my senses, stirring the most primal parts of my instincts to breed, claim, protect, and love higher in a jumble of confusion where I cannot separate my own feelings from those which the darkness inspires. I feel utterly lost within it, but above that is the hunger and need to join with my mate that echoes Drisk’s own longing. Without preamble, I thrust, forcing the girth of my cock into her slick channel, driving completely to the root as we cry out together in ecstasy.

Holding her to me, I grip the saddle once more and begin to rock against it, shuttling my cock fiercely in and out of her as Drisk’s strand squeezes my shaft and strokes the inside of it with every pass. I can feel his other strands sliding against my cock within her, stroking her channel as she shakes and shatters over me. Yet still she rocks in counterpoint to my every thrust, her pants turning aggressive as she desperately rides herself to another climax, her channel milking me when such strength that I erupt with a roar as she screams her pleasure.

I drive into her trembling, squeezing heat, seed boiling up from my testicles, spewing in hot bursts that make me bellow with every jerk of my cock. The darkness strokes over us, bringing us to fever pitch over and over, my cock spilling so often that I can feel it saturating my surc completely, but still it does not cease. It does not give us a moment to rest, does not slacken its hold on us to allow the heat to cool—it laughs, a dark chuckle burrowing through my head straight to the center of my being as I rut my mate on Drisk’s back as the wyvern shrieks his own pleasure and flames the low, icy peaks beneath us, our pleasure joining us and entwining us together as one.

The hold of the darkness seems infinite until at last it untangles from us and slips

away, leaving us gasping and shivering in the aftermath as the outline of the palace peak and our cold rookery within its cliffside comes into view. Drisk makes for it without even a tremble in his wings as he powers through the snow with renewed vigor. He skims along the face of the palace cliffs with a surprising speed before folding his wings to plunge into our rookery's access point, plunging deep within its long tunnel as we finally arrive home. Perhaps in more ways than one as my cock gives one last spasm within her clutch and we both cry out our bliss.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Two

### ANYA

I am drifting so sweetly as Daghel dismounts, drawing me from Drisk's back as the male's strands pull free from me, making me shake with bliss. Unfortunately, the cold air and the residual effects of the storm are catching up to me with such strength that I'm violently shivering in my mate's arms. I can't complain too much. If not for all the fucking, I would probably be dead. Although I had been warned, the reality of the situation settled with a grim and inescapable weight. I shouldn't have survived. I don't know what happened up there. Daghel seemed possessed as he fucked me, and the way my body answered to it and craved every bit of it with a wild frenzy frightens me in retrospect even as I feel a deep, dark craving for it come alive within my core.

"Saved by dick," I whisper with a chuckle, bringing Daghel's worried gaze to my face.

He shakes his head but quickly gathers me more firmly into his arms and swiftly carries me to our bedchamber. "Your odd sense of humor never ceases to surprise me," he mutters as he gently deposits me on the bed.

I grin weakly at him in response, but promptly bury my face in the furs to moan pitifully when he turns away to gather up the largest and thickest of the furs. Gods, I am so messed up. His gentleness makes me feel even worse because I can see the guilt in his eyes. It is obvious that he didn't get the same charge out of it that I

did—or if he did, then it must have made him uncomfortable. Damn.

Oh, Anya, can you be more shameless, I scold myself. Who in the right mind wants to be fucked to the edge of oblivion while practically in the cold clasp of death's claws?

It did teach me one important lesson, though: the winter storms that are so common in the depths of the Cold Mountains are no joke. And realistically far more than any human could handle. It is no wonder that Zyerk's king and ruling parliament are content to leave the mountains undisturbed as the northernmost border of the kingdom.

"She is too cold," Drisk complains, and he belches a startling huge flame directly into the hearth, making Daghel drop the furs with a curse as he runs to smother the tiny embers and flames dancing across our bedchamber's floor. "Apologies," Drisk grumbles and grimaces as he settles close to me in an attempt to warm me with the heat of his body.

I hate to tell him that I don't feel a thing and that's beginning to worry me. In fact, I dare say that my shivering is getting worse. The numbness doesn't stop me from jumping at the loud banging echoing from the rookery's door. I can see that Daghel is tempted to ignore it as he bends to gather the furs that he dropped, but whoever is knocking is relentless and the banging is now a nonstop symphony that works his last nerve until he tosses the entire bundle he's collected onto the bed beside me and storms from the room with a clipped command to Drisk to keep me warm.

I want to cry for the lack of good it's doing, but blink back the icy tears before they can drip down my cold cheeks. No sense in making myself even colder and more miserable than I already am. Instead, I focus on trying to control my shivering enough so that the sound of my teeth rattling in my head doesn't drown out the voices echoing down the hall when Daghel pulls the door open with a surly, "What is it?"

“About time,” an irate female voice snaps, and I imagine that she shoves her way inside from how her voice rapidly increases in volume. “Vorn sent me the moment his guards noticed Drisk dropping into the rookery. I am to tell you that he requests your presence... immediately. I cannot imagine what could possibly be so urgent about Glas Village of all places that it cannot wait until morning. Honestly, it was suicidal that you returned tonight at all,” she berates him.

I grimace. Linahna doesn't sound happy, but I cannot blame her. It is a cold and miserable night, and the prince has no compunction about sending his sister and the rightful heir on errands for him.

“I cannot. Not right now,” Daghel replies flatly. “I am needed by my wyva's side. The return was hard on Anya, and she is having difficulty recovering from it.”

“Wyva?” she replies with a note of surprise that promptly fades into fury. “She is your wyva, but you are telling me that you took her there and didn't stay? Are you completely insane? I had assumed that perhaps you left her here to await your return, and that was the reason for your rush back, but to hear this... where is she?” she loudly demands seconds before I hear a commotion in the hall like a pack of hellhounds preparing to eviscerate me.

Perhaps I should be a little concerned about what is charging my way, but I wince as the entire rookery seems to shake with her bellow. Is my hearing becoming more sensitive, or does Linahna simply have a very powerful set of lungs? I steel myself, preparing for the worst. Perhaps she will think a foolish human too weak for the male she cannot have and will take it upon herself to murder me on the spot to put me out of my misery? It is an insane thought, but I can admit that I'm not feeling quite right. I may be slightly feverish after all.

I slump against Drisk, suddenly very tired, drawing a concerned rumble from the wyvern seconds before Linahna flies into the room with Daghel hot on her heels. Her

eyes go round for only a heartbeat before she springs into action and rushes to my side.

“She is practically frozen,” Linahna scolds, a scowl tightening her face. “If you insisted on taking her, why would you ever keep her out so long? And then to fly back... You should have just stayed in the lower village overnight. Drisk would have found a comfortable enough place to sleep and keep warm. Get these wet things off her.”

“I wouldn’t let him,” I admit, forcing the words between chattering teeth. “I wouldn’t let him leave Drisk outside. I-it’s damned inhumane the way wyverns are barred from any of the comforts their orcs enjoy whenever the gathols must attend to the villages. And don’t scold him too much because until now I’ve been delightfully warm.”

She gives me an arched look, but upon peeling off my frozen skirts and drawers, she chuckles wryly despite herself. “I guess I can imagine exactly how you were kept warm. Creative. Insane as all hells, but creative, I must give you that.”

“I did not plan it, female,” Daghel grouses as he nudges her out of the way to drag off my chemise and bundle me up in a thick fur as he rubs me briskly. “Call it a compellation if you will,” he grunts. “Thankfully, whatever it was, it at least did some good by way of keeping her safe until we returned. But I do not know what to make of this.”

“You were keeping her warm all right, but the ice and sleet soaked her through so that the moment she came down from your toasty little romp,” she adds scathingly, “her body temperature plunged. Now she is struggling to regulate her body’s core temperature, so I suggest, if you truly wish to be useful, let me take over drying her while you go get Gwen. From what I gather, she was assigned to this side of the palace, so I imagine that you have a better idea of where her quarters are than I do.”

Daghel grunts reluctantly in agreement, but he carefully releases me and stands when Linahna begins to rub the fur over me. It is clear that he does not wish to leave, but is willing to at least entrust me to her care. It makes me wonder again at how deep their relationship is, but I'm distracted when his dark gaze fastens on me intently.

"I will return quickly," he assures me in a quiet voice, and I nod in acknowledgment.

Or at least I think I do. My head is feeling so woolly that I'm not entirely sure if it's moving or if I'm holding it still. I squint at the female briskly rubbing me in Daghel's absence. I squint at her, and I squint at the door where Daghel just stood a moment ago and I realize he has gone and actually left me with her.

"Daghel must really like you," I observe aloud, and her lips twitch in response.

"You believe so?" she murmurs, and I nod, this time moving my head more vigorously to be certain that I feel it. I ignore the fact that she chuckles in response. It doesn't matter, so long as I'm getting my point across.

What was my point again? Oh yes.

"You do realize that all of this is pointless," I say.

Her eyebrows rise in response, but her rubbing slows a little to gentle pats as she peers at me, meeting my eyes. "Why do you say that, Anya?"

Oh, that must have pricked a nerve. I do feel sympathy for her. She is a lovely female constrained by tradition and expectations and in the midst of all of that fighting for her inheritance. It seems no matter where one is in Helfallow, females must deal with much of the same bullshit. Still, sympathy only goes so far, and she needs to know that she now has zero chance with my gathol.

“He’s mine,” I say bluntly, my mouth completely bypassing the entire speech my brain was hastily putting together in its rambling fashion. “Drisk is mine. They are my gathol.”

Her lips twitch, and I promptly frown in response. Why is she laughing?

“So they are,” she observes, and Drisk cackles in a more subdued series of clicks as he nuzzles my cheek.

I give his muzzle a fond, if clumsy, pat and beam happily. Of course Drisk loves me. Despite being a wyvern, and possessing an appearance that makes one wonder if he is preparing to devour them or not, he makes his emotions readily available and visible for anyone who knows how to look for them.

“I just wanted you to know so that you are aware that, no matter what happens or how anything changes, you will never have a chance with them. It is only fair to say so, female to female. I will never give them up.”

“Is that what you imagine I want?” She chuckles. “I see that Daghel did not explain it well... and Drisk, well, he would not know the situation clearly.”

I frown at her, a little befuddled. “Situation?”

Linahna nods. “Being a princess can be tedious at best and often made it difficult to find many truly loyal and honest friends. Daghel is such a friend, and we have been friends since we were pups. Because of this—and because I knew that I could trust him with anything—I had him pretend to be my lover when we were younger and I was still vulnerable to many of the orcs who were still much larger than me.” She gives me a wry smile. “The females of the royal familial line have a distinguished size, but we are slow to grow into it.”

“He pretended to be your lover,” I echo, my mind shamelessly stuck on that one tidbit of information. “Wasn’t that difficult?”

She shakes her head. “Not at all. We were never romantically interested in each other. I was never interested in any male, to be honest.” I blink at her in confusion, and she laughs and begins to rub me briskly with the fur once more. “While I would not mind having a male to suit my purposes, it would only be to pleasure and breed my mate.” She pauses and gives me a meaningful look. “My female mate.”

Oh. Oh! “Daghel was your beard!” I exclaim as the pieces fall together despite my mental fuzziness.

Linahna chuckles and gives me a curious look. “That is an interesting expression—one we do not have, but I believe I can defer your meaning well enough. But yes. He provided for me, and every so often I helped him with some necessary release when he required it... manually,” she adds with a grimace. “No offense, but there is no way I would have allowed him to mount me. It was far safer to mount him in order to help him find the release he needed. I would like to think that it also prepared him for Drisk when he arrived.”

“I see,” I murmur in fascination. They gave each other a hand then and, by doing so, cemented a deep friendship. That is something I can comprehend even in my current state. What’s a little pegging between unattached friends?

She pauses and gives me a worried look. “You aren’t offended, are you? I know that humans can be particular about some things but?—”

“No, of course not,” I interrupt her with a laugh. “Just as long as we both understand each other when I say that whatever Daghel needs from here on out, I can more than give him,” I assure her, drawing a pleased chuckle from the princess.

But her words do give me an idea. A fabulous idea of how I can utilize my special talents in a way that is certain to please him and win his heart entirely. He likes pain and clearly... other things... as much as I do. It will make the perfect gift for my gathol!

She squeezes my arm companionably, but I immediately grab her hand and beam at her earnestly. "Can I trust you with anything?"

"Of course," she soothes, and I wonder just how crazy I must have looked in my feverish state when I asked for her to respond that way.

Something to worry about later.

"Good, because I have a request." I pause and glower at Drisk until he turns his head away from us with an indignant huff before motioning her closer. Her eyebrows rise but she leans in, curious. "It's a very special request," I whisper. "I have a gift in mind.... a very special gift for my gathol for Gehl."

The corners of her mouth draw up in a sly smile. "Do tell."

Her smile broadens as I whisper it into her ear, though I am more than a little alarmed at how quickly my strength is fading as I am talking. Finally, I settle back on the bed with a yawn, and she pats my hand reassuringly. "Not a problem. I know exactly where to take this project."

I return her smile tiredly. "Thank you." My eyes flutter closed and I yawn again as the chill continues to seep deeper into me, making me sleepy. "Apologies. I really feel quite odd."

"It will be okay. I didn't think that this would stabilize your temperature, but I hoped that it would at least prolong things for a bit before you fell unconscious." I hear her

sigh and the rustle of furs as she wraps another one around me. “It is only nature that a cold body would shut down to conserve strength. But never fear. You are in no immediate mortal danger. You may sleep without fear. Gwen is coming. You will wake up, and when you do, you will be right as rain,” she murmurs, her voice fading to a distant purr as the cold blackness encompasses me.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Three

### DAGHEL

“A re you sure about this, Daghel?” Linahna asks, her eyes following Gwen as the healer ducks out of the room, taking her leave now that Anya is resting comfortably. Her gaze turns to me and regards me far more calmly after hearing my request than I calculated. “So long as you are left in peace, you are not usually one to make waves. This would definitely get Vorn’s attention, and not in a good way.”

“It cannot be helped,” I grumble as my eyes drift over my female’s sleeping face. The tension within the small muscles is now completely relaxed following the healer’s work, but seeing her resting peacefully does nothing to settle my heart. “I will not dance attendance on his whims when my mate is healing. I will meet with him afterward.”

“And you want me to tell him that?” She expels a slow breath when I nod. “He is not going to be pleased.”

“Vorn can stand some lessons in disappointment,” I point out. “And patience.”

“I’m not arguing with you there,” she replies. Sighing, she rises to her feet and glances toward Anya worriedly before turning her gaze back to me. “I will try to frame it a little more diplomatically. Maybe he will refrain from sending guards to imprison you.”

I snort quietly in response. My request is too small of an infraction for him to lose what he considers to be an advantage. He will not throw me into the cells until he has wrung every bit of usefulness out of me. All the same, that does not stop me from inclining my head toward my longtime friend in thanks. "You have my thanks."

"I simply do not want your mate to wake up and discover you are dead," she retorts crossly, and I lower my head to hide my amusement. "Just do not do anything else to infuriate him while she is recovering. I do not want to be the one to explain to her," she mutters in parting.

I stare at the empty doorway for a long moment. My emotions are in a tumult, despite my unflinching silence. It is only after several minutes that I stand, unable to sit there at Anya's side for a moment longer as everything within me rages in silent protest. I want to howl and scream. I want to tear something apart with my own hands and claws. But I am helpless against the storm within me while also being so unfortunate as I cannot risk giving release to all my rage.

In truth, this is all my fault. I should not have allowed this to happen and I am sick with grief over it. It is as if it is shattering from within, pulling me apart in a way no enemy ever has. I can barely breathe because of its terrible force, and I feel my heart beating frantically within my chest like a trapped bird trying to break free from its cage.

Even Drisk's concern weighs heavily in the atmosphere of our chambers as the male clings tightly to her, his big body wrapped around our fragile little mate. His low, crooning hum echoes through the rookery in a resonant song, touches a vulnerable spot deep inside of me even as it makes me desire to bellow my frustration. I am struggling with a helpless rage as I pace back and forth across the room, my claws threading through my hair as I swipe my hand through it.

Gwen has put her in a healing sleep and has warned us that she may not wake for two

or three days. The thought is agonizing. Linahna is right—I should not have risked it. No matter how much Anya resented me for my decision, no matter how strongly her needs affected me, I never should have flown with her through that storm. Never mind that I subjected her to the darkness... I keep that knowledge tightly contained within myself, though I am practically shaking with my rage.

“Be calm, Daghel,” Drisk rumbles as the faint echo of his hum subsides. He lifts his head and peers at me, his eyes glowing in the dimly lit room. “She has not been harmed. She will rest and then she will awaken and all will be fine.”

“What if she had not made it? What if?—”

“But she did,” the wyvern interrupts, his voice mild and almost disinterested in my mental plight as his wing stretches slightly and he draws her closer to his side with his claws. “She would not thank you for all of... this. Our Anya has her own mind and spirit, and she understands and knows herself well. It was a dangerous risk, and I did not agree with it, but it is over now. When we mate, I will give her my fire, just as I gave it once to you, and she will never suffer this way again.”

I growl in frustration. What he says makes sense, but his chilling logic matters little to me, not when the fear of losing her makes my heart ache. I pin with him with an angry glare. “Do you care so little about her? She nearly died!”

The low growl is the only warning I get. The wyvern is a blur of movement as he surges up from the bed before his heavy frame throws me to the ground. I grunt in surprise, though I welcome the pain as I hit the unforgivingly hard floor. I lie there in shock for only a heartbeat and a single breath before Drisk drops over me, his jaw vibrating as he clatters with menace.

“Do not speak in such a way to me,” he snarls. “There is only death for a wyvern who loses their mate. There is no fire, no passion, no love like that of a wyvern. It is what

makes us. It is the lifeblood within our veins. I serve and protect you because of this great devotion and love—you and our Anya. If anything happened to either of you, my fires would be swallowed by the void and my scales cool with instantaneous death,” he rasps lowly as he withdraws, allowing me to push myself up to a seated position.

Resting my arms on my knees, I’m hunched over as I stare up at him grimly. “If that is the case, then why does this not disturb you and enrage you as it does me? How are you not prepared to tear the walls down over what it did to us?”

“What it did?” He cocks his head at me as he draws back further, wings trembling. “What exactly did it do? Did it not give you both the strength necessary to preserve her life?”

My brow furrows with annoyance. “The darkness is not to be trusted,” I growl.

“I did not say it was,” Drisk replies as he turns and climbs back onto the bed. “I am saying do not make more of it than it is or use it as an excuse to inflict punishment on yourself. You cannot evade the fact that this was her choice. By trying to reassign blame, you are disrespecting her as a female capable of making her own decisions and bearing the consequences.”

I glower up at him. “I dislike it when you are reasonable—it is strange. Where is the male who advocates for murder whenever someone even looks at her sideways?”

Drisk snorts with amusement as he gathers Anya’s sleeping form against him once more. “Do you plan on murdering the darkness? How? To do such is beyond my capabilities. Besides,” he huffs, “I only want to eat those who actively try to harm her. It is different. I hold the highest respect for her ability to choose, even when she is being remarkably suicidal. Her reasoning for it was... touching,” he admits quietly, his muzzle dipping to nuzzle her. “She is typically very pragmatic, our mate. For

Anya to be willing to sacrifice her own safety, something that she holds at such a high value that she was willing to contemplate mating with us from the start, it is the highest declaration of love. I will respect it. And she will learn from this, as she must—as all must. The Cold Mountains are a beautiful but deadly place. Only the strong survive... and she did. Now she will live and be even stronger.”

My brows rise in surprise. He is... right. Right and far more loquacious than usual. And somehow, just that easily, something within me, that felt fractured beyond repair, settles into place.

I sigh heavily and scrape my claws against my jaw. “I still dislike it.”

Drisk’s eyes slide shut tiredly and for a moment I see just how exhausted he is after flying through the storm. “No one said you had to like it, orc.” His nearest eye slides back open briefly to peer at me. “What you should be concerned about is what Vorn will do when Linahna delivers your message. He is a vindictive male, and he does not like to be kept waiting. Do not trust him with your back turned for even a moment.”

I grunt in agreement. Truer words have never been spoken.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Four

### ANYA

I am drifting, floating in a frozen black sea. It is the same old nightmare. I know it is a nightmare and yet I have no control over the panic that fills me as the coldness crystalizes around me. There is nothing but the icy abyss as far as I can see, its cold clawing at me, drawing itself deeper and deeper within me. It closed over my throat, choking me. I am choking, my lungs are freezing, and I'm drifting in endless nothing. My mouth opens in a scream, and I jolt upward and straight into a hard, warm body.

"Anya?" Drisk rumbles, and I feel the heat of his arm and the soft leather of his wing curl around me. His muzzle brushes over me, his nostrils flaring as he proceeds to thoroughly scent me. "You smell of fear, but you are unharmed."

"I... I'm okay," I croak, as I wrap my arms around his thick neck. "It was only a nightmare. Only a fucking nightmare."

His head tips to caress the side of his horned brow against me affectionately. "Do you wish to speak of it? I would help you bear the burden of your terror."

I give him a fond smile but remain silent as I trace the sensitive scales on his jaw with my fingertips. I still feel disoriented from the dream. I don't want to think about it, much less speak of it. That he wants to be there for me in that capacity is more than enough.

“Speak of what?” Daghel grumbles sleepily. He rolls slightly and squints blearily over his shoulder at us. Then his eyes fly open wide with relief as he turns with a happy bellow and gathers me tightly into his arms. “Merciful Vepra, you are awake!”

“Barely,” I admit with a shaken laugh. “Sorry if I worried you.”

