



Marked by the Wild Orc (Heat & Ink)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Im broke and need a job fast.

The best tattoo artist in the Pacific Northwest is hiring a manager for his tattoo shop.

So I don't have any experience. A few lies on my resume can fix that.

Anyway, how hard can it be?

I get the job and quickly find out that running a tattoo shop is very hard.

Especially dealing with my new wild, brooding boss.

He's an orc.

An orc with a fiery temper.

He's not all bad though, with a deep love for his three black cats.

But for me? Not so much.

We fight on a daily basis (usually while I'm taking care of the cats).

But it's not long before this huge, hard-working orc with a purring cat snuggled in his hulking green arms instantly softens my attitude.

He starts grabbing all my attention.

Those tusks really do it for me, and I can't seem to take my eyes off them.

But it would never work.

He's much too old for me.

And way too grumpy.

He fires me (twice) claiming it's too dangerous to keep me by his side because "orcs claim their brides in the dark of winter."

Page 1

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Chapter 1

Krissy

I need a job immediately.

No lie, right now. My checking account is nearly empty. I'm so broke, payday loan places are starting to sound like a godsend, except I don't even have a check on the way as collateral.

My stomach growls as I walk over to the small kitchen in my studio apartment. The only things that are edible in my cabinets are the loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter I recently purchased from a nearby dollar store.

Tears well up as I grab the bread, peanut butter, and a knife to spread this with—because I instantly think of my grandmother. These utensils belonged to her. The blue Fiestaware plate I set two slices of bread on are part of grandma's prized dishes.

I sniff, rub the back of my hand against my eyes and carry on with the sandwich making.

Most of my life was spent with my beloved grandmother who passed away thirty days ago after losing a two-year battle against stage four breast cancer that had spread to other parts of her body. The cards were stacked against her and we saw this coming from far away, but this doesn't make the shock of her passing any less severe. I lost my best friend, as well as the person I was closest to in life.

Grandma battled hard against the disease that would finally take her life, and I was proud to become her full-time caretaker. I don't regret a single moment of our time together. After all, my paternal grandmother had lovingly stepped in when I was only five years old and raised me when my parents' addictions got the worst of them, causing them to both die from a drug overdose. Giving Debbie Thompkins back that love and caring she'd originally shown for me when I was small, by being there for her during her last moments, keeping her comfortable and making sure she knew how much she was loved, was a blessing.

But when Grandma passed away last month, I'd thought I didn't have to worry about where to live because she was leaving her small condo to me. The home we'd lived in together since I was in kindergarten. My plan was to get a new job and then restart coursework at the community college towards an eventual certificate in bookkeeping. I'm reasonably certain Grandma also thought she was leaving her condo to me too, and at the very least I could sell it and have a good-sized inheritance left over. But I believe she was too ashamed of the extent of her mountains of medical debt to keep track. And I wasn't aware either because she'd been hiding it from the both of us. Eventually, after a lot of detective work in her mail and accounts, I learned the truth of situation. Grandma not only had a huge amount of recent debt but also had an old lien on her condo from back in the day when her own son had ruined her credit. The condo was sold off to pay the creditors.

Therefore, I'm twenty-four, alone, broke and homeless, needing to start all over again.

The good news is that my older, orc half-brother, Kavin, is a generous soul who wants to help. Kavin Irontree recently moved to the outskirts of Spokane, Washington because he got a job there as that city's first orc firefighter.

How is my half-brother an orc when I'm fully human?

People are always amazed when I tell them. They think we must be the product of a remarriage and he's my stepbrother, or there was an adoption. Nope, we're biological half siblings who share the same mother.

I guess our mother got around? She hooked up with Kavin's father, gave birth to an orc son and then left them both behind without a backward glance. Kavin was raised on a commune, so I didn't know about him until he was an adult who'd moved out to live amongst humans. He got in touch with his human family, and we've been close ever since.

My brother was there for my grandmother's funeral, and he wants me to come live with him until I can get back on my feet. This is a kind offer, which normally I'd be taking advantage of, but no way am I moving in with him and his crazy girlfriend. I'm happy to live in the same town as them, but not in the same apartment.

Mia is nuts and in fact dangerous. If I look at her the wrong way, she'll cut me. This is literally what she threatened to do the last time I saw her at Thanksgiving at Grandma's house. She narrowed her eyes and waved a knife at me when we were alone in the kitchen, snarled and threatened to slice me to bits, then laughed afterwards, "Just joking, don't take it so seriously."

Uh huh.

I assume she doesn't show this side of herself to my brother.

Thankfully I'd saved a little bit of money for a rainy day. And Grandma had a tight-knit group of coworkers and close friends who were kind enough to start a GoFundMe for her funeral expenses. There was some money left over for me to keep Grandma's ancient car that still works great, with insurance and registration paid for the whole year. I was even able to hide some of her furniture and prized items before they were sold at the estate sale.

On that last day, as I left my childhood home forever, this wonderful group of ladies stood on the driveway, tearing up, waving at me as I pulled away with a U-Haul, towing my tiny car behind. I will never forget their kindness to me in my darkest hours.

That was a scary six-hour drive to do alone, but I made it all the way from Portland, Oregon to my new home in Spokane, Washington. I'd found a studio apartment in a part of town that isn't the nicest but also not the worst. It took all the money I had left for the deposit and the first three months of rent I had to promise because I had no job or rental history. Luckily my cell phone bill isn't due again for another month.

Kavin was there and helped me move in and tried to offer me money for living expenses, but I declined. "Krissy, let me help you get started. If you want, we can call it a loan."

"No. Thank you but I'm really okay." Kavin and Mia share a bank account and I don't want her after me for that too.

But, twenty-four hours later, I'm already getting desperate.

I'm now completely out of money. Four dollars and twenty-seven cents are all that's left in my account. This small amount of food, along with a big box of ramen, is all I have, which will hopefully last me long enough to find a new job and receive my first paycheck. There's not even enough money to fill up my half-full gas tank.

I need a job, now, and one that doesn't require driving. After I get enough money from that first job, I can get a second job and work my way up from there. I just need that first job, someplace walkable or accessible with the bus system, to get me going. And across the street is a small strip mall with a few different businesses and a gas station with a mini mart.

I'm on my phone, seeing if any of these places are hiring, when my brother calls.

"Hey Krissy."

"Hey Kevin," I grin. My brother's girlfriend might be crazy as hell but he's truly a nice guy. He means well. We've become close friends and I really do view him as my brother, which is lovely because my whole life I was an only child, with no family other than my grandmother.

"Let me send you some money," he offers again. "Just so you can get by."

I shake my head, thinking again of how Mia would most certainly find out and then I'd have her on my doorstep, with a knife. "Nope, I'll be okay. I'm going to try and get a job at..."

"That's the other reason why I'm calling. I know a place that has a job opening that would be perfect for you."

I stand up straight. "Already? Where?"

"You know how that apartment complex you moved into at First and Willow is across the street from a strip mall?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I know the guy who owns a shop at the corner of that strip mall."

My jaw drops open. I walk over to the window of my second-story apartment and look through the blinds. It's raining and hazy, but I can still see what he's talking about. "Really? That place is so close I can walk over there. I'd never even need to use my car."

“Yeah, I got the idea when I was moving you in, but I didn’t want to say anything until I’d spoken to him and confirmed he’s hiring. Talon’s business is new and he’s been saying he needs to hire someone.”

“Who is Talon?”

“Talon Overtree, the best orc tattoo artist in the Pacific Northwest. Personally, I think he’s the best in the entire world, but that might be because he’s also my best friend.”

I purse my lips. “The sign for the store says it’s called Heat and Ink and now I understand the meaning. Kavin, I don’t have a single tattoo on my body and I’ve never given anyone a tattoo in my life, or even watched anyone being given a tattoo. Why would he want a novice like me working there?”

“He needs someone up front because he’s getting busier than before. Someone to greet customers, accept payments and clean up around there.”

“Ah, okay I can do that.”

“Yes, you can and I’m certain you would like to work there, but you need to know up front that it’s an orc tattoo shop that mainly caters to orcs. Can you work with a bunch of huge orcs stomping around who might have little social skills with humans? You will not be mistreated in any way, but there will be a lot of rough orcs who smile very little.”

I let out a snort. “I can work with anyone right now as long as it’s legal and I don’t have to take off clothes or perform sexual favors to get my pay.”

He chuckles. “I’d never put my own sister at a job that isn’t good for her.”

I reach up and start twirling my hair, shifting on my feet. “Wait, what about how orcs

used to...I know modern orcs don't kidnap women anymore but...I mean, I'm young and single, so I'm a little worried that..."

"Don't worry," Kavin offers. "All of the orcs who will traffic the shop, and Talon as well, are modern orcs who follow all modern laws. And I know for a fact that none of the orcs you will work with or any of the orc customers will be interested in you as a bride. No orcs will ever, your entire life, want you as a mate. They will treat you as a friend or a coworker. There will be no sexual harassment of any kind. I promise."

I blink. "None of them will want me as a mate, ever? I mean I'm not necessarily looking for an orc husband, but I'd like to think that I'm at least like to think that eventually, if I'd worked there for many years, at least one of them I run into might want..."

"No," he laughs. "No, I'm not saying you aren't attractive both inside and out. I'm certain human males will be asking you out often. It's just that orcs don't date, we only mate with the female who our body recognizes as physically able to carry our son."

"Oh." My eyes instantly grow hot as I recognize his meaning. "Orcs get together with someone who can get pregnant. And if that woman can't get pregnant then..."

"Then our mating instincts don't kick in."

"Orcs can scent if a woman they are attracted to is able to get pregnant?"

