



# The Orc's Auctioned Mate (Bloodfire Orcs #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** When the huge, terrifying orc bid on me, I thought my life was over. But could it be just the beginning?

On the midwinter full moon, I am dragged by bandits from the only home I know and stood on a chair in a tavern under the gazes of despicable men bidding on my innocence. But then the shadowy figure in the corner calls out the winning offer, and I realize he is like no one I've ever seen before.

Now I belong to Torvolk, Ranger of the Bloodfire Clan, and neither of us knows what this means. He's taken me through the pathway in the standing stones to his world, where I discovered naught is as it has always seemed. Torvolk has a mission, and the longer I spend with my new keeper, the more I realize I might be able to help him.

The way he's helped me.

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

## CHAPTER ONE

Isadora

I never thought I'd be grateful for the taste of blood in my mouth.

But on the worst day of my life, it helped anchor me, gave me something to focus on. As the bandit lifted me onto the chair in that tavern, I pressed the back of my hand to my lips to keep from crying out at the horrifying way the men jeered, focusing instead on the metallic liquid creeping across my tongue and the way it had felt when the blow had split my lip.

It might sound daft to focus on such trauma, but 'twas a good deal safer than focusing on my current problem.

"Who'll give me a gold piece for her virginity?" the bandit leader roared, already half-drunk on anticipation of my sale. "Such a cunny is worth a gold piece!"

The men—beasts?—in the room howled and heckled, letting him know exactly how much they thought I was worth.

"A copper piece!"

"Gold? Gold ? No woman's worth that!"

"Show me her tits! I'll let ya know if she feels worth it!"

My breaths were coming too fast, the frigid midwinter air burning my lungs. Or mayhap 'twas the fear of what was to come.

Just this morning I'd woken on my pallet in front of the hearth, determined to get an early start on the day's chores so I might have an extra hour to focus on my soap-making...and now, as the full moon rose outside the tavern, I was being auctioned off to the highest bidder?

Nay, not me .

My body. My cunny . As if I were worth naught more than what rested between my legs?

My frantic gaze swept the tavern, looking not for help, because I knew I would find none here, but for a way out. Mayhap, if I could climb down from this wobbly chair I could find a way out the back through the kitchens?

And then what? Freeze to death in the snow? Where will you go? Mistress Smith will not take you back, not after she sold you to these bandits.

Mayhap I could run?

Run where?

My panic was slowly turning to despair as the bearded faces and unwashed bodies around me faded to a dull sort of blur. I knew this wasn't a good sign; I couldn't become inured to this horror. I had to fight. Fight !

But how?

One man—a huge brute with a shaved head—swayed close, his tankard sloshing as

he reached for my chest. I shrank away, the chair wobbling dangerously beneath my feet, my gaze darting about, looking for a way to escape.

It landed on the dark corner at the back of the room.

The corner made even darker by the still figure sitting in it, his back against the wall, one gloved hand wrapped around a tankard resting on the table. The hood of his fur cloak hid his features, but I imagined I could feel his gaze on me, and I shivered, suspecting he was one male I wouldn't be able to fight.

I'd seen rangers before, with their green cloaks and dangerous miens, but never one this large.

Dear God, keep him at his table with his ale. Do not let him become interested in these proceedings. Do not let him ? —

I choked on a sob, unable to utter the words buy me even in a prayer.

Before me, the bandit leader was yelling at the bald brute about trying to touch me afore paying. I could take no more of this.

Gasping for air, I spun about, overbalancing the chair and sending myself spilling forward. I managed to land on my feet, but my stumble sent me into a set of arms I didn't expect.

“Hush, love, hush.”

The woman—a buxom red-head—wrapped one arm around my shoulders, turning me so my back was to the crowd, her other hand reaching for mine.

“’Twill be aright,” she promised in a soothing voice, hustling me toward the plank of

wood that served as the bar. “’Twill not be so bad, eh?”

Shaking, I tried to focus on her face. Anything to forget what went on behind me.

“How—how do you know?”

She really was quite pretty, with her plump cheeks and her crooked smile.

“Because it happened to me, did it not? When I was much younger than you, and look at me now!” She swayed her hips, sending the red skirt swishing around her knees, and her large breasts—barely contained in the low white bodice—bouncing.

“You can make a living on your back if you are particular about your clients.”

Something of my shock—or perhaps disgust—must’ve showed on my face, because her expression softened.

“Och, lovie,” she murmured, taking my cheeks in her warm palms and forcing my gaze to hers. “What is your name?”

“Isadora,” I mumbled. I had no second name, because Mistress Smith had never allowed me to claim hers.

“Isadora.” Her smile was soft, gentle, a little pitying. “I am Verna. I work upstairs, and I know we will be friends.”

I didn’t want to be her friend, not like this. I didn’t want to whore, to make a living on my back. I didn’t want to be sold to the highest bidder like I was a piece of meat.

I was breathing too fast again.

“Isadora. Izzie .” She inhaled, slow and steady. “Stay with me.” She exhaled, then inhaled again.

And in the midst of the panic and the chaos, I found myself mimicking her. My breathing evened and the band around my chest loosened.

I felt tears coming to my eyes for the first time since Mistress Smith oh-so-matter-of-factly announced my fate to my disbelieving ears.

“ Thank you ,” I whispered.

“Oh, love, of course.” Verna gathered me to her. “Women need to stick together, no matter what comes.”

And ‘ twas coming.

Behind me, the noise had risen as men called to each other. I flinched from a particularly loud shout.

“Pay no attention to him. That is Alred, the owner of this place.”

I defied her suggestion and peeked from Verna’s shoulder to see the tavern’s owner arguing with the bandit leader.

“You think to cut my share from me?” he was yelling.

“What share?” The bandit leader—the one who’d paid Mistress Smith, the one who’d slapped me hard enough for me to taste blood right before he’d lifted me onto that chair—scoffed in return. “She’s mine to sell.”

“In my whorehouse! You’ll sell her to me, or not sell her at all.”

“You think you can afford such a cunny? Look at that hair, look at those tits!”

I whimpered against Verna’s shoulder, hearing Mistress Smith’s complaints all over again. For years, I’d hidden my hair in a braid atop my head, and learned to slouch and bind my breasts so she couldn’t accuse me of tempting her husband.

It hadn’t worked then either.

“Buy her from me,” the bandit leader taunted. “I’ll have a guaranteed payday; you’ll get your auction.”

The tavern owner was reaching for his purse. “Half a gold coin.”

“Done,” the bandit snapped gleefully, and I knew he’d likely made thrice what he’d paid Mistress Smith for me.

I stifled my sob and Verna’s arms tightened around me as she turned me away from the crowd, trying to protect me.

It didn’t work. As the crowd roared in excitement, Alred’s hand closed around my upper arm and he yanked me away from Verna’s temporary oasis. I saw the sorrow in her expression before he spun me about.

“Let’s see what I’ve bought myself,” he crowed, spittle flying from his lips.

If I’d had an inkling of what to expect, I might have fought. But I was too shocked and confused to understand what he was about to do.

He reached out to grab the front of my bodice, and, in one sharp tug, yanked it down, splitting my ties open to my waist. I reached for my wrappings to keep myself covered, but he was too quick.

With his hold on me tightened, he yanked my bindings down as well, so my heavy breasts fell free.

The level of noise—jeering and excited calls from the watching men—doubled.

And the tears which had threatened for so long finally spilled down my cheeks and over my split lip, the sting of pain and the taste of blood no longer enough to distract me from this horror.

Torvolk

Och, fabulous. Just what I needed. Excitement enough to draw every single human male in a mile's radius to the very place I was trying to hide.

As the ruckus began, I glanced out the window. The moon wasn't high enough yet, which meant I had to kill another hour at least afore I could leave for the stones. No use getting there early and waiting around in the snow, stomping my feet to keep the blood flowing, waiting for the pathway to open.

Hells .

I slouched lower on the bench and pulled my ale closer, hoping to avoid notice.

I focused on my drink so I wouldn't have to watch the cruelty the rest of the males in this tavern were cheering for.

In my years crossing through the veil between my world and the human's, I'd seen plenty such injustices. Some I tried to stop if it didn't affect my mission. Some I had to turn away from and pray to the gods below that I'd be forgiven.

Humans treated one another as if they were expendable. As if they were worth no



more than a hen or a cow— Nay, actually, I'd seen more than one human crofter care for his milking cow with more concern than his own wife.

Well, why no'? When ye reproduce like rabbits, 'tis nae wonder they treat each other as replaceable. They are replaceable, created by unskilled labor. Hells, how hard can it be, if they're spitting out bairns all the time?

Scowling, I lifted the tankard to my lips, careful not to pull back the hood of my cloak which shadowed my features—and skin—from the humans around me.

This town was one of the three closest to the stone circle I used most frequently to travel home. While I'd visited this tavern in the past, I don't think anyone recognized me, since it had been a while.

In the pair of fortnights since the last full moon, I'd journeyed up and down this coast, looking for clues and hints about my chief's disappearance. I considered approaching the tavern-keeper here, but ran out of time to do so sneakily.

Tonight I had to cross through the veil, report my findings to the Keeper. If he didn't have any word or updates on the search for Kragorn, I would cross back and continue my search in the south—and begin praying.

Aye, all I had to do was make it through another hour of this. When the crowd around me began to thin, I'd be able to slip out through the kitchens and make my way to the west road, toward the stone circle.

I glanced at the moon again. Another hour. I could do this.

But when I turned back, the female was looking at me.

The female with the terrified eyes, bright blue in the light from the torches. The

female with the glorious golden hair and the tempting figure, who shivered and shuddered atop that chair, her expression waffling between panic and horror and confusion.

She was looking at me, and my Kteer stirred in my chest.

Slowly, against my will, against my intention to stay unnoticed, I felt myself straightening against the wall. I wanted to reach out to her, to cradle her cheek. To pull her against my chest and tell her aught would be well.

To claim her.

‘Twasn’t until she wrenched her gaze away, turning and nearly falling from the chair, that I allowed my scowl to creep across my face.

Fooking idiot. Ye cannae allow a pretty face to distract ye. Humans are cruel, aye, but ye can do naught about it. Focus on yer mission, finding yer chief. Ye owe him that much .

I owed him more, truthfully, and I’d not be able to repay it if I allowed myself to be distracted.

She was being comforted now by one of Alred’s whores. Good. Women were better at comforting each other.

As the flame-haired lass rocked her in her arms, I could see my female relaxing, softening?—

My female ?

My scowl deepened as I lifted the tankard. The blonde was not mine, could not be

mine. I was leaving shortly, and whatever was happening could happen without me.

Alred, the tavern-keeper I recognized from past visits, was arguing with the bastard who'd brought her in. The bastard who'd struck her across the mouth to shut her up when she'd begun to fight him.

My jaw tightened.

"You have nerve, thinking to sell a whore under my roof!"

"She's not a whore yet," the bastard mocked. "I'll sell her virginity, then you can have her the rest of the time."

"A cut!" Alred demanded, shoving his chest into the other man's. "You'll give me a cut, or you'll do your business elsewhere."

Disgusted, I shook my head, dropping my gaze.

Alred wasn't fighting on the lass's behalf. He was fighting to receive some of the profit when she was sold like a piece of meat.

Their argument continued, but I forced myself not to listen, not to become involved.

My Kteer had other plans.

When the money changed hands, Alred yanked the lass away from her haven against the other woman and I heard her whimper—pain? Fear?—over the sounds of the other males.

I told myself I was only worried about her well-being.

But then he ripped her clothing, and I sucked in a breath.

Her breasts were magnificent , large and rounded and tipped with wide pink nipples pebbling in the cold. She scrambled to cover herself, but the tavern-keeper didn't allow it, wrenching her toward the center of the crowd so she stumbled.

'Twasn't until he pushed her up onto the chair once more and she stood there, head bowed and arms wrapped around her waist, that I realized she was crying.

Well of course she's fooking crying.

I should have felt pity.

But my Kteer was too busy eyeing those tits. Gods below, I could feel my cock stirring beneath my kilt.

"Bidding, gentleman!" called Alred gaily. "Some excitement! Bidding on this lovely virgin's sweet, unbloodied cunny!"

Laughter. Jeers. Calls.

Her shoulders hunched further.

"Who will be the first to sink into her warm channel, sirs?" Alred taunted. "Spill in her tight, virgin hole?"

Oh, Malla the Beginner, such a thing shouldn't interest me. Couldn't interest me.

Very much did interest me.

Under the table, my hand moved to my lap. I could feel my cock hardening beneath

the wool at the thought of being the one to fook the pretty blonde human. The one to claim her. To own her.

I realized my chest was tightening, my claws lengthening, my Kteer urging me to buy take claim own .

“Who will start the bidding, sirs?” Alred called.

“Och, you can’t expect us to bid without a bit of a feel!” hooted a male. “Just a kiss, darlin’?”

As the others laughed uproariously, Alred pushed back the drunkard.

“No touching until she’s yours! I’ll not let her go for much less than a gold piece! Think of it, sirs, a gold piece, and you can sink your prick into her soft, hot cunny.”

A more-sober male pointed out reasonably, “I can get Verna for much less!”

“Nay, you cannot!” called the red-headed whore, her hands on her hips, a frown on her face. “I will not let you touch me again, John the Tanner!”

“He’s right, though,” another male called. “Why would I spend a gold coin for one fook?”

One fook. One chance to sink into her wet cunny, to feel her tighten around me as her pleasure took her into oblivion. I wondered what noises she’d make as I coaxed her to climax. My palm pressed against my erect cock.

Then I remembered her little whimper of fear and I frowned.

Alred had heard the customer’s words. “Fine! For a full gold coin, she’s yours! Take

her off my hands and do what you want with her!”

“A slave?” the first man asked thoughtfully, and I saw the lass shudder. “She’d have to do aught I wanted then, aye?”

“Aye,” Alred wheedled, cajoling the other men. “Think of her cunny and her mouth at your beck and call, aye? And she might be useful in between fooks too, cooking and the like?”

“John,” called out a male, “your wife could use a reprieve from bearing all your bairns!”

My hand dropped away from my cock to the haft of my ax.

“Aye, you could plow her belly each night and your wife would be grateful not to have to clean up after your brood too!”

Amid the laughter and teasing, I saw the lass look up.

Her cheeks were streaked with tears, her expression a dull sort of shock. And there was fear in those big blue eyes. Fear of the fooking? Fear of the man’s lust? Or fear of being filled with his bastards?

Deep in my chest, my Kteer growled, and I pushed away my tankard.

“Please.”

I saw her lips form the word, but even with my senses, I couldn’t hear it. Mayhap she said naught at all and I imagined it.

I wasn’t imagining her fear, though.

I pushed myself to my feet, instinctively loosening my battleax, even as my other hand fell to the purse tied on my belt. The Bloodfire gold I'd brought through the veil to use as bribes and payment in my quest to find my chief.

"Come along, sirs," called Alred. "Who will pay me a single gold piece for this fine cunny? This perfect sex slave?"

"She's not worth it!" one yelled, while another called, "Will I have to feed her too?" amid the laughter.

"Twenty gold pieces."

The words rang through the crowd, and all noise ceased. 'Twasn't until the gathered males turned to me that I realized I'd been the one to say them.

Fook .

Sighing, I reached up to push back my hood, relishing the way they shrank from me. Good. Let these fools feel some of the same fear the lass had felt.

"The bidding's over. Twenty gold pieces," I repeated. "For the lass to become mine."

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### CHAPTER TWO

Isadora

“Twenty gold pieces for the lass to become mine.”

Orc.

I stared. I wasn't the only one staring, but I stared in a mixture of hope and fear.

The male from the dark corner, the one I'd hoped wouldn't become involved...he was the largest male I'd ever seen. He towered over the men around him, and his shoulders were intimidatingly large...as was his ax.

And the rest of him?

Green, tusked, and ...

Orc.

I'd heard the stories, the whispers, about the beasts who lived among the stones, who would cross over at the full moon and steal maidens. I'd dismissed the tales, but now...? Now I couldn't.

Orc .

Because one of them was staring eye-to-eye with me, his dark eyes menacing and his



green skin unmistakable. And his tusks...

Oh God. I shuddered, imagining what kind of horror he could inflict on a woman with those tusks and the dangerous claws at the end of each finger.

Orc. Beast. Fear .

I forced myself to drag in a breath before the edges of my vision went dark.

An orc was standing in the center of the tavern, and all eyes were on him.

Because he just offered twenty gold pieces for you .

I'd never even seen a single gold piece. Until tonight, when Alred bought me from the bandit leader, I'd never seen half a gold piece. And this orc had casually announced he carried twenty with him?

Dragging my gaze away from him, I sought out Verna. She was watching the gathered men with a worried frown, chewing on her lip as she backed away toward the bar. Aye, the men were fingering their blades speculatively, weren't they?

'Twas Alred's greed that broke the silence. "Am I to understand, stranger, that you're offering twenty gold pieces to buy my new whore from me?"

"No' a whore," the orc growled, brows drawn low over his dark stare. " Mine ."

"Don't do it, Alred," came a mutter from the crowd. "He'll fook her dry, then kill her. It'll be a waste."

The tavern keeper's laugh was a harsh bark. "What do I care? I'll have twenty gold pieces. You lost your chance, John!"

Before I could process that, Alred reached up and grabbed my braid, which hung down my back, and yanked me from the chair. I stumbled when I hit the ground, my ankle twisting painfully.

Sucking in a gasp at the sharp pain and the sudden shock, my gaze flew to the orc's. He was watching me, his expression impassive. I didn't like that look which spoke of always getting his way, and I lifted my hands to my chest to try to tug my bindings back into place for some semblance of modesty.

Alred was having none of it. "Here, slave," he growled, tugging me by my hair as he walked toward the stranger. "Meet your new master."

Instinctively, I rebelled, pulling against him, putting weight on my whole ankle. This tugged my braid from his grip, and he scrambled to tighten his hold.

"You bitch ," he hissed, rounding on me. I expected him to hit me, but instead he pulled out a knife. I flinched back as I saw the orc behind Alred reach for the tavern keeper.

The green beast was too slow. Alred's blade flashed toward my head even as he yanked me closer...and in a blink, my braid—my golden hair, my one glory—dangled from his hand.

I had no more tears, especially not over something as inconsequential as hair ...but I still gasped, lifting my hand to the base of my neck, which now seemed draftier.

He'd cut off my hair, hacked it close to my head so everyone would know my shame.

Gloating, as if knowing what he'd done would hurt me more than a blow, Alred gestured with his knife. "I said , come meet your new master, slave."

I limped, subdued, in his wake, hearing the angry mutterings around me. From this angle, I saw the coins as they hit the tabletop beside me, one after another, being counted from large green fingers.

One, two, three, four, five...

I straightened, my hand still on the nude back of my neck, and realized the orc was watching me. Not the coins, which he continued to drop.

Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve...

He cared so little for the gold, he wouldn't even glance down to watch it leave his possession? Alred, for his part, leapt to gather up each coin, greedily shoving them into his belt pouch.

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen ...

The sound of each coin hitting the wood was like nails being driven into a coffin. My coffin. Suddenly, the thought of losing my virginity to one of these unwashed brutes, of spending the rest of my days whoring upstairs like Verna, didn't seem so bad.

Seventeen, eighteen ...

It sounded better than belonging to an orc.

Nineteen ...

An orc who would own me, not just for a night, but for ever ?

Twenty.

Alred made a gleeful little crowing noise from his scrawny chicken neck as he scooped up the last of the coins, and I realized I was staring wide-eyed at the huge stranger who hadn't taken his impassive gaze from me.

Oh God.

I belonged to him. To an orc .

“Come with me,” he commanded, his voice a gravelly growl, too deep to be considered possible. I gaped as if I didn't understand.

His hand reached for me, and I'll confess I flinched back, but that didn't seem to stop him. He latched onto my arm, but didn't squeeze like Alred or the bandit had. Instead, his touch ran down my forearm to my hand, engulfing it in his large green one. He held my gaze, his expression neutral and his dark eyes angry, as if he was waiting for me to get used to his touch.

“You're not going to let him take her?” someone whined in the back. “I was going to come back to have a go at her!”

The orc in front of me ignored the speaker, but his chin dropped slightly, as if he could impress upon me the seriousness of the situation.

“Come with me,” he repeated.

And I nodded, once.

Was it better to stay here, to be forced to whore for all these men? Or to be owned by only one male, a male scarier than any I could've imagined?

I had no choice but to limp after him out the tavern door and into the snow.

His hand was warm around mine, and I could admit that, at that moment, 'twas the only warm part of me. The cold mid-winter air bit into the exposed skin of my chest, and beneath the woefully loosened bindings, my nipples hardened.

I stumbled, my ankle painning me, and the reality of my situation slammed into me.

I couldn't go with him! I couldn't be owned by an orc !

Orc. Beast. Fear .

Yanking my arm, I tried to pull my hand from his. It didn't work, but he did turn around, a questioning scowl on his face.

I don't know what he saw in my expression, but he blinked, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

"Och, ye're so small," he muttered.

When he dropped my hand and lifted his, I'll confess I flinched back, expecting violence from such a terrifying male. But he merely unclasped the ornate brooch holding his cloak shut and swung it from his shoulders.

Before I could understand what he was doing, he'd wrapped the fur around me, clasping it once more. I clutched at it, desperate to hide my exposed skin from his eyes...and grateful for the warmth.

It carried his heat and smelled of him.

Smelled of him? You know his smell?

No, I didn't. I didn't want to. He wasn't even human!

Orc. Beast. Fear .

But a tiny part of me snarked, Oh, and human men have treated you so well up until now? Mayhap you ought to try something a bit different .

Orc. Beast . . . The fear was easing despite the danger.

A reluctant smirk curled one corner of my lips and I was surprised I could find anything even vaguely humorous about this situation.

Well, God knows your good humor is the only thing you can truly control in this world. Mayhap you should use it.

Oh good. Now I was being lectured by my subconscious.

I blinked up at the strange beast standing under the light of the full moon, wondering if the earlier blow had knocked the sense from my head. Why would I be arguing with myself? Was I actually considering going with him willingly ?

And then the decision was taken from me.

The noise of men spilling from the tavern—mutterings, metal clinking on metal—had the orc and me both turning. A dozen or so men from inside stepped into the snow, fanning out, brandishing weapons and scowling. Likely spurred out into the cold by the thought of being bested by someone with more gold than they'd see in twelve lifetimes, and the loss of the promise of a virgin to bed.

Alred wasn't to be seen—likely inside counting his money. A horrible person but not a complete idiot.

The beast at my side stepped in front of me, putting his wide shoulders between me

and the men as he slid his battleax free.

“Stay behind me,” he muttered. Then, to the men, he called, “What do ye want?”

“We want the whore!” one of them called, while another shouted, “The rest of your gold!”

Yes, ‘twas as I suspected. Gold and cunny. The lure of men.

The orc slid one huge, booted foot in front of the other, finding his stance, and raised his weapon. His ax was larger than any sword I could have imagined, razor sharp on both edges and inscribed with runes along the haft. ‘Twas a terrifying killing tool.

“Make up yer minds,” he growled. “The lass or the gold?”

Would he give me to them to save his gold? Of course he would.

Several of the men exchanged glances.

“The lass or the gold?” one asked the other.

“Both?” another suggested, and a third and fourth nodded firmly.

“Both,” they agreed in unison. All of them turned back to us and raised their weapons.

“Both,” they declared.

“Fook,” the orc sighed. “Well, come on then.”

He seemed resigned, as if he’d known this would happen.

Clutching his cloak around me, I stumbled backward as the men surged forward. Four at a time, each raising nasty-looking blades and mis-matched farming implements. 'Twas an ill-planned attack if ever I'd seen one.

The orc switched his battleax to one hand, then balled his other into a fist and met them all.

I turned away. I didn't want to see them die. Mayhap a tiny part of me suggested they deserved whatever fate they chose, but I still didn't want to see them die. I didn't want to see him die. My feet were frigid and my ankle still throbbed as I took a few hobbling steps toward the town's stables.

Could I make it there before the beast noticed I was running...limping...away? Or was dispatched by the unruly mob? Would there be anyone willing to help me escape?

Not in this village.

I glanced back. My eyes widened and I froze.

The orc...wasn't losing.

Even I, who had been raised in a smithy, and understood weapons only as things which started as lumps of metal and ended as works of art, could see he was a master with his ax.

The huge weapon swung in deadly arcs, mirroring the fan of his kilt as he spun. I expected blood to spray, staining the winter night.

But he turned the edge at the last minute, slamming the flat of it into an unprotected head. Blood sprayed, aye, but only from a broken nose, not a decapitation. At the



same time, his other hand reached for a different attacker, curled around the front of the man's tunic, yanked him into the first until their foreheads collided and they both fell groaning to the ground.

I glanced around at the broken and bleeding—but whole—bodies scattered in the courtyard.

The orc grabbed the last man and, with an almost nonchalant flick of his wrist, sent him slamming into the stone wall of the tavern. Then he turned back to me, sliding his battleax away.

He hadn't killed any of them. I made a conscious effort to close my dropped jaw.

“Ye're still here?” he asked, brows lowering in what I thought might have been irritation as he stalked toward me. “I thought ye'd have run for the horses.”

I stumbled back a step, wincing as I put weight on my ankle. “I—I?—”

“What's wrong with yer foot?”

“My ankle,” I gasped, grateful for the question so I didn't have to think about the fight I'd just witnessed and his incredible strength.

Orc. Beast. Fear .

I swallowed. “'Tis hurt?—”

My words halted in a squeak when he scooped me up as if I weighed naught and tossed me over one shoulder. I landed with an oof , then tried to twist my upper body away from his back, suddenly afraid of being this high in the air.

“What are you doing? Put me down!”

His hand landed on my arse, holding me in place. Not...cruelly. Just ensuring I didn't fall off.

He didn't answer me, but stomped toward the stables. I looked back at the men from the tavern who were groaning and slowly pushing themselves upright.

He hadn't killed them. He had fought to protect me.

He fought to protect his gold .

Aye, that. But he'd put his body between me and the men who'd wanted to—to take me. And he'd expected me to run away when his back was turned.

He hadn't killed them.

Orc. Beast .

I didn't understand him, and I didn't understand what was going on, so I frowned as he slammed the stable doors open and stomped inside.

There were only a few horses inside because this deep in the winter, most crofters moved their livestock indoors with them as a convenient heat source. But the orc wasted no time in deciding upon the largest animal in the barn.

Oh God. All I knew about horses was they were huge, apparently ate grass, and could break a man's leg with a kick. Or mayhap they ate legs and broke grass; I was vague on the details.

With a shrug of his shoulder, he tossed me up onto the animal's back, and I shrieked

again, grabbing at the long, flowing hair along the beast's neck to keep myself from sliding off the other side. The horse made a noise I have to assume meant it wasn't happy either, then side-stepped. Which caused me to shriek again and throw myself forward, wrapping my arms around its neck and burying my face against the silky strands of hair. Fur. Whatever.

"What are ye doing?" the orc growled.

"Trying not to die," I snapped back, eyes closed tight. I wrinkled my nose and spat out strings of hair.

But when I glanced at him, 'twas to realize his eyes were level with mine, and to him, I—and the horse's back—really weren't that high after all. Mayhap a fall from this height wouldn't kill me entirely.

"I'll get the reins for ye," he said, and stepped over to where the tack was hung.

He said this as if I knew what reins meant. Oh, they were...leather cordy things?

My expression must've given me away.

"Dinnae tell me ye cannae ride a horse?" he growled

I swallowed and looked up from the unfamiliar leather straps. "I have never been on a horse's back afore." Why would I? Mistress Smith would hardly have allowed such a freedom.

"Fook," he muttered again, then glanced upward, as if he could see the full moon through the roof. "Nae time to teach ye."

"I—I do not need to know how?—"

“How else were ye planning on getting away from that crowd out there? Hobbling through the night?” He scoffed, shaking his head as he turned back to the tack, pulling down mysterious bits of horsey, leathery things. “Without me, they’ll just drag ye back to Alred.”

Without me .

I stared, realizing what he meant.

He was...offering to let me go? That’s why he was surprised—irritated?—I hadn’t run away during the fight? Because he’d always intended for me to go my separate way from him?

He paid twenty gold pieces for me !

I belonged to him—at least, in the eyes of everyone I would meet. Here in the human world.