He pulls back to peer at me, his smile fading in a way that breaks my fucking heart. “More than worried,” he admits heavily and exhales a pent breath. “But what matters is that you are okay. I swear that I shall never allow such a thing to happen again.”

I tip my head in confusion. “How do you think you will do that?” My lips twitch faintly when he meets my question with a frustrated expression. “I get that you want to, and I truly love that you want to keep me safe,” I assure him, “but I don’t want that promise from you.”

His brow lowers even further. “Why?”

I offer him a small smile as I rub the deep line drawn between his eyebrows. “Because, for you to make that guarantee, it means I would have to surrender all my autonomy into your keeping and make you responsible in a way that isn’t fair to either of us. I don’t want that, Daghel. I don’t mind that you and Drisk are perfectly happy to slaughter anyone or anything that might hurt me, but my decisions still need to be my own. And while I promise to listen to your input, there are going to be a few hard lines that I need you to respect.”

“You speak of the cold,” he grumbles. “You are afraid of it.”

“It is the terror that haunts her sleep,” Drisk replies, accurately surmising what I suffered within my nightmare with just that small amount of information.

I swallow and nod. Daghel sighs and drags his hand down his face. Cupping his chin,

he considers me for a long moment before slowly dipping his head in agreement.

“Very well. I do not wish to chain and break the things I love the most. If there is something that is what you call a hard line, I want you to clearly tell me so that I understand your reasoning, but I wish for you to take my cautioning—and Drisk’s—seriously. The Cold Mountains are not forgiving to people as fragile as humans. They are not even forgiving to orcs, and we have tougher skin,” he adds with a faint twist of his lips.

Love the most? I’m pretty sure he continued speaking after—something about the mountains being unforgiving to humans and orcs—but my brain is still stuck on those three little words. He loves me. Happiness blooms within me despite my attempt to temper it and exercise some self-control.

“You love me?” I whisper, and he regards me first with surprise and then amusement as his icy expression shifts and thaws.

“What I feel... it is love, and more than love. It is as a fire within my soul, uniting us,” he answers, his voice a soothing rumble in my ears. He smirks and nods toward Drisk curled at my side. “Drisk does as well.”

“I have already proclaimed the highest nature of my devotion,” Drisk sighs, “but as Anya was not conscious to enjoy it, if she wishes to narrowly define it in terms such as love, then I can accept the facsimile.”

I bite back a smile at the wyvern’s cocky tone that is completely belied by the soft crooning that fills my ears as his claws gather me closer to his broad chest. I blink back my tears, overwhelmed by emotion.

“I—”

A small knock at the bedchamber door startles me, and I look over as Gwen pops in just even to give Daghel a cautious smile.

“Apologies. Vorn asked me to check on Anya’s recuperation. I had hoped to do so without waking anyone, but I see that everyone is awake already,” she adds, directing a warm smile my way as she walks inside and heads directly for the bed. “I’m so happy to see that you are awake, Anya.”

“No more than me,” I admit with a small chuckle as I wrap the back of my neck where I swear I can still feel the prick of ice.

The healer chuckles as she takes my wrist in her hand, her fingers finding my pulse. “I’m afraid that healing sleep is not as gentle as our regular sleep cycles, so it is only natural that you might have had some intense dreams or felt disoriented. But you seem to be okay. Any complaints... stiffness or numbness?”

I shake my head, and she gives me a satisfied smile.

“Excellent. In that case, I will clear you for returning to your regular activities, and most especially these two.” She glances apologetically over at Daghel. “Vorn insisted that, if she was awake and sufficiently recovered, I convey the message that you are to proceed immediately to his private chambers.”

“I will get dressed,” I reply and slide off the bed despite the protests of my males.

“Oh, he didn’t mean you,” Gwen protests, but I wave it off.

“I’ve been lying down too long. I will stretch my legs a bit and provide a little bit of tangible support while Daghel speaks to the prince. Who knows—as I was also there, I might have some important input to offer.”

Daghel nods in agreement and looks over at Gwen. “Our wyva is correct. We are a unit as much as Drisk and I are gathol. She belongs at my side, as is tradition.”

The healer gives us an unconvinced look, but I pointedly ignore her as I stride to my bureau and immediately begin to pull out clothes.

“Very well,” she mumbles as she withdraws from the room. “I will let him know to expect you both.”

“Should expect all three of us if not for the ridiculous rules,” Drisk mutters in complaint several minutes later, and I look over at him with a fond smile.

“You are absolutely right. Perhaps that would be a good use of Daghel’s new standing. Gathols have been treated as pariahs long enough—and unfairly too if Linahna’s suspicions are correct. If we can find a way to spin it so that Vorn sees it as personally beneficial?—”

Drisk snorts contemptuously and drops back down onto the bed, only to stretch out one winged arm and catch me in his claws so that he may easily drag me to him and capture me against his chest. “It is of no use. The power of the gathol is a threat. The first among the gathols in earlier ages were the queens. At that time, gathol referred to the entire mated unit. Only now does it refer to the male components as if to forget the power and necessity of the female’s role. The queens led the gathols in order to protect their clans. All gathols remember that deep within them. They will rally only for what they perceive to be a queen. And Vorn will not allow that.”

“Drisk is correct.” Daghel gives me a grim look. “As it is, he is trying to weaken the presence of the females among the gathols. He will not see any benefit of giving power to the gathols when there is such a strong ancient legacy attached. Even if it is half-forgotten. And so long as he does not directly attempt to interfere with their necessary working unit with their mates, the gathols will not rise against him. Not

even for the queen.”

“Should just eat them all,” Drisk grumbles with a huff. Snarling with disgust, he climbs off the bed and stalks toward the door. “I am going to go kill and gnaw on something before I do it to that male’s head and go down in flames and glory when the clan attacks me. Although maybe I should if that will motivate the gathols to do something.”

“Not likely, so keep your own scaly hide intact,” Daghel growls after him.

Daghel’s grim words stay with me well after we leave our rookery and are trapped within Vorn’s private chambers. My impression of Vorn from our brief previous meeting hasn’t improved in the slightest. Not only does he have a small human face down on his bed as he drives his disgusting prick in and out of her ass, but the way he is looking at me, his slimy tongue sweeping over his lips to slap at his tusks, makes my skin prickle with the desire to scrub every inch of my body where his gaze falls with a metal scouring pad.

“What is the state of Glas Village?” he grunts as he adjusts his grip on the woman and drives his cock into her with a hard thrust.

Daghel’s expression gives nothing away, and I work hard to maintain my veneer of icy detachment as he inclines his head toward the prince in assent.

There is a certain satisfaction that comes from hearing the clever weave of nonsense presented as intelligence, and I’m very impressed with the fact that my mate possesses this skill and wields it expertly as he relates the conversation he overheard and the information he acquired from various individuals throughout the village. I’m actually impressed with just how much bullshit he methodically acquired just to piss off prince Vorn. And I can see that said prince is growing increasingly impatient as Daghel expressionlessly recounts the disputes in prices amongst some shopkeepers, a

butcher complaining about someone stealing a link of sweetened sausages meant for the town feast, various ongoing courtships, and sundry little bits of gossip from around the village. The prince's expression grows darker and darker, his lip curling with disgust when Daghel informs him of a small feud between a pair of females, a human and orc who are otherwise the best of friends the rest of the year, as they try to outdo each other with their decorations and festivities planned for Gehl, the latest incident of which resulted in a mass of ice being tossed into a brewing pot of mulled wine right before the Gehl Eve party.

I bite back a smile as the prince bellows in frustration, yanking his cock out of the female as he surges to his feet. The female sags in relief and scampers out of the room without even taking the time to gather her clothes, but this seems to go unnoticed by him as he storms toward Daghel.

"This is not what I sent you there for," he snarls. "You were to gather intel on where the factions rest that are opposed to my rule."

"I can only report what I heard and observed," Daghel points out blandly. "Such information never came up, and when I inquired further... well, you heard everything."

Vorn's jaw tightens and cracks, but then he exhales heavily and laughs humorlessly. "Gutless cowards. Of course they will hide. But I know that they are out there." He stalks back toward his bed and pauses, his brow furrowing when he notices that the bed is empty. He growls and spins away from the bed, panting aggressively as his gaze snaps around the room for a long moment before suddenly recalling our presence. With a hard smile fixed on his face, he turns in place and grin at Daghel. "Just keep your eyes and ears open. They will slip up eventually. In the meantime, I have some things for you to oversee in the next few days."

I listen while giving the pretense of not paying attention, committing every little

detail to memory as Vorn assigns numerous tasks to my mate that will take him over various paths across the mountain in daily, sweeping flights. Although I don't relish going out in the cold again, I harden my resolve, recalling Drisk's words. It will be a cold day in the nine hells before I abandon my place at their side.

At the corner of my vision, however, I see a black shadow slipping along the walls like dripping tar. I peer at it as I watch long fingers working over the stone, sliding in an almost oily fashion, yet there is no sheen to it. It seems to gather in on itself as it flows lower down the wall, collecting and gathering into a form just behind Daghel. My brow puckers as I stare at it. It has merely stopped there on the wall as if it were a spider gathering itself up to strike. Not a drip oozes from it now—it is just a stain of a shadow that seems to take more of a form. It almost seems to bulge in a kind of optical illusion, as if reaching... reaching... I jump, startled when Vorn suddenly laughs.

“Never mind about the villages, then. They would not dare to incur the wrath of my commanders—not even the chieftains would risk their pretty heads. Leave the villages to their backward seasonal superstitions. With you leading the gathol in methodical sweeps over the mountains, we are far more likely to discover an encampment of those belonging to a faction. Your first sweep is at noon, tomorrow. Now get out of here and leave me,” he growls as his eyes search the room once more as he lewdly squeezes his cock. “I am in need of a hot, sweet cunt to wet my prick... unless you would like your female to be honored?”

It is all I can do to keep from gaping at him in disgust and disbelief. What's more, when I look over at Daghel, I notice that the shadowy stain is gone, as if it has never been there.

“What the hell?” I whisper, and Daghel cuts me a look of warning as he pulls me to his side.

“She is not deserving of it,” Daghel says emphatically with a brief bow of his head to Vorn. I stare at him in surprise until I realize that he assumed my comment was for Vorn. I shake my head and glance back at the wall again. Perhaps I am losing my mind. Whether that’s the case or not, however, I allow him to draw me away before I also lose control over my mouth. “We shall leave you to your rut, my lord,” he says deferentially, then pulls me quickly from the room before the prince has a chance to insist.

Daghel’s face tightens with fury as he glares at the door, but I just barely resist giggling at his angry expression and I pull him down the hallway with me as we make our way back to our rookery.

“What did you say to him?” I whisper the moment I am certain that we are far away enough that there is less chance of someone overhearing.

A cold smile tugs at Daghel’s mouth. “I merely stroked his ego—which is as over-inflated as his enchanted prick and twice as useless.”

My lips twitch in response as I quicken my pace as we continue to hurry down the hall. He glances at me again as his smile widens further.

“I merely pointed out to him that with his iron control over the mountain, that chieftains would be too frightened to offend him and his commanders. Logically, they would wish to make a consolidated camp far from the villages where they would be less likely to be noticed and easier to overlook.”

I frown skeptically. That makes sense, but it seems too easy. “Whenever we’ve had rebellions, there was always a stronghold within the cities themselves from which the operations are staged.”

“Of course, but with his ego it is much easier for him to assume that they are like

rabbits in the snow, quivering far away from the eyes of everyone as they plot,” Daghel explains. “There will be minimal casualties this way if an attack does come, but it means that we need to be prepared for long, brutal flights in the cold.”

I nod in agreement and quicken my pace to a trot at his side, eager to return to our rookery and wash the filth off me from simply being in Vorn’s presence.

At length we return to the rookery, silent but touching each other in small ways that convey more than words ever could. Drisk looks up as we enter the main room, his amber eyes narrowing with interest as we share with him all that happened in Vorn’s private room. The wyvern stretches like a cat in the cream, but he does not remark upon it. Instead, he hums thoughtfully and surprises me by asking how I enjoyed seeing the festivities of Glas Village.

I stare at him for a moment at the sudden shift in the conversation. “It was really lovely. All the rich traditions were very charming. The only thing that was missing was a Yulen tree and it would have looked like something every child from the streets of Zyl dreams of.”

“What tree?” Drisk asks and glances back at Daghel, searching for support. My other male simply shrugs back at him so that Drisk eyes me suspiciously. “Why would you wish to have a tree? There are plenty outdoors.”

“A Yulen tree,” I correct with amusement. “It is a custom to decorate a tree for the holiday with many shiny and handmade ornaments, to bring festive cheer into our homes and lives to share with our loved ones. It represents all the hope and joy of the season—a special magic that comes to life.”

“By putting stuff on a tree?”

“Yes, it is a Yulen tradition,” I confirm as I begin to laugh.

The wyvern proceeds to roll his eyes as he grumbles, making me laugh harder at his antics . “Ridiculous elvish custom.” He peers at me and back over at Daghel for a moment before grunting at his blatant amusement. “Very well. When the weather calms, I will fetch this ridiculous tree when we are returning from one of Vorn’s equally ridiculous tasks.”

Delighted, I throw my arms around his neck and hug him tightly, fully aware of the way I am pressed against the rigid and defined muscles of his chest. Finally, a Yulen tree! Even as a courtesan, I hadn’t been able to afford such an extravagance! Not to mention that it was heavily frowned on to indulge in such things that might appear too homey to gentleman clients seeking an escape and outlet from the domestic seasonal bliss.

Well, fuck all those old rules. I am now enjoying my domestic seasonal bliss, and I’m going to do it right.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Five

### DAGHEL

I do not look at the gathered gathol as I lead my female out to the assembly, the spot where all coordinated flights take off from the various rookeries along the peaks. There is a thrum of excitement among the wyverns as the gathols look to me expectantly. Several are mated with a female, and I feel a burst of pride at the sight of them standing between their mates. Among the females there are many more orcs than there are humans, but I am saddened to see that their total number together still only belong to a third of the regiment.

“Vorn is interfering with the ability of the gathols to mate,” Drisk informs me along our connection, catching the direction of where my thoughts rest. “Some wyverns have informed me that he keeps them far from the villages and only transporting warriors such as we were assigned to do, allowing only the briefest contact with females and only in well-guarded company. They see our wyva and they yearn.”

My mouth tightens grimly. This situation is unthinkable. Gathols have been among our prized and cherished, lauded for what they sacrifice for the clans. All I ever wanted to be in my youth was part of a gathol and yet now our kind is being forced to the precipice of extinction by Vorn’s selfish whims. He and his supporters do not consider what they will do when the last of us are gone. And while they can sacrifice young males to the duties and seek to constrain him with their laws and regulations, without mating, the wyverns will eventually disappear from our clans. The chances of

another like Drisk coming from the depths of the mountains is so rare that his presence is looked to by the clan with a certain amount of respect and pride despite their considerable fear of him.

My gaze skims over the males and females that I will be flying with, and their gazes meet mine with trepidatious respect. Drisk hums behind me and the other wyverns take up the hum, their throats expanding as an energy flows through all of us, connecting us. Ajek stands at my other side, his expression tight with obvious distaste.

“All right, knock it off,” he barks as he strides forward into the gathol circle, cutting a sharp look at Drisk. The wyvern shows his teeth and the general’s gaze whips away to scowl furiously at the others. “This is not a social gathering. Over the next weeks, days, months, or years, you will be on daily maneuvers, scouring every inch of Fang Peaks. Because Vorn is not without kindness, there will be a rotation of four days on and one day off. We are charged with locating any encampments of any rebellious factions that would attempt to destroy the fabric of the Cold Fang Clan.”

“What about Gehl?” a grizzled orc demands, gently brushing off the small hands of his human mate as she urgently grabs at his arm in an attempt to silence him. “Gathols have always had the days of Gehl free with the rest of the villagers, to spend days of merriment with our families.”

“Fuck Gehl,” Ajek barks.

The gathol exchange glances and an unhappy grumble goes up among them. A young wyvern barks, throwing up a small ball of fire harmlessly into the air at his bonded’s displeasure. Ajek whirls toward him and launches his javelin at the male. It spins with a deadly speed, impacting the young wyvern with a chilling thud as it burrows into the sensitive spot between the thick muscles of his chest and neck. The male collapses and the sound of anguish coming from his bonded—a lone orc barely

twenty summers old—as he drops to his knees to drag the wyvern’s head into his lap pierces me with pain. It does so with such violence that my right hand curls furiously into a tight fist at my side. Damned Ajek and his cruelty. The wyvern’s body heaves and flops in its death throes, vomiting and spilling blood even as his bonded clings to his head in an attempt to hold him to him and calm him while the spark of fire slowly fades and dies within the wyvern’s eyes.

A hush falls over the gathol, and Ajek straightens with a hard smile as he glances among them. “Any more dissenters who wish to betray Vorn’s kindness? As merciful as our prince is, his retribution is swift.”

Several of the gathol shake their heads in response, but they glower heavily as their mates frown at their sides. Unanimous agreement. None will contest. None wish for an outright war against their clan and families.

It would only take the smallest push from the right person at the right moment. Ajek’s actions will ripple through the clan as word spreads—and it will spread—and eventually it will be the spark of the fire that I need to bring Palace Peak down on Vorn’s head.

“You could do it now,” a hiss of a whisper plays on the wind, the deadly coldness of it prickling my skin.

I cautiously glance around so as to not draw attention, wariness tightening my muscles. Although it has never spoken to me, the sinuous creep of ice in the air pulses with an altogether far too familiar and unwelcome presence.

“Break his neck. It would take little effort, especially with my power flowing through you. I make you stronger, do I not?” it murmurs as if in afterthought. “With my strength, you can keep your mate happy and safe. Do you think Vorn will allow you to continue to live thusly? He will use you and then destroy everything that you love

in front of you to utilize the last bit of you in your grief. You must not allow it. Destroy them all. With me you can.”

I shudder at the temptation within those words. Whatever evil the darkness may or may not be, it is not wrong in this, which makes its offer difficult to resist. From the corner of my left eye, I see it moving in a sinuous fashion as it creeps over the stonework of the assembly. It is like a predator prowling along the stones, preparing to pounce, the abyssal void of its eyes drifting over Ajek and the gathol before turning toward me to burn me with their ice-fire.

I close my eyes tightly, refusing to meet its gaze, refusing its access to me as I focus on my mate’s hand on my arm. Her grip has remained light, however, so I am certain that she does not see it. I hear its soft chuckle on the wind as there is a sense of it withdrawing and moving away.

“Next time perhaps,” it whispers in parting, and I shudder in response.

“Mount up!” Ajek orders, and my eyes snap open as his growl rises loudly over the assembly. His hard gaze turns to two gathol, and he gestures dismissively to the fallen wyvern. “You—remove that and incinerate its remains, then return and join us.”

The grieving male looks up from his dead bonded wyvern, hate darkening his eyes. “Xarv never did anything wrong and yet you not only slaughter him but deny him the funerary rites allotted to all the clan, orc and wyvern alike?”

Ajek gives the boy a hard smile and prowls toward him, drawing a blade from his side. I know what he intends, but I have had enough. I would have never allowed the wyvern’s death at all if I had foreseen his intention then, as I do now. Gently pulling my arm from my wyva’s hold, I rush forward, drawing my blade and bringing it up at the exact moment Ajek’s sword descends. The violent strike of metal echoes over the assembly, ringing loudly enough that renders all else silent. I stand there between

Ajek and the youth, my lips drawing slowly back from my teeth as he snarls at me with undisguised hate.

“Daghel! What do you think you are doing?” he growls, spittle flying from his lips. “You forget yourself. Vorn will hear of this.”

“Report me if you will,” I reply coldly as I shove him away to lower my sword. “But my instructions do not include permitting murder of a gathol, half of which you have already accomplished. We are at Vorn’s command, but we are not yours to sacrifice. Or do you wish to incur the fury of the entire clan? Perhaps I should report that to Vorn so that he sees where the true faction spies are.”

Ajek takes a menacing step forward, his nostrils flaring. “You would dare?”

“Do you wish to test me? Then just try to spill gathol blood,” I growl.

“But I’m already dead.” My head whips around as the young male stands, the wind catching his hair as his head bows to hide the grief stamped across his face. “There is no Krish without Xarv,” he whispers and in one swift movement, he draws his blade and slashes it across his throat.

I stare in horror as his body, still lean with youth and once full of promise of the warrior he would become, spins slightly with the force of his motion before falling over Xarv. He stares into the wyvern’s dead eyes with a faint smile as he chokes, gurgling on his own blood. A sob of shocked grief comes from the assembly and my eyes lift to find my mate’s teary gaze over the fist clenched hard against her mouth in an attempt to remain silent.

“What a waste,” Ajek grumbles, sheathing his sword. His brow lowers into a scowl as he turns toward the remaining gathol. “Are you deaf? Mount up, I said. We depart immediately unless anyone else would like to share their fate.”

Tension coils in the air, but the gathols reluctantly obey as male orcs mount their bonded wyverns and those with mates draw their females up in front of them. I notice then that strands weave securely around the female's legs and torso, keeping them firmly seated, and for a moment I am surprised. Was this something that I failed to notice before when flying with Anya?

Giving Ajek one last hard look, I leave the circle and stalk over to Drisk. The wyvern lowers his head to give me a knowing look, but I merely rest my hand for a moment on his brow in a silent sharing of sorrow before walking over to side and pulling myself into the saddle. Anya reaches for me and I bend down, my hand wrapping around her forearm to pull her into the saddle in front of me.

"That boy—" she whispers brokenly, and I hug her tightly to me.