"Yes, that's why I'm marrying Mia, because my body recognized her as the female to mate. We have an orc son on the way."

I let out a squeak of surprise. "You do? Are you saying I'm going to be an aunt?"

“Yes, I’ve scented that she was carrying my son for many months now, but Mia didn’t want us to tell anyone until she was past three months along. I don’t understand, some sort of human rule. But starting today I can tell anyone, and I want to tell you first because you are my sister.”

“Ah, congratulations, Kavin, that’s wonderful. You’re going to be a great dad,” I say with enthusiasm. I love him so much and I really am truly delighted for Kavin and thrilled that I’m going to have a nephew on the way. But less grateful that Mia is forever tied our family.

“I know this is last minute,” he says, “but can you go over there right now for a job interview?”

“Sure. This couldn’t be more perfect. Things are looking up for me. I’m going to be an aunt and there’s a job that sounds right for me and it’s across the street.”

“Talon needs someone to start immediately and he’s...”

I slip into a rain jacket and grab my purse. “No worries. I’m on my way. I’d also prefer to start immediately.”

“Good luck, Krissy.”

“Congratulations again and thanks for everything, Kavin.”

Ten minutes later, I’ve trudged through the heavy rain, crossed the street and I’m in front of that shop I’d seen through the window. Up close it’s slightly more impressive. It is in fact at the end of the strip mall, next door to a sandwich shop and a nail salon. The good news is that it really is so close that I can simply walk here for all my shifts and even go home during lunch breaks if I want.

How did I get so lucky? I really, really need this job. So I don't have any experience... A few white lies can fix that. Anyway, how hard can it be? I take out my phone, open Google Docs and add a quick line into my resume.

A sign on the door says it's closed, but I push at the glass door and find it opens easily. Inside, the entryway is more spacious than I assumed, and I gape at a wall of framed, breathtaking tattoo art as well as other photographs of orcs posing with a variety of tattoos. This is an establishment that mainly caters to orcs, but there are many pictures of humans smiling proudly, displaying their own orc tribal art.

The entry smells fresh and new, as if this shop was recently remodeled. Brand new wood floors with white baseboards are below my rain boots and all the walls appear freshly painted a light gray. An intricately carved wooden bench provides seating in the entry area. Everything looks rustic, or vintage in the best way. On the counter is an older cash register and next to it is a giant notebook with a nice pen on display.

"Hello?" I question. "Is anyone here?"

No response. The only sound is the rain outside.

Business probably does best later in the day and on Friday, Saturday and weekday nights when people are off work. I'm unfortunately a morning person so if I do get this job, I'm going to have to get used to this new schedule.

I keep walking past the counter and find a short hallway lit with a sconce made of black iron. There are several closed doors, but one remains open. Inside is a comfortable chair that leans back and reminds me of a nice dentist chair. Am I being rude, looking around? I'm just so curious because I've never been inside of a tattoo shop and I'm pleasantly surprised how much I like the aesthetic.

There are rustic tools and knives, I assume for the traditional orc tattoos. Small pots

are lined up, along with areas to grind and mash their own inks and colors. It looks like a mix of old and new techniques together. Very interesting. There's even something, I assume, to make a flame and an array of black irons with symbols at the tip. These orcs are serious about their markings.

I don't touch anything, but I do also see gadgets that are neatly lined that I vaguely recognize must be for tattoos on humans and everything looks highly sanitary and safe. If I were to get ink on my body, I would trust this place simply from a first glance. No wonder business is good here and this orc, Talon Overtree, needs help.

Then I hear a deep voice.

I step back out into the hallway, trying to find the source.

A single, fully grown black cat sits in the middle of the hallway.

“Oh my gosh. Well, this is a surprise.” A big smile spreads across my face because I adore cats. Soon there's a second cat, and then a third joins the group and all three black cats sit and stare at me.

“Hi kitties.” I stretch out my hand and lead with my fingertips, ready to greet and pet these three darling animals.

All three cats stand their ground, not running away and watch my approach with curiosity.

The first black cat, the biggest of the three, sniffs my fingertips and seems to decide that I'm worthy. I give it a little pet on the head, and then the second, a thinner cat, allows a pet too. The third black cat with tall ears and a long tail hangs back and then darts off into the open door at the end of the hallway.

Oh well, with cats, two out of three accepting me isn't so bad.

I can still hear the deep voice through the open door and I'm not sure what to do now. Is this Talon Overtree's office? I don't want to intrude on his business conversation. I'm guessing these are his cats? He must be a nice man if he's such a cat lover. Right?

Soon my curiosity gets the best of me, and I can't help but feel the need to see what this orc, my brother's best friend, looks like.

I get close and the third cat comes back out and rubs against my ankle, finally deciding to make first contact. "Hi, baby," I whisper. All three of them move around me as I peek past the edge of the door.

I've got a good view of my new boss and I suck in a breath because he's a bit terrifying. Ancient feelings of fear kick in, because orcs have always kidnapped human women to fill them with their sons. There are no females in the orc species, so their only way to procreate is with human woman who give birth to orc sons. And in ancient times, orcs didn't always wait for consent, just grabbed and ran. It was bad, but modern orcs do not kidnap.

"They do not kidnap," I whisper to myself as I clutch the door. My brother is a sweetheart who did not kidnap Mia. They met, and I assume she's in love with him in her own twisted way.

I bite my lip and my eyes scan his entire body.

Talon is huge.

I watch as he speaks on his cell phone. He fills up the entire office chair, which squeaks under his weight. Black horns burst out on either side of his forehead and he has thick black hair with gray at the temples. A thick black beard covers his wide jaw.

And a rope necklace, that looks like it was made by hand, with a heavy medallion hangs from around his corded neck and rests on his muscular, green chest. Interesting tattoos weave down both of his arms.

He's too old for me.

My brow furrows. Why am I even thinking about this? It doesn't matter if he's too old because, of course, nothing's going to happen between me and this intimidating orc with the tusks that jut up from his lower lip.

Kavin said that none of these orcs would be interested in me because I can't get pregnant. At first, this is slightly offensive because it means my worth only applies as a babymaker. But on the other hand, this is a good thing because I'm just here to work, not here to pick up a new boyfriend.

I've always had crazy, painful periods and after a lot of very intrusive tests and a procedure that helped to ease the pain, I was told by my gynecologist that I'd never get pregnant. It's sad but true. It's not like I'll never be a mother; I just won't be able to carry my own biological children. Maybe in the future I could do a surrogacy, or I could adopt. Not that any of this matters at the moment, because I can't have kids right now anyways. I can't even afford to take care of myself, let alone a child.

I look back down at the cats. Sadly, I couldn't afford to take care of pets right now either.

These cats are adorable. Grandma was highly allergic to cats, so I've never had my own.

The smallest black cat licks itself and the one with the big ears chases an imaginary bug. I pick the biggest one up and he allows it, letting me give him a big hug and kiss on the head. I put him back down gently and pet the other two cats who also want

love.

Talon Overtree appears to like cats, and hopefully he'd let me help take care of these cats and get my pet fix, while he pays for all their food, etc. Perfect.

And then I realize he must be talking to my brother because I hear my name.

Talon's voice turns dark and scary as he snarls, "...and I am not hiring some stupid, useless human girl who's never been around a tattoo shop in her life."

Oh jeez.

Page 2

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Chapter 2

Talon

I 'm in my office, alone and comfortable, when I receive an annoying call from my so-called best friend. The male who moved from our commune to the same town I live in and is already a firefighter, found his bride and has a son on the way.

It's most annoying.

And now he's trying to unload his human sister onto me.

"No," I respond. "It's bad enough that I've moved to a human town and give humans orc tattoos, but I draw the line at a human working with me day in and day out, least of all an unmated female. It's me and two other orcs in the shop and none of us are mated. This would be a disaster."

"She's my sister and I've already told her that the job is hers."

"This was your mistake, not mine. I don't care if she's the President of the United States, I don't want her here. I'm not mated and it's the fall. What if I scent her and my body locks on to her and that isn't what she wants? I'll only be able to remain sane for a few short months."

"You won't ever want her as a mate and neither will Oreg or Doril."

"Why not?"

“Because my sister is not able to become pregnant.”

“What is the problem? Why is she unable to conceive?”

“I don’t know, but that’s what the human doctors told her. But don’t tell her I told you that; she’d kill me. I’m only telling you because it’s important.”

I let out a snort. “Wild orcs are not the easiest to be around.”

“I know. But you’d better treat my sister well or I’ll kick your ass.”

“How am I supposed to know how to treat her well? I don’t know how to deal with delicate humans. I’ve only been in the commune and now I’m here, giving orcs tattoos in the ways of old and also to these needy humans because it’s become trendy. They put up with my aggression to get the tattoo.”

“You said you needed someone immediately.”

“Heh,” I growl. “This is true. Does she know how to take care of customers? She’s worked in a tattoo shop before?”

“She’ll be great.”

“What are you hiding?”

“Nothing. Like I said, she’ll be great.”

Heat churns in my chest. “She’d better be because I’m not hiring some stupid, useless human girl who’s never been around a tattoo shop in her life.” And then I hear a squeak in the hallway past my open office door. “Who is there?” I growl, pounding my fist against the desk.

“If you ever call my sister ‘stupid’ again,” Gavin snarls, “I’m going to beat you first then toss you in the fire pit.”

I see a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I hang up. Then I throw open the office door and see a female rushing away from me. I march down the hall and catch up with her as she’s halfway through the front door, ready to exit the shop.

“Stop!” I bellow.

She pauses and looks back at me.

I’m transfixed for a moment by her radiant beauty. “Come inside and talk with me,” I order.