My head slowly lifted. “I have nowhere to go,” I admitted—heh— hoarsely . “My old mistress sold me...”

He was saddling another animal. “Then ride in the opposite direction.”

“On this horse ?” I held myself still, moving only my lips, afraid that any motion would set the animal moving. “I do not know how to make it...go. Stop. Do aught at all. Do I have to make it turn, or does it do that on its own? Is it a boy? Boys are more difficult, I have heard.”

I saw him freeze. Saw him lower his forehead to the saddle, saw the steam as he breathed out another curse word as if defeated.

Then he swung up into the saddle without speaking to me, and for one terrifying moment I thought he was going to ride off without me.

Then I had another moment where I thought, Did you just think that ? because surely I wanted him to leave me? To go back to his beastly kind and leave me here where I could escape?

But he reached over and wrapped an arm around my waist, lifting me almost gently from my mount, all without giving me another look. He took the reins from my frozen fingers and settled me sideways on his lap.

With a muted, “ Hyah ,” he urged both animals into flight, and we thundered from the stable and into the moonlit night.

I didn't know where we were going, other than away .

I wasn't sure if that was good enough.

But I squeezed my eyes shut, wrapped my arms around the big green waist of the orc holding me, and pressed my cheek against his chest. I could hear his heart beating, and after a moment, felt his arm cradling my back, allowing me to relax slightly.

We thundered into the night, my new master and I, while behind us the men began to yell and call for their own mounts.

I don't know if I was in better hands. An orc's hands.

But I was his.

### CHAPTER THREE

Torvolk

The female in my arms had long ago ceased shivering, and I wasn't certain if 'twas a good thing or a bad thing.

And I wasn't sure why I cared.

With the second horse galloping behind, we made straight for the standing stone circle and I found myself checking the position of the moon every few minutes. That fight in the courtyard had taken more time than I expected, but I couldn't afford for those men to follow too closely behind.

I glanced down at the female I carried. She hadn't fought me when I'd pulled her into my lap, and I didn't know if I was disappointed by that. My Kteer wasn't; it had crowed at the realization this sweet-smelling female was dependent on me. I should be disgusted by the way that made me feel strong, but I wasn't.

I wanted her. I wanted to take her.

Which is why I couldn't. Couldn't afford the distraction.

Her mouth was open, pressed against my plaid, her little pink tongue visible. I could feel her breath, warm against my chest, and decided she'd just fallen asleep. Fallen asleep with her arms wrapped around my middle.

Careful not to disturb her, I wrapped the reins of my stolen horse around my wrist and allowed one claw to scrape along her temple. She didn't flinch, not in her sleep, and I tucked a wispy strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

I'd seen her struck, seen her sold. Something was wrong with one of her legs, and her lip was swollen. But 'twas the mutilation of her hair which had hurt her the most, it seemed.

Should've killed that tavern keeper. Should've hacked off Alred's head and hung it from a pike with the lass's braid stuffed in his mouth .

Aye, but what good would that have done?

I'd already exposed myself to the humans, something I hated doing, and had never before tried in a crowd. And that fight? I'd been so fooking careful not to kill any of them, despite my rage.

Why?

Because if my chief was still alive, and if he was going to have any hope of surviving the human world, orcs couldn't afford to anger these fragile, pale-skinned beings.

'Twas bad enough the Bladesedge clan had made an alliance with the Tarberts last summer, Mating with the laird's daughters. Combined with the Tarbert might, the Bladesedge could stand against us when we attacked.

That's where Kragorn had gone missing.

By all the gods below, let him be alive .

He was a good chief, but more importantly, he was a good friend.

“Nay!”

The little whimper drew my attention back to the female in my arms.

“Nay!” she murmured again, shaking her head, burrowing deeper against me.

Feeling awkward, uncertain, I tried to pat her fur-covered back.

“Hush, lass,” I commanded gruffly. “Ye’re safe now.”

Was she? We were thundering toward the veil and far enough ahead that those men at the tavern wouldn’t be able to follow us through this cycle.

But she had nowhere to go. No one to protect her.

And now she’s a slave. Yer slave. To do with as ye wish.

Frowning, I tucked my cloak around her again, shifted the reins to my palm, and urged the horses even faster.

Because my Kteer knew exactly what I wanted to do with her.

The standing stones gleamed with reflected moonlight, and I confessed I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the shimmering silver mist in the center of the circle.

On the first day of the full moon, for an hour at midnight, the veil between our world and the humans’ weakens and we can pass through.

The horses thundered straight through the mist, and when we emerged on the other side of the circle, I knew I was home.



Yanking hard on the reins, I slowed both animals. The gelding I rode reared then pawed briefly at the ground as I tightened my hold on the lass in my lap. But as soon as the animals settled, I lifted my head to study my surroundings.

My people farmed less than the humans, because there were fewer of us, and thus much of our landscape was still forested, the way the humans' had been centuries ago. The snow was shallower here because of the rowan trees...but I saw no footprints.

“Ho! Keeper!” I let out a piercing whistle.

“Why in the fook would ye do that?” came the grumble from behind me.

I pulled the horse about but saw no one. “Where are ye?”

“I’m hiding, ye daft arsehole. Some of us understand the meaning of quiet. And subtlety. And peace. And?—”

“I understand,” I interrupted his litany with a growl.

“Do ye?” The other male’s voice drifted among the stones, sounding amused. “Because ye thundered into my realm as if all the Christians’ demons were on yer heels.”

“Aye, mayhap they are.” I was peering about, trying to pinpoint the male’s location. “Has anyone else come through tonight?”

“Nae one.” I heard a sigh, and then he stepped out from behind one of the standing stones...one which was entirely too close and I would’ve thought too small to hide his bulk, the sneaky bastard.

“Nae one?” I repeated, hating the way disappointment stabbed at my chest. “Nae word from Kragorn?”

The other male, who’d taken this post soon after he’d lost his arm, shook his head and strode over to take the reins of the spare horse from me.

“Ye’re the first through, although there’s still half the veil left.”

And I knew, even once the mist passed and the veil closed, the Keeper would scour the area, looking for signs that any creatures had stepped through. ‘Twas his job to know such things.

“Still hope,” I muttered angrily, glancing down at the lass I’d bought, and uncertain why I’d done so. Why I hadn’t dropped her off somewhere along the way.

“Dinnae wager on it,” the Keeper warned. “Most come through at the beginning of the hour or risk being stranded.”

My lips twisted into a snarl, and I took a breath, ready to snap at him that Kragorn was still alive...but when I met his steady gaze, I bit down on the words.

This male was no older than I, but had chosen an existence as isolated as I had for the sake of the clan. He did not deserve my anger for stating the truth.

I glanced away and heard him make a noise which might’ve been approval.

“There is pottage on the hearth,” he offered quietly. “I always make a pot before the crossing, to welcome whoever returns. I was hoping ‘twould be ye with news, but...”

Beneath me, the horse sidestepped, and I was grateful for the distraction as I admitted painfully, “I spread around gold”— Too much gold —“but learned naught. I will

report to Vartok and then head south. Mayhap one of the other clans has word.”

The other male nodded. “Well, the pottage is warm if yer female needs a meal to recover from yer adventures. There’s feed in the stalls for yer mounts.”

“She’s no’ my female.”

The denial was instinctual, but I’ll not deny the way my Kteer had crowed with glee at the suggestion she was .

Hells, I didn’t even know her name!

The Keeper merely hummed, handed me back the reins of the spare horse, and tipped his head toward the cottage up the hill.

“My bed is as warm as the pottage if she is looking for someplace to hide.”

My bed .

I bristled, and this time I couldn’t blame it entirely on my Kteer , that primal, essential part of me. Nay, this was me bristling at the suggestion of putting my female, my slave, in his bed.

A moment ago, ye said she wasnae yer female .

But I did trade gold for her. She was mine.

Mine .

With a growl, I wrenched the horses toward the cottage and kicked them into motion.

I couldn't be certain, but I think I saw the Keeper's lips curl wryly before I left.

The lass whimpered in her sleep as I swung from the saddle with her in my arms. Her brow pinched and her arms tightened around me. I told my Kteer to calm the fook down, it meant naught that she was turning to me in her distress.

I don't think it worked.

In the Keeper's modest croft, I was irritated to see the only logical place I could set her down was the bed, which was piled high with warm furs. Yet, even knowing the horses needed me, I stood there with the lass in my arms, unable to make myself release her.

This is daft. Ye're being daft. Drop her off and see to the horses who've carried ye to safety and deserve yer thanks. What has she done, other than cause ye more trouble?

Scowling, I dropped her none-too-gently atop the Keeper's bed and would have turned to stomp from the room...had I not seen her roll to her side, gathering my cloak about her as if in protection.

I paused, staring down at the ragged ends of her shorn hair, frowning in contemplation.

What had happened to her? Who were her people?

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I went to see to the horses.

I'll admit I took my time, half-hoping the problem of the lass—and the strange way she made my chest feel—would be gone when I returned. Either because the Keeper had claimed her as his own, she'd run away, or because she'd died.

But as soon as I'd had that thought, my stomach clenched and I'd shoveled the last of the hay the animals required, then stomped my way through the connecting passage to the croft.

She still breathed, although quickly enough now I doubted she slept. Nay, she faced the wall, her back to me with my cloak clutched around her...and she breathed too quickly.

I wanted to speak to her, to calm her. The need was...well, 'twas a need to comfort her, and that realization had me scowling and turning toward the hearth.

The Keeper lived alone for twenty-seven days of the moon's cycle, but kept enough earthenware to feed a band of warriors who might pass through. I lifted down a bowl and filled it from the pot dangling from the crane's hook.

Smelled like venison and wild onions, one of my favorites, especially when served with Nan's brown bread.

I stared down at the bubbling stew, frowning.

When had I last thought of my grandmother? Or anyone in my village? Och, I knew; two months back, when I'd stopped in long enough to report to the chief's brother, Vartok, before heading south. I'd seen Nan then, kissed her forehead.

Did I miss her? Miss them?

Dinnae be stupid. Ye are a ranger. Ye have nae home.

Cradling the bowl in my hands, I glanced around the cozy little croft. The Keeper might live alone, but he lived comfortably. I had a weapon, a cloak, and the trust of my clan.

That was enough, wasn't it?

Scowling now, I scooped up a spoon, but the pottage didn't taste nearly as good as it had smelled. Or mayhap my tongue was poisoned by my thoughts.

Across the room, the lass on the bed slowly rolled over. I watched her, and when her gaze met mine, she froze. The surprise in her expression was enough to almost make me smile. What? She'd expected me to be elsewhere?

"Are ye hungry?" I asked.

She laid there, eyes wide.

"Female," I barked, holding out the bowl and the spoon. "Are ye hungry?"

"I have a name."

Her voice was soft but I remembered how she'd stood up to my anger in the stables near the tavern.

My brow twitched. "Female. Are ye hungry?"

She narrowed her eyes and frowned slightly—which shouldn't be as adorable as 'twas—then began to struggle upright, caught in my too-large cloak. I crossed to her, but when I reached for the clasp to untangle her, she jerked away.

"Nay, I—" She bit off the rest of her words, then exhaled. "I am sorry. You likely want your cloak back." She pushed away my hand then struggled with the large clasp. "Thank you for the loan. I thought..."

She peeled the fur from her shoulders, although she was still sitting on it atop the bed

and thus couldn't hand it to me.

"What did ye think?" I prompted blandly.

Blue eyes peeked at me from under her lashes. "I thought I would never be warm again. Thank you."

Damn my Kteer for preening at that.

"Food," I managed gruffly, shoving the bowl at her. "Eat. Ye'll waste away and die otherwise."

She took the pottage from me and as I turned away, I heard her mutter, "'Twould be a shame to lose your investment like that."

A slave. She was my slave now, was she not?

Except orcs kept no slaves.

I scooped some more pottage for myself.

We ate in silence and I had to force myself not to watch her. Instead, I focused on the small onion bulbs in my bowl and pretended they were fascinating.

There's quite a lot of things that wild onions are: nutritious, tasty, easy to dig. But no one, not even the most devoted foragers, would call them fascinating.

"Thank you."

Her voice jerked me from my perusement of the translucent bulbs, and my gaze found hers unerringly. She was sitting cross-legged on my cloak, the bowl between

her thighs, her attention on the broken strings of her bodice as she tried to feed them through the holes and close her gown again.

I couldn't help but watch her movements, watch those small, delicate hands hovering so near her tits. By Malla the Beginner, she had nice tits; round and heavy, the kind I wanted to see again.

The kind I wanted to taste .

Beneath my kilt, my cock stirred, and I scowled.

Ye dinnae need this kind of complication.

So to distract myself, I asked, "Do ye want more? Of the food?"

Her head jerked up, her eyes wide with surprise and her lips parted. I'd heard humans tasted one another's mouths, and in that moment, I very, very much wanted to claim those lips with my own.

She blinked. "You would...allow me more?"

I frowned. "Aye, of course. The Keeper made a large pot, and we're no' even halfway through. Are ye still hungry?"

"Nay," she whispered. I saw a flash of blue from beneath her lashes. "I am sufficed. But thank you."

She'd been thanking me often since she woke. But for this? For a second helping of food? She had been surprised by that.

I wondered what her life had been like before tonight.



As she attempted once more to fix her gown, I finished my meal. This time I didn't pretend not to watch her, and she must have known, because her cheeks grew pinker and pinker as my gaze drifted over her.

I drew my plaid from over my shoulder and pulled my small dagger from my belt. With a quick prick, I started a rip which allowed me to tear a long, thin strip from the woolen material.

I slid the dagger into its hidden sheath and wrapped the cord—because that's what 'twas—around my palm as I crossed the room.

I stopped in front of her, in front of where she sat on the bed. She didn't look up. Instead, her gaze was locked on my kilt, her cheeks deepening to red.

When my Kteer realized she was staring at the outline of my cock, the damned thing grew harder.

“Here,” I grunted, thrusting my hand toward her. “For yer gown.”

She hesitated, then took the cord with two fingers, being careful not to touch my skin.

“Thank you. Again.”

I cleared my throat and turned away, and she suddenly asked, “What is this place? Is this your home?”

“Nay.” I picked up her dish and crossed back to the hearth where I knew the Keeper kept washing water. “This is the Keeper's home. He watches the stones; 'tis his job to patrol and control the pathway.”

“Pathway?”

“The route between our worlds. I imagine the job is boring as shite for most of the month.”

“ Our worlds ?” Her voice was higher pitched than usual, almost panicky, as her wide blue eyes darted to mine.

I turned away from the washing and propped a shoulder against the mantel.

“Yer world, and the orcs’ homeworld.” Holding up two fists, I butted them up against each other. “But once a month, at the full moon, for only a short amount of time...” I flattened my hands, palm to palm. “’Tis possible to cross from one to the other.”

Her eyes were wide, her hands frozen in the process of threading the cord through her bodice.

“The stones,” she whispered. “I remember legends...”

“Aye, they’re true.” I turned back to my washing. “My people have been raiding through the stones for generations, bringing back cattle and prizes.”

“And women?”

I lifted my head to stare at the stones supporting the mantal, but I wasn’t really seeing them.

“Aye. And females.”

“And I am in your world now.” She blew out a breath. “What is your name?”

I shouldn’t tell her.

I couldn't tell her, not if I wanted to be rid of her. Not if I wanted to leave her with the Keeper, or worst case, deposit her with Nan and Vartok and the others in the village. She didn't need to know my name.

I told her anyway.

"Torvolk," I said gruffly to the wall. "I am Torvolk, Ranger for the Bloodfire Clan."

"Torvolk," she repeated in that soft tone of hers. "Torvolk."

And my Kteer and my cock were in complete agreement about how perfectly my name on her lips sounded.

Dinnae ask her name. Dinnae ask her name. Ye cannae afford to ken it. She's no' important. She's nae one.

"I am Isadora, Torvolk."

Isadora .

The name was as perfectly delicate as she was.

I closed my eyes in defeat.

Isadora.

Mine.

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### CHAPTER FOUR

Isadora

I told myself 'twas exhaustion which made it easier to accept what this male had told me. I had traveled through the stones with him and was now in his world. The orcs' world.

This cottage was comfortable and surprisingly familiar, but everything was scaled differently than I was used to; made for creatures larger and heavier than humans.

Torvolk .

My new master's name was Torvolk.

I eyed him warily as he washed our dishes. The muscles across his back stretched in interesting ways. I'd never noticed a man's muscles—I did my best to avoid noticing men, so they'd avoid noticing me—but 'twas impossible to deny Torvolk's were...

Intriguing ?

Mayhap I only felt that way because I knew what he expected of me. I'd seen the outline of that huge cock, known he was aroused. I swallowed.

Today had been horrible. Traumatic.

So why was I noticing a male's cock at all? Why was I intrigued by the thought of his

body?

Because he was kind to me?

Mayhap 'twould be easier to just lie back and spread your legs, to get it over with. But when he discovers the truth of your innocence—or lack thereof—will he be angry?

My shaking fingers finished lacing my bodice and I was able to pull it closed with a relieved sigh. My chest was warmer now, and not just because I'd caught him watching me. He'd admired my breasts, the way those brutes at the tavern had.

Why did his gaze make me feel differently?

Because you belong to him .

I closed my eyes on a shudder.

Torvolk, Ranger of the Bloodfire Clan.

My new master.

Well, if naught else, he is kinder than Mistress Smith, aye ?

How did I know that? Just because he'd warmed me and fed me and ripped his own clothing to clothe me? Aye, that was more than Mistress Smith ever did... But what did he expect in return?

You are his slave. He can do aught he desires with you .

I swallowed again, hating the way my stomach clenched at the thought. Fear? Nay,

something else. I thought of that cock, thought of those large hands with the claws...

I should be afraid of him. I was afraid of him, wasn't I?

“Why did you buy me?”

‘Twas not until I saw him stiffen that I realized I’d asked the question out loud. He froze for a moment then continued drying the bowl and placed it with the other.

I had to know. “Why did you buy me?” I repeated. “In the tavern. They did not expect you to be there.” All of them—except mayhap Alred—had been as shocked as I’d been to see an orc.

Slowly he turned, crossing his arms in front of his chest and propping his shoulder against the mantel. His dark gaze swept from the top of my shorn head, down my face—lingering on my lips—and to my bosom. Slowly, I untangled my feet from beneath me and placed them on the floor, his gaze making me feel... warm .

My insides tingled and I told myself ‘twas just nerves. Aye?

“Why were ye there?” he finally asked, not answering my question. “Who are yer people, lass? Are they waiting for ye back home?”

Home . I shook her head dully. “I have no...” A deep breath, and I lifted my chin. “I was orphaned young. The village blacksmith offered me a place in exchange for labor, but his wife...”

Torvolk made a noise of understanding. “A difficult woman?”

I huffed. Difficult didn’t begin to explain Mistress Smith. I pushed myself to my feet.

“When I was a child, she beat me daily to teach me humility.” The admission caused me to shift my weight, remembering the blows.

His brow twitched, even as his gaze turned stormy.

“Did it work?”

Did I learn humility? There likely wasn’t much that was farther from the truth. I planted my hands on my hips and raised my chin.

“Nay.”

Torvolk turned to look at the fire in the hearth, but I thought I saw his lips curl before he hid his face from me. My new master was a stern man.

“Alred argued with the man who brought ye to the tavern. He said he’d bought ye.”

“He did.” The words caught in my throat, and I stepped forward, suddenly anxious to be moving. However, I’d forgotten about my ankle, the one I’d twisted earlier in my foolish rebellion, and putting weight on it caused me to gasp and stumble.

I don’t think I would’ve fallen—I am not so clumsy—but he caught me nevertheless. One moment he was standing by the hearth, imperious and menacing, and the next he was at my side, his hands on my shoulders, stopping my fall.

“Sit down, lass,” he ordered gruffly, pushing me backward to the bed.

I had a moment of awareness, that this was what ‘twould feel like when he decided to take me for the first time, and I sucked in another sudden breath at the way such a thing would make me feel. I saw his nostrils flare and his dark gaze slammed into mine as he lowered me to the mattress.

But his eyes...they weren't as dark as they'd been. Now, a tiny spark of green nestled in the center of each one.

Torvolk ducked his head, going down to one knee beside me, his hands on my right leg. "Can I touch yer ankle?"

He was...asking? I tried to nod, but my thoughts were distracted by the way his hand felt—warm, soft—on me. I imagined him spreading my legs, plunging into me right then and there, and I might have whimpered softly.

"Easy, lass," he grunted, running his hands past my knee, then lifting to rest my ankle across his knee. "I'm no' in the mood."

In the... mood ? Had he somehow guessed my thoughts?

But then he grasped my ankle, bending and twisting it, and I gasped at the sudden twinge of pain.

"Good," he muttered. "Now ye move it yerself."

Biting my tongue to keep from voicing the discomfort, I followed his command, inordinately pleased by his murmured praises for each movement. I kept still, then, for him to wrap my ankle with another strip torn from his plaid. If this continued, he'd be nude.

Something inside me perked up and I squashed the sensation.

I didn't want that, right?

Right. Aye. No nudity. Definitely no nudity.



I almost believed it.

“Tisnae broken,” he declared in his gruff way as he lowered my foot to the floor and stood. This put his crotch in line with my face once more, and I couldn’t help but stare at the way his cock strained against the woolen cloth. Close enough to . . .

He made a growl which sounded a bit like frustration and spun to stomp toward the door.

I stared after him, my mind whirling in confusion at his response. If he didn’t buy me to tup, why did he spend the gold?

Torvolk returned with a chunk of ice and another male orc. This one was even larger than Torvolk, wider at the shoulder, and suddenly the room was much too small for the three of us. He sent me a gentle smile as I shrank away from him. Surely, Torvolk wasn’t planning to do something as human as share me?

‘Twas not until he turned toward the hearth that I realized the other male only had one arm, the stump of the other hidden beneath his cloak. For some reason, this calmed me.

I startled again when Torvolk dropped to one knee beside me and reached for the back of my head. Instinctively, I pushed against him, not liking the feeling of restraint, but he merely frowned and pressed the ice to my lip.

His hands were warm, and I stared, our noses close enough I could feel his breath on my cheeks. He was...caring for me?

When had a male done that? Most had demanded and hurt me when I didn’t give into their demands.

You need to tell him the truth. Tell him now, so 'twill be less painful. He has not hurt you yet.

“I am not a virgin,” I whispered against the ice. Against his fingers.

Something flared in his green-flecked eyes, something which looked like anger, and I hurried to explain.

“I wanted to tell you, in case you wanted to...” To return me. To beat me. “You paid gold for me. My virginity. You will not get what you paid for.” I felt tears forming in the corner of my eyes, and I curled my lips together. “I am...sorry,” I whispered.

Torvolk's expression had hardened once more, and his gaze was locked on my lips, on the swelling the blow had caused.

“Ye think I would take ye back to that tavern and accuse that bastard of lying?”

I didn't know what to think. For not getting what they paid for, men of my world would be angry, seek retribution – kill.

His gaze flicked to mine, then back to my mouth. “We couldnae return until the next full moon, even if I wanted to.”

Even if I wanted to. As if...he didn't wish it? He hadn't bought me for my virginity? I couldn't make sense of his words.

We sat in silence for another dozen heartbeats, and I realized I was breathing deeper than normal, trying to capture a scent I couldn't identify, something about him so very different than any other male I'd met. Behind him, the other male, the one he hadn't introduced, placed his own bowl on the mantel to eat with his one hand.

The ice was beginning to melt down my chin, but I couldn't force myself to move, to wipe it away.

Finally, without looking up, Torvolk asked me in a low voice, "This man who had ye. Did ye enjoy it?"

My heart began to pound wildly.

Did I enjoy it? It had been hurried and exciting, a sort of rebellion against Mistress Smith. But enjoy it? I managed a slight shrug.

"At the beginning, mayhap. I wanted to experience...it." The orc's gaze met mine and held it. "A village lad," I continued my confession in a whisper, "who married the baker's daughter a few months later."

He'd only wanted some fun with me, and I hadn't thought of him again.

Torvolk blinked, then nodded sternly and pulled the ice away from my lip. He didn't, however, drop his hand from my head. Instead, I felt the pads of his fingertips dig into my scalp, the touch a strangely pleasant sort of massage.

"Expected," he murmured, his gaze caressing my face. "Human males ken naught about their females' pleasure."

With that, he abruptly stood.

As if he hadn't just touched me so gently. As if he hadn't just made such a nonchalant comment about sexual pleasure .

I knew men found pleasure from sex—of course they did. But none of the women in my life had ever mentioned their pleasure.

“Dawn is still a few hours off,” murmured the other male to Torvolk, who nodded.

“There’s enough of a moon to travel.” He glanced over his shoulder to me, as he tossed the chunk of ice into the hearth. “But we’ll wait til dawn to leave.”

Leave? Where were we going?

“The Torvolk I ken wouldnae allow aught to disrupt his schedule,” the other male murmured teasingly. But as Torvolk scowled a warning, the one-armed man changed his tone and continued, “Do ye have supplies? Warm clothes?” He nodded toward me.

Torvolk shook his head with a grunt. “She’ll wear my cloak, we’ll be fine.”

I was still sitting upon it and my fingers brushed over the fine fur. I couldn’t keep it from him, he didn’t deserve to be cold just because?—

Do not be foolish. He is offering you warmth in the middle of the winter. Accept it!

He’d also offered me kindnesses and comfort in that gruff way of his.

And I touched my lower lip, the swelling already receding, wondering how I knew what kind of way he had, considering I’d only just learned his name.

“Last I heard, Vartok had his hands full in the village.”

Torvolk’s lips twitched as he crossed his arms. “Myra is still giving him trouble?”

“Aye, and there’s word from the Bladesedge clan in the south.”

I watched Torvolk glower and pretend to spit. “Fook them and their chief. I ken they

had something to do with Kragorn's disappearance."

"Aye likely." The other male calmly finished his meal, dropped the spoon in the bowl, then turned to speak directly to me. "I have further duties for the rest of the night, patrols and searches. Ye're welcome to make good use of my home until Torvolk is ready to take ye to Bloodfire Village."

Bloodfire Village . That is where we were going? My gaze darted to my master, then back to the one-armed brute who would have scared me had I met him first, but who had spoken gently to me. I managed to nod in acknowledgement, my fingers curling into the furs I sat upon.

"Lass." My gaze jerked to Torvolk at his call. He tipped his head to the other male. "Forgive my rudeness. This is the Keeper, our host."

I nodded again, mind whirling, wondering if I would be allowed to ask questions. "Thank you, Keeper, for your hospitality," I murmured, lowering my gaze modestly.

The other man paused in the middle of pulling his cloak back on. "Prettily said." His tone was teasing as he shot Torvolk an amused look. "Mayhap you should stay here with someone who appreciates politeness, instead of this grumpy arsehole."

My eyes widened and my breath caught as Torvolk scowled at the other male.

"I paid twenty gold for her at auction," he finally said. "Can ye?"

"Nay!" I gasped, thrusting to my feet, my hands fisting in my skirts to keep from reaching—for what I didn't know. I didn't know why I wanted to deny the chance to stay in this cozy home with this polite male, or why leaving with Lord Grumpiness was the more appealing choice. "I..."

Torvolk had twisted his neck to look at me, his expression impassive, as I shook my head frantically.

“The village!” I whispered. Aye, that was a good excuse. I wanted to go to the village, didn’t I? The fact Torvolk would be there was... I was his. ‘Twas my duty to follow him. Right?

The Keeper, meanwhile, had paled, as much as I could tell with his green skin. But his eyes were round and dismayed. “I was no’ being serious, Torvolk. I would no’ honestly try to woo yer Mate away from ye?”

“She’s no’ my Mate,” Torvolk snarled. “I bought her with Bloodfire gold.”

I didn’t know what that meant, and I didn’t understand the Keeper’s reaction when he tipped his head to one side to study my master.

“Have ye looked at yer reflection?” He shook his head before giving Torvolk a chance to answer. “Besides, a female would be lonely here, too isolated. Best take her to the village, where she’ll be with other females and ye can be near her.”

Torvolk’s brow was now stormy. “Aye, she’s mine, and she’ll come with me.”

“Ye’d no’ let her stay, even if I wanted her.”

“And I’d no’ let her stay, especially if ye wanted her,” Torvolk snapped.

The Keeper smiled ruefully. “Because she’s yers. But no’ yer Mate.”