"Do not think of it now," I murmur and brush my lips against the top of her head. I hate asking this of her when she never complains, not about these new demands or even the hours that are demanded of us to stand attentively as Vorn hosts his nightly assemblies. "There will be all the time you need when we return to our rookery."

She snuffles but nods her head in agreement, my brave wyva. She pulls up her fitted facemask at the same time I secure mine into place, her hand tightening on the saddle loop as Drisk's tendrils penetrate us. For once, the pleasure that usually accompanies Drisk's connection is muted. Anya barely shivers in reaction and all I feel cold and detached from it, the sensation more of a distant observation.

"And then vengeance will come," Drisk growls to us, his mental voice filling my mind as he springs into the air with a vicious flap of his wings, communicating his fury as the gathols follow behind us.

We rise together into the sky, the frigid leaving the white platform plateau with its hundreds of icicles dripping from its sides shrinking below us. Ajek's presence is a

stain on the snow as the male turns and heads back toward the hidden cavern entrance leading back to the palace. My eyes narrow on him as we continue to ascend.

His time will come soon. And then... Vorn.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Six

### DRISK

“D o you know how to make those big straw dolls?” our wyva asks Daghel as she glances up from straightening the fabric skirts around the tree that she insisted that I find and carry back to the rookery.

Her cheeks are still bright pink from the icy air from our latest rounds, but her spirits are high, and she seems to be suffering no ill effects from the freezing weather. I am pleased that we could find what she wanted. Although evergreens are found everywhere in the Cold Mountains, including Fang Peaks, most are little more than bushes, their growth stunted by the frigid temperatures and the brutal length of the winters. It took several days of going out on our sweeps before we were in the right part of the mountains to find her precious evergreens trees but now that we have it in our rookery, I cannot feel as if it was a ridiculous waste of effort and time when she looks so pleased with it.

She smiles brightly as she brings out the box filled with little ornaments that she’s been making the last several evenings and sets it on the floor between her and Daghel. Her eyebrows creep upward as her question goes unanswered until Daghel finally takes notice and nods.

“The thanika. They are not difficult to make, though there are those in the villages who specialize in such things and can do much better designs than I can create.” He

raises one white eyebrow at her, his head slightly. “Do you wish for a pair of thanika, wyva?”

“It doesn’t have to be anything fancy if you have the time to make them, but I think it would be a nice addition for our rookery,” she agrees.

Daghel glances around, taking in the tree and the various bits of décor hanging made garlands of evergreen boughs, nuts, berries, ribbon, and bits of glass and metal. Truthfully, it is not as grand as what can be found in the lower villages, but that is to be expected, considering that Vorn forbids such decoration to be made by the workshops in the upper village.

He nods thoughtfully. “It could be managed. I will go down to the outskirts of Shendra Pass and get some straw bales from the village there. It is one of the clan’s biggest farming villages, and they often supply plenty of straw for all those who need or want it. We just merely return it after Gehl for feed and bedding for their animals,” he replies and then smiles with true pleasure as Anya stands on her toe and drags his head to press a kiss against his cheek.

Dropping to the flat of her feet, our wyva grins and bends down to lift the lid from the box, reveals the numerous ornaments. She plucks an ornament from it and carries it over to the tree to place it on one of the slender branches filled with small prickly leaves. Daghel’s eyes follow her and settle on the ornament for a long moment before he too bends to pick an ornament from the box. They work together, hanging each delicate ornament on the tree’s boughs one by one. I ought to feel a little excluded since this activity requires far more nimbleness than my hands possess but I find instead that I’m enjoying the festivity of the atmosphere as they work, especially since she hums to herself to herself as she hangs the ornaments, and the sound washes over me in a pleasing embrace.

“What do you sing?” I ask her, my eyes dropping half-mast as a sense of peace settles

within me, quieting the voraciousness of the flames within me.

She glances back at me over her shoulder and laughs softly before turning back to her work, hanging some little sparkly thing made of twisted bits of metal that she acquired from the blacksmith, if I am not mistaken.

“It is just an old Yulen song that children often sing,” she replies and clears her throat as she glances back at me awkwardly. “I do not have the best singing voice. While some courtesans have such talents with which they can amuse their guests, I was never one of them. My talents lie... elsewhere,” she adds with a laugh. “But I can perhaps sing a few bars for you, if you do not laugh too hard,” she adds with a teasing smile.

“And you can demonstrate your own talents later,” I purr, drawing a burst of laughter from our mate. Even Daghel chuckles reluctantly at my comments, which is a rarity that I treasure and decidedly savor.

“Whatever you decide to gift us with, we would never laugh,” Daghel assures her as he reaches over to take a dainty bit of colored glass that she tirelessly bore a hole through to string it with a bit of ribbon. He lifts it and a small smile curls the corners of his mouth in admiration before placing it on a branch of the tree.

My pleasure curls within me at his happiness so that the tiniest puff of smoke drifts from my mouth. If I did not already adore our wyva with every part of being, just seeing how much happiness she brought my solemn bonded male would have conquered me.

“Sing for us,” I insist with a little musical hum of my own that makes her smile widen.

“Very well,” she says with a little laugh and clears her throat again.

“Gods bless ye merry, kindly folk

May peace greet your day

Let all the gifts of Yulen come

With what sweetness that it may.

It comes like a golden power

Brightening all that’s gray.

O may it bring joy to us all

Joy to us all

O may it ever bring joy to us all.”

A deep, content happiness curls through me and the tip of my tail hooks contently in response. Now that I have the melody, I begin to languidly hum along with her, my tail curling and uncurling as she and Daghel steadily add their little ornaments to the tree amid with strings of red berries and garlands of woven fabric—scraps that she got from Linahna.

Another storm has risen out of nowhere, which makes me additionally thankful that this is our rest rotation. Although the winds have died down, the snow persists to fall in fat snowflakes that are rapidly accumulating over every surface of the palace peak and upper village. It is far better for her to be here beside the rookery’s main fire, where she can keep warm.

“Linahna should be here soon,” she says absently as she adjusts a little ornament

sewn made of fabric and stuffed with fleece. “She is dropping something off as a favor to me.”

Daghel glances at her curiously but grunts in acknowledgment. However, I do not miss the secretive little smile that teases her lips. Interesting.

The tree comes together quickly, and I must admit that, looking upon it, it is a fine thing. Daghel and Anya step back to join me at my side so that we may admire it together.

“Perhaps... it is not so ridiculous,” I admit. “If you insist on dragging a tree into our rookery every Gehl, it would be worth the annoyance.”

“How sweet of you,” Anya replies, her face scrunching up with amusement and I just adore every little fine line around her eyes and mouth as this speaks to me of our mate’s happiness. She sighs and her eyes sparkle with the firelight reflected off the little pieces of colored glass. “I’ve always wanted a Yulen tree.”

“Then you shall always have one,” Daghel replies and I chirp my agreement as the male curls his arms around her, hugging her to his side.

It is a perfect moment and I am about to suggest that Daghel go into the palace to locate some mulled wine for us—even if it does irritate the fires just a little for wyverns—so that we can drink, make merry, and carry out our prepared gift for our female, a true mating as we both take her and bathe her in our fires. An itch of excitement runs over my scales but a knock at the door interrupts the mood. Linahna... already.

Grumbling surlily, I sprawl on the floor and glower toward the entrance, letting my displeasure be known as Anya disappears and then quickly returns with Linahna in tow, the latter laughing at our mate’s exuberance as she carries a large, colorfully

wrapped box with her free arm with a bottle tucked into the crook of her elbow. Her smile widens unrepentantly as her gaze falls on me and then shifts to Daghel, who stands a short distance away with his arms crossed over his chest. I am not the only one annoyed by the interruption. I am certain that he told her of our intention to mate with our wyva tonight. That the female gives us an evil spice and cheery wave when Anya releases her hand upon entering the common room chafes.

What is this female up to? What is Anya up to? My gaze narrows suspiciously on the pair of them before falling slowly back to the box. What is that? The favor that Anya mentioned?

Anya frowns at us with disapproval before turning a smile of chagrin to Linahna. "I'm so sorry about this reception. I did warn them that you were coming."

"It is fine," Linahna assures her. "As it happens, I cannot stay, but I did say that I would bring this by for you, so I am just dropping it off." She hands the colorful box to Anya. "And this," she adds as she also hands her the bottle, which our female immediately passes to Daghel.

"Are you certain you did not want to stay? At least share a drink with us," Anya insists, but the princess shakes her head, her eyes sparkling mirthfully.

"I would like to," she drawls, making my scales prickly angrily, "but no. Not this eve. As it happens, I was invited to another village for some merriment for Gehl, and it will be a relief to get away from all the gloom of the palace and upper village. But your rookery is spectacular," she admits with a note of admiration in her voice.

That softens some of my hostility. At least the female has some taste, even if she is unpleasantly devious.

"Oh, well, that is a different matter then," Anya says. "We went to Glas Village, and

it was truly beautiful. We had such a good time. You can just join us another time. You will be missed, of course.”

“Oh, I am certain you will survive without me,” Linahna teases. “But I will check in with you tomorrow for all the details,” she says as she leans in and brushes a kiss on Anya’s cheek. “Be sure to do everything that I would not do,” she teases.

Giving Anya’s arm a fond pat, she turns and struts to the door, winking slyly at us as she passes. “Happy Gehl, you all,” she purrs before slipping out the door, leaving us alone with our wyva.

I glance down at the gift left on the stuffed sitting bench. Curious, I prowl over to it and tap the box with one claw. The package is so overdone with the costly fabric wrapping it that it strikes me as exactly what an elf would come up with. Humans clearly did not improve at all on the tradition’s garishness. It is a strange custom overall. However, what strikes me as even stranger is that Anya did not immediately stuff it under her Yulen tree as she explained is done. Instead, it is left here, teasing us. Even Daghel is peering at it curiously, though his expression is as impassive as ever. It is clear that neither of us knows what to expect. Among the orcs gifts are given spontaneously through the twelve-day festival, little tokens of affection, and among wyverns... well... our gifts are the same gift we give for everything—a good rutting to ring in the holiday.

“Is this... for us?” I query, and our wyva claps her hands together with a laugh of delight.

“Yes! I’ve been waiting patiently forever for it to be ready and Linahna sent me a message this morning. Happy Gehl!”

I glance over at Daghel and nudge the gift with my claws in his direction. I am too nervous to open it with my limited dexterity. My bonded male gives me an

understanding look and unties the ribbon that holds the fabric snuggling tucked into place. It all falls away to reveal a box stained black with brass metal fittings. With a flick of a claw, he releases the latch and opens it. We stare down at the contents together and I chirp softly in wonder as he reaches into it and withdraws a long lash with several woven tails at its tip. He glances over at our mate, an eyebrow rising.

“What is this, wyva?”

“A box of pleasures,” she replies in a sultry voice.

“Pleasures,” the orc rumbles, his voice deepening with interest as he sets the lash aside and reaches in again to withdraw a large phallus hooked to an unmistakable strap. “I have an idea of what pleasures can be had with this. I would be delighted to make you scream.”

“That’s sweet,” she replies as she gently plucks it from his fingers and sets it aside. “But later. As it happens, the box of pleasures itself is not your only gift. The actual gift is so much more than this.”

“More?” Daghel echoes with interest.

“Oh yes, but first... let’s take this to the bedchamber,” she says as she picks up the lash and phallus, depositing the latter into the box. She points at it with the lash and smiles. “Don’t forget the box.”

There is no objection there. That was exactly where our festivities were to go, anyway. I continue to chirp with delight as Daghel scoops up to the box and we follow our female down the corridor. She turns in the center of our bedchamber to watch us enter and gestures to the bed with the lash.

“Put the box on the floor,” she commands, her eyes following him as he carefully

lowers it to the stone floor. Her lips quirk in response. “Good. Now, take off your clothes and get on your knees.”

Daghel eyes her impassively for a moment but then smirks and quickly sheds his tunic and surc. Anya’s smile widens and her hands go to her simple shift to untie the ribbons keeping it together. The warm layers to drop the floor as she undoes each one and hunger stirs within me as I watch my gift slowly be unwrapped. It is perfection and when the firelight touches her skin, giving it a warm glow, I want to skip the preamble and go straight to giving her my fires now. It is only my intrigue with what she has planned that keeps me in place as she prowls toward the bed where Daghel kneels, his eyes tracking her movements with predatory intensity as she stalks over to where he is kneeling.

She drags the lash along his shoulders and chest, and I watch with interest as his flesh quivers in response. Flicking it against his chest, she draws a soft rumble of pleasure from the male as a bright mark streaks across his chest. Anya smiles and traces patterns over his skin before flicking him again and again, each at unexpected intervals so that his muscles clench with anticipation and his cock swells with desire. She slides it over his straining length, her toes brushing against his sack so that they cradle the root of his phallus. She rubs her foot gently on the underside of his shaft, making him growl in pleasure, a sound that breaks into a loud moan when she gently flicks the lash against the tip of his cock.

“Good,” she murmurs. “You are doing so well. Perhaps a reward, yes?” Placing her hand at the top of his head, she widens her stance as she pushes him down, bringing her beautiful cunt close his face. She widens her stance, firmly settling her foot against his cock and gently rocks her weight, pressing her slick folds close to his mouth and nose. I stare with fascination, salivating with my hunger as Daghel’s nostrils flare. “Taste me,” she purrs.

Daghel growls with desire and his long tongue slips from his mouth to slick over her

slit. She sucks in a breath and his growl deepens as his powerful arms curl around her to grasp her ass, holding her in place, his tusks spreading her folds as his mouth seals against her. A cry of need rises from our wyva and she grinds her pretty cunt against his mouth as her foot rubs against his cock. She punctuates the pleasure of my bonded with intermittent flicks of the lash that she continues to trace over him as she surrenders to the haze of her desire.

Her moans fill the bedchamber and my cock swells lustfully within my sheath, her hips canting in rhythm with every stroke of her foot again Daghel's cock. Every so often she presses down against it with a fraction of her weight, making the male snarl, delirious with his desire. With every touch, his moans are drawn steadily from him, muffled against her cunt. All the while he works against her sweet flesh, lapping and sucking at her sex with boiling need.

"Such a perfect mouth," she moans as his tongue delves into the hot clasp of her sex, making her tilt her head back with a short gasp. "So good."

She shivers and shakes against him, crying out as her release spills over his lips. He growls and swallows as his mouth turns ravenous in response until she drops the lash to clutch at his head as she rides out the storm of her pleasure. Eventually, she pulls away with a jerk, her thighs damp with her release and her chest heaving as she pants and stares at him with a smile pulling at her lips.

"That was... amazing," she confesses. Her hand shakes as she lifts it and brushes her hair from her face, but she turns to the box and removes the phallus, its straps dangling as she peers at it thoughtfully and holds it aloft in front of us.

Daghel's brow rises. "Are we finished?"

She laughs softly. "Hardly."

I watch with fascination as she loosens the straps and slides them over her plump thighs before tightening them firmly into place. The large phallus protrudes from between her thighs and she gives it a leisurely stroke as her gaze fastens once more on my bonded male's face.

“Back in the day my clients would beg for me to allow them to suck on my toys,” she murmurs as she begins to circle around Daghel, her every step perfectly measured and her gaze pinned on him with such focus that my cock twitches hard within my sheath with definite interest. She stops in front of him and leans forward, her lush breasts swaying as she looks him right in the eye and smirks. “But for you... I think I have a far better idea.”

Ah, my lusty heroine of my dreams. I cackle my little clicks and my wings fan eagerly, though I am careful to keep them from colliding against anything in our bedchamber.

Daghel coolly meets her eyes, but I can taste his excited musk rising to perfume the air. His ardor for our mate is an all-consuming love and hunger churning together in a vortex that I can feel trembling within the quick of me.

“Suck our wyvern's cock, orc,” she commands, and my wings flare just slightly in surprise as I cast an uncertain look toward my bonded male.

As frequently as I rut him, and often violently, service of this sort has never entered into our dynamic. Nor is it a part of most wyvern-orc dynamics that I have heard of. There is no way to predict how Daghel will instinctively react to such an order.

“Perhaps we should not—” I begin, but am silenced by a sharp look from our wyva .

“Did I ask you?” she replies and my cock jerks excitedly within my sheath as a chirp of delight at her power and command rushes unbidden from my chest. Her gaze turns

sternly toward Daghel and imperiously arches an eyebrow. “Well?”

He meets her gaze, his cold, hard expression giving nothing away. I am certain that he will reject her little game, but to my surprise, he coolly nods in agreement. Excitement fills me and I begin to croon softly as I climb onto the bed and recline, stretching out as I feel my prick slowly slip from its sheath. Anya’s eyes settle on it and her pupils expand even as her eyes brighten with an unmistakable heat that only a blind wyvern would fail to see.

Daghel turns toward me and climbs onto the bed beside me. My eyes follow his every movement, and I nearly stop breathing as his hand curls around my prick. His flesh is cooler than mine by a couple degrees so that I shiver with pleasure and gasp when his mouth closes around me. Daghel’s tusks perfectly cradle my shaft, gliding against my length as he sucks me deeply into his mouth. His sharp teeth tease my scales so that I gasp as the first shot of cum works swiftly up my shaft to spray over his tongue. He sucks harder in response, his head bobbing, working my prick in and out of the tight, hot clasp of his mouth. I grunt and gently pump my hips, thrusting into his mouth with every drop of his head.

There is a wet sound and my gaze lifts to where Anya is coating the shaft of her leather phallus with some kind of oil. She smiles approvingly at me and gives me a playful wink. I moan, my right wing fanning slightly as my claws come down on his head, holding him in place around my prick as she lines up behind him and rubs the tip of the large cock against his ass. His bottom flexes, his skin jumping a little in response, but he moans loudly around my cock and my eyes roll black with the intense pleasure of the vibrations. Her smile widens, and she clenches the globes of his tightly in her hands, her nails biting into his tough skin until his cock jumps and he growls with pleasure around me. My fires lick through me and rise, spilling down around the root of my cock, filling it further.

Spreading him wide, she notches the tip of her cock against his ass while curling one

hand around him to grip the thick base of his cock. Holding his shaft tightly, she drags her hand down his length as she presses into him with one long, hard stroke. Pre-cum dribbles from his dip and my cock pulses as he drags on my cock harder and faster.

Anya pumps in and out of him, her body rocking hard and fast as she runs her heavily lubricated hand up and down his cock. Daghel moves with her as much as he can with my claw on his head, his moans rising through the chamber mingling with my own hisses of pleasure. Anya's smile just gets wider and wider as she quickens her pace, her hips slapping his thighs with another force to drive his mouth onto my cock. His tongue teases my ridges as he sucks, and plies at my slit as he attempts to work out another stream of release. I can feel it boiling at the root of my cock. My fire flares brighter and my cock gets harder as my cum rises into it. I pant eagerly as I rut his mouth. His own cock is rigid and leaking within Anya's grasp, straining within her hold. I watch it hungrily, wanting him to climax—needing it as our female slams into him from behind.

Then it happens. Daghel's muffled howl swallows my cock, vibrating all around it a long shout and scrape of his teeth that snaps the tension coiled through me. I roar as my cock spurts within his mouth and his own cock spits its own release in heavy streams in front of him. It is only when the last of our seed is drained that Anya steps back and allows her phallus to slip from its tight fit in his ass. Daghel's mouth still gently sucks at my tip, drawing up the last bit before slipping up with a sly smile.

“Enjoy that, wyvern?” he rumbles in jest, and I grunt as I collapse on the bed.

“Oh, we aren't done yet,” Anya says with a soft laugh. “There is something I really want to try ever since I've seen what your strands can do. Daghel, climb up onto Drisk's back and lie flat. Drisk, hold on to him and... connect.”

Despite my recent release, my interest stirs at her words. Connect while they are

fucking. I do enjoy that. It would be a good appetizer while I recover for the main event. I grin with delight and stretch on my belly. Daghel gives our female an amused look but readily climbs onto my back and rolls, settling flat against me. It only takes a moment of contact for my strands to respond. They slide quickly over his body, wrapping tightly around him, binding him completely with his arms and torso held against me as others burrow up into the clench of his ass and around his shaft before diving into its tip. He gasps and growls in reaction, his cock stiffening rapidly within the grasp of my strand, but his pleasure swamps over me with a hot blast that makes me croon as heat crawls back into my prick.

I close my eyes with pleasure and hiss, my scales quivering, as I feel Anya's small, bare feet on me as she, too, climbs onto my back. Her soft sigh and the heat of her cunt sliding over and swallowing Daghel's cock ripples through me. My strands snap up in response, coiling around her and anchoring her to Daghel and me both as they drive into her both ass and cunt, wiggling around my bonded male's cock as it finds a perfect little soft spot onto which to latch. Her pleasure is sweeter, and my claws kneed the furs, scraping with pleasure as her body begins to rock and bounce against the restraint of my strands.

They moan together and more of my strands slide over them, working their way over their bodies to slide over their eyes in a blinding mask as others dive into their parted mouth, muffling all sound. They are a part of me, breathing with me as they fuck, as Anya's hips lift and drop, grinding on Daghel, sending a frenzy through me—through us. Fire gathers in my mouth and my cock extrudes anew, leaking all over the furs as I claw the bed with the ecstasy rushing through me. I keep Daghel's cock plugged with my strand, holding back his release for as long as possible so that Anya continues to ride him as her climaxes trip through her.

When she grows tired, I move my strands, helping her ride the orc as a pattern of our pleasure and need twists through me; pleasures mingling together, twisting tighter and tighter with me until my cock is fully engorged and trembling with the need to

spill. With a growl, I rip my strand from inside Daghel's cock and allow his release to boil out of him in heavy, thick sprays into our mate. His roar of completion as her cunt spasms tightly and viciously around him is muffled by my strands, but nothing blocks my bellow as flames shoot from my mouth, blackening the opposite wall.