A muscle ticks in her jaw. Her long, brown hair whips in the wind and her hazel eyes narrow. When have I ever witnessed a more extraordinary female? How did an orc as ugly as Gavin become half sibling with this graceful human?

“You said you would never work with a stupid human,” she challenges. “Therefore, I’m leaving.”

“Heh. Does this mean you are admitting you are stupid?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course I’m not stupid. But it’s terrible of you to assume I’m of lower intelligence ahead of time before even meeting me.”

I soften my voice. “You are Gavin’s sister. I would like to talk with you about a job.”

She blows out a breath and rubs a hand against her forehead. “Job. Yes. I need to talk to you about a job.”

“Let’s go to my office and talk.”

“Okay.” The female quietly closes the door behind her and follows me back inside.

All three cats march alongside us.

I sit behind my desk and the female takes one of the two chairs on the other side. Now that we are in an enclosed space, her pheromones reach my lungs and I inhale, confirming that she is not compatible. I find myself mildly disappointed. “My name is Talon Overtree,” I greet.

“I am Krissy Thompsons.”

I lean back in my chair. “I might say things to you that will be difficult for a delicate human to process.”

“I heard.”

My lips twitch. “I will not apologize for speaking like an orc. This is who I am. I always say what I want,” I warn her. “I refuse to be different for anyone and I can't have an employee who's so delicate that they cannot handle orc talk.”

She tilts her head. “But my brother doesn't talk like that to anyone.”

“He is being different for you.”

“I’ve never heard him talk in a rude manner towards Mia either...”

A growl rumbles in my chest.

She puts up a palm. “I understand, you expect me to roll with the punches while I work here. I can do that.”

“There will be no punches. You will be safe in all your interactions with me.”

Her beautiful eyes flash with defiance. “Sometimes there isn’t much of a difference between hurtful words and the pain of physical hurt.”

“Female, can you work here, or not?”

Kavin’s sister sits up straight. “Oh, I can definitely work here. Sorry. I will do a good job, I promise.”

This is when I remember my friend said his sister was in great need of an immediate job so I back down. It doesn’t seem fair for a human who is already affronted by my plain orc speak to have to work with orcs because she needs the money. If I hire her, I will pay her well so she can move on as soon as possible to another job that is a better match. And then I can hire an orc, hopefully, who I can speak to plainly.

Meanwhile, If I did choose to hire her, I’d have to put up with this human.

And then I witness something so stunning, I choke on a sip of my now-cold coffee.

My largest black cat hops into Krissy’s arms and she greets this vicious animal with a rub right under his chin. The other two animals sit at her feet, purring for attention, completely ignoring me.

“What is this?” I thunder.

She looks up at me with surprise, still petting the cat.

“You have met my cats?” I question. “And survived?”

“Oh, yes. I hope that was okay. The front door was open and I was trying to find you and these three cats were sort of leading me to your office. I heard your voice, and since I was told to come immediately for an interview, I followed the sound.”

Shadow jumps down onto the floor and then both Ink and Cole take his place on her lap at the same time. Krissy giggles and takes it all in good stride, balancing both cats and giving them equal attention.

All three of my cats like her? I try to call them over, but they ignore me, except for Shadow. “This has never happened before. My cats don't like anyone except for me,” I explain. “They are trained guard cats. They don't even like the two other males who work here.”

“Guard cats? I'm never heard of that. Cats are sweethearts who love to be petted, played with and given snacks. They stopped and stared at me, so I reached out and let them each sniff my hand.”

“They didn't hiss at you?”

She looks confused. “No, why would they?”

“They didn't bite or scratch?”

She laughs. “Of course not. Each one had a slightly different reaction to me, but none of them acted scared or afraid.”

“You can tell the difference between them?”

“Yeah, they're all black, but they have different body shapes and their personalities are different. Do you bring your cats with you to work every day?”

“Yes, they enjoy traveling with me in my car and I don't want to leave them alone. And normally I'm the only one who can tell them apart.” I cross my arms. “You aren't allergic to cats?”

“No, but I understand what you're talking about and I appreciate you checking. I always wanted cats but I've never been able to have my own as a pet because my grandmother was allergic. What are their names?”

“The biggest one that was in your arms first was Shadow. The cat with the large ears and tail is Ink and the smallest cat is Cole.”

“Oh, I love their names.”

“That would be part of your job too,” I tell her. “Herding cats. I need someone to help keep them fed, happy and safe from the customers.”

“I can do that. In fact, that sounds like the best part of the job.”

And that's when I decide to hire her. “When can you start?”

“I can start right now.”

I stand and open the door. “Good.”

“Um, can I ask...when do you pay? Do you pay weekly, biweekly, monthly...”

“I pay weekly.”

She nods and looks away, still biting her lip.

And this is when I realize today is Sunday. “We pay on Mondays. Tomorrow you can be paid for today’s work. Then next Monday you will get a full week’s pay.”

“Really? You can start to pay me that soon?”

“Yes, this is no problem.”

“Thank you,” she smiles with a flash of perfect teeth.

Shadow gives out a loud meow, as if he agrees.

I give Kevin’s human sister a quick tour of the shop, the chairs and our supplies. Time flies as I train her to take over the cat’s feeding system and the front counter. The good news is that she is indeed smart and takes direction easily. It helps that the cats like her.

“Everyone pays in cash?” she asks with true surprise after I show her the cash register. “You don’t have a point-of-sale system?”

“A what? I’ve never heard of that.”

“Oh jeez. Well, you at least use QuickBooks, right? So at least there’s that.”

“What is Quick...what did you call it?”

Her mouth drops open.

“I bought a franchise of Heat and Ink but turned it into the only orc tattoo establishment in the country. As far as I know, we’re the only place that practices

tattoo art in the ways of the ancients and even allows the ancient ink onto humans.”

“I’ve never had a tattoo.”

I glance at her with surprise. “I assumed you had tattoos on your body that were under your clothes. Why have you never had one?”

“I can't handle the thought of the pain. Plus, I always think to myself, what if I hate this ten or twenty years from now? I don't want to be like a celebrity I heard of who had to spend two years of pain and two hundred thousand dollars to get all the ink lasered off his body that he'd accumulated, including the names of ex-girlfriends.”

I chuckle. “That is human idiocy.” I proudly point at the work done on both my arms. “Orcs never apply tribal ink that would later need removal. Our symbols are earned as a badge of honor and have life-long meaning.”

She blinks. “If they are so meaningful, why do you place these on humans too?”

“I understand their desperation for orc ink on their bodies, because it is indeed the best. I give humans special art that I’ve specifically created that looks similar to our markings but is in truth not our tribal ink. Humans can’t handle the pain of orc tattoo application. They think what I make for them has orc meaning, but it is simply decorative. Only orcs receive ancient tribal ink in the ways of old bestowed on them by their elders, which I then apply.”

“Do the humans know this?”

“I avoid telling them that theirs is different, but if directly asked I will answer truthfully. I do this because I’m trying my best to keep the secrets of tribal ink amongst orcs. And we charge humans twice as much as we charge orcs.”

“Oh.”

“Do you consider that unfair?”

“No...it makes sense. You said that this is originally for orcs and only recently have you been allowing humans to get these tattoos too. You had to go through the bother of creating special tattoos so humans could be included while still preserving orc rituals for orcs only. It makes sense to me that they should be charged more for this privilege.”

“Exactly.”

“I understand. Your secret is safe with me.” She gives me a wide smile, which causes her to look even more charming than before.

And then the first orc customers arrive and my training of this human begins in earnest. I make sure to leave the door to my room open and at first I am able to keep an eye on her for questions and still keep up my work, so that I am not leaving Krissy alone in front.

But eventually I am in deep thought, busy heating up tools and talking with an orc under my care who needs a tattoo to memorialize his first successful knock out of his older brother, tossing him over the fire pit, which is to be celebrated. When I finish the last burn and we both admire the work and he leaves, I notice a human has arrived who wants an orc tattoo.

I overhear him talking to Krissy at the front counter as she signs him in, and I don't like the way this male stands too close when he speaks to her.

“How did you get this job, working with orcs?” he questions.

“My brother is Talon Overtree’s best friend and he recommended me for this job.”

“Talon’s best friend is a human?”

“No,” she laughs. “My brother is an orc.”

“How is that possible?”

“Well, he’s my older half-brother. My mother met his dad”—she wags a finger—“and no, he didn’t kidnap her. She was smitten and got knocked up by him right away. My mother went with Kevin’s dad to his commune and hid out there for her entire pregnancy until she’d healed from the delivery and then left them both and they never saw her again. Then she went on to eventually meet my dad, get married and had me. In fact, my mother didn’t tell a single person she’d had a secret orc baby. The only way I found out that my brother existed was because he got in contact with me when he’d learned he had a sibling through the Orc Ancestry Database.”

“Oh wow, I should check that database. What if I have a secret orc brother? That would be amazing.”

“You could,” she chuckles, “you could. And you’d be lucky because my brother is a great guy.”

And then she turns and gives me a wink and I realize she knew I was listening all along.

For some reason my eyes drift down when she turns away. The curve of her ass is spectacular, as are the heft of her breasts. Why am I thinking this way if she is a female who cannot mate?

I shake my head, greet the human and lead him into my room and get back to work.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 am

Chapter 3

Krissy

Talon was able to pay me so quickly for Sunday's work because his business is cash only. When we closed last night, the intimidating orc handed me two hundred dollars in cash for six hours of work. "Here, I'll pay you right now."

Of course I was grateful, I desperately needed that money. He'd also insisted on giving me cash to get us both pizza for dinner, which was lovely because that was much better than what waited me at home.