“Ye talk too much,” my master muttered, turning away. “Ye’ve been too long away from our people. Polite society.”

The other male had reached for the door. “As have ye, Ranger . My duty is here?—”

“Yer time here was only for a handful of years,” Torvolk interrupted. He held up five fingers. “Ye have completed yer service to the clan. Allow another male this responsibility.”

The Keeper’s brows rose. “And force a young, whole male to give up his happiness?” Shaking his head, he moved the stump of his arm beneath his cloak. “Besides, we were speaking of ye and yer auctioned female.”

She’s mine .

Did I hear the words or imagine them?

The door closed behind the other male, and Torvolk glanced at me. I stood there beside the bed, clutching my skirts, my heart hammering in my chest.

I was no longer terrified of belonging to him. I was no longer horrified at the thought of him touching me, stroking me...taking me. Using me.

All I could think of was that I didn’t want him to leave me behind.

His nostrils flared and he made a noise that sounded as if it came from deep in his chest.

“Am I going with you, Torvolk?” I asked, daring to hold his gaze. Daring to question my master. “To the village?”

He didn’t respond for a long moment, then dropped his chin with a jerk. “Aye,” he grunted, not looking at me as he twisted for the door. “In a few hours. Rest. I’ll help the Keeper.”

“Wait!” I blurted, stopping him as he laid his hand on the door handle.

He froze, his back to me, his gaze on the wood under his fingertips. I scooped up the cloak from the bed and hobbled as fast as I could toward him. I slowed as I approached.

“Here, Master,” I whispered. “You should not be cold if I could help it.”

He didn’t move as I stretched up to drape the fur around first one shoulder then the other, ignoring the twinge in my ankle as I did so. But his free hand grasped the front, pulling it closed...his gaze somewhere over my left shoulder.

Then, without a word, he pulled open the door and stepped out into the night.



## Page 5

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### CHAPTER FIVE

Torvolk

There's only so many times I could brush down the horses or shovel their shite or polish their tack. The Keeper didn't want my help with his duties, and I didn't want to go back into his home.

With Isadora. And that bed so near.

I shuddered, remembering the way the faint scent of her arousal had flitted through the air once or twice when I'd been near to her. She shouldn't be interested in someone like me, not after the day she'd had...but I couldn't deny I wanted her.

Wanted her badly.

And that scent had told me I could have her, if I wanted.

I could push her down on that bed and plunge into her, claiming her the way my Kteer demanded. I could lick her until she screamed my name in pleasure, until I made her forget any other male who'd looked her way.

But I was a Ranger, one who hunted on behalf of the clan. I had a cottage in the village, but 'twas rarely used. My life had no place for a female.

So? Fook her a few times, drop her off in the village, and be done with her. Ye're no' committing to Mate with her, for shite's sake .

That was my Kteer's desires, not mine.

Just had to remember that...

But I confess, when the Keeper had guessed Isadora was my Mate, likely from the way she was curled up on my lap holding me, something deep inside had preened at that. Something more than just my primitive Kteer .

Something deeper.

Focus on finding the chief. Kragorn's yer cousin, ye dobber. Nan will never forgive ye if ye dinnae find him. Ye owe the clan that much .

Aye, I did.

And she was a distraction.

So, I focused on the horses and the milking cow and the small flock of chickens the Keeper had obviously culled for the winter and kept in the barn which attached to the back of his cottage. And I avoided hooves, and tried not to step on birds, and forgot about Isadora.

Mostly.

But as the sun lightened the eastern sky, I stretched with a small groan and wondered if mayhap these hours might have been better spent asleep.

No' the first time ye've gone a night without sleep. 'Twill no' be the last .

I hitched my cloak around my shoulders, my fingers lingering on the clasp. My chest tightened at the memory of the way she'd hurried to drape it around me.

Master, you should not be cold if I can help it , she'd said as she'd...cared for my comfort.

There was no other way to twist that, was there? She'd given me the cloak so I wouldn't freeze. She'd cared for my comfort.

I told myself not to put too much weight on that. She likely only did it because she didn't want me to freeze to death. She knew if I died, she'd have to stay here with the Keeper, and her reaction to that possibility told me she very much wanted to go to the village.

With me.

Nay, not with me! Me didn't matter in this! She just wanted to be around other females—I'd seen the way she interacted with that whore at the tavern! She wanted to go to the village instead of staying here and I was her best option for that!

Aye. Aye, that was it.

I stomped toward the door to the cottage, muscles tightening against the cold, drawing my brows together, dragging my mouth down into a scowl.

I took a deep breath and held it, focusing on the way the icy air burned my lungs. When I could hold it no longer, I exhaled then pushed my way into the cozy home.

I'd never traveled with a female before. I suppose, if you asked me what I would expect, I would answer delays and concessions. But Isadora was waiting for me, her eyes glazed with sleep and a mark on her cheek from the furs on the bed.

She was adorable.

I wanted to gather her to me, to brush her jagged locks behind her ear, to warm her.

I didn't, obviously, because I'm not an idiot.

The Keeper smirked from a safe distance behind Isadora. My eyes narrowed and I felt my upper lip curl.

"Are ye ready?" I growled. Isadora nodded and stood, wincing when she put weight on her ankle. I needed to get her to the village so Myra could examine her.

Right. That should be my mission. Just focus on the next few hours.

But after I lifted her up onto the horse's back and swung up behind her, I couldn't help the way my arms tightened around her.

The Keeper—who had bravely followed us outdoors—patted the animal's neck.

"She'll get ye to Bloodfire village by noon. Ye certain ye dinnae mind leaving the other animal here?"

I nodded, my mind drawn to the beasts. "Thank ye for keeping him. I'll send more feed."

Stepping back, he flicked his fingers dismissively. "I'll be fine, I have plenty of food for the animals and myself...and I'll enjoy having someone to talk to."

"Ye dinnae have to worry until the horse starts talking back to ye," I deadpanned, and saw his lips twitch before he turned away.

"Go," he commanded. "Leave me to my solitude."

And I obliged.

But I soon learned that riding with a female in my lap was vastly different when she was awake. Last night, Isadora had curled around me, her mouth pressed to my chest as she slept. This morning, however, after her wee hours nap, she was awake, peering around at the landscape, shifting her weight...

There's only so many times I can remind my cock not to get involved before it sits up and makes itself known...and Isadora was fast approaching that point, as often as she brushed that sweet arse across my crotch.

I eventually spread my palm across her thigh to keep her still, and I heard her suck in a breath. Unable to help myself, I moved my thumb slightly closer to the apex of her thighs, just to see what would happen.

That faint, sweet scent of her arousal teased my nose and tongue.

Apparently, I was a glutton for punishment, tormenting myself this way.

I felt her relax once more, her shoulders pressed against me trustingly. My arms were wrapped around her, my cloak covering both of us. Having her plastered against my chest and my cock was keeping me very warm indeed.

The horse carefully picked its way along a scree-covered slope, and suddenly Isadora leaned forward, her breath frosting the air in front of her as she breathed a surprised, "Oh!"

"What is it?" I grumbled, pulling her back against me more to warm my chest than anything else, I told myself.

"Those trees." She pointed to the rowan. "I recognize them. And the lumps beneath

the snow, are those heather?”

“Aye,” I grunted. “Our world has the same plants and animals as yers.”

“Why?” She twisted just enough to peer up at me. “Why are they not completely different?”

I shrugged, fighting to keep from glancing down at her. I could feel her gaze on my skin and knew if I gave into the temptation, the damn horse might send us over a cliff before I’d notice.

“Who kens why the gods work the way they do?” I asked. “But our worlds are mirrored—even the geography. My people dinnae farm as extensively as ye do, because there are far fewer of us, so the landscape hasnae been changed as much.”

She settled back against me. “Why are there fewer orcs than humans?”

“Because we dinnae breed the way ye do.” I felt her stiffen at such a coarse topic. “Kits can only be born to Mated pairs, and no’ everyone is lucky enough to find their Mate in this lifetime. The humans can breed with any female, willing or no’.”

I felt her tip forward and knew she was going to wrap her arms around her middle before she did it. She was clearly thinking about last night.

“That man in the tavern. John the Tanner, Verna called him...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “He wanted to use me that way. To breed bairns.”

I tried to keep my tone nonchalant, tried to hide the sudden rage. “He wanted to fook ye. If he got ye with bairn, he wouldnae care.” The thought of creating a kitling so casually, without a connection to its mother...the thought was abhorrent to an orc, especially a male. But humans had no such qualms.

“He was only interested in his own pleasure.”

In thrusting his cock into her warm cunny, again and again, spilling inside her, feeling her soft body under his... I shouldn't be aroused by the thought, but my Kteer rarely listened to reason.

“He would not have cared about my wants,” she stated.

“Or yer pleasure,” I agreed.

Instinctively, I tightened my hold on her, drawing her back against my chest. My Kteer wanted to keep her here. Forever.

“My mistress...” she began with a deep shuddering breath.

“The unpleasant one?” I prompted. “Who beat ye?”

‘Twas strange to me the humans considered us monsters when they would so causally create a child and then beat it.

“When I began to...become a woman, she...” She hunched her shoulders. “She accused me of seducing her husband. I was just a girl.”

I swallowed my anger.

“But my breasts...grew larger than expected. I learned to hide them, and my hair. I did not want her husband—the smith’s—attentions. I hoped one of the village lads might offer for me, but I guess they agreed...”

When she trailed off, I frowned. “Agreed with what?”

“Mistress Smith used to call me a whore. To anyone who would listen. She would accuse me of tempting her husband and warn her friends to protect their sons and husbands from me. But I was not like that! Once I tried it, and...”

I knew what she meant, but something prompted me to ask, “It?”

“Sex,” she whispered. “I think, since I was already condemned for being a whore, I wanted to try it.”

I didn’t groan out loud, but ‘twas close. I could picture her; her hair down, pressed against a wall, those magnificent tits bared as a male tasted her—tasted them. The sounds she’d make, the expression of bliss on her face.

She said she’d no’ enjoyed it.

I realized the male I was picturing with her had green skin and dark hair.

Fook.

She was no whore. But she was mine. She was seated on my lap now. How easy would it be to reach up, to pull that bodice down and release those tits to the winter air? I could imagine how the nipples would pebble in the cold, how she’d moan as I squeezed and fondled. She’d want me to touch her.

I could do that. I wanted to do that.

I fucking wasn’t going to do that.

Focus on yer mission. Get her to the village and leave her with Nan.

Isadora clearly wasn’t thinking such things, because she continued. “Yesterday



morning, Mistress Smith announced she was done with me. I suspect her husband refused to come to her bed and she blamed me.”

I forced myself to focus. She was sharing her story with me, and I was curious.

“She sold ye?”

Isadora exhaled softly. I glanced down. I could only see the top of her head—and I was grateful I wasn’t snared by those sky-blue eyes.

Her breath puffed in front of her face.

“She sold me,” she agreed quietly. “Said if I was going to whore, she might as well earn some money from me. She told the bandits I was a virgin, though.”

“Why?”

A moment’s pause, then she shrugged. “At the time, I thought mayhap ‘twas to protect me from their lust. But I think ‘tis more likely she thought a virgin would earn more payment, although she thought me a slut. But she sold me...” Her voice caught on what sounded suspiciously like a sob. “For half a silver.”

The bandit paid half a silver for this beautiful, fierce young female. He struck her, bloodied her, then sold her for half a gold piece to Alred to whore out.

I closed my eyes on a silent prayer of thanksgiving I had been there.

Wait .

I was pleased I’d saved her? I was pleased I’d endangered my mission by announcing myself to a tavern full of humans, of fighting them? I was pleased I’d spent my clan’s

gold on this female?

Aye.

Aye, I was.

Because if I hadn't, she would've been lost.

Now, at least, she'd live a peaceful life in Bloodfire village with the other females until she accepted a male's claim.

And I tried to ignore the anger the thought of another male touching what should be mine made me feel.

In my arms, the tiny female sniffed, and I realized I was trying to see her face. Was she crying? The noise she'd made had sounded like a sob, but she hadn't cried since that bastard had cut off her hair.

"What's wrong?" I barked, torn between horror and pity that she might be crying again.

"I was not a slave," she whispered. One palm swiped across her eyes, and her tone turned angry. "I was not hers to sell. Aye, I had never received a wage from Mistress Smith, but I was not a slave. She sold me like I was her property, and now..."

Now she was.

My Kteer growled, but I couldn't understand if this hot feeling in my chest was rage or shame or a fierce sort of joy.

But then I ceased trying to determine it—ceased even breathing—because Isadora's

small hand landed on my wrist. I dropped my gaze to where her pale slender fingers wrapped around my green skin.

“Thank you, Torvolk,” she whispered. “Thank you for buying me. Those men...” She shuddered, her hold on me tightening. “They called me a sex slave. They wanted a whore. They wanted to plow my belly until they got me with child. If I am to be a slave...”

She trailed off, and I continued to hold my breath, half-dreading, half-hoping what she would say.

Finally, she continued. “If I am to be a slave, I am grateful to be yours .”

Oh, blessed Malla.

Oh, gods below.

Oh, foook .

My throat closed off and I couldn't seem to draw breath or make a sound.

She was grateful to be mine?

Nay, she's grateful to be yer slave.

There's a difference?

Is there? Because I'll admit, all I was hearing was the mine part.

That's because ye're thinking with yer cock. Ye're stronger than yer Kteer , aye? So rein the damned thing in and focus on finding yer chief!

I was finally able to suck in a breath, but in the next moment, Isadora leaned forward again with a surprised, “Oh!”

She lifted the hand which had been holding my wrist—and I hated how bereft that made me feel—and pointed. “I see smoke ahead.”

“The village,” I rasped, my voice betraying my inner battle. “Bloodfire Village.”

She twisted to look up at me. “Home?”

By Palton’s Spear, how could she look so hopeful? Her eyes glittered with something I thought might be excitement, and her skin gleamed despite the midday clouds. Her lips were still bruised and broken, but the swelling had gone down.

I very much wanted to taste them. To taste her . To claim her.

Instead, I switched my attention to the distant smoke.

“Aye,” I managed. “’Twill be yer home for as long as ye wish it.”

But not mine.

I told myself I should be grateful she spent the rest of the ride in a sort of interested silence, peering about and straining in my lap to see farther ahead of us. But the truth is, I missed her voice, her touch.

Even if the topic was difficult, I missed hearing her thoughts.

By Malla the Beginner, ye’ve kenned the lass for less than a day!

Eventually, the horse reached the edge of the great loch and the village came into

view. The boats were pulled up past the flood line, each covered in a blanket of snow, and the garden paths were swept carefully clear. Smoke drifted from the chimneys of each cottage but mine, and neighbors called cheerful greetings to one another.

Taking a deep breath, I tucked Isadora against my chest and lifted the reins.

Here we go.

Even knowing what was coming, I rode directly toward Nan's home. Friends and neighbors I hadn't seen in months called out welcomes and I responded awkwardly. Their friendship and cheer always made me feel thus—like I wasn't quite a part of the village.

But I wanted to be.

I heard Isadora suck in a breath, felt her shrink back against me, and I glanced down. She twisted her head to stare at a figure. Who...? Oh, 'twas Hanna, Girstig's Mate, and she was huge with child. Good for them. The future of the clan was always something to celebrate.

Avaleen—my brother's Mate—waved cheerfully when she saw me, her other hand cradling her own bulging stomach. She turned to hurry toward her cottage—I suppose I should expect a visit from my twin soon—and Isadora actually leaned around me to watch her go.

“Your people keep so many slaves?” she murmured.

“What?” I twisted as well, wondering who she spoke of.

“So many of these women are human.” She straightened and I could see how pale she was as she tipped her head sideways. “That one was pregnant. Did her master plow

her belly until he got her with a bastard?” Her voice caught. “The way those men threatened to do to me?”

“Nay,” I growled. “These women are honored?—”

“You cannot honor a slave , Master,” she snapped, twisting to glare up at me.

And despite the anger in her tone, my lips twitched.

Mayhap because of the anger in her tone.

This wee lass, who called me master ...her heart was strong and her will was fierce.

Allowing the horse to find its way, I lifted my hand to her cheek, feeling her too-cold skin beneath my touch.

“They are Mates, lass.” I tucked one of her hacked strands of hair behind her ear. “Honored Mates. That was Avaleen, the Mate of my twin brother, and she carries my niece or nephew with pride.”

Her mouth had opened as soon as I touched her, but now she’d frozen, those eyes—the color of my sky on a summer’s day—staring at me in confusion.

Orcs didn’t keep slaves, and I would tell her that as soon as I could focus on my tongue, and not on how she was looking at me.

“Torvolk?”

Damn. The horse had stopped in front of Nan’s cottage and the door slammed open, accompanied by that pleased shout.

“Torvolk, my lad, I was praying ye’d return today!” Nan called, hobbling toward me.

I sighed, pretending I disliked being fussed over, and nodded.

“Hello Nan.”

“And who is this?” My grandmother, tiny and wizened, stopped by the horse’s head to peer up with us, shading her pale face with her hand. “Oh, praise all the gods ye’ve ever wanted, Torvolk, have ye finally brought yer Mate home?”

Mate?

Now my expression slid into its more habitual scowl.

“She’s no’ my Mate, Nan.” I could feel Isadora’s shock as she stared, and realized I would have to introduce them.

“This is my grandmother, lass. Nan, I bought her at an auction last night. ‘Tis up to ye to make her feel comfortable, aye?”

I cannae say who was more surprised, the lass in my arms or my grandmother. So, with another sigh, I locked my legs, tipped to one side, and deposited Isadora on the ground. And I tried not to crow with pride when she pressed against my booted calf, shying away from the little old lady who was staring at her wide-eyed.

“Lass,” I growled. “My grandmother will settle ye. I must go find Vartok and report.”

Her eyes were wide, her hand on my foot. “Master,” she whispered. “Your grandmother...is human?”

### CHAPTER SIX

Isadora

When Torvolk wheeled his horse and trotted away, I felt strangely bereft...for all of a few seconds...until the wrinkled old woman reached for my hands.

“Och, lass, ‘tis so good to meet ye. Isadora, my Torvolk said?”

The woman was shorter than me, with the sort of stoop that comes from a life well-lived. Her smile was bright—although a few teeth were missing—and her cheeks plump. I stood there, my hands in her mittened ones, trying to search her face for similarities between her features and Torvolk’s.

I found none.

“I...” I shook my head. “Are you really his grandmother?”

“Oh dear.” She clicked her tongue, then turned to pull me toward a cottage. Not the one she’d just emerged from, but the one beside it, which shared a garden with hers.

“I always said Torvolk was a bit of an arse when it came to females—cannae see the sun shining directly on his cheeks.” She gave a bright grin and squeezed my hands. “I can see that dobber explained verra little to ye. Did he really buy ye? Using the clan coin, I suppose, which is likely a better use for it than bribery. Oh, Myra! We need ye!”



This last was yelled toward a pretty, dark-skinned human woman who was bundled against the cold. She changed direction toward us just as Torvolk's grandmother tugged me inside the cold cottage.

"Forgive me, Isadora," she demanded, bustling about, closing the shutters. "I hoped Torvolk would be home today, so I freshened up the place, laid the hearth, that sort of thing. He's a strong—if stubborn—lad and can take care of himself, after all. But if I'd kenned ye'd be with him, I would've started the fire, so ye'd be nice and warm."

She settled me on a straight-backed chair built to Torvolk's proportions—the wooden seat was too hard to be truly comfortable—then knelt in front of the hearth to light the kindling which had indeed been laid. I had the vague thought that I should offer to do that for her, but I confess I was in too much shock to do aught more than stare.

The other woman—Myra?—let herself in.

"A newcomer, Nan? Is this Torvolk's Mate?" She turned to me "I'm Myra," she said.

"Isadora." Thoughts a-whirl, I managed to remember my name.

Why were all these human women here? Torvolk said they weren't slaves, but his own grandmother was...a human?

With a groan, Nan pushed herself to her feet. She smiled broadly and wiped her hands on her skirts as the fire caught.

"There, that's nice and cozy. Myra, get some of those tapers lit. I'll fetch some food from my cottage and we can get comfortable."

"Wait," I blurted as the newcomer began to light the candles set on the table and the older woman reached the door. "What—what is going on?"

“Och, dearie,” Nan clucked, turning back with her arms wide. “Ye’ve had a hell of an adventure, aye?” She wrapped me in her arms, a comforting embrace which made me long to relax into her hold. I’d never been hugged like this by another woman, much less one who reminded me of—well, not my grandmother, because I’d never had one. Well, presumably I must have had a grandmother at some point—unless there were some miracles in my family tree I didn’t know about—but I’d never known her.

You are beginning to blather .

‘Twas the panic, surely.

The old woman smiled gently. “Ye should call me Nan, because most of the village does at this point. Myra is a midwife; she came through the stones a few months back because her sister Avaleen is expecting my next great-grandson and insisted she be here to help. Since Avaleen is Mated to Torvolk’s twin brother Mkaalad, she calls me Nan as well.”

“She is right,” Myra said, expression serious as she focused on her task. “Everyone calls her Nan, because she’s related to half the village. You should as well.”

“But...you are human .” The panic was slowly giving way to confusion as the fire warmed me. “Your grandsons are orcs ?”

“Oh dear,” Nan sighed, straightening. “I see food will have to wait. I can explain while Myra examines ye.” She gestured the other woman closer. “Where are ye hurt, lassie?”

“I am—I am not hurt.” I looked between the two of them, wide-eyed. “Torvolk would not hurt me.” I didn’t understand how I knew that with such certainty, but ‘twas true.

“I know that,” Myra announced softly as she took my chin in her hand and tilted it

toward the light. “But someone struck you.” Her touch was light on my split lip. “You seem to be healing. Hopefully you put some snow on it?”

“Ice,” I mumbled. “Last night, Torvolk...”

“He said he bought her at an auction, Myra,” Nan interrupted. She was placing a kettle on the fire, and I found myself hoping that meant tea was a possibility. “Ye ken what that means?”

The midwife hummed, still examining me, so I explained.

“It means I am his slave.”

Myra’s gaze darted to mine then away as Nan gasped.

“Orcs keep nae slaves, Isadora. If my grandson paid money?—”

“Twenty gold pieces,” I interrupted, willing them to understand the severity of the situation.

Strangely neither woman reacted to that outrageous amount. Myra was still focused on my bruises, while Nan just shrugged.

“Gold means less to orcs, lassie, and thus they— we have more of it. In the human world, ‘tis hoarded by a few rich men who use it to adorn themselves. We have the same resources here, but only use the gold to trade with the humans.”

We . She included herself in the orcs’ world?

“If you were being sold at auction, does that mean you were a slave?” Myra asked, her expression and tone carefully neutral. “Where was the auction?”

“’Twas in a tavern—a whorehouse.” I couldn’t stop my shudder. “And nay, I was not a slave...until my mistress sold me to be one. The men in that tavern, they wanted...” I swallowed, tipping my chin against my chest and wrapping my arms around myself, hating this resurgence of fear.

With a sympathetic noise, Myra dropped to a crouch beside me so she could gather my hands in hers. “Were you defiled, Isadora? Hurt by those men? You do not have to speak of it, but I am a midwife, and very good at it. I would ask that you allow me to examine you to ensure no lasting damage.”

I was surprised to find myself blinking back tears as I shook my head. Not just at this stranger’s kindness, but at the reminder of what might have been.

As the kettle finished boiling and Nan poured three mugs of what turned out to be fragrant tea in a flavor I’d never before tasted, I told the women my story. Of cruel Mistress Smith and her fears, and how the bandits had sold me to Alred, who cut off my hair and bared my body to so many men. I told them of how Torvolk had stood and offered for me, more money than any of us could comprehend. I told them of how scared I’d been, and how he fought the men in the tavern.

“Did he kill them?” Myra asked sharply. She’d sat across the small table from me, her expression skeptical as she listened. I could tell she wasn’t outgoing in the way of Verna—the whore at the tavern—or Nan. “That is the last thing the orcs need, another war with the humans.”

Another war? I wondered what she meant by that.

But Nan reached over and patted my hand, which was warming around my mug of tea. “Ye poor lassie. I’m sorry about yer hair.”

My finger rose to the strands which now hung around my ears. On the horse, when I

was sitting upon his lap, Torvolk had touched me here. I remembered how he'd warmed me, and I felt my cheeks heating.

'Twas just hair. Aye, it had been my prettiest feature, but Torvolk had bought me even without it.

Myra sighed and pushed aside her tea. "You do not need me to check you for aught?"

I started to shake my head, then stopped. "I did—yesterday, when I was in the tavern, I twisted my ankle. Torvolk bound it last night, but..."

Nodding, she slid from her chair and went down on one knee beside me, already pushing aside my hem so she could study my foot. I remembered how Torvolk had asked before he'd touched me, and again I wondered what kind of male he was.

'Twas as if his grandmother guessed the direction of my thoughts, because she patted me again.

"My grandson is a good lad, Isadora. He's gruff, aye, and pretends he doesnae care for the company of others, and sometimes he's grumpier than a box of rocks—although why someone would box rocks is beyond me—and he cannae carry a tune to save his life, but... What was I saying? Och, aye," she announced, wagging her finger. "Torvolk is a good lad."

"He..." Ignoring the way Myra was poking and prodding me, I peered down into my tea and realized these women had warmed me in a way the fire hadn't. "I was being sold for sex. To satisfy a man. A slave."

"You were no slave," snapped Myra from down around my knee. "And you are not now."

“She’s right, lassie.” Nan smiled softly, lifting her own mug. “Orcs dinnae keep slaves, and Torvolk isnae yer master. I heard ye call him that.”

“He paid twenty gold pieces,” I whisper. “I am his.”

“Aye, ye might be.” When I glanced up, there was a twinkle in Nan’s eye. “But no’ because of that. Has he told ye of orcish Mating?”

Mutely, I shook my head, then changed my mind. “He said...” I glanced down at Myra, then up at the old woman. “When I asked about the other women in the village, like Avaleen, he said they were honored Mates.”

Myra snorted without looking up. “They had best be. If I ever caught a hint that Mkaalad was not treating Avaleen well, I would cut off his cock myself.”

Across the table, Nan smiled indulgently. “Myra is verra protective, but she has nae reason to worry. My lads ken how lucky they are to have Mates, and Torvolk will soon too.”

When the midwife twisted my foot, I winced, then confessed, “I do not understand.”

“Orcs dinnae Mate the way humans do. To humans, marriage is supposed to be a sacred vow before God, but even then ‘tis often defiled.”

I thought of the way John the Tanner had considered buying me so his wife wouldn’t be burdened with his tuppung her each night and shuddered my agreement.

“’Tis not very sacred.”

“But to orcs, Mating is...”

“A natural imperative,” Myra interrupted, re-wrapping my ankle, her attention—and voice—pointed downward. “’Tis part of who they are, something they know in the same way you might be able to tell when your flow is approaching, or when your gut is unhappy, or when you can feel a headache coming on.”

Nan was nodding along. “Myra hasnae experienced it, but she is right. An orc male is born with a Kteer , ‘tis almost like another sense, deep in his chest. ‘Tis the primitive part of him, the part which urges him to do things the auld ways.” She winked. “Sometimes it can be quite pleasant to let his Kteer have free reign.”

I merely gaped, not understanding.

“The Kteer is part of what determines the Mating bond. An orc male just kens the woman he is to spend his life with, and the longer he is with her, the more she can feel the same thing.”

“But...” I glanced down at the midwife. “Humans do not have this... kah-teer , do they?”

“Nay,” Myra announced, gently settling my foot back down. “I do not understand it either. Your ankle just needs rest. Torvolk bound it well.”

“I told ye he’d take care of ye,” Nan announced, patting my hand once more.

“But...” None of this was making sense. “When an orc marries?—”

“’Tis a Mating ,” Nan corrected. “And ‘tis a commitment made before the gods and the clan, aye, the same as a human ceremony. But once Mated, the couple is bound in a way no human couple could imagine. Neither will ever find another Mate, and only Mated pairs can produce kitlings. ‘Tis why our bairns are so precious to us.”

Myra arched, pressing her palms against her lower back. “All bairns are precious, but to the orcs, the life of the mother is more important, because her Mate cares for her above all else.”

The words were matter-of-fact, but her tone sounded skeptical.

“How long have you been here?” I asked Myra.