I slowly come down from my climax, my strands unraveling slowly from their mouths and faces to retreat from their bodies. I am preparing to withdraw the one from Anya's cunt when I pause at a flutter of sensation. I follow it with my senses until I find it. A pup tucked safely in her womb. Shadows drift around it, grazing it as the darkness, too, seems to realize that it is there and brushes over it briefly before retreating. I hiss low and then withdraw my strand slowly from her body.

Anya groans as she drops from my back, her legs shaking as she stumbles from me toward the edge of the bed. Daghel rumbles in her wake as he, too, drops from my back. He kneels at my side for a moment, dragging in deep breaths. I am surprised to see that his cock is still swollen with need, its length an angry blue. He bares his teeth with a savage hunger as he stares at her plump ass as she staggers away from us in an effort to collect herself.

"Where are you going?" Daghel rumbles as he straightens, drawing Anya's shocked gaze back to him. I chirp with excitement, my cock still hard and aching. A dark smile teases his lips, which gives me pause as I see something shift behind his eyes as the darkness brushes through him. How long has it been there? I am beginning to suspect that it has been touching him all along. I remain still, watching. Daghel is still in control, so I do not bring a halt to this new game. What he does here must be fully his decision. "You have given us our gift, but we have yet to give you ours. On all fours, wyva," he purrs, making my cock jump eagerly.

She glances at us uncertainly, but she drops to her knees on the bed and slowly leans forward, putting her hand on the mattress. Daghel draws his claws along her ass, making her shiver as he peers down into her box and withdraws something long that

is shaped like a phallus but without the defined shape or a base to be fitted into the harness. Daghel drags it back and forth across her sopping cunt and I savor the little sounds she makes as her musk thickens once more to perfume the air. With one long, slow stroke, he presses the phallus deep, working in and out of her cunt. It squelches loudly, his seed dribbling from around it. His gaze grows hotter as he watches it spill from her, and he leisurely drags it from her cunt to press its slick tip against her ass. With excruciating care, he works slowly into her ass. Although we both know that she likely had this part of her penetrated given her history, he still demonstrates tenderness in this task, working it in and out of her until she is gasping, and her toes are curling with every thrust. He doesn't let up until she is shaking in the hold of another orgasm, and only then does he keep it buried within her as she spasms around it.

Holding it in place, he peers down at her thoughtfully, a shadow of darkness shifting once more behind his eyes. He smiles then and withdraws it to its tip as he lines his cock up with her dripping cunt. Gripping her hip firmly with one hand, he drags her ass toward him as he thrusts forward in one hard snap of his hips. She whimpers, her fragile human body shivering, but a moan falls from her lips as he works the phallus back into her ass until she is thoroughly plugged. I croon softly, delighted with how easily she takes them. This will make things much easier. He withdraws his prick from the clasp of her cunt, pressing deeper with the phallus, only to pull it back as he rams his cock back into her depths. His hips flex, driving his cock in alternating thrusts in counterpoint to the leather shaft as he thrusts that into her as well. Her fingers cling to the furs, her moans becoming louder until they break into wails as Daghel's thrusts faster to where her breasts are jiggling in a frenzied dance to the rapid bounce of his pelvis against her ass.

He growls, his eyes sliding shut for a moment as he drifts with the pleasure as he ruts her, their bodies slamming together in a frenzy. Her cunt creams around his shaft, her cries growing louder and louder, but then his hand tightens on her hip and he stops, his cock buried completely in her as she climaxes around him with a shriek. He

shudders over and over, his growl a continuous rumble in his chest as his cock visibly throbs at its root and pumps his seed deep into her. Eventually, his eyes open and they burn with cold fire as he glances over at me, his lips curling in a sly smile. At length the dark fire withdraws from his eyes, and they flutter closed for a second as another shudder runs through him. He withdraws the leather cock from her ass and tosses it aside as he pulls his prick from her body with a ragged gasp. His hand grips her at the back of the neck and he nudges her bottom with his knee.

“To the floor now. You are ready,” he rasps.

“Why the floor?” Anya looks over at him warily, but she follows him to the floor only to stare at him when he lies on the cold stone and pulls her down on top of him.

“When Drisk flames—and he will—it is better if it is on the floor than our bed,” he replies with a wry chuckle and nods toward the charred wall.

I grimace at the black stain. It is not often that I lose control. But in this particular case, it is necessary. When I give her my flame, it is better that there is nothing flammable beneath us.

“Flames?” An uneasy look flashes across her face and she glances over at me as realization dawns that she will have me filling her ass where once her little plaything filled her. There is a flicker of doubt, but her jaw hardens, and she nods as she straddles his rigid cock.

Even after climaxing as much as he has, his cock is swollen with his mating rut, so Anya’s cunt has no trouble swallowing him in one easy glide. She rocks experimentally on it to reawaken her own pleasure and need before she sinks down with a sigh, her lush body covering him as his arms wrap tightly around her, pinning her in place. He flexes his hips, working his cock in shallow little thrusts and growls low in his throat.

“Join us now, Drisk,” he pants, and I readily drop from the bed and prowl over to where they lie on the floor.

Our female looks like a decadent morsel with her ass lifted into the air. I want a taste so bad that I lower my muzzle and drag it from her ass to where her slit is wrapped tightly around my bonded male’s prick. I stroke my tongue along the connection point between their bodies, enjoying their little gasps and moans as I stroke and flick my tongue, enjoying their mingled flavors. Tipping my head just a little, I wiggle my long, tapered tongue against her slit, pressing it alongside his shaft as I penetrate her with it, savoring her taste as my tongue curls deep inside of her. I work it in and out of her and am rewarded when she climaxes, spraying her sweet essence into my mouth. It is like nectar of the gods! I could be content to remain buried in such a fashion, dragging my tongue in and out of her for quite some time, but Daghel’s cock jerk in warning against it, reminding me of our purpose.

I grumble but withdraw my tongue, enjoying the snug pull of her channel around it and Daghel’s cock. It is a sensation he also clearly enjoys since he hisses between his teeth with pleasure, but he gives me an annoyed look over Anya’s shoulder. I bare my teeth in a grin, but I adjust my arm-wings as I take my place, my feet planted at either side of Daghel’s legs and my claws dropping on either side of my mates, pressing my wings firmly against the floor. My slick cock grazes Anya’s ass and she shivers in reaction so that I chirp happily and rest more confidently behind her as the tip of my cock notches at her tight ass.

Bracing my weight, I press forward. I take my time, enjoying every whimper from her as Daghel moans in response to the pressure of my cock tightly rubbing against his, separated only by a thin wall of inner flesh.

Oh, this is very nice. I must insist on doing this often in the future.

Flames lick over my tongue as I withdraw shallowly before pressing in a hard, abrupt

thrust back into her clenching hole. Anya makes a strangled sound, but it is all pleasure, and I growl as I do it again. And again. My pace quickens as I get into a rhythm and Daghel rocks his hip in tiny shallow thrusts at counterpoint. The feeling is delicious. A shudder rushes over me and my cock swells and spasms deep with her as she flexes instinctively around me. My claws hook against the store floor as I thrust, her hot ass clenching tightly around me. And she is loud, our wyva , as all of her perfect control shatters as we penetrate her. Her mouth gapes as she gasps and cries out with every thrust. If I close my eyes, I can almost imagine that I am breeding her. I grunt as I thrust harder, my hips snapping with the build of pleasure rising within me. I stroke into her long and hard as Daghel bounces, his ass lifting to thrust up into her from his position on the bottom. Flames rise from within the pit of me, drawing higher with every thrust and every rippling squeeze of her body around me as she wails her pleasure.

Daghel's prick flexes, pressing its heavily engorged length hard against mine. His hips begin jerking to drive his cock faster and harder into her, riding the wave of his impending climax. I grind against it, flames filling my mouth once again as I drive my cock into her repeatedly, working myself into a frenzy.

It is coming. I feel the bright, hot glow of my mating flames rising from deep behind my gonads as it makes a scorching path up through my body. My internal testicles pulse and draw tighter as deep spasming takes hold over me. My prick hardens further as the blood vessels swell to their maximum. Daghel comes with a roar, his cock shuttling in and out of her furiously, tipping me over the edge of pleasure. My senses plunge into ecstasy as the fire erupts, spewing in rivers everywhere as Anya screams and screams, her height of ecstasy making her appear as a goddess as she wrenches back from Daghel's hold, her back arching exquisitely as she reaches back to grip the smallest horn toward the end of my muzzle as she rides and soars through her bliss, remade.

Our wyva. My wyva. She is now ours, reborn in wyvern's fire, mated and claimed.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Seven

### ANYA

I stir languidly, my limbs still aching but in the best of ways. Gods, what a night! Although I still feel the faint flicker of fire beneath my skin, I barely remember Daghel gathering me in his arms and lifting me back onto the bed. I am a little surprised, however, to discover that not only are my mates missing from my bed, but that the furs have long gone cold. They've been gone for a while. Sitting up, I rub my eyes and frown as I glance around the empty room. For a moment, I swear I see an inky black shadow looming, but it disappears when I turn to focus on it.

The shadows within the palace and its rookery are strange.

I shake my head and climb from the bed, but am immediately distracted by the sound of laughter coming from the common room. My lips curl happily and pull on a clean shift and dressing gown before slipping my feet into my slippers and heading out into the hall of the rookery.

I do not know what I expect to see, but the sight of Daghel sitting cross-legged on the floor as he wrestles with straw, twisting them methodically into shapes and binding them with cord, is a charming surprise. His eyes lift to me and warm as he offers me the briefest wink. I grin in response to his unusual demonstrative affection. How adorable. Drisk is absent, of course, but he is frequently gone in the morning to hunt up a meal to gorge himself on before bringing a choice rump or section of one of kills

back to us. Linahna grins at me from where she is sprawled on the plush bench, a cup in her hand and the hint of spiced hard cider in the air informs me that she located the bottle we hadn't yet opened and started the party early. She follows his line of gaze to me and lifts her cup in salutation.

“Good morrow, Anya! How does it feel to be thoroughly fucked and mated?”

I grin at her candid words and step into the room, plopping onto the bench beside her. “I see that you already possessed secret knowledge before the fact,” I tease, and she smirks back at me.

“Who am I to get between good fuck and true love?” she says as she takes another long drink from her cup. “May we all be so blessed.”

I frown a little at her note of misery, but she waves off my concern. “Do not worry yourself. I thought I had this thing going with a female in a nearby village, just a flirtation, mind you. Unfortunately, I decided to pay her a call only to find her skewered on an orc's cock quite passionately.” She sighs a little and shrugs, her lips tipping merrily. “I will find my perfect little mate someday, so do not dare worry about me.”

I give her a sympathetic smile, but I nod in agreement. “Of course, and on your mating, I swear I will drink cups of cider with you as well.”

Her expression softens, and she nods toward the kitchen facing the common room. “Get a cup then and we shall drink heartily to your mating.”

“Not too heartily,” I say as I get to my feet and head toward the kitchen. “We have our sweep to make, and I need to be relatively sober for it. At least enough to not affect Drisk. The last thing anyone needs is a wyvern falling from the sky.”

“That may be the case tomorrow, but not today,” Linahna singsongs from the bench, her head falling back to peer at me over the padded, high back of the bench. “I was walking past Vorn’s quarters—just a touch of my usual spying—and heard Daghel tell him that he refused you into the mountains when you are so vulnerable post-mating.”

“Did he?” I glance over at Daghel in surprise as I sit back down at Linahna’s side only for the male merely smirk over at me as he gathers more straw together to bind.

“Of course, Vorn pitched a fit,” Linahna added and chuckled with delight. “My brother always was a big baby when something is inconvenient for him, but Daghel was not going to budge and jeopardize your safety, so he had no choice but to relent. So today... we are celebrating,” she proclaims as she leans forward with the bottle and splashes a healthy amount into my cup.

“I suppose we are,” I chuckle and bring the cup up to my nose.

The scent of apples, alcohol and fragrant spices is perfectly sweet, and I sip it slowly, savoring the flavor sliding over my tongue. Lowering the cup, I turn to watch Daghel work while Linahna fills me in on palace gossip, noting that the way the forms of what appear to be a warrior and a maiden are coming together. Or rather, Durethikal and his bride. I sit and watching, silently sipping on my cider as the god-king and his fair maiden come together in vaguely recognizable forms. At least they look like the rough forms of a male and a skirted female.

“Did you leave with Drisk early in the morning, then, to get all of this?” I ask, and my mate nods with a look of satisfaction on his face.

“I wished to finish before you awakened so as to surprise you, but Vorn’s meltdown delayed me from returning to the rookery as quickly as I would have liked,” he mutters as he tosses aside the twine and reaches for the ribbon. “I am afraid that these

are not as nice as the ones that you admired in the village, but I brought plenty for you to adorn them,” he says, nodding to a basket a short distance away from where he is sitting.

I look at it with delight, utterly touched by his efforts. “I think they look wonderful,” I tell him.

Rising from the bench, I walk over to him with a smile. He sits back to look up at me as I place a foot beside his leg. Heat fills his eyes, and he reaches up to cup my legs in his big hands while I step over him and set my foot on his other side. A soft growl rumbles in his chest and his hands lovingly cup my ass as I lower myself so that I am sitting on him and curl my legs around his hips. Looking up at him, I brush a finger over his chin and sigh with pleasure when his head dips and his lips brush mine in the sweetest caress as his hands slide to my back and he holds me tightly to him.

My mouth immediately opens for him, and I don’t bother holding back my moan as his tongue slips between my lips, thrusting into my mouth in a way that sends a tingle rushing through me. Our mouths move over each, our tongues entangling as we kiss. The only thing that could make it better was if Drisk was reclined next to us. I’ve felt his tongue within my cunt, but I wonder what it would feel like to suck at its textured tip so that he can spirit a kind of kiss that is special just for him. I make a mental note to try it later as I lose myself in the love of my mate.

Tomorrow is back to the real world, but today is for dreams and celebration, and I just can’t wait to get more of that with both of my males to sustain us over the hard days of flying to come as we return to our regular duties. For now, I will savor this simple romance that I never believed possible for any courtesan to have.

“And that’s my cue to leave.” Linahna chuckles and I hear the scrape of her boots against the stone floor as she stands. “A blessed mating to you all,” she says and I smile against Daghel’s lips.

It is indeed. Never have I felt more blessed.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Eight

### DAGHEL

I stand to the right of Vorn's throne, my expression as carefully blank and composed as ever belying the dark, icy fury stirring within my gut. I am in an unforgiving mood this morning, especially since I was summoned in the earliest hours of the morning. Although Anya has been living with us for many days since our mating, there is a newness to it that is still rocking through me. I had fully expected to go on our usual sweep today as we have the past several days, but to be so rudely summoned and commanded to come without my mate makes hostility and wariness prickle through me.

I stare at the gathered orcs icily. There is not a female among us. Not even the assembled gathol orcs are present with their mates. It is unnerving. There is nothing good to come of this.

Vorn stares down at us coldly from the throne. "As some of you may or may not know, I have been corresponding with other powerful clan lords that have risen to the height of power within their own clans and wrestled power from the queens. It is mostly outlier clans, as those of the inner mountains with their deep fortresses are still deferentially loyal to the old ways. It is because of this alliance I have learned what our enemies do not wish us to know."

He stares at the males, his gaze shifting among them, holding their gaze with his

beady stare. “They are launching strategic attacks against clans where the claim of rule is uncertain, and an entire contingent consisting of gathols and warriors are heading our way to join with the factions in hiding within our own peaks,” he shouts as he gestures to a covered table in front of him. “We must destroy this faction encampment before the gathol and supporting warriors can arrive and muster their strength! We must strike the death blow from which they will never recover, so that they turn away from the Fang Peaks and never threaten our power again!”

At his nod, Ajek whips the fabric from the table, revealing a carefully carved layout of the mountains. I recognize this map only distantly as I recall the queen pouring it over a time or two while Linahna and I played as pups in her chambers. There are markers now set upon them with carefully placed pieces, and I realize quickly that the red pieces are the attacking forces that he mentioned.

His gaze drifted over the males, his expression cruel and pitiless. “This cannot be allowed,” he thunders, his fist striking the arm of the throne and the sound echoes throughout the throne room. “I have summoned you today, all powerful warriors and leaders of your own ranks, and call on you to prepare for battle. They dare to attack our peaks on the eve of the solstice, on the longest night of the year. Well then, we will meet them and bathe the night red with their blood. We will descend upon them, and we will tear them to pieces and feast upon their bones!”

A shout goes up through the room, a roaring sound of bloodlust from the gathered males, and my eyes narrow on them. The warriors gnash their teeth violently, their fists beating their chest in salute and allegiance to the prince. There are those commanders around the outer ring who remain quiet, warily observing the chaos of the fanatics eager to rise to Vorn’s cause. Just beyond them, the gathol wing leaders are assembled and I note the distinct discomfort plainly on the face of many of those among their numbers.

Vorn settles back into his throne with a smirk of satisfaction, gesturing aimlessly at

Ajek to take the lead now that he has gotten his followers riled up. His gaze shifts to me and his smile widens ruthlessly as he leans toward me on his throne.

“Daghel, you have special orders. While the other gathol go to gather the war-platforms, you will fly ahead and scout for the best vantage point to direct the gathols. There will be no survivors, do you understand? You will not interfere with my warriors, nor will you allow any other gathol to. If any disobey your command... drop them. Is that clear?”

I meet his gaze coolly and incline my head as I prowl away from the throne, my gaze trained on the gathol that I am now entirely responsible for. I pray that this does not come to haunt me in the days to come.

“Move out,” Ajek bellows, thrusting his fist into the air. “May we be picking their bones out of our teeth for the days to come!”

A howl erupts from among them and the gathols move back a pace, their gaze shifting over to meet mine. There is no getting out of this, certainly not in the current setting. The maddened orcs would be quick to rip apart their own clan members if any of just choose to leave, risking our families. I tip my head toward the staircase going to the assembly platform and they nod. We will mount there and descend to gather the war-platforms from the outskirts of the village below. The males give one last glance to the room and withdraw toward the staircase, their path swift and silent. I follow them grimly, the fall of our boots echoing in the staircase as we make our terrible march to the summit of the plateau.

In contrast to the frenzy descending through the palace, we remain silent as we exit the stairwell into the frigid air of the assembly, where the wyverns wait for us at the ready. Drisk catches the mood quickly, and he bends his head slightly to peer at me expectantly as his gaze shifts in search of our mate, but I give a small shake of my head. I will speak with him privately when we are airborne. The fact that Vorn has

intentionally separated us from our females in this flight makes my skin prickle uneasily. Drisk does not offer complaint, but his eyes narrow as his head turns toward the palace, his long, pointed ears pricking as they draw from their tight tuck against the sides of his head. He rumbles quietly to himself with heavy suspicion but remains completely still as I launch myself onto his saddle and wait patiently for the strands' invasion.

They launch themselves over me, crawling rapidly as they twist themselves so rapidly and violently into place with his impatience that I am forced to gasp to drag in a lungful of air.

"Apologies," Drisk mutters along our connection and I frown down at him in reply, knowing that he will have his way of reading the expression without looking back at me now that we are connected.

Drawing his wings up wide, he launches us into the sky and carries us rapidly away from the assembly with the furious beat of his wings, leaving the gathols to catch up with us once they fetch the war-platforms. I cling tightly to him as we sail past the peaks covered heavily with ice and snow, and still he climbs, arching slowly in adjustment of his course as I pass along the image of Vorn's battle plans and his explicit instructions.

Drisk hisses in my mind vehemently. "The gathols can never stand by and do nothing. He means to sacrifice the higher ranked, older, mated gathol and has separated them from their females to weaken them when they are most vulnerable without their females to keep watch tethered to their sides. They are the only ones who have been assigned on this round to carry the war-platforms."

I also did not miss that. "This is exactly his intention. And he means for us to not return in the midst of defending ourselves from the other gathols when they turn on us in response," I reply grimly. "He wants none to remain but the younger and

unmated whom he can fashion into what he wants the gathols to be—a sexless, loveless blade for him to wield against his enemies.”

“What are you going to do? You cannot sacrifice them.”

My lips curl, chilling. “I agreed to his orders. I never intended to follow them in the spirit they were stated. We will merely follow up with a report that they are all dead and give them all a bit of a fiery show.”

Drisk cackles, his clicks echoing over the mountains as we pass through them. “And what of the warriors?”

“I suspect that many of the warrior commanders will have been given orders to make camp and wait for retrieval, but once Ajek realizes that we are still alive, I suspect that he will demand that we carry him and a few of his more prized warriors back with us. Though I am certain that he will be disappointed in not being given the opportunity to carry out his charade of reporting my death to the remaining gathols in order to rally them in support of Vorn.”

“So sad,” Drisk replies with another cackle.

My lips twitch in response. Drisk never laughed before Anya, preferring to be of terrible mood and temperament to everyone around him—even me to a degree, but I suspect that it is only because he knew that I would not take offense to his scathing tongue. But in recent days, it seems that he is quick to laugh, even if it is perhaps more menacing and terrifying than any growl that the male produces. I settle into the saddle and peer along the mountains, matching them up to the map I am carrying in my mind. There is a small sign of smoke in the distance, outing the camp, but that is not my concern at this moment.

“The other gathols will soon be arriving,” I mutter to myself and for Drisk’s benefit

so that he hears the thoughts clearly and understands the plan. “I need to plot a route so that they may escape from the battlefield without raising suspicion.”