The money he gave me is already in the ATM and in my account. Last night I went to the cheapest gas station in town and filled my tank so I don't have to worry about not being able to get somewhere farther to find a better job. And the good news is that I'll get paid again next Monday.

What a blessing.

I should be thrilled to receive cash as my payment, but this leaves me not knowing yet what my hourly pay rate is and will this job count toward taxes? I've never had a job, besides babysitting, where I was paid cash only. I'm now worried that Talon Overtree isn't just a tattoo artist but is also running some sort of orc money laundering mafia business and I'll always be paid under the table, constantly worrying that there's going to be an FBI raid of the place.

I know this is terrible to think, considering I spent most of yesterday with him, in his

shop, watching him work and getting to know him. But there's something wrong with how he's running his business and I can't move forward until I get to the bottom of this mystery—what if this business is illegal?

I'm annoyed because I specifically told my brother I was willing to do any type of work as long as it wasn't illegal, and I wasn't doing any sex work either because that's way out of my comfort zone.

I walk over to the strip mall for my next shift and send my brother a text. Kevin, you said this tattoo shop wasn't an illegal business.

He answers right away. It isn't.

Then why is this a cash only business with a set of books that is messily written in a spiral notebook like this is a 1960s casino or something.

It's probably because orcs have never had to pay human taxes or run human businesses.

Never?

Never. But now that we've recently become citizens, all of us, including those that now own businesses, have to start paying taxes this next year. He'll learn and change.

I respond with a thinking emoji.

He leaves a laughing emoji. You good?

Yes, thanks...back to work

Me too.

I reach Heat the office door slams loudly behind him.

“What was all that about?” I question the cats.

They give a chorus of tinkling meows.

Then I get right to work, first feeding all three cats their mid-morning snacks and giving them fresh water. I clean out their kitty litter box and make sure their beds and their whole little area is neat and clean. This is no hardship and I’m happy to keep them entertained with the toys that are in a box for them. I even find a catalogue to look through for more cat paraphernalia and I find a darling cat tree that I plan on talking Talon into ordering.

I’d like to think that my grandma would be thrilled to see me finally living my dream of having cats I can be amongst day in and day out. She always felt bad that I couldn’t have a cat because of her allergies.

I continue to focus on my work, making sure that my boss never has any idea of how I truly feel about him. He would consider my attraction annoying, like a bug to be swatted away. And I’m going to have to somehow get over this over-the-top attraction I have for this orc, because nothing is ever going to happen between us. I’m most likely going to work here for only a few months and then find another job elsewhere.

It's for the best.

Orc customers soon arrive for their “ink” and I greet them, take their payments, show them to Talon’s room and get them set up for their next appointments. I’m getting good at answering the phone, although at this point since I don’t know much, I always forward calls to Talon, but hopefully in the future I’ll be able to answer some of the questions myself, so he doesn’t have to be burdened with everything.

Finally, after lunch, two other orc employees arrive and I get to meet the other tattoo artists in the shop. They stomp over and greet me with typical orc gruffness. “I am Oreg and this is Doril.” They gaze at me with serious expressions, not bothering to smile. Both are also covered in tattoos that I believe aren’t as good-looking as all the ones on Talon’s chest. And I think Oreg is probably older than Talon and I assume Doril is the same age as me.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” I say with all honesty.

Neither of them are as intimidating as Talon and seem easier to get along with, similar to my brother. They each have their own rooms too with chairs and their paraphernalia all set up. On weekdays, these two males will be here until closing at two in the morning. I cannot believe they stay open so late, but apparently, they get an influx of orcs that late at night because the orc brewery closes at midnight and they come over afterwards in groups. Most stores would close on Sundays and Mondays. But Mondays apparently are their busiest day and they are instead closed on Wednesday and Thursdays.

I notice that these two are wary of the cats, which is surprising. They walk around them and act scared and are both truly stunned that the cats seem to like me.

“I have never seen this before,” Oreg says when Cole jumps onto the counter and rubs against my hand.

“They’re sweethearts,” I comment.

“They’re furry demons,” Doril responds.

I’m about to deny this when Shadow hisses at Oreg and the large orc rushes into his room and shuts the door. My jaw drops open because I’ve never seen this cat act this way, I’d only heard rumors. But as the day progresses I see it’s true, they hiss at the

customers they don't like, and at the other orcs who work here. They are only one hundred percent loving towards me, and Talon, the owner of the shop.

"Why do they like you so much?" one of the orc customers, who is a regular, questions.

"I don't know," I answer truthfully. "Maybe because they can sense that I adore them?"

"That's not the reason," Oreg grumbles.

"You know why?"

"I do but I'm keeping my ideas to myself."

Business picks up later in the day. The afternoon and early evening were spent juggling a steady stream of orcs and humans, keeping all three rooms full, with customers waiting for their next openings.

Talon seems to have the most customers who are here with appointments. Doril and Oreg are always full with walk-ins.

Doril and I end up taking a dinner break at the same time. We leave together and walk over to the pizza place at the end of the strip mall and order enough pizza for all four of us. And when we return together, laughing over a shared joke, Talon is immediately rude to Doril for an unknown reason. "Get back to work," he barks. "You shouldn't be wasting time talking with the new human. Your booth isn't even properly set up for your next appointment."

My jaw drops open and I confront Talon for his irrational treatment of an orc who is obviously a hard worker and, as far as I can tell, a reasonably kind orc. "It's not his

fault. His next appointment canceled.”

“No, it's okay,” Doril offers. “It’s true I need to get things ready. Might as well start now.”

I put my hands on my hips and step closer to Talon. “No, it's not okay. Doril needs to pause and eat his dinner and it’s not right for you to confront him like that in the middle of his dinner break.”

“Krissy,” Talon growls, “we had an agreement. You knew how I was when you accepted this job.”

I blow out a breath, because I do need this job. And he did warn me. Also, I’m getting distracted yet again by Talon’s perfect chest and that deep voice. The tusks that jut out from his lower jaw are somehow highly erotic. All day I’ve watched other orcs arrive and treat him in a god-like manner because he’s “the best tattoo artist in the Pacific Northwest” and I have to admit it was awesome to see what he was creating on the other orc’s bodies because they’d always show it off to me on the way out. “I know. You did warn me. It's just difficult, okay?”

And then Doril looks between the two of us and steps close. He leans towards me and inhales and then looks over at Talon. He seems to come to some sort of decision and takes a step back. “I have to get work complete in my room during my lunch break,” he grumbles.

“Oh, really, but you don't have to...”

He steps back from me and says with a firm tone. “I'm busy and need time to myself. But thank you, female.” And then he’s gone and shuts the door to his booth behind him.

For the rest of the week, I see the effects of that confrontation.

Oreg and Doril are just as kind to me as ever, always quick to help out with an explanation for the new girl on how things work. Always showing me their tools and ink work, because I'm endlessly curious about what they do.

But neither one of them is ever alone with me. Oreg and Doril now take their dinner break together and my dinner break is with...Talon.

"Don't you have friends?" Talon questions as we share a pizza inside of his office.

Not that I mind having dinner each night with this amazing male, but it doesn't help me in the least with my initial plans of getting over my doomed attraction. This last week I've spent most of my time with Talon and I still go home at night and masturbate to highly erotic thoughts of my boss. When I'm in here with him like this, the space between my thighs grows hot. I imagine him shutting the door and kissing me. Which is silly because that's never, never going to happen. "No, I didn't have many friends locally, back home, and obviously not here either because I'm new," I answer truthfully and with all the professional detachment I can muster. This orc must never know how much I wish he wanted me as his mate. I'd die of embarrassment if he ever knew of my inappropriate attraction. I'm just an employee and I guess we're becoming friends? Probably because he's friends already with my brother. "My friends are all on the internet. They live all over the world."

"You travel often?"

I'm having a hard time, keeping my eyes off the way his forearms look so strong and sexy. I love watching him devour pizza with gusto. "No, it's because I've been trying to write a romance novella for the last five years. My closest friends are all other women like me, trying to write and publish our first book to no avail. We've grown close over the years."

“Ah.”

I tense at the timber of his voice, which I think sounds a tad judgmental. “It’s hard to write a romance book.”

His lips twitch as he bends down to pet both Ink and Cole. “I understand.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

He sits up. “I do not make fun of you.”

For some reason I’m immediately angry. “You make a living drawing pictures and putting ink permanently in orc skin. That also sounds weird at face value, but it’s important to you and you spend a lot of time getting better and better at it, so I’d never make fun of it and instead take it seriously. I understand that you are a professional at what you do.”

He grunts.

I stand up. “Okay, I’m done with dinner.”

He waves a huge hand over towards the closet. “Why don’t you go ahead and get your pay for this last week.”

I open the closet and then I discover the huge safe in the office holds ridiculous piles of cash. I count out one-hundred-dollar bills in the correct amount, not particularly happy that I’ll be out in public, carrying that amount of cash on me. Then I sit back down to show him and double check it’s correct. “Let me guess, orcs don’t use banks either,” I grumble, half joking.

“No, we don’t.”

I drop my face in my hands. “I can’t believe this. You can’t pay me with cash for forever. I want to be able to declare this job on my taxes like a normal person.”

“I never had to pay taxes because I wasn’t a citizen and was instead taxed by my tribe. Also, I only recently moved into this store. Prior to this I ran my business out of my commune. Human business practices are foreign to me.”

“Maybe you need an actual CPA.”

“What?”

“An accountant. Or a bookkeeper.”

“No, I do not want more humans I do not know meddling in my business. And I do not make fun of your dream to write and publish romance books, therefore you cannot make fun of my lack of banking.”