“Mkaalad brought Avaleen through the stones to fetch me before the first snows came,” she explained, settling back into her chair. She took a sip of the tea, then wrinkled her nose when she found it cold. “I am still getting used to the village and life with orcs.”

“Myra is fitting right in. ‘Tis just her nemesis she doesnae like.”

“Vartok is a gentleman,” Myra announced stiffly, clasping her mug in both hands. “Without the sense his grandmother has.”

Nan cackled gleefully and slapped the table. “Well said, lassie!” To me she confessed, “Vartok has a bit of a stubborn streak too.”

As if I had an inkling who this Vore-talk was.

“A bit?” muttered Myra. “He would not know good sense if it bit him in the arse.”

“See?” Nan asked triumphantly. “Myra is fitting right in and likes life here in the village better. All of us human females here feel the same way!”

Ah. We’d finally reached the part I was curious about. “And...you, Nan? You are human, aye?”



She chuckled, a sort of cackling laugh. “I am, lassie. I’ve been here over fifty years! My Bartolk came through the stones as part of a raiding party, took one look at me, and decided he had to have me. Took me a bit longer to come around, but ‘twas worth it.” She nodded proudly. “I gave birth to three strong sons and a lovely daughter, and am proud grandma to quite a few grandchildren.”

I stared, unable to fully comprehend what I was hearing. This wizened old woman sitting across from me had once been like myself? Disbelieving? But she seemed so happy and at ease now.

Myra cleared her throat, drawing my attention. Her expression turned a little sympathetic at my confusion, and I could see how this no-nonsense woman might make a good midwife.

“When a male child is born to a human female and an orc male, he is more likely to look like his father. When a female child is born, she is more likely to look like her mother. If she Mates a human, her children are virtually indistinguishable from normal humans.” She shrugged. “And if the son Mates with a female orc, their children will look just like full-blooded orcs.”

Nan took up the explanation. “There are a few females here in the village that might look human but have orc fathers. Likewise, quite a few of our males have human mothers or grandmothers.”

“Torvolk?” I whispered, wide-eyed.

“His parents were both orcs,” Nan told me, “but we’ve lost them both. My son, his father, drowned in the same storm that killed my Bartolk, and his mother died in childbirth a few years before. I raised him and his twin.”

Myra’s lips had pressed together until they were a white line, and I knew she was

thinking about losing her own sister to childbirth.

“I-I am sorry for your losses,” I managed. “It must be difficult and wonderful, at once, to look around your village and see so many parts of your family.”

“This is my home,” Nan said simply. “So much more than my father’s croft had ever been. ‘Tis said that orcish blood requires human mixing in order to keep the species healthy. If they stopped Mating with humans, they would begin to die out, but nae one is stupid enough to try to cut off contact with the human world.”

“Aye,” drawled Myra with a sigh. “If we did, where else would we get books? Or soft soap for bathing?”

Nan snorted, even as she reached across the table to pull my mug from my hands. “Or more lasses to be Mates for our grandsons?”

As Myra rolled her eyes, I shyly offered, “I can make you soap; it’s my one talent. But...” I blew out a breath in confusion. “I am not certain I understand...why would a human female want ...”

Torvolk’s grandmother had hobbled over to the kettle and now turned back to us, her grin wide. “Pleasure, lassie. Orc males are better at giving pleasure than any human I’ve ever met!”

Myra rolled her eyes again. “She has been claiming this for months,” she muttered to me. “And aye, their tongues are impressive, but how could?—”

Just as I began to choke at the thought of a male using his tongue to bring pleasure, Nan plopped the kettle atop the table with a snort.

“Nae matter how inexperienced the lad is, he’s guaranteed to bring his Mate

pleasure.” She was concentrating on pouring hot water into each of our cups. “’Tis another part of their—what did ye call it, Myra? Natural imperative? An orc’s cock is made to make his partner climax as soon as he enters her.”

I gasped, looking to Myra for confirmation, but she shrugged. “Avaleen claims this, but I cannot imagine why such a thing exists.”

“Because of how thick orc cocks are!” Nan cackled, seeming to enjoy my blush. “’Tis to ensure his partner is well-lubricated. Her pleasure matters to him, see? I’ll wager ye’ve never had a partner like that!”

From the way Myra’s cheeks were growing even darker, I wondered if she’d ever had a partner at all.

“It makes them arrogant, I know that ,” she muttered, pouring the hot water into my cup. “Think themselves God’s gift to women.”

Nan snorted. “Ye only say that because my grandson is driving ye mad!”

“He is !” Myra snapped with a scowl.

Confused, I shook my head. “I thought your sister was Mated to Nan’s grandson?”

“Avaleen is mated to Mkaalad, Torvolk’s twin,” Myra explained with a huff. “Their cousin is Kragorn, the clan’s missing chief, the one Torvolk has been looking for.”

“No’ just Kragorn,” Nan teased, nudging the other woman. “But his younger brother Vartok, our smith. The puir lad’s been put in charge of the clan, with nae experience.”

Myra snorted. “He is not a puir lad , he is a nuisance.”

As the two of them bickered, I dropped my gaze to the depths of my tea. Because as curious as I was about my new friends, I couldn't seem to drag my attention away from what Nan had explained about Torvolk's cock. Torvolk's cock . His cock, which was designed to pleasure a female. What lurked beneath his kilt?

He'd bought me to be a sex slave, had he not?

Nay, orcs do not keep slaves. He bought you out of pity. 'Tis why he dumped you with his grandmother .

I decided to ignore that bit of encouragement.

I wrapped my hands around my hot-once-more tea and lifted it to my lips, considering what Nan had told me. I couldn't return home until the next full moon, and frankly, I had naught to return home to. But here, in this village, there were kind women who cared for me, and a male who...

A male who treated me kindly. A male to whom I belonged.

A male who can make ye climax with his cock.

I shifted on the wooden chair, suddenly thinking about the breathless sort of way I'd felt when I'd imagined him climbing atop me, or when I imagined him lifting his kilt and demanding I suck him.

I couldn't deny that such thoughts...aroused me in some way. When he'd asked me about my sexual experience and spoken to me so causally about pleasure, I'd become a little breathless. And the way his touch warmed me, or his gaze made my stomach clench...

Did I want my master?

Well, why not? He said I was his, aye? Why shouldn't I be?

I shifted on my chair once more. I was stuck here for another month, so why not make the best of it? A sort of experiment?

As if she could read my thoughts, Nan cleared her throat, her eyes twinkling. "How about I pop next door and bring over a meal, and together we can get this cottage stocked for ye."

I glanced around at the cozy, spacious cottage. "For... me? "

"Aye, lass," the older woman said, pushing herself to her feet. "'Tis Torvolk's home, and ye belong to him, as ye say. The Midwinter celebration is in a few sennights, and 'twill be good to have this place warm and cozy before then, to start the new year on the best foot."

"Aye," drawled Myra with a carefully blank expression. "'Tis up to you to clean and cook and keep his home."

Well...I could do that. 'Twas naught more difficult than I'd done for Mistress Smith. "This is...his home?"

Nan reached for my hand and squeezed it. "Yer home now too, lass."

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### CHAPTER SEVEN

Torvolk

My first night back in the village, the snow hit. I spent it in Vartok's cottage, knowing Isadora was warm and cozy in mine, being looked after by Nan.

Vartok is our chief's younger brother, the one left in command when Kragorn set off on that ill-fated raid, and I considered him a friend as well as cousin. He welcomed me with a hot meal and all the news.

I confess I was distracted during the recitation.

The second night, with the storm still raging, I went to the tavern with Mkaalad and drank too much and ended up passed out on one of the benches.

Turns out my twin could still outdrink me, but at least I didnae have to listen to him teasing me about the female I'd brought back.

The third night, when the snow ended, Vartok gave me a mission in the south, offering information to the Battleborn clan in exchange for anything they knew about our missing chief or our feud with the Bladesedge chief's new allies. He ordered me to return by the Midwinter Feast, which was a few days afore the next full moon.

I was grateful for the order to be away for so long.

As I rode away from Bloodfire village, I confess I found myself studying the faces of

the small females I passed. 'Twasn't until I was well away from the village that I realized I was looking for Isadora.

Which was fooking ironic, considering I'd clearly been doing my best to avoid her.

Bah.

She was Nan's problem now, not mine. I'd gotten her safely to the village, safely to other females who could care for her and keep her safe. I didn't need to be a part of her life any longer.

So why, by Palton's Spear, did that make me so damnably itchy ? Beneath my fur cloak, my shoulders hunched as I rode, and I had to resist the urge to scratch my chest, because more than once I caught my claws trying to dig into the skin there, as if I could scrape out whatever 'twas that was making me feel this hot.

Heat, aye, that was it.

I was hot and itchy and anxious and angry . So fooking angry, and I knew 'twas because I wasn't getting answers about Kragorn's location, and I was stuck here until the next full moon. Aye, that's why I was angry.

And I stayed angry for the next fortnight, the time it took me to travel south, receive approximately zero answers, and return home.

Home? Nay, the village wasn't home, was it?

I rode toward Bloodfire Village a few days before the new moon, the normally bright orb a mere sliver in the sky, a full fortnight early. The Midwinter Feast was almost a fortnight away, which meant I had even longer before the next full moon; the next time I could return to the human's world to look for clues and spread more gold.

I should be focused on that , not wondering how Isadora had fared this last fortnight, if her ankle had healed.

I should be focused on Kragorn, and the debt of friendship I owed him. He needed me!

What had happened to our chief in the last days? Where was he? Why hadn't we heard word?

If only I had answers, or any sort of information to report! Instead, I was returning to the village in defeat. Cold, angry, and still jumpy as all the hells.

I hated it.

I hated feeling this way.

For the last fortnight, as I wandered through our world, avoiding the clans we were feuding with, making contact with the rangers and chiefs of our allies...my mind wasn't centered. 'Twasn't centered in a way it had never been uncentered before.

And 'twas because of Isadora.

I would be crouched in a grove, silent, still, watching a hunting party in the valley below...and find myself wondering if Isadora liked the scent of pine.

I followed the chief of the Battleborn clan into his home and saw the way his Mate smiled at him, saw the way his children cheered in excitement...and wondered if Isadora might ever respond that way to her Mate.

I took down one of the mighty bkarn with my bow and gifted most of it to an isolated crofter who gave me lodging for the night...and wondered if I could somehow



preserve the heart to bring back for Isadora to taste.

And each and every time she crossed my mind, I cursed myself for a fool.

She was no one—merely a human who'd needed help. She wasn't obligated to me, and I had no reason to stay awake at night thinking of her.

For certes, I did not have any right to take myself in hand and stroke my cock, imagining what 'twould feel like to have her pressed against me. Imagine what 'twould be like to bury my face in her cunny and taste her arousal, to lick her until she came on my lips. To settle her atop me so I could touch every part of that delicious body, those heavy tits, as she rode me to oblivion.

Nay, I had not the right.

I did it anyhow.

By the time I rode back through Bloodfire Village, I was in a foul mood, and, judging from the way the clan members shied away from me, 'twas obvious I wasnae able to hide it.

I found a few of the males on the sparring ground and swung down from my horse. I would walk it over to the stables when I was done with my reports, and then I would...fook, I dinnae ken what I would do. Take a cold bath in the icy loch, mayhap.

Growling at my own stupidity, I scrubbed my hand over my face.

“Ho! Torvolk!”

I dropped my hand to see a pair of warriors striding toward me. My twin brother

carried his huge sword at his side, and cousin Vartok was sliding his blade back into its scabbard. They were sweaty and breathing hard, and I realized I was envious.

Mayhap if I could work my body to such exhaustion, I might silence this unsettled anger in my chest.

“Any news?” Vartok asked eagerly as the two of them stopped near the stacked bales of hay we occasionally used as padding when we sparred. I shook my head with a scowl.

“Naught useful. If Kragorn isnae dead, he’s being hidden, and nae one in the Highlands has heard aught of it.”

“Ransom,” mused Mkaalad as he rested the haft of his ax on the ground and folded his arms atop the butt. “If he fell in the last battle with the Bladesedge, they might be holding him?”

I shook my head. “Could the entire clan keep such a secret? I’ve heard naught.”

“And why no’ make their demands?” Vartok’s expression turned bleak, and he shifted his gaze toward the village. “If they had him, they would have sent word, if only to gloat.”

“Fook,” I muttered, knowing he was right. “The human world then?”

“Aye, the humans.” Vartok dragged a hand through his hair. “We need him back.”

My brother scoffed and nudged his elbow into Vartok’s side hard enough to send the younger man stumbling.

“Ye do a fine enough job as chief. So eager to hand the responsibility back to yer

brother?”

“I would gladly cut off my left hand to have Kragorn back and all this”—my cousin waved said hand to encompass the village, the fields, the loch, and all the inhabitants—”be his problem again. I’m no’ meant to be aught more than a blacksmith.”

“Yer left hand?” I asked, raising a brow.

Mkaalad snorted. “He didnae say his right hand, did he? He’s no’ that desperate.”

I nodded solemnly. “When he starts offering to cut off the more important bits, ye ken he’s serious.”

“More important than his right hand?” my brother mused. “Like his right ballock?”

“’Tis his favorite ballock,” I deadpanned.

My twin’s sharp bark of laughter surprised me, as did the way his hand fell heavily against my shoulder.

“Torvolk making a joke? Mayhap the loch will dry up and the sun shrivel next! I always said there were swarms of bees with better dispositions than ye, brother.”

“There are,” I scowled. Granted, ‘twas easy to scowl with the arsehole shaking me the way he was. “And I could offer to cut off yer right ballock for ye.”

“Avaleen would never forgive ye,” announced Mkaalad cheerfully. “But ‘tis irrelevant, because Vartok isnae suggesting he’d trade his ballocks for the chance to give his brother back all this responsibility, is he?”

“I might be,” Vartok muttered.

My brother nodded to me conspiratorially. “He’s been bitching and moaning since ye’ve been gone. The new female’s been giving him shite.”

New female ?

“Isadora?” I snapped, hackles and instincts rising. “What’s wrong? Is she hurt?”

Mkaalad flicked his fingers teasingly. “Nay, no’ that one. The other one. Myra.”

I gaped. “Ye forgot yer sister-in-law’s name?”

“Ye’re being a fool,” my cousin muttered. “I cannae understand why she’s no’ yer problem. She lives in yer home, aye?”

“I wish she didnae. Ye ken how difficult ‘tis to do aught more than cuddle with yer Mate when her sister is sleeping right on the other side of the screen?”

Vartok dragged his hand through his hair again. “Nay, I dinnae, and I have nae interest in kenning. Move her elsewhere. Nan likes her.”

“Avaleen wants her close by in case she goes into labor,” my brother confessed, “and I’m no’ about to do aught that’ll cross her when she’s so round with my son.”

Fook .

‘Twasn’t until the pain flash through my brain that I realized I was pressing my claws against my chest again, digging, digging, digging at the source of this horrible, unsettling unease. Was it jealousy? Anger? This heat that wouldn’t leave me be... All I knew was I couldn’t stand to listen to Mkaalad’s blather about his Mated bliss any

longer.

“Torvolk.”

My name, spoken in quiet defeat from my chief’s brother, my younger cousin, cut through the buzz in my veins. I jerked my gaze up, dropping my claws away from my chest.

“Go,” he said quietly, nodding toward my cottage. “Yer Mate has been agitated, asking after ye each day. I’m sorry for keeping ye apart.”

I reared back as if he’d struck me. “She is no’ my Mate. She was being sold as a slave and I used clan gold to buy her. If aught, she’s yers .”

Mkaalad snorted again. “He can only handle one female giving him shite at a time.”

Vartok was eyeing me now in concern. “She’s no’ the clan’s, she’s yers . Nan gave her yer home, and she’s asked after ye each day ye’ve been gone.”

“Aye,” my brother cut in, “and have ye looked at yerself lately?”

My scowl deepened. ‘Twas the same thing the Keeper had asked me, but it made no sense.

“She’s no’ my Mate,” I growled. If I said it often enough, I would believe it. I couldn’t afford distractions.

And the way my Kteer was howling at the thought of claiming Isadora as my Mate? Pretty fooking distracting, if you ask me.

“Go,” Vartok snapped, pointing toward my home more emphatically. “Talk to her.

Set her mind at rest. Let Nan ken ye're alive. I'll no' send ye out until the next full moon anyhow. The Midwinter Feast is nearly upon us, and ye deserve to celebrate our survival as much as the next male."

A fortnight. A fortnight here in the village. With her .

"I should go now," I rumbled, desperate. "If I could find out where he's being held, 'twould be easier to cross through the stones and go directly there?—"

"Nay, I've given ye orders." And I saw, in Vartok's tired eyes, the strength his brother had seen when he'd left Vartok in command. "Rest. Ye deserve it."

Foooooooook .

Still scowling, I turned away, scrubbing my hand down my face. First, I would have to go to the stables?—

"I'll take yer horse!" Mkaalad called out cheerfully, likely guessing I was stalling.

I made a rude gesture over my shoulder which had him laughing.

I didn't want to face her. I didn't want to have to look into her haunted eyes and bruised lips and remember the fact I fooked my hand while thinking of her. She wasn't mine to fantasize about like that.

Was she?

My stride was longer now, my kilt slapping against my thighs as I turned the corner. Ignoring the stares of my neighbors, I made my way toward my home, faster than I expected.

And then I was there, in front of the door. I told myself not to go in, to give her privacy, but my hand was on the latch. My heart was pounding in confusion and anger and need and fear...

I opened the door, and there she was.

Every damned part of me relaxed. The band around my chest eased and I stepped into the cottage like a moth drawn to a flame, helpless to resist, and knowing I hadn't felt this peaceful in the last fortnight.

Isadora spun about from her task near the fire, a smile on her face. Gods below, that smile. It reached down into my chest, wrapped around my Kteer and squeezed, soothing the anger and the itch.

"Torvolk," she breathed, her face lit with—joy? She grasped the skirts of her gown—a pretty blue one with billowy sleeves—and offered me a small curtsy, her gaze never leaving my face.

"Welcome home, Master."

I hadn't stopped at the door. I should have, but I didn't. I just...went to her, as if 'twas the most natural thing in two worlds.

And when I reached her, I wanted to pull her into my arms, to crush her against me. Instead, I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger and tipped her head back to meet my eyes.

"I'm no' yer master, lass."

Her cheeks pinked, a saucy grin twitching her lips, but she didn't reply.

“Yer lips look better.” Torvar’s Hammer, what an understatement! I wanted to lick them, to claim them the way the human females like. “Ye are well?”

“I am,” she whispered, those blue eyes sparkling. “My ankle is healed and I have been hard at work.”

I took the time to glance about the cottage and saw what she meant.

There was a large screen separating the bed from the main room now—enough to grant privacy, but not enough to block the heat. Another screen hid what I have to assume was the pisspot and mayhap her hanging gowns.

Here in the main room there were feminine touches: curtains in front of the shuttered windows, a cloth on the table, dried herbs hanging near the door, and stacks of what looked like bars of soap piled atop the mantel. And throughout, the most magnificent scents of baked bread and cooking meat.

Almost as good as the scent of her .

“You do not mind the changes?” she asked, her voice low, cautious.

I realized I was still holding her chin. I dropped my hand and stepped back.

“Nay,” I managed gruffly. “Nay, I’m glad ye made the cottage yer home. Ye’re welcome to it.” I would stay with my cousin Vartok or in the unmarried males’ barracks or?—

“’Tis your home, Torvolk,” she said clearly, clasping her hands in front of her. “I have made it welcoming for you .”

I glanced at her sharply, or mayhap ‘twas just because I couldn’t not look her way.



“Why?”

She smiled. Gods below, she smiled. With her cheeks flushed from the fire and her hair bound back in that kerchief, she looked...fook me, she looked happy .

“Because I want you to feel good.” After dropping that mind-boggling bit of rhetoric on me, she spun back to the fire. “Now, are you hungry?”

“Aye, of course,” I grunted, because how could I not be hungry with those smells wafting through the house?

“The venison stew is not yet ready, but the bread is.” She used her skirt to protect her hand as she lifted a tray from the coals. “I will make you a quick snack if you will do me a favor?”

The shy glance she shot my way bypassed my chest and Kteer entirely and wrapped around my cock.

“Aye,” I rasped, already stepping closer. “Aught.”

She glided past, her skirt brushing my leg as she moved to the counter and set the bread down.

“Would you fill the tub?”

Her back was to me, but she used her chin to point to the cauldron of boiling water on the hearth. “I cannot lift it all at once, so ‘twould be easier if you do not mind.”

“Of course.”

For the first time I noticed the large barrel tub half-hidden behind the bed screen, and

looked between it and the cauldron hanging from the crane hook. Isadora must have set the water to bubbling ages ago for it to be ready now, and I hated that she had to go through so much trouble to have a comforting soak. ‘Twould take many trips to fill the tub from the cauldron if she had to do it by the bucketful.

There were hot springs nearby, and I would take her there so she could enjoy a hot bath without all the work. I vowed that the next time she wanted a comforting soak, I would fetch her whatever she needed; ‘twas not right for someone as wee as her to work so hard.

Nodding to myself, I swung the heavy cauldron from the flames—I recognized the piece as Nan’s, and assumed Isadora had borrowed it for her bath—and lifted it with a grunt. Careful not to spill the boiling water, I crossed to pour it into the tub.

“Thank you,” she called out. “The cold-water buckets are by the door.”

So they were. I moved them closer to the tub, then checked the water. A little too hot, so I poured in water from one of the buckets and decided ‘twas perfect.

I straightened, ready to beckon her to her bath when she turned to me with a tray and a smile.

“Could you move the stool closer to the tub, please?”

Raising one brow, I did as she asked and was surprised when she crossed beside me to place the tray on the stool. She’d broken off a large piece of the bread, sliced some cheese and dried beef, and arranged it on a plate with some apple pieces. There was also a folded rag and a bar of soap atop it, along with a mug of something strong-smelling.

This was a lass who knew how to bathe, and I was impressed.

“Your brother told me your favorite brew,” she announced, straightening.

“What?”

“The whisky.” Isadora gestured to the mug. “’Tis your favorite, I have been told. I am sorry the meal is not prepared yet, but hopefully this luncheon will hold you over?”

Frowning, I glanced between the tray and her face. “The meal...is for me?”

“’Tis not much of a meal, Master.”

Unable to help myself, I reached for her chin and tipped her head back. “I told ye, I’m no’ yer master.”

Her eyes twinkled, and by all the gods below, I wanted to taste her. I wanted to claim her.

“I know,” she whispered, impishly, then pulled away. “Enjoy your bath, Torvolk.”

“Lass—” I called out, but she had pulled her cloak down from the peg by the door, and now the cold blast of midwinter air hit me as she slipped out.

Leaving me alone in my home.

In my home, which had never looked so appealing. The scents of fresh baked bread and strong whisky and a hearty stew filled each corner. Her gowns hung on the walls, and a few feminine touches were scattered about—hair pins on a shelf, a vase with dried rosemary on the mantel.

Isadora had done this.

She'd taken my empty cottage and turned it into a home.

I glanced down at myself, filthy from the last fortnight's travels. A Ranger had no home, I reminded myself. This cottage should just be hers.

But she prepared a meal for ye. A meal and a bath and, gods below, ye could use a bath. And that whisky .

Aye, I could.

She'd done this...for me?

Slowly, I unclasped my cloak and then shrugged it off, hanging it beside the door on the same peg where hers had hung. Where had she gotten that cloak? One of the females of the village who had taken pity on her when they realized I couldn't provide for her? Or—my Kteer growled at the thought—one of the males?

'Tisnae yer responsibility to care for her .

I bent to remove my boots.

Aye, 'twas not my responsibility. So why did the thought of someone else caring for her, providing for her, fill my chest with that same itchy anger?

I rested my battleax beside my cloak, then stripped out of my kilt and shirt until I stood naked in my cottage. I hissed when I stepped into the hot bath, but forced myself to sit, to acclimate to the waters.

And by Malla the Beginner, it felt good . The heat—wet and comforting instead of the hot sharpness I'd been used to these last weeks—wrapped itself around me, soothing aching muscles.

Blowing out a breath, I sank down, pulling my knees up and resting my head back. I reached for the whisky and held it against my tongue to enjoy the smooth burn.

Aye, I was right.

The lass knew how to take a bath.

And she'd made certain I did too.

She'd done this for me.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Isadora

I walked.

I knew if I went to Nan's, she would guess something was wrong. By the way heat filled my cheeks. I knew they must flame redder than Verna's hair. Same thing with Myra, although she wouldn't push for an answer the way the old woman would. Maybal would tease me, and Hanna would offer me advice, and...

I did not want advice.

Wrapping my cloak around me, I blew out a steamy breath and turned toward the loch where I knew I'd be alone on such a raw day. I still was in a bit of awe at Bloodfire village and how perfect everything was here.

For the first time in my life, I had genuine friends . Women who cared about me, whom I cared about. The gown I wore now was a gift from Avaleen, who said she knew she'd never be that small again—her sister suspected she was carrying twins, not uncommon among orcs. My cloak was made for me—for me !— by Nan and one of her friends after the first time they saw me wrapping myself in a blanket from Torvolk's bed.

Aye, the last fortnight had been an amazing journey of change and discovery, as each day I learned something new about myself or this place that I was coming to love.

But each night?

Oh, God, each night... Each night I curled up in Torvolk's bed and thought of him. Missed him in a way which shouldn't be possible considering I'd been with him for such a short amount of time.

He'd never curled around me in bed, holding me close...but I could imagine it. He'd never touched me, cherished me, told me I was special...but by all that was holy, I could imagine it.

'Twas three nights after he left that I touched myself for the first time. I'd been lying there under his blankets, surrounded by his smell, imagining what 'twould feel like to be touched by him...and I moved aside my chemise and pictured his large green hands on my skin. Pinched my nipples and closed my eyes and pretended 'twas him...

I'd sunk my thin fingers into my wetness and wished they were larger, like his.

When I came, I whimpered his name.

In the past, when I'd done such things, 'twas hurried, furtive, hushed. I'd been ashamed of such feelings. But the last fortnight living among orcs had been...eye opening.

Orcs did not view sex as something shameful. While Mated pairs were the more prevalent, young un-Mated orcs experimented and practiced with each other, and more than a few times I'd come across a couple—or sometimes three or four—grunting and sighing and wrapped around each other behind a building or in the stables.

And Myra had shared with me a copy of a scroll titled A Harlot's Guide to the

Forbidden and Delightful Arts . I couldn't read it of course—and I was amazed she had such an amazing ability!—but the illustrations were...quite illustrative. I had no idea pleasure could be found in so many positions!

I'm not sure what Myra thought of my questions, but she answered them with her usual straight-faced expression, and explained that sex and pleasure isn't something to be feared or hidden, but something to be embraced.

I went back to Torvolk's home that day in quite a thoughtful frame of mind.

Now I came to the stoney beach which bordered the loch and turned left. I didn't want to get too close to the frigid water and risk my boots; I was merely wasting time before I could return to the cottage.

Because when Nan told me Torvolk would be returning today—and I didn't ask her how she guessed—I knew this was my chance.

My chance to stay here in this village I had come to love.

My chance to convince him not to take me back to the hell where he'd found me.

My chance for a home .

Hopefully with him.

Blowing out a deep breath, I tipped my head back to stare up at the gray sky. I wanted this. I wanted him . Was I using him? Mayhap. But I remembered the outline of his hard cock when he'd stared at my breasts, and I didn't think he would mind so much.

Hence the meal and the hot bath and the whisky.



I needed to seduce him.

Nodding once to myself, I decided I'd given him enough time to get comfortable. Time to set my plan into motion.

I tugged my cloak tighter and turned back toward the village, my steps faster than one might have guessed. This was what I'd been waiting for. This is what I wanted.

Torvolk .

At the door to the cottage— his cottage, which I'd done my best to make cozy for him so he'd want to keep me around—I paused. Could I do this?

An orc's cock is made to make his partner climax as soon as he enters her.

Aye. Aye, I could most definitely do this.

Smiling in excited anticipation, I pushed open the door.

Torvolk was sitting in the tub, head tipped back so his dark hair hung down along the wood, and his knees drawn up. This tub practically swallowed me whole, and he could barely fit in it. Just more proof of how much larger he was than me, but he didn't frighten me. If aught, his size was a comfort .