Drisk grunts in acknowledgement as we continue to glide close among the cliff faces as we pass through the mountains, keeping our profile low as I carefully plot the angle of attack. The warriors will strike head-on northward, so that means that the two peaks, Andra and Dwana, the closest set of the Fang Peaks, will be a blind spot. I smile triumphantly as I give Drisk the command to circle back around.

We are returning to the point of attack just as the gathol wings soar in formation over the lowest peaks; the wyverns carrying their heavy burdens in their powerful rear claws. The bellow of wyverns crack through the air and the warriors in the war-platform beat their chest with their fists and their weapons upon the high walls of the platforms carrying them. The combined sound is like a violent roll of thunder and the “enemy” reacts swiftly.

Males pile out from the camps, many of them pulling on their armor in the process as their heads tilt up to the wyverns gliding over them. Weapons are raised and some javelins are tossed into the air as a shower of arrows fly upward to meet us. Wyverns duck low, sailing below them to skim the snow with their packages before releasing the war-platform to break through the snow as they jettison across the expanse toward the rallying faction.

I stare down in shock at them, noting the many humans in their midst. It is not unusual to see human males in the villages when they are brought among our people as pups and raised with our own, but usually they take to tasks such as farming or weaving, though there are some who are stationed as village guards. To see them fighting so bravely against orcs much larger than them fills me with respect for them and an unexpected sorrow when I see them cut down.

A bellow rises, cutting through the air, and then another as warriors pile from the

platforms, many barely waiting for them to slow completely before leaping clear of it to continue the charge on foot. The clash of force is vicious. Even from my vantage point above, I can clearly see its gruesomeness as the Fang Peak warriors, half crazy and out of the minds, attack not only with their weapons but with their tusks, teeth, and claws once they brought them in close, goring them savagely and ripping at their flesh. In fact, many seem to be forgoing weapons for clean deaths altogether, to tear bloodily into their enemy and rip them apart just as Vorn instructed. Without outside support, the small faction encampment is heavily outnumbered three to one and being savagely obliterated as they are leapt upon from two or three directions. Some few of the Cold Fang Clan fall, but it is not enough, not nearly enough to make a retreat.

I can feel the cold touch of the darkness gathering near the battle, but its approach this time, unlike other battles, it is silent. It is an electric hiss within the atmosphere and a charge of power rippling through the air as it descends upon us as the skies darken and an icy wind blasts over the mountains with the howl of the damned.

“It comes,” Drisk rumbles and I nod.

“I am aware.”

“What shall you do?” the male purrs, and I close my eyes.

“Wait for the right moment,” I reply.

I am not a fool. Although I have chosen to ignore the fact that Drisk comes from the depths of the mountains, I have known all along that his purpose for flying the long expanse over the mountains was one full of complexities and secrecy. All along he has been waiting and watching and while he follows my direction and lead when it comes to the darkness, it feels now like one long dance that he has patiently waited to play out. It is as if he knew that this decision would come. He is aware of it seeping around me, its seductive whisper teasing my senses as the evils and atrocities below

fill my vision. Orcs grab fallen victims of both species, ripping flesh from the fallen bodies, gorging themselves on their bloody flesh as they howl and roar triumphantly before springing on their next victim.

Beyond the presence of the darkness boiling around me, there is a sense of horror as the wings of gathol hang in the air, almost frozen in place by the brutality below. I watch them from the corner of my eye but also rely on Drisk's observations as he keeps me informed regarding the gathol wings. None of them makes the move I'm waiting for and I gnash my teeth in frustration.

A sudden movement to my left has my gaze shifting from the battlefield, snapping up as one of the wing leaders abruptly drops in a sharp descent with his wyvern, his look of horror melting into determination. This was the moment I was waiting for, so that my approach did not look too suspicious from below.

"Cut them off, Drisk," I command coldly, and my bonded-wyvern complies, circling slightly before folding his wings in a rapid drop on course with the other wyvern.

The wing leader's wyvern pulls up with a bellow as Drisk's wings snap out right in front of him so that we are flying in place and the male barely avoids the collision.

"Daghel! What in the name of the hells are you doing?" the wing leader shouts. "There is something wrong with all of this. We have to stop it!"

"There is no stopping it," I growl back, lifting my voice to be heard above the wind. "To stop it is a death sentence for all of us as well as them. They kept our females away from this battle not only to weaken us, but to hold them for their vengeance. Do you think Vorn will kill them quickly and mercifully if we go against orders? He wants all of us dead and thinks to see to it that exactly that happens in this battle."

The male pales. "My Daniella," he whispers. "We are all damned." He shakes his

head sorrowfully, his lips moving in a silent prayer for the dead, but his gaze meets mine steadily despite the grief welling up within them. “What do we do?”

“Perform,” I reply with a sharp smile. “I will chase you among the wings. Shout your orders to the wing leaders and I will pursue the lot of you between those peaks there.” I tip my head toward them meaningfully even as Drisk’s neck coils, making a vicious strike against the leader’s bonded.

Understanding lights the males and his wyvern shoots up away from us so quickly that I tip my head back to watch him ascend. We pause for a moment to allow him to gain distance, Drisk flapping his wings in a way to suggest that he is recovering from a bite, before his wings snap us through the air in hot pursuit.

I watch everything play out almost as an observer watching it all from the distance, a cool smile on my lips even as the screams from below fill my heart with dark rage. Drisk’s wyvern fire flares through the air over and over and I can hear roars of triumph rising to me from below in response. My lips twist in a cruel grin as Drisk continues to give chase, pursuing the wings of gathol across the skies. They truly believe that I am on their side?

I laugh aloud, but the sound is so cold that I have little doubt that it would be easily mistaken by the right people. And when we finally arrived beyond the two peaks, sliding expertly through the narrow gap, Drisk releases his flame in a performance that would never be forgotten if any will live to tell the tale to future generations. And through it all, the darkness rides beside me, watching and smiling... waiting.

“Have you decided?” Drisk asks, his fire spent now that the performance has played out and we are the only gathol in the sky.

“Yes,” I growl. Time to give it what it wants.

Drawing in a deep breath, I turn to meet the darknesses' black eyes. It is seated on the shadowy form of its own wyvern, but it is more of a shadow of something that once was rather than containing a true substance like the darkness itself. The darkness smiles and I incline my head. The air vibrates thunderously around me—as if destiny is suddenly winding into place and time stands still—as I let the darkness in.

Not it... Durethikal.

He flows into me, his mount vanishing and becoming nothing more than Drisk's own shadow as the darkness clasps my forearm and invades me, drawing us together with a magnetic force that is pain and pleasure, joy and anger all once as he settles within me. Fire and ice meet and I bellow at the shock as raw seams of a tear I never realized was there meets and mends and he fills an empty hole as if it was waiting just for him.

Not he... not we.... Me. Everything is still roiling in confusion as my entire being is knit together anew, but one thing is for certain.... It is time to begin the next act in our little performance.

“Driskal,” I rasp. “Let us go and... play.”

### Chapter

### Twenty-Nine

### ANYA

It has been two days since I've seen my mates. Two days since they left in the dead of night without a word. My brow furrows as I head out into the corridors. The chill from the cold stone immediately penetrates the soles of my shoes upon leaving the comfort of my rookery, but I ignore it, my concern propelling me forward as I take the twists and turns of the corridors.

Someone has to know something. Someone.

Just ahead I see a door slowly open and a familiar form cautiously slips out, her head turning as she keeps a wary eye on her surroundings. Sneaking... spying. Of course that would be Linahna. I am certain of it before I even clearly see her, so I quicken my pace, heading directly for her.

"Linahna," I whisper loudly as I come up behind her and her back snaps straight as she whirls around, brandishing a blade that she brings to my neck.

She blinks down at me in surprise and slowly lowers her dagger. Sheathing it once more at her side, she hurries across the small amount of distance between us and grabs me by the arm, dragging me to the heavy shadows of the wall. I don't want to tell her that the dark shadows frighten me and have ever since I began seeing the strange moving shadow that seems to crawl hungrily all over the palace, but I keep

my mouth shut when I see the concern in her eyes.

“Anya? What are you doing out here?” Linahna whispers back. She glances around nervously before pinning me with a hard stare. “It is not a good idea to be out and about in the palace, today,” she says emphatically, and I frown at her in confusion.

“Why? What’s happening? Where is my gathol?” I demand in a low voice. “Drisk I expect to leave randomly as often as he hunts these days but, Linahna, I haven’t seen either of them for two days. I refuse to be kept locked in my rookery without word of what is happening with my own mates.”

She herds me along the halls, back toward the staircase, her eyes flicking around us nervously. “Vorn discovered an encampment of one of my supporting factions in the mountains,” she hisses as we draw nearer to my rookery. “I did not realize that he found them. I do not know how he found them. Their presence was obscured with spells, unless one of the clans he is allied with did it and sent a mage. It is possible,” she murmurs.

I frown up at her in confusion. “That’s impossible. Drisk and Daghel would never have left without me. Gathols fight with their mates at their side.”

She shakes her head vehemently. “Vorn commanded them not to,” she whispers. “I think... I think he had something bad planned for them. I have located where they are being kept and will have someone local to me keep an eye on them until their mates arrive to claim them, but I find this very disturbing as I have not heard of any gathols return yet other than Daghel and Drisk. But maybe he has them scouting for any who have fled,” she says thoughtfully, though the worry in her eyes says that she is not convinced.

I am not convinced either. It just makes it urgent that I see my mates immediately. Something is happening. And though I am worried for the other gathols, I can’t help

but feel a heavy weight lift from me knowing that my mates have returned. Even if it does make me feel guilty when the other females are still waiting for word.

“I must see them. You must take me to them, or at the very least tell me where I can find them.”

She shakes her head grimly, her lips trembling around her small tusks. “There is more. There is a good reason that Daghel will not want you to come to him now. The factions have an unprecedented number of humans within them because of the way Vorn’s commanders treat those human males that have grown up within our clan and villages. So, when the encampment was attacked, they—” she swallows thickly, battling back her tears.

My mouth drops open. It is not that I am unaware of the practices among the clans, but I did not think I would ever truly encounter it. Especially not among those that the clans consider their own.

A sob breaks from Linahna, and I quickly wrap my arms around her. The female clings to me as she whispers brokenly.

“They are all feasting in the hall. Vorn has all of his commanders in there and I saw Daghel follow them in when my brother demanded that he join them. I do not understand how they could do this. These humans may not have been our blood, but they were members of our clan. And they feast on them as if they are livestock that we raised or invaders with no ties to us.” She shudders with her grief but pulls away, her hands gripping me urgently by the shoulders. “Stay in your rooms until your mates come to you. Do not leave for any reason. Swear to me. You cannot trust any of them who would eat our own clan and kin.”

I nod, suddenly frightened as she pushes me to the stairs. I take the stairs two at a time, my heart pounding with fear even as I tremble with the tears of shock and

horror that break free and run down my face. The weight of the rookery door slides open as stubbornly as ever, but I get it open enough to slip inside and push it closed once more. I lean against it, my hands working quickly and nimbly as Daghel had practiced with me as I drop the bolts in place, locking the rest of the palace out.

I stare at the black stone as I back slowly away from it, my entire body trembling with my sobs until I reach the common room. Once there, I sag and collapse to the floor. My knees hit the stones painfully and look up, tears streaming down my face as I look at the empty room. What does Vorn have planned? Will I even see my mates again or will I be like the other gathol women, waiting alone for mates that never return. Although Daghel has been caught up in a feast, Drisk has not returned, and it makes me worry that my mate will not escape the feast alive. My gaze eventually falls the Yulen tree in front of me. It sparkles cheerfully in the fire and yet the red glass catches the fire light even brighter than usual, hinting of wyvern fire. And the small gifts of the solstice I had made for my mates—just a tiny token but meaningful—lie unopened beneath the tree.

We did not even get to spend the holy solstice day of Yulen together. I sob a little harder and even the Gehl dolls that Daghel made seem to weep with me from where they stand at either side of the tree.

### Chapter

### Thirty

### DAGHEL

I smile grimly as I prowl through the throne room. I played my expected part and done it so well that Vorn feasts and laughs jovially as if he truly counts me among his assembled brothers. Even Ajek has begrudgingly played the part of accepting me despite not being able to follow through with his plans. But as far as everyone is concerned, the ends have been accomplished, and I am the last mated gathol remaining, so naturally they fearlessly celebrate. As are the warriors for, although there are other hidden faction encampments, all are unconcerned about them at this moment. Vorn boastful speeches have them all convinced that our blow was brutal enough to shatter morale if not send them fleeing from our peaks.

The male is not only boastful and crude, but possesses a disgusting cruelty that I know some creatures of Vepra's pit would enjoy playing with, but I merely smile as I move casually among his warriors and accept their loud toasts to me with a faint tip of my head. Not only do they think that I am one of them, but they all think me a fool. That is a dangerous mistake.

My gaze lifts to Vorn, and my lips curl. The pretend king is so desperate for power that he feeds his warriors food tainted heavily with magic so that his influence can slip them into madness with their killing rage. I had not realized that before when I was merely Daghel, but the scent of dark sorcery is heavy with a comfortable familiarity that I can easily identify. What is more is that I am not blind to Vorn's true

intentions toward me. I saw it in the slyness of his smile when he insisted that I enjoy them and the secretive shadows within Ajek's eyes.

Of course, they intend that I do not leave. That much is apparent to me now. They used me as their sword against our own gathols. It is all so clear to me. Was there ever a message of reinforcement forces coming from the inner mountains to attack the peaks? Oh, that clever, nasty little orc. He played his cunning little ploy very well in finding a way to dispense with the gathol who were the true potential threat to his rule. I never even suspected. And who was the mastermind? Was it Vorn, or was it Ajek?

It does not matter. Both will die and then the gathols will return to their mates and queen. It is only right that I set things back in order. The clans have forgotten their allegiance to Vepra and the rulership she established with her own hand. I will remind them... and I will begin with the clan of the Fang Peaks.

My gaze shifts among the revelers as they feast as the smell of charred human flesh fills the room, searching for one particular individual who does not belong. But then I catch sight of him—a new face amongst Vorn's retinue. Ah. There is the mage. My smile widens. Perfect. Now that I have his location, it is time for the real fun to begin. I know that I will not succeed in killing everyone before the mage finds a way to bind me, but at least now that I know where he is, I can find ways to delay him as I kill as many as possible. Ever since Vorn insisted I enter the feast hall, I have been aware of this. But it is no matter. This is only to whet the appetite. More will fall before the end. I can play this cat-and-mouse game very well.

I come to a stop behind a male and my eyes drop to him and I smile, dipping my head when he turns to raise his cup to me. No one sees the sword I oh so carefully pull from its sheath. Blood lust sings through me and I wish that Drisk could be here to savor it with me, but I have little doubt now that Vorn had plans for him as well. He probably never made it up to our rookery for Anya to take her to join the hidden

gathol as I instructed.

But I do have an advantage, none of them know my secret. Even the mage is feasting without care, completely oblivious and ignorant of my presence among them.

I brush a claw against the male's cheek, drawing a chuckle from, his eyes brightening with interest. Ajek's beautiful son. What a pity he is as poisoned with cruelty inside as his father. My gaze lifts to meet Ajek's eyes and the male freezes, his smile slowly slipping and replaced with horror as I quickly bring out my blade and plunge it into the young warrior's throat in the same spot Ajek's javelin had pierced the wyvern. The male's body arches violently and thrashes as he chokes on his spurting blood, but he is already forgotten as I spin, slashing my blade as I cut down those nearest to me to the sweet, sweet melody of Ajek's bellow of grief.

A shout of fear goes up as I feel my dark fire welling up within me, spilling from me and down my sword, incinerating those that attempt to attack on my claws crushed skulls into bloody messes and pull out in entrails in the wake of my slashing blade. Blood spills everywhere as I perform my macabre dance, moving quickly and calculatedly to keep warriors between me and the mage stumbling in horror to his feet.

I know when he recognizes me because my first name spills from his lips with a sound of terror that sends Vorn bolting, wide-eyed to his feet.

“Durethikal!”

I grin at the mage as the orc between us slumps, his head severed and his body dropping twitchingly to the ground, and spin to avoid a bolt of magic as I renew my attack.

“Impossible!” Vorn bellows fearfully. He spins haplessly in place, searching for

protection as I methodically cut my way to him.

Platters of roasted meat and flesh fall to the floor as they are overturned with every table I viciously kick over. The foul filth of eating clan. I cannot abide it! I laugh as the blood spurts and runs over the floor and at their screams of fear and pain fill the air.

“Are you not entertained by suffering?” I bellow as I catch a male by the hair, wrenching his head around so hard that it snaps. He doesn’t even have a chance to experience the horror of his skull caving in as I puncture it with my claws and break it open like a melon. “You laughed at the suffering of your clan you slaughtered, and you laugh now as you feast. So, laugh,” I command with a bark of cruel laughter. “Laugh sons of Fang Peaks!”

The screams grow louder in a symphony, and I am almost disappointed when I see Ajek manage to get across the room and flee into the hallway beyond. Never mind, I can deal with him later. Let him savor his suffering.

“Save me... and stop him,” Vorn roars, and several males gather around him as a protective shield despite the white terror in the depths of their eyes.

I laugh at his fear but sadly, I can see my carnage coming to an end before it hits. The warriors were too good at providing obstacles between me and their king and now there are fewer bodies available to be shields against the mage’s magic. Several blasts skim far too close to me so that my skin prickles as I whirl out of their path, grinning ferociously as stone and furnishings explode and giant, metal candlesticks fall to the floor with metallic clangs.

Drawing up my ice fire through me, I sweep it out, blasting it in an arc, incinerating males as they fall, their flesh burning rapidly from their bodies as they quake with their screams before falling in lumps of blackened, oozing meat to the floor.

Their despair and terror is so delicious but my gaze lifts as a tall, powerful male strides quickly into the room, tossing back his cloak. There is fear within his eyes as he lifts his hands with determination, and I laugh incredulously. It seems that there was more than one mage, after all. That explains where the cowardly Ajek went.

Magic hits me from two sides, and my body arches, captured within its pulse crackling over me.

“Do not release your concentration for even a moment,” the first mage bellows as he skirts carefully around the tables, drawing in closer to me as his magic focuses and gathers with his proximity. “We are dealing with none less than Durethikal!”

The other glances toward him in surprise before snapping his head back to me warily, as if afraid of what I might do without his eyes trained on me. “If it is Durethikal, we cannot take any chances. Two of us together cannot bind him as our ancestors did before.” His gaze shifts with thinly veiled contempt to Vorn. “You dared to allow a drehl to be born? You did not say that you one such in your midst when I arrived. Do you have any idea how this folly could have torn apart the Cold Mountain Council of Clans whom I represent?”

Vorn shakes his head and sneers, and his eyes turn to me with a hatred that makes me smile back at him despite the spell’s hold. That shakes him. His gaze flees from mine to address the mage of the rebellious clans. He too will have to die.

“It was not my decision but my mother’s. She insisted on keeping the pup and allowing his mother to raise him within the palace grounds. But there has never been anything special about the male. It was a miracle that he even managed to become gathol because not even the clan wyverns would come near him. If not for Drisk showing up?—”

“The wyvern, where he is?” the council mage demands and perplexed look furrows

Vorn's brow.

"He is chained by trusted warriors, waiting for my signal to kill him so as not to alert Daghel to our intentions prematurely."

The mage laughs bitterly. "You are a fool. This 'Drisk' is not who you have been led to believe he is. He is not just any wyvern, but the wyvern, the bonded one of Durethikal. He came for the male he is bonded to, and his purpose has now been realized. Do not imagine for a second you can kill him. Do you think that our ancestors did not try? Driskal is a nightmare unto himself, impossible to kill because of his bond with Durethikal. You will slay him and believe you succeeded, but then he will rise and destroy every fool he catches. We can enchant the chains of both males so that we do not repeat any mistakes. I will need to report this to the council and gather the mages. This experiment of purging your gathol has been successful. They will be pleased to hear these results despite having to deal with a larger problem. As for the queen?—"

"Have no fear, all accounts with her have already been settled," Vorn assures him as I am dragged from the room.

Someone places a hood over my head—mostly due superstitious foolery I am certain—and it serves to disorient me as I am forcibly guided through the palace as we descend into the cool dampness of the lower cells carved into the cliffs below the palace floors, and far beneath the warmth of the rookeries. They are taking me into the dungeons. I can smell the cold, wet rot in the air and the icy cold that has formed icicles on some walls I brush against. Still, they lead me down farther into the depths until there is a clang of metal as a cell door creaks open and I am thrust inside. Cold metal clamps my wrist but the temperature of it does not bother me nor does the itch of magic from the enchantments they weave around my shackles and chain, and on the metal ring they draw the chain through, securing me to the wall. I am pretty certain that they are also enchanting the wall itself and my lips curl with amusement.

Smart males.

It is only when I am thoroughly bound that they pull off my hood. As I have been pushed to my knees, with hands bound above my head it forces me to look up at them briefly. They stare down at me warily and back away as I rise to my feet, shifting my arms to one side as I grin at them.

“What are you smiling about?” Vorn demands and takes a step forward with foolish bravado only to be stopped by Ajek’s hand firmly gripping his shoulder.

My grin widens and the council mage draws back and turns to face Vorn at the entrance of my cell. “I will leave immediately, but I must advise you to not permit anyone to linger around this cell. Durethikal is far too cunning. I would fear for any orc left within range of his influence.”