“This is different. You have been losing money by not investing your profits. And anyone could steal from you.”

“You wouldn’t steal from me.”

“Of course I wouldn’t, but that doesn’t mean that...” I wave a hand.

He looks truly affronted, stands up and starts pacing. “Are you suggesting that customers or employees would steal from me? No one here would steal from me.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Are you trying to say that Oreg and Doril would steal from me?”

I stand up and move closer. “I’m telling you it’s stupid to leave your money sitting in this safe or I’m guessing under your mattress at home, not gaining interest and leaving it exposed to theft.”

His forehead lowers and his lips thin. “I’m not stupid.”

Now we’re close, too close, and dammit, he smells so good. I lean forward and poke a finger against his bare chest. “It doesn’t feel good to be called stupid, does it?”

“Hey,” a deep voice rings out from the open doorway.

I drop my hands and look over my shoulder.

“Can you two stop fighting and get ready for work?” Oreg growls. “All three of us have a busy day. Our next group of customers arrives for their appointments in five minutes.”

I instantly calm down, a bit embarrassed at how this must look. What is it about this orc that gets me so riled up? I’m normally known as calm and levelheaded.

“Get to work,” Talon orders with a low growl.

“Yep.” And I’m out the door, taking my position at the front counter.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 am

Chapter 4

Talon

Two months later....

I've been living in the midst of a hellscape wherein I am becoming attracted to a human female I cannot claim. Each day that passes makes it worse.

I wasn't attracted at first, simply intrigued at this beautiful female that Kevin had charged me to take care of for him. I needed a new employee and she's proven good at her job.

Then, on that second morning, I inhaled her attraction for me and grew fascinated. This female, who cannot get pregnant, is my best friend's sister, and who claimed at first to dislike my plain orc speak, was attracted to me? And she never, ever acts upon it. I wouldn't know of her attraction except for the fact that I am an orc and can scent her arousal for me.

Doril and Oreg can also scent her arousal, which is why neither of them, while both being unmated, have tried to take her as their own. They know that she wants only me, therefore my claim has been marked. If I want her, the way is clear.

But I didn't want her that way, at first.

Six weeks later, things began to change.

Spending all workdays with this female and all my dinner breaks too, has caused me to get to know her very well. In fact, I've somehow become friends with this small, sometimes very annoying, female. I didn't think I'd have anything in common with Kavin's sister, but I suppose since I am his best friend, this female who is biologically linked to him is someone I would get along with too. It makes sense.

I've never told Kavin that his sister is attracted to me, because I'm trying to protect Krissy. Her attraction for me shames her because she thinks she cannot become pregnant and therefore I am not a male who would want to mate with her.

I believe she wants children in her future, because I overheard her speaking this way to a customer one day. An orc was here to receive a tattoo honoring the birth of his son and he and his bride brought the infant with them. Krissy was charmed and said to the mother that she was hoping one day to have a child of her own.

She thinks she will need a human male who already has offspring so she can be a mother, or one who wants adoption. I've also heard of something called surrogacy amongst humans.

That was the first day I began to envision Krissy as my bride, carrying my orc son.

How is it possible for my body to be growing steadily attracted towards a female who cannot carry my orc son? This is supposed to be an impossibility within my species. Kavin placed his sister with three unmated males at Heat we found each other through the orc ancestry database. And I feel blessed to have him, because I have no one in this town, and at least now that Grandma's gone, there's someone."

"You have me."

Her beautiful hazel eyes grow watery and her voice thickens. "I do?"

And then I scoop up all three cats in my arms and shout on my way out, “Lock this door behind me.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 am

Chapter 5

Krissy

The very next day, after I saw heat in Talon's eyes while he was gazing at my bed, the shop closed for the winter holiday.

I knew this vacation was happening, but it was strange to suddenly be in a situation where I wasn't going to see Talon for a whole month—because I swear I caught a glimpse of a hard on in his pants when he entered my apartment.

He kept eyeing my bed. And he was standing very close to me while he spoke and there was a difference in his voice, it sounded almost...seductive. And he was so sweet, that big, hulking orc, with the tusks and the horns, telling me that he's got my back. I wanted to give him a big hug, or really a passionate kiss.

But then he basically ran away and slammed the door shut behind him.

I really believe he feels something for me beyond friendship. But how is that possible? I can't get pregnant, so our relationship has been professional friendship and me pretending I'm not falling in love with my boss. I work there, we have dinner together, I care for his cats and run his shop so he and the other artists can do their work.

All four of us have become a great team.

I enjoy working at that tattoo shop, greeting all the customers and watching them

proudly display their new ink. Some of them save money for months or years to be able to afford our services, because we're exclusive. I'm proud of the high quality work we provide for our customers. I like working at Heat that's in fact tearing me up inside. I should find a new job and try to meet other people my age. He doesn't think I know, but Talon scares away any of the guys who even hint at the possibility of asking me out on a date. Maybe he thinks he needs to protect me, for my brother? But in fact, he's isolating me. If I can't be with him, I should be allowed to find someone else.

But it's hard to think of anyone else when my mind and body desperately want Talon.

It's a crazy situation, made worse that now I've been given an inkling of hope of something happening between us by the way he acted when he dropped me off at my apartment.

Or maybe I was misunderstanding and that was nothing? It must be nothing, because again, how could he possibly want me as more than a friend when his species only mates with a woman they know will instantly conceive? It's a biological prerogative he can't circumvent and neither can I.

Ugh.

Maybe it's good that Heat & Ink is closed for a whole month over the holidays, mainly so that Talon, Oreg and Doril can each return to their respective communes for a winter break. But also, this provides me with a sorely needed break from seeing Talon every single day. This could be the break I need to get my head on straight and start updating my resume.

They're all gone but meanwhile, I'm sad because this is my first Christmas without grandma.

Kavin invited me to go with him to Mia's parents' house for the holiday, which I of course declined. Instead, I plan on driving all the way back to Portland to stay for a few nights with grandma's best friend, Lori and her family, who are also like my family too. Lori called and insisted that I come down or she'd pick me up herself.

So sweet.

But first, I have to check on the cats again. I'm house sitting for Talon while he's gone. Kavin is stepping in for me over Christmas Eve and Christmas, to come and check in on the baby kitties while I'm out of town for two days. I want to bring them with me, but I've learned that Shadow, Ink and Cole are very choosy about who they show their affection towards and I'd hate to bring them all the way to Portland, only for them to hate everyone and for chaos to ensue. So, at home they stay.

I unlock the door to Talon's home and instantly miss him all over again.

What a mess.

Three weeks later...

It was cathartic to talk with others who'd loved grandma as much as I did.

We shared memories and talked of times past. I even went to the cemetery and left flowers at her gravesite. I sat on the grass and chatted with grandma and told her all about my new adventures in Spokane with Kavin and my job at the shop. I even laughingly admitted my attraction to my boss. It was nice.

Then I returned to my new hometown and spent a lot of time at Talon's house, taking care of the cats and also getting words done on my novel. I brought my laptop with me each day because I'd discovered a perfect little desk in his second bedroom which was pushed up under a large window. If I brought a chair to the desk, I could write on

my laptop and pause often to look out at the large front yard, with a beautiful view of large trees, birds and white snow. With the occasional cat hopping up for hugs and kisses. Lovely.

I got two whole chapters completed while I house sat. It was good times.

But at the same time, I heard nothing from Talon, which was heartbreaking considering I thought about him every single day. How could I not, considering I was in his home, taking care of his cats?

I sent him texts with pictures of the cats, but he never responds.

He has not lived in this home for very long. I thought at first that he was renting, but I learned he bought this home, with cash. It's fully paid for, which is astounding. He moved in only a month prior to opening the shop. There still isn't much furniture. And I can't help but think of all the large furniture I have in my apartment and how it would fit nicely here. My Fiestaware, cookware and utensils would also be a nice addition.

Look at me, play acting like I'm moving in with him.

Jeez, I think I'm in love with Talon Overtree. The male who doesn't want to have anything to do with be beyond friendship and a coworker relationship. It's a sad state of affairs. And this isn't like a relationship with a human male. I can't just tell myself that I should get brave and tell him how I feel and ask him out, so then I'd at least know where I stand. Of course, I know where I stand, permanent friendship. I'll never be able to get past this point.

Except on the last day of this house sitting gig, the day before the shop reopens in the middle of January—I find an envelope that looks like it had fallen and slipped between the trash can and the wall. It is addressed to me.

I glance over at Shadow. “Did you knock this off the counter and never tell me that it had fallen down here?”

The cat gives an adorable, embarrassed meow and rubs his head against my arm.

A light growl of disappointment rumbles in my throat but I also give him a pet so he knows I’m not remaining angry.

“This is from Talon, isn’t it?” I tear it open and see that it’s indeed a handwritten letter from my boss.

Talon told me, long ago, that often orcs raised in communes were sent to human schools in nearby human towns. He graduated from a small human high school with a large mixture of orcs amongst the humans. I’ve always thought that sounded interesting. But it also means that he has good handwriting in English despite the fact that it’s his second language.

Dear Krissy,

I cannot communicate with you while we are both on winter break. Kavin remains in Spokane to share your holiday and will be your contact if you need anything. Thank you for caring for Shadow, Ink and Cole while I’m gone. And thank you for the excellent job you do at Heat & Ink.

Happy Holidays,

Talon

An extra two hundred dollars, in twenties, falls out of the envelope. Of course, he pays me in cash. Some things never change. Talon is very generous, always trying to give me extra bonuses. He also pays for my health benefits, which is how I was able

to recently get my teeth cleaned and a cavity fixed.