When he heard the door open, he opened one eye and tipped his head to the side to see who had disturbed him. His scowl didn't stop my smile from growing, because I was just so happy to see him relaxing.

I slipped from my cloak. "Are you enjoying the bath?"

He grunted what I had to guess was agreement, considering the food was gone and

the mug empty of whisky. I imagined the hot water and harsh spirit had combined to make him feel languid, which is exactly what I'd hoped. Mayhap even welcoming and indulgent. Aye, I could hope.

His gaze followed me as I slipped from my boots and padded in my stockings across the room. The rug-covered floor was chilly, but I tossed another log on the fire and hoped I'd be warm enough soon.

You can do this, Isadora. You want to do this.

Aye.

I stopped behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Are you well, Master? Can I fetch you aught to make you happier?"

"I told ye, lass," he growled, tipping his head back farther to glare up at me. "I'm no' yer master."

I grinned. "I know." I bent down and brushed a kiss on his forehead, my smile growing at the way his eyes crossed trying to follow my movements. "I am just teasing you."

"Why?" he barked. "Why would ye joke about such a thing?"

Since I could tell he was becoming less relaxed, I pushed on his shoulder, forcing him back into the water as much as I could.

"Because I want to make you smile. You have given me so much to smile about, and I want to return that joy."

He was silent for a moment, and his scowl eased to mere confusion. I moved behind

him so I could spread my fingers and then my palms across both his shoulders, and squeezed the tight muscles there.

“Joy?” he finally asked again. “I dinnae understand.”

“You saved me, Torvolk,” I said simply. “Not just that night in the tavern when you paid an outrageous sum for my non-existent virginity, but after. You could have sent me on my way and I would have been dead or enslaved within days. Instead, you brought me here.”

I leaned over and scooped up the soap from the tray, lathering it in my hands. “And here is the most wonderful place I have ever been.”

My answer must have satisfied him, because he relaxed again beneath my palms.

“Ye’re welcome,” he muttered. “But ye dinnae need to serve me. The gold wasnae mine.”

“Aye,” I agreed matter-of-factly as I began to scrub his shoulders and neck. “I have learned much about your world in the last fortnight. Enough to know I want to stay here.”

An orc’s cock is made to make his partner climax as soon as he enters her.

Aye, I wanted to stay here.

I wanted everything this world could offer me.

My thumbs dug into the muscles at the base of his neck and he groaned and sank lower in the tub. From this angle, I could look down his broad chest and see where his skin disappeared into the water. There wasn’t enough light to see the rest of him

under the water, but I wondered if I could make him hard again.

“Ye want to stay, lass?” he finally murmured.

Lass . He’d never called me by my name, although he knew it. I wanted to hear him say my name.

“I do. I want to stay here.” I moved his hair to one side so I could reach his muscles better, and confessed in the barest whisper, “With you.”

I felt him stiffen, and I knew he’d heard. I knew, from what I’d learned, that orcs’ senses were far superior to humans. Avaleen said her Mate’s sense of smell was good enough he could tell when she was aroused, and I remembered the way Torvolk’s nostrils had flared when he’d watched me. I’d been aroused.

Now though, he cleared his throat. “This soap feels good. I dinnae recognize it.”

“Rosemary and mint,” I explained matter-of-factly, plopping the bar down on the tray and reaching for the bindings of my gown. I didn’t want to get too wet as I washed him, and removing my gown would further expedite things. “’Tis my favorite blend.”

As I finished pulling the gown off I realized he’d twisted to watch me, his gaze carefully blank.

“Ye made this soap?” he asked, although he was looking not at the object in question, but at my chemise-clad body. My breasts peeked back at him through the sheer cloth.

I stepped back to him, pushing up my sleeves. “Aye, ‘tis my one real talent. This has cured enough for use, but ‘tis not hard enough to last.” I moved the empty bucket beneath his head and began to ladle warm water over his hair, forcing him to tip his head back. “I have left the rest of that batch to cure.”

“Seems to me ye have many talents, lass,” he muttered. I began to soap his hair. His eyes closed and a low moan of pleasure slipped from his chest. He cleared his throat. “And when the other bars have cured?”

I suppose I could sell them, but I was realizing Bloodfire Village—in fact, the entire orcish world—was very different from what I was used to. Here people didn’t scrimp and save desperately, working their fingers to the bone to afford a bit of joy. Instead, everyone looked out for one another, helping where needed, and even where not. ‘Twas one of the things I loved about this place.

So I shrugged, my fingers digging into his scalp as he groaned once more.

“I suppose I will make more. I never had the time to do more than a small batch here or there, although since I slept before the hearth, I had plenty of opportunity to choose the kind of wood ash I needed.”

Another groan, then Torvolk sighed. “Ye are free to pursue yer talents here, lass. Would ye...?”

When he trailed off, I switched my attention to the rest of his hair, gently combing out the tangles.

“Would I what, Torvolk?” I whispered.

“I’d like to learn—to see how ye make yer soap. Nan gave ye the herbs, I assume?”

Shyly, I admitted another friend, an orcish woman named Amma, had allowed me to take some of hers since the gardens were long dormant, if I promised her soap in return. We spent several minutes talking about the soap-making itself, and although I was surprised Torvolk was interested, his questions put me at ease.

When it came time to rinse his hair, I lifted the remaining bucket of water. “Brace yourself, this will be chilled.”

He didn’t flinch as I poured the water down his hair, sluicing it into the empty bucket...

And onto me.

“Oh, damn,” I muttered, realizing the front of my chemise was now soaked.

“What?” he asked, twisting around.

I shoved down on his shoulder again to push him back in place and stepped away from the tub. Well...this was what I’d been waiting for, wasn’t it?

Taking a deep breath, and not allowing myself time to reconsider my action, I pulled my chemise up and over my head until I stood there wearing only my stockings, which were now wet through.

I immediately stepped behind Torvolk’s head and picked up the soap to run it across his shoulders again. Then I swiped it across his chest. Once, twice...I could feel his heartbeat beneath my palm, and I spread my fingers to try to capture the sensation of his skin beneath mine.

The soap slid from my hand, and I didn’t care. I ran my palms over his chest, one arm on either side of his head, leaning over him until my breasts cocooned the back of his head. My breathing stuttered at the warmth and pressure against my breasts, and I had to squeeze my thighs together to capture the throbbing sensation in my core.

Touching him like this was everything I’d imagined.

He stiffened, his muscles tight beneath my fingers, as I slid my hands over his nipples and down, lower, lower...

As they reached the waterline, he sprang into motion, grasping one of my wrists.

“What are ye doing, lass?” he growled, his voice two octaves lower than normal.

“Washing you,” I replied as nonchalantly as I could manage. Without pulling my hand from his hold, I moved around the tub until I was at his side.

Torvolk slowly straightened, his gaze raking me from chin to knee. He didn’t seem surprised by my nudity, but I saw his nostrils flare as his gaze landed on the clump of curls which hid my sex.

Feeling bolder now, my free hand rose to cup my breast, hefting it in a way I could imagine him doing. Since coming to the village, I hadn’t felt the need to bind and hide them—such a relief! And I most definitely didn’t want to hide them now from Torvolk.

“Is there anything else I could wash for you?” I murmured.

His eyes, which had been dark when I’d first met him, now glowed green. His lips parted and his tongue darted out to swipe along his tusk in a distracted sort of way. I wanted to do that. I wanted to kiss him, to taste him.

But now I held his gaze, wondering if he could feel the flutter of my pulse beneath his fingers. I wanted him to touch me other places. All the places.

“Lass,” he whispered.

I was already leaning forward when he gave me the slightest little tug, and I went

gladly into his arms.

Well, to be fair, what really happened was I splashed ungainly across his lap in the tub, but 'twas worth it.

I ended up sitting in his lap, one arm thrown across his shoulders, my stockinged legs kicking over the edge of the tub, staring wide-eyed up at him.

I stifled a giggle.

Torvolk no longer held my gaze. Instead, he eyed my breasts and stomach and thatch of curls as if I were a buffet laid out for a starving man. I arched my back slightly to give him a better view, not even caring if I was acting wanton.

For so long I'd been called terrible things for acting like a good girl. Now, here in this place, I could be as wanton as I wanted.

When he growled, I felt it reverberate through his chest and into mine. His tusks didn't so much elongate as his lips pulled back from them, and when he lifted his hand toward me, I saw his claws extend.

This was the beast, the primitive part of Torvolk Avaleen had warned me about. Well, she didn't so much warn me as say "Hold on and enjoy the ride" with a wink.

Oh God, how I wanted this.

When his hand closed around my breast, the claws dimpling my skin ever so slightly, I whimpered, arching into his touch again. But he didn't move, and I glanced up at him.

He was watching me.



There was something in his green gaze I couldn't identify, a need ...but there was also hope there. I could feel his breathing stutter, and I wondered if he was as desperate as I was.

“Aye,” I whispered, looking deep into his eyes. “Torvolk, aye .”

When he squeezed, we both groaned. His large hand on me...it felt as good as I'd imagined. Better.

Torvolk took his time with me. Examining me, enjoying me. 'Twas as if he'd been imagining what my body would feel like, and now he wanted the chance to learn the truth. At least, that is what I told myself as I gasped and moaned under his hands.

He shifted, pulling me closer, squeezing me against his chest with his knees as he captured my nipple between a thumb and forefinger.

“Torvolk,” I cried, bucking my hips hard enough to send water splashing over the side of the tub.

“Hush, lass,” he chuckled.

Chuckled .

My eyes flashed open to see a small grin pulling at his lips, his gaze focused on my body. He wasn't a male to smile easily, and I wondered if the world was about to end—or could it be something else ?

His fingers caressed, stroked, teased every inch of me, and when they dipped toward my thighs, I spread my legs, welcoming his touch. But he hesitated over my curls, then his fingers trailed down my thighs toward my garters.

“Yer stockings are wet.”

They weren't the only wet thing about me. But I managed a nonchalant,

“Aye.”

I managed a single word. Of one syllable. This was definitely something else .

“We should get ye out of them.”

Was this feeling roiling through me excitement or disappointment? Instinctively I flexed my thighs, hoping to entice his hand back where I wanted it. But his lips tugged into a stern frown which might have been faked.

“Lass, I cannae afford to have ye catch yer death of cold, sitting here in my lap.”

I wriggled my arse. “I like your lap, Master.”

“I am no' —”

I surged upward to cut him off, pulling myself toward him with the arm I'd locked around his neck. My mouth landed on his and he froze. While I tried to show him how to soften his lips, how to tease, my hips rolled and I threw one leg over his arm, until I was practically climbing him.

And still, his lips remained still. I pulled his lower lip between mine, then dragged my tongue along his until he relaxed. I licked his tusk, the way I'd wanted to, and he reared back.

“What are ye doing?” he growled.

I refused to feel self-conscious. “I am kissing you.”

“Nay, lass.” His hold on me tightened. “That is no’ kissing.” He stood, water sloshing everywhere, and I squealed, throwing both my arms around his neck.

He stood there in the tub, water sluicing off both of us, him peering down at me seriously. “I’ve wanted to taste ye, lass.”

My heart began to pound. “I have wanted that too.” I stretched up again, trying to press my lips against his, but he stepped from the tub, jostling me.

Still dripping, he crossed to the bed.

“Tell me ye want this, lass. Ye want me to taste ye. No’ because I’m yer master, or because I bid gold for ye, but because...”

“Oh, by all that is holy, Torvolk.” I pressed my forehead to his shoulder, shuddering with anticipation and, well, frustration. “Aye . I began to dream of it that very first night, when you touched me so gently, when I saw the size of your massive cock. I want you.”

He didn’t reply, but I sucked in a breath when he tossed me atop the bed. I was getting the blankets wet, but if it meant finally having Torvolk, finally securing my place here in the village, I couldn’t care less.

An orc’s cock is made to make his partner climax as soon as he enters her.

Aye, please.

He loomed over me, and his erect cock was enough to make my mouth water and my insides quiver. How could something that big fit inside me? ‘Twas thick and ridged

and a darker green than the rest of him. I wanted to touch it, and in fact, I lifted my arms, reaching for him...

He bent down, grabbed my ankles, and tugged.

Squealing, I slid to the edge of the bed.

He planted his palms on either side of my hips. "I told ye, I didnae want ye catching cold." His voice was deep, commanding. "Ye heard that?"

I wriggled my arse, hoping to show him how excited I was. "Aye, Master, you did."

He let this one pass as he shifted his weight and rested one set of fingertips atop my right breast. He allowed them to trail over my nipple, along my stomach, down, down...to my garter. I sucked in a breath. Held it.

"Ye cannae lay here in wet clothing," he growled, and afore I knew what was happening, he'd bent down to catch the garter in his mouth.

Nay, his tusks .

I gasped.

A ripping sound, then he was pulling my stocking down. His hands and the wool caressed the skin of my knees, then my calves, before sliding over my feet. The second one joined the first, but he didn't move from where he crouched between my legs.

Breathless, my body overwhelmed with sensation, I lifted my head and shoulders to peer between my breasts at the male who now captured my gaze.

“Better,” he rumbled. “Are ye still cold?”

“Nay,” I said with a shiver that belied the claim. The curl of his lips—so unusual on this stoic male—told me he saw my lie.

Still holding my gaze, he lowered his mouth to my knee. “Are ye cold here?”

When his lips caressed my skin, I shivered again. “Nay,” I managed, back to one-syllable words.

He shifted, moving up a few inches to the inside of my thigh. “Here?”

When his tusk scraped against my sensitive skin, I groaned and collapsed back on the bed. “Nay.” This time the word was a mere squeak.

I felt his tongue scrape upward.

“Here?” He murmured at the apex of my thighs.

There was a rush of liquid heat to my core, and he responded with a rumbling sort of growl before he surged forward.

I’m not sure what I expected, but ‘twas not for this great beast of a male to bury his nose into my curls and inhale long and heavy, his hands clamped to my thighs, claws dimpling my skin.

Startling, I jerked upright again. “Torvolk?”

“Hush, lass,” he murmured. “I’m savoring.”

“Savoring?”

“ This is how ye kiss.”

And with that, he wrenched my thighs apart and his tongue—just as ridged and thick as his cock—snaked out to swipe along my cleft.

I jerked in his hold at the initial contact, then melted back with a surprised moan. What had Myra called this? When a male used his tongue on his female’s cunny? There was a word for this from A Harlot’s Guide , but right now I couldn’t think of what ‘twas.

I couldn’t think of aught .

Because after fourteen long days, I finally had Torvolk’s hands on my skin and his mouth... Oh God, his mouth.

Part of me was almost glad I couldn’t see what he was doing, because the sensations alone were overwhelming. His hands hefted my thighs, holding them up and apart until he settled them over his shoulders. Then he moved his hands to my arse and lifted.

I squeaked as this new angle allowed his tongue to reach all the way from my rear hole to swipe forward. This felt almost dirty, and I might’ve had the chance to blush...had the ridges on his tongue not chosen that moment to drag over my clitoris.

Every.

Single.

Ridge.

“Torvolk !” I cried, grabbing for his hair to lock him there.

He huffed a chuckle against my core. “Ye like that, do ye?”

I couldn’t answer, my vocabulary depleted, but thrust my hips forward in reply. He took the hint.

As his tongue curled around the bud of my pleasure, teasing me with those ridiculously delicious ridges, I locked my ankles together to try to keep from floating away. His fingertip slid along my cleft, and I rocked forward, hoping he’d take the hint again.

He did.

I groaned as one of his fingers slid inside me.

“Good lass,” he murmured against my curls, shifting so his mouth was lower. “Can ye take another one?”

“Aye!” I gasped, pleading...and Torvolk gently pushed another thick finger into my core.

These two fingers were thicker than anything I’d ever experienced—much bigger than my own fingers—but it still wasn’t enough.

“More,” I begged, gyrating my cunny into his face.

Another chuckle that I felt through my whole body, and he flicked his tongue against my pearl as he slowly slid a third finger inside me.

I froze, my muscles tightening. This was... I was stuffed full, stretched in a way I’d never considered. I ached, but ‘twas a good ache.

“Dinnae fash, lass,” he crooned, kissing my curls again. “Ye’re doing such a bonny job. Taking three of my fingers so quickly, like ye were made for me.”

His praise caused another flood of liquid heat to spill over his fingers.

“I love it,” I gasped truthfully. “Oh please, Torvolk!”

“Please what?” he hummed, then dragged the ridges of his tongue over my clitoris.

“What do ye want?”

What did I want? I couldn’t grasp the words, couldn’t think straight. I gyrated against him, tightening my hold on his hair.

“ Please ,” I managed to whine helplessly.

His fingers began to move, just miniscule movements out, then in again. I whimpered, squeezing my thighs together, the pressure and pleasure building to a point I could no longer breathe.

“Ye want to come?” He kissed me again. “Ye want me to lick ye until ye come, like a good lass?”

“I am good,” I gasped, desperate.

“Ye want this? Ye want me to make ye come?” he crooned, then glided his tongue along the seam where his fingers disappeared. “Ye’re my good lass?”

“Yours,” I sobbed, “Torvolk, yours.”

He closed his lips around my clitoris, his tusks scraping against the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, and I exploded.



With a wail, I came around his fingers, my entire body convulsing as my arse thrust off the bed and ground against him. My inner muscles pulsed again and again, almost painfully , each spasm seeming to take him deeper and deeper and deeper.

I was stretched full of him .

And I was so very complete.

But...

But eventually my pleasure faded. Eventually he slid from my core, he gently untangled my legs and set my arse back on the bed. Eventually he placed a final kiss on my curls and pushed himself upright.

Torvolk rarely grinned, and now was no exception. But his mouth and jaw were covered in my desire, and as he held my gaze, his tongue darted across his lips to pull my spend into his mouth.

“I kenned ye’d be delicious.” ‘Twas all he said, and my cheeks heated, unable to believe my behavior of moments before.

Had I really ridden his face like that? Had he really done those things to me?

Aye. And I wanted to do it again.

I reached for him, and to my surprise, he came willingly. His cock seemed less erect than when he’d placed me on the mattress, and for the first time I remembered that this was supposed to be about his pleasure.

What was that word he always used?

Oh fook .

As he took me in his arms, I peeked up at him. “Do you want me to use my mouth on you?”

Torvolk stiffened, something fierce flashing across his face before he relaxed and scowled down at me. “Go to sleep, lass.”

Lass .

That’s who I was to him. Just a lass.

“I am not tired.” ‘Twas still the middle of the afternoon. “I need to clean up the tub and these blankets.”

Still scowling, he wrapped his arms around me, pinned me to the mattress with a leg, and tucked my head against his shoulder.

“Go to sleep,” he growled.

I wasn’t sleepy.

But...he was so very comfortable. And warm. And safe.

And my body did feel lethargic after that magnificent climax.

Twisting and stretching, I was able to brush a kiss over his jaw. I tasted myself, which was strange.

“Thank you, Torvolk.”

He used his free hand to shove my head back to his shoulder with a grunt.

I exhaled, allowing my eyes to close.

Mayhap a nap in the middle of the day wasn't such a terrible idea after all.

The last thing I heard as I drifted off in a cloud of comfort was his whisper.

“That's my good lass.”

### CHAPTER NINE

Torvolk

‘Twas torture to watch her sleep.

I remembered her small mouth pressed to mine—I don’t think I’d ever be able to forget it—and the self-control it took not to crush her to me and take command of that “kiss.” I’d wanted to. Gods below, how I wanted to.

But it seemed so...intimate.

I snorted at my own idiocy.

A kiss was intimate, but what I’d just done wasn’t?

Shaking my head, I rolled away from Isadora, pulling my arm from under her as gently as possible to avoid waking her.

Tasting her had been...it had been the most remarkable experience. Once I’d started, once I had the scent of her arousal in my nose, I didn’t think I could stop. I wanted to bury my face in her cunny, I wanted to be surrounded by her scent and her taste and her... her .

My Kteer had gone a bit mad, but I couldn’t only blame that primitive side of me.

I—my heart and my mind—had wanted Isadora as well. Too much. Which is why I

couldn't allow myself to get any closer. If I was going to leave in a fortnight to continue my search for Kragorn, I couldn't become any more obsessed with this female...more than I currently was.

Cursing myself for a fool, I carefully rolled out of bed.

We were both nude, and the cool air had dried us after our bath. I pulled a blanket from the chest to cover her, then gently tugged at the one she was lying half on, half off. Aye, 'twas damp from our bodies, but...

I grimaced, holding it up.

When was the last time I'd spilled on my blankets in the middle of the night? Not since I was a lad, for certes.

And yes, this afternoon as I'd pressed against the mattress, my tongue and my hands and my entire being focused on bringing Isadora pleasure, the friction had been too much. I'd spilled my seed against the blanket like an untried youth as she'd come on my tongue.

Congratulations. Ye fooked a mattress.

Scowling, I tossed the blanket into the now-cooled bath water. Without bothering to dress, I knelt at the tub, picked up the soap, and began to scrub. But the movements were unconscious, which allowed my mind to wander.

This bar of soap...Isadora would have made it soon after her arrival here. She'd made herself a home not just in the village, but in this cottage. This was her space now; cozy and welcoming. I ought to leave it to her and stay with Nan when I needed a bed on my occasional returns to the village.

But...

But Nan's cottage shared a garden with this one. 'Twas why I'd built this home after my father's death, so I could be near to her in case she needed aught. Mkaalad had lived with me for a time afore he took over our uncle's cottage on the other side of the village.

As a Ranger, I only returned home occasionally. But when I was here, could I content myself to living with Nan? With being so close to Isadora? Mayhap I should abandon this side of the village altogether, or resign myself to staying in the bachelor barracks.

Because this home was now Isadora's.

I lifted the herb-scented soap and stared at it.

But she'd made me welcome here. She'd made me feel comfortable.

This was her home now, aye, but she'd cooked me bread and readied a bath and fetched my favorite whisky. She'd washed my hair and kissed me.

She'd called me master, but even I could tell she no longer meant it.

Isadora had made this my home as well.

And I had no idea what that meant.

Scowling again, I wrung out the blanket and hung it over the privacy screen to slowly dry. Only then did I dress in a clean shirt and kilt.

Isadora sat up as I was finishing, and I froze. Not because I was guilty, but because she looked so fucking alluring, with her hair a wild cloud around her head and her

eyes hazy with sleep. She clutched the blanket to her chest in a display of modesty that amused me, and her cheeks darkened with a blush.

“Torvolk?” Her voice, husky with sleep and desire, went right to my cock.

To distract myself, I lifted the tub with a grunt. ‘Twas a strain even for me.

“I’ll dump this and return Nan’s cauldron,” I managed.

“You will return, aye?”

‘Twas the worry in her voice that my Kteer reacted to, and I had to tamp down the urge to tell her I would protect her and keep her safe. Instead, I nodded brusquely, grunted an “Aye,” and shuffled out the door.

I will admit that once I propped the tub to dry in the garden and returned the cauldron to Nan, I stomped around the village looking for a distraction. I would spar, except I’d just bathed. And I was feeling strangely sated, my body still relaxed and a little tingly from the hot bath and the release, even if it had been embarrassing.

So I went to find Vartok and discuss options. Unfortunately, he was still with my brother, and the pair of them—and even my hugely pregnant sister-in-law—teased me for smelling like rosemary and mint.

My Kteer urged me to hit them with chairs. Well, Vartok and Mkaalad; Avaleen I would allow to tease me as much as she wanted, and not just because she carried my nephew. I managed to tamp down the violent urge, but that itchy, angry sensation was creeping back.

I liked the way I smelled, by the gods! It reminded me of Isadora.

Deciding no good would come of breaking my promise to her, I returned to the cottage as the sun was setting.

Seeing her smile immediately light her face made me feel like a fool for not returning sooner.

“Torvolk, you are just in time for the meal. Sit, sit!” she commanded, waving a spoon toward the table she’d set.

She reminded me of a little chief. Isadora might call me master , but she’d been demanding and certain in bed. She’d held my face against her cunny and gyrated on my tongue and fingers.

Just the reminder made my cock stiffen beneath my kilt, and I hurried to follow her instructions so she wouldn’t see.

The meal was hearty and filling; stewed root vegetables and roasted bkarn , with the same thick bread she’d served earlier. ‘Twas not warm, but she’d smothered it in rich butter, and I decided this was one of the best meals I’d ever eaten.

Throughout, she sat across from me and spoke. She spoke about the village and the women she’d met. She spoke about the skills she’d learned and what she’d been able to share. She spoke of the clan’s generosity and welcome...while I listened and occasionally grunted in agreement.

‘Twas rude, I knew. But what was I supposed to say? That she was welcome to stay as long as she liked? That the clan would love her?

Better to keep my mouth occupied with eating a third helping.

The food was delicious, and the entertainment even better. The itchy ball of hot anger



I'd been carrying around in my chest was still there, but felt less warm when I was with her.

As she described how she'd soaked the herbs in oil to scent her soap, I found myself studying her.

Her eyes were bright with reflected firelight from the candles which sat between us, and she waved her hands animatedly as she spoke. I was struck with the difference between her conversation style now versus when I first met her. When I first bought her.

Her cheeks were flushed becomingly, and her hair... A frown tugged at my lips. She was wearing that kerchief again, a dull brown wool that did naught to set off her golden strands.

"May I ask a question?" I interrupted.

She blinked. "Aye, of course."

"The kerchief. Why do ye wear it? Is it to keep yer head warm?"

I could see her surprise as she reached up to touch the scratchy material. "'Tis..." Her flush worked its way down her throat. "Nay, it only serves to keep my hair out of my face. Since I cannot pull it back anymore, and since 'tis too ragged to wear without covering it."

She thought her hair unattractive? That was why she wore the kerchief? But it also served a purpose.

I nodded in understanding.

“I am sorry I dominated the conversation,” she offered a little shyly, no longer full of animation as she prodded her vegetables with an eating knife. “You likely do not care to hear about soap-making.”

“On the contrary, I liked it verra much.” When she peeked up at me, I dropped my chin once to let her know I wasn’t lying. “When will ye make another batch? I’d like to watch.”

As she lifted her face, her lips formed the word, “ watch,” but no sound emerged. She cleared her throat. “I...have never had anyone interested in my craft.”

Nay, she’d spent her life sleeping on hearthstones and eating scraps. The least I could do was be interested in her skills. But I didn’t make the offer out of pity.

“I would like to learn, if ye’d allow it.”

“You want me to teach you to make soap?” she breathed in surprise.

Did I? I had only meant I wanted to learn about her . But I nodded again, then grunted, “Aye,” for good measure.

And her smile when she heard that? Her smile made me vow to make soap with her every damned day. And to bathe with her soap every day so she would need to make more ...

After the meal, I helped her clean, which surprised her. Admittedly, I wasn’t quite certain how to scrub a baking tray, but she showed me what to do.

“I’ve never learned the ways of making bread,” I admitted as I scrubbed. After a lifetime of living alone, I knew how to roast meat, how to make a passable pottage, and how to clean up after...but bread had always been a mystery.

“I can teach you. ‘Tis not so difficult.”

“Ye mix plants together with water and get a loaf. ‘Tis sorcery.”

She giggled, and my Kteer crowed.

Gods below, it had been mere hours and already I was ready to devote my every waking hour to this female. I craved her smiles, her voice, her laughter. Her scent. Her taste .

Thinking of how she’d cared for me that afternoon, I reached for my cloak after we finished cleaning.

“Where are you going?” she blurted, and instinctively I reacted to the panic in her voice.

“Just to Nan’s,” I reassured her. “I need to borrow shears. If she doesnae have them, I will try Darnaal the shepherd.”

Isadora stood in the center of the cottage, wringing her pink hands, raw from hard work.

“You will return, aye?”

‘Tis what she asked me earlier. I nodded once, because aye...I was beginning to suspect I would always return.

I wanted Isadora.

I wanted to claim her. Not just taste her, not just feel her climax around me, but claim her .

Gods help me.

I returned with the shears and a lotion I knew Nan valued.

I could feel Isadora's eyes on me—she sat in one of the straight-backed wooden chairs she'd dragged near the fire, mending ignored on her lap—as I crossed to the chest of discarded clothing. I pulled out an old plaid, one I often cut from when I needed scraps or patches, and used the shears to neatly cut a rectangle from one end.