Vorn nods and follows him out so that they proceed down the corridor together. “These are the palace dungeons. There is no one else who is a guest here presently, so I will close them down entirely. Anyone caught entering without permission will find themselves becoming an additional guest down here while they await my judgment.”

All of my “admirers” move on, leaving only Ajek and one warrior in the cell with me. Ajek glowers at me, hatred burning in his eyes as I smile up at him.

“Let us see how long you smile. Strip him,” he barks to the warrior at his side.

The male’s reluctance to follow the order is laughable as it is understandable but he steps forward with wariness stamped across his face as he quickly removes every bit of clothing from me before following Ajek out of the cell.

The cell door swings shut with a loud clang and the rusty sound of a bar locking in place brings a smile to my face. Ajek sneers at me from the other side of the bar and

spits at me before turning away, leaving the warrior holding my clothing to follow after him.

I smirk as their voices echo down the corridor and lower myself comfortably to the icy floor. As if my nudity bothers me. There is straw covering the ground to supposedly provide some illusion of warmth, but it does not matter to be me. I wait there in the darkness within only the firelight of distant torches providing the dimmest illumination.

I am there, alone in the darkness—just like old times—but my eyes snap open when I catch a familiar scent and see something shift in the shadows. A little spy.

“Hello Linahna,” I rumble pleasantly, and she freezes outside of my cell.

“How did you know I was here, Daghel?” she whispers.

“Who else would it be?” I sigh, my eyes closing once more as I rotate my shoulders to relieve some of the tension from them.

“Are you okay? They have forbidden anyone to come into the cells. I was not sure I could even make it down here. I heard that you avenged my people,” she whispers, admiration in her voice.

“All is well,” I assure. “But do me a favor if you would.”

“Anything.”

My eyes snap open to fix on her in the darkness. “Bring me my mate.”

### Chapter

### Thirty-One

### ANYA

I jump, awakening on the common room floor at the sound of banging on the door. I blink blearily, my heart stutters a little with hope that it might be Daghel but I am more worried that it might not be. I push to my feet and head cautiously for the door. What if it is someone Vorn sent to kill me? That is a strong possibility as well.

“Anya, let me in,” Linahna calls through the door and she bangs on it again.

Relief swamps me and I run to the door as I try not to worry about the fact that it is not Daghel coming for me. Throwing open the locks, I pull open the door just as she shoves against it, making us both stumble back into the rookery. She barely seems to notice that she momentarily is off balance because she grabs for me, urgency bright in her eyes.

“Anya, Daghel is okay. He’s alive!”

My knees grow weak, and I nearly crumble to the ground, but she catches me and forces me upright. “No time for that now. Listen—I was right! After I left you, I went to Vorn’s room while he was busy feasting, and you have no idea. He is in thick with some of the outlier clans, all of them ruled by males who have overthrown their queens. They call themselves something absurd like ‘the Council. Apparently, when Daghel brought you here, it gave him exactly the opening that he was looking for to

bring a gathol under his control and execute an experiment that the Council has been talking about for some time.” She shakes her head in frustration. “I do not know the details but all I know is that all of this has been orchestrated in a way I never could have imagined.”

“And what about Daghel?” I whisper. “You said that he’s okay?—”

“He is, he is. For now,” she amends with a grimace. “He is imprisoned. Drisk, too I imagine. I do not know what is going about but everyone seems afraid of them. And Anya—he avenged my people. He slaughtered nearly every warrior who participated in that attack before a pair of mages restrained him. Mages! Can you believe that my brother has had a mage here the entire time, and another had newly arrived?”

My breath shudders in and out of me as I grip her arms. I am unspeakably proud of Daghel but I am also confused. Why wouldn’t Vorn just kill him?

“There is something else, Daghel is not quite Daghel,” she says in a low voice and my gaze snaps to her in surprise.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that he is a Daghel, but he is also not. There is something strange about him that I cannot quite put my finger on.”

“Did he say anything?”

She nods. “He asked me to bring you to him.”

### Chapter

### Thirty-Two

### DAGHEL

The cell door opens, and I scent her—I taste her on the air itself—before she even enters my prison. Before I can even set eyes on her. She is nervous and a little frightened, and from the corner of my eye I see that she is trembling as she steps inside.

“Daghel?”

I turn my head toward her and smile, pleasure humming through me. “Yes, my wyva?”

Her head cocks as she across the cell, and I can feel her gaze appraising me as it slides over me. “You are naked,” she observes with surprise.

“Ajek thought it would be entertaining. Perhaps it can be if you are so inclined.”

She freezes there in the middle of my cell, her eyes widening for just a moment, betraying her surprise and sorrow, before her expression shutters completely. “You are not Daghel.”

I chuckle in delight. The others were not so quick to catch on, much to their demise, but she is both right and wrong. Even now, as past and present, as the threads of

reality and memories that separate Durethikal and Daghel are coming more and more together, I am only truly beginning to understand. “But I am... but I am also more.”

She shakes her head, her upper teeth sinking into her bottom lip. “I don’t understand. Are you some kind of parasite... a terrible thing possessing him?” Her brow furrows as she searches my eyes, and I smile in response. She is so close to hitting on the truth. Of course my mate would be so clever. “You are the dark shadow,” she says at last.

I grin as I offer her a shrug. Close enough. “You call me the dark shadow, I... Daghel... called me the darkness. I blame Driskal for that. He always had a sense of humor about such things.”

“Driskal,” she whispers, and I incline my head.

“Oh yes, he has been going as Drisk while lurking in the Fang Peaks. He found the other part of me, protected me and nurtured me as Daghel. Drisk knew all along what was required to let Durethikal in, but he also knew that it ultimately had to be Daghel’s choice. My choice.” I frown in annoyance and sigh. “It is so vexing trying to communicate about oneself in such a way, but I pray that you get the idea. The point is that Daghel has always been Durethikal. He is the warmth and love of Ishugor’s son that survived what the clans had done, leaving Vepra’s dark child to wander with half a soul through the snowy mountain peaks once I escaped the bound prison of my divine flesh. I am simply... whole... now.”

“I see,” she murmurs as she moves a step closer, her head tilting slightly as she cautiously regards me. “What should I call you then?”

I consider her question thoughtfully. “Daghel. For all my previous power, Durethikal died a cruel and terrible death within that imprisonment. But that death also released me so that I can come again. I am now Daghel.”

“Ok... Daghel. Linahna said that you are imprisoned for avenging her people.”

I peer at her, amused by her non-question. She presents it as a statement, but in truth it is a question for me, uncertain as if this was truly my goal. So soft and sweet. For all that had jaded her and hardened my wyva, ultimately her heart is soft and filled with a warmth that I crave and treasure above all things.

“Yes, and no. Seeing the horrors of the slaughter and understanding what was to come of the mated gathol was the last nail in the coffin, so to speak. It is what allowed this reunion to happen. They were... as you just said of me... parasites,” I reply pleasantly, despite the gnash of my teeth as I consider the taint within my clan. “The moment Daghel saw the truth of things and the vile destruction that clans were causing, and let his darkness in, it was the moment that spelled their doom. I merely waited, biding my time until they were all happily fattening themselves and celebrating their hollow victory. But the root of my intention was to clean up the filth and poison destroying the Cold Mountain Clans. It is simply that the worst of it was right there in the room and had participated in the massacre of the encampment.” My eyes drift from her to the door of my cage. “It is a pity that several of them escaped... especially Vorn.”

Her throat works but she creeps closer to me, her brow furrowing slightly. “They will want to kill you, Daghel.”

I laugh and the deep sound echoes throughout the walls of my prison. “I am certain that is what they intend to do,” I agree. “But they cannot. All they can do is imprison me until I surrender my flesh. That is what they did the first time. And to accomplish this, they will need first to assemble all their sorcerers and mages so that they can bind me again. Daghel may have been born of orc flesh and blood but upon welcoming in his darkness and becoming whole, my flesh is divine once again, and the mages are not so foolish as to overlook that.”

“If all this is true, why did you ask for me?” she sadly whispers.

My smile fades as I feel a terrible pain piercing my heart and something cracks within me as I watch a tear track down her cheek. I pull in frustration against my chain, wanting and needing to comfort her so that for the first time I truly resent their presence and the spells of containment upon them. Can it be that she thinks I have abandoned her by becoming my true self once again? How could I? An eternity without my mate would be an insufferable pain that would destroy me in ways that no orc would ever be capable of doing with their own hands. That she believes that I can do so—I who gave my heart entirely to her both as Daghel and as Durethikal as I watched over her—is intolerable. I choke on the tears that well up within me.

I blink my eyes in surprise, drying the tears. Who would have imagined that Vepra’s son could cry. I have no memory of ever weeping as either Durethikal or Daghel but now I suffer with that urge.

“Why would I not?” I gruffly demand, my voice thick with my pain. “You are my mate, my heart. Even as Driskal is my beloved and bonded male and is a part of me, so are you. Losing you would destroy me far more effectively than any of these fools could imagine... that is why I called you here. You must leave, wyva .”

She wipes a hand over her cheeks, brushing away her tears as her brow furrows with confusion. “Leave? You called me here to send me away? I don’t understand.”

I incline my head regretfully. “I had a small understanding of what they intended when I returned with Driskal, though it was incomplete. He was to take you away then, but it seems that the blind spots in my knowledge were detrimental enough to ruin those plans and he was captured just as surely as me.”

Her soft little mouth parts in shock. “Is he?—”

“No,” I quickly reply, cutting off the terrible thought before it can be uttered. “We are bonded just as you and I are bonded. I would know if any harm came to him. I would feel it. What is more, although he will suffer great pain if they try to kill him, they cannot kill him. Nor would you die, though if you are captured, they will make you suffer. I asked for you to be brought to me so that I can tell you to go find Driskal and have him take you to the hidden gathols. He will know of what you speak. All of those males who were supposed to fall—Vorn’s great plot—is all an illusion and this would-be king is not even aware of it. You must go and rally the gathols,” I whisper.

“But only a queen can rally the gathol,” she quietly replies, and I chuckle mirthfully.

“My love, you are the long-awaited bride of the wintry god-king. You are the queen of clan queens.”

Her face pales with the enormity of what I hit her with but my brave, fierce mate recovers as quickly as I knew she could. She nods grimly and straightens but I hiss softly, drawing her attention back to me.

“There is one other thing,” I admit with a purr, and her brow lifts in inquiry. “Give me something to dream about in this darkness while you are away.”

She peers at me uncertainly, her eyes searching mine for a long moment as she weighs her decision. I wait in anticipation as this moment will tell the tale of whether she can truly accept me... accept our gathol of three. I barely dare to breathe until her nod frees me and I feel a desire to weep with relief as she walks to me, drawing the lacings free on her gown so that falls in a quiet flutter to the ground.

I rise quickly to my feet as she approaches my side, her bare body just as lovely in the low light, and love blooms fiercely in me as I peer down at her upturned little face. “Just quickly, wyva. This cell is too cold for one as small and fragile as you, even with the Driskal’s wyvern fire. We cannot delay your escape too much. And look I

am already ready for you,” I purr, nodding down to my erect cock.”

Her lips curl in a smile as some of the tension eases from her face. A tiny sigh parts from her, and she shakes her head. “Your words may be a bit more flippant, but everything else is most definitely my mate.”

She runs a hand along my cheek and my eyes flutter shut with pleasure at the warmth of her touch. “Sit down, my love. This will be far easier on the ground with your hands bound like that.”

I grunt at her astute observation and sink once more to the floor, my legs crossing as my back is pulled straight against the wall with my arms suspended above my head. Like when I made the Gehl dolls, she steps smoothly over my legs, bracing a foot at either side of me before lowering herself into my lap. This time, however, she grips my cock with one hand and lowers herself on it. She is not as wet as she should be, so it does not slide in as easily but slowly stretches her. In doing so, she gradually grows wetter as she slowly works herself down my cock with tiny thrusts until I am rumbling with a trembling wave of pleasure, and she seats herself fully upon my length.

Her arms wrap around me then, holding me tenderly as she presses against me. I can feel the thump of her heart against my torso and tears spring anew to my eyes as she gently begins to rock on me. Every movement is a love song in motion as we sway together, the chains rattling quietly in melody. Her cunt embraces my prick, fluttering around it as the soft walls of her channel stroke my length as she lifts and lowers herself on my cock in shallow, grinding thrusts that keep my cock implanted deeply within her. She gasps and sighs with the delicious friction and my cock jerks in agreement, spewing drops of precum, making me groan my pleasure as the head of my cock presses repeatedly against the mouth of her womb.

She is unhurried as she rides me, but at length her strokes quicken, her hips rolling

with urgency so that my cock taps within her even as it is squeezed by the tightening fist of her cunt as the edge of her climax approaches. My testicles tighten in response, and I moan, my head falling forward to breathe in her scent as I roll my hips to meet her, driving my cock deeper, harder, faster until we are panting and moving together, and the sweetness of our embrace turns fervent.

Her body arches as she lifts off my cock and drops harder and faster, making me growl as I thrust up into her clenching heat. She gasps and softly cries her pleasure, her ecstasy rising with mine as I draw my mouth over the delicate skin of her neck and thrust up into her. My cock engorges with my impending release, every ridge and node swollen as my seed boils up at the base of my cock in response to the tightening flutters of her cunt and she winds higher and higher. But still, she does not break—afraid to let go, afraid to scream and surrender completely to me. She is almost there, but she needs a little push. A little pain for her to accept the pain and greater pleasure that comes with submission and love.

“Bleed for me,” I rasp, drawing a fang against her skin, slicing it shallowly and ever so gently.

The crimson river pools to the surface and I stroke my tongue over it worshipfully as she shatters with her final surrender, bringing me with her as my cock pulses streams of seed within her soft, clutching depths.

And then, she is gone, her footsteps fading at my insistence, carrying her away from me. She will find Driskal and escape. I know she will. Nothing will stop the wyva of Durethikal.

### Chapter

### Thirty-Three

### ANYA

“What do you know of Durethikal?” I ask, glancing up at Linahna from where I sit cross-legged on the bed. I haven’t a clue where to start looking for Drisk... or Driskal, that is. Sometimes I think I hear an echo of his cackling echoing through the palace and gives me a sort of grim satisfaction knowing that he is probably driving someone mad.

I am not even sure how to free him. How does one free someone from enchanted chains? Kidnap a mage? That will go over well and probably get me killed. No, not killed but a very painful almost death and probably put in similar chains once they see me pop up like a spring flower from it.

Her lips purse thoughtfully around her small tusks. Although she greeted the news of what I shared with shock, she had come to terms with it far more quickly than I had. According to her, it all actually made a startling amount of sense as apparently there was some legend suggesting that he would return. She wanted to verify it for herself but the sudden increase of guards at the dungeon entrance has made it impossible for either of us to get back into them unnoticed.

“I know what you are going to say, but I must know. I need to know this other half of him. One thing I am certain of is that it is most certainly Daghel in that cell. But, as you said, more. I looked into his eyes and beyond the dark, cold fire, he was there,

staring back at me. It is like this Durethikal completed him. His face is more emotive rather than watching the world passively, his expressions passing with genuine emotions across his face. It was almost frightening at first to see it,” I admit. “I can’t know how to even begin. I need help and I hope that knowing more about him will reveal some clue to what I need.”

Linahna sighs but inclines her head in agreement. “I know he has become something of a haunting... a story that we tell the children. A merciless dark god who rules the mountains and destroyed everything in his wake as he passed over on his mount—a wyvern as cold and deadly as he, keeping the order of all seasonal tides and powers within the mountains. The warriors, of course, especially like to tell these stories of how the old ways were overthrown so that orc might could reign on the mountains.” She shakes her head, her jaw clenching. “They celebrate it, but mother was always suspicious of such tales told with such relish. The power of the queens has been weakening generation by generation amongst many of the clans, though there are a few that remain loyal to the Black Tower and who keep to the old ways and who, according to rumors, have not been touched by such madness. The stories of his fall also contradict many of the ancient lore that we have of the time of Durethikal. You have seen how we celebrate Gehl, right? Down in the lower villages?”

I nod my head, curious as to where she is going with this.

“That does not seem like something that hearkens some sort of cruel and evil god-king, right? Oh, I know that he could be cruel and merciless, and the festivities were meant to ease his coldness and bring warmth with the promise of a bride, but that does not call for what was done to him. In all of the stories, he was betrayed and bound by clans and imprisoned within ice and stone. That he managed to escape his body to be reborn is something, I think, was always hinted at with the way the drehl were feared. As if their presence would hearken his return or something of that sort.”

I sigh heavily and rub my brow. That doesn’t help me too much. “Too bad the

legends don't say anything about a handy weapon capable of breaking Drisk out," I mutter.

Linahna's face brightens, and she grabs my hand in excitement. "Wait, there is! Like Daghel, Durethikal was always fond of using a sword. If he used his power at all in the feast room, maybe his sword gained some of his influence. If we can get hold of that, it might just be enough to break the chains. The mage's spells might not hold up against it."

"Perfect! Where is the sword?" I asked urgently and her smile falters in response, her lips twisting in a grimace.

"Oh. Right. Vorn has it. It is likely locked in his chambers." She licks her lips nervously. "I have often gotten in there without issue, but I have never taken anything out, and especially nothing so large as an orc's sword." Her hand tightens over mine. "But I am willing to try. First, I need to see someone. She needs to be made aware of what's going on even if it interrupts her peaceful recovery. I would not have dared before when it would have made Vorn suspicious of my motivation. I did not want to draw his attention to me too much. But we have no choice. I must see her."

My eyebrows raise. "Who?"

Linahna's mouth flattens grimly as she returns my regard. "My mother."

Although Linahna tries to insist I remain behind, I refuse to relent and, after a brief stop at her chambers so that I might change into a surc and one of her tunics she outgrew in her youth, I remain stubbornly at her side as we evade guards to make our way through the palace to its northernmost wing. I know that I am not as powerful as Linahna, nor do I have the strength or battle acumen of even the most average orc in the village, I can't believe that I am useless. Not when Daghel has entrusted so much to me.

“You can turn back here, you need not continue if you are afraid,” Linahna whispers as we duck into the shadows of a doorway opening into the next corridor just in time to avoid being spotted by a pair of guards passing. “There is no shame in it.”

I shake my head in silent refusal. Despite her words, I can’t help but wonder if she is saying them because she just doesn’t want me there, or because she is worried that I might slow her down. More than that, I can see that she is worried for me, and somehow that makes me feel even worse, though it strengthens my resolve. This is my life now, not that of a pampered courtesan.

“I can’t,” I whisper back. “Perhaps this is in part me needing to believe that I can do more than just being a courtesan. I know I’ve flown with Daghel and Drisk many times,” I immediately say when she lifts an eyebrow at me, “but I’ve never had to actually do anything except sit there and keep watch since we were never needed to fight. I must be more, Linahna. I need to know I can actually be more, especially when Daghel expects me to do something as significant as rallying the gathols.”

A fleeting expression of surprises crosses her face. “He does?” A wry chuckle bursts from her. “Of course he does. You are a queen—the bride of Durethikal.” She nods thoughtfully. “Very well, come on, bride,” she gently teases, grabbing my hand in hers, “since you’ve pledged yourself, you are an orc now. No soft, tender human here. So let us speak to my mother and get that fucking sword.”

Linahna does not temper her speed for my sake but forces me to keep up now as we dart along the corridors and staircases, climbing higher in the palace as she takes down those who stand in our way with ruthless efficiency. We maintain the brutal pace until we arrive at a cold door with no warmth of a hearth fire burning beyond it. A deep coldness seeps from it as it stands ajar and a look of worry creases her face as she touches the door and nudges it open a little more, enough so that the firelight of a nearby torch touches the dry stain of blood smeared on the floor. Trepidation tightly grips my heart as Linahna pushes harder on the door, but it gives only so far until it

won't open any further, forcing us to squeeze inside one by one. And then we see what is blocking the door.

I recoil with horror, cramming my fist against my mouth and biting hard against my knuckles to silence my urge to scream. A woman lays there, her face a gruesome mess as if claws ripped into over and over, tearing out her eyes and shredding her cheeks, mouth, and neck until a river of blood dyed a once ornate gown with the heavy reddish-brown crust of dried blood,

“It is Deihedra, our spirit talker. Gods, what have they done to you?” Linahna whispers mournfully in a choked voice as she crouches before the fallen body. Her hand reaches to the dead female, her claws skimming along the ruin of the female's face before dropping away as she lurches to her feet. “Mother,” she sobs and turns toward the inner chamber and breaks into a run, leaving me to race after her. “Mother!”

Blood splatters everywhere in the sitting room with fallen bodies everywhere, the dead staring sightlessly at the ceiling as their ravaged remains bear the tale of their brutal deaths. Throats and bowels torn out, chest cracked open with hearts missing as if someone had torn them out and devoured them. Swallow back my urge to vomit as I hurry behind Linahna into the bedchamber where a shrouded bed takes up a large part of the room. A female lies slumped over and when Linahna touches her shoulder, the corpse falls over, its severed hands rolling across the floor as the body rolls so that a female faces toward us in an image of horror as she stares at us with bloody holes where her eyes had been and her mouth open in a silent scream, filled with blood where her tongue had been severed.

“Ahandra,” a voice calls, a thin whisper of sound from the shrouded bed.

Linahna surges forward, ripping away the curtain and drops to her knees where the corpse had been as she reaches clawed hands to the frail female who had once been

large and power in life.

“Mother, the healer is dead,” Linahna whispers.

The queen sighs heavily with a deep wheezing sound in a death rattle that makes my chest tighten with sorrow. Although it had been many years since I heard that sound, it was ingrained in my memory and my gaze falls sorrowfully on the female I had long begun to count as a friend.