I hold the letter to my chest with tears in my eyes. He does have feelings for me. Right? Isn't that what he's saying? Well, not outright, but it sounds close.

Dammit, I need to act on this. Why wait? Maybe there is some loophole in orc mating allowing the two of us to be together that I haven't been aware of until now.

I'm going to show up tomorrow morning, ready to get something started.

I arrive at work in a new outfit that shows cleavage. I can't even quite explain why I'm dressed like this, but I'm growing a little desperate.

I take off my long, puffy coat and the dark brown sweater dress clings to all my curves. I'm kinda excited for him to see it because it's the first nice dress I've bought with the money I earned from this job.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" a deep voice questions.

I turn around and shift in my tall boots. I lick my lips because I haven't seen Talon in a little over a month and my poor heart can't handle all that green muscle and silver belt buckle, yearning to be touched. "Maybe?" I squeak.

His dark, molten gaze scans me from head to toe, lingering on my chest and then finally back to my face. Is his crotch tented or am I imagining things?

"I'm on the edge of sanity," he growls. "You have to get away from me or I'll fuck you right now."

Am I dreaming or is this real? "And this is bad because...?"

“I won’t be able to make it to my home, or even to your apartment across the street. If you don’t leave now I’ll strip you bare and fuck you here, in my office or even on the floor or against the wall. And customers are set to arrive soon. I might need to close the shop today, either way.”

I stare at him, continuing to not understand how this is something I shouldn’t want. And then I take a step closer to his hot body. “Can’t we talk about this? Is the problem that you think you’re too old for me? Because I don’t think that’s a problem at all. We get along great and a thirteen year age difference isn’t a big deal.”

“You are fired,” he snarls.

I have a sinking feeling that this time he’s not joking. “Why? What have I done wrong?”

“You know.”

“I don’t know.”

“Get out, now,” he thunders.

One hour later I stand in the snow in front of the nearby sandwich shop, crying.

My brother calls me at exactly the wrong moment. Right when I’m in the midst of a snotty ugly cry over the fact that Talon has fired me, for reals this time. He literally kicked me out of his shop.

I’ve been here for awhile now, not quite knowing where to go or what to do with myself. I did have presence of mind to zip up my long, puffy coat and pull on my hat. The boots are pretty but they’re also practical and warm in the snow.

“Yes?” I sob.

“Krissy? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I try to say and then cry some more.

My brother’s voice vibrates with agitation. “I just got back to the station and was calling to invite you to an open house we’re having at the fire station next month, but instead you need to tell me why you’re crying. The tears of a female, especially from a sibling, affect me greatly. Tell me. Who is making you cry? I will pound this human into the ground.”

“It’s...it’s an orc. But really, it’s nothing you need to do anything about. It’s more like I just need to get over it and move on. Or, I don’t know, go back and try again later? I’m so confused. You happened to call right after it happened, so I’m upset.”

“An orc has mistreated you to the point where you are crying? Is it one of the customers at the shop? Have you told Talon so he can take care of this individual?”

“That’s the problem, it’s Talon,” I cry because I’m a freaking mess. “He’s fired me and I don’t even really understand why. Well, I guess I do understand but why did he have to fire me? It’s silly how he acted and it...it hurts my feelings.”

A vicious growl rumbles over the phone. “I will be there in moments to take care of this.”

“No. No, I was only telling you because you called and happened to ask. This is nothing. I can handle it myself. Really, maybe he’s right that I shouldn’t work there...Kavin? Kavin?”

But the line is dead in my hand. Uh oh, this won’t be pretty.

And then I hear a shout of greeting and look up to see Doril who has come to my rescue. "Get in the car," he says.

I use the back of my hand to wipe at my face and get in the passenger seat.

Doril slowly drives me home and I ask questions. "I don't understand why he's treating me this way," I cry. "I mean there was another reason for him firing me, that I hope you didn't hear about but, this is the second time he's tried to fire me, and you and I both know there's no cause."

"Well, you're his bride, that's why."

"Huh?"

"He treats you nice because you're his bride."

"He doesn't treat me nice at all... Wait, what did you say? I can't be his bride, or any orc's bride ever, because I can't get pregnant."

"That's not true. You can get pregnant."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, when you first arrived, it's true, I didn't scent your compatibility, but lately it's very strong."

"Compatibility? Do you mean you can scent that I can..."

"All orcs can scent that you are now able to become pregnant. It's a thing amongst our species. In ancient times we had to know in order to, um, identify and kidnap as quickly as we did. We don't kidnap anymore but we still have the ancient ability to

know if a potential mate is fertile.”

“But neither you or Oreg have ever asked me out or shown any interest in me at all.”

He parks in the spot in guest parking, closest to my apartment and turns to answer my question. “Well, to be truthful, it’s because the both of us could also immediately scent your arousal for Talon.”

My cheeks grow hot. “No.”

“Yes.”

“This whole time you’ve been able to...and Talon could scent this also?”

“Yes, he’s always known how you felt towards him, as we did. But don’t worry, once we knew that Talon was interested, we backed off and especially when it was clear lately that he returned your feelings. And now neither of us feels any way for you other than friendship, or coworkers. That’s how it works amongst orcs. Once a female has been identified by another, we don’t fight amongst ourselves for that female, instead we step aside and keep looking for another.”

“What is that noise?”

I look out the window and let out a whimper of fear. “It’s my brother.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 am

Chapter 6

Talon

The front door of Heat & Ink bursts open. Glass shatters and wood cracks.

Luckily, I'd already sent out an email and text blast that we would be closed today.

I look up and see Gavin has blown through the door and lower my head with acceptance. There was always the very real possibility of this happening. I stopped by his house to tell him face to face about my need to keep his sister away from me, but Mia was stubborn and wouldn't tell me where he was. I assumed he was on shift, but when I went to the firehouse, he was out actually working on a fire.

And now he got to Krissy before I could.

He stomps inside, ready for battle. "I placed my sister here with you because I promised she'd be safe," he snarls. "She told me you fired her today, and that, in fact, this was the second time, but she hid it from me the first time. You're lucky that happened."

"You don't understand, Gavin. I wanted to tell you."

"I put my sister under your care, only you, not anybody else. I don't have any other family besides my father and this sister. You have lots of family and I have none. She's the same, all she has is me, and I put her under my best friend's care. I told you that she needed to be treated well. You knew what I expected." He cracks his neck

and lifts his fists. “And I warned you what would happen if you didn't.”

“You did,” I acknowledge.

“I found her crying.”

Shame settles in my chest. “I had to fire her,” I tell him.

“You did not.” He steps forward and slams a fist in my face.

I feel the crunch of bone and nearly fall.

My tusks are longer lately, but then so are his. I feel more strength than I normally have because my body is making itself ready for mating, which has never happened before. In ancient times, we sometimes fought against each other before a female was taken, but the moment she physically or verbally declared her mate it was over. We battle against each other for dominance and prestige or positions within our communes. And friends settle disputes with battle. Also, we've had to historically fight our claim off from other humans.

Kavin and I have fought before, and we are equally matched in both strength and skill. I am older than him but also slightly bigger. But this time, I understand that I deserve all his rage. I hit back but pull my punches. He grabs onto my horns and slams me against the wall. I grab onto his waist and rush him.

And we fall against the counter. My friend pounds on me again and again with rock hard fists.

Shadow shrieks and leaps onto his back, trying to shred skin.

Kavin bats him away. “Your animals will not save you. You need to pay for the pain

you have caused to my sister.”

I roll to my side and take deep, painful breaths, blood dripping from my lips. “I am wrong,” I agree. “That second day when I could tell how she felt about me and then I knew something was wrong, because I wasn't rejecting her as I should—that was the day I should have fired her by giving her a good bonus so that she could find something else. But I was weak.”

“My sister does not want you as a mate.”

“She does.”

He grabs for me and punches me in the face again. “If this is true, why do you play with her feelings?”

“Because I am weak. And I also want her.”

“How is that possible?”

“I don't know.”

“You are angry at your body's reaction towards my sister and are trying to resist because you hate her and are angry at the fact that your body chooses her?”

“No. I am confused at the fact that my body must've healed her so she can become pregnant.”

He punches me again.

“And I am angry because my body and mind wants her fully now, exactly when the first snow starts. I fired her because you and I both know I won't be able to treat her

with respect until springtime.”

Finally, Kavin lets go and steps back. “You love her?”

“I do,” I whisper.

“Kavin?” a female voice cries out. “Talon?” Krissy of course arrives, probably because Kavin had first stopped at her apartment and she’s here to talk him down. She steps over the debris. “Oh my god, what are you two doing?”

A growl rumbles in my chest as my body reacts to the sound of my bride’s voice. Primitive instincts take hold and I struggle to move past the large orc in my way so I can grab my bride.

Kavin looks over at his sister. “Get out,” he bellows. “Stay away from Talon and this store. He is right. Orcs claim their brides in the dark of winter so you must go.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Get out and go home.”

My troubled bride throws her hands up in the air. “You are both assholes,” she declares, lifts her chin and marches with as much pride as she can muster, back out the ruined door and returns to her car.

A growl rumbles in my chest. “And now you are the one who makes her cry.”

Kavin slides down and sits on the ground. “I will fix it.”

“No, she is no longer your responsibility. I will fix it.”

“She is my sister.”

“She is my bride.”

“Yeah and maybe neither of you assholes thought of the possibility that you might want to ask Krissy what she wants.”

I look over at Mia, Kevin’s glowering bride, who has her hands on her hips. “You have been gone for too long, so I came to take you home. Let him fix it,” she orders. “I need you home. My feet are killing me.”