This I spread over the table and, using my hand to measure, cut it into large squares. One of these I cut diagonally, and when I held them up to show her, she gasped in delight.

“Kerchiefs?” she asked in amazement. “You would cut your kilt to make me new kerchiefs?”

I shrugged a little awkwardly. I'd cut my kilt to fix her bodice, had I not?

“If they serve a purpose, I thought ye might like a bit more color.”

And the thought of her wearing my plaid, even if 'twas not the traditional way over her heart, made my Kteer pleased.

I stacked the remaining squares. “Could ye use these? More kerchiefs?”

“Actually...” She was blushing as she set aside her mending and stood to cross to the table. “I was thinking I might make some cushions. For the chairs.” She glanced over her shoulder at the hard wooden seat. “I thought 'twould be more comfortable, to sit in front of the fire on a winter's evening if we had some cushions.”

We .

I swallowed, vowing to find her something even more comfortable.

“They’re so hard, when I sit in them I feel as if my arse is breaking,” I admitted.

“Well...” Her tone told me she was smiling, and aye, when I glanced up at her, there was a twinkle in those blue eyes. “Yer arse does have a crack in it.”

If I were the type of male to laugh, I would have. Instead, I ducked my head to hide my smile and thrust the material at her.

“Fine.”

As she folded the squares, I worked up the courage to make the other offer I’d intended.

“Yer hair.”

Isadora’s grin faded into wariness. “What about it?”

I opened and closed the shears a few times, shnick-shnick , in the obligatory motion. “Ye said ‘twas unruly—nay, ye called it ragged.”

Her hand rose to pull off her kerchief, as her eyes widened with disbelief. “You brought me shears to trim it? Oh, Torvolk, that is so very kind of you! But I cannot style my own hair, I cannot see it.”

Ah. I should have considered that.

Without thinking, I grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the hearth. I moved the candle to the mantel so I could see better, then I took her chin between my thumb and forefinger and tipped her head back.

I could lower my mouth to hers here. I could taste her. Kiss her.

Nay ye cannae. Because if ye do, ye'll no' be able to leave her in a fortnight .

And I had to leave.

So I forced myself to study her features and the way the hair fell about her cheeks and around her ears. When that bastard had lopped off her magnificent braid, he'd done so close to her neck, so 'twas longer in the front, and ragged along the edges...

Frowning in concentration, I went to work.

It seemed as if the universe held its breath as I snipped and brushed. The only sound was the popping of the fire and the gentle shnick of the shears. When Isadora exhaled, I could feel it against my fingers and my cheeks.

And she never took her trusting gaze off me.

I realized I was stroking her jaw now, rather than holding it, and when I finished, I released her.

"There." I blew out a breath. "I'm no' saying 'tis beautiful, but 'twill do."

She didn't move, didn't touch her hair, didn't do aught besides smile up at me.

"'Tis perfect ," she whispered, and her joy reached down my chest and wrapped itself around my heart.

And my cock, truth be told.

Clearing my throat, I shnick-shicked again. "I'll get the broom?—"

“Nay, I can sweep the hair into the fire, if ye can stand the smell.” Isadora sprang into motion. “You have done so much for me already.”

Had I? “Then at least allow me to brush off yer gown outside. Take it off there, near the hearth.”

“Oh, ‘tis a smart plan.” Without hesitation, she reached for the ties of her gown.

And I stood there like a dobber, staring as she efficiently stripped. I mean, to be fair, I couldn’t look away if a herd of cattle had stampeded through the cottage, but I should have made an attempt.

Isadora was blushing when she—in her chemise and stockings—handed me the gown to take outside. As I opened the door, I called out, “Aye, I’ll be back,” so she didn’t have to ask a third time.

When I returned, she was sitting on the bed, knees drawn up and arms wrapped around herself. The fire was dying, and I blew out the candles after I tugged off my boots.

I wanted to strip down, but doubted ‘twas smart.

“Torvolk?” she whispered.

“Aye, lass?”

A pause. Then, in the near darkness: “You are not leaving tonight, are you?”

I hadn’t slept in this cottage in months. Even that first day I’d returned, I’d found someplace else to lay my head. Then I ran off for a fortnight, and returned to find this beguiling human had made herself at home.

“Nay, lass,” I confessed. “I’m no’ leaving.”

I heard her shifting on the bed and remembered the lotion I’d fetched from Nan. Best to put it on now, so ‘twould have the night to soak in. I crossed to the bed with the crock.

“Give me yer hand, lass,” I demanded as I sank down onto the mattress beside her.

‘Twas as if every sense of mine was attuned to her. Even in the poor light, I knew exactly where her hand was as she held it out. I could feel her breathing next to me. I could smell her curiosity.

When I rested her small hand in my palm and used the other set of fingers to rub in a glob of the lotion, she released a small moan of pleasure.

“What is this?”

Since she was whispering, I matched her tone, tipping my head toward hers.

“Goat’s butter for yer hands. Ye shouldnae work so hard, lass. Ye are worth more than just yer labor.”

“I have to work hard if I want to stay.” Another little moan of pleasure when I flipped her hand over and used the pads of my thumbs to work the lotion into her palm. “I...”

“Ye deserve to sit on a throne and be waited upon.”

I heard her smile.

“And who would wait upon me? Nay, Torvolk, I am happy to work hard. At least here...”



When she trailed off, I took her other hand.

“Here, what?”

She was quiet as I rubbed the lotion into her other hand, making sure the calluses on her fingertips were covered. Finally she sighed in what sounded like pleasure.

“At least here, I can work for myself.”

A month ago, she was slaving for a cruel mistress. Och, the smith and his wife might not have owned her, but they treated her like a slave. Then I bought her and brought her to a place where she never had to worry about such a thing, and of course she would be thrilled to finally work hard for herself.

“I’m glad, lass,” I confessed gruffly, unable to stop myself from lifting her hand to my mouth. “Verra glad.”

I brushed my lips over her palm, knowing ‘twas a poor substitute for what I wanted to taste.

Her breath caught, but she cleared her throat and said, a teasing lilt in her voice, “I meant, Master, that I am working hard for you . And myself. But mainly you.”

I couldn’t stop the chuckle which burst from my lips. “Ye dinnae give up on an idea once it gets in yer head, do ye?”

“Torvolk?” She shifted to press her free hand against my cheek. “Are ye well? Is aught amiss? You do not feel fevered. Should I light the candles? Call for a healer?”

I caught her hand. “For what?”

“You laughed . I have never heard you laugh before.”

Mayhap ‘twas the darkness which made it safe to reveal more of myself, but I found myself chuckling again as I caught both of her hands and pressed them against my chest. I fell against the pillows, taking her with me.

“Go to sleep, lass.”

“You will not leave me?”

Gods below, I couldn’t make such a vow! My laughter died, and in the silence I could hear her holding her breath.

“I’ll be here when ye wake.” ‘Twas the best I could promise, now. “Go to sleep, lass,” I commanded again.

And miracle of miracles, she did.

### CHAPTER TEN

Isadora

In all my life, I have never woken so warm and safe.

Until I came to Bloodfire Village, I couldn't recall the last time I'd slept in an actual bed. Those first few nights, I struggled to get used to the soft mattress, and now each morning felt like a blissful slow awakening.

The birds chirping outside, the soft light through the shutters, the cloud of blankets and pillows...

Aye, I was in love with Torvolk's bed.

But this morning?

This morning I woke sprawled atop Torvolk, my cheek pressed to his chest, his hand resting on the small of my back, and I knew the meaning of the word perfection .

For about five seconds, before I realized I was drooling all over the poor male.

I shot upright with a gasp, only to find him already awake, staring at me.

"Good morning," he rumbled.

I swiped fingers across my chin, praying he hadn't noticed the giant wet spot on his

chest, and turned away to hide my embarrassment.

“You should have woken me. I will make porridge to break your fast.”

His hand closed around my wrist, stopping my attempts to roll out of bed.

“Are ye hungry, lass?”

Flustered, I tucked my newly trimmed hair behind my ear. “Nay, I am rarely hungry in the morning.” I was used to waiting until nearly noon to eat.

He shrugged. “Then there’s nae need to cook. I’m no’ hungry yet either, and when I am, I’ll cook myself some porridge.” His lips twitched. “Mayhap I’ll feed ye for a change.”

“Och nay, Torvolk, you have given me so much?—”

When his brow twitched, I realized what I’d said, and my cheeks heated.

Thinking of yesterday.

Remembering the way he’d held my chin so gently as he fixed my mess of hair.

Remembering how he’d cut his own plaid so I’d have more colorful kerchiefs.

Remembering how he’d let me blather on and had asked me to teach him to make soap.

Remembering the way he’d held me down on the bed and made me come all over his tongue and face.

Oh dear, here came my blush again.

“What are yer plans for the day, lass?”

I felt as if his question was a peace offering, allowing the memories of what passed between us yesterday to fade. He hadn't released my wrist, and I didn't want him too. Averting my gaze, I stared at the blankets when I answered.

“I thought I would make another small batch of soap. 'Twill not cure in time for gifts at the Midwinter Feast, but I have already had many requests.”

“And when will ye do that?”

I peeked at him. “This afternoon?”

His nod was gruff, just like he was. “Fine then. I'll do some chores around the place this morning and join ye then. What have ye noticed needs doing around this place?”

He was asking me ?

Well, why not? You have lived here the last fortnight, have you not ? Surely you have done more than drool on his bed?

My lips pressed together as I thought of what needed to be done.

“The thatch on the backside of the roof will need replacing this summer, but for now there are only a few places that need patching. The firewood pile needs restocking.” My mind raced. “There is a loose flagstone in the garden. One of the table legs is cracked.”

He made a little huff that might have been a laugh coming from another male. He

squeezed my wrist once then rolled from the bed.

‘Twas... strange to go about my morning with him in the same space. I kept sneaking glances at him. Now that I’d been in the village for a fortnight, I was used to the way orc males moved, and how much space they took up.

But I confess myself utterly fascinated by the way Torvolk cleaned his teeth, and how he dressed himself in the strange kilt. A few times I found myself outright staring, and I had to shake my head and return to my own chores.

This morning I was to meet with Maybal, Amma, and Avaleen to do our washing out of doors. Luckily, the sun chose today to shine, which was a boon. Unluckily, I couldn’t seem to focus on my scrubbing, because we chose a spot within sight of Nan’s garden.

And, in the garden, Torvolk was chopping wood.

“Isadora!” I turned at the sound of my name in time to be smacked in the face by a wet chemise, tossed at me by Avaleen, who was giggling madly. “Do you want me to take over for you?” she asked teasingly. “So you can properly ogle?”

If aught, she should be the one sitting out the washing, and I vowed to do enough of hers so that my new friend could rest.

“I am not ogling.”

“Please,” snorted Amma, an orc woman a few years older than me who was not yet Mated. “Torvolk is a fine choice to ogle. The way he holds that ax?”

All of us turned, and I felt a hot ball of something in my chest. Was this...jealousy?

“Is he a fine choice?” I managed airily. “All those muscles bunching and relaxing. The way he fills out his shirt and kilt.” I swallowed in an effort to wet my suddenly dry mouth.

“I had not noticed.”

I shrugged, tilting my head to hide my grin as the others gaped at me.

This time ‘twas Maybal, a Mated orc lass younger than me who wore her sleeping kitling strapped to her back, who laughed gaily.

“There is nae shame in ogling, Isadora. No’ when a male is as lovely as Torvolk. Just dinnae tell my Gartaag I was noticing .”

The others chuckled, but my hackles rose despite my attempt to tamp down my jealousy.

“Have you all noticed him?”

It does not matter if they have, or if he has noticed them in return. He is not yours.

But...I suspected I was his , whether he wanted me or not. I became his the moment he stood up in that tavern and called out an outrageous price for me. The moment he took my hand in his and I knew I would be safe.

The moment I woke up warm and comfortable in his arms and discovered he’d been awake but hadn’t moved in order to keep from waking me.

The moment he rubbed lotion into my calluses and told me I was worth more than just my labor.

Swoon.

The other females teased and chuckled, but Amma placed her hand on my arm.

“Och, dinnae fash, lass.” When I glanced at her mulishly, ‘twas to see understanding in her eyes. “Torvolk is yers, we all ken it.”

Mine ? I reared back, not sure how to explain.

“Nay, nay. He is just...I was staying in his home while he was gone. I mean, he did buy me, but he insists orcs keep no slaves, and that I do not belong to him.”

“Oh, ye belong to him.” She patted my arm with a knowing smile. “We are all wagering how long ‘twill take for him to realize it.”

So ‘twas in a thoughtful frame of mind that I hung the linens and plaids out to dry. Yesterday Torvolk had washed a blanket and it had taken all night inside to dry. Hopefully the sun would do its work faster today.

Mine .

He’d called me that the first night. He’d claimed me as his then. What did the women mean? What did they see?

I returned to the cottage to find porridge bubbling over the fire and a crock of honey on the table. Torvolk had made a meal for me after all.

Swoon – again.

Just as I finished eating, the door swung open and he stomped through, carrying a heavy load of firewood. He dropped it beside the hearth and went down on one knee



to arrange it, glancing up at me.

He didn't smile, but something like pleasure lit his eyes.

"Ye're eating. Good. 'Twas acceptable?"

"More than acceptable. Do you want me to serve you?—"

"I ate earlier." He finished stacking the logs then slapped his hands together to clean them of dust. "Will ye be making soap soon? I need to bring in a few more loads and stack the rest around back."

He really did want to join me in my craft?

"I can wait for you," I offered, my emotions a-whir at the heady sensation of his interest in what I did. "I will set up the preparations but wait until you have the time."

He was already heading toward the door. "I'll be back soon."

I'd asked him that yesterday, because I was so worried he would run off again. You will return, aye? It had made me sound needy and whining, but I hadn't been able to stop myself. The thought of him not returning...

I swallowed.

He is not yours to covet .

Still, by the time Torvolk returned, face and hands still wet from where he'd washed, I was near giddy with excitement. I'd never had someone interested in soap-making afore, and I didn't care if he spent the whole time scowling and grunting at me, I was going to enjoy this.

“What do we do first?”

We? I suppose he was going to participate, and I couldn't be happier.

I forced myself to keep calm as I explained the tools and ingredients and the steps and cautions.

“The ash slurry is caustic,” I warned. “We will be diluting it with the oils, so the final product will be gentler than the soap we use for laundering. But for now, be careful not to get it on your skin.”

Frowning down at the ingredients on the table, he tapped the bowl which contained the slurry. “Mayhap ye should let me do the mixing then. My skin is tougher. Why is it hot?”

I loved that he cared. “The ash and the water create heat as they meld. This is why I mixed them earlier, but the slurry should be cool enough to work with now. If I were making a large batch for laundering, we would be doing this out-of-doors, with kerchiefs over our noses and mouths.”

He wrinkled his nose. “No’ me. ‘Twould look silly.”

“Aye,” I agreed with a giggle, “but worth it not to inhale the caustic fumes. Since this is a small batch, we can do it here, with the fire to keep things liquid. Now, our first step...”

When I pointed to the small dram of whisky, he scooped it up. “If we’re drunk, we cannae smell the fumes?” he guessed.

I had to chuckle. He was cute when he tried to joke. “Nay, ‘tis for scent. This scent is very popular. Pour it into the slurry and mix well, but be careful not to splash.”

“Ye’re making whisky-scented soap?”

I scooped up the crock which he’d placed on the table to flavor the porridge. “Whisky and honey. While you mix the whisky into the slurry, I will mix the honey into the oils...”

He watched me for a moment, then followed my lead.

Despite my warning, he insisted on sniffing the slurry to see if he could still smell the whisky, then had to go outside to hack and cough as I fetched him some cool water to clear his throat. After that, he was more subdued when we mixed the slurry into the oils.

“Now we stir,” I told him, handing over a wooden spoon. “This is the deepest bowl I could find, so you can be vigorous without worry about splashing, but we will need to stir for a while for the magic to happen.”

“Magic?” he demanded, and as he stirred, I did my best to explain the strange reaction which turned water and oils and ash into sweet-smelling soaps.

After a while, I realized the benefits of having an orc as a soap-making partner. It seemed as if he didn’t tire. His strong arms continued to stir and stir long past the point where I would have to take a break.

“Look!” I pointed out. “See how the soap is opaque now and seems thicker? ‘Tis happening.”

“Thank the gods,” he muttered. “So I can stop?”

Well, mayhap he wasn’t entirely tireless. “I can take over.”

“Nay,” he grunted. “I’ll no’ have ye risk yer skin with a burn.”

I wanted to tell him I’d been doing this for years, but then I remembered the way he’d rubbed goat butter lotion into my calluses and told me not to work so hard, and something clenched in my stomach.

Torvolk was protecting me.

I turned away, uncertain what my face would show with that realization.

“I will get the tray.”

He was the one to pour the soap into the tray, but I smoothed it carefully.

“After a few days, we can cut this into bars or chunks. ‘Twill need to cure for a while, to account for the whisky and honey, but in a pair of fortnights we can give it away to friends.”

Torvolk was silent, and when I glanced at him, he was frowning.

“What?” I asked. “Would you rather sell it?”

“I will no’ be here in a pair of fortnights.”

Oh.

Oh .

He was leaving.

“Why?” I whispered, panic clawing its way up my throat. Was I about to lose him?

“Where are you going?”

“I...” He set the bowl on the table and stepped to me. “I have to return to yer world. I’m searching for someone.”

“For the chief.” My voice choked. “The clan has been speaking of him.”

His hand rose to cup my cheek. “Aye, lass. I’m the Bloodfire Ranger. ‘Tis my responsibility to find him.”

There were tears pricking at his eyes.

“And when you do?”

And when you do? Will you return home ?

The words hung between us, unspoken. His thumb caressed my cheek.

“I am a Ranger.”

The words were simple, but I heard their true meaning.

I will not stay with you.

With a choked sob, I surged upward, throwing my arms around his neck and pulling his lips down to mine. His tongue met mine this time, teasing me the way I’d taught him.

This is how ye kiss .

I remembered his teasing words from yesterday as he’d tongued my clitoris. While

the band around my chest didn't loosen, heat pooled in my core.

With a groan of surrender, Torvolk wrapped his arms around my back and lifted me closer. His hardness throbbed against my center and I rocked my hips forward to cradle him as we kissed.

For someone who hadn't tried the whole kissing thing afore, Torvolk was a fast learner.

His hands held my arse, my feet dangling, as I clutched at him desperately. I squeezed my thighs together to capture the sensation of friction as my core flooded with desire, and he groaned again.

Aye !

I needed him. I wanted him yesterday, I would want him tomorrow, but now? Now I needed him.

"Please," I whispered frantically against his lips. "Please, Torvolk."

He wrenched away with a shuddering breath, pressing his forehead to mine. "Lass..."

"Aye, your good lass." I wriggled my hips again, trying to capture his cock against my pulsing heat. "Please, Torvolk, let me be your good lass again."

With a groan, he set me away from him, and I actually swayed, surprise and confusion overtaking gravity for a moment.

"Ye are worth more than a fooking, lass."

I fumbled for the back of the chair, using it to hold me upright. My mouth opened,

but I didn't know what to say in response to that claim.

He turned away, and I saw his throat work as he swallowed.

“Ye are no' obligated to me, lass. Ye have a place here. Ye can have this cottage—'tis ye who made it a home, after all. Ye deserve...” His voice caught. “I am no' yer master.”

“I...” I took a deep breath, trying to pretend my chest wasn't aching. “I do not need a master, Torvolk. Just you.”

“I cannae.” His words sounded defeated. As he scrubbed a hand down his face, I saw the way his cock juttet outward, tenting his kilt. “I cannae.”

“Why?” By all that was holy, I sounded like a whiney child, but I couldn't help it. I tightened my hold on the chair, forcing myself to breathe deeply.

The look he sent me over his shoulder was tortured; there was no other word for it. His eyes were almost completely green now, something I'd only seen from a few other males in the village, and only occasionally.

His hand was pressed against his chest, his claws dimpling his skin, as if he were trying to dig at his heart, and his breathing quickened.

“I cannae,” he repeated. “I am... Nay ,” he growled, stalking toward the door, not making any sense.

As he swung his cloak around his shoulders, I repeated yesterday's question.

“You will return, aye?”

He paused, his hand on the door. I saw his knuckles lighten as he squeezed. I saw him take a shuddering breath.

Then he growled, “Aye, may the gods forgive me. Aye.”

And he was gone.



### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Torvolk

The day before the Midwinter celebration, I could no longer take the agony. Every moment of the day and night, I felt as if my chest was being squeezed by a tight band; my throat was raw for no reason; I had to consciously fight to keep my claws retracted.

‘Twas pure torture to spend so much time with Isadora, yet I couldn’t seem to stay away.

She was the light in my world, when the days were so short and overcast. She was the reason my heart thundered in my chest each morning when she smiled at me; she was my last thought before I fell asleep each night.

The fact that I slept curled around her wasn’t helping either.

Isadora wasn’t a restful sleeper, and I had to admit myself amused by the way she more often than not ended up sprawled atop me. I didn’t mind though; I laid there holding her, fighting with my Kteer’s urging to taste lick take Mate plunge taste claim take Mate claim.

Those were long nights.

And yet...

And yet, the thought of not being with Isadora seemed impossible as well. No matter my pain, I sat across from her each meal. I helped her with her chores. I pretended we could live together in this small cottage and make it into a successful home.

Each night, the last thing she said to me was “You will not leave me, will you?” and each night I told her I would be there when she awoke, because I could promise no more than that.

And each time the scent of her arousal teased my tongue, I would find an excuse to escape into the woods where I’d jerk my own cock and pretend ‘twas good enough.

It never was.

Painting a poor sternka bush with my seed was not the satisfaction I needed.

But by the day before the Midwinter Feast, I thought I’d go mad from the way I was being torn in so many directions. I didn’t break my fast but instead threw on my heavy boots and my cloak.

I was headed for the stables, but at the door I paused, waiting for Isadora to ask if I would return. When she didn’t, I turned to see her standing at the table, sleeves rolled up as she kneaded bread for tomorrow’s celebration.

“I’m heading out on a ride.” I didn’t know where, so I couldn’t tell her.

She shot me a grin, made more impish by the fact there was flour smeared across her nose.

“Enjoy yourself. In a few days, we will have more sunlight. ‘Tis something to look forward to.”

My chest tightened even more to hear her positivity and joy and know I couldn't sink into it.

"Aye," I rasped. "I'll be...some time."

Her hands didn't stop their work, and she nodded happily. "This morning we are all making dough for sweet bread, and we are meeting at the bakers to let them set for tomorrow. After that I have been tasked with making the glaze for the roast, and I promised Amma I would help decorate the village square."

My hand tightened on the handle, knowing I couldn't leave her and I couldn't stay.

"Do ye need help?"

She flicked her fingers, then giggled when the flour poofed over the table.

"Nay, Vartok promised there'd be no sparring today, so the women are planning on pressing their Mates into the heavy lifting."

Mates .

My eyes closed and I dropped my forehead briefly against the wooden door. My Kteer hated hearing Isadora speaking of Mates and other males, when I couldn't give her what she deserved.

Ye are the Bloodfire Ranger. Ye have a duty. Elsewhere.

"Then I'll leave ye to it," I choked, lifting my head and inhaling in determination, pushing open the door.

I paused, waiting for her question.

You will return, aye ?

She asked it each time I left. And each time I assured her I would. I hadn't broken that vow yet.

I peeked over my shoulder, but Isadora was focused on the dough. I told myself 'twas a good thing she hadn't asked. A good thing she was becoming more comfortable with the village and her place in it, and wasn't so focused on her safety that she wondered about my return.

You will return, aye ?

"Aye," I whispered to the door, too low for her to hear.

Aye .

No one questioned me when I saddled a horse and rode out, but my clan members waved and called out greetings as they hurried from place to place, bundled against the cold. I saw excitement in their expressions and heard the welcome in their words.

The last sennight was the longest I'd stayed in Bloodfire Village in a long time, and I had to admit that I was intrigued. Infatuated, mayhap. I enjoyed being able to discuss training and technique with the men. I appreciated their helpful suggestions and teasing jokes. And I definitely liked the variety of food and comforts their Mates brought to the village.

Ye cannae allow yerself to fall in love with village life any more than ye can fall in love with a life with Isadora. Ye're leaving a few days after Midwinter, at the full moon .

Scowling, I urged my horse into a gallop, and the animal seemed to revel in the

freedom.

But I couldn't outrun the truth.

Because I wasn't falling in love with a life with Isadora . I was already in love with her.

Foooook .

I rode for hours, and 'twas not until midday that I recognized the unconscious direction I'd taken. I was heading toward the standing stones.

Inspired, I continued.

After all, 'twas the first time in a sennight my cock wasn't hard, the first time my Kteer wasn't whining at me to claim Isadora as my own. Instead, 'twas howling about the freedom and fresh air and the feel of a weapon at my side.

Gods-damned primitive Kteer .

Then sun was already sinking in the west when I approached the stones. As expected, there were a few footprints around them—likely the Keeper's—but no signs of concern. After all, no one could pass through the veil at any part of the moon's cycle except full.

But when I reached his cabin, I did encounter a surprise.

Apparently, Isadora and I were not the only ones to cross through the stones last full moon, and the Keeper was...preoccupied.

Still, I appreciated being able to tease him for a change. The poor bastard didn't know

how to handle his visitor, and I opted to leave him to it rather than interfere too much.

But by the time I switched out horses to head back to the village, I knew night would fall soon. After all, 'twas almost the longest night of the year. For certes, the horse and I had to go slower since the moon was only half, and I ate cold rations on the trail as the night wind howled.

'Twas not the first time I'd traveled in the dark of night in the dead of winter; a Ranger was used to such hardships.

But 'twas the first time I was so anxious to get home.

To Isadora.

By the time I returned the horse to the stables, the village was mostly asleep. Likely my clan members were exhausted from a day of preparation and looking forward to tomorrow's celebrations.

I slipped into my cottage to find the fire already banked. Isadora was asleep on top of the blankets, still fully dressed. And a meal was waiting for me on the table.

'Twas a kind gesture, another way she tried to take care of me.

But right then, I didn't need food. I needed her .

I slid my boots off and climbed into bed with her, gathering her in my arms and tucking us under the warm covers. She mumbled in her sleep and rolled over, pressing her cheek against my shoulder, and my Kteer relaxed, softening into this perfect moment.

"Do not leave me," she murmured.

I dropped a kiss to the crown of her head and whispered, “I’ll be here, lass.”

And I fell asleep thinking about the Keeper and my own problems.

The day of the Midwinter Feast dawned cold and overcast, which was typical for the Highlands, and seemed fitting. If the sun barely showed its face on Midwinter Day, ‘twas a sign that the coming days would be warmer.

Plus, it meant we all snuggled in bed longer than usual.

I have to confess that I’d never seen the appeal of snuggling or bed afore Isadora landed in my life, and now...now I did.

She’s in yer bed and in yer arms, but she’s no’ yers .

The reminder sent my chest tightening and made my throat all raw with itchy anger once more. I sighed and scrubbed my hand over my face, cursing myself and my Kteer .

“Good morning,” Isadora chirped, pushing herself up in bed. “Blessed Midwinter.”

This was a holiday humans didn’t celebrate, but she’d embraced it already. My voice was gruff with fondness when I grunted, “Blessed Midwinter.”

I saw her hesitate, then she leaned over and planted a kiss on one of my cheekbones. Then she rolled out of bed, but not before I saw her own cheeks pinken with a blush. I laid there in bed, staring after her in bemusement as my fingertips brushed against the spot where her lips had been.

“Torvolk, may I ask you something?” Her back was to me, and she was tying one of her new kerchiefs around her hair.

I felt pride, knowing she was using one of my gifts to her. “Aye, lass, of course.”

She suddenly turned back to me, one hand on her hip. “Do you know you only ever call me lass ? Not my name? No, wait.” She waved away the words. “That was not my question.”

I’d blinked at her outburst, and now my lips tugged into a frown. I knew I’d been trying to hold myself back...but had it really become so bad I’d never called her by her given name?

“What is it then?” I managed.

“Your eyes.” She moved around the end of the bed, but her motions had turned less certain, and she was watching me through her lashes, as if wasn’t certain how I would react. “Sometimes they are...”

Frowning, I pushed myself upright. “They are what?”