“I figured as much,” the queen mumbles. “But when hearing movement beyond the curtain, I had hoped that she had survived. It seems that none of us were so fortunate.”

Linahna swallows and grasps her mother’s hand. “What are you say? You have escaped. You are going to be fine. I am going to get you out of here and I am going to have a gathol take you away to keep you safe.”

The queen chuckles tiredly and my eyes tear as her withered hand lightly touches her daughter’s hair. “Do not be obtuse, girl. I am already dead. Mine was just chosen to be the slower death—damned cowards.”

She gestures to her belly and then I see it in the heavy shadow of the bed. A javelin pierces her through so deeply that it is obviously buried into the bed beneath her.

“As if being slowly poisoned for years was not enough of an insult. This is how I will die.” She shakes her head morosely, the movement small in her weakness. “Ajek always was the cruelest of Vorn’s dogs. It seems that my son has finally made his move. The clan will fall.”

“But he will not win,” I say around the emotion choking me as I step toward the bed. “The clan will not fall.”

Her head turns to me, and a tiny frown pulls between her brows. “A human? Who are you?”

“I am Anya. I am Anastasia,” I whisper. “I am a concubine born to no future and a woman reborn in the hot and ice flames of the wyvern, Driskal. I am the mate of Daghel and the bride of Durethikal. And I swear to you that Vorn will die.”

Faded eyes tear, and she sighs, a tired smile pulling at her mouth. “You hear that, Deihedra, you rotten bitch. We were right. Through Daghel, Durethikal rises and his bride has come as promised.” Her smile brightens, tears flowing down her cheeks as she turns as much as she can toward Linahna to cup her cheek in her hand as her free slides to her chest, her finger dig into what appears to be a healed wound—the healer’s work I presume—her blood flowing sluggishly as she drags out an ice-blue stone on a golden chain with a pained cry. She presses the bloody token into Linahna’s hands and my friend’s face pales in shock as her fingers curl around it. “Rise, daughter of my body, daughter of my spirit, and take back all which the gods deem as yours.”

Her hand brushes over Linahna’s clenched fist but drops away as she sighs her last breath and her eyes drift shut to close forever. Linahna clenches her mother, sobbing her grief as I stand beside the bed with my head bowed and my heart hurting. I refuse to interrupt these last moments and do not look until my friend finally stands, brushing away her tears with her bloody hand as she loops the pendant around her neck. Her head turns to me, her expression grim.

“Let’s go get that fucking sword.”

I nod and follow her as we rush from the chambers and into the corridors as we take a direct shot for Vorn’s residence within the palace. I am rather surprised that not only are the guards notably absent in the halls but that the prince’s chambers have been left unguarded. I glance curiously at Linahna but she smiles grimly and opens the

door as a sound shakes through the palace.

“Looks like they were all called away. Drisk’s timing for causing trouble is impeccable,” she observes with a chuckle as she slips inside.

I follow her in, worried that the sword will be so well hidden that our presence will be discovered before we are found. I am, therefore, surprised to see it mounted on the wall like some kind of trophy instead of hidden and secured somewhere. I exchange a glance with Linahna and the female shakes her head with a bark of scathing laughter.

“My brother always was short on intelligence and far too vain for his own good. Of course, he would display a trophy of living enemy right where someone can just... pluck it off the wall,” she says emphatically as she removes it and hands it to me.

I stare down at the sword, nonplused. “That was stupidly easy,” I remark.

“My brother is a cruel, evil bastard, but he is not the mastermind he thinks he is,” she observes dryly. “I will bet you anything that if Ajek had seen it, he would have birthed a pup on the spot. He is the cunning one between the two that you have to watch. I guarantee he told Vorn to hide the fucking things.” She chuckles again and nods toward the sword. “Wrap that up in your cloak just in case someone spots us. Two females in the hall will draw a lot more attention if it is obvious that one of us is carrying a sword.”

I nod in agreement and wrap it snugly inside my cape and tuck the bundle tightly against my chest. Linahna watches patiently and then tips her head to the door as soon as it is secure so that we can make our escape.

“Where do we find Drisk?” I whisper from behind as we take several narrow, largely hidden, servant’s corridors.

I had never been down these halls before, but I am still a little surprised when they take us right out of the palace. I immediately shiver a little when an ice-cold wind sweeps over us and glance over at her

She glances back at me and her lips twist in a faint smile. “There is only one place near the village where a wyvern might be kept: the cavern that connects to the common gathol rookeries. This way! There is rarely anyone that loiters near the rookeries because the gathols get peevish about it, but we can likely expect guards as we get closer.”

Sure enough, the route to the cavern is remarkably clear but the commotion from within the cavern is audible so that we duck down and wait it out. And thank the gods for Drisk’s wyvern fire or else I would be a lump of ice already. I am not the least bit warm but it is better than freezing.

Eventually a group of males storm from the cavern and I recognize Vorn and Ajek at their head. Linahna’s hand tightens on her blade, but she exhales heavily and shakes her head before looking back over her shoulder at me.

“I will see to it that they all are murdered soon enough. Right now, we need to free Drisk,” she whispers, and I nod in agreement.

Although I do not doubt her ability, the odds are currently insurmountable. Daghel and Drisk need to be free.

We slip into the cavern and take the main tunnels that head deeper into the cave system but at an upward angle that lets me know that the shaft somehow connects to all the rookeries in some fashion. We duck into a side tunnel when a group of guards suddenly appear in the main tunnel, their voices echoing around them.

“Fucking wyverns. The gathols all believe that they are so superior to the rest of us. I

cannot abide them. Vorn has taken them down a peg at least, but I would be happy if not a single wyvern ever returned to our peaks.”

The other males mutter in agreement and joined in, though I catch no more of the conversation as they head away from us. Linahna shakes her head in disgust as we move back out into the open and take the tunnel they left.

“Short-sighted fools. How do they think they would transport goods easily from the nearby villages, or during raids? Who looks for clan members who become lost on the snow or watch for attacks from the peaks? How do they imagine our way of life continuing without gathols much less wyverns?”

“They think of nothing, but Vorn’s promises,” Drisk’s voice rasps, echoing around us as we run down the remaining length of corridor to him.

I want to cry when I see my mate. Although he still wears his harness as if he were just captured, I know that he has suffered for many hours bound even tighter than Daghel to compensate for his great physical strength. His wings are pinned with chains at his side, and several more attached to stacked manacles around his neck. His gaze shifts to me and he croons softly as I run to him and press against his chest with a sob of relief.

“I’m getting you out of here,” I promise him, my voice wobbling with emotion as I step back and draw the sword from my cloak.

I allow the fur-lined material to drop to the floor as I brandish it and eye the nearest chain grimly. Throwing all my strength behind my swing, I strike the chain and magic flashes, nearly blinding me. I blink my eyes rapidly but, when my vision clears, I am dismayed to find that the chain is still very much intact.

I stare down at the sword dismally as Linahna groans with disappointment. “And of

course here is where things get complicated.”

### Chapter

### Thirty-Four

### DRISK

“ I can help,” I hiss, drawing her attention to me as I hold her within my stare, my heart clenching with what I must ask of her. “But I will need to access my ice fire,” I admit in a long hiss. “With it I can reforge Daghel’s sword with it, assume my true form and break from these chains.”

She blinks at me, not at all understanding what I am asking.

“Whatever you are going to do, do it quickly,” Linahna growls in a quiet voice as she presses against the entrance of the cavern to peer cautiously around the corner. “If they return before you do this fancy ice fire, we are all going to be dead.”

“Right,” Anya replies with a sharp nod of her head and she glances back over at me expectantly. “So how do you summon it?”

I do not know how to say it without making it sound as if I am using her. “I need to build my internal heat... as I did to summon my mating fire. But the ice fire takes more. It will not be pleasant. But once it is achieved, it will continue to burn so long as the fires are maintained.”

The memory of my fires dwindling and banking with the loss of Durethikal until I succumbed to periods of nightmare-filled sleep is still fresh within me. They did not

truly awaken until I sensed Durethikal and found Daghel. But I could never regain my full power. I did not dare to even try while we were in hiding. To regain my full power now is both a temptation but also a terrible risk because of what it would demand of my delicate mate. I swallow back my misery, expecting the rejection to come as I steel myself to make the matter clearer when a look of understanding that crosses her face and she laughs softly.

“It seems being a courtesan and not easily shocked is going to save the day after all,” she muses as she unfastens her surc and allows the material to fall around her legs. Gathering it above her hips, she turns and lowers herself to the floor, presenting her ass to me.

Linahna looks back toward us, her brow furrowing in response to our muddled conversation but a blush rises rapidly into her cheeks with embarrassment as she witnesses my prick extrude as I gather myself over my wyva’s hindquarters.

“What is the name of all the hells?—”

“We are gathering the fucking fires so Drisk can burn it all down,” my mate replies with a wink toward the orc that makes the other female quietly chuckle. “You know... it’s that special cunt magic.”

“Gods, Anya. Only you would prove that fucking can save the day. Do what you need to do, high queen, and I will try not to watch too closely.”

Anya’s soft laughter makes my cock drip with pre-cum as I nudge her slit with it, notching myself at her entrance.

“Why would I care if you watch?” Her head turns toward me, drawing my gaze. “Do you have any objections, Drisk?”

“Not one,” I purr. “But brace yourself, wyva,” I warn as I press my hips forward, shoving my prick mercilessly within her with such strength that she nearly comes off her knees.

I nearly stop, fearful that I have harmed her, but her moan rises from beneath me in encouragement and her cunt clenches hard around my length in a way that makes my cock swell further inside of her with wyvern fire.

“Don’t stop now,” she chokes. “You promised me the fucking of a lifetime, so if you are going to fuck me to death, do it now. Don’t fuck off on me now.”

I growl softly in her ear, pitching my voice low. “When have I ever fucked off and left such a perfect cunt when it is so greedy and weeping for me? Only the treasure of my heart would keep my fires stirring so boldly below the surface and greedy for you.”

“Gods, you are such a talker,” she replies with a small laugh. “And how I love you. Now fuck me.”

I shift my hips and allow myself a moment to relish the tight pull of her cunt’s muscles on my length before plunging back in, dragging a ragged moan from her. I hiss in response as the first kindle starts within my gut and I thrust again, harder, and again. I pump my hips, my cock withdrawing and plunging in a building tempo that not only has my mating panting beneath me, but draws a small, shuddering gasp from the orc watching us.

I boldly hold the female’s eye as I revel in the audience of my claiming. It stirs my arousal, igniting my fires higher so that I growl over Anya in my ardor as I thrust in an ever-quickenning tempo, shuttling my cock in and out of the sheath stretched snugly around me. It creams and weeps, spilling my frothy pre-cum with her own sweet juices onto the ground with every quick withdrawal of my cock before it slams

back in again. I thrust over and over with a brutal pace, working her on my length so fiercely that more pre-cum spurts from me, filling her with more of my heat, preparing her for my inferno as her cunt greedily swallows it down. My mate pants and cries out as her body whips forward with my plowing, only to fling herself back to meet the drive of my prick with a shout.

“Oh.. ah... oh fuck. Oh, gods,” she wails as my rut turns aggressive, picking up speed as an instinct to dominate and breed my mate mindlessly overtakes me.

“Oh gods,” Linahna echoes, her fist pressing against her own cunt in an attempt to stem her own desire.

She may not have any interest in being rutted by a male, but it is clear that she enjoys watching a female taking it. And I am very pleased to show off just how well I can do it.

I curl my lip, baring my teeth in a savage grin as I snap my hips violently, wringing a cry from my female, as my wings thrash against the ground, gathering more force behind the thrusts. Her cunt squeezes my length in a velvet grip, clenching as her muscles tighten and fluttering with a little pulse before breaking with her release to pulse all around with a rhythmic squeezing motion, dragging tightly on my length as if milky me before starting all over again. I resist the urge to release, holding it back so that my fires rise hotter and brighter within me.

My cock begins to engorge and strain beyond normal within her, every thrust clasping me so tightly that it borders on pain which sends a lick of dark pleasure deeper through me as an icy-hot sensation wells in my throat as I feel the first hint of my flame filling my mouth. Anya's cunt pulses hard as it tightens around me and she trembles inside and out, making her vibrate exquisitely around my length until she bears down, her channel quaking and flexing hard around me in a vicious sucking sensation as she screams her pleasure.

Fire bellows through me as my cock spasms, my seed spilling through her as blue fire spills from my mouth over the both of us. Her cunt tightens and releases in quickening, brutal spasms as I fuck her through my fires as the blue flames climb over and around us, burning the glamour away from my scales, rendering them to their true blue-black sheen even as it engulfs the sword and the chains holding me. Fire breaks the chains, freezing and shattering them even as it harmlessly races up Daghel's blade, separating the particles and reforging it instantly with its own ice-fire. Durethikal's fire that had once already touched it within his hand. It was that which made it possible. I shake my head, sending the remnants of the chain flying as I continue to fuck my release and pour fire. I can sense Linahna easing away, but that common sense seems to elude the panicked guard who comes racing in as he begins to raise the alarm, only to be engulfed in the roar of my flame.

He falls to the floor, his skin blackening and peeling away from where the ice-fire touched him. I watch dispassionately, feeling only a sense of satisfaction that the rest of my cum drains from my testicles with a pleasant hum of sensation. I hiss and shiver with my completion as I slowly withdraw my prick from my mate's clutch. She whimpers in reaction, and my seed, which had already spilled in copious amounts during our rut, gushes from in a thick stream from her cunt's swollen lips.

I draw back and nuzzle her gently with concern, smiling in relief when she gives it a reassuring pat and turns her mouth toward it in an unexpected kiss. I freeze in surprise as renewed heat wraps under my heart in adoration as she presses her lips so firmly to the front of my muzzle that I instinctually lick out to briefly capture her taste. Her mouth parts at that moment, capturing the tapered tip of my tongue in, sucking it in a far sweeter kiss than I could have imagined. A special kiss made for me. All the jealousy I felt whenever she coupled mouths with Daghel melts away and I savor her kiss with a purr of deepening love. Sadly, it ends far too abruptly because Linahna hurries in just as I am beginning to enjoy myself and Anya's mouth withdraws from mine as she turns to greet the other female.

“Gods, Anya, you look like hell. Well fucked, too, but definitely liked you have were fucked in some outer wheel of one of the hells,” the female observes with a wince, but my mate only laughs lustily as she rises to her feet.

Brushing her hands off, she gathers her surc back into place, grimacing slightly at the seed that is still dripping from her, but that cannot be helped. I am surprised, however, when she runs to the remains of the guard. Bending down, she pulls his sword from the scabbard and tosses it aside before wrestling the belt off of him and swinging it around her hips, the empty scabbard tapping her thigh. She gets the belt fastened but we all freeze as the distant sound of foots steps rushing through the wyvern caverns echoes back to us.

“Time to get out of here,” my mate observes as she turns toward me, climbing expertly onto my back. I hand Daghel’s sword to her and she murmurs her thanks as she slides it into the sheath hanging from the belt at her waist.

“Come on,” Anya shouts to the other female and I inwardly recoil in distaste as a dull flush climbs Linahna’s face.

To her credit, the princess shakes her head as she backs away. “Impossible,” she calls up. “Drisk will never allow me to mount. Besides... you know what happens to those who do. There is a reason that no one but the mated and bonded mount a wyvern.”

Anya pauses and curses vehemently, recalling the reason at the exact moment that my strands penetrate her, anchoring her to me—her mind to my mind.

“Right,” she pants and shakes her head to clear it before casting a worried glance toward the other female. “What will you do then?”

Linahna smirks as she backs away from my side. “Go back to my bedchambers, of course, and then perform being very shocked when guards come rushing in to search

for you. I cannot leave,” she says, her fingers going to a gleaming pendant at her breast.

“You are going to stay?” My little female asks, so aghast at the idea that I want to cackle with amusement. What a time this is turning out to be for her.

“What do you imagine that they will do to me?” Linahna laughs. “Oh! Do not forget to tell the gathol that their females are safe. When they failed to return, I kept an eye on their mates to make sure neither Vorn nor their men tried anything. They are not happy or comfortable, but they are alive and whole, and waiting for their mates. Now get the fuck out of here, both of you,” she shouts as she runs out of the cavern.

My mate stares after her in aghast, her concern rolling through me, but I do not let it slow me down. Running on all fours, I begin to spread my anterior fingers as I race for the exit, allowing my wings to spread just enough that they ripple in preparation to catch the air. The night opens up to us, embraces us as we burst from the cavern as my powerful legs spring into the air and wings snap wide. We sail from the cavern amid a frenzy of shouts and alarm from below, and the village valley spreads out beneath us as fires spring up, spreading the alert of our escape before rapidly shrinking as my wings carry us higher and higher into the air.

“We need to get to the gathols!” Anya shouts over the wind and I wince as the volume of her mental voice hits me. I glance back at her reproachfully and she gives me a small, embarrassed grin. “Sorry about that. But Daghel said?—”

“The gathols, yes, I know,” I rumble with amusement. “As it happens, I know a shortcut to get us there even quicker.”

I turn, spreading my wings wide to bank the force of my spin before diving toward a crevice that runs through the center of the mountain. My mate’s heart pounds anxiously as we speed in a long glide through the heart of the mountain, its confining

walls closing in increasingly around us little by little until she is forced to flatten herself against my back. The claustrophobic whip of air is a shrill shriek as we skim the stones above and below us until we shoot out into the open air at the other end. I roll in the air until we come back upright, my mate's laughter ringing in my ears as I flap my wings and carry us forward over the ice and snow.

Valleys that most of the Cold Fang Clan have never seen, as they have never been on this side of the Fang Peaks' border mountain, Gathanaral, open below us in rivers of blue and white ice and heavy drifts of snow. We fly far longer than I like, especially since my mate is without even a cloak, but she seems to be handling the icy weather far better than ever, her skin retaining a blush of warmth as we glide toward our destination.

At last, a rugged double peak mountain rises and an encampment comes into view within a valley tucked deeply between its peaks. A burst of blue ice-flame leaves me as the orcs spill out of their tents and the wyverns gathered on the cliffs begin to croon and take to the skies. And my clever Anya chooses that moment to withdraw Daghel's sword so that its fire burns high, banishing any doubts within the minds of the witnessing gathols of just who is calling to them, rallying them to battle.

### Chapter

### Thirty-Five

### ANYA

The gathols greet our arrival and the news of their mates with an impressive rush of activity. As segments of their numbers work tirelessly to prepare for the flight over the mountains—because they certainly aren't going to chance Drisk's route, which I quickly come to learn after the fact is considered suicidal by most of the gathols—the wing leaders sat in conference with me as we go over the situation in the palace peak. They listen grimly and their eyes occasionally stray to Drisk, who reclines lazily behind me since he refuses to be parted from my side.

No one can really blame him, but I am fascinated with the amount of reverence they seem to hold for him as they frequently watch the light cast a blue blush onto his black scales. Because of this, he is also a bit of a distraction and I'm glad when business finally concludes, and the wing leaders leave us in peace outside of sending a pair of males back with a basin of hot water so that I might wash and a set of clothes.

Although the basin is nowhere near big enough for me to sit in, I sigh with pleasure as I scrub every inch of my body with the wet cloth, especially the dried mess between my legs. Kicking away my soiled clothes, I dress gratefully in the clean surc and tunic provided before lying down at Drisk's side on a pallet made of straw. Its warm scent surrounds me as Drisk croons, lulling me swiftly to a dreamless sleep.

No nightmares haunt me. It is as if there is a light kindled deep within me that drives them away, burning them up before they can even touch me. I sleep deeply and wake just before dawn to pull Drisk's saddle and harness around him and tighten it in place as the gathols assemble around us, orcs mounting on their bonded wyverns, their gazes fastened upon me expectantly. A hum starts up from the wyverns as I climb up into his saddle and I feel it prickle over me as I slide into place and sigh with the invasion of his strands sliding inside and around me, securing me tightly in place. Every eye is on me as I shiver with pleasure, but what do I care? I merely cling to the curved handgrip of the saddle and give Drisk the command he has been waiting for.

"Let's go burn shit down."

His cackle echoes through the valley, but it is his dark delight that fills me as he launches from the ground with a burst of blue ice-fire and a powerful beat of his wings. I soar aloft over the snowy peaks, everything settling into a stillness within me as, for the first time, I truly take in my surroundings. Not with the grim patience of the daily sweeps that I endured at Daghel's side, nor with the frantic escape from the palace peak. It is with a calm mind that I survey my surroundings and feel the echo of its ancient power filling me. The quiet stretches on with a peace that seems to unite all wings as we rush over ice and snow of the peaks drifting below and around us until finally the palace peak breaks into view, the iced black stone catching the weak winter sun as the deep, resonate sound of a massive horn bellows a warning into the air.

It is a primal call that dances over my skin even as it is echoed by the gathols who rise from the rookeries ahead of us, their wings beating like a drum of war as they take to the air, heading directly for us. I grit my teeth, my jaw tightening as I prepare for the confrontation. They do not know who we are from this distance. They are only rising in response to the rising alarm that calls on them to protect the palace and upper village. The gathols are like a shadow looming ahead of us, flying for us with deadly intent. I see the fire spew from some of the wyverns' mouths, preparing to

attack.

“Fuck this,” I growl. “Let’s see if this trick works more than once, Drisk. Nothing catches the eye quite like ice-fire.”