Kevin smiles wide, gets up and staggers over to her. “Yes, my bride. One foot massage on the way.” He scoops his heavily pregnant bride into his arms and is gone.

Later that night I return to the shop and attach a sheet of plastic to the gaping hole in front of Heat & Ink.

Oreg and Doril have already hired a team of orcs who will clean all of this up tomorrow and have it fixed like new. But I need to keep the snow and rain out overnight to decrease the damage. No one will try and commit theft because this is an orc establishment, and they know the consequences of such an endeavor.

I hear a crunch of glass and look up. “Krissy,” I growl. “Two more months. You must wait two more months.” I take a step back because even while upset, she somehow grows more beautiful each time I see her lately.

She wears simple, thick sweats and snow boots and a jacket. Her hair is pulled back from her face. “I know it’s kinda crazy for me to come back again, after being kicked out of here two times already today, but...I can’t help it, I saw the light on from my apartment window and I had to drive over and tell you...I really don’t understand. I feel like you and my brother came to some sort of weird understanding today, but the

only one who doesn't understand anything is me. Kavin texted me earlier and said something again about how it's the dark of winter and so you can't talk to me until spring and how in spring everything will be fine. He said I did have to remain fired until the spring and to wait and get my job back? But, Talon, spring isn't until almost the end of March and that's two months from now. Who is going to work the front counter for the next two months?" Her voice cracks. "Who is going to take care of the cats?"

I swallow hard and clutch the doorframe. I am exhausted with all this denial and without Kavin's presence to block my baser urges I know I will fail and claim her in a rough manner. She has stepped into the lion's den. "You need to leave and ask all these questions to either Oreg or Doril until..."

"March?"

"Yes."

"What happens in March? What am I waiting for?"

I take a deep breath, which doesn't help matters because I inhale the scent of her arousal. "You are waiting to become my bride."

"I am?" Her features brighten. "Talon, are you asking me to marry you?"

"I'm asking you to become my mate, which is very different from that stupid, flimsy human construct of marriage. A mating can never be broken and will last the entire lifetimes of both human and orc."

"Why do we have to wait to see each other until March for this?"

"Krissy, you can see with your own eyes that I am not the same. My tusks are longer

and my horns are sharper. I am hard and leaking whenever you are near. In the dark of winter orcs have historically claimed their brides. This is the time when I cannot remain sane. I will possibly take you roughly. I might, even now, not let you leave and instead grab you and take you to my home and keep you there, not checking for consent.”

“What if I give my consent to all of that ahead of time?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t treat me like I’m stupid. I perfectly understand what you’re saying and I appreciate that you’ve been trying to protect me. Yes, I could leave right now and you’ll never see me until the end of March and we could start all of this over again...but I don’t want to wait. It will hurt me too. There’s no need to wait. I want you as you are right now. I’m not scared.”

I let go of the doorframe and take a step closer, my voice deepening with desire. “You should be.”

She stands her ground. “I want you too. You’ve known that since you met me.”

I pull her close and bury my nose in her neck and give a deep inhale, which calms my mating frenzy. It helps that she is not running from me, lighting up ancient kidnapping instincts. “I will impregnate you with my orc son. Can you stay with me your whole life, having only orc sons and never giving birth to daughters?”

“Are you certain that I will be able to...”

“Yes, you will.”

I lick her neck and pull her in tighter so she can feel how hard I am for her. “If you

remain with me tonight, you are deciding that you will be marked.”

“Marked? Where?”

I reach around and grab her ass. “I will mark your ass with my brand so that I can always see it when I take you from behind.”

Her eyes darken and the scent of her arousal intensifies. “Do it.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 am

Chapter 7

Krissy

I can't help but scream as the heat of the brand lands on my ass. Because it hurts like hell. And then he immediately licks my skin and the pain is gone. I look over my shoulder and see that Talon gazes proudly at his work.

"I wish I could see it better."

He gives me a handheld mirror. I stand with my back to the larger wall mirror and can see it, not up close and zoomed in, but even like this it looks amazing. He's created a stylized letter "T" in black with thorns around wrapped around the letter.

"It shows you're mine and for others to keep away."

"Thanks. I love it," I say with genuine excitement. "You know this is the first, and probably the last tattoo I'll ever have and I really like how this looks. It's not too big or too small and I can hide it under clothes and bathing suits. It's just for the two of us."

He pulls me in close, connecting my back and behind to the feel of that enormous, hard shaft underneath his pants.

I instantly melt like hot candy as a rush of wetness grows between my thighs. My clit literally throbs, wanting his attention. For months now I've been wanting Talon's hard body next to mine, wanting the ability to touch that green skin all over and put

my lips against his, and anywhere else I wanted. And tonight is the night all my dreams come true.

“You're not as delicate as I thought.”

I give back the mirror with one hand and hold onto my drooping sweatpants with the other hand. “And you're not as stupid as I first assumed.”

He chuckles. “You are never going to let that go, are you?”

“Probably not. Ten years from now, I'll bring it up again.” I tap my forehead. “I have a memory like an elephant for things like that.”

He's very intent on my bare ass. “You were the one for me to hire because the cats liked you. And then, I don't know if you realize this, but none of my customers have complained about you. They all seem to like you too. In fact, too much.”

“I try. I mean, I am the first one they meet at front or on the phone. I'm first contact, so I do my best to give good customer service. I mean, right at first I was kind of clunky, because I didn't know anything about tattoos, but they were kind to me. I admitted to the orcs that I was Gavin's sister. That seemed to help. I had no idea that my brother was so well liked...I mean, as he should be.”

“He is a good male.”

“You think this even after he torn down the front door of the shop and beat you up in your own store?”

“Eh, I deserved it. We are normally evenly matched, but I didn't try too hard this time.”

“I feel bad that it happened. I’m the one who was crying when he called...”

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

I reach up and lightly touch his bruised face. “You got beat up and the store is a mess, all because of me.”

He cups my face with his rough hands. “My best friend left his sister in my care and told me to treat her with care or he’d beat me and toss me in the fire pit. And in the end, I didn’t treat you with care. Therefore, he beat me. I’m lucky there was no nearby firepit, or it would’ve been worse. I deserved it and if the roles had been reversed, I would have been at the fire station, giving him a beating in front of all his coworkers.”

I stand on my tip toes and give him a soft kiss, perfectly between both of his tusks. “It’s not your fault that your body and mind finally realized I was the one for you, exactly when it started to snow.”

“But it’s my fault that I can’t seem to keep you away until spring.”

I shift on my feet, wishing I could strip bare and be done with it, but I have to follow this orc’s orders to the letter because this how I’ve learned to keep him calm. I owe him this because he was the one who wanted me to wait because the idea of treating me badly freaked him out so much. “Can I pull up my pants up over this brand or is it too soon?”

“Not yet, first I need to provide relief for my female. Then I will take you to my bed and strip you bare.”

“Relief?” My eyes widen as he strides over and locks the door.

“Lay back in the chair,” he orders.

I’m so excited it’s hard to remain still. It’s true that he’s not asking me if I want anything he’s doing, he’s just gives orders. I wasn’t asked what brand I wanted on myself or where. He decided it the style and that it would be on my ass. I can see what he meant about worrying that he would do something I didn’t want. But I want everything. If we hadn’t known each other for three months already and become close friends...and I believe, in love , then yeah this wouldn’t be a good thing. I’d definitely be running and hiding from him like this was the dark ages. But I wasn’t kidding when I told him I was giving blanket consent.

He carefully takes off my pink sweatpants and tosses them over a chair. Then he pulls down my cute panties and they are also tossed. And I’m now fully naked from the waist down. Thankfully I had the presence of mind to shave my legs and trim my pussy before I returned to the shop tonight, just in case.

“Open your legs.”

In a moment my ass is pulled down to the edge of the chair and my legs are open. And Talon is gazing at me down there, as if this was his first Christmas. “You are beautiful,” he groans. “I have never done this before, but I have studied for this exact moment, so that I could pleasure my bride when the time was right, without hurting you.” And then he attacks, his bearded face and those massive tusks are between my thighs and his tongue on my clit in record time.

Very soon, I’m grabbing both of his horns because I’m already mindless over the way he’s able to lick and suck me in exactly the right way and he’s right about not hurting me. I can feel the ridge of both tusks against the inside of both my thighs, but they don’t seem to get in the way. All I do is groan and push my hips down, trying to get more and more contact.

I start babbling, because I've never felt like this before. My other boyfriends didn't even really understand the importance of my clit or really where it was. And this is even better than when I try to do this myself. And this is only the beginning.

He licks me right on the side of my clit, this does some sort of sucking, then vibrating and then he's back to licking me with the tip of his tongue on super-fast speed and I'm gasping for air. "Right there," I cry out. "Don't stop."

And then the orgasm hits me hard and my back bows off the chair until I flop back down, like a boneless fish.

Talon stands above me and uses the back of his hand to wipe away all the juices from his lips and beard.

"I love you," I moan.

"I know," he laughs.

And then Talon gently helps me up from the chair. I get dressed, and then we work together to tidy up everything and close the shop as best we can, considering the front is demolished because of my brother.

We gather the cats who were waiting for us in the office and we go...home.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 am

Chapter 8

Talon

My bride is in my SUV and so are my three cats. I drive home as fast as I can, while remaining safe. I live on the outskirts of town in a neighborhood with large acreage. Human neighbors are nearby, but none of them are so close as to cause annoyance.

Her taste is still on my tongue and in my lungs, which is keeping me reasonably sane. I realize now this is the way to get through these next two months—with her at my side, not running away or denying me and with her scent and taste always nearby.