“Your eyes are bright green, Torvolk. Right now, I mean. When I first met you, they were black. And sometimes they are mostly black with some green. But more often than not, lately they have been fully green.” Her fingers clasped and unclasped themselves in front of her. “I mean no offense.”

“I’m no’ offended.” My tone belied my words as I swung my legs off the bed and pushed myself out of the warm cocoon. “’Tis something that happens to orcs when we’re feeling different emotions. Rage.” Love . “Fear.” I stomped behind the screen, as much to hide myself as to perform my morning ablutions.

“I have seen this,” Isadora admitted. “Are you angry now?”

“Nay,” I grunted. “I’m...hungry.” Aye, ‘twas a good explanation. “Today is a big



day.”

“Oh! I will start some porridge.”

I felt guilty for such a lie, but when I emerged, Isadora was bustling about the cottage as if she'd always lived here, preparing to break our fast. She'd ceased asking questions I couldn't give her answers to.

Because I didn't know them myself.

‘Twas not until I felt the sharp stabs of pain that I realized I was digging into my chest with my claws again, as if trying to scratch an itch on my heart. Or my Kteer . Was this horrible heat, this pain , this uncertainty ...was it linked to my eyes changing color? I hadn't realized that was happening.

Have ye looked at yer reflection ? The Keeper had asked me that the first night I'd carried Isadora through the stones, and Vartok had asked the same thing.

What did it mean?

With a snort, I scrubbed my hand over my face and realized what I was going to have to do. I was going to have to ask Nan, and she'd crow about being right .

Midwinter was a sacred time for orcs, the moment at which light returns to the world, and when the days begin to grow longer. The Bloodfire Clan celebrated with food, music, ale, and whisky, and four times more shenanigans than usual.

The day was loud and full of festivities, is the point.

I found myself swept up in the merriment: drinking with the males, and helping the females tote food back and forth from the fires to the eating circles and keeping the

flames burning. I swear we went through an entire tree by noon, but 'twas worth it to see so many of my kinsmen warm and happy.

And through it all, Isadora was there. She was part of the clan now, and she knew everyone. When I was gone and she was alone in my home, would she take a lover? Would she find a Mate?

The pain that pierced my chest at the thought almost sent me to my knees. I bent over, gasping.

Isadora in the arms of another male. Isadora finding her Mate.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I wanted her to be happy, did I not? She needed to be safe and cared for.

No' like this .

"Grandson," came the quiet voice behind me. "I think 'tis time we spoke."

Nan .

"Aye," I croaked, knowing I couldn't avoid this conversation.

The tiny woman latched onto my elbow and tugged. Even bent over I was taller than her, but she had an iron will I couldn't defy. So I stumbled after her toward her cottage, glancing back once to ensure Isadora was safe with Myra.

Nan muttered to herself as I followed her into her cottage. Like every other clan member, she'd allowed her hearth fire to die out overnight and would relight it tonight from the communal fire, signaling our new year.

But this meant 'twas dark inside.

“Leave the door open,” she commanded. “And open those shutters.”

Ignoring the cold, I did as she instructed as she bustled about, pulling down crocks and stoppered jugs from shelves. 'Twas not the first time I'd seen her brew a concoction, so I stood by with my arms folded under my cloak and watched her.

“Ye, my lad, are as stubborn as yer father. And yer grandfather, now that I think of it. None of the three of ye could see the nose in front of yer face.”

“Oh, so ye're no' to blame for any of that?”

“Me?” She scowled over her shoulder. “My nose is lovely.”

“I meant the stubbornness, Nan.”

“I'm perfect in every way.”

“Aye,” I drawled, “Yer humility is peerless.”

She made a rude gesture I hadn't realized my grandmother knew.

“I mean ,” she stressed, “ye've been living with that sweet lass, and ye've determined naught, am I right?”

This was about Isadora ? “I've determined what I need to determine. I'm the Bloodfire Ranger.”

“And ye think this means ye cannae have a future with her. I've had to watch ye tearing yerself apart because of this stubbornness.” She scooped water into a bowl

and set it on the table beneath the open window. “Ye cannae see the truth, can ye?”

“What truth, Nan?”

“Oh, for fook’s sake!” She clucked her tongue in frustration. “Ye will have a future with Isadora, Torvolk, because ye have to.”

With those prophetic words, she poured something dark and inky into the water bowl, but I’d already stepped forward, my arms dropping into fists by my sides.

“What do ye mean?” I barked, torn between terror and a fierce sort of joy.

“Look,” my wee grandmother commanded, pointing at the bowl. “Look, ye complete idiot, look!”

Frowning at her for her cryptic reply, I stepped up to the table, planted my palms on the wood, and leaned forward, peering into the dark depths.

Except...

Except the dark surface of the water showed me .

“Ye havenae looked at yer reflection lately, have ye, laddie?”

My eyes glowed green.

Not just green, but glowing green . The color was shocking. I startled, rearing back before forcing myself closer.

“I’ve never...why?” I rasped. One set of fingertips rose to pry my eyelids open further, to look for the cause.

“‘Tis a Mating Heat, Torvolk.” Her voice turned gentler. “All of us can see it, we’ve been waiting for ye to work yer way through. But ‘tis getting worse.”

My hand dropped to my chest and I pressed my claws into my skin.

“Heat,” I muttered.

“Aye, and anger and confusion and fear and apparently a sort of itchiness.” I could hear the shrug in Nan’s voice, but I couldn’t drag my gaze away from my reflection.

“‘Tis like puberty, only a hundred times worse.”

I finally lifted my head. “Puberty? What’s?—”

“No’ important. A terrible human thing, like taxes and boiled beef and being so terrified of the great cosmos above our head that we had to invent a god to stick up there to protect us from all that nothingness.”

I shuddered. “I cannae imagine aught worse than boiled beef, Nan.”

“Och, well, puberty is when yer mind quits working and yer body works thrice as fast, and neither of them agree on aught.”

That did sound horrible.

“And even that’s no’ as bad as a Mating Heat?” I murmured.

She made a flicking motion with her fingers, although her expression stayed serious.

“I grew tired of watching ye bumble through this alone, Torvolk. Ye might be our Ranger, and that might mean ye will be leaving us...but ye cannae leave yer Mate.”

Mate Mate Mate Mate.

The word pounded through my head, which had suddenly gone otherwise empty.

Mate.

Isadora is my Mate .

Aye.

Aye, the simplicity, the perfection of it, 'twas undeniable.

In that moment, I knew 'twas the truth.

There is a kenning .

I knew her. My very soul knew Isadora.

Slowly, I turned away from my grandmother to peer out the door toward the festivities.

Isadora was my Mate.

Could I convince her?

“Go,” Nan whispered. “Go put us all out of yer misery. Go claim yer Mate.”

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Isadora

Bloodfire Village's Midwinter Feast was the most amazing event I'd ever attended. I remembered there being holy day celebrations back home—I mean, back in the village in which I'd grown up. Mistress Smith had never allowed me to participate, but they were somber affairs compared to this revelry.

The bonfire was huge and the food abundant. The ale and whisky flowed and even I could scent the arousal in the air as Mated pairs danced and cuddled and laughed together.

As the sun sank in the west, the piping began, accompanied by drumming on everything from hollow logs to intricately carved bone-and-leather instruments. I watched—delighted and enthusiastic—as the couples spun by exuberantly.

And when the hands closed around my waist from behind, I squealed in surprise...only to relax on a chuckle when I scented Torvolk.

“Would ye dance?” he murmured in my ear, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine.

Smiling, I lifted my arms as I turned in his hold. “I would do aught you asked for, Torvolk,” I teased with a wink.

To my surprise, he didn't hide from my innuendo or look away. Instead, his gaze

swept me hungrily, as if he were a starving man. He lifted me—wrenching a delighted gasp from my lips—and swung me into the throng of dancers.

We spun, we cavorted, and through it all, he touched me. As the bonfire leapt into the growing darkness, Torvolk held my gaze, his eyes glowing green, an expectant smile on his lips.

Gone was the awkwardness of the last days; something had changed.

Torvolk was buoyant, lively, dancing with me in a breathless sort of way...and I threw myself wholeheartedly into this— whatever this was.

The pipes drew out the last note of their latest dance as he scooped me into his arms, pressing me against his chest and burying his face in my neck.

“Lass,” he murmured. “I need ye.”

I wriggled against his hardness, feeling the bulge pressing into my core.

“Torvolk...”

His lips found the skin between my cloak and my kerchief tie. “I want to taste ye.”

Oh God, aye . I nearly moaned as liquid heat—arousal born of anticipation—pooled between my legs. The way his lips curled told me he smelled my need.

“Ye want me too, lass, aye?”

“Aye,” I gasped, pulling myself closer with the grip of my arms around his neck.  
“Please?”



I wasn't sure what had changed, but I wasn't complaining. Not one little bit.

In one movement Torvolk lifted me, throwing me over his shoulder in the same way he'd done in the tavern yard that first night. It surprised a burst of breathless laughter out of me, but when he rested his palm atop my arse for a moment, squeezing, that laughter turned to a moan of need.

He grabbed a torch and thrust it into the bonfire, the first to take the light from the village flame, then turned to stalk toward his— our cottage.

Behind us, his clan called out lewd suggestions and cheers I couldn't concentrate on...because I was fully focused on Torvolk.

When we reached the cottage, he kicked the door shut and stalked to the hearth, where he tossed the torch onto the pile of kindling he'd laid that morning. As the fire burst into being, bringing warmth and light into our lives in this new year, he slowly lowered me to my feet.

I tipped my head back to stare breathlessly up at him.

He gently dragged one claw down my cheek, his green gaze not leaving mine. "This is the longest night of the year," he murmured, "and I want to spend it tasting ye."

My heartbeat sped up and my tongue darted across my lips in anticipation.

"Would ye allow that, Isadora? Can I taste ye again?"

Isadora .

He called me by my name.

My face split into a grin as I surged up on my toes, reaching for his neck so I could drag his lips to mine. With a growl, he claimed me.

We undressed frantically, ties ripping and his boots tossed across the room. Each moment we weren't naked felt like a waste...until we were . And just like the last time, seeing his nude body, his mighty cock standing so proud before me, made my mouth water.

I reached for him, closing both my palms around his thickness, marveling at how hard he was. Torvolk hissed, his hands curling into fists at his sides, his head thrown back, his throat bobbing as he swallowed.

Grinning, I stroked him experimentally and loved the little growl I wrenched from his lips, and the shudder which passed through him.

His cock was a darker green than the rest of him, and ridged just like his tongue. I was nearly faint with giddiness, anticipating how that would feel sliding into me. Oh, please, let tonight—whatever had changed between us—be the night I got to feel him!

An orc's cock is made to make his partner climax as soon as he enters her.

Nan had told me that the day I'd arrived, and the other women had joked about it since then. I wanted that.

Nay...I wanted him .

I wanted Torvolk.

Once, the idea of fooking him had been merely to secure my place here in the village. But now? Now I wanted him because despite his scowls, he was the kindest, gentlest

male I'd ever known, and I knew I was falling in love with him.

"I want you, Torvolk."

"I ken it, lass," he rasped, his eyes squeezed, his body almost vibrating with the power it took to remain in control. "And I'm trying so fooking hard to keep from throwing ye on that bed and making ye scream my name. I'm trying to let ye explore me."

I dragged my hand along his cock to the tip, which was beaded with cum already. Gathering some on my fingertip to taste—a spicy flavor I couldn't name—I hummed with pleasure.

He groaned.

"I am ready now," I announced primly. His eyes flashed open, and I smirked. "Ready for you to throw me on the bed and make me scream your name."

I didn't have to ask twice. Between one heartbeat and the next, he'd lifted me, tossed me. Then I was lying on my back with his head between my thighs and he was tasting me, the way he'd said he wanted.

I sucked in a surprised gasp, my hands going to his hair, but one of his palms rested against my belly while the other hand rose to squeeze my breast. I squirmed, breathless, keening, as the pressure rose within me.

"Torvolk," I gasped. "Oh God?—"

His only response was to drag his tongue along my cleft again, his tusks scraping at my sensitive inner thighs and making me squirm. I loved the ridges of his tongue, loved the way they felt against the nub of my pleasure, loved the way they felt

withdrawing from my core.

Then his lips closed around my clit at the same moment he tugged hard on my nipple, and to my surprise, my climax burst over me. I gasped, arching my back and thrusting my hips upward to grind against his face as the pleasure rolled through me.

And yet...

As Torvolk lifted his head, his long tongue drawing my spend from his lips and jaw into his mouth in that self-satisfied way of his, my climax felt somehow...lacking.

He met my eyes, his still pulsing with that green impatience, and his lips curled.

“No’ good enough,” he growled, and then he was lowering his mouth again.

Torvolk

I’m not certain what was happening to me; my Kteer was pounding against my heart and my blood was screaming. I needed to claim Isadora...but at the same time I wanted to drag this out, to make her pleasure last as long as possible.

As I licked her again, tasting her climax, I pulled my hands from her tits and lifted her ass. The new position allowed me to thrust my tongue inside her and made her whimper.

Gods below, I could still feel her muscles quivering, and I told myself to go slow...but I couldn’t.

“Palton’s Spear, Isadora,” I murmured, licking her. “Ye are magnificent. Everything I want.”

Her fingers tightened in my hair, but I was beyond thinking. I pressed one finger inside her, knowing ‘twas too soon to expect her to come again. I licked her again, then added a second finger.

“How does that feel, dkaar ?” I murmured. “To stretch like that?”

She might not be ready to come again yet, but I could taste her arousal building—or mayhap it had never left. Her hips bucked forward and she moaned.

“Good?” I prompted, kissing the little pearl hidden in her curls. “More?”

“More,” she whispered, and my lips curled against her thighs.

“That’s my good lass,” I murmured, slowly pushing another finger in. “Ye feel how ye stretch so perfectly? Yer cunny was meant for me.”

“You,” she gasped, arching into my hold, and I couldn’t take it any longer. That word seemed—to me, anyhow—to be all the blessing I needed.

I withdrew, kissing my way up her body, until I could roll onto my back, taking her with me. She sprawled across my chest and, holding her gaze, I lifted my hand to my mouth to suck my fingers.

Her lovely eyes widened, her cheeks pinking, her skin bare against mine. Withdrawing my fingers, I pressed them against her lips.

“Fooking perfection, Isadora.”

Tentatively, her lips opened, and I slid my fingers inside, coating her tongue with her spend. The way her nose wrinkled told me ‘twas a new experience, and her little grimace made me want to laugh.

So I did.

Isadora's eyes widened at the sound, and I pulled my fingers from her mouth.

“Ye didnae like the way ye taste?”

Her lids lowered, although he gaze remained on me, as a naughty little smirk crossed her lips.

“I'd rather taste ye .”

“Gods below, Isadora,” I groaned, reaching for her leg to pull her into a straddling position. “Ye're magnificent.”

She planted her palms on my chest. “You have been calling me by name.”

“I have to,” I admitted. “I cannae fight the truth any longer.”

“What truth?” she whispered.

Ye are my Mate .

“That ye are mine.”

“Aye,” she sighed happily, scooting backward until her wet cunny cradled my throbbing cock. “And you are mine. And we cannot be finished yet.”

My hands settled on her hips. “We're no' done,” I growled in agreement. “Ye're going to come eight or nine more times afore the new year starts.” Her eyes widened, but I didn't give her time to argue. “Now, show me how stretched ye are, and take my cock like a good lass.”

Isadora was the one to lean forward, to hold my gaze as she allowed me to position my cock beneath her. She sat back, sinking down around my shaft, each ridge sliding neatly into her core, the sensation sending white-hot sparks to my brain.

And then she was down and her second climax erupted. She gasped and stiffened, digging her fingers into my chest as her cunny tightened around me.

I wanted to give her time to adjust, but by Malla the Beginner, I lost all control.

My Kteer ruled me insatiably. I thrust upward into her wet warmth, burrowing deep before withdrawing and doing it again, each plunge a delicious, mind-numbing torture.

I needed her. I needed to pleasure her. I needed her the way I needed my next breath, the way I needed water and food and life . Isadora was life.

“Fooking magnificent,” I growled again, my hands sliding up her sides. “Ye take my cock like such a perfect Mate. Such a good lass, coming around my cock like that.”

Her breaths were coming quickly now, her eyes wide enough I could see the pupils in the blazing firelight. I could still feel her squeezing me as I pulled her forward, causing those magnificent tits to tip toward my mouth.

Well, there was only one thing to do. I stretched up and caught the nipple between my lips, tugging with my teeth, and she mewled in pleasure, wriggling her hips.

And then she was the one who took over the movement, rocking atop me at the same steady, desperate pace. I flicked her nipple with my tongue, and her eyes closed on a moan.

I grinned, and the movement—or mayhap her rocking—pulled her tit from my

mouth.

“That’s a good lass.” I slid my hands down her stomach, my thumbs circling her navel, to grip the apex of her thighs. “That’s my Mate. You’re taking my cock like such a good little lass, are ye no’? Ye’re mine.”

“Yours,” she gasped, arching against me. “Oh God, Torvolk, I am yours .”

She’d been mine since the moment I laid eyes on her—half-naked and scared in that tavern—and my Kteer howled at the certainty of it.

I was so close to spilling, so close to claiming her. But not yet.

“ Mine ,” I growled, tipping my hands closer to her cunny. I used one thumb to push aside her curls. “Isadora.”

With that, I rubbed her clit the way I knew she liked and felt her freeze atop me.

No’ good enough.

“Isadora,” I said again. “ Mine .”

“Yours,” came her ragged whisper.

I rubbed my thumb in a circle, felt her thighs clenching me as her climax approached. I flexed my arse, pushing my cock up into her slowly, each ridge a new explosion of sensations.

“Isadora,” I whispered again, and I pinched the pearl of her pleasure.

“ Torvolk !” she screamed as she came, and I smiled, remembering my vow to make



her scream my name.

But my smugness didn't last long, because her climax triggered my own.

With a wordless roar, I released my thin control on my Kteer and spilled my seed against her womb.

Mine mine claim Mate mine forever.

The words—the sensation, the pleasure—throbbed through me, painting stars behind my eyelids, until I thought my entire world was an endless cycle of Isadora, Isadora, Isadora.

Then she collapsed bonelessly against me and I found I could breathe again—deep, gulping, desperate breaths as I wrestled with myself. Her own breathing evened out, and I knew she'd fallen asleep.

Well of course she had; I'd worn her out.

“Good lass,” I murmured, running my hand up and down her back. “My perfect Mate.”

I needed to stand, to tend the fire. I needed to set water to warming so I could clean her. I needed to sleep.

But my Kteer wasn't satisfied.

I was never going to be satisfied. The full moon was in a few days and I knew my duty would take me away from her...but I'd leave my heart here in Bloodfire Village. But here and now, I had my Mate in my arms, and my Kteer wasn't satisfied.

I rolled over gently and lowered my lips to her skin.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Isadora

I wasn't certain what had changed, but I wasn't complaining.

Torvolk was...insatiable.

The morning after the Midwinter Feast, he woke me with his tongue. This sounds impressive, and aye, 'twas quite pleasurable...but he'd done the same three or four times throughout the night—truthfully, I'd lost count. 'Twas a bit of a blur.

At this point, he must have just been eating his own spend.

And I don't know why that thought was so arousing—him eating his cum from my cunny—but 'twas, and I moaned in pleasure, wriggling my hips against the mattress as he tossed my leg over his shoulder and really just got in there.

I think I was in a bit of shock, in truth.

As before, it took Torvolk little time at all to chase my pleasure. I gasped, my back arching instinctively as his tongue thrust inside me, searching for that rough spot behind my clitoris that always drove me mad.

Aye, I was awake now .

His fingers replaced his tongue, and vaguely I recognized that I felt no stretching

now, thanks to his efforts of last night. But then his tongue circled the bud of my pleasure, and I confess all other considerations were tossed right into the fire.

I exploded as he sucked on my clit, and judging from the chuckling sort of hum he made, that was exactly what he wanted.

“Good morning, Isadora,” he murmured from between my legs, dropping a kiss to my curls before grinning up at me.

Grinning? Isadora ? I didn’t think I would ever get used to him calling me by my true name, rather than mere lass. Whatever happened yesterday changed Torvolk.

And I was more than fine with the changes.

“Good morning,” I managed, my voice raspy from sleep. And possibly all the screaming-in-pleasure things from last night.

“What can I get ye?” he rolled upright in bed, his cock jutting proudly. “Food? Drink?”

“Tea would be nice.” I think I was dehydrated. Seeing how much of my liquid was dripping from Torvolk’s chin, I shouldn’t be surprised. “Thank you.”

Somewhere around the third time he’d taken me hard, I’d ceased being embarrassed around this man.

“Ye need sustenance.” He was rummaging—still nude—through the crocks and storage bins. “Bread? Cheese?”

I knew from my conversations with the women that the feasting could continue today, but mainly just to eat up the leftovers from yesterday’s celebration. My stomach

rumbled at the thought, because two-day old bread was less appealing.

Still, he was right; I needed to eat something . So I nodded as I ducked behind the screen to take care of my morning ablutions. I was slightly sore, but in a good way.

As I emerged, Torvolk's hand closed around my wrist, and he tugged me against him.

“Wh—” I began, but I had no time to say more before his lips covered mine, and I turned my question into a pleased hum.

In short order, he'd become quite adept at kissing, had he not?

Our tongues played, our lips caressed. I loved the way his tusks—which should have been in the way, but somehow seemed to perfectly frame my lips—scraped against my cheeks, smooth and chilled.

I tasted myself, and that shouldn't be erotic, but I couldn't help but think of those illustrations Myra had showed me, and I moaned, pressing my naked body against his.

His hands were on me—everywhere. I loved the way he caressed my breasts, as if they were something holy, to be revered. He hefted them as his lips ran along my jaw, his thumb and forefingers finding my nipples unerringly.

I arched into his hold, hoping he'd put his mouth on them...and he obliged.

One moment I was blissfully focused on the feel of his tongue against my nipple, the next I felt as if I was flying through the air. I landed face-down on the mattress, and his hands wrapped around my ankles, pulling me backward toward the edge of the bed. I pushed myself up on my hands and knees, and tried to twist around to see him, but his palm landed lightly on my arse.

“Just like that,” he gasped. “Stay like that.”

I froze, feeling his heat behind me, and then his mouth was on me. He was kneeling on the floor behind the bed, his mouth even with my cunny, and he was making use of that.

This position was different from anything I’d imagined before; his tongue could stroke my cleft all the way from my arsehole to my curls. He buried his face against me, his tongue reaching forward to curl around my clitoris, as I ground my arse against him, the sudden desperation taking my breath away.

By all that was holy, this was remarkable!

“Torvolk!” I gasped. “Please.”

I wanted to climax, but it didn’t feel possible. Not like this.

Abruptly he withdrew, and I felt him straighten, his hands going to my hips.

“Ye want me inside ye? Ye want to take my thick cock?”

“Please, Torvolk,” I whimpered, thrusting my arse back to gyrate against his hardness. “Give me your cock.”

I felt him take himself in hand, felt him pull aside my arse cheek...I sucked in a breath in anticipation...

When he speared me, I screamed wordlessly, my climax bursting over me sudden and violent.

He fooked me from behind, his grunts mingling with my gasps as my core squeezed

at him. I would say that my climax eventually faded, but the pleasure didn't; each time his ridges slid across the sensitive skin of my cunny, I felt as if my ecstasy continued.

"Mine," he grunted, plunging into me. "Mine. Mine ."

"Yours," I gasped. "Always." I'd been his since the moment he paid gold for me. "My master."

We both knew I only called him that teasingly, so I wasn't exactly surprised when he denied it. What I didn't expect...

"Nay," he growled, curling around me and reaching for my cunny from the front. "Mate. My Mate. Mine ."

Mate ?

His thumb and forefinger found my clitoris then, and when he pinched, the world went white. I came again as he spilled his seed against my womb while roaring my name, and my legs wobbled, spent.

We never did eat the bread and cheese.

But throughout the day, people of the Bloodfire Clan made deliveries, often with smirks and winks and teasing grins. Cold venison, warm bread, a jug of ale delivered by Mkaalad with a warning to keep hydrated. I wasn't sure why or how they knew we needed it...but we did.

Torvolk allowed me to nap, sleeping curled around him, but I don't think he did. He couldn't, what with the near-constant efforts to pleasure me. I lost track of how many times he coaxed an orgasm from me, before hand-feeding me the choicest cuts of

meat and holding me as I fell asleep again.

But I know he came over and over again. In me, on me. I learned to love the taste of his seed: a spicy, pale green spend that he seemed to have in copious amounts. I teased him about running out, but he only growled and grabbed me again.

He seemed to like taking me from behind the best, because my heavy breasts would hang free if I was on my hands and knees. He would fuck me from behind while holding onto them, fondling and caressing until I was near out of my mind.

And then, after I collapsed, spent...he'd clean me with his tongue and with a warm towel, and I'd sleep and eat and he'd start again.

He called me Mine . And Love . And Isadora . And Mate.

And I don't think I'd ever felt so beloved and cherished.

'Twas the third day after the Midwinter celebration when I finally woke on my own, sore and sticky and fully sated. I was a little surprised not to be woken with an orgasm, and I peeked open one eye to see Torvolk sprawled beside me on the mattress, snoring.

The poor male likely needed his rest.

I curled up at his side, reveling in his heat, and fell back asleep.

I don't know how many hours passed before I woke again, this time to him calling my name gently.

“Are ye hungry?”



“Mmmm.” I stretched, then winced. “Ravenous.”

To my surprise, he didn’t take that as an invitation, and instead bent down to scoop me up.

“I’m sorry I ran ye so ragged these last days, love. I should have been focused on satisfying yer needs.”

Since I was sitting in his lap now and he was fully dressed, I discovered I did have a bit of blush left in me.

“I did not mind so much,” I said to his chest. “I think you did a lovely job satisfying my needs.”

His thumb and forefinger tipped my chin up, and he dropped a kiss to my nose. “I’m glad, but ye have other needs I’ve been ignoring.” With brisk movements, he set me on my feet. “Get dressed, I’m taking ye to the hot springs.”

In bemusement, I watched him bustle around the house, and realized what was different about him: Torvolk’s eyes no longer glowed green. The spark of green was still there, deep in their dark depths, but they were nowhere near as desperate as they’d been at Midwinter.

In a thoughtful frame of mind, I washed myself as best I could, then bundled into a gown and cloak.

Torvolk was solicitous but distracted as he wrapped food and cups in a towel, then took my hand. As he pulled me through the village at a rate fast enough I had to jog to keep up, my new friends called out teasing remarks that left no doubt they knew what we’d been doing these last few days.

Well of course they do. Ye were loud enough to wake the dead, and someone had to deliver all that food to keep ye alive, aye ?

Flustered now, I called out, “You are so anxious to get to these hot springs?” as I trotted beside him.

“Aye,” he grunted. “I have...things to discuss.”

“You know, if you wanted to get me naked again, we could have stayed home, instead of running across the Highlands.”

That stopped him.

He eyed me, as if suddenly realizing how hard I was breathing. “’Tis my duty to take care of ye,” he muttered.

How had our lives changed since that night a month ago when he’d bought me, and I’d assumed ‘twould become my role to take care of him !

“You do,” I assured him gently, squeezing his hand.

“Nay, ye dinnae understand— fook .” He shook his head. “Come, we’re almost there, and I ken ye need to relax.”

This time he took smaller steps, which I appreciated, but I was beginning to get nervous.

“Why do I need to relax?”

A hint of green from under his lashes. “Because I’ve kept ye awake for three days, satisfying my lust. Ye’re covered in my scent and ye must be sore.”

Satisfying his lust? I'd enjoyed it too.

"You want me to wash away your scent?" I asked mildly.

"Och, nay. I love the smell of me on ye, and kenning every other male can smell it as well." His gaze was ahead, his jaw tight. "Ye're mine, Isadora, and everyone will ken it. But..."

This was sounding...serious. There was more here than I understood.

"But?"

Now his lips twitched as he shot me another glance. "But my seed is dripping from ye, and I ken ye want to feel clean again."

I had to chuckle at that, because he was right.

When we reached the spring, I gasped in delight. 'Twas a creek which babbled around large boulders, cutting away the peat on either side. The hot spring emerged alongside, and someone—mayhap long ago—had piled rocks in a vague circle to allow the heated water to mix with the cold stream water. There was a little structure—a roof with two sides—built over it for privacy.