Although it feels heavier than my muscles remember, I draw Daghel’s sword from the scabbard, enjoying the way it comes alive with blue flames as I free it and lift it to the sky. Drisk flames with a roar and I feel the intense cold wash of his fire running over with a sigh of pleasure. It is an exquisite sensation, but more than that, it does exactly what I intend. The fires of the approaching gathols snuff out and as one, the wings of wyverns drop, passing below us as we fly unobstructed over them. I turn in my seat, a laugh of wonder breaking from me as a roar of triumph breaks among the wings following me, fists jabbing triumphantly into the air, as I see the younger gathols rise at the rear, the sunlight catching along the scales and wyvern wings as they twist in the air and fall into formation behind us.

“The gathols have all been rallied,” Drisk observes with pleasure and his wings catch the air, snapping us forward with greater strength so that we sail ahead straight for the palace.

My heart swells as if it is being carried on wings, but the triumphant filling is short-lived and my smile falters and is chased away by the sight of the panicked villagers fleeing beneath us. Shouts fill the air from below and weapons are hurtled at us as males cover the females who busily assist the young and the elderly inside. I stare at them in confusion as Drisk dodges one particularly well-aimed arrow. Don’t they see that we are trying to help them?

The wing formations break and scatter in the air as the gathols work hard to avoid the projectiles aimed at them, slowly following our single-minded trajectory for the palace. As none wish to harm an innocent villager, the gathols keep control over their ranks with not a single wyvern fire flaming in attack or even a threat.

I growl in frustration as we are forced to side-dive away from another projectile. Collectively, we are no longer moving forward as we roll and dive through the air to avoid being hit. Fucking Vorn. I know he is at the heart of this. Or more likely, Ajek. Someone has stirred the villagers into a panic so that they are reactively trying to attack us before we can even get to the palace defenses.

“Just one stream of fire is all it would take to send them all scurrying to safety,” Drisk complains, but I shake my head.

“No. They are already frightened. I do not think they even know who they are attacking, just like the gathols who rose to meet us. They likely have been lied to and told that an invading force is on its way. That is the only thing that makes sense. But if we attack now and the clan becomes distrusting of their own gathols, it will not survive.”

Drisk grumbles in agreement as he kicks off, glancing off the side of a cliff as he attempts to correct our course back for the palace. I bite my bottom lip in frustration as we spin through the air, silently willing for something, somewhere, to give.

Another horn cuts through the air, this one brighter, louder, and closer, and my eyes scan the peak beneath us. A sparkle of blue catches the sun, and my gaze draws immediately to it and then focuses on Linahna standing on the summoning hill just above the village, a horn pressed to her lips as it sings her demand. One by one, the villagers respond, their gazes drawn reverently to the amulet she holds above for all to see. Weapons lower in surprise and those who have hidden inside emerge from their dwellings, heading her call. Several among them fall to their knees in respect and a wail goes up, even among the younger gathol who had not yet received word, as the message is received loud and clear.

The queen is dead.

Linahna lowers her horn and stares over them, her voice rising, booming over the village in the very specific fashion that the placement of the summoning hill that allows all to clearly hear.

“I am Linahna, daughter of queen Leedra. I am the sole heir of my mother, and I reject the unlawful authority of my brother Vorn. He slowly poisoned our mother in bed and sanctioned her murder when he believed the power of our gathol to be dead. But look above... our gathols survive and they have come to tear out the poison that has been destroying our clan. By my mother’s authority, witnessing by this amulet that she gave me with her own hand, rise with me, for all orcs are warriors of old and vanquish those who hold tyranny from the palace peak!”

“Bring down the warriors of the peak,” a female shouts as she steps forward, her face horribly scarred but proud. “Bring down the violators and murderers in our midst.”

“Bring them down,” a male growls as he joins her, his fist rising to the sky. “Bring down those who feast upon the ruin of our village and clan.”

“Bring down the monsters.”

“Bring them down!”

A shout of agreement goes up and then another and my breath catches in wonder as orcs, males and females both, turn away to gather their weapons from homes and barnyards. Even burly and lean humans raised among their kind grab arms while the more vulnerable of their numbers are sent to keep watch and guard the families as the villagers boil up from the valley, their growls and shouts of anger echoing the skies above. I laugh in wonder and hold my sword to the sky, summoning the attention of the gathol to me.

“To the palace!” I cry and Drisk roars as his wings flap in rapid snaps that sends us

bolting across the sky with the gathol wings in hot pursuit.

Flames spurt as the gathols descend upon Vorn's warriors gathered on the outcroppings around the castle. Their bodies bulge and tremble with violence and with whatever the mage has dosed them with. Wyverns dive for them from above, spitting fire as the villagers attack head on, rushing forward with weapons raised as they collide with the males ill-prepared and too easily frustrated with a fight on two fronts. They rage violently as they are pulled down, the villagers hungry for their destruction as all their terrors and wounds are repaid with the swords plunged into them and limbs hacked off with blades. A wyvern swoops in to take off the head off one of Vorn's warriors and cheer rises from those swarming him.

I wince a little but smile despite myself. This is cathartic for the clan, that much is clear, for Vorn as his warriors had brought much pain and misery even as they held the upper village under their collective thumb while wielding the gathol as a shadow of a threat against them by the authority that they pretended to hold.

Drisk bypasses the main conflict, darting over the falling warriors as his wings fold and he drops, crashing through the wide entrance of the palace. His head whips violently, his teeth catching the nearest orcs as they flee in terror from him. Just ahead, I spot Kael and the male stumbles as he pulls his cock roughly from the young woman he held pinned against a table, his terror obvious in the way he trips over his own feet in an attempt to get away from us. I shake my head in disgust and give Drisk's strands a tap in a silent command. I slide from the wyvern's back, leaving him to devour to his pleasure as my feet lightly hit the floor. Bouncing off the balls of my feet, I stalk toward Kael, and his eyes widen further as he focuses on the flaming sword. I smirk a little at his cowardice, but I'm not surprised. Only Kael would be here getting his prick wet while a battle rages just outside the walls.

Although I'm half his size, the orc spins and tries to run from me except the woman that he was ruthlessly fucking stretches her leg and trips him, sending him sprawling

to the floor. He hits with a loud thud, but I take advantage of the opportunity presented and rush forward, lifting my sword above my head. He crosses his arms in front of him in an attempt to block me and entreaty that I completely ignore as I drive the burning blade straight through him as images of the dying queen fill my mind. A sort of peace settles into my belly as I lean there on the blade, as my previous pain at the hands of the male washes away with his blood as Drisk's flame blasts by me, scorching a pair of orcs into a greasy black smear on the wall.

I slowly straighten, but from the corner of my eye, I catch the bright flare of a ball of magic hurtling for me and I instinctively raise my blade, striking it with all my strength. Magic explodes harmlessly around me, but my arm instantly goes numb and sags with the weight of my blade. I cry out and circle my opposite hand around my wrist in an attempt to lift my blade as the mage draws near, his eyes glowing as they narrow on me. He lifts his hand, energy cycling and pulling at me as magic begins to gather once more in his hand, only to sputter out of existence like a candle blown out as his back bows with the force of the blade driven through him. He slumps and crumples to the floor as Linahna grins victoriously behind him.

Her eyes meet mine and she jerks her head in a silent order for me to go and find Daghel. I give her a quick smile and take off across the entry, my numbed arm supported with my hand as I run, focus trained on the way to get back down to the dungeon cells as Drisk's roars shake the surrounding palace. My gaze skims all my surroundings as I run deeper along the inner corridors of the palace, searching for the reinforced metal door that leads to the lower levels beneath the palace.

There. Found it.

I grin as I run for it, transferring my sword from my weakened hand to the other. This arm is not as strong, but it will have to suffice. If it can cut through magic chains, it should cut through a simple door like a hot knife through butter. I am nearly at the door, my sword rising as I prepare to strike, but something, or someone, plows into

me with such strength that I'm thrown to the floor. I hit the stone hard, my breath expelling from my lungs with such force that I choke and gasp as I struggle to draw in a breath of air. I try to roll to my side, but a sword taps against my neck, and I freeze as my eyes lift to Ajek's smiling face.

"Just look at what I have," he murmurs as he sheaths his blade. "If it is not Daghel's little mate." He crouches down beside me and pulls my sword from my hand, the flames dying the moment he does so. He gives it a disgusted look but shrugs and lays it across his knees as he regards me. "You know, Vorn entertained some interesting ideas about you and the other gathol females. I never quite understood what drove those deviant thoughts, but I would have played along and enjoyed screwing your little cunt while your mate rotted within a prison of magic."

He sniffs thoughtfully and grunts. "But seeing how you orchestrated this little attack, I am no longer feeling so charitable. I worked hard to get Vorn into power and seeing how you wish to ruin all of it, I have decided that my vengeance is better than fucking. Daghel took from me someone I loved very much—my son. That monster destroyed him. So now I am going to destroy you. But for it to be true justice, he must suffer like I suffered. He must watch you die before his eyes and know that there. And who knows," he growls into my face, "just maybe I will fuck your corpse after all that while he weeps."

His hand clamps around the back of my neck and he stands, hauling me to my feet before dragging me down into the depths of the dungeon.

### Chapter

### Thirty-Six

### DAGHEL

I rise to my feet at the sound of footsteps coming down into the dungeons, my eyes fixed on the door of my cell. Tension crackles around me as I wait expectantly, my breathing crystalizing in the air in front of me as I watch and wait. I hear the commotion of battle from above as Driskal's fury quakes through the palace. The footsteps come to a halt outside my door and the bolts of my cell slide open. My ears prick at the groaning of the cold, resistant metal as the door swings open and my liberator steps forward.

My heart falters as I stare in horror. Ajek. Anya twists in his iron grip as he holds her by the neck, my sword in his opposite hand. He dangles her in front of my eyes like a lure before tossing her to the ground in front of me. I drop to my knees in an attempt to get to her, but my chain keeps me anchored firmly to the wall. I roar my frustration, but he grins cruelly as he points the blade in his hand at her.

“What do you think, Daghel... or is Durethikal? I do not really care who you are but what I do care about is making you suffer.,” he says, leveling a kick at her that makes her cry, her body jerking and collapsing from the impact. And since you like pain, we are going to go nice and slow. I was thinking of waiting on this part, but I think I am just going to start by fucking her right in front of you so you can watch her writhe and squeal, skewered on my cock? I can always have another and fuck her corpse later. It is an interesting experience having all that cold, tight flesh resisting you, but nothing

quite beats a hot cunt squeezing your prick to death while you snuff her life out.”

He chuckles with menace as he drops my blade to the floor and falls on my mate while I howl and rage, helpless to prevent it. His hands are rough as he grabs, dragging her across the stone the stone floor beneath her. She claws at the stones with one hand, her other hand twitching in helpless movements from whatever damaged it as she tries desperately to get away from him or find any kind of weapon, her nails breaking as he wrenches her across the floor. He pulls a dagger from his boot and brings it level with her bottom, slicing through the fabric of her surc. He releases her hips just long enough to grip the fabric and rip the tear wider, baring her bottom as his tongue runs hungrily along his tusks and lips. Grabbing her hip once more with one hand, he slaps her cunt and cups it with one hand as she wails, grinding his palm against it as he pants lustily.

My female meets my eyes and her lips curl secretively, giving me pause as Ajek withdraws his hand with an impatient grunt and drops it to his surc as he pulls his cock free. Her eye slowly closes in a wink, and she opens her mouth to wail louder, wrenching her hips as he fumbles with her, his attention distracted as she slides her hand across the floor. Her fingertips graze the sword as he grunts lavishly, notching his cock snugly against her slit.

“That’s it,” he growls hungrily as he braces his legs, preparing to thrust, his dagger rising in the air just as her hand closes around the hilt of my blade.

The flames of ice spring to life as they crawl swiftly over its length as she rolls viciously as his blade stabs deep and withdraws. A bellow of shock leave Ajek’s mouth and he strikes again and again in an attempt to stop her, his blade digging into her soft body repeatedly in short, panicked slices as she continues to roll through the pain, her momentum carrying her around with a scream. My blade comes down, the flame winking out briefly as it passes through his neck. Ajek’s body jerks in place, his muscles locking up as he stares down at her grinning, blood-splattered face for a

moment before his neck parts with the weight of his head as it slides down and detaches to hit the floor beside her. The dying, anguished bellow of a wyvern echoes faintly some distance away as he launches himself into his death dance far beyond the palace peak in response to Ajek's death. Anya shudders in reaction, and I eye with her concern as she wobbles to her feet. She stumbles toward me, blood running freely from her torso and one arm hanging limply at her side. She gives me a small grin as she meets my eyes.

"How's that for a fucking rescue," she says weakly as she sways on her feet, frightening me anew. "Bastard didn't know that I wouldn't die, but fuck does it hurt," she rasps with a wince and she clutches her belly as the blood pours from her.

"You are not supposed to run into a blade," I scold her halfheartedly, my eyes following her. "Anya?—"

"Just hold still, handsome," she whispers.

"Handsome, am I?" I tease in an attempt to keep her with me. "Be glad that you did not mate with a bog orc. Not only is there nothing as ugly as bog orc, but he would have dragged you deep into a swamp where the sun does not shine. I could not say for sure if that is worse than the clan of Cliffers, in their miserable little caves; or the Savage Claw Clan, with the stench of their weasels."

"And an icy mountain where there are orcs actively trying to murder me is preferable?" she replies breathlessly as she draws up my blade.

The muscles in her arm tighten, her flagging strength coiling with an admirable force. She expels her breath in a scream as she brings it down against the chain in an icy blast that sends needle-like cold outward from it through the air. The magic shatters through the air as my chains fall free. I rise like death as they fall from me and move forward as she crumples, catching her in my arms. I drag her to my chest lovingly,

tears stinging my eyes as she gurgles painfully up at me.

“I know, my love,” I whisper. “You are going to hurt a lot, but I need you to hang on. Staying conscious will help you recover quicker. If you sleep, the magic within you will slow down as your body naturally slows down whenever our kind sleeps, and caught, you will go into a torpor state as you heal and sleep. You may not wake quite so easily, or at least not quickly.”

“Sounds damned terrible,” my wyva whispers. “You better hurry up and get me out of here, then.”

I smile down at her and stride across the floor, only pausing for a moment to look pitilessly down at Ajek’s remains. This male has done such foul things and now he sought to take my mate from me, making her suffer a pain that I never wished for her to feel. I only wish I could kill him a thousand times over. I did not even get to do it once.

Grunting in disgust with myself, I stalk from the dungeon, carrying my mate into the palace to stride briskly through the throne room, my mate cradled in my arms. She is not dead—of course she is not dead—but she is in such pain that it tears at my heart, making it bleed deep within me. Gwen can accelerate her natural healing. She cries out in pain, her blood splattering from where it wells up beneath my hand and my pace quickens into a run.

“Please, stop,” she cries, but I shake my head in refusal.

“Hold on just a little more, wyva,” I beg her. “Gwen’s quarters are near here. She will fix it. Your blood knows what to do. She just needs to give it a push. The more blood you lose, the more time it will take for you to heal. It will only be just a little longer.”

Anya whimpers, but she nods weakly against my chest. I clench her tightly and begin

to run, her every cry of pain, as my gait jolts through her, digging deeper into me. I almost do not even see Vorn in the throne until he rises brusquely to his feet, his bearing radiating hostility as he whips up an ax and rushes at me. I drop from my run and stop completely, head turning to him as he flies at me. The icy void within me yawns and my lips tip in a smile as I watch him approach.

Finally, someone I get to murder.

I lift my hand, my fingers splayed wide as I focus the points of energy from the center of my palm out to the tips of my claws. Ice gathers and wind, the brutal cold energy of my ice-fire sweeps through me to collect within my fingertips before blasting out as I expend all of my vengeance and fury. The cold flames surround Vorn in mid-charge, his bellow of rage shifting rapidly to screams as it consumes him. I feed the flame, driving it higher, swallowing him whole, devouring him until nothing but a pillar of dust remains. I am about to stride past, but my mate's voice whispers up to me.

"No, wait. I want a closer look," she murmurs.

I look down into her pleading face, and my lips pull in an indulgent smile. "You are in pain, wyva."

"I know, I can feel it, but I will survive," she reminds me with a weak chuckle. "I want to see up close and personal what has become of that bastard."

I smile down at her and my gaze lifts smugly to Vorn as I snuggle my mate close. I walk toward him, delighting in her murmur of awe that rises above her pain as we admire the dust frozen in time so perfectly that his features appear carved within it. I walk toward it until I am nose to nose with it. I lift a claw and flick the tip of its nose and laugh as the ash disintegrates and billows away, scattering throughout the room as my mate quietly chuckles. I am circling in place as Anya and I briefly admire my

handiwork when Linahna stumbles into the room, her hand clenched at the wound at her side. She comes to a halt, leaning her weight against her sword as she breathes heavily and stares in puzzlement.

“Vorn?”

“There,” I say, nodding to a bit of floating ash. “And there. And there. You might need a broom,” I advise as I sweep from the room, leaving the stunned young queen behind as I carry my mate to safety.

I do not leave my mate’s side as Gwen heals her, nor does Driskal, though the infernal male continues to push his bulk onto me at an uncomfortable angle in his determination to curl around Anya. Unfortunately, there was no keeping her from falling asleep and so she rests, our pup thriving within her as days pass into weeks. For two weeks she sleeps and then one day, just as quickly, she awakens, her eyes fluttering open.

From there, things fall into place quickly as we prepare for our departure from the Fang Peaks, and I am only a little sad to leave it all behind when I climb onto Driskal’s back and haul Anya up in front of me. But just a little—the nostalgia will pass, I am certain.

“Linahna, come with us,” my mate pleads, her hand reaching out in entreaty to the other female gowned in royal robes and bearing the royal amulet around her neck as she walks up to Driskal’s side.

The young queen shakes her head, though she gives an encouraging look to the warriors who protest from where they have filed into the war-platforms. “I cannot. The Fang Peaks and its people are my responsibility. More than that, it is my home. But the peaks will not survive against the clans once news spreads about Vorn’s fall and there are those who are even crueler and more powerful than him out there. But

know that I will miss you terribly and look forward to our reunion,” she says as she offers a fond smile to my mate and queen.

Linahna’s expression sobers as her gaze drifts to me. “Daghel, I am giving you the youngest division of my gathols. They are among the swiftest. And take these warriors who are among my most valiant. Not only will they fight your side, and fight well for you, but the tower clan has long lain dead, the rookeries empty. They will fill the Black Tower with life again so that your people may once again flourish and prosper. Go and secure the Cold Mountains and return to us with good news that we may celebrate properly and renew our ties with each other.”

She steps back from Driskal’s side, her head bowing respectfully to us as was once due in fealty to the high god-king of the Cold Mountains. I no longer truly care about such ceremony—perhaps that is the before-Daghel within me—but the respect and remembrance please me.

And as I stare at her for a long moment, I see a glimpse of the queen that she will one day be, and a smile curls my lips with satisfaction. Good. Inclining my head to her, I give Driskal a silent command and he bursts into the air with a triumphant bellow.

It is time to head home.

### DAGHEL

Peace falls over me as we fly over the mountains. The ice sings to me, mingling with the hum of the wyverns as the gathols fly freely all around me, sending an ancient power awakening and renewing as it rushes through my veins. I always favored this power and to feel it again brings me a greater feeling of bliss, but none of it compares to my wyva snug in my arms, her fur cloak wrapped around and our pup growing beneath my palm as my hand rests over her belly.

I sing to my pup and mate as I curl around them so that my cheek brushes Anya's head, and I feel her smile against my neck. The ice and wind no longer chill her, and nightmares no longer plague her. This is just part of the peace I hoped for. I have even more dreams now, however. Greater ambitions than merely ruling as high sovereign over my mountains.

I wish to see my pup grow, whether wyvern or orc, to enjoy a happy mortal life as is fated for all my young. My mother had once warned me that there would only be two that I could bring into my immortality: my bonded and my mate, but in truth I am pleased to know that my young can enjoy the warmth and simple joys of a mortal, if long-lived, existence and breed a great many others as time passes with its ancient crawl for beings such as us. I wish, too, for the clans to flourish as they once had in my youth before they became stained with corruption and the hunger of the ambitious.

I wish to see peace return, and with it the simple joy that belongs to life within the brutal cold landscape of our mountains. The risen cliffs of the Fang Peaks yield to the greater mountains, and these open up the monstrous Sonrana, Koronda, Veskula, and

Bugura Mountains that form the interior of the great mountain chain that we call the Cold Mountains.

“Do you think we will be there soon?” my wyva sighs and I grunt softly in agreement.

“You will see it when it rises amongst the mountains. It is the most beautiful of places with great hearths and halls, and private quarters rising from its spires so that never is a wyvern banished away into far off rookeries but can still live in such simple comforts as they wish,” Driskal rumbles happily. “Of course, they have been vacant for hundreds of years, so consider it the gift of an opportunity to renovate.”

“Thanks,” she replies wryly as she snuggles into the fur of my cloak with a chuckle as Driskal’s cackle echoes merrily over the mountains. “It is beautiful, though,” she sighs.

“A beauty I will preserve forever, all for you,” I whisper as I brush a kiss to the top of her head. “These mountains are yours, my love.”

Anya shifts in my arms, turning slightly so that she can admire the mountains passing around us. Her sigh of happiness warms my heart as my gaze shifts once more to the embrace of my home. For, the interior mountains tower higher and broader, with peaks that pierce the clouds far above us as ancient glaciers sweep between them with large breaks of open land. It is ancient and seemingly endless and whispers a greeting to me, calling me home as the Black Tower rises in the distance and the welcoming call of wyverns from the nearby clans greet us as we pass overhead.

Word travels fast. Durethikal has returned to the Cold Mountains with his bride. And the war for the clans has begun.