I click the button for the garage and drive inside, closing it behind me. The car rumbles to a stop and I open the driver's side door, allowing all three cats to tumble out, like usual. But I remain inside, making sure that my bride has her seatbelt unclicked. "Stay here," I order. Then I walk around, open her door and scoop her up.

Krissy laughs with delight and puts her arms around my neck.

I kick open the garage door that leads into a laundry room and place her down in the kitchen. "Welcome home," I announce as the cats rush around our ankles. "This is where you will now live. We will return in a few days and start moving you into this home. We can fit your grandmother's things in here, easily."

She takes my hand and leads me to the bedroom.

I lock the door behind us, keeping the cats out of our private time. "I'm a virgin," I

admit.

“I’m not a virgin.”

“This is good. You can teach me how to best pleasure you.”

“From what I’ve already experienced you won’t need much teaching.”

I begin to unbuckle my belt. I’ve been aching hard for her since the moment she stepped into Heat & Ink tonight.

Krissy stands close and helps me to let my throbbing shaft loose. Her mouth drops open. “Are we certain that’s going to fit?”

“I will go slowly and make sure it fits.”

She starts to sink to her knees. “I want to give you a blow job first, because I love your cock.”

“Not right now. I want that too, but I want to release inside of you the first time because I am hoping this will be when I impregnate you with your son.”

She bites her lip. “That sounds beautiful.”

“Let’s get to work.”

“Yes. I’ve been waiting months for this.”

In moments the both of us have stripped off all our clothes.

For the first time I see her fully naked. “Your breasts are perfect.”

“They aren’t but thank you for saying that.”

I carry her to the bed and toss her onto her back. She giggles when I lie on top of her and cover her body with mine. First, I kiss her lips, being careful to not dig or scratch her with my tusks. Then I move down and suck on first one nipple, then the other, spending a very long time on those gorgeous breasts.

Her legs spread and my hips are between her thighs. “Please,” she begs.

I sit back up. “Up,” I order. “I want you on your hands and knees so I can take you from behind and look at my brand as I sink inside of you.”

I begin to sink inside of her wet channel, watching as my green cock slowly disappears, with another eye on the mark I have given her on her ass. It is the most erotic, monumental moment in my life. At this exact moment I am taking my bride and creating my son.

“I love you,” I gasp.

“I know,” she laughs.

And then I finally hit the bottom and I’m fully seated. “More,” she pleads.

I reach under and start thrumming her clit with my finger as I slide in and out. I start slow but soon lose control and am fucking her hard.

Krissy is soon screaming out her orgasm, her entire channel clamping down on me and her body writhes with pleasure.

And then I can feel that moment arrive, my own pleasure racing up my spine and through my body. I toss back my head and let out a thunderous roar as my seed jets

out again and again, until I am empty and exhausted.

I pull back and the both of us fall back into the bed, with our arms around each other. And soon, we're both asleep.

The next morning, I wake up with a stiff cock because my bride is still in bed with me, naked. And she's already working on giving me that blow job she promised.

I let out a gasp of surprised delight at this wonderful way to wake up in the morning. And I place both of my hands gently on her head, as if to guide her, but then drop both when I realize she needs no guidance whatsoever.

How is she so good at this?

This is when I surmise I don't want to know and will simply remain grateful that her knowledge benefits me.

She works hard, her cheeks sucking in and out, her other hand underneath her lips, stroking me. And then she pauses to concentrate on the head of my cock, right where I'm leaking. She looks over and makes eye contact with me as she uses her tongue to scoop up my seed and swallow.

I let out a moan of desire. "I'm almost there."

And then she gets back to it, giving me mean strokes this time, sucking hard. "I'm about to come." And then I seize up and start jetting. My bride takes her time, swallowing all I have to offer.

I have to lay for a minute, gasping for breath and recovering. Then I sit up, grab my naked bride by the waist and toss her back onto the bed, with her legs splayed. "Your turn."

“Oh yes.”

I place my head between her thighs and start licking, just the way I know she likes.

She holds onto my horns tight.

I grin with delight, because I can't believe my luck—for the rest of my life, this female will allow her cries of passion to ring in my ears alone.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:12 am

Krissy

Five years later...

I look out the window of my home office, still loving the view of the snow on our expansive front yard.

A huge smile spreads across my face as I work on our financials, because I have to admit, life is good.

All three of our slightly senior cats are sleeping in perfect contentment on the huge cat tree in the corner, near the desk and window.

Both my sons are in school right at this very moment and since we've recently hired Doril's younger brother to come in part time, I'm able to take more time off than ever before.

I feel slightly spoiled.

Our business is doing well and supports all of us and our employees comfortably. We've been able to give Oreg and Doril good raises and bonuses and I've made sure that all four of us have retirement accounts started. But what makes me the happiest is that Talon and I have been able to remain debt-free and grow a hefty emergency savings, which makes me happy, every time I look at the account.

Talon runs the tattoo side of the business, and I do the accounting. Oreg and Doril are still with us and surprisingly both single. I think they are both wonderful males and

good friends so it's shocking to me that some woman hasn't snapped them up yet. We're still a good team.

But ever since Talon and I had Lukis and then Donner, I started to feel the pressure of having too much to do and not enough time for pursuits that used to bring me a lot of joy. Something had to go, and it's been years since I did any writing. I did get one small novella published years ago, while I was pregnant with Lukis, which sold about five copies, mainly to friends and family. And then I was so busy with babies, work and husband I had to let it all go until I was in a different phase of life where I could pick up the writing again.

And now our youngest son, Lukis, has started preschool, and our older son, Donner, recently entered first grade. Yes, I could be a mom who spends that extra time that has opened up volunteering at the school, but...I look out the window again... instead I'd like to find time to write. There's a burning need inside to pick up where I left off, because I really believe it's something I need to pursue.

All the stories I used to love are crowding in my brain again, wanting to be put down on paper.

"Do you mind if I get back into the romance writing that I used to do?" I blurt out that evening while Talon does the dishes. I'm getting ready to cook dinner and both the boys are playing video games. "I feel I have a lot to say and I want to get my stories on the page."

My huge orc husband turns on the dishwasher, walks over and puts his arms around me. "I will always support what you want to do."

Tears literally well up in my eyes. I guess I was worried he'd say there wasn't enough time in the day. That I'd be taking time away that could be better spent with our family. That the writing wasn't really that important. Or remind me how the first time

I tried, I hardly sold.

“Krissy, you have been there, supporting the art I create. You make it so that I can lead a life amongst humans, doing what I was good at on the commune, using the skills that were passed down for generations from father to son and finally to me. I will teach this to both our sons too, hoping that at least one of them will take an interest in the family business.”

“But you are good at what you do and I’m happy to work with you and also Oreg and Doril. All three of you are wonderful artists.”

“Because you are there, supporting our creativity and our skills, it is only right that I support your creativity. And also, I wasn’t always good at what I do. It takes practice. Lots and lots of practice. I want you to also have that time, to practice.”

I give him a massive kiss, between the tusks. “I love you.”

“Love you too, my bride.”

Talon

Two years later...

It's nine o'clock in the morning on a Saturday and I have a surprise planned for Krissy today.

First, I've let her sleep in while I take care of our sons, make breakfast, feed the cats and get the laundry started. I've also cleaned the kitchen and the dishwasher is humming. She will be pleased.

I cannot believe how lucky I was, to find my bride. I didn't even have to search far and wide, she was my best friend's human sister. I did have to wait for what seemed like an eternity. I thought there was the distinct possibility that I would never mate or have offspring. This happens to many orcs. And when I wasn't looking at all, my bride was dropped right into my lap.

Krissy has finally published her next romance book and she claims it's "doing well." I am very pleased for her. "It's in the top one hundred of the kindle store." I don't understand what that means but I assume this is something to be proud of. I've heard many humans and even orcs say they are writing a book too, usually it's a memoir and not fiction. I am proud of her for finally finishing. I know Krissy has had little time to write with two sons and a full-time job, but I've done my best to give her space to finish a project that brings her so much joy. She's even in the midst of writing her next book.

And today, Lukis, Donner and I are going to surprise her with a celebration.

She said she didn't want to do any local book signings because she says it's "just a little ebook." I think in fact she's just shy.

I want to give her a book release celebration at the local orc brewery, a place that she truly loves to frequent.

Surprisingly, Kevin's wife, Mia, has decided to join us and is bringing a cake. In fact, she ended up planning the entire book signing. Normally, our brides are not friends, but Mia seems to have taken a newfound interest in my bride once she realized her sister in law was now a "badass, bestselling hot contemporary romance author."

Finally, at nine o'clock I warn Krissy that she needs to take a shower and get ready because my mother is visiting. This is a lie, but at least it will get her started on what I know is a long-running beauty process. Two hours later I'm ready and so are the boys and my bride looks gorgeous, in a dress and sandals.

"I thought your mother was coming over for a visit. Why are we getting in the car? Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

Krissy brightens because she loves a good surprise.

Lukis and Donner can barely keep it together in the back seat because those boys love a good surprise too.

We arrive at the brewery and a huge crowd steps out of the courtyard to shout surprise when Krissy exits the vehicle. And the moment she realizes it's a celebration for her book release the tears and hugs begin.

Lots of human brides, friends and family end up purchasing signed copies of Krissy's book. There's in fact a line.

Kavin stands next to me as we watch how happy both Mia and Krissy are at the same time, which never happens. “Do you think this means our brides will finally become friends?”

“Probably not,” I laugh.

“True. But at least they’re happy.”

“Thank you for suggesting I take your sister on as my new employee.”

He digs an elbow into my ribs. “And you’d better not ever make her unhappy ever again. Next time I will toss you into the fire pit.”

We growl and clink tankards of orc ale, chuckling over the good joke.