"Ye can choose how close to the heat ye want to be," Torvolk pointed out, already bent over the ties of my bodice. Concerned about me, as he'd been since that first night.

As he straightened, he pulled my gown off, leaving me in a chemise. "I should apologize," he said solemnly.

When I was free, I shook my head. "For what?"

“For the way I’ve acted these last days.” His hand rose to cup my cheek. “Isadora, when the Mating Heat took me, I could think of naught beside claiming ye, again and again.”

My cheeks heated. “I enjoyed it.”

“Thank fook,” he muttered, then dropped a kiss on my forehead. “But what I mean is...I’m an orc.”

I placed my hands on his chest. “I noticed,” I said with a gentle smile.

“And...an orc male is sometimes ruled by his Kteer . These last days, when I realized who ye were...”

“Who am I?” I breathed.

His gaze held mine and his lips twitched. “Ye mean I havenae told ye enough? Ye’re my Mate, Isadora. And I am yers.”

My heart was pounding, part in excitement, part in joy, and my fingers curled around his plaid, as if I could hold his heart.

“There is a knowing,” I whispered.

His free hand closed over mine where ‘twas pressed against his chest. “Aye, there is. I have fought it for so long, but once I allowed myself to admit the truth, I had to claim ye. I should have been gentler.”

He’d been plenty gentle, many times. I was blushing, I knew. “I did not mind it one bit, Master.”

“Mate,” he corrected, and lowered a gentle, slow kiss to my lips.

Mate .

Mate.

If I was his Mate, then he was mine. And if we were Mates, then...Then my place was at his side, among the Bloodfire Clan.

I had a future with him, and I knew Torvolk would make it the best possible future.

Because I loved him. And although he hadn't said the words—I don't know if orcs even felt that way about their Mates—the words he had said were perfectly wonderful. Mine. Mate.

I was floating on a cloud of joy when he pulled away.

Torvolk finished undressing me quickly and efficiently, then stripped himself. I squealed when I stepped into the water, then sighed blissfully. He laid out the blanket with the food beside where I rested against a boulder, and we took turns feeding one another, our conversation nonchalant, as if naught of consequence had passed between us. Then he pulled out one of my bars of soap and washed me thoroughly as the warm water flowed around us.

Granted, he took longer to soap my breasts than strictly necessary.

I ended up seated in his lap, and I could feel his erection pressing against my arse. But he didn't seem bothered by it; just wrapped his arms around me and rested his chin on my head and exhaled in satisfaction.

I suppose he really was sated, and the Mating Heat over.

I remembered what the other women had whispered and giggled about as we'd worked together over the last month, and I smiled against Torvolk's shoulder, because now I knew the truth. Mating was so much more than mere sex, and I don't think I'd ever get used to the way he was so devoted to my pleasure.

You have the rest of your life to experience that.

The thought took away my breath and I shifted in his lap.

Mating was...forever.

"I can feel ye thinking, love," he rumbled.

I pulled away slightly, causing the water to ripple around us. "I was considering what it meant to be Mated."

To my surprise, Torvolk stiffened and looked away. "Aye."

"If we are Mated, then..."

"Then the cottage is yers." He wouldn't meet my gaze, but his hand stroked up and down my spine in a comforting way. "Ye'll have the support of the clan, and I will have a reason to come home."

Come home ?

As in...he wouldn't be there with me? I pushed off his lap, the water buoying me. "What are you saying, Torvolk? You will not..."

"I am a Ranger," he muttered stiffly. "The Bloodfire Ranger."

I rose, planting my feet on the sandy floor of the pool, and moved between his legs. “You might be the Ranger, but you will be my Mate,” I announced, taking his face between my hands. “And I need you.”

His eyes, when they finally met mine, were anguished. “How, Isadora?” he whispered, raggedly. “I dinnae ken how to be aught besides a Ranger.”

My chest squeezed, a sense of rightness filling me, and I smiled softly. Had it only been a month ago that I’d been terrified of this male? This gentle, gruff, caring male who treated me so perfectly?

“You could be a Mate,” I told him softly, certainly. “Mayhap a father.”

He shuddered, his eyes closing. “I would like that.”

“The clan loves you, and I hope these last days have shown you how important you are to them—not because you are their Ranger, but because you are theirs .”

Slowly, Torvolk opened his eyes, uncertainty shining in their depths. “Ye really think that?”

I kissed him, then straightened. “I know that. And if you decide you need to stay a Ranger, then you can just take me Ranging with you.”

His lips twitched upward on one side. “Ye think that’s a good idea?”

“I can...” Without loosening my hold on him, I cast about for inspiration. “Tiptoe through the snow or lurk in taverns with the best of them.”

“Only, I heard ye scream when ye found that nest of mice the other day.”

“—As long as there are no mice,” I continued, as if that’s what I’d intended to say all along.

Huffing out a laugh, Torvolk pulled me toward him. “Ye are my Mate,” he whispered, burying his face against my neck. “I need to be with ye.”

Mate . My fingers curled through his hair. “And I want to be with ye.”

“Nay, ye dinnae understand.” He straightened. “’Tis a need . The thought of being without ye...” He shuddered.

“There is a knowing,” I whispered, kissing his brow. I love you , but I didn’t say the words, because I couldn’t understand his reticence. “What is wrong?”

“The full moon is tomorrow night. I need to return to the human world to find Kragorn.” When I sucked in a breath, his hold on me tightened. “A month, Isadora. I swear, I’ll be gone no more than a month. At the next full moon, I’ll be waiting at the stones for the veil to open so I can return to ye. I swear it.”

But my blood pounded in my ears.

His vow was pretty, but all I could hear was that he was leaving me.

I’d always known ‘twould happen, because he was the Bloodfire Ranger. But now we were Mated ! To learn that bit of bliss, then to have him rip it away so quickly.

I’d found my Mate, my forever...

And he was leaving.



### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Torvolk

Beneath me, the horse stamped its feet impatiently, its breath fogging the near-midnight air. The nights were getting shorter now, but that mattered little at this time of darkness. At least the full moon above gave decent light.

I quieted the beastie with a gentle murmur and pat, and waited, watching the stones for the tell-tale glimmer of silvery fog.

The Keeper waited beside me, his hand on the weapon he still wore on his belt, despite his balance being so skewed after the loss of his arm. He was silent as well, his expression tight with worry.

“Have ye convinced her to return to her world?” I asked him, finally, thinking of the conversation about his houseguest I’d had when I’d visited before Midwinter. That had been an eye-opening afternoon, to see the two of them together.

At least the Keeper could no longer tease me for being a fool when it came to beautiful curves and tempting lips.

He glanced at me, then away, toward his cottage where his female waited. “Nay. I nae longer think ‘tis the right choice for her to go back to her world.”

I noted the glimpse of green in his eyes and nodded in understanding. He couldn’t send her back, not if she was his Mate. I wondered if he knew, but decided ‘twas not

my place to intercede.

The gods knew I hadn't been willing to take any advice until I was desperate.

And now?

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Now I was desperate again. Desperate and miserable.

No matter what stood before me, 'twas Isadora's eyes I saw. The joy in them when I called her Mate. The hurt when I told her I would have to leave her once more. The sorrow as she stood today with Nan, clutching her cloak about her shoulders as I prepared to ride away.

I couldn't decide if 'twas a good thing or a bad thing that sorrow had turned to anger and she'd turned away to dart back inside our cottage afore I actually climbed into the saddle.

Gods below! That had been the hardest thing I'd ever done, to ride away from Bloodfire Village, and I still couldn't understand why. I'd ridden away many times, knowing Nan was safe with Mkaalad. How many times had I left my clan, knowing I was doing it for them?

But now?

But now, the thought of being away even a month was causing my chest to ache. Being away from my Mate for so long was madness, torture. I was already miserable, and I hadn't even traveled through the stones.

Please, Malla the Beginner. Tarvor the Strong. Please let me find Kragorn this month.

Let me find him and bring him home, so I might consider my mission complete and stay home with my Mate .

Because aye, I could see that now. My place was at my Mate's side, and if that meant settling down and using my skills to help protect the village, then I would gladly jump at the opportunity.

Aught to keep Isadora safe. To keep her with me.

I sighed, my breath fogging the air before me, and scrubbed a hand down my face.

What was I thinking? This wasn't going to work.

I needed her. I needed to be with her and I was a fool to think I could leave her. Duty to my clan or not, I needed her. The Mating Heat had been satisfied, but the thought of leaving her for a full month made my stomach cramp, my Kteer howl, and my head pound.

I needed her.

My decision made, I tugged on the horse's reins to turn the animal about. I would have to explain my failure to Vartok and pray he took pity on me. Because...

"Where are ye going?" the Keeper asked.

I didn't hesitate. "Home to my Mate."

The other male merely grunted, then dropped his hold on his blade to lift his finger toward the edge of the valley. "Ye might no' need to."

The moment I saw the figure on horseback riding toward me, I sucked in a breath so

cold it froze my lungs. ‘Twas her . ‘Twas Isadora; I could feel it.

Without wasting time voicing my fear and disbelief, I kicked my horse into motion, thundering away from the stones. Thank the gods I did, because I reached her just in time to see her wobble in the saddle as she yanked on the reins to halt her horse.

“What in the fook are ye doing?” I bellowed, reached across the empty space between us and hauling her onto my lap. “Woman, ye cannae ride!”

And yet...clearly she had. I remembered her fear of being on a horse that first night when I’d placed her in the saddle and expected her to run away. She’d been terrified and without experience.

I wrapped her in my arms and shook her.

“Have ye been taking lessons?” I yelled, as I wheeled my animal about to head for the Keeper’s cottage. “Did ye somehow learn to ride in the last few weeks?”

She was trembling and I prayed ‘twas just from the cold, and not from fear or hurt.

“Well?” I bellowed down at her as the horse slowed.

She tilted an impertinent look at me.

“I am waiting to see if you plan to answer for me as well. I do not think I am necessary for this conversation.”

Her voice, so prim and tart, made my lips twitch.

“Isadora, love...” I pulled my cloak away from her face so I could check her for wounds. “Are ye well?”

“I am, thank you.” She was still shivering, her teeth chattering. “I had no idea horseback could be so cold when I was not wrapped in your arms.”

I squeezed her in relief. “Then ye never shall ride without me again,” I vowed. “But how did ye ride tonight?”

“Nan helped.”

Taking a deep breath, she pushed herself upright in my lap and scooted so her back was pressed against my chest, presumably the easiest way to warm her. With an utterly feminine motion, she tugged on her kerchief and I caught that mittened hand to raise it to my lips.

“My grandmother saddled ye a horse?” I grunted.

“Do not be silly.” She tipped her head to one side to smirk up at me. “She threatened your brother that she would turn him into a frog if he did not help. He wanted to come, but I told him he needed to stay with Avaleen, and I remembered the way.”

“I’ll kill him,” I growled.

I wanted to be angry.

I should be angry.

She’d ridden alone for hours on an unfamiliar animal to reach an unfamiliar location. What if she’d forgotten the way, or fallen, or been beset by bandits? I should punch Mkaalad next time I saw him.

But she was safe.

With a low, grateful growl, I wrapped my arms around her. She hadn't fallen, or gotten lost, or been beset by bandits. She was here, and she was safe.

Doesnae mean ye cannae still punch that arsehole for letting her go off alone .

Aye, that was something to look forward to.

Isadora patted my arm as her horse nudged closer. "I am here, Torvolk."

"Aye, and why are ye here?" With a tap of my heel, my animal turned us both toward the circle of standing stones where the Keeper was splitting his attention between us and the veil that would be opening soon. "Why risk yerself?"

"Because." She twisted to look up at me, and when she did, I was surprised to be the recipient of a fierce glare. "Because I love you, Torvolk. You stupid, idiotic, ridiculous, stupid male, I love you."

I blinked in surprise. "Stupid?"

"And all the other synonyms for stupid!" She suddenly grabbed my arm and lifted herself, shifting and climbing until she was kneeling atop my thighs and she was able to glare up at me, holding herself upright with an iron grip on my plaid.

"I love you, and you left me ."

She loved me.

She loved me.

That band around my chest? It squeezed tight again.

She loved me, and I'd left her.

Oh, shite.

"I love ye too," I managed to rasp.

Her expression softened. "Then why?"

"I thought..." I swallowed. "I thought my duty to the clan was more important than our Mating bond, Isadora. I'm sorry, I ken I was wrong. I'd only just realized it when ye came thundering down here. I was coming back to ye."

To my surprise, that apparently wasn't the answer she'd been hoping for.

"Your duty is important, Torvolk," she said with a scowl, even as she surged up to grasp my cheeks between her mittens. "You are the Bloodfire Ranger."

Ignoring the way she was squeezing me—as if trying to shake some sense into me, I locked my forearm around her arse so she wouldn't fall. I loved the way she trusted me to keep her secure, and vowed to never let her doubt me.

"I am." I felt as if I was choking as I tried to give her what she needed. "But ye are more important, Mate. Mine . I cannae bear the thought of being parted from ye?"

"Then take. Me. With. You." She tightened her hold on my cheeks with each word until my lips were pressed against my tusks.

"What?" Only, since she was squishing my face, it came out more like "Wuuuh?"

"Take me with you, you stupid male !" Only she was smiling as she said it. Or didn't so much say it as shout it at me. "There is no reason I cannot help."

“Ooo anneroff.” Which is, of course, the best I could manage to say Too dangerous .

Her forehead pressed against mine. “Nay, ‘tis not, because you would keep me safe. Torvolk, I have spent a lifetime dodging danger in the humans’ world and you have to admit I would fit in far better than you.”

She was right.

Gods help me, she was right.

My eyes fluttered closed in defeat as I tightened my hold on her. Why hadn’t I thought of that? I hated the thought of her in any kind of danger, but she’d survived the worst the humans could throw at her, and she’d come out whole.

But... “ Sadowa .” ‘Twas supposed to be her name, and it sounded so ridiculous I smiled against her hold, then began to chuckle.

At that sound, she straightened and released my face. “Are you feeling well?”

“I love you, Isadora. Mate . I ken ye like my village?—”

“I love it,” she corrected. “’Tis the first place I have ever felt at home and I want to return there as soon as possible. But Torvolk...” She placed a kiss on my nose. “We will be able to return home. To our home.”

Home.

I had a home. I had a home with Isadora, and in that moment, I knew I was the luckiest male in both worlds.

“I dinnae have to go,” I offered.



But she immediately shook her head. “If you do not, you would not be the Bloodfire Ranger.”

“Aye, but lass, do ye no’ see? Now that I’ve found ye, found my Mate, I cannae be the Bloodfire Ranger. I’ll train a new male, just as I’ve been nagging the Keeper to do, and take my place in the village at yer side. I’ll spar and train and get fat and happy with my Mate and children at my side.”

Her beautiful eyes went wide.

“Children?” she breathed.

“Aye, lass...” I dropped my gaze to her stomach because I couldn’t touch her there as my hands were busy elsewhere. “Did ye no’ ken children are a possible result of what we’ve been doing?”

Her laughter burst from her. “Aye, Torvolk, but I never imagined...” She trailed off as her expression slid into wonder. “I want a son who will look like you.”

“Nay.” I moved one hand from behind her to trace her cheek. “A daughter, a lassie as beautiful as her mother, and strong-willed besides.”

“Unlike me.” Isadora’s grin turned impish. “ Master .”

My lips curled as they claimed hers.

And kissing her, holding her—even though ‘twas atop a horse—felt right . Felt like home . I didn’t love the idea of taking her away from safety, but I couldn’t leave her. If she was willing to go with me...

Taking a deep breath, I pressed my forehead to hers once more.

Aye. 'Twas the only solution. I would take her into the human's world, take her into danger, and pray I could keep her safe for the month 'twould take us to find Kragorn.

And, after that, we would return home. Together.

"Ho!" came the Keeper's call from far off. "Torvolk!"

With a sigh of resignation, I pulled away from my Mate, lifting her to settle her properly—or, at least more safely—in my lap as I urged the horse toward the stone circle. Sure enough, the other male was gesturing toward the stones.

"The veil is opening!" he called.

"'Tis lovely," Isadora breathed, wonder in her voice.

"Aye." I shifted in the saddle, ensuring my ax was loose and the animal ready to run. We'd have only a few hours to find shelter once we passed through, and my senses would be on high alert since I traveled with such a precious companion.

The horse trotted to a stop beside the Keeper who was peering toward the mist.

"A few more moments," he muttered. "Do ye want to stop in my cottage first to fetch supplies for yer lady?"

"My Mate," I corrected proudly.

"Aye," he grunted without looking at me. "I kenned it a month ago."

I resisted the urge to swing my boot into his shoulder and merely snorted.

"I am well, Keeper," Isadora assured him. "I am strong and warm, and we will see

you in a month.”

“A month,” I murmured, watching the way the mist was swirling. There was something wrong with it... “Just a month.”

“Or...” The Keeper stepped closer to the stone. “Mayhap no’.”

As he said those words, two figures burst into existence in the middle of the stones, stumbling through the mist. The larger one was clearly an orc male, one arm thrown over the shoulders of his companion, who was much shorter.

As they staggered from between the stones, I heard Isadora suck in a gasp. The smaller figure was a human woman, her face twisted in pain and worry as her foot dragged behind her. And the male...

“Kragorn,” whispered the Keeper.

A sense of certainty swept through me.

“Our chief has returned!” I bellowed in joy, kicking the horse forward before throwing myself from the saddle. “Kragorn!”

“He’s hurt,” the tiny human female whispered. “Please help him...”

“Forget me,” croaked my chief, my cousin, as I hitched my shoulder beneath his and took his weight. “Save Lillian.”

“Where in the hells have ye been, Kragorn?”

“Hells,” he muttered, stumbling forward, but he grabbed the little woman’s hand to pull her along with him. “All of them.”

Then the Keeper was there, helping me lift our chief onto the second horse, and I forced myself to swallow my questions. After all, they could wait; Kragorn was finally back.

I glanced up at my Mate, who now held the reins in a confident grip. She nodded once, and I knew she was thinking what I was thinking.

We had to get Kragorn and this female to Nan, who could help them both. And since the chief was here, there was no need for us to go through the stones to the human's world.

No need for Isadora to be in danger.

No need for us to be away from our home.

No reason we couldn't spend the next month curled around each other in our cozy cottage, creating those kitlings we had discussed.

I knew my smile matched hers.

Our future could begin.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:28 am*

Isadora

I groaned a little as I straightened over the steaming cauldron, pressing one hand against my lower back and twisting the kinks out of my neck. Boiling a large amount of ash-water solution was never pleasant, but doing it in the midday midsummer heat had to be the worst.

Luckily, my Mate had hung the cauldron over the firepit behind our home so the cottage wouldn't smell so horribly.

My hair had grown out in the months since my arrival in Bloodfire Village, but 'twas still too short to do aught more with than tie it beneath a kerchief. Torvolk kept me supplied with colorful kerchiefs—and what he couldn't find here in the village, he traded for—but the little wisps of pale hair still stuck to my sweaty forehead and the back of my neck.

Irritating as all the hells.

I had to smile at myself as I pulled the wooden stick from the solution and watched the liquid simmer. Hells . I was already sounding like my Mate.

When I'd first arrived, I'd listened to Nan and the other human women speak of orcish customs and religion as if they claimed them as well, and wondered how that was possible.

But in a few short months, I was cursing like an orc. Believing like an orc. Celebrating like an orc. And most definitely loving like an orc.

I sighed happily and wiped my hands down my stained soap-making apron.

Aye, Bloodfire Village was my home in the way the human world had never been, and I'd found my family. Not just Torvolk's kin—of which there were many—but the women who accepted and supported and loved me the way I did for them.

“Morning, Isadora!” The call came from the front of the garden. “We can smell you back there.”

Laughing, I strolled to the front fence. “I am not the only one who needs laundry soap. You should be thanking me for stinking up this half of the village.”

Myra was making a show of plugging her nose against the acrid scent, but Avaleen merely laughed as she waved her hand in front of her bairn's face.

“’Tis not so bad,” she admonished her sister. “As long as you do not breathe...”

I chuckled as Myra began to gag playfully.

“Oh, stop,” I chided, resting my hip against the rail that surrounded Nan's herbs and flowers. “At least I chose a day with a nice breeze.” Although from the way my gown was plastered to my back with sweat, you wouldn't know it. “Where are you two off to?”

“Lillian,” announced Myra, abruptly straightening, all teasing forgotten as she gestured to the basket she carried. “Now that she is getting bigger, I promised Kragorn I would find a way to keep her ankles from swelling so much.”

I nodded, sticking my tongue out at the bairn on Avaleen's hip and smiling at the sweet laughter.

The last six months had brought so many changes for all of us. Avaleen's difficult

birth had been scary, aye, but Lillian's public breeding had been even stranger. I'd been shocked to learn of the tradition, whereby the clan witnessed the joining of our chief and his new Mate...

But I knew for a fact Torvolk and I hadn't been the only ones to be so aroused by the spectacle we'd consummated our own love right then and there.

And now that Lillian was carrying the next Bloodfire chief, we'd made a reluctant sort of treaty with the Bladesedge clan to the south. After all, with her sister Mated to the Bladesedge chief, there wasn't any way we could continue feuding.

"Are you making soap for the Midsummer Festival?" Avaleen asked, wrinkling her nose as the wind carried the scent toward us. "Or for trading?"

"This is for later in the season." I jerked my head toward the back garden and the simmering pot. "But dinnae fash, I made your Midsummer gifts of soap weeks ago."

"Honey and whisky?" Myra asked, brightening. "My favorite."

"I ken," I drawled, and Avaleen giggled, a sound echoed by her bairn.

"You are sounding like one of our Mates!"

We all had a chuckle over that, but my head popped up as I felt Torvolk approaching.

Aye, for certes, he came around the corner of Nan's house, his expression neutral but a bucket of water cradled in the crook of his arm.

I still wasn't certain how the Mate bond worked, but if anything, it had become stronger in our months together. There is a knowing. Not only did I know Torvolk held my heart...but I was becoming increasingly aware of where he was, and what his feelings were, even before he spoke.

Now, for instance, I could read his intention for that water, and I brightened.

“Hello love,” I murmured, stretching up on my toes to brush a kiss over his jaw.

“Isadora,” he grunted. He turned to my friends. “Ladies, I’m stealing my Mate.”

Avaleen giggled and Myra rolled her eyes, but I didn’t see anything else, because I was already imagining how good that water was going to feel. Torvolk hooked his arm around my waist and tugged me toward the front door of our cottage.

Inside was bright with all the windows open, and not as stuffy as it should be. But my Mate tugged me toward the screen which hid our bed.

“Is that water for me?” I asked teasingly.

“Ye are hot and sweaty and smell wrong. Ye need a bath.”

“Aye, I do,” I agreed, raising my brow at his gruff announcement, already untying my kerchief. “But the hot springs do not sound appealing, and I notice you have not dragged the tub inside.”

“Nay.” He plopped the bucket down atop our chest and reached for a bar of soap and a rag. “Take off yer gown, lass.”

I sucked in a breath, the familiar heat pooling between my legs, the way it always did when he said something to remind me of those first days together—when I thought he owned my body and I wanted him to claim me.

“Torvolk,” I murmured, already unlacing my bodice.

“Hurry,” he commanded, stepping up to me, the green in his eyes flaring brightly.



I hurried.

Not just because I could sense his need. Not just because I felt his cock throbbing against my hip. Not just because my own body was suddenly humming with desperation for his touch.

But for all three of those reasons and a million more.

When I stood naked before him, my Mate took his time cleaning me, running the cool water over my salty skin, washing me— licking me . ‘Twas torturously delicious; the temperature of the water cooled me down from my morning of sweaty work, but then his lips and fingers heated me again.

And Torvolk? He was insatiable. I wasn’t certain what was different today, but his strength was more demanding than usual, his touches more frantic. He stopped frequently to press his nose against my skin, to run his tongue across my sensitive areas.

When I was clean, he scooped me into his arms and lifted me high, running his tongue down my stomach. My brows rose as I grabbed at his hair.

“Torvolk? Love?”

“Nay,” he growled, tossing me onto the bed. “No’ good enough. No’ right.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but then his mouth was between my thighs, and I lost all thought. He buried his tongue in my cunny, stroking and licking and sucking, until I was mad with need.

I heard him groan as my pleasure exploded, but he didn’t stop. Usually, he was aware of how sensitive I was after a climax, but today he didn’t stop licking me, lapping at my core as if he could eat me right up. He nuzzled closer and I gasped at the intensity

of it.

Something was different.

“Torvolk,” I groaned, tugging at his hair. “Master .”

Normally, the old nickname made him smile, but today he merely lifted his head, repositioned himself between my thighs, and plunged into me.

I screamed his name as another orgasm burst over me, but he didn’t slow to allow me to enjoy it.

“Mine,” he growled as he pounded into me. “Mine. Mine .”

Breathless, I could do little more than wrap my arms and legs around him as my cunny pulsed around his cock, squeezing him closer, closer, closer...

He came with a roar as my climax was finally receding, and we both collapsed, spent and breathless onto the bed.

We weren’t still long, though, because Torvolk’s hand ran up and down my spine, and I eventually shuddered, pressing myself against his chest. I was so sensitive !

“Different,” he muttered.

I lifted my head. “Aye, I agree. Mayhap ‘tis my part of the cycle?” But that wouldn’t explain his response.

His eyes were closed, and now he inhaled, long and steady.

“Yer scent...’tis different.” When he opened his eyes, the green glow had faded to a mere spark. “What changed?”

“Different, how?” I poked him teasingly. “Bad? You used my favorite soap.”

Torvolk lifted his head to press his nose against my hair. “Different...” Another inhale. “I smell ye. And me. Mixed together.”

Grinning, I lifted myself up, so his seed slid from my cunny and coated his skin. “I wonder why.”

His lips tugged upward, almost reluctantly. Claspings his hands around my waist, he rolled me off him and went to fetch the wet towel to clean me. I confess the cool cloth felt good after the power of our fooking.

After, though, he gathered me to him, his habitual frown back. His hand ran over my naked shoulder and arm. “When I tasted ye, I tasted myself. Ye are different...”

Scoffing, I nudged him, but his hand fell to my stomach, and his gaze followed. The intensity I saw in his eyes drew my own gaze.

“Torvolk?”

“Mine,” he murmured. “My scent and yers, mixed together.” When he looked up at me, there was wonder in his expression, wonder which made my heart begin to thump in excitement.

“A kitling, Isadora.”

“I am pregnant?” I breathed, emotions swelling inside me. Not quite disbelief, but a kind of wonder at such a thing could happen to me. “Truly? I have no symptoms.”

“Early still.” He shifted so I rested on my back and his head lay on my stomach. “So small. So miraculous.”

Feeling almost giddy with excitement and joy, I twined my fingers through my Mate's hair.

"Not so unexpected, however, considering what you have been doing to me every night. And day. And sometimes twice afore dinner."

I felt him grin against my stomach, then he kissed me. "A kitling. Ye're going to be the most perfect mother, Isadora."

Would I? I'd never known a mother's love, not until I discovered Bloodfire Village and the families here. I wanted to curl around him, wanted to savor this moment.

"And you will be his strong and loving father. Are you happy?"

Torvolk lifted his head, and I could read the astonishment in those green-flecked eyes.

"How could ye doubt it?" He pressed a kiss to my skin. "I have a home, a clan..." Another kiss. "A son on the way..." This kiss was lower, closer to my curls. "And the most perfect Mate a male could hope for."

When his tongue made another swipe, I hummed, distracted, and arched toward his mouth.

"Happy," I repeated on a gasp.

"Aye, love." He settled between my legs, his lips curling wickedly. "A happy life begins with making ye happy." He scraped his tusk along the inside of my thighs, making me shudder with anticipation. "I need to show ye how pleased I am with ye, after all."

My hands went to his head. "Have I told you how glad I am you were there in that

tavern that night, Torvolk? Twenty gold pieces seemed an exorbitant amount—I could not believe a male would think me worth that.”

His green gaze blazed. “Ye’re worth a hundred times that, love. A million. Because ye’re mine , and I am yers.”

I grinned softly, gently urging his mouth toward my core. “Forever, master .”

With a growl of agreement, he gave me what I needed.

Forever.

Don’t want to leave Bloodfire Village just yet?